

Introduction

Thinking Black Joy, Sovereignty, and Being from Colonial Latin America

In February 1539, Mexico City descended into jubilation to celebrate the Truce of Nice, accorded the previous year between Emperor Charles V and Francis I of France. The celebration constituted New Spain's first major civic ceremony.¹ It is significant therefore that the festivities included a performance (*inbençión*) by “más de çinquenta” (more than fifty) “xinetes hechos de negros y negras *con su rey y reina*” (horseback riders made up of Black men and women *with their king and queen*).² The Black performers wore “grandes riquezas . . . de oro y piedras ricas y aljófar y argentería” (great riches of gold and precious stones and pearls and silver) as well as a great “diversidad de rostros” (diversity of masks).³ The Blacks' performance also included a mock battle between the Black actors and a group of Indigenous performers. Described by the conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo (ca. 1496–1584) in chapter 201 of his *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (*True History of the Conquest of New Spain*) (completed ca. 1575), this is also the earliest known American example of a performative genre that became a staple of the African diaspora in the Atlantic: festive Black kings and queens. In Mexico City, there is record of this performance taking place again in 1608, 1610, 1611, 1612, and 1640, in both public ceremonies and communal settings, and as I analyze in this book, it may have been part of an annual celebration among Afro-Mexicans.

¹ See Lopes Don, “Carnivals”; Harris, *Aztecs*, 123–31.

² Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera*, 755; my emphasis. ³ *Ibid.*

Festive Black kings and queens would be found all over the African diaspora and have been widely studied in Brazil and to a lesser extent in the Iberian Peninsula, the River Plate region, Peru, Panama, Cuba, and even New Orleans, New England, and the Danish Caribbean, but not in Mexico.⁴ As the scholarship shows, this performance became a preferred form of festive expression among diasporic Afrodescendants. Through it, Atlantic Blacks sought to recreate parts of their African world as they built a new one. They expressed ancestral and diasporic sovereignty; in sum, they articulated their subjectivities, or how they understood themselves and the world around them. *Sovereign Joy* studies this performative genre among Afro-Mexicans as an expression of their collective agency and selfhood.

In this study, I turn to the only five known texts that describe Afro-Mexican festive kings and queens. Besides Díaz del Castillo's text, I study two other festival accounts. The first is an anonymous "Relación de las fiestas insignes" ("Account of the Great Festival") about Mexico City's 1610 festivities for the beatification of the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius of Loyola. This text describes two performances of Black festive kings (no queens). The second, *Festín hecho por las morenas criollas de la muy noble y muy leal Ciudad de México* (*Dance Performed by the Creole Black Women of the Most Noble and Most Loyal City of Mexico*) (Mexico City, 1640), is unique in many ways. For one, it is the only known colonial festival account solely dedicated to a Black performance. It is also the only text that describes a Black performance for the festivities that normally accompanied the arrival of a new viceroy. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, it is the only text studied here where women are the sole protagonists.

Besides these celebratory texts, I study two court reports that illustrate how colonial officials could use Afro-Mexicans' festive practices against them. These accusatory texts underscore the anti-Black milieu within which Afro-Mexicans practiced their festive traditions. They demonstrate that while colonial officials welcomed, even sought, Black kings and queens for public festivals, the same authorities were displeased, even

⁴ Bastide, *African Civilisations*, 182–4; Bettelheim, "Carnaval of Los Congos"; Craft, *When the Devil Knocks*; "¡Los Gringos Vienen!"; Mello e Souza, *Reis negros*; Kiddy, *Blacks of the Rosary*; Fromont, "Dancing for the King of Congo"; Walker, "The Queen of los Congos"; Fogelman and Goldberg, "El rey de los congos"; Borucki, *From Shipmates to Soldiers*, 99–105; Lund Drolet, *El ritual congo*; Dewulf, *From the Kingdom of Kongo*; Howard, *Changing History*; Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 117–28; Valerio, "The Queen of Sheba's Manifold Body"; "Black Confraternity Members"; "A Mexican *Sangamento?*"

felt threatened by the freedom and autonomy these practices made manifest when staged outside an officially sanctioned festive space.

