Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Professors Sarah Derbew and Nandini Pandey

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. And this week's episode is more special than usual because we have not one but two experts. Welcome to the show, Professors Sarah Derbew and Nandini Pandey, where I ask them: how did they think about diversity in the Ancient Mediterranean? Welcome to Getting Curious. Have we got an episode for you. We're going into the time machine and you know there's no place I love to go more than that. So you know on our show, we've learned that we can't apply our contemporary understandings of gender, sexuality, and race to the past. Today, we're going back to Greco-Roman antiquity to learn more about ancient understandings of diversity. Our guests are amazing. I'm so excited that they're here. First we have Sarah Derbew, who is an assistant professor of classics at Stanford University. Come on, resume. She's also the author of the new book *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity*. Title is giving me everything. Welcome, Sarah. And we have Nandini Pandey, who is an associate professor of classics at Johns Hopkins University. She studies ethnic and cultural diversity in the Roman Empire. Welcome to Getting Curious, you two.

SARAH DERBEW [00:01:22] Thank you. Thank you. Jonathan, I feel like you should introduce my classes because I just feel like a drumroll would follow and then students would do all of their work.

JVN [00:01:31] Oh, my gosh. I would be a really good hype person for, like, college professors, I feel like. Here's the thing. I was minding my own business this one day on Getting Curious, and we were interviewing Sarah Bond, who we love. And that's how we discovered all of your gorgeous work. I always thought that, like, Greece and Rome were operating in, like, different times and that, like, there was, like, no overlap. I just thought that it, like, basically just looked like *Gladiator*, kind of, like, fuzzy, like, you know, wheat and there was, like, kind of Enya-esque music playing everywhere. Dash in a little bit of Pompeii. And I was, like, "I get it!" Honey, I don't get it. So I'm just, like, very fascinated by, like, how people understood things in different times. And I think I'm also really fascinated by, like, and correct me if I'm wrong, either of you want to jump in here, but, like, race was still a thing even back then. It was just, like, different.

SARAH DERBEW [00:02:27] You're good.

JVN [00:02:29] Right?

SARAH DERBEW [00:02:30] Absolutely. And I think even what race means is so explosive. Because when we think about race, we can't *not* think about skin color. But like you were saying, even if we think about family orientations, how someone identifies, how many

husbands or wives someone has, there's so many other ways of figuring out how to categorize people. So I feel like this is an area that we all want to be revisited. We need to remember that we have these modern goggles and that we can't take them off completely. But being really conscious of it is useful. I think we need to do that for every category. And when it comes to skin color, we need to be especially careful because of the ways that anti-Blackness still informs our present and how easy it is to say, "Black equals slavery through time immemorial." And we never even need to think about why we have that assumption or how that assumption is one that was built on slave traders in the 15th century onward, really entrenching their policies through practice and language and actually does not apply in the same ways to a time period, centuries, millennia before a single person was forcibly transported from Africa to the Americas.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:03:43] I think if we work with an expansive definition of race as power shaping populations and controlling populations through categories that are often imaginary or based on changeable factors—sometimes skin color, sometimes gender, sometimes other things—then we have this really big lens through which we can examine the way a lot of societies put themselves together similarly and differently. And my students always learn a lot by traveling back to antiquity because there were huge categories and huge inequalities in antiquity. But it helps us unwrite some of our own very modern reflexive assumptions about race and color and ethnicity that unfortunately are baked into our country, specifically here in the US, as part of a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade.

JVN [00:04:25] Yes. So much to unpack. I'm, like, so excited. So just so that we can, like, further set the stage because, like, you know how you just said 15th century. I used to go through this phase in the podcast where, like, that would make me go off rails for, like, 30 minutes about, like, "What does 15th century mean?" Listeners, I'm not doing it to you again. We are not doing that. When are we talking about when we're talking about, like, Greco-Roman antiquity?

SARAH DERBEW [00:04:49] You bring up a great question, Jonathan, because we're not always specific about what we mean. And a lot of times when we say "ancient Greeks," for example, we mean only the fifth century BCE, only the years between 400 and 300 BCE, and that's it, even though there's so much more, because that's a time when a lot of the writers that we have are producing work, when a lot of the productions that we see are getting really popular, but it's not the only time period. That shorthand is one of the gatekeeping techniques, I think, unfortunately of the academy, where if I think fifth century, and I don't even say BCE, I'm just assuming that you know what I'm talking about. And I have trouble with the numbers too. And I always have to remember, "Is it subtracting 100 or adding 100 and carry the ones?" And so it can get really confusing.

But I think that the, the shorthand that I have learned through my years of schooling is fifth century BCE is when Greece was really hot. And in terms of Rome, the first, second centuries CE or AD is when Rome was producing in ways that we consider being really legible today.

And so that's roughly the end of the Roman Republic, it's a transition of government from a republic into an empire. And so because of that transition and the amount of literature and monuments that grow out of it, we tend to reduce Rome's to maybe a 200 year period. And we give Greece 100 years. And because chronologically the fifth century BCE predates the first and second centuries CE, we tend to talk about Greece and Rome rather than Rome and Greece as a way to signal that we're going from the deep, deep past to the kind of deep past. But I'm curious to hear what Nandini uses to think about these time periods.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:006:33] That's great, and I would add there's also a geographical dimension layering on top of the chronological ones. Sarah's also thinking of classical Athens but there's actually a bunch of city states in the ancient Greek world. They're all speaking slightly different dialects. They all worship slightly different versions of the same kinds of gods. So there's a lot of different groups that get layered under the concept of classical Greece, and there's a lot of diversity that gets hidden by the conflation of Greece with fifth-century Athens. I would say Rome actually spans hundreds, if not thousands of years, depending on how you want to define it. This is a culture that traces itself back to this legendary exile from Asia [modern-day Turkey] named Aeneas, who around the year 1000-ish BCE migrated from the sacked city of Troy that was destroyed from Asia into Europe and supposedly brought his immigrant people over to Italy. And the Italian culture was sort of formed from the intermingling of these different ethnic groups. And so that's around 1000.

And then there's another founder figure named Romulus who is supposed to have founded the city of Rome in the year 753 BC. So this is a couple of hundred years earlier than classical Greece. And this guy, he founded a city, then he had no one to live in it. So what he did was he threw open the doors and invited refugees and criminals and people from all over who wanted to come in to come and populate his city. So this creates a precedent where Rome is inviting people in from elsewhere. And then because they have no women, they actually have to go and steal women from a neighboring tribe called the Sabines. And this sets a precedent for marrying outside your immediate family group. So this is all supposedly happening in the legendary past. These stories weren't written down until around maybe, like, 100 B.C. to 100 A.D. But these are stories the Romans told to explain the very multiethnic world they saw around them.

Basically the history of Rome is: it started as a tiny little village on the river Tiber. There was nothing special about it, and it just [metaphorically] ate all the surrounding people, conquered them, incorporated them, often enslaved them. So this was not a pretty process. But then over time, because of Rome's really unique manumission and citizen policies, which we can go into later, these people kind of became part of Rome. So it's really a kind of world empire. It spans three continents and it includes people from very different ethnic groups. As an imperial system, it figures out ways to get them all working toward the imperial economy. From around 200 to 100, this is a really important period for Rome because it conquers Carthage, which is a North African empire of Semitic and some other peoples. And then it also conquers the remnants of the Greek alliances. Greeks were really much admired in Rome. So Rome wants to

be like Greece. It actually looks up to conquered Greece. And the Roman joke was that first Rome conquered Greece and then Greece conquered Rome culturally.

