Tam magnus ex Asia veni:
Towards an Asian American Hermeneutics in Classics

Dominic Machado

Abstract: Riffing off Vincent Wimbush's directive to consider Blackness in biblical studies, this article imagines what it might mean to center Asian Americanness in the study of the classics. I offer two brief case studies that offer one possible vision of what an Asian American hermeneutics for classics might look like. These two case studies focus on two Asian immigrants in Roman culture—Aeneas (as well as his fellow Trojans) in Vergil's *Aeneid* and Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyrica*—and how reading them through an Asian Americanist lens can shed light on these figures and, more broadly, on contemporary Roman social, cultural, and political structures. The article concludes by considering the ethics that might attend further attempts at developing an Asian American hermeneutics in classics.

Keywords: Asian American hermeneutics, *Aeneid*, disciplinary reform, freedmen, Petronius, racialization, romantic capitalism.

"We have been running for so long. We are tired. We want to rest.
We don't want to wake up tomorrow and pack our bags. We have gone 10,000 miles.
We have boarded a row boat, tug boat, bus, freight train. We have a cell phone
And some bread.

Our eyes are dry. Our breath needs washing. What next? You are
Putting up a wall on your Southern flank? What an irony. The country that
accepts refugees do not want us. We qualify."

— Indran Amirthanayagam, *The Migrant's Reply* (2020)

Introduction: (Re)Orienting the Classics

A decade ago, the idea of an entire special issue of an academic journal devoted to Asian and Asian American perspectives on classics would have seemed unimaginable. The existence of this special issue is a testament to the unerring determination of Asian-identifying scholars to not only find a place for themselves within the field, but to transform the discipline so that others can follow in their footsteps. For instance, the likes of Yung In Chae, Mathura Umachandran, Nandini Pandey, and Stephanie Wong, among others, have brought to light their own experiences in the discipline to reveal the white-norming and white supremacist face of the 21st-century Classics and sound to clarion call for disciplinary reform.[1] Similarly, Kelly Nguyen and Chris Waldo have challenged and entrenched notions of the classical canon by publishing a number of path-breaking articles that analyze how Asian and Asian American writers have engaged with classical traditions to meditate on experiences of empire,

[1] Chae 2018; Pandey 2018; Umachandran 2019; Wong 2019.

marginalization, and diaspora.[2] Perhaps, most significantly, Asian and Asian American classicists have stridently pushed back against the individualist models of scholarship by developing communal structures like the Asian and Asian American Classical Caucus (AAACC) that support, mentor, and connect Asian-identifying scholars of the ancient Mediterranean.[3]

By challenging exclusionary disciplinary practices, radically expanding the temporal and geographic boundaries of classical scholarship, and building enduring communal support structures, Asian-identifying classicists have contributed meaningfully to a larger reconsideration of the academic study of the Greco-Roman world. This article seeks to build on the pioneering work of these Asian and Asian American scholars. Riffing off Vincent Wimbush's directive to consider Blackness in biblical studies, I want to imagine what it might mean to center Asianness—or, more precisely, Asian Americanness—in the study of the classics.[4] By moving the periphery to the center, I hope to disrupt the discipline's long-standing entanglements with white supremacy, colonialism, imperialism, and racial capitalism and its epistemic privileging of white ways of knowing and being. As such, this paper functions as a very partial answer to Dan-el Padilla Peralta's call to develop "an oppositional set of communities of inquiry, understanding Greco-Roman classics in its Euro-American iteration as bedeviled by the same absences and silences that mark other white-centric epistemic projects."[5]

New Perspectives: Asian and Asian American Hermeneutics

What exactly do I mean by centering Asianness and Asian Americanness in classics? I mean developing a way of reading, writing, and teaching about the classics that takes the experiences of Asian and Asian Americans as a primary vehicle for understanding the Greco-Roman Mediterranean. The idea of such an identitarian hermeneutic for the study of classics, particularly one centered around Asianness, may seem shocking to some. To some skepticism, I offer the following response: Classics as an academic discipline already uses an identitarian hermeneutic, just one that has long escaped notice. Classics, as it is dominantly practiced, centers post-Enlightenment Euro-American whiteness as its primary vehicle for understanding the Greco-Roman past.[6] Consequently, offering and naming oppositional hermeneutics to that of whiteness serves a critical function. It both lays bare the unnamed identitarian politics that has shaped the discipline of classics and offers an alternative to them.

Thankfully, as Padilla Peralta has noted, such work is not unprecedented in ancient Mediterranean studies. For nearly four decades now, minoritized scholars in biblical studies have developed communities of inquiry that have called into question the "absences and silences" of their own discipline by developing numerous identitarian hermeneutics for reading biblical texts. The likes of Renita Weems, Delores Williams, Mitzi Smith, Cheryl Sanders, and Nyasha Junior have developed womanist and Black feminist interpretations of

[2] Nguyen 2020, 2021; Kim 2022; Waldo 2023; Johnston 2023. See also Chew 1997.

[3] On the foundation of the AAACC, see Wong 2019.

[4] Wimbush 2000: 1-43, esp. 2-7.

[5] Padilla Peralta 2022.

[6] Padilla Peralta 2019a; Stewart and Machado 2019; Eccleston and Padilla Peralta 2022; McCoskey 2022; Umachandran 2022; Umachandran and Ward 2023.

biblical texts, while Gail Yee, Benny Liew, Kwok Pui-Lan, and R. S. Sugirtharajah have advanced Asian and Asian American ways of reading such texts.[7]

The benefits of developing these identitarian hermeneutics for biblical studies have been many. First among these are moral and ethical benefits. According to Mitzi Smith, by adopting an identitarian hermeneutic, scholars "become iconoclasts, breaking up, deconstructing oppressive iconic knowledge, but also constructing, resurrecting, retrieving, and affirming epistemologies that allow black women and other oppressed peoples to survive and thrive."[8] Second, identitarian hermeneutics simultaneously disrupt the idea of an ancient world that can be recovered unblemished by the gaze of modernity and troubles the claim that Western epistemologies hold some sort of universal value. Yii-Jan Lin, in her recent article on violence against Asian American women, has argued that identitarian approaches "[reject] the claim that the moment for textual, scriptural creation ended with" the past, "and that the only valid form of interpretation comes from the methods of European men of the last few centuries."[9] Identitarian hermeneutics establish the study of the past as a necessarily bidirectional process, in which the ancient and modern are inextricably entangled, and acknowledge that alternative ways of being lead to alternative ways of knowing.[10]

In order to do this work of constructing, resurrecting, retrieving, and affirming alternative epistemologies that move beyond Euro-American centric forms of disciplinary inquiry that fetishize the Greco-Roman past, I propose an Asian American hermeneutics based on two interrelated intellectual foundations: 1) the robust theoretical underpinning of Asian American studies and 2) my own experience as an immigrant who has been racialized as Asian American.

