

Race Before “Whiteness”: Studying Identity in Ptolemaic Egypt

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the models classical historians and papyrologists use to study Greek and Egyptian identity during the period of Greek occupation of Egypt (332-30 B.C.E.). Employing the concept of ethnicity, some scholars have recently emphasized the fluidity with which identity seems to operate in colonial documents from the Ptolemaic period. In particular, scholars argue that these documents attest to the increasing ability of certain “native Egyptians” to act as “Greek” in various administrative and legal contexts. While finding this recent use of ethnicity productive in grappling with the complexity of identity as a form of social practice in Ptolemaic Egypt, I nonetheless caution against over-emphasizing the role of context and individual agency within this colonial framework. In contrast, I argue that the concept of race should be added to current models to allow historians of this period to situate certain performances within a larger colonial structure that continued to treat the categories of “Greek” and “Egyptian” as conceptually distinct and indeed representative of inverse positions of social power.

Ye gods, what a crowd! How and when will we ever
Get through this mob? Ants without number or measure!
You’ve done many commendable things, Ptolemy,
Since your father has been among the immortals. No villain
Creeps up upon one in the street, Egyptian-wise, bent on mischief,
As in the past – a trick that pack of rogues used to play,
One as bad as the other, all of them scoundrels.

(Theocritus, *Idyll* 15. lines 44-50, trans. Thelma Sargent)

Beginning with Alexander the Great's conquest in 332 B.C.E. (i.e., B.C.), Egypt was ruled for three often chaotic centuries by a Greek foreign dynasty, the Ptolemies – a name taken from the general who was Alexander's initial successor in Egypt. From their royal residence in the new capital of Alexandria, the Ptolemies governed Egypt until they were forced to relinquish it to the rapidly expanding Roman Empire following the death of Cleopatra VII, the last of the Ptolemies, in 30 B.C.E. While these facts may be familiar to many, I pointedly begin with them because they mark an essential context for what follows. Stripped of other details, this brief chronology calls attention to a dynamic that was often obscured by the Greeks in their contemporary representations of themselves – namely the inextricable link between “Greek” identity and the political process of colonization, both in Egypt and throughout the ancient Mediterranean, following Alexander the Great's campaigns.¹

Greek literary sources, long accorded a privileged position in the discipline of classics, do not help us witness this startling historical shift; indeed, we might say Greek literature of this period often functions precisely to conceal its progressively colonial context through its pointed nostalgia for, and response to, earlier Greek literary traditions.² Yet the Greek poet Theocritus, in the passage quoted above, gives us a rare and provocative literary allusion to the ways in which Egypt and its new capital, Alexandria, remained infused with a hostile, perpetually unsettled colonial contest. In this poem, dated to the early third-century B.C.E., Theocritus depicts the experiences of two pompous and, as they emphatically assert, *Greek* women, Gorgo and Praxinoa, who are planning to attend the festival of Adonis in Alexandria's royal district.³ As the women walk to the festival along the crowded streets of Alexandria, Praxinoa momentarily

¹ The period between Alexander's death and the rise of Roman control in the east (i.e., 323-1st century B.C.E.) has traditionally been called the Hellenistic Period. During this time, Alexander's former empire was divided between three independent Greek dynasties: that of the Ptolemies (who received Egypt), the Antigonids (Macedonia), and the Seleucids (Asia). The combined territory of these three empires “extended from mainland Greece to modern-day Afghanistan and northwest India, north to south it reached from Macedonia and Thrace to Egypt and the Gulf of Arabia” (Alcock 1994: 171). Alcock and Green 1993 discuss the evolution and current state of Hellenistic historiography.

² Andrew Erskine discusses the striking invisibility of Egypt and Egyptians in most Greek literature of the Hellenistic Period, insisting that the “omission . . . masks a fundamental insecurity” (1995: 43).

³ For the text of the original Greek poem and accompanying commentary, see Dover 1971. Delia 1996 discusses the significance of the women's insistence on their Syracusan identity, “which by extension makes them Corinthians” (41), i.e., from a Greek city-state, an important “status badge” among members of the foreign Greek population in Alexandria (47).

raises the specter of the otherwise invisible native Egyptian population. In the scornful diatribe quoted above, she categorically casts the natives as dangerous thieves and pick-pockets, a persistent public threat that King Ptolemy has only recently quelled.

Taken as evidence of the interaction between colonizers and colonized in Ptolemaic Alexandria, this outburst is depressingly brief and one-sided. The attitudes of the Egyptian population toward the arrogant Greek upper-class women, not to mention their reactions to the lavish displays of the Greek monarchy, are simply unimagined by Theocritus.⁴ Indeed, just as the alleged criminal threat of the Egyptians has been contained by Ptolemy's recent measures, so, too, all Egyptians are expelled from the rest of poem. Instead, the women return to what seems a purely (in every sense of the word) Greek environment. Precisely because of its placement within a poem centered around the elaborate staging of a Greek festival, however, Praxinoa's derogatory comment about the Egyptians is significant. Juxtaposing Greek cultural display with a suppressed Egyptian threat, this brief passage illustrates the colonial fantasies and paranoias upon which Greek identity in Egypt was founded, that is, it suggests that a Greek colonial identity, one expressed in great part through cultural forms, relied upon the uncomfortable and always disconcertingly incomplete expulsion of all Egyptian "elements" to the margins.

Although I will focus in the remainder of this essay on the use of historical rather than literary evidence in the study of identity in Ptolemaic Egypt, I have dwelt on this scene from ancient literature at the outset because it functions as a potent symbol for the ways in which Ptolemaic Egypt has traditionally been treated by classical historians. For Praxinoa's dismissive attitude toward the Egyptian population of Alexandria all too often seems to parallel historians' tendencies either to treat the colonized Egyptian population as fundamentally inconsequential, as the non-speaking extras in front of whom the Greeks conduct "world history," or to idealize the Greek methods for assimilating native Egyptians into the new colonial structure.⁵ In contrast, I would like to insist that the colonial context

⁴ The Ptolemaic strategies for bolstering their position of authority seemed to involve public display of their power and resources. Thompson discusses the evidence for an elaborate procession in 279/8 B.C.E. (1997: 242; see also Erskine 1995: 43-44), just a few years before the events of Theocritus' poem, which is dated by Dover within a year or two of 274 B.C.E. (1971: 197).

⁵ Ritner argues that the Ptolemaic period is neglected by historians of Egypt precisely because they consider it a period of decline, interpreting the "(l)oss of political independence ... as a loss of cultural independence and vitality" (1992: 284). Meanwhile, to those in classical studies, too often "(t)he presumption is, of course, that Ptolemaic history is *Greek history*" (285).

remain central, that any understanding of the Greek presence in Egypt is ultimately only partial (and therefore insufficient) unless it is situated explicitly within a mutually dependent, structurally violent colonial system, one reliant upon ideologies that constructed Egyptian identity as inferior (or at the very least, silent) as a way of providing a foil for a superior (or, we might say, clamorous) Greek identity. This approach demands that questions of power, both individual and especially institutional, be constantly raised. So, too, in accordance with the overall aim of this collection of essays, I believe it urges a return to the concept of race as a primary analytic tool.

