

*A book in the series*

**Radical Perspectives**

*A Radical History Review book series*

*Series editors:*

Daniel J. Walkowitz, New York University

Barbara Weinstein, New York University

# **Imagining Our Americas**

**Toward a Transnational Frame**

**Edited by Sandhya Shukla and Heidi Tinsman**

**Duke University Press**

*Durham and London*

**2007**

## Blackness Goes South

Race and Mestizaje in Our America

Rachel Adams

On the circuitous inter-American route linking the black Atlantic to the borderlands, there may be no better guide than José Martí. He is not an unbiased observer, and twenty-first-century travelers must inevitably grapple with the contradictions underlying his understandings of race. On the one hand, Martí articulates a diverse and inclusive racial politics. His U.S. journalism reflects concern about the injustices committed against African, Asian, and indigenous Americans. His “Nuestra América” calls on native intellectuals “to rescue the Indian, to make a place for the competent Negro, to fit liberty to the body of those who rebelled and conquered for it.” On the other, Martí seeks to transcend racial distinctions altogether by replacing them with national or Pan-American identifications. Writing in favor of Cuban independence, he famously claimed that “a Cuban is more than mulatto, black, or white.” And an equally famous phrase in “Nuestra América” reads, “There can be no racial animosity, because there are no races.”<sup>1</sup> Martí’s vision of a transcendent *mestizaje* in which racial differences are erased by shared political commitments thus rests uncomfortably against his recognition that racism is a persistent reality of his

time. And although he is sometimes aware of the broad panoply of American races, his conceptualization of *mestizaje*, like that of many other Latin American thinkers, privileges the fusion of European and indigenous roots at the expense of other racial groups, particularly blacks.<sup>2</sup> As Susan Gillman puts it, “A fundamental contradiction . . . emerges between race and *mestizaje* in its nineteenth-century formulations: the call for a new race of mixed beings is also a call for racelessness, for citizens defined by national rather than racial membership.”<sup>3</sup> While Gillman locates this contradiction in Martí’s nineteenth-century moment, it endures in many Latin American countries where official ideologies of *mestizaje* effectively erase the more hybrid composition of actual populations.

This essay takes the contradictory views of race in Martí’s “Nuestra América” as a point of entry into a discussion of the conflicted place of blackness in the history of U.S.-Mexico relations. Mexico, to a greater extent than countries with more visible black populations such as Cuba, Brazil, or Colombia, vividly instantiates the tensions characteristic of Martí’s thought. There a celebratory discourse of *mestizaje* is employed as a tool of national unification while the African heritage is suppressed, despite the fact that it is so pervasive among the Mexican populace that it has been described as a “third root.”<sup>4</sup> For Mexicans, the acknowledgment of blackness is blocked by a version of *mestizaje* that recognizes only European and indigenous ancestry. When the Mexican politician José Vasconcelos famously labeled *mestizos la raza cósmica* in 1925, he codified the mixture of black, Indian, and Spaniard into the nation’s official ideology. But since then, thanks in part to the infiltration of U.S.-style racial politics, blackness has virtually been erased from collective understandings of Mexican heritage. This explains why Mexicans—unlike Canadians, who have made much of their nation’s role in harboring fugitive slaves—have largely ignored the fact that the abolition of slavery played a central role in the War for Independence; that the Mexican Constitution (unlike that of the United States) explicitly guaranteed equality for all citizens regardless of race; and that Mexicans consistently thwarted U.S. slavery by helping fugitives to escape and refusing to include them in any extradition treaty signed with the United States. The history of Afro-Mexicans has been no more visible from the U.S. side of the border, despite a heightened diasporic consciousness among African Americans. To acknowledge blackness south of the border would require unsettling racial narratives that put African Americans at the center of the history of slavery and its aftermath. In the United States, the story of African American

struggles and victories has overshadowed that of blacks in other parts of the Americas.

Recently, the growing interest in black diaspora has prompted efforts by a small group of scholars, authors, and artists who seek to reclaim the history of Afro-Mexicans and to bring the tensions between race and *mestizaje* into the public eye.<sup>5</sup> Such work has great promise for Americanists because of its potential to build a bridge between two strands of transnational scholarship that have become central to the field: Paul Gilroy's concept of the black Atlantic, which knits together Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and North America as participants in the transatlantic slave trade and progenitors of a diasporic black culture, and Chicano studies' focus on the borderlands, the contact zone that links the United States to Latin America.<sup>6</sup> This essay connects the borderlands to the black Atlantic by arguing for the unacknowledged importance of Mexico in the history of U.S. slavery. In doing so, it seeks to expand the terrain of border studies by offering an alternative genealogy of cultural crossing and to revise the collective imagined geographies of the Americas by questioning the cultural associations surrounding "North" and "South."

I begin by examining how these directional biases undergird the historical study of slavery in North America. Mexico's role as a harbor for fugitive slaves has been overlooked in favor of narratives that locate freedom exclusively in the North. The dominance of these narratives is tied to a nationalist blind spot in the historiography of U.S. slavery, which tends to view "the South" as being confined within U.S. borders. The cultural significance of North and South looks quite different when the South is conceived as the region encompassing Mexico and the rest of Latin America. Contemporary representations in literature and the visual arts have played a vital role in the creation of revisionist geographies of the Americas. More than a hundred years after the abolition of slavery in North America, authors and artists such as the novelists Gail Jones and Guillermo Sánchez de Anda, the filmmaker John Sayles, and the photographer Tony Gleaton are beginning to probe the historical amnesia that has erased the presence of blackness south of the border. Their work is the subject of the second part of my essay. Employing a range of inventive formal strategies, these artists take on the difficult task of excavating an Africanist presence in Mexico and the U.S. Southwest, regions that have long been dominated by other racial narratives but still contain the submerged traces of alternative histories of blackness in the Americas.

### Alternative Fugitive Cartographies

In the history of North American slavery, Canada has been enshrined as the terminus of the Underground Railroad, a bastion of freedom that welcomed fugitives at the end of a long and arduous journey. Although significant numbers of slaves escaped by running south to Mexico or elsewhere in the Americas, "the South" is persistently held up as the epicenter of unfreedom in contrast to the northern states and Canada. This directional bias has much to do with the authority granted to slave narratives as a form of historical evidence. Produced under the auspices of white abolitionists in Canada and the northern United States, the slave narrative is the most formulaic of genres. One of its primary conventions is the story of harrowing passage from south to north. As Francis Smith Foster characterizes the slave narrative's structure, from the first page "the identification of the slave's birthplace fixed the South-to-North axis of the narration and introduced the theme of the journey to the promised land. The South was described much like a wilderness of untamed land, ineffective religion, and savage brutality, while the North became the location of enlightened Christianity, harmony, and brotherhood."<sup>7</sup> In the slave narrative's imagined geography, north and south are far more than regional locations or points on a compass; they are the very distinction between freedom and bondage itself. Often this literary convention is taken as a form of historical data about the actual routes of fugitive slaves, while paths less fully recorded in print have been occluded from the historical record.

Slave narratives reflect a more pervasive cultural bias toward the North that is manifest in nineteenth-century U.S. religious discourse, popular culture, and foreign policy. To the north were the British, who had come to an uneasy co-existence with the United States following the War of 1812, which concluded with a mutual recognition of military strength. To the south, the Spanish empire was in decline. The United States took advantage of the vulnerable border region with frequent attempts to seize land, often in the interest of expanding slave territory. In his autobiography, the Reverend J. W. Loguen, a former slave, insightfully summarizes this directional bias. Describing a failed annexation of Canadian land, he concludes that "the filibusters were thus promptly taught that incursions for the conquest of northern Territory were less adapted to the national taste, than like forays for the conquest of Texas, Mexico, Cuba, and the Isthmus. The instant and decided check given to this northern move, effectually curbed unlawful enterprises in that direction; and the only vent for national

passions in this regard has been found to lay in the South.”<sup>8</sup> According to national policy as well as popular consciousness, the southern borderlands were chaotic and shifting, the South itself a place of decadence and excess. Populated by a mixture of indigenous tribes and Spanish, French, and British colonists, the region was often treated as if it were up for grabs. It was hotly contested by both pro- and antislavery factions, who recognized land as the key to victory for their cause. The closer that slaves were to the United States’ southern border, the better they must have understood the connection between their bondage and the fate of the nation’s shifting boundaries.

