CHAPTER EIGHT


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Professor Pieter Emmer, to whose scholarly achievement this volume is dedicated, has devoted much of his life to the study of the rise and fall of the Atlantic slave trade.¹ This is a subject that, during the course of the nineteenth century, came to be perceived in most parts of the western world as an iniquitous activity that, at no point, was, or could have been, morally justified either in secular or in religious terms.² This stance may be taken as much a snub upon those nineteenth-century writers, principally from the southern states of the United States, who sought to justify slavery in just such terms,³ as it was a manifestation of nineteenth-century self belief in the spiritual and material progress of rational people. However its general acceptance as a truism has meant that historians in the twentieth and in the present century have devoted relatively little attention to justifications for slavery in the Atlantic offered by those who witnessed the system in practice during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rather, the development of the trade in African slaves has come to be represented as an expansion

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² See the works of David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966) and The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975); his works both explain the novelty of opposition to slavery in western and demonstrate the rapidity with which principled opposition to slavery quickly became almost universally adopted in western society.

³ For some fine examples of continued rationalizations of slavery especially from states that later constituted themselves as the American Confederacy see Drew Gilpin Faust, The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).
westwards of an activity that had long prevailed within both Africa and the Mediterranean basin, and the adoption of chattel slavery as a normal form of labor is frequently referred to as “an unthinking decision” stumbled upon at the moment when entrepreneurs in various locations in the Atlantic undertook to cultivate particular crops, notably sugar, tobacco and rice, that had already come to be associated with black slave labor.4

This position does not allow for the fact that some authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did comment (sometimes with unease) on the phenomenon of slavery, and tendered observations on the moral obligations of the dominant white society towards the slaves whose work enabled their prosperity. The texts to which I refer were composed by French and English authors principally in the context of writing Natural Histories of the West Indies, and while we will examine these works sequentially the ultimate intention is to compare French with English appraisals of the phenomenon of slavery.

The writing of natural history is as old as the recorded word and can certainly be traced back to Herodotus and Pliny each of whom described, and sought to categorize, the various “barbaric” peoples of whom they had information, and the responsibility of the “civilized” people of their respective classical worlds towards these outliers. Each of these authors was read through the centuries by people conversant with classical learning, but their observations seemed all the more relevant during the early modern centuries when European encounters in the Atlantic basin with a variety of peoples who were completely foreign to them added a fresh urgency to the fundamental question concerning the origins of America and the origins of man.

Spaniards (and some Portuguese) authors were the first to respond to the demand for answers to the philosophical questions that the so-called ‘Discoveries’ posed for Europeans. This is not surprising given that these had the most sustained and varied contacts with the indigenous peoples of America, from the initial Columbus voyage to the close of the sixteenth century.5 These Iberian authors (mostly priests)


5 Anthony Pagden, The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); see also David Abulafia, The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2008).