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Introduction

But justifications for concern with classics are afterthoughts of guilty Puritans . . .

—MOSES HADAS (1954, 3)

THIS BOOK is invested first of all in drawing a bright line between classics and *classicism*, the term foregrounded in my title and a cornerstone of my conceptual edifice. I understand classicism as a system of aesthetic determination and calibration that binds (1) a tradition received and contested within communities across space and time to (2) assertions of chronological precedence and priority and (3) normative presumptions of value. Classicism is best understood as a historical process, and it is through a primarily processualist regard for its designs—and not solely by reference to the question “What is a classic?”—that this book develops its argumentative momentum.¹ Of course, there are other, more intricate and specialized definitions of classicism to which one might turn, and I will have a few words about James Porter’s taxonomy of features at the end of chapter 2. For the most part, however, this book will keep to the tripartite arrangement just specified. I isolate

1. For probing assessment of this question, see now Mukherjee 2013, ch. 1, parsing J. M. Coetzee on T. S. Eliot.

classicism and not *classics* for scrutiny because my interest is less with the substantive contents of the field of classics in its past and current versions, and more with **the historical-material processes whereby some domains of human experience come to be identified and valued as classical.**

The second proposition at the heart of this monograph is that the discipline of classics, as it comes to life in the racializing, imperializing, and settler-colonialist settings of the early modern and modern Euro-Americas, becomes overrepresented as *the* dominant, and in time the *only*, mode of classicism. My recourse to the language and framework of overrepresentation is a homage to and application of a core concept in Sylvia Wynter's writings, as sharpened in the recent work of Mathura Umachandran.² Ancient Greece and Rome come to be lashed to the hegemonic projections of North Atlantic liberalism as White-supremacist and settler-colonialist structures of exploitation increasingly capitalized on their ideological and semiotic potency. The demarcation of private property and the legalization of human beings *as* property; the institutional and legal architectures of Euro-American nation-states, and indeed of the nation-state as a paradigm; the contents and morphologies of global orders of race and racism, sedimenting ultimately into what W.E.B. Du Bois famously characterized as the problem of the color line; and the routinization of human movements and social choreographies around physical and immaterial monuments to the primacy of the West, ranging from the urban and peri-urban sightlines of what Lyra Monteiro has crisply distilled as "White columns, White marble, White supremacy" to the habit-forming enshrinement of ancient Greece and Rome in disciplines and curricula at all levels of education: these all underpin the Western European imposition of "a conceptual dictatorship on the rest of the planet" that repeatedly justified itself in the language of overrepresentation.³

2. Wynter 2003; Umachandran 2022.

3. For "White columns," see Monteiro 2020, well paired with Mirzoeff 2023, ch. 2; cf. Levitt et al. 2024, 167 on museum architecture that through referencing ancient

The overrepresentation of ancient Greece and Rome went together with the invisibilizing of value and its interrogation in many of the discipline's practices, such that, as the Postclassicisms Collective has commented, "Value is neither mentioned nor interrogated in these scenes of instruction. It is *presumed*."⁴ However, even as the validation and institutionalization of the disciplinary study of ancient Greece and Rome took off in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, first in the North Atlantic and then globally in connection with European imperialisms, other forms of classicism remained in circulation, and in some cases managed to persist, despite being pushed to the edge by the overrepresentation of "classics." I see this book as a contribution to a project far greater than its author, or any one community of practitioners within or adjacent to the field of classics: the creation of a structure for bringing awareness to these other types of classicism, and for validating the study of these types of classicism, as a reparative corrective to the historical overrepresentation of Greco-Roman classics.

The realization of this structure remains central to the mission of *Racing the Classics*, the conference series that Sasha-Mae Eccleston and I cofounded several years ago.⁵ The development and fine-tuning of theory in close dialogue with this structure's stabilization has steered my research along several axes in recent years, primarily in connection with the historical mechanics and institutional forms of epistemicide.⁶ Notwithstanding the artifice of the high-visibility lecture series where this book took its first steps, with its elevation of the solitary scholar from whom knowledge issues forth, the greater project must necessarily be a collective undertaking if it is to be successful. A passage from M. Jacqui

Greece and Rome "engenders compliance." For disciplines and overrepresentation, see Myers 2023, ch. 2. For the notion of "conceptual dictatorship," see Pocock 2005, 173.

4. Postclassicisms Collective 2020, 10.

5. For orientation to *RtC*'s guiding assumptions and objectives, see Eccleston and Padilla Peralta 2022.

6. Padilla Peralta 2020a. On epistemicide in connection with the university as an institutional form, note González Stokas 2023, 38.

Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing*, taped to the wall right above my desk, serves me well as a reminder of what matters most: "It was with a great deal of help and a deep level of self-scrutiny that I came to understand how a single individual could ignite a political struggle but ultimately had to be subsumed under it, simply be within it, if that struggle were to be successful. This interior work is indispensable in this journey to wholeness."⁷

Keeping the focus on the *political* struggle over disciplinary and epistemic authority is key. Whether favorable or antagonistic toward the interrogation of the field of classics, recent published accounts fixate on narratives of individual scholars or specific spectacles of interpersonal behavior as entry-points into the discipline's practices of racialization and race-making. The benefits of theorizing from the situatedness of those practitioners who are directly involved in such moments are many. But so too are the downsides. Public coverage of the discipline's tensions seizes on racialized spectacles of interpersonal conflict for the purpose of synecdoche, on the assumption that these moments signify beyond themselves.⁸ The regularity with which these spectacles are chalked up to an individualized deficit or personal antagonism—with even the most obvious instances of racism reduced to speculation about mental health,⁹ or to some underlying disagreement that *really* explains what the beef is all about—marks one obvious limit of their efficacy for constructive work. But fastening onto spectacles of interpersonal racism is a double-edged sword for another reason. As Jonathan Markovitz has observed, attention to "racist incidents" "presents a serious quandary for anti-racist activists" mainly because "the opportunities that they provide for anti-racist organizing and critiques can be undercut once those

7. Alexander 2005, 283.

8. Instances of the tendency: Pettit 2019; Poser 2021. Borgna 2023, ch. 1 departs from these in seeking to distinguish between "le famose cause apparenti e quelle remote" ("the famous ostensible causes and the [more] distant ones").

9. Padilla Peralta 2019 [2022] supplies one example.

extraordinary events have faded or been effectively managed.”¹⁰ The struggle for epistemic authority, and with it the possibility of claiming alternatives to historically overrepresented forms of classicism, must be conceptualized and realized on a different plane, if it is successfully to fend off the claim that an identity-centered vision of knowledge production is all *ressentiment* and no politics.¹¹

In reaching for this higher plane, this book aims to situate Blackness and Black life in relation to this historical dynamic of overrepresentation. At no point is this book concerned with establishing the “relatability” of Greco-Roman classics to aspiring or current practitioners from minoritized groups, though there is nothing intrinsically bad or misguided about relatability as a critical ethics.¹² Nor do these pages take up the history of African American and Afro-diasporic investments in Greco-Roman classics as indexical of Black people’s ability to “do” classics,¹³ or as proof of the capacity of this field and its kindred disciplines to accommodate non-White practitioners. There is no question about the former, and as for the latter it can well and truly be said of any hegemonic discourse that it readily accommodates the ennobling of select racialized subjects as token performers. “The trouble with dead white men,” Qadri Ismail once quipped, “is that some are not men, many not white, and an alarming number not even dead.”¹⁴ To linger for too long on these tokenized performers

10. Markovitz 2011, 164. For race and its spectacularization in classical studies, see the 2024 special issue of *TAPA* (guest editors Patrice Rankine and Sasha-Mae Eccleston).

11. For a tenaciously argued version of this claim, see Brown 1993. This book’s grounding in overrepresentation as a material / structural phenomenon that is *not* reducible to individual episodes of racist behavior does not slot easily into any of the three rubrics specified in Meyer-Zwiffelhofer’s (2023, 3–4) survey of developments at the crossroads of classics, anti-racism, and epistemic (in)justice.

12. Pace Guillory 2022, 228–30. On relatability and critique, see Glavey 2019.

13. For the history of these investments in North American university settings, see now Goings and O’Connor 2024.

14. Ismail 2017, 40.

is, as Charles Mills remarked nearly two decades ago of work in some precincts of philosophy, an excellent way of *not* “aggressively engag[ing] the broader debate.”¹⁵ The productivity of Black interventions in Greco-Roman classicism will be of interest to me only insofar as these potentially set the terms for a transformative classicism that is prepared to displace the traditionally overrepresented variety. But ultimately this book seeks an answer, however provisional, to the question of whether classicism *in general* as a system of value and valuation has the capacity to affirm and protect Black life in the teeth of the predatory violences of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century ethno-racial Euro-American order. I take as given the provocation of the Postclassicisms Collective: “Why should other cultures not have their own versions of the classical, with all the privileges, responsibilities, and problems that come with the concept?”¹⁶

I approach this task from a historically contingent embodiment and inscription of Blackness: my own, as an Afro-Caribbean transplant to the homeland of the Lenape (*Lenapehoking*). This book’s frame of reference, however, accommodates an assortment of differently textured Black experiences, well beyond those that have uniquely constituted me. Yet I remain sensitive to the very real possibility that, at least as contemplated within the book’s four chapters, “Black classicism sometimes risks eliding . . . whole Black histories and civilizations, too”—to quote from the sage report of an anonymous reviewer. Without pretending to neutralize critiques of the book that proceed from this premise, I offer several anticipatory observations.

