

# Confronting Identities in the Roman Empire

*Assumptions about the Other  
in Literary Evidence*

Edited by  
José Luís Brandão,  
Cláudia Teixeira  
and  
Ália Rodrigues

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## *Decolor heres: Dark Skin in the Roman Cultural Imagination*<sup>1</sup>

Mario Lentano

On 30 May 2021, news appeared online that those intending to graduate in Classics at Princeton University would no longer be required to know Greek and Latin, ‘in a push to create a more inclusive and equitable program’. In the view of the professors who shared this decision, students entering the Department of Classics without ‘previous exposure’ to the classical languages ‘will make it a more vibrant intellectual community’. What is more, the department’s role ‘in the long arc of systemic racism’ is evident in their view.<sup>2</sup> To tell the truth, the examples given to justify these contrite affirmations relate more to the utilisation of slaves by the founders and benefactors of the University, on whose largesse the institution’s financing then partly rested, than to racism strictly conceived. In any case, there can be no doubt that Princeton University’s choice takes place in the context of a wider tendency that appears to be gathering pace in the United States and United Kingdom, which imputes to the classics – I mean, in this case, ancient Latin and Greek authors, not the departments that study them – the status of pathogens that should be kept at a distance, apparently because they are still considered capable of exercising a sort of contaminating effect on students who might come into contact with them. Even the choice of a term like ‘exposure’ to indicate the study of ancient languages in high schools is telling in this regard, since it is the same term used, for instance, to denote exposure to radiation or to the harmful effects of environmental pollutants.

This contribution offers too small a space to confront questions of such complexity and about which, besides, a sizeable bibliography has already accumulated in recent years.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, what I would like to try to suggest is that although Rome’s history – for Greece the story would be different, at least in part – has been marked undeniably by much that is appalling (at least according to how our contemporary culture classifies behaviours), among these we do not

find racism, systemic or otherwise, at least if we understand by this term the belief that the members of certain human groups possess characteristics that make them inferior and that legitimize discrimination against them, simply on account of belonging to this or that group.<sup>4</sup>

To begin with, the geo-climatic doctrine – theorized for the first time, in my understanding, at the end of the fifth century BCE in the Pseudo-Hippocratic treatise *Airs, Waters, and Places*, and diffused in Rome already in the late Republican period as the dominant paradigm for describing the differences between people and ethnicities – attributes differences above all to environmental factors. In the simplified version of the model that developed in the Roman world (probably thanks to Posidonius' ethnography), the theory clearly distinguished between peoples of the North and peoples of the South – the former being marked by light skin, large bodies, straight and light-coloured head and body hair, deep voices, and abundant blood; the latter, by contrast, because of their proximity to the sun, being marked by smaller bodies, curly hair, darker pigmentation, and a general prevalence of the dry element, resulting in scarcer blood. This distinction, based largely on corporal features, was associated with a second, psychological and attitudinal feature, which opposed the excessive martial courage of northern populations – valorous but tending to be reckless in the face of danger – to the excessive prudence of southern peoples, a vice that was only in part compensated for by their greater intellect. Between these extremes, Greece – and later Rome – presented an ideal balance of characteristics, which allowed its inhabitants to impose their hegemony on the rest of the world and simultaneously legitimated the position of primacy that they enjoyed.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the characteristics of human communities do not come from any intrinsic (and so structural and indelible) features, but from external factors, as shown by the fact that changing such external factors could bring about a modification of characteristics and attitudes.<sup>6</sup> To give only one example: the Galatians or Gallo-Greeks, inhabitants of a region of Asia Minor which took from them the name of Galatia, were a Celtic tribe, originally from the Transalpine region, who emigrated to Anatolia during the third century BCE. According to the Roman historians, however, the environmental context of their new homeland brought it about that the Galatians lost some of the features associated with northern populations (especially their unthinking aggressiveness in war). The mild climate of Asia and the abundant resources available in their new territory in fact altered the nature of the Gallo-Greeks, clouding and cancelling the *feritas* (ferocity) that had characterized them previously.<sup>7</sup> The Roman sources explain this metamorphosis by analogy to the plant world, likening what

happened to the Galatians to what happens to seeds when they are planted in soil different from customary.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, a similar way of posing the question highlights how, for ancient cultures, the traits that identify a people are not tied to innate and immutable characteristics, but can be modified to a significant extent, if the context in which its members find themselves living has changed. Not by chance, the opposite of what happened to the Galatians happened to the inhabitants of Massalia (modern Marseille), an ancient Greek outpost on the Mediterranean coast of Gaul, in the heart of the Celtic zone. Through continual contact with their barbarian neighbours, Livy observes, the Massaliotes 'took on a certain aggressiveness', which evidently the original Greek inhabitants of the city did not possess.<sup>9</sup>

