

Montclair State University Department of Anthropology
Anth 140: Non Western Contributions to the Western World
Dr. Richard W. Franke

The Black Athena Debate

Lecture for Week 08

This lecture was last updated on 23 September 2019 and 13 August 2013

Week 08: The Black Athena Debate

The learning objectives for week 08 are:

- To understand the main elements of the debate over the extent and nature of possible ancient Egyptian influences on ancient Greece
- To see the basic types of information from archaeology, linguistics, history and mythology that fuel the debate
- To be aware of the relationship between the Black Athena debate and an intellectual movement called “Afro-centrism
- To be aware of how the history of ideas in Europe might have influenced the way we view ancient Egypt today

Week 08: The Black Athena Debate

Terms you should know for week 08:

- Aryan model
- Revised ancient model
- Philo (original meaning)
- Thera-Akrotiri
- Rome (ancient meaning)

Week 08: The Black Athena Debate

Sources:

- Bernal, Martin. 1987. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. Vol. 1: *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. The book that started the recent debate over Egyptian influences on Greek science and mathematics. Vol. 1 is mainly an intellectual history of Europe and North America during the years specified in the title, emphasizing how racism and anti-Semitism led to changing views of Greek civilization.
- Vol. 2. 1991. *The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence*. Mostly archaeological data on recent discoveries suggesting Egyptian influences and possibly even conquest of parts of the Eastern Mediterranean in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. These data form much of the controversy shown in the video in class.
- Vol. 3. 2006. *The Linguistic Evidence*. Bernal claims show that many of the non-Indoeuropean words in Greek can be explained from the ancient Egyptian or Canaanite languages. (Hebrew is a dialect of Canaanite.)

Week 08: The Black Athena Debate

Sources: (continued)

Lefkowitz, Mary. 1996. *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*. New York: Basic Books. A strong attack on Afrocentrism that treats Bernal's Black Athena hypothesis as a version of Afrocentrism.

Moore, David Chioni, ed. 2001. *Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to His Critics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. Pages 2–11 give a summary of the Black Athena argument. See pages 373–95 for a direct response to Mary Lefkowitz's book (above). Many of the other essays are highly technical.

Readings on Afrocentrism:

Diop, Cheikh Anta. 1974 [orig. 1967]. *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality?* Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books. Translated by Mercer Cook. The book by a Senegalese scientist that launched the modern Afrocentric movement.

Asante, Molefi Kete. 1987. *The Afrocentric Idea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. A view of Afrocentrism that goes beyond Diop's original ideas.

2013 Update

Week 08: The Black Athena Debate

Sources: (continued)

The California Newsreel 47 minute video about the Black Athena debate has now been posted on youtube. The video dates to 1991 but most of the issues it covers are still relevant. To view it, click [HERE](#).

2013 Update

Week 08: The Black Athena Debate

Sources: (continued)

The video allows you to see the famous Akrotiri paintings that are described later in this lecture at slide 51. For the video click [HERE](#).

The Black Athena Debate

- 1. Our examination of ancient Egypt from last week suggests many Egyptian contributions to the modern world**
- 2. Europeans accepted this notion for many centuries**

The Black Athena Debate

- 3. In fact, some people had a near fixation on ancient Egypt – perhaps including the members of the Masonic Order – the “Masons”**
- 4. In the 19th Century ideas about Egypt underwent a radical transformation**

The Black Athena Debate

- 5. Egypt became much less admired**
- 6. Greece became the “childhood” of Europe**

