Performing Blackness in Costa Chica: The Chilena in a Multicultural Framework

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the *chilena*, a regional music and dance tradition of Mexico's Costa Chica, as a site through which Blackness has been imagined, negotiated, and performed across shifting political and cultural contexts. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Oaxaca and Guerrero between 2024 and 2025, including participant observation, interviews, and archival research, the study investigates how Afro-Mexican identity has been articulated through the chilena from the post-revolutionary ideology of mestizaje to the contemporary multicultural framework that emerged alongside the recognition of Afro-Mexicans as a distinct population.

Organized chronologically, the dissertation demonstrates that the chilena has reflected changing understandings of Black and Afro-descendant ways of identifying in Mexico over time. Rather than serving as a stable marker of Afro-Mexican culture, the genre has proven remarkably adaptable, accommodating diverse and sometimes contradictory formulations of race, belonging, and regional identity. This flexibility is precisely what makes the chilena a powerful vehicle for performing Blackness. Through analyses of competing origin narratives, the legacy of composer Álvaro Carrillo, the social memory practices of Los Banqueros, and the performances of contemporary chileneros and chileneras, the dissertation shows how Blackness has been alternately obscured, incorporated into mestizaje, strategically mobilized within multicultural frameworks, and reimagined through performance. By investigating chilena as a form of cultural knowledge and memory, this study contributes to scholarship on the African diaspora, ethnomusicology, performance studies, and Latin American studies while demonstrating how performance mediates the relationship between racial identity, political recognition, and local belonging.

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DEDICATION

A mis padres, Efraín y Maria Matilde Landa. Por todos los sacrificios que hicieron para que sus hijos tuvieran acceso a oportunidades que ustedes nunca tuvieron. Este logro también es suyo.

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I. THE *CHILENA* AND PERFORMING BLACKNESS IN COSTA CHICA

The morning humidity began to settle over El Tamal, Oaxaca—an *agencia* of the municipality of Pinotepa Nacional—as Organización Sopinda's *Encuentro AFRO25: DDHH, Comunidades, Culturas y Territorios* unfolded. Beneath a modest tent and in front of an audience that ebbed and flowed between attentive listening and everyday social exchange, Peter "El Negro de la Costa" Cruz sat down with his guitar. He began to sing Álvaro Carrillo's *chilena,* "Negro de la costa," his voice carrying a line that articulated both a personal declaration and a broader collective claim: "*Soy el negro de la Costa de Guerrero y Oaxaca* (*I am the Black man of the coast of Guerrero and Oaxaca*)." It echoed his stage name and, more importantly, articulated Blackness in regional, historical, and political terms. In a gathering explicitly organized around Afro-Mexican rights, recognition, and solidarity, the performance was a forceful declaration and assertion of Blackness.

Since the early 2000s, organizations dedicated to Afro-Mexican visibility and advocacy have proliferated, and events like AFRO25 have become a common feature of the cultural and political landscape in Costa Chica and beyond. Following the founding of México Negro A.C. in 1997—an organization "dedicated to promoting the visibility of, advancing, and defending the rights of Afro-Mexican peoples"—civil initiatives have increasingly created forums for articulating Black identity, advocating for rights, and fostering community cohesion. Organizations such as Sopinda situate themselves within broader national and transnational frameworks of recognition, drawing on constitutional and international legal discourse. Within these spaces, expressive culture— such as music, dance, and oral literature— functions as a

central medium through which collective identity is made visible, negotiated, and collectively experienced.

The expressive forms that come to stand in for Blackness within these settings are shaped by historical, political, and aesthetic considerations. Practices that more readily index Africa or the broader African diaspora—such as the *Danza de los Diablos* or the dance troupe Obatalá—are often foregrounded. In the case of Obatalá, a dance group founded in 2013 by Flaviano Cisneros—a Catholic priest from Collantes (another agencia of Pinotepa Nacional) and member of México Negro A.C.—Blackness is rendered through the assemblage of Colombian *mapalé*, West African-inspired dress, and references to Yoruba spiritual practice. The group debuted that same year at the *Encuentro de Pueblos Negros* (Meeting of the Black Communities), a key site for Afro-Mexican cultural and political expression. These elements draw from across the African diaspora, constructing Blackness as something that is deliberately constructed through transnational circulation. In this sense, Obatalá resonates with Heidi Carolyn Feldman's Black Pacific framework, in which performers mobilize diasporic references to create legible and circulating forms of Blackness across contexts, though this is complicated by the direct reference to Africa rather than solely relying on borrowing from diasporas contexts.[1]

At the same time, forms such as the Danza de los Diablos—a longstanding fixture of Costa Chica expressive culture—reflect a different but complementary dynamic. The dance indexes Africa through masking, choreography, and performance context, the Danza de los Diablos emerges from a historically layered and locally grounded process of cultural mixture. In this sense, it aligns more closely with Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic framework, in which

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[1] Heidi Carolyn Feldman, *Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).

recognizable signs of Blackness are mobilized within hybrid formations that resist reduction to fixed origins.[2] As Amanda Itza Varela Huerta argues in *Tiempo de diablos*, both the Danza de los Diablos and Obatalá are mobilized within a processes of *ethnogenesis*, in which culture becomes a resource for articulating an emergent Afro-Mexican identity. Focusing on "*uso del pasado* (*use of the past)*", Varela Huerta suggests that these practices are staged in specific contexts to "perform" a developing ethnic formation in postcolonial Mexico.[3]

Against this backdrop, chilena occupies a more contested position. According to many, it is the "defining feature of vernacular culture" in the Costa Chica, yet its impact on Afro-Mexican identity formation is less immediately tangible than that of more overtly African-coded practices.[4] The genre itself encompasses a wide range of stylistic and social formations—from *sones de artesa* to public facing folkloric stagings, particularly in events such as the *Guelaguetza*, alongside *chilena cantada* traditions, *chilena mixteca* and more contemporary/ popular *conjunto* forms that cross over with other regional genres such as *charanga* and *merequetengue*—each carrying different associations and claims to meaning. This ambiguity is precisely what makes Peter's performance at AFRO25 so significant. By performing "Negro de la Costa," he situates chilena within ongoing projects of Afro-Mexican recognition, insisting that the genre itself articulates Blackness. At the same time, his use of chilena underscores a different mode of Black expression: one that is locally grounded in the histories and social worlds of the

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[2] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[3] Amanda Itza Varela Huerta, *Tiempo de Diablos: Usos de la cultura y el pasado en el proceso de construcción étnica de los pueblos negros afromexicanos* (Ciudad de México: CIESAS, 2023), 32.

[4] John H. McDowell, *Poetry and Violence: The Ballad Tradition of Mexico's Costa Chica* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 112.

Costa Chica, yet shaped by longer trajectories of transnational exchange—from its connections to Chilean sailors to its contemporary circulation. This is not to suggest that practices like Danza de los Diablos or Obatalá are not similarly transnational; rather, as the emblematic musical genre of the region, chilena demands closer attention for how it operates within and alongside these frameworks.

Peter's performance highlights a central tension that animates this dissertation. Chilena is present within Afro-Mexican social movements, but its meanings, affiliations, and political potential remain debated. It circulates alongside other expressive forms that may more readily signal diasporic belonging, even as it offers its own, more locally embedded articulation of Blackness. As such, it participates in its ongoing construction, negotiation, and stabilization in a process that is contingent and open to reinterpretation. This dissertation examines how chilena, since its emergence in the early nineteenth century, has been used to reflect and shape how Afro-Mexicans define themselves and their place in the Costa Chica, nationally, and within broader transnational frameworks. By tracing how performers connect their practices to meanings across these layers, I argue for chilena's potential towards articulating Blackness that is at once locally grounded and intrinsically transnational. This complicates both diasporic models and national narratives of identity formation, and in doing so, expands how belonging itself is imagined and enacted.

Afro-Mexican Political Context

In 2019, an amendment to Article 2 of the Mexican constitution recognized people of African descent as part of the cultural composition of Mexican society. The subsequent census of 2020 showed, for the first time in the country's modern history, 2% of its general population

identifying as Afro-Mexican or Afro-descendant.[5] These developments grew out of efforts of local organizations in Costa Chica, a region extending along the coast of the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca with one of the largest concentrations of people of African origin in Mexico. Here, NGOs like Mexico Negro A.C., Africa, EPOCA, and Ecosta Yutucuii S. S. S. have engaged in cultural activism since the late 1990s, only to find fruition in the amendment to Article 2 decades later.



Figure 1.1 - Peter “El Negro de la Costa” Cruz performing at AFRO25

Ahead of the 2020 census, the National Institute of Statistics conducted a 2015 preliminary survey in which respondents could identify as Afromexican for the first time.[6] The

[5] Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), *Censo de Población y Vivienda 2020: Principales resultados*. Estados Unidos Mexicanos (México: INEGI, 2022), 60.

[6] Kana Kavon, “The Third Root: Exploring Afro-Mexican History & Culture: A K–12 Curriculum Guide” (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Center for Latin American Studies, n.d.), 3

Mexico Population and Housing Census 2020 finally gave the public the first look at demographic data that included Afromexicans. The results demonstrated that 2,576,213 (or 2%) of respondents identified as either Afromexican or Afrodescendent.[7] Of these respondents, 49.6% identified as male and 50.4% identified as female. Additionally, 7.4% of people identifying as Afromexican or Afrodescendent spoke an indigenous language.[8] This last piece of information is especially interesting because the federal government identifies indigenous people by their knowledge of an indigenous language, rather than racial or ethnic makeup. Andrés Villareal explains, "Whether individuals are considered to be indigenous depends on they speak an indigenous language, live in an indigenous community, or share certain cultural traits, rather than their skin color or ancestry."[9] Villareal also notes that there has historically been a general distrust of people of authority and whites among Afromexicans. As Hoffmann states, "It is not the same to declare oneself 'black' to a neighbor as it is to the investigator, it also is not the same do so in the village or in the neighboring city…"[10] Additionally, Telles and Garcia state, "Many who might consider themselves indigenous in some situations, or are considered indigenous by others, may prefer to self-identify as mestizo."[11]

Prior to the inclusion of Afro-Mexicans in census data, it was difficult to ascertain social

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[7] INEGI, *Censo de Población y Vivienda 2020*, 23.

[8] Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), *Encuesta Intercensal 2015: Presentación de resultados* (México: INEGI, 2015), 85, https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/intercensal/2015/doc/eic_2015_presentacion.pdf.

[9] Andrés Villarreal, "Stratification by Skin Color in Contemporary Mexico," *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 5 (2010): 653.

[10] Odile Hoffmann, "Negros y afromestizos en México: Viejas y nuevas lecturas de un mundo olvidado," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 68, no. 1 (2006): 104.

[11] Edward Telles and Denia Garcia, "Mestizaje and Public Opinion in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 48, no. 3 (2013): 138.

inequalities on the basis of race and ethnicity in Mexico. In his 2010 study, Andrés Villareal uses skin color as a proxy in his study on stratification.[12] He analyzed a survey of 3,105 respondents who answered questions regarding skin color identification. Three skin color types are used in this analysis: white, light brown, and dark brown. Inhabitants of urban areas also tended to identify as whiter than rural inhabitants. Southerners tended to identify as having darker skin compared to northerners.[13] These finding are all in line with what was to be expected because, as Pierre Van den Berghe notes, "European-looking Mexicans are disproportionately represented in the upper and middle classes."[14] Villareal's analysis finds that individuals with darker skin tones have substantially lower education levels.[15] Additionally, those who identify as dark brown are 57.6% less likely of having a college education.[16] Finally, dark brown individuals are 50.9% less likely to be affluent. [17] The survey does not take into account biases that exists along the line of how people self-identify. While this study does not provide a full scope of how Afro-Mexicans are discriminated against, it demonstrates a predilection in Mexican society for looking unfavorably towards individuals with darker skin. Additionally, it suggests that the legacy of colonial era ethnic stratification has had lasting effects that persist in Mexican society.

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[12] Villarreal, "Stratification by Skin Color in Contemporary Mexico," 653.

[13] Ibid., 661

[14] Ibid., 656

[15] Ibid., 655

[16] Ibid., 666

[17] Ibid., 670

Brief History from Colonial Period to Present

By the end of the 18th century, Black people greatly outnumbered Europeans in Mexico. By some estimates there were between 186,997 and 380,000 Afro-Mexicans by the turn of the century.[18] A 1791 military census taken in the province of Igualapa, Guerrero for the purposes of recruiting soldiers demonstrated that there were 5,407 free Black people in this province, constituting one of the largest concentration of Afro-Mexicans.[19] Afro-Mexicans had less occupational diversity and were mostly categorized into a lower class status.[20] Ben Vinson argues that the concentration of Afro-Mexicans as workers in haciendas contributed to what he considered a "relatively uninterrupted Afro-Mexican cultural heritage."[21] The census also demonstrates that the majority of Afro-Mexicans were endogamous.[22] However, Vinson goes on to say, "For certain mulattos, morenos, and pardos, marrying fairer skinned spouses supported their efforts at being perceived as belonging to a lighter caste. Having a lighter spouse theoretically enhanced racial mobility by providing access to new networks…"[23] Colonial Spaniards viewed intermarriage with Black people as a stain on lineage more so than with Indigenous populations.[24] Somewhat contrary to the military census findings, Deborah Kanter explains, "The Afro-Mexican trend toward racial exogamy began early, when the imbalanced sex

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[18] Ben Vinson III, "The Racial Profile of a Rural Mexican Province in the 'Costa Chica,'" *The Americas* 57, no. 2 (2000): 270.

[19] Ibid., 272.

[20] Ibid., 273.

[21] Ibid., 278.

[22] Ibid., 279.

[23] Ibid., 280.

[24] María Elena Martínez, "The Black Blood of New Spain: Limpieza de Sangre, Racial Violence, and Gendered Power in Early Colonial Mexico," *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2004): 484.

ratio within the slave population forced males to seek (usually Indian) spouses… Afro-Mexicans had something to gain by assuming a place for themselves or their children within the Indian world during the colonial period."[25] The *casta* system that was developed in colonial Mexico placed Black people on the bottom of the social order and set in motion a legacy of racism and prejudice that exists to this day.

Mestizaje and Black Erasure

The erasure of Black presence in post-colonial Mexico must be seen through the framework of mestizaje. Beginning in the 1920s, the post-revolutionary Mexican government sought to consolidate social power by adopting a policy of cultural and ethnic homogenization, mestizaje, that prioritized European and Indigenous identities while downplaying African heritage.[26] According to Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran, the Afro-Mexican population did not retain cultural markers sufficient enough to establish a cohesive Black identity.[27] He argued that Black identity "had 'blurred into' the process of mestizaje (race-mixing) that came to characterize the new nation," contributing to its erasure.[28] Such a claim overlooks the ways Afro-descendant identities and cultural practices persisted in regional and everyday contexts even when they remained illegible within dominant narratives of mestizaje.

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[25] Deborah E. Kanter, "'Their Hair Was Curly': Afro-Mexicans in Indian Villages, Central Mexico, 1700–1820," in *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country*, ed. Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 178.

[26] Telles and Garcia, "Mestizaje," 130.

[27] Hoffmann, "Negros y afromestizos," 112.

[28] Laura A. Lewis, "Blacks, Black Indians, Afromexicans: The Dynamics of Race, Nation, and Identity in a Mexican Moreno Community (Guerrero)," *American Ethnologist* 27, no. 4 (2000): 903.

Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran's 1946 work *La población negra de México* is considered the first case of ethnographic research concerning Afromexicans.[29] While his work established a foundation for future scholarship on Afro-Mexican communities, it also reflected many of the assumptions and racial ideologies of its time. For example, Aguirre Beltrán argued that characteristics such as violence and aggression persisted among Afro-Mexicans as legacies of slavery. As a result, his scholarship simultaneously advanced the study of Afro-Mexicans while reproducing prejudices that would continue to shape representations of Blackness in Mexico.

The 1920s movement towards *mestizaje* as an ideology saw a push by cultural elites to study indigenous history and issues, but it was not until the formation of the Third Root Project, formed in 1992, that the federal government began to look into "African presence and influence in Mexican history, culture, and contemporary society."[30] Using Aguirre Beltran's work as a starting point, the Third Root Project helped establish an interest in the topic of African descent in academic circles.[31] This new wave of scholarly interest in Afro-Mexicans was intimated in the late 1980s by anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, who was head of the national Office of Popular Culture.[32] Batalla was interested in finding nonwestern elements in Mexican culture by looking at its "forgotten people."[33] As Lewis states, "The goals of the Third Root project have been to recognize the African heritage of the American peoples… and to give blacks a voice by

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[29] Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, La población negra de México (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1946).

[30] Kavon, "The Third Root," 4.

[31] Lewis, "Blacks," 903.

[32] Ibid, 901.

[33] Ibid.

recovering "traces" of "the African contribution to [Mexican] multiculturalism."[34] Put broadly, the Third Root Project sought to identify and celebrate African influence within Afromexican culture.[35] The project specifically looked to promote Afromexican dance, music, cuisine, and oral literature.[36] However, anthropologist Laura Lewis has argued that attention to the disappearance and reappearance of Black identity in this project is inadequate and that, "Work that remains blind to these processes cannot critically address blacks as 'Afromexicans' or as 'black Indians.' Its assumptions go unquestioned, and morenos' experiences of identity formation remain unexplored."[37] Groups such as México Negro AC have advocated for strengthening rights and representation in government for Afromexicans since its founding in 1993. They were the driving force behind the campaign to include Afro-descendant as a racial category in the national census and they regularly use cultural expressions as a means of highlighting longstanding Black presence in Mexico.[38] Varela-Huerta explains that their primary aim was constitutional recognition of Black populations in Mexico, which was achieved through an amendment to Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution in 2019.[39]

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid, 899.

[36] Hoffmann, "Negros y afromestizos," 114.

[37] Lewis, "Blacks," 903.

[38] Amanda Itza Varela Huerta, "Proceso de identificación de los pueblos negros de la Costa Chica en México: usos de la cultura en la constitución de su etnogénesis," *Intersticios de la Política y la Cultura: Intervenciones Latinoamericanas* 3, no. 5 (2014): 59.

[39] Ibid., 53

The Multicultural Turn

As with many other Latin American countries, Mexico experienced a "multicultural turn" in the late 1980s and 1990s, which gave way to recognition of many indigenous rights.[40] In light of these policies, some state projects, in tandem with activist efforts by grassroots organizations, have pushed for visibility and recognition of Afro-descendants at increasing rates in Mexico over the last 30 years. However, according to Luis Tapia Maella's interpretation of René Zavaleta Mercado's work, "recognition... is the horizon of liberal ethnocentric multiculturalism."[41] Building on Maella's critique of recognition politics, this study addresses the limitations of visibility without deeper transformation. While the state multicultural project has failed to fully address the needs of Black populations, this project explores how local communities navigate and respond to contemporary racial and political dynamics which are a result of a history of exclusion.

Government backed multiculturalism projects such as this tend to work in tandem with neoliberal policies (a concept that Charles Hale calls neoliberal multiculturalism) that privilege state agendas over the demands of ethnic minorities.[42] In Mexico, the neoliberal turn emerged in part as a response to earlier assimilationist policies of mestizaje, reframing Indigenous rights through state-sanctioned multicultural recognition while avoiding more substantive structural

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[40] Tianna S. Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 20.

[41] Luis Tapia Mealla, The Production of Local Knowledge: History and Politics in the Work of René Zavaleta Mercado, trans. Alison Spedding (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2022), xvii.

[42] Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 141–42.

reforms and shifting public policy towards market based solutions.[43] Citing Hale, Anthony Russell Jerry writes, "multiculturalism can be used to reinforce neoliberal doctrine rather than promote collective empowerment."[44] Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) such as México Negro A.C. have been key actors in efforts to secure recognition for Afro-Mexicans within the multicultural framework of the Mexican state. According to Varela-Huerta, the organization helped lead campaigns for constitutional recognition and for the inclusion of Afro-descendant as a category in the national census. These efforts were accompanied by the strategic use of cultural expressions and public performances to make Afro-Mexican communities visible within national discourses of diversity and citizenship.[45] They were the driving force behind the campaign to include Afro-descendant as a racial category in the national census and they regularly use cultural expressions as a means of highlighting longstanding Black presence in Mexico.[46]

Multicultural Alignment and Ethno-Rights Alignment (Paschel)

To understand the political terrain in which Afro-Mexican recognition has emerged, it is useful to situate Mexico within broader Latin American patterns of ethno-racial politics. As Tianna Paschel argues, Black social movements in Latin America have been shaped by the interaction between two overlapping fields: domestic political contexts and what she terms a "global ethno-racial field," constituted by transnational discourses on race, nation, and rights.[47] Rather than treating Black political consciousness as either a continuous historical presence or a

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[43] Russell Anthony *Jerry, Blackness in Mexico: Afro-Mexican Recognition and the Production of Citizenship in Costa Chica* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2023), 73–74.

[44] Jerry, *Blackness in Mexico*, 74.

[45] Ibid., 53.

[46] Varela Huerta, *Tiempo de diablos*, 53-57.

[47] Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects*, 2016, 3.

sudden awakening, Paschel emphasizes the conditions under which a unified discourse of Black political subjectivity is "forged" or "made."[48] This perspective is particularly useful for understanding Afro-Mexican mobilization, which has developed through both local struggles and engagement with broader transnational frameworks.

Paschel identifies two distinct moments of alignment between domestic and global political dynamics over the past several decades. The first, which she terms the multicultural alignment, emerged between the late 1980s and late 1990s and centered on constitutional reforms recognizing the "pluri-ethnic" and "multicultural" character of the nation.[49] These reforms extended specific rights—particularly land and cultural rights—to populations understood as culturally distinct communities, most notably Indigenous groups, and in some cases Afro-descendant populations. Within this framework, Blackness was often legible insofar as it could be articulated through culturally bounded, frequently rural forms of community life, drawing on anthropological models that emphasized tradition and territoriality.

The second moment, which Paschel describes as a racial equity alignment, took shape in the early twenty-first century and shifted focus toward combating racial discrimination and advancing racial equality through mechanisms such as anti-discrimination law and affirmative action. Unlike multicultural reforms, which were largely oriented toward Indigenous populations, these ethno-racial reforms more directly targeted Black populations and addressed inequalities that could not be resolved through cultural recognition alone. Importantly, Paschel demonstrates that while transnational activism and global discourses of rights were crucial in enabling these

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[48] Ibid., 13.

[49] Ibid., 4.

reforms, the specific forms they took were shaped by national political contexts, including the configuration of social movements, the relationship between rural and urban constituencies, and the dynamics of negotiation between activists and the state.[50]

This distinction between multicultural and racial equity alignments helps clarify the uneven and often contradictory nature of Afro-Mexican recognition. Mexico's recent constitutional recognition of Afro-descendants in 2019 can be understood as part of a broader multicultural framework that emphasizes visibility and cultural inclusion. Yet, as critics of neoliberal multiculturalism have noted, such recognition privileges forms of difference that can be rendered culturally legible while leaving underlying structures of inequality intact. In this sense, Afro-Mexican struggles for recognition reflect not only national political developments but also their positioning within a translocal field of activism, where global discourses of afrodescendencia, human rights, and racial justice intersect with local histories and forms of cultural expression.

By adopting a *translocal* perspective, as Paschel suggests, it becomes possible to see Afro-Mexican identity formation as shaped by the ongoing interplay between local practices and global frameworks.[51] This dynamic is especially evident in the use of performance as a political resource, where cultural expressions are mobilized to align with broader discourses of Blackness while remaining rooted in the specific histories and social worlds of the Costa Chica.

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[50] Ibid., 16.

[51] Ibid.

Black Identify Formation

In her article, “Blacks, Black Indians, Afromexicans: the dynamics of race, nation, and identity in a Mexican moreno community (Guerrero),” Laura A. Lewis argues that Afromexicans in San Nícolas Tolentino have tied their ethnic identity to that of indigenous population as a means of achieving social integration.[52] The term *moreno* is the preferred term of identification for Afromexicans in San Nícolas, as the term *negro* can be considered an impolite or pejorative term.[53] Many Costa Chica Afromexicans intermarried outside of their ethnic group, as previously explained by Deborah Kanter.[54] Indigenous people were mythologized in a way that placed them as an indispensable part of Mexican society. Because indigenous culture has historically been championed as an important component of Mexican society, via the process of *mestizaje*, "the *morenos*, who identify with them, subvert their own traditional exclusion from Mexico.”[55] She goes on to explain that *morenos* from San Nícolos do not identify with their African descent “because such attributes do not coincide with their self-perceptions or improve their material conditions.”[56] Even if these Costa Chica *morenos* do not articulate these sentiments, Lewis argues, they engage in this strategy because it benefits them in achieving goals of survival.[57] Ironically, as Lewis points out, Afro-Mexicans tend to have a higher socioeconomic status, partly due to better access to land.[58] Nevertheless, they tie themselves to indigenous identity through a

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[52] Lewis, “Blacks,” 898.

[53] Ibid, 899.

[54] Kanter, “‘Their Hair Was Curly,’” 178.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., 900.

[57] Ibid., 903.

[58] Ibid., 905.

shared sense of subjugation from white Mexicans. They perceive whiteness as associated with prestige, power, and money. As Lewis puts it, "Blackness is not useful to them because whiteness grants material power and indigenousness grants symbolic power."[59] This mode of identifying is contrast to what we start to see now with organizations such as Mexico Negro A.C. One of the goals of Mexico Negro A.C. is to promote Afro-Mexican cultural traditions.

Afro-Mexican feminist organizations such as the Foro por el Reconocimiento de las Mujeres Afrolatinoamericanas (Forum for the Recognition of Afro-Latin American Women), which is led by activist Juliana Acevedo Avila, have began to emerge since the late 1990s and are now starting to gain momentum.[60] Afro-Mexican organizations have so far been somewhat successful in getting the attention of politicians, as the inclusion of Afromexican identity in the last census can be attributed to their advocacy. Contrary to Lewis's findings, Afro-Mexicans seem to be reclaiming lost African identity more recently. According to Varela Huerta, this new movement aligns with international rights campaigns. As organizations like this continue to mobilize, we may see a continued trend in Black ethnic identification throughout Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica. Whereas Afro-Mexicans have historically been marginalized and treated as foreigners, they are now in process of reestablishing their identity as separate from indigenous and mestizo and challenging the social structure in Mexico.