But what to say of those dark-skinned peoples, to which the pronouncements of Princeton University specifically refer, and which constitute the preferred target of modern-day racisms? In this case, too, the information that can be found scattered throughout ancient sources does not appear to indicate the existence of any special stigma.<sup>10</sup> Let's begin with something that has not often attracted the attention of scholars, but that appears – to me – to be meaningful. At no moment in their history do the Romans, as the Greeks before them, ever appear to be collectively defined as 'white'. In Latin, the adjective *albus* can be used as an antonym of 'person of colour', but it does not ever appear to have been used in the plural to designate individuals of light complexion collectively.<sup>11</sup> This is not some mere terminological subtlety. In a passage of surpassing insight at the beginning of his *Histories*, Thucydides reflects on the absence of the term 'barbarian' in the Homeric poems, and justifies this absence by observing that during the period in which the poems were composed, the Greeks 'had not yet been marked off from the rest of the world by one distinctive appellation'.<sup>12</sup> Thus, according to the great Athenian historian, conceptions of 'Greek' and of 'barbarian' emerged together, and the latter had no reason to exist except in opposition to the former. If 'barbarians' do not appear in Homer, it is because the 'Greeks' themselves do not appear, either (or, at least, they were not yet endowed with a unique name that encompassed them all as a whole). Thucydides' reflection is striking for its understanding of how categories take form only through their relations and dialectically. Now, for the opposition 'white' vs. 'Black', an analogous process can be imagined. The two terms make sense only in relation to one another, as poles of a single dichotomy. So, the fact that the Romans did not define themselves in terms of the colour of their skin (that is, that they never call themselves *albi* –whites) appears to exclude that, in their eyes, another analogous category existed that included those who did *not* share that colour, identified as a separate and opposed grouping.

Second, in order to describe individuals of dark skin, Latin normally uses ethnonymic terms: *Maurus* and above all *Aethiops*. *Aethiops*, in particular, refers properly to the inhabitants of Ethiopia, the vast area that ancient geography located at the extreme edge of the world and that over the course of time was identified specifically with the area south of Egypt. This choice is interesting for several reasons.<sup>13</sup> To begin with, *Aethiops* is a compound adjective, which in its Greek matrix alludes to the appearance of skin ‘burnt’ by the sun. In respect to modern designations like *ne(g)ro*, *noir*, Black, and so on, it is not so much, then, a chromatic feature of the skin that comes to be emphasized, as its origin, which is again traced back to the influence of an environmental or climatic factor: close exposure to the heat of the sun. This is precisely what encouraged Lucretius, in two passages of the *De rerum natura*, to speak of the Ethiopians’ ‘completely cooked colour (*percoctus color*)’.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in ancient literature the Ethiopians are a familiar and indeed highly valorized people, already in Homer.<sup>15</sup> So far as we can tell, when they are tired of Olympus – or, more concretely, when the poet needs to free the scene of their cumbersome presence – the gods betake themselves, collectively or individually, to banquet among the Ethiopians, as Poseidon does at the beginning of the *Odyssey*. Poseidon is not present when it is agreed, in Zeus’ vast hall, that Odysseus will return home – something he had long tried to prevent – and Homer justifies his absence by explaining:

now the distant Ethiopians,  
 who live between the sunset and the dawn,  
 were worshipping the Sea God with a feast,  
 a hundred cattle and a hundred rams.  
 There sat the god, delighting in his banquet.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Iliad*, the gods spend a total of twelve days in Ethiopia, requiring Thetis, the mother of Achilles, to wait before meeting Zeus, before she can argue to him in favour of her son, who has been embarrassed by Agamemnon’s arrogance. At the end of the poem, moreover, Iris goes to the Ethiopians to take part in the hecatombs offered to the gods.<sup>17</sup> So the Ethiopians, at the extreme edge of the world, enjoy the same commensality with the gods that Odysseus will enjoy in another margin space, the island of the Phaeacians, but that is unattainable by common man. Not by chance, the Ethiopians are described repeatedly by the ancients as a flawless people, specially devoted to the gods, whose benevolence they acquired by being the first to introduce sacrifices, festivals, and celebrations in their honour.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, none of this made the Ethiopians weaklings or cowardly hedonists, devoted exclusively to dinner parties and religious festivals.



