

More Than “A Hidden Race”: The Complexities of Blackness in Mexico and Peru

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In the PBS film series, *Black in Latin America*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. takes on the ambitious task of depicting blackness in six countries – the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, Mexico, and Peru – to a primarily “American” audience. Given that Latin America and the Caribbean have the largest concentration of persons of African descent outside of Africa, the documentary is an important one. Gates’ coverage of “blackness”¹ in these countries is comprehensive, spanning from the time of slavery to the present, with a primary focus on the cultural contributions, social experiences, and identities of individuals of African descent in these regions. However, Gates’ research traditionally has not focused on race in Latin America and, as scholars positioned more centrally in this field, we found some of his characterizations and treatment of the topic to be problematic. In this and the following commentary articles, scholars of race in the featured countries engage in a critical analysis of the documentary.

We begin with an examination of Gates’ presentation of blackness in Mexico and Peru. In contrast to the other countries featured in the series, Mexico and Peru fall within *mestizo* America; their populations are mainly

¹ Although racial and color categories are social constructions and should thus be placed in quotations, for the purposes of smoother reading, in the remainder of the article, we will not use quotations around such terms unless referencing an outside source.

comprised of *mestizos*² and Indigenous peoples and they have relatively small populations of African descent. Moreover, blackness is marginalized in the historical narratives and national ideologies (state-sponsored belief systems) of these countries. Consequently, many people are unaware of the nations' African heritage. The film endeavors to expose this hidden history.

Replete with rich visual displays, the Mexican portion of the documentary addresses a range of issues which contextualize the Afro-Mexican³ experience. Gates discusses the historical context, cultural influences, and the contemporary situation of this population. Regionally, he focuses on the two areas of Mexico with the largest concentration of Afro-Mexicans – Veracruz and the Costa Chica, a region which runs along the coasts of Guerrero and Oaxaca. Also incorporating dynamic visual imagery, the Peru segment delves into the Afro-Peruvian experience, placing substantial emphasis on the history of slavery. Gates highlights the fact that at least 100,000 African slaves were brought to Peru and that, in colonial times, Africans and their descendants made up between 30 and 40 percent of Lima's population. The film makes note of the urban character and more relaxed nature of slavery in Lima, as compared to the haciendas, where workers toiled on plantations. Fast forwarding to the current era, Gates takes viewers to El Carmen, a center of Afro-Peruvian cultural production.

² Individuals of mixed Indigenous and Spanish ancestry.

³ In this article we employ the terms "Afro-Mexican" and "Afro-Peruvian" to refer to the populations in Mexico and Peru that are of African descent. We acknowledge, however, that these are generally not emic terms, a point we discuss later in the article.

Our critique of the film focuses on the themes of national ideology, racial categorization, and portrayals of the “black” experience. However, we do so with the understanding that, given the intended audience and the limited public knowledge about blackness in Mexico and Peru, the presentation of an accurate, comprehensive, and nuanced account of the topic in an hour segment verges on the impossible. Considering this, Gates succeeded in covering important topics. Nonetheless, we believe there is ample room for improvement.

National Ideology

The national ideologies of Mexico and Peru are driving forces in the racialization process (de la Cadena 2000; Sue forthcoming). The documentary would have been stronger had Gates emphasized the powerful yet nuanced influence of national ideology on understandings of blackness in these countries. In Mexico, using national ideology as an overarching theme would have tied together various elements of the film, giving it a greater sense of cohesiveness. The film would have benefitted from Gates clearly spelling out how, in the early twentieth century, Mexican elites promoted the idea of race mixture, declared the country free of racism, and touted the *mestizo* as the prototypical Mexican. In the film, Gates touches upon national ideology but in an incomplete and somewhat misleading way. For example, Gates mentions José Vasconcelos’ celebratory vision of the “cosmic race” and poses the important question about the placement of “blacks” under the

cosmic race ideology. However, his discussion implies that the ideology had the *unintended* consequence of symbolically displacing Mexico's African heritage when, in fact, elites of the time, including Vasconcelos, promoted the idea of race mixture, in part, because it provided an avenue for integrating the Afro-Mexican and Indigenous populations – groups viewed as obstacles to the modernization process (Hernandez-Cuevas 2004; Knight 1990). Thus, Mexican national ideology played a crucial role in enhancing the invisibility of the African roots of Mexico's population, a critical point that gets lost in Gates' narrative.

Emphasizing national ideology also would have helped to clarify many of the “whys” that surface throughout the documentary. For example, rather than merely mentioning that some Mexican families are reluctant to transmit knowledge of their African ancestry to younger generations, providing information about the national ideology would have helped viewers understand why this is the case - because blackness is stigmatized and elites have consistently portrayed Mexico's population as being of Spanish and Indigenous (not African) origins. Moreover, it would explain why some Afro-Mexicans are asked by Mexican immigration officials to sing the national anthem as “proof” of their Mexicanness. Finally, if the controversy over comic book character Memín Pinguín had been discussed in the context of the ideological position that the country is free from racism, viewers would be better equipped to understand why Mexicans so vehemently argued that Memín is not racist. In sum, addressing the national ideology would have

fostered an understanding of blackness in Mexico that goes beyond the idea that many Mexicans have a “black grandma in the closet,” (a subtitle for the Mexico-Peru segment) and illuminated the more important point of *why* the black grandma is in the closet in the first place.

