

African Athena: Discussions Surrounding Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*

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Abstract

This thesis will explore the various ways in which Martin Bernal's peers received the first two volumes of his four-volume series, *Black Athena*. In *Black Athena* Bernal questions the extent to which 19th-century and 20th-century historiographers not only ignored, but also intentionally excluded any allusion to or evidence of Afroasiatic influence or origin of Greek Classical Civilization as a result of racism. The responses to Bernal's *Black Athena*, specifically the responses to the first two volumes, has turned into what is often referred to as the *Black Athena Controversy*, as the arguments put forth by Bernal ignited both responses which exclude Bernal from discussion, as well as responses which engage with and include Bernal in discussion. This thesis will explore the scholarship relevant to the *Black Athena Controversy*, namely by those who have responded to Bernal and those who have written on the subject before Bernal, his predecessors. Bernal's questioning of 19th-century and 20th-century historiographers undoubtedly leads to a more contemporary question which will be addressed in this thesis: Why were Bernal's theories in the 1980s and 1990s so harshly dismissed in what seems to be a non-academic and exclusionary manner? The narrative created by scholars in the *Black Athena Controversy* is utilized in this thesis to explore such a question.

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Introduction

“Part of the violent debate around Bernal has been fed by his unique personality and another part by his idiosyncratic choice of empirical positions in research- but much was fed by the ideological positions of others, resenting and combating not the contents but the stance of his counter-hegemonic scholarship.”¹ – Wim van Binsbergen

Over the last three and a half decades, some major arguments posited by Professor Martin Bernal in a four-volume series has turned into what is often referred to as the *Black Athena Controversy*. The purpose of this paper is to explore the various ways in which Bernal’s peers received the first two volumes of *Black Athena*. The purpose in exploring the responses to Bernal’s theories is to ask the same question that Bernal himself poses to those who read, write and teach ancient history. Bernal questions the extent to which 19th-century and 20th-century historiographers not only ignored, but also intentionally excluded any allusion to or evidence of Afroasiatic influence or origin of Greek Classical Civilization as a result of racism. This question undoubtedly leads to a more contemporary question which will be addressed in this paper: Why were Bernal’s theories in the 1980s and 1990s so harshly dismissed in what seems to be a non-academic and exclusionary manner?

In order to explore the ways in which Bernal was both received and dismissed, this paper will first outline the major arguments of the first two volumes, and most importantly restate Bernal’s purpose for writing the volumes. Next it will offer relevant scholarship which addresses the role of race in the reading and writing of history, as well as the challenges which faced many Black historians, limiting the diversity of authorship during the 20th century. Finally, I will

¹ Wim van Binsbergen, ed. *Black Athena Comes of Age* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 6.

explore the manner in which Bernal was received by discussing two collections. The first collection, *Black Athena Revisited*, edited by Mary Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers rejects almost all of Bernal's theories, and disallows Bernal to respond or engage in any sort of debate within the collection. The second, *Black Athena Comes of Age: Towards a Constructive Re-Assessment*, edited by Wim van Binsbergen, although not necessarily always in agreement with the arguments put forward in *Black Athena*, offers support for the overall goal of Bernal and allows him multiple spaces in the collection to debate and respond to his peers, as well as those who have dismissed him outside of the present collection. In addition to the aforementioned collections, I will also utilize two individual responses to Bernal's work, Mary Lefkowitz's *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* and Jacques Berlinerblau's *Heresy in the University: The Black Athena Controversy and the Responsibility of American Intellectuals*.

All of the responses to Bernal's *Black Athena* spend a great deal of time outlining their interpretations of the core claims he makes in his work. As broad and voluminous as his publications are, this is a necessity in order to critique him, especially as the interpretations of his theories by those who engage with Bernal and those who dismiss him, are often quite different. I have found that often those who engage with Bernal spend much more of their space utilizing his text to examine not only precisely what he is claiming, but also in order to improve upon his writing in areas where they see he is on the right track, but believe him to have failed methodologically. They often provide the exact point at which they believe him to have gone awry, rather than discarding the entire corpus of his work. This is especially apparent in the discussion between Josine H. Blok's "Proof and Persuasion in *Black Athena I: The Case of K.O. Muller*" and Bernal's "Responses to Josine H. Blok" in *Black Athena Comes of Age*, which is

discussed in Chapter 3. There is not the same tendency among scholars who have dismissed and excluded Bernal from discussion in their works, which often recount their interpretation of his claims as well, but do not give much space for his actual text in their own critiques. Therefore, I, too, will outline Bernal's major arguments from his first two volumes of *Black Athena* to the best of my ability in order for the reader to understand to what exactly his peers are responding, or not responding.

The Making of Black Athena

In the closing words of the introduction to Volume I of *Black Athena: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, Bernal states, "The political purpose of Black Athena is, of course, to lessen European cultural arrogance."² Bernal is referring to his own direct challenge to the Eurocentric blinders that have robbed, and ignored, Africa and Asia of their influence and role in Antiquity. In general, Bernal argues that it is necessary to rethink the foundation of Western Civilization, and really the Western canon. Specifically, he renders it necessary to challenge the "penetration of racism or 'continental chauvinism' into all our historiography, or philosophy of writing history."³ One of Bernal's major points regarding the challenging of the status quo in academia is that this challenge often comes from the outside. He argues that often, major transformations or discoveries in one's respective field are external.⁴

Bernal himself is an outsider, so to speak. A long-time professor of Government and Near Eastern Studies at Cornell University, the London native required submersion in the many subjects, some of which he would already be considered to have mastery in, necessary to explore

² Martin Bernal, *Black Athena Volume 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 73.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

his proposals regarding the Afroasiatic roots of Greek civilization. Despite the discouragement of Classicists whom he relies on for aid in this project, he wholly committed to the vast and particular research needed in order to formulate *Black Athena*. The creation of this project, or rather Bernal's motivation for this project, is one of the points in which his peers are skeptical. He is accused of pursuing *Black Athena* as an unexpected hobby, an obsession with myth, rather than as a serious scholar of ancient history.

In order to understand how Bernal came to this project, it is vital to know his academic and personal background, which shaped his career and his interests. In Volume I, Bernal dutifully informs his reader how he came to undertake such a vast project, one which differs quite a bit from his usual undertakings.

For the first twenty years of his academic career, Bernal focused on Chinese studies, particularly China's relation to the West at the turn of the twentieth century and modern Chinese politics. He became deeply interested in Jewish history. He explains that this came as the result of the end of the Maoist era in China and the end of American intervention in Indo-China. He notes that as global political attention shifted to the Eastern Mediterranean, so did his concern for his "roots" and searching for a scattered Jewish ancestry. Within Jewish history, Bernal became particularly intrigued with the Canaanites and Phoenicians, leading him to discover that linguists regarded Hebrew and Phoenician both as dialects of a single language. From this, he was not able to ignore what he saw as outstanding similarities between Hebrew and Greek. Justified by the large scale in which Phoenicians travelled, Bernal claims it quite possible for loan words from Canaanite/Phoenician into Greek. In conjunction with his experience with Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and Chichewa languages, he realized that the number of parallels he was finding were not normal for languages that do not have contact with one another. Thus, Bernal

began his search to find not only Afro-Asiatic points of contact, but also evidence for cultural and linguistic influence on, and origin of, Greek civilization.

Bernal worked in close contact with many scholars of ancient history, ancient languages, and ancient archaeology to bring his theory to fruition. He worked very closely with Cyrus Gordon and Michael Astour to study general contacts between Semitic and Greek civilizations. He admits that often times to the frustration of the aforementioned scholars, there was disagreement regarding aspects of his research. Bernal studied for four years, leading him to conclude that he could connect close to a quarter of Greek vocabulary to Semitic origins, and another quarter from Egyptian origins, and the rest owing itself to Indo-European roots. His nascent discovery of similarities between Hebrew and Greek languages evolved into vast but convincing linguistic and archaeological findings, which supported Bernal in his endeavor to continue research and eventually produce the arguments put forth in the *Black Athena* volumes.⁵

Despite the convincing connections that Bernal continued to find, he was perplexed as to why no one had made these connections, or rather, if they had made these connections why there was not more serious scholarly discussion of such. The explanation, according to him, must have had to be “profound cultural inhibitions against associating Egypt with Greece.”⁶ In search of these cultural inhibitions, Bernal looked toward historiography and the origins of Greek civilization. Guided by Astour, who advised Bernal that anti-Semitic attitudes may have justified the denial of the Phoenician role in the formation of Greece, Bernal turned to the Greek texts. Through this investigation, he concluded that there existed an Ancient model, the perspective of ancient men, until the early nineteenth century, when historiographies were embedded with

⁵ Bernal, *Black Athena Volume 1*, xii-xvii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xiv.

Northern European racism. For him, the dismissal of Egyptians in historiographies during a highly racist, and particularly anti-Semitic era, seemed an obvious explanation for the absence of his recent findings in the academy, and the basis for the theory regarding the take-over of the Ancient model by an Aryan model.⁷

⁷ Ibid., xv.

1- Martin Bernal's Arguments in *Black Athena*

Bernal's first volume of *Black Athena* was published in 1987. Beginning with its disquieting title, *The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, the volume is a direct challenge to the Eurocentric tendencies of ancient historiographies. In his first volume, Bernal focuses on the development of two models of historiography, the "Ancient model in Antiquity" and the "Aryan model," which have contributed to our understanding of the formation of ancient Greece. Throughout the first volume, he employs a method of competition between the models. Using this competition, he is able to examine each model, its rise and fall, and determine which model holds to be more "competitively plausible." This method of competing models, an effort to examine them in as unbiased a manner as possible, is actually a weakness in Bernal's work, which he admits in his second volume, where he abandons the competition between models and argues completely for a Revised Ancient Model.

The arguments in the first volume focus on Egyptian and Levantine cultural influences on Greek civilization in the 2nd millennium BC (circa 2100-1100 BC), the period in which Greek civilization is most commonly believed to have been formed. Through this discussion, Bernal shows the attitudes of ancient Hellenes toward their distant (argued as Egyptian-influenced) past and frames the Ancient model. It is significant at this point that he addresses the extremities of negative attitudes of ancient Hellenes toward the role of Egyptian civilization in the formation of their own culture. He uses these negative sentiments to advance his point, arguing that "national prejudice" is the explanation for any failure to address or denial of the aforementioned Egyptian role. Bernal argues that despite national prejudices and pride, scholars cannot selectively dismiss

ancient historians (and their Ancient Model), who were much less removed from the era than were the 19th and 20th century historians.

