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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Anthony Russell Jerry, *Blackness in Mexico: Afro-Mexican Recognition and the Production of Citizenship in the Costa Chica*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2023.

Since the Revolution, Mexican elites have privileged a racial ideology that promotes *mestizaje*--the mixture of indigenous and European peoples. Yet in more recent years, both international and domestic groups have called for new, more inclusive approaches to identity politics. The guardians of the Cosmic Race were summoned.

Marginalized people of African descent have increasingly figured into the Mexico national discourse on "race." Yet, as anthropologist Anthony Russell Jerry argues, government efforts to locate and fully recognize "blacks" have been relatively half-hearted and superficial: mostly playing to *al corriente* international identity political trends. "Blackness," Jerry writes, "is a [largely] unrecognized racial and cultural form," in Mexico, [one that] "interrupts the neatly organized ethnic geography" of national society (27).

The 2011 United Nation's International Year for Peoples of African Descent and ensuing General Assembly's resolution 68/237 called for a decade long honoring of African peoples to be observed from 2015 to 2024 issued a challenge to governments and NGOs across the world. To this, many wondered closer to home, how would Mexico respond?

Conducting field research in the Costa Chica region of Oaxaca and Guerrero, Jerry tells how a federal government initiative called the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI) set out, in conjunction with local outlets of Secretaría de Asuntos Indígenas (SAI), to engage Afro-Mexicans.

The state led program manifested a series of *consultas* that temporarily brought together government officials, regional community activists, scholars, and various people of color. Meetings took place in Costa Chica town centers where activity saw government types seeking to uncover "cultural elements that were imagined to be unique to Black Mexican communities" (2). According to Jerry, the official aim of these municipal convocations was to "inform the African-descendent communities of the Costa Chica about the process of [state] recognition and to gather information on the cultural repertoire of Black Mexicans within the region" (1). One wonders what was in it for the national commission.

Consulta experience differed widely. Visitors pursued an agenda that recast people of African descent as “Afro-Mexicans”—now a recognized status category in the larger national ethnoscape. Black community activists meanwhile used the occasion to call out racist attitudes, practices and policies. At the same time, they raised concerns about possible unintended consequences of state-led “racial” programming.

In the end, black townspeople largely eschewed much of the outsider’s talk—perhaps recognizing that bureaucrats were mostly interested in excavating only symbolic and superficial information to fulfill predetermined expectations about a “black Mexican experience.” Public relations rather than social reform seemed to be the order of the day.

“The official conversations,” Jerry writes, “rarely involved deep discussions about slavery in Mexico, or the manner in which African descendants arrived in the Costa Chica or racial discrimination or the historic roles that Black people and Blackness had played in the production of the Mexican nation” (2).

From the start the overall agenda was clear: newfound federal efforts at documenting and acknowledging Mexican people of African descent was an elite affair. The *consultas*, first and foremost, served the interests of the state. Whatever patronizing notice of a “black presence” was made, results tended to leave subjects dismissively “trapped” within their own regional context while “newly discovered” ideas about blackness were “put to work” and utilized elsewhere. The author’s frequent theoretical flights occasionally serve to distance the reader from the ethnography at hand.

Refreshingly, Jerry’s last chapter returns to the real people of the Costa Chica. Here, individual commentary by residents on issues pertaining to ideas of race, perceptions of color, status and power solidly ground Jerry’s work. Perhaps not surprisingly, he suggests by way of conclusion that “[t]he project of Black recognition seems to make it easier for Mestizos to reconcile the existence of Blackness in the nation, rather than making it easier to be Black in Mexico” (158). Nevertheless, Jerry finds hope in the testimonies he records. He sees these as provid[ing] evidence of “narratives of the process of constructing a Black identity that is underway and continuing to develop in the Costa Chica.” In time, we may find that these individuals have served as an important foundation for a “political project of Blackness” in Mexico (179). One need not—and should not—wait for the government to act for—as Jerry shows—there is real power in the black Costa Chica communities.

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