These accusatory texts have received far more attention than the celebratory ones. For this reason, Afro-Mexican kings and queens have only been studied within the context of colonial Mexico's supposed Black revolts.⁵ In other words, scholars have mainly encountered Afro-Mexican kings and queens in these accusatory documents. This has even included the confraternities (or lay Catholic brotherhoods) that often staged festive kings and queens. By focusing on celebratory texts that explicitly describe the performances of Black festive kings and queens among Mexico City's Black confraternities, *Sovereign Joy* attends to this hitherto unstudied aspect of Afro-Mexican sodalities in early colonial Mexico City. It thus steers the discussion about Black kings and queens in colonial Mexico City in a different direction: to a focus on how this performative tradition allowed Afro-Mexicans to express communal sovereignty and their understanding of themselves and of the world around them to themselves and to their host community, Mexico City.

FESTIVE BLACK KINGS AND QUEENS AND THE ARCHIVE AND THE REPERTOIRE

Moving beyond the dichotomy of the archive and the repertoire proposed by Diana Taylor, I read these texts as performance:⁶ performance of the performances they describe so ekphrastically, on one hand, and, on the other, of "white" colonial discourse and practices, which often framed the performances they describe within what Peter Mason has called the "exotic genre," which often lacked cultural and geographic specificity.⁷ Nonetheless, while the texts studied here are often limited, they are the only repertoire we have of Afro-Mexicans' festive practices. Read critically, they do not just illuminate "white" colonial discourse and practices but, more importantly, give us the only window we have into Afro-Mexicans'

⁵ Examples include Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 71–103; Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*, 93–112; Proctor, "Slave Rebellion"; Tardieu, *Resistencia de los negros en el virreinato de México*, 229–76; Palmer, *Slaves*, 110–44; Masferrer León, "Por las ánimas de negros bozales"; Riva Palacio, *Los treinta y tres negros*; Ngou-Mve, *Lucha y victorias*, 137–45; Martínez, "The Black Blood of New Spain"; Nemser, "Triangulating Blackness."

⁶ See Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*. I am grateful to Xiomara Verence Cervantes-Gómez for helping me work through this idea.

⁷ See Mason, *Infelicities*.

festive practices, as these practices have not survived in Mexico – as they have elsewhere.

The book casts a wide spatial and temporal diasporic net to supplement the Mexican texts, which more often than not provide scant information. This broad diasporic perspective includes the use of texts and visual material from other times and geographies. The purpose of this approach is to move beyond the text to see, albeit through it, what can be recovered of Afro-Mexicans' festive repertoire. While performance has been traditionally understood as ephemeral, irrecoverable, in performance studies, the absence of live performances of colonial Afro-Mexican festive customs forces us to avail ourselves of the archive to reconstruct them.⁸

Since the texts discussed here – perhaps except for *Festín* – give only brief descriptions of the performances (most are one paragraph at most), a diasporic approach can help us reconstruct the performance from a few lines. This is especially true of Chapter 1, where I discuss Díaz del Castillo's account of the 1539 festival and lay out a genealogy of the performance as a prelude to the remainder of the book. Long in use in diasporic African studies, this approach utilizes similar sources from other geographies and periods of the African diaspora in order to reconstruct a Black diasporic practice that is not given in full in the source under scrutiny but rather supplemented in remarkable ways by one or more sources from a different geography and/or period.⁹ Therefore, in order to attempt a relatively full reconstruction of an early modern performance of Black festive kings and queens, I compare Díaz del Castillo's text with the most detailed description of a Black festive king and queen performance to have come down to us, in eighteenth-century Brazil. The continuities in these texts emphasize common – albeit not identical – practices across the African diaspora and, with the first recorded instance of a Black festive king and queen performance in the Americas taking place in Mexico City in 1539, Díaz del Castillo's text marks Mexico as a key early player in the cultural transformations prompted by European expansion into Africa and the Americas.¹⁰ While this approach has its limitations – for one, it does not provide exact parallels, and if not done properly, risks homogenizing the diaspora – it proves useful for reconstructing – however partially – diasporic Black culture from fragmentary sources.

⁸ I am grateful to Xiomara Verence Cervantes-Gómez for helping me work through this idea as well.

⁹ See, for example, Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 117–28; Chasteen, *National Rhythms*, 170.

¹⁰ Heywood, *Central Africans*; Heywood and Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles*; Thornton, *Africa and Africans*.

This diasporic framework allows me to use both textual and visual sources to supplement the Mexican texts' many lacunae or silences. In many cases, the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words holds true, for – albeit not without its own limitations – visual art furnishes details that written texts do not. We cannot obtain a full picture of Afro-Mexican festive culture without examining those visual sources, even if they are from other geographies and periods, as there is no visual record of Afro-Mexican festive king and queen performances. (Therefore, this book's cover comes from early nineteenth-century Brazil.) This approach is warranted by the fact that urban colonial Afro-Mexican culture did not exist in isolation, but rather within the broader network of the Black Atlantic, as these supplementary sources show. Moreover, the texts' ekphrastic nature also invites comparison with the visual record.