Revising many of the conventions of slave narratives written under the sponsorship of white patrons, Martin Delany’s *Blake* (1859–62) provides a more hemispheric view of fugitive geography that takes into account the racial dynamics and political stability of different regions of the Americas. Delany’s unfinished novel of revolution recognizes Canada as a place of refuge but ultimately rejects it in favor of Latin America as the ideal location for black resettlement. The first part of *Blake* echoes the structure of a slave narrative as its protagonist leads a group of fugitive slaves to Canada, which he calls “a free country.”<sup>9</sup> However, once his friends are safely settled there, Henry criticizes Canadians for their failure to uphold the egalitarian principles set forth by British law, then departs for the south. In Cuba he initiates his radical plan for revolution. Henry’s geographical trajectory corresponds to sentiments expressed in Delany’s 1854 pamphlet entitled “Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent,” which lists Canada as one of several “places of temporary relief, especially to the fleeing fugitive—which, like a palliative, soothes for the time being the misery,” only to reject it as a “permanent [place] upon which to fix our destiny; and that of our children, who shall come after us.”<sup>10</sup> In addition to the accusations of racism he makes in *Blake*, Delany has other reasons for opposing long-term colonization in Canada. One is that he predicts its imminent annexation by the United States. Another is that it does not fit his criteria for a new homeland dominated by blacks. As Gregg Crane has argued, Delany’s revolutionary vision relies on a majority black population, since he cannot imagine a society in which the dominant group can be trusted to protect the rights of minorities.<sup>11</sup> Thus Henry must leave Canada for Cuba, whose racial demographics make it a more appropriate place to plot his unrealized rebellion. Half a century before Martí, Delany saw revolutionary potential in Cuba. However, in contrast to Martí, who called for the subordination of racial differences to national purpose, Delany articulates an early version of

diasporic consciousness in which blacks identify across national boundaries to the exclusion of other groups.

Whereas Cuba is the locus of Delany’s radicalism in *Blake*, his pamphlet “Political Destiny” suggests other possible sites of relocation, most strongly advocating emigration south of the U.S. border. Although at other points in his career Delany would support black recolonization of Africa, “Political Destiny” is important to my argument because it assesses the potential of Mexico and Central America as homelands for freed slaves. Delany asserts that black people have a divine right to remain on the American continent because it was “designed by Providence as a reserved asylum for the various oppressed people of the earth, of all races.”<sup>12</sup> He claims not only that black people belong in America by virtue of their oppression, but that they in fact “discovered” it long before the Europeans, having arrived as a part of the ancient “Carthaginian expedition.” According to Delany’s revisionist history, black people are a long-standing presence in the New World, rather than being the unwelcome newcomers they are often mistaken for. Thus, he insists, “Upon the American continent . . . we are determined to remain, despite every opposition that may be urged against us.”<sup>13</sup> The task Delany lays out is a matter of geographic reeducation to teach slaves the benefits of flight to the south: “They already find their way in large companies to the Canadas, and they have only to be made sensible that there is as much freedom for them South, as there is North; as much protection in Mexico as in Canada; and the fugitive slave will find it a much pleasanter journey and more easy of access, to wend his way from Louisiana and Arkansas to Mexico, than the thousands of miles through the slave-holders of the South and slave-catchers of the North, to Canada. Once in Mexico, and his farther exit to Central and South America and the West Indies, would be certain.”<sup>14</sup> Although his revolutionary vision of black resettlement was interrupted by the Civil War, Delany significantly revised the geographic imaginary of the slave narrative by representing Mexico and Central America as alternatives to Canada.

Other opponents of slavery would attempt to put the alternatives envisioned by Delany into practice. When the Philadelphia abolitionist Samuel Webb inquired about the relocation of former slaves, the Mexican government expressed its willingness to accept new immigrants. Vice president Valentín Gómez Farías responded to Webb’s letter: “If they [the former slaves] would like to come, we will offer them land for cultivation, plots for houses where they can establish towns, and tools for work, under the obligation [that they

will] obey the laws of the country and the authorities already established by the Supreme Government of the Federation."<sup>15</sup> Responding to a similar invitation, the Black Seminoles—former slaves of the Seminole tribe—traveled to Mexico in 1849. Initially the arrangement promised to be mutually advantageous. In crossing the border, the Black Seminoles hoped to evade the slave owners who threatened their freedom in Florida. For its part, the Mexican government sought to populate the sparsely inhabited border region with settlers who might help to fight off hostile Indian tribes and invaders from the United States.<sup>16</sup> Although the relocation ended in disappointment on both sides, the Black Seminoles remained in Mexico until after the Civil War.

The most ambitious plan for relocation was devised by Benjamin Lundy, a Quaker and publisher of the first abolitionist periodical, the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. Like Delany, Lundy thought comparatively about Canada and Texas (then a part of Mexico) as potential homes for a black colony and concluded in favor of Texas.<sup>17</sup> At considerable cost to his health and finances, Lundy traveled to Mexico in search of available land and permission to establish a colony. His journals document encounters with a number of black people who expressed enthusiasm about joining the new settlement, as well as others who were already settled comfortably in Mexico, several in mixed marriages to Anglos or Mexicans. Interrupted by the Texas uprising, Lundy's project remained unrealized. Other migrants, including a free black named Luis N. Fouché, and a group of former slaves who traveled from New Orleans to Veracruz, successfully petitioned for land to establish colonies in Mexico.<sup>18</sup>

Black resettlement south of the border was an attractive prospect for more ambivalent opponents of slavery who worried about the presence of a free black population in the United States.<sup>19</sup> They saw an opportunity in the annexation of Texas, which could serve as a safety valve to siphon off unwanted elements from the continent. In 1844 Senator Robert J. Walker of Mississippi argued that as slave labor used up land in the South, planters and slaves would migrate into Texas. Masters who found the land beyond the Texas border inadequate for new plantations would be forced to free their slaves, who would continue to move south, where "the sparse population occupying the land would welcome the Negroes and treat them as equals."<sup>20</sup> A similar case was made in the late 1850s when one Frank P. Blair Jr. of Missouri proposed a "drainage system" whereby the U.S. government would buy large blocks of land south of the border for the resettlement of freed blacks. He argued that as they vacated more desirable regions, the former slaves "would be succeeded by the most useful of all the tillers

of the earth, small freeholders and an independent tenantry. The influx of immigrants from Europe and the North, with moderate capital, already running into Maryland and Virginia, would, as these States sloughed the black skin, fill up the rich region round the Chesapeake Bay."<sup>21</sup>

In arguing for population drift to the south, Walker claimed that, unlike the white population of the United States, who would never treat freed blacks as equals, Latin Americans "cherish no race prejudice against Negroes."<sup>22</sup> While this was not entirely true, Mexico refused to sign any treaty requiring the extradition of fugitive slaves to the United States, and Mexicans were known regularly to help slaves to escape.<sup>23</sup> Even before Mexican independence, the Spanish—who were slave owners themselves—had a history of encouraging British and American slaves to escape by promising freedom in exchange for military service and conversion to Catholicism.<sup>24</sup> With independence from Spain, Mexico turned the strategic objection to slavery into official policy. According to Rosalie Schwartz, "The Federal Act of July 13, 1824 . . . specifically prohibited the commerce and traffic in slaves from any country, and declared that slaves introduced contrary to the tenor of the act would be free simply by the condition of their being in Mexican territory."<sup>25</sup> To a certain extent, Mexicans assisted fugitives and refused to return escaped slaves out of a genuine abhorrence of slavery.<sup>26</sup> Mexico inherited New Spain's legacy of liberalism on matters of race, an attitude that grew from the relatively contained and fluid relations of slavery within colonial Mexico, the high degree of racial mixture, and a Catholic emphasis on the fundamental equality of souls within colonial Mexico.<sup>27</sup> But Mexicans also helped the fugitive slaves out of a desire to discourage Anglo-American settlers along the northwestern border by establishing obstacles to slaveholding in the region.<sup>28</sup> The reasoning was that the more difficult it became to keep slaves in proximity to Mexican territory, the less incentive there would be to introduce this costly form of property into the region.

Evidence of the large number of slaves who did escape into Mexico must be found in the words of outraged slave owners and observers, since the slaves left no written record themselves. Without the culture of abolitionism that flourished in the northern United States and British Canada, there was little incentive for those who fled south to set their stories to paper. There was neither an audience nor a marketplace to make such a product financially viable. Former slaves south of the border confronted the additional challenge of linguistic difference as they encountered populations who spoke Spanish or indigenous languages. Since the communities they entered were often nonliterate, there was little in-

centive to learn to write or to record their stories in print. These circumstances pose an interesting challenge to the logic of the slave narrative, which assumes that the desire to be literate and to record one's experiences on paper necessarily came with the desire for freedom. The slaves who ran south were no less determined to escape their bondage but lacked the cultural context that would drive them to produce slave narratives. Conditions of illiteracy, linguistic differences, and extreme poverty did not mean that the fugitive slaves didn't tell their stories: in the mid-twentieth century, historians and anthropologists began to collect the remarkable oral narratives generated by slaves who had escaped to freedom and passed their stories down over several generations.<sup>29</sup> Absent the strict generic formulas of slave narrative, these stories are often partial, fragmented, and varied in form and content.

Some fugitives who fled south, particularly from Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, and other states in the vicinity, joined the Florida Seminoles. Settled in Spanish territory, the Seminoles were slaveholders themselves but were known to be far more lenient than white masters. Their twentieth-century descendants claimed that the Seminole slaves' "everyday life was idyllic compared to that of plantation slaves."<sup>30</sup> According to the historian Kenneth W. Porter, many slaves in the region were motivated to escape from their Anglo owners by the promise of a better life under the Seminoles. Often the Seminoles and their slaves were enlisted to help the Spanish in military conflict against the United States. During the siege of St. Augustine in 1812, Colonel Thomas A. Smith wrote that the Seminoles had "several hundred fugitive slaves from the Carolinas & Georgia at present in their Towns & unless they are checked soon they will be so strengthened by [more] desertions from Georgia & Florida . . . it will be found troublesome to reduce them."<sup>31</sup> His words provide evidence of the large numbers of fugitives in the region, and their willingness to fight against the power that had enslaved them. The military prowess of the Black Seminoles is a legend that survives into the present.

