Rarely has a study, not yet more than a third complete, excited as much interest or made as politically an opportune entry into the stage of scholarly debate as has Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena.* While laying many serious charges against classical studies past and present, and specifically asserting that the last three centuries of scholarship have been imbued with racism and antisemitism, Bernal’s work is basically an argument that what long have been thought of as the unique achievements of Greek civilization were in fact deeply and pervasively indebted to earlier African and Asian models. As such, it has become a source of intellectual ammunition for those seeking to redirect the curriculum away from its traditionally Western focus, and toward a variety of newfound “multicultural” preoccupations.

Panel discussions, university symposia, general interest articles, and scholarly criticism in abundance have followed *Black Athena’s* publication, despite Bernal’s repeated suggestion of a conspiracy to suppress the truth. Indeed, *Black Athena’s* impact has been so considerable, that however one may feel about the underlying plausibility of its contentions, the most serious critical attention must be paid to them, evaluating both their strengths and their more numerous and substantial weaknesses. To his credit, Bernal himself has been a constructive participant in the process of analyzing the merits of his theses.

**Bernal’s Arguments**

Bernal argues on three fronts that Egypt and Phoenicia had crucial and manifest formative influences on Greek language and civilization, beginning in the second millennium B.C.E. and continuing through classical times. His general understanding (xiv) is that perhaps as much as half of the Greek vocabulary derived from either Egyptian or Semitic roots as opposed to Indo-European stock. He further argues that the Greeks themselves acknowledged a massive debt to Egypt and Phoenicia. Thus he names his approach the “Revised Ancient Model,” differing from the Greeks’ own version insofar as it posits an Afroasiatic colonization of Hellas centuries earlier than some ancient writers conjectured, and assumes that the “pre-Greek” population was, in fact, already Indo-European, or as Bernal prefers, Indo-Hittite. Finally, he attempts

Michael Poliakoff is professor of classics and chairman of the Department of Classics at Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, MI 49242.
to show that the ultimate acceptance of the alternative "Aryan Model," which credits Indo European invaders from the North with planting the seeds of Greek civilization, was the result of a prevailing ideology of romanticism and racism. A wrongheaded classical philology and a positivistic approach to history, according to Bernal, provided the methodology for discarding the more accurate view of the ancients.

*Black Athena* does indeed speak to real issues in contemporary classical studies. E. R. Dodds pointedly urged classicists to gain a better understanding of the ancient Near East, "learning something at first hand of that oriental background against which Greek culture arose, and from which it was never completely isolated save in the minds of classical scholars." According to the eminent scholar Martin West, "From the first, Greece's face was turned towards the Sun. Greece is part of Asia; Greek literature is a Near Eastern literature." Yet other classicists have looked upon Afroasiatic civilization, if they bothered to at all, with a degree of contempt. C. E. Robinson, without denying the greatness of Egyptian civilization, believed "the 'Wisdom' of the Egyptians—the whole structure of their religious and philosophic thought—was built on the craziest foundation . . . beneath [which] lay a creed which stunted the mental growth of the entire race." H. D. F. Kitto argued that "[w]hile the older civilizations of the East were often extremely efficient in practical matters . . . yet they were intellectually barren." There are, in fact, many important distinctions to be drawn among Greek, Near Eastern, and Egyptian civilizations, but if Bernal makes us more vigilant about clichés such as Robinson's and Kitto's and renews interest in the significance of the Orient, then he is certainly a welcome catalyst.

But despite the timeliness of the study and Bernal's wide-ranging and formidable erudition, the book loses substantial credibility through questionable handling of evidence and insufficient or unconvincing linguistic/archaeological argumentation. Worse yet, despite Bernal's acknowledgement that although "the Aryan Model was conceived in what we should call sin and error . . . its conception in sin, or even error, does not necessarily invalidate it" (442), he largely rests content in making a case against its intellectual origins instead of its factual substance (443).

Thus, Bernal devotes relatively few pages (approximately 150 out of 443) to the ancient world, favoring instead a history of scholarship that castigates contemporary classicists for their insistence that "things were 'not so simple,'" and nineteenth-century philologists for their "professional jargon designed to maintain barriers between the practitioners of the discipline and the lay public" (281). But no scholar (and Bernal is a scholar) can slight the documents and still be convincing. The eager researcher challenged by the etymologies in chapter 1 will twelve times find that the footnote for a provocative statement is or includes the phrase "see volume 2" or "see volume 3," neither of which has yet been published. Ironically, in order to resolve these technical etymological
complexities, Bernal (as he admits) must engage in the same rigorous, old-fashioned methods of argumentation that he deplores. Philology, slow-moving perhaps, like the classical personification of Retribution, will be the principal arbitrator of Black Athena.

