

What is a Classic? Experimenting with Engaged Scholarship

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Abstract: In this essay, I reconsider and revise a talk called “What is a Classic?” that I gave in 2017. By refusing my own previous claims to kinship with T.S. Eliot and J.M. Coetzee, and by shifting my relationship to Sappho from one that embeds us in the classical tradition to one that refuses classicizing discourses, I commit to antiracist, engaged scholarship and model the process of change. Cultivating my perspective as a person who identifies as White, working class, and queer, I suggest that engaged scholarship, as a form of process-oriented, deliberately subjective and self-reflective academic inquiry, supports trenchant object analysis, personal experiences of coherence, and ethical social practices.

Keywords: classical tradition, critical self-reflection, reflexive antiracism, Sappho, subjectivity, White privilege.

ΣΩ. δεινὸν γάρ που, ὦ Φαῖδρε, τοῦτ' ἔχει γραφή, καὶ ὡς ἀληθῶς ὅμοιον ζωγραφίᾳ. καὶ γὰρ τὰ ἐκείνης ἔκγονα ἔστηκε μὲν ὡς ζῶντα, ἐὰν δ' ἀνέρη τι, σεμνῶς πάνυ σιγᾷ. ταῦτόν δὲ καὶ οἱ λόγοι· δόξαις μὲν ἂν ὥς τι φρονοῦντας αὐτοὺς λέγειν, ἐὰν δέ τι ἔρη τῶν λεγομένων βουλόμενος μαθεῖν, ἔν τι σημαίνει μόνον ταῦτόν αἰεί.

Socrates: *Phaedrus*, writing does something strange. It reminds me of painting. The things depicted in a painting stand, just as if they are alive. But, if you ask one something, they keep solemnly silent. Written words, too. You would think that they communicate something because they are cognizant of it. But, if you ask them a question, because you want to understand what they mean, they always indicate that one thing and only that one thing.

—Plato, *Phaedrus* (275d-e)

The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself.

—bell hooks (1994, 11)

Introduction

The question “What is a Classic?” asks for an answer—a painting, a sculpture, a piece of music, a text—that will remain steady and steadfast, unmoving and unchangeable, and, as Socrates laments, unable to listen, respond, or change. For bell hooks, engagement means rejecting the calcification of a classic in favor of dialogic transformation. Is it possible to cultivate an engaged voice, not only in pedagogical spaces but also in written scholarship? What might it look like to develop an engaged voice in the field of “Classics,” where preservation may seem essential to our remit? In this essay, I trace how I have experienced meaningful change, through a critical, self-reflective process of engaged scholarship. I suggest that, and attempt to model how, it is possible to write in a way that elevates process over product and that incorporates and invites growth. Practicing engaged scholarship has enabled me to see the

external objects of my inquiry more clearly while developing a more nuanced understanding of the unique subjective experiences that determine my viewpoint and shape my scholarship. Engaged scholarship offers a coherent way to bring subjectivity into scholarship so that our academic inquiries are strengthened by the conscientious incorporation of our embodied and contextual experiential insights. I share my story as an example and an invitation.¹

Caveat 2026²

In December of 2017, I gave a talk titled “What is a Classic?” at the University of Southern California, where I received my PhD in Classics. In this talk, I placed myself in conversation with T.S. Eliot and J. M. Coetzee, who each delivered a lecture that asked the same question. For Eliot, the answer was Vergil’s *Aeneid*. Coetzee named Bach’s *Well-tempered Clavier*. I recited Sappho 16 and, with a hint of pride, claimed this poem as my own queer classic. I revealed that I had been siloing my identity as a queer feminist away from my scholarly work as a Classicist. I described how, in my pedagogy, I had begun to break down this boundary. I’d learned through my experiences as an educator why it was important for me to reflect honestly and openly about how Sappho empowers me and how the queer and gendered aspects of my identity shape my scholarship. For the first time in my academic life, I celebrated that my queer subjectivity shaped my scholarly voice. I felt excited and more than a bit nervous to be making this claim, particularly because I was doing so at the institution where I had been inducted into an academic culture that claims to value objectivity and detachment. This was a vital step for me to take: owning my queer identity and celebrating how it informed my scholarship felt (and, perhaps, was) radical.

I presented my “What is a Classic?” as an invited speaker at an event titled “What is the Role of Classics Outside the Academy?”. The event centered a performance by Rhodessa Jones’s organization *The Medea Project: Theatre for Incarcerated Women* and featured Rhodessa Jones, Amy Richlin (influential feminist Classics scholar and my own grad school professor),³ and myself as panelists; we were invited to explore connections between the humanities and social justice activism. I was honored to be included on the panel of presenters even though I felt unsure about what I had to offer on the topic.⁴ I was in my sixth post-doctorate year of teaching as a contingent instructor and hurling myself onto the academic job market. More than an expert on the role of the Classics *outside* of the academy, I was hustling to gain access *into* the academy.

My talk was well received, and I was encouraged write it up for publication. I wondered: could I join Eliot and Coetzee in print by writing up my “What is a Classic?” lecture and turning it into a published essay venerating a poem by Sappho that I genuinely loved?

¹ I offer this experiment in engaged scholarship with gratitude to Hannah Čulík-Baird and the *Res Difficiles* team, including the scholars who generously and helpfully offered peer review of this piece.

² This section title nods to Mathura Umachandran’s chapter, “Classics at the Borderlands: Decolonizing with Gloria Anzaldúa,” in Katherine Blouin and Ben Akrigg’s *The Routledge Handbook of Classics, Colonialism, and Postcolonial Theory*, where Umachandran enacts what I am calling engaged scholarship by publishing work that she has come to see as insufficient to its original aim of decolonizing the “so-called field of Classics” with a “caveat” and “an affirmation of a feminist practice of err and error, and serious self-reflexive criticism” (2024, 62).

³ Amy Richlin wrote “Hijacking the Palladion: Feminists in Classics” (1992) in the first person, interweaving personal essay with scholarship. Her encouragement inspired me to try something similar here.

⁴ I want to thank Jessica Wright for organizing this event and inviting me to participate.

