

Africanos/Afro-Mexicans: Visual Journeys in Afrodescendant Communities

Abraham Nahón¹

Underlying the images displayed and intertwined in the exhibition *Africanos* there is undoubtedly a purpose designed specifically for these bleak times: to challenge the dominant narrative. Stories of pain, exclusion, and resistance burst forth from its singular accounts. The images are contemporary —or archival— visualizations of a latent past, in which the recording of reality, the construction of settings, and the reinvention of imaginaries undertake to combat a process of invisibilization. Fissures, subterfuges, allegories, and conflicting visions that endeavor to activate subjectivities, in order to continue struggling against a false appearance of totality, of homogeneity. Photographs created out of the heterogeneous ways of life, worldviews, and different kinds of rituality of the descendants of Africans in the western hemisphere, “infected” by the creative force of their own diversity.

These black peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean constitute living, singular, and clearly differentiated cultures that enrich the plurality of these places. They are communities with their own divergences and inner contradictions that configure, in the face of adversities provoked by this whitened modernity, new social relations, emotions, desires, memories, solidarities. Our racialized vision of them has prevented us from understanding the complex cultural and visual framework within which they exist. An ideological argument for white supremacy prevails in the present-day world. The hatred, contempt, and incomprehension of that racist vision is easily reproduced and, translated into a sociopolitical practice associated with economic inequality, does serious harm to the potentialities of these black (and indigenous) communities.

In order to challenge the hegemonic discourse propagated by this simplifying logic, multiple creative projects have been brought together in the exhibition and in this book

¹ Born 1974, in Oaxaca, Mexico. Professor and researcher at the Instituto de Investigaciones en Humanidades of the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca. Holds a PhD in sociology from the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. His field of research involves the interconnections of art, photography, and society in indigenous, mestizo, and Afro-Mexican communities, particularly in the state of Oaxaca.

through the use of contemporary images, which can be reflected on as areas of discussion about the historical, political and social significance to be assigned to these Afrodescendant populations. These photographs have been created from different sensorial and geographical coordinates, seeking to make a claim on the viewer's attention through various visual and conceptual approaches.

This effort to trace, research, present, and produce both documentary and artistic images that reflect on these Afrodescendant communities suggests new paths to interpretation as regards certain central themes of their paradoxical symbolic cartography: the different forms taken by identity processes, the activation of resistance memories, the latent influence of shamanism and *santería*, the poetics of landscape, the concealment of everyday habits, the whitening of historical images, the violent rending of the social fabric, the inventiveness of popular culture, the stylized performance of rites and ceremonies, including dances that involve the ritual use of masks, among many others.

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From the very beginning of the exhibition, the two murals executed on site by artists Baltazar Castellano (Mexico) and Gustavo Esquina and Manuel Golden (Panama) celebrate the theme of "Africamericanness" by depicting profane rituals, dances, symbols, and mythical figures coexisting in a representation of fused identity, in a panoramic festive ceremonial. The artists' own talents and their Afrodescendant backgrounds allow them to blend esthetic traits, cultural allegories, and personal life experiences in a collective exercise. The communal festivities do not only interrupt the time of domination: the imaginative drama they depict may also be subversive, if, to the rhythm of the *arcusa* (a sort of friction drum) and the *charrasca* (jawbone), we follow Queen Congo, the devils, *la Minga*, and especially, the *cimarrón*, or Maroon, who, to the sound of *sones de artesa*, invites us to enjoy the fruits of rebellion.

But the present, in order to be transformed, requires the sparks struck by the past, and needs to understand how certain images, in spite of being conditioned by the

mentalities and technical possibilities of a former age, have opened up new perspectives, deepening our knowledge. Which is why, in this curatorial proposal, the intersection of timelines acquires such exceptional force. The exhibition explores the recesses of memory by means of a sort of visual archaeology, presenting photographs from collections as important as the Fundação Pierre Verger, the Fondo Documental Afro-Andino of Juan García Salazar, the Archivo Fotográfico Courret at the Biblioteca Nacional del Perú, the collection of the Instituto Moreira Salles in Brazil, the family archive of Victoria Santa Cruz, and the collection of the Consejo Mexicano de Fotografía at the Centro de la Imagen, as well as the photographic archive of Humberto Rodríguez in Peru. Ethnographic, historical, and poetic visions as forms of sensibility and critical political approaches to the world, which reveal a past that should no longer be retold by a single voice, but as a polyphony, creating new spaces for memory. The images of the past can be transformed into sails, raised to orient us in navigating the sea of our ongoing histories.

