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The Muestra de Cine Afrodescendencias in Costa Chica: Intersections of Afrodescendance and Decoloniality in Curatorial Practice

Claudia Lora, Bianca Pires, Ana Isabel León,
Ana Rosa Marques, and Estrella Sendra

Abstract: *The article analyses the curatorial work and collective exhibition of the Muestra de Cine Afrodescendencias (Film Showcase Afrodescendencias), a film programme that is part of the fourth Festival Artístico Audiovisual Afrodescendencias (Afrodescendant Audiovisual Arts Festival) in Afro-Mexican communities held in Costa Chica. The festival emerged in 2021 as an itinerant event led by researchers, collectives, artists and communities around the Amefrican (Afro-Mexican) arts. The film programme, after the first two online editions due to COVID-19 restrictions, gained a new dimension with film screenings in the villages. This article offers an analysis of this new dimension in light of the fourth Film Showcase within the Afrodescendant Audiovisual Arts Festival, of Guerrero in June 2024. In its fourth edition, the film programme was composed of films made in Mexico, Brazil and Senegal. These were exhibited based on thematic axes and followed by discussions with filmmakers and/or actors. The challenges for the organisation, curatorship and realisation of the exhibition, as well as audience reception, guide the reflections of this article.*

The Afrodescendant Audiovisual Arts Festival was conceived in 2021 as part of the postdoctoral research project of anthropologist Claudia Lora Krstulovic at the Centre for Research and Higher Education in Social Anthropology (CIESAS) in Mexico City. This fellowship fostered a collaboration with the Audiovisual Laboratory, to which the Festival was proposed with the aim of facilitating dialogues between artists, activists and researchers interested in the different Afrodescendant arts in Mexico. To achieve this, we opted for an itinerant format, dedicating each annual event to different Amefrican communities or regions. The festival further sought to contribute to the visibility of Amefrican artists and to produce supportive networks for specialists interested in being involved in the various artistic projects developed in these territories.

The festival name contained the word “audiovisual” from the beginning, with the aim of highlighting its place within the artistic expressions showcased. Although it seeks to exhibit the most representative arts of each region or community hosting the festival, the audiovisual component was designed not only to present films or videos made mainly by Afrodescendant artists, but also, since its first edition, it has served as a methodological tool for dialogue on issues and themes addressed in the curated work.

A great achievement of the 2024 edition was that, for the first time in the history of the festival, African films were presented in dialogue with the realities of the Afro-Mexican communities of the Costa Chica, Guerrero and Oaxaca. Through film, aspects from a territory that the population understands as distant in time and space, and which they claim as the place of origin of their culture, were shown. At the same time, the presence of works from Brazil, the Latin American country with the largest black population outside Africa, gave continuity to the festival's links with Afro-Latin American cinemas. The curatorial gesture of the Muestra de Cine Afrodescendencias has sought to create bridges between the different cinemas of Afro origin—attentive to the fact that the term encompasses different definitions in Latin America and Africa—promoting dynamic and participatory spaces to evoke aesthetic, social, and cultural aspects from cinema (Dovey 20). It is also from a perspective where we perceive that the important thing is to give visibility to Amefrican and international production that dialogue with the communities visited at each new edition of the festival.

The preproduction of each showcase has entailed careful research work, with a significant emphasis on understanding the socio-cultural context, in order to determine the themes. This consists of fieldwork, bibliographic and artistic research, conversations with experts on the themes, viewing films and the creation of an informative text to then be shared on social networks with the festival's publics.¹

Curating Afrodescendant audiovisual films for spectators with limited access to cinema in general has also played an important educational role in the festival. This educational dimension has been increasingly present, especially since its in-person post-pandemic editions, where workshops in areas such as photography and documentary filmmaking with mobile phones had a significant presence in the programme.

Due to the global restrictions of COVID-19, the first two editions took place virtually. The first was in 2021 and was dedicated to the Costa Chica, a region located between the coasts of Acapulco, Guerrero and Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca (Lora and Martinez). The second edition, in 2022, was dedicated to the Mascoga communities of the north of the country.² Similarly, the curatorship focused on the theme of the Mascoga/Black Seminole communities (Lora and Sánchez). The film selection and discussions would not have been possible without the collaboration of anthropologists Karla Rivera and Rocío Gil.

The third edition of the Festival Afrodescendencias was the first one to be hosted in a face-to-face modality, following the COVID-19 restrictions and health measures of social distancing. It was also the first edition where a curatorial team was formed to select films and organise a more formal film showcase. The team included sociologist Bianca Pires and anthropologist Ana Isabel León, who supported Claudia Lora.³ The chosen venue for it was the state of Veracruz, specifically, the municipal capital of Yanga, internationally known for being a reference point for the history of the liberation of the Afrodescendant population from the yoke of colonial slavery. There were also activities in the surrounding communities of Mata Clara, Cuitláhuac and El Mirador, Yanga (Lora et al.).