Before engaging the question of race, including what race might even connote during this period, I would like to begin by describing more fully some of the models and methods scholars have traditionally used to reconstruct Egypt under Ptolemaic control.

To many audiences an exoticized, asp-bitten Cleopatra VII provides the most dominant image of Egypt during the Greek and then Roman periods of occupation; yet the study of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt has occupied a more complicated and indeed mostly marginalized position within classical studies. Although the period is attested in traditional forms of evidence, such as literary texts, art, and archaeological remains,⁶ from the 1880's onwards, the study of Ptolemaic Egypt was transformed by increasing attention to a new form of evidence: Greek papyri (Turner 1982).⁷ Having survived to an unprecedented degree in Egypt because of a variety of factors, including the dry Egyptian environment (Thompson 1994: 71), hoards of documents preserved on papyri have been discovered in sites throughout Egypt. Although the papyri themselves survive primarily in fragments, these fragments, both individually and in relation to one another, allow scholars to reconstruct a more detailed picture of every-day life in Egypt than in any other part of the former Greco-Roman world. The content of such documents ranges from legal texts (e.g., tax records, wills, divorce agreements) to personal letters, many of which provide witness to interactions between individuals and various officials of the colonial government.

As invaluable as the papyri are, however, it is at the same time already in the papyrological record that we can discern a bias toward the colonizing

⁶ For an introduction to recent archaeological excavation of Ptolemaic sites, see Bianchi 1996. Most general introductions to literature and art from the Hellenistic Period include extensive discussion of material from Egypt. This is especially true of studies of Hellenistic literature given that Alexandria was the center of Greek literary production during this period.

⁷ Produced from a reed that was native to Egypt (the papyrus plant), papyrus, a form of ancient paper, was used throughout the ancient Mediterranean world and the manufacture of it remained an important industry in Ptolemaic Egypt (Bowman 1986: 56).

Greeks – for the majority of papyrological texts that survive are written in Greek and indeed many pointedly fall within the Greek administrative apparatus. Even more, the study of such documents has long been restricted in the field of classics to a small group of scholars, papyrologists, who have been specially trained to reconstruct the original documents from such fragments and to interpret the information they contain. Given its traditional focus on specific Greek linguistic and philological problems that emerge when reading the papyri (papyrologists are rarely trained to read the contemporary form of the Egyptian language, Demotic, which also, albeit less frequently, appears in the papyri), the field of papyrology has often had difficulty presenting its findings to wider audiences in classics. Similarly, the work of papyrologists is rarely cited by classicists doing work in ancient social history or scholars from other disciplines doing comparative studies of colonialism.⁸ Indeed, many papyrologists seem pointedly to eschew the label of colonial historian.⁹

Yet some papyrologists and ancient historians have explicitly treated the study of Egypt under Greek domination as a form of colonial history. In doing so, they have often devoted attention, perhaps not surprisingly, to the top of the colonial hierarchy, that is, to the Ptolemaic monarchy itself. Thus certain scholars have attempted to document the specific ways in which the Ptolemies negotiated both Egyptian and Greek traditions in establishing and representing their authority. Such studies have documented the development of the Ptolemies' royal religious cult and the visual styles and symbols that were used when representing them more generally in public discourse (e.g., Koenen 1993; Samuel 1993: 180-83; Bothmer 1996; and Smith 1996). Other scholars, preferring to study Ptolemaic rule as a practice rather than iconographic event, have sought to reveal the economic motives and strategies of the colonizing dynasty. For without any

⁸ See Bagnall 1982 for a review of trends in documentary papyrology from 1956-1980; Hobson 1988 and Keenan 1991 discuss more recent attempts to link papyrology with work in ancient social history. Wider access to surviving papyrological texts has been greatly facilitated by the advent of the internet. The University of Michigan, under the direction of Traianos Gagos, has not only made its own papyrological collection available on-line, but also provides a comprehensive set of links to other papyrological websites at <http://www.lib.umich.edu/pap/>.

⁹ In a recent article, Bagnall discusses the relevance of post-colonial theory to the study of Ptolemaic Egypt, responding in particular to the previous comparative study by Edouard Will. Adopting a dismissive tone toward the political biases he believes some scholars bring to their use of post-colonial theory (1997: 227), Bagnall ultimately argues that colonial models are too restrictive, concluding that “those power relationships that are distinctive to colonialism are only a subset of those that can help us understand the societies of the Hellenistic world” (241).

surviving direct articulation of the political or racial justification of Ptolemaic rule, financial need appears in the historical record as the primary engine of Ptolemaic policy. A.E. Samuel has argued that the main goal of the Ptolemaic dynasty was “to continue collecting rent and tax revenues over an extensive tract of land, from a large number of people whose language they did not understand and who functioned in a different social and economic system from that to which the Greeks were accustomed” (1993: 174). While the Ptolemies themselves remained in control of the military and what we might call foreign policy (Samuel 1993: 183), in trying to meet their fiscal needs, they relied on an increasingly diffuse yet elaborate bureaucracy, one that seemed at times to function independently of direct royal authority. As Samuel describes it: “The monarchy existed alongside the bureaucracy, in a sense, rather than being part of it; and the king could always be seen as a figure qualitatively, not just quantitatively, different from other members of the administration” (192).

In seeking to trace more concretely the regular points of contact between colonizers and colonized in Ptolemaic Egypt, many scholars have thus shifted their attention from the royal family in Alexandria to the development of the colonial bureaucracy throughout Egypt. Such work has demonstrated that the Ptolemaic bureaucracy retained a number of institutions that pre-existed its arrival in Egypt. For example, the Ptolemies allowed the previously established Egyptian legal system to co-exist alongside a newer Greek legal system, although the independence of the Egyptian system was eventually curtailed in 146 B.C.E., when it became necessary to register an Egyptian contract, i.e., one that was composed in Demotic, in a Greek registry office (Thompson 1994: 82). Like their predecessors, the Greeks also divided Egypt into thirty administrative units called *nomes*, upon which, however, the Greeks imposed a new official, called a *strategos*.

As both the gradual evolution toward a Greek standard in law and the introduction of a new Greek office suggests, despite its adaptation of certain traditional features of Egyptian government (as well as those from the Persian regime that immediately preceded Alexander’s conquest), the Ptolemaic bureaucracy was overwhelmingly conceived as a Greek institution. As such, it brought tangible privilege to the Greek population in Egypt, a population that was comprised of both military personnel and other types of recent immigrants (Bowman 1986: 122).¹⁰ Greek soldiers, for example, were compensated for their service with land grants through

¹⁰ There was a general increase in the overall population of Egypt under the Ptolemies. Although estimates of its precise size have varied, Bowman suggests a population as large as eight million may have been possible (Bowman 1986: 17-18). Despite the increasing

what was called the cleruch system, a practice that Samuel believes also served the purpose of “ . . . putting as many Greek-speaking people on the land as possible, in order to facilitate the collection of rents and taxes.” As Samuel continues, this meant that Greeks were distributed throughout the Egyptian countryside, not just resident in the cities, as one might expect from such a newly arriving population (Samuel 1993: 175).

