

Chapter 6

ESTEFANIA DE SAN JOSEPH AND ESPERANZA DE SAN ALBERTO: THE DUAL DISCOURSE IN THE LIVES OF TWO EXEMPLARY AFRO-WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN EARLY MODERN SPANISH-AMERICA

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IN 1650 THE Franciscan Diego de Córdoba y Salinas made the unconventional decision to include the spiritual biography of an Afro-Franciscan *beata* named Estefania de San Joseph into his chronicle about the Franciscans of colonial Peru.¹ A few decades later, in 1703, José Gómez de la Parra, a prominent theologian from Puebla in colonial Mexico made a similar choice when incorporating the spiritual life of an Afro-Mexican nun known as Esperanza de San Alberto into the chronicle of the San José convent. Very few Afro-women professed in colonial Spanish-America during the Early Modern period. Indeed, in the Ibero-Atlantic world, people generally associated Afro-individuals with the Devil and they thought that women of African ancestry lacked the necessary moral attributes to undertake a religious vocation. So it is surprising that Estefania and Esperanza became known for their Catholic exemplarity and even more intriguing that highly respected clergy members chose them as the subjects of religious biographies since such portrayals were usually reserved for saintly figures such as Teresa of Avila and Rosa of Lima.²

Until now, few scholars have examined the rare discourse about exemplary Afro-Catholic women in the early modern Ibero-Atlantic world.³ Alice Wood, who has studied

1 A *beata* was a lay pious woman who took informal religious vows: Van Deusen, *The Souls of Purgatory*, 194.

2 St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) was a prominent Spanish Carmelite who, together with John of the Cross, is considered the founder of the Discalced Carmelites. She was canonized in 1622. For more information on her works and life, please consult Slade, “St. Teresa of Avila as a Social Reformer.” St. Rose of Lima (1586–1617) was a lay member of the Dominican Order and the first person born in the Americas to be canonized. She was canonized in 1671. To learn more about her, see Graziano, “Santa Rosa de Lima” and Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*.

3 There were only a handful of Afro-religious women whose spiritual lives were recorded in the

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Estefania's life, maintains that her spiritual biography demonstrates that "even under restrictive conditions"⁴ Afro-women such as Estefania could stand as "so exemplary and such a credit to the Franciscan order."⁵ In two remarkable chapters about Esperanza, Joan Cameron Bristol argues that Esperanza's biographer used a discourse of "exceptionalism" to introduce her as an exemplary black religious figure.⁶ Elsewhere, while further analyzing this discourse of "exceptionalism," I have identified the presence of a language of whitening in Esperanza's spiritual biography.⁷ In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the whitening accompanying Esperanza's description was also present in Estefania's, and that both characterizations were tightly connected to their biographers' projects to glorify their *criollo* convents and orders.⁸ As part of that project, when presenting Estefania and Esperanza, Gómez de la Parra and Córdoba y Salinas portrayed them as exceptional women and as models of religious exemplarity that exemplified the success of the New World and their respective orders and convents in their spiritual enterprises. They characterized Estefania and Esperanza as exceptional Afro-women who God chose to embody the specific saintly virtues of charity, self-sacrifice, and humility; however, the two biographers also adopted a dual discourse in the semiotic construction of their subjects and whitened them as they established their evolution towards religious exemplarity.

Estefania and Esperanza were both born in slavery, both had ample contact with conventual life, and both eventually took on religious habits despite their *casta*.⁹ Even more surprisingly, the two Afro-women gained considerable fame for their Catholic exemplarity during their lives, so much so that prominent members of their religious communities recorded their deaths as showing evidence of their possible sanctity. Esperanza was born in what is now known as Guinea-Bissau.¹⁰ She was baptized immediately after arriving to Veracruz where Doña Fajardo purchased her. When her mistress joined the Convent of Discalced Carmelites of San José in Puebla near the end of her life, Esperanza accompanied her as her servant. As was often done, upon her death Doña Fajardo

Ibero-Atlantic world during the early modern period. Apart from Estefania and Esperanza, we can also find an Afro-Peruvian mystic by the name of Ursula de Jesús as well as an Afro-Iberian tertiary nun called Teresa Chicaba. For information on Ursula, see Van Deusen, *The Souls* and Wood, "Religious Women of Color"; for Teresa Chicaba, see Ferrús Antón, "Sor Teresa"; Fra Molinero, "La primera escritora afrohispanica"; and Maeso, *Sor Chikaba*.

