



---

***Denise Eileen McCoskey, Race: Antiquity and its Legacy. London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2012. \$24.95. Pp. x & 250. Paperback. ISBN 9780195381887***

**Reviewed by: Tristan Samuels  
University of Toronto**

McC. provides an important contribution to the growing body of literature on race in classical antiquity.<sup>1</sup> The book discusses the significance of race in Classical Greece, Rome and Greco-Roman Egypt. McC.'s use of critical race theory and modern analogies provides insightful perspectives on the primary sources. This approach also demonstrates the ways in which the Greco-Roman world can enlighten our own understandings of race and racism. McC. explores the various 'racial formations' that existed in Greco-Roman antiquity and their reception by the modern western world.

The book consists of an introduction and four thematically organized chapters: 'Racial Theory', 'Race as Social Practice', 'Racial Representations' and 'Whose History'. In addition, there are 779 endnotes, a 'Further Readings' section and an index. This review will focus on McC.'s discussions on the utility of race, ancient racial theory and blackness.

The introduction demonstrates, convincingly, the significance of race in antiquity. 'Race', McC. explains, is a social construct that decides which features matter in determining racial groups (p. 2). However, McC. prefers the term 'racial formation' because it investigates the socio-historical processes by which racial categories developed (p. 3). Classicists, however, often dismiss race because Frank Snowden and Lloyd Thompson, the specialists on blacks in Greco-Roman antiquity<sup>2</sup>, concluded that 'color prejudice' was irrelevant in antiquity (pp. 5-9). McC. correctly argues that race is not defined by skin color. For example, the Cleopatra VII debate – 'was she black or white' – is contextualized in a modern perspective. Cleopatra, rather, embraced a hybrid Egyptian/Greek racial identity which, in this instance, did not pivot around skin color (pp. 11-23).

McC. justifies her privileging of race over ethnicity. First, race is not distinguishable from ethnicity on the basis of biology as is often assumed (pp. 28-29).

---

<sup>1</sup> See Isaac (2004); Lape (2010)

<sup>2</sup> See Snowden (1971), (1983); Thompson (1989)

Moreover, race both connotes and investigates issues of power. McC. argues that race forces classicists to confront frequent idealizations of Greco-Roman antiquity by critically engaging the violent aspects of its ideologies and practices which are sanitized when using other terms like ethnicity (p. 31). McC. is also acknowledging a set of processes associated with race, like essentialist thought. The concept of racial formation, in addition, explores the varying meanings of race in response to shifting historical dynamics (pp. 24-25). Furthermore, racial formations illustrate the ways that race defined both the dominant group and the 'other' (p. 26). McC. establishes a good theoretical foundation for discussion.

The chapter 'Racial Theory' explores the development of Greek and Roman racial formations. McC. demonstrates how Greek concepts like the environmental theory and *οἰκουμένη* structured their views of the 'other'. This mapping of racial difference was the theoretical foundation for the Greek/Barbarian racial opposition which was reinforced, in large measure, by the Persian Wars (pp. 48, 54-56). The Romans later expanded this division to Roman/Greek/Barbarian. While Greek self-definition was connected to mythical lineage, Roman self-definition privileged material culture and morality. It was theorized that Roman rule could 'civilize' barbarians which morally justified Roman imperial ambitions (p. 75). This chapter clearly demonstrates how the Greeks and Romans used racial formations to reaffirm their identity.

The book, however, struggles with the issue of blackness. McC., uncritical of Snowden and Thompson, believes that blackness had negligible racial value as it was not a basis of racial difference (pp. 9-10). However, Snowden and Thompson debated the treatment of blacks, not the existence of 'blackness' as a racial difference. Both scholars, using antiquated anthropological views of blackness (i.e. 'negroid' type), assumed that the Greco-Roman term 'Ethiopian' was an exact equivalent to black.<sup>3</sup> Inheriting their mistakes, McC. treats blackness as a monolithic concept as she does not contextualize its meanings in Greco-Roman racial formations. The Greeks and Romans did not have a 'negroid' concept. Blackness denoted a relatively darker complexion and Ethiopians were not the only group that was racialized as black (see for example: Pind. *Pyth.* 4. 208-15; Aesch. *Supp.* 154-5; *TrGF* Adespota F 161). McC. promises to discuss the racial meaning that blackness "might" have had (p. 24), but inconsistencies persist throughout the book.

McC. argues that identifying somatic difference is not the same as a difference with wide-ranging consequences, like the unequal distribution of social and political power (p. 24). McC. also ponders whether blackness could be a non-racial marker for an 'other' as oppose to 'the other' (p. 142). Blackness was not a racial category, but it was a clearly racial marker for certain collective identities. For example, the environmental theory stereotyped Ethiopians as black due to the sun which is an essentialist approach to identity (pp. 43-44). Furthermore, blackness is a marker of 'otherness' which signifies exclusion and underlying assumptions of inferiority. McC. overlooks the consequences of blackness because she views blackness as a biological fact. Blackness, however, is a social construct.

McC. does not consistently contextualize blackness in intersections of race, class, and gender. She argues that references to adulterous relationships between elite Roman women and lower class Ethiopian men target female sexuality rather than 'race' (p. 116). One of the texts (Mart. 6.39), however, refers to a Moor – not an Ethiopian. Greco-Roman writers did not limit blackness to Ethiopians, as noted

<sup>3</sup> Snowden (1970) 2; Thompson (1989) 51-52. Both see 'Ethiopian' as the equivalent to 'negroid'

earlier. Furthermore, these black men are clearly stereotyped as hypersexual in these texts.