The emphasis Samuel places on “Greek-speaking” is essential, for perhaps the most notable feature of the Ptolemaic bureaucracy was its increasingly exclusive use of Greek as its official language (Thompson 1994: 73, Clarysse 1993: 187). So clear was the privilege bestowed on Greek-speakers (or, as they appear in our sources, writers of Greek) by this access to official power that Samuel suggests the growth of the bureaucracy was driven in part by “wishes on the part of Greeks in Egypt to find administrative posts and get themselves some benefit from their official positions” (1993: 178). He goes on to estimate that “by 250 B.C. a very large proportion of the noncleruchic Greek-speaking individuals of Egypt had found their way into one administrative billet or another” (178). The contrast between the terms used in Samuel’s statements here, however, marks a central tension in the study of identity in Ptolemaic Egypt, one to which we will return – namely the slippage between “Greek” and “Greek-speaking” in identifying the precise group holding privilege under this colonial structure.

While entry into the Greek administration seemed to bring economic privilege, it is perhaps surprising to find that administrators in Ptolemaic Egypt received no regular salary, leading many scholars to conclude that rewards were garnered by individual bureaucrats primarily from exploitation of their position. As Samuel articulates it, “The woes of the peasants were caused less by a rapacious monarchy than by a steadily growing army of bureaucrats lining their pockets and then covering themselves against any complaints from superiors by draining the producers to meet expectations, even in difficult times” (1993: 180).

In such a characterization, colonial abuse and exploitation is therefore located at the level of individual encounter between individual subjects and agents of the colonial bureaucracy, allowing the Greek colonization of Egypt as an institution to remain uninterrogated or (at the most) to seem primarily benign, an optimism that characterizes many current treatments of Ptolemaic Egypt.¹¹

immigration, the native Egyptians, however, continued to vastly outnumber any other group (Bowman 1986: 122).

¹¹ Such scholarly attitudes seem compounded by the failure of most of our evidence to register any direct collective hostility toward the Greek administration. Samuel suggests:

Before examining more closely the operation of the Ptolemaic bureaucracy as it is attested in our surviving documentary evidence, we should briefly consider the role of culture itself as a concomitant tool of domination in Ptolemaic Egypt. In part, culture plays such a distinctive role in the negotiation of power in Ptolemaic Egypt because the Ptolemies themselves actively promoted it as a key vocabulary for expressing their authority both in Egypt and, as they hoped, throughout the ancient Mediterranean. In treating culture as a central domain in which to establish superiority, the Ptolemies drew on the long-standing authority culture had previously acquired in articulating Greek identity. One of the main public goals of the Ptolemies was therefore to establish Alexandria as the new Greek cultural center, the descendant of once-golden Athens. In effect, they sought to achieve a “monopoly of Greek culture” (Erskine 1995: 45). Such aspirations announced themselves most prominently in the Museum (a center for scholarly study) and the Library of Alexandria, both situated within the royal district of the new capital city. Through these institutions, the Ptolemies sought to amass the most comprehensive collection of Greek literature and to make their collection the most authoritative in the world, producing from it “definitive editions of the great works of Greek literature, especially Homer” (Erskine 1995: 45). Indeed, so explicit was the claim for Greek cultural superiority that although foreign texts were included in the library’s collections, they were done so only after they had been translated into Greek (Erskine 1995: 43). In placing such priority on Greek culture, the Ptolemies understood it furthermore as the means by which Greek identity could be both constituted and expressed in the “foreign” setting provided by Egypt. Erskine writes:

The Ptolemaic emphasis on Greek culture establishes the Greeks of Egypt with an identity for themselves... But the emphasis on Greek culture does even more than this – these are Greeks ruling in a foreign land. The more Greeks can indulge in their own culture, the more they can exclude non-Greeks, in other words Egyptians, the subjects whose land has been taken over. The assertion of Greek culture serves to enforce Egyptian subjection. (43)¹²

“We don’t know what Egyptians did to protest exploitation if they didn’t speak Greek” (1993: 208). This statement is only partially true, however, for historical records do suggest an increasing instability in Egypt following the mid-third-century B.C.E., a phenomenon that can be traced not only in various military failures by the Ptolemies abroad, but also increasing rebelliousness among the population within Egypt. Such internal hostilities culminated in a series of movements that established rival native governments in other parts of Egypt, including one that lasted in Thebes for two decades beginning in 206 B.C.E. (Samuel 1993: 176).

¹² Yet, just as culture could be promoted to claim Greek dominance, it might also, as Jorgen Podemann Sorensen argues, be a site in which Egyptian reactions and resistance to

If the public display of culture served as one of the arenas in which Greek identity could be established at a national level, Dorothy Thompson has shown the adoption of such practices on the personal level, suggesting the ways in which literature could be used by individuals to formulate an expression of, or reflection upon, their own identities as they were situated within this colonial environment. In examining the personal literary collection of two brothers, Ptolemaios and Apollonios, who lived in a religious complex known as the Serapeum at Memphis, a complex which housed both Greeks and Egyptians (Thompson 1987: 107), Thompson at first notes the interesting combination of literary texts, which include an astronomical treatise, a Greek version of what was probably originally an Egyptian story (“The Dream of Nectanebo”), and quotations copied out from various Greek authors. She acknowledges, moreover, that this variety may simply reflect aspects of contemporary literary taste, including testifying to the availability of Egyptian tales translated into Greek, as well as perhaps indicating the content of a standard school curriculum (110). In trying to posit a more pointed principle of selection, however, Thompson suggests that particular passages appealed to Ptolemaios and Apollonios precisely because they addressed the tensions the brothers faced in establishing their Greek identity within “the mainly Egyptian world of the Serapeum” (116). She notes that after copying out a literary passage from a Greek tragedy by Euripides, the *Telephus*, in which Telephus described “his background as king and as a Greek ruling now far from home among barbarians,” Apollonios emphatically (albeit almost illegibly) signaled his identification with the character and the character’s plight by writing his own name underneath it, twice repeating his status as Greek (117).¹³ As insight into personal affiliation with colonial power, this note in the margin of the text is as potentially provocative as an Englishman in colonial India owning and inserting himself into, say, a work by Kipling. And literature was presumably not the only cultural means by which Greek

Greek rule could simultaneously be expressed (1992: 164). Sorensen argues, for example, that although apocalypticism was present in earlier literary traditions, it emerged as an especially salient feature of native Egyptian literature during this time (170). See also Tait 1992 on Demotic literature.

