

Historical Invisibility: Black Migrants and Mexico's Colonial Past

Brenda Romero

Assistant Professor

California State University, Sacramento

Abstract

Despite reports of thousands of Black and African migrants and asylum seekers present at the U.S.-Mexican border, this group continues to be excluded from the narrative of that contentious frontier. This study explores Mexico's Colonial past as a foundation of this racial relegation. Since their arrival to the New World, Spaniards conveyed their biases against Blacks in their American colonies, including Mexico, where individuals of African descent were denigrated, unfavorably portrayed, and vilified. Primary texts from the time, such as Domingo Chimalpáhin's Diary, demonstrate that the association of blackness with disease and violence was prevalent in Colonial Mexico. Despite their continuous presence in Mexican territory in the centuries following its Independence from Spain and even after the 2015 Census quantified their existence, Afro-Mexicans continued to be disregarded from mainstream Mexican society. This historical invisibility has nowadays been extended into the marginalization of Black and African migrants in the U.S.-Mexican border.

Keywords: African migration, colonialization, Mexico, Afro-Mexican marginalization

Introduction

In recent years, the U.S.-Mexican border has remained the most contentious frontier in the Western Hemisphere. Immigrants and asylum seekers, some traveling by foot from Central

America in massive caravans, congregate in towns such as Juárez and Tijuana for days, weeks, or months at a time hoping to cross North in search of a better life (Correal and Specia 2018). The separation of children from their parents at the border by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and their confinement in crowded detention centers in the U.S. have captured the attention of the media and of audiences worldwide. For instance, on January 17, 2019, Spanish newspaper *El País* reported “EE. UU. admite haber separado a más niños de sus padres en la frontera de México de los reconocidos” [USA admits having separated more children than previously acknowledged at the border with Mexico] while on June 26, 2019, the article “U.S. Border: Who decided to separate families?” was published by the *BBC News*. Advocates on both sides of the border have raised their voices to condemn mistreatment and human rights violations committed against these vulnerable individuals (Villegas 2019).

However, not all involved parties have been included in the narrative of this humanitarian crisis. Black migrants and asylum seekers from Haiti, Jamaica, Congo, Cameroon, and other parts of the world—including some Black Central Americans—remain excluded from conversations concerning the U.S.-Mexican border (Solís 2019). This racial marginalization specifically on the Mexican side of the border is not surprising. As this study explains, the invisibility and rejection of Black people is a phenomenon deeply rooted in Mexico’s Colonial past. Since their initial arrival in Aztec territory in the sixteenth century, first as personal servants of Spanish conquistadors and later as slaves for domestic help and manual labor, Africans and their descendants have lastingly been relegated to the shadows of Mexican society.

The Conquest of Mexico

As Gonzalo Aguirre (1946) indicates in his groundbreaking piece *La población negra de México. Estudio etnohistórico* [The Black Population of Mexico. Ethnohistorical Study], Hernán Cortés and some of his fellow Spaniards traveled with their Black servants during their expeditions in the New World. Cortés brought at least one African man in his initial journey to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, and so did others such as Juan Núñez Sedeño (Aguirre 1946). They are believed to be the first ever Black individuals to enter Mexican territory. During the Conquest of Mexico, these servants actively participated in the battlefield, assisting their masters in their combat against the Aztec army. As history tells it, despite being vastly outnumbered, Cortés and his men were triumphant. Various theories have emerged throughout time to explain this unexpected outcome (Todorov 1984). Some propose that Emperor Moctezuma surrendered because he mistook Cortés for the fair-skinned god Quetzalcóatl, who according to Aztec belief would one day return from the East. Others believe that horses and firearms gave Spaniards a significant advantage. A third premise suggests that Cortés and his army were successful due to the support of Indigenous allies, formerly subjugated by the Aztecs, who joined them in the battle ground. In addition to being alluded to, in primary texts, such as the letters that Cortés wrote to the Spanish King or the account of the Conquest written by soldier Bernal Díaz del Castillo, these theories have been explored extensively in literary works including *Tenoxtitán en llamas* [Tenochtitlan on Fire] by Alfonso Ortiz Palma (1958), *Ceremonias del alba* [Ceremonies at Dawn] by Carlos Fuentes (2005), and *La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas* [It's the Fault of the Tlaxcaltecas] by Elena Garro (1987).