Texas was an even greater source of conflict between slaveholders and their opponents. When slavery was abolished in Mexico in 1829, a large and influential population of slaveholding colonists from the United States ensured that Texas would be exempt from the new legislation. Mexico saw this arrangement as a means of keeping peace in the region while deterring further Anglo colonization by simultaneously recognizing existing slavery and prohibiting the introduction of new slaves. Nevertheless, proximity to free territory enticed many slaves in Texas to escape south to freedom, often with the help of local

Mexicans.<sup>32</sup> In planning his assault on the Alamo, General Antonio López de Santa Anna, president of Mexico and commander of the Mexican army, promised to free the Texas slaves.<sup>33</sup> This is an especially interesting detail, given that he was widely characterized in the United States as a ruthless and unforgiving tyrant. During the Texas War of Independence, many slaves either joined the Mexican forces or took advantage of the confusion to flee across the border. Following the annexation of Texas by the United States, the chaos increased as more slave owners arrived and their chattel attempted flight across the border in large numbers. According to the historians John Hope Franklin and Loren Schwening, "During the 1840s and 1850s, southern Texas became a thoroughfare for slaves crossing the border to freedom in Mexico."<sup>34</sup> In a complaint made before the General Assembly in Austin, a delegation of slave owners stated, "You are well aware of the insecurity of Slave Property in this County . . . and will at once perceive the necessity of enacting an appropriate remedy."<sup>35</sup> A resident of San Antonio wrote in 1855 of the difficulty of keeping slaves in border regions: "The number of negroes in the city and indeed in all this part of the state is comparatively small. . . . They cannot be kept here without great risk to their running away. . . . [There are] always Mexicans who are ready and willing to help the slaves off."<sup>36</sup>

The vigor of Texan demands for help with the return of fugitive slaves attests to the significance of the problem. Although there are no print autobiographies about escape from Texas, oral histories of former slaves corroborate the accounts of slaveholders. One Walter Rimm recalled a runaway he had encountered in the woods and speculated that "maybe he got clear to Mexico, where a lot of slaves ran to."<sup>37</sup> Another named Felix Haywood compared the prospects of escape, north and south:

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 to walk, but walk *south*, and we'd be free as soon as we crossed the Rio Grande. In Mexico you could be free. They didn't care what color you were, black, white, yellow, or blue. Hundreds of slaves did go to Mexico and got on all right. We would hear about them and how they were going to be Mexicans. They brought up their children to speak only Mexican.<sup>38</sup>

From the standpoint of a slave in Texas, it is easy to see why flight to the south seemed like a much better proposition than flight to the north. That Haywood,

who claimed to like his life as a slave and never attempted to escape, was well acquainted with the adventures of those who had fled illustrates the ubiquity of such stories.

The most detailed contemporary description of slavery in Texas comes from Frederick Law Olmsted, who published an account of his travels there in 1860. *Journey through Texas* confirms the frequency with which slaves fled to Mexico and the Mexican abhorrence of slavery, concluding, "No country could be selected better adapted to a fugitive and clandestine life, and no people among whom it would be more difficult to enforce the regulations vital to slavery."<sup>39</sup> While journeying through Mexico, Olmsted encounters a number of former slaves who have relocated south of the border, such as a man living in Piedras Negras who informs him that "runaways were constantly arriving here; two had got over, as I had previously been informed, the night before. He could not guess how many came in a year, but he could count forty, that he had known of, in the last three months. At other points, further down the river, a great many more came than here" (324). He claims that "the Mexican Government was very just to them, they could always have their rights as fully protected as if they were Mexican born." Olmsted validates his informant's account by noting that it was corroborated by other stories he had heard: "I believe these statements to have been pretty nearly true; he had no object, that I could discover, to exaggerate the facts either way. . . . They were confirmed, also, in all essential particulars, by every foreigner I saw, who had lived or traveled in this part of Mexico, as well as by Mexicans themselves, with whom I was able to converse on the subject" (325). Of the fugitives' fates, Olmsted observes that those living closer to the border suffer far more than those who move deeper into Mexican territory. "The runaways are generally reported to be very poor and miserable, which, it is natural to suppose, they must be," he writes. "Yet there is something a little strange about this. It is those that remain near the frontier that suffer most; they who have got far into the interior are said to be almost invariably doing passing well" (326). Since life was harder for blacks in northernmost Mexico, many returned to the United States following the Civil War. This was the case with the Black Seminoles, some of whom went on to become Indian fighters for the U.S. Army. But those who made it to a better life in regions more distant from the U.S. border were absorbed into the Mexican population. Because they typically settled in rural, nonliterate communities, their stories remain unrecorded, and the reconstruction of their history must necessarily be partial and fragmentary. The problem is compounded by the erasure of black

ancestry in Mexico's official ideology, which effectively denies the existence of these populations.

In truth, the U.S. slaves who escaped into Mexico were but a small part of an already significant black presence south of the border. In the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth, Mexico was an important location for the Spanish slave trade. The dwindling of the native population as a result of disease and overwork required the Spanish to introduce African slaves into colonial industries such as mining, sugar culture, and urban textiles.<sup>40</sup> At least 200,000 Africans were brought to Mexico as slaves, so that by 1810 they made up more than 10 percent of the population, at times outnumbering the indigenous inhabitants.<sup>41</sup> During the War of Independence, Mexicans promised the abolition of slavery and equality for all citizens, which, as we have seen, provided a strong incentive for U.S. slaves to cross the border. In contrast to the United States, where miscegenation was discouraged, African slaves and their descendants were absorbed into the Mexican population, so that instead of distinct groupings of black and white, a large percentage of the Mexican people contained at least some African heritage. Demographers estimate that much of this process had taken place by 1900.<sup>42</sup> By the time the slaves fleeing the United States entered Mexico, there would have been very few Mexicans of purely African descent, but many with one or more black ancestors. Significant numbers of Afro-Mexicans lived in the north and thus would have been among the first Mexicans encountered by fugitives from U.S. slavery.<sup>43</sup>

However, Mexico's resistance to acknowledging its "third root," combined with the hegemony of U.S.-centered racial narratives, has effectively obscured the black presence south of the border. In the United States, an emphasis on the North as the direction of freedom erases the important role played by Mexicans in the history of North American slavery and abolition, while in Mexico, the official postrevolutionary rhetoric of *mestizaje* occludes the presence of blackness in national history and culture. These erasures are the context for the revisionist work of twentieth-century authors and artists who use a combination of historical excavation and imagination to fill gaps in the historical record.

### South to Mexico

Narratives about flight from slavery and the southern U.S. border conjure up a history that—at least from the perspective of the victims—existed *only* through oral transmission until the mid-twentieth century. Thus contemporary repre-

sentations of that history seek to represent many events that were never recorded at all, surviving only through oral transmission and more inchoate forms of cultural memory. This silence presents both challenges and opportunities for imaginative work. The artists considered here draw on a range of formal devices to tackle the dynamics of memory and storytelling in the absence of recorded history. Taken together, their work represents a marked surge of interest in the submerged histories of blacks in the U.S. Southwest and Mexico, as each artist seeks to unmask, and then to work through, the tensions between race and *mestizaje*. Each takes a particular approach to the uneven and limited historical evidence at his or her disposal. I have labeled these approaches the “borderlands,” the “national,” and the “diasporic,” each category corresponding to a distinctive regional geography and spatial understanding. Gayl Jones and John Sayles are most representative of the borderlands perspective, a transnational paradigm that seeks overlaps between U.S. and Mexican histories. By comparison, Guillermo Sánchez de Anda is nationalistic in focus, attempting to reclaim the Afro-Mexicans for the purposes of a progressive, multiracial Mexican politics. Tony Gleaton’s work, like certain aspects of Jones’s, falls into the diasporic category, a perspective that emphasizes transnational connections among people of African descent. Although these divisions are intended to clarify the distinctive perspective of each author, they often overlap within a single work.

The suppressed history of flight across the southern border is a recurring theme in Gayl Jones’s massive, sprawling novel *Mosquito* (1999). This is an ideal topic for Jones, who has frequently written about slavery from an inter-American perspective in her fiction, poetry, and criticism. Her first novel, *Corregidora*, is named for a brutal Brazilian slave owner who “fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed,” a line of scarred, mixed-race female descendants.<sup>44</sup> As one of the characters tells Ursa, the novel’s protagonist, “You seem like you got a little bit of everything in you.”<sup>45</sup> In *Corregidora*, containing “a little bit of everything” means carrying the weight of the collective oppression experienced by people of the New World. A blues singer, Ursa seeks an appropriate expression for the burden of ancestral possession: “I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life *and* theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world. I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress. Her father, the master. Her daughter’s father. The father of her daughter’s daughter. How many generations?”<sup>46</sup> Ursa’s “new world song” would connect singer and lis-

tener with the violence of a brand, but also with the communicability of a trait passed from one generation of women to the next.

