

# EMISFÉRICA



## Memín Pinguín, Changing Racial Debates, and Transnational Blackness

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### Abstract:

In 2005, a black Mexican comic book character Memín Pinguín was celebrated with an honorary postage stamp. While generally well received in Mexico, the stamp was derided as offensive by many African Americans. The same year, Mexican President Vicente Fox publicly compared Mexican migrants to American blacks, also creating controversy. Although Fox apologized, such controversies sparked a bilateral discussion of race. This article examines the contemporaneous commentary of politicians, newspapers, and academics, particularly in Mexico, to understand why such controversies were often explained as benign expressions of Mexican culture, as opposed to racialized invective. Afro-Mexicans of the Costa Chica region saw the controversies as largely disconnected from their own racial reality. As Afro-Mexicans increasingly transmigrate to the United States, racial formation processes are likely to shift on both sides of the border as different understandings of race converge. The 2005 controversies exemplify the discursive terrain upon which such shifts may occur.

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and Littlefield, 2007), 223–245.

In July of 2005, Memín Penguin, a black Mexican comic book character who resembles Curious George, or even a little black Sambo, was celebrated with a postage stamp in his honor. The stamp was well received by many sectors of the Mexican public, representing a fond image of childhood. But the stamp's image offended African Americans in the United States and a wide segment of the international community, since it smacked of discrimination. The stamp's release came only months after Mexican President Vicente Fox made disturbing public remarks that Mexican immigrants to the United States take jobs "that not even blacks want to do."<sup>1</sup> The public attention that both episodes garnered on each side of the border reveals interesting new dimensions of the ongoing, shifting saga of race relations. For the first time, within the context of high-level forums, Mexican images of blackness were pitted against those of African Americans. Notably, the ways that Mexicans of African descent might have responded to these episodes did not appear to be part of the public relations considerations. Our extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Afro-Mexican communities over the past decade affords us an additional vantage from which to analyze the unfolding of these racially charged events.<sup>2</sup>



The ideas and actions behind the discourse and debate signal important differences and dynamics. On the one hand, President Fox said what was perhaps on the minds of many Mexicans, immigrants and non-immigrants alike. From his point of view, blackness served as a form of class marker. By invoking the notion that all Mexican immigrants “occupied” a space that, within the structure of the United States’s hierarchical system of social relations was traditionally held by blacks, Fox situated Mexican immigrants at the lowest rung of the social ladder. However, in perceiving race as being analogous to class, Fox made an error—essentially miscalculating the trajectory of race relations in the United States. One reason why African Americans demanded an apology and were offended by his remarks was because the Civil Rights Movement and subsequent gains for equality have marked significant strides in helping blacks move beyond the freeze-frame, lower-class stereotypes held by invocations of blackness. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton traveled to Mexico to help bring the leader up to speed on African American progress and diversity. Unknowingly, Fox had turned back the clock on African American history with his remarks, even though he was trying to make a comment about the plight of Hispanics.

Fox stalled before issuing an apology. Part of the delay may have come from political posturing. The Mexican leader did not want to appear malleable to U.S. whims. On the other hand, the delay may have been due to the sincere belief that his remarks were innocent, with little wide-reaching effect. The stalling did not play out well in the Mexican press, and numerous headlines and political cartoons were released on the issue.<sup>3</sup> The seemingly small affair began mushrooming into something greater. For our purposes in this article it is important to note that as events continued to unfold, the debates about Fox's comments sparked an internal, national conversation about race in Mexico that called into question the nation's race credentials. The conventional wisdom of *mestizaje* asserts that because racial mixture is an inherent feature of national life, those who live within "racial democracies" such as Mexico are usually vigilant against racism.<sup>4</sup> Fox seemingly broke the principles of this idea with his comments. Opportunists, critical of Fox's leadership, took the incident as a chance to expose his shortcomings of leadership, even to the point of labeling him a racist both against blacks and the very Mexican immigrants he was trying to defend. Salvos like these were launched from politicians in the PRI and the PRD, the two major opposition parties in Mexico.<sup>5</sup> But there were others, less fettered by the political jockeying, who probed for deeper meaning from the event. In fact, on the airwaves and in the newspapers, a public space was opened to critically examine Mexico's own blackness. A few articles appeared on Afro-Mexicans living in the Costa Chica (an area renowned for its black Mexican presence), as well as essays reflecting on why Mexico has been so reluctant to acknowledge its own African heritage.<sup>6</sup> Recent struggles by politicians to obtain communal rights for Afro-Mexicans (based on claims to ethnic status) were also featured in the press, particularly the activities of Ángel Heladio Aguirre Rivero, the ex-governor of the state of Guerrero (1996–1999).<sup>7</sup>

