

It would be impossible to conclude this attempt to chart the role of ancient art and literature in both advancing and subverting ancient racial formations without turning once more to Alexander the Great and his own textual legacy, which reaches even further than the limits of the ancient *oikumene* that once inspired him. For the exploits of Alexander were embellished in innumerable outlets, including a colourful novel known as the *Alexander Romance*, which survives in many different versions and perhaps has its origins as early as the third or second century BCE in Egypt.¹⁵⁴ Alexander's literary image was also developed in two prominent Arabic texts, *The Sayings of Philosophers* and *The Secret of Secrets*, the former based in part on a text in Syriac – and both texts, like the rest of the Alexander corpus, would be transmitted into multiple languages over time, and read and reproduced in an array of national contexts.¹⁵⁵ Surely such a richly diverse afterlife begs the question: to whom does Alexander ultimately belong?

CHAPTER IV

WHOSE HISTORY?

Germans are tourists and Frenchman are tourists but Englishmen are Greeks. Such was the sense of their discourse, and we must take their word for it that it was very good sense indeed.

Virginia Woolf

In her story 'A Dialogue upon Mount Pentelicus', Virginia Woolf details the pretensions of six Englishmen on a visit to Greece. At one point, the group of tourists – a label they themselves eschew – attempt to speak to their 'escort of dirty Greek peasant boys' in Greek, or, as Woolf phrases it, 'in their own tongue as Plato would have spoken it had Plato learned Greek at Harrow'. When faced with the incomprehension of their listeners, the reaction of the Englishmen is unanimous: 'one word came aptly to their lips; a word that Sophocles might have spoken, and that Plato would have sanctioned; they were "barbarians."' 'To denounce them,' Woolf adds, 'was not only to discharge a duty on behalf of the dead but to declare the rightful inheritors.' Using the term 'barbarian', one whose abiding power we have witnessed, as Woolf wryly notes, the Englishmen effectively align themselves with the ancient Greeks, while putting in place those modern Greek 'imposters'.¹

The English tourists soon begin a conversation with one another, arriving 'upon the tough old riddle of the modern Greek and his position in the world today' and inspiring one of the group to 'demonstrate with great shocks of speech and of muscle what it was the Greeks had been, and what it is that they are no longer'. Another member of the group, however, calls attention to the ways in which the ancient Greeks have become a store for

all manner of projection, a process by which, he proclaims, the name Greek 'can mean in short all that we do not know and as in your case all that we dream and desire'. The speaker then proposes with devastating accuracy: 'Indeed there is no reason why you should read their writings, for have you not written them?'²

In this final chapter, I want to examine a range of assumptions and desires that make Woolf's Englishmen identify so adamantly with the Greeks, adhering to them so closely, in fact, that they seem to have 'written' or even become the Greeks themselves. What dreams and aspirations have attended such claims to a classical inheritance? Or, perhaps more importantly, how have such identifications with – and inventions of – classical antiquity and its structures of thought shaped our modern racial ideologies? I will survey a range of appropriations of the classical world here, but most of my sites of discussion, like the controversial *Black Athena* itself, will admittedly bring us back again and again to the modern nineteenth century, a period with whose giant windmills we still endlessly seem to tilt.³

Although various art and architectural traces of ancient Greece and Rome had survived through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance initiated a sweeping revival of interest in the classical world.⁴ (Just how certain texts were there to be 'rediscovered' is itself an intricate tale; suffice to say, that although Irish monks may have 'saved civilization',⁵ Arab intellectuals were also central to the transmission of an important set of ancient texts.⁶) From that point on, the ever-widening circulation of Greek and Roman texts and translations, drawings of classical ruins, and ancient artwork would forever transform the ways in which the classical past and present were understood in relation to one another. At times, the 'old riddle' of antiquity's relation to later eras would be a difficult one to solve, especially when reverence for the ancient world was confronted by the emergent belief in progress – the conviction, reinforced by Darwinism, that younger civilizations inherently outstrip their elders.⁷ Despite such intermittent challenges, dialogue with the classical world would continue to flourish over the centuries and Greek and Roman antiquity would provide an irreplaceable, if malleable resource

for the articulation of a range of concepts central to modern life, not least race and nation.

The ancient environmental theory itself initially provided a key edifice for the organization of modern racial thought, surviving in both broad outline and via the Hippocratic essay *Airs, Waters, Places*.⁸ A summary of *Airs, Waters, Places* was found among Montesquieu's papers, and he presumably relied heavily on it for his seminal work *On The Spirit of the Laws* (1748),⁹ a treatise that 'took it as axiomatic that the character of a people depended on the climate to which they were exposed.'¹⁰ As Mark Harrison explains, 'Classical doctrines of environmental determinism came into vogue during the eighteenth century because they offered an explanation of the material and intellectual progress experienced by European countries over the previous two centuries.'¹¹ The differences allegedly produced by climate also served in more direct terms to help justify a range of contemporary processes, not least empire-building: 'India, it was thought, had been subjugated because her climate had made its inhabitants supine and fatalistic, while the bracing weather of northern Europe had produced a dynamic race, fit for conquest and exploration.'¹²

By the nineteenth century, the theory of environmental determinism was starting to yield to biological theories of race based on skin colour. Indeed, Harrison argues that the British recognition that they were *not* adapting to the tropical climate of India helped precipitate a greater reliance on newer scientific theories of race throughout the British Empire.¹³ Given that climate was often retained as an explanation for varying skin colours, however, these two theories at times intersected, even as their treatment of the source of racial difference – biology versus geography – emphatically diverged.¹⁴ In the antebellum American South, as Mart Stewart notes, environmentalism lasted into the nineteenth century in part because such ideology was critical to the southern justification of slavery: '(t)hat Africans could apparently . . . endure such labour better than whites was proof positive to some that different climates had moulded the races differently and to others at least that Africans were historically better "acclimated" to hot climates.'¹⁵ Still, when environmentalism was eventually dislodged, many

adherents to the newer biological theory used it not to discredit slavery, but simply to offer a different rationale. Drawing on concepts like polygenesis, Africans were no longer thought to be conditioned by climate for the gruelling labours of slavery, but rather able to undergo it because they were fundamentally different from white Southerners.¹⁶

Given the nineteenth century's advancement of a range of theories designed to buttress Eurocentrism and – in more material terms – European imperialism and colonialism, it is no coincidence that this century provides a key foundation for Martin Bernal's controversial study of Greek cultural origin: *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. With one eye on the ancient world, Bernal's multi-volume project aims in part to reveal the many attempts beginning in the modern nineteenth century to portray the origins of ancient Greek civilization as an entirely autonomous phenomenon, an assertion that corresponded both with the emergence of classics itself as a modern academic discipline and new scientific theories of race.¹⁷ Explicitly founded on attempts to connect modern Europe and ancient Greece, the actual 'doing' of classics was thus deeply implicated from its very start, in Bernal's view, in the promotion of an historical and transnational genealogy of 'whiteness'.¹⁸

In foregrounding the influence of specific intellectual and historical movements on the study of western antiquity, *Black Athena* has often been compared to Edward Said's *Orientalism*,¹⁹ but Bernal strongly insists on the differences between the two, writing that 'his (i.e. Said's) work is literary and allusive, mine historical and pedestrian. More importantly, I do not accept his view that Orientalism – or for that matter ancient history – are almost entirely self-referential'.²⁰ As this statement suggests, Bernal's positivism and absolute belief in an historical truth are apparent throughout *Black Athena*. Bernal's attempt to dispel the racist influences on various models of Greek origin is therefore not a preface to claiming that all perceptions of history are comprised by ideology, but rather a way of clearing the fog in order to see 'what actually happened.' At the same time, the terms of Bernal's analysis, and especially the spectre of race itself, remain a sticking point for his wildly ambitious project.

Coming to terms with *Black Athena*

The subject of *Black Athena* seems deceptively straightforward; as Bernal writes: '*Black Athena* is essentially concerned with the Egyptian and Semitic roles in the formation of Greece in the Middle and Late Bronze Age.'²¹ As Bernal well knew, however, by opening examination of Greece and its origins, including its putative dependency on civilizations to the east, he was lighting a powder keg – openly defying the assumption of Greek self-sufficiency or 'miraculism' that had bolstered many intellectual and nationalist projects in the west. In *Volume 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985*, Bernal conspicuously began his work not with demonstration of the actual historical origins of Greek culture, but with an extensive historiography of how that origin has been presented, beginning with the Greeks themselves. In Bernal's view, the ancient Greeks subscribed to an 'Ancient Model' of their own cultural development, one that recognized a period of Egyptian and Phoenician colonization around 1500 BCE, as well as the continuing and profound influence of these cultures on their own.

