
Maghan Keita. *Race and the Writing of History*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. 214 pp. \$45.00.

Reviewed by

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“Martin Bernal has spawned a cottage industry of which I am a part,” says Maghan Keita toward the end of his discussion of the reception of Bernal’s *Black Athena* and the black historians whose work anticipated it. Keita, currently Associate Professor of History and Director of Africana Studies at Villanova University, broaches several important and more or less Afrocentric themes, some only briefly, some through more sustained attention. Most fundamentally, he explores the ways in which historians who are or were themselves African and African-American expressed what we now call Afrocentric views regarding the roles of

Egypt and Ethiopia in the forging of ancient Greece. Although the book bears the title *Race and the Writing of History*, it keeps to the preoccupations of Afrocentrism and, accordingly, should more precisely be called *Race and the Writing of Ancient History*.

Keita begins with the culture wars of the 1990s, in which Afrocentrism came in for little more than disparagement. Throughout the book he reviews critiques of Afrocentrism, reserving greatest scorn for the conservative columnist George Will (for ignorance) and the African-American literary critic Gerald Early (for careless negrophobia). Keita mentions race as a category of analysis that is both

useless and essential, then moves on to two of his main conclusions: First, race as a category has influenced the writing of history, because most historians have used blackness negatively and only in relation to whiteness. Second, the racism of Western culture has prevented black historians' work from being taken seriously as history. In light of this distortion and disregard, historians who are black have had to rewrite historiography as well as history. Their work recasts the whole epistemology of understanding the ancient past. Chapters One, Two, Three, Eight, Nine, and Ten of *Race and the Writing of History* focus on the first theme. Four chapters in the middle each discuss one prominent Afrocentrist historian.

While the more general chapters at the beginning and the end contain much insight and useful knowledge, the intellectual biographies of Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, William Leo Hansberry, and Frank M. Snowden, Jr., are particularly thoughtful and sensitive. Keita teases out the main themes of their work, discerning commonalties and contrasts in approach, reputation, and personality. His juxtaposition of Hansberry and Woodson is exceptionally fruitful.

The many minor themes in *Race and the Writing of History* will long occupy Keita and readers inspired by his analysis, notably the relationship among the various generations of African, African-American, and Afro-British Afrocentrists such as Cheikh Anta Diop and his student Theophile Obenga, Valentine Mudimbe, Ali Mazrui, Molefe Asante, and Paul Gilroy. Keita does not probe issues of translation. But translation and the whole question of the various intellectual legacies of colonialism (i.e., French, English, Belgian, and other differing European cultural traditions) linger as problems just below the surface of a book with too many good ideas to flesh them all out.

Keita evidently decided against tarrying over one problem and one scholar, both crying out for focus. Although he castigates opponents of Afrocentrism for heedlessly lumping together themes and thinkers, he only fitfully defines what he means by the term. For the most part, this oversight does not present an insuperable problem, because the thinkers Keita concentrates on emerge clearly from his pages. But the thought of important Afrocentrists like Molefe Asante and Maulana Karenga, who lack chapters of their own, does not receive a critical reading. As a result, their superficial characterizations of "Africa" and "Africans" seem to carry equal intellectual weight with the life's work of Woodson, Du Bois, Hansberry, or Snowden. The scholar haunting the pages of this book is the perceptive Ann duCille, who appears toward the end to contribute some of the most acute commentary of all. Because her appearances remain transitory, her thinking never receives its due. Keita realizes—and rightly so—that black scholars have not been taken seriously because they are black. Unfortunately black scholars who are women have not been taken seriously twice over: because they are black *and* because they are women. Afrocentrism, with its all-too-common androcentric bias, still has far to go to overcome its seemingly inherent myopia regarding the thought of black women.