

‘Can the *instrumenta domini* dismantle the *domus domini*?’

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Although my paper nominally addresses the idea of ‘rethinking the materials’, my brief discussion will range across a number of topics: my ambivalence towards the discipline of Classics and how I have aimed to address this ambivalence, the sorts of classical scholarship that I think work towards exploring the ambivalences at the heart of the discipline today, and the sort of work which can be done within and without the discipline and the university in order to work towards what I would see as a genuinely inclusive Classics.

Much of my personal ambivalence is rooted, I think, in my background as both a child of a Brit(ish), to borrow the title of Afua Hirsch’s recent book, middle-class family, at the same time as being a brown descendent of black and brown postcolonial subjects. My parents were always very keen on the idea that I should study Classics at university as opposed to, for example, Law, or even English, History, or Modern Languages (the other options eighteen-year-old me considered). It is only recently that I have given pause to reflect on why it was that my parents were so keen on my studying Classics. At least part of their implicit logic must have been the idea that Classics constitutes a sort of ‘secret language’ of prestige and privilege. Barbara Goff (2005) has explored the ways in which classical education was viewed as such in colonial West Africa, a secret language into which was encoded an ideology of European cultural supremacy and the inferiority of West African cultures. At the same time, however, it was a vocabulary that could be articulated into discourses of national liberation by West African political elites, a picture closely mirrored across the British Empire, as numerous scholars have shown.¹ So, while I doubt that my parents would see it in such a way, I suspect that this double-edged symbolic potency of classical antiquity may have influenced their encouragement of my interests in the Greek and Roman worlds: in short, to learn the language of imperial power and privilege, and to turn it to my advantage in navigating the cultural hierarchies supported by classical education.

So much for psychoanalysing my parents – what bearing does this have on how I imagine a more ‘inclusive Classics’? I would suggest that the implicit logic of my path into Classics does nothing to contribute to a more inclusive discipline – quite the opposite, rather, it serves to reinforce the mystical aura of privilege surrounding the study of Greek and Roman antiquity. Moreover, the idea of a discipline – any discipline – as inclusive requires further attention. Disciplines are formed with the circumscription of their objects of knowledge and the exclusion of what is not encompassed within the discipline’s domain. For the discipline of Classics, these circumscriptions are bound by geography and by chronology. Add to this the additional requirement that the discipline of Classics’ objects of knowledge must relate in some way to the language, literatures, and cultures of Greek and Roman antiquity and we

¹ E.g. Vasunia (2013); Bradley (2010).

are left with a relatively narrowly defined discipline. With Classics so defined, I have found myself and my research interests at the discipline's margins. Of course, I have studied and taught the canon, but I found myself wandering down a research path which has taken me firmly into the realm of Classical Reception Studies, straddling disciplinary boundaries, and, as Luke Richardson (2017) so eloquently described, encumbered by all the baggage of not doing 'real Classics'.

With these considerations in mind, what would an inclusive Classics look like? Much depends on where our commitments as Classicists lie, what we consider possible or desirable, and how we see the role of Classics in wider society. Much is also predicated on how we see the role of the university and of academia in general. The title of my presentation is a tacky nod to Audre Lorde's contribution at the 1979 Second Sex Conference at NYU. Lorde's (1984: 110-113) intervention, entitled, 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', challenges the conference to adopt tools other than those of racist patriarchy with which to examine this same racist patriarchy, to embrace difference rather than to suppress it, and to think creatively. She also draws attention to Black feminist scholars being shoehorned into a session on 'race' as an afterthought, as if they are unable to be expert on any other facet of feminism. Of course, here we are discussing Classics rather than Black, Queer, Feminist scholarship, but Lorde's intervention provides important lessons that I think worth quoting. This comes from towards the end of her brief contribution:

... *the masters tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporally 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 ['women' because this is an address to feminist scholars in the 1970s] who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (*ibid.* 112)

What, then, is the master's house? If it is the discipline and the academy, the tools being the traditional methods and approaches to scholarship, I think that the first lesson for a more inclusive Classics to be drawn from Lorde's piece is to think creatively, embrace difference, and to think outside the discipline and the academy. But what does this look like in practice? Thankfully, over the past half-century or so, classical scholars have expanded the discipline's methodological panoply, drawing insights from advances in fields as diverse as feminist, queer, postcolonial, and critical race theories, to name but a few. Concurrently, initiatives to increase participation in the discipline have proliferated and, while there remains much work to do, this can only be greeted as moving in a positive direction even while remaining sceptical of neoliberal discourses of diversity and inclusion.²

However, does working towards a more 'diverse' discipline make for a more inclusive or equitable one? At this time, it is worth pausing to reflect on the distinction between the 'difference' valorised by Lorde,

² On the pitfalls of inclusivity, see for example Ahmed (2012) 51-81.

