

CHAPTER 1

Be Not Afraid of the Dark

Critical Race Theory and Classical Studies

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Critical race theory, which began in the scholarship of jurisprudence and the theory of social construction in the 1970s, was a response to the backlash against civil rights legislation. Its oppositional stance and its use of storytelling to challenge negative portrayals of people of color hold attraction in particular for people of African descent. The justification for using a theory focused on modern phenomena like “race” and “racism” to analyze ancient Greek and Roman society is that modern interpreters of those ancient societies have internalized the modern values, structures, and behaviors that are the object of critical race theory.

In light of literary evidence from the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E., it is plausible that the Romans were aware of skin-color difference and that it played a role, among other factors, in the social construction of *difference*. Given the simultaneity of other factors as well, it is important to examine the Roman construction of difference with particular attention to color, gender, class, and culture using a symmetrical mode of analysis. The Romans in Augustus’s day were more keenly aware of different cultural practices—especially those of African societies—than we have given them credit for up to now, as Vergil’s *Aeneid* and the Pseudo-Vergilian *Moretum* illustrate.



Introduction

Critical race theory had its beginnings in the scholarship of jurisprudence and in the sociological theory of social construction that developed in the 1970s as a response to the backlash and rollbacks of civil rights legislation. To me, as a Classical Studies scholar who is simultaneously a woman of African descent, critical race theory is appealing because of its oppositional stance and its use of storytelling to challenge negative portrayals of all people of color, but particularly people of African descent.

Critical race theory has found its way into the academy with the publication of Ladson-Billings and Tate's article, "Towards a Critical Theory of Education."¹ In addition, critical race theory has nurtured critical race feminism, which centers on the experiential knowledge of women of color and challenges white liberal feminism and essentialist feminism. I would argue that critical race theory has also found its way into literary criticism, most notably in Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*.²

Admittedly, this all sounds very twentieth and twenty-first century. How can a classicist justify using a theory so closely aligned with modern phenomena like "race," "racism," and "systemic oppression" to analyze the vanished societies of ancient Greece and ancient Rome? I hope to show in this chapter that my justification abides in the fact that the interpreters of these ancient societies were or are intellectuals of the nineteenth through twentieth-first centuries, and so have internalized (consciously or not) the values, structures, and behaviors that foster the need for critical race theory.

It is important to remember that critical race theory challenges the experience of whites as the norm while at the same time it centers its conceptual framework in the experiences of people of color. In its broadest possible framing, critical race theory demonstrates that there are multiple levels of meaning of race and difference and that these levels are experienced simultaneously.

1. G. Ladson-Billings and W. Tate, "Towards a Critical Theory of Education," *Teachers College Report* 97 (1995): 4–68.

2. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).

According to George J. Sefa Dei, “There is a social, political, cultural, and intellectual meaning of race and difference. . . . Race and racisms also work differently for groups depending on history, geography, culture, class, and gender.”³ Before we can even attempt an integrated analysis of these factors on the ancient construction of race, we must interrogate the extent to which we bring our modern “social, political, cultural, and intellectual meaning of race and difference”⁴ to our analyses of the ancient world. Only by acknowledging the presence of this meaning can we begin to pull back the layers in order to arrive at the ancient construct of race. It certainly is not easy. However, I shall present here my attempts to apply a critical race theory to begin this unlayering process.

Defining Race and Color in the Ancient Mediterranean World

In 1996, a reporter for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* called me. She was reviewing a book by a notoriously vitriolic critic of Afrocentric interpretations of “classical” history.⁵ The reporter called me because the author mentions my defense of the position that Cleopatra was “black.”⁶ After my explanation that Cleopatra symbolizes the treatment we have received at the hands of Eurocentric patriarchy, and that it is in this light that we embrace Cleopatra as a “sister,” the reporter asked, “Symbolic construction aside, what do you tell your students regarding Cleopatra’s race?” I explained that this is a very complex question when one can ask it about Cleopatra or any ancient—or modern—historical figure. “Race” as the social and

3. George J. Sefa Dei, “Recasting Anti-Racism and the Axis of Difference: Beyond the Question of Theory,” *Race, Class and Gender* 7, no.2 (2000): 38–48. This particular quote is taken from the *ProQuest* version, 3.

4. *Ibid.*, 4.

5. Ellen Coughlin, “Not out of Africa,” review of *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*, by Mary Lefkowitz, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 16 (February 1996): A6–7.

6. Shelley P. Haley, “Black Feminist Thought and Classics: Re-membering, Re-claiming, Re-empowering,” in Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin, eds., *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 23–43, especially 27–30.

ideological construct that we understand in the late twentieth century in the United States of America clearly had not been formulated in the first-century B.C.E. Mediterranean.

