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Perceptions of Blackness in the ancient world

Solange Ashby

Course description

This course explores depictions of people of African descent in antiquity beginning with the ancient Greeks and Romans who referred to African peoples as Aithiops. Extensive connections through trade, politics, warfare, and religious practices made the people of northeast Africa a source of fascination in Greco-Roman histories, geographies, and shared religious practices in which Greeks and later Romans modified Egyptian temple rites for Isis and Serapis for their own use. Depictions of African peoples were both positive and negative. Blackness came to have symbolic resonance in Christianity adopted partially from earlier writings about African people in the Hebrew Bible and from the larger Greco-Roman cultural sphere. Elsewhere in the ancient world, Persians, Indians, Japanese, and Chinese people also created their own portrayals of Black people.

Learning outcomes

- Develop the skill of close reading difficult texts (primary and secondary sources) through the use of collaborative annotated readings.
- Develop writing skills through writing and revising an analytical paper which investigates an Ancient Case History related to the phenomenon of perceptions of Blackness in the ancient world.

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- Develop writing skills through writing and revising a research paper which investigates a specific topic related to the phenomenon of perceptions of Blackness in the ancient world.
- Create an annotated bibliography.
- Explore information literacy topics including intellectual property, file sharing, citing and documenting sources, project management, and academic dishonesty.
- Develop a broad, chronological understanding of the processes through which perceptions of Blackness developed.
- Become comfortable discussing race in the public settings of the lecture and in class, both of which are created as safe spaces built to grapple with challenging subjects.

Assignments

Paper 1: Ancient perceptions of Blackness

Using the theoretical and historical sources on perceptions of Blackness in antiquity discussed in class, perform a close reading of ancient sources to respond to the following prompt:

What factors conspire to create ancient perceptions of Blackness in antiquity? How do sources from different cultural spheres (ancient Greece, Rome, or Judea) or ancient religious communities influence each other in the development of contemporary perceptions of Blackness? Do any of these cultures have actual interaction with Black people? If so, where and in which context?

Paper 2: Research comparing and contrasting two groups on their perceptions of Blackness

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In this paper, students choose one of the topics below and compare and contrast. How are the groups similar? At least one of these groups must be from the ancient Near East. In the process of comparing and contrasting, it is important to contextualize the chosen groups, explain why these similarities and differences occur, and consider the effect of these similarities and differences on other relevant issues.

Possible topics:

1. The artistic depiction of Black people.
2. The conception of the body and its proper function.
3. The use of color symbolism in ancient religious texts.
4. Women's sexuality as dangerous.

In this research paper, each student will engage with at least eight secondary sources and three primary sources, as well as the historical background of perceptions of Blackness in the ancient world to offer a detailed overview and original thesis. As part of this research paper, each student is required to submit an annotated bibliography of six sources.

In crafting a thesis for this paper, students should consider: How the groups are similar? How are they different? And more importantly, why do these differences and similarities exist?

- Students should choose 2-3 areas of similarity and difference to discuss in detail.
- Students should be careful not to merely summarize similarities and differences, and instead to show why these similarities and differences occur.
- Students should keep in mind the importance of socio-historical context.

Course schedule

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Week 1

Defining Blackness in Antiquity: Aethiops, melas, niger

- Snowden, Frank. *Blacks in Antiquity* (Harvard University Press, 1970): pp. 2-14.
- Hansberry, William Leo. *Africa and Africans As Seen by Classical Writers*. Harris, Joseph E., ed. (Black Classics Press, 2019): pp. 3-15.
- Kennedy, Rebecca Futo. "Airs, Waters, Metals, Earth: People and Environment in Archaic and classical Greek Thought" in *The Routledge Handbook of Identity and the Environment in the Classical and Medieval Worlds*. Kennedy, Rebecca Futo and Molly Jones-Lewis, eds. (Routledge, 2016): pp. 1-29.

