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Publication Date

2018

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Black Mexico's Sites of Struggles across Borders:

The Problem of the Color Line

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

by

Christian Yanaí Bermúdez-Castro

2018

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2018

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Black Mexico's Sites of Struggles across Borders:

The Problem of The Color Line

by

Christian Yanaí Bermúdez-Castro

Doctor of Philosophy in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Héctor V. Calderón, Chair

This dissertation studies the socio-cultural connections of the United States and Mexico's Pan-African selected twentieth- and twenty-first century sites of struggle through literature, film, and music. Novels and movies such as *La negra Angustias* (1948/1950), *Imitation of Life* (1933/1959), *Angelitos negros* (1948/1970), *Como agua para chocolate* saga (1989, 2016, 2017), and film (1992), as well as music of racial activism by Mexican and Afro-Latino artists such as Negro José and Afro-Chicano band Third Root, are all key elements of my project to study the formation and understanding what of Mexico's *Tercera Raíz* entails historically, politically, and culturally.

I focus my study on the development of black racial consciousness in twentieth-century Mexican cultural life, and I consequently explore the manner in which Mexican writers, filmmakers and artists have managed the relationship between Afro-Mexicans and majority

populations of white and *mestizo* Mexicans, as well as the racial bridge existent between the United States' black history, and Mexico's Third Root. After the realization that there are Mexican *oeuvres* (filmic and literary) with racial overtones have been inspired by works of American and/or African American authors, who approach racial consciousness in a completely different manner, I take into consideration such cultural philosophies and apply them to the Mexican context. With this said, a great part of my project on blackness in Mexico is based on African-American intellectuals that, due to the lack of black studies in Mexico, shed light on new ways of uncovering the racial consciousness of Mexican *mestizos* and Afro-Mexicans.

To understand the cultural enigma of the Afro-Mexican, my project explores some of the following inquiries: the ideology of *mestizaje* directed towards the Spaniard-Indigenous binary; the representation of Afro-Mexican women treated in literature and film; mutual influences of the United States and Mexico through visual media and music to expose topics on blackness; the absence of official black intellectuals, centers of research, and curricula in universities in Mexico; and lastly, the benefit of drawing on foreign ideologies of blackness to explain Mexico's tripartite racial origins.

The dissertation of Christian Yanai Bermúdez-Castro is approved.

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*Para mis padres,
Salvador Bermúdez Caratachea y Ma. de la Luz Castro Herrera.
Gracias por impulsarme a volar con mis propias alas
sin dudar nunca que sería capaz de sostener el vuelo sola.
Por su infinito apoyo y amor incondicional,
esto es para ustedes.*

*Para usted, Profe.
Thank you for inspiring me to do this work,
and for always believing in me.*

*Para mi país, México, y nuestra tercera raíz;
porque existe un México Negro.*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I always thought that this was going to be the easiest page to include in my dissertation, but I have to say it has not been the case. It is a bit difficult to think about every person that, one way or another, have been there along the way to guide me, to help me, to give me that extra push that I often needed. This project has been the result of many long days and nights of hard work, that would not have been possible without the support of many people.

I would first like to thank my advisor, Prof. Héctor Calderón, for his mentorship, and for his many hours of dedication to this project that is also his. I want to thank him for his friendship and unconditional support throughout my doctoral studies, and for helping me become a better student, a better writer, and a better academic. For being the inspiration behind the topic of this work—which I discovered while I took one of his classes as an undergraduate. I am forever thankful to him because I know his “Are you sure you want to do this?” questions were intended to guide me and make sure I really wanted to continue in this profession, and I did. Here we are now at the end of this part of the journey, and I cannot thank him enough for helping me keep my optimism throughout these years in academia and making it seem that it was doable when I questioned it: “work, work, work, fun, fun, fun.” But most importantly, I want to thank him for believing in me when I doubted myself, ¡gracias, Profe!

I would also like to acknowledge my doctoral committee members: Patricia Arroyo Calderón, Stephanie Bosh Santana, and Kevin Terraciano. Thank you for your wisdom, support, and enthusiasm throughout this process. I would also like to thank UCLA’s Graduate Division for the many scholarships I was awarded, and that made this dissertation possible. Without the Harry and Yvonne Lenart Graduate Travel Fellowship, Graduate Summer Mentorship, and Graduate Research Mentorships the completion of my graduate studies and research would not

have been possible either. I am also thankful to the Department of Spanish & Portuguese for their support with the Eugene V. Cota-Robles Fellowship and Ben and Rue Travel Awards, and to the administrative staff for their assistance and patience during our interactions.

I am eternally grateful to my parents for their love and ongoing support throughout my academic life. To my mom, Lucha Castro Herrera, and my dad, Salvador Bermúdez: Gracias por siempre apoyarme y darme palabras de aliento cuando me sentía agotada. Gracias por su amor incondicional, por sus oraciones, y por nunca dudar que este día llegaría. Los amo.

I also want to thank my fellow graduate students and friends who have been there sharing this journey with me. I would especially like to thank Verónica García Moreno, Alejandro Ramírez Méndez, Nitzaira Delgado García, Laura Muñoz, Renee Rivera, Alli Carlisle, and Jesús Galleres, my beloved cohort, and to Armando Guerrero and Ernesto Arciniega, my non-cohort amazing friends. Thank you all for being such a great system of support throughout our years together in graduate school. Vero, thank you for the many hours of laughter and always making sure I was okay; Ale, thank you for your unconditional support and the many hours we spent joking and laughing together; Jesús, thank you for always being yourself with me and considering me your friend. Nitzaira, thank you for your unconditional friendship, for always been there when I needed you, for the many trips we took together, for the hours of laughter and dancing we shared, for being the best roommate, but mostly, for becoming one of my best friends. Ernesto, thanks for coming into my life during the last years of graduate school, thank you for being YOU and showing me that I can always count on you. And lastly, thank you Armando for these years of friendship. Thank you for all the laughs and the jokes, for being my confidant and one of my best friends. I am glad we went through this process together, I know it would not have been the same without your company. Let's do this!

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“*México Negro* Identities Without Borders: Afro-Mexican and Afro-Latino Rap Music.”

INTRODUCTION

In my dissertation, I will study the socio-cultural connections of the United States and Mexico's Pan-African selected twentieth- and twenty-first century sites of struggle through literature, film, and music. Since the early twentieth-century, the issues of African origin communities in both the United States and Mexico have come to the foreground. Mexico had more African slave populations than the United States; however, it is not until recent years that the now existing black populations of Mexico have begun the struggle for citizenship and cultural rights. Black populations in Mexico are now located in the Costa Chica in the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero. A 2015 census of Afro-Mexican populations established their numbers at 1.4 million, roughly 1.2 percent of the total population. Though marginalized and erased from history, late in the twentieth-century black activists have emerged forming the racially conscious *México Negro* and *Tercera Raíz* movements. In the historically symbolic year of 1992, the Mexican government finally recognized that Mexico had a racial/cultural third root, the African root, la *Tercera Raíz*, along with the original Indigenous and European Spanish roots. In his classic *La población negra de México. Estudio Etnohistórico* (1946), anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán had provided evidentiary proof of the historical and cultural presence of Mexican *afrodescendientes*. The Afro-Mexican populations have been an ignored minority until recently.

I will focus my dissertation on the development of black racial consciousness in twentieth-century and twenty-first Mexican cultural and artistic life; I will explore the manner in which Mexican writers, filmmakers and artists have managed the relationship between Afro-Mexicans and majority populations of white and *mestizo* Mexicans. Interestingly, some of the works by Mexican authors have been inspired by works by American authors who approach

racial consciousness in a completely different way from Mexican artists. With this said, a great part of my analysis of blackness in Mexico is based on African-American intellectuals that shed light on new ways of uncovering the racial consciousness of Mexican nationals and Afro-Mexicans. To understand the cultural enigma of the Afro-Mexican, my project explores some of the following inquiries: the ideology of *mestizaje* directed towards the Spaniard-Indigenous binary; the representation of Afro-Mexican women treated in literature and film; mutual influences of the United States and Mexico through visual media and music to expose topics on blackness; the absence of official black intellectuals, centers of research, and curricula in universities in Mexico until recently in 2014 with UNAM's Programa Universitario de Estudios de la Diversidad Cultural y la Interculturalidad; and lastly, the benefit of drawing on foreign ideologies of blackness to explain Mexican racial blackness. My project will address blackness in "free" African subjects (no longer subjects of trafficking, a condition that lasted through the beginning of the twentieth-century in rural Mexico in haciendas in indentured peonage and caste systems) as an enduring connection between Mexico and the United States and its representation in works of social struggle: literature, film, and music.

It must be brought to attention that in this dissertation film is as important as literature. Although the majority of the works studied in this project are literary, the filmic choices used are equal in importance in matters of their cultural significance and representation of blackness. As a form of popular media, film has the power to reach multitudes, it represents a vehicle to propagate messages that often times come with a social, cultural, or racial connotation. It was the first popular media available that was realistically affordable to masses, which represented a way for producers and directors to project their social and cultural ideologies. And if we think about the mere act of going to the theater as an act of submission—as intellectual bell hooks has

analyzed it—films are methods in which audiences attending the theater, or watching the film at home, get flooded with information that has an embedded persuading purpose in terms of social, cultural, and/or racial beliefs. The fact that films then, are a form of popular culture and have the power to persuade audiences, make the cinematographic works I have studied in this project much more significant.

It is important to note that Mexican film and literature of the twentieth-century are not necessarily dedicated “exclusively” to racial struggles. However, during this period, when the Mexican nation went through a period of social upheaval that aimed at transforming the country into a modern nation, a new outlook on racial matters emerged. In the wake of this post-revolutionary period, Mexico experienced a cultural renaissance that exploited the philosophy of *mestizaje* and that highlighted the positive outcome brought with the Mexican Revolution; indigeneity, integration, and *mestizaje* were the key ideas that dignified Mexico’s racial diversity. While this racial philosophy became the definition of Mexican identity which, in a way, echoed the utopian cosmic race principle of José Vasconcelos, the United States was witnessing a racial uprising that was a continuation from the U.S. Civil war where African Americans begun fighting for their equal treatment as U.S. citizens.

The aftershocks of Civil War (1861-1865) in the United States, and the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921) gave rise to specific themes to be expressed in twentieth-century Mexican and American culture. In the United States, the Harlem Renaissance became the pivotal cultural movement at the beginning of the twentieth-century, and in Mexico, the post-revolutionary period became the foundation for the *mestizaje* movement.¹ This is to say, both of

¹ The *mestizaje* project promoted the idea of unity, nationalism, and miscegenation between Mexican citizens regardless of race and color.

these movements are the result of racial and social of struggle present in both nations and that targeted the marginalized populations: the indigenous groups and the Afro-descendants.

In Mexico, the ideology of *mestizaje* became the central racial philosophy of the nation. In 1916, Manuel Gamio, considered the father of modern anthropological studies in Mexico, wrote *Forjando Patria*, a book with a pro-nationalist approach in which he proposed an integrational program for the country based on four forms of action: “Fusión de razas, convergencia y fusión de manifestaciones culturales, unificación lingüística y equilibrio económico de los elementos sociales” ‘Fusion of races, convergence and fusion of cultural manifestations, linguistic unification and economic balance of the social elements’ (my trans.; 183)². Later, in 1921, this ideology gained greater force with José Vasconcelos, the Minister of Education during the presidency of Álvaro Obregón. In 1925, Vasconcelos widely-known essay on *mestizo* identity where it is described as “la raza cósmica,” the quintessence of Mexicanness as it was formed by the best features of all races: “hay mil puentes para la fusión sincera y cordial de todas las razas [...]llegaremos en América, antes que en parte alguna del globo, a la creación de una raza hecha con el tesoro de todas las anteriores, la raza final, la raza cósmica” ‘a thousand bridges are available for the sincere and cordial fusion of all races [...] We in America shall arrive, before any other part of the world, at the creation of a new race fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones: The final race, the cosmic race’ (Jaén 42).³

With the philosophies of the *mestizaje* and the cosmic race, which opposed the ideas of European exceptionalism and purity of blood, the Mexican state praised the concept of

² Gamio, Manuel. *Forjando patria*. México: Editorial Porrúa, 1982.

³ Vasconcelos, José, and Didier T. Jaén. *The Cosmic Race: La Raza Cósmica*. Dept. of Chicano Studies, California State University, Los Angeles, 1979.

miscegenation at the beginning of the twentieth-century. Anthropologist María Elisa Velázquez writes: “Al contrario de los postulados del racismo europeo, en México se consideró que en el “mestizo” se encontraba la fórmula que debía promoverse para forjar la unidad demográfica y cultural de la nación” ‘Contrary to the postulates of European racism, in Mexico it was considered that the "mestizo" was the formula that should be promoted to forge the demographic and cultural unity of the nation’ (my trans.; 95).⁴ Opposing the praise for whiteness of the Eurocentric current, Mexico’s philosophy of *mestizaje* applauded the mixing of races as the only possibility of obtaining national unity. Although the praise for the *mestizo* became dominant, the presence of Africans and Afro-descendants was omitted from the discourse of the *mestizo* identity and the references to African heritage were significantly minimized: “Quedaron apenas algunas referencias en los libros de texto gratuitos de su llegada como esclavos en el pasado colonial. En el teatro, el cine y las revistas como los “comics,” se fortaleció la idea de que las personas afrodescendientes en México eran extranjeras, construyendo estereotipos racistas que, cuando no las ridiculizaban, las convertían en un peligro para el país” ‘There were barely any references left in the free textbooks of their arrival as slaves in the colonial past. In theater, movies and in “comic” magazines, the idea that Afro-descendants in Mexico were foreigners was strengthened, constructing racist stereotypes that, when they were not ridiculed, made them a menace to the country (my trans.; 97).⁵

In the northern part of the Mexican border, across the Río Grande, things were much different for Afro-descendants. In the United States, unlike Mexico, the history of Africans and

⁴ Velázquez, María Elisa. *Afrodescendientes en México: Una historia de silencio y discriminación*. INAH, 2016.

⁵ Idem.

Afro-descendants has always been present. For African-Americans their history was not buried, to the contrary, it was well known, yet unwanted. Africans and African-Americans in the U.S. suffered from racial segregation since the colonial era up to the twentieth-century with the Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.⁶ The evident difference of cultural and social treatment based on race among Mexico and the U.S. implicitly triggered artistic influences between both nations and their distinctive views on blackness. Although at some point Mexico had more African slaves than all of Latin America together, as anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán once mentioned, the official history of the country has tried to obliterate their significance in the construction of the country as a modern nation. In his book *El proceso de aculturación* (1957), Aguirre Beltrán wrote that Mexico received annually an average of two thousand African slaves during the period of 1580-1650 (25)⁷. Currently, as mentioned above, the population of *afrodescendientes* in México constitutes 1.2 percent of the country's population: an estimated total of 1.4 million Afro-Mexicans live in the nation.⁸ On the other hand, the black population of the United States constitutes 14.3% of the total population of the country, 46,282,080 African Americans are living in the country.⁹ To grasp the importance of these statistics, it is crucial to remember that for centuries, blacks were victims of the longest and largest human trafficking in history.

⁶ The Civil Rights Movement ended with the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which prohibited any type of discrimination based on religion, national origin, and race.

⁷ Aguirre, Beltrán G. *El proceso de aculturación*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Dirección General de Publicaciones, 1982.

⁸ INEGI. "Perfil sociodemográfico de localidades con presencia de población afromexicana." *INEGI*. 2015, www.beta.inegi.org.mx/app/biblioteca/ficha.html?upc=702825050719.

⁹ Black Demographics. "African American Population Report." *Black Demographics*. 2015, www.blackdemographics.com.

Paradoxically, and returning to blackness in Mexico, the enormous quantity of people of African descent in the country since the colonial period corresponded to their marginalization and the attempts of the nation-state to undermine its presence. On the contrary, the presence of blacks in the U.S. became necessary and known for the economic success of the nation, but the openly and forbidding oppression against blacks gave way to intellectual and cultural movements that were absent in the Mexican nation until the twentieth-century and beginning of the twenty-first century. The cultural and intellectual movements in the U.S. gave rise to the Harlem Renaissance, where the segregation and oppression of black Americans was vividly represented in print, music, and film. Surprisingly, some of these works of the Harlem Renaissance crossed the Mexican border, as I mentioned above, and became inspirations for Mexican artists (writers, film producers/directors, actors and singers) to create their own versions of such works in relation to blackness; topics such as passing otherness, colorism, and black face became important subjects in Mexican culture through art.

The traditional literature of social and political struggle in Mexico would be the genre of *Novela de la Revolución Mexicana*, as I have implied previously. However, this genre only focuses in the general socio-historical conflict of the Mexican working class, the indigenous-peasant. My project, on the other hand, focuses on the culture and struggle of the Afro-Mexican. To that end, concerning instances of struggle, my work has been informed by Barbara Harlow's essay "Sites of Struggle: Immigration, Deportation, Prison, and Exile" (1991).¹⁰ Harlow focuses on immigration, exile, deportation, and prison in Israeli, Palestinian and Chicano/a literatures; her ideas are precisely based on the experiences of minorities who go through these processes.

¹⁰ Harlow, Barbara. "Sites of Struggle: Immigration, Deportation, Prison, and Exile." *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*, edited by Héctor Calderón and José Saldivar, Duke Univ. Press, 1998, pp. 149–163.

For this reason, Harlow's ideological criticism becomes relevant to explain Afro-Mexico and to consider Third World women's bodies as sites of struggle. Moreover, when speaking about Third World countries' struggles, Harlow talks borders and how these geographical limitations are pertinent to the definition of a social struggle, which, in this case, I argue that is also significant to the racial struggle as she argues that borders "determine sites of struggle and potential social transformation" (150). In terms of Afro-Mexico's struggles, race becomes the number one issue that determines how they are socially and culturally perceived and treated in the country; the racial "illegality" embedded to their historical consciousness "acknowledges the political duplicity of hegemonic language of nationalism" (Harlow 152). To fathom the struggles of Afro-Mexicans through culture, whether it is literature, music, or film, it is necessary to recognize how their socio-cultural marginality is determined by their race. The language of nationalism that Harlow refers to, in this case, is entirely dedicated (until the twenty-first century) to the Spanish-indigenous *mestizo* race.

The geographical locations of Afro-Mexicans on the Pacific Costa Chica of Mexico are sites of struggle. They are marginalized spaces that border other states or that fall in the limits between land and the sea. As Harlow states, "borders become bonds among peoples, rather than the articulation of national difference and the basis of exclusion" and they "function as a site of confrontation between popular and official interpretations of the historical narrative" (152). These statements made by Harlow, become evident when we analyze the relationship between border towns of the Costa Chica of Oaxaca and Guerrero, and their relationship with the official history of the country and their place in the official discourse of nationalism and the mestizo identity.¹¹ The instances of struggle of the Afro-Mexican community have been ever-present and

¹¹ The Costa Chica of Oaxaca and Guerrero is an area that counts with the greatest population of Afromexicans in the coun

insufficiently recorded in the national historical narrative. For the Afro-descendant communities, crossing the borders of their towns into other parts of Mexico represents a feeling of societal transgression that awakens their racial consciousness; this feeling, however, is more present in Afro-Mexican women since not only do they feel out of place, racially speaking, but also objectified due to their exoticism as viewed by the majority Other. For that reason, as Barbara Harlow claims in her essay, it is necessary to contrive a "task of reformulation across borders of gender and race" to aid in the construction of identity within the margins of the political struggle (152).¹²

To open the notion of a reconstruction of a racial identity, as Harlow suggested, I begin Chapter One with writer/anthropologist Francisco Rojas González whose lead character in his novel *La negra Angustias* (1944), Angustias Farrera, a *mulata coronela* in Mexico's civil war, the Mexican Revolution of 1910, is the first Afro-Mexican woman to be represented in Mexican literature. I will continue with Mexican female director Matilde Landeta, who through the film adaptation of Rojas González's work, *La negra Angustias* (1950), brings to Golden Age Mexican Cinema, for the first time as well, a Mexican *mulata*. Francisco Rojas González and Matilde Landeta, through the character of Angustias Farrera (novel and film, respectively), not only touch upon gender issues but also expose "a woman's perspective on official history" and popular culture (Heredia 4).¹³ Therefore, in this chapter I will be looking into the quasi-spectral role of the Mexican *soldaderas* who in great majority were mulatto women. Though the official

¹² Barbara Harlow speaks about the "reformulation across borders of gender and race" referring to the story of a Salvadorian woman refugee in "The Cariboo Café" by Helena María Viramontes. However, I consider this idea/statement relevant to the Afromexican communities, as they are also a marginalized and liminal population, just as refugees.

¹³ Heredia, Juanita. *Transnational Latina Narratives in the Twenty First Century: The Politics of Gender, Race, and Migrations*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

history of the Mexican Revolution refers to women's participants of the struggle as *Adelitas*, the docile and subservient male companions who were popularly known to fulfill a domestic-like role in this civil war, these women offered much more than a nurturing and moral support. Through the transgression of gender roles these women performed (becoming *generalas*, carrying guns, riding horses like men, dressing in a masculine manner, etc.), I propose a new meaning to the *soldadera* imagery while exposing the African lineage of these women in this unique novel of the Mexican Revolution genre and a film of the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. For this reason, through Angustias Farrera, my research on Chapter Two studies the role of Afro-Mexican *soldaderas* as women warriors of the Mexican Revolution that were of equal value as the male soldiers fighting the cause.

In Chapter Two, I continue with a novel of the Mexican Revolution turned saga, *Como agua para chocolate* (1989). Forty-five years after the publication of *La negra Angustias*, writer Laura Esquivel—in novel *Como agua para chocolate* (1989)—develops a narrative of magical realism set against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution. Similar to Rojas González's novel, Laura Esquivel touches upon the topic of Mexican African ancestry through another female character, Gertrudis De la Garza. However, Esquivel takes it to a transnational level by situating her novel on the Mexican northern border cities of Piedras Negras, Coahuila-Eagle Pass, Texas and linking Mexican blackness to African-Americans escaping from another civil war, the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865). Over twenty-five years after *Como agua para chocolate* was published, this Mexican female writer/cinematographer turns her world-renowned novel into a trilogy. Through *El diario de Tita* (2016) and *Mi negro pasado* (2017), Esquivel continues developing the racial theme of the first novel. I analyze *El diario de Tita* as a *testimonio* of Gertrudis' African lineage (Afro-Mexican and Afro-American) and ultimately as an allegory of Mexico's

long-buried *Tercera Raíz* arising in the twenty-first century. Similarly, in *Mi negro pasado*, as the transnational links of blackness from both sides of the border are evident, as well as the general and historical connection to the Black Atlantic, I explore the many racial statements of this novel that expose how Esquivel takes Mexican blackness beyond national territory to explore the African American and Afro-Mexican diasporas that conform *México Negro* in a transnational context in Chicago and New Orleans. Finally, considering the transnationality, biculturality, and racial contents of Esquivel's saga, I call this Mexican trilogy a trans-Afromexican novel. For these reasons, Esquivel can be considered a border Latina writer who uses a transnational context to bring awareness to the socio-political and racial relations between Mexico and the United States during periods of struggle.

Following up to the transnational aspect of Negritude, I begin Chapter Three with a classic American novel of race. In this chapter, I deal with blackness across borders in a more modern or contemporary setting, in contrast to the historical background in which Esquivel's trilogy is set against. American author Fannie Hurst, whose novel *Imitation of Life* (1933)—written at the beginning of the first Civil Rights Movements and in the zenith of the Harlem Renaissance—became one of the most important works in early twentieth-century American literature. Hurst depicted black-white race relations during a time that suffered the effects of Jim Crow laws and the “one drop rule.” Through the representation of the trope of the tragic mulatto as one of the lead characters in the novel, Fannie Hurst inspired director and producer John Stahl to produce the film adaptation of *Imitation of Life* in 1934. The unrealistic representation of the mammy archetype (imported to Mexican film classic *Angelitos negros*) as a conformist and servile black woman who, having a prosperous business partnership with her white mistress, decides to remain a servant caused controversy among black intellectuals of the period.

Therefore, this work makes use of Langston Hughes's satirical play "Limitations of Life" (1938) to bring a better understanding of the contradictions in the public's perception of the novel and film, especially from the African American audience.

Years later, in 1959, German-born auteur director Douglas Sirk produces a remake of Stahl's film starring Mexican-American actress Susan Kohner (daughter of recently deceased renowned Mexican American screen actress Lupita Tovar) as Sarah Jane, the tragic mulatto. Bringing a twist to the traditional American melodrama, Sirk uses his auteurist view to produce a melodrama that disturbs the mind; he gives a twist to the plot and centers the story on the black characters, the mammy and the tragic mulatto, rather than the white characters that were originally meant to carry the weight of the film.

Fortifying the connections between the U.S. and Mexico, I return south of the border to Mexican director Joselito Rodríguez and his film adaptation of *Imitation of Life*, the Mexican Golden Age classic *Angelitos negros* (1948)—starring popular Mexican star Pedro Infante—and Rodríguez's 1970 *Angelitos negros* remake starring African-American actress Juanita More (mother Annie Johnson in Sirk's 1959 *Imitation of Life*) in the role of the Mexican "mammy," la Nana Mercé. For Mexico, *Angelitos negros* represented a turning point for Golden Age Cinema as it became the most important film of the era and even more so, the most important film to deal with the subject of blackness (already well-established in the U.S.) in Mexico. The transnational influence of *Imitation of Life* via *Angelitos negros* was not destined to film only; it was also transmitted through an international musical scene. With the popularity of film *Angelitos negros* (1948) came a highly successful song that shares the same title. First interpreted by Pedro Infante, this song became internationally popular; it crossed the U.S.-Mexico border and it made its way to the ears of African-American singer Eartha Kitt. Kitt—raised in North Carolina in a

family of slaves and a product of rape by a white landowner—adopted the song as a sentimental racial anthem and covered the song in Spanish in 1953, and a second time in English in 1970, reflecting in this manner, the socio-racial similarities between both nations. With this crisscrossing of the U.S. Mexico border utilizing the theme of blackness and Mexican and black actresses trading place, I dare to make an analysis of these films through the intellectual critical thinking of African-American writer James Baldwin. For the purpose of this chapter, I will primarily focus on Baldwin’s 1976 book-length essay of film criticism and racial politics, *The Devil Finds Work*. Through the use of Baldwin’s cinematographic critical lens, I give a different perspective to the analysis of these films, particularly in the Mexican remake of *Imitation of Life* since the Aztec nation lacks in scholarship of African Studies.

In Mexico, the official ethnohistorical narrative imposed by the nation-state concealed the black ethnicity of Mexicans, obligating Afro-descendants, deliberately or unintentionally, to remain marginalized and/or segregated. Mexican Afro-ancestry through cultural studies--and represented in the artistic works mentioned throughout this essay--are the result of what Paul Gilroy named “Black Atlantic,” a cultural and political Pan-African formation defined through a “desire to transcend both the structures of the nation-state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” (19).¹⁴ For this reason, Gilroy’s term and/or theory of the Black Atlantic helps us reconsider the ideas developed in the modern West Hemisphere to understand the manner in which performers and/or writers apply their knowledge to depict the reality of a specific social group, the Afro-descendants.¹⁵

¹⁴ See Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 1993.

¹⁵ Gilroy analyzes the studies of diverse writers and performers of African descent such African Americans as W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright to support his ideologies and criticisms about ethnicity, race, and national identity.

In conclusion, by re-analyzing philosophies of Afro-American writers such as Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, W.E.B. Dubois, and Frederick Douglas, I will echo Gilroy's theory of the Black Atlantic in relation to the reality of the cultures formed in Europe, America, and the Caribbean. In the case of Mexico, just as exposed by Frederick Douglass in the late eighteenth century, and by Du Bois in the beginning of the nineteenth-century, I analyze how the color line is what dictates the race relations within a country. In sum, I study the *Afro-mestizaje* in Mexico while also looking at its transnationality. I choose specific artistic traditions that represent *Afro-Mexicanidad* and analyze that in the depiction of these subjectivities, as exposed by Douglass — and as depicted in the films, novels, and music I study for this project—color is the lone reason that falls between the Afro-Mexican and his/her place in Mexican society as a result of the negative historical connotations associated with blackness. I reach to the conclusion that “color is innocent enough, but things with which it is coupled make it hated. Slavery, ignorance, stupidity, servility, poverty, and dependence are undesirable conditions. When these shall cease to be coupled with color, there will be no color line drawn” (3).

CHAPTER ONE

The Mexican Revolution and the Black Woman Warrior

in *La negra Angustias* (1944, 1949)

It is obvious that many women have appropriated feminism to serve their own ends [...] but rather than resigning myself to this appropriation I choose to re-appropriate the term “feminism,” to focus on the fact that to be “feminist” in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression.

— bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 1981

Este episodio es un grito de rebelión de la clase más oprimida y pertenece al México de ayer. Es sólo un hecho de la Gran Revolución, ese sacudimiento que dio lugar a la reintegración de una nacionalidad respetable y respetada que hoy en día levanta su estructura definitiva sobre bases de justicia y equidad.

— Matilde Landeta, *La negra Angustias*, 1949

Introduction

During the early decades of the twentieth-century, Mexico underwent a process of armed and institutional revolution designed to lead the country toward political freedom and justice. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the ensuing Constitution of 1917 strove to establish national democracy and equal treatment for all Mexican citizens. Known as the most important sociopolitical conflict of the twentieth-century, the Mexican Revolution contributed to the renaissance of the country as a modern nation that undoubtedly would not have been possible without the armies of poor *mestizos*, indigenous peoples and Afro-Mexicans. Although this political struggle is known to have been male-dominated, women also played a crucial role in the success of the Revolution. The *soldaderas*, women soldiers popularly known as Adelitas, were not only comprised of indigenous women, as is commonly believed, but also included Afro-Mexican *soldaderas*, some of whom reached the status of colonel and general. Setting aside the romanticized tale of the *Adelita*, the popular woman soldier, this dissertation studies the role of

one Afro-Mexican *soldadera* through a feminist and racial lens using Francisco Rojas González's 1944 novel *La negra Angustias* and the 1949 film adaptation of the same title by pioneer feminist filmmaker Matilde Landeta. Through the analysis of both works, this project brings to the surface the “revolutionary” blackness of the Mexican Revolution while uncovering the non-traditional role of the women warriors who took part in this historic event.

At the end of the 1940s, a memorable meeting took place among three individuals who represent a significant but unknown aspect of Mexican cultural and political history: Anthropologist and writer Francisco Rojas González, filmmaker Matilde Landeta, and one of the first revolutionary Afro-Mexican women, Colonel Remedios Farrera. Found living in poverty in a small town in the southern state of Guerrero, Farrera is already a woman of more than sixty years of age, residing in isolation in a hut. Rojas González has taken his friend and collaborator Landeta to meet the colonel, who Landeta describes as a playful character who expressed herself with profanity while smoking a cigar that at times seemed larger than her in light of Farrera's diminutive stature (Burton-Carvajal and Landeta 87). This memorable episode reflected the importance of the woman who managed to become the muse of both artists. Leader of a Zapatista troop during the southern Mexican Revolution, this daring woman, who wielded an infamous 30-30 carbine and defended revolutionary ideals, would eventually be immortalized: first in Rojas González's novel and later when Landeta transformed the story of this Afro-Mexicana beyond pen and paper, giving each female character a place in Mexican cinema that would reflect their transcendence as “revolutionary” women.

This chapter explores the importance of a female Afro-Mexican portrayal in Mexican literature through a critical feminist perspective of the representation of such a character in cinema. The essay is in part a response to the current male-dominated body of scholarship on

Mexico's Afro-descendants focusing on the masculinist perspective of Mexican literary works.¹⁶ Given the lack of attention to African lineage in female literary characters, as well as the near complete absence of analytical works, in this project, I will touch on topics of identity within the novel, and also within the cinematographic adaptation of Francisco Rojas González's work. While I question Rojas González's views of the cultural identity of Angustias as an *Afromestiza* and of gender roles, I also juxtapose his portrayal of the mulatto character with the feminist vision incorporated in Landeta's adaptation. Although both of these works expose the misrepresentations of a minority ethnic group through the mulatto character from southern Mexico, Angustias becomes a key element in the deconstruction of the social representation of feminine subjectivities in literary and cinematographic works as well as in Mexican culture. Therefore, this study provided a broader perspective on Afro-Mexican women as warriors in social movements and their place in the *mestizaje* project that defines the official Mexican discourse on race.

The Evolution of Mexico's Artistic Movement: Race, Gender, and Feminism

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 influenced various artistic fields in Mexico. Literature became one of the first means of communication to express Mexico's post-revolutionary nationalist ideology. Well-known writers like Mariano Azuela in *Los de abajo* (1916) to Juan Rulfo in *El llano en llamas* (1953) captured the age of armed conflict focusing on the Mexican mestizo peasantry. However, it would be Rojas González, first with *La negra Angustias* in 1944

¹⁶ Among the most famous, if not the most famous, literary works that depict the Afro-Mexican culture, we find *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962) by Carlos Fuentes. One notable exception of a female literary Afro-Mexican character is "la Morena" in Argentinian writer Myriam Laurini's detective novel *Morena en rojo* (1994). See Sandra Ruiz's "Escrito con tinta roja: The Mexican Feminist Detective in the Fiction of María Elvira Bermúdez, Myriam Laurini, and Patricia Valladares," UCLA Dissertation, Hispanic Languages and Literatures, 2014.

and three years later with *Lola Casanova* in 1947, who would break the narrative mold of the Mexican Revolution by immortalizing a Mexican mulatto and a Creole woman who adopts an indigenous culture in exchange for her native Spanish heritage. Identifying Mexico as a multicultural and multiethnic nation, the postrevolutionary narrative eventually proved to be a failed attempt to spread the ideology of national unity implied in the political discourse of the nation-state: it reflects a literature of racist and discriminatory traits against marginalized groups, including the indigenous, peasants, Afro-Mexicans and, above all, women. Taking into account context of the Revolution, as well as post-revolutionary Mexico, in 1940s literature and film, rather than promoting a message of national unity, portrayed a division of classes with the power of the ruling class over the popular masses, the patriarchal discourse that remained dominant. Films such as *Flor Silvestre* (1942), *María Candelaria* (1943) and *Enamorada* (1946) by director Emilio “El Indio” Fernández top the list of films that comprise what is known as the Golden Age of Mexican cinema in relation to the Mexican Revolution. In these cinematographic works, the idea of national unity is fortified through the family, and therefore, through the virgin, a selfless, submissive woman who serves as the cohesive member of the family nucleus so praised during the Revolution. The war only serves as a backdrop, and the plot revolves around the construction of women who defined by the prototype of the holy mother and the sacrifices she makes for the benefit of her family. Weak, docile, and even strong women who subjugate themselves before the image of man are the women most commonly represented in films made during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. In these post-revolutionary films, the strong image of the Mexican *macho* is placed before the weak and passive feminine image.

In response to the patriarchal ideology so strongly propagated in Mexico during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the counterpart to the all-male narrative and post-revolutionary

cinematography begins in Mexico. Matilde Landeta becomes the first Mexican filmmaker to give prominence to women in the revolutionary scheme. Not only does she choose to portray women, she also selects women who are regarded as marginalized: peasants, the indigenous, and Afro-mestizas, among others. Landeta's cinema is a sum of reflected ideas that, in addition to being innovative, are threatening to an industry controlled by men, to a "cinema of men." Despite facing a male-regulated industry as the most important obstacle in her career, Landeta clings to her passion for cinema and projects a different vision in cinematography, and with her begins a "cine de mujer," a cinema by women. The steps taken by this trailblazing Mexican filmmaker became a source of inspiration for new generations of female writers and filmmakers. One of these women is writer Rosario Castellanos, who, as a contemporary of Landeta, was influenced by the feminist vision she contributed to Mexican cinema. In 1950, Castellanos began her feminist writings with her Master's thesis in Philosophy at the UNAM, "Sobre cultura femenina." Several years later, in 1957, she published the novel *Balun Canán*, in which she exposed the injustices toward the indigenous community, and in 1972, with *Poesía no eres tú: obra poética, 1948-1971*, the writer used her poetry to break the mold of the canonical eternal feminine. In cinematography new filmmakers who followed Landeta's example also arose. María Novaro who began her career in the 1980s with ideas linked to those of Landeta that are solidly depicted in films such as *Lola* (1989) and *Danzón* (1991). Novaro, in the new stage of contemporary Mexican cinema, continues the legacy of Matilde Landeta by contributing a feminist vision to the Mexican film industry in which women's cinema, *cine de mujer*, is consolidated. With the "rewriting" of Rojas González's novels, especially *La negra Angustias*, the pioneer of Mexican *cine de mujer* becomes a woman who transcends Mexican patriarchal revolutionary ideas, influencing the work of other female artists.

Cinematographic works became relevant in post-revolutionary Mexico as they reflected much of the social and cultural reality of people while inviting the spectator for a ride along the culturally and racially unknown. As intellectual bell hooks writes in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* (1996), “in this age of mixing and hybridity, popular culture, particularly the world of movies, constitutes a new frontier providing a sense of movement, of pulling away from the familiar and journeying into and beyond the world of the other [...] Movies remain the perfect vehicle for the introduction of certain ritual rites of passage that come to stand for the quintessential experience of border crossing for everyone who wants to take a look at difference and the different” (2). In this sense, the movies of post-revolutionary Mexico function as a means to properly introduce the world of the Other. The nationalistic significance of the *mestizaje* movement, the relationships among races, and the racial and gender biases implied in the fiction of most nationalist authors encapsulate the focal themes on which filmmakers relied to illustrate cultural otherness in cinematography.

Without taking away credit from Rojas González’s work regarding gender and race relations, Landeta’s film adaptation adds a new vision to his novel. While Rojas González’s portrayal of the mulatto as a subaltern subject and as a woman are rather questionable, the sole fact that he employed a mulatto character as the protagonist of his novel made him an innovative author, demonstrating an uncommon manifestation of racial consciousness through his work. Landeta in turn becomes a daring woman filmmaker who changes the original, traditional/paternalistic depiction of “la negra” Angustias. The filmmaker does, however, make certain to portray a character who remains strong during a historical and sociopolitical period of struggle. In this sense, the filmmaker becomes another type of author as she tweaks the story for the purpose of the film. As Juanita Heredia explains in *Transnational Latina Narratives* (2009),

Latina authors who involve historical facts in their narratives assume the role of historical commentator (4). On this occasion, although Landeta is not the original author of the novel, she takes on the role of author in the narrative of her film adaptation. She sought to change the way women and minorities were portrayed, since, as Heredia indicated, the Latin American nation-building process “is often recorded as the efforts by men, often obfuscating the role of the marginal in societies (i.e., black, indigenous, Asian, mestizos, women, and the working class). These women writers are not only imparting gender matters or a woman’s perspective on official history, but also popular culture” (4). Landeta’s *Angustias* was a more distinct character than that depicted in the novel, as she represented a strong, fearless woman who took part in the building of Mexico as a modern nation. Substantially, Matilde Landeta’s cinema echoed a pedagogic role in which--as bell hooks suggests concerning the racialization of mainstream cinema---, it promoted a “counterhegemonic narrative challenging the conventional structures of domination that uphold and maintain white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (3). By the same token, *La negra Angustias*, through Landeta’s vision, became a subversive form of cinema that challenged the established patriarchal norms of the male-dominated film industry.

Francisco Rojas González: Breaking Away from the Traditional Revolutionary Novel

Comprised of a set of narrative works inspired by the diverse social movements of the Mexican Revolution, the *novela de la revolución* represents the most important literary movement of twentieth-century México. Writer Francisco Rojas González, although being known as a revolutionary author, broke away from the conventional models of this movement by defying some of the “established” characteristics. In *Francisco Rojas González: Exponente del nacionalismo mexicano* (1966), Joseph Sommers cites writer Joaquina Navarro’s essential

characteristics of the revolutionary novel: brevity; autobiographical form or witness testimony; simplicity of the plot restricted to historical narration of events; lack of importance of amorous topics or female characters; idiomatic adjustment; a didactic intent, and constant present of the common people as protagonist, encompass the main characteristics.¹⁷ Among these, author Rojas González defies a few: lack of importance on female characters and romantic themes, didactic intent, and the constant present of “the people,” *el pueblo*, as protagonist. Contrary to the *novela de la revolución* where the central characters are Mexican *mestizos* and indigenous peasants, Rojas González’s main character is a black Mexican. In the same manner, opposing the revolutionary novel’s main characteristics, the protagonist is a female, the plot is more centered in the personal transformation of the character rather than the socio-political conflict, and consequently, the mulatto woman, not the Mexican people, captures the role of the protagonist of story: “El relato fundamental no es el de la Revolución o el de las luchas agrarias de Zapata sino el de la trayectoria humana de la joven *mulata*, a medida que el trastorno social influye en su vida. *La negra Angustias* se desvía del modelo de la novela revolucionaria por este intento de enfocar el desarrollo del personaje” “The fundamental story is not that of the Revolution or that of Zapata's agrarian struggles, but of the human trajectory of the young mulatto, as the social upheaval influences her life. *La negra Angustias* deviates from the model of the revolutionary novel for this attempt to focus the development of the character’ (my trans.; Sommers 68). In this manner, the author of *La negra Angustias* evidently breaks the mold of the *novela de la revolución*, although the most significant defiance of them all is undoubtedly the presence of Mexican blackness in his work.

¹⁷ See Joaquina Navarro. *La novela realista mexicana*. Compañía General de Ediciones, S. A., 1955, pp. 37.

Rojas González before dedicating part of his life as a literary author was involved in anthropological and ethnographic studies. Joseph Sommers commented in his book that, around 1930, González studied at the Museo Nacional de Etnología under the wing of Miguel Othón de Mendizábal and Andrés Molina Enríquez, two of the precursors of Mexico's anthropological and ethnological research (23). Profoundly influenced by this stage of his life, Rojas González, then as a literary writer, became concerned with portraying the essence of the Mexican people. His nationalistic views acquired from personal experiences, along with his research at the Museo Nacional, echoed his mother's words of advice in 1912 as a young nine-year-old living in the midst of the Revolución: "Estás muy chico para irte a la bola...pero prométeme que lucharás siempre por los pobres" 'You are too young to join the revolt...But promise me that you will always fight for the poor' (my trans.; Sommers 21).¹⁸ Given these facts, Rojas González's intentions in the literary field were always associated with the representation of the lower class and the discovery of Mexico's cultural roots.¹⁹ Ultimately, it comes to no surprise that the majority of his works portray indigenous people, and with *La negra Angustias*, the Afro-*mestizaje*.

Understanding Rojas González's influence and ideologies are a result of the nationalistic discourse of Mexican *mestizaje*. Therefore, it is significant to acknowledge that the author's viewpoints are derived from the notions of heterogeneity and diversity that label Mexico as a country in which its national identity derives from the coexistence of different ethnic and linguistic groups, mainly indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and Europeans. Mexican

¹⁸ See Mauricio Ocampo. "Francisco Rojas González, o el arte por el pueblo." *El Popular*, 21 Feb. 1954, pp. 6.

¹⁹ Rojas González's other literary works include *El Diosero* (1954), a collection of short stories that portray the life, customs, and syncretism of the indigenous peoples. He also authored anthropological and ethnographic works as *Etnografía de México. Síntesis monográficas* (1957), "El comercio entre los indios de México" (1945), "El zapatismo y la calumnia" (1935), "Los mazahuas" (1939), "Totemismo y nahualismo" (1944).

mestizaje, that is, indigenous Mexicans and those of Spanish descent, formed the cultural and racial base of Mexico, simultaneously representing new possibilities for the future. When contemplating Mexico through historical stages, and up until the twenty-first century, the identity of the country revolved around the idea of the mixing of races, which led to the creation of new cultures. However, it was not until 1992 that the Mexican government recognized the third cultural and racial base of Mexico, its Afro-Mexican population. In *African Mexicans and the Discourse on Modern Nation* (2004), scholar Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas considers *mestizaje* in relation to Afromexicanness. Echoing the reflections of Richard L. Jackson on *mestizaje*, Cuevas interprets *mestizaje* as an “ethnic lynching” in which whiteness is reinstated by the bleaching out of blackness, thus eliminating any possible association amongst *mestizaje* and negritude.²⁰ Although the European, indigenous and Afro-*mestizo* lineages are an intrinsic part of Mexico’s national identity – and are critical to the formation of a multicultural Mexico – the last two have been undervalued and relegated to marginal roles due to discriminatory standards of colorism. Since Mexico is a patriarchal nation, the focus of previous studies pertaining to Afro-Mexicans and Mexico’s indigenous peoples has exclusively considered the male perspective, focusing on male characters and reinforcing social stereotypes that ignore the key role women have played in Mexican society. For this reason, for having awareness of Rojas González’s ethnological works, we can deduce the significance, on behalf of the author, of creating a novel with an Afro-Mexican female protagonist.