So my answer to the reporter and to my students and to colleagues—whether Afrocentric or Eurocentric in standpoint—is that Cleopatra, and indeed, the people of “the ancient world,” had a “race,” but that it is anachronistic to insist that she or they had a race as we understand it. Instead, we must search out and analyze *their* construct of race. So, my caveat to readers of this chapter is the same. Do not read our construct of race into ancient cultures. Did the Romans conceptualize a phenomenon such as “racial difference”? Yes. Did the Romans notice skin-color differences? Yes. Did they attach a value to skin-color differences? That question is not answered so easily. In any society’s value system, individuals are aggregates of multiple differences; judgments are then made according to the combination. The Romans did react strongly, even prejudicially, to difference; however, one cannot point just to Roman reactions to skin color, but must take into account class, gender, culture, and sexuality as well. In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate that, based on literary evidence from the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E., it is plausible (we can *never* know for sure) that the Romans were aware of skin color difference and that skin color was a factor in their formulation of a social construction of *difference*. But it was one of many factors. The simultaneity of these factors is crucial to my analysis; it is, therefore, important to examine the Roman construct of difference with particular attention to color, gender, class, and culture using a symmetrical, nonlinear mode of thinking. The texts on which I shall concentrate are Vergil’s *Aeneid*, particularly Book Four, with its familiar story of Queen Dido of Carthage, and the Pseudo-Vergilian *Moretum*.

Before beginning to discuss difference as constructed by the Romans, we need to establish the “norm.” Just as in the United States, when Americans say “African Americans,” they mean black men, and when they say “Americans,” they mean white men, so for the Romans, *Romani* meant Roman men. Roman masculinity (a social construct in and of itself) was the norm in each of the texts we shall examine. Roman society was patriarchal and androcentric; the fact that the authors of the texts under examination are mostly all male reflects

that.⁷ Gender difference is filtered through a male lens, which is the framework for gender difference.

What color did the Romans see themselves? Was there a skin-color “norm” in Roman society? There was, in fact, a range of skin hues, and this is reflected in the skin color terminology. *Albus*, *ater*, *candidus*, *fuscus*, and *niger* are all used by Roman authors to describe the skin color of peoples with whom they came in contact.⁸ However, it is equally important to note that there are many contexts where skin color is not mentioned at all. For example, there is no skin color given for Aeneas, Dido, or Iarbas, three central characters in Book Four of the *Aeneid*. In these contexts, character—or characterization—was not dependent on skin color, an attitude that ironically was Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream. When the Romans did apply a skin color descriptor to themselves it was *albus*. What did *albus* mean to a Roman?

Nineteenth-century lexicographers render *albus* as “white,” and *candidus* as “shiny or glistening white.” The opposite of *albus* is *ater*, “black” (“lusterless black”), and opposite to *candidus* is *niger*, “black” (“shiny or glistening black”). Lloyd Thompson, in *Romans and Blacks*, persuasively argues against the reference point of “white,” which for the modern reader in the United States connotes a Nordic or northern European coloring. As Thompson says, “no concept of ‘white’ people as a meaningful socio-cultural category could arise in Roman society. . . . The ‘developed world’ of the Roman world view was definitely the world of pale-brown Mediterraneans.”⁹

If, then, the reference point for *albus* is pale-brown, not the white of a Nordic consciousness, interpretations and reading of the other skin color terminology are transformed. *Ater*, *candidus*, *fuscus*, and *niger* become degrees of brownness. For me, *candidus* is reminiscent of Gwendolyn Brooks’s use of the term “brights” for the lighter shades of brown associated with mixed-race (African-European) Americans. She says,

7. There is an outside chance that a woman authored the *Moretum*. However, given that there is very little surviving Roman literature authored by women, female authorship of this text is highly unlikely.

8. I am using the masculine morpheme of the adjectives, because this is the form that is traditionally listed first in lexicons and dictionaries. Feminine forms would be *alba*, *atra*, *candida*, *fusca*, and *nigra*.

9. Lloyd Thompson, *Romans and Blacks* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 10–11.

One of the first “world”-truths revealed to me when I at last became a member of SCHOOL was that, to be socially successful, a little girl must be Bright (of skin). It was better if your hair was curly too—or at least Good Grade (Good Grade implied, usually, no involvement with the Hot Comb)—but Bright you marvelously *needed* to be.¹⁰

Fuscus, *ater*, and *niger* then become deeper shades of brown until the shade *niger*, which was associated with the ancient Africans. Scybale, the African woman in the *Moretum*, is described as being “of a deep brown color” (*fusca colore*, 1.33).¹¹ This skin coloring is given as one of several traits, each reinforcing her African descent (*Afra genus*, 1.32). Cypassis, the sexually exploited hairdresser in Ovid’s *Amores* 2.7 and 2.8, is addressed as *fusca Cypassi* (2.8.22), which, given the pale-brown reference point for Ovid, should be rendered as “deep-brown Cypassis.”¹² *Albus* is often contrasted by *ater* as, for example, when Cicero in *Philippics* 2.16 says to Marc Antony:

vide quam te amarit is qui albus aterne fuerit ignoras. Fratris filium praeterit. ¹³

Haley: See, how much that man loved you, a man about whom you do not know whether he was pale brown or dark brown. He passed over his nephew.

Or as in *Catullus* 93:

Nil nimium studeo, Caesar, tibi velle placere,
nec scire utrum sis albus an ater homo.¹⁴

10. Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report from Part One: The Autobiography of Gwendolyn Brooks* (Detroit: Broadside, 1972), 37.

11. Latin text from W.V. Clausen et al., eds. *Appendix Vergiliana* (OCT; Oxford: Clarendon, 1966).

12. Latin text from Ovid, *Amores; Medicamina faciei feminae; Ars amatoria; Remedia amoris* (ed. E.J. Kenney; OCT; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

13. Latin text from Cicero, *Orationes* vol. 6 ed. A.C. Clark (OCT; Oxford: Clarendon, 1900).

14. Latin text from Catullus, *Carmina* ed. R. A. B. Mynors (OCT; Oxford: Clarendon, 1958).

Haley: I'm not terribly eager to please you, Caesar, nor do I care to know if you are pale-brown or dark brown.

