



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

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Volume 38  
Number 1

Article 8

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October 2019

## Pyramids in America: Rewriting the “Egypt of the West” in Rick Riordan’s *The Kane Chronicles* series

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### Recommended Citation

Cyr, Heather K. (2019) "Pyramids in America: Rewriting the “Egypt of the West” in Rick Riordan’s *The Kane Chronicles* series," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 38: No. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol38/iss1/8>

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### Pyramids in America: Rewriting the “Egypt of the West” in Rick Riordan’s *The Kane Chronicles* series

#### Abstract

In this paper, I examine the use of well-known American landmarks in Rick Riordan’s *The Kane Chronicles* (2010-2012), a set of Children’s Fantasy novels that place Ancient Egyptian mythology in the modern world. With reference to the author’s more famous *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series (2005-2009), this essay focuses on specific American landscapes in the first novel of the Egyptian mythology-inspired series, *The Red Pyramid*, arguing that Riordan’s use of Ancient Egyptian-inspired structures reflects the overall ethos of the text. On one level, Riordan’s use of modern American landmarks signals that new stories using old myths have just as much power as the originals and that renewal is inevitable. On another, Riordan’s particular settings assert America’s power as the inheritor of ancient myths, making the American landscape an appropriate tableau upon which to enact Ancient Egyptian stories. The text’s matrix of American landmarks, some modern and some from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, taps into America’s long history of appropriating Ancient Egyptian forms and symbols; however, the text does little to acknowledge the layers between the source myth and the contemporary landscape, collapsing decades and centuries. I will show that, rather than questioning the foundations of “Western Civilization” within this “old versus new” paradigm and complicating the dissemination of culture and power over time, Riordan’s novels instead use American settings to privilege America’s status as the inheritor of perceived European cultural dominance, emphasizing American cultural forms and structures that re-entrench a brand of American cultural dominance ultimately rooted in nineteenth-century Egyptomania.

#### Additional Keywords

Riordan; Egyptomania; Children’s Literature; Landscape

#### Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Dr. Jason Bourget and Dr. Shelley King for their insight and helpful suggestions.



PYRAMIDS IN AMERICA: REWRITING  
the "Egypt of the West"  
IN RICK RIORDAN'S  
*The Kane Chronicles* SERIES

HEATHER K. CYR

RICK RIORDAN IS WELL-KNOWN for his best-selling books that feature ancient mythological characters and stories within a modern American context. Riordan's works, marketed towards a cross-over audience of older children and younger adolescents, include *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2009), *The Heroes of Olympus* (2010-2014), *The Kane Chronicles* (2010-2012), *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* (2015-2017), and *The Trials of Apollo* (2016-). Among these, *Percy Jackson* is Riordan's most popular, allowing readers of all ages to follow along with Percy's exploits as he discovers that he is the son of a Greek god and that Ancient Greek gods have settled across the United States. The first book, *The Lightning Thief* (2005), has the teen protagonist and his friends travelling across America to uncover the twisted plot behind the theft of Zeus' lightning bolt and to recover the godly weapon before the gods can declare war on each other. In *The Kane Chronicles*, which employ a similar formula using Ancient Egyptian mythology, *The Red Pyramid* (2010), *The Throne of Fire* (2011), and *The Serpent's Shadow* (2012) follow siblings Carter and Sadie Kane on their quest to deal with troublesome Ancient Egyptian gods and, ultimately, Apophis, chaos itself. In the first book of the series, *The Red Pyramid*, the teen protagonists discover that they have inherited magic from the Ancient Egyptian pharaohs and can channel the very gods. Similar to the journey in the first *Percy Jackson* book, Carter and Sadie's discovery leads them across continental America as they hunt the devious red god Set and fulfill fantastic quests linked to American landmarks that have Ancient Egyptian ties. While the formula is comparable, a striking difference can be found in the way the first book of each series incorporates myth into the American landscape. While *The Lightning Thief* focuses more broadly on major American mid-century landmarks such as the Hoover Dam and the Empire State Building, *The Red Pyramid* and its sequels are much more specific about "Egyptian" settings, with Riordan narrowing in on landmarks that have a clear relationship with Ancient Egypt, such as the giant obelisk of the nineteenth-century Washington Monument, Cleopatra's Needle in New York's Central Park, and the modern glass structure of the Memphis Pyramid. By mixing authentic antiquities like New York's Cleopatra's Needle with

modern and nineteenth century recreations and making each equally magical, Riordan's use of settings displaces age as an inherently powerful force, making *The Kane Chronicles* a reversal of what we often see in children's fantasy dealing with antiquities and ancient cultures.<sup>1</sup>

The specific landscapes and landmarks in Riordan's novels carry certain meanings that work together to shape and reflect the overall ethos of the text. On one level, Riordan's use of American landmarks signals that new stories using old myths have just as much power as the originals and that renewal is inevitable. On another, Riordan's particular settings assert America's power as the inheritor of ancient myths, suggesting that the American landscape is an appropriate tableau upon which to enact Ancient Egyptian stories. The text's matrix of American landmarks, some modern and some from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, taps into America's long history of appropriating Ancient Egyptian forms and symbols; however, the text does little to acknowledge the layers between the source myth and the contemporary landscape, collapsing decades and centuries. Instead, Riordan's choice of American landmarks modernizes nineteenth-century American Egyptomania's ideological foundations, reaffirming that America is the new and most powerful empire within (an anachronistic concept of) "Western civilization."<sup>2</sup> While *The Red Pyramid*, like *The Lightning Thief*, occasionally critiques modern American culture (particularly consumerism), Riordan's strategic choice of landmarks serves to reinforce aspects of American self-mythology. By examining select landmarks in *The Red Pyramid* and its sequels, I will show that, rather than questioning the foundations of "Western Civilization" within this "old versus new" paradigm and complicating the dissemination of culture and power over time, Riordan's novels instead use American settings to privilege America's status as the inheritor of perceived European cultural dominance, emphasizing American cultural forms and

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<sup>1</sup> Children's fantasy offers a bounty of powerfully magical ancient objects, sites, and landscapes. Notable examples of texts that equate the age of objects and sites with power and magic include Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising Series* (1965-1977), Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960), and Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet* (1906) to name but a few. For a thorough examination of how landscape and archaeology work in Cooper, see Jane Suzanne Carroll's *Landscapes in Children's Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> In their introduction to *Consuming Ancient Egypt*, Sally MacDonald and Michael Rice suggest, "There is patently a degree of bias that tilts much of the presentation, if not the study, of Egypt's past onto a western axis," a phenomenon that has roots in the "European traditions [that] laid down many of the paradigms which still determine the study of its past in the present day" (3). For information on the long history of Egyptomania and its relationship with Orientalism, see Claudia Gyss, "The Roots of Egyptomania and Orientalism: From the Renaissance to the Nineteenth Century."

structures that re-entrench a brand of American cultural dominance ultimately rooted in nineteenth-century Egyptomania.

