Masks of Blackness
Reading the Iconography of Black People in Ancient Greece

In fifth-century BCE Athens, the symposium provided a convivial space for various *polis* inhabitants, including poor Athenian men, metics, and perhaps women, to indulge in boisterous activities.[1] More than a homogeneous drinking party, the symposium was a pseudo-microcosm of the *polis* that reflected its heterogeneity.[2] Public performance, an integral part of the city, found its counterpart in the private world of the symposium. Within this world, guests played games and professed their erotic desires, sometimes at the same time. For instance, *kottabos*, ostensibly a game of skill that measured how accurately a drunk person could fling wine from a vessel onto a specific target, offered symposiasts a way to profess their love for someone in whose name they dedicated their throw. Participants engaged in these lively pursuits, all the while consuming copious amounts of wine from a variety of cups. Among these cups, revelers came face to face with various characters depicted on their drinkware, including janiform[3] (two-faced) drinking cups which fused brown and

---

[1] Jones (2014) asserts that non-elite people composed and performed musical pieces at Athenian symposia; conversely, Steiner (2002: 375–76) remarks that although there was a democratization of the symposium after Cleisthenes's reforms, there was no mixing between elite and non-elite people. Burton (1998) and Kennedy (2015) argue for the presence of women in the symposium; Corner (2012) argues against women's presence; and Goldman (2015) challenges the hypersexualization of the *aulētris* ("flute girl") in symposiastic spaces. Ancient Greek sources suggest a diverse group of symposiasts: the lyric poet Archilochus bemoans the presence of an uninvited Myconian who gorges on unmixed wine (fr. 124b [Ath. 1.7f–8b], as numbered in Gerber [1999b]), the narrator of the *Theognidea* welcomes a Scythian to the symposium (fr. 825–30, as numbered in Gerber [1999a]), and the lyric poet Anacreon asks his companions to desist from Scythian-like drinking practices (fr. 356b [Ath. 10.427b], as numbered in Campbell [1988]). In Plutarch's *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*, Anacharsis's sympotic *persona* suggests that Scythian customs are more consistent and sensible than their Greek counterparts (*Mor.* 146e–164d; Hobden [2013]: 73–116, esp. 107–16; Hartog [1988]).

[2] I build on Corner's (2010: 356) reading of the symposium as a microcosm of the *polis* and Hobden's (2009) treatment of the symposium as a subversive reflection of the *polis*.

[3] The term "janiform" invokes Janus, the two-faced Roman god: one face looks to the past, and one looks to the future. See Appendix 1 for a list of extant janiform cups.

black faces together. In addition to functioning as vessels from which drinkers could imbibe alcohol, these cups allowed symposiasts to try on different faces within the privacy of their party. Through their use of cups, carousers came into close contact with brown faces, black faces, gods, and satyrs. The physiological effects of the wine within the janiform cups further blurred the sharp distinctions between the drinker and the life-like faces in his or her midst.

Millennia after their production, many of these janiform cups are now housed in American and European museums. Curators have struggled to extricate a suitable label for these objects, sometimes opting to delineate one face of the cup as "White" and "beautiful," and the other as "Negroid" and "humorous." The tendency among Classicists and art historians to slip between the categories of (ancient) black people and (modern) Black people further exacerbates these imprecisions.[4] More broadly, the whitening of ancient Greek bodies has created a pervasive hierarchy that relegates black bodies to its lowest rungs. Moving towards a balanced treatment of blackness, in this chapter I offer a reparative account of the iconography of black people on Attic pottery, in particular fifth-century BCE janiform drinking cups used in symposia. Visual representations of black people on Attic janiform cups invite viewers to the stage of the symposium, a site where performances of blackness occurred.

At the beginning of this chapter, I probe the scholarly inclination to apply modern categories to Attic janiform cups. Namely, my proposed nomenclature for janiform cups, brown and black faces, resists contemporary attempts to divorce these cups from their historical context. Next, I investigate janiform cups in their current location: museums. Various museums become performance spaces where ancient iconography meets contemporary reception. Both the objects themselves and paratextual details, such as their captions, contribute to the entanglement of (ancient) blackness and (modern) Blackness in the twenty-first century. As part of this inquiry, I examine the British Museum's display of objects from Nubia, a historical region associated with black people. I close the chapter with a look at recent museum exhibits and exhibitions that reinforce the importance of critical curation,

---

[4] I remind the reader to consult Section 1.3, the Note on Nomenclature, and Table P.1 on my deliberate use of orthography to differentiate between colors and descriptors of socially constructed groups, as well as my specific connotations for key terms.

particularly when displaying the iconography of historically over-looked groups.[5]

2.1   Seeing Brown and Black Faces

Twenty-five centuries after its production, a two-handled janiform drinking cup that might have been used in a convivial symposium sits in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA, Figure 2.1a–c). It affords numerous observations, not the least of which is its name: *kantharos*.[6] I refer to this object as a "cup," rather than *kantharos*, because "cup" prioritizes its function in the symposium. Furthermore, "cup" transports the object out of the museum, out of the sole purview of art historians, and away from the limitations imposed by disciplinary boundaries. The museum's label of this cup reads: "high-handled *kantharos* in the form of two heads." From bottom to top, the cup features a short base and a stylized body shaped to resemble two conjoined faces gazing in opposite directions. Loose curls peeking out of a black headband (*sakkos*) frame the face on one side, and tight curls sit atop the other. The delicate eyebrows and lack of facial hair on both faces suggest that they represent women. Greek text runs along the rim of the cup (ΚΑΛΟΣ Ο ΠΑΙΣ, Ο ΠΑΙΣ ΚΑΛΟΣ, "attractive is this boy, this boy is attractive"), and a neat arrangement of palm fronds appears on the neck's central section. A pair of handles is fused onto the sides of the cup: the handle bases are located directly above the ears on both of the faces, and the upper ends of the handles are fused with the palmettes. Finally, geometric square designs decorate the lip of the cup.

Over time, presumptions about skin color have bled into scholarly commentary about this janiform cup. Popular labels for the left-hand side of Figure 2.1c include: "white," "White," and "Greek." A proponent of the term "white," Frank Snowden, Jr. defends his preference: "It is likely that many Greeks referred to the blacks of these [janiform] vases as *melanes* and the white as *leukoi*, a terminology that would have been a natural development of the dramatic contrast between the black glaze and white paint, as well as a logical extension of the *melas–leukos* antithesis of the environment theory."[7]

---

[5] In line with museum terminology, I use "exhibit" to denote permanent museum displays and "exhibition" to refer to temporary installations.

[6] Nineteenth-century art historians Theodor Panofka and Eduard Gerhard were instrumental in the modern codification of these two-handled cups as *kantharoi*. More tenuous linguistic connections include: the harbor of Piraeus (Κανθάρου λιμήν: Aristophanes, *Peace* 145; Plutarch, *Phocion* 28.6.2) or Kantharos being the name of a potter who made these cups (Ath. 11.474d–e; discussed in Richter and Milne [1935: 25]).

[7] Snowden (1988: 61).

(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 2.1a–c High-handled *kantharos* in the form of two heads, Attic black-figure
ceramic, attributed to the London Class, c. 510–480 BCE. H. 19.2 cm, 98.926.
© Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Upon closer inspection, Snowden's *melas–leukos* ("black–white") model
falls apart. Barring the sclerae of both sets of eyes and the teeth of the
right-hand face, the color "white" does not account for the visual com-
position of the cup at all. Even more, the term *leukos* ("white") is not an

adequate signifier of skin color for all depictions of Greek people.[8] Greek iconographic tradition attributes white skin to Greek women and girls, not Greek men, and environmental treatises pair Scythians and white skin (*Aer.* 20). Snowden's conflation of the visual experience of seeing the color "white" and the constructed categorization of people as "White" (uppercase) ignores the historically specific context of the latter term.[9] The Black–White binary does not have an ancient visual referent. "White," an imprecise label that folds the amorphous category of "Greeks" into a contemporary group made up of a range of skin colors, reflects modernity's fixation on artificial categories. From the fifteenth century onward, careful policing of the parameters of "Whiteness" has enabled a subjective category to gain currency. Expanding this language of economics, Harryette Mullen compares Whiteness to legal tender.[10] Within Mullen's model, Whiteness operates as a transactional category in which power is doled out to select individuals. Its historical roots date back to the advent of the transatlantic slave trade, during which people formulated imbalanced equations of power that resulted in the supremacy of Whiteness. Due to this relatively recent timeline of calculated "Whiteness," it remains an ill-suited term to apply to ancient Greek iconography. Another popular label, "Greek," may initially seem promising because it coincides with an ancient group of people. Even with the temporal relevance of "Greek," this designation suggests a singular, fixed phenotype associated with "Greek" people that does not address the contested nature of this term.[11]

My proposed label for the face on the left-hand side of Figure 2.1c, "brown face," resists anachronistic presuppositions. Closely related to its material referent "clay-colored," "brown" subsumes different shades of color (i.e. light brown and dark brown) into one category. Although the lowercase "brown" loosely overlaps with "Brown," a modern social categorization used to describe people of South Asian descent among others, the lowercase term focuses on color while also alluding to metamorphoses of chromatically inflected language.[12] In other words, the emphasis on the

---

[8] Snowden's inclusion of "white" coincides with Knox's (1993: 26) labeling of ancient Greeks as "undoubtedly white or, to be exact, a sort of Mediterranean olive color."

[9] See Skinner's (2012: 98) description of "the face of a Caucasian woman" on a janiform cup and Winckelmann's preference for ancient Greek statues that appeared unpainted and marble-white; Harloe (2013); Hägele (2013: 253).

[10] Mullen (1994: 80–81). Mullen expands the financial metaphor in her description of White people of humble financial means benefitting from what she deems "color capital," a system of accounting that subtracts more from non-White people than from their White counterparts.

[11] Princeton University Art Museum's online catalogue refers to a face on a janiform cup as "Greek" (https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/20038; see Figure 2.4a–c).

[12] Prashad (2001) and Harpalani (2015) explore the use of "Brown" to refer to people of South Asian descent. Davé (2013) examines the phenomenon of "Brownface," a term she developed to describe

visual composition of "brown" sidesteps the warped mutations of "white." I use the second word of this description, "face," to acknowledge the anthropomorphic imagery on the cup. "Face" refers to the two-dimensional subject of my investigation, the frontal area that spans from the forehead to the chin, whereas a term like "head" encompasses the three-dimensional body part above the neck. Taken together, "brown face" resists the impulse to consider the left-hand side of the cup as historical evidence of a particular group's phenotype. Instead, this designation highlights the limited color palette in the artist's workshop. More broadly, this nomenclature pushes back against a project of erasure that has over-looked what is immediately visible for the sake of mapping contemporary binaries onto ancient Greek iconography.[13]

Descriptions of the color associated with the cup's right-hand face (Figure 2.1c) oscillate between "African," "black-glazed," and "Black."[14] Again, these terms include a neutral color marker and a highly polemic label. The first proposed label, "African," is unsuitable because it has no clear assignation in the fifth century BCE. Even still, the geographical prominence of one region ignores black people's literary presence in Greece (Chapter 5), India (chapters 4 and 6), and Colchis (Hdt. 2.104; *Pyth.* 4.212). The technical term "black-glazed" reflects the manipulation of oxygen during the cup's firing process. Potentially appealing because of its focus on color and material composition, "black-glazed" nonetheless lacks the ideological heft needed to confront the onslaught of modern bigotry associated with this color. The next label, "Black," promotes an anachron-istic understanding of skin color in Greek antiquity. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields help to (re)visit this vocabulary with their coinage of "racecraft," the mode of thought that consists of the unseen and vivid, the imagined and real, what Fields and Fields deem "invisible ontologies."[15] This framework applies to the application of "Black" to this cup's right-hand face, in that racecraft immediately summons the modern hierarchy of skin color when examining the deep past.

