

AFRO *RE-EXISTENCE* IN THE SCHOOL OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

This article adopts an ethnographic approach to describe a learning experience aimed at making visible the works of African and Afro-descendant artists among undergraduate students in Visual Arts and Photography of the Faculty of Plastic Arts of Universidad Veracruzana (in Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico). From a decolonial perspective, an analysis is conducted on how their knowledge has increased in terms of Africa and its diaspora, the contemporary art of African artists, the work of Afro-Mexican artists and the gaps in their education regarding knowledge of the African continent and the history of Afro-descendance in Mexico. Furthermore, an exploration is made of the terms in which they have reflected about how blackness is represented in art, the place occupied by Africa and its diaspora in the visual studies and art history they have accessed as part of their university education, and how they personally relate to the ethnic category “Afro-descendant” with which, in some cases, singular processes of Afro-Mexican ethnogenesis were triggered. In summary, it systematizes an experience of artistic education that activated processes of Afro *re-existence*; that is to say, to a certain extent, that a restitution of Afro-Mexican memory and identities occurred.

Keywords: African art; Art education; Intercultural education; Racism; Higher education.

For the first time since the population census was carried out in the viceroyalty of New Spain in 1790, we have demographic data regarding self-recognition in the black population in Mexico. In 2020, to the question “Because of your ancestors and according to your customs and traditions, do you consider yourself black, that is, Afro-Mexican or Afro-descendant?”, 2.04% of the Mexican population responded affirmatively, according to the Population and Housing Census of the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, 2021). The historical significance of the Afro-descendant cultural and sociodemographic reality is usually designated as the “third root” of the country, thus differentiating it from the native and white-mestizo populations. In the state of Veracruz, 2.67% of the population recognize themselves as black, Afro-Mexican or Afro-descendant, but this rate rises to 32.65% in a municipality like Yanga (INEGI, 2021). In the current context of neoliberal multiculturalism and extractive developmentalism, the concession made by the State to include this new question of black self-recognition in the 2020 census corresponds to the fruits of the struggles of Afro-Mexican organizations, activists and intellectuals converging in a cultural affirmation movement that contributes to the politicization of Afro-descendant identities.

In the framework of global confinement and international Afro-descendant protests such as Black Lives Matter in the US, it seems to us that university art education tends to evade its role as a shaper of anti-racist consciences and commitments in a Latin American society that discriminates against peoples and individuals because of their origin and cultural belonging. However, training in visual arts represents a field of incidence and transformation of identities. It can reach, in the case of the present study, forms of identity re-invention, that is, an ethnogenetic dynamic triggered by an educational experience in higher intercultural education that aims to decolonize the learning of artistic knowledge related to Afro-descendants. However, this approach is almost non-existent across Mexican university curricula, as well as in the formal education of children and youth.

This text addresses the forms of self-identification, discovery, and construction of politically legitimized ethnic identities by social movements that promote the restitution of collective memories and the affirmation of contemporary Afro-Mexican identities, as well as *re-existence* in arts education. The Colombian intellectual and artist Adolfo Albán Achinte (2013) conceives *re-existence* as the devices created by indigenous and Afro-descendant communities to confront the reality established by the hegemonic project that has inferiorized and silenced their existence and portrayed them in a negative light. In this sense, *re-existence* aims to decentralize the established logic to search the depths of indigenous and Afro-descendant cultures for “the keys of organizational, productive, nutritional, ritual and aesthetic forms that give dignity to life and allow its re-invention in order to continue transforming” (Albán Achinte, 2013, p. 455). Furthermore, the oppression of aspirations towards *re-existence*

concerns the role of the State in violating human dignity that is manifested in different forms of racism in educational contents for the Afro-Latino populations (Velasco & Baronnet, 2016), despite the ideal local conditions for promoting an Indigenous and Black collective oversight of pedagogical materials, supported by collaboration with White and Mestizo professors. In the field of art education, we first propose an analysis of the anti-black racism present in Mexican visual culture. Second, we expose critical elements that challenge new discussions towards a decolonial art education. Third, we describe our methodology, and fourth, we discuss the results of analytical issues, before providing conclusions in terms of our learning regarding a specific *re-existence* process within the faculty of Arts of the state university of Veracruz.

ANTI-BLACK RACISM IN MEXICAN VISUAL CULTURE

Over time, the Mexican State has used all the media in its reach to promote a given grammar of identity/alterity (Gingrich, 2004), i.e., the geographically, socially, historically, and politically situated cultural patterns from which we structure our national perception of “us” and “them” and our interactions with subjects and groups of diverse identities. Through the public education system in particular, this grammar has circulated as representations of the National History, narratives about the origin of the American mestizo nation. It has given rise to a visual culture that reproduces the mythical story of the national identity as an exclusive result of the miscegenation between the indigenous peoples and the Spaniards, in denial of the fact that the Africans and Afro-descendants formed one of the largest populational groups in the viceroyalty of New Spain, while the peninsular and creole peoples represented a minority.

