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The African Diaspora in Latin America: Afro-Peru and San Martín de Porres¹

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On May 7, 1962, *The New York Times* published an eye-opening article describing how "the illegitimate son of a sixteenth-century Spanish knight and a freed Negro slave girl was proclaimed a saint by Pope John XXIII."² The person the Roman Catholic Church canonized that day was a Lima-born Afro-Peruvian known as San Martín de Porres.³ The *Times* story goes on to mention how San Martín was born to a woman "descended from Abyssinian slaves," how his intercession was credited for a number of miracles, including one involving a child from the Canary Islands, and how a "Negro Cardinal" from Tanganyika attended the canonization in the Vatican. In many ways, the story of San Martín is about a larger historical process—of colonization, African migration, cultural and religious assimilation, and, in the case of the celebrated Afro-Peruvian saint, distinction—in other words, it is a story about the making of the global African Diaspora.

The African Diaspora—the free and forced migration of Africans and their descendents across the Indian Ocean and Atlantic worlds—was made over the course of several centuries.⁴ The African Diaspora in Latin America begins with the arrival of the first enslaved Africans to Hispaniola in 1502. In San Martín's Peru the Diaspora begins with the arrival of the first Africans accompanying the Spanish military commander Francisco Pizarro

in the late 1520s. As part of the imperial Spanish armies of conquest, black soldiers were used against the indigenous populations of Peru—even as enslaved Africans would be soon joining Indians in their maroon (runaway slave) settlements across much of the Americas and carrying out armed revolts.⁵

With no immunity to certain infectious diseases (such as measles and small pox) and a protracted war of Iberian conquest, followed by civil wars, lasting from 1532 to 1571, Native American populations across the Americas were decimated. Replacing them in the silver mines and on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean and South America were Africans (as infamously supported and then later repented by the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas). With the decimation of the indigenous population, increasing numbers of enslaved Africans were brought to Peru for gold, silver, and emerald mining and to work on both sugar plantations and in wine production. Over the next two centuries over 100,000 Africans were captured, enslaved, and forcibly taken across the Atlantic, marched over the Isthmus of Panama, and shipped down along the Pacific coast to Peru.⁶

African captives largely landed at the Port of Callao, just west of Peru's capital of Lima, and from there taken to Malambo where they were prepared for auction and distribution.

Approximately twenty-five percent of Africans stayed in Lima, while the rest were sold off to plantations, such as the dreaded Hacienda San José, outside of Lima, which thrived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with up to 800 African captives working there at any one time.

By the end of the sixteenth century upwards of forty percent of Lima's population was African. So visible was the black presence in Lima that Europeans considered it a 'black city.' Urban black labor would run much of Lima; Afro-Peruvians worked as artisans, domestic servants, street vendors, laundresses, bakers, water carriers, cooks, gardeners, and fruit and vegetable sellers. The black presence was therefore felt across the entire city.

The Portuguese *Asiento* (trading agreement) from 1595 to 1640 brought African captives into Peru via the New Granada port of Cartagena in the Caribbean; many other captives came in via Buenos Aires on the Atlantic. A large percentage of the captives that entered Peru were from Angola. For instance, as the historians Linda Heywood and John K. Thornton note, of the African slaves brought into Cusco from 1655 to 1683 approximately 73 percent were from Angola.⁷ The next highest numbers of Africans brought to Peru by the Portuguese were from Senegambia and Sierra Leone, followed by the area of Benin. Over time, the three largest African ethnic groups in colonial Peru were the Bran, Biafra, and Mandingo.⁸ With many captives coming from Senegambia, a region with a large Muslim population, a significant percentage of Afro-Peruvians were descended from Muslims. As the historian Sylviane Diouf notes, "Between 1560 and 1650, according to notarial records, the Wolof, Mandigo, Fulani, and Susu of Peru represented 15 percent of the Africans there, and many, if not most, would have been Muslims."⁹

Slavery in urban Peru—specifically, Lima—could lead to social mobility and freedom in ways that were much more difficult than on plantations in the countryside. One particular kind of slave, the *jornalero*, a day worker who gave a portion of

their earning to their owner, worked with little or no supervision. Under such conditions they were slowly able to save enough money to buy themselves their own freedom and the freedom of their loved ones—creating an ever-larger free black population in Lima. Urban slavery was therefore more fluid than plantation slavery, which was comparably much harsher with virtually no opportunities for freedom, short of flight—although plantation slavery did include both free and forced labor. The majority of Afro-Peruvians eventually settled along the coast. However Lima had the highest concentration of Africans and their descendants.

