Disciplinecraft: Towards an Anti-racist Classics

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Disciplinecraft: Towards an Anti-racist Classics∗

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“We cannot begin to address the obscene injustices in this country without grappling with whiteness—not as a simplistic racial categorization, but as a deeply structured relationship to power and group entitlement.”


“Racist concepts do considerable work in political and economic life; but, if they were merely an appendage of politics and economics, without intimate roots in other phases of life, their persuasiveness would accordingly diminish.”

Racraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life

What would it take to imagine and to materialize an anti-racist discipline of Classics? To start with, nothing less than a massive rupture with previous arrangements, that is to say, the ways we train our students and produce knowledge, and of how we act on and beyond the university as part of the wider world. And yet in the multiple overlapping and compounding crises of COVID-19, parts of academic life have found ways to adapt and continue in altered form. If a value beloved by neoliberalism is “resilience” (a personal quality that implies fortitude but actually indexes access to material resources), then here we are in 2021, resilient.

But what if we were to see this present crisis (with its material effects on living, working, travelling, congregating, moving, breathing, protesting, visiting, mourning, comforting, celebrating, witnessing) as precisely the rupture that is needed to realize fundamental shifts in the so-called discipline of Classics’

∗This essay was drafted on the one-year anniversary of the United Kingdom government instituting a national lockdown. It is dedicated to all those who have suffered in this year.

†Fields and Fields 2012: 11.

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“business as usual,” since it is a moment co-articulated with a consciousness of a crisis in racial justice? And can the so-called discipline of Classics face up to its co-formation with white supremacy, that is, how anti-Blackness constitutes one of its foundational principles and how it is organized around ideas of the “human” and of scientific knowledge-making. My fear is that institutional and disciplinary structures might elastically snap back into place after a period of more than eighteen months in which people have taken to the streets, burnt down police stations, and rioted in order to draw attention to the lethal effects of systemic racism. To put that differently, my fear is that power is resilient to these incursions. Going into the third decade of this century, the worst outcome for the so-called discipline of Classics would be to refuse the call of this transformative moment and batten down the hatches.

This brief essay meditates on the epistemic and political possibilities of going through the cleansing fires and building anew. What are the jeopardies of “resilience” that remain, and what are the pragmatics of staking such a bold gambit when so little about the future seems reliable? It is possible that exaggerated tendencies of preservation, caution, and austerity might prevail instead. For a field as ideologically committed to forgetting its complicity in projects of empire and epistemic coloniality as the so-called discipline of Classics (a move Marchella Ward and I have elsewhere named “settler moves to innocence” following Janet Mawhinney), giving way to such conservatism would be disastrous. Building an anti-racist discipline is an active, if not also an activist, commitment to justice that sees race as intimately and abundantly entangled with other social categories. In the second epigraph to this essay, Barbara and Karen Fields issue a salient reminder that race is never exclusively a question of political economy but rather is part of the making of the world through social categories. As such, I take from the Fields sisters that it is precisely through the craftedness of this world (and discipline as a subset of the world) that we get to intercede with agency. To put it otherwise: another discipline is possible.

All too often, such transformation is imagined at the disciplinary peripheries, wherein public-facing activities undergo a little light seasoning with progressive rhetoric in order that core activities and values of knowledge-making remain petrified in their epistemic and political conservatism. This moment provides us with the unimpeachable legitimacy of insisting: race is central to who we are and what we know.

3 Mawhinney’s notion of “settler moves to innocence” has been influentially taken up by Tuck and Yang 2012:1–40; cf. Umachandran and Ward forthcoming.
I want to think about how we become acquainted with and integrate critical knowledge-making practices so that they form part of the common set of skills and practices. For a long time, the cohesion of the discipline has been constituted by proficiency and mastery of the ancient languages, driving arguments of historical continuity and individual improvement. This has come at the expense and systematic exclusion of other things we might craft as core to disciplinary knowledge. What if we stop mourning the loss of linguistic mastery and insist on telling and teaching the critical histories of the so-called discipline of Classics? What if critical disciplinary history was not an elective topic for an enterprising graduate student but as central as learning the genitive absolute? We might then replace stories about scholarly “heroes” with ones that narrate how the blueprint of the discipline was co-produced with the discursive paradigms of race, gender, class, and ability that continue to shape the present world.

Such work is a tall order. It requires scholars, already established in areas of expertise, to become learners once again and relinquish performances, self-conceptions, and repertoires of mastery. Indeed, the pervasive logic of white supremacy is precisely the seduction of mastery—and that is what must be disavowed. “I do not know where to begin even though I know we must” is a fine place to start when you have identified the need to dismantle racism as part of your scholarly activity. Recognize that your own intellectual formation falls short of providing you with the knowledge, tools, and resources for teaching the critical history of the so-called discipline of Classics.

Mastery’s opposites are epistemic humility and vulnerability—values that academia in general does not invite much less inculcate (how to cultivate a practice of humility as scholars of color when we are structurally made-as-humble?). All of us—Black, non-Black and white scholars—need a basic understanding about the history of anti-colonial struggles and nation- and region-specific contestations of race and belonging, in order to make new undergraduate courses, syllabi, and programs of study. If the present moment of crisis is a “back to the drawing board” moment where we get to put radical questions about accountability and justice to people in positions of social and political power—Classicists must also ask the same questions about what we know and do not know, what the so-called discipline of Classics has excluded from its knowing and how we can rewire the epistemic formation of scholarly knowers, starting with ourselves. I am asking for life transformation, along with world transformation: the dismantling of racecraft is a demand for structural change out there in the world and inside, too. Can Black people thinking and making culture while alive matter to you as much as the spectacle of Black
death? Can you allow the dismantling of racism to transform your whole orientation to what you do in the world, including your scholarly output?