While the texts may have myriad lacunae, the images I use to illustrate them give us a resonant picture of Afrodescendants' festive lives, even in bondage, or despite it. Thus, through these images I extend Tina M. Campt's invitation "to 'listen' rather than simply 'look at' images," for they reveal an element "that is critical to Black Atlantic cultural formations: sound."¹¹ In this fashion, we become attuned to what Paul Gilroy has dubbed "the politics of transfiguration" or "the power of music [and performance] in developing black struggles by communicating information, organizing consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency."¹² This book seeks to account for the sounds (and colors) of Afro-Mexicans' festive practices, with the help of their counterparts from other localities of the African diaspora in the Atlantic.

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Chapter 1 studies the Black performances for Mexico City's 1539 celebration of the Truce of Nice. This chapter puts into use the diasporic framework perhaps more than any of the others. Using that framework, I reconstruct the performance from Díaz del Castillo's few lines by situating the performance in its broader Atlantic setting. The chapter identifies the origin of the performance in Africa, concretely the Kingdom of Kongo, and documents its diasporic transformations in the Iberian Peninsula, before the first Blacks who accompanied the first Spanish colonizers of New Spain brought it to the Americas. The chapter thus asserts Mexico

¹¹ Campt, *Listening to Images*, 6. ¹² Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 36–7.

City as a central site of the birth of the Black Atlantic and the cultural transformations set in motion by imperial expansion. The chapter also begins to demonstrate the central role confraternities played in Afrodescendants' diasporic festive practices.

The 1539 performance is surprising for many reasons, not least of which was the fact that it took place less than two years after Blacks in New Spain had been accused of electing a king as part of a plot to “matar a todos los españoles y aserse con la tierra” (“kill all the Spaniards and take over the land”).¹³ This pattern would repeat itself several times throughout the colonial period. In Chapter 2, through a close reading of two accusatory documents, and the Nahua chronicler Domingo Chimalpahin's (1579–1660) version of those events, however, I question colonial authorities' misrepresentation of Black festive kings and queens. These documents detailed the supposed conspiracies Afro-Mexicans plotted in 1608–9 and 1611–12 to rape and kill all the Spaniards, enslave the Indigenous population, and establish an African kingdom. As in 1537, these plots are said to have begun with the election of kings and, these times, queens. In fact, that, and that Portuguese slave traders supposedly overheard the Blacks plotting in “Angolan,” is the only evidence offered for the alleged conspiracies. I contend, however, that the evidence shows that colonial officials, afflicted by an anti-Black racial psychosis or a neurotic fear of Black rebellion, mischaracterized Afro-Mexicans' festive customs, especially when these took place outside the officially sanctioned space of colonial festivals. I situate this psychosis within the broader history of the racialization of Blackness via slavery in the early modern Atlantic to show how Europeans came to conceive of liberty and sovereignty as exclusionary of Black subjects – in other words, how Black subjects became the most-feared objects of colonial psychosis.

Compared with the celebratory texts that make up the bulk of this book, this dynamic presents contradictions that have not been easy to reconcile intellectually. For one, how were Afro-Mexicans able to participate in public festivals so close to being accused of plotting these treasonous conspiracies? What was the colonial thinking that welcomed these subversion-laden performances? Chapters 3 and 4 try to answer these and other questions by showing how Afro-Mexicans were able to leverage this dynamic to their favor, while at the same time presenting it as something that also benefited colonial elites. Chapter 3 concretely studies the

¹³ “Informe del virrey Antonio de Mendoza,” Mexico City, December 10, 1537, AGI, Patronato 184, R. 27, sf.

performances Afro-Mexicans staged for the city's 1610 celebration of the beatification of the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius of Loyola. The text, an anonymous "Relación de las fiestas insignes" ("Account of the Great Festival"), is one of the few sources to directly link confraternities to Afrodescendants' festive practices. While this connection has been assumed in the literature, or deduced from indirect references, this text explicitly connects confraternities to Afrodescendants' festive customs, underscoring the former's centrality to the latter in ways other sources do not. More importantly, however, this chapter explores how Afro-Mexicans engaged with the material culture of baroque festive culture, especially floats. This is demonstrated by the fact that two Black troupes appeared with their kings (no queens) on elegant floats: one shaped like a castle and the other like an elephant. The chapter also explores Afro-Mexican dance and musical practices, as the festivities also included eight Black dances. Yet these are not described in the text. Thus in order to offer some idea of what they may have looked (and sounded) like, I offer an overview of Afro-diasporic dances in the early modern Iberian Atlantic. Finally, from the fact that these performances were staged for a religious celebration, I contend that the Blacks' performances could show how Afro-Mexicans sought the protection of religious orders to guard them from colonial officials' mischaracterization of their festive practices.

