Afro-descendant culture in Oaxaca and the United States

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Positionality

Taking the Education 895 Global Education course at San Diego State University in Oaxaca City, Oaxaca, Mexico allowed me to transcend the limitations of the United States and the homogenized portrayals of Mexico. The U.S.'s *Racial Script* of Mexicans is a stereotype premised on the idea of the *illegal alien*; American media typically emulates Mexican people as one group- needing to flee Mexico; rarely do we ever discuss the different states or providences. Although I knew that Mexico had different states, languages, regions, and cultures, I was never fully engaged in what it meant to be Oaxacan. This experience as a Black/African American man who grew up surrounded by Mexican classmates, friends, neighbors, and cultures in the metropolitan Los Angeles area never quite explored the nuances of Mexican identity- even those who were of African descent. I was constantly engulfed with friends who were 1st or 2nd generation Mexican American. My childhood and teenage years consisted of Spanish, Spanglish, raspados, quincerias, taquerias, etc. and many loved ones and close friends who identify with being Mexican. Despite my rich cultural experiences and living in Southern California, I had yet to actually visit Mexico.

Introduction & Historical Background

African Americans and Mexican/Mexican Americans have often had their own communities and cultural customs due to legal racially discriminatory policies and laws. "African American migrants, however, built opportunity out of segregation. By the mid-1910s, Central Avenue had become the economic and social center of the community." (Rosas, 28) Communities like Pasadena, Venice, Crenshaw, Watts, Compton, and South Central Los Angeles became heralds of African American prosperity and west coast affluence. The true American dream was accessible for Black Americans in California and at the same time Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans understood the same to be true for themselves. "Los Angeles" translates to "the Angels" in English–and as locals call it–*the city of angels*.

Los Angeles became a complex amalgamation of people and cultures due to the California gold rush and the lack of state laws on Black freedom. It was legal for slave holding states in the American south to bring enslaved Africans to California to mine gold. Although Jim Crow had influence in Los Ángeles it wasn't quite as strict in comparison to the south. The complex history of this nation and this state is complicit in the establishment of Los Angeles, which was founded by both African American, Latinx, and Afro-Mexican people. Two of the most notable founders of Los Angeles were Biddy Mae Mason, she was the first African American woman to own land in Los Angeles, and Pio Pico, an Afro-Mexican man who was the first mayor of the city. African Americans and Latinxs have been co-creators in the culture and appeal of Los Angeles since its founding.

As the decades passed African American and Mexican/Mexican American citizens of the city came to realize that perhaps, they could align both racially and politically to bring community investment and resources to their cities and neighborhoods. In Abigail Rosas book, ***South Central is Home: Race and the Power of Community Investment in Los Angeles,*** a historical, empirical thesis on African American and Latino engagement in South Central Los Angeles, we learn how a once predominantly African American community becomes home to Latinxs as well. Forged by decades of "strain between both groups", community members of the South Central neighborhood found common ground to make their neighborhood a stronger place (Rosas,12).

Despite the anti-Blackness African Americans sometimes face from Latino communities, it was African American Civil Rights agitators and organizers that helped push for the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965- which was part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Civil Rights Movement and the legislation that came along with these federally backed policies drastically changed the trajectory of the United States of America. (Rosas,13). Before 1965, the U.S. immigration system relied heavily on a quota system which preferred immigrants from Northern Europe. After the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s the demographics of the U.S. shifted.

Anti– Blackness

Anti-Blackness is a worldwide phenomena and it did not go unknown to Mexican families and individuals who arrived in Los Angeles in the mid twentieth century. Anti-Blackness is known as having negative orientations, cultural ideas or stereotypes with Black people. This tension was a push and pull of two cultures dealing with the known and unknown. Black Americans were used to being the *known* minority within the cultural hierarchy; white people on top and Black folks on the bottom.

For a community whose racial discourse is based on *mestizaje,* the embrace of racial mixing between Spanish and Indigenous, where a discussion of Blackness is obscured, living in a Black neighborhood means quickly learning what a Black-white racial system entails for Mexican immigrants (Rosas,14).

Stronger influxes of Mexican communities made U.S. *citizens* uneasy and at times African Americans were not exempt from this xenophobia. This *us vs. them* narrative came into context, and was perpetuated especially when it came to shifting demographics. This did not pair well with anti-Black sentiments from Mexican migrants who were moving into African American communities, this fact further exacerbated the issues between Black and Brown communities not only in Los Angeles but in the United States. The demonization and skepticism around Blackness and the humanity of African American people was [and is] standard in United States media, politics, resources, education, and society. However, these ideas were not exempt from Mexico either, as anti-Blackness and white supremacy are global political powerhouses. These forces of colonization have led to false narratives around Blackness, marginalization, and invisibility in both the United States and Mexico.