1. The concept of Blackness subtending this book exists in a kind of dialectical counterpoint to the Whiteness that W.E.B. Du Bois defines in *Darkwater*: “Whiteness is the ownership of the earth, forever and ever, Amen!” As both Du Bois and his later readers have clarified, this claim to ownership is predicated on false

15. Mills 1997, 2.

16. Postclassicisms Collective 2020, 13.

belief; it is fantastical, and at the same time fantastically potent.¹⁷ If Whiteness is the condition of total ownership of the earth, then Blackness is the condition of *non*-ownership. One primary objective of this book is to consider whether safety, protection, and potentially even liberation are reconcilable with participation in classics for those who have been historically interpellated into Blackness of this kind. Another is to sketch how the emergence of Blackness as “a cosmically urgent force that has framed how the West defines what it means to be Human”¹⁸ follows closely on the heels of the emergence of classics as a discipline.

2. Partly because of Du Bois’s definition, still generative for critical race theorists studying the historical and legal architecture of property and dominion,¹⁹ this book raises a skeptical eyebrow at efforts to recenter or restore Black-identified people as claiming ownership over the study of ancient worlds. I particularly have in mind the photographer and essayist Teju Cole’s response to James Baldwin’s classic 1953 essay “Stranger in the Village.” There, Baldwin voices his alienation from “the West” through pointed comparison to the denizens of the Swiss hamlet where he had briefly taken up residence: “These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it. The most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine . . . Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory—but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.” Cole’s

17. Du Bois [1920] 2007, 16. For a rewarding contextualization of this claim and its appearance in “The Souls of White Folk,” see Myers 2022, ch. 4. Note also Carter 2023, 14–15 and *passim* on the theological and cosmological textures of whiteness; I revisit this line of inquiry with reference to the work of Willie James Jennings in chapter 1.

18. I quote here Daphne Brooks’s beautiful distillation of Fred Moten’s writings on Blackness and modernity: Brooks 2021, 21.

19. Harris 1993 was a game changer. A highly original and new entrant in the conversation: Williams 2024, building on decades of her own work in the field.

earnest response invokes the “stack of corroborating scholarship” that has placed African artistic achievements on a level with those of the mythical West confected by Baldwin, before insisting that there is no need to choose between the two: “I’m happy to own it all . . . I am not an interloper when I look at a Rembrandt portrait.”²⁰ But Cole’s cresting assertion “I’m happy to own it all” is inadvertently revealing, even damning.

Baldwin had trained his sights on power’s role in the constitution, valuation, and distribution of art—a power equally catalytic of the ravages of the transatlantic slave trade and of the commodifying and dispossessive circuits of the international art market. His essay’s plangent comment invites readers *not* to ownership, but to undoing the matrix of violently exploitative relations by which the racial-colonial orders of modernity dictate who can access and who can see themselves in art. Taken one step further, Baldwin’s claim opens the door to critical examination of the estrangement of Black life itself from the material production of positive aesthetic value. In a first step toward the stance of Frank Wilderson and other Afropessimists, Baldwin entertains the possibility that Blackness is a condition of abjection, of “watch[ing] the conquerors arrive.” Can the experience of engaging with the field of classics as a Black-identified individual be successfully delinked from the reproduction of this species of abjection?

3. Different communities are racialized as Black differently, on either side of the Atlantic and around the world. This book does not propose to accommodate in full the historical and contemporary expressions of this racialization on the ground. For that reason alone, it would be irresponsible not to acknowledge the force and acuity of several questions lately posed by Adom Getachew in her review of Louis Chude-Sokei’s trilogy of books on African diasporic experience: “Does the demand for unity and solidarity among Black people ultimately require the submersion of difference and the elevation of one particular experience of

20. Baldwin [1953] 1985, 83; Cole 2016, 10, 11.

Blackness? If so, what determines which experience of Blackness comes to stand in for the whole?”²¹ This book proceeds largely via metonym, inasmuch as the multidimensional ascription of Blackness most familiar to me is made to function as a stand-in for Blackness more generally. But for this exercise to hold any validity, leave alone any claim to generalization, there must be some common ground or shared space around which the many differentiated schemas of Blackness cluster. Such common ground as does exist emerged precisely through the historical roll-out of this differentiation: racial division, and in particular that species of racial division that leveraged anti-Blackness, took hold globally over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because it effectively resolved a latent tension between racial-capitalist imperialism and herrenvolk nationalism.²²

4. I opt for the term “Black” over other alternatives for practical reasons—in most instances, as a convenient shorthand for “African American and Afro-diasporic”—and for more substantively theoretical ones: to gesture to this book’s orientation to a literature that construes Blackness as not reducible to any one episodic or historical epidermal or (pseudo-)biological ascription, but as an ontology arising from and repeatedly reaffirmed through relations of property, discourses of ownership, and protocols for abjection. By no means do I assume that my use of the term itself is exhaustive of all or even many of the possibilities for individual and collective self-identification that exist within the veil of racialized difference. And it could well be the case that, in the near or far future in which this book has read, a more supple lexicon for describing and conceptualizing the experiences of Black American and Afro-diasporic communities takes hold. In that case, to borrow a sign-off from adrienne maree brown: “If this is being read in

21. Getachew 2024, 33.

22. As argued in Singh 2004, 32–36. For a complementary approach that locates the origins and reproduction of “a global Black condition” within interlocking international regimes of property and carcerality, see Walcott 2020.

a future in which this language has evolved, then please know I would be evolving right along with you.”²³

Whether such evolution is even possible depends on how much value one assigns to the importance of naming and affirming Black life. Valuation, and the related question of how valuation is constituted via racializing *and* classicizing processes, is this book’s *fil rouge*.