Bernal engages with the work of ancient authors whose writings referred to Egyptian colonies in Thebes and Athens, and provides accounts of Egyptian conquest of the Argolid and Phoenician foundation of Thebes in order to explore the attitudes of Classical and Hellenistic period Greeks to their own past. Ancient authors include Herodotus, Thucydides, Isokrates, Plato, Aristotle and Plutarch. The Ancient Model, which Bernal defines as the conventional perspective of Greeks in the Classical and Hellenistic ages, proposes that Greek culture evolved as a result of the colonization of its native inhabitants by Egyptians and Phoenicians around 1500 BC. He states that Herodotus' *Histories* strongly suggests that in the fifth century there existed a general belief that Greece had been colonized by Egypt at the end of the Heroic Age.⁸ This perspective, represented by the Ancient model, was overthrown by the advent of the relatively recent Aryan Model, which was created during the first half of the nineteenth century. This model denies Egyptian settlement and is skeptical of the Phoenicians role in settlement and influence as well.

The Aryan Model

Bernal speculates that Christians during this era created a new paradigm of progress, which demoted an antiquated Egypt. This is significant because it created a paradigm shift from an all-inclusive slavery to enslavement based on the color of one's skin. Bernal argues that both racism and Romanticism emerge as dominant thought at the end of the eighteenth century and

⁸ Ibid., 75.

modern disciplinary scholars began to publish histories of peoples and races, rather than individuals.⁹

Before introducing the Aryan model, Bernal dutifully explores the common sentiment toward the Ancient model from the 17th century to the early 19th century. He discusses the affinity intellectuals had toward Egyptian advancements and intellectual thought and demonstrates over the course of three chapters the shift of attitude in the late 18th century in Europe toward more hostile notions of Asia and Africa due to tensions between Egyptian religion and Christianity. He includes discussion of Isaac Newton, whom he believes to be a key figure in tracing the popularity of Egyptophilia, by citing his belief in the *prisca sapientia* of Ancient Egypt as related to Newton's own sciences.¹⁰ Newton is a significant figure to demonstrate the shift, as there is evidence of him contrastingly defending a work which Bernal argues "damned the Egyptians as relative latecomers, making them inferior to the much older biblical tradition."¹¹ He argues that the contradiction is the result of Christian reactions to the Radical Enlightenment, in an effort not to discredit Egypt, but rather only to make the Israelites a priority.¹²

He supports his argument for the transformation of the Ancient model into the Aryan model using Charles Francois Dupuis, a highly contested figure who challenged both Christianity and the myth of Greek cultural beginning. Dupuis' work was highly influential to his contemporaries, but was highly criticized and deemed absurd by Christian writers and those whom Bernal views as proponents of the Aryan model. This highlights an intellectual shift in

⁹ Ibid., 196-212.

¹⁰ Ibid., 167.

¹¹ Ibid., 168.

¹² Ibid., 169.

Europe in which notions of atheism and pantheism became a point of hostility toward Egypt.¹³ Acclaim for nineteenth-century scholarship on the ancient world, as it was seen to make “a quantum leap into ‘modernity’, or ‘true science,’” had reinforced the superior status of the Aryan model, and all its distinct proof.¹⁴ Regarding the Aryan Model, Bernal attributes much of the influence of nineteenth century “progress” in historiography to such leaps made in the natural sciences. Such progress established the scientific analyses of groups of people, especially those of African descent, as inferior, and provided credibility and a privileged place amongst the authors of history for early scholars. In his chapter “Hellenomania”, Bernal carefully displays the way racism and romanticism elevated the image of ancient Greece on its pedestal of European descent: “Thus it became increasingly intolerable that Greece—which was seen by the Romantics not merely as the epitome of Europe but also as its pure childhood—could be the result of the mixture of native Europeans and colonizing Africans and Semites.”¹⁵ These sentiments laid the groundwork for the formation of the “Extreme Aryan Model.” During this era of extremely heightened racism, circa 1880-1945, efforts were made in historiography to discredit African influence, specifically that of the Phoenicians, on European civilizations. Bernal argues that researchers still fail to question the Aryan model, even its existence, let alone its effects on historiography in Classical studies.

Bernal gives much credit to the destruction, or the take-over, of the Ancient model by the Aryan model to the German tradition of *Altertumswissenschaft*, meaning “science of antiquity.” He argues that although the German term is less restrictive than its English translation, the notion of being scientific animated in scholars of the nineteenth century a confidence in their

¹³ Ibid., 182.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

scholarship as superior to their “baroque predecessors.”¹⁶ According to Bernal, the fascination with being scientific arose under Kantian influence in the 1790s, preceding technological breakthroughs of the early 1800s. This confidence convinced nineteenth-century philologists and historians that their scientific approach made them superior to all of their predecessors, namely the gullible Classical and Hellenistic writers:

For the new scholars, the Ancient Model was a delusion. Just as ‘scientific’ historians had to discount all Greek references to centaurs, sirens and other mythical creatures that offended against the laws of natural history, the Ancients’ view of Greece as having been civilized by Egyptian and Phoenicians had to be removed because it offended against the laws of ‘racial science’.¹⁷

Bernal argues not for certainty, but for competitive plausibility. Therefore, he remarks that he does not strive to prove that the Aryan Model is wrong, but rather that his proposal of a “Revised Ancient Model” is more plausible for future research. He counters the “color-blind” historian by writing, “...but what is claimed here is that modern archaeologists and ancient historians of this region are still working with models set up by men who were crudely positivist and racist. Thus it is extremely implausible to suppose that the models were not influenced by this idea.”¹⁸

There is a misconception that we have moved beyond an Aryan model and that scholarship is rid of the racist motivations of prominent nineteenth and twentieth-century science and history. This misconception is Bernal’s motivation for publishing *Black Athena*. It is also worth mentioning that the very fact that scholars like Frank Snowden Jr. felt it necessary to contribute work to the Academy on race in the ancient world, works which challenge the notion

¹⁶ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena Volume 2: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 9.

¹⁷ Ibid., 9.

¹⁸ Bernal, *Black Athena Volume 1*, 9.

of the presence of modern racial discrimination among ancient men, suggests that an Aryan model of sorts existed, and had yet to be completely vetted by scholars. Not only does Snowden's work attest to the presence of characteristics of the Aryan model, it also reinforces the significance of understanding the Ancient model, and taking seriously ancient human's perspective of their own world. Discussion of Mary Lefkowitz's *Not Out of Africa*, in Chapter three, will address the ways she and other classicists often opportunistically disregarded the perspective of the Classical Hellenes. The transition to such a sentiment of disregard is traced in great detail, and is allotted serious space in Bernal's first volume.

In Dr. Bernal's account of historiography's transition from the Ancient Model to the Aryan model, he posits that the Ancient Model began to fall in the 1790s and the Aryan Model rose between 1830-1860. Providing the social and intellectual climate in Protestant North Germany, Bernal introduces the significant influences which such a climate had on the educational system. Wilhelm von Humboldt was an influential Prussian political figure who pushed for his *Bildung* (educational formation). With *Altertumswissenschaft* at its core, Humboldt's *Bildung* was the basis for establishing a new university system in Prussia and Germany. Bernal adds that it is curious that an aristocrat like Humboldt, also played a significant role in linguistic and historical issues in academia.

The idea of *Alterumswissenschaft* hinged on the image of the divine and idealized Greek, like the Germans themselves, as unified with their native land and pure. It is in this notion that the Ancient model became more and more unacceptable, as it attested to multiple cultural borrowings and invasions and inevitable racial mixture.¹⁹ This marked the "fall of Egypt" and the "rise of Greece" in the minds of the revolutionary intellectuals. During the French

¹⁹ Ibid., 282.

Revolution, the friendship between Fredreich August Wolf and Humboldt created the sketch for a work titled “On the Study of Antiquity and of the Greeks in Particular.”²⁰ In this sketch, which was published after Humboldt’s death, Humboldt provided justifications for making the tradition of *Alterumswissenschaft* the crux of general education, the main reason being his belief that the study of the men of antiquity would create better men presently. Humboldt recruited Wolf to the new University of Berlin, where he introduced a system of ‘the Seminar’ in the university.

Bernal argues that while this system was seen as a means to give students more freedom in their research, it has also provided a means to control both choice and treatment of academic topics. More importantly, Humboldt insisted, “The historian, however, unlike the poet, must subordinate his imagination to the investigation of reality, and ‘must of necessity yield to the power of form, while keeping constantly in mind the ideas which are its laws’.”²¹ These laws, according to Bernal, would have indeed included the nineteenth-century scientific laws of race.²²

The seeming obsession with all things Greek and the foundation of new ideas of educational thought discussed above is a pivotal point in Bernal’s explanation of the rise of the Aryan model. It is from the shift in curricula toward a study of Antiquity, specifically the study of the Greeks and in the process elevating them to their superior status, which results in the decline of scholarship connecting Europe to Africa or Asia, or cultural mixings, and the silencing of discussion of such. From here Bernal explores the height of the Aryan model through new scholarship transmitted to England by intellectuals such as George Grote, Connop Thirlwall²³ and Karl Otfriend Muller, which takes different approaches, but ultimately shares the goal of

²⁰ Ibid., 284.

²¹ Ibid., 287.

²² Ibid., 287.

²³ For more discussion of the prominent actors in the takeover of Bernal’s Ancient Model by the Aryan Model, see Bernal, *Black Athena Volume I*, 317-336.

discrediting the traditions of colonization of Greece by Egyptians and empowering the notion of the independent creativity of the Greeks.

