

Grey Shades of Blackness in Gomes Eanes de Zurara's *Crónica do descobrimento da Guiné*

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In this talk, I'll be looking at how the fifteenth-century Portuguese historian Gomes Eanes de Zurara classifies African and European bodies. In addition, I'll also be working to understand what it is that underlies Zurara's somewhat obsessive with classifying them in the first place. Beyond my analysis of Zurara's treatment of European and African bodies, I also want to attend, in a more reflexive way, to our concern as twenty-first century readers with reading race into and out from late medieval and early modern texts of exploration. Why is it that we tend to read Zurara (and other late medieval authors) as a potential point of racism in the West? In large part, it stems from our own politically inflected perspective. By seeking to understand the late medieval (or early modern, or classical) origins contemporary racism, we strive to untangle and deconstruct the undeniably damaging web of racism in which North America and Europe are still trapped. Whether or not it is realistic to expect to be able to find a historical origin for modern racism, this way of reading Zurara also points to our understanding of race as a negotiated and emergent mode of social and economic classification—one that can evolve over time and across space. Whatever the reasons, it remains more or less axiomatic that we have real trouble reading Zurara in 2011 without seeing his various *Crónicas* as a means to understanding how we got to where we are today with respect to race, and how we might move forward on better footing.

A close reading of *Crónica do descobrimento da Guiné* reveals that, even in the early modern period, writers recognized race as a fiction useful for justifying imperial ventures, but hardly thought of it as an ethical way of looking at the world. I contend that Zurara's deployment

of racial rhetoric in the voice of his narrator demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the exotic as a useful narrative tool for capturing the reader's attention, whereas the subsequent amendments to that exoticism manifest a more subtle vision of the dynamic relationships between key figures of Portugal's African expansion. Zurara explicitly and consciously posits a stable self, which he then constantly adjusts, interrogates, and recalibrates over the course of the text in a way that presents a portrait of contingency and instability, rather than a coherent, imperial vision.

The *Crónica do descobrimento da Guiné* narrates the process by which fifteenth-century Portuguese explorers of the Atlantic coast of Africa sought to map and make sense of the waters they navigated; the physical and epistemological maps they drew underwent a series of drastic amendments and drafts with each successive exploratory voyage. This paper, then, deals with three levels of revision: 1) the process by which conceptions of selfhood and alterity are constituted over the course of the chronicle; 2) the metatextual revisions in which the narrator engages as he reevaluates the limits of his own knowledge; and 3) the implications these processes of constitution and revision have for our understanding of race in early modern Iberia.

Gomes Eanes de Zurara, the official chronicler of the Portuguese Avis dynasty from 1452 to 1474, wrote the *Crónica da tomada de Ceuta* in 1450 to recount the 1415 Portuguese conquest of the city of Ceuta, on the northern coast of Morocco. This invasion served as part of a chivalric ritual whereby the three Portuguese princes, Duarte, Henrique, and Pedro, sought to earn their knighthood in real battle (Barletta, "*Uma Lança em África*" 72). In historical terms, the taking of Ceuta marked the beginning of Portuguese imperial expansion onto the African continent—a history that Zurara would continue in his subsequent *Crónica do descobrimento e conquista da Guiné* (1453). The later chronicle follows the southward push along the western African

coastline by Portuguese navigators in the years following the conquest of Ceuta. Portuguese voyages of discovery, sponsored by the Infante Dom Henrique, Duke of Viseu (1394-1460), known to the English-speaking world as Henry the Navigator, greatly expanded European cartographic knowledge of the African coast as the explorers captured the native inhabitants along the coast.

Charles Boxer has argued that several factors drove the Portuguese to undertake expansion into Africa in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. First, the Avis crown had come to an uneasy agreement with Castile in 1387 whereby the Portuguese ceded their right to reclaim territories held by the Muslim kingdom of Granada. This agreement, as Vincent Barletta points out, deprived the Portuguese royal family, and by extension the Portuguese people, of their primary means of constituting themselves: “*hemos de tener en cuenta que esta lucha contra el Islam es el conflicto a partir del cual el reino de Portugal emergió en el siglo XII*” (71). Lacking Muslim adversaries on the Iberian Peninsula, the Avis dynasty chose to continue their conflict with Islam in Africa, and thus retain access to the experiences necessary for discerning in its citizens essential qualities such as nobility, masculinity, and loyalty.