The term I offer for the right side of the cup, "black face," aims to bring together the world of color and that of people (who have faces), thereby

---

White actors who exaggerate the accent, mannerisms, and color of South Asian people in American film and television.
[13] Haley's translation of *albus* as "pale brown" inspires my language choices; Haley (2009): 31–34.
[14] An earlier investigation of these terms appears in Derbew (2018); see also Ako-Adounvo (1999) and Gaither et al. (2020).
[15] Fields and Fields use "invisible ontology" after Appiah, who describes the act of pouring liquor onto the ground for ancestors as a literal belief in a symbolic act, that is, the ontology of invisible beings; Appiah (1992: 113–34); Fields and Fields (2014: 5–6, 203).

humanizing representations of black people in Greek antiquity. My orthographic practice, using lowercase "b" and a single space between "black" and "face," aims to distinguish "black face" from nineteenth-century minstrelsy. Although it is naïve to imagine that "black face," paired with this face's full lips and broad nose, does not evoke comparison with "Blackface," a term used to describe nineteenth- and twentieth-century White minstrel actors, there can be meaningful dialogue between the two terms. Despite their wildly different historical settings, both exist within the world of performance: Blackface actors in front of theatrical audiences, and black faces on janiform cups before an eager group of symposiasts. In addition, both introduce their audiences to a diverse array of characters in a jovial atmosphere.[16]

 Scholarship about janiform cups of the fifth century BCE benefits from a continual push against an oversimplistic Black–White model of skin color. The notion that Black people are a "prototypical minority group" against which all non-Black minority groups are weighed is irrelevant to any interpretation of these cups. Emily Greenwood cautions against the dangers of adopting a modern hierarchy: "The conjoined head vases speak to the desire on the part of many modern scholars, from the civil-rights era and the era of decolonization onwards, to realign and to level the social and political hierarchies that existed between raced bodies."[17] Contemporary ideas are all the more pronounced when dealing with visual constructs of skin color in Greek antiquity and therefore require constant interrogation. The scholarly tendency to slip between time periods creates an inaccurate and potentially damaging picture of Greek antiquity. For example, in J. D. Beazley's discussion of "negro heads" of extant janiform Attic cups, he explains that a black face on a single-handled cup wears an expression "of one born to serve, and to suffer confusedly: a drudge."[18] This linkage of skin color and abject subservience reflects perspectives that dominate Beazley's historical context, not that of the cup. More than eighty years later, Beth Cohen echoes Beazley's sentiments. In her appraisal of iconography of black people carrying large birds on fifth-century Attic cups, she concludes that these representations would have been amusing. There is an uncomfortable ease with which Cohen assumes a fixed association between

[16] It is worth noting that Blackface actors and black faces on janiform cups exist within performances; they do not offer direct historical anecdotes. Richlin (2019) offers a thought experiment pairing Blackface minstrelsy and third-century BCE Latium. Despite her cogent analysis of the role of Carthaginians in the *palliata*, Richlin's discussion of "Blackface" without contextualization of loaded terms ("African," "black") left this reader wanting.
[17] Greenwood (2013).
[18] Beazley (1929: 42). Compare with the Archaeological Museum of Polygyros's label for Figure 2.5a–c: "*kantharos* with the heads of a negro and a girl (from Akanthos)."

black people and bumbling inferiority. To be sure, there are depictions of
enslaved black people in ancient Greek art, and there is a correlation
between small stature and humble status.[19] Cohen's assured reading,
however, exceeds the speculative basis of her observation.[20] Her cited
evidence does not adequately substantiate her argument, in that she bases
her argument on uncritical scholarly remarks.[21] Her commentary ignores
ancient Greek iconography depicting black people in numerous roles as
soldiers, followers of Isaic and Bacchic rituals, and musicians.[22] Lopsided
readings like Beazley's and Cohen's stand to gain from contextualized
evaluations of visual representations in Greek antiquity. In this vein,
I offer this reading to replace infiltrations of contemporary color dynamics
with historically informed analyses of iconography of black people in
Greek antiquity.[23] Although gender coding by skin color was pervasive
on Attic pottery, Greek women depicted with white skin and their male
counterparts with black skin, janiform cups depicting faces of different
colors were more than supplemental illustrations of subjugation.[24]
A careful inspection of these cups within their specific contexts offers
alternative ways to read these brown and black faces.

2.2   Facing Blackness in the Symposium

When people gathered for social activities and entertainment in the sym-
posium, they utilized a variety of decorated pottery to aid with their

[19] Cohen (2012: 468). Cohen is perhaps alluding to Theophrastus's *Characters* 21.4.2, in which a man of
    petty ambition (μικροφιλότιμος) acquires an Aithiopian attendant in order to fulfill his desire for
    prestige; Wrenhaven (2011: 105–07) and Oakley (2000) discuss the link between height and status in
    Greek art.
[20] Counteracting Cohen's myopia, Ramgopal points out the need for humane approaches to enslaved
    people. In the context of their mobility in ancient Rome, Ramgopal (2019: 133) cautions: "where
    studies of mobility are concerned, to set aside the little evidence we have for the movements of slaves
    is to treat their sufferings as trivial and to tacitly regard slavery as an acceptable feature of empire."
[21] Cohen cites Metzler and Hoffman (1977: 7–10, 18 n. 12); Bäbler (1998: 73–74); and Lissarrague (2001:
    105–07). Metzler and Hoffman (1977: 9) hesitatingly describe a horn-shaped cup (*rhyton*) depicting
    a black person being eaten by a crocodile as amusing without clear reasoning for doing so; Bäbler
    (1988: 73–74) does not provide evidence for her claim that enslaved Aithiopians' "peculiar appear-
    ance" was amusing to their owners; and Lissarrague (2001: 106) remarks that the black glaze of
    a Sotadean horn-shaped cup accentuates the "negroid characteristics" and "caricatural aspect of the
    statuette."
[22] Snowden (1981: 415–18; 2010: 141–250) offers a fuller list of black peoples in Greco-Roman
    iconography.
[23] Although I focus on janiform cups (*kantharoi*), images of black people in Greek antiquity show up in
    numerous media. Contributions in Bindman and Gates (2010) discuss hundreds of representations
    of black people in Greco-Roman antiquity; Volz (2012: 114–55) examines janiform objects from
    various parts of the world, including Africa, China, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands.
[24] Tanner (2010: 30–31). See also Irwin (1974), Sassi (2001: 1–33), and Eaverly (2013).

consumption of wine: a mixing bowl (*kratēr*) to mix the wine with water in order to ensure its potency was not overwhelming, a wine cooler (*psyktēr*) to keep the beverage at the appropriate temperature, and a variety of drinking cups. Of the approximately ninety-five extant head-shaped cups, seventy-five are janiform (see Table 2.1).[25]

The process of making these janiform cups began with the preparation of the clay. Attic clay, rich in iron (which contributed to its reddish-brown color), came from nearby clay pits. In order to purify the clay, workers used the pits as settling basins in which they mixed the excavated clay with water. This allowed the impurities, such as sand and small stones, to fall to the bottom. After skimming the top layer and pouring it into a new basin of water, and repeating the process numerous times, workers left the mixture untouched in order to allow some of the water to evaporate. Damp blocks of clay were later mixed with older clay, then partially dried before use. Once the clay was malleable, the shaping process consisted of three steps: forming the object, decorating it, and firing it.[26] First, the potter shaped a piece of clay on a wooden wheel to form the cup's body and molded another piece of clay to form the foot. To make the faces and handles, the potter pressed clay into a hand-shaped terracotta mold and shaped the handles by hand. The potter then used slip (a mixture of clay

Table 2.1 *Distribution of janiform cups*

	brown face (female)	black face[27]	satyr
satyr	23	1	-
brown face (female)	21	11	-
Hercules	13	2	2
Dionysus	1	-	1

[25] Lissarrague (1995: 6; 2001: 108–09). I have slightly amended Lissarrague's count of ninety-four cups to ninety-five, to include a janiform cup bearing a satyr and a black face that he omits. For a list of extant single-headed cups featuring a black face, see Appendix 2.

[26] Noble (1988: 16–18, 75–78, 166–67). This was at least a two-person job: the potter threw and shaped the clay, and the vase painter decorated the objects (Noble [1988: 10–11]). Balachandran (2019) helpfully points out that the pottery process was a communal one and that each stage had its own "sensory signature." For instance, see Lissarrague's (1994) discussion of a cup that is signed by a painter (Epiktetos) and a potter (Python). Noble (1988: 25–34) provides detailed pictures of the pottery process; see also the Getty Museum's instructional video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhPW5or07L8).

[27] Due to the inconsistent labeling of the gender of black faces in museum collections, I have not been able to categorize the black faces by gender.

and water) to attach the cup's various components. During the decoration process, the shaped clay was painted with additional slip. If the painter chose to give the faces curly hair, this procedure included pressing clay dots into the surface of the cup and coating the dots with slip as well.[28] Following this step, the kiln master carefully fired the cup, oscillating between preventing air from entering the kiln and allowing it to enter. Upon removal from the kiln, the oxygen-rich parts of the cup had a matte finish and the oxygen-poor parts a black-glazed finish. It is worth stating that this glossy black exterior differs from "black face," a term I use to denote the iconography of people with black skin, a broad nose, and full lips on janiform cups. The former focuses solely on material composition, and the latter relies on a combination of chromatic and phenotypic features.

In addition to symposiastic ware, ongoing intersections between the iconography of black people and performance exist throughout antiquity.[29] Four examples elucidate the numerous stagings of blackness among artists who predate and postdate fifth-century potters.[30] First, a wall painting in the palace of Knossos includes one of the earliest visualizations of black people in the Mediterranean. A twentieth-century reconstruction of this palace, which flourished between 1700 BCE and 1400 BCE, features the "Captain of the Blacks" fresco of three figures in flight. From left to right, three men run in close succession towards the right side of the frame. They are almost identical, except for skin color and height: the two men in the rear have black skin, as is visible in the legs of both figures and the head of one, and are taller than the leader of the trio, who has brown skin. Barring a piece of fabric around their waists and two bands around each of their ankles, they are all naked. The shorter man leading the group holds two long, narrow objects in his right hand, and he wears a feather in his hair. Arthur Evans, the lead excavator at this site, concluded that the fresco portrayed a Minoan commander leading Nubian soldiers to fight against Greece.[31] Viewers gazing at the fresco would presumably marvel at the men's shared performance of military might.

