

SCOTT TRAFTON

◀ Egypt Land ▶

RACE AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY

AMERICAN EGYPTOMANIA



EGYPT LAND

New Americanists

A SERIES EDITED BY DONALD E. PEASE



SCOTT TRAFTON

Egypt Land

RACE AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY

AMERICAN EGYPTOMANIA

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FOR MICHELLE



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Acknowledgments

“To write rapidly about Egypt is impossible,” apologized explorer, feminist, and agent of British empire Amelia Edwards in 1877. “The subject grows with the book, and with the knowledge one acquires by the way. It is, moreover, a subject beset with such obstacles as must impede even the swiftest pen; and to that swiftest pen I lay no claim.”¹ As ambivalent as I might be concerning the source of this quotation, I find myself hard pressed to disagree with its significance: for those who have known me while I have lived and labored in Egypt Land, it goes without saying that this process has taken far too long and I have incurred far too many debts along the way for me to do any kind of justice to those I owe here. Yet of course I must make a way out of no way, and so first things first: this project was originally drafted as my dissertation for the Department of English at Duke University in 1998, and the people who oversaw it in that stage were generous in their contributions and extraordinary in their support and have remained my models for intellectual and political engagement ever since—Cathy Davidson, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Nahum Dimitri Chandler, and Wahneema Lubiano. In the years that have followed, Nahum and Wahneema especially have been my constant friends, linked most importantly by our loves of jazz and trashy Hollywood movies, respectively, and to them I cannot express the depth of my thanks.

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Since arriving at George Mason, I have been surrounded by friends and colleagues with an outrageous array of skills and talents, all of which are matched only by their kindness and camaraderie: special thanks are due to Denise Albanese, Zofia Burr, Peter Brunette, John Burt Foster, Deborah Kaplan, David Kaufmann, Rosemary Jann, Barbara Melosh, Paul Smith, Chris Thaiss, Steven Weinberger, Alok Yadov, Peggy Yocom, and especially, Cindy Fuchs and Jeanette Roan. Particular thanks are especially due, however, to my colleagues in the Program for African American Studies, who have been there for me from can't see to can't see: Rose Cherubin, Yvette Richards Jordan, Phillis Slade-Martin, Jeffrey Stewart, and especially Keith Clark, Marilyn Mobley McKenzie, and Michelle Smith-Bermis. I could not imagine a more welcoming and supportive location.

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And then there are the people who have known me for an embarrassingly long time yet who still have for whatever reason decided to remain

my friends and have even offered their support of this book along the way. James Wolf, twice a roommate of mine and now a staff member of the Library of Congress, contributed crucially timed and thankfully obsessive research skills which helped bring this project to a close — not to mention a spare bed to sleep on at his and his wife Anna's house during one summer in 1997. Robert Reid-Pharr, who needs to give me a call sometime, could be included in this list for a multitude of reasons but is officially acknowledged here because he hates acknowledgments pages just like this one. And Greta Ai-Yu Niu, who like James and Robert has known me through some truly bad hairstyles, has been the sort of friend who comes along once in a lifetime.

I must also thank the members of my family from whom I would never hear the end of it if I did not, and who I would then have to face every Juneteenth: my brothers Greg and Michael Trafton (who published his book before me), my sisters Wendy and Anne Rosamond, my stepbrothers Jonathan Silberberg and Adam Kass, and my once and future stepmothers Lynn Townsend and Miriam Kass. A family as big as Texas, and as essential as a junk drawer. Likewise, properly acknowledging one's parents at a moment like this is a ritual as necessary as it is impossible: Dorothy Louise Rosamond Trafton Dockal Remington Rosamond — Dot — has been a source of more humor and recipes than I could ever hope to remember, and with my father, John Gregory Trafton III, to whom an earlier version of this manuscript was dedicated, I have shared so much that I can only begin to frame it all.

But then, of course, there's the one last and most important name. One night long ago in the middle of an empty street in Durham, I promised that this version of this manuscript would bear a single name, and now, finally, I am able to honor that promise. Moving from place to place with me like a refugee from someone else's war, tolerating my moods and indulging my habits, making me travel and letting me sleep, always there when the hurricanes blow and the dogwoods bloom: an indescribable togetherness has attended every word written here. It is of course too much to try and express how I feel, and certainly a book is hardly adequate evidence, but this book is dedicated, as it has in many ways always been, to Michelle.



PREFACE

“An Inspired Frenzy or Madness”

“If we observe the patient for a time,” wrote Emil Kraepelin, nineteenth-century German psychologist and coiner of the term *manic depression*, “[we] see that, in spite of his good education, he lies in bed for weeks and months, or sits about without feeling the slightest need of occupation. He occasionally composes a letter to the doctor, expressing all kinds of distorted, half-formed ideas, with a peculiar and silly play on words, in very fair style, but with little connection. . . . As the illness developed quite gradually, it is hardly possible to fix on any particular point of time as the beginning.”¹ This book could have been used as evidence in one of Kraepelin’s case studies: it had its beginnings in a series of questions, which led to the repeated recognition of a series of lacks, which I then slowly began to trace. Initially, I was interested in exploring the relationships between the rise of nineteenth-century racialized science and the rise of American Egyptology; the final results of those explorations are seen here, but as I continued to conduct research I became aware of some significant gaps in the scholarship of the period. The foremost study of these initial

connections was—and still is, I would argue—William Stanton’s 1960 *The Leopard’s Spots*, and, well researched as it is, it is, to put it mildly, something of an apology for one of the major collective characters in this study, the proslavery American School of Ethnology. The availability of sources on the American School has improved significantly since this project was begun—and as such this book is one of several now available that reassess the role Egyptology played in discourses of race and the biology of racialization—but it is still the case, I think, that this study addresses several other absences in American and African American cultural scholarship.

