

## Res Difficiles, The Journal: Co-editors' Preface

### Hannah Čulík-Baird and Joseph Romero

“how often do we truly love our work even at its most difficult?”

– Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic* (1978)

“Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places. In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”

– Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (2016)

“The task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty.”

– Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (2017)

### **Res Difficiles. “Difficult things.”**

What does it mean to be “difficult”?

The first iteration of the *Res Difficiles* conference—which, through the function of Twitter, also came to be known as *Res Diff* (#ResDiff)—took place during a moment of acute global crisis at the onset of COVID-19 in Spring 2020. Initially envisioned as a small event to be held in person at the University of Mary Washington campus in Fredericksburg, Virginia, we pivoted towards a Zoom format, holding the conference online for free, subsequently publishing the video recordings on our website: *resdifficiles.com*. Since 2020, we have continued to hold the *Res Difficiles* conference series online for free every year—and continued to publish the recordings thereafter—inviting contributions from everyone who studies or teaches Classics (broadly construed), with papers aimed at addressing “difficulty” within the field. In this work, our contributors have examined issues arising out of intersectional vectors of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, class, socio-economic status, and beyond. As we prepare for our fifth iteration of the conference (#ResDiff5), we also now embark upon a new way to address inequity within the field of Classics: *Res Difficiles, The Journal*, a Green and Open Access publication and imprint of *Ancient History Bulletin*.

The contributors to the conference series over the last years have demonstrated how multivalent the concept of “difficulty” can be. “Difficulty” might be—and, as Nicolette D’Angelo and Jonah Stewart demonstrate in their contribution to this first issue, is most

often imagined to be—related to the “challenging” nature of an ancient text, especially in relation to sexual violence, whose “difficulty” is deepened by disciplinary resistance to the acknowledgement of power relations in the ancient world and the modern classroom.<sup>1</sup> In other contexts, “difficulty” relates to the conditions which create the need for student self-advocacy in higher education, with undergraduate student organizations such as the UK-based London Classicists of Colour and Christian Cole Society each seeking to create solidarity around the lack of institutional or curricular support for BIPOC/BAME students in Classics.<sup>2</sup> Or else “difficulty” might relate to lack of financial support which, as the contribution by Sportula Europe to this issue shows, creates material obstacles to academic life. “Difficulty” might refer to the circumstances which shape the need to create international resources and networks of support, as Michael K. Okyere Asante has discussed in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>3</sup> Or perhaps “difficulty” might mean working to uncover narratives in ancient and modern texts which have been denied, such as Najee Olya’s reassessment of images of Aithiopians in ancient art, replete within classical traditions yet systemically excluded from scholarship and art history textbooks alike.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, “difficulty” might even refer to the challenges of addressing difficulty itself, especially with long-term sustainability, as Tori Lee has discussed.<sup>5</sup>

Our first papers in the new journal demonstrate the many ways in which difficulty may be conceptualized as well as addressed: Nicolette D’Angelo and Jonah Stewart theorize the difficulty of “difficulty” literature in Classics; Kelly Dugan examines the classicisms of the Black intellectual, Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford, and his understudied antilynching text, *The Tragedy* (1897), in the context of contemporary white paternalism; Sportula Europe describes the necessities and challenges of mutual aid in and beyond higher education.<sup>6</sup> Each of these pieces emerges from a particular moment in time—the world as it was amidst COVID-19 lockdowns and uprisings for racial justice following the police murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Tony McDade, as well as countless others. The papers as a set are a reminder of what was surfaced during these mass events—a glimpse, amidst horror, of collaborative, ethical efforts—efforts which seem now to have receded, especially within institutional spaces, since we have “returned” to “regular life.” Indeed, hopes in the summer of 2020 that the discipline of Classics might address its own history and ongoing legacies have, to some extent, diminished in the face of enthusiastic revanchism within its mainstream, with promises to “diversify” and “rethink” amounting—*still*—to performative lip service, window dressing, commodifying tokenism. Even while institutions may have

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<sup>1</sup> See also the contributions to *Res Diff* (2020): Moss, “Teaching Lucretia: Addressing Sexual Violence as a Responsible Pedagogy”; Bostick, “From Awareness to Action: Using Your Power To Transform Classics.”

<sup>2</sup> *Res Diff* 3 (2022): London Classicists of Colour, “Building Communities and Networks for POCs in Higher Education”; Cheung, “The Christian Cole Society: Three Years On.”

