

# Centering the “Pupil of the Eye”: Blackness, Modernity, and the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh

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## *Abstract*

In the late nineteenth century, Bahá’u’lláh likened people of African descent to the “pupil of the eye” through which the “light of the spirit shineth forth.” This essay argues that the “pupil of the eye” metaphor is a deeply consequential, distinguishing feature of the transformative social and spiritual system laid out in Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation. Studying the nexus of capitalism, race, and intellectual history, the essay historicizes Bahá’u’lláh’s elevating metaphor, arguing that it amounts to a forceful refutation of anti-blackness and thus a dismantling of one of modernity’s pivotal ideologies. Ultimately, the essay demonstrates that the unique integrity and coherence of Bahá’u’lláh’s system for the creation of universal unity and justice is especially manifest through analytical contemplation of the “pupil of the eye” metaphor.

## *Résumé*

À la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, Bahá’u’lláh a comparé les personnes d’ascendance africaine à « la pupille de l’œil » par laquelle « la lumière de l’esprit » brille. L’auteur de cet essai soutient que la métaphore de la pupille

de l’œil est un élément profondément conséquent et distinctif du système transformateur social et spirituel énoncé dans les écrits de la Révélation de Bahá’u’lláh. Examinant le lien entre le capitalisme, la race et l’histoire intellectuelle, l’auteur met en contexte historique la métaphore transcendante de Bahá’u’lláh et soutient qu’il s’agit d’une réfutation énergique du racisme anti-noir, et donc d’un démantèlement d’une des idéologies centrales de la modernité. En conclusion, l’auteur démontre que l’intégrité et la cohérence uniques du système de Bahá’u’lláh pour la création de l’unité et de la justice universelles ressortent à la lumière d’une analyse approfondie de la métaphore de la pupille de l’œil.

## *Resumen*

En los años posteriores del siglo diecinueve, Bahá’u’lláh comparó a las personas de descendencia africana a la “pupila del ojo” a través de la cual la “luz del espíritu brilla”. Este ensayo argumenta que la metáfora de la pupila del ojo es una característica profundamente consecencial y distintiva del sistema social y espiritualmente transformativo presentado en la Revelación de Bahá’u’lláh. Estudiando el nexo del capitalismo, la raza y la historia intelectual, el ensayo historiza la metáfora elevadora de Bahá’u’lláh y argumenta que se debe a una refutación contundente de anti-negrura, y por lo tanto desmantela una de las ideologías fundamentales de la modernidad. En última instancia, el ensayo demuestra que la integridad y la coherencia únicas del sistema de Bahá’u’lláh para la creación de la unidad y la justicia universal están especialmente manifiestas a través de la contemplación analítica de la metáfora de la pupila del ojo.

For twenty-first century organizers and intellectuals addressing issues of racial justice, best praxis often involves centering the experiences of those most marginalized by social power relations.<sup>1</sup> This challenging principle demands that any project of social transformation prioritizes the predicaments and perspectives of groups with the least amounts of cultural, social, and economic capital. Prioritizing consideration of such groups is of course antithetical to the mainstream of social thought and shakes the very foundation of hegemonic world order, which is stabilized by systemic *devaluation* of the most marginalized and the least capitalized. And because rhetorical and practical attempts to implement this principle predictably meet strong resistance, those now at the forefront of secular movements for racial justice in the United States and elsewhere are often adamant in their efforts to call attention to the most marginalized people—people who are often black. At first blush this adamancy can appear parochial, even ethnocentric. (Why must *black* lives matter? Why can't *all* lives matter?) However, the logic of advocacy implemented by many of these activists is

1 Bonnie and Clayton Taylor are among those “spiritual activists” who have devoted many years of service to the Bahá'í Faith and, through that living service, have courageously addressed issues of social and racial justice. This essay is “livicated” to the Taylors, to William “Billy” Roberts, and to my radiant parents, Magda and Alan Smith.

ultimately universalist. Angela Davis explains that, in this approach to social action, “universal freedom is an ideal best represented not by those who are already at the pinnacle of racial, gender and class hierarchies but rather by those whose lives are most defined by conditions of unfreedom” (xiv). With racial specificity, Alicia Garza succinctly unpacks the tactical logic of the Black Lives Matter movement that she helped to spark: “When Black people get free, everybody gets free” (“A Herstory”).

The strategies of social transformation offered by these racial justice activists do not perfectly mirror those being implemented by Bahá'ís throughout the world. However, the rationale of these initiatives that foreground the predicament of the most marginal ought to pique the interest of followers and students of the universal project of social and spiritual transformation laid out in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Indeed, the explicit centering of black life called for by some twenty-first century social theorists and activists was anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh's nineteenth-century emphasis on the special spiritual station and capacity of black people. In His global Proclamation, pivoting on the principle of the “Oneness of Mankind,” Bahá'u'lláh accorded “colored people” a particularly hallowed and seemingly cynosural position in the figurative body of humanity.<sup>2</sup>

2 The “pupil of the eye” metaphor first appeared in the letters and talks of ‘Abdu’lBahá in the early decades of the

As most observers of race matters in the Bahá'í Faith know, Bahá'u'lláh declared that black people were appropriately comparable to the “black pupil of the eye” through which the “light of the spirit shineth forth” (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 37).<sup>3</sup> This selection of metaphor, often referred to by Central Figures and Institutions of the Bahá'í Faith, effectively positions blackness at the epicenter of a “bold and universal” world-transformative project that involves nothing less than the “coming twentieth century when “colored people” was a respectable term for those who might today be described as “people of African descent.” With evolving conventions of language, the term “colored people” has fallen out of use and is now evocative of racial and linguistic politics associated with the mid-twentieth century and earlier. In this essay, people of African descent are sometimes referred to as “colored” in order to evoke the era in which the “pupil of the eye” metaphor first appeared. The essay also uses the term of contemporary parlance, “black people,” in reference to the collective that Bahá'u'lláh metaphorized as the “pupil of the eye.”