Construction of *Afrodescedencia* in Transnational Networks

Defined within a broader Pan-African framework, *afrodescendencia* (African descent) was introduced as a socio-political category at the 2000 Regional Conference of the Americas in

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[59] Lewis, "Blacks," 917.

[60] Itza Amanda Varela Huerta, "Mujeres y movimiento negro afromexicano a través de la historia de vida," *Revista Estudos Feministas* 29, no. 1 (2021): 1.

preparation for the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Santiago, Chile, positioning it within global conversations on African diasporic identity. Yet, while the term afrodescendiente has gained purchase in the last decade, ambiguity remains as to how African heritage intersects with local imaginaries, where terms like *afromestizo* and moreno are used to reflect Black identities in relation to a history of cultural exchange and collective bargaining. Costa Chica is one of such localities, where Afro-descendant communities use music and dance as core sites to stake claims to political recognition and belonging. This dissertation explores how Afro-descendant communities in Costa Chica negotiate identity through performances of chilenas to connect Costa Chica's musical heritage with broader African diasporic networks through mediated and digital platforms. In this context, this dissertation addresses the politics of neoliberal multicultural recognition in Mexico, highlighting the challenges faced by Afro-descendant communities as they articulate identity as a strategy to assert sociopolitical rights. The recent constitutional recognition of Afro-Mexicans/ Afrodescendientes, achieved in 2019 through a reform to Article 2 of the Mexican Federal Constitution, marked a pivotal moment in the struggle for Afro-descendant rights in Mexico. However, work remains to be done in addressing the limitations and uneven impacts of these processes at the local level.

The Role of Performance in Political Recognition/The *etnogenesis* model

Through music and dance performances that emphasize distinct Afro-Mexican expressions, communities have asserted their place within Mexico's multicultural framework, thereby resisting historical erasure. Performance was particularly critical after 2018, when the presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador endorsed neoliberal multiculturalism to promote an

idea of cultural inclusion centered on the idea of *pueblos originarios* (First Nations) to reframe indigenismo as the basis of national culture.[61] It is for this reason that African aesthetics became particularly important, as they provided a recognizable form of difference on the basis of African heritage, fitting to the state's multiculturalist criteria for inclusion. This emphasis is particularly evident in the case studies at the center of Amanda Itzá Varela Huerta's *Tiempo de Diablos: Usos de la cultura y el pasado en el proceso de construcción étnica de los pueblos negros afromexicanos*, which focuses on the Danza de los Diablos —widely regarded as one of the most African-influenced dances in Mexico — and the dance troupe Obatalá, known for blending Colombian Mapalé, Yoruba spirituality, and West African dress.[62] Thus, the aestheticization of culture became a double-edged sword for cultural brokers: on the one hand, it gave access to a cultural reservoir that could be used with political expediency. On the other, such aesthetics risk making of afrodescendencia a fetish, which can effectively erase the historical realities of centuries of transculturation — particularly between Afro-Mexican and Indigenous communities – and therefore, the broader landscape of Afro-Mexican contributions to national culture.

Mexico Negro A.C.'s annual Encuentro de Pueblos Negros constitutes a central public arena in which performance is mobilized to foreground Afro-descendant presence and to advance claims for political and social recognition. These gatherings routinely integrate music and dance alongside panels and discussions, making performance a primary mode through which Afro-descendant identity is rendered visible and legible within national discourses that have historically marginalized Blackness. As Varela Huerta observes, the staging of Afro-descendant

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[61] Jesús A. Ramos-Kittrell, Decentering the Nation: Music, Mexicanidad, and Globalization (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).

[62] Varela Huerta, *Tiempo de Diablos*, 2023.

cultural practices at recognition-oriented events is a common and strategic feature of Afro-Mexican activism.

Varela Huerta's study emphasizes the performance of Blackness as central to the *etnogenesis* of Afro-Mexican identity. As deployed in this framework, ethnogenesis tends to presume an earlier absence — or underdevelopment — of racial consciousness within Black communities in Mexico, positioning public performance as the primary catalyst for the emergence of collective racial identity. While this model has been influential, it risks oversimplifying the historical and experiential dimensions of Afro-descendant self-understanding. At the same time, it is important not to understate the political efficacy of these performances. Public enactments of Blackness have played a crucial role in raising awareness and advancing demands for state recognition, particularly within contexts shaped by neoliberal multiculturalism. As Jerry's critique suggests, however, such frameworks of recognition often reproduce new forms of marginalization by rendering Afro-Mexican identity legible primarily through commodified or state-sanctioned cultural displays.

This study builds on, but also departs from, the ethnogenesis model by adopting a more nuanced understanding of identity formation as an ongoing process of negotiation enacted through musical performance. Rather than treating racial consciousness as something that emerges only through recent recognition-oriented performances, I examine how long-standing musical traditions in Costa Chica — particularly chilena cantada — have functioned as sites where Afro-descendant knowledge, memory, and racial awareness are continuously articulated, contested, and reworked within everyday social life.

Costa Chica Geography and Culture

The Costa Chica is a region that spans approximately 400 miles along the southwest coasts of Mexico, roughly between the municipalities of Acapulco in Guerrero and Huatulco in Oaxaca. It is home to one of the largest concentrations of people variously identifying as *negro*, *moreno*, *afrodescendiente*, *afromestizo*, and *afromexicano*. Although the presence of an African diaspora in Mexico can be traced back to colonial times, they are often subject to discrimination due to the fact that many Mexicans are unaware of their existence. However, since the late 1980s there has been a push by the Mexican government as well as Black activists for cultural and/or political recognition of Black populations in Mexico. One of the main ways in which this has been achieved is through public performances of music-dance. Music-dance from the Costa Chica has been relatively understudied compared to other regions known to have large Black populations. Historically, the Danza de los Diablos and chilenas have been the traditions most associated with Black communities in the Costa Chica. More recently, some groups are looking at Africa as a source of inspiration for reconnecting with their heritage. Borrowing from other parts of the diaspora is also a common thread.

Carlos Ruiz Rodríguez's chapter, "La Costa Chica y su Diversidad Musical," offers a panoramic overview of the traditional music of the Costa Chica region.[63] Throughout the chapter, he presents traditional musical expressions as integral to the everyday lives of the Afro-Mexican, Indigenous, and mestizo communities that coexist in this territory. Ruiz Rodríguez notes that Costa Chica remains one of the most marginalized regions in terms of systematic scholarly

[63] Carlos Ruiz Rodríguez, "La Costa Chica y su diversidad musical: Ensayo sobre las expresiones afrodescendientes," in *Cunas, ramas y encuentros sonoros: Doce ensayos sobre el patrimonio musical de México* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2009).

research on its music and dance traditions, which he attributes to the region's historical geographic isolation until the mid–twentieth century.



Figure 1.2 - Map of Costa Chica from *Cuajinicuilapa* (1958) by Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran

A central aspect of the chapter is its discussion of colonial ethnic categories — indios, negros, and gente de razón (mestizos) — which historically structured social differentiation in the region. These designations continue to shape local forms of self-identification, such as the widespread use of the term morenos, and remain analytically useful for mapping contemporary musical practices. Ruiz Rodríguez frames music and dance as sites of cultural exchange that reflect long-standing processes of interaction and hybridity. At the same time, a broader regional identity expressed through the term costeño has been promoted in some contexts to emphasize regional belonging over ethnic difference.

The chapter details several dance and music traditions found throughout Costa Chica. Ruiz Rodríguez discusses dances such as *Moros y Cristianos*, *Doce Pares de Francia*, and *La Conquista*, which dramatize battles between Christians and Muslims or Spaniards and Indigenous peoples. He also examines the *Danza de los Diablos*, a performance closely associated with Afro-mestizo identity and typically performed during Day of the Dead celebrations. The diablos, wearing masks and tattered clothing, move through the streets accompanied by an instrumental ensemble that includes harmonica, quijada (donkey jawbone), tigrera or bote (friction drum), and occasionally violin. While Marino Mariano (1998) documents the use of chilenas to accompany the diablos, Ruiz Rodríguez notes that this accompaniment does not occur in rituals directly associated with the dead.[64]

In *Afro-Mexico,* Anita González argues that the forward tilted posture, loose body movement, and "open sexuality" of the devil dancers signify African aesthetics within the dance. A common thread in the analysis of this dance is that performers use it to create a sense of power in the subversion of the normative social order. Natalia Gabayet argues the following: "We can deduce that dance stands in opposition to a major moral code—one that reflects the demonization of otherness and the cultural domination carried out by the Church, and subsequently internalized by the Black population of the Costa Chica within the ritual space."[65]

The danza de los diablos thus serves as an expression of resistance to the hegemonic power structures through ritualized performance. Integral to this practice is the notion of having a spiritual animal companion, that is taken from Mixtec, Amuzgo, Chatino, and Nahua Tlapaneca

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[64] Ibid.

[65] Natalia Gabayet González, *El tigre escondido: Memoria ritual de los pueblos negros de la Costa Chica* (Ciudad de México: Turner, 2020), 90.

traditions. Through their body movements and regalia these participants perform representations of death, masculinity, and animal spirit guides. In *El tigre escondido: Memoria ritual de los pueblos negros de la Costa Chica*, Gabayet argues that this practice demonstrates "un pueblo negro, un tanto indígena, un tanto blanco y sobre todo muy costeño (A Black people—somewhat Indigenous, somewhat White, and, above all, very coastal)."[66] The tradition demonstrates a constellation of ideas from various sources negotiated over generations, yet this tradition is considered one of the most emblematically Black expressions from the Costa Chica. Participants connect their involvement with these performances to their Black identity. Victor Hugo Laredo Morales, one of the participants from a staged performance in Santiago Llano Grande in 2018, asks "cuantos años tuvieron que pasar para que nos tomaran en cuenta a los negros (How many years had to pass before we Black people were taken into account)?"[67] These two sides demonstrate a give and take between wanting to be seen as Black while acknowledging that the dance itself in derived from various backgrounds.

Another significant tradition discussed by Ruiz Rodriguez is the *Baile del Toro de Petate*, which stages the taming of a wild bull by cowboys representing the region's historical cattle workers. This dance encodes symbolic hierarchies related to rural labor and is accompanied by sones performed on violin, drum, or wind band. The Toro de Petate reinforces connections between the religious devotion to San Nicolás de Tolentino and Costa Chica's ranching past. Ruiz Rodríguez situates his work in dialogue with earlier scholarship by Vicente T. Mendoza,

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Del Gallo al Grito, "La Danza de los Diablos de Santiago Llano Grande," YouTube video, July 31, 2018, https://youtu.be/1LLshuwuWNE.

Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, Moisés Ochoa, and Miguel Ángel Gutiérrez, while emphasizing the continued need for research centered on the region's musical diversity.

The Chilena Supergenre

Music scholar Alex Stewart argues that the chilena exists as a broad array of subgenres that serve "geographically and culturally distinct populations" across the Costa Chica.[68] Stewart identifies five principal variants within the chilena complex: *chilena cantada*, *banda*, *orquesta*, *artesa*, and *conjunto*. Chilena cantada, the guitar-based and text-driven form, foregrounds sung poetry and is the principal focus of this project. Banda chilena, often performed instrumentally and closely associated with staged dance, is the most recognizable version in folkloric display and the one most often presented in state-sanctioned spectacles such as the Guelaguetza by delegations from Pinotepa Nacional and Jamiltepec. Orquesta, which has fallen out of practice, uses smaller ensembles with strings and woodwinds rather than the heavier brass emphasis of banda. Artesa, meanwhile, is the Afro-Mexican variant most visibly linked to Black expressive culture through its percussive dance platform and embodied performance practice, which helps explain its prominence in activist discourse. Conjunto names a more contemporary and hybridized format shaped by commercial popular music.

The most widely recognized form of chilena—particularly in national and tourism contexts—is the folkloric chilena, where the music is performed by a wind ensemble (banda). This form, often instrumental and performed without singing, is closely associated with staged representations of regional identity. It is prominently featured in state-sponsored events such as the Guelaguetza, where delegations from Pinotepa Nacional and Jamiltepec present

[68] Alex Stewart, "La chilena mexicana es peruana: Multiculturalism, Regionalism, and Transnational Musical Currents in the Hispanic Pacific," Latin American Music Review 34, no. 1 (2013): 72.

choreographed versions of the chilena as emblematic of Costa Chica culture. In these contexts, the chilena is standardized and stylized, its rhythmic vitality and flirtatious dance patterns preserved while its local variability is streamlined for broader audiences. As such, banda-based folkloric performance plays a key role in mediating the chilena's visibility within national imaginaries, even as it represents only one facet of a much broader expressive field.

In contrast, chilena cantada—the primary focus of this study—operates within a more intimate and text-driven performance tradition. Typically accompanied by guitar and sometimes requinto, this variant foregrounds sung poetry, often structured in octosyllabic verse and rich with local references, humor, and social commentary. Rather than serving primarily as dance music, chilena cantada is frequently oriented toward listening, improvisation, and the circulation of *versos* (poetry) among performers. Its aesthetic aligns with broader trova traditions, and it remains central to local festivals such as the Festival de la Chilena in Jamiltepec, where composition and lyrical delivery are key criteria of evaluation.

Other ensemble-based variants, including *chilena de orquesta* and *chilena de conjunto* (or banda tropical), further demonstrate the genre's adaptability. Orquesta-based chilenas incorporate strings and woodwinds, producing a timbral palette that bridges rural and urban sensibilities, while conjunto styles reflect more recent hybridizations with commercial genres such as cumbia.



Figure 1.3 - Folkloric chilena performance during the patron saint festival *tata santiagu* in Pinotepa Nacional



Figure 1.4 - Los Banqueros in Pinotepa Nacional singing chilena cantada

Particularly significant for understanding the relationship between music and identity in the Costa Chica is the *chilena de artesa*, which is closely associated with Afro-Mexican communities. In this variant, the artesa—a hollowed wooden platform, historically an turned over canoe—serves as both a visual and sonic focal point, with dancers producing percussive rhythms through stomping movements. The artesa form is not only musically distinctive but also symbolically charged, often interpreted as an index of African diasporic heritage within the region. Its emphasis on percussive embodiment and collective participation distinguishes it from other chilena variants and situates it within broader discourses of Black cultural expression.

Chilena cantada and chilena de artesa intersect in both repertoire and performance practice. Songs may circulate between formats, and musicians often move fluidly across these contexts. Yet, in contemporary cultural politics, the artesa has become more closely aligned with the aims of Afro-Mexican activist organizations, in part because its visual and sonic features are more readily legible as markers of Blackness. By contrast, chilena cantada, while deeply embedded in Afro-Mexican communities, does not always foreground racial identity as explicitly in performance, instead articulating belonging through place, language, and poetic discourse.

A different mode of chilena classification, proposed by Baltazar A. Velasco García, makes this connection between musical form and social identity explicit by organizing chilena practices along ethno-racial lines: "The Black people perform their sones de artesa (Afro-Chilena), the mestizos their instrumental chilena (Mestizo chilena), and the Indigenous people their fandanguito (Indigenous chilena)."[69] While this framework risks reifying racial and cultural boundaries, it nevertheless reflects an emic understanding of how musical styles are associated

[69] Baltazar A. Velasco García, *Un son mexicano llamado chilena: Baile y canto de la Costa Chica de Oaxaca y de Guerrero* (Oaxaca: 1450 Ediciones, 2016), loc. 230.

with particular communities within the Costa Chica. When read alongside Stewart's more formalist taxonomy, Velasco García's classification underscores that the chilena is not only a musical genre but also a socially differentiated field of practice, in which questions of race, region, and identity are continually negotiated.

Sounding out Chilena — Forms

A substantial portion of Ruiz Rodriguez's chapter is devoted to the role of chilenas in Costa Chica. Ruiz Rodríguez explains that earlier chilenas featured Phrygian cadences and formal elements associated with older Latin American song traditions, while newer chilenas—emerging from the second third of the twentieth century onward—tend toward minor modes and more standardized formal structures, particularly the copla–estribillo–interlude triad. Instrumentation has also shifted over time: whereas chilenas were once commonly performed with bajo quinto, harp, or violin, guitar trios became dominant by the mid–twentieth century, and today wind bands constitute the most emblematic ensemble for their performance. The author further notes that chilena cantada typically employs octosyllabic coplas and follows a structure he describes as a "sung copla–sung refrain–musical interlude triad, with instrumental introduction and closing."[70] The chilena competition in Jamiltepec is highlighted as an important space in which the genre is publicly articulated.

Research Questions

Afro-descendant populations have long been part of the Mexican state, contributing to its cultural, economic, and social life for centuries, even as they have remained structurally marginalized. My research interrogates how multicultural recognition, rather than redressing this

[70] Ruiz Rodríguez, "La Costa Chica y su diversidad musical," 72.

exclusion, often reinscribes it — by privileging narrow, aestheticized notions of blackness that align with state agendas while obscuring the full complexity of Afro-Mexican cultural forms. Anthropologist Anthony Russell Jerry (2023) has argued, multicultural recognition in Mexico is an extension of the post-revolutionary project of mestizaje.[71] In his ethnographic account of Costa Chica, Jerry shows how state officials seek to frame the region as a distinctly "black" space. In doing so, recognition becomes a "methodology of mestizaje" that reaffirms the non-Black mestizo as the archetype of the ideal Mexican citizen.[72] In this sense, multicultural recognition paradoxically isolates Blackness into carefully bounded cultural forms while obscuring the broader Afro-descendant influences already embedded within Mexican national and regional culture.

The study centers on the chilena, a musical and dance expression developed out of the *cueca* (a Chilean dance brought to Mexico by immigrant sailors), and one of the most influenced by Afro-Mexican communities. Through a study of the chilena, this project sheds light on afrodescendencia as a fluid and dynamic historical process of cultural presence that challenges aesthetic readings of "Africanness." By examining chilena and the historical precedents it has laid out for the emergence of other Afrodescendent cultural forms in Costa Chica, this project sheds light on the trans-national and transactional aspects of human imagination and behavior that make Afro-Mexican culture an arena for political representation today. In so doing, the project attends to the political character of Afro-Mexicanidad as it has become a site for the production of symbolic capital within the new multicultural discourse promoted by the Mexican

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[71] Jerry, *Blackness in Mexico*, 3.

[72] Ibid.

state. Ultimately, this study hopes to make inroads into the complex and intertwined history of African heritage in Mexican society.

This project asks: How do Afro-Mexican communities in Costa Chica use performance to assert identity, navigate recognition, and contest the logics of state multiculturalism? To answer this, I explore how music and dance function as domains of political expression and identity formation. Furthermore, I seek to address the following questions:

- How are chilenas performed, interpreted, and circulated within local Afro-Mexican communities, and how do these practices vary between everyday, community-based contexts and state-sponsored performances?
- In what ways do Afro-Mexican performers and cultural organizers articulate or resist state definitions of Blackness through music and dance?
- How has the inclusion of Afro-Mexican cultural expressions like chilena and Danza de los Diablos in state-sponsored events shaped their meanings, visibility, and reception—both locally and nationally?
- What role do aesthetics have in the recognition or marginalization of Afro-Mexican identity in the multicultural framework?

As María Fernanda Escallón observes, heritage politics frequently deploy the rhetoric of inclusion while overlooking the lived realities of Black communities.[73] This project positions chilena as a critical, yet understudied, entry point into the politics of Black cultural recognition in Mexico. While state multiculturalism increasingly celebrates afrodescendencia through African coded forms, chilena offers a subtler but no less powerful mode of Afro-descendant expression—

[73] Maria Fernanda Escallon, *Becoming Heritage: Recognition, Exclusion, and the Politics of Black Cultural Heritage in Colombia*, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

rooted in oral poetics, local history, and everyday performance. At a time when African heritage is often reduced to visible markers and stylized forms, studying chilena offers a more complex view of afrodescendencia and its role in the cultural politics of contemporary Mexico. Although chilena is also mobilized within activist contexts, its hybrid and fluid character often renders it less immediately legible within multicultural frameworks that privilege more visibly African-coded forms. I argue that chilena's ambiguous and hybrid status within Costa Chica complicates multicultural frameworks that privilege easily legible performances of Blackness, revealing instead how Afro-descendant identity is articulated through fluid, everyday, and regionally embedded cultural practices. More broadly, this dissertation argues that chilena's relative instability as a marker of Blackness is not a weakness, but rather one of its greatest strengths, allowing Black communities in Costa Chica to negotiate and respond to shifting racial formations in Mexico from mestizaje to multiculturalism.

Theoretical Frameworks

Drawing on Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* and Kay Kaufman Shelemay's contributions to memory studies, I will examine how the chilena serves as a cultural repository for Afro-Mexican history.[74] According to Nora, "A lieux de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community".[75] Performances of chilenas are acts of memory in which community identity is preserved, celebrated, and contested.

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[74] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, 1989; Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "Music, Memory and History," *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 2006.

[75] Pierre Nora, "From Lieux de mémoire to Realms of Memory," preface to *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xvii.

They are a space where Afro-Mexican communities commemorate their historical contributions to Mexican nation-building, while challenging narratives that have historically marginalized their presence and significance.

Drawing on Richard Bauman's performance theory, I understand musical performance as a reflexive and socially marked even that emerges through interaction between performers and audiences and is shaped by shared expectations, conventions, and interpretive frameworks. This framework is particularly productive for analyzing chilena cantada, which functions as a culturally saturated performance event through which Afro-Mexican communities articulate belonging, authority, and racialized presence. Whether enacted in informal gatherings, community celebrations, or institutionalized cultural spaces, the chilena operates as a site where meaning remains fluid. In performances that incorporate elements from other regional genres or stylistic traditions, performative framing itself becomes a strategy for navigating competing racial, aesthetic, and political goals.

Paul Gilroy's The Black Atlantic (1993) remains foundational for its insistence on understanding Black expressive culture as diasporic, transnational, and politically charged.[76] While Gilroy emphasizes circulation and hybridity across the Atlantic world, his insights extend to localized traditions that carry histories of displacement and reinvention. Within this diasporic lens, the chilena — often interpreted as a mestizo genre — can be reexamined as a repertoire shaped by Afro-descendant presence and performance practices that link Costa Chica to broader currents of Black cultural production.

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[76] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 1995.

Tianna Paschel's Becoming Black Political Subjects (2018) provides a critical framework for understanding how Afro-descendant movements gain visibility through state-led multicultural reforms.[77] Paschel's concept of political subject formation is central to my analysis of how chilena cantada — a form deeply embedded in regional life yet frequently detached from its Afro-descendant roots in national narratives — becomes a contested site through which performers negotiate recognition and erasure.

Building on these insights, María Fernanda Escallón's Becoming Heritage (2023) offers a critical lens on the cultural politics of recognition under neoliberal multiculturalism.[78] Escallón shows how heritage regimes can reproduce internal hierarchies and obscure material inequalities, privileging symbolic inclusion over structural transformation. Cultural recognition, in this framework, becomes a substitute for social justice rather than its guarantee. I draw on this critique to examine how folklorized representations of Afro-Mexican culture—particularly staged performances of chilena—can aestheticize Blackness while leaving racialized poverty and exclusion unaddressed. Although such performances generate symbolic capital and public visibility, they often fail to translate into meaningful redistribution or political power.

Methodology

This research was based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Costa Chica region of Oaxaca (July to August of 2024 and August to December of 2025), with primary emphasis on chilena cantada—the sung, guitar-based variant of the chilena tradition. Through participant observation, performance-based engagement, and semi-structured interviews, I

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[77] Tiana Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects*.

[78] Maria Escallon, *Becoming Heritage.*

examined how chilena cantada functions as a key site of Afro-descendant knowledge, memory, and identity formation in everyday social life. While I also observed folkloric chilena and other regional genres such as *charanga* and *merequetengue*, these served primarily as contextual points of comparison rather than the central focus of the study.

Fieldwork was centered in Pinotepa Nacional, where I worked closely with the Casa de Cultura by participating as a performing musician in community events and maintaining sustained contact with instructors, students, and local performers. My positionality as a musician enabled me to engage chilena cantada as a lived, embodied practice. This performance-based methodology provided insight into repertoire selection, stylistic conventions, performance practices, and the social contexts in which chilenas cantada is shared.

A significant portion of the research involved sustained engagement with practitioners of chilena cantada, including interviews and informal conversations with members of Los Banqueros and other local guitarists and singers. Los Banqueros, a group of older men who regularly gather in the central plaza of Pinotepa Nacional to perform chilenas and versos, constituted a central site of ethnographic inquiry. Their gatherings functioned as spaces of oral history, intergenerational transmission, and collective memory, offering critical insight into how Afro-descendant identity is articulated through lyrical content, musical style, and social interaction.

In addition to interviews, I attended rehearsals, concerts, and informal performances where chilena cantada was performed in both public and semi-private settings. These included patron saint festivals, community celebrations, and everyday social gatherings. I also attended larger cultural events where folkloric representations of chilena were staged, including state-

supported performances and competitions. Observing these contexts allowed me to analyze how chilena circulates differently across intimate community spaces and formalized folkloric frameworks, particularly in relation to processes of cultural standardization and heritage tourism.

Ethnographic research was complemented by archival and documentary research on the history and folklorization of the chilena, with particular attention to the contributions of Álvaro Carrillo and the marginalization of Afro-descendant perspectives within dominant narratives of Mexican musical history. I also conducted interviews with personnel at the Museo Nacional de las Culturas Afromestizas in Cuajinicuilapa, which provided institutional perspectives on the documentation and public representation of Afro-Mexican musical traditions. Together, these methods allowed for an analysis of chilena as a social process through which Afro-descendant communities in Costa Chica negotiate visibility, belonging, and cultural articulation.