In keeping with the biography of Remedios Farrera, Rojas González selected the state of Guerrero as the place of origin of the fictional “la negra” Angustias. Pacific Coastal Guerrero along with Oaxaca is composed of a large number of Afro-Mexicans whose ancestors are said to

²⁰ See Richard L. Jackson. *The Black Image in Latin American Literature*. U of New Mexico, 1976.

have settled in the area during the colonial period due to the geographic isolation leading runaway slaves to seek asylum in the *palenques* of the area.²¹ In *La negra Angustias*, Rojas González memorializes the true story of a female Afro-mestiza colonel who promoted libertarian ideas during the Mexican Revolution of 1910. In the literary work, the revolutionary vicissitudes serve as a vehicle in which the author profiles the idiosyncrasies of the central figure, Angustias Farrera. Raised most of her life by indigenous woman Doña Crescencia, Angustias begins to develop feminist attitudes since the opening of the novel. The mulatto protagonist, a goatherd, arrives at a negative attitude toward males based on the death of young nannie who nonetheless gave birth to two goats. It is an old billie who has caused the death of Angustias's favorite goat. Angustia's mother had died in the same manner. In this instance, an attitude of rebellion against forceful males arises through the suffering of the protagonist, a suffering she attributes to her race and gender.

The aversion that Angustias develops against aggressive masculinity is a consequence of the frequent attempts of assault she suffers as she is constantly over-sexualized and objectified by the males of her village, which Rojas González affirms through his description of the young black woman: "La mujer grande y cuadrada alzóse de su incómoda postura para levantar en alto los brazos llenos de carne juvenil. Su cintura, perfectamente contorneada, tuvo movimientos felinos, por elásticos y graciosos, cuando echó hacia atrás su admirable torso" 'The tall and curvy woman stood up from her uncomfortable position in order to lift up her arms full of youthful flesh. Her waist, perfectly contoured, had feline movements, elastic and graceful, as she pulled back her admirable torso' (my trans.; 43). This hypersexuality attached to the mulatto is a reflection of the foreign models of blackness linked to Mexico's racial imaginary. Thereupon,

²¹ "*Palenque*" is a term used in Mexico to refer to the politically organized places and concentrations of black maroons in Spanish *cimarrón*.

among the rape attempts that the mulatto experiences, one in particular ultimately forces her to escape Mesa del Aire after killing the attacker, Laureano, and oxherd, in self defense:

Lúbricamente enfurecido, el boyero trató de arrastrar a la hembra fuera del camino. A un lado, el barrancón profundo y negro; al otro, el campo de agresivos chaparrales...

–Allá –dijo el hombre mientras empujaba a la mulata–. Allá, entre las breñas, como los chivos y las pastoras...

Ella tuvo entonces un movimiento trémulo de horror y asco [...] rápidamente arracó de su cintura el cuchillo de monte y tiró a ciegas varias puñaladas. El mango del pata de venado se humedeció [...] Corrió, corrió, por entre el monte hasta alcanzar la falda de una loma; miró en medio de las sombras parpadear las lucecitas de los jacales de Mesa del Aire.

[Erodingly enraged, the oxherd tried to drag the female out of the way. To one side, the deep black ravine; To the other, the field of aggressive chaparrals ...

–There –the man said as he pushed the mulatto. There, among the thickets, like the goats and the shepherdesses...

She then had a tremulous movement of horror and disgust [...] she quickly drew the mountain knife from her waist and flung several stab wounds. The handle of the deer's foot was moistened ...She ran, ran through the mountain until she reached the slope of a hill; She looked in between the shadows, blinking little lights of the huts of Mesa del Aire]. (my trans.; 45)

Unjustly forced to become a runaway, Angustias ironically resonates a colonial episode of a runaway slave or a black maroon. Her escape from Mesa del Aire, as she relentlessly runs away afraid of being captured, echoes the phrase “run, nigger, run” from nineteenth century American folk song of homonymous name made popular in the Southern states during the slave-owning period. This episode, inevitably, marks a before and after in the life of Angustias. From this episode on, Angustias starts being conscious of her demoralized treatment as a woman and as a mulatto. Each time she becomes aware of the role that gender and race place in her life, and paradoxically, is not until soldiers of the Revolution find her that she starts her journey as a “revolutionary” woman.

Nevertheless, the exposure of the mulatto’s racial hybridity is present since the early pages of the novel when her father, the “Robin Hood” mulatto Antón Farrera, returns to Mesa del Aire, Guerrero for his firstborn daughter after several years of being a fugitive: “No más véale la color. Mulata como usted. La madre – que en paz del Señor descansa – era blanca y fina; de ella sacó Angustias las facciones y de usted los ademanes, la resolución y lo prietillo” ‘Just look at her color. Mulatto like you. The mother, may she rest in the Lord’s peace, was white and refined; Angustias inherited her facial features, and from you the mannerisms, the determination and the dark skin tone’ (my trans.; 13).²² The physical description of the protagonist which Rojas González strongly emphasizes demonstrates the author’s perception of *mestizaje*; by describing the Other explicitly through skin color and facial features, while emphasizing the hegemony of the white race through descriptive adjectives of superiority, the presentation of Angustias as a mulatto projects the white-black dichotomy of the subject as a symbol of inferiority. By making

²² All translations of cited quotes from *La negra Angustias*, the novel and the film, as well as personal interviews and any other cited works titled in Spanish are mine.

Angustias the novel's protagonist, Rojas González confirms that, like colonel Remedios Farrera, there were many other Afro-Mexican men and women, perhaps thousands, who participated in the Mexican Revolution. Although the "official history" of Mexico buries it, the Revolution was not only a revolution of the poor indigenous peoples, or the peasantry, but also of the Afro-Mexicans who rose up in arms with the rest of the Mexican citizenry.²³ It is precisely in this novel, *La negra Angustias*, where the contributions of the Afro-Mestizos in this social conflict are evidenced. Rojas González introduces us to a Mexican black woman as a "revolutionary" being in singular ways. Undoubtedly, both her feminist ideology and her lineage, formed in the revolutionary field, are key pieces of this character and the novel itself, serving as weapons in the obliteration of post-revolutionary misogynistic and racial stereotypes.²⁴

Briefly delving into the importance of this subject, it is fundamental to momentarily return to the historical past of the country to comprehend the social situation of the Afro-Mexicans through ethnographic and theoretical studies. With this said, the first negroes entered the country with Hernán Cortés during the conquest, primarily by the port of Veracruz, where they were brought to work in the canefields, as they were considered descendants of a "bestial"

²³ An example of Afro-Mexicans participating in social struggles is José María Morelos y Pavón, Insurgent soldier, priest, and one of the leaders of the Mexican Independence war of 1810. It is said that he was a mulatto and that to avoid being pointed out in certain circles, he covered his curly hair, his black heritage, with the legendary bandanna that adorns his head in each image that represents him. On September 14, 1913 he presented the document "Sentimientos de la nación" at the National Constituent Congress in Chilpanguingo Guerrero. Noticeably, one of the twenty-three points of this document called for slavery to be outlawed forever, same for the distinction of castes. See Gobierno del Estado de Guerrero. "Los Sentimientos de la nación." *Portal Oficial del Gobierno del Estado de Guerrero*, 2015, guerrero.gob.mx/articulos/sentimientos-de-la-nacion.

²⁴ Another example Afro-Mexicans involved in social and political conflicts is Vicente Guerrero, head of the insurgency in the resistance stage of the Mexican Independence. His African ancestry was never exposed to the public until recent years.

force.²⁵ Many of the blacks who were brought into slavery to the New Spain also disembarked in other coastal areas of the country. As explained in *Afrodescendientes en México: Una historia de silencio y discriminación* (2012), a large number of Africans settled in the coastal areas of Oaxca and Guerrero to work primarily in *haciendas*: “Primero llegaron los africanos que formaban parte de las huestes de los conquistadores españoles; más adelante desembarcaron en las costas mexicanas miles de personas esclavizadas para trabajar en las haciendas agrícolas y ganaderas, en la minas, los ingenios, los talleres gremiales y el servicio doméstico en casas conventos y colegios” ‘First came the Africans who were part of the troops of the Spanish conquistadors; thousands of people were enslaved to work on the agricultural and cattle ranches, in the mines, the mills, the guild workshops, and in domestic service in convents and schools’ (my trans.; Velázquez 61). As implied in the novel, Angustias hails from the coastal state of Guerrero, alluding to the fact that Rojas González was, in fact, aware of the anthropological facts of the Afro-Mexican population:

Iba [Angustias] por la soledad del campo respirando a pulmón pleno la tibia y húmeda atmósfera que venía de la costa; de “allá abajo,” cerca del mar en donde había tanta gente igual a ella en color, en gustos, en índole; gente sencilla, dueña de ademanes lentos y sensuales y de acciones broncas como la marejada. Gente alegre y noble, de corazón abierto, tal como ella se imaginaba el cielo marino.

[She was walking through the loneliness of the countryside deeply breathing the the warm and humid air that came from the coast; from "down there," near the sea

²⁵ I will sometimes use the terms “negro” or “negroes” throughout my study, not with a pejorative connotation, but as a result of the many ethnographic and academic studies that I utilize as sources of information. In these sources, the African population brought to Mexico during the colonial periods are referred to in this manner.

where there were so many people equal to her in color, in customs, in character; Simple people, holders of slow and sensual gestures and angry actions like the surge. Happy and noble people, with open hearts, just as she imagined the sea sky]. (my trans.; 41)

In the beginning of the novel, at the return of Antón Farrera to Mesa del Aire, he also mentions his origins after having questioned the paternity of his mulatto daughter to Doña Crescencia: “–Es verdad... En la sierra no había entonces más mulato que yo; pero “allá abajo,” de donde fueron mis padres, hay muchos que de vez en vez caen por acá...” ‘It’s true ... In the sierra there was no other mulatto than myself; But "down there," where my parents were from, there are many who come here every now and then...’ (my trans.; 13). To point out, aside of recognizing the place of “origin” of Afro-Mexicans in the novel, in this case of Angustias and Antón Farrera, the author also makes the black woman a warrior of the Mexican Revolution, once again reflecting his knowledge of the life and participation of mulattoes in social struggles.

According to José Luis Martínez in *Pasajeros de indias: Viajes trasatlánticos del siglo XVI* (2001), Afro-Mexicans were known to be participants of militias since the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors to the Americas. Therefore, it is no surprise that this racial group remained active in such military groups, and that evidence of this activity was employed by Rojas González: “Para formar su ejército, algunos famosos capitanes comenzaron a llevar en sus huestes, además de indígenas, a negros, que en su mayor parte provenían de las Antillas. Así lo hicieron Hernán Cortés, Pánfilo de Narváez, en su fracasada expedición de Cuba a México y Francisco de Montejo en la conquista de Yucatán” ‘In order to form their army, some famous captains began to carry in their troops, besides indigenous peoples, blacks, who for the most part came from the Antilles. This was done by Hernán Cortés, Panfilo de Narváez, in their failed

expedition from Cuba to Mexico, and by Francisco de Montejo in the conquest of Yucatán' (203).

Moreover, it is said that for much of the first years of the colony (1521-1640), blacks surpassed the white population in New Spain, and contrary to other beliefs, they not only inhabited the coastal zones of the country, but also inhabited every part of the colony, playing a crucial role in the economic uprising of it (Carroll xi). Gonzalo Beltrán estimated that Mexico received annually an average of 2,000 African slaves during the period spanning 1580-1650 (*El proceso de aculturación* 25). However, the trafficking of black women into the New Spain, although it was known to be low cost, began to slowly decrease, as it was believed that women were less useful than black men due to their diminished physical strength: “Las esclavas tenían un precio inferior y eran de más difícil venta. Al principio, se traían mitad hombres y mitad mujeres, pero luego se redujo la proporción femenina a un tercio” ‘Women slaves had a lower price and were more difficult to sell. At first, half men and half women were brought in, but then the female ratio was reduced to a third’ (Martínez 200-1). It is evident that Africans have been present in Mexico since the colonial period, and with this came the emergence of a black Mexico that the national discourse sought to hide in virtually all social and cultural spheres:

Basta echar una simple ojeada a la literatura que va de 1910 a 1940 que comprende los años cruciales del movimiento revolucionario, para darse cuenta de la preponderancia de los estudios sociales sobre el indio y, consiguientemente, de la ausencia de cualquier alusión a los negros como sector de la población de que una u otra manera podría haber contribuido en la formación de la nacionalidad mexicana. No es pues extraño constatar que en todos los casos en que se habla de mestizaje en México, sus autores hacen exclusiva referencia a la

mezcla blanca dominante con la americana vencida. Nadie se cuida de considerar la parte que toca a los negros en la integración de una cultura en México.

[It is enough by just taking a simple glance at the literature that spans from 1910 to 1940 and comprises the crucial years of the revolutionary movement to realize the preponderance of social studies on the indigenous and, consequently, the absence of any allusion to blacks as a sector of the population that one way or another could have contributed to the formation of Mexican nationality. It is not strange, then, to observe that in all cases where *mestizaje* is spoken about in Mexico, its authors make an exclusive reference to the dominant white mixture with the defeated Native American. Nobody cares to consider the part that belongs to blacks in the integration of a culture in Mexico]. (*La población negra* 9)

Using a mulatto as the main character of his novel, Rojas González makes clear his interest in helping readers to understand and acknowledge the Afro-Mexican presence in Mexico's national identity, even though his intention may get lost by the rhetoric of the class struggle, *mestizaje*, and nationalism. Angustias Farrera, not only bears the racial, cultural, and social determinations of her race, but also the feminine marginalization this entails. Furthermore, she is a mulatto woman portrayed as living "barbaramente," barbarously among the thickets, acting in an animalistic manner in the care of goats, always restricted to the same space inside her father's hut and, at the same time, obliged to execute all of the "corresponding" domestic chores assigned to every woman. Although at first glance this mulatto could be placed within the scheme of both traditional images, racial and culture-gendered, from the beginning Angustias broke with one of

these typecasts, that of her traditional feminine and servile role (Rojas González 18). “La negra” Angustias felt contempt against men, and she rejected the marriage proposal of a suitor, which within the given sociohistorical period was not common: “Para la muchacha, Rito Reyes era uno de tantos machos hinchados de vanidad y empecinados de repugnante lujuria” ‘For the girl, Rito Reyes was one of many males swollen with vanity and dogged with disgusting lust’ (Rojas González 27). On the other hand, Antón, her father, shared opposite ideologies as he expressed his belief that his daughter needed someone to complete her, “que la acomplete,” because she is already “pidiendo a gritos,” ‘crying out’ for a *macho* “que la quebrante” ‘that breaks her in’ (Rojas González 29).

The two examples above represent an illustration of the ideological clash that existed between traditional society and Angustias. On one side it was expected that every woman would accept a man who proposed marriage, and on the other, Angustias felt an immense aversion towards the masculine gender, exposing in this manner the pseudo-feminist feeling implied in the novel, which is also evident in the epigraph in which Rojas González uses a fragment of “Hombres necios” by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz:

Siempre tan necios andáis
que con desigual nivel
a una culpáis por cruel
y a otra por fácil culpáis.
[You’re always so stubbornly mulish
that with an unbalanced scale
you blame one woman for being cruel
and the other for being easy]. (my trans.; 7)

Why would Rojas González use a poem from the tenth Mexican muse as the epigraph of his novel? The daughter of a Mexican mother and a Spanish father, Sor Juana (1648-1695) was a remarkably modern woman in her time. Her revolutionary feminine ideology kept her unhappy with the life that she, as a woman, had to endure. Due to the impositions of an extremely patriarchal society at the time, and also as a nun, she felt obligated to disguise, through her lyricism, the discontent she felt regarding all of the social injustices suffered by women. As a creator of feminist poetry, Sor Juana was able to express in a witty and ingenious way her feminine conscience. On the other hand, and with similar ideas in mind the writer from Jalisco, Rojas González, offers us a female character who tries to break from the *machista* norms of her time after being subjected to several instances of gendered injustice within her own community.

Ironically, the mulatto's feminist attitude is triggered by the sexual harassment from the male gender toward her. Certainly, for this reason, the author decided to use the religious poetess' verse to compare the character's internal and social struggles as a woman living in a patriarchal environment. However, finding herself in a somewhat more liberal historical context than that of the poet, Angustias succeeds in taking action and expressing her feminism, including her aversion to sex, as a result of the circumstances which led her to flee her village and, ultimately, become a woman of the Mexican Revolution. According to Joseph Sommers, the most important characteristic of this work and, therefore, of the character of Angustias, is the omnipresent ironic tone throughout the plot: "El desarrollo, los propios acontecimientos y el resultado, constituyen un alarde de ironía. Es irónico que una mujer llegue a la jefatura de una revolución viril" 'The development, the particular events and the outcome, constitute a display of irony. It is ironic that a woman arrives at the leadership of a virile revolution' (71). Perhaps this irony derives from the feminist personality the character adopts; she defends her position as a

woman – as well as those women around her – an action that at one point is acknowledged by a secondary character who validates her position and her just attitude before situations of struggle: “Lástima que el más hombre de todos sea mujer” ‘What a shame that the manliest person out of everyone is a woman’ (12).

Equally ironic is the fact that this woman, Angustias, represses her femininity in her role as a “colonel” and revolutionary leader by wearing pants instead of skirts and shawls, which is notably expressed in the novel during the revolutionary beginnings of the protagonist: “Un hermoso traje de charro de gamuza de venado con cachirulos de cabritilla blanca y botones de plata; un par de zapatos de vaqueta de esos llamados de “dos riendas” y un gran sombrero de pelo con enormes alas arriscadas y alta copa...” ‘A beautiful *charro* suit made of deer suede with white handkerchiefs and silver buttons; a pair of cowboy shoes, the so-called “two reins,” and a big hat with enormous and elevated wings and a high crown ...’ (103). Dressing in a masculine outfit is one of the strongest explicit feminist symbols of “La negra,” who, by carrying this out, and to reinforce her posture as a strong, independent woman, unpins the image of the Lord of Chalma that came with the suit and replaces it with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe by arguing that she does not need “machos que la cuiden,” or ‘males to take care of her.’ (108)²⁶

Although the novel’s background revolves around the Revolution, unlike the revolutionary novel – which expressed its complete discontent with the cause and instead focused on actual events – *La negra Angustias* demonstrates a position of sympathy. The author does not support any thesis; he simply conducts an analysis of the reasons that accelerate the uprising of Emiliano Zapata. Even so, this is not the primary theme of *La negra Angustias*. Rather, it is the trajectory the mulatto navigates as social disruption influences her decisions (Sommers 69).

²⁶ The Lord of Chalma is a venerated saint from a town of the same name, which is located in the state of Mexico.

Although within the narrative of the Mexican Revolution the *soldaderas* (women soldiers) play an important role, they were invariably relegated to secondary roles: as assistants of the males, almost used as pack mules. Elizabeth Salas, in *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military* (1987), argues that the representation of the *soldaderas* during the Mexican Revolution was always linked to good-bad binary thoughts: “Depiction of the *soldaderas* during the Revolution tended to be part eyewitness account and part fiction. Authors would describe the soldierly activities of the *soldaderas* but at the same time portray them as good, feminine, pathetic camp followers or bad, ruthless female soldiers who seemed out of control” (85). More often than not, the *soldaderas*, commonly known as the Adelitas, were associated with a submissive narrative that implied tenderness and associated them with the role of the caretaker, in this way romanticizing the image of the woman warrior: “As the Revolution became distant in people’s memories, the image of the *soldaderas* became more romanticized and somewhat sedate” (88). Their image was rarely associated with strength, as it would be viewed negatively if a woman displayed masculine-like characteristics, especially in a patriarchal society.

The revolutionary woman rarely occupied the leading role of a hero within the literature of the Revolution, as portrayed by Rojas González in *La negra Angustias*. However, the role of the Revolution was not as important as the decision of Angustias, as a mulatto woman, in choosing a different path around this political conflict, especially at the sociocultural level. Taking into account the fact that the author lived during the revolutionary period, it is important to emphasize that he meditated extensively on the meaning of this sociopolitical conflict, its history and evolution, as well as the effect that this war had on the inhabitants of different regions of the country. Therefore, Angustias, a “rare” literary heroine, represents a character who simultaneously approaches and distances herself from the traditional roles that women played in

Mexican society while portraying them as a marginalized black subject. At the same time, as she distances herself from conventional roles, she becomes a strong symbol of the Revolution, as a woman, and as an Afro-Mexican (Chang Rodriguez 2). Proof of this is found in an instance in the novel in which, upon entering another village of Guerrero, she encounters a male character, an innkeeper, or “*huespere*,” to whom she “recites” a speech to denote her agency as a woman, a mulatto, and a warrior:

—¡Mírame!— ordenó fríamente la mulata, mientras acercaba a su cara el mechero de petróleo — ¡Veme mucho! — repitió impuramente...

—¡El negro Farrera, Antón Farrera! Sí, son sus mismos ojos, su mismo gesto... ¡Sangre de Cristo! Antón Farrera, el más atravesado pandillero... Parece que lo veo...

—¡Silencio! cortó con energía muchacha, ya has dicho mucho... Cuela, dilo a toda la gente de Real de Ánimas; plátcales que aquí está la hija de Antón el negro, al que cantaban los corridos de esta tierra; al que le alzan pelo todavía los mineros y los comerciantes ricos, pero al que quieren los *probes*. Anda, viejo, corre la voz por el pueblo, di a todos que aquí está la mulata Angustias, la hija del negro Farrera.

[—Look at me! the mulatto ordered coldly, as she brought closer the oil-lamp to her face – Look at me well! – she repeated in a commanding voice...

—The Negro Farrera, Antón Farrera! Yes, it is his very eyes, his very gestures ... Blood of Christ! Antón Farrera, the most merciless bandit ... It seems that I see him...

—Silence! the girl commanded with energy, You’ve already said a lot ... Hurry up, tell all the people of Real de Ánimas; Tell them that the daughter of Antón the Negro is here, the one whom the *corridos* of this land sang about; to which the miners and rich merchants are still afraid of, but to whom the poor ones love. Go, old man, spread the word in the town, tell everyone that here is the mulatto Angustias, the daughter of Negro Farrera]. (79-80)

This is how Angustias, a mulatto woman, transcends her time and challenges the social models in which a woman belonging to a marginalized minority group that has largely been forgotten shows her worth and fights for the rights of her people. She makes known her acquired agency and works to defend her people, not only as a leader but also as a woman. Contrary to the stagnant, submissive ideals of women soldiers in Mexican literature and culture, from which she emerged “as an ultranationalistic patriot who serves as a reminder to Mexicans that heroic abnegation on behalf of the homeland is important,” Angustias remains firm in her ideals. Although in the literary version the author portrays her as both a mixture of the reflections of paternalistic thinking and a strong woman who fights for the rights of “her people,” in the film adaptation, Landeta makes sure she represents in the protagonist the precise opposite of the traditional, established notion of the *soldadera* (Salas 89).

Mexico is characterized as a patriarchal society in which women play subordinate, submissive roles. In the chapter of his *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) entitled “Máscaras Mexicanas,” author Octavio Paz delves into the psychology of the Mexican to decode his/her individuality and morality, to explain the relationship between men and women in Mexican society, and to clarify the causes and origins of their behavior, both collectively and individually. Written regarding the nationalist ideology that was prevalent from the colonial period up to the

Revolution, “Máscaras Mexicanas,” or ‘Mexican Masks,’ represents an aspect of Paz’ search for national identity, for Mexican icons, and for everything that this exemplifies. Among the ideas expressed by this Mexican intellectual, the classification of the prototypes of women within Mexican society stands out. Taking this into account, Angustias Farrera rebels against the archetype that exposes the “nature” of a woman as a “rajado” individual, a cracked-open being (Paz 34). The mulatto defies the normative models of traditional women and rises up in arms as a “coronela,” or ‘colonel,’ in the Revolution.

Although Rojas González supports “modern” women with feminist qualities within the historical context of the novel, it does not fall out of place to question whether the author actually accepts this new cultural identity of women, in this case of Angustias, or if--in some instances--rejects the identity of the black female subjectivity as a strong yet feminine being. This question comes to light as a result of peculiar episodes in the novel in which Angustias jumps from the “revolutionary” and/or feminist model to the traditional role of women, especially at the moment she is introduced to her upper-class, white male professor, the *catrín* (dandy) Manolo.

During several passages of the novel in which the Afromestiza is in the presence of the literate man aboved mentioned, Manuel de la Reguera and Perez Cacho (Manolo), she changes her trousers to skirts and her hats to hair bows: “Luego compró una caja de polvos de arroz y un frasco de agua florida; peinó su cabello en dos trenzas rematadas por moñitos de listón encarnado. [...] vestía ella por primera vez en muchos meses, zagalejo encarnado y blusa blanca; sobre sus hombros caía airosamente terciado un rebozo “de bolita”. En las sienas llevaba ramitos de nomeolvides” ‘Soon she bought a box of rice powder and a flask of flowery water; made her hair into two braids adorned by little red bows. [...] She wore for the first time in many months a skirt and a white blouse; over her shoulders fell a fine shawl. On her temples she wore scions of

forget-me-nots' (Rojas González 172-5). Paradoxically, these actions are countered by the initial perceived image of the mulatto, that of a strong woman who does not allow herself to be subjugated under the *machista* regime, a woman who, on the contrary, challenges social and racial standards while providing a feminist message demonstrating her strong character: "Fumaba un enorme veguero y bebía al parejo de los hombres; tosía roncamente y lanzaba lejos de ella los gruesos escupitajos" "She smoked a huge cigar and drank equal to men; coughing raspily and spitting out thick spittles" (Rojas González 124). Although this is the most notorious image of "La negra," the author from Jalisco also retracts himself from this ideology in the moments of the novel where he transforms Angustias from "altiva y orgullosa" or 'haughty and proud,' to a woman who is "modosita," or 'submissive' in the presence of the man she loves, for whom she eventually fulfills the archetype of the Mexican woman, passive, compliant and dedicated to the care of the children. These types of dichotomies found throughout the novel indicate that the author of *La negra Angustias* allowed himself to follow the tradition of hegemonic politics that were propagated by the State in which, as Paz expressed, women played a secondary and manageable role.

The change of personality of Angustias, from strong to submissive, occurs only before the presence of the white, upper-class man. It is in this instance, with Angustias submission that a colonialist discourse gives nuances to the trama. For this reason, it is precisely here where the reader is allowed to question whether the author truly accepts the new prototype of a strong, feminist Afro-Mexican woman, or if it is only a hypothetical approach left up in the air as a result of the author not truly believing in this new feminine identity. Was Rojas González not fully convinced that an Afro-Mexican woman could be a revolutionary leader with feminist ideas? Undoubtedly – although this question remains open, providing room for several

interpretations – this also leaves space to debate the importance of a female character who proved that she possessed a superior fearlessness when compared to the male figures of her time.

Talking Film: Matilde Landeta's *Cine de Mujer*

Talking back film, Landeta's cinematography counteracted the patriarchal socio-cultural interpretations of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. Her *cine de mujer* became a intermediary for her feminists views, and also a political production in which she displayed her "revolutionary" ideals. Landeta's filmography, in especific *La negra Angustias*, was a political film that goes against what African-American writer and intellectual bell hooks argues in terms of politicized films of race. In *Reel to Real*, hooks echoes the thoughts of American filmmaker Stan Brakhage on the uses of an "aesthetic ecology" in cinema. hooks is in agreement with the ideologies of Brakhage as, in words of hooks, he believes that "there must be a delicate balance between showing conscious concern for the political in artistic production and allowing an unfettered expression of artistry to emerge...It is important that a filmmaker 'be very careful not to allow social and political impulses to dominate' his or her work, because that would 'falsify the balances that are intrinsic and necessary to make an aesthetic ecology' (87-8). For hooks, the standpoint of resistance through cinematographic imagery, as those depicted in Landeta's *Angustias*, must not overcome the overall aesthetic of the film. In this sense, we can argue that Matilde Landeta finds a balance in her film by not making it solely a political production, but rather treating other socio-cultural topics, gender and race, principally.

On account of the fact that Landeta moved in a "world of men," and to intelligently manifest her political side in terms of race and gender, the filmmaker subsequently sought to portray her feminist thoughts on the screen by risking everything in order to create the film

adaptations of Rojas González's novels. In order to understand her ideology as a woman and filmmaker – along with the vision she intended to capture in the film adaptations – it becomes necessary to know her story. Landeta, who came from a Spanish family and belonged to the upper class, was born on September 20, 1910, the same year in which the Mexican Revolution began. In an interview for Julianne Burton-Carvajal in, Matilde Landeta commented that from a young age, while living in San Luis Potosí with her maternal grandmother, she witnessed the social injustices committed against peasants and indigenous peoples, and this, in words of the filmmaker, became an integral part of her social consciousness:

Un día cuando tendría unos seis años, varias docenas de carretas repletas de sacos de arroz llegaron a nuestras puertas [...] Ese día, escuché más alboroto que de costumbre, así que salí al balcón principal para ver que pasaba. Lo que vi me marcó para el resto de mi vida. De rodillas, un grupo de mujeres y niños recogía uno por uno los granitos de arroz que se habían deslizado entre las costuras de los costales, regándose por adoquines y grietas. Los niños usaban sombreros como recipientes, las mujeres sus rebozos. La Revolución mexicana había durado seis años, la lucha se prolongaría otros cuatro, pero ésta era la primera vez que me enfrenté personalmente con una diferencia tan marcada entre la abundancia y la desesperación.

[One day when I was about six years old, several dozen wagons full of sacks of rice arrived at our doors [...] That day I heard more commotion than usual, so I went out to the main balcony to see what was going on. What I saw marked me for the rest of my life. On their knees, a group of women and children were

picking up one by one the rice grains that had slipped between the seams of the sacks, falling in between cobblestones and cracks. The children used their hats as containers, and the women used their shawls. The Mexican Revolution had lasted for six years; the struggle would last four more, but this was the first time that I personally faced such a marked difference between abundance and despair]. (my trans.; 29)

The above episode, as the filmmaker recounts, represented the event that marked her life most significantly. Witnessing this striking difference in social stratification caused a great change in her and unleashed her liberal thinking. In an interview conducted by Julianne Burton-Carvajal in 1994, Landeta expressed her misgivings regarding the abundance of wealth and food for some people in the face of extreme scarcity faced by others. This “indelible” memory was described by the filmmaker as the “seed” of her personal rebellion and of her ideology of social justice, which explains why she decided to make certain types of films.

In addition to gaining prominence for the types of films she produced, Landeta was a pioneer in Mexican cinema: she was the first and best-paid script girl in Mexico. Despite having been involved in the film world during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, a period marked by sexism, Landeta was also the first female filmmaker of the North American continent. However, even after Landeta had worked with great filmmakers such as Emilio “El Indio” Fernández, no producer trusted her or her abilities as a filmmaker because of the mere fact that she was a woman. For this reason, Landeta was forced to place everything at stake in order to fulfill her dreams; she decided to sell all of her possessions and put her home under mortgage so that she could create her own production company, TACMA S.A. de C.V., and finance her own films (*6 mujeres cineastas* 5). At this point, with her production company, Landeta began production of

her first movie, the film adaptation of *Lola Casanova*. The aforementioned film was made in 1948, and it was the first film directed by Landeta, who, despite facing several obstacles, managed to bring the production to life.²⁷ Landeta, a great friend of Rojas González, decided to bring these novels to the big screen not only because of her friend, but because these novels featured women from minority groups that more closely reflected Mexico's true identity, the indigenous and the Afro-descendants.²⁸ At the threshold of mid-century industrialization in post-revolutionary Mexico, discursive melodramas were the norm, and as such, the characterization of the nation's identity and the emancipation of the citizenry were at stake. During this era, the Mexico mestizo reigned. According to Susan Dever in *Celluloid Nationalism and Other Melodramas* (2003), political melodramas staged by important nationalists of the time came to convey the idea of the "gloriously pure" Indians in need of civilization and "purely glorious" women as those designated to carry out this task of national "reconstruction" (71). However, Matilde Landeta took Rojas González's nation-related ideologies beyond the original intention in the novels by providing a different twist to the plot in order to reflect her own vision.

Landeta's first official work as a producer and director was the 1948 film adaptation of Rojas González' novel *Lola Casanova* (1947). In *Lola Casanova*, we find a character who represents *indigenismo* but at the same time elevates the characteristics of *indianismo*. The first, as stated by Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, aims at the mestizo, national unification, and the second,

²⁷ Landeta asked for a loan from the Cinematographic Bank in Mexico for the production of *Lola Casanova*, which was given to her too late. For this reason, she had many delays in the production of the film, and even a roll of negatives got lost. See *6 mujeres cineastas*. INBA, 1983, pp. 12.

²⁸ I want to thank Marcela Fernández Violante for this and other biographical information on her great friend, Matilde Landeta. Ms. Fernández Violante is the current general secretary of the Sindicato General de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica de la República Mexicana, STPC, (Workers Union of Film Production of the Mexican Republic). Mexico City, August 29, 2014.

at the cultural expression of the Indian and Indian icons (*Aculturación* 111).²⁹ The character of Lola represents both concepts. While she was the daughter of a hardworking Catalan man, she was also a young woman who always demonstrated compassion and sympathy toward the natives, especially those who inhabited the region of Sonora, the *Seris*. Removed from the indigenous stereotypes, especially physically, Lola breaks with the schemes and expectations of a woman of Spanish descent, those of a Creole woman. She is interested in the welfare of the *Seris* and is concerned about the injustices suffered by them. Despite being described as a woman with a very white complexion, fine eyebrows, red and fleshy lips, and “una ala de águila como cabellera,” or ‘an eagle wing-like hair,’ Lola Casanova, the character, breaks the mold of *mestizaje* and becomes, by choice, a *Seri* woman (11). The film does not differ greatly from the original literary version. Notwithstanding having lost a roll of negatives for the film, Landeta knew how to handle this inconvenience and create the best possible version on the big screen. Although of the meager budget is evident in the film, quite famously, the message of national unity was successfully conveyed. In the film, Lola Casanova, played by Cuban actress Meche Barba, stands out for her role as a negotiator rather than a woman and mother, which becomes a key element in promoting the sentiment of national unity through the creation of a new form of *mestizaje*. The creation of a separate identity for women, in addition to that of mother, was an important characteristic of the “second wave” of Mexican filmmakers between the 1940s and the 1960s; their [feminist] objective was to reject the idea of equating womanhood with motherhood. Landeta specifically strove to hold firm to this ideology, and in her own words she expressed that according to Judeo-Christian tradition, the only mission of women was marriage and procreation,

²⁹ *Indigenismo* is “the cultural expression of a biological phenomenon, *mestizaje*, which is intelligible only as a product of the emergence and elevation of the mestizo at the historical level” (*El proceso de aculturación* 105). Contrary to indigenismo, the *indianismo* “is expressed directly by the Indian or through people or agencies that identify with the Indian” (*El proceso de aculturación* 111).

and therefore, the Catholic Church only considers women as wombs (Arredondo 5).

In an interview conducted by Burton-Carvajal for the book *Matilde Landeta, hija de la Revolución* (2002), the filmmaker explains that when thinking about the kinds of film roles Mexican cinema has provided to women, they invariably turn out to be those in which women play the role of a submissive, self-sacrificing, selfless wife of a drunken, womanizing husband. Landeta altered this pattern by offering women a type of cinematic role made for them, as she believed a woman “debía tener un rol menos pasivo. Debía ser parte de la vida de su país y su familia, una persona que piensa y actúa y educa,” or ‘had to play a less passive role. She should be part of the life of her country and her family, a person who thinks and acts and educates’ (75). Through her films and their female characters, Landeta wanted to expose new ideas and present a new model of women in a new type of cinema. Undoubtedly, a way to achieve this was to use women and indigenous Mexicans as central characters without depicting them as slaves or fragile beings, but, rather, quite the opposite.

A great example of this new type of woman is precisely illustrated, as previously suggested, in *Lola Casanova* (film version), in which Landeta, with her feminist vision, exemplifies the representation of the average Mexican women – and of the indigenous woman – through the use of the “past” in order to recreate the present. Unlike male directors such as Emilio Fernández, who used female protagonists merely to establish the conditions of a future mestizo nation, Landeta meticulously employed balance in gender relations to represent the route to *mestizaje* (Dever 74). From the beginning of the film, Lola’s future role in the formation of a new Mexican nation is revealed. From the opening of the first cinematographic sequences, the narrator speaks of a feeling similar to a breeze, like the breath of someone watching and waiting for the right moment to “amalgamate everything.” That “something” who will come to blend

everything – that is, races and cultures – is Lola Casanova, who will eventually become the creator of a new race.

Acting as the glue that links “two cultures,” Lola is a representation of the right of every Mexican to enjoy dual cultural citizenship, an ideology that differs from the thoughts proposed by José Vasconcelos in “La raza cósmica,” or ‘The Cosmic Race’ (1925). Vasconcelos proposed – as a cultural goal for the country – the homogenization of all of the ethnicities in post-revolutionary Mexico under the ideology of *mestizaje* and considered necessary the acculturation of indigenous peoples, even if it meant the loss of their own culture and traditions.³⁰ As the mother of a new culture, a new “race,” Lola represents a strong woman, the “head” of the family, just as the other women depicted in the film and the novel are matrons. Landeta emphasizes the image of the strong indigenous female in the novel and upholds the ideology of uniting the different cultural identities of Mexico into one: “In her articulation of national coherence, “*mestizaje*,” more than a social policy to incorporate or assimilate indigenous peoples, was the critical fulcrum upon which a bicultural national character balanced the past and the future in order to “mold a new man and with him create a new world and a new human destiny” (Dever 76). Marcela Fernández Violante, Landeta’s dear friend, commented in my interview with her that Matilde Landeta liked the fact that Lola Casanova was a fusion character, representing the fusion of our identity as Mexicans: “Ella [Matilde] tuvo la visión de ver que el mexicano ni es español – que la colonia fue española – que somos indígenas y somos europeos [...] ¿Qué película mexicana iba a hablar de eso, la fusión de dos razas que se convierten en una nueva raza?” ‘She [Matilde] had the vision to see that the Mexican is not merely Spanish – that the

³⁰ José Vasconcelos was the Minister of Education in 1921 during the presidency of Álvaro Obregón. Vasconcelos, in his essay “La raza cósmica,” talked about the mestizo identity as the cosmic race, the quintessential representation of “Mexicanness,” as the best features of all races formed it.

colony was Spanish – that we are indigenous and we are Europeans [...] Which Mexican film was going to talk about that, the fusion of two races that become a new race?” (Fernández Violante). As in the cultural image and myth of La Malinche, Landeta manages to represent in Lola a mixture of myth and reality.³¹ She intended to show how different components of the story addressed the main goal of the Mexican Revolution. Through her historical and cultural reconstruction of events in the late nineteenth-century – the context of the story – Landeta was able to establish a link between history and cultural ideology, thus transforming the story of Lola Casanova, through her vision, into the history of Mexico.

Film *La negra Angustias* (1949) also told an important story in the history of Mexico, the Revolution, and through this she brought to light the racial identity that had been relegated to the margins of the Mexican tripartite heritage, where it largely remains: the Afro-mestizo identity. Angustias, a young mulatto who as a child witnesses her favorite goat die after being impregnated by “el chivo más barbudo,” or ‘the strongest male goat,’ is traumatized by this event. It causes her to remember how her mother also passed away after giving birth to her. As a consequence, Angustias abhors motherhood, and this is why she rejects the marriage proposal of Rito Reyes, a light-skinned mestizo and the son of the wealthiest cattle rancher in Angustias’ village. Matilde Landeta captures with great veracity the feminist sentiment of the protagonist who, as interpreted by María Elena Marqués, manages to transmit the aversion the young mulatto felt toward marriage and motherhood, as it was originally presented in the novel.

As a woman filmmaker, Landeta demonstrates through *Angustias* a different type of heroine. Primarily, she chose to represent in cinema the story of an Afro-Mexican woman, and secondarily, she moved the character away from the feminine model so idealized in Mexico. As

³¹ At the beginning of the film, Landeta explains in an epigraph that the story of Lola Casanova was veridical. She supported this theory/statement based on studies previously made by Fortunato Hernández in 1902.

the story of *Angustias* takes place during the Mexican Revolution of 1910, this indirectly influences the destiny of the protagonist when she becomes a colonel. The cinematographic direction of Landeta has a very intense effect on the performance of María Elena Marqués. It manages to transmit to the audience her feminist vision as a filmmaker, which allows Landeta to execute a new type of cinema: women's cinema. This type of cinematographic work, as achieved by Landeta, shows that women have their own identity and at the same time demonstrates the existence of the cultural ambiguity and/or dichotomy imposed upon the role of women up to that moment in time: virgin or prostitute, Mater Dolorosa or femme fatal, one who nourishes or one who destroys. With this said, Matilde tries to explain that this "female ambiguity" functioned, until that time, as a symbol of the social instability and established sexual roles in 1940s Mexico (Hershfield 3). As a director and filmmaker, Landeta's rebellion sought to oppose the 1940s cinema, which produced films that portrayed women as suffering mothers or virtuous women, seduced and/or abandoned women, and, finally, bad women.

Although *Angustias* does the opposite of what is expected in her role as a woman within a patriarchal country, especially in the early twentieth-century, Landeta does not depict this character as a "bad woman." Rather, she chooses to portray the character in a positive way: "la negra [*Angustias*] era una mujer fuerte, decidida, con un liderazgo nato" 'the black woman [*Angustias*] was a strong, determined [woman], with a natural leadership' (Fernández Violante). The director departs from the negative connotations linked to women presented by intellectual Octavio Paz. The latter labeled women as "bad" when they were not being passive. In his definition of a bad woman, *Angustias* could be considered as such, a "mala mujer" due to her constant activity, same that plays as her own enemy in a patriarchal society:

...la imagen de la mala mujer casi siempre se presenta acompañada de la idea de actividad. A la inversa de la "abnegada madre," de la "novia que espera" y del ídolo hermético, seres estáticos, la "mala" va y viene, busca a los hombres... su extrema movilidad la vuelve invulnerable. Actividad e impudicia se alían en ella y acaban por petrificar su alma. La "mala" es dura, impía, independiente, como el "macho".

[... the image of the bad woman almost always appears accompanied by the idea of activity. Conversely to the "self-sacrificing mother," the "waiting bride" and the hermetic idol, static beings, the "bad one" comes and goes, seeks men ... Her extreme mobility makes her invulnerable. Activity and impudence are allied in her and end up petrifying her soul. The "bad one" is tough, impious, independent, as the "male." (my trans.; Paz 35)

If one reexamines all of the characteristics Paz associates with bad women, it could be evidently deduced that Angustias falls under this classification. However, Matilde Landeta fights for the character of Angustias to represent a woman whose identity is not limited to the social expectations imposed by Mexican society. Much like *Lola Casanova*, *La negra Angustias* is a novel based on a historical figure. Based on an actual woman, it tracks the story of a mulatto from the sierra of Guerrero whose racial pride, active personality, and psychological resilience had her follow the footsteps of her father, a revolutionary bandit, eventually becoming a colonel in the army of revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata. According to Marcela Fernández Violante, Landeta once told her that *La negra Angustias* was her favorite film, not only because she

identified with the character—as an orphan who despised the *macho* for being *macho*—but also because it reflected with great fidelity her ideologies.

