The Color of Salvation: The Materiality of Blackness in Alonso de Sandoval’s *De instauranda Aethiopum salute*

Grace Harpster

In Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon’s eighteenth-century natural history *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*, he included an engraving of a young slave girl named Mary Sabina, whose vitiligo condition had caused patches of black and white skin (Fig. 3.1).¹ Born to two black slave parents on a Jesuit plantation in Cartagena, Columbia, Mary Sabina’s unusual coloration aroused the interests of naturalists and collectors, who speculated about its cause. Portraits of this rare ‘piebald’ child circulated throughout the Atlantic, one painting sent directly to London, another found on a captured Spanish ship and copied several times in Carolina, and still another recovered from an English prize ship and sent to Buffon, who used it as a model for the present engraving.² This print highlights Mary Sabina’s marvelous condition with the addition of exotic attributes like the feather headdress and straw parasol, which also likely allude to her origin in the Indies. The medium of engraving also contributes to the sense of a Manichean binary between black and white, the inked line and the blank page echoing the oppositional effect of patches of pigmentation and its absence on skin. Mary Sabina's piebaldism visually concretizes the colonial incommensurability of black and white, here situated ambiguously between incidental pigment and racial signification.

In the early modern period, dark skin color was itself conceptualized as a deviant condition. A long tradition of scholarship had focused not on the possible origins of the marvelous piebald coloration, but on those of black African skin. Dark skin in sub-Saharan Africa was commonly attributed to environmental

---


factors, leading to a conception of black skin as burnt or scorched. This etiology, however, did not explain the birth of dark-skinned individuals relocated to colder