In reflecting on value, I take my bearings from Sylvia Wynter’s insights in *Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World* concerning the foundations of modern racial capitalism, and specifically its drive “to extract surplus value from non-white labor. Cultural racism is therefore organic, *not* anomalous, to Western capitalism . . . In other words, the perception of the Indian, black, native as inherently inferior plays a central role in the concrete determination of the value of ‘inferior’ men, and of their ‘inferior’ labor power. The devaluation of their cultures, which implies the devaluation of their humanity, far from being a merely *cultural* or superstructural phenomenon, was rooted in a material base, in the *economic infrastructure*.”²⁴ The wealth of Wynter’s analysis, and of the rich and rapidly expanding vein of research into racial capitalism to which Destin Jenkins and Justin Leroy offer an excellent primer in their recent edited volume,²⁵ resides precisely in its

23. brown 2019, 18. I thank Sarah Derbew for introducing me to this passage.

24. Wynter [unpublished], 13 (author’s emphasis). For an introduction to this work, see Kamugisha 2016; on its generativity for disciplinary critiques, see Hines 2024, 217–19.

25. Jenkins and Leroy 2021, several of whose essays draw inspiration from and build on Robinson 1983. For marvelously succinct definitions of racial capitalism, see Melamed 2015, 77; and Huerta 2023, 229n1. On capitalism and slavery, Williams 1944 is foundational; on Afro-diasporic critiques of capitalism that compellingly leverage Marx, see Nesbitt 2022, and note chapter 3 below. While this book does not engage with the contention of Pandey 2020 that the roots of modern racial capitalism are

regard for the material devaluation of non-White cultures, which proceeds in tandem with and is in fact inseparable from the extraction of surplus value from Black and Native / Indigenous people. Historically, this devaluation was quickly hitched to the phobogenic project that, as Tsisti Dangarembga explains in a careful reading of Frantz Fanon, structured the relationship between more and lesser melanated peoples in the time-space of European imperial hegemony.²⁶ One consequence of the anxieties around the Negro and Blackness that ensue from and are poured right back into the extraction of surplus value is that classicism in its most overrepresented form itself becomes wired to a phobia: aversion even to the prospect of acknowledging the presence of Black people, Black cultures, and Black being-in-the-world in the kingdom of culture. Hence this book's title.

After all, if Wynter is correct, it stands to reason that the specific form(s) of classicism that attained monopolistic status in Euro-American modernity are likewise enmeshed within the economic infrastructure of non-White labor exploitation: the species of classicism that cleaves to the name of classics became a cog in the machinery of wealth generation and resource hoarding, no matter the insistence of some modern-day practitioners that their brand of "historical scholarship is fundamentally a different kind of enterprise from political or economic colonialism."²⁷ It also follows that inattention to this historical contingency, and the racializing infrastructure it spawned, simply reinstates what John T. Hamilton has described as an "unreflective classicism" that "overlooks the historically constructed nature of its values."²⁸ Wynter's argument supplies one more reason for classicists to pour themselves into

traceable to the Roman Mediterranean, I note that efforts to assess this claim mischaracterize it or rush into category errors; Kilb 2021 shows signs of both. For application of theories of racial capitalism to the ancient Roman economy, see now Eberle 2024.

26. Dangarembga 2022, 142–44.

27. I quote from the apologetics of Lefkowitz 2008, 31.

28. Hamilton 2022, 35.

the redistribution of material resources and not simply indulge in talk of curricular decolonization.²⁹ But the work does not stop there, since Wynter's comments on value necessarily force to the surface the interconnection of histories of racial-economic oppression with the predication of aesthetic worth, freshly under scrutiny as a generation of scholarship grapples with the relationship of Blackness to humanism.³⁰ This predication extends well beyond "a vestigial reliance to believe ill of the idealised Greeks," to tap a well-turned phrase from the Latinist L. P. Wilkinson's quirky and underappreciated lectures on classics and modern issues.³¹ It is, again, fundamentally phobic in nature.

