

# *The Indians Who Came from Ophir: Prophecy and Natural History in Early Modern Brazil*

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## EARLY MODERN IBERIAN NATURAL HISTORY

Some authors have claimed that Iberian naturalists paved the way to the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century by radically increasing and revising European knowledge about nature in their explorations of the New World. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra claimed, for instance, that Spanish colonizers wrote “path-breaking” accounts of marvels, trying to modify early modern “dominant narratives” of natural history.<sup>1</sup>

The main thrust of Cañizares-Esguerra’s argument is that although Iberian naturalists shared with other Europeans of the time beliefs in demons, witchcraft, and the Apocalypse, they nonetheless strove to subsume the phenomena they found in the New World under the range of what they considered to be naturally possible. The natural history presented by authors such as José de Acosta (1540–1600) would bear witness to “an effort to deny the devil any agency *over the structure* of the natural world.” Acosta and his peers contended that demons wouldn’t actually be able to produce “any effect that goes beyond the limit of natural action.”<sup>2</sup>

But this was not innovative at all. This was actually the current view of most early modern naturalists and demonologists in Europe and can be traced back to Thomas Aquinas’s thought,

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, and Nation: Explorations of the History of Science in the Iberian World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550–1700* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 120, 128, italics added.



as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> According to the Italian Dominican friar and doctor of the church, every created being is subject to the order established by God in nature. It is a dogma of the church that angels and demons cannot work outside the natural order unless they are working by the power of God to produce miracles, which are rare and exceptional.<sup>4</sup>

To deny the devil any agency over the structure of the natural world wasn't anything new. I argue accordingly that the main cosmological views and methodological procedures of Thomism and older traditions were not really challenged by Iberian naturalists in the same way they were indeed challenged by experimental natural philosophers such as Robert Boyle, who inaugurated an unprecedented style of thinking. I don't deny, however, that Iberian naturalists helped to increase and revise European knowledge about the natural world. They did, but on the whole their approach was not experimental, and their real concerns went much beyond the advancement of empirical knowledge.

The discussion developed here, focusing on just one theory of a single author and much more restricted in scope than my previous work, reinforces the idea that Iberian naturalists working in places such as Brazil in the early modern period should not be taken as forerunners of modern scientists. While people gathering around the Royal Society of London "insisted upon the foundational status of experimentally produced matters of fact" sustaining their theories,<sup>5</sup> Brandão and his peers did not shy away from grounding their views in highly speculative and much more obscure evidence, which they called *signs*. I believe this point is of paramount importance. Without paying due attention to it, we won't be able to understand the meaning of "experience" to the early modern Portuguese when they say, for instance, that experience is "the mother of all things."<sup>6</sup> I strongly suspect that in several—if not all—cases what they have in mind is much more related to literary and mystical traditions typical of the Renaissance (and with roots in the medieval period) than to the experimental scientific traditions that started to emerge only after the seventeenth century in countries such as England.

## THE AUTHOR OF THE *DIÁLOGOS*

We know that Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão arrived in Brazil in 1583. He remained there until 1618, living in the northeast administrative divisions of Pernambuco, Paraíba, and Itamaracá and occasionally traveling to Portugal. He was the owner of a large estate for sugar production and also the authority responsible "for collecting the taxes on sugar production in the whole administrative division of Pernambuco."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Alessandro Zir, *Luso-Brazilian Encounters of the Sixteenth-Century: A Styles of Thinking Approach* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2011), 10–11.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Opera Omnia: Tomus Decimus Quartus; Summa contra Gentiles, Liber Tertius* (Rome: Typis Riccardi Garroni, 1926), 3.103.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life, Including a Translation of Thomas Hobbes, "Dialogus physicus de natura aeris" by Simon Schaffer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 39.

<sup>6</sup> The adage is from Duarte Pacheco's *Esmeraldo de situ orbis*, a sixteenth-century classic of Portuguese travel literature. Most scholars interpret Pacheco's "experience" in a merely empirical way. As an example, see Francisco Contente Domingues, "Science and Technology in Portuguese Navigation: The Idea of Experience in the Sixteenth Century," in *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion, 1400–1800*, ed. Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo R. Curto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 463.

