Paulette Ramsay, *Afro-Mexican Constructions of Diaspora, Gender, Identity and Nation*. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2016. xx + 204 pp.

**Reviewed by Joe Pereira**

**The Stereotypic Representation of Mexico** is that of a *mestizo* society, where European and Mexican Indian mixed. It surprises many that this same Mexico absorbed close to half a million Africans transported to the Western hemisphere as enslaved people between 1521 and 1639. It surprises many that this same Mexico during the colonial period had a larger African than European population. It surprises many that this same Mexico today has a distinctive population of African descent that continues African cultural practices and traditions. In 2015, the official interim Mexican census for the first time in over 150 years identified persons by race, and 1.4 million persons (1.2 percent of the national population) self-identified as Afro-Mexican or Afro-descendant.

It is this reality that Paulette Ramsay has been researching for some time, and she has become one of the leading international scholars on Afro-Mexico. Having published various articles on the subject, she has now published a book. This is the first full-length study of the literary and cultural production of the Afro-Mexican communities located on the Costa Chica in the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca on the Pacific coast of Mexico – one of the main concentrations of Afro-Mexicans in that nation.

Ramsay provides a useful introductory chapter on the historical presence of Africans and their descendants in Mexico, drawing on scholarly research as she traces the resistance to enslavement and subordination and the reality of *marronaje*. She gives insights into the racist approach to national identity by leading Mexican thinkers. For example, she quotes José Vasconcelos, noted for his essay on “The Cosmic Race” in which he projects a racial ‘type’ emerging from interracial mixing. She exposes his view that “in a few decades of aesthetic eugenics the black may disappear together with the types that a free instinct of beauty may go on signalling as fundamentally recessive and undeserving” (10). Such theories surrounding the dominant Mexican discourse of a *mestizo* national identity underscore the exclusion of, and racism towards, the Afro-Mexican. There
is an amnesia and obliteration of the African contribution to Mexico’s independ-
ence. Ramsay points out that heroes such as Morelos and Guerrero were of
African ancestry, with two Mexican states named after them. Indeed, Guerrero
became president in the early years of independence, and was disparagingly
dubbed “El Negro” by those forces vehemently opposed to him. He was subse-
quently executed. After generations of marginalising and silencing the African
presence in national discourse and promoting the identity of mestizaje, the Mex-
ican government in the late 1970s engaged in a policy that claimed Mexico as a
Caribbean state. This led to governmental initiatives such as “The Third Root”
meant to focus on the African presence, contemporaneous with this policy inter-
est in expanding Mexican influence among Caribbean states.

Before analysing the cultural product of the Costa Chica, Ramsay devotes a
chapter to deconstructing a black comic book character, Memín Pinguín, devel-
oped by a non-Afro-Mexican and widely popular in the country, to give an idea
of what Mexicans consume and construct regarding blacks. She succinctly unveils
the racist implications behind the visually and behaviourally caricatured black
youth, Memín, and his ‘Aunt Jemima’-stereotyped and caricatured mother.
Despite Mexican protestations that no racism is involved in this series, Ramsay
analyses with sound theoretical substantiation the multiple ways in which these
black characters reflect a marginalised ‘other’ outside the scope of that Mexican
myth of a mestizo society. She examines the persistently negative and demeaning
depiction of both Memín and his mother and contrasts them with the positive
presentation of the other, ‘Mexican’, characters, who essentially control Memín
in the storyline. The fact that this comic series is consumed especially by Mexican
children implies the extent to which a distorted and racist depiction of the black
person is perpetuated in the formation of racial attitudes and a Mexican
identity.

The cultural life of Costa Chica involves both oral collective traditions of
anonymous authorship and individual literary creations. Ramsay studies both.
In a chapter analysing a collection of Afro-Mexican folktales, she discusses how
they reveal the patriarchal subordination of women seen as objects and rewards
for male prowess, yet at the same time how the African female characters are able
to establish their own liberation and self-identity. Some of the tales reflect the
impact of enslavement and European exploitation using metaphorical tech-
niques, as in the tale of the bear who captures and subjugates the female until
she and her son devise and succeed in their own liberation. Ramsay draws on a
range of feminist theories to deconstruct these folktales and convincingly relate
them to a wider postcolonial discourse and politics of empowerment, where women achieve agency and the Afro-Mexican woman in her particularity establishes for herself a confident location in the wider nation.

By contrast, the chapter that studies the popular musical form the *corridos*, produced by Afro-Mexicans of the Costa Chica, reflects the masculinist project. These songs were born out of, and often reflect the fighting in, the Mexican Revolution of a century ago, where the Afro-Mexicans were supporters of Zapata against the oppressive state forces. The Afro-Mexican protagonists of these *corridos* become powerful by asserting their agency and resistance to their oppressors. There is derision of those forces and ego-boosting celebration of the protagonists’ fearlessness and bravery. Through their masculinity, they affirm their selfhood. Their construction of masculinity projects the Afro-Mexican male as powerful in his individual ability to defy and defeat the official state. He is heroically presented as agent of his freedom. Even in dying he remains brash and heroic. Through his violent physical prowess, he asserts his right to self-identity and the right of his community to being recognised.