4 Wood, "Religious Women of Color," 292.

5 Wood, "Religious Women of Color," 292.

6 Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*, 23–62; Bristol, "Although I am Black I am Beautiful."

7 Benoist, "Esperanza de San Alberto"; Benoist, "El 'blanqueamiento' de dos escogidas negras de Dios."

8 During the rest of this analysis I will refer to Juana Esperanza as Esperanza, her shorter name.

9 In the early modern period, the concept of race was much more conceived as *casta*. See Hill, "Caste Theater and Poetry" and Hill, *Hierarchy, Commerce, and Fraud in Bourbon Spanish America*. *Casta* was more fluid and was articulated in terms of "lineage" and "calidad" rather than as a fixed biological marker as it would become during the nineteenth century. See Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain*, 6.

10 When examining the "facts" that have been attached to Esperanza's life, such as her birthplace, it is important to remember that what we know about her comes from her biographers' construction.

donated her slave to the convent. Esperanza lived there for more than sixty years, during which time she worked as a servant performing domestic duties in the kitchen and the infirmary.¹¹ However, unlike most conventual Afro-Catholic servants, Esperanza's exemplary observance of the convent's rules eventually led her to become a nun in 1678. Esperanza accepted doing so at the time of her death, and so in 1678, when Esperanza thought she was about to die, she called the bishop of Santa Cruz to profess. Esperanza died a year later in 1679. Upon her death, her convent gave her a sumptuous funeral that the whole city attended, including the highest members of Puebla's elite.¹²

Like Esperanza, Estefania was born a slave and eventually became a highly respected religious model. Estefania was born in 1561 in Cuzco, colonial Peru, from an enslaved Afro-mother and a Spanish father. After her owner emancipated her mother and her upon dying, Estefania's mother became a *donada* and joined the convent of Santa Clara where Ursula would later profess. Estefania, in turn, became a *beata* and vowed to live a holy life.¹³ As a *beata*, Estefania was a lay member of the Franciscans and lived according to religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to God. Although she resided outside the convent, she wore a religious habit and was supervised by a male spiritual advisor. She spent a large amount of her time living a religious life of prayers, humility, and penance and dedicating herself to charitable work for the poor and the sick. To support herself and the four orphans she adopted, she also worked as a housekeeper and sewed pillows.¹⁴ Throughout her life she gained high recognition as an exemplary religious woman.¹⁵

By the seventeenth century, Afro enslaved people such as Estefania and Esperanza played a vital economic role in all of the Spanish colonies but they were particularly predominant in colonial Mexico and colonial Peru. The concentration of enslaved workers in these two regions was mainly dictated by labour needs, especially after the decline in the Amerindian population. By 1640 there were close to one hundred thousand Afro-descendants living in slavery in Peru, constituting ten to fifteen percent of the total population. In Lima the presence of Afro-Peruvians was even stronger, so much so that by the 1590s Lima was half black and would remain as such for most of the seventeenth century.¹⁶ In those cities slaves were vital to the economy and the production of goods and services. They predominated in metalworking, clothing, and constructions supplies as well as in most crafts except silversmithing and printing.¹⁷ In these urban centers many Afro-Peruvian women worked performing domestic chores in households, convents, and hospitals.

Similarly, by 1640, colonial Mexico was home to the second-largest population of enslaved Africans in the Americas, only second to colonial Brazil. During the mid-seven-

11 Lavrin, "Female Religious," 169–70.

12 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 308–20.

