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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

An Understanding of the African Diaspora Through Art

By Kimberly Barillas

Afromexican art is made by and for Afromexican people who seek an expressive and creative way to address and engage with topics like social issues, culture, identity, and history. Contemporary Afromexican artists produce pieces that add to our understanding of Black populations in Mexico and the intersection of identity formation and the pressing social issues facing Afromexican women, men and children. The creation and exhibition of this artwork is important because there is a constant conversation about who can claim a Mexican identity. Stemming from centuries of mestizaje and interracial and cultural mixing, there are many people who identify as Black and of Mexican heritage. It is undeniable that for a long time, Afromexicans have dealt with racism because they do not look phenotypically Mexican. However, many Afro-descendent people have made a home in Mexico.

In November of 2023 I participated in a week-long research trip to Mexico City, where I had the opportunity to see the mural “Muerte de Las Culturas” that was created by artists Baltazar Castellano Melo, Olga Manzano Ranacuija and Jose Luis Hernandez Guzman of the collective, Raiz de la Ceiba. Baltazar Castellano Melo used this mural to regain autonomy over his identity. He has stated, “I am the son of a black mother and a Mixtec father, I am a mestizo, who has experienced transgression and discrimination due to my origin, that is why I began to paint my people and then to interpret my reality so that each work I make is a new historical source that tells this our story, our memory and that will never be erased again.”¹ In addition to

¹ Cultura, Secretaría de. 2023. “Presentación Del Proyecto Mural La Muerte de Las Culturas. (El México Negro) Del Artista Baltazar Castellano Melo.” *Gob. Mx*.

the theme of identity, the mural depicts other societal issues like immigration, motherhood, assimilation, and cultural remembrance. It is important that artists like Baltazar Castellano Melo, Olga Manzano, José Luis Hernández Guzmán bring awareness to the historical erasure of Afrodescendant people. Representation and awareness will inform people about the Afromexican population in Mexico, and can raise more support for social movements that advocate for more funding and resources in areas where Afromexican people live.

The mural “Muerte de Las Culturas,” was presented at the former college of San Ildefonso, which is now a museum and cultural center in Mexico City, best known to be the birthplace of the Mexican muralism movement. It is part of an exhibition that focuses on cultural resistance, which is exactly what Afromexican art is since it represents a community of people that have been historically ignored. “Muerte de Las Culturas” is an impressive mural that extends over two walls filled with many characters, vivid colors, and objects that add texture. There is an abundance of symbolism in the mural that is meant to add to our understanding of the African diaspora in Latin America and what it means to be Afromexican. The artists created a collaborative effort between local residents and passing migrants to contribute to the mural. Individuals could either share their creative input or have a piece of their belongings thoroughly integrated into the mural. The mural “Muerte de Las Culturas,” provided a space for marginalized people to demonstrate that Mexican identity is multifaceted and composed of many factors including historical roots, migration and diaspora, class, gender, and more. All of these factors are represented in the mural to showcase the complexity of Mexican identity.

Through the “Muertes de las Culturas” mural, our understanding of Afromexican people is deepened because it addresses immigration, identity, motherhood, assimilation, cultural

remembrance, and intersectionality. The mural's imagery highlights the historical challenges, community resistance, formation and preservation of the Afromexican identity and their culture. To create the mural, the main artists drew inspiration and help from community members who would come and go through the space where the mural was being created, truly making it a community collaboration. Olga Manzano Ranacuija, one of the 3 main artists, shared that certain items that were sewed onto the mural, were the belongings of real people who came by to add to the mural.² The addition of the personal belongings adds depth to the mural's theme, which aims to represent and honor the same people that are helping create it. For those who were only passing through, leaving a belonging behind on the mural meant that a part of them would always be in Mexico, the country that helped them get one step closer to their destination. Through their art, Baltazar Castellano Melo, Olga Manzano Ranacuija, and Jose Luis Hernandez Guzman represent the experiences of Afromexican people in a contemporary Mexico that has for very long ignored Afrodescendant people. The artists of the mural "Muertes de las Culturas" use art to visualize Afromexicans and bring awareness to the social issues faced by Afromexicans who live in Mexico but are treated as foreigners. In an interview with the journalism website America Latina, Baltazar Castellano Melo stated that "African origin is intertwined with and shared in all the spaces and territories where the Black diaspora of Latin America arrived,"³ adding to our understanding of the impact of colonialism and the slave trade. African slaves were forcibly displaced and transported to Mexico to work domestically and agriculturally. Mexican