Within the small but growing body of critical work on Riordan's novels, I can locate no work on *The Kane Chronicles* specifically; however, several articles examine how myth functions within the contemporary settings of *Percy Jackson* and its accompanying series *The Heroes of Olympus*. Frances Foster and Ginger Stelle, for instance, separately discuss the treatment of death in these novels. In "Visiting the Ancient Land of the Dead in Le Guin and Riordan," Foster reads Ged's and Percy's travels to and through the Underworld against Homer. Among the differences Foster highlights are Percy's long journey in *The Lightning Thief* across "Riordan's loud and commercialized America" (36) and the humorously specific location of the Underworld below the DOA Recording Studios in Los Angeles. Throughout these travels, Foster says, "America is represented by Percy [...] as the inhabited world: Percy does not really consider the world beyond or outside it. Therefore, the western edge of the inhabited world within this context [is] the west coast of the North American continent" (38). While the conceit of *The Kane Chronicles* also makes American landscapes central, it differs in scope: Carter Kane has travelled the world with his archaeologist father, and his and Sadie's quests in the three books lead them to other places including London, Paris, St. Petersburg, and various locales in Egypt; however, not only does this network of places translate Ancient Egypt through a (specifically nineteenth-century) European lens, but the pivotal moments in the story all return to the United States, so the Kanes have a similarly limited perspective of the "inhabited world" (Foster 38).

In "Loyalty, Honor, and Death in Rick Riordan's *Olympus Series*," Stelle examines Riordan's works as "appropriations" of myth. However, while she argues that Riordan's works are "unique" and that his "original story arc[s] [are] set against the backdrop[s] of Classical motifs" (35), Stelle also argues that these works offer an overall stabilizing influence akin to archetypal heroic epics and myths. To support this interpretation, she quotes John Stephens and Robyn McCallum to suggest that Riordan's work, like Classical myth, "invoke[s] a metaethic to stand against the perceived self-absorption and fracturing of identity attributable to late twentieth-century (post)modernism, materialism and cultural relativism" (qtd. in Stelle 36). Amie Doughty finds a slightly more ambivalent message in "Gaea's Last Stand: Uneasy Environmentalism in Rick Riordan's *The Heroes of Olympus*," but ultimately argues that the series has a similar goal of cultural and social cohesion: "Riordan's series can be seen as a metaphor of the level to which disparate peoples, including sworn enemies, must unite to stop Gaea from destroying the world as we know it" (173). Indeed, *The Kane Chronicles* offers a comparable three-book arc of perceived enemies coming together to stop Apophis, or chaos itself, from devouring the world, and,

much like the journey of Percy Jackson examined in Stelle and Foster's articles, Carter and Sadie must travel through the Ancient Egyptian afterlife to do so.

Apart from the fully mythological settings such as Elysium Fields in the *Percy Jackson* series and the Duat in *The Kane Chronicles*, there are other fictional settings that are ostensibly located in this plane of existence but are almost entirely drawn from or inspired by myth. In "Taking a Zebra to Vegas: Allegorical Reality in the Percy Jackson & the Olympians Series," Lily Glasner uses Umberto Eco and Jean Baurillard's conceptions of hyperreality to read several of these locales in *Percy Jackson* such as the Lotus Hotel and Casino (which Riordan places in Las Vegas), C.C.'s Spa and Resort (run, of course, by the wily and powerful Circe), and Daedalus's deadly labyrinth.<sup>3</sup> She argues that these settings function as "enclosures of allegorical reality" (162) in order to facilitate Riordan's critiques of American culture, noting that such enclosures "serve as a looking glass for contemporary Western civilization, mirroring more specifically some of its corrupt and destructive values" (162). Here, Glasner concludes, as do other critics, that "as the narrative progresses, the focus shifts towards a reestablishing of traditional values" (171). While Glasner does not examine non-fictional settings, she does show that the books tie specific built environments to their larger goals of reviving "the great power of the West" (*Lightning Thief* 73). Glasner quotes Chiron the centaur's admonishment to Percy that "all you need to do is look at the [American] architecture" (*Lightning Thief* 73) to see that the gods are not forgotten. She then plays on this concept of architectural form to return to Riordan's mythic foundations of social and cultural cohesion: "if the foundations, the classical heritage, are forgotten, the whole structure, that is the whole of Western civilization, will fall apart" (Glasner 162).

It is notable, then, if these structures are so essential to Riordan's strategy, that alongside the fantastic and fully fictional locations that Glasner focuses on, *Percy Jackson's* American landmarks are not neo-Classical structures. In "A God Buys Us Cheeseburgers': Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* Series and America's Culture Wars," Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson discuss Riordan's style of adaptation, placing particular emphasis on the role of Riordan's

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<sup>3</sup> These fantastic locales are certainly Americanized and contemporized: the Lotus, for example, draws out parallels between the lotus eaters in the *Odyssey* who lose all impulse for anything other than the flowers and the hedonistic loss of time in lavish casinos, "a capitalistic golden cage, controlled by the American slogan 'more'" (Glasner 163). *The Kane Chronicles* features similar myth-inspired fantastic locales such as the Hall of Judgment in the Ancient Egyptian afterlife which metamorphizes variously into a New Orleans graveyard (featuring a gorgeous and brooding teen version of Anubis) and a Los Angeles apartment; however, my interest here lies in how Riordan anchors his narrative within real American landmarks and landscapes.

“tripartite” authorial persona as author, former middle school teacher, and “franchising phenomenon” (236).<sup>4</sup> They spend some time examining the landmarks in *Percy Jackson*, including settings such as the Empire State Building and the Hoover Dam: “Riordan’s series seems particularly interested in venues that both evoke American greatness in the mid-twentieth century and have been the destinations of countless family car trips [...]. [These] iconic settings used in the series are not neoclassical structures memorializing our coopting of the Greek national brand” (249). This stands in a stark contrast to *The Kane Chronicles* which, especially in its first book, *The Red Pyramid*, hews much more closely to forms and structures that are recognizably Ancient Egyptian. Interestingly, as Morey and Nelson point out, “Riordan does not stage showdowns between Percy and the Titans in the Lincoln Memorial or the U.S. Capitol” (249). However, in *The Red Pyramid*, the Washington Monument plays a major role, suggesting that Riordan’s Ancient Egyptian-inspired texts are more eager to make clear—and less metaphorical—connections between the Ancient Egyptian past and the contemporary American present. Since the first book of the series, which sees Carter and Sadie travel across the continental United States, best illuminates Riordan’s engagement with Ancient Egyptian antiquities and recreations in the American landscape, I will focus on that text. Below, I examine several specific settings from *The Red Pyramid*, moving from the Rosetta Stone in London’s British Museum through the siblings’ travels to the final confrontation at the Washington Monument, to demonstrate how the text brings American landscapes and monuments into a (mostly European) network of Ancient Egyptian structures and privileges American sites within this network.

