

Katherine Blouin and Rebecca Futo Kennedy: False friends & Shortchanging Black America, insulting Africa.

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Blouin and Kennedy have written about the current controversy regarding Cleopatra as a Black Pharaoh.¹ It will be argued that they have engaged in massive misdirection and are false friends.

1 Misrepresenting Afrocentrism:

Afro-centrism: there is a great tendency to ascribe to 'Afrocentrism' any silly idea the commentator may have. Dr Amro Ali states: '*spare a thought for the previous six unfortunate Cleopatras who ruled Egypt and yet no Egyptian, Greek, Macedonian or Afrocentricist ever mentions them or wants to claim as their own because they were apparently boring and less scandal-prone women rulers.*'²

No evidence is provided for this claim about Africans that we have no interest in the possible Africanity of the Ptolemaic dynasty. While the references to Afrocentrists abound everywhere in this debate there is almost complete absence of reference to any actual statement by the accused. These 'Afrocentrists' are straw men and women, convenient 'bogeymen' to hurl insults at. One is used to this at the level of popular debate, but when academics stoop to this, one is astonished. Blouin quotes Haley referring to 'whether Afrocentric or Eurocentric in standpoint', but neither explains who the Afrocentrics are nor clarifies that Haley would fall into the camp of Afrocentrics. The way the quote is framed would appear to make Haley 'above the fray' as a 'disinterested academic' rather than engaged as a human being as she was.

2 . Post modernism:

She argues we must understand the history of racism and colonialism - by which she distances herself by showing awareness. But is this true awareness? History reveals the abject failure of Western academia as an objective source of information in this area, but this is not fully acknowledged. She implies her awareness of Orientalism means she is free of it. She writes: 'the following questions matter to me the most: What is each story aiming to achieve? What's the end game here? What's the master narrative under it all?' This post-modernist critical theory reduces everything to narrative. It means that Western academia in the past is not a pack of lies but just a different 'narrative'. This view becomes an interpretative nightmare because it implies that the fact that it is a knowing lie is not part of the power play.

This approach is politically incoherent. It is crucial to fully understand Colin Powell's presentation at the UN about weapons of mass destruction to acknowledge that it was a known lie at the time. It was important at the time that the US believed that other countries would follow their lead even when these other countries knew it was a lie. Equally, it was important to Western academics that

other Western academics would follow their views even when they knew it was a lie. This view means that this is not just a different 'narrative' but an act of power.

In the genetics debate during the 1970s, I exposed blatant lying on race by an academic scientist. But other scientists knew he was lying and said nothing! There was a power structure in place. We, Black scholars, have been incredibly inept in this matter. We complain about this or that scholar's racist bias not knowing the key issue is how this scholar is able to 'fail' students who do not share his views. After I exposed an Oxford academic as a racist, I received a thank you from 'white' anti-racist graduate students whom he had failed or otherwise terminated and whose careers were now being re-evaluated. Blouin's piece imagines that racial bias was an acknowledged problem of the past, but we have moved on from that Excuse me, madam!

3. Focus on Black Americans

This takes us to Africa. Western academics feel they have power over Black American academics and their careers, but hesitate about African academics so they wish to restrict the debate to African American academics. Saying to African historians that they wish to exaggerate African history in order to impress Western audiences would be met with hysterical laughter as their primary audience is fellow Africans.

Kennedy wrote:

"Imagine that you are told (as Black Americans were) that their "people" have contributed nothing to world history and others around you (like "White" people) that all great civilizations are a result of European/White people.

Cleopatra is contentious and fought over because she is a larger than life historical figure based in the continent of Africa, which supposedly has contributed "nothing" to world history and the pushback comes as a result of historical anti-blackness.'

Her subtext to be clear is: let African Americans have Cleopatra. We have abused them enough, we should give them something to be proud of. It does not matter if Cleopatra was Black or not, African Americans need a 'useable past'. A nod and a wink and 'lets move on'.

There are serious issues that are misaddressed here. In Africa, we have 'white' people who joined the liberation movement and married Africans. Are we denying that they are Africans? Do we accept the European definition that you need Black curly hair and a Black skin to be African? Consider the Appiahs: the mother adopted African culture and loved it. He hated it. Are we to say that she is not African but he is? What nonsense. If devotion to African culture and ways and love of Africa makes you African then Cleopatra's skin colour is entirely irrelevant.

Again Europeans feel free to adopt a similar definition when it allows them to make Alexander Pushkin and Alexandre Dumas Russian and French respectively.

4. Cultural issue:

Kennedy writes:

'Q: How does our understanding of Cleopatra, including her credentials, and history in general, change if we were to view her as Black?

It changes nothing about Cleopatra herself, but it changes the way people claim her or feel rights to claim her.’

Blouin writes: “She could have been Greek, Macedonian, Egyptian, and Roman all at the same time because these are not a matter (only) of ancestry.’

This blurs the issue of her cultural identity.

What follows? If Cleopatra was African, then the issue is what cultural influence did she have?

