Introduction

Linguistic and Spiritual Mediations in the Earlier
Black Atlantic

On a May morning in 1659 in the Caribbean port of Cartagena de Indias, a man from Angola named Andrés Sacabuche testified before a notary and a judge in the city’s Jesuit church. Sacabuche was serving as a witness in a formal inquiry into the potentially saintly life of Jesuit priest Pedro Claver, his recently deceased supervisor. In his lengthy testimony, Sacabuche provided details about his own life as a survivor of the Middle Passage and an enslaved evangelical interpreter in Cartagena: after arriving in Cartagena as a young man on a slave ship, he was purchased by the city’s Jesuit school to help its priests evangelize the new black arrivals from central Africa disembarking in the port by the hundreds almost every year during this period.¹ As a speaker of the languages of Kimbundu and Anchico, Sacabuche became an important member of a group of enslaved black interpreters owned by the Jesuits in Cartagena. Sacabuche’s testimony and related Jesuit writings about missionary efforts in colonial Lima and Cartagena offer windows onto how black men and women in the diaspora used linguistic and spiritual mediation to communicate with each other and adapt to their New World surroundings.

While Sacabuche narrated his testimony in 1659, some 1,050 miles away in the Pacific coastal city of Lima, Úrsula de Jesús, a Peruvian-born black religious servant in the Convent of Santa Clara, was fashioning another kind of testimony. Úrsula’s narration took the form of a spiritual diary about her visions and conversations with holy voices and souls in purgatory that she related out loud to nuns in her convent at the request of her confessor. Úrsula was a different kind of intermediary than Sacabuche: rather than translate between distinct languages, she served as a respected visionary and relayer of messages between God, souls in purgatory, and the living. Two posthumous biographies written about her shortly after her death in 1666 use her spiritual diary to fashion their own accounts about her. The biographies selectively repeat her diary’s portrayals of how black men and women should be perceived in and beyond her religious community.

Andrés Sacabuche and Úrsula de Jesús are two of the black intermediaries from colonial Spanish America who are the focus of this book. By examining texts by and about them, Beyond Babel highlights the influence black men and women had on the production of written texts in their respective communities through the work of linguistic and spiritual mediation. In the case of the evangelical interpreters in Cartagena such as Sacabuche, linguistic mediation describes the transposition of messages across the many different languages spoken by the black men and women disembarking from slave ships to facilitate their arrival in the port as well as their catechisms and baptisms. In the case of Úrsula de Jesús in Lima, spiritual mediation describes the labor of relaying messages communicated to her by God and other otherworldly interlocutors to her spiritual community and to serve as an advocate for the salvation of the souls of the living and the dead. This book will demonstrate that these black intermediaries used linguistic and spiritual mediation to shape notions of blackness in written texts that have been overlooked by previous scholarship on colonial Latin America and the African diaspora. Specifically, these intermediaries helped document and circulate notions of black

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2 *Diario espiritual de la venerable Úrsula de Jesús, escrita por ella misma*, Archivo de Santa Clara de Lima, 8r–60r. This document has been edited and published by Nancy van Deusen in Spanish and English. Nancy van Deusen, *Las almas del purgatorio: El diario espiritual y vida anónima de Úrsula de Jesús, una mística negra del siglo XVII* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2012); *Souls of Purgatory: The Spiritual Diary of a Seventeenth-Century Afro-Peruvian Mystic, Úrsula de Jesús* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004). Úrsula’s diary dates from 1650 and concludes in 1661.
Men and women of African descent first arrived in the territories that would become Peru and New Granada along with the first Spanish expeditions to these areas in the sixteenth century. In some cases, they were conquistadors themselves, and in others they were servants to conquistadors. The importation of large numbers of enslaved Africans to the Caribbean for commercial purposes began in 1518 after the Spanish Crown authorized the first large shipment to Hispaniola. Then, when the Spanish Crown assumed control of Portugal in 1580, the volume of the transatlantic slave trade to Spanish America increased significantly until 1640. The enslaved black men, women, and children who survived the sea voyage during this period were taken to work in farms, fields, and mines or to serve as servants in domestic spaces and convents. Some already knew skilled trades on arrival in Spanish America; others learned