Much like *Percy Jackson* before it, *The Red Pyramid* begins with teen characters who discover their powers under extreme circumstances. Siblings Carter and Sadie Kane ascertain that they are among a group of magicians with clandestine powers who are descended from the pharaohs and are charged with secretly maintaining the fragile balance between the gods and the rest of the oblivious human race. In *The Red Pyramid*, Carter and Sadie start their quest at the British Museum, where the explosive destruction of the renowned Rosetta Stone introduces the series’ connection between America and Ancient Egypt.

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<sup>4</sup> Morey and Nelson make a dual argument with regard to Riordan’s place within larger debates about adapting “high culture and classical tradition” (236) for the masses. They trace Riordan’s indebtedness to John Dewey’s perspective on “constructing a curriculum relevant to the child’s experience and of integrating the educational with knowledge of one’s immediate environment” (237), particularly in regards to how education builds effective citizenship. They then bring this reading of Dewey to bear on an examination of the structural similarities in Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* and Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (1959), arguing that “[b]oth series and film establish an equivalency among the American, the adolescent, and the defense of culture through play” (237).

Carter and his father, famed American archaeologist (and secret magician) Julius Kane, return from their travels to archaeological sites and museums around the world to visit London where Sadie, who, although an American citizen, has lived with her English grandparents since their mother's death. Sadie, the apparent victim of an odd and fractious custody battle, later discovers that she and Carter were purposefully kept separate because being in proximity sparked their individual magic potential. During their annual reunion outing, Julius takes his children on what appears to be a boring work trip to the British Museum for a private viewing of the Rosetta Stone. Sadie is unimpressed: "Christmas Eve, and we're going to see some moldy old relics from Egypt" (11). Julius, however, is not rebuffed by his children's reticence,<sup>5</sup> telling them that the famous stone (which French Egyptologist Jean-François Champollion discovered was the key to interpreting hieroglyphics) was, "[w]hen it was first carved, [...] no big deal" (*The Red Pyramid* 20),<sup>6</sup> though "over the centuries it has become a powerful symbol. Perhaps the most important connection between Ancient Egypt and the modern world. I was a fool not to realize its potential sooner" (20).<sup>7</sup> Here, Riordan introduces Classical learning as essential (clues

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<sup>5</sup> Carter and Sadie's annoyance at the extraordinary opportunity of a private viewing of the Rosetta Stone fits with Percy reluctantly attending a torturous school trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Sheila Murnaghan argues that the *Percy Jackson* books perform a rhetorical bait and switch in that Percy's narrative clearly implies an audience that agrees learning and school are "uncool," yet the texts also present an argument for the place of Classical learning within modern society and the "coolness" of Percy (and the Kanes) is positioned as an entry into ancient myth: "[Riordan] is calculating that if he enters robustly into an anti-elitist, low-cultural view of the classics, he can somehow promote the more elitist, high cultural values with which they are also identified; that by agreeing that school is boring, he can make kids want to learn; that by denying that myths are metaphors requiring interpretation, he can get kids to benefit from the fact that they are" (Murnaghan 352).

<sup>6</sup> Champollion (1790-1832) built upon the efforts of Thomas Young to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics. In 1822, he published his translation of the Rosetta Stone, forever altering the study of Ancient Egypt. *The Red Pyramid* ascribes Champollion's breakthrough to an effort to control magic: "You know that when Champollion first deciphered hieroglyphics, he fell into a coma for five days? He became the first man outside the House of Life to ever unleash their magic, and it almost killed him" (*The Red Pyramid* 230). In the novels, one of the Kanes' enemies-then-allies, the 200-year-old powerful French magician, Michel Desjardins, is the great-nephew of Champollion.

<sup>7</sup> Later, their Uncle Amos explains, "You see, as Egypt faded, its magic collected and concentrated into its remaining relics. Most of these, of course, are still in Egypt. But you can find some in almost every major museum. A magician can use these artifacts as focal points to work more powerful spells" (*The Red Pyramid* 75). While the relics contain power, Riordan clearly also gives power to recreations, making Amos' explanation of powerful relics incomplete.



about the stone will help Carter and Sadie later), sets up the idea that an object does not inherently contain power just because of its age, and also gives a glimpse into how these texts and objects that define the present's relationship with Ancient Egypt are easily co-optable and translated through colonial acquisition.

Instead of acknowledging power as something that belongs to age, Julius suggests that an accumulation of meaning can give power to an artifact, an idea that translates to the American recreations that will play a major role later in the text. As Julius notes, the power of the Rosetta Stone is not innate; when it was created, it was "[n]othing important. It's basically a thank-you letter from some priests to King Ptolemy V" (*The Red Pyramid* 20). However, since it has gained power through its recent history, the Rosetta Stone has gained authority and meaning as the metaphorical key to the past, its pride of place at the British Museum, and its symbolic representation of colonial exploits in Egypt. These accumulated layers of meaning make it powerful—and an appropriate conduit for Julius' magic. When Julius performs a spell that blows up the Rosetta Stone and unleashes five major gods of the Ancient Egyptian pantheon, he is immediately overtaken by Osiris. At first, the red god of chaos, Set, is the only other god who appears, trapping Julius (who is now fused with Osiris) in a sarcophagus that sinks through the floor and disappears. In a meta-textual moment that sets up the series, Set then declares: "Now let the story be told anew. And this time you shall *never* rise!" (26).<sup>8</sup> Set wants to rewrite the myth in which he lost power because his brother and sister gods trapped him, and he chooses America as the place to do it, heading to Arizona to build the titular red pyramid that will summon chaos. Much like his character, Riordan sets out to renew Ancient Egyptian mythology for young audiences, and he strategically chooses to import this mythology to America in order to do it.

After their father disappears while performing his spell using the Rosetta Stone, Carter, Sadie, and Muffin, Sadie's cat (actually the disguised cat goddess, Bast, who becomes their protector), are soon whisked away by their estranged magician uncle Amos to Brooklyn, New York, where they discover

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<sup>8</sup> In Ancient Egyptian myths (there are several variations), Osiris was the first god-king of Egypt and had four godly siblings (Set, Nephthys, Isis, and Horus). His brother Set usurped his throne and murdered him. Osiris posthumously impregnated his wife/sister Isis who gave birth to their son/brother Horus who triumphs over Set and resurrects Osiris, who takes his place as lord of the afterlife. With the cooperation of the gods, Horus takes over the throne and becomes the rightful king of Egypt from whom all other kings and pharaohs (including the Kaness) are descended. Later in the novel, the Kaness learn that the gods' mortal forms die and the gods assume new forms: "Horus, who in one lifetime was their brother, was born into a new life as their son." As Sadie says, "That's confusing. [...] And a little gross" (179-180).

