1

INTRODUCTION

This book is concerned with historiographies of progress and decline that have surfaced in African American consciousness – both learned and popular – from the end of the eighteenth to the middle of the twentieth century.[1] The various perspectives on black history under discussion include one that laments the eclipse of a noble past, and one that celebrates a progressive evolution toward a new and brighter day. I have not confined myself to a definition of history as it is practiced by contemporary professional historians, but have reflected broadly on the historical understanding of literate persons outside the academy. These essays are not confined to the investigation of Afrocentrism, although I have referred throughout to the nineteenth-century origins of some of the historical views that are commonly, and misleadingly, designated "Afrocentric." I have also alluded to African American folk histories that extend beyond simple Afrocentrism to encompass a broader Afro-Asiatic consciousness, for example, the traditions of the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam.

I must confess that I do not share the obsession with ancient Egypt, "Egyptocentrism," that has dominated much discussion of African American folk-historiography in recent years. That is because my concern encompasses something broader and more complex than the simple attempt to explain or defend the idea that Egypt is geographically and culturally part of Africa. I doubt if I could be called an Afrocentrist, except in the sense that I sympathize with the contemporary sufferings of African peoples, and believe that the image of Africa has always affected both external perceptions and self-images of African Americans.

I have not discovered who was the first person to employ the expression "Afrocentrism," but it was not Professor Molefi Asante, although the term has been closely associated with him for almost

two decades. Derrick Alridge, a Ph.D. candidate at the Pennsylvania State University, has reminded me that, not only the concept but the actual term "Afrocentrism" was employed by W. E. B. Du Bois, possibly as early as 1961, and definitely by 1962. Mr. Alridge brought to my attention Du Bois's typescript draft of "Proposed plans for an *Encyclopaedia Africana*," which was to be "unashamedly Afro-Centric, but not indifferent to the impact of the outside world upon Africa or to the impact of Africa upon the outside world." As soon as I saw the proposal, I was reminded of a series of documents shared with me some years ago by the distinguished Africanist Adelaide Cromwell: *Information Reports* issued by the Secretariat for an Encyclopedia Africana in Accra, Ghana, under the directorship of Du Bois. I discovered that the phrase "Unashamedly Afrocentric" appeared in *Information Report* No. 2 and elsewhere in the series. It was obviously known to participants in the project along with the entire panoply of issues later associated with Afrocentrism by Dr. Asante.[2]

Dr. Asante's efforts to appropriate the term Afrocentrism began in 1980 with the publication of his *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*. The work was a brief essay concerned with a historical analysis of African American political theory, and offering some speculations on how African American students and scholars might avoid incorporating Eurocentric biases into their own work. Since 1980 Asante has amended his definition several times, so that recent formulations are vastly more imaginative than his original statement. His second book, *The Afrocentric Idea* (1987), was a creative and in some respects brilliant but rambling theoretical work, much influenced by the revolution in "critical theory" that occurred in American intellectual life during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The deconstructionist critic Henry Louis Gates found Asante's *Afrocentric Idea* convincing enough, if we are to believe the jacket blurb in which he gushed, "Asante's wide range of references, his delightful examples taken from black traditions, and his sheer pleasure at discussing black culture, all combine to make his argument both cogent and important. This will be a major book." Houston Baker, later the first black president of the Modern Language Association, also provided a blurb – subtly equivocal but cautiously positive: "Asante's dramaturgy presents an alternative model of inquiry. It persuasively suggests a model of rhetorical and scholarly production." Asante did homage in his footnotes to the works of several authors who have been most influential in contemporary critical theory, including Raymond Geuss, Thomas Kuhn, Marvin Harris, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Edmund Husserl, and Michel Foucault. It was not until his third book, *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (1990),

that Asante's writings demonstrated any great concern with establishing a relationship between the culture of ancient Egypt and the so-called African personality of modern times.[3]

It is important to distinguish between Afrocentrism and Egyptocentrism, as Derrick Gilbert, an undergraduate student at Berkeley, once noted. In neither of Asante's first two books on the subject was he particularly fixated with Egypt. In later works, Egypt became increasingly important, but Asante was hardly the first to insist on linking the study of Egypt to the study of the rest of Africa. Egyptians themselves called for the inclusion of Egypt in the Encyclopedia Africana. The director of the United Arab Republic Cultural Centre in Accra wrote to praise Du Bois for having "maintained faith in the African character of Egypt's achievement," and urging that the Encyclopedia Africana keep Egypt within its Afrocentric focus.[4]

