



History of Anthropology Newsletter

Volume 24
Issue 2 December 1997

Article 3

January 1997

Petrus Camper on the Origin and Color of Blacks

Miriam Claude Meijer

Petrus Camper

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/han>

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meijer, Miriam Claude and Camper, Petrus (1997) "Petrus Camper on the Origin and Color of Blacks," *History of Anthropology Newsletter*. Vol. 24 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/han/vol24/iss2/3>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. <https://repository.upenn.edu/han/vol24/iss2/3>
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

FOOTNOTES TO THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Petrus Camper On the Origin and Color of Blacks

Miriam Claude Meijer
1438 Geranium St. NW
Washington, D.C.

The following is a translation of a lecture, "On the Origin and Color of Blacks," which the famed eighteenth-century Dutch scientist Petrus Camper delivered on November 14, 1764 in the Anatomy Lecture Hall of the University of Groningen. Readers familiar with Camper's reputation as the historic initiator of racist craniology, will be surprised by his liberal views towards black people. The common misinterpretations of Camper's anthropology are due to the way his successors misused his "facial angle" theory for a polygenist anthropological position diametrically opposed to his own, which was monogenist, environmentalist, and relativist. As a comparative anatomist and an artist, Camper was more astute about the nature of aesthetic prejudice than most of his contemporaries. His famous facial angle thesis was a graphic device that accounted for the physical variety of humanity and an indirect argument for the equal worth of that variety. After life-long observations of mammalian and human crania arrested in various stages of life, Camper speculated on the laws behind the existing diversity of cranial morphology. After sawing several skulls perpendicularly down the middle, he argued that uniformity was evident in the brain cavity's oval form, but that the key to pluriformity rested in the variable extension of the jaw and its resulting impact on craniofacial morphology. While this general observation was not new, Camper's reduction of the craniofacial profile to a simple geometric expression that could be readily measured was an original contribution that had a profound impact on the development of anthropology. Specifically, Camper's method involved the transference of the cranial form onto paper (in the manner of an architect), and tracing a line from the front of the incisor teeth to the prominent part of the forehead. This *linea facialis* intersected a horizontal line, drawn from the nosebase to the earhole, thereby producing the "facial angle," later termed "prognathism." The results of Camper's measurements were illustrated by a series of profiled heads manifesting a progressive lowering of the facial angle. From the idealized Greek statue profile (100 degrees), the angle descended through the European (80 degrees), Asian and African (both 70 degrees), to the orangutan (58 degrees) and tailed monkey (42 degrees). The iconographic impact of these drawings, which seemed to "prove" a racial hierarchy, popularized the science of cephalometry on into the first half of the twentieth century. Recently, however, a reexamination of Camper's original work in its totality proves that his facial angle theory was in fact intended to correct the racial prejudices of Europeans concerning the naturalness/unnaturalness or beauty/ugliness of non-European physiognomies. The complete set of Camper's engravings indicates that the facial angle was not meant to be understood solely in profile but in three dimensions, in terms of the principle of the correlation of parts. The spatial arrangement of an organism's parts was fixed in such a way that changes in one part of the organism entailed changes in the other parts. If the human head were visualized as a finite mound of clay, racial traits could be seen to be so interdependent that the retraction or protrusion of the jaw determined whether the nose was flat or long and the lips broad or thin. The purpose of this graphic exercise was to prove the naturalness of non-European features that many Europeans believed to be artificial. The idea that thick lips, flat noses, or stretched eyes had been manipulated by midwives or mothers immediately after birth implied that foreign physiognomy was too ugly to be natural; in addition, body tampering had sinful connotations in Christianity. Camper's theory was designed to demonstrate the actual mechanism of physiognomical variation in nature. The material variation of any one racial feature immediately modified the mutually-related parts, resulting in the characteristic national physiognomies, thereby disproving the then

widespread belief that unfamiliar racial traits were derived from postnatal intervention. While Camper intended to prove that the denaturalization of black people, based on their looks, was empirically false, nineteenth-century anthropologists used the facial angle theory instead as evidence for polygenism.

