

Chicanx visits Mexico: A Personal History and Self Reflection

By Devon Antonio

I have always carried a close bond with my Grandpa Manuel and my Grandma Frances. They were both born and raised in California's San Joaquin Valley. Their parents, however, were from various states in Mexico including Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacan, and Sonora. Many of my great grandparents arrived to the SJV by train after fleeing Mexico during the Revolution either solo or accompanied with other relatives. Upon arriving in California, they settled in rural areas including Clovis and Fresno and then began their life's work as migrant farmworkers. Despite working a job that requires an incredible amount of physical demand, many of my great grandparents were blessed with longevity and lived till they were in their 90s and some even till their 100s. I had the incredible honor of meeting many of them. My memories with my great-grandparents include watching them only speak Spanish, never English. Nonetheless, whenever my Grandpa and Grandma took me with them to visit my great-grandparents, they were always very kind and loving. I am grateful to have met my great-grandparents who despite spending most of their lives in the United States, still carried a Mexican identity with them.

Upon arriving in the Central Valley, my great-grandparents began working long hours and days in the fields and agricultural packing houses. Their families grew large within a short span of time and many of my great-grandparents never returned to their hometowns in Mexico to visit. Over the years, I've always heard different reasons for why they never returned. In some instances, their decisions to not return were tied to a changing of their faith from Catholic to Christian, the trauma they endured escaping the Mexican Revolution, and logistical challenges of traveling to their hometowns in Central Mexico with such a large family. Because my great-

grandparents didn't travel to Mexico, neither did my grandparents, nor my parents, and inherently, neither did I. This all changed when I was granted the chance of a lifetime to study and research in Mexico on the topic of Afro-descendants during my fall semester at the University of California Merced. When I received the opportunity to go to Mexico as part of a research project in HIST/CRES 141, I felt called to finally bridge a part of me I never fully got to know: *my Mexican roots*.

Ever since my beloved ancestors immigrated to the United States (over a century ago), the very meaning of Mexican-American identity has undergone many significant changes. Mexican-American identity has been associated with many different labels, including Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, Brown, and of course, Mexican. I've heard many family elders and relatives reference themselves by all these categories. However, all these identifications are in relation to a country that I had previously never been to. But this all changed after I received an opportunity to travel to Mexico as part of Professor Sabrina Smith's seminar course on the African Diaspora in Latin America. This profound experience not only advanced my education and research experience but contributed to my own personal growth as a 4th generation Mexican-American.

The topic of research for our class was on Afro-descendants in Mexico including their history and legacy. The importance of researching African descendants and their communities in Mexico is significant because, in many ways and for centuries, their history and presence in the country has been minimized or improperly accounted for. For example, barely in the year 2020 was the first year that citizens in Mexico were able to identify as Afro-descendent on the

country's census. I was so excited to learn and research all I could during my time in Mexico.

When the morning finally came to depart from Fresno to Mexico, I was so excited that I could not sleep the night before. Visiting Mexico has been my ultimate dream in life, and to be able to travel there to learn and research the country all seemed like my dream come true. When the time finally came to board from my layover in Arizona to Mexico City, I was anxious yet so excited. The flight from Phoenix, Arizona to Mexico City was anticipated to be a little over 3 hours. I slept for the first 2 hours of the flight but woke up just as we approached our destination. From my window seat, I was gifted a bird's eye view of the sprawling neighborhoods and surrounding mountains of Mexico City. As we began emerging more into Mexico's capital, I thought to myself, "did any of my great-grandparents ever get to visit Mexico City before arriving in California?" In learning about the important role Mexico City has always played as part of Mexico's history, I'm certain my great-grandparents knew of their former country's metropolis. But had they ever journeyed there? I may not ever truly know. However, I'm glad I thought of them because so much of them lives inherently in me, and they are from Mexico. My first visit to Mexico in 2023 taught me so much both academically and personally. I'm better because of it in ways that I am still realizing, and I am so eager and inspired to return.



Photo: (Manuel Nieves Camarena, Frances Ponce Camarena, Devon Antonio, Gloria Ferrer Garcia)