

Egypt in America : *Black Athena*, Racism and Colonial Discourse

Robert J.C. Young

Colonial discourse analysis was initiated as an academic sub-discipline within literary and cultural theory by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). This is not to suggest that colonialism had not been studied before then, but it was Said who shifted the study of colonialism among cultural critics towards its *discursive* operations, showing the intimate connection between the language and forms of knowledge developed for the study of cultures and the history of colonialism and imperialism. This meant that the kinds of concepts and representations used in literary texts, travel writings, memoirs and academic studies across a range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, could be analyzed as a means for understanding the diverse ideological practices of colonialism. Said's Foucauldian emphasis on the way in which Orientalism developed as a discursive construction, so that its language and conceptual structure determined both what could be said and what recognized as truth, demonstrated that all other perspectives on colonialism share and have to deal with a common discursive medium: the language used to describe or analyze colonialism is not transparent, innocent, ahistorical or merely instrumental. Colonial discourse analysis therefore looks at the wide variety of texts of colonialism as something more than mere documentation or 'evidence', and also emphasizes and analyzes the ways in

which colonialism involved not just a military or economic activity, but permeated forms of knowledge which, if unchallenged, may continue to be the very ones through which we try to analyze and understand colonialism itself.

Said's emphasis on Orientalism as a discourse had two main implications. First, the charting of the complicity of Western literary and academic knowledge with the history of European colonialism emphasized the ways in which seemingly impartial, objective academic disciplines had in fact colluded with, and indeed been instrumental in the production of actual forms of colonial subjugation and administration. *Orientalism* provided powerful evidence of the complicity between politics and knowledge. Said's more controversial contention was that the discursive construction of Orientalism was self-generating, and bore little if any relation to the actuality of its putative object, 'the Orient'. This has been the most disputed aspect of his thesis and the most difficult for people to accept. At the same time, it has been one which, at worst, has allowed a certain lack of historical specificity. After all, if Orientalist discourse is a form of Western fantasy that can say nothing about actuality, while at the same time its determining cultural pressure means that those in the West cannot but use it, then any obligation to address the reality of the historical conditions of colonialism can be safely discarded. Thus colonial discourse analysis has meant that we have learnt a lot about the fantasmatics of colonial *discourse*, but at the same time it has prevented us by definition from knowing about the actual conditions such discourse was framed to describe, analyze or control.

The totalizing direction of Said's argument in *Orientalism* was quickly challenged by Homi K. Bhabha, who

maintained that Said assumed too readily that an unequivocal intention on the part of the West was always realized through its discursive productions (Bhabha, 1983). Bhabha called attention to the moment in which Said briefly, but in an undeveloped way, set up the possibility of Orientalism working at two conflictual levels, and in a significant but uncharacteristic invocation of psychoanalysis, distinguished between a 'manifest' Orientalism, the conscious body of 'scientific' knowledge about the Orient, and a 'latent' Orientalism, an unconscious positivity of fantasy and desire. Bhabha's outstanding contribution was to develop the implications of this idea by emphasizing the extent to which the two levels fused and were, in operation, indistinguishable. He showed how colonial discourse of whatever kind operated not only as an instrumental construction of knowledge but also according to the ambivalent protocols of fantasy and desire. In subsequent work, Bhabha has been concerned to demonstrate the constitutive ambivalence that rests at the heart of colonial discursive production, an ambivalence that its appearance in a non-European context only accentuated. He has exhibited through a series of analyses the ways in which European colonial discourse—whether it be governmental decree, district officers reports, or missionary accounts—is effectively decentred from its position of power and authority. At times this occurs by its taking on an increasing hybridity when placed in a colonial context, at other times through the exploitation by the colonized themselves of its evident equivocations and contradictions that are all too apparent in the more hostile and challenging criteria of its alien surroundings. If Said shows that misrelation is the anagrammatic secret of Orientalism, Bhabha demonstrates that oscillation is that

of the colonialist.

By contrast, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has rather been concerned to emphasize, against Said, the possibility of counter-knowledges such as those constructed around the criteria of the journal *Subaltern Studies* (Spivak 1985, 1987, 1990; Guha, 1982). If the desire of today's anti-colonial historian is to retrieve a subaltern history that rewrites the received account both of the colonizing academics and of the native ruling elite, Spivak stresses the pitfalls and aporias that even radical historiography can remain blind to. She instances examples of histories that continue to be ignored, such as those of native subaltern women. Taken always as an object of knowledge, by colonial and indigenous rulers who are as masculinist as each other, the subaltern woman is written, argued about, even legislated for, but allowed no discursive position from which to speak herself. She therefore tends to be absent from the documentary archives, and to write her history has to involve a particular effort of retrieval. This focus on the kinds of exclusion produced not only by colonialism itself but even by current forms of understanding is typical of Spivak's more general concern with what she considers to be the continuing epistemic violence that is practiced in the exercise of Western forms of thought upon the East. Equally importantly, Spivak has championed with a remarkable degree of success the cause of minority groups excluded or neglected by contemporary academic, particularly feminist, practices. It is typical of the relentlessly questioning nature of her work, however, that she has recently been concerned with an interrogation of, as she sees it, the increasing commodification of the category of 'marginality' itself (Spivak, 1991).

