A line from St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, “Vera tu [domine] et summa suavitas” (You [Lord] who are the true, the sovereign joy), which Miguel Valerio found after coming up with the title of his book, sheds light on the two main concepts through which *Sovereign Joy* explores Afro-Mexican kings and queens in New Spain’s festive culture. The book focuses on three events in Mexico City that featured performances by Afrodescendants: the 1539 celebration of the Truce of Nice; the 1610 festivities for the beatification of the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius of Loyola; and the dances that accompanied the arrival of the new viceroy, don Diego López Pacheco Cabrera y Bobadilla, in 1640. According to Valerio, these festive practices constitute an avenue to capture Afro-Mexicans’ political agency, since he views performance as a body language that allows Afrodescendants to articulate a “discursive sovereignty,” that is to say, the capacity “to tell ourselves and others about ourselves” (p. 11). In this sense, the joyful dimension of Afro-Mexicans’ festivities—achieved through the use of dance and music and the display of sumptuous paraphernalia—is more than an expression of mere emotion but is rather conceived as a means of increasing “one’s power to affect and be affected” (p. 13).

These lines of interpretation might seem surprising in a context characterized by unequal power relationships between enslaved Black peoples and owners, the emergence of a racialized discourse on Blackness, and the growing criminalization of Afrodescendants in the governance of New Spain. But Valerio takes these factors into account in his analysis, especially in chapter 2, which focuses on the supposed 1608–9 and 1611–12 Black conspiracies against the Spaniards. He convincingly shows how the fear of Black rebellions led the colonial authorities to mischaracterize Afro-Mexicans’ festive customs and to unleash a fierce repression against the alleged conspirators. One of the book’s challenges consists precisely in unraveling the contradictions of imperial rule and highlighting how Afro-Mexicans took advantage of interstitial spaces to negotiate their position in the urban context of Mexico City.

To do so, Valerio bridges the gap between two types of sources, celebratory and accusatory texts, which have been treated separately in historiography. Within the first category falls chapter 201 of Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (ca. 1575), the anonymous “Relación de las fiestas insignes” (1610), and *Festín hecho por las morenas criollas de la muy noble muy leal Ciudad de México* (1640), written by the secular cleric Nicolas de Torres, who also composed the Latin texts that accompanied Black women’s dances. The second one consists of the audience’s “Relación del alzamiento” (1612), and the letters to Philip III authored by the magistrate López de Azoca. Maybe more importantly, Valerio makes use of what he calls a “diasporic approach” in order to fill the multiple lacunae and silences of the colonial archive in which Black voices are largely absent or misrepresented. The book therefore...
establishes a constant and fascinating dialogue with scholarship on the Black Atlantic, which finds its justification in Afrodiasporic experiences across Africa, Europe, and America.

This approach allows Valerio to incorporate in the analysis a wide range of textual and visual sources, especially from sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Iberia, Kongo, and Brazil, which not only sheds new light on Afro-Mexican festive culture but also inserts New Spain into the Black Atlantic. In this sense, *Sovereign Joy* makes a major contribution in showing the central role that Mexico City played in shaping Afro-American history and cultural development, without disregarding local specificities. The insertion and analysis of a significant number of illustrations is worth emphasizing since, following Diana Taylor, Valerio views performance as a "nonarchival form of knowledge transfer" (p. 14) that visual sources can help unravel.

The book includes an insightful analysis of how Afro-Mexicans’ confraternities, or lay Catholic brotherhoods, were pivotal in socially and materially supporting Afro-Mexican festive kings and queens. Valerio traces the roots of this tradition back to early modern Iberia and their role in taking care of the sick and dying, in supporting Black litigants in court, and, more broadly, in negotiating Afrodescendants’ Catholic identity and defining the contours of their political agency. But Valerio also makes a necessary detour to Kongo to explore the African precedents of Afro-Mexican festive culture. In this sense, he makes a point of showing how the Kongolese royal pageantry and the sagamento, an African martial dance, bore the marks of contact with Portuguese material and political culture as well as Christianity. According to Valerio, then, these precedents might have inspired Afro-Iberians and merged with Moorish and Christian battles and European carnivalesque inversions before being refashioned in Mexico City.

There is little doubt that *Sovereign Joy* is part of the current effort to rethink the African-European encounter, as Herman Bennett puts it, "beyond that of superior-inferior power dynamic, but rather as one that entails negotiations" (p. 11). Valerio convincingly shows "how Afro-Mexicans used festive culture to navigate colonial psychosis and Iberian racial ideology to redefine their position in colonial society" (p. 125). He brings to light the paradoxes of imperial rule, and how thin the line was between what was tolerated and what was criminalized. The last chapter, focused on the discourses that accompanied the 1640 dances for the new viceroy, is particularly illustrative of the inherent ambiguities and constant tensions of Afro-Mexicans’ agency in a context marked by both structural asymmetric power relationships and cultural intimacies. How indeed to disentangle Black women’s agency and their bodies being transformed into symbols of creole identity, a claim of cultural difference and political agency on behalf of the local elite, and advice to the viceroy regarding the need to act with prudence in an unknown territory? *Sovereign Joy* makes a significant contribution to addressing this complex methodological challenge.
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