It is because of an early nineteenth century Afro-Peruvian painter named Francisco 'Pancho' Fierro Palas that we are able to peer into daily black life in Lima.¹⁰ A painter as much as an ethnographer, he captured ordinary scenes of black, white, *mestizo* (Native American/Spanish), and other racially-mixed Limeneans, such as in the painting "La Placera, Trez Razas," depicting "three races" of women at a marketplace. Afro-Peruvians were also visible in celebrations such as "Amancaes," on the outskirts of Lima, and "Pinkster," a form of Mardi Gras coronation celebration, in the city proper. However, the most visible celebration among the entire population of Lima was that of El Señor de Los Milagros (Lord of the Miracles), also referred to as the "Black Christ" since its painter was a seventeenth-century Angolan slave who painted a scene of Christ on a cross on a wall of a sanctuary that formed part of the slave quarters. The painting survived several earthquakes, lending it an aura of holiness. Every October hundreds, and over time hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of Lima life would carry a copy of the painting in the streets. El Señor de Los Milagros, venerated across Peru, would become the largest religious procession in all of Latin America.

It was into this world that San Martín was born to a Panamanian black woman named Ana Velasquez on December 9, 1579. She had gained her freedom in Panama where she met Don Juan de Porres a Spanish nobleman of the Order of

Alcántara.¹¹ She moved to Peru and gave birth to both San Martín and his sister Juana. Don Juan did not initially acknowledge his children, although he did return when San Martín was about eight, and took them to be educated in Guayaquil (Ecuador), where he was posted. San Martín only stayed for a while before returning to Lima.

By all accounts, San Martín was precocious and exceedingly charitable; at a very young age he also had an ability to heal others. In 1591, through his father's connections, he was apprenticed to Dr. Marcelo de Rivero, a barber-surgeon. While still a novice San Martín began practicing medicine among the poor, among whom he quickly gained a reputation as a compassionate and effective healer; word would also reach Lima's highest levels of society. San Martín's mother had grown and used herbs for medicinal purposes and had likely taught him some of his earliest lessons—which he carried for the rest of his life.¹²

A devout Catholic, San Martín applied to serve as a *donado* (lowest level assistant-server) to the friars of the Convento del Santo Rosario (Convent of the Most Holy Rosary), which was part of a Dominican order. Since he was of African descent, however, the order initially refused to give him the habit (consisting of a white tunic and a black cape); he was, however, offered the opportunity to distribute alms. Impressing his superiors by gathering large amounts of donations from Lima's population (especially wealthy Limeneans) to support the Dominican's infirmary he was later offered the holy habit in 1594. As one of his biographers has written, it was said that "he treated each person in the infirmary as if the patient were his Lord, remembering Jesus' words, 'I was sick and you visited me.'"¹³

Becoming a member of the Order of Preachers, San Martín established facilities to care for Lima's poorest children—establishing an orphanage and then raising enough money to educate those who entered it. His charity was unsurpassed and extended to every person, and

even extended to animals and insects. He died in Lima in 1639 at the age of 60 and became the Patron Saint of Social Justice.¹⁴

San Martín was joined by other Afro-Peruvians, including his contemporaries, the Afro-Peruvian mystic Ursula de Jesus and the Angolan painter of El Señor de Los Milagros, in making Lima a notable 'black city' within the wider African Diaspora.¹⁵ Today there are up to three million Afro-Peruvians living in the country. This amounts to less than ten percent of the total Peruvian population (with the greatest concentration of African descendants being in the District of Rimac)—a markedly lower percentage than in the early Spanish colonial period.

Assimilation, the ending of the slave trade, and abolition are among several of the factors for the drop in the black population. An overriding reason, however, was the glorification of white Iberian culture over either Native American or African cultures, accompanied by systematic, legal, institutional forms of racial discrimination against non-white Europeans (ultimately, a question of power). This latter reality of Peruvian society and culture makes San Martín all the more remarkable, as all of white Peruvian society (at the highest levels, in his day and now) view him with respect and admiration—as a model of Catholic charitable conduct.

To be sure, across Latin America, the Catholic Church had invested heavily in the conversion of Africans—that is those of other religious backgrounds and spiritual faiths. During the latter part of the sixteenth century black populations outnumbered the white populations not only of Lima, but of Mexico City, and Salvador de Bahia. For a time, then, Africans were among the majorities of colonial Latin American urban centers. They were also subjects, as well as servants and slaves, leading to creative ways of having to engage and move through their worlds. In large part they did so by assimilating, yet many continued their own religious and spiritual practices alongside their Catholic practices (sometimes called religious syncretism—the

simultaneous practice, or merging, of two or more religious traditions).