---

[28] Pedley (2012: 193); Cohen (2006: 107).
[29] As noted in Table P.1, I use the generic term "antiquity," rather than "Greek antiquity" to acknowledge the inclusion of ancient Minoan civilization.
[30] Athenian craftspeople began to create cups with divine, satyr-like, and mortal faces at the end of the sixth century BCE.
[31] Snowden (2010: 143). The extant wall painting reveals the left leg of the man in the rear, both legs of the central figure, and the full profile of the leading figure; Newman (2017: 219–22); Gere (2009: 112–17).

Approximately seven centuries later, on a relief carved onto the eastern staircase in the Apadana (palace hall) of Persepolis, three short men march behind a man who dwarfs them. From right to left, the tall man bears a staff in his left hand and holds his right hand behind him, the first diminutive figure holds the hand of the lofty man in front of him, the second one holds a cylindrical jar, and the third wields a curved object that resembles an elephant tusk in his left hand and the leash of an okapi that trails the group in his right. Alongside other political imagery in the Apadana, this relief is a visual microcosm of Persian imperial might. In other words, it enacts a performance of Persian domination.[32] Eric Schmidt understands the gifts in this scene – an okapi, an elephant tusk, and a vessel presumably filled with gold – as proof that the three figures are Aithiopians bringing tribute to the Persian ruler. In its current state, this relief does not retain traces of color. Therefore, Schmidt relies on the figures' gifts, curly hair, and what he deems to be "Negroid features" to support his claim.[33] While the animal imagery and hairstyle of the iconography suggest affiliation with Aithiopians, people whose skin color is frequently associated with blackness, it is unclear what undergirds Schmidt's assertion of the figures' "Negroid features." Schmidt perhaps bases this label on their rounded noses and their prominent chins, but their physical appearance does not differ greatly from the figure identified as Persian on this relief. Even so, if both Evans's and Schmidt's identifications are correct, the fresco and relief endorse the Minoans' and Persians' empire-building initiatives. As these superpowers co-opt their warrior neighbors into the world of political performance, the skin color and portable items in the "Captain of the Blacks" fresco and the Apadana relief, respectively, translate into costumes that help viewers identify the figures.

Three-dimensional depictions are another part of the iconographic tradition of performances of blackness. Horn-shaped cups (*rhyta*) depicting a black person engulfed in the jaws of a crocodile enhance the performative atmosphere of the symposium.[34] As revelers drink wine from these cups, they bring animals onto the lively stage of the symposium. The horn-shaped cups grant them a sense of security, allowing them to witness black people trying to escape the clutches of reptiles without putting

---

[32] Kuhrt (2007: 469) interprets the images alongside the text of the Apadana.
[33] Schmidt (1953: 90); Valdez and Tuck (1980); Hdt. 3.96. Based on their short stature and beardless state, Reimer (2013) describes the three figures as boys.
[34] True (2006); Lissarrague (1995). *Rhyta* were the subject of a 2018–19 Harvard Art Museums exhibition, "Animal-Shaped Vessels from the Ancient World: Feasting with Gods, Heroes, and Kings"; see Ebbinghaus (2018).

themselves in danger. In fact, the sight of the violent fate of the black
figures on the horn-shaped cups perhaps encourages drinkers to curb their
drinking habits to avoid drowning in wine. Alternatively, a travel warning
may lurk behind this iconography: any reveler who intends to travel across
the Mediterranean may find him or herself caught in the mouth of
a hungry crocodile whose appetite has been whetted by human flesh.

   An implicit call for restraint among wine-guzzling symposiasts also appears
on scenes painted onto wide-mouthed cups (*skyphoi*) from the sanctuary of
the Kabeiroi in Thebes (Boeotia). At this site, five of these cups recall
a memorable scene from the *Odyssey*, in which the nymph Circe coaxes
Odysseus to drink a potion that will transform him into a pig (10.302–47).[35]
On one of these late fifth-/early fourth-century cups, both Circe and
Odysseus are depicted as squat, black figures (Figure 2.2). Barring some
fabric draped over his left arm and his brimmed hat, Odysseus is completely
naked. His erect penis, pronounced nipples, and potbelly are on full display.
Holding a sword in his right hand and its sheath in his left, he seems poised

Figure 2.2 *Skyphos* depicting Odysseus at sea and with Circe, Boeotian black-figure
ceramic, attributed to the Cabirion Group, c. fourth century BCE. H. 15.4 cm,
AN1896–1908 G249. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

---

[35] Dosoo (2020: 262–67); Snowden (2010: 168); Bedigan (2008: 285–89); Blakely (2006: 38–54); cf.
references to Circe in Walcott's epic *Omeros*: Walcott (1990: 64 [v. 1.11.1]; 96 [*Od.* 2.18.1]; 155 [*Od.*
3.29.3]; 204 [*Od.* 5.40.2]; 250 [*Od.* 6.49.3]). Worshipped mainly in Asia Minor and northern Greece,
the Kabeiroi promoted fertility and protected seafarers: Bedigan (2008: 282–89).

to attack Circe. Unlike her nude houseguest, the curly haired Circe wears a *chitōn*-like dress. Abandoning the loom behind her, she holds a wide-mouthed cup in her left hand and a stick with which she mixes a potion in her right. Even though Odysseus shares Circe's skin tone and phenotypic features, Kirsten Bedigan construes Circe as a "Negro[,] an object of derision" and Odysseus as a symbol of Greek superiority.[36] Bedigan's conclusion ignores the unusual portrayal of Odysseus as a chubby and lustful houseguest, and it also disregards the heady combination of wine and magic at Circe's disposal. Circe's modest appearance disguises the power with which she transforms Odysseus's men into utterly helpless creatures, thereby taking on the role of omniscient director who supervises an unfolding drama. The contrast between her unassuming looks and her cunning talents mirrors the deceptively powerful role of wine in the symposium.[37] In the event that revelers underestimate this seemingly innocuous drink, the depiction of Circe on these wide-mouthed cups gently cautions drunken symposiasts to pace themselves, lest they risk transgressing acceptable limits of intoxication and ending up in dire straits like Odysseus's men-turned-pigs.[38]

As was the case for the four visual renditions of black people discussed above, janiform cups do not require the physical edifice of a theater to be part of a performance. In their own right, they wield transformative power. A drinker reaching for a two-handled janiform cup encounters a pair of eyes looking back at him or her. This direct gaze casts the drinker in the role of an audience member who watches the face on the cup. As the drinker brings the cup to his or her mouth, the face-as-actor becomes less and less visible. By the time the drinker's lips touch the rim of the cup, the drinker is rendered mute and blind, his or her throat filled with wine and his or her gaze obscured by the interior of the cup. At this moment of physical contact between the drinker and the mask-like face, the interactive performance is underway. Although most cups do not indicate whether there was a preferred way in which the drinker should hold them, one janiform cup currently held in the collection at the Fitzwilliam Museum at the University of Cambridge provides some clues. Labeled "janiform

---

[36] Bedigan (2008: 285) insists on Odysseus's superiority, despite describing his appearance as "pot-bellied … disproportionate … slightly gormless … child-like … rat-like … stocky"; see also Bedigan (2013).

[37] I describe Circe's looks as modest and unassuming not to apply modern, Eurocentric notions of beauty to an ancient character, but to acknowledge that her appearance differs from depictions of goddesses on extant Attic pottery. That is, painters of Attic pottery typically depict Greek goddesses with narrow noses, thin lips, and well-proportioned limbs.

[38] Osborne (2014: 60) interprets wine as a disguise: "intoxication also both revealed the true individual, and bonded the group. The intoxicated both put on and took off their mask."

kantharos belonging to the Class G of the head vases," this cup features two female faces: the black face is wearing a fitted headdress and her slightly open mouth reveals her teeth, and the brown face wears a headband from underneath which her loose curls escape (Figure 2.3a–c).[39] This cup has a slight indent on the lip directly above the black face (Figure 2.3a), which suggests that the drinker turned the black face of the cup towards himself or herself and the other guests observed the brown face. In this way, the black face of this cup morphs into a mask for the drinker. The metamorphosis extends to the symposium, which is recast as a stage on which the drinker's companions turn into the drinker's audience.[40] Emboldened by liquid courage, the symposiasts enter a world of alcohol-induced mirth and performance.

Close scrutiny of another janiform cup foregrounds the realm of performance in which these cups existed. One cup currently in the Princeton University Art Museum's collection (Figure 2.4a–c), labeled as "janiform *kantharos* with addorsed heads of a male African and a female Greek," presents two female faces. A curly haired black face with full lips and a broad nose appears on the left-hand side, and a headband-wearing brown face with thin lips and a narrow nose on the right (Figure 2.4c). The fused clay, most apparent at the neck of the cup, draws attention to the inexorable connection between the two faces. On the whole, the cup invites multiple versions of difference, in that viewers may understand the two faces as opposing or complementary. In my effort to redress the scholarly tendency to elide difference and inferiority, I regard these two faces as complementary masks. They reinforce the jocular atmosphere, in that they invite many performers to the party. Moreover, the interconnected faces circumvent cultural chauvinism. As a unit, the two faces embody an intertwined performance in which the symposiasts partake.[41] Separately, each face resembles an actor performing for an audience of symposiasts.

---

[39] Similar to my analysis of the janiform cup currently held at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Figure 2.1a–c above), I interpret the delicate eyebrows and hairless faces on both sides of Figure 2.3a–c as indicators of gender.

[40] Frontisi-Ducroux (1989: 151) discusses the inversion of the one-way relationship between subject and object in depictions of a frontal-facing Dionysus on the tondo of a shallow cup (*kylix*). Although art historians frequently point to eye cups (*kylikes* with pairs of eyes painted on the exterior) when conceptualizing masks in the symposium, a drinker must lift an eye cup in order to transform his or her drinkware into a mask, whereas janiform cups require no intervention on the drinker's part in order to resemble a mask.

[41] An emphasis on antagonistic juxtaposition risks playing into the modern polarization of skin color. Lewis (2002: 170) rightly questions the anachronistic conflation present when scholars describe depictions of women on janiform cups as marginal figures who stand "in opposition to the white citizen symposiast."

(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 2.3a–c Janiform *kantharos* belonging to Class G of head vases, Attic red-figure ceramic, attributed to the London Class, c. 470 BCE. H. 20 cm, GR.2.1999.
© Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.

(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 2.4a–c Janiform *kantharos* with addorsed heads of a male African and
a female Greek, Attic red-figure ceramic, attributed to the Princeton Class, c. 480–
470 BCE. H. 14.9 cm, 33.45 (y1933–45). © Princeton University Art Museum/Art
Resource, NY.