It stands to reason, after knowing instances of her life, that the ideology of Landeta as a woman and a filmmaker not only supported women, but also supported marginalized Mexican communities, especially those that included indigenous and Afro-mestizo groups. “La negra,” as a representation of marginality, and according to Stuart Hall’s definition in his essay “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” (1992), is the “result of the cultural politics of difference, of the struggles around difference, of the production of new identities, of the appearance of new subjects on the political and cultural stage” (24). Hall confirms that this statement “is true not only regarding race,” but also for feminism, which ties together the two main matters addressed by Landeta (Ibid). Although it is known that Matilde Landeta was a dear friend of Rojas González, the female filmmaker did not completely agree with the representation of Angustias in the novel and decided to make changes to the story with the express permission of the author. For instance, in the novel Angustias is portrayed as a woman with softer facial features, a voluptuous body, and long hair, leaning more toward an image of a mestizo-indigenous woman and her story ends as expected for a female character of that time: married, submissive, mothering a child, and, most importantly, abandoning her ideals for a man. Opposed to this portrayal, Landeta decided to impose her own vision in the film adaptation: it hardens the physical features of Angustias, giving her short, curly hair, more in agreement with the physical description of a mulatto and, most importantly, for the filmmaker, Landeta changes the end of the original plot. Landeta does not make Angustias a mother or a passive woman. Rather, in Landeta’s version of the story, the mulatto recovers her courage after Manolo’s rejection and

continues on with her obligation as a strong female colonel of the Revolution, as a woman warrior who endures all of the struggles that come her way.

Matilde Landeta could have stuck to the original story and portrayed it in the same way in the film adaptation. However, she decided to remain firm to her feminist ideals and her views on social justice. Bringing to the big screen a film in which the true story of Mexico is told, both politically and culturally, has great merit, especially considering the fact that Landeta was a woman during a time in which a cinema created by males ruled the industry. True to her feminist vision, including the daring revision to the ending of the novel in the film, as mentioned previously, Landeta essentially finished the story of the novel in midstream, before the protagonist's encounter with effeminate, upper-class white Professor, Manuel de la Reguera. The reason for this decision is influenced by Rojas González's point of view in which a woman loses initiative whenever she falls in love, which evidently clashed with Landeta's feminist outlooks. As expected, and markedly differing from Rojas González' beliefs, Matilde Landeta decided to change the ending because it did not represent the type of mulatto she wanted to depict on the big screen, explaining that "una mujer preparada para el liderazgo por su herencia de vida, así como por el propio Rojas, no podía terminar de ese modo" 'a woman prepared for leadership because of life heritage, as well as because of Rojas himself, could not end that way' (Burton-Carvajal 89). Not even the most sensitive passages of the novel, such as the episode in which the mulatto did justice to other women by sentencing Efrén "El picado" to be castrated, could prevent the director/filmmaker from hesitating in her decision to bring to the big screen this magnificent novel, found worthy of the National Prize for Literature in 1946. Her passion for cinema, her desire to remind Mexican citizenry that Mexico has an Afromestizo population in which women, both in culture and in art, can serve as heroines of books and films, regardless of

their cultural identity, and above all, regardless of their ideology within their role as women dictated by their culture, propelled Landeta forward.

In conclusion, in both literature and film, *La negra Angustias* delivers an important message to Mexicans: the importance of both the appraisal of national unity among all races, without disregarding the third cultural and racial base, and the participation of Afro-Mexican warrior woman in instances of struggle during the Mexican Revolution of 1910. In a post-revolutionary Mexico in which literature and film strove to create a sense of patriotism and establish discourse regarding the evolving concept of “Mexicanness,” these two works represent a snapshot of the cultural and social norms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century in Mexico, norms that were still being implemented in several respects, especially in the case of those that refer to social typecasts and the meaning of cultural identity. Thus, from the “patria,” or ‘homeland’ of Manuel Gamio, who saw the indigenous as a national problem, to Octavio Paz and his labyrinths of identity, the melodramatic imagination of nationalist philosophers found its expression in cinema, consistently representing the Mexican national identity as the fruit of only two cultures (Dever 80).³²

It was precisely the idea that Mexico is a bipartite nation that makes the works of Landeta and Rojas González so important. Following the efforts of the State to continue to marginalize Afro-Mexican heritage, *La negra Angustias* brings an essential awareness regarding racial otherness in Mexico; *La negra* is a reminder that Mexico is also an Afromestizo nation, and that it is important to reevaluate the history of the country to come to terms with the “*negritud*,” or ‘blackness,’ which was left behind when the State sought to emphasize the *indigenismo*

³² Manuel Gamio (1883), considered the father of Mexican anthropology, wrote *Forjando Patria* (1916), in which he expressed a philosophy in which he believed the indigenous people could not be modernized and therefore could not become part of the Mexican nation, due to their culture, religious traditions, and lack of knowledge of the Spanish language.

movement and the bipartite *mestizaje*. Perhaps the marginalization of the Afro-Mexican population is due to the ideology that has been present between black Mexicans and the indigenous people, an ideology in which blacks are considered to be a community deprived of ethnicity (Vinson & Vaughn 19).

Despite cultural and social conventions formulated and established by the nation-state, Rojas González and Landeta managed to create works that broke the cultural schemes of twentieth-century Mexican literature and cinema. To begin, Francisco Rojas González breaks the mold of the literature addressing the Mexican Revolution by replacing the indigenous and peasant protagonist with a mulatto in *La negra Angustias*. Rojas González revives in his literature the African lineage strongly present in Mexican miscegenation, which had been erased from official memory during the first decades of the twentieth-century, when Mexico began to emerge as a modern nation (Hernández Cuevas 99). Furthermore, Landeta raises from the ashes the image of the strong *Afromestiza* woman, effectively buries the stereotype of the submissive woman, and redefines the concept of “Mexicanness” through the female image by bringing to the big screen a liminal identity that had been both marginalized and forgotten by the national consciousness.

Matilde Landeta, a woman of rebellious spirit, represented and continues to represent a great model among female Mexican artists, as mentioned in the opening pages of this essay. Beyond serving as a feminist and artistic prototype, Landeta’s ideology transcends the defense of women as a product of men and their *machismo*; it traverses the generality of pure and traditional feminism to more deeply examine the subordination of women as intellectual beings. Described by Fernández Violante as a “*libre pensadora*,” or ‘a free thinker,’ Landeta is perceived throughout her professional career as a woman who was too modern for her time. When

modifying and re-writing stories of women through her films, she wanted to make certain she was portraying a strong woman until the end: “[Matilde] no quiso terminar ninguna de sus películas con la derrota de *su* personaje” ‘[Matilde] did not want to end any of her films with the defeat of *her* character’ (Fernández Violante).³³ During her participation in El Encuentro de Mujeres Cineastas y Videoastas Latinas: México-Estados Unidos. Cruzando Fronteras, in the late 1990s, Landeta confessed to her involvement in a “world of men,” especially in the film industry, which represented a formidable obstacle in her career, as she was interested in presenting a different point of view: “Me interesaba dar otra visión de las cosas, mostrar el otro lado del drama [...] la posición de la mujer, su fuerza, su fortaleza, lo que podemos hacer si nos desatan” ‘I was interested in offering another vision of things, in showing the other side of the melodrama [...] showing the position of a woman, her strength, her courage, what we can do if they untie us’ (Trujillo Muñoz 157).

The lack of support that Landeta experienced during her career as a filmmaker was in part due to her “different” vision of cinema, and this constituted a problem for her films. Still, Landeta affirms that the greatest challenge of all was not being a man: “... a la hora de buscar un productor para hacerlas [películas] ninguno me quiso apoyar por ser mujer” ‘... when looking for a producer to make them [films] no one wanted to support me because I was a woman’ (Trujillo Muñoz 158). During an era, replete with racial and gender prejudices, Landeta demonstrated that she had the backbone necessary to stand up for her ideals in the male-dominated world of cinematography.

The lack of support in the professional field “for being a woman” is also one of the characteristics that unite Landeta and other female artists. Evidently, patriarchy and *machismo*

³³ My emphasis.

represent ongoing issues for women in most any professional field, but especially in Mexican cinema and quite often in Mexican literature as well. Much like Landeta, writer Rosario Castellanos and filmmaker María Novaro endured similar experiences, and coincidentally shared the same female/feminist vision as the female artists depicted in this essay. Surprisingly, Landeta's message in her works is not vehemently feminist: "No me considero una feminista militante, pero siempre he buscado la reivindicación de la mujer a través de mis películas" 'I do not consider myself a militant feminist, but I have always sought women's revindication through my films,' Landeta commented at a meeting of women filmmakers (Trujillo Muñoz 159). Having said that, the work of Landeta often centers on the search for feminine revindication. In the same manner, Castellanos achieves that goal through her writing, and Novaro through her films.

Writer Castellanos focuses on the depiction of a narrative voice that maintains a dialogue with the reader. Although the narrative of Castellanos primarily touches feminine subjects, the author addresses different audiences, including masculine readers. With the completion of her Master's thesis, "Sobre cultura femenina," in June 1950, Castellanos effectively opened the field of feminist expression in Mexican literature. In her thesis, Castellanos decries the absence of a feminine culture and the social "blockade" of an intellectual culture for women. Her philosophical essay reflects on the marginalization of women in various social spheres, such as art, science, and culture. Castellanos exposes the subaltern position of women in Mexico's patriarchal society and concludes that the position of women as humans and subordinate beings in Mexico is not a predestined situation, but is, rather, a social state irascible to change due to the culture in which they live, which continues to be dominated by men: "La cultura ha sido creada casi exclusivamente por hombres [...]. Entre la imponente masa de nombres, arrastrada en un alud de datos, confundida, apenas perceptible, apenas notable grano de arena junto a una

montaña, está la obra de la mujer, de unas cuantas mujeres que resaltan sobre todo por su rareza” ‘Culture has been created almost exclusively by men [...] Among the imposing mass of names, dragged in a flood of data, confused, barely perceptible, barely a noticeable grain of sand next to a mountain, is the work of women, a few women who stand out above all for their rareness’ (my trans.; Castellanos 90).

The limited feminine perceptibility in Mexican culture, as depicted by Rosario Castellanos explains the lack of intellectual expression of women in the artistic media. However, Castellanos admits that within that cultural and intellectual media there is an art form that has not completely closed its doors to women: literature. She recognizes this cultural and “intellectual” opening for women in the arts and affirms: “La literatura es la única carrera que ha estado permanentemente abierta para la mujer” ‘Literature is the only career that has been permanently open to women’ (my trans.; Castellanos 93).³⁴ However, in the same way that she recognizes literature as an “open” career for women, she also criticizes the existence of prejudices and subordination: “Se les reprocha la pobreza de sus temas y la falta de originalidad en el modo de desarrollarlos, la falta de una generosa intención [...] se les acusa de mediocridad y de que su imitación de las obras hechas por hombres es demasiado burda” ‘They are reprimanded for the poverty of their subjects and the lack of originality in the way they develop them, and the lack of a substantial intention [...] They are accused of mediocrity and that their imitation of the works done by men is too basic’ (my trans.; Castellanos 95). Through Castellanos, we realize the underestimation and marginalization of women in the professional and intellectual spheres. Just as Landeta was denied support in the production of her films, and men strove to obstruct the fulfillment of her projects in any way possible, women of virtually any social class also fell

³⁴ Rosario Castellanos cites this quote from Virginia Woolf in "Sobre cultura femenina. Note also that "Sobre cultura femenina" appears a year after *Le Deuxième Sexe* by Simone de Beauvoir.

under this misfortune. This type of action reflects the Mexican colonialist way of thinking, long propagated throughout history, where women are validated as social entities exclusively through motherhood. According to Castellanos, women are “... excluidas de su finalidad propia, anuladas en su personalidad y en su misión, negadas en su vocación” ‘... excluded from their own purpose, annulled in their personality and mission, denied in their vocation’ (my trans.; 90).

As one of the themes of women’s revindication, motherhood appears as a bond that unites Landeta, Castellanos and filmmaker María Novaro. The latter, through her cinematography, continues the legacy of Landeta, lending a vision of women to men’s movies. Novaro, like Castellanos, addresses feminist logic to express her position against the placement of Mexican women within the framework of a set model, or archetype. The filmmaker juxtaposes the cultural dichotomies that coincide with the all-important image of women as mothers in Mexican society: prostitute-saint, virgin mother-lubricious female, sinful-saint, and all of the other images “engendered” by the myth of the Virgin of Guadalupe and La Malinche (Robles 11). Novaro’s most iconic films, *Lola* (1989) and *Danzón* (1991), represent the story of two mothers who are apparently outside the traditional model of the self-sacrificing mother; they are mothers who go through a process of internalization, which leads them to the materialization of a journey, the leitmotif of both works, in which the daughters of the protagonists do not take part.

With her films, Novaro proposes individuality in women and reflects an alternative vision of the woman-mother duality. Feminism in her films, like that of Landeta, is not militant. She merely creates a cinema that reflects “la experiencia diaria de ser mujer,” ‘the daily experience of being a woman,’ and in the process, she too creates a women’s cinema, “un cine poderosamente visual y transgresor que (re)construye el imaginario femenino y el imaginario nacional con historias e imágenes” ‘a powerfully visual and transgressive cinema that (re)constructs the

feminine imaginary and the national imaginary with stories and images' (Robles 13). The characters in her films, including Lola and Julia Solórzano (in *Danzón*), introduce a new model for Mexican women: the modern Mexican woman. Both women appear as characters that allegorically reflect the "traditional" model of the Mexican woman, to which they give new meaning by "nuancing" – in a positive way – the images of the "woman" and the "mother" established by Mexican culture. Unlike the revolutionary nationalism previously propagated with the cinema of producers/directors such as Emilio "Indio" Fernández, Novaro's cinema appears as a response to the country's patriarchal system.

We can conclude that the cinema, and therefore the ideology of Matilde Landeta, served as a model for other women in search of women's vindication through art. Rosario Castellanos and María Novaro are the most emblematic examples of women who have struggled, as did Landeta, for a change in attitude toward women, not only in society but also in culture and the arts. Remembering the personality of "Mati," as her close friend and colleague Marcela Fernández Violante affectionately refers to Landeta, we encounter the image of a very modern woman for her time, a woman who is "lanzada o aventada," or 'courageous,' as Violante explains. Although Francisco Rojas González was the creator of *La negra Angustias*, Landeta became the most fearless filmmaker of her time by depicting Mexican blackness in a woman and a film during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. While the attempt to depict strong and marginalized female characters was significant for Landeta, the film does fall into racial stereotypes linked to the foreignness thoughts of blackness as a result of a false racial democracy believed to rule Mexico. Landeta does not use ethnically black people to portray the role of the mulatto Angustias; she hired Mexican actress María Elena Marqués, a beautiful *mestizo* woman

who was often cast to play the role of the indigenous woman in Mexican and American films.³⁵

To play the role of Angustias, Marqués had to wear blackface, exposing this way, the American cinema influence on Landeta. The use of blackface became popular during the 1920's with U.S. comedian and singer Al Jolson and his performances involving jazz, ragtime, and the blues in blackface for white audiences.³⁶ It would come as no surprise that Landeta knew about this character, and most importantly, about the portrayal of blackness in Hollywood cinema. Although I do not attempt to claim that Landeta had Maria Elena Marqués in blackface as a racist depiction of Angustias, I do however, emphasize that she was clearly aware of the use of this method in films, and that Marqués was the type of actress whose physical appearance would easily blend with the use of blackface in order to avoid an “unnatural” look in Landeta’s film adaptation. By having knowledge of Landeta’s struggles as a female filmmaker in a male-dominated industry, I argue that Landeta’s choice of María Elena Marqués, a well-known actress of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, in the portrayal of a Mexican mulatto, was the result of a strategic plan in which she had not many choices to achieve success in the film. Nevertheless, the actress in blackface portraying Angustias does not make the audience respond in the same manner as they would if the actress was, in fact, a *mulata*. Eli Bartra in her essay “*How Black is La Negra Angustias?*” (2012), talks about the reception of the Mexican spectator to the use of blackface in the film:

³⁵ Maria Elena Marqués participated in Mexican films like *La Perla* (1947) and *Así era Pancho Villa* (1956). In the U.S., she participated in Hollywood Western films *Across the Wide Missouri* (1951) and *Ambush at Tomahawk Gap* (1953), next to Clark Gable and John Derek respectively. In *La Perla*, Marqués played the role of a Mexican peasant; in the U.S. films, she was an “Indian.”

³⁶ Al Jolson was considered the world’s greatest entertainer. He was said to be the first to introduce African-American music to White audiences.

The character of Black Angustias is supposed to be a black woman, but, watching the film, everyone knows she is not. As a result, a strange ambivalence is created in the audience; the actress acts like a black woman, displays the ravages of racism, sexism and poverty, but the audience do not respond in the same way as if she really were black. In fact, it is a masquerade, a black face that the actress uses as a disguise (the same as any other) and the audience know this. It is a case of racial ‘transvestism’. (Bartra 281).

In the Mexican imaginary, the existence of blackness is foreign. The notion of *mestizaje* is not associated with blackness, therefore, as bell hooks argues, “the ways transgressive imagery of a nonwhite ‘other’ is used in the work of filmmakers without challenging stereotypes or the existing structures of domination” (p. 10). The racial transvestism that involves blackface, as Bartra mentions, comes then as a consequence of the inability of the culturally justified inability of Mexican filmmakers, as Landeta, to achieve an unprejudiced portrayal of Mexican blackness. Landeta, while being an innovative filmmaker, also fell into the homogenizing racial discourse propagated by the State. When speaking about the meeting with the “real” Angustias, Remedios Farrera, Landeta commented on the skin complexion of the mulatto colonel saying that: “she was dark, dark, but not that she was black” (282). In the light of this statement, one can deduce yet another reason for the casting of María Elena Marqués for the role of Angustias Farrera while exposing the presence of white supremacy in the film industry.³⁷

From the racial “transvestism” of Angustias in the film to her gender transvestism in novel, Angustias can be described as a character that transgresses traditional gender roles and

³⁷ María Elena Marqués, as well as Mexican American actress Susan Kohner, daughter of renowned Mexican cinema actress Lupita Tovar, underwent the same artistic fate. Both actresses were primarily cast to play “exotic” roles in films, both in Mexico (Marqués) and in the U.S. (both actresses).

racial stereotypes. In a way, Angustias shares similarities with the filmmaker. In the beginning of her career, as a script girl, Landeta showed her courageous personality by dressing as a male in order to “jokingly” be taken seriously and to make a point to her male colleagues in the industry about the unjust gender relations she witnessed in the work area. Yet, as Christine Arce asserts in *Mexico’s Nobodies: The Cultural Legacy of the Soldadera and Afro-Mexican Women* (2017), Landeta’s cross-dressing, just as the semi-fictional character of Angustias, did not assure any sort of merit-based recognition. In relation to the *soldaderas*, “vesting oneself in a masculine-coded honor ... did not ultimately translate into any meaningful recognition of the work performed by women before, during, or after the Revolution” (7). While Landeta’s sporadic cross-dressing or transvestism incidents may have enabled her to symbolically render her unconformity towards the disequilibrium of gender relations in the film industry, she chose to keep “her” Angustias in feminine attire (contrary to Rojas González) in order to show that blackness and femininity are non-contrasting parallels, and mainly, that a black Mexican female colonel does not equal an instability of gender roles.

Ultimately, as it is a known fact that the Mexican government did not officially recognize Afro-Mexicans until 1992, the racial consciousness and keen awareness of Mexico’s tripartite heritage exemplified in the works of Landeta and Rojas González are particularly noteworthy. This racial consciousness, so noticeable in Matilde Landeta’s works, is one of the most critical elements that led Landeta to become a revolutionary intellectual who, through her female characters, especially the Afro-Mexican Angustias, moves Mexico toward other cultural moments of awakening. The innovative filmmaker noticed the degradation of the lead female character in Rojas González’ novel, in which being a black female turns her into an oversexualized being, and took it upon herself to “rewrite” the story for the big screen; she was

not interested in exploiting María Elena Marqués's beauty as she sought to project an image of a different woman, both in the actress chosen for the role and in the semi-fictional character: "Le interesaba mucho que las protagonistas fueran mujeres y que no fuera el caso típico del cine mexicano en donde eran maltratadas por la vida – o por el amante si eran cabareteras – o si eran mamas, las hacían sufrir los hijos. Le chocaban las sufridas a Mati, que era lo que más explotaba el melodrama del cine mexicano" "She was very interested [in the fact] that the protagonists were women and that it was not the typical case of Mexican cinema where they were mistreated by life – or by the lover if they were showgirls – or if they were mothers, the children made them suffer. Mati hated the victims, which was what the melodrama of Mexican cinema exploited" (Fernández Violante).³⁸ While the story of *La negra Angustias* does not fall into the tragic mulatto trope or genre, as it does not fall into the dramatization of a mixed raced individual, it does contain characteristics—both novel and film—that portray the stigmatization of black subjecthood. By being called *negra*, *mulata*, *prieta* or *cambuja*, pejorative terms derived from the colonial caste system, "la negra" *Angustias* reflects the racist ideologies internalized and psychologically embodied by the Mexican citizenry, especially up to the twentieth-century. This white supremacy however, is more present in the novel than in the film adaptation proving this way that viewpoints on race also differ in gender.

In sum, Matilde Landeta, through her women's cinema, her ideology, and her intellectual and professional history, reflects a feminist ideology nuanced with a unique racial consciousness that is also evident in the works of her contemporaries, Rosario Castellanos and Maria Novaro.

³⁸ Matilde Landeta always strove to produce movies in which the lead role was a woman of strong character who did not comply with traditional roles. As an example, in addition to *La negra Angustias* is the film *Trotacalles* (1951), in which the protagonist plays the role of a prostitute. Landeta's female protagonists go against the "norms" of female acting in the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, where the beauty of the female protagonists was always made an important point within the plot. Movies such as *Doña Bárbara* (1943) by director Fernando de Fuentes, *Río Escondido* (1948) and *Bugambilia* (1945) by Emilio "El Indio" Fernández exemplify this characteristic.

On their own, Matilde Landeta's work and life leave behind an important message that echoes freedom and equality for women and for marginalized members of society, especially for the Afro-mestizo population. Her works serve to reiterate that the manner in which Mexicans perceive themselves as a multiracial and a multicultural nation is as important as the equality of gender relations between men and women. Looking back at *La negra Angustias*, both novel and film, as revolutionary *oeuvres* of Mexican culture, is inevitable to consider these works as cinematic and literary representations of blackness that, somehow, were inspired by the true story of a strong and fearless Afro-Mexican woman who became a leader of a Zapatista troop during the Mexican Revolution. Having said this, the story of this mulatto, a liminal subject of society, although being told by each artist with their own artistic and ideological intentionality, marked the beginning of a diachronic look at the spectral presence of blackness in twentieth-century Mexican popular culture. In both versions, "la negra" Angustias, represented a woman who, ironically, gained full agency by acquiring consciousness of her race and gender through her involvement in a social conflict that fought against the subordination of marginalized subjectivities.

CHAPTER TWO

Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* (1989), *El diario de Tita* (2016), and *Mi negro pasado* (2017): Northern Mexico's Black Revolutionary Saga

Todo lo que se logró con la Revolución Mexicana, se diluyó con el paso del tiempo y en la actualidad casi no queda nada [...] El cambio social que todos seguimos esperando se va a dar de dentro hacia fuera y no a la inversa.

— Laura Esquivel

There must always be a remedy for wrong and injustice if we only know how to find it.

— Ida B. Wells

Introduction: The Mexico-Texas Borderlands

When *Como agua para chocolate* was first published in 1989, Laura Esquivel did not imagine the extent of the success of her novel as a bestseller translated into numerous languages and film adaptation of the same title (1992) as one of Mexico's first significant international box office hits. Commonly described as a novel of womanhood mixed with the magic realism, *Como agua para chocolate* contains more social themes than that of empowered femininity. This novel, which I consider belonging to the "Novela de la Revolución Mexicana," explores cultural, political, and racial themes. Subtly placed references to *Afro-mestizaje* have been largely unnoticed in the novel. However, almost 30 years later, Laura Esquivel decided to publish in consecutive years the racial history she placed in *Como agua para chocolate* with Mamá Elena, José Treviño, and Gertrudis. In 2016, Esquivel publishes *El diario de Tita*, which the writer describes as the link that unites the past, *Como agua para chocolate*, with the present in *Mi negro pasado* (2017). These works represent a series of political novels connecting social class

and race against the backdrop of the northern Mexican Revolution, linking this early twentieth-century period to contemporary Mexican society. I propose in this chapter that this trilogy disrupts the traditional Mexican state's *mestizo* hierarchy by focusing on the African lineage of a Mexican family. I argue that the second book is presented as a diary in order to provide a "testimonio" of the family's black ancestry, and lastly, the final book is a modern-day Mexican novel that takes a look at the past, through *El diario de Tita*, and exposes the transnational side of Mexico's *africanidad*, which is to say, to consider it a trans-Afromexican novel, from northern Mexico to African-American Chicago.

Laura Esquivel is an intellectual, educator, journalist, novelist, and political activist who since 2012 has been a member of Mexico's Chamber of Deputies for the leftist Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional Party (Morena). In her family saga which began by mixing magical realism with Mexico's Revolutionary past, she has continued emitting powerful statements that deal with race, politics, and culture through 2016 and 2017. In her Afro-Mexican trilogy, Esquivel reaches back to her maternal family origins in northern border city Piedras Negras, Coahuila. In order to understand the importance of my arguments, which are based on the racial references of Esquivel's *oeuvre*, it is imperative to understand the historical backdrop of this series of novels set against the Mexico-Texas borderlands.

Mexican history seems to dictate that social triumphs embellished every battle fought in the name of the country. During the mid-nineteenth century, the Mexican territory comprised present-day California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and part of Utah. However, shortly after Texas gained its independence from Mexico in 1836, constant disputes between the United States government and the Mexican government caused armed conflicts between the two

nations.³⁹ These political tensions lead to the socio-political armed uprising of both countries known as the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). Under the rule of President Antonio López de Santa Anna and the administration of the United States President James K. Polk, this armed conflict placed the unprepared Mexican army at a disadvantage, and consequently, gave rise to the invasion of the U.S. troops into Mexican territory, reaching the capital Mexico City. The expansionist mindset of President Polk's administration triggered the armed conflict, which under the fragile state of the Mexican militia, caused President Santa Anna to agree to the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. Under this treaty, the Río Grande was declared the physical and geographical border between both nations, leaving all the land north of the river as part of the United States territory. Laura Esquivel's family history dates from these years on the Piedras Negras-Eagle Pass border.

That same year, the northern border of Mexico is in a strategic geographical position; the border towns closer to Texas become a refuge for Africans escaping slavery in the United States. Most of the African people that would eventually settle in Mexico, begin arriving from Florida, a state that "except for twenty years of British rule just before and during the American Revolution... had been under Spanish authority for nearly a century" and that, at the same time was a known territory that "had been a natural, sometimes even official, refuge for runaways" (Porter 4). Slaves started arriving in Florida during this period and settled in Seminole lands. It is important to notice as well that Seminole Chiefs often bought blacks as "they and their Lower Creek kin noted the prestige that both Spanish and English attached to owning slaves" (Porter 4).

While the Seminole Chiefs bought some of the blacks, others arrived in efforts to escape slavery from other states. Seminoles were known to accept runaway slaves and developed a

³⁹ Although Texas became independent from Mexico in 1836, it was not annexed by the United States government due to political conflicts of interest, until 1844.

mutually beneficial relationship. Blacks would work with crops and livestock, among other things, in return for keeping some of the food and receiving material to build their houses, “the ‘owner’ provided protection, and the ‘slave’ paid a modest amount in return. This arrangement was, obviously, quite different from traditional plantation bondage” (Porter 5). Miscegenation occurred, and the Black Seminoles were born. However, the relationship developed among Seminoles and blacks turned out to be more of a system of indentured servitude for maroons and Black Seminoles.

This labor practice came to an end on June 28, 1848, when U.S. Attorney General John Y. Mason decided all Negroes be restored to the condition of slaves. This caused that Black Seminoles, “who had regarded themselves as free for a decade, were now restored to their condition as Seminole slaves” (Porter 125). A year later, in 1849, under the command of Seminole Chief Wild Cat and Black Seminole John Horse, the Black Seminoles took the important decision to leave Florida and head towards Mexico where slavery had been abolished since 1821 (Porter 127). It is said that John Horse (John Cavallo/Juan Caballo) “knew that a land of the free lay just across the Río Grande” and that he was advised to “go to Mexico with all of those who claimed to be free” (Ibid). According to Kenneth W. Porter in *The Black Seminoles, History of a Freedom-Seeking People* (1996), in summer and fall of 1840, Black Seminoles prepared for flight, leaving on November of that year. Around July 5, they finally reached the Río Grande; they built rafts in order to cross it between Eagle Pass and Del Río (131). Official documents state that the crossing took place on July 12, 1850 and that “on that date, about three hundred persons belonging to the three tribes (the Kickapoos had joined them earlier) presented themselves to the Mexican commandant at Piedras Negras, across from Eagle Pass, asking permission to settle in Mexico” (Porter 131).

Black Seminoles remained in Mexican territory in exchange for obedience to Mexican laws and protection on the border. Under the command of John Horse, Black Seminoles formed an army to protect the Mexican border from Apache attacks. In return for their service, the government of President Benito Juárez offered them asylum and Mexican citizenship. In 1850, the Mexican government gave them the designation of “Mascogos,” a word derived from the word Muskogee, a linguistic term associated with the Crics and Seminole tribes, which is still used in the maroon community of Nacimiento in Coahuila. The adoption of this identity term made the recording of their collective identity possible, for the very first time, on official historic documents (Boteler Mock 73). Finally, in 1856 they founded the town where they would eventually settle and still reside today: Nacimiento, Coahuila, Municipio de Múzquiz.

In 1861, Mexico is still under the government of Zapotec-origin lawyer of liberal views, President Benito Juárez. At this time, the country was undergoing change with the Liberal Reforms, a radical retort to President Antonio López de Santa Anna’s dispossession of power. La Reforma, as this period was called, constituted a set of liberal reform laws marked, especially, by the separation of church and state with the intention of remaking Mexico. The country became a nation-state, and the Constitution of 1857 had reasserted the abolition of slavery. Mexico as a whole was adapting to the change of being ruled under conservative politics with Santa Anna’s dictatorship, to being governed democratically through the liberal lens of President Juárez.

In the northern Mexican states, as they became the geographical division between Mexico and the United States, political troubles emerged in the form of discontent against of those in power with the northern elites opposed to the liberal Reform laws. Specifically, the state of Coahuila represented a meeting point among citizens of United States and Mexico because of its proximity to Texas. With the outbreak of U.S. Civil War (1861-1865) as a result of the

Confederacy's opposition to the anti-slavery views of newly-elected President Abraham Lincoln: African Americans in the Confederate states began to seek refuge elsewhere. As they knew since the Seminole Wars that Mexico represented a land of freedom, many decided to flee the country and sought refuge south of the border. More African Americans began arriving in Mexican territory, and many of them settled in the same Coahuila area occupied by the Black Seminoles prior to the Civil War. In search of freedom, escaping segregation and lynching, African Americans settling in Mexico became part of the formation of what now encompasses Mexico's Third Root. These waves of African American trans-border migrations from north to south, from the U.S. South to northern Mexico, form the black historical backdrop for *Como agua para chocolate*.

***Como Agua Para Chocolate's* Black Secret: Passing Privilege and *Mulatez* in the New Novel of the Mexican Revolution**

Forty-five years after *La negra Angustias* (1944) was published, writer Laura Esquivel develops a narrative of magical realism set against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution: *Como agua para chocolate* (1989). Similar to Rojas González's novel, Laura Esquivel traces the topic of Mexican African ancestry through another female character, Gertrudis De la Garza, daughter of a Mexican woman and a mulatto descendant of African Americans who escaped the Civil War in the United States and fled to Mexico. Esquivel takes Mexico's Third Root (*Tercera Raíz*) to a transnational level by situating her novel in a specific region of Mexico's northern border: Piedras Negras, Coahuila. In this manner, Esquivel links Mexico's blackness to African-American history. Thus, Esquivel can be considered a border Latina writer who uses a

transnational context to bring awareness to the socio-political and racial relations between Mexico and the United States that developed during periods of struggle.

Scholar Juanita Heredia writes in *Transnational Latina Narratives in the Twenty-First Century: The Politics of Gender, Race, and Migrations* (2009) that Latinas' writings that take place within a transnational context—such as that of Esquivel's—transform the author into a historical commentator: “Without understanding the social and historical context of Latin America in a hemispheric dialogue with the United States in these transnational narratives, one cannot comprehend the political impact of continuous im/migration of communities and especially genealogies that stretch between the United States and Latin American nations” (3)⁴⁰. Matilde Landeta, through the character of Angustias Farrera in *La negra Angustias* (film), and Laura Esquivel with Gertrudis De la Garza, not only focus their writing and work on gender issues, but also expose “a woman's perspective on official history” and popular culture (Heredia 4)⁴¹.

Although the story of *Como agua para chocolate* focuses on an upper-class family from northern Mexico, the struggle of the “people” (el pueblo) during the Revolution is boldly represented. The affluent household of De la Garza family, led by a female, represents those in power who, during this socio-political conflict, began to lose their power and monetary assets as a result of the rise against the government of the minorities in the country. The Mexican Revolution was a battle for justice and equality, and Laura Esquivel wanted to portray these elements not only in the political aspect, or out in the public sphere, but also inside the home of

⁴⁰ Heredia, Juanita. *Transnational Latina Narratives in the Twenty-First Century: The Politics of Gender, Race, and Migrations*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

⁴¹ Idem.

Mexican family located in a border a city in northern Mexico, where the everyday life of a matriarchal family was deeply influenced by race and gender cultural politics. In this sense, Esquivel's goal was to use the female voice to denounce race, gender, socio-cultural injustices, and or/prejudices happening in the early twentieth-century in the midst of sites of struggle in the northern border. In this sense, the novel aimed to represent the life of three women following distinct ideologies in life, love, culture, and society. Being a hopeless romantic, as she has described herself in many interviews, Esquivel wanted to use love as the center of the novel. She wanted this love reflected in the kitchen, a place that represented the cultural norm for women regardless of the time period. For this reason, it is precisely in the kitchen where the magical realism takes place, where the De la Garza women are influenced by the alchemic processes in the food cooked by the main character, Tita.

Published in 1989 and translated to more than 35 languages with over four million copies sold worldwide, *Como agua para chocolate* was an immediate success; the film adaptation by Director Alfonso Arau was an international box office hit. The novel has been studied mainly for its stylistic exploration of magical realism, its representations of gender identity, and the Revolution's goal of democracy and liberty. However, there has been little to none attention paid to one key and unnoted topic of the plot: *Afro-mestizaje*. Although the presence of Afro-Mexican ancestry is displayed in minor occasions throughout the novel and film, it speaks loudly in the few passages where it is presented. *Como agua para chocolate* lets us see the presence of the black diaspora not only in the historical context but in the storyline as well. Being the Afro-diaspora a strong factor during the historical and cultural context at the time, Laura Esquivel makes the keen and selective choice to depict implicitly in the backdrop story with an Afro-

descendant character that only appears in a photograph, but also in the main storyline through a secondary female character.

Laura Esquivel, born in Mexico City in 1950, began her writing career as a scriptwriter. In fact, she has mentioned that her acclaimed novel, *Como agua para chocolate*, was thought out as a film. Facing rejection from the already mentioned male-dominated film industry, Esquivel “was discouraged due to the high cost of creating ‘period film.’ A novel, it was decided, would be a more appropriate medium for the story [...] Ironically, the novel was then contemplated as a film” (Gardner 7). Before the prejudices encountered while attempting to have her movie funded and filled with frustration, the author decided to write the novel with the intention of representing on paper what she could not do on film:

En México es muy difícil hacer cine... así que me decidí a escribir mi primera novela con la intención de plasmar en papel la película que imaginaba nadie me iba a financiar. Me entusiasmaba que no iba a tener ningún productor o director diciéndome qué escena podía poner, qué escena quitar, cuántos personajes debía tener mi guión y si podía ser una película de época o no.

[In Mexico it is challenging to make movies ... so I decided to write my first novel with the intention of capturing on paper the film that I imagined nobody was going to finance. I was excited that I would not have any producer or director telling me which scene I could put in the movie, which scene to remove, how many characters my script should have and whether it could be a historical period film or not]. (my trans.; Benlabbah 42)

For this reason, Esquivel wrote with full freedom about the topics she wished to depict and most importantly, she wrote about women within a space that remains socially stagnant in the

household, the kitchen, had a voice that wanted to be heard, but mainly, a voice that represented different traditions and ideologies “inherited” from the cultural and social cosmovision of the country. To that end, Laura Esquivel mentioned that, once she obtained the opportunity to create the story of *Como agua para chocolate* in film, she was aware she could finally speak about the topics that mattered to her as a woman: “Yo tenía total libertad y en ese momento fue cuando hablé precisamente de todo lo que pasaba en ese espacio de la cocina, donde, aparentemente, no pasaba nada” ‘I had total freedom and that's when I talked about everything that happened in that space, the kitchen, where, apparently, nothing happened’ (my trans.; Benlabbah 42)⁴².

Undoubtedly, Esquivel uses magical realism to portray feminist issues that otherwise would not have been possible in an era of social struggles where women rights were not in effect. Although this novel has been seen more as part of the magical realism genre, it is also a novel of the Revolution, a genre that since its origins had been dominated by male authors. Laura Esquivel brings back a genre that reached its peak during the 1950s, and although situated in the same period, amidst the Mexican Revolution, she modernizes the genre with the liberal and feminist topics that were brought to light. For this reason, it can be said that *Como agua para chocolate* has its own genre, the new novel of the Revolution.

Being an educator, Esquivel carefully chose the Mexican Revolution as the historical background of her novel. She stated that her goal was to portray three different viewpoints of women who lived during the same era: “Ubiqué la novela en la época de la Revolución Mexicana porque deseaba mostrar tres diferentes posturas ante un mismo movimiento social.” ‘I located the novel at the time of the Mexican Revolution because I wanted to show three different

⁴² All translations of cited quotes from the book *Laura Esquivel en Marruecos* by Fatiha Benlabbah, are mine.

views before the same social movement' (my trans.; Benlabbah 42). This reflects on the novel as the women who lead story are sisters: Rosaura, the eldest, refuses to break the family tradition towards women; Gertrudis, the middle sister, is representative of the feminist movement and the steps that women took when it flourished, leaving home; and Tita, the youngest sister, a woman who fought her own revolution in order to break the unjust tradition imposed in her family. Just as *La negra Angustias*, Esquivel's novel also challenges the rules that set the standard for the "Novela de la Revolución" genre.

Taking place at the turn of the twentieth-century in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, a town in close proximity to Eagle Pass, Texas, Laura Esquivel sets *Como agua para chocolate* in a bi-national location in the midst of the Mexican Revolution. Tita, the main character, is the youngest daughter of Mamá Elena, who becomes a widow after giving birth. Mamá Elena is now left to raise her three daughters, Rosaura, Gertrudis, and Tita, alone in a ranch in Piedras Negras. We soon find out that Mamá Elena religiously follows the *Manual of Urbanity and Good Manners* (1853), better known as *El manual de Carreño*.⁴³ The matriarch possesses a set of strict and traditional customs, societal and religious, that she imprints on her three daughters who portray different viewpoints about this matter.

Although this novel has been studied more in the realm of magical realism, it holds a culturally interesting topic for Mexican literature and culture: *Afro-mestizaje*. As mentioned previously, Mamá Elena's husband dies of a heart attack after Tita's birth while discovering that their second child, Gertrudis, is the daughter of a mulatto: "Juan De la Graza por muchos años ignoró toda esta historia, pero se enteró de ella precisamente cuando Tita nació- Había ido a la

⁴³ The nickname of this book was given after its author, Venezuelan teacher and politician Manuel Antonio Carreño Muñoz. The book focuses on the individual's instruction of common decency in terms of moral and religious ethics.

cantina a festejar con unos amigos el nacimiento de su nueva hija y ahí alguna lengua venenosa le había soltado toda la información. La terrible noticia le provocó un infarto. Eso era todo” ‘Though for many years Juan De la Garza had been unaware of the entire story, he had learned of it just when Tita was born. He had gone to a bar to celebrate the birth of his new daughter with some friends; there a venomous tongue had let out the information. The terrible news brought on a heart attack. That was all there was’ (139.; Christensen 136).

As the novel flows, the reader discovers that Gertrudis is a mulatta with a passing privilege. She is unaware of her heritage, making it possible for Mamá Elena to disguise her as Juan De la Garza’s daughter. Nonetheless, since an early age, Gertrudis emanates characteristics somewhat stereotypical of person of African descent. In Chapter III, “Quail in Rose Petal Sauce,” after ingesting the sensually exquisite dish, she is described as a voluptuous, exotic, and sexual person:

Parecía que el alimento que estaba ingiriendo producía en ella un efecto afrodisíaco pues empezó a sentir que un intenso calor le invadía las piernas. Un cosquilleo en el centro de su cuerpo no la dejaba estar correctamente sentada en su silla. Empezó a sudar y a imaginar qué se sentiría ir sentada a lomo de un caballo, abrazada por un villista, de esos que había visto una semana antes entrando a la plaza del pueblo.

[On her the food seemed to act as an aphrodisiac; she began to feel an intense heat pulsing through her limbs. An itch in the center of her body kept her from sitting properly in her chair. She began to sweat, imagining herself on horseback with her arms clasped around one of Pancho Villa’s men: the one she had seen in the village plaza the week before.] (50.; Christensen 49).

More physical and personal characteristics like these are attached to Gertrudis throughout the novel. In the episode of the dish of quail and rose petal sauce, Gertrudis decides to take a shower, and after a fire makes her leave the room naked, she then is spotted by the Villista who, while still galloping, takes her by the waist and runs away with her : “Él, sin dejar de galopar para no perder tiempo, se inclinó, la tomó de la cintura, la subió al caballo delante de él, pero acomodándola frente a frente y se la llevó” ‘Without slowing his gallop, so as not to waste a moment, he leaned over, put his arm around her waist, and lifted her onto the horse in front of him, face to face, and carried her away.] (57.; Christensen 53-4). This image, perpetuated in the collective memory of the inhabitants of Piedras Negras; Gertrudis would be forever remembered as the daughter of the mulatto, a girl who ran away naked on a horse with a Villista.

Aside of the stereotypical and objectifying depictions that are associated with mulatto women, bold actions like Gertrudis’s escape reflect the strong character of *mulatas* and *Afro-mestizo* women, mainly of those who were active participants in the war. The fight for Revolution was lying in wait in the northern populations of the country, the fear of hunger and death was spreading rapidly throughout the country, but at the same time, the hope for justice was pervasive. Women at the turn of the century still lived under a patriarchal system crammed with male-dictated cultural traditions; the *Afro-mestizas* who participated as *soldaderas* in the Revolution, somewhat broke the pattern. As Nathaniel Gardner writes in *Critical Guides to Spanish & Latin American Texts and Films: Como Agua Para Chocolate, The Novel and Film Version* (2009), “before the Mexican Revolution, societal tradition dictated many of the ways in which women lived, both in rural and urban Mexico. Women were taught to read and write and, if they were of indigenous origin, to speak Spanish in segregated schools – the segregation

dependent not only upon sex, but on race as well” (18). They were taught to become obedient and quiet women with good manners, opposite to what Gertrudis embodied.

Opposing the traditional norms of nineteenth-century, Gertrudis’s character played a secondary role in the plot of the novel. Her role became undermined before the melodramatic love story of Tita and Pedro. Everything Gertrudis represents for women and Afro-Mexican women seems to go unnoticed for the reader, even though Esquivel’s intentions were to have her readers be her accomplices, to find things out at the same time as the protagonist (Benlabbah 47). Holding on to this thought, one questions the importance of the events in the lives of secondary characters as Gertrudis as they can be more significant to the reader’s cultural ideologies or enrich the mind of an educated audience.

