

Mexico welcomed fugitive slaves and African American job-seekers

New perspectives on the immigration debate

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In 1829, AfroMexican President Vicente Guerrero signed a decree banning slavery in the Mexican Republic. There are, of course, many angles from which to view the escalating immigration debate. Mexican immigrants, who constitute the largest share of the undocumented, have a unique history with the African population inside the United States. As the Black community weighs in on this very contentious issue, it becomes necessary for us – both black and brown – to review the history that we share.

However, before reviewing our history together, I need to say unequivocally that the U.S. seizure of more than half of Mexico's territory in 1848 netted Washington more than 80 percent of Mexico's fertile land and was a criminal act. And that if Mexico today still included California and Texas, she would possess more oil than Saudi Arabia and have sufficient economic infrastructure to employ all of her people.

When Mexican people say that "the border crossed us, we did not cross the border," they speak the truth, and more Black people – most of whom are not strangers to oppression, exploitation, domination and exclusion – need to appreciate that.

It has been said that for most of the 19th century, Mexican immigrants were more highly regarded by African Americans than any other immigrant group. What may account for this, at least in part, is the enormous if not pivotal role undertaken by Black fighters in the war to secure Mexican independence from Spain and abolish slavery. Unfortunately, many of us repeat the falsehoods of our adversaries and have forgotten our special relationship with Mexican and Indigenous peoples.

It is time that our memories be restored and that the nay Sayers and nativist Negroes among us either put up or shut up. What follows is the little known history of Mexico serving as a refuge for fugitive slaves and a provider of job opportunities for Blacks emigrating from the U.S. to Mexico.

The Native Youth Movement, including the rap group War Club, was with the POCC, including LA POCC member Jazz, Chairman Fred Hampton Jr. and POCC artist Jocelyn backstage at the "We the People" festival in Watts on April 8. The event was a huge success in bringing young Black and Brown people together. Photo: JR Mexico as a haven for fugitive slaves

From the very beginning of his Texas colonization scheme, a determined and deceitful Stephen Austin sought to have Mexican officials acquiesce to the settlement of slave-owning

whites into the territory. It was generally acknowledged that the people and government of Mexico abhorred slavery and were determined to prohibit its practice within the Mexican republic.

Beginning in 1822, at least 20,000 Anglos, many with their slave property, settled into Texas. Jared Groce, one of the first of Stephen Austin's Texas settlers that year, arrived with 90 enslaved Africans.

The Mexican Federal Law of July 13, 1824, clearly favored and promoted the emancipation of slaves. Mexico had even stipulated that it was prepared to compensate North American owners of fugitive slaves. Determined instead to have things their way, Anglos began to press for an extradition treaty which would require Mexico to return fugitive slaves.

From 1825 until the end of the Civil War in 1865, Mexican authorities continuously thwarted attempts by slave-holding Texas settlers to conclude fugitive slave extradition treaties between the two parties. During this period of extremely tense relations between the two governments, Mexico consistently repudiated and forbade the institution of slavery in its territory, while U.S. officials and Texas slave-owners continuously sought ways to circumvent Mexican law. The Mexican authorities thwarted repeated attempts by slave-holding Texas settlers to conclude fugitive slave extradition treaties between the two parties.

In 1826 the Committee of Foreign Relations of the Mexican Chamber of Deputies refused to compromise on the issue of fugitive slaves and defended the right of enslaved Africans to liberate themselves. Mexican government officials cited "the inalienable right which the Author of nature has conceded to him (meaning enslaved persons)." Congress member Erasmo Seguin from Texas commented that the Congress was "resolved to decree the perpetual extinction in the Republic of commerce and traffic in slaves and that their introduction into our territory should not be permitted under any pretext".

Again in October 1828, the Mexican Senate rejected 14 articles of a newly-proposed treaty and harshly criticized Article 33, stating "it would be most extraordinary that in a treaty between two free republics slavery should be encouraged by obliging ours to deliver up fugitive slaves to their merciless and barbarous masters of North America".

Reporting on the growing number of Anglo settlers in Texas, Mexican Gen. Teran reported, "Most of them have slaves, and these slaves are beginning to learn the favorable intent of Mexican law to their unfortunate condition and are becoming restless under their yokes ..." Gen. Teran went on to describe the cruelty meted out by masters to restless slaves: "They extract their teeth, set on the dogs to tear them in pieces, the most lenient being he who but flogs his slaves until they are flayed."