The best known and most comprehensive study of the imagery of ancient Egypt in nineteenth-century American culture prior to this one is an instructive case in point: John Irwin’s 1980 *American Hieroglyphics* was and still is a landmark analysis of many of the same problematics under investigation here, but, brilliant as Irwin’s text is, it stands at something of a conspicuous distance from issues of race and American racialization. Owing, no doubt, to the theoretical preoccupations of his brand of 1970s deconstruction, Irwin manages to produce, for example, a reading of the concluding section of Edgar Allan Poe’s racially overwrought *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which, even in the context of nineteenth-century American fascinations with ancient Egypt, provides an analysis of a set of black/white and master/slave oppositions that does not specifically thematize race.² Indeed, as this project progressed it became clear that Irwin’s text was more the rule than the exception: while there were numerous treatments of the separate concerns that eventually contributed to its major arguments, there was no comprehensive study of the relationship race had to what I here term American Egyptomania.³

To be sure, there are studies of many of the subfields that inform *Egypt Land*, and over the years during which this project took shape they have only increased in number and quality: Dana D. Nelson’s *National Manhood*, Malini Johar Schueller’s *U.S. Orientalisms*, Theophus H. Smith’s *Conjuring Culture*, Teresa Goddu’s *Gothic America*, Wilson Jeremiah Moses’s *Afrotopia*, Shawn Michelle Smith’s *American Archives*, Eddie S. Glaude Jr.’s *Exodus!*, Hilton Obenzinger’s *American Palestine*, Maurice O. Wallace’s *Constructing the Black Masculine*, Reina Lewis’s *Gendering Orientalism*, John Davis’s *The Landscape of Belief*, Inderpal Grewal’s *Home and Harem*, Bruce A. Harvey’s *American Geographics*, and a number of essays and collections of essays on Cleopatra, Orientalism, and Egyptomania in general.⁴ But what this study attempts to do is bridge many different fields and present a new synthesis of the contri-

butions of several divergent areas of research: literary history, cultural history, art history, scientific history, Orientalism, Afrocentricity, white historiography, black historiography, queer historiography, and more.

During the realization of this attempt, however, it became clear to me that there were several additional deficiencies in the existing scholarship available to a project such as this: most of the studies of the history of American interest in ancient Egypt conspicuously avoided the issue of race, and those that did attempt to breach the questions of racialization and Egyptian historiography—however scandalously their appearance was received—were almost exclusively European in interest and focus or treated a time period other than the nineteenth century.⁵ This European bias, in fact, characterizes much of the scholarship to which I refer: of the existing studies of Orientalism, for example, nearly all are either British or European in terms of their primary source materials, twentieth century in their time frame, or oriented toward an “Orient” that is not primarily North African. Not until Schueller’s 1998 *U.S. Orientalisms* did a comprehensive study exist that treated nineteenth-century American Orientalism at length, much less with an eye toward contemporary race theory, and what works like Schueller’s represent is a body of long overdue cultural reevaluations to which I hope this study contributes in some small way.

The texts that treat Egyptian imagery in a context of the nineteenth-century American politics of race are, moreover, characteristically divided in ways that made one of the main motions of this project that of negotiation—between fields that are concerned with the signs of the sacred and those that are more focused on signs of the secular. Certainly the tradition of scholarship treating African American religious inscriptions of the signs of ancient Egypt is especially rich, and without it this work would not have been possible; yet in writing this book it seemed to me that too few previous studies recognized the extent to which black Americans in the nineteenth century were also engaged in a more secular politics of Egyptomanic signifying—or, if they did, they did so to the exclusion of a systematic reevaluation of the sacred discourses with which the signs of a proto-Afrocentric Egypt must then engage.⁶ This is not exclusively the case, of course—Smith’s 1994 *Conjuring Culture* is an excellent example of recent attempts to provide an account of African American Egyptian imagery that does not rely on undertheorized distinctions between “sacred” and “secular”—but there is no question that *Egypt Land* developed in large part out of an urge to do justice to what I saw as a heterogeneity and complexity

of African American representations of ancient Egypt that had previously been undersold.

I was thus also concerned to provide an account of American interests in ancient Egypt that highlighted what I saw as the radical interactions between various factions of nineteenth-century American culture: sacred and secular, professional and popular, classicist and Orientalist, Aryanist and Afrocentrist, black and white. Indeed, if there is any one single contribution I hope to make with this study, it is along these lines; I do not so much ignore boundaries between such various groups as I recognize their extreme permeabilities. What *Egypt Land* attempts to describe is a radical dialogicism at work in the racially fraught historiographic idioms of nineteenth-century American culture; in doing so, I hope to suggest that this wildly contingent structure can provide some insights about the larger workings of nineteenth-century American racial and national identity.

These realizations led me to make two commitments to the concerns of this project: one, that it would be irreducibly interdisciplinary; and, two, that it would base its arguments as much as possible on relatively lesser known source materials. Of course, the latter commitment proved the most difficult, but what I believe *Egypt Land* does is present a range of relatively canonical source materials next to potentially less common ones, and I do hope that readers will find the materials that emerge from these interactions both familiar and fresh. In doing so, I have relied on the resources of a wide variety of libraries, rare book rooms, archives, and special collections across the United States—especially those of Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Texas at Austin, the Library of Congress, and various branches of the Smithsonian Institution—and it goes without saying that the fruits of *Egypt Land* presented here would have been patently impossible without them. That it is possible that the study of race and American Egyptomania lends itself in particularly effective ways to such a dialogic project has been suggested to me many times, yet I also continue to carry with me a sneaking suspicion that the influence has in fact been the other way around.