My rationale for the former is two-fold. First, Asian American studies is concerned with critiquing the white-centering logic of liberalism, exposing the invisible workings of white supremacy, and unearthing the deep impacts of colonialism in its various guises. As Lisa Lowe writes, "the force of Asian American studies is not the restoration of a cultural heritage to an identity formation, *but rather the history of Asian alterity to the modern nation-state highlights the convergence of nationalism with racial exclusion, gendered social stratification, and labor exploitation* (emphasis added)."[11] Second, it offers alternatives to current social, cultural, and political formation. Asian American cultures, Lowe argues, "[are] the site of more than the critical negation of the U.S. nation; [they are] a site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new

[7] Womanist and Black feminist hermeneutics (e.g.): Weems 1988; Williams 1993; Sanders 1995; Smith 2015a; Junior 2018, 2020. Asian and Asian American hermeneutics (e.g.): Sugirtharajah 1998, 2001; Pui-Lan 2000, 2005; Yee 2006, 2009; Liew 2008.

[8] Smith 2015b: 120-121.

[9] Lin 2022: 768.

[10] I borrow the framing of bidirectionality from Hendricks 2021: 368-369.

[11] Lowe 1998: 30. Asian American studies, as part of the larger umbrella of ethnic studies, functions in the words of Lorgia García Peña 2022: 83-84 "as a critical, anticolonial site of knowledge, learning, and teaching ... charged with filling in the immense gaps left by our Eurocentric education system, contradicting its violence, changing the narrative."

ways of questioning the government of human life by the nation state."[12] The deep engagement of Asian American studies with these questions makes it well-suited (though, I should add, not uniquely suited) as a theoretical grounding for both an identitarian critique of the white norming nature of classics and for the construction of epistemologies that offer alternatives to it.[13]

The means by which this critique occurs leads us to our second point. Asian American studies is premised in part on granting epistemological standing to the experiences of those racialized as Asian American.[14] Consequently, abstracting the theory of Asian American studies without discussing my complex positionality as an Asian American obscures the particular perspectives, concerns, and histories that I bring to the engagement with and theorization of the ancient Mediterranean world. What's more, the very term Asian American is exceedingly complex. Any attempt to interpellate peoples who come from a wide variety of countries and religious traditions, who speak thousands of languages, and who have very different social, cultural, and economic standing is bound to fail.[15]

I write as a Sri Lankan American immigrant who has enjoyed significant economic and educational privileges as a result of my upper-middle class upbringing.[16] I write as the son of a Tamil father who fled discrimination in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and whose brothers and sisters were scattered across the globe in diaspora after barely surviving the terrors of the Black July riots in 1983. I speak as the son of a mixed-race mother, whose Sinhalese father was a civil servant and whose Burgher mother was the descendent of Dutch colonizers who overran the island in the 17th century. I thus speak as an individual whose histories, whose personhood have been triangulated by imperialism, colonialism, and racism, and I firmly believe that bringing these complex entanglements to bear on my scholarship is a strength.[17]

To be clear, the model that I propose is in no way definitive; the development of an identitarian hermeneutic cannot be the work of a single individual. Here I borrow from Benny Liew, who writes the following of his endeavor to develop an Asian American hermeneutics in biblical studies: "I am fashioning an account of an ongoing conversation, in which I am only one participant, so that afterwards a larger community can join in for another conversation…my ideas do not represent the views of all Asian Americans; they are meant to stimulate multiple projects simultaneously rather than to suggest a single project

[12] Lowe 1996: 29.

[13] See Umachandran and Ward 2023: 3-34 for another vision of an oppositional hermeneutics inspired by Critical Muslim Studies.

[14] E.g. Takaki 1993: 1-3; Min and Kim 1999: 11-14

[15] For more on the difficulty of deciding who or what constitutes the Asian Americans in Asian American studies, see among others Chin et al. 1974; Palumbo-Liu 1999: 1-13; Chang 1999: 1-8. Chuh 2003 offers a powerful argument for treating Asian American studies as a field without a subject (see below).

[16] South Asians have often been excluded from Asian American studies (cf. Shankar and Srikanth 1998: 1-24).

[17] A cue taken from Padilla Peralta 2019b: "*I should have been hired because I was black*: because my Afro-Latinity is the rock-solid foundation upon which the edifice of what I have accomplished and everything I hope to accomplish rests; because my black body's vulnerability challenges and universalizing pretensions of color-blind classics; because my black being-in-the-world makes it possible for me to ask new and different questions within the field, to inhabit new and different approaches to answering them, and to forge alliances with other scholars past and present whose black being-in-the-world has cleared the way for my leap into the breach."

of a monolithic dimension or direction."[18] For Liew, identitarian biblical hermeneutics are not prescriptive, but prefigurative. They open possibilities for interpretation, rather than foreclose them.

What does the "ongoing conversation" of an identitarian-oriented hermeneutics look like in practice? I will present two brief case studies that offer one possible vision of an Asian American hermeneutics for classics. These case studies focus on two Asian immigrants in Roman culture—Aeneas (as well as his fellow Trojans) in Vergil's *Aeneid* and Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyrica*—and how reading them through an Asian Americanist lens can shed light on these figures and, more broadly, on contemporary Roman social, cultural, and political structures.

Exsulibusne? Racializing the Refugee in Vergil's *Aeneid*

In recent years, Asian American studies, long interested in matters of migration, has turned to consider a type of migrant that been overlooked, both by the academy and the state: the refugee.[19] This attention has been a productive one, leading to the development of a new field, critical refugee studies, that interrogates the various roles played by the figure of the refugee within society. This field, in the words of Yến Lê Espiritu, "challenges the solidarity and primacy of the nation-state and the promise of inclusion and recognition within it."[20] As such, critical refugee studies "flips the script, positing it is the existence of the displaced refugee, rather than the rooted citizen, that provided the clue to a new model of politics."[21]

Such is the case for the Romans too, as it is an Asian refugee who figures at the very heart of Rome's core foundational myths. Aeneas is described by Vergil as "a refugee by fate who first came from the shores of Troy to Italy" (Vir. A. 1.1-2*: Troiae qui primis ab oris Italiam fato profugus*).[22] Although he is "buffeted about on both land and sea by the violence of the gods, on account of the begrudging wrath of ruthless Juno" (1.3-4: *ille et terris iactatus et alto vi superum saevae memorem Iunonis ob iram*), Aeneas comes to the shores of Lavinium with a specific purpose in mind. As Vergil tells us, he is to "found the Roman race" (1.33: *Romanam condere gentem*), a task that we learn was "a real struggle" (*tantae molis erat*).

The matter of founding a race cues another important similarity between the story of Aeneas and the history of Asian American refugees.[23] Central to both is what scholars of

[18] Liew 2008: 2.

[19] On the centrality of immigration to Asian American Studies, see Lowe 1996: 7: "... the life conditions, choices, and expressions of Asian Americans have been significantly determined by the U.S. state through the apparatus of immigration laws and policies, through the enfranchisements denied or extended to immigrant individuals and communities, and through the processes of naturalization and citizenship."

[20] Yến Lê Espiritu 2021:4

[21] Yến Lê Espiritu 2021:4

[22] Lee-Stecum 2008: 69-91 discusses the place of refugees in Rome's foundational mythography (cf. Dench 2005: 14 on the way that it differs from other Mediterranean myths, on which see Dougherty 1993).