Gertrudis signifies an unorthodox model of women of that era. She is the result of a forbidden relationship, she leaves the household before marriage, and she is an independent woman with progressive ideas. Her story in the novel is noteworthy not only due to her feminist conceptions, but also culturally by depicting the presence of *Afro-mestizaje* in the Mexican Revolution at the northern border. Following her escape with the Villista captain, and much like *la negra Angustias*, Gertrudis joins the armed forces and becomes a *soldadera*, eventually reaching the rank of *general*, as Tita recalls: “Era *general* del ejército revolucionario. Este nombramiento se lo había ganado a pulso, luchando como nadie en el campo de batalla. En la sangre traía el don de mando, así que cuando ingresó el ejército, rápidamente empezó a escalar puestos en el poder hasta alcanzar el mayor puesto” “She was a general in the revolutionary army. The commission had been earned by her hard work, she fought like mad on the field of battle. Leadership was in her blood, and once she joined the army, she began a rapid ascent through powerful positions until she arrived at the top” (180.; Christensen 176). The fact that in the novel

the role of the *soldadera*, and moreover, of women fighting in the Revolution is recognized, shows the author's awareness of the *Tercera Raíz* and its role in Mexican culture. Getrudis De la Garza becomes a strong woman that acquires her agency the moment she sets foot out of the patriarchal household, and therefore, defies all societal norms linked to women.

A year later after Gertrudis returns to her family's ranch as a *general*, she reappears with a baby in arms: a mulato. Unfortunately, she returns alone, without Juan Alejándrez, her Villista husband who doubted his paternity, and therefore Gertrudis's fidelity. How could it be possible of a white woman to birth a Negro child? In this fragment of the novel, Esquivel once again reinforces the African presence and heritage in what comprises "mexicanness": "Un año más tarde Gertrudis dio a luz a un niño mulato. Juan enfureció y amenazó con dejarla. No le perdonaba a Gertrudis que hubiera vuelto a las andadas. Entonces Tita, para salvar ese matrimonio, confesó todo. Por fortuna, no se había atrevido a quemar las cartas, ahora sí que con el <<negro pasado>> de su madre" 'A year later Gertrudis gave birth to a mulatto baby. Juan was furious and threatened to leave her. He could not forgive Gertrudis for having returned to her old ways. Then Tita, to save their marriage, told them everything. It was fortunate she had not dared to burn the letters, since now her mother's "black past' (181.; Christensen 178). Ironically, the focus of this segment does not fall in the fact that Gertrudis is part black, but in the "happy" outcome of Tita having saved Mamá Elena's letters to prove Gertrudis's innocence of adultery before her husband. While it is important to acknowledge that Laura Esquivel dares to touch on *Afromestizaje* in her novel, it is as important to notice that the studies done on this novel have not been directed towards the socio-cultural importance of the racial references expressed in the book, but in romance and magical realism.

Laura Esquivel possibly chose to not bolster the topic of Afro-ancestry in her novel knowing that at the time, 1989, the Mexican audience was not ideologically prepared to fully comprehend the importance and relevance of the Third Root of Mexican heritage. Let us remember that it was not until 1992 that the Mexican government officially recognized African ancestry as the *Tercera Raíz*. What is more important in Esquivel's work is that the presence of blackness in the novel is linked to the United States. Piedras Negras being a binational location, represented meeting point between Mexican and American citizens. Moreover, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the state of Coahuila symbolized a refuge for African Americans escaping the American Civil War, and surprisingly, this connection is depicted in *Como agua para chocolate* after Mamá Elena's death when Tita opens a box that belonged to her deceased mother. The passage becomes extremely significant by revealing the background story of the interracial relationship between Mamá Elena and the mulatto: "Tita abrió el cofre con morbosa curiosidad. Contenía un paquete de cartas de un tal José Treviño y un diario. Las cartas estaban dirigidas a Mamá Elena. Tita las ordenó por fechas y se enteró de la verdadera historia de amor de su madre. José había sido el amor de su vida. No le habían permitido casarse con él pues tenía en sus venas sangre negra" 'Full of morbid curiosity, Tita opened the box. It contained a diary and a packet of letters written to Mamá Elena from someone named José Treviño. Tita put them in order by date and learned the true story of her mother's love. José was the love of her life. She hadn't been allowed to marry him because he had Negro blood in his veins' (138.; Christensen 134-5).

The evident opposition to interracial relationships from Mamá Elena's family, reflects that the idea of an accepting pluricultural Mexico did not apply to all citizenry, especially states as Coahuila who were in close contact to Confederate states such as Texas. The Mexican elite of

that period evidently had ideologies more in sync with United States culture than their own. As Chege Githiora states the term Diaspora is “crucially based on ‘forced dispersion,’ the scattering of large numbers of a people into other places and their subsequent settlement in a new “home” environment” (15). With the whitening of race ideologies carried on since colonial times, conservative Elite members saw the *Mascogos* and, years later African Americans, as a threat to the homogeneity they adamantly wanted to preserve.

Moreover, what becomes intriguing, and significantly critical on Mamá Elenas failed [interracial] love story, is the following part of that passage, where Tita traces, based on love letters, the origins of José Treviño back to the United States and the Civil War: “Una colonia de negros, huyendo de la Guerra civil en U.S.A.y del peligro que corrían de ser linchados, había llegado a instalarse cerca del pueblo. José era el producto de los amores ilícitos entre José Treviño padre y una guapa negra” ‘A colony of Negroes, fleeing from the Civil War in the United States, from the risk they ran of being lynched, had come to settle near the village. Young José Treviño was the product of an illicit love affair between the elder José Treviño and a beautiful Negress’ (138-9.; Christensen 135). In this short but meaningful passage, Laura Esquivel displays her detailed research on the miscegenation of the northern Border States. While this topic is not the center of the plot, it is just as equal, if not more, in significance to the novel.

Like Water for Chocolate: The Film

Comparably to the novel the film adaptation of *Como agua para chocolate* (1992), directed and produced by Esquivel’s former husband, Alfonso Arau, expressed the same message that the author intended with the novel: different female points of view under the same social

movement. Esquivel believes that the real Revolutions come from within “pues si no cambiamos la manera de pensar y no realizamos dentro de nosotros un verdadero cambio, esto no se va a ver reflejado en el mundo public” ‘If we do not change the way we think and we do not make a real change within ourselves, this is not going to be reflected in the public world’ (my trans.; Benlabbah 43). This ideology what probably inspired Esquivel to use the Mexican Revolution as the backdrop to the storyline, scenario that can be better perceived in the film.

Similar to Esquivel, feminist Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros in “Eyes of Zapata” of *Women Hollering Creek* (1991), also echoes Esquivel’s idea of a true revolution. As Héctor Calderón has argued in his reading of “Eyes of Zapata,” “The Wars Begin Here in Our Beds and in Our Hearts” from his *Narratives of Greater Mexico*, Cisneros as well expresses the idea of a revolution from within. In “Eyes of Zapata,” also set against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution, Inés, a female peasant, finds herself in an internal fight with Emiliano Zapata, one of the main leaders of the Mexican Revolution, who while fighting for the people’s rights in war forgets to validate women’s rights in his own household. It is then that Inés cries: “Ay, Miliano, don’t you see? The wars begin here, in our hearts and in our beds. You have a daughter. How do you want her treated? Like you treated me?” (Cisneros 282). Calderón ends his reading of “Eyes of Zapata”: “And this is possible not only because of the broad sweep of events that Cisneros captures in a short story but also because Cisneros, like her character Inés is possessed of great vision. ‘Eyes of Zapata’ reminds readers that broadly-based struggles for social justice begin in one’s home with family, with family members, with lovers, in bed” (Calderón 197). In this manner, Esquivel, as a female and feminist writer, like Cisneros, uses the De la Garza sisters, Gertrudis specifically, to embody the internal changes that are required in a person in order to

fight a “real” revolution. Esquivel made sure that in the film adaptation of *Como agua para chocolate*, these internal changes were captured by actress Claudette Maillé (Gertrudis).

In the film, contrary to the novel, the spectator is more informed of historical facts that are relevant in the development of the story. For example, in the first scene, we as spectators are aware that the story took place in Río Grande, Mexico in 1895. As the film advances, we are shown a French-inspired household that holds portraits of the then president Porfirio Díaz.⁴⁴ We then see Juan De la Garza speaking English with a couple of men. This fact alone implies that this is a diasporic narrative, which later—as in the novel—is reinforced with the emergence of the mulatto and the discovering of his origins. Speaking English, the presence of American men, and the story of the mulatto put together the queue that Esquivel places in the film for us to find: this story is not only about the Mexican Revolution confined in the country, but one that displays the topic of the Mexican, American, and African diasporas.

The transnationality of the novel and film, and its ethnographic approach make evident the racial elements of the film. As already mentioned, the forbidden interracial relationship between Mamá Elena and José Treviño, depicts the racial hierarchy still existent at the turn of twentieth-century Mexico. The African diaspora, although legally permitted by the government, was still not well seen under the eye of the member of the social hegemony of the nation. For *Mascogos* and/or Afro-Mexicans, their place in society resonates to what Chege Githiora states in *Afro-Mexicans: Discourse of Race and Identity in the African Diaspora* (2008), “As with most black Diaspora groups, their interaction with others in Mexico can be analyzed within the context of power relations, for race and class are associated with attributes of power, that is, they

⁴⁴ Members of the Elite that lived under Díaz presidency were deeply influenced by his ideologies of Europeization and *afrancesamiento*. Díaz had a great obsession with France, as at that moment, France was considered the cultural capital of the world.

have a determinative effect on the accessibility of opportunity structures” (Githiora 2). In the second book of the saga, we will find more in-depth how these relations between race and power undoubtedly directed the outcome of Mamá Elena and José Treviño lives. Although people of African-descent have been marginalized and excluded for centuries, *Como agua para chocolate*, though briefly, rescues an integral part of the history of this neglected group, and at the same time, places the presence of the Afro-Mexican, the Afro-Mexican woman in this case, on the surface for the reader and spectator to figure out.

Gertrudis De la Garza appears in the film as a white, voluptuous woman, with red-headed curly hair. Equally to the movie, the only indications the spectator gets about her Afro-ancestry are the references made by Tita, in her omniscient narrator voice, regards Gertrudis’s actions and character. Being the happiest member of the De la Garza sisters, Gertrudis emanates a sense of carelessness and boldness. This is represented throughout the movie her various acts of bravery. The best and first example of this begins with Gertrudis being “robbed” by a captain of the Villista troops, which ironically marks the beginning of her military/Revolutionary career. I consider this instance as an act of bravery and fearlessness; more than a kidnapping situation, Gertrudis is portrayed in the film as being willing to be captured.

From this instance on, we see the presence of Gertrudis in very few, but significant, scenes. The first scene is of Gertrudis’s return to the ranch after her “escape” with the Villista soldier. She now returns as a *generala* of the Mexican Revolution, she arrives riding a horse and leading her troop with a sense of pride. Dressed in masculine attire, pants, boots, jacket, a hat, and *cananas* around her torso, displayed on top of her chest, we observe a Gertrudis that has been masculinized; she is no longer the Gertudis who always wore a dress and skirts, and always obeyed. As she descends from her horse to greet Tita, we see how Gertrudis now gives orders

and commands to the group of men she leads, to what they respond “Sí, mi *Generala*” ‘Yes, my general’, whether the orders are to complete a task related to the troop or to the kitchen, Gertrudis, as *La negra Angustias*, subverts gender roles once she joins the fight for social justice (my trans.). Gertrudis, as an Afro-*mestiza*, and a soldier, is fearless, daring.

Unlike other female authors, Laura Esquivel does not take away the importance of Gertrudis’s fight in the Mexican Revolution (as we will see in the second book of the saga). In most fictional representations of daring women placed in stories of social struggles, “preexisting discursive conventions silence and erase the complexities that women’s participation in these struggles implies” (Linhard 9). Laura Esquivel does not depict through Gertrudis the stereotype of the docile and submissive *soldadera*. Instead, she implies that Afro-Mexican *soldaderas* and *generalas* as Gertrudis participated actively in the fight for Revolution, and that their presence and activism was fundamental for its success. They were strong women whose role was not only linked to cooking and feeding the soldiers, but to fighting and defending their rights for “Tierra y Libertad,” ‘Land and Freedom.’

The weight that this Afro-*mestiza* character carries in the plot of *Como agua para chocolate* is not as insignificant as it is displayed on both the novel and film. Although Gertrudis is a mulatto woman who is unknowingly “passing,” she is placed in a site of struggle, and in a war that fights to eradicate the injustices against marginalized--mestizos, indigenous groups, and Afro-descendants. Gertrudis as an Afro-*mestiza*, makes use of her agency in favor of “the cause.” Because even though Afro-descendants “have been objects of racial, economic, and political repression, they are not merely products of those situations, but rather have taken an active role in defining their interaction with others, including those same repressive forces. They, too, are creators, active agents of change within their own territories” (Githiora 5). Therefore, Laura

Esquivel created in Gertrudis De la Garza, a woman, an Afro-Mexican woman, that represented what truly embodied the role of socially-conscious Afro-*mestizas* fighting in the Mexican Revolution.

The story of Gertrudis as an active member of the Revolution is undeniably stated in the film and novel. In the film we are able to see a photograph of José Treviño, her father, and we are also able to witness her child standing next to her. Unlike the novel, the film does not recreate the scene/passage where Gertrudis returns with a mulatto child in her arms. Instead, this episode is skipped and she reappears towards the end of the film, at her niece's wedding. Transformed into a more feminine version of herself, well dressed, and arriving in an elegant car, Gertrudis appears in the last segment of the film accompanied by her husband, Villista Juan Alejándrez, and her child, much like it is described in the novel: “Llegó en un coupé Ford <<T>>, de los primeros que sacaron con velocidades. Al bajarse del auto por poco se le cae el gran sombrero de ala ancha con plumas de avestruz que portaba. Su vestido con hombreras era de lo más moderno y llamativo” ‘She drove up in a model T Ford coupe, one of the first to be produced with multiple gears. Stepping out of the car, she nearly dropped the huge wide-brimmed hat trimmed with ostrich feathers that she was carrying. Her dress with its shoulder pads was the most daring, absolutely the latest thing’ (235.; Christensen 232).

It is 1934, and she is now a wealthy woman, no longer fighting in the Mexican Revolution. In the novel, Gertrudis appears at the wedding with her son, who is described as her oldest child who had become a resemblance of his grandparents: “se había convertido en un mulato escultural. Las facciones de su rostro eran muy finas y el color oscuro de su piel contrastaba con el azul agua de sus ojos” ‘[he] had turned into a fine figure of a mulatto’ and whose “delicate features, and his clear blue eyes stood out against his dark skin’ (235.;

Christensen 232). It is then affirmed that his physical features are a result of his mixed ancestry: “El color de la piel era la herencia de su abuelo y los ojos azules la de Mamá Elena. Tenía los ojos idénticos a la abuela” ‘He got his dark skin from his grandfather and his blue eyes from Mamá Elena. He had eyes just like his grandmother’ (235.; Christensen 232). The Afro-ancestry of Gertrudis’s *Mascogo* side of the family, along with the white mestizo heritage of her mother, produced this other element of the Afro-Mexican race that Esquivel chooses to depict as part of the *tercera raíz*.

Film serves as a tool to reach masses, and its power is such, that, as James Snead states, the magnification of the film image “can both elevate and degrade” (143). The way that an author or director chooses to portray an ethnic character, defines how this one will be perceived by the audience, mental images, and visual images mainly, “allow the spectator to register the image of the black person” (Snead 142). In this sense, *Como agua para chocolate* in its film version, allows for a representation of the African ancestry so ever-present in Mexico’s history. Wisely creating a white-looking mulatto female character who becomes a *general*, a fearless woman of the Mexican Revolution, and knowing that the film version of the novel will reach a broad audience, Laura Esquivel indirectly sends an important message to the spectator: just as Gertrudis, many of us are also unaware of our African heritage. She represents the Mexican mulatta of the Revolution, the *soldadera*, the strong woman whom, as Angustias Farrera in Francisco Rojas Gonzalez’s *La negra Angustias* (1944), achieves success by her own merit. She defies the image of the typical submissive woman in Mexican literature and culture: She masculinizes herself in many occasions, not only for her military career as a *general*, but also in her clothing and the manner in which she deals with the Revolutionary soldiers in her troop, this way giving a message of gender equality to the reader: “Gertrudis se ‘masculiniza’, se convierte

en generala que da órdenes y que mata en un afán de lograr un mundo más equitativo” ‘Gertrudis "masculinizes" herself, she becomes a general who gives orders and who kills in an effort to achieve a more equitable world’ .(my trans.; Gardner 43). Although it is implied that perhaps her racial hybridity aided her in her path to success, she is never portrayed rejecting her race after finding out about her African heritage. On the contrary, whenever she returned to the ranch with her son, (a daughter in the film) a sense of pride was depicted in her character. Gertrudis De la Garza, a passing mulatto woman, embodies the various elements that define the third root of Mexicans, clarifying to the reader this way, that our ancestry is not only Indigenous and European, but also African, and more so, that it can also be a result of the cultural ties with Mexico’s neighboring country, the United States, with whom we share cultural and racial ties.

El Diario de Tita: A Testimonio of Blackness in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands.

Earlier this year, I while I was doing research for *Como agua para chocolate* (1989)—as I felt there was not enough material in regards to my topic—I found myself on the Internet browsing through the website of a Mexican bookstore. After a little while, I was pleasantly and eagerly surprised by the appearance of the newest books of the Mexican writer Laura Esquivel: *El diario de Tita* (2016) and *Mi negro pasado* (2017). Thus, after having read the description of both books, I realized they were the continuation of *Como agua para chocolate*; Esquivel had created a saga of the story of this matriarchal family that echoed *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936) written by the famous Spanish playwright Federico García Lorca.⁴⁵ The second book, *El diario de Tita*, recovers the story of De la Garza family from the ashes. Esquivel wittingly exhibits the impact of certain personal, social, and political struggles that passed through De la

⁴⁵ This play tells the story of an all-female household where Bernarda de Alba, the matriarch, imposes control over the life of her five daughters.

Garza family. Most importantly, through Tita's words, Esquivel exposes twenty-two years of events that determined the destiny of the family. Most importantly, we discover their revolutionary acts, and their fight against the color-line within the family. I will be focusing on specific entries of Tita's diary in regards to Gertrudis Afro-Mexican heritage; the story of Mamá Elena and José Treviño as a *testimonio* given and/or exposed by Tita, signals the significance of the transnational links of negritude between Mexico and the United States. Consequently, discovering Gertrudis's roots, guides the reader to a better understanding of the black presence in the Mexican Revolution, moreover, of the importance of Afro-Mexican women in this socio-political conflict.

Laura Esquivel, a woman of strong values and liberal mindset, reached recognition with *Como agua para chocolate*, not only for the economic success of the novel, or for being a female Mexican author in achieving such success, but for being a female author reaching that goal with a first novel. As a former educator, her critical thinking was essential for her writing, which reflected in *Como agua para chocolate*. Although—and as I have mentioned before—the novel's primary focus of academic studies has centered in gender studies and the culinary art of Mexican cuisine, the fashion in which she uses her criticism towards Mexican society results evident in the novel. The thoughtfulness behind each of her literary fictions, particularly in *El diario de Tita*, is evidence of her acute eye for small yet meaningful details, which tell us there is a reason behind each choice, as suggested by Elizabeth Moore Willingham: "Esquivel's skill with narrative, mode, voice, and character is deft storytelling, and the narrative mirror that she holds up to Mexican woman-hood, family dynamics, gender roles, religion, society, and politics has given readers a truth-telling fiction that speaks across political boundaries" (Moore Willingham 4). Such statement positively speaks truth to Esquivel's writing; however, it proves that the

academic scholarship written on Esquivel's work leaves behind a topic that she commonly uses in her narratives but that most people are oblivious of, race.

In a burgundy paper cover design with the image of a lock on the side, and an elongated beige old-looking ruled piece of paper in the center that reads "El diario de Tita" in cursive letters, Laura Esquivel brilliantly presents to us the second part of *Como agua para chocolate*. Evidently simulating the look of a real vintage and burned diary, we are introduced once again to the story of *Como agua para chocolate* but through the eyes of Tita, without missing the details of those twenty-two years that passed between the death of Rosaura (Tita's eldest sister) and the wedding of Tita's niece Esperanza, Rosaura's and Pedro's daughter, and John Brown's son, Alex. *El diario de Tita* is a book-object that was thought out to the very last detail. Evoking the look of an antique genuine diary that has been burned, this work of art is filled with pages that use typography that emulates real cursive hand writing; salvaged printed old black and white family photographs and portraits of people that would resemble the characters; invitations with hand-writing on them; images of flowers that were pressed one by one on some pages so they would appear real in the diary, and emotional hand written love letters, some of which become the revelation of the forbidden love affair between Mamá Elena and the mulatto José Treviño.

Published twenty-seven years after *Como agua para chocolate*, this second book of the saga is not an exception to the absence of racial themes in Esquivel's works. It is precisely in *El diario de Tita* where, abetted by the format and style of the book, the African heritage presence in De la Garza family is deciphered through an archival-like recipe.⁴⁶ Through the use of images of letters and photographs printed on the pages of the book/diary, Esquivel presents an "official"

⁴⁶ From this point forward, I will often refer to *El diario de Tita* as *El diario* to avoid repetition.

testimonio of De la Garza's *Tercera Raíz*.⁴⁷ However, Esquivel also captures elements of Mexican indigenous cultures to bridge the cultural gap between the tripartite heritage of the Mexican *mestizo*, and of Mexico and the United States. The story imprisoned in this diary turned into an emancipated story of oppression; it is the liberation of marginalized individuals at the turn of the twentieth-century in the Mexican northern border. The diary, in terms of cultural memory re-appropriation is in part "a response or reaction to rapid changes and to a life without anchors or roots" (Jelin 1). This statement applies soundly to the case of the Mexican Negro, a subject whose history and collective memory has been marginalized from Mexico's official history. As a result of the lack of a tangible memory (documents, diaries, artifacts, etc), the upholding of a shared history, identity, and cultural memory has remained uncertain for the rising Afro-Mexican population. When a document that shares the cultural aspect of a community is found, it functions as a method to produce a change; something that Elizabeth Jelin argues regarding the memory-archive dynamic:

At the societal level, there may be an abundance of archives and documentation center, even of accumulated knowledge and information about the past, with traces in various types of recognized vehicles and material supports. Yet all these supports and props do not guarantee that the past will be recalled or the specific meanings that groups will attach to its traces. To the extent that recall is activated by social subjects and is mobilized in actions intended to give meaning to the past, by interpreting it and bringing

⁴⁷ The term "testimonio" does not have the same connotation as "testimony." Unlike the English sense of the term testimony, where the narration recorded has the intention of the recorder, usually a social scientist, in order to obtain data, as stated by John Beverly. A *testimonio*, on the other hand, expresses the intentionality of the source (the narrator) and involves a sense of urgency a social problem: repression, subalternity, poverty, imprisonment, struggle for survival. It is meant to reflect sincerity. See Beverly, John. "The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio." *Testimonio: On The Politics of Truth*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004, pp.29-44.

it onto the stage of the current drama, the process of recalling becomes central in the process of social interaction. (“Memories” 13)

Although the presence of Africanness in Mexico is registered in a limited amount of documents that throughout different archives in the country, the historical and cultural memory of the African heritage in Mexico is, as I have suggested, a blurred thought in the racial consciousness of Mexicans. In this sense, *El diario de Tita*, through her object-book format, is the fictional equivalent to a cultural archive which will aid the reader—fictional (*Mi negro pasado*) and non-fictional—in the restoration of the collective memory of Afro-Mexicans.

Written in a first-person narrative voice, Tita’s diary first page displays an old photograph of Mamá Elena and Tita with a caption that says, “La que está de pie junto a su madre, soy yo” ‘The one who is standing next to her mother, is me’ (my trans.; 3).⁴⁸ In sepia tone, this photograph alludes to the traditional nature of the content expected in the book. As we turn to the next page, we see another old portrait, but this time of Pedro Múzquiz, Tita’s eternal love. The photograph is preceded by a love poem in an indigenous language and followed by its Spanish translation. The poem titled “Poema Hñahnu Otomí,” is the first important racial and ethnic reference in the book.⁴⁹ The fact that Esquivel chose to open the narrative with a poem in *Otomí* language, voices the author’s interest in the recognition and exposure of minorities in Mexican literature and culture.

In this personal narrative of Tita, the youngest of De la Garza’s sister, the revolution

⁴⁸ All the translations for *El diario de Tita* and *Mi negro pasado* are mine. The books have not been published in the U.S., and therefore, a translation has not been made.

⁴⁹ Otomí people emigrated from southern to northern Mexico during the twentieth-century. They are typically located in the states of México, Querétaro, Hidalgo, Guanajuato, and also Tlaxcala, Michoacán and Veracruz. They are identified according to the region they are from, either Hñähñü, Ñuhu, Ñhato or Ñuhmu. See Sánchez Alaniz, José Ignacio. “Filiación cultural Otomí.” *INAH*.

continues. Moreover, I do not only refer to the political struggle happening in the background of the story, but also of the personal revolution the family fought internally: oppression. Tita begins exalting Nacha, an indigenous Otomí maid who, for De la Garza's sisters, was considered a "Nana," the equivalent of the mammy in American history. The exaltation of Nacha's persona in the book is done as a way to underline the importance she had in bringing comfort to Tita's struggles under Mamá Elena's repressing attitudes towards her. Through Nacha's traditions and customs passed down to Tita, the youngest De la Garza female was able to endure living in a dictatorship-like household. Tita often turns to Nacha's traditions to find answers to her tribulations:

Hoy nacha me regaló el cielo. Me enseñó una puntada de tejido que en su pueblo solo lo pueden border las mujeres casadas. Parece una escalera ascendente. Dice Nacha que, dentro de su tradición, se piensa que la forma de alcanzar el cielo se da a través de las relaciones familiares Me conmovió hasta las lágrimas este gesto de Nacha pues teniendo en cuenta que nunca me voy a casar, esta puntada me permite alcanzar el cielo aún sin el matrimonio.

[Today Nacha gave me heaven as a gift. She showed me knitting stitch that can only be embroidered by married women in her hometown. It looks like an ascending staircase. Nacha says that, within her tradition, it is thought that the way to reach heaven is through family relationships I was moved to tears by Nacha's gesture because considering that I'm never going to get married, this stitch allows me to reach heaven even without marriage.] (my trans.; 24)

Similar to the previous example, Tita often writes about Nacha's influence in her life. Often making references to Nacha's cosmovision—similar to the *Popol Vuh*—Tita executes many of her customs and turns to indigenous philosophies to adopt an alternate view of the events happening in her life and make sense of the struggles she is battling.⁵⁰ Along with her fighting her internal battle of not being able to have a free will under her mother's rule, a social battle is also acknowledged by Tita in the pages of her diary: The Mexican Revolution.

The Revolution places a more central part in this story than it did in *Como agua para chocolate*. References to this political conflict surface more throughout the pages of the diary. The very first one places the geographical context in the northern border and it exposes the links between Mexican and American societies during this period of struggle. Tita makes reference to the social aspect of Mexican border towns during the Revolution by alluding to the possible scarceness of food as a consequence of the war: “Mamá y Chenchá se habían ido a abastecerse de lo necesario para el parto, pues debido a la lucha revolucionaria se esperaba una escasez de alimentos para el pueblo. Pedro había salido temprano a Eagle Pass para traer al Dr. Brown. El traslado del doctor se complicó a causa de los enfrentamientos entre federales y revolucionarios...” ‘Mom and Chenchá had gone to stock up on what was necessary for the birth delivery, because due to the revolutionary struggle a shortage of food for people was expected. Pedro had left early to Eagle Pass to bring Dr. Brown. However, bringing the doctor got complicated because of the battles between federals and revolutionaries...’ (my trans.; 45). From this point on, Esquivel begins to bring afloat, more and more, the hidden origins of Gertrudis’

⁵⁰ The *Popol Vuh* is considered the most important text in the indigenous literature of the New World. It is said to be the mythological version of the creation of the world, also that it is the "book of the council or book of the community".

heritage, the motives of her personality as a strong mulatto woman, and therefore the linkage between Mexico, the United States, and race. The first time a reference is made happens when Tita writes about José Treviño, months prior to the death of her mother. The family was getting ready for the baptism of Roberto, her nephew. She recalls having noticed a different look in the eyes of her authoritarian mother, a loving look. This instance, she recalls, happened as she and Mamá Elena were exiting the market, suddenly running into a black man that made her mother uneasy:

...nos topamos con un señor mulato. Él venía caminando con su esposa y sus hijos. Cuando mi mama lo vio se paró en seco. El hombre al verla, también se detuvo. Incluyó su cabeza, se quitó el sombrero y le dijo: 'Mis respetos para usted y su familia, doña Elena. ¿Cómo están todos?' 'Bien, gracias', le respondió mi mama con una voz enronquecida, rara, como apenada, como si fuera algo pecaminoso hablar con ese hombre y apresuró el paso. Inmediatamente volteó hacia todos lados para ver si alguien la había visto. De pronto se dio cuenta de que yo estaba a su lado mirándola...Me gustaría entender por qué mi mama vive tan enojada.

[... we ran into a mulatto man. He was walking with his wife and children. When my mom saw him, she stopped abruptly. The man, when he saw her, also stopped. He bowed his head, took off his hat and said: 'My respects to you and your family, Mrs. Elena. How is everyone?' 'Good, thank you,' my mother replied in a hoarse voice, she was strange, as if embarrassed, as if talking to that man were something sinful, she then hastened her pace. Immediately after, she turned around to see if anyone had seen her. Suddenly, she

realized that I was by her side looking at her, and she got angry ... I would like to understand why my mom lives so angry.] (my trans.; 50-1)

This ironic coincidence between Mamá Elena and José Treviño, marks for the first time the social norms established at the time among people considered of inferior races. The manner in which José Treviño greets Mamá Elena, taking his hat off and bowing while expressing his respect for her and her family, demonstrates the social placement of black people in Mexican society. This is the first scene that evokes the normalized power-relations between black and white mestizos; it is an example of cultural racism and proof that “race always seems to refer to human difference understood as ‘natural’” (Wade 4). An upper-class white woman and a black man could not have any type of association that was not a master-servant-like relationship. And consequently, marginalized people, indigenous and blacks, needed to display an “appropriate” behavior towards whites that reflected the utmost respect whites deserved as members of a superior race. Othering allowed for a clear separation in racial or class hierarchy directed towards subjects that have been socially and culturally classified as different. Mama Elena’s encounter with José Treviño, and the behavior/response the latter had towards her, a powerful white woman, is the example of internalized norms in which he, as the Other, had grown up with since childhood. Yes, slavery has been abolished in Mexico since 1821, but informal segregation towards indigenous and blacks continued to take place. Othering marginalized groups became an everyday norm as Eurocentric ideologies remained strong. Ultimately, José Treviño’s social behavior represented a way to reinforce the place of the black man before the white race.

In a following entry of the diary, Esquivel makes an important connection between blackness and indigeneity that embraces the cultural links between Mexico and the U.S. In this account, Tita is narrating in detail about her experience at Dr. John Brown’s home as she is

recovering from a mental breakdown after the death of her nephew, Roberto. While being there, Tita recalls meeting an indigenous woman, a Kickapoo woman who would disappear as before the presence of others who were not Tita. Continuing with the magical realism characteristic of *Como agua para chocolate*, Esquivel introduces the presence of this liminal subject. I call the Kickapoo woman a liminal entity, not only because of the origins of these bicultural tribes with roots in Mexico and the U.S., but also due to her intermittent presence between a physical and an intangible presence:

...estaba sentada al lado de una mujer kikapú con la que acosumbraba a tomar té; de pronto John se presentó ante mi vista y la mujer kikapú desapareció....yo regresé a mi pero disimuladamente buscaba con la vista a la kikapú hasta que la descubrí en una foto que colgaba de la pared. John se percató de ello y me preguntó: ‘¿Le gusta la foto? Es de mi abuela. Se llamaba Luz del Amanecer. Era una india kikapú...Claro que a la mayoría de la familia le llevó muchos años aceptarla. La encontraban extraña. Una especie salvaje.’

[... I was sitting next to a Kickapoo woman with whom I used to drink tea; Suddenly John appeared before my eyes and the Kickapoo woman disappeared ... I returned to my knitting but secretly looked for the Kickapoo woman, until I found her in a photo that hung on the wall. John noticed this and asked me: 'Do you like the picture? It is of my grandmother. Her name was Luz del Amanecer (Light of Dawn). She was a Kickapoo Indian ... Of course, it took many years for the majority of the family to accept her. They found her strange. A wild species.] (my trans.; 78-9)

Dr. Brown's grandmother is a relevant character in *El diario de Tita*, as it shows Esquivel's knowledge of the connections between indigenous tribes and the Afro-Seminole during the exodus of the latter to Mexico. The state of Coahuila, Mexico was a place where African groups and Indian groups collided as a consequence of the political conflicts to minority groups in the United States. The town of El Nacimiento, Coahuila, is the melting pot of groups of African origin and indigenous groups are juxtaposed before the Mexican *mestizo* culture and the Mexican-Texan border region (Del Moral 11). However, it has to be noted that El Nacimiento is subdivided into two areas separated by nine kilometers from each other, one corresponding to the *Mascogos*, El Nacimiento de los Negros, and the other one corresponding to the Kickapoos, popularly known as Ranchería El Nacimiento (Ibid). The Kickapoo tribe "del Águila" (of the Eagle), name that appeals to their geographical placement Eagle Pass-El Nacimiento, settled in this border town at the same time as the *Mascogos* in 1850, and later on another migratory wave took place around 1864 during the U.S. Civil War when African Americans searched for refuge in Mexico as well (Del Moral 20). Coahuila was a place of a bicultural life between indigenous and blacks: "During the 1950s, the *Mascogos*' Kickapoo neighbors had been able to come and go as they pleased across the Texas/Mexico border. The Kickapoo Capitán negotiated permission from both governments for his people to cross without restriction since they engage in an annual migration between Nacimiento and Eagle Pass" (sic) (Adams 139-140).

As a result of the geographical proximity and bicultural life of the indigenous tribes, the *Mascogos*, and white Americans, and as noted in the previous passage narrated by Tita, interracial relationships occurred. It seems, however, that in such taboo relationships it was easier for a white man to justify his union to a Kickapoo woman, than for a white woman to have society favor her relationship to a black man. Nonetheless, as expressed by Dr. Brown, it took

time for her grandmother to receive the “approval” of his white family, for she was looked down on and perceived as a wild species. Esquivel did not choose such derogatory descriptive adjectives because she has a superiority complex or a condescending view of minorities, but in an attempt to display her awareness of the ever-existent racism towards indigenous communities, as they are continuously associated with barbarism.

Similar views of black inferiority displayed in the story of Mamá Elena and José Treviño. One of the most important testaments of the black presence in the story of *Como agua para chocolate*, occurs in *El diario de Tita* through a letter José Treviño wrote to Mamá Elena, which she never received. The letter falls in Tita’s hands when José’s son, Felipe Treviño, finds out about the birth of Gertrudis’ mulatto child. It was not until then that Felipe figured out who was the recipient of the letter his father made him promise to deliver at deathbed. The letter was written “a la mujer blanca de la que se había enamorado” ‘to the white woman who he had loved’ (my trans.; 191). When José Treviño visits the ranch in search of the white woman and delivers the letter, Tita informs him that it was her mother and had passed away, for he decides it Gertrudis’s right to keep it. When Tita writes about Jose’s visit, she describes the similarities between the two siblings, underlining how—besides the difference in skin color--the physical features reveal their blood ties: “Finalmente todo apuntaba a que corría la misma sangre bajo sus venas. Para mí no había la menor duda. A pesar de que tienen diferente color de piel, no cabe duda de que son hijos del mismo padre. Tienen la misma forma de los ojos. La misma mirada, el cabello rizado, la boca carnosa y una nariz afilada, product de la mezcla de razas” ‘Finally, everything pointed out that they had same blood running through their veins. For me, there was not the slightest doubt. Although they have different skin color, there is no doubt that they are offspring of the same father. They have the same eye shape. The same gaze, the curly hair, full

lips and a sharp nose, product of the mixture of races' (my trans.; 191-2). In this passage, Esquivel suggests the reader when paying close attention to physical features one can uncover physical traits that function as clues to deduce genetic lineage. By the closing that sentence signaling Gertrudis's and Felipe's African physical resemblances are the result of race miscegenation, she is acknowledging the existence of the Afro-Mexican as part of Mexican identity and culture.

Contrary to this allusion of racial acknowledgment and acceptance is the reaction of Rosaura, the oldest of De la Garza's sisters, before Felipe's presence in the house. As narrated by Tita, Rosaura "puso el grito en el cielo" 'made a big fuss' after finding out the mulatto entered the ranch. According to Tita's account, the eldest of the sisters said to Gertrudis and to her that "no le gustaba que entrara a la casa *ese tipo de gente*" 'she did not like *that kind of people* entering the house' (my trans.; 192-3).⁵¹ Through Rosaura's character Esquivel provides a different take on race, a non-utopian view at the reality of racial notions within Mexican society. By pejoratively defining Felipe as a "that kind of people," Rosaura displays racist beliefs that, as many Mexicans today, have been part of her formation as a white *mestiza*. Racism in the Mexican nation ironically existed at that time, over one hundred years after the emancipation of slaves in the country, and unfortunately still exists today in twenty-first century Mexico. Esquivel's academic-intellectual self purposely represented Rosaura's take on race to contrast it against Gertrudis's racial reformist outlook, which Tita paraphrases in her diary:

Estoy de acuerdo con Gertrudis que para acabar con el racismo y la esclavitud son necesarias tanto las guerras civiles, como las revoluciones. Y le aclaró que 'ese tipo de gente' a la que de manera despectiva Rosaura se refería era la más valiente y noble que

⁵¹ Emphasis added.

ella había conocido, y ya para rematar, le recordó que mi mamá tan no vio diferencia entre el mulato y su papá que a los dos les abrió las piernas por igual.

[I agree with Gertrudis that to put an end to racism and slavery, both civil wars and revolutions are necessary. And she clarified that 'that kind of people' that Rosaura referred to in such a derogatory manner, were the bravest and most noble people that she had ever known, and to top it off, she reminded her that my mom saw no difference between the mulatto and her father, that she opened her legs to both of them, equally.]
(my trans.; 193)

With sarcasm and 'dark' humor, Laura Esquivel expresses how individuals often and intentionally "forget" compromising personal situations when these go against one's racial/cultural ideologies. Exposing her mother's past was a tactic Gertrudis used to make a statement about how racist conducts in De la Garza family had relevance when the most 'traditional' member of all, their mother, had no problem towards someone of different skin color or social status. It is immediately this argument between the two older [half] sisters that we are presented with the infamous letter José Treviño never sent to Mamá Elena, and which tells the story of their forbidden relationship.

"Elena querida, te escribo esta carta para hacer de tu conocimiento las causas y motivos que tuve para no aparecerme en la estación de tren" 'Dear Elena, I am writing this letter to inform you of the reasons and motives I had for not showing up at the train station' (my trans.; 196). Already in a *testimonio*-like form, José Treviño begins the letter suggesting the missing of his meeting with Mamá Elena as something that was beyond his will. As he continues with the letter, he then admits being there, watching Mamá Elena look for him while carrying Gertrudis in

her arms and holding Rosaura by the hand. However, little by little, he begins giving hints that he could not take action and fulfill their plan: fleeing together. Describing himself as being standing there “A lo lejos. Escondido” ‘From afar. Hiding’, he consequently reveals the truth with the following statement: “Temeroso de que tus hermanos me encontraran” ‘Afraid that your brothers would find me’ (my trans.; Ibid). As it would have happened with a runaway slave during colonial times, José Treviño was being persecuted. How dare a black man be with an upper-class white woman? He could not risk attempting such “audacity.”

In his effort to escape and save his life, the young mulatto mentions having hidden at her aunt’s house. José’s aunt, Julitas, worried for his life, asked him how he was not able to give her up after the last murder attempt of her brothers against him. José then expresses his aunt’s disbelief to such attacks given the personal circumstances that bind them—him and Elena’s family—together: “Le parece increíble que tu familia me busque como si fuera el peor de los asesinos. A mi también me sorprende. Crecimos juntos, por Dios. ¿En qué momento resultó tan ofensivo el color de mi piel? Hay veces que quisiera odiarlos pero no puedo” ‘She finds it unbelievable that your family looks for me as if I were the worst of assassins. It also surprises me. We grew up together, for God’s sake. At what point did the color of my skin become so offensive? There are times I wish I could hate them, but I cannot’ (my trans.; 196). José Treviño writes these sentences with a sense of pain and disbelief by the way he is being treated because of his black skin tone. He alludes to the notion of being hunted, chased, bringing to mind an image, not of negroes “singing and dancing down on the levee,” but of negroes running away from slave-hunters, “trying to keep alive” and “trying to survive a very brutal system” (Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro* 49).

The following part of José's statement is undoubtedly the epitome of Laura Esquivel's outstanding knowledge of the transnational racial and cultural ties of Mexico and The United States. Keeping up with the allusion to the struggles of slavery for African Americans, Esquivel, through José's character, speaks about a socio-political movement that impacted the destiny of millions of African Americans searching for equality and freedom, the Civil War. While doing this, the Mexican writer discloses some of the presumably unknown reasons that link Mexican to American negritude. Praising the settlement of African Americans in Mexican territory, José Treviño retells a small part of the history of slavery of his ancestors in the U.S., and their life as acculturated black Mexican nationals:

Bendigo que la familia de mis abuelos huyera de la Guerra Civil en Estados Unidos y buscara refugio en donde sus hijos pudieran crecer sin conocer lo que era la esclavitud. Bendigo que tu tío y padrino les hubiera dado trabajo y cobijo por tantos años, aunque en el camino se hubiera visto atraído de tal forma por la belleza de mi madre que la preñó a los quince años. Si nada de esto hubiera pasado yo no estaría vivo. No sería el mulato que te ama con locura. Nunca te hubiera visto, besado, amado, embarazado.... Si por eso ahora me condenan, bendigo la condena. Me declaro culpable y con gusto *me dejaría colgar de un árbol* (emphasis added).

[I bless that my grandparents' family fled the Civil War in the United States and sought refuge where their children could grow up without knowing what slavery was. I bless that your uncle and godfather had given them work and shelter for so many years, although on the way he would have been attracted in such a way by the beauty of my mother whom he impregnated at fifteen years old. If none of this had happened I would not be alive. I

would not be the mulatto who loves you with madness. I would have never seen you, kissed you, loved you, impregnated you ... If that's why they now condemn me, I bless the sentence. I plead guilty and would gladly *let them hang me from a tree* (emphasis added).] (my trans.; 196)

This powerful *testimonio* reveals the hardships José's family underwent as a consequence of the Civil War. Forced to flee their home country in order to save their lives, the "Treviño" family chose self-exile before surrendering to slavery again. Todd W. Wahlstrom stated in his introduction to *The Southern Exodus to Mexico* (2015) that many white southerners felt threatened by the Confederate war and attempted to move their slaves Southwest (Texas) aiming to "resurrect an Old South in Mexico" (xv). The first "exodus" in reality began with white slave owners fleeing the South as they faced struggles to keep their slaves. For this reason, many African slaves began their exodus after being brought to the Texas-Mexico border by their owners. Although it is said that most African Americans stayed in the U.S. after the Civil War, also "a select number of black southerners, particularly from the Texas-Coahuila border, decided to search for a better postemancipation life in Mexico" (Wahlstrom 26). With this said, the forced migration of black slaves by white slave-holders to the Texas side, provides a "better understanding of the social history of southern migration to Mexico" (Ibid). It is in fact this history that Laura Esquivel was aware of as she mentions in an interview I conducted—and which I will address further on—that she knew about the history of African Americans escaping the Civil War to settle in Mexican land. Such was the growing presence of black Americans in Mexican territory, that by the mid 1850s an approximate number of four thousand fugitive slaves settled along the northern regions of the Aztec country (Wahlstrom 41).