Another theory used to justify the Spanish victory is the smallpox epidemic that affected Central Mexico in 1520. This tragic episode in Mexican history indeed initiated the negative

perception of Blacks in the region (Aguirre 1946). According to various sources of the time, including Fray Juan de Torquemada's (1975) *Monarquía Indiana* [Indian Monarchy], a Black servant brought by Pánfilo de Narváez, who traveled to Mexico shortly after Cortés, began showing symptoms of smallpox upon their arrival on the shores of Veracruz. The Indigenous population of the area, which had never been exposed to the disease, became infected in large numbers. Smallpox eventually reached the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan where it weakened the Aztec army, put a halt to their food production and commercial activity, created a collective sense of fear, and decimated the overall Indigenous population (Sahagún2016). In fact, Moctezuma's successor, Cuitláhuac, could only perform his duties as Aztec leader for 80 days before dying from this illness. That first lethal outbreak in Mexico planted the seeds for a long-lasting correlation of disease and death with Blackness (Ocaranza1982). After the Conquest, other epidemics would occur in the region, including measles, typhus, and typhoid outbreaks (Bustamante 1982). In total, scholars like Andrés Cavo (2013) estimate that more than two million Indigenous Mexicans died by the end of the sixteenth century because of contagious diseases.

The Colonial Period

The 300 years that Mexican territory remained under Spanish control after the Conquest were crucial for the extension and solidification of racial bias against Black people. The Colonial Period brought many drastic changes to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in terms of race and power dynamics. This former indigenous metropolis became Mexico City, the center of the Viceroyalty of New Spain. Historians and conquistadors widely chronicled the events of the Conquest and the early Colonial Period. The history and pre-Hispanic way of life of Indigenous Mexicans—labeled by Europeans as Indians—captured the attention of Spanish priests, who believed that knowing and understanding them would facilitate Christianization (Battock2019).

The communities residing in Central Mexico, the former Aztec empire, were speakers of the Náhuatl language. To overcome the linguistic barrier, boys from the Indigenous nobility were trained in monasteries and schools as interpreters and translators. Besides being introduced to the Catholic faith, at these centers they also learned alphabetic writing, the Spanish language, and some Latin. With the assistance of these bilingual, and sometimes trilingual young Nahua men, Spanish missionaries were able to compile and later publish vast amounts of information about the aboriginal groups of the region (López2011). *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* [General History of Things from New Spain] by Bernardino de Sahagún (2016) and *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España* [History of the Indies of New Spain] by Diego Durán (1967) are examples of this trend.

The central topic of the texts written in and about Mexico during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were chronicles of exploration and conquest, with Spaniards as protagonists, and the history and customs of the Indigenous civilizations, with Aztecs, Mayans, Mixtecs, and other groups as main subjects of study. African slaves, who had been arriving regularly in Mexico to compensate the loss of native labor due to disease, violence, and poor living conditions, were notoriously excluded from literature of the time. Research indicates that by 1570 there were more individuals of African descent than Spaniards in Mexico City and it is estimated that by 1640 almost 300,000 slaves, mainly from West and West-Central Africa, had been brought to New Spain (Bennett 2011). Thus, as explained below, this omission was based on the negative stereotyping of Blacks and not on the size of their presence.

Racial identity was a key component of Mexican society during the Colonial Period. It was an era when Black people continued to be perceived in a negative manner, parallel to the contemporary adverse perception about African and Black migrants at the U.S.-Mexican border.

New Spain was a multi-racial colony where individuals of European, African, and Indigenous descent frequently interacted. Spaniards and Black slaves who arrived during the first decades after the conquest, a vast majority of them male, procreated with Indigenous women. Since children in the Spanish colonies were given the legal status of their mothers, most mixed-race Blacks—commonly called mulattos—were not born into slavery. In addition to mulattos, the free Black population of New Spain was also comprised of former slaves who purchased their freedom, and runaways living in cimarron communities. Being neither part of the dominant group—Spaniards—nor members of the native dominated factions—the Indigenous—enslaved and free Blacks were outsiders in New Spain’s society.