Confradias, religious brotherhoods in which Africans gathered along ethnic lines, were encouraged by Peru's Catholic Church. Such black brotherhoods, however, while reinforcing Christianity, also allowed for a degree of black independence, which permitted Africans' own cultural importations, sensibilities, and ways of expressing themselves. Indeed, Africans and their descendants in Latin America continued to focus on their own nations, electing kings and queens with great ceremony, celebrating traditional festivals, and forming mutual aid societies—*cabildos*. San Martín appears to have been on the more assimilated side of the spectrum of African Diasporic experiences. Yet possible traces of his African heritage, such as his herbal medicinal practices inherited from his mother, or what could be viewed as animism, in which he treated all creatures as if they had spirits, if not souls. His compassion even extended to mosquitos according to one of the many “little stories” about his life told and retold from one generation to the next.¹⁶

San Martín de Porres is part of the wider African Diaspora of the seventeenth century—

which includes the Abyssinian general Malik Ambar in India, the Angolan Antonio “a Negro” in Virginia, and the West African maroon leader Benkos Biohó in New Grenada.¹⁷ Africans in the Americas, and their descendants, variously navigated the complex and often contradictory Spanish imperial world—some excelling in ways that brought worldwide attention (albeit not always during their lifetimes). Most African descendants, like most of the world's poor, remain in the shadows or margins of historical accounts. The life and legacy of San Martín, however, shines a bright light on the African Diaspora, reminding us of the multiple roles and contributions of Africans in the making of the modern world.



*St. Martin de Porres statue,
St. Luke's Episcopal Church,
New Orleans, Louisiana
(photo by R. Easterling)*

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² “Pope Canonizes Peruvian Friar In Vatican Rites Before 20,000: St. Martín de Porres Hailed by Pontiff as Patron of Universal Brotherhood,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1962.

³ The earliest sources spell the last name of San Martín's father as ‘Porras.’ Over time, the name came to be spelled ‘Porres.’ See Alex García-Rivera, *St. Martin de Porres: The “Little Stories” and the Semiotics of Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 107.

⁴ The more familiar African Diaspora in the Atlantic world was preceded by nearly fifteen hundred years by the African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean world. See Omar H. Ali, “The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World” online exhibit and essays, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library (2011) at: <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africansindianocean/index2.php>

⁵ One rebellion recorded among African slaves in Peru took place in 1560; Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 147.

⁶ The historian Frederick P. Browser offers the most comprehensive history of Africans in the early colonial period of Peru; Browser, *The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 1524-1650* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974). In 2011 PBS aired a documentary by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. entitled “Black in Latin America”; one of the sections focuses on Afro-Peru. Companion book by Gates, *Black in Latin America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

⁷ Linda Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 166; Jean-Pierre Tardieu, *El Negro en el Cusco. Los Caminos de la Alienación en la Segunda Mitad del Siglo XVII* (Lima, 1998), 20.

⁸ Stephanie Orosco, “Mestizaje Sin Negro: Africa’s Descendants in Latin America” unpublished paper for Afro-Latin America independent study at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (May 2, 2013), 8. Captives directly taken from Africa and who were unassimilated were called *bozales*, while those who had some degree of Hispanicization were called *ladinos*. San Martín was considered a *mulatto* (mixed African and Spaniard).

⁹ Sylviane Diouf also notes how many Muslims, among other African captives, were unloaded at Buenos Aires and then marched across the cold South American mountains and the heat of the plains to work in the Peruvian mines; Diouf, 45, 47.

¹⁰ The role of African-imported Islam into South America, outside of Brazil, remains under-studied. Diouf notes for instance the existence of Qur’anic

teaching in Lima by an African during the nineteenth century; Diouf, 121.

¹¹ Giuliana Cavallini states that Don Porres was in the Order of Alcántara, a Spanish military order founded in 1166—two years after the founding of the Order of Calatrava, which *The New York Times* reports as having been his affiliation (and spelled “Culatrava”); Cavallini, *Saint Martin de Porres, Apostle of Charity* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1979), 5.

¹² García-Rivera, 3.

¹³ Joan Monahan, *Martin de Porres: A Saint for our Time* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 30.

¹⁴ In 1763, the Catholic Church recognized San Martín for his work with an Apostolic Decree, which began the process of canonization. Beatified in 1837 by Pope Gregory XVI, he was declared a “Beloved Servant of God.” His sainthood would take place over three hundred years.

¹⁵ See Nancy E. Van Deusen, *The Souls of Purgatory: The Spiritual Diary of a Seventeenth-Century Afro-Peruvian Mystic, Ursula de Jesús* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004) *passim*.

¹⁶ Monahan, 74; García-Rivera, 9-24.

¹⁷ See Ali, 2011; T. H. Breene and Stephen Inne, “My Own Ground” *Race and Freedom on Virginia’s Eastern Shore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); and Omar H. Ali, “Benkos Biohó: African Maroon Leadership in New Grenada,” in *Atlantic Lives: Biographies that Cross the Ocean*, Jeffrey Fortin and Mark Meuwese, eds. (Boston: Brill, 2013).