The hero Memnon, son of Aurora, came from Ethiopia, who with his band of dark-skinned warriors fought bravely by the side of the Trojans in one of the many narrative developments that flourished around the famous war, finally to be killed by Achilles. And in a well-known passage of the third book of Herodotus, the king of the Ethiopians 'of long life', scoffs at the threat of Cambyses to march against his country, giving a scornful response to the ambassadors who came to ask, on behalf of the Persians, for their submission.<sup>19</sup> Even in the garb of slaves the Ethiopians seem to be appreciated, even if only as an exotic curiosity. In a comedy of Terence – and already, presumably, in its Greek original – the young man Phaedria claims among his titles of merit that of having brought as a gift to his beloved courtesan a young Ethiopian slave-girl, whom the woman had insisted on having.<sup>20</sup>

We understand that the bodily traits of people of colour – curly hair, full lips, flat nose, to which are sometimes added thin and bowed legs, flat feet and, for women, abundant breasts – were well known to Greeks and Romans and recur often in their descriptions or iconographic representations of individuals belonging to these populations. In this case, too, however, a negative value does not seem to have been attributed to these features, except perhaps on a purely aesthetic level.<sup>21</sup> Already in the sixth century BCE the poet and philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon, in a famous passage in which he stresses how every human culture has elaborated an image of the gods beginning from its own physical characteristics, and after the striking claim that cows, lions, or horses, if they possessed hands, would depict the gods according to the model of their own bodies, goes on to explain that the Ethiopians venerate dark-skinned, snub-nosed gods, while the Thracians, on the other side of the world, depict them with blue eyes and red hair.<sup>22</sup> In a text like this, it is the same radical relativism that inspires reasoning to exclude that Xenophanes wanted to give the Ethiopians any negative connotation because of their skin colour.

In an entirely different period and context, similar conclusions are suggested by a brilliant but biting epigram of Martial:

You have become a father, Cinna, from Marulla of seven  
 not children: for not any are yours  
 nor is one a son of your friend or neighbor,  
 but conceived on pallets and mats  
 they reveal their mother's indiscretions by their heads.  
 This one with curled hair, who moves in a Mauritanian way  
 shows himself to be the progeny of the cook Santra.  
 But that one with a flat nose, and swollen lips

is the spitting image of Pannychus, director of the wrestling school.  
 Who is unaware that the third boy is the baker's,  
 whoever recognizes and sees bleary-eyed Dama?<sup>23</sup>

The epigram continues, mentioning other sons and daughters of Cinna, but its meaning is already clear from the part we have just cited. The unchaste Marulla has conceived seven times by so many different fathers, none of whom happens to be her actual husband. To her misfortune, however – and above all by means of the ancient understandings of transmission of appearances, which recognize the determining role of the paternal imprint – the features all come to be reproduced in their faces of the man from whom they were conceived, inevitably unmasking the woman's *materna furta*.<sup>24</sup> Among the many partners identified securely by Martial, it seems certain that the *palaestrita* Pannychus was imagined as a man of colour, given the recurrence of conventional descriptive elements like the snub nose and full lips.<sup>25</sup> A man of colour is in all likelihood (even if in this case there is not full agreement among scholars) also the son of Santra the cook, whose curly hair Martial mentions and whom he describes as *Maurus*, properly 'of the colour of the Mauritians': a North African ethnic group that one part of the sources connected precisely with the Ethiopians and considered a kind of eastern offspring of that 'Black' people *par excellence*.<sup>26</sup> In any case – and this is what most counts in our perspective – in the eyes of the epigrammatist, the sexual relations enjoyed by Marulla with partners of colour do not seem to have brought the woman any particular opprobrium. Her two 'Black' lovers are cited by Martial on equal footing with the others, without their ethnic origin being attributed any special emphasis. What is important in his eyes is only the servile status that they share, as the initial pun shows on the double meaning of *liberi* (legitimate children and free individuals).

It is true, however, that at least in some cases adultery consummated with an individual of dark skin appears to bring an additional element of degradation, especially when the woman involved in that relation is not any Marulla but the irreprehensible Lucretia, that national heroin and unquestionable model of matronly chastity. The night on which Sextus Tarquinius entered her bedroom with the intention of raping her, Lucretia's resistance, as is known, was conquered by the threat of killing her and of placing in her bed, beside her body, a nude slave, and then accusing her of having been caught *in flagrante delicto* in the course of a sordid adultery.<sup>27</sup> Now, it is interesting that in one probably late version of this tale, cited in a note of Servius' commentary on Vergil, the slave in question becomes an 'Ethiopian', that is, a man of colour: a modification that is justified, apparently, by the supposition that this detail conferred on Tarquin's

argument additional constrictive efficacy, to the degree it would have cast stronger discredit on Lucretia's reputation.<sup>28</sup> It is true, however, that the determining element of Tarquin's threat nevertheless remains, as already in the case of Martial's epigram, the servile status of the partner and not the colour of his skin, so much so that only the first element appears unchanged in all the versions of the story of Lucretia. At Rome, slave men and slave woman are a sexual toy at the disposition of their masters, but for a woman it is shameful to have intimate relations with one of them.

