

Misreading Black Others in Greco-Roman Antiquity

Rezension zu:

Erich S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton 2011).

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Responding to studies on prejudice in the Greco-Roman world,¹ E. Gruen argues that Greeks and Romans had more nuanced and complex opinions about foreigners than often recognized. G. observes that the Greek and Romans could discover or invent links with these other societies through cultural appropriations of the past. These connections, G. contends, show that the Greeks and Romans cannot be ‘blanketed’ with xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and “let alone racism” (p. 3). G. argues that the Greeks and Romans were more interested in drawing connections with the other through cultural appropriation. G. contends that this approach reveals a positive outlook which does not reject or degrade the foreign other.

The book has an introduction and twelve chapters divided into two parts: ‘Impressions of the Other’ consists of eight chapters detailing the different groups in the Greco-Roman experience and ‘Connections with the Other’ analyzes the mythical lineages and fictive relationships in the remaining four chapters. In addition, there is an index and a bibliography. The title, however, is misleading because the discussion exclusively focuses on Greek and Roman views – not the perspectives of other ancient civilizations or cultures. It is intrinsically Eurocentric to treat Greek and Roman conceptions of foreign otherness as the universal viewpoints of antiquity. This review essay focuses on G.’s discussion of people of color (‘Blacks’) because other reviews have not addressed this issue.² Furthermore, a critical analysis of G.’s discussion of blackness shows that his thesis is untenable.

Blackness was not exclusive to Ethiopians in Greco-Roman racial ideologies. There were other Black racial groups, like the Egyptians.³ In his chapter ‘Egypt in the Classical Imagination’, however, G. ignores the fact that the Greeks and Romans saw the Egyptians as Black. This methodological flaw is most evident in his discussion of Herodotus’ views. G. observes that Herodotus did not show any prejudice or disrespect to the differing traditions of the Oracle at Dodona. Gruen (p. 83) argues that Herodotus used a “rationalistic” explanation for the origins of the oracle. Herodotus’ ‘rationalistic’ answer, however, was based on Egyptian blackness. Herodotus argued that because the blackness

¹ Isaac, B. *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton UP, 2004)

² See: Adler, E. Rev. of *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*. *The European Legacy* 18.1 (2013), 87-88; Broader, M. Rev. of Rev. of *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (2011) 8.24 <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2011/2011-08-24.html>; Champion, C. Rev. of *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*. *The American Historical Review* 117.2 (2012), 584-85; Nylan, M. “Talk about “Barbarians” in Antiquity”. *Philosophy East and West* 62.4 (2012), 580-601; Skinner, J. Rev. of *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*. *Journal of Roman Studies* 102 (2012), 307-09. Wilson, E. Rev. of *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*. *The New Republic*, 13 September 2012, 28-31.

³ For example see Luc. Nav. 2-3; TrGF Adespota F 161

of the dove in one of the traditions signified the Egyptian identity of the priestess (2.57: μέλαιναν). G. (p. 83, n. 44), however, fails to note this comment on Egyptian blackness. G.'s summary of Herodotus' discussion on Egyptian-Colchian ancestry (2.104) follows the same pattern. He claims: "Herodotus drew the conclusion that Egyptians and Colchians must come from the same stock since both peoples circumcised their sons, evidently from time immemorial" (p. 86). G.'s summary, however, is incomplete as it overlooks one of the most debated passages in Herodotus' commentary on ancient Egypt.⁴ Herodotus argued that the Colchians and Egyptians were related because "they are black skinned and afro-haired" (μελάγχροες εἰσὶ καὶ οὐλότριχες) and, in addition, both groups practiced circumcision. Again, G. fails to even acknowledge these comments (p. 86, n. 57-59). Nonetheless, Herodotus' repeated mention of Egyptian blackness clearly reveals an underlying essentialist approach to human difference.