Albus and *ater* connote a matte-like quality, whereas *candidus* and *niger* imply luster and brightness. Consequently, a graffito contrasts a *candida* (a “bright brown woman”) and a *nigra* (a “bright black woman”):

candida me docuit nigras
odisse puellas . . . (CIL 4.1520)¹⁵

Haley: A bright brown girl taught me to hate bright black girls.¹⁶

Based on these examples, it is plausible to assume that pale-brown was the reference point for the Roman evaluation of skin-color differences, and that skin color was one of many factors—not necessarily the most important one—in the Roman construction of difference.

As I noted before, often skin color is not mentioned, and thus was not the chief component in the construction of difference. For example, in Book Four of Vergil's *Aeneid*, in the character of Dido, gender, culture, and geographical location, rather than the somatic trait of skin color, are the factors construing difference. Here, we meet the Semitic queen Dido, who founds a new city, Carthage, on the northeastern shores of Africa. By so doing, she brings together in one character all the fears of Roman ruling class men: a foreign woman with political power in a geopolitical area that, historically, produced Rome's most tenacious and feared rivals: Hannibal (whose coming is prayed for by Dido at 4.625–30), and Cleopatra. Dido, through conflation with Cleopatra, represents the Roman male fear of the power of the “Other.” At the same time, Dido provides Vergil with an opportunity for moral didacticism. By having Aeneas abandon Dido, Vergil crafts an Aeneas who demonstrates the moral supremacy of what will be known to Vergil's contemporaries as “old-fashioned” Roman virtues.

15. Karl Friedrich Wilhelm Zangemeister, ed., *Inscriptiones Parietariae Pompeianae, Herculanaenses, Stabianae* (vol. 4 of *CIL*; Berlin: G. Reimerus, 1871). No date is given; the following contextual information is provided: “Nunc Neapoli in museo; inter duos limites quibus rubrum tectorium distinctum est” (97).

16. The author clearly is referring to sexually mature women; he may be referring to women who are prostitutes. By labeling them “girls,” he infantilizes and devalues them further.

This moral supremacy stands in stark contrast to Marc Antony, who—according to the propaganda—surrendered to the wiles of a foreign seductress and enmeshed Rome in a messy war.

Vergil was not the only author of the Augustan age to promote a moral agenda by employing the image of the foreign seductress.¹⁷ Livy also articulates the dangers of beautiful, foreign women, most noticeably in the case of the Carthaginian princess Sophoniba. Once again, there are parallels with both the historical and literary Cleopatra: a beautiful passionate woman of Africa who distracts a Roman—or in this case, the Roman surrogate Massinissa—from his duty to Rome.¹⁸ Through such characters, Augustan authors reinforced the need for patriarchal control of female sexuality, whether domestic or foreign. Without it, women are destructive and suspect.

Reconsidering Race and Vergil's Dido

Vergil reinforces this position towards female sexuality through his development of Dido's character. When first we meet her, she is the model *univira*—a “one-man woman”—having taken a vow of celibacy and fidelity to her dead husband.¹⁹ She sublimates her sexuality, diverting her energy to the founding of a city for her people. In the beginning, she embodies the solid moral and asexual character of a Roman *matrona*. Furthermore, like Livy's Lucretia, she works hard for the welfare of those dependent on her. In this way, Dido recalls the one positive category of women illustrated in Semonides' *Catalogue of Women*. Vergil (1.430) reinforces the parallel by using a metaphor of bees to describe the activity of the city builders. Before Aeneas arrived, Dido had rejected an offer of a marriage/political alliance from the native African prince Iarbas: she could remain sexually controlled and true to her vow to her deceased husband.

17. For an explanation of how a controlling image differs from a stereotype, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 67–90.

18. Shelley P. Haley, “Livy's Sophoniba,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 40 (1989): 171–81.

19. Readers do not actually learn about this vow until the beginning of book four.

Clearly, Dido had to change. At the beginning of the episode, she represents the ideal Roman woman. Within the frame of a misogynistic lens, what destroys the moral fabric of women, even seemingly good women? What is the *essence* of foreign women that makes them especially alien to Romans? The answer, of course, is passion and control of their sexuality. Passion was a cultural stereotype projected upon Africans by Romans and Greeks.²⁰ Vergil moves Dido further away from Rome and closer to Africa by implicating her in the flaw of passion. In Vergil's depiction, the emotional stress of coping with the eruption of her repressed sexuality and the moral pressure of breaking a sacred vow drives Dido toward madness. This, in turn, deepens her "Otherness," distancing Dido from the ideal Roman woman. As her madness grows, she is drawn towards indigenous African cultural practices, which bring her comfort. By rejecting Roman and Tyrian religious rituals, she alienates herself further from the Roman male audience.

There are two fascinating elements in Vergil's development of this progression. First, he reveals an awareness of African rituals and cultural values, and second, nearly all interpreters of the *Aeneid* have ignored or dismissed this awareness. They tend to follow the paradigm that Toni Morrison discusses in *Playing in the Dark* by reading Vergil's "Africanism"²¹ out of his epic.

