

**Rosa de Lima, First Saint of the Americas:  
Women, Bodies, Sainthood, and National Identity (1)**

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One of the puzzles one encounters when studying women saints is how the story of their lives present a perplexing mixture of compliance with stereotypes coupled with an ability to “use” or twist those same stereotypes to serve their own needs. I first encountered this paradox several decades ago in my research on Latina women healers (Espín, 1988; 1996). The women I interviewed for that study talked about how surrendering to the dictates of supernatural forces helped them to act in ways they deemed appropriate even though their actions may have challenged or even contradicted the traditions they supposedly espoused. Such subversive compliance is reflected in the lives of the saints I had read and heard about in my childhood. Not that the nuns in my school ever mentioned this. Perhaps those nuns were attempting to live similar paradoxes in their lives. Yet, they never emphasized resistance to tradition when talking about women saints or women's roles in general. On the contrary, the nuns stressed obedience to (male) authority and compliance with rules and traditional expectations when interpreting the saints' lives or our expected role and behavior as women. But it must have been the paradox at

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the center of the saints' lives that attracted me. I remember having an inkling that even the most obedient among them had challenged authority. Even little, quiet, unassuming Thérèse of Lisieux—the most popular female saint in the Catholic church—had spoken to the Pope in public after a specific injunction to remain silent in his presence. It didn't seem to matter that women saints had rebelled against authority figures because they wanted to become cloistered nuns or self-mutilating fiends. Their rebellion was a way to get what they wanted rather than what others dictated, no matter how misguided we might perceive them to be centuries later.

Several years before I saw Ingrid Bergman conquering castles for God and France in her role as Joan of Arc, I was mesmerized by actress Delia Garcés playing the role of Rose of Lima. “*Rosa de América*,” a black and white Argentinean feature film from 1946, triggered my eight-year-old fantasies about sainthood. Garcés was a beautiful woman, as Rosa was supposed to have been. She played many other glamorous roles in Argentinean cinema but none made her as famous to the Latin American public as her role as Rosa. After watching Garcés in *Rosa de América*, Rose of Lima became one of my childhood heroines. Her beauty made sainthood seem like an attractive possibility. Her long dark curly hair, so much like mine, made me think I could be like her if I tried. Maybe if I behaved like her I could become as beautiful and as good as she was.

There was one little “catch” though. While Joan of Arc evoked fantasies of achievement in my childish mind, Rosa had built her sanctity through acts of self-mutilation. Imitating Rosa meant hurting my body. I was lucky enough not to wear a veil that could hide a crown of nails or clothes that might conceal a locked iron chain around my waist like she did. Instead I filled my school shoes with beans, knelt on pebbles to pray whenever possible and ate foods I strongly

disliked. I even went long hours without drinking water in the Cuban heat, while dreaming about founding a religious order named after St. Rose of Lima. I spent hours designing the habit my nuns would wear, making it as beautiful as possible: white pleated chiffon, trimmed with black velvet at the neckline, the sleeves and the waist. I guess I wanted to be a fashionable saint!

Also, when I was a girl of eight or nine, during another hot and humid Christmas season in Havana, *los Tres Reyes Magos*—the Three Kings or Wise Men who bring presents to children on January 6, the feast of the Epiphany, in many Catholic countries—had brought me a small book: “*Niños Santos*.” I was already an avid reader; “*Niños Santos*” became my constant companion. I read its stories so often I could recite from memory the lives of the young people it contained. The film on the life of Rose of Lima, furthered my fantasies about sainthood. Watching Rosa on the screen after reading about her in “*Niños Santos*,” made saints even more real to me.

I had read other stories and fairy tales and seen other films about young female heroines. Indeed, Disney’s Snow White was the first film I saw. But the stories of young women devoted so deeply to God that they reached the Catholic Church’s pinnacle of sanctity, captivated my imagination. Transforming the world in which they lived or the lives of others looked a lot more attractive than marrying an unknown prince. I liked that they played an active role in their own lives, instead of waiting for that prince to wake them up with a kiss. What I wanted most in the world was to be a saint. I fantasized about being some self-sacrificing martyr or hermit, play acting the roles on a daily basis. The saints who stimulated my imagination most were women. The intricacies of these women’s lives have stayed with me: Their courage as well as their weakness, their childishness as well as their maturity, their loves and fears, and above all, their focus on doing what they believed God wanted from them regardless of the opinions of others,

including the male authorities of Church and family.

