

Article

Leo Africanus Curiously Strays Afield of Himself

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Abstract: The word “curiosity” has an opaque history with contradictory attitudes and connotations acquired ever since Antiquity. This poses an interesting problem in the case of Leo Africanus, who never uses the word in his *Cosmographia de l’Affrica* yet exhibits curiosity at every turn as a traveler and a writer. This essay relies on a distinction that Michel Foucault makes regarding types of curiosity: that which produces conventional knowledge (which he rejects) and that which seeks extraordinary knowledge that “enables one to get free of oneself”, resulting in “the knower’s straying afield of himself”. Both as a traveler and a writer, Michel de Montaigne demonstrates that such an attitude was a living reality in sixteenth-century Europe. Montaigne’s many reflections on his “straying afield of himself” provide a bridge to interpreting Leo Africanus’s practices of traveling and writing. Leo’s profession as a diplomat, his economic expertise and his training as an Islamic legal expert all led to his far-reaching journeys, particularly in Islamic Africa but also Asia as of a young age, bringing about his many encounters with historical figures and events while also granting him access to uninhabited nature, as well as every sort of human settlement, from remote villages to great cities. His will to knowledge—curiosity that leads him to ‘stray afield of himself’ by seeking out the unusual and the unknown—proves to be the key to his travel and his writing.

Keywords: curiosity; travel; writing; cities; knowledge; Leo Africanus; Michel de Montaigne; Michel Foucault; Miguel de Cervantes



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Not once in the manuscript of his monumental *Cosmographia de l’Affrica* (1526) does Leo Africanus (alias Al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Wazzān) use the word *curiosità* or *curioso/a* (Leo Africanus [1526] 2014). These words and their equivalents in many Western European languages were by no means neutral signifiers but words to which conflicting attitudes and values within different social contexts had accrued over time. To take a rather extreme example, Barbara Benedict portrays curiosity in England over the period 1660–1820 as predominantly held to be perverse, trivial and trivializing, associated with vice, and essentially an epistemological threat to the status quo (Benedict 2001, pp. 1–23).¹ People with curiosity produced or collected curiosities, and they themselves were viewed as objects of curiosity. Such attitudes would have drowned out those voices (e.g., Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Samuel Johnson) that eloquently coupled curiosity with knowledge, truth and intellect. Anyone using these words would presumably have been aware of how much extraneous matter, indeed hostility, had stuck to them. As Friedrich Nietzsche observes in an analysis of ‘revenge’, multiple meanings and even contradictions inhere in many key words that function like pockets:

The word ‘revenge’ [in German, *Rache*] is said so quickly it almost seems as if it could contain no more than one conceptual and perceptual root. And so, one continues to strive to discover it: just as our economists have not yet wearied of scenting a similar unity in the word ‘value’ [Werth] and of searching after the

original root-concept of the word. As if every word were not a pocket into which now this, now that, now several things at once have been put! Thus ‘revenge’, too, is now this, now that, now something more combined. (Nietzsche 1986, p. 316)

So it is with ‘curiosity’, whose assumed unity as a word with an identifiable ‘root’ sense likewise obscures markedly divergent meanings, and in varying contexts takes on nuances well outside common definitions.

If Leo had used *curiosità* it would have been within his understanding of how the word was used in early sixteenth-century Italian. A glance through the 45 or so instances of *curiosidad* and *curioso* in *Don Quixote* would probably mirror Italian usages in their bifurcation between things performed with care, skill, expertise, and alternatively, the condition of wanting to know. As the following examples show, the meaning of ‘curiosity’ tends to be defined by the other words around it—e.g., an adjective, a noun in apposition—as well as the social context in which it appears:

- “llegó a tanto su curiosidad y desatino en esto, que vendió muchas hanegas de tierra de sembradura para comprar libros de caballerías en que leer” (Cervantes [1605/1615] 1998, I, 1, p. 37);

- “como van agora nuestras cortesanas con las raras y peregrinas invenciones que la curiosidad ociosa les ha mostrado” (Cervantes [1605/1615] 1998, I, 11, p. 122);

- “Anoche supimos la muerte de Grisóstomo, y que en este lugar había de ser enterrado, y así, de curiosidad y de lástima, dejamos nuestro derecho viaje” (Cervantes [1605/1615] 1998, I, 13, p. 145);

- “mira por cuán vana e impertinente curiosidad quieres revolver los humores que ahora están sosegados en el pecho de tu casta esposa” (Cervantes [1605/1615] 1998, I, 33, p. 388);

- “«Somos fulano y fulana, que nos salimos a espaciar de casa de nuestros padres con esta invención, solo por curiosidad, sin otro designio alguno», se acabara el cuento, y no gemidicos, y lloramicos, y darle” (I Cervantes [1605/1615] 1998, I, 49, pp. 1033–34—emphasis mine in all citations).