In 1821, when the struggle for independence ended, the social system of castes and slavery was constitutionally abolished. However, the creole and mestizo elites who assumed power failed to break from the grammar of identity/alterity imposed by the conquistadors, and gave continuity to the positive valuation of whiteness, in opposition to the negative valuation of blackness. For this reason, in the visual culture of Mexico, as with those of many other Central and South American countries, the dominant representation of African and Afro-descendant otherness often reproduces a Eurocentric and racist social imaginary. From this, a whitening of history, memory and the national identity is conducted, as exemplified in the representations made by the 19th century intellectuals and artists with respect to Vicente Guerrero, the first Afro-Mexican president and second president of Mexico (Ballesteros Páez, 2011). His figure was deliberately whitened in many images in order to erase his African roots and make him look like one of the elites in power. At the same time, the journalistic chronicles of his life ranged from insulting his racial origin to attributing him with evil simply due to his African heritage.

The dominant visual culture features a predominantly colonial view that reproduces the ideas of biological racism of the 19th century across

1 In Mexico, the Ministry of Public Education provides illustrated textbooks free of charge to all students of primary and upper-middle school education.

a range of supports, platforms and exhibition spaces. This was even present in the free textbooks¹ issued for use in the year 2010, when the State commemorated the bicentenary of Mexican independence and the centenary of the Mexican revolution. These textbooks reproduce stereotypical illustrations of Africans and Afro-descendants, reducing them to the role of strong and vigorous slaves, whose contribution to the national culture consisted only of music. At the same time, the textbooks minimize the presence of these people in the past and present, almost erasing them completely, and fail to incorporate the history of Africa and its cultural diversity, highlighting only that conditions of poverty predominate in Africa, without explaining why (Masferrer León, 2014). This also occurs in graphic novels and cinematographic productions, which also dialog with the nationalist ideology of the State.

For example, *Memín Pinguín* (Fernández Sánchez, 2015), one of the best-selling Mexican comic strips, recycles stereotypical and racist representations popular in the visual culture of the United States of America, such as *Little Black Sambo* and *Aunt Jemima*. Although it often gives voice to characters that reject explicitly racist and discriminatory actions, it still inferiorizes and dehumanizes blackness, portraying it as disagreeable and of no benefit to society. Consequently, it also reproduces a condescending and paternalist view: it portrays *Memín* and his mother, the only black characters, as intellectually and socially inferior, in a lower evolutionary state to that of the other characters, recreating the whitening ideology of miscegenation promoted by the Mexican State since the foundation of the Ministry of Public Education in 1921.

On the other hand, the dominant Mexican cinematographic production rarely includes characters and experiences of Africa and its diaspora and, when it does, it recycles racist stereotypes. During the so-called “Golden Era” of Mexican cinema (1936-1951), a considerable quantity of films represented African or Afro-descendant identities, cultures, and experiences. However, even those with anti-racist aspirations ultimately reproduced an *ingenuous racism*, “thoughtless and naturalized practices around what it means to be racist and what is racism, as well as the historical denial that such practices exist in Mexico” (Varela Huerta, 2020, p. 92). Repeatedly, “black voices are silenced, and black lives are denied as protagonistic stake-holders” (Weltman-Cisneros, 2019, p. 13). The experience of being black is lived as a tragedy and there is a recycling of stereotypical representations imported from foreign visual cultures (Bailey, 2019, p. 5). The *black* aspect is excluded from *mexicanness* and is instead given an alien status associated with Cuba or Africa (Juárez Huet, 2018). Ultimately, it reproduces a colonial, Eurocentric, and stereotypical view of blackness, as well as of the national identity.

In the 21st century, blackness rarely forms part of the dominant visual culture in Mexico and, when it does occur, it is almost exclusively in historical stories featuring *black* characters fulfilling stereotypical roles, such as those of servants or slaves (Weltman-Cisneros, 2019, p. 14). In this context, *La Negrada* (Pérez Solano, 2018), the first Mexican drama film in which all the actors and actresses are Afro-Mexican, presents

their struggles and addresses the theme of the discrimination they often face. However, it still reproduces a colonial view, portraying the people as passive, savage, and exotic (Bailey, 2019, p. 6). Thus, while seeking to highlight and recognize the dignity of the Afro-Mexican communities, it reaffirms and reinforces racist discourse and naturalized stereotypes, without these being “questioned by the communication media and public and private institutions” (Varela Huerta, 2020, p. 96).