Yet, the saints weren't the only catalysts in my life. My childhood memories are also full of 'snapshots' of my budding feminism. One anecdote remains vividly present. I was five; my sister and I were playing with my two cousins on the porch of my paternal grandmother's house watched closely by one of my father's sisters. The four of us were about the same age, three girls and one boy. In the course of our play talk, I referred to the four of us as "*nosotras*." My aunt corrected me, saying the right form to use was the masculine "*nosotros*" because my male cousin was part of the "we." Although at the time I had no idea of what sexism was I quickly responded to her that it did not make any sense: Manoly was only one boy and we were three girls, we were the majority; the feminine form should prevail! How my aunt responded, I cannot remember, but I imagine she probably said the rule was the rule regardless of what I thought.

My recent scholarly studies of women saints are an effort at making sense of early influences and present understandings. This paper on Saint Rose of Lima is one among several focusing on feminist and psychological interpretations of the lives of women saints (e.g., Espín, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2010, forthcoming).

No matter how unclear my interpretations of Rosa and other saints were and despite my ambivalence about self-sacrifice—particularly if it entailed wearing ugly clothes—saintly heroines who transgressed against established female codes of conduct were attractive role models for me. Rosa's disobedience to her mother and confessors encouraged my imitation. Rosa had eleven confessors at some point in her life and "played" the opinions of some against others, particularly against the opinions of her mother who begged her to discontinue her extreme self-mutilation. To me, the content of her disobedience was less important than the

subliminal message I derived from her behavior: as long as I did what God wanted from me, I did not have to pay attention to adults... This was the persistent theme from female saints' lives that I made mine at a fairly young age: do what you believe God wants, never mind what those in authority say you should do. I was a very obedient little girl in most areas of my life; however, when it came to spiritual issues, I felt the will of God, as I understood it, was the guiding principle. Even if discovering what God wanted remained ambiguous and confusing, in the end, I decided –more or less deliberately– that my conscience determined what God wanted, regardless of what authority figures expected of me.

In a sense, all women saints transgressed the established norms of female virtue. By definition, had they not transgressed the established norms of appropriate women's behaviors, they would have never been known by those who would make them the object of their devotion. But the inherent contradictions embedded in women's pursuit of sainthood seem to have escaped their hagiographers. Paradoxically, their hagiographers characterized them as examples of typical, prescribed womanhood to encourage other women to follow the established norms obediently, making them seem more acceptable to the hierarchy and imitable by the faithful. But obedience is not the hallmark of their actual behavior. Rosa engaged in forms of accommodation and resistance characteristic of women saints. She appeared as virtuous and obedient while actively disobeying the authority of parents and confessors and acting as an independent agent. She rationalized her behavior as following the will of God. Considering the limited options available to her, she created relatively independent strategies in her self-styled search for sanctity.

Rosa's personal life is a study in contradictions. Born in 1586, barely 50 years after the Spanish conquest of Perú, Isabel Flores de Oliva, known to the world as Saint Rose of Lima

(1586-1617) was the first canonized saint of the Americas<sup>(2)</sup>. Rosa's ancestry was partly Indian, although in the social hierarchy of colonial Lima, she was considered "Spanish." <sup>(3)</sup> During her short life people believed she had effected many miracles. She was particularly revered for her care of the sick and poor and for miraculous cures of Indians and African slaves as well as her protecting the city of Lima from earthquakes and the attack of pirates through the power of her prayers. True or not, the populace of Lima considered her a saint during her lifetime. The Catholic Church confirmed the popular beliefs by canonizing her as a saint in 1671.

Her contemporaries—and later the Church—thought that the extreme penances she had performed since childhood pointed to her holiness. She slept on a bed of broken glass, pieces of metal and rocks; walked around the garden every day carrying a heavy wooden cross; hung herself from her hair; burnt her hands... Her inventiveness for physical self-destructive behaviors seemed inexhaustible, much to the chagrin of her mother and her confessors.

Her parents, living under serious economic constraints, were intent on marrying Rosa to some rich man to capitalize on her beauty. Instead, she refused marriage adamantly, although she never became a nun. She became a Dominican Tertiary like her most admired Saint Catherine of Siena, remaining "in the world" as a lay person. She surrounded herself with a group of women who devoted their lives to God and she worked embroidering and cultivating flowers to help support her family. That she opted for virginity outside of the convent was a paradox; it challenged the expectations of both her family and social context. Rosa's refusal of

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2 At the end of the millennium there were only three canonized women in Latin America: Rosa de Lima (1586-1617), canonized in 1671; Mariana de Jesús Paredes de Quito (1618-1645), canonized in 1950; and Teresa de Los Andes (1900-1920), canonized in 1993. Other women were beatified and canonized recently (e.g., Laura Vicuña from Chile; María de San José from Venezuela, Conchita Armida from Mexico).