This drive to continue its struggle against Islam was coupled with powerful imperial pretensions as the Avis dynasty jostled against other Iberian kingdoms (for example, the Crown of Aragon was also actively looking to expand its territories within the Mediterranean) to take its place as the rightful heir of the Romans. This imperial expansion would allow the Portuguese to achieve military security, for by controlling ports in the Maghreb, they would also defend their own coasts against pirate raids. Commercially, as well, the Maghreb could serve Portugal as a possible commercial channel, and a site at which to tap the riches of Saharan caravans. Finally, imperial expansion provided the realm with a safety valve—a means by which ambitious

members of the warrior class could rise in rank and status by means of practicing their now-obsolete trade away from a home that no longer had an immediate need for them. The *Crónica da tomada de Ceuta* traces a narrative that discounts Portugal as a valid locus of self-constitution. The Avis princes have limited scope for constructing an identity for themselves as knights while they remain on an Iberian soil with few Moorish enemies, and so they inaugurate the Portuguese irruption onto the African continent as, at least in part, a search for themselves as knighted members of the nobility.

From the very start of the *Crónica do descobrimento i conquista da Guiné*, the voice of Zurara's narrator explicitly aims to establish this history of the conquest of Guinea as the primary authoritative account of these important events in Portuguese history. As the official royal historian, the author makes certain to invoke the endorsement of the king himself and of his uncle dom Henrique to demonstrate the authenticity and reliability of his chronicle:

Aqui se começa a Cronica na qual som escriptos todellos feitos notavees que se passaram na conquista de Guinee. Per mandado do muy alto e muito honrado principe e muito vertuoso senhor o Infante dom Henrique duque de Viseu e senhor de Cevilhã, regedor e governador da cavallarga da ordem de Jesu Christo. A qual Cronica foi ajuntada em este volume per mandado do muito alto e muito excelente principe e muito poderoso senhor el Rey dom Affonso o quinto de Portugal. (1)

While at first blush this merely seems to be a standard formulaic beginning, in which the author acknowledges the patron of his project, in fact, the presence—both corporeal and symbolic—of dom Henrique pervades the text, as much at the level of the metanarrative commentary offered by the authorial voice as at the level of the events that the text describes. Indeed, the alternate

title to the history is *Crónica dos feitos notáveis que se passaram na conquista da Guiné por mandado do infante D. Henrique*—the title explicitly credits the prince with notable deeds undertaken by the Portuguese on the African littoral.

The prince is not simply the historical prime mover of the inception of Portuguese exploration of Africa, as well as the only individual with papally sanctioned power to authorize each event described in this text; he is also a main character of the narrative, a frequently interpellated member of the text's audience, and an icon invoked by the sailors to justify, endorse, and motivate their actions over the course of their journeys. The prince is even called another Alexander: “manifestamente diziam que o Infante nom podia ser senom que era outro Alexandre” (104). It is on the prince's symbolic, political clout, and on that of the king his nephew, that Zurara's narrator draws to establish his text not merely as *an* account of the discovery and conquest of Guinea, but as *the* single, unimpeachable source for information on the subject.

Beyond the constant and deliberate reminders to the reader of his personal relationship with and connection to the power with the royal family, Zurara also relies on a number of textual tropes to attempt to establish the authority of his narrative. He undertook this historical project, Zurara explains, on orders from the king, to compile and screen the numerous accounts of the discovery of Guinea into one master text:

E considerando el Rey nosso senhor que nom conviinha ao processo de uma soo conquista seer contado per muitas maneiras, posto que todas concorram em um effeito; porem men mandou sua senhoria que me trabalhasse de as ajuntar e ordenar em este volume, porque os leitores *mais perfeitamente* possam aver dellas conhecimento. (5, my emphasis)

The process of compilation described here not only seeks to confirm the text itself as an Urtext, but also serves to raise Zurara-as-narrator to a vantage point from which he is able to survey, interpret, and map the anthropomorphic geography of this story. This topography he describes in his second chapter as part of a panegyric to the toils of the great Prince:

Vejo aquelles *Garamantes*, e aquelles *Tiopios*, que vivem sob a sombra do monte *Caucaso*; negros em color perque jazem de sob o oposito do auge do sol, o qual seendo na cabeça de Capricornyo, e a elles em estranha quentura, Segundo se mostra pello movimento do centro de seu excentrico, ou per outra maneira, porque vezinham com a cinta queimada; e os *Indios* mayores e menores, todos iguães em color, que me requerem que screva tantas dadivas de dinheiros e de roupas, passageês de navios, gasalhado de pessoa quanto de ti receberom que por visitaçom do apostollo, ou cobiiçosos de veer a fremosura do mundo, chegarom a as fiins da nossa Espanha. (10-11, italics in original)

Thus, from the very beginning of the history, Zurara delimits the borders of the lands brought under not merely Portuguese control, but indeed explicitly under that of the prince. He also situates himself within a narratorial panopticon from which he observes these various subjects of the Portuguese empire, whom he parades before the eyes of his reader in a spectacle of racialized exoticism.

A particularly vivid example of a racialized exoticism that establishes clear cultural, economic, and human hierarchies can be found in another of Zurara's histories—the *Crónica da tomada de Ceuta*. Barletta suggests that by constructing rubrics of racialized differentiation in his *Crónica da tomada de Ceuta*, Zurara attempts to create a teleological system that allows the official imperial chronicler to justify the Portuguese incursion into Africa. In his depiction of the

battle between the Portuguese and the Muslims at the gates of the city of Ceuta, he focuses in particular on the fight between “um mouro grande e crespo todo nu, que não trazia outras armas senão pedras” and Vasco Martins de Albergaria. The Muslim defender is broken down into monstrous parts, the sum of which is “espantosa”: his size, his kinky hair, his nudity, and his primitive choice of arms. The sum is explained by the color of his skin: “cá ele havia o corpo todo negro assim como um corvo” (*Crónica da Tomada de Ceuta*, 226). By conjuring up a binary of Portuguese rationality in confrontation with African monstrosity, Zurara creates a moral imperative for the Portuguese to subdue the African Other. In Barletta’s words:

Son precisamente estos rasgos monstruosos, poderosos, oscuros y primitivos de los musulmanes, los que los violentos y racionales portugueses deben dominar y desechar; pero también es este hombre, con todas sus características asociadas, quien debe ser literalmente “atravesado” –como hace Vasco Martins con su lanza–para que la conquista y colonización de Ceuta puedan llevarse a cabo. El suyo es el “corazón de las tinieblas” que, desde en enfoque de Zurara, ha de ser traspasado, penetrado y expuesto a la cruel luz de la razón europea, un acto que sirve tanto de justificación como de paso necesario para la expansion europea en el norte de África. (“Uma Lança em África” 80)

The justification for this imperial venture is linked to the blackness of the representative Moor’s skin. Racial qualities dictate not only social standing but also political capital and imperial dominance.

If we were to stop reading at this point in the *Crónica do descobrimento da Guiné*, it would be tempting to make the argument that Zurara has marshaled the terminology of classical understandings, as explicated by Herodotus and Josephus, inter alia, of phenotypical differences,

in order to conjure up an essentialized image of the African Other. Such a step would tie neatly into the narrator's gesture toward his own omniscience and absolute control over the text;

however, Zurara instead moves on to admit the limits of his own narrative knowledge:

Espantamme aquelas vezinhos do Nylo, cuja grande multidom tem ocupados os termos daquela velha e antiga cidade de Thebas, porque os vejo vestidos da tua devysa, e as suas carnes, que nunca conhecerom vestidura, trazem agora roupas de desvayradas collores, e as gargantas das suas molheres grarnidas com joyas de ricos labores douro e de prata. (11-12, my emphasis)

This passage in the second chapter initiates a crucial narrative rhythm that Zurara will follow for the remainder of the text, whereby the narrative voice sets up expectations of exoticism and amazement, only to later revise that exaggerated preconception to a more modest understanding of African difference. In this passage, for example, the narrator first confesses an imperfect understanding of the world he sees from his vantage point—"espantamme." What frightens or surprises Zurara is not the outlandish exoticism of the black bodies he just described, but instead their relative proximity to a recognizable form of civilization. The expectation of "carne que nunca conhecerom vestidura" is revised to the figure of these bodies, this flesh, clothed in the livery of the Portuguese Prince.