[23] The topic of race in the *Aeneid* has largely been avoided (e.g. Wimperis 2024's use of ethnicity instead of race as the core concept in his discussion of community construction in the epic). Notable exceptions are Haley 2009; Haley 2021; Giusti 2023. Reed 2007: 8-9 discusses how shores tend to police ethnic boundaries throughout the poem.

critical race studies have termed *racialization.* Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racialization as the "process of selection, of imparting social and symbolic meaning" to particular group differences for the purpose of social and political ordering.[24] In other words, racialization is the process by which race is socially constructed and societally embedded. By race here, I refer not to the epidermic and physiognomic permutations that have dominated modern understandings of the concept, but rather to a transhistorical entity used for the dividing and ordering of populations for the project of power. Following Falguni Sheth, I understand race as a "vehicle of division, and an engine of political power" that "seeks and utilizes" essentialized differences, be they physical, religious, status-based, or cultural, "in order to produce a certain consequence: to eliminate or manage potential challenges to the social and political organization of a society."[25] As Rebecca Futo Kennedy writes, such a definition frames race as "historically contingent and fluid," allowing us to understand and compare the mechanics of various forms of oppression in different eras and cultures.[26]

In Vergil's telling, Aeneas' arrival on the shores of Latium is met with immediate racialization. When the native Latins first see the Trojan embassy heading towards the palace, they quickly race ahead to tell King Latinus of "giant men" (7.167-8: *ingentis…viros*) dressed "in some unknown garb" (7.167: *ignota in veste*). King Latinus, though, is not concerned with their appearance. Rather, he focuses on a different racial characteristic: their descent.[27] The second word of his address to the Trojan ambassadors is the patronymic *Dardanidae* (7.195), which signals not just Trojan descent from Dardanus, but their possible connection to the Italic peninsula.[28] Latinus notes that he heard rumors from "old Italian men" (7.206: *Auruncos…senes*) that Dardanus, long before heading to Phrygia, had been born on Italian soil, a claim which the Trojan ambassador, Ilioneus, seconds in his response before adding that they are also directly related to Jupiter. This claim of shared descent is backed up with other claims of familiarity with the Trojans; immediately after invoking their Dardanian descent, Latinus states that he is "not unaware of their city and their race" (7.195: *neque enim nescimus et urbem et genus*) nor of their travails in the years after Troy's destruction.

These Trojans are, for Latinus, "good refugees," of good birth and of good repute. But as Lê Espiritu argues, the positive racialization of refugees always serves a political purpose; for instance, the focus on the economic and academic success achieved by Vietnamese refugees reframes the Vietnam War as a "good war" that produced positive outcomes rather than an imperialistic endeavor.[29] For Latinus, the appearance of the Trojans offers political opportunity as well. As he gleefully remarks after the speech of Ilioneus, the arrival of the Trojans marks the fulfillment of an oracle that says Lavinia is to marry a foreigner who will help his kingdom grow. King Latinus is fated "to have future progeny outstanding in war and

[24] Omi and Winant 2014: 111 (cf. Giusti 2023: 54-6; Padilla Peralta 2024: 248-9 for the utility of the concept of racialization in the ancient world).

[25] Sheth 2004: 80-1.

[26] Kennedy 2021.

[27] For descent as a crucial component of ancient racial thought, see McCoskey 2012: 27-31, 49-61.

[28] Reed 2006 and Nakata 2012 discuss the genealogical manipulations evident in this scene and elsewhere in the second half of the poem. Tori Lee has also pointed out to me that the alliterative *Dicite Dardanidae* has a strongly Ennian flavoring to it (cf. Nethercut 2020), which further bolsters the Italic claims of the passage.

[29] Lê Espiritu 2014: 81-104.

who will colonize the whole world with his men" (7.258: *totum quae viribus occupet orbem*).[30] The mixing of Trojan and Latin blood "will carry our name into the stars" (7.98-99: *qui sanguine nostrum nomen in astra ferant*). The positive racialization of the Trojan refugees, thus, serves a larger imperial end and ensures that history remembers Latinus and his people.

Refugees, however, are never racialized only in positive terms. To quote Lê Espiritu again, refugees constitute "objects of state suspicion and threats to security."[31] Aeneas proves no exception. Shortly after King Latinus' oration, Queen Amata delivers an impassioned speech of her own that calls into question the suitability of Lavinia's marriage to Aeneas by racializing the Trojan refugees as a threat to the solidity of Latinus' kingdom:

> ***exsulibus****ne datur ducenda Lavinia Teucris,*
> *o genitor, nec* ***te*** *miseret nataeque* ***tuique****?*
> *nec matris miseret, quam primo Aquilone relinquet*
> ***perfidus*** *alta petens abducta virgine praedo?*
> *at non sic* ***Phrygius penetrat Lacedaemona pastor****,*
> ***Ledaeamque Helenam Troianas vexit ad urbes****?*
> *quid* ***tua sancta fides****? quid cura antiqua* ***tuorum***
> *et* ***consanguineo*** *totiens data dextera* ***Turno****?*
>
> "Is Lavinia to be given to be married to these Trojan exiles? Have you, 'father,' no pity for your own daughter or yourself? Have you no pity for her mother, when this treacherous man will leave for the sea with the first north-wind with the girl as prize? Wasn't this how that Phrygian shepherd entered Sparta, and snatched Leda's Helen off to the Trojan cities? What of your sacred promise? What of your long-held care for your people of your own race, and your oath given again and again to your blood brother Turnus?" (7.359-366)

Amata's speech holds nothing back. She begins by reframing the refugees as criminals; they are *exsulibus*, people who have been banished from their homeland for political reasons.[32] Amata doubles down on her characterization of the Trojans as criminals in the very next line. According to her, Aeneas is totally untrustworthy (*perfidus*) and will abscond with Lavinia the first chance he gets. The word *perfidus*, it should be noted, is a term with strong racial connotations. The language of perfidy featured centrally in the racialization of Rome's foremost enemies during the Republic: the Carthaginians and the Gauls.[33] She further underscores this point by noting that snatching women is something Trojans do: "Wasn't this how that Phrygian shepherd entered Sparta, and snatched Leda's Helen off to the Trojan cities?" As is typical with racial stereotyping, Amata takes one well-known anecdote—Paris' abduction of Helen—and attributes the qualities of a singular individual to an entire people. In doing so, Amata takes Latinus' point about Aeneas' good Trojan lineage and flips it on its

[30] Zanker 2019: 153-163 offers insight on the larger intellectual trends in the first century BCE that figure behind this line.

[31] Lê Espiritu 2014: 12 (cf. also Gandhi 2022 for a discussion of the discourse of "good" and "bad" refugees in modern-day Israel).

[32] Nappa 2022: 93-95 shows this accusation of criminality resounds in numerous speeches in the *Aeneid.*

[33] Carthaginians: Isaac 2004: 327-333; Levene 2010: 99-103, 216; Gruen 2011: 115-140; Gauls: Murphy 1977: 238-242; Riggsby 2006: 56, 174.

head, locating a more immediate relative for Aeneas whose behavior as a foreign guest was notoriously bad.