Although New World slavery is a similarly vivid presence in *Mosquito*, its protagonist is less brutalized by her connection to it. The idiosyncratic Sojourner Nadine Jane Johnson (aka Mosquito) is a truck driver who lives and works in the U.S. Southwest. Stridently independent, she refuses alliances with any group or collectivity, including the truckers’ union. When she finds a Mexican dissident named Maria hidden in the back of her truck, she is introduced to the covert world of Sanctuary, a movement to assist political refugees. Initiated by U.S. religious communities in the 1980s, Sanctuary sought to shelter the victims of political oppression who tried to cross the Mexican border as they fled from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, where oppressive military regimes had risen to power with covert aid from the U.S. government. In *Mosquito*, Sanctuary is described as a present-day Underground Railroad, a term that forms a bridge between past and present but, even more interestingly, links the paths of escape across the United States’ northern and southern borders. Spanning the geography of North America, *Mosquito* reflects on the ruptures and continuities in the history of flight from injustice, uncovering the repressed legacy of blacks in Mexico and Central America by way of comparison with their African American and African Canadian counterparts.

Nadine is primed to connect the histories of northern and southern flight by a family history that is genuinely continental in scope. Like many black Americans, the Johnsons locate U.S. slavery at the root of their family tree, attributing their surname to a “John” who fought for the Union during the Civil War. Although “somebody told me that Johnson were my slave name,” Nadine insists, “we changed us name after Emancipation to the name of John, so’s it wasn’t a slave name, it were a Emancipation name.”<sup>47</sup> The distinction is significant. Unlike Ursa Corregidora, who is damaged by the knowledge that she bears the name of a cruel slave owner, the Johnsons are proud of a genealogy rooted in freedom. They trace another early North American relative to the black regiment that fought for the English “up in Canada” during the Revolutionary War (351). Yet a third set of Johnson roots extends to the south, giving Nadine a familial link to the region where she lives and works. She explains: “Us family history say that some of us Johnsons originated in Mexico, that we was originally Mexican Africans, then if that is true history then maybe that’s why I’s never had the typical American attitude towards Mexicans. I know I don’t look like no Mexican, but family history say there’s a little Mexican in me” (317). These



Latin American origins, which she recalls numerous times during the course of the novel, are central to the recovery of a history even more submerged than that of the Underground Railroad: the blacks in Mexico.

Nadine attributes her affinity for the Southwest and its inhabitants to traces of Mexican blood in her own ancestry. In contrast to her easy association with the Chicanos and Mexicans she meets during her travels, she notices that her Chicana friend Delgadina is decidedly reticent on the subject of black Mexican history. Delgadina is representative of a collective resistance among Mexicans and Mexican Americans to acknowledging black ancestry. As Nadine puts it, "Ain't never heard nobody talk about African Mexicans, though" (189). Given this silence, it is particularly important for her own circuitous narrative detours to call up a black presence in Mexico that remains little known and shrouded in shame. At one point, Nadine is gratified to learn that Amanda Wordlaw, a renowned author of romance novels featuring African American characters, is writing a book called *A Natural History of Afro-Mexico*, "which deals with the African presence in Mexico, from the slaves who jumped slave ships to seek refuge in Mexico to others who traveled south to Mexico rather than north to Canada" (362). The fictional character Amanda Wordlaw joins a small but growing number of authors working to recover a black Mexican history that extends back even further than the fugitive slaves from the United States to the Africans imported by the Spanish beginning in the 1590s.

By designating Sanctuary an Underground Railroad, the novel invites comparisons between north and south. Indeed, the Sanctuary movement encompasses the entire continent and beyond, often identifying Canada as a potential place of refuge for Latin American dissidents threatened with deportation from the United States. Recalling Delany, the work of Sanctuary in the present is informed by the long history of North American places of refuge. Having driven transcontinental routes into Canada as well as Mexico, Nadine has considerable experience with the very different personalities of the two regions. She describes the border between the United States and Canada as "the free border" in comparison with its heavily policed Mexican counterpart (131, 239). The characters in *Mosquito* are well aware of the state's power to control the movement of people and goods at its borders. As a truck driver, Nadine regularly experiences the impact of restrictive state power when she is stopped, searched, or interrogated by border patrols. She remarks of the INS: "I guess a lot of them immigration agents acting on what they believe. But then they got what you call the state behind them. The state be saying, I got your back, so it pretty easy

for them to act on what they believe, I mean, when they believe the same thing the state believe" (313). In contrast to the immigration agents, members of the Sanctuary movement describe themselves as working *against* the interests of nation-states, in favor of a higher international or human law. From their perspective, states are responsible for the injustice of national borders, which are open to commerce and the right kinds of travelers (Nadine remarks, "The rich don't have borders" [297]), and closed to those most in need of passage.

As *Mosquito* vividly illustrates, the conditions of any one border are best understood comparatively and with a deep view of history. The comprehensive view required to combat the injustices of U.S. immigration policy is available only by considering circumstances at both land borders, by recognizing North America as a unit rather than as three discrete nations. Nadine's rambling monologues do this and more, weaving connections among blacks on the North American continent, as well as in the Caribbean, South America, and Africa. The narratives she summons forth brilliantly rewrite the map of fugitive cartography by emphasizing the importance of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands to black history and culture in the Americas. Unfortunately, as the protagonist's nickname suggests, they are delivered in a voice that many have found so relentless and annoyingly circuitous as to be virtually unreadable.<sup>48</sup> Unlike her invention the best-selling author Amanda Wordlaw, or *Urša Corregidora*, whose singing has the searing impact of a brand, Jones may not perform the work to which her protagonist aspires, the work of making Afro-Mexican history a part of collective North American consciousness.

John Sayles's 1996 film *Lone Star* shares *Mosquito*'s South Texas setting and its concern with the impact of the U.S.-Mexico border on those who live in the region, especially those overlooked by dominant historical narratives. Like Jones's novel, the film draws comparisons across time and space and, at the same time, is, as Sayles describes it, "very much about the specifics of a particular place and history—the Texas-Mexican border with its baggage of wars and racial politics."<sup>49</sup> Sayles's South Texas is made up of a familiar mix of Anglos, Mexicans, and Chicanos, as well as an African American family with deep roots in the region. What interests Sayles about this region is its diverse population and multiple and contradictory histories. In Frontera, a fictional town where high-school teachers and parents argue about the meaning of the Alamo and illegal immigrants run through homeowners' backyards, history is a matter of considerable urgency. Each of the film's central characters is drawn into a quest for knowledge about his or her personal history, which becomes entwined with

the collective histories of the region. Sayles uses a repeated visual device to illustrate the enduring impact of the past on the present. When someone begins to remember the past, a point-of-view shot pans slowly across space, but also through time. When the camera comes to rest, we have entered the space of memory. This visual motif illustrates the power of memory to resurrect important past events as vividly as if they were occurring in the present. It also emphasizes how particular spaces become so laden with history that they function as portals into the past.

African Americans in *Lone Star* have a particularly conflicted relationship to local history in Frontera. Flashbacks depict the more vibrant black community of a generation ago. Now it is largely associated with the local army base, which is scheduled to close in two years. The popular hangout Big O's Roadhouse seems to be patronized primarily by the black servicemen and women who will soon be relocated. As its owner, Otis Payne, describes their dwindling numbers, "There's not enough of us to run anything in this town." A small minority overlooked by the town's political disputes, African Americans find their primary occupation in the army, a national, rather than a local, institution. The film is ambivalent in its depiction of the military, which is the source of pride and professional success for African American men like Otis's son, Colonel Del Payne, but is also the agent of a culture that does not belong to them. As one private explains her enlistment, "It's their country. This is one of the best deals they offer." Her comment underscores the uneasy position occupied by black people in *Lone Star*. Their fraught relationship to both local and national culture crystallizes in their identification with the migratory, multiracial figures of the Black Seminoles.

Given the importance of the military in *Lone Star*, it is fitting that the Black Seminoles—whose best fighters joined the U.S. Army when they returned from Mexico after the Civil War—are central to a series of encounters among three generations of Paynes, the film's African American family. Colonel Del Payne returns to his hometown when he is sent there to oversee the closure of the military base. An incident of violence involving an enlisted man requires Del to visit his father's bar (Big O's) to investigate. There he finds a sign posted outside that reads: "BLACK SEMINOLE EXHIBIT—REAR ENTRANCE." Del, who has long been estranged from his father, shows no interest in the collection of artifacts and documents that make up the exhibit, which Otis describes as his "hobby." However, it will resurface later when Del visits Otis's home and discovers that on the wall next to Otis's Black Seminole collection hang news

clippings and photographs chronicling Del's military career. Having failed to be a good father, Otis compensates by creating an archive devoted to the success Del has achieved on his own. In this, Otis resembles many other characters in *Lone Star*, who shrink from difficult interpersonal situations by retreating into stories about the past. There is far less at stake in claiming the Black Seminoles as his blood relatives than in attempting to come to terms with his estranged son. However, the possibility of retreat is more an impression than a reality, since the film insistently points to the links between past and present. The question that each character faces once the past erupts is how he or she will use it to act in the present. At the same time that Otis announces his connection to the Black Seminoles, he concludes that "blood only means what you let it," a statement that has as much significance for his relationship to Del as it does to his more distant ancestors.