Gruen's discussion in 'People of Color' is deeply flawed in three ways. First, G. uses terminology which is now considered offensive, using the term 'negro' multiple times (pp. 215-17). This is both inappropriate and anachronistic. It is extremely disappointing that this term could appear in a modern scholarly publication. There is no reason why G. could not simply use 'Black' as he did in the rest of the book. Also, The Greeks had no notion of 'negroes' or 'negroid' types nor did they have analogous concepts. Moreover, G. also uses term 'Black African' to discuss Greek portrayals of Ethiopians (p. 197, n. 3) which is anachronistic. The Greeks and Romans did not have a notion of a Black Africa or an analogous concept, it is an entirely modern construct. Furthermore, as noted earlier, blackness was not exclusive to Ethiopians as G. claims (p. 202). G. does not consider the possibility that the Greeks and Romans had their own constructions of Black identity.

Secondly, G. seems unaware that blackness, like any racial concept, is a social construct. For example, G. argues that "[t]he observation of difference hardly amounts to racial stereotyping, let alone racism" (p. 197). He further contends (p. 198) that the Greeks and Romans did not "assume that such physical characteristics were inherited traits, fixed across generations." However, the Greeks and Romans clearly saw blackness as an inherent physical trait in Ethiopians which G. later acknowledges (p. 202) and, as discussed earlier, the Egyptians. G. clearly assumes that observations of blackness are natural and free of social constructionism. These problematic assumptions imply that Black identity is monolithic. Consequently, the concept of blackness is not contextualized within Greek and Roman ideologies in G.'s discussion.

Third, G. boldly states that "there is little to suggest that the ancients ascribed moral, intellectual, or cultural deficiencies to persons on the basis of their color" (p. 198). G. correctly observes that there was positive commentary on Ethiopians in Greco-Roman literature, but he downplays clear examples of anti-Black racism. For example, the author of the Aristotelian *Physiognomica* (6.812a) claims that those who are black, like Egyptians and Ethiopians, are cowards. Gruen claims that this view is not racist because the author says the same as those who are "fair" (p. 205). It is clear, however, that the medium-toned Athenian male is the normative identity, while Black racial groups (Egyptians and Ethiopians) and White Athenian women are outside the norm. In fact, the construction of Athenian normative identity reveals an intersection of race and gender through

⁴ For a thorough discussion of the controversy regarding this passage see Martin, F. "The Egyptian Ethnicity Controversy and the Sociology of Knowledge". *Journal of Black Studies* 14.3 (1984), 299-306

skin color and, while G. concedes this fact, he then dismisses the text as “exceptional” (p. 205), thus missing an opportunity to discuss this nuanced Athenian delineation of otherness.

Gruen’s analysis of the treatment of Black people in Latin satires follows the same pattern of dismissal. For example, Juvenal supports the idea of a pale-brown Roman mocking a Black Ethiopian, a moment that highlights the social norms in Roman society (2.21-24), yet G. contends (pp. 207-208) that it is “excessive” to infer that “whites” regularly derided blacks. However, the Romans did not define themselves as ‘white’, instead, ‘pale brown’ (*albus*) was the Roman somatic norm.⁵ Furthermore, that satirical piece clearly refers to a hierarchy that degrades the blackness of the Ethiopian. In another satire, Juvenal (5.49-64) contrasts an Asian slave with a Black slave. G. (p. 208) argues that Juvenal takes a satirical commentary on the social gap between the powerful and dependent, again downplaying the racist comments in the text. The Black slave is explicitly described as threatening and ugly in contrast to the beautiful Asian slave. For Juvenal, it is even worse that this low end slave turned down a request from an elderly *cliens*. There is a clear intersection of race and class boundaries being reinforced in Juvenal’s portrayal of the Black slave. Gruen (p. 209) concedes that the blackness of Ethiopians was subject to jokes and dark humour, but concludes that this was not bigotry. This is clearly a contradictory and apologetic reading of the literature.