In many ways, numerous aspects of the rich discussions were short lived. With the issuance of the commemorative Memín Penuin stamp, negative U.S. responses toward the comic book image inspired some Mexicans to revert to defensive attitudes and posturing with respect to their outlook on race. According to several commentators, academics, and observers, particularly within Mexico City, the caricature should not have been understood as a racialized figure, but a cultural emblem.<sup>8</sup> Created in the 1940s by Yolanda Vargas, the comic book proved instrumental in the literacy campaigns of mid-century. Thematically, it was a risk taker, addressing subjects such as interracial family dynamics and class disparity, but always from a humorous perspective (at least in the eyes of some Mexicans). It quickly became a success, running new storylines into the early 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Although repeat issues with freshly designed cover art can still be found on the streets of Mexico today, large numbers of Mexicans fondly remember Memín as an image of their childhood. On this score, shortly after the stamp was released, many pleaded for the United States to consider the broader context of the image and its production, as well as its storylines, rather than simply rushing to interpret and chastise Memín's physical features.<sup>10</sup> Several advisors and ministers close to President Fox conceived that it might be wise to invite Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton down to Mexico for another visit, this time so that *they* might be able to bring these civil rights leaders up to speed

on the nuances of racial sensitivities. Memín had come to demonstrate what many Mexicans had always feared about the influence of ideas from the North—a desire to over-analyze situations for racially charged themes.

A number of critical themes can be detected in the subtext of the Memín episode and the Vicente Fox comments. First, Mexican historian Miguel León-Portilla wondered, why was it that the media and others were intentionally undermining the relationship between African Americans and Mexicans? The question is an excellent one, with significant trans-border implications. As we have seen in our research on North Carolina,<sup>11</sup> the relationships between African Americans and Mexicans can be sometimes marked by suspicion and tension, although in Winston-Salem (North Carolina) this has been less of a factor. The high profile given to the “racist” tendencies of Fox, and the history of discriminatory caricature that the Memín image invoked, has arguably not smoothed over these relations. Secondly, both episodes call attention to the new landscape of cultural politics emerging in the United States. As the border becomes more permeable and as Mexicans continue to increase their demographic presence, there may be more incidents like the Memín controversy. Mexicans coming to the U.S. may bring with them different attitudes towards race and blackness that may not meld with ours. There is a different racial history. Meanwhile, the United States will insist upon conformity to a multi-cultural sensitivity that may seem strange to Mexicans. This insistence upon conformity tends (unintentionally or not) to permeate politics within Mexico. Interestingly, the change in political regimes in Mexico, from the PRI (which held presidential power continuously from the 1920s until 2000) to the PAN, provided a historical break in Mexican political culture, and quite possibly an opportunity to facilitate wide changes in racial thinking. And as witnessed in 2005, Mexican politicians played the race card against Fox.

Will this translate into a new form of multi-cultural politics, one that evaluates a Mexican politician’s success on his/her ability to maneuver successfully within the international scene of racial diplomacy?

