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## Signs across Races

Al-Jāhiz’s cosmo-semiosis and his trans-racial mapping of the “human”

### Abstract

This essay aims to carry out an analysis of al-Jāhiz’s *Book of the Glory of the Black Race* from a semiotic perspective. The topic of racial difference is read in light of the theory of categorization that al-Jāhiz develops in his main work, titled *Book of Animals*. What is particular to this approach to categorization is the adoption of a cosmo-semiotic view according to which the overall world and the plurality of entities comprising it are immanently and signically inter-related. This means that the checklist of features and connotations, namely the attributes, composing each category are interpreted in a non-exclusionary way. Rather than consisting of oppositional and mutually exclusive categories, al-Jāhiz’s world comprises nuanced categorical differences that result from the ubiquitous and trans-categorical presence of those same attributes. The significance of each attribute is therefore an outcome of its radial inclusion in many other categories, which are, in turn, mutually interrelated. What determines the smooth and ambiguous borders of each category is the responsible and weighted choice of the attributes to be chosen, on a case by case basis, as salient categorical axes. From this perspective, even the human being is a sign, precisely an “interpretant” sign, and his moral and destinal task is to decode the semiotic and therefore relational cipher that is immanently inscribed by God in Creation. This moral task becomes a never-ending duty that makes semiosis the very categorical pivot of humanity.

The trans-categorical method of inquiry is also applied by al-Jāhiz to a “reading” of racial diversity. Hence, the real glory of the Black race—and the genuine thesis underlying this book—is its assessment of the human category, and its attitude to embody the best attributes/qualities with which God has endowed (at least potentially) humankind. Skin color differences have no relevance in God’s eyes, nor are they the consequence of any kind of divine punishment or reward. Even if an open-minded material investigation and comparison of some black-skinned human beings finds them to be connoted by many good attributes, blackness in itself is still not considered to be a salient categorical axis. The value of each individual depends on the degree to which s/he engages a genuine inquiring gaze on the signs of human trans-racial and racially ubiquitous positive attributes.

**Keywords:** Al-Jāhiz, Race, Semiosis, Categories, Trans-cultural

### 1. Al-Jāhiz’s *Glory of the Black Race* and its semiotic generative source

Al-Jāhiz was one of the greatest scholars in the traditional array of Islamic thinkers. He lived during the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. and was a hyper-prolific writer with a polyvalent and multidisciplinary approach

to research.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will analyze his *Book of the Glory of the Black Race* (*Risalat mufakharat al-sudan 'ala al-bidan*) from a semiotic-anthropological perspective. This book was recently interpreted as a precursor of modern Racial and Pro-Black Studies through an emphasis on its historical ties with the rebellion of the Zanj (the Black People from some African regions in Arab language) which took place during the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E.<sup>2</sup> I will propose a different reading, not immediately concerned with political and/or ideological issues. Despite the partisan sound of its title, I think that al-Jāhiz's *Book of the Glory of the Black Race*, offers a sort of semiotic diagram for a trans-cultural reading of races and their significance.

The text, actually, starts with a sequence of excerpts from other authors' works that literally glorify the deeds of Zanj historical figures so as to demonstrate and 'certify' the positive qualities of Black peoples. Many of these actions were linked to the successful rebellion of the Zanj against the enslavement enforced upon them by Arab With the potentates: an exploitation which sadly entailed something very close to the modern trans-Atlantic deportation of Black African peoples to the New World. By and by, however, al-Jāhiz shifts the focus of his discourse from specific, historically contextualized events, to the general features of the black race. But he seems even to go even beyond this to the point of drawing—although by only through the barest of hints—a black-centered semiotic of colors. What he appears to offer is an oppositional schema of creatures and things within which he shows the empirical equivalence between 'black entities' and 'good entities.' The 'black list' does not only include black human beings and their qualities, but indeed all that is black: mountains, fruits, stones, kinds of wood, animals, sources of smell, the darkness in itself, the night ... and even snakes, scorpions, wild animals, and ghosts, because of their link to blackness.

Nonetheless, even if only gradually, his discourse slips into ambiguity. Al-Jāhiz seems perfectly aware that a classification of worlds grounded on a rigid, formal opposition between black and white (and/or other colors) would be nothing but an aprioristic and paroxysmal representation of the world. Black, as a color, could be considered as a feature, a sign, but in and of itself it cannot be assumed as an essential constructive axis to interpret the world and grasp its inner order. Little by little, al-Jāhiz's introduces ambiguity, insinuating it into the reader's mind.<sup>3</sup> He shows that bad things, or at least things, events and creatures that could be negatively assessed, also contain the feature of 'blackness.' The final point on the way down towards the ambiguity or ambivalence of "being black" is reached when he establishes an empirical or evenemential coincidence between black entities and pure entities, blackness and purity. From an expositive point of view, this final point is embodied by the purity of the Islamic religious symbol correspondent to the Black Stone. This climax of coincidence between blackness and purity is, however, suddenly and contrastively followed by this remark:<sup>4</sup>

The Arabs draw glory from the black color. If an objector advances: "On what is that based, as they say: Such is of a pure white, bursting of whiteness, white and of clear face? We will answer: By this, the Arabs do not mean the whiteness of the skin, but rather the nobility and purity of character.

<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive outlook on this extraordinary author can be found in Montgomery (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Ingram (2015), Smith (2015), Mcleod (2016), Rashidi (2008).

<sup>3</sup> On the al-Jāhiz's rhetoric style and rhetoric strategy see Hefter (2014).

<sup>4</sup> The excerpts from *Book of the Glory of the Black Race* included hereinafter in the text are adapted from the English edition of "Risalat mufakharat al-sudan 'ala al-bidan" edited by Starr (2012).

And shortly after:

The Arabs qualify the iron as dark, because it is hard, and that it is dark means black.

He goes ahead to reach a sort of coincidence of opposites, namely ‘black’ and ‘white,’ when they are inscribed within the category of purity.

In light of this categorical shifting of blackness, considered as a feature or attribute (in the Aristotelian sense), we are compelled to acknowledge the impossibility of applying contemporary attempts to construe a structuralist semiotic<sup>5</sup> of colors to al-Jāhiz’s apparently oppositional discourse about colors, and specifically ‘black.’ Conversely, under a ‘skin deep’ classification of the world accordingly to an ‘either/or’ exclusive logic, he introduces his own peculiar semiotic approach to categorization, characteristically hinged upon the multivalent classificatory role of attributes, connotations, features: in short, their trans-categoriality.

In my view, *The Glory of Blacks* should not be interpreted as an oppositional and racializing discourse that recognizes and normatively constitutes black and white (or non-black colors) as two contrasting sides of reality and the universe. Rather, human beings, including black ones, are to be considered valiant because they, along with all the black entities of the world, partake in the overall gamut of virtues and good qualities taken as such, that is, as abstract categorical features: black entities that are, at the same time, different and equivalent to white (or other diversely colored) entities. This is because black entities include in their categorical checklist attributes and connotations that our mind can discover to also be present in the categorical structures of other entities. The emphasis al-Jāhiz places on this multi-categorical presence of attributes and connotations stems from his own ‘and/and’ or inclusive logic of classification/categorization.