¹³ Actually, he uses the term “Macedonian,” writing: “Apollonios the Macedonian . . . a Macedonian I say” (117). Macedonian identity held dual reference in Ptolemaic Egypt. On the one hand, “Macedonian” in many contexts merely suggested a generic Greek identity. On the other hand, it could also more specifically signal affiliation with Alexander the Great, who was Macedonian, and the Ptolemies themselves who continued (in part because of Alexander) to claim a Macedonian identity. Borza 1996 examines the ways in which later ancient sources conceptualized the relationship between Greek and Macedonian identities.

and Egyptian identities were given expression in Ptolemaic Egypt. Public institutions like religion could also serve to mediate and display identity (van Straten 1993); so, too, participation in the activities of the local gymnasium, a cultural center that included “lecture halls and classrooms, ball-courts, a gymnasium (in the modern sense) and baths” marked men emphatically as Greek (Bowman 1986: 143-44).

Yet Thompson’s study of the personal use of literature acknowledges the primacy that the study of Ptolemaic Egypt, because of its dependency on papyrological evidence, places on *textual* records of identity. And because it is this textual/papyrological study of identity that I would like to examine in the remainder of my essay, I would like to acknowledge some of its limitations from the outset. First, in relying so strongly on ancient papyri, our modern ability to reconstruct Ptolemaic social practice as it related to social power and identity is circumscribed by the very real necessity that the written record of that act hold some significance in its original context. The form and content of our evidence is thus dictated in no small part by the context of its production, one that was often public and related closely to the working of the colonial state apparatus (i.e., in contrast, temporary, private, or ephemeral acts of identification are not always visible in our sources). Second, in relying so heavily on textual material, we lose the ability to witness any visual markers of identity unless they are explicitly mentioned in the texts. Although identity in Egypt seems to hold little direct correlation to the most prominent modern visual sign of identity, i.e., skin color, the bias of our evidence prevents any attempt to determine whether identity was established through other visual means during this period (e.g., through physical features or cultural items, such as clothing). Finally, since such documents are often produced with regard to a particular function or to produce a specific outcome (e.g., win a legal proceeding), it is dangerous to assume that the participants in the documents would necessarily represent themselves the same way in other contexts, i.e., that the identities produced in formal contexts directly correlate to identities claimed in other social domains. In fact, we possess only a few instances in which we can compare our evidence for individuals’ activities in documentary evidence with their behavior and self-representations in other settings, such as private relationships (Clarysse 1985: 66).

Nonetheless, it is primarily this function of identity as a type of social practice in Ptolemaic Egypt (as it is recorded in text) that certain papyrologists have progressively engaged in their work, and it is precisely the terms and methods of this reconstruction of Ptolemaic Egypt that I would like finally to interrogate. Citing papyri in which references to power and status seem to appear, papyrologists have attempted in particular to understand more fully the relationship between Greeks and Egyptians,

and the social power conferred by each position in colonized Egypt. In theorizing the putative level of interaction between the two groups, Robert Ritner has traced a noticeable recent shift from traditional models that emphasized the persistent hostility between the Greeks and Egyptians to more recent models that insist on keeping the two groups distinct (1992: 286-87). While this more recent insistence on separate social spheres has shed positive light on Egyptian culture during this period (allowing it to be seen as “vital” on its own),¹⁴ Ritner nonetheless notes “. . . that it can be taken too far” and he “. . . (is) suspicious of the underlying motives in *overstressing* the absence of interaction” (287).

In discussing social relations in Ptolemaic Egypt (not just culture in the more abstract sense), the absence of interaction between Greeks and Egyptians has often been similarly stressed (and overstated) by ancient historians. In contrast to this tendency to treat the populations separately, however, a number of scholars have sought to examine such putative boundaries more closely and, indeed, to demonstrate that the boundaries between the two groups are less rigid in practice than they might seem. Evoking primarily the concept of ethnicity, such scholarship has sought to demonstrate an increasing fluidity in the ways identity was formulated during the Ptolemaic period. Although it has revealed a more complicated (and therefore welcome) picture of social life in Ptolemaic Egypt, such employment of the term ethnicity has nonetheless come to place special and, in my mind, dangerous emphasis on the opportunity for self-identification and assimilation in Ptolemaic Egypt. To complement current scholarly optimism about the divergent possibilities and profits of individual social performance, I would therefore like to reintroduce race to our critical apparatus as a way of drawing attention to the simultaneous survival of ideological structures that continued to associate the category of “Greek” with domination and that of “Egyptian” with dominated.

To begin, despite the fact that the term ethnicity is almost universally evoked as a salient form of identity by scholars of this period, closer examination of its usage reveals a fundamental instability – an instability

¹⁴ Ritner is specifically concerned with how such models represent culture, i.e., “whether cultural ‘vitality’ is again confused with ‘purity’” (287). Bagnall, like many scholars, envisions Egyptian culture as fundamentally static, arguing for “. . . the almost total lack of visible impact of Greek occupation on Egyptian culture. . .” (1988: 24). The tendency to view Egyptian culture as primarily unaffected by the contemporary occupation has been applied in particular to interpretations of Egyptian religion (Bagnall 1988: 24). Such models, of course, rely on a continuing sense that it is possible to distinguish “Greek” from “Egyptian” culture, rather than positing the production of any type of hybrid culture. Avoiding the possibility of a hybrid culture means likewise that scholars like Bagnall continue to express cultural contact in terms of which culture is “stronger” by its very “nature” (1988: 24).

linked to a failure to comprehend exactly what operation the term ethnicity seeks to describe. In short, papyrologists have been unable to agree on precisely what ethnicity might mean in Ptolemaic Egypt. Roger Bagnall argues that ethnic identity "... at least for men ... was an official status, such as one had been required to give in all legal contexts since at least the time of Ptolemy II" (1988: 22). Yet, he is forced to admit a certain ambiguity in determining its exact foundation for men, not to mention its meaning overall for women, continuing "(h)ow one came by such status ... and what it meant subjectively for the individuals, particularly women, at an unofficial level, are much harder questions" (22).