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Here, as in other Latin American countries, the richness of this past was long buried and concealed. Soldiers and enslaved Africans joined to form the battalions of Hernán Cortés in the Conquest of Mexico. During the period of colonial exploitation, slave ships transported their enslaved populations to a fate of forced labor not only on the coasts, but all over the viceroyalty. The contribution of the black labor force was important in agriculture, fishing, and mining, as well as in the cities, where Afrodescendants worked as street vendors, artisans, and domestics. Their contributions to making up what now constitutes the culture and population of Mexico are innumerable, including participation in decisive historical events, such as the struggle for Independence and the Mexican Revolution.

In 1946 the historical significance of these black populations began to be appreciated, with the publication of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán's pioneering study *La población negra en México* (The Black Population in Mexico), which was followed in 1958 by Cuijla, *esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro* (Cuijla: An Ethnographic Sketch of a

Black Village). The research carried out for this latter study included ethnographic photographs, which were used in only a limited way, or definitively discounted, in the published version of this and other studies. In other words, not only were the black populations of Mexico virtually unknown until these years, but the use of photographs in anthropological research, documentation, and publishing would still remain unrecognized for several decades afterwards.

It was in this period that the post-revolutionary national ideology of Mexico was consolidated, with the notion of *mestizaje*, or the mixing of races, as one of its fundamental pillars. This apparently neutral concept has actually concealed processes of exclusion and racism as concerns the black and indigenous populations of Mexico. The underlying premises of this ideology have entailed not only a centralized cultural policy that has naturalized racism, but also a modern visual culture that replicates certain stereotypes, reinforced by more subtle and intricate social practices.

Those of us who have carried out socio-anthropological research in Afro-Mexican communities have observed how processes of social and political organization have intensified over the last decade. This ethno-political mobilization has given new vigor to demands for the recognition of their rights and increased awareness of the fact that these communities have a culture and identity of their own, which distinguishes them from other ethnic groups. This has in turn reinforced the reappraisal of their cultural expressions.

Both the presentation of *Africamericanos* in Afro-Mexican communities in Oaxaca and Guerrero² and the dialogues established with them—in places such as Cuajinicuilapa, Santiago Llano Grande, San Nicolás, Montecillos, Punta Maldonado, San Juan Bautista Lo de Soto, Pinotepa Nacional, Cerro de la Esperanza, Collantes, and elsewhere—allowed us to achieve a central aim of the project, which is not always given its due; namely, to activate the construction of images by putting emphasis on social, communicative, and creative links with the communities.

At the same time, the inclusion of Afro-Mexican photographers and others from the regions in question, as well as non-Afro-Mexican photographers who have nevertheless

² At two venues: the Museo de las Culturas Afromestizas “Vicente Guerrero Saldaña” in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, and the Casa de Cultura “Paco Melo” in Santiago Llano Grande, Oaxaca.

worked for years in the area made for a fruitful and inventive intercrossing by articulating both personal and collective stories and experiences forged in the crucible of the creative process. The view from within, the anthropological approach, and an immersion in the numberless realities and imaginaries of the Afrodescendant communities form part of the social significance of this open project. In our twenty-first century it is indispensable that we reflect on all these images still absent from our construction of the history —still incomplete, mutilated, centralized— of Mexican (and Latin American) photography. There is a need to include the visual expressions of photographers rendered hitherto invisible, either because they do not come from the center of the country (or from a major town or city), or because they belong to indigenous or Afro-Mexican regions or communities.