The curatorship of the film festival was carried out after fieldwork in the three communities and was divided into two stages: a first stay in February 2023 and a second stay in May 2023. The

preproduction fieldwork deepened the knowledge about the identity processes of the Afro-Mexican communities and what they considered necessary to reinforce through film and the workshops given by the festival. The collaboration of anthropologist Luis Alberto Castillo, a researcher in the region, was fundamental, since at that time he was working on his master's thesis on the subject of Afrodescendence in the Yanga area. Because he was involved with community leaders and Afro-Mexican networks in the area, his participation in the organisation of the Festival opened doors for us by bringing us closer to the people of the communities. At the same time, we organised the selected films into general themes, a decision that broadened the dialogue between the films' specific themes. In order to expand these conversations further and share and compare experiences between different Latin American countries, we decided to have a guest country: Colombia. This was chosen because of the historical proximity between Yanga and Palenque San Basilio, places that dispute the first place in the liberation of their peoples; also, because we observed that part of the repertoire danced by the Comparsa Afrodescenditente El Mirador was of Afro-Colombian origin.

For the fourth Festival Artístico Audiovisual Afrodescendencias, we returned to the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca, this time in person. We already had the thematic and programming routes that had worked for us and that the public had liked. We needed to prioritise films from and about the territory, organising the exhibition through thematic axes concerning the people and communities in this region. We decided to curate short films for adults, women, children and young people. Like with the previous edition, in the fourth Festival in 2024 we enriched the showcase with another Latin American perspective. This time the guest country was Brazil. This was greatly shaped by the Brazilian connections by some of the curators involved in the project, specifically with the Recôncavo Bahia. We collaborated with Professor Ana Rosa Marques (Brazil), which allowed us to access and curate some of the audiovisual works by film students at the Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia (UFRB). Similarly, thanks to the support from the British Consulate's Circular Culture programme, which granted us the largest funding awarded for the Festival so far, we strengthened our alliance with the Spanish UK-based researcher Estrella Sendra, a specialist in African film festivals, who shared with us views and titles by Senegalese filmmakers. The final curated programme of films from Mexico, Brazil and Senegal was the result of the joint efforts by these five women.



Figure 1: Inauguration of the IV Film Showcase Afrodescendencias featuring the director and curators in the civic square of Cuajinulapa on 6 June 2024. Photograph by Rodrigo Gerardo Martínez Vargas.

The Region of the Costa Chica: Node of Artistic Expressions and Afro-Mexican Visualities

Costa Chica refers to the coastal region of southeastern Mexico, comprising 400 kilometres, encompassing the state of Oaxaca, past the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, from Huatulco, and the state of Guerrero, to Acapulco. Although two percent of the Mexican population considers themselves as Afrodescendant, the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca have the highest concentration of Afro-Mexican population at a national level, followed by Veracruz and Mexico City (“Población”). Similarly, the production of Afro-Mexican-themed films is largely concentrated in this territory. If we consider that film production in the history of the country has been mainly centralised in Mexico City, the audiovisual activity that exists in the coastal areas of Guerrero and Oaxaca is striking.

The presence of Indigenous peoples in the southeast of the country has led to the development of historical and social processes (for example, projects such as Indigenism), which have facilitated the arrival of filmmakers and film equipment in the region. A paradigmatic example is the case of the Audiovisual Ethnographic Archive, created in 1977 by the National Indigenist Institute, as an area of audiovisual production dedicated to recording different features and cultural and economic aspects, as well as policies and forms of social organisation of the Indigenous population of Mexico, in all its diversity (Zirión 17). This initiative launched the important project of Audiovisual Media Transfer to Indigenous Organizations and Communities, which took place between 1989 and 1994. It consisted in the promotion of audiovisual practices among Indigenous settlers so that they could capture reality through their own eyes (Cuevas 404).

In the specific case of the Costa Chica, the historical contact that the Indigenous peoples or native peoples have had with the Black Afro-Mexican peoples means that the notion of Afro-Mexicanity, Afrodescendence or Blackness is necessarily intertwined with the native cultures of the area (Ñuu Savi or Mixtecs, Chatinos, Amuzgos, Tlapanecas, etc.). What is referred to in academia as “Afro-Indigenous”, in the towns of the Costa Chica, is conceived more as an intersection where at some point they amalgamate completely (Gabayet 235), rather than as a proximity between cultures. However, factors such as the anthropological studies inaugurated by Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán in the mid-1940s, the activism of the Afro-Mexican movement for the struggle for rights that began in the 1990s, and the new governmental and independent support for filmmaking that emerged from the decade of Afrodescendants (UNESCO) and the constitutional recognition of Afro-Mexicanity have contributed to the construction of narratives that highlight the Afrodescendant identities of the area, based on the singularity of their Black roots.

Within the academy, there have been copious audiovisual works that in the curatorial process we have named “from outside”, referring to films made by non-Afrodescendants or people who are not part of the community from which the stories presented to us are told.⁴ In contrast, we have chosen to select works directed “from the inside”, which are increasingly common among young Afro-Mexicans, who do the directing work or are involved in some other part of the filming process, thus reflecting the insider’s view.⁵ The growing training of young people in audiovisual work is due in part to federal initiatives by IMCINE, such as the ECAMC; or to civil organisations such as Ambulante A.C., with its travelling school programme “Ambulante más allá”; or the DocsMX festival, through Reto Docs carried out in different states. However, it is important to highlight that in most cases, during the different filmmaking processes, non-Afro-Mexican people

are involved in different preproduction, production and postproduction fields. This helps foster internal intercultural dialogues, even if the director is a local Afro-Mexican person, but also reveals the more privileged condition of white people, because of their access to film training. But on the other hand, a greater number of community and collaborative educational actions, initiatives linked to NGOs, artistic collectives or universities should be celebrated.

