



**Sarah F. Derbew, *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity*,
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This is the first book-length study on Black people in the Greco-Roman world since Frank Snowden's works, which makes it a critical addition to the growing discourse on those racial dynamics. More specifically, the book focuses on representations of Blackness in classical Greek literature and art. It consists of 'A Note on Nomenclature', followed by seven chapters. The first chapter 'Introduction: The Metatheater of Blackness' outlines Derbew's perspective on race and Blackness in modern and ancient Greek contexts. The second chapter, 'Masks of Blackness: Reading the Iconography of Black People in Greek Antiquity', focuses on the representations of Blackness on fifth-century BCE janiform cups and the marginalization of ancient Nubia in favour of ancient Egypt. The third chapter, 'Masks of Difference in Aeschylus's *Suppliants*', contextualizes the Danaids as exemplars of hybrid identity that transcends their Blackness. The fourth chapter, 'Beyond Blackness: Reorienting Greek Geography', deconstructs Herodotus's discourse of Aithiopians,¹ and, for comparison, Scythians as nuanced and complex representations. The fifth chapter, 'From Greek Scythians to Black Greeks: A Spectrum of Foreignness in Lucian's *Satires*', complicates the meaning of skin colour in Lucian satires, specifically focusing on Aithiopians, Scythians and Greeks. The sixth chapter, 'Black Disguises in an Aithiopian Novel', argues that Heliodorus's *Aithiopika* subverts the Greek-foreigner binary. The seventh and concluding chapter, '(Re)placing Blackness in Greek Antiquity', looks to Black poets for innovative approaches to Blackness in Greek antiquity. The remaining portions of the book are appendices, recommended translations, bibliography, and index.

Derbew argues that modern studies of race in Greek antiquity tend to project modern racial sensibilities around skin colour onto Greek constructions of Blackness which were not rigidly bound by skin colour. In doing so, she engages anti-colonial

¹ I use 'Aithiopians' and 'Aithiopia' to avoid confusion with the modern nation-state of Ethiopia.

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and critical race scholarship, primarily from Black thinkers and writers of the modern era, to illuminate the nuances in the Greek material. Derbew provides some corrective analysis for Greek art. For example, she skilfully disproves the spurious claims of ‘negroid features’ in Attic pottery which have dominated previous scholarship (pp. 39–41). Also, there are some insightful applications of critical race theory. Derbew’s use of Critical Race Theorist Derrick Bell’s interest convergence theory to explain King Pelasgus giving into the pleas of the Danaids is effective because it highlights the institutional aspect of racism (pp. 89–90). These examples show the necessity of critical race scholarship for Greek antiquity. Unfortunately, however, the book’s engagement with critical race scholarship is undermined by its conceptual and methodological problems.

Derbew argues that an ‘over focus’ on ancient Egyptian skin colour marginalizes ancient Nubia (Aithiopia) which, in turn, reinforces a monolithic representation of ancient Afrika (pp. 12–13). This caution, however, is ahistorical; the debate is a result of the rejection of Kemet’s Afrikanity that is widespread in Egyptology.² For example, Egyptologists and Nubiologists often refer to the Kushite (Aithiopian) dynasty in Kemet as the ‘Black Pharaohs’,³ which is a colonialist characterization.⁴ In fact, Afrikan-centred scholars have addressed this problem; but Derbew only engages with them in a footnote (pp. 21–2 n. 66). Furthermore, Snowden incorrectly assumed that the Egyptians were not Black and that Aithiopians were *the* Black people in antiquity. Derbew acknowledges that the Greeks describe the Egyptians as Black people (p. 12) and that they are often paired together with Aithiopians (p. 100), but she does not critique the colonialist erasure of Kemet’s Blackness, which is the actual problem. Thus, Derbew’s prioritization of Aithiopians reinforces the colonialist discourse that disconnects Kemet from Afrika and, in turn, positions Kush as the token Black civilization.

Derbew’s contextualization of race and racism is conceptually limited. She does not locate her work within the context of critical race scholarship on Greco-Roman representations of Black people.⁵ Her engagement with this scholarship is limited to passing comments in footnotes (p. 3 n. 8, p. 19 n. 61, p. 34 n. 13; p. 105 n. 24). Moreover, she defines ‘modern race’ as: ‘A doctrine that assigns fixed traits to groups of people loosely based on laws of hypodescent’ (p. xv). This definition overlooks the complex socio-historical and cultural aspects of race. Derbew defines racism as ‘the social practice of applying a double standard to people loosely based

² I use ‘Kemet’, the indigenous term, to refer to the civilization on its own terms, and ‘Egypt’ to refer to Greek material.

