C H A P T E R  I

Introduction

The Metatheater of Blackness

Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity charts the literary and artistic representations of black people in ancient Greece. Delving into primary sources ranging from the fifth century BCE to the fourth century CE, I unearth numerous performances of blackness from ancient Greek literature and art. Ancient authors and artists create characters, contemporary scholars analyze these personae, and readers and viewers bring their own preoccupations to the fore. Running alongside this inquiry of portrayals of black people, a deep probing of race’s precarious grip on skin color uncovers the silences, suppression, and misappropriation of blackness within modern studies of Greek antiquity. Shaped foundationally by performance studies and critical race theory, this project maps out an archaeology of blackness that rejects simplistic conflations. Altogether, this anti-racist study promotes a contextualized, critical approach to representations of black people in Greek antiquity.

1.1 Prologue: An Educational Revolution

In their 1968 memo, “On the Abolition of the English Department,” lecturers Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (then known as James Ngũgĩ), Henry Owuor-Anyumba, and Taban lo Liyong spearheaded an educational revolution at the University of Nairobi. Eager to sweep out the vestiges of British colonialism from the university’s English department, Ngũgĩ, Owuor-Anyumba, and Liyong proposed renaming their department “The Department of African Literature and Languages” and suggested

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1 Throughout the book, I make deliberate use of orthography and modifiers to differentiate between ancient and modern peoples and places, between colors and descriptors of socially constructed groups, and I assign specific connotations to certain key terms. I discuss my rationale for these choices in the second section of this introductory chapter, but I encourage the reader to consult the Note on Nomenclature and Table P.1, above, before reading this chapter and subsequent chapters.
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a revised curriculum that emphasized the centrality of Africa via the study of its oral and written literature, art, and drama. Building on this manifesto for literary emancipation, Ngũgĩ later drew attention to the immense significance of the written language in his collection of essays *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1987). Here, the Kenyan scholar bid farewell to the English language as his literary medium and vowed to write all future works in Swahili and his native Gikũũyũ. Instead of espousing colonial languages on the African continent, Ngũgĩ urged fellow African writers to develop literature in their mother tongues.

This intentional erasure of Africa from the twentieth-century Kenyan curriculum serves as a reminder that unchallenged biases can lead to academic colonialism. Writing from a different context, I nonetheless heed Ngũgĩ’s appeal for a plurality of voices in the literary archive. His determined efforts to democratize the reading experience embolden me to prioritize representations of black people within the purview of ancient material. Moreover, Ngũgĩ’s insistence that language connotes power compels me to interrogate both the written word and the dynamic power plays that undergird it.

Snapshots from Ngũgĩ’s career underline the real-life stakes of literary liberation. After Kenya gained independence from Britain in 1963, Ngũgĩ worked with Kenyan farmers at the Kamĩrũthũ Community Educational and Cultural Centre to create plays that examined unchecked political control in their country. Soon after the 1977 performance of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*, 1997), a play that recounts a crumbling love affair between a poor woman and the son of her wealthy landlord, Kenyan government officials arrested Ngũgĩ. Following his release from prison and protracted exile, he returned to Nairobi and survived a violent assault. These glimpses into Ngũgĩ’s life lay bare the challenging position in which writers find themselves. They cannot divorce...
themselves from their historical present. There can be rich synergy in self-aware, collaborative literary initiatives, as evidenced in Ngugi’s work at the University of Nairobi and the Kamiriithu Centre, but there are costly consequences associated with revolutionary undertakings.^

Classicists are not exempt from such visceral reactions to their work. For instance, Donna Zuckerberg and Sarah Bond have received praise for calling to task racist ideologies masquerading as relics of Greco-Roman antiquity. They also have both spoken publicly about the death threats they have received following the publication of their articles about White supremacist receptions of Roman imperial history and polychromy on ancient Greek sculptures, respectively. Such vitriol reminds invested parties that much work remains to be done. The immense task of rehabilitating the academic terrain requires a vast community of thinkers who are willing to apply precision and historical depth to the subjects of their research. I align my study with this trend in the hopes that my contextualized account of ancient formulations of blackness and their modern reception will encourage others to undertake similar research in the future.