Once established, this 'Ancient Model' stood until the modern nineteenth century, at which point what Bernal calls an 'Aryan Model' was developed precisely to promote the alleged purity of Greece and its superiority over Egypt. Notably, the rise of the Aryan Model did not pivot on the discovery of any new 'internal' evidence from the ancient world, but rather, as Bernal argues, was driven by external ideas concerning race, progress, and Romanticism, including growing identification of Greece as the birthplace of modern Europe. In general terms, the Aryan Model posited that 'Greek culture developed as a result of the mixing between an aboriginal "Pre-Hellenic" population and one or more invasions from the North by Indo-European speakers.'²² While there was little evidence for the earliest occupants of Greece – as we have seen, the Greeks themselves vaguely construed them as 'Pelagians' or the like – classicists insisted that these 'Pre-Hellenic' groups had 'been "white" or "Caucasian", and certainly not Semitic or African.'²³ The Aryan Model itself, Bernal proposes, actually took two forms: a 'Broad' version that developed first which, while it

adamantly denied the role of Egypt, continued to allow for the Phoenician (i.e. Semitic) impact on Greek culture, and an 'Extreme' one that eventually repudiated even the prospect of substantial Phoenician influence in light of contemporary anti-Semitism.²⁴ Ultimately, Bernal aimed to restore a 'Revised Ancient Model', which accepted both the stories of Egyptian and Phoenician colonization, albeit dating them to the first half of the 2nd millennium BCE, and an invasion of Indo-European speakers in the 4th or 3rd millennium BCE.

The discipline of classics was founded on the study of ancient languages, a practice called 'philology', and Bernal's attempts to demonstrate early foreign influence on Greek culture by examining ancient Greek remains central to his approach. Ancient Greek itself has long been classified as an Indo-European language, a classification with which Bernal generally agrees. But Bernal argues that the earlier population of Greece, the 'Pre-Hellenic' population, spoke a language that left little trace in Greek, and so contends that the significant number of non-Indo-European forms in Greek (i.e. those not attributable for linguistic reasons to the presumed Indo-European invaders) must derive from a different source.²⁵ In looking to foreign influences instead, Bernal thus seeks pointedly to discredit a linchpin of the Aryan Model: 'the non-Indo-European speaking "Pre-Hellenic" peoples upon whom every inexplicable aspect of Greek culture has been thrust.'²⁶ More specifically, Bernal claims that the non-Indo-European elements in Greek 'can be plausibly derived from Egyptian and West Semitic' in accordance with 'a long period of domination by Egypto-Semitic conquerors'.²⁷

Despite more neutral-sounding claims that *Black Athena* focuses on 'Greek cultural borrowings from Egypt and the Levant (my emphasis)'²⁸ as Bernal's reference to the role of 'Egypto-Semitic conquerors' suggests, he stresses the impact of domination throughout his work. In fact, Bernal himself points out that all three models outlined in *Black Athena* – including his own Revised one – 'share one paradigm, that of the possibility of diffusion of language or culture through conquest', a prospect that 'goes against the dominant trend in archaeology today, which is to stress indigenous development'.²⁹ Recognizing that such assumptions are central to Bernal's

approach, some critics have suggested (not without irony) that Bernal himself thus relies heavily on nineteenth-century models of top-down cultural transmission in seeking to unseat the Aryan model.³⁰ Arguments about colonization, in particular, remain one of the most controversial parts of *Black Athena*, raising questions we have considered in Chapter I, that is, how myth and material evidence can be used to unlock early Greek history.

Classicists have long been receptive to the idea of links between Greece and the Near East, although they have traditionally limited substantial Near Eastern influence on Greek culture to a relatively late era known as the 'Orientalizing Period', c. 750–650 BCE, a standard convention whose motives Bernal rightly questions. In recent years, though, many classical historians have been willing to push the date of contact further back, albeit generally interpreting the influence in economic rather than political terms. Sarah P. Morris writes of *Black Athena* that '(m)y treatment of the same period (the Late Bronze Age) and some of the same evidence . . . imagines not conquest or colonization, those military encounters exaggerated by ancient rulers and overestimated by modern historians, but regular and mutually profitable transactions.'³¹ In a similar vein, David O'Connor acknowledges that although there is evidence of people from the Aegean – most likely traders – travelling to Egypt by the time of the Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty (c. 1574–1293 BCE), it is unclear whether Egyptians, in turn, were in the Aegean.³² More broadly, O'Connor argues that 'Egyptian objects (or objects reflecting Egyptian styles) found in the Aegean, and Aegean objects found in Egypt' are not sufficient to confirm the particular phenomenon of colonization, especially when ancient Egyptian colonization in Lower and Upper Nubia left clear evidence of its arrival in the material record.³³

Invasions and migrations have long featured prominently in discussions of Greek racial origins because they provide a useful device for explaining dramatic changes in the archaeological record, not to mention positing a single source of group identity. Among his sequence of historical invasions, Bernal includes the 'Dorian Invasion' from northwest Greece – an event associated with the so-called myth of the 'Return of the Heraklids'

(children of Hercules), which he dates to the twelfth century BCE.³⁴ While this invasion is not central to his own work, Bernal's perfunctory mention of it belies the fact that the 'Dorian invasion' has been hotly contested by modern scholars, and such debates shed light on the hazards of reconstructing early Greek history from later mythic narratives.

The Dorians, one of the major Greek ethnic sub-groups, were commonly associated with the Peloponnese in antiquity. Sparta would eventually serve as the quintessential Dorian city, and in the shadow of the Peloponnesian War, this identification gave a powerful structure for elucidating Sparta's antagonism with Athens, the paradigmatic Ionian city, suggesting that their conflict derived from fundamental differences of character and not merely their respective political aspirations. The work of Karl Otfried Müller, a nineteenth-century German philologist, helped shape modern perceptions of the so-called 'moderation, simplicity, frugality, and steadfastness' of the Dorians, qualities that not only allegedly distinguished them from the Ionians, but also made them, like Müller, 'uncannily Protestant'.³⁵ Significantly, German identification with the Dorians would continue into the Nazi period.³⁶

But where did the Dorians come from? Relying on myths that claimed the Dorians had invaded the Peloponnese following the Trojan War, archaeologists at the end of the nineteenth century conflated the alleged invasion of the Dorians with the fall of the Mycenaean palace civilization, a wide-scale destruction that was readily visible in the archaeological record, as was a subsequent transformation of material culture that quickly became attributed to the Dorians.³⁷ Much of this archaeological evidence has been re-evaluated, however, and Jonathan Hall responds to the barbed question of whether the Dorian invasion 'ever actually happened' by clarifying the different possible meanings behind such phrasing:

If . . . by the 'Dorian migration' we mean a single, massive influx of immigrants from central Greece, then the answer must be no. If we mean that every member of the population of Dorian cities in the Classical period was genetically descended from an original inhabitant

of central Greece, then again – no. And if we mean that 'real blood ties' existed between the populations of cities as distant as Argos, Melos and Halikarnassos, then – almost certainly not . . . This is not to say, however, that there was no reality to 'being Dorian' in the sixth or fifth centuries.³⁸

Hall's sense that the 'Dorian migration' was 'real' in that it provided the grounds for 'being Dorian' in the sixth or fifth centuries marks the importance he places on interpreting Greek myth within the context of its mobilization rather than the murky past it purports to explain. Looking more closely, Hall notes the inconsistencies between stories of the Dorian invasion and those of the 'Return of the Heraklids' and argues that there were initially two distinct myths – 'that of the Dorians of Erineos, perhaps first developed at Sparta, and that of the Herakleidai, engineered in the Argolid' – which were eventually fused.³⁹ The version of the myth that we find in our evidence thus 'dates back no further than the mid-sixth century – that is, some five or six centuries after the supposed date of the migration'.⁴⁰ Given such gaps in time, any core truth behind the myth seems forever out of reach, but, as Hall proposes, we can still try to illuminate the ways in which the transmissions of these myths of origin served those telling them. To take a more modern (if hackneyed) example: we may never know the historical basis, if any, of a story like George Washington's chopping down of the cherry tree, but surely we can trace the role of the re-telling of such a tale in the bolstering of our perceptions of America's first President, and so perhaps American identity itself.