3 According to Peruvian historians there were no European women at the time in the region of Perú where her maternal grandmother was born, therefore, her great-grandmother must have been an indigenous woman.

both marriage and the convent, opting to become a *beata*, a woman living her spiritual calling to prayer and virginity in her family's home gave her a special status in colonial Lima. Although financial problems may have prevented her family from providing Rosa with the dowry needed to enter a convent, she defended her decision not to join a convent on the basis of divine intervention. She declared that the statue of the Virgin of the Rosary in the Dominican church she visited in Lima on her way to entering a convent would not allow her to rise from a kneeling position. Instead, the baby Jesus in the Virgin's arms asked her to be his wife and miraculously gave her a ring that said, "*Rosa de mi corazón, se tú mi esposa*" ["Rose of my heart, be my wife."]. By "marrying God" in this sociocultural context, despite apparent restrictions on her sexuality, she provided herself with the freedom to do what she wanted.

Indeed, sexuality of the sort encountered in marriage gave most women very little fulfillment. It had to do more with the husband's desires than with the woman's. Moreover, the consequence of sexuality was one pregnancy after another in rapid succession, often leading to death from childbirth at a very early age. Catherine of Siena made her vow of virginity in childhood, immediately after one of her older sisters died in childbirth. Teresa of Avila makes explicit comments on the topic in some of her writings. Rosa and many others who chose not to marry were not this explicit but, no doubt, this concern was present in their minds.

Her status as a *beata* and her reputation of being a living saint because of her extreme mortification garnered her considerable prestige and made her a central figure in her city. It also garnered the inevitable visit from the Inquisition. Although the inquisitors concluded that her level of infused knowledge was comparable to that of trained theologians, and absolved her of all guilt, other *beatas* did not fare so well. Some *beatas*, who had been in Rosa's circle landed in the jails of the Inquisition shortly after her death—including Luisa Melgarejo who had had an

ecstatic vision at Rosa's death bed (Iwasaki, 1993). The *beatas* of Lima, like all women who claimed to be "visionaries" or "mystics," but who were not in a convent or under the control of a husband, raised the suspicion of religious authorities. Rosa's place becomes more exceptional once we learn that she ended up on the altars while many of her contemporaries were condemned by the Inquisition.

The issue of extreme physical mortification still remains, though. But, regardless of how bizarre the behavior of Rosa or other self-mutilating medieval saints may seem to us today, the reality is that their behavior is not so foreign to modern women. In our time, at the beginning of a new millennium, women frequently resort to "controlling" their bodies through dieting, plastic surgery or other means, which produce physical suffering, while sustaining an illusion of control over their lives. Women "control" their bodies when they feel deprived of control in other areas of life. Research on the etiology of eating disorders clearly links them to more or less desperate attempts to control one's life (Brumberg, 1988; Vanderycken & van Deth, 1994). In our post-modern world, women self-sacrifice and self-torture in the name of physical attractiveness or health. In the case of Medieval and early Modern women saints, such as Rosa, the theological interpretations of the value of expiatory prayer and self-immolation, particularly applied to ideals of virtue and sainthood for women, provided the intellectual foundation and rationale for their behavior (e.g., Brumberg, 1988; Maitland, 1987, Vanderycken & van Deth, 1994). Many women today engage in behaviors for the sake of aestheticism in ways similar to what women in earlier centuries did for the sake of asceticism (Vanderycken & van Deth, 1994). Then, as now, the search for perfection through the body is, for any woman, entangled with and influenced by the vicissitudes of her individual history combined with sociohistorical circumstances. Even though conscious motivations may be different in different sociohistorical contexts, privatized behaviors



may serve a social purpose. Rosa's behavior was motivated by both private and public understandings and experiences, as one would argue about some apparently paradoxical self-destructive behaviors in contemporary women (e.g., Davis, 1999). Indeed, "the experience and the perception of sanctity and insanity [or any form of behavior considered abnormal] are culturally [and historically] relative, and whoever would presume to sort one from the other [...] is bound by that same reality" (Graziano, 2004, p. 8).

The "spirituality of expiation" ("*espiritualidad de expiación*"), so congruent with traditional female roles, appears to be at the core of Rosa's life choices. Such spirituality justified her transgression of other aspects of traditional female roles in the eyes of her contemporaries. Because her self-sacrifice was so extreme, she was allowed to live publicly as a saintly woman, respected because of her intense self-denial and eventual self-destruction, despite her visibility.