1.2 Performances of Blackness
Throughout my contextualized account of blackness in Greek antiquity, I recognize that the twenty-first century is undeniably implicated in any iteration of “performances of blackness,” a phrase that discloses my theoretical underpinnings. That is, I enlist the help of critical race theorists and performance studies scholars, both of whom continually interrogate categories of skin color and performance. From the 1950s onward, critical race theory has functioned as a complex methodology that breaks down polarizing categories. This relatively recent constellation of theories unsettles the prevailing argument that modern race is a form of objective science. Many scholars date the birth of critical race theory to 1952, the year that Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* ([2008]) was published. I differentiate between “modern race” and “race” below, in Section 3 of this chapter. Haley ([1993], 2005, 2009) and Bell (in press) offer models for integrating critical race theory into Latin literature and imperial Roman art, respectively.

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1 Ngugi’s fight against colonialism spans many decades from the 1960s; see Ngugi (1964); Ngugi and Mugo (1976); Ngugi and Ngugi wa Miriti (1997); Ngugi (2006); and Ngugi (2018). Gikandi (2000) offers a comprehensive analysis of Ngugi’s career.

2 See Zuckerberg (2016) and Bond (2017).

3 This community includes Classicists (The Postclassicisms Collective [2020]), scholars of theater (Wetmore [2002]), English (Walters [2007]; Hairston [2013]; Barnard [2018]), modern Greek studies (Tsiovos [2014]), and religion (Cahana-Blum and MacKendrick [2019]), to name a few.

4 Many scholars date the birth of critical race theory to 1952, the year that Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* ([2008]) was published. I differentiate between “modern race” and “race” below, in Section 3 of this chapter. Haley ([1993], 2005, 2009) and Bell (in press) offer models for integrating critical race theory into Latin literature and imperial Roman art, respectively.
embark on a two-pronged project: to analyze the broad scope of modern race and scrutinize the unstable valence of skin color. Theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields have generated incisive theorizations of Blackness that refute simplistic analyses of Black people. As I discuss in later chapters, their sophisticated conceptualizations of Blackness speak to a wide range of audiences beyond their own time period and field of expertise (medicine, law, sociology, and history, respectively). Performance studies, which emerged in the 1960s in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and theater studies, draws the writer, performer, and audience together into a tripartite relationship. Performance studies transforms literary and visual constructs into performers who manipulate their words and appearance to expose substantial challenges that they face. Despite performers’ roles as fictional characters, their shrewd performativity grants them agency within circumscribed confines. Meanwhile, in terms of pragmatics, the term “performative,” developed by the linguistic philosopher J. L. Austin in 1962, helps to articulate the agential force of performers’ semiotics (i.e. words, dress, and nonverbal gestures) as they wield different types of “language” to circumvent adverse situations.

Nestled within the realm of performance studies, the metatheater is another useful tool with which I parse performances of blackness. Coined by Lionel Abel, the metatheater is a self-referential form of drama that incorporates various instances of reflexive theatricality. On a base level of theatrical engagement, playwrights create characters, characters enact performances, and performances attract viewers. Operating beyond these parameters, the metatheater recasts dramatists and the drama in which they participate as performers who warrant investigation. In other words, the metatheater houses characters who are aware of their own performances (“drama within drama”) and offers a bird’s-eye view of the dramatic performance itself (“drama about drama”). A horizontal mode of inquiry applies to all parties involved in these metatheatrical productions. In this vein, I treat each genre discussed in subsequent chapters as a stage on which

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12 Quotations are from Ringer (1998: 7). Abel (1963, 2003) interprets the latter form of reflexive theatricality (“drama about drama”) as a manifestation of the playwright’s disillusion with mimicry; he also distinguishes between the metatheater, which deals with the imaginary world, and tragedy, which deals with the real world. Dustagheer and Newman (2018) present a helpful survey of the metatheater; Taplin (1977) and Dobrov (2001) offer metatheatrical approaches to ancient Athenian tragedy.
1.2 Performances of Blackness

Performances of blackness take place. Art history, tragedy, historiography, satire, and the novel morph into sites of production.

Situated at the intersection of critical race theory and performance studies, Black performance studies informs my analysis of performances of blackness. The early genealogy of this interdisciplinary dates to the mid-nineteenth century, and its formal introduction into the academy occurred in the 1990s. Sometimes deemed performance historians, scholars of Black performance studies examine the movement and expressive culture of Black people, and they develop creative tools with which to animate Black performances that occur in a variety of settings. Despite the wide range of their source material, Black performance scholars converge on what E. Patrick Johnson deems “the material, intellectual, and aesthetic matrix that is black performance.”