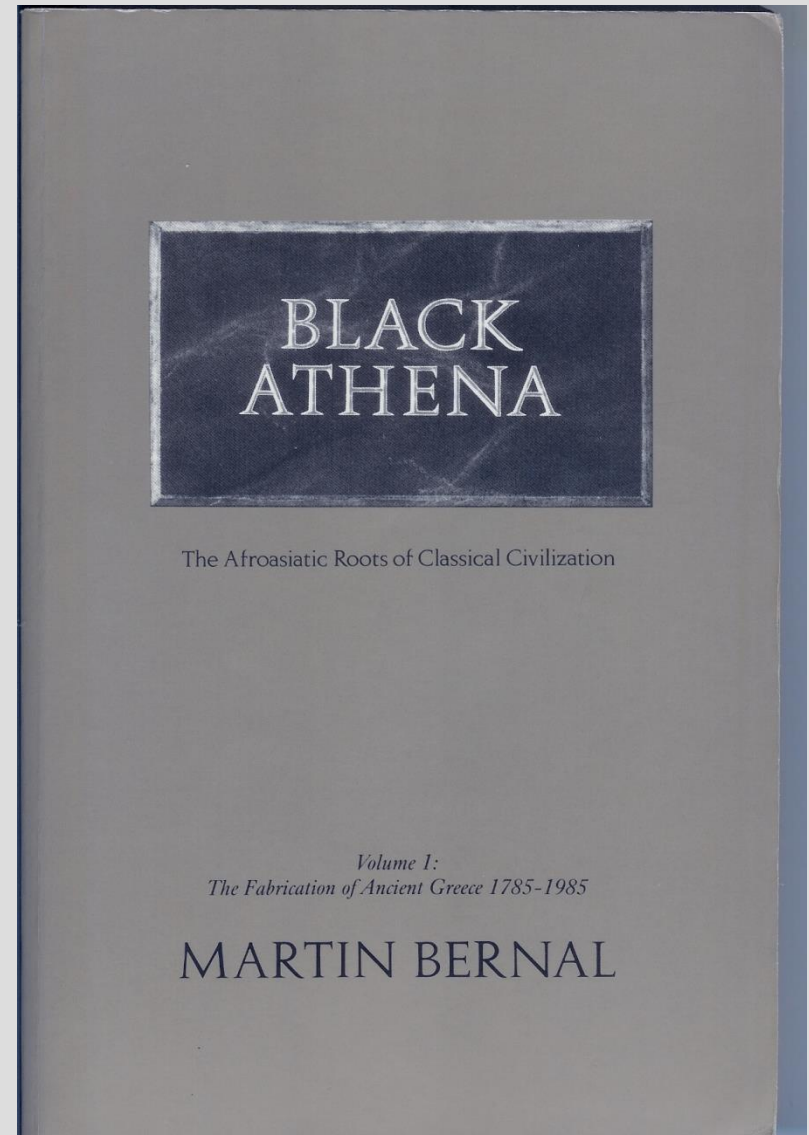
The Black Athena Debate

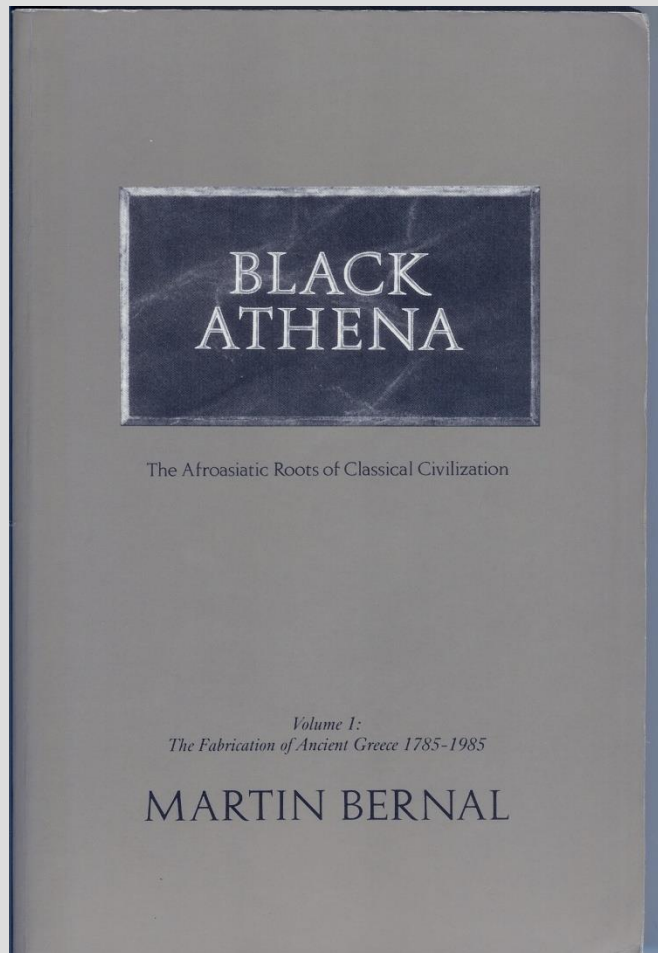
- 7. In 1987 Rutgers University Press published a book by a Cornell professor of East Asian studies.**
- 8. His name is Martin Bernal**
- 9. The book is entitled *Black Athena***