When the drinker lifts the cup, he or she subsumes this role of actor. The
depiction of two faces fused onto one janiform cup simultaneously pro-
vokes and cuts across any permanent hierarchy of color that viewers may be
tempted to map onto Greek antiquity. Skin color works in tandem with
other visual markers to serve as a mask for symposiasts. In the minds of
modern viewers who are not aware of the ways that cultural conditioning
can infiltrate their perspective, there may appear to be an imbalanced
presentation of the different faces on these cups. The sharp lines that
distinguish each face from the other may mislead them to perceive the

cup as a vivid antecedent of nineteenth-century Jim Crow laws. In spite of this problematic shorthand, there is no simple Black–White binary at work here. To be sure, color was part of a larger apparatus of distinction on Attic pottery, but its valence was not perpetually fixed. Instead, the faces on these cups represent semiotic markers of the diversity and flexibility at play in symposiastic performances.

2.3 Interrogating Claims of Beauty and Humor

It is curious that none of the documented janiform cups, with the exception of Figure 2.5a–c, discussed below, features a brown male face on either side of the cup. Jeremy Tanner argues that the brown male face, a visual representation of a "Greek man," stands in contrast to different modes of alterity present on these cups.[42] This merging of many groups into a "not Greek male" category requires probing. There is little evidence to support Tanner's claim that Greek people, a contested grouping in and of itself, have a specific phenotype or that all non-Greeks shared enough similarities to warrant their grouping in the symposium. Furthermore, Tanner's desire to extrapolate historical fact from Attic pottery undermines the flexible nature of performance in the symposium. In line with Tanner's treatment of the cups' faces as historical relics, François Lissarrague states that the brown faces reflect Greek women's position as wine pourers at the symposium, and the black faces represent servants at the symposium. Here, Lissarrague does not reflect on the conjectural nature of his assessment. The twin assumptions that the iconography of black people always depicts subjugation and that this visual iconography consistently corresponds to historical evidence misrepresent the evidence at hand.[43] If such misconstrued conclusions remain unchallenged, it is all too easy to translate a subjective stance into an unalterable fact. Even still, the inaccurate notion that the conflation of inferiority and skin color has a historical antecedent could easily morph into a justification of bigotry. Conversely, Claude Bérard proposes to render both faces on janiform cups with a brown and a black face as a shared site of unmarked and exotic beauty.[44] Based on his exploration of a wine jar (*amphora*) depicting Memnon receiving battle equipment from his black

---

[42] Tanner (2010: 31).
[43] Lissarrague (1995: 6; 2001: 108–09). Skinner (2012: 98) comments that "representations such as the African face that features on one side of an Attic red-figure head-kantharos . . . are frequently cited as evidence of a derogatory juxtaposition of idealized Greek and ugly barbarian." Rotroff (2014: 167) briefly summarizes various interpretations of these cups.
[44] Bérard (2000: 396–405, 411). See also Gruen (2011: 211–20, esp. 219).

squires and a rotund wine jar (*pelikē*) portraying Andromeda flanked by black servants, Bérard deduces that skin color is a malleable tool that localizes people to Aithiopia.[45] While Bérard's use of these cups as evidence regarding people's beauty standards or geographic specificity is speculative, his scrutiny of each face of the cup in its own context offers a refreshing alternative to the conclusions posed by Tanner and Lissarrague.

The need for even-handed coverage extends to inscriptions on janiform cups. Various types of inscriptions appear on Attic cups: signatures of artists, captions that identify figures, dedications, and acclamations.[46] *Kalos* inscriptions are found on roughly 1,000 extant pieces of Attic pottery.[47] They appear in a number of locations, including the base of a cup's neck (Figure 2.1a–c) and its lip (Figure 2.5a–c). These inscriptions indicating beauty, *kalē* for women and *kalos* for men, were usually painted onto cups in the workshop.[48] The generic formula *ho pais kalos* ("this boy is attractive," Figure 2.1a–c) was a popular inscription that enabled an older lover (*erastēs*) to offer a romantic compliment to a younger lover (*erōmenos*), a fitting gesture at the convivial symposium.[49] With this combination of stunning imagery and textual labels, inscribed cups catered to all levels of literacy.

A janiform cup currently held at the Archaeological Museum of Polygyros (Figure 2.5a–c) described as a "*kantharos* with the heads of a young woman and a negro from Akanthos," reveals the lopsided treatment of inscriptions in modern scholarship. From left to right, a light brown female face wears a headband over loose curls, and a dark brown

45 Full descriptions of the pottery featuring Memnon and Andromeda (respectively): terracotta neck-*amphora*, attributed to an artist near Exekias, c. 530 BCE, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 98.8.13; Attic red-figure *pelikē*, related to the workshop of the Niobid painter, c. 460 BCE, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 63.2663. Snowden (1970: 154) suggests that Andromeda may have been black in Greek mythology; later descriptions of her imply that her skin is the same color as black Indians (*Andromedan Perseus nigris portarit ab Indis*, "Perseus carried Andromeda away from the black Indians," *Ars am.* 1.53). Unencumbered by polarity, Greek myth emerges as a genre in which various mythological characters (Memnon, Andromeda, Hercules, and Busiris) are rendered in complex ways. For example, the scene on a red-figure rotund wine jar of the Egyptian Busiris attempting to sacrifice Hercules is both Greek and anti-Greek, in that Busiris uses Greek sacrificial tools but causes an orderly, revered process to descend into chaos; Lissarrague (2001: 123–24).

46 The earliest inscriptions on Attic pottery date to the mid-sixth century BCE; the latest inscriptions date to 420 BCE; see Lissarrague (1999: 362). *Kalos* inscriptions rarely appear on Attic pottery made after 440 BCE; Shapiro (1987: 117–18).

47 Lissarrague (1999: 362).

48 Steiner (2002: 358–61) insists that these inscriptions were not scratched on afterwards; conversely, Ebbinghaus (2008) identifies them as graffiti.

49 Lissarrague (1999: 364–66). In his analysis of thirty-seven pieces of Attic pottery, mainly oil flasks (*lekythoi*) with *kalos* inscriptions and a patronymic name, Shapiro (1987) suggests that these inscriptions had political resonances.

(a)

(b)

(c)

Figures 2.5a–c *Kantharos* with the heads of a young woman and a negro from Akanthos, Attic red-figure ceramic, c. 480–470 BCE. H. 18.6 cm. Archaeological Museum of Polygyros, I.D.Y. 8. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, Ephorate of Antiquities of Chalcidice and Mount Athos.

male face with sideburns sports a mustache and beard that frame an open mouth. An inscription running horizontally along the lip of the cup reads:

Ἐρόνασσε εἰμί καλὲ πάνυ[.] Τίμυλλος ὡς τό[δε τ]ὸ πρόσωπον καλὸς[.]

I am Eronassa, the most beautiful . . . Timyllos is as handsome as this face.

The text describing Eronassa runs above the light brown face, and that describing Timyllos runs above the dark brown face. It is instructive to examine first the scholarly labeling practices applied to the dark brown face (hereafter referred to as "Timyllos's face"). Despite the presence of two brown faces of different shades on this cup, scholars tend to distance Timyllos from Eronassa, whose skin color they conflate with "Greek." The Archaeological Museum of Polygyros likens Timyllos to an "African man"; the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, where the cup was held before it moved to Polygyros, identifies him as a "a negro"; the Beazley Archive, a comprehensive online database for Attic pottery, lists him as a "black youth"; and Lissarrague categorizes him as "black." Aware that Timyllos is "a deep reddish brown color, rather than the usual shiny black," Ada Cohen nonetheless insists that he is a "black man." She provides a rationale for Timyllos's appearance by arguing that his non-black skin offers a color contrast to his black facial hair and eyebrows.[50] Although the full lips and broad nose of Timyllos's face correspond to those on the black faces of other cups (figures 2.1a–c, 2.3a–c, and 2.4a–c), classification as "negro" or "black" is an oversimplification. Scholars import hypodescent laws into Greek antiquity when they describe Timyllos's face with these terms.[51] By priori-tizing their historical present, they have elided (ancient) blackness into (modern) Blackness. Nomenclature benefits from self-reflexive labels that historicize the unavoidable preoccupation with color dynamics in the twenty-first century without reproducing it. Therefore, my decision to refer to Timyllos's face as brown encourages viewers to pair him with Eronassa rather than superimpose the appearance of a Black man onto him.

   In his analysis of the inscriptions on the janiform cup at the Archaeological Museum of Polygyros (Figure 2.5a–c), Lissarrague under-stands the inscription associated with Eronassa as a compliment and that of Timyllos as an ironic twist.[52] Lissarrague insists that the potter has

---

[50] Vokotopoulou (1996: 236); Lissarrague (2001: 109–10); Cohen (2011: 480).
[51] Scholars may also be relying on gender codes in ancient Greek art that associate Greek women with white skin and Greek men with black skin.
[52] Comparable to Lissarrague (2001), Ebbinghaus (2008: 153) interprets the male face as a parody of the standard *kalos* inscription.

caricatured the features on Timyllos's face because of Timyllos's promin-
ent teeth.[53] Exposed teeth are a popular feature of archaic Greek pottery, but
there is no consensus about them indicating a simple and/or ugly person.[54]
Even so, Lissarrague identifies Eronassa as Greek and therefore not subject to
ridicule. His inclination to construe only Timyllos's face as a parody resonates
with twenty-first-century labeling of Black people as "other."[55] His insistence
that Timyllos's face can only exist in inadequate response to Eronassa's traps
the viewer in a modern historical conundrum without consideration of the
world in which the cup existed. The lack of convincing evidence to support
Lissarrague's claim that Timyllos is inherently comedic leaves viewers to draw
their own conclusions about this conflation, which may lead them to make
uninformed connections between Timyllos's exposed teeth in the fifth cen-
tury BCE and the iconic teeth-baring grin of Blackface actors in the nine-
teenth and twentieth centuries. Admittedly, the presence of the first person ("I
am Eronassa") and third person ("Timyllos is handsome") adds a playful
quality to this cup. The variability may emphasize an interpersonal play
between the reader of the inscription and the face on the cup.[56] Taking this
switch between persons further, Eronassa may be the speaker of both inscrip-
tions. If this is the case, she remarks on Timyllos's appearance after she
admires her own beauty. This reciprocal exchange fits in well with the general
theme of malleability that dominates the metatheatrical stage of the
symposium.

  Despite Ada Cohen's argument that Eronassa's face represents a *hetaira*
who is teasing her companion because of his dark brown complexion, the
relationship between *hetairai* and prostitution is more complicated than
Cohen acknowledges.[57] Mapping an egalitarian stance onto both sides of

---

[53] Lissarrague (2001: 109–10). With his caricaturing of Timyllos, Lissarrague (1999: 364) contradicts an
earlier statement: "there is practically no painted inscription, as far as I know, that is derisory or
insulting – all belong to the field of praise."