Costa Chica cinema made by Afro-Mexicans thus responds to various layers of meaning. We suggest that some layers of significance of Afro-Mexican identities in the area are: Blackness permeated by the point of view of the Afro-Mexican activist movement; Blackness seen from the everyday life of people in the communities; and coastal membership. This sense of belonging permeates the peoples of the area beyond ethnic-racial singularities. It is then common to find in the films produced images and sounds that refer to the aesthetic experiences of living near the sea, what the coast sounds like, what they eat on the coast, how they move and what personalities are references in the Afro-Costa Rican communities. The thematic diversity ranges from films that present internal problems, such as migration; others that praise artists from the region; those that speak of their cultural expressions, specifically dance and music; as well as those that highlight the importance of activities carried out “by the sea”, such as fishing and surfing.

The technical particularities of the films are equally diverse. In Mexico, formal film schools are almost entirely centralised in Mexico City.⁶ For the Afro-Mexican population of the Costa Chica it is still difficult to access formal film education, which results in a scarce production of films by formally trained filmmakers. This educational gap has been addressed through workshops and free courses, either independently run, or at the state or federal level. During the process of searching for and selecting films, we noticed that most of the work is of good quality, which demonstrates professionalisation through training courses.

Curating an Afrodescendant Film Festival in Mexico: Paths and Challenges

Image is necessary to recover identity, it is necessary to become visible, because one's face is the reflection of the other, one's body is the reflection of the other and in each one is the reflection of all bodies. Invisibility is at the root of the loss of identity. (Beatriz Nascimento in Ôrí, Raquel Gerber, 1989)

In the book *Desaguar em cinema: documentário, memória e ação com o Cachoeira* (Doc *Flowing in Cinema: Documentary, Memory and Action through CachoeiraDoc*), which examines the trajectory of the CachoeiraDoc Festival in the Recôncavo da Bahia, Brazil, Amaranta Cesar suggests that film curating and programming are acts of intervention in history. She argues that the choice of works that have not had an adequate circulation, made from other aesthetic and/or ethical perspectives, that tell the stories of subjects who, due to colonial impositions and the patriarchal system, have occupied the place of the other, promotes an intervention in the present and potentially the writing of other futures (139–40). This echoes bell hooks's proposal of an “emancipatory gaze”, which refers to the practice of spectatorship as a place of resistance. hooks further notes that decolonisation demands a critical intervention in the world of images, in order to effect transformation.

Inspired by these reflections, and with the challenge of founding and producing an Afrodescendant audiovisual festival in Mexico, our curatorial approach centred on audiovisual productions that, from their scripts to their aesthetics choices and discourses on Afrodescendants, and the memories narrated by their characters, reflect different ways of making films. We were aware that the Afrodescendencias Festival means another effort to promote exhibition screens for African and Afro-diasporic cinema, circulating films that, due to the lack of a formal distribution system and the dynamics of the circuit of prestigious competitions, do not reach their audience potential (Dovey 3).

The first step in the curatorial process involves research on audiovisual productions by each of the communities where the Festival has been hosted throughout its itinerant trajectory. Tracking down filmmakers, community workshops and experiences carried out in the different communities that define themselves as Afrodescendant, *Afro-mestizo* or Afro-Indigenous (they can be Afro-Mixtecs, Afro-Amuzgos, etc., depending on the original cultures with which the Afrodescendant people have contact) has always been the first step for the collection of audiovisual works that can guide us to think about the programming.

IV FESTIVAL ARTISTICO AUDIOVISUAL

AFRODESCENDENCIAS

|||/ 6 al 9 de junio /||| 2024

TALLERES PRESENTACIONES EXPOSICIONES CINE



MUESTRA DE CINE AFRODESCENDIENTE

JUEVES 06 7:00 PM Cuajinicuilapa Canchas de básquetbol	MUJERES, ARTES Y SABERES <i>La danza de las muletas</i> (Senegal). Director: Yoro Lidel Niang <i>Samba de Roda</i> (Brasil). Dirección: colectiva <i>Soy Yuyé</i> (México). Director: Balam Toscano <i>El Pitahayo</i> (México). Director: Axel Isai Rivera Conversatorio con equipo de filmación y artistas mujeres Moderan: Aideé Rodríguez y Blanca Pires
VIERNES 07 8:00 PM El Quizá, Guerrero Salón de Usos Múltiples	DANZAS AFROCOSTEÑAS EN EL CINE <i>Santos Vaqueros</i> (México). Director: Cristobal Jasso <i>Diablos, El Quizá Nueva Generación</i> (México). Dir. Claudia Lora Conversatorio con equipo de filmación y danzantes Moderan: Estrella Sendra, Familia de Don Hermelindo Zárate y Mtro. Abad Campos
SÁBADO 08 7:00 PM El Quizá, Guerrero Salón de Usos Múltiples	MIGRACIÓN Y DIÁSPORAS <i>Nyanga</i> (México) de Medhin Tewolde <i>Tiempos verbales</i> (Brasil) de dirección colectiva <i>Amare</i> (México) de Balam Benjamin <i>Dem Dem</i> (Senegal) de Pape Bouname, Christophe Rolin y Marc Recchia <i>Festival Internacional de Folklore y de Percusión Louga</i> (Senegal) de Estrella Sendra Conversatorio con equipo de filmación y migrantes de El Quizá Moderan: Ana Isabel León y Maria Gazga.
DOMINGO 09 8:00 PM Cuajinicuilapa Canchas de básquetbol	JUVENTUDES Y DIVERSIDADES <i>Sábado de cine</i> (Senegal) de Mamadou Dia <i>Afeminados</i> (Brasil) de Charles Morais <i>Weck: la palabra es mi voz</i> (México) de Aldo Arellanes Antonio <i>El sonar de las olas</i> (México) de Vanessa Ischel Ortega CINEMINUTOS resultado de los talleres Conversatorio con equipos de filmación y jóvenes Moderan: Claudia Lora, Pablo Vicenteño y Director Preparatoria de Cuajinicuilapa