<sup>7</sup> This fact was established by the modern Portuguese historian Jaime Cortesão (1884–1960). See João Capistrano de Abreu's introduction to Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão, *Diálogos das grandezas do Brasil* (1618; Rio de Janeiro: Dois Mundos Editora, 1960), 9.

Brandão was also a “New Christian”—that is, a Jew who had converted to Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Despite all the conflicts in the Iberian Peninsula during the periods of the Moslem invasion and the Christian Reconquista, Jews, Moslems, and Christians were able to coexist relatively peacefully for centuries. However, after the end of the fifteenth century, when the dominion of the Christians extended over the whole region, the status of the Jews and Moslems became more problematic. Many were expelled and the others were forced to convert.<sup>9</sup> This occurred before the process of overseas expansion began and determined beforehand the life of the people in the Portuguese and Spanish colonies.<sup>10</sup>

Eva Alexandra Uchmany, who studied the life of the Portuguese New Christians living a century later (from 1580 to 1606, when the overseas expansion was already consolidated), says that “the vast majority of these New Christians were crypto-Jews.”<sup>11</sup> That is, they secretly maintained many of their religious traditional beliefs and practices. And indeed, it is known that in 1591 a priest denounced Brandão together with a friend to the Inquisition in Brazil. According to the priest, Brandão and his friend worked on Sundays and frequented a “synagogue.” The friend in question has also been recognized as the main inspiration for one of the two characters in Brandão’s dialogue. Brandão himself was the inspiration for the other.<sup>12</sup>

### AMERICAN INDIANS AND JEWS: A COMMON ANCESTRY

Brandão’s *Diálogos das grandezas do Brasil* (*Dialogues of the Great Things of Brazil*) characterizes Brazil as the “plaza,” “the marketplace of the world.” Brazil would have attracted, at a certain point in its early colonial history, part of the nobility of Portugal,

who married there and became related by kinship to the inhabitants of the land, so that the noblest blood circulated among everyone. And since in Brazil different kinds of people come from many regions in order to trade, the original inhabitants of the land (with whom everyone trades and who are generally endowed with many skills, because they benefit from the nature of the climate and the favorable sky)—the original inhabitants of the land take from the foreigners everything they estimate as valuable, and with this they accrue excellent savings on which they can rely when necessary.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See the notes of Rodolfo Garcia in Brandão, *Diálogos*, 35–36.

<sup>9</sup> See Francisco Bethencourt, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 138–51; Francisco Bethencourt, “Rejeições e polémicas,” in *História religiosa de Portugal*, vol. 2, *Humanismos e reformas*, ed. C. M. Azevedo (Lisbon: Circulo-Leitores, 2000), 49; Lyle N. McAlister, *Spain and Portugal in the New World, 1492–1700* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 3–7; and António Henrique de Oliveira Marques, *History of Portugal*, vol. 1, *From Lusitania to Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 73–74.

<sup>10</sup> See Francisco Bethencourt, “Political Configurations and Local Powers,” in Bethencourt and Curto, *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion*, 246–47.

<sup>11</sup> Eva A. Uchmany, *La vida entre el judaísmo y el cristianismo en la Nueva España, 1580–1606* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Brandão, *Diálogos*, 35–36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 155. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are my own. I have tried to preserve the awkwardness of the syntax of these early modern Portuguese descriptions. As I have said elsewhere, these were frequently “constructed through the accretions of characteristics, in a way that the parts paratactically overwhelm the whole, blocking the emergence of a systematic and coherent unity” (Zir, *Luso-Brazilian Encounters*, 45).

These original inhabitants, the aboriginal people of Brazil—whom Brandão depicts as provident and skillful traders, actively engaging in business with the colonizers—are the same people whose origin he investigates in relation to the Old Testament’s history of the Jews. The Brazilian Indians are the descendants of an ancient tribe sent by King Solomon to the celebrated land of Ophir in order to fetch wood for the construction of the Temple of God.