13 Córdoba y Salinas, *Corónica*, 189–91; Wood, "Religious Women of Color," 294.

14 Wood, "Religious Women of Color," 289–93.

15 Wood, "Religious Women of Color," 293.

16 Klein and Vinson, *African Slavery in Latin America*, 26.

17 Klein and Vinson, *African Slavery in Latin America*, 26.

teenth century, the number of enslaved people declined due to the Spanish Crown's prohibition on purchasing slaves from the Portuguese after the Crowns of Spain and Portugal separated. And yet, by 1810 the free Afro-population of Mexico was still approximately 624,000 or ten percent of the total population.¹⁸ Urban enslaved workers could work as domestic servants or also as *jornaleros* (day labourers who negotiated their work for people other than their masters but received a percentage of their earnings). Like in colonial Peru, many Afro-Mexican urban women worked as personal servants in nunneries and monasteries or were in charge of general domestic chores.¹⁹

During Esperanza's and Estefania's lifetime *criollos* and Spaniards usually associated blackness with evilness, sinfulness, and ugliness and set it in opposition to whiteness, the symbol of purity and sanctity.²⁰ As a consequence of that binary, Spaniards and *criollos* commonly defined Afro-descendants in opposition to Spaniards and perceived them as morally inferior beings characterized by debased moral traits.²¹ Many of the period's biblical scholars believed that blacks stemmed from a curse and that the colour of their skin and their slavery was God's punishment to Ham for exposing Noah's nakedness.²² A different explanation proposed that black skin was God's curse on Cain for slaying Abel.²³ Moreover, because Afro-men and women were coupled with slavery and were not legally identified as a republic of their own, by the turn of the seventeenth century it became easy for the colonial institutions to identify Afro-descendants as impure in their genealogy with no limit on how far back their "stain" went.²⁴ As a consequence of this negative construction of blackness, convents had regulations establishing that Afro-women could not take the vow and *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) was necessary to profess in Spain and its colonies.²⁵

Nevertheless, sometimes convents played an important empowering role for some Afro-*donadas* and *beatas*. Indeed, when wealthy women entered the convent, they often took with them an enslaved woman. Convents were dual spheres for these Afro-women: on the one hand, they replicated the outside world's social hierarchy and placed slaves

18 Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico*, 1; Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 221; Proctor, "Slave Rebellion and Liberty."

19 Klein and Vinson, *African Slavery in Latin America*, 30; Proctor, "Slave Rebellion and Liberty," 31; Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Mujeres de origen africano en la capital novohispana*, 64 and 130.

20 Gómez, "El estigma africano," 149; Rowe, "Visualizing Black Sanctity," 57. Also worth noting, before the sixteenth century, blacks were not always considered pagans and infidels who were genealogically impure. For more information on the transformation of their genealogy and its connection to purity of blood I recommend consulting Martínez, *Genealogical Fiction*, in particular 157–58.

21 Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain*, 7; Rowe, "Visualizing Black Sanctity," 57.

22 That explanation was based on a reading of Genesis 9:21–28. Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain*, 11; Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 158.

23 Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain*, 11.

24 Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 221.

25 "Limpieza de sangre" referred to the concept of "purity of blood." In the Covarrubias 1611 dictionary, "limpio" is defined as "old Christian, free of Jewish or Muslim blood" (my translation, fol. 525r–v). Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, 167.

and free Afro-women at the bottom of the convent hierarchy. Inside the convent, Afro-enslaved and free Afro-women were servants, and they performed most of the hard manual tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and attending orchards.²⁶ Enslaved women given to a convent as part of a will were more vulnerable than free black servants because the convent could decide to sell them at any time.²⁷ However, at the same time convents could offer positive aspects for these women by functioning as a unique access to spiritual life.²⁸ They introduced Afro-women to a textual community that incorporated knowledge about the Bible and the Christian interpretative tradition.²⁹ The regular conventual *predicatio* involved reading out aloud a written text or a reflection about a religious topic and discussion and interpretation of the text, which allowed these women to become familiar with the fundamental aspects of Christian doctrine and to acquire knowledge about the forms of thinking and reasoning of Western Christian cultures.³⁰ With Christianity, Afro-women learned to develop new literary practices. These practices, which people gained through writing or their knowledge of writing, allowed them to form social connections with other individuals with the same knowledge and similar social identities and ideologies.³¹ Thanks to that knowledge and the spiritual community formed around convents Afro-women like Estefania and Esperanza became known for their exceptional religiosity.