Blackness in the Greek world: geography

- McCoskey, Denise Eileen. "Racial Theory," in *Race: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (Bloomsbury, 2021): pp. 35-80.
- Derbew, Sarah. "Beyond Blackness, Reorienting Greek Geography," in *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2022): pp. 98-128.

Week 2

Blackness in the Greek world: iconography

- Snowden, Frank, "Iconographical Evidence on the Black Populations in Greco-Roman Antiquity," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art from the Pharaohs to the Fall of the Roman Empire*. Bindman, D. and H.L. Gates, eds. (Belknap Press, 2010): pp. 141-250.
- Desanges, Jehan. "The Iconography of the Black in Ancient North Africa," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art from the Pharaohs to the Fall of the Roman Empire*. Bindman, D. and H.L. Gates, eds. (Belknap Press, 2010): pp. 339-274.

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- Suggested: Olya, Najee. "Exiting Frank Snowden's Anthropological Gallery."

Blackness in the Greek world: literature

- Heliodorus, "An Ethiopian Story" in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*. Reardon, B.P., ed. (University of California Press, 2008): pp. 349-409.
- Derbew, Sarah "Black Disguises in an Aithiopian Novel," in *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2022): pp. 98-128.
- McGrath, Elizabeth. "The Black Andromeda." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes,* Volume 55 (1992): pp. 1-18.
- McCoskey, Denise. "Racial Representations," in *Race: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (Bloomsbury, 2021): pp. 145-148.
- Homer, *Odyssey* 1.22-24 and *Iliad* 1.423-424.
- Herodotus. *Histories*. Books: 3.17ff, 3.25ff, 3.94, and 7.70.
- Diodorus Siculus. *Bibliotheca Historica*: 1.10.
- Strabo. *Geographica*: 1.2.25 and 27, 17.1.12.

Week 3

Blackness in the Greek world: slavery

- Aristotle. *Politics*. Book 1, Chapter 5: 1254b 16-21.
- Beckmann, Sarah. "The Naked Reader: Child Enslavement in the Villa of the Mysteries Fresco." *American Journal of Archaeology* Volume 127, Number 1 (2022).
- Isaac, Benjamin. "Proto-Racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity." *World Archaeology* Volume 38, Issue 1 (2006): pp. 32–47.

Week 4

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Blackness in the Roman world

- Juvenal. *Satires*: 2.23, 6.594-601.
- Cicero. *De Senectute*: Section 6.
- Thompson, Lloyd. *Romans and Blacks* (Routledge Revivals, 1989).
- Bell, Sinclair. "Aethiopians in Roman Art and Society: Visualizing Difference in a Multiethnic Empire." National Gallery of Art member's note (2022).

Blackness in the Persian/Arabic world

- Bindman, David and Henry Louis Gates. *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (Harvard University Press, 2010): Introduction, 1-16.
- Hillenbrand, Robert. "The image of the Black in Islamic art: the case of painting," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art from the Pharaohs to the Fall of the Roman Empire*. Bindman, D. and H.L. Gates, eds. (Belknap Press, 2010): pp. 215-253.

Week 5

Blackness in the Indian world

- McLeod, John and Kenneth X. Robbins. "The image of the Black in India," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art from the Pharaohs to the Fall of the Roman Empire*. Bindman, D. and H.L. Gates, eds. (Belknap Press, 2010): pp. 254-294.

Week 6

Blackness in the Chinese world and Japanese art

- Wyatt, Don J. "The image of the Black in Chinese art," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art from the Pharaohs to the Fall of the Roman Empire*. Bindman, D. and H.L. Gates, eds. (Belknap Press, 2010): pp. 295-324.
- Wyatt, Don J. Lecture on "Who- or What- Were the First Blacks of China?"

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- Screech, Timon. "The Image of the Black in Japanese Art: From the Beginning to 1850," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art from the Pharaohs to the Fall of the Roman Empire*. Bindman, D. and H.L. Gates, eds. (Belknap Press, 2010): pp. 325-340.