The comparison to Paris also contributes to the racialization of Aeneas and the Trojans in another way. As brought out more fully in Iarbas' speech in Book 4 and Numanus Remulus' speech in Book 9, the comparison to Paris, to quote Shelley Haley, "endows Aeneas with racialized gender," as a half-man, whose version of masculinity is far inferior to that of his Italic rivals.[34] In a similar vein is Lavinia's use of the verb *penetrat.* As Chris Nappa has argued, the verb offers insight into the type of rhetoric that Amata uses to explain the Trojan threat.[35] Indeed, the verb certainly connotes the idea of an invasion of the state by a foreign entity, suggesting that Aeneas' arrival may lead to him seizing power. But, as Nappa argues, it is also sexually suggestive: Aeneas' prospective penetration of Lavinia is an act of miscegenation that disrupts the solidity and purity of the Latin regnal line.

In addition to racializing Aeneas, Amata also offers a brutal indictment of her husband's judgment. Amata argues that a marriage between Aeneas and Lavinia will mean the end of *fides* ("faithfulness"), one of the core cultural values of the Latins (and Vergil's Roman readership).[36] Further, she reminds him of the promise (*data dextra*) that he made to Turnus. She also points out the blood-ties between Latinus and Turnus (*consanguineo...Turno*), referring to the ethnic heritage they share with the Rutulians; in doing so, she essentially accuses Latinus of effectively becoming a race traitor. The idea of Latinus as a race traitor is further reinforced throughout the scene by Lavinia's repeated use of the second person to emphasize the kinships he stands to violate: accepting the Trojans means that he has no pity for "[himself] or [his] own daughter" (*te...natae...tuique*), no respect for "[his] own cultural values" (*tua sancta fides*), and no "concern for [his] own people" (*cura...tuorum*).

Commixti Corpore ... Subsident: Assimilation and Erasure

The dueling visions of the Trojans and their potential for integration, as Michael Fontaine has pointed out, lingers over the rest of the epic, with the war between Aeneas' men and Turnus' troops playing out the debate on the battlefield.[37] As such, it embodies the complexity of Roman views towards refugees, migrants, and foreigners, reflecting, on the one hand, a narrative of Roman inclusivity and on the other, as Dan-el Padilla Peralta puts it, "centuries of unease at Rome about the presence and role of foreigners."[38] Along similar lines, Yasmin Syed has written that these passages show that Roman views of ethnicity were discursive; that is, they were constantly subject to change depending on what the local circumstances demanded.[39] I would add that this discursivity is fundamentally political in nature. The Trojans appear, at once, as an asset for Rome's world domination and a challenge to the cultural and racial purity of the native Italians. Through this rhetoric, the Trojans find

[34] Haley 2021: 127. Iarbas' speech: 4.211-218. Numanus Remulus' speech: 9.598-620 (cf. Nappa 2022: 93-94; 100-103).

[35] Nappa 2022: 97.

[36] For custom as a marker of racial difference in the ancient world, see McCoskey 2012: 62-75 and Kennedy, Roy, and Goldman 2013: 65-79.

[37] Fontaine 2015.

[38] Padilla Peralta 2015.

[39] Syed 2005: 206-209.

themselves triangulated into questions related to palace power dynamics between Latinus and Amata, regional power struggles between the Latins and Rutulians, and Rome's imperial future, not to mention divine marriage politics. In short, their presence offered a flexible and malleable rhetorical tool that Romans could use to stoke passionate and emotional responses in support of their own political endeavors. It is certainly striking that Roman views on migrants and refugees—both positive and negative—remain a talking point, not only within the field of classics but in political discussions of immigration today.[40]

The aftermath of this debate is war: *bella, horrida bella* (6.86: "wars, horrible wars"). Scores of Trojans and Italians, as the poem tells us, meet gruesome deaths due to the inability of Amata and Latinus to resolve the dispute. Ultimately, it is Latinus' side that wins out, a reality that is so disconcerting to Amata that she dies by suicide rather than see the marriage of her daughter to Aeneas. The Trojans get to settle in Latium and Aeneas marries Lavinia, events that, as the reader is well aware, set in motion the ineluctable rise of Rome as a dominant Mediterranean power.

The ultimate acceptance of Aeneas by the Latins comes at a cost. "Successful" integration, as Asian American studies has shown, is a double-edged sword. Since the 1970s, Asian Americans have been tagged as model minorities, "singled out," according to Gale Yee, "as a group that has successfully assimilated into American society, becoming financially well-off and achieving the American dream."[41] The so-called model minority myth is problematic for a number of reasons, but, in particular, I want to draw attention to one troublesome aspect of this stereotype. The myth of the model minority papers over the fact that integration by means of assimilation requires cultural loss. Lisa Lowe explains that this narrative of the assimilated model minority is contingent on a "modern American society that 'discovers,' 'welcomes,' and 'domesticates' them."[42] Wen Liu has put it even more bluntly: the racial inclusion of Asian Americans necessitates their "racial erasure."[43] This centrality of loss, according to Anne Cheng, turns the racialized Asian American into a "ghostly figure" who is overwhelmed and overcome by "racial melancholy."[44]

This sense of loss is part and parcel of my own autoethnography. My trilingual parents, speakers of Sinhalese, Tamil, and English, chose to teach me only English, something that they thought was necessary for me to survive, succeed, and thrive. What use were languages that people had never heard of? It was far more practical to learn French or Spanish. Far more prestigious to know Latin. So too did Sri Lanka's rich culture—the lights at Wesak, the elephants at the Kandy Perahera, the sounds of the Papare band at the Premadasa, and the reveries of Pongal—flash before me like an apparition. My parents' own fragmented and incomplete stories could recover just a fraction of the sights, sounds, and tastes that I would never get to experience.[45]

[40] Dench 2005: 10-11; Padilla Peralta 2015.

[41] Yee 2009: 124 (cf. Lee 1999: 145-179 and Wu 2002: 39-77 for more on the myth of the model minority).

[42] Lowe 1996: 5.

[43] Liu 2019: 179.

[44] Cheng 2000: 23.

[45] Cf. Waldo 2023: 520-1 for other reflections by Asian American authors on the loss of their native tongues and its impact on their engagement with the worlds they inhabit.

This kind of cultural loss was also what the Trojans had to face when they settled in Latium. Juno, whose opposition to the Trojans has been clear since the very beginning of the poem, states that total assimilation is the necessary precondition for Trojan settlement in Latium:

> *ne vetus indigenas nomen mutare Latinos*
> *neu Troas fieri iubeas Teucrosque vocari*
> *aut vocem mutare viros aut vertere vestem.*
> *sit Latium, sint Albani per saecula reges,*
> *sit Romana potens Itala virtute propago:*
>
> "Do not order the indigenous Latins to change their ancient name or become Trojans and be called Teucrians—or that the men change their language and their clothing. But let Latium, let Alban kings throughout the ages exist; let Roman offspring hold power through Italian manliness. Troy is dead, and let it stay dead along with its name." (12.823-828)

The realities of assimilation are not sugar-coated in this passage—it is not a pathway to cultural integration; it is not a pathway to achieve economic or political success; it is not the collapsing of perceived cultural differences.[46] Assimilation is a divine dictate, as evinced by Juno's commands and hortatory subjunctives. Most arrestingly, assimilation signifies cultural death (*occidit, occideritque*): the Trojans lose their name, their language, their clothing.