Buoyed by the encouragement, I began digging into Eliot, Coetzee, and my initial claims. During the process of interrogating my position, I discovered not only more about Eliot and Coetzee, but also something more personal.

Rather than erase my previous claims to present my subsequent findings here as a *fait accompli*, I will show the palimpsest of my process. In the first part of this essay, I'll describe what I brought to the room in 2017—why I had avoided, and then embraced, Sappho. I'll share what it meant for me to claim Sappho 16 as my own classic, and why I continue to bring some of the work I did in 2017 with Sappho's poetry forward with me today. I'll then show how, through the research, critical analysis, and self-reflection entailed in revising my presentation into this essay, I have come to understand my position in relationship to the question "What is a Classic?" and to the two famous authors who have asked it, differently.⁵

Sappho 16: My Queer Classic

I first encountered Sappho in the early 2000s, in my early twenties, when a selection of her poetry was assigned for a class I took with Stephen Hinds at the University of Washington on representations of sex and gender in ancient Greece and Rome. I read the English translation on xeroxed copies, stapled into my course reader, at a wobbly wooden table in the Pearl Café on University Avenue in Seattle, where I worked early mornings, cooking soup and pulling espresso. Flushed with heat, I wanted more. Rushing to the bookstore, I found Anne Carson's beautiful translations of Sappho's surviving fragments, newly published in *If Not, Winter* (2002). Printed in Greek with page-facing English translations, Carson's edition contains copious brackets and ellipses emphasizing the fragmentary nature of the poems. Many of Sappho's fragments, with their lost phrases, lines, and verses, long for what is lost, I noticed. Transfixed, but also self-conscious and embarrassed by my crush on Sappho, I wondered: Was Sappho's truly a female homoerotic voice, telling us (her) stories of love (lost) and beauty (lost) from ancient Greece? Was I, a queer academic in training, allowed to love Sappho, or was I supposed to study her poetry *objectively*? I was afraid even to ask these questions—when would I ask, and who would I ask? My kind (straight, male) Irish professor? During class? In office hours? I found these awkward, intimate questions impossible to ask (or answer), but I couldn't set Sappho aside. Slowly, through many semesters of encountering Sappho's poetry together with students in liberatory, engaged, collaborative learning communities, I began to understand and embrace why Sappho's poetry, especially number 16, resonates so easily, and so significantly, with me. And then one day, in 2017, my Sappho appeared, right in front of me.

A multi-media installation by artist and scholar Kiki Loveday invited me to declare my love. From November 2017–February 2018, the Huntington Museum and Gardens in Pasadena sponsored and exhibited a collection of works created by seven feminist artists-in-residence titled "WCCW/five." For the second year of a five-year project (/five), the Huntington collaborated with the Women's Center for Creative Work in Los Angeles (since renamed the Feminist Center for Creative Work, or FCCW). The FCCW recruited these scholar-artists to create new work in response to the Huntington's collection and gardens. The resulting projects exemplify the potential for creative, revitalizing engagements within

⁵ For a study of the question "What is a Classic?" with attention to Eliot, Coetzee, post colonialism, and subaltern studies that draws more optimistic conclusions than my own, see Mukherjee 2014.



Fig. 1: A multi-media installation by artist and scholar Kiki Loveday (2017). Photo by author.

elite, conservative institutions, such as the Huntington. Soyoung Shin reweave a tapestry to show the connection between women's work as weavers and their contributions to the coding of early computers; Zya Levy crafted a collection of white cacti, displaying their ubiquity at the Huntington even as they disappear from their native habitats. While I loved every part of this project, one contribution to the exhibit filled me with dizzying joy.⁶

In the center of the lavish Huntington Gardens, on the wall in the back room of a brightly lit building, sat a well-loved wooden writing desk covered in a slightly musty, Sapphic collection of books. Anne Carson's translation of a stanza from the poem known as Sappho 16 inscribed in black on the wall behind the desk reminded the viewer that Sappho says the most beautiful thing is "what you love." On the desk's writing surface, a handwritten invitation from the artist with a box of pencils and a stack of handmade paper beckoned visitors to sit down and write their own queer love stories. My four-year-old accepted the invitation without hesitation and inscribed a thick piece of paper for Loveday's letterbox (Fig. 1).

I walked up to Loveday's installation and felt that she had brought *my own Sappho* into physical, material form. My favorite books inspired by a mythic iconography of Sappho, including Pierre Louÿs's *The Songs of Bilitis* and Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love's *Sappho was*

⁶ The exhibition's website can be viewed at <https://www.huntington.org/exhibition/collections-wccw-five-huntington>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

a *Right-on Woman*, were gathered on the desk, as if borrowed from my own bookshelves. The invitation to tell *my* (queer) love story, just as Sappho had told hers, gave me a feeling of ebullient pleasure. I reached out to the artist-scholar and learned that this installation was part of her larger project archiving first-person accounts, love letters, and other memorabilia that document queer love stories, titled “What You Love.”⁷ Loveday’s project invites Sappho 16 to create space for a practice of queer identity formation that rejects the privilege and prestige inherent in the “classic.” Loveday celebrates Sappho 16 as *one of many* queer love stories that need to be told. As Loveday says, “Time will not tell. Only we can tell our stories.”⁸

Inspired by Kiki Loveday, I spoke at USC about how Sappho 16’s self-reflexivity invites us to celebrate subjectivity, to see ourselves in the “you” of the poem. The poem tells us, the readers, that no one else can tell either the “I” of the poem or you (or me) what love is. In Anne Carson’s 2002 translation:

Some men say an army of horse and some men say an army on foot
and some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing
on the black earth. But I say it is
what you love.

The poem, attributed to the only queer-presenting, female-identifying poet of Greek antiquity whose work and name have survived the intervening two thousand five hundred (or so) years, offers what could be read as a rejection of universality, objectivity, and tradition—or what we call the classical: *Define love for yourself. Love who you love—that love is real. Decide what you find most beautiful for yourself. I, Sappho, am on your side. And everyone will, or should, understand. I will make them understand, easily.* I handed out postcards that promoted Loveday’s project and invited audience members to submit their own (queer) love stories to be included in her archive.