Chapter Previews

This dissertation is organized around four chapters that collectively examine how chilena cantada functions as a site for performing Blackness, negotiating Afro-Mexican identity, and articulating belonging in Costa Chica. Chapter 1, "The Chilena and Performing Blackness in Costa Chica," introduced the three central components of this study (chilena, Afro- Mexican subjectivity, and the Costa Chica region) and establishes the historical, political, and theoretical foundations of the dissertation. The chapter outlines how performance has become central to contemporary frameworks of political recognition, and how chilena is a key lens through which we can answer questions about performing Blackness in Mexico.

Chapter 2, "Origins, Circulation, and Afro-Diasporic Debates of the Chilena," examines the historical emergence of the chilena and the competing narratives that attempt to explain its

origins and development. Drawing on scholarship that traces the genre's connections to the *cueca* and broader transpacific musical currents, the chapter situates the chilena within nineteenth-century networks of migration, trade, and cultural exchange along the Pacific. At the same time, it critically engages longstanding debates over whether the chilena should be understood as an Afro-diasporic form, a mestizo regional genre, or some combination of both.

Chapter 3, "Articulating Place and Race in the Chilenas of Álvaro Carrillo," gives a historical account of the most important chilena composer in Costa Chica and sheds light on how Carrillo is reframed as an Afro-Mexican composer as opposed to how he has long been described as a non racially marked cosmopolitan bolero composer.

Chapter 4, "Los Banqueros and Afro- Mexican Social Memory," centers on Los Banqueros of Pinotepa Nacional to examine how chilena functions as a site of memory connecting present day performance to remembering the past. In this chapter, I discuss local racial imaginaries as they differ from dominant nationalist narratives and highlight how these performances fit within contemporary multiculturalist discourses.

Chapter 5, "Contemporary Chileneros and Chileneras Performing Blackness Within the New Multiculturalist Paradigm Today," looks at how contemporary chileneros and chileneras perform Blackness within Mexico's current multiculturalist paradigm. Focusing on artists who mobilize chilena across local, national, and transnational contexts, the chapter analyzes the use of chilena in political activism, community advocacy, and professional music- making, and the tensions between state recognition and everyday identity negotiation. Three case studies are discussed that highlight diverse strategies and goals.

II. DISCOURSES ON THE ORIGINS OF CHILENA

During the fall of 2025, I spent many afternoons at the Casa de Cultura María Luisa Aguirre Palancare in Pinotepa Nacional, speaking with staff and instructors about local musical traditions. In my first extended conversation with the director, we sat across from each other in his office, surrounded by posters from past festivals and photographs of regional dance groups. As I explained that my research focused on the role of chilena in Afro-Mexican processes of identity formation, he listened quietly, then interrupted with a matter-of-fact statement: "los negros en verdad no son chileneros/ Black people are not really *chileneros*." He went on to suggest that if I was interested in Black musical traditions in the Costa Chica, I should instead look to *charanga* or *merequetengue*—genres he suggested were truly representative of Black culture.

While it is certainly true that these genres hold significant importance for Afro-descended communities in the region, I had come to chilena as an Afro-diasporic music shaped through its absorption and transformation by Afro-descended coastal populations. This framework was informed in part by my reading of The Black Atlantic by Paul Gilroy, and particularly its emphasis on circulation and diasporic exchange. As the conversation continued, the director reached over to his desk and handed me a printed excerpt from a locally circulated text by Alfonso Prudente Moar. The passage read: "En la región de la Costa Oaxaqueña, se practica un género de baile conocido como CHILENA, que aunque tiene una influencia inevitable de los grupos negro e indígenas de la zona, es principalmente mestizo/ In the region of the Oaxacan Coast, a dance genre known as chilena is practiced which, although it has an undeniable

influence from Black and Indigenous groups in the area, is primarily ***mestizo***" [emphasis mine].[79] Here, Afro-descendant influence is acknowledged, yet ultimately contained within a broader mestizo framework. As I will demonstrate, such framing is reflective of a broader discursive pattern in which Blackness is repeatedly subsumed within the logics of mestizaje.

I left the Casa de Cultura that afternoon with a lingering sense of dissonance. The exchange had not simply presented a competing interpretation of the chilena; it had revealed the ways in which cultural authority is exercised in defining who can claim a genre and on what terms. What does it mean for a musical form so central to regional identity to be shaped by Afro-descendant communities and yet discursively distanced from Blackness?

Following Tianna S. Paschel, who argues for the importance of historicizing Black political consciousness in Latin America, this chapter examines how racialized meanings are produced over time.[80] The emergence of Black collective identities is contingent upon specific historical and political conditions, not predetermined universal criteria. I argue that the chilena is not inherently legible as either "Black" or "mestizo." Instead, its racial and cultural meanings have been shaped through a series of overlapping and conflicting narratives—academic, institutional, and local—that reflect broader struggles over nation, race, and belonging.

This chapter traces these narratives through a range of sources, from early musicological writings to regional historiography and contemporary local perspectives. I begin by examining dominant origin stories, including the widely circulated account of the chilena's arrival via

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[79] Alfonso A. Pudente Moar, *Historia de la chilena y sones mexicanos que se cantan y bailan en la Costa Chica de los estados de Oaxaca y Guerrero*, 3rd ed., (Oaxaca, Oax., 2003): 4.

[80] Theodore W. Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico: Race and Nation after the Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 10.

Chilean sailors and the framework of the broader zamacueca complex, which situates the genre within transpacific circuits of exchange. I then analyze how scholars such as Vicente T. Mendoza, Moisés Ochoa Campos, and Alex Stewart have framed the chilena within national and transnational contexts. Finally, I turn to local discourses in the Costa Chica, including those articulated by cultural institutions and practicing musicians, which reveal competing understandings of the genre's racial identity. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that the chilena is a site in which the meanings of Blackness, mestizaje, and regional identity are produced and contested.

Ships and Shipwreck Mythology

One of the most widely circulated narratives concerning the origins of the chilena holds that the genre arrived on the Pacific coast of Mexico through Chilean sailors associated with the naval expeditions of Lord Thomas Cochrane in the early nineteenth century. In its most commonly repeated form, the story centers on the ship Araucano, which arrived in Acapulco on January 25, 1822 carrying sailors who apparently introduced the *cueca* to local populations in Guerrero and Oaxaca.[81] This account was popularized most prominently by Moisés Ochoa Campos in *La Chilena Guerrerense* (1987), though versions of the story appear in other regional histories and musical scholarship as well.[82] In these narratives, the chilena emerges through a concrete process of cultural exchange. Chilean sailors arrive by sea, share their music and dance, and local populations subsequently adapt the form into what becomes known as the chilena.

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[81] Alex Stewart, "La Chilena Mexicana es Peruana."

[82] Moisés Ochoa Campos, *La chilena guerrerense* (Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 1987).

This narrative provides the chilena with a singular point of origin rooted in maritime encounter. However, the story raises significant historical problems. As Alex Stewart notes, the cueca itself was still in the process of formation within Chile during roughly the same period that the Araucano supposedly introduced it to Mexico. Additionally, the cueca belongs to the broader zamacueca complex circulating between Peru, Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina in the early nineteenth century and had not yet stabilized into a distinctly Chilean national genre by the early 1820s. The notion that the chilena could emerge from a single event is also difficult to sustain. More likely, musical forms associated with the cueca circulated gradually through repeated maritime exchanges, commercial routes, and migratory movements along the Pacific coast (ie. the California Gold Rush in the mid-19th century).

Still, the persistence of the Araucano narrative is significant. The maritime imagery of the Araucano narrative resonates strongly with broader discourses surrounding Blackness in the Costa Chica. As Laura A. Lewis and Kelvin White have observed, local narratives concerning the origins of Afro-descendant populations in the region frequently center on ships and shipwrecks. Writing about El Ciruelo, Oaxaca, White notes that elders often traced their ancestry to stories of foreign ships wrecking along the coast.[83] In some versions, the ships carried enslaved Africans; in others, the details are left vague. Either way, the shipwreck survivors reached land, established communities along the Costa Chica, and became the ancestors of present-day Black or moreno populations. For White, these narratives reveal not only the erosion of historical memory surrounding slavery in Mexico, but also a tension between two competing discourses: one that

[83] Kelvin L. White, "Mestizaje and Remembering in Afro-Mexican Communities of the Costa Chica: Implications for Archival Education in Mexico," *Archival Science* 9 (2009): 44.

seeks meaning and historical explanation for Black presence in the region, and another marked by an uncertainty regarding Black origins in the area.

It comes as little surprise that one of the dominant origin stories of the chilena likewise centers on a ship, even if not a shipwreck. In both cases, ships operate as the technology of arrival, linking Costa Chica population and culture to the notion of displacement. The recurrence of maritime origin stories in both discussions of Blackness and chilena suggests the extent to which the Pacific functions as an imagined space of historical connection in Costa Chica discourse. At the same time, these narratives often obscure the central historical reality that Afro-descendant populations in the Costa Chica emerged through the violence of the transatlantic slave trade and the forced labor systems of Spanish colonialism. However, in recent decades these histories have become increasingly brought to the center of attention through the efforts of Afro-Mexican activists and cultural organizations in the Costa Chica, many of whom have worked to reconnect regional identity to the histories of slavery, displacement, and African diaspora that earlier narratives avoided.

The Zamacueca Complex as an African Diaspora Connection

Scholars understand the chilena as part of a broader network of related music-dance forms referred to collectively as the "zamacueca complex."[84] As Alex Stewart explains, the chilena belongs to a family of couple dances that includes the Peruvian zamacueca or marinera, Chilean cueca, Bolivian cueca, and Argentinian Zamba. These genres share a number of similarities, including paired courtship dancing, use of handkerchiefs, and related rhythmic patterns, while also developing distinct local characteristics in their respective regions.

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[84] Stewart, "La chilena mexicana," 72.

In Peru, the zamacueca was renamed the marinera following the War of the Pacific (1879–1884), partly as a nationalist effort to distance the genre from Chilean influence.[85] Meanwhile, in Chile, the cueca became known as emblematic of Chilean national identity, while in Mexico the chilena retained its reference to Chile even as it developed into a distinct regional form in the Costa Chica of Oaxaca and Guerrero.

Within this broader transpacific framework, questions concerning African diasporic influence become especially significant. One of the most influential attempts to theorize an African genealogy for the zamacueca complex came from Afro-Peruvian intellectual Nicomedes Santa Cruz. Writing in the booklet titled *Cumanana* (1970), Santa Cruz argued that the Peruvian marinera descended from an older Afro-Peruvian dance called the *landó*, which itself derived from the *lundú*, a dance of Congo-Angolan origin brought to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade.[86] According to Santa Cruz, the lundú gave rise to the landó, as well as dozens of related couple dances throughout Latin America. Central to this constellation of dances was the *golpe de frente*—a pelvic bump or choreographed bodily contact described by colonial chroniclers as overtly sensual or erotic.

As Heidi Feldman explains, Santa Cruz's theory was less important for its certainty than for its intervention into Peruvian national discourse. At a moment when Afro-Peruvian cultural contributions were often marginalized or erased, Santa Cruz sought to reinscribe Blackness into the history of coastal Peruvian music by linking the marinera and zamacueca to a broader African diaspora. His work drew heavily on Afro-Brazilian scholarship concerning the lundú as

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[85] Feldman, *Black Rhythms of Peru*, 274n16.

[86] Ibid., 101-105.

well as earlier writings by Fernando Romero, who similarly argued that the zamacueca possessed African-derived choreographic traits. Although scholars such as William Tompkins later criticized Santa Cruz's theory for lacking firm historical evidence—particularly the claim that a dance explicitly called lundú existed in Peru—its influence persisted.

These debates surrounding the zamacueca complex and African diasporic origins are important for understanding later discussions of the chilena in Mexico. In *La Chilena Guerrerense* (1987), Moisés Ochoa Campos opens his discussion of the chilena by asking directly whether the cueca—and by extension the chilena—was of African origin.[87] Drawing on nineteenth-century Chilean intellectual debates, Ochoa cites Chilean writer Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna's claim that the cueca was "de origen negro," tracing the zamacueca to African influences carried to South America by enslaved Africans from Guinea.[88] At the same time, Ochoa also references writers who rejected Vicuñas assertions and ultimately frames the history of the cueca (and by extension the chilena) through this unresolved tension. In this sense, the African diasporic connection to the zamacueca complex was not invented solely by contemporary scholars, but has long been embedded within the historical discourse surrounding the cueca, marinera, and chilena themselves.

Chilena as Iberian

Among the earliest and most influential scholarly writings on the chilena are from Vicente T. Mendoza, whose work helped establish the foundational framework through which the genre would be understood in Mexico. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Mendoza

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[87] Ochoa Campos, *La chilena guerrerense*, 10.

[88] Ibid., 18-23

approached the chilena primarily through the lens of Spanish musical tradition. Mendoza begins from the premise that the chilena arrived in Mexico through maritime contact associated with Chilean sailors traveling between Chile and Acapulco during the California Gold Rush era of the 1850s. In his account, the genre was subsequently transformed within the Costa Chica, acquiring "nuevos matices y aun nuevos aspectos/new nuances and even new aspects," yet still remained essentially the same as the cueca.[89] As described in the liner notes accompanying the INAH recording *Música de la Costa Chica de Guerrero y Oaxaca*, Mendoza ultimately considered the chilena practiced in Mexico to be a localized variant of the Chilean cueca "tal como la conocemos y practicamos actualmente en México (as we know and practice it today in Mexico)."[90]

Central to Mendoza's writing is his emphasis on Spanish musical structures. In discussing the rhythmic organization of the chilena, he identifies the alternation between 6/8 and 3/4 meter —a feature commonly associated with the broader son tradition—as deriving from what he calls the "modalidad del ritmo del bolero español."[91] He likewise analyzes the melodic structure of the chilena in terms of recurring "semiperíodos," or half-phrases (four measures), consisting of alternating metric groupings between 6/8 and 3/4. Through this approach, Mendoza situates the chilena firmly within a Hispanic musical genealogy rooted in Iberian song and dance traditions, rather than within African diasporic expressive practices.

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[89] Vicente T. Mendoza, "La canción chilena en México," *Revista Musical Chilena* 4, no. 28 (1948): 8.

[90] Thomas Stanford, "Música de la Costa Chica," liner notes to *Música de la Costa Chica de Guerrero y Oaxaca* (Mexico City: INAH, 2002), 20–21.

[91] Vicente T. Mendoza, "La canción chilena en México," 9.

Despite writing about a genre that developed in one of Mexico's most historically significant Afro-descendant regions, Mendoza makes no reference to Black musical influence or African diasporic history. The Costa Chica appears primarily as a site of regional localization rather than racial formation. In this sense, Mendoza's work aligns closely with broader post-revolutionary ideologies of mestizaje that dominated Mexican cultural nationalism during the twentieth century. Within this framework, regional musical traditions were often celebrated as products of mixture and hybridity while the specific historical contributions of Afro-descendant populations were minimized, subsumed, or rendered invisible altogether.

Mendoza's silence regarding Afro-diasporic influence is especially significant when contrasted with the debates surrounding the zamacueca complex. Whereas scholars and intellectuals such as Nicomedes Santa Cruz and Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna entertained the possibility of African genealogies for the cueca and related genres, Mendoza instead places the chilena squarely within Iberian tradition.

Chilena is/as Son

Both Moisés Ochoa Campos and Beltazar Velasco García position the chilena within the broader category of son mexicano. For Ochoa, the chilena constitutes a regional son associated specifically with Guerrero, while Velasco frames it more broadly as a son tradition belonging to the Costa Chica as a whole. In both cases, the chilena is ultimately incorporated into a regionalized mestizo musical framework, even as traces of Afro-descendant influence remain present within their discussions. Velasco, for example, explicitly distinguishes between what he calls the "chilena negroide" associated with the artesa tradition and the more instrumental or

folkloric chilena, which he frames primarily as mestizo.[92] Such distinctions reveal an effort to racialize particular expressive forms within the broader chilena tradition while simultaneously maintaining the instrumental chilena as part of a regional mestizo son tradition.

At the same time, framing the chilena as a son raises important questions regarding the relationship between chilena and son as distinct yet overlapping categories in Costa Chica. Neither Ochoa nor Velasco substantially addresses the fact that "son" (as it is referred to chilena performs" and chilena itself frequently coexist side by side within local performance contexts, particularly in folkloric performances. Typically, a chilena is followed immediately by a faster-tempo son that retains nearly identical rhythmic characteristics. A typical folkloric performance may include the chilena itself, a son section, recited *versos*, and various *juegos* or dance games performed between participants. Rather than functioning as entirely separate genres, chilena and son often appear as interconnected performance nodes. This close relationship between chilena and son was already noted by Thomas Stanford, who observed that the son following the chilena "recuerda la fuga con que suelen terminar muchas piezas andinas/is reminiscent of the fugue-like ending found in many Andean pieces."[93]

The chilena has not generally been incorporated into national discussions of the Mexican son complex in the same way as genres such as *son jarocho*, or *son huasteco*. Alex Stewart addresses this ambiguity, arguing that the chilena's relative flexibility and adaptability may, in fact, stem from its partial exclusion from rigid genre classification. Because the chilena was not fully stabilized within a singular national son framework, it was able to develop a wide range of

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[92] Velasco García, *Un son mexicano llamado chilena*, loc. 230.

[93] Stanford, "Música de la Costa Chica," 15.

subgenres and ensemble configurations, including chilena de banda, chilena de orquesta, chilena de conjunto, and chilena cantada.

The chilena's ambiguous relationship to the Mexican son complex may also reflect the relative geographic and cultural isolation of the Costa Chica for much of the twentieth century. Until the construction of the coastal highway connecting Acapulco and Pinotepa Nacional in the 1970s, the region remained comparatively disconnected from many of the institutional and commercial centers that shaped national folklore discourse in Mexico. As a result, the chilena developed somewhat outside the canonizing processes that transformed other regional son traditions into nationally recognized genres. This relative marginality may help explain why the chilena has remained unusually open to competing interpretations—as mestizo, Afro-descendant, Indigenous, transpacific, and regional—without ever fully resolving into a singular category.

Chilena and *ñuu savi*

The association of the chilena with mestizo regional identity becomes more complicated in the writings of Thomas Stanford, who writes about the genre within an explicitly Indigenous context. Writing about Mixtec (*ñuu savi*) communities in Oaxaca during the 1950s and early 1960s, Stanford documents how chilena and son formed part of everyday ceremonial and social life in Jamiltepec. His work is particularly significant because it reveals how deeply localized these musical forms had become among Indigenous communities in Costa Chica.

Stanford writes that among the Indigenous populations of Jamiltepec "no hay ninguna diferencia entre los ritmos de los dos/there is no difference at all between the rhythms of the two," and that one only knows whether a piece is a chilena or a son because the composition itself is recognized as such. Both genres, he explains, were traditionally performed with violin,

jarana, and cajón. Stanford notes that the cajon probably replaced the artesa, which had been common 40 years prior but was apparently already out of use by then.[94] Stanford further notes that in Jamiltepec the customary practice was to perform a chilena first, followed immediately by a faster son. This is the same structure that we see today in folkloric performances.

The fact that chilena and son coexist seamlessly within Indigenous performance practice raises the possibility that local son traditions may have predated the arrival of the cueca/chilena itself, with the chilena becoming absorbed into preexisting regional musical frameworks. Stanford hints at this ambiguity when he notes the close relationship between Costa Chica chilenas and the son traditions of Tierra Caliente in Michoacán, a connection he describes as posing "un problema básico en cuanto al verdadero origen de la chilena mexicana/a basic problem concerning the true origin of the Mexican chilena."[95]

Stanford's work reveals how racialized understandings of the chilena were already emerging in regional discourse in the early 1960s. Although much of his discussion centers on Indigenous communities, he nevertheless states that the chilena tradition was best preserved among the "grupos negroides" of the lower Costa Chica.[96] His work occupies an intermediate position between earlier Hispanicist frameworks that largely ignored Blackness and later multicultural discourses that would more explicitly foreground Afro-Mexican identity. Ultimately, Stanford's writings demonstrate that by the mid-twentieth century the chilena could

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[94] Thomas Stanford, "Datos sobre la música y las danzas de Jamiltepec, Oaxaca," *Anales del INAH* 15 (1962): 196.

[95] Ibid., 199-200.

[96] Ibid., 199.

simultaneously function as an Indigenous regional tradition, a mestizo coastal genre, and a musical form associated with Afro-descendant communities in the Costa Chica.

Chilena as Afro-Descendant

A more explicit attempt to frame the chilena within Afro-descendant cultural history appears in the work of Carlos Ruiz Rodríguez. In "La Costa Chica y su diversidad musical: ensayo sobre las expresiones afrodescendientes," Ruiz Rodríguez situates the musical traditions of Costa Chica within the broader historical formation of Afro-descendant communities in the region. Rather than treating Blackness as peripheral to regional culture, he foregrounds Afro-descendant expressive practices as central to understanding the social and musical history of the Costa Chica.

Ruiz Rodríguez begins by emphasizing the interethnic character of the region, arguing that the Costa Chica developed through centuries of transculturation among Indigenous, African-descended, and mestizo populations. He notes that colonial social categories such as "indios," "negros," and "gente de razón" continued to shape regional social organization and cultural identity long after the colonial period.[97] Although these distinctions persist in modified form, Afro-descendant populations in the Costa Chica frequently identify themselves through terms such as moreno or costeño, categories that simultaneously reference phenotype, region, and shared cultural belonging. Importantly, Ruiz Rodríguez does not present Afro-descendant identity as isolated or static, but rather as formed through ongoing interaction with Indigenous and mestizo communities across the region.

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[97] Ruiz Rodríguez, "La Costa Chica y su diversidad musical," 40.

Unlike earlier scholars such as Vicente T. Mendoza, whose discussions of the chilena largely emphasized mestizaje and Hispanic musical inheritance, Ruiz Rodríguez explicitly frames Costa Chica musical traditions through Afro-descendant cultural production. He repeatedly stresses the hybrid and transcultural formation of Costa Chica traditions, arguing that the region's music emerged through the convergence of "influencias culturales afroandaluzas, prehispánicas, orientales y sudamericanas."[98] In this sense, his work aligns with broader approaches in Afro-Latin American studies that understand Black expressive culture as dynamic, relational, and historically constituted through movement and exchange rather than cultural purity.

Ruiz Rodríguez's discussion of chilena reflects this tension between Afro-descendant identification and regional hybridity. He notes that the chilena occupies a central role within the musical life of the Costa Chica and traces both its musical structure and changing instrumentation over time. Older chilenas, he argues, retained phrygian cadences and features associated with earlier Latin American song traditions, while twentieth-century chilenas increasingly adopted more standardized harmonic and formal structures. He also describes how the genre shifted instrumentally from ensembles featuring bajo quinto, harp, and violin toward guitar trios and eventually brass bands, which today constitute one of the most recognizable chilena sounds.

Ruiz Rodriguez presents chilena as a musical tradition deeply embedded within Afro-descendant communities that simultaneously circulates across Indigenous and mestizo social worlds. Whereas some contemporary cultural discourses attempt to stabilize chilena as either

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[98] Ibid., 44.

definitively Afro-Mexican or fundamentally mestizo, Ruiz Rodríguez instead emphasizes the region's historical processes of exchange and coexistence. In doing so, he offers a framework that recognizes Afro-descendant centrality without erasing the inter-ethnic formation of the genre itself.

Local Histories and Municipal Discourse

Locally produced histories from the Costa Chica reveal many of the same tensions that appear in academic debates surrounding the origins of the chilena. During my archival work in the municipal library of Pinotepa Nacional, I encountered a locally published text by Augurio Rodríguez Clavel titled *Historia y relatos de un pueblo que se nos fue: Santiago Pinotepa Nacional Oaxaca*. The section dedicated to the chilena assembles a broad range of origin narratives, drawing simultaneously from Peruvian, Chilean, Africanist, Hispanist, and regional Mexican discourses. Rather than resolving these competing explanations, the text layers them together, reflecting how local understandings of the chilena frequently operate through accumulation rather than strict historical coherence.

Rodríguez Clavel begins by situating the chilena within the broader zamacueca complex, tracing the genre from the Peruvian *sambacueca* to the Chilean cueca and eventually to the Mexican chilena. Echoing previous discourses, he outlines several competing frameworks: an "Africanist" current that links the zamacueca to Black dance traditions and the lundú, a "Peruanista" current emphasizing Indigenous and colonial Peruvian origins, and a "Hispanist" current that derives the dance from European salon traditions such as the minuet and quadrille.[99]

[99] Augurio Rodríguez Clavel, *Historia y relatos de un pueblo que se nos fue: Santiago Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca* (n.p., n.d.), 70–71.

Particularly striking is the extent to which the text synthesizes arguments from figures such as Nicomedes Santa Cruz, Fernando Romero, and Carlos Vega alongside local Costa Chica interpretations. In doing so, Rodríguez Clavel reproduces on a local level the same broader hemispheric debates surrounding Blackness, mestizaje, and transpacific circulation explored earlier in this chapter.

At the same time, Rodríguez Clavel argues that migrations between Chile, Peru, Mexico, California, and even the Philippines contributed to the emergence of the chilena in Oaxaca and Guerrero through long processes of transculturation. Rather than portraying the chilena as a simple importation from Chile, he describes the genre as the product of multiple converging influences. This emphasis on transculturation strongly resembles the framework articulated by Carlos Ruiz Rodríguez, though Rodríguez Clavel presents it through a more explicitly regional and vernacular lens.

