

Revisiting Views of Blackness in Antiquity

As a visiting researcher in 2016 at University College London in the Department of Greek and Latin, **Sarah Derbew '09** spent hours exploring antiquities at the British Museum. Those included the Benin Bronzes, a trove of artifacts that ended up in museums worldwide after being looted by British colonial soldiers from what is now Nigeria.

At the British Museum, signage at the time said that these were “a discovery of art by the West.”

“The Benin Bronzes are a hot topic now,” says Derbew, now an assistant professor of classics at Stanford University. “There’s a museum being built in Nigeria to house them, and the Boston Museum [and London’s Horniman Museum] said they’ll return their bronzes, while other museums say they won’t. This is a moment of reckoning and steps towards restitution seem a lot closer.”

Derbew is both an expert on and advocate for ancient African studies. She also studies the role of Black people in ancient Greek literature and art, and critiques contemporary thinking about Greek antiquity. Her new book, *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2022), has been praised by critics as ambitious and groundbreaking.

In a piece in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Najee Olya, an early-career scholar of classical archaeology, wrote: “*Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity* is proof that the future of classics is already here. It’s simply waiting for everyone else to catch up.”

Described by her publisher as “the first concerted treatment of Black skin color in the Greek literature and visual culture of antiquity,” Derbew’s book “uncovers the many silences, suppressions, and misappropriations of blackness within modern studies of Greek antiquity.” Reminding readers of long-overlooked ancient civilizations such as Nubia (in northeastern Africa) and Aksum (located in what is present day Ethiopia), Derbew also examines Egypt, whose ancient culture is often grouped with Greece and Rome rather than with neighboring African countries.

The Brooklyn native is a rarity in her field. By Derbew’s count, she’s one of approximately 14 Black classics faculty at U.S. universities, and most know of one another.

As a Haverford undergrad, Derbew took Latin classes but was initially set on being an economics major and going into law—until her calculus professor and mentor, Jeff Tecosky-Feldman, suggested she consider a Ph.D. in classics, starting with a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship.

Before graduating she spent one summer—five days a week, eight hours a day, for 10 weeks—learning ancient Greek at City University of New York. “We went from learning the alphabet in week one to reading Plato by week seven,” she says. “I figured graduate school wouldn’t be much harder.” She is also proficient in Swahili, French, and Amharic, and she reads Latin, ancient Greek, and classical Ethiopic (Ge’ez).

Derbew studied at CUNY’s Graduate Program in Classics, then completed her Ph.D. in classics at Yale in 2018. She did a post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard, then started at Stanford in 2020. She’s currently working on a co-edited volume entitled *Classics and Race: A Historical Reader*. Containing essays from around the world, it’s a way, she says, “to expand what the word ‘classics’ can mean if we free it from meaning only Europe at a particular time.”

“I hope that my work helps the field of classics grow in productive ways,” Derbew says. “There’s so much diversity in the material that remains in the backdrop in the 21st century.” —Anne Stein