Chimalpáhin’s Diary

One manuscript that reflects the marginalized status and adverse depiction of Afro-Mexicans during the Colonial period is Domingo Chimalpáhin’s Diary. The Nahuatl manuscript from 1615 was translated into Spanish and published as *Diario* [Diary] in 2001 and in English as *Annals of His Time* in 2006. Domingo Chimalpáhin, whose full name is Domingo Francisco de San Antón Muñón Chimalpáhin Quauhtlehuanitzin was born roughly 60 years after the Conquest of Mexico. After receiving some basic instruction in his native town of Chalco, (when he was fourteen) he arrived in Mexico City to continue his training at the church of Saint Anthony Abad. Research indicates that he began writing around the age of 27, when he inherited his family’s codices—Indigenous pictorial books—after his father’s death (Tena 2001). Chimalpáhin received documents containing the history of his town and noble ancestors. Since members of the Indigenous nobility enjoyed certain benefits in their role as mediators between Spaniards and Indians in the early Colonial Period, it was important for them to document their lineage.

We can speculate that upon receiving the records of his past Chimalpáhin was inspired to write about his present. The manuscript known as his Diary resembles the Nahuatl codices of historical content that document events in a yearly manner, providing a vivid portrait of the Mexico City of his time. Consequently, Chimalpáhin's Diary does not revolve around the life of the author, but it is rather a history of Mexico City and its people, including its Black inhabitants.

Chimalpáhin is one of the very few known Indigenous authors of his time. In the mid-seventeenth century, after his death, his manuscripts were in the possession of various individuals, including Mexican writer Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora and Italian historian Lorenzo Boturini, but they remained stored in libraries for many years (Tena 2001). In his document this author recounts events taking place in Mexico City between 1577 and 1615. Since its publication, this manuscript has provided valuable information about the everyday life of Colonial Mexico. This text reveals the complexities of Mexican Colonial society in terms of power, race, and identity. In the case of enslaved Africans and their descendants, Chimalpáhin's narrative clearly exposes the prejudices against and marginalization of this segment of the population. As we will see, the invisibility of African and Black migrants and asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border is consistent with the attitude towards Afro-Mexicans during the Colonial Period.

Border Thinking

It is evident that Chimalpáhin creates his identity as a bicultural colonial subject in his writing. He is aware of the existence between two worlds—Spanish and Indigenous—and his text exemplifies what Walter Dignolo (2012) defines as “border thinking” in *Local Histories, Global Designs*. According to this theorist, border thinking is “a logical consequence” and “response to the colonial difference;” it means to be or to feel in between, to create “a locus of enunciation

where different ways of knowing and individual and collective expressions mingle” (Mignolo 2012, 194). Chimalpáhin creates a document that follows the chronological structure and historical content of codices but instead of drawing symbols like the Nahua People, he registers information using alphabetic writing; a means of expression introduced by the colonizer. The dates and names mentioned in the text are also examples of his hybrid identity. The author indicates years in both European and Nahua forms. For instance, he registers 1577 also as 7 house, 1578 as 8 rabbit, 1579 as 9 reed, and so on. In terms of individuals mentioned by name, this Indigenous author includes Spanish government officials and Church leaders, as well as members of the Nahua nobility like himself.

One episode that clearly displays Chimalpáhin’s border thinking and reflects the historical invisibility of Afro-Mexicans is his description of a solar eclipse. The writer explains this phenomenon from two different perspectives. He states that according to the elders, his Indigenous ancestors, this event was perceived as a bad omen as it suggested the possibility of perpetual darkness. On the other hand, Chimalpáhin also indicates what he learned about this subject in a book written by a Franciscan priest that explains how the moon covers the light of the sun only due to their orbits overlapping momentarily. These two perceptions of an eclipse are then followed by the description of how this natural phenomenon was experienced in Mexico City in 1611. Chimalpáhin indicates that Spanish astrologists warned the population that on June 10 at 11:00A.M. the sky would begin turning yellow until eventually becoming completely dark, and that by 2:00P.M. there would be light again. Everyone was instructed to stay inside and to avoid looking at the sky. As Chimalpáhin tells us, there was nobody on the streets of Mexico City. By 2:30P.M. people started coming out of their homes and assumed that the eclipse would not happen. Then finally at 3:00P.M. the prediction became a reality. As darkness covered the city, some people

locked themselves inside their homes crying while others took refuge at churches and prayed. Despite the warnings, the population was confused and afraid.