[54] Rotroff (2014: 168–70). See Isaac's (2017: 20) warning about the emotional weight that can be
hidden behind a presumed sense of humor.

[55] Gruen (2011) offers an excellent reworking of the category of "other" in Greco-Roman antiquity. See
also Mitchell (2009: 198), who interprets a depiction of an "African youth" grooming a horse on an
Attic cup from the fifth century BCE as a reflection of the social marginalization of animal groomers
rather than an indication of humor. Nonetheless, Mitchell's (2009: 3–4) ready labeling of foreigners
on Attic pottery as comedic lacks the careful consideration that he applies to other groups depicted
on Attic pottery.

[56] Martin (2014) inclusively suggests that there is irony in both inscriptions.

[57] Cohen (2011: 478–82). True (2006: 268) describes a brown woman on a janiform cup as a prostitute
"depicted with both grace and beauty." Neils (2000: 226) reduces women to their sexual prowess in
her suggestion that Greek men had a begrudging admiration for the "liberated and liberating acts of
such women [who worked as prostitutes] . . . because they do, and do well, something that men
admire." Burton (1998: 150–54) provides a wide range of evidence that many women in Athens were

the cup, I interpret the inscriptions as attempts to highlight the plurality of performances without privileging either side. Whether humor is part of this cup's pictorial value is unclear. Nonetheless, if there is a comedic element, it applies to both faces. The potential etymology of their names hints at this balance: Eronassa as "lovely duck" (ἔρος + νᾶσσα) and Timyllos as "honorable Egyptian mongoose" (τιμή + ὕλλος).

The art historical perspectives discussed above deny modern viewers a contextualized understanding of black skin color on janiform cups. Counteracting the historical lapses in their arguments, I treat the cups' black faces as masks that people adopted during symposia. Whenever symposiasts wielded these janiform cups, they were able to enact performances in which new characters entered their private party. Altogether, my analysis prompts viewers to look beyond the facile renderings of skin color. Furthermore, my recasting of the iconography of black people in Greek antiquity as performances of blackness offers contemporary audiences a new model for confronting their own historicized positionality without immediately grafting it onto antiquity.

2.4   Ancient Blackness in Modern Museums

As is apparent in art historians' lopsided treatment of black and brown faces on janiform cups, contemporary influences contribute to the uneven treatment of iconography of black people in public-facing settings. For instance, in the Beazley Archive, the world's largest online database of photographs of ancient Greek pottery, descriptions generally concentrate on the color of the black face and female gender of the brown face, thereby nullifying the gender of the former and the color of the latter.[58] This reductive shorthand invariably privileges the male gender and brown faces, the latter of which many art historians liken to a Greek phenotype.

conspicuous in a nonsexualized manner at drinking and dining occasions where men were present. Although Corner (2012) appreciates Burton's examination of men and women eating together outside of the symposium, he nonetheless argues for the exclusion of women who were not *hetairai* as part of the symposium's function. More generally, Goldhill (2015) situates the *hetairai* within the marketplace of sex while Kennedy (2014b: 68–96) redefines a *hetaira* as a foreign woman of wealth who interacts with elite Greek men.

[58] The Beazley Archive is physically housed in the Ioannou Centre at the University of Oxford. For examples of the uneven labeling practices applied to the iconography of black people in Greek antiquity, see appendices 1 and 2. Cf. Jim Crow laws that rendered the gender of Black women irrelevant. Hartman (2019: 37–42, esp. 38) vividly describes Ida B. Wells's experience on a train trip in Tennessee during which she was dragged out of the ladies' train car and forced onto the smoky, filthy segregated car where White men could enter freely and engage in lewd behavior without consequence.

In this way, the Beazley Archive reinforces the popular notion that the Greek male is the artistic norm. Other faces are remarkable only in comparison to this standard. No label provides a singular "correct" or "accurate" insight into the world of the fifth century BCE. On the contrary, they flag the multiple layers of comprehension that collide when modernity and antiquity interact. Indeed, it is impossible to isolate the past while living in the present, but it is the responsibility of curators and academics to confront twenty-first-century notions of Blackness before making conclusive remarks about the representations of blackness in Greek antiquity.

The inconsistent analysis of janiform cups reaches its apex in the labeling practices of contemporary museums. In the authoritative guide for museum professionals *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretative Approach*, Beverly Serrell exhorts label writers to avoid generalizations based on singular examples.[59] In this vein, in the remainder of this chapter, I rely on new museum ethics, a subfield of museum studies that calls for museums to create democratized social spaces and amend ideological barriers that perpetuate subjugation based on skin color.[60] Nascent attempts to achieve this goal are apparent in the Princeton University Art Museum's online description of a janiform cup with a black face and a brown face as presenting "a male African and a female Greek" (Figure 2.4a–c). Combining a metaphorical and literal approach to color, the online catalogue of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) notes an unusual "joining of black and white female heads" on another janiform cup (Figure 2.1a–c). In the MFA's entry, the cataloguer situates the cup within the wider context of "white (i.e. Greek) women." The cataloguer's parenthetical inclusion "(i.e. Greek)" anachronistically collapses the distinction between white and Greek while also creating a false color dichotomy that ignores the cup's color palette. In fact, there is more white on the black face than on its brown counterpart.[61] The Fitzwilliam

---

[59] Serrell (2015: 37, 63–65). In a study of labels from seventy-three British museums, Sorsby and Horne (1980) conclude that many contained vocabulary and sentences that were too difficult for the average reader. For a cautionary tale about the dangers of ironic museum labels, see Butler (2011). Museum ethnologist Marjorie Halpin (1983: 268–73) describes her and her colleagues' phenomenological approach to the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology.

[60] Marstine (2011); Kreps (2015).

[61] The black face has white eyebrows, teeth, and sclerae of the eyes; the brown face has white sclerae. The MFA's full description of this cup reads: "The joining of black and white female heads is unusual. On black-figure vases, white (i.e. Greek) women are often painted with the same white slip (liquid clay) as that used on the mouth of this cup, but on head vases they are always left in the reddish and more lifelike color of the clay, heightened somewhat by a wash of yellow ochre, so the

Museum's online catalogue eliminates any mention of color or gender with a generic label: "Class G of the head vases; the London Class" (Figure 2.3a–c). The cataloguing practices of the MFA and the Fitzwilliam Museum deny the viewer contextualized information about the cups. Even the color- and gender-inclusive categorization of the Princeton University Art Museum's online catalogue poses challenges due to the historical variations generally attributed to the term "Africa." Altogether, these labels reveal the complex interactions between modernity and antiquity that occur within museums.

Returning to the language of performance, I construe the museum as another stage on which performances of blackness occur. Quotidian productions ranging from the smallest captions to the most expansive layouts can have a lasting impact on the general public.[62] These performances of blackness appear in the greatest numbers in museums' Nubian collections.[63] In concert with the unequal treatment of skin color on janiform cups discussed above, museums situate Nubian iconography in ways that subvert a clear understanding of their relevance. Generally, Nubian objects are part of a Greco-Roman exhibit, an Egyptian exhibit, or have their own display.[64] The display of Nubia and Egypt together is understandable since Lower Nubia, the northern region of Nubia, and Upper Egypt, the southern region of Egypt, shared a border. This emphasis becomes problematic, however, when Egypt functions as a legitimizing force in the presentation of Nubian objects. Tracing a visitor's experience in the British Museum highlights the visual cues that can subordinate Nubia to Egypt.[65]

---

flesh is red, eyes white, and the iris black. The African woman smiles with her teeth showing; her eyes and eyebrows are white. Her hair is a mass of dots, with traces of red paint."

[62] Dubin (2006); Hooper-Greenhill (2006); Karp and Kratz (2006); Marstine, Bauer, and Haines (2011, 2013). In his 1992 "Panta Rhei" exhibition at Metro Pictures, New York, artist Fred Wilson manipulated titles as a way to shift his audience's focus. Namely, he sculpted renditions of Greek gods and relabeled them with the names of their Egyptian predecessors; Karp and Wilson (1996: 253–58). See also Wintle (2013), who traces colonial legacies in the museum-like British Empire and Commonwealth Institute (this entity is now a registered charity under the name Commonwealth Education Trust).

[63] On the nomenclature of Nubia, see sections 1.3 and 6.3.

[64] The Fitzwilliam Museum pays scant attention to Nubia in its "Rome and Ancient Sudan" exhibit (Room 24) on the lower ground floor next to the toilets, whose pungent odors wafted into the space during my visit in October 2016. The Egyptian wing in the Metropolitan Museum of Art features the Temple of Dendur from Lower Nubia (Gallery 131), animal horns from the tombs of Nubian mercenaries (Gallery 117), and a facsimile wall painting of Nubians carrying tributes (Gallery 135). The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Oxford, the British Museum, the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago, and the MFA in Boston each have at least one room dedicated to Nubian objects.

[65] Many museums house collections of Nubian objects: the Ashmolean, the MFA, the Fitzwilliam, the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University, the Oriental Institute Museum, the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Art and Archaeology, the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, and Yale

Upon entering the British Museum, the visitor almost immediately becomes aware of Egypt's looming presence (Figure 2.6). Centrally located beyond the main entrance, a gift shop, and a room featuring Assyrian sculptures (Room 6), the "Egyptian Sculpture" (Room 4) consist of three interconnected rooms that display the Egyptians' artistic prowess from 2686 BCE–395 CE.[66] Here, massive lion sculptures, temple pillars, and busts of pharaohs appear alongside sarcophagi, tomb reliefs, and the Rosetta Stone.[67] It is easy to overlook the small area in the third segment of Room 4 (furthest from Room 6) that addresses Egypt's relationship with Nubia. Off the main walking path and up a short ramp, the more determined visitor encounters a small area entitled "Political Fragmentation: Third Intermediate Period (21st–25th Dynasties)." The term "Third Intermediate Period" suggests that the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty (c. 720–664 BCE), in which Nubian rulers Shabaqo, Shebitqo, and Taharqo successively ruled Egypt, was a brief anomaly between the New Kingdom and the Late Period.

A closer look at interpretive remarks on the panel titled "Political Fragmentation" reveals the implicit assumptions that the curator passes on to viewers:

> King Piankhy of Kush *took advantage* of Egypt's division [into multiple regional kingdoms] and invaded. He and his successors, the 25th Dynasty, *imposed themselves as overlords* on the local rulers. Napata was the capital in Kush, and Memphis became its Egyptian twin. The Kushites *embraced*

Peabody Museum of Natural History. In an upcoming project, I expand the scope of this discussion to put several of these museums in dialogue with museums located on the Nile corridor, such as the Nubia Museum in Aswan (Egypt) and the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum.

