

Reconceptualizing Difficulty in Classics Using Critical Pedagogical Approaches

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Abstract: This paper offers a critique of traditional Classics pedagogy which has been historically avoidant of pedagogical theories from other disciplines, such as Education. Resituating the bibliography of difficulty literature in Classics through the discursive frameworks of critical pedagogy advanced by scholars such as Paulo Freire, we examine Classics' dependence upon a banking model of learning which positions students as empty vessels waiting to be filled by the authority of their teacher. Furthermore, we offer a critique of the prevailing pedagogical mode in Classics, which positions some students as the cause of "difficulty," as a fundamentally managerial practice. Finally, we offer some reflections on the potential of *conscientização* ("consciousness raising") to chart a course for disciplinary change within Classics.

Keywords: banking model, Classics teaching, *conscientização*, critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire.

"Reading the world always precedes reading the word,
and reading the word implies continually reading the world."

– Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1998)

In this paper we—a classicist, and a scholar of education with classical training—aim to provide a set of conceptual tools for Classics¹ educators interested in critically reflecting on their pedagogical practices. Our primary aim is to canvass, and ultimately critique, the current state of what we call "difficulty literature"—that is, pedagogical literature concerned with "difficult" and/or "sensitive" topics, such as racism, misogyny, and sexual violence, that regularly crop up in secondary and undergraduate Classics classrooms.² We want to suggest that the very concept of difficulty merits scrutiny in its construction of the above topics as matters that are positioned as exterior to Classics itself.

No reasonable educator would deny there are challenges inherent to teaching "difficult" topics. In social environments rampant with systemic violence, such discussions are not only unavoidable, but necessary. This paper, in fact, emerged from the second iteration of the *Res Difficiles* conference series, during which educators and researchers have engaged in productive and nuanced discussions about how to navigate difficult conversations in Classics. The rise of similar initiatives organized around difficulty certainly seems promising as a first step toward a more reflexive Classics pedagogy. Yet even the most emancipatory

¹ Throughout this paper, by "Classics" we mean the study of the languages and cultures of the Ancient Mediterranean, and we acknowledge the historical primacy of Greco-Roman languages and literature within this disciplinary formulation. "Classics" is but one of many formulations available to us as educators; on the possible futures of global antiquity or a critical ancient world studies respectively, see Seo 2019 and Umachandran and Ward 2024.

² E.g., Rabinowitz and McHardy 2014, Hunt 2016, Parodi 2020.

projects in Classics still seldom engage with literature in education studies, critical sociology, and other allied disciplines: literature that would provide helpful theoretical backing to these initial intuitions and observations. As we will demonstrate, Classics' unwillingness to engage with pedagogical insights is symptomatic of wider disciplinary issues.

We argue that foundational work in critical pedagogy offers apt tools for both meta-reflection on Classics' harmful disciplinary impulses and for taking action to change them. It is necessary, however, to briefly clarify first how exactly we understand critical pedagogy and operationalize it in our analysis. We consider critical pedagogy to encompass an expansive set of pedagogical theories and practices that attempt to understand and unlock the emancipatory potentials of education. One key thinker associated with the origins of critical pedagogy is Brazilian activist and theorist Paulo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) animated an ongoing global conversation about education and emancipation in the 1970s.³ We turn to Freire's work not to reify his status as founder or father of critical pedagogy, but because, as we will show, his critique of "banking models" in education is particularly pertinent to Classics. Colleagues of Freire's, such as bell hooks, Henry Giroux, Ivan Illich, Antonia Darder, and Ira Shor, among others, are all considered figureheads in the critical pedagogy movement, and likewise will inform our discussion implicitly if not explicitly.

The common thread uniting these thinkers is not identical theoretical allegiances, or even consensus around best pedagogical practices. Rather, all work from the base assumption that education is, and should be, a tool for facilitating consciousness-raising and transformative political action. Our critique is buttressed by both traditional and contemporary interventions from critical pedagogy, from core concepts developed by Paulo Freire (1968), bell hooks (1994), and Henry Giroux (2004, 2020), to Sara Ahmed's recent critiques (2012, 2021, 2023) of institutional diversity. In doing so, we hope to demonstrate critical pedagogy's purchase in providing educators with tools for meta-reflection about the structural causes behind difficulty in the classroom. Ultimately, we seek to chart a path from the world a discipline can portray and the world as it actually exists.⁴

Throughout our analysis, we draw on an array of critical pedagogical constructs and critiques to examine the state of play in Classics pedagogy. In Section I, we consider the disciplinary worldview underpinning Classics' unwillingness to engage with decades-old developments in educational theory and praxis. We draw from recent analyses of classicists' citational practices—particularly Dan-el Padilla Peralta's observations that the discipline's current citational practices amount to an insular "scholarly enclosure"⁵—and conclude that enclosure, too, has led to extractivist, shallow, and atheoretical engagements with pedagogical, educational, and sociological fields of study.

In Section II, we survey liberal and progressive Classics pedagogical literature to examine how liberal Classics pedagogy often unwittingly follows what Freire famously called the "banking model" of education, in which teachers are positioned as sources of authority, and students as vessels for receiving ordained knowledge.⁶ Our core contention is that a banking model causes liberal, well-meaning educators to interpellate students as potential problems to be managed and corrected. Having established that banking models preclude

³ Giroux 1996 offers a thorough retrospective.

⁴ Paraphrasing Giroux 2017: 27.

⁵ Padilla Peralta 2020.