JVN [00:09:18] So Rome conquers Greece?

NANDINI PANDEY [00:09:20] The Roman Empire, based out of the city of Rome, comes to include all of Greece, all of old Turkey, all of the Near East, and lots of parts of Africa and Europe as well. The high point geographically is about 117 A.D. under the emperor Trajan. People usually date the end of Rome to about 476 CE but you could argue that actually the Byzantine people in Constantinople, modern day Istanbul, continued Roman culture. They still called themselves Romans for another thousand years. So we're talking, like, about 2000 years of Rome.

JVN [00:09:50] Damn. Sarah your work focuses, like, in Greece even though they, like, were happening at the same time…

SARAH DERBEW [00:09:57] Absolutely, Jonathan, I work on ancient Greece and whatever that encompasses, ancient Greek speakers. I don't know, Nandini when you were in school, if people made you choose one. But I was very much told, "Choose Greece or Rome and then stick with it and ride that train until the last stop." So even in the training process, it's very much you kind of choose which will be your specialty, even though you need to really understand both in order to even get your degree and when you're teaching, students don't care if you're a Greek specialist. If they really want to know about Rome, they'll ask you questions. If they want to know about Carthage and all of these other regions that were involved with Rome, they'll come to you. So it's a broad region. But you're right, Jonathan, in terms of specialties.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:10:38] There's also just fantastic stuff much later in antiquity that again, because of the disciplinary boundaries Sarah is pointing to, we don't do as good a job as we should incorporating this into our field and into our study and into our teaching. So, like, there are amazing mosaics from Roman North Africa, from the edges of empire that actually kind of become a very central point of imperial culture that are more, like, fourth century CE. And Roman culture is still going strong in other parts of the world, even after the city of Rome kind of reduces and becomes a bunch of rubble and ruins.

JVN [00:11:10] And Greece is really just, like, for us who are, like, a little bit more, like, *basic*, in the words of Anna Delvey. Greece didn't start in a vacuum at, like, 300 BCE. It was, like, there was probably some stuff, you know, happening, but then it's really most known in its high point in, like, 3 to 400 BCE.

SARAH DERBEW [00:11:27] Yeah, absolutely. And so even thinking about the ways in which the Greek world was borrowing and connecting with their neighbors, too, there were people from the Mycenaean civilization, the island of Crete. There were so many other nation states

that were being built. And Greece, like Rome, eventually ends up solidifying their power and then expanding a bit as well. But Greece was not without problems. There were both wars with their neighbors in Persia, but also wars with the different city states as well. So the movie *300* talks about the Peloponnesian War. But there are all these ways in which Greece is not monolithic and the city of Athens, as Nandini said, starts becoming representative for the entire what we would now call a country, but then was a bunch of city states. But someone who was from Athens and someone who was from Sparta definitely considered themselves different peoples, or at least had their own cultures. But today, if you travel to Greece, you can fly from Athens to Sparta and it's still all part of the same nation-state.

So the ideas of nation states being as big as they are is one that is very modern because even as the Greek empire was spreading, I could be from 5000 miles away from you. Or even if I were from Turkey, there's a famous writer who in the fifth century BCE, again, that time period, Herodotus, he's writing from modern day Turkey or ancient Asia Minor, a city called Halicarnassus. But he's writing in a different dialect than the people in Athens, but they can still understand each other. But he also has roots and cultural backgrounds that are specific to his local geographic point. But he's also part of this greater Greek world. So if we think about English in America, too, versus English in Britain or English in Australia, we can kind of see the ways in which even when you speak the same language, find different dialects, it's still very different cultures that can form. Nandini, what do you think?

NANDINI PANDEY [00:13:23] Yeah, I agree. And in fact, just to build off of that, you could actually even argue that any sense of Greek identity at all comes from contact with other peoples. What we think of as the first Greek writer who is actually a collection of singers, we call this person or people Homer. These songs that we call the Homeric epics are in a dialect that is associated with modern-day Turkey. And they're talking about this war where all these fragmented city states whose leaders actually hate each other, they all go to this poor city in Asia and they besiege the city. And the Greeks are all fighting among themselves, whereas the Asians are actually a multi-ethnic but more unified civilization. It's actually that action that kind of constructs a sense of Greek-ness, that Greeks start to get referred to under one term. And actually the act of traveling around these islands and Asia and singing these songs that had to do with all these heroes that are related to each other, they worship the same gods—that actually helps create a sense of Greek identity. And similarly, Sarah was talking about Herodotus. Herodotus is this author who's writing the story of the Greek city states fending off a Persian invasion. But it's because of that Persian threat that the Greek city states have to start getting along in the first place. And it's that contact with an Eastern group that helps solidify any sense of Greek identity or unity or cooperation.

JVN [00:14:43] People have been colonizing for the longest time! We have been doing this violence ass, trying to impart our views on that person over there for fucking thousands of years. Why can we not just make out? Like, we are all so cute, like, we should just be literally making out like "You're cute. No, you're cute. I love your culture. No, I love your amphora or whatever." Like, why are we doing all the fighting? You know, it's, like, so, but we're getting

into that. So when modern day Italy is modern day Italy and then modern day Greece is modern day Greece. But ancient Greece goes from…

SARAH DERBEW [00:15:24] So we can think of these as epicenters. So with the city of Athens and the city of Rome, these are two epicenters. And then they expand. In the, in the texts, the histories by this author Herodotus, we've mentioned a few times, he writes this nine volume, nine book tome, all about Greece and their different neighbors, people they get along with, people they don't get along with, lovers, enemies and so on. And you get to go to different parts of the world as a way to build your world map as well. And when I give talks, I usually will show the map of the world according to Herodotus, to help us understand who the Greeks were in contact with. That being said, even with that map, these are who the Greeks are telling us they're in contact with. So sometimes we need to take things with a grain of salt. But in terms of their neighbors in the South, for example, I'm really curious about their interactions with people in what we would call modern day Africa. So in, in one of Herodotus' books, he talks about someone from Persia, which is modern day Iran, who wants to go and conquer parts of what we would now call Egypt and Sudan, parts of an ancient civilization of Nubia. And so because he doesn't speak the language—

And again, this is Herodotus telling us the story in Greek. So this Greek writer, from what is modern day Turkey, is telling us a story about people who are from modern day Iran, who are then sending people from modern day Egypt to go down to modern day Sudan to figure out why these people in northeastern Africa have such great food and resources. So it's such a geographical, mind twisting journey you go on. But it's really exciting to think about how much contact all of these people are having with each other, to even know how to get from point A to point B. There's a great writer, an anonymous writer, who was an Egyptian who spoke Greek about 500 years later, who writes of *Periplus*, which is a journey on the Red Sea of this region, and gives exact, exact descriptions of the geographic markers and distance from one city to another in North Africa. So he goes from this city in Egypt, and then you travel 15 stades and you get to this city. So there is so much specificity in terms of how to get from point A to point B in ways that blow our minds because without GPSes, without Google Maps, we have a lot of trouble even figuring out how to get to supermarkets in our neighborhood, let alone how to travel and go visit people who have fabled resources of of food and of water.