The Black Race and other Black entities (animal, things, etc.) have some aspects that are superior to the White Race, because they participate in, and embody in themselves, qualities shared by the otherwise-colored entities of the world. But such superiority is not to be considered in absolute terms; rather, it is contingent, and this means that is up to us, the human beings endowed with rationality and the ‘ability to know,’ to determine which features are to be deemed worthy for use as categorical axes.

When we look at the text, all evidence indicates that the implicit compositional inspiration of *The Glory of the Black Race* has been to challenge a pervasive social conviction that White is better, along with all the prejudices stemming from this cultural/political representation. Al-Jāhiz seems to be aiming at dismantling the semantic coherence of such a cultural disposition by showing all the contextual areas in which our mind can and must recognize the empirical pertinence of the sign ‘black’ to human beings, animals, things, events, situations, and more generally, entities which conversely are connoted by good qualities, which should thus be included in their categorical checklists.

The *chromo-cosmology* al-Jāhiz seems to describe as an empirical occurrence is, therefore, an expositive premise meant to give impetus to a semiotic transformative process that he uses as

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<sup>5</sup> Groupe μ (1992).

dialectical motor to urge the reader to follow him in his idiomatic, ever-open commitment to endlessly categorizing the world and, in this way, acquiring a wider knowledge of it.

In the little treatise on *the Glory of the Black Race* we find a typical strategy that al-Jāhiz employs in his works. On the one hand, he adopts the schema of a dialectic debate between different parties as a rhetorical device to make the right solution emerge from the words of subjects different from the author himself, even if this ultimately depends on the way the writer drives the discussion. Through this literary fiction, the writer puts on a sort of self-generating objectivity that allows him to remain in the background of the textual development. However, in al-Jāhiz's writings we can often find the voice of the author himself, which as a *deus ex machina*, shows up for the exposition to veer decisively towards the statement of pivotal theoretical or argumentative steps. This occurs also in *Glory of the Black Race*, even if here—as pointed out above—the other debating party is implicit as the socio-cultural dominant context of Arab society at that time. Consequentially, the argumentation ambles among quotes from various literary sources (poetry, historical reports, sacred texts, experiential records, and so on), each of which is called upon to give support and evidence for the theses of the debating actors. In the midst of this swarming field of ideas, cultural clues, empirical and lexicographic indexes, the author's position takes the form of a sort of discursive and demonstrative thirdness. It is embodied by the voice of the author to give theatrical concreteness to a synthetic logical *interpretant*—something retrospectively echoing the Peircean one. However, for the reader to adequately weigh the legitimacy of such an (only apparently) anachronistic reading of al-Jāhiz's *Book of the Glory of the Black* and before going any further in the analysis of the semiotic constructive principle of this work, we have to put its content against the foil of the overall cosmo-semiotics elaborated by this author in his *magnus opus*, which is titled *Book of the Animals* (*Kitab al-Hayawan*).

## 2. Al-Jāhiz's Cosmo-semiotic Vision in his *Book of Animals*

This huge and unfinished work by al-Jāhiz orbits around the attempt to elaborate an all-comprehensive taxonomy of the animal kingdom. However, this is only the formal task undertaken in this encyclopedic taxonomy. The true purpose of this opus is to draw up a method of classification and, through it, determine the relationship between mind, the world and the process of signification that leads human beings to know the divine cipher enshrined in creation. The fundamental assumption al-Jāhiz's speculative path takes as its starting point is that all creatures speak, and thereby tell us something. The content of their speaking (*nāṭiq*) is the expression of God's creational design and His infinite knowledge, resting in each element of Creation. In this sense, all entities, animate as well as inanimate, tell us something, and can reveal to the interpreting human mind the signs of God's wisdom (*hikma*). It would be better, however, to give evidence for this global semiotic conception using al-Jāhiz's words (from *Book of Animals*, I, 33-37)<sup>6</sup>:

<sup>6</sup> The excerpts from *The Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*) included hereinafter in the text are drawn by the partial translation of the related Book I which Miller carried out in her insightful analysis of this al-Jāhiz's work (Miller, 2013). I would like explicitly express my debt with this young scholar and his thoughtful research. See there, moreover, for further bibliographical references on the *Book of Animals* and al-Jāhiz's theory of categorization.

We have found the generation of the world (*kawn al-'ālam*), along with everything in it, to be wisdom (*ḥikma*). And we have found that wisdom is of two kinds (*darbayn*): One has been made as wisdom (*ḥikma*), but does not rationally comprehend (*ya'qil*) that wisdom (*ḥikma*) or its consequences; and the other has been made as wisdom (*ḥikma*), and does understand that wisdom and its consequences. So the comprehending (*'āqil*) and the uncomprehending (*ghayr al-'āqil*) are equivalent insofar as they are each a sign (*dalāla*) of wisdom, but they differ insofar as one of them is a sign (*dalāla*) that does not interpret (*yastadillu*) and the other is a sign that does interpret. Then, there was made for the interpreter of signs a connection (*sabab*), for him to indicate (*yadullu 'alā*) elements of his interpretation, and elements that have resulted from his interpretation, and this was called communication (*bayān*).

Communication has been made in four divisions: speech, writing, dactylometry (signal by means of the fingers), and gesture.

The communication of the “sign that does not interpret” has been made as follows. It is: its enabling of the interpreter [to understand] it, and its guidance, for anyone who reflects upon it, toward understanding the proofs that have been stored in it, the signs that have been placed inside it, and the wonderful wisdom that has been deposited in it. So dumb (*khurs*) mute (*sāmita*) bodies can be said to speak (*nātiqa*) insofar as [they are] signs (*dalāla*), and they are expressive (*mu'riba*) insofar as they give accurate testimony. For the providence and the wisdom that they contain give information to anyone seeking it, and speak to anyone that wants them to speak – just as emaciation and pallor signify illness, while plumpness and an attractive fresh color “speak” of health.

[...]

The body's position and its physical presence are a sign, giving information about its condition, drawing attention to it, and informing about it. Dumb (*abkam*) mute (*khurs*) inanimate objects (*jamād*) have a share in communication along with living speaking humans.

So anyone who says that there are really five kinds of communication is speaking in an acceptable (*jawāz*) manner according to the Arabic language and according to the testimony of reason. This is one of the two divisions of wisdom (*ḥikma*), and one of the two meanings of the trust (*wadī'a*) that God has deposited [in his appointment of the world].

The other branch of wisdom is that varied knowledge which He has deposited in the breasts of every kind of animal; that marvellous guidance which He has predisposed...

[...]

They achieve spontaneously (to the extent of the capacities inherent in their nature) improvisatorily, extemporaneously, directly, and in an impromptu fashion, that which the experts, men of insight, and the philosophers among the scholars of humanity cannot achieve whether by hand or with tools. In fact, people of the most perfect traits and most complete characteristics cannot achieve this, whether by improvisation and spontaneity, by domination and force, by gradual improvement and a step-by-step approach, or by arranging the prerequisites and setting up helpful conditions. In this way, the effort of a human being, with his piercing senses, his complete capacities, who can act in different areas, and who is advanced in many fields – he is powerless to achieve the instinctive behavior of many animals, when he looks upon the various things they produce: that [capacity] which was bestowed upon the spider and the caterpillar (*surfa*); that which the bee was taught; that wonderful knowledge and strange craft which the weaver-bird (*tanawwūt*) was made to understand; and that which is in other creatures as well.

