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Becoming “the First Free Town in the Americas”:
Claiming and Celebrating Blackness in Yanga, Veracruz

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History 101E
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“Today, as authentic citizens of Yanga, we should feel pride in this heroic deed and proclaim in one voice, with courage and valor, Yanga, the First Free Town of America!” –Erik Querol Ortiz, *Revista Voces Libres*, 2004¹

The small town of Yanga, located a few miles east of the city of Córdoba in Central Veracruz, is “the First Free Town in the Americas”—at least, that is how it identifies itself.² It has earned this title because it is the successor community to what was once called San Lorenzo de los Negros, the first maroon town to be ceded territorial sovereignty in the Western Hemisphere.³ Founded in the late sixteenth century by an African-born escapee from slavery (maroon) named Yanga, the community came to consist of several hundred escaped formerly enslaved people who lived freely in the mountainous jungles near the city of Orizaba. In 1608, when the maroons became too much of a threat to the colonial order, the Spanish government sent an expedition to subdue them. Yanga and his compatriots fought the Spanish to a stalemate, signing a treaty with the viceroy in which the maroons would be allowed to live autonomously, provided they did not allow further escaped slaves to join their ranks.⁴ The community was christened San Lorenzo de los Negros (Saint Lawrence of the Blacks) and maintained relative

1. Erik Querol Ortiz, “Libertad. 400 Años Después,” *Voces Libres*, (Yanga: September, 2004), 16. “Hoy como verdaderos ciudadanos yanguenses debemos de sentirnos orgullosos de esta gesta heroica y proclamar en una sola voz, con coraje y valor, Yanga, Primer Pueblo Libre de America!” (All translations are the author’s unless otherwise indicated).

2. The actual historical veracity of this claim is complicated and not directly relevant to this study. San Basilio de Palenque, a maroon community founded in Colombia by Benkos Biohó, today claims the very same title, though the comparative chronologies are unclear and do not match up exactly. One can compare dates of the leader’s escape from slavery, the community’s formal establishment, defeat of the Spanish military, or recognition from the Crown to arrive at different dates of origin. This discussion assumes that Indigenous communities should not be considered in the running for the title of “free town.”

3. Jiménez Ramos, Marisela. “Black Mexico: Nineteenth-Century Discourses of Race and Nation.” Brown University, 2009, 208.

<https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:135/PDF/>.

4. Juan Laurencio, *Campaña contra Yanga en 1608*, ed. Leonardo Pasquel, Colección Suma Veracruzana. Serie Historiografía (México: Citlalpetl, 1974).

freedom from colonial intervention for the next century, eventually peaceably becoming part of the Mexican state with Independence in 1820 and the abolition of slavery in 1829.



[Figure 1: Map view of Yanga, Google Maps, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Yanga,+Ver.,+Mexico/@18.9581431,-96.6891831,10z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x85c4f253bb79dbab:0x575bf63f4e84463a!8m2!3d18.8302259!4d-96.7993059>. The map has been edited and cropped to emphasize the Municipality of Yanga (outlined) in relationship to the colonial cities Orizaba, Córdoba, and Veracruz City, on the Caribbean Coast.]

In the twenty-first century, the memory and significance of Yanga's triumph over the colonial slaveholding regime remains a powerful symbol within the municipality that now bears his name. In 2004, residents of the town, now known by the demonym Yanguenses, came together to publish a magazine entitled *Voces libres (Free voices)*, in which they wrote evocatively about the meaning of Yanga's rebellion for their own local culture and identity. Erik Querol Ortiz, the magazine's editor, argued that the history taught in Mexican textbooks was wrong to identify Miguel Hidalgo y Castillo as the founding father of the Mexican nation: it was Yanga, "he who gives his name to our town, who was denied his freedom in Africa and brought

to America in slavery” who was “truthfully the first liberator in New Spain.”⁵ Through poetry and passionate essays, the contributors of *Voces libres* argued for a reframing of all of Mexican history through the lens of Yanga’s struggle for freedom, which occurred centuries before Independence, Abolition, and the Revolution. Yet *Voces libres* also draws attention to a contradiction that sets Yanga outside of the typical model of a twenty-first century maroon town: to hear the contributors tell it, there are no longer Black people in Yanga. Contributor Ismael Paz exhorts readers to “stop at [Yanga’s] central park, where you will not find people of Black skin, but people who are hospitable and ready to receive you with open arms.”⁶ *Voces libres*, a twenty-page magazine published by the residents of a peripheral Mexican town, is a tantalizing introduction to a community with a unique and complex history. Yanga is virtually unknown outside Mexico and yet it is the purported birthplace of freedom in the Americas; it is a town founded by maroons and yet it claims to have no Black residents.

This paper takes seriously Querol Ortiz’s invitation to position Yanga at the center of Mexican history. Yanga distinguishes itself from almost all other communities across Mexico because its identity is formulated around and in relation to a conceptualization of Blackness as Mexican. Scholars have persuasively shown that the deliberate erasure of Blackness in the cultural, historical, and discursive realms characterizes post-Independence Mexico. Through various technologies of silencing, Mexican historians, politicians, and philosophers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have consistently elided the reality that more than a

5. Querol Ortiz, “Libertad,” 16. “aquél que da su nombre a nuestro pueblo, que fue privado de su libertad en África y traído a América en calidad de esclavo es verdaderamente el primer libertador en la Nueva España.”

6. Ismael Paz, “Yanga: Algo más por descubrir,” in *Voces Libres*, 11. “Basta con llegar a su parque central, donde no encontrará gente de piel negra, pero si hospitalaria y dispuesta a recibirlo con los brazos abiertos”

quarter million African slaves were trafficked to colonial Mexico, that people of African descent have had a profound impact on the country's culture and development, and that they continue to constitute a vital part of Mexico today.⁷

In Veracruz, especially, Blackness is often neglected as a part of history and culture. The Port of Veracruz was the major connection between New Spain and the Caribbean, and enormous numbers of Africans were held in captivity in the state to work its sugar-growing haciendas. Yet it is only in limited ways that the history of Africans and people of African descent has been recognized in Veracruz. To this day, many Veracruzans balk at the implication that they themselves may be Black. The region's culture is occasionally associated with something "Afro-Caribbean" or "Afro-Mexican" in hesitant, strategic ways that maintain a level of distance between Veracruzans themselves and Blackness.⁸ This erasure has had impact on San Lorenzo de los Negros' history as well: eighteenth-century colonial authorities swiftly moved to change the town's name to San Lorenzo de Cerralvo, stripping it of the distinctive racial marker "de los Negros" (of the Blacks).⁹ There is a potent tension between the town's local history and the regional and national history that surrounds it. It is a community born of Black marronage in a state that has a tendency to avoid its uncomfortable history of anti-Blackness and slavery.

Despite a national culture working actively to erase Blackness, the town of San Lorenzo de Cerralvo/Yanga's name, public engagement with its history, and self-articulation during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries defy the suggestion that Blackness has been erased there. Contrary to prevailing understandings of Afro-Mexico, Blackness maintained significant

7. Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade – Estimates, Slave Voyages, accessed 30 March 2021, <https://slavevoyages.org/estimates/9OJxRBSn>.

8. Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

9. Jiménez Ramos, "Black Mexico," 234.

historical presence at the local level long before the emergence of Afro-Mexican cultural mobilization and activism in the 1980s and 90s. Therefore, Yanga is an excellent local case study through which various questions of Afro-Mexican historical memory, race, and identity formation can be explored. In a place like Yanga, where Blackness has not been stamped out of civic culture, how has it been understood? How might it have been appropriated and reimagined by non-Black newcomers to the town as demographics and cultural attitudes towards Blackness have shifted across the twentieth century? In short, I am seeking to answer how Yanguenses came to identify themselves as the “First Free Town in the Americas”: how have they claimed, celebrated, and articulated this bold communal identity in relationship to the history and meaning of Blackness in Mexico?

Yanga’s history is both a local story of communal identity formation and a microcosm of the twentieth century’s shifting definitions of “Afro-Mexico.” In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a series of Revolutionary changes to Mexican society and cultural policy began to glorify Black resistance as part of a nationalist, de-racialized, identity. In 1932, the state government drew on this Revolutionary interpretation of history to rename San Lorenzo de Cerralvo after Yanga. Residents of the newly rechristened town, most of whom were relative newcomers to the area and not descendants of the maroons themselves, began to explore and articulate their own relationship to their community’s history of marronage. Through this process, local actors defined an increasingly coherent identity for their town, which involved the celebration of Yanga in public art and other institutionalized forms of commemoration. Beginning in 1976, residents began celebrating a yearly Carnival which became an annual expression of the town’s unique history and identity. As outside interest in Yanga increased, especially from culture workers and academics drawn to the town’s unique history, the Carnival

began to imitate more touristically-oriented institutions that intentionally celebrated an aesthetic deemed “Afro-Mexican.” By incorporating a variety of Afro-Caribbean influences into the Carnaval, performers and organizers joined their town to the emerging movement celebrating Afro-Mexican identity. At the same time, they embraced a type of commodified, strategic aesthetic and stylization of Blackness that was meant to appeal to non-Black outsiders. In the present, as Mexico continues to negotiate how to visibilize and properly acknowledge the vital role of people of African descent in its national past and present, Yanga’s local self-articulation shows both the power and permanence of Blackness as an identity, memory, and historical force in Mexican culture.

Nationally, Mexico is best understood as a Mestizo nation in constant negotiation with the fact that the presence of Blackness within the nation challenges its system of racial categorization, known as *mestizaje* (mixture). Within the ideology of mestizo nationalism that Mexico embraced after the 1920 Revolution, there was no space for either Blackness or an admission of racism within Mexico. Revolutionary ideologues constructed the nation as consisting entirely of the descendants of Iberians and Indigenous Americas.¹⁰ Mestizaje purports to be a nonracist ideology that precludes the existence of discrimination, but Blackness has been systematically excluded from coequal status alongside Indigeneity and whiteness within its framework.¹¹ The insistence on these oversimplified binary “roots” (raíces) of Mexican racial

10. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race*, 15.