Bernal connects this event with one of the very first products of the new German system, Karl Otfried Muller, who was a key figure in the foundation of the field of mythology. He claims that the transmission of Karl Otfried Muller's work to England, specifically his *Histories of Greek Tribes and Cities* (1820-1824) and his *Introduction to a Scientific System of Mythology* (1825), explicitly attacks the Ancient Model and denies any relationship between Greek and Eastern Myth.²⁴ Significantly, Muller claimed that a false impression was created in which Greece had derived its religion, myths and civilization from the Near East. In doing so, he employed an "argument from silence," his technique to remove what he believed to be late accretions from history, which he now deemed as fabrications. In order to argue that the ancients fabricated such influence from Africa and the Near East, Muller would have to put forth a strong motivation for the production of legendary falsehoods. Bernal explains:

In practice, however, lack of attestation alone was seen as damning, especially when Muller was attacking the Ancient Model. Indeed he and his successors have employed Homer and Hesiod not as broad ranging poets but as encyclopaedias. In this way the common phrase 'unknown to H.' was used not in the sense 'unattested in the surviving corpus of H', but to mean 'did not exist in the time of H.'²⁵

In addition to Muller's arguments from silence, he advanced a demand for "distinct proof," an idea in the study of history, which Bernal finds absurd in the spirit of competitive plausibility and also attributes as a successful tactic of Muller in the overthrow of the Ancient model. In demanding proof from any challengers to his forbidden relationship between Greece and the Near East, Muller made it quite difficult to formally challenge his arguments from silence,

²⁴ Ibid., 313.

²⁵ Ibid., 310

especially in a post Greek War of Independence climate, when Muller's audiences preferred not to hear any defense of the Ancient model. Not to mention, in Muller's memory, a *History of Classical Scholarship* was published in 1921, which praised the late Muller as a hero who contributed to "the conquest of the ancient world by science." Bernal argues that this image of him, the father of mythology, was well established during and after his lifetime as he "who turns chaos and dark into order and light and created a new scientific field."²⁶ Muller is one of many whom Bernal spends extensive time to show the methodological ways in which new generations of scholars of the ancient world, influenced by the German education traditions, accorded Greece its independent and semi-divine status in history, and more importantly in historiography.

In Martin Bernal's second volume, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (Volume II: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence) some significant schematic changes are made to his project, and to his approaches set out in his first volume. The changes, he writes, are the result of outside responses to his first volume as well as critical self-analysis after completing his first volume. The two most obvious differences are, first, his decision to devote a whole volume to archaeology and documented evidences from the Bronze Age of the Egypto-Phoenician influence, both by contact and by settlement, in and around the Aegean. Secondly, he completely disposes of the "competition" between the Aryan Model and Revised Ancient Model, admitting that impartiality to that competition is impossible and instead aims to show that the Revised Ancient Model provides much more plausibility, and less of a racial supremacist attitude, than the Aryan Model.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid., 315.

²⁷ Bernal, *Black Athena Volume II*, 1-12.

His decision to make such changes, not only strengthen the clarity and the approach of his argument, but it also reinforces his larger point: that there is not always certainty in the study of ancient history; the best we can do is strive for the most “competitive probability,” and at the very least engage with alternative histories and chronologies. Bernal’s major point regarding his preference for, and now more accurately his insistence on, the Revised Ancient Model is in dismantling the notion that the Ancient Model was less plausible by only the fact that it was replaced by the Aryan Model in the mid-nineteenth century.

In his introduction Bernal writes that, “...proponents of the Aryan Model base their claim to superiority less on the amount of information available to them than on the contention that they, unlike the credulous Classical and Hellenistic writers, have a critical approach and scientific viewpoint....”²⁸ He holds to his argument from volume I, that the strides made by Egyptologists, similar to the “progress” in natural sciences, in this time period should not lead us to overestimate the completeness of modern knowledge. In other words, despite our leaps of progress we cannot discredit ancient writers on the assumption of having less knowledge of Egypt and the Aegean than modern scholars.

Bernal opens his second volume by focusing on the evidences of Egypto-Phoenician influence on the Island of Crete. He remarks that this is the obvious place to begin an examination of the interaction between the Near East and the Aegean. Bernal goes in depth to explore the documentation of archaeological and textual findings on the island, including religious parallels like bull cults and gender associations with deities, and how those can be connected to Egyptian and Levantine origin and influence.

²⁸ Ibid., 9.

The next couple of chapters discuss specific archaeological findings on the coast and mainland of Greece, which can be traced to Egyptian structures and objects (pottery-style and possibly pyramidal imitation), suggesting that there was at least Egyptian architectural influence and maybe even the presence of Egyptian architects. Also in this section is linguistic analysis of toponyms regarding irrigation system remains, natural bodies and channels of water, which can be contextually and etymologically related to Egyptian toponyms. He devotes two more chapters to the conquests of Pharaoh Sesostri at the end of the Early Bronze Age as documented in the *Mit Rahina* inscriptions and records from ancient Greek writers. Bernal uses the account of the conquest of Sesostri in conjunction with archaeological evidence to argue the credibility of Classical sources. He culminates these discussions by reminding his reader to be weary of the incessant need for Europe to undeniably place itself at beginnings of great civilization, as this intention explains the denial of Afroasiatic connections and origin in the Bronze Age.

A vital section of his argument is in the pages devoted to the revisions in Egyptian chronology. Bernal displays the ways in which chronology had been selectively utilized in a manner conducive to conventional wisdom during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He highlights circumstances in which Carbon-14 dating and other more recent methods of dating have posed a problem for conventional wisdom. The resistance to revisions in chronology is an on-going problem for historians and exposes a hesitance, a stubbornness even, to disrupt the status quo in certain fields, specifically archaeology, but in linguistics too. Bernal notes, "For some time radio-carbon laboratories had been making continued 'errors' in their dating, which

then had to be repeated until they ‘got it right,’ that is until they found dates that fitted the conventional chronologies.”²⁹

Ultimately, Bernal questions the motivations of not only the overtly racist scholarship, but also those whose fields have been greatly influenced by them. He spends significant space discussing the impact of those who contributed to the rise of the Aryan model to show that in academia it is common to elevate such pioneers of a discipline to a status in which they are too easily forgiven and their motivation not often or thoroughly enough examined.

²⁹ Ibid., 7-8.

2-African Antiquity and Bernal's Predecessors

. “Conventional epistemologies reflect the status quo; alternative epistemologies contest it.”

--Maghan Keita

Bernal was not the first to try to refocus historiographies of the ancient world away from Eurocentric myopia, but he did receive more attention than his predecessors. This is not lost on Bernal, who, in *Black Athena Comes of Age*, acknowledges his own privilege in response to the reception of his work among Afrocentrists: “They argue convincingly that my receiving this degree of attention was the result of racism. Indeed in 1987, I had every status card in my hand, I was male, middle aged, white, middle class and British in America.”³⁰ Bernal argues that American Blacks have been mostly favorable toward his contribution, but he is cognizant of the resentments from Afrocentrists and very keen on why it exists. He cites an example of a feature on Afrocentrism on the cover of *Newsweek* in which he is seated next to a bust of Nefertiti, explaining obvious outrage that two whites were pictured as representations of the section on Afrocentrism.

As Bernal is aware of, his aim in *Black Athena* of challenging the Eurocentric production of knowledge, stands on the shoulders of the efforts of many Black scholars before him including, but not merely limited to intellectuals such as Cheikh A. Diop,³¹ Frank M. Snowden Jr., St. Clair Drake, W.E.B. DuBois, William Leo Hansberry, and Carter G. Woodson who too,

³⁰ Binsbergen, *Black Athena Comes of Age*, 69.

³¹ Discussion of Diop is not present in this paper, for his contributions to this scholarship see *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality?* M. Cook, trans. Westport, Conn.:L. Hill. (1974), and Maghan Keita, *Race and the Writing of History: Riddling the Sphinx*, 171-179.

called for the decolonization of world history, and the acknowledgement of the prevalence of racism in the recording of knowledge.

There is a tendency of critics of Bernal to attempt to lessen the degree to which racism affected scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The academic struggles faced by William Sanders Scarborough in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provide a context for conceptualizing the penetration of racism in historiography. Scarborough was a Black classicist and a race leader, often facing hardship in finding work suitable to his political and scholastic talent. His life was committed to testing the limits of American liberty through his academic endeavors. His works portray his sure mastery of both the ancient languages and philosophical ideals of classical authors. After being stripped of his professorship at Wilberforce, the activist was consistently placed not only in positions that limited the utilization of his strengths, but also in positions where he had limited agency. On the topic of agency, Scarborough's most striking works were those that encouraged the Black author to be both the "portrayer" and the "portrayed." Not surprisingly, he criticized the caricature-like portrayal of Black men and women, arguing that although some White authors provided decent representations of Black intellectual capability, no author could accurately represent or understand Black life better than a Black author. He advocated greatly for the unique traditions rooted in African cultures, even as they evolved outside of the continent and through generations of African American slaves and freedmen. Scarborough is relevant to the *Black Athena Controversy* because he serves as an example of exclusion from elitist fields, especially as an African American in the early twentieth century.³²

³² Michelle Ronnick, *The Works of Williams Sanders Scarborough* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

In addition to Ronnick's work on Scarborough and his experience as a scholar during a highly racist era, Maghan Keita's *Race and the Writing of History* does well not only to highlight the effects of such racism, but also to highlight the fact that Martin Bernal, though receiving much attention, was not the first to make such claims. Keita's goal is to discuss race and how it affects the writing history and the construction of knowledge. He connects his investigation of race and historiography within the American culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, where perspectives on the way we understand the world led to discussion of whether the "ways of knowing" had any significant effect on the lives of Americans. Keita achieves this through analyzing the writing of history before and after the construction of the idea of race and by recognizing the themes and arguments presented by nineteenth and twentieth-century African and African-American scholars. First he discusses what is similar to Bernal's Aryan Model, which Keita notes was well under way as early as 1774 with Edward Long's *History of Jamaica*. He reinforces the existence of the nineteenth-century notion that Africans and all people of African descent were incapable of independent civilization, and where a civilization existed it was only made possible by external forces which civilized inferior African elements. Thus, Egypt, as it had endured and has a legacy of greatness, could not be the result of miscegenation of hybrids, half castes or mulattoes, but must be "white."³³

According to Keita, W.E.B Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, Leo Hansberry, and Frank Snowden find common ground in exploring the ways in which colonialism and pseudoscientific justifications for labeling Africans an inferior race not only subordinated human beings, but also made the recording and investigation of a Black-narrated history nearly impossible to publish. In

³³ Maghan Keita, *Race and the Writing of History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 41-42.

agreement with Bernal, Keita argues that the only other group of scholars who were receptive to revisiting “significant cultural contact between Greeks and Egyptians”³⁴ were Black Americans. He argues that Bernal has offered quite a bit to scholarship and discourse on race and historiography, but most importantly makes apparent the dismissal and marginalization of the existence of well-founded scholarship and discourse by Black scholars.³⁵

Keita argues that emphasis on consciousness and the historical construction of identity by Du Bois displays the way in which people use history to construct identity and perception of themselves. Thus, the statement “Egypt is Africa” is a deliberate and conscious historiographical statement regarding race. Keita shows how Du Bois acknowledged the prejudices and racialized thinking which affected the writing of history. Du Bois brings into focus the manner in which the construction of identity operated for white scholars who were able to construct black identity through historiography, while also implying that black people themselves were capable of constructing their identities, if only given the same space and privilege. Keita’s major point regarding Du Bois and his contributions to challenge Western historiographies’ weaknesses, is that Du Bois sees history as key in the construction of race, not vice versa. The brilliance of Du Bois is the way in which he used both image and history, and used conventional White images of blackness to create a history of his own, and to challenge conventional wisdom:

Having recognized the racist roots of Egyptology in the political economy of slavery, sugar, and cotton, Du Bois was quick to realize how seemingly irrefutable truths of the “science” could be used against it in the juxtaposition of image and history.³⁶

³⁴ Bernal, *Black Athena Volume I*, 434.

