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ENTERING AND EXITING BLACKNESS: A COLOR CONTROVERSY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SPAIN

In the first half of the eighteenth century, historians and essayists in Spain were debating the natural and metaphysical (or divine) causes of blackness in humans. They implicitly rejected the opinions of Montesquieu and Voltaire (Aldridge), whose disgust for Black Africans embodied the false universalism of Western European thought (Martín Alcoff). In what follows I focus on a slice of that color debate: chapter 5 of part 1 of *Orinoco ilustrado* (1741–5) by the Valencian Jesuit José Gumilla (1686–1750), a pointed rebuttal to the Spanish cultural critic Benito Feijoo's "Color etiópico" (1736). One of the most original statements on blackness published in the early modern period, Gumilla's chapter responds to theories developed by Sir Thomas Browne in England, members of the Royal Academy of Sciences in France, and Johann Ludwig Hannemann in Germany. Like Browne and like Feijoo, Gumilla rejected the apotheosis of whiteness and the universality of European standards of beauty and morality. However, in contrast to all of these theorists, Gumilla derived his understanding of blackness from direct experience and knowledge of the New World: he had spent more than two decades in the Orinoco region evangelizing among Indians and sub-Saharan Africans.¹

First, a few words about terminology, geography, and notions of human diversity in the early modern Spanish world. The term used frequently by Gumilla and Feijoo is "Ethiopian" (*etíope* or the adjective *etiópico*), the native of two kingdoms in sub-Saharan Africa known as Higher Ethiopia and Lower Ethiopia (*Etiopía Superior*, *Etiopía Inferior*). According to Sebastián Fernández de Medrano, the most important Spanish geographer of the late baroque period, Ethiopia belonged to New Africa: "Divídese el África en Septentrional y Meridional; o en África vieja y nueva. Ésta es aquella parte de que los Antiguos no tuvieron noticia . . ." (*Breve descripción del Mundo* 210). New Africa stretched as far as the Cape of Good Hope and included seven large kingdoms: Egypt, Barbary, Numidia, Inner Lybia, Guinea, Higher Ethiopia, and Lower Ethiopia (211). Higher Ethiopia was Christian and its inhabitants were coal-black (*atezados*) (234). Four kingdoms (Congo, Monomotapa, Zanzibar and Ayana) constituted Lower Ethiopia. The majority of its inhabitants were either idolatrous or followed Islam, though the Portuguese had converted many to Christianity, and in Congo and Monomotapa they were black (239–241). In a rhymed version of *Breve descripción del Mundo* published two years later, Fernández de Medrano did not divide Ethiopia into two regions, but he still distinguished clearly between New Africa and Old Africa (27).

The implications of the discovery and settlement of New Africa for the discovery and settlement of the New World are barely visible in the critical literature on the Curse of Ham, the Mark of Cain, and the origins of New World and New African peoples.² It is taken for granted that the second set of explorations and exploitations

put Spaniards and Portuguese into contact with native peoples and imported African slaves, sparking several theories about the origins of brownness and of New World peoples while renewing debates about the two maledictions recorded in Genesis. What still needs to be acknowledged and accounted for, critically, is that the first set of events had already reconfigured both of these Judeo-Christian touchstones. Blackness would thereafter be increasingly correlated to slavery, like the words *etíope* and *negro* themselves (Hill “Casta”), as both Genesis punishments shifted from Jews to Blacks, and, eventually, to native peoples in the New World. Exploring and exploiting the vast territories of Africa unknown to the Ancients also increased curiosity about natural or scientific causes of blackness and the ancestry of African peoples.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, theological and scientific explanations for human variation often revealed the somatic preferences of their Spanish authors. In some theological explanations, there was also an assimilation of black or brown skin and features to Catholic dogma and discipline: North Africans and sub-Saharan Africans were portrayed as possessing shoddy morals and Indians as engaging in sodomy. Both caricatures contained appellations to Church Fathers who held that Ham’s progeny had been turned black as a divine punishment for Ham’s disrespect (and, in some glosses, incestuous homoeroticism) toward his father Noah. Remarkably, many theological explanations did not proclaim the *intellectual* inferiority of sub-Saharan Africans. Alonso de Sandoval’s 1627 *Tratado sobre la esclavitud* (*Tractatus de instauranda aethiopum salute*), the most important treatise on Black Africans published during the early modern period, was strident on this point: “. . . estos negros no son bestias como he oido dezir a algunos, que por aqui los quieren hazer incapaces del Cristianismo, ni se deven reputar por infantes, o amentes, porque no son sino hombres adultos, y como a tales se ha de dar al baptismo . . . mas o menos conforme a la mayor o menor capacidad que en ellos hallaremos, porque en ninguna nacion dexa de aver esta desigualdad de entendimientos” (380).³ To be sure, Sandoval was not calling for the abolition of slavery or an interfaith dialogue. At no point did he fail to carry forth what critical race theorist David Goldberg has termed *conceptual hegemony*:

Dominant discourses—those that in the social relations of power at some moment come to assume authority and confer status—reflect the material relations that render them dominant. More significantly, they articulate these relations, conceptualize them, give them form, express their otherwise unarticulated and yet inarticulate values. It is this capacity—to name the condition, to define it, to render it not merely meaningful but actually conceivable and comprehensible—that at once constitutes power over it, to determine after all what it is (or is not), to define its limits. To control the conceptual scheme is thus to command one’s world. (*Racist Culture* 9)

The Jesuit did, however, underscore the intellectual and moral capacity of Black Africans, a legacy preserved by some Spanish writers on New Africa and the New World in succeeding generations.