² Olga Manzano Ranacuija and Jose Luis Hernandez Guzman of the collective, Raiz de la Ceiba (2023; Mexico City, Mexico).

³ "Afro-Hybrid Images in Motion." 2022. *C& AMÉRICA LATINA*. April 6. <https://amlatina.contemporaryand.com/editorial/afro-hybrid-images-in-motion-baltazar-melo/>.

society and culture were shaped by the language, traditions, food, music, and religious practices that were a part of the African identity. Before the 19th century, African slaves in Mexico were treated harshly and had no opportunities for self-improvement. Even after the abolition of slavery in Mexico in the 19th century, African and Afromexican slaves continued to face discrimination, systemic oppression, and marginalization. Now in the 21st century, Afromexicans continue to face social injustices, but we have begun to see a greater effort to recognize and celebrate African origin, heritage, and history that is present in Mexico. One example being the “Muertes de las Culturas” mural.

On the very far left of the first wall, Figure 3, we can see that there is a Jaguar figure, which is a mask that represents two characters that are important to the indigenous population: The Tecuan and Tlaloc. The Tecuan mask served as a way for people to communicate with the supernatural and was worn in the context of historical dances where people disguised themselves to defeat the Tecuan.⁴ While Tlaloc is the Mesoamerican god of rain and fertility, which the Aztecs venerated and made sacrifices to. In Figure 3 we can see that the mask’s head is adorned with feathers and hair that resembles braids or cornrows that are worn by African and African descended people. During our discussion with the artists, we talked about two major points regarding the historical importance of braids. First, Olga Manzano Ranacuija mentioned that slaves utilized cornrows to create maps that showed escape routes since they could not vocalize this. Secondly, during the era of the transatlantic slave trade, it was mentioned that enslaved Africans hid their own seeds in their braids, allowing them to bring a part of their identity to this

⁴ “TECUÁN MEXICAN MASKS.” 2023. *The Mexican Museum*. Accessed December 15. <https://www.mexicanmuseum.org/tecuan-mexican-masks>.

unknown territory. Thus, explaining how certain African fruits and vegetables are found around the world. Though it is only a small part of the mural, this visual narrative connects the African Diaspora with Afromexican heritage and honors the people who were forcibly taken from their homelands in Africa in the 16th century.

One notable aspect of the mural that resonated with me the most was the depiction of the river flowing through the entire bottom half of each wall, as seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2. The artists explained that it represents the Rio Grande, the river that migrants have to cross, at whatever costs, to reach the U.S. Border. The inclusion of the Rio Grande holds a lot of contemporary and historical importance because of the increase in migrants who are attempting to come to the U.S. In response to this increase, Texas authorities took extreme measures such as a string of buoys in the river and a wire fence at the border, to prevent migrants from successfully crossing, resulting in the deaths of approximately 500 people, reported in September of 2023.⁵ It is devastating because these were people who were trying to overcome the obstacles after an already long and hard journey. The representation of the river in the mural serves as a reminder of the ongoing challenges that migrants face in their journeys to the U.S. The artists took it a step further and incorporated birds within the river, portraying them as half alive, and half dead, as seen in Figure 4. Their legs were painted as skeletons to represent the people who have lost their lives in the river, while the visible part of their bodies above the water represents the people who are currently crossing it and/or have been successful in doing so. Additionally, in

⁵ Martinez, MaryAnn. 2023. "Migrant Deaths Crossing US-Mexico Border Hit 500, Extra Agents Dispatched to Help Prevent Them: 'Some Just Don't Make It.'" *New York Post*. New York Post. September 8.