Week 7

Blackness in the Hebrew Bible

- Byron, Gay. *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (Routledge, 2022): pp. 35-51.
- Hebrew Bible: Numbers 12:1-16, Song of Songs 1:5-6.
- New Testament: Acts of Peter.

Week 8

Blackness in the Hebrew Bible, continued

- Burrell, Kevin. "Cushites: Race and Representation in the Hebrew Bible," in *The Ancient Near East Today* (2020).
- Burrell, Kevin. "Representing Cush in the Hebrew Bible," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (2020): pp. 62-64.

Blackness in the New Testament: color symbolism, the Ethiopian as object of sexual passion

- Byron, Gay. *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (Routledge, 2022): pp. 77-103.
- Kominko, Maja. "Ugly as Sin" in *The Routledge Handbook of Identity and the Environment in the Classical and Medieval Worlds*. Kennedy, Rebecca Futo and Molly Jones-Lewis, eds. (Routledge, 2016): pp. 373-379.

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- Wright, Alexa. "Monstrous Strangers at the Edge of the World," in *The Monster Theory Reader*. Weinstock, Jennfrey Andrew, ed. (University of Minnesota Press, 2020): pp. 173-191.
- Strings, Sabrina. *Fear of the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (NYU Press, 2019): pp. 15-41.
- Hebrew Bible: Genesis 6:4; 1 Enoch 1.8–12 "The Watchers."

Week 9

Blackness in the New Testament: "We were Ethiopians in our sin"

- Byron, Gay. *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (Routledge, 2022): pp. 55-60.
- *Apothegmata Patrum*: Moses the Black.
- Minski, Mauricio Lapchik. "Color Symbolism and Ascetic Piety: Moses the Black:" pp. 1-16.
- Evelyn-White, Hugh G. "The Monasteries of Wadi el-Natrun: The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and Scetis." *Publications of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Egyptian Expedition*, v. 7 (1932): pp. 154-157.

Blackness in the New Testament: Black saints

- Byron, Gay. *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (Routledge, 2022): "Apostolic Fathers," pp. 60-76.
- Mayerson, Philip. "Anti-Black Sentiment in the 'Vitae Patrum.'" *The Harvard Theological Review* 71, number 3/4 (1978): 304–11.
- Ashby, Solange. "From Slave to Demon: Barya in Ethiopic Prayer Scrolls:" pp. 269-274.

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Week 10

Blackness in the New Testament: Treasurer of the Candace

- Acts of the Apostles: 8:27-41.
- Byron, Gay. *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (Routledge, 2022): pp. 109.

Blackness in Medieval Europe

- Heng, Geraldine. *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 2018): pp. 181-256; 222-242.
- Whitaker, Cord J. *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019): pp. 123-152.
- Spicer, Joaneath, ed. *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe* (Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 2012): pp. 35-60.

Week 11

Blackness in colonial rhetoric

- Ndiaye, Noémie. *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022): pp. 1-34; 235-237.
- Troutt Powell, Eve. *Tell This in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford University Press, 2012): 1-38.
- Hall, Kim F. "The Daughters of Eve and the Children of Ham," in *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Cornell University Press, 1995): pp. 177-210.

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- Optional: Ndiaye, Noémie. *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022): "A Brief Herstory of Baroque Black-Up: Cosmetic Blackness, Gender, and Sexuality:" pp. 83-136.

"Where do we go from here?"

- McCoskey, Denise. "Introduction" in *Race: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (Bloomsbury, 2021): pp. 1-34.
- Isaac, Benjamin. "Proto-Racism in Greco-Roman Antiquity." *World Archaeology* 38 (2006): pp. 32-47.
- McCoskey, Denise. "Naming the Fault in Question: Theorizing Racism among the Greeks and Romans," in *Race: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (Bloomsbury, 2021): pp. 243-267.