

## From Sister Ursula de Jesús' Colonial "Imagined Community" to Modern Day Communities She Has Inspired

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Sister Ursula was born in 1604 in the viceroyalty of Peru, Lima.<sup>1</sup> Her mother was a *criolla* slave working in the household of Gerónima de los Ríos and it was there that Ursula spent the first years of her life.<sup>2</sup> In 1612, her owner died and a wealthy *beata* (pious laywoman) and mystic by the name of Luisa de Melgarejo Sotomayor became her new mistress. Attending to Sotomayor's needs during these five years provided a unique opportunity for Ursula to meet many of Lima's most renowned mystics. In 1617 Sotomayor sent Ursula to the Convent of Santa Clara to serve one of her family members who had joined the convent (Van Deusen, "Ursula", 90-1).<sup>3</sup> But in 1642, after having lived 25 years as a conventual slave, as she was placing a skirt to

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent study on the African slaves in colonial Peru, I recommend consulting the work of Frederick Bowser, *The African Slave in Colonial Peru 1524-1650*.

<sup>2</sup> Afro-Latin Americans born in the Americas were identified as *criollos* to differentiate them from *bozales* who had been born in Africa and then brought to the Americas. By 1619, there were 11,997 blacks in Lima. By 1634, the numbers had increased to 13,620 compared to only 11,088 Spaniards. By 1670 the number of blacks had reached 40,000 in Lima and its surroundings (Corilla 16).

<sup>3</sup> Like in Spain and New Spain, in Peru slaves often entered the convent accompanying a nun. Slaves usually worked in the kitchen, in the dining halls and in the laundry room. In their spare time, they would also work for their owners. For more information, see Tardieu 188-200. It is not completely clear if Inés was Sotomayor's young cousin (Wood, "Chains", 298) or her niece (Van Deusen, "Ursula", 90).

dry on a deep well's mouth, the platform she stood on suddenly collapsed. Ursula was left hanging by a nail and implored the Virgin of Carmen for her help. At that moment she found the miraculous strength to lift herself (Van Deusen, "Ursula", 93-94; Wood 298). The event changed her life and she began living as a mystic fully devoted to God (Van Deusen, "Ursula", 96; Woods 298-9).<sup>4</sup> After she became a mystic, tensions began to arise between Ursula and her master, Inés del Pulgar, because of Ursula's religious transformation. The nun complained of Ursula's excessive devotion to her mystical activities, and accused her of insufficient service to her. Because of the tensions, Ursula requested to leave the convent and find a new owner. At that time, one of Santa Clara's black veiled nuns named *doña* Rafael de Esquivel, fearing Ursula would leave the community, decided to purchase her freedom (Van Deusen, "A Seventeenth", 95-6). After gaining her liberty, Ursula became a *donada* in Santa Clara's convent and lived there until her passing in 1666. During those years, she gained recognition for her exceptional piety and her mystical experiences (Van Deusen, "A Seventeenth", 96).

When Ursula became a mystic, following typical procedure, her confessor asked her to record her visions and mystical experiences.<sup>5</sup> Ursula obediently did so from the time she became a *donada* in 1645 to her death in 1666.<sup>6</sup> Today her narrative constitutes the first known *vida* dictated by an Afro-Latin American woman in colonial Spanish America.<sup>7</sup> As such, the richness of Ursula's spiritual diary has provoked some well-deserved scholarly attention.<sup>8</sup> In this article, my objective is to

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<sup>4</sup> *Donadas* were the lowest category of nuns. They were tertiaries, the lowest of the three groups within the hierarchy of nuns, and they occupied the lowest strata in the tertiaries. They were indentured religious servants and wore a different habit and a white veil to differentiate them from the nuns of the other ranks (Wood 297).

<sup>5</sup> Ursula had several confessors. The first one was the Jesuit Miguel de Salazar. He was most likely who first ordered her to record her visions. Many other confessors followed him, and fortunately many of them supported Ursula's mystical activities. For more information, please see Van Deusen, *The Souls*, 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Parts of her diary have survived and can be found today in a Santa Clara's Monastery's archive. Her dictated account is written in first person and consists of fifty-seven folios that mainly describe the black mystic's visions and her life inside the convent. Considering the different types of penmanship present in the spiritual journal, Ursula probably dictated her text to other nuns who served as scribes. Two copies of this biography still exist in the Franciscan Library, one complete and the other incomplete.

<sup>7</sup> It is unclear if Ursula wrote her diary herself. It is more likely that she dictated it to other nuns who then transcribed what she was saying. Although there is no evidence of Ursula's literacy, she received informal tutelage from Luisa Melgarejo, a very famous woman visionary, during the years she lived in her household (Van Deusen, *The Souls*, 15).

<sup>8</sup> In 1997 Alicia Wood compared Ursula's narrative to those that *criollo* male clerics wrote about her and Estephania, another religious woman of color in colonial Lima. In 2004 Nancy Van Deusen published an outstanding edited translation of Ursula's spiritual

add to the examination of Ursula's unique text, but unlike previous scholars, I will also examine the impact Ursula's spiritual diary has today in the non-academic world. More specifically, I hope to demonstrate that, more than four centuries after the black *donada* lived and dictated her *vida* proposing a Catholic "imagined community" based on deeds and not race, some digital writers still find that her text resonates with their readers and hence have appropriated it to foster new "imagined communities".<sup>9</sup> The writer(s) of the Santa Clara convent's website have incorporated her as an important conventual figure and present her as a model of religiosity in order to construct Lima and their convent as part of a God chosen religious community. In contrast, other digital writers have expanded Ursula's message about an afterlife fraternal Christian "imagined community" in order to create a digital community where Afro-Peruvians can be proud of their heritage and reinforce their sense of racial equality within current Peruvian society.