Moreover, He has not decreed people's incapacity by their natures (*anfus*) in most such things – only in those things which flying bugs, creeping bugs, and vermin can do. [God] gave mankind reason and capacity, agency and control, responsibility and experience, deliberation and competition, understanding and quickness. He made mankind so that he looks into the consequences of things, and so that when he is good at something, he finds everything less obscure to be easier. He made the other animals so that even when one of them is good at something that the most skilled human does not excel at – even when it excels at something amazing – it still cannot do something that you would think would be simpler and easier for it; indeed it cannot do what is actually simpler.

[...]

Then God placed these two kinds of wisdom before the eyes of those who consider, and the ears of those who reflect, urging them to think and deduce, to take heed and be awestruck, to know deeply and

understand clearly, to pause and remember. He made them as a reminder and a warning, and he made people's inner natures so that they give rise to thoughts, and cause the people having [the thoughts] to explore different ideas. (*ja 'ala al-ḥitar tunshi' al-khawāṭir wa-tajūlu bi-ahlihā fī al-madhāhib*)

The role al-Jāḥiẓ gives to his own interventions in his texts somehow resembles that of the human mind amidst creation. All entities encapsulate and potentially emanate signs of God's wisdom by means of their 'behavior,' including human beings. However, what is particular to human beings within the order of creation and is, at the same time, their main task, is the interpretation of the polyphonic orchestration of God's signs, and of the pervasive speech of creatures, so as to learn from them. This 'learning' is the specific human ontological substance: what rises from the fulfillment of such a cosmological function is a cogeneration of sense by means of the interpenetrative encounter between the signs from the world's entities and the sign that the human being himself constitutes. In al-Jāḥiẓ's view, semiotic cogeneration and communication seem to be coextensive, as if learning and acquiring knowledge were continuous to God's act of Creation. The signical matter of the world and the materiality of signs (or, their coextensiveness with creation and its materiality) make in turn knowledge and the world coextensive.

The classification/categorization of the entities populating the world is a way to know them, hear their voices, semiotically *develop* the meaning they enshrine, and ultimately, engender an attunement between the human mind and God's wisdom. Classifying, categorizing the world's creatures is precisely the interpretation of the signical cipher that God has materially codified in each of them, from the greatest to the smallest, the most important to the humblest. We can find here another important element of al-Jāḥiẓ's cosmo-semiotics: the interdependence and the interrelationality of all items of Creation. Like many others philosophers of his time and cultural context, al-Jāḥiẓ knows and is influenced by an atomistic physical conception of the world. He thinks that Creation is constituted of parts, and that parts as well as bodies, in turn, comprise atoms. Hence his following argument: assume that one atom can be removed; then, since atoms 'are of equal weight with an equal effect, share and portion,' the same should and could be permitted of another one, and then another, and so on. In this way, we could arrive, as a last consequence, at the removal of the whole. This implies, therefore, that it is impossible to choose among the parts of Creation without compromising the whole.

The above argument, however, is developed further, so as to escape the merely quantitative and deterministic implications typical of ancient atomism. Al-Jāḥiẓ seems to think that Creation is made of parts, and that each part or entity is like a bundle or aggregation of attributes. These attributes not only have quantitative substance, as atoms, but also qualitative features. Nonetheless the significance of these qualities could not be grasped by absolutizing their individual differences. On the contrary, if we want to understand the significance of the qualitative attributes comprising categories and individuals, we have to consider their trans-categoriality, that is to say, their simultaneous, relative and multivalent presence within many categories and individuals. Only in this way can we understand the compositional significance of qualities with respect to the whole and, therefore, God Himself. In this sense, the meaning of each quality is not something that transfigures under our gaze, through the force of our ability to connect it to partial or overarching ends that are external to Creation; were this so, qualities would be a kind of means to an end whose significance changed according to the nature of the end, on a case by case basis. Rather, what relativizes and, at the same time reveals their significance to us, is the semiotic co-relationality of the simultaneous presence of qualities within

different categories. In other words, it is the actual and omni-directional self-reflexivity of the Creation, considered in its materiality/signicality, that shows us the immanent relational significance of qualitative attributes. This does not mean that both ends and values, teleological and axiological dimensions, are outside the order of Being, but only that they are not heteronomous or heteroclit with respect to the material world: in short, ends are inherently embedded in the world's matter.

As al-Jāhīz explains, this teleological and axiological immanence implies that good and evil, sweet and bitter, as well as all other qualities, are as such only with respect to human beings. In God's eyes, everything is equivalent because it is all co-constitutive with the inclusive order of Creation. What distinguishes creatures (both animate and inanimate) is only the degree of their obedience to God, something which is directly connected to the rationality/wisdom enshrined in each created entity and its attitude toward being an object of knowledge/interpretation or an active motor of hermeneutical activities. Human beings' specific task is therefore to use their reason to go beyond the mere appearance and contingent absoluteness of qualities when considered with regard to single things, and to see their radial, polyvalent presence in all the entities populating the whole of Creation. Only in this way can human beings, by means of their interpreting activity, engender the synthesis or *interpretant*—to use a Peircean term—that, through communication, attunes human minds to God's wisdom. As we will see, this is at the same time a cognitive and moral activity which conjoins "ought" and "is," values and facts.

In response to this argument, contemporary philosophers and semioticians will likely recall Spinozan as well as Deleuzian visions and, once again, Peircean semiotics.<sup>7</sup> The immanent and coextensive conception of knowledge and being elaborated by al-Jāhīz, moves on, however, along an idiomatic discursive path, which is strictly intertwined with its dialectical approach to categorization.

The starting point in the al-Jāhīz's analysis of categorization is natural language. It is so because he assumes that the extant words, through their very existence, constitute signs of the world. This assumption depends on an immanent conception of Creation and the related signical matter that pervades al-Jāhīz's thought. Nonetheless, immanence and materiality are assumed, as it were, in an integral way. This means that everything existing within Creation should be heard and interpreted if we want to grasp the reality of categories that are inherently ciphered in the material world by God. To this end, al-Jāhīz carries out a specific critical review of existing categories—and the related words—using two main tools: 'comparison' and 'parallel listing.' To show the idiomatic pace of al-Jāhīz's argument, consider the following passage (from *Book of Animals*, I, 28-31):

Animals are divided into four groups: that which walks (*shay' yamshī*), that which flies (*shay' yaṭīr*), that which swims (*shay' yasbaḥ*), and that which creeps (*shay' yansāḥ*).

However (*illā anna*), all flying things walk, though that which walks and does not fly is not called a bird (*tā'ir*).

[...]