and the ‘diversity’ chased by university targets and championed in prospectuses. Here, I think, the work of Homi K. Bhabha might be especially illuminating. Throughout his work, Bhabha has valorised cultural liminality and hybridity, the so-called ‘Third Space’ between cultures. Although more recently Bhabha’s theories of hybridity have been critiqued for assuming a fixity of the sort that he seeks to undo,³ they remain a useful conceptual tool for examining liberal discourses of diversity and multiculturalism. According to Bhabha, such discourses render difference transparent and map it onto a normative, universalising cultural matrix which is laid out by the hegemonic culture.⁴ In this way, liberal multiculturalism amounts to an evolution of the colonial museum – cataloguing and displaying subjugated cultures to demonstrate the ‘civilisation’ of the dominant one. We know, of course, of the closely related history of the colonial museum, a neo-classical temple to European dominance, the Grand Tour, antiquarianism, and the emergence of the scientific study of antiquity. Although less explicit in its acts of plunder, discourses of diversity are still underpinned by an epistemological domination that suppresses rather than empowers difference and still constitute an apparatus of a Eurocentric hegemony. By focusing instead on the ‘Third Space’ between cultures, the liminal zones suppressed in constructions of hegemonic cultures, we can expose and investigate the limits of cultural hegemonies and begin to view culture as predicated upon difference.

So, what does this mean for studying and teaching Classics? Again, this returns us to the question of how we see the role of classical scholarship in the world. We all understand the centrality of the study of classical antiquity in the construction of the idea of ‘Western civilisation’, so how can classical scholars move from this to the Third Space, while remaining classicists? This is where I believe Reception Studies plays a vital role at the very centre of the discipline, rather than constituting a marginal field, an ‘academic hobby’ done in the spare time of serious classicists. ‘Know thyself’, exhorts the Delphic maxim, and it is in the task of knowing ourselves as classicists that Reception Studies proves indispensable: many of the participants of this workshop are leading scholars on the history of the discipline, how it arose, its institutionalisation within the academy, its instrumentalization in projects of nation and empire, in constructions of ‘race’, gender, and sexuality – these are the research areas that acquaint us with how classical antiquity was forged into the tools which built the master’s house. We should also remember the heated debates which have arisen around earlier attempts to investigate these questions, notably the controversy surrounding the *Black Athena* books by non-classicist Martin Bernal. Concurrent to these research strands, we can probe the newly exposed foundations of the discipline with tools of our own making or borrowed from elsewhere, or explore and complicate ideas of there being centres and peripheries of the classical tradition, as, for example, in contributions to the *Classics in Extremis* (2018) volume edited by Edmund Richardson.

³ E.g. Spickard (2020).

⁴ See, for example, Bhabha (1994).

In my view, this project to interrogate the roots and boundaries of the discipline extends to teaching practices. For me, education – institutional or otherwise – must have as its aim the promotion of a more free and equal society. Here, I take inspiration from Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), in dialogue with scholars such as bell hooks (1994) who have challenged and developed his pedagogical philosophy. For Freire, a central contradiction in traditional pedagogy is that between the teacher as narrating subject, and the student as passive, listening object, a receptacle for the information deposited by the teacher. Instead, according to Freire, we ought to strive for a situation in which all are both teacher and student. Freire suggests that a strategy by which this can be affected is through problem-posing education and dialogue. Within a Classics context, this is easy to envisage. Close readings of texts conducted collaboratively in class where all interpretations are valuable and in which the instructor is decentred in the proceedings go some way towards enacting a problem-based dialectic education. Translation exercises are especially well-suited as a format for transformative pedagogical practices, not only as problem-based learning, allowing us to step outside our own linguistic worlds. Translation forces us to occupy momentarily a space between languages, between cultures, between ways of seeing the world. A huge array of scholars has written about how different subject positions produce different translations of the same text, something that could be foregrounded early on in Classics curricula at schools and universities.⁵

But there’s the rub. I am still talking in terms of Classics courses at universities and schools; I still see the master’s house as the supporting structure for how I see an inclusive discipline, a perilous presumption. ‘Critical’ scholarship can easily slip into a socially reactionary role. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten phrase it better than I could hope to:

Whatever else they do, critical intellectuals who have found a space in the university are always already performing the denial of the new society when they deny the undercommons [networks of solidarity reappropriating the resources of the academy], when they find that space on the surface of the university, and when they join the conquest denial by improving that space. (Harney and Moten, 2013: 31)

In other words, there always remains the risk that critical knowledge production in institutions becomes another layer of gatekeeping to prevent prefigurative work. Thus, having worked myself into aporia, I extricate myself by concluding that there are too many contradictions in the institutionalisation of inclusivity and ‘critique’ for me to address here. However, I will outline three main ways in which I think Classics can strive towards a meaningful form of inclusivity. Firstly, to promote communities beyond the hierarchies of institutions, alternative networks of support – our own ‘undercommons’ – within and without the walls of the university should be promoted and sustained. For example, networks such as the Sportula in the USA (<https://thesportula.wordpress.com/>), and now in Europe

⁵ E.g. Haley (2009); Gibson (2019).