In chapter 5 of Gumilla’s *Orinoco ilustrado*, entering and exiting blackness, brownness, and whiteness lays the foundation for what he later argues about the origins of New African and New World peoples and the cultural determinants of

beauty. Black and Indian newborns are in fact born white and stay that way for a few days, the Jesuit observes. Only a spot at the ends of their fingernails or a purplish-brown patch near their waist reveals their imminent departure from whiteness and entrance into blackness and brownness, respectively (II, 84–5). This colligation of Ethiopian and Indian as almost-white subjects who are gradually suffused with color reframed a 1702 study of Black African newborns reported by the French Academy of Sciences, as cited by Gumilla (II, 84) and Feijoo (XII, 55). It also flattened Browne's conclusion about Ethiopians in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*: “not onely their legitimate and timely births, but their abortions are also duskie . . .” (517).⁴

Gumilla also wished to dispel a popular belief about colors and categories: “la falsa opinión de que la especie de mulatos *no sale*: esto es, no llegan los descendientes a la clase de blancos, como sucede en los mestizos y los indios” (II, 86). Responding to the *vox populi*, the Spanish Jesuit countered that people categorized as *mulatos* whitened in the same fashion as people categorized as *mestizos*:

En fin, quede por fijo que por los mismos grados por donde blanquea la mestiza, blanquea también la mulata a la cuarta generación, en la forma siguiente de casamientos:

- I. De europeo y negra sale *mulata* (dos cuartos de cada parte).
- II. De europeo y mulata sale *cuarterona* (cuarta parte de mulata).
- III. De europeo y cuarterona sale *ochavona* (octava parte de mulata).
- IV. De europeo y ochavona sale *puchuela* (blanca totalmente).

Ya se ve que si esta puchuela se casa con mulato propio, la prole vuelve a retroceder; y si se casa con un negro, se atrasará mucho más: y de estos atrasos depende el que pocos de ellos lleguen a puros blancos; pero algunos realmente llegan. (II, 86–7)

Peter Wade has correctly observed that Blacks and Indians in Spanish America “have fitted in different ways into . . . the structures of alterity” (*Race and Ethnicity* 36). I wish to suggest that in the early modern Spanish world, a more capacious—even crepuscular—notion of whiteness interpellated those structures of alterity. This pre-racial whiteness is reckoned with in Gumilla's ch. 5, but it is conspicuously absent in British and North American critical whiteness studies, which is grounded in a truncated—either ethnic or racial or class-based—formulation of whiteness.⁵ Black Africans can, and do, fade to white, Gumilla argued; blackness, whatever it was, could be covered up with or diluted by whiteness.

In his pre-racial or traditional society, such exits and entrances were defined by Church and Crown, not by modern science and the state. Gumilla's explanation of how Indians enter whiteness impinges on the larger issue of category formation in the early eighteenth century:

Y a la verdad es notable la brevedad con que blanquea el color de los indios; tanto que la india que se casó con un europeo, con tal que la hija, nieta, bisnieta y la chosna se casen con europeos, la cuarta nieta ya sale puramente blanca, y tanto

cuanto lo es la francesa que nació y creció en París. En caso que sean dichos casamientos con europeos, las dichas cuatro generaciones son así:

- I. De europeo e india sale mestiza (*dos cuartos de cada parte*).
- II. De europeo y mestiza sale cuarterona (*cuarta parte de india*).
- III. De europeo y cuarterona sale ochavona (*octava parte de india*).
- IV. De europeo y ochavona sale puchuela (*enteramente blanca*).

... Pero aquí es de saber que si la mestiza se casó con mestizo, la prole es mestiza, y se llaman vulgarmente *tente en el aire*; porque ni es más ni es menos que sus padres, y queda en el grado de ellos. Si la mestiza se casó con indio, la prole se llama *salta atrás*; porque en lugar de adelantar algo, se atrasa o vuelve atrás, de grado superior a inferior. (sec. II, 85)

Two observations are in order here. First, it is evident that both itineraries to whiteness are vertical: going forward, falling back, leaving, staying, being up in the air—all are derived from a semantics of whiteness that subordinates blackness and brownness according to the conceptual hegemony exercised by the dominant culture. However, this underlying hierarchy is biocultural, for it is rooted in the cultural consensus forged by law and custom (not science) that Blacks and Indians become Whites by the fourth generation if their ancestors practice exogamy consistently. Second, Gumilla amended his chart in keeping with the newest laws—not of science, but of religion, for the gatekeeper of whiteness was not nature or biology as it was then constituted, but culture:

Nótese, empero, que esta graduación va según el rigor antiguo, y a que se atendía, así para saber hasta cuál de aquellos grados llegaba a incluirse en la voz neófito (esto es, nuevamente convertido), para que, según privilegios, pudiesen dispensar los Padres misioneros en ciertos grados de consanguinidad y de afinidad, para poder casarlos lícita y válidamente; pero por nueva Bula del señor Clemente XI consta y declaró que por neófitos ya no se entienden sino los indios y mestizos, de modo que los cuarterones y ochavones se reputan y se deben tener por blancos. (II, 85)