Benedict Anderson originally introduced the term "imagined communities" to describe the birth and spread of nationalism during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the American colonies. Anderson contended that the communities that led to the Independence movements in America were "imagined" because the members did not know each other face-to-face but still felt a sense of community (5-7). Anderson also argued that while their actual relationships might have been defined by inequality and exploitation, the members of these communities envisioned their community as a horizontal relationship of partnership and comradeship (Anderson 5-7). Nowadays, the concept of "imagined communities" is being used more broadly as an almost synonym of "community of interest". As an illustration of that wider usage, in 2011 the journal *American Behavioral Scientist* devoted an entire volume to the application of "imagined communities". In the next section of this article I propose that in her spiritual diary Ursula imagined a Catholic "imagined community" that did not require face-to-face interaction between its members, a community based on the idea that all Catholics, including Afro-Catholics, should be equal members judged by their actions and not their skin color.

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autobiography as well as a later article examining how, despite her identity as a black slave, Ursula was able to become such a highly respected mystic in colonial Peru. And finally, in 2013 Larissa Brewer-García considered Ursula's spiritual diary as an example of the emergence of a discourse of "sacred blackness" in Limeña seventeenth century society.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict Anderson crafter the the term "imagined community" in his now well known *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Creation and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.

At the time of Ursula's life, in the Iberian Peninsula and its American colonies the Catholic Church had a complicated relationship with black African slaves. On the one hand, the Church considered black Africans as infidels or pagans and justified their enslavement on that basis. Indeed, the Papacy had authorized their enslavement with the notion that it could provide their conversion and hence their salvation (Martínez 488).<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, some of the religious orders worked hard to convert and "spiritually save" the slaves arriving from Africa.<sup>11</sup> As an added complicating factor, the Church owned many slaves and financially benefitted from their enslavement.<sup>12</sup>

While the Catholic Church did certainly exploit the body of the slaves it owned, it also provided them access to religious knowledge and to the power of the lettered world. Indeed through the predication of Christian doctrine, the Catholic Church introduced the slaves to a textual community that incorporated knowledge about the Bible and the Christian interpretative tradition (Jouve 58). Predication involved the out loud reading of a written text or a reflection about a religious topic and the discussion and interpretation of the text, which allowed black African slaves to be familiar with the fundamental aspects of the Christian doctrine and to acquire knowledge about the forms of thinking and reasoning of the Western Christian cultures. Slaves also became aware of the power of the written word and they 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 (Barton 7-8 cited in Jouve 80). Thanks to that knowledge, some of the Afro-Latin

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<sup>10</sup> Between 1452 and 1456 several specific papal bulls gave approval for the conquest and enslavement of Sub-Saharan Africans as divine missions to free them of their bestial and infidel condition through their slavery.

<sup>11</sup> The Jesuits, for example, who would paddle to the ships entering the Cartagena de Indias harbor (point of entry for most slaves into the Spanish America) to baptize the slaves through the help of interpreters (Brewer-García, "Beyond Babel", 183). For an excellent study of the role of these translators on the conversion of the newly arrived I recommend reading Larissa Brewer-García's dissertation chapter titled "Plotting Translation and Converting Blackness in Seventeenth-Century Cartagena de Indias".

<sup>12</sup> For example, starting in the sixteenth century the Jesuits employed African slaves on the orders' *haciendas* in Latin America and used them to cultivate sugarcane for profit in order to financially support their colleges and their indigenous missions across Latin America (Olsen 14). For a specific example of a Jesuit *hacienda* that employed slaves, see Konrad 247-266.

American slaves, such as Ursula, appropriated parts of the Catholic religion as tools of resistance and empowerment.<sup>13</sup>

Both in the Iberian Peninsula and Spanish America, the black African slaves and their descendants who looked for new forms of community and resistance to their experience of marginalization and victimization found that Christianity could sometimes help them.<sup>14</sup> Some of them formed black African solidarity ties through black confraternities whose public purposes were officially to express their religious devotion, but which in practice also served as spaces from which their members were able to form support community, negotiate some autonomy, and in some cases even obtain their manumission (Schmidt 36-38). These confraternities were also key spaces of empowerment for Afro-Latin American women and offered them more opportunities of active roles in the religious institution than were traditionally present to Spanish women (Von Germeten 41-45). Confraternities helped negotiate cultural and linguistics differences and offered a common ground to bridge those differences through Christianity. In particular, members underscored their adherence to the Christian principles of humility, peacefulness and suffering (Von Germeten, "Colonial", 150-152).

Confraternities were not the only religious spaces that Afro-Latin American women appropriated to create communities of empowerment and resistance. Convents played an equally important role. Indeed, when wealthy women entered the convent, they often took with them a female slave. Likewise, it was not rare for a woman to donate her female slaves to the convent after she passed. Convents were dual spheres for women slaves: on the one hand, they replicated the outside world's social hierarchy of and placed slaves and free black women at the bottom of the convent. Inside the convent, black slaves and free black women were servants, and as such they performed most of the hard manual tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and attending orchards (Burns 115). Slaves given to a convent as part of a will were even more vulnerable than free black servants because the convent could decide to sell them at any time (Lavrín, *Brides*, 167). Moreover, some convents were accused of not respecting the conditions of time and price set for the women slaves' manumission

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<sup>13</sup> For references to specific scholarship describing case in which black slaves used blasphemy or religion to provoke intervention against abusive masters, I recommend consulting Villa Flores and Echeverri. It is also worth noting that some scholars such as Frank Proctor III have concluded that such cases of blasphemy as resistance have been very limited and warns against the "temptation to universalize the experiences of those few" (97)

<sup>14</sup> Confraternities based on African origins already existed in Spain and can dated back as early as the fourteenth century (Von Germeten, "Colonial", 150).

upon their entrance (Palmer 113-115). However, at the same time convents could also provide some opportunities for women slaves. They sometimes served as safekeeping spaces for young girl slaves and fugitive slaves because, once inside the convent's walls, at times the slave's owner went through a long and hard process of litigation with the convent to get back the slave (Van Deusen, "The alienated", 10-11). And more importantly, convents functioned as a unique access to spiritual life for some of the black women who entered them as slaves or servants (Lavrin, *Brides*, 167).

