

AFTER SAN DIEGO: REFLECTIONS ON RACISM IN CLASSICS

by Josephine Quinn

This was supposed to be the Woke SCS: the 150th ('Sesquicentennial!') anniversary annual meeting of the Society of Classical Studies held as ever jointly with the Archaeological Institute of America in San Diego 3-6 January 2019, would be an opportunity to reflect on the past and future of the discipline. [Special Events](#) scheduled included keynote lectures from Mary Beard on the "role of Classics in the context of global history" and the Chicano artist, writer, and activist Luis Alfaro on the "contemporary retelling of ancient tragedy", panels on the history of the SCS, on the influence of Rome in the Americas, and on "Global Classics", as well as a workshop on the "Future of Classics".

Everything started promisingly: the sun was out, the margaritas were flowing, and the optimistic mood increased on the first, Thursday night when the [Women's Classical Caucus](#) Award for Public Scholarship went to Curtis Dozier of Vassar College for his [Pharos](#) website, which documents appropriations of Greco-Roman antiquity by modern hate groups, and the award for Professional Equity was given to the [Sportula](#), a crowdfunding initiative led by graduate students to make microgrants to other students "from working-class and historically looted communities". On Friday afternoon the Global Classics panel, with speakers from China, Egypt, Zimbabwe, India, and Nigeria, put a crowded room of American and European classicists under unusual external scrutiny. (Videos of all the Special Events should be posted on the SCS Youtube Channel in the next few days.)

But events were already overtaking the curated program of self-reflection. Earlier that day a Marriot security guard had [accosted](#) the Sportula's representatives Djesika Bel Watson and Stefani Echeverría-Fenn in a public area of the hotel demanding their – and only their – credentials, despite the fact that many of the older white people in the immediate vicinity weren't wearing conference badges either. News of the incident spread, and it was a more subdued crowd who gathered the next morning for the workshop on the Future of Classics.

This too started well, with three brief and provocative talks (useful live-tweet thread [here](#)). Sarah Bond (Associate Professor at the University of Iowa) pointed to the importance of diversity and inclusivity in public-facing contexts as well as in our footnotes, and called for SCS guidelines encouraging departments to count outreach and digital humanities work in promotion decisions. Joy Connolly (Provost and Interim President of the CUNY Graduate Center) counselled a focus on Classics at Community College level, where enrolments are growing, and suggested that language learning – and teaching – might in time become an option for enthusiasts rather than a requirement for all. And Dan-el Padilla Peralta (Assistant Professor at Princeton) presented the results of a gender and race audit of three major American Classics journals over the last twenty years, which showed that the representation of women and people of colour was poor and in some cases even declining. If that is going to change, he pointed out, white men are going to have to cede some space. Then the microphone was opened to the floor.

The first speaker began her remarks by asserting that Greek and Latin must remain central to the discipline. Here she had much, perhaps most, of the room with her. She then began to talk about the importance of Western Civilization, and to lose her audience, a process which accelerated when she moved on to the superiority of the West as the source of freedom and

democracy. As panellists and other participants began to object, she became irate, declaring “I am not a socialist, I believe in merit.” By now audience members were trying to reclaim the microphone, but they did not succeed before she shouted at Dan-el Padilla, “You only got your job because you are black”.

The woman – later identified as Mary Frances Williams, an independent scholar – then rushed from the room, and was later [asked to leave](#) the conference for violating its harassment code (a win, by the way, for conference harassment policies).

There’s a report of the events [here](#), and Dan-el Padilla’s own comments on the incident are [here](#), a highly recommended read. Further reporting on both can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

As an eye- or at least ear-witness (I was on the other side of the room from the microphone, and at the back), it was chilling to hear the such a clearly enunciated path from the importance of Greek and Latin to the importance of Western Civilization to straightforward racist abuse. But the real eye-opener was what happened over the following 24 hours or so, as news of what had happened spread, first on Twitter, then by word of mouth.

Mary Williams’ words had been crystal clear, and heard by at least a hundred people. But afterwards I heard people who had not been there pass the story on to others, with horror, but also with a coldly familiar academic scepticism: Mary Williams allegedly said; people thought they heard her say; the room must have been very loud; I guess we don’t know exactly what happened. My friend and colleague Deborah Cameron wrote a [blog](#) this week about the same tendency in relation to sexual assault; I watched the process in live action, and I saw for the first time how very *comforting* rigour and caution can be.

Everyone I heard discuss the matter did at least accept that racist abuse of some kind had taken place. But as well as caution there was a collective impulse to minimization. Over and over again I heard people saying, in close to the same words: look, this is a woman with obvious problems, and she’s never held an academic post. Sure, it was a horrible thing to say, but we don’t need to read much into it – in fact we shouldn’t let the ravings of a rogue individual distract us from the real business at hand in this conference, and from the progress we’ve made.