Along with their expansive take on performers, scholars of Black performance studies rework the timeline and location of performances. For example, Tavia Nyong’o conceptualizes performative hybridity as an untamed, time-bending trope that speaks to both the future and the past. Nyong’o’s temporal malleability is especially relevant to my twenty-first-century inquiry of representations of blackness in Greek antiquity. Furthermore, Nyong’o’s inclusion of genres not traditionally associated with performance, such as historiography, in the domain of performance speaks to my theorization of genres as metatheatrical stages on which performances of blackness occur. Relatedly, I also build on Saidiya Hartman’s analysis of quotidian performances enacted by enslaved Black people in the antebellum American south. Hartman traces an arc from

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13 This date corresponds to academic publications by the Black Public Sphere Collective (1995) and Dent (1998). Nonetheless, M. Gaines (2017) and Nyong’o (2019) expand on Black artistic production from the 1960s onward. Even still, earlier theorists of Black performances include Henry “Box” Brown (b. 1815; discussed in Brooks [2006: 66–110]), Pauline Hopkins (1859–1930), and Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960; discussed in Hurston [1998]; and DeFrantz and Gonzalez [2014: 2–3]). When listing people’s life span, I provide only a birthdate for cases where there is no death date available from a reliable source.

14 Johnson (2006) and Colbert (2015) offer critical overviews of Black performance studies (which Colbert delineates as “African American Performance”). See also Brody (1998); the contributions in Phelan and Lane (1998); the contributions in Elam and Krasner (2001); Johnson (2003); Moten (2003); and Brown (2008). For a few examples of Black performance studies in practice: Brody (2008) treats seemingly minute gestures, such as the choice of punctuation, as performance pieces that trouble notions of stability; Young (2010: 7–12, 165–66) unearths meaningful dialogue buried underneath Black performers’ silence; see also Benston (2000) and Fleetwood (2011: 53–70). These examples reflect only some of the current trajectories in the ever-growing realm of Black performance studies.


16 Nyong’o (2009).
“scenes of subjection” into scenes of resistance, inspecting the ways in which Black subjects successfully transform small-scale acts such as work slowdowns and unlicensed travel into scenes that are part of the larger stagecraft of slavery. In the process, Hartman defamiliarizes expectations about what a typical theatrical performance looks like. For instance, she converts the inhumane site of the auction block into a scene from the “theater of the marketplace” where unwilling actors encounter a willing audience. In this constrained context, enslaved people’s refusal to bare their teeth or dance on command exposes the limitations of their self-authorizing performances. Hartman later elaborates that “what unites these varied tactics [of resistance] is the effort to redress the condition of the enslaved, restore the disrupted affiliations of the socially dead, challenge the authority and dominion of the slaveholder, and alleviate the pained state of the captive body.”

Although a vast historical distance separates Hartman’s source material from my own, her supple theorization of performances that redress, restore, challenge, and alleviate reimagines the scope of performance at the intersection of modern race and power. Daphne Brooks offers another useful blueprint for excavating performances of blackness. Focusing on Black people’s stage presence in the late nineteenth century, Brooks reworks the confines of performance to highlight linguistic and corporeal acts of dissent that occur among Black people who occupy seemingly marginal roles. She documents the phenomenon whereby, in spite of the strict social boundaries that govern their lives, they rupture the veil of Blackness under the guise of performance. ‘That is, their performative interventions destabilize presumed notions of inferiority based on skin color. Coupled with her investigative lens, Brooks’s trope of dramatic interference informs my present inquiry of performers who upend audiences’ expectations.

Equally convincing is Brooks’s acknowledgment that there can be no singular, correct interpretation, as writers’ intentions collide with those of performers, readers, and spectators. These multiple points of contact lead to numerous discoveries. Brooks’s admission of her own position as spectator is especially liberating in its disavowal of authority. Indeed, attempts to completely restore the “original” interplay between performers and their audience are futile, whether for performances of Blackness in the nineteenth century or for performances of blackness in Greco-Roman antiquity. Brooks’s self-reflexive body of theory works well alongside

18 Hartman (1997: 51; emphasis added).  
19 The language of unveiling evokes Du Bois (1903).  
1.2 Performances of Blackness

Classical reception theory to underline the many audiences who engage with ancient source material, including characters within the world of ancient Greek literature and art, their audiences, and twenty-first-century readers. As Lorna Hardwick and Emily Greenwood assert, even frail connections between the ancient and modern worlds can lead to substantial discoveries.\(^2\) In other words, a confrontation between contemporary observations and ancient representations results in a vibrant metatheater.\(^2\) Taking cues from Nyong’o, Hartman, and Brooks, I include a variety of performers and performances in this investigation. My subjects of inquiry include characters written for the theatrical stage, characters in literary texts, and characters who interact with viewers in the sphere of visual and material culture.