Egypt Land is thus a manifestly intercultural text. It partakes of a polysemy that is characteristic of its subject matter, no doubt, but even though it did not begin as a study of interracial dialogicism it has certainly ended up that way. And while I have throughout this study wrestled with the impulses toward an encyclopedism clearly diagnosable as manic, I nevertheless ultimately hope that what I present here engages in dialogue with the

many areas in which I have resided, if even for a brief time, and does not seem to dismiss them. An “inspired frenzy or madness” is one of the definitions other than that of Kraepelin’s provided for the suffix *-mania* by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and, as I hope will be clear, I have made every effort to respect the breadth of scholarship that attends every field I have relied on for aid and comfort during my days as an Egyptomaniac. And, although the frenzy has now passed, if nothing else has come of those days, the pages that follow are evidence that the madness has left its mark.



INTRODUCTION

“This Egypt of the West”

MAKING RACE AND NATION ALONG

THE AMERICAN NILE

“For America, read Africa; for the United States, Egypt,” wrote African American race theorist, spiritualist, and amateur Egyptologist Paschal Beverly Randolph in 1863: “change a few phrases into their required equivalents, and in this account of a modern colony, you have the story of the old Nilotic civilizations.”¹ In this, his signature treatise on history, chronology, and the origins of races, Randolph saw a relationship between two countries of both metaphor and literal link: between Egypt and America there existed a set of connections, which, when properly interpreted, could reveal signs and wonders of revolutionary importance. “We know that these palmy days stretch away vastly beyond the horizon of Time,” he wrote. “Little by little we are unravelling the tangled skein of Time and human history.”² In its combination of racialized theorizing, biblical controversy, historiographic melodrama, political urgency, speculative intellectualism, and popular Egyptology, Randolph’s text represents a cluster of consanguinated issues that this book will be concerned to trace. “Reader,

let us imagine ourselves to be on the banks of the Nile,” Randolph wrote. “We are there. Tread lightly, my fellow-traveler; we are on holy ground, here in Egypt, holy by reason of the awful shadows that enshroud its past.”³

Randolph was one of many in nineteenth-century American culture who understood the relationship between modern America and ancient Egypt to be one based on close family ties: mirror images, twinned and inseparable. Witness some scenes from Washington, D.C.: the Washington Monument stands forever taller than any other structure in the nation’s capital; Egypt and America sit side by side in the main reading room mural of the Library of Congress; and, in the last hours before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, an assembled force of African Americans gathered together in the shadow of the White House and sang an adaptation of the spiritual from which this study takes both its impetus and its title:

Go down Moses,
Way down in Egypt Land;
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.

Go down Abraham,
Away down in Dixie’s Land;
Tell Jeff Davis
To let my people go.⁴

Throughout American history the iconography of empire—that of its wielders as well as its resisters—was lavishly drawn from that of ancient Egypt.

That this equation was no simple matter was an open secret; all of the multiple meanings and ambiguous connotations of what was both one of history’s most famous empires and its most infamous slave society would be transferred in radically transformative ways to the United States. “A view of the national sin of America,” wrote abolitionist E. S. Addy in 1838, “is like discovering the object of worship in the old temples of Egypt, where, after the stranger had walked bewildered through the vistas of superb architecture, he came at last to the filthy idol—a mouthing and obscene ape, playing its pranks on a throne of gold!”⁵ Even in antislavery circles the sign of Egypt was constantly shifting, however, and was structured by a kind of



Edwin Blashfield, *The Evolution of Civilization*, 1895. (Rotunda Dome Collar Mural, Main Reading Room, Jefferson Building, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.)

radical split. “The phoenix fire of Egypt revives again,” wrote a contributor enigmatically to *The Colored American* in 1840: “[I]n America the face of things appertaining to the rights of man are fast changing.”⁶ Yet, speaking of the moment when she first escaped from slavery, the famously metaphorical Sojourner Truth reported: “I left everything behind. I wa’n’t goin’ to keep nothin’ of Egypt on me.”⁷ This is the kind of structure this project will be concerned to describe: a sort of doubled doubleness in American national and racial identity in which a doubled relationship is evident between nineteenth-century America and ancient Egypt and brought into view by the doubled relationship African Americans had with America.

This doubled structure of the American Egypt attends its appearances throughout the nineteenth century. “The oldest people of the world sends its morning greeting to the youngest nation,” read the inscription on the two identical pylons that served as the entrance to the Egyptian Court of the Centennial International Exhibition held in Philadelphia in 1876, and this dual configuration would be reiterated at the end of the century, at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, when the two rep-

lica obelisks fronting either side of the Chicago re-creation of the Temple of Luxor would bear matching inscriptions in hieroglyphics: one a dedication to Rameses II, pharaoh during the days of the temple, the other a dedication to Grover Cleveland, president during the days of the World's Fair.⁸ Yet an inescapable feature of this relationship was its recursivity: for every moment of the conscription of Egyptian imagery into the services of empire or authority, there was a corresponding moment of opposition and confrontation. "We have for years been fraternally outraged, and the present calls upon us for action," wrote black nationalist and black Freemason Martin Robison Delany in 1853. "From whence sprung Masonry, but from Ethiopia, Egypt, and Assyria—all settled and peopled by the children of Ham?"⁹

Thus, one of the primary arguments of this book is that much of nineteenth-century American racial and national identity can be said to partake of a schematic split structured by the conflictual visions of ancient Egypt. More than this, however, I am arguing that this split in itself—that is, this split as a split, as necessarily doubled—is indicative not exactly of a doubled identity per se, but rather of an overall and widespread instability in American racial and national identity that, through American visions of ancient Egypt, was often stylized as a split. In fact, when African Americans in particular insist on a stylized duality in American racial and national identity—efforts realized most famously, of course, at the turn of the twentieth century in the early work of W. E. B. Du Bois but which this study will insist existed in a variety of ways all across the century that preceded his famous formulation—they do so in large part as a way to gain a stylized purchase on the multilayered operations of American racialization and they also do so principally through the figure of ancient Egypt. There is perhaps no better analytic frame for the violent crucible of race and nation that was the nineteenth-century United States than the figure of ancient Egypt: a land that represented the origins of races and nations, the power of empires and their inevitable falls, and the stories of despots holding people in bondage and of the exodus of the saved from the land of slavery.