These positions have been elaborated and devel-

oped by a number of other critics, but it would be true to say that Said, Bhabha and Spivak constitute the holy trinity of colonial discourse analysis, and have to be acknowledged as central to the field (Young, 1990). While there has been a remarkable, indeed quite staggering, growth of critics researching in this area, an increasing tendency has been to produce new archival material rather than to develop further the theoretical parameters set up by Said *et al.* The major challenge has come from critics such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Benita Parry, or Aijaz Ahmad, who have criticized a certain textualism and idealism in colonial discourse analysis which, they allege, occurs at the expense of materialist historical inquiry (Mohanty, 1984; Parry, 1987; Ahmad, 1992). There is a considerable cogency to some of these objections, the underlying message of which has probably less to do with Said's own work than with its influence, and the sense that from a theoretical perspective colonial discourse analysis has reached a stage where it is itself in danger of becoming oddly stagnated, and as reified in its approach—and therefore in what it can possibly produce at the level of analysis—as the colonial discourse which it analyzes. Critics have reached something of an impasse with regard to the theoretical questions involved in the analysis of colonial discourse, and at times this has meant a certain complacency about or neglect of the problems of the methodologies that have been developed.

II *Black Athena* and Geopolitics

From a theoretical point of view, this situation could be said to have occurred because the analytic paradigms developed for other literatures or continents have not

been strong enough to challenge the discursive model of Said. I want now to consider a book which holds out the promise of providing a different possibility for the theoretical paradigm of colonial discourse analysis, Martin Bernal's controversial *Black Athena*, a book whose impact can only be compared to that *Orientalism* (Bernal 1987, 1991). Bernal does not claim to be providing an analysis of colonialism as such, but colonialism of a more far-reaching kind proves to be fundamental to his analysis. *Black Athena* is important first of all because it moves the question of Africa to the centre of both historical and intellectual enquiry in the history of Western knowledge. For reasons that will become clear, the book is hostile to the nineteenth-century obsession with India. As Said shows, 'the Orient' itself tended to move eastwards with the historical movement of exploration and colonization. But the decline of interest in the Middle East in the nineteenth century can also be attributed to other factors. *Black Athena* argues that the waning of attention and prestige accorded to the Middle East corresponded to an increasing denigration of Semitic and African culture, the reasons for which were largely racist. The prestige of India, by contrast, developed with the notion of its common 'Aryan' stock with Europeans. Even today India quite clearly retains that position of pride of place, the jewel in the crown of colonial discourse analysis.

Black Athena's significance derives not only from its hotly contested claims to revise some of the fundamental historical assumptions of Classics and Archaeology. Its more far-reaching contemporary cultural and political importance stems from its implied reappraisal of Black history, not only making it central to any account of the origins of European civilization, but also powerfully

strengthening its still marginalized institutional academic standing. The book thus makes a dynamic intervention in the current reappraisals of the bases of Western knowledge. *Black Athena's* value also derives from the fact that it provides the most detailed and comprehensive demonstration to date of the way in which the allegedly objective historical scholarship of apparently non-political academic disciplines, Classics and Archaeology, were in fact determined by their own cultural and political values. Bernal corroborates Said's claim that all knowledge is interested, but connects this more specifically to questions of racism. Bernal's book suggests that the parameters that have already been set up defining the limits of colonial discourse need to be extended much more widely into the history of academic disciplines. *Black Athena* holds out the much more disturbing possibility that all Western knowledge is, directly or indirectly, a form of colonial discourse.

Bernal begins by making the provocative claim that the Classical and Archaeological scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been racially biased. He supports this argument with an historical analysis which demonstrates that the formation of Classics as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century was based on the deployment of a new form of historical scholarship that significantly modified the story of the origins of Greek civilization that had hitherto been accepted for the previous two thousand years. In the place of the 'Ancient model' of the dependence of Greece on Egyptian culture, nineteenth-century academics substituted what Bernal calls the 'Aryan model' which denied that the Greeks had received any cultural influence at all either from the Semitic or African cultures of the Phoenicians or the Egyptians and held instead that

Greek culture was, essentially, self-generated. This is the paradigm which, he alleges, with its cultural and racial assumptions intact, has broadly speaking stayed in place ever since. The main argument of *Black Athena*, then, as Bernal himself summarizes it, is that

the Ancient Model was destroyed and replaced by the Aryan Model not because of any internal deficiencies, nor because the Aryan Model explained anything better or more plausibly; what it did do, however, was make the history of Greece and its relations to Egypt and the Levant conform to the world-view of the nineteenth century and, specifically, to its systematic racism. (Bernal, 1987: 442)

The hostile reaction of Classicists to *Black Athena* is hardly surprising and recalls that of Orientalists to Said's *Orientalism*. Whether Bernal's claims can be sustained at their broad-stroke level of generality is doubtless open to question. It is not my intention here to consider the argument among classicists, archaeologists or historians about whether Bernal is right or wrong. I want to focus instead on his methodological claims and look more closely at the contemporary political implications of his argument.