As Asante's ideas are impossible to ignore, so too is it, regrettably, impossible to ignore a recent book purporting to treat on the subject of Afrocentrism – Mary Lefkowitz's *Not Out of Africa.* In a withering broadside against this work delivered from the deck of the flagship *Journal of American History* (December 1996), the redoubtable August Meier correctly observed that "Nineteenth century black intellectuals . . . as early as the 1830s and 1840s presented virtually full-blown arguments about Egypt that are today known as Afrocentric." I agree with him that "to argue with the claims of Afrocentrists is one thing, but that to ignore the work of the band of Afro-American intellectuals and popularizers who enunciated a line of thought that was deeply rooted among rank-and-file Negroes would, I believe, reveal an essentially Eurocentric orientation."[5] In *Black Folk Here and There,* St. Clair Drake, the late dean of African American social scientists, provided an informed discussion of the tradition to which Meier refers.[6] The work was published posthumously in 1987–90, and has been studiously ignored since then by the sentimental Egyptocentrists, who are mocked with icy civility in Drake's erudite volumes.

Aside from the dangers of Eurocentrism that Meier observes, a more glaring problem is Lefkowitz's failure to make use of well-established methods of cultural and intellectual history. She is oddly more concerned with attempting to prove that Cleopatra was a pure "Aryan" than with understanding the circumstances that have produced the colorful phenomenon of black Egyptocentrism. The cultural and historical contexts that have given rise to the peculiarities of African American mythologies are of no interest to her. Furthermore, she demonstrates absolutely no interest in the methods that have been developed over the past sixty years for studying similar

problems in cultural history, by scholars such as Henry Nash Smith, David Brion Davis, and Carl Bode.[7]

Many African Americans outside the academy, like their white counterparts, tend to be dismissive of academic history as taught in "respectable" educational institutions. They are convinced that history is written by members of a hostile elitist "establishment." Lefkowitz seems intent on confirming them in their belief. Thus, she attacks the Afrocentric pronouncements of the populist leader Marcus Garvey, and makes the astonishing statement, "I do not know if Garvey was the originator of the idea that Europeans had deliberately concealed the truth from blacks."[8] Surely, she does not intend to challenge the view that the education available to African Americans in Garvey's time was historically inferior, and that it largely functioned to inculcate in them a sense of inferiority. In most cases it actively discouraged or disparaged the idea – championed later by Frank Snowden and others – that African individuals, since ancient times, had made contributions to history, and that racism as experienced in America was a relatively recent phenomenon.[9] Garvey certainly was not the originator of the idea that whites in America systematically withheld knowledge from African Americans.

John E. Bruce, a prominent Garveyite and autodidact, who was born a slave in 1856, did not need to be reminded that whites deliberately withheld knowledge from blacks. At the time of Garvey's rise there were hundreds of thousands of former slaves still living in the United States – some of them, like Bruce, became members of or supporters of his movement. These people had living memories of a time when it was illegal to teach black people to read and write. Slave testimony, recorded in the slave narratives collected by the Works Progress Authority, reminds every historian of the systematic denial of knowledge to black Americans under slavery and segregation. Illiterate people have an amazing ability to create a mythology of the past, meaningful to themselves. One need only recall the often illiterate mummers of medieval Europe, who incorporated biblical history into their miracle plays, or the "rude mechanicals" satirized in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, who incorporated classical mythology into their folk history and folk arts. Slave testimony reveals that a mythology fed by European as much as by African sources sprang up among the enslaved masses of the African American population. By the early twentieth century they had created a folklore in which many famous persons from history or the Bible were claimed for the black race.[10]

Black Egyptocentrists believe that ancient Egyptian culture was as profoundly influenced by black Africa as American popular culture

has been influenced by America's black population. Their project, therefore, is simply to prove that the basic elements of Egyptian culture are historically intermeshed with the cultures of other regions of Africa. The glorification and romanticism of ancient Egypt is clearly only a part of what we call Afrocentrism today. It is to be admitted that since the early nineteenth century some black authors have desired to identify with the land of the pharaohs. It is important to note, however, that many black nationalists – especially those with a strong sense of class consciousness – are disinclined to romanticize pharaonic dominion. John H. Bracey, for example, sees little to celebrate in the joys of dragging a block of sandstone up the side of a pyramid.