This coupled correlation took many different forms at many different times and for many different people; the studies that make up this book have in large part emerged from the interactions between the two constantly shifting sides of what might be thought of as Egypt's split personality. That Africa, for African Americans, is a figure that is itself structured

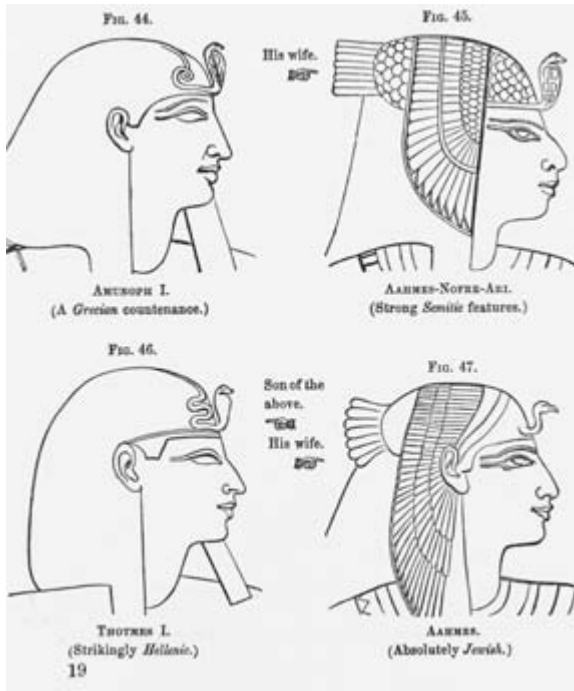
by a kind of doubled doubleness—as we will see in a series of what are themselves split figurations of the sign of ancient Egypt—is evidence of the sort of shape I wish to describe. And in point of fact what this study argues is that what American Egyptomania reveals about American racial and national identity is not just a structurally stylized schematic split but also the mechanics of the instability of that split: throughout this book emphasis is placed on the mechanics, the erotics, and the aesthetics of a series of related disruptive figures—the breach, the rupture, undressing, panic. Time and again what American Egyptomania provides is both the means for representing violently opposed and mutually exclusive identities, spaces, or states of being and the means for representing just how irreducibly impossible such separations ultimately are. What these oddly but conspicuously familiar shapes reveal is evidence not just of attempts to structure racial instability—into sets of binary systems in particular—but evidence of the very instability of such attempts as well. That ancient Egypt as a figure carried so many sets of these conflicting operations of stabilization and destabilization is, I believe, evidence of the indispensability to nineteenth-century American identities of the signs of Egypt.

At times Egypt was a symbol split by the politics of power and oppression: half secular greatness, pure and progenitive, half religious oppression, despotic and destructive. At times it was divided along the lines of liberation: operating at once as a sign of righteous insurrection, yet also as a sign of freedoms freely squandered. At times it was a figure of strict and serious rationalism, early parent to mathematics and the sciences, yet also one of the antirational, a signifier of magic, mystery, and the unknown, a figure of esoteric secrets encouraging unrestrained speculation. At times it was half classical patriarch, part of the grand triumvirate of grand ancient civilizations, a third of the holy trinity of Greece, Rome, and Egypt, and yet also half Orientalist fantastic, an interracialized hallucination of sex, decadence, and degeneration, home to the most extreme projections of overwrought Otherness nineteenth-century American culture could imagine. The power and privilege claimed by Egypt as a multivariied sign in nineteenth-century American culture derived in large part from the heterogeneous and often unpredictable uses resulting from the exchanges between the sides of such a split sign—a sign of ancient and modern, religious and secular, proper and shocking, oppression and resistance, civilized and savage, black and white. It is these complex and contradictory cultural interoperations, and the products that emerge from them, that this

study places under the heading of American Egyptomania and situates in a space radically racialized and radically fraught, referred to throughout as Egypt Land.

“Come Forth with the Signs and Wonders”

This study is concerned with the complex interrelations between two main cultural formations in nineteenth-century American culture: those of representations of ancient Egypt, and those of what are variously referred to as race. Densely interwoven and often lengthily stretched, the connections between the cluster of discourses that informed, produced, and resulted from nineteenth-century American interests in ancient Egypt and those that were involved in the construction of race and racialization were thoroughly indebted to one another. As Du Bois wrote in 1946: “[I]t is especially significant that the science of Egyptology arose and flourished at the very time that the cotton kingdom reached its greatest power on the foundation of American Negro slavery.”¹⁰ Significant, indeed: as a land of scandals, contradictions, and directly opposed interests, in nineteenth-century America the problems of writing the history of Egypt were of a piece with the problems of the politics of race. Ancient Egypt and its representations were crucibles for conflicting and often contradictory assumptions about some of the most critical and foundational social and political issues in operation throughout America in the nineteenth century, and throughout the century the signs of Egypt were associated with a disruptive power reserved for few others. Indeed, to this day, to bring attention to the relationship here under investigation—even to raise the question of the issue of race in the context of the study or teaching of the history of the Nile Valley—is to create an almost immediate scandal.¹¹ Yet my concern here, among other things, is to show how routine scandals like this have been. With varying degrees of specificity and varying degrees of success, debates over issues understood to be crucial to concepts of “America” would return again and again to ancient Egypt. From visions of Cleopatra to the tales of Edgar Allan Poe, from the works of Pauline Hopkins to the construction of the Washington Monument, from the measurement of slave skulls to the singing of slave spirituals: in all of these diverse social arenas, claims about and representations of ancient Egypt served as linchpins for discussions about nineteenth-century American racial and national identity.



