

# Liberation philology: decolonizing Classics in Africa, a native view from the South

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Εἰ δὲ εἰσι ὑπερβόρειοι τινες ἄνθρωποι, εἰσὶ καὶ ὑπερνότιοι ἄλλοι.

But if there are people who live in the far North, there are also others who live in the furthest South.

Herodotus 4.36.4–5

## I. INTRODUCTORY LIBERTI

The mind of the African is empty, and he has a great idea of what he calls 'getting knowledge.'

James Stewart, Missionary and Educationalist<sup>1</sup>

If you were a manumitted slave, the child of a slave or descendant of enslaved or dispossessed people or, say, you were a member of your society's lowest castes and you were given the opportunity to study, and perhaps even to take up scholarship as your life's work, your vocation, what subject would you, should you elect to learn?

William Sanders Scarborough was born in slavery in the deep South of the United States. His father, Jeremiah, was *libertus*, a freeman. Nonetheless, William De Graffenreid, the owner of Scarborough's mother Frances, magnanimously allowed Jeremiah to marry her, his property. She gave birth to her son in Macon, Georgia, in 1852. Scarborough would go on to become one of the first Black Hellenists in the United States. Over a productive life he was a schoolteacher, a professor at Wilberforce University in Ohio, an early Black member of the American Philological Association (the first was Richard Greener, his friend and fellow classicist), the first Black member of the Modern Languages Association, the president of Wilberforce, and a founding member of the Negro Academy and of the NAACP. He published a popular primer, *First Lessons in Greek* (New York, 1881), and a study of Aristophanes, *The 'Birds' of Aristophanes: A Theory of Interpretation* (Boston, 1886).<sup>2</sup>

The editor of Scarborough's autobiography, Michele Ronnick, described Scarborough's publication of the Greek text as a great advancement for his era and his achievement as "invalidat[ing] commonly held prejudicial opinions such as those evident in John C. Calhoun's statement that 'if he could find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax, he would then believe that the negro was a human being

<sup>1</sup> From an undated pamphlet by Stewart, cited in De Kock 1996: 90.

<sup>2</sup> On Black American classicists, see also Ronnick 2004: 85–102; and note 8 below.