This study is not concerned with attempts to establish the "racial identities" of Neolithic Egyptians or Ethiopians. Such questions are best left to persons with interests and abilities in the methods of archeology, physical anthropology, and radiocarbon dating. Burkhard Bilger, senior editor of *The Sciences*, a publication of the New York Academy of Sciences, has said as much in the pages of that journal. Bilger observes, as all reasonable persons must, that it is fruitless and unscholarly to impose nineteenth-century American racial categories on Neolithic populations.[11] Scholars as ideologically diverse as Frank Snowden, St. Clair Drake, and Ivan Hannaford have taken this position, and I agree with them. I tend, however, to share the ironic and amused detachment of St. Clair Drake respecting the folksy racial boosterism of the Afrocentrists, rather than the steaming indignation of Snowden.

I have described Afrocentrism as a traditional "historiography of decline" in several versions of Chapter 2, delivered on numerous occasions over the past ten years. Indeed, in some of its manifestations, Afrocentrism may be viewed as a historiography of decline. Gerald Early has credited me with this observation, and I must in turn credit my source. I borrowed the concept from Professor Bryce Lyon of Brown University, who offered a seminar on the topic, which I unfortunately never visited. I was fascinated enough to scan his book on the subject and to explore the theme independently, and along somewhat different lines. Afrocentrism, however, is not always a historiography of decline, and the various permutations of the ideology must always be related to the changing historical circumstances in which it has arisen over the past century and a half. I would associate W. E. B. Du Bois with the historiography of decline, but not inextricably, as Arthur Herman does in *The Idea of Decline in Western History*. Du Bois, whether viewed as a Hegelian idealist or as a Marxist materialist (and he could speak the language of each), was funda-

mentally a "progressive," albeit capable of the sentimentalism and romantic nostalgia that I have highlighted in my discussion of him.[12]

More than once, I shall remind the reader that Egyptocentrism and Afrocentrism are not the same thing. Egyptocentrism is the sometimes sentimental, at other times cynical, attempt to claim ancient Egyptian ancestry for black Americans. It involves the attempt to reconstruct the peoples of ancient Egypt in terms of traditional American racial perceptions. Afrocentrism, on the other hand, is simply the belief that the African ancestry of black peoples, regardless of where they live, is an inescapable element of their various identities – imposed both from within and from without their own communities. I have attempted to discuss some of the aspects of so-called Afrocentrism that have been sensibly argued by historians and cultural anthropologists. Most aspects of African consciousness among black Americans are, after all, unrelated to the fanciful exaggeration that African Americans are, in some exceptional or exclusive way, heirs to the civilization of the ancient Nile. The heritage of Egypt belongs to all of humanity.

Lefkowitz's agenda is not driven solely by her distaste for black Egyptocentrism or its sometimes irrational exuberance. She and her supporters are motivated by the guild jealousy of Greek and Latin professors, who are upset by the intrusion of Martin Bernal, an Asian specialist, on their turf with the publication of his *Black Athena.* Largely in response to this, Lefkowitz published *Not Out of Africa*, and a subsequent edited volume, *Black Athena Revisited.*[13] Bernal's efforts are of less than marginal interest to the present study, but I am intrigued by the way classicists have reacted to his work. Professors of Greek (who are usually untrained in hieroglyphics, archeology, or physical anthropology) can hardly be considered more qualified to work in Egyptology than Bernal, albeit his guild affiliation in East Asian languages and culture. Bernal, with his appreciable skills as a linguist, at least claims some knowledge of Egyptian language and writing.

As I shall illustrate, concern with ancient Egypt as a feature of African American cultural ideology did not begin with Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, which is only the latest in a series of works by white authors cited by African Americans in their attempts to authenticate a tie to the monumental history of dynastic Egypt. In the nineteenth century it was Count Constantin Volney who was most frequently cited by Afrocentric enthusiasts.[14] Bernal acknowledges a tradition of black authors who have represented this concern with ancient Egypt, although his treatment of these authors is sketchy and uncritical. St. Clair Drake offers a more sophisticated treatment of

this tradition in his sadly neglected *Black Folk Here and There,* presented with irony and gentle wit. To his credit, Bernal has demonstrated his awareness that those aspects of Afrocentrism with which he is concerned are much older than the current heated debate. His purpose, however, was never to offer a complete discussion of African American folk historiography but, rather, to announce his emotional attachment to some of its more Egyptocentric proponents.[15]

