

A DOCUMENTARY

# INVISIBLE ROOTS

AFRO-MEXICANS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



PRODUCERS: **TIFFANY WALTON** AND **LIZZ MULLIS**

2015 [AFROMEXICANROOTS.COM](http://AFROMEXICANROOTS.COM)

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A FILM BY TIFFANY WALTON & LIZZ MULLIS

More than one million Mexicans are of African descent, yet this heritage is often forgotten, denied, and many times stigmatized, both in Mexico and in Chicanx communities in the United States. INVISIBLE ROOTS is an intimate look at Afro-Mexicans living in Southern California as they discuss complex issues of racial, national and cultural identities.

The Herrera family in Pasadena proudly performs the famous “La Danza de los Diablos”, or “The Dance of the Devils.” One of the performers explains the origins of the dance: “We have been told by our ancestors that the dance came from Africa, but when they were enslaved and brought over here, the dance became a way to make fun of the overseer.” Meanwhile, the Cisneros family makes sure to keep alive the spiritual traditions and culinary secrets that they brought from Costa Chica, Mexico. Lastly, college student Yismar is embracing his newfound identity, and explains that “being proud of being Black has boosted my self-esteem, but before when I didn’t know that, I was just Mexican. That didn’t boost my self-esteem because people would always make fun of me.”

INVISIBLE ROOTS, a groundbreaking documentary about Afro-Mexicans in Southern California, features interviews with historians Alva Moore Stevenson and Daniel Cendejaz Mendez; and music by Kemo the Blaxican. (2015, 21 minutes, English & Spanish with Subtitles and Closed Captions, Specs: 29.97 fps, 1920x1080, all sound recorded in AVCHD format)

**Tiffany Walton** first became familiar with Afro-Mexicans after seeing Tony Gleaton’s photography of the African presence in Mexico, while she was a teen. Later, she read an article in the Los Angeles Times, by John Mitchell, about Afro-Mexicans living in Southern California and wanted to learn more about their stories. As a writer and producer, Tiffany creates content for the lifestyle site, SkinGab.

**Lizz Mullis** is a recent graduate of the University of Southern California. Influenced by her experience as a photographer and editor, Lizz has ventured into creating both fiction and non-fiction film narratives. Her ultimate goals are to create content that challenges viewers’ thought processes and invites social change.



“Whether through film, social media or the theatre, Afromexican stories need to be told. There are still people out there who question the existence of Black Latin@s... The INVISIBLE ROOTS team is doing the work to make sure that history is at the forefront.”

BLACK GIRL, LATIN WORLD BLOG

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PROGRESSIVE MEDIA SINCE 1968

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## AFRO-MEXICANS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

### A FILM BY TIFFANY WALTON & LIZZ MULLIS

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Herrera Family  
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Isidro Felix Castaneda  
Pedro Castaneda  
Hector Castro  
Ana Fierro  
Arturo Herrera  
Emmanuel Herrera  
Christian Herrera  
Simeon Herrera  
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Byron Mayoral  
Jose Mayoral  
Handel Mayoral  
Adrianna Rojas  
Anahi Rojas  
Isidro Sanchez  
Maribel Silva  
U.C. Santa Barbara Students  
Michael Robles  
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Yismar Toribio  
Cisneros Family  
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Cristal Cisneros  
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## The Filmmakers Behind 'Invisible Roots' on Finding Afro-Mexicans Living in Southern California



Almost a year before the Mexican government officially acknowledged Afro-Mexicans as a distinct racial and ethnic group, directors **Tiffany Walton** and **Lizz Mullis** first began working on their film, [\*Invisible Roots: Afro-Mexicans of Southern California\*](#), as a film project while attending the University of Southern California (USC). For Walton, whose grandfather was Afro-Panamanian, the project was deeply connected to her family's Afro-Latino story, while Mullis was motivated by her interests in broader societal questions about race and identity. But during the early stages of the project both struggled to find subjects for their film. After a number of failed attempts at connecting with Afro-Mexican families in the Los Angeles area, attempts they both called "extensive," Walton and Mullis were fortuitously connected to a few Afro-Mexican families through academic and professional contacts. The film premiered at the [Los Angeles Pan African Film Festival](#) with which the directing duo hopes to shed light on the experiences of a group that continues to garner recognition both in Mexico and in the U.S.