11. Elisabeth Cunin, ed., *Mestizaje, diferencia y nación: Lo “negro” en América Central y el Caribe* (Mexico: Centro de estudios mexicanos y centroamericanos, 2010); Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, *African Mexicans and the Discourse on Modern Nation* (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/txu.059173016614447>; Regina Martínez Casas et al., “The Different Faces of Mestizaje: Ethnicity and Race in Mexico,” in *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America*, ed. Edward Telles (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), <https://muse-jhu-edu.libproxy.berkeley.edu/chapter/1723672>.

identity ignore the indispensable role of African and African-descended people in building and participating in the national project. Some scholar-activists from Veracruz, such as the ethnologist Luz María Martínez Montiel, have sought to expand the limiting framework of mestizaje by positioning Africa as Mexico's "third root" (la tercera raíz) alongside its European and Indigenous roots, but these efforts are only beginning to show signs of popular success.¹² A mestizo racial imaginary has maintained enormous power within the minds of Veracruzans, who consistently draw on mestizaje's framework of non-Blackness in their own racial formation.¹³ Yanga emerges as a counterexample to this clearly established dynamic of erasure and invisibility. It is a community in which Blackness has retained meaning in the public sphere. Yanga's celebrations of the role of Africans and people of African descent in the formative history of the nation show how mestizaje's framework can be subverted, adapted, and re-articulated at the local level.

Despite its unique history and immense potential as a site of historical study, Yanga has been overlooked by scholars of maroon societies in the Americas, who have generally understood the community to possess a distinctive character only during the colonial period.¹⁴ In

12. A representative example of this intervention, which characterizes nearly all of Martínez Montiel's decades of work in the field, is *Afroamérica III. La tercera raíz. Presencia africana en México* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2017).

13. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race*, 57-9; Hettie Malcomson, "The Expediency of Blackness: Racial Logics and Danzón in the Port of Veracruz, Mexico," in *Afro-Latin@s in Movement: Critical Approaches to Blackness and Transnationalism in the Americas*, ed. Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, Jennifer A. Jones, and Tianna S. Paschel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016), 35–59, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59874-5_2.

14. Richard Price's canonical text *Maroon Societies* includes one brief study of Yanga's revolt by David M. Davidson. Davidson's piece, entitled "Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico" is now dated (it was first published in 1966) and concerns itself mostly with establishing the specific timeline of the revolt. David M. Davidson, "Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico" in *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* ed. Richard Price (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

contrast to other maroon communities, such as Brazil's Quilombo dos Palmares or Colombia's San Basilio de Palenque, Yanga is shockingly underexplored in the historical literature. The drama of military conflict between a small band of maroons and the Spanish Empire is clearly most interesting to scholars of colonial Latin America, who tend to cite Yanga's revolt as part of a broader argument about racial repression in Mexico during the 17th century.¹⁵ Citing from only himself, Historian Patrick Carroll writes that Yanga's followers "lost their racial distinctiveness as non-Afro-descended people intermingled with them. Within a few generations the town became racially and ethnically indistinguishable from other settlements that dotted the area."¹⁶ My project is predicated on a rejection of this claim, at least in part. While San Lorenzo de los Negros did not maintain an immediately recognizable "maroon identity" in the mold of—for example—San Basilio de Palenque, the community's unique history set it on a radically different trajectory from its neighbors throughout the following centuries.¹⁷ Yanga must be understood as a community in search of how best to claim and celebrate a maroon past, whose post-colonial history is unique in its specific relationship to Blackness.

In order to account for both the complexities of Black local self-identification in Mexico and the complex cultural history of Afro-Mexico's formation in the twentieth century, this study positions itself somewhere between the diverging methodological approaches of anthropologist

15. Jane G. Landers, "Cimarrón and Citizen: African Ethnicity, Corporate Identity, and the Evolution of Free Black Towns in the Spanish Circum-Caribbean," in *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Jane G. Landers and Barry M. Robinson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 121-132; Jean-Pierre Tardieu, *Resistencia de los negros en el virreinato de México (siglos XVI-XVII)* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2017), 143-170; Frank "Trey" Proctor III, "Slave Rebellion and Liberty in Colonial Mexico," in *Black Mexico: Race and Society from Colonial to Modern Times*, ed. Ben Vinson III and Matthew Restall (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009), 24-27.

16. Patrick J. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz: Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development* (University of Texas Press, 2001), 147.

17. Jiménez Ramos, "Black Mexico," 227-246.

Laura A. Lewis and historian Theodore Cohen. A rigorously ethical ethnographer dedicated to respectfully and authentically representing the voices of her subjects in her work, Lewis undertook years-long research in a community in Oaxaca's Costa Chica, a region with many communities that trace their heritage back to enslaved Africans. Her 2012 monograph *Chocolate and Corn Flour* argues for the need to scrupulously adhere to a local understanding of how race and identity are understood in Mexico. Her ethnography is also a harsh polemic against most existing scholarship on what is often called "Afro-Mexico," claiming that scholarly treatment of the subject and related culture work (including much activism) fails to properly understand the racial and communal identity of people who are often considered "Afro-Mexican" by academic and government outsiders.¹⁸ This study strives to adopt a similarly local approach to Yanga as Lewis affords to San Nicolás on the Costa Chica, though it is obviously limited by duration of the study (twelve months as opposed to years) and the ability to be physically present in Yanga, building personal relationships and bonds of trust.

I also draw on many of the same methods as the historian Theodore Cohen in his 2020 book *Finding Afro-Mexico*. Cohen, as an intellectual and cultural historian, adopts a vastly different attitude towards "Afro-Mexico" than Lewis. Explicitly rejecting a local approach, Cohen explores the ways in which intellectuals, politicians, and culture workers across Mexico (though generally based in Mexico City) constructed an idea of what Afro-Mexico has been. He describes this as a process of "finding" that occurred in conversation with hemispheric Black movements and national ideologies. Cohen interrogates the creation of a racialized national ideology by noting transnational influences on Mexican thought and conceptualizations of

18. Laura A. Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour: History, Race, and Place in the Making of "Black" Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2012), <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/16157/>.

Blackness.¹⁹ This study uses many of Cohen's methods and attempts to focus his national inquiry down to the local scale, exploring the ways in which the concept of "Afro-Mexico" has been invented, imagined, and claimed by local actors during the twentieth century. "Afro-Mexico," as Cohen describes it, is a concept in the historical imaginary of Mexico that must be found through methods such as anthropological research, archeology, public art, and transnational intellectual thought. Afro-Mexico was and has been found in Yanga since the early twentieth century through many of the same methods others employed nationally but along a trajectory undeniably shaped by Yanga's unique historical connection to marronage and slavery.

Nationalizing Blackness

On November 5, 1932, San Lorenzo de Cerralvo, Veracruz, became Yanga, Veracruz. Once named for a colonial viceroy, the town was suddenly the most visible legacy of the legendary maroon leader and most prominent African in Mexican history.²⁰ Shortly after the end of the Mexican Revolution and half a century before the acceleration of attempts to build an Afro-Mexican consciousness regionally, a town on the economic and cultural margins of the state of Veracruz found itself positioned directly and explicitly within the historical lineage of Blackness in Mexico. In this section, I analyze the major actors who made Yanga into a national hero through de-racialized and liberal interpretations of his marronage as a symbol of Mexico's history of resistance to "bondage," regardless of race. This historiographic process, undertaken nationally, set the stage for San Lorenzo de Cerralvo's transformation into Yanga and consolidated a claim to Yanga's legacy within the town.

19. Theodore W. Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico: Race and Nation after the Revolution*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

20. "Yanga," Enciclopedia de Los Municipios y Delegaciones de México, accessed August 31, 2020, <http://www.inafed.gob.mx/work/enciclopedia/EMM30veracruz/municipios/30196a.html>.

The state decree changing the name of the town built on various elite Mexican dialogues that glorified Yanga as a liberal icon and national symbol. In the years leading up to the 1910 outbreak of Revolution, intellectuals and politicians in urban sites like Córdoba, Veracruz City, and Mexico City occasionally turned to Yanga to justify the innate connection between Mexican identity and a struggle for freedom. Drawing on the racial doctrine of *mestizaje*, in which any and all racial mobilization was folded into nationalist identity, these thinkers and leaders used Yanga to demonstrate how “slave resistance was part of Mexico’s revolutionary spirit.”²¹ This tendency of Mexican discourse to relegate any discussion of the enslavement or presence of Africans in Mexico to discussion of a few, discrete, heroic figures (which Hernández Cuevas calls the “mythification” of Black people in Mexico) has been well-documented on a national level.²² In so doing, these thinkers aligned Yanga the man with nationalist, liberal goals. Elite thinkers transformed Yanga the man, his marronage, and his victory over the colonial military into a de-racialized story of Mexican triumph over bondage. In order to belong to the pantheon of national heroes, Yanga became a Mexican icon, not a Black icon. It was only after this de-racialization had taken place that his name could be given to a municipality.

Yanga was first de-racialized and transformed into a national symbol in the late nineteenth century, as the mestizo nationalist project advanced and sought to create a coherent canon of Mexican icons.²³ The pre-Revolutionary statesman Vicente Riva Palacio was responsible for presenting a definitive account and preliminary interpretation of Yanga’s revolt

21. Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico*, 63.

22. Hernández Cuevas, *African Mexicans*, 78; Jiménez Ramos, “Black Mexico,” 158; Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico*, 63.

23. Claudio Lomnitz, “The Partido Liberal Mexicano and the Idea of Mexico” (1810 ~ 1910 ~ 2010 Mexico’s Unfinished Revolutions, University of California, Berkeley, 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIW9CjWUqmo>;

to a national Mexican audience during the late nineteenth century. An influential national politician and the grandson of Mexico's first president of African descent, Vicente Guerrero, Riva Palacio was also an accomplished historian of Mexico. His works span the entirety of Mexican history and contained what Cohen describes as "the most comprehensive history of Yanga and his followers" written prior to 1930.²⁴ Riva Palacio by no means centered Africans and people of African descent in Mexico's history, but his work does stand out for his unequivocal affirmation of the impact that enslaved people had on the nation's colonial past, especially in colonial Veracruz. His narrative generally followed the only primary source of Yanga's revolt written by the Jesuit Juan Laurencio, though unlike Father Laurencio, Riva Palacio emphasized the brutality of the Spanish Crown against enslaved people.²⁵ In other works, he would further embellish the story with dramatic dialogue and description of Yanga's power to inspire a yearning for freedom "like all men" among his followers.²⁶ Riva Palacio fit the mold of the nineteenth-century Mexican historian who was as much politician and nationalist myth-maker as historian, and his use of Yanga to advance a nationalist project took root.²⁷ Through Riva Palacio's writing, Yanga's story disseminated across late nineteenth-century intellectual and political circles as a tale of Mexican resistance to Spanish colonialism and a sign of humanity's innate love of freedom.

24. Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico*, 63.

25. Vicente Riva Palacio, *México á Través de Los Siglos. Historia General y Completa Del Desenvolvimiento Social, Politico, Religioso, Militar, Artístico, Científico y Literario de México Desde La Antigüedad Más Remota Hasta La Época Actual ...*, vol. 2, 5 vols. (Barcelona, 1888), 549-50. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t7np1xc8v>.