Whiteness for Indians was not just any itinerary; it was a pilgrimage: once the Pope decided that Indian quadroons and octoroons were not neophytes, they became Whites (or Spaniards), though they lost the Indian Privileges (*Privilegios Índicos*) instituted by popes and managed by the Spanish Inquisition. Of course, not all neophytes were Indians, and Church officials in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Peru on occasion extended Indian Privileges to Blacks, *mulatos*, and *zambos* (half-Black, half-Indian), as well as to Indians and *mestizos*. In the late sixteenth century, in fact, a papal bull explicitly included *zambos* among the groups who enjoyed all of the Indian Privileges, even the right to be absolved of heresy and idolatry by bishops and archbishops (Olabarrieta Medrano 97–9; Hill ch. 6). Though the Spanish missionary insisted that blackness could, indeed, come out, his two itineraries elided a pivotal difference between Ethiopians and Indians and their respective entrances into whiteness: exiting blackness was, as a general rule, far more difficult than exiting brownness.

Gumilla opened sec. III by curtly dismissing a panoply of theories and anatomical findings about black skin patiently assessed by Feijoo at the conclusion of “Color etiópico” (XII, 57–8). He declared that he was not concerned with explaining what blackness was, physically, but instead with figuring out its origins and how and whether it could be changed. Yet, he belittled the Benedictine again by adding a possible physical cause that Feijoo had not even considered: the varying ability of black skin glands to reflect sunlight (III, 87). Like his modern predecessors, Gumilla oscillated between explaining the origins of blackness and explaining the origins of Blacks: between “sentencias sobre el color de los negros” (III, 91) y “el origen de los negros” (III, 90). The two questions were related in surprising ways.

In *Curiosum scrutinium Nigredinis posterorum Cham* (1677), Johann Ludwig Hannemann (1640?–1724) had divided the causes given for black skin in Ethiopians into the physical (particular disposition of cutis, climate, semen, imagination or maternal impression) and the “hyperphysical” (Ham’s Curse, Mark of Cain) (sec. XIII). He devoted a lengthy section—the longest in *Curiosum scrutinium*—to an exegesis of Genesis focused on Noah’s three sons and their descendants. Reviewing numerous ancient and modern histories and glosses of Scripture, he determined that Scythians and Celts had descended from Japhet, Ethiopians from Ham (through Canaan and/or Cush), and “Indians” (i.e. Asiatic peoples from India to Phoenicia and Arabia) from Sem. The sons of Sem were “brown and beautiful”; the sons of Ham, “black and crow-like”; and the sons of Japhet, “white and handsome” (XIV). The German believed that Ham and his son Canaan had been cursed by God: Ham was turned black, and Canaan was made the servant of his brothers. The latter curse, like Ham’s, was passed onto the sons, so that Canaan’s son Cain bore the mark of slavery and blackness (II, VI, X).

According to Feijoo and Gumilla, Hannemann got it all wrong. Unlike the Galician essayist (V, 15) and the Englishman Browne (518–20), the Valencian missionary did not explicitly complain that Ham’s sons Cush and Canaan had become interchangeable in theological explanations of blackness. He was clearly exasperated, nonetheless, by that reconfiguration and conflation of the two Genesis punishments:

[Hannemann] escudriñó (a su parecer) curiosamente el origen de los negros, [pero] no se conformó muy bien con la Divina Escritura. Dice que la maldición que Noé echó a Cam fue como marca o divisa de aquella pena el color negro. ¿Pero cómo lo prueba? Dirá porque los negros, extraídos fuera de su patria, son vendidos por esclavos, que es lo sustancial de la maldición: *Servus servorum erit fratribus suis*, sin advertir que las naciones y gentes blancas de la Europa y Asia extraídas y cautivadas se venden y son esclavos, sin ser negros; y así es cierto que el color prieto, ni es castigo, ni es efecto de la dicha maldición . . . (III, 88)

Earlier, in his explanation of exiting blackness and entering whiteness, Gumilla inveighed against the assimilation of blackness to indelible taint, against the very idea of the permanence of pigment. Here he rejects outright any divine or metaphysical relationship between slavery and blackness, just as Feijoo had done in 1736. How or why did Hannemann and other modern exegetes overlook the obvious? To insinuate an answer, Gumilla relied on what rhetoricians then called *sermocinatio* (feigned or re-created speech), a key figure of *amplificatio* (intensification of emotions):

... [R]esponda Hanneman a lo que diré en nombre de un negro de Angola. —Es verdad (dice) que por la culpa de Caín, y por la maldición, que cayó en nuestro Padre y Progenitor Canahán, somos reputados como verdaderos esclavos; pero mira, que compadecido Dios de nuestra desdicha, nos consoló, prefirió y condecoró con este bellissimo color negro, gala con la cual estamos contentísimos—. Dirá Hanneman que esto no consta de la Escritura, y replica el negro que tampoco consta lo que dice este autor; y que si Hanneman tiene por feo el color negro, y lo aplica a lutos, a tiempos y cosas tristes, ellos tienen todo su gusto en él, y tienen por melancólico y triste el color blanco. (88)

