UNTANGLING BLACKNESS IN GREEK ANTIQUITY

How should articulations of blackness from the fifth century BCE to the twenty-first century be properly read and interpreted? This important and timely new book is the first concerted treatment of black skin color in the Greek literature and visual culture of antiquity. In charting representations in the Hellenic world of black Egyptians, Aithiopians, Indians, and Greeks, Sarah Derbew dexterously disentangles the complex and varied ways in which blackness has been co-produced by ancient authors and artists; their readers, audiences, and viewers; and contemporary scholars. Exploring the precarious hold that race has on skin coloration, the author uncovers the many silences, suppressions, and misappropriations of blackness within modern studies of Greek antiquity. Shaped by performance studies and critical race theory alike, her book maps out an authoritative archaeology of blackness that reappraises its significance. It offers a committedly anti-racist approach to depictions of black people while rejecting simplistic conflations or explanations.

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Acknowledgments

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Travel was an integral part of this project. I thank the staff at the following sites who ensured that I had access to relevant materials during my sojourns: the British Museum (especially Derek Welsby), the Louvre (special thanks to the guard who slowed down his rapid-fire French so I could understand his directions and locate the appropriate museum entrance), the Museo Nazionale Etrusco, the Ashmolean Museum, the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Sudan National Museum, and the Royal City of Meroe. In England, numerous scholars offered constructive feedback over cups of tea: Rosa Andújar, Pavlos Avlamis, Justine McConnell, and Jeremy Tanner. All of these international meetings would have been impossible without the financial support of the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies, the Department of Classics at Yale, the Social Science Research Council, and the William F. Milton Fund at Harvard.

Beyond museum visits, I worked on this project in various cities. Kind hosts enabled me to focus on my work by providing me with a place to lay my head, tasty food, and top-notch company: Sym in Asan City, Julia in Sheung Wan, Nithya in Quito, my Sunshine family (Asteway, Lizayay, Rozit, Aman, and Nathania pre-Gelila and Moses) in Melbourne, SMLC in Brockley and Paris (along with Pascal and Esmé), Ifeanyi in London, Mahlu and Markos (plus Enana and Zinah) in Nashua, Unkie and Teddy in Chicago, Candace in Philadelphia, Denise and Ama in New Haven, and Tege and Suziyay in Addis Ababa. Thanks as well to Jeff Tecosky-Feldman, my undergraduate mentor (and calculus professor), who invited me back to my alma mater on numerous occasions. He was the first person to suggest that I consider a PhD in Classics. Had he not handed me a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship application in my freshman year of college, the financial sector would have had one more in its ranks.

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My love of reading began at P.S. 11K in Brooklyn. A heartfelt thanks to my elementary school teachers: Mrs. Jacobs, Mrs. Smiling, Mrs. Peterson-Ruffin, Ms. Frazier, Mrs. Stephens-Spellman, Ms. McGhie, and Ms. Holder. These women gave me a solid foundation and always encouraged me to be proud of my intelligence. I share a few snapshots from this well-rounded public education. It was in Mrs. Jacobs’ kindergarten class that I read my first book, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. In Mrs. Smiling’s class, I was able to gobble up books and cookies from her seemingly endless stash. I vividly remember Mrs. Stephens-Spellman calling us to attention in the Akan language in fourth grade (*Ago? Amé*) and the gift of ankara fabric that she gave me when I did well on the New York citywide tests. I will never forget the fear I felt, and the lesson I learned, when my fifth-grade teacher Ms. McGhie threatened to call my parents after she caught me watching my friends throw wads of wet toilet paper onto the ceiling of the girls’ bathroom; she told me that witnessing bad behavior and staying silent was the same as participating in the act. In sixth grade, Ms. Holder’s passionate speech about the importance of capitalizing “Black” and scrutinizing the media’s representation of Black people left an indelible mark on my impressionable eleven-year-old self. The Clinton Hill branch of the Brooklyn Public Library also deserves public acknowledgment. When they gave me a library card, they gave me a ticket to the world.