Figure 2: Programme of the IV Film Showcase Afrodescendencias.
Design: Claudia Lora. Engraving: Ingrid Sáenz Sánchez.

The methodology starts with conversations with the communities, sharing ideas about potential festival themes, ensuring these resonate with and respond to realities in each region. This is further put in dialogue with the Festival's mission to bring short films made by Afrodescendants in Mexico and the invited countries. All these approaches are brought together in the programme, which has sought to foster dialogues across productions, while prioritising the presence of filmmakers and actors from the visited state, in order to generate engaged local audiences. On numerous occasions, audiences in the various communities have told us that it was the first time that films were shown on the big screen in the community, generating a unique moment of encounter between the works and the public. They further emphasise the recognition of landscapes, characters and stories exhibited, celebrating the focus on the territory. In 2024, the screenings were held in the public square of Cuajinicuilapa and in the Salón de Usos Múltiples of El Quizá. Each screening was introduced by the curators, briefly contextualising the origin of the works, and explaining their relationship to the broader curated programme and its themes.

Curating Brazilian Films for Costa Chica

The Brazilian films included in the Festival were produced by students of the UFRB. They are very personal films that at the same time have a strong dialogue with the territory. To understand this connection, it is first necessary to know the history and culture of Cachoeira, the town where the university's film course is located. Since the first decades of the nineteenth century, Cachoeira has played a very important emancipatory role, whether in the struggle for Brazil's independence from Portugal or in the preservation of African traditions (IPHAN). Built with the sweat and blood of enslaved Blacks, quilombos also sprang up around Cachoeira to house those who fled oppression in search of freedom.⁷ The legacy of this Afrodescendant struggle and resistance was founded on and had an impact on many cultural manifestations in the region, such as capoeira, samba, gastronomy and popular festivals.

The UFRB is an academic institution, recognising and affirming Afrodescendant culture and histories. Created in 2005 as part of public policy to internalise and democratise access to higher education, the university also seeks to promote inclusion and diversity in both its epistemologies and its form of admission through the adoption of racial quotas. Currently eighty-one percent of the students are Black.⁸ The inclusion of subjects historically excluded from higher education, such as Black, Indigenous and LGBTQI+ people, has generated an impact and transformation of the University, with the integration and reflection of other knowledge and experiences. In the specific case of the film degree, the narratives produced have brought to the screen themes, forms, effects and bodies that are often made invisible by hegemonic narratives. Issues of race, gender, sexuality and social class, as experienced by the students, also shape the films. And it is in Cachoeira, a city far from the big centres, far from the places of origin of these students coming from different parts of Brazil, where such issues come to the surface and gain voice through film.

Living in such a multilayered place affects these young people who find themselves in a life circumstance permeated by significant discoveries and changes. Film is an excellent means to represent the territory by combining other perceptions, experiences, memories and affections about it. Filmmaking, therefore, is a way of knowing, constructing and inhabiting the territory, the cinema

and oneself. In this small group of films we see, then, the intersection between territory and subjects, and the creation of new territories through the action and relationship of and with cinema.

Curating Senegalese Films for Costa Chica

When Bianca Pires and Estrella Sendra presented papers on film festivals in Mexico and Senegal respectively at the European Network for Cinema and Media Studies Conference in Oslo in 2023, there were similarities between the audience-centred curatorial approach in the festivals presented by both scholars. This led to an invitation to Estrella Sendra to collaborate with the curation of three Senegalese short films for the festival analysed here. When curating these films, there was awareness of both the opportunity and challenge deriving from the fact that this would arguably be the first time that populations in Costa Chica would ever see African films. Despite the deeply felt connection of the population to African heritage, the continent and its rich cultural diversity remains rather distant from the imaginary, due to various institutional and colonial roadblocks.

There is a concerning “narrative of exclusion” of Africa in the history of Mexico that this antiracist festival is addressing (Dovey 50). When including it in the audiovisual landscape, the aim was to offer a glimpse into some rather contemporary productions in Senegal by filmmakers who have been travelling along international festivals thanks to their passion, film training and collaborative networks, and whose films were concerned with topics that could both resonate with the population of Costa Chica yet potentially surprise them by showing unexpected images of the continent. This resonates with what Lindiwe Dovey has defined as “*(dis)sensus communis*”, due to the conflicted and contested expectations and understandings of what an African film may look like, particularly in an area where the recognition of the African heritage of an important part of the population is still an ongoing struggle (20). As James S. Williams notes, “black African cinema has never been more heterogeneous and diffuse” (15). That is, there is not a single kind of African film language. Rather, there is a subversive use of the camera, through which African filmmakers “redefined and deconstructed ways of seeing and created new forms of expression, rejecting the Western frame of view, through the African gaze” (Sall 7).