The text also reproduces one of the most common local origin stories surrounding the chilena: the account of a Chilean ship wrecking or becoming stranded near Pinotepa Nacional, whose sailors supposedly left behind their dances and songs. Rodríguez Clavel ultimately treats this narrative with skepticism, acknowledging that "no existe documento alguno que sirva para verificarlo/there exists no document capable of verifying it."[100] Nevertheless, he preserves the story as part of the region's collective memory. He suggests that even if the narrative itself cannot be historically confirmed, the broader processes of maritime exchange and cultural contact associated with Pacific trade routes likely contributed to the formation of the chilena. In this sense, the text mirrors the larger discursive pattern examined earlier in this chapter: ships

[100] Ibid., 72.

and maritime circulation function as technologies of origin linking Costa Chica population and culture.

Perhaps most revealing is the way Rodríguez Clavel negotiates racial identity within the chilena tradition itself. On the one hand, he explicitly frames the Costa Chica as an "afromestiza" region and repeatedly acknowledges African influence in the development of local music and dance. On the other hand, he ultimately subsumes these influences into a broader regional mestizo framework. Even the son de artesa, which Rodríguez Clavel associates most directly with Afro-descendant populations, is positioned as one branch within a larger chilena tradition rather than as a separate Black musical tradition.

At the same time, Rodríguez Clavel's text reveals the persistence of local efforts to differentiate racialized expressive forms within Costa Chica performance culture. He distinguishes between Indigenous sones, mestizo chilenas, and Afro-descendant artesa traditions while simultaneously emphasizing their shared rhythmic and choreographic characteristics. These distinctions parallel those found in the writings of Beltazar Velasco García, who similarly separates the "chilena negroide" of the artesa from the more instrumental and folkloric chilena tradition. In both cases, Blackness is acknowledged as foundational to particular expressive practices while the chilena as a whole remains folded into a broader regional mestizo identity. As a locally produced historical text circulating within Pinotepa Nacional itself, Rodríguez Clavel's work brings academic scholarship, oral tradition, Afro-diasporic discourse, and local folklore together and in doing so reveals some of the ongoing tensions within chilena.

Local Memory and the Authority of Oral History: Beltazar Velasco

My interview with Beltazar Velasco García, a chilena expert and member of the social group Los Banqueros in Pinotepa Nacional, revealed how origin narratives surrounding the chilena continue to circulate not only through scholarship and institutional discourse, but also through local memory and oral tradition. Velasco emphasized that many towns throughout the Costa Chica claim to be the "cuna de la chilena (birthplace of the chilena)," including communities far beyond the immediate coastal region. He noted, for example, that even Sola de Vega maintains its own narrative concerning the origins of the genre.

In his account, around 1850 a Chilean shipwrecked near Pinotepa Nacional, and surviving sailors remained in the region, where they taught local populations their music and dance traditions. Velasco acknowledged that he had never personally seen documentary proof of this event, but he recounted being told by an older resident that a church *acta de defunción* (death certificate) existed recording the death of Chilean sailors from the shipwreck. According to Velasco, the individual who had reportedly seen the document encountered it around the 1960s, at a time when memories of the mid-nineteenth century were, as he put it, "not yet so lost." Although the document itself remains unverifiable, Velasco nevertheless treated the story as credible and historically meaningful.

What is particularly significant about Velasco's version of the narrative is not simply the shipwreck itself, but the racialized process that it follows. According to his account, the surviving sailors taught their music and dances to the local coastal populations, particularly Afro-descendant communities, who then adapted and transformed these forms within the Costa Chica. He explains that, later on, mestizo populations begin to adopt the genre more broadly. This

closely mirrors Velasco's own writings, where he distinguishes between the "chilena negroide" associated with the artesa tradition and the later instrumental chilena identified with mestizo performance practices.

Velasco's narrative is especially revealing because it synthesizes many of the competing discourses explored throughout this chapter. Like the Araucano narrative discussed earlier, his account centers on maritime arrival and transpacific circulation. Like the Africanist interpretations associated with the zamacueca complex, it positions Afro-descendant communities as central agents in the transformation of the genre. Yet at the same time, Velasco ultimately preserves a distinction between Black expressive traditions and the more broadly mestizo chilena instrumental that later emerged in folkloric and regional performance contexts. His account therefore frames the chilena as the product of layered racial and cultural processes unfolding over time.

Perhaps most importantly, Velasco's interview demonstrates how oral history and local memory continue to shape understandings of the chilena's origins independently of archival verification. The significance of the supposed church document lies less in whether it can ultimately be authenticated than in the authority it carries within local memory.

Conclusion

Rather than seeking a singular point of origin, I approach the chilena as a product of overlapping historical processes that include transpacific movement, regional musical exchange, and Afro-diasporic expressive practices. This perspective allows us to move beyond binary formulations—such as "Chilean" versus "Mexican," or "mestizo" versus "Afro"—and instead

consider how the genre operates as a site where multiple genealogies intersect. At the same time, I argue that the relative marginalization of Afro-diasporic frameworks within dominant narratives is not incidental, but reflects longer histories of racial formation in Mexico, in which Blackness has been alternately erased, subsumed, or strategically rearticulated.

This chapter situates the chilena within broader debates about diaspora, history, memory, and cultural politics. In particular, it incoporates theoretical frameworks from scholars such as Paul Gilroy, whose formulation of the Black Atlantic emphasizes the circulation of expressive forms across geographies, and Heidi Carolyn Feldman, who highlights similar dynamics in the Black Pacific. While these models offer important points of departure, I also consider their limits in accounting for the specificities of Afro-Mexican experience, where Blackness is often articulated through regional and national idioms rather than explicitly diasporic ones. As such, the chilena invites us to rethink how Afro-diasporic frameworks might be adapted—or expanded—to better account for what might be understood as a "peripheral" or less legible formation of the diaspora.

III. ARTICULATING PLACE AND RACE IN THE CHILENAS OF ÁLVARO CARRILLO

In 1967, at the height of his fame, Álvaro Carrillo published a poem in homage to his home titled *Canto a la Costa Chica*. By then, his boleros (such as "Sabor a mi" and "Se te Olvida") had earned him widespread acclaim—not only in Mexico, but internationally, with figures like Frank Sinatra and Doris Day performing his songs abroad. Yet, in the same year that he was being celebrated as a symbol of Mexican musical modernity, Carrillo turned his attention toward his past. Canto a la Costa Chica reads as both a lyrical tribute and a personal reckoning: a poetic return to the region of his upbringing, its people, its metaphors, and its musicality. Carrillo states in the preface, *"*I'm Oaxacan by birth and a raised child of the Costa Chica." grounding his artistic identity in the cultural landscape of the Black and Indigenous Pacific coast.[101] Published just two years before his untimely death, the poem suggests that Carrillo, even at the peak of his career, was grappling with the contradictions of national fame and racialized marginalization. As he became a national hero of Mexican cosmopolitanism, this poem reasserted a rootedness in a region and identity long rendered invisible by dominant narratives of mestizaje. In it, Carrillo foregrounds place and race at a moment when Carrillo was being consumed by a national imaginary that prioritized cosmopolitanism over marginalized identities.

This chapter argues that Álvaro Carrillo's *chilenas* — a genre with deep Afro-diasporic roots in the Costa Chica — function as a site of cultural memory through which Carrillo explores his relationship to place, identity, and belonging. While his boleros brought him mainstream success, it is in his chilenas — songs like "Negro de la Costa", "Alingo Lingo", and "Pinotepa" — that Carrillo articulates a racialized and regional self. These songs assert a rooted

[101] Álvaro Carrillo, Canto a la Costa Chica (Mexico City, 1967).

Black identity that runs counter to dominant narratives of mestizaje, which have historically erased or minimized the presence of Afro-Mexicans in national discourse. Contrary to claims that Afro-Mexican identity only recently emerged through a process of political mobilization, Carrillo's work suggests that racial and regional consciousness have long been embedded in popular cultural forms, even if not always legible within nationalist frameworks of culture and race.[102]

In making this argument, I draw from cultural and memory studies to position Carrillo as both a product of and a voice against the silences of Mexican racial discourse. I approach his chilenas as musical texts that carry historical and cultural significance, placing them in conversation with official or state-sponsored narratives. The chapter begins with a biographical overview that situates Carrillo within the racialized geography of the Costa Chica and traces his move through agrarian educational institutions and into the market of commercial music. I then turn to a close analysis of key chilenas, attending to their lyrical content, musical structure, and regional aesthetics. The third section considers the reception and partial erasure of Carrillo's racial identity within the broader canon of Mexican music, examining both how he was framed during his lifetime and how recent generations are reclaiming his legacy. Finally, I consider how contemporary Afro-Mexican artists and institutions have begun to position Carrillo as a central figure in the cultural and political resurgence of Black identity in Mexico. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Carrillo as a cultural figure whose work problematizes the boundaries between center and periphery, mainstream and marginal, mestizo and Black. Through his chilenas, he preserved and performed a memory of Costa Chica that continues to resonate today.

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[102] Varela Huerta, *Tiempo de Diablos.*

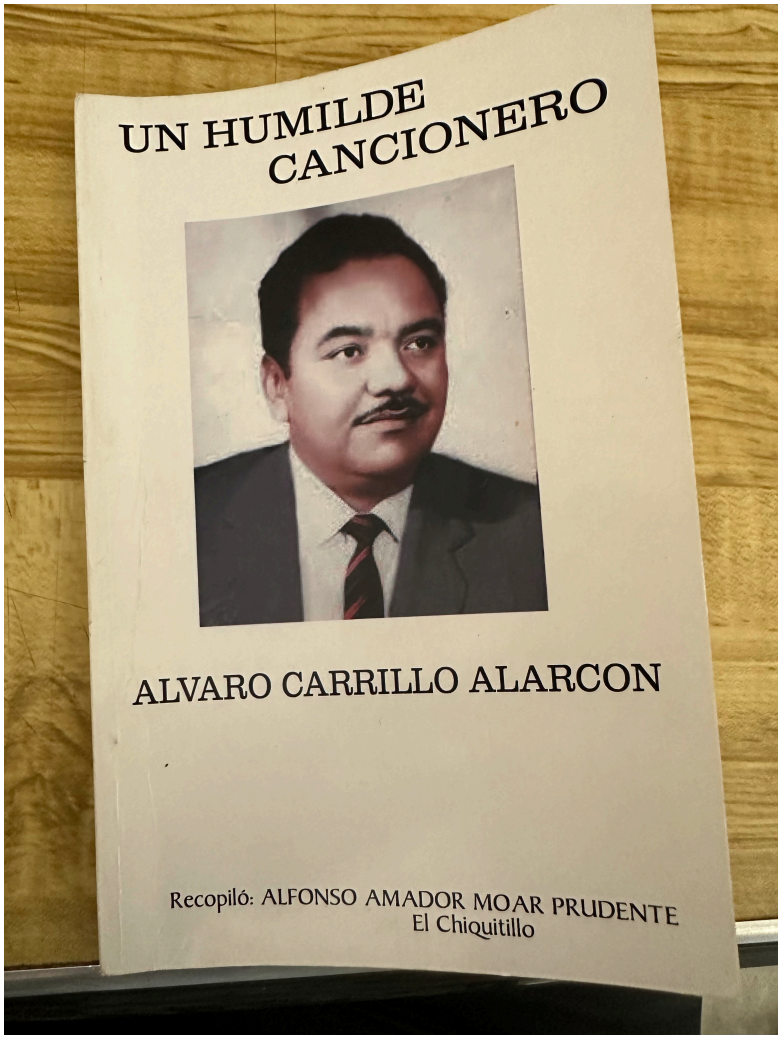

Figure 3.1 - Cover of *Un Humilde Cancionero*, a collection of Álvaro Carrillo's compositions accompanied by biography, and personal anecdotes. Found in Pinotepa Nacional's municipal library.

"*Andan peleando terrenos*": Articulating Place

Álvaro Carrillo, born in 1921 in Cacahuatepec, Oaxaca, came of age in the Costa Chica — a region historically defined by its intertwined Afrodiasporic, Indigenous, and mestizo heritages. His mother, identified in some sources as a *mulata*, died while Carrillo was only seven years old, leaving him to be raised by his stepmother.[103] According to some biographical

[103] Araceli Reynoso and Kate Adlena Cronin, "Carrillo Alarcón, Álvaro," in *Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro–Latin American Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

accounts (including his own son's writings), he was brought up alongside half-siblings, although existing documentation is unclear on their exact familial relationship. This mixed familial structure may have shaped Carrillo's understanding of racial identity from a young age, particularly in a region like Costa Chica, where racial and cultural identities often blur across local lines of kinship and community.

As Jesús Mendoza Muñoz writes, the Costa Chica's social landscape in the colonial and postcolonial periods was marked by a complex interplay of *encomenderos*, Indigenous communities, Black *vaqueros*, and *estancieros*.[104] The region remained on the margins of national development projects, and the layering of race, land, and labor histories in this context created both material and symbolic exclusions. It was from this layered environment that Carrillo emerged, shaped by both the racialized marginalization of his home region as well as its oral and musical traditions.

Carrillo's educational path was deeply informed by the agrarian realities of the Costa Chica. His early schooling began at the internado in San Pedro Amuzgos, a rural school serving students from the surrounding region. On March 2, 1936, the school was abruptly closed following rumors that a group of Indigenous people would attack and seize the facility.[105] The resulting panic led to a violent confrontation that left three people injured and three others dead. Investigations were poorly conducted, and blame ultimately fell on the teachers, leading to the school's permanent closure. As a result, Carrillo was forced to relocate to continue his studies—a

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[104] Jesús Mendoza Muñoz, "Entre encomenderos, estancieros, indios y negros vaqueros: Territorio y población en la Costa Chica de Guerrero. Siglos XVI y XVIII," *Boletín del AGN* 6 (October–December 2004): 127–142.

[105] Pablo Eduardo Franco Romero and Dunaashii Rodríguez Carrillo, *Álvaro Carrillo: El cancionero de Oaxaca* (México: Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas [INPI], 2024): 158.

formative experience that exposed him to the structural precarity of rural life and the tensions between land, governance, and Indigenous communities in southern Mexico. He would later enroll at the Escuela Normal Rural Isidro Burgos in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero — another institution shaped by the post-revolutionary state's efforts to modernize the countryside.

These early encounters with instability and land conflict helped shape Carrillo's political and regional consciousness, grounding his creative output in a nuanced awareness of Costa Chica's territorial and cultural struggles. One example of this is heard in his song "Alingo Lingo" (which I will discuss more at length later), a chilena that draws on a poem he recalled hearing from his mother as a child:

///Juchitán y Huehuetán
Andan peleando terrenos//
Juchitán dice ganamos
Huehuetán dice veremos.

//Juchitán and Huehuetán
are fighting over land.//
Juchitán says, 'We'll win,'
Huehuetán says, 'We'll see.'

Carrillo set these verses to music, expanding them with his own lyrics. The poem references an actual land dispute between neighboring towns — echoing the very kind of territorial tensions Carrillo witnessed throughout his life. In transforming this oral history into a chilena, Carrillo was not only preserving a regional idiom, but also embedding a local politics of land and identity into his music.

In 1940, Carrillo began studies at the Universidad Autónoma Chapingo in Estado de Mexico, one of Mexico's most important agricultural institutions. He trained as an agronomist and was part of a generation of students molded by post-revolutionary ideals of rural modernization. However, his musical inclinations began to take precedence. As Alfonso Moar

Prudente recounts, Carrillo's time at Chapingo was also the beginning of his songwriting, and he even formed a musical trio using "rudimentary" instruments like the *quijada*, harmonica, and *hojas de naranjo* (orange tree leaves).[106] Upon completing his studies, Carrillo composed "Adiós Chapingo", a farewell song that resonated so deeply with the campus that it was later adopted as the university's official hymn. As he moved into new professional and geographic terrains, Carrillo used music as a way to mark transitions and maintain a connection to the institutions and regions that shaped him.

Carrillo briefly worked for the Comisión Nacional del Maíz in 1953, thanks to the help of a fellow Chapingo alumnus, Amador Terán. Yet his tenure there lasted only three months. Though trained in agronomy, Carrillo was already gravitating toward a career in music. The story goes that Terán, impressed by Carrillo's songs, offered to pay for his recording session fees. Carrillo declined, asking instead for a job but soon after abandoned agronomy altogether.

His breakthrough into the national music scene was aided by Carlos Madrigal, a fellow costeño from Ometepec who helped him establish connections in Mexico City's music world, including an introduction to the famed bolero singer Pepe Jara. Initially dismissive of Carrillo's compositions — believing them to be Madrigal's — Jara would go on to become one of Carrillo's most strategic collaborators. Jara's renditions helped catapult Carrillo into the mainstream, particularly with the bolero "Sabor a Mí," which gained immense popularity across Latin America.

Despite his fame, Carrillo's personal life has been subject to conflicting narratives. Accounts of his romantic relationships vary. According to Agustín Gurza, Carrillo met Ana

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[106] Alfonso Amador Moar Prudente, *Un humilde cancionero: Álvaro Carrillo Alarcón* (Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca, n.d.).

María Incháustegui, his eventual wife, in 1957 through a cousin who was secretly in love with her.[107] Other sources, like Baltazar Velasco García, suggest Carrillo had a prior marriage and an eight-year relationship with Ana María before they officially married in 1960.[108] Meanwhile, the 1988 biopic starring José José casts Carrillo in a negative light, portraying him as an absent father and drunkard — a representation that both sensationalizes and oversimplifies his complex personal life. This uneven portrayal — coupled with the racialized invisibility often imposed on Afro-descendant figures in Mexican cultural history — has contributed to a partial and sometimes distorted public memory of the composer.

In tracing Carrillo's life from his upbringing in the Costa Chica to his national fame as a bolero composer, one begins to see the fault lines of race, class, and regional identity that come to surface in his music. While his boleros brought him widespread acclaim, it was his chilenas that allowed him to reconnect with the Costa Chica and assert an identity that defied the assimilative pressures of mestizaje and cosmopolitanism. Carrillo is often remembered as a *bohemio*, a romanticized figure of the artistic vagabond detached from conventional social and political commitments. Yet his life tells a different story: one of sustained engagement with agrarian realities, educational institutions grounded in rural reform, and a deep emotional and cultural connection to land and region. These ties complicate the myth of the drifting artist and instead position Carrillo as a figure profoundly shaped by, and responsive to, the political and structural forces of his time.

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[107] Agustín Gurza, "Featured Song: Romance and Revolution in 'Sabor a Mí,'" *Strachwitz Frontera Collection*, UCLA Library, February 12, 2019.

[108] Baltazar Antonino Velasco García, "Álvaro Carrillo, El Negro de la Costa" (self-published article, Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca, n.d.).

“Soy el negro de la costa”: Articulating Race

In the first chapter of this dissertation I trace the origins and significance of chilenas as an Afrodiasporic music and dance from Costa Chica. To many costeños (people who live in Costa Chica), the chilena is the “defining feature of vernacular culture” in the region.[109] Chilena occupies a unique place within the Mexican son complex, a broad category of regional musical styles characterized by their blend of European, Indigenous, and African influences. Like other genres in the son tradition, chilena incorporates the seisquialtera and a strong connection to dance, but it also distinguishes itself through its fluidity and adaptability across contexts. This flexibility is evident in the various chilena variants or formats that suit different performance settings: *chilena orquesta, chilena banda, chilena cantada, artesa,* and *chilena conjunto*.[110] Alvaro Carrillo’s compositions fit within the chilena cantada tradition — the largely storytelling, troubadour variant, although some such as “Pinotepa” have been adapted for banda for use in *danza folclorico*. The origins of chilena are steeped in transnational histories that reflect the interconnected nature of Afro-diasporic and Latin American cultural exchanges.[111] Several theories about the origins of chilena circulate, but what we can know for sure is that the genre was absorbed into the local culture of Costa Chica, particularly by its Afro-diasporic population.

Carrillo is said to have composed over 500 songs in his lifetime, many of which remain unpublished or survive only through oral transmission, performance, or family archives. His chilenas, in particular, were likely intended for intimate or community contexts rather than the commercial stage. This informal circulation may have contributed to their relative absence from

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[109] McDowell, *Poetry and Violence*.

[110] Stewart, “La Chilena Mexicana.”

[111] Ochoa Campos, *La chilena guerrerense*.

the national musical canon, even as they reflect some of the most regionally specific and racially marked aspects of Carrillo's artistic output. The form of a typical chilena often begins with a short instrumental introduction on guitar, usually echoing the main melodic line of the song. This is followed by a first lyrical section (A), a contrasting section (B), an instrumental interlude, and then a repetition of the lyrical sections.

Lyrically, most chilenas tend to center on flirtation, romantic bravado, and expressions of the male gaze — often objectifying or idealizing women through sensual and racialized imagery. Carrillo's chilenas reflect this broader pattern, notably emphasizing *morenas* — dark-skinned women — and uses racialized language not only to describe women, but also to construct a Black regional masculinity. In this way, his chilenas double as acts of self-positioning, placing both the lyrical subject and the imagined addressee within a specifically Afro-Costa Chican cultural frame.

Nowhere is the assertion and articulation of Blackness more direct than in Álvaro Carrillo's "Negro de la Costa:"

// Soy el negro de la costa de Guerrero y de Oaxaca //
No me enseñen a matar, porque sé como se mata
Y en el agua se lazar, sin que se moje la reata.

// I am the Black man from the coast of Guerrero and Oaxaca //
Don't teach me how to kill, because I know how to kill
And I can lasso in the water, without the rope getting wet.

In just a few lines, this song performs heavy cultural work in signaling Afro-Mexican life in the Costa Chica region of Mexico. The opening line boldly asserts both race and place, marking a racialized geography of belonging. The second alludes to the region's long-standing history of violence and territorial conflict. The third is a boastful display of skill and pride, referencing two

traditional occupations among Afro-descendant communities in Costa Chica — cattle ranching and fishing.

At a time when the racial ideology of mestizaje — literally meaning “mixture” but effectively erasing Black heritage — was upheld as the foundation of national identity, Carrillo’s declaration seems like defiant call for recognition of Black presence in Mexico’s cultural landscape. In *Poetry and Violence*, John McDowell explores how corridos simultaneously celebrate and regulate violence in Costa Chica, but the same principle can be applied to this chilena.[112]

In post-revolutionary 20th century Mexico, the ideology of mestizaje sought to erase Blackness from the Mexican national imaginary. Afro-Mexicans were not only geographically marginalized but also systematically excluded from official narratives of race and nation. In *The Cosmic Race: La raza cósmica* (1925), Jose Vasconcelos, the most influential proponent of this ideology writes:

> The Indian, by grading onto the related race, would take a jump of millions of years […], and in a few decades of aesthetic eugenics, the Black may disappear, together with the types that a free instinct of beauty may go on signaling as fundamentally recessive and deserving.[113]

Within this context, Carrillo’s self-identification as "el negro de la costa" in his chilenas is both radical and deeply personal.

Carrillo’s “Alingo Lingo” is not only rooted in regional memory, as I mentioned in the first section of this chapter, it also plays with the Afro-diasporic Badman archetype. Mich Nyawalo states, “Badman character… emerged as meta-juridical figures whose heroic depiction

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[112] McDowell, *Poetry and Violence*, 148.

[113] José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica: Misión de la raza iberoamericana* (Mexico City: Aguilar, 1967), 32.

subverted the validity of an evolving legal system that has historically disenfranchised large segments of the African-American community."[114] The Badman archetype represents a figure of defiant masculinity. He is part folk hero, part outlaw, admired for his independence and feared for his volatility. In "Alingo Lingo," Carrillo's lyrical voice moves fluidly between charm and menace, singing and violence, guitar and shotgun — asserting authority through artistic prowess and potential force: "Soy trovador y mi guitarra es la ley... Soy tirador, mi retrocarga es la ley./ I'm a troubadour, and my guitar is the law… I'm a shooter; my breech-loader is the law."

The speaker moves freely across space "Cuajinicuilapa, Tacubaya y el Maguey, Alingo lingo lingo lingo la, Santo Domingo, San Nicolás," again articulating space but also race as many of these towns are historically linked to Black populations in the Costa Chica. Additionally, the vocalization "alingo lingo lingo lingo la" invites further curiosity. It echoes Afro-mestizo forms of dialect and musical play, suggesting ties to oral tradition and linguistic practices in Afro-descendant performance. While its exact origin and meaning remain unclear, it may function as a sonic marker of Black aesthetics. For example, Mario Carillo notes that the phrase "Alingo lingo" bears a resemblance to the song "Tilingo lingo" by Lino Carrillo (no known relation to Alvaro Carillo), which is born out of "la población afrodecendiente del Estado de Veracruz."[115]

If "Negro de la Costa" is Carrillo's lyrical assertion of Black identity and "Alingo Lingo" offers a playful negotiation of masculinity and territory, "Pinotepa" turns to the language of desire as a vehicle for racial articulation. Frequently described as a love letter to Pinotepa Nacional, this chilena does more than celebrate place — it centers morenas as objects of

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[114] Mich Nyawalo, "From 'Badman' to 'Gangsta': Double Consciousness and Authenticity, from African-American Folklore to Hip Hop," *Popular Music and Society* 36, no. 4 (2013).

[115] Mario Carrillo Incháustegui, *Centenario Álvaro Carrillo*, nueva ed. (Ciudad de México: Editorial Fundación Chapingo, 2025), 15.

affection and representative of regional Black identity, turning romantic longing into a mode of cultural pride. The song opens with an emphatic, "Bonito Pinotepa, yo soy coplero y te estoy cantando (Beautiful Pinotepa, I'm a verse-maker, and I'm singing to you," but immediately situates the reason for singing in the body of a woman: "Porque nació en tu suelo la morenita que estoy amando/ Because the dark-skinned girl I love was born on your soil." The term *morenita*, repeated in the final verse, is not incidental. In the context of Costa Chica, morena refers specifically to dark-skinned women, often Afro-descendant, and its use here reinforces a romantic and racialized attachment to the region. Carrillo's desire is not abstract; it is racialized and localized. The chorus, "Me gustan tus mujeres... Viva la costa con Pinotepa (I like your women… Long live the coast with Pinotepa)," echoes this sentiment. It moves from the individual morenita to a broader appreciation for "tus mujeres", framing Black coastal femininity as central to the town's beauty and identity. This repetition turns erotic desire into a communal statement, transforming Pinotepa into a space defined by its Blackness and sensuality. While the male gaze is undeniably at work here, the song also serves as a celebration of Black beauty and coastal pride, resonating with a long history of Afro-diasporic lyrical traditions in which praise of women intersects with assertions of place and people.