Similar considerations hold for a widespread scholastic theme that sees a matron accused of adultery after having given birth to a child of colour. The task, an ample extract of which has reached us in the declamatory collection of Calpurnius Flaccus, meant to offer a test of extreme difficulty to the students of rhetorical schools, who were called upon to defend the woman, more than to feed in them a stigmatizing vision of people of dark skin. And it is a fact that, in the quite lengthy surviving text of Calpurnius, the rhetor who takes the role of accuser does not appear to have emphasized the element of dark skin at all, except as an undeniable proof that the adultery actually took place.<sup>29</sup>

If anything, it can be useful to emphasize a further passage, which again refers to the specific mental framework of ancient cultures, like the association between skin colour and omens of bad augury. Black was in fact consistently connected in both Greece and Rome with the sphere of death, the underworld, and the dead, to whom not by chance were offered sacrificial victims of dark skin, while animals with white skin were reserved for the gods of the heavens.<sup>30</sup> Thus, speaking of a matron not much more inclined to marital fidelity than Martial's Marulla, in the so-called satire against women, Juvenal puts his interlocutor on guard against the possible birth of a baby of colour – the *decolor heres* mentioned in the title of this piece – alluding to the pigmentation of the skin with the statement that its father would never have wanted to see it in the morning:

Rejoice, poor wretch; give her the stuff to drink whatever it be, with your own hand: for were she willing to get big and trouble her womb with bouncing babes, you might perhaps find yourself the father of an Ethiopian; and some day a coloured heir, whom you would rather not meet by daylight, would fill all the places in your will.<sup>31</sup>

Such a description does not refer at all to a presumed racist attitude on the part of this involuntary father, whose wife, moreover, does not seem to show any repugnance at joining with a man of dark skin. If anything, it alludes to the widespread popular belief, attested, almost contemporaneously to Juvenal, in

Lucian of Samosata and present in the folklore of many cultures until recent times: at its heart, to encounter something ill-omened, especially if it happens at the beginning of the day, represents an unlucky presage and suggests therefore the opportunity of not leaving home or of quickly returning home. This holds for a great variety of encounters considered of bad auspice, which include among other things an individual who stumbles on his right foot, a eunuch, a monkey, or, as the satirist's verses show, an individual of dark skin.<sup>32</sup> Once more, in short, the ancient text does not present any evidence of attitudes that can be described as racist, and the modern scholar ought to pay attention to not imposing interpretive categories that *seem* self-evident, because they are familiar to us, on a culture that must be studied instead according to its own standards.<sup>33</sup>

In the same way, a widespread historiographic tradition recounted that on the eve of the battle of Philippi, in 42 BCE, the imminent defeat of Caesar's killers had been presaged among other unlucky signs by the appearance at the gate of their camp of a Black man. The historian Florus speaks in this regard of an 'all too obvious signal of mourning', while Plutarch affirms that there had been a casual encounter between the man in question and the flagbearer who carried the eagle in battle, the standard of the legion and for this reason endowed with a strong symbolic value. Not by chance, the soldiers had seen to immediately eliminate this unfortunate circumstance, in demonstration of the vast diffusion of certain cultural models.<sup>34</sup> Something similar happened, later, to Septimius Severus on the eve of his death. While he was busy in military operations on the front of Britain, the emperor sees coming towards him a Black soldier, crowned by a wreath of cypress. If this were not enough, the 'Ethiopian' addresses Septimius Severus and calls him *deus victor* (winning god). Becoming angry, the emperor immediately orders the man to be taken from his sight, shaken by the triple bad omen represented by the man's skin colour, the plant used for the crown (traditionally associated with the sphere of mourning), and his invocation as a god, which could be considered an omen of his imminent apotheosis.<sup>35</sup>