Indeed, even though convents were a microcosm of the outside world's hierarchy, they were also the space where a few extraordinary black women such as Ursula became models of religious exemplarity.<sup>15</sup> Their unique trajectory inside their respective religious communities was truly spectacular despite the racial<sup>16</sup> tensions and discrimination they suffered inside the convent. Yet, in spite of their recognized religious qualities, the convents never allowed these women to reach the ranks of white or black veiled nuns because convents determined hierarchy based on the criteria of race and economic status. The black veil nuns occupied the highest rank and were almost always Spanish women. Nuns of white veil were under them and were generally *criollas* and *mestizas*.<sup>17</sup> *Donadas*, such as Ursula, occupied the lowest rank and were composed of *casta*, black and indigenous women (Van Deusen, *Between*, 7).<sup>18</sup> *Donadas* worked as religious servants and wore a different habit and a white veil to differentiate them from the nuns of the other two ranks (Fernández 450-1).<sup>19</sup>

#### *Ursula's "Imagined Community" in Seventeenth Century Colonial Peru*

As an illustration to the complicated and contradictory relationship between the Catholic Church and African slaves, although Ursula was forced to tell her story

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<sup>15</sup> A few other women of African origin such as Juana Esperanza in colonial Mexico and Teresa Chicaba in the Iberian peninsula had the same spectacular trajectory from slave to exemplary religious role model.

<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that our current usage of the term "race" is a modern notion that appeared in the nineteenth century and which does not translate into the term *raza* (lineage) of the times. During the seventeenth century, the concept of race was much more conceived as *casta* (Hill "Casta 200; Hill, Hierarchy, 198-218), was much more fluid and was articulated in terms of "lineage" and *calidad* (Carrera, 6) rather than as a fixed biological marker as it would become during the nineteenth century.

<sup>17</sup> *Mestizos* were children of a white parent and an indigenous parent.

<sup>18</sup> *Casta* was a term used to refer to people of mixed ancestry in colonial Spanish America.

<sup>19</sup> Like the other nuns, *donadas* had to undergo a period of usually a year as a novice under the direction of a religious master. At the end of that period, a *donada* could sometimes take her vows, but in order to do so she had to present a dowry and be approved by the religious community. Very few of them achieved both. Even when professed, *donadas* could not vote in elections and could not be elected in high administrative positions (Fernández 450-1).

so her confessor could control her religious conviction, ultimately her spiritual journal also became a space of empowerment for her as well as for her Afro-Peruvian community. When dictating her spiritual journey, Ursula was obeying her confessor's request to record her mystical visions and experiences. Confessors often ordered nuns and mystics to compose their spiritual diary because they wanted to be persuaded of their exemplarity and special standing with God (Gunnarsdóttir 10). These writings allowed confessors to regulate the women's religiosity (Donahue 231). Because of these two different purposes, women wrote from a position of strength and weakness at the same time. As such, they developed narrative strategies for both. Some of the "stratagems of strength" included drawing legitimacy through the women's mystical union with God and referencing Santa Teresa's words as a means of authorization (Arenal and Schlau 25). Those narrative devices were always combined with "stratagems of the weak" such as affirmation of inadequacy (Arenal and Schlau 25), a discourse of self-deprecation (Gunnarsdóttir 10) and the play between knowing/saying /not saying (Ludmer).<sup>20</sup>

In many ways, Ursula's diary conformed to the expectations of her confessor as it included a summary of her visions and characterized Ursula as an exceptional religious woman chosen by God:

when I ask those questions I do not do so because I want to but, just as soon as I see them, they speak to me without my wishing it to happen, and they make me speak without wanting to. I need for them to commend me to God because all this torments me. She had told me that I should thank God for the gifts He had given her... (8r)<sup>21</sup>

By stressing that others had come to her to request her intervention with God on their behalf and thanking Him through her, Ursula positioned herself as a woman with special standing with God. Yet, at the same time, by emphasizing that it was not her choice to "see" visions or to "speak" the words she did, she also underscored her lack of agency and control over what she is asking and saying. Moreover, she

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<sup>20</sup> As Ludmer has explained in her "Respuesta a Sor Filotea", Sor Juana uses this combination of words to be able to write from her subaltern situation. Because she was a woman responding to a male superior, Sor Juana constantly represents herself as a subject who "does not know how to say" or "does not know what to say." See 47-54.

<sup>21</sup> This quote is a translation provided by Van Deusen and it can be found on page 80 of *The Souls of Purgatory*. The original unabridged text written by Ursula in Spanish can also be accessed online at [http://www.benditasalmas.org/interna\\_contenido.php?id=31](http://www.benditasalmas.org/interna_contenido.php?id=31). It reads as follows: "o cuando ago estas preguntas no las ago porque / quiero sino que asi como beo y me ablan sin que quiera asi me asen ablar sin / querer yo e menester que me encomienden mucho a dios todo esto me sirbe de tormen- / to tambien me dijo que yo diese grasiasa dios por los benefisios que le abia echo."

appropriated the common notion where female mystics' bodies were understood as "readable spaces", places where God could communicate through and where the mystics could find refuge from the scrutiny of their confessors (Van Deusen, "Reading", 5-16). As such, for the Catholic Church her spiritual diary was intended to serve as a model of religious exemplarity for other nuns (Wood 296).