[Originally published in Dutch in *De Rhapsodist* 2 (1772): 373-394, this translation by Miriam C. Meijer will appear as appendix to her forthcoming book, *Race and Aesthetics in the Anthropology of Petrus Camper (1722-1789)*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998. In the present version, all but one of the footnotes have been omitted, and some Latin passages that were duplicated in the English translation have been deleted]

Sciences, of any kind whatsoever, should be useful in a general way as well as in a particular field. Anatomy, the knowledge of the human body, would be, in my opinion, a narrow branch of learning if it had no effect on other sciences besides Medicine and Surgery. Anatomy constitutes the most distinguished part of the venerated Natural Sciences, of Natural History, and offers an important basic principle which serves as foundation for rational Religion. It sounds strange, Honored Listeners, when one wants to make a hall intended for medical lessons resound with the praise which the infinite Supreme Being deserves. However, with the exception of the school of Theology, where does one give stronger, more solemn evidence of the great wisdom, providence and unlimited power of God than in this Lecture Hall, where the beauty and perfection of our ingenious and excellent constitution are researched and displayed through the art of Dissection? Particularly because not everyone can be convinced by the bare force of reasoning, but all without exception are convinced by the very sight of this wonderful Masterpiece that the Divine Creator of this Treasure must be an infinitely wise, powerful and merciful Being!

In my discourse I now could pass from the body to the soul and perhaps not unduly describe in detail the amazing qualities of that spiritual being; but who could treat in a profitable way, and to the satisfaction of our fellow Citizens, a Subject which was not long ago explicated to the point of perfection by one of our most renowned men and treated with utmost clarity? Discussions about the soul must be left to clever Philosophers and to them alone; we will limit ourselves to discussing the coarser part of our being, namely the body, and its mechanical structure, the skin, muscles and entrails! These are parts whose beauty can be observed with the naked eye; yet, they are worthy to be seen, for even in those lesser parts something Divine always shines through.

In the past year, I planned to say something about the color of the skin, in order to have the opportunity to discuss the skin of the Moors, which at first glance appears so different from ours that many people, but wrongly so, imagine that Blacks belonged to some particular kind of species which did not descend from Adam. As an introduction to these Anatomy classes, I intend to deal with this peculiar phenomenon, to see if I can elucidate it here through the revealed truths of our Religion: namely, that God created a single human being in the beginning, Adam, to whom all of us, whatever our shape or color may be, owe our origin. Many, who find pleasure in doubting the most evident things, come up with all kinds of arguments against this principle, arguments that will be brought to naught as soon as I demonstrate that all of us are all black, only more or less, and that this color difference can in no way prove that we do not descend from the same Ancestors.

The subject itself has been treated with great interest for a long time already, and the Ancients expressed their amazement about this strange phenomenon, and judged unanimously that Whites are superior creatures, and that they are of greater intelligence than Blacks! Herodotus at first praises the Blacks, and is amazed that the Ethiopians were such clever people, as Cambyses, King of Persia, discovered. Called the Macrobii, or the long-lived, they even laughed at Cambyses' envoys and ascribed to their bad habits the fact that the Persians did not become older than eighty years, while they themselves

reached the age of at least one hundred and twenty years by eating roasted meat and drinking milk. However, the same Herodotus, who first recounted so many wonderful things about the Ethiopians, disgraces himself by saying in the same third book, dedicated to Thalia, in reference to the Indians: "All the Indians that I described unite in public like animals, their color is as awful as that of their neighbors, the Ethiopians. Their reproductive fluid with which they impregnate the women, is not white like that of all other people, but black, like the color of their skin, a liquid resembling that dirty or noxious seed, which the Ethiopians also eject." Who does not see that Herodotus, carried away by the prejudices of his time, promoted such a detestable image, and a false one as well! Aristotle himself could not resist from criticizing him: in his *Natural History of Animals* he first affirms that the semen of all Animals is white, then says that one must not believe Herodotus at all when he relates that the Moors and the Ethiopians have black semen. In contrast, to these same Ethiopians and Indians who according to Herodotus in his *Polymnia*, differ from each other, not only in language and hair ("In fact the sunrise Ethiopians have flowing hair, Ethiopians from Africa have the frizziest hair of all mankind"), [Aristotle] now ascribes heroic virtues, as well as the praiseworthy custom and manly taste of clothing and adorning their bodies in tiger and lion skins--garments, Listeners, that are more dignified for warriors than the feathers and ermines which are worn and seen perhaps too often nowadays. My indignation about Herodotus will make You understand quite well how much more highly I think of these black peoples, and that I am inclined to describe them as our fellow men.