McC. suggests that the contrasts between black men and Greek women on classical Athenian Janiform vases were likely used to reaffirm male citizen identity as they were ‘outsiders’ presented in a ‘tamed’ context like the symposium (p. 142). This is her only good analysis on the issue of blackness. Her synonymous usage of ‘African’ and ‘black’ (p. 141) to describe these depictions, however, essentializes ‘Africaness’ and ‘blackness’.

Examining Ovid’s pursuit of the black servant woman Cypassis (*Am.* 2.78), McC. observes intersecting power dynamics: male/female, black/white, slave/master (p. 142). However, ‘black/white’ contradicts McC.’s argument that the Greeks and Romans did not identify as white (p. 24). The racial dynamic, rather, is black/Roman. Since slavery was not defined by skin color, McC. ponders: “what does it mean...when blackness is paired with slavery?” (p. 142). The better question is – was blackness itself defined by slavery? Unfortunately, McC. offers no insights on the issue in question.

McC. argues that pseudo Vergil’s portrayal of Scybale in *Moretum* 31-35, especially the description of Scybale’s body, reveals power relations: male/female; master/servant; viewer/object (p. 138). Scybale’s name, however, is not a pun on ‘dung’ as McC. claims. It derives from a Greek herb which suits the context of a poem about salad.<sup>4</sup> Second, Scybale is not a servant as McC. assumes (p. 137). McC. discusses Haley’s analysis of the Cleopatra debate (p. 13, n. 24), but completely overlooks Haley’s analysis of *Moretum* 31-35 which clearly shows that Scybale was not an object of a racist gaze as commonly assumed.<sup>5</sup> McC., however, seems to have internalized the assumption that Blacks were only slaves in antiquity. McC.’s inability to consistently contextualize these intersections undermines the complex operations of blackness.

McC. downplays the anti-black racism in late archaic Greek artistic portrayals of Ethiopian mythological figures Memnon and Andromeda. McC. argues that Memnon is depicted with pale complexion to maintain ‘heroic sameness’ with mythological heroes (p. 145) and that Andromeda is pale complexioned simply because she reflects Greek notions of beauty (p. 146). Those notions, however, are clearly rooted in a racist gaze as Ethiopian blackness is ostracized from mythological prestige which reinforces racial boundaries.

McC. downplays the presence of Egyptian blackness in Greco-Roman racial formations. She dismisses Herodotus’ comments on Egyptian ‘blackness’ as “merely” passing references that only engage modern interests in the Egyptian body (p. 61) and warns the reader not to “overestimate” color terminology (p. 62). Herodotus, however, clearly describes the Egyptians as ‘black’ (2.57: μέλαιναν) and ‘black skinned’ (2.104: μέλαγχροες) – there is no ‘overestimation’. Furthermore, Herodotus’ comments show that blackness could function as a racial marker for Egyptian identity.

McC.’s analysis of Egyptians in late archaic Greek art renders Egyptian blackness invisible. McC. explains that Bousiris was presented as a foreigner “by means of clothing and physiognomy” (p. 145). Miller, whom McC. cites (p. 145, n. 57), describes these same portrayals as “Black physiognomy”.<sup>6</sup> McC. does not give attention to Miller’s comments on Egyptian blackness. However, McC. describes

<sup>4</sup> Snowden (1990) 545

<sup>5</sup> Haley (1993) 31

<sup>6</sup> Miller (2000) 425

archaic Greek visual depictions of Ethiopians, which are identical to the Egyptian portrayals, as ‘Black African’ (pp. 140-41) which is anachronistic, as discussed earlier. McC.’s analysis is contradictory because she accepts Ethiopian blackness, but evades Egyptian blackness.

Discussing the Egyptian race controversy, McC. argues that ‘Afrocentric’ scholars who categorize ancient Egypt as a ‘black’ civilization are guilty of a “dangerous” essentialism (p. 180). However, as discussed earlier, McC. follows the anachronistic approaches of Snowden and Thompson which presuppose blackness as a monolithic concept. Afrocentric scholars, moreover, are correct to point out that the Greeks and Romans saw the Egyptians as black. It is not ‘dangerous’ to acknowledge that the Greeks and Romans used blackness as a racial marker for Egyptians. McC. clearly has a Eurocentric bias which polemically opposes Egyptian blackness.

This book is significantly progressive as the concept of racial formation provides an excellent starting point for discussion as it allows classicists to critically engage the concept of race. However, McC.’s discussion of blackness is a glaring weakness. McC. undermines the complexity of blackness by treating it as a biological fact as oppose to a fluid social construct. More disturbing, McC. polemically opposes Egyptian blackness which ignores Greco-Roman racial views. As a result, McC. is unable to contextualize or give insight on the meanings of blackness within Greco-Roman racial formations. This book could have been significantly better with a deeper engagement of blackness.

---

T.S.

---

## WORKS CITED

Isaac, Benjamin H. 2004. *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.

Haley, S.P. 1993. "Black Feminist Thought and Classics: Re-membering, Re-claiming, Re-empowering," in *Feminist Theory and the Classics*. Eds. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin. New York: Routledge. 23-43

Lape, Susan. 2010. *Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Miller Margaret. 2000. "The Myth of Bousiris: Ethnicity and Art," in *Not the Classical Ideal: Athens and the Construction of the Other in Greek Art*. Ed. Beth Cohen. Leiden: Brill. 413-42.

Snowden, Frank M., Jr. 1983. *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1970. *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard Univ.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1990. "Romans and Blacks: A Review Essay." Rev. of *Romans and Blacks*, by Lloyd A. Thompson. *The American Journal of Philology* 111: 543-57

Thompson, Lloyd A. 1989. *Romans and Blacks*. Norman: University of Oklahoma.