The debate about the origin of the American Indians was prominent among early modern authors concerned with the discovery of the New World, and not only among them. Even Paracelsus was acquainted with the issue and, in his *Astronomia Magna*, entertained the idea that “the inhabitants of the New World were not necessarily descended from the Adam of Genesis.”<sup>14</sup> Gregorio García’s *Origen de los indios del Nuevo Mundo e Indias Occidentales* (On the origin of the Indians of the New World and West Indies) is a huge treatise covering the many theories that were available at the time on the subject. It was published in Spain in 1607, about ten years earlier than Brandão’s book. Both authors relate the American Indians to the Jews, and unlike Paracelsus they don’t defend preadamite theories.<sup>15</sup> But for García, the relation was seen as something derisive, as seems to be the case with most of the authors of the period whose opinions he reproduces. For instance, he examines at length many moral defects that would be shared by Indians and Jews, such as fearfulness, ingratitude, and lack of faith.<sup>16</sup>

It seems that this was the predominant position at the time, as remarked recently by Lúcia Helena Costigan. She gives only two examples of early modern authors who viewed the kinship between Indians and Jews from a positive perspective: the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio Vieira (1608–97) and Menasseh ben Israel (a Jew who migrated as a four-year-old child with his family from Portugal to Amsterdam in 1610 and established there the first Hebrew press of the Netherlands).<sup>17</sup> As this essay will show, Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão should be added to this list.

### **A WRITER’S JOB: THE COLLECTION OF SIGNS**

Brandão begins his analysis by admitting the difficulty of the matter he is addressing. The origin of the inhabitants of Africa and Asia could be ascertained by reading the scriptures, which state that “the descendants of Noah” “vie in order to inhabit and colonize the three parts of the World, that is, Asia, Africa, and Europe.”<sup>18</sup> The issue of the origin of the inhabitants of Brazil, in America, was much more controversial, however:

Concerning the people that settled down in the coast of Brazil we have no account [*notícia*] that could be used in order to infer the time of their arrival. . . . the Scriptures give no clue [*rasto*] by which one might infer whether they came crossing the ocean or by the land; and even nowadays

<sup>14</sup> See Allen George Debus, *Man and Nature in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 63.

<sup>15</sup> Other authors in the early modern period who defended preadamite theories—that is, theories that speculate about the existence of human races not descended from Adam—were Sir Walter Raleigh (1554–1618), Thomas Harriot (1560–1621), and, more famously, Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676). See David N. Livingstone, “The Preadamite Theory and the Marriage of Science and Religion,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s., 82, no. 3 (1992): 3–11.

<sup>16</sup> Gregorio García, *Origen de los indios del Nuevo Mundo e Indias Occidentales* (1607; Madrid: Imprenta de Francisco Martínez, 1729), 84–96.

<sup>17</sup> Lúcia Helena Costigan, “Judeus e Cristãos-Novos nos escritos de letrados do Barroco Espanhol e de Antônio Vieira e Menasseh ben Israel,” in *Diálogos da conversão*, ed. L. H. Costigan (Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2005), 123–24.

<sup>18</sup> Brandão, *Diálogos*, 106.

when so much has been discovered, one cannot nose out [*rastejar*] the place through which they might have moved into this other world.<sup>19</sup>

Special attention should be paid to the expression Brandão uses here: *rasto*, which I have translated as “clue” but could have translated as “track,” “trace,” or “indication.” They are all members of a family of concepts among which “symptom” might be included. Moreover, when an argument is found to be convincing, Brandão refers positively to it as something “very apparent.”<sup>20</sup> These are details of paramount importance, for they show how much his style of thinking is preprobabilistic. It is a style typical of those early modern developments in natural history with roots in the medieval low sciences and once studied exhaustively by authors such as Ian Hacking and Barbara Shapiro.<sup>21</sup> In sum, the kind of evidence Brandão considers is neither deductive nor inductive strictly speaking but related to the interpretation of *signaes* (signs) and authoritative knowledge.