With hopes for possible upward mobility and of obtaining total freedom, runaway slaves looked at Mexico as an answer to the social injustices they faced back in the United States. Alluding to this notion, in his letter José Treviño expresses his gratefulness to his grandparents for providing their children the opportunity to start a life in a place where slavery was a meaningless term. Because of Mexico's political standpoint against slavery, he also renders thanks to the De la Garza's for giving his family work and a place to live. It is also important to remember that part of Mexico's viewpoints on racial politics were reflected in the government's actions to encourage black southerners' migration into the northern regions of the country to—as mentioned previously in this chapter—provide “buffer against American filibusters and Indian raids” (Ibid). In Mexican history, President Santa Anna's sentiments against slavery are well known. Todd W. Wahlstrom quotes an important statement of Santa Anna in regards to his liberal-minded views race. According to Wahlstrom, the president commended the nation's rebuttal to upturn its wealth “with the sweat, blood and tears of the African race,” and this statement only became stronger by Mexico's 1857 constitution which offered protection “to fugitive slaves and outlawed any sort of extraordinary treaty” (Idem 41). However, while José claims to support his family's positive appraisal of their exodus to Mexico, in like manner, through a subtle yet bold reproach, the mulatto implies the rape of his mother, then a fifteen-year-old woman, by a member of Mamá Elena's family, her uncle/godfather. Describing the reasons for his birth as a causality of his mother's beauty does not conceal the reality of the situation. Laura Esquivel knew the history of slavery and the power-relationships between black slaves/servants and white *patrones*/masters.

In this previous poignant fragment of the letter, after reminiscing of his family's hardships before arriving in Mexico, José Treviño refers to several instances of segregation and

blatant racism that he and his family faced in the northern side of the border. He, nevertheless, particularly alludes to the possibility of such xenophobic occurrences proceeding in Mexico, a country his family arrived to with the determination of starting a new life cycle in which they would not find themselves living in fear. Shortly after, José reassures Elena that everything that happened throughout his life, wrong or right, directed him her way; he uses determinism to justify every aspect of his life for it was the reason which led him to meet, fall in love, and procreate a child with Mamá Elena. And as a hopeless romantic, the sadden mulatto implies that if loving her is considered a crime, he would gladly pay his sentence: “...bendigo la condena. Me declaro culpable y con gusto que me cuelguen de un árbol” ‘...I bless the sentence. I plead guilty and would gladly *let them hang me from a tree*’ (my trans.; 196). I emphasized the last part of the sentence as it is obvious that José is referring to lynching of black Americans, a blatantly racist practice commonly performed in Southern states; it was the pretense to punishments for African Americans who were [unfairly] accused of the murder or rape of a white woman. By suggesting this particular punishment as his “sentence,” and as if he were being judged for a crime—the way society view shis relationship with Elena—the emotionally conflicted mulatto expresses this choice of chastisement as an actual possibility if caught by Mamá Elena’s brothers.

Towards the end of the second half of Treviño’s letter, he vents his impotence before his social and racial status for it is the reason he could not escape with Elena and her two daughters. With a sorrowful narrative style, the mulatto consequently makes a powerful cultural statement that forbade the two lovers from being together: “Un mulato con una mujer blanca no es aceptado en sociedad. Punto.” ‘A mulatto with a white woman is not accepted in society. Period.’ (my trans.; 197). As I mentioned at earlier in this chapter, relationships between white

and black individuals were socially banned. Though white men had the “privilege” to “seduce” and maintain extra-marital relations with black women, the exception to the rule did not, and could not, apply to white women and black men. White men, since colonial times used sex as a method to perform supremacy and dominance tactics. It demonstrated their ability to “satisfy their lusts on conquered (black and indigenous) women” who by working and living on their territory were seen as sexually accessible, or even “willing” to participate in such encounters—presumably forced—due to their subservient social position (Wade 71). This situation was almost certainly the setting José’s mother faced with Elena’s uncle. The double standard that De la Garza brothers had towards the relationship between José Treviño and their sister, especially after being aware of the history of the mulatto, demonstrated that racial relations are subject to gender well, regardless who is placed higher in the racial hierarchy. Situations like Mama Elena’s, where a white woman tries to establish a personal relationship with someone considered of an inferior race, a mulatto, were harshly judged by society. On the one hand, families had to “protect” the honor of their daughters, as losing it to a black man would have been worse than losing it to a nobody before marriage. On the other hand, the acceptance of this interracial relationship, where the powerful individual is the woman, would have still been questioned before the “prevalence of the assumption that social aspiration motivates the darker partner (Wade 171). Because of this, among other things, in culture, art, and film, white woman-black man relationships still tend to be ignored, particularly in literary narratives. In this sense, Laura Esquivel transgresses the mold of novels of race and acknowledges it throughout the entire saga.

The closing narrative of José’s letter recapitulated the history of black slaves. With a fearful feeling for the future of his daughter and his beloved Elena as a result of his racial inferiority, the mulatto described his decision to turn around at the train station and leave her

eternal lover as a consequence of his place in the social strata: “¿Con qué derecho las iba a exponer al peligro? ¿Qué pasaría si hubiéramos logrado huir? ¿A dónde las hubiera podido llevar que fueran bien recibidas?” “With what right was I going to expose you to danger? What would have happened if we had managed to escape? Where could I have taken you so that you would have felt welcomed?” (my trans.;). In other words, the impossibility of being in a relationship with a white woman was the result of the white and racist status quo of the country. Taking into account the geographical proximity of Coahuila to Texas, it could be assumed that due to their shared cultural history, a majority of white Mexicans adopted Texan’s racist philosophies; let us remember that it is known many Mexicans moved to Texas and passed for white in order to gain permission from the Texas Republic to purchase land in their territory. Additionally, “Spanish” Mexicans who participated in the Texas insurgency against Mexico “we entitled to a first-class ‘head-right’ for one league and a labor of land, provided they could persuade the court that they were white and not of Indian or African descent” (Foley 19). Attaching this sentiment of white pride of many medium and upper northern Mexicans, we can achieve a better understanding of the De la Garza’s racial outlooks.

However, the previous statement was just a hint to the manner in which he alluded, in a brief manner, to instances that defined the struggling history of African slaves. In the last lines of the letter, José Treviño pleads for Mamá Elena to educate their daughter, Gertrudis, as a strong and free woman who would never have to suffer the adversities of slavery:

Por favor, educa a Gertrudis como una mujer *libre*. Que nunca sepa de *esclavitudes*, ni de prohibiciones, que se tumbe a tomar el sol donde quiera y a la hora que quiera. Que baile, que ría, que nada le impida galopar hasta la locura, que *los ladridos de los perros* no detengan su andar, que nunca tenga que elegir entre amar o vivir. Enséñale a ver el

mundo con la mirada *limpia de prejuicios*. Sus ojos nunca me vieron como el bastardo de tu padrino, me miraron como soy más allá del color de mi piel (emphasis added).

[Please, educate Gertrudis as a *free woman*. So that she never finds out *slavery*, nor about prohibitions, that she lay down to sunbathe wherever she wants and at the time she wants. That she dances, that she laughs, that nothing prevents her from madly galloping through the fields, that *the barking of the dogs* does not stop her walk, that she never has to choose between loving or living. Teach her to see the world with a clean view, *without prejudice*. Her eyes never saw me as your godfather's bastard, she looked at me as I am beyond the color of my skin (emphasis added)].

This powerful letter explained the reasons it was socially intolerable at the time for Mamá Elena and her beloved José Treviño to establish a romantic relationship. The liminal place in which African Americans settled in Mexico's borderlands triggered adverse reactions in them as many blacks had chosen to exile themselves from the slave-holding states in the United States and sink roots in a country where racial segregation was merely a myth. African Americans and black Seminoles located in Coahuila could not fathom experiencing slavery-like practices in a territory they knew to have slavery abolished years before. By alluding to racist actions such as the slave-hunting (barking of the dogs) or the hanging of a slave from a tree, José Treviño brings the history of slavery of the United States to Mexico. Esquivel wanted to make the reader assume the possibility of such practices being implemented in Mexico as well. As a slave-holding state, the place with closest proximity to Coahuila, Texas took part in the xenophobic attitudes of Mexicans living on the northern border.

I had the opportunity to interview Laura Esquivel in her Mexico home of Coyoacán, a borough located in the south of Mexico City. I had just completed reading the *Como agua para chocolate* saga, and I told Esquivel I wished to find out more about the racial component of these novels. She began by telling me that *El diario de Tita* functions as the missing link between the ranch and the present, to look back at the wrongdoings of the family, and of society. When I asked “la señora Laura,” as her assistant calls her, about the story of Mamá Elena and José Treviño, as I had just mentioned feeling moved by the painful letter the mulatto wrote for the woman of his life, she responded:

Mira, la familia de mi mama era de Piedras Negras, y entonces yo siempre supe que hubo, cuando la Guerra civil en Estados Unidos, una colonia de negros que venían huyendo de la esclavitud y de la guerra, y se establecieron en Piedras Negras por un tiempo. Ahora si tú vas, no se ve la presencia negra en Piedras Negras, pero en su momento tiene que haber sido muy importante.

[Look, my mom's family was from Piedras Negras, and I always knew that there was, when the Civil War in the United States, a colony of blacks who had fled from slavery and war and settled in Piedras Negras for a period of time. Today, if you go, you cannot see the black presence in Piedras Negras, but at the time it must have been very important.] (Esquivel)

As someone being familiar with the northern border of Mexico, it is understandable that Esquivel had chosen to write about a topic of which she was knowledgeable. However, the decision to include a black female character in *Como agua para chocolate*, was the product of speculation as Esquivel and her siblings believe they have African heritage in their family. Sitting across from

the table, in the dining room of her home, as I assume she is about to delve more into her Afro-ancestry topic, she quietly laughs while touching her curly hair, and says:

Mira, mi abuela era muy blanca, blanca, blanca, en exceso. De esas pieles así como muy blanquita, pero su pelo era de ese pelo "Afro," y su boca era carnosa. Pero nunca nadie dijo nada, nunca nadie se preguntó nada. De mi mamá fueron doce hijos y sólo fueron dos con pelo así. Mi mamá lo tenía rizado, pero no así. Pero sólo dos sí tuvieron el cabello chino, chino, chino, dos de sus hijos, los demás no. Todos eran blancos, pero yo siempre dije, "estoy segura," y ¿de dónde? ¿cómo fue? Y a la hora de estar escribiendo la historia la ubiqué dentro de la época de la Revolución Mexicana. Dije, de seguro estaba ahí esta colonia, ¿y qué pasó? Y de ahí se me ocurrió meter este personaje, José Treviño.

[Look, my grandmother was very white, white, white, in excess. She had that type of skin, like very white, but her hair was that "Afro" hair kind, and her mouth was fleshy. But no one ever said anything, nobody asked anything. My mother had twelve children and only two had hair like that. My mother had it curly, but not like that. But only two did have curly, curly, curly hair, two of her children, the others did not. They were all White, but I always said, "I'm sure," and where? And how did it happen? And at the time the writing of the story came about, I placed it within the time of the Mexican Revolution. I said, 'surely this colony was there. What happened?' And from there it occurred to me to create this character, José Treviño. (my trans.)

The black presence in the Mexican Revolution was important. As I mentioned in the first part of this essay, as well as in Chapter One, Mexican Afro-*mestizas* played a key role in the success of this political conflict. Moreover, as Esquivel speculated, Afro-Seminole were present during the

Mexican Revolution as well. However, although some were recruited into guerrilla groups lead by Francisco Villa, the majority of Afro-Seminole did not support the Villista troops, for they were known for their savagery. An elder Afro-Seminole woman who lived in Nacimiento during the revolutionary period, recalls being aware that some men from Nacimiento escaped Villa's troops to join the opposing forces, others fled to Texas, and others avoided conscription (Boteler Mock 197- 204).

The official history of Mexico does not recognize the participation of black Seminoles in the wars of Revolution. Their presence in this movement is not easily traced since the *Mascogos* used Spanish names as part of their process of acculturation. Soon after they were granted land "the state government of Coahuila ordered all Mascogo children to be baptized Catholic, be assigned godparents from neighboring families, and receive Spanish names" (Adams 131). Shortly after, between 1883 and 1896, this edict was implemented to adults as well, who took the surname of their "godfathers" or from elite members who associated closely with them. A great example of this is Chief John Horse (Juan Caballo), who took his godfather's name and surname, "Juan Nepomuceno Vidaurri." The Afro-Seminole Chief is often times referred to as Capitán Juan de Dios Vidaurri in Coahuila's historical archives (Adams 131).

Many of the popular names and last names Afro-Seminole used derived from their American last names. For example, the last name Bruno derived from Bruner, Caballo from Horse, Sanchez from Daniels, Guerrero from Warrior, Alvarez from Fay, and Garza from Washington (Adams 133). Though in her interview with me Esquivel did not share if she researched the origins of the names and last names she used for the characters of the saga, she did acknowledge that she was aware that Múzquiz, Treviño, and De la Garza were significant last names of the region: "Son apellidos del norte, importantes. Incluso, mi bisabuela era

Treviño” ‘They are last names from the northern states, important ones. Actually, my great-grandmother was Treviño’ (my trans.). Coincidentally, among the female first names that were popular among the Afro-Seminole/Mascogos, I found María, Lucía, and Gertrudis, all of them which are found throughout the *Como agua para chocolate* saga.

It is precisely Gertrudis, the light-skinned/curly hair *mulata* from *Como agua para chocolate*, that caught my attention in the novel and film, and whose fictional life story consequently ignited my interest in researching the topic of Mexican negritude. In *Como agua para chocolate*, Gertrudis’ origins and military involvement in the Revolution were only exposed at a superficial level. *El diario de Tita* as the missing link of *Como agua para chocolate*, functions as the omitted historical fragment of the life of Gertrudis that readers did not get to discover in the first novel of the saga. When the reader opens this book, she/he gets the feeling of reading a real diary where page by page he/she discovers the secrets of a family. The life of this mulatto woman makes this contemporary Mexican novel unique. By taking a look at the past, we discover what defines the present time.

Through an Afro-*mestiza* we are transported into a part of history that was purposely buried. The philosophy of a twofold *mestizaje*, European-indigenous, pushed away the acknowledgement of a third element as part of the Mexican identity. Esquivel, as the intellectual she is, placed in Gertrudis psychological features that alluded to an alternate point of view of Mexicanness. Tita describes Gertrudis as someone sees things with a different perspective: ‘Ella lo mira todo desde otro punto de vista’ ‘She looks at everything from a different point of view’ (my trans.; 143). And as the youngest De la Garza sister recalls Gertrudis’s phase as a warrior woman, a *revolucionaria*, she also describes the uniqueness and importance of his mulatto sister persona: “Gertrudis hace lo que quiere y a la hora que quiere, sin pedir permiso a nadie y sin

arrepentirse de nada. Los hombres obedecen sus órdenes sin chistar. No hay problema que no pueda solucionar y siempre se sale con la suya” ‘Gertrudis does what she wants and at the time she wants, without asking anyone's permission and without regretting anything. Men obey her orders without saying a word. There is no problem that she cannot solve, and she always gets her way’ (my trans.;143). Portrayed as woman with agency, with free will, strong enough to transgress the traditional social norms, and subverting gender roles by becoming the chief in command of Villista revolutionary soldiers, Gertrudis begins to embody the non-subservient role attached to the Mexican *soldadera*, often times an *Afro-mestiza*.

Gertrudis De la Garza is a character that embodies a double marginal subject: a female and a black subject. She joins the revolution by chance, and she remains in the movement to fight for the rights of women, of the women she worked with, the *soldaderas*. In Tita’s diary, images are glued to the pages of the journal to make reference to each passage as a way to physically retain that the image of a particular memory. In the journal entry where Tita writes about Gertrudis’s role in the Revolution, *soldadera* who turned *coronela*, she attaches a photograph of a group of indigenous and *Afro-mestiza soldaderas* sitting under the threshold of a railway. Yet the attached photograph does not display the traditional image of the *soldadera* whose only role was to cook and tend to the male soldiers, but of those who wore a hat, held a gun between their hands, and actively participated in the social conflict. Captioned “Las amigas de Gertrudis” ‘Gertrudis’s friends,’ this photograph serves as an official *testimonio* of the presence and importance of the work of these females in the fight for land and freedom, “Tierra y Libertad” (my trans.; 235).

I cannot emphasize enough the significance of Gertrudis’s character in the saga. As modern transnational novels of the Mexican Revolution, *Como agua para chocolate* and *El*

diario de Tita, expose racial taboos for Mexican society and, by embodying Mexican blackness in a woman, these novels turn into progressive literary works. Not only is Gertrudis a strong female during times of social struggle, but also a woman of color who is actively advocating for women's rights, which ironically led her to disenchantment of the Mexican Revolution. Tita recalls this discouraging episode as follows:

Gertrudis estaba muy enojada, y con justa razón.... en la redacción de la Constitución Mexicana no se otorgó el voto a las mujeres bajo el argumento de que las mujeres no sienten la necesidad de participar en asuntos públicos, ¡como lo demuestra la falta de movimientos colectivos en ese sentido! Te imaginas el insulto que esto representa para alguien que participó en la Revolución, que arriesgó su vida y que fue testigo del papel que las soldaderas jugaron en la lucha armada, por dar sólo un ejemplo. (234)

[Gertrudis was very angry, and with good reason ... in the drafting of the Mexican Constitution, voting was not granted to women under the argument that women do not feel the need to participate in public affairs, as shown by the lack of collective movements in that sense! You can imagine the insult that this represents for someone who participated in the Revolution, who risked her life and who witnessed the role that *soldaderas* played in the armed struggle, to offer just one example.] (my trans.; 234)

How is it possible that a person can risk her life daily to defend the rights of others, and that those who started it all, turn their backs on individuals who desire to legitimize a human right that appealed to their gender? As Tita wrote in her diary, “se necesita organizar otra Revolución y redactar otra Constitución para que se les haga justicia a las mujeres” ‘they need to organize another revolution and draft another Constitution so that women can get justice’ (my trans.; 234).

Gertrudis's was not a mere fictional character, she was the embodiment of those women warriors that raised their voice at the turn of the twentieth-century. I can now assure, after speaking to Esquivel, that she based the character of Gertrudis on people she knew growing up. The mulatto character was inspired by her alleged Afro-Mexican grandmother, but also by a *generalala* of the Revolution whom she met as a child during her trips to Piedras Negras, Coahuila: "Conocí a una generala del norte, una pariente de mi familia que sí fue generala, una mujerzota... cuando yo era muy niña. Y llegó a visitar a mi mamá" 'I met a *generalala* from northern Mexico, a family relative who was *generalala*, a real woman... when I was very young. And she actually visited my mom' (my trans.). For Esquivel it was important that a female character as Gertrudis, who was part of Mexico's political movements, represented the failure of the system, a system that claimed to fight for the well-being of *all* citizens, including women (emphasis added).

As Esquivel recognized, women like Gertrudis did exist and were core elements to the fight for social justice in the name of the people, the ethnic minorities. Making Gertrudis the daughter of an Afro-Mexican, a man whose ancestors withstood the struggles of slavery, Esquivel intended to reflect, as she commented to me, that "así como se heredan miedos también se heredan estas actitudes de lucha" 'just as fears are inherited warrior attitudes against struggles are inherited as well' (my trans.). Esquivel's philosophies about cultural, racial, and political issues are intertwined, for her, a social struggle cannot be overthrown in any aspect by addressing each cultural or social sphere individually.

The reference to the inheritance of fears as expressed by Esquivel in *El diario de Tita*, goes to show that despite of the efforts to promote Mexico as a modern and liberal nation since the beginning of the twentieth-century, archaic cultural philosophies continue to get passed on through generations. Tita writes in her journal, "no sé por qué uno siempre ve el pasado, nunca el

presente” ‘I do not know why we always look at the past, never at the present’ (my trans.; 285).

By continuing to return to features of outdated or traditional social systems, whether big or small, people will continue failing to overcome their cultural, political or social battles. Gertrudis then, is not only the echo of a race that was let down by its country, but also the reflection of a country that achieves an incomplete triumph of a revolution in which its original commitment became overthrown by the individual ambitions of a hegemonic political system:

No se dio el cambio porque la Revolución finalmente no se concretó. Y yo sostengo desde *Como agua para chocolate* que en la revolución, si no va acompañada de un cambio interno, no va a pasar nada. Si yo sigo pensando lo mismo puedo hacer veinte revoluciones que se convertirán en lo mismo. Va a entrar un grupo [político] por otro, eso no es Revolución. Y va a repetir exactamente los mismos vicios, y los mismos actos equivocados.

[The change did not take place because the Revolution did not materialize in the end. And I argue since *Como agua para chocolate* that in the revolution, if it is not accompanied by an internal change, nothing will happen. If I keep thinking the same thing, I can make twenty revolutions that will become the same. A [political] group will enter in exchange for another one, *that* is not a Revolution. And it will keep repeating exactly the same vices, and the same wrong acts.] (my trans.)

El diario de Tita, as the middle nexus that ties together the three stories of the saga, represents a physical testament of a racial history that has been purposely ignored and forgotten. In like manner, it represents a deeper look at the failures of the Mexican Revolution, but at the same time exposes a critical response for a possible solution: a change must come from within in order

to work in society. Tita's diary then, will help linking the past, Mamá Elena's ranch, with the present in *Mi negro pasado*. Through *El diario the Tita*, the future lineage of the De la Garza family will (re)gain consciousness of their forgotten racial past. Therefore, I consider this novel, a fictional, yet real, *testimonio* of the missing history of Afro-descendants in Mexico. As we will see in *Mi negro pasado*, this "journal" allows for a cultural restoration of a collective memory that disappeared as a consequence of a cultural generational rupture.

***Mi negro pasado*, A Trans-Afromexican Novel: Literary Twentieth-century's Take on Mexico's Tercera Raíz**

In a magical realist setting, as if it was a Broadway musical and to sound of "When the Saints go Marching In" (Louis Armstrong), Horacio Fuentes Pérez, the months old mulatto child of María Pérez Alejándrez—great-great-granddaughter of Pedro Múzquiz and Rosaura De la Garza—sees his relatives waiting for him.⁵² Every member of his family that was part of the history of the generations following Mamá Elena, or that at some point crossed paths with Pedro, Tita, José Treviño, Mamá Elena, Rosaura, old Chenchá, Esperanza, Alex, Loreta and Felipe, and/or Luz del Amanecer were present. Everyone appeared happy, marching through the streets of New Orleans while receiving directions from Louis Armstrong. The contingent was headed by Lucía, Felipe, and Horacio, who seemed as if he were flying and sang louder than the chorus, with his powerful voice of firefly wings, burned, free, eternally free (*Mi negro pasado* 215).

Geographically placed in the United States, specifically in New Orleans, a majority black community, the above passage from this Mexican novel takes a turn towards a new direction and leaves a racial statement that is plausibly unknown by Mexican and American culture. With this

⁵² "When the Saints go Marching in' is a popular African American song catalogued as a spiritual. Spirituals were religious songs created by African Americans to express the struggles of the slavery-system.

scene, *Mi negro pasado* (2017), the last book of the *Como agua para chocolate* trilogy reaches its end. Choosing as the cover page the image of a family tree with photographs of its members hanging from its roots, Laura Esquivel completes the missing piece of the puzzle in the life of the last De la Garza-Treviño generation. Although the introductory lines of the description of the novel, found on the back cover, place it as “una defensa de la independencia femenina, y la mejor receta contra los males de nuestros días: el desarraigo, la obesidad y el consumismo” ‘a defense of feminine independence, and the best recipe against the evils of our days: uprooting, obesity and consumerism,’ I argue that *Mi negro pasado*, as the two previous book of the trilogy, is a novel of race. And as a result of the lack of a literary term, I defined it as a *trans-Afromexican* novel.

I came about this term after reading Esquivel’s saga and realizing that it is the first time that I recognize a work of Mexican literature where an author fuses in such a coherent and reliable manner the historical and cultural links between the Afro-ancestry of both, the United States and Mexico. It could not be described as a *Negrista* novel, for it would not fit appropriately with the content of the book, and nor as a *Negritude novel* since it is not written by a black author and its primary focus is not the praise of cultural values of blackness.⁵³ In *Mi negro pasado*, the black subject presence from both sides of the border represents the African diaspora of the Americas and presents a new ideological construct of blackness. By setting the storyline in modern Mexico and taking a look back at black history from the United States and Africa—more in-depth than *El diario de Tita*—Laura Esquivel takes a daring shot at the representation of black Mexico. For this reason, I believed necessary to place this literary work under its own category, as it a novel unlike anything else published in contemporary Mexican

⁵³ *Negrista* is derived from the *Negrismo* movement originated in Cuba by Afro-Cuban writer Nicolás Guillén during the 1920s. Its main goal was to celebrate [Cuban] blackness in all its artistic forms.

literature. Defining *Mi negro pasado* as a trans-Afromexican novel perfectly expresses what it represents in terms of Mexico's African heritage at a cultural level.

The plot of this novel revolves around the birth of a mulatto child, Horacio, whose skin color disturbs the family relationships of his mother. María's immediate family, as well as her husband, turn their back on her and reject her son. When her mother dies, her estranged grandmother, Lucía Brown (Dr. John Brown's granddaughter) appears at the funeral at the exact moment María's sister is attempting to block her way so that she does not get seen with her black child. Shortly after, grandmother and grandmother leave together and make their way to Lucía's ranch in Coahuila, where the story of their family began, Piedras Negras. When the two women settle in the ranch, workers of the ranch are eager to meet Horacio, whom they have heard is a live painting of his grandfather and great-grandfather, from one he inherited the color of the skin, and from the other the color of his eyes. As María listens to her grandmother explain the reasons the workers are excited to meet her son, she realizes that her son's blackness it is in fact genetically justified. In this passage, and for the first time in Mexican literature, we read for the first time the term "afrodescendiente" (47). Similarly, after mentioning this term, which is being used in contemporary Mexico in anthropological studies to refer to black Mexicans, Esquivel makes an allusion to the African American culture as well by having Lucía express her desires of wanting to have had a black child as she believed "¡la raza negra es bella!" 'the black race is beautiful' (my trans.; 48).⁵⁴

An interesting approach to blackness in this novel, as I have been underlining, is the transnationality and binationality of it, which began with the arrival of José Treviño's family to Coahuila as a consequence of the American Civil War. In terms of binationalism, I refer to

⁵⁴ "Black is beautiful" is a cultural movement that derived from the Black Power movement. It was meant as a cultural statement to dismantle racists ideas about black people physical features being ugly.

Gertrudis, who after feeling disappointed by the outcome of the Revolution with the denial of women's vote in the 1917 Constitution, moved to the United States, to Chicago "con la intención de colaborar con las mujeres sufragistas" 'with the intention of collaborating with women suffragettes' (my trans.; 60). Although soon after she realized that the situation with the women suffragettes was complicated, as some organizations only wanted to advocate for the vote of white women, she decided to stay and joined African American women's suffrage activist, Ida B. Wells. Nonetheless, she reflecting her liberal cosmovision, Gertrudis settled in Chicago where she moved to the Hull House neighborhood, a historically relevant area in Chicago as it was known to be a neighborhood of immigrant communities in which Mexicans, Italians, Greeks, Polish, and African Americans respected one another and no one was discriminated against (*Mi negro pasado* 61). Gertrudis's reason for making Chicago her new home was for the bettering of his son's life: "Anhelaba que su hijo creciera en un lugar donde no fuera 'el mulato' del pueblo" 'She longed for her son to grow up in a place where he was not the "mulatto" of the town' (my trans.; 61). It is due to Gertrudis's decision to move to the United States and settle in Chicago that the biracial, transnational, and African heritage of De la Garza family continues on; this is the city in which Gertrudis's son marries an African American woman, and where her grandchild, Felipe—who would later move to Mexico—was born.

Through Felipe, who plays a substantial role in *Mi negro pasado*, Esquivel symbolizes the historical struggles of the black race. She does not specify whether the traumas or fears he projects are pertinent to the United States or Mexico's black past but takes it to the point of origin for slavery in both countries, Africa. Felipe is described as having a marvelous voice that unfortunately he cannot make the best use of as he goes into a state of fright when he performs before large crowds; every time he attempts to perform for people he does not know, his vocal

cords start closing up, not letting his voice to come out of his mouth. Esquivel mentioned to me that to her “era muy importante dar voz, por eso Felipe no puede expresarse” ‘it was very important to give voice, that is why Felipe cannot express himself’ (my trans.). The fact that whenever Felipe tries to “speak” through his singing he feels a knot in the throat, is a symbolic image of how he has not been able to express his traumas, those that originated from the aches of his ancestors.

When Felipe’s wife, Lucía (María’s grandmother) would feel guilty about pushing him to sing, Esquivel writes—through the latter—that she wanted to believe the only reason for Felipe’s struggle was not her, that it also must have been the ravages that slavery caused not only in one individual but in his/her descendants as well. Lucía thought that slavery was the root of everything, the culprit of it all, she thought: “La esclavitud pues, era la culpable de todo lo ocurrido, era la memoria presente y constant del dolor, era el esparadrapo en la garganta, era la parálisis de las cuerdas vocales” ‘Slavery, then, was guilty of everything that happened, it was the present and constant memory of the pain, it was the plaster in the throat, it was the paralysis of the vocal cords’ (my trans.; 64). Through a critical lens and aided by the historical narrative of the Black Atlantic, Laura Esquivel uses her platform as a writer to expose parts of history that are ignored in Mexican culture, like that of African-heritage. Referring to Billie Holiday as one of Felipe’s favorite singers, Lucía describes Felipe’s voice as one similar to Holiday and Sinatra, but that his vibrato was the combination of the suffering voices of African slaves, the sobbing of those that saw the African sea for the last time, or that contained the painful scream after receiving a whip on their backs (my trans.;65).

The transnationality of this novel of race is exposed through African history and African American history. The origins of the black characters Esquivel created intentionally are linked to

African Americans as, how I mentioned at the beginning of this section, she has roots in Mexico's northern borderlands. It is also evident that the exaltation of womanhood is an important, if not a key theme throughout all her novels, especially in this trilogy. Just as it is known in world history, humanity's origins go back to Africa. Our first mother was an African woman, and Laura Esquivel makes a clear reference to this notion in *Mi negro pasado* by having the protagonist ask Lucía, her grandmother, “¿Quién fue la primera mujer de raza negra en la familia?” ‘Who was the first woman of black race in the family?’ (my trans.; 79).

The reference is clear for those who know about world history and African ancestry. Making a clear connection between African ancestry and African history, Esquivel then continues by placing this first “woman of the African race in the family” as an African slave in a cotton field. This woman does not have a name, and the only *testimonio* of her existence is a photograph of her in a cotton field: “Estaba en medio de un campo algodonero. Un pañuelo le cubría la cabeza y con sus manos sostenía el delantal arremangado lleno de flores de algodón” ‘She was in the middle of a cotton field. A handkerchief covered her head and with her hands she held the rolled-up apron filled with cotton flowers’ (my trans.; 80). Before the American Civil War, and prior to President Antonio López de Santanna's actions in support of the emancipation of slavery, the slave-based agriculture fostered the Coahuila-Texas regions economic development (Torget 141). The economic growth of cotton plantation owners on both sides of the borders could not perform “without the robust and almost tireless labor of this race of human species called blacks,” as Mexican slavery supporter Ramón Múzquiz stated in a letter to the governor of then Mexican Texas (Idem, 145). Having said this, the photograph of José's mother is fictionally displayed as an account of the hardships of slavery, but not for males—as it is the

set gender we associate with slavery—but of female slaves who possessed an extraordinary beauty—as José’s mother was physically described—and whom also had to endure sexual abuse.

Esquivel displays an amazing “photograph” through her writing. By this I mean, that the imagery that she provides us with is as effective as one we would see in a film. The reason for this is Esquivel’s history as a cinematographer, she mentioned that often times she first sees an image and she subsequently translates it into words. In this passage about the life of José Treviño’s mother at a time of slavery, Esquivel then adds the final touch to that photograph/image when the character of María looks at the back of the picture and reads the phrase “Strange fruit.” The caption of the photograph brings the transnational side of the blackness (race) of the book to the forefront once again. Cotton fields as the main resource of wealth during the Confederacy, and before the emancipation of slavery in Mexico, were located on both sides of the border, mainly in the Mexico-Texas borderlands. The beginning of African American history starts with African slaves at the cotton fields and, after the emancipation of slavery, historical references to plantations and black slaves remained a part of the American social imagery. With this in mind, the photograph of “Strange Fruit” that Esquivel writes about in *Mi negro pasado* links the slavery context with the racial segregation and xenophobia post-emancipation. By placing it within a Mexican novel in Spanish, the message is clear: blackness and culture are not dependent on borders.

The caption “Strange Fruit” is, in reality, the title of a 1939 song performed by African American singer Billie Holiday and written by a then young white Jewish poet and social activist from the Bronx, New York, Abel Meeropol. The song reached an outstanding popularity at a turning point for the Jim Crow laws and the Civil Rights movement. It was a powerful yet moving statement against the lynching of African Americans that were taking over the South of

the United States, and consequently, a protest against racist America. The African American singer chose to sing this particular song as she stated it reminded her of the death of her father who presumably died from pneumonia, although she disagreed with this verdict. According to James Baldwin, who wrote about her biographical film in “The Devil Finds Work” (1976), Holiday wrote in her biography the following statement about her father’s death: “It wasn’t the pneumonia that killed him, it was Dallas, Texas. That’s where he was, and where he walked around, going from hospital to hospital, trying to get help. But none of them would even so much as take his temperature or let him in [but] because he had been in the Army, had ruined his lungs and had records to prove it, it was too late.”⁵⁵ The black female artist would sing this song, to her assumed majority white audiences, with a painful singing cry-like tone as the first lines came out of her voice:

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh. (Billie Holiday)

As deduced from the lyrics of the song, the “strange fruit” was the body of a man hanging from a tree. This racist practice became so common and almost normalized in white America’s society

⁵⁵ See Baldwin, James. “The Devil Finds Work.” *Collected Essays*. Library of America, pp 560-1, 1998.

(particularly from southern states), that the message of the song/poem reflected recurrence of encountering these types of “fruitful” trees. After analyzing the lyrics of the song, thinking about the image of José’s mother in the cotton field, and recalling his letter to Mamá Elena in which he implied the possibility of being hung from a tree as punishment for loving a white woman, the interweaving of Africanness is palpable in the novel.

Aside “Strange Fruit,” Esquivel names and presents the lyrics of various important American song, many of them which are “post-war” iconic songs, which she attaches to Felipe’s character, since he is the binational, bicultural, and transnational character that summarizes the origins of the black heritage in the latest generation of the De la Garza descendants. Songs as “I’ll be seeing you” by Billie Holiday, “The Impossible Dream” by Frank Sinatra, “At Last” by Etta James, and “When the Saints go Marching In” by Louis Armstrong, are part of the playlist of the books. Songs that were iconic post-Civil War, and in which its majority were performed by African American artists are used by Esquivel as background music to reflect the historical subtext of each passage in the book.

Mixed with Magical realist elements, Laura Esquivel makes the more explicit racial messages surface in the novel. Possibly as a tactic to retain the interest of her readers, who praised the magical realism aspect of *Como agua para chocolate*, the author decided to mix the history, the traditional fiction, and the entertaining characteristic of magical realism to convey her intellectuality and thought-provoking racial messages. Every time María, the main character of *Mi negro pasado* drinks the famous “ceremonial chocolate,” whose recipe has been passed down through generations of the De la Garza family, she receives images that reveal a secret related to the family. Several of these *déjà vu*-like images are related to African slave trade as the following: “[era] la imagen de un grupo de esclavos capturados en Africa que viajaban dentro de

un bote sin la posibilidad de ver el firmamento...perdiendo la tierra, perdiendo la voz que inevitablemente se apagaba dentro de sus gargantas como resultado de la desgarradora separación” [it was] the image of a group of slaves captured in Africa who were traveling inside a boat without the possibility of seeing the sky ... losing sight of the land, losing the voice that inevitably was diminishing inside their throats as a result of the heartbreaking separation’ (my trans.; 129). This is just one of the many instances in which Esquivel makes references to the cruelty of the history of the Black Atlantic. References as the latter are the traumas left behind on newer generations of black “Americans,” and in this sense, I refer to those black Americans as the entire population of African slaves that unwillingly landed centuries ago in the American continent.

Felipe Alejándrez Jackson, the grandson of Gertrudis De la Garza, is the Afro-descendent in which the emotional ravages of generations of African slaves are echoed from. “En él se reunieron todos los miedos familiares, y la imposibilidad de mostrarse totalmente libre, de salir, de que se le vea, que se le escuche” ‘Through him, all the familiar fears met, as well as the impossibility to feel completely free, to rise, to be seen, to be heard,’ said Esquivel during our interview (my trans.). The racial struggles of blacks on both sides of the border are exemplified in him, directly or indirectly, either through their direct family members like his father Juan Felipe Alejandrez, his great-grandfather José Treviño, or his great-great-grandmother “Strange Fruit.” The physical consequences of racial hierarchies, as well as enforced sentiments of black inferiority, are passed down to him from the above-mentioned characters and therefore are shown in this novel as the aftermath of a culture that keeps reproducing the same mistakes societally and politically speaking.

In Lucía's husband surname, Alejándrez Jackson, the notion of a trans-*Afromexicanista* literary style is displayed. To argue that this novel is a traditional Mexican novel would be deceitful. When it comes to writing about negritude in Mexico, the very few works found will be in the areas of anthropology or ethnography; the literary aspect of blackness is almost non-existent. The very few artistic examples that deal with Afro-ancestry in contemporary Mexico—that we could use in comparison to Esquivel's works—are those exposed in the additional chapters of this work. Exposing an obvious modern take on Mexican Afro-ancestry, *Mi negro pasado* is placed as a progressive novel of race in twenty-first century Mexico. Although echoing a similar plot to other Mexican artistic work that deals with blackness, *Angelitos negros* (1948), Esquivel's latest novel makes a twist in the storyline and directs it towards a transnational route.

Horacio, the mulatto child from which the plot develops, is the element that announces the revelation of important messages throughout the novel. With his first cry (birth), he reveals that the *Tercera Raíz* of Mexicans remains present. Esquivel mentioned to me that “Horacio es un niño destinado a develar secretos, a mostrar lo que se esconde, lo que se oculta” ‘Horacio is a child destined to unveil secrets, to show what is hidden, what is concealed’ (my trans.). It is as if this mulatto child announces with each cry a symbolic reminder of the importance of our African ancestry. When I asked Esquivel why it was important for her to use this racial topic in her novels, to have black characters, to talk about Mexican *afrodescendientes*, she answered: “Porque creo que hay una gran injusticia con esta raza. Tenemos una deuda histórica tremenda con ellos porque nunca se les ha reconocido su gran aporte para la construcción de México...Se fue desdibujando su presencia, pero han sido parte fundamental de nuestra historia, y entonces fue también un deseo de ponerlos en el panorama” ‘Because I think there is a great injustice with this race. We have a tremendous historical debt with them because they have never recognized

their great contribution to the construction of Mexico ... Their presence was blurring, but they have been a fundamental part of our history, and so it was also a desire to put them on the map' (my trans.).

To conclude, *Mi negro pasado* is the final piece of the puzzle for the racial aspect of *Como agua para chocolate*. This novel surfaces at a time when the *México Negro* movement is rising, and the invisibility of Afro-Mexicans is finally starting to fade. Just as the *Tercera Raíz* of Mexicans, the African heritage history of the De la Garza family had three stages: troubling beginning, a period of disconnection and suppression, and finally, a renaissance phase. Laura Esquivel is an advocate of Afro-Mexican rights, as Gertrudis, she is involved in the political sphere of the country. She now works as a congress representative in Mexico City and revealed to me that she has sent in a proposal for the recognition of Afro-Mexicans as an official ethnic group in the Constitution. *Mi negro pasado* then mirrors the current history of Afro-Mexicans whose collective memory was buried. Horacio is the embodiment of current generations of Mexicans who are beginning to discover their African roots; he is the proof that “*la memoria*,” that hidden piece of historical collective memory resurfaces when least expected. Through the last two elements of *Como agua para chocolate* (1989), *El diario de Tita* (2016) and *Mi negro pasado* (2017), Esquivel presents the reader with a semi-fictional evidence of the existence of Mexican’s tripartite identity. *El diario de Tita* serves as an allegory to the missing collective *testimonio* of the history of Afro-Mexicans, and *Mi negro pasado* functions as the last link that makes the negritude of a [fictional] Mexican family come full circle. Using a “digestible” representation of Otherness to her market, Laura Esquivel makes important statements of Mexican, American, and Mexican-American culture in terms of race. Ending the story of *Mi negro pasado* with a multi-racial Mexican family reuniting in a predominantly black city of the

United States, New Orleans, while they dance to the sound of a symbolic African American song (a spiritual) as “When the Saints Go Marching In,” place this progressive novel of race under a sphere of literary production which I named the trans-Afromexican novel.

Al amanecer, cuando el llanto de Horacio anunció el nuevo día,
tomaron las cenizas de Lucía y las mezclaron con las de Felipe en una misma urna
para más tarde depositarlas en el Río Bravo. Eran del mismo color.

[At dawn, when Horacio's cry announced the new day,
they took the ashes of Lucia and mixed them with those of Felipe in the same urn
to later deposit them into the Río Grande. They were the same color.]

--Laura Esquivel, *Mi negro pasado*

CHAPTER THREE

Filming Blackness across Borders: Cheating on Color with *Imitation of Life* (1934, 1959) and *Angelitos negros* (1948)

There's nothing wrong in passing. The wrong is the world that makes it necessary.... I've cried myself dry. Cried myself out with self-loathing and self-pity and self-consciousness. I tell you I've prayed same as you, for the strength to be proud of being black under my white. I've tried to glory in my people. I've drenched myself in the life of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Booker Washington, and Frederick Douglass. I've tried to catch some of their spark. But I'm not that stuff. I haven't pride of race, or love of race. There's nothing grand or of-the-stuff-martyrs-are-made about me. I can't learn to endure being black in a white world.

— “Peola,” Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, 1933

But, Ma, I felt mighty bad about last night. The first time we'd met in public that way. That's the kind of thing that makes passing hard, having to deny your own family when you see them. Of course, I know you and I both realize it is all for the best, but anyhow it's terrible. I love you, Ma, and hate to do it, even if you say you don't mind.

— Langston Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*, 1934⁵⁶

Introduction: When Cinema Meets Race

During my adolescent years in Mexico, I remember spending Sunday afternoons with my mother watching black and white films of Golden Age Mexican Cinema. Mexican superstar, Pedro Infante, at the peak of his career, starred in several of the most popular films of the 1940s. The film *Angelitos negros* (1948), one of the melodramas with most popularity for Infante, became a classic for Mexican audiences. It certainly left an imprint on my mother's and my memory. *Angelitos negros*, a remake of American film *Imitation of Life* (1934)—one of the most important American films on race—, quickly became a favorite in the genre of Mexican

⁵⁶ See Hughes's short story, “Passing.”

melodrama. Although it portrayed a story about race to the Mexican audience—mainly constituted by female portrayals—it unwittingly *passed* as romanticized melodrama, a common theme for films starring Pedro Infante. In this chapter, I will focus my analysis on the 1959 adaptation of *Imitation of Life* and the 1948 adaptation of *Angelitos negros* considering the racial and ethnic similarities and singularities of both films, which made the socio-cultural connections among them possible for the matter of this topic.⁵⁷

It comes to no surprise that in Mexico, talking about cultural differences and race has been an ongoing struggle in the psyche of its citizenry. For a film made in mid-twentieth-century Mexico, *Angelitos* was undoubtedly a progressive film for its time.⁵⁸ As a film about race camouflaged within the “typical” Mexican melodrama genre, it was groundbreaking for the Mexican film industry. While the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema is characterized by its romantic melodramas, *Angelitos negros* appears as the first Mexican melodrama about race. Inspired by Hollywood film, *Imitation of Life* (1934), an adaptation of Fannie Hurst’s novel of homonymous title (1933), *Angelitos*’s director, Joselito Rodríguez, symbolically crossed the northern Mexican border and looked at the cinematographic handling of the color line. Rodríguez emigrated to in Los Angeles, California at a young age and attended Polytechnic High School. After graduating as a technical engineer, he built what ultimately would be the lightest portable sound equipment in the world (at only 12 pounds). As a result of this, he started working in Hollywood along his brother, Roberto, and later return to Mexico to become the pioneer of Mexican sound cinema with the film *Santa* (1932), starring Lupita Tovar, Susan Kohner’s mother. Due to his links to Hollywood, it becomes evident that the producer and

⁵⁷ Joselito Rodríguez also made a remake of *Angelitos negros* in 1970.