Only when we know *who* has curiosity, *about what* and *for what purpose*, can we begin to understand its positive or negative inflections in any context, because curiosity ‘in itself’ is simply a desire to know something, for better or for worse, without any particular value or legitimacy. Even in Roman times, *curiositas* often meant inappropriate or excessive inquisitiveness. The kinds and degrees of inquisitiveness already identified in classical Latin have undoubtedly spread through the Romance languages and beyond, such that, with added doses of small-minded moralism over the ages, the *Diccionario de la Real Academia* (22nd ed., 2001), in one of its least inspired entries, defines *curiosidad* in its sense of wanting to know *only* as inappropriate prying, and therefore as a vice: “1. Deseo de saber o averiguar alguien lo que no le concierne. 2. Vicio que lleva a alguien a inquirir lo que no debiera importarle”. The stern condemnation of curiosity in Ecclesiastes 3:22–26 could have left its mark indirectly on definitions like this as it did explicitly on that of Covarrubias (Covarrubias 1611). Dictionaries of other Romance languages tend to be more generous and comprehensive, yet all of these traditions endow curiosity with a range of often contrary attributes.

While Natalie Zemon Davis’s superb study of Leo Africanus reveals much about him, particularly with regard to his nine years in Italy, he remains—as she often acknowledges—a profoundly complex and enigmatic figure. Nearly all of what we know about him apart from that period comes from the autobiographical aspects of his *Cosmography of Africa*. It is in his own work where his curiosity as a traveler and writer comes to light. The question might arise as to whether his curiosity was shaped by the language and traditions in which he was raised. The main word for ‘curiosity’ in Arabic is *fuḍūl* (curiosity, inquisitiveness, nosiness), as defined in Hans Wehr’s Arabic to English Dictionary, which

registers *fuḍūlī* as the adjective (inquisitive, curious, busybody, meddlesome, etc.) and *fuḍūlīya* as a variant abstract noun (inquisitiveness, curiosity; obtrusiveness, importunity). Interestingly, these definitions closely mirror the definitions of ‘curiosity’ in Latin and other European languages. This suggests that the Arabic language did not offer an idea of ‘curiosity’ much different from what Leo Africanus would have encountered in Latin and Italian. Moreover, the work translated as *The Book of Curiosities* (ca. 1200) does not use the word *fuḍūl* in its title but rather *gharāʾib* (i.e., ‘marvels’, ‘strange things’, etc.). Other terms can likewise be translated as ‘curiosity’ but with different connotations. More broadly, we have no way of knowing what attitudes toward curiosity Leo might have been exposed to in his immediate social circles in Fez and elsewhere in his travels, nor can we assume that he would have shared those attitudes because, as has been noted with regard to several European philosophers and writers, practices regarding curiosity are often very personal, adapted from life experience and character dispositions and in those cases have little to do with their languages or cultural traditions. My sense is that Leo’s curiosity emerges in similar ways rather than being culturally prescribed.

If the absence of the words *curiosità* or *curioso* in Leo Africanus’s work would seem to place the author in a kind of semantic void, the overwhelming evidence of his curiosity as a traveler and writer might pose the problem of how to situate him in relation to the extremely varied modes of curiosity ostensibly practiced during that epoch. Yet this turns out to be a false problem. We know very well that the inexistence of a word in any particular language by no means prevents speakers of that language from having concepts that can be most closely associated with such a word, which in turn may be useful to us in understanding their thought and behavior even if they lack the word.² However, the fact that a fairly common word does not appear in a long work in which we might deem it to be highly appropriate seems significant in its own right, as it begs the question as to why a writer does not use it and whether this could have been a deliberate choice. Given the often negative connotations of ‘curiosity’ and how antithetical these were to Leo’s traveling and writing, one might surmise that he avoided using it, or perhaps was indifferent to it and its conceptual baggage. Since ‘curiosity’ in its most positive sense so aptly expresses Leo’s extraordinary will to knowledge as a traveler and writer, the absence of that word in his text in effect frees us up from having to tease out negative and positive strands of his curiosity as reflected in definitions of the word in various languages during his era. At issue is how he pursued knowledge and reached understanding in the vast, complex world he traveled and wrote about.