[66] In the British Museum, five rooms are dedicated solely to Egypt: "Egyptian Sculpture" (Room 4, partitioned into three interconnected rooms), "Egyptian Life and Death: The Tomb-Chapel of Nebamun" (Room 61), "Egyptian Death and Afterlife: Mummies" (Rooms 62–63), and "Early Egypt" (Room 64). Separate galleries on the upper floors are dedicated to "Sudan, Egypt and Nubia" (Room 65), "Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt" (Room 66); and "Africa" (Room 25, partitioned into three interconnected rooms) is in the basement. When I inquired about this disparate layout of neighboring regions during a personal interview in 2017 with Derek Welsby, a keeper (curator) in the British Museum's Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan, he explained that the ground-floor location of "Egyptian Sculpture" (Room 4) was a practical choice: the museum building could not support large objects on upper floors. He also stated that that the ad hoc room assignments of other objects led to the odd position of Egyptian objects on the upper levels. Caygill (1992) and Wilson (2002) offer a comprehensive history of the British Museum.

[67] The Rosetta Stone has an enviable location: its placement in the middle segment of Room 4 grants visitors access to its display from Room 8 and the Collections Shop. Visitors who approach the Rosetta Stone from the Collections Shop will also see the entrance to the Parthenon galleries (Room 18) directly behind the glassed case that houses the trilingual *stela*.
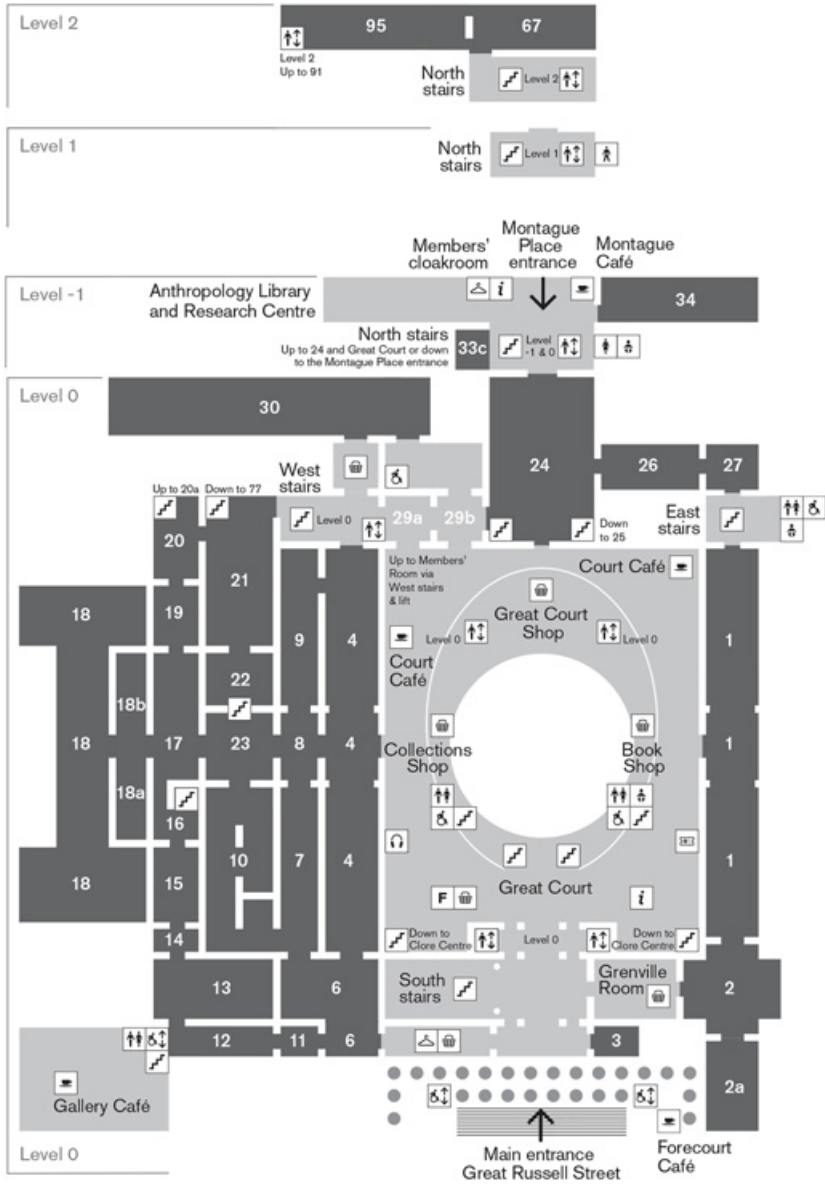
Figure 2.6 Ground floor layout of the British Museum, 2016. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Egypt's culture and artistic expression, as their own had been *transformed* by past pharaonic domination.[68]

This wall text foregrounds Egypt and pushes Nubia to the periphery, which in turn renders Nubia's rule of Egypt an irregularity. According to the author of this text, Nubia gained power because it "took advantage" of preexisting conditions. Therefore, unfortunate political circumstances, rather than Nubia's military prowess or Egypt's inadequate efforts to unify itself, led to the end of Egyptian rule. The characterization of Nubians who "imposed themselves as overlords" likens them to ruthless invaders whose sinister plots threatened to destroy the political landscape. These Nubians disregarded the position of "local rulers" and forged ahead with their deceitful rule. The writer of this text implies that Nubian rulers could not even create their own northern capital; they merely appropriated an Egyptian one. A superficial glance at the extent of the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty (approximately sixty years) may buttress the argument that brute force and sheer luck fueled Nubian rule since the Egyptians regained control of their kingdom to found the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty (c. 664–525 BCE). But even with Egyptians' periodically successful local uprisings, it is impossible to ignore the centuries of Persian and Greek domination of Egypt that followed.

The reverence for Egyptian rule extends to the closing words of the wall text, in that the violent Nubians somehow "embraced" Egyptian culture. Here, the writer intimates that Egypt's "culture and artistic expression" compelled the Nubians to take a "transformed" perspective. These comments are especially puzzling in light of the panel's earlier account of pugnacious Nubians. It is difficult to make sense of brutal and luck-driven Nubians, as the wall text characterizes them, who somehow set aside their belligerent ways and welcome their former oppressors. The repeated glorification of Egypt in Room 4 prevents a contextualized understanding of the relationship between Egypt and Nubia. Even though archaeological evidence points to sustained cultural exchange among Nubians and Egyptians, especially those living in proximity to each other near the First and Second Cataracts of the Nile, the false impression of a one-way stream of culture from Egypt to Nubia overshadows the realities of acculturation.[69] Outside of this

---

[68] I recorded the interpretive material from Room 4 during a 2019 visit to the British Museum. The emphasis is my own. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from museum signage and interpretive material derive from my notes during in-person visits.

[69] Nubian acculturation to Egyptian practices occurred as early as the late Bronze Age: O'Connor (1993: 56–57). Smith (2003) and Török (2009) examine the two-way cultural transfer between Egypt and Nubia, especially in frontier regions.

"Political Fragmentation" display, the presence of Nubia in Room 4 mostly serves to aggrandize Egypt.[70] The omission of the two-way exchanges among these neighboring groups robs visitors of the opportunity to view Nubia as a region rich with its own history. The intense focus on Egypt is understandable since these objects are part of the "Egyptian Sculpture Galleries." Nonetheless, the direct and indirect emphasis on Nubia's perceived inferiority detracts from the educational value of Room 4 as a whole. Regardless of whatever the curatorial team's goals may have been for this room, this layout reduces Nubia to a primitive outpost of Egypt and promotes an Egyptocentric understanding of Nubia.

Coinciding with its limiting portrayal of Nubia in the "Egyptian Sculpture" gallery, the British Museum presents a skewed display of visual representations of black people in Greek antiquity. For a visitor interested in this iconography, a short walk from "Egyptian Sculpture" through "Assyria: Nimrud" (rooms 7–8), "Greek and Roman Sculpture" (Room 23), and "Nereid Monument" (Room 17) leads to a series of rooms (14–16) displaying ancient Greek pottery. In "Athens and Lycia" (Room 15), the British Museum's only janiform object with a brown face and a black face on display is a stout perfume bottle (*aryballos*).[71] Part of a glassed collection entitled "Africans," the label for the perfume bottle reads: "5th-century Athens was dominated by citizen males. Foreigners and women were both

---

[70] The region of Nubia is mentioned eight times in Room 4's object labels, including the caption for a pair of statues depicting Amenhotep III as a lion found in "foreign soil ... [in] the conquered former kingdom of Kush"; statues of Senwosret II, who "campaigned in Nubia"; a statue of Teti, whose "grandfather and great-grandfather had been viceroys of Nubia"; a sarcophagus of Merymose, who was "a king's son of Kush, a viceroy ruling the whole of conquered Nubia"; a sarcophagus lid of Setau, "the viceroy of Nubia for Ramesses II"; a statue of Montuemhat, who was a "vassal of the Kushite kings [until] he switched loyalty as Psamtek I of Sais phased out all foreign domination by Assyria and Kush"; a libation bowl of Montuemhat that "probably stood in the temple ... [where there was] a chapel that feature[d] him and King Taharqo, his original Kushite overlord"; and a sarcophagus lid of Sisobek, a "vizier of Lower Egypt after King Psamtek I had freed the land of Assyrian and Kushite rule." The region of Nubia is mentioned four times on wall text in Room 4: "Theban kings also faced incursions from the southern kingdom of Kush, after it seized Egypt's former Nubian possessions" (panel "Decline and Hyksos Rule: Second Intermediate Period"); "Campaigns in the south put an end to the kingdom of Kush and the whole of Nubia was annexed" ("The Age of Empire: Early New Kingdom"); "[Ramses II's temples include] two rock temples at Abu Simbel, in Lower Nubia ... [in the Twentieth Dynasty,] Egypt also lost control of Nubia" ("The Ramessides: Late New Kingdom"); and "Psamtek I gained recognition across Egypt, forging the country's independence from both Assyrian and Kushite domination" ("Independence and Occupation: The Late Period").