G. correctly acknowledges that “[h]ow blacks fared in day-to-day encounters with others lies beyond our knowledge” (p. 209). He correctly argues that the Blacks in Greek art were not always slaves as often assumed (p. 210). However, Athenian citizenship accessibility was racially based. As a result individuals associated with Black racial groups would receive, at best, *Metic* status.⁶ Moreover, G. (p. 210) is too optimistic that race had no effect on social mobility because of Roman citizenship accessibility for freedmen. Evidence shows Blacks in various occupations, but Roman literature also shows examples of racism. Further, evidence shows that the Romans restricted manumission in order to limit this accessibility which G. (p. 210, n. 105) simply dismisses. Again, G. simply refuses to acknowledge that the Greco-Roman world was not free from prejudice.

G.’s analysis of artistic images is also apologetic. He correctly observes that Blacks are shown in a variety of motifs, scenes and designs. However, he tries to dismiss the significance of negative depictions. For example, G. (p. 213) argues that it is not racist because non-Blacks were also subject to mockery and with greater frequency. However, Greek and Roman racial thought was not based on a black/white dichotomy; it was Greek/Barbarian and Roman/Barbarian and sometimes Greek/Roman/Barbarian. Also, the juxtapositions of Black men and Greek women on *Janiform* vases are not positive as G. suggests (p. 216). Rather, these images, in a symposium context, reinforced Athenian citizen identity by emphasizing the otherness of women and non-Greeks (Black racial groups in this case). This becomes evident by the tag above the head of a Black male in

⁵ Haley, S. “Be Not Afraid of the Dark: Critical Race Theory and Classical Studies”. *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies*. Ed. Laura Salah Nasrallah and Fiorenza Elisabeth Schüssler (Fortress, 2009), 31-32. Haley makes a convincing case that *albus* is best translated as ‘pale brown’ – not ‘white’.

⁶ Lape, Susan. *Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge UP, 2010), 43-44

an early fifth century Janus vase (figure 8). The tag sarcastically states “Timyllos is beautiful like this face”. It is not “good-natured joking” as G. contends (p. 219), rather the sarcastic tone it is a degradation of the Black body.

In the second part of the book, G. dismisses the possibility of racism in the fictive lineages in Greco-Roman mythological discourse. For example, he (p. 231) argues that the negative depiction of Egyptians in Aeschylus’ *Suppliant Women* is directed towards the villainous behaviour of the lustful sons of Aegyptus instead of Egyptians and that the acceptance of the Danaids shows tolerance of foreign rule (pp. 232-33). However, the portrayal of the Aegyptiads clearly emphasizes the otherness of Egyptians through blackness and hypersexuality. As a result, the Aegyptiads are portrayed as oversexed black men. Furthermore, it is the Hellenic aspects of the Danaids that distinguish them from the Aegyptiads and, in turn, make them acceptable by the Argives. Greek/Egyptian hybridity is tolerable, but Egyptianness is not. Mythological lineages could accept hybrid identities or interconnections, but racial otherness was not ignored. In fact, racial boundaries could be reinforced.

Gruen’s study, unfortunately, shows a lack of progression on the issue of Black identity.⁷ G. ignores the presence of Black Egyptians in Greco-Roman racial ideologies and he applies anachronistic and outdated notions of Black identity to the sources, overlooking the absence of a conscious Black perspective. This is a major methodological limit in assessing the extent of prejudice in the Greek and Roman worlds as the evidence is sufficient enough to show that racism existed. G. is correct to point out that Greek and Roman views of Blacks were not exclusively negative, but he downplays clear examples of racism. This problematic approach reveals G.’s tendency to idealize Greco-Roman culture. His study does not provide a ‘rethinking’ as much as an apologetic analysis of prejudiced attitudes towards the Black Other in the Greco-Roman world.

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⁷ For example see Isaac (2004), 49-50. Isaac completely downplays the existence of Blacks in the Greco-Roman experience. See criticisms: Haley, S. Rev. of *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*. *The American Journal of Philology* 126.3 (2005), 452; Lambert, M. Rev. of *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*. *Classical Review* 55.2 (2005), 661. Also see McCoskey, D.E. *Race Antiquity and its Legacy* (I.B. Tauris, 2012). For criticism of her discussion of Black Identities see: Samuels, T. Rev. of *Race: Antiquity and Its Legacy*. *Electryone* 2 (2013), 39-43. http://www.electryone.gr/?page_id=455