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AFRO-MEXICAN SPACES AND LEGACIES ON THE LOWER RIO GRANDE

by James M. Starling

During the last decades of the Spanish colonial period (1519-1821), present-day South Texas below the Nueces River was part of the multiracial frontier province of Nuevo Santander. Afro-Mexicans were a substantial portion of the population in Mier, Camargo, and Revilla, three towns with a total of 6,877 people by the close of the Spanish period.[1] This article focuses more specifically on the colonial history and post-colonial legacy of African-descended people in Starr and Zapata counties along the lower Rio Grande. The region, which emerged as a ranchland north of Mier, Camargo, and Revilla, is at the core of what geographer Daniel Arreola terms "Mexican South Texas." These two counties have roots in colonial settlements and remained predominantly Latino after 1848.[2] During the Spanish era, the area's Afro-Mexican settlers ranged from servants and vaqueros to land-holding rancheros and political and military leaders. Another aim of this study is to recover the family ties, communities, and place names that defined black life in colonial South Texas. Furthermore, this piece considers the legacy of these early encounters in later race relations in South Texas' borderlands. The position of the Lower Rio Grande, first within the northern frontier of New Spain after 1749, and along the United States-Mexico borderlands a century later, created a complex milieu for peoples of African origin along the lower Rio Grande. Historian Omar Valerio-Jiménez describes the transition that residents of these borderlands experienced from being "neglected" Spanish subjects during the late eighteenth century to becoming "unwanted" citizens on the margins of the slaveholding U.S. South after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.[3] This article posits that within the larger Spanish-speaking community, Mexicans of African descent experienced specific struggles for acceptance and social status within this "neglected" community. Moreover, after U.S. annexation, people of African ancestry faced the threat of outright exclusion from even the tenuous citizenship that Mexican Americans gained in 1848.

The encounters between African Americans, Anglos, and Mexicans that took place during the 1840s and

1850s represented new beginnings for the U.S.-Mexican borderlands, but also marked the return of colonial hierarchies and institutions, particularly slavery and formal racial stratification, on the lower Rio Grande. African Americans also encountered hostility on the border, even where they served as soldiers and had vital economic roles. Yet, isolation and "neglect" also allowed for opportunities for land ownership and social advancement for Afro-Mexicans and relatively relaxed attitudes toward intermarriage and integration.

The recorded black history of South Texas began in 1528, when Estevanico, an enslaved African man, arrived in Cabeza de Vaca's expedition. Along the Spanish colonial borderlands at large, an arc of communities from California to Florida owed their foundations to pobladores (settlers) who bore caste labels such as mulatos, moriscos, and lobos, all terms for people with varied degrees of African ancestry. Black men and women were particularly prominent as soldiers and settlers in the many presidios and military frontier towns of the vast northern Mexican frontier in the colonial period. Among these frontier zones was the Nuevo Santander colony along the lower Rio Grande, where las villas del norte (the "towns of the north" from a Mexican perspective) continue to stand along the border of Texas and the Mexican state of Tamaulipas.

Armando Alonzo's Tejano Legacy and Andres Tijerina's Tejano Empire, both published in 1998, methodically describe how rancheros during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century established land use patterns, stock raising techniques, and networks of trade that made the later "Cattle Kingdom" possible in South Texas.[4] More recently, Omar Valerio-Jiménez provides a comprehensive social history of the lower Rio Grande during the Spanish colonial and independent Mexican eras in his monograph River of Hope (2013). These historians of the colonial borderlands differ slightly on the relative impact of the Afro-Mexican population on las villas del norte. Alonzo holds Afro-Mexican population to be rather low in relation to many other parts of New Spain, due to the lack of mines and presence of "but one or two haciendas" in colonial South Texas.[5] However, Valerio-Jiménez finds that people of African origin are relatively abundant in parish records, especially during the first fifty years of Hispanic settlement. Valerio-Jiménez includes mulatos and other people of African heritage as part of a larger population of castas, with an emphasis on how these mixed-race categories gradually became more generalized with time.[6]

In the lands around Revilla, Mier, and Camargo many Afro-Mexicans bore an additional identity marker, as residents of La Hacienda de Miguel Pérez. The location of this tract of land, at present-day El Sauz, Starr County, Texas, was a significant point of origin for much of the servant population of this region. While parish records emanated from towns, many lived on and worked at widely spread ranch holdings along both sides of the Rio Grande. Many of these small ranchos remained as rural settlements in South Texas after U.S. annexation.