One specific dimension of this predication will be the focus of chapter 3: the overrepresentation of ancient Greece and Rome as a privileged classicism is directly implicated in the unequal distribution of material resources for projecting identities (personal and collective) into the near and distant future. One spectacular achievement of those literary texts that, originating in ancient Greece and Rome, came to be transmitted and valued under the heading of the "classical" has been their vindication of textualization as a strategy for individual authorial survival and immortalization. But this success necessarily came at the cost of other textualized

29. For a corrective to watered-down versions of decolonization, see Tuck and Yang 2012, to be read now with Gopal 2021 and the nicely curated materials of the Worcester College Oxford Decolonisation Course; for *decentering* as an alternative to decolonization see Levitt et al. 2024. Classicist confusion about what decolonization substantively entails: Giusti 2022, 68–70, and cf. Beck 2024 on debates over decolonization in the German academy; one example of classicists' confusion can be found at Ismard 2022, 136. On the value of differentiating *postcolonial* from *decolonial* methods for the interrogation of classical texts, see Henao Castro 2024, 583–85. On the utility of distinguishing between *epistemic* and *reparative* decolonization, see Neale and Kowal 2020.

30. On this development note the clarifying and inspiring comments of Rankine 2023, 12–13.

31. Wilkinson 1978, 10. The lectures were organized around the topics of population and family planning, women's liberation, nudism, and homosexuality—an eclectic bundling, though true to the spirit of the 1970s.

and non-textualized packages of aesthetic meaning that were not delivered to the present, still less to the future.³² The continuing overrepresentation of these authors thus mounts a bid to exert control over past *and* future, and to extend the sovereignty of a particular configuration of the past into the future; it is a device for colonizing time, arguably the most impactful instantiation of what Ika Willis captured with the tag “the Empire never ended.”³³

The scale of this temporal colonization is one justification for pursuing this book’s main idea at this moment in (post-?)pandemic temporality. Other justifications I will spell out more briefly. Regarding the ancient languages that have traditionally constituted the foundation for classics as the most privileged classicism, I am not sure if ancient Greek and Latin instruction will survive into the Great Beyond, no matter the amount of pleasure that immersion in these languages affords me and other minoritized scholars.³⁴ The resistance of many coworkers in the kingdom of their study to recognizing the existence of a political economy of pleasure, one that has been and remains unavoidably racialized, does not bode well for the pedagogical and institutional viability of ancient language study in the long term.³⁵ The study of Greek and Latin languages and literatures has been and continues to be

32. On textualization as strategy for survival, see Padilla Peralta 2020a, 167 and 175; cf. Park 2021, 285–89.

33. Willis 2007. Note the distinction between this type of colonialism and the “strong” / “weak” colonialisms defined, with reference to classics, in Lateiner 2003, 427–28.

34. Some reasons for this pessimism are set out in Padilla Peralta 2018 [2022]. On language study and pleasure, see Eccleston and Padilla Peralta 2022, 202. More abstractly on the language-pleasure-racialization nexus: see Dillon 2022 on catachresis and racial violence; Emily Greenwood’s (2022b: 336) adaptation of Christina Sharpe’s “dysgraphia of disaster.”

35. This sentence choreographs a move from W.E.B. Du Bois’s iconic evocation of this kingdom in *The Souls of Black Folk*—borrowed into the title of Withun 2022—to Marxist theories of the leisure class. For the tendency of classicists to dissociate from any critical awareness of this political economy’s existence, see Padilla Peralta 2023a, 66–67.

an incubator for modern and contemporary subjectivities whose affective attachment to Mediterranean antiquity veers into uncritical fandom. In principle it is certainly possible, as Tilman Bechthold-Hengelhaupt has detailed with reference to the work of Julia Wildberger and Andreas Dörpinghaus among others, to fashion critically self-distancing pedagogies that deny exemplary authority to ancient authors and their texts.³⁶ But this work is very hard to execute consistently, and at the end of the day a collective emancipation from “textual bondage . . . to the texts that benefit the powerful” will require purposefully aggressive and iconoclastic modes of interrogation and dethronement.³⁷ The likelihood of such an emancipation is necessarily bound up with debates over the future of the humanities, about which I will have more to say in the final two chapters.

In fellow-feeling with Emily Greenwood, “I listen with a heavy heart to variations on the argument that Classics departments cannot be all things to all people, and that we *just* teach the languages, the literatures, the history, and the material remains of ancient Greece and Rome.”³⁸ The heart sinks still more at the sight of defenses of the field and its adjacent disciplines that armor themselves in the rhetoric and presumption of objectivity but eschew any recognition of the relevance of racialized situatedness to the production of scholarly knowledge.³⁹ But the heart

36. Bechthold-Hengelhaupt 2022, 306.

37. Powery 2022, 85, in a discussion of biblical texts. For one example of this mode of interrogation, see Cedric Robinson’s paper on Plato (1995), little read or cited among classicists.