their family is part of The House of Life. The House is a millennia-old sect of magicians split into Nomes—or magical guilds—all over the world. When Carter confuses the term—"Gnome? [...] Like those little runty guys?" (*The Red Pyramid* 52)—, Amos explains: "*Nome*, n-o-m-e. As in a district, a region. The term is from ancient times, when Egypt was divided into forty-two provinces. Today, the system is a little different. We've gone global. The world is divided into three hundred and sixty nomes. Egypt, of course, is the First. Greater New York is the Twenty-first" (52-53).<sup>9</sup> The nomes' task is to keep Ancient Egyptian magic traditions alive and also to keep the fractious Ancient Egyptian gods contained away from the world, a tradition that the Kanes come to challenge when they discover that channeling the gods is the only way to defeat Set. That the practitioners of Ancient Egyptian magic are scattered across the world speaks to the diffuseness of Ancient Egyptian history and myth, but Set's choice of America and the setting of Brooklyn House make America central within this matrix (later in the books, we also see that the Texas nome is an important player). Brooklyn House, which "look[s] like a cross between a modern museum and an ancient temple" (53), is both a hip loft (equipped with a pool inhabited by a magical crocodile and a basketball court dominated by a basketball-loving ape) and the magical headquarters of the 21<sup>st</sup> nome. Its location fits within Riordan's schema of calling upon certain historical strata of meaning. Amos explains why the house is in Brooklyn and not New York: "In ancient times, the east bank of the Nile was always the side of the living, the side where the sun rises. The dead were buried west of the river. It was considered bad luck, even dangerous, to live there. The tradition is still strong among . . . our people" (*The Red Pyramid* 51-52). Riordan migrates this Ancient Egyptian superstition from the Nile to the Hudson River, overlaying the two landscapes. Later, in *The Throne of Fire*, Riordan finds a more concretely American reason for Brooklyn House's location: the Brooklyn Museum. Among the most famous European Egyptologists of the nineteenth century (Champollion, Howard Carter, Auguste Mariette, Flinders Petrie, Adolf Erman, etc.), there are few Americans of note with some exceptions including Charles Edwin Wilbour (1833-1896) whose collections and library are housed at the Brooklyn Museum; "[p]lus, the

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<sup>9</sup> The "three hundred and sixty nomes" that Amos mentions are based on the traditional nomes (districts) of Ancient Egypt situated along the Nile. Since Cairo is the first nome, Brooklyn's position at 21 marks it as a curiously early adoptee into this imagined worldwide system. The number 21 is especially odd if 360 represents longitudinal lines in a circle (counting from number one in Cairo does not make New York number 21). The number 360 also refers to the days of the year in the Ancient Egyptian calendar apart from the five "demon days" (see below). Furthermore, Riordan sets up an expectation here of a global network, but his texts themselves focus on the triangle of Egypt, Europe, and the United States of America, a relationship mirrored by nineteenth-century Egyptomania.

Brooklyn Museum has the largest collection of Egyptian magic scrolls in the world. That's why our uncle Amos had located his headquarters in Brooklyn" (*The Throne of Fire* 6). To explain his American sites, Riordan reaches into the layers of association and draws upon both the symbolic landscape of the left bank and the more tangible landscape of the Brooklyn Museum's collections.<sup>10</sup>

What distinguishes Riordan's use of landscape in *The Red Pyramid* from *The Lightning Thief* is the way in which each privileges American culture in the context of ancient mythology. While *The Red Pyramid* focuses specifically on America's inheritance of Ancient Egyptian forms that are linked to nineteenth-century Egyptomania, *The Lightning Thief* empowers sites that are recognizably American rather than Greek. A major site in *The Lightning Thief* is the Empire State Building, where Riordan locates Olympus. As Morey and Nelson point out, the Empire State Building "touts itself (among other things, through eight illuminated panels in its lobby) as the 'Eighth Wonder of the World,' challenging the primacy of the ancient world's original seven" (250). *The Kane Chronicles*, in contrast, at least appears to be fitting Brooklyn (and all of America) into a network of Ancient Egyptian sites, whereas *The Lightning Thief*'s other major monuments such as the Gateway Arch and Hoover Dam "are advertisements for modern progress, which by definition posits the inadequacy of the past" (Morey and Nelson 250). In this sense, *The Kane Chronicles* offers American landscapes as inheritors of a tradition, interweaving antiquities and recreations, and suggesting that the past can be integrated and appropriated rather than triumphed over.

Just as Carter and Sadie start to reconcile themselves to their new life, despite disturbing dreams that reveal Set's plans in the Arizona desert, they find themselves on the run and escape from Brooklyn to New York and, specifically, move toward some authentic antiquities housed in that city. After a showdown with monsters, they desperately make their way towards the nearest site that could serve as a magical portal, Cleopatra's Needle in Central Park, the twin obelisk to the London needle where their mother died attempting a major spell that, had it worked, would have stopped chaos before Julius had to resort to becoming one with Osiris. Carter describes the needle as fairly abandoned, "A little over seventy feet tall, it looked like an exact copy of the needle in London. It was tucked away on a grassy hill, so it actually felt isolated, which is hard to

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<sup>10</sup> Riordan carefully layers his own stories as well as historical ones. Uncle Amos gives another reason why the nome's headquarters is not situated in Manhattan: "Manhattan has other problems. Other gods. It's best we stay separate" (*The Red Pyramid* 52). For readers of the *Percy Jackson* series, it is obvious that he refers to Mount Olympus, situated directly above the Empire State Building.

achieve in the center of New York" (*The Red Pyramid* 123).<sup>11</sup> These twin needles represent a nineteenth-century trans-Atlantic obsession all things Ancient Egyptian; obelisks like these were symbols of power for nations that wished to align themselves with and emulate what they saw as the first and longest running of all great empires: Ancient Egypt. Riordan's conspicuous use of the London and New York needles as power-laden landscapes reaffirms this appropriation as well as the texts' approach to the Ancient Egyptian past as translated through European colonial exploits and the political frameworks that shaped Egyptomania. The New York Cleopatra's Needle, built in 1450 BCE in Heliopolis, was imported to New York during the height of American Egyptomania. In *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*, Elliott Colla explains, "For rising empires, both ancient and modern, Egypt has always been a symbol of ancient sovereignty whose power might be grasped through acquisition (or reproduction) of its monumental objects—hence the conspicuous placement of obelisks in Rome, London, Paris, New York, and Washington" (Colla 21). Bob Brier, in his book *Egyptomania*, traces the journeys of these famous obelisks as Egyptomania drove major world cities.<sup>12</sup> He describes the events of 1878 when, to great fanfare and popular interest, London erected its Cleopatra's Needle on the bank of the Thames not far from Westminster, and, as Brier says, "New York was suffering from obelisk envy" (Brier 112).

Egyptomania-driven New York wanted to be a part of this network of powerful sites associated with Ancient Egypt, so the city set out, at great cost and logistical effort, to bring an obelisk to America.<sup>13</sup> The city also went to great

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<sup>11</sup> While Riordan's book was published in 2010, it seems his interest in reinvigorating these links to Ancient Egypt, and the neglected Central Park needle in particular, was anticipatory. Soon after, the New York needle was the subject of political maneuvering when, in 2011, Zahi Hawass, the outspoken then-minister of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, called for New Yorkers to properly take care of their decaying obelisk or lose it. In a letter to New York officials he wrote, "If the Central Park Conservancy and the City of New York cannot properly care for this obelisk, [...] I will take the necessary steps to bring this precious artifact home and save it from ruin" (Foderaro A21). In response, the Met launched a series of lectures and an exhibition in the spring of 2014 to accompany the refurbishment of the needle by the Central Park Conservancy Department. It seems all things Ancient Egyptian are in fashion again.