El Sauz and La Hacienda de Miguel Pérez: Crossroads of the Borderlands

El Sauz in far south Texas exemplifies the ranching communities of South Texas. While small in size, this locale is of great significance in the shared black and Latino history of South Texas. Today, El Sauz is an unincorporated site, with about fifty residents, at the junction of Farm Roads 3167 and 649 in Starr County, Texas, north of Rio Grande City.[7] As of the early twenty-first century, the population in and around El Sauz includes descendants of the original grantees, the Pérez, Garza, Villareal, and Reséndez families.[8] Despite its small population, El Sauz occupies a mythic place in Tejano folklore. In Américo Paredes' epic retelling of the Texas Rangers' pursuit of Gregorio Cortez "With His Pistol in His Hand," El Sauz provided a refuge from the

dreaded Texas Rangers and the vigilante mobs that pursued Cortez after the killing of the sheriff of Karnes County.[9] George Díaz, in his history of contrabandistas in South Texas, states that "Fronterizo ranches were more than simple sites for raising animals; they were communities of extensive familial and fictive kinships with many ties of obligation, particularly for reasons of defense."[10]

The lands around El Sauz extended across serially numbered Spanish land grants, known as porciónes 103-108. Porción 106 bears the name of its original grantee Miguel Pérez, a colonial landlord who asserted governance over a community of Afro-Mexican and indigenous laborers at this site in the late eighteenth century. Land grants such as La Hacienda de Miguel Pérez formed a network of ranches tied to the three villas of Camargo, Mier, and Revilla (later renamed Guerrero after the Afro-Mexican independence hero Vicente Guerrero), founded between 1749 and 1752. These towns now lie immediately south of the U.S.-Mexico boundary, but their residents' land grants extended north of the Rio Grande.[11] These towns are among the oldest colonial settlements in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and served as administrative centers for the many porciones that extended across the border in what is now Starr and Zapata counties in South Texas.[12] Within fifty years of its founding, the province of Nuevo Santander (modern-day Tamaulipas, Mexico and Texas south of the Nueces River) supported a settler population that exceeded that of the much older frontier province of New Mexico. The ribbon of riverside towns from Laredo to Matamoros quickly surpassed the population of Spanish Texas, or the lands north of the Nueces River, during the late eighteenth century. The cluster of Revilla, Mier and Camargo, with about a thousand residents in each town, exceeded the population of Béxar, the San Antonio region of Texas, during the late colonial period.[13]

For centuries, the rolling, semi-arid plains of South Texas were hunting grounds for indigenous groups such as the Coahuilteca, Karankawa, and Lipan Apache origin. While Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and Estevanico traversed the general area in 1536, what is now South Texas remained at the periphery of Spanish colonization for two centuries. In response to increased British activity in the Gulf of Mexico and the rapid advance of Anglo-American settlers toward Spanish Florida, in 1749, José de Escandón led Mexican and Spanish settlers to the new colony of Nuevo Santander. The Spaniards initially named the region along the Lower Rio Grande to the Nueces Sabana Grande, the Great Savannah. The suitability of these lands for livestock was noted in another early name, Llanos de los Mesteños, or "Mustang Plains," as feral horses and cattle thrived on the open range. Other travelers had a less inviting name for the region, La Brazada, or "The Hot Coals," as summertime heat made the ground seem to smolder to the touch. However, the prospect of owning land and vast herds made the region enticing for colonists. Aside from a variety of vegetation for grazing and foraging, these plains also had salt beds and saltpeter deposits that were valuable for ranchers. Arroyos (creeks), norias (wells) and aguajes (watering holes) provided relief in a place that alternated between prolonged drought and heavy rainfall. Before the introduction of deep-water wells, ranchos required access to abundant fresh water for the large herds of livestock; either from the Rio Grande or at spring-fed aguajes. The Hacienda de Miguel Pérez appeared to have an advantage with its location near several water sources.[14]