3 Although 'Abdu'l-Bahá appealed to the “pupil of the eye” metaphor in a variety of contexts, its most notable articulation is found in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, wherein Shoghi Effendi writes, “Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá moreover has said, ‘once compared the colored people to the black pupil of the eye surrounded by the white. In this black pupil is seen the reflection of that which is before it, and through it the light of the spirit shineth forth’” (37).

of age of the entire human race” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 43, 163). Explications by the Universal House of Justice clarify that “Bahá'u'lláh favored the black peoples by making a specific reference to them” through this metaphor (“Letter,” Ridván 153). Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation offers few, if any, analogous designations, which isolate and “favor” a racialized subset of humanity. Thus, this specific reference to black peoples constitutes a noteworthy moment in the “wondrous System” He elaborated in the nineteenth century (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶181).

Explanations of the importance and potential meaning of the “pupil of the eye” reference have been outlined by scholars who primarily have examined 'Abdu'l-Bahá's deployment of the metaphor as a means of building an egalitarian, interracial religious community in North America during the early twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> This essay extends those explorations by proposing a number of interpretive possibilities organized around two interrelated claims. First, by giving black people a principal position in the figurative body of humanity, Bahá'u'lláh's metaphor is reflective of the material reality that black people were among the principal builders of global modernity—a reality that has been obscured in scholarly and lay discourse, but which is becoming increasingly prominent in the work of influential historians. Second, by favoring black people

4 See the important scholarship by Richard Thomas, Christopher Buck, and Bonnie J. Taylor.

through the “pupil of the eye” metaphor, Bahá'u'lláh produced a rupture in racial epistemology of the nineteenth century, one that distinguished the world-transformative project of His Revelation from social reformist movements of the era and was critical to the establishment of the “principle of the Oneness of Mankind—the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 42). Indeed, the special favoring accorded by the “pupil of the eye” metaphor is an indispensable element of a System meant to bring on the Oneness of Mankind in the context of a modern era riven by a *uniquely potent animus* directed at black people. That is to say, the anomalous nature of the metaphor—the fact that Bahá'u'lláh seems to have reserved this exceptional favoring for black people—highlights the particularly virulent role that anti-black ideology has played in the constitution of modern social and philosophical thought, and suggests that anti-blackness is a distinctively ominous impediment to human oneness.

Scholarly engagement with the implications of the “pupil of the eye” metaphor, and its function in the context of modernity, provokes a number of preliminary questions and caveats. To begin, very little is known about the specific circumstances, rhetorical context, or historical moment in which Bahá'u'lláh offered up the metaphor; in His Writings that have been translated into English thus far, the phrase does not appear. However,

‘Abdu'l-Bahá—who was Bahá'u'lláh’s “vicegerent on earth” and the appointed “Interpreter of His mind” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 245)—established that His Father used the metaphor. On that basis, the “pupil of the eye” designation is considered the Word of Bahá'u'lláh, an element of a Divine Revelation unfolded in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

When exactly in the latter half of the nineteenth century did Bahá'u'lláh offer the metaphor? During which period of His ministry? This has not yet been determined. Similarly, it is all but impossible to precisely delimit the human collective that Bahá'u'lláh intended to compare to the pupil of the eye. Who exactly are the “colored people” that Bahá'u'lláh esteems with the metaphor? It may be simply assumed that all people of African descent are honored by the designation—‘Abdu'l-Bahá evoked the metaphor when addressing African Americans; the Universal House of Justice has used it in communications with Bahá'ís on the continent of Africa. But if the spiritual reality of all African-descended people is described by the metaphor, what is it that binds this collectivity together? Is it a morphological, phenotypical similarity—the presence of visually perceptible markers that in certain geographical contexts once signified “coloredness” and now signify “blackness,” markers like melanin-endowed skin, specific hair-textures, or facial features? Or, is it a matter of genotype—does genetic composition determine whether or not one is

properly comparable to “the black pupil of the eye”? If Bahá'u'lláh's metaphor is meant to be understood as the articulation of a metaphysical truth about a certain group of people, these questions are worth considering. The rich body of scholarship that investigates the philosophical complexity of racial and cultural identity illuminates these types of questions, even if it does not answer them. Because “blackness” is a social construction that has no definitive biological reality, it can be difficult to say who is black and who is not, and it is equally difficult to define black culture. What experience or biology is shared by a wealthy black New Yorker with little melanin, a subsistence farmer in never-colonized Ethiopia, and an Afro-Iranian fisherman on the coast of the Persian Gulf? There is no immutable black essence transcending time and space. As Jamaican-British scholar Stuart Hall once put it when considering the slipperiness of black identity, “We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity’” (225). And yet, for several centuries now, blackness as a racial identifier has been deeply consequential in many social environments. As modernity has crept across the globe so too has anti-blackness, an evolving, protean thought regime that works to stigmatize those deemed black, wherever and whenever they have been found. Perhaps, then, what is most important about Bahá'u'lláh's metaphor is not the boundary of the collective that it describes, or the socio-cultural

practices of that collective, but rather the metaphor's absolute refutation of one of the most pernicious constructs of modernity.