38. Greenwood 2022a, 192.

39. This is true even of defenses that are otherwise sound on the factual merits, such as Pellard et al. 2018 in response to the critique in Demoule 2014 of Indo-European linguistics; their disavowal of “*préjugés culturels ou idéologiques*” and professed espousal of “*l’examen objectif des faits*” should be read with the references cited at their ch. 2 note 47. Note also the claims to scientific objectivity among proponents of genomic history, which is bedeviled by bioessentialist conceptions of race: Parmenter 2024a is a must-read.

sinks to its lowest depths whenever confronted with signs that the overrepresentation of Greco-Roman antiquity as the primary form of classicism has, for many of its students and teachers, mystified the material structures of racial capitalism through which some are granted and many more denied access to the resources—beginning with the “corn bread and fat meat that they and their families were eating three times a day”—for cultivating and promoting their own classicisms.⁴⁰ Faced with such reminders, I remain committed to affirming the belief, declared with point and verve in Kandice Chuh’s *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, that “the crisis confronting the humanities calls less for their defense and instead prompts the crafting of a vision of what a defensible humanities might be and do, and how it differs from its dominant iteration”; and to profess, with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the necessity of “work[ing] towards the impossible task of producing a general will for social justice” through teaching in the humanities.⁴¹

Connected with this crisis and efforts at mitigating or blunting its rampage is the desperate search, afoot in some circles of the humanities, for salvation on the backs of the historically minoritized—a salvific enterprise that has even claimed me as one of its putative masterminds, if the title of a *New York Times Magazine* article is to be believed. Headlines mislead, and I have no desire to ride at dawn to the defense of anything besides my kinfolk and their freedom.⁴² But what the contortions and distortions

40. I quote from, and through the metaphor of the sinking heart seek intentionally to echo and redirect, Booker T. Washington’s dismissiveness toward Greek and Latin studies (1900, 51; see Sick 2017, 376–77 for discussion).

41. Defensible humanities: Chuh 2019, 1–2; an analogous position is taken in Tompkins 2021, 148 and is pursued with exemplary tenacity in Sánchez Prado 2023. On “a general will for social justice,” see Spivak 2021, 24. See Van Schoor et al. 2022 for the adoption of this line as a slogan for a new “liberation philology.”

42. The *New York Times Magazine* article: Poser 2021, published online with the title “He Wants to Save Classics from Whiteness.” For all its merits, the article is symptomatic of what Hazel Carby pointedly flagged as the tendency of mass media

apparent in public debates about the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of Greco-Roman classics / ancient Mediterranean studies and their predominantly White practitioners do justify is a psychohistory of the discipline as a site + scene of collective neurosis and anxiety. Such a psychohistory, which is still waiting to be written, would need to scrutinize *The New Criterion* / *Quillette* mimic men whose parody of intellectualism masks their unwillingness to see beyond their own narrow horizons, or to admit to the ideologically propelled distortions of history and fact that they champion.⁴³ These are the panic-mongers with ample material resources, legal backing, and a technological apparatus for fanning the flames of cancel culture / *wokisme* paranoias at their disposal.⁴⁴ I offer comment on one instance of this hustle in the conclusion. But other entries for this psychohistory in need of writing could be readily allocated to those scholars whose spadework in the service of championing non-hegemonic and non-Eurocentrist approaches to the study of Greco-Roman antiquity has been rightly lauded.

In the final chapter of *The Lives of Objects: Material Culture, Experience, and the Real in the History of Early Christianity*, Maia Kotrosits works through Robyn Wiegman's *Object Lessons* "not to unveil the uselessness of political aspirations within studies of the

to "all too eagerly assign to a few carefully chosen voices the representation of the racialized many" (Carby 1998, 4). Critic as rescuer: note the comments of Robbins 2022, 154–55.

43. This subject urgently calls for further study. For sober appraisal of the (historical) writings of one of the more vociferous right-wing ancient historians, see González García and Barja de Quiroga 2012. For more on the intellectual self-styling with respect to Greco-Roman antiquity in corners of the far right, see Görne et al. 2023.

44. On these paranoias, Mahoudeau 2022 deserves a wider readership on both sides of the Atlantic; note also Schliesser 2023 on the susceptibility of European academic elites to "cancel culture" discourse. For the financing and networking of right-wing activism, see Potter 2023; Bérubé and Ruth 2022, 20–21; see also Singeisen 2024 on "Trojan horse universities." On legal backing, Williams 2024, 98–103 covers the most important developments. On the algorithmic substructure of the "Antiquity to Alt-Right pipeline" on X/Twitter, see Trezevant 2024.

ancient world, but to ask what subtends them, and to worry aloud about what happens when we take ourselves and our political gestures too seriously on their own terms, and without recourse to the fantasies they entertain. The fantasies themselves might produce an interesting account of the discipline . . . [and] impel me, in this case, to wonder at the undertow of disciplinary attachments, and the negotiations of desires for omnipotence and fears of destruction that they entertain. And these are racially inflected desires and fears, for sure.”⁴⁵ It will not do simply to plead away the promise and urgency of this line of argument by appealing to altruistic and / as anti-racist motivations: even those most dedicated to expanding the field’s horizons need to face up to the prospect that such expansion, well-meaning though it might be, may act instead to recenter White practitioners and / or White-centering knowledges under the guise of a benevolent multiculturalism. “The white-centering logic of diversity ideology” is transparently in evidence throughout the Euro-Americas; it will continue to leave a mark on the profession of classics so long as fictions of benevolence and performances of allyship retain market value.⁴⁶