³⁵ Keita, *Race and the Writing of History*, 43.

³⁶ Du Bois, in Keita, 75.

Keita notes that Du Bois recognized the incessant need for Egypt to be white, or nonblack, as it led to the European civilization, which the world holds in such high esteem. Furthermore, Keita points to the irony of historiography, where here Du Bois states Bernal's thesis well before Bernal and his *Black Athena*. Keita also criticizes the lack of space that Bernal provides for Du Bois, who precedes him and his ideas.³⁷ All in all, what makes Du Bois unique amongst the predecessors of Bernal is that he is more interested in the processes in which history is constructed and interpreted to create a common tradition and a common history.³⁸

Another scholar not often acknowledged within in the debate for his work on Africa's relationship to the world, and who was highly influenced by the work of Du Bois, is William Leo Hansberry. Hansberry credits Du Bois for rescuing him from "academic and psychological dilemmas"³⁹ motivating his study to challenge the notion that Africa was without a history or culture prior to the slave trade, and Du Bois, himself, admired that Hansberry so dutifully studied Egypt and Ethiopia and regretted that he did not publish his work on the subject. Du Bois alludes to the climate of the academy for this: "The overwhelming weight of conventional scientific opinion has overawed him, but his work in manuscript is outstanding."⁴⁰ Keita provides a letter written by Ernest A. Hooten, one of the men who helped to train Hansberry at Harvard. The letter is testament to the progressive scope of Hansberry's academic ambitions. Hooten writes that Hansberry did not receive his doctorate from Harvard because there was no scholar with the competency which Hansberry possessed in the field he developed. Furthermore, the lack of interest in ancient Africana studies was obsolete, as Hooten concludes in his letter: "He has been

³⁷ Ibid, 76.

³⁸ Ibid, 73.

³⁹ Hansberry, in Keita, 96.

⁴⁰ Du Bois, in Keita, 96.

unable to take the Ph.D. degree in his chosen subject here or anywhere else because there is no university or institution, so far as I know, that has manifested a really profound interest in this subject.”⁴¹

Hansberry’s story is especially significant, as Keita demonstrates, in that it illuminates the professional negligence and intellectual desertion by the larger academic community of a scholar like Hansberry who brilliantly chartered the unknown, or rather, that which countered the modern conception of an African past and its relation to those considered to have been the greatest civilizations. Interestingly, Keita points out that even Woodson and Snowden, among others, were not unable to grasp the vast potential of Hansberry’s work and ultimately the question that his work posed to the status quo of academia. Hansberry questioned why Africana studies, a field in which he helped to create, was almost completely focused on the modern era. Hansberry was under the impression that there was no commitment from historians to engage in “the African nature of this particular historical enterprise.”⁴² Keita notes that Hansberry’s work was often dismissed for its lack of documentation, as he rarely used citations in textual references. He explains in a note that this was emblematic of the time in which Hansberry wrote, when citation seemed optional, especially to a “qualified scholar” who was seen as able to reach individual conclusions “without extensive documentation.”⁴³ The climate in which Hansberry worked, and how he was and still is regarded as far as research, speaks to the restrictive nature of the process of academia.

Carter G. Woodson devoted work to the system of education, or miseducation, rather, in which Bernal’s Aryan model was perpetuated in America. Woodson was a landmark figure in

⁴¹ Letter from Ernest A. Hooten to the Rosenwald Fund, in Keita, 98.

⁴² Keita, *Race and the Writing of History*, 99.

⁴³ *Hansberry Notebook*, in Keita note, 99.

that he transformed the history of African Americans from the perspective of the masters to that of the slave and former slave.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it is Keita's belief that this shift in historiographic focus surely set the stage for the coming of an Afrocentric model of historical writing. In addition, Keita credits Woodson with priming the Academy for Bernal: "Woodson provided the fora for an evaluation of ideas that could not be, and in many, many instances, have not been, envisioned or entertained within mainstream academia until the advent of Bernal and *Black Athena*"⁴⁵ He argues that Woodson was the creator of an atmosphere which questioned racial definitions from the ancient to the present, making implicit the social, economic and political factors which motivated racial decrees that made "the dark Egyptian a paragon and the dark American a pariah."⁴⁶ Woodson was questioning, in his time of work where there existed no such thing as "African antiquity", the academy, which was solely responsible for the rationalization of inherently racist ideologies. He also paved a way, in founding the *Journal of Negro History* in 1916, for Black scholars to author a history of great civilization for a people long denied as having such, and to ensure that there no longer be a paucity of literature available for the dissemination of that history.

All of these scholars worked to show evidence to counter previous histories, which were interpreted and written within the contemporary eighteenth and nineteenth-century parameters of race and social hierarchy. Specifically, Keita uses the lives and works of Woodson, Du Bois, Hansberry and Snowden in order to motivate critics of Bernal's *Black Athena* to remember that these investigations have bearing for historians more than a century before Bernal's work, and were met with adversity then, too. Keita calls for academic discourse, which evaluates the way

⁴⁴ Keita, *Race and the Writing of History*, 52.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

that ideas of blackness shaped and misshaped history, and for a committed reevaluation of how and why we remember history the way that we do.⁴⁷ Bernal makes bold claims. They are bold because they challenge centuries of accepted plausibility, which were accorded the status of historical fact, fitting of the historian's privilege. The presence of such intense resistance to Bernal's first two volumes says much regarding the necessity of some variation of a Revised Model for a fresh and skeptical look at the interpretation of the role of Africa and the Near East in antiquity. Bernal provides thorough analyses of areas where conventional wisdom and Classical sourcing can be challenged.

In regard to Frank Snowden's work on the ancient world, Keita offers a key point by comparing the reception of Edward Said's critique of *Orientalism* and the Afrocentric critique. He argues that those scholars in the academy opposed to Afrocentrism (Keita refers to Lefkowitz and George Will) and the "official" media provide either validation or critique opportunistically.⁴⁸ The validation of Snowden, especially in critiques on Afrocentrists and on Bernal in this case, are opportunistic in that they ignore Snowden's large call for discussion of the reality that "...modern views have vitiated the interpretation and have attributed anachronistically to antiquity a nonexistent racial discrimination."⁴⁹

Keita also discusses Snowden's criticism of Bernal's Egyptians as black. It is a bit perplexing to see Snowden's presence in the work of *Black Athena Revisited*, a collection of those Bernal would deem academic conservatives, but his presence adds support to a point

⁴⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁹ Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), 1.

Bernal makes regarding the preservation of the status quo, especially at the cost of years and years of work built on the certain knowledge. For instance, Snowden's had committed much work to showing that the Ethiopians as closest to our modern notion of "blackness," so when a distortion of Bernal's argument includes that he believes not only the Greeks to be black but also the Egyptians, it is understandable that Snowden would participate in this particular effort to disprove.

Snowden's work on race in the ancient world seems to align with Bernal's major premise regarding a point of advent of racist historiographers, and thus the transformation from the Ancient model to the Aryan model. In 1970, Snowden published *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*. *Blacks in Antiquity* is a focused examination of the prevalence of Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman world, and the perception of their physical appearance as expressed by classical and early Christian writers. Snowden uses the term "Ethiopian," as it was the term applied to all dark and black-skinned African peoples by Greek and Romans. His temporal focus spans "from the Homeric era to the Justinian period."⁵⁰ He divides his work into nine sections with illustrations of the archaeological evidence he uses to contextualize the physical appearance of Ethiopians according to Greek and Roman artists. Throughout these nine sections, or chapters, he analyzes ancient evidence found in literature, epigraphy, papyrology, numismatics, and archaeology, which describe or depict physical characterizations of Ethiopians.

Snowden highlights the issues presented by scholars who aim to examine Blacks or Blackness in antiquity, one of which being the incessant forcing of a modern and westernized racial paradigm on interpretations of classical Greek and Roman material sources.⁵¹ The author

⁵⁰ Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity*, viii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

presents various encounters between both Greco-Romans and Ethiopians and explores the characteristic differences between the two, but also the characteristics that vary among Ethiopians themselves. The author's conclusion is that the population of black and dark-skinned individuals who the Greeks and Romans identified as Ethiopians (*Aethiop/Maurus*) were not necessarily glorified, but they were not met with prejudices either.

Snowden argues that Ethiopians participating in Greco-Roman societies had a variety of different conceptions in classical mythology. Ethiopians also held a variety of occupations in society ranging from warrior and athlete to diplomat and entertainer. While the Greeks and Romans recognized other physical differences between themselves and Ethiopians such as narrow waists, long legs and flatter noses, the most common description is that of the difference in skin color. He presents material evidence, which demonstrates that Greeks and Romans understood the Ethiopians difference in pigmentation as a particularity of the more intense heat from the sun in their environment, not an idiosyncrasy dictated by an inferior nature. In fact, Homer described Ethiopians as "most remote men", from a geographical standpoint, and a people often blessed with divine visits. The author provides numerous illustrations that make the case for the favorability from Greek and Roman artists who sculpted and painted images of them.