Lefkowitz and Bernal have associated the romanticization of Egypt with the rise of black Freemasonry, but when we examine the major writings of African American Masons during its early years, we find that the Egyptians are curiously neglected.[16] The most important works on black Masonic history, such as Charles Wesley's *Prince Hall,* have been more concerned with demonstrating the validity of their charter putatively acquired from British Freemasons in the eighteenth century.[17] It would have been contrary to their purposes to have asserted a separatist or exceptionalist tradition. Furthermore, the founders of African American Freemasonry were clergymen, who identified with biblical Hebrews and did not wish to be associated with pagan Egypt. William Grimshaw's *Official History of Freemasonry Among the Colored People* traced the tradition not to the Great Pyramid but to the Temple of Solomon.[18]

Since Lefkowitz and Bernal have attributed the rise of Black Egyptocentrism to Freemasonry, it is surprising that they have failed to reference the works of either Charles Wesley or William H. Grimshaw, which are present in the collections of most university libraries. More understandable is that they have overlooked a rare book, Martin Delany's 1853 publication entitled *Origins and Objects of Ancient Freemasonry.*[19] Delany, who buttressed with fundamentalist biblical arguments his position that all wisdom could be traced to black Africa, would have provided wonderful grist for Lefkowitz and Bernal's mill. The writings of black Masons would certainly have more relevancy to their arguments than their digressions on the Egyptian themes of Mozart's *Magic Flute.* They have not troubled to explain how a German opera could have had much influence on African Americans at a time when they were banned from opera houses. The work's many instances of gratuitous racism have always been painful to black people, even those like myself who are fond of Mozart.[20]

For a disproportionate part of her argument Lefkowitz has relied on one idiosyncratic example of Egyptocentric black Freemasonry, simply because it suits her position. She is obsessed with George James's popular underground classic, *Stolen Legacy* (1954), a mystical work that has recently been rediscovered, particularly by working-class black males. James appeals to readers who feel alienated from

university-based African American studies programs, which they view as controlled by a flashy crew of postmodernists and deconstructionists who have co-opted every aspect of black culture, from feminism to gangsta rap. Young black males have an understandable mistrust for those amazingly ambidextrous black studies spokesmen who write blurbs for Molefi Asante with one hand and denunciations with the other. They feel excluded from the mainstream black studies movement and are attracted to the mysticism of Egyptocentric books, believing that the black studies movement has "sold out." I have frequently encountered the opinion that it has been taken over by showy media specialists, who cynically exploit the rhetoric of blackness while craftily paying lip service to the vernacular Afrocentrism of the grass roots.[21]

Ironically, the appearance of Lefkowitz's book has been heralded with jubilation by paranoid black nationalists and Egyptocentrists. What better proof for their conspiracy theories could they have desired than such a volume? Especially since it is written by a white woman, its very existence is all the proof they require that there really is a conspiracy to steal the legacy of ancient Egypt from African Americans and other African peoples.[22] Demagogues like Maulana Karenga leap at the chance to debate her, thereby enhancing their notoriety and appealing to their constituencies as defenders of the "stolen legacy" of African peoples. In the process, they assist Mary Lefkowitz, once an obscure drudge in the academic backwaters of a classics department, in her quest for status as a "public intellectual." She has received only negligible monetary rewards on the conservative lecture circuit for her efforts, but the damage she has done by contributing to a spirit of paranoia and mistrust will be impossible to counteract.

Glenn Loury, a well-known black moderate who is not an Egyptocentrist, has astutely called attention to an additional problem. He notes that Lefkowitz expresses on more than one occasion her concern that propagating the myth of the stolen legacy "robs the ancient Greeks and their modern descendants of a heritage that rightly belongs to them" (126). With gentle irony Loury muses, "And here I had been thinking it was *my* heritage too!" He continues with the assertion that "the search for a black Shakespeare or a black Tolstoy [is] unnecessary," presumably because their heritage belongs to whoever is capable of appreciating them. Concludes Loury, "I genuinely doubt that Mary Lefkowitz would disagree with these sentiments. Yet I deeply regret that she sometimes writes in *Not Out of Africa* as though she would."[23]