5 Frederick Bowser, The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 1524–1650 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), 4–6. A trickling arrival of enslaved Africans as personal servants in the early years of the Peruvian viceroyalty resulted from the permits for the importation of African slaves from Iberia that the Crown awarded Pizarro and his men for the conquests in Peru. For example, when Pizarro returned to Spain and signed the Capitulations of Toledo in 1529, the Crown authorized him to import duty-free fifty African slaves into the land. Other men who went with him were granted similar permits for a modest fee. Then, between 1529 and 1537, the Crown granted more people to import at least 363 slaves. Black servants were coveted in the early viceregal period, as they would be throughout the following centuries, because they were considered a symbol of prestige for their owners (8). On the prestige of owning black slaves in the Andes, see also Tamara J. Walker, Exquisite Slaves: Race, Clothing, and Status in Colonial Lima (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 26–42. For a recent synthesis of historiography on Iberian and Mediterranean antecedents to the transatlantic slave trade, see William D. Phillips, Jr., Slavery in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 10–78. On black soldiers in the early European settlement of the Spanish Caribbean, see Jane Landers, Black Society in Spanish Florida (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 21–23; Matthew Restall, The Black Middle: Africans, Mayans, and Spaniards in Colonial Yucatan (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 6–13.

them afterward.⁵ Some became free through their owners’ selective manumission, their own supplemental work as day laborers, or physical escape.⁶ Many more stayed enslaved. By the early seventeenth century, free and enslaved black men and women came to form a significant percentage of the population in these regions.⁷

The texts examined in this book were produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the urban centers of Lima and Cartagena, two coastal cities connected by empire, commercial routes, and evangelical projects.⁸ Together, as ports, Lima and Cartagena were tied to other cities across the globe such as Seville, Luanda, Lisbon, Veracruz, Portobello, Buenos Aires, and São Tomé. Colonial Peru and New Granada, the broader areas surrounding Lima and Cartagena, are usually studied separately, but by focusing on both in conversation in this book I can

⁵ On black men and women in the skilled trades, see Bowser, The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 125–146.
⁸ Travel between these two cities during this period was typically realized by sailing from Cartagena to Portobello, crossing the Panamanian isthmus by land, and sailing south from Panama to Lima. For Iberians seeking to reach Peru as well as west African captives forced to travel the same route, stopping in Cartagena was often the first stop after crossing the Atlantic. See Nicolás del Castillo Matheu, La llave de las Indias (Bogota: El Tiempo, 1981); Wheat, Atlantic Africa; and Linda Newson and Susie Minchin, From Capture to Sale: The Portuguese Slave Trade to Spanish South America in the Early Seventeenth Century (Boston: Brill, 2007). For a narrative of a voyage from Iberia to Peru via Cartagena, see Gerónymo Pallas, Misión a las Indias [1619], ed. José Hernández Palomo (Sevilla: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2006).
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attend to some of the ways the movement of people, material goods, and evangelical projects between them were frequent and mutually influential.9 For example, most of the routes of the legal and illegal slave trades to Peru during this period passed through Cartagena such that the black men and women who arrived in Peru from Iberia or western Africa had to stop in Cartagena before resuming their voyage. As I will show in Chapter 2, people, materials, and evangelical projects also went in the other direction: missionary strategies that were first developed for indigenous populations in Peru in the late sixteenth century then served as models for Jesuit missionary efforts among black men and women in Cartagena when the order expanded northward into New Granada from Peru in the early seventeenth century. Focusing on both areas in this book allows me to examine a shared discourse about blackness produced in collaboration with distinct kinds of black intermediaries across different areas of colonial Spanish America. The juxtaposition demonstrates that the notions of black virtue and black beauty that circulated in each city were not merely local phenomena. They were shared across regions as well as among recent arrivals from Africa and black men and women born in the Americas. The bifocal frame of my study also offers an alternative to “Atlantic-only” readings of the African diaspora by foregrounding ways in which policies and practices developed to incorporate black men and women into colonial societies in the Atlantic were directly connected to precedents established in the Andean highlands and the Pacific littoral.10