On Sept. 15, 1829, AfroMexican President Vicente Guerrero signed a decree banning slavery in the Mexican Republic. Yielding to appeals from panicked settlers and Mexican collaborators who saw Mexico benefiting economically from the Anglo presence, Guerrero exempted Texas from the prohibition on the introduction of slaves into the republic, on Dec. 2. Several months later, the Mexican government severely restricted Anglo immigration and banned the introduction of slaves into the republic.

Undeterred, the Anglos succeeded in negotiating a new treaty with Mexico in 1831, which included Article 34, which called for pursuit and reclamation of fugitive slaves. After

considerable wrangling between the Mexican Chamber of Deputies and Senate, Article 34 was removed from the treaty. Also, by 1831 it became apparent through debate within the Mexican Senate that the government's welcoming of fugitive slaves was not completely altruistic.

Some Mexican officials, fearful of U.S. military intervention, had begun to see it as wise to encourage the development of runaway slave colonies along the Northern border as a way to lessen the threat posed by the U.S. As historian Rosalie Schwartz put it, many Mexican officials "reasoned these fugitives, choosing between liberty under the Mexican government and bondage in the United States, would fight to protect their Mexican freedom more vigorously than any mercenaries." As the interests of Mexican officials and U.S. abolitionists coincided during the early 1830s, a modest number of former slaves established themselves in Texas and fared well during the period.

In 1836, after the fall of the Alamo and its slave-owning or pro-slavery leaders, such as William Travis, Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett, Mexican forces were defeated and an independent Texas was eventually annexed by the United States. However, before the expulsion of Mexican forces from Texas, Brig. Gen. Jose Urrea evicted scores of illegally-settled plantation owners, liberated slaves and, in many instances, granted them on-the-spot titles to the land they had worked.

Oddly enough, many Black people call for "40 acres and a mule" - a reference to Union Gen. Sherman's Special Field Order 15 and Gen. Howard's Circular 13, which made some land available to former slaves. But what one never hears are references to Mexican Gen. Jose Urrea and the land titles that he and his men granted to former Texas slaves following the defeat of the Alamo, a generation before the Civil War.

Even after the loss of Texas, Mexican officials refused to formally acknowledge Texas independence on the grounds that it "would be equivalent to the sanction and recognition of slavery." After Texas independence, the slave population mushroomed, and the number of runaways across the South Texas-North Mexico border increased. In 1842, Mexico's Constitutional Congress reasserted the nation's commitment to fugitive slaves. In 1847, 38,753 slaves and 102,961 whites were listed in the first official Texas census. In 1850, in a new treaty accord with the United States, Mexico again refused to provide for the return of fugitive slaves

The slave institution in Texas was continuously undermined by defiant Tejanos (Mexicans in Texas), who took great risks and invested enormous resources toward facilitating the escape of enslaved Africans. The Texas to Mexico routes to freedom constituted major unacknowledged extensions of the "Underground Railroad." Tejanos were variously accused of "tampering with slave property," "consorting with Blacks" and stirring up among the slave population "a spirit of insubordination."

Plantation owners in Central Texas adopted various resolutions aimed at preventing Mexicans from aiding the slave population. Whites in Guadalupe County prohibited Mexican "peons" from entering the county and anyone from conducting business or interacting with enslaved persons without authorization from the owners.

Bexar County whites suggested that "Mexican strangers entering from San Antonio register at the mayor's office and give an account of themselves and their business." Delegates to a convention in Gonzales resolved that "counties should organize vigilance committees to

prosecute persons tampering with slaves” and that all citizens and slaveholders were to endeavor to prevent Mexicans from communicating with Blacks.

Whites in Austin decreed that “all transient Mexicans should be warned to leave within 10 days, that all remaining should be forcibly expelled unless their good character and good behavior were substantiated by responsible American citizens” and that “Mexicans should no longer be employed and their presence in the area should be discouraged.” In Matagorda County, all Mexicans were driven out under the bogus claim that they were wandering, indigent sub-humans who “have no fixed domicile but hang around the plantations, taking the likeliest negro girls for wives ... they often steal horses, and these girls too, and endeavor to run them to Mexico”.

By the year 1855, the estimates were that as many as 4,000 to 5,000 formerly enslaved Africans had escaped to Mexico. Slaveholders became so alarmed at this trend that they requested and received approximately one fifth of the standing U.S. Army which was deployed along the Texas-Mexico border in a vain effort to stem the flow of runaways.