Jupiter does not put up a fight. Rather, he not only concedes to his wife's demands, but he offes an even more harrowing vision of assimilation.

> *sermonem Ausonii patrium moresque tenebunt,*
> *utque est nomen erit; commixti corpore tantum*
> *subsident Teucri. morem ritusque sacrorum*
> *adiciam faciamque omnis uno ore Latinos.*
>
> "Ausonia's sons **will keep** their father's speech and manners, as their name is, so it **will be**: the Trojans **shall sink, merged into the mass** alone. I will add sacred laws and rites, and make them all Latins of one tongue." (12.834-837)

As is made clear by Jupiter's repeated use of the future tense, assimilation for the Trojans is an inevitability. Further, the assimilation of the Latins will not only lead to the disappearance of the Trojan customs and culture, but to their total erasure. By assimilating, the bodies of the Trojans are "merged into the mass" (*commixti corpore…subsident*), resulting in the complete and total subsumption of their Asian identity.[47]

Can we speak, apposite to this loss, of a sort of racial melancholy on the part of the Trojans? The *Aeneid*, of course, does not relate the life of the Trojans after the war ends. But I would suggest, following Aaron Seider, that the poem as a whole is suffused with melancholic remembrances of a Trojan past.[48] Trojan ghosts haunt Aeneas throughout the

[46] Nappa 2022: 105.

[47] As Jewell 2019 has shown, this language of mixing and agglomeration echoes Late Republican rhetoric of urban displacement.

[48] Seider 2013: 66-95 treats the question of remembrances of Troy through the lens of memory and trauma studies.

epic. Creusa and Hector both appear before Rome's future founder in Book 2, and in Book 6, he meets the shades of Palinurus, Anchises, and countless other Trojans who died defending the city.[49] Furthermore, traumatic memories of the destruction of Troy resound throughout the epic, not only in the stories that Trojans themselves retell, but through a variety of inter- and intratextual references that Vergil weaves throughout it. Aeneas' lamentation "O, three and four times blessed were those who died before their fathers' eyes beneath the walls of Troy" (1.133-135) takes on new meaning when read in light of forced Trojan assimilation.

We will return to consider Aeneas' response to this divine directive of assimilation from an Asian American lens later on. But for now, we turn to our second ancient narrative of Asian migration and assimilation in Italy, that of Petronius' first-century CE novel, the *Satyrica.*

Beyond Satire: Trimalchio and Alien Capital

At the heart of Petronius' *Satyrica*, as it remains to us, is a lavish dinner feast at the house of a freedman by the name of Trimalchio. Trimalchio, like Aeneas, is an Asian migrant. As he tells us: "I came [to Italy] from Asia when I was as tall as this candelabra" (Pet. *Sat.* 75.10: *tam magnus ex Asia veni quam hic candelabrus est*). After decades of enslavement, Trimalchio gained his freedom and, at least according to his account of affairs, enjoyed substantial financial success. Due in large part to the ostentatiousness of the party he holds and his failed attempts to appear cultured, the character of Trimalchio is often read as a satirization of the freedmen who had become prominent in Roman society in the first century CE.[50] Others have read the death and underworld imagery that dominates the dinner party as a commentary on the impacts of enslavement on freedmen.[51] What I'd like to suggest here, however, is that there are other aspects of Trimalchio's portrayal that emerge when we read his character in light of Asian American studies.

In her 2016 monograph, *Alien Capital*, Iyko Day argues that a key part of the racialization of Asian Americans and Asian Canadians from the 19th century onwards has been their abstraction as capital. As she shows, Asian Americans and Asian Canadians have been characterized as and compared to commodities and technologies. Day demonstrates how "economism" plays a central role in this particular stereotyping of Asians; they are efficient, compliant, and technologically savvy and, to borrow a repugnant neologism, they add value. The result of these racialized associations is that the humanity of Asian Americans is erased.[52] The abstraction of Asian Americans as capital, Day contends, is part and parcel of North American settler colonial ideology. It correlates directly with the mediating role that Asian Americans and Asian Canadians played in North American settler colonial projects. Together with African slaves, Asians were the alien capital needed to power a settler colonial state as it sought to exterminate the land's indigenous inhabitants.

[49] Feldherr 1999: 116-22; Sugar 2019: 172-90.

[50] E.g. Walsh 1970; Conte 1996; Goldman 2008.

[51] E.g. Bodel 1994; Padilla Peralta 2024.

[52] Day 2016: 1-40. See also Luis 2024, who shows the history of Asians as migrant capital (free and unfree) in the Americas far predates the late 19th century.

In addition to subtending settler colonialism, this particular racialization of Asian Americans, Day argues, functions as a key part of justifying North America's capitalist logics by way of romantic anticapitalism. According to Day, romantic anticapitalism refers to the "misperception of the *appearance* of capitalist relations for their essence."[53] Romantic anticapitalism glorifies the concrete "thingly" dimensions of capitalism, "the dusty workboots by the door, the reliable pickup truck" while casting as evil and morally destructive its more abstract elements like "capital accumulation, surplus-value, and money."[54] To this "opposition between a concrete natural world and a destructively abstract, value-driven one" is added a dynamic racial opposition between whites who embody the former and Asians who embody the latter.[55] Day offers the example of American rhetoric around Japanese workers during their internment, noting that the stereotyping of Japanese Americans as machine-like in their ruthless efficiency and obedience not only dehumanized them but also justified their displacement to labor camps.[56] The framing of Asian Americans as abstract capital in such narratives casts them as agents of moral decline while cloaking the role that the whites play in a capitalist, greed-driven society.

The same dynamics appear to be at play in Petronius' characterization of Trimalchio. Case in point is his story of his manifold successes after manumission as told in Chapter 76:

