

*Assimilation or Dissimulation?:
Leo Africanus's "Geographical Historie
of Africa" and the Parable of Amphibia*

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Introduction:

Early Modern Histories and Postcolonial Theories

A *Geographical Historie of Africa, Written in Arabicke and Italian by Iohn Leo a More, borne in Granada, and brought up in Barbarie*, to cite the title of the English translation made by John Pory at the turn of the seventeenth century, remained the most authoritative rendering of Africa for Europeans from its initial publication in Italian by the humanist geographer Gian Battista Ramusio in the mid-sixteenth century until the late nineteenth century, when an exponentially expanding European imperialism displaced it with a spate of travelogues, mercantile inventories, and ethnographies.¹ As Pory's title indicates, the man who would become known in the Western European tradition as John Leo Africanus was born in Granada, the last bastion of the Islamic polity of al-Andalus conquered in 1492 by the combined forces of the Catholic sovereigns Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile.² His birth name, al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wezzan, identifies him as a Muslim and an Andalusian.³ His birth date has not been firmly established, though it has been narrowed to sometime between 1489 and 1495; that is, either shortly before or shortly after the fall of Granada. As part of the resultant diaspora of Andalusian Muslims, the young al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wezzan fled with his family to the Kingdom of Fez on the northwest corner of the African continent. From Fez, he travelled extensively throughout northern Africa into Egypt; sub-Saharan Africa as far as the renowned city of Timbuktu; the Arabian Peninsula on pilgrimage to Mecca; and

Asia Minor with an important sojourn in Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. While on route from Asia Minor to North Africa in 1520, he was captured by Christian pirates in the Mediterranean and transported to the heart of Western Christendom in Rome. Here he was christened *Johannis Leo de Medicis* after Pope Leo X (formerly *Giovanni de' Medici*), with the nomen "Africanus" added to his Christian name by Ramusio in his edition of 1550. Hence, as Oumelbanine Zhiri stresses, though it is the name by which he is best known in the Western European tradition, "John Leo Africanus" was a name its bearer "never gave himself" (49).⁴ Moreover, as some sources have affirmed, his "conversion" to Christianity in Rome may have been followed by a "reconversion" to Islam in North Africa at the end of his life.⁵

Considering this tangled mass of nomens and toponyms and the layers of reading and rewriting that produced them, I therefore propose to conceptualize Leo Africanus as an "author function" — which Michel Foucault defines as a "classificatory function . . . marking off the edges of the text" (107) — while simultaneously respecting the historical residue of a life in his writings. I submit that Leo Africanus represents a palimpsest of the shifting imperialist relations between Christians and Muslims in early sixteenth-century Europe. Moreover, this palimpsest becomes significantly complicated in early seventeenth-century England, with Leo Africanus's life and writings presenting a primary source for Shakespeare's *Othello*, whose eponymous hero similarly "spoke of most disastrous chances,/ Of moving accidents by flood and field,/ Of hair-breadth scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach,/ Of being taken by the insolent foe/ And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence,/ And portance in my traveller's history" (I.iii.133-38).⁶ Unlike *Othello*, however, Leo Africanus was not a soldier in the service of an exclusively Western Christian European polity, but a scholar grounded in the classical Islamic tradition whose works included a book of Arabic grammar (later expanded to include Hebrew and Latin), a treatise on Arabic prosody, a biographical compendium of illustrious Arabs, and his aforementioned description of Africa.⁷ As a contingent exile from his home in North Africa, and as a permanent exile from his Andalusian homeland, Leo Africanus personally translated the Arabic notes for the latter text

into an Italian manuscript in 1526. After the initial publication of his translation in 1550 by Ramusio, who exercised extensive editorial liberties, subsequent translations were increasingly characterized by misreadings, omissions, and additions.⁸ It is in this context that John Pory, a protégé of the imperialist propagandist Richard Hakluyt, Englished Leo Africanus's description, framing it with layers of introductory apparatus from authorities such as Hakluyt, Ramusio, Abraham Ortelius, Jean Bodin, and Antonius Possevinus to account for what he considered lacunae in the original text.⁹

In Pory's translation, then, the Protestant Englishman corrects and co-opts the Andalusian-cum-Fessian Muslim-cum-Latin Christian Leo Africanus for an increasingly anglocentric discourse of empire. Still the premier authority on Africa for Western Europe, as the introductory apparatus to Pory's translation bears out, Leo Africanus was transformed into a "native informant" whose knowledge was supplemented and then implemented by an increasingly strident English protocolonial power.¹⁰ In this manner, the layered name "Leo Africanus" continued to legitimate a text that had strayed significantly from its point of origin in the observations and experiences of the Andalusian exile to become part of the eurocentric discourse of empire that emerged in the early modern period.¹¹ The trajectory Edward Said outlines in his essay on "Traveling Theory" thus applies almost prototypically to Leo Africanus, whose life and writings similarly moved from "a point of origin," through "a distance transversed," to "a set of conditions" of acceptance and resistance, to the transformation of a theory or idea "by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place" (226-27).¹² It is in this sense that "Leo Africanus" as an author function unifies an emerging eurocentric, and an increasingly anglocentric, discourse of empire describing the regions of Africa that the English at the turn of the seventeenth century were bent on exploiting. At the same time, this author function bears an increasingly tangential relationship to the Andalusian exile at the turn of the sixteenth century whose amphibian-like agency and multiple conversions appear far more complex than the early modern, protocolonial Western European translators of his text would have us believe.