Chapter 4 studies the only Mexican text to describe a Black performance for the arrival of a new viceroy, in 1640. The performance is the most complex of all the performances studied in this book. In it, eleven Afro-Mexicanas (women) reenacted the Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon. The women multiplied the queen's body to represent different aspects of their creole identity. I contend that the performance constitutes the most mature expression of Afro-Mexican identity analyzed in this book. I show how the women articulated an identity that incorporated their African, European, and Mexican heritages. This, I argue, underscores the women's and by extension Afro-Mexicans' cultural literacy, or keen awareness of their cultural makeup. I close the chapter by positing that the women or the confraternity or confraternities they most likely represented sponsored the publication of *Festín*, making it the earliest known such example in the Iberian world.

I conclude the book by musing why *Festín* is the last source about Afro-Mexicans' festive practices, when most of the sources from other latitudes are posterior. Through the analysis of a 1699–1702 Inquisition case that shows Mexicans of all "especie" (kind) acting in concert, I propose that the case may demonstrate the natural result of creolization: the

incorporation of different cultures into a new one. Thus, Afro-Mexicans, who had gone from Africans to Afro-Mexicans, become simply Mexicans. This scenario underscores the kind of cultural intimacies Afro-Mexicans developed with other groups and further complicates Mexican narratives of *mestizaje*.

Afro-Mexican history is a well-established field, and this book owes a great deal to the work of scholars such as Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, María Elisa Gutiérrez Velázquez, Verónica Cristina Masferrer León, Nicole von Germeten, Joan Cameron Bristol, Laura Lewis, Herman L. Bennett, Nicolás Ngou-Mve, Pablo Miguel Sierra Silva, Norah Gharala, Úrsula Camba Ludlow, Ben Vinson, and Frank Proctor, among others. These scholars have shown that Afro-Mexicans joined confraternities, or lay Catholic associations; owned homes; sold foodstuffs in the city's markets, plazas, and streets; built many of the city's houses and public monuments; worked as domestic servants and wet nurses, laundresses, seamstresses, cooks, carpenters, tailors, masons, blacksmiths, cobblers, tanners, candle-makers, bricklayers, carriage drivers, builders, and water carriers, among other jobs; were artists and artisans; and, among other things, joined colonial militias defending Spanish interests.¹⁴ More importantly, these scholars have demonstrated that Afro-Mexicans built community, safety nets, and the Afro-creole culture to which Afro-Mexican kings and queens belong.

Sovereign Joy, however, is not a history, but rather a work of literary and cultural analysis, though it seeks to close the gap between these two disciplinary outlooks. Where historians would hold back for lack of evidence, this book casts a wide diasporic net in search of answers. For this reason, many will find my conclusions speculative, but in-depth critical analysis is required if we are to account for the myriad silences and lies about Afro-Mexicans in the colonial archive. In this respect, *Sovereign Joy* follows the intrepid work of literary scholars like Paul Gilroy, Kim Hall, Daphne Brooks, Jerome Branche, Nick Jones, Larissa Brewer-García, Noémie Ndiaye, and Daniel Nemser; historians like Danielle Terrazas Williams, Jennifer Morgan, Marisa Fuentes, Jessica Johnson, and Sasha Turner; and art historians like Paul Kaplan, Kate Rowe, Cécile Fromont, and Ximena Gómez. These scholars have narrowed the divide between historical and cultural analysis and employed

¹⁴ See Bennett, *Africans*; *Colonial Blackness*; Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*; Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*; Sierra Silva, *Urban Slavery*; Vinson, *Bearing Arms*; Palmer, *Slaves*.

creative methodologies to account for the lives and subjectivities of Black people in early modernity.