The time period covered by this book begins in the late sixteenth century and closes toward the end of seventeenth century, a stretch of time that coincides not only with the demographic boom of Africans in

9 In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Peru corresponded to the contemporary territories of Peru, northern Chile, and Bolivia, whereas New Granada corresponded to today’s Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela. The Spanish began their conquests in the Andes in 1532 and incorporated Peru as an official viceroyalty in 1542. The region of New Granada took on its name starting in 1539, although sometimes it was also referred to as Tierra Firme. Santa Fe (Bogota) became the seat of the Audience of New Granada in 1550, but the Spanish Crown did not officially incorporate the “New Kingdom of Granada” as a separate viceroyalty (from that of Peru) until 1718.

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colonial Spanish America, but also with the onset of the influence of Iberian Renaissance humanism and Counter Reformation theology in these areas.¹¹ As I will show in Chapter 1, the confluence of Renaissance humanist ideology and Counter Reformation theology had a profound effect on the way written texts began to codify blackness in early and mid-colonial Spanish America. In particular, I identify and analyze the work of a pervasive set of interlocking associations between black men and women and the uncivilized body, a limited capacity to speak, and a redeemable soul. Important alternatives to this set of stereotypes appear in the textual portrayals of black intermediaries who are described or describe themselves as masters of language, models of Christian virtue, and privileged relayers of religious signs. Their texts offer a set of aesthetic and moral valences that blackness held in this period that have gone unrecognized by scholarship on racial hierarchies of the more secular eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

For this analysis, it is crucial to note that one of the key ways blackness took shape in Spanish America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was through comparisons with indigeneity. Especially in the first two chapters, this book engages how attitudes and policies developed by Spanish missionaries to evangelize black and indigenous populations helped structure colonial ideas of race. In taking this approach, I join a growing number of scholars integrating the study of Africans and their descendants with that of indigenous peoples in Latin America, examining these groups’ social and political histories side by side or examining interactions between them.¹² While mine is not a full comparative study,

¹¹ The period of the unification of the Spanish and Portuguese Crowns (1580–1640) gave Spanish America immediate access to the Portuguese slave trade. For more on the demographic changes of black populations in Spanish America during this period, see Wheat, *Atlantic Africa*, 267–81. The Bourbon takeover of the Hapsburg reign at the beginning of the eighteenth century and the British assumption of political and economic primacy in the Atlantic changed the demographics of the slave trade and the distribution of military and economic power on all sides of the Atlantic.

it demonstrates that the Jesuit missionary strategies among black men and
women in the Americas grew out of and then in distinction from evangel-
ical projects among indigenous populations in the same regions. More
specifically, I show that the roles assigned to and adapted by black
linguistic and spiritual intermediaries in colonial evangelical projects were
initially based on and then expressly different from those assigned to
indigenous intermediaries.

The unique roles assumed by the black intermediaries examined in this
book relate to the different treatment of black populations compared with
indigenous populations in early colonial Spanish America. Key to this
difference were the distinct juridical categories given to black and indigen-
ous populations based on their perceived relationships to territorial pos-
session by the Spanish Crown.13 While the Crown made efforts to legally
protect indigenous populations of the Americas and to establish a separ-
ate governing system of la república de los indios to function parallel to la
re pública de los españoles, there was no comparable legal space created
for black political collectivities in Spanish American colonial govern-
ments.14 As has been noted by several scholars, black men and women

13 O’Toole, Bound Lives, 64–87; Herman Bennett, Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-
Mexico (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 212; Laura Lewis, Hall of
Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft, and Caste in Colonial Mexico (Durham: Duke University
Press, 2003), 49–54; Peter Wade, Race and Ethnicity in Latin America, 2nd ed. (London:
Pluto, 2010), 27; María Elena Martínez, Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre,
Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press,
2008), 100 and 143.