Ironically, this protocolonial co-option of Leo Africanus has been inadvertently perpetuated in a number of postcolonial critiques

— including Christopher Miller’s *Blank Darkness* (1985), Emily Bartels’s “Making More of the Moor” (1990), and Kim Hall’s *Things of Darkness* (1995) — that reify the author function “Leo Africanus” construed in early modern translations of his life and writings such as Pory’s. As I demonstrate below, these highly influential analyses of the early modern discourse of empire reductively cast Leo Africanus as a “converted Moor” along the lines of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, thus limiting him to his history in the heart of Western Christendom and his inscription in the text he wrote for this audience. Significantly, this fallacy extends to Jonathan Burton’s revisionist treatment in “‘A Most Wily Bird’: Leo Africanus, *Othello* and the Trafficking in Difference” (1998), which continues to exhibit an anachronistic eurocentric bias by asserting the binary counter-image of an African “Leo” as opposed to an Europeanized “Leo Africanus,” thus effacing the historical complexity of this figure’s agency. In response to the complementary misrepresentations of Leo Africanus as either wholly Europeanized (hence, to follow the logic emerging in the early modern period, Christianized)¹³ or wholly Africanized (and thus, to follow a corresponding counter-logic, non-Christian), I submit that he may be situated more productively in the interstices of this dichotomy. Following Edward Said’s conceptualization of the postcolonial “cultural amphibian,”¹⁴ I further propose to re-situate Leo Africanus’s literary, cultural, and political agency within the Islamic context of *taqiya* — defined as cultural dissimulation under the pressure of forced assimilation — to argue that he represents the prototypical liminal subject on the cusp of Western European expansionism.¹⁵ In enacting this shift in critical perspective, I thereby participate in the project of “provincializing ‘Europe’” (20, 21) framed by Dipesh Chakrabarty in “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History” (1992),¹⁶ by turning to the history of European territories as provinces of Islamic empires, both bygone (in Western Europe under the Nasrid kings of Granada) and imminent (in Eastern Europe under the Ottoman sultans) rather than by simply reversing the post-1492 dichotomies of (Western Christian) Europe and its (colonial) Others.¹⁷

Postcolonial Critics and the “Converted Moor”

As suggested above, Leo Africanus recently has come under critical attention in connection with Africanist discourse and the Western

literary tradition (Miller, *Blank Darkness*), with respect to the ambivalent rendering of the Moor in English Renaissance drama (Bartels, "Making More of the Moor"), and in the context of the imbricated economies of race, gender, and nation in early modern England (Hall, *Things of Darkness*). Despite the stated allegiance of these critical studies to various postcolonial theories, however, all three persist in emphasizing Leo Africanus's unilateral conversion to Latin Christianity and his corresponding assimilation into the Western European tradition. By casting Leo Africanus as their negative touchstone for an analysis of early modern eurocentrism, therefore, these critical studies inevitably efface the strategic oscillation between assimilation and dissimulation revealed by an alternative analysis that foregrounds the uncertain geographical and historical boundaries of Western Christian Europe at the turn of the sixteenth century.

In his foundational study of Africanist discourse in the francophone tradition, Miller aptly notes that the "importance of the *Description of Africa* [the translated French title for Leo Africanus's text] is that it is located precisely on the cusp between Europe and Islam" (12). Nevertheless, he fallaciously casts Leo Africanus not merely as an assimilated Europeanized Christian, but more so as a "non-Arab" Muslim who held himself above his co-religionists even before his conversion (16). In making this claim, Miller anachronistically imposes modern hierarchies of ethnicity on the modern French translator Alexis Epaulard's comment, "Il n'a eu de véritable aversion que contre les 'Arabes', auxquels il attribuait, comme d'ailleurs l'avait fait Ibn Khaldoun, la ruine de la Berbérie" (X). Miller interprets this statement thus: "On the biographical level, it is known that Leo came from the non-Arab Muslims, who felt themselves to be superior" (16). It is unclear what Miller means here, though perhaps he is assuming al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wezzan (alias Leo Africanus) was descended from the non-Arab Berbers from North Africa who formed the bulk of the conquering forces of Islam in the Iberian peninsula (as Epaulard suggests). Perhaps Miller is implying that he belonged to the class of *Mudéjares*, or non-Arab Christian converts to Islam in al-Andalus and precursors of the Moriscos. In any case, where ethnocentrism persisted in al-Andalus during the period of Islamic hegemony, it

generally took the form of Arab discrimination toward non-Arab Muslims. Such hierarchies, not endorsed by the Islamic belief system but present in realms where Islam was spread by Muslims of Arab descent, resulted in frequent Berber revolts during the first centuries of the Muslim occupation of the Iberian peninsula.¹⁸ Hence, the “aversion” Epaulard indicates alternatively may be read as that of the (Berber) colonized in North Africa toward the (Arab) colonizers. It is also essential to note that “Arab” in classical Arabic generally refers to the nomadic Bedouins, and thus encodes a hierarchy of culture and class for city dwellers such as al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wezzan (and Ibn Khaldun) that cannot accurately be collapsed into anachronistic models of the West and its Others.¹⁹

Only by imposing such an anachronistic binary opposition onto the historical complexities of al-Andalus from the eighth to the fifteenth century, then, can Miller reduce Leo Africanus into a figure for othering the Other: “first of the European over the Arab, but then of the Arab over . . . what?” (16). What follows from this assimilationist trajectory is, Miller concludes, the *Description of Africa*. However, what remains unexplored in Miller’s condemnation of Leo Africanus as an imperialist flunky is the oscillation between assimilation and dissimulation that I argue situates Leo Africanus’s life and writings as a counterpoint to the emerging Western Christian European imperialist project epitomized by the fall of Granada. In this, I profoundly disagree with Miller, who asserts that “this ‘Orient,’ the ‘Arabs,’ is a negative to him, defining the profile of what he is not” (16). Rather, it is the incipient eurocentric discourse of empire that reifies Leo Africanus’s moment of religious and cultural conversion in Rome as definitive. Outside the bounds of Western Christian Europe, however, this conversion may be seen as a strategy of dissimulation in a dangerous situation, or *taqiya*. From within a cultural framework that can account for the practice of *taqiya*, that is, Leo Africanus returns to the Maghreb and to Islam because he never really left it!