<https://nypost.com/2023/09/08/migrant-deaths-crossing-us-mexico-border-hit-500-in-2023>.

Figure 5, we can see that there is a person who is drowning. The river and the details in the river bring awareness to the inhumane treatment of migrants, honor those who have crossed and those who lost their lives and emphasize the need to address the border policies that are resulting in the deaths of many.

Another interesting part of the mural lies in the detailed depiction of the Afromexicans who are on their journeys to the U.S. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that some people are facing forward while others are looking back, as seen in Figures 6 and 7. The portrayal of individuals who are facing backward was implemented to represent the people who successfully arrive in the U.S. but miss their country and the life they left behind. This resonated with me because a lot of people, including my parents, have moved to the U.S., yet they persistently long for their home countries. This portrayal challenges the assumption that everyone who migrates to the U.S. is content with their decision. This generalization is not true because, for many people, it is a sacrifice that they feel they need to make, not one they want to make. The people who are looking back also represent the fact that Mexico is home for Afromexicans. As a society we cannot deny the fact that Afromexicans belong in Mexico because their history, traditions, and culture are there. The African diaspora has been present in Mexico from the 16th century to now, so the acknowledgement that Mexico is the home they yearn for is important. Even if they are in the U.S. and are able to make a home in the new territory, they will always be Afromexican. The mural acknowledges that many people build communities or move to areas that are populated by people they identify with, as a coping mechanism and to feel close to home. In the mural, some people are looking back because they have hopes that someday they will be able to return to their home country.

Another noteworthy detail in the mural is the depiction of the shoes worn by the birds, as seen in Figure 8, where we can see that each bird has one foot with a shoe on and one bare foot. Olga shared that when the children would come through the space of the mural, they would tell her, “Look at my cuchehuaraches or cuche shirt” instead of saying Gucci.⁶ The shoes symbolize the diversity of Afromexicans who embark on their migration journey, where they now wear popular brand shoes that represent their identities. Huaraches are a traditional Mexican sandal that have been worn for centuries and play an important role in Mexican culture. Nike has huarache inspired sneakers also called huaraches. Once in America, children go from wearing the traditional Mexican sandal huaraches to the Nike sneaker huaraches. The depiction of the popular brand shoes holds a dual significance because it represents both people’s identities and the process of assimilation that they go through.

Recently, there has been an increase of Haitian and Latin American migrants passing through Mexico, and sometimes even staying in Mexico, contributing to the growing Afrodescendant population. Due to the demographic shift, Mexico must address and increase the resources available in marginalized communities where Afrodescendant people are building their lives. Mexican citizens must learn to combat and stop perpetuating anti-Black racism, colorism, xenophobia, and other forms of racism. Even though there has always been a presence of Afrodescendant and Afromexican people, there has been a lack of consistent acknowledgment of their existence and contributions to Mexican society. While in Mexico, my classmates and I had the opportunity to participate in a workshop led by Andre Lo Sanchez, which he called “Black

⁶ Olga Manzano Ranacuija and Jose Luis Hernandez Guzman of the collective, Raiz de la Ceiba (2023; Mexico City, Mexico).