Miguel Pérez held high status on account of his Spanish birth, wealth, and his patronage of many servants and clients. Pérez, born in 1731, was among the first settlers of Camargo; at the age of 19, he was listed as the oldest son of José Pérez and Anna María de la Garza in the 1750 census of Camargo. His future wife Bernarda Hinojosa also appeared in this census as the seven-year-old daughter of Juan Crisóstomo Hinojosa and Margarita Gonzales, who were also among the first settlers of the town and held porción 103. The nearby

porciones 104 and 105 also belonged to members of the extended De La Garza Falcón and Hinojosa families. Camargo was the first of Nuevo Santander's northern settlements, founded in 1749. In 1750, Revilla was founded to the west, and in 1752, Escandón's settlers established Mier between these two sites. While Miguel Pérez and his extended family was made up of residents (vecinos) of these towns, they lived and worked on the ranchos that extended far across the neighboring river valley and plains. Vecino literally meant "neighbor" or resident of a Spanish settlement. However, this became a marker of status that designated fully socialized members of a "Spanish" municipality, especially in opposition to indigenous peoples, slaves, and "vagrants" or outcasts.[15]

The working population of Miguel Pérez's hacienda included Afro-Mexicans with extended family ties that centered on porción 106. Among the first recorded baptisms at the Mier parish was that of María Andrea, listed as a mulata and the legitimate daughter of Diego de Santiago González and Casilda de Torres. They, along with godparents José Ypólito Xabier and María Francisca Dorothea Ambriza, were all servants on the "rancho de Miguel Pérez." A few months later, González and Torres served as godparents for another child, Francisco Román, indio, the child of Vicente Domingo Montoya and Rosa María García; these indigenous people all appeared in records as servants on the Pérez ranch. Over the course of the following decade, a number of other indigenous and Afro-Mexican children were born to servants on this ranch site, and many of these had godparents who also came from Miguel Pérez's holdings.[16]

In his discussion of employer-servant relations, Omar Valerio-Jiménez points out that "employers sought to control worker's personal lives by suing to prevent suitors from courting domestic servants," and regulating marriage choice and preventing elopement. In parish records, repeated patterns of family affinity also appear in baptismal and marriage records of these servants. Furthermore, the figurative identity stamp of being "from the Hacienda Pérez" often defined this kinship network among the servants on the holding. Long after its owner's death in 1786, clergy in Mier and Camargo continued to note parishioners as residents of the Hacienda de Miguel Pérez. As late as June 4, 1814, Padre José Antonio del Alamo listed José Ipólito Tanguma as a casta (mixed-race person) of the Hacienda de Miguel Pérez. By this point, the caste system in the Mier Parish records took a very simple form. Of 112 baptisms that year, 21 simply appeared as castas with no further racial description. Most of the remaining baptisms were españoles as racial labels tended to broaden during the final years of colonial rule.[17]

Mestizaje: The Blending of Peoples on the Colonial Frontier

Overall, Spanish census figures reveal that African-descended people, especially those of mixed origin, were a notable percentage of Nuevo Santander's settlers. This colony's population totaled 23,514 in a 1788 Spanish census. Negros of "unmixed" African origin comprised 5.8%, mulatos of mixed African and Spanish origin were 12.5%, and lobos of African and Native American origin were 14.6%. In total, about a third of the people of Nuevo Santander had documented African ancestry according to that census.[18] At Mier, between 1767 and 1780, Franciscan missionaries recorded approximately 31 baptisms as mulatos, within a total of 323 births.[19] These statistics do not reveal an exact picture of the ethnic composition of the colonial borderlands. Caste distinctions and formal definitions of race in frontier areas were especially arbitrary, and reflected the whims of individual clergy, self-declared identities, and community judgments as well as the documented ancestral background of individuals.

In Mier, successive parish priests differed widely in their record keeping, as Franciscan missionaries who performed the functions of secular priests came and went frequently during the late eighteenth century. Fray Francisco Pérez Brizuela, who served Mier from 1767 to 1772 was one of the longer serving clergymen in this community. At the parish of Mier, successive Franciscans varied in their definition of españoles, with some leaving the category unmarked and implicit, only specifically identifying caste groups and Indians. However, the number of mulatos relatively consistent from 1767 to 1800 at around 8-10% of births. After 1800, a blurring of these identities took place, and mulatos, mestizos, and coyotes became part of a larger category, simply labeled castas in most records.[20]