⁶ Freire 2000[1968].

consciousness-raising in Classics classrooms, in Section III we offer a primer on *conscientização* (often translated as “raising critical consciousness”) and the conditions that allow it to take form in classrooms.

Ultimately, our goal in this paper is not to offer a set of cleanly operationalizable solutions to Classics’ pedagogical problems (the impulse to develop a bulletproof lesson plan, in fact, runs counter to the aims of critical pedagogy). Rather, our aim is far more modest: to explore how the current disciplinary formulation of Classics limits our ability to conceptualize and confront difficulty, and to introduce a preliminary vocabulary for injecting more criticality into Classics pedagogy.

I. The state of play in Classics pedagogy

Classics has historically occupied an outsized place in the western cultural imaginary around education. This is perhaps due to the centrality of education within canonical texts such as Platonic dialogues and didactic poetry; or the continued use of classical pedagogical methods in universities and professional schools, such as Socratic methods; or the longstanding cultural importance of classical education to the maintenance and expansion of western empires,⁷ among other things. And of course, the term pedagogy itself comes from the Ancient Greek παιδαγωγός and Latin *paedagōgus* (literally “child leader”), used especially in the Rome period and onward to refer to an enslaved person who oversaw a child’s moral, grammatical, and rhetorical education.

And yet, while many still presume Classics to be a key to resolving the perennial “crisis” of the humanities,⁸ classicists themselves are beginning to realize that they are not educated for the classrooms of today (or ten years ago). Recent Classics pedagogical literature reveals increasing insecurity and a growing acknowledgment that the profession needs to rethink its approach to pedagogy. For example, classicists committed to social justice have vocalized the profession’s incompetence surrounding equitable and trauma-informed pedagogies.⁹ As Bethanie Sawyer puts it: “the Latin teacher training program I graduated from did not prepare me quite so well as to teach my students.” Sawyer continues: “I never formally learned the importance of an inclusive and affirming classroom and curriculum, or how to achieve it.”¹⁰ Furthermore, pedagogical debates remain either outdated or stagnant surrounding even the most traditional content. Take for example recent controversies over “grammar-translation” versus “comprehensible input” (CI) approaches in the Latin classroom.¹¹ Such a debate is surely worthwhile among practitioners at every level. However, the fact that CI—a method for language acquisition that has been established since the 1970s¹²—is still eyed with suspicion is symptomatic of Classics’ vexed relationship to pedagogy more broadly.

The result of this is not merely the embarrassment of being outmoded, nor the existential anxiety of being irrelevant: as we will show, Classics’ failure to consider—much

⁷ See, e.g., Vasunia 2013.

⁸ For a recent iteration of this argument, see Adler 2020, critically reviewed by Christensen 2021. For a helpful consideration of *which* humanities are under attack and worth fighting for, see Sánchez Prado 2023.

⁹ See, e.g., Dugan 2020 and Moss 2020.

¹⁰ Sawyer 2016: 35, a view echoed by Kahn 2006 and Hill and Lee Chin 2021.

¹¹ E.g., Bracey 2020.

¹² Krashen 1977. See also Krashen 2017 for a summary of the merits of CI.

less operationalize—contemporary pedagogical discourses and modalities causes material harm. In this section, we consider the wider disciplinary worldview underpinning Classics' pedagogical failures. We argue that the source of Classics' pedagogical pitfalls can be located in one overarching assumption that remains operative in the field: that the study of the Classics is, *per se*, a self-contained pedagogical pursuit. Indeed, as discussed above, education (or, at least, a good education) and classical education have been considered essentially synonymous for centuries.

Classics' presumed self-sufficiency, however, is the outgrowth of a wider, more pernicious disciplinary worldview that has become institutionalized in Classics. Following Dan-el Padilla Peralta, we start from the premise that Classics, in both its substantive interests and methodologies, perpetuates "scholarly enclosure." The figure of scholarly enclosure, proposed by Carolyn N. Biloft, refers to "efforts to secure and reinforce specific scholastic territories."¹³ Enclosure is readily observable in the citational practices of Classics as a field.¹⁴ Padilla Peralta has argued that Classics as a field comprises one such enclosure, dominated at every level by "a highly aggressive ethics of inward-facing citation practices."¹⁵ By Padilla Peralta's numbers, Classics journals cluster around 90-100% inward citationality. Within this insular marketplace of ideas, as shown by Stewart and Machado's analysis of *TAPA*'s demographic data, contributions of scholars of color have been systematically ignored as well.¹⁶

If, as Sara Ahmed puts it, "[c]itation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before,"¹⁷ then citational refusal is how we neglect or efface that debt—an erasure that is profoundly evident in classicists' citational practices. When sources coded as *outside* Classics are cited at all, classicists tend to do so as if these are untouchable theoretical texts outside Classics and, crucially, outside the realm of lived experience. Hence Padilla Peralta's 2020 Stanford University lecture, "The Haunted House of Classics," suggests that the field of Classics has so far sustained itself by "ghosting" disciplinary ancestors—ritually offering blood to some spectral presences and not others—in accordance with "the racial investments of the living."¹⁸ A discipline's collective citational footprint, in this light, is a highly telling record of these investments.¹⁹

Though citational politics are a demonstrably harmful effect of enclosure, enclosure's grip on Classics is even more fundamental. Enclosure dictates the terms of legitimacy for which knowledges count as real and good, acting as a "machinery of universe maintenance"²⁰

¹³ Biloft 2019: 233. The metaphor is lifted from the process by which "lands once held in common were legally cordoned off into privately owned farms in sixteenth-century England."