Community: For Whom? How to develop anti-racist transmedia content.” Andre Lo Sanchez is an Afromexican filmmaker and social media influencer dedicated to creating activism media that addresses and represents everyday experiences of racism that he and others face in Mexico. His content addresses the challenges faced by Black identities in Mexico and confronts the question of one’s identity as either Black or Mexican- when in reality one can identify as both. During the workshop, we had the opportunity to ask him questions about how racism is present in Mexico, how activists like himself respond to racism, and how it affects the daily lives of Afromexicans in education, the workforce, and society. Much like the mural, Andre expressed that Afromexicans and Afrodescendant people are ignored or become victims of social prejudice, but they are never acknowledged. They have to live in a society that forces them to choose between their identities without allowing them to be both African/African descended and Mexican. Sanchez’s workshops served as a bridge that connected awareness and action, challenging our perspectives and providing a realistic understanding of the complexities of Black identities in Mexico. The workshop prompted reflection on the broader societal issues that the mural represents and highlighted that institutionalized racism is part of what motivates African and African descended people’s identities to migrate to the U.S. in search of better opportunities. It represents the experiences of African and African descended people’s identities, like the experiences Sanchez shared with us during the workshop, and encourages them to preserve and prevent their cultures from dying by creating a sense of unity, pride, and community, within and beyond the Mexican border.

Despite ongoing efforts to increase awareness for Afromexicans, there continues to be a disconnect between the needs of the population in Mexico City, where the mural was created and

housed at the Colegio de San Ildefonso, and the availability of social services in more marginalized communities outside of the city. The neglect of the Mexican government in recognizing the percentage of the population that identifies as Black is a formidable challenge. Up until the 2020 census, Mexico was the only Latin American country that did not account for its Black population, therefore perpetuating the invisibility of Afromexicans.⁷ The census matters because it helps the government determine the allocation of funding for programs that are supported to further ensure equality for all Mexican citizens. The census collects data on the social and economic groups of different populations within specific areas in the country. Afromexicans were first included in the Mexican census in 2015, so there was no accurate information on what regions had Afromexican communities and what percentage of the population they made up. This was an issue because it meant that Afromexican people were not

⁷ Christina A. Sue (2023), *Is Mexico Beyond Mestizaje? Blackness, Race Mixture, and Discrimination*, *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 18:1, 47-74.

accounted for and, therefore not given the resources necessary. It also meant that the language regarding identity was complicated because you were either African or Mexican, but not Afromexican. The inclusion of Afromexicans in the Mexican census paved the way for the government, and society, to acknowledge the African diaspora in Mexico. It gave visibility and recognition to Afromexican communities that already existed but had been historically ignored. Additionally, the inclusion of Afromexicans on the census resulted in the acknowledgment of an equitable distribution of resources because most Afromexicans live in impoverished regions where living conditions are intolerable. Furthermore, the census has the power to influence anti-Black laws and behaviors. The government has long failed the Afromexican communities in Costa Chica because there have been minimal efforts to create employment opportunities and invest in infrastructure, like roads, that allow people to travel in and out of the area to commute for work.⁸ Social injustices like these perpetuate the false belief that Black people can't exist in Mexico, impeding the mobilization of advocates for the community. If the government continues to perpetuate social injustices like discrimination, economic disparities, lack of representation, and colorism, it will result in a widespread failure to recognize the significance of Afromexican identities in Mexico.

Based on the mural we can see that art can prevent cultures from dying by creating art that represents marginalized communities. To address this, we can contribute to cultures that persist and thrive through artistic activism and expression, and other forms of cultural preservation. Conversely, cultures run the risk of dying if society and our governments continue

⁸ Ibid

to marginalize communities simply for being different. Ultimately, it is our responsibility to recognize that we are all human, and advocacy for equal opportunities and resources is a must. Mexico was affected by colonization, which stripped it of its land and resources. Language, religion, and forced labor were imposed upon its peoples. Mexico was affected by colonization, which stripped it of its land and resources. Language, religion, and forced labor were imposed upon its peoples. Similarly, the continent of Africa suffered because its people were dispossessed, resulting in the loss of their autonomy and identities. Baltazar Castellano Melo, Olga Manzano Ranacuija and Jose Luis Hernandez Guzman created the mural “Muertes de las Culturas” to represent the history of blackness, the history of the mestizo, and of indigenous women who were also part of this great important black history.⁹ Through the mural, we can see that it is important to acknowledge Afrolatinx and Afromexican people because they are a part of the country’s history. Phenotypic differences do not diminish their Mexican identity. The mural serves as a reminder that cultures will die if we continue to perpetuate the erasure and invisibility of the Afromexican community. Additionally, the mural emphasizes that advocacy, unity, and awareness are key solutions to the preservation of cultures and a way to combat contemporary racism.

