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# The Elephant in the Room: Confronting Petrie's Racism

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[Review Essay: Challis, Debbie, *The Archaeology of Race: The Eugenic Ideas of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie*. New York/London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. Hardcover; xiv + 272 pages; RRP CDN \$69; ISBN: 978-1-78093-420-4]

Egyptologists have recently begun thorough discussions of the overt racism of early Egyptology.<sup>1</sup> Challis' work is an important contribution to a growing discussion. This book, made up of ten chapters and foreword by Kathleen L. Sheppard, discusses the personal and academic relationship between eugenicist Francis Galton and Egyptologist William Flinders Petrie with an emphasis on the eugenic-thinking in Petrie's intellectual and personal life. In addition, Challis places Petrie's thought within the context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century racial thinking. The historical context shows how Petrie's eugenic-thinking was both in line and, in some cases, at odds with the overt racist academic views of his time. Challis shows that Petrie's racist theories played a major role in the linking of anthropology, archaeology and, most notably, Egyptology through his archaeological interpretations. This book succeeds in demonstrating Petrie's racism, but the deeper issues surrounding race and *Kemet* (ancient Egypt) in the works of Petrie and his contemporaries, which still impact Egyptology today,<sup>2</sup> are not adequately addressed.

The initial problem is that Challis misinterprets race. Challis correctly acknowledges that race is a social construct, but makes race and racism contingent on biology. Challis defines racist as:

the point of view in which a biological concept of race is systematically used to be the main determining factor in explaining the actions and a characteristics of a person or a group of people (p. 3).

However, race and racism are social constructs that are *not* contingent on biological concepts. Race is a symmetrical identity based on a state of consciousness and being,

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<sup>1</sup> For examples see Ambridge (2012), Manley (2011).

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion see Ashton (2011), Bernasconi (2007), Martin (1984)

rather than a program or pattern of action.<sup>3</sup> In addition, racial identification is an ongoing dialogue between groups which, in turn, makes it a tool of domination and resistance.<sup>4</sup> Racism, in contrast, is an imposition of inferior category to a people to determine their social, economic, civic, and human standing on that basis.<sup>5</sup> The racist eugenics theories assumed a biological validity in the equivalence of skin color and physiognomy to the type of civilization of non-European peoples (or lack thereof), especially those of African descent. In other words, eugenics used biology to justify White supremacy and was based on racist presuppositions. The notion of race itself, being a social construct, was not biological. The problem with Challis' approach to race and racism is that there is no use of critical race theory.<sup>6</sup>

Challis, due to this misinterpretation, loosely dismisses the possibility of race and racism as valid analytical tools for studying ancient identities. She argues that "race and identity in the ancient world was about more than skin color" (p. 6). Some of the ancient sources noted in her study suggest otherwise. For example, Challis mentions the dismissal of Herodotus' description of Kemetians by Richard Knox (p. 36), but she does not detail Herodotus' statement which clearly illustrates the anti-Black racism in Knox's dismissal. Herodotus (2.104) describes Kemetians as having black skin color (μελάγχροες) and kinky hair (οὔλοτριχες). This passage shows that the Greeks saw the Kemetians as a Black racial group. Moreover, Challis does not acknowledge the debate on race in antiquity even though these discussions appear in her bibliography.

Challis is open to the concept of ethnicity as an analytical tool for identity (p. 211), but this is another consequence of her misinterpretation of race. Challis treats ethnicity as the culturally based identity in contrast to the biological assumption of race (p. 211). However, her distinction between race and ethnicity later becomes ambiguous. Commenting on the difficulties in interpreting the ethnic identity of the 'Memphis heads' (terracotta heads examined by Petrie found in Memphis), Challis says "physical appearance was not the only way of distinguishing *ethnic* groups" (p. 212). This concession mirrors her argument against the issue of race in antiquity and it contradicts her distinction between race and ethnicity. In addition, she observes that language and custom have been treated as racial characteristics in modern contexts (p. 212) which is correct, but this observation further contradicts her argument against race in antiquity. It seems likely that Petrie and other early antiquities scholars were not wrong to attribute racial thinking to antiquity. Rather, the problem is that they projected *their* racist views onto ancient material culture instead of contextualizing ancient racial thought. The undermining of this possibility overlooks the fundamental problem with Petrie's use of race.