As Bagnall's statement suggests, the source of ethnic identity in Ptolemaic Egypt, how one came by such status, is an especially troublesome gap left by many of our sources. In earlier periods, as Jonathan Hall has argued, ethnic identity for the Greeks seemed to be linked primarily to a claim of geographic origin (Hall 1997: 25), a traditional meaning evoked by the women in Theocritus' poem, who aggressively assert the significance of their own Greek origins. Yet such an explicit foundation of ethnic identity is rarely so directly established by our documentary sources from the period. Instead, papyrologists have had to approach the question by studying the ostensible manifestations of ethnic identity in the papyri and from that to infer its primary components and consequences. But even this concession underestimates the nature of the problem, for papyrologists must begin with an even more fundamental question: how can we locate the presence and operation of ethnic identity in our sources when it may be marked in ways that are not immediately comprehensible from our modern perspective? For a long time, papyrologists chose to use names as the primary sign of ethnic identity in Ptolemaic Egypt, given that Greek names seem fairly distinguishable from Egyptian names in our sources, even when both are written in Greek. In short, papyrologists assumed "as a rule, Greek names point to ethnic Greeks, Egyptian names to ethnic Egyptians" (Clarysse 1985: 58). Such an assumption, however, clearly serves to reinforce a boundary between Greeks and Egyptians that is all too often taken for granted by scholars. That is, the method threatens to rely on a transparently circular argument: people were Greeks because they had Greek names, and people had Greek names because they were Greek. The weight placed on names as the primary sign of ethnic identity has been challenged even more by a practice only recently discovered in our sources – the use of double names, that is, persons who can be seen to be employing a Greek name in one context and an Egyptian name in another context (Clarysse 1985: 57-58).

Given the nature of papyrological evidence (its general attachment to a discrete event or function), many scholars have recently moved away from

models that treat ethnic identities as absolute and predetermined in this period and have instead explored the numerous contingencies by which identity seemed to function, that is, to explicate more closely the specific contexts for identity declaration and, equally, the specific privileges or consequences particular claims held within that context. Willy Clarysse, for example, argues that the use of double names, at least among government employees, seems to be dictated by occupation rather than a claim of geographic origin. This means that certain positions were considered Greek (e.g., bankers), while others were considered Egyptian (e.g., village scribes), and the holder of the job used the appropriate type of name in documents related to that position.¹⁵ Clarysse writes:

I do not want to suggest that there was any legal obligation to change one's name or to use a Greek or Egyptian name upon becoming epistates or village scribe respectively... But one job was felt to be Egyptian in character, the other was felt to be Greek, and since the people involved seem quite often to have had double names, the corresponding name was used more frequently than the other. (1985: 60)

Clarysse even finds individual families whose members used a combination of both Greek and Egyptian names (58-62).

Assessing similar, albeit more direct, economic consequences of ethnic identifications, Dorothy Thompson has argued that ethnic identity functioned as an important tax category in Ptolemaic Egypt, demonstrating that tax exemptions were explicitly granted to those who identified as Greek ("Hellene") or who seemed to engage in standard Greek cultural practices.¹⁶ Thus, exemptions from the salt tax (a type of poll-tax) were given to "schoolteachers, athletic coaches, (most probably) artists of Dionysus, and victors in the games of the various Alexandrian festivals," while

¹⁵ Clarysse shows that another widely discussed office, that of *agoranomos*, should likewise be linked to Greek names and not necessarily any broader sense of Greek identity. He cites the work of Pestman who previously showed "... that the *agoranomoi* in Pathyris in fact belonged to a family of Graeco-Egyptian soldiers, that they wrote demotic as well as (or even better than) Greek, and that they had an Egyptian besides their Greek name. When writing demotic they used their Egyptian name; when writing Greek, and especially in their capacity of *agoranomoi*, they used their Greek name" (1985: 60).

¹⁶ Taxes were levied on both land and individuals and provided one of the most important sources of revenue for the Ptolemies. Much of their elaborate bureaucracy, including the census, was therefore constructed around calculating and collecting it. Thompson provides a succinct description of how taxes were assessed in Ptolemaic Egypt (1992: 324), while Clarysse notes the range of information that can be gleaned from ancient tax documents (1994: 69). Ethnic identity was not the only identity category that mattered in Ptolemaic taxation; Thompson notes that women paid a lesser amount on the salt tax (1997: 246).

exemptions from a tax called the obol-tax, were given (before it was eliminated) to Greeks (“Hellenes”) and Persians, the latter being colonizers of Egypt prior to Alexander (Thompson 1997: 247; on the status of a “Persian” identity during the Ptolemaic Period, see Clarysse 1994). Moreover, just as Clarysse detaches names from any clear signification of origin, “Hellenes” in the tax context, according to Thompson, likewise cannot be strictly limited to a sign of origin, for although

(s)ome of these tax-Hellenes were certainly ethnic Greeks, ... the category also included those from Egyptian families who worked within the administration and came to form part of the privileged group. Greek origins were clearly not necessary for the acquisition of an Hellenic designation; Jews too might count as Hellenes. “Greeks” were no longer Greeks... (247-48)

Like Clarysse, Thompson has even discovered a discrepancy in tax status within individual families, finding that “in two cases ... Egyptian named brothers ... pay the full rate of both the salt-tax and the obol tax, while the brothers with Greek names pay only the salt tax” (Thompson 1992: 326). These circumstantial definitions of ethnic identity led Clarysse to conclude overall that by “the last quarter of the third century the Hellenes were no longer a purely ethnic group, but a tax category or a social category, to which also some Egyptians ... could gain access” (1994: 76). Casting it in slightly different terms, Thompson and Clarysse have argued that origin played an increasingly negligible role in establishing ethnic identity in Ptolemaic Egypt (Thompson 1994: 75).

If such models capture well the way documentary papyri reveal the significance of context, as well as the change across time, it is nonetheless important to evaluate the consequences and contradictions that may result from giving too much emphasis to fluidity in reading the operation of identity during the Ptolemaic period. For one, the notion of fluidity itself has been employed in a limited fashion, studied almost exclusively as a one-way process, that is, the manner by which Egyptians crossed into the category of Greek. This emphasis suggests that to many scholars upward social mobility played an exclusive role in determining the Egyptian response to Greek colonial rule, i.e., that any Egyptian who “could” pass as Greek would. Yet such an assumption, focusing narrowly on economic incentive, threatens to ignore other types of personal or political sources for certain identity claims, such as family structures produced under the conditions of increasing intermarriage.¹⁷

¹⁷ Willy Clarysse is one of the few classical historians to turn from focus on “the preservation of Greek identity” to “the opposite phenomenon, that of Greek integration in Egyptian society” (1992: 51). He notes, for example, the importance of intermarriage

With increasing consensus that Egyptians could become or act as “Greek” in Ptolemaic Egypt, scholars have further sought to identify the specific colonial institutions that permitted or facilitated such crossings. Dorothy Thompson, for example, demonstrates the ways in which the educational system in Egypt provided an important means by which the Egyptian upper-class could learn Greek and, therefore, gain access to positions in the colonial administration, concluding that “... the Ptolemies used education combined with tax incentives to encourage Hellenisation among the majority population of Egypt” (1994: 82).¹⁸ While such projects are, of course, important in revealing the precise institutions involved in the practice of colonialism in Egypt, Thompson’s choice of the verb “encourage” is powerful in this context and reveals the ways in which the very possibility of Egyptian assimilation has led some scholars to emphasize “opportunity” over any structural violence such assimilation may have entailed. Thompson herself identifies two possible ways of reading “hellenization” within the Egyptian population, i.e., as “Greek imposition or Egyptian collaboration” (1994: 77). While she argues for the simultaneous existence of both processes, Thompson’s work, as her statement above suggests, more frequently adopts a positive view of these measures. She calls the tax exemptions, “encouragement,” a “dispensation to those prepared to ‘go Greek’” (Thompson 1997: 248). Willy Clarysse, in contrast, although emphasizing in certain contexts the fluidity of the system, has elsewhere called the Ptolemaic tax structure “clear proof of official discrimination against the Egyptian part of the population” (1992: 52). And he has even used the word “apartheid” to characterize the structure of power relations produced by Ptolemaic occupation (Ritner 1992: 290).