Just three short films by Senegalese filmmakers would by no means be representative of Africa. They could, instead, be illustrative of the African gaze, as understood by Amy Sall, offering a kind of self-representation able to liberate views and communities “from the definitions and categorizations imposed on them by the West” (Sall 7). We were interested in engaging with various forms of love, a theme which we would then see featuring in quite a significant number of the audience productions at the film and artistic workshops in the Festival. The curatorial decisions were led by love, and were all beloved films by the guest curator, Estrella, for various reasons. Yet, they are also films depicting various forms of love: love for Dakar; love for cinema; love between Matar and Nafi, a young couple; love for mothers; and ultimately, love for one’s dignity.

The Axes of the Programme and Its Films

The option chosen to organise the works and screen them for the public was to intersperse films from the three countries programmed. The curatorial effort was in the sense of starting from

the nature of the material that existed in and about the Costa Chica, looking for dialogues, imagining common axes and viewing as many works as possible to then decide how to group the films. The music video *Oro mimá* (Camila Yallouz, Elen Linth and Lamonier Angelo, 2012), performed by the musical group Bantos Iguape (Bahia) was used at the opening of all the performances.⁹ Below we analyse the works that formed each axis and the discussions revolving around them. Next, we analyse the programming axes in more detail.

Women, Arts and Knowledge

The inclusion of an axis that addresses the relationship between Afro-Mexican women and the arts, their knowledge and resistance to patriarchy and racism has been present since the first edition of the festival. On this occasion, the programme for the first day of the festival was designed to highlight the work of women artists from the region. In the afternoon, the exhibition “Graphic Exhibition Afromexicanías: Afromexican Women Engravers of the Costa Chica” was inaugurated in the Afromestizo Museum, which is located next to the civic square of Cuajinicuilapa where the film screenings took place. In this way, many of the artists and audiences who visited the exhibition stayed for the film show.

On this occasion, the curators looked for local and foreign productions that had women as protagonists. This is how we arrived at the choice of the four works that make up this axis, whose narrators and artists express with their different bodies the meanings of being an Afro woman and exercising their arts—dance, music and plastic arts. The curated films were *The Dance of the Crutches* (*La danse des béquilles*, Yoro Lidel Niang, 2021), *Samba de Roda* (Jesus Diego et al., 2012), a collective audiovisual training project for documentary production for local students, *Soy Yuyé* (*I Am Yuyé*, Balam Toscano, 2024) and *El Pitahayo* (*The Pitahayo*, Axel Isaí Rivera, 2022).

The Senegalese short film *The Dance of the Crutches* was curated for three reasons: its theme, dance; its approach to both gender and “disability”; and for its recent award of Best Short Film at the Festival Films Femmes Afrique in 2022, a women-centred African film festival whose theme that year was Women Creators of the Future. The debut film by young director Yoro Lidel Niang, trained at Média Centre in Dakar, was the result of the training programme Up Court Métrages, produced by Cinekap and supported by FOPICA, the national funder that promotes the film and audiovisual industry. The curation of the film also served to highlight such institutional initiatives, which promote the production and circulation of cinema, as well as the work by the organisers of the Festival Films Femmes Afrique. The film is a fictional story featuring Penda (Coumba Déme) an actual dancer from Senegal with physical impairment. There is no victimisation of Penda, but rather a representation of the power of love and an ability-centred narrative. Penda is portrayed as a super-abled woman, with the ability to adapt, dance with crutches, rather than despite them, and to challenge stereotypes about physical disabilities. In other words, Penda has the ability to dream, create and transform society, which alongside the films produced by the Afro-Mexican communities hosting the festival, was encouraging for audiences.

Samba de Roda features Riane, who tells the story of two sambas de roda groups in Santiago do Iguape, a village of Quilombola fishermen and farmers located near the municipality of Cachoeira and known for its rich Afrodescendant culture. *Yo soy Yuyé* focuses on visual artist

Yuyé; and *El Pitayo* features harmonica player Angely Ramírez. The short films portray the strength and will of these four women who, from their different regions, extol their roots through the arts and their struggles to occupy their spaces in the world. During the festival, Angely Ramírez, lead actor in *El Pitayo*, was present for the discussion, sharing with the audience her vision of being an Afro-Mexican woman and harmonica player in a group of Danza de Diablos, inviting other young women to pursue their dreams, overcoming gender stigmas.

Afro-Costal Dances in Film

The section Afro-Costal Dances in Film was held in El Quizá, Guerrero. The show was conceived as part of a larger cultural programme dedicated to highlighting and reflecting on the Afrodescendant dances of the Costa Chica, referred to in the show as Afro-Costal Dances. The programme was imagined, organised and produced in collaboration with artists and schools from San Juan Lo de Soto, Oaxaca and El Quizá. The afternoon began with the inauguration of the photographic exhibition *Llegaron los Diablos (The Devils Arrived, 2024)*, by photographers Hugo Arellanes and Venancio López, held in the house of the late musician Bruno Morgan (who passed away shortly after the festival), followed by an exhibition of dances in the town's multipurpose hall.