If it is difficult to offer up a concrete, static definition of blackness, it is also hard to crisply define the phenomenon of “modernity” that has produced race and blackness. Political scientist Richard Iton furnishes a roughshod description of modernity that is as good as any by describing it as “that bundle of cultural, political, philosophical and technological iterations and reiterations of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution” that has shaped the material world in recent centuries (13). There are some aspects of this “bundle” worth underscoring when considering Bahá'u'lláh's “pupil of the eye” metaphor. One is that although modernity is often (simplistically) linked to the “West,” it has ramified throughout the world. As one scholar of Iranian history puts it, “The cataclysmic revolution of Western modernity has left virtually no part of the globe unaffected” (Vahdat xi). Whether or not Western modernity should be regarded as a cataclysm is not pertinent here; however, according to Iton and many other scholars of race, Western modernity has wrought devastation for some because it has always created “antonymic and problematic others,” groups of people stigmatized as unworthy of social and civic honor and protection (13). Indeed, it can be argued that blackness is nothing more, and nothing less, than the stigma that

modernity has projected onto people deemed to be its most “antonymic and problematic others.” This is not to say that blackness is always and everywhere a stigma, or that those who embrace black identity are embracing stigma—rather that, in the context of now-global modernity, blackness is inextricably bound to its origin as a racial classification meant to facilitate the exclusion of “others” from the protected community. Whatever else blackness may be, in the period since the emergence of modernity it has also been an antonym of the sacred community, the sign of the excluded “other.” Through the “pupil of the eye” metaphor, Bahá'u'lláh wrestles with and radically transforms the meaning of a major symbol of modernity. If modernity conjured blackness to fragment humanity and marginalize those bearing its mark, Bahá'u'lláh's metaphor alters the meaning of blackness, drawing it to the center of the body of humanity.

#### THE INSTRUMENTAL AND INSTRUCTIVE PURPOSES OF THE METAPHOR

For the most part, scholars have figured the “pupil of the eye” reference as a refutation of chauvinisms as well as a means by which Bahá'u'lláh conferred “new racial identity” to black people and furnished an “effective psychological antidote to the prevailing racial stereotypes” (Thomas 46; Buck 2). This is surely an important social function of a scriptural metaphor that imbues its *tenor*—black people—with

the qualities of its *vehicle*—the pupil of the eye—and consequently brings honor and esteem to a segment of humanity that was subject to some of the most dishonoring and stigmatizing discourses of modernity. However, before tracing out some of the implications of the purely instrumental purposes of Bahá'u'lláh's nineteenth-century metaphor, which affiliated black people with spiritual light rather than mortal darkness, it is important to recognize that the metaphor was not only an instrument that would elevate the social status of black people. The metaphor was also instructional: it was the articulation of some truth that the Manifestation of God wanted to teach the world. Indeed, the instrumental purpose of the metaphor—an elevated regard for black life—only gains traction if the instructional purpose of the metaphor is contemplated and accepted. But it must be acknowledged that the precise truth taught through the metaphor is difficult to pin down. It may be understood that black people are like the pupil of the eye, but how so? In what way?

The literal relationship between the vehicle and the tenor of the metaphor is apparent—black people have more melanin in the skin than other races and are thus darker than other peoples, just as the pupil is darker than other parts of the eye. The chromatic likeness shared by tenor and vehicle makes the metaphor resonant, but the figuration only becomes instructional when the physiological qualities of

the pupil are considered. By likening black people to a key apparatus in the physiological system that creates vision, Bahá'u'lláh may have been teaching the world about their perceptive powers. Christopher Buck has advanced this interpretation, suggesting that the metaphor implies that black people possess “insight into the human condition”—insight achieved because of collective suffering (4–5). If this is among the truths that Bahá'u'lláh conveyed through the “pupil of the eye” metaphor, it bears some similarity to well-known statements of W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the foremost American intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who in 1902 contended that black people in America were “gifted with a second-sight” (7). Du Bois elaborated this claim in his most well-known book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in which he attempted to describe the somewhat mystical essence of the African-American experience in his era. Thus, interpretations of the “pupil of the eye” metaphor that fix upon the spiritual perceptiveness of black people are in keeping with a tradition of African-American thought that was significantly advanced by Du Bois and that attempted to alchemize a history of oppression into a source of pride and inspiration. As he would put it elsewhere in his writings, “Among American Negroes there are sources of strength in common memories of suffering in the past” (*Dusk* 110). Du Bois, and many following him in

the twentieth century, deliberately encouraged racial pride among African Americans by suggesting that the race’s tormented history had conferred upon it a special insight and ability. Of course, recognizing tests and trials as strengthening and spiritually ennobling is not without precedent; any number of intellectual and spiritual traditions appeal to this framework as a mechanism for making sense of life’s difficulties. Speaking in the voice of Divinity, Bahá'u'lláh Himself declared that “with fire We test the gold” (*Hidden Words* 59), and in elaborating this formulation, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained that “[t]orment is the fire of test wherein pure gold shineth resplendently” (*Selections* 170). Interpretations of the “pupil of the eye” metaphor that link distinctive spiritual insight to black people because they have endured a history of torment take this formula, which can give positive meaning to horrible events, and apply it to the racial collective. In this interpretive framework, the instrumental purpose of the metaphor (elevating the social status of black people) is accomplished when the instructional purpose of the metaphor (teaching that black people have spiritual insight because of historical suffering) is understood. In its concentration on spiritual insight born out of hardship, this interpretation implicitly draws from a stream of African-American thought that flows from Du Bois and other early twentieth-century black historians who sought to make the

memory of slavery into a point of pride rather than a mark of shame.<sup>5</sup>

#### BUILDING MODERNITY

In recent years, historians have started to think about New World enslavement of Africans and African-descended people in ways that were intuited by Du Bois and his contemporaries and