When scientists and theologians qualified black as ugly and sad, and then operationalized this alleged curse to justify Black African slavery as God's will, they were embodying whiteness, i.e. activating norms and values derived from an elite European male subjectivity. Browne had underscored this point one hundred years before: "[W]hereas men affirme this colour was a Curse, I cannot make out the propriety of that name, it neither seeming so to them, nor reasonably unto us . . . For beauty is determined by opinion, and seems to have no essence that holds one notion with all; that seeming beauteous unto one, which hath no favor with another, and that unto every one, according as custome hath made it naturall, or sympathy and conformity of minds shall make it seem agreeable" (1: 521–22). Feijoo had gone even further, arguing that though black was beautiful, Ethiopians internalized their oppression: living as slaves amongst Europeans they came to adopt a colonial mentality that prized white skin and features and taught them to hate their own (VIII, 36). Like Feijoo and Browne before him, Gumilla eschewed rigid patterns of racialization that both objectified and devalued blackness—patterns that have been critically framed as representative of the European Enlightenment.⁶

There was an even greater purpose to Gumilla's *sermocinatio*. Like the author of *Teatro crítico*, the author of *Orinoco ilustrado* advanced the theory that Black Africans carried the mark of Cain (if they carried any mark at all), not Ham's Curse, because they were descendants of Canaanites. Both authors rejected the idea that Africa had been settled by Noah's grandson Cush, a black man like his father Ham. Further, they would not concede that blackness was the mark of Cain: to the contrary, Canaanites and their descendants in ancient Palestine who bore the mark of Cain were white, and those white peoples settled Africa. (Putting these ideas in the mouth of an Angolan was Gumilla's deft rhetorical touch.) The figure of *sermocinatio* eliminated a Scripture-based explanation of the origins of blackness, opening the door (further into chapter 5) for his scientific defense of maternal impression. At the very same time it secured a Biblical basis for his theory about the origins of Africans and Black Africans in particular. Introducing the latter, Gumilla again chided Hannemann:

Mas, si dicho autor hubiera discurrido con mayor reflexión, habría hallado en la Divina Escritura que de Canahán nació Sydón y de éste los Sidonios; después nació Hetheo y los Hetheos; después nació el padre de los Jebuseos y otros hijos que poblaron primero la Palestina, y después se fueron extendiendo hacia el África (y en mi sentir) de las costas de ésta a las Américas; todo a fuerza de mucho tiempo y de muchas generaciones, sin que haya con qué probar que fuesen negros los Cananeos, ni los Sidonios, Hetheos, Jebuseos, etc., ni después

del Diluvio y la dispersión de Babel, ni hasta hoy en día. Luego de estas gentes blancas, descendientes de Caín, y de Canahán, se originaron después las gentes negras; y de éstas, finalmente, los indios trigueños de las Américas . . . Pero, ¿para qué es detenernos en lo que no es la cuestión? Ahora buscamos la raíz de esta mutación de color, para cuya declaración debemos suponer que si los hombres negros salieron de padres blancos, también los blancos y trigueños pudieron y podrán originarse de padres negros. (III, 88)

Blacks went to the New World, and the Indians (*trigueños*) descended from them. Remember: Blacks and Indians are born white, except for their respective telltale birthmarks that signal their categorical futures. The first part of Gumilla's chapter 5 becomes richer in meanings now, though Gumilla does not refer us back to it. If Blacks in Africa descended from those Whites west of the River Jordan, how did they become black? Gumilla's first part already suggested a possible answer: people can and do exit whiteness just as they can and do exit blackness.

In "Color etiópico", Feijoo had backed into this and related possibilities. At the onset, he confronts pre-Adamites, who argued that black skin was inherent, genetic, and immutable: "que el color negro de los Etiópes es de tal modo natural y congénito a aquella raza de hombres, que por ningún accidente puede alterarse, ni en ellos, ni en sus sucesores" (II, 5). Therefore, they argued, Ethiopians could not be descended from Adam, who was white: "que Adán no fue primer padre de esta gente, o si lo fue suyo, no lo fue nuestro. Si Adán fue negro, nosotros no somos hijos suyos; si blanco, no lo son ellos" (II, 6). Again, to turn back Hannemann, Feijoo proclaims that the mark of Cain could just as easily be whiteness, which hints at the possibility that Adam was black, not white. According to the Bible, "todos los hombres que hay hoy en el mundo, incluyendo Etiópes, Chinos y Americanos, descienden de los hijos de Noé; luego no hay lugar a la determinación de colores de algunas particulares Naciones . . ." (V, 16).

Yet again, while presenting his climate theory, Feijoo left the door ajar: skin color and body shape and other physical features could not possibly be hereditary. If they were, given the continuous mixture of different human groups spanning history, there would be no visible differences anymore, anywhere (X, 45). Instead, there would be a single phenotype that reflected that mixed human genotype. He pointed out the obvious: plants and animals, when transplanted to other lands, did not remain the same. Flavor, size, and color changed drastically in plants. Size, color, and hair changed in animals. These plants and animals over time came to resemble plants and animals of entirely different species. "¿Por qué en los hombres no sucederá lo mismo a proporción?" (X, 46). Spain's best-known cultural critic was positively convinced that some people changed color when they changed climate. In Oviedo, in fact, he knew two people born in Mexico to Spanish parents, one of them the Archbishop of Oviedo and the other a little boy whose father was a battleship captain, "y ambos tenían el color entre pálido y aceitunado, propio de aquella Region." The Archbishop, "... que salió de la América hombre hecho . . . conservó este color toda la vida; el otro que salió de allá de siete años . . . y hoy tendrá nueve, o diez, ya mejoró y prosiguió mejorando cada día sensiblemente de color" (XI, 52). Furthermore, the editors of the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* had claimed that Ethiopians taken to Europe begin to whiten by the second or third generation, and he recalled having read something

similar in the *Memoires de Trévoux*. “Es creíble,” he concluded, “que nunca o muy rara vez se borran a la primera generación todas las señas del origen a los Etiopes, que nacen en Europa, sino que poco a poco se van extinguiendo, y no en igual número de generaciones a unos que a otros” (XI, 49).⁷