According to Alfonso Moar Prudente, Carrillo allegedly wrote "Pinotepa" after having abandoned his post at the Comisión Nacional del Maíz.[116] Upon hearing the song, his superior was so taken with it that he reinstated Carrillo to his post. Whether or not this anecdote is fully accurate, it speaks to the song's immediate and lasting impact. It is one of the few chilenas for which we have a known original recording by Carrillo himself, although the circumstances of its

[116] Moar Prudente, *Un Cancionero Humilde*, 122.

production remain unclear. That this particular song survives in Carrillo's own voice adds a layer of intimacy and documentation to its legacy.

Over time, "Pinotepa" has become an anthem for the city of Pinotepa Nacional, regularly performed at festivals and civic events, and warmly remembered by diaspora communities. Carrillo visited Pinotepa often and was received with admiration and affection. His song, in turn, helped inscribe the town's name into the musical geography of the Costa Chica — not just as a place, but as a site of racial and cultural affirmation.

While his boleros gained him national and international recognition, it is in his chilenas that Carrillo more directly engages with the politics of place, race, and memory. These songs draw from oral tradition, regional speech, and local histories to assert a Black Costa Chican identity that defies the homogenizing logic of mestizaje.

The Myth of Disappearance

Despite his musical success and national recognition as a bolero composer, Álvaro Carrillo's racial and regional identity has remained mostly peripheral to dominant narratives of his life and work. His self-identification as "el negro de la costa", so clearly and unapologetically articulated in his chilenas, is often obscured by the romanticized figure of the *bohemio* — a drifting, lovestruck artist disconnected from politics, place, and racial history. In public memory, Costa Chica is rendered anecdotal, if acknowledged at all, and Carrillo's contributions to the chilena genre are overshadowed by his boleros, which are deracialized and framed as universal.

This partial erasure of Carrillo's racial identity and regional grounding mirrors the broader ideological patterns described by Paulette Ramsay in her critique of post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism. She argues that the ideology of mestizaje, as articulated by José

Vasconcelos in *La raza cósmica*, operated through a logic of aesthetic eugenics that envisioned Blackness as destined to disappear through racial mixing. Under this model, Afro-Mexicans were excluded from the nation's official self-image and left on the margins of cultural and political discourse. Ramsay states, "this myth became so dominant and masked Mexico's heterogeneity to such an extent that even visibly Black Mexicans and descendants of Indigenous groups accepted the ideology of mestizaje and apparently ended up with no consciousness of race or of themselves as Blacks or as Indigenous peoples."[117] This sentiment was echoed by other 20th century scholars and researchers. According to Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran, the Afro-Mexican population did not retain cultural markers sufficient enough to establish a cohesive Black identity.[118]

Thus, Carrillo's articulations of place and race within his output must be understood within this broader narrative of the myth of disappearance. While his racially unmarked boleros achieved transnational acclaim, the racially marked aspects of his work were left unacknowledged. His chilenas — songs like "Negro de la Costa", "Alingo Lingo", and "Pinotepa" — which name Blackness, reference land disputes, and affirm regional belonging, have rarely been foregrounded in major exhibitions or retrospectives. In the 2019 exhibition "Sabor a ti, Álvaro Carrillo" at the Fonoteca Nacional on the 100th anniversary of the composer's birth, only a single chilena was included, and little attention was paid to Carrillo's Afro-Mexican identity or the significance of Costa Chica's musical traditions in shaping his

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[117] Paulette Ramsay, "Cross-Cultural Poetics: Debating the Place of Afro-Mexican Poetry in the Context of Caribbean Literary and Cultural Aesthetics," in *Perspectives on the 'Other America': Comparative Approaches to Caribbean and Latin American Culture*, ed. Julia Roth and Elke Schimpf (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 198.

[118] Laura A Lewis, "Blacks."

artistry. The result is a selective remembrance that privileges Carrillo's romantic persona while filtering out the political and cultural implications of his regional and racial identity.

This pattern of selective visibility continues to shape contemporary representations of Afro-Mexican culture. As Varela Huerta (2023) argues, the increasing recognition of Afro-Mexican communities in the 21st century has often required strategic deployments of cultural difference. In these cases, difference becomes a kind of currency, employed to claim space within a multicultural national framework that demands visible signs of alterity.

While chilenas are not absent from these political and cultural spaces — as they are regularly performed at the Encuentro de Pueblos Negros — they often occupy a more ambiguous position. Their association with Blackness is less explicitly foregrounded than in the Danza de los Diablos, and in state-sponsored festivals like the *Guelaguetza*, they are frequently presented in folklorized dances by delegations from Pinotepa Nacional and other Costa Chica towns. In these contexts, chilenas are celebrated more as regional heritage than as specifically Afro-Mexican cultural production.

This ambiguous visibility underscores the unique position of Carrillo's chilenas. They do not function as strategic performances of difference, nor were they composed for institutional or state audiences. Rather, they emerge from a vernacular world in which Blackness is lived and remembered through song. Ramsay emphasizes the importance of oral tradition and poetic forms in preserving Afro-descendant memory, and Carrillo's chilenas operate within this lineage. They assert a Costa Chican identity that is racialized and regional, predating contemporary recognition efforts and speaking directly to the structures that have historically rendered Blackness invisible in Mexico.

Carrillo's marginalization as a racialized figure in Mexican music history is not the result of historical oversight but the consequence of a national ideology that has long excluded Afro-Mexican voices from its dominant narratives. His chilenas, with their declarations of Blackness, regional pride, and social/political consciousness, are a site of memory for what official culture has long struggled to acknowledge. By centering these works, we not only recover a fuller picture of Carrillo, but also begin to hear the silenced voices of Afro-Mexican cultural memory.

Carrillo's Legacy and Reclamation

In the town square of Pinotepa Nacional, Álvaro Carrillo's bronze bust stands alongside two others — both political figures, likely tied to the town's civic history. Yet Carrillo, as a composer, holds a unique place in this trio: a local hero central to shaping the cultural landscape of the Costa Chica. His songs circulate not just through media, but in community memory, oral histories, and everyday performance. In Pinotepa and across the Costa Chica, festivals and competitions are held in his honor, celebrating his musical legacy and reaffirming his place in the region's cultural identity. The Universidad Autónoma Chapingo, where Carrillo studied agronomy, likewise hosts commemorative events in his memory. These collective acts of remembrance signal Carrillo's enduring presence, even as the framing of his identity continues to shift.

For decades, Carrillo's public image emphasized his boleros and his role in the broader tradition of Mexican cosmopolitan music, largely missing the racial and regional specificity that informed his work. However, a growing number of Afro-Mexican artists, institutions, and scholars have begun to reframe Carrillo as an Afro-Mexican composer whose work reflects and engages the histories, aesthetics, and politics of the Costa Chica's Black communities. His son,

Mario Carrillo Incháustegui, has played a pivotal role in this effort, positioning his father as the most prominent representative of Afro-Mexican musical heritage. In interviews and publications, Carrillo Incháustegui insists on the importance of acknowledging the composer's racial heritage, regional upbringing, and the chilenas that form part of his lesser-known but deeply rooted repertoire.



Figure 3.2 - A bust of Álvaro Carrillo in Pinotepa Nacional's central square

Institutional recognition has also begun to follow. In 2024, the Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas (INPI) published Álvaro Carrillo: El cancionero de Oaxaca.[119] The publication frames Carrillo as a son of the Costa Chica, explicitly naming him as Afro-Mexican and situating his music within the cultural heritage of the region's Black communities. This marks a significant departure from earlier biographical treatments that emphasized his bohemian character and national fame while glossing over the political and racial context of his upbringing. The reclamation of Carrillo's legacy has also taken shape through performance. Artists like Chogo Prudente and Alejandra Robles, both of whom engage Afro-Mexican activism through their music, have incorporated Carrillo's chilenas into their repertoires and are the subject of the next chapter. These musicians reinterpret his songs not as nostalgic evocations of coastal life, but as living cultural texts that express Afro-descendant presence and pride. Meanwhile, community-based groups like Los Banqueros continue to carry on the musical traditions of Pinotepa Nacional, including chilena cantada, preserving the oral and instrumental textures that shaped Carrillo's early work.

As Ramsay argues, the reemergence of Afro-descendant memory in contemporary Mexico is not simply a cultural recovery — it is a political act. In a country where Afro-Mexicans were long made invisible by the scope of mestizaje, the resurgence of figures like Carrillo is part of a broader project to reinsert Blackness into national narratives on the terms of Afro-Mexican communities themselves. The commemorations, publications, and performances that now foreground Carrillo's Afro-Mexican heritage resist the erasures that once rendered him racially unmarked.

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[119] Pablo Eduardo Franco Romero and Dunaashii Rodríguez Carrillo, *Álvaro Carrillo: El cancionero de Oaxaca* (México: Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas [INPI], 2024).

Racialized Frameworks of Carillo's Legacy

Francisco Camero Rodríguez writes, in Canto a la Costa Chica (2006), Carrillo "siempre se enorgulleció de su condición de mulato (always took pride in his condition as a mulatto)," viewing his racial identity as integral to his creative identity and "la fidedigna expresión de la cultura típicamente costa chiquense (the faithful expression of culture that is distinctly Costa Chican)."[120] Yet Camero Rodriguez also falls into problematic essentialist tropes, portraying the Black costeño as individualistic and prone to destructive violence, in contrast to an idealized Indigenous collectivity. These racialized tropes underscore the broader tensions Carrillo negotiated: being simultaneously celebrated as a representative of Costa Chica while his Blackness remained entangled in the region's and nation's ambivalent discourses on race.

Mario Carrillo Incháustegui's *Álvaro Carrillo: El Centenario* (2025) complicates this narrative further by grounding Carrillo's work in family memory and lived regional experience. He recounts that Carrillo's chilena "Alingo Lingo" originated from a poem sung by his mother, who was from Juchitán—once again affirming the oral and matrilineal dimensions of Carrillo's artistic lineage. These familial and territorial ties are reinforced in works like "El amuleto", "La Negra Cotijana", and "Arenitas de Mar", which Carrillo Incháustegui frames as part of "el folclor y eximente legado… a las culturas afrodescendientes (the folklore and exempting legacy… of Afro-descendant cultures)."[121] For Carrillo's son, these songs are cultural anchors that articulate pride, memory, and resistance within the Afro-Mexican experience.

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[120] Francisco Camero Rodríguez, Canto a Costa Chica: *El mundo poético de Álvaro Carrillo (Chapingo, Estado de México*: Universidad Autónoma Chapingo, 2006), 25.

[121] Carrillo Incháustegui, *Centenario Álvaro Carrillo*, 17.

One of the more poignant additions from Carrillo Incháustegui's account is the reference to Álvaro Carrillo witnessing the violent death of his half-brother, Mario Carrillo, during a conflict that erupted after a basketball game. This trauma left a lasting impact on the composer, who later wrote in his poem, Canto a la Costa Chica, of the "sangre estéril/ sterile blood" spilled in such feuds — a powerful phrase that mourns the cyclical violence in his home region.[122] Though Carrillo's music often channels masculine bravado and regional pride, it also contains moments of critical introspection. As his son notes, Carrillo ultimately used his talents to challenge violence as an "ejemplo para nuestra sociedad en contra de la violencia (an example for our society against violence)."[123]

This tension—between cosmopolitanism and regional critique, between pride and mourning—adds complexity to Carrillo's chilenas. They are meditations on the conditions that shaped that identity: colonial legacies, racial violence, and the everyday efforts to convert hardship into joy. As a result, Carrillo's body of work stands as both cultural archive and ethical intervention, resisting the simplistic framing of him as a bohemio. Rather, he can be seen as a Costa Chican thinker and artist whose music confronts the very contradictions of the region that shaped him.

Reconsidering Carrillo through the Multiculturalist Paradigm

As in many Latin American countries, Mexico experienced a "multicultural turn" beginning in the late 1980s and 1990s, a period marked by constitutional reforms and cultural policies that sought to recognize ethnic diversity and, most notably, Indigenous rights.[124] Within

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[122] Ibid, 23.

[123] bid, 19.

[124] Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects*, 20.

this broader shift, Afro-Mexican presence — long excluded from official narratives of the nation — began to enter public discourse through state-sponsored cultural and academic initiatives. One such effort was the Third Root (Tercera Raíz) project, established in 1992, which aimed to identify and document "African presence and influence in Mexican history, culture, and contemporary society" (Kavon 2018). As Laura Lewis observes, the stated goals of the Third Root project were to recognize African heritage in the Americas and to give Black communities a voice by recovering "traces" of African contributions to Mexican multiculturalism.[125]

While these initiatives marked an important rupture with the myth of Afro-Mexican disappearance, scholars have also noted the limitations of state-led multicultural recognition. By emphasizing cultural difference as evidence of belonging, multicultural frameworks often privilege forms of expression that are legible as visibly "African" while sidelining vernacular practices that do not conform as easily to expected aesthetic markers. These expressions have played a crucial role in making Afro-Mexican difference visible within national and transnational circuits of recognition. Yet they also risk reinforcing a narrow understanding of Afro-Mexican culture as something that must appear overtly African in order to be acknowledged. As Russell Anthony Jerry (2023) argues, the demand for recognition not only challenges the mestizo as the normative racial category but also risks reproducing the same logics of exclusion that have historically marginalized Black communities.[126]

It is within this context that Álvaro Carrillo's chilenas demand reconsideration. Unlike the forms most often highlighted in multicultural recognition projects, chilenas occupy a more

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[125] Lewis, "Blacks," 901.

[126] Jerry, *Blackness in Mexico*, 12.

ambiguous position: they are the most prominent and enduring music and dance of the Costa Chica, yet their association with Blackness is frequently naturalized, regionalized, or rendered racially unmarked. Carrillo's chilenas — composed decades before the multicultural turn — do not perform difference for the state, nor do they emerge from organized movements for recognition (as is the case for the dance group Obatalá). Instead, they articulate Blackness, place, and memory from within a vernacular cultural world.

Reconsidering Carrillo through the multiculturalist paradigm thus reveals both the historical depth of Afro-Mexican cultural consciousness and the limits of recognition frameworks that rely on strategic visibility. His chilenas challenge the assumption that Afro-Mexican identity only becomes meaningful when framed through institutional multiculturalism. Rather, they demonstrate how Black regional identities in Mexico have long been sustained through everyday musical practice, oral tradition, and communal memory—forms of cultural expression that precede, and ultimately exceed, the terms of multicultural recognition.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Carrillo's chilenas — particularly "Negro de la Costa," "Alingo Lingo," and "Pinotepa" — operate as sites of cultural memory through which Blackness, place, and belonging are articulated outside the dominant logics of mestizaje. These songs do not simply "preserve" Costa Chican culture; they actively perform it. In doing so, Carrillo blurs the boundary between the mainstream and the marginal. His boleros circulated globally as deracialized expressions of romantic universality, while his chilenas remained grounded in a racialized geography that the nation had long rendered invisible. Yet it is precisely

this uneven circulation that reveals the limits of nationalist frameworks that celebrate cultural hybridity while refusing to name Blackness.

Carrillo thus occupies an ambivalent position within Mexican cultural history: neither fully outside nor comfortably within the national canon. His chilenas unsettle the notion that Afro-Mexican identity emerges only through recent political mobilization, demonstrating instead that Black regional consciousness has long been articulated through vernacular cultural forms. At the same time, the selective remembrance of Carrillo — as bohemio, romantic, or cosmopolitan composer — shows how Afro-Mexican contributions have been incorporated into national culture only through processes of racial filtering and aesthetic containment.

To read Carrillo's chilenas as a body of work is therefore to confront the instability of the categories that have structured Mexican cultural discourse: mestizo and Black, modern and traditional, national and regional. His songs refuse these binaries by insisting on a Costa Chican world in which Blackness is lived, voiced, and remembered through music. Thus, Carrillo is a cultural figure whose work exposes the contradictions of Mexican modernity itself. Through his chilenas, he preserved a memory of Blackness in Costa Chica that remains audible in contemporary performance and communal life.

IV. LOS BANQUEROS AND AFRO-MEXICAN SOCIAL MEMORY

In the central plaza of Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca, a park bench bears an engraving that reads: "A LOS BANQUEROS, FORJADORES DE NUESTRA HISTORIA" (TO THE *BANQUEROS*, MOLDERS OF OUR HISTORY).[127] For many years, a social group comprised primarily of older gentlemen who call themselves *Los Banqueros* has gathered here to share music, poetry, local gossip, and cultural critique. As one member explained to me, the group's name is a play on words: banqueros suggests bankers — men of financial means — but *banco* in Spanish means both bank and bench, and their name instead refers to their meetings on the park bench. Here, Los Banqueros perform *chilenas, boleros*, and *versos*, creating a site of memory that evokes a social world understood as fading in the present. Through their performance of music and poetry, they recall the past while maintaining alive the tradition of *chilena cantada* in the vein of Álvaro Carrillo, even as their membership has dwindled in recent years due to members passing or moving away.

Scholarship on Afro-Mexican memory in the Costa Chica has largely emphasized ritual practice (Gabayet), and the strategic use of the past for political recognition (Varela-Huerta). According to Luis Tapia Maella's interpretation of René Zavaleta Mercado's work, "recognition… is the horizon of liberal ethnocentric multiculturalism"[128]. Building on Maella's critique of recognition politics, I seek to addresses the limitations of visibility without deeper inquiry. This chapter contributes to that conversation by shifting attention toward "social

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[127] Translations provided by the author.

[128] Tapia Maella, *The Production of Local Knowledge*, xvii.

memory" as a a localized practice in Pinotepa Nacional reinterprets mestizaje to acknowledge historical Black presence and contribution to Costa Chican culture.



Figure 4.1 - The Banqueros bench in Pinotepa Nacional central square

Meeting Los Banqueros

I first learned about Los Banqueros shortly after arriving in Pinotepa Nacional for the first time, eager to learn more about the place that inspired Álvaro Carrillo's most famous chilena, "Pinotepa." At the very center of the *parque*, or central plaza, is a bust of the composer alongside one of Benito Juárez. As I walked toward the church, Iglesia Santiago Apóstol, I heard the strumming of a guitar and discovered two men seated on a bench. I sat across from them and

listened as they sang a chilena I later came to know as "La Revolcada." After the song ended, I approached the man who had been singing and playing guitar and asked if I might ask him a few questions for my research. He was hesitant, explaining that he did not feel he had the right answers for me. Instead, he told me, "Come back tomorrow evening, another guy who knows a lot more than me will be here," raising his guitar in a gesture of humility. He added that they were part of a social group that met there regularly called Los Banqueros. I returned to my room excited over having just witnessed chilena cantada in action within an everyday, informal setting — precisely the kind of encounter I had been seeking in order to experience chilena as vernacular culture.

A couple of days later, I again waited near the bench to see whether anyone would arrive with a guitar in hand. When the guitarist I had heard previously did not appear, I took out my own guitar and began quietly plucking a few melodies. An older man seated on the bench called me over and asked if he could play it. He introduced himself as Pedro "Perico" Torres, one of the core members of Los Banqueros and a prolific chilenero from the region. He played two songs— "Pinotepa," followed by "El Andarriego"— agreed to answer my questions, and also showed me the strumming pattern he uses to play chilenas.

Over the course of that week, I returned regularly to the bench to speak with Perico and socialize with the small group of friends who gathered there most evenings, weather permitting, after dinner. Through these repeated encounters, I learned about Perico's extensive recording discography, his decades of performance experience, and some of the history of Los Banqueros as a social group. Perico described how, many years earlier, musicians and others would gather at

the bench to rehearse and socialize. He recalled: "Aquí ensayábamos nosotros con las guitarras y venían otros también" (We used to rehearse here with our guitars, and others would come too). These gatherings often extended late into the evening, characterized by shared coffee and reciprocal invitations, and gradually became a regular meeting place. What began as informal musical exchange evolved into what Perico described as their "centro de reunión" (meeting place)—a kind of nightly club composed mostly of retired men who now dedicate their evenings to music, poetry, and companionship.

Perico frequently brought up his forty-year career as a performer and recording artist in the region, as well as his connections to figures such as Indalecio Ramírez, a singer and close associate of Álvaro Carrillo. During one of our meetings, he sold me a USB drive containing his entire discography along with music videos that he had produced himself. He explained that nearly all of his projects are self-financed, noting that institutional or governmental support is limited and, when available, often comes with constraints he prefers to avoid. Maintaining creative control over his work, he stressed, was more important than external sponsorship. Reflecting on his musical development, Perico told me that he began singing as a student in school and later taught himself to play guitar in order to accompany himself. This process led him to develop a distinctive rhythmic strumming pattern. He stated emphatically, "Nadie toca como yo. Nadie. A menos que fueran mis alumno, yo le enseñe" (Nobody plays like me. Nobody. Unless they were my student, I taught them). This becomes significant later in this chapter, as I examine how specific rhythmic techniques are sometimes evaluated as inauthentic within chilena performance and how such techniques can also signal ethnic and regional affiliations.

One of the most notable experiences Perico shared with me was his recent performance in the Cervantino concert in Guanajuato, documented in a video posted to YouTube. The Festival Internacional Cervantino is one of Mexico's most prestigious cultural festivals, held annually in Guanajuato, where artists are often framed within state-sanctioned narratives of national culture and multiculturalism. At the start of this performance, he is explicitly introduced as an Afro-Mexican performer, but, when I asked him directly about chilena as an Afro-Mexican genre, his response was measured and quickly redirected toward his creative process. He responded, "Estas son mis raices, si no lo hago yo, ¿quien la va hacer? Cada quien la toca y la ve de forma diferente… (These are my roots, if I don't do it, who will? Everyone plays it and sees it a different way…)." In his Cervantino concert, he explained, he deliberately foregrounded dancers' feet, dress, and tightly rehearsed music, taking on the role of director and "scriptwriter" to ensure the performance aligned with his artistic vision.

Perico's reluctance to embrace Blackness and Afro-centric discourse explicitly reflects a broader generational disposition. He belongs to an age cohort that came of age prior to the multicultural turn in Mexico and before the emergence of contemporary Afro-Mexican activist networks in the mid 1990s. As such, his articulation of identity is expressed less through explicit political discourse than through sustained creative labor, cultural transmission, and an insistence on preserving what he sees as endangered musical practices.

This racial disposition aligns with what ethnographers have documented in the region. For example, Laura A. Lewis notes that "Costa Chican racial discourse echoes a national imaginary that pushes blackness to the margins of the postcolonial landscape while elevating

mestizos and indigenous people to the status of 'true' Mexican."[129] Lewis further observes that Black Mexicans often reject Africanness as a foreign imposition and instead prefer the term *moreno* (understood as denoting mixed Black and Indigenous descent) over *negro* (Black), a term more commonly reserved for foreigners or used jokingly or as an insult.[130] This contrasts sharply with the self-identifications of a younger generation of chileneros and chileneras, many of whom now openly embrace labels such as "negro" or "Afro-Mexicana" and have engaged directly with Afro-descendant activist networks in the region (see Chapter 4). Writing about the period surrounding the Third Meeting (Encuentro de Pueblos Negros, 1999), Lewis argues that "residents of San Nicolas, the seat of Afromexican culture, do not yet make their blackness meaningful in terms of a diasporic consciousness of Africa that links them to other blacks."[131] As a result, the racial construction of moreno—with its ties to indigeneity—functioned as the primary and most viable means through which Black Mexicans could articulate belonging within dominant definitions of Mexican national identity.[132] In my own observations, I frequently heard people describe Costa Chica as a place where "everyone is mixed," a formulation that effectively reiterates mestizaje as the way things just are. What I explore here, however, is how Blackness is rendered audible *within* mestizaje through musical performance, particularly in chilenas.

Throughout my first set of encounters with Los Banqueros, I noticed that few new participants joined the informal evening gatherings—usually no more than two or three. When I

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[129] Laura A. Lewis, "Blacks," 905.

[130] Ibid., 899.

[131] Ibid., 917.

[132] Ibid.

asked about the low attendance, Perico often explained that some members were traveling, and on one occasion he mentioned that one of the Banqueros had recently passed away. He also suggested that I speak with another foundational member of the group, Profesor Beltazar Antonino Velasco, who at the time was away visiting family. About a month later, after traveling to other fieldwork sites, I returned to the bench in Pinotepa Nacional and found that Beltazar was present. In contrast to Perico's more non-confrontational approach to explaining the low attendance of the meetings, Beltazar was more direct and reflective in our conversation, acknowledging that the group had slowly diminished over time but emphasizing that it continues to exist.

In my interview with Profesor Beltazar Antonino Velasco, he was careful to characterize Los Banqueros not as a cultural organization in any formal or institutional sense, but as a fundamentally social one. As he explained, "el grupo de los banqueros entre comillas es un grupo evidentemente social. Tiene muy poco de cuestión cultural" (The group of the so-called Banqueros is clearly a social group. It has very little to do with cultural matters). Although many of the men who gather at the bench are bearers of cultural memory—by virtue of age, experience, and long-standing participation in civic life—Beltazar emphasized that the group was not founded with the explicit goal of documenting or preserving Pinotepa Nacional's cultural history. Instead, Beltazar described the group as organized around practices of socialization, conversation, and remembrance among older men, most of whom are retired. He described the group as composed entirely of members "de la tercera edad" (of the third age (elderly)), laughing as he jokingly extended the label to the "cuarta y hasta quinta edad" (fourth and even fifth age).