According to [the philosophers], the "shared" (*mushtarak*) includes the sparrow (*'usfūr*), for it does not have curved talons or a hooked beak (*minsar*), and it collects grain, and yet despite this it hunts ants when they fly, it hunts locusts, and it eats meat. It does not regurgitate for its young as the dove (*ḥamām*) does, but feeds them chunks as the birds of prey do. There are many mixed birds like sparrows and we will mention

<sup>7</sup> As for an analysis of the possible threads of continuity among the semiotics-immanentistic approaches developed by these three Western philosophers see Gangle (2016).

them in their place, God willing.

Not everything that flies with two wings is a bird. Black dung-beetles (*ji lān*), *jaḥl* beetles, wild bees, flies, wasps, locusts, ants, moths, gnats, termites, cultivated bees, and other things all fly, but they are not called birds. However, they could be called birds in a certain manner of speaking and on certain occasions (*‘ind ba‘d al-dhikr walsabab*). People call the chicken a bird but they don’t call a locust a bird, even though the locust is much more of a flier, and is more famously proverbial for it. Angels fly and have wings but are not birds. And Ja‘far b. Abī Ṭālib “has two wings and flies with them in Heaven wherever he wishes;” but Ja‘far is not a bird.

As can be observed, the analysis starts with a basic partition of animal groups molded in an Aristotelian fashion. This initial approach would seem to suggest that the ensuing sub-categorization will be developed in a deductive hierarchical way by assuming each attribute/feature in an exclusionary way. But al-Jāḥiẓ’s technical approach to categorizing almost immediately shows an inclination to emphasize the multivalent signification and trans-categorical spreading of attributes. The sparrow is usually classified as a shared bird, namely not a bird of prey: nonetheless it does not eat only grain but also ants and flies. In the same vein, not only the flying creatures are birds, and so on.

In a sense, al-Jāḥiẓ seems to show a deep-rooted desire to produce semantic conflation by dismantling, as far as he is able, all the previously stated classifications. However, his strategy aims to show that reality, experience and language itself, in all their instantiations, confute and compel our minds to relativize the exclusionary or oppositional use of attributes/connotations. In other words, if we imagine categories as bounded spaces—a metaphor that was actually very common in the cultural and intellectual environment of al-Jāḥiẓ’s time—then attributes prove to be multi-sited. In this regard, we find in the above excerpt the expression ‘mixed birds,’ which is a species of the general meta-category of ‘inter-category’ and ‘inter-categorical entities.’ Creatures such as the sparrow and the dog, precisely because they are predators and yet not animals of prey, demonstrate their hybridity, that is, their apparent and relative indeterminacy with respect to the order of Creation.

The first book of the *Book of Animals* includes a large section that reproduces a debate on the categorical nature of the dog and the rooster, both taken as examples of hybridity and inter-categoriality. Already in the 9th century C.E., Arab culture was strongly influenced by the Aristotelian tradition (including Porfirio’s *Isagoge*) that recorded the existence of the *dualizers*—animals pertaining to different classes—but ultimately overlooked their significance in the categorical taxonomy of the living world, or the verification of assumed taxonomical differentiations. Animals like dogs were considered impure, and hence even a source of disgust. Of course, this theoretical and philosophical justification echoed a widespread cultural attitude unconnected to the taxonomical problems of speculative thinkers. However, just for this reason, al-Jāḥiẓ asserts the importance of considering this ‘dog case:’ it is a salient manifestation of experience, of material experience, and it is precisely in concrete life that human beings must search for the ciphers of the semiotic order that God has nestled within Creation. As observed above, everything speaks to us, and brings signs of God’s creational design. The signification of any attribute, as such part and parcel of Creation, should be related to the overall order God gave, and continues to give to the world.

To encourage human minds—those of the readers—to put their semiotic active potentialities in motion, al-Jāḥiẓ takes up the dialectical instrument of comparison. In so doing, his main commitment seems to be that of singling out a specific attribute, assumed to be salient or pivotally



connotative to a category, to show that (a) it can be found in other categories; or, conversely, it can function (b) as an entity included in a categorical type that holds one or more attributes also included by type or extensions in another category. To give argumentative and dialectical power to this critical approach, al-Jāhiz deploys impressive lists of categories and tokens that prove the multi-sited and trans-categorical significance of attributes. In each case, this process engenders a sort of feedback effect on the way in which the relevance and signification of a specific attribute is assumed in relation to the category that was initially considered. This effort of polyphonically widening the range of our cognitive and classifying gaze is inevitably endless and subverts any possible hierarchical deductive order in our tendency to apply an aprioristic order onto the world.

To make as powerful as possible the blurring and dismantling effect of his comparison strategy, al-Jāhiz spares no rhetorical device. Distinctively, he draws on the power of humor and irony, sometimes even accompanied by scatological and indecent sexual examples, so as to exploit the categorical ambivalence underlying the very phenomenon of human laughter. The geniality displayed in the use of communicative and psychological disruptions provoked by this ironic comparative discourse demonstrates that al-Jāhiz seeks to go beyond a simple elicitation of laughter. By compelling people to laugh, he inspires in his readers a self-reflexive urge to re-consider and remold the usual, unaware ways of categorizing the world, so that an inter-categorical movement relativizes the exclusive significance of each categorical spectrum/domain. The polyvalence of attributes need not necessarily lead to the invention of new categories, as if the trans-categoriality of their presence must imply the existence of other categories. The approach al-Jāhiz adopts is quite different, and this diversity can be traced back to his reluctance to invent and use neologism.

The refusal toward neologism could appear, at this point, as a sort of contradictory element of his thought. I would argue, however, that this apparent inconsistency is, instead, only superficial, and stems from our tendency to unconsciously superimpose the modern Aristotelian Western taxonomical method over al-Jāhiz's epistemology. His disinclination to coin neologisms is due, once again, to his immanentistic interpretation of the world and its signical matter, and an ensuing aversion towards the multiplication of reciprocally excluding categories. Conversely, the problem arising from the trans-categoriality of attributes, and directly tied to the comparison/listing strategy, is handled by al-Jāhiz through a continuous shifting of the indexical contours related to the individual categories already existing in both common and specialized language. The 'and/and' logic assumed as a constructive and inquiring pattern for interpreting the worlds' signs in *Book of Animals* leads to an interpretation of the trans-categoriality of attributes as differences of degree, with a sort of potential ubiquity, rather than as a source of hybridity taken as a factor of logical and existential confusion and disorder. In other words, to al-Jāhiz, differences are not reciprocally exclusionary and conflicting; and yet they are not reciprocally indifferent,<sup>8</sup> in the same way categories and parts of the universe are not. They are to be understood, on the contrary, as reciprocally interpenetrating and co-implied. The human mind must understand that attributes or qualities, as signs, are distributed across Creation and its creatures along a semiotic continuum. Thus, the human task is not to learn from the signical fabric of the material world by means of an exclusionary categorical allotment of attributes that are

<sup>8</sup> On the *reciprocal in-difference among entities*, including human beings, as a pragmatic implication of the adoption of the exclusionary Aristotelian logic of categorization see Ponzio (2013: spec. ch. 2) and his critical analysis of the Petrus Hispanus' *Summulae Logicales*, 1230, Liber II.

found in self-bounded bundles, or semantic domains. It consists, rather, in an infinite verifying of the concrete effectiveness of the salience given to each attribute in the categories included in the current linguistic uses, and the appropriateness of the related inclusion within one or another category of the individual creatures, things, events, and so on.