However, while Ursula adopted many of the *vidas'* conventions of her time, she also departed from them in significant ways by inserting blackness as an essential ingredient in the construction of religious exemplarity and by presenting a Catholic "imagined community" where Afro-Latin American Catholics were equal members. The Afro-Peruvians she introduced in her text did not serve as a contrast to her, but instead as members of a larger group of Christian to whom she herself belonged. She depicted this community very differently from the descriptions found in Inquisition narrative and the Spanish and *criolla* nuns' spiritual diaries. Instead of associating Afro-Peruvians with the Devil, she described them as Christians, who had committed reversible sins, and who were willing to suffer to redeem themselves.<sup>22</sup>

In many of her visions, Ursula recounted former conventual Afro-Peruvian servants approaching her to ask for her intercession with God: "I saw two black women below the earth... One of them said to me, "I am Luisa, the one who served Ana de San Joseph, and I have been in purgatory for this long, only because the great merciful God showed compassion toward me." (82)<sup>23</sup> What is particularly unique in these visions is that the two Afro-Peruvian women contacted Ursula from Purgatory and asked for her intervention to enter Heaven. In seventeenth century Peru, most of her readers would have considered the idea of blacks going to Heaven upon death surprising and unlikely.<sup>24</sup> Probably aware of this general perception, in her spiritual

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<sup>22</sup> In her spiritual diary Ursula does not address the question of salvation of non-christianized slaves or free people. She only includes Afro-Peruvians who were part of the catholic community. <sup>22</sup> The insistence on the suffering necessary for the redemption of Afro-Christians was in full alignment with Jesuit Alonso de Sandoval's characterization of the path of pain that slaves had to take in order to receive salvation. For more information please see Olsen 110-121. This idea is also present in the spiritual biographies of two other Afro-descendent religious women: sister Juana Esperanza and sister Chicaba Teresa. See Paniagua 60 and 100 and Gómez de la Parra 311-314. For more information about Afro-Catholics worship, see Graubart and O'Toole.

<sup>23</sup> The quote in Spanish can be found on the digital text cited before and reads as follows: "Lunes así que bine al coro y me postre al señor beo benir por debaxo / de tierra dos negras - llegandose en un probiso mui junto a mí la una / de ellas me dijo yo soy lusia la que era de señora ana de san joseph - que a / tanto queestoy en el purgatorio por la gran misericordia de dios que me yso / esta caridad."

<sup>24</sup> *Vidas* were generally intended for readers from the same religious community as well as religious sisters (Diendendorff 246).



journal Ursula portrayed herself as uncertain on the topic. She asked a black woman who was in Purgatory the following questions: “I asked whether black women went to heaven and she said if they were thankful and heeded His beneficence, and thanked Him for it. They were saved because of his great mercy ” (8r-8v).<sup>25</sup>

In her Catholic “imagined Community” Ursula also depicted Afro-Latin Americans as God’s children who were equal to His other children. To establish this idea, Ursula presented black African slaves brought to the Christian world as part of God’s plan. She did so through the testimony of an African-born woman who contacted her from Purgatory stating: “She was very thankful to God, who with His Divine Beneficence had taken her from her land and brought her down such difficult and rugged roads in order to become a Christian and be saved” (8r).<sup>26</sup> In her text, God considered all humans His children as when Ursula asserts: “In memory, understanding, and will, they were all one. Had He not created them all in His image and likeness and redeemed them with His blood” (52r).<sup>27</sup> When presenting Afro-descendants as God’s children equal to His other children, Ursula was appropriating the existing minority discourse already present in the works of clergymen such as Franciscan Diego de Córdoba y Salinas and Dominican Bernardino de Medina. In his hagiography about *mulato* Martín of Porres, Medina had written that Porres “was *pardo*, as they say, not white in color as everyone admires. But God, who does not consider accidents of color, but only the merits of the subject, makes no exception of persons, but cares equally for everyone” (quoted in Wood, “Chains” 174). Similarly, in his biography about Afro-Peruvian *beata* Estefania, Córdoba had claimed: in “the court of Heaven, where only merits are considered...the black and the white man when their deeds deserve it, because as Saint Paul said, writing to the Romans, God ...does not exclude anyone... This was very well verified with mother Estephania of Saint Joseph...” (949).

Equally hazardous was Ursula’s description of Africans and their descendants in Purgatory. Ursula writes: “I said, “How is that such a good black woman, who had

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<sup>25</sup> Van Deusen, *The Souls* 80. The digital Spanish quote is as follows: “y se salbase dije que si las negras yban asi al cielo dijo que como fuesen agradesidas (8v) y tubieson atension a los benefisios y le diesen gracias por ellos las salbaba/ por su gran misericordia .”

<sup>26</sup> *Idem.*, 80. The Spanish quote is: “y que daba / muchas gracias a dios que con su dibina proibidensia la abia sacado de su tieRa / y traydo la por caminos tan dificultosos y barrancosos para que fuese cristiana.”

<sup>27</sup> *Idem.*, 151. The Spanish quote is “que en la memoria entendimiento y boluntad / que todos eran unos - que si no las abia criado a todos – a su ymajen y semejanya yRedimido / con su sangre.”

neither been a thief nor liar, had spent so much time in purgatory?" She said she had gone there because of her character, and because she slept and ate at the improper time." (8r).<sup>28</sup> Recording these kinds of visions of Afro-Latin Americans in her spiritual journal was audacious, not only because they were not often thought to go to Purgatory, but because previous mystics had not made such references when recording their journeys and discussions with the souls of Purgatory. On the contrary, when Spanish and *criolla* nuns referenced blacks in their journals, they generally associated them with the devil. For example, in her *vida* composed in 1648, Sister Jerónima de San Dionisio (from the same convent as Ursula) described Purgatory as a place of suffering and God as "distant and corrector". She did not mention encounters with black souls in Purgatory and her only allusions to blacks were part of the nun's strategy of self-deprecation when she announced that "all others were better than her [Sister Jerónima], even the black women" (Alvarez 187-188). In a similar manner in her *vida* Mother Castillo, a mystic of Nueva Granada, only included blacks as inferior violent 'others', who symbolized the Devil and his evil influences on her (Steffanell 1-21).