Bernal calls Volume I of *Black Athena* 'The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985', and maintains that this involves the process of the Aryan model of the Romantics (Greece as a self-generated pure origin, both of itself and of European culture) superseding the traditional view of Greece's heavy dependence on Egyptian philosophy, science, and knowledge. The argument of the book, therefore, is that—with some modifications—the traditional view is in fact true, and that of the Romantics false.

This means that there is a crucial difference between Bernal's project and Said's in *Orientalism*. For Said, 'the Orient' is a Western projection onto the East that has no corresponding actuality or real that can be set against it to put the record straight, the reason being that the very notion of the Orient is itself a piece of Orientalism. This leads Said to develop the problematics of the whole question of representation to the point where he finds himself entangled in the anthropological quandary of whether it is possible to represent other cultures properly at all. Bernal, by contrast, says that we *can* know the truth about ancient Greece. Despite his appeal to Kuhn, ultimately it's not just a question of models or of representation. It's a matter of evidence, and he offers us, therefore, a return to historical truth. This sets up the interesting possibility that what Said describes in *Orientalism* is not just a discursive projection but a Romantic fantasy that could, after all, be corrected by a return to the historical actuality. Anthropology, too, would also once again be able to know and to represent its object. Moreover, the revalidation of the Ancient Model also means that *Black Athena* impinges on the symptomatic moment of anthropology in which indigenous and Western academic knowledges confront each other. Bernal's validation of the former offers a way of breaking our contemporary habit of even now seeing the so-called native as an object but not as a source of knowledge. This still operates as a general rule for non-Western forms of knowledge, particularly within the academic institution.

The problem with the book arises, however, from a related anthropological quandary: the position of the observer. In Volume I, Bernal makes his case via a sociology of knowledge which differentiates between

'internal' arguments—pure scholarship—and 'external' arguments—where knowledge is seen in an interested relation to its own contemporary politics and other equally politicized disciplines (e.g. ethnology, anthropology, eugenics etc.). Bernal argues that, from an historical perspective, the ultimate justification for the first can always be found in the second. Except in his own case, however. Here Bernal's old-fashioned and in many ways refreshing appeal to evidence, with its accompanying distinction between true and false history, means that he must also maintain a split between scholarship and politics, despite his eloquent simultaneous demonstration of its impossibility. His own illustrations of how facts are always imbricated with values begs the question of the status of his own 'facts'. The recently published *Black Athena* Volume II, which contains 'the evidence', has confirmed that Bernal cannot himself successfully lay claim to the very notion of disinterested scholarship that he shows to be impossible for everyone else (Young, 1994). Unlike J.D. Bernal's comparable project in *The Social Function of Science*, there is no Marxism available here enabling Martin Bernal to separate the metaphysical elements from science (Bernal, 1939). Bernal does not after all, then, succeed in returning to an empirical methodology that could set us free from the problems set up by Said.

Despite its methodological difficulties, however, *Black Athena* remains important for three reasons: first, because it puts Africa as central to the question of Western knowledge, secondly, because it poses far-reaching questions about the status of academic learning, and its policing of the borders between proper and improper knowledge (including *Black Athena* itself). Lastly, the book is important because, far more than

Orientalism, it puts the question of race at the centre of its inquiry. In short, Bernal's most significant intervention, though to some extent unacknowledged even by himself, is the fact that he places race, racism, and the racialization of knowledge, at the core of his argument.

III The Question of the Status of Egypt

Black Athena itself, and its subsequent reception, is testimony to the problem of the legitimation of knowledge and the degree to which political considerations perform this function. One of the many paradoxes of Bernal's book is that whereas public interest is focussed on its more general implications that go well beyond the immediate detail of the material discussed, Bernal himself wants to keep fairly rigorously to the parameters of his specific topic. In fact, despite his own strictures on Classics, Bernal remains predominately concerned to set his own argument within the limits of the field.

This avoidance of the book's contemporary political implications is most obviously apparent in the question of the status of Egypt. As we have seen, Bernal's argument is that in the early nineteenth century Greece replaced Egypt as the origin of European civilization. This shift was achieved not through documentary or archaeological evidence but via the prestige of linguistics, with the discovery of the Indo-European family of Aryan languages. Bernal argues that the motivation that lay behind this was the desire to give European civilization a European and not an African origin, a move which he connects to the development of scientific theories of racism in the nineteenth century. This shift from Egypt to Greece simultaneously involved a denigration and

indeed denial of the history and civilization of Africa.

Egypt, in Bernal's argument, is undoubtedly a fulcrum for this antagonism between Europe and Africa, and therefore also between white and black. Bernal himself shows that since classical times there has been a highly contested debate about whether the Egyptians were 'essentially African', whether they were white or black. Clearly, in terms of the book's political argument, this question is a crucial one—for if the Egyptians weren't African, if they weren't black, then the wider cultural consequences of the whole argument of *Black Athena* for our own contemporary cultural politics would collapse. Bernal himself, however, restricts his own comments to the guarded remark that 'the Ancient Egyptians ... though their colour was uncertain, lived in Africa' (Bernal, 1987: 440). Despite its critical significance for the argument of the book, Bernal plays the question down.