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<sup>3</sup> Fields (2001), 48

<sup>4</sup> Fields (2001), 49

<sup>5</sup> Fields (2001), 48

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of critical race theory, see Delgado and Stefancic (2012)

Challis does not clearly specify the type of racism that connected these divergent racist analyses of Kemet. Anti-Black racism was clearly central in the racist scientific discourses. For example, Challis points out that Galton confidently asserted that the 'African Negro' was the lowest race (p. 55). Challis also does not specify anti-Black racism as a fundamental presupposition in Petrie's eugenic thinking. For example, Challis argues that Petrie's abandonment of his 'New Race' Theory for the Naqada I population of Kemet showed that Petrie corrected his views when solid archaeological evidence was presented and that his mistake was a result of 'racial thinking' (p. 171). Yet, she acknowledges that Petrie never accepted Kemet as an indigenous African development (pp. 184-85). It is quite clear that anti-Blackness consistently underlined Petrie's analysis which is why he could not accept Kemet as an African civilization, but Challis does not specify this aspect of Petrie's racism.

Challis is hesitant to acknowledge Petrie as racist, preferring a "more nuanced portrait" (p. 190). However, Petrie was an unapologetic racist and no "nuance" should undermine this. This is not to dismiss the importance of his historical context which is, of course, undeniably important. The influence of eugenics in his work and personal life reflects the particularity of his time which she demonstrates throughout the book. Her precaution, however, frames Petrie as a victim of his time. This is problematic because it downplays Petrie's personal agency in his racist actions. More importantly, racism is still a problem today. Thus, her appeal to "nuance" is apologetic rather than critical. Historical particularity notwithstanding, the evidence conclusively demonstrates that Petrie was a racist. There should be no hesitancy in stating the obvious.

Challis' analysis of African-centered scholarship is problematic. Challis follows the loose usage of 'Afrocentric' by Dominic Montserrat who *imposes* his own definition of African-centered discourse,<sup>7</sup> rather than using definitions by actual Afrocentric scholars. There are multiple *African-centered* discourses. The discourse of Afrocentricity, articulated by Molefi Kete Asante, is *one* of these African-centered perspectives.<sup>8</sup> The two Black scholars she critiques do not identify as 'Afrocentric'. Black scholars who maintain the Black Kemet position are stereotyped as 'Afrocentric', often in a pejorative tone, by Egyptologists even when these scholars do not make such identification. As Exell explains, there are often simply Black historians as is the case in this situation.<sup>9</sup> Challis cautions that she is simply critiquing one Afrocentric reading of Queen Tiye and Nefertiti (p. 165). However, a thorough analysis would cover multiple African-centered readings. Moreover, if she supports African-centered research she should *also* emphasize its importance to the de-centering the Eurocentric biases in

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<sup>7</sup>Montserrat (2000), 115

<sup>8</sup> See Asante (1990)

<sup>9</sup> Exell (2013), 136

Egyptology.<sup>10</sup> Yet Challis makes no such argument, which makes her claim of support seem more like a shield from criticism. Furthermore, her claim that Tiye and Nefertiti are focal points of ‘Afrocentric’ reclamations of Kemet (p. 164) is based on the work Dominic Montserrat, not African-centered scholars. African-centered discourse on Kemet does not focus on specific individuals. It is unfortunate that Challis did not engage actual African-centered studies of Kemet.<sup>11</sup>

Challis assumes that Sonia Sanchez and Virginia Spottswood Simon, the alleged ‘Afrocentric’ scholars, use the same eugenic-thinking as Petrie (p. 165). She argues that they assume intellectual and ethical traits of Nefertiti and Tiye based on their physical appearance in anachronistic manner (p. 165). There is, however, a clear contextual difference between Petrie and the analyses of Sanchez and Simon. Petrie’s analysis of the physical appearance Tiye and Nefertiti is based on entirely on racist assumptions as he assumed them to be west Asian rather than African which Challis points out (pp. 148-58). In contrast, Sanchez and Simon clearly base their interpretations of Nefertiti and Tiye on the success of their reigns, textual sources, and the high esteem of queenship in Kemet. In addition, their judgements are based on Nefertiti and Tiye as individuals.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, there is no reason to dismiss the fact that modern Black aesthetics had some commonalities with Kemet. Queen Tiye’s hairstyles (e.g. afro and braids) and hoop earrings are common material characteristics in African and African diasporic cultures. The only problem is that Simon assumes Queen Tiye was Nubian, but that problem is not addressed by Challis. Challis overlooks the contextual difference between Petrie and the analyses by Sanchez and Simon.