The book is also indebted to scholars of early modern Black festive culture such as Marina Mello e Souza, Elizabeth Kiddy, Philip A. Howard, Patricia Lund Drolet, Judith Bettelheim, and Jeroen Dewulf, to name a few; scholars of Africa and the African diaspora more broadly, particularly John Thornton, Linda Heywood, James H. Sweet, Carmen Fracchia, Erin Rowe, Erika Edwards, Sherwin Bryant, Carmen Bernand, David Wheat, David Eltis, José Ramón Jouve Martín, Ricardo Raúl Salazar Rey, Alex Borucki, Sarah Rachel O'Toole, Tamara Walker, Michelle McKinley, and Karen Graubart, to name a few; scholars of Black confraternities such as Patricia A. Mulvey, Célia Borges, and Lucilene Reginaldo; historians of race like Robert S. Schwaller, Daniel Nemser, Douglas Cope, María Elena Martínez, Mariselle Meléndez, Geraldine Heng, and Thomas Holt, to name a few; and finally, ethnomusicologists like Peter Fryer and Charles Chasteen. The book then engages with and hopes to contribute to several fields, including Afro-Mexican, literary and cultural, confraternal, festive, critical race, performance, and religious studies as well as art history.

Sovereign Joy studies a varied archive of published and archival sources. As stated earlier in this introduction, only *Festín* was published in its day. Díaz del Castillo's text was published in 1632, but I work with a recent edition of his unpublished draft. "Relación de las fiestas insignes" remained unpublished until 1896 and has not received any attention since then. Moreover, its manuscript version has not survived. Chapter 2 is based on well-known archival sources that have not been studied vis-à-vis Afro-Mexicans' festive practices. As outlined previously, I further rely on a wide range of printed, archival, and visual sources from the Iberian world to supplement the many, inherently violent, silences and falsehoods found in the Mexican sources.

Sovereign Joy seeks to make several interventions. While historians have done remarkable recuperative work, Latin American literary and cultural studies – my home field – has privileged "white" creole lettered culture from its inception, although since the 1980s, the field has paid increasing attention to Indigenous texts and voices.¹⁵ What it has neglected, as the historian María Elena Díaz has lamented, is Black bodies and

¹⁵ See, for example, Adorno, *Polemics of Possession*; Bauer and Mazzotti, *Creole Subjects*; Mazzotti, *The Creole Invention of Peru*; Merrim, *The Spectacular City*; More, *Baroque Sovereignty*; Rama, *La ciudad letrada*.

voices as subjects of cultural analysis.¹⁶ And it is not because those bodies and voices are not to be found in the archive. José Ramón Jouve Martín's *Esclavos de la ciudad letrada* – to give an example framed within colonial Latin American literary and cultural studies – shows us that they abound.¹⁷ While the texts studied here do not always account for Black voices, they all provide us a different way to account for Black bodies – and their corporeal or physical subjectivities – other than the quantitative analysis of slavery, for example.

At the heart of the matter of Black royal courts are New Spain's confraternal groups; Black festive kings and queens were typically performed by confraternity members. While this aspect of Black confraternities has been extensively studied in Brazil and to a much lesser extent in colonial Peru and the River Plate region, the scholarship on Afro-Mexican confraternities has not given significant analysis to the festive royal courts of Afro-Mexican confraternal life.¹⁸ Scholars have linked Afro-Mexican confraternities to Black kings via a 1612 report, one of the accusatory texts I study. This anonymous report contends that the *mayordomos* (leaders) of Mexico City's Black confraternities, who were usually crowned kings, led a plot to kill all the Spanish men, rape the women, and enslave the indigenous population in the *monarquía africana* (African kingdom) they would establish after taking over the land. In Chapter 3, I discuss one of the few texts in the Atlantic that directly links Black confraternities and Black festive king and queen performances. My analysis sheds new light on the kind of festival performances Black confraternities staged in the early modern Atlantic and informs my reading of the two court reports.

After coming up with the title, I discovered that “sovereign joy” coincides with a translation of a line from St. Augustine's *Confessions*: “vera tu [domine] et *summa suavitas*” (“you [Lord] who are the true, the sovereign joy”).¹⁹ Afro-Mexicans' sovereign joy, then, is also theological

¹⁶ Díaz, “Writing Royal Slaves.”

¹⁷ Examples include Sierra Silva, *Urban Slavery*, McKinley, *Fractional Freedoms*, and Walker, *Exquisite Slaves*.

¹⁸ Besides those works listed earlier in this chapter, on Brazil, see Borges, *Esclavos e libertos*; Reginaldo, *Os Rosários dos Angolas*. On Afro-Mexican confraternities, see Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, “Black Brotherhoods,” “Colonial Middle Men?” and “Juan Roque's Donation”; Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*, 93–112; Masferrer León, “*Por las ánimas de negros bozales*.”

¹⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.1. English in Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 40. “*Suavitas*” is rendered as “delight” in Hammond's translation in the Loeb Classical