One of the most notable European examples of this style of female spirituality was Catherine of Siena –who was the model of sanctity Rose of Lima wanted to emulate. This alternative, however, was not unproblematic, then or now. As a matter of fact, some of Rosa's penitential excesses were seen as pathological even by her contemporaries. For example, some of Rosa's confessors believed that her supposed mystical experiences may have been due to "*flaqueza*" ("weakness"), "*desvanecimientos*" ("dizzy spells"), and "*melancholia*" ("melancholy") or "*vahidos de cabeza, de vapores melancólicos*" ("fainting due to melancholic vapors") rather than to virtue. Nonetheless, "Rose of Lima can be an exemplar of heroic sanctity only within a context in which her practices [...] are perceived as holy and meaningful rather than as aberrations" (Graziano, 2004, p.8).

For centuries, Church authorities claimed the Apostle Paul's injunctions denied Christian women the right to teach others. Deprived of "their ability to serve God and the Church via their

words or evangelistic excursions, pious women expressed their faith by means of that which they could (to some degree) control, namely their bodies. [The saint's] body rather than her words [constitutes] the locus of spiritual authority and exemplarity" (Morgan, 1998, p.11). For women aspiring to sainthood, "the body, specifically the female body" is both instrument of sanctification and problem. (Petroff, 1994, p.163). Considering that women's bodies were seen as sinful, impure, and imperfect, it is not surprising that sanctity for women was equated with controlling and reducing the body. Women who aspired to sainthood showed the power of their spirit through the mutilation or even annihilation of their bodies. Such control was the best demonstration of the strength of their soul. By exercising control over their bodies they subverted their "natural destiny" as women and thus became almost "non-female," almost male, pure spirit (i.e., holy). These women's extreme self-sacrifice included self-starvation, sleep deprivation, self-flagellation and other assorted forms of "self-torture" and "self-mutilation." As historian Ronald Morgan (1998) argues, the starved and sleep-deprived body stops menstruating (i.e., becomes de-feminized) and is prone to cognitive distortions that can be described as visions. "The female body, denied the sensual gratification of a healthy diet, adequate sleep, or sexual relations, becomes itself a religious text" (p.11).

Medieval historian Carolyn Bynum presents an alternative perspective to Rosa's and other female saint's extreme self-starvation and self-mutilation. Bynum is convinced that "real medieval women –unlike the unreal women portrayed by the male authors of the "hagiographic romances"– found a new way of dealing with the body. Their view of [Christ's] Incarnation saved them, for if they were bodies, Christ was body too" (Petroff, 1994, p.164) –physical deprivation and self-mutilation became an avenue of sanctification for women whose total being had been equated with their bodies. Bynum (1987) thinks that even the most bizarre women

mystics “were not rebelling against or torturing their flesh out of guilt [or helplessness or inability to engage in other activities...] so much as using the possibilities of [their bodies’] full sensual and affective range to soar ever closer to God” (p.295). In fact, they “saw in their own female bodies not only a symbol of the humanness of both genders but also a symbol of –and a means of approach to– the humanity of God” (Bynum, 1987, p.196). It is possible that Rosa, whose spirituality was deeply influenced by the medieval piety prevalent among the Spanish conquerors and missionaries, may have experienced her bodily penances in this way.

According to Elizabeth Petroff– who writes about medieval female mystics in general, not specifically about Rosa– “virginity is the sine qua non of the female saint, but virginity is associated with [...] being invisible. Visibility, then, is almost equivalent to the loss of virginity and cannot be part of female sanctity” (Petroff, 1994, p.163). Yet, despite this emphasis on invisibility as the demonstration of women’s virtue, Rosa was rather visible in her city (Lima: her “*patria*”) during her life and was credited with the protection of Lima from external dangers, such as pirates or earthquakes by her public and visible activities.

In a sociohistorical context in which female virtue was equated with maternity or virginity that, above all, demanded invisibility, “the ‘visibility’ of the female saint [was] dangerous” (1994, p.163). Learning and teaching became dangerous activities for women. “Beauty [in particular]...is a dangerous quality for a saint” (Petroff, 1994, p.164). The danger was sometimes rather concrete: accusations of demonic intervention raised the possibility of being burnt at the stake. Rosa, who is reputed to have been a beautiful young woman, actively struggled against the dangers of her own beauty by cutting her hair, burning her hands, putting garlic in her eyes, and other similar activities. Some of Rosa’s associates landed in the Inquisition jails shortly after her death, as Peruvian historian Fernando Iwasaki describes (1993)

and Rosa herself was examined by a tribunal of Lima's Holy Inquisition to ascertain the orthodoxy of her beliefs.