In marked contrast to Spanish and *criolla* nuns and women mystics whose lives or *vidas* were often included in the chronicles of convents and orders, rarely were the lives of Afro-*donadas* or *beatas* incorporated.³² In the exceptional instances when the religious lives of these women were documented, like the two instances examined in this chapter, male ecclesiastical figures generally wrote about them and not the women themselves. In their texts, the men addressed a lay audience and not just female members of the religious community.³³ Because of this wider audience, when representing their religious subject, biographers tended to underscore the compliance of their subject to church rules.³⁴ The male writers' motivations varied, from revealing an extraordinary spiritual experience to the reader to associating their names with a possible candidate for sainthood.³⁵

26 Burns, *Colonial Habits*, 115.

27 Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, 167.

28 Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, 167.

29 Jouve Martín, *Esclavos de la ciudad*, 58.

30 Jouve Martín, *Esclavos de la ciudad*, 62–68.

31 Barton cited in Jouve Martín, *Esclavos de la ciudad*, 80.

32 *Vidas* were spiritual autobiographies that nuns had to write as a means of confession to their confessors, and as such they were commissioned, many times against the will of the nuns themselves, and the nuns' writings were scrutinized by the confessors.

33 Dienfendorff, "Discerning Spirits," 246.

34 Ferrús Antón, "Sor Teresa," 188.

35 Vollendorf, *A New History of Inquisitional Spain*, 120.

Analyzing the discourse present in Estefania's and Esperanza's biographies also requires understanding the problematic question of the authorship of these chronicles of convents and orders. The biographers who wrote the religious lives of women usually departed from the nun's own writings when those existed or used other nuns' written records about them kept in conventual archives and they sometimes supplemented them with interviews with the nun herself. But as they wrote the religious biographies, the biographers considerably modified the nuns' text. They would start by reorganizing the biographical information in a chronological manner, then present a series of anecdotes to underline the virtues of the nuns, and finish with the narration of the death of their subject, insisting on the miracles that accompanied it. The whole writing process revealed the unequal power of the women vis-à-vis their male biographers since the lives, dictations, and writings that the women produced became the raw product for a male writer to adapt and modify, deciding what to keep and what to remove.³⁶

Moreover, these chronicles often had a bigger agenda than simply presenting the story of a particular convent or order. The chronicles were usually written with the main aim to underscore the exemplary nature of the convent and/or its order as a whole.³⁷ At the same time, like hagiographies, they also served as means of expressing *criollo* identity and were meant to counter European prejudices of colonial inferiority.³⁸ That is, *criollos* who considered the New World, and not Spain, as their home used this genre to exalt the merits of other members of their communities, presenting the virtues of one of its members as a synecdoche of the virtues of the whole *criollo* community.³⁹ As part of this purpose, it was crucial for *criollo* biographers to construct their conventual subjects in the most exemplary fashion. Writers needed to celebrate the triumph of Catholicism in the colonies and, in particular, underline the crucial role of their respective religious orders in the New World.

That objective is particularly clear in Esperanza's biography when Gómez de la Parra concludes by emphasizing that God brought her to the Carmelite convent in Puebla to enhance its Garden of Eden:

Siendo, pues todos los conventos de la Sagrada Reforma, frondosos y fecundos huertos, de todo género de plantas y árboles, cuantas son las virtudes que ejercitan en ellas las Carmelitas descalzas, habiendo traído la Divina Majestad a Esperanza, desde la gentilidad a esta Nueva España, la condujo a este fertil jardín, plantado en la América, para que no le faltase el exquisito árbol indiano del ébano negro, a quien Calepino apellida árbol peregrino, y que tan solamente se da en las Indias.⁴⁰

36 Franco, *Las conspiradoras*, transl. Córdoba, 37-42.

37 Hampe Martínez, *Santidad e Identidad Criolla*, 115; Jouve Martín, "En olor de santidad," 183; Myers, "Redeemer of America," 259.