Afromexican art is a tool that is used to address social injustices and challenges that people face. This mural honors and represents Afromexican identities that have long been overlooked, marginalized, and denied basic human rights and resources, to address social injustices through art. Despite the title being “The Death of the Cultures,” the colors, symbolism,

⁹“Afro-Hybrid Images in Motion.” 2022. *C& AMÉRICA LATINA*. April 6.
<https://amlatina.contemporaryand.com/editorial/afro-hybrid-images-in-motion-baltazar-melo/>.

objects, and images challenge this narrative by reviving the cultures through representation. The artists and community members who contributed to the mural actively confront invisibility and prevent these cultures from dying and continuing to be erased and forgotten. The mural not only challenges erasure but also provides a platform for people to see themselves, their cultures, and identities reflected on a piece of art that is accessible to everyone. The mural was made to represent the Afro-Latinx identities within Mexico, particularly focusing on the overlooked Afrodescendant communities that are mostly located in the Costa Chica, challenging the ongoing underrepresentation and invisibility.

Appendix



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

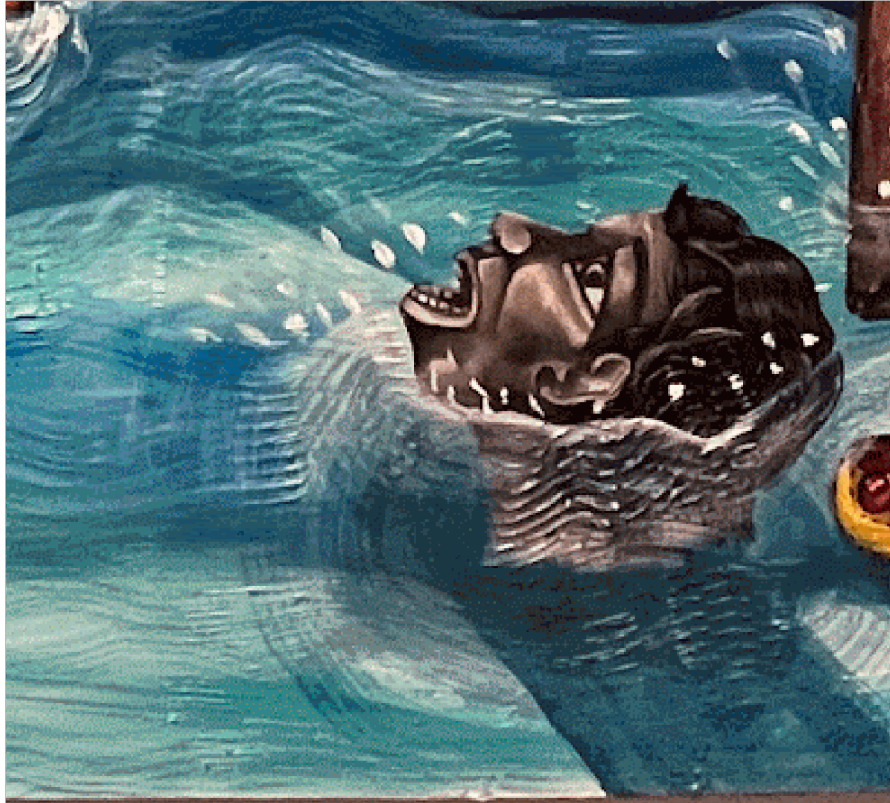


Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

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