> *Ceterum, quemadmodum di volunt, dominus in domo factus sum…Quid multa? coheredem me Caesari fecit, et accepi* ***patrimonium laticlavium****. Nemini tamen nihil satis est.* ***Concupivi negotiari….quinque naves*** *aedificavi, oneravi* ***vinum****—et tune erat contra* ***aurum****—misi Romam. Putares me hoc iussisse: omnes naves naufragarunt, factum, non fabula. Uno die Neptunus* ***trecenties sestertium*** *devoravit. Putatis me defecisse? Non mehercules mi haec* ***iactura*** *gusti fuit, tanquam nihil facti. Alteras feci* ***maiores*** *et meliores et feliciores, ut nemo non me virum fortem diceret. Scitis,* ***magna navis*** *magnam fortitudinem habet. Oneravi rursus* ***vinum, lardum, fabam, seplasium, mancipia****. Hoc loco Fortunata* ***rem piam*** *fecit;* ***omne enim aurum suum****,* ***omnia vestimenta vendidit*** *et mi* ***centum aureos*** *in manu posuit. Hoc fuit* ***peculii mei fermentum****….Uno cursu* ***centies sestertium*** *corrotundavi. Statim redemi* ***fundos omnes****, qui patroni mei fuerant. Aedifico* ***domum****,* ***venalicia*** *coemo* ***iumenta;*** *quicquid tangebam, crescebat tanquam favus. Postquam coepi* ***plus habere****, quam tota patria mea habet, manum de tabula: sustuli me de negotiatione et coepi libertos* ***faenerare****….*
>
> "Then, as the Gods willed, I became the real master of the house….I need only add that I was joint residuary legatee with Caesar, and came into an estate fit for a senator. But no one is satisfied with nothing. I conceived a passion for business….I built five ships, got a cargo of wine—which was worth its weight in gold at the time—and sent them to Rome. You may think it was a put-up job; every one was wrecked, truth and no fairy-tales. Neptune gulped down thirty million in one day. Do you think I lost heart? Lord! no, I no more tasted my loss than if nothing had happened. I built some more, bigger, better and more expensive, so that no one could say I was not a brave man. You know, a huge ship has a certain security about her. I got another cargo of wine, bacon,

[53] Day 2016: 8.

[54] Day 2016: 10.

[55] Day 2016: 16.

[56] Day 2016: 128-42.

> beans, perfumes, and slaves. Fortunata did a noble thing at that time; she sold all her jewellery and all her clothes, and put a hundred gold pieces into my hand. They were the incitements to my earnings.... I made a clear ten million on one voyage. I at once bought up all the estates which had belonged to my patron. I built a house, and bought slaves and cattle; whatever I touched grew like a honey-comb. When I came to have more than the whole revenues of my own country, I threw up the game: I retired from active work and began to finance freedmen.... (trans. Heseltine)

The narrative above is one of capital accumulation, the creation of surplus-value, and, of course, money. Trimalchio tells us that he not only won his freedom but came into a massive estate upon his master's death. We learn that this bequest of capital is particularly valuable because he "wanted to do business" (*concupivi negotiari*). A blow-by-blow account of his shipping endeavors is packed with references to capital (his building of ships and his shipping of various goods) and audacious sums of money (he lost 30 million sesterces on one occasion and won 10 million on another). Even the good deed (*rem piam*) that his wife, Fortunata, does for him is expressed in terms of capital and money—she sold all of her gold (*aurum*) and clothes (*vestimenta*) so that she could put one hundred gold coins (*centum aureos*) in his hand.

His success in shipping leads to surplus-value and, in turn, to the accumulation of more capital. He buys up "all the estates" (*fundos omnes*) of his former master, builds a massive home of his own, and soon ends up with more money than even his *patria*. Even though Trimalchio decides to retire at this point, his association with capital accumulation continues: he takes on the task of providing capital (*faenerare*) to his fellow freedmen.

Reading the life story of Trimalchio attuned to the broader framework of the abstraction of capital challenges a strictly satirical reading of the *Cena*. Rather, it opens the door to seeing Petronius' characterization of Trimalchio as something more sinister, as a part of a larger elite tactic of racializing freedmen to obscure Roman freeborn greed and thereby ensure their place at the top of Roman moral and social hierarchy.[57] We find similar stereotyping of freedmen as obsessed with stockpiling and showing off their newfound wealth in other imperial-era authors.[58] Juvenal's first *Satire*, for example, savagely critiques freedmen from Egypt and West Asia for their ostentatious display of their financial success.[59] Similarly, Martial pillories the freedmen from Syria, Parthia, and Cappadocia for their accumulation of wealth while freeborn citizens of birth and intelligence lack even a suitable cloak.[60]

[57] Padilla Peralta 2024: 249-52 offers a robust justification for seeing freedmen in the Roman world as a racialized group, drawing on the work of Anne Cheng and José Esteban Muñoz: "The first and most fundamental is that Roman manumission is a species of racial formation. Or, to package this idea in somewhat different language but with a roughly equivalent thrust: racialization attends the progression from enslavement to freedom....This chapter will test the proposition that Roman antiquity's closest analogue to contemporary states of "feeling brown" can be found in the melancholy of the manumitted." For another example of a non-descent based group being subject to racialization, see Kennedy 2021 which makes similar arguments about metic women in Athens.

[58] Habinek 2005: 178-80; Ritter 2019: 257-67.

[59] Juv. *Sat.* 1.24-30, 97-116.

[60] Mart. *Ep.* 10.76.

This stereotyping of foreign freedmen in terms of their material wealth, business acumen, and comparative success should be read against a broader Roman discourse on the "right" way to accumulate wealth. The Roman elite put out a story that they earned their wealth not by engaging in trade and mercantilism, but rather by more concrete, morally pure forms of business-like agriculture.[61] Cato the Elder notably began his *de Agricultura* with the claim that "it is true that to get money by trading is sometimes more profitable, were it not so dangerous; and likewise money-lending, if it were as honorable" (Cato *Agr.* praef.: *est interdum praestare mercaturis rem quaerere, nisi tam periculosum sit, et item* ***fenerari****, si tam* ***honestum*** *sit*). So too Cicero writes in *de Officiis* 1.150 that there were occupations that were regarded suitable for *liberales* ("free men") and dirty ones (*sordidi*) better suited to the enslaved or formerly enslaved.[62] First among the sordid occupations that Cicero names were those directly related to money and capital accumulation: tax-collectors (*portitoria*) and lenders at interest (*faeneratores*), a term that harkens back to Trimalchio's retirement gig.

Though I want to be careful about claiming that the Romans adopted some sort of romantic anticapitalist ideal, it is nonetheless clear that freedmen were racialized as immoral accumulators of capital in direct opposition to the morally pure economic endeavors of a Roman freeborn elite. This dynamic opposition worked in two ways. First, it occluded the role of the Roman elite in capital accumulation. After all, it was the political and economic prerogative of the Roman elite to conquer new lands, loot them for spoils, and traffic their inhabitants in a Mediterranean-wide slave trade. Second, it allowed for the casting of freedmen, much like Asians in the Americas, as agents of moral chaos and decline. Hence, we find the rising prominence of freedmen at the heart of narratives of a corrupt Imperial Rome, as evinced by the central role played by *liberti* in the courts of Claudius and Nero in the accounts of the Roman senatorial elites like Seneca, Pliny the Younger, and Tacitus.[63] Thus, we can read the *Satyrica* not only as a send-up of the freedman nouveau riche, but part of a larger discourse of pinning the blame of the state's moral decline in the mid-first century CE on them and *not* the Roman elite.

