To those of us who study the early modern Atlantic world, the problematic narrative of a well-defined, singular, and orthodox Catholicism spread by colonizing missionaries from Europe throughout the globe is all too familiar. Erin Kathleen Rowe’s *Black Saints in Early Modern Global Catholicism* seeks to decenter Europe and clerics in this history and shift focus to often-ignored cults and devotions to Black saints in the Iberian Atlantic. Combining textual analysis with visual and material analysis of surviving physical evidence, Rowe has written a sweeping study that concentrates primarily on Iberia and its colonies but that also extends to Sicily, and West and Central Africa. Situated within Spain and Portugal’s current struggle to recognize their slaving pasts and the histories of Black individuals on the Iberian Peninsula, devotion to Black saints, Rowe asserts, was “an act of creativity that resisted white hegemony, transformed the Church, and refuses to remain unseen” (p. 11).

Rowe frames her study using the lens of global Catholicism. This is not a geographic scope but a focus on the processes through which “normative Catholicism”—what the church considered licit—spread and was transformed (pp. 8, 19). *Black Saints* intertwines scholarship on Christianity, slavery, material culture, and race with meticulous primary source analysis to further two main arguments. The first brings Afro-Iberians to the fore, arguing that their devotional practices and the process of their transplantation around the Atlantic world altered “normative practices” of Catholicism, transforming the early modern church in both Europe and the Americas (p. 3). The second extends from the first: both white clerics and Afro-Iberians themselves constructed understandings of “black sacredness” through sacred texts, art, and devotional practices. This argument contributes to ongoing conversations about early modern iterations of race and embodied difference, pushing back against scholarly views of both as “inevitable or unchanging categories of otherness” that white Europeans created (p. 6). Rowe instead contends that Black practitioners of Catholicism furthered their own understandings of what it meant to be Black and holy, grounding their relationships to Black saints in terms of color same-ness. She concludes that these venerations, however, did not substantially alter the material lives of enslaved and free early modern Black individuals. Black saints instead provided “channels for deep spiritual expression, protection, cultural and linguistic preservation, and acts of profound creativity.” Their veneration created a discourse of “the equality of souls” that Afro-Iberians mobilized in search of “rights to civic life, justice, and freedom” (p. 241).
Black Saints includes an introduction, two parts consisting of three chapters each, and a conclusion. Part 1, “Devotion,” provides a linear narrative of the development, adoption, and circulation of devotion to Black saints. Chapter 1 looks at the first depictions of Black sacredness in the form of Black Madonnas and the figures of ancient Ethiopian saints. Rowe traces the development and spread of these figures and Black sacredness within the Reformation and with the advent and expansion of the transatlantic slave trade. The Catholic Church pointed to ancient Black saints to authenticate its long lineage in refutation of Protestant challengers while the promotion of these figures became entwined with the evangelization of Black slaves. Chapter 2 shifts from white, clerical perspectives to the spread of cults, both on the Iberian Peninsula and throughout the Atlantic world. Here, Rowe offers a narrative of the spread of global Catholicism through the lens of Black communities, specifically Black confraternities. Chapter 3 focuses more closely on the public aspects of Black confraternities’ devotional practices and veneration that resulted in white backlash. Rowe pairs this with an analysis of how slavery, its power relations, and metaphors were a vehicle through which Black individuals understood their relationship to Christ. These same tropes were also mobilized in service of “white spiritual slavery,” which could take the form of venerating a formerly enslaved image; Christ as slave-on-earth; and Catholic laity as slaves of the divine (pp. 116-17).

In part 2, “Illumination,” Rowe studies the formation and representation of sacred blackness in greater detail. Chapter 4 focuses on sacred art that “saturated the devotional landscape of the Iberian Atlantic” (p. 137). Primarily looking at baroque, polychrome sculptures, Rowe maps out where the images were located and uses material analysis to show how their various elements would have conveyed meanings about blackness, sanctity, and salvation to viewers. Chapter 5 moves from artistic evidence to descriptions of Black saints found in hagiographies and other sacred texts. White clerics promoted the holiness of their subjects in these texts but also struggled to frame their skin color within traditional Christian connotations of whiteness/brightness/virtue versus blackness/darkness/sin. According to Rowe, the resulting archetypes of Black sanctity “challenged entrenched views of people of color and their place in the Hispanic world” (p. 205). She explores these views further in chapter 6, turning to the vidas of Black women in early modern convents and how these “living saints” mobilized accepted tropes of sacred blackness (p. 207). The book ends with “Afterlife,” which brings the conclusions of Black Saints to bear on present-day remembering, ignoring, and forgetting the historical presence of Black saints throughout the Iberian Peninsula. Communal memory, Rowe states, has either “faded into obscurity” or fashioned and re-fashioned the meaning of these saints (p. 238).

Scholars engaged in ongoing conversations about early modern iterations of difference may take issue with Rowe’s interchangeable uses of race, color difference, racism, and color prejudice. Those who study Africa and the African diaspora will also note that Rowe does not extensively engage with African religious practices and ontologies nor how they might have informed or transformed devotional practices and understandings of blackness. Likewise, scholars of Christianity could question the existence, in practice, of the “normative Catholicism” that Rowe states is her focus. Rowe, however, provides provocative material and arguments with which all of these groups of scholars will have to engage. The meticulous work required to map the spread of these devotions, Rowe’s seemingly innumerable visits to see surviving material evidence, and the various case studies she provides ground this far-reaching study in the lives of individuals and communities scattered around the Atlantic world. This work will thus be of particular use to scholars interested in culture, embodied difference, and Christianity in the early modern period. Black Saints is a refreshing study.
of the Iberian Atlantic that should serve as a model for studying the lived nature of early modern Christianity.

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