The Black Athena Debate

10. The full title is *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*

Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785 – 1985 -- 575 pages



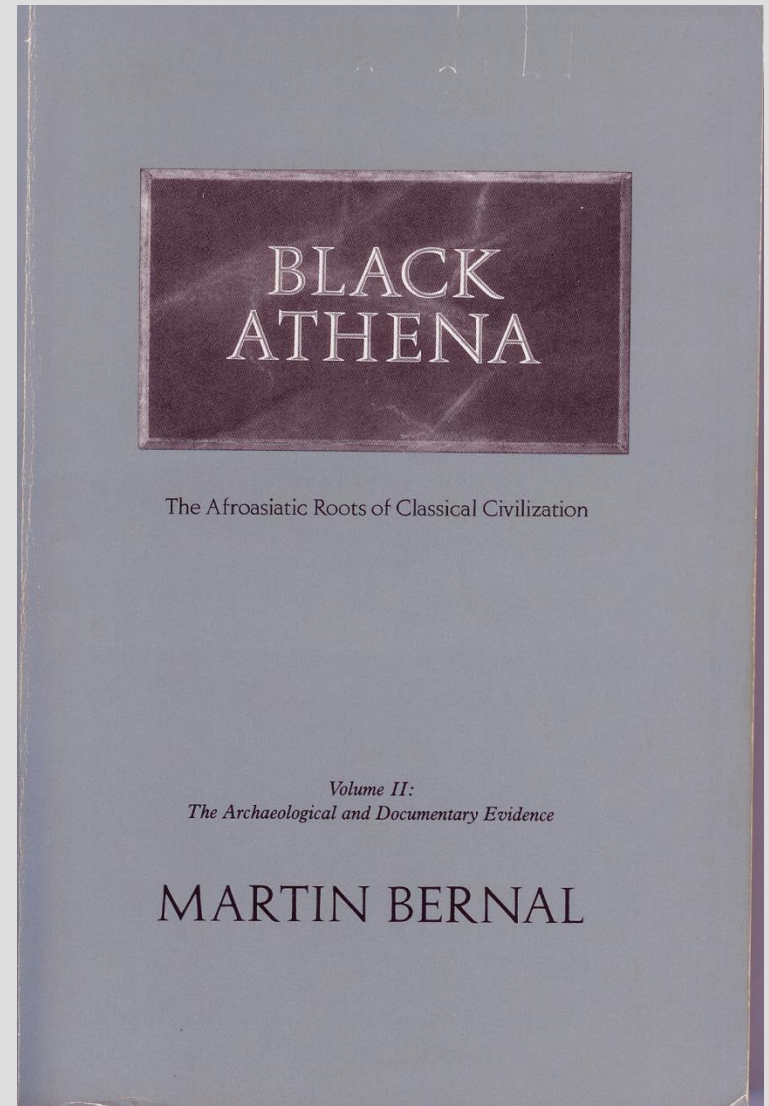


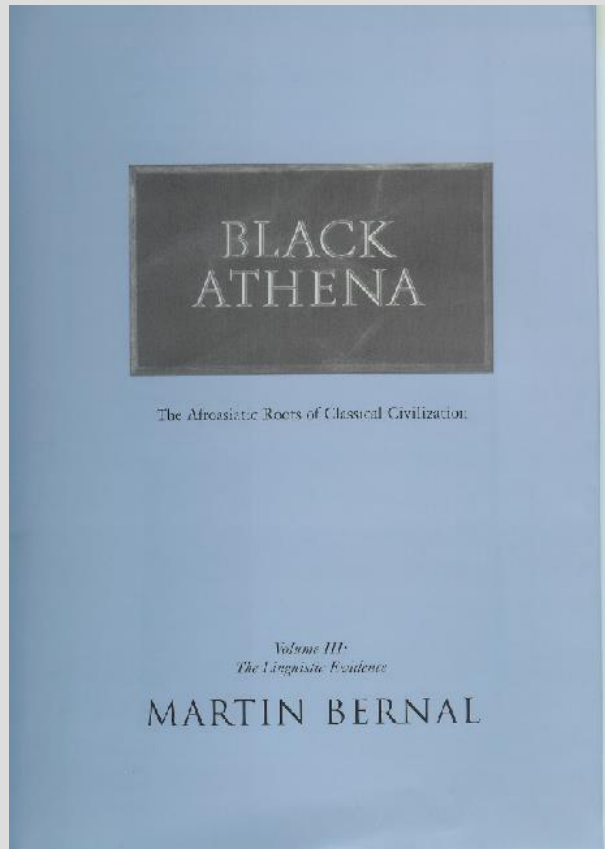
The Black Athena Debate
11. “Classical Civilization”
refers to ancient
Greece and to the idea
that Western
civilization owes its
basic ideas and
knowledge to ancient
Greece.

The Black Athena Debate

- 12. “Afroasiatic roots” means that Bernal believes classical (Greek) civilization is itself based heavily on the achievements of**
- Ancient Canaan (Israel, Palestine)**
 - Ancient Egypt**

The Black Athena Debate
13. The Black Athena
project produced vol. I
in 1987, then vol. II in
1991. Vol. II is titled:
The Archaeological and
Documentary Evidence
— 736 pages





The Black Athena Debate

**14. Vol. III on linguistics
came out at the end of
November 2006.**

The Black Athena Debate

- 15. The Black Athena books have stirred up a great controversy among Classics scholars in the Western world.**
- 16. Many of the issues are technical and quite complex.**

The Black Athena Debate

17. In this overview we shall consider the main ideas and the most accessible evidence

The Black Athena Debate: The Black Athena Theory

18. Bernal's theory has two main claims:

19. That Egyptians under the Middle Kingdom Pharaoh Senwosert (Sesostris) I and III conquered and colonized parts of Eastern Greece, Crete, and Western Anatolia (Turkey)

The Black Athena Debate

- 20. In other words, the Greeks themselves are descendents of Egyptians...and that...**
- 21. Egypt provided many of the intellectual and artistic contributions later attributed to the classical Greeks**

The Black Athena Debate

22. Bernal also claims many Greek achievements originated in the Eastern Mediterranean area called the “Levant,” the Old Testament lands – hence the “asiatic” part of “*Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization.*”

The Black Athena Debate

23. For this class we will focus mainly on the Egypt part of his argument.

24. The conquest and colonization theory is the more controversial and we shall only touch on it.

The Black Athena Debate

25. The most important part of Bernal's theory is the claim that ancient Egypt is the source of many of the Greek achievements.

26. Let us start with two observations –

The Black Athena Debate

26a.

- **To claim that many great achievements from Greece actually come from Egypt does not diminish the greatness of the ancient Greeks. Even if Bernal is completely correct, the Greeks have plenty to be proud of.**

The Black Athena Debate

26b.

- As observed last week, ancient Egypt achieved much in science and mathematics between 1,500 and 2,500 years before the “Golden Age” of Greece
 - 600 BC to 300 BC
- It is thus historically plausible that the Greeks could owe much to ancient Egypt

The Black Athena Debate

27. It is also therefore historically plausible that the Egyptians could owe much to cultures before them...however the evidence suggests that Egypt was the oldest of the ancient civilizations along with ancient Sumer.

The Black Athena Debate

28. Bernal identifies 3 “models” of ancient Greece:

- Ancient Model**
- Aryan Model**
- Revised Ancient Model**

The Ancient Model

29. Ancient Model says:

- **Greek culture resulted from Egyptian and Phoenician conquest and/or colonization around 1,500 BC**
- **Greek alphabet, Greek sculpture, Greek philosophy derived largely from Egyptian and Canaanite (including Jewish) sources**

The Ancient Model

30. Aryan Model says:

- Greek culture resulted from an Aryan conquest from northern Europe
- Non Indo-european words in Greek come from a “pre-Hellenic” culture that the Aryans conquered

The Ancient Model

31. Revised Ancient Model says:

- Greek culture resulted from Egyptian and Semitic sources**
- Recognizes the substantial Indo-European influences on the Greek language**
- Makes use of new linguistic and archaeological data – see later in the slides**

Black Athena Evidence

32. Until about 1785 Europeans themselves accepted the Egyptian origins of Western Civilization

- Based on the Greek sources such as Herodotus**

Black Athena Evidence

33. But certain elements of 18th and 19th century European and (white) North American history...

Black Athena Evidence

- 34. Anti-Black racism and anti-Semitism intensified in 19th century Europe partly as a reaction to the French revolution**
- Some blamed the “Masons” and the “Jews”**

