

SLAS Postgraduate Conference Grant Report

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'Díaspóra, nación y diferencia. Poblaciones de origen africano en México y Centroamérica' conference, Veracruz, Mexico (10-13 June 2008)

The papers in this international conference primarily reflected upon the complexities and multiplicities of notions and histories of 'blackness' and peoples of 'African' descent in Mexico and Central America. In the case of Mexico this field of enquiry was initiated by Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán's *Cuijla: Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro* in 1958. Numerous studies followed from historians and anthropologists, tracing what Guillermo Bonfil Batalla coined Mexico's 'third root.' These scholars sought to incorporate the contribution of peoples of African heritage into both Mexican history and its present. One of the aims of the 'Diaspora, nation and difference: populations of African descent in Mexico and Central America' conference was to bring together scholars – predominantly anthropologists, historians and political scientists – from Mexico, Central America and beyond to “mov[e] beyond the unnecessary clichés of black victimization and the folklorization of black culture—both of which have served to bind and stereotype research on blackness.”¹ This was, I would say, achieved overall. Papers included historical, socio-political, literary and cultural analyses of: colonial slave and 'free black' populations within the region, encompassing 'Black Atlantic' routes; later migrations and diasporas; racial ideologies (particularly mestizaje and creolization), nation, class, inclusivity, exclusivity and racism; contemporary social dynamics and identities; globalization and 'black' cultural flows; religious and social movements; the socio-political implications of recent legislation, such as that in Brazil, Colombia and Peru, recognizing peoples of African descent. Scholars were keen to emphasize the uniqueness of the Mexican and Central American experience and logic of 'blackness' and race and ethnicity more generally.

In my paper, entitled 'Danzón's racial configurations: Veracruz's racial imaginaries,' I considered how the racial imaginary of the Port of Veracruz, Mexico, intersects with danzón, a music-dance form emanating from Cuba for which the Port is renowned. I examined the tensions between perceptions of Veracruz's 'black' other as being located in Veracruz and as being located somewhere else: in Cuba (portrayed as 'black') or Veracruz's historical past. I explored how the history of danzón most commonly related in Mexico (re)produces ideas of Veracruz's relationship to the Caribbean, ideas concerning origins and originality, mestizaje and 'blackness.'

I am extremely grateful to SLAS for supporting my participation in this event. It provided a wonderful opportunity to gain invaluable feedback on my work from both international scholars and participants in my research, as well as to update my material since the Port of Veracruz is my primary fieldwork site.

¹ Diaspora, nation and difference: populations of African descent in Mexico and Central America conference 'Announcement:' http://www.afro2008-xalapa.com/convocatoria_eng.htm [accessed 30 June 2008].