26. Vicente Riva Palacio, *El Libro Rojo, 1520-1867.*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (México: A. Pola, [1869] 1905), 353-68. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015030319829>.

27. Erika Pani, "The Weight of the Past: History and the Invention of Mexican Identity" (1810 ~ 1910 ~ 2010 Mexico's Unfinished Revolutions, University of California, Berkeley, 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIW9CjWUqmo>.

From these national circles, the Veracruzán statesman Enrique Herrera Moreno brought liberal narratives of Yanga to the regional level in the 1890s. Herrera Moreno was a lifelong resident and prominent leader of Córdoba, the nearest city to San Lorenzo de Cerralvo. The Viceroyalty founded Córdoba in 1618, shortly after Yanga's victory, as a means of securing the region from perceived maroon threats to Imperial interests.²⁸ For Herrera Moreno, this interconnected history made Yanga's insurrection part of Córdoba's founding myth, uniting an established heroic story of Mexico's past with the region's local identity.²⁹ To be a Veracruzán was to be an heir to Yanga's natural spirit of independence and resistance to foreign brutality. In the late nineteenth century, such claims were patriotic articulations of a regional identity consistent with the broad sense that the Mexican people had succeeded in throwing off foreign yokes since Independence in 1821.³⁰ With the country's explosion into Revolution in 1910, however, being the heir of Yanga's legacy came to mean something very different for many Veracruzans.

The Mexican Revolution (generally periodized as 1910-1920) upended Mexican culture and identity in dramatic ways, producing a discursive environment that glorified subaltern resistance and transformed local identity expressions nationwide. Two themes of Revolutionary social reform—a push towards secularization and the exaltation of popular, “authentically Mexican” rebellion—caused a re-interpretation of Yanga's revolt and led to San Lorenzo de Cerralvo's renaming. Anti-clerical and secularizing policies fell under the massive scope of reforms branded as “Revolutionary” in the 1920s and 30s, as leaders of Revolutionary armies

28. Jiménez Ramos, *Black Mexico*, 228.

29. Enrique Herrera Moreno, *El Cantón de Córdoba: Apuntes de Geografía, Estadística, Historia, Etc.*, (Córdoba: Tip. de R. Valdecilla y comp., 1892), 84
<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433081702452>.

30. Lomnitz, “The Partido Liberal Mexicano and the Idea of Mexico.”

consolidated power and began the work of governing. In the state of Veracruz, these reforms were enacted by the populist veteran Adalberto Tejeda, who governed for two non-consecutive terms ending in 1932. Tejeda was a strong secularist who implemented various laws that restricted the political and economic authority of the Catholic Church while rooting out clerical influence in Veracruz's social, educational, and cultural spheres.³¹ Shortly after surviving an assassination attempt by a dissatisfied Catholic, Tejeda—a dominant force in the state legislature—oversaw the removal of religious names from towns across the state.³² San Lorenzo de Cerralvo (Saint Lawrence of Cerralvo) was one of a long list of towns whose religious name was in need of change. To find a new name, the government in Xalapa looked to another hallmark of Revolutionary rhetoric: the glorification of subaltern rebellion leaders.

Yanga was chosen as the new name for San Lorenzo de Cerralvo because it was a name of local importance that fit the mold of other new names that celebrated individual insurgent leaders from Mexico's past. This tactic can be seen clearly in a brief survey of the new names given to other towns changed by the Decree of November 5th, 1932. San Lorenzo's neighboring municipality San Juan de la Punta saw its name changed to Cuitláhuac, after the penultimate ruler of the Aztecs, on the same day.³³ Across the state, towns like Santa Rosa Necoxtla and Santiago Huatascos were renamed after strike leaders (Camerino Mendoza) and assassinated

31. Andrew Grant Wood, "Adalberto Tejeda of Veracruz: Radicalism and Reaction," in *State Governors in the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1952: Portraits in Conflict, Courage, and Corruption*, ed. Jürgen Buchenau et al. (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 86, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/berkeley-ebooks/detail.action?docID=466752>.

32. Wood, "Adalberto Tejeda," 88; Romana Falcón, Soledad García Morales, and María Eugenia Terrones, *La Semilla En El Surco: Adalberto Tejeda y El Radicalismo En Veracruz, (1883-1960)*, 1st ed. (El Colegio de México, 1986), 199, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv26d906.9>.

33. "Cuitláhuac," Enciclopedia de los Municipios y Delegaciones de México, accessed October 4, 2020, <http://www.inafed.gob.mx/work/enciclopedia/EMM30veracruz/index.html>.

socialist governors (Carrillo Puerto), respectively.³⁴ Yanga, as a celebrated symbol of Mexican liberty, fit the model of worthy namesakes for newly secularized towns. For pre-Revolutionary liberals like Riva Palacio and Herrera Moreno, Yanga was a symbol of humanity's innate desire to be "free," in all its de-racialized liberal meaning. During the Revolutionary period, these interpretations of his significance led to his sudden institutional commemoration in the town's primary identity marker: its name.

By consequence of various national trends, understandings of who Yanga was and what his rebellion meant that had been formulated in Mexico City, Xalapa, and Córdoba came crashing down to the local level in the town formerly known as San Lorenzo de Cerralvo. By 1932, few of the town's residents could claim to be descendants of Yanga and his followers, but they quickly took ownership of the name that their home had been given by the state government in Xalapa. They participated eagerly in a process of commemorating, recreating, and claiming Yanga's story as their own, consolidating their connection to his legacy and articulating their own local identity as "the first free town in the Americas."

Claiming Blackness

The people who found themselves newly-christened as Yanguenses in 1932 claimed their own identity in relation to a formulation of Blackness that relied heavily on earlier liberal, national, and Revolutionary constructions. The residents who dominated Yanga's cultural life in the twentieth century and drove this imaginative work of claiming Yanga's legacy as their own were generally non-Black relative newcomers to the area without direct familial ties to the region's colonial history. However, the history and significance of Blackness as Mexican became

34. José Luis Melgarejo Vivango, *Toponimia de Los Municipios Veracruzanos* (Jalapa, Ver.: EDITIV, 1950), 13-4, <https://www.uv.mx/colecciones/melgarejovivango/pdf/ToponimiaVeracruz.pdf>.

central to the worldview and self-articulation of these residents as they crafted a unique local identity. In this section, I show how Yanguenses claimed Black history as the anchor of their communal identity while not considering themselves Black, appropriating Yanga's story and inventing a relationship to him that relied not on ties of racial solidarity but on an interpretation of Yanga as a founding father and progenitor of liberty. Yanga became an icon of local identity that belonged to everyone in the municipality; Yanguenses creatively claimed and appropriated his heroic story as their own.

The town's cultural and symbolic relationship to its namesake was most powerfully articulated by Leonardo Ferrandón, a lifetime resident of the town who published a memoir in 1963 entitled *Apuntes históricos de mi pueblo, recordando a Yanga: ayer y hoy* (*Historical Notes on my Town, Remembering Yanga, Yesterday and Today*). Ferrandón read extensively from authors like Herrera Moreno and repurposed official histories of Blackness in Veracruz to promote his hometown's distinctiveness. Ferrandón was born and lived his entire life in San Lorenzo de Cerralvo/Yanga, but he was part of a particular socioeconomic circle in the town that consisted mostly of more recently arrived residents of the area. Ferrandón's father was a poor Frenchman who immigrated to Veracruz during Maximilian I's brief stint as Emperor of Mexico from 1864-67. He married a woman from the nearby city of Orizaba and eventually settled in San Lorenzo, where he "dedicated himself to agriculture."³⁵ Ferrandón was born in 1881 and described his childhood as a happy one, although it was characterized by poverty.³⁶ Census data confirms Ferrandón's age, birthplace, and occupation as a small farmer, one of few in his area

35. Leonardo Ferrandón, *Apuntes históricos de mi pueblo, recordando a Yanga: ayer y hoy* (Mexico: Imprenta Unión, 1963), 3-4.

36. Ferrandón, *Apuntes históricos*, 3, 61-3.

who owned property in the *campo* around the town.³⁷ Ferrandón was white or non-Black mestizo; he does not explicitly identify his own racial identity, but his description of the *negros* and *indios* among whom he grew up makes clear he writes of them as an observer. His social circle consisted of Yanga's white and mestizo elites, who arrived in the town from elsewhere during his lifetime. He was a dedicated musician whose affection for classical music and cultural "refinement" often translated into a favorable view of the gradual "whitening" of the town that he saw over the course of his life.³⁸

The municipality underwent a massive demographic shift during Ferrandón's lifetime, as families of African descent—the vast majority of whom were agricultural workers—were gradually pushed out of the town of San Lorenzo itself and into surrounding communities. According to Ferrandón, in the late twentieth century "the majority of the inhabitants of the town were *negros* who lived in covered huts of grass and palm, fenced with wooden slits, with doors leading to a coffee plantation, instead of towards the road. The few whites and mestizos who had come from other parts lived around the plaza (today the Park) in wooden and tile houses."³⁹ Ferrandón claims that he grew up around *negros* but by 1963 counted few of them as his neighbors.⁴⁰ Across Ferrandón's lifetime, the people whom he considered *negros* were slowly

37. "México censo nacional, 1930." *FamilySearch*. <http://FamilySearch.org> Citing Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática. Archivo General de la Nación, Distrito Federal.

38. Ferrandón, *Apuntes históricos*, 64-7.

39. Ferrandón, *Apuntes históricos*, 39. In the 1950s, a group of anthropologists commissioned by the state government arrived in the municipality on a mission to describe the state's "physical anthropology" and categorize its ethno-racial types. They measured the dimensions of noses, attempted to quantify skin tones, and concluded that it was in Yanga and the nearby community of Mata Clara where the "mulato" type could be found. This typology—informed by scientific racism's desire to quantify race—failed to reflect the social reality of demographic transformation within the municipality. Johanna Faulhaber, *Antropología Física de Veracruz*, vol. 2 vols (Gobierno de Veracruz, 1950), 5-7, 162-3.

40. Ferrandón, *Apuntes históricos*, 72.

forced out of the town's civic culture and came to live mostly in the extremely rural, even more peripheral communities outside of the town itself.