Finally, on another pass through this book’s definition of classicism, the reader would not be wrong to suspect that the resurgence of debates over canons and canonicity informs some of the directions that are pursued below. The background to this inflection deserves a few words. After the collective “Eos: African Receptions of Ancient Greece and Rome” organized at the January 2021 meeting of the Society for Classical Studies, a powerful seminar

45. Kotrosits 2020, 151. Note also Kotrosits 2023b, 49–51. A complementary line on disciplinary fantasies of salvation is taken in Davis and Dean 2022, 57–59, also working through Wiegman; I part ways with them on the place of identity and/as politics in incubating the production of these fantasies (see conclusion n. 3).

46. I quote from the title of Mayorga-Gallo 2019, an exacting treatment of the topic. Fictions of benevolence: one such fiction is crystallized in the notion of the “benevolent perpetrator,” developed in Kunze 2020, a study of ethnocide at off-reservation Indian boarding schools; my thanks to Chloe Coy for the reference. For skepticism about the feasibility and desirability of White allyship, see Uwagba 2020.

on Toni Morrison's 1988 Tanner Lecture "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," I found myself returning to Morrison's contention that "There must be some way to enhance canon readings without enshrining them."⁴⁷ Her words strengthened the charge of another text close to hand that same winter, Jacoby Adeshei Carter's essay on "Racing the Canon" for *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Race*, and specifically its claim that "The American racial canon is missing what every good canon needs: a lively active oppositional set of communities of inquiry. The American race canon historically excluded the very oppositional authorities that would have had the most theoretically corrective effect on its production."⁴⁸ Either as complement to or in place of the scheme of the "open field" that Brooke Holmes and Constanze Güthenke have proposed in response to the polar tendencies of "hypercanonicity" and "hyperinclusivity,"⁴⁹ one could opt instead to search for and elevate an "oppositional set of communities of inquiry," for exposition of a counternarrative that proceeds from the understanding that Greco-Roman classics in its Euro-American iteration is bedeviled by the same absences and silences that mark other White-centering epistemic projects.

In the eyes of some humanists, any effort to boost this "oppositional set" stands vulnerable to the objection that it confuses or conflates the politics of representation and the politics of canon (re)formation.⁵⁰ My faith in being able to neutralize and silence this objection owes much to the inspiration of literary critics such as Maryam Wasif Khan, who calls on us to "literally invent new

47. Morrison 1989, 5.

48. Carter 2018, 76.

49. Güthenke and Holmes 2018.

50. The most sophisticated, and arguably most devious, argument along these lines appears in Guillory 1993, ch. 1. I am much more sympathetic to Hazel Carby's note of caution, raised in multiple essays first published in the 1980s and 1990s, about pretending that the diversification of the canon is enough to rectify gross racial inequality: see Carby [1999] 2024, chs. 18–20.

methods of close reading that are not exclusively contingent on the accepted historical contexts of a grand text, but rather upon the place and time of the reader.”⁵¹ But as several case studies in this book stress, the valuation and validation of any set of oppositional communities of inquiry entails granting them hermeneutic standing; and this too is political work. The knowledge-work of these communities of inquiry has to be recognized as making a legitimate claim to unique forms of interpretive power that derive their potency equally from identitarian situatedness *and* fluency in theorizing that situatedness. In several classics-adjacent fields—most notably biblical, New Testament, and early Christian studies—this development is well under way: Delores Williams, Mitzi Smith, and Nyasha Junior, to name only three outstanding figures in the multi-decade run of African American and womanist biblical hermeneutics; Tat-Siong Benny Liew, Gale Yee, and Dong Hyeon Jeong in Asian American hermeneutics; Francisco Lozada, Jr., Fernando Segovia, and Jacqueline Hidalgo in Latino/a hermeneutics.⁵² In Euro-American classics, by contrast, the road to a future where African American and Asian American readings are accorded hermeneutic visibility and professional legitimacy remains to be traveled, not least because of the absence of a sturdy infrastructure for supporting such work.⁵³

As Patrice Rankine has underscored, Classics remains trapped in the fantasy of a “pure philology, unmixed with contemporary politics”; and the idea that classics might have a *racial* politics cannot even be countenanced.⁵⁴ That the discipline’s racializing origins, practices, and politics continue to be minimized in specialist and non-specialist settings, even though the philhellenism

51. Khan 2023, 77.

52. See, e.g., Smith 2017; Liew 2008; Lozada and Segovia 2014; Hidalgo 2018.

53. Agbamu 2023a, 94, arrives at much the same conclusion. Machado 2024 marks an important first step in the direction of an Asian American hermeneutics for classicists.