Ursula's depiction of Purgatory was quite different from the one these nuns proposed. Indeed, Ursula characterized herself as an Afro-Peruvian mystic who was trying to help other black, *mulata* and *morena* women who had served well their religious community.<sup>29</sup> In her text Ursula used these various *casta* terms with fluidity as she presented Afro-Peruvians. She, for example, presented "two black women" who contacted her from Purgatory (9r), a *mulata* who came to her because her owner often unjustly chastised her (14v) and a *morena* who had gone to Purgatory after Saint Francis and Saint Clare had prayed for her salvation (12v).<sup>30</sup> In these visions,

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<sup>28</sup> Van Deusen, *The Souls*, 80. The quote in Spanish is "dije yo que como una negra tan / buena que no era ladrona ni enbustera abiaestado tanto tiempo dijo que a- / bia estado por su condision y que alli se penaba el sueño fuera de tiempo y la co- / mida."

<sup>29</sup> *Negro*, *pardo*, *moreno* and *mulato* were fluidly employed in colonial Spanish-America. Those terms were not synonyms but could sometimes be used to refer to the same person or group of people, showing the fluidity of blackness (Brewer-García, *Beyond*, 18, 33). Spanish-American authors often used *moreno* as a euphemism for *negro* and as a way to indicate people of African-descent who occupied positions of authority, particularly as soldiers and free Afro-descendants (Brewer-García 31-2, *Beyond Babel* 31; Graubart 203; Pallas 111; Vinson III, "Race and Badge", 471; Zúñiga 10).<sup>29</sup> Unlike *moreno*, *mulato* was not used to refer to a certain color of skin but instead to a heritage, in particular to a person of Mixed African and Spanish descent. Hence, when examining the representation of blackness I do not limit myself to analyzing the usage of *negro* (term used to designate a person of black descent) but instead also examine all the other terms used to identify particular African-descendants.

<sup>30</sup> In the text in Spanish, the two black women are identified as "dos negras," the *mulata* as "la mulata" and the *morena* as "la morena".

although Ursula referred to these women with different *casta* terms, she did not differentiate between them otherwise. They all served God equally well and they were all part of the same Catholic Afro community. Moreover, in this community she did not describe Afro-Peruvian women as inferior evil “others” who should be excluded from Purgatory, but instead as Christians who were equal to the white nuns and friars of colonial Peru and part of the same Catholic “imagined community” despite their unequal relationships in colonial Peru. Ursula hence self portrayed as an advocator for all these subaltern women, whom she described as forgotten and excluded by religious and secular society despite their service to both:

Another time, after I had taken communion the voices told me to commend the spirit of a black woman to God. She had been in the convent and had been taken out to be cured because she was gravely ill but died a few days later. This happened more than thirty years ago, and I had forgotten about her as if she had never existed. I was frightened and thought to myself, “So long in purgatory?” The voices responded, For the things she did. Here, the voices led me to understand that she had illicitly loved a nun and the entire convent knew about it, but that my father, Saint Francis, and my mother, Saint Clare, had gotten on their knees and prayed to our Lady to secure the salvation of that soul from her Son. That is because she has served His house in good faith. (12 v)<sup>31</sup>

In her role as a supporter of these subaltern members of her society, Ursula positioned herself as a true follower of Saint Francis and Santa Clara, the founders of her order. Both Saint Francis and Santa Clara had strongly predicated that no brother or sister should have control or authority over another one, regardless of class (Lachance 70). By citing their example and aligning her conduct to that of the father and mother of the Franciscan order, Ursula was framing her work in favor of the marginalized African descendants of her community as one of the tenets of her order. Moreover, by including the example of Saint Francis and Santa Clara kneeling to secure the salvation of a black sinner, she was legitimizing her own work as an intermediary of salvation of the African blood community.

By working on behalf of the black, *morenos*, and *mulatos*, Ursula was also advocating on behalf of an “imagined community” of Afro-Peruvians based on

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<sup>31</sup> Van Deusen, *The Souls*, 88. The text in Spanish reads: “otro dia despues de aber comulgado disenme que encomiende a dios una / negra que abia estado en el conbento y la sacaron mui mala a curar y a po- / cos dias murio ya casi treynta años no me acordaba mas della/ que sino ubiera sido yo me espante y entre mi pense que tanto tiempo / y Respondenme que aquellas cosas en que ellaandaba - y aca dabanme a / entender que era un amor desordenado que tenia a una monga to- / da la casa lo sabia quemi padre san fransisco y mi madre santa clara se abi- / an yncado de Rodillas a nuestra señora porque alcansase de suyjo / la salvasion de aquella alma porque abia serbido a esta casa suya/ con mui buena Boluntad.”

reciprocity and solidarity and not money. Mixing her mystical discourse with a socio-political discourse was not a radical departure since other mystics such as Santa Teresa de Avila had already done so based on their own social identity. In fact, mystical discourse usually operated in a similar way to that of a political discourse in that it contained a precise political agenda for a community. The difference between the two was mainly that the mystical discourse's goal was to take that political agenda to the afterlife (Laclau 123-125). Ursula's visions on Afro-Peruvians followed that pattern and brought it to a full circle. Inspired by God's teachings of racial equality in the afterlife, Ursula dedicated her life to its practice on earth. By serving as an equalizer in the access to spiritual salvation at the service of the African descendant community, she also constructed an inclusive Afro community based on the Christian principles of equality and solidarity.

Indeed, a crucial societal change that Ursula suggested was a modification to the "economy of spiritual salvation".<sup>32</sup> In this economy, acts of piety, prayers for indulgence and for the soul's salvation had to be accumulated. These could be purchased through donations or money and served as remedies for a spiritual debt that the individual had acquired through his or her sinful conduct while alive. The access to this "economy of salvation" by families and friends of the departed was intrinsically connected to their financial means. Richer individuals had more time to pray, and more money for charity and masses. The wealthy also had better access to indulgences and could devote themselves more easily and efficiently to saving the souls of their departed ones and expediting their entrance into Heaven (Fogelman 1-26).