JVN [00:17:52] I think it was on Getting Curious, and we were learning about, like, the Nubian culture of Egypt. But then you were saying that, like, the idea of whiteness and Blackness is more, like, 1453 by that Henry guy. But we're more talking about, like, 3 to 400 B.C. is the height of Greece. And then Rome comes of age a little bit later.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:18:10] I'm glad to just show you the map because it helps kind of make sense of some of the parts of the world we're talking about. And so Egypt is right here, which even the ancients [Greek and Romans] thought was the cradle of civilization and the way that they got a lot of their traditions and gods, although they had a very mixed relationship

with Egypt because it sort of felt very foreign and different. And for sure Egypt had contact with further south places and we should do more in classics to talk about Nubian contributions and Nubian rulership of Egypt. Sarah was talking about these Greek city states which are around here, but also there are still plenty of Greek cities in Asia. There's also Greek colonies in Sicily and over here and also in Italy. So actually when Rome is a very young civilization, it already has very formative contact with Greek culture before it actually goes and takes over Greece. And then Sarah had been talking about the *Periplus* like sailing around here. The Romans actually had some trade routes that go all the way out to India. The islands had spices and they're working, they're trading with Arab and Persian merchants.

But throughout this, it's really interesting, there's no huge category of Blackness or whiteness or anything like that. But the Romans and the Greeks tended to think of specific groups of people, and they often understood their difference in terms of their different clothes, in terms of their different traditions, maybe in terms of their environments or geography. They thought that people were affected by where they lived. So the word Ethiopian literally means "burnt face." Not because this is bad. We got to unwrite that. It's because the Ethiopians lived closer to the sun, closer to the equator. And so it was thought that, you know, they're living near the sun, their skin is getting tanned, but all humans are fundamentally the same. So if you move someone from there to someplace further north, then all the blood would rush away from the cold and they would become pale. And their temperament might change. This idea that your environment shapes who you are and not some innate physical difference that makes you inferior or superior is one of the key ways that thinking of race through an ancient lens can help estrange and help us rethink our modern categories.

JVN [00:20:14] So Sarah, in your book, you take great care with terminology which, like, I—, obsessed. Can you help us understand, like, what names we should be using for these places and people as we, like, go forward in this conversation?

SARAH DERBEW [00:20:28] Sure. And I just want to gently push back on what Nandini was saying about what Ethiopia or Aethiopia means. So the etymology or the roots of the word come from two Greek words: "*aíthō*" (αἴθω [blaze]) and "*ops*" (ὤψ [face]), but something that I call out or I try to gently, responsibly call it in my own work is when we translate this as being "sunburnt," the modern lens comes out because who gets sunburnt? People who have lighter skin get sunburnt. So then it sets the norm as being light skinned and dark as being some sort of aberration or an anomaly. And so what I try to do is even in translating words like "Aethiopia," think really carefully about the ways in which I don't want to inject this idea of something being really painful or have people start thinking about who can afford to go and tan, who can afford to get sunburn, who goes to tanning salons and so forth. So I tend to use "sun kissed" as a way to be a little bit lighter, a little bit more jovial, but also to show that, yes, there is a direct interaction with the sun that's going on, but it's not as painful or as much as we don't need to have white as a norm for everything. And that's something I push back against in my work in general.

So even the idea of whiteness doesn't come up in my work unless we're talking about the actual color white, white, like, maybe the color of Nandini's shirt or something that is very much objective. And I feel like in the fashion world too, Jonathan, you know that even with white, there's so many different shades as there are with black. So we use these terms as catchall phrases, but we don't always pay attention to the fact that it's a color. And it's also this racial marker that we've created as humans after the transatlantic slave trade. So white for, for the purposes of antiquity, does not refer to the groups of people from Europe that we would associate it with. If anything, there are some environmental treaties and tracts that are roughly contemporary about the time Herodotus is writing, this fifth century BCE that we've been speaking about. And here the people who are white are the Scythians, the people who live near the Black Sea, and they're white and sometimes red because of how cold it is and how much they need to conserve energy. And then the Aethiopians are the people who are closer to the equator are Black, but that's because of the proximity with the sun.

And I do, I want to talk about the word Aethiopia for a minute, if I can, because as we saw on the map, there's the modern nation state, Ethiopia, and then there's this term, Aethiopia, Nubia and Kush, that we're using. And the two definitely need to be teased apart. And so what I do in my work is to try to always offer a map to situate us. So the map that I'm showing you here that I'll share with listeners, hopefully, in the future, is of modern day Northern Africa. And you can see running in red down the roughly regions between the first and the six cataracts of the Nile. This is the southern parts of modern Egypt and the northern parts of modern Sudan. We have this region called Nubia. Nubia is a word that is perhaps related to middle Egyptian or maybe to another language. Kush is another term that shows up. Perhaps this is a Nubian word, the word of the people in their language. Kush appears in Hebrew texts as well.

But Nubia, Kush, Aethiopia are all referring to this ancient region from the first of the six cataracts of the Nile in Northeast Africa and with what is modern day Ethiopia now, the kingdom, the ancient kingdom in that region. So this is further northeast. This is off the map that I have on the screen. This region was called Aksum at the time when Nubia was in its heyday. And in Aksum, the rulers of this region wanted a new name for their kingdom. Some sources say that they decided on the name Aethiopia because of the historical significance it had in the region, and more importantly, because they conquered what was Aethiopia. So they annexed it to their kingdom and renamed themselves after this empire. And the name persists today where Ethiopia continues to be the name of a modern nation state. So even when we use different terms, we always need to think about the time period and the geographic borders. You brought up a really great point about Nubia earlier Jonathan and their relationship with Egypt and there's a period, it's called the 25th dynasty, depending on your timeline.

JVN [00:24:35] Yes, we got to learn about it! Yes!

SARAH DERBEW [00:24:39] It is so dope. It is so dope really thinking about the people from this region of Nubia, they were called the Black Emperors more by modern people, from this region being able to control everything up the Nile all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. And so Egyptians were under their control. And it's just a powerful time to think about because these rulers Taharqa, Shabaqa, Shebitku, Tanwetamani, these are rulers who are, from what we would consider today Black Africa, what we would consider today to be parts of Egypt and Sudan. But they're ruling people all the way up to the Mediterranean. And because of the importance of water, if you run the Nile, you run things in this region, you're controlling trade coming in from the Red Sea, in the Indian Ocean, and you're determining whether or not Romans and Greeks can get incense, whether they can get particular animals that they need for war, or whether they can get particular spices for their food as well. So it's an incredibly important part of the world and something that I'm pushing for in my work and that I hope to get into in later years, is really thinking about ancient Africa as being part of the ancient Greco-Roman world, because as we've been saying, it's not even just Athens or just Rome, it's the people they interact with. So it's really important to include ancient Africa on that map and in our, in our mental realms to really start thinking about the languages and culture that are thriving at the same time as Herodotus and Augustus and all of these other figures that are so popular and that end up dominating the mainstream.

JVN [00:26:11] So I'm not going to go down that one road, even though my inner cosmetologist is wanting to. But I'm not going to. Although I will just say that Dr. Tina Lasisi, who we have had on the podcast, I just said I wasn't going to but now I'm fucking doing it. She's this, like, evolutionary biologist, and she studies, like, scalp and hair evolution. And she was talking about how, like, it's, like, a modern failure of medicine, like, there's so many people who are, like, biracial and Black, who are getting melanomas, who are getting skin cancer. And, like, we all need to protect our skin from the sun because, like, skin cancers are skyrocketing in, like, all these fucking people.

SARAH DERBEW [00:26:43] Absolutely, absolutely.