Matters of Detail

Bernal’s linguistic argument is fraught with all sorts of scholarly and technical problems. For instance, he advances one Egyptian root to explain the origin of both the Greek term *anax* (mortal or divine lord) and the name *Anchinoe*, the mother of the mythological Greeks Danaos and Aigyptos. For Bernal, it is an amazingly versatile root, appearing as the ancestor of *anax* in a pharaonic formula “may he live for ever,” and of *Anchinoe*, meaning “living [waters].” Leaving aside the grave linguistic problems that arise from the early Greek form of *anax*, which began with the consonant digamma (our “w” sound), we find Bernal simply torturing meaning. *Anchinoe* is a perfectly well-known Greek compound adjective meaning “person of close (anci) or keen intellect (nous)”: *anci* has no semantic relationship to *anax* or, for that matter, to any Egyptian root meaning “life.” What Bernal sees as a “peculiar semantic cluster—both Egyptian and Greek—around royalty, coffins, and flowing water” (94–95) is based upon fanciful speculation on vaguely similar sounds, without consideration of what the Greek words really mean. This methodology is completely unacceptable.

Bernal is skeptical, if not contemptuous, of source criticism, which was the principal tool by which the Ancient Model was overthrown (217–18, 221, 302–6, etc.). But since this is a book that upholds the verdict of the ancients, let us hear what the ancients themselves had to say about their own histories.

According to Livy, “It is difficult to decide which account or which authority to prefer to which. The record, I am convinced, has been falsified, and there is no such thing as a contemporary writer of those days on whose authority one might rely.” Thucydides writes, “For regarding the things before these [sc., the Peloponnesian War] and those yet more ancient, it was impossible to gain clear information.” So also Polybius writes. Source criticism is unavoidable and sobering. To be sure, Bernal indulges in it, trusting the objectivity of ancient sources that properly credit the East, but dismissing ancient criticism of, or departure from, the Ancient Model as simply a reaction to the Persian Wars or conditioned by some agenda that reveals Greek chauvinism.

Consider the tradition of Lykourgos, the Spartan lawgiver, who was thought to have visited Egypt. The ancients were uncertain about him. Plutarch notes, “Concerning the lawgiver Lykourgos it is not possible to make a single statement that is not disputed. His genealogy, his journeys, his death, and most of all his legislative and constitutional undertakings have been variously described, and there are very great differences of opinion regarding his date.” According
to Herodotus, the Pythian priestess was not certain whether to call him a man or a god.  

The story of Lykourgos' visit appears in chapter 4 of Plutarch's *Life of Lykourgos*, a key document for Bernal, and is part of a larger tale in which Lykourgos sets sail for many lands to avoid the suspicion of his fellow-citizens. We might note that this story is almost identical to one also told by Plutarch about Solon. It thus has a formulaic, rather than historical ring to it, and the wanderings of Lykourgos consequently become, in my mind, much too bruised a reed to support an argument about a formative Egyptian influence on Sparta.

Bernal also seems willing to rely on somewhat *ad hoc* genealogy, as is illustrated by his citation of the letter of the Spartan king Areus to the high priest Onias in Jerusalem, claiming joint descent from Abraham. In an impressive use of the techniques of source criticism, Jonathan A. Goldstein has argued that this letter is indeed authentic. But Goldstein also gives very cogent military reasons why Areus should have written such a letter and notes that the city of Pergamum made a similar claim at a time when such an alliance would have improved its position vis-à-vis the Romans, points Bernal ignores. The genealogy on which Herodotus depends (for the ancestry of the Dorian kings) goes back to the myth of Io and Zeus, but myths and legends are not necessarily history; and, as two reviewers argue (see below), the role of Egypt in these stories is almost certainly meant to be symbolic. All we have, then, in support of the notion that Spartan culture was derived from Egypt, are a myth, some ostensible parallels in art and architecture, two Greek traditions—one weak in Greek eyes; the other an apparent utilitarian etiology—and some etymologies that remain to be proven.  