If we consider that each category is a bundle, an aggregation of attributes, it will not come as much of a surprise that al-Jāhiz's semiotics is a processive one, that is, an endless semiosis. Needless to say, such a vision seems to be—again—a retrospective echoing of Peirce's epistemology. One possible objection to this analogy, however, might point to the pragmatic, and therefore experientialist, roots of Peirce's semiotics, something not fully recognizable in al-Jāhiz dialectics. On one hand, such a criticism is well-founded. Despite his inclination toward immanence and the examination of the material world, al-Jāhiz is not a Western modern scientist or philosopher of science, as Peirce was. Nonetheless one could contend—employing al-Jāhiz's argumentative technique—that pragmatism and the related processive semiotics are not only strictly tied to the experientialist epistemological approach. As strange as this may seem, in support of this idea we can turn to John Dewey<sup>9</sup> and one of his very rare references to Peirce's epistemological approach. An intriguing coincidence is that this quote relates to the famous pragmatic maxim: 'Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object'.<sup>10</sup> Regarding the applications and projections of the pragmatic maxim, Dewey argues as follows:

The mode of definition, however, has no inherent dependence upon pragmatism as a philosophy. It has been stated and adopted on the basis of analysis of mathematics and physics by writers who would be horrified to be called pragmatists. Thus stated, it is the principle known as "extensive abstraction," and assumes this form: ". . . what really matters to science is not the inner nature of objects but their mutual relations, and that any set of terms with the right mutual relations will answer all scientific purposes as well as any other set with the same sort of relations."<sup>7</sup>[nt.<sup>7</sup> Broad, *Scientific Thought* (1923) 39. The idea and the name are taken, however, by him from A. N. Whitehead. This is a more general statement than Peirce's, because it applies to mathematical concepts, such as "point," whose "consequences" are not physical effects. In concrete matters, the "mutual relations" which count are, however, of the nature of effects.]

From this point of view, the right-and-duty-bearing unit, or subject, signifies whatever has consequences of a specified kind. The reason that molecules or trees are not juridical "subjects" is then clear; they do not display the specified consequences. The definition of a legal subject is thus a legitimate, and quite conceivably a practically important matter. But it is a matter of analysis of facts, not of search for an inhering essence. The facts in question are whatever specific consequences flow from being right-and-duty-bearing units. This analysis is a matter to be conducted by one competent in law, and not by the layman. But even a layman can point out the field within which the search falls. The consequences must be social in character, and they must be such social consequences as are controlled and modified by being the bearing of rights and obligations, privileges and immunities.

It is no coincidence that Dewey proposes an enlarged interpretation of the pragmatic maxim, beyond a strictly experimental area, and precisely while addressing the "*Historic Background of Corporate Legal*

<sup>9</sup> Dewey (1926).

<sup>10</sup> Peirce (1878).

*Personality*.<sup>11</sup> Relying on Whitehead, Dewey terms such wider use of that maxim as ‘the principle of extensive abstraction,’ something that we can easily trace in al-Jāhiz’s approach, as well. Actually, the latter makes use of many sources to analyze and prove the trans-categoriality of attributes: from naturalistic reports to Islamic Tradition, from Sacred Texts to poetry, historical chronicles to lexicographic analyses, and so on. This is a consequence, after all, of his cosmo-semiotic gaze on the world: the same one that he considered to be a polyphony of voices and speakers.

On the other hand, al-Jāhiz was seriously committed to the study of nature, taken in its materiality, by observing that matter is not a misleading track to the truth, but rather the self-contained semiotic expression of God’s wisdom. In a sense, therefore, we could consider him to be an *ante-litteram* pragmatist, at least with regard to his continual search for *consequences* and *verification* of the semantic scope of each categorical attribute. His method, actually, involves the analytical decomposition of all the attributes present in the checklist of each category, taken one by one as subject-matter for his consideration. Almost in a Peircean sense, attributes are treated as *consequences*.<sup>12</sup> Hence the inquiry moves on through the survey of a series of consequences. All this is ordered to retrospectively ascertain the consistency, the semantic scope, and ultimately, the meaning of the initial attributes/consequences and their placement within categorization, with respect to the whole of Creation. In an almost Spinozian fashion, we can say that the human mind can become aware, by learning through comparison, of the multiple modes of signification that each attribute is capable of performing.

Beyond the intriguing even if anachronistic resemblance to Peirce’s semiosis, in the trans-categorical semantic inquiries of al-Jāhiz we can find a radial approach to categorization that seems to be very similar to the contemporary analysis of categorization proposed by Lakoff,<sup>13</sup> which is in turn deeply influenced by Wittgenstein’s ‘family resemblances.’<sup>14</sup> These trans-temporal and trans-cultural bridging analogies are helpful to convey to the present-day reader the plasticity and fluidity of the categorical landscape drawn by al-Jāhiz. His is a cosmological view inside which the human work of interpretation simultaneously constitutes a destinal cognitive task and a moral imperative.

As previously observed, human semiosis and the making of the world appear to be co-extensive dimensions of Creation. This reading is corroborated by al-Jāhiz’s conception of the human being as a microcosm in which all the attributes, notwithstanding their inconsistency and opposing significance/value, are simultaneously embedded.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the apparently inconsistent and even blurry

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that Dewey’s interpretation of “pragmatic maxim” goes beyond the precise limits of the implication that Peirce himself stated in another later essay, sadly unpublished during his lifetime due to its repeated rejection by both *The Nation* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. This essay was re-written five times by Peirce. The third version, entitled *Pragmatism*, can be found in Peirce’s *Collected Papers*, 1.560.562. Here the founder of pragmatism warns that ‘Yet the maxim of Pragmatism does not bestow a single smile upon beauty, upon moral virtue, or upon abstract truth;—the three things that alone raise Humanity above Animality.’

<sup>12</sup> To make the exposition clearer, the reader could substitute the term ‘consequences’ with ‘implications.’ This change allows for an easier multi-directional projection of the idea of ‘consequences’ both in space (spatial omni-directionality) and in time (towards both past and future). Such an approach, on the other hand, is aligned with the conversion in abductive terms of the pragmatic maxim substantially equivalent to the logical, as well as experimental scheme: if A, then *n* consequence, when ‘A’ could constitute a hypothesis just as a middle term of a syllogism assumed as a guess.

<sup>13</sup> Lakoff (1987).

<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein (1953).

<sup>15</sup> Miller (2013).

ubiquitous presence of attributes across different categories of the world is paralleled by their coexistence inside human beings. Learning, in semiotic/interpretive terms, from the analysis of the world—insofar as it remains holistic, pluralistic, and retains comparisons of its constituents—is a way for humans to learn about themselves and the divine cipher they enshrine. This task is particular to humanity just because each human being is an ‘interpreting sign,’ endowed with a moral responsibility before God to endlessly scan and assess the effective salience of attributes chosen as axes for categorizations and their uses. It is precisely in this sense that the infinite semiosis unfolding through an open- and never-ending comparison/listing can be paralleled to the making of the universe, itself a continuous and circular reiterating of God’s creative action. Learning from the world’s immanent signs and understanding them is, therefore, a kind of re-cognition of the human microcosm in and through the macrocosm: ultimately, humanity rejoining divine wisdom in the form of a human mind’s return to God.