The fact that many of the departed ones who contacted Ursula from Purgatory were Afro-Peruvians gives a new meaning to this "economy of salvation". Since these individuals were marginalized inside and outside the convent, and consequently did not belong to the rich and powerful communities who could afford to financially participate in this economy of salvation, Ursula's role as intercessor in their favor resisted and even subverted the inequality of the economy of salvation. Whereas in colonial society the departed Afro-Peruvians were quickly forgotten and did not have rich families or friends who could pay for masses and prayers or provide church donations on their behalf, they could rely on Ursula who worked hard on their

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<sup>32</sup> Asunción Lavrín and Juan Javier Pescador have already used this term in the context of colonial Mexico and Kathryn Burns and Patricia Fogelman have done as well in their critical work on colonial Peru. Please see bibliography.

behalf. Ursula records interceding with equal fervor for all members of her society, men and women, poor and rich, black and white. She offered to suffer for well-known deceased members of her colonial society such as the friar who “appears and asks that I commend his spirit to God. He is suffering terribly, and on his behalf he wants me to offer to the eternal Father the terrible torments that our Lord Jesus Christ suffered those three hours that he hung on the cross, until he died (8r).”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, she intervened for elite women such as doña Polonia who “had endured terrible suffering” (9r).<sup>34</sup> Yet, she served equally well the marginal and forgotten women, such as the black (9r) and the *mulata* (14v) servants who spent their lives serving others.

In most of these appearances, the text underscores that Ursula and her religious peers had completely forgotten the Afro individuals who requested her service with words such as “had no one who would remember her” (9r) or “one of the things most forgotten for me in this word” (8r).<sup>35</sup> Since society had completely forgotten those approaching her, it is highly likely as well that nobody was financially contributing to the “economy of their salvation”. By breaking that pattern, Ursula was also infringing the “economy of salvation” that prevailed in colonial Lima during the seventeenth century. She was offering an alternative method to counteract the financial contributions for salvation, one that required no money or elite position in society, and one that therefore did not support the privileged access of the rich to salvation.

By annulling the impact of low socio-economic standing on salvation, Ursula was also creating new structures between *castas* and social groups in the afterlife. Thanks to her intervention, poor and forgotten Afro-Peruvians who had served well enough on earth to be admitted into Purgatory could receive equal access to prayers and interventions on their behalf as the richer sectors of society with money and family members contributing to the economy of salvation. The principles of reciprocal service were not radically new. In fact, they were fully aligned with God’s precepts of equality, which is why she insists that God expected of everyone

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<sup>33</sup> Idem., 79. The text in Spanish reads as follows: “biene pidiendo que le encomiende mucho a dios que esta en / grandisimas penas que le ofresca al eterno padre por el aquellas terriblesagonias que padasio / nuestro señor jesuchristo aquellas tres oras que estubo pendiente de la crus.”

<sup>34</sup> Idem., 82. The Spanish version reads “no habido quien se acuerde de mi.”

<sup>35</sup> Idem., 80 and 82. The Spanish text is “una de las cosas / mas olvidadas que abia para mi en este mundo.”

according to their capacity when she writes: "that he called to account everyone according to the talent given to them" (28r).

Interestingly, the principles behind this alternative model of access to salvation paralleled the founding principles of *cofradías* (confraternities) in colonial Peru. *Cofradías* were one of the few European institutions that subaltern groups appropriated to fulfill their own needs (Vega 137).<sup>36</sup> They were meant to bring together individuals with shared interests. Because in *cofradías* two main values were cooperation and high solidarity amongst members, the members formed a community that empowered them socially and economically as well (Vega 140-9). By joining a *cofradía*, subaltern individuals sought a better inclusion in the hegemonic culture (Vega 149). A significant part of the pursuit was also spiritual. *Cofradías* offered their members material and spiritual services such as prayers and masses to help deceased members' souls not remain in Purgatory for too long (Vega 149).

In her spiritual diary, through her role as a mystic Ursula calls for a new Catholic "imagined community" of Afro-Peruvians based on the solidarity that had been the founding principle of *cofradías*. Ursula was familiar with *cofradías* since she herself had founded the *cofradía* of Santa Carmen (Van Deusen, *The souls* 37). By advocating for solidarity amongst Afro-Peruvians, Ursula also proposed an "imagined Christian community" for whom she served as an intermediary to God. In her "imagined community", Ursula was redefining the conflicted relationships between blacks, *morenos*, and *mulatos* that prevailed around her, even in religious spaces such as convents and *cofradías*. To replace them, she was offering a new Afro-Peruvian "imagined community" with members who shared three elements: their service to God, their desire for salvation, and their lack of access to the economy of salvation. Because of this shared situation and the fact that Ursula was like the members of her imagined community, a person of African descent and a subaltern who served God as best as she could and desired salvation, black women, *morenas*, and *mulatas* were all comfortable approaching her for help.

#### *Ursula's "Imagined Communities" Today*

Today, more than four centuries after its forced creation, the presence of various digital writings about Ursula's text make clear that her *vida* still resonates within many individuals outside of the academic world. To disperse knowledge about Ursula's *vida*, the current authors use digital writing, a communication form that

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<sup>36</sup> The institution of the *cofradía* dates back to the Roman period and began in Spain during the XII century. For more information, see Corilla 18.

reflects well the new modes of information diffusion that exist today. Because these authors write digitally, their writings are often not censored as they were in colonial times. Additionally, digital writers can diffuse their writings themselves by creating personal blogs and websites. Through such channels, their texts can reach a wider variety of readers in different geographical zones and in a much quicker timeframe. Indeed, as current research on the use of digital communication has demonstrated, digital texts such as blogs are tools located between the private and the public. They are like “enclosed and private spaces” for the writer to “cultivate an autonomous voice”, and at the same time they are open spaces for readers to read and participate in the conversation (Mortensen 258). As such, they are excellent tools “for exchanging information and being part of a discussion which potentially extends beyond the academic community” (Mortensen 250). They also foster “imagined communities” by creating a sense of community between users who do not always depend on in-person contact (Gruzd 1294-1318). Yet, an analysis of these digital texts needs to be based on a full awareness that these, like other texts, hold discourses that are constructions (Morrison 6). In other words, digital writers do more than present a series of neutral facts. They construct accounts by choosing which elements to include and how to present them to their readers.

