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E-racing Identity in Antiquity

**Jeremy McInerney, *A Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean*.
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This collection of essays reflects the growing interest in ethnicity among scholars of antiquity. The term 'Mediterranean', however, is somewhat problematic because African cultures, such as Ancient Egypt and Nubia,¹ and Near Eastern cultures are discussed, not only Greece and Rome. A more flexible title, such as 'Ethnicity in the Ancient World', should have been used. Altogether, the thirty seven essays cover a broad range of issues surrounding the concept of ethnicity and its applicability to the ancient world. However, as indicated by the title of this review, the issue of race and its interconnection with ethnicity is overlooked.

In the introduction, McInerney starts with a brief discussion of race. He acknowledges the changing discourse on race in Classical studies (p. 1). However, Shelley P. Haley's ground-breaking analysis on the subject matter is overlooked.² Moreover, McInerney admits that white academics often use ethnicity to avoid discussions of race, while the victims of racism are more likely to 'adopt' race as critical discourse or more loose usage (p. 1). This observation, however, does not lead him to confront the problem of white normativity.³ Furthermore, he does not adequately distinguish race and ethnicity. He concedes that there is a 'fuzziness' about ethnicity (p. 2), but seems to assume that the absence of pseudo-biological claims distinguishes ethnicity from race (p. 3). Critical

¹ For a discussion of the problems with the 'Mediterranean' classification of Ancient Egypt, see Keita 1997; Reynolds-Marniche 1994.

² See Haley 1993, 2009.

³ For discussions of this issue see DiAngelo 2011, Leonardo and Porter 2010, Lipsitz 1995.

race scholarship, such as critical race theory,⁴ shows that this differentiation between race and ethnicity is inaccurate.⁵ In short, McInerney does not justify the centrality given to ethnicity.

The first thirteen chapters (pp. 17-212) consist of essays on theoretical approaches to ethnicity in the ancient world. These discussions address important issues surrounding ethnicity, but there are some analytical problems. Firstly, there is a misinterpretation of race as pseudo-biology and essentialism, particularly in the essays by Johannes Siapkas (p. 69), Gary Reger (p. 114), and Stuart Tyson Smith (p. 196). Smith, for example, sees race as pseudo-biological essentialism and racism as discrimination against dark skinned people. Based on this interpretation, he argues that race has no analytical relevance to Ancient Egyptian society (p. 196). To the contrary, race is a symmetrical product of social relations, while racism is a system that imposes itself onto its targets which makes it asymmetrical.⁶ Ethnicity is interconnected with race as an intraracial subcategory or overlapping category.⁷ Ethnicity, consequently, is not the proper analytic for Ancient Egyptian relations with Nubians. Moreover, Blackness, contrary to Smith's interpretation (p. 196: Figure 13.1), was not a standard distinction between Ancient Egyptians and Nubians. Ancient Egyptian visual representations of Nubians and themselves show both groups in the same range of black and brown skin complexions all of which qualify as Black.⁸ For example, the Nubian pharaoh Tanutamani is depicted as reddish brown. In fact, this depiction of him is shown in Smith's essay (p. 206: Figure 13.6). Furthermore, the token presence of Nubians among the Ancient Egyptian elite cannot be equated with anti-racism as it has no structural implications. Overall, Smith's interpretation of race and racism is hindered by a lack of engagement with critical race scholarship.

⁴ See Delgado and Stefancic 2012.

⁵ Curry 2010: 551-53.

⁶ Fields 2001: 48-49.

⁷ Jeffers 2013: 425-26. For in-depth discussion see Rees 2007, Treitler 2013.

⁸ Ashton 2011: 106, Carruthers 1992: 469-71.

Second, ethnicity is used in contexts in which race is normally used. For example, in her discussion of ethnicity in Achaemenid Persian imperial ideology (pp. 175-93), Jennifer Gates Foster assumes race to be a modern issue without explanation (pp. 178-79). However, as anti-colonial scholar Franz Fanon explains, colonizing groups are always racist.⁹ Furthermore, Foster does not provide an explanation of race to compare with her use of ethnicity. Thus, Foster's use of ethnicity has no adequate justification.

Lastly, the archaeological discussions rightly emphasize the historical dynamics of ethnicity, but there is still the issue of material reductionism. A. Bernard Knapp (pp. 34-49) has a good critique of material reductionism, but his concept of hybridization as an analytic for explaining ethnicity in the context of migration and colonization rests upon the same assumptions. The over emphasis on material culture and the notion of situational identities reduces complex social relations, such as race and ethnicity, to personal attributes or lifestyle choices.¹⁰ Race is a plastic process shaped by the micro effects of daily decisions and the larger social, historical, and political forces.¹¹ This is likewise for ethnicity. In other words, the hybridity seen in archaeological evidence might not correlate with race or ethnicity.