¹⁴ Padilla Peralta 2019, 2020.

¹⁵ Padilla Peralta 2020, see also Eccleston and Padilla Peralta 2023: 207-210. When classicists do turn to other fields, the approach is usually extractivist or "smash and grab," leading to shallow engagements with select fields, usually French theory or Russian formalism. "Smash and grab" is the approach even of more aspirationally just parts of the field, namely reception studies: Padilla Peralta details how promising recent volumes on topics like "Classics and extremists" or "marginality and canonicity" largely dismiss issues of race and critical race theory altogether. On "compulsive Victorianizing" in *Queer Classics*, see Umachandran 2023, esp. 473-475.

¹⁶ Stewart and Machado 2019.

¹⁷ Ahmed 2017: 17.

¹⁸ Padilla Peralta 2020.

¹⁹ On the politics of citation in Classics, see Kennedy and Planudes 2020.

²⁰ Berger and Luckman 1966: 123.

for the disciplinary mythology that Classics possesses singular, unproblematic access to capital-T truths. In this picture, Classics is positioned as a self-contained, self-sufficient educational project, existing in a vacuum distinct from “outside” disciplines and epistemologies. Subjects that pose a threat to this hegemony—especially those regarding race, racism and/or critical race theory—are routinely coded as unrigorous and addressed unrigorously.

By the lights of this mythos, the prospect of disciplinary change is both preposterous and threatening. Classics’ commitment to a curriculum that seems unchanged and unchanging is rooted in the worship of philological rigor that finds in “change” an assault on something that is beyond question. It is therefore assumed that there is a delimited body of knowledge that should be mastered, and that there are proper, authorized ways of mastering it. Of course, as Patrice Rankine has pointed out, “[e]verything we touch mixes with something else, and thus the pretense of a pure philology, set apart from its legacies and associations, is pernicious.”²¹ The fantasy of pure philology, however, persists, and gives way to a pedagogical view in which ancient languages represent discrete objects of mastery to be unproblematically and linearly reproduced by students. The dominant assumption around Classics education accordingly remains that the discipline’s *content* is *inherently* pedagogical, holding a nearly mystical power to improve and humanize students regardless of an instructor’s training.²² Pedagogical expertise is rendered redundant. Indeed, we might even venture to call Classics an autodidactic or *anti-pedagogical* discipline: it claims to simply teach itself.

This has real implications in the domain of accessibility and inclusion. Latin teacher Maia Lee-Chin describes the deliberate opacity of Classics pedagogy in a feature for Nadhira Hill’s blog, *Notes from the Apotheke*. Upon discovering that the bulk of curricular resources in Classics are targeted toward researchers in higher education, she concluded that “[i]t seems that scholars in Classics thrive on the field being inaccessible; it gives them a sense of prestige and power that they cannot receive from studying other fields whose scholarship are meant to be accessible to the public, like Education.”²³ When we consider the historical realities underpinning the enclosure metaphor, we appreciate how enclosure is at its core a project of privatization. In medieval and early modern England, a raft of enclosure statutes steadily expropriated and privatized lands which had previously been deemed common, barring the public from freely accessing the rudiments of survival: pastures, water sources, spaces to work and live in. While we would not directly equate the hoarding of classical learning with the expropriation of land,²⁴ we follow Henry Giroux in naming material enclosure and the enclosure of knowledge as constitutive of the same projects of domination. The task of critical pedagogical critique is to develop

...an understanding of how the political becomes pedagogical, particularly in

²¹ Rankine 2019: 348. See also Bostick 2020.

²² E.g., Pring 2016: 2, himself an influential scholar of *education*, who speaks of the “contribution of classical subjects to ‘making our children more human’” and Nussbaum 1998, who understands a classical education as a means for “cultivating humanity.”

²³ Hill and Lee-Chin 2021. Though this description is fitting for the broad set of disciplines and scholarly communities devoted to educational inquiry, it is debated within the larger subset of educational studies whether “education” comprises a field. See Biesta 2011 for a critical summary of the debate.

²⁴ Though the history of higher education in the US is inseparable from the history of indigenous land dispossession, starting with the land-grab universities created by the Morrill Act of 1862 (see <https://www.landgrabu.org/>; link accessed Feb. 10, 2024). We thank Mathura Umachandran for this reminder.

terms of how private issues are connected to larger social conditions and collective forces—that is, how the very processes of learning constitute the political mechanisms through which identities are shaped and desires mobilized, and how experiences take on form and meaning within and through collective conditions and those larger forces that constitute the realm of the social.²⁵

How then do educational experiences within Classics differentially “take on form and meaning”? Our mandate in this critical pedagogical critique is to untangle how Classics’ (lack of) pedagogy takes form, and how it bears upon social conditions. While there are many dimensions here to disentangle, we are especially interested in the implications of enclosure on students, particularly students of minoritized backgrounds and identities. Using the case study of addressing sexual violence in primary sources and educational materials, we will show that even the most well-meaning, socially conscious educators in Classics reproduce the same relations of power that disregard the reality and substance of students’ lives. We are accordingly interested in how this phenomenon configures the student-teacher relationship.