Black Athena Evidence

35. Jean-Paul Marat, a leader of the radical wing of the French revolution, had been a Mason

36. Revolution abolished slavery and gave full citizenship to Jews

Black Athena Evidence

37. Part of the reaction was a conspiracy theory about Jews and Masons

38. Anti-Black racism also intensified during this time: 1815 – 1830

Black Athena Evidence

39. Ancient Egypt and ancient Canaan had to be written out of the grand history of Europe

40. So was born the “Aryan Model”

Recall: The Aryan Model

30. Aryan Model says:

- Greek culture resulted from an Aryan conquest from northern Europe**
- Non Indo-European words in Greek come from a “pre-Hellenic” culture that the Aryans conquered**

Black Athena Evidence

41. Problem with Aryan Model

- No evidence for ancient invasion from North**
- Not known who the Aryans could have been**
- Bernal therefore says it's a racist invention**
- Part of 19th century anti-Africa and anti-Semitic bigotry**

Black Athena Evidence: Bernal

42. Three main lines of argument –

- 42a. How could ancient Greece have created so many brilliant achievements in art, science and politics so suddenly around 600 BC**

Black Athena Evidence

- **42b. Why are 40% of Greek words of apparently non Indo-European origin? Why not consider ancient Egyptian as a likely source?**
- **42c. Why do some of the earliest Greek writers themselves – such as Herodotus – claim Egypt as the source of Greek culture?**

Black Athena Evidence

43. Bernal – four types of evidence

- **43.1 Ethnohistorical: ancient Greeks themselves, already mentioned**
- **43.2 Linguistic**
- **43.3 Archaeological**
- **43.4 Cultural**

Black Athena Evidence

44. Linguistic examples

- **Cretan King Minos from Egyptian 1st Pharaoh Menes**
- **City of Athenai (Athens) from Egyptian HATHENATHA**
- **Greek God Dionysius from Egyptian Osiris**
- **Greek word martyr (witness) from Egyptian metrw (witness)**

Black Athena Evidence

45. More linguistic examples

- **Greek word pyramis (pyramid) from Egyptian pemeer (pyramid: also tomb)**
- **Greek word xiphos (sword) from Egyptian xefer (sword)**

Black Athena Evidence

45a. New linguistic examples from Vol III: Greek words of Egyptian origin

- nymph**
- myth**
- Philo (as in
philosophy)**
- pharma**
- cobra**
- diamond**
- desert**

Black Athena Evidence 45b Philo (as in philosophy)

Philosophy comes to modern English from a Greek word usually translated as “love of wisdom”; an earlier Greek meaning may have been “friend”

There are 3 Greek words for “love”

Eros: romantic, sexual or erotic love

Philo: intellectual interest, love of learning (philosophy), love of stamps and stamp collecting (philately), etc.

Agape: something like “community spirit” – can include Christian love concept in Bible.

Black Athena Evidence 45c. Philo (as in philosophy)

Bernal (Vol 3, pages 206–207) argues in some detail that philo and eros come from ancient Egyptian while agape derives from ancient Hebrew.

He concludes that philo comes from an Egyptian word for friend

Words for “love”

Martin Luther King sometimes used the word “agape” to denote the “beloved community,” free of racism and oppression.

Another Biblical word for love is “storge,” from the 10 commandments – love (honor) your parents – this word comes from Hebrew.

The previous two update slides are...

Thanks to a student in the Fall 2012 class
who noticed that Philo had not been fully
explained.

Black Athena Evidence

45d. New linguistic examples from Vol III:

- Many place names in Greece such as Sparta, Athens**
- Most military terms in Greek**
- Most philosophical and political terms in Greek**
- Names of many Greek gods – eg Zeus**

All derive from plausible Egyptian etymologies

Black Athena Evidence

46. Semitic derivations

- **Greek river Iardanos from Canaanite Yarden (Jordan in English)**
- **Greek city stem name kary(at) from Canaanite karat, meaning town. Seen in city name KARthage.**
- **Greek word phaganon (sword) from Canaanite pasaga**

Black Athena Evidence

47. More Canaanite derivations

- **Cluster of Greek words beginning in arch (archaeology) from Canaanite arek, meaning to arrange in rows**
- **summa (as in summa cum laude)**
- **Rome (ramah=high place, citadel)**
- **alleluia**

Black Athena Evidence

48. Archaeological evidence – example

- Thera volcanic eruption in 1638 BC**
- Thera an island 70 miles north of Crete**
- Covered city of Akrotiri**
- City thus a museum of Mediterranean culture as of 1628 BC**

Black Athena Evidence

49. Thera an island 70 miles north of Crete



Black Athena Evidence 50. Covered city of Akrotiri



Black Athena Evidence

**51. City thus a
museum of
Mediterranean
culture as of 1628
BC**



Black Athena Evidence

52. Only small portion of Akrotiri excavated so far – Bernal says...

- paintings show Egyptian boats, birds, and papyrus**
- Papyrus not found there**
- Typical “Nile scene” with cat stalking birds**
- Swords and daggers also of Egyptian type**

Black Athena Evidence

53. Implications of the Akrotiri finds

- Egyptian culture was heavily influencing Crete**
- Crete as background to ancient Greece not very controversial**

Black Athena Evidence

54. (43.4) Cultural Evidence – example:

- **Egyptian and Cretan idea that the sun travels across the sky by day and under the world by night on a boat**
- **Cults of Osiris and/or Isis may be origins of Dionysius cult among Greeks – similar sets of beliefs surround them**

Black Athena: Is It True?