Rosa was what Kathleen Norris calls a "fierce holy little girl" (1996, p.203) intent on reaching God in her own way, even in the face of the opposition of her family and the norms for women in her own society. In doing so, she challenged authority and became a "model" of sainthood for women. At the same time, through her extreme behaviors, she re-inscribed the all-encompassing equation of women with the body. Because she focused on her body as the instrument of her sanctification, she underscored the importance and problematic nature of women's bodies. As was to be expected, she shared her contemporaries' constructions of women's bodies and sanctity. Thus she used self-destructive behaviors and gestures to mark her body as sacred, saintly.

And, as it is true for women today, this isn't an either/or situation but rather both/and: self-mutilation and self-starvation are both an effort to control personal fate within the context of accepted cultural values, in the face of relative powerlessness *as well as* an effort to escape that lack of control that may end up backfiring. These behaviors become pathological expressions of the social expectations imposed on women as they intertwine with individual women's life histories. The damaging consequences of cultural norms that inspire self-destructive behaviors in women should not remain unproblematized.

There is yet another unexplored possibility in the case of Rosa that may or may not be applicable to her or to any other ascetic woman. I hesitate to speculate about this because of the danger of ahistoricizing experience that I have pointed out earlier in this article. However, I cannot avoid thinking as a psychologist when confronted with these extreme cases of physical self-destruction. I am referring to the possibility that some of these behaviors may have been a

consequence of childhood physical abuse. Researchers have been able to trace adult self-destructive behavior to its traumatic childhood origins (e.g., Favazza, 1996; Hyman, 1999; Van der Kolk, Perry & Herman, 1991). Abused children tend to grow up confusing love and pain and believing that one necessarily involves the other. Attempting to control the effect of damaging experiences, they sometimes resort to self-mutilation (e.g., Favazza, 1996; Hyman, 1999; Strong, 1998; Walsh, & Rosen, 1988; Walsh, 2006).

We know from Rosa's history that she received severe physical punishment as a child from both her mother and her grandmother every time she responded to being called by the name each one of them had chosen for her. Baptized as Isabel, the name of her grandmother, her mother and an Indian servant took to calling her Rosa because her beauty resembled the beauty of roses. During her childhood, every time she responded when called Rosa, her grandmother beat her up, and every time she responded to the name Isabel, her mother did the same. Since they called her by one or another name multiple times during a given day, she was beaten by one or another of these two women every time she obediently responded to a call. Needless to say, a powerful message about how one deserves to be treated is conveyed to a child who receives multiple beatings every day throughout childhood, constantly beaten for simply responding to an adult's call. Did this experience influence Rosa's extreme physical self-abuse? If yes, are similar experiences responsible for the presumed asceticism of so many other women saints? This may not be such an absurd proposition if we consider how widespread the abuse of girls and women continues to be today. I am not affirming this unconscious link between abuse and self-destruction was present in Rosa's life or the life of other women saints, I am merely asking a question that, to my knowledge, has never been asked before.

Considering that our knowledge of Rosa comes from interpretations of men writing what Catherine Mooney (1999) and Elizabeth Petroff (1994) call “hagiographic romances” about her, it is next to impossible to determine what the real motivations for her extreme self-destruction were. But what is certain is that she took it upon herself to control the destiny of her body, including inviting death, rather than leave that control in the hands of others. She did so in the only and rather “contorted” way available to her in her specific cultural and religious context. In this endeavor, no matter how submissive to authority she appeared to have been, she presumed to have a life, a body, an identity apart from male authority and from cultural definitions of what should constitute femininity. Her efforts at “fooling” parents and confessors alike into allowing her to perform ever more extreme penances, although baffling to us, show her self-determination to pursue her own goals, perceived by her and presented to others as God’s will. And, although it is important to problematize this behavior (e.g., Maitland, 1987) as a manifestation of the negative messages and limited options available to women, it is important to not simply pathologize her behavior by looking at it from our perspective, several centuries later.

Regardless of Rosa’s reasons for her choices, we can see in them the social construction of women’s bodies and roles in early colonial Latin America and its implications for the construction of popular culture and national identity.

Her burial in 1617 nearly caused a riot; those who wanted to touch her or get some relics from her clothes were feverish with devotion. At her canonization as a saint by the Catholic Church in 1671 she was declared patron saint of the Americas, India, and the Philippines by Pope Clement X. To this day, Rosa remains the most popular figure among Latin American saints (rivalled perhaps only by her contemporary Martín de Porres, canonized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Aside from Lima, small towns and villages in Perú and other places in South America

continue to hold festivals and processions in her honor. During her lifetime and immediately after her death, her prominent cult helped to agglutinate the incipient community of Lima while the Spanish Crown promoted and used Rosa's canonization to strengthen its empire in Latin America.