<sup>3</sup> *Res Diff* 3 (2022): Okyere Asante, “Barriers to Access: Studying Classics in Sub-Saharan Africa.” Shortly after Okyere Asante gave his paper at *Res Diff* 3, his visa application to conduct research at Fondation Hardt and the American School at Athens was denied by the Embassy of Switzerland in Ghana—an immediate and ironic demonstration of the “barriers to access” which he had himself identified. For the widespread impact of visa denials to scholars holding passports from countries located outside of North America and Western Europe, see Daswani et al. (2022).

<sup>4</sup> *Res Diff* 3 (2022): Olya, “On the (In)visibility of Aithiopians: Interrogating the Presentation of Greek Images of Black Africans in Museums and Their Absence in Greek Art Survey Textbooks.”

<sup>5</sup> *Res Diff* 4 (2023): Lee, “Networking in the Margins: Towards a Future for Affinity Groups in Classics.” On the difficulties of sustainability, see also the postscript to Sportula Europe’s contribution to this issue.

<sup>6</sup> The contributions to the first issue emerged from the first two iterations of the conference series: Kelly Dugan, *Res Diff* (2020); D’Angelo and Stewart, *Res Diff* 2.0 (2021); Sportula Europe, *Res Diff* 2.0 (2021).

learned to use the language of inclusivity, stated ideals are often at odds with practical actions. A “gold rush” or “frontier” mentality has opened up a vein of scholarship written by established scholars seeking to enrich and enhance their own prestige, while individuals who live in the realities of the inequities under discussion are systematically marginalized or excluded from the scholarly archive. At the same time, there is an efflorescence of research relating to these intersectional “difficulties” produced by scholars with few options of support for the development and subsequent dissemination of their work. Just as the conference series aims to offer a collective gathering space for the discussion of “difficulty” (widely defined), so too does the new journal offer a venue through which efforts made disparate by systems of marginalization may come together in a collected form.

Although *Res Difficiles, The Journal* is not a replacement for *Eidolon*, an erstwhile venue for public scholarship, the significance of *Eidolon* upon the development of “difficulty” literature in Classics may be demonstrated by the citations in this first issue alone. *Eidolon* may no longer be active but we can certainly see how much the efforts of its contributors and editors have been successful in facilitating curricular change. *Eidolon*’s closure was followed by the destabilizing of Twitter through “new management”—fracturing and scattering online communities. Each of these events represents a significant loss for the potential of online spaces to offer alternative or annotating discourses to mainstream disciplinary concerns. Indeed, at our time of writing, networks of justice-oriented efforts are in many ways less secure than they were during the initial years of the *Res Difficiles* conference—that is, only a few years ago. In this context, the new journal offers a path to continue the systematic building out of resources for a more equitable field through the principles of sustainability, collectivity, generosity, and imagination. By purposefully publishing articles on unaddressed problems or understudied (or, rather, underpublished) themes, we may fill out the bibliographies needed for a curriculum which addresses the “difficulties” of ancient and modern worlds.

In co-founding a new journal, we not only offer a conduit for the scholarly energy which is dissipated in the face of rigid or unstable systems, but we also hope to enact new modes of compassionate and supportive editing in conscious contradistinction to long-standing disciplinary norms. Sasha-Mae Eccleston and Dan-el Padilla Peralta have recently underscored the fact that, within Classics, “existing systems of publication reward ruthlessly inward-facing citations and doxographies.”<sup>7</sup> In this statement, the co-authors extend and reaffirm Padilla Peralta’s prior critique of Classics journals as a “whites-only neighborhood.”<sup>8</sup> Contemporary and historical<sup>9</sup> practices of peer review within the discipline, with scholarly

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<sup>7</sup> Eccleston and Padilla Peralta (2022): 209, citing Padilla Peralta (2020) for “preliminary number-crunching”; cf. Padilla Peralta (2019a). On citation as feminist memory, see Ahmed (2013), (2017): 15-16.

<sup>8</sup> Padilla Peralta’s delivery of this critique was itself interrupted by the public—but not isolated—performance of racism and white fragility at the 2019 meeting of the Society for Classical Studies. Indeed, several acts of racism took place at the 2019 meeting of the AIA-SCS in San Diego. A Marriott security guard attempted to bar from entry Djesika Bel Watson and Stefani Echeverría-Fenn, the organizers of the mutual aid organization, Sportula US, whose work was being recognized with an award at the event. Mary Frances Williams interrupted Dan-el Padilla Peralta’s report on the severely low (and in some cases, declining) number of women and BIPOC contributors accepted to Classics journals, with an accusation that he himself had not earned his position at Princeton but instead had been hired as an instance of racial tokenism. On these events, see Padilla Peralta (2019b).