In this context, in the courses Projects of Animation for Photography and Projects of Visual Arts (February-July 2020), offered by the Faculty of Plastic Arts of the Universidad Veracruzana, we asked ourselves about the place Africa and Afro-descendance has in the development of artistic creators, as well as the ways in which the *Afro* otherness is often constructed in visual culture. We employed artistic creation as a strategy by which to visibilize the Afro-descendant people and their struggles throughout history; to break with the single story (Ngozi Adichie, 2018) regarding the mestizophilic national identity. Over the course of a semester, 14 students from two different programs, Photography and Visual Arts, participated in the project *Afro-descendance* and the following pages give an account of the learning experiences developed as a result.

TOWARDS A DECOLONIAL ART EDUCATION

This study is drawn from the understanding that the education offered by all art schools is a situated social construct that reproduces particular social imaginaries; that is, the social practices of creation and artistic education, as well as their results over time, institute a given system of thought. It is also drawn from the assumption that the practices of creation and artistic education are processes of cultural production carried out by concrete subjects and groups, within specific material and symbolic power relationships and in specific historical-social contexts (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013). Thus, the education of artistic creators is the result of historical practices moulded by relationships of power, in a given balance of forces. And when art school pays critical attention to its own historicity, it can become a space of resistance to power (Martins and Popkewitz, 2015, p. 12), in this case, resistance to the coloniality of seeing (Barriendos, 2011, p. 15). That is to say that the matrix of coloniality underlying every visual regime based on polarization and inferiorization between the subject who observes and the object of that observation. For this reason, from the critical perspective of Martins (2018), we ask ourselves what types of practices create inequalities in the social recognition accessed by African and Afro-descendant artistic creators and works, opposed to the institutional discourses of inclusion and recognition of diversity in the Faculty of Plastic Arts of Universidad Veracruzana.

In what way do these practices contravene the established plans of study, the existing plan of development, the institutional mission and vision? On one hand, the study plans for Degrees in Photography and Visual Arts establish that graduates should act from a humanist spirit aimed at fomenting common wellbeing within its spheres of professional

intervention. The current plan of development of the Faculty - PLADEA 2017-2021 (Facultad de Artes Plásticas, 2018) - aims to prompt the creation of artistic projects that favour gender equity and inclusion as part of the university culture. Moreover, inter-culturalism has been one of the transversal axes of institutional action in the strategic plans of Universidad Veracruzana for the last 20 years.

On the other hand, while recognizing that coloniality (Quijano, 2000) is a symbolic system of domination integrated into the social imaginary promoted by the Mexican State that acts to structure practically all fields of social life - including artistic education and creation -, the design, implementation, and analysis of the project *Afro-descendance* took place based on a decolonial perspective. The project focused on favouring processes of decolonial aesthetics (Mignolo, 2010), experiences of learning and unlearning to make the invisible visible - for example, how the systems of colonial domination operate and the consequences they bring. This focus served to make visible the way power creates and reproduces the dividing line of “to be” and “not to be” (Fanon, 2010), i.e., how it administers privileges and disadvantages in terms of diversity. Ultimately, it facilitated questioning the legitimacy and universal validity of this situation, highlighting and recognizing forms of constructing the world of subjects and groups that have historically experienced colonial disadvantages.

We opted for the development of a pedagogy of the Afro-descendant *re-existence* (Albán Achinte, 2013) from artistic creation and education; that is, to create spaces in which to break the colonial *status quo* and highlight with dignity the aesthetic proposals of identities and cultures historically subjected to modern-colonial domination. Here, we understand aesthetic experience as a space of action and decolonial reflection for the strengthening of these identities and cultures, as a pedagogical tool to dignify them with visibility. Pedagogy in a decolonial key (Díaz, 2010) is thus characterized by promoting thoughtful, ethical, and political actions capable of questioning the values, principles, and norms of the epistemic colonial perspective. These are learning experiences that can destabilize and weaken the dominant Eurocentric worldview, at the same time as recognizing alternative visions and experiences. They trigger unprecedented processes of construction of knowledge and empowerment of subjects based on questioning the hegemonically instituted *status quo*. Thus, the participants, rejecting categories and hierarchies of colonial domination, assume the role of leading agents in the construction of social justice, equity, and recognition of diversity.

With the project *Afro-descendance*, we also seek to favour processes of anti-racist education (Zárate-Moedano, 2017; 2018), offering conceptual and methodological tools so that the students develop critical views in terms of the institutional policies and practices that shape the processes of artistic creation, education and diffusion and contribute to the construction of reality, racializing processes of oppression and exclusion. We designed learning experiences aimed at identifying how racism is manifested, administering privileges and disadvantages in terms

of access to social justice as equal recognition of diverse identities and cultures - specifically, how “white privilege” and “anti-black” racism are reproduced. Its implementation thus makes clear how the institutional absence of Afro-descendance is no accident, but rather a structural racist construct, based on practices of symbolic eugenics, in symbolic processes of social discrimination (Giménez, 2007). These are reciprocal but unequal exchanges of evaluative recognition among subjects and groups that occupy asymmetric positions in social space, deriving in unequal treatment for subjects and groups of different identities, as well as negatively oriented actions from the dominant towards the dominated.