As will be evidenced in this section, as discursive constructions, the current digital texts stress particular facts about Ursula’s *vida* and omit others. The kept elements are generally elements that writers themselves and their communities of readers can connect most with and which therefore can best serve as inspirations for their readers; an important factor on how easily current readers can relate to Ursula as an inspiration is also the present discourse of national identity vis à vis Africanness and blackness in current Peru.

The digital writers writing about Ursula are mostly Peruvian. Their representations of Ursula seem to be divided into two main patterns: some have appropriated the conventional *vida* rhetoric present in Ursula’s spiritual diary in order to cultivate their communities of religious readers. As such, they characterize Ursula as an exceptional black religious woman chosen by God to showcase the saintliness of the convent of Santa Clara and Lima; the majority of digital writers, though, write for communities of social activists and Afro-Peruvians and emphasize the rhetoric of racial equality already present in Ursula’s spiritual journal.

The text on the website of Santa Clara convent, where Ursula professed as a *donada*, clearly falls into the first category. It includes a short presentation of her life

in a section describing the history and the important people associated with the convent. Her description is brief and reads as follows:

During the following years the monastery spruced up with an anthology of saintly souls like the already known Sister Ursula de Jesús, a free black who, with a life of piety and devotion, attracted Jesus' love to herself and others. She was the visionary of the souls of Purgatory who, with her prayers, saved many of them. She had great spiritual friends and confessors who came to the monastery with devotion to seek her advice. ("Historias")<sup>37</sup>

The reference to Ursula introduces her as a "saintly soul" and establishes her as a renowned visionary free black woman who God chose to save many souls during her lifetime. The placement of her life story under the conventual history is consistent with the fact that Ursula lived in that community for most of her life. Moreover, by describing her in such high religious terms and describing her as an essential religious figure of the history's convent, the biography indirectly establishes that God also chose the convent as a special spiritual community.

That Santa Clara's convent recognizes Ursula as a "saintly soul" and her convent as a chosen one is coherent with the long-standing religious discourse that has established Lima as God's chosen place for saints since colonial times. After all, Saint Rose, who became the first woman born in Latin America to be canonized in 1671, was from Lima. And Saint Martín of Porres, the first Afro-Latin American to be beatified in 1837, was also from there. To underscore Lima as a chosen community for saintly souls, the convent's biography includes information about Saint Martín of Porres and Saint Clare on its website even though neither of them belonged to the same religious order as Ursula. Saint Martín of Porres' description underscores his *mulato* identity and establishes his service to others as one of his main heroic virtues. The text about him also emphasizes his abnegation and his capacity to tolerate insults and humiliations due to his *mulato* condition without ever rebelling. Similarly, the text about Saint Rose insists that one her major saintly qualities was her capacity to practice corporal and spiritual mortifications.

Unlike their characterization, the convent's presentation of Ursula does not include her willingness to suffer for others and her capacity to humbly undergo mistreatment due to her blackness. Even more importantly, unlike the spiritual diary itself, her portrayal does not contain what are probably the most striking elements of her spiritual journal: her service towards other African descendants and her visions regarding God's equality between the blacks and *mulatos* and His other children.

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<sup>37</sup> The translation of the quote is mine.



Instead, with their characterization of Ursula, the writer(s) of the conventual text have appropriated the language already present in Ursula's *vida* that describes her and her convent as God chosen. Such a representation helps them foster an "imagined community" of religious readers who share their conception of Lima and Santa Clara's convent as sacred places chosen by God. Ultimately, the presence of Ursula on the convent's website serves their construction of such a religious community.

Such a construction is not new since it echoes the one found in the few biographies that colonial clergy men wrote about exceptional colonial Afro-Latin American religious women such as Juana Esperanza.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, in his biography of the Afro-Mexican sister, José Gómez de la Parra had underscored that the exceptional virtuous nature of the black nun was clear evidence that she, her convent, and Puebla were chosen by God. Like most conventual chronicles, hagiographies and biographies about New World Saints and exemplary religious figures, Gómez de la Parra's biography had a bigger agenda than simply recording the story of the convent and the Afro-Mexican saintly figure.<sup>39</sup> These texts also served as means of expressions of the *criollo* identity and were meant to oppose the European prejudices of colonial inferiority (Hampe 115). 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, therefore presenting the virtues of one of its members as a synecdoche of the virtues of the whole *criollo* community (Morgan 4). The digital characterization of Ursula currently found on Santa Clara's website carries on that tradition. It serves to showcase the merits of Ursula's former convent and the city where she lived and fosters a sense of a chosen community, one that would make its religious readers proud. However, following that tradition as well, because biographies such as Esperanza's did not question the institution of slavery and emphasized the necessary suffering of the Afro-Catholics to obtain salvation, the conventual digital representation of Ursula can also be read as an implicit account of the acceptance of subaltern condition of Afro-Peruvians.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> For more information on Juana Esperanza, please see Benoist and Bristol.

<sup>39</sup> As Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela has demonstrated the hagiographies of the New World incorporated the spiritual journeys of their subjects with the real transatlantic voyages that the women undertook and as such mixed the genre of the hagiography with the genre of the travel narrative (2).

<sup>40</sup> As Larissa García-Brewer has demonstrated in her analysis of Saint Porres, his hagiographer presented him as a man with a white soul in a black body, therefore erasing the African and mulatto difference and adopting the codes of white superiority of the colonial hegemonic discourse. For more information, please see her article "Negro, pero blanco de alma."