For example, in many precolonial, West African societies, women did not achieve any significant status until they became mothers. Through motherhood, women gained political, social, and economic power. Among ancient African societies, and especially in ancient Egypt, motherhood was also highly valued, conferring political and religious power upon women. While it is true that under Augustus motherhood was touted as the most valuable role for Roman women, no political or economic power accrued to them because of it. Certainly, mothers of the elite class had social and even political *influence*, but not power. Viewed from the African cultural valuation of motherhood, Dido's wish for a "little Aeneas" takes on further

20. Shelley P. Haley, "Livy, Passion, and Cultural Stereotypes," *Historia* 39 (1990): 375–81.

21. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 6–10.

significance. The following lines are usually read as a last desperate attempt by a frantic, spurned lover to keep her faithless lover with her just long enough to leave her with a token reminder of the love they shared:

Saltem si qua mihi de te suscepta fuisset
ante fugam suboles, si quis mihi parvulus aula
luderet Aeneas, qui te tamen ore referret,
non equidem omnino capta ac deserta viderer. (*Aen.*
4.327–330)

Haley: If only I had conceived a child by you before your flight, if some small Aeneas played in my courtyard who, despite everything, resembles you in looks, then I'd feel less like one taken and discarded.

This futile plea is viewed as another indication of Dido's deteriorating mental state: no successful, sane woman-ruler would *want* to be a mother. Such an interpretation comes from a social theoretical stance that devalues motherhood and discredits matrifocality.²² But from an Afrocentric perspective, Dido's lines can be read not only as a wish but also as a need: to come into her fullest power both as a ruler and as a human—Dido must be a mother. This interpretation is reinforced further by the encouragement Dido's sister Anna gives her to pursue a relationship with Aeneas:

22. Matrifocality, especially as a trait of African or African-descended societies, has been pathologized and bestialized by white men. For an example of this in Classical studies, see Thomas Fleming's review of Judith P. Hallett, *Fathers and Daughters in Rome: Women and the Elite Family* in *The Classical Journal* 82, no.1 (1986):

The term matrifocal was coined to describe the situation of Caribbean Black societies in which women are often abandoned by their husbands or lovers and find themselves compelled to exercise a sort of matriarchal authority over their family. . . . (Some primatologists use matrifocal to describe the life of chimpanzees, whose only enduring bonds are based on maternity.) It is completely illegitimate to take a term of social pathology and apply it to the ordinary conditions of Roman life—unless Hallett means to suggest that Roman society was organized matricentrically like that of the chimpanzee. (p. 77)

solane perpetua maerens carpere iuventa,
 nec dulcis natos, Veneris nec praemia noris? (*Aen.*
 4.32–33)

Haley: Why, alone, do you squander your youth always—grieving without sweet sons or the gifts of love?

The “sweet sons” would confer status and a mother’s power upon her, as well as provide companions and heirs. Taken this way, Dido has not yet totally abrogated her sense of self to her love of Aeneas. This is not to discount the desperation of her pleas; that is certainly there. However, the motivation for the desperation varies depending on the reader’s perspective.

It is important to note that mention of skin color is absent. In the character of Dido, gender, culture, and geographical location, rather than the somatic trait of skin color, are factors in construing difference. If Dido had belonged to the gene pool for which “having fair hair and skin and usually light eyes”²³ is the norm, then it seems to me that Vergil, whose reference point is *candidus* (pale brown), would have found that remarkable and would have mentioned it when we first encounter Dido. However, he does not describe her physically at all, making it all the more plausible that Vergil conceived of Dido as what I call the “beautiful norm”: southern Mediterranean and Semitic women who were *candidae*, with black hair, pale-brown skin, and dark eyes.²⁴

Therefore, why then does Vergil describe Dido as having “yellow hair” (*flaventis abscissa comas*, 4.590; and *nondum illi flavum Proserpina crinem/abstulerat Stygioque caput damnaverat Orco*, 4.698–99)? Let us review what has taken place: (1) Dido has fallen in lust with Aeneas, perhaps under the influence of Venus; (2) She has consummated what

23. William Morris, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary*, New College Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 142 (under the entry for “blond”).

24. After all, Dido is, in Vergil’s vision, Semitic. Of course, we must not forget that Dido is a fictional character, a product of Vergil’s imagination. What is the plausibility that blondes (or redheads, for that matter) were so deeply embedded in Vergil’s consciousness as standards of beauty, that they would enter his fantasy? Dido is not believable as anything other than the beautiful norm mentioned above.

she believes is a marriage with Aeneas; (3) She catches him being, in the words of Tina Turner, a typical male: he's about to abandon and jilt her. She does not want Aeneas to go, and she wants a child. Using that desire explicitly, she pleads with Aeneas to stay long enough to make her pregnant.