[71] In addition to the stout perfume bottle in Room 15, I found another janiform object that depicts a black face and a brown face in the British Museum holdings (see Appendix 1). I also identified one janiform object from Naukratis: a sixth-century *aryballos*. The British Museum's online collection describes the turquoise bottle as a depiction of "an African and a western Asiatic male's head" (www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1847-0806-20).

therefore political outsiders." Comparable to Tanner's observations,[72] the description presumes selective political resonances. This collection features other objects from the fifth century BCE: a bronze statue of a kneeling boy holding a sponge in his right hand and a boot in his left, a terracotta figurine of a boy sitting cross-legged with his right leg propped up and his hands folded over his right knee, and a mixing bowl (*kratēr*) depicting a brown Andromeda with her servants. Barring the mixing bowl, these objects all feature renditions of people with a broad nose and full lips. The general caption portrays a semi-divine group of people who swiftly descend into the substratum of society:

> The Mediterranean sea washes the shores of north Africa where Greek colonists came into contact with the native peoples of the African continent. Ethiopia (the land of burnt faces) held a special fascination for the Greeks as a fabled land, favoured by the gods and the presumed source of the Nile. Africans enter Greek art as figures in myth or as studies in human physical type. African residents in fifth-century Athens will have been mostly slaves.[73]

In her survey of the British Museum, Page DuBois astutely points out curators' myopia regarding ancient Greek and Roman slavery.[74] These blind spots lead to swift elisions, as is evidenced in Room 15's pairing of African residents and an enslaved status.[75] The decision to categorize the four objects in the "Africans" display as depictions of enslaved people unhelpfully applies a restrictive modern lens to the diverse enterprise of Greco-Roman slavery. Although the attribution of some black people as enslaved in the fifth century BCE is plausible, there is no sure signification among these objects of their enslaved status. The bronze statue may reflect a person of humble means, and the pose of the terracotta sculpture bears similarities with a pondering philosopher. The physical distance between the Nubian objects in "Sudan, Egypt and Nubia" (Room 65, two levels above Room 15) and those in Room 15 reinforces the inaccurate conflation of black people and servitude. The humble presence of Nubia against the backdrop of monumental Egyptian objects in Room 4 further heightens

---

[72] See above on p. 45.
[73] I recorded captions from Room 15 during my 2017 visit to the British Museum.
[74] DuBois (2008: 65–88, 113).
[75] In her study of ancient Greek iconography, Wrenhaven (2011: 97, 112–14) asserts that enslaved people were identifiable based on their hair color, tattoos, and skin color; she also distinguishes between the actual presence and the artistic presence of enslaved people. Despite her contextualized approach, Wrenhaven (2012: 81, 83, 109) equates black faces on janiform cups with "the supposedly wild and exotic 'Others'" (p. 82).

this divide. A trip upstairs to Room 65, a room dedicated to Nubia, provides a more thorough assessment of the iconography of black people on display in the British Museum.

The panel at the entrance of the Raymond and Beverly Sackler Gallery "Sudan, Egypt and Nubia" (Room 65; see Figure 2.7) recognizes the importance of Nubia beyond its association with Egypt.[76] It reads: "[Nubia] was a vital link between central Africa, Egypt, and the Mediterranean world." This bidirectional connection with its northern and southern neighbors frees Nubia from the shadows of Egypt into which it was previously thrust on the ground floor. Walking through the room, a visitor comes across stunning pieces that highlight Nubia's long-lasting presence: rock art of a long-horned cow that dates to the second millennium BCE, a remarkable reproduction of a frieze from the thirteenth century BCE in which black Nubians carry tribute to the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II, and a first-century BCE sculpture of a defeated enemy with an ironic inscription in the Meroitic language: "This is the king of the Nubians."[77] The gallery's title conveys the geographic scope of Nubia (spanning Sudan and modern Egypt) without presuming that Nubia depends on Egypt for political relevance.[78] The displays in this room reveal a somewhat expansive coverage of Nubian history including burial practices in Kerma, Pan-grave culture, Meroitic writing, the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty, and rescue archaeology in Abu Simbel. Some panels, however, promote a one-sided relationship, such as "Towns and Temples in Occupied Nubia" and "Egyptian Fortresses in Occupied Nubia."[79] These curatorial choices do not acknowledge that Nubia was a powerful entity in relation to all of its neighbors. In particular, the omission of Aksum (also spelled "Axum"), Nubia's southern neighbors who annexed Nubia in the fourth century CE,

---

[76] I give the full names of galleries to acknowledge the increasingly influential role of modern philanthropy in museums. Giridharadas (2018: 154–200, esp. 176–83) cautions against allowing plutocrats to become quasi-oligarchical stakeholders who weaponize philanthropy for their own ends.

[77] My visits to Room 65 yielded different observations. During my first visit, in August 2016, the podium on which millennia-old Nubian rock gongs sat was marked with stains from the coffee cups of unscrupulous visitors. During my second visit, in October 2016, the podium was scrubbed clean. During my third visit, in November 2016, the captions were difficult to read because of broken light fixtures. The skylights that had helped to illuminate the room on previous visits were insufficient because the sun had already set. I inquired about the lighting situation and a helpful guard, Mr. Ernest Johnson, explained that imminent repairs would remedy the lighting problems in the entire wing. I was unable to confirm whether the lights had been fixed during my fourth and fifth visits, in May 2017 and May 2019, because there was still daylight when the museum closed (around 9 p.m.).

[78] In 1988, Vivian Davies (a keeper at the British Museum) changed the name of the Department of Ancient Egypt to the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan to reflect sustained interest in Nubia.

[79] To be fair, many of these labels were part of the "Egyptian Imperialism in Nubia" display.
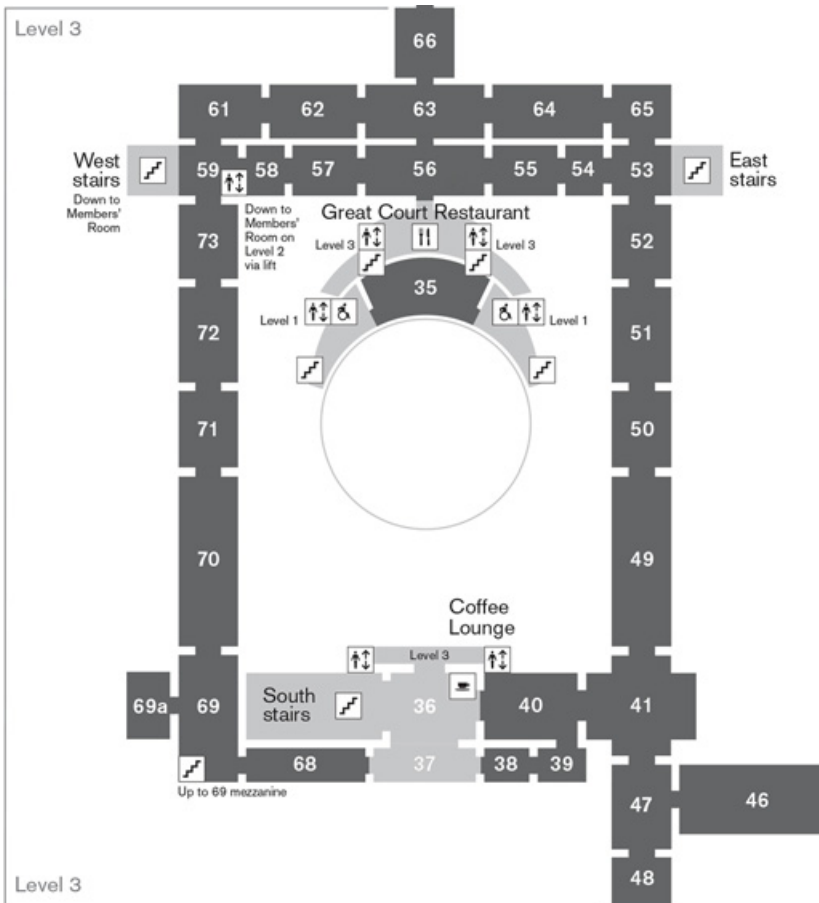
Figure 2.7   Level 3 layout of the British Museum, 2016. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

risks providing viewers with an incomplete picture of Nubia's history. None of the text in Room 65 mentions Aksum's contentious encounters with Nubia or its prominent role in Nubia's demise. Instead, the wall text explains that the collapse of Meroe, Nubia's capital city from c. 300BCE–300CE, was "apparently brought about by a decline in trade and persistent raiding by desert nomads."[80]

---

[80] When, in 2017, I asked keeper Derek Welsby about the omission of Aksum in Room 65, he stated that Aksum did not single-handedly lead to Meroe's demise; see Welsby (1996: 196–205) and Hatke

The British Museum's placement of Augustus's bronze head from Meroe further downplays the might of Nubia. Rather than use this piece to elevate Nubia as a powerful nation that literally trampled on the Roman emperor (due to the bust's original location, buried underneath the steps leading to a temple in Meroe), the British Museum treats this bronze head as a relic of Rome and places it in Room 70, "Roman Empire," eight rooms away from Room 65, "Sudan, Egypt and Nubia."[81] With this layout, only informed visitors are able to situate the bronze head among other Nubian objects and envision Nubia as a formidable region in its own right. For those determined to contextualize this head in its findspot, a brief side trip to Sudan reveals the relativity of the categories "center" and "periphery." Currently, a replica of Augustus's head is on display at the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum. The object's label omits any discussion of the head's replica status or the current location of the original bust.[82] It was only during a tour of the Royal City of Meroe, the site from which the head was excavated, in January 2020, that I was able to ascertain any information about the object's current location. Upon my inquiry, the local guide, Ms. Neema, located it "somewhere in England."[83]

The location of "Sudan, Egypt and Nubia" in Room 65 frames Nubia in relation to its northern neighbors: one literally walks through Egypt (in rooms 64 and 63) in order to travel from Nubia (Room 65) to its southern neighbor, Ethiopia. In "Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt" (Room 66), located in a narrow corridor between Room 63 and the north stairs, curators leapfrog

---

(2013: 143–47). Welsby also explained that this hotly debated topic was too complex for inclusion in the wall text. Nevertheless, the Ashmolean Museum explicitly lists Aksum as part of Nubia's history in the wall text "Dynastic Egypt and Nubia" (Room 23): "Around AD 350, an invading army from Aksum in Ethiopia brought an end to the Meroitic kingdom." See Burstein (1981), who suggests that Ezana completed his Aksumite predecessor's attempts to subdue Nubia.

[81] The object label for Augustus's head at the British Museum reads: "Bronze head from an over life-sized statue of Augustus (The Meroe Head): Statues of the emperor, together with images of him on coins and painted panels, were essential to imperial propaganda. They showed his far-flung subjects who he was and reminded them of his power . . . The Kushites intended the burial [of Augustus's head underneath the entrance of a temple] to be a sign of triumph over the Roman Empire and its emperor. But by a twist of fate it ultimately preserved this fascinating symbol of power."

[82] The object label for Augustus's head at the Sudan National Museum reads (in Arabic, then English), "Bronze head of Emperor Augustus discovered buried beneath the threshold of a temple in the royal city of Meroe, probably formed part of the plunder taken by . . . queen Amani Rinas during their raids [*sic*] upon Egyptian frontier in the late first century B.C." The British Museum also has its own replica of the bust, which curators put on display in Room 70 when the original bronze head was included in various traveling exhibitions (the National Museum of Western Australia in Perth in 2016, the National Museum of Australia in Canberra in 2016/17, and the Victoria Gallery and Museum at the University of Liverpool in 2018).