(<https://sportulaeurope.wordpress.com/>), work to support marginalised classicists through microgrants, demonstrating the simple efficacy of principles of solidarity. Secondly, the discipline ought to continue to welcome and nurture scholarship which challenges the boundaries and roots of Classics. Numerous research networks, publications, and websites do this very thing, such as *Eidolon*, *Everyday Orientalism* and many others, with their number growing year on year, developments, I think, that can only be welcomed. Finally, social justice ought to be at the very centre of the discipline: whether that means securely employed scholars ‘sticking their necks out’ for their precariously employed colleagues, university employees standing in solidarity with outsourced workers who are conveniently elided from university stats on pay conditions, or supporting students victimised by the Hostile Environment. In this way, we can begin, even if we are still within the master’s house of the academy, to think beyond its neo-classical colonnades, by supporting the struggles of all staff and students within our institutions, to strive for fair conditions for working and learning, and to make it clear that a university is not its buildings, its REF and TEF scores and rankings, but its people. Many early careers researchers will be face with the decision to withdraw from Classics in HE, exhausted and frustrated by short-term contracts and other forms of precarious labour, the uncertainty of the future of HE in the wake of COVID-19, compounded by academia’s shameful record on race equality, exacerbated in a time of pandemic.⁶ An inclusive Classics has to go beyond syllabi and outreach to give attention to the pre-existing disparities exacerbated by poor labour conditions and underpinned by the inequalities that plague wider society. Scholars such as Raewyn Connell (2019) and ia paperson (2017) challenge us to think creatively and draw on lessons from radical, counterhegemonic pedagogical experiments, drawing on perspectives from the Global South and which often entails actively working against the academy as an institution. Thus, in my opinion, it is only by reimagining the whole role of the discipline and academia within society as a whole, that might we move towards a genuinely more inclusive Classics.

When I started putting thoughts together for a contribution to this workshop, the world looked very different. Libraries and universities were still open, George Floyd was still alive, and there were reasons to be hopeful about a lot of things. And while there is perhaps still a lot to be hopeful about, the trajectory of society has certainly taken a sudden turn – if too early to say for the worst, then certainly for something. As a result, my contribution was not the contribution that I intended to make when I submitted a proposal a few long months ago. I wanted to talk about scholarship that I find exciting and that I think unpick some of the uglier complicities of the discipline of Classics. I wanted to talk about my thoughts on rethinking the materials of classical antiquity through inclusive pedagogical practises. I wanted to celebrate the work done in Classics departments across the world to open up the study of antiquity and to reimagine the future of the discipline.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/10/if-universities-struggle-financially-bame-academics-will-lose-their-jobs-first>; <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/feb/27/fewer-than-1-of-uk-university-professors-are-black-figures-show>

Now, the future seems to be an increasingly foggy prospect. While the UK government seems to be intent on re-opening the economy, schools begin to welcome pupils again, and the sudden impermeability of intra-European borders is dissolving, what the future of the academy holds, let alone that of Classics, is increasingly thrown into doubt, at least in my eyes. I ended up sending in a much more pessimistic piece than I wanted to. Even the sparks of optimism at the outset of the Covid-19 crisis in the UK fizzled out quickly. The mutual aid groups that sprung up everywhere dissolved into the monotony of lockdown, the groundswell of support for a publicly funded healthcare system was subsumed into a farcical pantomime of jingoism, and neighbourly vigilance gave way to over-zealous policing. In short, tools crafted by communities were rapidly reshaped to be tools built to extend and reinforce the master's house.

This movement towards being subsumed into hegemonic structures and practices is mirrored in the academy and academic disciplines, a problem that I try and fail to address in my contribution. Writing from a particular context and standpoint, my piece has a number of very clear omissions. For example, I prioritise 'race' as a structure of oppression and exclusion, and pay little attention to other ways in which people are excluded from academic disciplines. I hold reception studies and intellectual histories up as a panacea for disciplinary identity crises. I struggle to disentangle the task of working towards an inclusive discipline from the obstacles presented by institutional structures. I was energised and challenged by contributions to the workshop that highlighted some of the gaps in my own understanding of what makes an inclusive Classics.

So, in my contribution, I considered three overarching problems: how do we deal with the legacy of classical antiquity; how do we teach it; and how do we make it more accessible? These problems are underpinned by a larger problem: how do we do all this while genuinely working against the structures of exclusion which, paradoxically, give life to the discipline of Classics? Is an inclusive discipline an oxymoron?

I kept returning to the same problem, namely that articulated most succinctly and elegantly by Audre Lorde in 1979: 'the masters tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporally to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.' In short, by limiting what we do to the formal structures and apparatuses of the academy, we have to make a number of compromises. It was in the spirit of such compromise that I suggested that the three main questions considered by my piece might be answered by three approaches.

As a caveat, I represent these approaches as simple answers to complex questions, which is by no means the case in reality. I mean to gesture towards possibilities, suggestions, and provocation for discussion. I suggest that research which probes the roots and tests the boundaries of the discipline can only make it more intellectually inclusive, and that teaching that seeks to dissolve classroom hierarchies can work towards a wider and more even level of participation. Here, I draw on pedagogical theories inspired by

Paulo Freire. For example, approaching texts through a problem-based framework for learning, and teaching practices underpinned by collaboration between teachers and students. I also point to the example of networks which have some roots in institutions but reach out beyond them as possible ways to work against the exclusivity of institutions.

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