JVN [00:26:43] And we just aren't, like, teaching people about that. But that's, like, a hard core, like, hard right. But I just want people to protect their fucking skin and we're all so cute and young looking and I just want us to protect our skin.

SARAH DERBEW [00:26:51] You're so right. I wear SPF 30 every day.

JVN [00:26:54] Every day!

SARAH DERBEW [00:26:55] I do not play with my skin. [CROSSTALK] And it does make me sad. I've had friends who have had family members who have died, who are very, very dark skinned. But a lot of times it's not detected because of how dark their skin is. And I think that that is one of the really scary parts of melanoma, too, where if I have a tumor, but because all of the images in the textbooks in dermatology are of light skin, my doctor doesn't even know

that's a birthmark or if it's some sort of burn scar. So I think that we really need to think carefully about not having whiteness be the norm, period, whether it's in modern medicine or in antiquity.

JVN [00:27:25] Fuck yes!

SARAH DERBEW [00:27:27] But Jonathan, I definitely take your point in terms of really not saying that just because we're not using the language of sunburnedness. We don't need to protect our skin because I want the buoyancy to be with me forever, until the end.

JVN [00:27:37] All up forever, you know, we all deserve it!

NANDINI PANDEY [00:27:41] And there's the famous example in Emily Wilson's translation of the *Odyssey*, and I think Jackie Murray talks about this, where the same word is used to describe Odysseus, our hero, and then someone who was working for him, a messenger, I believe it is. And so for Odysseus, it's translated as "tanned" – you know, like, he went down to Cancun and, like, sat on the beach a little bit. And then for the servant, it's "black," because of the modern association between Blackness and class. So this infects our translations. It infects the way that we teach. It's so hard to right this. And Sarah is doing such important and wonderful work in correcting the narrative.

SARAH DERBEW [00:28:17] Can we talk hair for one minute, Jonathan?

JVN [00:28:18] Fuck yes.

SARAH DERBEW [00:28:19] Cause you got me on hair. Because even thinking about the styles, when I traveled as an undergraduate to Rome to different museums, I saw nary a Black skin in the museums, partly because of the ways that we tend to assume that if there is no color, then the default is white. But I saw so many braids and twists and all of these really beautiful, coiffed hairstyles for Roman matrons, for people who we wouldn't always associate with having really intricate hairstyles, and people would have hair pieces they would wear, too. But it's really important to also think about the ways in which we code braided hair or twists or curly hair in particular communities now. But it was hot back then. I mean, it was definitely the trend to have someone come and do your hair and to really have a style that ended up giving you more volume and more texture. So I think that even when we think about something that seemingly is objective as hair, there's so much richness in the ancient Greco-Roman world.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:29:11] I hope you do a podcast about ancient hair because there is so much to say about this. And actually my friend and fellow Baltimorean, Janet Stephens, is a great person to consult about how they actually constructed these elaborate hairdos.

JVN [00:29:22] Oooh!

NANDINI PANDEY [00:29:23] Fashions are international so the Fayum mummy portraits in Egypt are really very vivid representations and you can see that fashions in the city of Rome travel very quickly into Egypt. There's a trend for dressing up like a Briton. It's fashionable to have blond hair sometimes like a captive slave, because Germans at this time were most often seen in the city of Rome as captives with no standing. But there was some really interesting fashion play that people do almost like a kind of cosplay where people will dress like recently conquered people and you can make what you want out of that. But there is a whole world to talk about over here, as well as a world to think about when people see what they associate with African hair and they make a lot of assumptions about what they're looking at. All too often, modern curators will see someone who looks dark or who looks like they have kinky hair, and they will say, "Oh, this must be a slave." And that is a really irresponsible way of categorizing people by importing modern concepts of difference onto antiquity.

JVN [00:30:23] They were fucking traveling everywhere back then is what I also hear you saying. So like, were they ever just, like, talking about how people didn't look the same? Was that like a thing that people noticed?

SARAH DERBEW [00:30:35] What's striking is that sometimes they mention color, sometimes hair, sometimes it'll be outlandish things, like, "they have a foot growing right out of their forehead." So it's always taking things with a grain of salt when it comes to these historians or geographers who are known for traveling. But what is beautiful is that there's not one standard. And so the ways in which we tend to identify peoples first by skin color in the present day, and then we send them to other parts of their identity. It doesn't seem to be the same with antiquity. So going back to our man Herodotus, and we can leave him soon, for a new example, but there's a passage where he talks about people going to interact with Aethiopians and he doesn't mention their skin color at all. It's just you go, you travel there. But he does mention, "How rich they are, how incredibly handsome they are, how they're just some of the finest of the finest of the people on this planet and how they have so much food and, and liquid and they live a really long time. So maybe they're divinities, maybe they're not." And for the informed reader, he may be looking back to this group of Aethiopians who appear in the Homeric epics which Nandini mentioned were performed, written, penned in the seventh century, sixth century BCE. So maybe two, 300 years before Herodotus is writing. But in that text, the Aethiopians are essentially a celestial Airbnb. Gods go there for vacation, and when they're done with their vacation, they go back to the world of mortals. So there's so much more that can be used to describe people other than their skin color. But we can get bogged down in wanting to see, "Were they Black or white? What continent were they from?" because of our own sort of preoccupations and the ways in which color is so important in this context.

JVN [00:32:16] I did that! I did it. I did it. But it's so much more! Yeah.

SARAH DERBEW [00:32:19] It's true. And I look for it, too, for opposite, I'm, like, "Where's my brother and sister, where's my great-great-great grandfather, could this be him?" But I do think

that that's more because of the ways that color, not to use a pun, but it colors the ways in which we look at the world. And when we look at these texts where people did not automatically use that as a first way to judge someone, it really reminds us that there are so many other ways that we still categorize and treat people fairly or unfairly, but we can use things that now seem really, almost superfluous. They're second rate, after we get past color. So it's really exciting to go through these texts and see people describe in other ways. Egyptians in Herodotus' texts are just the opposite of Greeks. So if Greeks urinate standing up, then Egyptians urinate sitting down. Or if Greek people have really long hair then Egyptians are all bald.

JVN [00:33:08] Did they say that about the peeing, sitting down and standing up?

SARAH DERBEW [00:33:10] There is this dichotomy. Absolutely. And some people have sex in groups and some people have sex individually. Some people share wives. So it's all of these different ways of describing groups.

JVN [00:33:20] Who did they say that about what? For the group with, like, one-on-one, who did what?

SARAH DERBEW [00:33:26] That might have been the Libyans or the Persians.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:33:29] The Babylon call trade, is that the one? Where the Babylonians. [CROSSTALK] Yeah, we'd have to fact check that.

JVN [00:33:35] Is that why all the gay bars are called, like, Babylon in, like, *Queer As Folk* because they were always, like, having group sex and stuff?

NANDINI PANDEY [00:33:42] That and, like, Sodom and Gomorrah.

SARAH DERBEW [00:33:42] I wonder.

JVN [00:33:43] Was Sodom and Gomorrah in Babylon?