5 It should be noted that there is a limitation to the applicability of an interpretive model suggesting that black people possess spiritual insight because of the history of enslavement or colonial oppression. The particular torment of race-based slavery does not figure in the history of large portions of Africa. Indeed, many millions of black people have no history of enslavement or colonization in their genealogical pasts—national territories such as Liberia and Ethiopia were never fully colonized by Western powers, yet the metaphysical implications of the “pupil of the eye” designation surely extend to black people bearing these somewhat anomalous histories. The most precise articulation of the interpretive model that highlights the spiritual insight of black people as a collective should not link that insight to any specific history or political experience, per se. However, as the argument below will unfold, in the modern world black people contend with the unique set of stigmas created by global anti-black ideology. This anti-blackness manifests in myriad social, political, economic, and cultural formations. Perhaps all black people are endowed with spiritual insight because each and all must contend with the “test” of anti-blackness.

that may lead toward new interpretations of the instructive meaning of the “pupil of the eye” metaphor. Just as Bahá'u'lláh's metaphor gives black people a central and vital role in the figurative body of humanity, a fresh form of historiography is showing that the story of modernity pivots on the contributions of black people. Indeed, an influential cadre of twenty-first century scholars, working in a sub-field dubbed New Histories of Capitalism (NHC), are persuasively demonstrating that the labor of enslaved black people was one of the primal catalytic forces in the emergence of human industrialization and global capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In a series of book-length histories with suggestive titles like *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (2014), *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (2014), and *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (2016), these scholars are overturning a tradition of historiography that has downplayed the significance of slavery in the rise of European and American power in the world and the ensuing efflorescence of global material prosperity. For NHC historians, who follow in the footsteps of black scholars like the Trinidadian intellectual and political leader Eric Williams and his largely ignored *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), the lives and labor of black people are not mere addendums to the narrative that would explain the so-called “Great Divergence” or “European Miracle” that occurred

in the run-up to the nineteenth century's Industrial Revolution and the resultant flourishing of technology and wealth that has since transformed human societies. Instead, in the chronicle of material development offered by the new histories of capitalism, black people are the protagonists. This compelling and recently invigorated narrative insists that the explosion of prosperity in the modern world is not simplistically attributable to European—and later American—innovation, culture, governance, or advanced legal and property rights systems; rather, it shows that the expropriative and exploitative New World plantation complex was at the heart of a transformative social and economic process that first allowed for the accumulation of vast wealth in European metropolises, and then sparked the Industrial Revolution, which in turn led to the exponential expansion of material development in the world. The network of agricultural plantations that first bloomed in the Caribbean basin of the 1500s and eventually spread throughout the Americas produced “European capital liberation” but was impossible without “African labor enslavement” (Beckles 777). For a variety of reasons, histories of global development have marginalized the invaluable role of African work in the creation of the modern world and its earth-girdling economy. But NHC scholarship (which reiterates marginalized arguments made long ago by black scholars like Du Bois and Williams) shows that the stolen labor of black people was

at the very center of the “process of global integration and the ‘takeoff’ that gave modern capitalism its fundamental structures of production and consumption” (Beckert and Rockman 8–9).

Among the primary proponents of the NHC movement is Harvard professor Sven Beckert, who argues that the cotton trade was the keystone of the first truly global market, which connected Africa, Europe, the Americas, and various parts of Asia in the eighteenth century, and that it served as “the launching pad for the broader Industrial Revolution” in the nineteenth century (xiv). In Beckert's telling, the center of the “cotton empire” moved from the East (in India) to the West (in Great Britain) only after Europeans were able to establish an economic dominance that was built on roughly three hundred years of colonial enterprise in the New World. This enterprise—mostly focused on sugar production—was history-altering and essential to the flowering of not just global capitalism but Western Enlightenment. It was also *totally dependent* on the labor of those people described by Bahá'u'lláh as the “pupil of the eye.” The massive, central role played by black people in the material development of the modern world is manifest in one stark figure that is important to NHC scholarship: between 1492 and 1807, four out of every five people who came from the Old World to the New World were African (Baptist 41). These 6.5 million people prepared the land, grew the crops, and built the

infrastructure that was a necessary precursor to the development of the nineteenth century's global cotton market—a market that grew in leaps and bounds because of the mechanized production of textile made from “white gold.” During Bahá'u'lláh's lifetime, the great majority of the world's most lucrative and arguably most consequential commodity was grown and harvested in the United States by black people.

In 1853, the pro-slavery trade journal *American Cotton Planter* published an editorial that was mostly about the economically “overshadowing dimensions” of the global cotton trade. The editorial was simultaneously nefarious and accurate. Its writer, a staunch slavery advocate, rightly insisted that the cultivation and manufacturing of cotton was the commercial bond that linked Great Britain and the United States, and that cotton granted these nations the most powerful and productive economies in the mid-nineteenth-century world. But most important to an assessment of the instructive purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's “pupil of the eye” metaphor was the editorialist's implicit acknowledgment that the operations of the burgeoning economic world order would not be possible without black people. While ignoring their humanity, and attempting to justify slavery's systematic robbery of their life and labor, the writer nevertheless emphasized black people's central role in the drama of the rapidly developing world economy. His unscrupulous defense of slavery

in the United States rested upon a keen valuation of the enormously productive power of black people who toiled in bondage. However distasteful it now appears, a weighty truth is felt in the lower frequencies of his claim that “slave-labor of the United States, has hitherto conferred, and is still conferring *inappreciable* blessings on mankind” (Croom 11, emphasis added). Continuing the theme, the editorialist argues “that in the dispensation of an All-wise Providence, the peculiar institution of the Southern States (slavery), contributes an indispensable support to human progress and prosperity” (11). Couched in an apologia for slavery in the United States, these arguments advance a core premise of NHC scholarship: the rise of modern capitalism and its world-transformative effects depended upon unfree black labor. Perhaps unexpectedly, these arguments also shed light on a viable interpretation of the instructional meaning of the “pupil of the eye” metaphor. By according black people a central and “indispensable” function in the figurative body of humanity, Bahá'u'lláh illustrated a material reality that was ruthlessly recognized by nineteenth-century capitalists in the American South, but was—and remains—“inappreciable” to most. That is to say, through the “pupil of the eye” metaphor, Bahá'u'lláh instructed humanity about a fundamental historical truth: black people played a central, indispensable role in the creation of the modern world and were precious contributors to the global prosperity that

must, someday, redound to the benefit of all peoples.