Strabo thinks much more rationally about the Indians, although the scholars of his time also seem to have been deeply divided on the problem. Indeed, Onesicritus wanted to attribute the black color to hot water falling from the sky, an idea which Aristobulus flatly contradicted. Theodectes attributed it to the burning sun, and regarded the heat as the cause of that unpleasant hue. Meanwhile Onesicritus denies this, because the children, he states, are already black in the womb of their mothers, before the sun can shine on them; this we will soon prove to be wrong. Strabo himself prefers to hail the sun as the cause for the black color and the woolly hair, the latter of which the Indians do not have, because they, according to him, live in a humid region. Meanwhile he jumps over the issue under consideration by saying: they become already black in the womb, because the sperm has the power and nature to reproduce those who made the children as they are. You clearly see, that he must have shown how the first white human became black and got woolly hair, if one wants to give precedence to the whites. Aristotle, always both precise and witty in his arguments, attributes the blackness of the Moors exclusively to the heat of the sun. And Galen, a steady admirer of that great Philosopher, confirms, in his *Book on the Temperaments*, this sensible and reasonable opinion. But Pliny, although he usually copies Aristotle, relates, on the authority of others, that in Thessaly there is a river with water that makes men and animals black and curls their hair, but these are embellishments that are disputed by many, and not without reason.

So much for the Ancients, who had little experience in the natural sciences which now seem to have reached great heights. But, how can one not be astounded that the world renowned Meckel, a man famous for his great merits, for whom I have always shown the highest respect in my Anatomy papers and classes, who moreover studied under the supervision of the great Haller, dares to write in the year 1757 in Berlin, "that Negroes seem to be a completely different kind of species!" because their brains and their blood are black, which causes their skin to turn black? The strangeness of seeing a Moor must have surely inspired him with hatred and fear for their color—it was [only] the second one that he had dissected. He probably would have thought in a friendlier and more reasonable way if he, as we do in our Country, had seen Blacks every day and had seen that whites, men and women, however superior they may feel to those colored people, do not judge them unworthy of their love. Santorinus, a dissector of great fame, is preoccupied with another theory, namely that the liver secretes a black substance under the Epidermis, as he explains in the beginning of his book.

In the year 1758 in Amsterdam I had the opportunity to dissect a black Angolese boy and I found his blood very much like ours and his brains as white, if not whiter.¹ When I dissected this body in public, I examined it in a totally objective way and compared all the parts with the famous description of the Bush-man or "Orang-Outang" of the renowned Tyson. I must confess that I found nothing that had more in common with this animal than with a white man; on the contrary, everything was the same as for a white man. You ask, and rightly so, why indeed the comparison with the Bush-man? That is simply, Gentlemen, because there are Philosophers to be found who want to show with some rhetorical flourish that Negroes and Blacks descended from the mingling in olden times of white people with great Apes or Orang-Outangs, which were called Satyrs by the Ancients. Dr. Tyson's Dissection is very incomplete since the genitals are treated in a superficial way, and that is where indeed the greatest difference should be, if one may rely on Galen, who dissected Apes or animals of the Monkey Species only.

Meanwhile you remain in uncertainty and wonder whether the black color might not come from a kind of soot, a certain vitriol, or burnt fat, as Brownius believed. He does not accept burning of the skin at all as a cause, however probable it may be. Today we do not lack for people who believe that we have natural mercury in our blood as well as sulphur, both getting mixed in our body as in a mortar, thus making a black dye and imparting that to the skin. I do not dare reveal the discoverer of this miracle, for fear that you would lose respect for his good name, which he otherwise rightly deserves.