NANDINI PANDEY [00:33:44] We're, like, way out of my—

JVN [00:33:45] Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I freaked out. Tell us more, Nandini.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:33:48] I also think we cannot underestimate the importance of fashion and dress in expressing the self here because it's interesting, in my period, often it's what you wear that is your expression of your ethnic identity. If you, like, are wearing pants, then you must be a barbarian. You're probably from Thrace. If you're wearing a long loose gown with a belt and possibly an earring, you might be from, from Carthage in North Africa. What's interesting about this is it means that you're coding who you are based on your clothes, but

you can take off your clothes and put on someone else's clothes. And there's this really interesting intersectionality with gender, where sometimes you'll find a couple that's married and they'll put up a tombstone for themselves. And the guy might be, like, a German, but he maybe fought for the Roman military. So he'll be looking really Roman, but his wife from the same tribe will have native costume. So there's a way that women are associated with maybe staying longer in that home culture and kind of keeping that a little bit longer.

There's also some really interesting other factors. So, like, a gladiator might be from Thrace, but be dressed like a Celtic warrior. And that Celtic warrior thing is his identity in the arena, even though he's from somewhere else. Or you might have a Celt who's dressed like a Thracian warrior, and that becomes his identity in the arena. So there's a lot of, there's a lot of kind of mixing. There's a separation that we see in Rome between your actual birthplace and your ethnic identity and your performed social identity. And in a way, in Rome, we actually kind of loop back to the modern truth that, that your identity is kind of a social construction that you're performing and co-constructing with other people. So fashion, really matters here, too. And it's often the thing that is most emphasized in visual depictions that I look at. It's an easy way to signal a lot of information, but it means that you're not determined by bio-race, it means that your identity is a matter of construction.

JVN [00:35:40] So when you say Celtic, does that mean, like, Scotland and, like, up there?

NANDINI PANDEY [00:35:46] Up to, like, kind of France, Scotland. There's, like, Gauls.

JVN [00:35:49] The Roman Empire went all the way the fuck up there! Didn't they conquer, like, England in like 1050? My husband's voice is just coming to me.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:35:56] [LAUGHTER] That's right. The Romans were pretty bad ass.

JVN [00:36:00] They were huge. These modern concepts of, like, enslaving people were based off of stuff that happened back in these, like, Roman times, right?

SARAH DERBEW [00:36:16] I think the danger, Jonathan, is importing the categories of enslavement. So there was absolutely enslavement for thousands of year before the Europeans started forcing people onto boats to bring them to America. But the use of color, of skin color was definitely a modern European invention, because as Greeks, Romans, Thracians, Scythians, as all of these ancient empires were going about their business and trying to conquer others, it was usually through prisoners of war that they even got captives, that they even got people that they then enslaved. It was rare that, "You look this way, therefore you must be of this people who deserve to be destroyed." There are records of some people, for example, Cato, I think it's Cato, the younger, Nandini? Who would always say at the end of any speech he would get at the Roman forum, "Carthago delenda est," "Carthage needs to be destroyed." So for him, Carthage in North Africa was definitely full of people that needed to be conquered. And Rome did that work and ended up destroying this nation. But for the most

part, it was all products of war. How you got into people that then became enslaved then it wasn't as chromatically systematic as it becomes later on.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:37:25] Absolutely. I mean, you could call Rome in a gruesome way, it's "equal opportunity" in the way that it enslaves, because you could be Black, you could be white, you could be from any part of the Roman world, and you could certainly become enslaved by the Romans. And in fact, it's kind of ironic because nowadays we associate the big costume dramas of the 1950s and sixties with, like, these British white people pretending to be Roman, right, like, in Spartacus. Once the Romans actually went to Britain, the joke was they were so far from civilization that they were just savage. They had no culture to bring. And Cicero was kind of joking, like, "These Britons, right? They don't know anything." Whereas actually, people from the East, people from Greece and Asia and Persia were thought to be much more sophisticated, very educated. So they might become enslaved in order to be like tutors, teachers, doctors. I mean, these things that we think of as very high class professions now—

JVN [00:38:15] Oh…

NANDINI PANDEY [00:38:16] I mean, almost all labor in antiquity is done, is done by enslaved people. I also just want to point to the coding. Even in the word "slave," the modern English word slave actually comes from Slavs. The Slavic people were actually white people who were enslaved very, very often while the institution of slavery was developing before it got super targeted at Africans but in Latin, the word for slave is "servus." That means someone who has been preserved or saved, i.e. if you went out and conquered a town, you had every right to kill everybody and you were doing them a favor by letting them be a slave. But then the Romans also had a system. They realized that it could equally happen to them. So there was a sort of reciprocity where the Romans might enslave somebody. But then there were ways, if you were an enslaved person, to become freed and then even to have the opportunity to gain wealth and to gain money and to rise through the ranks of Roman society very slowly but surely [especially across generations], in a way that does not compare at all to the Black experiences in the United States, where we're still fighting for civil rights for Black people in the United States.

JVN [00:39:19] I just hate that about people, like, this dominating and, like, this, like ownership of people is just like a gross human thing that I think is just gross.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:39:27] And people are equally able to sustain hypocrisies or like, cognitive dissonance across history. So in the ancient world, there are people who said, "All humans are basically the same. It's only luck that I was born to a wealthy parent and this other person was born to someone who was enslaved and therefore they too were enslaved." They knew that, but they still kept enslaving people. And you can see the same with, like, the American founding fathers, like, are we all created equal? Do we all have a right to liberty?

Well, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington had no trouble enslaving people while penning those words that so many people hold to as American values.

SARAH DERBEW [00:40:00] I think we don't have any examples in history of rapid expansion that does not require extreme violence and enslaving of other people. So, Jonathan, I agree with you that in an ideal world, we don't need this. But I think if we didn't have that, then even the concept of America or Greece or Rome would not have been able to sustain itself just because as you continue growing your borders, you need more resources. But if you do want to speed it up, or if you want to be the industrial center, either you exploit people or if you do it the fair way, it takes a really long time and then you may end up being the fodder for someone else. So it is really disheartening to see the ways in which these cyclical events in history tend to happen. But I do think that humans, given free reign, unfortunately, we can be really greedy and that's why it can be useful for us in our personal lives to try to find ways to sort of embody this ethos of, of community. And, "I give you a hand up and not a hand out. And I try to receive the same when I need it, too.

JVN [00:41:55] 100%. Tell me.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:41:57] I totally agree. I mean, just to complicate things even a little more, I would say the Romans actually had a more liberal system of enslavement and manumission than a lot of Greek places because they were so greedy, actually. So offering enslaved people occasional chances to be freed was actually a tool of control. You know, you're going to be more likely to obey your "owner" if you think that someday you might get out of this horrible condition of bondage. And then once the Romans actually freed people, it's almost, like, the modern equivalent of, like, an IPO or like an investment, because once they freed somebody, that person would owe them for life and they would have to, like, funnel any money back. If they went off and, like, did really well in business, they would have to give a cut to their former owner. So it's actually a way of, like, investing in people and protecting yourself and growing your own interest. That's the reason why the Romans freed so many people, actually. And I sort of think that we could learn a lesson from this in the modern world. It would actually help all of society, all of the economy, all companies, all educational systems, if instead of just kind of doing some token diversification and putting, like, a couple of Black and brown people here and there in positions of power, like, on our brochures, if we actually really invested in people because those people – a rising tide really floats all boats. And we haven't gotten that message out in this country the same way I think the Romans did understand it with their stories of Aeneas and Romulus.

JVN [00:42:18] So, Sarah, going back to ancient Greece. Women. Were we thriving? Were we not thriving? I think I asked Sarah this, too, but like, is there no just cute, normal gay love stories, just, like, the cute little, like, sweet ones when they grow old together. Maybe, like, we don't know that it *didn't* happen.