<sup>9</sup> On the “difficulties” faced, for instance, by Frank M. Snowden, Jr., in his attempts to publish in Classics journals, see Keita (2000): 50n22, citing Du Bois (1946): x. On mainstream classicists’ refusal to cite Snowden’s work, see Rankine (2011): 53, Olya (2022). One of Snowden’s articles, “Μέλας-λευκός and *Niger-candidus*

contributions subjected to the capriciousness and contempt of reviewers empowered by their anonymity, have led to delays in publication or else outright exclusion.<sup>10</sup> “Exclusion” here manifests in the forms of the “shadow-book” as theorized by Kevin Young, that is “a book that we don’t have, but know of, a book that may haunt the very book we have in our hands.” Shadow-books are texts which “fail to be written” in various ways: their ideas are made to be stated askew from the author’s intent, or are expressed in code; they may never be written, or they may be written and lost.<sup>11</sup> What exclusion looks like within the landscape of peer review is not “merely” rejection, but the expectation of conformity or assimilation to a prevailing system of knowledge-making so dominant that its inward logics remain unquestioned.<sup>12</sup> Intervening in one vector of this system, Sarah Derbew, citing Charles Mills, has emphasized the need to examine antiquity “without the invasive operation of the ‘white eye.’”<sup>13</sup> In the context of Classics publishing, this means an active and thoughtful break from the “white-norming”<sup>14</sup> discourses of a profession whose “gentlemanly” origins survive not only in the cadences but also the thought processes of our academic disciplines. Rethinking *how* we write is as important as rethinking what we write *about*. Clearing away the “whataboutism” of academic discourses to allow a clarity of focus could be transformative for us as practitioners in the discipline. In the history of the study of the ancient Mediterranean, so much has been left on the table.

Although *Res Difficiles, The Journal*, like its host *Ancient History Bulletin*, is a peer reviewed venue, we as editors are committed to our execution of an ethical and respectful peer review process, for which the foremost guiding principle is our support of authors in the development and dissemination of their ideas. In this endeavor, we imagine what peer review might look like if it were based on a culture of “building up” and not “breaking down” the work of its community. Furthermore, we disavow the necessity of “prestige”—generated and safeguarded by the aforementioned “inward-facing” citational economy—for the creation of meaningful work. While we invite contributions from scholars and students working within Classics and related fields, institutional affiliation is not a prerequisite for submission. Likewise, while we will publish articles written with the tone, format, and single authorship traditional to the discipline, we also invite submissions which break these boundaries in a number of ways: for instance, in the form of compositions by co-authors or collectives,<sup>15</sup> or more personal reflections, or in the form of creative or otherwise

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Contrasts in Classical Literature” was, in fact, published in *Ancient History Bulletin* in 1988; for critique of this piece, see Derbew (2022): 31.

<sup>10</sup> On delay and conformity as regular outcomes of peer review, see Zuckerberg (2016).

<sup>11</sup> Young (2012): 11-15.

<sup>12</sup> Padilla Peralta (2021): 157: “What if the concept [of race] has insinuated itself into these [scholarly] procedures so effectively as to obstruct their capacity to produce forms of knowledge that are cleanly dissociable from the concept itself?” Umachandran (2022): 26: “And can the so-called discipline of Classics face up to its co-formation with white supremacy, that is, how anti-Blackness constitutes one of its foundational principles and how it is organized around ideas of the ‘human’ and of scientific knowledge-making.”

<sup>13</sup> Mills (1998): xvi cited by Derbew (2022): 15.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson (2004) cited by Eccleston and Padilla Peralta (2022): 208.

<sup>15</sup> Güthenke and Holmes (2018): 62: “collaboration alone is a limited model for imagining a truly open field, insofar as it can be understood simply as the conjoining of two specializations. What would it mean to imagine each of the partners as an interpretive community unto herself, at once multiple and engaged in forms of synthesis that are contingent, nimble, and creative? It is only by rethinking the very idea of the individual scholar, we want to argue, that we can unleash the full potential of larger interpretive communities.”

experimental writing.<sup>16</sup> In this work, there is room for the personal voice: more than that—the personal voice has power and honor.<sup>17</sup> We envision that many of our future contributions may resemble some of our conferences' past offerings, which have attended to intersectional issues of inequity within the field via a combination of personal testimony, scholarly investigation, and pedagogical theory. But we are also open to forms of work which we have not yet seen, or not yet even imagined.