The process by which the residents of the town ceased to be Black unfolds as an implicit background drama through Ferrandón's narration of various notable events in the town's history like infrastructure development and the outbreak of deadly illnesses.⁴¹ Ferrandón's French father and city-born mother were of the earliest generation of non-Black newcomers to the municipality. Towards the end of the twentieth century, large numbers of families from other regions in Mexico moved into the area alongside the descendants of African slaves who had lived San Lorenzo de Cerralvo and its surrounding towns since the colonial era. There is a sense in Ferrandón's recollection that such a disappearance is a natural consequence of the passage of time—as the nation modernized and Yanga alongside with it, non-Black people came to the town and accelerated the pace of this racialized “development.” The reality is more mundane and less racist—as a consequence of several new infrastructure projects in the region and severe flooding in the state of Guanajuato during the late nineteenth century, many non-Black families relocated to San Lorenzo for work and made it their home.⁴² The descendants of African slaves continued to live in the municipality—especially in peripheral rural communities like the tiny town of Mata Clara—though the written archive of the region and its changes through the twentieth century increasingly became dominated by the culture and beliefs of non-Black residents who lived within the town of San Lorenzo de Cerralvo/Yanga proper.⁴³

41. Ferrandón, *Apuntes históricos*, 72, 167.

42. Richard Fantina, “Mexico and ‘Nuestra Tercera Raíz’ : Ideology, History Identity and Two Towns of Veracruz” (Master of Arts Thesis, Florida International University, 2003), 83.

43. The problem of whose voices appear in the written archive about Yanga has been further exacerbated by the limitations of researching Yanga from abroad. Future projects seeking to understand the town's unique identity and relationship to Blackness must engage substantively and in-person with the repertoires and oral histories of people all throughout the municipality,

Ferrandón's memoir encapsulates the town's developing vision of its identity and position within the great historical legacy of Yanga's rebellion. Ferrandón believed that Revolutionary turmoil had gravely wounded public morality and cultural refinement in Yanga, and therefore wrote his memoir at the age of eighty-two in order to revindicate what he saw as the cultural core of his community. Ferrandón organized the memoir portions of the work as simple contrasts between the idyllic "Yesterday" (generally construed as pre-Revolutionary times; the Porfiriato) and the troubled "Today" (the 1950s/60s) in which nearly all aspects of life were harder for residents of Yanga. Keeping Ferrandón's worldview and his social positioning among a (very relatively) elite segment of Yanga's society at the forefront of an analysis of *Apuntes históricos* allows the memoir to be read effectively as a historical document that both describes and has influenced the course of the town's history.

Ferrandón's articulation of his town's identity in *Apuntes históricos* had a significant impact on how Yanguenses saw themselves and their history long after his death. Though Ferrandón went above and beyond to present himself very humbly (in all areas except his skill as a flautist, of which he was very proud), several sources point to his influence as an amateur local historian of some eminence who has been looked to as an authority on Yanga by outsiders throughout the twentieth century. A 1952 chapter describing the history of the town identifies Ferrandón as a "patriarchal resident of San Lorenzo who acts, positively, as a chronicler of the population."⁴⁴ The Veracruzán academic Leonardo Pasquel cited Ferrandón's memoir in his prologue to the 1974 edition of Juan Laurencio's testimony of the 1609 Spanish campaign

especially its most rural areas. For a taste of the promise held by interviews with residents of the municipality, see *Callaloo* 31, no. 1 (2008) ed. Charles H. Rowell.

44. Vicente Magdaleno, *Paisaje y celaje de México* (Mexico: Editorial de Mexico Stylo, 1952), 65. See Footnote. "vecino patriarcal de San Lorenzo y quien hace las veces, positivamente, de cronista de la población."

against Yanga.⁴⁵ Pasquel's citation shows that Ferrandón's work was being read by early academics who played an integral role in shaping outside perceptions of the town's history and character. Richard Fantina, a North American scholar who visited Yanga in 2002 cites "a poem, given to [him] by former mayor Eduardo Gordillo Guzman [which] illustrates some of the local sentiment towards Yanga."⁴⁶ Fantina excerpts the poem without attribution, as this was likely how he received it, though had Fantina read *Apuntes históricos* he would have recognized it as an original composition of Ferrandón's entitled "Recordando a Yanga," published within the memoir.⁴⁷ The first edition of Yanga's own cultural magazine, *Revista voces libres*, published in 2004, reprinted Ferrandón's history of Yanga's revolt as an authoritative historical account.⁴⁸ These recurring references to Ferrandón's authority across different types of sources and time periods demonstrate his undeniable impact as a chronicler of Yanga's history and architect of its identity within the community during the latter half of the twentieth century. Ferrandón was not merely a chronicler of the town; he was and has continued to be an actor in the project of articulating and giving meaning to Yanga's history.

Ferrandón embraced the story of Yanga's marronage in a broadly de-racialized sense consistent with most elite Mexican discourse of Yanga as a precursor of liberty for all Mexicans, regardless of race. Ferrandón's wholehearted embrace of this trope brings this national thinking closer to the local level, presenting a coherent and thorough depiction of how a resident of the town (albeit a white, well-educated one) actively participated in the process of mythifying Yanga

45. Laurencio, *Campaña contra Yanga en 1608*, xxi.

46. Richard Fantina, "Mexico and 'Nuestra Tercera Raíz'", 89, <https://doi.org/10.25148/etd.FI15101343>.

47. Ferrandón, *Apuntes históricos*, 31-2.

48. Leonardo Ferrandón, "Yanga. Libertad para un pueblo," *Voces Libres*, año 1, no. 9 (Yanga: September, 2004), 9.

the man and consolidating his legacy within the municipality's civic identity. Ferrandón chose to begin the memoir with the narrative of Yanga's revolt and battle with the colonial government, lifting an entire chapter directly from the pages of Enrique Herrera Moreno's 1892 book *El Cantón de Córdoba*.⁴⁹ In what may be the earliest use of the sobriquet, Ferrandón proudly described San Lorenzo de Cerralvo/Yanga as "the First Free Town in the Americas" and, in verse, depicted Yanga the man in terms that evoke hallmarks of the rhetoric of Mexican independence, though with a racialized element: "LIBERTY ... Yanga cried [*gritaba*, evoking the *Grito de Dolores*] / liberty is what I want / and this cry came / into the hearts of the *negros*."⁵⁰ Ferrandón, like Herrera Moreno and other prominent writers, worked to claim Yanga as a national hero and transform him into a precursor of liberty in general. In this liberal interpretation that drew on nationalist themes, Ferrandón and his newly arrived neighbors appropriated Yanga's legacy, believing themselves to have just as clear a claim to it as the African-descended residents of the region who had resided there since colonial times. Through *Apuntes históricos*, elite, academic, and political interpretations of Yanga's history, written elsewhere, took on a strong local resonance.

Within a few decades of the town's change of name, the residents of Yanga had fully and enthusiastically claimed the legacy they had been given, articulating a local identity that embraced their namesake and his role in Mexican history. Yanga's revolt took on meaning as a symbol of humanity's innate desire for freedom, and thus the town declared itself "the First Free Town in the Americas. As Yanguenses worked to celebrate this communal identity and (partially invented) heritage through public art and celebration during the second half of the twentieth

49. Ferrandón, *Apuntes históricos*, 9-24.

50. Ferrandón, *Apuntes históricos*, 32.

century, a conception of Blackness as both a transnational aesthetic and a component part of Mexican history became a potent means through which their claim to Yanga's legacy could be shown.

Celebrating Blackness

During the second half of the twentieth century, Yanguenses increasingly celebrated their local identity and connection to Black history through public displays of art and performance that presented an idiosyncratic, locally-formed interpretation of Blackness as a part of Mexican history. I use two distinctive instances of public art and performance in Yanga to analyze how attitudes towards the elusive and mutable concept of Blackness in Mexico has been celebrated within the town: the statue of Yanga that stands in the central park and the Carnaval celebrated yearly in August. These icons are visual, material instances of public culture that make tangible Yanga's status as the geographically placed legacy of its namesake in Mexico. They are also the products of local self-conceptualization and self-celebration, drawing on trans-Caribbean and hemispheric portrayals of Blackness in order to position the town and its residents adjacent to the aesthetic and culture of the contemporary African Diaspora. Whereas the bookish and somewhat elitist Ferrandón turned to the memoir to define his community in relationship to Yanga's marronage, his successors in Yanga throughout the latter half of the twentieth century relied more heavily on the generation of material culture and performance to establish a local identity. It is through these mediums that Yanguenses celebrated and articulated their relationship to Blackness most creatively and prominently.

Yanguenses were precocious in their celebration of Black rebellion and Afro-Mexican history. The celebratory institutions described in this section—most importantly, the Carnaval—predate movements for Afro-Mexican rights and visibility by several years. Finding themselves

in a national culture with a severe deficit of language and models for engaging with Blackness and Black history, Yanguenses became as much inventors as they were appropriators. Their town's history of marronage was so unique within the Mexican context that it lacked a set of reliable national symbols from which to draw. The forms through which Yanguenses came to celebrate their local identity drew on a set of unstable performative modes that they associated with Blackness but which were fundamentally products of local invention. These inventions reveal the contested, continuously shifting space Blackness has occupied in the Mexican racial imaginary, along with all its local idiosyncrasies.



[Figure 2: Erasmo Vásquez Lendecky, *Monumento a Yanga*, August 1976, Bronze, August 1976, Parque Yanga, Av. 2, Centro, 94930 Yanga, Ver., Mexico, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EstatuaYanga.jpg>.]

The statue of Yanga in the town's public park is an early example of Blackness celebrated and made visible in Mexico. In 1974, the Yanguenses commissioned a statue of their

heroic namesake to stand in the community's park, which was erected in 1976.⁵¹ This chronology is remarkable in both an international and national context. Few of the statues depicting or honoring maroons across the Americas share a similar periodization: Rio de Janeiro's *Homenagem a Zumbi dos Palmares* and Cuba's *Monumento al esclavo rebelde* were completed years later, in 1986 and 1991, respectively.⁵² The statue of Yanga emerges unexpectedly as one of the first works of civic-sponsored public art celebrating maroon resistance to slavery in Latin America.

While the Yanguenses were erecting a statue glorifying a Black rebel, Mexico at large was still grappling with the question of whether or not Afro-Mexico had a place in its post-Revolutionary national identity.⁵³ Mestizo nationalism and its myth of Mexico as a non-Black nation remained solidly in place in the middle of the twentieth century, when the most prominent Black figure in popular culture was the racist caricature Memín Pinguín.⁵⁴ The statue of Yanga is a dramatic counterpoint to this national imagery: while Memín Pinguín is infantilized, buffoonish, and comic, Yanga stands masculine, noble, and assertive over the park. The statue

51. Jiménez Ramos, *Black Mexico*, 249.

52. Peter Wade, "The Cultural Politics of Blackness in Colombia," *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (1995): 341–57; "Monumento Al Esclavo Rebelde," *EcuRed*, https://www.ecured.cu/index.php?title=Monumento_Al_Esclavo_Rebelde&oldid=3453044. Port-au-Prince's iconic celebration of marronage, *La marron inconnu*, was erected a decade earlier in 1967.

53. Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico*, 21.

54. Memín Pinguín has been exhaustively studied as a symbol of anti-Blackness in twentieth-century Mexico. See Chege Githiora, *Afro-Mexicans: Discourse of Race and Identity in the African Diaspora* (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 2008); Chinua Thelwell, *Exporting Jim Crow: Blackface Minstrelsy in South Africa and Beyond* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), 201–2, muse.jhu.edu/book/77081; Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race*, 153–5; Robert McKee Irwin, "Memín Pinguín, Rumba, and Racism:," in *Hemispheric American Studies*, ed. Caroline F. Lavender and Robert S. Levine (Rutgers University Press, 2008), 249–65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj6jc.16>; and Maria Elisa Vázquez, "Detrás de Memín Pinguín," *Diario de Campo*, no. 79, (2005): 65–68.

points to the contrast between the continued culture of anti-Black erasure in Mexico and the emergent conceptualization of Blackness as Mexican that Yanguenses increasingly embraced. While national movements to visibilize and celebrate Black contributions to the Mexican nation were still years in the making, Yanga had already moved to establish Black struggle and history firmly within the narrative of its own identity.

The statue makes visible Yanguenses' claim to Yanga the man as their founding father and their interpretation and aestheticization of his marronage and Blackness. The plaque beneath the statue reads in part "EL YANGA, Black African Precursor of the Liberty of the Black Slaves, Founded this Town of San Lorenzo de Cerralvo (Now Yanga)." Yanga is depicted a young shirtless man, machete held high in one hand and a rod in the other.⁵⁵ The machete, as the archetypal weapon of slave uprisings and revolutions in other Caribbean slave societies, connects Yanga clearly to a hemispheric movement of marronage and Black armed resistance, whereas his (un-)dress portrays Yanga as a kind of heroic noble savage who rejected Spanish coloniality and lived "as he would have in Africa" in the jungles of Veracruz. The statue communicates a clear message as a physical marker of a local relationship to history: the municipality of Yanga is heir to a remarkable legacy of Black resistance to slavery, and the celebration of this legendary origin story is the cornerstone of the town's civic identity.⁵⁶

This statue, which still stands today, features prominently in almost all visual material

55. There is no use in nitpicking the artist's portrayal, but it is interesting to note that at the time of his victory over the Spanish, Yanga was very old and unable to fight. He led his community away from the battlefield and oversaw negotiations with the Spanish, not the conflict itself. See Laurencio, *Campaña contra Yanga en 1608*.

56. An interesting comparison can be made between the statue of Yanga and the *Monumento a Benkos Biohó* in San Basilio de Palenque, Colombia, which is another Circum-Caribbean town that bases its identity in marronage. See Blanca Camargo and Alain Lawo-Sukam, "San Basilio de Palenque (Re)Visited: African Heritage, Tourism, and Development in Colombia," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 34, no. 1 (2015): 25–45.

connected to Yanga or Afro-Mexico. From photography collections to government reports to museum exhibits, the statue of Yanga is often included as a striking visual example of the “African presence in Mexico,” though rarely with any mention of the town to which it belongs.⁵⁷ It is the definitive visual portrayal of Yanga the man—more clearly and prominently represented worldwide than any historical or narrative text ever written about Yanga’s revolt. While the Yanguenses themselves are often neglected as actors in the articulation of the ever-elusive “Afro-Mexico,” the statue is perhaps their most visible and lasting contribution to national dialogue, though it often goes unattributed and unacknowledged. The Yanguenses’ depiction of their town’s namesake, which they sponsored themselves, has found remarkable visibility elsewhere. It is a small, though meaningful, instance of Yanga’s local articulation breaking out of the municipal sphere.

A more dynamic and popular expression of Yanguenses’ celebration of Blackness can be seen in the Carnaval the town celebrates each August. The Carnaval is a remarkable cultural performance that has drawn on a wealth of national and international sources across its forty-five-year history to produce a unique expression of local identity, articulated vis-a-vis Black aesthetics and history. Through a complex process of imitation and invention that has occurred over several decades in conversation with various understandings of Mexican and Caribbean Blackness, the Carnaval in Yanga has become a distinctive marker of how Blackness and identity are understood in Yanga.

The Carnaval began in the 1970s as a consequence of local youth community building. Andres Maceda Martínez, Yanga’s librarian, described its establishment in a 2004 interview:

57. Claudia Herrera, ed., *The African Presence in México: From Yanga to the Present* (Chicago: Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, 2006); 26; José Luis Martínez Maldonado, *Escultura en honor a Yanga*, 2017, <https://tecotl.ciesas.edu.mx/7-foto-1/>.

“The festival started in 1976 with a group of young people, with a costume party. It occurred to them to go out into the streets in their costumes. Every year after that, they would have the celebration but give it a different meaning. They did it in August, and we celebrate our patron saint, St. Lorenzo Mártir, in August.”⁵⁸ Building on Maceda Martínez’s account, secondary sources claim that the Carnaval was begun by a group of local youth led by Jorge Martínez and Maria de Jesus Morales Martinez who called themselves the Club Yang-Bara (after the “African tribe” to which Yanga is said to have belonged).⁵⁹ It is important to note that sources generally agree there was no explicitly racialized dimension to the festival’s very first iterations; it was initially a celebration situated at a time of religious and local significance meant as a showcase of community art and performance. Carnivals are a distinctly Catholic celebratory form that can be found across the world, from famous examples like New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro to comparatively tiny occasions like the Carnaval in Yanga.

Nonetheless, the Carnaval did quickly adopt a dimension that connected it not only to Yanga’s past but to broader constructions of Blackness in the Caribbean. For Maceda Martínez, this was a simple process in which “[the celebrants] mix black elements in the celebration. In fact, people would paint themselves black, they would put on curly-haired wigs, and they would decorate their cars to imitate rustic jungle homes or something like that. The city council took it

58. Andres Maceda Martinez, interview by Charles H. Rowell, Marcus Jones, and Florentino Flores Castro. “Una entrevista con Andres Maceda Martinez,” *Callaloo* 31, no. 1 (2008), 199. “Este festival empezó por 1976 con un grupo de muchachos, con una fiesta de disfraces. Se les ocurrió salir a la calle con sus disfraces. Posteriormente cada año lo hacían pero ya daban otro sentido. Lo hacían en agosto, y en agosto se celebra el santo patrón, San Lorenzo Mártir.”

59. Yang-Bara does not seem to be an African nation that exists today, and the source of this claim of Yanga’s nationality is unclear. Yang-Bara appears almost exclusively associated with the municipality of Yanga today, including as the name of a fried chicken restaurant in the town. “Yang-Bara,” Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/YangBaraMx/>; Jiménez Ramos, *Black Mexico*, 249; Richard Fantina, “Mexico and ‘Nuestra Tercera Raíz,’” 85.

over starting about 1982.⁶⁰ These “black elements,” however, are enormously varied in their origins and were incorporated into the Carnaval at different points in time and in response to shifts in the Carnaval’s purpose. The jungle motifs that decorated processions imitate not only the jungles in which Yanga and his allies hid from the Spanish but also the “jungles of Africa,” which loomed large in Veracruzán imaginaries of Blackness.⁶¹ The Carnaval’s performative and visual components come from a set of broader Afro-Caribbean aesthetics, often situated domestically in Veracruz City and abroad in Cuba. Through the Carnaval, Yanguenses attempted to position themselves as part of a transnational construction of the Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latinidad, embracing a cosmopolitan mode of celebrating Blackness within history and culture.

As Maceda Martínez alludes to, racial impersonation became a core mechanism through which Yanguenses performed their connection to Blackness at some point in the 1970s or early 1980s. Sagrario Cruz Carretero’s 1989 anthropological study of the Carnaval in Yanga, which to this day remains the only substantive attempt at analysis of its significance, argues for an understanding of the Carnaval based around its role as a “festival de la negritud” (“festival of blackness”). Through observation of the Carnaval as it was performed in the late 1980s, Cruz Carretero and her co-authors emphasized the role of blackface performance in the celebration as a natural means of incarnating an Afro-Mexican past in Yanga’s present as a town without any remaining residents who present visibly as Black or of African descent. The study describes a practice of full-body blackface among many young people: “in the absence of a black population, the soot on faces and bodies is nothing but the commemoration, re-presentation, and

60. Martínez et al., “Una Entrevista Con Andres Maceda Martinez.” “Se mezclan detalles de negro, incluso la gente se pintaba de negro, se ponía pelucas chinas, y armaban sus carros imitando casas rústicas con selvas o algo así. Lo toma el ayuntamiento desde 1982.”

61. Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico*, 66.

revitalization of the skin color of the founder of San Lorenzo de los Negros, today Yanga.”⁶²

This analysis views the practice of blackface in Yanga as a means of transporting a Black past into a performed Afro-Mexican present for the duration of the Carnaval, relying on the somatic meaning of re-pigmentation to facilitate this performative time travel.

The centrality of racial impersonation to the Carnaval in the 1980s reveals a shift in how Yanguenses understood themselves and their relationship to race and Blackness. For Ferrandón and the national or regional historians from whom he drew his understanding of Yanga’s marronage, all residents of the town were heirs to a legacy of freedom as defined by race-blind liberal sensibilities. Ferrandón (as the child of a French immigrant) saw no disconnect between his own family history and his claim to be heir to the legacy of Yanga the man. The use of blackface in the Carnaval during the late twentieth century suggests a tension or discomfort among Yanguenses between their own lighter pigmentation and their celebration of the Black African man who founded their town. Instead of celebrating Yanga in race-blind (or minimally racialized) terms as Ferrandón, Herrera Moreno, and others did, Yanguenses came to associate Yanga more directly with an explicitly Black aesthetic and performative mode. This association manifested itself most visibly in the use of full-body blackface, which marks—alongside all its unsavory implications—a departure from a de-racialized celebration of Yanga’s legacy. If Yanga was an icon not solely of Mexican freedom but of liberation for African slaves specifically, then there was a disconnect between who the Yanguenses saw themselves as in the moment and what they understood their past and communal identity to be. Blackface provided a means to draw this

62. Sagrario Cruz Carretero, Alfredo Martínez Maranto, and Angélica Santiago Silva, *El Carnaval en Yanga: notas y comentarios sobre una fiesta de la negritud*, Serie Ollin 2 (México, D.F.: Dirección General de Culturas Populares, 1990), 27. “a falta de población negra, el tizne en caras y cuerpos no es sino la conmemoración, la re-presentación, y la revitalización del color del piel del fundador de San Lorenzo de los Negros, hoy Yanga.”

perceived aesthetic contradiction between past and present into alignment during the Carnaval. For Yanguenses in the 1980s, racial impersonation through blackface became a means of connecting to an aesthetic of Blackness that was constructed hemispherically; it was a technique of inventing a connection to Black presence that they understood to have disappeared from themselves.