54. Rankine 2019, 353. For a complementary set of insights regarding gender and philology, see Vayntrub et al. 2019, introducing a collection of essays.

and nationalism foundational to classical philology's rise as a "cultural-political project of rendering the vivifying spirit of ancient civilizations in a form that could inspire imitation" structured the relation of its methodological apparatus to race science from its first inception, is nothing short of fantastical.⁵⁵ To be sure, practitioners in other humanistic disciplines are similarly prone to magical thinking, and by no means are the warts subjected to autopsy in this book's main chapters confined to classics alone. Euro-American art history, for instance, which takes flight first in conjunction with efforts to establish the "normativity of Greek and Roman architecture" and subsequently in dialogue with the larger-than-life strivings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, may have as strong a claim to being in the pilot's seat for the (re)production of this fantasy as classical philology and ancient history do.⁵⁶ But classics, having benefited in concrete ways from the accumulation of symbolic and material capital that such a fantasy brokered, has a unique responsibility to lead the way in shattering it. One key to terminating the fantasy's hold on the discipline's present and future practices is the cultivation of oppositional communities for knowledge exchange. Scholars from historically minoritized groups need space and support to bring the fullness of their personhoods, and their practice of oppositional consciousness, to bear on the

55. The quotation is from Harpham 2009, 38. On philology's "apparatus," see Kurtz 2021; on the colonial origins of philology, I am partial to Ahmed 2018, but Porter 2024 raises important criticisms. On racial science's entanglements with classical philology in North America, see McCoskey 2022. On the interactions of textual criticism with the racial and biological sciences, see Lin 2016. Alternatives to (pseudo-)biologically encoded structures of criticism are not only possible (see Kubler 1962 with the remarks of Olson 2020, 92) but ethically urgent: see Ward 2023.

56. I borrow the quoted phrase from Wood 2019, 113. This study, despite its author's candor about limitations (p. 10) and its determined effort to decenter Winckelmann (apparent in the short and non-too-deferential treatment on pp. 153–57), does not rise to the level of meta-disciplinary reflection that I am interested in pursuing. On Winckelmann, Harloe 2013 is fundamental.

imaginative interpretation that sustains ancient Mediterranean studies, without being pressured into concealing or ghosting their selves according to the dictates of what Chanda Prescod-Weinstein has aptly labeled White empiricism.⁵⁷

The commitment to train up oppositional communities of inquiry should rest on the recognition that value and valuation are bidirectional processes, and that, in the case of classicism, value does not travel already fully produced and package from past to present but is constituted and established in the struggle over meaning, a struggle that cannot be anything but political. Hence Morrison's reminder: "Finding or imposing Western influences in / on Afro-American literature has value, but when its sole purpose is to *place* value only where that influence is located it is pernicious."⁵⁸ Hence, too, Shelley Haley's gloss on this sentence in the opening paragraph of her 1995 article on Euripides's *Medea* and Morrison's *Beloved*: "As a traditionally-trained classicist, it is tempting to do such comparative work and easy to slip into the trap Morrison describes. As a Black feminist it is a political act to resist the pernicious aspects of the work."⁵⁹ *It is a political act.* Classicism is problematic, and not only or even primarily because of those factors that once impelled Werner Jaeger to organize a conference with the problem of the classical as its theme.⁶⁰

The problem is not reducible to the fact that Greco-Roman classics have been and continue to be misappropriated within regressive politics. Were that alone the issue, I would be more willing to indulge the possibility that centering and crediting

57. Prescod-Weinstein 2020, in a discussion of prevailing norms in the discipline of physics. Gordon 2013, 730, writes in a similar vein on "the presupposition of epistemic practices premised on normative whiteness." For a prospectus (now somewhat dated) of "oppositional communities" in classics, see the scholars and organizations cited at Padilla Peralta 2021, 170–71. On oppositional *consciousness*, see the important taxonomy of Sandoval 1991.

58. Morrison 1989, 10.

59. Haley 1995, 177.

60. See Porter 2006, 1–3, on this convening.

liberatory or emancipatory appropriations could be the discipline's silver bullet.⁶¹ And the problem is not resolvable simply through expansion of the overrepresented paradigm of classics "to include other classical traditions": such moves simply reaffirm, if they do not actively incentivize, the discipline's colonizer tendencies.⁶² There are levels to it, as we shall see. In what follows, I hope to give a credible account of the problem's scope. Along the way, I privilege a relational and associative mode of argument that, consciously eschewing classicist disciplinary norms, seeks instead connection with Black communities that have historically been sidelined in the discipline's overrepresentation.

61. For one reflex of the move to cite (defensively / apologetically) such positive appropriations, see da Costa 2022.

62. I quote from Yang 2022, 12, developing the concept of "Sinophone classicism"; cf. Seo 2019 and Xiao 2024 for elaboration of what the latter terms "a new global paradigm for comparative humanities." On the co-constitution of classics and Sinology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Murray 2020. Colonizer tendencies: note Andújar 2019 on "happy face classics" and Bryant 2023 on "classicizing creep." Curriculum expansion is a prominent emphasis in progressively minded pedagogical circles: see now the essays in Holmes-Henderson 2023.

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