

Racial Fluidity: A Story in Four Quotations

By Nathan Luis Cartagena, PhD

1. **Gomes Eanes de Azurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* (1444 AD)**

[On] the next day, which was the 8th of the month of August, very early in the morning, by reason of the heat, the seamen began to make ready their boats, and to take out those captives, and carry them on shore, as they were commanded. And these, placed all together in that field, were a marvelous sight; for amongst them were some white enough, fair to look upon, and well proportioned; others were less white like mulattoes; others again were as black as Ethiops [Ethiopians], and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear (to those who saw them) the images of a lower hemisphere.

2. **Alessandro Valignano, S.J. *Sumario* (1580)**

These people are all white, courteous and highly civilized, so much so that they surpass all the other known races of the world. They are naturally very intelligent, although they have no knowledge of sciences, because they are the most warlike and bellicose race yet discovered on the earth...

There is this difference between Indian and Japanese Christians, which in itself proves that there is really no room for comparison between them, for each one of the former was converted from some individual ulterior motive, and since they are blacks, and of small sense, they are subsequently very difficult to improve and turn into good Christians; whereas the Japanese usually become converted, not on some whimsical individual ulterior motive (since it is their suzerians who expect to benefit thereby and not themselves) but only in obedience to their lord's command; and since they are white and of good understanding and behavior, and greatly given to outward show, they readily frequent churches and sermons, and when they are instructed become very good Christians.

3. **Benjamin Franklin's *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind* (1755)**

Which leads me to add one Remark: That the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably very small. All Africa is black or tawny. Asia chiefly tawny. America (exclusive of the new Comers) wholly so. And in Europe, the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes, are generally of what we call a swarthy Complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who with the English, make the Principal Body of White People on the Face of the Earth. I could wish their Numbers were increased. And while we are, as I may call it, *Scouring* our Planet, by clearing America of Woods, and so making this Side of our Globe reflect a brighter Light to the Eyes of Inhabitants in Mars or Venus, why should we in the Sight of Superior Beings, darken its People? Why increase the Sons of Africa, by Planting them in America, where we have so fair an Opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White and Red? But perhaps I am partial to the Complexion of my Country, for such kind of Partiality is natural to Mankind.

4. **Ian Haney López on Statutory Racial Definitions in *White by Law* (2006)**

In the years leading up to [*Brown v. Board* (1954/55)], most states that made racial distinctions in their laws provided statutory racial definitions, almost always focusing on the boundaries of Black identity. Alabama and Arkansas defined anyone with one drop of “Negro” blood as Black; Florida had a one-eighth rule; Georgia referred to “ascertainable” non-White blood; Indiana used a one-eighth rule; Kentucky relied on a combination of any “appreciable admixture” of Black ancestry and a one-sixteenth rule; Louisiana did not statutorily define Blackness but did adopt via its Supreme Court an “appreciable mixture of negro blood” standard; Maryland used a “person of negro descent to the third generation” test; Mississippi combined an “appreciable amount of Negro blood” and a one-eighth rule; Missouri used a one-eighth test, as did Nebraska, North Carolina, and North Dakota; Oklahoma referred to “all persons of African descent,” adding that the “term ‘white race’ shall include all other persons”; Oregon promulgated a one-fourth rule; South Carolina had a one-eighth standard; Tennessee defined Blacks in terms of “mulattoes, mestizos, and their descendants, having any blood of the African race in their veins”; Texas used an “all persons of mixed blood descended from negro ancestry” standard; Utah law referred to mulattos, quadroons, and octoroons; and Virginia defined Blacks as those whom there was “ascertainable any Negro blood” with not more than one-sixteenth Native American ancestry.