Mulato was the only African-origin caste category in the Mier Parish records, and reflected a simple system that stood in contrast to the more elaborate classification scheme that appeared in records in central Mexico. Pedro Alonso O'Crouley, an Irish-Spanish merchant and traveler in New Spain's northern provinces during the 1760s and 1770s, noted a tendency toward simplified caste identities when he observed that while intermarriage formally resulted in labels such as morisco, torna atrás, tente en el aire, lobo, chino, and albarazado for specific mixtures of African, Spanish, and Native American ancestry, all of these categories for people of partial African origin eventually did "incline toward the mulato."[21] While O'Crouley's views reflect those of a foreign traveler, the baptismal records of the Nuevo Santander frontier revealed a less comprehensive array of castes. In 1769, Fray Pérez of Mier recorded José María Carmona as a mulato, the caste assigned to his father José Antonio Carmona. However, the infant's mother, Maria Francisca de Amar, was indigenous (india) in the record, which would result in a distinct caste category elsewhere, such as lobo or zambo. Likewise, in 1772, Juan Simón Ochoa Tanguma appears in the baptismal registry as a mulato, despite having an indigenous mother, Bartola Tanguma.[22]

The frontier society of northern New Spain offered opportunities for formal shifts in caste rank, through the conferral of certificates that granted a higher status in return for acts of military service or financial support to the Spanish Crown. These documents, which at times enabled the outright purchase of whiteness, fostered a climate of racial passing in late colonial Mexico. Castas in frontier communities also valued the status of being a vecino. One did not need to have fully Spanish ancestry to exercise the rights of a vecino within a town, and this status brought a degree of social distinction, especially for castas who sought to distinguish themselves from Indians and black slaves. However, the ability for castas to climb up the social ladder was highly contingent on approval from elites with unquestionable racial and social credentials.[23]

Afro-Mexican Lands: The Benavides Porción and Zapata County

A number of Afro-Mexicans in Camargo, Mier, and Revilla had family ties and social positions that suggested a degree of upward mobility. The family of María Olaya Rubio and Ysidro Benavides, whose child José Ponciano Benavides was baptized in 1768 as a mulato, were Afro-Mexicans who occupied a higher social category than the servants of Miguel Pérez's ranch. Ysidro Benavides held porción 24 of Revilla, now in Zapata County Texas near the town of Lopeño. Jose's godparents, Antonio Gregorio Sánchez Solis and Gertrudis Lerma, were landholders in Mier; they held porción 69, in what is now Roma, Starr County. The parentage of these godparents also appeared in Jose Ponciano Benavides' baptismal record, suggesting that the origins of fictive kin were important in establishing this family's social identity.[24]

A generation later, when José Benavides married María Antonia Molina in Revilla in 1792, the couple appeared as mestizos in Fray José Leonardo Sánchez Navarro's record. Yet, their son José Cayetano, born in 1798 was a mulato at his baptism. However, the friar at the time, José Cayetano González Hermosillo, was quicker to identify parishioners as having African ancestry; he identified eighteen of 64 baptized infants that year as mulatos. In addition to the observations of priests and witnesses, caste labels also rested on the ability of individuals to assert a specific status without facing a challenge to the claim. While mestizaje, "passing," and a landscape where many people shared similar hardships resulted in social leveling; hierarchies continued to matter. People such as José Ponciano Benavides and his family had to work to ensure the same degree of social respectability that higher status groups easily assumed.

Even for those who bore the label of "Spanish," social distinctions based on birthplace and ancestry remained significant.[25] For instance, Andrea Sánchez Rendón, born in 1769, appeared as an española in Mier parish records. While Fray Pérez listed her father Miguel Sánchez as a Spaniard, he recorded her mother Efigenia Rendón as a coyota, a designation that formally referred to the child of a mestizo and an indigenous parent. On the other hand, markers of an even more elevated social status for some Spaniards appear in colonial records, such as the identification of men and women as don and doña, or the designation of a family as "all Spanish" (todos españoles)."[26]

During the waning years of Spanish colonial rule, the caste system of the lower Rio Grande took on a simplified form. This broadening of "Spanish" or Creole status might suggest a more egalitarian caste framework, though some españoles such as the parents of José Vicente Ysidoro Ramírez, of Mier had indicators of elevated status within the broader español category. His parents and godparents appeared with the titles don and doña, suggesting elevated social rank. Such status distinctions that reflected class identities long survived the downfall of the formal caste system that took place after Mexican independence in 1821.[27]

While social markers that valorized whiteness and discriminated against people of African ancestry remained in independent Mexico, Afro-Mexicans also exercised a variety of military and political roles in the new republic. President Vicente Guerrero, of partial African ancestry, led an effort to abolish slavery in Mexico in 1829.

