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Review of Black Saints in Early Modern Catholicism

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***Black Saints in Early Modern Catholicism.* Erin Kathleen Rowe. Cambridge, UK and New York, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2019, hardcover, \$51.99 ISBN 9781108421218.**

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In 2013, in the early stages of research on global Catholicism for the website [Catholics & Cultures](#), I came across two remarkable churches in Ouro Preto, Brazil—the Igreja de Santa Ifigênia and Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Rosário—both baroque gems built by Black Catholics who had freed each other from slave labor in the mines, under the leadership of a man named Chico Rey. Like many things about the parish, the statues of Black saints there, Sts. Ifigênia, Kaleb of Axum, Benedict the Moor and Anthony of Carthage, only one of whom I'd ever heard of, were intriguing. I'd already been drawn to thinking about the stories behind the Black Madonnas at Montserrat and Guadalupe in Spain, and was interested in ways that African religions were imported to the new world, but my immediate work was focused on contemporary Catholic life in that town. I vowed that someday when I had time, I would find out more about the history of the saint and the story behind the amazing parish of Santa Ifigênia.

Black Saints in Early Modern Catholicism, Erin Kathleen Rowe's remarkable recent book, not only answered my curiosity, it introduces all of us to the devotional and ecclesial networks that fostered Black saints' devotion in the early modern era, and with that takes us into the world of Black confraternities and devotional life. It renders saints and devotions who have long been invisible, visible, though they have been hidden in plain sight or treated as less than significant one-offs. Rowe had encountered images like those I saw and set out to explore the world that put them up above altars. She begins the book with accounts of images of Black saints in Portuguese or Spanish churches where parishioners had told her there were none to be seen.

To set the frame, Rowe traces the emergence of devotions to Black saints, whether the Black Madonnas, Sts. Maurice or Moses, Elesban or Efigenia, as many of them were rediscovered and written back into the history of Catholic Christianity in the early modern era. She also draws attention to a number of men and women from this era who were once praised and known for their sanctity, such as five 16th-century Black Franciscans, including Benedict of Palermo, who had local and even international devotional cults in their honor.

To explain the growth of these devotional networks, she not only looks at the history of religious orders, but also traces the growth of Black confraternities from 1500 onward, much like the ones that built churches such as I marveled at in Ouro Preto. The confraternities allowed Black Catholics to take their devotional lives into their own hands, to help with dowry and burial expenses, and to pray for their dead. Rowe's scope is global, from Ethiopia through Sicily, to the Iberian peninsula and throughout the Ibero-Atlantic world from Angola to Lima and Mexico. To me, it was especially useful though that she reminded us of the extent to which the population of Lisbon and of many cities in Spain was composed of enslaved Africans, writing them and their confraternities and devotions back into the Iberian mainland story, not just into the Iberian overseas story.

Rowe helps us to see simultaneously how Black saints linked Blackness and sanctity in the minds of devotees; how often Whites, particularly in Iberia, were devoted to Black saints; how often, at the same time, there was White supremacist backlash against such a linkage as well; how interwoven slavery was with Catholic Christianity, and how so many forms and structures of Catholic spirituality were used to justify enslavement and diminishment. She regularly asks readers to deal with this complexity, even as she faces squarely with evil. “The story of baptism and catechesis, black confraternities and black saints, cannot be told simply in terms of black empowerment or ecclesiastic oppression—both are crucial aspects of this multi-faceted narrative.” (77). She helps us to encounter ways that Christian faith provided opportunities for freedom and transcendence from the colonial order, but also identifies the many ways that racism repeatedly worked to diminish and demean. One of the complexities she raises is how to grapple with the use of spiritualized language about slavery to God in a world of institutionalized, racialized slavery, particularly when it was idealized and applied to Blacks.

I mentioned my own background and work earlier to make explicit that this review is not from the perspective of an early modern historian but as a student of lived, global, contemporary Catholicism, a field that is oddly far less developed than early modern (or medieval or 19th century) Catholic studies. Leaving historian-reviewers room to ask how this book contributes to their field, the question I bring to it is, What does it model for scholars in contemporary global Catholicism? This might be an unfair question had Rowe not provided such an excellent model for contemporary scholars.

Rowe helps us to imagine the complexities of whole worlds. She gives us a sense of the texture of devotion, how values like poverty and humility fit within the religious imaginary and could be differently expected from and experienced by devotees of different races and genders. She grapples with the contradictions inherent in every culture. She pays attention both to saints whose scope was global, and to informal cults that were more local. This allows her to highlight networks of influence, but not to be forced to leave out a locally important story because it doesn't fit within the global network narrative. She shows how devotions were fostered from the top down, and also from the bottom up, by Black believers who brought their own priorities. She studies the physical images left behind to commemorate saints and the social networks that support them, but also treats them as objects of devotion, not merely artifacts. And she bolsters her thoughtful analysis with a rich array of photographs that convey her point. The book is built on deep historical expertise but is accessible to non-specialists. Never, as a reader, did I feel lost in the weeds. As I'd hoped, it helped open up new imaginary worlds and set a standard for future work.