Emily Bartels pursues a similar critical fallacy in privileging “Leo Africanus” over “al-Hassan ibn Mohammed al-Wezzan” in her reading of Pory’s 1600 English translation of *A Geographical Historie*. Though she productively complicates conventional “[c]laims

for a precise or intended correlation between Africanus and Othello" (436), she endorses the much more conventional reduction of Leo Africanus to the stereotypical "converted Moor" who abandons his Arabic, African, and Islamic heritage to embrace the Western Christian European imperialist project. Selectively citing the conclusion of the first book of *A Geographical Historie* — which I analyze below within the Islamic context of *taqiya* — Bartels reveals the contradictory impulses in current postcolonial treatments of Leo Africanus when she writes, "By alternately denying allegiance to Grenada and Africa, he effectively undermines his allegiance to both and distances himself from the two places that mark his non-Christian, non-European past" (437). However, by departing from a Western Christian European frame of analysis, Leo Africanus may be viewed more productively as oscillating between various, and often overlapping, allegiances that are not yet determined by the emerging binary opposition between Islam and Europe (his non-Christian past in Granada was, after all, simultaneously European *and* Muslim). The ambivalence Leo Africanus encodes in his life and writings as a strategy for subversive subject formation accordingly becomes in Bartels's analysis an "antipathy" towards his past (437). Only by stressing Leo Africanus's supposedly unilateral conversion to Western European Christianity, therefore, can Bartels equate his text with Richard Hakluyt's collection of frankly imperialist propaganda, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, published in 1589 to catalyze what Hakluyt deemed England's belated efforts at colonizing overseas.²⁰

Also addressing Pory's 1600 edition, Kim Hall perpetuates his model of Leo Africanus as a "converted Moor" in order to cast *A Geographical Historie* as preparatory for subsequent English imperialism in the African continent (28). Like Bartels, Hall is a rigorous reader of the discourse of empire who conscientiously foregrounds the tension between Leo Africanus as a "native informant" and John Pory as his imperialist "translator." She initially specifies the highly mediated construction of *A Geographical Historie* by describing it as "the Africanus/Pory text"; she further qualifies Leo Africanus's assimilated status with the modifier "seeming" (29, 30, 31). Nonetheless, drawing on the critical studies such as Miller's

and Bartels's, she ultimately conflates Leo Africanus's and Pory's descriptions into a monolithic project of "ordering and collecting" information about Africa for European exploitation and expansion (30). She consequently concludes that *A Geographical Historie* provides a map for disciplining Africa to European control, with the spectre of "unruly women" in Leo Africanus's text providing the rationale for launching the Western Christian European imperialist project (32). Unquestionably, Leo Africanus presents sharp cultural discriminations in his description of Africa — the gendered terms of which Hall astutely emphasizes — independent of Pory's specifically protocolonial English Protestant framework. These discriminations nevertheless do not constitute evidence of what Hall calls "Leo's imposition of European values of family and marriage," especially if by this statement she means Western Christian European values (34). Leo Africanus is working squarely within orthodox Islamic traditions in denigrating the cultural mores of non-Christian, non-Islamic peoples. In Hall's analysis, however, he never escapes the stereotype of "the converted Leo" (30).

Jonathan Burton, in "A Most Wily Bird': Leo Africanus, *Othello* and the Trafficking in Difference," perspicuously launches a parallel critique of the limitations of Bartels's and Hall's (mis)representations of Leo Africanus as a uncomplicated precursor of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Bartels, he argues, is typical of a broad cadre of literary critics who carefully mine Leo Africanus's text to support a Self/Other dichotomy dependent on the hierarchical division of West over East and epitomized by the Africanus/*Othello* pairing (44).²¹ Similarly, as Burton stresses, while "Hall treats Africanus quite separate from *Othello*, her understanding of him seems nevertheless informed by the same idea of a conforming alien-insider which holds sway in *Othello* criticism" (45-46). Drawing on Homi Bhabha's postcolonial elaboration of Jacques Derrida's deconstructive notion of "the supplement," Burton persuasively counters the long-standing critical consensus that informs Hall's and Bartels's critical studies (as well as Miller's, as I indicate above, and Jack D'Amico's *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama*, as Burton adds) that "Africanus, unlike *Othello*, reveals the instability of European discourse about difference by undermining many of those anti-African and anti-Islamic shibboleths which, ironically, gain him

admission to the ranks of authoritative European historians" (44). As such, Burton enacts a productive shift away from the reduction of Leo Africanus to the sort of "mimic man" who characterizes colonial accommodation towards the view of Leo Africanus as an icon of postcolonial "hybridity" and his (in)famous text as "a strategic form of textual mimicry" (46, 44).