Several other Mexicans with significant black ancestry were significant in Mexico's borderlands during and after independence, such as brothers Andrés and Pío Pico in California, Antonio Menchaca in Texas and Antonio José Zapata in the Tamaulipas borderlands along the lower Rio Grande. Zapata, listed as a mulato, was baptized January 29, 1797 in Revilla as the son of Ignacio Zapata and María Antonia Rocha. On May 2, 1821, at the eve of Mexican independence, Zapata married Asunción Barrera Salinas in the same parish; Padre Juan Santiago Sánchez listed him as a casta of the town.[28]

Over the course of the following decade, Zapata gained a degree of wealth as a rancher, and held political and legal authority as a judge (juez) in Revilla. This community became Guerrero, for the Afro-Mexican revolutionary Vicente Guerrero, after Mexican independence. Zapata also engaged in military service in ongoing campaigns between Mexican soldiers and Comanche and Lipan Apache forces to the north, rising to the rank of colonel. During the 1830s, Zapata grew disillusioned with the centralist policies of Mexico's Santa Anna regime and in collaboration with Antonio Canales Rosillo led an insurgency against the federal government that coincided with Texas's insurgency to the north.

The collapse of his short-lived Republic of the Rio Grande led to Zapata's arrest and execution in Guerrero for treason in 1840.[29]

Recolonizing the Rio Grande: Imposing a New Racial Hierarchy

Despite the end of caste labels such as mulato and the assimilation of many Afro-Mexicans into the general borderlands population, representations of blackness abounded in encounters between Anglos and Mexicans. Mexico's status as a haven for runaway slaves from the American South and the appearance of Mexicans with African ancestry were common themes in U.S. travelers' accounts. Thomas Jefferson Green, a soldier and politician who served in the Republic of Texas' ill-fated Mier Expedition of 1842-1843, narrated the encounters of runaway slaves – enjoying free status in Mexico – and their juxtaposition with white Texan prisoners.[30] While describing the confinement of American captives in a cowpen, Green narrated that "a negro fellow who had run off from Texas, looked over the fence, and in a mournful shake, he said, in a still more melancholy voice, 'Aha! white man, dey cotch you now; dey gib you hell!' This comfort was quite as good as their cowpen lodgings, up to their ankles in wet manure."[31] Green cast Mexico as a place that inverted Anglo-American norms of race and space, which commonly appeared in soldiers and travelers accounts from this period. Similar accounts of runaway slaves abounded in accounts of the borderlands campaigns of the U.S.-Mexico War of 1846-1848, such as in Zachary Taylor's narrative of the march from the Nueces at Corpus Christi Bay to Matamoros and then to the Camargo-Mier area. These encounters included a pursuit in Matamoros; where a "runaway negro of the neighborhood" was the suspect in the abduction and murder of a U.S. Army colonel near the city.[32]

American troops expressed fascination, and repulsion, with the sight of Afro-Mexican soldiers. Albert Gallatin Brackett, a Pennsylvanian officer who participated in the invasion of Tamaulipas and the Mexican northeast in 1846, explicitly described the revulsion some American soldiers expressed toward Afro-Mexicans. As his unit encountered captured Mexican soldiers on their invasion route south from the Rio Grande, Brackett noted, "One of them was certainly the most villainous-looking wretch I ever saw. He was about half negro, and constant exposure to the sun had blackened his face in addition to his sable color." Brackett described his "dusky features" as "hideous", and wrote that "a number of our men express a wish that they might kill him for no other reason than his really devilish looks.[33]

While the Pennsylvanian also recorded his "a strange sensation" at his first sight of slave laborers on the plantations of Louisiana, Brackett was among the settlers who reintroduced black slaves to the Rio Grande for the first time since Mexican independence.[34] At frontier posts in Texas, Army officers from different sectional origins held men and women as property before the Civil War. The 1860 U.S. Census Slave Schedule listed A. J. Brackett as the master of an unnamed forty-year-old woman at Camp Edinburg in Hidalgo County, east of Starr County along the Rio Grande.[35] Other U.S. Army officers and their families introduced six more slaves to Fort Ringgold, near Rio Grande City in Starr County [36] Arthur Lee, a native of New York, who like Brackett, later served in the Union Army, was listed as the owner of a 28-year-old woman and three enslaved girls, ages six, four, and two in the U.S. Census Slave Schedule of 1860. His neighbor, Thomas "Shanks" Evans of South Carolina, who later gained a degree of fame as a Confederate commander during the Civil War, had two slaves in his household, a 38-year-old woman and a 13-year-old girl. No further information on the names of these slaves, their relationships to one another, or the nature of their labor appears in these records.[37] A brief glimpse into slaveholding in the region appeared in Robert E. Lee's letter to Nathan Evans. Lee, then a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army who served at various garrisons along the south Texas frontier, informed Evans on the journey of an unidentified slave who Evans' mother sent to the