<sup>12</sup> In the nineteenth century, Rome had at least eight ancient obelisks that were taken from Egypt during the Classical period's years of conquest and conflict. Paris had the L'Aiguille de Cléopâtre—more accurately known as the Luxor obelisk—installed in 1833 in the Place de Concord, where the guillotine that killed Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI once stood, as a symbol of peace and, undoubtedly, a reminder of French plunder in Egypt.

<sup>13</sup> The New York Cleopatra's Needle is one of a pair built ca. 1450 BCE at the command of the Pharaoh Thutmose III in Heliopolis, removed to Alexandria by the Romans, gifted by

trouble to celebrate the event as it metaphorically placed itself alongside these other great world cities in an age of empire. When the cornerstone for New York's obelisk was installed in New York's Central Park, within view of the then brand-new Metropolitan Museum of Art, on October 9, 1880, thousands of Freemasons marched through the streets of New York to the park where they performed an elaborate ceremony. The large fanfare was hardly surprising; as the authors of *Obelisk: A History* point out, obelisks mean different things to different nations at different times:

Obelisks, everyone seems to sense, connote some very special kind of power. [...] But the simple association of obelisks with political might is too simple. For though they have always been associated with power, obelisks have not always represented the same sort of power or represented power in the same way. Partly because they are so inscrutable, partly because they serve no practical purpose, obelisks have served as a sort of Rorschach test for civilizations. (Curran et al. 7-8)

If they are such a "Rorschach test" (7), the neglected state of the Central Park needle suggests that the United States has neglected its own relationship to a kind of foundational power bestowed by the ancient past, one that the Kane siblings—as the inheritors of Brooklyn House—can renew. Since both of the American obelisks that Riordan uses in *The Red Pyramid*—the "original" in Central Park and the Washington Monument's "modern copy"—have strong ties to Freemasons (Freemasons took part in laying the cornerstones for both structures), Riordan's novel alludes to American freemasonry's links with pharaonic and mystical power. Furthermore, Amos's exhortation to "Look at the pyramid on the dollar bill" (72)—with its Eye of Providence, a Christian symbol that bears a striking resemblance to the Eye of Horus or Eye of Ra—serves a

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Egypt's Khedive to America during a time of immense Egyptian political instability in 1879, and brought from Alexandria to New York—its twin is the London needle that had sparked such popular excitement. Maybe it is because the Romans had previously moved the London-New York pair to a temple built by Cleopatra in 12 BCE that the three obelisks in Paris, New York, and London (each visited by the Kanes in the series) are all called "Cleopatra's Needle," but they were all carved a millennium before her lifetime. As Carter, Sadie, and their father arrive at the London needle in the first chapter of *The Red Pyramid*, Carter submits, "[I]t doesn't have anything to do with Cleopatra. I guess the British just thought the name sounded cool when they brought it to London" (*The Red Pyramid* 12). The moniker, no doubt, was given to increase their mystery and popularity by associating the much older obelisks with Ancient Egypt's most storied leader. By leaving Cleopatra out of the story entirely, and making this correction about the needle, Riordan suggests a savvier relationship to ancient antiquities than his forebears, but his strategy appears to share many similarities.

similar purpose. Riordan makes clear the history of appropriating Ancient Egypt's symbolic power at America's very foundations, but he also renews the symbolic power of these appropriations by giving them actual magical power.

Riordan further strengthens the theme of modern renewal of ancient power in his handling of Sadie and Carter's magical potential. Despite the power of Egyptian artifacts, Sadie cannot open a portal at the needle, although later in the book she will use several modern Egyptian-inspired structures like the Louvre Pyramid and the Washington Monument to create powerful portals. Here, however, Riordan delays Sadie's ability to tap fully into her magical ability, forcing the protagonists to go to Egypt itself, only to discover that the landscape of their origins matters little. Chased by the scorpion goddess Serquet and defended by Bast, the Kanes make a mad dash from Cleopatra's Needle in Central Park to the much more public Temple of Dendur inside the Met, another "authentic" Ancient Egyptian artifact,<sup>14</sup> prominently displayed inside a protective glass wing of New York's premier museum. At the Temple of Dendur, Sadie and Carter hide from Serquet and are reluctantly saved by Zia Rashid, a young magician from the House of Life who believes the American magicians are renegades breaking the age-old rule about channeling the gods. Zia takes them through a portal, created using the temple, to visit the Chief Lector Iskandar in the First Nome, housed in the ruins of Heliopolis under the Cairo Airport. Zia, a traditionally trained magician, can easily use the antiquity to channel magic even though Sadie could not, suggesting at first that Zia, with her training and ties to Egypt, is more powerful. However, Sadie and Carter discover that, despite the accepted wisdom that they need the training they can receive in Cairo, they have the abilities they need already inside of them. Representative of America itself, they represent a new generation—born in Los Angeles to a white British mother and an African American father—ready to carry on the legacy of Ancient Egyptian magic without traditional ties to the First Nome and Egypt itself.

The text further suggests that a modern take on ancient power is superior when the Kanes begin to learn about their powers at the First Nome, the central base and training center for all magicians using Ancient Egyptian magic. They discover that the House of Life is corrupted, and the traditional approach to the threat of the gods—"binding and banishing them whenever they appear" (*The Red Pyramid* 77)—is no longer working. The pharaohs themselves channeled the gods, with mixed results: "[Gods] can overpower

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<sup>14</sup> The Temple of Dendur was built by the Romans in 15 B.C.E. and dedicated to Isis and Osiris, as Carter explains much to Sadie's chagrin: "'When they occupied Egypt,' Carter said, like this was delightful information. 'Augustus commissioned it'" (137). The temple features relief carvings of Augustus in the regalia of a pharaoh in Ancient Egyptian style.

their hosts, literally burn them out. That is why so many hosts die young. Tutankhamen, poor boy, died at nineteen" (180). Based on their "most important law, issued by Chief Lector Iskandar in Roman times" (77), the House of Life has made channeling gods and their powers forbidden (and punishable by banishment and possibly death), but Carter and Sadie realize, as their parents had, that channeling the friendlier of the erratic gods is the only way to defeat Set, as it takes a god's power to defeat a god. The House wishes to cling to tradition, but Carter and Sadie immediately see that tradition isn't working. As Sadie puts it, "That's what you're worried about—just because of something our great-times-a-thousand grandparents did? That's completely daft" (*The Red Pyramid* 195). The failure on the part of the Cairo magicians to see that the mistakes of the past do not necessarily set the path for the future further suggests America as inheritor: the traditions of Ancient Egypt are no longer working and cannot save America from the malevolent god Set. Carter and Sadie, the young upstarts from the American nome Brooklyn House, must therefore prove the ancient order of magicians wrong in order to save the United States and the world. These biracial American children will learn that they have the "blood of the pharaohs" (181), and their modern take on an old tradition is a truer and more powerful use of Ancient Egyptian magic than the House's millennia-old approach.