Defiant Mexicans stood their ground, refused to return runaways, and continued supporting slave uprisings and providing assistance to escaping slaves. In the words of Felix Haywood, a Texas slave, whose experience is recalled in “The Slave Narratives of Texas, “Sometimes someone would come along and try to get us to run up north and be free. We used to laugh at that. There was no reason to run up north. All we had to do was walk, but walk south, and we’d be free as soon as we crossed the Rio Grande”.

What a difference a border made

1857 was a year whose profound irony made it one of the most interesting. 1857 was the year that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against Dred Scott, an enslaved African who had sued for his freedom, on the grounds that his owner had forfeited any claim to him after taking him into a free state. Ironically, 1857 was the same year that the Mexican Congress adopted Article 13, declaring that an enslaved person was free the moment he set foot on Mexican soil.

Mexico as a provider of job opportunities for African Americans

During the 1890s, hundreds of Black migrants fed up with slave-like conditions and segregation, left Alabama for Mexico and established 10 large colonies. Shortly thereafter, during the period of the Mexican Revolution, large numbers of Black people migrated from New Orleans to Tampico, Mexico, as the oil industry prospered.

These Africans in Mexico established branches of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association. One of the Black oil workers who came to Tampico stated, “There is no race prejudice; everyone is treated according to his abilities.” During the same period, Black heavyweight champion Jack Johnson asserted that Mexico was “willing not only to give us the privileges of Mexican citizenship, but was also willing to champion our cause.”

Juan Uribe, a major Mexican official, visiting Los Angeles in 1919, was quoted as saying, “My only regret is that it is not physically possible to immediately transport several million African Americans to my beloved Mexico, where the north yields her riches as nowhere else and where people are not disturbed by artificial standards of race or color.”

Similarly, African American immigrant Theodore Troy said, “I am going to a land where

freedom and opportunity beckon me as well as every other man, woman and child of dark skin. In this land, there are no Jim Crow laws to fetter me; I am not denied opportunity because of the color of my skin, and wonderful undeveloped resources of a country smiled upon by God beckon my genius on to their development.”

A Black colony which included 50 families developed fruit orchards and engaged in cattle raising. It established itself in Baja, California, in the Santa Clara and Vallecitos Valleys situated between Ensenada and Tecate, approximately 30 miles south of San Diego and lasted into the 1960s.

Not to be overlooked is the enormous success of the Negro Baseball Leagues in Mexico during the 1930s and 1940s. Black ball players together with 400-500 family members seeking relief from racism in the U.S. and segregated institutions were hosted in Mexico by generally respectful competitors and admiring fans. One competitor in particular, Ray Dandridge, played for 18 years in Mexico before Jackie Robinson gained admission into U.S. major league baseball.

Also, from the 1930s to the 1960s, major Mexican muralists, such as Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco invited prominent African American artists such as Hale Woodruff, John Biggers, Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White to the Mexican Art School, where they developed an art style which helped them to connect images more effectively to ethnic and class struggle.

Of course there are many more historical intersections where Mexican and African people cooperated with each other. A few examples were the solidarity between the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)/ Black Panther Party and Brown Berets, SNCC and the Alianza Federal de Pueblos Libres and El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Atzlan (MEChA) and the Black Student Union (BSU).

Mack Lyons, a Black member of the United Farmworkers Union’s National Executive, negotiated its contract with Coca Cola, which owns Minutemaid and sizeable Florida orange groves. In Los Angeles during the ’90s, Black and Brown students recognizing common history and mutual interests formed the African and Latino Youth Summit (ALYS).

Admittedly, Vicente Fox is no Vicente Guerrero. The Mexico of today is profoundly different from the refuge that once welcomed fugitive slaves or land of opportunity that embraced African American job-seekers; yet its beautiful history of support for African Americans in need of allies cannot be erased.

It might prove useful to see the relationship between Black and Brown people as similar to the bond between a man and woman. It is beautiful most of the time, but there are moments when it is tested and may become strained. When this happens, one or both must give more and work to increase or renew trust.

Pass this material on to others. The Black or Brown reader of this piece should now know that the best of our history together as Black and Brown people speaks to the necessity of collaborating during the worst of times. A wise people are a grateful people and never content themselves with recalling and celebrating their legendary alliance with an important neighbor. Instead, they press forward, fully aware that mutually supportive relationships are still possible and necessary.

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