The Peru segment would have benefited from an accurate and nuanced presentation of Peruvian national ideology to frame its discussion of blackness. In Peru, there are various competing imaginaries about race, only some of which exclude Afro-Peruvians. For example, whereas Cuzco ideology lauds Peru’s Incan heritage and ignores blackness (de la Cadena 2000), Lima ideology idealizes Peru’s Incan heritage (Mendez 1996) while also acknowledging the mixed African, Indigenous, and European roots of Peru’s population (Greene 2007). In Lima and surrounding areas, it would be hard to find an individual who denies the historical or contemporary presence of Afro-Peruvians in the country (Golash-Boza 2011). Therefore, the black grandma is not really in the closet, or at least not consistently so. In the film, Gates does not acknowledge these complexities. His use of the subtitles “the black grandma in the closet” and “a hidden race” in relation to Peru does not account for the varied and inconsistent treatment of Afro-Peruvians within Peruvian national ideology and discourse.

Racial Categorization

Within Latin America, systems of racial and color categorization are varied and fluid. Many scholars have faced the quagmire of how to use racial

and color terminology when discussing the region. This issue is complicated when the conversation involves a cross-national discussion of race. We found Gates' use of terminology to be inconsistent and oftentimes at odds with local usages and meanings. For example, in the Mexico segment, when discussing the 18th century *casta* paintings,⁴ Gates characterizes them as "sixteen shades of blackness." He says this despite the fact that he is given a tour and explanation of the paintings by a Mexican scholar who highlights caste categories such as *mestizo*, defined as a person of Spanish and Indigenous but not African ancestry. The caste system was not a catalogue of categories depicting a continuum of blackness. It was a system designed, in part, to maintain the stability of the existing social order and to police ethnic boundaries in light of increased race mixture (Katzew 2004). Although the system was certainly concerned with degrees of blood mixedness between Spaniards, Indians, and Africans, the idea that the paintings represent sixteen shades of blackness is a clear mischaracterization.

Gates' treatment of racial terminology in the contemporary Mexican context is also problematic. At the popular level, because of the stigma associated with blackness, the term *negro* (black) can sound harsh and/or offensive. Therefore, many Afro-Mexicans prefer to use the term *moreno* as a euphemism for blackness (Sue 2010). However, Gates seems to miss the distinction between *moreno* and *negro*, which is not insignificant as *morenidad* is very much part of the Afro-Mexican experience (Lewis 2000;

⁴ The paintings are visual representations of the caste system portraying race mixture between Indians, Spaniards, and Africans.

Sue 2010; Vaughn 2001). This distinction came to light at one point in the documentary when Gates asked residents of Yanga, Veracruz: “Are most people around here black?” and they responded “no,” that most are *morenos*. Despite exposure to these local nuances in categorization, throughout the film, Gates continually uses “black” to describe Afro-Mexicans. Gates may do this for political reasons - to challenge Mexico’s stigmatized treatment of blackness - or he may be adopting the language of the activists and scholars he interviews in the film. Although these reasons are defensible, recognition of these categorical distinctions would have better represented the popular experience.

In the Peru segment, Gates unsystematically employs the terms “Afro-Peruvian,” “African,” and “black” to describe the community of African descent. In Peru, however, these terms are not interchangeable. In popular parlance, people with visible African ancestry are generally referred to as *negro* or *moreno*. However, not all Peruvians who claim African heritage identify as *negro* and, conversely, Peruvians frequently identify as *negro* without any recognition of African ancestry (Sue and Golash-Boza 2009). It would have been useful if Gates communicated this complexity and was more careful with his own use of terms. The most problematic terminological slippage, however, involved Gates’ use of terms generally associated with the U.S. case. For example, in his conversation with Peruvian musician Chebo Ballumbrosio, Gates asked Chebo if he stands for “black power,” evoking a phrase popularized during the U.S. Civil Rights movement. In addition,

toward the end of the film, while showing scenes from a Peruvian *quinceañera*, Gates declared: “Afro-Latinos have a double identity ... they’re both black and Latino.” However, the term “Latino” emerged in the U.S. in the late twentieth century in reference to Latin Americans who migrate to the U.S. (Suarez-Orozco and Páez 2009). Both “black power” and “Latino” are very much out of place in the Peruvian context; the use of these terms constitutes a lack of sensitivity to local discourses. Such issues of categorization and terminology are not minor as they represent the complicated nature of blackness and racial politics in both Mexico and Peru.