All of this has the aim of educating gazes to resist the coloniality of seeing (Zárata-Moedano et al., 2019), i.e., gazes that deconstruct colonial representations, that generate critical reflection regarding how identities and cultures are represented from unequal quotas of power and strengthen the identities and cultures of those developing them. It gives shape to critical gazes regarding the dominant visual culture as an experience of popular education (Freire, 2011), creating situated learning experiences that trigger processes of critical introspection, of deconstruction and re-signifying of imaginaries and identities. These are formative actions that guide students to discover that, in their way of seeing the world, they “host” the oppressor and this leads them to maintain their own existence “in a dehumanizing condition”. These actions facilitate that, through their questioning, students transform the reality that oppresses them.

METHODOLOGY

This text is the result of a qualitative research process, based on the interpretative paradigm, regarding the perspective of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986). It is drawn from the assumption that the subjects name the world and act within it according to the knowledge they have constructed of it, based on the interactions in which they have participated throughout their lives, and that each process of attribution of meaning is developed within a given historical-social context, in the framework of the history of the subjects and the groups to which they belong. In our case, we participate in the construction of knowledge from our professional trajectory in intercultural and racism studies in education.

From this perspective, Rodrigo Zárata-Moedano, as course head for Projects of Visual Arts and Projects of Animation for Photography (February-July 2020), implemented the pedagogical intervention that we documented and analysed with an ethnographic approach (Rockwell, 2009). Assuming that the individual is, to a certain extent, a reflection of the collective, we analysed and interpreted the meanings attributed by the subjects to their experiences, seeking to shed light on that which is “not evident”. To this end, as a complement to the participative observation, we conducted semi-structured interviews and, in collaboration with Bruno Baronnet, transcribed and studied them to create an “ethnography of the discourses” (Olmos, 2015). To critically analyse the developed processes

of learning, we also sought to systemize the experience (Jara, 2018) in order to make a critical interpretation of that which was experienced, by ordering and reconstructing the facts to clarify the logic of the process, the different intervening factors, how they are related among themselves and why they were carried out in that manner.

In particular, the purpose of the systemization was to determine the results/effects of the process of teaching-learning on the students and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the project *Afro-descendance*, as well as alternatives with which to either reinforce or eradicate these, respectively. For this, we recovered individual experiences, contrasting the points of departure and arrival, creating an ordered and chronological reconstruction of what occurred in order to subsequently order and classify the information, and to conduct a deep reflection (analysing, summarizing and conducting a critical interpretation of the process and drawing conclusions). The information sources utilized to carry out this task were the course program, the attendance lists, the PowerPoint presentations made for each session, the field diary of the facilitator-researcher, the artistic works created by the students and the transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews.

Of the fourteen students who participated in the project *Afro-descendance* (seven from the Degree program in Photography and seven from the program in Visual Arts) three were selected for interview: Angélica and Kenia of the course Projects of Visual Arts (February-July 2020) and Pablo from the course Projects of Animation for Photography (February-July 2020). The selection of these particular students responded to three criteria: that both educational programs were represented, that there was representation from both men and women and that the students had appropriated the theme beyond the pedagogical intervention, of the duration of the project *Afro-descendance*, which took place over a period of five weeks between February and March 2020.

One year later, in March 2021, Angélica wrote her thesis *Everyday footprints of the third root, African cultural diversity in Mexico* and, in January, Kenia defended hers, *Free hair, digital illustrations for a children's story redefining Afro hair in Mexico*. Pablo applied for a grant to develop the project *Cimarronaje Fotográfico*, in reference to the *cimarrons*, free men of African origin who had escaped slavery in America, and Pablo's contribution to help African heritage escape from underrepresentation in Mexico. All three cases involved projects derived from the work of research and artistic creation they carried out under the framework of the project *Afro-descendance*. Moreover, from November 2020, Kenia and Pablo were founding members of the collective *Entre caña y cenizas*² that, because of the health emergency due to the propagation of Covid-19, conduct online anti-racism activism with an emphasis on the community of Yanga, Veracruz, generating visual and audiovisual content to "highlight the existence of racism and to confront it".

The context in which the pedagogical intervention was carried out was the Faculty of Plastic Arts of Universidad Veracruzana, a public institution whose history began in the university workshops of plastic arts

² The name "Between sugar cane and ashes" refers to the fact that the Yanga region is surrounded by fields of sugar cane and very close to one of the highest volcanoes in Mexico. The collective has its own Facebook and Instagram pages.

inaugurated in 1962 that became the School of Plastic Arts in 1973 and the current Faculty of Plastic Arts in 1975. All the working sessions were presential; however, the artistic works created could not be exhibited due to the limitations imposed by Covid-19 epidemic mitigation measures. These measures also dictated that the interviews with Pablo, Kenia and Angélica had to be conducted and recorded using the platform *Zoom*.