Volume 3 of *Black Athena*, as Bernal describes it, will deal extensively with the Egyptian roots of Greek religion. Still, in providing readers with a summary of the details in volume 1, Bernal slights crucial authorities on the subject. He mentions only briefly Martin West, who presents an inconvenience for the Egypto-Phoenician theory of origin by outlining stunning Mesopotamian parallels to the stories of Uranos, Kronos, Zeus, and even the monster Typhoeus. In addition, there are Hittite and Sumerian parallels for major elements of the Greek story of Demeter and Persephone, noted and described by Walter Burkert. (Burkert, whose name is never mentioned in *Black Athena*, is widely regarded as the greatest living authority on Greek religion.) In comparison to Burkert's arguments, Bernal's derivation of Persephone from the Egyptian Nephthys is most unconvincing. The *Odyssey*, too, will have a new lineage (in volume 3) derived from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (87), though the Egyptian work is largely advice for a corpse, not the story of a living hero's descent into and return from the Underworld. We also read in volume 1 that "Indo-European philology has failed, over the last 160 years, to be of any help in explaining Greek myth and religion" (314). But surely it is significant that in the oblique cases in Greek, the name of Zeus is *dios*, *dii*, etc., that the archaic Latin name for Jupiter is *diespitar*, and that in Sanskrit we meet a sky god called *dyaus pitar*. 
The name of Zeus, it can be proved, has some good Indo-European credentials. But before classical scholars are willing to accept a connection between members of the Greek Pantheon and the Egyptian gods, they will want to see etymological connections and parallels of role and action more convincing than what Bernal provides in _Black Athena_.

Bernal’s history of scholarship in _Black Athena_ has generally drawn high praise from reviewers, but it is not free from problems. Some, for example, arise from his characterization of the broadly sympathetic reaction nineteenth-century Europe accorded to the theses of Aryan origins. Thus, Bernal writes:

In 1856, [J. A. de] Gobineau’s patron Alexis de Tocqueville wrote to console him about the slow response to his great work in France. . . . Tocqueville thought that the book would have a better reception in Germany, with its “enthusiasm for abstract truth” . . . and he reassured his protégé that the work would “return to France, above all by way of Germany.” The book was, in fact, immediately reprinted after the German conquest of France in 1940. (P. 344)

In truth, Tocqueville showed his loathing for Gobineau’s book in the clearest of terms, beginning with the appearance of Gobineau’s first volume.17 Nor did Tocqueville ever praise the work, even when “consoling” his friend, as becomes clear when one completes the sentence which Bernal gives us only in part: “Alone in Europe, the Germans possess the particular talent of becoming impassioned with what they take as abstract truths, without considering their practical consequence” (emphasis added). A sentence later, moreover, Tocqueville warns Gobineau that the Americans who like the book are “perfervid leaders of the anti-abolitionist party. They translated the part of your book which suits their prejudices.” That last sentence might also be said with some justification in regard to Bernal.18

The sum of a series of weak or unprovable arguments does not often add up to one strong one, and _Black Athena’s_ readers will need to ask just how many real props are left for Bernal’s ambitious synthesis.

**Rhetorical Tactics, Stereotypes, and Conspiracy Theory**

In an interview following the publication of _Black Athena_, Bernal acknowledged that he was invited by the American Philological Association to participate in a Presidential Session on _Black Athena_, but adds disingenuously that this was “something they never would have given a black scholar, even now.”19 Bernal also seems to believe that we teach and write on the basis of what we are—black, white, Jewish, Christian, Hispanic, etc.—and not as part of a relatively disinterested search for the truth. “I know that if a black scholar were to say what I am saying, people would think that he or she had an ax to grind, and
that’s partially true—blacks are interested in African history, women are interested in women’s history, Jews are interested in Jewish history, and so on. But it’s untrue that white males are somehow detached and objective, whereas everyone else is biased and partial.20

As a result, along with the “victim status” that Bernal claims for his scholarly position comes a belief in conspiracies. For Bernal, objective and dispassionate higher analysis is impossible, for a man’s socioeconomic condition or political persuasion will necessarily determine what he says. Concerning the misdating of Aeschylus’ Suppliants, for instance, Bernal suggests “persistent attempts to diminish the Egyptian aspects of the play” since “it was considered unworthy of the greatest Greek tragedian in his prime to treat a topic that could be understood to suggest that Egyptians had settled in the Peloponnese” (89). Bernal is perversely wrong: the mistake was technical, not racist in origin, as scholarship makes clear.21 Also, since the relevant papyrus appeared in 1952, the new dating of the drama has quickly become orthodoxy in teaching and scholarship. “Externalist and ideological forces” (including a love-hate relationship with the Jews and the “threat of non-Europe”) explain for Bernal the favorable South African reception of a book on the semitic origin of Linear A script. “The positive feelings of the Victorian period towards the Phoenicians had been preserved,” writes Bernal, “and would seem to be a factor in the open-mindedness of South African Classicists on this issue” (418).