Yanga does not stand alone among (ostensibly) mestizo communities for its use of blackface in carnival performances. In other nations with a similar mestizaje-based system of racial stratification—such as Colombia and Peru—blackface has been widely incorporated into festivals and dance performances.⁶³ To make sense of these practices, Danielle Roper’s theory of hemispheric blackface is especially useful. Roper distinguishes hemispheric blackface from both US blackface minstrelsy and nationalist understandings of blackface. Instead of ascribing a single origin or single meaning to the impersonation or caricature of Black skin and bodies, Roper examines how hemispheric blackface “signifies on the images and tropes that circulate in the transnational web of exchange between the US and Latin America and the Caribbean,” resulting a multivalent and amorphous practice that defies generalization.⁶⁴ Hemispherically, blackface could take the form of cruel parody, invoking the carnivalesque aesthetic of mockery, as it has in Andean carnivals, while in other contexts it can purport to be affectionate or even celebratory.⁶⁵

63. Melissa M. Valle, “Burlesquing Blackness: Racial Significations in Carnivals and the Carnavalesque on Colombia’s Caribbean Coast,” *Public Culture* 31, no. 1 (2018): 5–21, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-7181814>; Danielle Roper, “Blackface at the Andean Fiesta: Performing Blackness in the Danza de Caporales,” *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 2 (2019): 381–97, <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.300>.

64. Roper, “Blackface at the Andean Fiesta,” 385.

65. Juan Eduardo Wolf, *Styling Blackness in Chile* (Indiana University Press, 2019), 175–177, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh4zdk3>; Roper, “Blackface at the Andean Fiesta.”

Brazil's Carnival, especially, is prone to justify the use of blackface and skin darkening (even among fairer-skinned Afro-Brazilians) out of a belief that it is necessary to match the skin tone of the Africans of the nation's past in order to properly perform them. The justification—or excuse—used by these celebrants is often built around an orientation of dark-skinned Africans in the nation's past and not their present. In 2018, a Brazilian choreographer who had staged a blackface Carnival performance claimed that because the plot of the performance was “a more historic Afro,” the dancers needed to have “darker features.” “The makeup,” he said, “was the only way to achieve the right tone.”⁶⁶ Because the kind of Blackness being performed was “historic”—that is, it belonged to the nation's racialized past and not its de-racialized present—a racialization of the performers was necessary. The possibility that people with skin as dark as historic Afro-Brazilians still exist was not even considered. In the racial logic of a modern Latin American so-called racial democracy, it is impossible that someone in the present can be “as Black” as people were in the past.

This same convoluted ideology of race mirrors how the Yanguenses understood themselves as non-Black but their history as Black. When a community believes on one hand that to be Black is to possess a very dark skin tone and on the other that there are no Black people remaining in their contemporary community, one cannot perform an episode in Black history without darkening one's skin. The Yanguenses used blackface to embody an Afro-Mexican past and simultaneously deny an Afro-Mexican present; the history of the community was Black, the present was not. The hemispheric repertoire of racial impersonation from which the Yanguenses drew resulted in blackface's use as a celebratory—not a derogatory—tool that

66. Quotation from Helio Bejani. Sarah DiLorenzo, “Use of Blackface in Brazil Carnival Parade Sparks Debate,” *Associated Press News*, February 13, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/8568fb0114e2434cb320589a13184c68>.

nonetheless made Blackness into a mere historical aesthetic. This ironic, problematic use of a potent anti-Black medium points to the still-unstable process through which Yanguenses were striving to invent and articulate exactly how they belonged to the world of Afro-Mexico.

Yanguenses also merged a hemispheric aesthetic of the carnivalesque with a depiction of Blackness in their practice of burning a Black man in effigy. The North American scholar Richard Fantina visited Yanga during the 2002 Carnaval, which he describes in a style reminiscent of a travel narrative. He records a conversation with town librarian Andres Maceda Martínez in which Maceda Martínez describes the recently-ended practice of effigy-burning to an incredulous Fantina:

“‘Until last year, an effigy of a black man was burned but this year we have already changed that. We will no longer burn the black man but we will burn a branding iron.’ I could scarcely believe what I was hearing. Here, at a festival celebrating blackness, they launch the proceedings by burning a black man in effigy.”⁶⁷

Effigy-burning is an established form of carnivalesque celebration across the Americas. In domestic Lenten festivals, especially on Holy Saturday, it is common practice for Mexican celebrants to burn Judas in effigy as symbolic revenge for his betrayal of Christ. Celebrants imaginatively recharacterize their wood-and-paper Judas to resemble the devil and other evil figures like politicians and oil executives.⁶⁸ Elsewhere in the Caribbean, Judas burning has been a component in festivals celebrating a maroon past: in the town of Cabral in the Dominican Republic, an effigy of Judas is burned during the annual Lenten Cimarrón (Maroon) Carnival. In the post-Trujillato Dominican Republic, the effigy of Judas often takes on the added persona of a

67. Fantina, “Mexico and Nuestra Tercera Raíz,” 87.

68. “Lenten Days in Mexico: Curious Customs to Be Seen This Week in the Land of Montezuma,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 1902; Dyana Aguyr, “Judas Burning in Mexico,” <https://www.mexican-folk-art-guide.com/judas-burning.html#.YCYpNKg1J>.

calié, a typically white spy for the dictatorship who would betray their neighbors to the repressive Military Intelligence Service.⁶⁹ Effigy-burning is an established component of Latin American carnivals and is often adapted in its meaning to serve particular purposes of enacting revenge on a local antagonist.

Given this context, Fantina's shock at the practice seems even more warranted. Why, at a festival celebrating an African man's historic resistance to slavery, would a Black man be burnt in effigy? Fantina, seeking to explain the contradiction, suggested that the absence of strict racial apartheid and lynch mobs in Mexico make the implication of violence and racial impersonation less horrifying to non-Black Mexicans than it is to North Americans. He hypothesized that "if the present population of Yanga was more phenotypically black and had a historical memory of oppression and slavery, it is doubtful whether they would have burned a black man in effigy."⁷⁰ Rather than phenotype, however, it is the repertoire of performance and celebration that the organizers drew from that resulted in the use of this confusing and violent image. The burning-in-effigy was a hallmark of pre-Lenten festivals elsewhere in the hemisphere, so the practice was adopted for Yanga's Carnaval. But the general aesthetic of the Carnaval was one of Blackness: the organizers used "jungle motifs" and images of Black people wherever possible. Therefore, the effigy was Black as well. In the absence of Black voices in positions of authority and without a general awareness of the tropes of anti-Black racist performances and rituals elsewhere, the practice could stand as somehow not in contradiction with the Carnaval's purpose as a celebration of Blackness. The practice can be understood as stemming from what was then a

69. Max Harris, "Diabolic Suffering, Whips, and the Burning of Judas: Holy Week in Cabral, Dominican Republic," in *Festive Devils of the Americas*, ed. Milla Cozart Riggio, Angela Marino, and Paolo Vignolo (London: Seagull Books, 2015).

70. Fantina, "Mexico and Nuestra Tercera Raíz," 88.

largely independent, ad-hoc, fluid set of motifs and symbols which changed in their significance and implications—especially around race—across time, just as blackface had.⁷¹

Throughout the late twentieth century, Yanguenses celebrated Blackness as a feature of the town's past, not its embodied present. In 1989, as Yanga's historic marronage began to gain modest attention internationally, a group of well-educated tourists from Côte d'Ivoire came to Yanga as part of a larger exploration of the African Diaspora in the Americas. They were greeted by the founder of the local archaeological museum, Daniel Cid Villagómez. Villagómez proudly told the visitors about Yanga's defeat of the Spanish in 1608 and the foundation of San Lorenzo de los Negros. When asked where Yanga's descendants could be found, Villagómez replied "the traces of the liberator have been lost. Nobody knows how or why [...] not even don Leonardo Ferrandón, who wrote a book to this respect, a native of this municipality, gives details."⁷² By the 1980s, relatively elite Yanguenses did not even entertain the possibility that Yanga's descendants continued to live in the municipality, or that Blackness was perhaps a part of Mexico's present culture. Blackness was a facet of Yanga's history to be celebrated, anchoring the community in a powerful legacy, but this celebration was fundamentally a work of commemorating the past through a lens of Black disappearance.

By the 1990s, Yanga's Carnaval had existed for more than a decade and was a cornerstone of the town's civic life. August after August, dancers, floats, and musicians would

71. Roper's approach to "hemispheric blackface" is once again extremely useful. Fantina falls into what Roper describes as a "nationalist frame" that whitewashes the transnational origins of these practices. Roper, "Blackface at the Andean Fiesta," 394.

72. Juan Aguilera Azpeitia, *Daniel Cid Villagómez: Hurgardor del pasado remoto* (León: Coty Editores, 2006), 169. "el rastro del libertador se perdió. Nadie sabe cómo ni por qué. Es más: "ni el lugar en dónde habitó se tiene preciso". Lamentó ese hecho y dijo haberlo rastreado sin resultados positivos, ni don Leonardo Ferrandón, que escribió una obra al respecto, lugareño de esa cabecera municipal, da pormenores."

fill the streets of the town in an exuberant celebration of its culture and identity as the First Free Town in the Americas. The Carnaval's organizers and performers experimented with sets of symbols and practices—like blackface—that might tie them to the African diaspora and demonstrate the town's pride in its connection to Black heroism. At the century's close, the Carnaval would continue its transformation, finding new means of celebrating Yanga through greater interaction with regional institutions and Afro-Mexican politics.

Commodifying Blackness

In the 1990s and early twenty-first century, Yanga grew connected to Veracruz's cultural institutions, entering the nascent world of Afro-Mexican mobilization that sought to undo Mexico's centuries-long project of anti-Black erasure. Nationally, the 1990s were a decade of rapid acceleration in the pace and sophistication of efforts to promote visibility for Mexico's African "Third Root," encouraged by the work of prominent academics like Guillermo Bonfil Batalla and Luz María Martínez Montiel.⁷³ It is during this decade that Yanga's Carnaval became less particular, idiosyncratic, and local in its manifestations. As the Carnaval increasingly conformed to more national- and elite-defined modes of celebrating Afro-Mexico, it also relied more heavily on a commodified portrayal of Blackness, not only as a part of the town's history to be celebrated but also as way to market the town to both domestic and international outsiders.