In general, the five working sessions took place based on the same dynamic between the students and the head of the course: collective viewing and analysis of representations of subjects and groups of African or Afro-descendant origin. In the first of these sessions, we studied and commented on representations of Africans and Afro-descendants popular in Mexican visual culture, images recreating the stereotype of the African cannibal. We analysed illustrations from the comic strip *Memín Pinguín*, and of enslaved Africans in the free textbooks, contrasting these with visual representations of Yanga, a fugitive enslaved African who led a rebellion in the territory currently occupied by Veracruz and founded a *palenque*, a village where the enslaved were free. Moreover, we commented on three short videos found using Google: *La Herencia Africana en América, San Juan de Ulúa y Yanga; Sitios de Memoria de la Esclavitud y Población Africana; and Inicia Cátedra UNESCO Afrodescendientes en México y Centroamérica*³.

In the second session, we addressed artistic creative works denouncing slave trade from Colombia and Ghana, the pieces *Negra menta* (2000) by Liliana Angulo and *Nkyinkyim* (2018) by Kwame Akoto-Bamfo. We reflected on how Afro-descendance in New Spain, and later in Mexico, has been represented by the visual arts. First, by studying and commenting on *De español y negra, mulata* and *De negro e india, china cambuja* (1763) by Miguel Cabrera and *El costeño* (Ca. 1870) by José Agustín Arrieta. Then, by reviewing the work of visual artists from Mexico, either by birth or naturalization, who address the theme of Afro-descendance in their work, including Elizabeth Catlett, Guadalupe García-Vásquez, Hugo Arellanes, Jorge Pérez Solano, Manuel González de la Parra, Mara Sánchez Renero, Maya Goded, Melchor Peredo, Paulina García Hubard, Ras Levy and the Taller de Gráfica Cimarrón. Finally, we reviewed the book *Breve Historia del arte africano* (Gillon, 1989), noting that this is one of only two books on this theme found in the Faculty library. Dealing exclusively with antique art, this book is small and contains photographs in black and white, when books of art are often large with colour photographs. It was also in excellent condition due to its lack of use.

In the third session, the students shared their ideas with respect to the projects of artistic creation they wished to undertake in the framework of the project *Afro-descendance* and reflected on the following questions: In what way can African cultural inheritances be made visible in Mexico through the visual arts? How can characteristic aspects of African cultures be made visible beyond mere idealizations? How to break with stereotypes in the representation of Africa and Africanness? And how to create a work that contributes to the memory of Yanga and his historical struggle? The group from Projects of Visual Arts received a visit from the

³ The videos can be found in the following links: *La Herencia Africana en América* (<https://youtu.be/1ApMBrMjhII>); *San Juan de Ulúa y Yanga. Sitios de Memoria de la Esclavitud y Población Africana* (<https://youtu.be/bsPN8iKZFuE>); *Inicia Cátedra UNESCO Afrodescendientes en México y Centroamérica* (<https://youtu.be/7U-5tEixOAU>).

Afro-Colombian student Marleys Patricia Meléndez Moré, who conducts her Masters' research *Afro-descendant girls and infant/juvenile literature: between appropriations and representations in contexts of marginalization and exclusion* - in Mata Clara, Veracruz, very close to the community of Yanga - and who shared general ideas about her project and experience as a black woman. This visit was a truly enriching experience for all, especially for Kenia, since the reflections generated in this session regarding racism directed towards Afro hair boosted her interest on that topic. Originally, Marleys had also wanted to visit the group of the Projects of Animation for Photography, but unfortunately this was not possible due to the incompatibility of the timing of the visit.

In the fourth session, the students shared their progress regarding the projects of artistic creation they wished to undertake or that were already underway in the framework of the project *Afro-descendance*. They also analysed and commented on the main ideas of the text *Pedagogías de la re-existencia. Artistas indígenas y afrocolombianos* (Albán Achinte, 2013), considering their creative process from the perspective of this text.