Most likely you will prefer those conjectures which have direct connections to the Holy Scripture. Labat, in his new description of Africa thinks that Adam was dark brown or reddish and that the color, blanched in Eve, consequently became whiter. Or that Cain, after killing Abel, was made black on the spot by the incensed Supreme Being so that he would be marked. But the great Flood and the single surviving household of Noah, all of Seth's tribe, does not allow us to believe this hypothesis. It has been said occasionally that Cham, because he was cursed by his father Noah, changed in color and became black. Whatever the case may be, it seems quite obvious that all scholars, through their association of a very hateful image with the color black, acted as if a certain well-deserved curse, or wrath of the Divine Supreme Being, were the origin of the unfavorable color: and usually, if not always, this one-sided and absurd account worked in favor of the Whites, because they had devised it themselves and thus had accorded themselves superiority over others of a different color. What kind of an image must the poor Americans have conceived of white people, after being treated by them in such an undeserved, such a cruel and barbaric manner? Will they not believe that the God of heaven and earth changed those brutes, as a permanent sign of his righteous wrath, into white people? This digression causes you to blush, and not without cause. All of us, not only as human beings but as Christians, would wish to be black if we could wash off this sin through such a change in color.

Let us rather backtrack: we must get to know Blacks better and therefore observe, as Maupertuis does in his clever work entitled *La Venus Physique*: 1) That from the tropic of Cancer to that of Capricorn, Africa has only black inhabitants, whose noses are wide and flat, lips thick, and hair woolly. 2) When we go to the point of Africa, the Cape of Good Hope, which is towards the South Pole, then we find that the faces of these people, which we consider ugly, stay the same, but that the color gets lighter. 3) Towards the east, the inhabitants have features that are more beautiful but they are just as black. 4) In the south the color lessens and becomes brown, yellowish red, etc. the eyes become small and narrow, but the bodies are tall.

¹ In Groningen on 16 April 1766, I dissected in public an elderly Negro and demonstrated that the white or marrow of the brains was whiter, and the cortex or gray matter lighter than in Europeans: to show this more obviously I dissected at the same time the brains of a white man. On 17 April 1768 I demonstrated the same fact in a young Negro and also that his blood was similar to ours, although with a somewhat purplish black tinge, like the sap of mulberries. The same color was also seen in the first case, and also in a Mulatto, whom I dissected in November of that same year. I can not deny, however, to have often seen and also to have shown in white bodies the presence of such a tint, as painters call it.

5) People become smaller towards the North Pole, so that the inhabitants of the Davis Strait and the Lapps are the smallest. It is noteworthy that all the people who live in the Torrid Zone, in America, in Africa as well as in Asia, are completely black or brown. As soon as one moves away from the Equator, people become whiter until one finds the whitest in Denmark. The renowned and astute Buffon, the greatest Naturalist of this century, has worked this out very precisely in the third volume of his *Natural History*. Meanwhile one finds white Negroes; they are those who are begotten by black parents, but are born white and stay that way, as Labat affirms. One, as witnessed by Maupertuis, was brought to Paris in 1744. He was a boy of about five years, born to very black parents, who had white woolly hair, pinkish, blue eyes, etc. One could ascribe this to a malady in the fluids, because something similar happens also among us. I remember seeing two sons of very white parents, having studied with them in Leyden, of whom one was as brown as a Mulatto, the other as white as a Danish Damsel.

From what I have just noted in general, it seems obvious that the heat of the region where we live is the cause of the color; but it takes many centuries for completely white people brought into a tropical zone to turn totally black, as the great Buffon rightly remarks. Therefore when one says that our countrymen, who have lived a long time in the East or West Indies, do not become black, that fact is no proof. We have had our colonies in the tropics too short a time to be able to judge. In my opinion, it is likely that our descendants there would become pitch black if they lived there continually for a thousand years, and that the Angolese Negroes will turn white after a similar stay among us in Europe. Absolute Rulers are in the unique position to have this tested by imposing and enforcing inviolable laws, but we will not live to see the outcome.