II. The banking model, managerialism, and difficulty literature in Classics

In this section, we argue that the current configuration of the student-teacher relationship in Classics pedagogy perpetuates what Paulo Freire called a “banking model” of education.²⁶ In Freire’s conception, the banking model describes the dominant form the teacher-student relationship assumes in capitalist and colonial contexts. Indeed, an important clarification is in order: at the heart of Freire’s work are those dispossessed by colonial violence. It is paramount that we engage with Freire in these terms: to do otherwise would venture into the very extractivism against which we have cautioned. Freire was first and foremost an activist²⁷ who developed his pedagogical praxis to work for the liberation of the Brazilian rural poor. We will not collapse this context in service of advancing an argument about classical education in the global minority. The banking model is relevant to us because, as an outgrowth of capitalist and colonial logics, it is ubiquitous. Moreover, given Freire’s focus on language instruction, it is particularly apt for Classics; the rote memorization of facts, such as endless language drills or date recalls with which all classicists are familiar, epitomizes the banking model.²⁸ Our intention is therefore to implicate ourselves, and our pedagogical practices, in Freire’s structural critiques—to identify the places where colonial impulses might influence how we engage with difficulty in our own contexts.

The banking model derives its power from a nested set of narratives: that is, the model not only is itself a narrative, but dictates the narratives that teachers impart to students. According to the banking model narrative, the teacher occupies the position of the “narrating Subject.” The teacher is positioned as authoritative, the possessor of worthy and

²⁵ Giroux 2004: 62, 63.

²⁶ Freire 2000[1968]: Ch.2.

²⁷ Often overlooked is the centrality of liberation theology to Freire’s activism and thought; see Wilcock 2021. On activism and Classics, see, e.g., Bhalerao 2021.

²⁸ “The outstanding characteristic of this narrative education, then, is the sonority of words, not their transforming power” (Freire 2000[1968]: 71). This is not to suggest that language teaching itself is invariably problematic, but, when approached uncritically, it can become a particular “scene of subjection” (Padilla Peralta 2018, citing Hartman 1997; see also Stray 1994 and D’Angelo 2020).

acceptable knowledge. Students, in turn, are rendered as “listening objects,” which act as vessels “filled” by their teacher's narration.²⁹ Within oppressive social systems, the knowledge that teachers are authorized to deposit is knowledge that works to prevent

critical consciousness which would result from [students'] intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely [students] accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.³⁰

If we think back to the fantasy of pure philology, a banking model is the ideal pedagogical vehicle for not only limiting the study of the ancient world to two languages and a handful of elite texts and subjectivities, but also dictating the terms by which students encounter and reproduce such a project.

But what happens when students do not readily take to banking? Always looming is the specter of student subjectivities compromising the depositing process. In traditional Classics pedagogy, where the stakes of a banking model are no less than maintaining the normative foundations of the discipline, such a threat is even more profoundly felt—even at the college and graduate level. Reflecting on their postgraduate experiences as Black classicists at Oxford, Sasha-Mae Eccleston and Padilla Peralta remember being vexed by their colleagues’ “*seemingly ubiquitous obsession* with removing one’s work from what was understood as lived experience, as if that detachment were the exclusive sign of intellectual rigor” (emphasis added).³¹ In the desire to manage student subjectivities, the castigation of “outside” ways of thinking and being amounts to the normalization of epistemic injustice within the Classics classroom. Following Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., we might call this a “willful hermeneutical ignorance,” a situation in which “dominantly situated knowers nonetheless continue to misunderstand and misinterpret the world” despite the testimonies of other knowers.³²

Epistemic injustice does not occur spontaneously; it is achieved, and constantly maintained, by structural social processes. Banking models, too, must be actively maintained, which gives way to an anxious kind of pedagogical managerialism.³³ Freire critiques the ease with which the banking model shapes students into “adaptable, manageable beings,” since, after all, it is “the educator’s role to regulate the way the world ‘enters into’ the students.”³⁴ In this conception, students are interpellated as liabilities: potential sources of difficulty just waiting to derail a smooth lesson plan. Indeed, it is hardly surprising who will be labeled as difficult, ungrateful, or (to extend the metaphor) “subprime borrowers” within such a model.³⁵ Minoritized students, especially students of color, are not only extracted from at predatory rates (including by those who wish to discourse on the difficulties of teaching Classics): they also will suffer the gravest consequences when the discipline’s conservative reflexes reveal themselves once more.

²⁹ Freire 2000[1968]: 71.

³⁰ Freire 2000[1968]: 73.

³¹ Eccleston and Padilla Peralta 2022: 201.

³² Pohlhaus 2012: 716, building on Fricker 2007. On epistemic justice within Classics in and beyond Fricker’s formulation, see Lance 2024.

³³ See Boltanski and Chiapello 2018[1999]: Ch.1 for a classic analysis of 20th century managerial discourses.

³⁴ Freire 2000[1968]: 73, 76.

³⁵ An insight we owe to Mathura Umachandran.

It is in this managerial impulse that we locate a banking model in liberal Classics pedagogy. In pinpointing this impulse, we want to avoid suggesting that no fruitful discussions have transpired between educators and students about the tilted power dynamics endemic to teaching Classics. Yet the regulation of students does not always resemble obvious forms of discipline and punishment. To the contrary, it is in many instances intended to be protective. Its methodologies and effects, however, are nonetheless dismissive of student agency and subjectivity. We therefore want to explore how a pronounced managerialism has become entrenched in self-identified liberal and progressive Classics educational spaces, a fact that becomes increasingly apparent in educators' engagement with this paper's concern: a discourse we call "difficulty literature."