Bernal conflates the difficulties he had in getting Black Athena published with the persecution of academics “who publish their findings on black history in white scholarly publications.”22 This opportune deflection avoids attention away from the fact that even if everything he says in Black Athena were to turn out to be correct, any responsible editor or referee would balk at its tendentious argumentation and unprofessional references to future publications.

Bernal’s Agenda

Bernal explicitly tells why he is writing this four-volume series: “The political purpose of Black Athena is, of course, to lessen European cultural arrogance” (73).

If I am right in urging the overthrow of the Aryan Model and its replacement by the Revised Ancient one, it will be necessary not only to rethink the fundamental bases of “Western Civilization” but also to recognize the penetration of racism and “continental chauvinism” into all our historiography, or philosophy of writing history. (P. 2, emphasis in original)

In a related article, Bernal identifies an emphasis on an education in the classics with the expression of European cultural arrogance:

In the 1980’s—to the embarrassment of the “liberal majority” of classicists—the Far Right offered to put classics back in the center of education. The offer was tempting but it came
at a high price. In the first place it entailed swallowing Allan Bloom and the appalling Straussian with their “bad” philology and philosophy and complete lack of objectivity. More generally, classicists were expected to abandon the academic aspect of their discipline entirely, to become priests and priestesses at the shrine of European civilization. 23

Bernal’s charges are both obnoxious and wrong. The teaching of the classics is not equivalent to “Eurocentrism,” nor will one find protocols for indoctrination in, say, Lynne Cheney’s Humanities in America. Moreover, if anyone has impugned philology and the rigorous teaching of classical languages, which remain the core of our academic discipline, it is not Bloom or the Straussian but Martin Bernal (see the conclusion of this article).

Bernal seems to think that the “failure of classical scholars to blast [him] out of the water” shows that his work “has become a legitimate view within ancient history and historiography.” 24 In other words, he feels that he has fulfilled his purpose even before the publication of a full and dispassionate analysis of his evidence. One sincerely hopes that in volumes 2 and 3, rather than hawking a strategy to bring the traditional study of Western Civilization into disrepute, Bernal will expand our knowledge about the contacts between Greece and other Mediterranean civilizations. But in his first volume’s discussion of the work of others, Bernal himself demonstrates how having an agenda can obstruct the pursuit of truth; and until he proves otherwise, there is every reason to regard his own writing with suspicion.

**Scholarly Reception of Black Athena**

The one constant in the scholarly response to Black Athena is the clear desire of the reviewers, including those who are critical of it, to admire the book. The typical reviewer reacts in shock, horror, or shame at the virulent racism and antisemitism Bernal documents, despite lingering questions about their significance in understanding antiquity and intellectual history.

Jasper Griffin, the distinguished fellow and tutor of Balliol College, writing in the New York Review of Books, displays a profoundly skeptical attitude towards Bernal’s arguments regarding antiquity (see below), but he is quick to affirm that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ancient history was riddled with racism; he even adds to Bernal’s case, citing the delicate praise given by the Austrian Anzeiger für Altertumswissenschaft of 1988 for Fritz Schachermeyer, an ancient historian with a more-than-casual affiliation with Nazism. 25 Though reserving judgment on Bernal’s claims for Egyptian civilization, G. W. Bowersock, fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study, praises him for showing us “as no one has before, the racist underpinnings of classics and Altertumswissenschaft in the West.” 26 Bowersock considers the exposure of scholarly racism so important that he expresses his hope that readers will “separate [from it] the issue of the actual truth or falsity of ancient traditions concerning Egyptians
and Phoenicians." David Konstan, well known for his work on Greek tragedy, regrets the lack of linguistic arguments and refuses to comment on the validity of Bernal's Revised Ancient Model, but he is warmly enthusiastic about Bernal's exposure of the ideological assumptions that have shaped classical studies. In a movingly personal review, Edmund Leach recalls his post-World War I British education, which painted a portrait of "Aryan warlords in their chariots." Black Athena causes Constantine Giannaris to reflect on the misinformation he received as a schoolboy in modern Greece. Perry Anderson hails this history of scholarship as "a critical inquiry into a large part of the European imagination" and predicts that the "fabrication" of Ancient Greece "will never pass as a natural identity again."