38 As Celia Cussen reminds us, hagiographies were also missionizing tools (*Black Saint of the Americas*, 107). Also as Elisa Sampson and Vera Tudela have demonstrated, the hagiographies of the New World incorporated the spiritual journeys of their subjects with the real trans-Atlantic voyages that the women undertook and as such mixed the genre of the hagiography with the genre of the travel narrative (*Colonial Angels*, 1-13). For a study of New World hagiographies as tools of *criollo* pride, see Rubial García, *La Santidad Controvertida*.

39 Morgan *Spanish American Saints*, 4.

40 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 321.

[Since all the convents of the Sacred Reform are leafy and fertile orchards with all kinds of plants and trees, such as the virtues that the Discalced Carmelites exercise, having brought his Divine Majesty Esperanza, from gentility to New Spain, He led her to this fertile garden, planted in America, so that the exquisite black ebony from the Indies, that Calepino calls pilgrim tree, and that only grown in the Indies, would not be missing.]⁴¹

By characterizing Esperanza as a treasure brought to New Spain to complete its Garden of Eden, Gómez de la Parra was underlining that New Spain was a land chosen by God. Furthermore, by adding that divine favour had brought Esperanza to the convent of the Discalced Carmelites of Puebla, the biography was celebrating the particular success of the Carmelites of colonial Mexico in the dissemination of Christianity.

While Estefania's biographer did not make as strong and specific a reference to her role as a missionizing tool for her order in Peru, he very much insisted on her celestial qualities, her connection with Lima and the convent of Santa Clara, and her identification as a saintly Afro-Peruvian figure. In the first paragraph of the biography he describes her as chosen by God with such heavenly qualities that she resembled a "seraph"⁴² surrounded by God's love. He then establishes that she was born in Cuzco, but that God brought her to Lima and in particular to the convent of Santa Clara where she professed.⁴³ And then, Córdoba y Salinas explains that don Pedro of Toledo and his wife, the viceroys of colonial Peru, visited Estefania while she was attending to the sick and requested her blessing:

señor mío, Excelencia no es el Virrey? ¿pues cómo visita a una mulata como yo? Notando la fuerza de la virtud que obró semejantes acciones, dando a una humilde mujer, y que había sido esclava, para hablar a personas tan vanas con tanto valor y cortesía, y a ellos a que reconociendo la santidad ... la besasen la mano y pidiesen su bendición.⁴⁴

[my Sir, is his excellence not the Viceroy? Then how is it possible that he visits a mulatta such as me? Because they noted the strength of the virtue that created such actions, giving to such a humble woman, and one who had been a slave, to speak to such high persons with such courage and courtesy, and they, who recognized sanctity ... kissed her hand and asked for her blessing]

As the above quotation illustrates, despite her condition as an Afro-Peruvian, the viceroy of Peru and his wife identified Estefania as a saintly woman who could intercede in their favour before God. As such, Córdoba y Salinas was implicitly positioning an Afro-member of Peruvian colonial society closer to God than two Spaniards of high society, and therefore cleverly refuting notions of colonial spiritual inferiority.

In Esperanza's biography, Gómez de la Parra incorporates a similar reference when he explains that the Marchioness of Mancera insisted on meeting Esperanza when she visited her convent and asked her to pray to God on her behalf every day: "Después de larga conversación, le pidió su Excelencia encarecidamente que todos los días les rezase una Ave María y que la encomendase a Dios, a lo cual respondió Esperanza: *Todos los*

41 All the translations of Spanish quotations into English are mine.

42 Córdoba y Salinas, *Corónica*, 949.

43 Córdoba y Salinas, *Corónica*, 950.

44 Córdoba y Salinas, *Corónica*, 952.

días, Señora Excelentísima, le rezaré".⁴⁵ [After the very long conversation, her excellence earnestly asked her to pray one Ave Maria for them every day and to entrust them to God, to which Esperanza answered: I will pray to Him every day, your Most High Excellence]. In both spiritual accounts, the biographers used a similar discourse to establish that God had chosen Afro-members from their colonial community, therefore underlining the spiritual success of the colonies.