Bernal, on the other hand, places a fundamental 'truth' at the heart of Greek myth, even if its trappings have been obscured over time, and he employs foundational figures from Greek myth in arguing more concretely for episodes of foreign colonization. Bernal thus treats Danaos as an historical personage, dating his arrival in Argos to around 1720 BCE as part of a general 'Hyksos Egypto-Canaanite conquest' (the Hyksos being a Semitic-speaking group who conquered Egypt at around that time after which, according to Bernal, they infiltrated the Aegean).⁴¹ Using Aeschylus'

Suppliant Women to support his theory, Bernal argues that while the play's surface may mask Danaus' actual role as colonizer (portraying him as dependent on Greek help instead), Aeschylus nonetheless employs persistent wordplay alluding to the Egyptian and Hyksos subtext in the myth.⁴² In short, despite certain adjustments to suit the Greek audience's sensibilities, Bernal believes that Aeschylus' play holds traces of a real historical event: Greek colonization at the hands of Hyksos invaders arriving from Egypt.

Many classicists have argued strenuously against such literal treatment of Greek myth. Edith Hall, as we have seen, asserts that the meaning of foreign origin changes over time in myth; more specifically, she argues that such foundation myths emerge not from a context of Egyptian (or Hyksos) colonization, but 'Greek colonization, as the poet-genealogists sought to provide their Hellenophone public, now spread over all corners of the Mediterranean, with mythical progenitors and founders who had prefigured their own activities in foreign parts (*sic*).'⁴³ Such arguments underscore the fact that perceptions of colonization themselves must be strictly historicized (how would Greek audiences make sense of episodes of foreign colonization in their distant past given their own colonization efforts beginning in the eighth century?), as well as the function of mythic narrative at any one point in time. Given his tendency to focus on what is told via myth rather than why or when and to what audience – surely, first and foremost, Aeschylus' play addresses not a generic Greek audience, but a specifically Athenian one – Bernal's handling of Greek myth remains a major point of contention in evaluations of his work, and some scholars have similarly challenged his complementary use of Egyptian legends about the pharaoh Sesotris.⁴⁴

On the other hand, the most unconditional praise for *Black Athena* tends to emphasize the broader service Bernal has performed in bringing modes of knowledge construction, and more specifically the pervasiveness of Eurocentrism, to public awareness.⁴⁵ Robert Young has insisted that 'Bernal's most significant intervention, *though to some extent unacknowledged even by himself*, is the fact that he places race, racism and the racialization of knowledge at the core of his argument' (my emphasis).⁴⁶ Significantly, despite his attempt to indict centuries of scholarly racism,

Bernal himself primarily employs the terminology of cultural contact and cultural formation when talking about antiquity itself; yet, as Michaels has pointed out, the affect of 'culture' is frequently supplied by race, and controversies over the racial connotations of Bernal's project continue to proliferate – encouraged in no small part by Bernal's provocative title and the spotlight it placed on the goddess Athena's presumptive 'blackness.'

Coming to terms with 'black' Athena

Observing the power of Bernal's title, Molly Myerowitz Levine has argued that *Black Athena* extends far beyond Athena – a potent figure in her own right – to 'impl(y) an unequivocal stand on the skin colour and/or race of the ancient Egyptians'⁴⁷ (a phrase whose hedging reliance on 'and/or' should not go unremarked). Bernal has nonetheless sought to counter such presumptions and at one point asserted that the title 'African Athena' would have more accurately reflected his aims.⁴⁸ Yet, Bernal did little to help his cause when he 'explained' that his 'publisher insisted on retaining it, arguing: "Blacks no longer sell. Women no longer sell. But black women still sell!"'⁴⁹ Still, in Volume 1, Bernal did attempt to provide a brief explanation of the rationale behind his titular goddess' skin colour:

... the earliest Greek representation of Athena is that from Mycenae, in which her limbs are painted, in line with Minoan convention – taken from Egypt – of representing men as red/brown and women as yellow/white. Nevertheless, it is the conjunction of Neit/Athena's Egypto-Libyan origins, Herodotus' awareness of the connection, and his portrayal of the Egyptians as black, that has inspired the title of this series.⁵⁰

Bernal later elaborated his specific claim about Herodotus stating, in essence, that, although classical writers applied various skin colour terminology to the ancient Egyptians, Herodotus had described Egyptians specifically with 'black skins and woolly hair' (a passage briefly discussed in Chapter I).⁵¹

Even more, Bernal outlined his own views concerning the ancient Egyptians, professing that he was both 'dubious of the utility of the concept "race" in general' and 'even more sceptical about the possibility of finding an answer in this particular case'. Stating that he believed 'Egyptian civilization was fundamentally African and that the African element was stronger in the Old and Middle Kingdoms, before the Hyksos invasion, than it later became', Bernal added: 'The actual African nature of Egyptian civilization, however, is not relevant to our present discussion, which is concerned with the ambiguities in the *perceived* "racial" position of the Egyptians' (sic).⁵² Bernal's designation of race as a socially constructed phenomenon – one whose complexities are only magnified when applying it to historical populations – has been almost universally overlooked by his critics. Indeed, many scholars have harshly criticized his assertion in the same passage that there were some pharaohs 'whom one can usefully call black',⁵³ meaning that, if alive today, certain Egyptian pharaohs would invariably fall into that modern category, regardless of the racial structures that mattered in their own lifetimes. Bernal's attempt to place the debates about ancient Egypt within modern racial formations is admirable in some ways (albeit potentially misleading as we have seen), but, as he rightly declares, the topics of Egyptian civilization and 'actual' race of the Egyptians are actually quite peripheral to his approach. In point of fact, Bernal shows little interest in whether – or how – the ancient Greeks defined the Egyptians and Phoenicians racially nor does he pause to consider the skin colour of the Greeks either as he outlines the relentless methods by which whiteness has been assigned to them. It is perhaps with no little irony, then, that *Black Athena* has been plunged headlong where her appearance seems to lead, that is, into longstanding debates about the skin colour of the ancient Egyptians.

Following its publication, *Black Athena* rapidly entered the American consciousness, and it was often connected specifically to the field of Afrocentrism. The September 23, 1991 issue of *Newsweek* that placed Cleopatra on its cover (see Introduction) sought to answer its own question about her racial identity by probing both the controversies surrounding

Black Athena and what it considered Afrocentrism's related attempts to transform the American school curriculum. Molefi Kete Asante has been a central figure in Afrocentrism since the 1980s,⁵⁴ but its doctrines with regard to ancient Egypt have a much longer genealogy. Stephen Howe has identified a substantial body of writing about ancient Egypt among African-American clergymen beginning in the mid-nineteenth century; and, by that time, such interpretations of Egypt

already contained the themes which were to re-echo through all the subsequent decades: identification with ancient Egypt as a great black civilization, at least partly the creation of 'Ethiopians', 'Negroes', 'Cushites' or 'sons of Ham'; belief that civilization originated in Africa and was carried thence to Greece and the world; (and) assertion that this past greatness was a source both of racial pride and of hope for future achievement.⁵⁵

By the twentieth century, the conviction that Egyptian culture was itself indebted to its southern neighbour Ethiopia would gain even further popularity, circumventing the prickly debates about the race of the ancient Egyptians, while also transferring priority to a Christian country, one that had been able to rebuff Italian attempts at colonization.⁵⁶ In the decades following, a number of prominent black leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey would continue to evoke ancient Egypt and ancient Africa in addressing contemporary racial concerns, references that often sought explicitly to assert, by illustration, the potential capacity of black populations.⁵⁷

Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912), a native of St. Thomas who, when denied an advanced education in the United States, moved to Liberia, has been credited with the formulation of Pan-Africanism, and Blyden at times alluded to the classical world's positive treatment of Blacks in calling attention to the extreme racism of the modern west.⁵⁸ The origins of Afrocentrism as a distinct intellectual and educational movement, on the other hand, are most closely associated with Cheikh Anta Diop (1923–1986), a Senegalese

scholar and advocate of Pan-African unity whose insistence on the links between Greece and Egypt, including belief in early Egyptian colonization of Greece, in many ways anticipated *Black Athena*.⁵⁹ One prominent trademark of Afrocentrism – its explicit critique of Eurocentrism and western culture – has infuriated many critics. Such open antagonism is captured well by the title of a work that has been central to Afrocentrism: George G. M. James' *Stolen Legacy* (1954) – a work whose title Michaels seemingly evokes in his assertion of the racial pathos behind claims about 'stealing culture'.