Woolly hair is not an important consideration. The incomparable Buffon says that men can be found in France with curly hair almost as woolly as that of Negroes. Among us it is rare. Nevertheless, I believe I have seen the same. What can be said about color, which is nothing but a particular reflection of beams of light? Is a person of another race when, tanned in the summer by the sun, he has become blackish? Does his individuality change when after a long winter he becomes pale, or after having been restricted to his house for a year, he becomes white? Maybe a comparison, though taken from animals, will clear up the problem. The hares in Russia and Sweden are grey in the summer and lily white in the winter, as Linnaeus notices. Are they therefore not the same animals? When we see different people who are less black than their neighbors, it proves that they are settlers from the North; or when we Northerners see among us people darker than we are, it proves that they came from the South. Let us take the ancient Jewish nation as an example; the group which stayed in Spain and Portugal is quite darker than those who have been living for many centuries in Bohemia, or further North in Silesia or Poland. The color, eyes, features of the mouth, will enable you to recognize among thousands of that race from which Country they came; nobody, however, would think so wrongly as to conclude that they did not sprout from the same branch.

We will forthwith examine the origin of blackness; but I first want to say something about the appearance. Blacks have a wide and flat nose, thick lips. Many Travelers have asserted, and on the basis of that authority many Naturalists say so as well, that they push in the nose of their children, and give it this form. The truth is far from that! Aside from the fact that they are already shaped like that in the womb, the form depends only on the projection of the upper and lower jaws, and that is how the nose becomes flat and small by itself and the lips thick. How could they cover the teeth otherwise? Don't we see a comparable difference of form in the heads of all white nations, without doubting that they come from one and the same Adam? Why then would we consider the difference of color, since it requires only a small change in the fine skin or epidermis which covers the body?

Food alone changes appearance: in the countryside people are always less comely, less attractive than in the cities. Maupertuis claims that nowhere does one find more beautiful women than in Paris, apparently not only because of their upbringing, but because the meals are better there. One of my friends,

a very knowledgeable man, and an exceptional observer, remarked years ago that Westphalian servants, whose features, hair and color are ugly when they first arrive, improve considerably in Amsterdam in six years time through better food, and get better color, finer skin and curly hair. If such changes can come about in a few years, if our Countrymen, who have lived in hot regions, can never get their white skin back, although they have come home, how much more certainly will this color pass on from generation to generation when the settlement lasts for centuries?

I must curtail myself as much as possible, for fear of spending too much time on this subject, but otherwise I could show with great probability of truth that the Americans are settlers who, after arriving from Northern Europe and Asia, multiplied; and, as Buffon correctly notes, they moved to the south to avoid the cold, losing their lightly tanned color as they resided in warmer regions. It is probable that these Settlers came there many Centuries ago. The proof lies in the small number of people who lived in the great expanse of America, and in their savage customs and manners. There may be a few exceptions, people who perhaps descend from very civilized peoples in Europe, and who, having landed by shipwreck, multiplied, and in the course of time lost the civilization of their first forefathers. All Islands in far-off seas were populated in the same way; and there remains no doubt that all races, spread over this Globe, descend from the same human couple who formerly lived in Paradise!

I will now proceed in an orderly way to pinpoint the source of blackness in the Moors, and first demonstrate to you: this child, which, although a foetus, is born of a Angolese Negro woman, whose husband was just as black. You see that the skin is white over the entire body, and therefore that the children are not black in the womb as Strabo believed. You also see that the nose, lips, the whole being are of the same form as that of adult Blacks. Be convinced therefore that the nose is not pushed in at birth, but that such a prematurely born creature already has all the features of his race. Buffon noticed rightly, that the children of Negroes are born white or rather reddish, like ours, and that they become brown a few days later and then black. However, it is to be noted that very soon after birth they have black skin around their nails and also on the circle around the nipples. But the genital area only becomes black on the third day and not at birth. I saw this in Amsterdam. A boy was born to a Negro woman who was very black; the third day the genitals were coal black and the nail-edges, and the circles around the nipples also. The fifth and sixth day the blackness spread over the whole body, and the boy, who had not been in the sun, but had been born in the winter in a closed room, and had been swaddled tightly according to local practice, still changed color and became black over his entire body, except for the balls of his feet and the palms of his hands, which are always paler and stay quite white among working Negroes.

Look here at the skin of this black boy, whose skull I show you also. You clearly see that the skin is, in itself, perfectly white, that it is covered by a second layer, which is called the *Reticulum*, and that this layer is actually black, brown, red-copperish or tanned. On top of this is another layer, which is the outer layer of the skin, which the renowned W. Hunter in London quite rightly compared to a thin glazing covering the colored layer, or to a varnish preserving it. This colored layer is manufactured by the vessels of the skin and one can see the fibers very clearly in the hand and foot when one removes the outer layer of the skin carefully after a long decay or when one soaks the skin in hot water. Never ever have blood-vessels been found there that could be filled artificially, contrary to what some have professed. Ruysch has denied seeing them, Hunter never saw them, but he did see the fibers, which run from the skin to the epidermis like a spiderweb, which he depicts, and which I have often shown to my Students.