In my family, my brother jokes that he is the brains behind this project. To be fair, there have been times when I have followed his footsteps. At the age of three, I stubbornly (and successfully) insisted that I was ready for school so that we could be classmates. When I was twelve, I transferred to his school Friends Seminary, where I began learning Latin. By the time I reached college, he had already declared a major in Classics and normalized the study of ancient languages in our family. As a devoted member of Contingent XIX, he introduced me to Prep for Prep, where I wound up securing my first Latin teaching job. Turning to other members of my family, my aunt Mehret fortified me with her food deliveries and nurturing presence throughout my many years of schooling. Finally, four people deserve the biggest thanks: Baba (Derbew), Anguache, Aboy, and Aday. They gave me the greatest gifts I have ever received: my parents. "I dedicate this book to my grandmother Anguache (1944–2017), whose energetic voice and shrewd smile remain etched in my memory. To quote her wise words: ያቅር ካለ፣አንድ እንጀራ ለአንድ ሺ ይበቃል።"

(Mata) Seck, Susan Stephens, and Jennifer Trimble. I am also grateful to Verity Walsh and Ellen Wert for their editing magic.
Note on Nomenclature

With the necessary exceptions of the book’s title, chapter titles, and subheading titles, throughout the book I make a number of deliberate distinctions among certain key terms, largely signaled by orthography (uppercase or lowercase initial letters) and modifiers (such as “modern”). These distinctions are especially useful for detangling the categories of ancient and modern people and identifying ancient and modern places – and for studying them. In addition, I intend specific connotations for other key terms, such as race and identity. I elaborate on these language choices mainly in Section 3 of Chapter 1 but also in subsequent chapters. Below I offer Table P.1 as a summary and visual reference.

Table P.1  Key Terms: Orthography and definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>A modern continent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aithiopia</td>
<td>An ancient ethereal land that Greek sources sometimes conflate with a historical region; its geographical location roughly corresponds with modern Egypt and Sudan (spanning the First to the Sixth Cataract of the Nile)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ancient world</td>
<td>A broad term that refers to past communities whose geography need not correspond with the Mediterranean region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>antiquity</td>
<td>A broad term that refers to past communities whose geography need not correspond with the Mediterranean region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blackness (lowercase)</td>
<td>A term that refers to the skin color of black (lowercase) people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackness (uppercase)</td>
<td>A term that refers to the skin color of Black (uppercase) people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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# Note on Nomenclature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>black face (lowercase)</td>
<td>A term that describes the faces of black people on Attic janiform cups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackface (uppercase)</td>
<td>A term that refers to the performances of nineteenth- and twentieth-century White minstrel actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black people (lowercase)</td>
<td>People whose skin color is rendered black in ancient Greek literature and art; their phenotypic features usually include full lips, curly hair, and a broad nose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black people (uppercase)</td>
<td>A modern, socially constructed categorization that denotes people with varying shades of melanin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brown face (lowercase)</td>
<td>A term that describes clay-colored faces on Attic janiform cups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown people (uppercase)</td>
<td>A modern, socially constructed categorization that denotes people of South Asian descent, among others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classical/classics (lowercase)</td>
<td>The study of ancient societies including and beyond the Mediterranean region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical/Classics (uppercase)</td>
<td>A problematic stand-in for the study of Greco-Roman antiquity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classicist (uppercase)</td>
<td>A person who studies Greco-Roman antiquity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>An ancient country that spans from the Nile Delta to the First Cataract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>A modern nation located in the Horn of Africa, east of Sudan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greco-Roman antiquity</td>
<td>A term used to denote the history of Greece and Rome from the eighth century BCE to the fourth century CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>A geographical marker of an ancient Mediterranean superpower that overlaps with the modern nation of Greece; also an umbrella term used to denote Greek-speaking cities such as Argos and Athens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek antiquity</td>
<td>A term used to denote the history of Greece from the eighth century BCE to the fourth century CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek world</td>
<td>A geographical term that corresponds to ancient writers’ amorphous mapping of Greek-speaking cities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Note on Nomenclature