#### ANTI-BLACKNESS AND MODERNITY

Anti-black ideology became such a powerful and important part of modernity *precisely* because the stolen labor of black people was so central to the building of the post-1492 world. Social theories of the West, from those of Karl Marx to Pierre Bourdieu, teach that exploitative or unequal power relations always require justificatory narratives (see Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction* 9–10). The massive human exploitation that was the predicate of New World modernity had to be reconciled with the moral frameworks of those who were doing the exploiting; as the lives and labors of millions of black people were robbed through enslavement, there arose a massive ideological apparatus that sought to justify the robbery. This multifaceted and thoroughgoing apparatus, which can be called anti-blackness, served to vigorously debase those “colored people” that Bahá'u'lláh would eventually uphold as the “pupil of the eye.”

The relatively unmitigated, centuries-long exploitation of African and African-descended people who were central to the emergence of modernity and global capitalism was justified through the development of an array of stigmas focused on dishonoring black bodies, cultures, minds, and even souls, with an intensity that matched the massive scale of the exploitation

that reflexively called forth the stigmas. From the sixteenth century onwards, many leaders of European and New World Christendom helped build anti-black ideology through scriptural hermeneutics and racialized theologies that attributed a special sinfulness, or even soullessness, to black people. But in the development of anti-black ideologies, the Christian clerics were also joined by their more secular-minded rivals—the intellectuals or *philosophes* who were the pioneers of Enlightenment thought. By the time Bahá'u'lláh offered up the “pupil of the eye” metaphor, centering and honoring black people, European and New World discourses of anti-blackness were certainly circulating in His milieu, which was also alive with its own anti-black ideology that justified the widespread enslavement of Africans in Qajar Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and elsewhere in the Islamic world. Recognizing the sharp distinction between Bahá'u'lláh's engagement with black life and that of the contextualizing thought regimes of His era produces a deepened appreciation for the novelty, independence, and internal coherence of the social theory woven into His Revelation. The instructive and instrumental purposes of the “pupil of the eye” metaphor contrast most sharply with the anti-black litany produced by the avant-garde humanists associated with the Western Enlightenment that flourished just before the opening of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh. Although the leading minds of this movement were committed to a “new

understanding of the human condition" (Pinker 8)—an understanding meant to bring on prosperity, ease of life, and social amelioration—these hugely creative thinkers were, without exception, promulgators of anti-blackness.

It is perhaps ironic that the architecture of modernity's racism—reliant on the pseudo-scientific construct of race—was designed even as the *philosophes* who were seminal to the Enlightenment simultaneously elevated the epistemic ideal of rationalism and putatively empiricist methods of inquiry. Emerging from these ideals and methods was much of the intellectual blueprint for conceptions of democracy, egalitarianism, justice, religious tolerance, and freedom of thought that are frequently associated with the Enlightenment and that are vital to the contemporary world order. But in the influential writings and heady salons of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, seminal thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot, Voltaire, and a legion of lesser-known intellectuals were simultaneously disseminating subjective ideas about race, most of which were characterized by intense anti-black sentiment dressed in the costumes of rational scientism. While these thinkers quarreled about the morality of the Atlantic slave trade and the enslavement of Africans in the European colonies of the New World, they were essentially unanimous in their low estimation of black humanity. As Voltaire, for example, sought to dismantle what he thought

to be irrational interpretations of the Genesis creation story, he concurrently built up the stigmatization of blackness. Writing on African people, Voltaire would quip, "Our wise men have said that man was created in the image of God. Now here is a lovely image of the Divine—a flat black nose with little or hardly any intelligence" (Cohen 88). This sarcastic attack on both African humanity and Christian clerical wisdom exemplifies the interconnection of Enlightenment scientism and anti-black rhetoric; Voltaire's effort to advance rational, secular inquiry about the origin of man was entwined with a subjective, degrading description of black people. Similarly, the transformational and widely disseminated compendium of knowledge known as the *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*—and sometimes considered the "first encyclopedia"—rationalized anti-blackness even as it disseminated Enlightenment ideals that were gaining traction among the educated classes of the seventeenth century. The editors of the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, explicitly set out to "change the way men think" and build a "war machine" of ideas that would subdue what they deemed to be outdated, ossified forms of thought (qtd. in Clark xvii). But as they advanced a steady revolution in Western intellectual history, they also helped legitimize anti-black chauvinism. The *Encyclopédie* is peppered with a variety of references to black people, which range from paternalistic to dehumanizing.