Challis’ approach to the Kemet race controversy is evasive and fraught with contradictions. She emphasizes that the book “is not about what racial or ethnic group [the people of Kemet] were”, but then insists that “different uses of ancient Egyptian images only tells us about the assumptions of the user and their social context” (p. 5). It is perplexing to dismiss the Kemet race controversy as irrelevant, but then claim its identity to be ambiguous. Challis does, at least, acknowledge that the Kemet race controversy is tied “to racism and the colonial legacy over the last two hundred years” (p. 6). However, she does not emphasize the possible on-going influence of anti-Black racism in the debates on Kemet’s identity.

Challis assumes that anti-Blackness in right-wing politics leads to “the *perceived* need to reclaim [Kemet] as a black African civilization obvious” (p. 164, emphasis added). Again, Challis’ approach to this issue downplays the *obvious* influence of anti-Black racism in the dismissal of a Black Kemet. However, it is clearly illustrated by the racist twentieth century intellectuals whom she discusses. Zoologist Earnest Warren downplayed the correlation between the limb proportions of the Naqada population and

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<sup>10</sup> Ashton (2011) 105, 108-110; Exell (2013), 133-37

<sup>11</sup> For an example see Carruthers (1995)

<sup>12</sup> See Sanchez (1984), Simon (1984)

'Negro' skeletons by emphasizing their alleged 'European' physical characteristics which was based on Eurocentric assumptions about the human body (p. 176). Petrie resorted to racial mixing (pp. 179-80) which lead him to this Semitic dynastic race theory (pp. 184-85) because he believed that a white ruling class had to guide an indigenous Black population. A Black Kemet is not a "perceived need" created by modern politics. Rather, it is corrective approach as it de-centers Eurocentric interpretations of Kemet. Challis' downplaying of the intellectual basis of the Black Kemet position is unsubstantiated.

Though Challis supports Sally-Ann Ashton's African-centered approach, she overlooks the issue of Black identity. Ashton openly accepts of Kemet as *both* Black and African.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Ashton makes a very revealing assessment of the Kemet race controversy:

It is perhaps significant that when you say ask if the Ancient Egyptians were African, the majority will say yes on account of the country's geographical location. *However*, if you ask 'Were they Ancient Egyptians Black?' you will get a different response.<sup>14</sup>

While Challis dismisses race as a modern question, Ashton correctly explains that the ancient world was not color-blind.<sup>15</sup> Also, Ashton realizes that the dominance of white scholars in the discipline has a deep impact on this debate.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, Challis does not address the impact of racism in the denial of Kemet's Blackness.

This book is important as it encourages further discussion on a sensitive subject matter, but it does not delve deep enough into the key issues. An engagement with critical race theory would have provided a much better understanding of race and racism. The misinterpretation of race was a fundamental reason for some of the problems. It would, for example, demonstrate that Petrie was not problematic for discussing race, but for being racist. Secondly, Challis does not specify anti-Black racism as a major factor in work of Petrie and his contemporaries. It was clearly the reason why Petrie could easily shift from his 'New Race' to his 'Dynastic Race' theory. In addition, anti-Black racism connects past and present discussions about Kemet's racial identity. An effective discussion of race demands engagement with controversy. Unfortunately, Challis' analysis avoids thorough discussion of such issues. This book would have been significantly better had these issues been addressed in greater depth.

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<sup>13</sup> Ashton (2011), 106

<sup>14</sup> Ashton (2011), 106. Emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> Ashton (2011), 106

<sup>16</sup> Ashton (2011), 105, 107

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