Finally, the fifth working session addressed the concept of historical memory, understood as the conscious effort to recognize violent events of the past while avoiding their repetition in the present or future. Reflections were made on the question of how to articulate a decolonial perspective in the artistic creation that, as an action of historical memory, can resist the national invisibility of the African cultural inheritance and favour social recognition of its existence. Moreover, an analysis was made of the book *Africamericanos* (Pérez Zamudio, 2019), a testimony of the homonymous exhibition presented in Centro de la Imagen de la Ciudad de México (2018) and Museo Amparo de la ciudad de Puebla (2019).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

From the theoretical perspective of this study, the Faculty of Plastic Arts of Universidad Veracruzana, as any institution of higher education, is a social construct situated in a given historical-social context, and one that reproduces particular social imaginaries from which it also cultivates particular knowledge and action. For this reason, it is no accident that its library only holds two books dedicated to artistic output originated in Africa and that the theme is rarely addressed in the courses offered. It is the result of concrete practices conducted by concrete subjects and groups, in the framework of relationships of power, which contributes to reproducing inequalities in the social recognition granted by the academic community to African and Afro-descendant artistic works and creators.

The library is a space to access knowledge that, from the dominant social imaginary, is considered worthy of teaching and learning; that is, a collection of Eurocentric, partial, provincial and limited knowledge, but presented as universal from the perspective of modern-colonial thought. For this reason, if we put "Africa art" or "African art" in the search engine of the library system of Universidad Veracruzana, we only find a handful of titles: *Encuentros en cadena: las artes escénicas en Asia, África y*

América Latina (Tanaka, 1998), *El arte romano en África* (Echevarría, 1991), *Breve historia del arte africano* (Gillon, 1989), *Las artes del África negra* (Laude, 1968), *El arte del África occidental: esculturas y máscaras* (Fagg, 1967) and *África negra* (Leuzinger, 1961), among which only the books of Tanaka (1998) and Gillon (1989) are found in the library of the Faculty of Plastic Arts.

As evidence of the lack of interest in the theme, it is also significant that the Faculty library held no copy of the book *Luces de raíz negra: México-Colombia* (González de la Parra & Hoffmann, 2004), which contains photographic images of Afro-descendant communities on the Colombian Pacific coast and in Coyolillo, Veracruz. There are 32 copies in 16 different libraries of the university, published by the University itself, and the photographs are by Manuel González de la Parra, who was a professor of the Faculty and director of the Institute of Plastic Arts of the same university. Moreover, it borders absurdity that we, the authors of this text, bought a copy of the book on the patio of the Faculty of Plastic Arts in February 2020, in a sale only a few meters from the library.

For this reason, the pedagogical intervention conducted - the project *Afro-descendance* - contributed to making the invisible visible and to triggering reflection about the lack of attention to the theme. For example, when we reviewed *Breve Historia del arte africano* (Gillon, 1989) in class and observed that the book was in excellent condition due to its lack of use – its record of loans indicated that, in February 2020, no-one had borrowed the book in 11 years - “the realization that there was not much information in the Faculty (...) raised the question: Why not? Why is there no information? And why are people not searching for it?” (Kenia, 15.03.2021).

Putting the theme in the spotlight, reviewing and commenting on texts, images and videos in class, makes it clear that this is an experience with no precedent in the academic trajectory of the students, since the references most often studied are mainly European and North American, “that which is most considered in art as ‘universal’” (Angélica. 15.03.2021). The professors rarely dedicate class time to the broad and systematic analysis of artistic expressions of African origin, nor do they incentivize the students to research this aspect; “often, we were assigned different artists or locations with which to make presentations and I do not remember ever being assigned Africa or any African artist” (Kenia, 15.03.2021).

Their approach to the theme led them to generate reflections regarding how they imagined Africa and why they did that in this concrete fashion, “to question myself about what I knew of Africa” (Pablo, 14.03.2021), “to make me aware of how I had conceived of what Africa was (...), why I had imagined this continent in a certain way” (Kenia, 15.03.2021). At the same time, it triggered their interest in learning more and to research on their own initiative, contributing to a broadening of their knowledge; realizing that Africa is not the monolithic cultural unit they had thought, but rather a set of diverse cultures. They came to discover that there is a considerable production of contemporary art in Africa, with “many African artists that even participate in large exhibitions

and museums, and I knew absolutely nothing of this, like it was a part of contemporary art that was hidden” (Kenia, 15.03.2021). Thus, in their process of questioning their imaginaries and broadening their knowledge of Africa, they also furthered their understanding of what African art is, “in terms of the production of contemporary African art, you can see all that it can address (...) beyond that which we always believed is African or what Africa is” (Angélica, 15.03.2021).

Likewise, the students discovered that the history of African subjects, identities and cultures in Mexico is much broader than they had thought, coming to know artistic manifestations that vindicate the identities, cultures, and histories of the black peoples of Mexico. They exercised critical views of the representation of Afro-descendance in Mexican visual culture, questioning the legitimacy of its underrepresentation. They reflected on how the invisibilization of Afro-Mexican history has been constructed in stories about the national identity.

(...) in the primary school, like in these books about Veracruz, at some point, yes it was mentioned (...) that Africans arrived and nothing more except they were slaves, this is how the story they told me was and that was what I knew (...) I did not even know the term Afro-Mexican (...) until I began this course, it did make me question myself, where is all that history I was unaware of before (...). (Kenia, 15.03.2021).