These expectations for unintelligibility are also carried over to language. Zurara tells us in the seventh chapter that one of the major motivations for the *Infante* to sponsor these voyages of discovery was in order to discern the extent of Muslim power in Africa "porque todo sesudo, per natural prudencia, he costringido a quere[r] saber o poder de seu imiigo, trabalhouse o dicto senhor de o mandar saber, pera determinadamente conhecer até onde chegava o poder daquelles infiees" (46). Surveillance of the African landscape, as part of a reconnaissance mission for

information for dom Henrique, is a constant that various leaders cite as a motivation for justifying forays and the taking of prisoners.

Crucial to this project of collecting native bodies are linguistic resources. Thus, when Nuno Tristam joins Antam Gonçalvez's expedition, he brings with him "um allarve [...] [que] fallasse com alguns cativos, pera ver se entendia sua linguagem, e que se se entendessem, que aproveitaria muito pera saber todo o estado e condições das gentes daquela terra" (79).

Similarly, Martin Vicente, a leader under Gil Eannes, calls explicit attention to the importance of interpreters, and makes the case to his fellow sailors that they ought to stage an attack on the African coast without permission from Gil Eannes, saying: "[...] porque per o desacordo que antre elles sera per nossa chegada, eles som vencidos, e que hi al nom aproveitemos senom aver lingua, nós devemos dello seer contentes" (110).

At first light, this strategy is only partially successful. As it turns out, most of the captives speak not Arabic but an African language whose origins the narrator locates somewhere in the Sahara: "E bem he que fallaram todos tres, mas a liguagem era muy afastada hũa das outras, pello qual se nom poderom entender" (79). The captives are, for all intents and purposes, unintelligible from the Portuguese perspective, despite the presence of Nuno Tristam's Arab translator. The complete incomprehensibility of these captives, however, is quickly revised, when the same African noble, Adahu, who will later frustrate Portuguese expectations by not reciprocating the supposed generosity of his "benefactors" is, at least, able to communicate with them. Indeed, this linguistic capacity is one of the features that most clearly distinguishes him in the first place from his fellow captives:

Recolheitos aquelles capitaães a seus navyos, mandarom a aquelle alarve, que Nuno Tristam levava comsigo, que fallasse com aquelles Mouros, e nunca o

poderom entender, porque a linguagem daquelles nom he mourisca, mas azaneguya de Zaara, ca assy chamam a aquella terra; mas o cavalleiro parece que assy como era nobre ante os outros que ally eram cativos, assy vira mais cousas e mihores, e andara outras terras onde aprendera a linguagem mourisca, e portanto se endendya com aquelle alarve, ao qual respondya a qualquer cousa que lhe preguntava. (83-4)

By calling the translator “alarve,” the narrator simultaneously renders him in linguistic, geographic and ethnic terms. The term “alarve” would have referred to a North African Arab, as opposed to a Portuguese Muslim. In contrast to the clear picture of this man's origins constructed by the term “alarve,” as well as remarkably sophisticated understanding of the provenance of the captives’ language—from a Saharan Berber tribe—the narrator is at first unable to distinguish clearly between various categories of otherness found in this group of “mouros.”

The captives are rendered even more understandable once they are brought back to Portugal, where even Adahu’s translation skills are upstaged by a servant of the *Infante*: “seendo trauteur ante elles um Martym Fernandez, que era Alfaqueque do Infante. E bem parece que avia gran sabedoria da linguagem mourisca, pois ante aqueles era entendido onde o outro allarve [Adahu], que era Mouro da naçom, nom podera achar quem o entendesse senom um soo” (97).

While on one level, Martin Fernandez merely represents an economic convenience that facilitates the dealings between parties; on the another, he also embodies a liminal Portuguese figure that is better at communicating in North African language than a native-born Saharan prince is.