Nonetheless, Burton's project falters precisely in terms of the laudable parameters it sets for itself: that is, his announced turn away from eurocentric (and, even more narrowly, Shakespeare-centred) interpretive models for considering potentially imperialist cross-cultural encounters ultimately collapses into the dichotomy that divides (Western Christian) Europe from its (colonial) Others. Though he reverses this polarity by privileging the "African" Leo Africanus over the "European" subject position within which the critical consensus has formerly contained him, Burton elides the instability of the dichotomies Europe/Africa — and, more particularly, Europe/Islam — that Leo Africanus signifies. This faulty assumption, which functions as an implicit motif in Burton's essay, is foregrounded most forcefully in the rhetorical question, "Could Africanus have asserted African nobility and European fallibility without the consolation of anti-African prejudice?" (52). Not only is "Africa" a far more heterogeneous geographical and historical entity than Burton concedes here, but in his analysis Burton confirms the eurocentric tendency to fix "Leo Africanus" in Africa as opposed to Europe when his positioning as simultaneously John Leo Africanus and al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wezzan undermines even as it establishes this dichotomy. A similar, and similarly faulty, assessment of Leo Africanus runs, "The placement of a non-European at the head of such a text [Ramusio's collection] speaks to a certain discursive openness" (47). The point, however, is that Leo Africanus as an Andalusian exile *was* a European, as well as an African, a Muslim, and (at least for a time) a Christian. By not addressing the specificity of Leo Africanus's historical and geographical location at the turn of the sixteenth century, which cannot be fixed in terms of the emerging political and ideological dichotomies that took shape as the irreconcilable divisions of nineteenth-century British and French Orientalism, Burton retreats from the challenge he launches against literary

critics like Hall and Bartels who remain caught in the circular logic of the Africanus/Othello pairing. Rather, Burton falls liable to the critique Chakrabarty elaborates against the sort of “asymmetric ignorance” that characterizes metropolitan postcolonial critics’ partial readings of non-Western, third-world texts (2).

What my meta-analysis reveals, then, is that literary critics applying postcolonial theory to a study of early modern culture not only tend to confirm the colonialist model of the assimilationist Leo Africanus when they condemn him as a Christianized (hence Europeanized) mimic man, but that even in challenging this assimilationist model a critic as perspicacious as Burton falls into the complementary fallacy of championing an “Africanized” Leo against his European Others. Both fallacies result from a persistent eurocentricism in postcolonial analyses of early modern texts, one rooted in the anachronisms that mar Said’s *Orientalism* when it posits a transhistorical dichotomy of “Europe” over and above its “Others” from the classical Greek era through the European Renaissance into the height of British and French imperialism during the nineteenth century. I have argued, by contrast, that through his life and writings Leo Africanus signifies the prototypical liminal subject on the borders of Arabic and Italian, Islam and Christianity, Africa and Europe. His status as an Andalusian exile profoundly complicates the dichotomy between Islam and Europe, for he is a European Muslim from the region of al-Andalus that had been part of the House of Islam for almost eight centuries.²² Yet he is also a sign of the widening and hardening gap between Islam and Europe in the Mediterranean regions from 1492 onwards. Hence, his position is not simply one of those “outsiders having a special role to play *inside* Europe” that Edward Said diagnoses in *Orientalism* with reference to Othello (71). Rather, the trajectory of his life and writings suggests those “*voyages in*” that Said delineates in *Culture and Imperialism* as “a still unresolved contradiction or discrepancy within metropolitan culture, which through co-option, dilution, and avoidance partly acknowledges and partly refuses the effort” (244). As Said reflects in the latter study, part of what was “left out of *Orientalism*” was a systemic account of resistance (xii). Negotiating arguably the prototypical voyage into the heart of Western Christian European imperialism, Leo Africanus’s life and writings accordingly chart strategies for protocolonial and

postcolonial resistance that demand a theoretically attentive and historically specific analysis of his strategically ambivalent positioning on both sides of the subsequent orientalist divide between Islam and Europe.

Theorizing Dissimulation as Resistance: The Parable of Amphibia

The alternative framework I propose for re-evaluating Leo Africanus as a figure of protocolonial (and potentially postcolonial) resistance derives from the primarily Shi'a tradition of *taqiya*, or dissimulation, a technique of cultural evasion that Fazlur Rahman in his study of *Islam* notes "was permitted also by orthodoxy [Sunni Islam] and notably by Abu Hanifa, who appealing to the Qur'an, III, 27, allowed a person to confess the contrary of his real belief under an immediate threat to life" (172). Around the time al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wezzan (alias Leo Africanus) was born, al-Andalus constituted a particularly volatile border region between an aggressively assimilationist Western Christian European polity and a historically pluralistic Islamic one. An anonymous *qasida*, or ode, directed to the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II (1418-1512) by the beleaguered Muslim community of *Reconquista* Spain, or the Moriscos, records the political and personal cataclysm that ensued for this community following the fall of Granada in 1492.²³ The *qasida* begins with the standard invocation of praise to the Ottoman Sultan, which gradually shifts into a litany of the treachery and persecution faced by the Morisco community, listing the violent unveiling of Muslim women, the coercive marriages of these women to Christian men, and the enforced consumption of pork and other interdicted foods (295). As this litany swells into a lament, the Morisco writer emphasizes the bad faith of the Christian conqueror who "broke the compacts he had deceived us with and converted us to Christianity by force, with harshness and severity," including the burning of Islamic books and Muslim believers (297). The writer particularly complains of the erasure of Morisco personal names by proselytizing Christians: "Our names were changed and given a new form with neither our consent nor our desire. / Therefore, alas, for the exchanging of Muhammad's religion for that of the Christian dogs, the worst of creatures! / Alas for our names when they were exchanged for those of ignorant non-Arabs!" (298). As