14 While in the case of the indigenous populations, there was a bureaucratic mechanism
(protector de indios) established to protect native subjects, there never existed a
protector de negros in the American viceroyalties (Jouve Martín, Esclavos de la ciudad
letrada, 100). Laws from the Spanish American vicerealties frequently discouraged
association between indigenous and black populations due perhaps to a perceived
threat posed by the development of a collective consciousness among the two groups
as well as the fact that black populations were often cast as aggressors to indigenous
communities. See Bowser, The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 150; Lewis, Hall of
Mirrors, 99; and Wade, Race and Ethnicity in Latin America, 27–28. O’Toole’s Bound
Lives provides an excellent study of the limits of those perceived divisions between
black and indigenous populations.

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were thus legally included as part of Spanish American viceregal societies without giving them means of collective representation and protection within them. Indeed, the Spanish Crown debated and defended indigenous rights by the mid-sixteenth century, making native slavery mostly illegal in principle (if not in practice) precisely at a time when black slavery began to grow. Contrary to the critiques of indigenous enslavement and violent evangelical methods that characterized the mid-sixteenth-century debates about Spanish treatment of New World natives, before the late seventeenth century few comparable critiques were made of the ownership of and trade in black men and women in the Iberian empire.

As religious subjects in Spanish America, black men and women also differed from indigenous men and women. The Church in Spanish America administratively considered black men and women to be Old World peoples who had at least technically already converted to Christianity before crossing the Atlantic, whereas indigenous peoples were considered neophytes. Historians have attributed this phenomenon to the many Iberian contacts with Ethiopians, North Africans, and sub-Saharan Africans before and after Iberian colonization of the Americas began. (Ethiopia had long been an independent Christian kingdom and the


Kongo had become Christian by the early sixteenth century.) Before and during the sixteenth century, it was not uncommon for peoples from what we now consider the African continent to arrive in Iberia as royal visitors, diplomats, servants, or slaves. Many of these were already Christian; others, especially if they were servants or enslaved, became Christian soon after arrival due to evangelization efforts inside the homes in which they worked. These precedents contributed to the fact that black men and women in the early modern Iberian world were often rarely categorically identified as New Christians.

Indigenous populations of the Americas, in contrast, were cast as neophytes. The missionaries, theologians, and Crown officials committed to evangelizing New World populations generally agreed on the need to use different policies and practices than those developed for the Old World populations of Jews and Muslims, many of whom were forcibly converted to Christianity in Iberia in the fifteenth and early sixteenth.

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One important perceived difference between the Old World conversions of Jews and Muslims and those of the New World natives was that, unlike Old World Jews and Muslims, New World natives had not known of Christianity before the arrival of the Spanish and therefore could not be considered guilty of rejecting it or descending from those who had rejected it.\(^2^1\)\(^2^2\)

The black men and women in Spanish America who arrived with the boom in the trade to the region in late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were caught in between these distinct models. Some missionaries sought to evangelize black men and women using the coercive practices employed for Jews and Muslims in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Iberia, but others looked to accommodate policies and techniques developed for indigenous evangelization.\(^2^3\) To complicate matters further, the Inquisition in Spanish America had jurisdiction over black men and women but not over indigenous populations.\(^2^4\) This policy, historians

\(^2^1\) For a study of the policies and practices developed to convert Jews and Muslims at the end of the fifteenth century and through the sixteenth century, see Seth Kimmel, *Parables of Coercion: Conversion and Knowledge at the End of Islamic Spain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Kimmel explains that a key moment occurred in 1525–26 when the Council of Madrid agreed that while no more forced conversions should happen in the future, those of the past should be considered legitimate. This ruling, according to Kimmel, was largely about defining jurisdiction for the governing of New Christian populations. It brought the forcibly converted under the purview of the Inquisition, who would then be in charge of monitoring New Christian beliefs and behaviors.


\(^2^3\) For a critique of the Old World model of mass baptisms, see José de Acosta, *De procuranda indorum salute*, vol. 2, 367–69; and Alonso Sandoval, *Naturaleza, policia sagrada*, book 3, chap. 4, 242v–249r.