By claiming Sappho 16 as my classic, I queered and bent (but didn’t refuse or break) the classical tradition. I situated myself in kinship with T.S. Eliot and J.M. Coetzee. In my talk, I suggested that their essays had inspired me and I playfully positioned myself as their heir: Coetzee had improved upon Eliot, and I was taking the next, slightly sideways, step. I now realize that my engagement with Eliot and Coetzee was self-protective. When I gave that talk, I was underemployed and insecure, and because of my class background (which I didn’t acknowledge in my presentation), I leaned on Eliot and Coetzee. I wanted to claim a place for myself in academia. As I subsequently came to see my own implication in the Eurocentrism and White supremacy of Eliot and Coetzee, I felt shame and, at first, planned to push the talk into the past and leave it there. But I sensed that revising my position in this essay might afford me an opportunity for growth. I would have to look critically not only at Eliot and Coetzee, but also at myself: my fears of marginalization and my privilege. As if critiquing two Nobel Prize winners wasn’t intimidating enough, I would also have to interrogate my decision to align myself with them. In the next two parts of this essay, I show what I discovered by asking what’s at stake in the question “What is a Classic?” and what Eliot, Coetzee, and I were obfuscating with our answers.

⁷ As of the publication of this essay, Kiki Loveday’s project is ongoing: If you have a (queer) love story to tell, put it in writing and send it to kikiloveday@gmail.com. See <https://kikimovingpictures.com/portfolio/what-you-love-2/>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

⁸ “WCCW/five Meet the Artists,” 5:08; <https://www.huntington.org/exhibition/collections-wccw-five-huntington>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

Virgil's *Aeneid* and Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*: The Classic Classics

In October of 1944, five years into World War Two, T. S. Eliot delivered “What is a Classic?” as the inaugural presidential address to London’s newly formed Virgil Society. In his speech, which was later published, Eliot constructs what he claims to be a universal model with identifiable patterns, attainable but rarely achieved, for defining a classic. First, for a classic to emerge, both the individual artist and his society (it seems to always be “his” for Eliot) must have achieved full maturity, but not surpassed it; both artist and society must simultaneously reach the tenuous peak of perfect development that comes only after the rise and, importantly, before even a suggestion of decline and fall (1945, 10–11). This apex of maturity, which, for Eliot, includes both a “maturity of mind” and “maturity of manners” (12), allows for a work of art to attain the sublime quality of “universality” (10): no society, no poet, and no poem better exemplify the achievement of this universality than Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

Eliot claimed that Virgil’s *Aeneid* is a classic on the grounds that the poem emerged at the perfect height of cultural achievement that all societies and individuals could, in the best possible circumstances, reach. Despite his claim to the universality of this classic, however, the particularity of Eliot’s exemplar cannot be missed. Eliot presented Virgil’s *Aeneid* as the definitive classic in a lecture that launched the first meeting of the Virgil Society. In the lecture, even as he claims to demonstrate the universality of the themes of the *Aeneid*, Eliot emphasizes how the poem specifically links ancient Rome to modern Europe and to England: Aeneas “is a man of fate... a symbol of Rome; and as Aeneas is to Rome, so is ancient Rome to Europe” (1945, 28–29). Despite arguing for Virgil (and Latin and Rome) as universal, Eliot shows his Eurocentrism: “The Roman Empire and the Latin language were not any empire and any language, but an empire and a language with a unique destiny in relation to ourselves” (29). Who are Eliot’s “us” and who are the (implied and necessary) “not us”? Eliot’s Eurocentric claim to a delineated “we” that is somehow also, all logic aside, “universal,” stealthily and insidiously produces symbolically inferior others, a “them”: those societies that are not of Europe and those individuals who are not (or, as in Eliot the American’s case, are not descendants of) Europeans.

Eliot’s belief in Europe’s universal significance, and the othering that this ideology entails, is not unique to him, nor is it a thing of the past. The ideology of European universalism is interwoven with European imperialism and colonialism, supported by and supportive of its violent practices. Academia, and the field of Classics, plays a particular role in maintaining a false model of Europe’s universal significance that disguises an insidious Eurocentric bias. Note that the Virgil Society remains active today, with the current website spotlighting Eliot and giving this description of its purpose and membership:

The Virgil Society was founded in 1943, and its first President, the poet T.S. Eliot, delivered *What is a Classic?* as his Presidential Address in the following year. The purpose of the Society was and remains to unite all those who cherish the central educational tradition of Western Europe. Of that tradition Virgil is the symbol. Membership is open to all those who are in sympathy, whether they read Latin or not.⁹

The chauvinism of the “us”—defined as those with an appreciation for the West as central, educational, and traditional—is clear. The implied “them”? Anyone not a part of, or not

⁹ See <https://virgilsociety.org.uk/new/#about-us>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

sufficiently appreciative of, the Western European tradition. The Virgil Society members' centering of Western Europe inscribes them into a long and—for those who are decentered by it—punitive and violent tradition of imperialistic, universalizing chauvinism.¹⁰

For Coetzee, Eliot's selection of Virgil's *Aeneid* was forgivably flawed, a charming choice shaped by Eliot's unique personal circumstances. Eliot's Aeneas, Coetzee observes, sounds a lot like the fifty-six-year-old Eliot himself: a tired and bedraggled middle-aged expat Trojan in Italy or American in England (2001, 1–2). Coetzee noticed something important about how Eliot's subjective experience informed his ostensibly objective claim but missed the mark with his evaluation of the consequences of Eliot's lack of critical self-reflection. For Coetzee, Eliot's misstep was revealing his subjectivity; but Coetzee overlooks how, by constructing a connection between Rome and England, and Virgil and himself, Eliot makes two problematically universalizing moves. First, if Eliot's veneration of Virgil's epic was informed by his own education, experience, and history, Eliot does not acknowledge his subjective position. Instead, he claims to perceive the universal significance of the poem as if from a wide, detached view. Second, he articulates a unidirectional, homogeneous theory of human and social development (as the rise from youth through maturity to the decline that comes with aging) that echoes a fundamental set of assumptions that are held, often unspoken or unrecognized, by scholars in multiple academic disciplines, certainly in "Classics," but also in European and American popular culture. In this model of development, both an individual person and a whole society, given the right circumstances, will progress on a linear trajectory upward, from an underdeveloped youth toward a peak of perfect maturity. If this apex is reached, it will be followed by an inevitable decline and fall. Just as an individual will grow old and die, so too will a society decline from the height of civilization into ruin. This paradigm supports the rhetorical subjugation of non-European (non-Anglophone, Indigenous, and recently, with particular ferocity, non-US) societies by describing them as either "underdeveloped" or "in decline" and perpetuates a pessimistic view of human development that misconstrues childhood and fosters antipathy toward aging.¹¹