Snowden reinforces that the early Christian view of the Ethiopian was, like the Greco-Roman view, not that of superiority or inferiority and focused on their religion's fundamental inclusion of all of mankind. The author notes that "Long after the Ethiopian was divested of any romanticized stemming from a mythological aura and long after he was well known to the Greeks and Romans, whether in Africa or in various parts of the classical world, antipathy did

not arise.”⁵²This notion is the most significant feature of Snowden’s argument for Greco-Roman and early Christian perception of and acquaintance with Ethiopians. His textual and archaeological evidence is abundant, and discussion of the interpretations of those evidences as unbiased shed light on the transition of perspective in the ways that colonial period in Europe and eventually in America shaped the construction of one’s racial identity as either superior (white) or inferior (non-white).

Snowden’s work is a significant contribution to the participation and influence of Blacks in classical civilization. As is the case in many ancient historical and geographical studies, the issues present are those of choice of terminology and classification of groups of people. Snowden’s analysis of perceptions to physical difference is important to consider for the debates and criticisms of Bernal’s use of the term “Black” in his volume titled *Black Athena*, especially since Snowden, too uses “Black” in his title. This is a significant point to discuss. Bernal retracts the use of Black, and argues that he would have preferred to use African Athena. In *Black Athena Comes of Age*, he notes that his publisher felt that Black Athena had more of a “snap” to it. Despite the reasoning, Bernal adds that he did not argue that the ancient Greeks were black, but used Black in the title to refer to cultural influences rather than genetic.⁵³ Most surprising to me as a reader was the consistency in which Greeks and Romans described the physical traits of Ethiopians. Having been a student of Latin, much frustration, but also beauty, came in the ability to discern the best possible English word for translation, since most times there were many. I think it is important to remember that Greek and Latin translations are interpretations, and the translator becomes an interpreter, and an influencer. This will prove to be both a strength and

⁵² Ibid., 216.

⁵³ Binsbergen, *Black Athena Comes of Age*, 73.

weakness used both for and against scholars arguing for African influence and participation in antiquity.

Snowden's *Before the Color Prejudice*, argues that while ancients did acknowledge different physical characteristics among people from various geographical regions, such as hair color, nose shape, height, and skin color, it cannot be concluded that there were any negative associations to skin color. Snowden calls for more emphasis to be placed on ancient artist's view of blacks, as they were both contemporaries and neighbors to blacks in their communities. He argues that it is too easy for us to force our modern perception of color prejudice on ancient art and literature, which was constructed by the more recent dawn of slavery and colonialism. Snowden focuses on the major points of contact between Whites and Blacks and what that contact tells modern scholars about Nubia, and the Kushites, as a major contender for influence and power in ancient civilization. He then outlines his interpretation of the images and attitudes of Greco-Romans toward Ethiopians, and Egyptians toward Nubians. He concludes that both civilizations viewed Ethiopians and Nubians in a consistent and positive manner, "Nubia was perceived by its contemporaries as an independent country, rich in coveted resources, inhabited to a large extent by dark-skinned and Negroid peoples, who from time to time played a significant role in the international politics of the day."⁵⁴ Snowden urges readers to accept and applaud the objectivity of classical writers regarding Ethiopians, rather than assume their writing was shaped by some "idealization of an unknown, distant people."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Frank M. Snowden Jr. *Before the Color Prejudice: The Ancient Views of Blacks* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 58.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

Snowden maintains that slavery in the ancient world was accepted as a reality, but “Black” in the ancient world did not equate to “slave”, as it did in the twentieth century, and may still today. The ancients did not base their “critical evaluations on skin color,” but they did make “ethnocentric judgments of other societies.”⁵⁶ Snowden indicates these judgments as natural for a society that has created its own “narcissistic canons of physical beauty.” Members of society are more inclined to identify beauty in those who resemble themselves, rather than those who do not. There are few cases in which “the other,” such as a preference for White in Black societies or for Black in White societies, has been described as more aesthetically appealing.

Though it is common for societies to use their own aesthetic yardstick for beauty, Snowden argues that it is problematic to assume that the Somatic White Norm Image was always observed as a motive of Greek and Roman artists. He also delves into racial mixing and concludes that based on known recordings of miscegenation, this was most likely not regarded as a negative practice. A significant factor in interpretation of classical thought is color symbolism, which originated from classical mythology and has become a literary and artistic device used for millennia by ancient writers and artists. Snowden effectively displays problems which arise when color symbolism is applied to skin color. He notes that it was a tendency for both Greco-Roman and Old Testament writers to equate blackness or night with evil and white or light with good, and therefore it is not surprising that an Ethiopian’s dark skin color would create a parallel for the same comparison.

He concludes, “In view of the overall attitude toward blacks in antiquity it is unlikely that the association of dark-skinned peoples with omens of evil in the early Roman Empire had an adverse impact on day-to-day reactions to blacks: the favorable image of Ethiopians had long

⁵⁶ Ibid., 63.

been firmly established, and the unbiased environmental explanation of racial difference had been deeply rooted since the fifth century B.C.”⁵⁷ Snowden’s point is that the natural or “basic tendency of peoples” to make an association of dark and night with danger did not have a significant effect on Greek and Roman’s actual perceptions of dark-skinned Ethiopians, and should be seen more as literary device than as real-life dogma.

The aforementioned environmental explanation is a significant point to discuss in relation to the ancient view of skin color. Snowden provides Pliny’s discussion of the effect of the climate on skin, hair and overall lifestyle. This discussion is not limited to Ethiopian’s, but includes northern German characteristics as well. The author provides evidence which shows assimilation of Blacks into Greek, Roman and Egyptian society. He argues that this integration was not solely a result of becoming a prisoner of war and then a slave, but that many African Blacks migrated to the Mediterranean world for the social and economic opportunities available for individual advancement. Snowden concludes that ultimately there is no certainty in determining the conditions or the specific point in time in which race developed the significance it now holds in our modern world, but that there is also no certainty that the ancients assumed the color prejudice that we acknowledge. The author thoroughly, but concisely, discusses the major points that need re-examination in our modern study of the ancient view of skin color and physical differences. The importance of Snowden’s work for the purposes of the *Black Athena Debate* is that despite uncertainties, we must not consider the ancients our ideological contemporaries.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 85.

The final predecessor to Bernal who will be discussed is St. Clair Drake. In *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History & Anthropology*, St. Clair Drake traces sentiments toward African or dark-skinned Ethiopians in antiquity through the medieval period to around the time of the Black Diaspora to the Americas and the plantation economy of the New World. Drake's intention is to trace the origin of modern or New World racism. In doing so he attacks scholarly analysis of racism or color prejudices as the result of human nature. Drake posits that negative associations of color prejudices began as a justification for the exploitation of conquered peoples through slave labor status. A significant section of Drake's second volume focuses on Christianity and Islam, namely the ways Blackness, through both peaceful and tense contact with myths regarding Ethiopians, were perceived.

Like Snowden, whom he often cites, Drake acknowledges the recognition of difference in skin color, hair, facial features and height, but he posits that there is no evidence that supports a massive sentiment of negative association of the color black to skin color, nor Ethiopians as synonymous with enslavement. In his analysis of Christianity, he focuses on the ways in which color symbolism evolved to connect the color black with sin, and the idea of "washing Ethiopians white" reflected a sentiment that was later used for Christian conversion propaganda, and eventually the justification of racialized slavery.⁵⁸

Drake approaches the Muslim world in a similar way. He sifts through points of contact between those of the Nile Valley and the Arabian Peninsula, textual interpretations of interactions and an egalitarian discourse that both Christianity and Islam proposed in theory, but not always in practice. Still, there were major points in which Black influence carried weight,

⁵⁸ St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History & Anthropology* (New York: Diasporic Africa Press Edition, 2014), 49-51.

especially having served in armies and in positions of leadership for the Muslim cause. Blacks in the Muslim World had a particularly different experience shaped by their involvement in political struggles. The author argues that while there were “undesirable” qualities assigned to Ethiopians as a result of their hot environment, similar undesirable qualities emerge regarding characteristics of northerners from the cold environments. Drake does not hide instances where negative associations existed in order to advance his thesis, rather he highlights them in order to strengthen his point: that it is problematic to approach such associations as if they occurred within a modern context jaded by New World stereotypes of skin color. Rather, the “anti-Negro” sentiment occurred among groups, like some Bedouin tribes, who had a pre-existing negative bias as a result of conquest, political conflict and later social relations, such as status as a slave, but not necessarily “Blackness.”⁵⁹

The author analyzes “The Black Experience in Medieval European Christendom” by expressing the ways that color symbolism still influenced European perception of the color black as symbolizing sin. He also notes that Medieval Christians in Europe were skeptical of non-Christian religious affiliations, therefore many medieval Blacks, and that the negative association made with pagans should not be misdeemed a skin-color prejudice. His description of Church art and iconography during this period does well to represent the differentiation made between color and skin color; skin color not having a completely negative association until the sixteenth century and the arrival of the transatlantic slave trade. Drake makes a significant point as he summarizes medieval Europe: “Real Black people were seldom seen outside of the Iberian peninsula and the Italian city states. Elsewhere, well-defined socially transmitted stereotypes about Negro behavior and temperament (esthetic, erotic, status-allocation, and

⁵⁹ Ibid., 77-80.

mystical/religious) did not exist within European Christendom prior to the sixteenth century.”⁶⁰

Prior to the sixteenth century, slavery was not limited to one race of people. White racism became a means to exploit low-cost labor in a new highly profitable system of Capitalism in the New World, but that form of racism was not necessarily practiced in the “Mother Countries”. Drake marks this transition and provides close examination on the “Evolution of Racial Slavery.” It was during the gradual migration of the sugar industry to the west, eventually to islands off the coast of West Africa, where the sugar service labor pool began to become increasingly Black, seemingly due to proximity of slave labor. As focus shifted to labor in the New World, bans on who could be a slave were prevalent in the early 1500s.