The problem is that he is trying to have it both ways. For Bernal, the point that the Egyptians were racially mixed makes their identification as black problematic; he addresses the issue by recourse to literal descriptions of skin colour. What he does not consider is the fundamental point that today's term, 'Black', was developed not to describe skin colour in any literal way but rather to characterize a political category of oppression. This points up the problems of the political use of the term 'Black' to describe peoples of different historical epochs who were not oppressed by white society, or to put it another way, it emphasizes the historical specificity of today's racial politics. The tendency to assimilate the Egyptian history of thousands of years ago to our own contemporary political issues and values obviously runs the risk of hypostatizing a transhistorical essence of 'Blackness'—because historically speaking, even if the

Egyptians were black, the meaning of Blackness could clearly not be the same then as it is now. Any tendency to assimilate the Egyptian history of thousands of years ago to our contemporary political issues is thus as full of pitfalls as of potential. On the other hand, Bernal himself shows that this very historical identification of the Egyptians as African and black was the itself reason why they were written out of European cultural history in the nineteenth century. In exactly the same way, it is because the book is considered to be saying something about the history of Black civilizations that it has made such a significant intervention in the realm of today's cultural politics. Moreover by calling it *Black Athena*, Bernal himself in fact directly invokes such an implication. All of which shows the continuing impossibility of trying to separate scholarship from politics. But despite its powerful demonstration of how this has operated historically, *Black Athena* insists on maintaining a sphinx-like silence about its own relation to today's contemporary cultural politics. This scholarly stance does not, however, prevent the meaning of *Black Athena* from being inextricably bound up with the racial politics of the past two hundred years.

The reception of *Black Athena* suggests that today's racial politics still work through a polarization between Black and white, just as we talk of colonizer and colonized, of self and Other. This remorseless dialectalization is characteristic of twentieth-century accounts of race, racial difference and racial identity, and suggests that they are in certain respects less different from those of the nineteenth century than is often assumed. The obviously necessary but easy dismissals of Victorian expressions of racial superiority mean that we are also often unaware of the links between contemporary cultural discourses and

earlier racist thinking. In fact I would suggest that oddly enough what has remained least visible to colonial discourse analysis is the question of race. Most of us, of course, work on the assumption that racism can always be found in the colonial arena, and a certain safety and comfortable moral rectitude can be found by citing glaring examples of racist sentiment in any analysis. So we have not missed the fact that most colonial discourse is racist in today's terms. What I would argue, however, is that nineteenth-century ideas about race haven't been taken seriously—precisely because we consider the racist assumptions of the Victorians to be so morally wrong, the most objectionable part of their culture. We therefore tend to neglect a fundamental aspect of the framework of colonialism, namely racialism as a *theoretical* discourse of the nineteenth century.

This discourse continues to impinge upon our own. Much of what we now discuss in terms of ethnicity and cultural difference fell in those times under the category of race: our aversion and nervousness about 'race' means that we tend both to ignore its own theoretical foundation and, as a corollary, fail to examine the links between our own contemporary cultural theorizations and those of the rejected past. The distinguishing characteristic of the analysis of colonial discourse today is that we like to talk about colonialism as if it were not us: we are 'postcolonial'.

IV Egypt in America

Bernal's reticence about the cultural conditions of his own book's production and reception is striking given the American context in which he is writing. For in all his

detailed, laborious discussions of racialism in nineteenth-century academia, particularly in relation to Egyptology, Bernal nowhere discusses the 'American School' of anthropology which was instrumental from the 1840s onwards in promoting in Europe as well as the U.S. what was claimed to be the modern, scientific account of racial difference. This lacuna is all the more curious given the significant role the history of Egypt played in that racial theory. The arguments are thus already local and determined: for Egypt has been a contested category in the racial politics of America for over a hundred and fifty years.

Bernal demonstrates how European scholars from the Romantic period onwards tended to argue that Greek civilization was essentially self-generated and owed nothing to that of Egypt. If so, why then, one might ask, did later scholars seek to prove that Egyptian civilization had itself been white rather than black? Bernal's answer is racism:

If it has been scientifically 'proved' that Blacks were biologically incapable of civilization, how could one explain Ancient Egypt—which was inconveniently placed on the African continent? (Bernal, 1987: 241, italics in original)

The immediate solution was to make Egypt white. But what Bernal does not point to is that there are two distinct arguments being made here in relation to Egypt: one is about the non-Egyptian origins of Greek (and therefore European) civilization. The other has nothing to do with Greece at all, but is focussed instead on the 'problem' of Egypt producing a civilization as such. This second issue was developed not by classicists (who, after all, had proved that Egypt was irrelevant) but by archae-

ologists and anthropologists who were engaged in developing racial theory. The point here is that they could never convincingly argue their thesis of the inherent biological inferiority of the black race while Egypt remained an African civilization. What Bernal does not say is that it was in the USA that the most concerted effort took place to prove that Egyptian civilization had not been African. The reason for this was straightforward: the desire to produce a scholarly, academic justification for slavery.