SARAH DERBEW [00:42:40] Well, the grow old part, Jonathan, is why I think I might have trouble finding an example. But even with Achilles, a great warrior who was a, a hero. He fought with the Greeks against the Trojans in the Trojan War. His boyfriend, his lover Patroclus was, they had a really sweet love story. It's unfortunate that Patroclus dies, but the way Achilles mourns his death is a really powerful scene.

JVN [00:43:01] He cries like someone who is so hurt and lost, like, the biggest, nicest dick ever. They're never going to get to see it again.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:43:09] And then he goes and murders ten thousand people.

SARAH DERBEW [00:43:12] Exactly. And so the flip side is he's so upset that he ends up becoming this war mongering person who just cannot stop killing.

JVN [00:43:19] Well, if you got dicked down that good and then someone fucking killed him, you would fucking go crazy, too, you know? And they probably deserved it. Like, they took his lover away. What about lesbians?

SARAH DERBEW [00:43:29] Ohhh!

NANDINI PANDEY [00:43:30] Sappho! Do you know about Sappho?

SARAH DERBEW [00:43:33] Sappho's poetry! So there's a lyric poem from the sixth century B.C., from the island of Lesbos. And she just writes about her lover in such open, unequivocally full of desirous ways. And it's really powerful to read because you see that she's someone who has status, she's a teacher, and she's talking openly about this woman she's in love with and homosexuality was thriving in the Greco-Roman world.

JVN [00:44:57] Do they grow old together?

SARAH DERBEW [00:44:59] So we have fragments. We have fragments, Jonathan. So we can imagine these beautiful hair flowing and the leaves in the distance. But there are also lyric poets who say the two best days for women are the days she's carried out of her house to get married and the days she's carried out of that house as part of the funeral pyre. So there's not a lot of freedom in terms of the ways that women are able to, at least in the texts we read, that women are able to really express themselves. There's a, a funeral oration that happens during the big Peloponnesian War, civil war between Athens and Sparta, and other city states join in. And one of the orators, this really powerful politician Pericles says it's about how the best women are the ones who don't speak at all. So there's not a lot of room for women in the political realm, perhaps in the domestic sphere they have a lot more power. In the religious sphere, we see them at festivals. They can be priestesses. If women are chaste their entire lives in the Roman world, they can become vestal virgins where they dedicate themselves to gods. And in Greece as well, they do have this deep connection with the supernatural world. But in

terms of, if I were a woman and I wanted to vote, or if I were a woman and I wanted to choose my partner, I would be hard pressed to find people to support me. It would be my father or my husband.

JVN [00:45:17] And Lesbos was only thriving for, like, a hundred years on one island. Or what?

NANDINI PANDEY [00:45:23] Well, we don't know what these women got up to at their festivals, you know, we'll never know. Their secrets will die with them.

SARAH DERBEW [00:45:30] And women were going together. There were deep friendships where they would go and they would dress up. And it was a time only for women. So the Thesmophoria was one type of festival where it's women and girls only. So we don't know what happened. And the fact that the word lesbian and the island of Lesbos seems to have a connection does show us that there is this looking back even in terms of thinking about lesbian identity or the word and this island of Lesbos. So I'm sure with future discoveries we'll be able to maybe complicate the story but find different instances of ways in which homosexuality thrived not just for men, because we have so much evidence for that. But really thinking about the ways that women, who have more limited spheres in which they could dominate, were also experiencing sexual pleasure, not just from their husbands.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:46:18] You also see examples of collective action amongst women envisioned, like, there's a [Greek] comedy called *Lysistrata* where the plotline is that these women are tired of their husbands being at war. So they decide to do this sex strike against their husbands. So the question is, what's the comedy there? Is the comedy the idea that women could do this and figure this out? I would also add that the reason I think why we have love between men so celebrated in antiquity and eroticized and there's so much art—I mean, it's amazing, right?—is precisely because women are not even considered equal human beings, like, they're considered to be, like, biologically defective, intellectually inferior. And if you can't see a woman as an equal and you're a man, then a man is, like, your only potential for true love, right? For the true love of equals. So it's actually interesting how there's this flipside of, like, this gender oppression that's actually giving us some of this, like, wonderful exaltation of gay love.

JVN [00:47:10] Who said that? Who said that about women back then, like, who was, like, the Francis Galton of that time, like, saying all this stuff about women?

NANDINI PANDEY [00:47:17] Everywhere! Biological treatises, medical treatises, like, it was thought that their, like, womb was floating. And that's literally what made women hysterical. The fact that they have, like, periods and their bodies changed was, like, deeply threatening and weird to these ancient thinkers. And the fact that they're, like, penetrated sexually made them kind of vessels where, like, they could be inspired by divine elements and, you know, become prophetesses or things. But basically their bodies are there for the purposes of reproduction and they're essentially chattel. Like, your wife is kind of somebody that you

basically own her reproductive capacity and she's there to generate children for you. They even thought that it was actually only the male sperm that created the child. And the woman was just kind of, like, an incubator and didn't really add a lot of material. So even, even in their very basic concept of reproduction, there's a famous play by Aeschylus where Athena, the goddess who is born from the head of Zeus, votes to exonerate a guy that has killed his mother because she basically thinks that even though she's a woman and she's the goddess of wisdom, she also kind of contributes toward the devaluation of mothers and motherhood and reproduction and all of that.

SARAH DERBEW [00:48:28] But perhaps a silver lining could be, Jonathan, the ways in which mothers and people who are related to men in power sometimes do find ways to wield their authority. So there are figures: Olympias, who was the mother of Alexander the Great, was said historically to have been someone who was really important in terms of the rise of this young Macedonian ruler who ends up ruling Greece. And she's someone who married into the family. She married Philip the Second and they have Alexander the Great. But she's able to have political influence on a scale that had not really been imagined before then. And if we look in the Roman period, Livia, who was the wife of Augustus, brings in her son to this marriage. So Tiberius is her son. And when Augustus, the First Emperor of Rome, dies, Livia is able to have her son be the new emperor, even though he's not related by blood to the ruler. And we see this with later people. Agrippina the younger is another woman who really vies for her son Nero to end up becoming emperor. So there are ways in which women will use whatever power they have, whatever political power they have, based on the men in their lives, usually their sons, to have some, some influence on the country and on the world in which they live.

It is unfair that so much of the ways in which they have power is related to men. And the danger becomes when we have right wing white supremacists using some of this or really famous ties to Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, which is a text where Xenophon, this writer from the fourth century BCE, is giving a manual to people about how to run your house. And in it, he says really vile things about what women should do. Some of the things that Nandini mentioned and this gets picked up in particular supremacist groups in ways that then become a shorthand for, "We just need to go back to those times." Curtis Dozier has a really great blog called Pharos, where he documents all of these ways in which the white supremacist structure is using and misusing and abusing the classical Greek and Roman world for their own purposes. So I would definitely point any listeners who want to see it and be able to really critically engage with it there, because it can be really difficult to engage with this material directly and to see the ways in which incels or other communities are using these texts to say that women have no place in in the academy or even outside of the house. And I know that Donna Zuckerberg has written about this, too, but there's so much important work being done to really dispel these careful cherry picking of particular quotes and using them as a catch-all for exactly where the world should be.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:51:00] I have a lot to say here, but I want to pause for a pop quiz for Jonathan.