Not lost on either of us is this moment in the academy. While not limited ideologically or geographically to the United States, where both co-editors live and work, we cannot help but be conditioned by our historical moment and the institution, that is, “higher education,” in which we practice. Just recently, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in two separate cases to eviscerate affirmative action in college admissions at Harvard and the University of North Carolina,<sup>18</sup> despite the demographic certainty that the U.S. will be “majority minority” within the next decade.<sup>19</sup> The *Res Difficiles* project is a symptom of these larger structural problems. We hope—through sustained and hardly easy (indeed: *difficilis*) yet necessary dialogue—to be part of a solution. Academics work under heightened scrutiny, yet higher education is once again asked to speak to some of society's anxieties while staying away from others. The calls to “mind your own business” come from without the house<sup>20</sup> and from within.<sup>21</sup> The calls to restrict academic work to (often utilitarian) knowledge and work-force development are loud and unceasing. That our work unavoidably has a political and moral dimension is problematic for some—for all?—but cannot, nonetheless, be avoided or ignored. The impetus for this journal is grounded in the principle that inclusion of dissonant voices, provided they are used in the liberation of the collective, is a necessary and appropriate remedy for the durable injustices that afflict us. Standing on this ground—and speaking and hearing our truths—is not always easy. Not a bit.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the kind of speculative fiction which would result from a class as imagined by Umachandran (2023): 483: “I can imagine a class in ancient political theory and its reception that is conceptually abundant, finding space for Octavia Butler’s dystopian forecasting (*Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents*) to brush up against Plato’s *Republic*. Moving out from there, this speculative syllabus might work through recent advances in the queerness of Plato’s fashioning of Socrates and put these into dialogue with Butler’s queer family-making (the *Patternist* novels), and experiments with otherness of all kinds (*Xenogenesis*). In staging such an encounter, we are not seeking applications or influences of the classical. Giving these a wide swerve, we would recognize the dialogue between Plato and Butler’s science fictive and narrative experiments as its own vibrant political form. This speculative syllabus, which is cross-listed with Africana Studies as well as with English, is co-taught and encourages creative writing as well as creative thinking. How would students respond to writing assignments that would ask them to meditate on justice, or utopia, or family as a concept convened by Octavia Butler as well as Plato?”

<sup>17</sup> Rabinowitz (2001): 207: “the personal voice must be characterized as one committed to social change”; cited by Richlin (2014), 3-4. On the personal voice in Classics, see Hallett and Van Nortwick eds. (1997); and Hallett and Van Nortwick eds., *Arethusa* 34.2 (2001).

<sup>18</sup> 600 U.S. 181 (2023) *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard College* and *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina*, which reversed the foundational affirmative action cases, 438 U.S. 265 (1978) *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* as well as *Gratz v. Bollinger* 539 U.S. 244 (2003) and *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003). On the latter two cases, see Gurin et al. (2004).

<sup>19</sup> Frey (2018).

<sup>20</sup> Usually, but not exclusively, state and federal legislators who use “ROI calculators” such as the one found in the following note to calculate appropriate investments in education.

<sup>21</sup> Fish (2008). An influential reflex of this trend is found in Georgetown University’s Center of Education and the Workforce: <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/collegeroi/>; link accessed Feb. 10, 2024.

<sup>22</sup> For a description and critique of the multivalent purposes of higher education and its various organs, such as journals, see Benson et al. (2017), who take Butts (1955) as a starting point.

This journal is for those who have ever struggled to find approachable readings for their students on topics of “difficulty.” This journal is for those who want to grow their ideas at a sustainable pace. This journal is for those unsure of where their work “fits” within their discipline(s). This journal is for those whose work has been sanitized or excluded from mainstream outlets just because an anonymous reader “doesn’t buy it.” This journal is for those who wish their work to be read by more than just the insular unit of institutional insiders. This journal is for those who wish to combine their scholarship and their activism. This journal is for those who wish to speak without euphemism about systemic injustice.

We express our gratitude to all of our speakers over the course of the last five conferences, with further thanks to our keynote speakers. We also express our gratitude to the contributors to the first issue, and to the leadership team of The Asian and Asian American Classical Caucus (AAACC), who will be guest-editing the second issue of *Res Difficiles, The Journal*. We look forward both to general submissions from individuals, pairs, and collectives, as well as pitches for future guest-edited issues.

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Hannah Čulík-Baird  
culikbaird@humnet.ucla.edu

Joseph Romero  
jromero@umw.edu

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