

Haverford College

Haverford Scholarship

Faculty Publications

Classics

2015

Review of McCoskey's *Race: Antiquity and Its Legacy*

Sydnor Roy

Haverford College, sroy1@haverford.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.haverford.edu/classics_facpubs

Repository Citation

Sydnor Roy. Review of *Race: Antiquity and Its Legacy*, by Denise Eileen McCoskey, Oxford University Press. *American Journal of Philology*, 136 (3):525-528. 2015.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics at Haverford Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Haverford Scholarship. For more information, please contact nmedeiro@haverford.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS



DENISE EILEEN MCCOSKEY. *Race: Antiquity and Its Legacy*. Ancients and Moderns. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. x + 250 pp. Paper, \$24.95.

This book is part of Oxford's "Ancients and Moderns" series, the goal of which, as stated in the series introduction by Phiroze Vasunia, is "to stir up debates about and within reception studies and to complicate some of the standard narratives about the 'legacy' of Greece and Rome" (ix) by encouraging scholars to consider the connection between the past and how it has been discussed in the history of scholarship. In her introduction, McCoskey states that she wants to "help explain the position of race today by unveiling its relation to structures of thought and practice in the past, and more specifically, those of classical antiquity" (1). *Race: Antiquity and Its Legacy* does an admirable job of accomplishing this goal. The book covers the whole range of antiquity but also zooms in to focus on key moments and controversial figures. McCoskey offers thought-provoking parallels to ancient constructions of race in more recent history, and the final chapter explicitly investigates through the lens of race how Greece and Rome have been received since the Renaissance.

The introduction offers readers a strong definition of race: a social construction imposed upon the human body. Keeping this definition in mind while reading the book is important, because, as McCoskey often points out, Classicists (among many other scholars) have a tendency to hide discussion of race and "racial formation" behind words like "ethnicity" or "cultural" because confronting race as an issue constructed around the body head-on (both in the ancient and modern world) can be uncomfortable and even scary (27, 93). McCoskey uses the terms "race" and "racial formation" precisely because they require readers to confront racism in the ancient world through to the present. In her subsection "Blacks in Antiquity," McCoskey skillfully argues that, despite the early scholarly consensus that skin color was insignificant in the construction of ancient racial ideology, that does not mean that the ancients did not think racially (with skin color as *a* criterion rather than *the* criteria) or that modern ideas which do posit that skin color is significant have not affected how ancient representations of race, and particularly blackness, have been received in the modern world. McCoskey's extensive analysis of Cleopatra and how she was perceived (and even presented herself) in the ancient world, as well as her exploration of representations of Cleopatra in recent history, reveal the tension between ancient and modern categories of racial thought created by the "hybrid cultures" that flourished in the ancient world.

The first chapter, "Racial Theory," surveys the development of ideas about race in the ancient world and how they changed over time and differ between Greece and Rome. I assigned this chapter to students in my Race and Ethnicity course because it is useful for identifying key moments that contributed to Greek and Roman racial ideology. Here, however, and also in the third chapter, "Racial Representations," is where one finds one of the problems with this book. The range of time periods and genres covered invites generalizations about both the nature of the "barbarians" the Greeks and Romans interact with and about the Greeks and Romans themselves. For example, in her discussion of the Greek-barbarian binary (a view which has been complicated since the seminal work of Edith Hall [1989], although McCoskey's presentation does not consistently acknowledge this), she claims that, "given the specific threat to Greek sovereignty the Persian Wars presented, the barbarian was defined first and foremost by the propensity for a particular mode of government, a theme central, as we have seen, to the Hippocratic *Airs, Waters, Places*. Whereas barbarians displayed a natural inclination for subservience and tyranny, as the theory went, Greeks were characterized by a commitment to democratic rule and the equality of citizens" (54). Here, as in many other instances in this book, "Greece" feels like a gloss for "Athens." She does offer a discussion of how Athens itself contributed to the discussions of identity (56–58), but it does not help dispel the feeling of a monolithic "Greece" that looks a lot like "Athens" in her exploration of Greek notions of identity after the Persian invasions. Her analysis of the discussion around Alexander's potential "unity of mankind" vision is strong, but she concludes with the claim that Alexander was probably more driven by self-aggrandizing megalomania than racial sensitivity in his assumption of the cultural attributes of power in Persia and Egypt (68). Although this claim may also be true, Alexander is following a long tradition of founders of earlier Near-Eastern empires in adopting recognizable (and local) customs that signal power as a means of consolidating and legitimizing one's rule. Throughout, this book lacks engagement with the "barbarians" through their own histories and material and literary culture. As a later example, after a discussion of how Ovid empathizes with the position of being a barbarian in chapter 3, she notes that "some historians" are now asking how the ancient Persians saw themselves and how they defined the Greeks (165). Although her footnote leads to the excellent chapter by Sancisi-Weerdenburg in Malkin (2001), she gives the impression that Achaemenid studies is an emerging field, rather than a well-established one.