For example, in an entry titled “Negroes, character of Negroes in general,” the *Encyclopédie* declares that black Africans are “always vicious . . . mostly inclined to lasciviousness, vengeance, theft and lies” (Cohen 72). So it went: anti-black ideology was part and parcel of the Enlightenment project—a viral attachment that spread along with literacy and the social and civic ideas that reshaped Europe and the Atlantic and Mediterranean basins in the centuries before the advent of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

Of course, in the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, as Bahá'u'lláh revealed a vision of global community that reserved a “favored” status for black people, the fire of Enlightenment-stoked racism continued to burn feverishly. Thomas Jefferson, for example, fueled anti-black sentiment in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which was read widely on both sides of the Atlantic and is often considered a compendium of his “most cherished ideas and interests” (Bernstein 67). In the book, he speculated that black people were “inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind,” heaping a variety of disparagements on the race (qtd. in Bernstein 80). In the 1840s, G.W.F. Hegel—frequently thought of as the “greatest philosopher of the modern experience” (Dorrien 388)—insisted that “[t]he peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend.” So difficult that, when it came to Africans, Hegel counseled that Europeans ought to “give up the principle

which naturally accompanies all our ideas,—the category of Universality” (97). Which is to say that one of the preeminent thinkers of modernity felt that black people were not quite human because “[i]n Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence” (97). American president Abraham Lincoln seemed to doubt that people of African descent could ever attain the moral and civic capacity of whites. Despite hazarding a bloodbath war to end slavery in his nation, he predicted that the black race could never “be placed on an equality with the white race” in America (qtd. in Kendi 219). Jefferson, Hegel, and Lincoln are only a few representative figures on the long list of philosophical, political, and cultural luminaries who helped to stigmatize blackness while also building the foundations of modernity; almost without exception, the revered intellects of modern social thought contributed to a voluminous disparagement of black humanity and inculcated a common sense that relegated black life to the lightless basement of a hugely consequential racial hierarchy.

To underscore the potency of anti-black ideology, and thus throw into relief the anomalous quality of Bahá'u'lláh's refutation of such thinking, it is worth noting that in the nineteenth century even black champions of justice could produce rhetoric that implicitly debased black people. Although African-descended

populations produced a range of intellectual, artistic, and spiritual confutations of anti-blackness, important black thought-leaders could slip into formulations that tacitly reinforced prevailing ideas about black lack. For example, despite being hailed as among the fiercest black-authored condemnations of slavery and racism, David Walker's 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* emphasizes the material and spiritual *deficits* that oppression has yielded in a black race characterized as "the most wretched, degraded, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began" (6). And consider that in 1867, Sojourner Truth, the once-enslaved black woman who tirelessly advocated for the rights of black people and women in America, would publicly testify that "[w]hite women are a great deal smarter, and know more than colored women," and that black men do little more than "go about idle, strutting up and down" (qtd. in Kendi 242). It is not surprising that anti-blackness surfaces in the rhetorical flourishes of even black leaders of the nineteenth century; it only indicates the pervasiveness of the thought patterns that in that era degraded black life, culture, and capacity. Indeed, in order to be taken seriously, black thought-leaders often had to mouth such deprecations in order to gain legitimacy with many audiences. The point here is that a proper appreciation of Bahá'u'lláh's "pupil of the eye" metaphor is only accessible when that positive centering of the "colored people" of the world is considered

in relation to its nineteenth-century context, so thoroughly suffused in social thought that was axiomatically anti-black. Against this backdrop, Bahá'u'lláh's intervention in the era's racial discourse amounts to nothing less than an *epistemological rupture*—the introduction of a radical ideological conception that had hardly any precedent in the secular or religious thinking of His historical moment. Archivists would be hard-pressed to find a comparable elevation of "colored people" in the reams of philosophical and social writing about race produced in Bahá'u'lláh's lifetime.

#### THE NOVELTY AND NECESSITY OF THE "PUPIL OF THE EYE" DESIGNATION

The absolute refusal of anti-black ideology should be considered a distinguishing feature of Bahá'u'lláh's social teaching; it is a notable example of the coherence in what Bahá'u'lláh Himself described as the "wondrous System" laid out in His Revelation (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶181). This System was animated by one "fundamental purpose," underscored time and again in His voluminous Writings: it sought to "safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men" (*Gleanings* 215). The virulent anti-blackness of His world-historical moment was, of course, antithetical to the "spirit of love and fellowship" that Bahá'u'lláh aimed to promote through what some scholars have called His "reformist

movement" (Cole 136). But while scores of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social reformers sought to advance the interests of the human race even as they endorsed ideologies that debased and relentlessly stigmatized black people, Bahá'u'lláh's favoring of "colored people" took hold of prevailing racial epistemology and turned it on its head. This was not reform; it was rupture—a rupture that was the prerequisite of any coherent program ultimately seeking "the unity of the human race." The widespread but tortured logic of social reformist movements that sought the betterment of humanity and simultaneously promoted or acquiesced to anti-black ideology operated in stark contrast to the logic of Bahá'u'lláh's mission. In itself, the specific refusal of anti-black ideology distinguishes Bahá'u'lláh's system from that of contemporaneous reform movements; it also speaks to the systemic integrity of the ethics of His Revelation, what Nader Saiedi describes as "the internal coherence of Bahá'u'lláh's system" (316).

Although it represents just one node in the expansive social and spiritual system activated in His Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh's especial promotion of the capacity of black people is an outsized marker of the novelty and philosophical independence of His System. Demonstrating this independence—"the creative, revolutionary, and unprecedented character of Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual and social vision"—is one of the central aims of Saiedi's ambitious study, *Logos and*

*Civilization*. In it, Saiedi effectively deconstructs and lays bare the shortcomings of a strand of scholarship that reduces Bahá'u'lláh's vision to a repackaging of millennial reformist ideas that, according to one commentator, were "in the air" during the late nineteenth century (Cole 68). Where Saiedi shows the unprecedented quality of Bahá'u'lláh's late nineteenth-century thought, scholars like Juan Cole have made efforts to drain it of originality and independence through a historicizing methodology that figures Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation as essentially a synthesis of European and Middle Eastern social reform discourse. To carry out his project, Cole selectively reconstructs the late nineteenth century ideological milieu which flowed about Bahá'u'lláh and searches for moments of "intertextuality" that align Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation with ideas that were prominent among progressive thinkers of His era (68). Cole's reconstruction of nineteenth-century social thought does not include any reference to the anti-black ideology that was endemic among European intellectuals and reformers of the era and that was particularly pivotal to the ideas of one figure whom Cole links to Bahá'u'lláh: the French political and social reformer Henri de Saint-Simon, whose beliefs about social justice (among other things) gained traction among European elites in the early nineteenth century.