[83] I visited the Sudan National Museum and the Royal City of Meroe in January 2020. I interpreted Ms. Neema's lack of specificity as a shrewd way to circumvent England's geographic hegemony beyond the country's borders.

over Nubia to pair two countries (Ethiopia and Egypt) whose people cannot access each other without traversing Nubia. "Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt" highlights the prominence of fifteenth-century CE Ethiopian crosses and Christian art alongside objects from fourth- to sixth-century CE Wadi Sarga in Coptic Egypt. Despite the religious overlaps in this room, the chronological leap unfortunately perpetuates the perception that Egypt alone has a meaningful ancient history. The British Museum's rendering of Egypt as a singularly remarkable country remains undisturbed, as the sole exhibit featuring objects from modern Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia is located in the Sainsbury African Galleries.[84] Only a brief note in "Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt" invites viewers interested in Ethiopian textiles to visit the African galleries.[85]

A visit to the basement brings this museum adventure to an end. Located in Room 25 on Level -2, "Africa" displays objects from over forty African countries (including four pieces from modern Egypt and nineteen from Sudan). Ivan Karp and his colleagues Fred Wilson and Corinne Kratz assert that the display of African objects in a museum's basement encourages visitors to perceive non-European civilizations as nebulous tributaries that feed into "the great stream culminating in Western civilization."[86] The British Museum unfortunately reinforces this troubling current with its presentation of the Benin Bronzes (c. sixteenth century CE) in Room 25. Stolen from the royal palace in Benin City (southern Nigeria) as part of British troops' punitive expedition in 1897, the British Museum treats these brass plaques as exotic war booty. The title wall sanitizes the British troops' destruction of Benin City and reflects imperial arrogance with the introductory title: "The Discovery of Benin Art by the West." The panel continues to identify positive aspects of the British invasion: "Benin treasures caused an enormous sensation [in the West], fuelling an appreciation for African art which profoundly influenced 20th century Western art." The exploitation extends to the final lines of the caption: "Between the 1950s and 1970s the British Museum sold around 30 objects to Nigeria." This closing comment underlines the

---

[84] I refer to "modern Egypt" and "Sudan," rather than "Egypt" and "Nubia," to emphasize the temporal shift in the labeling practices of the Sainsbury Galleries.

[85] The British Museum catalogue reinforces this hegemonic portrayal of Egypt, in that the "Ancient Egypt" category has six entries, including "Sudan, Egypt and Nubia" (Room 65) and "Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt" (Room 66). The museum catalogue lists only one entry under the "Africa" category: Room 25.

[86] Karp and Wilson (1996: 263–64); Karp and Kratz (2000: 194). For the perspective of the curators of the Sainsbury Galleries, see Spring, Barley, and Hudson (2001).

continued profiting of former colonial powers that occludes an egalitarian relationship between African and European nations.[87]

2.5 Conclusion: Critical Curation

Invisible ontologies pervade contemporary scholarship about ancient Greek iconography. Any exploration of blackness calls to mind broader histories of skin color, but representations of blackness in Greek antiquity need not mirror modern connotations of skin color. In referring to jani-form cups with black and brown faces as portable performance pieces within the symposium, I refrain from making general claims about the occupation of black people in the general iconographic world or in Greece as a whole. Adopting a new identity in a symposiastic setting is not the same as learning about or interacting with foreigners. Rather, my focus on a subset of artistic renditions of black people has aimed to encourage a wider exploration of the theatricality and flexibility of blackness. When symposiasts interact with a variety of faces on their cups, they tap into the performative nature of the symposium. In turn, the faces become part of a drinker-turned-actor's repertoire. This act of transformation reflects the power of performance, in that it enables drinkers to adopt, and guests to accept, a new identity.

Writ large, modernity's inconsistent fixation with skin color translates to museums' unequal presentation of black people in Greek and Nubian antiquity. At the British Museum, the general portrayal of Nubia promotes a rigid hierarchy that relegates it to a secondary position under Egypt. This limiting approach is tempered with a slightly more impartial handling of Nubia in "Sudan, Egypt and Nubia" (Room 65). On the whole, I question not the intentions of the curators, but the implementation of their goals.[88]

[87] Cuno (2008) and Jenkins (2016) examine the larger debate surrounding the repatriation of museums' dubiously acquired objects; Coombes (1994: 7–42), Ogbechie (2011: 173–207), and Hicks (2020) contextualize the Benin Bronzes. Although most of the Benin Bronzes remain in European and American museums' collections, museum officials from various European countries have worked with Nigerian officials to create the Benin Dialogue Group. As a result of this group's advocacy efforts, some European museums have agreed to arrange for a long-term loan of the Benin Bronzes to be displayed at the Edo Museum of West African Art in Benin City, Nigeria (currently under construction). Calls for full restitution of stolen African objects continue to dominate public discourse. There has been some progress, as France returned twenty-six artifacts looted from Benin in November 2021.

[88] The British Museum's keepers Anna Garnett and Derek Welsby discuss their admirable goals for the recently revised layout of "Sudan, Egypt and Nubia" (Room 65) in the British Museum's newsletter of July 2016: "[this room aims] to showcase the diversity of the Nubian and Sudanese civilisations and further highlight the great cultural and political flowerings in this region over more than six millennia ... it is hoped that these displays will enable visitors to better understand the

In their brilliant evaluation of museum exhibits, Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz outline the net positive results of critical curation:

> Ideally, exhibitions created with such recognition [that all people, even museum curators, are members of other cultures] would not only tell visitors about cultural diversity and include several perspectives, but also show the process through which curatorial judgments were made, that those judgments are contingent and contestable rather than final, and that there are other stories that were not included but might have been.[89]

Karp and Kratz exhort curators to think rigorously about categorizations of material culture and the issues they implicitly flag with their classifications. Otherwise, curators can too easily overlook the privileging of their own perspectives in their exhibits and exhibitions. Identifying blindspots in curatorial practices can address some of the dangerous consequences of slippage between different time periods. A reciprocal gaze that erodes the power dynamics in museums is especially important for any visual display of the iconography of black people in Greek antiquity.

Recent projects that promote equitable museum practices have begun to bear fruit. In 2019, Marenka Thompson-Odlum spearheaded "Labelling Matters: Activating Objects", a collaborative project that identifies colonial language in the Pitt Rivers Museum's labels. This endeavor culminated in a series of podcasts featuring fifteen- and sixteen-year old students from Oxford Spires Academy, a state-funded secondary school in England, who scrutinized the museum's curatorial practices.[90] Another instance of critical curating appears at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. This museum houses the Christian Levett Family Gallery "Dynastic Egypt and Nubia," which presents Nubia's vast relationships with its neighbors in a balanced manner. The wall text in this exhibit underscores Nubia's interactions without any Egyptocentric fanfare. The placement of the Nubian ruler Taharqo's massive shrine in the middle of the exhibit pushes back against

developments in Nubian and Sudanese history while gaining a new appreciation of the beauty and diversity of the material cultures of those who lived and died along the Nile Valley south of the First Nile Cataract"; Garnett and Welsby (2016: 17).

[89] Karp and Kratz (2000: 221).

[90] Thanks to Mai Musié for bringing "Labelling Matters" to my attention; see www.torch.ox.ac.uk /labelling-matters#/. Other creative museum projects include: the Museum of Westminster Street (a 3D pop-up museum in Providence, RI, www.themuseumonline.com/westminsterstor/index.php /museum/), the US-based movement "Decolonize This Place" (https://decolonizethisplace.org/), the Dutch initiative "Decolonize the Museum" (https://twitter.com/Decolonizemusea), and "Museum Detox" in the United Kingdom (www.museumdetox.org/). See also Bielenberg's (2018) shrewd analysis of an object label ("a bust of a boy, negroid type") at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum.

the portrayal of Nubia as an appendage of Egypt. In a tripartite display that examines Egypt's encounters with Nubia, the Levant, and the Mediterranean, a subheading entitled "Conflict" emphasizes the trilateral balance of power in this region of the world.[91] At the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago, the Robert F. Picken Family Nubian Gallery provides visitors with a balanced assessment of Nubian history through its chronological series of displays, including "Meroitic Pottery," "Nubian Archers," and "Dress and Adornment in Meroitic Nubia." The panel "New Kingdom," which encompasses the period of Egyptian occupation of Nubia from 1550 to 1069 BCE, emphasizes the two-way traffic of goods and people.[92] This evenhanded methodology applies to the variety of objects on view, such as a Qustul incense burner with Egyptian iconography and wheel-made (Egyptian-style) pottery with Nubian designs.[93]

   The exhibition "Ancient Nubia Now," which ran from October 2019 to January 2020 at the MFA, offers a final example of critical curation.[94] In possession of the largest Nubian collection outside of Sudan, the MFA highlighted Nubia's extensive networks via displays of imported Egyptian, Greek, and Roman objects found in Nubian tombs. Wall text throughout "Ancient Nubia Now" outlined Nubia and Egypt's intertwined history without subjugating the former. Near the entrance of the exhibition, the museum incorporated its own history into the narrative. Part of the "Nubia, History, and the MFA" panel, the wall text read:

> Until recently, Nubia's story has been told in large part by others – beginning
> with the ancient Egyptians, whose propaganda cast their enemies in a negative
> light. In the early 20th century, scholars and archaeologists often brought racial

---

[91] The Ashmolean's subheading reads, "The ancient Egyptians represented foreigners as tribute bearers or defeated enemies. However, archaeological evidence suggests that trade and immigration played a much greater role in inter-cultural affairs during most of the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period." I recorded this caption during my visit to the Ashmolean in May 2017.

[92] The Oriental Institute Museum's panel reads: "An Egyptian governor administered the country [Nubia] and ensured the flow of Nubian gold to Egypt. Nubia also contributed exotic products such as animal skins, ivory, and ebony as well as dates, cattle, and horses prized for their quality. Despite being required to send rich resources to Egypt, Nubia prospered during this period. Many Egyptians settled in Nubia, and Nubians moved north to Egypt." I recorded this caption during my visit to the museum in January 2017.

[93] Located between the First and Second Cataracts of the Nile, Qustul was the site of a royal cemetery with finds that date to c. 3200 BCE.

[94] A brief note about these museums' acquisition history: the Oriental Institute Museum acquired its Nubian collection mainly through rescue archaeology in advance of the completion of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s; the Ashmolean acquired most of its Nubian collection from the excavations led by Sir Francis Llewellyn Griffith in the early twentieth century; the Boston MFA built its Nubian collection from the excavation work led by George A. Reisner from 1913 to 1932.

prejudice to their work, influencing interpretations of Nubia for decades. This exhibition, drawn entirely from the MFA's collection, examines some of the ways in which Nubia's history has been obscured and misinterpreted – and the Museum's own role in that particular history.[95]

The MFA's explicit grappling with its colonialist history serves as a model for precisely the sort of reflexive work that Karp and Kratz invoke. In other words, the museum's accountable stewardship helps museum-goers construct their own restorative performance of blackness.[96] Channeling this bidirectional methodology, in the next chapter I explore a performance of blackness on a tragic stage: black protagonists in Aeschylus's *Suppliants* (c. 463 BCE) repurpose the mask of difference that their audience foists upon them. In line with these savvy ancient performers, Black characters in nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century literature wriggle out of the straitjacket of alterity into which others have forced them.

---

[95] I recorded this text during my January 2020 visit to the "Ancient Nubia Now" exhibition at the MFA.

[96] I use the language of accountable stewardship after Besterman (2011).