

Sovereign Joy

Sovereign Joy explores the performance of festive Black kings and queens among Afro-Mexicans between 1539 and 1640. This fascinating study illustrates how the first African and Afro-creole people in colonial Mexico transformed their ancestral culture into a shared identity among Afro-Mexicans, with particular focus on how public festival participation expressed their culture and subjectivities, as well as redefined their colonial condition and social standing. By analyzing this hitherto understudied aspect of Afro-Mexican Catholic confraternities in both literary texts and visual culture, Miguel A. Valerio teases out the deeply ambivalent and contradictory meanings behind these public processions and festivities that often reinscribed structures of race and hierarchy. Were they markers of Catholic subjecthood, and what sort of corporate structures did they create to project standing and respectability? *Sovereign Joy* examines many of these possibilities, and in the process highlights the central place occupied by Africans and their descendants in colonial culture. Through performance, Afro-Mexicans affirmed their being: the sovereignty of joy and the joy of sovereignty.

Miguel A. Valerio is Assistant Professor of Spanish at Washington University in St. Louis. His research focuses on the African diaspora in the literatures and cultures of the Iberian world. This is his first monograph.

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Sovereign Joy

Afro-Mexican Kings and Queens, 1539–1640

MIGUEL A. VALERIO

Washington University in St. Louis



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*For all Afro-cofrades
of the past, present, and future*

And for my cousin Banni

In memoriam

Jorge Miguel López Valerio

1978–2021

Morena criolla:

Carbón con alma, viviré a la fama.

(Coal with a soul, I will live in fame.)

Torres, *Festín*

Aquí estoy, vivo y moreno,

de mi estirpe defensor.

Miguel Hernández

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Preface

Joyful Defiance

Blackness is an immense and defiant joy.

Imani Perry¹

I wrote this book during a turbulent period: between the election of Donald Trump and the COVID-19 pandemic. Black lives continued (and continue) to be wasted – disposed of – by state terror. Thus, from a historical perspective, little had changed in five hundred years. This became ever clearer to me as I wrote Chapter 2. As that chapter explores, in colonial Mexico City, Blacks were summarily executed – hanged and quartered – for their festive practices. The documents at the center of that chapter underscore the *longue durée* of anti-Black state terror. Like the rest of the book, however, that is not the only story it tells. In 1611, a slave owner beat one of his female slaves to death. (In 1611, slave meant Black, and Black, slave, even when it came to “free/d” Blacks.) In protest, more than forty-five hundred Afro-Mexicans carried the woman’s body through Mexico City’s streets demanding justice. As they did so, they danced. White audiences could not understand why they would dance for a mournful cause. This remains true today, from New Orleans funerals to Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. As the Black scholar Imani Perry noted in *The Atlantic* on June 15, 2020: white audiences associate Blackness with tragedy, sorrow, and downtroddenness. As I explore in Chapter 2, and Perry points out, many see Blackness as a curse. As

¹ Perry, “Racism Is Terrible. Blackness Is Not,” *The Atlantic*, June 15, 2020.

Perry contends, this is not to see Blackness as Black people see themselves:

Joy is not found in the absence of pain and suffering. It exists through it. The scourges of racism, poverty, incarceration, medical discrimination, and so much more shape black life. We live with the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow, and with the new creative tides of antiblackness directed toward us and our children. We know the wail of a dying man calling for his mama, and it echoes into the distant past and cuts into our deepest wounds. The injustice is inescapable. So yes, I want the world to recognize our suffering. But I do not want pity from a single soul. Sin and shame are found in neither my body nor my identity. Blackness is an immense and defiant joy.²

As two opinion pieces, one in the *New York Times* and the other in the *Washington Post*, noted a few days before Perry's piece, BLM protesters were seen dancing in the streets of US cities.³ (I too found myself dancing alongside others as we marched.) Like their Mexican forebears, these protesters were channeling their defiance – of a world built on the principle that Black lives do not matter, are not lives – through their bodies-in-motion. They were joyfully defying the world that denies them ontology – even basic philosophically meaningful Being.⁴ Not only that. In 1611, as in other times, Afro-Mexicans, like their counterparts across geographies and time, did not let state terror hamper their festive traditions, going on to replace exiled and deceased festive kings and queens with new ones and making plans for Christmas and Easter. Yet these were expressions not of callousness or cynicism but rather of joyful defiance, affirmations of life. The performances studied in this book express this radical Blackness, and what could be more radical than performing as a sovereign people in a slavocracy?

This book studies the joyful defiance Blacks wrought in Mexico City between 1539 and 1640. It thus documents the first instances of such defiance in the Americas. It studies how that defiance was born and fashioned during its early years and how and why it took roots in the lives of diasporic Afrodescendants. It points to Africa as the source and the diaspora as the cause. Enslaved into a strange new world, not all Africans succumbed to tragedy, sorrow, and

² Ibid.

³ Siobhan Burke, "Dancing Bodies That Proclaim: Black Lives Matter," *New York Times*, June 9, 2020; Sarah L. Kauffman, "In Pain and Rage, a Protester Approached Police. And Then He Danced," *Washington Post*, June 6, 2020.

⁴ See Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness"; Warren, *Ontological Terror*.