While Cole focuses upon "particularly striking" parallels that apparently conjoin the "peace thought" of

Saint-Simon and Bahá'u'lláh (136), Saiedi rightly points out that, although somewhat progressive in his egalitarian principles, Saint-Simon was an advocate of European imperialism, which hinged on white supremacist beliefs. Saiedi contrasts Bahá'u'lláh's unqualified commitment to the unity of the entire human race with Saint-Simon's advocacy of race war in which "Europeans will unite their forces" to subdue indolent Asians and "bloodthirsty" Africans (qtd. in Saiedi 314). Demonstrating that the race discourse advanced by Bahá'u'lláh was fundamentally incompatible with that of Saint-Simon is one of the ways that Saiedi problematizes Cole's effort to equalize Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and that of European influencers whose ideas had filtered into the Ottoman intellectual context by the late nineteenth century. However innovative Saint-Simon was in his theorizing, he also subscribed to a run-of-the-mill racism that allowed him to simply excise black people from his conception of "mankind," declaring that "the Negro, because of his basic physical structure, is not susceptible, even with the same education, of rising to the intellectual level of Europeans" (qtd. in Swedberg 147-48).

Cole calls attention to another Western intellectual, the American historian John William Draper, whose work constituted a "plausible conduit" by which the North Atlantic ideals of the social contract and freedom of conscience found their way into Bahá'í texts (37). Noting that Draper's major

study, *A History of the Intellectual Development of Europe*, was available in the Middle East and was approvingly cited in an important Bahá'í treatise,<sup>6</sup> Cole highlights the seeming resemblance between the Lockean and Jeffersonian theories of the state articulated by Draper and those found in political theory emerging from the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. But these resemblances are rendered incidental in light of Bahá'u'lláh's definitive rejection of the racist premises that underlay eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North Atlantic social philosophy and that poisoned the work of even a progressive thinker like Draper, who in 1867 could declare that, "at the best," the American negro "will never be more than an overgrown child" (196). As race-conscious philosophers like Charles Mills have argued in recent decades, a legion of Enlightenment thinkers like Draper, Saint-Simon, Locke, and Jefferson built their putatively universal political philosophies on an almost invisible "Racial Contract." According to Mills and others, fair-minded analysis of seminal social contract theories of the Western Enlightenment reveals that they rest upon an "unacknowledged system," a racial contract which tacitly assumes that the rights and liberties guaranteed by the state to the citizen extend only to white people—"the people who count, the people who really are people" (3). Without exception, all the

6 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes reference to Draper's work in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*.

Western social philosophy that was potentially accessible to Bahá'u'lláh was also underwritten by this racial contract system, and yet His vision of spiritual polity bears no sign of it. Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh's System explicitly rejects the racial (and gender) contract that was latent in the theorizing reformers of the Enlightenment. The point here is that the chasm between Western political theory and Bahá'u'lláh's vision of social order is perhaps widest and deepest when the racially exclusionary logic of the former is contrasted with Bahá'u'lláh's thoroughgoing universalism—and His embrace of the "colored people" of the world in particular.

THE "PUPIL OF THE EYE"  
AND THE AFTERLIVES OF SLAVERY

If the "pupil of the eye" designation operated as a radical refutation of the anti-blackness that was essential to the Western modernity that Bahá'u'lláh engaged in His Revelation, this intervention cannot be easily attributed to the intellectual or social mores of His Islamic context. Bahá'u'lláh's geographic and social environment was rife with its own forms of racism, which stigmatized black Africans, who constituted a significant portion of the slave population in nineteenth-century Persia and the Ottoman Empire. However, the virulent, pervasive anti-blackness that crystallized in the modern West differed from the anti-black sentiment that circulated in the Islamic East. The distinction

between anti-blackness in the proverbial West and East is sharpened by a social taxonomy offered by historians who distinguish between "slave societies" and "societies with slaves" (Berlin 8). While the anti-blackness of the West was the ideological handmaid of New World "slave societies" in which "slavery stood at the center of economic production" and was the engine of enormous wealth production, the anti-black sentiment of Bahá'u'lláh's Qajar and Ottoman contexts grew out of "societies with slaves." In these societies, "slaves were marginal to the central productive processes," the institution of slavery was somewhat porous, and enslaved or formerly-enslaved people could sometimes ascend the social hierarchy (Berlin 8). The New World slave societies that were almost totally parasitic in their dependence on black labor required a deeper, more urgent form of stigmatizing ideology than did the societies with slaves that could be found the Islamic world. Nevertheless, anti-black sentiment was certainly a feature of the elite Persian matrix in which Bahá'u'lláh was raised in the early nineteenth century. Not only were enslaved Africans—often castrated eunuchs—commonplace in the households of the Persian nobility of the era, but by the time of Bahá'u'lláh's birth, this class of Persians was also beginning to emulate certain European social, cultural and intellectual practices. It would be naïve to suggest that the well-established anti-blackness of Western modernity did not influence Qajar Persia and

the Ottoman territories into which Bahá'u'lláh was exiled.