This moral-cognitive scheme is, in some respects, quite similar to the Islamic conception of charity. Charitable acts (after all, a kind of *communication*) are conceptualized in Islamic religious/cultural imagery as a means of recognition/restitution to Allah of all the goods each human being has received from Him, and that to Him belong. The recognition of Otherness, the ability to see in Others the signs that are also constitutive of the microcosm ciphered inside each human being is nothing but a path to God. Giving to Others is going back to God, thus infinitely and circularly reiterating the inner cipher of Creation.<sup>16</sup> In this way, what emerges from human semiotic/learning activity is the ‘interpretant,’ the thirdness in which—even if asymptotically—Creation mirrors itself.

It should not be disconcerting if al-Jāhiz outlines the hermeneutical human task by configuring it as a form of moral responsibility (*taklif*). This is precisely what ultimately distinguishes human beings from animals, in his eyes. It is no coincidence if he illustrates semiosis by swinging between an attentive analysis of legal Islamic imperatives and the most paradoxical inter-categorical comparisons. Hence, in the debate about the categorical pertinence of the dog, one of the competitors aligns the legal ban to eat dog meat with the disgusting habit of dogs to feed on their own feces. But—and this is the answer of the other competitor—if we should trace back the rationale of the Divine prohibition to eat dog meat to its ‘eating shit’ habit, then we should avoid eating the meat of many other animals, which are instead lawfully consumed. Although God’s commandments are to be faithfully obeyed, there is no rational justification for this ban. So, it is to be taken in its individuality, and it is impossible to infer from it any general pattern of categorization for the dog. The rational enlightenment connoting such an argument, although and despite its almost heretical bent, is shown by the ensuing conclusion that ‘eating excrement’ cannot be considered as a salient or axial attribute of categorical differentiation. To underpin this final assertion, al-Jāhiz orchestrates one of the most paradoxical, humorous, and provocative comparison/listings one can find in *Book of Animal*, a sort of a shit-olistic portrait of Creation by means of the words pronounced by someone undoubtedly quite competent in the field:

Musabbah the latrine-sweeper (*alkannaṣ*) said: The word *khayr* (good) is derived from *khur*’ (shit). In dreams, shit is good. .... He claimed that the whole world is putrescent (*munṭina*), its walls and its earth, its rivers and its streams. But everyone is so saturated with this stink surrounding them, that it has annihilated their

<sup>16</sup> Ricca (2017a, 2017b).

perception of it. This is because it has been sitting in their nostrils for so long. He said: He who doubts my story, let him refrain from rejecting it until he has had a chance to test it out, in the first moment right when he exits into the world from a perfumed house, by sniffing deeply. Still, swamps are distinct in stench. This is the speech of Musabbah the latrine-sweeper. (*Book of Animals* 1:245:8-246:1.)

In the end, al-Jāhiz goes as far as to state that the all-pervading ‘shittiness’ of the world does not enable us to assume as axis of categorical differentiation for the shitty alimentary tendencies of dogs, which in most cases, anyway, are simply due to the lack of other kinds of food. In other words, he takes a sort of godly perspective on ‘shit’ beyond good and evil, fragrance and stink, appreciation and disgust. Our disgust for the contingent ‘shitty’ inclinations in the behavior of dogs cannot lead to any exclusion of this animal from the list of categories ordinarily used to conceptualize the nature of the animal kingdom. Conversely, we should emphasize other aspects of this animal, so as to inscribe it within the borders of a larger group of animals, including both friendly attitudes as well as predatory ones. At the same time, we should contextualize the polyvalent behaviors and attitudes of the dog and try to find a salient and, as far as possible, unifying attribute or cluster of attributes to interpret the semiotic lesson of which the dog is bearer. To put it diversely, we have to escape the constraints of a hierarchical, deductive, and exclusionary use of categorization and attributes, and let our understanding range across the entire semiotic landscape that the material world presents to us. Above all, we must avoid applying our decoding failures within the semiotic warp of Creation upon the nature of creatures, which instead immanently embody God’s wisdom (*ḥikma*) and therefore the divine source of the world’s generation (*kawn al-‘ālam*).

### 3. The Relativity of the Signs of Race in the Categorization of Humanity

In the *mu‘tazilit* tradition of thought, where al-Jāhiz was educated and developed his world-view, the universe was conceived and created by God for human beings to understand and read within it the ciphers of His wisdom. In so doing, God reveals His inherent generosity. As I have been arguing, generosity and charity constitute the cognitive and moral sides of the act of recognition that includes knowing Otherness, both human and non-human, as well as attuning one’s own mind to God’s wisdom. The enfolding of this cognitive/moral circle—*God-Creation-Human Being-Creation-God*—finds in generosity/charity a sort of generative pragmatic motor.

Recognizing Otherness implies averting prejudice and an aprioristic use of categorization. Instead, it requires a humble attitude towards the world, and the open-mindedness necessary to probe the kaleidoscopic tapestry of the attributes of ‘the created,’ captured in their immanent material plurality. This is the glory and the duty of humankind, its highest destination. And it is precisely from generosity that the appreciation of the black-skinned humans derives its cultural and moral strength, as we can find at the heart of al-Jāhiz’s *Book of the Glory of the Black Race*.

Everybody knows that the Blacks are among the most generous of mortals; a quality that is found only among noble characters. These people have a natural talent for dancing to the rhythm of tambourine, without needing to learn it. There are no better singers anywhere in the world, no people more polished and eloquent, and no people less given to insulting language.  
[...]

They are courageous, energetic, and generous, which are the virtues of nobility, and also good-tempered and with little propensity to evil. They are cheerful, smiling, and devoid of malice, which is a sign of noble character.

As can be noted, al-Jāhiz's words elude any temptation to ascribe to Blacks the exclusive possession of the attribute of generosity, and the other virtues orbiting around it. The generous inclination of Blacks is a quality that they share with other mortal human beings. It is an attribute and a sign: but as such can be found in many other categories of humans and non-humans. In short, Blacks are not generous by virtue of their blackness, but their blackness is morally illuminated by their generosity. Al-Jāhiz's main goal seems to be that of showing modes of participation of Blacks in the bundle of good attributes extant in the category 'human,' the very attributes that outline the essential figure of a (universal) human being of worth. If this assumption about the Black's inclination to generosity is to be proven according to al-Jāhiz's inquiring idiomatic method, it needs a trans-categorical examination. And indeed, we find it in the words immediately following:

Some people say that their generosity is due to their stupidity, shortsightedness and lack of foresight, but our reply is that this is a wicked debased way of commending generosity and altruism. At that rate the wisest and most intelligent man would be the most stingy and ungenerous. But in fact the Slavs are more stingy than the Byzantines, and the latter more intelligent and thoughtful; according to our opponents' argument, the Slavs ought to be more generous and open-handed than the Byzantines.

