

Minoritizing Classics

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Abstract: This piece is a call-to-action for those who work with ancient greco-roman material, often identified as “classicists,” to minoritize the field of classics by adopting a stance of disciplinary and individual humility. This includes critically examining the assumption that classics is exempt, or will even benefit, from the political persecution of racialized, queer and trans, disabled, and other minoritized populations. Current diversification attempts to combat this state of affairs by incorporating minoritized viewpoints via reception, though well meaning, ultimately bolster the colonial supremacy of the discipline. Minoritizing classics requires a varied, widespread, and communal imaginative labor aimed at completely revising the hierarchized valuation of greco-roman material and classical (philological) methodologies.

Keywords: disciplinary humility, decolonizing classics, minoritized knowledges.

Res Difficiles continues to explore and encourage diverse forms of scholarly expression. This piece departs from traditional article format by combining the invitation sent to speakers with the opening remarks from the Minoritizing Classics Colloquium, held at UC Santa Barbara on February 8, 2025. The following text serves both as a record of the event’s framing and an invitation to reflect on the evolving shape of academic discourse.

I’m delighted to have present in this room many colleagues whom I greatly admire on both an intellectual and a personal level—thank you to Kelly Nguyen, Adriana Vazquez, Sukaina Hirji, and Hannah Silverblank for so generously sharing their unpublished work with us. Unforeseen circumstances have prevented Mathura Umachandran from being here, for which they send apologies. Their presence will be sorely missed, but undoubtedly felt through the profound influence their thinking has had on the conception of this colloquium. The speakers I have invited model creativity, intellectual curiosity, courage, integrity, political investment, and a deep sense of ethical responsibility. Every single one of them has acted consistently with their values at great risk to themselves and their careers, whether it be standing at the front lines of the encampments last spring, actively supporting graduate student strikes, or advocating for the fair and respectful treatment of their students and colleagues. They have done so not out of a sense of performative victimhood or martyrdom, but simply because it was the right thing to do. This is to say nothing of their contributions to the field and beyond, which speak for themselves and will be the subject of our discussion today.

In a time of dehumanizing legislation designed to terrorize, including the confiscation and withholding of trans people’s identity documents as part of an effort to deny trans existence, rampant ICE raids targeting people who have lived and contributed to the American economy and society for decades, the governmental funding and denial of genocide despite widespread popular protest, the mass-disabling event that is the ongoing pandemic, the defunding of higher education meant to stifle academic freedom, and many

other crises that disproportionately affect minoritized populations, but also touch the lives of the most privileged, whatever illusion the discipline of classics may have held of its objectivity and insulation from current political issues is undoubtedly crumbling.¹ It has been proven over and over again that much work published, condoned, and cited in this discipline actively bolsters the worldview of white supremacists and their interpretation of canonical texts.² Whether that work does so intentionally or not is beside the point. As Sukaina Hirji's paper argues, debating whether this is the effect of misinterpretation or misunderstanding risks stagnation and futility. No, this is an inherent feature of classical texts, upheld by those who interpret them, inseparable from the contexts in which they have been read.³

In response to this state of affairs, well-established scholars including Dan-el Padilla Peralta, Patrice Rankine, and Johanna Hanink have called for burning the classics—destroying what exists and starting fresh.⁴ Critics of their position tend to flatten it into the condemnation that classics is rotten to its root, for which the solution is nothing short of total annihilation, without hearing the second part of their provocation: that this destruction is only necessary if the discipline as-it-is refuses to change by making way for BIPOC and other marginalized points of view. As someone living in the ongoing aftermath of the recent LA fires—and I know many others in the room also remain deeply affected—I can tell you from personal experience that it is the continued suppression of minoritized knowledges, in this case, the pointed refusal to implement prescribed burns and other centuries-old land management techniques of the Tongva people, that leads to true devastation.⁵ It is not those who point out the misogynistic, racist, ableist, and colonial history and present of the discipline that are setting it destructively ablaze, but those who refuse to acknowledge that history and present, opting instead to cling steadfastly to the imagined comfort of the past while pretending they do not smell the smoke.

So if it is to avoid completely succumbing to the flames, what might the discipline do? Mathura Umachandran has argued that to combat the racism and colonialism endemic to the field, classicists must adopt a position of humility, decentering the field and by extension

¹ An illusion upheld by the mistaken belief that minoritized individuals do not exist in the field, or that they consist of so small a demographic that they are not worth consideration. On the lie of objective “pure philology,” see Rankine, P. 2019. “Classics, Race, and Community-Engaged Scholarship.” *AJP* 140.2, 345–59.

² E.g. Zuckerberg, D. 2018. *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Ranger, H. 2024. “Critical Reception Studies: The White Feminism of Feminist Reception Scholarship,” in *Critical Ancient World Studies: The Case for Forgetting Classics*, ed. by M. Umachandran and M. Ward. London and New York: Routledge, 213–33.