### Can you describe what inspired you to make this film?

**TW:** I've always been really interested in African-American history as well as the African diaspora. I remember first learning that my dad's grandfather had moved from Panama to Alabama to attend college. I felt excited

about having a personal connection to another place, an ancestral place, a place outside of the United States, that I could reference and say, “Hey, I have roots there.” With that, I became really curious about Black people who lived in Central America and other Latin American countries. I wanted to know how they identified culturally and racially, I wanted to know what they ate, and what things we would have in common. I was curious about learning how they navigated the world.

I first learned about Afro-Mexicans from a large poster my dad had hanging in his office. The poster was of a photograph called, “Tres Hermanas,” by Tony Gleaton. On this poster were the words, “Africa’s Legacy in Mexico.” That poster spoke volumes to me. So, the poster inspired me to make this film. It touched me in such an intangible, sublime way that made me want to take action. I wanted to know everything about those little girls. What would we have in common? Were they curious about Africa? Would they feel a connection to me? I really just wanted to know how they viewed the world and how the world viewed them and how they felt about what the world thought of them.

**LM:** Tiffany is the one who pitched the idea for the documentary to me, and since I like to be honest, I have to say that this community of people is one I had no familiarity with before she told me about them. When we started preparing for the documentary, I was a student at the time, and I happened to be taking a class that was on the subject of the history of Latin America. And once we started filming I was coincidentally learning about the history of how Afro-Mexico came to be, so to have that dual experience of learning about my subject while I was “documenting” it. . . it was one of the most fulfilling learning experiences to have while being a student.



**What’s one thing people should know about the Afro-Mexican community before watching your film?**

“We hope our film touches people and gets people to start exploring things that they’ve always wondered about in their own lives, family customs, traditions, and practices.”

**TW:** They have a pride in who they are, but don't seem to be caught up in defining themselves, they're just comfortable with who they are and their culture. However, when we asked them how they identified racially and culturally, many seemed very proud to say they were Afro-Mexican. Many of the individuals we met, identified as Afro-Mexican while others considered themselves to be Mexican or Hispanic. Regardless of how they identified, they seemed to know that they were quite unique and different and possessed a rich culture that was theirs, distinct from other Hispanics, Latinos, Mexican-Americans and Mexicans in Mexico, even maybe other Afro-Mexicans, those in Veracruz.

**LM:** That when it comes to the end of the day, the Afro-Mexican story is a human story. It's not about people who have had a magical experience and live their lives in shocking way. They are different, yes, but just like all of us are different and we all come from different experiences and backgrounds that shape us to be the different people we are meant to be.

**Most people tend to believe that Afro-Mexicans solely exist in Mexico, but your film is challenging that narrative. Why do you think it's important for people to know about U.S. Afro-Mexican communities?**

**TW:** I think that it's important to hear the stories of the people in our documentary because they challenge our notions of race, ethnicity and nationality. Again, we generally have this idea that Mexicans and Mexican Americans look a certain way, but our documentary shows the diversity and that there is a much deeper narrative—that oftentimes there is more than meets the eye. Especially when we judge people by how they look and assume things about them based upon our visual perspective, which oftentimes is extremely limiting, these kind of simplified or misinformed judgments can be at best sad and at worst, dangerous. I think it's important to know about Afro-Mexicans because many Mexicans in Mexico and here in the US, as well as many people in general, don't know that Afro-Mexicans even exist. I hope our documentary can challenge the way people think of each other and expand the idea of who people are. And I think Afro-Mexicans in the U.S. help us expand our cultural conversation because they might look one way, but they represent themselves culturally in a different and unique way, in a way that might be unexpected for some.

**LM:** It's important to recognize diversity in the U.S. as something that isn't black or white, one thing or the other, but rather a mix of all these cultures that shows us there is a lot of grey space when it comes to the way race and ethnicity actually is. It's important to know about Afro-Mexicans in the U.S. because being aware of these communities gives us an opportunity to create a dialogue about the way we think about race and social identities. We all want to be accepted for our differences, but sometimes it's hard to embrace our own differences. Knowing about a community like Afro-Mexicans and their presence in the U.S. is important for creating a culture of acceptance that isn't blind to the beautiful and different ways in which everyone is living their life.

**How did you find people for your film? Any challenges? Language barriers?**

“They have a pride in who they are, but don't seem to be caught up in defining themselves, they're just comfortable with who they are and their culture.”