This episode not only provides a detailed account of what happened in Mexico City during the eclipse and discusses this natural phenomenon from two different cultural perspectives but also succeeds at placing the residents of the town, both Indigenous and Spaniards, on an equal footing. In this report, Chimalpáhin emphasizes how the eclipse was a shared experience. He explains that on Friday all Spaniards and all Indigenous Mexicans locked themselves in their homes. When the anticipated eclipse did not seem to happen, he mentions that many Spaniards and Indigenous came out of their homes and walked on the streets of Mexico. He repeatedly refers to *nosotros*, “us” and “we,” to create a dual community in his text. They are all dwellers of the same city and despite their different race and cultural backgrounds, the skepticism and fear experienced that day were collective sentiments. Through his narrative, Chimalpáhin reinforces his identity as member of a dualistic colonial society where as Mignolo proposes, diverse ways of knowing and individual and collective expressions could co-exist. At the time, Mexico City was a territory ruled by the Spanish Empire, but the history of this town belonged to its residents, Spanish and Indigenous, including Chimalpáhin.

Chimalpahin’s “border thinking” does not extend to or acknowledge African descendants as members of this society. Instead, they are portrayed as occupants of a liminal space, excluded from having a voice or individual identity. In fact, none of them is mentioned by name in Chimalpáhin’s account. They are completely absent in events that affect the entire city, such as the eclipse of 1611, and are left out of that collective “us” that this author uses to refer to the community composed of Indigenous Mexicans and Spaniards. His writing reflects what Homi Bhabha (2004) defines as mimicry in *The Location of Culture*. The Indigenous author claims his

authority as Colonial intellectual through adoption and manipulation of the colonizer's culture and applies the lens of that dominating culture through which to gaze back at the new reality created by the colonizer (Bhabha 2004). In his Diary, he mimics the colonizer's thought process by implementing their concept of alterity. After Christopher Columbus first arrived in America, the colonizers created the term "Indian" to identify the peoples that were native to the New World, and that Indian was insistently described as Other. Their polytheistic beliefs, lack of alphabetic writing, and human sacrifices, among other features, were seen as sources of their otherness and used as justification for their conquest (Todorov 1984). However, in Chimalpáhin's narrative it is not Indians but rather Blacks who are perceived as the Other of Colonial Mexico.

The exclusion of Black residents of Mexico City in Chimalpáhin's text is repeated in several noteworthy events narrated in his account. For instance, when describing the flood in the city caused by torrential rains in 1604, the manuscript states that the homes of both Indigenous and Spaniards were damaged or destroyed. The author goes into detail about the consequences the flood had in various churches and the homes of specific individuals mentioned by name. A religious procession of about 24,000 residents of Mexico City was organized as a communal plea for the rain to stop. Chimalpáhin tells us that Spaniards and Indigenous met in the Ayotípcac area, where the group began marching, but the city's Black inhabitants are never mentioned. This Black invisibility is repeated when the text alludes to the flood of 1607, the earthquake of 1611, and other events affecting all residents of Mexico City. Similar to the current humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexican border, Black and African individuals are evidently excluded from the narrative.

One of the rare community events when Black individuals are part of Chimalpáhin's manuscript is the description of the festival of Saint Matthew, which coincided with the news of the birth of King Felipe III of Spain's first son. On September 21, 1605, the city celebrated with

church bells tolling, fireworks, and a nocturnal parade. The Viceroy of New Spain led the parade followed by prominent Spanish men on horseback. Chimalpáhin, who shows attention to detail throughout his text, indicates that Spaniards were luxuriously dressed for this occasion. He continues by noting that their horses were nicely decorated and that their slaves, who walked behind their masters, were dressed in colorful clothes. The inclusion of Black residents of the city in this episode reaffirms their lack of individual identity during the Colonial Period. By referring to them as possessions that Spaniards exhibit and decorate for special events, like they do with horses, the author alludes to a less than human nature.