Even evidence like this, however, does not necessarily imply a vision of 'Blacks' rooted in racism. In all likelihood, the Ethiopian killed at Philippi was a slave who normally followed the army, whose misfortune was only that of having been noticed at the moment in which the gates of the camp were being opened and the soldiers were heading towards the field of battle, as in fact all the sources do not fail to specify, in a situation, in short, that appears not too different from that of someone who sees a scene of bad omen precisely at the moment in which he leaves home and prepares to begin his day. As for the 'Ethiopian' who encountered Septimius Severus, the biographer of the *Historia Augusta* takes care to specify that

this was a famous *scurra*, known among the soldiers for his jokes and witticisms, and who belonged to a *militaris numerus*, that is, an auxiliary unit of the army, enrolled on an ethnic basis, according to a technical meaning that the term *numerus* takes on beginning from the age of Trajan: both facts that confirm that the man enjoyed the full trust of the emperor.<sup>36</sup> Once more, it is the circumstances of the encounter, and not the colour of the skin as such, that takes on an ominous value, justifying Septimius's harsh reaction, like that of Brutus' soldiers.

A picture like the one we have briefly traced is however destined to change in significant part beginning with Late Antiquity, when the increasing establishment of Christianity enriches, and at the same time complicates, the network of symbolic associations tied to the colour of skin. Black becomes then consistently an attribute of Satan, the monkey of God and icon of evil, already in Greek authors often defined simply as *ho mélas*, and by extension this colour comes to be attributed to those who share a status somehow 'demonic', from the idolator to the sinner to the heretic. A 'symbolic Blackness', as it has recently been defined, that colonizes the imaginary promoted by the new creed and becomes rapidly dominant in late imperial culture.<sup>37</sup> As for Ethiopia, it often occurs as the emblem of sinning nations in the works of Christian thinkers, and before that in the production of an author of Jewish culture like Philo of Alexandria, thanks also to the presence in biblical texts diligently interpreted by the Fathers of the Church: to cite only one example, in his commentary on the Old Testament book of Sophonia, Jerome states that 'in all sacred scripture they are called "Ethiopians" who are completely immersed in vice'.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, Ethiopia is often likened to Egypt, whose negative characterization derived obviously from the circumstance of having long held in slavery the chosen people.

If one considers that in the eyes of the Greeks and Romans the Egyptians were renowned for their ancient wisdom and their religious devotion and that the Ethiopians, as we have seen, entered into and remained for a long time in the literary tradition as a blessed nation, beloved of and sharing a table with the gods, the reversal of perspective is total and contributes to laying the foundations of a transformation destined sooner or later to move from the world of metaphorical expressions to that of real discrimination.

## Notes

- 1 I am grateful to the organisers of the conference *Othring and the Other: Performing Identity in the Roman Empire* for offering me the chance to take part in their work,

and to those who participated in the discussion that followed my talk for their precious suggestions and comments.

- 2 I cite Bernstein 2021. This is naturally not the first stance of its kind: in a ‘Statement on Police Brutality, Systemic Racism, and the Death of George Floyd’ published online on 3 June 2020 (Cullyer 2020), the American Society for Classical Studies ‘recognizes and acknowledges the complicity of Classics as a field in constructing and participating in racist and anti-Black educational structures and attitudes’; and the positions taken in this respect in particular by Dan-el Padilla Peralta, a scholar of Ancient History at Princeton, are well known (see Bond 2019). For sensible criticisms of these positions, cf. Rebenich 2021.
- 3 I refer in particular to the studies of Frank M. Snowden, Jr., Lloyd A. Thompson, Gay L. Byron and Benjamin Isaac, which are cited in the following pages and are in any case presupposed even when no explicit reference is made.
- 4 In my view, the same holds true for the notion of ‘proto-racism’ as defined by Isaac 2004: 38: ‘the term proto-racism, then, may be used when Greek and Latin sources attribute to groups of people common characteristics considered to be unalterable because they are determined by external factors or heredity’, taken up again in Isaac 2006. Recently, Marcone 2018: 91 has observed that ‘i concetti di “razzismo” e di “razzista” devono essere utilizzati quanto meno con cautela per non incorrere in forme di anacronismo’, because in the ancient world ‘è assente il presupposto che la differenza etnica abbia un fondamento biologico’, and that, at least in respect to Greek culture, it would be more correct to speak of ‘ethnocentrism’.
- 5 For Greece, cf. above all Aristotle, *Pol.* 1327b20 ff.; for Rome, Vitr. 6.1. All information on the geo-climatic model and on its transformation over time can be found in Sassi 1992; Oniga 1998; Stok 1999; Borca 2003; Isaac 2004: 55–74 (will full bibliography); Isaac 2006: 35–37; Li Causi 2008; Parodo 2011. I speak of a ‘simplified version’ in respect to the Roman world because in it the element of distinction between political regimes seems to disappear entirely – and especially the difference between free Greek cities and eastern despotisms – which instead plays a central role in Hellenic formulations of the model as an explanatory factor of cultural differences.
- 6 Thus rightly Oniga 1988: 106, ‘per quanto rigido e schematico, e in ultima analisi pseudoscientifico ed etnocentrico, il determinismo ambientale antico ha ben poco a che vedere con il razzismo moderno. Viene infatti escluso *a priori* il concetto di ereditarietà: la diversità umana è dovuta a fattori ambientali e culturali, non genetici’. Stok 1999: 265, among others, echoes him.
- 7 Liv. 38.17.9, *iam M. Manlius unus agmine scandentes in Capitolium detrusit Gallos. et illis maioribus nostris cum haud dubiis Gallis, in sua terra genitis, res erat; hi iam degeneres sunt, mixti, et Gallograeci vere, quod appellantur*. Cf. for this passage, and for the passage of Florus cited in n. 8, where the term *feritas* appears, Lentano 2007:

