

HOME ALONE: NEW YORK TO VERACRUZ is a video project to be filmed in Mexico City and Veracruz, Mexico over the course of 2011-2012. The filmic essay takes viewers on an investigation of the role of myths and fantasies in the interaction between race and national identity, as examined through the filmmaker's personal journey to Veracruz, Mexico.

PROJECT CONTEXT

As a child, as I pored over old albums of my parents in which they looked impossibly young, my mother would sometimes recount an anecdote already years old. Before I was born, before my parents even embarked upon their marriage, my mother and father took a trip to Mexico with two friends. During the month that they spent in the country during the 1970s, they were the objects of spectacle nearly everywhere that they traveled.

My mother recounts that while in Mexico City, they often felt they were the only conspicuously black individuals. When asked to translate what locals said as my parents' group went by, my Spanish speaking father relayed the recurring thought voiced by waiters, their fellow bus passengers, and passersby: "They must be from Veracruz."

THE USE OF THE MYTHIC IN IDENTITY FORMATION

The punch line of this anecdote was that somewhere in Mexico was a town my parents had never been to or heard of, but which they concluded must be the singular oasis of blacks in Mexico, the one bubbling source from which they emerged. The reverie of a mythic, mysterious geographic locale that contained a hidden reserve of blacks, and the fact that my parents were mistaken for these people, was one that stuck in my mind throughout my childhood.

National identity has always been somewhat of a puzzling topic for me. As a first generation American with one parent from a country in which I can't speak the language and another who herself was the product of immigrant parents, my grasp on my various identities is tenuous at best. In *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, Wodak et al discuss the oft reiterated importance of "the foundational myth or myth of origin" in

the invention of a national culture (2009). With my multiple, competing sources of identity, no one foundational myth seemed to explain my existence.

This, in retrospect, is the fertile ground upon which my personal myth of Veracruz was sown. While visits to my father's country of Senegal assuaged some uncertainty I had as to where I fit in and provided me with the experience of belonging to a racial majority, my inability to communicate in Wolof also contributed to an experience of alienation. Eschewing my lived experience of a fragmented and complicated identity, an alternative theory of origin that lay in a place I had never been to supplied a more open basis for the creation of a fantasy. When, as growing up, I caught wind of the notion of racial harmony as promoted by Mexico and several other Latin American countries, the fantasy became more robust.

THE MYTHIC IN MEXICO

While Veracruz seemed to me a fantastical ideal of a racial utopia- a former maroon colony founded by Gaspar Yanga, an escaped slave - it may have been more of a mirage. Historian Marixa Lasso examines how the myth of racial harmony developed in Latin America frequently as a means to placate large indigenous, African, and mixed race populations (2007). When taken as a pacificatory measure rather than a reflection of reality, the myth of racial harmony becomes an impediment to true progress rather than a liberation.

Mexico is no different from other countries in its use of foundational myths of origin in the creation of national identity. In *Ethnic Identity and Power: Cultural Contexts of Political Action*, Yali Zou and Enrique Trueba point to how Mexico's *mestizo* myth - the intentional promotion of the mixed race *mestizo* group as a national symbol - denies the less visible mixed race indigenous and black populations (1998). The development of this myth, a deliberate process undertaken during Mexican Independence and called *mestizaje*, was mainly employed as a conciliatory tactic to elicit the support of the majority indigenous Indian population (Graham 1990). Accordingly, the *mestizo* was promoted as a mixed race individual of European and indigenous Indian descent. Rarely was the *mestizo* taken to be a mixture of three heritages (Graham 1990). Consequently,

the role played by Africans and those of African descent in the creation and formation of Mexican culture has been largely overlooked. By relegating their conception of blacks to a finite geographic locale - Veracruz-Mexicans ignore the African ancestry present in the population at large.

Despite the fact that the black population in Mexico is estimated to be anywhere between 3 to 10% of the general population (the Mexican census doesn't account for race), it is so little known that Afro-Mexicans are often mistaken for illegal immigrants from Belize or other Latin American countries (Sue 2006). When they are recognized as Mexican, they, like my parents, are assumed to be from Veracruz, a land apart.

REPRESENTING THE MYTH

As a film scholar, I am explicitly concerned with matters of representation. Within Mexico, depictions of blacks are simultaneously negligible and fraught with problematic imagery. Former Mexican president Vicente Fox inadvertently set off a diplomatic kerfuffle when the country released commemorative stamps bearing images of the comic book character Mermín Penguin (Fears 2005). The stamps, which depicted the beloved "cartoon character with greatly exaggerated eyes and lips," seemed lifted straight out of a Jim Crow playbook and were immediately denounced by the White House as well as the NAACP (2005).

The incredulous response of President Fox and many Mexican citizens to the strong U.S. reaction indicates a crack in the smooth surface of the myth of racial harmony. Thus, the myth of Veracruz encompasses not solely my myth of a racial utopia, but also Mexico's own fallacy of an isolated and insignificant population. This project, which seeks to offer a nuanced portrait of a marginalized community, takes on further urgency when considered in the contemporary context of blacks in Mexico.