Another scene of encounter mediated through the Black Seminoles occurs when Del's son Chet, who has never met his grandfather, visits Big O's. Although he recognizes Chet immediately, Otis does not acknowledge it. Instead, his first words to his grandson are "That's John Horse." In place of an awkward introduction, Otis begins to relay the history of the Black Seminoles, prompted by questions from Chet. Chet's genuine surprise and curiosity about the unknown history stands in marked contrast to his father's lack of interest. Otis tells him of the Black Seminoles' return from Mexico after the Civil War, when some of the bravest warriors were organized into a celebrated regiment of the U.S. Army called the Seminole Negro Indian Scouts. When Chet asks incredulously if Indians fought against Indians, Otis answers, "They were in the Army. Like your father." This is the first time Otis intimates that he knows Chet's identity. The distant history of the Black Seminoles serves to mediate the more difficult problem of Otis's strained relationship to Del. Having made his connection with Chet, Otis explains that he is interested in the Black Seminoles because "these are our people," a veiled suggestion of belated interest in his own family. Through their meeting, Chet gains a connection with his grandfather, as well as with a heroic and little-known strand of North American history.

By embedding the story of the Black Seminoles within a contemporary story about the struggles of Mexican Americans, the film suggests a parallel between the two groups, both of which traversed the U.S.-Mexico border (albeit in different directions) in search of better lives. It shows Mexicans employing desperate measures to cross the border, only to find that the United States is hardly the Promised Land they had imagined. The new immigrants face prejudice,

corruption, and difficult working conditions, as well as the constant threat of repatriation. The haunting presence of the Black Seminoles is a reminder of the historical injustice of slavery that stains U.S. history. Their work as Indian fighters with the U.S. Army further recalls how often minority groups have been thrown into combat against one another in the service of national interests. Arguments about the Alamo recall Texas's own conflicted past. Although only Anglos and Chicanos participate in the debate over the high-school curriculum, the presence of African Americans in the region recalls that slavery was a crucial motivating factor in the annexation of Texas. As framed by *Lone Star*, the southwestern border is a contested zone for black as well as Mexican American history.

*Mosquito* and *Lone Star* recover the suppressed histories of African Americans in the U.S. Southwest and northern Mexico. Both connect the history of slave resistance with the current struggles of Mexican *indocumentados*. They represent the borderlands as a space where the legacy of the black Atlantic meets up with that of other minority groups. The revisionist energies of both works emphasize the northern side of the border by demonstrating how the recovery of suppressed histories and the drawing of unfamiliar historical parallels challenge dominant narratives about race and nation in the United States. They leave open the question of those fugitive slaves who chose not to return and instead put down roots in Mexico. Theirs may be the most submerged history of all, one that remains relatively untouched by artists and historians alike. While there is now a growing body of work on blacks in Mexico, few scholars recognize the African American connections described here. Nor are they acknowledged by black Mexicans themselves, who typically do not understand race in diasporic terms that would allow it to serve as a point of identification across national categories.<sup>50</sup> Afro-Mexicans are believed to descend from the Spanish slave trade (and hence, the narrative goes, to have been almost entirely assimilated—read *invisible*—by 1900) or to be migrants from the Caribbean.<sup>51</sup> The novelist Guillermo Sánchez de Anda and the photographer Tony Gleaton are both intent on making blackness visible within Mexican contexts.

Guillermo Sánchez de Anda's *Yanga* (1998) is one of the few works of Mexican fiction to address what the historian Ben Vinson calls Mexico's "racial amnesia."<sup>52</sup> Self-consciously foregrounding the difficult work of historical recovery, the novel frames the history of Yanga, a Nigerian slave who led a successful thirty-eight-year revolt against the Mexican Crown ending in 1609, within the fictional narrative of Silverio, a contemporary journalist who becomes obsessed

with unearthing Yanga's past. Silverio comes upon his story accidentally while on assignment to cover a government assault on a group of neo-Zapatistas holed up in the town of Yanga, which is located in Veracruz, home to one of the largest Afro-Mexican communities in the nation. A monument dedicated to the revolutionary leader who is the town's namesake sparks Silverio's curiosity. Like *Lone Star*, *Yanga* invests particularly charged places with the power to instigate the excavation of buried history. For Silverio, who begins to recognize parallels between the Zapatistas' current struggle for justice and Yanga's seventeenth-century rebellion, the town becomes a crucible of revolutionary energies destined to erupt during moments of particular historical crisis.

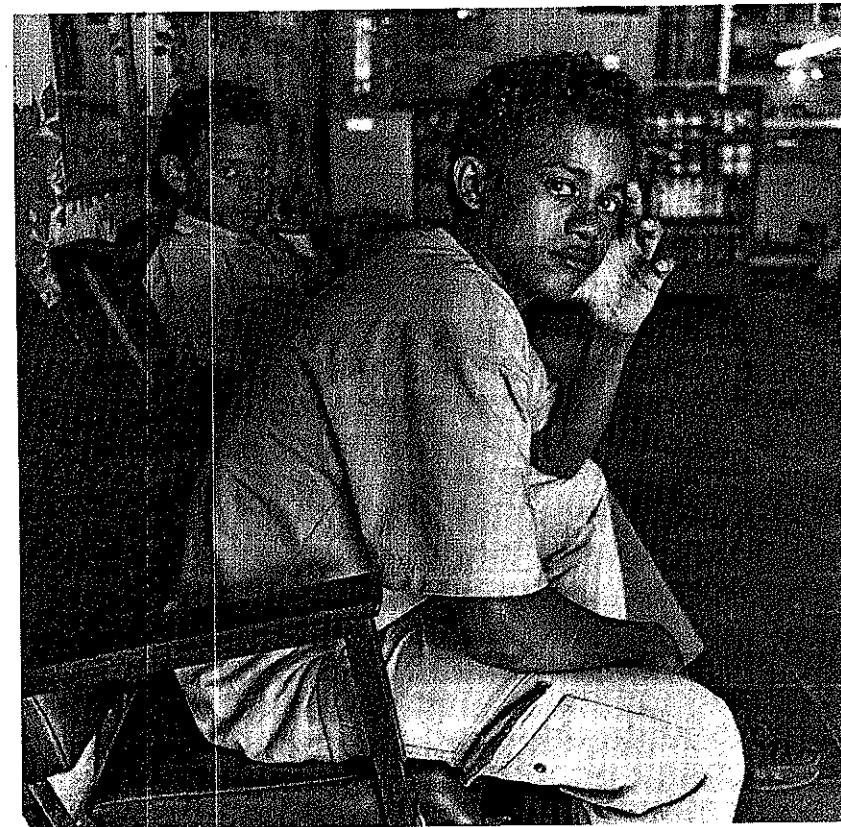
However, Yanga's revolt differs from other revolutionary moments in Mexico's past in that it is linked to the unacknowledged history of the Afro-Mexicans. To understand it, Silverio must first "reconocer la importancia de la 'negritud' en la historia de Mexico" (recognize the importance of "negritude" in the history of Mexico).<sup>53</sup> The importance and difficulty of this task are underscored by his local informant, Don Tiburcio, who tells him: "Tienes la gran oportunidad de escudriñar en un episodio trascendente de nuestra historia patria y de América, muy poco conocido, tal vez ignorado, quizá repudiado" (You have the great opportunity to examine a transcendent episode in our nation's history and that of America, one that is very little known, perhaps ignored, perhaps repudiated) (39). As he pursues the story of Yanga's victorious struggle against the Mexican military, Silverio undertakes the larger project of uncovering Mexico's forgotten black roots.

Silverio understands Yanga's radical legacy as a corrective to the current state of corruption and indifference plaguing "el México de hoy con sus carencias y limitaciones, con el abuso de autoridades y caciques y la inconciencia e indolencia de sus habitantes, los cuales no están dispuestos a realizar sacrificio alguno en aras del bienestar colectivo" (contemporary Mexico, with its deficiencies and limitations, with the abuses of authorities and political bosses and the thoughtlessness and indolence of its inhabitants, who aren't disposed to make the slightest sacrifice on the altar of the collective good) (126). Ultimately Sánchez de Anda relates the history of Yanga in the hope that it might redeem Mexico from its current political malaise. Unlike Jones or Sayles, he is uninterested in building bridges between the United States and other parts of the Americas; rather, he sees Afro-Mexican history as a strike in the war against Yankee hegemony. Although he claims that Yanga's revolt represents a "transcendent episode" in American history, Sánchez de Anda shares Martí's

skepticism about the role of the United States in the Americas. This is evident when Silverio orders a Coke during his meeting with Don Tiburcio and is told, “Es mejor que tome un café, pues sólo los negros americanos abren de las aguas negras del imperialismo yanqui” (Better to drink a coffee, since only the colored Americans imbibe the black waters of Yankee imperialism) (36). Later Silverio warns that if Mexico fails to recognize its own constitutional principles of universal equality, “dentro de unos años nos invadirán los gringos aduciendo que los mexicanos somos el pueblo ‘de mañana’” (within a few years the gringos will invade us, predicting that the Mexicans are the people of the future) (63). While criticizing the state for its authoritarianism and neglect of its own people, Sánchez de Anda frames his protest against the threat of U.S. imperialism in national rather than diasporic terms. His goal is to reclaim the history of Afro-Mexicans for Mexico, to awaken the nation’s slumbering revolutionary energies.

