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*Beyond Babel: Translations of Blackness in Colonial Peru and New Granada.* Larissa Brewer Garcia. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2019. Pp. 321.

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In *Beyond Babel: Translations of Blackness in Colonial Peru and New Granada*, Larissa Brewer Garcia exposes the ways in which early seventeenth century Africans in the colonial Americas forged a sense of “Blackness” as linguistic and spiritual intermediaries within Catholic settings. The book contains six chapters which revolve around Garcia’s core theme: the articulations of an African translator named Andrés Sacabuche (the translator for the “missionary of the blacks,” Pedro Claver) and the spiritual mystic Ursula de Jesus. Garcia bases these developments of “Blackness” in and against the confluence of Iberian Renaissance humanism and the Counter Reformation traditions. The writers within these literary movements situated Black people as hierarchically subordinate in the social realm while also underscoring their potential to be Christianized.

Drawing on the testimonies of Sacabuche and Ursula de Jesus as detractors from the Renaissance’s normative narratives, Garcia claims that Africans furthered the literary Black subject by shaping new understandings of Christianity and language as they related to Blackness in seventeenth century texts. Garcia’s work offers fresh insights into the lived experiences of Africans in what has been, for reasons she explores, a scant historiography. As a detailed and historically insightful read, the book critically underlines the creation and advancement of Blackness as an early modern Renaissance reality.

Garcia’s first chapter, “Black Types between Renaissance Humanism and Iberian Counter Reformation Theology,” captures the “Black typology” that existed in elite forms of early modern

literature and theater. She begins by depicting the *bozal* – an Iberian term for an undomesticated horse that was later used to describe Black people in the Iberian New World – as a trope within Jesuit missionary Geronymo Pallas’s *Mission a las Indias* (1619). The *bozal* was a farcical character often caricatured as an ill-spoken brute incapable of intellectual dexterity. According to Garcia, this representation of Black life captured the Renaissance humanist notion (relying on Aristotle’s natural slave thesis and praxis regarding the behavioral effects that refined speech creates) which claimed that heightened civility was dependent on exquisite use of language and intellectual capacity. Since early Black people were unable to express themselves in polished Castilian discourse, their depiction in artistic works reinforced the belief that they were civilization’s lowest members.

In this same chapter, Brewer exposes how this typology overlapped and diverged from descriptions of Black people in Counter Reformation literature. Specifically, she cites Jesuit missionary Jose de Acosta’s treatise *De procuranda indorum salute* (1589), where he similarly placed Black people at the base of society but believed that with proper tutelage and acceptance of the Christian faith they could be civilized. *De procuranda* offers critical ideas about how to convert African peoples, as Acosta suggests that relying on physical force would eventuate a softer reception of biblical ideas. Acosta’s treatise was exceedingly influential in educating future Jesuits who would work closely with Africans upon their arrival in Cartagena de las Indias. As the intellectual backdrop to Garcia’s presentation, and of colonial society at the time, the details exposed in these two intellectual movements constitute the relevant background from which Black linguistic and spiritual intermediaries formed their unique sense of “Blackness.”

In her second chapter, Garcia explores the colonial processes of language standardization that occurred in Bogotá and Peru. Here, Garcia juxtaposes the process of language standardization in Amerindian languages with that of African languages. In the Amerindian case, Fray Domingo de Santo Tomás and Fray Alonso Molina made early attempts to create a grammar of Quechua (Tomás in 1560) and Nahuatl (Molina in 1571). Utilizing these works, the Jesuits arrived in the Spanish Americas in the 1560s and quickly developed catechisms in Quechua and Aymara to train priests in those languages. The Third Lima Council, held in 1584, adopted their *Doctrina cristiana y catecismo para instrucción de los indios* which created a standardized catechism that dictated Catholic law in Spanish with a same-page Quechua and Aymara correspondence. The Order ensured that derivations from this standard were to be punished by law. Garcia stresses how this codification of language emphasized who would have the power to translate and command language, and thereby teach native populations: namely, Jesuit priests. In the African case, however, this same rule did not apply.

Garcia cites Jesuit priest Alonso de Sandoval's *Naturaleza, policia sagrada* (1627) as the main guide used to assist missionaries in evangelizing Black people. Unlike the Indigenous situation, however, Sandoval's guide did not rely on priests learning Black languages but on the use of African interpreters. Given the complexity of African ethnic groups and languages, which Sandoval attempts to describe in his treatise, Black interpreters used to circumvent timely language absorption on the part of priests. For this cause, Sandoval encouraged priests to create a census that recorded all enslaved and free Black men and women within a parish. Although these regulations were given and followed, Garcia points out, no instructions were given to monitor the evangelical language communicated between African

interpreters and newly arrived African subjects.

Garcia's third and fourth chapters particularize the Black linguistic interpreters who presented the gospel to newly arrived African slaves and yet are often ignored in early colonial historiography. Garcia situates these intermediaries as the crucial means by which Christianity reached Black people, provided that priests and missionaries often did not speak African languages due to the disparate and varied nature of the tongues. By engaging with Jesuit catechism scripts and testimonials from African translators, Garcia affords insight into the language used by translators to illicit responses from newly arrived African slaves. This language, Garcia asserts, constructed a sense of Black beauty and virtue within Cartagena and the vice-regal capital of Peru.

Garcia works meticulously with Sacabuche's portrayal of Pedro Claver's catechism as presented in *Proceso de Beatificación de San Pedro Claver* (1676). The catechism employed earlier Jesuit practices such as bodily inscriptions and verbal repetitions as a way of presenting the gospel. It also added the use of pictorial representations of newly-converted African believers. As African interpreters (Sacabuche and others) delivered their own verbal and visual rendition of Claver's thought to new arrivals, Garcia shows how they would mention the luminosity of the Black body after baptism. The dialogue between African translators and African enslaved subjects on the virtue and beauty of the Black body, Garcia claims, offers fresh insights into what she refers to as "Blackness" in the New World. This insular, and discrete, conversation diverged from narratives of Black life within the Renaissance humanist movement.

This language carries over into Garcia's fifth chapter on the spiritual diary of Ursula de Jesus. As one of the only works on the inner life of a Black servant, Ursula's diary (written between 1650–1661) shares her intercessory experiences intervening for

Black souls in purgatory. During these mystical episodes, Ursula would describe the spiritualized Black beings she perceived as “very beautiful” and “brilliantly Black” (244). Similar to the language used by translators, Ursula’s description of Black virtue and beauty emphasized that Black people were capable of civilization as devout and exemplary Christians. Coupled with Sacabuche’s engagement with Africans, Ursula’s language also thwarts humanist tropes by relying on Christianity as a universalizing force and promising space in which “Blackness” might flourish.

Garcia’s work offers sharp insights into the African creation of social and literary possibilities within the parameters of Christianity. Her work deserves applause not only for the literary and historical insights it reveals but also for giving life to the creative forms of subjecthood exercised by Sacabuche and Ursula de Jesus. To be sure, Garcia’s critical intervention that African people used European norms to redefine who could exist and thrive in a Euro-dominated New World is an acute contrast to the Renaissance humanist mode of writing about Africans. However, within the universalizing discourse of Christian Renaissance humanism, the work also invites us to reinterpret Black people as humans within a universal project as opposed to distinctive “ethnic” subjects.