This is explicitly shown, for instance, in a passage in which he tells the history of an astrological prediction about Brazil’s discovery and its importance to the Portuguese kingdom:

An old noble [*fidalgo*], very well known in Portugal, . . . told me that he heard his father saying, as something indubitable, that the notice [*nova*] concerning this very great discovery was very much welcomed by the magnanimous king; and that an astrologer, whose authority [*name*] was very respected in Portugal at the time, disclosed a horoscope [*alevantára uma figura*] by calculating the time and hour in which this land was discovered by Pedralvares Cabral, and also the time and hour in which the king received notice of its discovery; the astrologer believed that the newly discovered land would be a wealthy [*opulenta*] province: a hideout and shelter for the Portuguese people: although we should not give credit to this, it is part of the *signs* concerning the [Brazilian] great distinctions that we collect every day.<sup>22</sup>

In part, the skepticism displayed at the end of this passage seems to be evidence of a more modern, critical mentality. But one should be careful here. The very repetition of such a history demanded precaution on Brandão’s part. The prediction refers to Brazil as a hideout, and it is known that astrologers (and physicians) employed by the Iberian kings at the time when Brazil was discovered were mainly Jews forced to convert.<sup>23</sup> Given Brandão’s background as a New Christian, it could have been dangerous for him to endorse the history unreservedly.

And even if Brandão was skeptical in relation to astrology, he was not skeptical in relation to signs themselves. He declares that one “should not give credit” to the astrologer’s history but at the same time affirms the history of the astrologer as “part of the signs concerning the [Brazilian] great distinctions that we collect every day.” Brandão’s job (as a writer) consists precisely in the

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 106–7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 95, 105.

<sup>21</sup> See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 34–58; and Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3, 32–33, 38. See also Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 40–50.

<sup>22</sup> Brandão, *Diálogos*, 48, italics added.

<sup>23</sup> See Luís García-Ballester, “A Marginal Learned Medical World: Jewish, Muslim and Christian Medical Practitioners, and the Use of Arabic Medical Sources in Late Medieval Spain,” in *Practical Medicine from Salerno to the Black Death*, ed. L. García-Ballester et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 367–68.

collection of such signs. He not only narrates but draws them. He carefully reproduces twenty-four “signs” on one page of his book (they are the only drawings in the entire work). They are called “figurative characters concerning future events” and a “secret.” They were revealed to Brandão by a friend as “a novelty and strangeness,” and they make Brandão “wonder.”<sup>24</sup>

The friend discovered the signs while he was chasing some Indians (Petiguares) in a range of steep mountains. The signs were drawn in a cave near a river. Besides the ones reproduced in the book, Brandão describes many other characters that were found in the same cave and gives a detailed account of their overall arrangement. In another passage, he declares that he himself found a cave near a river while he was pursuing the same Indians. In this particular cave, he discovered numerous “large vases” (*alguidares*) that were “well arranged.” Each vase contained “the bones of an entire skeleton with the skull on the top.” “Some people” (not him!) maintained that, when broken, “the vases were always to be found the next day undamaged with all the bones inside.”<sup>25</sup>

Brandão doesn’t relate the discovery of these “characters” and bones to his speculations about the origin of the Brazilian Indians. But both topics are very representative of the literature about the origin of the American Indians in the period: the similarities between the letters of the Hebraic alphabet and Indian drawings; the fact that both Jews and Indians had the habit of building their graves near mountains. In Gregorio García’s treatise there are chapters specifically dedicated to each of these two ideas.<sup>26</sup>

From a modern scientific perspective, Brandão’s description and drawing of the characters seem important because of their empirical value. He is the first known author to register Brazilian rock paintings, which today are famous in the region of Paraíba. And signs indeed have an empirical dimension. Brandão admits that the ones he found in the cave were “artificially made,” with the “help of some human industry.”<sup>27</sup> Also, generally speaking, signs lead the way to technical innovation: “the first inventors” of things such as sugar, paper, and gunpowder “found them crudely [*toscamente*] as some unpolished principle [*principio mal limado*],” which had to be “honed to perfection.”<sup>28</sup> People discovered how to whiten sugar when “a hen untangled [*aclarou*] the secret.” The hen’s feet were “all dirty with clay.” It “flew and alighted by chance” on “a pan filled with sugar.” The result was that “in the place where its footprints became stamped” the sugar whitened, revealing “the whitening secret virtue of clay.”<sup>29</sup>