According to Drake, by the middle of the century, no White people were to be held as slaves in Spanish-American colonies and the idea that no people of the “master’s people” should be held as slaves represented the advent of strictly racial slavery and the rapid growth and profitable maintenance of plantation economy of the West. This system transformed the stereotype associated with Black skin color on a much larger-scale than centuries prior and eventually reinforced that the term slave in the New World as “Black.” There were still exceptions of individuals who maintained that humans were equal, and attitudes regarding skin-color as deterministic of status varied as it did before. Still, the sixteenth and seventh century may be viewed as a “White out” of Black history.⁶¹ This has allowed for mistaken interpretations of attitudes and associations made between personhood and skin color from antiquity through and beyond the New World colonial period.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 224.

⁶¹ Ibid., 227-290.

This discussion has provided a background of the scholarship on the study of Africa and the challenges made to racist scholarship, which limited Black agency in historiography of the Black experience. There existed a vast amount of work on African antiquity before Bernal published his first volume of *Black Athena*, which spurred the intense debate, and is of topic here. Scholars who were pioneering the first Africana studies programs in America, and those who were pioneering work which focused for the first time on antiquity in Africa like Hansberry, were combating exclusive social and political currents in America, but more importantly in academia. As Keita notes, Bernal does not give these scholars near enough space in *Black Athena*. Had he done so, his argument for the presence of racism in nineteenth and twentieth century historiographies may have been strengthened. The experience of the aforementioned predecessors to Bernal would have also strengthened Bernal's insistence on the vehement criticisms and exclusion awarded those who threaten to disrupt the assumptions that so many scholars based their academic lives working towards.

The responses to Bernal's *Black Athena* were mixed. In *Black Athena Comes of Age*, Bernal addresses the reception of his work, specifically how the first two volumes were received by classicists, Afrocentrists and other scholars of the ancient Mediterranean. He notes that of about thirty reviews of *Black Athena*, a majority of them have been hostile, and may be found in *Black Athena Revisited*, but over a dozen have been generally sympathetic, and certainly will not be found in Lefkowitz and Roger's collection. Those scholars whose work focuses specifically on the interrelations between ancient Egypt and Greece, and generally in the interrelations of the Eastern Mediterranean in the ancient world, have written generally favorable reviews.⁶² Before discussing of the specific distortions which he believes have been made regarding *Black Athena*,

⁶² Bernal, in Binsbergen, 70.

he explains that the reviews to his work can be viewed in three rings: "...those written by the inner core of specialists are mixed to favourable, the second ring is very largely unfavourable. The outer rings of non-specialists again is mixed but contains a considerable number of favourable reviews."⁶³ Chapters three and four will deal with the responses to *Black Athena*. Chapter three will address those responses, which Bernal refers to as the second ring, which include the collection edited by Lefkowitz and Rogers, *Black Athena Revisited* and Lefkowitz's individual work, *Not Out of Africa*. Chapter four will address those responses, which Bernal refers to as the inner core of specialists, which are mixed to favorable in their reviews, and will include a collection edited by Wim van Binsbergen, *Black Athena Comes of Age* and Jacques Berlinerblau's *Heresy in the University*.

⁶³ Ibid., 71

3-Bernal's Second Ring

Following a televised, and quite fervent, debate between Martin Bernal and John Henrik Clark, Mary Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, the latter two scholars published a collection of articles titled *Black Athena Revisited* in 1996. In compiling this dense collection of articles, Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers attempt to debunk the first two volumes of Bernal's *Black Athena* theory. They do so by calling upon scholars in an array of fields, but particularly archaeology, linguistics, race studies, historiography and anthropology. The collection's list of contributors is impressive and includes scholars with diverse perspectives regarding some of the controversial academic discussions ignited by Bernal's theory on the Afro-Asiatic roots of Classical civilization.

The editors begin in the book's preface by highlighting the purpose of the collection, the argument and both the major and minor premises, and the social parameters which they believe must be intact for proper and truthful scholarly investigation. Lefkowitz begins with an introduction "Ancient History, Modern Myths" by posing the question, are ancient historians racist? In it, Lefkowitz defends herself and her colleagues whom she believes Bernal has attacked and demanded that they acknowledge that they have been perpetrators of a large intellectual and cultural cover-up. While Bernal argues that objectivity of the historian is not possible, Lefkowitz spends much time defending the field of classics as having every intention to study history objectively and without prejudices to get as close to the truth as possible.⁶⁴ In a section titled "Afrocentric Ancient 'History'," Lefkowitz argues that it has been the case that great Greek accomplishments such as Democracy are so revered that every modern civilization

⁶⁴ Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, eds. *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 5.

has wanted to claim it as their own. She continues, “It was inevitable, therefore, that black peoples in English-speaking countries of this continent, as they developed a sense of their own identity, would want to show that they had a stake in the cultural legacy of ancient Greece.”⁶⁵ She cites Marcus Garvey in support of her point that Garvey, who was not a historian, “had a use for the past.” Her goal here seems to be to counter Bernal’s argument for racist agendas and laws of racial order, which too, had a use for the past. Lefkowitz definitively states that Bernal’s discussion of the Aryan model as a suggestion of conspiracy theory of European scholars who wished to elevate the contributions of northern people like themselves, is exaggerated. Thus, it seems Lefkowitz wishes to diminish the extent of which histories written during overtly racist eras have affected modern scholarship. The rest of the collection’s, including Lefkowitz’s introduction, overall goal in assigning so many contributors seems to be in order to display the incapability of one man, like Bernal, to cover all of the areas he sets out to do in the volumes of *Black Athena*.⁶⁶

There are multiple contributors in this collection who do a careful job to examine the areas and are extremely informative in helping to categorize the major issues “commonly” taken from Bernal’s propositions about the ancient world. Though they are helpful, it is suspect that the collection does not engage with Bernal’s call to challenge conventional wisdom, but insist on a methodology that defends (and in many respects has since at least the 1700s) that wisdom. For example, Snowden’s essay on race in the ancient world is consistent with his publications prior to this work, particularly dealing with perspectives on the physical characteristics of Africans in

⁶⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 3.

the ancient world.⁶⁷ He has a stake in this debate, as mentioned earlier, in that Bernal's description of the Egyptians as dark-skinned is in contrast to Snowden who physically differentiates Egyptians from Ethiopians, whom he classifies as dark-skinned or black. Snowden's presence in this collection, though consistent with his prior work, is distorting Bernal's major point, which is the cultural significance of Egyptian influence and origin. Again, Bernal offers that *African Athena* would have been preferable; however, Snowden insists that Bernal's focus on black Egyptians has given insufficient attention to the Nubians and their experience in the Mediterranean world.

The debate over the "blackness of Egypt" is one issue of many in which contributors in this collection focus on what seem to be irrelevant squabbles. For instance, Lefkowitz is angered and offers a page of space in the introduction addressing the question: "Was Cleopatra Black?" This defers from the fact that while she may have been Mediterranean physiognomy, she was African. On the other hand, contributors like Emily T. Vermeule, offers too little about Greece and too much about the already overstated arguments that the reader is well aware from the introduction to the collection that Bernal has made.⁶⁸ An aspect of Bernal's *Black Athena*, which Vermeule does applaud, is his historiography on nineteenth-century anti-Semitic German and French scholarship.⁶⁹ This seems to be at odds with Lefkowitz and Rogers who dismiss Bernal's Aryan model as a conspiracy theory to advance his theory and attack classicists. In addition, Bernal does hold that Vermeule, and a few others in the collection, have been open to discussion and have seriously debated his theory. Nevertheless, many contributions to this collection could

⁶⁷ Frank Snowden Jr, "Bernal's 'Black' and the Afrocentrists", in Lefkowitz and Rogers, eds. *Black Athena Revisited*, 112-128.

⁶⁸ Emily T. Vermeule, "The World Turned Upside Down", in Lefkowitz and Rogers, eds. *Black Athena Revisited*, 269-279.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

have eliminated pages as they only offer fluff to a belabored opinion of Bernal as inept. The frustration of these essays was not the convincing nature of the scholarship and careful investigation that these scholars practice, but the redundancy of criticisms of Bernal and the exclusion of his participation in the collection.

In “The Legacy of Black Athena,” Sarah P. Morris aims to highlight the disservice that Bernal has done to his predecessors. This is a significant discussion, in that it gets at his weakness, which was the lack of attention given by Bernal to those scholars who have contributed to this discussion’s vastness and quality. However, Morris participates in the popular marginalization of Afrocentrists by claiming that *Black Athena* “has bolstered, in ways not anticipated by the author, an Afrocentrist agenda which returns many debates to ground zero and demolishes decades of scrupulous research by eminent scholars such as Frank Snowden.”⁷⁰ Morris is calculated in mentioning only Snowden, as he is included in this collection, and advances here a concern that Bernal is the White villain who received the very privileged attention, which he challenges in *Black Athena*.

Rogers offers the last essay and a conclusion, in which the major questions spawned by *Black Athena* are restated and the collective conclusion of all the contributors is provided. Ultimately the answer to every one of these questions is, not surprisingly, a negation of every one of Bernal’s proposals.⁷¹ The contributors to this work claim and reclaim that Bernal is methodologically flawed, fantastical, an outsider who is not trained in the areas he “entrenches” upon, offers no discussion of multiculturalism as he should, and that he has in fact succumbed to

⁷⁰ Sarah P. Morris, “The Legacy of Black Athena”, in Lefkowitz and Rogers, eds. *Black Athena Revisited*, 173.

⁷¹ Guy MacLean Rogers, “Quo Vadis?”, in Lefkowitz and Rogers, eds. *Black Athena Revisited*, 447.

the very Eurocentric blinders which he accuses modern historians of wearing. Despite the obvious aim of this collection, to rid Bernal of every ounce of scholarly credibility, offering a condescending compliment here and there, Rogers closes by stating what the contributors to *Black Athena Revisited* have attempted to do. He writes, “In this book, we have attempted to set out a historical model of the origins and development of Greek civilization within a truly pluralistic framework of ancient cultures which are studied simultaneously, not just for what those cultures contributed to the Greeks, or to any society since, but for their own sakes.”⁷² I would argue that while a few contributors may have attempted to do so, what “they” actually set out to do was to conveniently answer no to all of Bernal’s proposals, and redundantly, too. I think that this work would have been more approachable had they eliminated unnecessary revisitations and proposed the ways in which they, scholars of ancient history, will divorce themselves from conventional wisdom enough to positively seek historical truths and discuss, without personal attack, the possibility of accounts foreign to that wisdom.