As we are not tied down to what is supposedly ‘good’ or ‘bad’ about curiosity, a more useful dichotomy could be adapted from Michel Foucault’s reflections on his motivation for undertaking *The History of Sexuality* project:

As for what motivated me, it is quite simple; I would hope that in the eyes of some people it might be sufficient in itself. It was curiosity—the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself. After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower’s straying afield of himself. (Foucault 1985–1986, vol. II, p. 8)

Foucault refers here to a curiosity-induced will to knowledge that, driven by passion, astonishes, challenges and alters the knower, quite the opposite of socially predetermined, self-reinforcing procedures for acquiring knowledge. It might be objected that this self-liberating curiosity, as opposed to a curiosity that merely incorporates conventional forms of knowledge, would perhaps be unthinkable in, say, sixteenth-century Europe. My sense is

that, though numerous exceptions come to mind, the sole example of Michel de Montaigne suffices to dispel such an objection, particularly when we look at his reflections and practice with regard to traveling. What is more, despite the fact that Montaigne and Leo Africanus are separated by half a century, not to mention by religion, language, culture and geographical space, I aim to point out how they are akin in their modes of travel, which derive in part from comparable attitudes toward what kinds of things intrigue them and lure them to pursue their interests.

As a traveler, Montaigne is much less interested in common knowledge than in whatever may be novel, unusual or strange. Like numerous other early modern travelers, he reveals a genuine fascination with differences in culture, ways of life, the diversity of ceremonies and material culture. In his *Journal de voyage en Italie*, had he gone alone he would have opted for more distant lands, he says, but he did not want to impose his desire to see lesser-known places on his younger companions.

When they complained that he took them on strange roads and landscapes, sometimes returning near the place from which he had departed (which he would do when he heard there was something worth seeing, or sometimes when he changed his mind), he responded that for his part he was not going anywhere other than where he happened to be, and that he could not change his route because he had no plan other than to pass through unknown places. [...] As for Rome, which was the destination of the others, he had less desire to see it than other places because it was known by everyone, and there was no lackey who could not tell them news of Florence or Ferrara.³

Quand on se plaignoit à luy de ce qu'il conduisoit souvent la troupe par chemins divers et contrées, revenant souvent bien près d'où il estoit parti (ce qu'il faisoit ou recevant l'avertissement de quelque chose digne de voir, ou changeant d'avis selon les occasions), il respondoit qu'il n'alloit, quant à luy, en nul lieu que là où il se trouvoit, et qu'il ne pouvoit faillir ny tordre sa voie, n'ayant nul project que de se promener par des lieux inconnus; [...] Et quant à Rome, où les autres visioient, il la desiroit d'autant moins voir que les autres lieux, qu'elle estoit connue d'un chacun et qu'il n'avoit laquais qui ne leur peust dire nouvelles de Florence et de Ferrare. (Montaigne 1962b, pp. 1176–77)

He actively shuns his own countrymen abroad and seeks out conversation with 'foreigners', be they local people or travelers from elsewhere. "I consider all people my compatriots, and as readily embrace a Pole as a Frenchman, holding in less esteem the national liaison than the universal bond"; (j'estime tous les hommes mes compatriotes, et embrasse un Polonois comme un François, postposant cette lyaison nationale à l'universelle et commune) (Montaigne 1962a, p. 950). His switch to writing in his own hand the last third of his *Journal de voyage* in Italian attests to his commitment to estranging himself through his medium.

Above all, he seeks what is *human* in all its variety, what is unfamiliar or previously unseen by him, and all of this gives him enormous pleasure, which is the primary purpose of his travels. Moreover, he is personally implicated in this search outside of himself, and he remarks on how the continual motion on horseback is good for the body as well as the soul, particularly as the soul observes what is new and alien. Travel frees him from his domestic responsibilities and worries, allows him to be unfettered, in constant motion and in contact with the different and unknown. His mode of travel is also a search for knowledge that "enables one to get free of oneself", as Foucault would put it. It is guided throughout by an all-round curiosity and a keen eye for local customs, habits and ceremony, with minimal if any judgmentalism on his part. For example, on his travels he (as a nominal Catholic) visits

Protestant churches and converses with the parishioners, witnesses a Jewish ceremony of circumcision and describes it with extreme equilibrium, and relates with equanimity and amusement the story of a local ‘renegade’ named Giuseppe, who escapes back to Muslim lands after presenting himself to his mother back home and unwittingly startling her to death.