In the process of breaking with the single story they knew, they also discovered the production of Mexican and Afro-Mexican visual artists that address the theme of Afro-descendance. The book *Africamericanos* (Pérez Zamudio, 2019) became particularly significant “because there I realized the magnitude of the work of many artists who were dealing with the subject in their works” (Pablo, 14.03.2021), that is, vindicating the Afro-descendant identities and cultures. Others, such as Angélica, also discovered the traditional Afro-mestizo carnival of Coyolillo, a village close to Xalapa where many of the inhabitants consider themselves Afro-descendants: “...I knew that there was an Afro presence here in Mexico and here in Veracruz, but I never knew how much (...) it was very curious that I came to know it in the class considering that it is very close, I had no idea” (Angélica, 15.03.2021).

All of this also made the students think about themselves and their surroundings in relation to the concepts they constructed in class: “Afro-descendance” and “Afro-Mexican”. For example, Kenia, considering her own history and that of the people she knows, trying to discover indications of Afro-descendance in her family

I arrive like this and said to her, ‘aunt, do you think you are Afro-Mexican?’ and I thought that she wasn’t going to answer because, I said, maybe she doesn’t even know to what I am referring, but actually she said to me (...) ‘yes, I recognize myself as Afro-Mexican, I am black, my family is black and I believe that I certainly am’ (...) it

was very interesting to ask that question because never in my life did I think of asking it. (Kenia, 15.03.2021)

Or Pablo, who carried out a process of research into his own history and personal identity, recalling racist aggression to which he had been subjected in his infancy for the colour of his skin, investigating his family history until he came to recognize himself as Afro-Mexican:

I asked myself, ‘am I Afro-Mexican?’ Why did I suffer so much racism, discrimination? (...) they said to me things like, ‘Ah look, here is the negro’ or ‘look, here is the son of Kalimba⁴ (...) at first much questioning (...) to open a dialog with myself and with my surroundings (...) much curiosity, much enthusiasm to investigate about Afro-descendance in Mexico and then, well, a lot of pride and love towards my persona (...) when these themes are raised in the school, in the university or wherever, there is a growing interest, even if only in one person, in changing something in their life, and for me it was a radical change (...) I went from being someone who didn’t know exactly what to do or research within art and within myself to being like this. (Pablo, 14.03.2021)

4 In reference to Kalimba, an Afro-Mexican pop singer with Cuban parents.

As a pedagogical action of liberation, the learning activities of the project *Afro-descendance* led the students to discover that in their way of seeing the world they had ‘hosted’ the colonial, anti-black, anti-African view and had reproduced it uncritically; as expressed by Kenya, “I opened my eyes to a situation I had never noticed (...) that we often replicate these racist acts (...) I noticed that I was part of this problem” (Kenia, 15.03.2021). Moreover, the students did this based on questioning the established order and their place within it, as well as exercising their capacity of agency to combat racism and transform reality with their artistic works. Racism was thus another concept to which the students gave particular meanings, reflecting on the ways in which it emerges in visual culture, how it has shaped the national past and present and how they themselves participate in its reproduction.

In parallel, the students gave shape to their own stories, to their projects of artistic creation addressing Afro-descendance as a general theme. Angélica did so through an installation entitled *Roots and reflections of the forgotten, African cultural diversity in Mexico*, which ultimately became a sketch of the project since it was impossible to mount it due to confinement against the propagation of Covid-19. Kenya produced a fanzine entitled *Free hair*, addressing the acceptance and empowerment of Afro hair and its history, while Pablo produced an animated short film entitled *Ubuntu*, about the trade of enslaved Africans. In all cases, exhibiting their works in their family surroundings and circles of friends triggered processes of recognition of Afro-descendance. For example, Pablo shared that, at home “they were left with the idea of the magnitude of heritage we have in Mexico” (Pablo, 14.03.2021). Kenya said that she has shown her work to friends who have Afro hair “and they begin

to question, sometimes it's like 'oh, then maybe I could, even, I could be Afro-Mexican' (...) it is something really great that it raises this type of questions, questioning their history" (Kenia, 15.03.2021).

Finally, it is important to highlight that, faced with the direct question of whether or not they recognized themselves as Afro-descendants, Angélica and Kenia responded negatively, and Pablo responded positively. Angélica, although she did not recognize herself as such, did consider that she shares "much of the cultural identity that has to do with Afro-descendance, above all being in Veracruz" (Angélica, 15.03.2021), while Kenia, explained her response by arguing that she tried to investigate her history, but "honestly, I have found no proof" (Kenia, 15.03.2021). However, all three students plan to continue addressing Afro-descendance in their artistic work: Angélica, by finishing and exhibiting her project, while Pablo and Kenia will do so in the framework of their activist work in the collective *Entre caña y cenizas*.