Only two reviewers argue that Bernal exaggerates the extent of antisemitism in the writing of ancient history. Minas Savas of San Diego State University writes: "Research sometimes leads scholars to strange conclusions, but if the strange conclusions precede the research, as with Black Athena, then the results become more intriguing. . . . [The book] is only a strident revisionist, political pamphlet." While somewhat eccentrically praising Bernal for his erudition, R. B. Lloyd's Choice review also objects to "what smacks of a grand anti-Semitic conspiracy." But despite the overplay of his sociology of scholarship, Bernal does properly win praise for exposing the extent to which cultural arrogance and religious and racial hatred permeated earlier scholarship, and the two nominations of Black Athena for book of the year in the New Statesman (27 November and 4 December 1987) allude to this virtue. It is a sign of the vitality and ethical stature of ancient studies that it eagerly welcomes the truth, even when this means impugning the great authority figures of classical scholarship.

The extent and impact of this racist legacy in contemporary scholarship is, however, less clear to reviewers. Gleaves Whitney, a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Michigan, in a long and generally thoughtful review, expresses his approval for Bernal's program to extirpate racism, but questions the extent of its presence in modern texts, challenging the Left to produce the evidence of a persistent slighting or denigrating of African and Asiatic achievements. He presents some reassuring examples of contemporary Western civilization textbooks that take seriously the contributions of Africa and Asia. To be fair, there does remain a case to be made against the texts of Kitto, Robinson, and Bury, all of which are reasonably current, but Whitney's call for a dispassionate review of the situation is most salubrious. Sarah Morris of Yale University, who endorses much of the Ancient Model on archaeological grounds, demonstrates that both classical studies and archaeology were involved in self-examination and criticism long before Bernal appeared on the scene.

Frank M. Turner of Yale University, though agreeing with many of Bernal's broader conclusions, challenges his methods and questions the validity of the labels Bernal applies to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians. Turner, a firm believer in professional scholarship, experiences "less a reaction of as-
tonishment than a new determination to undertake critical historical inquiry."\(^{36}\) He criticizes Bernal for the absence of particularist analysis—the sort that comes from the study and mastery of the primary text—and notes that scholarship cannot be seen to flow so seamlessly from conservative political associations. Turner also notes that the relative absence of interest in origins, Afroasiatic or otherwise, was conditioned by a Victorian focus on democratic politics and state-building, as well as by the more reprehensible ideologies that Bernal documents.

At the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity (IAC) panel in Claremont, California, one heard the charge that Bernal "confuses decoration and content" in calling the Freemasons and Rosicrucians bearers of Egyptian wisdom. There was also objection to the extraordinary weight Bernal gives Egypt in the Renaissance, which grew "surrounded by the ruins of Rome." The IAC *Bulletin* summary suggests that his reconstruction of nineteenth-century German thought also suffers from oversimplification. The summary makes a strong point: "Views that flout conventional establishment ideology are not necessarily more cogent, more palatable, or less ideological."\(^{37}\)

Several scholars raise a question that Bernal ignores, but which arises inevitably from *Black Athena*. Simply put, even if Bernal is correct about the extent of the Afroasiatic roots of Greece, what exactly is the relevance of this observation to the reduction of European cultural arrogance? Perry Anderson observes, "What was ‘classical’ about classical Greece, after all, was not its language or its religion... but its politics, philosophy, and art."\(^{38}\) That is to say, even if Bernal shows us Egyptian roots for the terminology of Greek democracy, where, for instance, is the Egyptian equivalent of the Athenian voting assembly (*ekklesia*)? Gleave Whitney asks perhaps the most important question: "Why didn’t [Egypt] produce the milieu in which a Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle could emerge?"\(^{39}\) Answering this question (perhaps with an eye to Jaspers’s Axial Age) could move the discussion away from either pro-white or pro-black racialism and toward an understanding of productive social mechanisms. Edmund Leach is keenly aware of the danger lurking in Bernal’s emphasis on origins: it harks back to the mischievous but persistent belief that "the boundaries of language group, cultural group, and ‘race’ are ‘normally’ coincident." Leach concludes that *Black Athena* offers us "a deconstruction rather than a reconstruction of Mediterranean prehistory."\(^{40}\)

Even enthusiastic reviewers have challenged Bernal’s Revised Ancient Model. Anderson, reserving judgment on the linguistic and religious parallels to be proven in volumes 2 and 3, questions the absence of archaeological evidence to support Bernal’s contention of extensive Afroasiatic colonization. Tamara Green, professor of classical studies at Hunter College, observes Bernal’s opportune Rankeianism in his assertion that “this [broad survey] is provided in order to show what I think actually happened as opposed to the other peoples’ view of the subject.”\(^{41}\) She also refers to the genre differences among Bernal’s Greek sources
and wonders why a man so able in criticizing eighteenth- through twentieth-century history should neglect to do so with ancient material. Finally, Green makes the excellent point that Egypt has a distinct image in Greek literature as an antidemocratic, static place.