The need then is to make a discipline that is hospitable to and interested in many kinds of knowledge and knowledge-making practices, founded on a recognition that when we encounter difference, our job is not to assimilate it. What can we do now to make the so-called discipline of Classics more hospitable, when its demographics are becoming more racially diverse while the master’s house is crashing down around it? Part of the answer lies in recognizing that we cannot do this work within institutions of economic inequality. The traditional academic job market has all but vanished, the promise of a tenure-track job an increasingly mythical beast. In the present situation the so-called discipline of Classics is producing more people of color with advanced qualifications but with decreasing amounts of job security. Semi-effective progressive hiring and admissions alongside an implosion of the traditional operations of academia makes for a perfect storm of material insecurity, whose effects disproportionately fall on people of color.

This surely must be an instance in which racial justice can be enacted quickly. An obvious place would be forgiveness for debts incurred during education. Such debts continue to be an enormous drain on personal finances long after a student has left a higher education institution. If they cannot enact it by themselves, could tenured Classics professors offer solidarity with and vocal support for the wider grassroots movement making the case for debt forgiveness? If we have seen smaller instances of debt jubilees, relief, rent holiday, and versions of universal basic income during the pandemic, now is the time to demand debt forgiveness because we have seen it rehearsed and we have seen it as possible. In that sense, individual professors do not hold the purse strings to make debt go away; rather, individual Classicists are members of multiple communities (one of which is their professional community) and so raising one’s voice in solidarity with precarious colleagues addresses a structural inequality in and beyond the academic world.

My second suggestion, however, does lie in the hands of Classics departments and their institutions. Since graduate education no longer conforms

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4 Padilla Peralta 2020: 151–86.
5 Agbamu 2021 explicitly thinks through mastery vis-à-vis the epistemology of the so-called discipline of Classics via Audre Lorde’s critical metaphor of construction.
6 On the detrimental consequences of the pandemic for work and life, see Sulprizio and Rader in this issue.
7 See Connolly in this issue on the varied, jagging, temporality of change (not to be confused with “progress” as inevitable).
to its original purpose, that is, replenishing the professoriate, racial justice must re-understand what graduate education is for and what it is, as well as reimagine what it can do. If the dissertation demonstrated that a student was prepared for a lifetime of research, what purpose does it serve now when for most graduates the reality is holding down multiple, relatively poorly paid adjuncting gigs? The increasing gap between what this training is about and what jobs people holding advanced degrees get cannot be patched over. I suggest that the dissertation should be replaced with two portfolios. The first portfolio would showcase writing that includes published scholarly articles alongside work for different kinds of audiences, including the wider public and non-specialist audiences. It would show employers how someone with a degree in the so-called discipline of Classics has a good eye for detail, can communicate complex information clearly, and can plan and complete projects. I am not sure the dissertation serves this purpose as well as a well-crafted and varied portfolio. A second portfolio of teaching experience would serve those who want to go into teaching jobs and show that they have engaged deeply with issues beyond those specific to the university classroom. The idea behind having two portfolios is to emphasize and showcase skills that are necessary for jobs other than academia. (Is this an anti-intellectual argument at root, one that would deny “us” the brightest and most brilliant minds? I’m not sure, and it might be rich coming from someone like me who swung from monkey bar to monkey bar of elite institutions, trading off mental health and personal relationships for the legitimacy that prestige can confer.)

Finally, as Kimberlé Crenshaw’s tweet provokes us to reflect on the machinations of power as institutionalized, embedded in social groups, and naturalized into whiteness, it is necessary to subordinate the self-reckoning of the so-called discipline of Classics to wider contexts of racial justice. Disciplinary transformation must accompany structural critiques of the university as a whole and in turn examine what part universities have to play in transformative social justice movements. The kinds of self-reflection, accountability, and justice that universities must engage in now—around questions about the accumulation of land and hoarding of wealth, the acquisition of objects up to and including human remains of colonized and oppressed peoples, investments, the policing of campus life as continuous with carceral culture—are questions that Classicists have to engage in qua inhabitants of unjust institutions and societies and not qua Classicists. If reading ancient texts facilitates clarity on

8 Douglas 2020.
9 Guest Contributors 2021.
10 Maroon Editorial Board 2021
racial injustice in the present, then by all means, continue to read in the name of anti-racism. If not, a limit on the relevance of reading Classical texts must be recognized and acknowledged. We cannot transform the so-called discipline of Classics just so it can once again purport to be universally relevant, a well of political resources through which all and any revolutionary movements, social crises, or political ideologies can be run through and thought about. In that sense, knowing the limitations of the so-called discipline of Classics and transcending them is part of building an anti-racist discipline. Even if every Classics department in the country were to institute a “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” committee, mandate anti-racism training, and build innovative new syllabi, it would still not be enough if we do not also act on the wider institutions, and through them the communities and social life beyond academia’s walls. The so-called discipline of Classics must reckon with its formation with supremacist logics of all stripes, and commit itself towards liberation. That, and nothing less than that, is what it will take to imagine and build an anti-racist discipline out of and in response to the long-burning crises of racism that the COVID-19 global pandemic has dragged painfully into view.

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11 Diversity and inclusion consultant Kim Tran (2021) asks, “Can diversity and inclusion shed its bourgeois skin?” The same question might well be put to the so-called discipline of Classics.


