

WHAT STUDYING CLASSICS TAUGHT ME ABOUT MY RELATIONSHIP WITH WESTERN CIVILISATION

by Hardeep Singh Dhindsa

[The following speech was presented at a conference organised by the University of St Andrews entitled 'Classics and Race' on the 15th October, 2019. For the full programme, see: <https://staigs.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/event/classics-and-race-research-and-pedagogy/>]

This paper was difficult to write. It isn't like any previous ones I've presented where I did research and formulated an argument. There is no argument here. I am simply speaking my truth and in some ways that is much more difficult than presenting an ordinary paper. In fact I prefer the former. The difficult thing about writing this paper was choosing what to put in. There are so many areas I think of when I think Classics and Race. Do I focus on the actual ancient world, do I speak about classical reception? Should I mention pedagogy, or should I focus on BAME experience? In the end I decided that speaking about my own experiences in Classics were more important to highlight. It is no secret that this field is severely lacking in BAME scholars, so I will use this platform because I have been given an opportunity to speak for myself, rather than have a white colleague speak on my behalf. This talk, therefore, will explore the various experiences BAME scholars have in Classics.

To begin, why is it that we can trace the history of the 'western' world through numerous countries, jumping from the US to Britain, to France, to Italy, to Greece but suddenly it stops there? Why is it that when people talk about ancient Greece they refer to it as the cradle of 'Western Civilisation', as if nothing could be traced before that? It is as if Greece and its culture just appeared out of nowhere with its own language, mythology, and art. This is what is problematic when I question the term 'Western Civilisation'. It is not a term that describes the ancient world but rather it describes a very specific way of looking at the ancient world, one entrenched in the idea that the West developed as a separate entity from the East and allows predominantly white men who aren't from the Mediterranean to lay some claim to a history that has seemingly flowed unobstructed to them.

So where do I come into this, and where does racism come into this? The first clue is obviously in the term 'Western Civilisation' itself. I'm not the first to say this and I certainly won't be the last, but the idea of the West isn't something that comes fully formed from the ancient world. Edward Said's *Orientalism* puts the idea of the West into context, where he argues that the formation of a western identity has always been inextricably linked with the formation of an eastern one, and is linked with the imperialist societies that maintained these distinctions. I myself come into this story in September 2018, when I started my MSc in Classical Art and



Archaeology. My only contact with Classics was through some optional courses I took during my third year of a history of art degree, and I was quite naïve about what the study of Classics was. I had dealt with racism during my history of art undergrad, as the only person of colour on my course, but it reached a whole new level when I started Classics, with abuse coming in from department offices to Twitter. Numerous trolls on twitter have DMed me, aggressively questioning why I, a person of Indian descent, was studying something that had nothing to do with me. And this made me think hard for the first time about my relationship with western civilisation. Up until that point, I had never identified as anything other than British or British Indian. When I thought of the West, I always considered myself part of that, I would describe myself as western. It wasn't until I started studying Classics and actively sought to decolonise that I was suddenly barred from being western. The trolls' point was clear. As a brown person, Classics and Western Civilisation were not something I was allowed to handle.

These microaggressions, or in some cases just straight up racial discrimination, come at me from multiple sides. I deal with the Twitter trolls okay, I just send some gifs their way with some snappy remarks and the retweets come pouring in. What I find much harder and more mentally exhausting are the microaggressions I get from people on my degree, from both staff and students. Before I recite depressing stories, it is useful to define the term microaggression, and how exactly it impacts BAME scholars, since some of you may not even be aware that that you are doing it. Put simply, a microaggression is a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority, according to Google. One of the keywords here is 'unintentional'. A lot of the time, people either think they are complementing me but are actually displaying a subconscious institutional bias that they do not understand the effects of.

So what are some examples of this? All of the instances I'll recount came from my time studying Classics since September 2018.

- 1) When I was discussing taking Ancient Greek with one of my tutors, they said 'I'm surprised you want to take it'. I asked him why, I'm a Classics student now. They said 'the course is taught in English so you might have some difficulty understanding the grammar'. Apparently my tutor had eyes but didn't have ears. I was born and raised in London so I would hope that my English would be up to scratch.
- 2) In one of my modules, every student was required to present a short, 5-minute presentation. I decided to call out the British Museum and their damaging attitudes towards decolonising the institution. Now, a few people went over by 30 seconds or so, and when it hit the 5 minute mark the tutor would give a little wave to let the presenter know. For me, he just interrupted my presentation, and gave me significantly less time to answer questions that other students had. I felt embarrassed to be perfectly honest. It takes a certain kind of courage to stand in a room full of white people (as I am right now) and tell them that they need to work harder in making Classics more inclusive. Maybe my tutor took it the wrong way.