Mexico City's Black Conspiracy

In various entries for the year 1612, Chimalpáhin writes extensively about Mexico's Black residents. This episode portrays that segment of the population not only as outcasts but also as a source of violence and disease. The Indigenous author discusses in detail the rumors of a Black uprising that spread in the capital. It was believed that former slaves, who had settled in Acapulco and Veracruz after escaping from their masters—cimarrons—would return to Mexico City to lead the revolt. The Black residents of the town would join them and together they would take over the entire New Spain. They would have a Black king and queen and divide the land among themselves. In his meticulous description of this plot, Chimalpáhin portrays the Black population as vicious and identifies them as a common enemy of the Indigenous and Spaniards. The text mentions that the plot involved enslaving the native peoples of this land and marking them on the cheek. The author also explains that Blacks planned to kill all Spanish men. They would kill old and young men, even children, so none of them could ever reproduce. With regards to Spanish women, they would only spare young good-looking ones who would bear their children. According to

Chimalpáhin, the former slaves were so brutal that they were planning to dispose of any male children procreated with Spanish women. It was believed that they would not only kill but also dismember those male babies, their own children, immediately after birth. On the other hand, their mixed-race daughters would be allowed to live so they could later carry the children of other Black men.

Despite the seriousness of the potential consequences of this revolt, Chimalpáhin's narrative does not identify any of its Black instigators by name. Instead, when discussing the execution of 35 slaves believed to be part of this conspiracy, their otherness is reaffirmed in the text by listing the full names of the judges involved in the case but none of the Black instigators. The Black Other exists only as a faceless and anonymous cluster living in the shadows of Mexico City's society. The Afro-Mexicans hung because of this incident were later decapitated and some also dismembered. As Chimalpáhin explains, only the heads and limbs of six of them were displayed publicly in the streets of Mexico City. Doctors advised the authorities that exposing the bodies of all 35 around the city could cause illness. The bodies would decompose, the stench would turn into pestilence, and later the winds would enter Mexico City causing disease to the residents. In this episode the author reiterates that collective "us" indicating that it would be the community of Indigenous and Spaniards who could be affected by illness. Blacks are once again excluded from Mexican Colonial society and portrayed as a pile of decomposing bodies correlated with sickness.

The Black conspiracy of 1612 in Mexico City is also included in Fray Juan de Torquemada's *Monarquía Indiana* [Indian Monarchy] (1975). This Spanish friar, who was an eyewitness of the events like Chimalpáhin, does not give details regarding the conspirators' plans. Instead, he merely mentions that a group of Blacks were planning to revolt and cause mayhem in

the town. This text focuses on the consequences that this scheme had for the city residents. Torquemada explains that Holy Week's processions had to be canceled and churches closed their doors. Like Chimalpáhin's account, this manuscript describes the execution and dismemberment of the black instigators, which in this case are 36 rather than 35 as reported by the Indigenous author. He also indicates that only a few body parts were hung around the city, as a cautionary sign for those considering rebelling, but to prevent disease they were not left on display for long.

In his rendering of this incident, Torquemada echoes Chimalpáhin's perspective towards New Spain's Black population. Resembling his Indigenous counterpart, this Spanish author reinforces the invisibility of Afro-Mexicans and denies their individualism by not mentioning any of the Black conspirators by name. He also strengthens the association of Blackness with disease. Despite being an official of the Catholic Church, the institution in charge of the colony's spiritual needs, his preoccupation upon the execution of the Black conspirators is not the human suffering of those hung or their families but rather the potential pestilence that their dismembered bodies could produce. In addition, the correlation of Afro-Mexicans with violence is included in Torquemada's text, which concludes the account of this incident by mentioning the fear the Black uprising caused in Mexico City and by advising the town's residents to consider it a warning of what could have happened if these instigators had not been captured on time. Thus, the perception of New Spain's Black population is equally negative in the texts written by Spanish and Indigenous authors.