Texas borderlands as a "gift" to her son,

> ***I send up by train today your woman. It had been the intention of the Qtr. Mr. to send up the saddles by the contractors' train, which would have given her a long pilgrimage equal to the Israelites of old. I discovered it and got it changed. I have selected a wagon for her & asked Capt. McLean to give the Wagon Mr. special instructions about her- That she is to be allowed to sleep in the wagon etc., & the recruits that go to Colorado are to be confined to the other wagons. She and her provisions, bedding, & baggage-She says she will pay her way up & I hope she will reach you safely & comfortably. She appears to be a very good woman, & I hope you will have great comfort in her.***[38]

In addition to the unnamed slaves who arrived, free African Americans such as Margarita Norris, a cook originally from Louisiana who arrived along with her daughter Lucia and son Luis Phillip, migrated to Starr County. Norris settled in the emerging port of Roma in Starr County, the westernmost navigable point along the Rio Grande at the time. Nearby in the same town, Sam Smith, a free black laborer from Maryland, shared a home with Dolores Smith, listed as a native of Mexico.[39] In communities such as Roma, two strands of the African Diaspora united along the banks of the Rio Grande. The influx of Anglo-Americans created an additional system of racial hierarchy, in South Texas. However, the presence of a large ethnic Mexican population ensured that older forms of accommodation and mestizaje would remain in effect.[40]

Afro-Mexican Legacies in the Texas Borderlands

Quintard Taylor, in his survey of black history in the American West titled "In Search of the Racial Frontier," reminds us that for "three centuries," "persons of African ancestry moved north from Mexico rather than west from the Atlantic slope" to reach North America's frontiers.[41] In both movements to the north and to the west, people of African descent sought opportunities for land ownership and the rights of citizenship. Just as Afro-Mexicans on the colonial frontier sought land grants and access to family networks in order to bolster their social standing and secure economic self-determination, African Americans sought similar opportunities in the Texas borderlands after 1848. In River of Hope, Omar Valerio–Jiménez covers the extensive post-1848 contacts between African American settlers from the United States and ethnic Mexicans, and finds that the cultural landscape of mestizaje allowed African Americans to defy the rigid racial boundaries of much of the nineteenth-century South, especially through intermarriage.[42]

One consequence of annexation, and the conferral of citizenship and legal "white" status to Mexican Americans was the generalized disappearance of Afro-Mexican identity in formal records. This erasure is evident in census records from the later nineteenth century, which invariably record people with Spanish-surnames or birth in Mexico as "whites." A Texas state Agricultural Bureau report on Starr County in 1887 described 8,074 of its 8,304 residents as "Mexican." However, the report only listed 18 of the county's residents were listed as "colored," and the report enumerated 1,670 "white" families and five "colored" families in the jurisdiction.[43] The tenuousness of this racial and social status was apparent in a subsequent Texas Adju-

tant General report, which stated of Starr County, "that section is mostly populated by Mexicans, with only a small percentum of whites," which during times of border tensions created "a very serious and dangerous condition of the whites in that section."[44] William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb document the widespread lynching and mob violence against Mexican Americans in South Texas through the late nineteenth century. In Starr County alone, these historians describe an outbreak of violence in Rio Grande City that claimed the lives of eight Mexicans in 1852, the lynching of three Mexicans in Starr County during the "Cortina Wars" from 1859-1861, and the lynching of four ethnic Mexicans near Rio Grande City in December of 1887. Additional cases involving the murder of individuals of Mexican descent also marked the history of Starr County during this era.[45]

