

Tanya Domey: Hi. This is Tanya [Domey 00:00:04]. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at to Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

This week's guest is Rocio Gil, a PhD candidate in Anthropology at the Graduate Center CUNY and an adjunct lecturer at Hunter College. She is author of *Borders of Belonging*, published in Mexico 2006, an ethnography about indigenous transnational communities and their governance systems between Mexico and the United States. Her current work and the subject of her dissertation is based on the Texas/Coahuila border land, where she conducted ethnographic and historical research about racialization and the relations between the Negro Mascogo, Black Seminole people, and the two nation states where they live, Mexico and the United States. Following graduation, Ms. Gil will return to Mexico. She will join the faculty at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. She will continue working with the Negro Mascogo, Black Seminole people, and researching about race formation at the border.

Welcome to the Thought Project Rocio Gil.

Rocio Gil: Thank you for having me, Tanya.

Tanya Domey: It's great that you're visiting with us today. Because you are indeed a news maker, just last month you were quotes in the Washington Post about a group of Black Mexicans known as Mascogos, originating from slaves who fled the US to Mexico more than six generations ago. You said in the article that the Mascogos do not look at the US as a place where they were enslaved but rather where they were able to escape as a free people. How did you discover this group of people who are also connected to the Seminole tribe that was in Florida?

Rocio Gil: Well, I have done work about the border, the Mexico/United States border, for a long time. I was interested in understanding how blackness, and the border play out for people's experiences. I was taking a class here at the Grad Center about the African diaspora and you know you have to do research for a paper, and you have to figure your way out. I started, literally, just looking for things online to get ideas. I started reading articles about the Negros Mascogos and I got really interested because it shows this connection between blackness, Indianness, and the border. So I started digging, and I found out that their history's not just about being Black Mexican, but also it's a history about mixing with Seminole Indians and that there's a long trajectory escaping slavery, mixing with Seminole Indians, being sent into Indian territory during the Indian Removal Act. All these things come together with this particular group. I just found it really interesting.

Tanya Domey: Well, it is interesting. You and I were speaking being we got into the studio. I was talking to you about slaves that left America in the 19th century and resettled in the country of Liberia of Africa. But I never, ever learned about this group of people. The Post also reported in this article that you were quoted in, that 300 members of this community are seeking to return to the United States. I would ask you, could this not be one of the least fortuitous moments to make their case? Could it not be given that the Trump administration's hard line that's really anti-immigrant, and their stance is so hard line?

Rocio Gil: Yeah, definitely. I mean I just want to clarify that they're not seeking to return to the United States as a collective. Just like many other migrants from Mexico, they're trying to make ends meet. The situation in Mexico is forcing people to come to the United States. Yes, it's a hard situation. They were used to ... because they are border dwellers, so they were used to crossing the border a lot more easily before. And now, there are a lot of obstacles. There are a lot of families who are separated because of this border.

The difference here, I guess, is they are a trans border population. There's part of the community living in Texas. They are American citizens. And another part of the community, they're Mexican and some have documents, some don't. Under the current border situation, it's becoming really hard. There are a lot of stories of people who have been detained in Texas for months just because they were trying to get back to their jobs, to their families. Yeah, definitely it's a question that, you know, people are scared and worried and they're trying to do their best.

Tanya Domey: Yes. Let's talk about this. This is a border land population. People are going back and forth for work. People are able to come to the United States to get work. And just as you just stated, it's become much more difficult because of the current administration's policy. I'm just going to call them what they are. It's a regime. The people that live in Texas, are they relatives of, are they family members of people who are actually on the other side of the border in Mexico?

Rocio Gil: Yeah, definitely. I mean to understand this, we have to go back all the way to the 19th century to understand history, just to be brief.

Tanya Domey: Please, let's go back to the 19th century.

Rocio Gil: These were former slaves who escaped. This is one important moment for this community, fleeing slavery and finding their freedom. Eventually, they migrated to Mexico, this was 1850, because of the threat to slavery, because the situation as Indian groups in Oklahoma and the Indian territories was not ideal. So, Mexico was in need of soldiers at the border. At this time, we're talking about 1850, which means the Mexico/US War had just finished and the border was very, very weak. So, Mexico was really concerned about, on the one hand, more US expansion. And on the other hand, there was a whole relation with Apache

and Comanche people who were being dispossessed and were resisting. So they were conducting a lot of raids.

So the Mascogos were hired by the Mexican government as soldiers. That's because-

Tanya Domey: They were really contracted.

Rocio Gil: They were contracted.

Tanya Domey: I get it. Okay.

Rocio Gil: They were given citizenship and land. So this shows a different side of migration, which is it's the other way around. Right?