Beltazar states, “Vamos, platicamos, recordamos” (We go, we talk, we *remember* [emphasis mine]), stressing that no one assumes responsibility for formally recording these exchanges as is done in cultural organizations. At the same time, he acknowledged the value of these informal conversations, noting that he himself has drawn on them in his own scholarly and cultural work: “inclusive yo he tomado muchos de mis trabajos basándome en las pláticas informales que se nos desarman en esa banca” (I myself have come up with much of my work based on the informal conversations we have while sitting on that bench). Despite this, he reiterated that Los Banqueros do not see themselves as “forjadores de la cultura” (molders of culture) engaged in a sustained project of oral history or heritage preservation.

The group did not originate with the current cohort of members. Beltazar traced its lineage to a man named Narno López Flores, who long ago would regularly occupy a bench in the central plaza and around whom others gradually gathered. In its earlier iterations, the gatherings were largely casual, shaped by conversation, observation of town life, and informal social exchange. Over time, these interactions extended into members’ homes, where they sang, played guitar, and socialized more often. Beltazar noted that the group that was coalescing consisted of musicians who had played together in their youth:

“De vez en cuando nos reuníamos para practicar unos, el chivo de la campana (su servidor), otro que acaba de fallecer que le decíamos Chevo. Tocamos durante mucho tiempo desde nuestra juventud y ahi nos reencontramos y generalmente en todos los convivimos tocábamos la guitarra.”

“Every now and then we would get together to practice, the bell ringer (yours truly), and another, who recently passed away, whom we called Chevo. We played together for a long time, since our youth, and that's where we reconnected, and generally, at all our get-togethers, we would play guitar.”

A key moment in the more regular occupation of the bench was the group’s organization of a public homage to Álvaro Carrillo in 2014. While Los Banqueros occasionally collaborated with associations or organized public events, such efforts were sporadic and never

institutionalized. Nevertheless, the homage appears to have functioned as a moment of consolidation, after which the current bench increasingly became a recognizable gathering place. Over time, and as members aged, passed away, or moved elsewhere, these forms of conviviality diminished. "Antes eran hasta 12, 13… ahora a veces están dos, tres" (Before there used to be up to 12, 13 now sometimes there are only two or three), he noted, describing the slow dissolution of what he referred to as "el club de la banca" (the bench club).

Despite the group's insistence on its informality, respectability quietly structures both its membership and its public perception. Beltazar emphasized that many Banqueros have occupied prominent positions in local social life: "en la banca estaba fulano y sultano, y este fue presidente municipal en tal año y otro fue director de COBAO… el otro es compositor, el otro es músico, el otro pertenece a un trío, el otro organiza mariachi" (Sitting on the bench were so-and-so and such-and-such, and this one was the mayor in such and such a year, and another was the director of COBAO [*Colegio de Bachilleres del Estado de Oaxaca*] … another is a composer, another is a musician, another belongs to a trio, and another organizes a mariachi group). These biographies confer a collective moral authority rooted in service, professionalism, and longevity. Even the group's name underscores this visibility. Beltazar jokingly told me, "Y nos decían, han de ser muy importantes, son banqueros. Pero no, el nombre viene de la banca donde nos sentamos todas las noches" (And they would tell us, 'You must be very important, you're bankers.' But no, the name comes from the bench where we sit every night). The humor of this explanation belies the fact that the men's presence in the plaza is legible as respectable because of who they are and their collective life experiences.

The group's lack of formal structure reinforces this respectability rather than undermining it. There are no written rules, no required attendance, and no fixed obligations. "No existen normas escritas… es completamente opcional" (There are no written rules... it's all completely optional), Beltazar explained, noting that participation is shaped by health and mobility rather than expectation. Coffee and bread are shared informally, invitations circulate casually, and absences are neither penalized nor explained. Yet the emotional stakes of participation remain high. Beltazar described the joy of reintegration after time away and the sadness that accompanies learning of illness or death among members—experiences he characterized as the "clásicos achaques ya de un grupo de personas mayores" (classic ailments typical of a group of elderly people).

The gatherings of Los Banqueros produces what Kay Shelemay describes as a combination of affinity and descent communities. As Shelemay explains, "Music proves to be a particularly powerful mechanism for catalyzing affinity communities, in which straightforward aesthetic and personal preferences may, but do not necessarily, intersect with other powerful diacritica such as ethnic identity, age cohort, or gender identity."[133] In the case of Los Banqueros, a shared affinity for chilenas, boleros, and versos played a central role in bringing the group together. At the same time, their cohesion is shaped by shared age, long-standing social positions within the town, and a common Costa Chica heritage. Shelemay notes that "Within collectivities shaped by processes of descent, music moves beyond a role as symbol literally to perform the identity in question and serves early on in the process of community formation to establish,

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[133] Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "Musical Communities: Rethinking the Collective in Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 2 (2011): 373.

maintain, and reinforce that collective identity." [134] Although Beltazar emphasized that the group's objectives—if they could be called that—were simply to meet, talk, and remember, music nonetheless operates as a key medium through which collective identity is enacted. On an individual level, both Perico and Beltazar maintain personal investments in archiving and local historiography; as a collective, however, Los Banqueros engage primarily in acts of remembering rather than documentation. Nostalgic orientation toward the past thus emerges as a defining feature of the group. While Beltazar explicitly rejects the idea that Los Banqueros constitute a cultural project, it is precisely this practice of remembering as a community that gives their gatherings cultural significance.

Although, the numbers of Los Banqueros has diminished in recent years, Beltazar says, "Sigue la llama todavia" (The flame continues). In this way, the bench has become a monument where music, poetry, and socialization still converges and where the past is recalled not through archival intent but through continued presence. Los Banqueros, thus, transform the bench into a "site of memory," shaped by the persistence of social bonds rather than by overt claims to heritage or tradition.

The Park Bench as a Site of Memory

Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* offers a productive way to understand the significance of the park bench where Los Banqueros gather. The bench operates as what Pierre Nora calls a *lieu de mémoire*, a site where memory "crystallizes and secretes itself" once everyday environments of memory begin to fade.[135] Sites of memory emerge when lived

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[134] Ibid., 368.

[135] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7.

environments of memory (*milieux de mémoire*)—settings in which memory once circulated naturally through everyday social life—have disappeared. In their absence, memory must be anchored to specific places, objects, or practices that connect people to the past through repeated engagement. The bench functions as a stable point in a social world that members themselves describe as gradually diminishing due to aging, illness, moving, and death.

Perico, for instance, laments that younger generations simply do not care about chilena cantada. He explained that he enjoys when outsiders like me show up because he wants to share his music. "No hay que ser celosos… esto se tiene que difundir" (There's no need to be possessive... this needs to be shared), he told me, before adding almost under his breath, "Aquí no les interesa, son muy contada la gente" (People don't care here, it's very few who do). For Perico, this concern motivates his individual recording projects. As he explained, "Siempre estoy tratando de rescatar lo que está perdido para que no se pierda… esa es la misión mía muy personal" (I am always trying to rescue what is lost so that it doesn't get lost completely... that is my very personal mission). At the same time, Perico draws a clear distinction between this professional labor and his participation in Los Banqueros. Describing the group's meetings, he emphasized their informal character: "Ya nos dedicamos a nuestras actividades particulares y en las noches nos reunimos como un club para pasar el tiempo" (We dedicate ourselves to our individual activities, and in the evenings we meet as a club to pass time together). In his view, the gatherings function less as deliberate acts of preservation than as social routine, distinct from the more intentional work of recording, concertizing, or producing materials for public circulation.

Other members of Los Banqueros are likewise engaged in cultural and historical documentation outside of the group. El Ingeniero Enrique Tosca, for example, has long contributed to local historiography through articles circulated in regional newspapers and publications, focusing on topics ranging from architectural history, family lineages, and Indigenous music practices in surrounding municipal agencies. Beltazar, for his part, authored *Un Son Llamado Chilena: Baile y Canto de la Costa Chica de Guerrero y Oaxaca*, a work I examine later in this chapter. Yet despite these individual commitments to preservation and documentation, the members do not see their participation in Los Banqueros as a project of preservation.

From Nora's perspective, it is precisely these gatherings (ongoing, informal, and diminished though they may be) that most closely approximate what he describes as "real memory."[136] Rather than producing historical accounts or archival records, Los Banqueros enact memory through presence, repetition, and sociality. In this sense, the bench operates as a space where memory remains lived and embodied, resisting its transformation into history as such.

Nora's distinction between memory and history sharpens the analytic stakes of these practices. Memory, as Nora theorizes it, is lived, embodied, and always oriented toward the present. It exists in "gestures" and "habits," skills passed down through "unspoken traditions," and in forms of knowledge that resist formal narratives.[137] This description closely aligns with the musical practices of Los Banqueros, where they do not aim to reconstruct the past as an object of study but rather sustain memory through active engagement.

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[136] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History," 8.

[137] Ibid, 13.

Halbwachs reinforces this point by emphasizing that collective memory is not a fixed idea but rather an ongoing process shaped by social conditions. He states, "It is not sufficient, in effect, to show that individuals always use social frameworks when they remember. It is necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the group or groups…. the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories."[138] Personal memories of past musicians, former gatherings, or earlier performances become meaningful precisely because they are shared, recognized, and affirmed by others present.



Figure 4.2 - Los Banqueros featured on a local news segment (2019)

[138] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 40.

Taken together, Nora's and Halbwachs's insights allow us to understand the park bench not as an archive but as a site where memory is reanimated through social practice. In this way, Los Banqueros transform their bench into a lieu de mémoire, a space where the past remains accessible not through documentation or institutionalization, but through the continued enactment of relationships, practices, and forms of belonging that participants themselves recognize as increasingly fragile. This framework points toward a conception of memory that is produced collectively through embodied social life—a perspective that will inform my theorization of Los Banqueros in the sections that follow.

Rethinking Mestizaje in Costa Chica

In Costa Chica, Afro-diasporic contributions are more readily acknowledged as part of the broader process of mestizaje than in many other regions of Mexico. During my fieldwork, I frequently heard cultural workers describe Costa Chica as composed of "tres etnias" (three ethnicities): *indio*, *negro*, and *mestizo* (also referred to as *gente de razón*).[139] This formulation can be understood as a pluri-ethnic conceptualization of race that departs from more homogenizing national narratives. At the same time, the boundaries imposed on each category risk reifying contemporary biases and prejudices, particularly when cultural practices are rigidly assigned to one group or another. Music and dance genres, in particular, are often expected as belonging to specific racialized categories. Chilena, as I show here, occupies a contested position within this framework and is subject to competing claims across racial/ethnic lines.

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[139] Interview with Lilia Viviana Diaz Aguila at the Casa de Cultura Pinotepa Nacional; Citlali Quecha Reyna, "Experiencias intergeneracionales sobre el racismo: un estudio entre afromexicanos de la Costa Chica de Guerrero y Oaxaca," *Boletín de Antropología* 35, no. 59 (2020): 35–59.

During my time in Pinotepa Nacional, I worked closely with La Casa de Cultura María Luisa Aguirre Palancare, interviewing staff and several instructors. In my first conversation with the director, I explained that I was researching the role of chilena in Afro-Mexican processes of identity formation. He responded bluntly: "los negros en verdad no son chileneros" (Black people are really not chileneros), adding that if I was interested in Black musical traditions in Costa Chica, I should instead focus on *charanga* and *merequetengue*. While it is certainly true that these genres hold significant importance for Afro-descended communities in the region, I approached chilena as an Afro-diasporic music precisely because it was absorbed and transformed by Afro-descended coastal populations after its arrival via Chilean sailors (see Chapter 1).[140] This interpretive framework was informed by my engagement with Paul Gilroy's The Black Atlantic, particularly its emphasis on circulation and diasporic exchange[141]. The director further reinforced his position by providing me with a printed excerpt from a text by Alfonso A. Moar Prudent, which states: "En la región de la Costa Oaxaqueña, se practica un género de baile conocido como CHILENA, que aunque tiene una influencia inevitable de los grupos negro e indígenas de la zona, es principalmente mestizo."[142] I left that conversation reconsidering how local cultural authorities limit racial ownership over musical forms and what those limitations meant for my research moving forward.

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[140] Carlos Ruiz-Rodriguez, "From the Corralero Sound to Merequetengue: Musical Glocality, Regional Locality, and Musical Translocality in the Costa Chica of Mexico/Del sonido corralero al merequetengue: glocalidad, localidad regional y translocalidad musical en la Costa Chica de Mexico," *CS (Universidad Icesi. Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Sociales)*, no. 34 (2021): 265.

[141] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic.*

[142] Alfonso A. Moar Prudente, *Historia de la Chilena*, 4.

My engagement with the Casa de Cultura also extended beyond interviews. I was invited to perform guitar on several occasions, including a full-length solo classical guitar recital attended by local students and municipal authorities, as well as the dedication of a new art installation by a Mixtec screenprinter and painter that featured a *fandanguito mixtec*. Through these performances, I established relationships with local musicians and cultural practitioners, one of which led to a sustained collaboration with a chilenero named Peter "El Negro de la Costa" Cruz (see Chapter 5).

Prior to my conversations with Peter, I understood stylistic differences in chilena performance primarily in terms of regional variation along the coast. Peter, however, demonstrated that chilena performance can also be understood locally through racialized stylistic distinctions. According to him, chilenas performed in Puerto Escondido—a region with relatively less Black presence—often feature a *chasquido*, or stoppage of the strings, which he described as "tipo huapango, lo hacen huapango" (It's a huapango style, they play it like a huapango). By contrast, in Cacahuatepec, an area with a larger Black presence, the *rasgueo* (strum pattern) is "suelto," or free, without the use of chasquido. This chasquido becomes a central point of contention, as it signals what some critics call "huapangeando".

Instrumentation also operates as a marker of racialized performance. Black performers, according to Peter, tend to incorporate Afro-diasporic instruments such as the *bote* or *tigrera*, as well as the *quijada*—an influence he attributes in part to the chilenero Chogo Prudente (See Chapter 4). Mestizo performers are more likely to introduce electronic instruments or requinto. Indigenous chilena is often characterized by the use of major tonalities and higher-pitched singing. In his Afro-centered approach, Peter emphasizes *bordoneo* (bass runs), evoking the *bajo*

quinto, a lower pitched instrument once used for chilenas and *corridos* in the region before being largely replaced by the guitar. His style also features more *remate*, a counter-rhythm that contrasts with the driving rhythmic pulse. Additionally, his guitar was tuned a whole step lower, something that Chogo Prudente also does.

When I told Peter about what the director of the Casa de Cultura said about Afro-Mexicans not being chileneros, he seemed taken aback and said to me, "Well, who were the people who were there to receive it when it arrived?" For someone who proudly presents himself as a Black chilenero, this clearly bothered him (For more on Peter see Chapter 4). Needless to say, whether chilena should be considered an Afro or Mestizo genre can be hotly debated, and additionally, some Mixtec groups also lay claim on chilena in a different ways as well.

The key to finding a tentative solution to this tension is perhaps in unpacking what mestizo means at a local level and suspend it from national discourse for the time being. Beltazar's book provides key insights on how he views racialization in Costa Chica in reference to chilena. In his book, Beltazar Velasco identifies three types of chilena: "los negros interpretan sus *sones de artesa* (chilena negroide), los mestizos, su chilena instrumental (chilena mestiza) y los indios, su fandanguito (chilena indígena)" (The Black people perform their sones de artesa (black chilena), the mestizos play their instrumental chilena (mestizo chilena), and the Indigenous people perform their fandanguito (Indigenous chilena)).[143] In discussing the origins of the chilena, he argues that the Black communities were the first to absorb the music from the Chilean sailors and that it transformed into the *son de artesa* but it remained as such. According to Beltazar, it was the mestizo population that adapted the music the Chilean sailors brought into

[143] Velasco García, *Un Son Mexicano Llamado Chilena*, loc. 229.

what became the chilena cantada on one hand, and the chilena bailada (such as seen in the Guelaguetza) on the other.[144]

Although Beltazar draws distinctions between Black and mestizo ownership claims surrounding the chilena, he also expresses frustration with anthropologists and ethnomusicologists who search for essentialized African survivals in Costa Chica culture. Reflecting on this tendency, he argues that the region's cultural "homogeneity" undermines attempts to classify particular traditions as exclusively Black:

"Esta homogeneidad existente en la Costa Chica echa por tierra el argumento que esgrimen algunos antropólogos o etnomusicólogos al catalogar estos rasgos culturales como exclusivos de los pueblos negros… La historia y cultura de la Costa Chica —guerrerense y oaxaqueña— son el resultado, pues, de una mezcla de tres razas: la indígena, la española y la negra." (Location 906/3067)[145]

Invoking the writer Gutierre Tibón, Beltazar rejects the notion that Costa Chica constitutes a preserved African enclave, criticizing outsiders who arrive in towns such as Cuajinicuilapa, San Nicolás, or Collantes expecting to encounter intact African rituals or traditions. Instead, he frames the region's culture as the product of centuries of racial and cultural intermixture initiated during the colonial period. In doing so, Beltazar simultaneously pushes back against reductive notions of Black authenticity while also reproducing the language of mestizaje as a framework for understanding regional identity.

This passage reveals that Beltazar's use of mestizaje is neither a denial of Afro-descended presence nor a simple subsumption of Blackness into a multicultural narrative. Rather, it reflects a local understanding of mestizaje as a condition of deep transculturation—one in which Afro-descended contributions are fully acknowledged but understood as inseparable from Indigenous

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[144] Ibid,.

[145] Ibid., loc. 906.

and Spanish influences. In this conceptualization, racial categories remain meaningful and chilena becomes a site where difference is articulated relationally. What emerges is a conception of mestizaje that differs markedly from nationalist, black-exclusionary conceptualization of mestizaje in the vein of Vasconcelos.[146] Beltazar's mestizaje is not a flattening of difference, but a historically grounded recognition of mixture as the defining condition of Costa Chica. This perspective helps explain why Afro-descended musicians like Peter Cruz can assert Black ownership over chilena without contradiction, even as others frame the genre as mestizo. The tension is not between Afro and mestizo identities per se, but between local, national, and academic levels of interpretation through which chilena is claimed and interpreted.

The Festival de Chilena and the Myth of Huapangeando

The Festival de la Chilena in Jamiltepec provides a crucial institutional context in which debates over chilena style, legitimacy, and ownership become explicit. Founded in the mid-1980s by Beltazar Velasco and Luis Estévez under the auspices of the Club Amistad, the festival emerged out of an earlier event known as Canto a Jamiltepec. That initial gathering was intentionally open-ended, allowing a wide range of genres to participate, including corridos, rancheras, and other regional song forms. As Beltazar recalled in our interview, the 1984 event was not a failure, but it posed serious challenges for the jury, who struggled to evaluate performances that spanned multiple genres with distinct aesthetic criteria.

In response, the organizers made a deliberate decision to narrow the festival's focus. By 1985, the event was formally reconstituted as the Festival de la Chilena, with chilena cantada *inédita* (unpublished) established as the sole eligible genre. The consolidation of chilena as the

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[146] Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cósmica*.

festival's centerpiece thus marked an early moment of genre stabilization. Over time, however, the festival became a site where questions of stylistic legitimacy were actively contested. Beltazar describes multiple instances in which the judging process was shaped by the intervention of individual jurors, particularly one judge from Omotepec, who insisted on enforcing what he understood to be the "true" rasgueo pattern. Performances that incorporated regional variants of strumming, those involving chasquido, were disqualified on the grounds that they were not chilena but rather a form of huapangeando. As Beltazar writes:

"En algunas ocasiones, el jurado calificador del concurso chilenero de Jamiltepec, por presión de uno de sus integrantes, se centró únicamente en el acompañamiento de la guitarra… Bajo ese precepto se descalificó, en varias ocasiones, a grupos que traían su estilo regional… con el argumento de que si no se rasgueaba con el estilo considerado como 'original', no se estaba tocando chilena sino que se estaba 'huapangueando'."[147] (1740/3067)

"On some occasions, the judging panel of the Jamiltepec chilena music competition, under pressure from one of its members, focused solely on the guitar accompaniment… Under this premise, groups that played in their regional style were disqualified on several occasions… with the argument that if the guitar wasn't strummed in the style considered 'original,' they weren't playing chilena music but rather 'huapango.'"

Beltazar strongly rejects this position and argues that equating these regional chilena styles with huapango is fundamentally incorrect. He notes that while both genres belong broadly to the son mexicano and share a compound meter, their rhythmic feel and strumming techniques are distinct. As he puts it succinctly, "Pensar que la chilena pudiera tocarse o ejecutarse como 'huapango lento', es otro absurdo" (The idea that the chilena could be played or performed as a 'slow huapango' is another absurdity).[148]

Beltazar argues that, at the Third Encuentro de Chileneros Foro (1992), a comparative demonstration between huapangueros from Aldama-Tampico, Tamaulipas were brought in and made clear that no chilena style actually resembles the huapango. The forum concluded not only

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[147] Velasco Garcia, *Un Son Mexicano Llamado Chilena*, loc. 1740.

[148] Ibid, loc. 1750.

that the genres were distinct, but also that chilena itself encompasses multiple legitimate styles, none of which can be elevated as singularly "original" or "true".[149]

While Beltazar insists that diverse rasgueos, instrumental configurations, and regional aesthetics should be respected, he remains deeply concerned with what he sees as the erosion of chilena's poetic structure. For Beltazar the integrity of chilena resides less in a fixed instrumental technique than in its textual and poetic architecture. On one hand, Beltazar resists purist efforts to freeze chilena into a single performance style, recognizing instead a historically grounded diversity shaped by regional practice, transculturation, and adaptation. On the other, his emphasis on poetic form introduces a different arena of authenticity, one that privileges literary structure as the defining feature of the genre. What we see is several layers of negotiation, demonstrating that chilena can be performed, interpreted, and racialized in many different ways.

Counter-Narratives of Belonging: Production of Local Knowledge and Social Memory

Tapia Maella's reading of René Zavaleta's *motley societies* offers a productive framework for understanding how Los Banqueros negotiate difference, authority, and belonging through chilena. For Tapia Maella, a motley social formation is defined by "the co-existence of various temporalities or historical times," such that multiple histories, social relations, and cultural matrices persist simultaneously within the same social space.[150] This coexistence entails "more or less irreducible differences in political structures and general culture" that cannot be reconciled through homogenizing narratives of the nation.[151]

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[149] Ibid., loc. 2085–2096.

[150] Tapia Maella, *The Production of Local Knowledge*, 310.

[151] Ibid.

Los Banqueros actively enact such a motley social formation. Their gatherings bring into contact distinct historical trajectories—Afro-descended, Indigenous, and mestizo—not as abstract categories, but as lived temporalities articulated through musical practice. These histories do not collapse into a single origin story of chilena, nor are they resolved through claims of stylistic purity. Instead, they remain audible through difference: in rasgueo patterns, instrumentation, tuning, poetic structure, and embodied performance. What some judges dismiss as huapangeando thus becomes, from this perspective, evidence of chilena's motley constitution rather than a deviation from it.

Tapia Maella further emphasizes that in motley societies, "local structures of authority persist" in ways that limit the legitimacy and efficacy of the national state.[152] This insight is crucial for understanding the authority of Los Banqueros vis-à-vis institutionalized spaces such as the Festival de la Chilena. While festival juries and cultural institutions attempt to regulate chilena through standardized criteria, Los Banqueros derive legitimacy from respectability, longevity, and social recognition within the community. Their authority is not conferred by the state or by cultural policy, but by their role as carriers of social memory and lived history. In this sense, their musical judgments operate within a different epistemological order—one grounded in local knowledge rather than national imaginaries.

Importantly, Tapia Maella describes motley societies as "the confluence of various histories… of the hits and misses they have passed through, and of the forms of domination structured by these relations."[153] This formulation resonates strongly with costeño culture, where

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[152] Ibid., 311.

[153] Ibid., 312.

Afro-descended inclusion exists alongside histories of marginalization within a national mestizaje that has often been Black-exclusionary. Los Banqueros' acceptance of difference within chilena reflects an alternative model of mestizaje—one that does not erase racialized histories, nor rigidly assign cultural ownership, but allows multiple histories to coexist without resolution.

In this way, Los Banqueros' insistence that chilena admits many valid forms constitutes a counter-narrative of belonging. Difference is not treated as a problem to be corrected, but as the very condition of chilena's survival. Coded locally as regionalism, this acceptance becomes visible through performance: it renders Afro-descended, Indigenous, and mestizo temporalities audible within everyday social life. Through chilena, Los Banqueros do not reconcile these differences into a unified national story; rather, they sustain a motley social formation in which memory, history, and belonging remain plural, embodied, and locally authoritative.

Read through the lens of Pierre Nora, the park bench where Los Banqueros gather functions as a lieu de mémoire precisely because it sustains this motley social formation through embodied practice rather than historical inscription. As environments of memory recede, Nora argues, memory must attach itself to specific sites that allow the past to be continually reactivated in the present. What distinguishes the bench is that it does not stabilize memory through representation or documentation, but through performance. Chilena, as enacted by Los Banqueros, becomes the medium through which heterogeneous historical times—Afro-descended, Indigenous, and mestizo—are held together without being resolved into a singular narrative. I propose understanding this process as *social memory*: memory that emerges intersubjectively through repeated, embodied social interaction, where knowledge is produced

not by intentional preservation but by the ongoing enactment of difference. In this sense, the bench is not simply a container for memory but a generative site where motley societies are continually re-embodied through sound, gesture, and social presence. Social memory thus operates at the intersection of Nora's sites of memory and Tapia Maella's motley societies, offering a framework for understanding how plural histories persist locally even as national narratives of mestizaje and multiculturalism seek to homogenize them.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced how chilena operates as a site of memory through everyday social practice, revealing how local knowledge, respectability, and embodied performance sustain forms of belonging that often exceed formal narratives of heritage or identity. By centering spaces such as the park bench and figures like Los Banqueros, I have argued that social memory emerges through the collective enactment of history in place, rather than through institutional recognition alone. These practices illuminate how Afro-descended presence in the Costa Chica is remembered, negotiated, and authorized locally, even as it remains unevenly legible within national frameworks of multiculturalism. The following chapter builds on this foundation by turning to contemporary chileneros and chileneras who mobilize chilena beyond these intimate sites of memory, examining how Blackness is performed, claimed, and contested within Mexico's current multiculturalist paradigm across political, professional, and transnational musical contexts.