JVN [00:51:04] I'm so ready to stop thinking about incels. So, yes, tell me. Like these fucking [UNINTELLIGBLE]. Why are we so fucked up? Everything's fine. We're fine, I'm not overwhelmed. Everything's fine. Give me. Give me the pop quiz.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:51:18] Okay, so even though we've deconstructed the idea that there was only Greece and Rome and that those are totally separate and there aren't wonderful other cultures thriving in other parts of the ancient world. Where would you rather be an enslaved person, in Greece or in Rome?

JVN [00:51:37] Based off of that one stuff that you said about. Well, I do hate a Bethenny Frankel clause. Maybe Greece? No! No, because there's no because of Gladiator like I would have. Because isn't that Greece? Isn't Marcus Aurelius in Greece?

NANDINI PANDEY [00:51:57] He's a Roman emperor. So he does go there as a gladiator.

JVN [00:52:00] Oh! So *Gladiator* is in Rome.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:52:02] [LAUGHTER] *Gladiator*'s all over the place.

JVN [00:52:03] Oh, so wait, so *Gladiator* isn't really historically accurate, then?

NANDINI PANDEY [00:52:06] [LAUGHS] That could be a whole other podcast. But I would pick Rome because you have a higher chance of being able to be manumitted and your children might have a chance of being free and there were a few more legal constraints, but that's me. Where would you rather be a gay man? Greece or Rome?

JVN [00:52:27] Rome?

NANDINI PANDEY [00:52:28] Well, I think you would have fun in either one, actually. How about a woman? Where would you rather be biologically or culturally or socially a woman?

JVN [00:52:37] You couldn't pay me enough to go live in those times because, like, I mean, you could have died of syphilis. And I'm, like, a huge slut so, like, so that would have been terrible. Like, it just never could have worked. And so, but I would have gone back for, like, a day just to pop in, see the fashion. So janiforms, what, what are janiforms and what can they tell us about diversity in, like, ancient Greece and ancient Rome?

SARAH DERBEW [00:53:01] Can I give you a question, too, Jonathan, since we're still in the pop quiz realm.

JVN [00:53:04] Yes!

SARAH DERBEW [00:53:05] So I want to ask you if you look at this image, so I'm showing you a cup that's at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and I usually will start talks with this. I'll ask you to describe what is the color that you see on the left side of this cup. So it's a cup with two faces that are connected and there are two different colors. But how would you describe the face on the left?

JVN [00:53:24] Terracotta.

SARAH DERBEW [00:53:26] Terracotta. Sophisticated!

JVN [00:53:29] Yeah, terra cotta.

SARAH DERBEW [00:53:29] Yes. You're so into the art historical world. And how would you describe the color of the face on the right?

JVN [00:53:36] Black.

SARAH DERBEW [00:53:38] Black. And these are definitely fair terms. And these are ones that get us into the mind of the viewer, but with the face on the left. So this is a clay colored face, terracotta light brown, however you want to describe it. A lot of museums will either leave it unmarked so they don't mention the color and they just say that there is a Greek woman and a Black person. Or they'll call it a white person. They'll say, "This is a white person and a Black person." And something that can be really dangerous is to use the language of whiteness, as we mean it today, to talk about people of the past, because the only white on this is the sclera, the white parts of the eye, and the teeth of the face on the black, but when we code it as white, we also implicitly tell viewers that, "This is the color, this is the ethnic group of people from a particular region in the past. And the blackness is foreign and the blackness is weird. And that's why we need to mention it in the label, but we don't need to focus on the color of the other side."

So these sorts of images I find really intoxicating to, to use a pun, because they were used in drinking parties. They were used in these formalized symposia where people would come together, you'd go to your friend's house, you'd recline on benches and drink, play games, men would have sex with men and other people would sing, enslaved people would be brought in for entertainment. Sometimes, rarely, women would come around. But this was really a hyper masculine space where people were able to perform and sing and put on different identities that they didn't always get to tap into outside of this symposium, outside of this party. And in this party they would drink from these cups. So the cup that I'm showing you is pretty small. It's no taller than about 20 centimeters. So from the base of the palm of my hand to the tip of my middle finger, but these would have been filled with wine that was

diluted with some water, and people would have been drinking, getting tipsy, using other drinkware as well. But these cups would have been used in a jovial setting.

So when we see it in a museum, it feels sterile and very maybe sophisticated because of the way the lighting is hitting it. And the AC is just right. These would have been thrown around. They would have been cracked or chipped. And the fact that some of these have two face means that they would have also been encountering the different people in these spaces and these stories would have come up about them. But we're getting two colors, this clay colored and the black. We're not getting just one and neither is, is being subjugated. They both seem to have this element of sophistication, of attention to detail, of the curls, of the hair and the earrings. The danger is when we start saying, "One is enslaved, one is a ruler," and we're just seeing slavery writ small on a piece of pottery.

JVN [00:56:10] Would this cup have been meant to show, like, maybe a partnership between, like, two different groups of people, like, because it's, like, you said, there is so much attention to detail. They're both gorgeous. Would it have been, like, a cup to celebrate, like some party or, like, commemorate maybe, like, a marriage or something?

SARAH DERBEW [00:56:25] It could be because the face on the left with the curly tendrils and the delicate features of the face, could have been a woman and the face on the right, maybe could have been a woman because of the earrings, maybe a man. But it seems like these two had some sort of harmony and together. These are two groups that perhaps were not in the symposium. They were not a drinking party because women were usually not invited to these spaces. So maybe there's a subversion in the two together, but there is this element of beauty, too. And sometimes when we look at beautiful things, they make us feel good. They can arouse us as well, too. So it's unclear the role that they played, but it's clearly part of some kind of game or some kind of jocular atmosphere that they're adding to. That's really powerful to think about, because if we look at both faces as beautiful and they don't describe one as having swollen features or the other one is having very sophisticated features, then we really start decolonizing our mind. So some museums will describe the lips of the black faces being swollen and swollen is not a compliment. Swollen is a remnant of language that's really violent.

JVN [00:57:26] Sure, sure, yeah.

SARAH DERBEW [00:57:27] But if we call them full or plump, it does add this sense of respect to them. And with the face on the left, if we think about maybe not calling the nose perfect, but maybe calling it pointed or calling them this thin and not ideal, then we really start showing that these are two sides of a coin rather than thinking about one as being ugly and one is being beautiful, which is what some art historians, unfortunately, have concluded.

JVN [00:57:50] Well, that just reminds me of how, like, a lot of times like science can be a product of its time. And if things were racist in its time, then a lot of the ways that people are going to describe stuff like can be racist or like some reflection on that.

NANDINI PANDEY [00:58:02] Let's rewind then and let's imaginatively go back to the drinking party Sarah was outlining. You're hanging out and we're all drinking. We're having a great time. So which side do you pick up and which side do you drink from, Jonathan? And what is the person across from you, your friend, seeing when you pick up that side?

JVN [00:58:24] So if you drink from the one side, the other friend sees the other face?

NANDINI PANDEY [00:58:30] Yeah. So either you're looking at one face, but then you're becoming the other face when your friend is looking at you. Or you can swap it around. Right? So you're really intimately engaging with these things. You were directly confronting an "other" and you are almost, like, becoming that other person. And it's a kind of joyous moment of play.

