CHAPTER 2

Visualizing Black Sanctity in Early Modern Spanish Polychrome Sculpture

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At the end of the eighteenth century, British dilettante and art connoisseur William Beckford (1760–1844) witnessed the festivals in Lisbon for the feast day of St. Anthony of Padua. Since St. Anthony was one of the most important saints venerated in Portugal, his feast day promised a sumptuous celebration, which Beckford watched with emotions ranging from distant criticism to outright disgust. Near the end of the passage detailing the procession, he described a cluster of “waxwork images of saints, angels, and madonnas” alongside “two blackamoor saints one never heard of” who “contribute[d] their share of ridicule to the procession.” He finished with a touch of malice: “I have seen many paltry shows, but none so ill-fancied as this.” Who were these “two blackamoor saints one never heard of”? There are a handful of possibilities, though the likely candidates narrow to four: Elesban, Efígenia, Benedict of Palermo, and Antonio de Noto. While Beckford’s phrasing suggests the obscurity of the saints he viewed, these four black saints were commonly represented throughout the early modern Catholic world; Benedict’s image proliferated with particular frequency. They can be seen together in Lisbon itself in the eighteenth-century altarpiece in the Capela da Antiga Confraria de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos [The Chapel of the Ancient Confraternity of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks] in Lisbon’s Igreja de Graça, the Augustinian convent church.

2 Most of these saints’ names appear a variety of ways. Antonio de Noto could be identified as Antonio da Caltagirone, Antonio de Categorè, or Antonio Etiope, the latter most common in Sicily. Efígenia could appear as Ifígenia or even Iphigenia, whereas Elesban was sometimes rendered as Elesbaan (in Portuguese: E/Ifigenia or Elesbão).
3 This excludes Baltasar/Gaspar, the black magus, who appears as part of Renaissance and Baroque scenes of the Adoration of the Magi. But to my knowledge, Baltasar was rarely an object of devotion in his own right.
In spite of their high visibility, Beckford’s ridicule of the presence of Afro-Portuguese participants and black saints was not exclusive to foreign, non-Catholic visitors. Murmurings against black saints were heard elsewhere. On the other side of the ocean, a seventeenth-century woman caught by the Inquisition in Mexico for secretly practicing Judaism was also denounced for speaking disrespectfully of Saint Benedict of Palermo, of whom she said: “How can he be a saint?” Earlier in the same century, the archbishop of Seville blocked the participation of black confraternities in Holy Week processions, because their appearance caused ‘scandal,’ although the scandal seems to have derived largely from the abuse hurled at black participants by a mocking and insulting white audience.

Yet images of black saints in Seville and elsewhere could provoke intense devotion as well as ridicule. One of the most wealthy and famous of Seville’s confraternities was the Hermandad del Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles (Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Angels), known in modern times as the Hermandad de los Negritos (Brotherhood of the Little Blacks). Seville’s Marian confraternity was one of the three black brotherhoods founded in early modern period as Seville’s enslaved population skyrocketed along with its wealth. While the titular image of the confraternity was the Blessed Virgin, the confraternity’s chapel contained images of black saints, which may also have been taken out in procession. Devotional images of black saints could resonate among...

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6 Isidoro Moreno, *La antigua Hermandad de Los Negros de Sevilla: etnicidad, poder y sociedad en 600 años de historia* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla y Junta de Andalucía, 1997), 85.

7 A list of many black confraternities in Extremadura and Andalusia can be found: Rocío Periáñez Gómez, *Negros, mulatos y blancos: Los esclavos en Extremadura durante la edad moderna* (Badajoz: Diputación de Badajoz, 2010), 350–361. Leo Garofalo has argued that by the seventeenth century as many as one in four or one in five people in major Andalusian port cities like Seville was of African origin or descent: “The Shape of a Diaspora: The Movement of Afro-Iberians to Colonial Spanish America,” in *Africans to Spanish America: Expanding the Diaspora*, ed. Sherwin K. Bryant, Rachel O’Toole, and Ben Vinson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 28–29.

8 The chapel still contains image of black saints: Benedict of Palmero and Martín de Porres. Isidoro Moreno has discovered that older images of Efigenía and Elesban used to be housed in the chapel, but have disappeared. Moreno, *La Antigua Hermandad de los Negros:* “Desde el siglo XVII poseyó retablo propio, en el que también figuraban dos pequeños lienzos de otros dos santos negros, estos legendarios: San Elesbán, rey de Etiopía, del que se cuenta rehusó a su corona para convertirse en monje en Jerusalem, y Santa Efigenía, también etíope” (120). He adds that the images were displaced in the 1960s and perhaps have vanished (121). The large silver float that carries the confraternity’s image of the Virgin during the Holy Week...