In as much as it offers us commentary on Roman elite racializations of freedmen, this passage in Chapter 76 also pertains to the issue of assimilation. From a narratological perspective, it is, of course, Trimalchio who tells his life story. His shipping success and lending business are seen as a source not of shame or reductionist racialization, but of immense pride. This is further confirmed in the description of the funeral monument that is to be built for him (71.1-12), which features a monumental representation of the story of his rise from a poor ex-slave to a wealthy, powerful freedman. In the monument, various forms of capital are central: ships that carry his goods to potential buyers, the adornments that he can purchase with his newly found wealth, and the money that he hands out to the urban *plebs*.[64]

Trimalchio's pride in his business accomplishments and his desire to display them publicly is not unique. Countless funerary epitaphs and monuments of freedmen and freedwomen not only relate stories of their occupational success but depict themselves

[61] D'Arms 1981: 1-19 lays out the evidence for the (contradictory) attitudes of the Roman elite towards business dealings (cf. Mouritsen 2011: 206-47 for *realia).*

[62] Joshel 1992: 68-69.

[63] E.g. Sen. *Ap.* 15; Plin. *Ep.* 7.29, 8.6; Tac. *Ann.* 11.38, 12.53, 14.64; Suet. *Cl.* 25 (cf. Joshel 1992: 81-83).

[64] Prag 2006: 538-47 discusses in detail the many resonances of the ships that show up in his funerary monument, with pertinent bibliography.

triumphantly engaging in this work.[65] Furthermore, Devon Stewart has argued that these epitaphs share more than just subject matter but exude a broader "aesthetic of sameness."[66] All of this suggests that many freedmen and freedwomen bought into and cultivated their associations with various forms of work and labor as positive. On this point, comparison with Asian Americans is once again revealing. Many Asian Americans have willingly accepted as positive their stereotyping as hard-working, efficient, and high-achieving. As Kandice Chuh writes: "significant numbers of those of us racialized as Asian Americans have increasingly organized and defined our lives and communities in terms of socioeconomic status, which is regularly defined in terms of credentials from the most prominent colleges and universities."[67]

Indeed, the "hard-working" immigrant narrative is certainly something that my family willingly wore as a badge of pride.[68] Upon my graduation from college and graduate school, my parents insisted upon buying a frame for my diplomas. After forking over an exorbitant fee to the campus bookstore, they proudly hung my diplomas (written in Latin, of course) in our family home, as a sign of a generational ethic of hard work and achievement. My assimilation to a reductionist Asian racialization of the hard-working immigrant was viewed as a triumph rather than some sort of deep cultural betrayal. My family's racial subjectivity, much like that of Trimalchio, was grounded in an acceptance of larger racial narratives imposed from above.

Asian Complicities: Ancient and Modern

How should we understand these moments, both ancient and modern, where an oppressed group internalizes narratives imposed by an oppressor as central to their racial subjectivity? One might see this move by ancient and modern Asians alike as a moment of resistance, a repackaging of reductionist logic for self-empowerment and, perhaps, evidence of group solidarity amidst oppressive circumstances. Alternatively, one might read the scenes somewhat more pessimistically as evidence of complicity with these oppressive structures. As Dan-el Padilla Peralta has put it in the case of the Roman freedman, "claiming dignity within this system of structural oppression thus requires full acceptance of its logic of valuation" and thereby works to legitimate those structures of power.[69] Or is it, as Anne

[65] Joshel 1992: 85-91.

[66] Stewart 2019: 135-52.

[67] Chuh 2019: 129.

[68] On the ever-presence of this narrative of "hard work" in South Asians immigrant to the United States, see Bhatia 2007: 74-111, 115-183.

[69] Padilla Peralta 2024: 265. The question of complicity has been hotly debated among Asian Americanists. The likes of Fujikane and Okamura 2008 and Kim 1999, 2023 have argued that the initial subjugation of Asian Americans does not exempt them from participating in oppressive state structures. Others, most notably Day 2016, have pushed back against carte blanche statements of Asian American complicity in such projects. They argue that claims to Asian American complicity covers over the vast social and economic disparities among Asian Americans, let alone properly accounts for geographic and temporal differences.

Cheng claims, some mixture of the two, "a web of negotiation that expresses agency as well as abjection"?[70]

The case of Trimalchio seems to favor the more pessimistic reading or perhaps more accurately a reading that attends to the dangers of accepting such stereotyping. Indeed, Trimalchio's attempted assimilation and his financial successes are attended by various forms of violence. Most apparently, Trimalchio's wealth and prominence are tied up in the practice of slavery. Not only does he own numerous slaves, so many that they must be organized into "companies of ten" (47.11: *decuriae*), but, as the passage above makes clear, he also seems to have been actively involved in the slave trade (*mancipia*). Nor do his experiences as a formerly enslaved person lead to better treatment for those he has himself enslaved. Throughout the *Cena*, there are numerous instances of Trimalchio ordering and threatening brutal punishments for his slaves—his dinner guests are greeted by a notice that any slave who leaves without his permission will receive 100 lashes (28.7); he orders his cook to strip down in order to receive a lashing (49.6); and he tells a young boy who accidentally drops his cup to kill himself (52.4-6).[71]

Trimalchio's attempts to become a member of the Roman elite, are thus deeply entangled with and dependent on continuing the violence of the very institution that oppressed him in the first place, slavery. The trafficking of slaves as objects to be bought and sold and the brutal punishments that they are subjected to reveal, to quote Padilla Peralta, Trimalchio's internalization of "a foundational ideological premise of Roman slavery, namely that the enslaved person lacks personhood."[72] Additionally, Trimalchio's autobiographical narrative also attests to his belief that his financial success can "dislodge the stigmatization of the past," a past that included sexual abuse at the hands of both his *dominus* and *domina*, as memorialized by his *candelabra*.[73] Yet, as the elite perspective of Petronius reveals, Trimalchio is bound to fail in these endeavors. His bumbling attempts to appear a man of class only serve to lay bare the *macula servitutis* ("mark of slavery") to those in the know.

A similar kind of violence-cum-assimilation can be seen in the example of the diplomas discussed above. The diplomas that hung on my parents' wall, written in Latin just like Trimalchio's tombstone, do not just symbolize a familial narrative of pluckiness and hard work. They also reveal my family's internalization of a foundational ideological premise of 20th- and 21st-century American racial thought: that of the model minority. As Jean Claire Kim has written, the myth of the model minority substitutes a cultural explanation for a racial one in explaining social inequalities.[74] By pointing to cultural differences between Asians and other non-white races (e.g., hard work, desire to succeed, the importance of intelligence), the narrative of the model minority implies that race/skin color is not an impediment to the achievement of the American dream of upward social mobility. In this narrative, the reason that other non-white races have not been as "successful" is not because

[70] Cheng 2000: 42.

[71] See Donahoe 2016: 380-400 for a broader discussion of violence against slaves in the narrative of the *Cena Trimalchionis*.

[72] Padilla Peralta 2024: 262.

[73] Padilla Peralta 2024: 263.

[74] Kim 1999: 119.

of systemic disadvantages and racial oppression, but rather a cultural lack of work ethic, intelligence, and discipline.[75]

As such, the model minority narrative substantiates white supremacy by offering another rationale for believing Blacks and other racial minority groups are inferior to their white counterparts. Ironically, however, this myth is harmful to Asian Americans as well. It homogenizes disparate groups of immigrants, without regard for class, gender identity, or ethnicity, simultaneously reducing them to a simplistic stereotype and obscuring the realities of discriminatory practices against Asian Americans.[76] This simplistic stereotyping, which gives way to satire and caricatures, serves as a veritable *macula servitutis* for Asian Americans and thereby ensures their exclusion from American society's innermost circles. By monumentalizing my diploma, my family served to perpetuate the triangulation of Asian Americans in a narrative that works to subtend white supremacy.

