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## Review

FEDERICO FALOPPA, *Sbiancare un etiope. La costruzione di un  
immaginario razzista*

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period paved the way for the first Catholic Jesuit missions in Ethiopia, which opened a new page in the relations between the Catholic Church and Ethiopia, as well as a new way of life for the now Catholic Ethiopians living in Santo Stefano.

The conclusion opens still a new theme: that of racial differentiation, to counterbalance a reading of an encounter based exclusively on faith. The conclusion brings together all the threads of this magnificent, dense study, which opens up new avenues of study for those with a mastery of erudition worthy of the humanists of the pre-modern era.

Anais Wion, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique

FEDERICO FALOPPA, *Sbiancare un etiope. La costruzione di un immaginario razzista* (Milano: UTET–De Agostini Libri, 2022). 248 pp. Price: €18,00. ISBN: 979-1-22-120270-0.

In *Sbiancare un etiope*, Federico Faloppa delves into the complex history of racial discourse in Western culture. The title translated to ‘Whitening an Ethiopian’—with ‘Ethiopian’ broadly representing stereotypes of Black and People of Colour (BPoC)<sup>1</sup>—sets the stage for examining this expression from its origins in Greco-Roman literature to its influence and infiltration in the contemporary world.

Introducing the book topic, Faloppa starts with the case of a 2017 advertising campaign by a well-known body care company, which faced accusations of racism, and highlights the persistent presence of the ‘whitening’ narrative in Western culture, a legacy that had not been adequately addressed. In eight chapters, the author investigates this inheritance through historical and linguistic lenses, expanding his previous research to a broader European context, and analyzes how verbal and non-verbal language have been powerful tools in shaping and perpetuating racial biases.

In the first chapter, Faloppa identifies distinct features of the expression ‘Whitening an Ethiopian’, from its earliest mentions in Greek tradition where it described a futile and impossible action. He notes the use of hyperonyms to refer to black people, which vary over time and between texts, and the fluctuation between literary idealisation and real interaction with diverse people. Selected passages demonstrate that Greco-Roman culture expressed judgment of the physical characteristics of blackness, reflecting a prevailing aesthetic norm and a discriminatory attitude toward those who did not conform to it. Concerning this historical

<sup>1</sup> Following Sarah Derbew’s analysis in *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge–New York, NY–Melbourne–New Delhi–Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2022), I use lowercase when referring to ‘blackness’ in the context of ancient Greek and Roman literature. Uppercase is employed when discussing sections of the book that pertain to modern contexts.

phase, Faloppa rightly notes that modern concepts of race and racism cannot be directly applied to antiquity (pp. 32–34). However, a more explicit clarification of how mockery of diversity contributed to the construction of a racist imagination would enhance the discussion.

The second chapter explores how Christian exegesis played a crucial role in associating the colour black with symbolic, often negative, meanings. Faloppa connects interpretations of biblical passages that mention dark-skinned figures, such as the Song of Songs and Jeremiah 13:23, to broader discussions in early Christian literature concerning the nature of human qualities—both internal and external—and the concepts of changeability and permanence.

In the third chapter, Faloppa explores the New Testament episode of the eunuch's baptism (Acts 8:26–40). Through depictions of this event, the author illustrates how BPoC were portrayed and perceived in modern Europe amidst religious transformations and the expansion of colonial policies. This analysis lays the groundwork for examining the development of the 'whitening' narrative from the fifteenth century onward.

In chapter four, the author depicts how the expression 'Whitening an Ethiopian' was recovered from Greek and Latin texts during Humanism and enriched with new interpretations. Particularly notable is the motif's revival within the emblematic genre, where text and image synergistically enhance its reinterpretation by bridging its literary nature with its realistic portrayal.

In chapter five, the association of this motif with the motto 'Impossible' in Alciati's *Emblematum liber*<sup>2</sup> prompts Faloppa to delve into the examination of the figure of speech known as adynaton. Connecting the transformative potential of this stylistic device to the expression 'Whitening an Ethiopian', Faloppa demonstrates how the adynaton's 'subversive power' remains confined to the literary realm within a rigid and hierarchical society (pp. 93–97). This is evident in modern Spain, where the theatrical scene served as a unique space for reversal, such as the 'whitening' of black characters on stage. Beyond its visual effect (achieved by removing the makeup of white actors portraying dark-skinned characters), this problematic transformation could symbolically represent a change in social status that was otherwise unattainable for BPoC in contemporary society.

Travel narratives, new theories on skin colour, and the slave trade had, indeed, exacerbated polarisation and prejudice in modern Europe. Chapter six further explores this process by examining the English context. Notably, it describes the first chemical experiments to alter skin colour, vividly illustrating the physical

<sup>2</sup> A. Alciati. *Emblemata. Denuo ab ipso Autore recognita, ac, quae desiderabantur, imaginibus locupletata*, rev. edn (Lugdunum: apud Matthias Bonhomme, 1550; 1st edn Augustanum: Heinrich Steyner, 1531).

pain and psychological suffering endured by BPoC in colonialist and supremacist Europe.