55. Bottom line

- **Was ancient Egypt source of much of ancient Greece**
- **Was ancient Egypt racially Black or at least partly inhabited by Black Africans?**

Black Athena: Is It True?

56. Earlier slides give reason to believe that ancient Egypt had a profound influence on ancient Greece even if the specific conquest theory cannot be proven

Black Athena: Is It True?

57. If the conquest is eventually shown to be convincing, then the matter is settled about the influence.

Who Were the Ancient Egyptians?

58. Modern Egypt has a population with a wide range of skin colors

59. Not possible at this time to decipher skin color of ancient remains – even from mummies

Who Were the Ancient Egyptians?

60. Best guess now – ancient Egyptians were

- Mixture of Semitic peoples from Eastern Mediterranean and black Africans from Kush**
- Kush is Sudan and Ethiopia and parts of it connect directly to upper Egypt**
- Nile River may have connected white and black populations**

Ancient Black Egypt?

- 61. There seems little doubt that Nubian (another name for Kush) influences in Egypt were strong**
- 62. By 700 BC we know that the Kushite king Plankhy had become the pharaoh of Egypt. Other Nubian pharaohs are possible but not confirmed.**

The Black Athena Debate

63. Why dispute the Black Athena hypothesis?

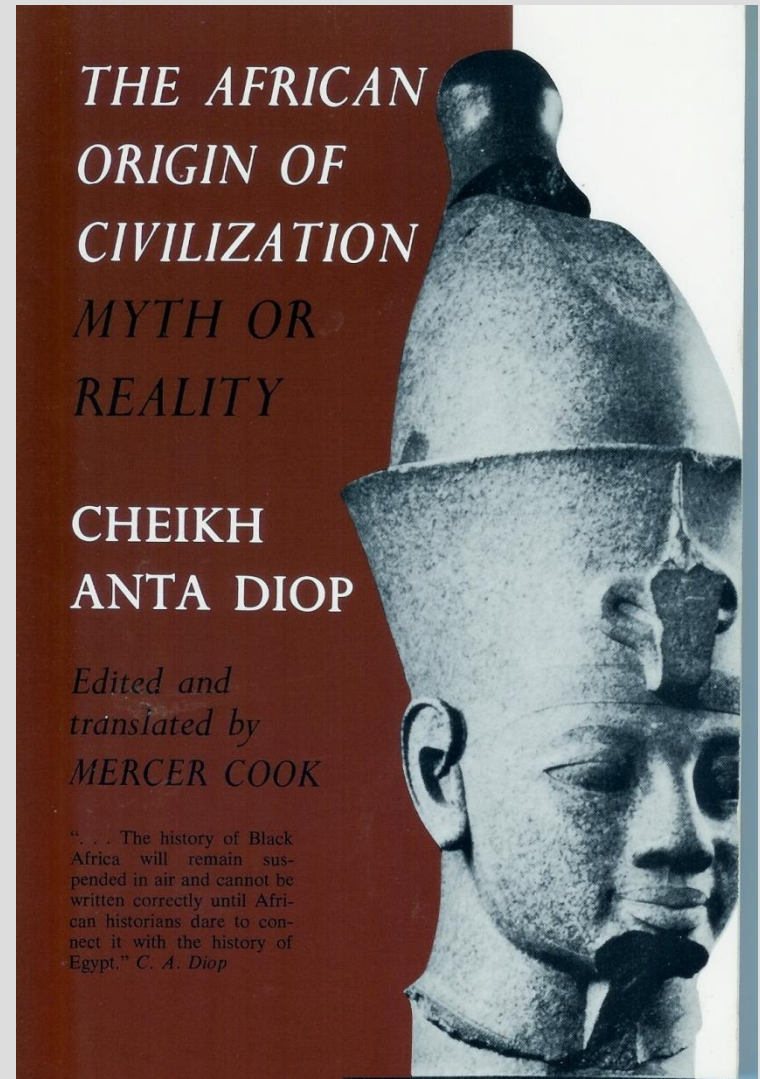


The Black Athena Debate

64. Some critics
(especially some white
critics) see in Black
Athena a version of so-
called “Afrocentrism,”
a theory associated
with a Senegalese
scientist named Cheikh
Anta Diop.

The Black Athena Debate

65. Diop claimed,
beginning about 1955,
that the ancient
Egyptian language had
close similarities with
Wolof – the main
language of Senegal.