V. PERFORMING BLACKNESS WITHIN MULTICULTURALIST AND ACTIVIST SPACES

Throughout this dissertation, I have examined how chilena functions as an expressive medium through which Mexicans of African descent respond to shifting models of racialization, particularly in relation to belonging and nation-making. In Chapter 1, I analyzed the role of publicly visible expressive culture in political activism, focusing on the Danza de los Diablos, as discussed by Itza Amanda Varela Huerta. This form operates as a powerful tool for highlighting difference, in part because it is legible as Black through essentialist expectations. Chilena has also been mobilized within activist spaces, though in more complex ways. As I argued in Chapter 3, chilena is often framed as a mestizo genre—albeit with differing local implications—yet its inclusion in activist contexts suggests that it carries political meaning.Within these spaces, *son de artesa*—sometimes categorized by scholars as a "Black chilena"—is frequently presented as Afro-Mexican cultural heritage.[154] As Carlos Ruiz Rodríguez observes, "The 'baile de artesa' is one of the traditions most closely linked to Afro-mestizo identity in the Costa Chica."[155] At the same time, it remains connected to chilena cantada and other contemporary forms of chilena, as I will illustrate later in this chapter. Nevertheless, son de artesa is often framed as folkloric and, to some extent, antiquated.

This chapter examines how contemporary chileneros and chileneras perform Blackness within Mexico's current multiculturalist paradigm and in dialogue with activist spaces. Focusing on artists who mobilize chilena across local, national, and transnational contexts, I analyze its

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[154] Beltazar Velasco, *Un Son Mexicano Llamado Chilena,* loc. 29.

[155] Ruiz Rodriguez, "La Costa Chica y su diversidad musical," 70.

use in political activism, community advocacy, and professional music-making, paying particular attention to the tensions between state recognition and everyday processes of identity negotiation. Through three* case studies, I highlight a range of artistic strategies and political investments. This chapter also assesses the efficacy of rights-based campaigns grounded in activist networks and considers their relationship to chilena performance in the Costa Chica. I ask what motivates artists to engage with these organizations and how they understand their roles within such processes. More broadly, I explore the tensions among three overlapping dynamics (political recognition, identity negotiation, and the pursuit of civil rights) all seen through the lens of chilena performance.

Stance and Performance of Blackness in Costa Chica

This chapter draws on the work of Richard Bauman, who conceptualizes performance as a mode of communicative practice in which expression is marked, framed, and made available for evaluation. Bauman states, "Performance is stancetaking… the performer, by invoking the performance frame, takes up a particular position or alignment, to his or her act of expression, the assumption of responsibility for a display of communicative skill and efficacy."[156] The audience is tasked with evaluating the success of a performance, which can be measured in terms of "relative skill, correctness, appropriateness, or effectiveness with which it is accomplished."[157]

The stylistic and formal features through which communicative acts are subject to interpretation. Performance, in this sense becomes a text shaped by participants, context, and reception. This process of *entextualization* is guided in large part by the formation of genre. As

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[156] Richard Bauman, "Performance," in *A Companion to Folklore*, ed. Regina Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2012), 101.

[157] Ibid.

Bauman explains, "genres represent schemata that guide the formal regimentation of utterances, routinized constellations of systematically related co-occurrent formal features and structures."[158] Chilena can be understood as one such genre, though Stewart actually calls it the *chilena complex*, and categorizes chilena *cantada*, *banda*, artesa, *conjunto*, and *orquesta* variants as sub-genres.[159] More realistically, however, chilena in the Costa Chica is highly fluid and these so-called sub-genres frequently overlap, with performers drawing freely across their boundaries and incorporating elements from other regional and transnational influences as well.

Within this framework, style becomes a crucial analytic category. While genre organizes expressive forms according to formal or structural criteria, the *what* that is being performed, style refers to *how* those forms are realized in practice. Style is a socially meaningful dimension of performance, encompassing the formal features, embodied techniques, and contextual cues through which performers signal competence, align with or differentiate from others, and invite evaluation. As Bauman suggests, performance depends on the recognition of these marked features as a display of communicative skill, one that positions performers as accountable to an audience's interpretive framework.

Building on this foundation, Juan Eduardo Wolf conceptualizes style as the set of performance choices through which music-dance is made legible within specific social contexts. In *Styling Blackness in Chile*, Wolf defines styling as the process through which performers use music and dance to frame their Blackness in relation to other groups. For Wolf, analyzing style involves examining how performers do music-dance and how these performances invite

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[158] Ibid., 103.

[159] Stewart, "La chilena mexicana," 83-104.

comparison, contrast, and evaluation. Styling emphasizes that such performances are context-dependent, allowing individuals to draw on different relationships, temporalities, and expressive resources to make Blackness legible in specific moments. As he notes, styling recognizes "the agency of individual performers to style Blackness as they see fit in a specific context."[160] In other words, styling allows for many interpretations on subjectivity formation. It is through these processes that performances become meaningful as they index differing ways of identifying.

Wolf demonstrates how Blackness is variably styled as *criollo*, *moreno*, *indígena*, or Afro-descendant depending on context. In the case of *tumbe carnaval* in Arica, Blackness is styled as Afro-descendant through a combination of sonic, visual, and embodied elements. As Wolf argues, these meanings emerge indexically through the co-presence of musical genres and performance practices within specific festive contexts, allowing participants to recognize Afro-diasporic affiliations even when particular sonic features are not explicitly identified as such. The sound qualities of instruments, for instance, function as signs that evoke connections to other Afro-diasporic spaces, thereby contributing to the styling of tumbe carvnaval as Afro-descendant.

This desire for identity formation and social cohesion is a defining feature of Afro-descendant activist organizations, which often work to cultivate a shared sense of belonging as a basis for political recognition. Wolf documents how the organization Oro Negro in Arica actively fostered such cohesion by building relationships with groups practicing capoeira and Rastafarianism, creating what one member described as a shared feeling that helped participants

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[160] Juan Eduardo Wolf, *Styling Blackness in Chile: Music and Dance in the African Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 108.

"sentirse afrodescendiente (feel Afro-descendant)."[161] As Stuart Hall suggests, such formations often involve strategic simplifications—foregrounding certain transnational affinities while downplaying internal differences—in order to make Blackness recognizable within institutional and political frameworks.[162] In this sense, activist projects strive towards a necessary sense of cohesion as they navigate the historically layered realities of Afro-descendant communities.

Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argue that while claims of commonality and difference are frequently articulated through the language of identity, "it is not clear that adopting that idiom for analytical purposes is necessary or even helpful." In other words, although "identity" remains a powerful category of practice—particularly within social movements—it risks flattening the complexity of the processes it seeks to represent when taken as an analytical tool. Instead, Brubaker and Cooper encourage attention to the processes through which collective self-understandings are produced. As they note, "the social movement literature has valuably emphasized the interactive, discursively mediated processes through which collective solidarities and self-understandings develop," but the problem arises in "the move from discussing the work of identification… to positing 'identity' as their necessary result."[163]

Blackness in the Costa Chica is not a stable idea, but rather an ongoing and contingent process of identification. This process of identity negotiation unfolds alongside, but not always in alignment with, Afro-Mexican political activism. While activist organizations seek to articulate a coherent and legible framework of Black identity in order to advance claims for

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[161] Ibid., 74.

[162] Ibid., 40.

[163] Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 16.

recognition and rights, performance practices such as chilena often sustain a wider range of interpretations, affiliations, and stylistic possibilities.

This relationship is both intertwined and tension-filled. On the one hand, the openness of performance allows for multiple forms of belonging to coexist, providing a rich expressive space through which Afro-diasporic communities can engage with Blackness in locally meaningful ways. On the other hand, activist movements may, at times, narrow this field of possibilities in order to present a more unified and politically expedient representation of identity which may resound with global or transnational formations.The efficacy of these movements, then, depends in part on their ability to accommodate the diversity of expressive practices without foreclosing the very processes of identification that give them meaning. By shifting the focus from identity as an outcome to identification as a process, it becomes possible to account for both the generative multiplicity of performance and the strategic consolidations required by political advocacy.

Afro-descendant Forums and the Centrality of Performance

The emergence of Afro-descendant political organizing in the Costa Chica since the late 1990s has been marked by the proliferation of forums, *encuentros*, and activist gatherings that function not only as sites of political deliberation, but also as spaces of cultural performance. Early initiatives such as the first Encuentro de Pueblos Negros, held in 1997 in El Ciruelo, Oaxaca, brought together activists, community members, and religious organizers to collectively discuss the meanings of Blackness, afromestizaje, and belonging within Mexico. These encuentros played a foundational role in articulating an agenda centered on political recognition, facing discrimination, and social cohesion.

As Itza Amanda Varela Huerta demonstrates, these early spaces were shaped by a convergence of actors—including clergy members, educators, and grassroots organizers—and were deeply invested in the recovery and presentation of cultural practices as evidence of a distinct Afro-descendant presence.[164] In this context, expressive forms such as dance, music, and oral literature were central to political organizing. Cultural performance became a primary means through which activists could demonstrate historical continuity, territorial belonging, and cultural difference in ways that were legible both to the Mexican state and to local communities.

This intertwining of politics and performance has only intensified over time. As organizations expanded and diversified—particularly with the emergence of feminist collectives and forums such as the Foro por el Reconocimiento de las Mujeres Afrolatinoamericanas—activist gatherings increasingly incorporated staged performances, poetry, dance, and musical presentations as integral components of their programming.[165]

These spaces reveal internal tensions regarding who gets to perform, speak, and represent the movement. As Varela Huerta emphasizes, women have historically played a crucial yet often underrecognized role in sustaining these events—not only through logistical labor, but increasingly through their own forms of cultural and political expression.[166] During my fieldwork, I interviewed the director of the Museo de las Culturas Afromestizas in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero. She expressed frustration at the fact that while some groups and individuals have been able to capitalize on the wave of mobilization over the course of the past few decades, many, including herself, have felt excluded these processes. Government-sponsored

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[164] Varela Huerta, *Tiempo de Diablos*.

[165] Varela Huerta, "Mujeres y movimiento negro afromexicano."

[166] Ibid.

multiculturalism projects tend to reward groups that align with their strategic economic interests, while institutions like this museum struggle to keep the lights on. Her experience highlighted the complexities of inclusion within larger cultural initiatives and the ways in which local actors and institutions must work to assert their place within these spaces.

In the Costa Chica, where there are multiple and sometimes competing understandings of how chilena should be performed, differences in rhythmic elements, instrumentation, and vocal delivery are often taken as indicators of broader questions of authenticity, belonging, and cultural meaning. These debates reflect the extent to which chilena operates as a site of negotiation, where performers and audiences alike participate in defining what the genre is and what it signifies.

At the same time, this open-ended process of evaluation does not always align neatly with the goals of Afro-descendant activist forums, which often seek to present a more cohesive and legible representation of cultural identity. While performance in these contexts can serve as a powerful means of asserting presence and distinctiveness, it may also require the temporary compartmentalization of internal disagreements in favor of a unified cultural narrative. In this sense, the performance of chilena both supports and complicates activist aims. It provides a flexible and widely recognized expressive medium through which Afro-Mexican identity can be articulated, yet its multiplicity of interpretations can exceed or unsettle efforts to stabilize identity formation within a singular framework.

The articulation of difference within chilena, and the capacity to style Blackness in multiple ways, can pose challenges for social cohesion in the context of collective political action. Yet it is precisely this variability that unsettles the exclusionary and essentialist logics

embedded in both mestizaje and neoliberal multiculturalism. In this sense, the performance of Blackness—often in competing forms—can be understood as a potentially liberatory practice that foregrounds the agency of Afro-Mexican chilena performers.

Representing Blackness in Afro-descendant Forums

Promotional materials for Afro-descendant forums and cultural encuentros underscore the centrality of performance within activist spaces. One such poster presents three figures: a masked diablo from the Danza de los Diablos, another masked figure representing *El Baile de los Moros*, and a guitarist, ostensibly referencing chilena or corrido performance. Together, these images condense a range of expressive practices on a visual field that is meant to represent Afro-Mexican culture.



Figure 5.1 - Promotional poster for Encuentro Cultural de Pueblos y Comunidades Afromexicanos de Oaxaca in 2023

While the inclusion of the Danza de los Diablos aligns with its well-established role as a marker of Afro-Mexican identity, the presence of the guitarist is particularly significant. As discussed in Chapter 3, chilena occupies a more ambiguous position within the cultural landscape of the Costa Chica. It is frequently framed as a mestizo genre, even as it circulates within Afro-Mexican communities and incorporates elements that can be read as Afro-descendant. Its inclusion in this iconography therefore signals an important shift: chilena is being positioned, at least in certain activist contexts, as part of Afro-Mexican expressive culture.

The Danza de los Moros y Cristianos originated in Spain during the Reconquista as a dramatization of Christian victory over the Moors, later spreading to the Americas during the colonial period where it was adapted to local contexts, often substituting Indigenous figures into the role of the defeated group.[167] In Mexico, these performances became part of a broader cycle of conquest dances that blend religious symbolism, theatricality, and popular festivity. Its inclusion within Afro-descendant forums is therefore not straightforwardly about historical African presence, but rather about its incorporation into a shared repertoire of expressive practices through which Blackness is made legible. As with other forms, its participation in these spaces signals "Africanness" indexically—through its co-presence alongside Afro-diasporic genres and its role within performances that evoke broader Black Atlantic and Pacific connections—demonstrating how Blackness is constructed relationally.

The tensions surrounding chilena—its frequent classification as mestizo, its varying local interpretations, and its uneven association with Blackness—are largely absent from this visual representation. This absence reflects a strategic imperative. In the context of political organizing

[167] Mercedes Díaz Roig, "La Danza de la Conquista," *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 32, no. 1 (1983): 176–77.

and demands for recognition, activist groups often prioritize coherence and legibility over internal debate. By presenting chilena alongside more clearly Afro-associated forms, the poster contributes to a broader project of consolidating Afro-Mexican identity through performance. By situating the genre within an Afro-Mexican expressive repertoire, it subtly shifts the terms through which chilena can be understood, opening space for its interpretation as a site of Afro-descendant knowledge and identity—even as those meanings remain contested in practice.

The following case studies examine artists whose work emerges at the intersection of performance and activism, each having engaged, to varying degrees, with Afro-descendant organizations, networks, and cultural forums. While these shared points of contact suggest a degree of alignment, a closer analysis reveals important divergences in their motivations, aesthetic choices, and reflections on Blackness. It is within these differences that the tensions outlined above become most visible: between multiplicity and cohesion, between stylistic flexibility and political legibility, and between individual agency and collective representation. By attending to these fault lines, the case studies that follow highlight how Blackness is not only asserted but continually negotiated through performance, even within spaces shaped by activist agendas.

Three Performative Stances Towards Blackness in Costa Chica

While all three performers discussed in this chapter engage with Afro-descendant cultural spaces and specialize in chilena, they perform Blackness in disparate ways. Their performances reveal differing orientations toward locality, activism, professionalism, and diasporic belonging. These differences become legible through style which is heard in instrumentation, vocal delivery,

rhythmic emphasis, staging, repertoire, and performance context, all of which function as means through which performers position themselves in relation to Blackness and to one another.

Building on Richard Bauman's understanding of performance as a communicative act open to evaluation, Juan Eduardo Wolf's concept of styling Blackness, and Harris Berger's discussions of musical meaning and stance, I argue that chilena's fluidity enables performers to take differing stances toward Blackness through musical performance. Stance, in this sense, refers to the ways performers actively position themselves toward particular identities, histories, audiences, and values, foregrounding the agency, interpretation, and lived experience through which performances become socially meaningful.[168] These stances emerge through the accumulation of performance choices that frame how Blackness is made recognizable within specific contexts.

The fluidity of chilena is particularly important here. As discussed earlier, chilena in the Costa Chica does not operate as a rigidly bounded genre, but rather as a flexible framework encompassing chilena cantada, son de artesa, banda, conjunto, and orquesta formats, while also at times absorbing influences from cumbia, bolero, trova, Caribbean music, and other transnational currents. Because of this openness, performers are able to mobilize the genre toward different expressive and political ends without necessarily abandoning chilena itself as a recognizable musical category. The result is a range of stylistic possibilities through which Blackness can be formulated outward toward broader diasporic formations.

The following case studies therefore examine not simply three individual artists, but three broader performative stances toward Blackness within contemporary chilena performance. Peter

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[168] Harris M. Berger, Stance: *Ideas about Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive Culture* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 24–25.

"El Negro de la Costa" Cruz represents a pragmatic and locally grounded stance in which Blackness emerges through flexible musical practice, community participation, and the everyday realities of working as a chilenero. Chogo Prudente styles Blackness through sonic markers associated with the Costa Chica and the Danza de los Diablos, emphasizing locality, memory, and embodied costeño experience. Alejandra Robles, by contrast, situates chilena within a transnational Afrodiasporic framework, drawing on cosmopolitan aesthetics and activist discourse to render Afro-Mexican identity legible to national and international audiences. Considered together, these performers demonstrate how Blackness in the Costa Chica is enacted through performance.

Peter "El Negro de la Costa" Cruz: Chilenero for Hire

In chapter 3, I discuss Peter, the chilenero from Pinotepa Nacional who taught me about various ways to play chilena that signal different ethnic affiliations (mestizo, Black, and indigenous). Born and raised in Pinotepa Nacional, Peter spent several years living in North Carolina before returning to the Costa Chica, where he now dedicates himself fully to music. For him, this commitment is both practical and philosophical. As he explained, taking on other forms of employment would limit his ability to respond to opportunities as they arise: "What if I have a job at the [convenience store] and someone calls me up to serenade somebody? No, I can't do that." He is musician whose livelihood depends on adaptability, availability, and the ability to move across performance contexts, from *serenatas* and local events to staged cultural presentations.



Figure 5.2 - Peter “El negro de la costa” Cruz self-promotion graphic, shared on Facebook

Peter’s artistic identity reflects a similarly fluid positioning. He identifies as “Afro" through his mother’s side, while acknowledging his mestizo and indigenous backgrounds as well. His stage name, “El Negro de la Costa,” is a direct reference to the chilena of the same name by Álvaro Carrillo. This deliberate choice signals an intentional alignment with Afro-descendant identity.

He maintains a busy schedule as a full-time musician, working across a range of projects and performance contexts. He performs regularly with Trio Pinotepa, teaches chilena to younger

musicians, develops his own repertoire as a solo artist, and plays electric bass in a cumbia group. In addition to these ongoing commitments, he is frequently called upon for serenades, community events, regional festivals, and cultural events.

At the same time, Peter's work intersects with Afro-descendant activist spaces, though often in ways that reflect his broader orientation as a working musician. One such instance was Encuentro Afro 25, held on November 29–30, 2025 in El Tamal, a small Afro-Mexican community located roughly ten miles northwest of Pinotepa Nacional. The event took place outdoors in a grassy clearing that functioned as a communal gathering space. Two large tents had been set up—one covering a modest stage and rows of chairs for speakers and attendees, the other providing additional shade for the audience. Despite the scale of the setup, attendance hovered at perhaps 40% capacity, giving the event a somewhat open and diffuse atmosphere over the course of the day's programming, which ran from morning into the late afternoon.

The structure of the encuentro alternated between musical performances and invited speakers. A keynote speaker from Colombia addressed issues of racism and Black empowerment, emphasizing transnational connections and expressing solidarity with local organizing efforts. One performer, dressed in pan-African clothing, sang merequetenque and charanga over recorded playback, while Peter performed solo, accompanying himself on guitar with some percussion playback.



Figure 5.3 - Promotional poster for AFRO25 forum

I arrived after taking a *colectivo* from Pinotepa to the highway turnoff for El Tamal, then walking a few miles into the town due to a lack of local transport. Upon arrival, I signed in and was given a meal ticket, which I exchanged for sopa and tortillas at a smaller food tent across the field. The atmosphere was welcoming and communal, with food vendors, families, and organizers moving between spaces of performance, speech, and everyday social interaction. I initially positioned myself as an observer, though I had brought my guitar at Peter's suggestion. Without prior rehearsal, he invited me to join him, introducing me over the microphone and

humorously stating that I must have seen an iguana on my walk from the highway. He introduced me as a concert guitarist and a costeño from Oregon, a thoughtful gesture given my position as an outsider.

We performed two chilenas together, “A lingo lingo” and “La Sureña,” with two guitars and voice, and without the percussion playback used in Peter’s solo set. During “A lingo lingo,” Peter called out to the audience, asking if anyone knew how to dance artesa. The choice of this term was notable, given its stronger association with Afro-descendant heritage. In response, one of the event organizers entered the performance space, dancing the pasillo of chilena with her handkerchief in a figure-eight motion.

While the encuentro was clearly framed as a space for articulating Afro-Mexican identity and fostering community cohesion, Peter’s participation reflected an active investment in these aims. As someone who has explicitly defended the idea of chilena as an Afro-descendant expression, the event provided him with a platform to advance this position through performance. Peter’s participation illustrates how performers can contribute to activist projects of cultural affirmation while continuing to engage Blackness as an open, negotiated, and situational practice.



Figure 5.4 - Peter performing a chilena at AFRO25 while one community organizer dances

More recently, Peter has begun performing with his daughters, forming a group called Las Chileneritas. This project extends his musical practice into the realm of intergenerational transmission, positioning chilena not only as a current site of identity negotiation but also as a resource for shaping future forms of belonging.

Chogo Prudente: The Black *Vaquero* from Llano Grande La Banda

A short drive north of Pinotepa Nacional, in the town of Llano Grande, lives Chogo Prudente—one of the most sought-after chileneros in the region. Though he describes cattle

ranching as his passion, he dedicates most of his time to performing at private gatherings, state-sponsored events, and cultural festivals.



Figure 5.5 - Promotional photo from Chogo Prudente's webpage

Born in Santiago Llano Grande La Banda, a small and relatively isolated community near the border with Guerrero, Chogo Prudente produces music as a representation of place. According to his official biography, the designation La Banda itself reflects a local history of musical formation, tied to the efforts of his *padrino*, Paco Melo, who helped establish instruments, teachers, and ensembles in the town in the 1950s and 60s.[169] Chogo's work draws directly from this environment, recreating the sounds of his upbringing—chilenas, versos,

[169] Luis Portanel, "Chogo Prudente," *Discos Corasón*, August 6, 2019, Discos Corasón – Chogo Prudente.

boleros, and corridos—while incorporating elements of the Danza de los Diablos and, at times even blues influences.

In conversation, Chogo comes across as humble and grounded, embodying an aura of authenticity that deeply resonates with costeños. He also speaks candidly about his experiences with racism and his growing disillusionment with the Afro-Mexican activist organizations he once supported. "They don't do anything to really help out the community," he told me, "They'll throw a party here or there and invite me to play, but they don't even pay."

Chogo also reflects on what it means to perform Blackness. He admits it is difficult to explain: "it's just something you're born with." He recounted an incident in which a non-Black performer struggled to sing a chilena correctly, and he told her, "It's because you have to be Black." Such essentialized notions of Blackness are pervasive in Costa Chica and Chogo's language aligns with the strategic essentialism often operative in activist spaces, where identity is condensed into more coherent forms for political expediency, even as such formulations sit alongside more complex lived realities.[170]

One of the most striking features of Chogo's performance is his incorporation of the bote (friction drum) and the quijada (jawbone), Afro-diasporic instruments also used in the Danza de los Diablos. These function as Black performance markers within a genre claimed by many. Both Velasco and Chogo describe the chilena as a mestizo genre—a blend of Black, Indigenous, and Spanish elements. Yet how mestizaje is understood locally differs significantly from national interpretations. In Costa Chica, mestizaje tends to be taken literally, as a mixture that

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[170] Juan Diego Díaz, *Africanness in Action: Essentialism and Musical Imaginations of Africa in Brazil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

includes Blackness. Outside the region, however, the term usually refers only to the fusion of Spanish and Indigenous heritage, effectively excluding African contributions. In this broader context, searching for the "truly" Afro-diasporic can become a kind of purity test, where only the most visibly Africanist aesthetics are recognized as authentically Black. Chogo, however, draw on Afro-diasporic markers freely because they form an integral part of his lived experience.

Jason Petrulis conceptualizes the quijada's presence in musical traditions across the Americas as instances of spacetimes, moments in which Black performers and communities engaged in "resistance and solidarity" and "opportunity and liberation".[171] He goes so far as to link the instrument to the biblical story of Samson slaying a thousand Philistines with a jawbone, suggesting that the quijada is symbolically tied to struggles for survival and empowerment. Through this lens, the quijada is embedded in a narrative of Afro-descendant resilience. However, in Chogo's performance, the quijada functions as a sonic marker of Blackness that may resonate with activist frameworks, but is not deployed for that purpose. Instead, it emerges from his lived musical background, pointing to the ways in which such *indices* can circulate between everyday practice and politicized representation.

[171] Petrulis, Jason. "From Jonkonnu and Son de los Diablos to Congo Square and Son Jarocho: Global Histories of the Jawbone/Quijada as a Black Musical Instrument." American Music 39, no. 3 (2021): 297–320. https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.39.3.0297, 314.



Figure 5.6 - Promotional photos from Chogo Prudente's webpage

Chogo Prudente's disengagement from activist forums does not signal a withdrawal from Afro-Mexican social participation, but rather a shift in how that engagement is enacted. I observed this most clearly in Oaxaca City, where he performed at a benefit concert for victims of Hurricane Erik (a tropical storm that affected large swaths of Costa Chica). Earlier that day, after messaging through his publicist, Chogo told me he would be performing that evening and that the program would be "all chilena." I took the next available bus, arriving after a six-hour ride, and met a friend outside the venue, The Charlot, a restaurant and performance space hosting the event.