The problem with the lone-wolf response is that it ignores the full context of the structural racism found in Classics (and many other academic disciplines), reflected not only in the lack of diversity among university staff, but as Dan-el Padilla eloquently illustrated in the pitiful record of our journals in publishing scholars of colour. It ignores the fact that this kind of comment is not uncommon, and it is made by senior tenured faculty as well as by unaffiliated scholars with an axe to grind – if usually in one on one conversations rather than to a crowded room and a video camera. I’ve heard it said of other Black colleagues, inside and outside classics, and just a few months ago a senior white female academic (not a classicist this time) explained to me how difficult it was for middle-aged white men to get academic jobs these days - just a few days after her white, male, middle-aged partner had been offered an excellent academic job. These things aren’t rational, and these are dangerous times for irrational thinking: the recent growth of white nationalism in the US and the rise in hate crimes in the UK are just two examples of how quickly the almost-unsayable can quickly become the perfectly acceptable.

We won’t get rid of the racism that threads its way through our discipline by rising above it: Dan-el Padilla himself has written vividly of the problem of the contentedly [colourblind](#) classicist, quoting Justice Blackmun in *California vs Bakke* (1988): “In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race.” And this problematizes a third reaction I heard in San Diego, that to dwell too much on isolated racist incidents, and to draw public attention to them, is

dangerous for our field. We are, after all, already under suspicion of exclusivity, elitism, and simple irrelevance from both university and state authorities.

My own response to that is that we have an opportunity here to confront those suspicions head-on, to show how relevant, inclusive, and positively anti-elitist our field can be. And if we don't or can't do that, then perhaps they are right. If we want to make our field one where racism is truly unacceptable, even in hiring and publishing, and even in private, we need real culture change, which must involve a communal re-examination of what we are doing, why, and how it affects students and scholars from historically disadvantaged communities. The SCS leadership tried to make that happen at the San Diego meeting, and perhaps in the end they will have succeeded, if not in the harmonious way that they must have been hoping.

What does this mean in practical and collective terms in the UK, and for CUCD?

The top priority, already in hand, is to compile a report on Classics parallel to the one published by the Royal Historical Society last year on [Race, Ethnicity and Equality](#) in their discipline. It makes depressing reading: "...the racial and ethnic profile of students and staff in UK university History departments has remained overwhelmingly White. In UK universities, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students and staff in History have disproportionately negative experiences of teaching, training and employment. Attainment of BME History students persistently lags behind that of their peers". But it is also a solid starting point for structural change.

This won't be a swift process - the RHS report took a year, and ours isn't off the starting blocks yet - but in the meantime the RHS recommendations (pp. 73ff) provide useful tactics for Classics departments too, and we can also share good practice from our own institutions: BME graduate scholarships have recently been advertised in the Humanities at [Oxford](#), for instance, and Gesine Manuwald points me to similar scholarships advertised across all departments at [UCL](#), as well as the annual [Inclusive Curriculum Health Check](#) that UCL departments are now required to carry out.

I want finally to draw attention to the problem Dan-el Padilla discussed at the Future of Classics workshop before his substantive comments were drowned out by racist abuse. His paper, now [posted online](#) in draft, demonstrates that of the scholars published in three top American Classics journals (*Transactions of the American Philological Association*, *American Journal of Philology*, and *Classical Antiquity*) over the twenty years 1997-2017, about 2/3 were male and well over 90% were white.

I made a rough and ready tabulation for the 'latest issue' posted online of three British journals (*Journal of Hellenic Studies*, *Journal of Roman Studies*, and *Classical Quarterly*) adopting almost the same criteria, although (not least for lack of time) I did not include the authors of reviews. It suggests that the situation in the UK may be even worse. The relatively good news at least on race comes from the May issue of *CQ*, where I felt able to assign 30 of the 33 authors to a standard racial/ethnic category: only 26 of them were white (though none were Black). All the scholars published in the 2018 issues of both *JHS* and *JRS* were white.

The figures on gender are also striking, and perhaps more surprising: women comprised only 3 out of 16 authors in *JHS*, 3 out of 33 in *CQ*, and 1 out of 10 in *JRS* - with that one writing a review article, presumably commissioned. It is perhaps also worth noting that all five editors shared between the three journals are white men.

There's a lot that could be said about all this already, some of it about the relevant differences between the US and UK contexts, but further commentary can wait for better, bigger data. What

is worth saying now is that this is not inevitable. Dan-el Padilla's paper links to [an editorial letter](#) in the *American Historical Review* outlining the practical steps that journal is undertaking to 'decolonize' itself, including expanding and diversifying its board of editors, amending its strict criteria for peer reviewers (which had previously included the publication of a monograph), and actively soliciting submissions from previously underrepresented groups. Further tactics laid out in the Royal Historical Society Race and Ethnicity [report](#) (pp. 91ff) include using book reviews, invited features, and forums to build up relationships with new authors, and diversifying the journal's subject matter. And for what it is worth, my own experience of editing a journal (*Papers of the British School at Rome*, 2008-11) was that it was relatively easy to tweak the author profile by actively soliciting contributions from more junior scholars, my own priority at the time, in return for an assurance of substantial editorial support if required. For many academic editors of course, unprotected by the ivory towers of an Oxbridge college, this and other diversification strategies would require significant additional resources and support. But the diversification of our journals could transform the stories that we tell, especially about ourselves, and it is an area where new CUCD policy and guidelines could make a significant difference.

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