When it is clear that personal appeals have no effect on Aeneas's resolve, Dido turns not to Greek or Roman religious rites, but rather to indigenous religious practices. The usual interpretation of Dido's consultation with an African priestess and her subsequent augury ritual is that they are further indications of Dido's deepening descent into madness and irrationality. As far as I know, no commentator has considered that these rituals may have been more familiar or more comforting to Dido. None has considered the parallels between traditional African religions (and their permutations in the Diaspora) and the advice and rituals delineated in Book Four. Vergil describes the priestess as a member of the "Massylian people" (*Massylae gentis*, 1.483); her home is the "westernmost boundary of the Ethiopians" (*ultimus Aethiopum locus est*, 1.481); before Dido notices her, she was guardian of the temple of the Hesperides, and she was minister to the "serpent" (*draconi*, 1.484). I would like to suggest that this priestess was from an ethnic group that might have been the ancestors of the Maasai. Migration would account for the current home of the Maasai in east Africa. Furthermore, I would suggest that this African woman was a priestess of a religion with strong parallels to the traditional African religions, especially as practiced by the Yoruba, and that the serpent is the symbolic representation of a major divinity of this religion.²⁵

The advice that the unnamed priestess gives Dido follows the charms and spells of vodoun, santeria, and other African-derived religions. One important aspect of ritual in some traditional African religions involves dousing the worshippers and presiders with a yellow mud made from ochre. I suggest also that Dido has been doused

25. The connection between the serpent and the divinity is clearest in voodoo, where one of the chief spirits, Damballah, comes in the form of a serpent or snake. Vodoun is a variation of Yoruba religion. Both religions employ priestesses as well as priests.

with a similar mud, hence the description of her as having yellow hair (*flaventis abscissa comas*, 1.590). Translators render *flaventis* as “golden” or “yellow,” but the word is a participial adjective from the verb *flaveo*, “to be yellow,” so that in line 590 there is a sense that Dido’s hair has just become yellow. Furthermore, the adjective *flavus* can refer to the coloring that comes from the “puzzolan earth” associated with the Tiber River. (Vergil uses *flavus* in this way in 7.31, *Tiberinus . . . multa flavus harena*). It is crucial to keep in mind that since Dido is Semitic and has been described as “beautiful” by a poet whose reference point for skin color is pale brown, it is highly unlikely that Dido’s natural or even usual hair color is “golden” or “yellow.” *Flaventis* seems to refer to an action; given the context of the ritual in which she has participated, and which was performed by an African priestess with connections to traditional African practices, it is plausible that Dido’s hair has become yellow because of a ritualistic dousing of ochre mud.

Vergil reveals his knowledge not only of the different ethnic and linguistic groups in Italy (book twelve), but also those in Africa. Near the beginning of book four, Anna lists the geographical neighbors of Dido’s newly founded city. For each, there is a cultural or national stereotype: the Gaetulians are “invincible in war” (*genus insuperabile bello*); the Numidians are “unbridled” (*infreni*), an epithet which conjures up their cultural stereotype of being passionate and oversexed; and finally the nomads of Barca are perceived as “wild” (*furentes*).²⁶ Most important for our purposes, however, is the introduction of a specific suitor who was rejected by Dido: Iarbas, the Gaetulan. Iarbas here is presented as one of several leaders “whom Africa—rich and proud—nourished” (*quos Africa terra triumphis divis alit*, 1.36), but whom Dido still rejected.

According to Vergil, Iarbas²⁷ is the product of the rape of a Garamantine nymph by the northern African god Ammon who, in the syncretism with Greco-Roman religious tradition, became associated with Zeus/Jupiter. There was a shrine to Zeus Ammon at Dodona,

26. See again Haley, “Livy, Passion”, 375–81.

27. The name Iarbas occurs at three places in Roman literature: Vergil, *Aeneid*, 4.36; Ovid, *Fasti*, 3.552; and Juvenal, *The Satires*, 5.45; italics added.

which was, like Delphi, an oracular shrine. Iarbas is credited with introducing the worship of Ammon to the Numidians.

Vergil gives no physical description of Iarbas; what is important to Vergil's intentions is how Iarbas will move the story along. Consequently, he is described in terms of Dido's actions. He is scorned (*despectus*), even though he is the child of a divine parent and a rich and powerful ruler. Dido rejects Iarbas not because he is African per se, nor because he is inferior in terms of class. Succinctly put, Iarbas is scorned because he is a man. By accepting his proposal—and Vergil implies that it was one of the first that Dido received—Dido would violate her sacred vow of heterosexual celibacy. Iarbas can accept her decision as long as she rejects all men. However, when she accepts the proposal of, or rather does the proposing to, a man inferior in nearly every way to Iarbas, he, relying on parental loyalty, berates Jupiter for allowing this to happen and seeks redress.

However, in the Roman construction of the foreign woman, Dido's vow and her strict observance of it, or of any vow, is unnatural. It is only a matter of time before she reveals her natural, perfidious character. She becomes what all women would be without the strict reins of patriarchy: mad, out of control, and destructive. Dido, in a sense, foreshadows later stereotypes of women of color, particularly of black women. While I am not arguing here that Dido was the definitive antecedent for the stereotype of the foreign seductress, I am interested in what happens when readers and interpreters of the ancient texts come out of intellectual traditions and societal constructions that acquiesce to these stereotypes. Wole Soyinka is quoted as saying:

We black Africans have been blandly invited to submit ourselves to a second epoch of colonialism—this time by a universal humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of *their world, and their history, and their social neuroses, and their value systems*.²⁸

28. Ketu H. Katrak, "Decolonizing Culture: Toward a Theory for Post-colonial Women's Texts," in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), 256; italics added.

I would argue that this recolonizing occurs in Classical studies.