Despite Gumilla's matter-of-factness in supposing “que si los hombres negros salieron de padres blancos, también los blancos y trigueños pudieron y podrán originarse de padres negros,” he pushed the idea that Ethiopians had descended from Whites (Canaanites) further than Feijoo, and he was bolder than the Benedictine in suggesting that *not just Indians but also Whites descended and will descend from black parents*. It is easy to underestimate the reach of such affirmations—Church Fathers and modern theologians and scientists did not vouchsafe them—because Gumilla abruptly turns away from his theory and faces down Eurocentric conceptions of beauty: “... en esta cuestión hemos de mirar los colores sin calificarlos ni darles entre sí preferencia, porque ésta sería siempre incierta, hija de la voluntad y no de la razón, al modo que cada cual prefiere el lenguaje materno en que se crió, al extranjero que no entiende, o se la hace duro aunque lo sepa ... Por otra parte, es cierto que la hermosura no consiste sólo en el color blanco. De este color hay caras muy feas, y del color negro les hubo muy hermosas ...” (III, 88). While arranging his controversial opinions about the white roots of Ethiopians and the black roots of Europeans around culturally-bound somatic and linguistic preferences, Gumilla also shuffled two existing theories on the origins of the first peoples (“trigueños”) in the Americas.

Though it was not uncommon to posit that Indians were descendants of the Jews, as Gregorio García had done in *Origen de los indios* (re-published in a lavish 1729 edition), it was unusual to contend that they had descended from Ethiopians. True, the Spanish friar Juan de Torquemada had gingerly tendered this hypothesis in his enormously influential *Monarquía Indiana* (1615), and Bishop Francisco Nuñez de la Vega did the same in his constitutions for Chiapas and Sonusco in New Spain (published in 1692 and again in 1702) (Hill *Hierarchy* ch. 5). However, the Friar's and the Bishop's respective assessments of Black Africans were unsparing, and their belief in Ham's Curse unwavering. Gumilla, in contrast, rejected Ham's Curse but maintained the (Black) African origins of pre-Columbian peoples; at the same time, he tied Israelites into this genealogy by making the inhabitants of ancient Palestine (the Israelites had defeated the Canaanites) the settlers of (pre-Black) Africa. Such a full-throttle statement on the Black African origins of the first peoples in the Americas would not be heard again until Leo Wiener's *Africa and the Discovery of America* (1920–22), and, more recently, Ivan Van Sertima's *They Came Before Columbus* (1976).⁸

Gumilla set out to prove that peoples have changed, can change, and do change skin color by dividing theorists of blackness into two camps: the ancient and the modern, which I call here the imagination or maternal impression school and the climate school. The ancients like Gumilla held that color changes were “efectos de la imaginativa” (III, 91), and he was determined to demonstrate “la mecánica natural con que la fantasía conmueve las facultades, por medio de las cuales imprime en el feto la idea o del color de que está impresionada la fantasía” (IV, 96). Feijoo belonged to the climate school, which asserted that “la causa verdadera y única del color de los etiopes es el influjo del clima o país que habitan; con la advertencia que esta vez influjo del clima no es cosa desnuda, sino que se debe mirar la altura del Sol y todas las demás propiedades y cualidades del tal país” (IV, 92) But the Portuguese, Dutch,

English, and Spanish colonizers in Africa, Asia, and America all preserved their whiteness, Gumilla pointed out, irrespective of the sun, the soil, and the atmosphere. Likewise, Africans and Asians kept their respective complexions in Europe, irrespective of the darker and colder climates (IV, 91–2). He showcased his firsthand knowledge of New World climes:

No obstante el influjo del clima o país de Etiopía; no obstante el primitivo origen de las particularidades del tal clima, y no obstante aquella cosa general a todo el país, vemos en él y en Angola y en Sierra Leona gran cantidad de familias blancas, descendientes de aquellos primeros argonautas portugueses que por espacio de dos siglos han retenido, de generación en generación, su color blanco hasta hoy; y al contrario, en el Perú, Paraguay, Quito, Caracas, Nueva España y en todas las islas de Barlovento, no obstante la carencia de aquella cosa característica y general del país de los negros, es constante y es notorio y ajeno de toda disputa que los descendientes de padres negros salen negros (a excepción de los que se casan con indias o con mestizas y a excepción de los partos irregulares, de que hablaremos después). Luego aquella cosa, aquel influjo del clima y aquel primitivo origen, no son la verdadera y única causa del color de los etíopes; y de serlo, todas las gentes de aquel clima fueran negras; y los hijos de ellos, nacidos lejos del tal clima, perdieran su color, lo cual no es así. (IV, 92–3)

Browne, Hannemann, Feijoo—none of these men had direct experience with Ethiopians in the New World, and “la experiencia es madre de la mejor y más cierta filosofía” (IV, 93). The Spanish Jesuit would prove his theory of “la eficacia natural de la imaginativa” (IV, 102) to a moral certitude with actual cases of unusual births (“partos irregulares”) from the Orinoco region.