Once they leave Cairo, the Kanes travel to Paris to steal an ancient spell book that is the key to controlling Set, but soon head to the very heart of American power: Washington, D.C. They wish to return to America with the book and use it against their enemy, but they end up being chased through the streets of Paris by an unfriendly French magician, so Sadie uses the Louvre's distinctly modern glass pyramid (famously designed by Chinese-American architect I.M. Pei) to desperately open a portal to the USA, hoping that travelling to America will help them escape the dangers of antagonistic French magicians and vengeful gods. With no particular destination in mind other than the United States, Sadie's portal lands them inside the observation rooms at the Washington Monument. Bast—the cat goddess and the Kanes' helper who was once freed from eternal prison by their mother—clarifies that the monument is the "biggest obelisk ever constructed" and "the default portal for the U.S.—the largest single source of Egyptian power in North America" (*The Red Pyramid* 239).<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that her earlier spell using the ancient obelisk in Central Park failed, Sadie's portal spell works to link together the Louvre Pyramid and the

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<sup>15</sup> The Washington Monument was constructed between 1848-1885 (its construction was interrupted by the Civil War) and stands 169.046 m tall. For Ancient Egyptians, obelisks were decorative and ritualistic structures often built in pairs at the entrances of temples; they represent a solid beam of sunlight that symbolizes the sun god Ra.

Washington Monument, two recreations of Ancient Egyptian structures, reaffirming the power of recreations. The "default portal" is a nineteenth-century creation at the center of American political power (Carter, looking out the window, immediately points out the White House). A loud humming surrounds them, and Bast explains where the mysterious vibrations are coming from:

"What is that?" I asked. "The wind?"

"Magic energy," Bast said. "I told you, this is a powerful monument."

"But it's modern. Like the Louvre pyramid. Why is it magic?"

"The Ancient Egyptians were excellent builders, Sadie. They picked shapes—obelisks, pyramids—that were charged with symbolic magic. An obelisk represents a sunbeam frozen in stone—a life-giving ray from the original king of the gods, Ra. It doesn't matter *when* the structure was built: it is still Egyptian." (*The Red Pyramid* 242)

This emphasis on intention, the very shape of the building, rather than its age or history, neatly fits into Riordan's strategy. He can claim that the building is from the coveted category of "origin"—drawing upon *nostos*—because Ancient Egyptian mythology is older than many other pantheons, and he can also make the Washington Monument and other relatively newer American sites fantastical because he underscores the importance of the shape of the obelisk over its age. The monument can stand for the power of America and the lingering influence of Ancient Egypt simultaneously. Its age doesn't matter. So, while the Washington Monument is an American-built and relatively modern structure—Carter's assertion that a monument Americans consider historic is "modern" shows that even the young protagonist sees age as relative—Riordan can place it in the same category as "authentic" Ancient Egyptian structures residing in the American landscape like the earlier Cleopatra's Needle. Later in the text, after the Kanes track Set and his minions across the American landscape to Washington, D.C. and through Nashville and Memphis to New Orleans—essentially following the "Nile of America," the Mississippi,<sup>16</sup>—, they then turn West towards their ultimate confrontation at a magical (fictional) pyramid in the Arizona desert, which is where Set hopes to regain his destructive powers.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Abraham Lincoln made the most famous instance of this association between the Mississippi and Nile Rivers (and geographical wealth of the American and Ancient Egyptian civilizations) in his second annual message to Congress on Dec. 1, 1862 when he called for the erasure of any "lines of separation" in order to keep whole the "Great Egypt of the West" (Lincoln).

<sup>17</sup> Other stops on their quest include the Memphis Pyramid, a glass two-thirds replica of the Pyramid of Giza which was opened in 1991 and formerly housed the Memphis



Before they can confront Set, the Kanes must trace the goddess Nephythys to attempt to get her help in defeating her brother god. Since she is the goddess most associated with rivers in Ancient Egyptian mythology, they track her to the Rio Grande, suggesting again a wholesale importation of Ancient Egyptian mythology into the American continent and an overlaying of the Egyptian and American landscapes. As the Kanes make their way to the banks, wary of monsters that may be lingering in the waters, Bast explains, “We just climb our way down to the river through a few miles of sand, cacti, and rattlesnakes, looking out for the Border Patrol, human traffickers, magicians, and demons—and summon Nephthys” (379). While Riordan often uses the convergence of fantasy and consensus reality to generate humor—the Kanes’ battle in the Jungle Room at Graceland Ranch is an example—here, Carter has a moment of introspection when he sees “a family of immigrants crossing midstream” (381). He narrates that he’d “heard stories about how thousands of people cross the border from Mexico illegally each year, looking for work and a better life, but it was startling to actually see them in front of me—a man and a woman hurrying along, carrying a little girl between them” (381). Scanning them to see if they are a “supernatural threat,” instead Carter sees kinship with the desperate refugees: “The man gave me a wary look and we seemed to come to a silent understanding: we both had enough problems without bothering each other” (381). The text’s brief description is sympathetic if oddly gentle—“looking for work and a better life” but no mention of fleeing violence—but it is brief and almost perfunctory, marking a moment in the novel when Riordan glances against but doesn’t grapple with the layers in the “real” American landscape.

In an effort to situate these American-Ancient Egyptian sites within a global network, Riordan moves quickly past opportunities to investigate the troubled layers within the American landscape itself. Carter will save the world from Set and, in the later books of the series Apophis—chaos itself—, but all of his magic will not end the humanitarian crises at America’s border; the threat is not supernatural, but the conception of America as symbolized by Carter and Sadie’s hope-filled and Egyptomania-inflected reading of the Washington Monument is under threat nonetheless. Haunting the margins of Riordan’s text are indications that suggest this vision of hope is naïve and essentially corrupt for what it does not confront. Carter, as a young Black man, cannot, early in the books, shake his father’s warning that “[p]eople will judge you more harshly”

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Grizzlies basketball but is currently a Bass Pro Shops megastore, and Graceland, where they must retrieve retrieve an ankh “necklace with a silver loop-topped cross” (308) that belonged to Elvis and is “Powerful magic!” (313).

(67).<sup>18</sup> Carter's magic can help him travel across oceans and through the afterlife itself, but, as a young Black man, he shares a kinship with the refugees beyond the brief glance that the text provides: Despite all of his abilities and his magical lineage, Carter still struggles in *The Red Pyramid* with being a marginalized body in public spaces.<sup>19</sup> Readers who encountered *The Kane Chronicles* during the Obama administration may see parallels between the first African American president and Riordan's first biracial protagonist, a studious and empathetic young man who becomes a powerful leader and symbol of hope; contemporary readers may be unable to easily read past these moments that Riordan has placed in the margins of the text without pause. These issues of representation echo across the spaces of the novel, from Carter's brief moment of recognizing refugees crossing Rio Grande through Riordan's grander strategy of landscape.