Many of the new ways of performing a connection to Blackness came to Yanga through domestic routes, by proxy of regional cultural centers like the Port of Veracruz and institutions with international or tourist ties. During the 1990s, regional actors organized a number of

73. Luz María Martínez Montiel, *Afroamérica III: La Tercera Raíz, Presencia Africana En México* (Ciudad de México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2017).

carnivals, festivals, and dance celebrations with an explicit “African,” “Afro-Mexican,” or “Afro-Caribbean” character. In contrast to Yanga’s Carnaval, these similar cultural institutions in Veracruz were generally far more touristically minded from the outset and were the product of top-down efforts by influential state actors to connect Veracruz to the attractive, eye-catching aesthetic of Caribbean Blackness.⁷⁴ The characteristic example of this type of tourist-oriented event is Veracruz City’s International Afro-Caribbean Festival, initiated in 1994 by the recently founded Veracruz Institute of Culture (IVEC).⁷⁵ In a study that is harshly critical of the Veracruz Institute of Culture (IVEC), which organizes the Festival, anthropologist Angela Castañeda argues that “IVEC festival organizers attempted to use historical links in a mythic and exotic form to construct new relationships with other Caribbean communities. This Afro-Caribbean link was oftentimes imagined or re-created to serve the needs of those in power, who are mostly members of the white and/or mestizo elite.”⁷⁶ The organizers of the International Afro-Caribbean Festival explicitly strove to include their city in the Caribbean cultural sphere through slogans like “Veracruz is also Caribbean” and the use of sexualized, stylized posters which depict dark-skinned Black women, often nude and dancing.⁷⁷ These promotional strategies, Christian Rinaudo argues, demonstrate how the International Afro-Caribbean Festival is an “Afro masquerade” in which an othered portrayal of “lo Afro” serves the “whimsy of political

74. Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico*, 279.

75. Angela N. Castañeda, “Performing the African Diaspora in Mexico,” in *Comparative Perspectives on Afro-Latin America*, ed. Kwame Dixon and John Burdick (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 104.

76. Castañeda, “Performing the African Diaspora,” 108.

77. Christian Rinaudo, “Más allá de la ‘identidad negra’: mestizaje y dinámicas raciales en la Ciudad de Veracruz,” in *Mestizaje, diferencia y nación: lo “negro” en América Central y el Caribe*, ed. Elisabeth Cunin (México: Centro de estudios mexicanos y centroamericanos, 2010), 225–66. “Veracruz también es Caribe”

opportunists” who wish to draw foreign tourist dollars to the city.⁷⁸ Veracruz City’s Festival began nearly two decades later than Yanga’s, but its scale and extensive connections to large cultural and tourist institutions set it up as a type of model for Yanguense organizers who wished to grow their celebration and transform it into a means of bringing tourist dollars to the town.

Over the years, the structure and style of Yanga’s Carnaval came to more closely resemble International Afro-Caribbean Festival in several substantive ways. In an aside, Castañeda draws a contrast between the opportunistic methods of the Veracruzans and the local, “Blackness-centered” approach of Yanga’s Carnaval, praising the Yanguenses’ celebration as an authentic means of “reinforcing their identity and their link to the African diaspora.”⁷⁹ While the contrast between the ethics of the organizers is appropriate, Castañeda overlooks the interplay which occurred between the aesthetics and promotional tactics of Veracruz’s Festival and the Carnaval in Yanga. Through a process of dialogue and imitation, Yanga’s aesthetics took a turn to align more closely to the regional norm during the late 1990s and early 2000s, shedding certain distinctive practices that would offend or confuse outsiders and embracing the aesthetic tendencies of other celebrations that were concurrently identifying themselves as “Afro-Mexican.”

This transformation can be seen in the eventual elimination of two practices common to the Carnaval in its first few decades of existence: the use of blackface in processions and performances and the burning of an effigy of a Black man. Cruz Carretero’s 1989 study is the latest firsthand account of the Carnaval to describe blackface as a widespread practice. The 1989 study has been cited occasionally in passing by other writers who mention Yanga’s Carnaval

78. Rinaudo, “Más allá de la ‘identidad negra’.” “mascarada afro,” “los caprichos de las oportunidades políticas”

79. Castañeda, “Performing the African Diaspora,” 109.

without drawing on primary observation as evidence for the permanence of blackface in Mexican culture, but there is little evidence to suggest that blackface has been as essential to the Carnaval since 1989 as Cruz Carretero argued it was.⁸⁰ Photographs, promotional materials, and videos depicting the Carnaval since the turn of the millennium do not show any instances of blackface during processions or performances⁸¹. Male dancers sometimes portray enslaved Africans from the colonial era by performing shirtless and wearing prop shackles, but their skin is not darkened artificially.⁸² Yanguenses have continued to embody Yanga and his maroon compatriots through their dress and performance in the past three decades, but blackface has long since ceased to be a means of accomplishing this goal. Racial impersonation remains a feature of the Carnaval, though in a relatively sanitized way.

Another example of this shift towards respectability is the Carnaval's transition away from the burning in effigy of a Black man, which demonstrates the celebration's changing form and function in the eyes of the organizers. Here, it is worth reproducing U.S. visitor Fantina's entire dialogue with Andrés Maceda Martínez, in which Fantina seeks to understand the effigy burning and Maceda Martínez describes how the practice ends:

I pressed Andres on this [...] [he] seemed to sense my disbelief and clarified how this came about. 'We are changing to the [branding iron]. [...] That was the fire that they

80. Cruz Carretero, Martínez Maranto, and Santiago Silva, *El Carnaval en Yanga*, 35.

81. Jose Luis Maldonado, *Gente de Yanga*, 2017; ROMANCECORDOBES, *Carnaval Yanga 2009 1*, YouTube Video, 10 August 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y58O85T0ogE&ab_channel=ROMANCECORDOBES; ROMANCECORDOBES, *Carnaval Yanga 2009 2 Procecion San Lorenzo*, YouTube Video, 10 August 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yxa3z5A86Dk&ab_channel=ROMANCECORDOBES; ROMANCECORDOBES, *Carnaval Yanga 2009 3*, YouTube Video, 15 August 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WoRGfnlKak&ab_channel=ROMANCECORDOBES.

82. ROMANCECORDOBES, *Carnaval Yanga 2009 3*, YouTube Video, 15 August 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WoRGfnlKak&ab_channel=ROMANCECORDOBES.

marked the slaves with and the object most hated by the blacks. The idea was accepted very well by the mayor and others. And to me it seems much better. It is something logical—not to burn a black man if it is a festival of blackness, but to burn the hated branding iron instead, the hated instrument that used to brand the men on the face and arms and the women on the breasts. It was something terrible for them.”⁸³

Maceda Martínez’s description of the end of the effigy-burning ritual demonstrates how Yanguenses’ understandings of the Carnaval’s purpose transformed during the 1990s and 2000s. Competing and multivalent inspirations from other Mexican and Caribbean festivals informed the practice’s original use, though these efforts at imitation eventually gave way to a less ambiguous, more explicitly “Afro-Mexican” use of symbols. The effigy-burning was replaced with a more appropriate and thematically consistent ritual. Maceda Martínez described the end of the practice as a consequence of a realization that the Carnaval was meant to celebrate Blackness. Therefore, an enemy of Black people in Mexico’s past—the branding iron which was used to torture enslaved people—would be a much more appropriate target for ritualized destruction. The change was a consequence of increased engagement from a Yanguense with outside materials: Maceda Martínez told Fantina that “we weren’t thinking of [changing to the branding iron] until a guy named Carlos Gómez read a report and said, “Hey, why not, instead of burning a black man, when we are supposed to be celebrating him, why not burn the [branding iron]?”⁸⁴ The practice changed its form into something more palatable to outsiders and more aligned with the explicit purpose of celebrating Blackness. As Yanga moved into the twenty-first century, aspects of the Carnaval’s repertoire that were not in line with broader cultural norms were replaced by a set of more externally attractive, marketable, and explicitly “Afro-Mexican” symbols and practices.

83. Fantina, “Mexico and Nuestra Tercera Raíz,” 87-8.

84. Fantina, “Mexico and Nuestra Tercera Raíz,” 88.

Promotional materials demonstrate this shift towards greater commodification of Blackness as a marketing tool. The Carnaval's promotional materials prior to the 1990s, to the extent that they existed, were oriented around celebrating Yanga's historic origins. Photographs of the Carnaval processions during the 1989 celebration show large banners welcoming celebrants to "the First Free Town in the Americas."⁸⁵ The type of sleek, well-designed logos and graphics that are used in posters and fliers advertising the Carnaval in the present day were nonexistent during this early period. The term "Afro-Mexican," indicative of a connection to academic or activist circles, was nowhere to be found.⁸⁶

While the moniker of "the First Free Town in the Americas" remains a prominent identifier for Yanga, it has increasingly become overshadowed by an explicit description of the Carnaval as "Carnaval Afromexicano Yanga." When Cruz Carretero described the Carnaval as a "festival of Blackness," she did so in her role as an anthropologist striving to provide a theoretical framework through which the celebration could be understood; the term was not taken from the community but rather ascribed to it. In the twenty-first century, however, the organizers fully embraced a history and identity of Blackness and "afromexicanidad" as the Carnaval's *raison d'être*. They did so alongside the Port of Veracruz's Carnaval, in response to greater emphasis from government actors on marketing Veracruz as an extension of the Caribbean, which culture workers racialized as Black.⁸⁷ Contemporary posters advertising Yanga's Carnaval boast more than a dozen logos of various governmental and private

85. Cruz Carretero, Martínez Maranto, and Santiago Silva, *El Carnaval en Yanga*, 28.

86. Rinaudo, "Más allá de la 'identidad negra'."

87. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race*, 139-40.

organizations that participate in the event's planning.⁸⁸ The Carnaval's sleeker design, explicit use of the term "Afro-Mexican" and use of symbols and performance more consistently with hemispheric norms are all consequences of Yanga's entrance into the formal world of "Afro-Mexico." In so doing, Yanga has also become a site of commodification, where its unique history is an asset to the region that can be used to further position Veracruz within the lucrative market of (Afro-)Caribbean tourism.

An important marker of this transition is the depiction of Black women in promotional materials for the Carnaval. Just as the IVEC used stereotyped and sexualized drawings of Black feminine figures, often dancing, to promote the International Afro-Caribbean Festival, posters for the more recent iterations of Yanga's Carnaval have relied on the faces and bodies of Afro-Mexican women as well.⁸⁹ The Carnaval's logo is a purple line drawing of a Black woman in profile, who wears a headscarf that transforms into multicolored ferns, leaves, and feathers, evoking the jungle motif that is so often associated with Yanga's Blackness.⁹⁰ In contrast to the masculine, machete-wielding, noble depiction of Yanga's statue, which is the iconic depiction of the town's maroon past, this drawing is a depiction of an imagined Afro-Mexican present, which increasingly manifests itself in the Carnaval. It parallels Veracruz City's use of the feminine form to appeal to the tourist market, and fits nicely into established tropes of how cultural elites desire to stylize and market Afro-Mexico to a non-Black gaze.