What is more, Montaigne transfers his travel to his writing, letting himself be taken along by its apparently chaotic movements, such that writing becomes a form of travel that enables him to stray afield of himself and, if we read him the way he reads the classics, perhaps also enables us to stray afield of ourselves:

“*Quo diversus abis?* [Why this detour?]" [...] I go out of my way, but rather by licence than carelessness. My ideas follow one another, but sometimes it is at a distance, and they look at one another, but with a sidelong glance [...] They [the ancient authors] are not afraid of these changes and have a marvelous grace in letting themselves roll with the wind, or seem to [...] I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols. It is an art, as Plato says, light, winged, and daemonic [...] I head for change, undiscerningly and tumultuously. My style and my mind go roving in the same way. “You must have a dash of madness if you do not want to have still more stupidity,” say both the precepts of our masters and even more their examples.

“*Quo diversus abis?* ... Je m’esgare, mais plustost par licence que par mesgarde. Mes fantasies se suyvent, mais par fois c’est de loing, et se regardent, mais d’une veuë oblique. [...] Ils ne creignent point ces muances, et ont une merveilleuse grace à se laisser ainsi rouler au vent, ou à le sembler [...] J’aime l’alleure poetique, à sauts et à gambades. C’est une art, comme dict Platon, legere, volage, demoniacle. [...] Je vais au change, indiscrettement et tumultuairement. Mon stile et mon esprit vont vagabondant de mesmes. Il faut avoir un peu de folie, qui ne veut avoir plus de sottise, disent et les preceptes de nos maistres et encore plus leurs exemples”. (Montaigne 1962a, p. 973)

Bearing in mind Montaigne’s extraordinary reflections on travel and writing—both driven by curiosity—we can now reflect on how they may lend insights into Leo Africanus’s practices as a traveler and writer. Even if Leo, as author, usually refers to himself modestly as *il compositore*, a reading of his text reveals that as a traveler and an author, he is everywhere both on the page and in the page. His portrayal of Africa is highly autobiographical because his travels are associated with nearly every place he mentions and because his authorial perspectives guide the entire work. A brief synopsis may be in order here.

Born around 1488, al-Ḥasan would have been very young when his family, just before or after the conquest of Granada in 1492, emigrated from there across the Strait of Gibraltar to Fez. It was there that he grew up, received an élite education and was ultimately qualified as a *faqīh* (expert in Islamic law). He provides glimpses here and there of his work and schooling in Fez, his travels with his merchant father to family-owned lands and with his diplomat uncle to Timbuktu. While still an adolescent, he began his major employment with the royal family of Fez as a diplomat, at first within the kingdoms of Fez and Marrakesh, but soon afterwards including missions across North Africa as well as sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahara itself and along the Atlas Mountains, not to mention travels to Istanbul, Western Asia and Saudi Arabia. In 1518, he was captured by a Spanish corsair, probably off Djerba, and taken to Rome, where he spent 15 months as a prisoner in the Castel Sant’Angelo. Medici Pope Leo X took a keen interest in him and baptized him with his own names in the presence of three cardinal godfathers in January 1520. As Natalie Zemon Davis has insightfully documented, this opened up a new and unexpected phase in

Leo's life as he was drawn into various scholarly projects with the upper clergy as well as humanistic scholars, some of whom were Jewish (Davis 2006, pp. 55–87). The manuscript of his *Cosmography of Africa*, which he undertook on his own, is dated 10 March 1526. Leo is thought to have left Rome for Tunis in 1527, probably during the sack of the city, after which he left virtually no trace of his whereabouts.

Even with so many lacunae, a quick look over this biographical sketch will show that his life was radically reoriented on several occasions, that he would at times have experienced the extremes of emotions during his travels, that his career would have undergone abrupt vicissitudes, and so on: he had no choice but to stray afield of himself, again and again. As a nominal Christian in Italy, he would have been given opportunities that he might not have imagined before, namely, those of becoming a scholar and a writer, albeit in a couple of languages that were previously unknown to him (Italian, Latin). It seems more interesting to speculate why he stayed in Italy for so long after he was freed than why he disappeared. Be that as it may, he apparently abandoned his life in Italy as suddenly as it began, crossing over to Dar al-Islam in perhaps dangerous conditions for someone who could have been suspected of apostasy.

