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978-1-107-03437-2 - Black Saint of the Americas: The Life and Afterlife of Martín de Porres

Celia Cussen

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## **Black Saint of the Americas: The Life and Afterlife of Martín de Porres**

In May 1962, as the struggle for civil rights heated up in the United States and leaders of the Catholic Church prepared to meet for Vatican Council II, Pope John XXIII named the first black saint of the Americas, the Peruvian Martín de Porres (1579–1639), and designated him the patron of racial justice. The son of a Spanish father and a former slave woman from Panama, Martín served a lifetime as the barber and nurse at the great Dominican monastery in Lima. This book draws on visual representations of Martín and the testimony of his contemporaries to produce the first biography of this pious and industrious black man from the cosmopolitan capital of the Viceroyalty of Peru. The book vividly chronicles the evolving interpretations of his legend and his miracles, and traces the centuries-long campaign to formally proclaim Martín de Porres a hero of universal Catholicism.

Celia Cussen is an associate professor at the Universidad de Chile, where she teaches courses in colonial Latin American history.

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*For Daniel and Laura*

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## Acknowledgments

The story of Saint Martín de Porres has occupied my thoughts, in one form or another, for years. The idea began to germinate in 1983, during a visit to the underground vault at Lima's monastery of San Francisco. A recent arrival to Latin America, not yet fully acclimated to my adopted world, I gaped at the scene laid out before me: hundreds of human skulls arranged in circles and rings, joined together by dozens of femurs set side by side, as if spokes on a ghoulish wheel. I'd never seen anything quite like it. So dramatic, so unfamiliar, the sight of scores of cherished bones compelled me to unlock the history of my new home through its religious past, and I began to hunt down traces of that legacy from Chile to Peru, Spain, Italy, and the United States. It's been a long journey of discovery, throughout which I have incurred many debts. It gives me great pleasure to express my gratitude here to all those along the way who made it possible.

In the graduate program at the University of Pennsylvania I had the good fortune of working with four distinguished scholars: Nancy Farriss, Dain Borges, Lynn Hunt, and Edward Peters. It was there that the book began to take its initial form. Since those early days, several institutions have contributed funding to my research for this book: the Mellon Foundation, the Vicerrectoría de Investigación of the Universidad de Chile, and the Chilean government's Comisión Nacional de Investigación Científica y Tecnológica (CONICYT). I am grateful to all of them as well to the Universidad de Chile, particularly to the dean of the Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades, María Eugenia Góngora, who gave her wholehearted support to this project in its final stages.

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In the United States, the staff at the library of the Catholic University of America allowed me invaluable access to their microfilm collection. Thanks to the María Elena Cassiet Fellowship, I also had the good fortune to spend four months poring over one of the best rare book collections in the Americas, the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University. The library's staff and its legendary director, Norman Fiering, afforded me all the support a scholar could want.

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tracking down a misplaced book of critical importance to me, a veritable needle in the world's greatest private bibliographic haystack.

Diane McWhorter, a great friend and justifiably acclaimed writer, encouraged me to steer my prose away from the shoals of academic discourse and into more vibrant narrative waters. With great skill, Julie Wolf suggested ways to accomplish that task. Blas Mena and Caterina di Girolamo kindly lent their prodigious design talents to this project. The anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press offered many valuable suggestions for improving this manuscript. Finally, over the years I have benefited immensely from the warm encouragement and generous support from two scholars endowed with equally great minds and large hearts: Herbert Klein and Carmen Bernand.

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