- 201–5, with further bibliography; I find unacceptable Isaac's 2006: 38 interpretation of the Livian passage.
- 8 Flor. 1.27.11, *ceterum gens Gallograecorum, sicut ipsum nomen indicio est, mixta et adulterata est: . . . uti frugum semina mutato solo degenerant, sic illa genuina feritas eorum Asiatica amoenitate mollita est.*
  - 9 Liv. 38.17.2, *Massilia, inter Gallos sita, traxit aliquantum ab accolis animorum.* Cf. Momigliano 1975: 51–7.
  - 10 On the ancient world's representation of people of colour and the suitability of the concept of 'racism' to Greek and Roman culture, cf. Snowden 1970, 1983 (anticipated in other studies by the same author, such as Snowden 1947, 1960), Salmon 1984, and, with specific reference to Rome, Thompson 1989 and more recently Gruen 2006: 472–4; 2011: 197–220. A vast collection of translated and commented texts, including from Christian authors, is given in the dissertation of Diatta 2017. Bartůněk and Dadák 2015 is untrustworthy.
  - 11 Cf., e.g., Varr., *Ling.* 8.41, *si alter erit puer, alter senex, aut unus albus et alter Aethiops* ('if the one is a boy and the other an old man, or one is white and the other an Ethiopian'; trans. R. G. Kent); 9.42, *si alter est Aethiops, alter albus* ('if the one is an Ethiopian and the other is a white man'); Iuv. 2.23, *loripedem rectus derideat, Aethiopem albus* ('let the straight-legged man laugh at the club-footed, the white man at the Blackamoor'; trans. G. G. Ramsay). On use of *Aethiops* to designate people of colour, cf. immediately following in the text.
  - 12 Thuc. 1.3.3 (trans. R. Crawley).
  - 13 According to Snowden 1997: 30, "Ethiopians" is the *only* word regularly used by Greeks and Romans as the equivalent of "Negroes" or "Blacks" in twentieth-century usage' (original emphasis).
  - 14 Lucr. 6.722, *inter nigra virum percocto saecla colore* ('among the tribes of people Blackened by the scorching sun'; trans. M. Ferguson Smith) and 6.1109, *usque ad nigra virum percocto saecla colore* (right on the tribes of people Blackened by the scorching sun), for which I refer to the observations of Nadeau 1977: 76–7 (I am grateful to Anna Maria Urso for having brought these passages to my attention). An alternative explanation for the Ethiopians' darker colouring is given by Ovid (*Met.* 2.235–236), who attributes it to an abundance of blood under the skin. It is telling that in this case, too, the ultimate reason is their close encounter with the chariot of the sun driven by Phaethon. In this respect, Plin., *Nat.* 2.189 speaks instead of humors attracted by heat towards the upper parts of the body, *illis in supera sucum revocari natura vaporis* ('the fluid, like vapour, are forced into the upper parts of the body'; trans. J. Bostock, H. T. Riley).
  - 15 A useful survey and careful discussion of passages is given in Ryan 1997 (esp. 19–26 for Homer). Cf. also Snowden 1960, 1970: 144–55, 1983: 46–55; Desanges 1975: 408–11; Cracco Ruggini 1979; Zadi 1996; Byron 2002: 29–41. A treatment of the