Chimalpáhin's account ends in the year 1615, when miscegenation was in its early stages. In the following decades, when more interracial couples emerged in Mexico and other colonies, the Spanish government created a complex classification to categorize their offspring. This taxonomy, named the *Sistema de Castas*, inspired artists who painted stereotypical representations

of the increasingly diverse colonial population. In those images, such as the ones painted by Miguel Cabrera, Black individuals and their mixed-race descendants were portrayed as violent, lazy, and savage (Vaughn 2005). In fact, some of the new racial combinations involving Blacks were given Spanish animal names such as *coyote* and *lobo* [wolf]. As Douglas Cope (1994) explains in his book *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660-1720*, Colonial government officials dictated laws specifically to control New Spain's Blacks. They were prohibited from being on the streets during the night, avoid the gatherings of not more than four persons, had to live under the supervision of a master, and could not wear jewelry or carry arms (Cope 1994).

The Mexican Nation

The Mexican war of Independence from Spain began in 1810, putting an end to the Colonial Period but continuing the discrimination and exclusion of Blacks. As Jorge Delgadillo (2019) indicates in his study about nineteenth century Mexico, it is estimated that in 1821 when the nation gained its sovereignty, at least 10 percent of the population was of African descent. However, the national identity that emerged after the Independence revolved around the figure of the Mestizo, progeny of Spaniards and Mexican Indians, who inherited a hybrid culture. This new Mexican national identity excluded Blacks, who remained an invisible and voiceless mass in this new nation. In fact, the Afro-Mexican heritage of Vicente Guerrero, one of the leaders during the war of Independence, was not disclosed or explicitly recognized until recent years (Vincent 2001). Afro-Mexicans were also excluded from literary texts that appeared in the new independent country, which focused on reconciling Mexico's two ethnic pillars: Spanish and Indigenous. As Doris Sommer (1993) explains in *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin*

America, inter-racial love stories—mainly between White men and Indigenous women—were a common component of literature from the nineteenth century as a symbolic merging of the two cultures.

During that period of national building and political turmoil that followed the Independence, one of the only acknowledgements of the presence of Afro-Mexicans in the country came by means of the *negrito poeta* [the little Black poet]. As Carmen Boullosa (2013) explains in her study about this character, a series of satirical poems situated in Mexico City and dealing with various clichéd individuals, the barber, the carpenter, the priest, etc., are attributed to this poet. Boullosa states that this Mexican Black poet was a creation that became part of Mexico's popular culture during the nineteenth century. Its creator is unknown but researchers such as Miguel Matos Moctezuma (2005) agree that he was not a real person but rather the product of someone's imagination. According to Boullosa, the *negrito poeta* was a caricaturized Black man and the use of a Spanish-language diminutive in his name—*el negrito* [the little Black man]—implies his lack of power and small significance. The unimportant role that Afro-Mexicans had in independent Mexico is reflected in this fictional Black poet, who in his own verses is mocked by others for being Black and poor.

The dismissive mentality toward Afro-Mexicans persisted throughout the twentieth century. After the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1921, the nation experimented with another period of identity formation. This time, revolutionaries such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata became national icons. With the emergence of muralism after that violent period, the walls of Mexico's public buildings turned into colossal canvases where the country's history was portrayed. These murals, painted by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, among others, once again excluded Afro-Mexicans. Mexico's Indigenous past, the blend of the two

cultures after the Spanish invasion, and the Mexican Revolution persisted as main themes in the visual narrative creative by muralists. It is not surprising that the mastermind behind this Mexican artistic phenomenon was José Vasconcelos, Secretary of Public Education at the time. In his renowned essay, *La Raza Cósmica* [The Cosmic Race], Vasconcelos (1997) suggests the emergence of a superior race—the cosmic race—that encompasses all single races in the world. This treatise proposes *mestizaje*—racial interbreeding—as a method for human advancement. According to this Mexican philosopher, this phenomenon would expand the positive attributes of superior races and eliminate the negative traits of inferior races (Vasconcelos 1997). With regard to the Black component of this new racial mixture, Vasconcelos relegates them to the inferior scale, portraying them once again as undesirable. As Manrique indicates in her article about this topic, the objective of *mejorar la raza*—improving the race—proposed by Vasconcelos is still present in Mexican society and pop culture expressions such as soap operas where whitening is perceived as a common goal (Manrique 2016).