Along with other opponents of Egyptocentric fanaticism, I am

apprehensive that Lefkowitz's diatribe will probably result in far more harm than good. It does nothing to dissuade radical Afrocentrists from their sentimental racism, and it is so mean-spirited that it has increased the difficulties of objective scholars in their attempts to minimize the presence of racial romanticism and sentimentalism in university classrooms. Lefkowitz's book has served only to obscure definitions further; it is ahistorical, presentist, synchronic, and absolutely devoid of any of the methods of serious cultural or intellectual history. Like most polemicists, its author finds methodology inconvenient and precise definitions intolerable. Thus she is hardly different from the various demagogues and polemicists who have gathered on the other side of the Afrocentrism debate. Much silliness and ill will has been spewed forth by the likes of Mary Lefkowitz and the black nationalist polemicist Maulana Karenga, who represent two sides of the same hateful coin. As a result, it has become almost impossible for most persons to engage in analytical, dispassionate discussion of the various expressions of those movements – both intellectual and emotional – that constitute what we today refer to as "Afrocentrism."

Racial polemicists of the Lefkowitz–Karenga ilk have assiduously avoided a systematic definition of Afrocentrism, confusing it not only with Egyptocentrism but with affirmative action, multiculturalism, black nationalism, and whatever other issue they may wish to address at a given time. Under the guise of promoting historical objectivity, they spew out whatever tendentious trash they wish on a wide variety of subjects, reflecting nothing more than their own racial and political biases. Afrocentrism provides for such authors a subject heading that is timely and titillating, to which any number of opinions and prejudices may easily be glued. Thus a limitless range of opinion has been attached to the term Afrocentrism by authors across the political spectrum, most of whom are less interested in scholarly investigations of African American cultures and historical traditions than in forwarding myriad self-serving political agendas.

In fairness to Professor Lefkowitz and her cohort, they have correctly (even usefully) pointed out numerous childish errors in the writings of enthusiastic nonacademic authors. They have exposed, for example, the ridiculous contention that European conspirators looted the Alexandrine Library years before it was built. On the other hand, Lefkowitz frequently makes statements that would be challenged by any shrewd undergraduate. For example, speaking of George James, she asserts that "many otherwise well-educated people believe that what he claims is true." Who are these "otherwise well-educated people" to whom she refers? She does not identify

them nor does she provide any data as to their numbers. What Lefkowitz achieves is to "darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge."

She has thoughtlessly muddled ideas derived from nineteenth-century ethnography, popular mythology of the 1920s, and cult literature of the 1980s. She makes the generalization that all of these ideas constitute Afrocentrism, and then implies that this "Afrocentrism" is widely being taught in college classrooms. Has it occurred to her that proponents of African American studies are divided into numerous categories, influenced by disciplinary affiliations, ideological backgrounds, and political affiliations? Conservative, feminist, deconstructionist, and Marxist scholars in black studies programs and departments have long and vocally opposed romantic and sentimental Afrochauvinism – indeed, far longer than she has.

If Professor Lefkowitz and the contributors to *Black Athena Revisited* are truly concerned about the use of taxpayers' dollars to teach myth as history, they ought to be courageously focusing on the real challenge. Conservative politicians in both major political parties have decided that the best way to improve American education at the primary and secondary levels is to give "the people" greater control of local school curricula. Their goal is to be accomplished by increasing the power of local public school boards, which will decide, without benefit of "pointy-headed intellectuals," what "truths" their children need to learn. Those who are truly opposed to antiintellectualism should be fighting against such proposals, and against the use of tax dollars to fund vouchers tenderable at private schools run by biblical fundamentalists, flat earth theorists, black chauvinists, white supremacists, and anti-Semites.

Because Jewish intellectuals have been among Afrocentrism's best, although shamefully unacknowledged, friends, one is appalled that Lefkowitz has ignored their role in the development of Afrocentrism. It is amazing that she has taken the work of Martin Bernal, which is a necessary and valid attack on nineteenth-century anti-Semitism, and mindlessly identified it with the very thing that Bernal is fighting. Furthermore, the fact that a lunatic fringe of slimy little anti-Semites have styled themselves "Afrocentrists" provides no logical basis for implying that Afrocentric writing is even peripherally anti-Semitic or for asserting that it is hate literature.[24] Because of the consistent attempts of the Lefkowitz school to associate Afrocentrism with anti-Semitism, the influence of Jewish scholars on the evolution of Afrocentrism is of interest. The work of Franz Boas and Melville Herskovits is particularly relevant to this discussion, and allusions to their work are frequent in these pages.