On the whole, though, partly out of scholarly caution and reluctance to tread (as Bernal does) into less-familiar specialties, but mostly out of regard for the antiracist stance Bernal takes, critics of *Black Athena* have been curiously mute, many of them unwilling seriously to referee its claims.

Unfortunately, relatively few specialized reviews have yet appeared in journals of classical studies. A notable exception is one by Semiticist Gary Rendsburg of Cornell University. Rendsburg challenges several of Bernal's Egyptian etymologies but argues that, on the whole, Bernal's linguistic thesis is correct, despite Rendsburg's admitted lack of expertise in Indo-European. Sarah Morris has begun to fill in some of the archaeological material necessary to evaluate Bernal's contention of Afroasiatic influence. She remains skeptical of the extent of the Egyptian connection, but notes the intriguing evidence of Ischia, Knossos, and Lefkandi, where both Greek and Levantine settlers seem to have lived, married, and died—evidence of casual cultural diffusion in the first millennium B.C.E. Citing shipwrecked cargo, along with architectural and religious parallels, Morris also argues for Bronze Age influence. She concludes that progress in archaeology and philology supports Bernal's thesis "on grounds other than those which he invokes." Although Morris is intent on finding common ground, it is important to clarify that what she (along with Burkert and West, whom she cites extensively) is trying to show is the effect of contact and proximity, especially in the context of trade. Bernal is more concerned with "origin," and "state to state relations" (i.e., the Afroasiatic colonization of Greece), the demonstration of which he hopes will reduce "European cultural arrogance." But it will take a much better case than that made in volume 1 of *Black Athena* to provide this. The brief report of the IAC's discussion raises similar doubts. Under the subheading, "The Classical World," the report reads:

Bernal often seems to construct arguments without evidence... Bernal typically falls victim to "parallelomania" when he compares the Greeks with the Egyptians... In many cases he draws conclusions about Old Kingdom Egypt based upon Egypt as it was dominated by Greek and Roman rulers.

Three longer reviews merit special attention for their balance and thoroughness. Bracht Branham poses again "Nietzsche's deceptively simple question... 'Who were the Greeks?" noting that for Bernal this is a question of origin, not a question of culture. Branham also gives more evidence on the modern textbook controversy, citing both villains and heroes. Concentrating on Bernal's vision of antiquity, he identifies three problems: (1) a model based on sources that range from philosophy to fiction, (2) a belief in the historical value
of myth, and (3) a notion that cultural influence acts on passive recipients. “Does classical civilization have the kind of identity that can be disclosed by a more accurate model of its pre-historic past?” Branham’s answer is well worth quoting:

If there is something missing from *Black Athena*, it is not learning; it is some sense of why the Greeks have elicited so much attention from such varied minds. It is the discovery, instigated by the “Hellenomaniacs” that if there was something categorically different about the Greeks, this difference was a matter of historical experience—of art, literature, philosophy, politics, and economics—not of origins.46

Molly Levine, professor of classics at Howard University, withholds judgment on the book, but in light of Bernal’s etymological and archaeological evidence frames the proper questions. For Bernal, “the liberal loss of faith in the mystique of ‘science,’” helps create a receptive ground for his new model (437). Levine, on the other hand, maintains her “responsibility as a teacher: to tell the truth, as far as it is known, to my students.”47 She is also profoundly aware of the double-edged sword of racialist arguments (such as Bernal’s claim of a “black” Egypt) and their impact on a nonscholarly readership looking for ideological weapons.

Griffin’s review notes Bernal’s reliance on the premise that one cannot prove absence, what philosophers call “unfalsifiability” (particularly regarding archaeological evidence and early transmission of the West Semitic alphabet). No matter how intriguing the idea of possibly early transmission might be, Griffin’s doubts remain: Why no Greek inscription before the eighth century B.C.E.? Why the clumsy Linear B if the West Semitic alphabet was already known? Why an oral culture from which Homer emerges? Griffin elegantly demonstrates that the Greeks may have used the theory of Egyptian origin as a means of deflating rival claims of originality among their states. Regarding Bernal’s etymologies, Griffin reminds us that linguists look for regular patterns, not *ad hoc* similarities. In response to Bernal’s use of Herodotus, Griffin points out that the father of history is simply wrong in his description of Egyptian metempsychosis, and he finds little in the actual text of the *Republic* to support the Roman contention that Plato learned philosophy in Egypt.