The first case came from the Majates plantation in Cartagena de Indias. By 1738, a black female slave married to a black male slave had had seven or eight children, “pariendo interpoladamente, ya negros, ya blancos, de una blancura algo fastidiosa, por ser excesiva, de pelo asortijado y tan amarillo como el mismo azafrán” (IV, 93). Gumilla added that Blacks in Angola were not surprised by “negros albinos” (IV, 93), then drew a conclusion that supported his theory about the white roots of Black Africans: “De este hecho y hechos infiero esta consecuencia: luego después de la dispersión de las gentes pudieron nacer de padres blancos hijos negros, y casados éstos entre sí, ir poblando países que hasta hoy poseen y llenarlos de negros a fuerza de tiempo, como ha sucedido en otras gentes y provincias” (IV, 93–94). The Jesuit used this New World case to bolster his earlier claim that in ancient times some Canaanite women, due to maternal impression, occasionally gave birth to black babies (either in Palestine or in Africa), and over several generations these black babies married and produced other black babies to populate the lands of New Africa.

Blackness, then, was not caused by a particular quality of air or water or soil, as Feijoo had argued. Nor was it the result of adaptation to a climate where the sun and heat were too powerful for white-skinned humans. In a pre-racial grammar Gumilla argued that the maternal imagination produced a mutant color gene or genes, the carriers of which practiced endogamy, which meant that all of their descendants would necessarily carry the mutant gene or genes of blackness unless they chose a partner from outside the group: “De modo que como primero de Adán y Eva, y

después de solas tres familias [de Sem, Cham y Jafhet], poco a poco creció el gentío y pobló la faz de la tierra, así de pocas familias negras (y aun de sólo una familia pudo acaecer), resultaron los millones de negros que pueblan sus países . . ." (IV, 94).

Another New World case from 1738 is a rhetorical *tour-de-force* worthy of Jesuit humanism in the eighteenth century. It centers on a mottled child, who was probably suffering from vitiligo (or leucoderma). A black slave was convalescing in the Jesuit infirmary in Cartagena de Indias. She told Gumilla that her six-month-old was not improving as the doctor had promised. As if the slave woman were taking off a veil, the Spanish missionary recounted how she pulled back the baby's blanket to reveal an unheard-of specimen: "Levantó la negra la mantilla, y vi (mas no sé si vi, hasta que salí de la suspensión con que me embargó la novedad), vi, en fin, una criatura cual creo que jamás han visto los siglos. Doy las señas de ella, para no incurrir en la nota de ponderativo; mas temo que no consiga la pluma lo que no pudieren con cabal perfección los mejores pinceles empeñados a instancias de muchos curiosos que solicitaron la copia de original tan peregrino y singularísimo juguete de la Naturaleza" (IV, 100). Gumilla insisted that she was a natural, not a supernatural, being (thereby implying that neither Ham's Curse nor the Mark of Cain was a necessary cause of blackness), and that others witnessed her uniqueness and rendered it in pigment as he was painting it in words.

The baby girl was mottled or "jaspered" (*jaspeada*) from head to toe, like a work of art. Her head, full of black ringlets, was crowned by a triangle of kinky white hair. Each of her eyebrows, which formed the base to the two sides of this triangle, split into black and white: the half closest to the eye remained white and curly, and the other half was black and kinky. Nature gave her a mole to set off the white triangle on her forehead (IV, 100–101). "Lo restante del rostro es de un negro claro," the humanist reported, "salpicado con algunos lunares más atezados; pero lo que sobre lo apacible, risueño y bien proporcionado del rostro y vivacidad de sus ojos, da el mayor aire a su hermosura es otra pirámide blanca que, estribando en la parte inferior del cuello, sube con proporción, y después de ocupar la medianía de la barba remata su cúspide al pie del labio inferior, entre una sombra muy sutil" (IV, 101).

Her hands and feet stunned all who saw them, for they were covered with black moles, and their color contrasted with her light complexion, "(como si la Naturaleza le hubiera puesto guantes y calzado botines de color entre negro, claro y ceniciento)" (IV, 101). Nature also gave her a black gown increasingly visible at age 5: "Desde el circuito del arranque de la garganta se extiende una como esclavina totalmente negra sobre pecho y hombros que remata formando tres puntas, dos en los lagartos de los brazos, y la otra mayor sobre la tabla del pecho; la espalda es de aquel negro claro y manchado, uniforme con el que tiene en los pies y manos" (IV, 101). Even more awe-inspiring was the rest of her body, "varia y peregrinamente jaspeado de blanco y negro, con notable correspondencia en la misma variedad, en la cual sobresalen dos manchas negras que ocupan entrambas rodillas de la criatura" (IV, 101). Gumilla went not once, not twice, but several times, along with the other Jesuit fathers, "a contemplar y admirar esta maravilla" (IV, 101). The piebald child became the talk of the town. The nobility, Church and Crown officials, ship owners, and shopkeepers went to see the little girl: "Todos se volvían atónitos y alabando al Criador, que, siendo siempre admirable en sus obras, suele también jugar en la tierra con las hechuras de sus poderosas manos" (IV, 101). They showered her and her parents with

precious stones, bracelets, and necklaces. Finally, Gumilla sent the baby and her mother back to the plantation where they came from, fearing that the commotion was too much for the infant (IV, 101–102).