88. Turismo Yanga, "Les compartimos el cartel oficial que contiene el programa de las jornadas académicas y artísticas," Facebook, August 14, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Turismo-Yanga-361400650674364/photos/864893906991700>

89. Rinaudo, "Más allá de la identidad negra."

90. Turismo Yanga, "Les compartimos el cartel..."



[Figure 3: Turismo Yanga, "Les compartimos el cartel oficial que contiene el programa de las jornadas académicas y artísticas," Facebook, August 14, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Turismo-Yanga-361400650674364/photos/864893906991700> (Left) A poster from the 2017 Carnaval, featuring the logos of the various government and private institutions that now have a role in its organization. (Right) Detail of the official logo for the Carnaval. The slogan reads "Joy came home."]

This commodification of Blackness as a logo and stylized aesthetic in Yanga has extended beyond the Carnaval. Businesses in Yanga bear "African" names associated with Yanga, like the fried chicken shop Yang-Bara or a restaurant called Yam-Bo that serves Cuban-style food, which the proprietor learned from Afro-Cuban immigrants in Oaxaca.⁹¹ Just as in the Carnaval materials, Black women are the most common symbol used to connect these businesses to a kind of marketable, desirable Afro-Mexican commodity. Restaurant Yam-Bo advertises

91. Edmundo Rosas Nava, Charles H. Rowell, and Marcus Jones, "Una Entrevista Con Edmundo Rosas Nava," *Callaloo* 31, no. 1 (2008): 279, 83; "Yang-Bara," Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/YangBaraMx/>

itself with a logo of a dark-skinned woman in a headscarf next to an entire pig on a spit, while a mural on the restaurant's side depicts a dark-skinned couple working amid sugar cane outside a straw-roofed hut.⁹² These symbols and stylizations, appearing in all sorts of visual materials across the town, are some of the least elite instances of the ways in which Blackness has been commodified in Yanga. As modest tourist attention has come to the town since the 1990s and greater attention has been paid to the ways in which an explicit association with Afro-Mexico can aid the economy of a peripheral town like Yanga, the same types of stylizations and commodification that exploded in the Port of Veracruz became a valuable tool for Yanguenses in all areas of the town's public life.

The costume party begun by youth in Yanga in 1976 is a vastly different institution now than it was at its outset. From a simple event for young people to dress up and celebrate, the Carnaval is now a prominent part of the regional culture with significant ties to various public and private agencies. The logos of the Veracruz Secretary of Culture, the National Council to Prevent Discrimination, and the National Institute of Anthropology and History, among other groups and businesses, adorn contemporary Carnaval materials. The once-parochial celebration has, by virtue of its connection to an aesthetic of Blackness that is both real and imagined, become a part of the still-expanding geography of Afro-Mexico and the Afro-Caribbean. This strategic commodification of Blackness has extended across the town, reshaping many institutions with a new aesthetic that departed from the nascent, more innocent, celebratory modes of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s.

92. México 190, 94930 Mexico, Ver., Mexico; digital image, "Street View," GoogleMaps (<http://www.googlemaps.com> : accessed 6 June 2020).

Centering Blackness

As a coda to Yanga's twentieth century, it is worth returning to *Voces libres*, the magazine published by a group of Yanguenses in 2004. Subtitled a "magazine of historical rescue and cultural diffusion," *Voces libres* is a local meditation on identity, race, and the importance of acknowledging Mexico's history of slavery and marronage. Dr. José Angel Beristáin Cardoso, an anthropologist and historian based in Mexico City, generously shared a scanned copy of *Voces libres* with me, commenting that the Yanguense "who provided me with [the magazine] did so with great pride because it was part of their memory and identity... that's how they expressed it to me."⁹³ Reading *Voces libres* provides a snapshot of how artistically and culturally-minded Yanguenses desired to present their town and promote its identity in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The contributors argued that Yanga's history is meaningful because it informs a different understanding of Mexican national history—an understanding in which the enslavement of Africans is a foundational part of the past. *Voces libres* is a counterpoint to the story of Blackness' commodification in Yanga since the 1990s; the magazine reverently centered Blackness in Mexican history as a source of local meaning and community pride.

In the context of severe economic difficulty and rapid social change, *Voces libres*'s use of Yanga's history as a source of pride and call to communal identity is poignant and touching. In a brief meditation on the state of the town, an unnamed contributor to the magazine decries that the youth of Yanga take too much advantage of the freedom Yanga fought for four hundred years before; they smoke cigarettes and drink publicly, taking the liberty given to them by Yanga and

93. José Ángel Beristáin Cardoso, email message to author, October 19, 2020. "La persona que me la proporcionó lo hizo con mucho orgullo porque era parte de su memoria e identidad... así me lo expresó."

becoming mere libertines.⁹⁴ These woes of modern life were not just the complaints of older residents worrying about youth behaviors, however. In oral histories conducted in Yanga the same year as the magazine's publication, several Yanguenses spoke of a local economy that was sluggish and hostile to young people without robust access to education and upward mobility. Many young people from Yanga and its surrounding communities migrated to Mexico City or to the United States since the enactment of NAFTA in 1994, which relatives described as ruptures in the fabric of family and communal identity.⁹⁵ The editors and contributors of *Voces libres* saw themselves as combatting this loss and erosion of Yanga's identity by publishing a collection of writings, photography, and poetry that would help revindicate its unique history and sense of civic dignity. In a challenging time, the community turned to the story of Yanga's marronage to find pride in their community and—hopefully—"rescue" its culture.

Understandings of Blackness are changing quickly in Mexico, and Yanga is already a major testing ground for new ways of categorizing, commodifying, and conceptualizing what it means to be Black in Mexico or have a connection to Black history and culture. For the first time in its history, the 2015 Mexican intercensal estimate included a question about whether or not the respondent "considered themselves Afro-Mexican or Afro-descendant."⁹⁶ This change was a consequence of over a decade of significant activism, gruelingly undertaken by Afro-Mexican activists and academics like Elena Ruiz Salinas, Father Glyn Jemmot, Jean-Philibert Mobwa

94. "Para meditarlo un momento," in *Voces Libres*, 4. My amateur stylometric analysis has led me to hypothesize the author of this piece is very likely Querol Ortiz, though this cannot be said for certain.

95. Miguel Romero et al., "Una Entrevista Con Miguel Romero," *Callaloo* 31, no. 1 (2008): 258–64; Socima Virgen Cid et al., "Una Entrevista Con Roberta and Socima Virgen Cid," *Callaloo* 31, no. 1 (2008): 218–24.

96. Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico*, 1–4.

Mobwa N'djoli, and Sergio Peñaloza Pérez.⁹⁷ In preparation for the inclusion of the same question on the full 2020 census, several cultural institutions worked to make sure that Mexicans who may be hesitant to associate themselves with Blackness would do so on the census. The academic-run activist group Colectivo para Eliminar el Racismo en México (Collective to Eliminate Racism in Mexico) began the campaign #AfrocensoMX to encourage self-identification as Afro-Mexican, using posters and videos with slogans such as “I am Afro-Mexican and I count” or “Here we are, here we have been, and here we will be.”⁹⁸ The census’ new category represents a paradigm shift in Mexican understandings of Blackness, in which Afro-Mexicans are increasingly understood to be part of the nation’s present, not just its past.

Yanga was identified quickly as a town worthy of investment in this cause of promoting Afro-Mexico’s quantification. State institutions helped organize AfroFest 2020 in March of that year, sponsoring dance troupes and music in an attempt to promote engagement with the census’ new question.⁹⁹ As Blackness officially enters the national, quantifiable ideology of race in Mexico, Yanga will continue to negotiate its own local identity alongside, but uniquely set apart from, the trajectory of the nation. For the better part of a century, Yanga has understood itself as an essential site of Black history and memory in Mexico: it will now have to consider if and how it belongs to the increasingly visible Afro-Mexican present.

Conclusion

Yanga’s transformation across the twentieth century runs parallel to the national history of the construction of Blackness in Mexico, making its most distinguishing characteristics visible

97. Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour*, 306; Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico*, 287.

98. AfroCenso MX. <https://afrocenso.mx/campana>

99. Vive el Folklore, *Así estuvo el AfroFest 2020 en Yanga, Veracruz*, YouTube Video, 3 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bLZerNmDPE>

and provoking questions about the place of Blackness within an ostensibly mestizo nation. Black history was sparsely written about in Mexico throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but certain works did take up the story of Yanga's revolt and the foundation of San Lorenzo de los Negros. These interpretations held Yanga as an early precursor to the other great men of Mexican official history and the nation's march towards greater freedom and human progress. It was the Revolutionary reforms of officials in Xalapa who relied on this narrative of progress towards freedom that brought Yanga's legend into the forefront of the identity of the community that newly bore his name, and from this elite imposition the town articulated an identity for itself that increasingly celebrated the centrality of Blackness to the national fabric.

The Yanguenses' enthusiastic adoption of their position as the heirs to Yanga and a part of Afro-Mexico, regardless of ancestral connections to the maroons, highlights the ways in which Black culture in the Caribbean can exist in an imaginative space, where a set of symbols and cultural markers can transform something local into something "African." Whether through unsubtle and contradictory mechanisms like blackface meant to celebrate Blackness, or more understated forms like the use of jungle motifs to signal a connection to Black history, Yanguenses brought their town into a recognizable Afro-Mexican sphere by tapping into this cultural imaginary and its transnational influences. State organizations and culture workers, often in search of tourist dollars, came to meet the Yanguenses in the middle during the twenty-first century, providing sponsorship and connections to the town as it marketed itself not only as "the First Free Town in the Americas" but also as a place where "Afro-Mexico"—that most elusive and complicated place—could be located.

Though they may be hard to find, Black histories have never been completely forgotten in Mexico. They have been sustained in the nation's margins—in places like Yanga —through

mechanisms that are unlike those seen elsewhere in the Americas. Blackness has been adapted, invented, reformulated, celebrated, and inconsistently claimed in different ways at different moments by local stakeholders who responded to shifts in Mexico's national culture and racial system. The Yanguenses' claim to and celebration of Yanga's marronage shows how the painful histories of African slavery and diaspora have been appropriated and taken on meaning even as the very existence of Black people has been denied in Mexico. In Yanga, Black history is at the center of Mexican history.

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