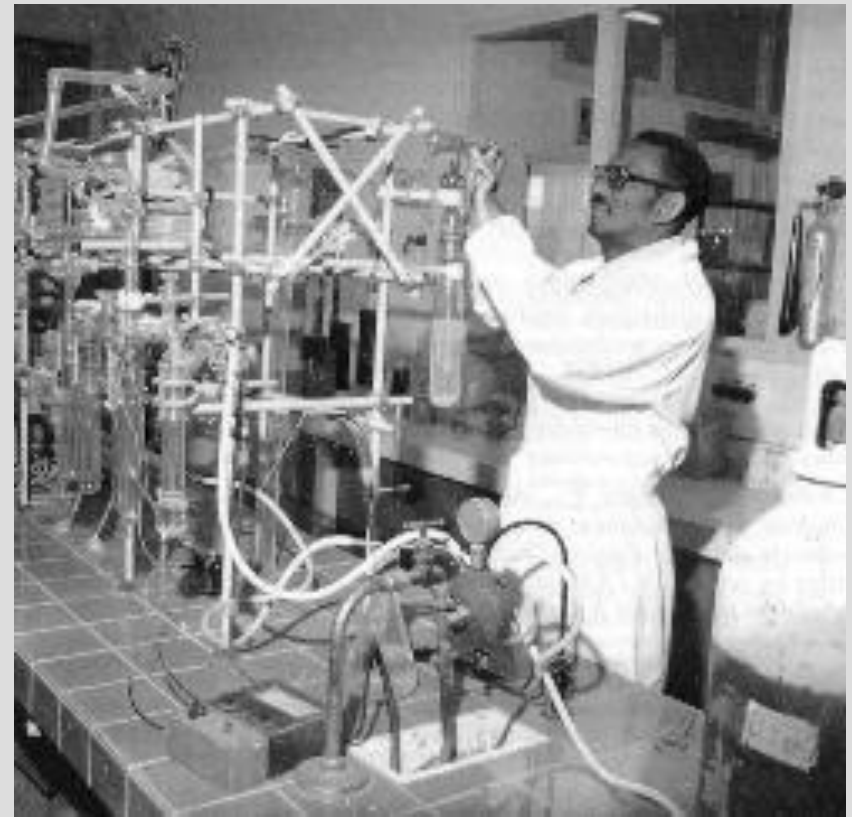


The Black Athena Debate

- 66. Diop further claimed that white historians had falsified the history of Africa and that many of the pharaohs were black Africans.**
- 67. Some of his arguments were based on questionable interpretations of the features of ancient statues and of Egyptian paintings.**

The Black Athena Debate

68. However Diop, a trained chemist, did develop a method for determining the melanin content of Egyptian mummies – and thus their likely skin color.



The Black Athena Debate

69. His method has been accepted by many scientists both black and white.



The Black Athena Debate

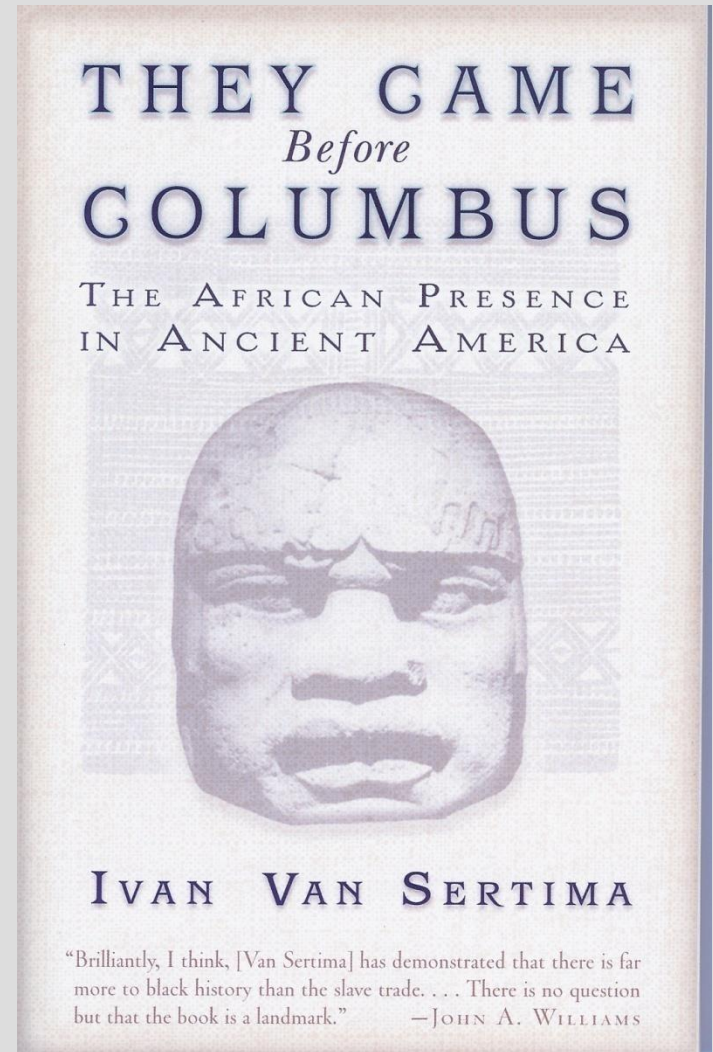
70. Unlike the Black Athena hypothesis that views ancient Egypt as a mixture of black and other populations (despite the misleading name of Bernal's series of books), Diop argued for a pure black African ancestry for Egypt.

The Black Athena Debate

71. Diop's views have been taken up and expanded on by Ivan Van Sertima, Professor of African Studies at Rutgers.

The Black Athena Debate

72. Van Sertima gained international attention with his book...



The Black Athena Debate

73. In which he argues that the pre-Mayan Olmec culture is African based, again largely on the interpretation of statues .