The racial fluidity of South Texas, rooted in Spain's complex colonial caste system society and Mexico's republican egalitarianism, had manifold consequences for race relations in the Texas borderlands. The presence of a large Mexican American community, generally "white by law," yet racialized and segregated, allowed for some challenges to Jim Crow in Texas and, occasionally, created social structures that were rare in the segregated south at large. Historian Alberto Rodríguez finds that in Cameron County, Texas during the U.S. Census of 1900, 38% of the eighteen households with African American residents had an interracial marriage. In nearby Hidalgo County, 72% of the 25 African American households had an interracial couple; these two counties, Rodríguez finds, had the "highest rates of interracial marriages involving at least one black spouse in the United States at that time."[46] Rodríguez cites the narrative of Ben Kinchlow, the son of a white master and black slave, whose mother Lizaer (Eliza) Moore married an ethnic man named Mexican Juan Ríos. Later, Kinchlow courted, but did not marry Antonita Flores. Rodríguez points out that, although such a union would violate the miscegenation laws of the time, members of the ethnic Mexican community such as Juan Ríos and Antonita Flores were either unaware of these laws or willfully defied them during the late nineteenth century.[47]

A relative laxity in enforcing Jim Crow along the Texas borderlands extended into the twentieth century, even through a time when "massive resistance" to integration made waves elsewhere in the U.S. South. In his study of the integration of higher education in Texas, Amilcar Shabazz describes the large Mexican American presence in south and west Texas as a "Trojan horse within the fortress of white supremacy," as the inclusion of nominally "white" Mexican Americans in institutions at times eased the integration of African Americans. Colleges such as Pan American College in Edinburg (now part of the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley) and Texas College of Arts and Industries (now Texas A&M-Kingsville) integrated during the 1950s and shunned the "massive resistance" that defined other parts of the segregated south. In this process, the presence of large numbers of Hispanic students at these institutions, and relatively small African American populations, made for a rather quiet transition to desegregation.[48]

However, relations between African Americans and Mexican Americans were not always tranquil, and overall, the region experienced a number violent episodes that involved African Americans, especially soldiers at border posts. The Rio Grande City Riot, which emerged around Fort Ringgold in 1899, provided an example of the fragility of racial tolerance in South Texas. In 1899, after the Spanish-American War, the army posted the all-black Ninth US Cavalry to the Texas border. Historian James Leiker, in "Racial Borders: Black Soldiers along the Rio Grande," describes the tensions that flared as black soldiers experienced legal segregation and widespread exclusion from a city where Mexican Americans made up the overwhelming majority. A series of violent clashes led the garrison's white commander to order the firing of Gatling guns

on Rio Grande City. While no civilians died in this assault, the specter of a "race war" involving armed and well-trained African-Americans alarmed many along the South Texas border and beyond.[49] A few years later, a similar episode of violence near nearby Fort Brown led to President Theodore Roosevelt's dishonorable discharge of 167 African American soldiers during the "Brownsville Affair" of 1906.[50]

These events took place amidst considerable tensions between Anglo and Hispanic residents in South Texas, including the pursuit of Gregorio Cortez across South Texas in 1901 after the killing of a deputy sheriff in Karnes County. This violence culminated in widespread lynching and vigilantism across South Texas from 1915 to 1920, a period Benjamin H. Johnson thoroughly examined in his book "Revolution in Texas."[51] Black-Latino tensions also marred race relations in Texas throughout the twentieth century, as Brian Behnken states, some Mexican Americans "practiced anti-black racism and conscientiously opposed black civil rights" in their pursuit of recognition as whites in Jim Crow Texas. Likewise, some African Americans were wary of Mexican American claims to "whiteness" and at times critiqued Tejanos as "free riders" who benefitted from black activism without investing similar efforts. Economic competition for jobs at the bottom of the pay scale also created tensions that have hampered cross-community collaboration[52]

In light of these conflicts, the deep historical connections that bind the African and Mexican diasporas in South Texas deserve wider attention. An greater public awareness of the Afro-Mexican past illustrates these communities' shared history with slavery and similar struggles for recognition as soldiers, landholders, and citizens. A wider appreciation of early black experiences in South Texas also enhances our appreciation of the complexities of race and identity along the borderlands and problematizes essentialist frameworks that often overlook the complex history of admixture and cultural blending in the borderlands. The Afro-Mexican legacy in South Texas adds complexity to America's "black and white" racial paradigm and the "Anglo and Hispanic" binary common in the Texas borderlands. Recovering the Afro-Mexican past creates a more inclusive historical framework for understanding South Texas' past and informs more productive dialogues that build bridges between all communities.

ENDNOTES

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