# BLACKNESS AND ANTIQUITY

DERBEW (S.F.) *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity*. Pp. xviii + 253, b/w & colour ills, colour maps. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Cased, £29.99, US$39.99. ISBN: 978-1-108-49528-8.
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D.'s landmark study exposes and counteracts 'the invisible ontologies of modern race' (p. 187) that have governed previous treatments of black people in ancient Greek literature and art. In seven meticulously researched chapters aiming to be 'illustrative rather than exhaustive' (p. 25) D. stages reparative readings of 'performances of blackness' (p. 187) across a breathtaking array of time periods, cultures, geographies, medias and genres: from Attic janiform cups to the British Museum's Nubia exhibits, from fifth-century BCE tragedy and Herodotus' *Histories* to Lucian's satires and Heliodorus' *Aithiopika*.

Chapters follow an appealing formula: metadisciplinary hors-d'oeuvres followed by carefully plated cuts of ancient Greek, ending with titbits from the trolley of Black receptions. The resultant meals will whet many appetites and leave others hungry for more. Critiques of anti-Black biases in classical scholarship and curatorship are piquant, Greek literary analyses not cooked to everyone's taste; presentations of Black art as food for onward thought are powerful interventions in their own right. All exemplify the innovative new cuisine that results from applying tools from postcolonial studies, critical race theory (CRT) and the African diaspora to ancient Mediterranean ingredients. *Untangling Blackness* succeeds in calling attention, and arms, to the 'silences' and 'prejudices' (p. 192) of Classics and its less-than-savoury history.

An opening 'Note on Nomenclature' (pp. xiii–xv) proclaims D.'s intention to distinguish terminologically between 'black 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') and 'Black people' ('a modern, socially constructed categorization that denotes people with varying shades of melanin', p. xiv). Subsequent chapters excavate how modern 'Black–White' binaries (p. 35) have cumulatively contaminated disciplinary encounters with ancient Greek representations of dark-skinned people. Largely eschewing the Roman/colonial term 'Africa', D. foregrounds representations of 'Aithiopia' ('An ancient ethereal land that Greek sources sometimes conflate with a historical region', p. xiii), with forays into Egypt, Scythia and populations not understood as 'black' by predecessors such as Frank Snowden, including 'sun-kissed Athenian athletes' who protect their skin with mud in Lucian's *Anacharsis* (p. 145). In keeping with her cover image of Fred Wilson's 1993 *Grey Area (Brown version)*, D. thereby unfurls a tonal spectrum behind ancient 'blackness'.

Yet colour was only one of many ancient markers of identity and difference – as D. recognises in discussing factors such as gender, costume, language and religion (with physiognomy, despite its prominence in her initial definition, receiving comparatively little attention). D. notes that supposedly 'White' or 'Greek' faces on janiform *kantharoi* are more accurately 'clay-colored' or 'brown' (p. 33), problematising her initial definition of 'white' as 'an objective color marker' (p. xv). Conversely, D. labels as 'black' faces ranging from the ebony glaze of Figure 2.1 to the red undertones of Figure 2.3 and the umber of 2.5 (the latter two captioned as 'African' and 'negro', respectively, despite D.'s rightful critique of such labels). This leaves us, as promised (p. 15), with questions to ponder, not all equally freighted. What is the relationship between representational and biological b/Blackness? How did ancient peoples perceive and render colour? Does

it always make sense, for them or us, to classify diverse pigments or melanin levels within the binary abstractions of 'white' and 'black'? Does it matter that some forms of B/blackness are predetermined genetically or artistically, whereas Lucian's gymnasts can wash mud from their bodies and Heliodorus' light-skinned Aethiopian princess Chariclea removes her ashen disguise (*Aeth.* 6.113) connoting poverty rather than race? Do we risk washing out the diversity of ancient individuals' experiences and perceptions under a retrofitted category of 'blackness' that remains entangled with the legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the United States' particular obsessions with colour and the 'one-drop rule'?

*Untangling Blackness* is deeply conversant with postcolonial theory, CRT and classical scholarship. Yet I wonder if D.'s definition of race as 'an outward-facing category of evaluation (how you conceptualize others)', in contrast to identity, 'an inward-facing category of self-evaluation (how you conceptualize yourself)' (p. xv), does justice to the complexity of the subject or the ongoing problematisation of these terms. Many scholars now understand race and racecraft as tools operating within systems of dominance to control populations and naturalise socially determined hierarchies (c.f., among many others, K. and B. Fields, *Racecraft: the Soul of Inequality in American Life* [2012]; G. Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* [2018]). In this view, it is not outward-facingness, but rather the ideological and institutional power to impose differential value on groups, that distinguishes 'race' from identity and ethnicity (which can themselves be emic or etic). CRT conceptualisations of 'race' enjoin us to think beyond colour lines – which manifest differently among cultures with different histories of indigeneity, migration, colonialism and inequality – towards power's systemic enforcement of constructed and contingent (as opposed to 'objective') divisions by gender, ethnicity, class, citizenship and other intersecting and mutable categories (for racialisation even along occupational lines, cf. J. Murray, 'Race and Sexuality: Racecraft in the *Odyssey*', in: D. McCoskey [ed.], *A Cultural History of Race* [2023], pp. 137–56).