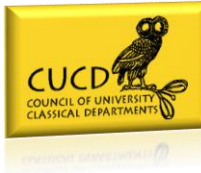
3) I did a course about Constantinople and we reached the lesson when the Ottomans finally conquered the city, and I was talking about something I didn't like during the lecture with a friend, who then turned to me and said 'oh I thought you were about to side with the Turks'. I told him, 'I'm not Turkish and who cares?', and he said 'well you know I just thought you would side with the East'. Sorry, I forgot I was wearing my Taj Mahal hat. Next time I'll make sure I'm wearing my London Eye fascinator to class.

4) The most frustrated and isolated I felt during the degree was during Semester 2 when we were tasked with finding a supervisor for our dissertations. Most people got on fine with finding one, but I had to go through 9 different people to find a supervisor, eventually finding one from outside the School of Classics. At first I thought it was just an issue because I wanted to do classical reception and we didn't really have anyone who did that. I was encouraged to change my topic and I realised the problem was something deeper when I asked a white peer, who was also having trouble finding a supervisor, was told not to change his, but he can have a non-specialist tutor who can help him as much as possible (this option was given to me after I said I didn't want to change topic). I refused to change it to make it more convenient for my conservative professors and my hunt continued. One of the faculty members I approached straight up told me, 'if you did something more relevant, perhaps I could help you', and another said 'I don't know how you came to the conclusion that mythological characters are portrayed as white because your proposal shows a complete lack of evidence'. Maybe they hadn't left their room in a few hundred years, I didn't want to break it them.

[After recounting my own experiences, I shared some experiences from BAME classicists that had been sent to me before the conference. While I recited them on the day, with permission, I will not include them here.]

The point I'm trying to make is that words matter, and we can go on and on about decolonising and diversifying our curriculums but at the end of the day it means nothing if white academics in this room don't start implementing changes on an individual level. The above examples only show a very small picture of what I have to deal with on top of all my studies. Everybody knows that a Masters degree is intense, but try doing one when everybody, from your tutors to your friends, is constantly reminding you that you either don't belong in this field or you are held to another standard than another white student.

I want to break these two feelings down a little more, because they are very important in understanding BAME experience in Classics. The first, that BAME scholars don't belong in this field has a strong bearing, at least for me, on how we use our voices. That is to say, our relentless efforts to highlight erased history are derived from our own feelings of isolation in the field. For me this is a blessing and a curse because while I feel like I am actually changing something in Classics, it seems as if I never had a choice in the matter. As an art history undergrad, I was always aware that I was the only person of colour on a course with 60 people in it, and while I always half-heartedly tried to challenge the racism embedded in the subject, it wasn't a factor in my feelings of self-fulfilment. I ended up writing my dissertation on papal



propaganda on fountains of a sixteenth-century aqueduct, a topic as niche as you could go. I had the best time doing research and it was something I wanted to sink my teeth into. When I came to Classics to do a Masters however, something at the back of my mind kept on stirring while I was trying to enjoy the degree. The topics that I was writing about, in the nicest way possible, were things that anybody could write. Here I was, an outsider in Classics, trying to, unsuccessfully, hide behind others and assimilate. As I developed my research, more and more holes in the neat little white history of world were exposed and I faced an ultimatum. Should I continue to research what I merely liked and become complicit in the whitewashing of Classics, knowing I had the power to try and change it (for my white colleagues certainly weren't going to), or should I open my own Pandora's box and fight for myself and open the doors for the next BAME classicists? While the journey has been exhausting, I have never felt more powerful. In the end, I made the choice to fight for my voice but it wasn't really a choice. It felt more like I was already on that path but I made the choice to walk it rather than be dragged down it.

Now the second feeling I mentioned was that BAME are held to a different standard than white people. At the same time, people express surprise that we have the same knowledge as our peers but we are also expected to work twice as hard for the same reward. This is mentally exhausting, even without the added strain that we feel we have to prove ourselves. Earlier this year I got a pretty bad grade, which thankfully didn't disrupt my average, but I reacted badly. It took me a while to recover but once I did, I realised two things: a top-grade paper by me is not seen on the same level as a top-grade paper by a white peer (in the same way that me speaking 7 languages is never going to be as impressive as a monolingual white Brit with Duolingo French level 2), and a bad grade on my part reflects worse upon me than if one of my white peers got a bad grade. BAME scholars are always having to balance a very thin line, but ultimately we are apparently only as good as second-best. There is a certain kind of horror about being the only person of colour in a Classics class, and it is that that will probably be the only experiences white people have of a BAME in classics. If you step out of line it doesn't reflect only upon you, but also on this person's perception of every BAME in the field. At all times I am representing so many people and it is scary knowing that I could be the deciding factor in how one white person goes on to treat the next BAME they meet in classics.