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The images produced by Maya Goded in the early 1990s on the Costa Chica of Oaxaca and Guerrero are now part of the recent (visual) history of the black peoples of Mexico. Although Tony Gleaton and Jorge Acevedo Mendoza, among others, were also taking photographs in the same region around the same time, their images never achieved so wide a circulation as Goded's. Her anecdotal treatment of a family life full of experiences of exile, flight, and love led Goded to begin a journey and immersion of her own among the black peoples of Mexico, through the medium of photography. The power of her work in *Tierra Negra*, published in 1994, is a result not only of having penetrated into domestic environments and marginalized circumstances, but of having adopted an intimate, empathetic vision of them, and so producing very moving images. The inclusion in the exhibition of unpublished photographs from this project, along with the creation of a short documentary film about Afrodescendant communities shot recently in the coastal town of Portobelo in Panama and the Caribbean region, connects these rich experiences, imbuing them with a visual poetics that takes nothing away from the documentary density characteristic of all of her work.

Also appearing in the exhibition are the contemporary visual testimonies of a new generation of photographers, aimed at activating new concerns and formulating new questions about the black communities of present-day Mexico. In *El cimarrón y su fandango* (The Maroon and His Fandango), Mara Sánchez Renero proposes a personal interpretation, expressed in a setting of visual poetics, of the construction of identities in black communities, fusing landscape with other symbolic and historical elements that fall within her field of vision. In a project entitled *Jinetes de la frontera* (Horsemen of the Border), the Argentine photographer Luján Augusti documents the Mascogo people, who arrived in Coahuila in northern Mexico in 1850, fleeing territorial annexations and slavery in the United States. The project explores the lives of this group, acknowledging its unique history and the binational memory kept alive by the celebration of Juneteenth —also known as Juneteenth Independence Day or Freedom Day—, which commemorates the abolition of slavery in the state of Texas on 19 June 1865. The images connect social history with a fundamental aspect of the contributions of the Afrodescendant population to the country, not only in guarding the frontier, but also in providing services and knowledge as ranchers, herders, “Negro” cowboys, and farmers. Meanwhile, in *Coyolillo. El misterio del disfrazado* (Coyolillo: The Mystery of the Man in Disguise), Veracruzian photographer Koral Carballo synthesizes in images a singular interpretation of the Afro-mestizo carnival in Coyolillo, a celebration of the annual day of freedom that the owner of the hacienda granted to his enslaved workers. The “men in disguise,” with their colorful attire and the bull’s masks of carven wood, with prominent horns, have kept alive a tradition that celebrates freedom in the context of a festival brimming with the creativity of folk culture. Finally, Manuel González de la Parra’s images of Coyolillo, also in the exhibition, irradiate light with black roots, constituting both a visual record of our hidden history and a reference for present-day generations.

Yael Martínez, originally from Tixtla, Guerrero, and still a member of the community he is portraying, documents a rich history by exploring unusual narratives. The sharpened vision of this “view from within” in his series *Su sangre en mi sangre* (Their Blood in My Blood) allows him to create images that emerge from a communitarian

culture. The audiovisual material that accompanies the series underlines the role of important social agents in the dissemination of the photographer's own culture and identity. It should be pointed out that the violence, the fraying of the social fabric, and the effects of the illegal drug trade in the region where he has undertaken his project lend a broader dimension to his creative work. Underlying his images there is a political stratum that constitutes a provocation, by the mere fact of confronting these devastating circumstances with significant experiences. In the series *El polvito en tus zapatos* (The Dust on Your Shoes), Hugo Arellanes, originally from Cuajinicuilapa, dares to turn to account both objects of everyday life and the festive rituals of the Afro-Mexican communities. Against a vivid reddish background, the objects in his images shine out from where they are rooted in a region rich in stories and memories. Paradoxically, some of own conflictive family experiences lead him to portray traditional domestic utensils in a way that evokes the everyday experience of violence in the region. These last two photographers have generated a sense of visual commitment from out of the experience of their black communities, exploring other narratives, "from the inside," and confronting stereotypes that stubbornly persist in visual hegemonies.

In this whitened, fractured, and contradictory modernity, all of these Afrodescendant and Afro-Mexican proposals must be considered as part of the struggle to change our ways of seeing, feeling, and thinking. The contemporary images presented in this extensively researched exhibition and book not only reveal to us the painful history of slavery suffered at the origins of these black Latin American communities, but also open up paths toward reactivating a fundamental part of what has been denied: a Maroon spirit—why not?—of resistance, creativity, and cultural effervescence.