Decisively linking Egypt and Africa, James' work bluntly declared that its objective was 'to show that the true authors of Greek philosophy were not the Greeks; but the people of North Africa, commonly called the Egyptians; and the praise and honour falsely given to the Greeks for centuries belong to the people of North Africa, and therefore to the African Continent'.⁶⁰ *Stolen Legacy* remains a passionate if problematic treatise, not only indicting Aristotle and Alexander the Great for robbing a library that was built only after their deaths, the famed library at Alexandria, but also seeming to rely on a vision of a mystical Egypt that comes straight out of Masonic literature.⁶¹ On the other hand, critics of Afrocentrism are not immune from their own distortions and emotionally-charged rhetoric. The classicist Mary Lefkowitz has written somewhat puzzlingly that '(t)he Greeks, *least of all peoples*, deserve the fate to which the Afrocentrists have subjected them (my emphasis),⁶² and the title of Glen Bowersock's review of Lefkowitz's *Not Out of Africa* and her jointly-edited volume *Black Athena Revisited* likewise demonstrates – or perhaps parodies – her general anguish: '*Rescuing the Greeks* (my emphasis).'⁶³

Despite launching a much-needed challenge to the deep-rooted historical and intellectual biases that have sustained Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism at times nevertheless reveals its own set of precarious foundations. Its insistence on the universal meanings of 'blackness', for example, advocates a dangerous racial essentialism, one that is not avoided by reference to a collective and homogenous 'black culture' instead. So, too, some of its more extreme adherents have practiced an ominous return to earlier racial science,

offering a range of 'theories' about the role of melanin and climate in dictating human destiny.⁶⁴ Not without some merit, then, does Kwame Anthony Appiah observe about Afrocentrism that 'the most striking thing ... is how thoroughly at home it is in the frameworks of nineteenth-century European thought', making Afrocentrism, in short, 'simply Eurocentrism turned upside down'.⁶⁵ Like Bernal himself, Afrocentrism thus seems to run up against the inescapability of nineteenth-century thought, even when pursuing an aggressive critique of its continuing legacy in modern thought. And finding new frameworks for approaching the ancient Egyptians has proven to be an equally onerous task.

Coming to terms with the ancient Egyptians

As *Black Athena* well demonstrates, debates about race and the 'capacity' for producing advanced civilizations have long placed ancient Egypt at their centre. By the mid-nineteenth century – alongside attempts to promote Greece over Egypt – there were also increasing efforts to make Egypt 'white' as an alternate way of 'explaining' its accomplishments. Turning to the American context, Young has argued that such a project found 'its rationale not in a general conspiracy of European racism in nineteenth-century academia, but in the particular context of nineteenth-century American racial theory in its attempt to justify and rationalize slavery in the years leading up to the American Civil War'.⁶⁶ In their seminal work *Types of Mankind* (1854) the American anthropologists J. C. Nott and George R. Gliddon thus adapted the research of S.G. Morton, who had sought through skull analysis to prove that the ancient Egyptians were Caucasian.⁶⁷ This method of analysis was patently circular, for it defined 'Egyptian as Asiatic Caucasian' and so made it seem that only those 'crania' approaching the "Caucasian" ideal were truly Egyptian.⁶⁸ Conversely, skulls that correlated with a 'Negro' type were interpreted as evidence of an ancient slave population in Egypt: 'Here, then, was an ancient historical precedent for a white society with black slaves.'⁶⁹ Meanwhile, other scholars sought to deny Egyptian achievement by suggesting that its culture was reliant on

foreign invasions – that racial cure-all for many historians – either by a ‘dynastic race’ (whose origins varied)⁷⁰ or a foreign group known as the Hamites, a term whose referent evolved as it moved away from the original idea of a group suffering from the biblical curse of Noah.⁷¹ Such a ‘Hamitic hypothesis’, not coincidentally, often identified the Hamites explicitly as ‘Caucasian’.⁷²

Anthropologists still study the physical remains of ancient Egyptians today, although they generally deny that their methods aim to demonstrate a causal relationship between who the Egyptians were biologically and how they achieved their impressive civilization.⁷³ In comparing the physical features of ancient Egyptians with other groups, most scholars conclude that ancient Egypt was a ‘mixed population’, even though there is debate over precisely what types composed that ‘mix’ (especially to what degree the Egyptian population shows affinity with populations further south) and how that ‘mix’ may have changed over time. Howe summarizes one prevailing view: ‘as the evidence of self-depiction would lead us to expect – this was a people predominantly of indigenous African origin, whose skin hues may have exhibited just, or almost, as wide a range as do those of peoples across the contemporary “Saharo-tropical” region, from Algerian Berbers to southern Sudanese.’⁷⁴

As the comparison to people inhabiting the region today implies, when describing the ancient Egyptians, scholars often draw on both implicit and explicit comparisons to modern populations. Frank Yurco accordingly argues for a range of skin colours among ancient Egyptians by using language that strongly intimates an unbroken continuity with the present:

The ancient Egyptians, *like their modern descendants*, were of varying complexions of colour, from the light Mediterranean type (like Nefertiti) to the light brown of Middle Egypt, to the darker brown of Upper Egypt, to the darkest shade around Aswan and the First Cataract region, *where even today*, the population shifts to Nubian (my emphasis).⁷⁵

Perceptions about modern Egyptians clearly hold a significant, if often tacit, position in debates about the Egyptian past. Although there is some attempt to restore Egyptian agency through such analogy, modern Egyptians have nonetheless also been subjected – like Woolf’s modern Greeks – to accusations of presumed ‘decline’. Thus, for many outside observers, ‘(t)he fact that by the nineteenth century Egypt’s population was clearly made up of a mixture of Arabs and Africans (was) held not to disprove the Caucasian thesis, but rather to explain Egypt’s long decline.’⁷⁶ Furthermore, as Soheir A. Morsy has shown, the stakes continue to be high for residents of Egypt since debates over ancient Egyptian skin colour still stalk the political status of contemporary Egypt, including the treatment of Egyptian identity by US immigration.⁷⁷

But what would it mean to restore agency to ancient Egyptians in these debates as well? Levine, a classical scholar, applauds the intervention of physical anthropologists in the *Black Athena* debate, advocating that physical anthropology is ‘especially critical for prehistory – a time long before any written records existed – where the mute remains of bodies and bones wait silently until given their voice as historical witnesses by the physical anthropologist.’⁷⁸ But is the restoration of past voices really that simple? What if ancient bodies prefer to remain silent on this matter or, indeed, do not speak our language? Yurco has insisted that ‘(t)he whole matter of black or white Egyptians is a chimera, cultural baggage from our own society that can only be imposed artificially on ancient Egyptian society.’⁷⁹ Rather than superimposing our values onto deceased Egyptian bodies, can we turn instead to the ‘evidence of self-depiction’ that Howe cites? The ancient Egyptians themselves called Egypt *Kmt*, ‘Black Land’, a term that has often been used to suggest their identification as ‘Black’, although it seems more likely an attempt to draw a distinction between the fertile soil of the Nile Valley and the ‘red land’ of the arid desert.⁸⁰

Egyptian art itself presents a complicated medium for determining what ancient Egyptians ‘really’ looked like – or thought of themselves – given that certain traditional conventions governed figural representation, including the practice of using different skin colours to represent men versus women,

with women (as in ancient Greek art) generally depicted with lighter skin tones. In the same way, it is not always possible to discern the motive behind the choice of materials: are two figures of Tutankhamen covered in black resin in order to approximate his skin colour or was black resin used because it was a valuable commodity and helped display the pharaoh's grandeur? The question is made more complicated when comparing these figures to other representations that show Tutankhamen with lighter skin.⁸¹ In general, pharaonic art does not seem to attempt realism (at least the way we define it today), especially when it comes to individual appearance. In contrast, albeit centuries later, scores of mummy portraits from Roman Egypt have been discovered, portraits which, given their variety, seem to convey the appearance of actual individuals. Significantly, these individuals are shown with a range of skin colours, and there is no suggestion that the difference in skin colour correlates to any difference in social status.⁸²