The surprise expressed by the narrator at the comprehensibility of corporeal and linguistic African-ness is surpassed by a corresponding astonishment at the incomprehensibility that Zurara

finds in some of the Portuguese men that he describes in his text. A man named Joham Fernandez, who chooses to stay behind in Africa, particularly fascinates the narrator:

E assy se tornarom sem mais fazer, senom que trouverom huñ Mouro velho, que per sua voontade quiz viir veer o Infante, do qual recebeo muyta mercee, Segundo sua pessoa, e depois o mandou tornar pera sua terra. Mas *nom me spanto tanto* da viinda daquesta, *como de huñ seudeiro* que hya com Antam Gonçalvez, que se chamava Joham Fernandez, que de sua voontade lhe prouve ficar em aquella terra, soamente polla veer, e trazer novas ao Infante, quando quer que se acertasse de tornar. (151-152)

The comparison and kinship between the two figures described in this passage is emphasized by the repetition of the idea of their shared, impenetrable “voontades.” Thus, the supposedly omniscient narrative voice is doubly confounded from both directions—on the one hand, by an old Muslim who wishes of his own volition to pay homage to the Portuguese *Infante*; on the other, by a sailor who, rather than seeking to extract and purloin information from captured African bodies, instead chooses to engage in his own version of embedded reconnaissance.

If the Muslim is the more comprehensible of the two, it is because of his susceptibility to being pigeon-holed as a “bom mouro,” like the African slaves patronizingly described earlier by the narrator that forget about Africa as soon as they begin to see the “advantage of living in Portugal, are loyal and obedient servants, are disinclined to lechery, and are fond of clothing (85). It should be noted, however, that the figure of the old Muslim cannot be entirely reduced to this reading, as the *Infante* sees fit to “o mandou tornar pera sua terra,” rather than allowing him to remain on Portuguese soil. Though similar to the “good” Muslim slaves, the old Muslim is still an uneasily liminal and disruptive character, perhaps because he does not behave like his

compatriots in resisting being removed from African soil, and moreover demonstrates a clearly voluntary and willful agency.

If the old Muslim eludes a facile classification, the figure of Fernandez even more forcefully disrupts Zurara's expectations for the categorical legibility of his compatriots, and literally renders the narrator mute with astonishment: "*E que direy eu de huñ homem, que naquella terra nunca for a, quanto em ella estevesse, nem alguñ outro homem que elle conhecesse, nem ouvisse, e querer assy ficar antre hũa gente pouco menos de salvajem, cujas manhas nem condiçoo~es nom sabya!*" (162, my emphasis). The helplessly emphatic "*que direy eu*"—"What shall *I* say?"—brings into stark light the fictitiousness of Zurara as an omniscient narrator, and consequently undermines the eminently legible and authoritative history that he seeks to create.

Fernandez defiantly thwarts narrative definition, and contaminates with similar inscrutibility the Muslims that come into contact with him: "*Se me ante maravilhava do padecimento de Joham Fernandez de sua governança, pouco menos me maravilho da afeiçom que lhe os moradores daquella terra tomarom*" (174). Though these people "*choravom com soydoso pensamento*" (174), and remind the reader of the way in which the Muslims of the Lagos and Lisbon slave markets weep helplessly over their subjugation to the Portuguese (133), these tears demonstrate the humanity and rationality of these figures not yet brought under the Portuguese yoke: "*somos todos filhos de Adam, compostos de huñs meesmos ellamentos, e que todos recebemos alma come criaturas razoavees!*" (174). Put simply, the narrator marvels that friendship could spring up between a Portuguese squire and Africans.

The character of Fernandez is baffling not only at the metatextual level, but he also succeeds in perplexing his Portuguese comrades that come to collect him after his seven months

living in Africa. Upon reaching the land where Fernandez has been staying, the ships see a man standing watching them, and one attempts to move closer in order to identify him. Nevertheless, the direction of the wind keeps it from approaching him directly, and Fernandez decides to move along the shore, possibly to get closer to the ships, though the narrator is unsure. The Portuguese on the ships misread this behavior, and rather than discerning the man that they seek, instead identify him as another “good” Muslim:

Joham Fernandez veendo o empacho que a caravella recebya, querendo ir ao longo da ribeira, ou por presumyr que os batees seryam em aquella parte, ou a outra algũa fim, leixousse assy ir hũa pequena peça, onde vyo os batees que viinham em busca de seus navyos, e braando contra aquella parte onde elles viinham, forom os outros muy allegres, pensando que era alguõ Mouro *que se viinha de sua voontade* pera elles [...]. (172)

Not until Fernandez opens his mouth, and identifies himself linguistically and by naming himself, do the sailors recognize him as the compatriot they are charged with rescuing: “pero quando conhecerom sua linguagem, pella qual se nomeou por aquella que era, forom ainda muyto mais ledos” (172). Yet again, language is mobilized as the primary means by which comprehensible cultural proximity is established, rather than by way of any visual cues.