A well-known example illustrates ongoing permutations of performances in relation to skin color. In 2002, a recent graduate of Howard University sued her alma mater on charges of discrimination. After losing the case, she built her career around advocating for the Black community; her artwork focused on Black people, she taught in the Africana Studies Program at Eastern Washington University, and she became the president of the Spokane chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Her bronze-toned skin and curly hair suggested that she had Black ancestors. Further, in a 2015 interview with KXLY4 (a local news station in Spokane, Washington), she encouraged this link by stating that her son and father were Black.\(^3\) Later that year, however, the truth began to tumble out once her birth parents revealed that their daughter, was White: Rachel Anne Doležal had accused Howard University of discriminating against her because she was White, among other reasons; she had started wearing artificial hair and cosmetically darkening her skin in 2009; her “son” was her adopted brother; and her “father” was a close friend.\(^4\) Despite these revelations, Doležal continued to identify as Black. In 2017,

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\(^3\) A. Gaines (2017: 158–71). In the memorandum opinion and judgment of Doležal’s appeal to the District of Columbia, the listed reasons for alleged discrimination are “race, pregnancy, family responsibilities and gender, as well as retaliation” (Moore v. Howard U., 876 A.2d 640 [D.C. Cir. 2003]).
she legally changed her name to Nkechi Amare Diallo and published a memoir, *In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World*, on the cover of which she appears with bronze-toned skin, an Afro, and a colorful beaded necklace.

Even though Doležal’s externally derived skin color, hairstyle, and accessories imply a performative aspect to her self-presentation, she has insisted that Blackness is not a costume to be worn or discarded. Instead, she has described her Blackness as a previously hidden part of herself that she intends to lay bare.25 Conversely, her self-avowed unveiling runs counter to her adoption of artifices of Blackness, such as curly hair and brown skin. Regardless of her best efforts to fortify her status as a Black person, the uproar following the discovery of her lineage exposed the inescapable intersubjectivity of Blackness. In other words, socially constructed ways of seeing Blackness greatly affected her acceptance into the Black community. If skin color were the sole determinant of Blackness, Doležal’s bronze-toned skin would have granted her swift entry. But the lack of a universally agreed-upon arbiter of Blackness made Doležal’s assertion of Blackness difficult to accept in the public sphere. She muddied this already murky territory by combining visual markers with a variety of nonvisual elements, such as her public comments about negative interactions with police officers and her remarks about being a mother to Black men. Alisha Gaines separates Doležal’s intentions from her actions by referring to Doležal’s self-identification as an instance of “empathetic racial impersonation.”26 This phrase simultaneously underscores Doležal’s yearning to understand perspectives outside of her own and the false consciousness that she has achieved. Indeed, Doležal has been adamant about her love for Black people, but the idea that there is a fixed criterion for becoming “Black,” and that she has met this criterion, overlooks the complexities of reality. By reducing Blackness to particular tropes, Doležal has risked essentializing a historically fraught category for the sake of her project of self-discovery. At the same time, her malleable performance of Blackness highlights the unsteady platform on which Blackness stands. Those who decry her claims of Blackness solely because of her White parentage also

25 “It [identifying as Black] felt less like I was adopting a new identity and more like I was unveiling one that had been there all along” (Doležal, 2017: 90–91; see also the documentary, *The Rachel Divide* [2018], dir. Laura Brownson).

subscribe to an essentialist fallacy – namely, their reliance on genealogy to determine Blackness privileges the laws of hypodescent, known as the "one drop rule" because it assigns the label “Black” to anyone with at least one Black ancestor.27

Doležal’s story of chosen exile raises pressing questions of definition for any historical inquiry that examines the nexus of color and social categorization.28 In addition, the aftermath of her transformation reveals potential consequences awaiting those whose identification with Blackness lacks a historically informed analysis of its contours. Although the Black–White constraint has no valuable application in ancient Greece, ancient writers and artists employ skin color and other visual markers in curious ways that speak poignantly to their own contexts as well as to the twenty-first century.29 Therefore, as I begin this bidirectional inquiry into blackness in ancient Greek literature and art, careful handling of pertinent vocabulary is vital. In Section 1.3 of this chapter, my explication of geographical and chromatic terms reflects my own efforts to expose the relay between ancient and present contexts. My self-reflexive endeavor contributes to the democratizing force of this study; as scholars who inhabit a world in which we see through the prism of modern race, none of us are exempt from scrutiny. In Section 1.4, I interrogate the privileged status of two White scholars, Martin Bernal and Grace Hadsley Beardsley, alongside their scholarship about blackness in antiquity. Section 1.5 alerts readers to what lies ahead in the remaining chapters.