“The Caucasian Types Carried through Egyptian Monuments.”
(From Josiah Clark Nott and George Robins Gliddon, *Types of Mankind*. Philadelphia: Lip-pincott, Grambo, 1854, figs. 44-47, p. 145. Library of Congress.)

In a sense, then, the basic argument of this book is quite straightforward: a wide range of Americans throughout the nineteenth century used images and discourses of ancient Egypt as ways of managing contemporary domestic conflicts arising from the politics of race and race-based slavery, and the terms of this management were both literal and metaphorical. They were literal in that, for example, “actual” Egyptians—especially those who were long dead—were used as critical features in the emergent biological taxonomies of the period to justify the enslavement and oppression of “actual” Americans—especially those who were black. “[F]or the sake of illustrating that, even in Ancient Egypt, African slavery was not altogether unmitigated by moments of congenial enjoyment, not always inseparable from the lash and the hand-cuff,” wrote Josiah Nott and George Gliddon in 1854, “we submit a copy of some Negroes ‘dancing in the streets of Thebes,’ by way of archaeological evidence that, 3400 years ago, ‘de same ole Nigger’ of our Southern plantations could spend his Nilotic sabbaths in saltatory recreations, and ‘Turn about, and wheel about, and jump Jim Crow!’”¹² They were metaphorical in that, for example, biblical traditions

of representing ancient Egypt were seized on and mobilized as weapons in the more discursive struggles over abolition and its aftermaths. “Hear, O Israel! and plead my cause against the ungodly nation!” wrote African American Jewish poet Adah Isaacs Menken in 1868. “Come forth with the signs and wonders, and thy strong hands, and stretched-out arms, even as thou didst from Egypt!”¹³

Thus, if one were given to schematization, American Egyptomania can be said to have operated schematically in at the very least a triangulated way: white Americans, black Americans, and ancient Egyptians existed in a radically counterpositioned but radically relational fashion, each admitting the significance of a mutually recognized territorial dispute. “A superficial criticism, guided by local and temporary prejudices,” wrote black nationalist Edward Wilmot Blyden in 1882, “has attempted to deny the intimate relations of the Negro with the great historic races of Egypt and Ethiopia.”¹⁴ But a better schematization would be quadrilateral: white America, black America, white Egypt, and black Egypt. “The question, in regard to the priority of erection between the pyramids of Meroe, and those of Memphis,” wrote Gliddon, one of the century’s most famous white Egyptologists, forty years before Blyden, “merges into the still more interesting fact of their having been built by the same race of men, who were not Africans, but Caucasians.”¹⁵ American representations of ancient Egypt were as radically split as America itself.

Or not; what something like a quadrilateral scheme would indicate would be, at the very least, an attempt to represent the enormous fluidity with which “black” and “white” and “Egypt” and “America” slid into each other and then out again. Black Americans paid strict attention to developments in white Egyptology—though until after Reconstruction American Egyptology could hardly be said to have existed as such—and yet this attention was not always suspicious; excerpts from the writings of white Egyptologists and white travelers to the valley of the Nile were routinely published in black newspapers, periodicals, and other writings, sometimes framed with sarcastic comments undermining the authoritativeness of the source, sometimes not. “The black man was the first skillful animal on the earth,” wrote the self-emancipated David Dorr after traveling to Egypt in the early 1850s, “because Homer describes the Egyptians as men with wooly hair, thick lips, flat feet, and black, and we have no better authority than Homer.”¹⁶

And the reverse was true as well; as is not recognized nearly often

enough, white Americans were regularly rapt when confronted by the voices of black Egypt. Indeed, the blackening of Egypt was as much a factor in the formation of white Egyptology as the whitening of Egypt was for black folks, both up close and at a distance, at least in terms of dynamic if not in documented quantity. A basic dynamic of suspicion, panic, opportunism, and signifying characterized all sides of American Egyptomania, from black Egyptologists' seizure of the claims of the blackness of ancient Egypt understood to have been made by Herodotus to the defensive distance adopted by white Egyptologists from what was, even — or especially — to the most racist of them, an unavoidable association between Egypt and the blackness of Africa which was seen to surround it. "Another popular fallacy, and one which, being very prevalent, produces many erroneous deductions," wrote Gliddon, "is the supposition that . . . Ham who, as the father of the Egyptians, has been therefore made the parent of other so-called African nations."¹⁷ Indeed, even the most racist constructions of Egypt as white carry within them a recognition of the instability of their structures: Egypt was white but blasphemously pagan, Egypt was white but decadent and doomed to destruction, Egypt was white but held the Hebrews in bondage, Egypt was white but succumbed to amalgamation. Even at its whitest, Egypt cast a dark shadow.

So in another sense, the basic argument of this book is not that straightforward. Instead, this book argues that American Egyptomania consisted of radically intersected and overlapping webs of discourses and practices that were spread widely across different racial or social groups, were utilized by these groups in some wildly inventive and often contradictory ways, and were not merely products of preexisting or racially configured social divisions but were in fact constitutive of them. Such distinctions, then — between "literal" and "metaphorical" or "white" and "black" — are sloppy and unsatisfying, relying as they do on a legacy of other such binary distinctions which work to oversimplify a profoundly complicated situation; moreover, as we will see, such epistemological divides based on either "race" or competing "truths" emerged in what for this study are their most relevant forms only through the very crucible of American Egyptomania, and thus were not so much the terms of the conflict as its spoils.