James T. Monroe stresses, this change in personal names was crucial since “Morisco society was based on knowledge of Arab tribal genealogies. Once Arab names disappeared, Morisco society was in danger of disintegrating since the social identity of the individual became uncertain” (285, n14).²⁴ In Monroe’s estimation, this forced exchange of names became an erasure that threatened complete assimilation into the dominant culture, though I would add that Leo Africanus’s life and writings offer a far more ambivalent and ultimately resistant accommodation to this layering of name upon name. Leo/Hasan asserts as much in his chapter “Of the Arabians inhabiting the citie of Africa,” where he concludes, “Howbeit the Arabians vsually doe blaze their petigree in daily and triuiall songs; which custome as yet is common both to *vs, and to the people of Barbarie also. For no man there is, be he neuer so base, which will not to his owne name, adde the name of his nation; as for example, Arabian, Barbarian, or such like.” Notably, Pory glosses “vs” [that is “us”] in this passage as “*The Moores of Granada*” (I: 135), though the text leaves the pronoun referent far more ambiguous.²⁵

Given this threat of forced assimilation, the *qasida*’s Morisco composer foregrounds the practice of *taqiya* as a mode of strategic resistance to Western Christian European imperialism: “We have been betrayed and converted to Christianity; our religion has been exchanged for another; we have been oppressed and treated in every shameful way. / Yet under the Prophet Muhammad’s religion we used to oppose the governors of the Cross with our inner intentions” (295-96). According to orthodox Islamic interpreters, these “inner intentions,” or *niya*, constitute the only legitimate justification for outward dissimulation of religion, or *taqiya*, which might otherwise be interpreted as an act of apostasy punishable by death. This disjunction between “inner intentions” and an outward show of conformity formed the basis for a culture of resistance among the Moriscos. As Andrew Hess documents in his history of the sixteenth-century Ibero-African frontier, the systematic practice of *taqiya* in al-Andalus produced a “crypto-Islamic society” that “often used words with double meanings and gestures by which they mocked the Christian religion” (145, 151).²⁶ It is within this cultural framework, then, that I locate strategies of resistance in Leo Africanus’s text, with its historical and geographical oscillation between Africa and Europe, Islam and Christianity.

The possibility that Leo Africanus eventually “reconverted” to Islam upon his return to North Africa accordingly becomes part of a dialectic of assimilation and dissimulation that enables resistance even as it acknowledges the pressure of potential co-optation.

The parable of Amphibia — or the bird “d’un ingenio mirabile” — showcased at the end of the first book of *A Geographical Historie . . . by John Leo* is grounded in Near Eastern collections of folktales such as *Kalila wa Dimna*, which Munther A. Younes notes “is as familiar in Arab culture as Aesop’s fables are in the West” (vii). Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, Robert Brown indicates in a gloss to his edition of *A Geographical Historie* that “[t]he story, which dates from the time ‘when men took the form of animals, and animals spoke like men’, is still told by professional story-tellers in the market places of Morocco, whose tales constitute such a wealth of ungathered Arabic and Berber folk-lore” (I: 224, n 96).²⁷ By contrast, Jonathan Burton likens this parable to “Aesop’s fable of the bat” (53), well-known to English readers from the Renaissance onwards. Despite Burton’s laudable emphasis on Aesop’s tales as “a sort of crossroads of European and African culture” (53), however, such familiar analogues propel critics into the pattern of “asymmetric ignorance” critiqued by Chakrabarty (2). Rather, we should turn to the cultural productions of the Maghreb and al-Andalus, such as the aforementioned *qasida*, to fully explicate this parable. Leo Africanus’s resonant cultural amphibian, that is, represents a historically and geographically specific instance of strategic dissimulation in response to the pressures of Western Christian European assimilation that first must be situated within the Islamic context of *taqiya*.

Introducing this parable with a chapter titled “What vices the foresaid Africans are subiect unto” (I: 185), Leo Africanus establishes his ambivalent attitude towards his subject matter by stressing his multiple and often conflicting allegiances. Hence, although he begins with the seemingly balanced claim, “Neuer was there any people or nation so perfectly endued with vertue, but that they had their contrarie faults and blemishes” (I: 185), he simultaneously conveys an awareness that his measured assessment of the pros and cons of various African peoples will be used against them and, by extension, against him. Notably, this strategic ambivalence becomes subject to just such a colonialist erasure by the turn of

the seventeenth century, as when “[w]hat Pory translates ‘tawnie Moores’, with deliberate disregard of Leo’s text, and Florianus ‘Subfusci’, is, in the original [that is, in the original *Italian* edition], ‘Affricani bianchi’ (white Africans), and ‘I Bianchi dell’ Affrica’ (the whites of Africa), that is, the Berbers, to distinguish them from the Negroes.” As Brown continues, “[t]he word ‘Moor’, as used by Pory and by all the writers of his time, and, indeed, subsequently, in a very loose way, is almost equivalent to Mohammedan. Leo never calls the Arabs ‘Africans’, they being immigrants from Arabia into Africa, though no doubt well known as individual settlers and traders long before they invaded Barbary in A.H. 27 (A.D. 647)” (I: 205, n13). Nonetheless, as Anthony Barthelemy stresses in *Black Face, Maligned Race*, by the turn of the seventeenth-century the term “Moor became synonymous with *black African*” in English culture (1), and thereby became invested not only with residual medieval prejudices about blackness but with an increasingly hegemonic early modern racism against blacks.