During the session two films were exhibited: *Santos Vaqueros (Santos Cowboys, Cristóbal Jasso, 2024)* and *Diablos, El Quizá Nueva Generación (Devils of El Quizá Next Generation, Claudia Lora, 2024)*. These closing film screenings, followed by a discussion, aimed to show documentaries that portrayed very important artistic expressions in the formation of the identity of the population of Costa Chica: the Dance of Toro de Petate or Dance of Vaqueiros and the Dance of the Devils. The objectives were, besides valuing these dance expressions, to generate an intergenerational dialogue about their dances and what cinema is saying about them.

The films provoked diverse reactions from the audience during the screening of the (still unfinished) feature film *Diablos de El Quizá Nueva Generación*. There was laughter, shouting and even crying. This was arguably due to the high degree of identification, as everyone in the audience had one or more family members or friends of the people featured, some of whom are now deceased or living outside the community. The discussion between the editor and director of the film and the audience was very interesting, as the people thanked and commented on their dance and historical processes. It was interesting to see the relationship established between audiovisual anthropology and the collective memory of a small Afro-Mexican community, as the documentary preserves moments spanning a period of more than twenty years, passing through various generations and historical and cultural contexts presented through dance.

Migration and Diasporas

The thematic axis Migration and Diasporas evolved after viewing material from the three countries involved, and to account for a dialogue between films that address the painful theme of migration. In Mexico today, people who assume themselves to be Afro-Mexican continue to suffer the ravages of a structural marginalisation that has limited their material and educational opportunities. In the case of people of African descent, born outside African territory but who form

part of a diaspora, migration is not only their current situation but also its genesis, since it was forced migration from the fifteenth century onwards, when the Portuguese began to introduce Africans to Europe for forced labour (Martínez 33–35), that initiated the global transit that would give rise to what we know today as the African diaspora.

This is how the transition of Afrodescendants between the past and the present, violence and resistance, converge in films from Senegal, Brazil and Mexico. These films immerse us in diverse realities, with different languages, but which manage to converge at some point. These similarities are what strengthens the dialogue around this important axis of reflection, and also the encounter at the Festival itself. This perspective was reflected in the five films that made up the programme Migration and Diasporas, including *Nyanga* (Medhin Tewolde, 2021), inspired by Gaspar Yanga, an African brought to Mexico in colonial times, enslaved to work in sugar cane fields in the lands of Veracruz in the Gulf of Mexico, and who has become a reference for organised rebellions along with other enslaved Africans, that finally led to their liberation from the Spanish yoke.



Figure 3: Photograph taken by Angélica Salas Rodríguez while the film *Nyanga* by Medhin Tewolde was being screened on the third day of the IV Film Showcase Afrodescendencias in El Quizá, Guerrero, on 8 June 2024.

In turn, *Tempos Verbais* (*Verbal Times*, Ema Ribeiro, 2019), is an essay based on photographs and paintings by foreign artists in Brazil during the nineteenth century. Ema Ribeiro's voiceover offers a poetic and critical look at history and Eurocentric iconography, which portray the forced migration of Blacks in degrading jobs. The desire and the need to move through territories foreign to one's own is part of the central theme that we also see in films such as *Amare* (Balam Toscano, 2024, Mexico) and *Dem Dem!* (*Leaving*, Pape Bouname Lopy, Christophe Rolin and Marc Recchia, 2016, Senegal). In *Dem Dem!*, Pape Bouname Lopy's stunning photography and dreamlike aesthetics are reminiscent of the films of Djibril Diop Mambéty, with the ocean as a constant reference and at the intersection of dreams (of travelling), economics shaped by colonial forms of exploitation which often persist in contemporary politics (fishing), and suffering (associated to the death of those who leave and do not return).

In less than thirty minutes, *Dem Dem!* offers a series of unforgettable shots and moments, intertwining various realities associated to youth in the continent, such as the moment where Nzibou (Cheikh Omar Diaw) is climbing the stairs on the beach to measure the clouds, and the exchange of gazes that leads to a shot of Nafi (Léa Kane) lying on the bed after having made love to Matar (Dial Thiam), featuring a semi-nude back, whose lower part is sensually adorned with a *bin-bin* (a waist-lace that is a crucial part of lingerie in Senegal). *Dem Dem!* makes one fall in love with Dakar. It also reminds those who already love Dakar of why they love it. The act of curating this film is also a way of celebrating the talent, cinephilia and filmmakers that emerged, like Pape Bouname Lopy, from Ciné Banlieue, a free school of cinema voluntarily founded and run by Abdel Aziz Boye for young people in the outskirts of Dakar, which has been run by its disciples, including Pape Bouname Lopy, ever since the passing of the master in 2017. Most of the films made in Senegal today have at least one person who has somehow been involved from this generous local film training initiative.

The constant mobility and encounters of African and Afrodescendant people are provided by spaces such as festivals, and we were able to appreciate it in the short film about the International Festival of Folklore and Percussion in Louga (Senegal) by Estrella Sendra (2024), who shared with us a little of what she has experienced in Louga, a crossroads of economic, cultural and social capital that makes it the cultural capital of Senegal.

