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**Probationary Faculty Development Grant
Spring 2021 Final Report**

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Project Title:

Afro-Mexican Women in the Northern Frontier: Inquisitorial Confessions and Accusations from 17th Century Mexico.

Project Background and Objectives:

In 2015, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) in Mexico included for the very first time in its Census an option for individuals to self-identify as Black, Afro-descendant or Afro-Mexican. The results of this survey indicated that at least 1.38 million people of African descent lived in 21 of the 32 Mexican states. Despite their official existence in statistical data, Afro-Mexican remains a highly concealed and rarely talked about identity in the country. This racial invisibility is rooted in Mexico's Colonial past, a period when African slaves and their descendants were relegated to the bottom of the complex racial hierarchy known as *Sistema de Castas*.

The objective of this project is to make a significant contribution to the emerging academic area of Afro-Mexican studies. When exploring the first generations of Black Mexicans dating from the Colonial period (1521-1810), the majority of published works have relied on primary texts from Mexico City, the capital of New Spain, and other metropolitan areas including Puebla and the busy port of Veracruz. In contrast, the purpose of this study is to explore sources and informants from the periphery, both in terms of location and gender identity. This research endeavor focuses on Afro-Mexican women



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living near the northern frontier of New Spain during early 17th century. By rescuing the voices of *negras, mulatas, criollas*, and *ladinas*, this analysis seeks to oppose their historical invisibility and to reveal still unknown complexities of Colonial Mexican society.

Project Description:

This project examined the inquisitorial confessions and accusations collected by Alonso de Benavides, Commissary of the Holy Office, during his visit to Cuencamé (currently part of the state of Durango) in 1625 and 1626. The voices and stories of Afro-Mexican women living in the northern village of Cuencamé during the early 17th century were the focus of this exploration. The first-hand accounts found in these thirty-five files (scanned and made available to the public in 2020), which contain testimonies from a wide variety of individuals residing in this village: men, women, old, young, rich, poor, etc., provide us with a rare glimpse into the power dynamics of this remote Colonial settlement. Statements given by and about Black women were carefully analyzed to identify the ways in which they took advantage of their subaltern, almost invisible, position in society to have an active role in the complex community of Cuencamé. In addition to secondary sources dealing with the subject matter, both in the Mexican and larger Latin American contexts, the exploration of these documents was informed by a Post-Colonial theoretical lens and framed by the concepts of subalternity, intersectionality, and transculturation.

Project Results:

The study of the inquisitorial confessions and accusations collected by Alonso de Benavides, Commissary of the Holy Office, during his visit to Cuencamé in 1625 and 1626 provided a rare glimpse



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into the lives of Afro-Mexican women. It became evident that in contrast to metropolitan and more populated Colonial towns such as Mexico City and Puebla, the remoteness of settlements near the northern frontier fostered a more permissive environment in terms of gender and race boundaries. This settlement, far away from the capital, enjoyed less supervision from governmental and church authorities. Thus, despite their intersectional marginalization, *negras*, *mulatas*, *criollas*, and *ladinas* manipulated their circumstances to gain agency in the society of Cuencamé. In these files, they acquire a voice, lose their anonymity, and reveal the disparities among Black Mexican women based on their place of birth, language skills, and servitude status. For instance, we observe that *criollas* (Black women born in Mexican territory) were more likely to accuse fellow Afro-Mexican women, particularly newly arrived slaves, of religious transgressions. Among their stories, we find fascinating tales of love-triangles, sorcery, crossdressing, and even bullfighting.

The manuscript containing the results of this project has been submitted for consideration for the upcoming edited volume *AfroLatinas/ LatiNegras: Culture, Identity, and Struggle from an Intersectional Perspective* to be published by Allegheny College.

Personal Note:

In addition to being extremely fulfilling professionally, this project has been particularly exciting for me at a personal level because several generations of my paternal ancestors came from Cuencamé, a rural town I used to visit frequently as a child. In other words, by bringing to light these unknown stories of Afro-Mexican women in the 17th century, I discovered part of my own family heritage.