Race and Gender in Pseudo-Vergil's *Moretum*

Images of black womanhood are part of a generalized ideology of domination. The ability to form and control images of black womanhood—that is, the authority to define these symbols—is a major instrument of power. In order to exercise power, elite white men and their representatives must be in a position to manipulate appropriate symbols concerning black women. They may do so by exploiting already existing symbols. I would like to suggest that this manipulation of symbols occurs even when such symbols are encountered in ancient texts. The ancient text then becomes the validation of a stereotype that is, in fact, alien—“other”—to the ancient society. This is particularly true of the physical stereotype of black women.

As seen from the foregoing discussion, I do not imply that no cultural or social stereotypes existed for women, whether African, Greek, or Roman, in the ancient world. One can see that, from Roman literature, Dido has come to represent the most persistent cultural stereotype for foreign women: the seductress, or “Jezebel.” She is the sultry enticer who disrupts the social and moral order with her sexuality. Nevertheless, I suggest that our understandings of the life experiences and images of ancient African women need revision, since scholars who have studied them were and are operating under the influence of physical and sexual stereotypes prevalent today.

Nowhere in Roman literature is the intersection of color, ethnic origin, gender, and class better represented than in the pseudo-Vergilian *Moretum*. This poem of 123 dactylic hexameters gives a detailed physical description of an African woman of the peasant class. Most scholarly attention has centered on the authorship of the piece, and once its attribution to Vergil was deemed implausible, it was forgotten and received little attention. However, in recent times, with renewed interest in the somatic and cultural diversity of the ancient Mediterranean world, Scybale, the African woman in question, has attracted more attention. Frank Snowden praises the author of the *Moretum* for the congruence of his or her description with the racial characteristics

delineated by modern physical anthropologists. He remarks, “The author of the *Moretum* who described Scybale would be rated today as a competent anthropologist.”²⁹

I provide the Latin and my translation of the description of Scybale. It is important to note that most translations of this piece have been done by men influenced by stereotypical descriptions of the physique of African women. Consequently, I have deliberately made my rendering as sensitive to black-feminist and female-empowering concerns as the Latin will allow:

Erat unica custos,
 Afra genus, tota patriam testante figura,
 torta comam, labroque tumens et fusca colore,
 pectore lata, iacens mammis, compressor alvo,
 cruribus exilis, spatiosa prodiga planta. (*Moretum* 31–35)

Haley: She was his only companion, African in her race, her whole form a testimony to her country: her hair twisted into dreads, her lips full, her color dark, her chest broad, her breasts flat, her stomach flat and firm, her legs slender, her feet broad and ample.

Needless to say, the *Moretum* is not now part of the Classical canon, but recently whenever the racial composition of ancient Greece or Rome is discussed, scholars always find it. Once again, men have over-analyzed this passage, and although I have respect for the conclusions reached by Lloyd Thompson, in particular, in his book *Romans and Blacks*, he, like other male scholars both black and white, has been imprinted with the physical and sexual stereotypes of black women. As a point of comparison with my translation, here are the translations of Snowden and Thompson, two black male scholars:

Snowden: African in her race, her whole figure proof of her
 country—
 her hair tightly curled, lips thick, color dark,

29. Frank M. Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 9. Most contemporary physical anthropologists reject both the ideology and the determinants of “scientific races.”

chest broad, breasts pendulous, belly somewhat
 pinched,
 legs thin, and feet broad and ample.³⁰

Thompson: She was his only help.
 She was African in stock, and all her physical
 features gave testimony of her land of origin:
 tightly-curved hair, swollen lips, dusky complexion,
 broad chest with low-swinging breasts, belly rather
 pinched,
 thin legs, broad and ample feet.³¹

For our purposes, this passage illustrates one very crucial point. Whoever the author of the *Moretum* was, she or he had detailed physical knowledge of Africans, in particular African women. The author also assumes that her/his audience has had enough contact with Africans to appreciate how Scybale's physical traits testify to her being of African descent (*Afra genus*). We can make the important inference that Africans were not a rare spectacle for at least some portion of the Roman populace. If such intimacy of physical contact existed, then detailed knowledge of cultural and ritualistic practices becomes even more plausible. While Scybale is a fictional character—and it is important to remember that—I believe that she is sympathetically drawn.³²

Despite this, Scybale has not fared well at the hands of most classical scholars. The last two translations cited above have been influenced by the stereotypical descriptions of the physique of black women. Snowden's "pendulous breasts" and Thompson's "low-swinging" ones

30. *Ibid.*, 6.