To emphasize that Estefania and Esperanza had saintly attributes, the two biographers introduced the incorruptibility of their Afro-subjects' bodies after their deaths. Such a *topos* was quite common in hagiographies and was meant to serve as a sign that the deceased was still living in heaven. Some of the most recurrent elements to showcase miracles associated with the saint's body after death were "flexible limbs, soft flesh and the absence of foul odors".⁴⁶ Both Gómez de la Parra and Córdoba y Salinas include these features when presenting the death of their subjects. Córdoba y Salinas writes that although Estefania had died more than thirty hours before her funeral, her hands were still soft and her fingers flexible, and he maintains that no bad smell surrounded her body.⁴⁷ Similarly, Gómez de la Parra describes Esperanza's body as one that looked like the body of a twenty-year-old girl and not that of an old woman. Furthermore, he affirms that the room where Esperanza was lying did not have the foul smells that usually accompany corpses.⁴⁸

When addressing the exemplary nature of their subjects, both biographers introduce their blackness as well as their slavery as central elements of their exceptional service to God. In the title of his section about Esperanza Gómez de la Parra makes Esperanza's *casta* clear by introducing her as "La Hermana Esperanza de San Alberto, la Morena"⁴⁹ and describing her in the first paragraph of the biography as a black slave who shined through her saintly example.⁵⁰ Similarly in the first section of Estefania's biography, Córdoba y Salinas establishes that despite being *parda* and daughter of a black slave, Estefania lived a heavenly life.⁵¹ Interestingly when presenting the saintly qualities of their Afro-subjects both men used their slave identity as evidence of their service to God by entwining their identities as slaves and God's servants. As Alice Wood has pointed out, the references to charitable caring along with the Christian humility and self-sacrifice that accompanied them were much more acute in the hagiographies of colonial Afro-saints than their *criollos* counterparts.⁵² Following that pattern, both Córdoba y Salinas and Gómez de la Parra describe their subjects as women who spent a consider-

45 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 315.

46 Wood, "Religious Women of Color," 294.

47 Córdoba y Salinas, *Corónica*, 953.

48 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 318.

49 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 308.

50 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 308.

51 Córdoba y Salinas, *Corónica*, 949. The nomenclature that the colonial society created was complex and included *pardos*, which were the equivalent of *mulatos* in parts of South America.

52 Wood, "Religious Women of Color," 291.

able part of their time taking care of the needs of others at the cost of their own. When listing their subjects' virtues they both underscore how much Estefania and Esperanza attended to the sick and the poor. Gómez de la Parra lists charity as one of Esperanza's greatest virtues as well as her long nights attending to the sick.⁵³ Similarly Córdoba y Salinas dedicates an entire paragraph to Estefania's charitable work healing the sick.⁵⁴

Although in their chronicles both men present their subjects as colonial Afro-women who embodied saintly attributes, at the same time they accompany that characterization with a discourse that whitens their Afro-protagonists as they evolved towards sanctity. The whitening process is present in both biographies, but it is much more acute in Esperanza's biography.⁵⁵ Indeed in order to obtain a truly exemplary state as a nun, Gómez de la Parra presents Esperanza as needing to disconnect from her black body. The first step towards that transformation can be found when Esperanza refuses to eat as a sign of true love for God. In the seventeenth century, fasting was a common practice to achieve higher spiritual consciousness with God through the "diminishment" or "erasure" of the body.⁵⁶ The ways in which the text describes the effects of the fasting on her body are worth noting: "En algunas ocasiones, solía estar muy mala, tanto que lo llegaban a conocer las religiosas, por verla tan descolorida, que parecía mulata, y jamás se quejaba" (Sometimes, she would get so ill, so much that the nuns would realize, when seeing her so pale, so much that she looked like a mulata, and she never complained).⁵⁷ The use of the word *mulata* carries strong implications since according to the Covarrubias dictionary from 1611 a "mulato" was the descendant of a white father and a black mother or vice versa.⁵⁸ The inference is therefore that by fasting Esperanza looked less dark and could have passed for a person with some white ancestry. More specifically, by associating the action of fasting—intended to bring the subject closer to God—with the transformation of the colour of the body from black to "mulata," the text suggests that in order to get closer to God Esperanza had to distance herself from her black body.