It is first important to define what difficulty literature is and purports to accomplish. By difficulty literature, we mean pedagogical literature concerned with "difficult" and/or "sensitive" topics, including (but not limited to) racism, misogyny, sexual violence, and queerphobia. Difficulty occupies an outsized role in the psyche of Classics educators, as shown by, e.g., Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Fiona McHardy's now standard primer for Classics pedagogy, the co-edited 2014 volume *From Abortion to Pederasty: Teaching Difficult Topics in the Classics Classroom*,³⁶ by various conference panels,³⁷ and by the series for which this paper was originally delivered, *Res Difficiles* (literally, "difficult things/matters"). Our case study for this section will focus on Rabinowitz and McHardy's volume, henceforth *Teaching Difficult Topics*, which, aside from one footnote on Freire, largely shies away from critical engagement with pedagogical theory. As in this titular example, "difficulty" as a key term is treated as self-evident, or purposely left ambiguous. The source of the difficulty in question is implied beforehand to originate either from individual "difficult" topics, and/or from Classics as a discipline, but—as we will see—this is not always the case.

If we are to think of difficulty literature as a genre, we can readily see how it is informed by enclosure and a banking model. These resources are, first and foremost, marketed explicitly for classicists.³⁸ The genre almost always follows a first-person narrative form, offering retrospectives and reflections on effective pedagogical practices, as well as lessons learned from mistakes and challenges. As a result, there is a genre-based bias toward recounting success and the rising conflict of pedagogical challenges generally enjoys some resolution in the end. That is, the educator is successful in overcoming difficulty to successfully implement a lesson plan. The purview is relegated solely to the teacher's experiences and positionality, casting them as "the narrating Subject."³⁹ This gives difficulty literature a definitively practical bent, focusing on the nuts and bolts of "what works" rather than attending to deeper conceptual problems underpinning the difficulty under discussion. This is, perhaps, not despite but because of difficulty literature's origins and historical debts to white feminism.

³⁶ *From Abortion to Pederasty* was the first additional resource listed on the course page for a required first-year graduate pedagogy seminar taken in 2023 by D'Angelo.

³⁷ E.g., "Difficult Topics in the Classroom" at the 2021 AIA/SCS annual meeting.

³⁸ Compare the interdisciplinary nature of projects such as RaceB4Race, by and for BIPOC educators working in premodern critical race studies. As described on their website, a major initiative of RaceB4Race generally is "develop, pilot, and disseminate higher education curricula and pedagogy for educators at all stages of their careers" in all corners of premodern studies. See <https://acmrs.asu.edu/RaceB4Race/Sustaining-Building-Innovating>; link accessed Feb. 10, 2024.

³⁹ See Freire (2000[1968]): Ch.2.

Difficulty literature grew out of feminist discourses and strategies for handling the topic of sexual violence in Classics classrooms, and sexual violence indeed remains a staple of the genre. Rabinowitz and McHardy's aforementioned primer *Teaching Difficult Topics* arose from conversations among feminist classicists about teaching ancient texts containing rape, which also gave way to a 2009 panel entitled "How to Manage Difficult Conversations in Classics Classrooms."⁴⁰ This emphasis is understandable, given the ubiquity of sexual violence in standard classical texts. However, in a recent, incisive critique, Holly Ranger has proposed that the prominence of sexual violence within feminist pedagogical scholarship may reflect a white liberal obsession with the body according to which "an alertness to sexualized threat to the body—the bourgeois white woman's sole marker of marginalization—is prioritized over an alertness to racism or classicism."⁴¹ As a result, a story such as Philomela and Procne comes to be regularly invoked as an "empowering example of ancient myth and a revenge fantasy," not an Ovidian rape scene in which the rapist is explicitly racialized.⁴² In other words, it is increasingly standard for white female educators to prioritize consciousness-raising around sexual violence without duly considering its intimate relationship to other axes of marginalization, especially race and otherness, both in antiquity and modernity (in our experience, the same shallow engagement attends the work of white scholars about ancient queerness and queerphobia).⁴³ Addressing these topics critically is not a zero-sum game. However, we find that existing priorities of feminist difficulty literature in Classics suffer from the tendency to reduce, rather than embrace, complexity and difference, without intersectional analysis or fundamental critique of structures of power.⁴⁴ Banking models likewise rely on the flattening of complicated realities and the furnishing of an easily deposited and easily digested educational product.

We see the pernicious implications of the banking model most clearly in how a managerial perspective ultimately misunderstands, or misrecognizes,⁴⁵ student subjectivities and experiences. In the introduction to *Teaching Difficult Topics*, Rabinowitz and

⁴⁰ Rabinowitz and McHardy 2014: 2. Kahn 2006 discusses the harms caused by prioritizing the text over students' emotional responses to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but nonetheless models her student-centered pedagogy around Ovidian metaphors of transformation in order to reveal the redeeming power and singular genius of Ovid (see Ranger 2023: 36-38).

⁴¹ Ranger 2023:36. In her literature review for the chapter, Ranger reports not being able to "find in any of the feminist pedagogical literature a critique of the discipline's normative aesthetic values; nor could I find any problematization of disciplinary methodologies of reading, nor any assessment of the ways in which the development of classical philology, and the institutionalization of its canonical texts and aesthetic value judgements, has been inextricably intertwined with misogyny, elitism and white supremacy."

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ On "rolling eyes" at whiteness as feminist pedagogy, particularly in queer spaces, see Ahmed 2023: 47-49.