In a related vein, chapter seven examines the evolving social dynamics of nineteenth-century Europe, using the fetishisation of soap as a pivotal example. The author illustrates how the concept of cleanliness was elevated to a civic obligation and how this was intertwined with colonial expansion. This phenomenon is elucidated through soap advertising campaigns aimed at achieving ‘social purification’, promoting the ‘washing’ and ‘partial whitening’—essentially, the oppression—of groups considered to fall short of prevailing public hygiene standards.

The concluding chapter concisely explains how the ‘whitening’ narrative remains a pervasive issue in twentieth-century and contemporary society, evidenced by persistent discomfort and distortions within Western culture, which still resists deep critical examination and deconstruction of its ingrained prejudices.

Combining history, literature, and linguistics, the book offers a comprehensive and insightful perspective that is accessible and engaging for both academic and general readers, particularly targeting the ‘future generations’ as noted in the dedication. The diverse audience of readers, partially limited by the choice to publish in Italian, benefit from the variety of selected passages and the illustrative plates, which are accompanied by clear and incisive captions. Regrettably, the book contains several inaccuracies in reporting quotes and terms from Greek, Latin, and other languages (an example is the term Αἰθίοψ, ‘Ethiopian’, always rendered with rough breathing in its declined forms).

The book maintains coherence with its objectives, tracing the evolution of the ‘whitening’ narrative over time within a defined framework of examples chosen by the author. This approach limits the horizon to some European countries, with only occasional references to the United States in the final two chapters.

Integrating the development of the expression ‘Whitening an Ethiopian’ within historical and cultural contexts offers valuable insights into how European perceptions of the so-conceived ‘other’ evolved. While this approach facilitates a comprehensive analysis across a wide timeframe, it may limit the exploration of critical periods and themes, like colonialism and twentieth-century developments, which are crucial for understanding racism more deeply. Furthermore, the treatment of the ancient period occasionally appears oversimplified and, at times, contradictory. Recognizing the ambitious scope and the challenge of conducting thorough examinations in each section, the author enriches the discussion with bibliographic references in the notes for further exploration. However, inaccuracies, such as the misleading portrayal of Prester John as a ‘missionary who became a king and introduced Christianity to the Horn of Africa around the fourth century AD’ (p. 182, fn. 25), indicate a necessity for deeper engagement and clarification on certain mentioned topics.

Finally, testimonies from victims of discriminatory and racist imagery appear only in the later chapters, standing in contrast to the abundant European narrative. As highlighted by the author, however, current post-colonial research will undoubtedly bridge these gaps.

In conclusion, *Sbiancare un etiope* provides a stimulating foundation for exploring the European perspective on conceived and perceived ‘otherness’, tracing its historical evolution and societal implications. The interdisciplinary approach, extensive use of sources, and commitment to addressing complex issues in an accessible manner establish this text as a valuable contribution to understanding the role of language and its enduring social impacts. Yet, enhancing precision and integrating a broader array of perspectives could further strengthen efforts aimed at dismantling entrenched prejudices.

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FRIEDRICH JULIUS BIEBER, *Reisen nach Äthiopien, Tagebücher 1904, 1905, 1909*, ed. SAYURI YOSHIDA, *Northeast African History, Orality and Heritage*, 5 (Berlin–Münster: LIT Verlag, 2021). viii, 627 pp. Price: €64,90. ISBN: 978-3-643-91062-2.

The volume currently under review, which is the fifth in the series *Northeast African History, Orality and Heritage*, contains the diary entries of the Austrian Julius Friedrich Bieber concerning his Ethiopian travels from the years 1904, 1905 and 1909. The handwritten diaries of Bieber, which are available in the Austrian National Library, were reviewed and edited by the Japanese cultural anthropologist Sayuri Yoshida and transcribed by Benedikt Roland. In light of the drastically changing societal conditions in Ethiopia at the beginning of the 20th century, the publication of Friedrich Julius Bieber’s diary offers contemporaneous insights into the changing lives of people in the countryside, while also recounting Bieber’s deeply personal experiences as a European traveler in East Africa and the everyday occurrences in urban and rural settings. The publication is organized according to Bieber’s three research trips, each of which, however, differs in its duration, intention, and experiences.

In the diary entries from 1904, the reader accompanies Friedrich Julius Bieber on his journey from Vienna via Trieste, Cairo, and Djibouti to Addis Abāba, the then still young capital of the Ethiopian Empire. In addition to descriptions of everyday life in Addis Abāba, the steady development of the city through the construction of new roads and buildings (p. 81), and the lives of European travelers, merchants, and missionaries (pp. 69, 158), the often finely detailed and thick descriptions of various festivities, audiences at court, and encounters with Ethiopian officials (including *Ras Wäldä Giyorgis* and *Ras Mäk<sup>w</sup>ännön*, father of the later