Thus it is a categorical mistake to understand Egypt as either representationally monolithic or racially stable on either side of the black/white divide, for both black and white Americans were aware of the radical contradictions contained — or not — by their own visions of ancient Egypt, and

even given a relatively clear politics of racialized self-definition the meanings of ancient Egypt were still fragmented, juggled, opposed, and explosive. Nineteenth-century racial and national identities were constructed by and through such contingent and conditional claims to ancient truth. Egypt was a land of mystery, magic, and paganism, but it was also a land of lasting monuments, ancient wisdom, and powerful rulers and their slaves. Egypt was potentially a great civilization or a land built on the backs of the oppressed, or both. Either way, it was a land shaped by racialized, historicized, Americanized conflict.

What follows this introduction, then, is an argument structured as a series of overlapping concerns spread over five chapters, each organized around relatively distinct divisions of subject matter. These chapters break down roughly along disciplinary lines; although an ongoing question for the overall argument of this book has been how to extend a set of theoretical discussions past a disciplinary boundary, I have tried my best to respect both the professional idioms of each chapter and the initial impulses behind the total project. Put more plainly, each of the five chapters of this book bases its discussions on a more or less different manifestation of nineteenth-century American Egyptomania: the development of American Egyptology and the rise of racialized science; the narrative and literary tradition of the imperialist adventure tale, and specifically how it relates to the trope of the hollow earth; the cultural politics of the architectural movement known as the Egyptian Revival; the nineteenth-century fascination with the figure of Cleopatra; and the complex interactions between ostensibly competing visions of ancient Egypt in nineteenth-century African America. The boundaries between these manifestations are, however, often hard to draw, and so a series of theoretical shapes emerge from these discussions that also map onto each chapter, if less neatly: the figure of radical interplay between white and black Egyptomanias, read as a reciprocal relationship between intimate enemies; the figure of the terrestrial rupture, read as a punctiform sign of colonial instability; the figure of the breach, read as a form of racialized anxiety; the figure of layered interiority, read alternately as a concern with raciological, sexological, and gynecological secrets; and the figure of radical improvisation, read as a strategy of antiracist resistance. That the individual arguments of each chapter are as convoluted as this brief summary suggests will not, I hope, be as maddening as a mania.

Often, as we will see, what happens in American Egyptomania is that

various forms of racial, social, or otherwise cultural anxiety are repeatedly yoked together and frequently form a kind of characteristic dyad: burial and excavation, puncture and containment, secrecy and revelation, rationalism and irrationalism, discipline and resistance, black and white. Yet what makes the study of nineteenth-century American Egyptomania so crucial to an understanding of the very dyadic formations it would seem to have had a stake in constructing is this: as often as a dualistic shape arises in the spaces of American Egyptomania, it appears with a corresponding sign of its own dissolution. Egypt brings wisdom to the dumb only with a curse, treasures are revealed to the hunter only to be lost, ancient mummies disrupt the modern age only to crumble to dust, fantastic races are revealed to the mundane only to disappear, pharaohs keep slaves only to have them escape; slaves pass from Egypt only to return.

This makes the history of American Egyptomania an acutely anxious one, as well as acutely racialized: what it represents are impossible dreams of eternal separation; unmanageable partitions between epistemologically distinct states; fantasies of social, cultural, or chronological segregation in a land that resists it at every turn. This is not to say, of course, that the racialized history of American Egyptomania does not return again and again to the imagery of ostensible containment and its uncontainable corollaries; thus the recursive patterns of discovery and loss, translation and confusion, excavation and destruction, confinement and escape, bondage and freedom, surface and depth, black and white. So what seems to be clearest of all in these doubled formations of American identity are the insistence of the shapes themselves, as well as regular returns to their motivating iconography; these intertwined patterns of disruption and reestablished composure, like all opponents in dramas of mutual exclusion, rely on each other for constant companionship.

Thus, what emerges from this book as a whole is an argument that can be more or less succinctly presented: the cultural politics of nineteenth-century American Egyptomania describe a *carceral aesthetics of racialized anxiety*. Put less succinctly: images and representations of ancient Egypt operated as fiercely contested sites for the expression of widespread anxieties relating to issues of social control, the principal features of these expressions are dialectics of containment and escape, and the resulting effects of these dialectics are a racialized metaphysics of national interiority in nineteenth-century American culture. Sometimes this interiority is associated with the racialized body—in the layers of skin containing

expressive essences thought so determinative for cultivation and civilization; sometimes it is associated outright with concepts of criminality—in the iconography of Egyptian prisons; sometimes it is associated with less prosecutable but no less pathological threats to American identity—in the construction of the gynecological, ethnological, or sexualized interiors represented by the disruptive figure of the transgressive Cleopatra; sometimes it is explicitly eruptive—in geological visions of the hollow earth holding evolutionary explosions; sometimes it is more metaphorically irruptive—in political incursions by African Americans into the historiographic structures of white identity. But usually it is associated with the fears and fascinations of interior space, and always it is driven by the anxieties of race.