Now, all of this might seem far afield from the color controversy in eighteenth-century Spain, but it is not. The humanist immediately tied this case to the controversy over color: “Desde el principio de esta novedad se excitó entre los curiosos la controversia del origen de los colores, y apenas se trataba de otro asunto” (IV, 102). While “cada cual discurría según la opinión a que se inclinaba”, Gumilla became a true believer in maternal impression by actually comparing the baby and the slave woman’s companion, and discerning patterns in both of them:

... en uno de aquellos días en que ya la negra iba convaleciendo tomé a la criatura en mis brazos para observar más y más la variedad dicha de sus colores, y reparé que al mismo tiempo saltó a las faldas de la negra una perrilla de color blanco y negro; empecé a cotejar en general aquellas pintas con las de la criatura y, hallando notable correspondencia de unas con otras, las fui cotejando parte por parte, unas con otras; y, en fin, hallé una total uniformidad entre unas y otras, no sólo en la forma, figura y color, sino en lo respectivo al lugar en que estaban colocados los colores. (IV, 102)

He had not pressured the mother at all, Gumilla assured his readers: “Y aquí advierto que no quise preguntar a la negra si había pensado o no. Ni para el dictamen que yo había ya formado era necesaria tal pregunta; solamente averigüé cuánto tiempo había que tenía aquella perrilla en su poder. A lo que respondió: ‘Que ella la había criado desde que la quitaron de su madre para dársela’. Preguntéla si la perra iba al campo con su marido. ‘No, Padre (dijo), ésta es siempre mi compañera’” (IV, 102). With the modeling of his inductive methodology complete, Gumilla made his closing arguments in favor of the imagination school:

Y así creí, y creo, que la continua vista, el afecto con que la miraba y los muchos ratos que jugaba con ella, fueron causa suficiente para dibujar toda aquella variedad de colores de la perrilla en su fantasía e imprimirlos después en la configuración natural de su hija en la matriz. Este pensamiento comuniqué a sólo dos sujetos del dicho Colegio de Cartagena, y ambos hicieron el mismo cálculo y cotejo de colores y manchas de la perra y de la niña, y la total correspondencia y uniformidad. Los convenció totalmente y obligó a creer ejecutada allí la fuerza de la imaginación en la madre. (IV, 103).

With this American case of maternal impression Gumilla tied together the two questions that he had posed at the beginning of his chapter: the origins of blackness and the origins of Black Africans. Gumilla marveled at the piebald girl’s complexion, but maintained throughout his presentation of the case that her “irregular” features were completely natural; they did not require divine intervention or a particular climate, but rather the keen imagination of a slave woman who loved her little dog. While the daughter became an exhibit that astonished, the Jesuit challenged the apodictic taxonomies of human variation that weighed against his theory of the origins of blackness and of Black Africans.

From the vantage point of the history of science, the debate between Gumilla and Feijoo illustrates the ever-increasing influence of rationalism and empiricism on religious men in eighteenth-century Spain and Spanish America (Hill, *Sceptres and Sciences*): each rejected Ham's Curse and the Mark of Cain and adopted a scientific explanation for human variation. When viewed from the particular subfield of the history of science which is race, their respective arguments acknowledged the distinction between heredity and environment—albeit for profoundly different purposes—and proceeded to break down this distinction. Both authors were cognizant of the distinction between genotype and phenotype, between heredity (the biological transmission of genetic material) and development (or physical manifestation of material transmitted). Each adopted a biocultural approach to the origins of blackness and of Blacks that both expanded the notion of whiteness and undermined the stability of categories such as Ethiopian and European, Indian and Spaniard, Black and White.

In *Race, Nation, and Culture*, Peter Wade has aligned himself with Bruno Latour's findings on identity and modernity, positing:

a vague and shifting line between elements seen as relatively fixed, which may also be handed down unchanged from previous generations and shared with some people but not others, and those seen as malleable and changing . . . The shifting line means . . . that the two realms interact and become mutually constitutive . . . Latour . . . contends that modern people try to keep nature and culture apart as pure categories . . . But, in fact, purification has never been clearly divided from hybridisation during the modern period; this lack of separation has become more visible recently, but it was always there. (70–71)

This shifting line in early eighteenth-century Spain revealed itself in the controversy over the origins of black skin and features, and of Black Africans themselves. Both Feijoo and Gumilla contended that inherited traits such as skin color, hair texture, and nose shape might change over the lifespan of an individual, and, over the course of several generations, in an entire group. In a pre-racial grammar they asserted that phenotype may not (and often does not) correspond to genotype. Such changes in fact explained both the diversity of Noah's progeny in the past and the unstable taxonomies created around Africans, Asians, Americans, and Europeans in their eighteenth-century present. They profoundly disagreed about *how* that change had occurred in the past and might occur in the future: one claimed that the environment was the cause for mutation and the other responded with his theory of maternal impression.