The experiences of other minority groups in Veracruz, particularly the region's large Drag community, further contextualize the basis of identification for Afro-Mexicans. Cross-dressing, like race, constitutes a physical manifestation of difference. The intentionality involved in manifesting one's difference on the outside by dressing

outside of the conventions of one's sex provides an interesting point of comparison with the involuntary stamp of difference of race.

INVESTIGATING THE MYTH

With the project *Home Alone: New York to Veracruz*, I intend to investigate the nature of myths of identification. The primary materials I intend to use in this project are family photographs and documents, film and TV footage, still images from television and advertising, and video footage as collected over the yearlong process. Working with these audiovisual materials, I will compose a filmic essay which meditates on the question of the nature of identification, and the stories that we tell ourselves in order to feel at home.

Beginning in New York, the first act of the filmic essay will concern my preparations to go to Veracruz. In consulting with my parents, friends, and family on the impending move, this section will explore my preconceived notions about Mexico and consequent myth creation. Family photos and U.S. American media images and video of Mexico will figure largely in this section.

Act two unfolds in Mexico City, where I reflect on the differences between my experience and those of my parents some forty years earlier. This section will meditate upon my encounters with the general Mexican population and deconstruct dialogues and exchanges with citizens regarding their conception of race.

In Act three, I arrive in Veracruz, confronting personal and political myths. In living amongst the people of Veracruz for an extended period, I hope to gain insight into the experience of its residents. The yearlong length of the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Fellowship is a necessary prerequisite for this project, as a stay of any shorter duration would likely not be enough for a nuanced picture of the community. This section will concern my attempts to integrate into the social fabric of Veracruz as well as the experiences of the residents of Veracruz to integrate into mainstream Mexican society.

A focal point of the cinematic essay will be the celebrations of Carnival in Veracruz, which take place yearly in May and are the largest of their kind in all of Mexico. During this period of masked performance and momentary fluidity of identity, in

which the black and cross-dressing populations of Veracruz are both represented, questions of the nature of identification will come to a head.

RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

The nature of the project is closely associated with the course of study that I undertook while a student. In the fall of 2009 I studied Latin American film in depth in the seminar "Radical Cinemas of Latin America," taught by Moira Fradinger (currently on sabbatical). The lessons learned in "Radical Cinemas of Latin America" have informed my approach to this project, amongst other things by compelling me to involve myself directly in the film rather than to present it as an ostensibly objective sociological representation of truth, as is the convention in traditional documentary. Experiences in other seminars such as "Media, the Movies, and Black Folk," "Errol Morris and Contemporary Documentary," and "Nationalism, Ethnicity and War" also reinforce my theoretical preparation for the project.

My practical experience with film is vigorous, having studied in classes such as "Introduction to Digital Video," "Intermediate Film Workshop," "Advanced Screenwriting," and a director's seminar at the Cinematography School of Madrid. In the spring of 2010 I completed and screened a 27-minute short fiction film entitled *Sleepwalker*, which I had written, directed, co-produced, and edited.

From August 2010 to the present I have been employed by a non-fiction television show as a production assistant. My experiences in this field have given me considerable insight into the process of making a non-fiction product. I consider myself well informed on the process of production and am aware of logistical steps that I will need to take in order to complete this project, such as the acquisition of stills and materials licensing releases, appearance releases, "on the fly" interviews, and much more.

My preparations for this particular project have been many. I am a fluent Spanish speaker, which will allow me to move easily through the country as well as connect more easily with those participating in the film. I have initiated a dialogue with Marco Villalobos, artist, writer, and co-creator of the photo exhibit "El Negro Mas Chulo: African by Legacy, Mexican by Birth," and have discussed with him his experience of

photographically documenting black communities in Mexico, as well as what limitations he met while making the project. My connection with Villalobos also provides me with a point of entry into the Veracruz community, as he will be able to put me in touch with individuals he worked with while making his project.

I have prepared a two-minute video to complement this proposal which serves as something of an abstract of the cinematic essay. The video is the result of interview footage, personal photographs, American and Mexican media images and video, and music from the Veracruz region. It is available to view along with excerpts from the short film *Sleepwalker*, in the enclosed DVD *Home Alone: New York to Veracruz*.

Lastly, I have been in touch with the Mexican Consulate in New York and was informed that as an artist traveling to Mexico to complete a documentary filmmaking project I must enter the country as a tourist and then apply for an FM3 visa at the National Immigration Institute following arrival. The visa is valid for one year, and renewable.

PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS

As a filmmaker, I hope for this project - my first post collegiate work - to serve as a calling card in the early days of my career. I intend to submit the film to several festivals, including the Mexico International Film Festival, and also hope to use the film as a directorial sample for admission to other programs such as the Sundance Writer's Lab. This project, which ruminates on the genesis and germination of identity in relation to location and legend, is what I hope to be the solid foundation upon which I build my career.

SOURCES

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