JVN [00:58:48] I hate to keep going back to this woman thing, but I just so, like, if you were a lady, you just couldn't be a slut if you wanted to? Like, women weren't allowed at the group sex things? Like, women couldn't be like super sexual in any of these cultures? Or they just didn't write about it because it could get you in trouble. So maybe they did, but it could put you at risk of getting in trouble? You want to go to the orgy, like, all those guys get to go to an orgy and you don't get to go, like, I would want to go to an orgy. In fact, I always feel bad for the girl at Fire Island that went with all of her gay friends. And she doesn't get to go to, like…

NANDINI PANDEY [00:59:21] There are plenty of examples. Like the people who would have been going to Fire Island would be the Roman emperors' daughters and wives, sometimes, because they had a lot of access. So there was an interesting fact that Augustus's daughter and granddaughter, Julia, they were both called Julia. They were both having affairs. They were living it up, you know, and Augustus was, like, "Sometimes you forget that you're my daughter." And she says, "No, no, I'm just always conscious I'm your daughter." So that's why she's able to, to sleep with whoever she wants, because she's actually kind of above the law because she's so well-connected that she can't be punished.

JVN [00:59:51] Oh! So but normal people can, like, own it, ever, maybe because it was just too dangerous?

NANDINI PANDEY [00:59:55] It depends on your, your circumstances. I mean, there's an empress Messalina, who's married to an emperor. And she was supposed to have actually, like, worked in a brothel for fun because she just loved sex and she loved this chance to kind of, I think, like "slum it," right. And do a sort of lower class work.

JVN [01:00:10] But then she was making money off of people who, like, were, like, in harm's way and stuff. So that part sucks. So, like, she was, like, sex positive but with, like, a nasty twist cause she was, like, mean to people.

NANDINI PANDEY [01:00:20] Yeah, they all get punished in the end and they certainly get punished by the historical record, for sure.

JVN [01:00:25] [SHUDDERS] As we are talking about, like women owning their sexuality in ancient Greece, in ancient Rome, there's a lot more that we need to unpack. One thing that comes to me is when we got to interview Professor Jue Guo, who's an expert on early China, which, if my memory serves me correctly, is like 0 to 1000. And a lot of that stuff is, like, happening at the time that we're talking about, you know, a little farther away, which is really interesting, like, these epicenters of, like, culture and like just epicenters of things that were happening. But she told us about, like, how a lot of times history is written by the winners and like the people who were kind of dominating. And so maybe that's why we don't have, like, as much history because women were, like, not being treated with, like, societal, like, respect and it was, like, like, super problematic. So I feel like we might have to do a cliffhanger on this part, class, which, like, I think Sarah and Nandini will very graciously come back to talk to us a little bit more, but I don't want to end, like that totally. So Sarah, I'm going to turn the floor to you on any final thoughts, where people can follow you in the meantime, the floor is yours.

SARAH DERBEW [01:01:30] Sure. Thank you, Jonathan. I appreciate you bringing up women because we do tend to write over them. We're not paid much attention because we don't have the resources. And after students get over the frustration of not having it, we immediately move to the men. So it is useful to think about how we can rehabilitate archives even when we don't have resources. And I definitely turn to a lot of Black theorists to help me in this. There are a lot of people, Christina Sharpe, Saidiya Hartman, different people who are really theorizing how do we fill in the blanks, Tiya Miles. All of these historians, scholars of English literature who are really, really creative in being rigorous about how we can read gaps and silences that I think the field of Greco-Roman studies could really benefit from. In terms of my own work, my book came out this year, 2022, *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity*. The coupon code for anyone who loves a good deal, is "UBGA2022" to get 20% off. And the book is filled with different anecdotes, stories, Black Studies, African Studies, Urban Studies, really trying to think about broadly encompassing a field of classics that has all of these different things and Twitter my handle. I think that's the right word. I'm a child of the nineties but my spirit, my spirit is in the twenties, but I would not want to live in the twenties. But my handle is @blackantiquity, so definitely I try to put articles that are of interest to be there and upcoming events that I had different opportunities to speak about my work.

JVN [01:02:53] I'm smashing the follow button on @blackantiquity, we'll also include a link to your book and the discount code in whatever you're listening to episode on. We've got to push that. We love that work, I'm following you yesterday is so exciting. I love that. Sarah, is there any final thoughts that you want to or do you want to just, like, save it till we meet again?

SARAH DERBEW [01:03:12] Let's keep thinking about capacious ways of imagining blackness and we'll get into it more next time.

JVN [01:03:18] Also want to tell us what capacious means again, really quick?

SARAH DERBEW [01:03:22] Expansive, opening up your mind, looking beyond tomorrow and yesterday. Let's break down barriers of time and geography. And this put on all kinds of multiverse goggles. Marvel, let's go, let's go.

JVN [01:03:33] Yes! Okay. I'm obsessed with that. Also, I just wrote down: "Was Nubia the original Wakanda?"

SARAH DERBEW [01:03:42] Let's talk about it! Nubians were warriors! They were so good at archery, they were known for it.

JVN [01:03:47] We're going to learn more about it next time. Also, Nandini, tell us where we can follow you, what we can see of you, and where we can follow your work.

NANDINI PANDEY [01:03:55] Thanks. It's been so much fun. I'm at @global_classics on Twitter. You can also look me up and follow me on academia.edu. You check out some of my lectures on my project on Roman diversity, which I'm currently writing for Princeton University Press. But I just want to, you know, speaking of capaciousness, I just want to say, I mean, Sarah's totally right. There are so many people left out of the archive of antiquity. The vast majority of people, especially enslaved or non-elite people, non-male people are all getting left out. So there's a couple of different fixes. One is to change how we do classics and what kind of methods we use to uncover the past. And sometimes we have to be creative. We have to read sources against their grains. We have to use our imaginations to follow the trajectories of people that didn't get to have their own voices in the record.

But another way that we can change this is actually by being more capacious about who does classics and who are voices of authority in classics. I mean, usually when you mention classics to someone, they imagine this, like, old white dude in, like, a tweed jacket, you know, talking in front of a white statue of Homer. And I think just by having us on the show and by having scholars like Sarah do such wonderful work and kind of really get innovative scholarship out there, and by representing people of color that have historically not been included in the discipline of classics, in the professoriate, in the public face of scholarship, I think that's a really great start. So I just want to thank you, Jonathan, for doing all you've done to make this space possible and make this conversation possible and bring our message to your large and wonderful audience.

JVN [01:05:23] I just wanted to learn stuff and, like, you know, I just have this, like, penchant for it, as does our show of, like, getting the best guests for the job. It's not our fault we have great taste, you know what I'm saying? So and then also, too, our listeners, if you are just like scintillating, titillating, like so excited that this is going to be a two part episode and you have special questions based off of what we've talked about so far, please submit that in our DMs.

That's so exciting. So we really never get a chance to do that. So we're, like, burgeoning on, like, new things we've never tried before. So I'm obsessed with that for us. Sarah, I'm obsessed with you. Nandini, I'm obsessed with you. Thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious. I can't wait for us to have another talk.

SARAH DERBEW [01:05:58] Thank you. Thank you, Jonathan.

NANDINI PANDEY [01:05:59] We can't wait either.

JVN [01:06:00] Ah! You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our guests this week were Professors Sarah Derbew and Nandini Pandey. You'll find links to their work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thank you to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, please introduce a friend, you can show them how to subscribe. If you would just help us out a little bit. But thanks so much for your support, not to ask you for another thing, because we just love you so much. You can follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. On our socials, we are just following up on all of our past guests, stories that we're following, if you're not following @curiouswithjvn, honey, you have an opportunity to get even more out of the podcast. So follow us over there. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim. Thanks for listening, we'll see you next time.