One Portrayal of Blackness

Gates’ film addresses only select and sometimes atypical aspects of the black experience. In Peru, most African slaves worked in the urban environment of Lima or on small haciendas scattered throughout the coast. However, after describing the more “relaxed” nature of slavery in Lima, Gates poses the question: “But was this truly the experience of the typical slave in Peru?” As an implied answer, he immediately takes viewers to San José, Chincha, one of the largest haciendas in Peru, and discusses the harsh life of slaves in this context. By posing his question and then cutting to the slave experience on a large hacienda, viewers are left with the distinct (yet false) impression that this experience was typical. In addition, Gates barely covers the experiences of free Afro-Peruvians and minimizes the fact that, for most of the colonial era, nearly half of all people of African descent in

Peru were *not* enslaved (Bowser 1974; Aguirre 1993). Gates continues with the plantation theme when he transitions to the contemporary era, showing scenes of Afro-Peruvian cotton-pickers. He narrates: “One hundred and fifty years later [after abolition], there are still many people living in the same places, doing the same work that their slave ancestors did.” Although the image of Afro-Peruvians picking cotton was clearly powerful in Gates’ eyes, the connection between blackness and cotton harvesting is simply not part of the collective imaginary surrounding blackness in Peru (Aguirre 2000) as it is in the U.S. Although it is true that some Afro-Peruvians still pick cotton on large haciendas as their ancestors did, much more has changed since the time of slavery than is suggested by Gates in the film. For example, the agrarian reforms of the 1970s enabled many Afro-Peruvians to become owners of the land they tilled; additionally, cotton production has declined precipitously since slavery (J. Escobar et al 2000). On a final point regarding the representativeness of Gates’ presentation of blackness in Peru, although he chose to focus on El Carmen, Chincha, the largest concentration of Afro-Peruvians outside of Lima actually reside in Yapatara, Piura (Golash-Boza 2011). By not covering this region in his documentary, Gates misses an important aspect of the Afro-Peruvian experience.

Gates also does not address the multiple manifestations of black-related identities in Mexico and Peru. To his credit, when discussing the Mexican case, Gates gives voice to prominent Mexican scholars and activists, featuring nearly all of the major players associated with the topic of “Afro

Mexico.” However, these individuals do not, by a long shot, represent a “typical” Mexican’s perspective. For example, although the two scholars who gave Gates a guided tour of Veracruz fortress San Juan de Ulúa described it as the major disembarking point for African slaves and explained how these slaves helped build the fortress, many Veracruzanos are unaware of this history.⁵ At another point in the film, Gates travels to the town of Yanga, a former free slave colony. He asks a few locals about Gaspar Yanga, the leader of the slave revolt. They share their knowledge of this history. Although the individuals featured in the film are informed on the topic, many Veracruzanos are not (Sue forthcoming). Overall, in the Mexican portion of the documentary, blackness is portrayed in its most fixed and salient forms – among individuals who have a strong black consciousness and among academics and activists striving to highlight the countries’ African heritage. Although Gates does touch upon the negation and invisibility of blackness in Mexico, this narrative is overpowered by that of an emergent and celebrated blackness. In actuality, although blackness is recognized and embraced on a limited basis within Mexico, it is much more commonly marginalized and/or buried.

The discussion of black-related identities in Peru is also skewed. Gates opens the segment with a discussion of singer Susana Baca’s quest to revive Afro-Peruvian traditions and how her family’s culture has given her the strength to confront racism. Later in the film, Chebo Ballumbrosio asserts the

⁵ This observation is based on the first author’s ethnographic work in Veracruz.

importance of “black” culture to his self-identity and self-esteem. However, many Afro-Peruvians do not identify with such views nor do they think about their blackness in the same way as individuals centrally involved in the Afro-Peruvian cultural revival. For example, few Afro-Peruvians mobilize their African roots as a way of dealing with racism in the way that Baca does (Feldman 2007).

In the film, Gates also gives voice to Afro-Peruvian activists at the expense of engaging popular views. For example, he spends ample time interviewing Monica Carillo and José Campos, highlighting important divisions among Peruvian activists regarding anti-racist strategies. However, in watching this, viewers miss a crucial point - that popular understandings and discourses of racism in Peru are still very underdeveloped and do not coincide with those of activists. For example, in contrast to activists who define racism broadly (e.g. perceiving media portrayals of Afro-Peruvians as racist), many Peruvians define racism more narrowly, equating it with the use of racial slurs and denial of entry of Afro-Peruvians into certain neighborhoods (Golash-Boza 2010). The fact that Gates does not highlight these important elite-popular distinctions gives viewers the impression that Afro-Peruvians have deep cultural and social roots and use their blackness as a source of strength, pride, identity formation, and as a vehicle for anti-racism. Although this is true for *some* Afro-Peruvians, it is certainly not true for the majority (Golash-Boza 2011; Feldman 2007). To conclude, although we appreciate the fact that Gates has done much to bring the important

subject of blackness in *mestizo* America to the public eye, we feel that the documentary would have benefitted from a more informed, nuanced, and careful treatment of the topic.

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