31. Thompson, *Romans and Blacks*, 31.

32. Every indication is that Scybale is the equal of the peasant Simylus, with whom she lives and for whom she cares. Others disagree. Thompson thinks the author is mocking Scybale, *ibid.*, 136. Jehan Desanges thinks the name is a play on the Greek word for "dung" and so it suggests "rubbish," "shit," or "riff-raff," and as such is, perhaps, a commentary on her color. Jehan Desanges, "l'Afrique noire et le monde mediterraneen dans l'antiquite: Ethiopiens et Greco-romains," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art, Volume I, From the Pharaohs to the Fall of the Roman Empire (Menil Foundation)*, ed. Jean Devisse, Jean Marie Courtes, Ladislav Bugner (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 409–11.

are reminiscent of a description from 1837 of a “Hottentot” woman.³³ Many white male observers and scholars seem to have had a curious preoccupation with black women’s breasts. Francis Moore, who first published his travelogue of Africa in 1738, included this description of Gambian women: “large breasts, thick lips and broad nostrils, are esteemed extreamly [*sic*] beautiful. One breast is generally larger than the other.”³⁴

In the treatment of ancient texts, modern scholars have assumed that ancient Romans would have found the breasts of African women “disgusting.” David Wiesen comments upon Juvenal 13.162–63 (*quis tumidum guttur miratur in Alpibus aut quis/in Meroe crasso maiorem infante mamillam?*³⁵) that, “a huge-breasted African woman nursing her fat child would have been an amazing, perhaps disgusting sight to a Roman viewer.”³⁶ Thompson agrees with Wiesen on this point, stating, “According to a widely held Roman view, the somatic ‘defects’ of the *Aethiops* somatic type comprised colour, hair, facial shape, and over-large breasts in the female of the *genus*.”³⁷ When scholars cite these lines as “evidence” for the physical characteristics of African women, they seem to forget that Juvenal is writing satire, a genre which requires the poetic device of hyperbole. He, like Lucretius before him,³⁸ is listing the varieties of the human condition and observing that there is nothing surprising about any of them in their own context.

33. J.J. Virey, *Histoire Naturelle du Genre Humane* (Paris: 1810) [*Natural History of the Negro Race*], J. H. Guenbault, trans. (Charleston, S.C.: D. J. Dowling, 1837), 13: “[Hottentot women] can suckle a child on their back, by throwing the breast over their shoulders.”

34. Francis Moore, *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa* (London: Edward Cave, 1738). Online: <http://people.uvawise.edu/runaways/lit/moore.html>; this edition was published in 1767.

35. “Who is amazed by a throat goiter in the Alps or who is amazed by a breast larger than a chubby baby in Meroe?”

36. David S. Weisen, “Juvenal and the Blacks,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 31 (1970): 145.

37. Thompson, *Romans and Blacks*, 35.

38. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 4.1160–69, especially 1168: *at tumida et mammosa ‘Ceres’ est ‘ipsa ab Iaccho.’* (But the plump and busty one is “Ceres herself [being suckled] by Bacchus.”) Lucretius is speaking of how love transforms blemishes into beauty marks in the eyes of the lover.

So, he says, there is nothing surprising about throat goiters in the Alps, Germans with their hair twisted into greasy horns, or Meroetic women with breasts larger than their fat babies. It is clear that Juvenal is exaggerating to make his point. No one now believes that throat goiters are an ethnic characteristic of the French and Swiss; no one travels to Germany expecting to see people with their hair twisted into greasy horns. Why, then, does the leading commentator on Juvenal, Edward Courtney, remark on Juvenal 13.163, “Large pendulous breasts are common in negro women”?³⁹ Furthermore, Wiesen’s comment on this line (cited earlier) takes Juvenal’s hyperbole as a point of fact. Juvenal’s point is that large breasts on *any* woman would have been surprising to a Roman. Incidentally, it is a flaw of the male-centered perspective of these scholars that none notes the fact that in these examples, the women are lactating. Lactating women of all races have fuller, larger breasts than when they are not lactating.

Because Scybale’s depiction is part of a text that today is decidedly marginal, Classical scholars sometimes turn to handbooks to read a general description of the work. How does Scybale fare in these reference works? In *A Literary History of Rome from the Origins to the Close of the Golden Age* (1910), J. Wight Duff describes Scybale as “the ugly, old, negress who is his [the peasant Simylus’s] housekeeper.”⁴⁰ H. J. Rose describes her in *A Handbook of Latin Literature* (1936) as, “an old negress who comprises his entire household.”⁴¹ Paul Harvey comments in the 1937 edition of the *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, “[The *Moretum*] vividly describes a peasant rising . . . and preparing his meal with the help of his old negress servant.”⁴² M. C. Howatson’s 1989 edition of the same reference work renders Scybale invisible: “It [the *Moretum*] vividly describes

39. Edward Courtney, *A Commentary on the Satires of Juvenal* (London: Athlone, 1980), 554.

40. J. Wight Duff, *A Literary History of Rome from the Origins to the Close of the Golden Age* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1910), 358.

41. H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Latin Literature: From the Earliest Times to the Death of St. Augustine* (London: Methuen & Co., 1936), 265.

42. Paul Harvey, *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937), 280.

the farmer rising early on a winter morning . . . and preparing his meal, then starting his day's work at the plough."⁴³ Thompson (1989) describes Scybale as "the slave and sole house companion of a simple peasant."⁴⁴ I have searched these lines and the remaining hexameters of the poem. There are no indications that she is old or ugly or a slave. She only becomes ugly if the beholder has been socialized to believe that African physiognomy is ugly. No commentator raises the possibility that the peasant Simylus and Scybale might be companions out of mutual affection.⁴⁵ It is also clear that Scybale is not sexualized the way that Dido or the black and pale-brown women of Pompeian graffiti are. Rather, she is asexual and in this regard she resembles the controlling image of the mammy/Aunt Jemima figure in the United States.