⁴⁴ Ranger 2023: 38: "liberal feminist readings of Ovid [...] work to assuage false consciousness and cognitive dissonance by reading the 'right' way [to] operate within existing disciplinary structures and aesthetics without fundamentally challenging those structures or aesthetics." For a critical pedagogical approach that actually seeks to interrupt the conditions of sexual violence, see Anwaruddin 2016.

⁴⁵ James 2015: 100, discussing Bourdieu's argument that structural inequities preclude certain experiences and phenomena from even being *cognized*, much less being understood or addressed, notes that misrecognition relates to "everyday and dynamic social process where one thing (say, a situation, process, or action) is not recognised for what it is because it was not previously 'cognised' within the range of dispositions and propensities of the habitus of the person(s) confronting it."

McHardy do not cite Freire or related pedagogical critiques of managerialism, but they do draw a distinction between managing and teaching. They ask:

What is the difference between managing difficult conversations and teaching difficult subjects? Managing implies that we have the conversations, but we don't want them to blow up in our faces, so we manage them, to a certain extent attempting to control where the conversation goes. Teaching sensitive subjects suggests that we should or will have to teach subjects that some consider sensitive or personal.⁴⁶

Each chapter in *Teaching Difficult Topics* accordingly employs a mix of both managing and teaching. Despite the editor's awareness that the urge to manage is to some extent about "control"—and that such an urge is fundamentally limiting—certain contributions justify managerialism with respect to teaching the topics most likely to "blow up in our faces," such as sexual violence. The rhetoric of constructing a "safe space" is often supplied as a pretext. One educator, reflecting on the challenges of addressing texts containing sexual violence as a male professor, writes the following:

[M]y goal is that everyone should feel that the classroom is a safe space, and to assist in this effort I tell students to think before they speak, and to avoid personal anecdotes in discussion, as these are often *tangential and highly emotionally charged*—keep the focus on texts. (emphasis added)⁴⁷

The quote above unintentionally dismisses students' life experiences as "tangential" and "highly emotional," a source of difficulty to be evaded. Ranger considers such an approach—"a 'lean-in' version of philology"—to be the reigning model among feminist Classics educators.⁴⁸ Here, whether due to their ignorance, obstinance, politics, or even their trauma, students are imaged as pedagogical obstacles to the all-important teaching of the text (recall here Rankine's critique of "pure philology"). First, such an approach also presumes that there is something more important or sublime about the text than its "bad" stuff—e.g., Plato's and Aristotle's "philosophies" are more important than discussing either thinker's defense of slavery, racialization, or eugenics. Second, students are not interpellated as empty vessels *per se*, but, when they pose challenges to successful transmission of "good" knowledge, they are seen as problems to be managed. Students need not intentionally challenge the model to pose difficulty: if a student's identities and/or experiences reflect social realities that could disrupt the political sterility of the learning environment, the student presents a problem. Unsurprisingly, students marginalized on the bases of race, gender, ability, and other axes are subjected to more intense management, since their experiences are more difficult to flatten and regulate.

Under a critical pedagogical lens, in fact, safe spaces do not exist because students' lives are not safe. In the context of anti-racist education, Zeus Leonardo and Ronald Porter argue that, in promoting conditions of "safety," educators—particularly white liberal

⁴⁶ Rabinowitz and McHardy 2014: 10.

⁴⁷ Thakur 2014: 160. See also, e.g., Liveley 2012: 546: "I hope in some way to help equip my students [...] to enter those worlds [i.e. the worlds of Roman love elegy] more safely." An exception might be Deacy and McHardy 2014, who advocate a "whole-university approach" to issues of domestic violence; in this approach, the challenges of "coping" with domestic violence are shared by both staff and students, though the accent remains on managing the "emotional labor" of responding to disclosures from "troubled students" (Deacy and McHardy 2014: 106).

⁴⁸ Ranger 2023: 38.

educators—enclose dialogue about race to an idealized and disembodied conversation. In “premiering racial pedagogy on assumptions about comfort,” white liberals “quickly degrade anti-racist teaching into image and *personal management*” (emphasis added).⁴⁹ Leonardo and Porter term such practices “pedagogies of fear,” since they are both motivated by fear of discomfort (on the part of the white educator), and exacerbate existing and unavoidable fear about racism (on the part of students of color).⁵⁰ Drawing on Frantz Fanon’s theory of violence, they seek to approach fear and violence as potential goods, asking what humanizing forms of fear and violence might liberate society from the dehumanizing fear to which it is subject.⁵¹ In our assessment, a pedagogy of fear also underpins Classics’ approach to difficult topics: for fear of evoking fear in students, educators adopt an authoritative posture, opting to regulate, manage, and control classroom discussion. Safe spaces, configured as such, are banking models draped in sentimental neoliberal agitprop.

What happens if students prefer safe spaces, or refuse to engage with new pedagogical practices? The elephant in the room is that many Classics students may be attracted to the material precisely *because of* its unsavory affiliations with conservative epistemic projects and aesthetics—even if only initially. Two chapters of *Teaching Difficult Topics*—“Teaching Uncomfortable Subjects: When Religious Beliefs Get in the Way,” and “Too Sexy for South Africa? Teaching Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* in the Land of the Rainbow Nation”—follow the experiences of two educators who find themselves teaching religious or “fundamentalist” students.⁵² The chapters are organized as a series of anecdotes of student distress, resistance, bias, refusal, and “extremism” both educators encountered in the Classics classroom. The first chapter’s author writes,

Evidently, what troubles students is not only the nature of the topics, but also the personal, sometimes biased perspectives that students bring into the discussion. How receptive the students are to new and controversial ideas depends to a great extent on their personal experiences and the education they are receiving, both formal and informal.⁵³

While the authors of this paper can relate as classicists to the experiences thus described, we want to make a couple of uncomfortable observations. First, the minimization of students’ “personal experiences” mirrors the earlier chapter’s comments on sexual violence, albeit working from different justifications; students (here, their religious beliefs) are imagined as posing difficulty in/to the educator’s narrative. To immediately disregard these students’

⁴⁹ Leonardo and Porter 2010: 139.

