Chapter 5

White or Black? Albinism and Spotted Blacks in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World

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In the eighteenth century, the increasing scientific obsession with origins and the transferability of skin color created an environment in which norms and deviations were discussed in more global and hierarchical terms. Portraits of albinos and spotted blacks (individuals affected with vitiligo) circulated and were discussed among a wide sector of society – from civil and ecclesiastic authorities to scientists and philosophers. This essay considers the proliferation of this type of imagery on both sides of the Atlantic in light of the racial theories of the time that attempted to explain human variation and human deviation; it also addresses the role of images in spreading knowledge across cultural boundaries – from the colonies to Europe and vice versa. Although this essay focuses primarily on colonial bodies from the Americas, determining if albinos and mottled blacks were white or black was a hemispheric question, one that stretched from the South to the North Atlantic, and therefore merits a transnational and comparative treatment. How were albinos and spotted blacks perceived racially and scientifically? Who generated this knowledge (that is, who was the voice of authority) in the eighteenth century, and with what purpose? And what do these categories in particular tell us about long-standing notions of the Americas (especially Spanish America) as a degenerative laboratory of hybridity and color instability? A key aspect that will therefore be addressed is how the evidentiary and epistemological status of images, which lie halfway between science and documentation and art, is critically complex. Images were accorded a preponderant role and were endowed

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1 Albinism and vitiligo is a disorder (not a disease) characterized by the destruction or inactivation of melanocytes (the special cells that produce pigment in the skin and organs). Albinism is caused by a genetic mutation that impedes the body from producing or distributing pigmentation; vitiligo occurs when the cells that make pigment in the skin are destroyed and white patches appear in different parts of the body.
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with the capacity to shape the enlightened science of skin. Their analysis allows us to understand how notions of degeneration and regeneration were conceptualized in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world and illustrates a central point that is frequently overlooked in discussions of race and science – that there is no single voice of authority nor stable inventory of the natural world. Opinions, whether emitted by Western European commentators or creole (American-born) authors, as we shall see throughout this essay, were not only individually and geopolitically motivated but also frequently ambivalent, contradictory, and elusive.

The Family of Man and Its Variations

To understand the place of albinos and spotted blacks in the eighteenth century, it is crucial to consider earlier constructions of racial hierarchy and mestizaje (racial mixing). During the early modern period, ancient medicine and philosophy were persistently alluded to in Western Europe. By the 1470s, the first printed Latin translations and re-editions of the works of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and the Roman encyclopedist Pliny (22/23–78 CE) among others had appeared. The resurgence of interest in ancient writings was due as much to the reverence for Greco-Roman learning as to the voyages of exploration and discovery. The encounter of new lands and peoples beginning in the 1500s prompted the need to explain human variation, allowing the West to proclaim its right to conquest and exploitation and to policing the attainment of civilization through the spread of Christianity. Ancient pagan writing and Christian theology became deeply intertwined and contributed to shaping the experience of colonization.

The question of where people came from became essential to understanding human diversity. Greco-Roman mythology espoused the theory of multiple origins for humanity, including instances of spontaneous generation. In his De Civitate Dei (413–426 CE), Saint Augustine vehemently countered the notion of

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2 It is important to remember that enlightened science used images not just for skin color but as a means for all kinds of scientific demonstration.

3 Here I am attentive to Nicholas Jardin and Emma Spary’s important observation that there is no ‘natural’ conception of nature or stable inventory of its products. N. Jardin, J.A. Secord, and E. Spary, Cultures of Natural History (England: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12.