It seems to have been Eliot's personal ambition to elevate English to the level of Latin so that one of his works might someday be declared a classic. He was protecting, and attempting to improve, his own privileged position. I recognize a hopeful longing from Eliot in his coordinated claims that no one may deliberately compose a classic, as such an attribution can only be made retrospectively (10), and that there was not (quite yet) the possibility of an English classic (17). Eliot's ambition to manifest an English language and an Anglophone culture worthy of producing an English classic, and then to be named the author of the first (and only) English classic is palpable. T.S. Eliot received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, four years after his lecture. Did he attain his desired status?

¹⁰ Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) have informed my analysis here. For resources to understand the relevance of Orientalism in the field of Classics, see, *inter alia*, Katherine Blouin, Usama Ali Gad, and Rachel Mairs's website "Everyday Orientalism" (n.d.), Marchella Ward 2024, and Phiroze Vasunia 2024. See also Emily Greenwood's discussion of how, "through false genealogies and cultural traditions masked as historical continuities, ancient Greece is often carelessly and erroneously linked with modern Europe, as though they shared a single, continuous history," including, she notes, by Said himself (2010, 2 and fn. 7).

¹¹ Though they do not address the aspect of decline that I notice as part of this paradigm, Umachandran and Ward express alarm at how genealogical, evolutionary, and kinship "metaphors and epistemological frameworks indicate one of the ways that classics as a discipline was structured in service of European cultural hegemony and white supremacy" (2024, 17).

In the late 1990s, as I dedicated my 20s to learning ancient languages, I made an overture to Eliot. In addition to sitting in cafés for innumerable hours studying gerundives and genitive absolutes, I also charged thousands of dollars onto my credit card at the University of Washington bookstore. Would owning every book on the course shelves secure my place in graduate school and insure me against the tragic fate of having dedicated so much time, effort, and money into joining academia, only to be shut out? One of the books I bought with money I didn't have was the newly printed Everyman's Library Pocket Series *Eliot: Poems*. I didn't fully understand my compulsion to buy every Everyman at the time, but I knew that I was hoping to fill my mind with the knowledge I felt I lacked, and I found it impossible to stop. But when I sat down with Eliot's poems, the words blurred. I felt no connection, no exhilaration or emotion. My eyes lost focus behind a fog of exhaustion and regret—compounding credit card interest for a book I couldn't comprehend. I was working full time, studying ancient Greek and Latin, and trying to maintain relationships with my family and friends. I couldn't focus my attention on those poems in that small book with creamy white pages. I couldn't perceive what made these poems important. I believed that I should be able to read and understand Eliot's poems, (they were *classics*, after all, and in English). When that didn't happen, I felt a gut punch of shame before I added the book to an ever-growing pile on the floor of my small Seattle apartment, where I lived with my partner. I didn't admit to her how much debt I was accruing, and I didn't tell anyone that I couldn't understand or appreciate T.S. Eliot's poems. I suppressed my shame by acing a Greek test and buying another book (to celebrate). So, in 2017, when I had made it through grad school and found a way to place myself into Eliot's lineage, I did so with a feeling of triumph.

I was also eager to set myself in the tradition of South African novelist and essayist, J.M. Coetzee, who, in 1991, had delivered his own "What is a Classic?" lecture in Graz, Austria. In his lecture, published as an essay in the collection *Stranger Shores*, Coetzee describes how a Bach fugue became his classic:

One Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1955, when I was fifteen years old, I was mooning around our back garden in the suburbs of Cape Town, wondering what to do, bored being the main problem of existence in those days, when from the house next door I heard music. As long as the music lasted, I was frozen, I dared not breathe. I was being spoken to by the music as music had never spoken to me before. What I was listening to was a recording of Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier* played on the harpsichord. (2001, 9)

Coetzee presents himself as following Eliot's lead, with the important addition of self-reflection. He asks:

Is there some non-vacuous sense in which I can say that the spirit of Bach was speaking to me across the ages?... [O]r was what was really going on at that moment that I was symbolically electing high European culture, and command of the codes of that culture, as a route that would take me out of my class position in white South African society and, ultimately, out of what I must have felt, in terms however obscure or mystified, as an historical dead end? (10)

Coetzee cultivates one degree of critical reflection of his experience. He interrogates the relationship that he (and Eliot) claim to their "classics." Were their responses to Virgil and Bach inspired by a transcendent quality in the works themselves, or were they, both born in colonial countries—the United States (Eliot) and South Africa (Coetzee)—interested in these "classics" because connecting themselves to Virgil and Bach would also link them to high

European culture (2001, 10–11)? Coetzee suggests that he will distinguish himself from Eliot by interrogating his own biases. He asks: “[W]as the experience what I understood it to be—a disinterested and in a sense impersonal aesthetic experience—or was it really the masked expression of a material interest?” (2001, 11).