³ Hirji, S. Forthcoming. “Ancient Greek Philosophy as Ideology,” in *Crafting Race in Plato and Aristotle*, ed. by P. Marechal and J. Proios. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴ On Padilla Peralta: Poser, R. Feb. 2, 2021, updated June 15, 2023. “He Wants to Save Classics From Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?” *The New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/magazine/classics-greece-rome-whiteness.html>; link accessed Apr. 27, 2025; Rankine, P. Nov. 14, 2024. “Fiery Towers: A Professional Classicist's Manifesto.” Penn Public Lectures on Classical Antiquity and the Contemporary World; Hanink, J. Feb. 11, 2021. “A New Path for Classics.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/if-classics-doesnt-change-let-it-burn>; link accessed Apr. 27, 2025.

⁵ Plevin, R. Jan. 19, 2025. “The Tongva's Land Burned in Eaton Fire. But Leaders Say Traditional Practices Mitigated Damage.” *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-01-19/tongva-ancestral-land-burned-eaton-fire>; link accessed Apr. 27, 2025. See “Gabrielino/Tongva Nation.” <https://gabrielinotongva.org/>; link accessed Apr. 27, 2025. See also the forthcoming Fall 2025 volume of *Res Difficiles*, “Rez Diff: Indigenous Perspectives,” ed. by A. Lance and T. Wells.

ourselves in the process.⁶ Building on their work, I propose that we minoritize classics: not diversify it, the milquetoast liberality of which Sara Ahmed has convincingly demonstrated.⁷ Diversification, after all, fuels consumption and assimilation while allowing the diversifiers to congratulate themselves for recruiting those who are tokenized-as-diverse into the project of empire.⁸ Minoritizing is instead a move to turn this colonial impulse on its head—seen, within reception studies, to enable classicists to “claim” cultural products that span a vast geographical and temporal spread. In focusing primarily on connections to greco-roman antiquity, the field via reception produces its own relevance by continuing its much-critiqued extractive impulses.

Contrary to the main currents of reception studies today, minoritizing classics asserts that works classified as reception are not worth studying *because* of their interaction with greco-roman antiquity, but rather are creative projects in their own right that *happen* to converse with the fodder of classicists, and deserve to be approached as such.

What is the difference in insisting, on the one hand, that one must have read vergil and/or homer to understand Ocean Vuong’s “Aubade with Burning City,” or that one must have knowledge of the Vietnam War, on the other?⁹ Both claims seek to historicize, contextualize, and prioritize, but surely the ethical and political valence differs. What about the myriad other burning cities that one may have historical, cultural, familial, and/or personal knowledge of? The most recent escalation of violence against Palestinians, for instance, exceeds Vuong’s authorial intent, but surely and rightly influences what readings we might produce today. In reading and teaching Vuong’s writing, one ought not to extract only those poems that interact with the classical tradition, but to also discuss those across his *oeuvre* that pointedly do not, discover how those in other fields and outside the academy read his work, consider emotional and artistic responses to his poetry, and so on, in an effort to respectfully understand and represent his creative agency—areas that traditionally fall outside of a classicist’s “lane,” requiring curiosity, humility, and yes, much discomfort and labor.¹⁰ This is one way to avoid positioning the classicist self as a masterful expert, the tradition as the guiding principle, instead truly dialoguing with the material at hand in its own right and drawing on the bounty of undisciplined knowledges.

Queer theory, building on Black feminist theory, validates personal and community-based experience as legitimate knowledge that one can use to theorize.¹¹ Perhaps a corollary

⁶ Umachandran, M. 2022. “Disciplinecraft: Towards an Anti-racist Classics.” *TAPA* 152.1, 25-31.

⁷ Ahmed, S. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. See also Padilla Peralta, D. 2018. “The Death of a Discipline.” *Arcade (Stanford Humanities Center)*; and Kotrosits, M. 2023. “The Ethnography of Gender: Reconsidering Gender as an Object of Study.” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 7.1, 5-28, esp. 21-24 on the problems of diversifying (ancient) gender.

⁸ Cf. Greenwood, E. 2022, 188-9 on “diversity as ethnographic fallacy.” “Introduction: Classical Philology, Otherhow.” *AJP* 143.2, 187-97.

⁹ Vuong, O. 2016. *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 10-12.

¹⁰ On this point, I depart from the limiting statement that “a *philological* journal for Classics cannot be asked to consider all manner of history and culture, American or otherwise [emphasis his].” Rankine 2019, “Classics, Race, and Community-Engaged Scholarship,” 357.