**TW:** It was extremely challenging finding people from the Afro-Mexican community. I took to Facebook, searching the terms “Costa Chica” and other terms associated with the presence of Blacks in Mexico. Through some advanced Facebook settings, I was able to search for people associated with Costa Chica who lived in

the Los Angeles area; many of these individuals looked like they were Afro-Mexicans. I felt as though I had hit the jackpot when I found a whole group of soccer players from the Costa Chica, spread throughout Los Angeles and Pasadena. The information for when and where they met was in Spanish, but I was able to piece things together with my basic Spanish or asked friends to translate. I contacted as many of the soccer players as I could. Much of that contact wasn't viable, but I finally connected with one of the guys who seemed to be the coach. I explained my project and he seemed receptive and told me when and where to meet them. Me, Lizz and my friend who speaks Spanish went to a soccer field in Boyle Heights to meet the team. The guys were friendly, but the meeting proved not to be fruitful because they seemed to think we had ulterior motives in wanting to connect with them and they also didn't seem to take our project or us too seriously.

I moved on from the soccer players and then did another search, contacting every person I could find on Facebook from Costa Chica who now lived in Southern California. I had discovered another name of a town to search: Cuajinicuilapa. Many people from that town now lived in Santa Ana. Most of the people I contacted didn't respond and those that did, didn't really understand what my project was or said they were interested, but then would never respond further when I contacted them. Things started to manifest. I met with Alva Moore Stevenson, an Afro-Mexican expert out of UCLA. She said she didn't personally know any Afro-Mexicans, but had met a man once who said he was from Costa Chica. She gave me his name and I contacted him via Facebook. He then put me in contact with an Afro-Mexican family in Pasadena.

**LM:** Social media was so important to us. The hashtag and the location or birthplace search helped us out so much. We had to breach a new community that neither of us were a part of, so it was definitely difficult, and neither of us speak Spanish as well as we could, so we had to get a lot of outside help, which we were so grateful for. People were also very suspicious of us, many families and individuals did not believe that we were two students making a documentary so we had to go through a lot of small tests of proving ourselves trustworthy and legitimate to many people. We've all heard of the weirdos on the internet, so it was definitely an interesting process to be approaching these people through social media.

**It seems that U.S. Afro-Mexicans often exist in an “in-between” zone where they are racially black and identify strongly with Mexican ethnic practices, how did the people in your film self-identify? And what kinds of racial experiences did they have upon immigrating to the U.S.?**

“Many seemed proud to claim they were Afro-Mexican, but there still seems to be this emerging awareness of what the “Africanness” of being Afro-Mexican means and how it relates to them.”

**TW:** As an observer and from my conversations on and off camera with some of the Afro-Mexicans that we met with, I think what it means to be Afro-Mexican is a growing consciousness. Many seemed emphatically proud to claim they were Afro-Mexican, but there still seems to be this emerging awareness of what the “Africanness” of being Afro-Mexican is and means and how it relates to them, their identity.

**LM:** One of the discoveries that I continue to think is how proud everyone feels about their Mexican roots, their country, and their traditions. I would say in the film that there's an even split between those who identified as Afro-Mexican and those who identify themselves as Mexican, Hispanic or Latino, but the most unifying factor between all of the people we interviewed is how much they love the nation they come from. The Afro-Mexicans we met LOVED their roots and where they come from. It's interesting to think about how much we as a society

impose upon a person who they are supposed to be based on what they look like; we make assumptions on who they are going to be because of how we see them, but for these people, who they are has little to do with what they look like. Who they are is based on where they come from and who they are surrounded by. I think this speaks a lot to our own flaws as a larger society, but it also speaks to the power of community.

**The Mexican government has recently formally recognized Afro-Mexicans as a racial and ethnic group and, according to the national census, counted as many as 1.4 Mexicans of African descent. How do you think these recent developments have affected the people in your film?**

“In the film there’s an even split between those who identified as Afro-Mexican and those who identify as Mexican, Hispanic or Latino, but the unifying factor between all of the people we interviewed is how much they love the nation they come from.”