But this is only one side of the history. By pointing to something else—“future events”—the characters that Brandão found in the cave are also always on the verge of surpassing any empirical meaning attributable to them. They are prophetic. They can’t be handled as matters of fact that are artificially produced under very restricted conditions through the use of technologies such as an air-pump and whose function is to restrict rather than to foster speculative hypotheses about the natural world.<sup>30</sup> Neither should they be equated with what Bruno Latour has called “inscriptions” (or matters of fact coded), through which scientists “oversee and control” and “become

<sup>24</sup> Brandão, *Diálogos*, 60–62.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>26</sup> García, *Origen de los indios*, 43–45, 95–96, 106–9, 117–23, 176–80, 196–200, 218–39.

<sup>27</sup> Brandão, *Diálogos*, 60, 62.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>30</sup> Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, 39, 51–52. See also Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 184.



superior” to the phenomena they deal with.<sup>31</sup> If they are indeed similar to something modern, it would have to be to something like Martin Heidegger’s *existentialia*, which disclose possibilities in a way that is to a great extent “enigmatical,”<sup>32</sup> or to what Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler called an “*arch-trace*,” a technique of “exteriorization” of something that always remains opaque: a *differance*.<sup>33</sup>

More specifically, in relation to Jewish messianism, Maurice Blanchot remarked that for many Jews the Messiah has in a certain sense “already come.” His coming wouldn’t correspond to a “presence.”<sup>34</sup> Traditions such as the Kabbalah (whose origin goes back to the Iberian Peninsula of the Middle Ages) are entangled in practices of writing and interpretation that explore to the utmost the opacity of language.<sup>35</sup> Even if this is not strictly the case with Brandão’s book, one can still feel in its background the weight of those practices, whose influence extended to the Brazilian literature of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

### THE SYSTEM OF COOLING WINDS AND THE LOCATION OF OPHIR

Before Brandão could answer the question about the origin of the Brazilian Indians, he had to face another problem. In his book he wanted to portray Brazil as a temperate land, but this conflicted with Brazil’s location in the so-called torrid zone, a region in which life was considered to be impossible.

Brandão begins to deal with the problem by referring, once again, to astrology: in Brazil, “the heat caused by the sun during the day is tempered by the humidity of the night; Saturn and Diana, which are planets that have a cold quality, are more influential over these regions, in which they communicate by straighter lines.” The main thrust of Brandão’s argument, however, concerns the remarkable impact of a system of cooling winds coming from the sea, which is experienced only by people who live in the land and was accordingly unknown to ancient and medieval authorities. These winds “have a strong effect, cooling the atmosphere” in such a “singular way” that the coast of Brazil could indeed be called “an earthly paradise.”<sup>37</sup>

This distinction, this difference, originating from inside the torrid zone, concerns not only the Brazilian climate and fauna and flora but also the people who had inhabited the land before the arrival of the colonizers. The system of cooling winds coming from the sea can to a certain extent explain why the inhabitants of Guinea and Ethiopia (regions also situated in the torrid zone) have black skin and curly hair (*cabelo retorcido*) while the inhabitants of Brazil are bleached out (*baço*) and have straight hair.<sup>38</sup> The explanation depends, however, on further arguments. At this point, Brandão starts to address the question of the origin of the Brazilian Indians.

<sup>31</sup> Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 65.

<sup>32</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967), §31, p. 148.

<sup>33</sup> See Bernard Stiegler, *La technique et le temps: La faute d’Épiméthée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 159 (cf. 162, 165–66, 172, 183); Jacques Derrida, *Grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 38, 92, 126–31; and Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 1–31.

<sup>34</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L’écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 214–15.

<sup>35</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L’entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 630–31, 633–34. Concerning the development of Kabbalistic traditions in the Iberian Peninsula, see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993), 156ff. For a discussion, see also Zir, *Luso-Brazilian Encounters*, 19.

<sup>36</sup> See Haroldo de Campos, *Metalinguagem and Outras Metas* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1992), 132, 161.

