Coming of age in the 1980s, it never occurred to me that the origins of the Olmec heads were the subject of a century-long series of fairly acrimonious disputes. Singular works of art that they are, with facial features that do not link them seamlessly to local populations, they were long thought by many to be signs of an ancient African presence on the Gulf coast of Mexico. This claim was ultimately dismissed by Mexican archaeologists in the 1960s but revived by Black nationalists in the United States imagining Africa’s global histories during those same decades. It is a riveting and admittedly confusing story, told in close detail here by Theodore Cohen—one part of a fascinating effort to unearth the history of Blackness in postindependence Mexico.

Until very recently, Mexico’s African-descended population was made largely invisible through the official record, in scholarship, and in forms of cultural nationalism that denied, appropriated, or erased the country’s African heritage. As Cohen ably demonstrates, while the spaces of indigenous politics and contention have shaped much of the country’s postindependence history, emancipation and the regionally specific nature of these communities left them largely erased from national histories (not so, obviously with histories of the colonial period, where formal slavery and caste categories made these populations quite visible). Since 2015, then, when the Mexican census began to count peoples of African descent, some have heralded a rediscovery of the nation’s African past. Cohen shows us here that this is not an entirely accurate reading of the past two centuries of Mexican history. Scholars, musicians, artists, and others have long tried to write those of African descent into the national past and present, though their efforts were uneven, often unrecognized, and often took forms that make the contemporary reader cringe.

There has long been a profoundly transnational quality to this project. Mexican scholars like Manuel Gamio and Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán took many of their cues from North American interlocutors (Franz Boas and Melville Herskovits). Miguel Covarrubias first became obsessed with Black bodies while witnessing the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Carlos Chávez found much of his audience for African-influenced Mexican popular music in the United States. Gerónimo Baqueiro Foster’s Suite Veracruzana No. 1, which featured the Bamba, found its greatest audiences as the music to dances choreographed by Katherine Dunham, who came across the piece during a relatively brief stay in Mexico (and licensed it rather cheaply).

These flows seem critical to Cohen’s story, as does the role of African Americans coming to Mex-
They helped create the frameworks and intellectual spaces in which Mexican composers and scholars found encouragement to turn their work to Mexico’s African-descended peoples, linking their past to specific histories of the African slave trade, connections between Mexico and Cuba, and the Atlantic world more generally.

There were, however, deep tensions in the project all along. Rooted in what now seem like anachronistic sensibilities, they sought evidence of traces of Blackness in music like the Bamba (the son jarocho), in local dance traditions (such as the huapango), in racial physiognomy, and in what they perceived as cultures of violence in places like the Costa Chica of Guerrero. Theirs was more a genealogical project looking for survivals of a distant, pure past (purity that most assumed had long ago ceased to exist because of mestizaje) than it was a project designed to simply document the lived experiences of distinct communities in a plural nation. What could be taken from them would be made into part of the national tradition, and what was undesirable eliminated in the process of national integration (much like the project of indigenous integration).

Cohen also traces a history that is largely defined by individuals who had no personal connection to the history of Afro-Mexico acting on, defining, sometimes denigrating, and appropriating or otherwise transforming forms and practices with some connection to the African past in the interest of progress, nationalism, and integration. In this, the project was not all that different from Indigenismo, which Cohen helpfully discusses at length in order to contextualize these efforts, though the slow emergence of indigenous cohorts of teachers and intellectuals within institutions like the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, along with the very fact that the efforts to groom individuals who could act as double agents—representing their communities to the state, and the state to their communities—was not really a component of this project. Afro-Mexico was said, even into the 1960s, to have largely disappeared. Few seemed to believe that there was anything to represent.

This again, makes the role played by the North American Black intellectuals and artists in this story all the more interesting. The range of people who became interested in Afro-Mexico, ranging from W. E. B. Dubois and Langston Hughes to Katherine Dunham and later, Black nationalists, offers us a view of a political project in which North Americans sought both to rescue a certain Mexican past and hold Mexico up as a foil to US racism. It is not really fair to call it an odd story, but the contours of a history in which invisibility in Mexico becomes visibility at least in part because of the symbolic appeal of Mexico’s apparent racial toleration can provoke head-scratching. Toward the end of the book Cohen is able to introduce newly empowered Afro-Mexican intellectuals, but in another twist, we are left with the bizarre observation that Mexico had its own Barack Obama when Vicente Guerrero became president in 1829. What is clear: the history of race is not linear, clearly not a story of moving from colonial caste systems to inclusive pluralist societies, liberal fantasies about progress aside.

Cohen’s is not a microhistory, not an effort to detail the actual lived experiences of these communities, but an effort to detail the intellectual project of documenting Blackness in Mexico, and in that it succeeds. Still, it leaves the reader wondering about a fundamental conundrum that informs the text. Given the invisibility of Blackness, and the fact that it does not even appear that the subjects of these investigations largely identified as Black—a sharp contrast to the US, where the state and African American communities have historically been engaged in what is a mutually reinforcing series of projects around Black identity formation—what does it really mean to identify Afro-Mexico? Is it merely an act of acknowledgement, that this cultural form or this community can trace its origins to enslaved Africans brought to Mexico during the colonial period? Or is there a
political salience here, what we might consider an act of ethnogenesis where acknowledgement is also an opportunity for those made invisible for centuries to make themselves visible in the interests of social justice?

Cohen ends on a hopeful note, suggesting that the census reforms of 2015 are in fact one more step in a long process in which a variety of intellectuals and artists, from both sides of the border, have sought to make Afro-Mexico visible, allowing communities that have long faced various forms of discrimination to make claims for their identities and their histories within a plural nation. Given the long stigmatization of Blackness in Mexico, significant challenges obviously remain, but his point is well taken.

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