If such language reveals more fully the conceptual frameworks by which the Ptolemaic colonial system, including its putative openness and flexibility, have been read, Thompson’s evocation of the Egyptian “upper-class” suggests some of the practical limits that simultaneously warn against overvaluing fluidity as a universal feature of ethnic identity in Ptolemaic Egypt. Although some portion of the population may have been able to cross between ethnic categories, evidence so far suggests that that group remained

(51-2) and finds evidence for the participation of Greek families in Egyptian temples (53); he also discovers evidence for Greeks using Demotic contracts instead of contracts written in Greek (54).

¹⁸ The subject of education in Ptolemaic Egypt is an important one. Thompson (1992 and 1994) considers a number of its dimensions, such as the role of literacy overall in Egypt and the specific content of the Greek school curriculum. See Criboire 1996 for a fuller account, while Tassier 1992 provides a short introductory study of Greek and Demotic school texts. Finally, Clarysse 1993 details the technical methods used to identify Egyptian scribes writing in Greek.

relatively small. Clarysse has only been able to find the use of double-names among government employees (1985: 58) and Thompson found that only 16% of the adult population in the Arsinoite nome was considered “Hellene” (1997: 247). Such numbers suggest that, far from being available to every resident of Egypt, “passing” as Greek required access to opportunity, an access that was itself presumably strictly monitored, i.e., that first and foremost the transgression of boundaries necessitated a particular, pre-existing privilege conferred by some *other* aspect, or perception, of one’s identity. Clarysse points out well that it is not necessarily the case that holders of offices acquired double names (and hence access to a more fluid identity) as a consequence of their job as opposed to holders of double names gaining offices from the precise measure of status that enabled them to adopt double names in the first place.

Yet I would like to go further in suggesting that the current discussions of ethnicity have themselves frequently articulated a conceptual problem that the term ethnicity alone cannot resolve, namely the terminological crisis that emerges in trying to trying to differentiate identity *categories* from identities claimed in *practice*, a contrast that has been variously termed as the difference between Greek and Greek-speaking (Samuel) or Greek and “Greek” (Thompson). Indeed, such formulations, especially the latter, suggest the persistent dual reference of meaning applied to the terms “Greek” and “Egyptian” in recent scholarship, where one meaning evokes an “essential” or authentic identity and the other, an identity claimed within a specific context. Nowhere is this scholarly expectation of a “true” identity residing beneath contextual identities in Ptolemaic Egypt more apparent than in the continuing debates over a woman who uses both the names Apollonia and Senmouthis in our documents. Not content to consider her *both* Greek *and* Egyptian, scholars have instead persistently sought to answer definitively the question “Was she a Greek or an Egyptian?” (1988: 21). And significantly, while scholars have not interrogated the phrasing of the question itself, they have been unable to agree on an answer. Thus, Bagnall observes a dramatic lack of consensus on her “true” identity, observing that “(t)he last five years have seen four scholars – two Demoticists and two Hellenists – divide evenly in print on this point, with one Demoticist and one Hellenist on each side” (21).¹⁹ In

¹⁹ Robert Ritner criticizes those who deny her Greek identity, claiming that “she explicitly styles herself a ‘Greek’ in both Demotic and Greek legal documents” (1992: 289). Citing Bagnall as one who has called her Egyptian, Ritner argues that these scholars insist on her Egyptianness precisely because they are uncomfortable with the possibility of a Greek woman wanting to act as Egyptian, an act that would be in clear opposition to the general scholarly emphasis on “passing” as a one-way (Egyptian to Greek) process. Yet, as Ritner points out, in many ways the Egyptian legal system was more favorable to women, since,

short, despite recent attention to the fluidity of ethnic identity in practice in Ptolemaic Egypt, no scholar has suggested that performance does more than temporarily undermine more enduring categories of “Greek” and “Egyptian.” Rather than positing the emergence of a new hybrid form of identity in Ptolemaic Egypt (where, for example, the term “Greco-Egyptian” might come to connote possibilities for a more complex form of identification among the ancient residents of Egypt, much like the possibilities of hybrid American identities today), scholars seem to take it for granted that people in this period would have remained permanently affiliated with one category or the other, despite occupying any temporary fluidity between them. Underneath the elaborate double-game of Apollonia and Senmouthis, then, some fundamental identification with one identity or the other is thought to reside – not an identification with the space between, a space to which I will return.

Whether explicitly stated or not, papyrologists thus still depend on the differentiated categories of “Greek” and “Egyptian” to structure the meanings of identity in Ptolemaic Egypt, an assumption that does receive some confirmation in the colonial ideology that underlies certain practices.²⁰ To give Greeks a tax-break, after all, relies on an ideology in which some type of Greek essence is considered superior. Similarly, it cannot be strictly coincidental that the occupations associated with Greek names are generally of higher status than those attached to Egyptian names. And this duality is precisely why I advocate a return to race – not as a replacement, but as a complement to the connotations attached to ethnicity in current study of Ptolemaic Egypt. For race provides a way of giving language to a different, more essentialized, more structural operation informing and producing identity in Ptolemaic Egypt. If ethnicity is used to name the performance or strategy, I believe race can name the ideological category that dictates the consequence of that performance (e.g., the tax break). Indeed, despite the possibilities for fluidity we have witnessed in practice, the Theocritus poem at the beginning of my paper attests to a retention of the concepts, or positions, of “Greek” and “Egyptian” that receive meaning precisely in their categorical opposition – not their blurring. And the evocation of these categories as distinct, as well as the association of each with inverse positions of power, is not restricted to literature.

unlike the Greek system, it allowed women to conduct legal business without a male guardian (289).

²⁰ Goudriaan 1992 seems to situate this distinction in the maintenance of a symbolic, more essential, boundary between Greek and non-Greek, even as cultural practice (such as language) brought the two groups into closer and closer alignment. Goudriaan, however, uses slightly different terminology to express this model – culture and ethnicity rather than ethnicity and race, which I adopt.