Racial scripts circulate in both the United States and Mexico. Knowledge about the U.S. African American struggle and experience is limited in Mexico, and what is shared is often negative attitudes. Mexico has its legacy of colonialism that serves to render its Black and indigenous roots invisible. The lack of conversation and discussion around Blackness in Latin America, Mexico and the United States leads some Mexican migrants... to believe that African Americans are predisposed to violence(Rosas,115).

Some Latinx people eventually recognized that their fear of African Americans was biased and unfounded. Others realized that anti-Blackness was taught in their homelands and communities. A simple example would be anti-Blackness manifested in places where nicknames like "negrita", "morena", "negrito", etc. likely had negative connotations and comparisons to Blackness and Africaness. The admission of anti-Blackness is further recognized and problematized when in her book, Rosas asks community member Josefina Hernandez how she was taught about Black people in the United States. Hernandez recalls her arrival in 1968 to the present, stating, "When I first came to this country, I was afraid of them. Now I see that they're just like we are. They have a good heart…People look down on them just because they're a little darker than we are." (Rosas,115) Latinxs had to face the reality that African Americans who were demonized by white supremacy culture were their neighbor– and more than that–part of the space where they lived. Their schools, homes, apartments, parks, public transportation, sidewalks, and community centers were to be shared with Black folks.

Community Development

The 1960s and 70s were turbulent on many levels. In the face of racial reckoning, racism, war, and false promises of racial equality and civil rights, people of color were organizing together in response to their needs, creating a united front. The "War on Poverty", declared by then- president Lyndon B. Johnson, led both Black and Brown communities to further question their circumstances and request resources that were unavailable in communities of color across the United States. The "exploration of interracial relations requires investigating how communities of color enter, inhabit, and survive the racial landscape together" (Rosas, 14). Stereotypes that plagued the Mexican/Mexican American and African American communities were reflections of environments that the U.S. had created for them. Tropes—like not going to the doctor when sick or hurt—proved to not only be cultural but also environmental upon analysis of the proximity of hospitals available to Black and Brown communities. Furthermore, analyzing access and distance to hospitals revealed that even if healthcare services were to be utilized by Black and Brown citizens, these institutions were not readily available to receive them with open arms or without the veil of racism. Inequities for Latinx children in the community became more apparent as South Central Los Angeles did not have any community childcare spaces available for single mothers or working families.

Continuing past the initial years of the War on Poverty's implementation we can uncover a complex matrix of interracial relations that are not solely encapsulated by experiences of tension. Long-standing institutions such as Head Start and health clinics illustrate the grounded efforts of placemaking as well as how maximizing on this social policy's promise required ingenuity and investment by a multiracial cadre of residents that at every turn reinforced the notion that poor people are deserving of programming that is dignified and attentive to their needs. For impoverished, working poor, and working-class communities of color, interracial relations are framed within the context of ever-diminishing resources (Rosas, 12).

The anticipation of community capital and agency led to a certain type of care that may have been previously displaced. South Central Los Angeles became more focused on securing federal and municipal funding for projects that would improve quality of life for community members despite their clear relegation to second class citizenship.

Africanity and Indigeneity in Mexico

Although Mexico struggles to synthesize its African and Indigenous peoples, its heritage features Africanity, which is, "the quality or state of being African or having African origins" (Merriam Webster, 2022). Mexico is not a wholly Black nation nor is its African heritage a main cultural influence. However, important elements of Africanity impact the nation, its African ancestry most notably found in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz.

While traveling and studying in Oaxaca in May 2022, my doctoral program cohort visited the ancient ruins of Monte Albán. Our tour guide repeatedly mentioned that the Olmec culture heavily influenced the sacred lands that we were roaming. The guide continuously referred to the Olmecs as the mother culture. I was actually flattered and surprised, as I had neer heard anyone refer to the Olmec people as a mother culture. Some scholars make the case that Olmec people were of African descent, having noted that the Olmec culture and its iconic stone heads are commonly linked to Africa in Black/Africana Studies, I asked the guide if the Olmec culture is recognized as Black. His response, "It's just a theory," shook me. That moment confirmed for me how anti-Black ideas

circulate. Why was it so easy to dismiss African peoples as a part of Mexican and Oaxacan culture? Why did the narrative of Blackness have to be theoretical, why couldn't it just be true? I found further confirmation in the book titled *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* by Dr. Ivan Van Sertima, which rigorously affirms Olmec stone heads and cultural traits are directly linked to Africa.