What other examples are there of modern stereotypes intruding upon the analysis of ancient women? I found it fascinating that when we have evidence that ancient men from Italy or Greece love women of color, many male scholars assume that the women are prostitutes. There are two inscriptions from Pompeii that deal with such relationships.

Candida me doCvit nigras
 OdIsse Pvellas; otero; sepotero; sed non InvItvs
 Amabo;
 SCripsit Venus; FisiCa; Pompeiana. (*CIL* 4.1520)

Haley: A bright pale-brown woman taught me to hate bright
 black women
 I would hate them if I could; but not unwilling
 I will love them.⁴⁶

43. M. C. Howatson, *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 45.

44. Thompson, *Ibid.*, 30.

45. Could the Anglo-American fear of miscegenation be lurking behind the omission of this possibility?

46. Cf. Ovid, *Amores*, 3.11b.35:

Luctantur pectusque leve in contraria tendunt
 hac amor hac odium, sed, puto, vincit amor.
odero, si potero; si non, invitus amabo. (Italics added.)
 Haley's translation:

The second is strikingly reminiscent of the Sable Venus Ode;⁴⁷ with my translation, it reads:

Quisquis amat nigra(m) nigris carbonibus ardet.
Nigra(m) cum video mora libenter ed<e>o. (CIL
4.6892)

Haley: Whoever loves a bright black woman burns with black
coals.
When I see a bright black woman, I gladly eat
blackberries.

Compare the following translations:

Thompson: Any man who loves a black girl is set on fire by hot
charcoal flames;
when I see a black girl I am ready and willing to eat
that blackberry.⁴⁸

Wick (an epigrapher and commentator on this inscription):

. . . se . . . nigras omnino timere et adversus eas mora
edere
solere tamquam amuletum fassus est.⁴⁹

Love and hate struggle over my fickle heart and pull it—Love in one direction, Hate in the other—but Love, I think, is winning. *I would hate if I could; if not, I will love unwilling.* (Italics added.)

47. *The Sable Venus Ode* (circa 1777), in Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, vol. 2, 3rd ed. (1801): 32–38:

Next comes a warmer race, from sable sprung,
To love each thought, to lust each nerve is strung;
The Samboe dark, and Mullattoe brown,
The Mestize fair, the well-limb'd Quaderoon,
And jetty Afric, from no spurious sire,
Warm as her soil, and as her sun—on fire.
These sooty dames, well vers'd in Venus' school,
Make love an art, and boast they kiss by rule.
48. Thompson, *Romans and Blacks*, 108.

Haley: He confesses that he really fears black girls and usually eats blackberries as a protection against them.

Note that *quisquis* can be either feminine or masculine, but both Thompson and Wick assume it refers to a man.

Thompson assumes that the bright-black women (“girls,” as he puts it) in both these inscriptions are prostitutes. In his note on 6892, he elaborates as follows:

The author may have been a slave; *nigra* in the context of a group of prostitutes in a brothel, as in this particular case, can hardly refer to any but an exotic or rare type of physical appearance: the scribbler’s sentiments presuppose such a rare type as distinct from a merely dark-skinned girl or a brunette, and so the graffito should be taken as alluding either to black prostitutes in general or to a particular black prostitute. But in any case it clearly exudes sexual curiosity and emphasizes the exoticism of one or more black prostitutes (probably slave girls) as sex objects offering a *rare* experience in Pompeian brothels.⁵⁰

It is important to note that Thompson is the same commentator who interprets Scybale as a slave. For him, a black woman must be a slave; if she is loved, she must be a prostitute. But there is nothing in inscription 6892 to indicate this; there is no way to know the ethnicity of the authors of 6892 or 1520. The author of 1520 might well have been a black man. Is there any textual evidence to support prostitution in either of these cases? The attribution of *Venus Fisica* in 1520 might arguably indicate a brothel, and the physical context of the inscription cannot be firmly determined. The inscriptions apparently were not found on the walls of brothels.⁵¹ In all probability, there were some black women who were prostitutes. But to read all black women from an ancient context as prostitutes is indicative of racist and sexist attitudes not of the ancient society, but of the modern reader.

49. *CIL* 4.6892, 721.

50. Thompson, *Romans and Blacks*, 210–11.

51. The only commentary on 6892 regards orthography: *litteris cursivis magis et pulchris*.

Conclusions

In conclusion, there is evidence in the Roman literature of the Augustan age and later that the Romans were acute observers of color, gender, and class difference. For instance, there is evidence that ancient Roman men feared female sexuality, but that sexuality is not necessarily colorized. Indeed, all women arouse such fear. In morally didactic texts like those of Vergil and Livy, the foreign woman with political power offers the greatest threat, but once she is subsumed into the domestic sphere, like Scybale, she becomes asexual and less of a threat. However, powerful foreign women distract the Roman man/hero (or his representative) from his *virtus* (“manly virtue”) and *officium* (“duty”) with their exotic sexuality.

Clearly, each of these differences carried varying value, and their intersection and simultaneity carried yet another value. It is too simplistic to assume that the Romans had no skin color prejudice; it is equally simplistic to assume that all women were perceived as Roman women. The Romans were more keenly aware of different cultural practices—especially those of African societies—than we have previously recognized. This should not be surprising, since Roman society at the time of Augustus was multilayered and complexly multicultural. As we discover the extent of that complexity, critical race theory can help to unlayer the intersectionality of the constructs of ancient Roman society.