27 Dating to the seventeenth century, the laws of hypodescent stated that no matter how diverse one’s parentage, any Black parentage or ancestry determined one’s categorization and that of his/her descendants. This drastically codified the assignment of Blackness and remains a powerful marker of social categorization in the twenty-first century.

28 Wald (2000); Hobbs (2014). This overview of Doležal’s story serves as merely one example of passing in America. Other examples of White people who passed as Black include Clarence King (b. 1842; discussed in Sandweiss [2009]), Ray Sprigle (1949), Grace Habell (1969), Jessica Krug, and C. V. Vitolo-Haddad (both discussed in Flaherty [2020]). Despite this list, recorded instances of Black people passing as White outnumber those of White people passing as Black, presumably due to the social and financial benefits associated with membership in the White community. A notable example of this phenomenon includes Belle da Costa Greene (1883–1950), the daughter of Richard Theodore Greener, the first Black member of the American Philological Association (currently named the Society for Classical Studies), who identified as a White woman of Portuguese ancestry. Passing was also a popular phenomenon in apartheid-era South Africa; Michael Chapman’s “Concrete Poem: The Chameleon Dance” highlights its ever-changing classifications (1986: 98).

29 The Black–White binary refers to the categorization of people as either “Black” or “White.” Even those who do not identify with either group are labeled as members of one or the other. In addition to creating social division, this binary model corrals all “non-White” people (a nebulous category in and of itself) into an amorphous group of “Black” people.
1.3 Building the Literary Landscape

In terms of geography, the borders of the Greek world were in flux from the fifth century BCE to the fourth century CE. Demarcations between regions were especially variable as hegemony in the Mediterranean region shifted from Athens to Rome. Although some Greek-speaking cities adopted an aggregative Greek identity during the Greco-Persian wars and later received the generic label of “Greece” after the battle of Corinth (146 BCE), “Greece” did not always reflect the geographic or political realities of individual cities.\(^{30}\) Cognizant of the porous topography and extensive temporal scope of “Greece,” I use “Greece” as an umbrella term that refers to a general location as well as specific Greek-speaking cities, such as Argos (Chapter 3) and Athens (Chapter 5).

Notwithstanding the complicated mapping of Greece, the temptation to fossilize historically specific labels persists in contemporary scholarship. For instance, many scholars assign the name of a modern country, Ethiopia, to an ancient region. The conflation between the only African country to successfully defend its sovereignty in the nineteenth century and a classical civilization whose popularity increased alongside nineteenth-century American Egyptomania is misleading, but not surprising.\(^{31}\) To contextualize Ethiopia in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century: Liberia was the only other independent nation (under the auspices of the American Colonization Society) on the African continent, and many uprisings against European colonizers were underway, such as those led by Bambatha kaMancinza in South Africa, Henrik Witbooi in German South West Africa (present-day Namibia), Samory Touré of the Wassoulou empire (Guinea, Sierra Leone, Mali, and Côte d’Ivoire), Kinjikitiile Ngwale in German East Africa (Tanzania), and John Chilibwwe in Nyasaland (Malawi). Roughly concurrent with Ethiopia’s victory against Italy in the Battle of Adwa (1896), Africans and African Americans adopted an iteration of the country’s name (“Ethiopianism”) during their quest for religious and political freedom.\(^{32}\)

The term “Africa” has its own historical trajectory as well. In this book, I use “Africa” to refer to the modern continent (see Figure 1.1). This decision stems from the fact that extant Greek texts refer to the land


\(^{31}\) On Egyptomania, see Trafton (2004); Moyer (2011) helpfully frames interactions between Greece and Egypt as transactional, rather than protocolonial. I discuss my capitalization practices relating to “classics” and “Classics” below (p. 13).

\(^{32}\) On Ethiopianism, see Nurhussein (2019: 1–20).