Although it remains difficult to pinpoint the precise racial meaning of individual portraits, pharaonic art did depict foreign groups in ways that marked them as visually different, both from the Egyptians and from one another. 'Nubians' and 'Asiatics' are frequently shown in New Kingdom art with recurring physical features that seem to distinguish them, and the message of Egyptian superiority in these contexts is often explicitly announced by showing these other groups in postures of submission or defeat. In one eighteenth-century tomb, an image portrays a series of foreign groups (e.g., 'Asiatics, Cretans, and Nubians') bringing tribute to Tuthmoses III, and the 'Nubians, from the Nile Valley south of the First Cataract at Aswan, are painted in darker skin tones than the Asiatics, and are depicted with more prognathous jaws than the Egyptians'.⁸³ A more unusual scene on Queen Hatshepsut's mortuary at Deir-el-Bahri depicts an expedition to 'Punt' (presumably 'located along and to the west of the Sudanese/Eritrean coast'), whose figures include 'a grossly obese "queen"' and her bearded husband.⁸⁴

Persistent debates about the ancient Egyptians signal the prominent place they have been accorded in thinking about race and past civilizations. When seeking better understanding of the ancient Egyptian view of themselves and others, however, it is important not to suspend Egypt in some

kind of romanticized and unchanging world, but rather to acknowledge the changing socio-historical contexts in which the ancient Egyptians encountered other groups, including the extent and manner of their engagement with civilizations to the south and east, and not merely their north, i.e. Greece. In contrast to the current enthusiasm for treating Egypt as strictly 'Mediterranean' – a turn S.O.Y. Keita rightly suggests needs more investigation, especially if it serves merely to re-encode Egyptian 'whiteness' under different guise⁸⁵ – van Binsbergen notes that we have yet 'to situate Ancient Egypt within the full range of great African civilisations, from that of Kush . . . to the great civilisations of West, East, and Southern Africa throughout history right up to the present times'.⁸⁶

Although surviving evidence suggests that civilizations to the south of Egypt developed later, there are a number of cultures – located in what is today southern Egypt, the Sudanese Republic, and Ethiopia – that need to be added to our map of ancient history. Kush, as we saw in Chapter I, was the Egyptian name for a series of states that developed in the upper Nile Valley beginning in the second millennium BCE. Generally speaking, developments in Kush followed the ebbs and flows of Egyptian history, flourishing when the Egyptian state faltered and vice versa;⁸⁷ the pharaohs of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty were, in fact, all Kushite.⁸⁸ A strong Kushite capital had developed at Kerma in the second millennium BCE, but that territory was later colonized by Egyptian pharaohs of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth dynasties. Later Kushite centres would develop in Napata then, beginning around 250 BCE, in Meroë.⁸⁹ Meroë itself finally collapsed in the fourth century CE when faced with various pressures, not least the rise of Axum in the north of present day Ethiopia and Eritrea. The city of Axum subsequently controlled a vast empire, and even after its political importance waned, it remained a major hub of Christianity.⁹⁰

From ancient to modern empire

In 1937, ancient Axum was catapulted into the modern world when Benito Mussolini brought an obelisk from the ancient Ethiopian city to

Rome to memorialize the recent Italian invasion, erecting the obelisk prominently in Rome's Circus Maximus. As part of a peace settlement, the Italians agreed to return the obelisk to Ethiopia in 1947, but it would take nearly sixty years to finalize the process.⁹¹ The obelisk has had a long history of appropriations by the west; one century before Mussolini, Napoleon had 'revive(d) the obelisk's glamour, and by the late 1880s the US government had just erected its own, in the form of the Washington Monument.'⁹² Later, the Ethiopians would dedicate their own obelisk to mark the end of Italian rule.⁹³ The inspiration for Mussolini's theft can be traced even further back, however, for Mussolini often portrayed his political efforts as an attempt to restore the glory of ancient Rome, an empire once ruled by that original obelisk-stealer: Augustus. Central to Mussolini's claims were massive construction projects designed to 'remake' the city of Rome in all its former grandeur, ironically destroying many historical remains in the process.⁹⁴

Adolf Hitler made a six-day state visit to Rome in May 1938, during which he spent time visiting the city's monuments and attending a special exhibit celebrating 'the bimillennary of Rome's "second founder"', the Roman emperor Augustus, an event clearly designed for 'the political advantage of Rome's "third founder," the Duce.'⁹⁵ In Volume 1 of *Black Athena*, Bernal traces the evolution of German ideas about Greece between the years 1790 and 1830, and Greece certainly retained its impressive hold on German intellectual and political life in the years following.⁹⁶ Hitler himself professed great admiration for the Spartans and at the end of the war apparently 'drew courage from the recollection of Leonidas's last stand at Thermopylae.'⁹⁷ But Nazi emulation of ancient Rome was also pervasive. Keenly aware of the problems presented by Rome's so-called 'decline and fall' (which Nazi ideology attributed to both 'race-mixing' in the later empire and the rise of Christianity), Hitler nonetheless drew repeatedly on the Roman empire as a model of ultimate state power.⁹⁸ Roman echoes appear throughout Nazi architecture, not least in the emulation of its sheer monumentality, which Hitler believed communicated the insignificance of the individual in relation to the group.⁹⁹ In 1936, Hitler charged Albert

Speer with designing a new plan for the capital, which he intended to rechristen 'Germania' at its planned completion in 1950.¹⁰⁰

The idea of 'Germania' is without question the most powerful Roman legacy in German thought; as with many Roman geographic labels, 'Germania' acquired female form in antiquity, and she later personified both the abstract idea of a German people and, after German unification in 1871, that nation in practice. While the form and meaning of 'Germania' would continue to evolve throughout German art and literature,¹⁰¹ its origins can be traced to a single Latin text: Tacitus' *Germania*. The reception of Tacitus' historical writings took many turns over the centuries, depending in large part on whether his perceived views conformed to contemporary intellectual movements. Tacitus' cynicism about political power, for example, caused him at times to be associated with Machiavelli. In other periods, Tacitus was seen as a revolutionary, and his popularity took a noticeable leap in France during the late eighteenth century. Across the Atlantic, he was both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson's favorite classical writer.¹⁰²

In contrast to Tacitus' other historical writings, the *Germania* occupied a fairly stable position across the centuries. The *Germania* had been 'rediscovered' in Italy in the fifteenth century and soon reached Germany, where it was widely circulated and accepted not only as a literal record of Germany's past but also as an *Ur*-account of what made Germans essentially German. From Tacitus came the idea that the Germans were a kind of 'noble savage', innately characterized by a love of liberty, a fierceness in battle, a kingship that ruled by election and consent, the equal treatment of women in marriage, and – more than anything else – a purity of blood. Tacitus' interest in contrasting the 'simple' Germans and 'over-civilized' Romans further helped German intellectuals draw a distinction between 'Romanists' and 'Germanists' in their own time – a divide that was essential to Reformation thought.¹⁰³ The notion of racial purity, of course, eventually found its way into Nazi Germany with devastating consequences, and acknowledging such dire results, Arnaldo Momigliano once proposed that the *Germania* 'should be given high priority among the hundred most dangerous books ever written.'¹⁰⁴

Separating out conflicting strands of historical thought among Nazi leaders, Volker Losemann has observed that '(t)here was undoubtedly a contradiction between Hitler's own positive assessment of Roman antiquity and the extreme admiration for German pre-history by other leading Nazi ideologists'.¹⁰⁵ Still, both views were presumably accommodated, perhaps because the Romans had never been able to vanquish the Germans, enabling a plausible, if uneasy, truce between the two historical archetypes. It would require a much trickier negotiation for nineteenth-century British writers and politicians, who were progressively forced to confront their own conquest at the hands of Rome, even as they were aggressively pursuing an empire to call their own.