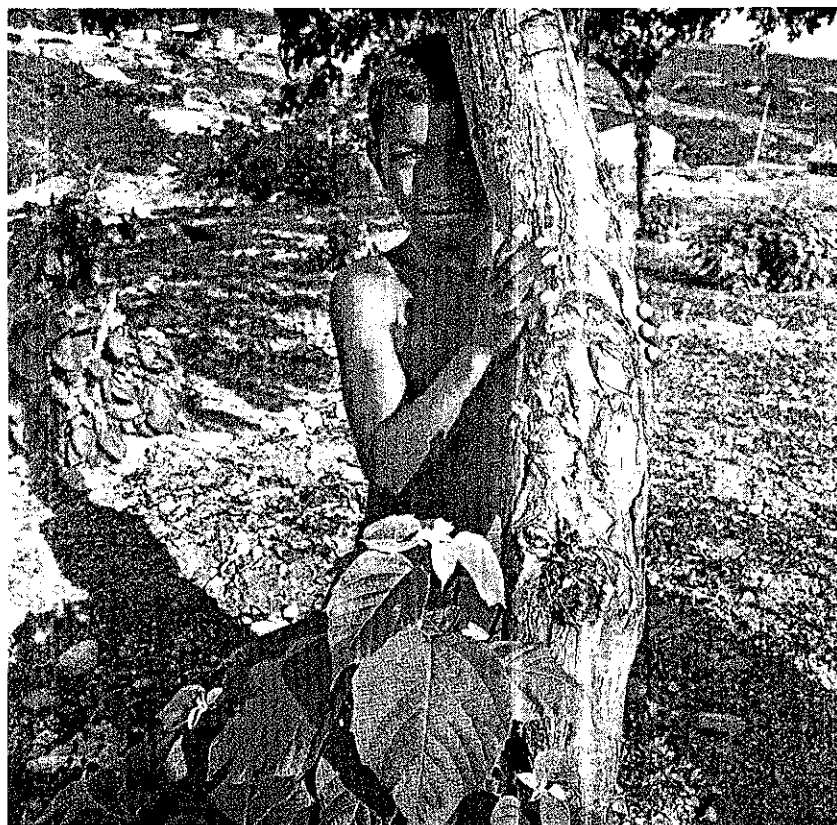
In many ways an ideal visual counterpart to Sánchez de Anda, the photographer Tony Gleaton also aspires to make the black component of Mexican ancestry visible. However, his purpose is to uncover the inter-American connections by excavating the Africanist genealogies in Mexico. Of mixed African and European heritage, Gleaton sees his project as both a cultural study and a more personal investigation of his own roots. A period of extensive travel in Mexico gave him an opportunity to photograph black populations concentrated on the Gulf Coast of central Veracruz and along the Pacific in Costa Chica, where poverty and geographic remoteness have kept them isolated from the national community. His series *Tengo casi 500 años* also includes images of blacks in El Salvador, Belize, Guatemala, Colombia, and other parts of Latin America.<sup>54</sup> Gleaton describes these photographs as part of a concerted effort to restore to public consciousness a people who have been nearly lost to history, in a region where the discourse of *mestizaje* has erased the presence of blackness and black citizens endure abiding prejudices and inequality. By combining images shot in Mexico and in other Latin American countries, *Tengo casi 500 años* suggests the continuity of black roots throughout the hemisphere.

The most striking feature of Gleaton’s photographs is their beauty and formal virtuosity. His subjects are often children, sometimes posed in tender, intimate contact with adult companions. At first glance, these images may appear to be documentary because the subjects are framed in the context of daily life. However, Gleaton works in the tradition of classic portraiture, posing his subjects and positioning the camera to maximum aesthetic effect. As one catalog de-



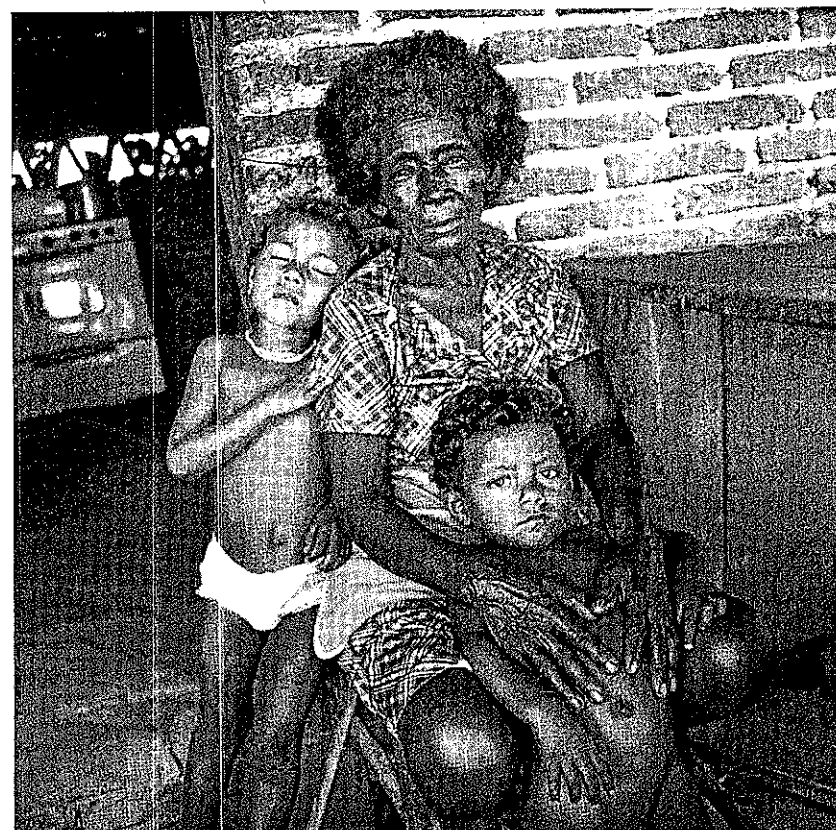
1 Tony Gleaton, no. 332, “Pero no hay negros en El Salvador” (But there are no blacks in El Salvador), Santa Rosa de Lima, El Salvador. Copyright 1992, *Africa’s Legacy in Mexico*. All rights reserved.

scribes the alignment of Gleaton’s aesthetic and political objectives, “Eschewing the faux objectivity of the documentary photographer, Gleaton’s photographs indicate both a subtle presence and a pronounced artistry. Subjects are indeed directed, often self-consciously posed within arranged scenes, to realize the artist’s visual narration of the legacy of colonialism — an evolving African-derived black culture. Images possess a ‘look’ of effortlessness, candidly observed shots, yet are often later further manipulated to perfect the Gleaton effect. And it is this *mélange* of actuality and artifice that widens our comprehension of the Presence Africane in the Americas.”<sup>55</sup>



2 Tony Gleaton, no. 149, "Jardín del paradiso" (Garden of Paradise), Corallero, Oaxaca, Mexico. Copyright 1991, *Africa's Legacy in Mexico*. All rights reserved.

Gleaton speaks frankly about posing his subjects to stand in as participants in a larger narrative about the Africanist legacy in Latin America: "There is no question about my repositioning subjects to create an effect, or having fathers embrace sons at my suggestion rather than theirs. The photographs that I create are as much an effort to define my own life, with its heritage encompassing Africa and Europe, as an endeavor to throw open the discourse on the broader aspects of 'mestizaje,' the 'assimilation' of Asians, Africans, and Europeans with indigenous Americans."<sup>56</sup> This statement clarifies Gleaton's conviction that the subjects of his photographs are simultaneously individuals and



3 Tony Gleaton, no. 129, "Abuelita y nieta" (Grandmother and Granddaughter), Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, Mexico. Copyright 1986, *Africa's Legacy in Mexico*. All rights reserved.

metaphors for his personal quest to uncover his heritage in the Americas. Yet at the same time that he understands his subjects as aspects of his own past, Gleaton somewhat contradictorily claims to "give a narrative voice by visual means to people deemed invisible by the greater part of society. . . . I deliberately craft an 'alternative iconography' of what beauty and family and love and goodness might stand for—one that is inclusive, not exclusive."<sup>57</sup> Like Jones and Sayles, Gleaton's goal is to resurrect suppressed histories and to give voice to those who have been left out of official narratives. Whether he achieves that goal is another question. Without Gleaton's print text, these gorgeous images



4 Tony Gleaton, no. 135, "La pollería" (The Chicken Seller), Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, Mexico. Copyright 1987, *Africa's Legacy in Mexico*. All rights reserved.

are more mute and static artifacts than participants in a narrative of their own self-expression.