Esperanza's decision to only accept taking her vows at the time of her death accentuates the message that she herself may have perceived her black body as an impediment to becoming a nun. Three years before her death, two Carmelites, who had come from Spain and visited the convent, approached the prelate and encouraged her to convince Esperanza to take her vows "porque habiendo observado tantos años, con tanta perfección, las obligaciones de religiosa, por ser negra no ha de perder tantas indulgencias, como tenemos concedidas a los que profesamos"⁵⁹ [because having observed during so many years, with such perfection, the obligations of a nun, she should not lose the mul-

⁵³ Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 311–12.

⁵⁴ Córdoba y Salinas, *Corónica*, 951.

⁵⁵ I have studied this whitening process in two other articles: Benoist, "Esperanza de San Alberto"; Benoist, "El 'blanqueamiento' de dos escogidas negras de Dios."

⁵⁶ Eich, "The Body as a Conventual Space of Resistance," 206–7.

⁵⁷ Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 314.

⁵⁸ "Mulato," in Covarrubias' *Tesoro de la lengua castellana* (1611), fol. 558r.

⁵⁹ Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 316–17.

tuple privileges we concede to those who profess, due to her black skin]. After the prelate failed to convince her, a year later a prominent religious figure in the community named don Diego de Malpartida made another attempt:

Mas ni de una ni de otra manera la pudo convencer a que profesara, diciendo y repitiendo Esperanza: Señor, no me atrevo ni me hallo con ánimo para hacer los votos de la profesión. Y tan solamente pudo conseguir el señor Deán que a la hora de la muerte pidiese el hábito y la profesión, y como lo prometió, así lo hizo.⁶⁰

[But he was not able to convince her one way or another, saying and repeating Esperanza: Sir, I do not dare nor do I find the impetus to profess. And the only thing that the Dean was able to get from her was that, at her time of death, she would profess and take the habit, and as she promised, so she did.]

Even though the passage does not specifically identify her skin colour as Esperanza's main reason for her refusal, considering the mistreatment she received from other nuns in the convent because of her identity as an Afro-Mexican nun, her description as *mulata* when fasting, and the remark from the Carmelite visitors that Esperanza should not let her blackness stop her from becoming a nun, it is likely that her reluctance was at least partially the result of societal perceptions. By accepting to become a nun precisely at the moment of abandoning her black body at death, Esperanza seemed to be communicating the message that she would only be able to become a true nun upon dissociating entirely from her black body, a process previously started through her fasting.

The idea that Afro-individuals could reach a white state through conversion was not completely new at the turn of the eighteenth century. The belief had its origin in a Latin legend where two twin brothers transplanted the leg of a black person onto the body of a white patient. The legend was part of the *Golden Legend* that the Archbishop of Genoa Jacobus of Voragine (1230–1298) had compiled. In the legend of the brothers Cosmos and Damian (who later became saints), after the thigh of an Ethiopian man was transplanted onto a white man, the thigh turned white.⁶¹ In the Early Modern period, for some theologians this legend of the leg had become a metaphor for the whitening process of blacks after their conversion.⁶² For them, it represented that baptism had the miraculous power to whiten not only the souls of blacks but also their bodies.⁶³ In his treaty on slavery, for example, Alonso de Sandoval affirmed that through conversion blacks could free themselves from the stain of their sin, cause of their black skin, and that as such blacks could become white in their heavenly life.⁶⁴

While the whitening process is not as accentuated in Cordoba y Salinas' biography, it is also subtly present. Indeed, as the biographer presents Estefania's body during her funeral, he emphasizes the candles that accompanied her into her final journey

60 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 317.