The debates about slavery that preceded and accompanied the American Civil War were themselves to be significant not only in the USA but in Britain too, and succeeded in changing the terms of debates about race. An important factor here was the comparative ease with which black and white were divided and set against each other in the American accounts: this apparently absolute antithesis then became the dominant theoretical model for all the relations of the white to the non-white world, neatly coinciding with popular racism which is really only ever interested in distinguishing between black and white. Thus instead of a general schema of degrees of difference between the races that had formerly dominated ethnology, the new model set up whites as absolute and distinct, and considered all non-white races only in terms of how much they deviated from the illustrious Caucasian standard.

With this new model, moreover, a more constitutive difference, of species, became the central focus of racial theory. The reason for this was simple. The constitution of the United States proclaimed that all men were born equal: the institution of slavery clearly constituted a flagrant breach of that principle. However, if there were different species of man, with black people

classified as a lower species that did not share all the human characteristics, then it could be argued that constitutional equality did not apply to them. We thus find a concerted effort gathering pace from the 1840s to establish the doctrine of polygenesis, that is, that blacks and whites constituted different species, in the place of monogenesis, according to which all humans were considered one species, their differences being explained by the effects of climate and environment.

The debate focussed on two related questions, one cultural, one biological: these two aspects always went hand in hand and always had to be assessed simultaneously. The cultural question was whether there had ever been a Black civilization (if not, this would substantiate claims about the superiority of the white race, and the inherent inferiority of the black). The biological question was whether the hybrid offspring of unions between the two races were fertile or not (if not this would show that they were different species, for the test of two animals being of different species was that any hybrid between them was infertile). For this reason the major emphasis in writing about race in this period gets placed on the history of Black civilizations (particularly Egypt), and the question of hybridity in human reproduction. The success of the American anthropologists J.C. Nott and George R. Gliddon's *Types of Mankind* (1854), which went into eight editions by 1860, was doubtless the result of a particular combination of skills that united both these areas: Nott was a physician, Gliddon an Egyptologist. The significance of their work was the way they brought the scientific and the cultural together in order to promulgate an indistinguishably scientific and cultural theory of race.

Improbably, therefore, biology and Egyptology *together* constituted the basis of the new 'scientific' racial

theory. Egypt, as the earliest civilization, developed in Africa, clearly represented the major potential stumbling block to the claim for the permanent inferiority of the black race which, it was alleged, had never created or produced anything whatsoever of value. As Gliddon made clear in his best-selling *Ancient Egypt* (1843), those who advocated an African Egypt were in effect also advocating 'the African origin of civilization', with the unwelcome consequence that 'we, who trace back to Egypt the origin of every art and science known in antiquity, have to thank the sable Negro, or the dusky Berber, for the first gleams of knowledge and invention' (Gliddon, 1843: 58-9). It was therefore essential to prove that the Egyptians were Caucasians. The whitening of Egypt that Bernal points to in *Black Athena* thus here finds its rationale not in a general conspiracy of European racism in nineteenth-century academia, but in the particular context of nineteenth-century American racial theory in its attempt to justify and rationalize slavery in the years leading up to the American Civil War.

Nott and Gliddon substantiated their argument that 'Egypt was originally peopled by the Caucasian race' by recourse to the phrenological researches of their fellow American S.G. Morton (also an anatomist and Egyptologist), whose *Crania Aegyptiaca* was published in 1844. Morton's phrenological investigations in Egypt were widely taken to have proved that the ancient Egyptians were Caucasians. It had, in fact, been Gliddon himself who had provided the Egyptian skulls for Morton's research, urging him to use his anatomical and craniological skills to prove the Caucasian basis of Egyptian civilization. He wrote to Morton in 1841:

I am hostile to the opinion of the *African* origin of the

Egyptians. I mean of the *high caste*—kings, priests, and military.... We, as hieroglyphists, know Egypt better *now*, than all the Greek authors or the Romans. On this ground, unless you are convinced from Comparative Anatomy, with which science I am totally unacquainted, and be backed by such evidence as is incontrovertible, I urge your pausing, and considering why the Egyptians may not be of Asiatic, and perhaps of Arabic descent; an idea which, I fancy, from the tenor of your letters, is your present conclusion. At any rate, they are not, and never were, Africans, still less Negroes (Nott and Gliddon, 1848: xxxvi-xxxvii)

Morton agreed, and in 1844 himself argued that ‘Negroes were numerous in Egypt, but their social position in ancient times was the same as it is now, that of servants and slaves’ (Morton, 1844: 66; cf. Nott, 1844: 16). Here, then, was an ancient historical precedent for a white society with black slaves: Morton, Nott and Gliddon, deployed their account of Egypt to justify the natural place of ‘negroes’ in their own Southern society, and argue for the everlasting nature of racial social relations. In *Types of Mankind*, Nott and Gliddon asserted the permanent difference between the races, their mutual antagonism, and the necessity of their enduring separation, by invoking the category of ‘types’, first introduced by Cuvier, to claim the fixed nature of the different races. Placing great emphasis on the evidence of Egyptian illustrations and skulls that were 5,000 years old, Nott and Gliddon claimed to have established proof of ‘*the permanency of types*’ and thus could argue that the Caucasian and Negro races were as different in ancient Egypt as in the American of the 1840s.