Youth and Diversities

To open the Festival, we decided to screen the Cineminutos (One-minute Cinema) short films made with mobile phones in a workshop offered as part of the Festival to students of Preparatoria 30 in Cuajinicuilapa by the Colombian filmmaker Julián Sacristán. The workshop was conceived as a way to contribute to the training of new generations of filmmakers in the region, who have little access to these courses. The themes presented by the young people dealt with love and heartbreak, belonging and pride in their place of origin, and their own traditions, which are highlighted in the filmmaking process. Collectively showing their work on the big screen, in the centre of their home location, was extremely moving and inspiring, and some of the young people stayed for the exhibitions that followed.

On this occasion, the curators looked for local and foreign productions with young people as protagonists or narrators. The four works chosen were: *Saturday of Cinema* (*Samedi cinéma*, Mamadou Dia, 2016), in which two Senegalese children dream of going to the cinema on a Saturday afternoon; *Afeminados* (*Afeminate*, Charles Morais, 2021), where Afeminate bodies occupy social spaces and networks, as they share journeys of discovery and self-acceptance of sexuality in Cachoeira, Brazil; *El sonar de las olas* (*The Sound of the Waves*, Vanessa Ixchel Ortega, 2018), which is the story of Elida, who defies gender roles and disability stigmas to surf waves in Acapulco, Guerrero (Vanessa Ortega); and *Weck: la palabra es mi voz* (*Weck: Word Is My Voice*, Aldo Arellanes Antonio, 2018), on the urban youth culture present in the event *Rap Conciencia*, through which Weck vindicates hip hop in Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca.

The choice of the Senegalese film *Samedi cinéma* derived from the love-centred curatorial approach in this festival. *Samedi cinéma* is a film showcasing love for cinema per se. The director,

Mamadou Dia, moved to the US for graduate film training at the NYU Tisch School of the Arts, but his award-winning film production is now based in Senegal. The screening of *Samedi cinéma* in Costa Chica was thus an entry point to a contemporary Senegalese filmmaker worth knowing, as well as a call for the cultivation of love for film from an early age.

Rapper Weck and director Aldo Arellanes Antonio were present at the discussion, sharing with the audience a bit about the process of making the film *Weck: la palabra es mi voz*, the importance of showing it for the first time in Cuajinicuilapa and of continuing to tell their local stories through audiovisual productions. To close the night, Weck performed some of his raps.

Final Reflections

Curatorship, Alliances and Challenges

The Fourth Afrodescendant Festival allowed us to exchange ideas and intercultural perspectives between Mexico, Brazil and Senegal. The dynamic of proposing materials, sharing them and viewing them together was an enriching exercise in the work of programming Afrodescendant cinema. This exercise has broken with imposed nationalisms and has generated an openness to think of ourselves as part of interconnected historical and cultural processes. In this way, the Fourth Afrodescendant Festival fulfilled one of its most overlooked functions, which we consider to be of utmost importance: to serve as a window onto other realities and different ways of making films.

The film showcase of the Fourth Afrodescendant Audiovisual Arts Festival taught us many lessons in our work as curators. It showed us strengths and also weaknesses as organisers of a festival that deals with important and delicate issues, as we must be careful with multiculturalist approaches that permeate global agendas in terms of public and cultural policies. Nowadays, there are greater ethnic–racial representations in various spaces such as audiovisual media. In this sense, it is worth bearing in mind that multiculturalism as a paradigm allows for “the generation of new subjectivities, new spaces of power, new fields of knowledge and new markets for symbolic goods” (Boccaro 6). It is important to mention this, because as we referred to at the beginning of this article, from the curatorial work, we also seek to create an active intervention, seeking a critical, anti-racist, decolonial and intercultural gaze.

From this position, we try to circulate and exhibit films “from within”, which reflect on their different realities through cinematographic language with a committed, respectful and genuinely curious perspective. However, if we find films made “from outside” that can contribute to internal reflections, we also select them, especially when they come from countries or people who have contributed historically and culturally to the artistic processes of the territories. We also advocate a love-led curatorial approach, as a form of facilitating access to the African gaze and challenging stereotypes about Africa and Afrodescendant communities, particularly in a context of historic narrative exclusion.

Nevertheless, developing a constructive criticism of our curatorship, we consider that we need to include people of African descent in the programming and selection of materials. Ideally,

they should come from the regions where the travelling exhibition is presented. Although an attempt has been made to include them, we have encountered a series of issues that make this difficult. The very existence of the festival itself, year after year, entails the uncertainty of its realisation, as the economic funds to carry it out are obtained from the research centres and universities to which we are linked, and through national and international calls for cultural support. This not only makes the organisation of the Afrodescendencias Festival fragile, but also, reaffirms the situation of instability in which cultural managers tend to work in countries like Mexico (Ziri3n and Cyr 25).

In this panorama, contemplating a specific and stable fund for the training of Afrodescendant and/or community film programmers becomes even more urgent, and the need for such activities to take place in a decentralised manner is also necessary. Afrodescendant cinema, as well as the recognition of the population that recognises itself with these roots, is still breaking new ground in Mexico. It is therefore necessary to point out that not only audiovisual training and funds for the production of this type of cinema are demands that need to be met, but also curatorial work. For it is only by knowing in depth the representations that have been made and continue to be made by people of African descent that it is possible to take an active position that helps to circulate films that have almost no exhibition outlets.