Considering the presence of black participants in the Heroic Age of the Bahá'í Faith adds important texture to the “pupil of the eye” metaphor and deepens its humanity-unifying implications. From the Bahá'í perspective, Bahá'u'lláh's acclamation of “colored people” is vested with transcendent, divine authority; yet, that iconoclastic pronouncement should also be linked to Bahá'u'lláh's lived experience in His father's household that was populated by “many colored maids and servants” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in “Sterling Faithfulness” 38). In this domestic setting, Bahá'u'lláh's personal relationships with black people were keen and substantial. According to ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, when Bahá'u'lláh became the head of His family, He liberated all who were considered property in His father's household. However, one black man, Isfandiyyár, chose to remain with Bahá'u'lláh and remained His willing servant until death (*Promulgation* 426). Another black man, Mubarak, who was likely enslaved in the household of Bahá'u'lláh's sister, sought manumission from Bahá'u'lláh, and was subsequently addressed by Him in terms that laid bare His absolute rejection of the social institution of slavery in the 1850s. Offered in the voice of a mortal servant of God, Bahá'u'lláh's response to Mubarak suggests that the enslaved man's request reveals a tragic irony in the practice of slavery—Bahá'u'lláh declares, “Behold how one slave hath stood at the door of another, seeking

from him his freedom, and this despite the fact that his owner is himself but Thy thrall and Thy servant” (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, letter dated 2 September 2014). Asserting that all are “vassals” before God, Bahá'u'lláh reflects upon Mubarak's plea by posing a rhetorical question that exposes slavery as a moral absurdity and establishes a necessary plank in theological egalitarianism: “How, then, can this thrall claim for himself ownership of any other human being?” He then goes on to liberate Mubarak in no uncertain terms. Bahá'u'lláh's direct response to Mubarak—in which He equates His own earthly condition with that of a black man—represents not only a total disavowal of slavery, but also a powerfully illustrative demolition of racial hierarchy and a profound refutation of anti-black ideology. In its mid-nineteenth-century context, this was no small statement. As much as it was a brief against slavery, the tablet for Mubarak was, like the “pupil of the eye” metaphor, also a lesson in Bahá'u'lláh's curriculum on the oneness of humanity.

Yet, it is important to disentangle Bahá'u'lláh's abrogation of the institution of slavery from His stand against anti-black ideology, which is implicit in His tablet to Mubarak and rather explicit in His “pupil of the eye” metaphor. With the revelation of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* in 1873, Bahá'u'lláh forbade the trade in slaves, and thus made known that in His Dispensation ownership of human beings was contrary to Divine Will. This law

was, of course, applicable to all humanity—it had no racial specificity; indeed, in nineteenth-century Qajar Persia and the Ottoman Empire, enslaved people hailed from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. The abolition of legal slavery, which was a worldwide evolution in the organization of human society (inaugurated by Republic of Haiti in the late eighteenth century), did not address the racial ideologies that the institution of slavery produced. This is evident in the history of abolitionism in the United States. Many of those who were instrumental in ending slavery, like Abraham Lincoln, did not renounce anti-black ideology. Once it was unlinked from the institution of slavery, the acceptance and persistence of this ideology gave life to what some scholars have termed the “afterlives of slavery” (Sharpe 5). In these afterlives, anti-blackness was simply reconfigured so that the harm of social, civic, and economic marginalization was inflicted upon black people through evolved mechanisms that were sanctioned by the state, even if slavery was not. As one scholar puts it, “From this vantage point, emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection” (Hartman 6). Intransigent anti-black racism ensured that in the aftermath of abolition—in the United States and in national contexts throughout the world—black people continued to suffer limited life chances and a host of social maladies. As New World

slavery gave life to unprecedented material prosperity, it also birthed a potent anti-blackness that could not be extinguished through “mere” abolition. But by producing the “pupil of the eye” metaphor, which gave favor to those targeted by anti-blackness, Bahá'u'lláh made it clear that any belief, institution, or social movement that was to be compatible with His Word could not abide by the insidious ideology that grew out of—and outlived—the New World permutation of institutionalized slavery.

The robust, pervasive quality of modernity’s anti-blackness makes it a serious impediment to the development of the loving, equitable, and just human society that is the ultimate aim of Bahá'u'lláh’s Divine Revelation. He has explained that those aligned with Divine Will must be driven by the desire to “quench the flame of hatred and enmity, so that the whole earth may come to be viewed as one country.” In further elucidating His own mission, Bahá'u'lláh states, “The Prophets of God should be regarded as physicians whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that, through the spirit of oneness, they may heal the sickness of a divided humanity” (*Gleanings* 80). Obviously, the anti-black ideology that has infected societies for several centuries is a constituent element of the humanity-dividing sickness that Bahá'u'lláh’s Revelation aims to heal. In its most virulent forms, anti-blackness has marginalized black life out of existence—that is to say, it promotes social

conditions in which disregard or disdain for black life is so intense that the social and civic body is unperturbed by or even desirous of the elimination of black people.

Through His “pupil of the eye” metaphor, which adamantly centers black life in the figurative body of humanity, Bahá'u'lláh acted as social Physician, prescribing a spiritual and social concept that must be regarded as something more than a gesture of

comfort or solace for a historically burdened people. Bahá'u'lláh's specific and explicit refutation of one of modernity's most hateful and divisive social ideologies is an instructive prescription addressed to all humanity. Surely, the condition of oneness that is global society's highest and most urgent aspiration is impossible without the universal internalization of the medicine that Bahá'u'lláh has loaded into the “pupil of the eye” metaphor.

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