David Gress, in “The Case Against Martin Bernal,” makes no attempt to give a balanced view of *Black Athena*; but this long and polemical review does contain vital information about factual and conceptual problems in the book.48 Gress does not take up Bernal’s attack on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship, but he reacts angrily to Bernal’s crude charges of racism against the generation of dedicated and careful scholars with whom Gress studied classics at Cambridge. His contrast of Greek and Egyptian political concepts, documented with citations, shows how insufficient Bernal is on this crucial point. Not every reader will share Gress’s diagnosis of Bernal as a “red diaper baby”
(following in the footsteps of his Stalinist father, John Desmond Bernal); but the charges of intellectual dishonesty leveled at *Black Athena* are not easy to refute. Both for its scholarship and penetrating critique of Bernal’s agenda, this is an important review.

**What Color Were the Egyptians?**

Responding to Bernal’s assertion that some of the Egyptian dynasties “were made up of pharaohs whom one can usefully call black” (242), Griffin astutely notes: “[T]o call many pharaohs black is ‘useful’—just as it is ‘useful’ to see the denial by the historians of Egyptian monotheism as caused by racism. The choice of adjective seems to emphasize that these are in large measure, value judgments, rather than statements of facts.” The principal living authority on blacks in antiquity, Frank Snowden of Howard University, also delivers a powerful rebuttal to this aspect of *Black Athena*. He points out that Herodotus does not support *Black Athena*’s contention that the Egyptians were black in the sense of Negro, and that the works of C. A. Diop and George James, which Bernal praises, are irresponsible, unscholarly, and grossly misleading.

Bernal uses terms like “black” and “Negro” loosely. By his own admission, he titled the book *Black Athena* because Herodotus thought the Egyptians and some Libyans were black and because Athena’s paradigm (in Bernal’s view) was the Egypto-Libyan goddess Neit. However, Bernal has subsequently regretted using this title, recognizing that “African” does not necessarily equal “black.” In response to Snowden’s criticism, Bernal equivocated further that one can mean black in the very broad sense that “it is used in the United States.” If this is the usage, of course, Bernal may well have a point, since Egypt can be correctly described as a multiethnic and racially heterogeneous society, whose population contained a significant Negroid strain. More tellingly, however, as Frank Yurco has observed, it was also one in which our primitive racial labels would have been regarded as utterly inapplicable.

Although, during the American Philological Association panel discussion, Bernal shrewdly distanced himself from George James’s wild claims that Aristotle stole his ideas from Africa, in *Black Athena* he called the idea that Aristotle had “access to Egyptian libraries” “worthy of serious examination” and praised James for being “more sensitive” than Snowden in recognizing that the well-being of contemporary black consciousness depends on an identification with the Egyptians (434–37 and note 165 [460]).

What does Bernal really think?

**Cry “Havoc” and Let Loose the Dogs of War**

Whatever the verdict of judicious readers, *Black Athena* has found enough supporters enamored of its conclusions to ensure its wide and perhaps unto-
ward popular impact. The idea of a “black Egypt” alone has particular appeal, despite the weakness and ambiguity of the argument. Greg Tate reviewed the book in the *Village Voice* along with George James’s *Stolen Legacy* and Indus Khamit Kush’s *What They Never Told You in History Class*. For Tate, Bernal is simply grist for the mill:

> What color were the ancient Egyptians? Blacker than Mubarak, baby. . . . If you figure different, it’s because the Egyptians’ complexion was bleached out of your liberal arts curriculum by the same 18th and 19th century white supremacist philosophers who tried to rub out the massive African contribution to that oxymoron, Western civilization (their disciples even went so far as to scrape the Negroid noses off the Egyptian statuary)."54

Apparently, Tate is convinced that Socrates was an initiate of the Egyptian Mysteries, and Aristotle came by all his wisdom from books stolen from Egyptian libraries. Tate’s program is “something more radical, like a suspension of all humanities courses nationwide until the racism that Göttingen institutionalized has been expelled from Academe.”55 He feels that Bernal has put “a heap more ammo in the reading room” to assist the new generation of radical scholars.

Tate is not the lone ideological camp follower. Thomas Patterson, writing in the Socialist *Monthly Review*, also predicts that the works of Diop and James will enjoy renewed interest. (Hillsdale College’s copy of *Stolen Legacy* is already in constant demand on interlibrary loan.) *Black Athena*, says Patterson, represents resistance to the interest in Western civilization expressed by “politicians and hack academics” (referring to Bennett and Bloom), and he is pleased that Bernal has made “racism in the academy public.”56