In 1844, in one of a series of popular lectures on what he privately described as ‘niggerology’ (Gould,

1984: 49), Nott began by emphasizing the crucial role that Egypt played in his racial theory:

Before entering upon the Natural History of the human race, it is indispensably necessary, as a preliminary step, to examine some points in chronology, and to take a glance at the early history of Egypt. I must show that the Caucasian or white, and the Negro races were distinct at a very remote date, and *that the Egyptians were Caucasians*. Unless this point can be established the contest must be abandoned. (Nott, 1844: 8; italics in original)

Nott here offers an argument familiar to readers of *Black Athena*, though it will seldom be found stated in so bald and explicit a fashion in Bernal's book:

the conclusion to my mind is irresistible, that the civilization of Egypt is attributable to these Caucasian heads; because civilization does not now and never has as far as we know from history, been carried to this perfection by any other race than the Caucasian—how can any reasoning mind come to any other conclusion?

It is clear then that history, the Egyptian Monuments, her paintings and sculptures, the examination of skulls by Cuvier, Morton and others, analogy, and every thing else connected with this country, combine to prove beyond possible doubt, that the Ancient Egyptian race were Caucasians.

But in Nott's account, the significance of the Caucasian identity of the ancient Egyptians is developed into an important corollary that constitutes the always-present other side of racial theory:

Positive historical facts prove too, that Egypt has been conquered in early times by various inferior tribes, and the blood of her people adulterated.... even the pure blood of Greece and Rome could not wash out the black stain, both moral and physical, which she had received.

Naturalists have strangely overlooked the effects of mixing races, when the illustrations drawn from the crossing of animals speak so plainly—man physically is, but an animal at best, with the same physiological laws which govern others.

This adulteration of blood is the reason why Egypt and the Barbary States never can rise again, until the present races are exterminated, and the Caucasian substituted.

Wherever in the history of the world the inferior races have conquered and mixed in with the Caucasian, the latter have sunk into barbarism. (Nott, 1844: 16)

Having claimed, like Schlegel and others before him, that Egyptian civilization was the product of the arrival of Aryans from India, the question that Nott here addresses is how that theory can be squared with the racial identity of modern Egyptians. The fact that by the nineteenth century Egypt's population was clearly made up of a mixture of Arabs and Africans is not held to disprove the Caucasian thesis, but rather to explain Egypt's long decline. In language that closely anticipates that of Gobineau (an edited English version of whose work Nott quickly arranged to be published in America) (Gobineau, 1856), Nott claims that the Aryans created Egyptian civilization, and that the subsequent mixing of races debased it and brought about its fall. He then concludes that all mixture of Caucasian races has caused them to sink into 'barbarism', thus extending his theory of

Egyptian history into a general historical theory of the rise and fall of nations according to the principle of race.

For Nott, the ultimate white supremacist, the Aryans did everything alone, and the mixing of races brought about degeneration, infertility, and barbarism. Egypt will never rise again, until its present mixed population is 'exterminated'. Nott comments in his Preface that 'the parts which treat of the effect of the crossing of races, are those to which I wish to draw more particular attention, as these facts have not heretofore been sufficiently considered' (Nott, 1844: 1). Clearly the mixing of races and racial extermination was a question preoccupying him, for in the same year he had published an article entitled 'The Mulatto a Hybrid—Probable Extermination of the Two Races if the Whites and Blacks are Allowed to Marry'. Here the argument took a contemporary swerve in the direction of the doctrine of polygenesis, addressing the vexed question of the fertility of inter-racial unions. Nott claimed that observation in the United States showed that mulattoes were less fertile than whites or blacks, and argued as a consequence that if a general mixing of races took place, the USA would not only degenerate culturally, but also physically (Banton, 1987: 40-1). In maintaining the reduced fertility of mulattos, Nott thus put the emphasis less on any threatened degeneration of American culture as such than on the idea that sexual interaction between white and black would cause the American people to decline and literally die out altogether. Sexuality and miscegenation thus occupy a core position in his covert defence of the 'peculiar institution'.

For despite the success of the notion of 'type' in the popular mind as a way of distinguishing between races (and classes), Nott and Gliddon's argument, though

clearly useful for the Southern defence of slavery, remained vulnerable to the question of hybridity. Sex was less easy to contain than ancient Egypt. Notwithstanding their fundamental claim for the permanence of types across the ages, it is noticeable that in *Types of Mankind*, Nott and Gliddon also feel obliged to repeat the threat of the ghastly effects of miscegenation:

It seems ... certain, however, in human physical history, that the superior race must inevitably become deteriorated by an intermixture with the inferior ... through the operation of the laws of Hybridity alone, the human family might possibly become exterminated by a thorough amalgamation of all the various types of mankind now existing on earth. (Nott and Gliddon, 1854: 407)

They thus make a double argument: the difference between the species of men is permanent, a permanence preserved through the laws of hybridity by the degeneration and eventual infertility of any crossing between them. Conversely, however, it is maintained that any breakdown of the social divisions between black and white in American society, which it was always assumed would lead inevitably to widespread inter-racial unions, would therefore cause the eventual extermination of the whole nation. The more racial theory proposes permanent racial difference, the more obsessed its upholders became with the question of hybridity and the prospect of inter-racial sex.