Here we can recognize the typical argumentative style of al-Jāhiz's works. He sets up a debate and uses the different positions to introduce the trans-categorical presence of attributes and their radial categorical relevance dialectically. However, in the *Book of the Glory of the Black Race* the author's role appears to be rather ambiguous. From time to time, he plays others' assertions against each other; in other cases, he substitutes his own voice by embodying the role of one of the contenders. He does this also because he qualifies himself as black-skinned, and for that reason his discourse often slips toward the use of the first person plural, equating 'We,' and the Blacks. Nonetheless, trans-categorical analysis and the essential humanity of the axis of comparison is always his guiding light, as is clearly apparent in his subsequent words:

Likewise we see that women have less sense than man and children have less sense than women, but are meaner than they are. If more sense meant greater meanness, then the child should be the most generous of all. Yet in fact we know nothing on earth that is worth less than a boy, for he is the most untruthful of mankind, the most calumnious, the nastiest, and the meanest, the least inclined to do good, and the most ruthless. Only gradually the boy leave these qualities as he gains in sense and gains in good deeds. How then can the lack of sense be the cause of generosity in the Blacks?

You have admitted that they are generous, and then you make assertions which are untenable, and we have already shown you the fallacy of your argument according to true reasoning. This opinion would mean that the coward is wiser than the brave man, the treacherous wiser than the loyal, and that the worrier is wiser than the patient man. This is something for which you have no proof. These qualities in man are gift of God. Sense is a gift, and good character is a gift, and generosity and courage likewise.

How could God give a gift as important as generosity and then, as a result, intrinsically (and categorically) deprive Blacks, as well as all the other generous human beings, of cleverness, courage and the other top human attributes? If we cannot avoid acknowledging the generosity of Blacks, how can we then de-categorize their race so as to consider them inferior to Whites or Reds? The hailstorm

of category-related collateral attributes that al-Jāhiz deploys could seem to rely on a compulsive impetus to throw the discourse on the qualities of Blacks into utter confusion by showing that generosity can be attached to many other good qualities and included, by the force of empirical observation, in numerous human categories and sub-categories beyond Blacks. But the aim of this comparison/listing strategy is precisely to dismantle the plausibility of racial and social prejudices against black-skinned people and the ‘tone’ of the underlying implicit way of categorizing them—*inter alia* the use of irony in the comparison with ‘boy category’<sup>17</sup> should not be overlooked. It is no coincidence that immediately after this carousel of trans-categorical migration of attributes, al-Jāhiz proposes an argumentative change of pace by offering a demonstrative and rhetorical inversion based on historical data.

The Blacks say to the Arabs: You are so ignorant that during the jahillyya (the time of ignorance)<sup>18</sup> you regarded us as your equals when it came to marrying Arab women, but with the advent of the justice of Islam you decided this practice was bad. Yet the desert is full of Blacks married to Arab Wives, and they have been princes and kings and have safeguarded your rights and sheltered you against your enemies. You even have sayings in your language which vaunt the deeds of our kings, deeds which you often placed above your own; this you would not have done had you considered them inferior to your own.

Here, al-Jāhiz’s puts forth the argument of inter-generation, a discursive device that plays a great role in his immanent analysis of categories and in the interpretations of God’s (materialized) signs ciphered in each creature. Mixed breeding and its value are also considered in the processive taxonomy of the animal kingdom as a relevant proof of the necessity to relativize categories and to avoid using them according to an exclusionary (either/or) rather than inclusive (and/and) logic. From this point on, al-Jāhiz’s discourse unfolds through the illustration of the black-centered *chromocology* outlined above. The black color functions like a catalyst of good qualities inherent in a potentially endless list of creatures, material entities, situations, conditions, contexts, and so on. Little by little, through a series of quotes from historical reports, poetry and other sources, the reasoning comes back to orbit around the different human races, which are considered, this time, in the light of Koranic revelation:

The Zanj attest: The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) said: I was sent to the red and the black. And everybody knows that the Zanj, Abyssinians and Nubians [are] surely not white or red but definitely black. We know that Allah, the Most Powerful and Exalted, sent His Prophet (to the people), all of them: Arabs and non-Arabs (ajam) alike. And if he (Muhammad) said: I was sent to the ruddy (Al-ahmar) and the dark-skinned (al-aswad), then in his view we are neither ruddy nor light-skinned (bid); so he want sent to us. Indeed, his use of the dark-skinned refers to us, as the people (of our community) are in one of these categories (i.e. either ruddy or dark-skinned). Therefore, if the Arabs are ruddy, then they belong to the Byzantines (Rum), Slavs (Saqaliba), Persians and Khurasanis. But if they belong to the dark-skinned peoples, then they are a sub-category of our stock. So they are called medium-complexioned and brownish-black (sumr sud) when they are classified with us...

<sup>17</sup> As for the cognitive function of irony, laughter, and rough paradoxes in al-Jāhiz’s argumentative style see above, § 2, the remarks concerning the *Book of the Animals*.

<sup>18</sup> ...that is, before the Koranic Revelation.

In the above excerpt, we see al-Jāhiz's discourse sliding from one category to another, one race to other, so to speak, 'surfing' on blackness, but floating among ambiguities, the inter-twining and overlapping of subcategories, and trans-categorical digressions. The conclusion of this lexical journey, a few lines below, is the following:

Therefore we (the Blacks) are the first people to whom he was missioned. Thus the appellation of the Arabs is predicated on ours, since we alone are designated dark-skinned, and they are not so designated unless they are part of us.

Notwithstanding the apparent semantic exclusiveness—even if tainted with ambiguity—of such an outcome, from this point forward al-Jāhiz's argument suddenly veers from quality to quantity. Zanj are defined as the most numerous on the Earth, but their absolute blackness, by and by, begins to transmute in a graded coloration that eventually takes the shape of a gradual resemblance among many populations. Lineages and languages, then, slowly show a tendency to conflate—an element that testifies to the reciprocal confluence, in al-Jāhiz's thought, of epistemology and ontology under the aegis of the signical matter of the world and its polyphonic inner inter-communicativeness. The assimilation of language and lineage genealogies culminates in the following remark:

Languages can be very different but still have the same origins; or have different origins but resemble each other anyhow. The languages in the different regions of Khurasan differ as well as those of Jibal and Faris it all depends on the region but they have the same origin.

Then, starting with the common origin of languages, the differentiation among races begins to assume an educational/environmental bent. The misconception and bias about Zanj are due to the circumstance that Arabs usually meet black captives from the coasts and forest, from the menial, lower orders, and slaves. 'The people of Qanbaluh have neither beauty nor intelligence. Qanbaluh is the name of the place by which your ships anchor.' This is a clear referral to the practice of enslavement that Arabs imposed on black people. But the lack of cleverness of such black people is only a consequence of their conditions. Indeed, the same could be said about the enslaved people of India. 'Yet,' al-Jāhiz continues:

You know how much there in India of mathematics, astronomy, medical science, turnery and woodwork, painting, and many other wonderful crafts. How does it happen that among the many Indian captives you have made there has never been one of this quality, or even a tenth of this quality? If you say, People of standing, intelligence and knowledge only live in the center, near the seat of government; these are hanger-on uncouth types, peasants, people of the coast and swamps and forests and islands, plowmen and fishermen, we answer you; the same is true of those whom you see and those you do not see of us. Our answer to you is as your answer to us.