Few 'ordinary' individuals of that era could have found themselves in the midst of so much history in the making. As a diplomat, he of course received many months of hospitality from the monarchs of the major royal courts of sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. He negotiated with attacking Portuguese forces on Moroccan shores, witnessed from Cairo the Portuguese attempts at seizing the spice trade in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, directly observed the workings of the Barbarossas in transforming the early modern Maghrib, and met the Ottoman emperor Selim in the Nile delta after he conquered Egypt in 1517, among many other top-level encounters. In Italy, he came to know three popes as well as many cardinals and bishops, in addition to a number of humanistic scholars. Even his capture and imprisonment opened him up to an enormous arena because those who came into contact with him, among them his corsair captor and his clerical interlocutors while he was in the Castel Sant'Angelo, saw much potential in him. His catechizer, the Bishop Paride de' Grassi, acknowledged in his diary that in all probability Leo agreed to be baptized in order to be released from prison. For his part, Leo writes in the *Cosmographia*—extracting the moral from his fable of the amphibious bird—that “whoever spies an advantage will always wait and go after it” (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, p. 48).⁴ For his part, the pope believed that Leo could be of use to him in his strategies against Islam and the Ottoman Empire. However, the case is not merely that each took advantage of the other, but that each was very curious about the other and what that other might make possible for him. In effect, throughout his travels, Leo as a royal messenger is seen by others to be extremely interesting in his own right for a wide variety of reasons, and he arouses *their* curiosity. In his mode of travel, both interest and curiosity are often mutual. He would have had this capacity from a young age. He recounts an anecdote about how an important tribal chief learns that Leo's uncle is headed to Timbuktu on a diplomatic mission. The chief's messengers insist that he go several days out of his way to accept the chief's hospitality, but instead he composes a poem of praise and sends his 16-year-old nephew Leo with sumptuous gifts. On the way, Leo composes his own panegyric poem in classical Arabic. The chief greets him effusively, offers him a feast, receives the gifts with much gratitude, responds enthusiastically to both poems, and especially looks in awe at this talented adolescent, as our author recalls. Finally, Leo is escorted away with warm gestures and equally lavish gifts. The author explains that he wanted to relate this at length “so the reader can understand that Africa indeed has great nobles like this ruler” (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, p. 105).⁵ His continuous travel over the years put him in perpetual contact with the unexpected, and he must have come to anticipate this as part of his *modus vivendi*.

Leo travels primarily as a diplomat, but often his journeys are combined with mercantile interests, and occasionally he acts as a *faqīh* settling local disputes. He seems always to be more or less on a mission, yet his itineraries frequently allow for days, weeks or months in which he has no specific work to do, leaving him to do whatever he chooses. Royal courts in North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa were notorious for keeping diplomats for months. Of the court of Tlemcen, he says: “The author had business there on several occasions and stayed many months at different times. He has left out the customs and precise order of things, since they are like those of Fez and he didn’t want to grow too long and tedious, having spent his time on other things” (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, p. 276). In Tunis and Cairo he also spent many months, but those two cities captured his fancy and imagination, allowing him to get to know them intimately, as his animated accounts of them reveal. Despite the radical change after Emperor Selim’s defeat of the Mamluk Sultanate and Abbasid Caliphate in Cairo, Leo has a long-standing interest in Cairo and its culture, which he insists on explaining: “But because the author lived in the time of the [mamluk] sultan, making three journeys to Egypt, he witnessed and studied its life and customs, as has already been narrated in the present work, and likewise he informed himself of the court and the sultan’s hierarchy, as follows now” (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, p. 417). In fact, several of the liveliest passages of the *Cosmographia* tell of the festivities in nearby suburb Bāb al-Lūq after Friday prayers in the mosques: “all the people of Cairo” go to this neighborhood with taverns, prostitutes, puppeteers, soothsayers and mountebanks. Leo devotes a page to one of these who can make his ass play dead, mimic human emotions, and choose a young (human) bride for itself, much to the crowd’s delight, while Leo’s prose enacts with live utterances how it all happens. Over many exuberant pages, Leo tells of Cairene festivities, domestic sexual intimacies, the rituals associated with the flooding of the Nile, as well as the magnificent mosques, gardens, and the like, all of it exhibiting his utmost curiosity. None of this keen observation issues as such from his expertise in diplomacy, commerce or Islamic law; rather, it stems from the abundant free time he had available to him during these court visits, coupled with his fascination for Cairene “life and customs”, which, as he says, he has “witnessed and studied” during his three lengthy visits to the city. Spurred by his own interests, his own curiosity, he has become an ethnographer and historian of sorts in his ample free time, a “participant observer”. This serious pose by no means detracts from his euphoria in being present at festive events, just as other places rouse melancholy or other emotions.