Coetzee, however, does not introspectively take up his own questions. Instead, he pulls his focus outwards, changing the question from one that demands critical self-reflection to a theoretical expansion of the concept of a classic: for Coetzee, a classic must have aesthetic beauty and must be brought forward through its contributions to our historical, “material,” understandings. A classic of this kind, Coetzee elegantly elaborates, makes our “historical understanding part of our present” and “requires us to understand ourselves not only as objects of historical forces but as subjects of our own historical self-understanding” (2001, 13). Coetzee’s definition of “historical understanding” importantly also contains “historical self-understanding,” as a “context of paradox and impossibility” (15). From the argument that Bach’s survival in various performance and scholarly contexts solidified its status as a classic, Coetzee asks: “What does it mean in living terms to say that the classic is what survives? How does such a conception of the classic manifest itself in people’s lives?” (19). There are ways that this question could be interesting and lead us toward inquiries into the magical, unconventional, and beautiful ways that art can survive even the most violent efforts to destroy it. Or toward the revelatory work of acknowledging how colonialist and racist powers shore up their status through the erasure of traditions, artistic legacies, and human lives. For Coetzee, however, these (rhetorical) questions about survival set up the conclusion of his piece, where he evokes Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert as “the great poet of the classic in our own times” (16). Coetzee brings forward Herbert’s idea that the opposite of the classic is “not the Romantic but the barbarian” (16). Coetzee contextualizes Herbert’s historical position of Poland:

... a country with an embattled Western culture caught between intermittently barbarous neighbors. It is not the possession of some essential quality, that, in Herbert’s eyes, makes it possible for the classic to withstand the assault of barbarism. Rather what survives the worst of barbarism, surviving because generations of people cannot afford to let go of it and therefore hold on to it at all costs—that is the classic. (16)

In presenting Herbert’s Poland as vulnerable to losing what he calls the “confrontation” between the classic and the barbarian (16), Coetzee doesn’t reflect on the etymology or connotations of the term but instead accepts and promotes the idea that anything non-Western is, by definition, the barbarian other.

I had marked this paragraph “Yikes!” in the margins, because I did know the term’s etymology. The English word barbarian derives from the Greek adjective βάρβαρος [*barbaros*], which scholars translate as “a non-Greek speaking foreigner.” This onomatopoetic word ostensibly emulates the sound of a foreign, unintelligible, non-Greek, language. Euripides’s *Medea* was a “barbarian” of this sort. Her character provides a rich example of the penchant among Greeks (especially Athenians of the Classical Period) to distinguish themselves hierarchically from others by figuring those others as less-human foreigners.¹² To robustly apply Coetzee’s own idea of historical perspective here, in the context of European colonialism, race-based slavery, and race-based apartheid, the English word barbarian cannot be interpreted to imply only linguistic or cultural difference. Is it possible

¹² See, *inter alia*, Blondell *et al.* 1999, 22–23 and Greenwood 2022.

to consider Coetzee's Herbertian denouement as anything other than racist? Coetzee's Cape Town suburb lay in the heart of apartheid South Africa, a country that, in Coetzee's youth, produced a particularly brutal form of White supremacy and European cultural elitism. In 1954, when Coetzee was fourteen and mooning around his back garden listening to Bach, apartheid was in its first decade as a legally ratified system built on, and perpetuating, a centuries-long, codified, violent, and oppressive racial stratification wrought by Dutch colonial rule of South Africa. In this context, how might we understand Coetzee's "class position" as a White South African? Coetzee's definition of class here depends on a particularly colonial framework. He claims a low-class position because he is a colonial rather than a European citizen. Coetzee is not referring to the specific socioeconomic status of his family's position *within* apartheid South Africa. He also doesn't account, in any way, for the high status and privilege that his Whiteness affords him.¹³ Instead, he perceives himself as a marginalized colonial subject.

Coetzee obfuscates his White privilege and the deeply racist and oppressive imperialism that supports his position as a White colonial subject. He implies that South African society has no claim to a classic, presumably because it lacks those qualities that Eliot insisted define a classic: maturity and (pure) Europeaness. Coetzee reinforces the hierarchical, imperialistic paradigm that devalues African society and culture. He does not argue that a South African author could create a classic. Instead, Coetzee constructs a model that reinforces Europe's superiority over Africa and places him as a defender of the West, with its unique claim to the classic, in confrontation with the barbarian. In 1991, when South African apartheid was in the earliest stages of dissolution and Nelson Mandela was barely one year out of prison, Coetzee delivered his "What is a Classic?" lecture. In 2002, Coetzee left South Africa for Australia after the African National Congress accused his novel *Disgrace* of racism; in 2003, Coetzee won the Nobel Prize for Literature.¹⁴ Despite Coetzee's initial promise to interrogate if "being spoken to across the ages is a notion that we can entertain today only in bad faith," (16) he ultimately proceeds, suggesting that by simply asking this question he has assured his good faith and therefore overlooks the tenacity of bad-faith racism that shadows the concept of a classical canon.

When I first presented my talk in 2017, I followed Coetzee's lead, forgiving that he failed to practice the critical self-reflection suggested by his own question and arguing that my intervention would improve upon his. In the model of scholarly progress I had assimilated in graduate school, I believed that I was building from Eliot and Coetzee to add my own contribution. In the next section of this essay, I'll describe how I recognized my own complicity in the self-protective racist maneuvering modeled by Eliot and Coetzee.

Self-reflection as Scholarly Work

In my 2017 presentation, I claimed Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *la facultad* for both Sappho and myself; I said:

Gloria Anzaldúa teaches us that those who have experienced oppression gain a specific type of understanding—and self-understanding—through *la facultad*, our view from somewhere, the border, the not-quite-in and not-

¹³ "White privilege can be thought of as intangible advantages that are afforded to white . . . individuals that have not been earned through labour or merit" (Lin, Kennette, and Havermaet 2023, 36).

¹⁴ See Donadio 2007.

quite-out perspective that any form of “queerness” or “otherness” gives us to look upon the center and see it more clearly, and to look upon ourselves and see who we are.