Coming to terms with Roman conquest

In identifying with classical antiquity, would-be claimants face a series of choices, not least whether Greece or Rome better serve their purpose. Greek and Roman antiquity have each held sway at different times and in different places, acquiring radically different connotations and conveying not only divergent political messages, but also different features presumed to epitomize each society, such as Greek aestheticism or Roman engineering. Roman antiquity, moreover, presents not only the possibility of pagan versus Christian identifications, but also two opposing forms of state structure, one that violently emerged from the other: the Republic and empire. The fall of the Roman Republic was itself subjected to a shifting set of interpretations in Britain beginning in the eighteenth century, closely following changes in contemporary political thought, with Julius Caesar often pitted directly against his eventual successor Augustus in assessing Rome's greatness.¹⁰⁶ The Victorian admiration for ancient Greek culture has attracted considerable scholarly attention,¹⁰⁷ but British intellectuals and politicians also turned to ancient Rome for a very specific purpose: to weigh the merits of their own imperial vision.

While the idea of empire had been discredited in much of Europe by the exploits of Napoleon and his successors, by around 1870, the British

nonetheless started to investigate more openly the terms of their own growing empire, a process that was increasingly public following the debate in Parliament over whether Queen Victoria should assume the title of Empress of India in 1876.¹⁰⁸ As part of these deliberations, comparisons to ancient Rome became increasingly prominent, and the analogy lasted in various forms into the twentieth century.¹⁰⁹ In its most overt form, this strategy involved direct identification with the Romans, a connection facilitated by the emphasis placed on classics in the contemporary British education system.¹¹⁰ Even more, the putative bond between the two empires drew on British perceptions of the so-called civilizing mission of Roman expansion, an idea central to the British justification of its advances in the British Isles and later its presence in India.¹¹¹

Still, the modern British appropriation of ancient Rome required considerable dexterity. British writers, for example, were acutely aware of Rome's eventual decline and sought to account for that possibility in the conduct of their own empire, discussions that became more fraught as anxieties about their own success grew.¹¹² In earlier eras, allusions to Rome's fall had been cloaked in romantic fantasy; thus, Joseph Michael Gandy's 1830 painting could lovingly portray the Bank of England as it would look in ruins in thousands of years' time.¹¹³ But later the prospect wrought greater unease and a more explicit opening for critique of British imperial policies. Norman Vance has identified a number of parodies of Edward Gibbon's hugely influential *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) that purported to be looking back on the fall of the British empire, including one that presented itself as a twenty-first century Japanese text book.¹¹⁴

Of particular concern was the way in which the Romans had allegedly been corrupted internally over the course of their foreign expansion, and some British writers expressed awareness that British rule in India was far more despotic than the political system practiced at home, seeking to frame their own harsh methods as necessity rather than a harbinger of internal decay.¹¹⁵ Following the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the remains of a male skeleton still holding his lance – discovered decades earlier in Pompeii – became 'a

celebrity' in British art and fiction, epitomizing the virtues of extreme duty and self-sacrifice.¹¹⁶ By the end of the century, however, the British would be much more concerned with the defenders of the British empire in flesh. Believing Roman decline had been precipitated by its increasing embrace of luxury and decadence, the current British constitution was scrutinized closely: 'Was Britain, were the British, still fit to rule, physically and mentally as well as morally?'¹¹⁷ To assuage such concerns, public discourse increasingly turned to ways of developing the ideal (male) British imperial body and moral practice;¹¹⁸ it was to meet these demands that General Baden-Powell conceived the Boy Scouts.¹¹⁹

The spectre of decadence and accompanying anxiety over the masculine body, however, also allowed Irish figures like George Moore and Oscar Wilde to use 'strategic alignment with Rome as a way of getting back at the mad dogs and Englishmen who sometimes saw themselves as neo-Roman world-rulers as well as the colonists of Ireland'.¹²⁰ Wilde, in particular, publicly imitated the Roman emperor Nero, pointedly going to Paris in 1882 to have his hair styled in the fashion depicted on surviving busts of the emperor.¹²¹ Appropriations of Rome were thus both dynamic and potentially subversive, demonstrating that while 'on one level allusions to imperial Rome did serve as a "heuristic reinforcement" in British imperial ideology, on another level, they also served to unravel and confront much that was rigid about categories in imperial ideology'.¹²² In addition to querying masculinity, the comparative vision of Rome also raised troubling questions about race, a term central to British rule in India.

India played a complex role in the nineteenth-century European engagement with antiquity, for it was in India in 1786 that the idea of an Indo-European language group was first developed when a British supreme court justice serving there 'realized that definite resemblances could be detected in the grammatical structure of Sanskrit (the classical language of ancient India), Latin, ancient Greek, Gothic, Celtic, and Persian'.¹²³ Following the initial classification of Indo-European, 'enthusiasm for all aspects of Indian culture . . . raged from the 1790s to the 1820s'.¹²⁴ The reception and motives, however, varied; in England, interest in India correlated closely

with its own imperial project – in fact, study of India was first initiated by the East India Company, and, as Javed Majeed has shown, at least one committee would advocate the inclusion of Sanskrit as one of the possible examination subjects for the Indian Civil Service¹²⁵ – while in Germany, where there were no such political aspirations, the project took a distinctly romanticized tone.¹²⁶ Despite the historical affiliations that might be deduced from Indo-European as a concept, British rule nonetheless maintained stringent boundaries between the British and native Indians, at least in theory; ideologies of race were critical to British strategies,¹²⁷ and the fear of miscegenation featured prominently in narratives throughout the colonial period.¹²⁸

When looking at the Roman empire, British writers were tested in particular by the ways the Romans had presumably been able to assimilate their conquered subjects. Recognizing that they were not doing the same in India, British writers believed that the Romans had not been forced to deal with populations racially different from themselves (a theory the Romans would not themselves endorse, as we have seen, but which seemed self-evident from the perspective of modern Europeans), and that the Romans had achieved such an end through their extension of citizenship, that is, by opening the gates in political rather than racial terms.¹²⁹ Even as they faced concerns about their own racial practice of empire, the British were also forced to come to terms with the complexity of their own Roman past. For identification with the Romans was undermined by one simple fact: Britain itself had once been conquered by Rome, making Roman Britain and British India uncomfortably close.¹³⁰ Richard Hingley has carefully documented the role of the Roman past in British imperial thought, and he argues that two specific solutions were developed specifically to counter this dilemma, both of which were pursued simultaneously: the attempt to reclaim a heroic British (i.e. Celtic) past and the attempt to move even closer to Rome.¹³¹ Both strategies would require reconstituting racial ideas about 'Englishness' itself.

The Romans had left Britain in 410 CE, and, although Britain subsequently experienced invasions by the Normans and Danish, the Victorian

era placed greatest emphasis on the invasion of the Anglo-Saxons when reconstructing racial origins, positing that the Anglo-Saxons, arriving after the Romans had left, had either killed the native Britons or driven them to the north and west. Such a narrative served not only to link the English to 'superior' Teutonic (i.e. German) roots,¹³² but also allowed them to distinguish themselves from other populations in the British Isles, i.e. the perceived descendants of the lowly 'Celts' in Ireland, Scotland and Wales. When contemplating Roman Britain initially, then, English writers did not see themselves as descended from the conquered population of Britain, whom they conceptualized in derogatory fashion as a kind of 'Celtic subaltern'.¹³³

As Germany became an increasing threat to Britain, however, there was a concomitant need to downplay German roots, and English writers soon promoted a theory of 'mixed-race' origins instead. In this version, while it was acknowledged that a number of groups had come together to form the modern British population, emphasis shifted to the role of two key components: the native population and their Roman conquerors. In order to make the native blood more 'attractive', the idea of a weak 'Celtic subaltern' was thereafter replaced by strong native figures who, it was thought, had actively resisted Rome, such as Boadicea, Caratacus, and Calgacus, as well as the newly-invented Beric.¹³⁴ So, too, while British authors had previously fashioned Britain as the heir to the Roman empire in an abstract sense,¹³⁵ it was now further claimed that the Romans had contributed to the genetic pool, so the British could conceive of their Roman inheritance 'in racial as well as moral terms'.¹³⁶

The impetus to refine views of racial identity in regard to the Roman past was precipitated by another significant trend: the increasing availability of material culture from Roman Britain. Visible remains of the Roman past in Britain had long been recorded,¹³⁷ but Francis Haverfield initiated the growth of Roman archaeology as a professional practice in the 1900s and 1910s.¹³⁸ Strongly influenced by the writings of Theodor Mommsen, Haverfield's work focused on questions of 'Romanization',¹³⁹ i.e. the impact of Roman conquest on the Britons as witnessed in material terms. Haverfield firmly believed that the study of material culture was

critical given that 'Roman culture carried with itself Roman identity'¹⁴⁰ – an assumption that, as we have seen in Chapter II, still structures many treatments of ancient material culture. Culture, then, became an important way of defining the Roman legacy and bolstering ideas about race. More specifically, the native British population, or at least its upper class, could be conceptualized as fully 'Romanized', meaning that 'the stigma of conquest' was alleviated.¹⁴¹ That the Romans had not reached every part of the British Isles likewise meant that the English could use ancient material culture to define themselves against those 'proximate others' who had not received the uplifting benefits of Romanization.¹⁴²