Riordan reinscribes Ancient Egyptian myth on the American landscape, perhaps nowhere more obviously than in locating the villain's eponymous pyramid anachronistically in the Arizona desert. Essentially, a

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<sup>18</sup> Throughout the text Carter struggles particularly with his clothing, wishing to dress casually like his peers, but feeling the weight of his father's advice about how others may view him: "I wanted to wear shorts and a T-shirt. Why couldn't I be comfortable? [...]" 'Carter, you're getting older. You're an African American man. People will judge you more harshly, and so you must always look impeccable' (67). Much like his treatment of environmentalism in the *Heroes of Olympus* texts, moments like this in the text suggest Riordan leaning into the realism of the texts' settings and gently nudging his readers towards understanding complex social issues. Although Riordan's 2010 text touches ever-so-briefly upon issues of race and gender, the public conversations after the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin, in particular, and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, more generally, make Riordan's brief acknowledgement of the potential racism (and violence) that Carter may face a much more difficult moment in the book; what is not addressed looms large.

<sup>19</sup> Near the end of the *The Red Pyramid*, Carter, encouraged by his sister, dons the clothing his father warned him about. His seemingly magical closet at Brooklyn House offers him linen clothes (good for magic), "[m]y old clothes [...] freshly cleaned—a button-down shirt, starched khaki slacks, loafers," and "some Reeboks, blue jeans, a T-shirt, and a hoodie" (509). Carter chooses the latter and is "self-conscious," suggesting to Sadie, "Dad would probably think I look like a gangster . . .", but Sadie announces, "It's brilliant, Carter. You look almost like a regular teenager! And Dad would think [...] you look like an impeccable magician, because that's what you are" (509). While there are a number of issues to unpack here, Carter's self-consciousness and inability to do something as seemingly simple as to select the clothing of "a regular teenager" without issue is especially troublesome. The text appears to offer this as a moment of liberation for the "buttoned-up" Carter, but the slippage between fantasy and reality springs to the fore. The optimism of the Obama era and the empowering influence of Carter's magic chafe against the systems that the monuments to nineteenth-century Egyptomania represent: the perceived greatness of civilizations built upon the foundations of slavery.

mythical battle with an Ancient Egyptian god becomes a good old-fashioned magical shoot-out on the familiar dusty stage of the American West. If Washington is the symbolic and literal capital of the country, the Southwestern desert represents another aspect of American power: the myth of the frontier and its ideals of rugged individualism. The text draws on this powerful mythology, suggesting that America is, in many ways, a clean canvas for the chief antagonist of *The Red Pyramid*. Set builds his red pyramid, the heart of his power that will unleash chaos, in the Arizona desert at Phoenix's Camelback Mountain: "Phoenix. How appropriate! And the desert so much like home! All it needs is to be scoured of life. The desert should be a sterile place, don't you think?" (64). The text sets up Camelback Mountain in Phoenix as an easily coopted space—Carter refers to it as a "barren mountain" (63)—and, therefore, open to Set's intrusion. "Phoenix," of course, is the Greek word for the "bennu" of ancient Egyptian mythology, and this simple association makes Camelback Mountain an appropriate choice for the text because Set believes that the symbolism in the city name gestures towards his rebirth, and the desert setting works within the larger conceit of identifying ancient Egyptian resonances within the American landscape.<sup>20</sup> However, Set's pyramid-building in Arizona also appeals to a troubling and anachronistic ideal of the frontier as an uninhabited landmass where American culture looks towards Ancient Egypt for forms and symbols.

Despite Set and Carter's descriptions in the novel, Camelback is not a "barren mountain" (63) at all. This location, in particular, shows the difficulties of deploying a landscape in service to one mythological narrative when that landscape already has its own layers of stories. As is the case with Greek mythology in *Percy Jackson*, Riordan attempts to keep *The Kane Chronicles'* narrative free from contact with other mythologies and histories. But this can lead to creating an absence where other historical layers could be represented, and Camelback is notable because the absence here includes indigenous peoples and their mythologies and histories. Camelback Mountain has a long history in the American landscape. It was a center of religious significance for the pre-historic Hohokam People, and it was, in 1879, declared an Indian Reservation on behalf of the Salt River Pima and Maricopa tribes, only for that decision to be quickly reversed due to the efforts of officials and non-native residents. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the citizens of Phoenix engaged in protracted disagreements over

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<sup>20</sup> The choice of "Phoenix" also works as foreshadowing because, in ancient Egyptian texts, the bennu is often associated with either Osiris or Ra. Carter and Sadie, children of the newly established Osiris, defeat Set at the Red Pyramid, and, in the next two books of the series, bring back the sun god, Ra. So, rather than a rebirth of Set's powers of chaos, the setting of Phoenix works as the first in a three-part arc that marks a rebirth of stability, in tune with the mythic resonances of Riordan's text.

whether the mountain should be preserved or developed. In "The Straw That Broke the Camel's Back: Preservation of an Urban Mountain Landscape," Josh Protas discusses the decades-long civic and legal battles that culminated in the 1968 decision to make the area into a city park. He argues that "The preservation of Camelback Mountain is significant in that it illustrates the contested nature of both the mental and physical landscapes in Phoenix and in the West" (380). Rather than a blank canvas for Set's pyramid, Camelback has its many layers of history that complicate tropes of an uninhabited and romanticized western frontier. The finale of the battle, however, does not take place on Camelback Mountain; instead, the novel uses Set's pyramid to set up the Washington Monument as the most significant landmark and the National Mall as the most significant landscape in the novel.

Set's menacing red pyramid, his obviously evil motives, and his appropriation of the desert space (as symbolic of an Egyptian landscape) are contrasted in the final scenes with a return, in grand fashion, to America's largest monument to Egyptomania. Using portal magic, Sadie brings the entire pyramid, Set, and his demons to the National Mall: "The pyramid had been ripped from its source of power, the desert, and in front of us loomed [...] the tall white obelisk that was the most powerful focal point of Ma'at [truth, justice and harmony] on the continent: the Washington Monument" (477). Here, the Washington Monument serves as a positive and cleansing recreation of Ancient Egyptian power, an authoritative source of good juxtaposed against Set's evil and polluting pyramid. Moving the final battle in *The Red Pyramid* from the frontier to the seat of American political power in Washington links positive uses of American Egyptomania and Ancient Egyptian magic through Sadie's spell: "I chanted the story of creation [...] and the first great empire of men, Egypt. The Washington Monument began to glow as hieroglyphs appeared along its sides. The capstone gleamed silver" (478). Neither ancient, nor authentically Egyptian, the Washington Monument's sheer size and dominance over the Mall makes it the ultimate signifier of American dominance over Classical forms and demonstrates Riordan's outsized strategy of using American landscapes to rewrite and reinvent Classical stories in a way that reimagines the impulses of Egyptomania.