“Sappho,” I continued, “is centered as part of the Classical canon, but her poetry also shows her *la facultad*. A female poet, who writes of same-sex desire! Sappho is my Aeneas and my Bach....” I fielded curious follow-up questions from people in the audience who were introduced to Anzaldúa for the first time that day. So, I can’t regret linking Anzaldúa with Sappho as I began to advocate for the value of diverse subjectivities, including my own, in the field of Classics. However, through recursive self-reflection that followed, I came to understand Anzaldúa differently.¹⁵

Rather than empowering me to subtly shift Eliot and Coetzee’s classicizing discourse, Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of *la facultad* requires a rejection of any claim to so-called “Western” culture; Anzaldúa provides a biting critique of those who have weaponized objectivity as the highest form of intelligent work and enacted a violent, oppressive othering of Indigenous people:

White anthropologists claim that Indians have “primitive” and therefore deficient minds, that we cannot think in the higher mode of consciousness—rationality. They are fascinated by what they call the “magical” mind, the “savage mind” In trying to become “objective,” Western culture made “objects” of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing “touch” with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence. (2012, 59)

Anzaldúa theorizes how, in reverse of White anthropologists’ belief in their lesser cognitive capacity, those who are marginalized by a dominant culture develop an extraordinarily sensitive awareness of the world. It is this insight that she calls *la facultad*:

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant “sensing,” a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world.... It is a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate. It is latent in all of us. (2012, 60–61)

Anzaldúa’s antidote to the violence of objectification comes through embracing a two-fold subjectivity: positional awareness and embodied self-awareness, which she describes as “Entering into the Serpent” (2012, 47–61). Anzaldúa tells of a childhood rattlesnake encounter, after which she feared and loved these magical, earthly, creatures. Over time, she writes, she came to “know things older than Freud, older than gender.... Like the ancient Olmecs, I know Earth is a coiled Serpent” (2012, 48). She continues: “Forty years it’s taken me to enter into the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body, that I am a body, and to assimilate the animal body, the animal soul” (2012, 48). Anzaldúa describes in evocative

¹⁵ As noted above (see fn. 2), I am struck by the similarly recursive Mathura Umachandran, who reassessed her initial claims about what it might mean for scholars in the field of Classics to ethically engage with Anzaldúa, as she moved away from imagining how to decolonize the classics with Anzaldúa (2024) and toward the Critical Ancient World Studies’ view that the field of classics is irredeemably colonial (Umachandran and Ward 2024).

terms why it is valuable for individuals to cultivate an embodied experience of subjectivity coupled with a unique positionality and perspective, a view from somewhere, *la facultad* (2012, 48, 60).¹⁶

Precisely because of a lack of centrality, those who exist in the borderlands can look into the center of the matter and see something true, from a specific perspective. Adapting Donna Haraway's pivotal concept of "situated knowledges," Nancy C. M. Hartsock highlights "the significance of experiences of marginalization and subordination for developing knowledge and subjectivity" (1989, 28).¹⁷ Of Anzaldúa, and similar theorists who have not only experienced marginalization but have self-reflectively incorporated that experience into their scholarship, Hartsock writes:

They do not see everything from nowhere but they do see some things from somewhere. They are the knowledges of specific cultures and peoples. As an aspect of being situated, these knowledges represent a response to and an expression of a specific embodiment. The bodies of the dominated have been made to function as the marks of their oppression: we are not allowed to pretend that they do not exist. (1989, 29)

Subjectivity and embodiment define Anzaldúa's queer, Chicana, feminist, activist scholarship. Her work opposes, and aims to transform, discourses that valorize objectivity (and falsely claim access to it) and perpetuate cycles of oppression that protect White privilege and the heteronormative patriarchy. This sentiment is echoed in the work of bell hooks, who asserts that "dominator culture promotes a calculated objectivism that is dehumanizing" (2003, 131). In my 2017 talk, I tried to decenter false objectivity by acknowledging one area of my identity and celebrating how it informs my work. However, by identifying only one part of my positionality, I was misappropriating Anzaldúa, misconstruing my viewpoint, and misperceiving the object of my analysis.

It took some additional work for me to recognize how fear and shame feel in my body, to recognize that I not only have access to *la facultad* through my position as a queer and working-class person in academia (and in the larger neo-liberal capitalist social context), but that I also have access to privileges that come from participation in dominant social and cultural forms. (I am a White, English-speaking citizen of the United States; by 2017, I had earned a doctorate in Classics; in 2025, I started a tenure-track job). The concept of *la facultad* doesn't allow me to add another rung to the ladder but requires a rejection of Eliot's, Coetzee's, and my own commitments to the classical tradition. To examine the degree to which I occupy an insider position, and to interrogate my own desire to move further in, has been the recursive work of this essay.

¹⁶ I'm honored that my essay is scheduled to be published in the spring 2026 issue of *Res Difficiles*, *The Journal*, following the fall 2025 issue *Rez Diff*, which practices an Anzaldúan approach to integrating indigeneity into the study of antiquity. See especially Casias 2025, 60–61, 67.

¹⁷ Haraway's essay, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988) is central to the Critical Ancient World Studies Collective's aims, as articulated in their "Manifesto" and in two of the essays in their volume (Umachandran and Ward 2024, 15–16; Haselswerdt 2024, 122, 133; Ward 2024, 176).

The Classics are the Master's Tools

As I reflected on my relationship to the field of Classics, I recalled the historical and ongoing failure of White women (feminists, Classicists) to be antiracist. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex* over seventy-five years ago, women have been complicit in our own marginalization (and the marginalization of people of color) because we have opted to hinge ourselves onto the highest rung of the social ladder we can reach:

[Women] live dispersed among men, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social status to certain men—fathers or husbands—more firmly than they are to other women. If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Black women. (1949/1952, 4–5. Translation is mine, following Parshley.)

The interweaving of academics—and academic conferences—with White supremacy was the context and impetus for Audre Lorde's famously incisive 1979 speech "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." At a by-invitation-only conference honoring the thirty-year anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in New York City, Lorde directly addressed the organizers, criticizing their exclusionary practices:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (2020, 41–42)

The organizers of the 1979 conference on de Beauvoir's work missed a significant facet of de Beauvoir's own analysis, instead replicating the exact behavior that de Beauvoir recognized as the cause of women's failure to emancipate ourselves from our secondary status in the patriarchal social order. Audre Lorde's powerful denunciation of the exclusionary, White-supremacist culture of academia remains relevant in the field of Classics.