¹¹ Black feminist theory: influential examples are hooks, b. 1991. “Theory as Liberatory Practice.” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4.1, 1-12; Collins, P. H. “Black Feminist Epistemology,” in *Black Feminist Thought* (2nd Edition). New York and London: Routledge, 251-71. On Queer theory: Sedgwick, E. K. 1993, 9: “there are important senses in which ‘queer’ can signify only *when attached to the first person* [emphasis hers].” “Queer and Now,” in *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1-20. Cf. Mel Y. Chen’s (2012, 197-202) use of the autobiographical in theorizing “toxicity” in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham and London: Duke

for our field is that the specialized knowledge of greco-roman antiquity that a classicist offers can be considered as part of any experience that one can bring to the table: no more or less valid than any other, albeit acquired through years of higher education and gatekept disciplinization. To minoritize classics thus does not consist merely of including “othered” voices and knowledges, but to consider them as important as, if not more important than, greco-roman antiquity and hetero-patriarchal colonial logics. The cultivation of disciplinary humility is beginning to take root.¹² It is, however, a duty that has fallen primarily on the minoritized, those who are already forcibly humbled by the white supremacy of the discipline—and whose burdened shoulders will continue to bear its weight, though it is my hope that they will not continue to do so alone.¹³

At its core, minoritizing classics is a reminder that every argument is political, *especially* those that refuse to acknowledge politics, and thus has profound ramifications for how real people are treated in the world. This is not an intellectual exercise. This is a call to shift your thinking, your speech, your writing, and above all, your actions to challenge the inequities of the status quo, *especially* when doing so decreases your own access to the privileges afforded by wealth, institutional power, masculinity, education, whiteness, class—the list could continue forever.

We envisage this space as a supportive one in which we can discuss how the identities projected upon and manifested through our bodies, configured by historical and ongoing colonialisms, shape the state of the discipline. We ask you to sit in discomfort when it arises, allowing it to mark areas for further examination, feeling, and growth, rather than topics to be avoided.¹⁴ The world that minoritizing classics is inviting you to co-create will only be realized if we have the humility to take responsibility for our mistakes, ignorance, and complicity in oppression, so that we can commit to doing better. The effect of these discussions will undoubtedly reverberate beyond this room. Thank you all for being part of this conversation.

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University Press; and José Esteban Muñoz’s (2019, 67-73) use of personal memory to theorize queer gesture in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (10th Anniversary Edition). New York: New York University Press.

¹² Notable examples are: Haselswerdt, E. 2023. “Sappho’s Body as Archive: Towards a Deep Lez Philology,” in *Critical Ancient World Studies: The Case for Forgetting Classics*, ed. by M. Umachandran and M. Ward. London and New York: Routledge, 121-37; Nguyen, K. 2021. “Queering Telemachus: Ocean Vuong, Postmemories and the Vietnam War.” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 29, 430-48; Nguyen, K. 2023. “Queering Feminine Movement: Sappho, Hồ Xuân Hương and Vi Khi Nao,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Classics and Queer Theory*, ed. by E. Haselswerdt, S. Lindheim, and K. Ormand. London: Routledge, 303-15. Umachandran, M. 2023. “Speculation on Classical Reception: Queer Desire and N. K. Jemisin’s ‘The Effluence Engine,’” in *The Routledge Handbook of Classics and Queer Theory* ed. by E. Haselswerdt, S. Lindheim, and K. Ormand. London: Routledge, 472-86.

¹³ This sentiment is inspired by Umachandran 2022, “Disciplinecraft,” 27.

¹⁴ See Umachandran, M. and M. Ward 2024, 24 on how “settler moves to innocence seek to address the discomfort itself rather than the structural problem it underscores.” “Towards a Manifesto for Critical Ancient World Studies,” in *Critical Ancient World Studies: The Case for Forgetting Classics*. London and New York: Routledge, 3-34.

The following unpublished papers were presented at the colloquium:

Hirji, S. "Ancient Greek Philosophy as Ideology," in *Crafting Race in Plato and Aristotle*, ed. by P. Marechal and J. Proios. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lam, E. "The Irreverent and Mischievous Genius of Johanna Hedva's *Minerva the Miscarriage of the Brain*." Ch. 1 of *A Hermeneutics of Irreverence: Queer of Color Poets Playing with the "Classical Tradition."*

Nguyen, K. "The Promise of the Classics: Nguyễn Mạnh Tường and the Yoke of Cultural Imperialism." Ch. 2 of *Critical Classicality and (De)colonial Vietnamese Writings*. Oxford University Press.

Silverblank, H. "Time for Astrology, or, Astrology for Crip Time."

Vazquez, A. "Virtual Libraries: Epic Totalization and the Arcadian Tradition." Ch. 3 of *Arcadia Ultramarina: Studies in the Neoclassical Literature of Portuguese America*.