Table P.1 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>identity</td>
<td>An inward-facing category of self-evaluation (how you conceptualize yourself)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>An ancient country located east of Aithiopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modern Egypt</td>
<td>A modern nation located in northeast Africa, north of Sudan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modern India</td>
<td>A modern nation located on the Indian subcontinent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modern race</td>
<td>A doctrine that assigns fixed traits to groups of people loosely based on laws of hypodescent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nubia</td>
<td>An ancient historical region whose geographical location roughly corresponds with modern Egypt and Sudan (spanning the First to the Sixth Cataract of the Nile)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persian empire (Achaemenid)</td>
<td>An extensive empire that lasted from c. 550 BCE to 330 BCE; the lowercase “e” democratizes the privileged delineation of “empire”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>race</td>
<td>An outward-facing category of evaluation (how you conceptualize others)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>racism</td>
<td>The social practice of applying a double standard to people loosely based on their physical appearance; developed in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman empire (Augustan)</td>
<td>An extensive empire that lasted from 27 BCE to c. 476 CE; the lowercase “e” democratizes the privileged delineation of “empire”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>A modern nation located in northeast Africa, south of modern Egypt and west of Ethiopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white (lowercase)</td>
<td>An objective color marker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White people (uppercase)</td>
<td>A modern, socially constructed group that exists in contradistinction to Black people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbreviations


All Greek text is from the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the ancient Greek and Latin sources are my own.

For the student, nonspecialist, or the curious reader, immediately preceding the bibliography I also offer a list of recommended modern translations of the four primary sources on which I focus in this study: Aeschylus’s Suppliants, Herodotus’s Histories, Lucian’s satires, and Heliodorus’s Aithiopika. On this latter, I use a direct transliteration of the Greek spelling, rather than the common (Latinate) Aethiopica. I discuss my use of “Aithiopia” further in sections 1.3 and 6.3.

Aer. Hippocratic treatise, De aere, aquis, et locis (On Airs, Waters, and Places)
Anach. Lucian, Anacharsis (Athletics)
Argon. Apollonius of Rhodes, Argonautica
Ars am. Ovid, Ars amatoria
Astr. Lucian, On Astrology
Ath. Athenaeus, Deipnosophistae
Cyr. Xenophon, Cyropaedia
Diod. Sic. Diodorus Siculus, Library
Dionys. Per. Dionysius of Alexandria, Periegesis
FGrH Felix Jacoby and Stefan Schorn, eds. Fragmente der griechischen Historiker. 5 vols. Leiden:Brill, 1923–.
FHN Tormod Eide, Tomas Hägg, R. H. Pierce, and László Török, eds. Fontes Historiae Nubiorum: Textual Sources for the History of the Middle Nile Region between the Eighth

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List of Abbreviations


fr. fragment
Hdt. Herodotus, Histories
Heliod. Aeth. Heliodorus, Aithiopika
Her. Ovid, Heroïdes
HN Pliny the Elder, Naturalis historia (Natural History)
II. Homer, Iliad
Ind. Lucian, Adversus indoctum (Ignorant Book Collector)
Med. Euripides, Medea
Met. Ovid, Metamorphoses
Mor. Plutarch, Moralia
Od. Homer, Odyssey
Arist. [Phgn.] Pseudo-Aristotle, Physiognomies
Pyth. Pindar, Pythian Ode
Scyth. Lucian, The Scythian or the Consul
Strabo Strabo, Geography
Supp. Aeschylus, Suppliants
Syr. D. Lucian, De Syria dea (On the Syrian Goddess)
Tox. Lucian, Toxaris: A Friendship Dialogue
Thuc. Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War
VA Philostratus, Vita Apollonii (Life of Apollonius of Tyana)
Ver. hist. Lucian, Verae historiae (True Stories)