American Egyptomania places the relationships among these widespread logics of interiority, transgressivity, criminality, and control in sharp relief. In other words, in this book most of the various and varied cultural forms associated with American Egyptomania are understood to derive from most of the most commonly recognized crises in nineteenth-century American cultural life—urbanization, imperialism, chronology, historiography, shifts in gender roles, racialization, emancipation, and the long shadow of race-based slavery—and most of the impacts made by the products of American Egyptomania recurred back to further complicate the politics that first gave them shape. Prisons, cemeteries, re-creations of tombs; mummies, harems, and images of bondage and exodus; gender, geology, and Freudian psychoanalysis; Aryanism, Ethiopianism, and the early formulas for Hollywood monster movies: in nineteenth-century American culture, all of these national formations are continually linked to issues of race, chronology, and notions of civilization, and thus all of them both produced and were in part produced by American Egyptomania.

“This Egypt of the West”

The history of American interest in ancient Egypt is a long one, dating to the early days of the colonies, and thus writing a history of American interest in ancient Egypt approaches the condition of attempting to write a history of America itself. But familiar as we might be with the importance of the uses by the early colonists of a specifically biblical Egypt—traditions theorized most famously by Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, and Werner

Sollors — ancient Egypt has, in American life and letters, also always played a relatively more secular role.¹⁸ However, for the earliest American settlers, Egypt's secular presence was one of relative *absence*; it was something of a neglected stepchild for colonial and Federalist American identity, especially when placed in such sharp contradistinction to its importance as a religious figure.

So, speaking for the moment strictly about Egypt as a term of the secular, while a famously historiographic self-fashioning structured much political philosophy during the colonial period, it was, of course, Greece and Rome that formed the most common references to the ancient world in America prior to the nineteenth century. Really only in the history of the Masons does one find sustained attention to Egyptian history and imagery placed in service of the construction of a secular American national identity before the nineteenth century, and even then Masonic secularism was an odd kind of secularism: partially historicized, partially sacralized, and altogether based on composite fragments of materialism, mysticism, historicism, and spiritualism, which, in their *assemblage*, would make Freemasonry a kind of example of the impossibilities of the blurred boundaries between sacred and secular that are so characteristic of nineteenth-century American Egyptomania.¹⁹

Like most other studies, then, this book finds its history of American Egyptomania beginning in 1798, with the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon Bonaparte. In fact, most of the few American travelers to the Nile Valley before 1800, such as John Ledyard, friend and correspondent of Thomas Jefferson, were relatively unimpressed with Egypt and its legacy. “Cairo is a wretched hole,” Ledyard wrote Jefferson in 1788. “Sweet are the songs of Egypt on paper.”²⁰ Even the Nile itself was a severe disappointment and an occasion for a lesson on not believing everything you read: “You have heard and read much of this River, and so had I: but when I saw it I could not conceive it to be the same — it is a mere mud puddle compared with the accounts we have of it. What eyes do travellers see with — are they fools or rogues. This is the mighty sovereign of rivers — the vast Nile, that has been metaphored into one of the wonders of the world — let me be carefull how I read — and above all how I read Antient history!”²¹ The wonders of Egypt, it seemed, were not worth the trouble it took to see them. “I saw three of the pyramids as I passed up the River,” Ledyard mentioned to Jefferson, “but they were 4 or 5 leagues off. If I see them nearer before I close my letter and observe any thing about them that I think will be new to you, will

insert it.”²² Evidently, Ledyard did not find the pyramids worth any extra effort; he mentions nothing else.

By 1837, however, the famous American travel writer John Lloyd Stephens was rhapsodizing ecstatically over “the great and interesting objects which are the traveler’s principal inducements and rewards, the ruined cities on its banks, the mighty temples and tombs, and all the wonderful monuments of Egypt’s departed greatness. . . . Of them I will barely say, that their great antiquity, the mystery that overhangs them, and their extraordinary preservation amid the surrounding desolation, make Egypt perhaps the most interesting country in the world.”²³ And twenty years after Stephens, Herman Melville would have an altogether different reaction: “I shudder at the idea of ancient Egyptians,” he wrote. “It was in these pyramids that was conceived the idea of Jehovah. Terrible mixture of the cunning and awful. . . . It is all or nothing. It is not the sense of height but the sense of immensity, that is stirred. After seeing the pyramid, all other architecture seems but pastry. . . . Its simplicity confounds you. Finding it vain to take in its vastness man . . . measures the base, & computes the size of individual stones. It refuses to be studied or adequately comprehended. It still looms in my imagination, dim & indefinite.”²⁴ Certainly, Melville’s almost tortured theo-philosophical vacillations mark a moment in the development of his thinking—and, indeed, in American transcendental thought in general—when a violent opposition between equally positioned philosophical concepts no longer produces an adequately formed sublime.²⁵ It must at least be recognized, however, that, in addition to marking a clear distinction between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century receptions of ancient Egypt, the vehicle for this transition is placed in an epistemologically unstable symbolic geography concerned with the boundaries of the origins of history that was being mapped onto a metaphor of America.

That representations of the ancient world played an overdetermined part in the formation of variously configured American identities was especially the case in the nineteenth century, when the definitions of “America” were being so visibly manufactured. The materials of this manufacture were often pointedly historiographic and even more often anciently so: as has frequently been noted, America during the nineteenth century was a land called “republic”; it had a national architecture based on superannuated forms; and it had cities named Athens, Sparta, Columbia, and Rome. But the national architecture for this ostensibly Christian nation was taken

from non-Christian cultures, and it also had cities named Memphis, Cairo, Alexandria, and Thebes. It had the same Grecian forms for state capitols as for plantation big houses, it was excavating in its own earth the ruins and evidences of its own history of ancient civilizations, and it had as its central suture throughout almost all of its first full century a 2,300 mile seam referred to over and over again as “the Nile of America.”