Tanya Domey: The other way around. Exactly.

Rocio Gil: People from the US fleeing Mexico, and they were not the only one. Many former slaves found refuge in Mexico in the 19th century. Like I said, there are many, many groups who settled there. Then in 1870, the US government recruited them back to be soldiers in Texas. Same reason, to fight against Comanche and Apache Indians. We're talking about a group who was recruited by two governments, and that's exactly what split them across the border. So, some people stayed in Texas as soldiers. Some others stayed in Mexico as soldiers. That's how they became a trans border population. Up until today, they have relatives in Texas, in Mexico, so it's really on both sides of the border.

Tanya Domey: So it involves the military and their status as soldiers. Very interesting. Now, you did mention before, and let's just go back to this. Many of these slaves were in Florida. And then the United States took over Florida in 1821. Correct? And this was during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, who Trump actually admires because he was so authoritarian. He ordered the removal of Indians and forced them to the Trail of Tears into Oklahoma. So these people have not only fled enslavement, but then they were forced onto the Trail of Tears.

Rocio Gil: Exactly. Really if you pay attention to their history, a history of displacement, of dispossession, of a lot of violence.

Tanya Domey: And oppression. Yes. Yes.

Rocio Gil: Yeah. Yeah. And then they were forced ... Somehow they were recruited soldiers, right, to fight against Comanche and Apache Indians. So they had to make really hard choices to fight against people who were also oppressed. But that was their way out, to be free, to gain citizenship, et cetera. It's a complicated history.

Tanya Domey: That was to be free on the Mexican side and to have citizenship on the Mexican side. Then they came back to Texas and they were recruited by the US government, were they also offered citizenship at that time?

Rocio Gil: Some became US citizens. Apparently, they were offered land in exchange, but that ... There isn't a treaty to prove it, so that land was never given to them.

Tanya Domey: That was contested?

Rocio Gil: Yeah. When they were discharged as soldiers in Texas in 1914, they were actually forcibly displaced from Fort Clark, which is where they were at. They had to become wage workers like anybody else. Again, another turn of violence in their forms of living and their situation. Yeah.

Tanya Domey: It's so interesting to think about Trump and now in the, I believe the Oval Office hangs the portrait of Andrew Jackson. I mean you cannot make this up. We're talking about ... It's historical parallels that's really quite chilling. In your dissertation, you analyze and examine the making of the Negro Mascogos Black Seminole people as part of the Coahuila/Texas border land via four threats: bordering, racialization, legibility, and historicity. Can you talk about that? Let's break that down and unpack that.

Rocio Gil: Yeah. My dissertation is an anthropological/historical perspective. What I am looking at is how the border has been made through race. And my lens through it is a group of Negro Mascogos Black Seminoles. When I talk about bordering, I'm talking about both the physical making of the border in the 19th century, but also in a more metaphorical way. How racial borders are established. How the community has to establish their own internal borders to be able to keep existing and maintain certain relations with the two states that they are living at.

Racialization, I look, historically, at the ways in which they have been labeled by the Mexican and US government. In what moments they have been defined as Black people, in what moments they have been defined as Indian people, and what that does to them in the present, which is very important because we often don't talk about Black Indians. It often sounds like an oxymoron.

Tanya Domey: Never. Never. I haven't even heard of it. That's why this situation is so fascinating.

Rocio Gil: But it's a reality. Right?

Tanya Domey: Right.

Rocio Gil: There are many Black Indian populations. The question here is how they have had to mobile either their blackness or Indianness to-

Tanya Domey: Depending on the situation, right?

Rocio Gil: Depending on the situation. For example, right now in Mexico, there's a whole movement for the recognition of Afro-descendant people that affects them. So, they articulate their identities in relation to this. I explore how that has played out historically how they ... Identities are flexible, and how they mobilize. And not just strategically but also how they have internalized this forms of identification and they have created new things through that. It's really interesting to see also how governments have strategically adapted those identities for their own needs.

Tanya Domey: Has the government of Mexico recognized them as a distinct ethnic group or racial group?

Rocio Gil: There's a process going on. They did get a certificate in 2012 that names them Afro-descendants. But this certificate doesn't translate into any form of collective rights.

Tanya Domey: Or benefits.

Rocio Gil: Or benefits. Not yet. Grassroots organizations are pushing for this. It might be the case that it will happen at some point. The local government of Coahuila, which is the Mexican state where they live, they did recognize them as an ethnic group. But again, it doesn't really translate into anything. It's just symbolic at this point. Like I said, in the future, it could happen.

Tanya Domey: It could change.

Rocio Gil: Yeah.