In *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach History*, Mary Lefkowitz, a well-known classicist, states that her motive behind writing this book was to speak out against the academic falsehoods, most of which she believes to be the consequences of the claims made by Bernal in *Black Athena*, taking place across the world and at her very own institution at Wellesley College. It is her goal to disprove and discredit the “extreme Afrocentrists” whom she accuses of mistaking myth for factual history and reaching for selective evidence to advance their socially-driven agendas.⁷³ The association between Bernal and “radical Afrocentrists” has been deemed a weakness of Bernal’s project. Keita argues in favor of Molly

⁷² Ibid., 453.

⁷³ Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1996), 2-8.

Myerowitz Levine, who argues against European historiographies which create an exclusive environment, specifically “an elitist and separatist attitude that marginalizes black scholarship and the arguments of Afrocentrists in the fallacious assumption that these are not and will never be part of the academic mainstream.”⁷⁴ Moreover, Keita reinforces that Afrocentrists have been labeled radical by elitist and separatists who have the privilege of characterizing their work, and those who came before them, as such.

Lefkowitz uses the association with Afrocentrist thought, and the common argument and ambiguity in defining blackness, as a weakness of Bernal and his work. She believes that the attention he has received is unfounded and expresses her frustration in encountering implications of Bernal’s theories in relation to race and racist historiographies in the classroom. Regarding the debate surrounding Bernal’s *Black Athena*, she considers it an irrevocable atrocity that such falsehoods are being relayed to students across universities, such as the question, “Was Cleopatra Black?” The “extreme Afrocentrist” whom Lefkowitz refers to does not include Bernal, but represents a marginalized and often misunderstood body of intellectual theory. Bernal is labeled an Afrocentrist in an effort to discredit his entire project. Berlinerblau argues that Bernal often engages and defends Afrocentrists against Lefkowitz by highlighting the ways in which Afrocentrists have been institutionally discredited in their attempts at scholarly research. He also argues that many of Bernal’s critics accuse Bernal of bolstering such radical Afrocentrists. However, Berlinerblau believes that Afrocentrists are not as moved by Bernal’s theories as they are by the fact that a white Ivy League professor was authoring them: “Bernal’s text has

⁷⁴ Molly Myerowitz Levine, “The Challenge Of Black Athena to Classics Today,” in Keita, 28.

accomplished what vindicationists and Afrocentrists could never achieve in a society where the “problem of the color-line” is etched miles into the ground.”⁷⁵

Keita makes a significant point regarding the criticisms of Afrocentrism and the dangers that Afrocentrism poses to the foundation of knowledge in scholarship and in identity as people, specifically as Americans. He argues that often times those radically opposed to all things Afrocentric rarely give careful critical and historical attention to the sources of Afrocentric thought. Rather, they focus on the sensationalization of Afrocentrism in the media to support their critique of works like *Black Athena*. Keita’s point is that those deemed Afrocentric are often lumped together in a group regarded as non-academic mythmakers. In connection to criticisms of Bernal, Keita argues that in *Black Athena Revisited*, Lefkowitz and company either utilize or ignore Snowden when convenient. For example, a large criticism of Afrocentrism is “mythmaking.” Snowden, who is at odds with most Afrocentrists, argues that given the African historical record, “foundation myths” are unnecessary as there is ample evidence of African influence, agency and contact in the Classical Age, and that too few give attention to that experience. Keita points out that those who attack Afrocentrism “ignore the essence of this [Snowden’s] statement” and use him as a gloss to discredit and assume monolithic the intellectual history of Afrocentrism.

Keita argues that works like Lefkowitz *Not Out of Africa* are insufficient: “...because they engage in the very “nonsense” that they deplore; and they do so in a manner that Levine has described as bereft of the intellectual and scholastic rigor of which they accuse Afrocentrists.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Jacques Berlinerblau, *Heresy in the University: The Black Athena Controversy and the Responsibility of American Intellectuals* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 145.

⁷⁶ Keita, *Race and the Writing of History*, 204.

He argues that though *Black Athena Revisited* is much more solid than *Not Out of Africa*, it does not bring the *Black Athena Debate* to an end as it had intended. It also completely misses the point. In agreement with Binsbergen and Berlinerblau, Keita urges that the scholars in *Black Athena Revisited* refuse to entertain the idea of the plurality of epistemologies, the multiple ways of knowing, and refuses to seriously engage Afrocentric intellectual history and recognize its variety. It seems that the contributors to this collection had their minds made up before their pens touched paper, as had the academy in its summarily dismissive attitude of Afrocentric scholars.

As Keita concludes, he inserts that the labeling of Black scholars as “radical” is the result of their dismissal. They have been labeled so because they are angry, and they are angry because they have been continuously dismissed and marginalized as insignificant actors in history and inferior contributors to intellectual history. He applauds Bernal for the debate he has spawned, and reiterates his motivation for *Race and the Writing of History*: “That agenda centers on the modern historiographic and epistemological construction. In particular, it asks, given the inquiries of Bernal, why have we not addressed in a similar fashion, with similar vigor, the entreaties of Woodson, DuBois, Hansberry, Snowden, and the rest?”⁷⁷ Keita makes a strong point in asking the academy this question, and in doing so calls attention to the privilege of an elitist academy to dictate whom they will engage, as well as which aspects of an individuals scholarship they will endorse or ignore.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

4-Enter the Dutch

Wim van Binsbergen's *Black Athena Comes of Age: Towards a Constructive Re-Assessment*, can be seen, to use Jacques Berlinblau's preferred expression, as an effort to practice *ethical responsibility* in modern academia. Binsbergen prefaces the collection with the proud admission that this edition serves as the positive re-assessment (an "intermediary position"), which differs from the revisitations edited by Mary Lefkowitz and Guy McLean Rogers, of Martin Bernal's arguments found in the first two volumes of *Black Athena*. Specifically it is different in that it includes Bernal in the collection in order to engage in scholarly debate of the theories he put forth in the Black Athena volumes. Binsbergen's collection is the result of a series of articles written surrounding a 1996 conference titled "Black Athena: Africa's contribution to global systems of knowledge" at the African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands. The editor, Binsbergen, initiated this conference in an effort to include and cultivate discussion among Dutch scholars regarding the Black Athena Controversy taking place in the late 80s and early 90s, mainly in the United States.⁷⁸ The contributors to Binsbergen's collection seem to fall in the inner core of specialists who have mixed reviews of Bernal's work, but are generally favorable or at the very least in favor of engaging in the discussion which his work had ignited.

Binsbergen proposes the goal of this work in just a few words, by contrasting the aims of *Black Athena Comes of Age* to the perceived aims of the infamous *Black Athena Revisited*. To begin, Binsbergen does not merely include Bernal, but uses the author himself as a central character in the collection, able to respond to skepticism and dissonance concerning the claims

⁷⁸ Binsbergen, *Black Athena Comes of Age*, 11-64.

made in his original publications of *Black Athena*. The aim of this collection was to praise Bernal not so much for his historical accuracy, but rather for the ethical and rational implications of his contestation of the often-uncontested acceptance of the “plausible cultural and linguistic influences on Greek civilization.” Binsbergen himself authors the first chapter, titled “Towards a Constructive Re-Assessment.” In this chapter the author thoroughly addresses the various fair and unfair interpretations of Bernal, focusing on our academic indebtedness to Bernal for his courageous and strenuous work. Throughout, Binsbergen and his contributors maintain that, “The Black Athena debate, to which the present volume is a contribution, has made at least one thing clear: we require new modes of thinking about cultural dynamics and interdependence.”⁷⁹

To Binsbergen’s credit, he rarely withholds his assessments of Bernal’s weaknesses. For example, he does applaud Bernal’s general concern regarding the “problematic(s)” of the sociology of knowledge in ancient history, specifically the inability of scholars to be truly a-political. However, in order to unveil inherent contradictions, he offers analyses of the social actors on Bernal himself, which include but are not limited to, growing up in an upper class British society, an academically elite family, and his experiences/introduction to Africa as a result of his family’s tea plantation in Malawi. His point is to highlight that similar analyses of the social actors that Bernal attributes as historical blinders worn by conservative traditionalists in the given subjects, are likewise probable unintended influences on his epistemological perspective.

The strength of *Black Athena Comes of Age* is the opportunity granted by its compiler for Bernal and content-relevant scholars to interact and debate the major claims of *Black Athena*.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 219.

Bernal informs the reader in his section focusing on the general responses to *Black Athena*, that Mary Lefkowitz and Guy McLean Rogers disallowed any inclusion of Bernal's defense in their collection, and in fact were in jeopardy of losing contributors should Bernal be granted the opportunity to respond to their critiques of his theory. The presence of Bernal in this work makes it much more approachable than *Black Athena Revisited*, where he is absent. Not only is it approachable, but also it earns respectability from the reader as he or she observes that the criticisms are no less blunt with his inclusion. Bernal is allowed the opportunity to state what he does and does not claim, and those in disagreement allowed the same space to provide evidence for their disagreement. The notability of this collection is the respect held for Bernal as a scholar and as a skeptic of the status quo, despite essential disagreement.

Though some of the criticisms are still cutting, the contributors recognize what Binsbergen posits as the most significant result of Bernal's grand theory. He holds that although he does not consider Bernal's contributions to be developed and plausible enough to be "canon of proto-history," his effort to produce a work of such great breadth is a landmark in that it serves to prompt scholars to cast away the "hegemonic mechanisms of global politics of knowledge." Binsbergen offers his own alternative theories for the re-assessment of traditional dogma and genuinely makes an effort to show Bernal's work as the stepping stool for the re-assessment of this work's contributors and those who will explore those aspects of traditional scholarship too easily accepted as fact. To conclude the intention of Binsbergen, his summary of the purpose of producing scholarship is especially significant in the context of the controversy and usage of myth: "What sustains our intellectual efforts and enables us to keep up with the frustrations of an institutional career (...) is a belief in the liberating and validating powers of

academic knowledge –through the production and enactment, not of arbitrary myth but of valid, reliable models of reality, of truth.”⁸⁰

Bernal’s space in the collection to engage with is impactful. In his discussion of the reception of *Black Athena*, he makes clear the intellectual systems which uphold the status quo. He notes that no one in the United States had heard of his book by the simple fact that it had not been reviewed by the *New York Times*: “And in America, unless a book is reviewed by the *New York Times* it does not exist for the cultivated lay public.”⁸¹ He makes a significant point in response to one of the many distortions of his argument by those he deems academic conservatives in *Black Athena Revisited* such as Robert Palter, but also by Josine Blok in *Black Athena Comes of Age* that his historical view lacks any dealing with countervailing forces. Bernal argues that where there is a trend there nearly always exists a counter trend to it, but the existence of a counter trend does not mean that the trends are equally influential. On this note, he states that the issue lies in a hierarchy of forces: “For instance anti racism was not as powerful as racism in Europe and North America in the 18th and 19th centuries.”⁸² Thus, he addresses the criticism made by Blok and Palter that Bernal ignores the fact that anti-racism existed alongside racism in his analysis of racist historiographies.