One of the key, under-publicized issues regarding the Memín/Fox episodes is how they unfolded in the Costa Chica, and to what extent they have influenced Afro-Mexican perceptions of blackness. Arguably, the results of the affair were most impactful symbolically—gesturing towards ideas of blackness rather than affecting the reality of lived conditions. While Memín’s image and Fox’s words certainly had real transnational effects in political circles (and in shaping attitudes among African Americans towards Mexicans), at the same time their impact may have rung hollow in the everyday experiences of Afro-Mexican immigrants and their families in Mexico.

Indeed, in the Costa Chica during the summer of 2005, Fox’s comments and the Memín controversy received little attention and were not being widely discussed. Carlos, a self-described *moreno*, didn’t feel personally offended by the image, but could see how blacks in the United States might not like it since, as he saw it, the character is supposed

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to be a depiction of an African American (*un negro de allá*), and not a Mexican! While many Afro-Mexicans expressed an understanding of their own racialized marginalization, they do not read images of Memín as speaking to that marginalization. Being caricatured in cartoon or other mass media images is not a form of racism with which Afro-Mexicans have much experience.

Afro-Mexican activists in the region, however, responded much more strongly and condemned the Memín stamp project. Representatives from *Mexico Negro* called for the withdrawal of the stamp and published an open letter to the President. These black leaders see the Memín controversy as a kind of blind spot in Mexico and one leader with whom we spoke informally mentioned that it probably never occurred to the government to ask any Afro-Mexican leaders what they thought, before they introduced the stamp.<sup>12</sup> These dissenting voices among Afro-Mexican leaders contrasted markedly with examples of an embrace of Memín as a symbol of nationalist pride. As we drove through Mexico City, we'd glimpse at a large billboard prominently situated along a major freeway. The sign featured the image of Memín, along with the words "Are you talking about me?" and "100% Mexicano." In addition, the noted Mexican historian Enrique Krauze, in a *Washington Post* column, appears to count himself among those Mexicans who see Memín not as racist, but as "a highly pleasing image rooted in Mexican popular culture."<sup>13</sup>

While the micro-events of race are playing themselves out transnationally in places like North Carolina, California, New York, Mexico City, the Costa Chica, and elsewhere in the U.S. and Mexico, at the same time there are macro-level changes and shifts in racial discourse that are equally transnational, and that are in a constant state of re-invention. While it is still too early to tell where these processes are headed, we can certainly surmise that the changes they bring about will impact racial formation processes on both sides of the border. In the United States, blackness as a category seems poised to become stretched—inclusively bearing within it the histories and experiences of blacks throughout the greater diaspora. To some degree, this process seems inevitable, given the current flow of migrant streams. But if diasporic blackness is to configure into the conceptualizations of blackness in the United States, a certain amount of racial consciousness is needed from the black immigrants themselves, which must then be recognized by African Americans. Specifically in the case of black Mexicans, this is precisely where the power of macro-level racial discourses may prove to be a contributing factor. The Memín/Fox episodes, despite being as sinuous, complex, and problematic as they were, at the very least sensitized broad sectors of the population on both sides of the border to Mexican blackness and Mexican debates on blackness. In this fashion, the episodes may have set the stage for a possible convergence of racial histories.

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Mexico City sparked his interest in Mexico, which would become the focus of his graduate work. He received a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Stanford University focusing his doctoral work on the study of the contemporary Afro-Mexican experience. He is an acknowledged expert in the history and culture of Mexicans of African descent and has lived more than four years in Mexico engaged in fieldwork over the course of the last 15 years. His publications include the co-authored book, *Afroméxico: El pulso de la población negra en México*, and scholarly articles such as "Afro-Mexico: Blacks, Indígenas, Politics, and the Greater Diaspora."