John Gabriel, writing in *Science as Culture*, feels that “*Black Athena* has more to offer black people of African descent than it does for those black people of Asian origin and even Greek origin.” If what underlies Gabriel’s concept of race is unclear, his call to activism is not: “Racial justice and equality do not inevitably follow from an effective intellectual rebuttal of a racist paradigm.”57 He is not rallying to a call for reason. Susantha Goonatilake is grateful to Bernal for freeing our minds from racism, but scolds him for implicitly holding a Eurocentric and colonialist vision. She looks for more work on “regional civilizations.”58 And finally, Amy Richlin, noting the attention *Black Athena* was getting from the APA, called for a “presidential session of this size directed towards feminist issues or women’s issues in the classics.”59 When politicization and empowerment are at issue, rather than the dispassionate pursuit of truth, many will stand in line for a piece of the pie. One recognizes the initiative in these quarters to Balkanize classical studies along lines of race and gender: there will be no victors in such a struggle, but we may be certain that truth will be the first victim.
Conclusion

Dr. Frances Powell, director of the social studies curriculum in the Washington, D.C., public school system has been keenly interested in the significance of Nile Valley civilization and its curricular applications. But Powell, a Ph.D. in history, enjoys an advantage by no means ubiquitous among scholars and educators—objectivity and scholarship. She has read Bernal, consulted Snowden, and is wrestling with the evidence. “They’re trying to get people to look at Africans in a different way—and we’re sympathetic to that,” she says. But she adds, “I don’t want children to go out and substitute one myth for a lot of other myths.”

At this point, I feel obliged to articulate what many reviewers have only discretely suggested. Black Athena was released prematurely, apparently out of a sense of ideological mission, and is a house divided against itself. Bernal’s disdain for “logocentrism” lurks behind comments such as: “[T]he language requirement is a very effective barrier to keep out strangers, who have not been properly taught the ways in which the members of the discipline think” or “What is dubious is whether or not there is ever any certainty and, more relevant to this discussion, whether there can be a meaningful ‘fact’ without a theory to set it in.” I, for one, will gladly be labeled “logocentric,” for I remain convinced that thought, truth, and reason are not a function of bourgeois hegemony, but the tools that allow people of different nations, races, and genders to advance human civilization cooperatively. I also remain convinced by Sir Kenneth Dover that no one is likely to make a substantial contribution to Hellenic studies who does not know the Greek language well.

Black Athena will probably engender some productive reflections in classical studies and intellectual history. The best of these will do what Bernal fails to do: pursue ideas in time-honored methods of objective and detailed investigation.

Acknowledgments

The wide-ranging nature of Black Athena left me with many questions, and a number of colleagues read part or the whole of my manuscript and offered their advice. I thank in particular Timothy Long, Simon Slings, Ludwig Koenen, Robert Eden, W. M. Calder III, Robert Bianci, Stanley Burnstein, Edmund Meltzer, Jon C. Billigmeier, Lorna Holmes, David Christenson, Gerda Seligson, Felix Kaufmann, and James Stephens. Any errors of fact or indelicacies of tone remain exclusively my responsibility.

Notes

2. E. R. Dodds, *Humanism and Technique in Greek Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 11, which is his inaugural lecture as the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford University.


6. Consider Bernal’s footnote 104, on page 457: “The great intricacies of the Egypto-Semitic roots and the word *phoenix* will be discussed in vol. 2.”

7. It is to Bernal’s credit that he has made a special request for linguists to criticize his work, and at an American Philological Association meeting, publicly expressed his disappointment that no hostile writer could be found to respond to his etymologies. See Martin Bernal, “Black Athena and the APA,” *The Challenge of Black Athena*, Arethusa, Special Issue (Fall 1989). It should be noted, however, that such analysis will be unfruitful until Bernal reveals the rules and patterns of derivation from Near Eastern languages to Greek that he is following.


13. Herodotus, 1.65.3.


15. Pierre Chantraine writes that the etymology of the name Sparta is obscure, but notes some plausible suggestions: derivation from *speiro* “sow,” presumably part of a pre-Dorian myth of autochthonous origin, or from the plant *spartos. Dictionnaire etymologique de la langue grecque* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968), s.v. “Sparta.”


20. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
40. Leach, 11.
43. Morris, 46.
44. Jefford, 12.
46. Ibid., 60.
49. Griffin, 27.
50. Frank M. Snowden, Jr., "Bernal's 'Blacks,' Herodotus, and Other Classical Evidence," The Challenge of Black Athena, Aretusa, Special Issue (Fall 1989). Two of Snowden's books, both published by Harvard University Press, analyze the terms of race and color in Greek and Latin as well as their sociological significance.
55. Ibid., 50.
62. See the brief but cogent remarks on this topic in Peter Shaw, “Making Sense of the New Academic Disciplines,” Academic Questions 3 (Summer 1990): 25.