⁵⁰ See also the normalization of “shame as pedagogy” within Classics, an example of which was noted by Dan-el Padilla Peralta via Twitter (March 15, 2021) in his recent revisiting of Peter Brunt’s obituary by Michael Crawford: “Soon after I started being taught Ancient History by Peter Brunt, our year was summoned as a group and asked what we had read of the list of sources that we had been given; my rather short list provoked the entirely justified response ‘That’s disgraceful.’” As a disclaimer, we do not discourage work on negative affect in Classics more broadly. To the contrary, more work must be done on “ugly” or “minor” feelings that arise in the Classics classroom, like the extreme shock and extreme boredom, irritation, and paranoia, using the ideas of, e.g., Ahmed 2004 and 2010, Ngai 2007, and Hong 2020.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Anwaruddin 2016 for discussion of how Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler’s seminal theories of violence can inform critical pedagogical praxis that “disrupts the conditions” of sexual violence.

⁵² Strolonga 2014, Sharland 2014. In the former example, the educator taught at a private religious institution; in the latter, the educator’s conservative “fundamentalist” students comprise a vocal minority (Sharland 2014: 121).

⁵³ Strolonga 2014: 107.

subjectivities and attempt to correct them merely by depositing “correct” information into them, is still nothing more than a banking model. By contrast, to meaningfully enact a liberatory pedagogy, educators must *start from* students’ subjectivities (as discussed further below). If this feels like a contradiction in principled radical action, that’s because it is. Freire believed it is a crucial aspect of the educator’s role to adopt “a frame of mind which can bear the burden of skepticism and which does not panic when many of the thought habits are doomed to vanish.”⁵⁴ And, due to the conservative appeal of Classics (and past exposure of most students to traditional teaching practices), it is not only those educators who choose to teach at religious institutions who should model such a skepticism.

III. Toward *conscientização* in Classics classrooms

To review, we have argued that, when unexamined, the urge to manage can unfairly transfer difficulty onto the Classics student, which negates their agency and diminishes their humanity. This form of management is premised on a dehumanizing understanding of student agency: students are not seen as agents of their education, nor as active subjects who can contextualize their lived experiences, even “difficult” ones, on their own terms. Alternatively, under this model, student defect necessitates the intervention of the well-meaning educator, whose authoritative knowledge equips them to cultivate a “safe,” ultimately sterile classroom environment. In this concluding section, we reflect further on how to move past this mindset to *conscientização*, a principal component of Freire’s radical pedagogy. Generally translated as “consciousness-raising” or “raising critical consciousness,” *conscientização* entails both heightened awareness of social conditions and action to transform them. Freire positions *conscientização* not only as an antidote to banking models, but as the very thing that banking models seek to blockade.

We want to stress that *conscientização* is never achieved *a priori*, but rather manifests differently depending on the material conditions in which it is intervening.⁵⁵ Artist and activist Antonia Darder likens it to the metaphor “we make the road by walking.”⁵⁶ It therefore will (and should) look different in secondary schools, undergraduate classrooms, prison teaching, community outreach initiatives—even within scholarly conversations and debates. Nonetheless, there are several conditions which are central to successful consciousness-raising that we will unpack: namely, its fundamentally communal nature and its epistemic effects on how we think, and what we prioritize, in classrooms.

While we experience consciousness-raising in our own subjectivities, *conscientização* is a product of communal dialogue and action. As Darder explains, Freire “understood exceedingly well” that this particular dimension of *conscientização* was liable to misinterpretation.⁵⁷ Indeed, liberal humanist (mis)readings of consciousness-raising are rampant in social justice discourses. An overly subjectivist reading of *conscientização* privileges already legible, individuated lived experiences over a more principled systematic analysis of social issues, thereby “produc[ing] truths divorced from social and material conditions.”⁵⁸ We are reminded here of the previous section’s discussion of how pedagogical

⁵⁴ Freire 1983: 33, discussed helpfully by Darder 2014: Ch.3.

⁵⁵ See Giroux 2020: 2.

⁵⁶ Darder 2014: 86.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

material surrounding sexual violence in Classics classrooms tends to privilege a singular subjectivity (that of the white liberal feminist). We cannot use this vantage point to raise consciousness around the social and material conditions underpinning a systemic issue such as sexual violence.