⁵⁸ From this point on, I will sometimes refer to the film in question as *Angelitos*.

“father of Mexican sound film,” as he is known, knew of the success of *Imitation of Life* (*Noticine*).

With this said, given the parallels in plot with the emphasis on race and passing, *Angelitos negros* was, in fact, a remake of the 1934 film adaptation of *Imitation of Life*. Directed by John M. Stahl, *Imitation* became a box office hit, not only for depicting the economic struggles of single women during the Great Depression, but also for portraying a friendship between a white woman and her black servant whose mixed-race daughter struggled with her identity between two worlds: the white world full of opportunities, and the black world filled with hatred and racism. Joselito Rodríguez, who was undoubtedly aware of the African heritage of Mexicans and possibilities of the Hollywood-based Mexican film industry, opted for the remake of Stahl’s adaptation and, knowing its great impact and success in the U.S., placed it in the Mexican context. Without jeopardizing his career, and possibly obtaining a negative response from the public due to its sensitive subject, Rodríguez intertwined the racial theme of the storyline with the cherished melodrama to which Mexicans were accustomed. Being a plot of a mother and daughter and the heartbreaks between the two, *Angelitos negros* appealed to the Mexican audience at the moment where family melodramas were at their peak.

A noteworthy fact about the latest American and Mexican film adaptations of *Imitation of Life* (1933), the novel, is that both films recurred to hiring actresses with origins in the opposite country from where the adaptation was being made to play what I consider the primary roles of the film. These actresses, surprisingly, were also involved either in a previous adaptation of the film or related in some way to the film industry of the neighboring country. I am referring to actresses Susan Kohner and Juanita Moore. Kohner, who plays the role of the mulatto daughter in the 1959 adaptation of *Imitation of Life*, is of Mexican descent: the daughter of Mexican

actress and Hollywood star, Lupita Tovar. African American actress Juanita Moore, portrayed the character of Annie, the mammy and mother of Sarah Jane (Kohner), was cast to play *nana* Mercé, same role as Annie Johnson in *Imitation*, but this time in the 1970 Mexican film adaptation of *Angelitos negros*.⁵⁹ The roles played by these actresses, as well as the stories behind their lives, seem to create a full circle that unites the racial history of Mexico and the U.S., principally in terms of African ancestry which, implicitly or not, speaks volumes about the treatment and perception of the color line in both countries.

While there is an obvious connection among the films to be studied in this chapter, I find the need to rely on the scholarship both countries Mexico and the U.S. provide for the reading of the color line. However, unlike Mexico, only the United States, due to its racial history, possesses the necessary intellectual material to aid in the cultural understanding of race and color. Having said this, it is imperative to rely on African American intellectuals for the analysis of *Angelitos*, the Mexican remake of Fannie Hurst's novel. Writer, social activist, and intellectual James Baldwin (1924-1987), provided a critical analysis of race in the U.S. through his novels, essays, and public appearances. In his book-length essay, "The Devil Finds Work" (1976), Baldwin dives into a cinematic analysis of racial politics in American films. Parting from his critical understanding of the Negro and its place in American society, in his essay, I will use his racially accented writing to further analyze specific roles and scenes of *Imitation of Life* (1959) and the role negritude plays in Mexican cinema in this case *Angelitos negros*.

A title for this chapter could also be "Going to the Movies with James Baldwin" for providing me with a thorough exploration of how film directors and audiences send and receive messages about racial ideologies across borders. Baldwin's notion of what it meant to be

⁵⁹ The word "nana" in Mexico is the equivalent to the term "nanny" in English, but the equivalent to "mammy" in cinema.

included in the Negro race in the United States developed at an early age; while growing up, he discovered that the formulaic narrative of the Negro in American society is constantly being reinforced in literature and, more specifically, in cinema.

In the second of the three chapters that comprise “The Devil Finds Work,” James Baldwin ends this section stating, “the language of the camera is the language of our dreams” (504). With this phrase, he summarizes one of the main elements of his critique of American films and its treatment of race: the camera shows the message you want to convey. Following this philosophy, I analyze key scenes and characters from *Imitation of Life* and *Angelitos negros* that prove Baldwin’s point, and moreover, that give a new insight in racial-politics between Mexico and the United States. The social critique that comes with the analysis of such scenes and characters defy the traditional and/or taboo ideologies of Mexican culture about *mestizaje* and blackness, and at the same time expose the connections of U.S. black culture with Mexican African ancestry.

Since the first film adaptation of Fannie Hurst’s novel in 1934 directed by John Stahl, to the Mexican remake of this adaptation in 1948, to the last American remake of the 1934 film in 1959 by German director Douglas Sirk, the color line has remained in its place societally speaking. Film, as a mass communication apparatus has served as a vehicle to impose racial ideologies on people’s culture. In the United States, as well as Mexico, cinema has an enormous influence on the popular culture, and it is this media tool precisely which, as Baldwin implies, enables the formation of stereotypes. Cinema, undoubtedly then, enforces the perpetuation of certain typecasts, and mainly, feeds the negative perception of society towards the Other by attaching the label of foreignness, therefore turning the Negro into the outsider, the one who does not belong.

U.S. and Mexico Cultural Movements from 1930 to 1960

In 1933, sixty-eight years have passed in the United States since the ending of the Civil War. African Americans are still facing prejudice and racism under Jim Crow laws established as a consequence of the Confederacy. Originated in the Southern United States, but not limited to that geographical region of the country, Jim Crow laws were strict anti-black laws that promoted segregation under the banner of “equal but separate” which allowed the false notion of equality for all American citizens since according to the politics of the country, it fell under the Fourteenth Amendment regulations which addressed equal protection of the laws and citizenship rights to former African slaves. However, the promise of equality for African Americans was never met; laws were interpreted in a way where the social segregation by race was strongly enforced and therefore, their rights as citizens of the United States were never equal as those considered White.

Nonetheless, amidst the inequality and racial segregations that blacks were placed under, the country found itself in the midst of a cultural awakening pertaining to the black race. The Harlem Renaissance marked a period of black history where black culture, through art, music, literature and film, began to be recognized. As a result of the Great Migration (1916-1970) of African American citizens from Jim Crow South to northern cities from Chicago to New York City, this cultural movement re-conceptualized the black race with the birth of the “New Negro.” The New Negro was a mood, a sentiment “in which black culture and its practitioners were seen as valuable part of the larger cultural scene” (Powell 42). African American writers as Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and W.E.B. Dubois, through their activism and writing, established the place of the Negro in American society, and with their critical lens redefined and dignified African Americans.

Meanwhile, in Mexico, socio-political matters were distinct from the U.S. As said in the previous chapter, slavery had been abolished since 1810, and the presence of blacks, or *afrodescendientes*, was not acknowledged. Although *afrodescendientes* were active participants of the civil conflict that had ended over a decade before, the Mexican Revolution, their recognition as citizens of Mexico was not—and would not be—recognized for many years to come. We are placed then in the 1930s, and similar to the United States, there is discontent within the lower classes, conformed mainly of indigenous people. Being the minority race, indigenous people—often Afro-indigenous as well—suffered from marginalization, and slavery camouflaged by indentured servitude, imparted by those considered superior, whites and mestizo elites. Similarly, to the Harlem Renaissance, Mexico also had its cultural awakening following the end of the Revolution. A culture of pride undergirded by the *mestizo* identity, and the exaltation of the indigenous and/or peasant subject—during and after the Revolution—populated Mexican society through art, music, literature, and film.

Fast forward to 1948 in Mexico, the cultural scene is going through a rupture where young artists are now trying to leave behind the ideas of post-revolutionary Mexico and adopt modern trends from other countries. Art then, is now taking a different route, especially in the film industry. Mexico's film industry rapidly expands and gains international fame due to the lack of European and American films as a consequence of the World War II.⁶⁰ As the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema is at its final stage, the themes of the films made begin changing as well. Parting from themes of Mexican nationalism and entering an era focused on individualism, as a reflection of the progress of the country towards a more modern outlook, filmmakers began opting for the production of melodramatic films. It is precisely during this time period that

⁶⁰ The United States and European countries that supported WWII were sending material to war for the production of ammunition, material that was also necessary for the production of films.

melodrama productions reached their peak. Movies such as *Angelitos negros* gained mass popularity, becoming the norm for the last phase of the Cinema of the Golden Age.

Once the era of the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema ended, the film industry in Mexico declined. By the late 1950's, cinema was no longer obtaining the popularity it once had, nor was it successfully profitable. However, things began rising for the American film industry, precisely due to economic growth the country developed in the post-WWII. With the financial stability of the country, the labor force became necessary in the cities, which meant an opportunity of economic progress for African Americans, thousands of whom fled from the Southern states to the big cities in the North during the Great Migration. Although things seemed to be going on a positive path for the country, including Negroes, segregation and racism were as strong as they had been before. However, this juxtaposition of social outcomes, economic growth for the Negro and remaining segregated at the same time, called for the uprising of African Americans with the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968). Led by Mr. Luther King, the Civil Rights Movement marked a new phase in U.S. history granting equal rights to African Americans and ending Jim Crow laws. With a new social critique on race, during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, around 1959, what would become one of the most important films on race is premiered: Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*.

Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*: Breaking the Color Line

American born Fannie Hurst (1889-1968), was one of the most popular female writers of the 1930's. Born in Ohio but raised in St. Louis, Missouri, and a daughter of Americans of Jewish descent, Hurst had a first-hand look at what it meant to have racial consciousness due to the prejudice her parents endured. Known for having a scandalous life due to her liberalist and

progressive mindset, Fannie Hurst became an active defender of women and African American rights. Labeled as the “highest paid short story writer in the world,” this female produced eight volumes of short stories and eighteen novels, in which some were turned into film adaptations and the majority were translated in more than a dozen countries (Koppelman 20).

Preoccupied with sensitive social topics, Hurst captured in her writing the struggles of marginalized subjectivities living in the United States: immigrants, women, and African Americans. At the age of forty-four, in 1933, Hurst published *Imitation of Life*, a novel based on the story of a middle-class white woman: Miss Bea Pullman, and a Negro maid, Delilah Johnston, whose lives intertwine at the right moment. Helping each other raise their respective daughters, the dynamic falls into a space of nuance as the girls begin growing up and start recognizing each other’s racial differences: Jessie, Miss Bea’s daughter is white, and Peola, Delilah’s daughter is considered black, as she is a light-skinned mulatto. At the moment of the publication of this novel, Hurst faced criticism from the African American community for the stereotypical character of the mammy, Delilah, and her servile attitudes towards Miss Bea in the novel.

However, it is important to underscore that Fannie Hurst’s intentions were not to keep feeding racial stereotypes, but to show the possible relationships that could develop between the two races in question. She gave voice to African American women and mainly, to women from marginalized communities in the United States. In “Writing for Her Life,” Susan Koppelman discusses Hurst’s motives in her novels and states: “Fannie Hurst gave a voice to a class of silenced American women—poor and working class, minimally educated, multi-ethnic white women. Their voices were as unfamiliar to the literary establishment of her day as the voices of the rural villagers popularized by the regional writers of the previous century” (20). Her novels,

short fictions, and her life always remained at the forefront of newspapers across the country. Perhaps the unintentional stereotypes she portrayed in her characters were merely a reflection of the limited superficial interactions she had with the marginalized communities around her.

This is not to say, of course, that her support of African American rights was an act to gain popularity in her publications. Her support of women, immigrants and African Americans might have been an echo of the internal identity conflict of her own, an “internalized anti-semitism,” as Koppelman mentions in her review of Brook Kroeger’s biography of Hurst (20).⁶¹ However, Koppelman does share an excerpt from a statement in Kroeger’s book where the Ohio born writer allows us to take a look at her conflicted emotions on racial matters:

Generations of the hunted and driven seemed to rise in me; a cold resentment toward the world that had driven them, mixed with a sense of humiliation at belonging to an unwanted people.... I hold no brief for that fact that I was one of those for whom it took a Hitler to blast out of regarding the Jew and his problems objectively ... But in Israel... [s]eeing the "tribal men and women out of Yemen and the long-eyed Sephardic Jews ...[in] the homeland to which they had returned, it came to me as if up from the Biblical soil: These are my people, and Mama and Papa and I from Cates Avenue in St. Louis are their people.” (21) ⁶²

There is certainty in the fact that her experiences as someone who indirectly belongs in that group of “unwanted people” gave rise to the storyline of her most acclaimed novels. In *Imitation of Life* (1933), for example, there is a possibility that the story might have been inspired by writer, anthropologist, and folklorist, Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), whom Hurst

⁶¹ See Brooke Kroeger. *Fannie: The Talent for Success of Writer Fannie Hurst*. Times Books, 1999.

⁶² Ibid.

hired as a secretary in 1925. After Hurst saw Zora's lack of secretary skills, she remained working for her as an assistant and chauffeur. Hurston, a promising writer at the time, had her way to convey in her writing "the result of experiences conditioned by race," as Fannie Hurst mentioned, referring to Hurston's 1942 autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Fischer 175).⁶³ It did not take long before Fannie Hurst began analyzing Zora's personality and thoughts on racial matters, and likewise, Zora did the same to Hurst as the intimate friendship between the two developed.

Who used whom? This is a debate that remains unresolved. But what could be heavily implied, I argue, is the influence of Hurston's life on Fannie Hurst's writing of *Imitation of Life*. After reading Hurst's essay on Zora after her death, I couldn't help to realize that many of the traits on the characters of Delilah and Peola sound very similar to the way Hurst spoke about Hurston and certain moments they spent together where the latter faced segregation with Hurst as a witness. Recalling a road trip they took together, Hurst recalls:

On our excursions, we repeatedly encounter the ogre of discrimination. At hotels, Zora was either assigned to servants' quarters or informed they were full up. When I also refused accommodations, Zora's attitude was adamant: "If you are going to take that stand, it will be impossible for us to travel together. This is the way it is and I can take care of myself as I have all my life. I will find my own lodging and be around with the car in the morning." And that was the way it was. (Fischer 175)

I recur to the above passage to point out the influence of Hurston's life on the creation of *Imitation*, for the acquiescent attitude of Zora mirrors Delilah's take on segregation in the novel.

⁶³ Laura Fischer's book contains a complete anthology of diverse documents pertaining to *Imitation of Life* (1959), including essays written by Fannie Hurst and Zora Neale Hurston.

What came to surprise Hurst, in regards to Hurston's "recurring and puzzling trait, lack of indignation," as Hurst had described, was altered during another trip together in which they made a stop at a renowned Inn:

One hot August day returning from Vermont ... Zora, in a red head-scarf and one of her bizarre frocks of many colors, looked hot and tired from a full day's driving. At my sudden request we stopped before the Inn: "Do me a favor, Zora. No questions please. Follow me." At the dining-room entrance I pushed ahead. A head-waiter appeared, his expression, when he saw Zora, as if a window shade had been drawn over his face. Before he could come through with the usual "Sorry, everything reserved," I announced, "The Princess Zora and I wish a table." We were shown to the best in the room.

Following a good meal and some levity, Zora made a remark that revealed for an instant her mental innards: "Who would think," she soliloquized as we resumed driving, "that a good meal could be so bitter." Thus we must rest content with the memory of Zora, a woman half in shadow. (Fischer 175-6)

Peola Johnston, the tragic mulatto in *Imitation of Life*, shows a heavy sense of hopelessness when she faces racism and segregation. That sense of bitterness that Zora experienced at that Inn, is very much imprinted by Hurst in Peola's character. Zora published the essay "How it Feels to be Colored Me" in 1928, in which she spoke about her childhood and the impact of moving to an all-white neighborhood had on her; undoubtedly, Fannie Hurst read Zora's essays. This, consequently, leads me to argue the strong influence of Hurston in Fannie's work(s).

Although the archetype of the mammy is portrayed in the novel—and caused controversy—it is the character/archetype of the tragic mulatto that stirred the minds of African American intellectuals and the African American audience. The double consciousness that

W.E.B. Dubois wrote about in 1903 is heavily portrayed in Peola's psyche. Battling her mother's obstinacy with accepting her place as a Negro woman, and her desire to "pass" and live as a white woman, Peola struggles to find her place in society without having a choice of her own.

As a color-line crosser, Peola defines the tragic mulatto model, white enough to "pass," and internally conflicted enough to fall into tragedy. In literature, especially during the Harlem Renaissance, the stories of the tragic mulatto—who is almost always a woman—are accompanied by an ironic display of the life of the mulatto: Passing becomes the tragedy and the joke. Just as in Peola's character, there are racial differences in her genetic make-up that have consequences. The main and greatest example is her blood, the black blood that runs through her veins, which ironically, will denounce her non-whiteness the moment she becomes a mother. Therefore, the joke becomes those things that outside of her skin color, the mulatto cannot control and that force her to take certain actions and/or predestine her life. The tragedy, amusingly enough, is usually the joke.

As the daughter of "a white nigger" that "you'd never think would've had truck with the likes" of a Negro woman as Delilah, Peola suffers the consequences of her mixed bloodline as she begins to grow up (Hurst 231). She is, physically speaking, the complete opposite of her mother and the mirror of her father. Described as "the purfectest white nigger baby dat God ever dropped down in de lap of a black woman from Virginie," Peola, at an early age, begins assuming her place as a white individual by "passing." After she is discovered "passing" by her mother while in elementary school, the conflict of identity starts to grow when she becomes older; the young mulatto then continuously attempts to keep passing without being discovered and exposed by her mother in order to be a member of society who will not face prejudice.

There is a sense of over-determinism of race placed in the fictional stories of the tragic mulatto, most of them have to do with the tragedy and the joke, where the mulatto is not able to control her destiny due to her genetics. However, Fannie Hurst breaks the mold of this trait, so common in literature and film of the Harlem Renaissance. As Peola constantly cries out “let me pass” to her black mother, without receiving affirmation, she eventually takes control of her destiny in the most unexpected way for the reader. After meeting a white man, whom she claims to love, they decide to get married and move to Bolivia where he obtained a job offer. Peola sees this as the best opportunity for her to “pass” and start a new life, not before taking the decision of controlling her body in a way where her blackness will not betray her, by becoming sterile: “I’ve done the—the right things—about the possibility of children. Never mind how. You couldn’t believe how! It hasn’t been easy. It’s been terrible that—well, without him, I couldn’t face a life that would be as sterile as I am” (Hurst 582). Before the possibility of being discovered “passing,” she gives up being a mother, this way breaking the hetero-normative construct of society. With this plot twist, Fannie Hurst, once again, takes a daring move that proved she was not a traditional women writer.

Peola’s identity struggle keeps surfacing throughout the novel, “It’s life, I tell you. Me clutching at life! You’ve got to let me pass into a new world,” she cries to Delilah, her mother (Hurst 582). Justifying that her actions are the result of living in a world where she does not know her place, and defending her decision of making herself sterile, Peola desperately puts into words that she does not want to be part of that world where she is faced with racism and segregation: “One dares everything when there is nothing to lose and everything to gain” (582).

Peola, more than any other character in the novel, expresses the struggle of many African Americans of mixed race. This character in Hurst’s novel, portrays the racial battles of white

Negroes in the United States, those who are conflicted with their identity, with their race, those who, at the time, are not able to find their place in a binary world. Undoubtedly, Delilah and Peola displayed Hurst's racial ideologies, and these outlooks on race, as a white woman in an era where Jim Crow was in force, caused her many scandals and controversies, as stated by David Izkovitz in the introduction of the 2004 edition of the novel:

Her massive audience was familiar with her extraliterary, outspoken commitment to progressive political causes, especially women's and anti-racist issues. With *Imitation of Life*, however, Hurst's investment in the politics of race suddenly became a rather unsettling matter of public interest. The nurturing and self-effacing mammy, Delilah, and her tempestuous light-skinned daughter, Peola, added a new dimension to the sentimental formula Hurst had perfected, but they also became the subjects of vigorous debate across the United States. (10)

Many African Americans did not sympathize with Peola, the tragic mulatto, when the novel was published, and some more, especially intellectuals of that period, were also upset at the stereotypical representation of the mammy.⁶⁴ But the truth is that Fannie Hurst presented both of these characters in a progressive manner: Delilah had a friendship, almost sisterhood with Miss Bea with whom she became business partners, and Peola controlled her destiny by choosing sterilization before the possibility of facing racism ever again. "Let me go. Let her be free of me. There is nothing for either of us this way. Mammy, I beg," says Peola to Delilah, with tears in

⁶⁴ Lydia Maria Child was the first one to introduce the character of the tragic mulatto in 1842 and 1843, in her short stories, "The Quadroons" and "Slavery's Pleasant Homes." In such short stories she depicted a biracial light-skinned woman, daughter of a white slave owner and a black female slave. This character eventually became popular in cinema where white producers emphasized her personal pathologies: suicide attempts, depression, sexual perversion, hatred, etc. To the white cinematographer, the tragic mulatto's personality reflected the biracialism in his/her blood: the self-control and intellect came from his/her white blood, and his savagery from his/her Negro blood. See Pilgrim, David. "The Tragic Mulatto Myth." *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*. Ferris State University, Nov. 2000.

her eyes (Hurst 584). And she was right; there was nothing beneficial for neither of them had Peola submissively accepted her blackness and crossed back to that side of the color line.

Nonetheless, the mammy and the tragic mulatto tropes have always remained sensitive topics in literature and, surely remained a delicate subject for those African American intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance whose goal was to eradicate the stereotypes assigned to blacks.

When *Imitation* Reveals “Limitations”: Langston Hughes’ and Fannie Hurst’s Contrasting Views on Race

A year after the publication of Fannie Hurst’s novel, *Imitation of Life*, the story made its first appearance on the big screen in 1934. Starring Claudette Colbert and African American actress Louise Beavers, Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* rapidly became a Hollywood favorite. Directed by John M. Stahl, the film adaptation of Hurst’s novel brought conflicting critiques to the female author from the African American community, particularly from important black intellectuals from the Harlem Renaissance. Missouri-born Langston Hughes (1902-1967), one of the most renowned authors and black intellectual at the time, expressed utterly strong negative opinions about the film through his satiric play titled “Limitations of Life” (1938).

In the film adaptation, Stahl remained true to the plot of the novel, only changing minimal details. Just as in the novel, the film portrays the story of the friendship and business partnership between a white and a black woman: Miss Bea Pullman and Delilah Johnson. This was a milestone for a film of that time since blacks were not allowed to mix with whites. One small but important difference between the novel and the film (which was a source of criticism) was the choice of food item for their business: pancake flour (film) instead of waffles (novel). This undoubtedly, was used as an allusion to the growing popularity of Aunt Jemima pancake

mix since 1889. Set against the backdrop of the aftermath of the Great Depression, the film exemplified hope for single women who found themselves in the necessity of leaving the household and having to join the labor force in order to support their families. An interracial friendship of two single mothers who become successful businesswomen seemed the perfect advertising for the market at the time.

Cinema reached the masses, and with this came the opportunity for African Americans to view the film. However, seeing on screen what many could not afford to read caused controversy: Hurst used the stereotype of the mammy and the trope of the tragic mulatto. Although the character of the tragic mulatto was not as criticized as many identified with the struggle in “passing,” what drew the attention of African Americans, significantly, was the over-exaggerated character of Delilah, the mammy; many blacks condemned the exceedingly servile and submissive traits of Louis Beavers as Delilah Johnson. With the debut of the film, critiques flooded Fannie Hurst, more than John M. Stahl. The negative reviews made against the film were undeniably stronger than those made after the publication of the novel. Since Hurst had been proclaimed as an avid advocate for African American rights, her equivocal representation of the mammy in the novel and film proved troublesome for African Americans who, directly or indirectly, were dealing with post-slavery trauma while enduring discrimination.

Adapted specifically for Hollywood cinema by Universal Studios, *Imitation of Life* sparked debate among the Negro intelligentsia of the Harlem. While the movie portrayed the story of two black subjectivities, the mammy role, as I have been mentioning, became problematic for black audiences. Literary critic Sterlin Brown, was among the first to publicly criticize the film in the pages of *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* (Caputi 698). In his review for the journal, Sterling states that the film and the novel are proportionately offensive as

“it requires no searching analysis to see in *Imitation of Life* the old stereotype of the contented Mammy, and the tragic mulatto; and the ancient ideas about the mixture of the races,” quotes Caputi, and follows up arguing that black mother and daughter, Delilah and Peola, “contribute to Anglo saxon steem” and that “it is not easy to see any ‘social value’ in perpetuating these stock characters” (701). Even though *Imitation* was considered the “first important ‘Black film’ of the 1930’s,” as Jane Caputi cites while quoting film historian Donald Bogle: Its “humanization of the Negro servant” and non-comical portrayal of Negro roles were not enough to prevent the fallacious representation of the Mammy (700).

Fannie Hurst attempted to depict a new social consciousness that begun emerging during the 1920’s and 1930’s. Nevertheless, the approach Hurst took in terms of blackness was not as progressive as her presumed liberal ideologies. The novel portrays an ideological struggle between a black mother and her “white nigger baby” (265). While the black mother is accepting of her place as a Negro woman, Peola, her daughter, battles with this fact more vehemently after being called a “nigger” by Miss Bea’s daughter, Jessie. In an attempt to console the little girl, at the time of that episode, Delilah tries to justify before Peola why she must accept and internalize that being a “nigger” is something predetermined by God:

Take it standin’. You gotta learn to take it all your life that way. Nigger is a tame-cat word when we uses it ourselves ag’in’ ourselves, and a wild-cat word when it comes jumpin’ at us from the outside. Doan’ let it git you ... Jessie ain’t to blame. God ain’t, ‘cause He had some good reason for makin’ us black and white... and de sooner mah chile learns to agree wid Him the better ... Oh, mah honey, cain’t you see de Lord done had good reason for makin’ you black? Oh, mah honey, cain’t you see de glory in de Lawd’s every move? (Hurst 436-7)

Learning to “take it,” to accepting the term “standing” is precisely the message of the film which caused resentment and disappointment from blacks towards Fannie Hurst. Perhaps Hurst’s intention, more than making a point about race itself, was to exalt the New Woman ideals of the nineteenth-century: “Bea/Delilah may epitomize Fannie Hurst’s rendition of Modern American Mother, one whose attributes range between and include assertive business agent, instinctive protector, selfless provider/nurturer, even altruistic martyr” (Ravitz 167). Unfortunately, these feminist ideals did not stand out as strong as the racial themes did. With the emergence of the New Negro movement, African Americans were visibly opposed to this type of backward racial thinking.

As part of the New Negro Renaissance, Langston Hughes, a “talented tenth man,” intellectual, and writer of *The Weary Blues* (1926), publically raised his opinions about *Imitation of Life*, the film, in his play “Limitations of Life” in 1938. In his satiric theatrical representation of *Imitation of Life*, Hughes mixes and modifies the names of the characters and real last names of the film to name the characters in his play: Mammy Weavers, Audette Aubert, and Ed Starks. One specific scene in the film stirred indignation in African Americans, and therefore the response of Hughes. In the infamous scene, Miss Bea Pullman is signing the contract to sell her shares of their business and join a corporation. With her manager by her side, Mr. Elmer Smith (Ned Sparks), Bea Pullman asks Delilah to sign the contract in which she “generously” offers her twenty percent of the shares of a product that was Delilah’s recipe. Portraying modern master-servant-like interactions, Delilah declines any economic remuneration, as in an innate manner of keeping her place as a subordinate. As Adrienne Gosselin states in “Racial Etiquette and the (White) Plot of Passing:(Re) Inscribing ‘Place’ in John Stahl’s *Imitation of Life*,” her refusal of payment for her own product “is baffling, except insofar as it helps maintain a recognizable

economic order that matches the racial power dynamic” (424). What becomes harrowing to African Americans, is Delilah’s representation of the African-American maid as a mammy, as the stereotypical slave-like character whose sole purpose in life is remaining servile and faithful to her white mistress:

BEA. Now. Here are the papers for you to sign.

DELILAH. But if I sign them, then what?

BEA. Then you’ll have a twenty percent interest in the Aunt Delilah Corporation.

ELMER. You’ll be rich.

BEA. You’ll have your own car, your own house.

DELILAH. My own house? You gonna send me away, Miss Bea? I can't live with you?

Oh, honey chile, please don't send me away. Don't do that to me.

(00:37:22-45)

As Delilah is standing there confused, across the table from Miss Bea and Elmer, she maintains her place as a servant even though she is also part owner of the corporation. With a sad expression on her face, she pleads Miss Bea to allow her and Peola to stay by her side:

BEA: Why? Don't you want your own house?

DELILAH: No. How am I gonna take care of you and Miss Jesse if I ain't here?

BEA. Oh, Delilah. Delilah, you’ll have me in tears in a minute.

DELILAH. Let me and Peola stay the same as we been doing. I's your cook, and I wanna stay your cook.

BEA: Well, of course you can stay, Delilah. I only thought now that the money's coming in, and after all, Delilah, it's all from your pancake flour.

DELILAH: I gives it to you honey. I makes you a present of it. You'se welcome.

(00:37:51-00:38:24)

Portraying the selfless and sacrificing nature of Delilah against the condescending yet pitiful words of Miss Bea, the film illustrates the notion of selfless love of the black maid/mammy, therefore of any black person towards whites. However, it is an implicit racist comment by Elmer, which added fuel to fire to black intellectuals:

BEA. Oh, Delilah, you're hopeless.

ELMER. I could've told you that.

BEA. We'll, I'll simply have to put the money in the ban for you.

DELILAH. That's all right, honey, If you want to, against my funeral. I does
hanker for a good funeral

ELMER. *Once a pancake, always a pancake* (emphasis added). (00:38:26-45)

This last line of the dialogue infuriated critics of the Harlem Renaissance. Not only did they perceive the passive-aggressiveness of the racial message with the portrayal of the stereotype of the mammy at a time where African Americans were fighting for change, but also they were aware of the embedded racist allusion in the "pancake" line. Hazel Washington, an African American female student, published an article on *Opportunity* in 1935, in which she declared her antipathy towards the film. After applauding Sterling Brown for his critique of the film, Washington continues her article expressing how, for her, *Imitation* was "full of subtle irony, partially veiled insult, and a half-hidden dimly suggested contempt for the whole Negro race," and how this implicit racial offense "was all there, behind the scenes ...but there for those to see who could see it (185). Hazel denounces the racial insult said by the character of Elmer stating that the "pancake" phrase was used deliberately as a subdued racist message:

When the pancake eater voiced that much-repeated expression, "Once a pancake, always

a pancake,” he did so with complete deliberation and an unmistakable, emphatic double meaning. My mind went back to the days when grandmother used to tell us stories of life on the plantation. When her master was displeased with something the slaves had or had not done, he would say to them, “You darkies will always be darkies.” Now, whether pancakes or darkies, the meaning is the same. (185)

To Hazel Washington, the message that was implied in that scene, which followed up with yet another untypical scene of a Negro woman (Delilah) rubbing the feet of her mistress (Miss Bea). Washington then, vehemently expresses that such scenes did not reflect the reality of black women of the 1930’s. Her rhetoric in this piece, titled “Imitations: Life, Color, and Pancakes,” reflected the authenticity that she, as a black woman—and behind the false allusions of both scenes—knew to be true:

These characters [Delilah and Peola] are not only untypical, they are inconsistent and untrue. Where among Negro women can you find one who prefers living in a white woman’s basement and massaging her mistress tired feet, (tired from either working or dancing) to making an independent home among her own people, and enjoying the peace and comfort earned by her own ingenuity? Where can you find an intelligent Negro girl, black or white, who would rather work and be white than live in ease and luxury with a loving black mother? (185)

Precisely, as a response to *Imitation* and the outburst this scene caused, Langston Hughes used the same scene as the epicenter of his satiric short play, “Limitations of Life.” Taking place in “Harlem,” “Right now,” the play begins in a setting with a “luxurious living room,” and next to it, an “electric stove, griddle, pancake turner, box of pancake four (only Aunt Jemima’s picture is white and a pile of paper plates. Also a loaf of white bread” (655). Next, we are introduced to the

main characters of the story, Audette Aubert, a “pretty blond maid” who is making pancakes, and Mammy Weavers, a “colored lady, in trailing evening gown, with a tiara and large Metropolitan Opera Program, speaking English with Oxford accent (655). As the play progresses, we encountered the various dialogues between Audette and Mammy Weavers that display the power relations, this time subverted. Audette Aubert is presented waiting worryingly for Mammy Weavers to come home. Once the latter walks in, the blond maid takes off mammy’s ermine and offers to make pancakes for her, to what Mammy Weavers responds: “I don’t wish any pancakes, Audette. I’ve just had lobster a la Newburg at the Palm Taber”. After denying the “fabulous” Audette’s pancakes, Mammy Weavers goes on to complain about her exhaustion due to her long evening at the Opera:

MAMMY. I’m just a wee bit tired, Audette.

AUDETTE. Oh, Mammy Weavers, sit right down and rest your feet.

(Brings footstool)

I’ll run fetch your slippers, honey.

(Fools with earrings)

MAMMY. I don’t know what I’d do without you, Audette.

AUDETTE. I’ll never leave you, Mammy Weavers.

(Runs and gets slippers)

Just lemme put your carper slippers on.

(Kneels)

I’ll rub your feet a little first (sic). (656)

While this scene is taking place, in the annotations Hughes describes Auddete performing this activity while “looking up like a faithful dog” (656). There is no question Hughes and his group

of intellectual friends, as well as the majority black Americans, perceived this scene in the movie as ironic and untrue as he described it in the play. Similarly, the way in which many of the scenes in *Imitation* portrayed Peola's struggle with her double consciousness was not of the liking of many. In the film and novel, Peola constantly fights her African heritage, she repudiates her skin color, however, this response from the mulatto young girl is not explained in depth, making it seem as if the character of Peola were a black person who simply prefers the white race for the mere skin color. Hughes and his fellow friends had to have discussed the film in depth, including the contradictions between this one and the reality of African Americans, which was far from truth. Although years later, with "Limitations of Life," Hughes made a clear statement about the laughable representation of the mulatto in *Imitation*:

MAMMY. Tell me, Audette, where is your little Riola tonight?

AUDETTE. Lawd, Mammy Weavers, ma little Riola's tryin' so hard to be colored. She just loves Harlem. She's lying out in de back yard in de sun all day longtannin' herself, everyday, tryin' so hard to be colored (sic).

MAMMY. What a shame, the darling's so fair and blue-eyed! Even though her father was an Eskimo, you'd never know it. Never. (656)

One cannot help but react to this laughable scene in "Limitations of Life." The level of sarcasm and irony presented by Langston Hughes, and exposed between these two characters, became the perfect tool to get the message across. However, although it was a short play, Hughes made sure to include the key scenes of the film that defined the hidden message of the movie in relation to the black race. In one of the final acts of the play, Mammy Weavers offers Audette to do something "nice" for her, to what Audette responds that she would be happy with a "grand funeral" when she passes away. Stunned by Audette's response, Mammy Weaver then asks:

“Darling! But don’t you want a nice home of your own?” And of course, “happily” subservient Audette replies with what allegedly makes her heart content: “No Mammy Weavers, that little room down in your basement is all right for me...All I want is just to work for you” (657)” The faithful dog portrayal of Delilah, and the condescending treatment of Miss Bea and Elmer, becomes clear in the satiric last act of the play, the “pancake” scene:

AUDETTE. I’ll never get tired of doin’ for you and Mr. Ed, Mammy Weavers. I just love colored folks.

MAMMY. I love white folks too, my dear. I was raised by the sweetest old white mammy! ... I want to do something for you, Audette. Something you’ll never forget...Dear, maybe, you’d like a day off?

AUDETTE. A day off?

MAMMY. Yes, dear, a day off.

AUDETTE. (Flipping a pancake) Not even a day off, Mammy Weavers! Ah wouldn’t know what to do with it.

ED. (Throwing up his hands) Once a pancake, always a pancake!

(Picks up Jemima box with white auntie on it, and shakes his head). (658)

The controversial scene of the “pancake” is the pivotal point in Hughes’s play. Proving that race is a discursive construct, as Stuart Hall would state decades later, the African American poet and intellectual demonstrated this by playing with irony and satire while exposing the passive-aggressive racism expressed and perpetuated in *Imitation of Life* (1934) through its colored characters. Citing Valerie Smith’s article “Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing, it is understood that Delilah becomes “the apologist’s vision of the plantation mammy revisited, devoid of any desire other than to care for her white mistress, even

after emancipation” (48). Having this internalized ideology of the mammy archetype, director John M. Stahl “chooses comedy to seal the plantation fantasy, ending the scene with the manager's droll one-liner, ‘Once a pancake, always a pancake,’ and the audience is to supply the metaphor's unspoken analogy” (Gosselin 58). The mammy—and therefore Delilah—is a white-created archetype that is meant to represent the slave-like behavior of the Negro and his/her acceptance of this role. As a non-sexual being, Delilah’s sole purpose is to be a servant and a caretaker to her white mistress, Miss Bea.

Although John M. Stahl became a pioneer for being the first director who redefined the tragic mulatto typecast by hiring an African-American for the role, Freddi Washington, he maintained the racial etiquette of the colored characters throughout the film. This, along with the stereotypes, and passive-aggressive racism, were the plugs that caused controversy within the black community, especially among members of the black intelligentsia of the Harlem, such as Langston Hughes. Yet, Peola’s character, although having also many negative and/or deceiving traits in its representation, did bring a little light to the awareness of the “Negro problem,” not in the sense whites refer to it, but the one African Americans fall under: segregation, racism, and mainly, that state of limbo many of them suffer as part of their double consciousness. Peola had to “rebel against the system. Peola was the New Negro demanding a real New Deal” (Bogle 51).⁶⁵ Phrases from this tragic mulatto such as “you don’t know what it is to look white and be black,” echoed in the mind of many mixed Negroes who struggled with the same identity issues. Hurst’s adaptation of *Imitation of Life* then, in terms of the black main characters, the mammy

⁶⁵ The New Deal was a a program of public service and projects that included financial regulations and reforms during the 1930s to provide some financial security to those individuals in need that suffered the economic damage of the Great Depression.

and the tragic mulatto, did not represent the state of the mind of the African American at the time; it reflected a psyche of a Negro person that would bring relief to white folks' conscience.

Stahl's *Imitation* transformed history into a problematic fiction with the perpetuation of stereotypes. Film, as a mass media artifact, allows for the advertising of false racial philosophies. In *White Screens, Black Images*, James Snead stated that television images and films "establish role-, behavior-, and relationship-models that are, through their repetition, even more effective on an unconscious model than rhetorical propaganda on a conscious level" (141). Having said this, the reinforcement of stereotypes made in *Imitation of Life* was subliminally directed to audiences in a code-like manner and, with the claim of fantasy/fiction that defines the storyline, both writer and director could justify the unequivocal accusation of racial misdoings in the film. It is important to remember, once again, that although the 1934 adaptation of *Imitation of Life* was, and still is, an important film on race, the message of racial "equality" Hurts wanted to depict behind the portrait of the "modern woman" got lost in "translation," as unmistakably and publically voiced Langston Hughes.

Going to The Movies with James Baldwin: Viewing Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*

It is twelve thirty in the afternoon on a cold and windy day in Los Angeles on January 28th, 2016. Walking in through the door of a Beverly Hills restaurant, with a thin frame, short hair parted on the side, wearing oversized sunglasses, a beige coat, dark pants, and a navy blue sweater accessorized with a scarf around her neck, I spot Susan Kohner, who had agreed to meet with me about *Imitation of Life*. Susan, daughter of Mexican Hollywood actress Lupita Tovar, then proceeds to sit next to me after I greet her. As we order drinks and make small talk to get to

know each other, with a soft voice and what sounds as a Mid-Atlantic accent, Kohner and I begin our conversation about *Imitation of Life*, which will be addressed further in this section.

“What is love without the giving, without love you're only living an imitation, an imitation of life,” sings African American vocalist, Earl Grant, while we see tear-looking diamonds fall against a black background and the title of *Imitation of Life* appears in white letters. *Imitation*, as a film of race, breaks the mold of the traditional melodrama up to the 1950's in Hollywood. It appears as a cinematic representation of a novel that was progressive for its time due to the racial topics depicted in the story. Likewise, the 1959 film adaptation becomes a progressive film by shifting the melodramatic intent of the picture. Produced by German film director, Douglas Sirk (1897-1987), the film opens with a scene on the beach; where we see people laying on the sand, *taking the sun*, and a few seconds later, we encounter a desperate mother, Lora Meredith (Lana Turner), searching for her young daughter, Susie, played by teen star Sandra Dee (emphasis added). As the camera follows Lana Turner in search of her daughter, she ironically passes by Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore). This crossing of paths between the two women is the first time we are introduced to these characters together. A minute later, Lora Meredith finally finds her daughter playing with Sarah Jane, Annie's daughter; this is also the first time we are introduced to these characters.

The setting of the first scene is significant and quite clever from the director, as it is with every film, everything that is shown has an intention. The director purposely chose the fact that the very first panorama we see is people tanning at the beach on a very sunny day. This was “not accidental, as the movie is about skin color,” said historian Foster Hirsh in the commentary of the DVD version of the film. This cinematic adaptation of Hurst's novel centers on the relationship between the black mother and daughter and the theme of “passing.” Consequently,

the beach scene suggests the theme of the film (race and colorism), and the fact that one of the characters –just as the people lying on the beach—wants to change her skin color. For this section of the chapter, which I consider to be what defines the overall idea of it

This *Imitation* does not depict the same storyline of entrepreneurship and business partnership between the two mothers. However, it does follow the idea of two mothers losing “sight” of their daughters, and how race defines the relationship between the colored black female characters. The racial emphasis the German director places on the film falls at a time where social change was beginning to arise. Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* premiered a few years after a handful of racist incidents in the United States. Hurst second film adaptation came out four years after the killing of Emmet Till, a fourteen-year-old African American from Mississippi who was lynched after being accused—by hearsay—of making sexual advances at a married white woman in 1955, and five years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Likewise, it was approximately when Martin Luther King Jr. and other African Americans took part in the “bus boycott” social protest in Montgomery, Alabama (1955-1956), and a couple years before nine black students, known as Little Rock Nine, were blocked from entering a Little Rock, Arkansas high school in 1957 after the *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954 decision that declared segregation in schools as unconstitutional (Feldstein 111-2). Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation* erupted at the peak of the most important social manifestations of the twentieth-century in the U.S., the Civil Rights Movement. The significance of the events happening throughout that period became a catapult for the director to reflect such socio-racial processes in the film. Due to the socio-political context present in the 1950’s and 1960’s, Sirk, in an indirect yet gifted manner, illustrated a social critique of society, which, to the surprise of many, imitated his own reality.

The Civil Rights Movement was a social renaissance for African Americans. With the rise of this movement, black Americans began challenging racist societal norms imposed by the government; their fight for social equality commenced with many collective actions that required each individual to perpetuate them in order to achieve success as a community. For this reason, many African Americans decided to reject domestic service positions, which discernibly placed them in a subservient position. By implementing that collective choice that had consequences such as jeopardizing their economic condition, they made a clear statement to white Americans and the government: They were prepared to stand to fight for racial equality. Although one of the philosophies of the movement was the use of non-violent protests in order to reflect a positive image of the African American, and cause a positive impact in society, such pacific protests as sit-ins, marches, or rejection of subordinate job positions, nevertheless sent a powerful message.