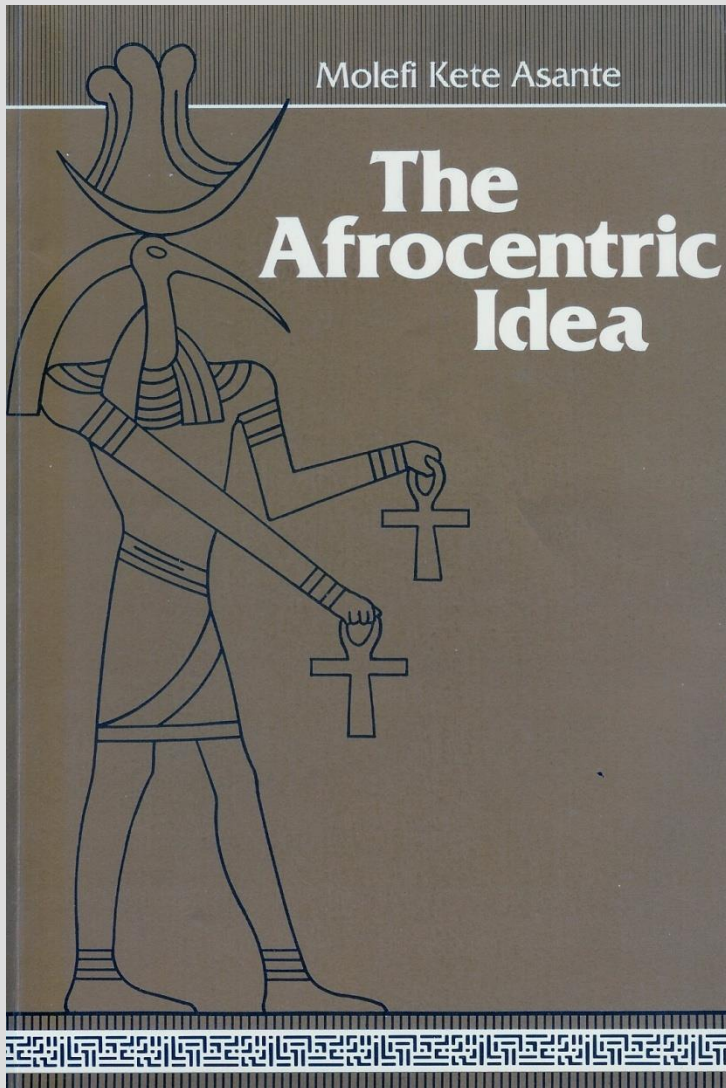
The Black Athena Debate

74. Van Sertima's work on Central America cannot be dismissed although its relation to the larger question of Egypt and Greece is remote.

The Black Athena Debate

75. But in recent years Van Sertima has turned his attention to work supporting Diop's research. [Diop died in 1986]

76. This resulted in two edited essay collections, *Egypt Revisited* (1989) and *Egypt: Child of Africa* (1994).

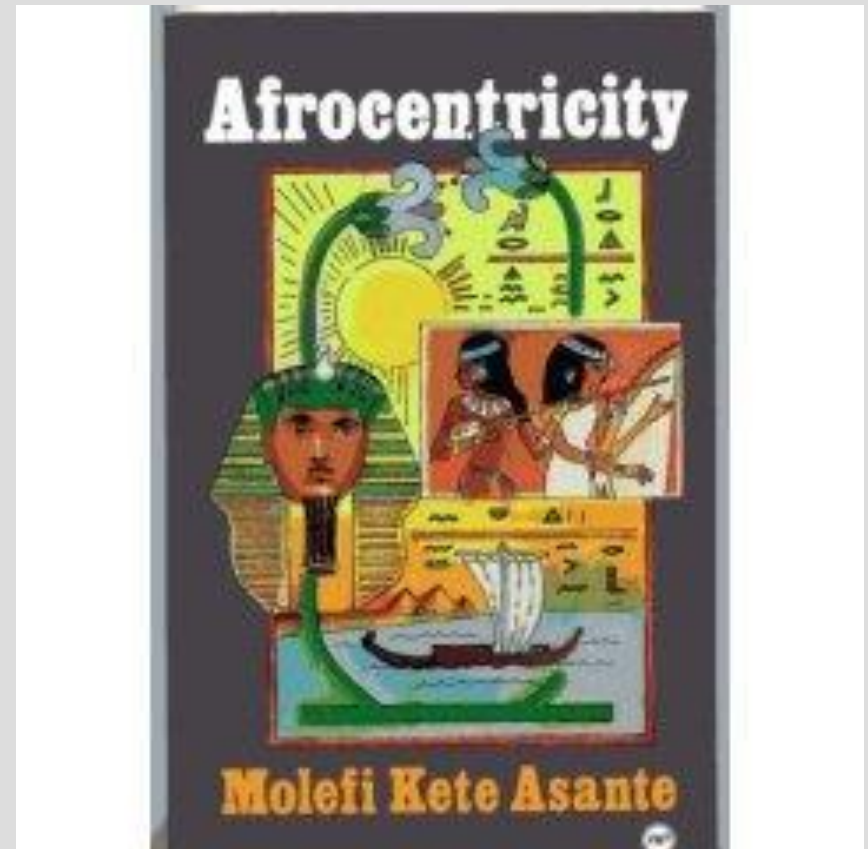


Afrocentrism

77. Another strain of Afrocentrism comes from Molefi Kete Asante, Professor of African American Studies at Temple University