Foundational Blackness entails grappling with how Mexican mestizaje racial narrative, which privileges the mix of Indigenous and European culture, disregards any African influence within Mexico. More recently there has been a movement to reclaim the African roots that shape a part of Mexico's history and present… understanding race has centered on mestizaje… for low-income residents, like those in South Central, there is "no benefit to attaching themselves to whiteness," and it is not that Latina/os identify with Blackness, but rather that foundational Blackness… helps fuse Black and Latino/a politics into a hybrid subjectivity, allowing groups often to act in unison while also providing them with a subject position from which to act." (Rosas, 117)

Dr. Rosas explains that foundational Blackness is a theory for organizing Black and Brown people in the United States when faced with the values of racial caste. However, when analyzing mestizaje in Mexico, both Blackness and Indigeneity are still overwhelmingly diminished or ignored. We see further layers of complexity in this analysis exemplified by both Mexico and the United States; Mexican slavery was abolished by Afro-Mexican President Vicente Guerro and later enslaved Africans fleeing the Southern United States escaped to Mexico for freedom.

Oaxaca as an Reflection of Ghana

Oaxaca has a somewhat comparable climate and culture to Ghana, including its humidity, heat, and pace of life. Personally, Oaxaca reminded me of Accra and Kumasi, Ghana. Walking, catching a taxi, drinking bottled water, eating outside, and conversing effortlessly with local people in Oaxaca reminded me of my 2018 trip to Ghana, West Africa. The architecture, cobblestone-lined streets, and open markets in Oaxaca also reminded me of those in Ghana.

Oaxaca and Black Lives Matter, Tu Lucha es mi Lucha

In 2006, Oaxaca saw an enormous, multi-month protest by teachers, unions, human rights groups, student groups, Indigenous rights groups, and political activists who combined efforts to create the Asamblea popular de los pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO) or the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca. These protests were centered around enhancing teachers rights and the funding and opportunities available for education in Oaxaca. Protestors took Oaxaca City and its government buildings with large encampments. Police patrolling was incessant, and the region was on the edge of martial law. The citizens of Oaxaca City demanded Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz be removed by the Mexican senate.

The beautiful state of Oaxaca is blighted by colorism and its caste system; Indigenous populations feel this discrimination deeply. Oaxaca is one of the three poorest states in Mexico.

Seven out of ten Oaxacans live in poverty, disproportionately Indigenous people. (*From the Edge of the Blade, 2006*) This racial and ethnic struggle in Oaxaca mirrors the political movement for civil rights and government reform within the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the United States.

Elements of the BLM movement's 2020 demonstrations also took place in the 2006 Oaxaca City protests: graffiti, marches, moving speeches, and encampments, as in the Plaza de la Danza and Historic City Center. Public opinion supported both movements, confirming the sociopolitical gravity of both resistances and the desires of the majority of both populations.

2006 Oaxaca City Protests

Women played an important role in the 2006 Oaxaca City Protests, helping to organize a takeover of the Channel 9 news station. Channel 9 has historically taken a stance against social and political movements, convincing the public that protesters are violent or delinquent. The takeover of a news outlet was a strategy to show the growth and influence of the movement.

Protesters were intimidated via surveillance. Some were sent anonymous messages on their cellular telephones to cause intimidation and skepticism. Other participants were arrested by plainclothes officers in unmarked vehicles.

Some were shot from rooftops during marches and Demonstrations. The Oaxaca City local government erected approximately 1,200 barricades in an effort to prevent protests.

In September of 2006, the Mexican federal government essentially closed Oaxaca City and searched for activists. The only people allowed in and out of the city were federal police; highways and main roads were closed. The Mexican federal government put detainees in helicopters and threatened to throw them out asking, "Do you know how to fly?". Those who were arrested were accused of belonging to a Guerrilla group. Families of those arrested received death threats. Oaxacan governor Ulises Ruiz did not consider resigning for the good of his state; his political career was invested in the political power of self. In November 2006, the new president of Mexico, Felipe Calderón, was elected. After Calderón's inauguration, nothing was done about the murders, intimidation, and abuse of hundreds of thousands of Oaxaqueños.

During the protests, 366 were arrested, more than 20 activists and teachers were murdered, and no one was charged with murder. Ruiz remained the governor of Oaxaca after the protests in 2006. The uprising's fallout left a stain on the legacy both the Oaxacan state government and Mexico's federal government, calling into question the intentions of elected officials and whether or not they truly cared about teachers or public education.

Conclusion
This paper in no way pretends to encompass all narratives surrounding Black and Brown relations in the United States or in Los Angeles. As a student and Los Angeles native, I found Abigail Rosas' book, South Central is Home: Race and the Power of Community Investment in Los Angeles, particularly compelling as it analyzed and highlighted the ways in which Mexican, Mexican American, Brown, and Black/African American communities have become enmeshed and worked together for political purposes and to obtain neighborhood resources. The history of coalition and alignment on matters of race continue to challenge Black and Brown people today regardless of origin, color, language, nationality, and proximity. This work is a part of a continuous conversation which aims to elevate Indigeneity and Blackness in a collective effort and to step away from white-centeredness and embrace liberation.

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