Rosa's life provides a particularly graphic example of how communities construct their saints and how saints contribute to the creation of communities and identities. Her role in the creation of Peruvian national identity is a demonstration of the importance of saints. Her canonization was the first successful attempt at acknowledging the possibility of holiness in the New World. According to Peruvian historian Fernando Iwasaki (1994), about 60 individuals died in "*olor de santidad*" [literally, "the smell of sainthood"] in Lima alone between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. "Were the protagonists of these texts really saints? Or did the authors of these colonial hagiographies have other specific purposes in mind?" asks Iwasaki (1994, p. 49). He concludes that there is no contradiction in these two purposes. The "effervescence" of sanctity in Perú became the best testimony of the value of the task of evangelization that the Spanish Crown was carrying out in the Americas. The different religious orders actively pursued the canonization of their members who had died in *olor de santidad* and in so doing made the name of Perú known in Europe. The hagiographies not only made the names of the presumed saints known to people outside of Lima, but also the names of slaves, women and petit bourgeois merchants. Their role as witnesses and participants in the events narrated in the hagiographic texts inscribed them in history.

The hagiographies of colonial Lima gave significance to marginal, humble people who otherwise would never have been known to history. Most of the saints these hagiographies describe, including Rosa and Martín de Porres, belonged to the lower and marginal classes. The

witnesses of these people's lives, whose names are recorded in hagiographic texts and canonization documents, belong to the same social strata. In any case, these hagiographic texts that present the lives of *limeños* as described by other *limeños* constitute an expression of colonial values while providing us with a description of the vicissitudes of daily life in colonial Lima. Iwasaki thinks that the eventual success or failure of the canonization of the protagonists of these texts is less important than the portrait of colonial Lima they present. These texts give us a sense of the building of a "*criollo*"<sup>(4)</sup> community in which the saints themselves were involved.

Another Peruvian historian, Luis Miguel Glave (1993), describes the chaotic situation in all of Perú at the turn of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Of the 6000 "Spanish" males in Lima, 2,500 belonged to a religious congregation. Many of the others were penniless men looking for fortune. These men roamed the countryside more or less aimlessly. Contrary to present day perceptions, the Church hierarchy and the Colonial administrators were more concerned about the problems created by these men than about the Indians. Scenes of violence were common. Licentiousness was also common among authorities and the clergy. Disputes between the religious orders as well as disputes inside convents where *peninsulares* (those born in Spain) refused to obey *criollos* and where those of Spanish descent humiliated those who were not "*Espanoles*" were common and bitter.

In the middle of this chaos, Rosa (as well as Martín de Porres and the other *limeño* saints) built her own identity and constructed her own version of sanctity. Rosa, the only woman ever canonized among the saints of this historical juncture in Perú, inaugurated a trend, followed by many women in Lima during her lifetime and lasting several centuries: the presence of

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4 Descendants of Spaniards born in the Americas.



*beatas*, lay women who lived their lives suffering and praying for forgiveness for their sinful city. In a city fragmented by racial differences that privileged Spaniards and their descendents, Rosa also made provisions before her death for the foundation of a convent of cloistered Dominican nuns that would admit women of all races (not just those of pure Spanish descent). This convent is still in existence.

Father Guillermo Alvarez, one of Rosa's recent biographers (1992), believes that her inability to express in any other way her solidarity with the suffering of the *indígenas* (the Indians), which she must have witnessed repeatedly led to her extreme self-mutilation and self-torture. He sees Rosa's extreme penances as an embodied protest against injustice –albeit the helpless protest of a woman deprived of other means of expression– rather than some psychological deficiency or tendency to masochism inherent in her as an individual.

Indirectly supporting Alvarez's thesis, Peruvian anthropologist Luis Millones (1993) points out that Rosa's father was a foreman in the silver mines in Quives, at the foot of the Andes, during Rosa's early adolescence. Her hagiographers have been persistently silent about her life during these years saying simply that she was very ill during this time. Apparently, there were several *cuadernos* (notebooks) written by Rosa which have conveniently disappeared, so we do not have any direct information on her thinking about any issues except what witnesses and hagiographers want to tell us. These sources present Rosa as uninterested in secular matters. But we know that she was very concerned about the poor. Against her mother's will, she used a room in her house as an infirmary to provide care for slaves and other destitute people. We also know that she was a working woman herself who needed to help provide financial support for her family. In fact, her family's need for her financial assistance, coupled with their inability to provide her with a dowry, may have been one reason why she never entered a convent. Given

such circumstances, it seems unlikely that she would have been indifferent toward or ignorant of the exploitation of the Indians and African slaves in colonial Perú. Yet any acknowledgement of Rosa's social conscience by 17<sup>th</sup> century hagiographers would have clashed with the Spanish crown's interests and thus hindered Rosa's canonization as a saint.