And unlike white people, our achievements are tightly bound to our skin colour. Earlier this year at the AIA's 2019 conference [*as reported [here](#) by Josephine Crawley Quinn in CUCD Bulletin*], a black professor was told he only had a job at Princeton because he was black. On later reflection, the professor, Dan-el Padilla Peralta, said the following: 'my merit and my blackness are fused to each other. It is impossible to think of my scholarship, my achievements without thinking about my blackness' [*Here is the link: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/My-Merit-My-Blackness/245462>*]. I cannot tell you the amount of times I have been told that I am where I am because of my skin colour. Why I was able to study at a Russell Group university, why I worked at a national gallery, why I've been able to speak at conferences, even why I was asked to speak here, a conference literally about Classics and race. I feel so invisible all the time, but at the same time I feel hyper visible. I am overlooked and covered up when I call out instances of racism, my dissertation topic is thrown around because no one wants to cover it, but then I am also 'that brown guy'. I'm the one person of colour in all of my classes and no



matter how British I am, no matter how good at ancient Greek or Latin I am, I will always be separated from my white peers. To those people who are not close to me, I am not Hardeep. I am India. I am Sikhism. I'm supposedly an entire population group that is supposed to speak on behalf of millions of people, and I supposed to absorb every problem a white person has had with one of these people. Until of course I'm the only brown person in the room again.

Moving on from my own wonderfully depressing experiences, I now want to look at the actual task of decolonising Classics. A definition from Keele University outlines why decolonisation itself is important: 'it involves a paradigm shift from a culture of exclusion...to the making of space for other political philosophies and knowledge systems. It's a culture shift to think more widely about why common knowledge is what it is, and in doing so adjusting cultural perceptions and power relations in real and significant ways'. My university thought it was doing this by adding one course of Jewish Diaspora and celebrating the diversity of that. That became the only course that was not about white people, but all of the organisers were white and I had a peek at the reading list (I didn't do the course) and wasn't surprised by what I saw. In the nicest way possible, that was not decolonisation and it barely scratched the surface of diversifying the curriculum. When I'm asking for decolonisation I'm not asking for the removal of traditionally white, elite curriculum. Keep your Plato, keep your Latin, keep your Roman poetry. Decolonising the curriculum is about interrogating the actual framework of what we study, and is not always about what exactly we are studying. When we refer to decolonising the Classics, we are not saying 'tell us about African presence in Ancient Rome' (though that would be a great course), we are saying *why* is it that the study of Africans is always in opposition to the Western world? *How* can we sift through the prejudices of not only the Romans, but the secondary scholars from periods of intense institutional racism? *Why* are books about Africans written by white men and what bias could be presented and how does this affect *our* understanding? A good example about understanding the difference between diversity and decolonisation is one that I saw on Twitter a while ago using *Orange is the New Black*. The cast itself is diverse, but the main character is white and the writers of the show are white. Essentially, decolonisation is not white people telling the stories of BAME, it's about giving us a platform for our own stories.

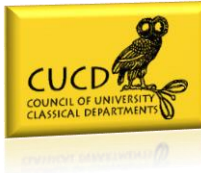
Universities are not doing enough. In fact I don't think they're doing anything to tackle this, at least successfully in any sense. Instead they are relying on empty buzz words and hiding behind words like 'inclusivity' and 'racial equality' without implementing anything workable to promote this. Forget about hiring any people of colour to teach these 'cutting edge' courses that dare teach about something other than white people. Did you know 92.39% of professors in UK academia are white and 95.33% of senior officials are white. Did you know that BME academics earn on average 26% less than their white colleagues? I am not here to beg St Andrews to introduce one more course about something that's not about Plato. I'm here to slam Classics departments around the UK by saying that it is disgusting that you promote ideas about diversity but shun those who represent that diversity. You are banking on a cultural movement without looking at yourselves and I find it shameful, and downright disrespectful, that you are unable to sit down and acknowledge the fact that your discipline was built on the backs on people of colour and your societies were built on the backs of the East. I am asking you to look beyond your little bubble for one minute and see that there are people who are



fighting just to be heard in this discipline and overturn the centuries of erasure that disciplines like Classics have actively participated in.