Power and identity in these songs are left to the males, and Ramsay analyses how the female image in the *corridos* often reflects women as weak background characters, disloyal even, and marginal to the assertion of freedom. Indeed, the author cites songs that underscore the phallocentric self-projection of the males, whose sexual prowess, like their fighting skills, is never left in doubt. Ramsay analyses, again with sound theoretical underpinning, the inherently patriarchal gender relationships in these songs, so that the defiance of the oppressive state is essentially a masculinist project. Only the religious icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe is kept free of negative female imagery and invoked as the unifying emblem of hope for all the underdogs in the unequal society.

Chapter 4 examines more recent oral and written verse from the Costa Chica that was prompted in part by increasing state promotion of the culture of the Afro-Mexicans. In her examination of the oral works, Ramsay sees them giving expression to the racial and cultural diversity of Mexico, again countering the notion of a *mestizo* society. There is frequent expression of pride in blackness and black beauty, with positive images ascribed to the black personae. The black woman, unlike in the *corridos*, is given dignity and respect in what are often love poems. Nonetheless, in both these and the written verses, there is an awareness of the demeaning negative view held by others in the society towards black persons, contested by the personae. Their consciousness of self and pride in their identity are repeated themes in these verses. Racial pride is linked to, and
supported by, regional pride: the pride of their geographic location in Costa Chica and in their identity as Costa Chican people. This positionality provides a distinctive identity that gives unity to the various Afro-Mexican townships celebrated in these verses. For Ramsay, the verses debunk the myth of who the Afro-Mexicans are and contest their marginalisation from national identity.

In a chapter relating Afro-Mexican cultural expression to Caribbean literary and cultural aesthetics, Ramsay engages a rather challenging notion: that the Pacific coast Afro-Mexicans can be seen as sharing a Caribbean aesthetic. She gives an interesting summary of links between Mexico and Jamaica in particular, both in the colonial shipping patterns and later on workers from Jamaica having been recruited for various projects in Mexico. Ramsay sees in the search for identity and self-affirmation amongst the Afro-Mexicans an affinity with a similar search in Caribbean culture. She draws on Édouard Glissant’s view of the cross-culturality of Caribbean society and Antonio Benítez Rojo’s characterisation of the Caribbean as a meta-archipelago to substantiate the connection with the Afro-Mexican culture that establishes not the homogeneity of a mestizo myth of Mexico but a multicultural reality. She compares the oral traditions and verses of Afro-Mexico with those of the Caribbean, and draws many parallels, including the humour and witty repartee of their verses with the extempo calypso tradition and the carnivalesque, while pointing to the deeper ideological self-identification behind the humour. Ramsay compares the appropriation of space and land by the Costa Chican versifiers as part of identity establishment similar to that among some Caribbean writers. She also somewhat briefly engages the issue of language in identity formation as another similarity, where some poets use an Afro-Mexican dialect form as a ‘linguistic marronage’ and way of contesting the homogeneity version of Mexican culture. As with Caribbean writers, Ramsay sees these writers as problematising the racial relations and attitudes and exposing the racism of the dominating society, even as they broaden the concept of the nation by affirming and inserting their discrete personhood.

The concluding chapter of Ramsay’s book is a very powerful assessment of the contribution of the literary and cultural product of the Afro-Mexicans. The author notes the changes that have taken place over the last thirty years or so in terms of increasing self-identity and the growing contestation of the negative stereotypes and racist attitudes. Ramsay recognises the complex negotiation of gender as well as the ways in which the discourses on nation, gender and race intersect. For her, there is a puncturing of the Mexican concept of mestizaje in the Afro-Mexican affirmation of self that has produced increasing works and
movements to reinforce their specific voice and culture. First the state of Oaxaca in 2013, then the state of Guerrero in 2014, have officially recognised in their legislation the political, social, cultural and economic rights of Afro-descendants as ethnic groups.

This book has contributed original research and analysis in bringing the hitherto marginalised culture of Afro-Mexico to wider attention. It challenges the discourse of Mexican society as homogeneous and *mestizo* in nature, inscribing as it does the Afro-Mexican presence and contribution to the multicultural state. Ramsay’s readable analysis is embedded in, and reflective of, a range of contemporary cultural studies, gender and identity theories. Her work is supported by over forty photographs that give visual support to the narrative and by an extensive bibliography and useful index. It will be invaluable reading for both Mexican and diaspora studies as well as gender studies. 