Chapter 2, "Race as Social Practice," seeks to examine the everyday acts and daily negotiations that highlight race as a lived phenomenon. This chapter examines material culture and practice, with a focus on Ptolemaic Egypt, and what it may or may not signify. By using a model of "racial governmentality," which focuses on how rule is conducted, she discusses the meaning of the census (both in the ancient world and in America), intermarriage between Greeks and Egyptians, the major shift in how the Egyptians and Greeks were ruled from the Ptolemies to the Romans, ancient Jewish identity in both Rome and Alexandria,

and the much-debated motivations behind rebellions against the Roman Empire. McCoskey's analysis of the many papyrus fragments and what they reveal about life in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt is quite engaging, but many times I found myself wanting more context for these fragments. As other reviewers have noted, most of these fragments are hard to track down—she cites them from other secondary sources and not by any traditional numbering system.

Chapter 3, “Racial Representations,” offers a broad overview of several different genres and discusses what art and literature conveyed to their ancient audience about race. She starts with a discussion of the library at Alexandria and the literary aspirations of the Ptolemies. She laments what is invisible: the colonial context of Hellenistic literature. Her focus is, however, on what is visible, and she samples (since she cannot cover everything) from across the genres of epic, vase painting, tragedy, and the Roman triumph. I would have liked to see an explanation for her choice of genres, and I would have expected a deeper engagement with each of them than we get in this chapter. The poem that gets the most attention in the discussion of epic is the pseudo-Vergilian *Moretum*, in part because it features in Snowden's (1970) analysis of the representation of Ethiopians in classical literature. She also draws attention to the fact that the motto of the United States, *e pluribus unum*, comes from a line in this poem. What is omitted from the motto is the opening words *color est*, which, she argues, “surely enacts” racial suppression. The implication while reading the paragraph is that this line is somehow about the servant Scybale, and not the *moretum* (a kind of garlicky cheese mixture) itself. Her primary source for the discussion of the motto, William Fitzgerald (1996), makes the connection between the *moretum* and the myth of the American “melting pot” and argues more clearly for the meaningful dropping of the word *color*. McCoskey does offer strong readings of the representations of Memnon and Andromeda in Greek vase painting, the “Dying Gaul” statue, and Ovid's *Tristia*.

The last chapter of the book, “Whose History?” examines how Greek and Roman concepts of race have been discussed. McCoskey offers a long analysis of Bernal's *Black Athena* and how that text has been received, and then she moves on to a discussion of the history of Afrocentrism and the debate about “who” (i.e., what race) the ancient Egyptians were. Here she calls for a systematic need to put Egypt in context of African history (as it has been contextualized in Mediterranean history) and offers a cursory glance at Kushite history. She then transitions to the reception of Rome and its empire by both the Germans and the British. The final discussion of the chapter is on Black classicism and how the ancient texts were both a means to expression but also, by the very use of those means, an expression of the unequal status that many of these writers held in society. Her examination of modern appropriations of the classical past offers several different ways to think about that appropriation—as a mechanism of power, as a mechanism of resistance, as a “safe” place to carry out modern debates—and introduces the reader to a variety of avenues by which to explore the reception of race in the modern world.

Any kind of broad overview is going to be frustrating to the specialist, who is inevitably moved to say, “but it is so much more complicated and nuanced than that!” McCoskey heads off this criticism at the end of her introduction: “I hope even more that [this book] will provoke a range of questions that go far beyond what I am able to attempt here. In that sense, I am more interested in *proposing an effective structure for asking the right questions about race* than providing all the answers” (34, emphasis mine). Sometimes, however, it can feel like the book does provide answers, and that is why caution is needed in reading this book with students and in accepting her readings of topics outside of one’s specialty. McCoskey does a remarkable job of sorting through the difficulties of approaching race, ancient and modern, and offers her readers many examples for how to navigate it. Yet we also lack explicit guidelines to follow so that her methodology could be more easily applied to the texts she does not discuss (and of course, to the ones she does); but perhaps a list of guidelines would hinder more than inspire further analysis.

In her “Afterword,” McCoskey lays out a more activist claim for this book than expected at the beginning. She hopes that by understanding the operation of race, “we can begin to combat its clandestine power” (201). This goal is admirable and also one that explains, I think, several of the digressions and modern comparisons that seem, at times, tacked on. They offer complex and interesting examples of modern race at work, which either can inform an ancient example by parallel or explain the specific turns she takes in this book.

SYDNOR ROY

HAVERFORD COLLEGE
e-mail: sroy1@haverford.edu

KATHERINE BLOUIN. *Triangular Landscapes: Environment, Society, and the State in the Nile Delta under Roman Rule*. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xxvi + 429 pp. 14 halftones, 28 tables, 5 maps. Cloth, \$150.00.

American journalist Hal Boyle is often said to have remarked, “What makes a river so restful to people is that it doesn’t have any doubt—it is sure to get where it is going and it doesn’t want to go anywhere else.” Restful, perhaps. But the single-mindedness of a river’s flow can also be a source of anxiety. In contemporary America, the Lower Mississippi’s steady westward shift is a prominent example. Were its floodgates removed and the river allowed to “get where it is going,” it would soon abandon the cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans, decimating their port-dependent economies.

An awareness of such fluvial hazards has percolated into the study of ancient history over the last decade and a half, and works on the ancient Mediterranean’s riverine environments have been appearing with frequency. As in ancient envi-