V Hybridity and Miscegenation

If it was in the United States that we find the greatest obsession and paranoia about hybridity, it was the American fantasmatic ideology of race, posing as scientific truth in the guise of ethnology, 'the science of races', that, from the 1840s onward, provided the theoretical justification for European colonialism just as it did for slavery in the USA. In the endless discussions of questions of miscegenation in nineteenth-century racial theory, we can see the soft underbelly of white-black power relations, whereby cultures in their colonial operation become hybridized, alienated and potentially threatening to their European originals. The detail with which miscegenation was discussed and thought through can be seen in Tschudi's table, reproduced in Nott and Gliddon, and here taken Robert Brown's four-volume survey, *The Races of Mankind* (Brown, 1873-9: II, 6):

Table 2 Tschudi's table of Peruvian 'mongrelity', as reproduced in Brown's *The Races of Mankind* (1873-9)

Nothing could perhaps better illustrate the mongrel character of the Spanish-American population than by saying that twenty-three crosses can be determined, and have received names. They are as follows:

PARENTS	CHILDREN	PARENTS	CHILDREN
White father and negro	mulatto	Negro father and quintera	mother
" " Indian	mestiza	" " mulatto	"
Indian " " negro	chino	" " mestiza	"
White " " mulatto	cuarteron		
" " " mestiza	creole (pale-brownish complexion)		
" " " chino	chino-blanco	" " " chino	"
" " " cuarterona	quintero	" " " zamba	"
" " " quintera	white	" " " chino-cola	"
Negro " " Indian	zambo	" " " quintera	"
" " " mulatto	zambo-negro	" " " zamba	"
" " " mestiza	mulatto-oscura	Mulatto " " " mestiza	"
" " " chino	zambo-chino	" " " " " chino	"
" " " zamba	zambo-negro (perfectly black)		

In America the terms mulatto, quadroon and octeroon are commonly used to express the possession of a half, a fourth or an eighth of black blood, and the nomenclature goes no further, but experienced observers can detect much more minute quantities. A person with one half of Indian blood is usually styled a half-caste, or more commonly a half-breed. The term is used, however, very vaguely to denote the presence of a greater or less amount of white blood.

Here the curious evaluative comments about the children of different proportions of mixed race that increasingly supplement the second column show the influence of contemporary anthropological tables of the different mental and physical qualities of the races. (It is no doubt symptomatic that despite its exhaustive categorizations, the coupling of any 'Indian' or 'negro' father with a white mother is completely excluded: the whole process is theoretically not reversible.) We can read this table of miscegenation or 'mongrelity' as an analytic account of the intricate gradations of cultural as well as fusion, regarded as a process of degeneration that mocked the nineteenth-century's imperial 'diffusion' model of the spread of cultures with confusion, subverted the evolutionary comparative method of anthropology, and beyond these held out the threat of undoing the whole progressive paradigm of Western civilization. Here theories of racial difference as degeneration themselves fused with the increasing cultural pessimism of the late nineteenth century and the claim that the world itself, that is the West, was degenerating.

In recent years a whole range of disciplines has been concerned with the question of the exclusion and representation of 'the other', of inside/outside notions of otherness, or of the difficulties, so painful for anthropology, of self-other relations. Brown's finely gradated table, by contrast, suggests that racism, and therefore perhaps colonialism, also worked according to a different paradigm than ours (still in fact present today but hidden), of diversity and inequality. Deleuze and Guattari get it right in the course of a discussion of Christ's face in a scene from Giotto's *The Life of St Francis*:

If the face is in fact Christ, in other words, your average ordinary White Man, then the first deviances, the first

divergence-types are racial: yellow man, black man.... European racism as the white man's claim has never operated by exclusion, or by the designation of someone as Other.... Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face, which endeavours to integrate non-conforming traits into increasingly eccentric and backward waves.... From the viewpoint of racism, there is no exterior, there are no people on the outside. There are only people who should be like us and whose crime is not to be. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 178)

Nineteenth-century racism was constructed through the 'computation of normalities' and 'degrees of deviance': a race, Deleuze and Guattari observe, 'is defined not by its purity but rather by the impurity conferred upon it by a system of domination. Bastard and mixed-blood are the true names of race' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 379).