Given this shift in material and symbolic economies, then, it may be that Pory could no longer conceptualize a “white” African, who could be likened to the “white” English, and thus translated “bianchi” as “tawny.”²⁸ It is in this context, moreover, that Leo Africanus’s carefully hedged evaluation of “the Negroes” was used to buttress Western Christian European imperialism and the institution of racial slavery that was its concomitant (I: 187).²⁹ It is significant, therefore, that precisely at this point in his narrative Leo Africanus asserts his strategic, and arguably resistant, ambivalence with the disclaimer, “Neither am I ignorant, how much mine owne credit is impeached, when I my selfe write so homely of Africa, vnto which countrie I stand indebted both for my birth, and also for the best part of my education” (I: 187). As Brown indicates, “my birth” (in the original Italian edition, *mia nudra*) is best translated as “my nursing” (I: 224, n95). Again, Pory may have found a Muslim whose origins lay in Europe (that is, Islamic Spain) too close for comfort, and therefore erroneously lodged his subject’s birthplace in Africa. The subsequent parable of Amphibia nevertheless continues Leo Africanus’s challenge to colonialist (and, potentially, postcolonialist) interpretations that attempt to fix him on either side of an orientalist divide still not consolidated at the turn of the sixteenth century.

As a highly allegorical rendering of cultural dissimulation, the parable begins by establishing a set of cultural coordinates that invite the reader to suspend disbelief even as they suggest more worldly correspondences: "There was vpon a time a most wily bird, so indued by nature, that she could liue as well with the fishes of the sea, as with the fowles of the aire; wherefore she was rightly called Amphibia" (I: 189). The parable continues by elaborating the political exigencies forcing this double consciousness:

This bird being summoned before the king of birds to pay her yeerely tribute, determined foorthwith to change her element, and to delude the king; and so flying out of the aire, she drencht herselfe in the Ocean sea. Which strange accident the fishes woondring at, came flocking about Amphibia, saluting her, and asking her the cause of her comming. Good fishes (quoth the bird) know you not, that all things are turned so vpside downe, that we wot not how to liue securely in the aire? Our tyrannicall king (what furie haunts him, I know not) commanded me to be cruelly put to death, whereas no silly bird respected euer his commodities as I haue done. Which most vnjust edict I no sooner heard of, but presently (gentle fishes) I came to you for refuge.
(I: 189)

As soon as she delivers this appeal, however, Amphibia enacts a literal *volte-face*, returning to her life as a bird to avoid paying tribute to the king of the fishes. Amphibia's rationale for her departure similarly involves a highly ambivalent rendering of the dialectic of assimilation and dissimulation, which allows for the possibility of future resistance once she finds herself back in the kingdom of the birds:

Great reason it is (saith the bird) that each man should have his due, and for my part I am contented to do the dutie of a loyall subiect. These words were no sooner spoken, but she suddenly spred her wings, and vp she mounted into the aire. And so this bird, to auoid yeerely exactions and tributes, woulde eftsoones change her element.
(I: 189)

Amphibia thus avoids tribute to both fish and fowl by pledging allegiance to both, living alternately as fowl, then fish, and then fowl (and we may reasonably extrapolate, as fish or fowl again as circumstances dictate). In deploying this distinctive mode of strategic dissimulation, she accordingly prefigures the cultural amphibian that has been identified as the epitome of (post)colonial resistance even as she dramatizes the historical exigency of *taqiya*.

More immediately, the moral of this parable reflects back onto Leo Africanus's own life and writings, though in a characteristically ambivalent way. Ironically, in an attempt to persuade the fish to accept her alien presence, this ingenious bird declares at the pivotal moment in her tale, "and then I may iustly say, that I haue found more friendship among strangers, then euer I did in mine owne natieue countrie" (I: 189). However, she is not defined by a fixed name or place, but by her ability to oscillate between mutually exclusive places: that is, she is a cultural amphibian *avant la lettre*. Correspondingly, critics relying on a Western Christian European framework, including the postcolonial critics of early modern texts I surveyed above, erroneously lodge Leo Africanus in *either* Europe *or* Africa, respectively identified with *either* Christianity *or* Islam. By defining Leo Africanus through such binary oppositions, these critics anachronistically assert an irreconcilable difference between Islam and Europe during an era when Islam was still very much "in" Western Europe (and expanding in Eastern Europe). The nomen "Africanus" imposed on its bearer by this tradition thus enacts its own circular logic even today. His "native country," however, is not simply and monolithically either Africa or Europe, but an explicit oscillation between North Africa and Islamic Spain, an oscillation implicitly triangulated with the specifically Western Christian European scene of his writing and translation. He accordingly concludes his self-reflexive parable of Amphibia by deferring closure of the story and of his subject position: "Out of this fable I will inferre no other morall, but that all men doe most affect that place, where they finde least damage and inconuenience. For mine owne part, when I heare the Africans euill spoken of, I will affirme my selfe to be one of Granada: and when I perceiue the nation of Granada to be discommended, then I will professe my self to be an African" (I: 189-90). In sum, by raising the principle of *taqiya* into a program of resistance to Western Christian European depredations against Islam and Africans, Leo Africanus subversively challenges the expulsion of Islam from Europe by thematizing his own complex subject position.