There is a major question: did she impart to Caesar the concept of a spiritual ruler? Is this what Octavian took from Egypt and why he forbade Romans from entering Egypt without his permission? Prior to Octavian, the Roman ruler was the top general but the Egyptian concept of ruler was different. It would be Cleopatra’s gift to explain how ancient Egypt lasted thousands of years and both Caesar and Octavian drank deeply. Is this fear that Caesar wanted to become a Roman Pharaoh that was the cause of his assassination? Octavian set himself up as a ruler 'a la pharaoh', not the top general. But Western academia scrupulously hides these issues.

By focussing on modern day, identity claims and skin colour a massive exercise in misdirection has been accomplished.

Katherine Blouin and Rebecca Kennedy are false friends.

5. Is narrative everything?

We now need a small detour to Sutton Hoo. Edith Pretty had a spiritual insight that there was something important at the bottom of her garden in several large mounds.

“ With spiritualism popular in the Thirties, Edith became friendly with faith healer William Parish. She built a chapel for him and supported the Woodbridge Spiritualist Church. It was to here that she sent archaeologist Basil Brown, the man she had selected to dig the mounds. The medium had a message for a member of the congregation: “You are digging in the sand. The message is: ‘keep digging, you will find what you are searching for’. It was later revealed an attempt was made to dig up the mound in Tudor times.”³

‘Edith Pretty’s unusual dream

The mound piqued Pretty’s interest due to the unusual dream or vision that she or one of her friends have experienced. Like many people living in England during the 1930s, Edith very much believed in spiritualism. It is often suggested that either her or a friend of hers had visions of soldiers walking around in mounds with spears. She could see this from her house which was very close to the site. This strong belief that something worthwhile must be under those dusts had motivated Mrs Pretty to start the excavation in the first place.

(“Sutton Hoo - Masterpieces of the British Museum - BBC Documentary”)⁴

This discovery was much acclaimed. One curator stated: 'It’s one of the most important archaeological discoveries of all time, certainly in British archeology but I would argue in the world,’ says Sue Brunning, Curator: Early Medieval European Insular Collections at the British Museum.’⁵

A spiritualist, Florence Thompson, played a key role in persuading Edith Pretty to keep going when her excavator, Basil Brown, suspected that there was nothing further to find.⁶

Can the above be captured by saying Edith Pretty wanted to seek a different ‘narrative’?

This leads to an element of autobiography. As a young student and then undergraduate I ravished libraries for books on different civilisations. I devoured Japanese culture and Chinese culture. I learned about India sutras. I read about Suleiman the Magnificent, Avicenna, Averroes and other great scholars of Islam. I had no particular interest in ancient Egypt. One day I picked up a book

on Ancient Egypt at Heffers. As I skimmed it a voice said 'this is yours'. I was astonished. I could not see anything in the book that was African but I bought it anyway. On closer reading, I saw the tell tale signs of academic lying. Obfuscation, unclear statements and misleading phrases abounded everywhere. But no clue as to what they were hiding. I then applied my forensic academic skills and tracked down an alternative culture dating back to the ancient Greeks, views of medievalists and Renaissance scholars etc. I then found self-published pamphlets by obscure African scholars and finally came upon scholars like Jean Firmin and finally came to Cheikh Anta Diop (whom I later met in person in Dakar). I then adopted this view in the classes I was teaching at a university in London, and later my classics professor took me aside and confidentially told me that Plato and Aristotle took their learning from Africa which was a Black civilisation at that time. One afternoon my tutor at Clare College, Cambridge, who was Malcolm Bowie, asked me what I was up to and we had a very lengthy chat about my work on ancient Egypt as a Black African civilisation. I had been publicly praised by a Nobel prize winner so as an undergraduate I had some credibility. Bowie was a close friend of Martin Bernal and the rest is history.

What role can 'intuitions' play in academic research? Obviously, these are not scientific some might say. However, anyone familiar with the history and philosophy of science will know this is nonsense. Scientific method focusses on the testing and checking of ideas. Attacking the source of an idea is merely ad hominem assault. If a mathematician gets an idea while in the bath it is rather irrelevant - the timing. Can a proof of the idea be found? Without the encouragement of the spiritualists Edith Pretty might not have kept going. Without the 'inspiration' would I have delved so thoroughly into the history of Egyptology as a student of philosophy? Probably not. When I then read that Africans who wish to claim that ancient Egypt was Black African simply want to have a civilisation that they can call their own, I am utterly insulted. Someone who is seeking their family after a long separation does not want someone else's family however distinguished. They want their family. Similarly, I wanted my family, my history, my culture. Jan Assman's view that Africans are lacking in culture so they need to find one in the past they can falsely identify with, a view which Blouin and Kennedy seem to be at home with, is a view that I deplore.

To the extent that 'skin color' is a proxy for cultural influence the issue is one of great importance. Skin colour itself may be of no importance.

If ancient Kemitic culture has something to tell the modern world getting it right is of the greatest importance. We need to pursue this and not be distracted by false friends.

Endnotes

1. (Blouin & Kennedy, 2023)
2. (Blouin & Kennedy, 2023)
3. (*Edith Pretty's Gift of Saxon Gold in the British Museum*, 2014)
4. (*Edith Pretty*, n.d.)
5. (*Edith Pretty's Gift of Saxon Gold in the British Museum*, 2014)
6. ('The Lady and the Mound: Edith Pretty', 2021)

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