For the last part of this talk I really want to drive home the points I've been making by talking a little on Classics itself and the study of it, rather than the teaching of it. At the end of the day, the fact that this workshop exists is proof that there is a problem when it comes to Classics and Race (as if I haven't given you enough evidence already). A lot of this has to do with that sense of ownership and the public perception that Classics is a white man's history. There has always been a relationship between whiteness and Classics, and because that whiteness was formalised during the period of Empires, that sense of western ownership has unfortunately been passed on to people in the twenty-first century. Now I'm not going to talk about class elitism or gender (those topics deserve their own conferences), but together with race they have created an exclusionary environment within this field that is so hostile to change. That's also because a lot of white people outside of academia have an idea of what Classics is and it's very difficult to change the views of millions of people at a time. I'm of course going to mention the often mentioned example of who gets to play Achilles. I'm sure most of us have seen the iconic film *Troy* (2004) starring Brad Pitt as Achilles. Now the significance of Brad Pitt, a white man, playing Achilles is only revealed when you compare the reactions it got to the BBC drama *Troy: Fall of a City* starring David Gyasi, a British Ghanaian actor. Of course the racist remarks about Achilles being black were not widespread, racism of this sort never is. But what it does tell us is that in the public mind, there is an assumption that white skin is considered normal when we are talking about the classical world, and that history is only accessible to certain people. I won't even begin to talk about the influence that white marble sculptures have had on our ideas of classical beauty. If you do want to discuss it then find me on Twitter.

This whole idea of "whose history" and the sense that Classics can only belong to select few is encapsulated in a story written by Virginia Woolf about six Englishmen visiting Greece. Now the men tried to communicate with native Greek people 'in their own tongue as Plato would have spoken it had Plato learned Greek at Harrow' [quoted in McCoskey, D. E. (2012), *Race: Antiquity and its Legacy*, London. p. 167] and called them barbarians when they couldn't understand them. Now that was written decades ago but unfortunately that story still resonates today, and it's for that reason that BAME are fighting so hard for their voices to be heard. Since the inception of Classics with a capital C we have been excluded from a history that is as much ours as it is the west's. And though we are few, it is the bravest thing we can do to simply exist in a space that was not made for us and inspire those who are watching. I am not standing here for me. I'm here because I want to make this discipline a safer place for those who come after me and let them know that they can enter this space. That is why representation matters. And I didn't appreciate the importance of representation until one author, Priyamvada Gopal, a Cambridge historian, said she would leave Twitter because of the abuse she was receiving. I became accustomed to seeing her tweets and didn't feel so lonely when I felt like I was part of a network of BAME scholars, but when she announced she was leaving, I felt the same isolation I feel when I'm sitting in my classes. I don't want any of the next generation of classicists of colour to feel like that so believe me when I say I will continue to fight and make myself heard until a workshop like Classics and Race doesn't need to be held again.

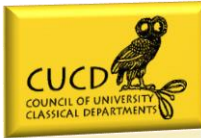


Classics needs to change. We need to change. We are part of a field that has proven to be very resistant to change and those of who are not willing to move forward are wholly complicit in the weaponisation of the classical world against BAME, women, working class scholars, peoples with disabilities, the list goes on. In its current form, Classics is a vehicle of white supremacy. There are people who actively use the classical world and western civilisation as ammunition against us, and if it becomes clear that Classics cannot distance itself from its ties with white supremacy then it is a discipline that deserves to die. I will kill Classics with my bare hands and walk out of this room with my head held high if we cannot change. But there is still time and I feel hope. I don't know if you all feel it but I feel that something big is coming in Classics, we are on a knife's edge and whichever side we fall on is dependent on what we do when we leave this room and go back to work tomorrow.

[The following paragraph is the 'Aftermath' of the original speech, concerning my feelings about Classics and Race.]

Presenting this paper was more difficult than I imagined, and I think the most challenging part was making it accessible to a white audience. Talking about race and racism to a single white person is a minefield in itself, but something on this level was more reminiscent of a labyrinth. On the one hand, you (that is, BAME) have to articulate your experiences truthfully and be honest about what needs to change, but on the other hand, you must be gentle enough to not come across as playing 'the blame game' or pointing the finger at every white person on a personal level. You'll notice that my speech was littered with jokes, particularly at the most critical moments. I used that to level everybody's emotions, mine included, when my speech threatened to trigger the 'fight or flight' response most white people succumb to when confronted about race. The truth is, were I to do this speech in front of other brown classicists, the jokes would be kept to a minimum, and I would probably favour the emotional elements of my experiences rather than the narrative sign-posting. In the end, the speech was more successful than I had anticipated, and the response from the (very few) BAME in attendance was heart-warming. The first came from a speaker who presented a couple of hours before me, and they praised me for my bravery and related to all of the anecdotes I had presented. The second came from an audience member, asking how to approach primary and secondary source materials from a postcolonial perspective. It was heart-warming because there are so many of us who are often alone in all-white Classics departments, experiencing the same struggles, but we can come together at conferences and places like Twitter to remind one another that we are in fact not alone. For a gargantuan task like decolonising Classics, being alone at your university puts a lot of weight on your shoulders, but we are living in a time where scholarly engagement is moving away from the typical settings of paper reviews and annual conferences. Now, we can discuss issues within Classics instantaneously and interact with scholars around the world in ways not possible even ten years ago. In fact, a white audience member, already established academically, asked about how using Twitter would benefit them and their research, showing that Classics isn't entirely resistant to change.