The concert was as much a celebration of Costa Chica culture as a fundraiser. The main ensemble, Costa Mía Orquesta, performed throughout the evening, presenting multiple regional variants of chilena. Their instrumentation—trumpet, saxophone, trombone, snare, acoustic guitar, electric bass, and tigrera—situated the performance within mostly an orquesta format, though elements of chilena cantada, conjunto, and son de artesa were also present. The dance floor

remained full throughout the night, with attendees performing zapateado and waving handkerchiefs in the air. While the concert was framed as a benefit, references to Hurricane Erik were minimal; the dominant affect was one of pride, festivity, and collective identification with the Costa Chica.

One of the most striking moments of the evening came with the presence of son de artesa composer Efrén Mairen of El Ciruelo, who has been recognized as a "Tesoro Vivo" by the Secretaría de Cultura y Artes. Introduced as a composer of numerous sones de artesa, Efrén Mairen delivered a verso that explicitly framed the genre within a narrative of Afro-descendant history: "Somos los negros de la costa/ representamos a los negros con el fandango de la artesa/ porque es herencia de los viejos que llegaron como esclavos." His recitation traced a lineage of enslavement, resistance, and settlement along the Costa Chica.

Chogo performed Efrén Mairen's son de artesa "El fandango" as the first piece of his set. He began by strumming the notably slower rhythm of son de artesa, backed by Costa Mía, and performing a zapateado, drawing applause from the audience before beginning to sing. The set that followed consisted largely of chilenas, with a few boleros, performed alongside the orquesta. His stage presence was commanding and relaxed; he greeted audience members, encouraged participation, and elicited gritos throughout the night. Although the evening was widely described as a distinctly costeño experience, it also drew participants from more elite cultural spheres, including the guitarist from Natalia Lafoucarde's band, who at one point took the stage to perform "La Sureña."

Although the concert did not foreground Afro-Mexican identity in the explicit terms characteristic of activist forums, it nonetheless engaged deeply with Black expressive culture.

This was most evident in moments like Mairen's verso and the inclusion of son de artesa, where the language of "negro" instead of "afrodescendiente" was used to articulate local history and memory. In this context, Blackness was not framed as an institutional or political category to be claimed, but as something embedded within costeño culture.

Alejandra Robles: Cosmopolitanism and Activism Converge

Alejandra Robles, a singer from Puerto Escondido often compared to Lila Downs, occupies a distinct position within the landscape of Costa Chica performance. Unlike Chogo Prudente, Peter Cruz, or Los Banqueros, Robles is classically trained—she is frequently described as "educada"—and she leverages her visibility as a sought-after performer to foreground issues of Afro-descendant recognition.

I encountered Alejandra Robles at a beach clean-up event in Puerto Escondido that she had promoted on social media. I happened to be nearby and joined the effort, which brought together a group of volunteers to collect trash along the beach. After the clean-up, one of the organizers delivered a brief speech thanking participants and emphasizing the importance of taking care of the environment. Robles did not speak during this moment, but she was publicly acknowledged by the organizer, and her presence carried a clear weight within the group. While understated, this interaction underscored her position as a visible and respected figure in the community.



Figure 5.7 - Robles performing at the London Sunfest music festival in 2012

In her chilenas, she incorporates elements from other parts of the African diaspora, both in instrumentation and stylistic approach. This strongly aligns with what Heidi Feldman describes as the Black Pacific, wherein performers borrow from other parts of the diaspora as a means of articulating Africanness.[172] Combined with her polished, classically informed vocal technique, this results in a type of syncretism that speaks to a transnational idea of Blackness. Her performances operate as a form of cultural activism, situating Afro-Mexican identity within a broader diasporic field while making it legible to audiences beyond the Costa Chica.

At the same time, Alejandra's work has generated critique within some musical circles. In conversation with Beltazar Velascos, he suggested that singers from outside the coast are unable

[172] Feldman, *Black Rhythms of Peru.*

to adequately perform chilena because “they’re not from here.” When I mentioned Robles, who is from the coast, he responded, “well yeah, but she’s missing something. She’s trying to be too much like Lila [Downs].” This critique points to ongoing debates about authenticity, class, and the boundaries of costeño identity. Alejandra’s musical output and transnational orientation, while central to her activist project, also position her at a distance from more locally grounded performance practices.

Alejandra’s work sits at the intersection of local and transnational articulations of Blackness. If performers like Peter and Chogo engage Blackness through flexible, practice-based modes of identification, Robles more explicitly aligns with institutional and activist frameworks, foregrounding Afro-descendant identity as a collective and politically legible category. In doing so, she expands the stylistic limits of chilena while simultaneously provoking questions about authenticity, belonging, and the terms through which Afro-Mexican identity is performed and recognized vis-a-vis transnational Black activist circuits.

Performance Comparisons

Alejandra Robles’s “Somos Afrodescendientes” presents perhaps the most overtly diasporic articulation of Blackness examined in this chapter. Both visually and sonically, the music and video frames Afro-Mexican identity through transnational formulations of Blackness that extend beyond the Costa Chica itself. She opens by dedicating the chilena to people of the coasts of Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Veracruz. Throughout the music video, photographs of Mexicans of African descent appear onscreen alongside the hashtag #orgullosamenteafromexicanos, transforming the performance into an explicit statement of collective visibility and political affirmation. Unlike more locally grounded performances of

chilena, Robles situates Afro-Mexican identity within broader activist and diasporic frameworks associated with contemporary Afro-descendant discourse. Even the title itself signals an important shift from the individualized “Soy el negro,” associated with Álvaro Carrillo, toward a collective “Somos Afrodescendientes,” foregrounding communal identity and political legibility.



Figure 5.8 - Screenshot of Robles’ music video for “Somos Afrodescendientes”

This diasporic orientation is reinforced sonically through its instrumentation as well. The inclusion of harp and marimba evokes broader Afro-diasporic and possibly son jarocho associations, while woodwind and brass sounds from the synthesizer continue to reference local chilena aesthetics. Layered percussion and polished studio production expand beyond chilena cantada into a more cosmopolitan Afro-diasporic soundscape. Blackness here is projected outward toward broader multicultural and activist publics rather than grounded primarily in localized regional belonging.

This orientation becomes even more pronounced in Robles's participation in the Festival Internacional Cervantino 2024. Projected images of Afro-Mexicans appeared behind the stage throughout the performance, visually reinforcing the representational politics embedded within her work. Musically, the performance expanded chilena through jazz-inflected introductions, sophisticated wind arrangements, and rhythmic gestures in keyboard playing that are suggestive of Caribbean popular music. Robles's operatic vocal style, shaped through formal vocal training in Paris, further distinguished her approach from the more vernacular vocal aesthetics associated with typical chilena cantada. At the same time, the inclusion of tarima dancing during "La Voladora" and "Pinotepa" maintained a visible and audible connection to son de artesa and Afro-costeño performance traditions. In these performances, Afro-Mexican identity is staged for national and international audiences through a cosmopolitan and explicitly diasporic aesthetic framework.

Whereas Robles expands chilena through transnational and diasporic formulations of Blackness, Chogo Prudente grounds Blackness more explicitly in the territorial and sonic traditions of the Costa Chica itself. This is particularly evident in his performance of "Tía Juaquina," both at the Hurricane Erik benefit concert in Oaxaca City alongside Orquesta Costa Mía and in a more stripped-down performances for the Fandango Vida y Son concert in 2021, held in Tixtla, Guerrero. The lyrics themselves foreground locality and regional belonging: "En Llano Grande nací, bandeño tenía que ser, la chilena es mi sentir, con orgullo cantaré." Here, identity is rooted first and foremost in place. Blackness is articulated less through activist terminology such as afrodescendiente and more through an attachment to Llano Grande La Banda and the broader costeño social world from which chilena emerges.



Figure 5.9 - Chogo Prudente performing at a benefit concert in Oaxaca City

Even Chogo's collaborations beyond the Costa Chica maintain this territorial orientation. His recorded version of "Tía Juaquina" with Orquesta Costa Mía and Lila Downs situates him within broader national circuits of representation, yet the musical style itself remains closely tied to chilena as performed in festive and communal settings throughout the Costa Chica. The danceable ensemble textures, brass instrumentation, and social atmosphere of the performance evoke the soundscape of costeño parties and regional celebrations rather than a cosmopolitan reformulation of the genre. In this sense, Chogo's work remains firmly grounded in local

performance practice even while circulating through broader institutional and commercial networks.



Figure 5.10 - Chogo Prudente performing at the Fandango Vida y Son event in 2021

At the same time, Chogo's performances foreground sonic markers strongly associated with Afro-costeño expressive traditions. In the Fandango Vida y Son event, the instrumentation in limited to voice, guitar, quijada, tigrera, bongos and cajon. The quijada and tigrera index Blackness through their associations with the Danza de los Diablos and son de artesa traditions, functioning as audible markers of regional Afro-descendant identity. Yet these sonic gestures do not appear as external additions meant to authenticate Blackness for activist audiences. Rather, they emerge organically from Chogo's lived musical environment and from the expressive

practices of Santiago Llano Grande La Banda itself. This territorialized framing of Blackness was also evident in Chogo's own Cervantino concert in 2025, where Danza de los Diablos dancers joined him onstage. Even within an institutional performance setting associated with national culture and cosmopolitan presentation, Chogo asserts Blackness mostly through locally grounded costeño expressive traditions rather than through explicitly diasporic discourse.

While Robles and Chogo each foreground Blackness through identifiable visual and sonic markers, Peter "El Negro de la Costa" Cruz presents a more locally grounded and pragmatic performance practice that nonetheless remains deeply engaged with Afro-Mexican expressive culture. Unlike Robles's large-scale productions or Chogo's frequent incorporation of instruments associated with the Danza de los Diablos, Peter most often performs alone, accompanying himself on guitar and at times using playback percussion tracks. His performances reflect the practical realities of working musicianship in the Costa Chica, where adaptability and consistency are essential to sustaining a livelihood through music. At the same time, Peter regularly participates in collaborative musical settings, including Trio Pinotepa, where another guitarist assumes a more requinto-oriented role, allowing Peter's accompaniment style to shift in response to the different instrumentation.

Peter's approach to guitar accompaniment is particularly significant because it complicates attempts to codify Black chilena through concrete criteria. As discussed earlier in this chapter, his style is marked by bordoneando passages on the bass strings, forceful remates, and notably, the absence of the chasquido often treated by some performers as a defining marker of "correct" costeño performance. Peter's avoidance of the chasquido can itself be interpreted as a distinctly Black way of approaching chilena.

Unlike Robles, whose performances explicitly frame Afro-Mexican identity through diasporic discourse, or Chogo, whose sonic markers territorialize Blackness through the expressive traditions of the Costa Chica, Peter's stance toward Blackness emerges through participation in local musical life itself. He remains deeply connected to activist and Afro-descendant spaces, as evidenced through performances at events such as Encuentro Afro 25. His solo performances are more in line with what is typically referred to as chilena cantada, albeit different than the way it is performed by Los Banqueros.

Peter has not circulated through the same national and international performance circuits as Robles, Chogo, or Pedro "Perico" Torres (one of the Banqueros), nor does he foreground theatrical staging or overt diasporic symbolism. Instead, Peter's performances remain rooted in the participatory aesthetics of chilena cantada and in the everyday realities of costeño musical practice.

Considered together, these performances demonstrate that Blackness within contemporary chilena is not organized around a singular aesthetic or ideological center. Rather, chilena's formal fluidity enables performers to negotiate Blackness across diasporic, regional, activist, and everyday musical contexts. Robles prioritizes Afro-diasporic formulations of Blackness designed for broader multicultural publics; Chogo territorializes Blackness through costeño sonic traditions and regional belonging; Peter foregrounds flexibility, participation, and lived musical practice as sites of Black identification. The multiplicity of these performances ultimately resists attempts to stabilize Afro-Mexican and Black categories into singular sonic, visual, or ideological forms.

Herein lies the transformative power of chilena. Its fluidity resists the essentialist traps that often accompany projects of racial categorization and political legibility. Rather than relying on a fixed set of sonic markers or a singular understanding of Blackness, chilena embraces hybridity, adaptability, and stylistic permeability while still maintaining meaningful connections to Afro-diasporic history and racial formation in the Costa Chica. In many ways, what may initially appear to be chilena's weakness as a vehicle for articulating Blackness in Mexico—its instability, openness, and multiplicity—is precisely what gives it its strength. Because chilena cannot be easily reduced to a single performance model, it allows for a broader range of Black experiences, identifications, and expressive possibilities to emerge.

This flexibility reflects the historical conditions from which chilena itself emerged. The genre bears the traces of multiple diasporic and regional encounters, and its contemporary performance practices continue to mediate relationships among Blackness, mestizaje, locality, and transnational belonging. Some chilena performers foreground activist discourse and transnational Afro-descendant identity; others emphasize locality, communal memory, or the everyday aesthetics of costeño musical life. Together, these approaches demonstrate that Blackness in the Costa Chica is continually produced and asserted through performance.

The artists examined in this chapter represent only a small portion of the performers currently engaging Blackness through chilena. Other musicians, such as El Negro Chande, a chilenero singer and composer from Río Grande, Oaxaca now based in Zihuatanejo, or Yamel Marmolejo, a chilenera singer and cajón player from Ayutla, Guerrero who performs in Mexico City, similarly participate in these ongoing negotiations of identity, locality, and musical expression. As costeños continue to migrate to urban centers within Mexico and abroad,

particularly to the United States, chilena itself will likely continue to adapt in new and unpredictable ways. It is therefore probable that there are many additional ways of performing Blackness through chilena that remain beyond the scope of this study. Rather than signaling the limits of chilena as an Afro-Mexican expressive form, this multiplicity points to its enduring capacity to adapt, circulate, and generate new forms of Black identification across shifting social and geographic contexts.

VI. BIACKNESS IN COSTA CHICA AND CHILENA AS CULTURAL REPERTOIRE

In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 64/169, proclaiming 2011 the "International Year for People of African Descent."[173] Framed around the goals of strengthening international cooperation and promoting the rights, visibility, and cultural recognition of African-descendant populations worldwide, the resolution encouraged member states to develop initiatives addressing the histories, contributions, and contemporary conditions of Afro-descendant communities. In Mexico, this international shift coincided with growing state efforts to formally recognize Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic category. As Anthony Russell Jerry notes, federal and state institutions organized a series of consultations in Costa Chica designed to gather information on the "cultural repertoire" of Black Mexicans within the region.[174] Embedded within this process was the assumption that Blackness could be rendered legible through identifiable cultural forms capable of being documented and mobilized within multicultural frameworks of recognition. This dissertation has explored the implications and limitations of that assumption by examining chilena as a cultural repertoire that exceeds stable or easily recognizable formulations of Blackness. In doing so, this project expands prevailing assumptions surrounding Afro-Mexican cultural repertoires by demonstrating how Blackness in Costa Chica is also articulated through hybrid, fluid, and regionally embedded practices that do not always conform to explicitly African-coded models of identity.

I argue that Chilena functions as a site through which Blackness is negotiated, articulated, and performed within Costa Chica across shifting racial formations in Mexico. Moving from

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[173] United Nations General Assembly, International Year for People of African Descent, A/RES/64/169 (March 18, 2010); United Nations, "International Year for People of African Descent," accessed May 21, 2026, United Nations.

[174] Russell Anthony Jerry, *Blackness in Mexico*, 1.

debates surrounding the genre's origins to contemporary performances within activist and multiculturalist spaces, I explain how Chilena operates as a flexible cultural repertoire through which performers, communities, and institutions articulate competing understandings of race, place, memory, and belonging. In doing so, this project has demonstrated that Afro-Mexican identity is not expressed through a singular aesthetic or ideological framework, but through fluid and often contradictory performances that emerge within everyday social life.

Central to this dissertation has been the argument that chilena complicates dominant multicultural frameworks that privilege easily recognizable or visibly African-coded expressions of Blackness. While state institutions and activist organizations alike often foreground forms such as Danza de los Diablos, artesa, or explicitly African diasporic imagery in projects of Afro-Mexican recognition, chilena occupies a more unstable position within these frameworks. Its hybrid musical structures, regional diffusion, and long association with mestizo identity render it less immediately legible as a marker of Blackness. Yet this ambiguity is precisely what makes chilena analytically significant. Rather than existing outside Afro-descendant identity formation, chilena reveals how Blackness in Costa Chica is frequently articulated through situational and regionally embedded practices that exceed narrowly defined multiculturalist models of recognition.

Revisiting the Chapters of the Dissertation

The historical trajectory traced throughout this dissertation demonstrates that chilena has continually adapted to changing racial paradigms in Mexico. Chapter II showed how competing narratives surrounding the origins of chilena—whether framed through shipwreck mythology, the zamacueca complex, Iberian influence, Indigenous participation, or Afro-descendant claims

—reflect broader struggles over ownership, authenticity, and racial belonging in Costa Chica. These debates reveal that the genre has never belonged exclusively to a singular racial or cultural category. Rather than viewing Afro-Mexican consciousness as a recent political development produced primarily through multicultural reforms or processes of ethnogenesis, the history of chilena reveals earlier and more locally embedded negotiations over race, mixture, and cultural legitimacy. In this sense, the dissertation complicates models that locate Afro-Mexican identity formation principally within contemporary political recognition movements by demonstrating how cultural practices such as chilena have long functioned as sites for articulating Blackness and regional belonging in Costa Chica.

Chapter III further develops this argument by examining the tensions between post-revolutionary mestizaje and the racialized regional discourse articulated within the chilenas of Álvaro Carrillo. Juxtaposing the modernization projects and assimilatory logics of the nationalist period with Carrillo's own lyrical representations of Costa Chica reveals the persistence of racialized forms of regional identity even within a cultural environment that increasingly privileged mestizo national belonging. Although Carrillo has frequently been incorporated into narratives that minimize or erase Blackness, songs such as "Negro de la Costa" demonstrate the continued articulation of race and place within the nationalist period. Carrillo's legacy ultimately illustrates the tensions between cultural incorporation and racial erasure that characterized mestizaje as a state project. At the same time, contemporary efforts to reclaim Carrillo within Afro-Mexican discourse demonstrate how his music continues to circulate within newer multicultural frameworks of recognition.

Chapter IV shifted attention toward Los Banqueros and the role of social memory in the production of local knowledge surrounding chilena. Through repeated gatherings, storytelling practices, and public performance, Los Banqueros transform the park bench into a site of memory where alternative histories of Costa Chica are maintained and reproduced. Their performances challenge linear or essentialist understandings of cultural authenticity by foregrounding coexistence, variation, and lived musical practice. As demonstrated through the narratives of Beltazar Velasco and other members of the group, local understandings of chilena often resist external attempts to categorize the genre according to rigid racial frameworks. Instead, these musicians emphasize mixture, coexistence, and regional belonging as central features of Costa Chica cultural life.

Finally, Chapter V explored how Blackness is performed strategically within contemporary multiculturalist and activist spaces. Through the contrasting performative stances of Peter "El Negro de la Costa" Cruz, Chogo Prudente, and Alejandra Robles, I demonstrated how Blackness in chilena carries different meanings in different performance contexts. Performers mobilize various musical, aesthetic, and ideological strategies depending on audience, context, and political objective. Robles foregrounds cosmopolitan Afro-diasporic connections designed for multicultural publics; Chogo territorializes Blackness through costeño musical traditions and regional belonging; Peter emphasizes flexibility, participation, and everyday musical labor as forms of Black identification. Considered together, these performances reveal that Afro-Mexican identity is continually produced through negotiation rather than inherited through stable cultural forms.

Revisiting the Research Questions

How are chilenas performed, interpreted, and circulated within local Afro-Mexican communities, and how do these practices vary between everyday, community-based contexts and state-sponsored performances? This dissertation has demonstrated that chilena circulates across a wide range of social and political contexts in Costa Chica, and that its meanings shift depending on the setting in which it is performed. Within local community spaces, chilena frequently functions as an everyday social practice embedded within oral tradition, interpersonal exchange, regional memory, and community gathering. As demonstrated through the performances and social practices of Los Banqueros, chilena operates as a mechanism for storytelling, socialization, historical reflection, and the production of local knowledge. In these contexts, performance is often informal, participatory, and deeply tied to lived social relationships.

By contrast, state-sponsored performances and multicultural festivals frequently reposition chilena within frameworks of folkloric representation and heritage display. In such spaces, performance becomes increasingly shaped by institutional expectations surrounding visibility, authenticity, and cultural legibility. While these events have contributed to the broader recognition of Afro-Mexican culture, they also reshape the meanings of chilena by incorporating it into official narratives of multicultural inclusion. This shift often privileges staged representations over the more fluid and socially embedded meanings the genre carries within everyday community life.

In what ways do Afro-Mexican performers and cultural organizers articulate or resist state definitions of Blackness through music and dance? The dissertation has shown that Afro-Mexican performers and cultural organizers engage with state definitions of Blackness in highly

varied and strategic ways rather than simply accepting or rejecting them. Performers mobilize differing aesthetic and ideological approaches depending on audience, political context, and personal orientation toward Black identity. In some cases, performers foreground explicitly African diasporic aesthetics that align with multicultural frameworks of recognition and global understandings of Blackness. In others, performers emphasize regional belonging, local musical practices, or the coexistence of Black, mestizo, and Indigenous cultural formations within Costa Chica.

The contrasting performative stances of Alejandra Robles, Chogo Prudente, and Peter "El Negro de la Costa" Cruz illustrate these differences clearly. Robles employs cosmopolitan Afro-diasporic imagery that resonates within activist and multicultural spaces, while Chogo territorializes Blackness through costeño musical traditions and regional identity. Peter Cruz, meanwhile, foregrounds flexibility, participation, and everyday musical labor. Considered together, these examples demonstrate that Afro-Mexican identity is not articulated through a singular aesthetic or political model, but through negotiated and situational forms of performance.

How has the inclusion of Afro-Mexican cultural expressions like chilena and Danza de los Diablos in state-sponsored events shaped their meanings, visibility, and reception—both locally and nationally? The incorporation of Afro-Mexican cultural expressions into state-sponsored festivals, multicultural initiatives, and heritage programs has significantly increased their national visibility. Forms such as Danza de los Diablos have become central symbols within projects of Afro-Mexican recognition because they align readily with multicultural expectations surrounding African-derived cultural expression. Their visibility within official discourse has

helped create greater public awareness surrounding Afro-Mexican communities and contributed to broader political recognition efforts.

At the same time, the dissertation has argued that these processes also reshape the meanings and reception of such traditions by privileging forms of Blackness that are easily recognizable, aestheticized, and institutionally legible. Chilena occupies a more ambiguous position within these frameworks because of its variability and historical association with broader mestizo cultural life. Although chilena is sometimes mobilized within activist and multiculturalist contexts, it does not always conform to dominant expectations surrounding Afro-descendant performance. As a result, its role within state-sponsored recognition projects remains more unstable and contested. This instability, however, reveals the limitations of multicultural frameworks that attempt to define Afro-Mexican culture through narrowly bounded representational forms.

What role do aesthetics have in the recognition or marginalization of Afro-Mexican identity in the multicultural framework? Aesthetics play a central role in determining which expressions of Afro-Mexican culture become visible and legible within multicultural frameworks of recognition. Performances that foreground visibly African-coded symbols, choreographies, rhythms, or visual aesthetics are often privileged because they align more easily with state and transnational understandings of Blackness. Within multicultural discourse, Black identity frequently becomes tied to recognizable visual and performative markers capable of functioning within projects of heritage display and cultural recognition.

This dissertation has argued, however, that such frameworks risk narrowing the range of practices through which Afro-Mexican identity can be articulated. Chilena complicates these

assumptions because it demonstrates how Blackness may also be expressed through culturally hybrid, fluid, and regionally embedded forms historically intertwined with broader mestizo and Indigenous social life. Rather than existing outside Afro-descendant identity formation, chilena reveals the ways Blackness in Costa Chica has long been negotiated through practices that resist stable or essentialized racial categorization. In this sense, the relative instability of chilena as a marker of Blackness is not a weakness, but one of its greatest strengths, allowing performers and communities to navigate changing racial formations in Mexico from mestizaje to multiculturalism.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study examined a wide range of performances, interviews, and community spaces across Costa Chica, it does not attempt to provide an exhaustive account of all chilena traditions or Afro-Mexican experiences within the region. The dissertation focused primarily on chilena cantada and its relationship to Afro-Mexican identity formation, meaning that other important regional forms remain areas for further study. Likewise, while this project considered the role of dance and embodied performance, its primary emphasis remained on musical discourse, lyrical representation, and ethnographic interpretation rather than choreographic analysis.

Additionally, this dissertation focused largely on performances and cultural actors located within Costa Chica, and near Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca. Future research could further explore the circulation of chilena within diasporic communities outside the region, particularly among Afro-Mexican and Oaxacan migrant populations in Mexico City, and the United States. Such work would provide valuable insight into how chilena functions within transregional and

transnational networks of belonging, labor, and cultural memory. The increasing circulation of chilena through digital media platforms, livestream performances, and social media also represents an important area for future scholarship, particularly as younger performers continue to reinterpret the genre within contemporary political and commercial contexts.

Future work might also examine the evolving relationship between chilena and heritage tourism, especially as Afro-Mexican recognition continues to expand within state and institutional frameworks. As this dissertation has demonstrated, multicultural recognition often reshapes local performance practices by privileging particular aesthetics and narratives of Blackness. Continued research will be necessary to understand how communities negotiate these pressures over time and how newer generations of performers respond to shifting expectations surrounding authenticity, visibility, and representation.

Finally, this dissertation opens broader comparative questions regarding the relationship between music, racial formation, and multiculturalism throughout Latin America. The tensions identified here between hybridity, legibility, and cultural recognition are not unique to Costa Chica or Mexico. Similar dynamics emerge across Afro-Latin American contexts in which Black identity is negotiated through musical practices historically absorbed into nationalist or mestizo cultural frameworks. By foregrounding chilena as a flexible and contested site of Afro-descendant expression, this project ultimately invites further scholarship on how musical performance mediates the shifting meanings of race, place, and belonging across the African diaspora.

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