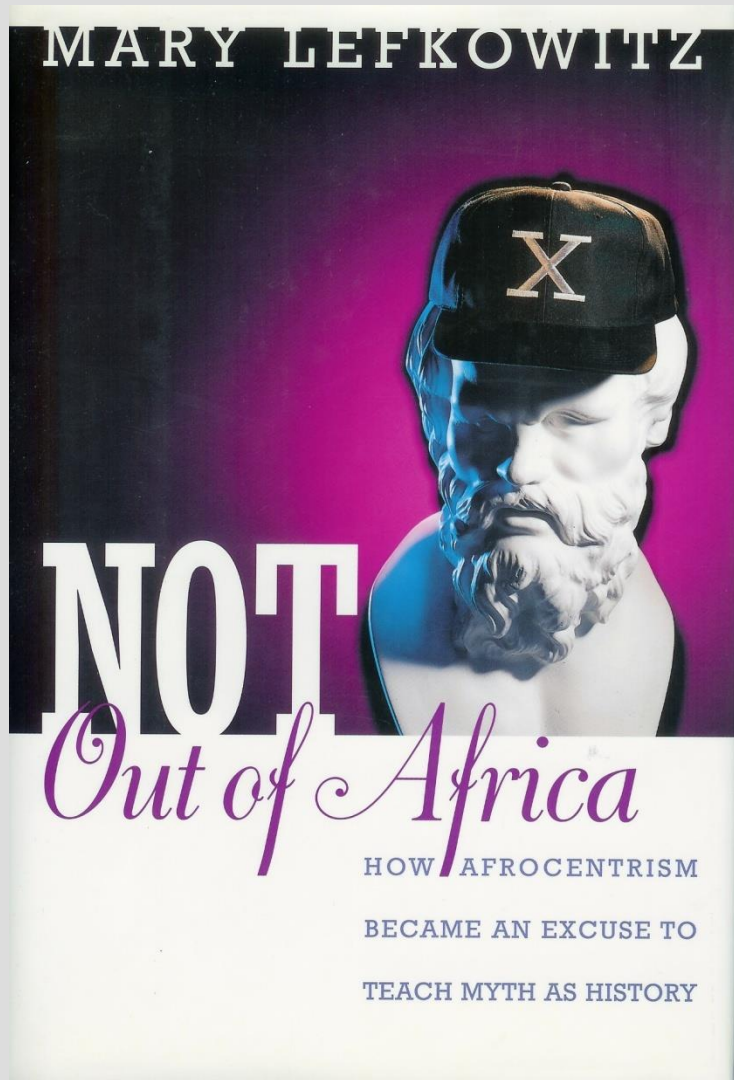
Afrocentrism

78. Asante lays out a philosophy and style of life he claims originates from Africa and can help diasporic blacks free themselves of harmful and self-denigrating European stereotypes.



Afrocentrism and Black Athena

79. Bernal's Black Athena argument has become enmeshed in a white reaction against Afrocentrism

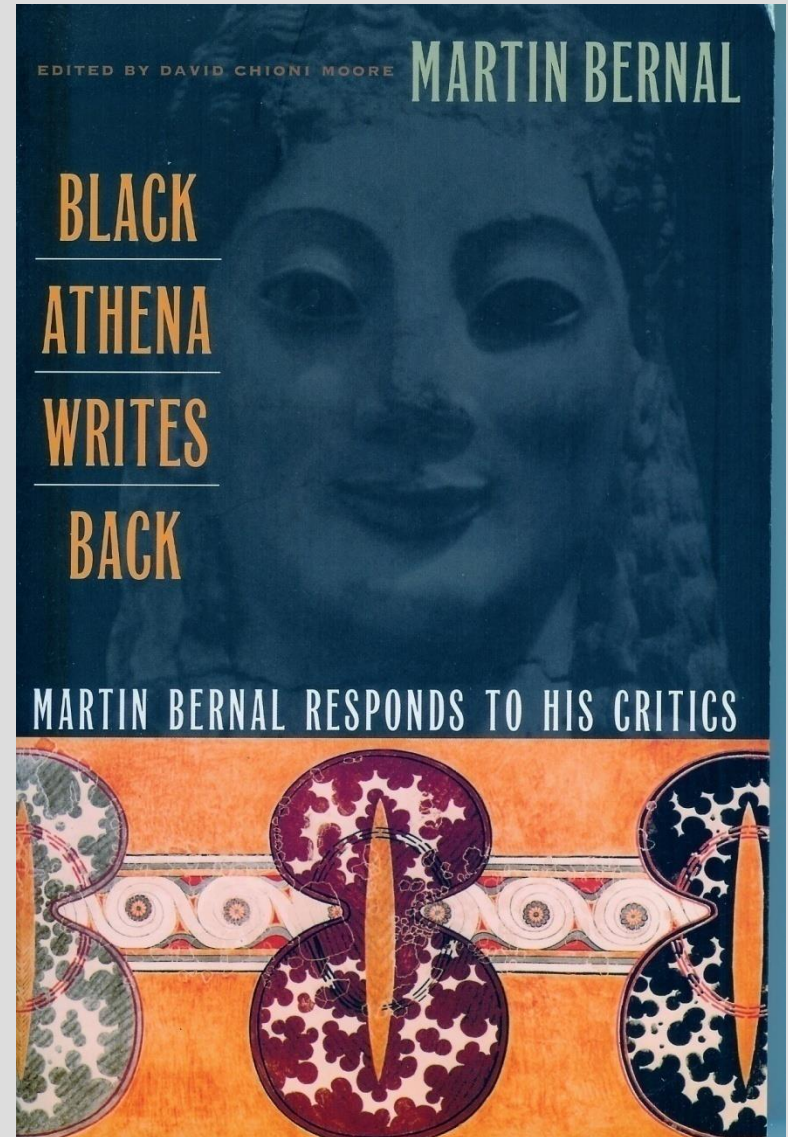


The Black Athena Debate and Afrocentrism

80. In 1996 Classics
Professor Mary
Lefkowitz published a
strong attack on
Afrocentrism,
essentially equating
Martin Bernal's ideas
with those of Diop

The Black Athena Debate

81. This has led to a lengthy and often bitter debate, accusations of racism, and even lawsuits by some of the parties involved (though not Bernal)



The Black Athena Debate

82. So what can the non-expert do who wants to understand what is going on but cannot become an expert?

The Black Athena Debate

83. Bernal gives a basic overview of his argument in:

Walter Cohen Interview with Martin Bernal published in the journal *Social Text* in 1993, No. 35, pages 1–24.

This is one of the articles you have as a reading assignment for this week.

The Black Athena Debate

84. And criticisms from Lefkowitz and others appear in the 51 minute California Newsreel video that you can view on youtube by clicking [HERE](#).

The Black Athena Debate

85. You also have assigned a short review of Bernal's first book by the historian Robert Pounder. That reading is also part of the assignment for this week and you can access it by clicking [here](#).

The Black Athena Debate Update of 13 August, 2013

Martin Bernal died on June 9, 2013 in Cambridge, England.

To read his obituary in the New York Times, click [here](#).

The Black Athena Debate

End of Lecture for

Week 08 on

The Black Athena Debate