There is room and indeed need in our field for multiple conceptions of race. D. has thought carefully about hers (pp. 14–21), and her distinctions between 'blackness' and 'Blackness', 'race' and 'identity' foster valuable conversations. But the purported clarity of such terms pulls against the complex methodological demands of D.'s attempt to recuperate metatheatrical 'performances of blackness' from Greek source materials. These performances involve representational, agential and epistemic imbalances best 'untangled' by confronting entanglements between power and race. Chapter 3, for instance, treats the Egyptian-born Danaids' transcendence of their superficial foreignness (as largely signified by costume) to gain sanctuary from their Argive kin in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*. D. prefaces her discussion with the 1903 minstrel show *In Dahomey*, whose co-creative Black author and vaudeville stars turned 'claims of primitivism inside out' in D. Brooks's analysis (p. 71). But what of the fact that the Danaids' 'performance of blackness' is acted, scripted and staged by and for Greek men without the evident involvement of 'black' people? What separates the racial condescension of 'White'-authored American 'Blackface' from 'white' Athenians' playing of 'black' others? And how does the latter get us closer to 'black' people of antiquity? Though D. tends to avoid such questions, asking (if not answering) them might advance the book's persuasiveness and ability to preach beyond the choir.

None of these questions diminish the originality or importance of D.'s achievement, which bravely seeks to incite rather than conclude conversation. I learned a great deal from *Untangling Blackness* and its deft interweaving of ancient sources with Black voices rarely encountered in classical scholarship. To be sure, its impressive concision and ambition make demands upon readers. Undergraduates will find D.'s public-facing work

more accessible, notably her 2018 'Investigation of Black Figures in Classical Greek Art' online at the Getty (which treats key points from Chapters 1–2). Scholars without classical backgrounds may struggle to orient themselves within discussions of ancient works spanning many temporal and societal contexts; Graeco-Romanists may crave fuller elucidation of transhistoric leaps, for example, in relating Chariclea's reclamation of her privileged 'black' heritage with 'passing' in the opposite socioeconomic direction in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (p. 184). Overall, though, *Untangling Blackness* argues that the fault lies not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are limited by our disciplinary perspectives. D. scaffolds much-needed bridges between 'Classics', Black studies and long-marginalised perspectives towards a more global study of antiquities. The volume merits thoughtful perusal by classical scholars invested in racial justice, and the field will be enriched if others follow in D.'s pioneering footsteps.

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## AN OVERVIEW OF ANCIENT SCIENCE

TAUB (L.) *Ancient Greek and Roman Science. A Very Short Introduction*. Pp. xxii + 154, ills, maps. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Paper, £8.99. US$11.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-873699-8.
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For OUP's series, *Very Short Introductions*, 'for anyone wanting a stimulating and accessible way into a new subject', T.'s volume achieves its goal. The only disappointment: it does not cover the 'technology' that accompanied science. To be fair, T. recuses herself of that task in the first chapter, when she states that her work 'concentrates on attempts to understand the natural world, rather than strategies to control it. Hence it is primarily concerned with science rather than technology' (p. 1). The book, and each in the series, is tiny at only 7 inches tall and 4.5 inches wide, light to hold and bendable at the spine. It is a diminutive treat to tuck away in a bag for easy access on a train or in a café, where one might have time for an 'accessible' overview of a dense subject.

T.'s chronological approach simplifies a complicated and broad topic. In Chapter 1 she begins by stressing that the ancient Greeks and Romans looked to nature, *natura* in Latin and *physis* in ancient Greek, to understand *phenomena*. Very simply, science started out as a desire to understand the world and the things in it through an inquiry process. Also discussed are the many reasons for studying science and advocating for its study amongst the educated.

In the particularly delightful Chapter 2 T. talks about the scientific knowledge found in plain sight in ancient poetry, details not every modern reader may notice without a careful commentary nearby. Before philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle penned their scientific queries, poets such as Hesiod and Homer infused their stories with scientific titbits about the stars, the weather and the cosmos, signifying the common knowledge of basic science that ancient readers must have known.

The foundations of science began with philosophy where the world's big questions were considered. Chapter 3 discusses the many *physiologoi* who pondered the scientific

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