“It is the great body of the republic,” Abraham Lincoln would say, precisely one month before signing the final Emancipation Proclamation, of the Mississippi River valley. “The other parts are but marginal borders to it.”²⁶ Lincoln was making his comments in the context of a secessionist debate over the proposed separation of the United States into two or more autonomous regions as a solution to the Civil War; the issue at this moment in both his speech and his presidency was one of both geographical and metaphorical national identity. “Physically speaking, we cannot separate,” Lincoln wrote. “There is no line, straight or crooked, suitable for a national boundary, upon which to divide.”²⁷ But separation, of course, certainly had its advocates: “one section of our country believes slavery is right, and ought to be extended,” he summarized, “while the other believes it is *wrong*, and ought not to be extended. This is the only substantial dispute.”²⁸

Speaking in the critical days after Antietam, less than three months after the issuance of the preliminary proclamation, Lincoln was only too aware that for a number of reasons a multitude of issues were converging on the problem of control of the Mississippi. “In the production of provisions, grains, grasses, and all which proceed from them, this great interior region is naturally one of the most important in the world,” he wrote. “But separate our common country into two nations, as designed by the present rebellion, and every man of this great interior region is thereby cut off.”²⁹ In addressing Congress, Lincoln was attempting to draw a picture of the United States as a country not divided by a boundary but joined by a seam. “True to themselves,” he wrote of the inhabitants of the valley, “they will not ask where a line of separation shall be, but will vow, rather, that there shall be no such line,” and four short paragraphs after this passage he proposes the adoption of a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery. Should, however, the crux of the war continue to involve the Mississippi Valley, “we shall be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the prospect presented . . . [by] this Egypt of the West.”³⁰

Lincoln was relying on one of the great metaphors of American national

identity: the Mississippi River as the Nile River, and by extension America as Egypt itself, that is, as a great and powerful empire marked by the sign of a mighty river and its delta. This project will have more to say about these twinned and yet oppositional metaphors, but for now it is important to mark the overlapping significations they had in 1862. At a moment of national crisis based on the politics of race and race-based slavery, Lincoln invoked the land which was not only famous for its role as the earliest and ostensibly greatest of all civilizations, and not only infamous for its role as a biblical slaveholder, but as a metaphor was also particularly well suited as a vehicle for the incompatibilities, contradictions, and violent oppositions operating across the United States. The signification slippages and uncontainable messages delivered by Lincoln's invocation of the Nile and its country spilled out across his land like the racialized and sectionalized strife that was the occasion of his address in the first place. The Mississippi River valley thus took on a sharply specific, doubled, meaning: not only a geographic metonym of the Nile but the very sign of the politics of slavery. "Egypt of the West," indeed.

"We Americans Are the Israel of Our Time"

The reasons for these intimacies of contact between ancient Egypt, nineteenth-century America, and the signs of race were primarily threefold. First, there was a simultaneity in timing: with the Louisiana Purchase concluded only five years after 1798, Napoleon's invasion of Egypt coincided almost exactly with the earliest explorations of the American West. And for the geographically overwhelmed surveyors and explorers this synchronous timing was further cemented by the immediately exported analogy between the Nile and the Mississippi. "This noble river," asserted the first promoter of the city of Memphis, Tennessee, "may, with propriety, be denominated the American Nile. . . . The general advantages of Memphis, are owing to its being founded on the Mississippi, one of the largest and most important rivers on the globe."³¹ As Lincoln's comments over forty years later would make continuingly clear, the semiotic and ideological links between the Nile and the Mississippi were formative links for the iconography of western expansion.

Second, there was a twinned development in American ethnology. Or, more specifically, there was a development in ethnology of two twinned

sites of interest: Egypt and America. “Veritable specimens of black, wooly-headed negroes,” wrote Virginia-born Mississippi ethnologist Edward Fontaine in 1877, “are represented by the old Egyptian artists in chains, as slaves, and even singing and dancing, as we have seen them on Southern plantations in the present century.”³² Samuel George Morton, for example, craniometrist father figure of American ethnology, wrote two major works: the *Crania Americana* of 1839, and the *Crania Aegyptiaca* of 1844, and, as we will see in chapter one, American ethnology was founded on this relationship between *Aegyptiaca* and *Americana*, between Egypt as a site of racialized theorization and America as its investigational counterpart. The racialized, chronologically disruptive figures of Egypt and America were radically dialogic, producing fields of study that at times had no boundaries at all.

The relationship Egypt had with America was not, however, only one of western expansion or ethnological data and racial theorization. America was seen to have its own antiquity, with its own accompanying chronological scandals, rivaling those of Egypt itself. This bipartite division, moreover, was not confined to scientists such as Morton. Stephens, the most significant and popular American travel writer of the nineteenth century, friend and theoretical ally of Morton, also made a career out of exploring the same two general regions of such importance to American ethnologists, Egypt and Central America. “The magnificent tombs of the kings at Thebes rose up before me,” he wrote of excavating skeletons near Ticul and exploring the labyrinth at La Cueva de Maxcanú: “Every step was exciting, and called up recollections of the Pyramids and tombs of Egypt.”³³ The pyramids of the Yucatán and the pyramids of Egypt have an iconographic relationship that remains lucid and robust to this day, but it began in the early days of the nineteenth century with the coeval rise of American ethnology, American archaeology, and American Egyptomania.

Both ancient and newly discovered, both racially charged, the relationship between Egypt and America was altogether intimate. Antiquity became a primary sign of this relationship in the complicated days of the all too self-consciously young American republic, in the days of the Greek Revival and the words *American republic*. Antiquity became a central feature of the *new*, and its operations were conducted in large part through the sign of ancient Egypt. “America will become another Egypt to Antiquarians,” wrote a contributor to *The Colored American* in 1839, “and her ruins will go back to the oldest periods of the world, showing doubtless that the ancestors of the Montezumas lived on the Nile.”³⁴ The sign of antiquity and yet