What is most striking is that the 'scientific' account of racial difference is in fact focussed on an extraordinary, nightmare vision of fertility, a frenetic panorama of frenzied, interminable copulation between races. Racial theory projects a dynamic phantasmagoria of the coupling, coalescence and fusing that give rise to the infinite motley variety of interbreeding and the melange, miscegenation, mongrelity, hybridization of its offspring—half-blood, half-caste, half-breed, eurasian, creole, mulatto, mestiza, chino, zambo, terceron, quarteron, quinteron, quadroon, octoroon.... Nineteenth-century theories of race did not just consist of essentializing differentiations between white and black: they were about people having sex—interminably adulterating, aleatory, illicit, inter-racial sex.

But this steamy model of mixture was not a simple sexual or even cultural matter: in many ways it preserved

the older commercial discourse that it superseded. For it is clear that the forms of sexual exchange brought about by colonialism were themselves both mirrors and consequences of the forms of economic exchange that constituted the basis of colonial relations: that extended exchange of property which began with small trading posts and the visiting slave ships originated, indeed, as much as an exchange of bodies as of goods, rather of bodies as goods: as in that paradigm of respectability, marriage, the economic and sexual exchange were intimately bound up, coupled with each other, from the very first. It was therefore wholly appropriate that sexual exchange, and its miscegenated product, should be the dominant paradigm through which the economic and cultural forms of colonialism were theorized. Perhaps this begins to explain why our own forms of racism remain so intimately bound up with sexuality and desire. At the same time, it is striking that our own contemporary cultural theory remains equally preoccupied with the concept of hybridity. Its translation from the biological to the cultural sphere would be more reassuring if the biological and cultural had not always been inextricably intertwined. The fantasy of those working in cultural studies and colonial discourse analysis in the Western academy is that we have managed to free ourselves from the hybrid commerce of colonialism, as from every other aspect of the colonial legacy.

Bibliography

Ahmad, Aijaz (1992), *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London, Verso

Banton, Michael (1987), *Racial Theories*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Bernal, John Desmond (1939), *The Social Function of Science*, London, Routledge

Bernal, Martin (1987), *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, London, Free Association Books

— (1991), *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Volume II. The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence*, London, Free Association Books

Bhabha, Homi K. (1983), 'Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism', in *The Politics of Theory*, ed. Francis Barker et al, Colchester, University of Essex, 194-211

Brown, Robert (1873-9), *The Races of Mankind: Being a Popular Description of the Characteristics, Manners and Customs of the Principal Varieties of the Human Family*, 4 vols, London, Cassell Petter & Galpin

Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix (1988), *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, London, Athlone

Gliddon, George R. (1843), *Ancient Egypt. A Series of Chapters on Early Egyptian History, Archaeology, and other*

Subjects, connected with Hieroglyphical Literature, New York, Winchester. 12th edition, revised and corrected, with an Appendix, Philadelphia, Peterson, 1848

Gobineau, Arthur de (1856), *The Moral and Intellectual Diversity of Races, with Particular Reference to their Respective Influence in the Civil and Political History of Mankind. With an analytical introduction and copious historical notes, by H. Hotz. To which is added an Appendix containing a summary of the latest scientific facts bearing upon the question of the unity or plurality of species. By J.C. Nott, M.D., of Mobile*, Philadelphia, Lippincott

Gould, Stephen Jay (1984), *The Mismeasure of Man*, Harmondsworth, Penguin

Guha, Ranajit (1982), 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India', *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. I, ed. Ranajit Guha, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1-8

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade (1984), 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Boundary 2* 12:3/13:1, 71-92

Morton, Samuel George (1844), *Crania Aegyptiaca; or, Observations on Egyptian Ethnography, derived from Anatomy, History, and the Monuments*, Philadelphia, Penington

Nott, Josiah C. (1844), *Two Lectures on the Natural History of the Caucasian and Negro Races*, Mobile, Dade and Thompson

— and Gliddon, George R. (1854), *Types of Mankind: or,*

Ethnological Researches, Based upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and upon their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History: illustrated by Selections from the inedited papers of Samuel George Morton, M.D., London, Trübner; Paris, Bossange; Leipsic, Tauchnitz; Philadelphia, Lippincott, Grambo

Parry, Benita (1987), 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review* 9, 27-58

Said, Edward (1978), *Orientalism*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1987), *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York, Methuen

— (1990), *The Post-Colonial Critic*, London, Routledge

— (1985), 'Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice', *Wedge* 7/8, 120-30

— (1991), 'Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* reading Defoe's *Crusoe and Roxana*', in Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson, eds, *Consequences of Theory*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press

Young, Robert (1990), *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, London, Routledge

— (1994), 'Black Athena: The Politics of Scholarship', *Science as Culture* 4:2, 19 (1993), 274-81

Publication history

Original publication: 'Egypt in America: *Black Athena*, Racism and Colonial Discourse', in *On the Western Front: Studies in Racism, Modernity and Identity*, eds Ali Rattansi and Sallie Westwood (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 150-69

Web version published 2007

© Robert J.C. Young 1996, 2007

all rights reserved

To cite this version:

MLA Style: Robert J.C. Young, 'Egypt in America: *Black Athena*, Racism and Colonial Discourse' (1994). 21 July 2007 [access date]

<http://robertjcyoung.com/Egypt.pdf>