Judge now, Listeners! If this white skin from the Moor is a proof of black blood, of sulphur, mercury or soot, flowing in their veins! You see that the epidermis can be divided into two membranes, into more even, and the one that lies directly on the skin, is black, and that the outer one is transparent; so that it seems more or less colored by the same blackness. See here! A big piece of skin taken by me in Amsterdam from the arm of an Italian sailor. You see that the name and skull was branded in blue upon the

true skin, and not the Cuticula or outer layer of skin. You clearly see the brown membrane quite similar to that of Blacks and the totally removed outer membrane that is transparent and hardly colored!

I show You furthermore a piece of skin taken from the side of the breast of a very white woman. You see on top of the true white skin a tanned layer and on top of that, but now removed, a transparent membrane. Does it not follow from all this that we, just like Blacks and tanned Italians, have a colored membrane located under the outer layer of skin, and right on top of the true skin just like the Moors do? When this second layer is completely without color, then we are very white and pale: that is to say, we are white Moors, or rather, we are people similar to Blacks in every way except that we have this middle layer less tanned. This black skin, or this second or middle layer, when injured, never grows back the same as it was before but stays white, as I demonstrate to you in a piece of skin from the shin. It is just the same with us when we have scars, they stay white, as can be seen most often on those that are pock-marked. The same is the case with black animals, please excuse the comparison. A black horse, having lost hair through abrasions, burns, or ulcers, always gets white hair in its place. That slight and subtle something, which changes the color of our outer skin and hair into black, seems to be strained from our blood most often in the prime of youth: that is why we become gray and get white silvery hair, which is the most beautiful jewel of advanced age.

It is not merely the sun which is the cause of the darkness of our skin, although it has more to do with it than anything else. Our privy parts, which modesty teaches us to cover, have a second layer in their skin which is quite brown, even among the whitest people. Many women see the lower part of their body and the circles around the nipples become completely black whenever they are pregnant. When we become thin and waste away, our skin becomes sufficiently black to bring about a proverb, "to be black from emaciation"; and indeed one often sees this happen. In contrast, the skin becomes whiter when it is made smoother and stretched by plumpness.

I deem it sufficient to have shown through physical examination of our body and especially of our skin that there is not any reason why we should not consider the race of the Moors to be descended like ours from Adam. Be Adam created black, brown, tanned or white, his descendants, as soon as they spread out over the wide surface of the earth, necessarily had to change in color and shape according to how the country, the particular foods and illnesses differed. In many, an accidental variation was passed on through heredity, as we still see happen daily. A mixture of two very different types of people could not but produce a third type, which carried on something from both and which could only be changed in the course of several centuries. Remember from ancient history how the peoples from the North invaded Europe, all the way to the South; how those in Asia spread Northwards, how the Africans and Moors occupied a part of Europe, so that in Portugal and Spain entire recognizable groups of these can still be found. How on the contrary, we explored the remotest coasts of Asia, Africa and America, which are presently populated by Whites. What a mixture would come out of that? And how different must the color be in our Commonwealth, where scarcely a family can be found which is not linked through various marriages to a great number of nations and has kept a confusing mixture of their features and color?

Read, in case you may want to know more about it and make the examples that I showed you of Moors become clear in your mind, the excellent discourse of the great Albinus on the cause and origin of the color of Blacks and other people. Read what Littre, that renowned Member of the Royal French Academy, left us in writing in the proceedings of the year 1702; leaf through the quoted work of the incomparable Maupertuis, and in particular the *Natural History of Mankind* by the immortal Buffon, published in his third Volume of the Royal Natural History Collection. Add to that the Observations of the talented Le Cat; and You will no longer raise any objections to joining me in holding out the hand of brotherhood to Negroes and Blacks, and in recognizing them as true descendants of the first man whom we all recognize as our Father!

I have spoken.