Mexico's discrimination toward Blacks became a topic of conversation in two incidents occurred in 2005 as recounted by Claudio Lomnitz (2017) in *La nación desdibujada: México en trece ensayos* [The Blurred Nation: Mexico in Thirteen Essays]. The first one happened when President Vicente Fox, during a press conference organized to discuss new restrictions put in place against migrants in the U.S., exclaimed that Mexican migrants did the work that not even Blacks wanted to do (Lomnitz2017). This affirmation was condemned in the U.S. by numerous governmental and private organizations as well as individuals, including the White House and Jesse Jackson. That same year, the Mexican Postal Service released a series of commemorative stamps depicting Memín Pinguín, a cartoon character from the 1940's. In the Mexican comic book, Memín is a Black boy with thick lips and a flat nose, lives in Mexico City with his mother, who

physically resembles Aunt Jemima, and is frequently ridiculed at school. Like the President's statement, this also became an international controversy. Mexico had conventionally associated discrimination against Black people with the United States, but the 2005 incident forced Mexicans to evaluate their own racism and examine the collective marginalization of Afro-Mexicans.

An important effort to overcome the invisibility of Afro-Mexicans took place in 2015. That year the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) included for the first time ever an option in its Census for Mexicans to self-identify as Black, Afro-descendant, or Afro-Mexican. The results of this survey indicated that at least 1.38 million people of African descent lived in 21 of the 32 Mexican states (1.16% of the total population), with the highest numbers in Oaxaca, Veracruz, and Guerrero (CONAPDE et al. 2015). While this segment of the population has now been officially recognized in statistical data, the Afro-Mexican identity remains highly concealed and rarely talked about in the country.

Conclusion

Mexico's systemic and institutional bias against its Afro-descendant citizens, a discriminatory ideology replicated towards Black and African migrants at the U.S.-Mexican border, is deeply rooted in the Colonial Period. As this study explains, Spaniards conveyed their prejudices against this population in their American colonies, including Mexico, where individuals of African descent were relegated, unfavorably portrayed, and denigrated. Primary texts from the time, such as Domingo Chimalpáhin's Diary, demonstrate that the association of Blackness with disease and violence, among both Indigenous Mexicans and Spaniards, was prevalent in Colonial Mexico. Despite their continuous presence in Mexican territory in the centuries following its

independence from Spain and even after the 2015 Census quantified their existence for the first time, Afro-Mexicans continue to be essentially disregarded by mainstream Mexican society.

This racial marginalization extends to the invisibility of Black and African migrants and asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexican border, whose presence in this contentious frontier is overlooked. Recent reports indicate that at least 5,800 Black migrants from Haiti, Cameroon, Congo, Sierra Leone, and other countries remain in Mexico while waiting to seek asylum in the United States (Solís 2019). In addition to being excluded from the narrative of the border, which lately tends to focus on the majority of the migrants who are largely Indigenous and Mestizo, Black migrants are victims of racially based mistreatment and many struggle to overcome the language barrier (Bernal 2019). The Colonial Period ended centuries ago but unfortunately, racial discrimination against Blacks continues to be palpable in present-day Mexico.

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Brenda Romero is an Assistant Professor of Spanish at the Department of World Languages and Literatures at California State University, Sacramento. She received a Master's in Spanish and a PhD in Latin American Literature from the University of Utah and was a faculty member at College of Saint Mary in Omaha, Nebraska. Dr. Romero's areas of expertise are Mexican Studies and the Colonial Period. She was editor-in-chief for the Utah Foreign Language Review. She has presented her research at numerous professional conferences in the U.S. and abroad, and her work has been published in various academic journals.