The same could be said about his travels everywhere else, from remote settlements to major cities, including his own adoptive city of Fez, which reveals so much variety of esoteric religious and sexual practice that Leo cannot simply rely on having grown up in the city to understand its more clandestine workings: moved by curiosity, he has to seek them out. For Leo, Fez exemplifies what is most noble in the Maghrib and indeed all of Africa, but he refrains from idealizing it, as when he describes the city’s inns, some of which serve as houses of prostitution and foment drunkenness (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, pp. 146–47).

Leo’s disapproval of the debauched revels of the Sufis in Fez and elsewhere does not detract from his fascination with regard to them. He does indeed see them as utterly bereft of the inspired teachings and poetry of early Sufi leaders and regards them as religious impostors among so many other ‘heretics’ (he uses the closest Italian term), whom he nonetheless observes with great interest throughout the book (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, pp. 175–79). I would venture to say that, in his book that essentially covers Islamic Africa, the majority of the Muslims he mentions *as* Muslims are ‘heretics’, including the first preachers of Islam in the Maghrib, the founder of Fez, the Mahdi, these Sufis in Fez, and many other self-styled prophets and ‘holy men’ of the past and present who evoke such

skepticism in him. Although there is no doubt that he identifies with the orthodox Maliki Sunni Islam of his training, his own practices and beliefs do not seem to interfere with his endless curiosity for religious deviation within Islam. Besides this, it would not surprise me that his frequent mention of ‘heretical’ Muslims contributed to a strategy of presenting Islam to his European readers as a divided religion, perhaps just as Christianity was when he was baptized barely two years after Luther posted his 95 theses on the Wittenberg church door.

Leo also presents a fascinating cult of female ‘fortune-tellers’ who say they have red, white or black demons as lovers. When one of them wants to tell somebody’s fortune, she perfumes herself, assumes the voice of her demon lover and becomes possessed by it. Yet, says Leo, these women are actually *suḥāqiyāt*, that is, *fregatrice* “who have that bad practice in which one of them rubs the other” sexually (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, p. 306).⁶ When a beautiful wife is visited by such a diviner and likes what she sees, she asks the diviner to ‘rub’ her, believing that the diviner is merely an intermediary between her and the demon. Leo explains further that women who want to be “of that sort” first feign illness and fall to the ground, and their ‘cuckold husbands’ call for the diviners to cure their wives. The wife then secretly tells the diviner that she wants to join the guild, whereupon the diviner tells the husband that his wife is possessed by a demon who wants her as a lover and that he must allow his wife to do what she wants with the diviner. The husband thus prepares a feast with ‘Ethiopian’ musicians, and after eating they dance as demons with changed voices. After this the wife freely joins the group of diviners as one of them. Leo adds that a decent man, undeceived, will whip the demon out of his wife, and that some men pretend to be possessed by the demons’ wives so as to have sex with the diviners, who play along (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, pp. 172–73).

This anecdote caught the attention of Dr. Ambroise Paré, who reproduced it in his *Des Monstres et prodiges* (Paré [1573] 1987), from Jean Temporal’s 1556 French translation of Giovanni Battista Ramusio’s version of Leo’s *Cosmographia* (Leo Africanus and Ramusio 1550). Appearing in an extensive series of descriptions of occult or extraordinary practices (including the Sufis) in Fez, this intricately detailed story contributes to the sense that, somehow beneath standard religious and social practices, there is a substratum of quasi-esoteric individuals and activities ostensibly related to health, sexuality, spirits, the future, and so on, all of which are conjugated by this group of mock diviners. The ritualistic, theatrical setup of the complicated ruse also has an element of suspense as it could also play out in unexpected ways, as indicated at the end of the passage. Or so Leo says, and he obviously presents it as an authentic and ingenious work of artifice. It is remarkable that a group of women would have to go to these lengths to get what they want. This narrative is among many forms of occult practice—whether with deceptive intentions or not—believed to have been happening in Leo’s own city. Then again, if speculation is permissible here, a collective enterprise of women enacting demons and spirits, illness and vitality, feasts and diabolic dance, beguiling naïve husbands with their lewd and ludic ‘rubbing’, might have its own emotive recompense perhaps unmatched by more accessible sexual relations. While Leo is reluctant to celebrate the means and intentions of this subterfuge, his curiosity far outshines any moralistic disapproval. The underground cultural world of Fez fascinates him and forms a significant part of how the city works. Without his curiosity this underground world would be vacant, as would those of Tunis and Cairo. One can easily imagine the majority of the population of Fez having no awareness of what he relates here.