Even as English writers were denying sites like Ireland equal rights to the Roman heritage, by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Irish 'hedge schools' were themselves teaching Greek and Latin. The classical past, moreover, had its own place in Irish identifications; Laurie O'Higgins contends that '(a)ll sectors of eighteenth-century Irish society held that a bond with the classics was constitutive of Irish identity'¹⁴³ – that classics could be a source of enrichment and not merely, as the English would have, a mode of Irish deprivation. Bernal has asserted that 'from the beginning, the chief purpose of those advocating a humanistic education . . . was to forestall or avoid revolution'; he added: 'Indeed, the cult of the Classics served quite effectively to maintain the status quo'.¹⁴⁴ While depressingly true at many historical moments, exclusive concentration on the powerful when evaluating classical influences on the modern world has recently been challenged by scholars looking more closely at other sites of reception, such as Ireland, where structures of class, race, and power made very different demands on antiquity. Arguing that Irish peasants interpolated their own lives into classical texts, Siobhán McElduff proposes that '(w)hile Irish peasants might have been somewhat unusual in their relationship to the classics, they were by no means unique',¹⁴⁵ meaning that it is time to radically rethink the possibilities of 'our' classical heritage, maybe it is even time – as Woolf might phrase it – to write new Greeks and Romans.

Yet, as Bernal has demonstrated, classical antiquity has often been asked to draw insistent lines between 'black' and 'white', and I would like to

re-examine this particular charge from another angle – through the eyes of Phillis Wheatley, a young American slave whose knowledge of Latin helped challenged the boundaries between slave and free, challenging contemporary assumptions about who could qualify as human.

Setting new terms: *Classica Africana*

On March 10, 1742, a lecture entitled 'Is slavery compatible with Christian freedom or not' was delivered in Latin at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands.¹⁴⁶ Drawing on classical writings on slavery, as well as biblical passages, the author concluded that the two were, in fact, compatible – not an unusual thesis for its time. But the speech could be considered remarkable because its writer, Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein, had himself formerly been a slave. Grant Parker, meticulously locating the lecture in its broader historical context, notes that Capitein has occupied an ambivalent place in modern study of slave narratives. Parker, however, places special emphasis on the dominant role of Christianity in Capitein's views, asserting '(i)t would be a wilful and inaccurate reading of the treatise to imagine that it sought in the first instance to justify slavery when the goal of Christian conversion is so clearly at its core.'¹⁴⁷

Christianity provided a major source of identification for another classically educated slave, Phillis Wheatley, whose sometime defence of slavery has also provoked mixed response. Wheatley, likely 'a native Wolof speaker from the Senegambian coast' was taken into slavery in 1761, at around the age of seven or eight.¹⁴⁸ She was purchased upon her arrival in Boston by the merchant John Wheatley, after which she received the name 'Phillis' and converted to Christianity. Taught by her owner's daughter, Wheatley evidently learned English quickly, and, as John Wheatley later wrote, she had 'a great Inclination to learn the Latin tongue'.¹⁴⁹ Having published her own poetry as early as 1767, Wheatley first received international attention for an elegy she wrote on the occasion of the Reverend George Whitefield's death in 1770. Around 1773, Wheatley travelled to London with her mistress, where she published *Poems On Various Subjects, Religious*

and Moral, the first 'by a person of African descent in the English language, marking the beginning of an African-American literary tradition.'¹⁵⁰ She was manumitted upon her return,¹⁵¹ but with the advent of the Revolutionary war in 1775, she had difficulty getting more of her work in print. Wheatley eventually died in poverty in 1784 at the age of thirty or thirty-one.

In her writing, Wheatley was greatly influenced by Latin authors like Vergil, Ovid, and Terence, as well as the neoclassical writer Alexander Pope, and Tracey Walters suggests that, to Wheatley, 'classical revision was about artistic license as well as poetic validation.'¹⁵² In the poem, 'To Maecenas', Wheatley pointedly evokes Terence – presumably well aware of accounts that Terence had once himself been a slave – whose paired glory from the Muses and origins in 'Afric's sable race' were critical to her affiliations.¹⁵³ On a few occasions, Wheatley openly refers to herself when defining her poetic voice, even calling attention to her slave status. In a poem addressed to Harvard students, Wheatley markedly portrays her passage into slavery in positive terms because it had provided the route to Christianity. Thus, in contrast to the 'Father of mercy' with a 'gracious hand' who receives her, Wheatley portrays her 'native shore' as 'the land of errors and *Egyptian* gloom (*sic*)' and 'dark abodes'.¹⁵⁴ Later in the same poem, she declares that it is '(a)n *Ethiop* tells you (*sic*)'. In another poem addressed to the Earl of Dartmouth, however, Wheatley evokes a more painful image of slavery, using her own separation from her family to illuminate the threat of British tyranny:

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was the soul that by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe below'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?¹⁵⁵

Wheatley's poetry was published on both sides of the Atlantic, and she became known to many major figures of her era; Voltaire, for one, praised her talent. So dangerous to the ideology of slavery, which relied on seeing slaves as sub-human, was her ability to compose original poetry, however, that she was forced to undergo a public examination in 1772 by eighteen prominent Boston men, who were charged with determining whether she was actually the author of her work; they eventually issued a statement confirming her authorship.¹⁵⁶ Perhaps her most notorious critic was Thomas Jefferson, whom she never met in person but who remained sceptical about the capacities her poetry evinced, dismissively writing that '(r)eligion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Whately (*sic*); but it could not produce a poet'.¹⁵⁷ And the gap between the two is worth underscoring, for while Wheatley used her knowledge of classics to define her literary voice, a deeply personal commitment, it was also necessary for claiming the status of human being itself. Her white male contemporaries like Jefferson, on the other hand, felt nothing like the same pressure. Jefferson's abilities in classics could be harnessed with great public acclaim to the charting of a new nation.¹⁵⁸

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American slavery continued to inform the relationship between classics and many African-American intellectuals. Michele Valerie Ronnick has devoted particular attention to the writings of William Sanders Scarborough (1852–1926), who was born into slavery in Georgia, but eventually became Chair of Greek and Latin at Wilberforce University.¹⁵⁹ In the early part of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois, a one-time professor of Greek and Latin at Wilberforce, would engage in very public debates about the relevance of classical education with Booker T. Washington, a former slave who had founded the Tuskegee Institute, with Washington placing greater value on vocational training for rising black students.¹⁶⁰ At the same time, a number of black women like Anna Julia Cooper were also pursuing a classical education, often continuing their engagement with the classics by becoming teachers – one of the few professions open to women at that time – of Latin or other ancient subjects.¹⁶¹

Alongside such debates about whether classics should (or did) mean different things to black and white Americans, black artists were also developing their own creative responses to the classical tradition. As Tracey Walters has shown, it is possible to trace a distinct set of conversations black women writers, following in the footsteps of Phillis Wheatley, forged with the classical tradition, including Henrietta Cordelia Ray, Pauline Hopkins, Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, and Rita Dove.¹⁶² In particular, Walters has pointed out the recurring use of 'mythic mothers' like Demeter and Niobe in their writings.¹⁶³ Patrice Rankine, on the other hand, makes a very different character from Greek myth central to his rich study of Ralph Ellison: Ulysses. While Ulysses provides inspiration in many parts of Ellison's work, Ulysses (Odysseus to the Greeks) also serves well, Rankine notes, as 'a metaphor for black classicism' more broadly¹⁶⁴ – a proposition whose possibilities find infinite echo in the series of vibrant paintings created by the African-American artist Romare Bearden based on the *Odyssey*.¹⁶⁵

Beyond the United States, classicists are now exposing other sites of black classicism.¹⁶⁶ Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson have explored the particular draw of the mythic house of Laius – and its two most prominent figures, Oedipus and Antigone – on black writers in both Africa and the African diaspora.¹⁶⁷ Beginning with the eighteenth-century Jamaican poet Francis Williams, whose work predates Wheatley's, scholars from a range of disciplines are also exploring both Caribbean classical education and its literary traditions,¹⁶⁸ traditions the Greek Odysseus has also frequented through Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros*. In reflecting on his own literary dialogue with the *Odyssey*, Walcott lyrically reflects that 'it is perfectly valid for me to think of an archipelago in which there are boats and pigs and men, scared people and a succession of islands – home to me – to think of the *Odyssey* in terms of the Caribbean'.¹⁶⁹ Unusual, but by no means unique: such black writers illustrate beautifully that although the Greek and Roman world has often been a place of alienation to those without power, it can also offer a place to come home to and rest.