**TW:** I’m not sure, but I would suspect that there is a sense of relief that their existence has been acknowledged, but probably a bit of resentment in that it took decades to do so. Because many of them are still very connected to their home towns back in Mexico and many of those areas were impoverished as a direct result of the government pretending that those people didn’t exist, I’d think there is probably more relief knowing, or hoping that their areas will start to receive better infrastructure and resources.

With this news, I also think that they have more validation in calling themselves Mexican or Afro-Mexican, whatever, they deem appropriated. One of the women in our film said that when she was growing up in Pasadena and would tell people she was Mexican; she would hear them say, “No she’s not.” She said now seeing and interacting with other Afro-Mexicans makes her feel more proud because “you can kind of see where you’re coming from now, you’re not just a dark Mexican at school.” I think being formally recognized and acknowledged will help provide Afro-Mexicans with more of a place, they have a reference point for who they are, their people and from where their people might have originated. They’re able to see why they are a distinctive group and point to where some of that distinction originates.

**LM:** I don’t know if these changes have had immediate effects on the people in our film, since they and most of their families are living in the U.S., but at the same time I still think this is encouraging and a bit of a relief. To have the country that you come from accept and validate your own roots, I think that would mean a lot to a community that was previously pushed aside from political thought.

**What is one thing that you hope people walk away with after seeing your film?**

**TW:** I hope our film touches people in the way that it needs to touch them – I think that might be a very individual, subjective and personal way that make sense only to them. I hope it helps to answer some questions they have, inform them in new ways and gets people to start exploring things that they’ve always wondered about in their own lives, family customs, traditions, and practices. I also hope people question why we’ve never heard of certain people or hear very little about certain types of people. In this case, why did it have to take a small, unfunded documentary to shed the light on a community that many people are unaware of? How can we all do a better job, as small as it might be, to start connecting with other people who seem different, having conversations that might change lives, especially our own? How can we all do a better job connecting to our own identity and seeing people as people and treating people as a long lost relative? I’m not trying to be utopian or idealistic, but I think the concept of acknowledging the truth, working to understand where people

come from and trying to understand while certain disparities exist and treating people with respect, I think those things are all really basic and I hope people just connect with the best of their own humanity and identity, because all we want as people are our basic needs to be met, and one of those needs is acknowledgment.

**LM:** I know I said this before, but what we really want people to see is that we're just telling a story about our fellow humans. They aren't magical, they are certainly different and practice traditions that are pretty cool and unique, but they are people that very much exist. We want people to start thinking about the way they view and treat other people who are different from them, and just start participating in a world that embraces differences and learns to love other people a little bit more than themselves.

## Film shines light on “Invisible Roots” of Afromexicans in Southern California



via [afromexicanroots.com](http://afromexicanroots.com)

Mexico is finally woke ya'll.

For the first time in history, Afromexicans are counted on the Mexican census.

Maybe now my lovely Mexican compadres can stop looking at Black people weird when we utter “Hola, como estas?” with less of an accent than expected.

One step at a time.

I had the opportunity to view a film called “Invisible Roots: Afromexicans in Southern California”. What really drew me toward the film was the fact that it detailed the lives and experiences of Afromexicans IN the United States. It's great to see documentaries about the abuelas in Costa Chica or to learn about Yanga, but I believe that learning about this history in a United States context adds another layer to el mundo complicado de la diaspora.

The film “pays homage to the “third root” of Mexico” and it puts a face to the Afro-descendent experiences. We follow the Herrera family in Pasadena, the Cisneros family in Santa Ana and a young college student at UC Santa Barbara. As we dive into specific stories, specific families and specific culture, we find that we can all relate to trying to find a sense of belonging, family and future.

Another cool thing about this film is that it takes the viewer into the intimate celebrations. One scene is at a neighborhood get-together where many of the attendees are interviewed about their stories.

Now, I have my qualms about coming into a personal space and conducting research. It can be very hard to the community to trust you. The people are there to enjoy themselves and be around their loved ones.

However, with a little time talking to Tiffany Walton, the producer of this film, I found that she made sure to get the blessing of the people in charge of the party before invading their personal space. She also made sure to have people who identified as Afromexican in the center of creating this piece.

Invisible Roots is making quite the splash. Infact, it will be featured in the Pan African Film Festival this February!

Whether through film, social media or the theatre, Afromexican stories need to be told. There are still people out there who question the existence of Black Latin@s. I am so glad that the Invisible Roots team is doing the work to make sure that history is at the forefront.