There are indeed moments in the text where Leo acknowledges that he would prefer not to say more about a particular practice or event. Several of the occult or sexually marginal topics in his account of Fez—or Tunis or Cairo, for that matter—would have

been considered morally censurable or religiously illicit, and yet he recounts them in detail. As an apparent exception, one of the many occult topics in Fez is that of *zāīrja* magic, to which he devotes a couple of pages before declaring that Muslim authorities forbid it as a “dishonorable science” and consider its practice punishable, concluding that he was lazy and looked no further into it. This might be viewed as a kind of self-censorship, but he obviously sees *zāīrja* as a false art of little interest (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, pp. 173–75), unlike the other practices mentioned such as those of the women ‘fortune-tellers’ and the Sufi revels. We should also recall that he writes his magnum opus in Italian in Rome for a European readership, and he does so as an implausible convert to Christianity. One gathers from comments throughout his book that he was considerably more curious than what he thought prudent to say in his text, but that he would not refrain from broaching religiously proscribed materials when he saw fit to do so. Occasionally, he admits feeling shame when relating things he has witnessed, at which point he interrupts his story.

From a panoramic viewpoint, his major book reveals the natural, geographical, economic, historical, social, cultural, political and religious dimensions of the Africa he came to know or—as he sometimes indicates—to hear about from trusted others he met along the way, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where he visited 15 kingdoms, he avers, but acknowledges hearing about many more. Even so, by the time he was captured at about the age of 30 he knew much more about Africa than any European or African writer of his time or earlier. He was captured with notebooks in his possession, and though we know little about those notes, including how extensive they were or what their purpose was, he does tell us now and then what kinds of things he wrote to aid his memory. Doubting critics have wondered how he could have remembered so much about hundreds of places, but he would have had no trouble organizing his notes (as in fact he says he did) to write the book. My impression is that his remarks about each village, town or city are a unique synthesis of what he regards as its defining traits, such that every portrait is different but interesting, guided by shifting criteria that emerge in each case.

He follows a geographical sequence, moving from west to east across North Africa and then proceeding southwards to the other climatic zones one by one, through Numidia, the Sahara and the Lands of the Blacks (*Bilād as-Sūdān*), and finally Egypt (part of which is in Asia by some geographers’ criteria including Leo’s), a method that could become dull in the hands of many writers. At the risk of disputing centuries of unquestioning praise, my impression is that even the great traveler and *qadi* Ibn Baṭṭūṭa often becomes tedious when he routinely fills his text with dry itineraries or visits to holy men—or their tombs—along the way: he may well believe that this is what is most piously worthy of narration, but one might wish for more description and narrative about countless other humanly interesting themes such as the peoples and places he visits, his encounters and conversations throughout his travels, the marriages and divorces that marked his sojourns in different places, and much else that would bring out the story-teller in him rather than the severe, devout judge.

Just as Leo’s mode of travel is marked by conversation with nearly everyone he meets, his style as a writer also seeks to converse with his readers as though they were present within his present.⁷ He explains why he has devoted so much space to one topic or another (e.g., to Fez, whose description covering nearly one-seventh of the entire work is a masterpiece that would provide a model for the description of cities by other writers), or why he tells or does not tell autobiographical stories at certain moments in the text, and so on. Among the various genres he develops in his work, geography and autobiographical travelogue complement each other and yet interrupt each other: while his lived experiences intensify the interest invested in every place he describes, his overriding organization requires a suppression of many personal stories. He thus inserts his own travels not in their

chronological sequences but according to how they coincide with the order of places he describes. He is aware that this interrupts the main sequence but adds great interest to the places he describes. His ongoing comments to his readers about how he does not want to bore them, or why he cannot at times insert more personal or festive material, bring to light his awareness of the effects of his mixing or combining textual genres.

A primary aim of his is no doubt to convey what he finds remarkable about every place he mentions: his interest is at least partly intended to spur the interest of his readers, through contagion. The curiosity that he as a traveler brought to every place he visited should thus have the effect of prompting his readers' curiosity, though he is willing to suppress things that he might like to tell if he suspects they may be tedious for his readers or disruptive to his primary design. Ultimately, then, his sense of what might interest his readers seems to have priority over whatever other criteria he may have for including descriptions and narratives in his book.

Taking into consideration how Leo manages his ample free time, we can infer that, for him, curiosity may be understood as a desire to see, engage with, experience, know and comprehend especially human life in its many aspects, contexts and variations, as he the traveler encounters them and as he the writer recollects them. It is a curiosity that is never satisfied with what is all too apparent or obvious. This mode of curiosity undoubtedly pervades his travel and writing perhaps as much as it does those of nearly anyone in the early modern period, and it has undoubtedly contributed to the astounding success of this work for half a millennium despite the dismal editorial history of his work via Ramusio ([Leo Africanus and Ramusio 1550](#)) and the ensuing translations into different languages.