- Ethiopians is expressly excluded by Isaac 2004, as the author explains in his introduction (49–50).
- 16 Hom., *Od.* 1.22–26 (trans. E. Wilson). Cf. also 5.282–287. For commentary on these passages, cf., among others, MacLachlan 1992.
- 17 Cf., respectively, Hom., *Il.* 1.423–427 and 23.205–207.
- 18 Diodorus Siculus insists specially on this point. For Diodorus, divine benevolence allowed the Ethiopians to escape all those who tried to subjugate them, and to continue to live in peace and harmony (3.2).
- 19 For Memnon, central to the lost poem *Aithiopsis* of the epic cycle, it is sufficient to refer to West 2013: 129–62. The episode of Cambyses' embassy and the reaction of the Ethiopians is recounted in Hdt. 3.17–25 and appears frequently in later texts, both in Greek and Latin.
- 20 Ter., *Eun.* 165–166, *mi dixti cupere te ex Aethiopia / ancillulam* ('you told me that you wanted a slave girl from Ethiopia'; trans. J. Barsby).
- 21 We can add, as well, the description of the African slave Scybale in the Pseudo-Vergilian *Moretum*, esp. vv. 31–35, and the observations of Giton in Petr. 102.
- 22 Xenoph., 11 B 16 Diels-Kranz (trans. J. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven): 'the Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and Black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair'.
- 23 Mart. 6.39 (trans. J. R. Wells), *pater ex Marulla, Cinna, factus es septem / non liberorum: namque nec tuus quisquam / nec est amici filiusve vicini, / sed in grabatis tegetibusque concepti / materna produnt capitibus suis furta. / Hic qui retorto crine Maurus incedit / subolem fatetur esse se coci Santrae; / at ille sima nare, turgidis labris / ipsa est imago Pannychi palaestritae. / Pistores esse tertium quis ignorat, / quicumque lippum novit et videt Damam? / Quartus cinaeda fronte, candido voltu / ex concubino natus est tibi Lygdo: / percide, si vis, filium: nefas non est. / Hunc vero acuto capite et auribus longis, / quae sic moventur ut solent asellorum, / quis morionis filium negat Cyrtae? / Duae sorores, illa nigra et haec rufa, / Croti choraulae vilicique sunt Carpi. / Iam Niobidarum grex tibi foret plenus / si spado Coresus Dindymusque non esset.*
- 24 Bettini 1999: 217–18.
- 25 *Pannychus* is usually considered a kind of 'speaking name' that alludes to a lover capable of 'lasting' all night (hints in Soldevila et al. 2019: 445–6, s.v.); I would not exclude that it is also a reference to the dark colour of his skin, which makes him a kind of 'all night' (on the association of dark skin with shade, cf. e.g. Manil. 4.723–724). For Santra, cf. again Soldevila et al. 2019: 536–7, who do not comment on the presumable ethnicity of Marulla's lover, but note that the name is attested only in an epigraph of African provenance.
- 26 Cf. among others, Serv., *Aen.* 4.481, *Aethiopiae duae sunt, una circa ortum solis, altera circa occasum in Mauretania, quam nunc dicit* ('there are two Ethiopias, one in the



- East and one in the West, in Mauretania, which is here referred to'; my trans.). The idea that there were two groups of Ethiopians, those of the setting sun and those of the rising sun, goes back to Homer and appears in the passage of the *Odyssey* cited above (1.23–24); on the reception and interpretation of this passage in ancient authors, cf. Nadeau 1970.
- 27 Thus the canonical version of Livy, cf. 1.58.4: *ubi obstinatum videbat et ne mortis quidem metu inclinari, addit ad metum dedecus: cum mortua iugulatum servum nudum positurum ait, ut in sordido adulterio necata dicatur* ('When he found her obdurate and not to be moved even by fear of death, he went farther and threatened her with disgrace, saying that when she was dead he would kill his slave and lay him naked by her side, that she might be said to have been put to death in adultery with a man of base condition'; trans. B. O. Foster).
- 28 Serv., *Aen.* 8.646: *per noctem stricto gladio eius ingressus cubiculum cum Aethiope, hac arte egit ut secum coiret, dicens: 'nisi mecum concubueris, Aethiopem tecum interimo, tamquam in adulterio deprehenderim* ('during the night, after holding a sword he entered her bedroom with an Ethiopian and by this stratagem he got her to lie with him, saying: If you don't sleep with me, I will kill the Ethiopian together with you as if I had caught you in the act of adultery'; my trans.). For interpretation of this passage, within the vast tradition on Lucretia, cf. Ramires 2010; Brescia 2019; Lentano 2020b, esp. 73–5.
- 29 I have discussed the *controversia* of Calpurnius Flaccus (2: 'Matrona Aethiopem peperit. Arguitur adulterii') in Lentano 2020a, with additional bibliography. The theme appeared also in a lost major declamation of Pseudo-Quintilian, not included in the collection that has reached us but whose content we can partially reconstruct (fr. 8 Lehnert = 4 Stramaglia).
- 30 On this last point, cf. Arnob., *Adv. gent.* 7.19–20. Generally, on the ominous associations of the colour Black, cf. Thompson 1989: 110–13.
- 31 Juv. 6.597–601 (trans. G. G. Ramsay; cf. also 5.52–55): *gaude, infelix, atque ipse bibendum / porrige quidquid erit; nam si distendere vellet / et vexare uterum pueris salientibus, esses / Aethiopsis fortasse pater, mox decolor heres / impleret tabulas numquam tibi mane videndus*. On the theme of ethnic prejudice generally in Juvenal, see the works of Watts 1976 and more recently of Gellérfi 2019; on the meaning of *decolor* and its use 'to mark racial differences', cf. Snowden 1947: 280–1 and more recently Goldman 2015: 104–5 (the source of the citation); those who interpret the adjective in the sense of 'mulatto' are misled, as Watson and Watson 2014: 263 rightly observe.
- 32 Lucian, *Pseud.* 17 (trans. A. M. Harmon), 'We avoid those who are lame in the right foot, especially if we should see them early in the morning; and if anyone should see a cut priest or a eunuch or a monkey immediately upon leaving the house, he returns upon his tracks and goes back, auguring that his daily business for that day will not