Conclusion: coming to terms with the classical past

One attempt to ascertain the cause of Rome's demise phrases the question with great aplomb: did Rome fall or was it pushed? Reports of the end of the classical world have been greatly exaggerated. But by way of closing, I would like to return to Woolf's short story, and consider how the 'dirty Greek peasant boys' might take ownership of their own history. For even as Bernal purports to find in classics a wholly anti-revolutionary impulse from its very inceptions, he is forced to acknowledge one powerful nineteenth century exception: the Greek War of Independence.¹⁷⁰ The story of the War of Independence, which broke out in 1821, is often told through the 'philhellenes', that band of romantic idealists – estimated at between 1100–1200 total volunteers¹⁷¹ – who travelled from all parts of Europe to help liberate Greece from its Turkish oppressors. The narrative's impact derives in no small part from the disillusion and death many of the young men faced when actually arriving in Greece, and continuing veneration of their romantic sacrifice is surely fostered by the death of Byron at Missolonghi. Such poignant images, of course, conceal a series of more complicated facts – for one, that religious difference was the source of much of the western anxiety about the conflict and that many of the philhellenes were, in fact, professional soldiers who found Greece their only possible destination given the anti-revolutionary wave sweeping other parts of Europe.¹⁷²

I do not intend to debunk conventional narratives of the Greek War of Independence here, but I do want to reconsider our reliance on classics itself as the primary intellectual framework for making sense of the war and its aftermath, especially since such devotion to the ancient Greeks was a much more ambivalent prospect within Greece itself. The Greek poet George Seferis captures beautifully both the pride and the burden wrought by the classical past when he writes of waking 'with a marble head in his hands', one he 'did not know where to put down'.¹⁷³ And, as Michael Herzfeld has shown, the Greeks developed their own academic modes of investigating Greek identity after the wars, in part as a response to the burdensome demands of 'performing' Hellenism for outsiders. Herzfeld explains:

The development of an indigenous folklore discipline was . . . a sustained, often painful attempt to discern order in chaos, on the part of a people whose national identity was often threatened by the very nations which had appointed themselves as its guardians. It gave the Greeks a chance of applying one of their most celebrated ancient proverbs – 'know thyself' – by providing a framework for discovery. In this sense, Greek folklore studies were an organic part of the making of modern Greece.¹⁷⁴

Through folklore studies, the Greeks (or certain Greeks), then, were able to come to terms with their own past in a way that complemented – and at times eluded – the burdens of a 'Greekness' that had been imposed externally, a form of study that sought not to reinstate a restrictive continuity with the past, but to understand more fully who they had become in their own right in the present.

AFTERWORD

I, too, sing America.

According to family history, my grandfather only just missed making the 1936 US Olympic team. What would he have felt watching Jesse Owens' stunning performance in the face of such hostility and racism? My grandfather has left an even more enduring mark on me, however, for as a young man he decided to change his last name from the decidedly Polish 'Markowski' to 'McCoskey' in order to make it easier for the local Pittsburgh sportswriters to spell, or so the story goes. But I think the act was really about whiteness – and how could my grandfather have known that in the complex racial terrain of early twentieth-century America, one of the only European immigrant groups less 'white' than the Polish was the Irish? Later, when they met, perhaps my Irish grandfather would have told him.

The material in this book has been with me for a long time. I have advocated a return to race in classical studies on a number of occasions. The response of many of my colleagues is often the same – race, they say, is such an American preoccupation. To which, I suppose, the answer is: yes, of course, but not only American. In his poem 'I, too, sing America,' Langston Hughes writes of being the 'darker brother,' one who grows strong despite his exclusion and who will soon be strong enough to demand his own place. His beauty, he says, will put America to shame. As he announces in the final line: 'I, too, am America.' To confront race, to understand the roots and consequences of our own blackness and whiteness, requires first that we know our own histories and then that we find our own voice.

AFTERWORD

As I hope this book has shown, it is essential to document scrupulously the operation of race, including both the strenuous ways it sets about its work and the ways we might help it come undone. By gaining a more firm foothold on race historically, including its roots in classical antiquity (both real and invented), I think we can begin to combat its clandestine power and also see that our modern version of race is far from inevitable or neutral, it is simply a structure of belief that has been so powerful as to convince us that it is the only possible one.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

For a general introduction to race theory, especially in historical perspective:

- Back, Les and John Solomos (eds), *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, (New York and London, 2000).
Bernasconi, Robert and Tommy L. Lott (eds), *The Idea of Race*, (Indianapolis, 2000).
Dain, Bruce, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic*, (Cambridge, Mass, 2002).
Mills, Charles W., *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, (Ithaca, 1998).
Smedley, Audrey, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, third edition (Boulder, 2007).
Stepan, Nancy, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960*, (Hamden, Conn, 1982).

For approaches to identity and difference in classical antiquity:

- Balsdon, J. P. V. D., *Romans and Aliens*, (London, 1979).
Bilde, Per et al. (eds), *Ethnicity in Hellenistic Egypt*, (Aarhus, 1992).
Burstein, Stanley M., *Graeco-Africana: Studies in the History of Greek Relations with Egypt and Nubia*, (New Rochelle, 1995).
Hall, Edith, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*, (Oxford, 1989).
Hall, Jonathan M., *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*, (Cambridge and New York, 1997).
———, *Hellenicity: Between Ethnicity and Culture*, (Chicago, 2002).
Harrison, Thomas (ed), *Greeks and Barbarians*, (New York, 2002).
Isaac, Benjamin, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, (Princeton, 2004).
Johnson, Janet H. (ed), *Life in a Multi-Cultural Society: Egypt from Cambyes to Constantine and Beyond*, *Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization*, no. 51 (Chicago, 1992).

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Malkin, Irad (ed), *Ancient Perceptions of Greek Ethnicity*, (Cambridge, Mass, 2001).
Mudimbe, V. Y., *The Idea of Africa*, (Bloomington, 1994).
Sherwin-White, A. N., *Racial Prejudice in Imperial Rome*, (Cambridge, 1967).
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———, *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*, (Cambridge, Mass, 1970).
Thompson, Lloyd A., *Romans and Blacks*, (Norman, 1989).
Yamauchi, Edwin M. (ed), *Africa and Africans in Antiquity*, (East Lansing, 2001).

For race and classical receptions:

- Bridges, Emma et al. (eds), *Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars: Antiquity to the Third Millennium*, (Oxford and New York, 2007).
Cook, William W. and James Tatum, *African American Writers and Classical Tradition*, (Chicago, 2010).
Greenwood, Emily, *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues Between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford and New York, 2010).
Goff, Barbara and Michael Simpson, *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora*, (Oxford and New York, 2007).
Howe, Stephen, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes*, (London and New York, 1998).
Rankine, Patrice, *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism and African American Literature*, (Madison, 2006).
Trafton, Scott, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania*, (Durham, 2004).

On Black Athena:

- Berlinerblau, Jacques, *Heresy in the University: The Black Athena Controversy and the Responsibilities of American Intellectuals*, (New Brunswick, 1999).
Bernal, Martin, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985*, (New Brunswick, 1987).
———, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume 2: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence*, (New Brunswick, 1991).
———, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume 3: The Linguistic Evidence*, (New Brunswick, 2006).
———, *Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to his Critics*, edited by David Chioni Moore, (Durham and London, 2001).
Lefkowitz, Mary R. and Guy MacLean Rogers (eds), *Black Athena Revisited*, (Chapel Hill, 1996).
Orrells, Daniel et al. (eds), *African Athena: New Agendas*, (Oxford, forthcoming).