CONCLUSIONS

In the framework of the dominant social imaginary, Mexican visual culture reproduces racist views of identities and cultures of African origin, in a dialog with the nationalist ideology promoted by the State. With languages, forms and supports as diverse as the free textbooks, graphic novels, and cinematographic production, this minimizes the presence of Africans and Afro-descendants in the national past and present, almost to the point of erasure. Even behind policies and works that intend to position themselves against racism and celebrate diversity, an *ingenuous racism* (Varela Huerta, 2020) is often produced. The construction of images thus serves to reproduce a single story (Ngozi Adichie, 2018) that whitens the representation of the past, present and future.

Artistic creation, education and diffusion are battlefields on which the actions of subjects and groups can be added to the cultural production promoted by the dominant powers or can resist it. In the Faculty of Plastic Arts of Universidad Veracruzana, the lack of attention paid to African and Afro-descendant works and artistic creators, in the library and in the educational action of the professors, acts to reinforce the common perception of the nonexistence or irrelevance of the cultural production originated from Africa and its diasporas, as well as to reproduce inequalities in the social recognition to which the black peoples of Mexico have access. In this context, the project *Afro-descendance*, paying critical attention to the historicity of the Faculty of Plastic Arts, generated a space of resistance to power (Martins and Popkewitz, 2015), a space for cultural production resisting the coloniality of seeing (Barriendos, 2011).

It favoured processes of decolonial aesthetics (Mignolo, 2010), experiences of dialog and critical reflection that made the invisible visible: how the power creates and reproduces the dividing line of "to be" and "not to be" (Fanon, 2010), administrating privileges and disadvantages through the inclusion of knowledge in plans and programs of study, as well as in the stock of the library. At the same time, it visibilized and recognized the cultural

production of African and Afro-descendant creators, and that of creators from different latitudes, who address the theme of Afro-descendance in their work; that is, the work of subjects and groups that have historically been subjected to structural actions to render them invisible.

This, as the result of a learning experience in a decolonial key (Díaz, 2010), favoured questioning of that which is hegemonically instituted, i.e., the values, principles, and norms of the epistemic colonial perspective. We supported a space of learning where the dominant Eurocentric worldview was destabilized and weakened and the students assumed the role of leading agents in the construction of social justice, equity, and recognition of diversity. Even by triggering, in the case of Pablo, an ethnogenetic Afro-descendant process, through identifying himself with cultural and socio-political traits that distinguished him from other ethnic groups (white-mestizo and indigenous). Thus, the resistance to power in the project *Afro-descendance* took place as an educational experience to learn and unlearn perspectives in terms of what is valuable to know, recognize and learn in the field of the arts.

It was also a process of anti-racist education (Zárate-Moedano, 2017; 2018), visibilizing racism as a system of thought encrusted into the social imaginary. It generated reflection with regard to the manner in which the absence of Africa and Afro-descendance in the national history, as well as in the content studied in the Faculty of Plastic Arts, is no accident, but rather an instituted racist construct of almost two hundred years, which reproduces white privilege and anti-black racism through definition of what is and what is not of value to know, recognize and learn.

At the same time, as a pedagogy of liberation (Freire, 2011), the project *Afro-descendance* generated a space for situated learning that fostered the deconstruction and redefinition of imaginaries and identities, as well as the development of gazes in resistance to the coloniality of seeing (Zárate-Moedano et al., 2019), scrutinizing how identities and cultures are represented from unequal quotas of power, while also strengthening self-identity and culture. As a pedagogy of the Afro-descendant *re-existence* (Albán Achinte, 2013), it was a space of artistic creation and education that opened a crack in the colonial *status quo*, visibilizing with dignity the aesthetic proposals of identities and cultures historically subjected to modern-colonial domination.

In summary, it favoured Afro *re-existence* in the school of arts as a critical approach towards a decolonial art education, highlighting its absence and filling the gap with visibilization, critical dialog, reflection, and recognition. With this, Angélica and Pablo drove projects that proposed to break with the single story, making the invisible visible: the African cultural diversity embedded into the daily life of their regions of origin in Veracruz. Kenia does this by proposing a positive story regarding Afro hair as an expression of identity, culture and history, in contrast to the negative stories from racism. While recognizing that the project *Afro-descendance* could be perfected by incorporating greater and more precise references to visual culture in order to exemplify key concepts such as coloniality, decoloniality, racism, discrimination, anti-racism, Afro-descendance

and Afro-Mexican identity, and by having a greater number of sessions, it operated as a space of resistance to the colonial power within Mexican visual culture, and thus makes a contribution to the breaking of Eurocentric tradition in the field of art education.

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