Tanya Domey: It makes sense, given what we know about identity, that you would use an identity when it probably benefits you. You know? You could leverage that identity because America, as you know having lived here, people have all kinds of ethnic history. I happen to be Albanian, third generation Albanian. Do I leverage that? Well, actually as a scholar of that region, I teach on that region and I research on that region, it can be useful. It's an identity that I do claim culturally. But what's so striking to me about these two groups is that they both have been historically oppressed in US history. I mean you could argue, at the time it was not called genocide, but as a human rights professor, that's without question is what happened to them. The Indian people, the US government committed genocide against the Indians and the African-Americans were brought here in chains in the belly of boats and sold on stocks in public forums like in Savannah and New Orleans, sold into slavery.

The idea of who they came from, I mean, really incredible oppression.

Rocio Gil: Agreed. I would add to this that they ... It's also Mexican oppression. It's not just the United States. We don't talk much about racism in Mexico, for example, but the whole question of black populations in Mexico has been silenced for a lot of time. There's the [crosstalk 00:15:46]

Tanya Domey: So there's no really public discussion of it, or is that changing?

Rocio Gil: It's changing right now, especially with the recognition of Afro-descendants or the movement for this. But really, their history has been silenced in Mexico. We don't really talk much about slavery, for example. When Mexico, in fact, was a hub for slavery. Black populations often suffer discrimination in the sense that they are seen as foreigners. There are cases, for example, of black people who have been deported. There's this popular understanding that there are no black people in Mexico. That does violence to this populations as well. So even though Mexico did offer a way out of slavery, it doesn't mean that there are-

Tanya Domey: Completely free.

Rocio Gil: Exactly. There's a lot of oppression in Mexico. There's marginality in there as well. It's a two way process I would say.

Tanya Domey: Interesting. To enter the military and being bound by a military obligation, they were seeking ... and this was men, obviously, principally men-

Rocio Gil: It's a masculine-

Tanya Domey: It's a masculine definition that they were able to seek different freedoms at different times.

Rocio Gil: Yeah, and that gave them access. But like I said, it's within the limited circumstances they try to make ends meet. That meant they were situated in a very complicated situation where they had to fight the Comanches and Apaches who were being oppressed too. So they became tools of the state.

Tanya Domey: They were instrumentalist.

Rocio Gil: They were. Exactly. They became instruments for state violence, which is problematic. But then they had no other way out. Like I said, it's not black and white. It's a very, very complicated history that needs to be understood in its particularity.

Tanya Domey: Are there inter-generational narratives that have been passed down within these groups? I mean narratives about how they see themselves or some pride of certain things that have been accomplished? It's just interesting when you start talking about that long of a period. What kind of intrafamilial narratives

have emerged? Are there anythings that are defining? How they define themselves.

Rocio Gil: I think the idea of freedom plays a very, very important role. I mean, of course, they do remember slavery. Of course, who wouldn't. Right? But the very fact that they managed to escape, that they managed to find their way to Mexico, it's a narrative of pride. The fact that they participated in history as soldiers, to them, I think, it's very relevant because it's a way of inscribing themselves into the grand narrative and fighting against the silencing of their own history. I think that's a big component.

Tanya Domey: And gaining franchise. Gaining citizenship.

Rocio Gil: And land.

Tanya Domey: And land. Yes. Yes.

Rocio Gil: The question of land in Mexico is very, very important. They are proud because they don't see it as something that was just granted to them by the state as a gift.

Tanya Domey: They earned it.

Rocio Gil: It's something that they earned-

Tanya Domey: They earned.

Rocio Gil: ... as soldiers. I think that's what has passed on over generations.

Tanya Domey: Yeah. That is a tradition in the United States Army that people have come here, Filipinos are an example, where they served on Navy ships and became citizens through their service. That's been a time honored tradition. It is this administration that has violated that tradition where people are being deported. It's just an unbelievable, shocking action that has been taken by the Trump administration to actually deport combat veterans of the United States.

Full disclosure to our audience, I served in the United States Army for 15 years, so I knew about this tradition, which started with the beginning of the continental army. For me, that's shocking. I've seen that there have been Mexicans deported, and even though they had served in United States military during the Iraq, Afghanistan wars. It just shocks me. Still, it shocks me.

Rocio Gil: Going along with that connection that you were making, I think it's very important and just a very specific example of how ... for example, this military history of the 19th century connects to today's situation is in 2018, Fort Blaze

was accepted as one of the many detention centers in Texas for ... People are being caged and other things.

Tanya Domey: Yes. Yes.

Rocio Gil: What's interesting to me is the fact that Fort Blaze was one of the many forts built in the 19th century with soldiers like the Black Seminoles and the Negros Mascogos for the purposes of fighting against Comanches and Apaches. So, it's this same structure, physically-

Tanya Domey: That still exists.