When we try to build up the value of the "Classics," we are engaging in a futile effort to shore up the rotten foundations of the master's house, which are crumbling beneath us.¹⁸ We cannot assume that progress toward equity will happen without deliberate efforts by White people to recognize, interrogate, and cede our own privilege. Lorde does not mean that scholarly work inherently belongs to the oppressor's toolkit and must be wholly rejected, but rather that the systems and practices of White supremacy, misogyny, and

¹⁸ As Dan-el Padilla Peralta has repeatedly argued. For example, at the SCS in 2019, he demonstrated how the field of Classics dramatically skews toward publishing, and so supporting, White male scholars. Padilla Peralta stated, "White men will have to surrender the privilege they have of seeing their words printed and disseminated; they will have to take a back seat so that people of color—and women and gender-nonconforming scholars of color—benefit from the privilege of seeing their words on the page." (See Padilla Peralta 2019 for his self-published transcript and data from the presentation.) At that event, a white female audience member attempted to defend the "classic Classics" and to discredit Padilla Peralta's presentation. Watching the video of this event reminded me of the brittle irony of Lorde's intervention at the conference in honor of Simone de Beauvoir.

heteronormativity must be resolutely and radically refused for meaningful antiracist, feminist, pro-queer transformative scholarly (and political) action to unfold. Anzaldúa's concept of *la facultad* provides a framework for understanding the importance of developing our own situated perspectives. I believe that cultivating *la facultad*, or the capacity for self-reflection, is necessary to the survival of our field, and the institutions we inhabit and create. It also affords us opportunities for a less-impooverished, indeed richer, more ethically coherent, and ultimately more pleasurable enterprise. Because paradigmatic transformation within institutions, including—but not limited to—academia, depends on the willingness to analyze and reject the dissonant classicism and racism that underpin our disciplinary and institutional culture, we must each critically self-reflect, interrogating where we benefit from race-based privilege, and actively seek opportunities to cede status and make space.

In 2017, I had yet to secure a tenure-track position. In the face of my own frustration, fear, grief, and the material consequences of my failure to gain stable employment, a decent salary, or a sense of belonging in academia, did I desire to glean status and privilege through a connection with the classical tradition? I did. And when I eventually noticed this insecure, striving part of myself, I resisted the urge to conceal my shame. Instead, I asked myself: if I stay with the discomfort of how, and why, I have sought to uplift myself through the discipline of Classics, what happens next? What can I learn and how might I change?

Classicism, White Privilege, and Me

Sappho exists as a valorized poet in the classical canon who shows a self-reflective subjectivity supportive of queer identity. From my first encounter till now: I find her poetry physically, emotionally, and intellectually pleasurable. Sappho 16 matters to me because I have become a more liberated and empowered scholar and teacher through my experience with it. But when I claimed that poem as my (queer) classic, I was off. The question “What is a Classic?” demands a more radical answer. By following in the footsteps of Eliot and Coetzee, I was working to elevate the value of (my) subjective, queer experience. I was also placing myself into a lineage of Eurocentric classicizing and White supremacy. Developing my presentation into this essay gave me an opportunity to reconsider my aims. To do so, I had to reflect on my White privilege. This process has, at times, been painful: I recall feeling cloudy with shame and genuinely afraid to write (let alone publish) any of what you are reading. A 2018 essay published in *Eidolon* helped me to understand and not get stuck alone in my shame.

In “White People Explain Classics to Us,” Yung In Chae interviewed Dan-el Padilla Peralta; in her analysis of their conversation, she realizes that both of these scholars of color were motivated in their study of the Classics by “a form of epistemic injustice.” Padilla Peralta candidly tells Yung In Chae about his reasons for studying Classics:

It was the erasure or occlusion of many other historical and cultural trajectories that had been folded into my immigrant experience but did not receive repeated validation.... It was when I turned to *Classics* that people started saying, ‘Ah! You do Classics? That’s so hard. That’s so amazing, that you’re interested in the Greeks and Romans.’ Of course there was all this condescension in the attempts to encourage me. A version of ‘look at how articulate he is.’ But because there was such an overwhelming urge to be validated, I turned in the direction of those compliments and smiled. And I basked in their glow because I felt that it was this form of affirmation that

heralded a deliverance from life circumstances that I found reprehensible.
(2018)

Yung In Chae had a realization about herself while in conversation with Dan-el Padilla Peralta:

[T]he real, honest, secret, shameful reason that I majored in Classics is simple and clear: *I wanted to tell people that I was a Classics major.* I wanted to tell people that I was studying something esoteric and important, which required knowledge of two difficult dead languages. (2018)

These scholars' experiences differ from and resonate with my own experience. First, I have had a different experience because I have the privilege of Whiteness. Privilege often works behind the scenes, unnoticed or ignored by those it benefits, and so it did for me, allowing me to pass as someone entitled entry into the field of Classics, and into the wider culture of academia in the United States. I didn't recognize my Whiteness at work. Coming from a working-class family without any connection to academic culture, I felt keenly aware of my outsider status, and I relished the recognition I began to receive when I showed myself capable of mastering the Classicist's toolkit.

I only started studying Greek and Latin after I finished my undergraduate degree at the Evergreen State College, where I was introduced to ancient Greek texts in translation as part of interdisciplinary programs offered by professors who were not Classicists by training. When I started studying in the University of Washington's Department of Classics, I began to have experiences similar to what Dan-el Padilla Peralta and Yung In Chae describe. When I told people that I was studying "the Classics," they were either confused ("What is 'the Classics?'"") or impressed. I began to receive scholarships to support my studies. I felt pride that I was doing something so *difficult* and so *fundamental*. I was studying the same ancient Greek and Latin texts as Freud, Nietzsche, and Arendt. I imagined that mastering the classics would empower me to develop and articulate my own ideas and to knowingly critique the oppressive (patriarchal, pessimistic) ideologies of my own historical context. While there was always a part of me that felt off track, I pushed forward. I often wondered whether studying the Classics was really the best way to work toward my aims. Through the process of asking "What is a Classic?" and engaging in this self-reflective reconsideration of my initial answer, I have come to realize that the dissonance I have felt, and continue to feel, was an emotional coupling of pride and shame. How could I celebrate the pride I felt at my accomplishments as a student and teacher, acknowledge the privilege I was beginning to receive through my identification with an elitist and exclusionary field, and simultaneously uphold my commitment to breaking down the value system that affirmed my status?