61 For the complete story, see Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 582–84.

62 Fracchia, "La problematización del blanqueamiento visual," 71–73.

63 Fracchia, "Depicting the Iberian African," 62. For information about the representation of the black leg in Western art during the fifteenth century, see Devisse and Mollat, "The African Transposed."

64 Brewer-García, "Negro, pero blanco de alma," 9; Olsen, *Slavery and Salvation*, 84. See Sandoval, "Naturaleza, policía sagrada y profana" in *Un Tratado sobre la esclavitud*, trans. Vila Vilar.

and describes them as follows: “que con mucha cera blanca encendida acompañaron el cuerpo con veneraciones de mujer santa”⁶⁵ [which with much white lit wax accompanied the body with the venerations of a saintly woman]. In this final description, like in Esperanza’s, the *criollo* theologian adopts a discourse that Sandoval had already introduced with the metaphor of Christianity as the flame that could purify and whiten the soul of Africans.⁶⁶ In Córdoba’s biography, the candles become a symbol of Estefania’s religious evolution. By underlining that many white candles accompanied Estefania’s black body as she joined heaven as a saint, Córdoba was proposing that Christianity whitened her black body as she reached the heavens. This juxtaposition of the black body of saints with light was not uncommon in the representation of black saints of that era. For example, the sculptures of the Ethiopian saints Elesbaan and Ephigenia in the church of Avila combined the blackness of their bodies with “radiant lights” from God.⁶⁷

So, while particularly rich as sources on two of very few Afro-women of the Ibero-Atlantic world who were considered Catholic models in the early modern world, Estefania’s and Esperanza’s biographies also reveal the priorities and attitudes of the *criollo* male biographers who wrote them. Both biographers focused on the blackness and slavery of their subjects as central elements of their exemplarity, but they introduced them more as proof that God had chosen their *criollo* communities than as statements about the religious potential of Afro-communities. Indeed, both Córdoba y Salinas and Gómez de la Parra not only underlined the exceptional nature of their Afro-subjects, but they also adopted a dual discourse when writing about the exemplarity of their Afro-subjects. While they characterized Estefania and Esperanza as Afro-women with saintly attributes, they also represented them as Afro-women who had gone through a process of whitening as they approached a higher state. Because the Spanish Crown and Church sought control over the Afro-populations in colonial Spanish-America, the conventional discourse associated with Afro-Latin Americans was that of inferiority to justify their marginal position. It is hence likely that Córdoba y Salinas and Gómez de la Parra felt that they had to replicate that discourse in order to authorize their writings to their *criollo* readers. Whitening their subjects allowed them to more safely postulate their Afro-subjects as exceptional Afro-Catholic figures while at the same time avoiding the possible danger of having readers perceive them as a threat to the racial hierarchies of the Iberian colonial world.⁶⁸

65 Córdoba y Salinas, *Corónica*, 952.

66 Olsen, *Slavery and Salvation*, 87.

67 Rowe interprets this combination of light and darkness as evidence that blackness and light were not viewed as being in opposition to each other. While I agree with that interpretation as a possible one, I also find it problematic that in order to be presented as legitimate saints, Afro-saints had to be associated with lightness and whiteness: Rowe, “Visualizing Black Sanctity,” 77–80.

68 Indeed, by the seventeenth century in colonial Mexico and Peru the Afro-populations were high enough to be perceived as possibly dangerous to the white colonial hegemony. Sometimes helped by indigenous populations, Afro-populations had organized rebellions against the Spaniards and the *criollos* such as the revolts in Mexico in 1609, 1611, 1612, and 1670: see Fracchia, “Depicting the Iberian African,” 58.

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