Riordan's text certainly digs into various strata of history, opening up possibilities for his readers to learn more about Ancient Egyptian mythology and to recognize the Ancient Egyptian forms in the landscape around them, but the recognition of these forms is in service to a nationalizing agenda. Despite the texts' assurance that Ancient Egyptian magic is now a worldwide phenomenon, the series' relationship with the American landscape emphasizes a relationship with myth and ancient structures that is filtered through 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Egyptomania, and the text's main conceit of Ancient Egypt forms and symbols

in America often leaves other layers of the palimpsest unexplored. Instead, the text reestablishes order through symbols of empire to heal the fractures that the House of Life's turn away from the gods has caused.<sup>21</sup> The text returns to an even older tradition—the pharaonic channeling of the gods banned by Iskander—to achieve stability, acting similarly to Glasner's suggestion about the underlying message in *Percy Jackson*: “if the foundations, the classical heritage, are forgotten, the whole structure, that is the whole of Western civilization, will fall apart” (162). However, the stability that the text returns to is one that puts American Egyptomania at its center without unpacking those layers of history in a meaningful way. Riordan's choice of the Washington Monument and other sites inflected by Egyptomania might have offered a lens through which its biracial protagonists confronted conflicted layers of America's past. Instead, it relies upon empowering symbolic readings (the American desert as uninhabited frontier that can act as a new Egypt or the Washington Monument as an unabashed representation of order and stability are examples) that don't always work once pressure—from both inside and outside of the text—is applied to them.

*The Red Pyramid's* assertion of the Washington Monument as “the most powerful focal point of Ma'at on the continent” (477) suggests that this outsized symbol of American empire is an irrevocably positive force. Riordan's choice to focalize magical life-giving power through this particular monument brings nineteenth-century Egyptomania tantalizingly close to the surface of the text while eliding other ways of reading America's relationship with Ancient Egypt. In *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century America Egyptomania*, Scott Trafton explores the history of Egyptomania and its relationship with race. He shows that Egyptomania—and indeed the creation of the field of Egyptology in America itself—is irretrievably linked to mid-nineteenth century discourses

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<sup>21</sup> The Kanes learn that the House of Life began its long decline at the end of Cleopatra's reign: “When she took her life, the last line of pharaohs ended. Egypt, the great nation, faded. Our language was forgotten. The ancient rites were suppressed. The House of Life survived, but we were forced into hiding” (*The Red Pyramid* 162). While the House of Life's secretiveness and decision to stop communing with gods are major contributors to the threat of chaos in the novel, the Kanes also learn that humanity's ignorance about the past is to blame for other problems. In *The Throne of Fire*, they visit a nursing home for “minor deities” and forgotten gods who have “wasted away, lonely and forgotten.” The hippo goddess Tawaret explains, “Their names have been forgotten by the world above. Once your name is no longer spoken, what good is life?” (359). While some gods, like Thoth, have adapted, the forgetfulness of humanity, its concern with modern life, and its ignorance of its past are represented as obstacles that the Kanes must work to overcome at the conclusion of the series as they recruit more kids who have powers and encourage them to commune with lesser gods, thereby reinvigorating the past and safe-guarding the future.

about race, civilization, science, and institutionalized slavery: "In America, the scientific construction of race *begins* with the question of ancient Egypt and vice versa: the question of the race of the ancient Egyptians inaugurates the field of American Egyptology" (49, emphasis in original). If Ancient Egyptians were Black (or biracial or anything but white), the sham "science" that partially upheld the foundations of race-based slavery would crumble. This anxiety about the potential Blackness of Ancient Egyptian symbols, motifs, and designs made its way into Egyptian Revivalism (the aesthetic realization of Egyptomania, its more commercial counterpart) and into its monuments: "The mammoth efforts to police the boundaries between the neoclassical—nationalized—designs of the Egyptian style and the Orientalist—racialized—connotations radiating off of Egyptian imagery everywhere else in America can be seen in every inch of the Washington Monument's 555 feet" (Trafton 147).<sup>22</sup> This history of empire and its rationalization of slavery cannot be extracted from the landmark itself, but Riordan's text treats the Washington Monument as a continuation of Ancient Egyptian history without acknowledging its very real American history.

Furthermore, a sense of ambiguity and tension is lost when the chief goal of representation, like Riordan's, is correlation between two points in history—Ancient Egypt and modern America—; the intrusion of Egyptomania (and all other points in between) makes for a deeper, more ambivalent, often difficult set of associations that the text glances upon but does not grapple with, as opposed to a more nuanced exploration of the layers within the landscape. Riordan invites the reader to read the Washington Monument and other landmarks and landscapes in the series, suggesting that there is a layer of meaning that may be missed at first glance (ie: that the monument is an obelisk and affiliates with both America and Ancient Egypt simultaneously). *The Red Pyramid*, in particular, creates a network of "hidden" Ancient Egyptian structures that, taken together, suggests a reading of America (as a whole) that is inextricably linked to Ancient Egypt through this series of individual readings. However, his insistence on one particular reading of specific landmarks like the Washington Monument—one informed by the hopeful

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<sup>22</sup> The different colour stones that separate the first building phase of the Washington Monument in 1848-1854 and the second in 1877-1884 remain a clear demarcation of where building stopped and started again on either side of the Civil War, echoing what Trafton calls "a 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" (3). For an in-depth discussion of Egyptomania and its relationship to race history in America, see Trafton.

empire-building inherent in nineteenth-century Egyptomania—closes down the many other layers of symbolism and history available to be read.

Written and set during the Obama administration, Riordan's series, which imagines America as inheritor to Ancient Egyptian power, leader in a network of global locations, empowered by a new generation of young people whose ethnic diversity makes them even more powerful, offers a hopeful vision of an America that is a benevolent, participatory, and yet powerful force in the world, much like the myth-making associated with American Egyptomania that claimed America's place among "enlightened" cities of the west that appealed to an Ancient Egyptian past. In Riordan's series, the regeneration and reimagination of Egyptomania's traces in the American landscape as a hidden and arcane palimpsest of America's greatness and potential as a thriving nineteenth-century empire pairs with the hope for the future embodied by the Obama administration. However, Egyptomania as a troubled site of colonial acquisition that claims a disturbing kinship with a violent empire built on slavery makes the untroubled celebration of Egyptomania difficult to read through in order to allow the text its ultimate goal of societal reintegration. These larger questions of meaning within the layers of the American landscape appear to point to opportunities to grapple with more difficult questions about America's conflicted past; however, the ways in which Riordan imports Ancient Egyptian myth into the American landscape leave these opportunities unexplored, making it difficult to unproblematically accept the positive "shift[s] towards [...] reestablishing of traditional values" (Glasner 171) that Riordan's treatment of Ancient Egyptian mythology offers.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thank you to Dr. Jason Bourget and Dr. Shelley King for their insight and helpful suggestions.

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