<sup>37</sup> Brandão, *Diálogos*, 96.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

Both Africans and Brazilians are descendants of Noah and Adam. The Africans descend from Ham, who settled in Africa a very long time ago.<sup>39</sup> The physiological characteristics of the Africans are explained by long and continued exposure to the direct incidence of the solar rays in the region, which would not benefit from a system of cooling winds. According to Brandão, contrary to what happens in Brazil, most winds in Africa come from inside the continent and not from the sea. Brandão also takes into account time and the influence of hereditary factors, which makes his explanation minimally sophisticated. He considers that when Africans are brought from the torrid zone to Spain, the color of their skin doesn't change immediately but does so over the next generations. The same thing would happen with the Portuguese who lived in Guinea.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, the Brazilian Indians are bleached out and have straight hair *not only* because of the influence of the cooling winds. There is an additional reason, and here we face a most significant turn in Brandão's argumentation. He believes that Brazilian Indians are more "modern." They would have started to inhabit the land later than the Africans started to inhabit Africa. Brandão now advances his particular theory about Ophir. The place is referred to in the Old Testament, but there is no indication about its precise location. It was where (much later than the colonization of Africa by Ham and his descendants) King Solomon and King Hiram sent people from Israel to fetch gold, silver, and wood for the construction of the Temple of God.

Other authors addressing the issue of the origin of the American Indians speculated about the history. Some of them situate Ophir directly in America (e.g., in Peru).<sup>41</sup> Brandão localizes Ophir on the coast of Africa, on the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>42</sup> The people sent by Solomon and Hiram to fetch material for the construction of the Temple would have navigated to that region, from where it would not have been difficult to reach the coast of Brazil. Brandão believes that this was indeed the destiny of part of the fleet, which became lost during the voyage.

### **WOOD FROM A MAGNIFICENT FOREST TO BUILD THE TEMPLE OF GOD**

All this explanation, which relates the northeast coast of Brazil and its people to Old Testament history, is established by a contrast with the northwest coast of Africa. But the contrast is presented against a background of similarity: both regions are in the torrid zone, and Africans and Brazilians are equally descendants of the Israelite people.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, one can feel the tension through which the explanation is sustained. Just as much as the common ground is extended and encompasses new things, it is also deconstructed. Brandão points out the longevity of the Indians<sup>44</sup> and their knowledge of the stars<sup>45</sup>—characteristics that are easily associated with the Jews and the history of the Old Testament patriarchs. He has, nonetheless, to recognize other

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<sup>39</sup> The idea that Africans descend from Ham goes back to the theories of medieval authors such as Isidore of Seville. See Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 45, 63.

<sup>40</sup> Brandão, *Diálogos*, 101–5. The consideration of both geographical and hereditary factors in the explanation of physiological differences among people is not innovative and can be traced back to the Greeks and Romans. See Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 13, 15.

<sup>41</sup> García, *Origen de los indios*, 16.

<sup>42</sup> Brandão, *Diálogos*, 112.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 113–14.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 115–16.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.



characteristics of the Indians that would have made any association with them controversial and problematic: their cannibalistic rituals, for instance.<sup>46</sup>

The logic implied in the conundrum seems to match what Jean-Luc Nancy says about “monotheism”: it is a “condition of possibility” of many other things, including “atheism.” Unity here “dislocates [*déplace*] . . . divinity,” which is always a kind of *Deus absconditus*, permanently exceeding itself.<sup>47</sup> A certain specific way of handling signs, that is, “writing” (*écriture*), is how “one is exposed to this flight of sense that withdraws from ‘sense’ its meaning, in order to give it the sense of this very flight . . . which flees from flight as much as from presence.”<sup>48</sup> The activity is not exclusive of certain trends in modern literature. On the contrary, it is what connects modern literature to sixteenth-century conceptions of language in terms of signs.<sup>49</sup>