Significantly, in yet another enactment of the strategies — and exigencies — of the cultural amphibian, Leo Africanus towards the end of his extended description of Africa further reverses, and

subsequently defers, his ambivalent relationship to the unstable political and social locations that define him as an Andalusian exile when he writes:

But if it shall please god to vouchsafe me longer life, I purpose to describe all the regions of Asia which I haue trauelled; to wit Arabia deserta, Arabia felix, Arabia Petrea, the Asian part of Egypt, Armenia, and some part of Tartaria; all which countries I saw and passed through in the time of my youth. Likewise I will set downe my last voiajes from Fez to Constantinople, from Constantinople to Egypt, and from thence into Italie, in which Journey I saw diuers and sundry Islands. All which my trauels I meane (by Gods assistance) being returned forth of Europe into mine owne countrie, particularly to describe; decyphering first the regions of Europe and Asia I haue seen, and thereunto annexing this my discourse of Africa; to the end that I may promote the endeouours of such as are desirous to know the state of forren countries. (III: 904-5)

With this provisional conclusion, Leo Africanus further allows for the oscillation between geography and history as part of a strategic practice of dissimulation, or *taqiya*, by neither simply acceding to his forced assimilation into the Other nor relapsing into rigid oppositions of Self and Other. When considered within the cultural framework of *taqiya*, the parable of Amphibia concluding the first book of the extended description of Africa consequently articulates a mode of resistance that anticipates the postcolonial model of the cultural amphibian even as it enables subsequent co-optation by the protocolonial powers of Western Christian Europe. As such, it productively adumbrates ongoing debates in postcolonial studies of early modern texts by complicating the subsequent imperialist and orientalist dichotomies that depend on the exclusion of Islam from Europe.³⁰

NOTES

- 1 Comprehensive lists of the translations and editions of Leo Africanus's text may be found in Massignon, 4-9, and Zhiri, 227-28. An important addition to these lists is Luther Jones's Afrocentric edition of *The Geographical History of Africa*. Unless otherwise indicated, I shall draw from the standard Hakluyt edition when quoting Leo Africanus's text.
- 2 Sources for Leo Africanus's life and writings include Brown, Massignon, and Zhiri. Also see the entry for "Leo Africanus" in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. Bosworth, et al. Sources for Andalusian history include Baroja, Chejne, Fletcher, Lea, O'Callaghan, and Watt and Cachia. Leo Africanus covers the conquest of the Iberian peninsula by Muslim forces in 711 to its "reconquest" with the fall of Granada in 1492 in "His Third Booke of the Historie of Africa," II: 507-515.

- 3 In his Introduction to *Description de l'Afrique*, Epaulard usefully unpacks the name "el-Hasan ben Mohammed el-Wezzan *ex-Zayati*" (VII). Also see Brown, who details Leo Africanus's various Romance language and Arabic names before and after his Christianization (i-ii).
- 4 The full passage from Zhiri runs:
 Dans leurs commentaires ou leurs aperçus biographiques, ils hésitant quand il s'agit de fixer à Léon une origine nationale. Est-il arabe, andalou, espagnol, 'Maure'? Chacun tranche comme il l'entend. Mais finalement une tendance l'a emporté, celle qui a conduit à lui attribuer le nom sous lequel nous le connaissons, et qu'il ne s'est jamais donné lui-même: Jean Léon l'Africain. (49)
 Significantly, as Massignon documents, in his only surviving European manuscript Leo Africanus used Arabic script to sign himself "Yuhanna al-Asad al-Ghar-nati" (10) : an Arabization of "John Leo of Granada."
- 5 Massignon makes this point in his ethnographic study (34), and Maalouf dramatizes it in his imaginary autobiography ("autobiographie imaginaire"). I treat Maalouf's *Leo Africanus* at greater length in my forthcoming article, "The Ghost of Leo Africanus from the English to the Irish Renaissance," *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval through Modern*, ed. Patricia Clare Ingram and Michelle R. Warren (Palgrave).
- 6 The connection between Othello and Leo Africanus has been frequently proposed, most notably by Braxton, Johnson, Jones, Levin, and Whitney.
- 7 Massignon follows his extensive survey of the first editions in Italian, French, Latin, English, and German of Leo Africanus's immensely popular description of Africa with a suggestive list of Leo Africanus's other works (4-10).
- 8 Zhiri details the omissions, additions, and mistranslations made to Leo Africanus's Italian manuscript as it was published in the major Western European languages of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including Latin (54-83).
- 9 Powell's biography usefully situates Pory within English protocolonial concerns in Asia Minor and the Middle East (not fully realized until the nineteenth century) and the Americas (entrenched by the late seventeenth century).
- 10 See Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*, for a useful corrective to anachronistic assumptions that the English during the early seventeenth century were a fully fledged colonial power. Rather, as Matar stresses, "[h]istorians and critics who have inaccurately applied a postcolonial theory to a precolonial period in British history forget that in the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods, England was not a colonial power — not in the imperial sense that followed in the eighteenth century. Although England had colonized Wales and Scotland and was waging a colonial war in Ireland, at the time Queen Elizabeth died [1603], England did not yet possess a single colonial inch in the Americas" (10).
- 11 See Cohen for an astute assessment of "The Discourse of Empire in the Renaissance." Pagden's study provides a broad context for this discourse. Also see Kerrigan and Braden's exemplary discussion of the classical Roman precedents for this mode of early modern imperialism (5-10).
- 12 The special issue of *Inscriptions* devoted to "Traveling Theories: Traveling Theorists," edited by Clifford and Dhareshwar, productively explores the implications of Said's essay for anthropological and cultural studies.
- 13 See Hay, who traces this logic from the classical Greek and Roman era into the late eighteenth-century Western European tradition.
- 14 Said conceptualizes this amphibious mode in "Third-World Intellectuals and Metropolitan Culture," which he later revised as "The Voyage In and the Emergence of Opposition," in *Culture and Imperialism*, 230-61. Also note Aijaz Ahmad's reference to the Saidian "cultural amphibian" in "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said," 210. Notably, Gandhi dwells on Ahmad's "Orientalism and After" in her assessment of "Edward Said and His