³ As with Kemet/Egypt, Kushite refers to the civilization itself, while Aithiopian is a Greek term.

⁴ For further discussion, see K. Crawford, ‘Critique of the “Black Pharaohs” Theme: Racist Perspectives of Egyptian and Kushite/Nubian Interactions in Popular Media’, *African Archaeological Review*, 2021; <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-021-09453-7>.

⁵ See S. P. Haley, ‘Be Not Afraid of the Dark: Critical Race Theory and Classical Studies’, in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies*, ed. L. Salah Nasrallah and F. E. Schüssler, Minneapolis, 2009, pp. 27–50; and Tristan Samuels (Talawa Adodo), ‘Herodotus and the Black Body: A Critical Race Theory Analysis’, *Journal of Black Studies*, 46.7, 2015, pp. 723–41.

on their physical appearance; developed in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade' (ibid.), while negative or violent commentary in Greek texts is restricted to 'colour prejudice' and 'discrimination' (p. 19 n. 61). Apart from the European enslavement of 'Afrikan' people,⁶ this definition is the same as colour prejudice. Further, racism is a systematic phenomenon that involves power dynamics and cultural imposition.⁷ Derbew reduces race and racism to fixed traits and colour prejudice, rather than complex socio-historical phenomena.

The Greeks had a somatic norm image of the bronzed Greek (Athenian) man and the white Greek woman. Derbew, however, prefers 'brown faces' for the Athenian women on the Janus cups (p. 33) and, misinterprets the description of Athenian athletes as τὸ μελάυτερον in Lucian's *Anacharsis* (25) as 'black' (p. 150). To the contrary, Athenian males understood their somatic norm as the complexion in-between the whiteness of Athenian women and the blackness of Egyptians and Aithiopians (Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomy*, 812a), as Derbew acknowledges (p. 153). Μέλας refers to the sunburnt, ruddy or swarthy complexion for Athenian males, but connotes black skin colour for Egyptians and Aithiopians. Whiteness was not central to Greek identity as it is in modern western racial dynamics, but the Greek somatic norm shows that skin colour was a central aspect in Greek identity.

There is no methodology to assess anti-Blackness in Greek antiquity. Derbew argues that the interpretation of the racial juxtapositions on Janiform cups as a pejorative representation is based on modern assumptions of Blackness (p. 45). However, the previously mentioned commentary in the *Physiognomy* (812a) suggests that the juxtaposition on the Janiform cups, indeed, represents the otherness of Athenian women and Black people as they are outside the realm of Athenian citizenship. Moreover, Derbew argues that the Danaids in Aeschylus's *Suppliants* decentralize skin colour in favour of hybrid identity. However, Frantz Fanon, whom she references for her argument, argues that the colonial language is prioritized in the assimilationist aspirations of the colonized – not hybridity.⁸ As such, the Danaids appeal to Greek culture shows their assimilationist aspirations. Clearly, the power dynamics of Athenian society were not favourable to Egyptians and Aithiopians.

Derbew argues that Herodotus and Heliodorus complicate the Greek/non-Greek binary in their representations of Aithiopians. Both authors, however, have their own cultural subjectivity as Greeks. Herodotus evaluates the Aithiopian king from a Greek perspective and, ultimately, illuminates the shortcomings of the Persians. As such, the Kushites are passive objects in Herodotus's narrative, contrary to what Derbew claims (p. 121). Moreover, she acknowledges that Heliodorus does not have an indigenous perspective (p. 164). Consequently, *Aethiopika* could not be an 'Aithiopian novel written in Greek', as she contends. Rather, it is a Greek story *set in*

⁶ I have adopted this spelling because it corresponds to the orthography of most indigenous languages on the continent.

⁷ For examples, see T. J. Curry, 'Race', in *Political and Civic Leadership. A Reference Handbook*, ed. R. A. Couto, Los Angeles, 2009, pp. 550–9; and B. Fields, 'Whiteness, Racism and Identity'. *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60, 2001, pp. 48–56.

⁸ F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, London, 1986, pp. 17–40.

Aithiopia as signified by Chariclea's whiteness. Epistemic agency for Kemetiu and Kushites can only come from the people themselves, not their representations as Egyptians and Aithiopians by the Greeks.

The inadequate theorization of race and racism in the book leads to its methodological flaws. Derbew's rigid bifurcation of race and skin colour is not supported by the evidence. Moreover, anti-Blackness cannot be addressed because racism is reduced to modern colour prejudice rather than a systematic phenomenon. Furthermore, the cultural bias of the Greek representations of Kemetiu and Kushites is overlooked. Ultimately, the book is unable to contextualize the socio-historical and cultural dynamics of ancient Greek representations of Black people.

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