Sometimes Gleaton's political message is explicit, as in a photograph titled "Pero no hay negros en El Salvador" (El Salvador, figure 1). Two boys turn to the camera with looks of skepticism and anxiety. Read in context, it is clear that their physical appearance—tightly curled hair, dark skin, and broad features—is meant to undermine the title's statement of protest. More often, Gleaton's photos are untitled or captioned to evoke pastoral or familial connotations. The posed, motionless quality of his subjects is compounded by their rural sur-



5 Tony Gleaton, no. 111, "Pescador con red" (Fisherman with Net), Corallero, Oaxaca, Mexico. Copyright 1987, *Africa's Legacy in Mexico*. All rights reserved.

roundings, which suggest a people barely touched by modernity. For example, in "Jardín del paradiso" (Mexico, figure 2), a naked boy peers out from behind a tree, his lower body concealed by foliage. Shot in deep focus, the image reveals an expanse of field, trees, and grazing animals stretching to the horizon. There are many images of parents and children posed to suggest the unbroken continuity of generations (Mexico, figure 3). Others provide more context, showing people working at humble occupations such as chicken vendor, fisherman, or barber (Mexico, figures 4–6). Or they are arrested in moments of leisure: men playing dominos (Colombia), drinking beer (Panama), or reclining together



6 Tony Gleaton, no. 113, "Peluquería" (Barbershop), Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca, Mexico. Copyright 1990, *Africa's Legacy in Mexico*. All rights reserved.

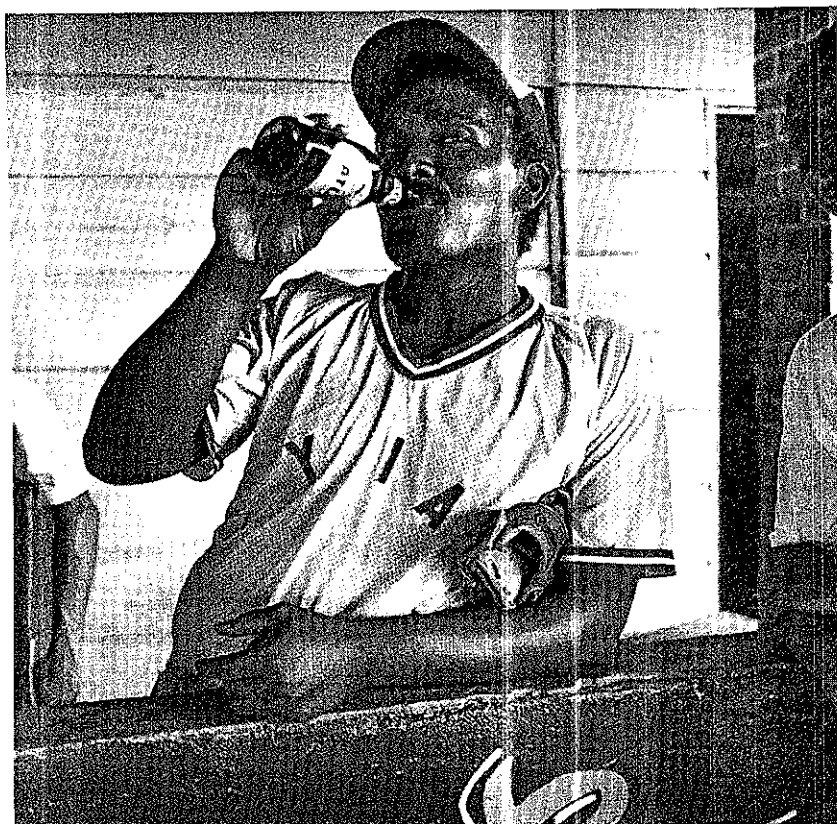
(figures 7–8). Unlike the texts discussed earlier, in which the artist retraces the tracks of previous generations, Gleaton's work suggests that he is the first to cover this ground. His path leads him to discover people untouched by time or modernity. These photographs lack the deep historical consciousness that animates the work of Sayles, Jones, or Sánchez de Anda. Their stasis—which likens them to the objectifying, primitivist impulses of earlier ethnographic photography—threatens to undermine Gleaton's revisionist impulse.

When modernity does intrude into these images, the feeling is jarring and anachronistic. For example, a photograph called "Las muñecas" (Mexico, fig-



7 Tony Gleaton, no. 417, "Sin título" (Untitled), Barlovento, Venezuela. Copyright 1994, *Africa's Legacy in Mexico*. All rights reserved.

ure 9) pictures a group of dark-skinned, curly-haired girls holding two battered white dolls. The dolls' blonde hair and Western clothes bespeak another world, governed by different standards of beauty and femininity. In an untitled photo, three boys stand in the open window of a house (Honduras, figure 10). The boy in the middle has turned his back to the photographer to display the Adidas symbol cut into the back of his short, nappy hair. The logo and worn, Westernized T-shirts seem out of place in the series of more timeless pastoral images. In both photographs, it is clear that these well-worn artifacts and icons of Western consumer culture are deeply meaningful to their owners, who are not frozen in time but instead living in a moment where globalization has reached the most



8 Tony Gleaton, no. 361, "Sin título" (Untitled), Darien, Panama. Copyright 1992, *Africa's Legacy in Mexico*. All rights reserved.

remote corners of the planet. It is Gleaton's youngest subjects who confront seismic changes that have the potential to teach them difficult lessons about prejudice and inequality, but also help them to recognize connections with blacks in other parts of the world. Although this is not necessarily Gleaton's understanding of his own photographs, they have been adapted by others as illustrations of the as yet unrecognized extent of the black diaspora.

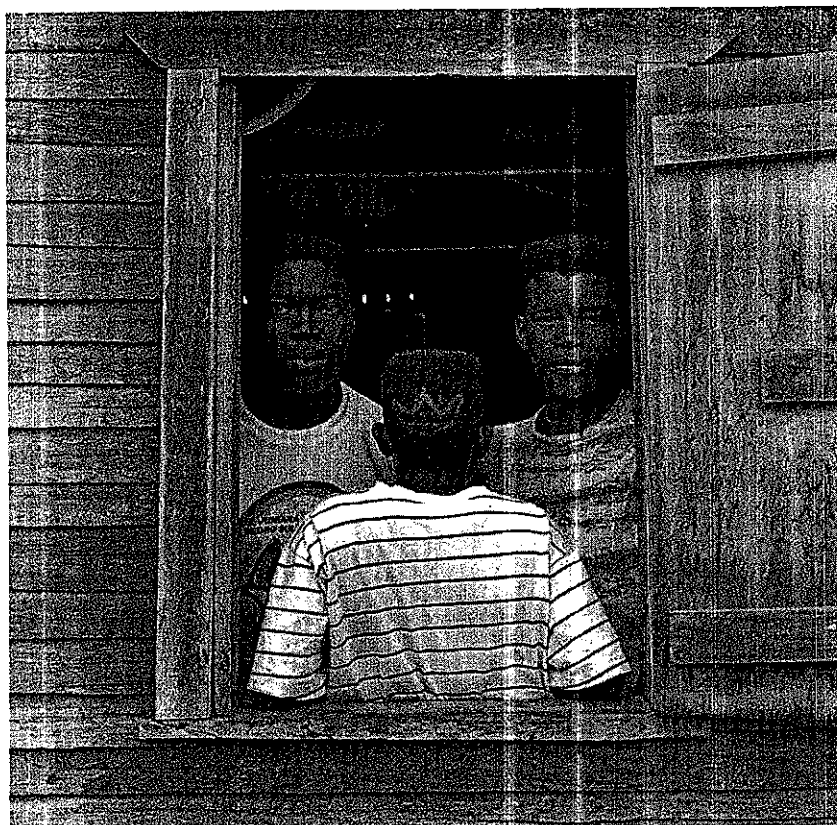
Despite the contradictions in Gleaton's message, his project makes an important and virtually unique statement about the recovery of cultural memory. Like Sayles and Jones, he seeks to unearth buried Afro-Mexican and American connections by excavating American spaces that have long resisted such a



9 Tony Gleaton, no. 125, "Las muñecas" (The Dolls, or Four Young Girls, Two Dolls), El Ciruelo, Oaxaca, Mexico. Copyright 1987, *Africa's Legacy in Mexico*. All rights reserved.

history. But Gleaton's work is doubly important because he moves south of the U.S. border to some of the poorest and most marginalized areas of Mexico. He thus begins to retrace the presence of blackness among Mexico's mestizo populations, which is a legacy of the Spanish slave trade as well as the little-known history of the fugitive slaves who traveled south and stayed there. Whereas the large African population introduced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is believed to have been completely assimilated, Gleaton photographs black communities in remote regions of Mexico, where they remain isolated from the general population. To make blackness visible south of the border is to con-





10 Tony Gleaton, no. 327, "Sin título" (Untitled), Limón, Honduras. Copyright 1992, *Africa's Legacy in Mexico*. All rights reserved.

tribute to a largely overlooked chapter in black diasporic consciousness, which has found African roots more affirmingly acknowledged in other parts of Latin America, but seldom in Mexico, as well as adding a more nuanced understanding of "the South" to the imagined geographies of U.S. racial history.