The interconnectedness of violence and assimilation leads us back to Book 12 of the *Aeneid* discussed above. Although we do not get to see the impact that the divine dictate of assimilation has on the Trojans as a people, we afforded a glimpse at how it affects one of them: Aeneas. And indeed, Aeneas' very first act after Juno and Jupiter strike a deal to ensure Trojan assimilation is violence. Immediately following the denouement between Juno and Jupiter, Aeneas fells Turnus with a spear. Totally at the mercy of Aeneas, Turnus begs for his life, causing Aeneas to momentarily relent. However, the sight of Pallas' baldric causes a change of heart in Aeneas. Filled with rage, Aeneas drives his sword right through Turnus' chest, killing him and bringing Vergil's epic to a stunning close.

The poem's climactic final scene, however, is marked not just by Aeneas' change of heart, but also by a change in his identity that matches the divine dictates of Juno and Jupiter. First, Aeneas' behavior and language evoke and mirror the actions of Italy's inhabitants. Several of his actions in the final scene are reminiscent of those of his Rutulian rival, Turnus. Just as Turnus kills Pallas with a spear, so too is the *hasta* the weapon that Aeneas uses to send Turnus tumbling to the ground. Additionally, Aeneas is "incensed with rage and terribly angry" (12.946-947: *furiis accensus et ira terribilis*), a rage that likewise links him to Turnus, whose anger and irascibility is not only central to his portrayal in the poem, but displayed in his final breath (*indignata*).[77] Even more pointedly, Aeneas literally takes on the identity of another one of Italy's denizens, the recently killed Pallas, as he strikes Turnus with his final blow: "Pallas sacrifices you with this wound; Pallas takes his revenge from your wicked blood" (12.948-949: *Pallas te hoc volnere, Pallas immolat et poenam scelerato ex sanguine sumit*). This Aeneas is not the effeminate *semivir* ("half-man") that Queen Amata and others accuse him of being, but rather the raging and spiteful Italian warrior that Juno insists upon.

But there is another transformation afoot. In the very last line of the poem, Vergil tells us how Turnus' "life resentfully takes refuge under the shades with a groan" (A. 12.952: *vitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras*). The verb *fugit* here, as numerous scholars have noted, harkens back to the opening lines of the *Aeneid* where Vergil described Aeneas as a

[75] Kim 1999: 118.

[76] Kim 1999: 118-119.

[77] For a contextualization of Aeneas' anger within the context of the poem and broader cultural trends, see Galinksy 1988.

fato profugus ("refugee by fate").[78] Yet this time, it is not Aeneas who is seeking refuge. Rather, Aeneas has become the one who puts others to flight, the root cause of Turnus's forced migration (fugit) from his Italian homeland to the shores of the river Styx. Consequently, the wordplay brings a fitting conclusion to Aeneas's metamorphosis from helpless migrant to violent colonizer that, according to Sharilyn Nakata and Keith Fletcher, Vergil advances in the second half of the epic.[79] Aeneas has not only displaced but killed the native who stands between him and his divinely promised colonial future. The formerly oppressed has now adopted the tools of oppression for his own benefit and, in the process, become the oppressor.

Thus, when read through an Asian American lens, the final lines of the *Aeneid* offer a sobering reminder of the realities of assimilation and its proximity to violence. They signal the very thin line between oppressor and oppressed, reminding the reader that past oppression does not preclude them from participating in oppression.

Conclusion: Future Considerations

This thin line between oppressor and oppressed is something that troubles me as an Asian American who possesses significant privileges because of my gender, education, and upbringing. I frequently ponder the way that the work that I do unwittingly ensures the continuance of the structures of racial capitalism, imperialism, and settler colonialism. And indeed, similar concerns are very much present in my mind as I lay out my vision for an Asian American hermeneutics in this essay. Might the project of Asian American hermeneutics that I propose aid and abet a toxic and predatory academic ecosystem? Might it become, for instance, an example of the gold rush mentality of which Hannah Čulík-Baird and Joseph Romero warned us in the first volume of *Res Difficiles, The Journal*? Will it be a means by which established scholars "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"?[80]

There is no straight forward answer to this question, but I do find some solace in the fact that the bedrock of the proposed hermeneutic is Asian American studies. Asian American studies, as discussed above, is a field which values not just the critical, but the *self*-critical. That is, the field takes as foundational to its outlook an awareness of Asian American privileges and complicities and, as such, prioritizes anti-racist and anti-imperial praxis in its epistemological maneuverings. As Kandice Chuh has written, Asian American studies is not a field defined by racial subjectivities, but rather by a commitment to "advancing and engaging in practices of liberation and freedom" with a deep attention to question of power and relationality on a transnational scale.[81] To my mind, Chuh's description of Asian American studies as a subjectless and political endeavor very much echoes the words of the

[78] On the connection (and others) between the beginning and end of the poem, see Hardie 1997; Putnam 2010: 20-23.

[79] Nakata 2004; Fletcher 2014.

[80] Čulík-Baird and Romero 2024: 3.

[81] Chuh 2003: 115.

Black poet, essayist, and activist, June Jordan, who called on her readers "to stop cooperating with our enemies.... to stop the courtesies and to let the feeling be real."[82]

Drawing from Jordan and Chuh's observations, I see Asian American hermeneutics as an expressly political endeavor, aimed at "advancing and engaging in practices of liberation and freedom." Further, as Jordan's "our" suggests, I believe that Asian American hermeneutics cannot do this work alone. One way to build towards Jordan's "our" is through the building of alliances. Asian American hermeneutics can only perform its political purpose when allied to other minoritarian ways of being and reading. Then and only then can it truly work towards disrupting our discipline's centuries-long entanglement with white supremacy and settler colonialism.[83] However, if we are to truly reach Jordan's communal "our", Asian American hermeneutics cannot be in anyway territorial. As I have argued above, Asian American hermeneutics is way of seeing the world that all disciplinary practitioners, regardless of racial identification, ought to engage with in their own reading, writing, and teaching of the classics.[84] The methods and approaches made visible by Asian American studies and Asian American experiences not only offer alternative and heretofore unconsidered ways of understanding ancient pasts, but also disrupt the white identitarian hermeneutics that have guided our study of ancient Greece and Rome. The wide dissemination of such perspectives is essential for developing a form of classics that does not perpetuate white supremacy, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism. Gatekeeping Asian American hermeneutics will only result in ghettoizing of critical perspectives and ultimately led to the recentering of white identarian hermeneutics as the dominant way of reading, writing, and teaching about the Greco-Roman past. And that is something we desperately need to avoid.[85]

Dominic Machado
dmachado@holycross.edu

[82] Jordan 1981: 187.

[83] Liew 2008: 14-15.

[84] Cf. Liew 2008: 16-17 for a similar argument regarding Asian American biblical hermeneutics.

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