In his discussion of ethnicity in the Neo-Assyrian Empire (pp. 158-74), Geoff Emberling argues that heavy cultural borrowing from conquered groups shows a weak Assyrian identity (pp. 167, 169). Frantz Fanon argued that colonialism objectifies the culture of the colonized indigenous population, rather than destroying it.¹² In other words, Neo-Assyrians may have engaged in a strategy of cultural appropriation and/or exotification. Evidently, an over emphasis on the archaeological record can undermine the complexities of social relations, such as race and ethnicity, especially in asymmetrical situations.

⁹ Fanon 1967: 40.

¹⁰ Epperson 2004: 102.

¹¹ López 2000: 193.

¹² Fanon 1967: 34-35.

Chapters 14 to 26 (pp. 213-404) focus on the Greek world. Some contributions demonstrate the analytical value of ethnicity. The essays by Angela Ganter (pp. 228-40) and Emily Mackil (pp. 270-84), for example, discuss ethnicity among the Greeks themselves. Although this application of ethnicity is not explicitly suggested by the authors, it corresponds with the intraracial usage of ethnicity.¹³ James Roy's (pp. 241-55) discussion of the Greek concept of autochthony can apply to ethnicity or race. Although she centers ethnicity, S. Rebecca Martin (pp. 356-75) is open to the possibility of racialized representations of non-Greeks in Greek art (p. 365).

However, the relevance of race is overlooked or not adequately contextualized. Nino Luraghi (pp. 213-27) argues that ethnicity connotes culture and, in turn, is more flexible than race (p. 218). Race, according to him, is an issue of naturalistic or pseudo-biological claims and a more suitable a framework for violence (p. 218). To the contrary, race is as much a product of social relations as ethnicity and race is interconnected with culture.¹⁴ The framework of violence that Luraghi describes refers to racism, i.e. the system of racial domination. Efi Papdodima (pp. 256-69) centers ethnicity in his discussion, but he points to examples of "racist slurs" in Athenian drama without providing a clear distinction between race and ethnicity (p. 261). Rosaria Vignolo Munson (pp. 341-55) uses ethnicity to explain the non-Greek/Greek distinction in Herodotus which, as explained previously, is problematic. Moreover, she argues that physical characteristics were irrelevant to Herodotus' perception of non-Greeks (p. 344). However, her argument overlooks Herodotus' racialization of certain groups. Blackness, for example, is an essential racial marker for Egyptians and Aithiopians (e.g. Hdt. 2.57, 2.104, 3.101).¹⁵ Aaron P. Johnson (pp. 376-89) discusses racial thinking in Christian thought (pp. 377-79), but his analysis centers on the concept of 'ethnic argumentation' (pp. 379-84). The lack of a clear distinction between race and ethnicity undermines the analytical value of the latter.

¹³ McCoskey 2012: 31. McCoskey argues convincingly that ethnicity is effective for conceptualizing difference amongst Greek groups, i.e. Athenian/Spartan, while race does likewise for distinctions between Greek and non-Greek, i.e. Greek/Egyptian.

¹⁴ See Jeffers 2013, Sheridan 2003.

¹⁵ For an in-depth discussion on race and Blackness in Herodotus see Samuels 2015.

Chapters 27 to 35 (pp. 405-540) focus on ethnicity in the Roman world. Some contributions show a lack of critical engagement with race. In his study of Roman and Jewish interaction, Erich S. Gruen (pp. 423-36) argues that neither race nor ethnicity were social problems in Roman society. However, Gruen discusses individual circumstances, rather than providing a structural analysis. Parshia Lee-Stecum's (pp. 455-69) discussion invokes empire which, as noted earlier, immediately connotes race. The treatment of non-Roman elite is a clear example of racial tokenism. Kathryn Lomas (pp. 483-96) contextualizes the relationship between gender and stereotypes of non-Romans. However, the concept of race is more applicable for non-Romans,¹⁶ especially since she compares these stereotypes with British and French imperialist racial ideology (p. 488). Brent D. Shaw's (pp. 527-40) discussion of the relationship between African identity and sub-groups of Roman North Africa could be clarified if African identity, *Afer*, is understood as racial and if the distinctions among the groups of that region, such as *Mauri*, are interpreted as ethnic. This approach can explain why some individuals identified as African or with their specific ethnic group. The two categories may not have been antithetical for them and, also, there could be various situational factors at work.

Chapters 36 and 37 are two essays on ethnic continuities in Europe. Valentina Follow (pp. 541-54) discusses the ways in which the myth of Rome was used by Mussolini as rhetoric to unify the ethnic groups of Italy to create a national Italian identity. Walter Pohl (pp. 555-68) discusses the historical context of Goth and Hun ethnicities and compares it with their legacy in the European historical imagination. These essays are strong contributions because ethnicity is used as a subcategory within European groups which better captures its function.

This collection is a relevant contribution to the discussion of collective identity in antiquity because it covers important issues that are constructive for further investigation. However, the lack of engagement with critical race scholarship is problematic. There are glaring misinterpretations of race and racism. Also, the

¹⁶ See Haley 2009: 34-41.

interconnection between race and ethnicity is not addressed. Consequently, the centrality placed on ethnicity lacks analytical substance. This volume would have been better if there were in-depth discussions of race alongside ethnicity because the latter is insufficient on its own.

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