In one surviving legal petition dated between the years 222-218 B.C.E, a Greek man, Herakleides, asks the legal authorities to punish the Egyptian woman, Psenobastis, for emptying her chamber pot over his head, emphatically pointing out that he was “for no reason, manhandled by an Egyptian woman, whereas I am a Greek and a visitor” (translated in Lewis, 61), a rhetorical gesture that invites outrage in casting Egyptian/Greek and woman/man as parallel categorical oppositions.²¹ Similarly, the same Ptolemaios, whose literary sensibilities Thompson analyzed previously, complained in a petition in 163 B.C.E. that the temple bakers had “forced their way in with the intention of dragging me out and driving me away, just as they tried to do also in earlier years, when the revolt was on – and that despite the fact that I am a Greek!” (Lewis 1986: 85). Ptolemaios moreover repeats this phrasing “despite the fact that I am a Greek” at least twice in subsequent petitions, once in response to alleged abuse by the temple cleaners, and a second time in response to being hit through a window by stones thrown by “personnel of the temple” (86). Ptolemaios’ complaints not only remind us again (and indeed rhetorically exploit) the occupational distinctions between Greeks and Egyptians (that seems to be the reason he cites the occupations of his attackers), but also allude to the recurring colonial tensions that are only briefly glimpsed in other sources. That Ptolemais’ recourse to the polarizing categories of “Greek” (stated) and “Egyptian” (implied) was not in any way mediated by presumably having an Egyptian roommate, Harmais, and an Egyptian friend, Nektembes, whose dream he recorded (Thompson 1987: 107 and 109-10), suggests the ways in which certain categories, categories founded in ideology and designed to enforce relations of power, are not always disrupted by more fluid social practices. In all, such passages forcefully evoke Greek as a meaningful category, a distinct position of power, even as its precise referent (who counts as Greek) might have been becoming less determinate in social practice – indeed, we might wonder if claims of “Greekness” to people like Ptolemaios acquire such weight (if the boundary is so adamantly set) precisely because the exclusivity of Greekness is being challenged by an increasing fluidity in contemporary social performance.

It is precisely for this ability to name, and therefore make visible, the structural aspect of identity both governing and opposing performance in Ptolemaic Egypt that I advocate a return to the concept of race. My

²¹ In the archive belonging to the *strategos* Diophanes from which this document is taken, Lewis notes that twenty-five papyri (one-fifth of the collection) feature cases brought by Greeks against Egyptians and vice versa, with eighteen of the twenty-five submitted by Greeks (1986: 59-60). The terms “Greek” and “Egyptian” are not always explicitly stated by the petitioner as in the passage quoted, but ethnic tension is inferred because of the names of those involved.

recommendation that we revive use of the specific term race to connote the organizing and essentializing operations of identity, however, may still require some justification. So in the remainder of the essay, I would like to discuss briefly what race means, why I think classicists (including papyrologists) have ceased to employ it in discussing ancient identities, and finally why I believe, given certain connotations that race has acquired, the current conceptual gaps in the study of Ptolemaic Egypt demand its return.

Racial identity has long been thought to categorize identity strictly according to biological features as opposed to ethnicity, which seemed to relate strictly to social features. Recently, however, race's deceptive, albeit potent, claims to being a solely biological category have been exposed; most scholars now recognize that despite its previous status as a pseudo-science, and thus by extension, a natural, universal and objective mode of differentiation, race remains emphatically a product of social construction (Omi and Winant 1994: 65).²² Indeed, as Omi and Winant have argued, the concept of race involves a series of social decisions that not only (in modern terms) privilege a rhetoric of biological essentialism in accounting for race, but also determine *which* biological features to privilege in assigning racial categories (e.g., skin color), the meanings that such features are presumed to signify (e.g., serving as signs of supposed social or intellectual inferiority) and the subsequent uses to which they are put (e.g., rationalizing forms of discrimination). Rather than considering race a static concept, one that holds the same connotations and consequences regardless of context, Omi and Winant propose instead that we treat race as a dynamic formation, that is, as a "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (55). Omi and Winant use race, then, to denote the shifting organizational principles that establish identity and structure its meanings and representations. This emphasis on situating race within its historical and social contexts has led a variety of scholars to scrutinize more closely the workings of race within historically specific social and political sites (e.g., Gates 1997). Perhaps most dramatically, historians have now carefully explicated the ways in which the advent of (post-classical) European colonialism provided a critical juncture in the history of racial ideologies, "legitimizing" racial distinctions through a burgeoning science of race, one centered around visible somatic features, most notably skin color (Omi and Winant 1994: 63-64, Appiah 1992: 13 and *passim*). One of the most critical aspects of contemporary race

²² This conclusion has not only been proposed in academic contexts, but also widely disseminated in the American popular media, including in the science magazine *Discover* in a special issue (November 1994).

theory has therefore been the unveiling of skin color as an arbitrary and overdetermined modern sign of race.

While scholars in other fields have demonstrated the historical specificity of modern racial systems, tracing the origins of racial ideologies centered around “black” and “white” to the period of post-classical European imperialism, it is nevertheless a thesis that has been primarily overlooked by classicists, who have remained trapped within the pervasive modern paradigms of “blackness” and “whiteness” when applying the term race to antiquity. Thus, by the 1970’s the concept of race had become so bounded by the modern system of racial formation that the concept was associated almost exclusively with the question of skin color (i.e., black skin color) in classical scholarship.²³ Although making black skin color the center of such study, scholars found little evidence that it provided a structural foundation for identity in antiquity (Snowden 1970: 218). That is, although ancient authors do at times describe physical appearance, there is little indication that such physical appearance, much less the narrow criterion of skin color, served as a primary basis for identity in ancient ideology.²⁴ Instead, as we have seen in Ptolemaic Egypt, identities in antiquity seem to be based more systematically on practice and cultural traits, such as language.²⁵ Concluding that the ancients did not discriminate according to skin color (the modern basis for racial formation), however, such scholarship overstated its aims in denying any salience to the concept of race itself in ancient studies. Ironically, this has meant that just as other disciplines are devoting more critical attention to the question of race and

²³ In 1970, Frank Snowden, Jr., published his first study of “blacks” in antiquity, a work that has had tremendous influence on the way the concept “race” has been understood in classical scholarship; a few years later, Lloyd Thompson, similarly conducted a study of Roman attitudes toward “blacks” (1989).

²⁴ This is not to deny that the question of ancient skin color holds modern political significance. But it is only when we distinguish the meanings of Cleopatra’s skin color *to us* from the meanings her skin color held *to her* (virtually non-existent) that we apprehend the arbitrary basis of modern racial systems. For racial ideologies in ancient Egypt before the Ptolemies, see Bard 1996, who considers the ways in which the ancient Egyptians represented their own racial identity. Morsy 1996 writes about the impact the debate over the skin color of ancient Egyptians has had on modern political attitudes toward Egyptians and Egyptian identity.

²⁵ A contrasting, albeit now muted, tradition which attempted to define the concept of race within the ancient context can be identified in classical studies, one that I hope can be reinstated. See, for example, D.B. Saddington who quietly repudiated the use of modern models of race and argued for the necessity of using “Roman terms of reference” if “we wish to understand race relations in the early Roman empire” (1975: 134). See also Mudimbe 1992 and Sherwin-White 1967 for examples of ways in which the term “race” can be applied to antiquity without relying on skin color as its primary signifier.

its historic formations, the term has dropped out of the vocabulary of most classical historians altogether.