The human being is here portrayed, in a kind of ethnological report of habits and crafts, as a microcosm. Inside each individual, all the oppositions and modes of being/signification dwell simultaneously. This list of good and bad attitudes, or potentialities, combines in the following paragraphs with the exaltation of the prolificacy of black men and women, even when it produces its valuable consequences through mixed or interracial progeny. Al-Jāhiz recognizes that the black color is prevalent in the children from people of different races, and if there are many races this is due to



the fact that black men and women prefer to marry those who have their same color. Nonetheless, all the races like each other. If some people prefer those of the same race or color this depends only on convention and cultural habits. About this topic, al-Jāhīz offers a far-reaching conclusion:

Each people has a taste for the women whom they import as slaves and captives, apart from the exception, and no inferences can be drawn from exceptions.

As a master of categorization, al-Jāhīz shows here all of his authority. This is the definitive phrase: *from exceptions no inferences can be drawn*. But such an assertion can reveal its authentic meaning only if one reads it against the foil of and/or logic that al-Jāhīz uses in his way of categorizing the world. Exceptions are not outside the world, or existing categories. More simply, they reflect the graded distribution of attributes in the overall array of creatures. Therefore, it is up to the human to interpret, as his main cognitive/moral task, to choose those indexically salient qualities that are worthy for use as axes of categorization. In the work of the categorization of reality, and depending on the situation, each attribute can assume a peripheral position, or instead a central one. This means that in our categorizing assessment some attributes that were previously considered peripheral can become central, and vice versa. A great lesson is included in this apparently smooth and elusive way of carving out the contours of categorical ranges from the immanent signical warp of the world. It can be understood by contesting the (allegedly) aprioristic over-simplification of modern Western categorical thought. Specifically, we can look to a group of modern artists who flourished in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Great painter-thinkers such as Gauguin, Picasso, Gris, Klee, and Savinio, achieved this result through their multi-faceted ways of dis-composing forms and representative patterns.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Jāhīz, for his part, gives the reader a geographical spatialization of the spread of Blackness across countries, lands, landscapes, people, and so on. This blurring of peoples and the overlapping of their spaces of existence seems to embody a material metaphor of the universal co-relatedness of categories and their attributes, wherein human beings are assumed as an all-encompassing and all-including epitome. All this argumentation culminates, not coincidentally, in the strong claim that the black color, alongside all the others, depends only on the ‘environment, the natural properties of water and soil, distance from the sun, and intensity of heat.’ This is true not only for human beings, who within three generations can change their complexions when they live away from the original environmental conditions of their ascendants, but also for animals as gazelles, ostriches, insects, wolves, foxes, sheep, donkeys, horses, and birds. All can transform their color from white to black (and supposedly, also back again) as a result of their environment.

There is no question of metamorphosis, or of punishment, disfigurement or favor meted out by Allah.

This means that the aspect or the *morphé* of both animal species and human races do not derive from superstitious or mythic metamorphosis, but can instead be traced in the material world and its phenomenology. For example—as al-Jāhīz tells us in his *Book of Animals*—it is also the case of the gecko, which in the Arab sacred tradition deserved to be crushed or killed on the assumption that

<sup>19</sup> Ricca (2016).

this species was the divine transfiguration of the tribes responsible for the burning of Ibrāhīm.<sup>20</sup> Consequentially, people and species coming from different geographical areas, and thus differently characterized, can nevertheless be found in the same places. But even origins are not an unchangeable root or a categorically salient sign on essential nature. Symmetrically, the adaptation to the environment does not change the order of salience in the attributes constituting categories. In a sense, there is a sort a “chameleontism” in the mimetic attitude of living beings. According to al-Jāhīz:

This exists in all things. Thus we see that locusts and worms on plants are green, and we see that the lice are black on a young man’s head, white if this hair whitens, red if it is dyed. Our Blackness, O people of Zanj, is not different from the blackness of the Banu Sulaym and other Arab tribes we have mentioned. And the very blackness of the Zanj is like the total whiteness of the white men.

We could epitomize the last excerpts by arguing that in al-Jāhīz’s view, Blackness is Whiteness if related to purity and, more generally, moral value. Such an assertion finds, on the other hand, an immediate sequel in the following excerpt:

An enslaved of the Bana Jada, being laughed at because of his black colors said: they ridicule me because of my black color. I answered that only very stupid men can do so. Because as much as my skin is black I am in character pure.

What makes a human being a ‘human being’ is therefore his moral value and responsibility (*taklīf*). In this final remark we can find a summarization of al-Jāhīz’s entire cosmo-semiotics. Learning from Creation, knowing and wisely categorizing it, are cognitive human duties. Only upon the fulfillment of their communicative and interpretive duties can human beings recognize the divine creational cipher of the world, its inner meaning, and construe together a meaningful life environment.

Significantly, the last lines of the *Book of the Glory of the Black Race* are dedicated to emphasizing the moral importance of trust, intended as reciprocal confidence. After a long list of qualities and skills, at which once again (black) Indians prove to excel, they are identified as the most worthy of trust in business and financial activities. Communication—or better, the same possibility to communicate—and reciprocal confidence are co-implicating elements. Purity, humility in learning from the world, and a ready and open disposition toward recognizing the divine cipher in Otherness, are all pre-requisites for human beings to be able to engage in genuine communicative exchange. Truthfulness and reliability are pre-conditions and, at the same time, inherent implications within a world of communication: that is, in a Greimasian sense,<sup>21</sup> pre-conditions of any effective *contrat de véridition* that can survive the infinite openness of sense by means of continuous efforts of recognition and transaction between differences, the inside and outside of its semantic and socio-communicative field. Comparison, endless listing, laughing at the ambiguity stemming from categorical stiffness, continual critical responsibility in choosing the axes of categorization, a multi-perspectival attitude, the use of inclusive rather than exclusive logic, are all teachings encapsulated in the last line of the *Book of the Glory of the Black Race*, where al-Jāhīz promises: ‘I will write on the pride of the Adnam against the Qahtan in much of what they said.’ a testament of his inclination and readiness to reweave the

<sup>20</sup> See, *Book on Animals*, I:304:16-305:9. As for the confutation of the metamorphic origins of species, see Miller (2013: spec. 358).

<sup>21</sup> Greimas (1983).

tapestry of categories by re-starting, again and again, the destinal semiotic task of all human beings: the endless searching for, listening for, and interpreting signs among races and cultures, species and things, events and the voices of the universe. This is, if understood astride the opposite but complementary perspectives of contemporary structuralist and pragmatist semiotic approaches, we can recognize the trans-cultural legacy and categorization approach al-Jāhīz has been advocating since 868 (or 869) C.E./254 H., the year of his last text. It is a lesson from the *finisterrae* of both the ancient world and our contemporary cultures that we humans desperately need to retrieve from the library of history today, so as to become, hopefully, as clever as al-Jāhīz's adaptively mimetic lice.

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