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downtroddenness. Instead, they defied the ontology of that world by asserting their humanity through festive customs. They baffled white audiences by being joyful when they were expected to be mournful, by being independent when they were meant to be helpless, and by staging lavish displays that confounded the colonial imagination. This book then is a testament of their joyful defiance, which should serve as an inspiration for those of us still in the struggle. It proclaims that the Black past (and present) is not only one of tragedy – most of all, ontologically – and that to study joy is not to forget pain.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without Lisa Voigt, who has been with it since its inception in 2013; Kathryn Santner's keen editorial eye; Stephanie Kirk, Diana Taylor, Mariselle Meléndez, and Ximena Gómez – my forever *cofrada* – who read and commented on previous drafts; the anonymous readers; the editors of this series, Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews; and Cambridge University Press's team, especially Cecelia Cancellaro and Ruth Boyes. Nor would it have come to fruition without the generous support of The Ohio State University Graduate School, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, Center for Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and Office of Diversity and Inclusion, the Huntington Library, the National Academies, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Institute for Citizens and Scholars, the Ford Foundation, the Renaissance Society of America, my department at Washington University in St. Louis, the Center for the Humanities, the Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity, and Equity, and the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. I am forever grateful to the custodians of the precious sources I was privileged to study in Seville, Lisbon, Mexico City, Salvador, Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, and the Huntington, and to Pamela, Rebeka, and Yolanda for their support.

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Mine has been a long journey marked by traumas and promises – it is therefore defiant to write and seek joy, some may say an ontometaphysical impossibility in our anti-Black world. In thanking my family, I do not thank the usual suspects: the doting mother, the stern father who was never there. I thank my grandmother for sacrificing herself for her children and grandchildren, my aunts, Migue and Marcia, and my older sister, Ana, for playing mother to me, my siblings, More, Juanka, and Leo, and my cousins, David, Ricardo, and Nairobi. My older uncle Reyes played father to us all. Many who have been on this journey with me are still caught in its traumas and cannot read this book. I will be silent on them, as this book will be silent to them, speaking no promises. Catholic rituals have always captured my imagination; in my teens, I immersed myself in them, and priests and nuns, especially Father Al and Sister Claudia – who, among other things, lent me

the first book of Darío's poetry I read – were instrumental in changing my life's trajectory. I am forever grateful to the Redemptorists, who took a gamble on me and lost, as I immersed myself in literature, not theology. Like my first encounter with Father Al in 2000, my first encounter with Latin American literature changed the course of my life and has brought me here. I would like to name some of my first accomplices at this juncture: Myrna, Eduardo, Alina, Marie-Lise, Carmen, and Toscano were my first teachers of Latin American literature in New York, where after leaving the seminary, my great-aunt, Milagros, gave me a launching pad for my life's new direction. In two years in her house, I went from being this unfamiliar kid from the old country to her children, Lisa, Jessica, Priscilla, and Samantha, to becoming their cousin. It was a joy to be with them as they welcomed new members into the family: Shan, Jonas, Haylie, Logan, Jonathan, Jason, Amaya, and Joel. I thank the Huertas and Lenny and Sally for their generosity, model, and mentorship.

My experience in Columbus, Ohio, where this project more than captured my imagination and first spoke to my roots, would not have been as full as it was without the close bonds a group of us developed. Meghan and Robin – my “church” buddies – Lorena, Celia, Fernando, Aintzane, Lee, Oihane, Laura, Alba, Madeline, John – *la familia – sin vosotros, no se hubiere podido. Gracias por todo, con toda el alma.* Patricia, my forever *vecina*, who predated the family, *gracias por su amistad y apoyo continuo en mis tragicomedias.* Thanks also to Omar, Paola, Mónica, Alessandro, Ane, and many others, as well as the professors who welcomed us into their homes. Although I met them in New York, in Dayton, Ohio, I had a family in Mamma, La Ron, and Brittany. In St. Louis, I have benefited immensely from Diana, Christina, Bahia (*mi gente!*), Mayela, Stève, Erik, Fran, Hedy, Ana, Clara, Juan Pablo, Elena, Luna, and Eliza and Caio's friendships. At Washington University, besides the support of my Roman Language and Literatures colleagues, I have enjoyed the collegiality of Leo, Luis, Cynthia, and Rebecca. At home, where I write, and in my private life with its ups and downs and sleepless nights, I have had the reassurance of AJ's unwavering love and faith. Your dedication to occupational therapy has been an inspiring example. Finally, I thank your parents, Dinah, Jim, and Michelle, for their love and generosity.

I dedicate this book to all *Afro-cofrades* of the past, present, and future, who wrought, continue to fashion, and will bring about new forms of joyful defiance, to my cousin Banni – may she find the joyful today she seeks – and to the memory of my brother More, whose Black ~~being~~ was too meagerly dotted with joy. May they forgive me for its shortcomings.

Abbreviations

AASSB	Arquivo da Arquidiocese de São Salvador da Bahia
AGCA	Archivo General de la Corona de Aragón
AGI	Archivo General de Indias
AGN	Archivo General de la Nación, México
AHAM	Archivo Histórico de la Archidiócesis de México
AHDF	Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México
AHS	Archivo Histórico de Sevilla
AHU	Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino
AMB	Axiu Municipal de Barcelona
ANB	Arquivo Nacional do Brasil
ANTT	Arquivo Nacional Torre Tombo
APEB	Arquivo Público do Estado de Bahia
AVM	Archivo de la Villa de Madrid
BCC	Biblioteca Civica Centrale, Turin
BNB	Biblioteca Nacional do Brasil
BNE	Biblioteca Nacional de España
BNF	Bibliothèque nationale de France
BNP	Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal
BPR	Biblioteca del Palacio Real, Madrid
HL	The Huntington Library
RNB	Rouen nouvelles bibliothèques
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