What would it mean then to employ race as a concept in the time period before “whiteness” acquired categorical force? And, perhaps most importantly, why do I advocate employing race specifically in the case of Ptolemaic Egypt? First of all, it is important to acknowledge that in applying the concept of race to the study of identity during this period, we must always define precisely what we mean the term to connote. I draw, therefore, on the ways that race has been explicated in modern scholarship, including the specific emphasis given to race as a type of formation, an ideological structure within which identities are formed. This does not mean that any comprehensive and coherent boundary between the concepts of race and ethnicity can be firmly established; in fact, most contemporary theoretical discussions of the terms emphasize their confusing sites of convergence. Yet the terms do at times acquire a certain precision in contrast to one another and, in using them explicitly to call attention to divergent traits, can operate effectively within the same critical apparatus. For example, since the concept of race has often connoted a greater degree of difference than ethnicity (Cornell and Hartmann 1998: 26ff, Sollors 1996: xxx), it can be used to help clarify (and indeed emphasize) critical degrees of difference at operation in Ptolemaic Egypt. This connotation of race would be especially useful given that “ethnicity” is currently (and at time confusingly) employed by scholars to name both differences among the Greeks themselves and between Greeks and Egyptians – an overlapping usage that obscures the fact that the distances signified by each pair are not parallel (i.e., the degree of difference between Greek and Egyptian and Macedonian and Syracusan identities is certainly not equivalent in Ptolemaic colonial ideology).²⁶

Using race rather than ethnicity to encapsulate a particular facet of identity formation can furthermore draw attention not to its constructedness (since both types of identity are social constructs), but to the nature of the claims that construct it – for example, whether the identity is based on a type of essentialist thinking, as the use of race often suggests in modern ideology. If race signifies an identity category based in essentialist ideology, the term ethnicity, in turn, can continue to denote an identification claimed through a contextualized performance – one, race, designating the latent structure that grants meaning to the other, ethnicity, the temporal and manifest practice. For it is clear from the Greek women in Theocritus’

²⁶ This means that a study of ethnic identity in Egypt can entirely avoid the question of Egyptians, such as Delia 1996. Clarysse 1998 similarly adopts the term to speak of divergent ethnic identifications within a broader “Greek” identity.

poem that any fluidity in social performance does not necessarily eliminate an appeal to essentialism and stereotype in other arenas. That they must be envisioned in Ptolemaic Egypt as operating in unison, sometimes jarringly so, is therefore critical. K. Anthony Appiah describes a similar mediating site that makes “passing” possible in modern society, namely, a gap “between what a person ascriptively is and the racial identities they perform,” where he uses ascription to signify “the process of applying . . . (a racial) label to people, including ourselves” (1996: 69). In short, that identity may happen precisely in the spaces between institutionalized structures and individual performance.

Using race to identify structure (the production and ascription of “labels”), moreover, allows us to theorize the *conditions* and *limits* of performance in Ptolemaic Egypt, including the power structures that surround and make every performance possible, i.e., the aspects that might control when and by whom such performances could be enacted. Any identity theory based solely on performance would surely be most strongly tested in times of oppression of certain identity types, when self-identification, for example, might not outweigh the external imposition of identities by others holding greater power. This point reminds us to clarify the potentially violent consequences of certain identificatory acts, when, for example, race and stereotype function to enable and justify racism.²⁷ In concluding with emphasis on the often brutal consequences of certain operations, I argue for the use of race finally because it has been employed in contemporary usage to call most persistent attention to the role of power, and relatedly, the abuse of power. Suggesting some of the limitations ethnicity has acquired in its current use, Barker thus argues that “(o)ne problem with the concept of ethnicity, especially in the context of discussions about multiculturalism, is that questions of power and racism are too often sidelined” (63). In adding race to the study of Ptolemaic Egypt, I therefore join scholars in other fields who pointedly “prefer the concept of ‘race’, not because it corresponds to any biological or cultural absolutes, but because it connotes, and refers investigation to, issues of power” (Barker 1999: 63).

In all, Ptolemaic Egypt provides a unique site for studying ancient identity as both a colonial institution and individual practice. Yet it is precisely because of the great opportunity that it provides that we must broaden our models to enable us to comprehend fully all of its complexities, including the areas left primarily invisible in our sources. By adding the

²⁷ Omi and Winant, among others, argue for making clear distinctions between race and racism. They write that “racism can be seen as characterizing some, but not all, racial projects” (1994: 71).

concept of race to such study we achieve a number of aims: we bring the invisible, the marginal to light; we combat structural invisibilities (or we might say the invisibility of structure); and we remain ever attentive to the colonial background, the ideologies, the power relationships, that surround every individual contextualized performance in Ptolemaic Egypt – whether they make themselves felt or whether it is precisely their nature to remain hidden. Whether explicitly articulated in our sources or not, we therefore understand that the category of “Greek” receives its meaning only in reference to the mutual functioning (and subordination) of “Egyptian” in Ptolemaic Egypt. Moreover, when evoking race, despite its own pretensions to hold a “natural status,” one outside of temporal pressures, we understand it as a formation, a process, a set of projects, whose precise meanings and operations in Ptolemaic Egypt we have not had time to fully interrogate here, including the ways they may have shifted over time. We can say that racial identity in this period falls long before the modern fixation on blackness and whiteness. This final reminder of the historical contingency of racial formation is essential, not least because it reveals the arbitrary nature of modern racial formations and, in terms of Ptolemaic Egypt, it prepares the way for the Romans, who loom on the horizon. And when the Romans arrive in Egypt, the forms of identity assigned to its residents will once again be transformed.²⁸

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²⁸ Rostovtzeff 1929 points out some critical changes brought by Roman rule in his examination of the Roman exploitation of Egypt specifically in the first-century C.E. In noted contrast to the seeming (if contextualized) fluidity of identity in Ptolemaic Egypt, the new Roman legal code in Egypt sought to establish and maintain more explicit boundaries between various identity categories (Lewis 1983: 32; see also Alston 1997). Woolf 1994 presents an important discussion of the confrontation between Greek and Roman forms of identity under the Roman empire. The Roman emphasis on citizenship in particular served to both eclipse and even collapse a number of former identity categories. Lewis writes: “If you were an inhabitant of Egypt, but not Roman, a citizen of one of the four poleis, or a Jew, to the Roman government you were an Egyptian. No matter that you were descended from six or seven generations of military reservists, that class of hereditary privilege settled on the land under the Ptolemies. That privileged status was now gone, and with it those ethnic designations by which you used proudly to proclaim your family’s origin in the Greek or Macedonian homeland – Coan, Cretan, Thessalian, and so forth. In the government records you were all now Egyptians, nothing more.” (1983: 31).

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