Only Medea in name: Rhodessa Jones Supports Women to Tell Their Own Stories

Looking back to the context of my 2017 lecture, I recognize how that event provided me inspiration for doing Classics differently. Vital, antiracist work is possible when we reject the limitations of the "classic(s)," as Rhodessa Jones's work with *The Medea Project* demonstrates. In the late 1980s, Jones founded *The Medea Project* to bring theatrical activism to incarcerated women. Over three decades of operation, the organization has made a real, significant, and positive impact on many people's lives. When Jones first began to produce plays with incarcerated women, their performances were adaptations of Euripides's fifth-century Greek tragedy, *Medea*, a riveting play about a woman who kills her own children. Despite her origin in a decidedly patriarchal and misogynistic time and place, and her characterization in the

play as a barbarian, Euripides's character Medea speaks (and acts) on her own behalf, famously articulating several persuasive points about her untenable position: Medea recognizes that she—as a foreigner and a woman—has no power, no status, and no cultural capital. She states that she would rather stand behind a shield in battle three times than give birth to one child (Diggle 1984, ll. 250–251). Medea is a problematic hero, to say the least, but it is not difficult to see how performing a version of her story could be cathartic and empowering.

According to Jones, although the group retains the name “The Medea Project,” they drew on Euripides's *Medea* for the content of their performances only briefly, when they were first getting started. Jones quickly understood that the women she was supporting—both incarcerated women and, subsequently, women who are HIV positive—did not need Euripides's words in order to tell their stories. The program participants had their own stories to tell, so Jones incorporated a creative writing component into her workshop. Today, participating members of *The Medea Project* create and perform their own original works. While the Greek “classic” provided a meaningful place to begin and, perhaps, some cultural capital, supporting living women to tell their own stories became the ongoing project.¹⁹ Like Sappho 16 and Kiki Loveday's project, Rhodessa Jones invites us to consider what can happen when we hold the Classics lightly, when we generate opportunities for traditionally marginalized people to tell their stories—and when all of us to learn to listen.

Self-reflection continues

It turns out that wrenching my way into academia did not equip me to write honestly in the way that I had hoped. I formed habits that were antithetical to my original aims of self-actualization and transformation through scholarship. My training as a Classicist hindered my capacity to engage in self-reflective scholarship. By claiming my own queer classic, I had begun to weave together subjective self-reflection with scholarly analysis, but by situating myself into Eliot and Coetzee's intellectual genealogy, I stepped into my White privilege. Through learning from the antiracist, intersectional work of many scholars and activists, and co-learning with students, who have generously joined and challenged me, I now believe that queering the Classics was only the start of the work I need to do to properly answer the question, “What is a Classic?”²⁰ I now reject, and am working to dismantle, the “imagined kinship” that I had previously aspired to construct (Umachandran and Ward 2014, 14).²¹

In this essay, I attempt to understand and describe how I have participated in constructing a concept of the classic, and the field of Classics, in ways that obfuscated my own privilege. From the time I gave my “What is a Classic?” talk until now, I've been

¹⁹ For more on *The Medea Project* see their website at <https://themedeproject.weebly.com/>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026. See also Fraden 2001 and Rabinowitz 2008.

²⁰ In the field of Classics, the work of Shelley Haley 1993, 1995, and 2009, Patrice Rankine 2020, the scholarly society *Eos* founded in 2017, and Sasha Mae Eccleston and Dan-el Padilla Peralta's recent essay published in a special issue of *American Journal of Philology* 2022 are vital interventions into this conversation that have inspired and educated me. My perspective and commitments have been, and continue to be, shaped and revitalized through the important work of activists and scholars outside of the field of Classics, including bell hooks (e.g. 1998 and 2014), Alicia Garza, and adrienne marie brown 2019.

²¹ I believe that the CAWS call for the field to “rend the fabric of the kinship narrative” and “[r]efuse to allow the classical to provide justification for European cultural hegemony through an imagined genealogical relationship with white Europeans” elevates what I'm doing personally in this essay to the level of a collective call for our discipline (Umachandran and Ward 2024, 14–19).

contemplating the problem of love. Valorizing something only because I love it, I've come to understand, isn't in and of itself sufficient. Many love the Classics *because* the field affords prestige and shores up oppressive paradigms. Was I doing something substantively different? Or, was I, like Eliot and Coetzee, in love with the feeling of belonging to an elevated class of people who could read Sappho in Greek and fill our shelves with volumes of poetry? It's not that my love for Kiki Loveday or Sappho, or the pleasure of teaching with their work, has diminished. It's that my commitments as a scholar and educator have expanded: I no longer celebrate what I love (Sappho 16, teaching, and the possibility of becoming a professor), without acknowledging what I refuse, including my own unexamined White privilege and acquiescence to the racism implicated in academic institutions and culture.

Because shame and silence prevent personal and social change, I am writing and publishing this essay, which details part of my imperfect process of becoming a more self-aware, honest, and engaged scholar. By working to refuse my complicity in the oppressive, dysfunctional dynamics of the field of Classics, I am experiencing firsthand the transformative potential of self-reflective scholarship. As I acknowledge my own White privilege and examine how that privilege intersects with my queerness and socioeconomic status to shape my experience and identity, I cultivate my own honest voice as a scholar and writer. I feel vulnerable publishing my process in printed words that can't continue to change. But I also feel a growing sense of coherence and self-respect as I recognize that, here and now, I am working toward my aims.

What is a classic? The classic is, I believe, a concept scholars might productively engage with as a site for refusal; it is an opportunity to cultivate a thoughtful, engaged, and historically contextualized, "No." Claiming, protecting, and carrying forward a concept of the classic doesn't serve us. We need movement. Classics can provide a productive field for cultivating the critical, self-reflective practice of engaged scholarship. Engaged scholarship can help us change.

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