As an example, Nancy mentions the figure of the tree, which is so conspicuous in the monotheistic tradition and which can be transformed into “a unity of profusion.”<sup>50</sup> Brandão opens his book by writing precisely about a tree growing out of a house. The tree began as a simple board in the building’s structure but grew into a tree because of the extraordinary fertility of Brazilian soil. He writes about the great potential of the Brazilian wood for construction.<sup>51</sup> These passages provide food for thought in view of Brandão’s theory relating the ancestors of the Brazilian Indians to the people sent by Solomon to fetch wood for the construction of the Temple of God. One of the caves described by him, the one in which he found “large vases” containing human bones, was surrounded by a forest whose greatness suggested to him “that it was created immediately after the universal flood.”<sup>52</sup>

At the end of the book, the character who represents Brandão’s friend and interlocutor declares that he has been convinced by Brandão’s “preaching” (*pregação*). He would willingly convert to Brandão’s “sect” (*seita*).<sup>53</sup> Concerning the strength of the Jewish stand, the weight of its prophetic implications—whose appeal survives through early modern and modern periods as well—a famous passage from Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* is both accurate and reliable. Nietzsche writes from a perspective far from any commitment to a religious or ethnic cause, but nonetheless he says: “In the Jewish ‘Old Testament,’ the book of the divine justice [*göttlichen Gerechtigkeit*], men, words, and things exist in such a style that it is unsurpassed by anything one could find in Greek and Indian literature.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 287–89.

<sup>47</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *La décloison*, *Déconstruction du christianisme*, vol. 1 (Paris: Galilée, 2005), 36–37.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>49</sup> Several authors defend this thesis. See, e.g., Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 58–59. For a discussion, see also Zir, *Luso-Brazilian Encounters*, 67–71.

<sup>50</sup> Nancy, *La décloison*, 111.

<sup>51</sup> Brandão, *Diálogos*, 170–71.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>54</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Zur Genealogie der Moral* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002), §52. Blanchot (*L’écriture du désastre*, 188–90) refers to this passage. Derrida, on the other hand, has acknowledged his own proximity, at least in terms of “birth,” to Jewish (and Arabic) mystical traditions in negative theology. See Jacques Derrida, “Comment ne pas parler: Dénégations,” in *Psyché: Invention de l’autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), §62n1. Concerning the strength of the Jewish stand, and faith, Hanna Arendt, in a famous letter to Gershom Scholem, tells the following story: “let me tell you of a conversation I had in Israel with a prominent political personality who was defending the—in my opinion disastrous—non-separation of religion and state in Israel. What he said . . . ran something like this: ‘You will understand that, as a Socialist, I, of course, do not believe in God; I believe in the Jewish people.’ I found this a shocking statement and, being

Sebastianism, a messianic tradition whose importance in the early modern and modern history of Portugal and Brazil is well known, owes a great deal to Jewish mysticism.<sup>55</sup> One should note, however, and this should come as no surprise, that what in Brandão's book is referred to as "preaching" also has a very pragmatic thrust. Brandão had a talent for business. What he values most in the tree described at the beginning of his book (the one growing out of a house) is the fluff that is produced inside its fruit. He considers it similar to wool and speculates that it could be used to "fill pillows, cushions, and mattresses." "If weaved," it would provide fabric "for the production of very good hats."<sup>56</sup> He also has an ambitious program for the production of pepper and other spices in the country, the costs of and revenues from which he discusses at length.<sup>57</sup>

For Brandão, only the myopia and lack of curiosity of most of its new residents contradict the great potential of the land.<sup>58</sup> Like many of the works constituting the corpus of the early modern Portuguese colonizers of Brazil, Brandão's book can be considered a veritable treatise on sustainable economy (which the residents of the land have continued to ignore up to the present day, to their own shame and risk). He describes traditional techniques for the growing and processing of rice, corn, and wheat,<sup>59</sup> along with manioc and other native plants that can produce flour, oils, and dyes.<sup>60</sup> He enumerates and describes more than sixty types of fowl, domestic and game,<sup>61</sup> besides fishes and other edible animals. He also mentions medicines.