Therefore, given the systemic nature of the oppressive conditions it seeks to fight, *conscientizaçao* can only be achieved through collective action. The only path for resolving and surmounting these contradictions is solidarity. Indeed, Freire urges that “we cannot liberate the others, people cannot liberate themselves alone, because people liberate themselves in communion, mediated by reality which they must transform.”⁵⁹ *Conscientizaçao* is the communal exploration and resolution of the tensions between interlocutors, not simply the marriage of embodied and theoretical knowledge possessed solely by the educator.

bell hooks, for whose work “critical consciousness” is a key term, reminds us in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* that the classroom is a communal space, and thus that teaching is not about control.⁶⁰ Sharing an anecdote from a course she admits to have “completely failed on the communal level,” hooks writes: “More than any other class I had taught, this one compelled me to abandon the sense that the professor could, by *sheer strength of will and desire*, make the classroom an exciting, learning community” (emphasis added).⁶¹ Imperative to critical pedagogical work is to recognize that, though each classroom is different, *conscientizaçao* is a collective enterprise in which everyone’s subjectivity, agency, and experiences are constitutive of the realities we are tasked to teach. This work starts with the educator eschewing epistemic mastery in favor of a posture of curiosity.

Epistemic curiosity in Classics is not a lost cause. As Eccleston recently pointed out, “there is no shame in admitting” when one’s tools at present are lacking, or perhaps even irrelevant and detrimental.⁶² Eccleston—co-founder of *Eos*, a community for studying Africana receptions of ancient Greece and Rome—was writing in the wake of 2020, after scholars unsurprisingly failed to intervene in anti-Black racism in the academy. To quote her at length:

If the model of intellectual one holds onto entails a stable mastery, the confrontation [...] crosses over from humbling to humiliation. But there are models other than mastery available. And in light of those models there is no shame in admitting that the way we have been trained, the skills we have learned to complete projects recognizable within our disciplines, may not empower us to do the work that emancipatory projects demand. We may very well have to *unlearn* those skills and, instead, learn from those excluded by the framing of our disciplines and the gates of our institutions.⁶³

Eccleston is reflecting here on the 2020 special session of *Eos READS for Black Lives*. This session involved the study of several pairs of texts by Black diasporic writers from different eras,

⁵⁹ Davis 1981: 62.

⁶⁰ For a nuanced discussion of Freire’s role in the field and shortcomings, including feminist critique of the sexism of Freire’s thought focalized through hooks’ and Freire’s friendship, see hooks 1994: Ch.4 and Green 2023: Ch.2.

⁶¹ hooks 1994: 8.

⁶² Eccleston 2021.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

including Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, as discussed by Eccleston in the piece quoted above. Many *Eos* READS discussion groups, including our own at Oxford, were naturally drawn to Fanon's characterization of the "colonized intellectual": someone who plays accomplice for the colonizer by normalizing, or making *thinkable*, the colonial power's frameworks of the world. "The colonized intellectual accepted the cogency of these ideas and there in the back of his mind stood a sentinel on duty guarding the Greco-Roman pedestal," writes Fanon in the chapter entitled "On Violence."⁶⁴ Eccleston rightly diagnoses the pedestalization of Classics as an attachment to a colonial order, one which should prompt us to "[ask] how the kinds of knowledge we are said to produce might support life concretely."⁶⁵

To pose such questions requires classicists to let go of the idea that they are mere commentators on their object of study, or observers of difficulty, but "active and complicit participants in the perpetuation of ancient literature and its ideologies" until proven otherwise.⁶⁶ This is why *conscientização* is fundamentally about the alternation of word and deed: it is an ongoing process of theorizing and practical action. In Classics and the humanities more broadly, then, we might think of the movement toward *conscientização* as ensuring that our experience of "reading the word" is governed by the embodied act of "reading the world."⁶⁷ Even critically minded classicists feel great allegiance to the written word and its potential to single-handedly educate us, transform us, afford us empathy. We are not alone in this error. As Sara Ahmed points out, in the radical philosophies of Marx and even Freire, the emphasis in discussions of theory and action implicitly privileges the former.⁶⁸ Marx urges that the point of interpretation is to change the world; Freire tells us that praxis requires "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it."⁶⁹ Ahmed proposes a compelling shift in directionality: what if embodied experience of the world itself gives way to transformative knowledge? What would Classics classrooms look like if students' and educators' experiences of the world were honored as an interpretative lens in and of itself?

In summary, we have proposed that foundational work in critical pedagogy offers both tools for diagnosing Classics' difficulty *with difficulty*, and reflexive practices for moving past it. Our primary critique of current pedagogical guidance in Classics is its dependence on a banking model: namely, its preoccupation with "managing difficulty," and unwitting interpellation of students as potential sources of said difficulty. Our closing discussion of *conscientização* provides a path forward, away from "difficulty" and toward classrooms that above all embrace liberation, achieved only by a cycle of dialogue and action premised on fellowship and solidarity. Finally, in offering this discussion, we acknowledge that a mainstay of critical pedagogical thought is retaining openness, reflexivity, and curiosity in critique. To claim that one set of approaches could fix problems as complex and longstanding as those endemic to Classics pedagogy would not only be enclosed and epistemically arrogant, but counterproductive to our aims. Pedagogy must be continually remade in response to changing social conditions. To quote Freire, "[t]he unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing

⁶⁴ Fanon 2021[1961]: 11.

⁶⁵ Eccleston 2021.

⁶⁶ Ranger 2023: 38.

⁶⁷ Freire and Macedo 1998: 8.

⁶⁸ Ahmed 2012: 173.

⁶⁹ Freire 2000[1968]: 51.

activity.”⁷⁰ In this spirit, we eagerly welcome robust critique of this paper in the immediate and the long term.⁷¹

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⁷⁰ Freire 2000[1968]: 84.

⁷¹ We would especially like to thank Hannah Čulík-Baird, Joseph Romero, the anonymous reviewer, Holly Ranger, and Mathura Umachandran for their insightful engagement with and support of this piece through its many iterations.

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