Eventually, Rosa became a symbol. As symbol, her struggle for self-control was obliterated by her hagiographers, her devout followers, and the Spanish crown. As already mentioned, the canonization of Rosa de Lima was used by the Spanish monarchy for their own purposes: she became "proof" of the benefits of the Spanish conquest of America. Two illustrations of this point: The *Archivo de Indias* in Seville holds a big stack of documents referring to all the festivities ordered by Queen Mariana, then Regent of the Spanish throne, in 1671, to celebrate Rosa's canonization all over the territories of the Spanish Empire. Several allegorical paintings (5) produced after her canonization depict Rosa holding the Eucharist in a monstrance above her head. Standing to her right side with his sword drawn is the King of Spain whom Rosa is assisting in defending the Eucharist from the Moors standing to her left. I am quite sure that Rosa never saw a Moor in her life but, of course, the allegory is about siding with the Spanish Crown against the only "enemies of the faith" that the unknown painter could imagine.

To some extent, being used by others for their own purposes is the unavoidable destiny of anyone who becomes "famous," particularly famous members of powerless groups. On the other hand, –and aside from whatever manipulative intent on the part of the Crown and the Church– the fact is that Rosa was a symbol for the populace of Lima. According to a specialist in the

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5 "Santa Rosa Defendiendo la Eucaristía" (135cm. x110cm.) Anónimo, Escuela Cuzqueña, 18<sup>th</sup> century (private collection); described as *Santa Rosa luchando con el Rey de España contra los enemigos de la Eucaristía* [St. Rosa fighting with the King of Spain against the enemies of the Eucharist]. And "Santa Rosa Defendiendo la Eucaristía" (101 cm. x 75 cm.) Anónimo, Escuela Cuzqueña, 18<sup>th</sup> century (Museo de Osma, Lima, Perú); described as *Santa Rosa defensora tridentina ortodoxa de la Eucaristía* [St. Rose Orthodox Tridentine defender of the Eucharist]. Both reprinted in Flores Araoz et. al, 1995.

study of Rosa, Peruvian historian Teodoro Hampe-Martínez (1997), through Rosa, all *limeños* had a “direct line to heaven” and Lima was represented in the heavenly court. The first saint of the Americas was a *criolla*—a person of Spanish descent born on South American soil—and thus, through her, *criollos* had received a “seal of approval” from God. Her canonization process, where all sectors of *limeña* society were widely represented as witnesses and unified by their commitment to her elevation to the altars, demonstrates her symbolic value and appeal in the later construction of *criollo* identity. In the birth of colonial Lima and *criollo* identity, Rosa’s image substituted for that of the Virgen del Rosario (Our Lady of the Rosary) who had been the symbol of the Spanish *conquistadores* and of Rosa’s own Dominican order. Perhaps only another woman could give birth to this new identity.

Rosa’s popularity, although transformed through the centuries, continues being central in Latin America. Modern forms of artistic representations of Rosa comprise abstract paintings and other forms of contemporary art, including some by famous artists such as Colombian Fernando Botero. In addition to “*Rosa de América*,” which became a repetitive feature in Latin American TV during Holy Week, there are other minor films, comic books, songs, and a plethora of scholarly articles about details of her life that demonstrate her continued appeal. Articles in scholarly publications by several authors who conceptualize her as a mentally ill young woman appear every so often. Paradoxically, the effort at diagnosing her pathology by modern psychiatrists is another demonstration of her enduring popularity. Why else would anyone bother to discuss the mental health of a woman who has been dead for almost four centuries?

In Lima, Rosa's house has been transformed into a museum. One can see in the central courtyard the well where Rosa threw the key to the chain she had wrapped around her waist. There is a church next to the house; its walls are decorated with paintings that represent Rosa's

dream in which she saw many maids working for Jesus in heaven by hammering at stones in a quarry.

According to anthropologist Luis Millones (1993), Santa Rosa is a symbol of how Lima sees itself since colonial times. According to him, Rosa's cult also represents all the frustrations of the populations of the Peruvian and South American Andes. During colonial times she was associated by the indigenous population with prophecies about liberation from the domination of the Spaniards and their descendants. During the struggle from independence in the nineteenth century the white *criollo* descendants of Spaniards used her image as a symbol, while ignoring the plight of the Andean population. She has been transformed and re-transformed with time.

As it happens frequently in Latin America, Catholic beliefs mix and mingle with the ancestral beliefs of the indigenous populations or African slaves thus assimilating pre-Christian traditions to the official Catholic cult. The resulting beliefs and rituals may resemble both sources but are in fact different from either. Rosa's cult is no exception.

