

“The Nobility of the Soul: Multiethnic Sanctity in the Early Modern Spanish World,” paper presented for *Indigenous Communities Confront Modernity and Identity*, The Conference on Latin American History, Atlanta, Georgia, USA, January 9, 2016.

At the turn of the seventeenth century a new form of hagiography emerged across Spanish America. Sacred historians began to write lives of colonial subjects from various socioracial backgrounds. Despite the negative stereotypes applied to mestizos, mulattos, blacks, and Indians, religious men hailed an exemplary few as models of Christian virtue. This baroque phenomenon of multiethnic sanctity is best exemplified in the work of the creole Jesuit Francisco de Florencia (1620–1695). Although the majority of his *vidas* concentrate on Spaniards and creoles, his lives of *castas* and indigenous people highlight an important aspect of colonial religion: people from all ethnic backgrounds participated in the construction of holiness and local Catholicisms. Florencia may have held fast to the baroque social hierarchy of colonial societies, but through the theological principle of the “nobility of the soul” he argued that all people had the potential to be saints regardless of their ethnic background. In this paper I analyze Florencia’s lives of the “three fortunate Indians,” the mestizo hermits of Chalma, and his Jesuit brethren of indigenous ancestry. I argue that beyond spiritual edification, his multiethnic *vidas* were partially designed to argue for parity within the larger Spanish empire. Florencia’s lives of Indians and mestizos demonstrate that creole patriots did not only turn to the pre-Hispanic past to construct their identities. But more importantly, they highlight how sacred histories are narratives shared deeply between Europeans and members of the multiethnic population, a collective and dynamic process that is representative of some of the larger political and cultural negotiations characteristic of colonial societies.