We can see here that early modern Iberian natural history had a potential to increase and even revise traditional European knowledge about the natural world. It certainly had an empirical weight. The postulation by Brandão of a system of cooling winds is far from being irrational. It doesn't imply the existence of some kind of absolutely incommensurable phenomenon. The system of cooling winds emerges as a difference in a common ground: the torrid zone. It helps one to make sense of other differences, of physiological differences emerging in what would be a common history of the development of human races since time immemorial. Moreover, the postulation is not arbitrary and grounds itself in what one could call empirical evidence, unknown to classical authorities, and which the early modern Portuguese experienced along the northeast coast of Brazil.

too shocked, I did not reply at the time. But I could have answered: the greatness of this people was once that it believed in God, and believed in Him in such a way that its trust and love towards Him was greater than its fear." See Hannah Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 393.

<sup>55</sup> See José Eduardo Franco and José Augusto Mourão, *A influência de Joaquim de Flora em Portugal e na Europa: Estritos de Natália Correia sobre a utopia da idade feminina do Espírito Santo* (Lisbon: Roma Editora, 2005), 110–13; José Hermano Saraiva, *História de Portugal* (Lisbon: Publicações Alfa, 1993), 179–81; Pinharanda Gomes, *História da filosofia portuguesa*, vol. 3, *A filosofia árabe portuguesa* (Lisbon: Guimarães Editores, 1991), 323; and António Quadros, *Poesia e filosofia do mito sebastianista*, vol. 1, *O sebastianismo em Portugal e no Brasil* (Lisbon: Guimarães Editores, 1982), 61, 197–98.

<sup>56</sup> Brandão, *Diálogos*, 38.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–43, 145–48, 152–53. It is known that the persecution of New Christians in Spain and Portugal paradoxically ended by fostering the creation of a "New Christian elite of merchants and bankers... in an international network with links stretching from Amsterdam to Leghorn, Lisbon to Goa, the Cape Verde Islands to Cartagena de Indias and Bahia, Luanda to Rio and Buenos Aires" (Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 151). Brandão doesn't refer to this network, but he would have been aware of its existence even if he was not actively engaged in it.

<sup>58</sup> Brandão, *Diálogos*, 194–95, 249, 271.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 191–94.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 187–89, 201–2, 207–8.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 225–34.

Nevertheless, the system of cooling winds wasn't enough to explain the physiological differences between Brazilians and Africans. And so Brandão appealed to Old Testament history to suggest that Brazilians were more modern and came to inhabit the torrid zone later than Africans. This argument has a fundamental role in Brandão's explanation of the origin of the Brazilian Indians. It is what eventually enabled the connection between Brazilians and Jews. Moreover, for Brandão, life in Brazil, in the torrid zone, was not only possible but prolific. The extraordinary fertility he attributes to the Brazilian land is clearly overstated.

On the one hand, the whole thesis becomes entangled in a further expectation, a promise: the possibility of leaving Europe for Brazil, which turns out to be "more temperate and suitable for the human nature" than any other land.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, the thesis bears the germ of its deconstruction. By relating the Indians to the Jews, one has also to give a place to a barbaric practice *inside* the common human history that would be shared by them: cannibalism. This was not a small issue. Europeans at the time associated cannibalism with the people they found in America and understood it as a sign of their alleged bestiality. This is shown emblematically in the title page of Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1612), in which America is personified with a club and a severed head in her hands, lying down almost naked, below the personifications of Europe, Asia, and Africa.<sup>63</sup>

Both the use of the Old Testament and the issue of cannibalism make one appreciate how much modern Iberian natural history proceeds in a way that is significantly different from the way modern sciences do. The grounds of early modern Iberian natural history are much more elusive and speculative than replicable, experimentally produced matters of fact. In this sense early modern Iberian natural history was open to approaches that exceed the realm of what is generally considered to be strictly scientific. Philosophy of science, however, has been massively influenced by the developments of science itself, and it might have difficulty in dealing with the activities and interests of these naturalists. The mainstream tendency is to appreciate in them only what contributed to the development of modern science. But in this way, one marginalizes what is more characteristic of their experience of the New World and what one could indeed *learn* from them. A

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 94–96.

<sup>63</sup> For an analysis of the illustration, see Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 65–67, 70. A colored version of the engraving can be found in the Digital Image Collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library, accessed January 22, 2015, <http://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/s/753ihl>.