The Afrodescendant Showcase Among Film Festivals in Mexico



Figure 4: First day of the Fourth Film Showcase Afrodescendencias in the civic square of Cuajinicuilapa on 6 June 2024. Photograph by Rodrigo Gerardo Mart3n Varg3s.

Itinerant festivals in Mexico have played an important role in the decentralisation of the film experience, contributing to broadening the right to cultural access for spectators and diversifying what is screened (Pires 82). At the same time, the action of appropriating public spaces in an exceptional way and of gathering collectively around a cinema screen during an audiovisual event has promoted other senses of citizen belonging, “where what is shown on the screen resonates with local and individual experiences, generating important encounters and public

debates” (Pires 366). In the case of the Muestra Afrodescendencias, the model adopted by the Festival acquires other layers of relevance: it is a multidisciplinary festival, dedicated to the different Afrodescendant artistic expressions in a broad manner, composed of the presentation of music, dance, visual arts exhibitions and film, in addition to promoting workshops that bring together local artists and those from other regions of Mexico, fostering shared learning processes.

Within this wide range of expressions presented, film occupies a significant place within the Festival for several reasons. The participation of Afro-Mexican filmmakers and actors promotes the fact of thinking about the theme of self-representation through film; the diversity of themes and countries that dialogue interculturally and, in this last edition, the educational aspect for the young high school students who presented their short films in the showcase.

Likewise, the Muestra Afrodescendencias programmes independent productions that exclusively portray Afro-Mexican, African and diasporic expressions, whose exhibition routes are still underdeveloped. Through the festival, the films reach towns and cities where there are no regular cinemas, and where the screenings of the Festival have often been the first encounter with cinema on the big screen by young spectators. Conversations with local filmmakers and artists-actors from the region link the audience to the history and traditions of Mexican Afrodescendants. In these paths of learning and challenges we have shared knowledge and experiences with each community visited, with the intention of continuing to collaborate to promote Amefrican and African cinema in Mexico.

Notes

¹ In line with the theoretical reflections of Latin American Cultural Studies, we use the terms “audiences” and “spectators: in the plural (Martín-Barberos 56; Rosas Mantecón 21–22) to emphasise that we do not consider the audience as a hegemonic collective, but rather made up of particularities that come together during the cinematographic pact, while maintaining their individualities.

² The Mascoga/Black Seminole communities are groups formed from the mixtures of maroon and Seminole people dispersed along the US–Mexico border. The Mascoga/Black Seminole communities are in constant discussion about their self-identification, not only as people with Indigenous and Black heritage, but also by claiming the term “tribe” towards the end of the twentieth century. This debate was framed by “the Government of Texas under the status of tribes in 1985. With this status, they were able to claim dual citizenship and freely cross the border to work and gather with the members of their tribe on both sides of the international border. Mascogos/Black Seminoles could not meet the criteria and were not recognized as a tribe (even though they claim to have signed a land treaty with the US government in 1870)” (Gil 30).

³ Postdoctoral researcher Bianca Pires, a specialist in film audiences, had already collaborated with the Festival since the first editions, providing advice for the online transmission of the festival. Doctoral student Ana Isabel León, on the other hand, joined because of her work related to the new “visualities” in the Costa Chica, as well as her technical and organisational knowledge of film

shows through the Cinema Colecta collective in Xalapa, Veracruz. It is important to mention that the three researchers have collaborated on a voluntary basis, considering the work of the exhibition as an axis of social retribution of their research, all of them financed by the Secretariat of Science, Humanities, Technology and Innovation (SECIHTI, Mexico).

⁴ In the group of films named “From Outside”, we find productions that have occurred collaboratively, together with the communities. However, the lack of information on the nature of the collaborations made us choose to separate the productions into those made by Afro-Mexican and non-Afro-Mexican directors.

⁵ The term “From Inside” has been used since the first festival to refer to films made by people of African descent. The term was coined by Black researchers Sheila S. Walker and Jesús Chucho García in a collective work with the Barlovento Group (Venezuela), in which they “took on the responsibility of telling their own story, from their own perspective, to serve the interests of their own community—and also those of other people, who want to have a more complex, complete and correct vision of what the Americas are about” (Walker 14).

⁶ According to data from the Statistical Yearbook of Mexican Cinema 2023, in that year there were 289 curricula for film and audiovisual degrees and postgraduate studies in 115 educational centres, 87% of them private and 13% public. However, the offer is concentrated in Mexico City (28%) and Jalisco (12%), in Guerrero there is only one educational programme, and in Oaxaca there are two programmes (IMCINE 114–15).

⁷ “Quilombo” is a Portuguese word of African origin from the *quimbundu* language that came to designate in Brazil the places where fugitive slaves who had escaped from the plantations and mines controlled by Portuguese slavers used to live. Today, there are more than 3,000 quilombos throughout Brazil. These communities have a constitutionally guaranteed right to land. However, like the Indigenous communities, they still face problems with the legalisation of their properties.

⁸ The Recôncavo region is extremely important for the history and present of the African diaspora in Brazil and the world. This area is also home to another public university called Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Braziliana (UNILAB), with a strong majority of Black students from different parts of the world.

⁹ “*Oro mimã*” comes from Yoruba, the language of one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa and means “God is the sea”. The spiritual reference extends to the Orixá Oxum, to whom the song is dedicated.

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