The conceptual hegemony exercised over New Africa and its peoples in eighteenth-century Spain allowed for an intermittent awareness of how the whiteness of French and German authors had colored their opinions of blackness in scientific and theological explanations of the origins of blackness and of Ethiopians. Neither Feijoo nor Gumilla proposed that Black African slavery or slavery in general be abolished, but they both stoutly refused the reduction of blackness to perpetual servitude. Neither an African countenance nor a European is superior, Gumilla reminded his American and European readers: "el amor es ciego, y el ciego en punto de colores ni distingue ni tiene voto; y, caso que lo tuviera, es nulo" (III, 89).

Notes

- 1 Feijoo was a great admirer of Gumilla and praised him in print. See Ewalt on Gumilla's life and works and his relationship with Feijoo. My friend Manuel Lucena Giraldo, Latin American historian and editor of *Revista de Occidente*, has told me in conversation that Gumilla's hostility toward Feijoo was probably motivated by the divergent opinions of the Indians in the Orinoco region issued by their respective religious orders, and by competing policies to convert and control the Indians that were rooted in those opinions.
- 2 On Ham's Curse in Spain and Spanish America, see Girón Negrón; Sweet; Hill, *Hierarchy* chs. 5 and 6; and in the English-speaking world, see Peterson; Haynes; Goldenberg; Johnson; Braude.
- 3 On Sandoval, see Vincent; Bénaassy-Berling; Cesareo; Olsen; Tiffany.
- 4 Browne does not signal any awareness of Roger Williams's *A Key into the Language of America* (1643), in which the author's off-the-cuff observation about the Narragansett terms for "White" (Wompésu) and "Black or swarthish" (Mowêsu, Suckêsu) evokes primordial whiteness: "Hence they call a Blackamore (themselves are tawnie, by the Sunne and their annoyntings, yet they are borne white) Suckáutacone *A cole blacke man*" (132–33). Aldridge mentions Williams' account though he defines him as an eighteenth-century cleric (114).
- 5 See M. Hill; Roediger; Yancy; Rasmussen; Garner.
- 6 Richard Popkin identifies the conjoining of blackness and degeneration as an Enlightenment pattern of racialization: "... being non-white is a sign of sickness or degeneracy: the normal, natural condition of man is whiteness, but due to unfortunate environmental factors, some people have lost their whiteness and with this, part of their human nature (Buffon, Blumenbach, etc.)" (247). According to Blumenbach, there was a single species of human with six varieties, the results of degeneration from a primordial whiteness. In a weighty section of his *Natural Varieties of Mankind* (1776) he set out to explain "how in general a primordial species may degenerate into varieties" (80). Herder too subscribed to primordial whiteness: "A negro child is born white; the skin around the nails, the nipples, and the private parts, first becomes coloured; and the same consent of parts in the disposition to colour is observable in other nations" (77), and insisted that Nature made Africans for Africa—a people rich in sensuality, and poor in intellect and morals, well-suited to their excessively-hot climate (77–8).
- 7 Aldridge (112–113) asserts without evidence that Feijoo was influenced by the French monk Jean-Baptiste Dubos, who devoted a large chunk of his work (originally published in 1719) to the theory that air, food, soil, and other environmental factors alter skin color, hair texture, blood, and intellectual and moral qualities. Still, his negative characterization of Black Africans was not embraced by the Spanish Benedictine: "Does not every body agree in attributing the stupidity of the Negroes and the Laplanders to the excess of heat or cold in their respective countries?" (213). Herder too believed that climate was responsible for pigmentation changes over time and space: "All depends therefore on the causes, that were capable of unfolding it here; and analogy instructs us, that sun and air must have had great share in it. For what makes us brown? What makes the difference between the two sexes in almost every country? What has rendered the descendants of the Portuguese after residing some centuries in Africa, so similar in

colour to the negroes? Nay, what so forcibly discriminates the negro races in Africa itself? The climate, considered in the most extensive signification of the word, so as to include the manner of life, and kind of food" (75). However, as was suggested earlier, Herder's racial environmentalism was part and parcel of a false universalism that correlated European origins or whiteness to intellectual and moral greatness, and African origins or blackness to idiocy and depravity.

- 8 In Andrés González Barcia's 1729 edition of García's treatise, he added numerous sections covering contemporary writers on the origins of the Indians, one of which was devoted to the theory that the direct ancestors of the first peoples in the Americas had been "Africans". However, it must be taken into account that "African" for such theorists was a mobile signifier that ranged from "Phoenician" to "Arab" to "Moor" to "Carthaginian". In another section, he summarized Hugo Grotius's dispute with Johannes de Laet (multiple treatises were published in the period 1642–44). None of the Spanish writers, I am convinced, derived his arguments from Grotius. Though the Dutchman was adamant that the indigenous in Yucatan had descended from Ethiopians, he did not define the latter as Gumilla, Feijoo, Torquemada, and Núñez de la Vega defined them. Grotius claimed that Ethiopians were already Christians centuries before their encounters with the Portuguese, and those Ethiopians were not the dark-skinned pagans whom these Spaniards called *etíopes*. Furthermore, Grotius argued that Indians in the rest of North America were the descendants of Scandinavians, and Indians in pre-Colombian Peru had arrived from China.

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