Critics," in *Postcolonial Theory*, 64-80, and necessarily so as Ahmad's remains the most prominent critique of Said's postcolonial *oeuvre*. Ahmad's study is itself challenged in a special issue of *Public Culture*, which concludes with "A Response" by Ahmad.

- 15 For an expanded definition of *taqiya*, see Rahman, 172-74. Also see the twelfth-century jurist al-Ghazzali's *fatwa* (or authoritative legal opinion) on the practice of *taqiya*, esp. 271. As Chejne notes in *Muslim Spain*, al-Ghaz[z]ali is considered "the greatest theologian of Islam" (78).
- 16 Loomba foregrounds "Chakrabarty's declared project . . . to return the gaze by 'provincializing Europe'" in her Introduction to *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, 18. Loomba cites, and slightly modifies, Chakrabarty 20, 23.
- 17 The limits of Islamic imperialist incursions into Europe during the medieval and early modern era include the battle of Tours and Poitiers in southern France in 732, the shores of southern Italy in 1480-81, and the gates of Vienna in 1529 and 1683. These decisive moments for Islamic imperial expansion in Europe are detailed in Hess, *The Forgotten Frontier*, Itzkowitz, and Watt and Cachia. During the early modern era, the Ottoman Empire nevertheless held sway in the Mediterranean, with corsairs from the Ottoman Empire and the North African principalities allied with the Ottomans attacking regions as far north as Ireland and Iceland. For the activities of Islamic corsairs in the regions of Northern Europe, including the British Isles, see Lewis, "Corsairs in Iceland," in *Islam in History*, 239-45; Matar, *Islam in Britain*; and Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*, especially his chapter on "Soldiers, Pirates, Traders, and Captives: Britons Among the Muslims" (43-82). For the intersection of Ottoman imperialism and that of the Spanish *conquistadores* in the early sixteenth century, see Andrea, "Columbus in Istanbul."
- 18 Chejne thoroughly documents the tensions that Arab discrimination towards non-Arabs produced in his *Muslim Spain*, especially "The Conquest of Spain and the Emirate" (3-30) and "Social Structure and Socio-Religious Tensions" (110-32).
- 19 On Ibn Khaldun, see Lacoste. Ibn Khaldun's fourteenth-century *al-Muqaddima* exerted a significant influence on Leo Africanus's sixteenth-century study.
- 20 A second, much expanded edition of *The Principal Navigations* was published in the years 1598, 1599, and 1600 (subsequently reissued by the Hakluyt Society in 1903). Bartels provides a more nuanced analysis of Hakluyt's project in "Imperialist Beginnings: Richard Hakluyt and the Construction of Africa."
- 21 Cf. Said's influential enunciation of the West/ East dichotomy in *Orientalism* (1978; rpt. 1979). Lowe provides an extensive critique, and corrective, to this tendency in *Critical Terrains*. Also see Andrea, "Columbus in Istanbul," 135-40.
- 22 *Adb-al-islam* (or the "House of Islam," which indicates a polity under Islamic rule, as well as the broader sense of peace, security, soundness, submission, and so on) contrasts with *adb-al-harb* (or the "House of War," which indicates all realms outside Islamic rule). This dichotomy, then, is not equivalent to the eurocentric model of West versus East, or Occident versus Orient, but is simultaneously far more general and specific, lodged both in the shifting political lineaments of Islamic rule and in the personal integrity of the Muslim believer. Lewis applies this distinction to the dilemma, in his words, "Behind the Rushdie Affair," in *Islam in History*, 361-74. The parallels of this dilemma with the Moriscos' case, and Leo Africanus's, after the fall of Granada are resonant.
- 23 Monroe provides the full *qasida*, along with an English translation, in "A Curious Morisco Appeal to the Ottoman Empire." Also see Temimi, who notes that the Andalusian Muslims addressed similar letters of appeal to North African kings and corsairs.
- 24 Monroe draws on Baroja's social history of the Moriscos.

- 25 See Natalie Zemon Davis's forthcoming study for the descriptor "Leo/ Hasan."
- 26 Also see Hess, "The Moriscos: an Ottoman Fifth Column in Sixteenth-Century Spain."
- 27 For a recent survey of such folklore, see el-Shamy. For a tempering of some of Brown's geographical and historical claims, see Massignon (8).
- 28 See Hall's Introduction to *Things of Darkness*, for an astute analysis of the increasing racialization of the English nation as "white" during the early modern period (1-24).
- 29 For the material economy of racial slavery that emerged in the early modern period, and the symbolic economy of racialization that buttressed it, see Drake's chapter on "The Evolution of Racial Slavery" in *Black Folk Here and There* (2: 227-89).
- 30 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the *Renaissance Society of America's* annual conference. Many thanks to Timothy Billings for his rigorous response to this presentation. Thanks also to Cynthia Klekar for her assistance in collecting materials for this article.

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