In contrast to Santa Clara convent's website, the other websites on Ursula form communities of readers mostly tied by their desire to surpass racial and social inequalities. For example, in the online news publication from Lima named *Expediente oculto*, journalist Percy Taira describes Ursula as a black slave woman who became one of Lima's most widely known saints during her time, but who was never canonized because of the loss of the documents proving her sainthood. As a result, Ursula became "Lima's hidden saint". Taira closes the article by indicating that although Ursula was not as widely known as other saints from Lima, she remains a very strong "symbol that faith transcends races and social conditions of people".<sup>41</sup> In a similar line, in his blog created with the "objective to facilitate the search of data for anyone interested in history" Spaniard José Antonio Benito includes a post stating that the most significant element of Ursula's spiritual diary is her presentation of the Christian God as one who judges all with justice and equality, without taking into account race, social class and gender. Likewise, in her blog titled Peruvian author Milagros Carazas states that Ursula was a woman who transcended her time because she gave a vision of God as One who "judges everyone equally without looking at racial, social and even gender differences".

All three digital texts are typical digital forms of communication that work between the private and the public space. Indeed, all three are written by an author who clearly self identifies and shares his or her knowledge about Ursula. Yet, at the same time all three texts also function in the public space as each one encourages readers not only to read the posts but also to fully engage in a discussion with the digital text by commenting on the author's writing. As is still the case with many digital spaces and blogs, particularly in Latin America, social class and literacy restrict the access to these blogs. These digital texts are nevertheless accessible to non-academics in and outside of Peru and they invite all readers to participate in the conversation. By doing so they foster a freer and more equal community of readers. Members simply need to share an interest on racial and social equality for Afro-Peruvians to participate to the blog conversation. Moreover, by allowing readers to become writers in this community, the digital texts break the barriers between author and reader and redefine all participants as equal members in the dialogue and writing process. Interestingly, this redefinition of all digital participants as equal members parallels in some ways the alternative economy of salvation that Ursula had proposed

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<sup>41</sup> The quotes from Percy, Benito and Carazas are all in Spanish and I have translated them.

in her colonial text. Indeed, the free opportunity for the members of the digital community to be equally heard echoes Ursula's radical reformulation of the economy of salvation as one where all individuals had free access to speak to her and have her intercede with God for their salvation.

Furthermore, these digital writings underscore that the messages of fraternal "imagined communities" and racial and social justice that Ursula had proposed more than four centuries ago have remained very pertinent in current Peru. The relevance of her message for Afro-Peruvians is evidenced in one of the blog's comments: "Thank you for posting this analysis of Ursula's life. For us Afro-Peruvians, it is very important to find out about past references that show awareness of a conscience of blackness." (Carazas). Carazas, the author of the blog where this comment was posted, describes her website as a virtual space of reflection on Afro-Peruvian culture. To help her readers and bloggers understand and learn about Afro-Peruvian cultures, she lists the links of several other virtual spaces focusing on Afro-Peruvian cultures such as the Afro-Peruvian Museum and Cañete, as well as others concentrating on Afro-Latin American cultures such as the Afro-Ecuadorian Cultural Center. All referenced sites have one commonality with Ursula's text: they all define Afro-Latin Americans as equal members of their communities, and in the process, they create a transnational Afro community. As the responder to Carazas' blog on Ursula implies, reading about Ursula's spiritual diary reminds Afro-Peruvians that some of their ancestors had special standing with God and were good Christians who God perceived as equals to His other children.

Learning about past Afro-Peruvians such as Ursula is important for current Afro-Peruvians because it allows them to build a collective memory about the vital elements that Africans contributed to Peru. By doing so, it enables them to become proud of their heritage and identity. In 2003 in Peru, people of African descent constituted approximately ten percent of the total population, and they were amongst the poorest and the least educated in the country (CEDET, quoted in Valdiviezo 26). Although by law, all people born in Peru are citizens with equal rights, in practice Afro-Peruvians are often excluded from the social, political and economic life of Peru (Valdiviezo 26). However, some black social movements have emerged to rebel against this situation. The first one was named *Movimiento Negro Francisco Congo*. It was created in 1986 and one of its main goals was to fight the attitude of "passiveness towards their condition of subordination" shared by most Afro-Peruvians. The movement believed that it was imperative for Afro-Peruvians to

become conscious of their marginalization in order to participate in their own liberation. That liberation also required that Afro-Peruvians build a stronger sense of identity and self-pride (Valdiviezo 31). By reading about Ursula, the Afro-Peruvians are gaining conscience of the colonial past of their marginalization, and they are also achieving a sense of pride in their heritage through members of their communities as exemplary as Ursula.<sup>42</sup>

Ursula's current representations hence reveal that she is still quite relevant as a model for contemporary readers outside of academia and that in today's Peruvian society, individuals still deeply connect with her messages and perceive her as an inspiration. Limeñan Catholics in quest of saintly models of conduct can find an "imagined community" on Santa Clara's convent's website, a community with members who share common religious interests, but who might, perhaps unwillingly, be contributing to the political acceptance of racial inequality by emphasizing the stories of Afro sacrifice. In contrast, Afro-Peruvians in need of role models in their journey towards self affirmation and their struggle for racial equality can partake in a digital community that welcomes all members equally and gives them the possibility to share their voice with other members of their "imagined community". The two communities of readers have appropriated different aspects of the original colonial text. The religious Limeñan community adopted a central conventional element of Ursula's *vida*, her special standing with God, whereas the more social justice community stressed the more unconventional elements in her *vida*, such as God's equal treatment to Afro-descendants and her call for a more fraternal and socially and racially equal society. These two different readings of Ursula's *vida* are likely to parallel a similar division in colonial readers. Indeed *criollo* and Spanish readers would probably have concentrated on the conventional elements of her *vida* that did not put in question their hegemony while Afro-Peruvians would likely have focused on the less conventional call for social and racial equality.

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<sup>42</sup> It is also possible that some Afro-Peruvian groups have appropriated the discourse on Afro-religious practices present in Ursula's original text to create non-digital popular renditions of Ursula. I have not been able to locate any such representations for sale on the web but they might exist in Peru and just not be accessible through web. For information on the presence of Afro-religious practices in Ursula's original text I recommend the section on the incorporation of Yoruba religious practices in Ursula's diary in Spaulding's dissertation 210-220.

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