Guided by the ambiguous voice of José Martí, this essay has traversed a circuitous path from the nineteenth century to the present, revealing along the way an often overlooked connection between the American slave trade and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. This connection is important to U.S. history because it revises the map of fugitive cartography drawn by slave narratives, which has often guided nation-centered understandings of slavery. Recovering the stories of the

slaves who fled south makes slavery more central to the notion of "the borderlands" that has inspired much recent work in American studies. Those stories are equally important to Latin American history, which so often subordinates race to mestizaje, losing sight of its more hybrid ancestry and erasing ongoing problems of racial discrimination and injustice. Locating blackness south of the U.S. border opens up new possibilities of diasporic community based on a shared past and common struggles in the present. It is no accident that these connections have been most compellingly expressed in the arts, which recognize the crucial role of the imagination by filling the gaps left by an absence of historical data and solidifying local, national, and diasporic sensibilities. It is important that we listen to the voices contained in these representations, or we risk losing the varied and multidirectional routes of freedom followed by America's subaltern populations.

#### Notes

- 1 José Martí, "Our America," in *José Martí Reader: Writings on the Americas*, ed. Deborah Shnookal and Mirta Muñiz (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1999), 119.
- 2 Anani Dzidzienyo, "Conclusions," in *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1995), 345-58; Alan Knight, "Race, Revolution, and Indigenismo: Mexico, 1910-1940," in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*, ed. Richard Graham (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 71-113.
- 3 Susan Gillman, "Ramona in 'Our America,'" in *José Martí's "Our America": From National to Hemispheric Cultural Studies*, ed. Jeffrey Belnap and Raúl Fernández (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 96.
- 4 Luz María Martínez Montiel, "Africa's Legacy in Mexico: Mexico's Third Root," <http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/migrations/legacy/almthird.html> (accessed October 5, 2006).
- 5 Despite a lack of official recognition, there is a growing body of scholarship on blacks in Mexico that began with Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán's *La población negra de México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1946). See also Herman Lee Bennett, *Lovers, Family, Friends: The Formation of Afro-Mexico, 1580-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Colin Palmer, *Slaves of the White God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); Martha Menchaca, *Recovering History, Constructing Race: The Indian, Black, and White Roots of Mexican Americans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Ben Vinson, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty: The Free-Colored Militia in Colonial Mexico* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2001).
- 6 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

- 7 Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 76.
- 8 J. W. Loguen, *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman: A Narrative of Real Life* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 345.
- 9 Martin Delany, *Blake, or The Huts of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 30.
- 10 Martin Delany, "Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent," in *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790-1860*, ed. Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Philip Lapsansky (New York: Routledge, 2001), 230.
- 11 Gregg Crane, "The Lexicon of Rights, Power, and Community in *Blake*: Martin R. Delany's Dissent from *Dred Scott*," *American Literature* 68, no. 3 (September 1996): 527-53.
- 12 Delany, "Political Destiny," 234.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 235.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 238-39.
- 15 Cited in Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: Norton, 1998), 38-39.
- 16 On the Black Seminoles, see Kenneth W. Porter, *The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-Seeking People* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996); Rosalie Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom: U.S. Negroes in Mexico* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1975); and Ronnie C. Tyler, "Fugitive Slaves in Mexico," *Journal of Negro History* 57, no. 1 (January 1972): 1-12.
- 17 Benjamin Lundy, *The Life, Travels and Opinions of Benjamin Lundy* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1971), 96. On Lundy, see also Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom*.
- 18 Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom*, 40-41.
- 19 D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 298; Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom*.
- 20 Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom*, 29.
- 21 Cited in Meinig, *The Shaping of America*, 305.
- 22 Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom*, 29.
- 23 Josefina Zoraida Vázquez and Lorenzo Meyer, *The United States and Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 28-29.
- 24 This greater atmosphere of racial tolerance had its roots in the Old World. Some critics have argued that during the Enlightenment, Spain's Islamic heritage gave rise to a culture that saw slavery as a temporary condition and pluralism as the norm. See Patricia Seed, *American Pentimento: The Invention of Indians and the Pursuit of Riches* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); and Jaime Rodríguez, "The Emancipation of America," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (February 2000): 131-52; Rodríguez, "La Antigua Provincia de Guayaquil en la época de la Independencia," in *Revolución, Independencia y la nuevas naciones de América*, ed. Jaime E. Rodríguez (Madrid: Fundación Mapfre-Tavera, 2005), 511-56; and Rodríguez, "Ciudadanos de la Nación Española: Los indígenas y las elecciones constitucionales en el Reino de Quito," in *La mirada esquiva: Reflexiones históricas sobre la interacción del Estado y la ciudadanía en los Andes*, ed. Marta Irrozquí (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2005).
- 25 Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom*, 7.
- 26 Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom*.
- 27 Vázquez and Meyer, *The United States and Mexico*, 18.
- 28 Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom*, 37.
- 29 See Jeff Guin, *Our Land before We Die: The Proud Story of the Seminole Negro* (New York: Putnam, 2002); and Porter, *The Black Seminoles*.
- 30 Porter, *The Black Seminoles*, 6.
- 31 Cited in Porter, *The Black Seminoles*, 9.
- 32 On Mexican help to fugitive slaves, see Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*; Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom*; and Ruthe Winegarten, *Black Texas Women: 150 Years of Trial and Triumph* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
- 33 Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 41.
- 34 John Hope Franklin and Loren Schwenger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 115.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 37 Ronnie Tyler and Laurence R. Murphy, *Slave Narratives of Texas* (Austin: Encino Press, 1974), 68.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 69.
- 39 Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey through Texas* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1969), 454. Hereafter cited in the text.
- 40 Patrick J. Carroll, "Africa in the Americas: Blacks in Mexico," <http://www.humanities-interactive.org>.
- 41 Aguiere Beltrán, *La población negra de Mexico*, 200; Bobby Vaughn, "Blacks in Mexico: A Brief Overview," <http://www.mexconnect.com>.
- 42 Carroll, "Africa in the Americas"; Steve Sailer, "Mexico's Missing Blacks," May 8, 2002, <http://www.upi.com>.
- 43 Dedra S. McDonald, "To Be Black and Female in the Spanish Southwest: Toward a History of African Women on New Spain's Far Northern Frontier," in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000*, ed. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 32-52.
- 44 Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 9.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 47 Gayl Jones, *Mosquito* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 322. Hereafter cited in the text.
- 48 The reviewer James A. Miller wrote that the novel "aspires to the condition of 'truth,' of 'experience in all its formlessness and apparent chaos'" ("A Talker, a Tale-Teller, a Sojourner," *Boston Globe*, January 17, 1999, E3), while Tom Leclair

- commented more critically that it “reads like 2,000 pages of Gertrude Stein’s ‘Melanctha,’ aggressively digressive, frequently vapid, and stupefyingly repetitive” (review of *Mosquito*, January 21, 1999, <http://www.salon.com>).
- 49 John Sayles, introduction to *Men with Guns and Lone Star* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), viii.
- 50 Bobby Vaughan, “Afro-Mexico: Blacks, Indígenas, Politics, and the Greater Diaspora,” in *Neither Enemies nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos*, ed. Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 125–27.
- 51 The anthropologist Bobby Vaughn is conducting important research on contemporary Afro-Mexicans. His preliminary findings reveal that the Afro-Mexicans of Veracruz trace their origins to Cuba, while those in Costa Chica lack a consciousness of their slave ancestry and often claim to come from the descendants of shipwrecks. Vaughan, “Mexico in the Context of the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *Diálogo* 5 (2001): 1–11; and Vaughan, “Afro-Mexico,” 118–36.
- 52 Vinson, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty*.
- 53 Guillermo Sánchez de Anda, *Yanga: El Guerrero Negro* (Mexico: Círculo Cuadrado, 1998), 39. Hereafter cited in the text.
- 54 Tony Gleaton’s photographs from the series *Tengo casi 500 años: Africa’s Legacy in Mexico, Central and South America*, are part of the Southwest Collection Special Collection Archives, Texas Tech University.
- 55 Warren Chrichlow, “Tony Gleaton,” Wedge Gallery review, April 30, 2001, <http://www.wedgegallery.com>.
- 56 Tony Gleaton, “Africa’s Legacy in Mexico: Oaxaca Diary,” <http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/migrations/legacy/almdia.html> (accessed October 5, 2006).
- 57 Tony Gleaton, cited in copy for “Tracing African Roots throughout the Americas,” <http://www.aarl.denverlibrary.org>.

## Queer Harvests

Homosexuality, the U.S. New Left, and  
the Venceremos Brigades to Cuba

Ian Lekus

Early in 1969, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the largest white student organization of the sixties in the United States, stood teetering at the brink of implosion, torn apart by competing factions. Confronted by the potential collapse of SDS, its leaders launched a project that they hoped would rejuvenate the movement. Inspired by Cuba’s material advances and resistance to U.S. policy since the 1959 revolution, SDS began mobilizing hundreds of Americans to travel south to cut sugar cane, contributing their labor to the island’s export harvest. On these Venceremos Brigades, participants would, in the words of organizers Sandra Levinson and Carol Brightman, “gain direct experience with a Third World socialist revolution and a greater understanding of ‘revolution’ as something which entails much more than guns in the hills, something which means hard work every day.”<sup>1</sup> Brigade organizers in the United States recognized that the daily work of harvesting sugar cane and living together in the new socialist Cuba offered *norteamericanos* the potential of sowing a new revolutionary culture to import back home.

Visions of revolutionizing American culture notwithstanding, the Vencere-