Ben Vinson III is Professor of Latin American History at Johns Hopkins University and the Director of the Center for Africana Studies. He is the author of *Bearing Arms for His Majesty* (Stanford, 2001); *Flight: The Story of Virgil Richardson, A Tuskegee Airman in Mexico* (Palgrave, 2004); and co-author of *Afroméxico* (with Bobby Vaughn, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004); *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2nd edition* (with Herbert S. Klein, Oxford, 2007); and *Black Mexico* (with Matthew Restall, University of New Mexico, forthcoming). His primary area of research is on the Afromexican historical experience.

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## Notes

1 See: "Mexican Leader Criticized for Comment on Blacks," [CNN.com, 15 May, 2005](http://www.cnn.com/2005/05/15/mexico.fox), and Rosa Elvira Vargas Enviada, "Realizan mexicanos trabajos que ni los negros quieren: Fox," *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 14 May, 2005.

2 Vaughn's anthropological fieldwork among Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica examines the role of blackness in localized understandings of Mexican-ness. See, for example, Vaughn, "Mexico: Blacks, Indígenas, Politics, and the Greater Diaspora," in *Neither Enemies Nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos*. A. Dzidzienyo and S. Oboler (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), 117–136, and Vaughn, "The African diaspora through *Ojos Mexicanos*: Blackness and *Mexicanidad* in Southern Mexico," *Review of Black Political Economy* 33 (1), 2005, 49–57.

3 For instance, see a cartoon of President Fox dressed as a colonial viceroy, standing in front of portraits of the colonial Mexican caste system. This ran in [La Jornada, 17 May, 2005](http://www.lajornada.com.mx/2005/05/17). *La Jornada* and other Mexican dailies ran several cartoons during that week.

4 This premise is explored and tested by several contributors in Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler (eds.), *Neither Enemies nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), 4–155.

5 Roberto Garduño, "Fox, inculto, racista y falta de sensibilidad: PRI y PRD," *La Jornada*, 15 May, 2005.

6 Laura Castellanos, “Ignora México datos de su población negra,” *La Reforma*, 8 June, 2005.

7 For example, see: Laura Castellanos, “Buscan volver etnia a los afromexicanos,” *La Reforma* (Mexico City), 8 June, 2005. Note that efforts for the formal recognition and enfranchisement of Afro-Mexicans mirror the strategies waged by Mexico’s indigenous communities to secure privileges, and are representative of a broader set of political tactics currently employed by Afro-Latin Americans throughout the hemisphere for multi-cultural citizenship, a process that has been a response to the neo-liberal politics of the region since the 1980s. For more on this topic, see: Juliet Hooker, “Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion: Race, Ethnicity and Multicultural Citizenship in Latin America,” *Journal of Latin American Studies (JLAS)* 37 (2), 2005, 285–310.

8 David Brooks Corresponsal, “Travesura de Memín Pinguín pone en jaque la relación bilateral entre México y EU,” *La Jornada*, 1 July, 2005; Pablo Espinosa, “Travesura diplomática de Memín Pinguín,” *La Jornada*, 1 July 2005; Fabiola Palapa, Ericka Montaña, and Monica Mateos, “Memín Pinguín ‘no es el icono popular del racismo en México,’” *La Jornada*, 1 July, 2005.

9 Interview with Sixto Valencia, May 1996. Note that there was a hiatus in storylines between the mid ‘50s and 1961.

10 The story lines, however, do not necessarily depict Memín in the most flattering light, as his Spanish is difficult to understand, he remains locked in poverty, and he becomes the butt of all jokes. An interesting examination of the comic book is Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, “Memín Pinguín: Uno de los Cómicos Mexicanos Más Populares Como Instrumento para Codificar al Negro,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* XXII, no. 1 (2003): 52–59.

11 2007 “Unfinished Migrations: From the Mexican South to the American South – Impressions on Afro-Mexican Migration to North Carolina” In *Beyond Slavery: The Multilayered Legacy of Africans in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Davis, Darién J., ed. pp. 223–245. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield).

12 The open letter from México Negro can be found [online](#).

13 Enrique Krauze, “The Pride in Memin Penguin,” *The Washington Post*, 12 July, 2005.