In our time, her image appears on the tables of Andean *curanderos*; she is honored and venerated next to the images of a legendary Inca rebel who sacrificed himself for his people. Obviously, the Inca himself images Jesus. But for the Andean population, Rosa is not the bride of Christ.

Because, as it happens with other female saints, representation of Rosa's, "marriage" to Jesus as a grown man was too evocative of sexuality, Jesus as a baby was offered to Rosa by his mother, the *Virgen del Rosario*. Thus, Rosa is frequently represented embracing a baby. Therefore, for villagers in the Andes, Rosa is just another mother with her child. And as such, she is a goddess of fertility: a woman with a child; a woman who can make the earth bear fruit. Her feast and processions are associated with fertility in the minds of the peasants, partially

because her feast coincides with a very dry month in Perú.

Variations of the cult of Rosa appear in other countries and regions. The festival of Santa Rosa, in the Chilean town of Santa Rosa de Pelequén shares all the characteristics of the Peruvian Andean festivals. But the image of Santa Rosa that is taken out for the procession during her festivities in this town is black. This is yet another transformation: a white *criolla* has been transformed into a black woman.

Indeed, Rosa's cult, transformed through the centuries in Latin America, Europe, the Philipines and possibly other areas of the world, seems to show endless possibilities. To this day, her image and story are renovated to fit the needs and conceptions of life of those who venerate her.

As Antoine Vergote says,

In contrast to the almost iconoclastic austerity of the great mystical traditions, popular religion clearly adheres to the most visible signs that establish a psychical contact between man and the supernatural universe. Here the saints, acting as mediators between man and God, take on a special importance. Whereas God may remain distant and beyond all representation, the saints can be known, the stories of their lives recounted, their virtues and acts represented by an eloquent system of iconography. They are idealized, endowed with quasi-divine powers, and the most human prayers, needs, can be addressed to them. This more external form of religiosity fosters another side of faith; it emphasizes a more direct and affective expression of it by linking the everyday tribulations and doubts, joys and pleasures, to the aims of faith" (Vergote, 1988, p.185).

To summarize, women saints are the constructions both of popular piety and hagiographical writing, both of which are intertwined with political considerations. As living individuals, they constructed and modeled their own lives and identity after available interpretations of sainthood for women, influenced by their own personal histories and psychological makeup. Rosa constructed her life on the basis of understandings about women's bodies and women's sanctity available to her. In so doing, though, she constructed herself as different from other women contemporaries. She challenged her confessors, family, and even her hagiographers to interpret her life in ways that both fit and subverted acceptable interpretations of women's lives. What forces in her own individual history made her uniqueness possible? The real Rosa and her motivations remain a mystery to us. However, the fact is that she resisted the life that had been planned for her. Her lack of conformity and her independent decision-making conspire against the hagiographers' efforts to make her appear only as an accommodating and submissive woman, even despite her own bizarre means of self-assertion. The story of Rosa and other women saints' lives suggest that women, though constrained by difficult circumstances and having limited resources, may resort to bold, even apparently self-destructive measures, to assert their own capacity for action and resist being just passive victims. In this way their lives are lived paradoxically against the grain of societal scripts...while limited in their choice of possibilities by those same scripts. The crux, for each woman, is in the specific intersection of subjectivity and social power; in "dissecting how [oppressive] regimes compel submission on the level of [her] subjectivity" (Bergner, 2005, p. 17). And in finding ways in which her personal experience of oppression can be harnessed and subverted.

For me, personally, Rosa's story creates more questions and paradoxes than it solves. I know that, as a child, watching movies and reading books about Rosa and other women saints,

offered a vision of alternatives heroism and possibilities for my life as a woman. I liked that they played an active role in their own lives, instead of waiting for a prince to wake them up with a kiss. But as I look at Rosa through a feminist lens, I am mostly disgusted and horrified at the price she paid for her elevation to the altars. And, as a therapist, I have been witness to how our modern society also destroys women's lives and bodies in the name of beauty or love.

As a feminist deeply touched by liberation theologies, I believe in the importance of resisting oppression. I am conscious that each one of us has a limited repertory of behaviors to do so. I think that Rosa and many women saints, like us, were both conformists and resisters. I have come to realize that the "resistance narrative" embedded in Rosa's story is present in one form or another in all women's lives, including mine, because I know that I have not always made the best decisions while trying to live my life to its fullest. I hope that I have learned some lessons along the way. And above all, I hope I can transmit those lessons to other women to encourage them to make their lives all they can be without ever resorting to self-destruction.

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