Another work which fits into Bernal’s inner core of specialist who received his work generally favorably is Jacques Berlinerblau’s *Heresy in the University: The Black Athena Controversy and the Responsibility of American Intellectuals*, which provides a thorough investigation of what has come to be known by scholars and the interested public as the Black

⁸⁰ Ibid., 61.

⁸¹ Ibid., 66.

⁸² Ibid., 76.

Athena Controversy/Debate. As a professor of Jewish Civilization, Berlinerblau brings a perspective to the Black Athena Debate that offers not only a critical analysis of Martin Bernal's claims, but also those of his toughest critics.

Berlinerblau begins in the same way most scholars involved in this debate begin, by restating his or her interpretation of Bernal's theory. He makes it clear that his aim is to write in order to explore the ethical responsibilities of scholars and question the present state of those ethics in using the Black Athena Controversy for scale. He maintains that a scholar engages the trust of his or her audience, and has a responsibility to treat opposing opinions with respect and consideration, as well as thoroughly question his or her own motivations.⁸³

Berlinerblau's purpose is to clearly outline Bernal's motivations in writing *Black Athena* and the significance of Bernal's larger argument: "Egypt as an African civilization with a central role in the formation of Greece." Thus, according to Berlinerblau, in doing so, he is not just contributing to "boutique multiculturalism," but rather arguing for the significant role Africans and Semites have played in Western Civilization. He references Charles Taylor's "the politics of recognition" in that the withholding of recognition of Egypt's influence on Greece in education is a form of oppression in and of itself.⁸⁴

Berlinerblau broadly, and admittedly so, restates Bernal's historical argument: that the ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians exerted great influence on ancient Greek civilization as early as the eighteenth century B.C.E through the Classical and Hellenistic eras (480-30 B.C.E) and that the Greeks themselves acknowledged and recorded not only the cultural influence but also

⁸³ Berlinerblau, *Heresy in the University*, 178.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

discussion of kinship with “more sophisticated civilizations of the East.”⁸⁵ It is clear in reading Berlinerblau’s summary of Bernal’s argument, especially compared to summaries of the argument by Bernal’s adversaries, that he has carefully analyzed Bernal’s theories with an open mind and an awareness of the responsibility he, as an academician, has to explore all ends of the theory. He even dubs Bernal the protagonist of the narrative that has become the Black Athena Controversy. In reading the dissenting critiques from other authors, it is typically apparent in their summaries of his argument whether they will allow his theories the proper scholarly consideration.

Berlinerblau uses the term heresy, and the religious-historical context surrounding the term, to guide the reader through Bernal’s theory and the ways it has been received or rejected through what resembles more of a system rather than a process of academia. The author’s significant point about the heretic is that he or she is relative and the term is relational: “A heresy is a heresy only because orthodoxy says so.”⁸⁶ Berlinerblau goes into hundreds of pages of discussion of Bernal’s major claims, his methodology used, the strengths and weaknesses of each claim, and how and by whom those claims have been combated by his adversaries. Berlinerblau posits that beyond the specificity necessary in sifting through the significant points of *Black Athena*, and beyond the culture war represented in this debate, there is a conflict in defining what scholarship is and about the moral responsibilities of the scholar.⁸⁷

Berlinerblau calls attention to two huge parts of Bernal’s work, which have been ignored by his critics almost entirely. The first are his arguments about anti-Semitism, the second is his

⁸⁵ Ibid, 3.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 16.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 17.

attack on the academy. The little attention his anti-Semitic arguments have received is a testament to the impact *Black Athena* had on the contemporary main intellectual and political concerns surrounding racism in the United States. Ignoring the attack on the academy is a significant failure of Bernal's critics, as Bernal fervently challenges our modern understanding of what constitutes scholarship. Berlinerblau notes that Bernal makes apparent a contradiction that exists in the very institution that has a duty to provide a space where "dissenting voices are protected, tolerated, and even occasionally exalted."⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Berlinerblau, *Heresy in the University*, 12.

Conclusion

The lack of engagement of the work of Drake, Du Bois, Woodson, Hansberry and Snowden, among others not discussed here, prior to and within *Black Athena* is a testament to the existence of an Aryan model of sorts and the marginalization of Black scholars who studied African antiquity extensively during the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries. As significant as it is to question why Bernal was excluded, it is just as significant to explore the fact that Bernal's theory was not the first of its kind. Furthermore, while his work is vast and impressive, it is not near the quality of those before him, yet he has become the central figure in a debate that he was not the first to start.

Nevertheless, in studying the response to Bernal's publications of *Black Athena*, it is apparent that his many peers did not engage him in a scholarly manner. He was not only excluded from Lefkowitz and Rogers' *Black Athena Revisited*, but also explicitly denied the opportunity to participate in the collection to defend and engage with the contributors seeking to discredit him and his work. Bernal himself states, "Thus, where liberal academics had urged me to join in actual or printed symposia, Mary Lefkowitz, the conservative, excluded me because as she puts it, 'Bernal is wrong.'"⁸⁹ He adds that this shows a misunderstanding of the basic nature and goal of academia, which is to engage in debate and discussion in order to get at the truth. Furthermore, he defines an academic conservative in this context as one who defends the status quo. He makes another significant point, which gets at the question posed at the outset of this paper, which asks why Bernal was dismissed and received in what appears to be a non-academic and exclusionary manner: that there exists a neoconservative myth which holds that until about

⁸⁹ Bernal, in Binsbergen, 72.

1960s when radicals corrupted it by introducing politics, scholarship was pure. He argues that his historiographical analysis of scholarship shows, contrary to the neoconservative myth, that politics has existed, particularly in classics, from the very beginning of the discipline and has been assigned a privileged place in curricula. More importantly, he argues that the objections by academic conservatives to challenges to the status quo are the result of the implications of his claims on their own work: “They object to what they see as my flouting the methods and rigour with which they have worked and which have undoubtedly secured great achievements for their disciplines.”⁹⁰

In contrast, the work of scholars such as Berlinerblau, Binsbergen, and the contributors in Binsbergen’s *Black Athena Comes of Age*, not only engage Bernal as a credible scholar, they seek to engage his arguments with an ethical responsibility.⁹¹ These scholars were willing to engage with Bernal and allow him the space to respond to their reviews of his work, in such a way that is in stark contrast to *Black Athena Revisited*, in which he was prohibited from participating. Comparing the responses to Bernal is a good way to address a major point, which Bernal himself makes, which is that there must be a faith in the nature and purpose of academia to fully vet our modes of knowledge, so that we have the most truthful and most inclusive processes of disseminating knowledge to the public. Overall, the importance of this debate, and the responses which surround it, is that it demands a discussion to continue and challenges the misconception that we are fully removed from the perspective of racist or racism-influenced

⁹⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁹¹ Ethical responsibility, as discussed, refers to Berlinerblau’s discussion of the implications of the *Black Athena Debate* for academia. This is a response to the tendency of critics of both Bernal and his theories to attack him as a scholar of ancient history. The focus of his critics is on him as an outsider, a non-expert, and overly ambitious, a distraction from serious engagement of his theories.

historians whom we continue to revere as pioneers in the study of antiquity, particularly, but in all fields of academia, generally.

The exploration of the discussions surrounding the “Black Athena Controversy” has displayed the complex nature of the debate. It is difficult to categorize responses to Bernal’s work as either receptive, non-receptive, or a mixture of both. However, in engaging with scholarship like that of Binsbergen, we can get closer to grasping the various fronts of counter-arguments to Bernal, and most importantly try to understand the motivations behind those who not only fervently disagree with his arguments, but also take such serious offense to his claims that they refuse to include him in discussion of them. Attempting to set the stage, or tell the story of how Bernal’s publications turned into the debate referred to throughout, has shown a more profound aspect of the questions Bernal poses to his readers. That is, what Bernal has done well, and is given credit for, even by some of his toughest critics in *Black Athena Revisited*, is his historiographical work. His investigation of the Aryan model brings much needed attention to the racist climate of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an era of scholars whose legacy still lives on in our schools and universities. He argues for the livelihood of that legacy, by reinforcing his belief that no historian can be totally objective and immune to the social constructions of his or her personal and academic life, or to how one was raised or who one has read.

Really, Bernal foresees his exclusion from academic debate and the effort to discredit him as a scholar in his first volume of *Black Athena* in his discussion of the silencing stigma of “outsider” and “non-expert,” and answers the question that this paper has set out to explore. His theories were dismissed in-part, in the spirit of academia, that is they were engaged and critiqued by peers, and weaknesses and missteps were found, but he was also dismissed and slammed by the specialists as an outsider to the study of antiquity, one not worthy of the conversation. On the

one hand, some are at odds with some of Bernal's claims and methodology, like Berlinerblau and Binsbergen, but nevertheless believe him to be onto something and deserving of investigation which checks the status quo of academia. On the other hand, there are those who may have too much academic achievement, too much at risk, to engage with a scholar who calls for the whole canon to be turned on its head. Despite the weaknesses and some agreed upon failures in Bernal's theories, by both friend and foe, and despite the fact that he did not give much space to his predecessors in *Black Athena*, the work is a reminder to scholars to continue to question the status quo, and to not allow the discussion to cease because it has been deemed dormant by the George Wills of the world.⁹²

⁹² Featured on the cover of Lefkowitz's *Not Out of Africa* is a review by George Will in *Newsweek*: "If truth mattered in this controversy, [this] book would end the debate."

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