This melodramatic representation of race bared a strong statement, and although not many understood the director's intention in regards to the main colored characters, African Americans did identify with some aspects of the latter. The problematic reception of the characters, as I have mentioned previously, fell under the character of Delilah. At the turn of the Civil Rights Movement period, the legacy of the history, struggles, and new victories of African Americans rights was in a transient state towards the new generations of black Americans: From the Annie Johnsons to the Sarah Janes. The empathies of African Americans were with Sarah Jane (Feldstein 128). While the film falls under the genre of melodrama, it certainly does not follow the formulaic tradition of the genre. For Sirk, it was essential to make a clear-cut of the traditional melodrama and bring to the table a "dark" touch to it, leaving aside the hyperbolic romanticism and determinism of the ever-lasting Hollywood melodrama.

In his *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), Peter Brooks discusses his interpretation of the term “melodramatic” after reading Balzac and Henry James. For Brooks, the word is associated with the mode of dramatization of the works of such authors, but “especially the extravagance of certain representations, and the intensity of moral claim impinging on their characters’ consciousness” (ix). The manner in which Balzac and Henry James used realism in their works seemed to be overly staged, said Brooks. He criticized that it used a “heightened and hyperbolic drama, making reference to pure and polar concepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnation (ix). Although Brooks implies that *melodrama* has been used, more often than not, in a pejorative manner, he mentions that for many it also has its positive trademarks. Citing Eric Bentley, Brooks refers to the core of the genre as the representation of “the theatrical impulse itself: the impulse toward dramatization, heightening, expression, acting out,” and that it must be considered as an “eternal type of theater” (xi). *Imitation of life* (1933) embodies what Brooks considers to be the “melodramatic imagination,” nineteenth-century literature done by melodramatists of that century. With this in mind, Fannie Hurst could be, in fact, considered a progressive melodramatist; yet her novel fell under the characteristics of the genre that Brooks criticizes. Portraying a distinct use of melodrama, I contend that Douglas Sirk can be denominated as a modern cinematic melodramatist.

A son of Danish parents, Douglas Sirk (named Claus Detler Sierck) was born in Hamburg, Germany on the 26 of April 1900. Always interested in the arts, Sirk studied painting, art history, and attended Albert EinStein’s lectures on relativity from which he was enthused by the ‘dark and mighty breath of the new century’ (Fischer 29). Continuing with his interest for art, in 1921 he became director of the Kleines Theater in Chemnitz. However, he soon became frustrated “by its penchant for producing crowd-pleasers: melodramas and comedies” (Ibid).

After leaving the theater, he worked as a designer for a film in 1923, and six years later he went back to work as the manager of a theater company in Leipzig where he “oversaw adaptations of works by Shakespeare, Ibsen, Schiller, Shaw, Brecht, Pedro Calderón, Strindberg, and Sophocles” (Fischer 30). After he angered Nazis with a production of a play and lost job opportunities after theater companies would find out his wife was Jewish, he made the transition to film hoping that censorship wouldn’t reach him as directly as in the theater (Ibid).

Once in the cinematographic industry, Sirk directed [drama] films he considered to be works of social criticism. Working on nine films from 1935 and 1937, he mastered “his craft, picture by picture,” and stated that he learned to trust his eyes “rather more than the windiness of words” (Fischer 31). In the 1940’s, the German director received an offer from Warner Brothers to direct a film. It is said that he and his second wife, fled to the United States after being persecuted by the Nazis when his first wife, a Hitler supporter, denounced his relationship with his Jewish wife. By 1941, Sirk and wife arrived in the U.S. where they joined the community of refugees of people who worked in the industry. Undoubtedly, his professional and academic background (theater, art history, philosophy, film), as well as his personal life, were strong elements that influenced his film directing. Once settled in the U.S., Sirk directed films with racial themes such as *Hitler’s Madman* (1943) and *Taza, Son of Cochise* (1954), and melodramas such as *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), and of course, *Imitation of Life* (1959).

As a result of French auterist theory, a film scholarship arising at the time and for which Sirk was “an early inductee,” *Imitation of Life* captured the spotlight of the media.⁶⁶ His auterist directing made the films he worked to be regarded as both unique and typical (Fischer 5).

⁶⁶ An auteur is a filmmaker who has control over most aspects of the production of a cinematic work, adding his personal artistic style on it, so that it becomes recognizable as his.

Likewise, his innovative take on melodrama with *Imitation*, which reflected ideologies related to his personal experiences, as well as a recognizable style, parted from an ideological criticism exposed through “its inclusion of dominant black characters in a period of heightened racial awareness...” (Ibid). Sirk readapted Stahl’s version of the novel while keeping what I consider the focal plot, the black mother with the light-skinned mulatto daughter who struggles to “pass” for white as her over-nurturing mother—who devotes her life as a caretaker of her mistress—constantly tries to force on her the subservient role of the Negro imposed by a white supremacist society.

Similar to Sirk’s cinematic critical lens, the already mentioned African American writer, James Baldwin, also shared a unique analytical eye for cinema. Baldwin, whose philosophy reflected the idea of embracing the stranger, was a core figure during the Civil Rights Movement. His progressive narrative on racial matters often made headlines, which reflected his self-perception as the “Great Black Hope of the Great White Father” (Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro* 41). One of the most interesting and notable characteristics of Baldwin was his rawness and truthfulness to talk about race and its role in American culture and society. He could effortlessly provide a noteworthy critique and/or review of a novel, as well as well as an insightful analysis of a film. Since an early age, he became particularly interested in cinema; he would later claim that interest to be the factor that awoke his Negro (racial) consciousness. The manner in which he analyzed Hollywood cinema eloquently—and critically—captured the African American reality at a time of racial marginalization.

In 1976, Baldwin wrote “The Devil Finds Work,” a book length essay that described the influence of films in the shaping of his identity while exploring the impact of cinema on the formation of stereotypes and racism. I am bringing Baldwin’s critic eye to this chapter because

of his role as a Negro intellectual during the Civil Rights Movement, and because his study of cinema in “The Devil Finds Work” enables me to provide a critical analysis of *Imitation* in a way that has not been done. I also pair the description of Sirk and Baldwin together because beyond of being contemporaries, they share similar views on the black-white racial binary of American society. Both of their approaches towards a social criticism of American society come together in the representation and elucidation of cinema. While Sirk uses well-thought iconography in *Imitation* in order to construct his social criticism, Baldwin uses his intellectuality as a tool to analyze and/or decode racialized Hollywood films.

Beginning with the poster used for the advertising of *Imitation of Life*, the film, without having yet to be seen, depicts a message of marginalization. While Lana Turner, John Gavin, and Sandra Dee (the white characters) are placed at the forefront, Juanita Moore and Susah Kohner remain depicted at a smaller scale in the bottom right corner of the poster. Having in mind the socio-racial climate during the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, it is evident that the imagery used for the film had a racial significance. As historian Foster Hirsch commented on the DVD version of the film, it reflected the racial realities of its own period. As someone who fled Germany during the Nazi era, and as a persecuted subject, Sirk could relate to the issue of racism, segregation, and violence against a marginalized group. It can be said then, that Sirk brought the Nazi context to the U.S., and after witnessing the “Negro problem” in American society, he decided to express his social criticism in *Imitation of Life*.

Sirk once said: “*Imitation of Life* is more than just a good title, it is a wonderful title. I would have made the picture just for the title, because it is all there” (Fischer 2). And in fact, it is all there, those three words imply so much within society and the film certainly displays the different manners in which one can “imitate life.” Two specific scenes in the film embody the

subtitle of this chapter, “Cheating on Color,” whilst mirroring as well the title of the film. Sarah Jane stars both scenes, which reflect her relationship with Annie, consequently echoing the degradation of race and gender that leads to an “imitation of life.”

The first scene I will draw attention to, redirects the mind of the audience to the title of the film while exposing racial historical instances of African Americans, and calling out white Americans on the perpetration of negative stereotypes. This scene takes place in the Connecticut mansion the home for the white and black mothers and their daughters. While throughout the film we, as the audience, are constantly influenced by the just and non-racist portrayal of Miss Lora Meredith, she breaks such expectations by perpetrating them through a passive-aggressive discourse. In the scene where Miss Lora is having a business meeting with a few film producers, she reproduces this micro racist behavior by suggesting what she expects from Annie and Sarah Jane. Minutes before the meeting guests arrive, Lora asks Sarah Jane to help out her mother in the kitchen to have everything ready on time (to serve them). Once Sarah Jane goes to the kitchen, Annie then asks her to take a tray of aperitifs to Lora, manager and a film representative, to what the young mulatto ironically replies with a: “Why, certainly! Anything at all for Miss Lora and her friends” (Fischer 114).⁶⁷ As she exits the kitchen and walks into the living room, Sarah Jane adopts a savagely daring attitude. With the tray over her head and a hand on her waist, she follows up with a satirical representation of a mammy while imitating Negro dialect:

SARAH JANE. Fetched you-all a mess o’ crawdads. Miss Lora, for you an’ your friends!

LORA. Well, that’s quite a trick...*(She sets her glass down on the coffee table.)* ... Sarah Jane! Where did you learn it?

⁶⁷ See Fischer, Lucy, editor. *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk, Director*. Rutgers University Press, 1991. From this point on, I will be using the script of the film for the quoting of scene dialogues, directions, and camera shots.

SARAH JANE. Oh, no trick to totin', Miss Lora. Ah I'arned it from my mammy ... and she I'arned it from old Massa ... 'fo she belonged to you!

LORA. (*rising, walking screen left, and into the background*): Excuse me.

Lora entering the kitchen (as seen from inside the room). The camera pulls back and pans left slightly as she comes forward and stops by the far end of the counter. She speaks to Sarah Jane who is in the foreground, also facing the camera.

LORA. Sarah Jane, why did you do that? What's the matter with you? (*Turning to Annie.*) Annie, did you see what she did?

ANNIE. (*off*): I heard her.

SARAH JANE. You and my mother are so anxious for me to be colored ... I was going to show you I could be. (116-7)

With a seemingly upsetting face, Miss Lora continues scolding Sarah Jane by calling her "childish." She then proceeds with a patronizing speech in which she exalts her compassionate conduct towards Sarah Jane, implying she doesn't make racial distinctions between she and her daughter. Annie then, facing Miss Lora, comments that she [Sarah Jane] "has to be patient," that "things'll work out" (117). Evidently upset, the daring yet conflicted mulatto, replies: "Miss Lora ... you don't know what it means to be ... different," and here, at this moment, is where Miss Lora then responds with an offended and hurtful but yet condescending attitude: "Have I ever treated you as if you were different? Has Susie? Has anyone here?" (117). Rather ashamed and upset, Sarah Jane replies with "No. You've been wonderful ..." (Ibid). What becomes interesting about this particular scene and the exchange between Lora and Sarah Jane, is that it reflects the reality of the situation, which is that in fact, Sarah Jane receives a different treatment, even

though Lana Turner (Lora) attempts to prove that to be wrong. Douglas Sirk depicted in a witty but critical manner the truth behind these micro racial aggressions. From the scene of the moment Lana Turner asks Susan Kohner (Sarah Jane) to be of help to her and her mother, the two actresses are strategically placed at different levels of the house. While Miss Lora is located downstairs, looking up towards Sarah Jane who is on the second floor, Sirk implies the subversion of roles, however, he crashes this theory and highlights—with the use objects that are part of the scenography, such as stair rail—that there is in fact a difference, a separation between the mulatto character and the mistress. By juxtaposing these two characters that are located at different levels of the house, in a low medium shot of the camera, the white rail from the stairs in which Sarah Jane stands behind marks the division of race and social status.

The acting and scenography polarities shown in the film, chosen by auteur Sirk, redefine the expectations of a melodramatic film. The over exaggerated acting and the constant implication determinism, along with the focus on the romantic relationship, are substituted by the development of the plot around secondary characters, colored secondary characters that is, and the message of a social critique. In “Sirkumstantial Evidence,” a 1978 interview to James Harvey, Douglas Sirk describes himself as a “handicraft worker” while admitting he does subvert what he is given: “You functioned a lot as an ironist and a subverter,” says Harvey. Sirk then follows up by stating that, when it came to working on *Imitation of Life*, they [him and Ross Hunter, the producer] “played what was between the lines.”⁶⁸ Although the director was not aware of the manner in which the novel and first adaptation had portrayed a social message -as he never watched the first adaptation or read the novel before his production-, he admits having read an outline Ross Hunter gave him, which closely followed Stalh’s film. He did not want any

⁶⁸ See Fischer, Lucy. *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk, Director*. Rutgers University Press, 1991, pp. 221.

past influence to affect his view of the film, he said (Fischer 228). An obvious social critic, Sirk's ironist thought aimed to work as defiance to cultural and racial norms in the United States.

By keeping the black characters as true to the perception of white American society at the time, Sirk was working against the system, in an embedded manner, by denouncing the ever-present discrimination of black Americans. His 1959 film adaptation, contrary to Stahl's, did not include a business partnership between Annie and Lora. In a crucial time of segregation and the fight for Civil Rights, it was essential for Sirk to maintain the social reality of blacks; a black rich woman would have never chosen to be reliant on the White woman. However, he did keep some stereotypical scenes of the black maid in Stahl's version and in Hurst's novel: the rubbing of feet and the self-sacrificing/unconditional love towards the white mistress, and mainly her docile and submissive personality that revealed her acceptance of the segregation she lived under:

After I had read the outline, I made one change, socially—an important one, I think. In Stahl's treatment of the story, the white and the Negro women are co-owners of a thriving pancake business—which took all the social significance out of the Negro mother's situation. Maybe it would have been all right for Stahl's time, but nowadays a Negro woman who got rich *could* buy a house, and wouldn't be dependent to such a degree on the white woman, a fact that makes the Negro woman's daughter less understandable. So, I had to change the axis of the film and make the Negro woman just the typical Negro, a servant, without much she could call her own but the friendship, love, and charity of the white mistress. (Fischer 228)

This statement made during his interview with Jon Halliday, "Sirk on Sirk," serves as an example to recognize how, the portrayal of stereotypes for film directors involved in social

criticism as him, works as a strong element in the critical analysis of society in racialized films.⁶⁹ In order to truthfully display the social and racial milieu of the 1950's and 1960's, he needed to adjust the characters accurately to their place in a society of the treated period. Thus, Sirk had to keep Annie as a poor, dependent, and submissive maid/servant to depict Sarah Jane's identity and social struggles appropriately: "This whole uncertain and kind of oppressive situation accounts for much more for the daughter's attitude," said in Halliday's interview (Fischer 228). Since Susan Kohner's distressed character represents the psychological *mêlée* of African Americans of mixed race, her everyday life struggles as a mulatto who is white enough to "pass," make this character the center of the story as it is she whom the newer generation of blacks (at the time) identified with. Kohner's character, unlike Annie Johnson, was part of an empathetic collectivity.

One could wonder why Miss Lora, as a white woman, would display a passive-aggressive treatment towards Annie and especially Sarah Jane. Her rhetoric of fair treatment among the latter and her daughter, Susie, gets completely exposed as insincere as she keeps making decisions in her household that keep undermining the Other. What Sirk does, in this sense, is aiming towards a critical thinking to indicate that, as James Baldwin says, "white people did not act as they did because they were white, but for some other reason," and that cinema often becomes an apparatus that aids to our own understanding of various social issues ("Devil" 483). According to Baldwin, cinematography has a way to plant ideas in the subconscious. The scene of Sarah Jane's mammy imitation echoes Baldwin's ideology that movies are frequently an entrance to the cinema of our minds (Ibid). Observing a character of a movie "play" what could

⁶⁹ See Fischer, Lucy. "The Director: Interviews." *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk, Director*. Rutgers University Press, 199, pp. 226-231.

be considered another “character,” a stereotype, registers in the mind and ideologies that people may or may not develop.

Movies of race such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), or *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *Imitation of Life* (1959) reflected what “it meant to be a nigger,” and most of the topics and situations represented on screen have something to do with social reality and the justification of treatment towards the Other (Baldwin, “Devil” 485). *The Birth of a Nation*, for example, is “the justification of mass murder,” says Baldwin (“Devil” 511). Having this idea of reflecting the realities of society, and validating the injustices towards blacks, we can contemplate that as Sarah Jane replicated Negro slang and mannerisms from a stereotype that white American society stubbornly fabricated, her “performance” justified what Baldwin believed, from his view as Negro, those in power constructed. Echoing *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (1845), and keeping in mind the mammy impersonation scene from *Imitation of Life*, James Baldwin inferred about the mirroring of society in cinema by stating: “The civilized have created the wretched, quite coldly and deliberately, and do not intend to change the *status quo*; are responsible for their slaughter and enslavement ... These people are not to be taken seriously when they speak of the ‘sanctity’ of human life, or the ‘conscience’ of the civilized world” (Idem 489).

The civilized and the savage, two polar opposite terms that have always been linked to the white and black races, and that infer the social value of a member of each race, and that encapsulate the idea of the second and final key scene of *Imitation of Life* to analyze in this chapter. The scene I am referring to is what I call “the beating scene.” Sarah Jane Johnson, always troubled by her place in society as a liminal subject, continues to find herself in constant “imitation” of life, of that life that as a black woman she cannot have, or be a part of. However, in her urgency to escape the subordinate position that is intertwined to her blackness, she begins dating a white

man, Frankie (Troy Donahue). In what it seems will be another routine meeting with Frankie, dressed in a yellow dress, Sarah Jane arrives at a deserted street and crosses the street to meet Frankie, whom she spots in the opposite corner, as “a mellow jazz theme plays in the background” (Fischer 119). However, opposite of a romantic encounter, this scene quickly develops into a violent incident caused by the discovery of Sarah Jane’s “passing” tactic:

FRANKIE. Is it true?

SARAH JANE. Is what true?

FRANKIE. Is your mother a nigger? TELL ME!

SARAH JANE. What difference does it make? You love me ...

FRANKIE. All the kids talking behind my back! Is it true?

SARAH JANE. No!

FRANKIE. Are you black?

SARAH JANE. No, I’m as white as you!

FRANKIE. (*slapping her.*) You’re lying!

SARAH JANE. I’m not!

FRANKIE. You are! (*He gives her another blow to the face.*)

This disturbing and violent scene is the utmost representation of racism in the entire film, the strongest criticism of American society. Douglas Sirk, as someone who was a victim of Nazi persecution, undoubtedly brought this feeling to the scene. As socially conscious director, his auteurist qualities were astoundingly reflected in this specific passage, his famous *mise-en-scène* comes to life in this iconic section of the film. In the street where this scene takes place, we see a sign that says “Liberty” in the opposite corner from the empty business space that has the word “BAR” painted on its glass window, under which we find a “For Rent” sign. The symbolic

importance of these details is enormous for the racial context at the time; Sarah Jane's yellow dress hints her racial categorization as a "high yellow" or "yaller" woman, which was a term used to refer to a light-skinned African American, the "yellow" implied the undertone of their skin; the "Liberty" banner hanging from the top corner of a building could have been an association to slavery; the word "BAR" on the glass window was a reference to the color-line (color-bar); and finally, the "For Rent" sign under the "BAR" word, was an implication that "anyone" could get it, as long as they had the means for it, but in this case, and referring to the crossing the color line, meant anyone who was light-skinned enough, could "pass" .⁷⁰ The final symbolic and crucial items in this film were the mirrors, objects that denote a lot in the film.

Mirrors appeared in most of the scenes of *Imitation of Life*. These objects were significantly symbolic for Sirk because they represented a view to reality. In the beating scene, we can see the atrocity that is being committed towards Sarah Jane through the reflection of the glass window. The fact that the camera makes the shot directed at the reflection of the mirror has an important message to the spectator: we are witnessing a sight of a reality. For Sirk, "the mirror is the imitation of life. What is interesting about a mirror is that it does not show yourself as you are, it shows you the opposite" (Fischer 3). Similar to Sirk, James Baldwin considers the mirror an important object that reflects reality, the evil of life, the Devil, says the black intellectual. When it comes to cinema, and in this violent incident between Frankie and Sarah Jane, the mirror was that Devil that keeps punishing Otherness due to their skin color. The fact that the word "nigger" was used in this film was groundbreaking for a Hollywood film of the time, let alone for a melodrama. Not only was it extremely daring culturally speaking, but at the

⁷⁰ The word "yellow" referred to the yellow undertone of their skin.

same time the word yelled by Troy Donahue, vividly represented a reality for African Americans, who as Sarah Jane, were victims of racial violence.

In this disturbing scene of *Imitation of Life*, Frankie was that evil side of white society that was commonly represented in Hollywood cinema. In his essay, “The Devil Finds Work,” Baldwin’s theory was that the dark, evil, immoral part of American society always had its ways to find work. The “devil” finding work was the unjust, racist, insensitive, and equivocal representations of minorities that somehow held a recurring representation in cinema. Something that becomes ironic in this particular scene, is that the mulatto role is played by Mexican-Czech-American and Jewish, Susan Kohner. Although it was common for a white actress to play mulatto roles at the time, it was a first for a Latina, a Mexican, and a Jewish, to play a black woman.

In my interview with Susan Kohner, she recalled her childhood years traveling to Mexico City every summer to practice her Spanish. As the daughter of a famous Mexican actress, she and her family were always surrounded by important artists of the time. She remembers having a family portrait painted by Diego Rivera, for which they “posed for several weeks,” and doing her first communion in Mexico, having Dolores del Río—the first important Mexican actress that “crossed” over and gained fame in Hollywood—as her godmother. She participated in movies such as *The Last Wagon* (1956) and tv series like *Four Star Playhouse* (1960), where she played ethnic characters, “I always played ethnic roles,” she laughed. It comes as no surprise that she was chosen for the role of Sarah Jane. In the production notes of *Imitation of Life* it is said that the search for the actress who would play the role of the “light-skinned Negress” extended to two continents, and that producer Ross Hunter and director Douglas Sirk “interviewed almost 100 Negro actresses and tested five non-Negro thespians before deciding on Susan (Fischer 184).

During our interview Kohner mentioned that she tested for Sarah Jane's role with Juanita Moore, and that "they" made her wear shorts. She assumed it was because her role had to do a dancing scene and "they probably wanted to see if [she] had any legs". She recalls testing with a scene in which she is at a motel room with a friend, "passing," and she has to say goodbye to her black mother. She said it was a difficult scene to test, and that the fact that her mother, Lupita Tovar, was with her during the test, did not make it easier. When I asked if her father, Hollywood agent Paul Kohner, or her mother read the script, she nodded and said: "Certainly, they thought it was a marvelous film."

In relationship to actress Juanita More, Kohner said they kept a close relationship, a friendship after finishing the film. However, due to the cruelty of many of their scenes together, during the filming of *Imitation* she tried to keep her distance: "She was very fond, but I tried not to spend too much time with her because I had to be very nasty to her. But she was marvelous," she tells me as she chuckles. Kohner also mentioned that *Imitation* was really important for Juanita as "at the time there weren't many roles for African Americans women, or very few, and they were always cast as maids or housekeepers."

Susan Kohner due to her racial background was aware of society's injustices towards blacks at the time that is why it was hard for her to complete the argumentative scenes with Juanita More. Following this topic of conversation, I finally asked her about the "beating scene" with Troy Donahue, to what she responded:

(*Chuckles.*) Unfortunately, I did not know that it was going to be a blow on the face, it was shocking and painful. Troy Donahue, I mean, did it because he was directed. They had to shoot it over again because I had bruises the next day. And of course, then when they shot it next, sometime a week later, they faked it, the slap was fake, which is how it

should have been done in the first place. In the first take, I really got hit, and I think in the second one they used a double, for just the shot where I fall down on the pavement. I think at the time it was the Hays' Office, they, I think, said that it was too brutal, so it had to be shot over... Anyway, they looked at most films and decided it something was beyond the mark. I don't know if there is such a kind of censorship today, probably not.

(Kohner)

As I was asking about this particular scene, I could sense that she still recalls being hit with a bit of shock. At that moment, I cannot help but state to her that the director and producer kept the racial slur in the scene, "nigger." Kohner, with a sober expression, replied: "Yes, they kept that. How could you put it instead? They could have used: 'Is it true that your mother is a black woman? But the way they kept it was much more effective.'" As we are about to end our conversation—she had to go back to show her late mother's house—she went on to tell me an anecdote that proceeded after the "beating" scene. Kohner said that because she actually got hurt while shooting the scene, the next day she received a bouquet of yellow flowers from the director that said: "yellow flowers for the blue bruises." Which again, speaks about the importance of symbolism for Douglas Sirk.

Following up with this infamous scene, it is important to underline a key element to the scene: the background musical choice. As Frankie hits and slaps Sarah Jane in the face, "the background jazz theme becomes loud, discordant, and abrasive" (Fischer 119). The reason for this selection of music was to cause some sort of discomfort and anxiety in the audience. Music plays an important role in melodrama, which is something that Sirk says most people have forgotten about: "Well, the word 'melodrama' has rather lost its meaning nowadays: people tend to lose the 'melos' in it, the music" (Idem 227). Although music has always remained an

important part of films since the silent cinematic era, in sound films it makes the significance of important scenes weight more. In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks refers to this aspect of melodrama and states that in speaking films it “determines mode and meaning” and that emotional dramas need the “desemanticized language of music, its evocation of the ‘ineffable,’ its tones and registers” (14). While some critics found the scene and the music “blaringly exaggerated,” Sirk mentions he completed the scene in this manner by intuition as he “had a slight feeling that the scene could be lacking in cruelty, lacking in drama,” because it was an extremely short scene, in his opinion (Idem 225). Consequently, he states something interestingly important in terms of his way of emitting a socio-racial criticism in directing this scene: “I was a bit doubtful that the scene would come off as it should be—a scene of utter degradation of the girl I told the writer we have to get the feeling that this is not just the boy knocking her down, but society. This is another race, this is another power, you have to represent “Whitey” here. Yes, I was only doubtful it wouldn’t be extreme enough” (Ibid).

Sirk had this unique perception about the melodrama he liked to create, which was, in a way, a dark melodrama that did not fall into the banality of Hollywood films of that genre. After finishing *Imitation* he decided to move back to Europe because he “had outgrown this type of picture-making which ... was typical of Hollywood in the fifties and of American society, too, which tolerated only the play that pleases, not the thing that *disturbs the mind*” (Fischer 34; emphasis added). The Sirkian style of melodramas represents, in a greater sense, the rampant oppression towards black, and most importantly, the horrid violence towards a black woman who can “cross the line.” Among other issues, it blatantly displays the incoherence of racial beliefs in American society. Sirk, with the social and racial consciousness of his Jewish wife, was able to

intelligently reproduce, through his directing, society's anxieties in terms of racial relations and the color-line.

The rigidity of color-line, was so unbendable, crossing it implied serious consequences for those who dared; beatings, lynching, and emotional violence were among the main punishments for African Americans who were discovered "passing," or committing another act that of "transgression" towards whites. Keeping African Americans in their "place" on film represented a way for racial hegemony to maintain the status quo. The cinematographic portrayal of African American stereotypes on film reaffirmed their position at the bottom of the racial pyramid, much like a caste system did during colonial times. These images, when sent through a film, do not recount the veracity of the history behind the portrayal of such. They denote a rhetorical message to the spectator that does not require any explanation. A film, as mass media, serves as a medium to propagate any type of image that carries an evident social meaning. Hence, the cinematic representations of reality, especially when it deals with racial topics, seldom become truthful realities, on the contrary, fantasy seems to overtake the display of sensitive topics in the day to day of society.

Going back to the representation of black stereotypes on film, Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959) is certainly one of the films that contests the manner in which stereotypes speak of the reality of the African America. The mammy and the tragic mulatto in *Imitation of Life* are characterized in the manner in which American society has assembled them, which is the intention Sirk meant to represent. Sirk's choice of maintaining those roles in their "true" archetypical display mirror, once again, James Baldwin interpretation of the use of black image in film. Baldwin, as already mentioned, came to the conclusion that the formation of archetypical images of the Negro in film always seem to be negative in order to maintain the black American

in a position where it results nearly impossible to defend the social status they are under. Always represented in polar versions of themselves (thieves, rapists, murderers or the faithful servant, docile Negro, or submissive maid), the image of the Negro is a model constructed by society and its influence on film. In *White Screens, Black Images* (1994), James Snead calls this construction of images, “codes.” Snead says that “stereotypes ultimately connect to form larger complexes of symbols and connotations,” and that consequently, such codes then “begin to form a kind of ‘private conversation’ among themselves without needing to refer back to the real world for their facticity” (141). The hypersexualized image of the mulatto in *Imitation of Life*, as well as the extremely conformist personality of Annie Johnson, the mammy, evoke Snead’s analysis of stereotypes; once the public sees them on screen, a non-vocal conversation begins between what the stereotype displays on screens and what the message that the public receives; this way creating an automatic repetition in America’s culture of the equivocal racial message given on screen.

In this sense, Douglas Sirk works as a filmic puppet master in his adaptation of *Imitation of Life*. By trying to remain faithful to the negative stereotypes, supported by the history of the United States, he reflects the emotional poverty that the United States, as a whole, reflects. Sirk uses the gaze to show the audience, that in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, the racial reality of America remains as outdated as it was in prior decades, before the Civil War. The oldest stereotype of *Imitation*, is undoubtedly the mammy, Annie Johnson, who although is not openly represented as such, it is explicitly evoked in the psyche of the character and the dialogues with Sarah Jane, where in a few instances, she uses the word “mammy” to refer to her black mother. Therefore, Annie is the equivalent of the mammy in a modern era, she is what James Baldwin referred to as “the loyal nigger maid” (“Devil” 533). Looking back at *The Birth*

of a Nation (1915), *Imitation of Life* (1934), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *Imitation of Life* (1959), whether it is nineteen years between the first two, 20 years between the second two films, or 24 years between the two *Imitation of Life* pictures, the loyal Negro maid has remained present.

The continuing repetition of stereotypical images in Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, echo an important message to society. As I have repeated throughout this chapter, Sirk's personal experience with Nazism and persecution, made his approach to this film much more significant in terms of social criticism. He believed that in *Imitation of Life*, "the only interesting thing is the Negro angle: The Negro girl trying to escape her condition, sacrificing to her status in society her bonds of friendship, family, etc., and rather trying to vanish into the imitation world of vaudeville. The imitation of life is not the real life" (Fischer 228). This comes forth to show that her nature of his work in melodrama was to make the "moral occult," the "masked surface of reality," evident (Brooks 5). As Peter Brooks stated, the melodramatic mode, in a large degree, exists in order "to articulate the moral occult" (Ibid). Sirk, unconsciously borrows Brooks' theory of the moral occult, but expresses it on his own terms, by following an expression which he lived by during his time as a director: "Seeing through a glass darkly" (Fischer 228). Sirk meant that at everything we see in life at some point is removed from us, without us being able to grasp such things, "you just see the reflections. If you try to grasp happiness itself your fingers only meet glass. It's hopeless" (Ibid).

It is precisely a sense of hopelessness that defines Sarah Jane, and consequently, many African Americans who, through Sarah Jane, identified, whether they saw themselves in the identity struggle of the young mulatto as a person of mixed race or through her impotence of feeling helpless living in a white supremacist society that punished her for being black. In an era

in which Jim Crow determined the lives of African Americans, it was inevitable for Sirk to avoid scenes such as the beating of Sarah Jane by a white man; an episode in the life of the mulatto that reflected the impact of the one-drop rule.

I wanted to accentuate Susan Kohner's character in this section because, looking at the film, from hindsight, I felt it was the mulatto who carried the plot. It was she and her relationship with her mother, an ironic representation of the traditional mammy who remained in the cult of domesticity, that told me more than what other studies have done with this movie in which they focused on the relationship between Miss Lora and Annie and their friendship and impact of the white woman actress during an era of consumerism. In most academic studies of *Imitation of Life*, the research focused on this aspect, the racial topic was aimed more to be studied in terms of how in a modern era, a friendship between a white and a black mother could be possible regardless of the social situation. For me, however, the two characters that are displayed in the smallest size on the poster of the film were the real protagonists of the story.

The representation in cinema of the tragic mulatto had always been misinterpreted, as they seemed to have been directed towards a white audience that "needed" a justification for their role in a violent history towards blacks. Sirk stated that *Imitation* was a "piece of social criticism—of both white and black" (Fischer 228). During a time (late 1950's, early 1960's) when African Americans were awakening to the "black is beautiful" slogan, or "black power" message, it was valuable to try to make *Imitation* "into a picture of social criticism—not only for a white social consciousness, but of a Negro one, too" (Ibid). Consequently, I consider that his decision on how to make Susan Kohner's character appear relatable and suitable for the time, meant to emanate—through the psyche and personality of the character—that her choices and attitudes were not the results of the mixing of two different races, but the outcome of racist

ideologies constantly implemented in American culture. However, in the traditional representation of this archetype, “the mulatto is made likable—even sympathetic (because of her white blood, no doubt)—and the audience believes that the girl’s life could have been productive and happy had she not been a ‘victim of divided racial inheritance’” (Bogle 6).

Sarah Jane lives in a society that blames her bloodline for her marginalized place in society. She knows that she is not to blame for the manner in which she is treated, and that her fixation to achieving white status is the reflection of what surrounds her. Her struggle, more than identity, is a social one that makes her defy race subjugation to stop living in a stasis of racial shame. Sirk and Baldwin are both intellectuals of different backgrounds who share similar life experiences in terms of marginalization and racial ordeals. They both have a similar or almost equal vision of society and the way this one reflects and delivers social and racial messages through cinema.

Twenty-five years after John Stahl’s film adaptation of *Imitation of Life* (1934), the societal and cultural issues of race (passing, stereotypes, violence, segregation, racism) are still relevant during the time of Sirk’s remake (1959). The remake of the German director (Sirk) became one of Universal’s “most successful enterprise for years,” surpassing Stahl’s adaptation by more than ten times, mentioned Sirk in his interview with Halliday (Fischer 227). *Imitation of Life* was not what Sirk called, the melodrama that pleases, but the one that disturbed the mine. His aim was not to produce “crowd-pleasers,” as he referred to the typical Hollywood melodramas, but to create a film of social criticism.

The formulaic narrative of the mammy (Annie Johnson), and the tragic mulatto (Sarah Jane), were kept in such manner so that Sirk could reflect that even when the time has passed by, social (racial) change had not arrived. Baldwin once referred to a French proverb in *Notes of a*

Native Son (1955) that clearly defined the situation of American society and its racial matters over time: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (xx). Meaning, “the more it changes, the more it stays the same,” this rhetoric sums up the intention of Sirk’s *Imitation of Life*. This stagnant state of cultural ideology, racially speaking, spread throughout all countries of the American continent whose history included slavery. This fact is so evident that, even when slavery and segregation might have ended in countries like Mexico, years before it did in the United States, the fundamentals of a racialized society remained constant. As Baldwin stated, “morally, there has been no change at all and a moral change is the one real one” (*Notes* xx).

The Mexican *Imitation of Life: Angelitos Negros*, Mexico’s First Melodrama of Race

I purposely left *Angelitos negros* (1948) for the last section of this chapter, regardless of the chronology of the works which have occupied my scholarly reflection. From the North to South, United States to Mexico, the African diaspora of both nations intertwines with the production of *Angelitos negros*, a film that I call, the Mexican *Imitation of Life*. Film which was produced with the political context of the Good Neighbor policy that the United States established with Latin American countries during the 1940s as stated by the New York Times: “With the growing threat of war with Germany, the United States appeared eager to smooth any remaining tensions with South American governments in order to maintain hemispheric unity as a bulwark against foreign invasion. President Franklin D. Roosevelt thus attempted to reassert the "Good Neighbor Policy" in order to promote friendship among the two Americas” (Woll). With the close ties between the two countries, and as a result of the deficit in Hollywood film productions due to the United States intervention in World War II, the rise in cinematographic production in Mexico, who became the biggest producer of cinema at the time, influenced the

cultural representations of race in film on both sides of the border. It can be inferred then, that *Angelitos negros* was a result of this cinematic and cultural influence of the United States.

Although it has not been officially corroborated, it could be predicted that *Angelitos* is evidently based on the 1934 version of *Imitation of Life*.⁷¹ Similar to *Imitation of Life*, *Angelitos* tells the story of a mulatto woman and her black mother. Ana Luisa, an extremely blonde mulatto, marries a famous singer from a humble background. Soon after marriage, Ana Luisa becomes pregnant and delivers a black baby. Shockingly surprised by the skin color of her daughter, Ana Luisa struggles to understand why her daughter is black and becomes angry at life. The mulatto then opts for an attitude of rejection towards her little black girl who suffers her racism. Eventually, it is known that Ana Luisa is the daughter of her black maid. This realization comes on the deathbed of the old black woman, making Ana Luisa change her attitudes about race. It was, and still is, very atypical for Mexican cinema to produce film projects that deal with race as negritude in Mexico is a social taboo. The fact that a Mexican producer, one of the most important during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (1936-1959), Joselito Rodríguez, was somehow aware of the cinematic relevance of *Imitation of Life* and took a chance on a movie as *Angelitos negros*, defied the norm for the production of Mexican melodramas. The race topic alone would have called for failure and negative critiques from top heads in the industry, as well as the rejection from the Mexican audience. However, whether it was a hit due to Pedro Infante's popularity—he was the major Mexican superstar of the time—, or merely the storyline, the film broke records of audience, becoming one of the most important films of the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. For the first time in Mexican cinema, *Angelitos negros* exposed the topic of

⁷¹ I will often refer to *Angelitos negros* as *Angelitos*, to avoid repetition-

Mexican blackness and replicated the African American archetypes of the mulatto and the mammy, new racial images for Mexican culture.

The connection between these two films is artistically innovative for the analysis of twentieth and twenty-first century Mexican and American cultures. Being Afro-American and being Afro-Mexican implies very different cultural and social connotations. African Americans have had a documented history, their presence in the United States has been acknowledged, and they are, and have been—although with social limitations—officially recognized by their government. However, for Mexican culture, that has not been the case. African Mexicans did not—and still do not—count with a fully documented history, as Afro-Americans do. Their presence as Mexicans continues to miss the acknowledgement and lastly, their rights as an ethnic group are yet to be recognized in the Mexican constitution. As a result of the mixing of races caused by colonialism and the racial stratification that issued from it with the caste system, the ethnic presence of Afro-Mexicans became spectral and their mentioning or acknowledgment became a cultural taboo.

With the making of *Angelitos negros*, Mexicans crossed the U.S.-Mexico border to gain racial knowledge. Undeniably, the popularity of *Imitation of Life* was also a reflection of the social events of that period. In the United States, the 1930's symbolized the awakening of the New negro, and in Mexico, it was a period of nation rebuilding and a time of social change for marginalized groups, mainly constituted by indigenous people and Mexican mestizos. This social improvement of the country continued from the 1930's up to the late 1940's, at the time of *Angelitos* debut, when Mexico had its first civilian (who had not participated in the Mexican Revolution) president. Finally, during the late 1950's, early 1960's, the United States witnessed the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, while in Mexico students were fighting for a social

change, and African American athletes protested for African American rights with the “Black power” salute during the Olympics of 1968 in Mexico City.

In terms of color, the political, social, and racial ties between nations continued to surface in history, even in music. African American singers, Eartha Kitt, daughter of a plantation master and a slave, and Roberta Flack, both recorded renditions of the film’s popular song, “Angelitos negros,” a bolero made popular by its protagonist, Pedro Infante. Singing “Angelitos negros” both in English and Spanish, Roberta Flack in her album *First Take* (1969), and Eartha Kitt in her albums *Eartha Kitt* and *Sentimental Eartha*, 1953 and 1970, respectively, made a statement of support, during a time of social activism for people of color, to end racism and segregation of blacks. Kitt and Flack did the soulful and jazz versions of the song, reflecting the powerful emotions present in the fight for equality of the Civil Rights Movement. Eartha Kitt sang her English cover with a jazz sound, while the Spanish version remained close to the original, as a bolero in which she sang with an almost perfect Spanish and Caribbean-like accent. It is known that Kitt lived a few months in Mexico during her time working as a performer for the Dunham Dance Company’s show *Bal Negre*, a display of Afro-diasporic dance routines (Burns 317). During her time in this company, Kitt mentioned she begun knowing about the world during her time as a performer for the company, and in her autobiography *Alone with me* she lamented “her ignorance of global politics and her desire to know what’s going on in the world” (Ibid).⁷² It is evident, therefore, that Kitt’s choice of covering “Angelitos negros” was influenced by her newfound awareness of racial politics combined with her impressions of Mexico while stationed there with the dance company. Being aware of this song, and presumably

⁷² See Kitt, Eartha. *Alone with Me*.

of the film, shows through these African American singers that Mexico and the United States have always been united by culture, African heritage, and history.

Technicolor in Mexican cinema first appeared when the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema was at its zenith and Joselito Rodríguez (1907-1985) opted to bring *Angelitos negros* to the screen. Nationalist topics characterized the beginning of the Golden Age; films that represented the rural landscape, the mestizo identity, and the Mexican Revolution were the principal themes treated by the industry. However, during the 1940's, after the agrarian reform when Mexico began a social and economic development, the themes that appeared in Mexican cinema were directed towards a Mexican urban domestic world: the city, *cabareteras*, and family. In this sense, *Angelitos negros* appeared during a period when films related to family matters were popular; movies such as *Cuando los hijos se van* (1941), *Nosotros los pobres* (1947), y *Una familia de tantas* (1948) were among the films that evoked family values. Similar to the previous films, *Angelitos negros* was a film that echoed and promoted traditional family values. Although the film had an evident racial message, it went unnoticed and ignored by many. However, it was meaningful, as it became the first melodrama of race during an epoch of traditional cultural values where African heritage was not at all a part of the Mexican filmic imaginary.

The idea for the title of the film first emerged in the 1940's when Venezuelan poet and intellectual Andrés Eloy Blanco wrote "Píntame angelitos negros."⁷³ Blanco, an active fighter for the representation of Afro-Venezuelans, wrote this poem aiming to "establish greater representation for blacks in Venezuela's political system and to recognize Afro-Venezuelan contributions to national culture" (Delgadillo, "Black Angels" 284). With the poem, Andrés Eloy Blanco critiqued the constant marginalization of black Venezuelans in society, politics, and

⁷³ The exact date of the first publication of the poem is unknown.

culture. He implies the absence of Afro-Venezuelans in the poem through a religious analogy that traces the Eurocentric ideologies of Latin America, to a social institution as ancient as the Catholic Church. The poem begins with the cry of a black mother, la negra Juana, for the loss of her black child while she voices her hopes of God assigning him a place in heaven. Using vernacular language, the sobbing mother says:

Se me murió mi negrito;
Dios lo tendría dispuesto;
ya lo tendrá colocao
como angelito de Cielo.

But shortly after this hopeful wish, a second person appears in the poem, the Godfather of the late child, who then reminds her—and implies—that just as it is on earth, in Heaven there are no black angels: “Desengañese, comadre, / que no hay angelitos negros” ‘Don’t fool yourself, sister, there are no black angels’ (my trans.). As the poem progresses, the second speaker continues his speech asserting that even when artists are painting their beloved saints, they do not care to remember their people since when they paint Virgins, they always paint white angels, but forget the black ones. This statement is embodied in a stanza that pleads painters to also remember painting little black angels:

Pintor nacido en mi tierra,
con el pincel extranjero,
pintor que sigues el rumbo
de tantos pintores viejos,
aunque la Virgen sea blanca,
píntame angelitos negros. (Blanco)

After this painful plead, Juana's *compadre* (the child's Godfather) continues lamenting the lack of artists who would be dare to paint black faces. He later asks, "¿No hay un pintor que pintara angelitos de mi pueblo? / Yo quiero angelitos blancos / con angelitos morenos" 'Is not there a painter who could paint little angels from my town? / I want little white angels / with little dark angels' (my trans.). By the end of the poem, in the last stanza, Andrés Eloy Blanco—through the voice of this sad and disappointed man—finishes with a powerful rhetoric about race where he expresses his wishes for an artist to paint the heaven that reflects his land and the different color shades of its people, "que haga el cielo de mi tierra, / con los tonos de mi pueblo" (Blanco).