Surprisingly, the misrecognition of Fernandez is primarily accounted for not through recourse to environmental explanations, like those used to explain why Africans are dark-skinned with kinky hair, but rather by imagining the dietary changes Fernandez would have had to undertake in a new land:

Consiiro, diz o autor, qual *serya* stonce a presença daquele nobre scudeiro, sendo criado as vyandas que sabees, scilicet, pam, e vinho, e carne, e outras cousas

arteficiosamente compostas, e vivir sete meses assy, onde nom comya outra cousa senom pescado, e leite de camellas, ca penso que nom ha hy outro gaado, bebendo augua salmaça, e ainda nom em abastança; e estar em terra queente e areosa sem nhũa deleitaçom! (172, my emphasis)

I would like to quickly point out that the presence of the authorial figure is explicitly invoked in the third person, with the phrase “diz o autor,” while his authority is simultaneously undermined by the degree of conjecture and guesswork at play in what that author actually articulates—he considers what *might* have been the appearance of Fernandez, but can make no affirmative statements about what it actually was. Though there is a mention of the inhospitable climate—the “terra queente e areosa”—in which Fernandez has lived for the preceding seven months, that factor in causing the novel and decidedly African flavor of the Portuguese squire’s appearance is quickly passed over in favor of a long passage comparing Fernandez’s toils to religious fasts.

The figure of Fernandez is crucial for understanding the broader relationship of the process of revision to Zurara’s imperial historical project. Fernandez embodies the best of the Portuguese exploratory venture, as Zurara exhorts his readers to notice and emulate: “Esguardaae se quiserdes, sobre o padecimento deste homem, e achalloeos digno de grande exemplo pera qualquer que servindo, quer fazer voontade de seu senhor!” (172-173). Nevertheless, the extreme nature of his heroism makes him an unruly sort of exemplary case, while his long absence from the “doçura dos valles deSpanha [*sic.*]” (172) renders him nearly unrecognizable to the compatriots on whose behalf he was supposed to be acting.

The narrator’s ambivalent relationship to Fernandez parallels the complicated relationship that Portugal had with the men that populated its ships navigating the African coastline, and that later travelled to the Indies. On the one hand, these men—including the poet

Luís de Camões—made possible and executed on the ground the ambitions of the Avis dynasty to expand the Lusitanian empire to the far reaches of the globe. On the other hand, as Barletta notes following Boxer, the consequences of this drain on the population were dramatic and unforeseen. The premature death “por ahogo, enfermidad o en batalla” (“*Uma lança em África*” 73) of a large number of these men created a widely acknowledged crisis in the social order at home—represented, for example, in Gil Vicente’s *Auto da Índia* (1509?). The misrecognition of Fernandez by his comrades in the caravel is comparable to the young wife’s protestation at the end of *Auto da Índia*, in which she proclaims that she no longer loves her husband because the sun has turned him dark. Fernandez embodies the changes wrought on Portugal as a nation as a result of its forays into Africa, and the voice of the narrator, anticipating Constança’s cry of “Jesu, quão negro e tostado! / Não vos quero, não vos quero” (424-425) is uncertain if it likes what it sees.

In conclusion, the *Crónica do descobrimento da Guiné* illustrates a moment of profound uncertainty vis-à-vis Portuguese imperial identity. The Portuguese incursion onto the African continent in 1415, and the subsequent ever southward-moving expansion of its sphere of influence along the African coastline were envisioned as a means by which Portugal could prove its nobility and importance. The narrative generated around this expansion was one that imagined Africa as a proving ground where Portuguese soldiers could earn their knighthood and bring glory and riches back to their homeland, all while seeing strange and magical things in a new land. The exoticism of this story as recounted by Zurara is gradually revised and adjusted, as the wondrous marvels of Africa make way for the mundane banality of recognition and familiarity.

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