While we may well never know what circumstances and considerations led him to undertake the writing of the *Cosmographia*, there is no doubt that he was uniquely well positioned to do so. Judging from the growing interest in Europe about Africa during this time, coupled with the abysmal ignorance about it beyond its Mediterranean shores and its coastal contours, Leo could take up the challenge of bringing to life the Africa that he knew, assuming the perspective of writing both as an insider and an outsider. His outsider status is somewhat tenuous, based on his birth in Granada and perhaps bolstered by his years in Italy and his writing in Italian. Yet he insists on his Granadan origins not only in his fable of the amphibious bird ([Leo Africanus \[1526\] 2023](#), p. 48)—with which he identifies—but also in the closing lines of his book where he declares who he is and what the book is about (with habitual touches of Spanish in his Italian): “Finito el libro o vero tractato del prefato compositore Ms. *Ioan Lione granatino circa el significato de Affrica* [. . .] per modo de cosmographia; in Roma alli 10 di marzo 1526” ([Leo Africanus \[1526\] 2014](#), p. 606, my emphasis). [Here ends the book or treatise of the author, Messer Giovanni Leone of Granada, on what is meant by Africa [. . .] in the manner of a cosmography. Rome, 10 March 1526 ([Leo Africanus \[1526\] 2023](#), p. 467).] Leo's claim to be from Granada stems not only from the fact of his birth and early years there but also because he belonged to a prosperous immigrant family from Granada, judging from how well-established his father and uncle were in the kingdom of Fez and how early his own diplomatic career was launched. Moreover, he reveals a fascination and admiration for Granadans throughout his book, aware that during those decades significant numbers of Granadans settled and made their mark in important towns and cities in the Maghrib, including Marrakesh, Fez, Chefchaouen, Tlemcen, Cherchell, Algiers and Tunis. In sum, he signs off as a Granadan (bearing the names of Leo X) who has written about “what is meant by Africa” at a time when the meaning of “Africa” was evolving but by no means definite. He knows this Africa from the inside out—its settlements and peoples, its cultures and languages, its climates and topographies, its economies and routes—yet always seems to have that curiosity of an outsider looking in. Everywhere he goes, even within the kingdom of Fez, he acts like

a stranger, and for good reason, because the places he describes such as the village with houses full of serpents as pets bear no resemblance to the city where he grew up. Even that city, as we have seen, harbors many hidden alterities that require curiosity to discover and tell about them—and to incite our own curiosity.

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Notes

- ¹ For a variety of studies on the topic in early modern times, see (Evans and Marr 2006).
- ² I explore an example of this in my book *Frontier Narratives* (Hutchinson 2020, pp. 185–6).
- ³ English translations of passages by Montaigne are mine.
- ⁴ The primary text is the 1526 manuscript (Leo Africanus [1526] 2014). We are fortunate to have an excellent new English translation by Anthony Ossa-Richardson and Richard J. Oosterhoff based on this Italian manuscript (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023). This is the translation I use except when otherwise indicated.
- ⁵ This episode is analyzed in my forthcoming article “Radiant, Unsettling Gifts” (Hutchinson, forthcoming).
- ⁶ Leo uses the word *fregatrice* (derived from the Latin *frictrix*, a woman who rubs, already understood in an erotic sense in Ancient times). The Italian verb *fregare*, to rub, was an obvious erotic code word. The Arabic *suḥāqiyāt* is the plural of *siḥāqa*, a woman who rubs. In discussing this passage I have preferred Leo’s 1526 Italian manuscript to the new English translation of Ossa-Richardson and Oosterhoff, which, though justifiable in its choices, deprives the text of the playful erotic use of the Italian *fregare* (reinforced by the Arabic word), and translates “quello male costume, cioè che una de loro frega una altra” as “the wicked practice of fucking each other”—rather than something less evil such as “that bad practice in which one of them rubs the other” (Leo Africanus [1526] 2014, p. 172; [1526] 2023, p. 306). For me, ‘wicked’ is too harsh for the judgments that Leo typically expresses.
- ⁷ While treating distinct topics and focusing on different aspects of Leo Africanus’s life and text, this essay dovetails in many respects with my article “‘Nada humano...’” (Hutchinson 2023). Each of them can stand on its own but also provides an explanatory context for the other.

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