be successful, thanks to the bad and inauspicious omen at the start.' The same in Lucian, *Eun.* 6, referring specifically to eunuchs.

33 This is the approach that in anthropological theory is termed 'emic' (in opposition to the 'etic' perspective, closer to the cultural categories of the observer); for application of this model to the ancient world, cf. Bettini and Short 2018: 11–17.

34 Cf., respectively, Flor. 2.17.7–8 (*nam et signis insedit examen et adsuetae cadaverum pabulo volucres castra quasi iam sua circumvolabant, et in aciem prodeuntibus obvius Aethiops nimis aperte feralis signum fuit* ('a swarm of bees settled on the standards; the birds which usually feed upon corpses flew round the camp, as though it were already their prey; and an Ethiopian who met the troops as they were marching to battle was only too clearly an omen of disaster'; trans. E. S. Forster) and Plut. *Brut.* 48.5 (trans. B. Perrin), according to whom the story was 'well known' ('And the story of the Ethiopian is well known, who, as the gate of the camp was thrown open, met the standard-bearer, and was cut to pieces by the soldiers, who thought his appearance ominous'). The same can be read in the later manual of omens by Julius Obsequens, who, as we know, drew on Livian material (70: *Brutianis in proelium egredientibus Aethiops in porta occurrit et a militibus confossus* ('as Brutus and his army were going out to battle an Ethiopian met them at the gate and was run through by the soldiers'; trans. A. Nice)), as well as in Appian (*Civ.* 4.134), who specifies that the encounter took place 'in front of the gates' (trans. H. White). Additionally, the death of Caligula (according to Suet., *Cal.* 57.4) was presaged, among other unlucky signs, by the fact that the night on which the emperor was stabbed, a theatrical production was given at the palace in which many Egyptian and Ethiopian actors took part, obviously characterised by their dark skin. On these episodes, cf., among others, Aubert 1999: 3–4.

35 SHA, *Sev.* 22.4–5, *Aethiops quidam e numero militari, clarae inter scurras famae et celebratorum semper iocorum, cum corona e cupressu facta idem occurrit. quem cum ille iratus removeri ab oculis praecepisset et coloris eius tactus omine et coronae, dixisse ille dicitur ioci causa: 'totum fuisti, totum vicisti, iam deus esto victor'*.

36 Cf. *OLD*, s.v. *numerus*, 9b ('one of certain units of native troops employed as auxiliaries from Trajan's time onward').

37 I allude to Byron 2002. Amongst a vast bibliography, see esp. Aubert 1999 and Brakke 2001; for much useful information, cf. also Snowden 1960: 30–53, 1983: 44–6; Ullendorff 1968: 5–15; Cracco Ruggini 1979: 115–17 and 122–35; Wilson 2014. A partial reinterpretation of the Christian position can be found in Snowden 1997: 34–6.

38 Hier., in *Sophon.* 2.12: *in omnibus Scripturis Aethiopes eos appellari, qui penitus in vitia sunt demersi* (regarding a passage in which the oracle of Yahweh threatens kill the Ethiopians by sword). Other useful references in *ThLL*, vol. I, col. 1155: 27–34.

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