Shadowing the racial message of "Píntame angelitos negros," Mexican director Joselito Rodríguez creates a melodrama of race. On the one hand, he uses a "controversial" topic that would draw the attention of the audience, and on the other, he maintains the melodramatic line to which a Mexican audience is accustomed. The depiction of marginalized subjectivities on film, although popular in Mexican cinema, was only shedding light on indigenous *mestizos*. For this reason, aside from portraying blackness in a stereotypical and deceitful manner, *Angelitos negros* transgresses the norms of Mexican cinema of that period. In relation to this idea, racial representation on films, Hiram Perez states in "Alma Latina: The American Hemisphere's Racial Melodramas," that a film "elides more complex histories of production and reception [...] especially in regard to the different marginalized identities that form a key congregation amongst its mass audience" (Perez 1). Being a melodrama after all, Rodríguez's film sends a message of condescending attitudes towards the black race while addressing it in a public way, and in the Mexican context.

Breaking away from the utopian racial concept of the José Vasconcelos 's "cosmic race" (1925), *Angelitos* makes recognition of Mexican blackness and its links with the

Caribbean by choosing a markedly Cuban woman as the source of blackness. Within the use of the melodramatic imagination, the film captures the popular imaginary of Mexicans as cinema reaches audiences of different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds and levels. Both *Angelitos* and *Imitation* are melodramas about race that possess important resemblances and differences, attesting to that the geographical proximity between the United States and Mexico shares historical and cultural elements. One of the main resemblances between the two films is the plot: the troubling relationship between a black mother (mammy) and a mulatto daughter. The fact that the archetype of the mammy and the mulatto is represented in Mexican cinema was a progressive approach to conversations of race in Mexican society.

Yes, both films share these archetypes as a common trait. However, the depiction of such images is quite different from the one seen in *Imitation of Life*, which kept the archetypes true to what they embodied since their creation and accurate to the racial beliefs of white Americans. Since Mexico had the ideology of *mestizaje* as part of the formation of the country as a multicultural and multiethnic nation, the physical and cultural representation of the mulatto and the mammy was treated according to such notions. In Mexico, especially in the twentieth-century blacks were not part of the national *mestizaje*. For this reason, the character of the mammy in *Angelitos* is different from Delilah in *Imitation* (1934). Mercé, the black woman, is called nana Mercé, whose name in vernacular pronunciation and writing, refers to her Cuban origins. However, there is a similarity between Delilah and nana Mercé: they both physically and aesthetically mirror the archetype of the mammy in American history. They are both large black women, who wear a humble dress, bonnet around their heads, and an apron. This attire on one side reflected their role in the domestic duties of their patrons, and on the other side replicated the archetypical image of Aunt Jemima. In the case of the mulatto character, the physical

representation is almost a polar opposite from the one in *Imitation of Life*. Whereas in *Imitation of Life* the mulatto is played by a dark-haired, light-skinned actress, one being African American (Fredi Washington) in the 1934 adaptation and the other one a Mexican-American in the 1959 remake, the Mexican actress chosen for the mulatto role is extremely white. Ana Luisa is a fair skinned, exceedingly blonde woman. In other words, the mulatto of *Angelitos negros* is the epitome of a white woman, which knowing the racial history and dogmas of the country, depicts the pervasive praise of Mexicans for Eurocentrism.

The cinematography of each country adapts according to the history and cultural beliefs of its society. Evidence of this detail is that the representation and conducts towards the colored characters on *Imitation* and *Angelitos* are specifically aimed to the culture of each country. Blackness in *Imitation* is based on an American context where race relations with blacks are linked to Europe. Contrary to this, *Angelitos negros* associates blackness with the Caribbean countries. In fact, Rita Montaner, who plays the role of nana Mercé is a Cuban *mulata* who was light-skinned enough to not be able to pass for black. As a result of this, and to the foreign notion of the blackness of the Mexican people, Rita Montaner, Titina Romay—who plays the Belén— (Ana Luisa’s black daughter), and Chela Castro (Jose Luis’ dancer friend) are portrayed in black face.⁷⁴ The only legitimate Afro-mestizos in the film are a few Cuban mulatto actors play performer characters (singers, dancers, entertainers) in Jose Luis’ famous show.⁷⁵ However, this does not take away that, culturally speaking, the film represents “a

⁷⁴ Due to the cultural ideologies and relationship of the Mexican culture to blackness, the use of black face in Mexican cinema was never seen as racist. The use of black face, to the Mexican film industry, simply reflected the truth about the philosophies of *mestizaje* still fossilized back then: in Mexico there are no Negroes.

⁷⁵ Part of associating blackness with foreignness meant associating black people living in Mexico with Cuba as many Cuban citizens worked in the entertainment industry in Mexico as singers, musicians, and *rumberas*. Benny Moré, Pérez Padro’s Orchestra, and Ninón Sevilla were among the most popular Caribbean artists in Mexico during the 1940s.

cinematographic message about visibly black Mestizos broadcast by a far-reaching medium” (*Modern Nation*, Hernández Cuevas 69). *Angelitos negros*, in a possibly accidental manner, exposes the politics of race in Mexican society. Perhaps at the time rarely any member of Mexican citizenry was aware of the African-heritage, nonetheless, today *Angelitos* can be seen through a critical lens that analyzes the why’s and how’s of the Mexican perception of blackness.

As a melodramatic film, *Angelitos negros* becomes a film that could reach Mexican families since the apparent message was about family unity. Yet, the film contains the aspect of melodrama where, according to Peter Brooks, it “starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue” (Brooks 20). The anxieties that surface in the film relate to colorism and the presence of Otherness, which makes the topic of family values unstable. Negritude in *Angelitos negros* represents a state of discomfort as a result of the rupture of expected social norms and the exposure of interracial relationships.

In the film one can find a plethora of scenes that depict the racial anxieties of Mexican culture. Among those scenes, I have chosen a few that represent the passive-aggressive and, in some occasions, openly racist Mexican culture. The first scene that is very significant in terms of race and blackness is the presentation of the mammy, nana Mercé. We first see this black woman in traditional mammy attire: long dress, loose sleeves, and apron on top, and a kerchief around her head to hold in place her coarse hair. As we are presented with this image, we see her turn around and walk towards the stairs of a mansion, waiting at the bottom floor while her white daughter, Ana Luisa—Spanish-Mexican actress Emilia Guiú—, descends gracefully. This scene is the first representation of racial hierarchies and of the relationship that is expected between a white woman and a black woman: master-servant. At the same time, this is the first appearance

of the archetype of the mammy in a Mexican cultural context.

The second important scene of *Angelitos*, is also associated with the mammy. In this scene, Ana Luisa (Emilia Guiú) has married José Luis (Pedro Infante), and before the possibility of having children, the mammy (Ana Luisa's birth mother) feels trapped and finds herself in a state of guilt and anxiety. In order to liberate some of her remorse, Mercé decides to go to Church and have confession with a Catholic priest. During the revelation of Ana Luisa's ethnic background, Mercé justifies her former patron (master) and Father of Ana Luisa for having her lie about the relationship with her daughter:

Ana Luisa es hija mía, yo era criada en la casa del que fue su padre, Don Agustín de la Fuente. Era viudo, rico. Nació ella, blanca como él, rubia como un sol. Al verla tan bonita la comenzó a querer y decidió darle su nombre, su fortuna, a cambio de que yo renunciara a ella. ¿Qué madre en mi lugar no hubiera aceptado? Se trataba de la felicidad de mi hija. Él fue tan bueno, que me dejó seguir a su lado para cuidarla. Cuando él murió quedamos solas, para ella siempre he sido su nana. Ella no sabe nada, nunca debe de saber.

[Ana Luisa is my daughter, I was raised in the house of her father, Don Agustín de la Fuente. He was a widower, rich. She was born, white like him, blonde like the sun. When he saw her, so beautiful, he began to love her and decided to give her his last name, his fortune in exchange to give her up to him. What mother in my place would not have accepted? It was about my daughter's happiness. He was such a good man; he let me continue by his side to take care of her. When he died we were alone, but to her I have always been her nanny. She does not know anything, she should never know.] (00:28:45-00:29:50)

This particular scene is powerful. In Mercé's narration of her life, she recounts a story of gender and race discrimination. She tells the story of African women in the Americas who were raped by their masters and mothered mulatto children who at times were taken away from them. At the same time, she also justifies the history of colonialism by associating positive traits to a man that in reality abused her. In other words, nana Mercé vindicated the system by normalizing and positively justifying the atrocities committed towards her, a woman of color. Nana Mercé's discourse is then "part of ethnic integration or whitening discourse" spread throughout the history of centuries of colonialism (*Modern Nationan*, Haernández Cuevas 69). In *Angelitos negros*, through the character of the black mother, we become witnesses of the remnants of a Eurocentric-oriented outlook in Mexican film and culture.

The very last important scene of Joselito Rodríguez's film is one of violence. During the final moments of the film, while Ana Luisa is attempting to leave the house and abandon her black daughter, nana Mercé tries to avoid this from happening. In consequence, both women begin arguing at the top of the stairs, to the point where it becomes physical and during the final attempt of Ana Luisa to get Mercé out of her way, she yells "¡quítame las manos de encima, maldita negra!" "Take your hands off of me, you damn nigger!," and slaps her across the face, making her fall down the stairs, getting her seriously hurt. (1:32:33). Similar to the scene in *Imitation of Life* (1959) where Sarah Jane receives a blow on the face and gets beaten up, this scene between nana Mercé echoes Douglas Sirk's scene.

As James Baldwin analyzed in "The Devil Finds Work," the role of the mammy is one that is necessary for racial films. This character represents the loyal nigger maid who, no matter what, is willing to sacrifice and life in exchange for the well-being of the white family she works for. "How many times have we seen her! She is Dilsey, she is Mammy, in *Gone with the Wind*,

and in *Imitation of Life*, and *The Member of the Wedding*—mother of sorrows, whore and saint, reaching a kind of apotheosis in *Requiem for a Nun*. (And yet, black men have mothers and sisters and daughters who are not like that at all!)” (533). However, although this character is essential for films on race, in like manner is also essential its disappearance: “The ritual of melodrama involves confrontation of clearly identified antagonists and the expulsion of one of them” (Brooks 17). Perhaps the mammy is not the embodiment of the “antagonist,” or the “enemy,” but no longer having her presence as the Other, allows for things to fall back into place, culturally speaking; either the other characters will forget about the racial dilemma, or the tragic mulatto will accept her role and her place as what she is, a black woman.

In conclusion, as the result of the influence of *Imitation of Life*, and the message behind social poetry with “Píntame angelitos negros,” this Mexican black and white classic becomes the bridge—between both sides of the border—that carries the message of a common racial history where African heritage has been tried to be buried by its society. Reflecting on the black mammy, the *nana*, and the Mexican tragic mulatto, *Angelitos negros* is a groundbreaking cinematic work. It has now become a film of social and racial consciousness for Mexicans in which its significance falls on constructing racial images forgotten by the *mestizaje* identity discourse. Slavery and African heritage are part of Mexican history, and it is important that a film such as *Angelitos negros*, even with its flaws in the representation of blackness, bring this image to Mexican collectivity so that maybe, with time (as it happened with this film), they can remember that like slavery, as a heritage and tradition “can, and should be collected, written down and written about” (Eyeran 90).

CONCLUSIONS

Let us make a slave. What do we need? First of all, we need a black nigger man, a pregnant nigger woman and her baby nigger boy. Second, we will use the same basic principle that we use in breaking a horse, combined with some more sustaining factors. What we do with horse is that we break them from one form of life to another; that is, we reduce them from their natural state in nature. Whereas nature provides them with the natural capacity to take care of their offspring, we break that natural string of independence from them and thereby create a dependency status, so that we may be able to get from them, useful production for our business and pleasure.

— Willie Lynch, *The Willie Lynch Letter And the Making of a Slave*

...In the case of the American Negro, born in that glittering republic...and in the moment you are born, since you don't know any better, every stick and stone and every face is white, and since you have not yet seen a mirror, you suppose that you are, too....It comes as a great shock to discover the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and your identity has not in its whole system of reality evolved any place for you.

— James Baldwin, "Cambridge University Debate," 1965.⁷⁶

I chose using as an epigraph a fragment of *The Willie Lynch Letter and the Making of a Slave* because I wanted to begin my concluding thoughts with a reminder of the roots of the economic system of slavery. I wanted to give the reader a flashback of the oppressive system Africans lived under upon their forced arrival to the Americas. My epigraph of James Baldwin, on the other hand, reflects the outcome of slavery many generations later: the African Negro and his/her descendants have yet to find their place in society. These correlating thoughts allow me to demonstrate the origin of the premise of this work, that Afro-descendants' outlook on life and their place in society and culture today, have been defined by the burdens of slavery of their ancestors, which ultimately reflects the depiction of the characters analyzed in the works of literature, film and music I use for the purpose of this project.

⁷⁶ See Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro* (2017), "Heroes."

Although my research focuses on Afro-Mexicans, as well as their link to African American history, the transnational aspect of the works I study allow me to delve into African history for it is the origin of Mexico's *Tercera Raíz*. The premise of my dissertation, therefore, is how the African lineage of Mexican identity is linked to African American history, and how, the works I have chosen, show traits of the history of slavery and colonialism in the representation of the stories they portray. I specifically elected such artistic works as they become precise examples of the transnational links of negritude among Mexico, Africa and the U.S. Focusing on north and south of the Mexico-U.S. border, I began analyzing how, through a female mulatto character of the Mexican Revolution, one of the main problems of the emancipation of slaves was echoed: the skepticism of the possibility of a black person achieving societal respectability.

Parting from this thought, I then continued to analyze a work that showed the painful aspect of post-slavery emotional struggles in subsequent generations of African descendants. Such traumas, that extended from north to south (in sites of struggle) of the border, from African slaves to African Americans and African-Mexicans, continued to manifest throughout time and reflected, distinctively, the manner in which American culture and Mexican culture handled their share of African history. I then moved to another period of social struggle for blacks in American history. I chose an American classic novel turned film, with three adaptations, two American and one Mexican that reached audiences during key moments of black social activism in the United States. In these works, I proved how racial tensions that white society tried to camouflage through film, as media that reached masses, reinforced the attitudes of racism present in a white supremacist society (U.S.) and in a Eurocentric-oriented culture (Mexico).

In Chapter One, “The Mexican Revolution and The Black Women Warriors in *La negra Angustias* (1944, 1949),” I provided an overview of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 and the participation of Afro-Mexican women in this social conflict. We can consider the Mexican Revolution, the first in the twentieth-century, as the second moment of liberation after the wars of independence against Spain, 1810-1821. Indeed, although slavery and the caste system were abolished in independent Mexico, these problems persisted and contributed to the Revolution. I analyzed the topic of Revolution and freedom comparatively with the Mexican novel and its film adaptations in which race, often times overlooked in the studies of these novels and films, places a central element in the development of the plot. Focusing on twentieth-century Mexican literature, this first chapter provided an in-depth study of the presence and importance of the Afro-Mexican culture in sites of struggle. From *La negra Angustias* (1944) by Francisco Rojas González to Landeta’s film adaptation of this work (1949), my dissertation explored the presence and importance of the *afromexicana* as she played a key role in the struggle for human rights for Mexican nationals. By analyzing the film adaptations of this novel, Chapter One brought to light the manner in which the Afro-Mexican woman warrior was being presented for the first time in film, and how her cinematographic portrayal contrasted her literary depiction.

The *mulata* as a central character in *La negra Angustias* was the object of analysis of the chapter. The representation of the *soldadera* in the Mexican Revolution had never been presented in Mexican literature or film as a *mulata*. The *soldaderas* of Mexican popular culture had always been described as indigenous and mestizo peasants who, as the infamous “Adelita,” were servile, noble, kind-hearted women who accompanied the soldiers to war.⁷⁷ With Francisco Rojas

⁷⁷ During the Mexican revolution soldiers had a “*corrido*” named “Adelita” which described a sweet and docile *soldadera* that eventually became the archetype of the women of the revolution.

González, the romanticized *soldadera* changed; not only was she a black woman, but a strong warrior woman who was not afraid to fight in war and who voiced her opinions about living in a patriarchal society: “el día que las mujeres tengamos la misma facilidad que los calzonudos, pos entonces habrá en el mundo más gentes que piensen, y no es lo mismo que piense uno a que piensen dos” ‘The day that we as women have the same opportunities as men, then there will be more people in the world that think, and it is not the same having one person thinking, than having two’, Angustias said (my trans.; 155)⁷⁸

La negra Angustias saw her role as *coronela* of a Zapatista troop in the Mexican Revolution, as an internal call to pursue equality between men and women. Rojas González’s *mulata* colonel character argued that it was better for the world to have two thinking human beings making decisions together than just having a single person dictating what needed to be done. Not only did Rojas González use an Afro-Mexican woman as a revolutionary leader, a warrior, but also turned this character into a literate woman who exercised her free agency. Contrary to the figure of the Adelita, Angustias Farrera juxtaposed the archetype of the compliant *soldadera* of the Mexican Revolution. As Elizabeth Salas stated in “Adelita Defeats Juana Gallo,” that when the revolution became a distant memory, “the image of the *soldaderas* became more romanticized and somewhat sedate” (87-88).⁷⁹

Similar to Francisco Rojas González, Laura Esquivel portrays a warrior woman of the Revolution. In Chapter Two, I presented an analysis of the *Como agua para chocolate* trilogy—*Como agua para chocolate* (1989), *El diario de Tita* (2016), and *Mi negro pasado* (2017)—

⁷⁸ See Rojas González, Francisco. *La negra Angustias*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1948.

⁷⁹ See Salas, Elizabeth. *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History*. University of Texas Press, 1990.

novels whose main storyline develops against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution, the mulatto character, Gertrudis de la Garza, an upper-class woman turned *coronela*, comes from a wealthy family from border state Coahuila. However, this affluent and free-spirited woman who escapes with a soldier during the political conflict is the product of an interracial relationship between his white Mexican mother and a black mulatto from African American origins. *Como agua para chocolate* and the film adaption in 1992 were immediate successes, coming at the beginning of Mexico's world-class cinema of the 1990s; the film adaptation by Director Alfonso Arau was an international box office hit. The novel has been studied mainly for the stylistic exploration of magical realism, representations of gender identity, and the Revolution's goal of democracy and liberty. However, there has been little to none attention paid to the unnoted, yet important topic of Afro-*mestizaje*. Although the presence of Afro-Mexican ancestry is displayed in minor occasions throughout the novel and film, it speaks loudly in the few passages where it is presented. Taking place during the Mexican Revolution, in *Como agua para chocolate*, I analyzed the presence of the black diaspora not only in the historical context but in the storyline as well by studying the portrayal of an Afro-Mexican woman, a *mulata*, who passes for white (unknowingly) as the result of her mother's forbidden relationship with a black man. In *El diario de Tita*, the political and racial issues that forbade the romantic relationship between José Treviño and Mamá Elena, Gertrudis' parents, came afloat. This gave room for an in-depth analysis of the transnational connections of Mexican Afro-*mestizaje*, more in specific of its connections to African American history through the Seminole and Civil wars. The book-object aspect of the second book of the trilogy allowed me to examine the book and its content as a *testimonio* of an ethnic group (Afro-Mexicans) whose collective memory has been buried in official history. At the same time, I demonstrated how this "unofficial" *testimonio* provided

another perspective to the outcome of the Mexican Revolution by voicing through Gertrudis the social disappointment that this civil war represented for many.

As Esquivel revealed, to Gertrudis the Revolution did not really happen, it did not fulfill the promises made to the people, and in order to continue the search for justice and social and gender equality she then decided to cross the border and join the fight of her American comrades. However, as a conscious mulatto woman, and after fighting the Mexican Revolution alongside many *Afro-mestizas soldaderas*, Gertrudis joins the women's suffrage movement with African Americans after realizing the original faction only supported women's vote for white women. In her decision to fight for women's right to vote with one of the most important African American women activists of the movement, Ida B. Wells, founder of the Alpha Suffrage Club—the first African American women's suffrage association—I exposed *El diario de Tita's* role as testament of the transnational connections involved in the process and outcome of the Mexican Revolution. Finally, with *Mi negro pasado*, the book that completed Esquivel's political trilogy, I went back to the roots of *Afro-mestizaje*—the history of African slavery—and analyzed how history shaped the formation of newer generations of Afro-descendants. Although the historical background of this book is set in present-day Mexico, I explored the constant historical references of slavery that Esquivel used. I proposed that such references were placed to expose the socio-emotional upsets Afro-Mexican communities have to face daily as they are experiencing the rebirth of their African consciousness. In sum, the purpose of Chapter Two was not only to show a different aspect of the *soldadera* in the Mexican Revolution through a white *mulata* in northern Mexico, but to display the connections of African American culture and Afro-Mexican culture, and ultimately provide an image of everything that embodies the African lineage, culturally, socially, and politically speaking, as well as an overview of the current

renaissance of Mexico's third root of *mestizaje* through a fictional Mexican family or modern day Mexico.

The most noteworthy aspect of this second chapter was being able to surmise that the African American characters in the trilogy were part of the Black Seminoles in the U.S. or the Mascogos in Mexico; these were warriors, runaway slaves or free men, who escaped captivity and lynchings, some by way of the Underground Railroad through Texas (Porter 33)⁸⁰. Seminoles had originally fled to freedom in Spanish Florida from South Carolina perhaps the reason for Seminoles in Mexico. The Black Seminoles also suffered deportation, removed from Florida to Oklahoma by the United States with the annexation of Florida from Spain in 1819. The descendants of the Mascogos are now settled in El Nacimiento, Coahuila. The legendary leader of the 1849 Mascogos in Mexico is John Horse (Juan Caballo) arriving one year after the creation of the U.S.-Mexico border with the annexation of Mexican territory by the U.S. in 1848 (36).⁸¹ We must understand that Spanish Florida was part of New Spain whose capital was Mexico City and that most of the western United States was part of Mexico until 1835 and 1848. Two pieces of literary work as *La negra Angustias* and *Como agua para chocolate* saga, are still relevant to the twenty-first century, but most importantly, they are both pioneers of "black" Mexican literature in popular culture. Traditional nationalist indigenous *mestizaje* is now seen as Afro-Mexican *mestizaje* in a bi-national and transborder historical frame of reference.

The work of the writers and film directors above mentioned, simply show a historical truth that the Mexican government has tried to conceal, the African root of Mexican ancestry. It

⁸⁰ See Porter, Kenneth W., et al. *The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-Seeking People*. University of Florida Press, 2013.

⁸¹ Idem.

is now recognized that Afro-Mexican ancestry forms part of the tripartite heritage of Mexico that flourished during the establishment of the colonial period (New Spain/*Nueva España*). However, the presence of this element--that is a key element to the formation of the multicultural México--has been persistently relegated to marginalized and undervalued. Being México a patriarchal nation, the focus of previous scholarly studies on Afro-*mestizaje* have been conducted using a male perspective and approaching male characters, reinforcing social hierarchical gendered subject and leaving behind the key role that women have played in Mexican society. My research, therefore, explored the female representation of Afro-Mexican female characters in *La negra Angustias* (1944) and *Como agua para chocolate* (1989), as well as the racial connections of African Americans in the formation of Afro Mexicanness in the northern borderlands of Mexican territory with *El diario de Tita* and *Mi negro pasado*. The works of this chapter, one authored by Mexican writer Francisco Rojas González with a screen adaptation (*La negra Angustias*, 1950) by Mexican female director Matilde Landeta, and the latter, written by Laura Esquivel with a film adaptation by director Alfonso Arau. Furthermore, I explored the importance of main Afro-Mexican characters in Mexican literature following with a feminist critical view in the portrayal of these women warrior characters on film.

It is known that the current body of scholarship on Afro-Mexicans is somewhat limited. Therefore, in this chapter, I made use of racial identity topics in literature and film, using the feminists' views of a female director's adaptation of Francisco Rojas González's work. Adding the female vision of Matilde Landeta and Laura Esquivel in the portrayal of a minority group, specifically a black *mulata* from southern México and a white *mulata* from northern Mexico, and in the deconstruction of female representations, this work served as an aid system in providing a broader and groundbreaking perspective on Afro-Mexican women and the transnationality of

Afro-mestizaje. I analyzed the stereotypes of Afro-Mexican female characters in Esquivel's trilogy and film adaptation, as well as in Rojas González's novels, in which I also questioned the author's acceptance of these cultural identities in contrast with the female vision that Landeta offers in the films. I conducted a critical analysis of *La negra Angustias* and *Como agua para chocolate* (novels) with a theoretical, historical and social frame. Women warriors of the Mexican Revolution were never represented as black subjectivities in Mexican cultural scene. For this reason, this chapter aimed to bare the importance of black Mexican females in their role/depiction in sites of struggle of Mexican history.

For the fulfillment of this chapter, I conducted research at Mexico City's Cineteca Nacional during my Summer Research Mentorship in 2014 with Professor Héctor Calderón and in summer 2016 traveled to Veracruz and Oaxaca supported by a Harry and Yvonne Lenart Graduate Travel Fellowship. During that 2014 trip to Mexico City, I had the good fortune of interviewing filmmaker Marcela Fernández Violante, Matilde Landeta's close friend. In fall 2016, I traveled to Oaxaca and Guerrero to witness the Encuentro de Pueblos Negros where I met Father Glyn Jemmot, the founder of the Mexico Negro movement. I in March, 2018, I interviewed novelist Laura Esquivel and inquired about the border setting of her novel and the presence of a U.S. black Seminole as crucial elements for her racialized rendering of the Mexican Revolution.

In Chapter Three, the final chapter of this dissertation, I examined how white supremacy and racial prejudice have been an ever-present issue not only in Latin American countries such as Mexico, but in the United States as well. African ancestry, without hesitation, has come to represent in the history of the Americas, a crucial predicament when speaking of racism in both countries. *Afro-mestizaje*, as part of the tripartite heritage of Mexicans, as mentioned in previous

chapters, has always been secreted and pushed aside as part of the Mexican multicultural nation. On the other hand, the African heritage in the United States, although it has not been hidden, it has, however, been marginalized and neglected as part of the national identity. I focused this chapter on the relationship between these two nations and their African heritage through melodramatic films of race while touching upon musical influences as well. Using the writings of African American intellectual, James Baldwin (1924-1987), I explored the way in which Mexican film *Angelitos negros* (1948) portrays blackness, and how American film *Imitation of Life* (1959) makes use of a *mestiza*/Mexican actress to play racially mixed character, as well as the manner in which the colored characters seemed to promote stereotypical representations of blackness, in particular the character of the mammy. However, I offered a counter argument to this in the 1959 remake of *Imitation of Life*, where its producer, Douglas Sirk offered a new melodramatic representation and focused on the societal issues toward blacks within a white supremacist society. The elements that tied both of these films, *Angelitos negros* and *Imitation of Life*, blackness and the misrepresentation of such, reflected Baldwin's views that "the country which is your birth place and to which you owe your life and your identity has not in its whole system of reality evolved a place for you" (23).⁸² Whether it was in *Angelitos negros*, or in *Imitation of Life*, neither of the producers attempted to expose a factual portrayal of blackness; their diversity rationale lacked reliability.⁸³ However, the popularity of both films left an impression on each of the two nations, triggering the remake of Fannie Hurst's novel in film in the Spanish language, and the cover in Spanish of song "Píntame angelitos negros" (originally

⁸² See Baldwin, James, and Raoul Peck. *I Am Not Your Negro: A Major Motion Picture Directed by Raoul Peck*. Vintage, 2017.

⁸³ I use *Angelitos* as a short name for *Angelitos negros*.

sung by legendary star, Pedro Infante) by African American singers Eartha Kitt in 1953 and Roberta Flack in 1969. Kitt later recorded an English language cover, “Paint me black angels,” in 1970.

Written and directed by Joselito Rodríguez, *Angelitos negros* was inspired by the poem “Píntame angelitos negros” written by Afro-Venezuelan poet Andrés Eloy Blanco, who wanted to portray the marginality to which Afro-Venezuelans were subjected. Starring Mexican actor-singer Pedro Infante, perhaps the most popular actor of the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, *Angelitos negros* exposed the existing prejudices towards “people of color” through the actions of the main characters: the *mestizo* husband who preached equality, the blonde Afro-*mestiza* wife unaware of her heritage, and the *mulata* daughter who is rejected by her mother. Presumably inspired by Fannie Hurst’s 1933 American novel *Imitation of life*, and the film adaptation by John Stahl in 1934--named one of the most important films on race--, *Angelitos negros* depicted the same racial issues as *Imitation*: passing and the trope of the tragic mulatto. Thus, I analyze how *Angelitos* becomes the bridge between both sides of the border to depict racial discrimination in a country where African heritage has been buried by its society. I also expose how the international impact of *Angelitos negros* led African American singers Eartha Kitt (1927-2008) and Roberta Flack (1937) to cover the song in English and Spanish. Influenced by their experience during the Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement, both American singers expressed their sentiments towards the African community through their music. In this chapter, I express how Eartha Kitt, for example, related to “Angelitos” as she recounted in her autobiographical book, being a victim of racism because of her skin. For this reason, and during many years, Eartha Kitt considered Eartha Mae (her real name/self) to be ugly, unwanted,

rejected, and grew up with a “tremendous conflict to who [she] was” (5).⁸⁴ This attitude of her torturous racial identity then, became palpable in her choice of covering a Spanish song such as “Angelitos negros,” and in her decision to include it in both languages in one of her albums.

Chapter Three then, portrayed the connection between México’s African heritage and the United States’ African-American pride, which has lacked attention in the current body of scholarship. Exploring films and music by a few key important artists, I evaluated the influence each country has had towards the other to express their discontent to racial prejudices and, at the same time, praise their African pride. Using Mexican and American works of “passing,” I demonstrated the manner in which crossing borders through art made it possible to link the topic of Afro-ancestry between the United States and México. Continuing with this thought of the transnationality of African heritage, I explored the critical thinking process of African American writer and intellectual James Baldwin, known to have professed his criticism of racial issues in the United States, to make a critical argument of the representation of race in the films studied in this work. While the topics of these chapters are literature and film, I often times focused on the latter to place *Angelitos negros*, and subsequently, *Imitation of life*, under the lens of Baldwin’s racial criticism on film, as marked in his book-length essay “The Devil Finds Work” (1976). I expose how, since age seven, he began understanding the hatred, violence and brutality depicted against black people in American films. Just as it is shown in *Angelitos negros* with the tragic mulatto and her black young daughter, the “nuisance” that comes with blackness has been all along expressed in American films without changing the racial views of white Americans at the time. Baldwin, who knew the hurtful scenes often portrayed in the big screen were much too

⁸⁴ See Kitt, Eartha. *Alone with Me: A New Autobiography*. H. Regnery Co, 1976.

familiar to his everyday life, did not have to question the reason for the treatment of blacks in movies, nor the outcome of their punishments: “They were those people and that torment was a torment that I recognized, those were real daggers, it was real blood, and those crimes resounded and compounded, as real crimes do: I did not have to ask, *what happens to them now?*” (504).⁸⁵ The violence of the rejection of a black-skinned child in *Angelitos negros* was cruelly and violently represented in the 1959 *Imitation of Life* when blond actor Troy Donahue beat his girlfriend Mexican American actress Susan Kohner (the tragic mulatto character) while shouting “nigger.” Through a personal interview to Kohner in Los Angeles, I explore the back story of the beating scene where she actually recalled receiving a blow in the face which, coming at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement (the Little Rock Nine of 1957, for example), parallels the actual racial struggles to come.⁸⁶

An analysis of key literature, music, and film works, under the lens of James Baldwin, among other intellectuals, comprised this chapter. The role of an American film of passing such as *Imitation of Life*, that created a resonance across the border and inspired a film such as *Angelitos negros*, is something that had been overlooked in literary scholarship. For this reason, just as it comes naturally to analyze an American film of passing under the theoretical frame of one of the greatest African-American intellectuals, James Baldwin, in the same manner it was factual to me to analyze a movie like *Angelitos negros* as they both share the same racial topics regardless of the country of origin of the film. I exposed how the views on race and blackness of an African American intellectual as Baldwin also made sense beyond borders. Although Baldwin

⁸⁵ Idem.

⁸⁶ Kohner, Susan. Personal Interview. 26 Jan. 2016. In this interview were also present Prof. Héctor Calderón and Susan Kohner’s son, Hollywood director Chris Weitz.

wrote his essay based on his criticism of race in American films, his thoughts are also relevant in Mexican films that expose issues on race relations and blackness. Films, as it is known, are a form of universal language in which the message can always be perceived regardless of the country in which the film is produced, or the language in which it is made; in terms of blackness and race, filmmakers are commonly very conscious of the message they want to expose and transmit to the general public. As Baldwin stated in “The Devil Finds Work”: “It is said that the camera cannot lie, but rarely do we allow it to do anything else, since the camera sees what you point it at: the camera sees what you want it to see” (504). A film, just as blackness, is not specific to one country and, more often than not, exposes universal, yet sensitive topics for the audience. In sum, for the purpose of Chapter Three, the intellectual criticism of a black American, James Baldwin, served as the guiding principle in which all subjects on race in films are analyzed. Baldwin, as one of the greatest American intellectuals of all times, provided me with a broader and critical view on the blackness portrayal in Mexican cinematography.

From the Mexican Revolution and the resulting new national constitution (1910-1917) to the Harlem Renaissance (1920-1930), and the African-American Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s), I exposed the influence of black intellectuals across borders in the formation and understanding of *México Negro*. African-American intellectual Langston Hughes, Father Glyn Jemmott (from Trinidad and Tobago), Mexican rapper Youalli G. (Negro José), and rap music band Third Root now provide an intellectual approach to blackness that brings the Mexican citizenry back to the (missing) source and formation of the mestizo identity: the *Tercera Raíz*, Third Root.

Continuing with the idea of a multicultural Mexico, there is still work to be done in terms of *Afro-mestizaje* in Mexico. The future of my research relies upon the new forms of

representation of blackness and in the renaissance of a Mexican black consciousness that began in the twentieth-century. I plan to continue exploring this topic, this new phase of the collective memory of *México Negro* through the role of Father Glyn Jemmott, a Catholic priest from Trinidad and Tobago sent as a missionary to parish over a dozen towns in the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca in 1984 (Mitchell)⁸⁷. Father Glyn Jemmot, upon his arrival to the Costa Chica, to towns such as Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, noticed the evident presence of black Mexicans in all of the towns of the region. Jemmott is considered the father of black racial consciousness in Mexico, most importantly in the Costa Chica region. Coming from Trinidad and Tobago, Father Jemmot began educating the population of the towns about their African heritage and their rights, leading to their mobilization as black political subjects. The acceptance of their *negritud* quickly took power and, with this significant change in the perception of their mestizo identity, Father Jemmott founded the *México Negro Asociación Civil* movement in 1997, a Mexican non-profit association that fights for the constitutional ethnic recognition of Afromexicans.⁸⁸

Following up with the idea of black consciousness and black Mexicans as political subjects, I will dive into the analysis of intellectual music of the black struggle by Mexican rapper Youalli G. (Negro José) and Texas-based Afro-Chicano hip-hop group, Third Root. Native of a black town of the Costa Chica of Guerrero, Negro José's music is based on the

⁸⁷ Mitchell, John L. "Mexico's Black History is Often Ignored." *Los Angeles Times*, 13 Apr. 2008, articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/13/local/me-afromexside13.

⁸⁸ For this chapter, I have already conducted research in the Port of Veracruz and the town of Yanga (Veracruz), known as the first free town of the Americas. I also conducted research in the city of Oaxaca and the Costa Chica region of Guerrero/Oaxaca where I visited the city of Pinotepa Nacional (Oaxaca), and two black communities of Guerrero: Cuajinicuilapa and Vista Hermosa. In the last two villages I attended the XVII Encuentro de Pueblos Negros and had the opportunity to meet Father Glyn Jemmott and Sergio Peñaloza, current president of Mexico Negro A.C. In summer 2016 I was awarded the Harry and Yvonne Lenart Fellowship, which made this research possible.

exposure of the racial consciousness of black Mexicans. Topics such as identity, Mexico's multiracial and multicultural *mestizaje*, the third root, and African pride crowd his rap lyrics in songs such as "Negro guerrero" (2013).⁸⁹ After listening to a reggae song in 1987 and finding the need to approach specific cultural subjects and give voice to the people, José decided to pursue a career in music.⁹⁰ The music of Youalli G. is defined as hip-hop, but in many of his raps the presence of a reggae influence is palpable. As Paul Gilroy expresses in *The Black Atlantic*, the hip-hop culture "grew out of the cross-fertilisation of African-American vernacular cultures with their Caribbean equivalents" (103). For Negro José, his rap seems to express his racial identity and pride in his Afro-Mexicans, proving that "black music is so often the symbol of racial authenticity" (Gilroy 34).

The cultural differences that are existent in present-society across borders are represented in U.S. rap music as well. These cultural differences are the one that united the members of the transcultural band Third Root. Based in San Antonio, Texas, the members of this band come from similar yet different cultural backgrounds. Formed by Mexicans of African descent and African-American, Third Root is molded around educated rappers, among them is Marcos Cervantes, a musicology teacher at the University of Texas, San Antonio.⁹¹ The purpose of the band is to expose diverse racial and social issues that affect minorities across the borders (in specific Hispanics, *Afrolatinos*, and African-Americans) as depicted in their comments of their most recent album, "Libertad":

⁸⁹ García, José Youalli. "Negro guerrero." *Youalli G*. Independent, 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6D7xBfAzd0.

⁹⁰ See Soriano Guerrero, Javier. "Mi música no es de protesta, es más de propuesta: Youalli G." *La Jornada Guerrero*, 3 Jan. 2017, www.lajornadaguerrero.com.mx/2017/01/03/index.php?section=sociedad&article=012n1soc.

⁹¹ See Third Root. Comment on "Band Members". *Third Root*, 11 Oct. 2016, thirdroot.bandcamp.com.

The album, *Libertad*, reflects today's current mobilization among Black and Brown communities in the face of debilitating cycles of police brutality, flawed educational systems, privately owned prisons and detainment centers, corporately owned politicians, and racist judicial systems. In this climate, Third Root, a group born out of Black and Brown cultural dialogue, offers *Libertad* as a talking piece surrounding such issues as anti-Black, anti-Mexican, anti-immigrant, anti-poor and anti working-class sentiment. Through Easy Lee and MexStep's back and forth Black Chicano intellectual flow, DJCG's dynamic turntablism, and Adrian Quesada's AfroLatino psychedelic funk-infused beats, the album delivers a mix of social justice and jam session with each song designed to raise questions, incite discussion, and promote healing, growth, and liberation.⁹²

The educated rap performed by Third Root and Negro José, also known as Yo M.C. Youalli G., raise the same questions about racial identity, otherness, segregation, racism, white supremacy and blackness. Whether through the song "Negro guerrero" by Youalli G. where he praises the "mezcla de todas las castas" 'mixture of all castes' and a "*mestizaje multicultural*," or the song "Yanga's Theme" by Third Root, where they question the sense of racial equality and unity by asking "If Yanga had a song, who would sing along?" The hip-hop performed by these educated rappers, marks a change in the race-relations and cultural influence between México and the United States. Although hip-hop music is known to have emerged from the streets in the United States, its origins are in Africa, as stated by Cheryl L. Keys in *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (2002), this music with its Caribbean influences, is viewed "through a historical

⁹² Third Root. Comment on "Libertad Album". *Third Root*, 11 Oct. 2016, thirdroot.bandcamp.com.

lens by which (West) Africa is primarily perceived as the place of the origin of the rap music tradition” (17).⁹³ However, the historical components of hip-hop/rap music also include other genres that spoke of the negro hardships in the United States: the Negro spirituals, originated during the slavery period in the nineteenth-century, and the Blues, also emerged during nineteenth-century, but made popular in the twentieth-century during the Harlem Renaissance. The stories and feelings of hardships and weariness expressed in the blues and the spirituals are the same foundation in which rap/hip-hop music moves across borders; the transnational impact of rap music crosses borders due to the commonality of struggles amongst black communities.

The black intellectuals mentioned in this essay, Father Glyn Jemmott, Negro José, and the members of Third Root, are examples of how cultural issues that share the same racial background are not limited to a specific country. In the case of Mexico, a country that lacks a black intellectual foundational group, the artists and intellectuals from the neighboring nation act as influences to analyze and find answers of a late black consciousness. In sum, for the continuity of this dissertation, and going back to the Mexican racial awakening and the rise of a black consciousness, I will study the cultural tasks of these black intellectuals, in terms of the resistance struggle. In a way, their knowledge—whether is through music or speech—becomes the apparatus for the Mexican nation to obliterate its color-blindness, bring to surface its concealed blackness, and take action in terms of racial and identity politics as their role of what I call “intellectuals of the vernacular”.

In conclusion, this dissertation was a tool to reflect on black sites of struggles across the U.S-Mexico border. These instances of struggle that dealt with gendered, cultural, and racial

⁹³ Keyes, Cheryl L. *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*. University of Illinois Press, 2002.

differences were studied through the analysis of Mexican literature, film, and music with American and African-American cultural influences. I did not intend to solve the problem of the Afro-Mexican identity and the lack of their presence in the official discourse for so many years but bring it to surface. With this said, I explored and analyzed the glorification of the *mestizo* identity and Mexico's stagnant position in regards to this racial ideology. By making a historical tour through the cultural *oeuvres* and key individuals studied in each chapter, I exposed how the white-black binary is ever-present in the cultural affairs of Mexico and the United States. At the same time, I attempted to depict how racial literary products still undermine the presence and importance of the Afro-Mexican. The subjecthood of the Afro-Mexican characters in literature and film always seemed to become secondary in the plot of such works. Ironically, the public appeared continuing to buy into the narrative of racial democracy, which, undeniably, had ruled and still rules Mexican society. However, in recent years, since the late twentieth-century, the "nation-less" populations of Afro-Mexicans have politically awakened, and with the aid of cultural forms such as literature, music, or film, have been able to start constructing their identity politics.

Although for over 400 years blackness has been marginalized on both sides of the border, the liminality of the black subjectivities has begun changing. While pigmentocracies are still important in Mexico, the presence of blackness in the tripartite heritage of Mexicans has been brought to the foreground. Just as in the United States the Black Lives Matter movement has made an impact in American society, the *México Negro* movement has become the voice of collectivity for black communities and, along with the black intellectuals such as Jemcott, Negro José, and other members of *México Negro*, it has opened the doors for the construction of a social narrative that aids in the recognition of black communities and the retrieval of their lost

place in the official racial discourse of the country. With this said, film, music, and literature, as the forms studied in this project, are important elements in the goal of strengthening the collective memory of black Mexicans (alias Mexico's nobodies) and promoting pride in African ancestry.⁹⁴ Ultimately, the sites of struggle involving blackness in Mexico are reflected in diverse works of art in which the portrayal of the black racial struggle is aimed to bring racial awareness to an already color-blind society. Though it might take years to achieve a true racial democracy in Mexico, the resistance struggle of black Mexicans is stronger than ever and is in the path of their recognition as an ethnic group and as official Mexican citizens-

Ethnography, anthropology, history, literature, and music conform a set of cultural studies through which the works and artists examined in my project expose—as Richard Delgado states—the racialization of subaltern and/or disfavored subjects “according to the needs of the majority group at particular times in history” (77).⁹⁵ Thus, the novels, films, and music I study for my dissertation reveal the conflictive race interactions of Mexicans in terms of blackness and, at the same time, underline the importance of skin color in socio-cultural relations. All things considered, as W.E.B. Du Bois stated in the Forethought for *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903): “the problem of the Twentieth-century is the problem of the color-line” (v). Echoing this thought, it is important to remember that Mexico has an African root attached to its national identity. It is time now for Mexican culture to fulfill the slogan of *México Negro*: ¡Nunca más un México sin Afromexicanos!⁹⁶

⁹⁴ See *México's Nobodies: The Cultural Legacy of the Soldadera and Afro-Mexican Women*. State University of New York Press, 2017.

⁹⁵ Delgado, Richard and Stefancic, Jean. “Power and the Shape of Knowledge.” *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. NYU Press, 2001.

⁹⁶ Organizations in pro of the recognition of the Afromexican, as well as the population from the black towns in the Costa Chica, sing this mantra: Never again a Mexico without Afromexicans!

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