I say entirely because this aftermath also covers a more pessimistic view on the topic of decolonising Classics. At the roundtable discussion, where all of the speakers were discussing the major themes of conference, the topic of accessibility in Classics was brought up, particularly the elitism that comes with learning Latin and Ancient Greek. Starting productively,



the topic slowly veered towards the job security of Latin teachers at universities. The discussion was centred around two white scholars who expressed concern over a potential decline in Latin and what that would mean for Classics with a capital C. This for me, and conveniently for this paper, was representative of why decolonisation is no easy task: it requires white people to decentralise their experience of the world, and recalibrate the field where their needs are not front and centre. I found it a little frustrating that after 45 minutes of me talking about the experiences of classicists of colour, the debate ended up lamenting the fact that Latin may not remain as popular (I won't even begin to dissect the underlying current that suggests the popularity of a dead language is more important than opening the doors of this field to less privileged people). Classics is slowly moving on from the insistence that learning Latin and Ancient Greek is the only entry-point into classical history (note the difference between Classics with a capital C and classical history with a lowercase C), and this in turn has facilitated the emergence of new perspectives of the ancient world, and particularly of classical historiography. I'm not saying that Latin doesn't have its place in Classics, I myself am studying it at the moment. But we have to confront the many privileges that accompany many of those who study Classics, the fluency and importance placed on knowing only two of the countless languages spoken in the classical world being one of them. Latin will always be taught in Classics departments, but if I have to choose between gatekeeping based on Latin proficiency and accepting that knowing Latin isn't essential for every subfield within Classics, I hope I've made it clear which one I would pick.

Finally, I want to give my thoughts of the future on Classics outside of this paper based on the work that I have been doing since October. Looking back on the speech four months later, I realise I was a little naïve in not explicitly stating that decolonising Classics will not happen on the same timeline of decolonising Britain. Now there's a challenge. Personally, I do not think Britain will decolonise during my academic career. We have built an image of ourselves as a quiet, quaint population that in effect does not see race, with post-racial liberals claiming that we must end all discussions of race to move past it. What is lacking is any sort of awareness of the racial bias that exists within the structure of our society, which is partly due to our complete reluctance to address our own problematic history in national curriculums, like Germany or the United States. Everybody's heads turning when I walk into a lecture room or me not being able to find a supervisor for my dissertation topic is not a problem with Classics, it is a problem with the way race and white privilege operate in the UK. White people get to benefit from the fact that they do not need to think about race. In Classics, this means the privilege of ignoring the imperial ideologies surrounding looting culture and museums displays, the fact that our images of white marble sculptures are completely wrong, the reaction to David Gyasi playing Achilles compared to Brad Pitt, the fact that the classical world was more than Rome and Greece, and so much more. Of course one small paragraph is not going to suggest any answers to this problem, but it will at least bring these issues to the forefront of the reader's mind, if only for a second. As for me, I will continue trying to question Britain's problem with race in a way that makes it clear it is a problem that needs to be addressed. Now. I knew when I started studying Classics that I would be entering it as a complete outsider. Not an outsider in that I had never studied it before, though that was also the case, but in that I was not *supposed* to be studying it. To white people, Classics wasn't a history that included me, and to some other BAME, I was joining 'them', that is, I was now playing nice with the baddies. But



Bulletin 49 (2020) <https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/bulletin/>

this is not a case of 'if you can't beat them, join them'. This is me walking into Classics uninvited and forcing it into a conversation that it wanted no part in participating in. The end goal, however, is not equality. As Reni Eddo-Lodge wrote, 'I have no desire to be equal. I want to deconstruct the structural power of a system that marked me out as different...The onus is not on *me* to change. Instead, it's the world around me' (Eddo-Lodge, R. (2018), *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, London, p. 184). The battle for decolonisation is widespread, and dismantling the imperial structures that have propped up Classics since its inception is only one small part of it.

Hardeep Singh Dhindsa
hardeepsdhindsa@gmail.com
@_HardeepDhindsa