Rocio Gil: ... and ideologically that is being used. So it speaks to a continuity of the violence in the border. We tend to think of what's going on today about the wall discourse as a spectacle, right, something new. But in reality, this case shows that's been an ongoing process-

Tanya Domey: It's a continuation.

Rocio Gil: ... and it's racialized. It's been like that all along. The mechanisms are different, but it's not something new, really, which is more worrisome.

Tanya Domey: It's more worrisome. You're right. It's quite a tradition. I am sorry to say. I was also reading that the Negros Mascogos, they also celebrate Juneteenth. I think our listeners would be interested in that. I mean they celebrate Juneteenth, which is the day that celebrates the freedom of slaves in America.

Rocio Gil: Yeah. I mean they call it El Dia de Los Negros or [foreign language 00:21:44] in Spanish, which is a day of the blacks. It's a main celebration in [foreign language 00:21:50] where they live. Well, it's because they have their roots in the United States.

Tanya Domey: Sure.

Rocio Gil: It's this connection with freedom that people make and they celebrate that. So every June 19th they gather, some people remember the history. They have this big parade. But it speaks back to their origins as people who escaped slavery. Yeah.

Tanya Domey: Deeply embedded in their culture.

Rocio Gil: Deeply. Deeply.

Tanya Domey: What has surprised you during the course of your research? I always like to find out, because whenever we get into new projects in our life and we think we've

got this idea about something, and we get surprised. Have you been surprised during the course of your research?

Rocio Gil: Yeah. A lot.

Tanya Domey: Oh, tell me. Tell me. I want to hear.

Rocio Gil: I think one of the surprises was to actually see this continuity of the violence of the border that I somehow expected but not so straightforwardly. We talked about this already, but I think the second thing for me was to discover the dynamics at the border in relation to race. Specifically, the kind of negotiations governments do to accept racialized populations, in particular with Mexico. I mean I'm Mexican, so I thought I knew my history. It turns out that there's this whole side of enslaved people who found refuge in Mexico, which I had no idea about. So the whole question of blackness and how it was so instrumental in the making of the border, that was something really surprising to me that, again, we don't talk about. I think, for me, it was that. To revisit my own Mexican history and learn this.

Tanya Domey: Yes. Well, I'm learning new parts of my history just by reading the journal article and about the base, the extract from your dissertation. I mean it's really I'm shocked by it because I went to school and I would say that my favorite subject in school was always history and social studies. Never heard of this before. Never heard of this. You're finishing your dissertation. You're going to deposit it soon. Does this become a book? Do you aspire to get this published?

Rocio Gil: I hope so. I would like to publish it in English, in the academic setting. But I also, I do have a very strong commitment to the people I work with, so I want to make it accessible to both Black Seminoles in Texas and Negros Mascogos in Mexico. So I also want to write in a simple, non-academic jargon so that they can actually use the material for their own benefit.

Tanya Domey: That's wonderful. I want to ask you one other question and it doesn't really have anything to ... Well, it does sort of have something to do with your dissertation. Here you are. You're a Mexican citizen. You came to New York City to do your dissertation here at the Graduate Center during a time when Donald Trump was elected president and this crack down. Yes, the border has always been violent. We know that. The border has become so contested and such a place of violence now that we're living in probably the most immigrant-filled city in the United States. It's one out of three New York City is an immigrant or a child of an immigrant. That was written by Nancy [Fonner 00:25:22], one of our sociologists, one out of three. It's one of the reasons I live in this wonderful city. My grandmother came through this city when she immigrated to the United States. We love New York City for its diversity. And yet, we know that people are being arrested, detained, and deported. That must've been quite personally challenging to be here at this time.

Rocio Gil: Yes. Definitely. You learn a lot. But you know what? New York is a very friendly environment for immigrants. I think my biggest shock actually came in Texas when I was living at the border as an immigrant. Although I did have the perspective, I was still a privileged grad student with a visa, right? But going to the border, to a very conservative environment, where people don't expect Mexicans to be educated, for example, things like that, I think that's when it really hit me. I really understood why so many people follow Donald Trump and why there's this narrative about white supremacy. I got to live it as an immigrant there. New York is ... part of that is compared to other places of the United States. I think my biggest experience was while doing research as an immigrant, for sure.

Tanya Domey: Rocio Gil, I am so glad you came here today to share with us. We wish you good luck in publishing this important book and contribution.

Rocio Gil: Thank you so much, Tanya, for having me here. I'm glad to talk to you.

Tanya Domey: Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project. And thanks to today's guest, PhD candidate, Rocio Gil, at the Graduate Center CUNY.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domey. Tune in next week.