

Why I Teach About Race and Ethnicity in the Classical World

In June 2017, Professor Sarah Bond published an article in [Hyperallergic](#) on [polychromy](#), the multicolored paint on ancient marble sculpture, and how its erasure has connections to white supremacy. The topic might not strike the professional scholar of the ancient world as particularly controversial or problematic; the response will (unfortunately) also not surprise scholars who have ventured recently into the public realm to discuss the problem of Classics and racism. In addition to misrepresentations in conservative media outlets, her essay generated over a hundred comments—most of them dismissive, some hostile—and a slew of threatening emails, tweets, even tumblr pages.

If one peruses the comments on the article itself, some interesting themes emerge that may explain why articles like Bond's receive such vitriolic backlash, even from people who clearly have studied the ancient world at university and do not consider their own responses as contributing to white supremacy. It can also help to explain why I teach race and ethnicity in the Classical world and why I hope more students get a chance to study it.

Bond's article aimed to inform the broader public on aspects of Classical antiquity that relate to race and ethnicity (to use contemporary language). Similar was Professor Mary Beard's [response](#) to anger at the representation of some Romans with dark skin in a BBC educational cartoon on Roman Britain, for which she received copious amounts of abuse. Articles like these frequently seem to receive hostile responses, mostly attempts to dismiss the validity of studying race/ethnicity in antiquity at all. Why? In some cases, readers assert that the ancient Greeks and Romans had no concepts like our modern race ([which is itself a social construct—genetic testing only confirms the categories we are looking for](#)) and/or ethnicity. At other times, they protest that any talk of 19th century racism in the field of Classics is intended to arouse “white guilt” in those who enjoy Classics today. It seems to be the case that people are more comfortable with antiquity being racist (and sexist and classist) than they are with it being diverse.

In Bond's case, commenters accused her both of pushing a “liberal” political agenda by [inserting race into everything](#) and of accusing white people of being racist because she pointed out the reality that the whiteness of marble sculptures was emphasized and enhanced in the 18th and 19th centuries as part of a fetishization of racial whiteness and the equation of it with beauty. Her points were further misrepresented in conservative media as [“Professor says White Statues are Racist.”](#)

Reading the responses to Bond and other similar articles has made me think about the importance of teaching ancient Greek and Roman ideas about race and ethnicity. Something has gone wrong in the classroom when even those people who have taken courses on the Classical world view discussions of race and ethnicity in Classics as part of a politicized liberal agenda rather than as scholarship designed to understand the ancient world and the history of its study. Some may even argue that we should only teach and discuss with the general public aspects of

the ancient world that will not offend anyone. But when that goal of inoffensive appeal runs against the goal of scholarly honesty, we do our field no favors.

Further, when members of our profession are attacked for doing their job and by sharing what is well-known fact in professional circles with the public, the responsibility rests with us all to look at how and what we teach—especially when it contributes to the continued use of the [classical past to support modern white supremacy](#), and especially when that support is often passive or dressed up in the guise of [well-meaning people who enjoy learning about ancient Greece and Rome](#).

Discussions of race and ethnicity in the Classical world should not be controversial, at least not among classicists. The topic has been an important area of scholarship almost since the field came into being and it has almost always been political: from the promotion of the so-called [Dorian invasion](#), to [theories that race mixing led to the fall of Rome](#), to the [Black Athena debates](#) of the 1980s and '90s, to continued use of [autochthony as a rallying cry](#). When Dr. Donna Zuckerberg wrote an article last year in this journal [encouraging us to incorporate more of it into our research and teaching](#), I was surprised at how few people within the field came to her defense when she was [maligned and received various types of threats](#) for asking us to do something that we should already be doing as responsible scholars, particularly in light of the way classicists had intentionally reinforced theories of white superiority using ancient texts in the past.

Even the most casual reader of ancient texts will find discussion of what we today call race and ethnicity in a wide range of ancient authors—from Homer and Hesiod to Herodotus and Hippocrates, from Aeschylus to Ctesias, Caesar, Tacitus, Plutarch, Pliny, Livy, Sallust, Horace, Ovid and more. Further, any trip to a museum yields ample images that further display the Greek and Roman interest in and engagement with human diversity. And yet, we still hear the refrain that wanting to study or teach race and ethnicity is a part of a “social justice” political agenda because the ancient Greeks and Romans had no words that are exactly equivalent to our modern concepts of race or ethnicity—which is not, in fact, true.

Greeks and Romans seem to have been obsessed with what we would term race or ethnicity: they had a whole series of words (*ethnos*, *genos*, *phyllos*, *gens*, *natio*, etc.) from which our modern terms for group organization based on descent and shared culture derive, and all of them contain elements of what we call race and ethnicity. Interestingly, one of the things that our ancient sources seem to make clear is that frequently they did not separate biological descent from cultural or “national” identity. Nor should we use ethnicity as a “safe” way to avoid talking about

race in antiquity as some people try to do in the modern world. The two concepts are hardly distinctive for the ancients.

The two concepts, race and ethnicity, are both aspects of group identity for Greeks and Romans. The most famous statement that demonstrates this connection comes from [Herodotus](#), who has his Athenians tell the Spartans that they will never betray their fellow Greeks because they share blood (*homaimos* is a word often used for siblings), language, religious practices, and a way of life (*ethos*). This passage lists what we consider today the core elements of race and ethnicity, and this is often where my courses start. The Greeks and Romans had multiple words that encompassed the idea of identity based on descent groups, geographic origin, and shared cultural practices (like language). They absolutely had concepts akin to modern race/ethnicity, even if they weren't the specific type of cultural and "[scientific](#)" categories we have today. And, what's more, they seemed to consider them subjective concepts, not objective. Teaching these complexities can have an impact in our classrooms.

I have been teaching race and ethnicity in the Classical world for almost a decade now, and I do so in several ways. I include discussions of relevant texts and material artifacts in my Greek and Roman history classes and try to offer students Greek and Latin courses on some of the many texts that engage with the issues of identity, such as Herodotus' *Histories*, Euripides' *Medea*, Sallust's *Jugurthan War*, and Tacitus' *Germania* ([a most dangerous book!](#)).

I also regularly teach the topic as a stand-alone course called "[Ancient Identities](#)" that has proven popular with students and colleagues alike. The course focuses on the various ways that ancient Greeks and Romans talked about, represented, and attempted to understand and categorize human diversity—what we call race and ethnicity. The modern reception of these ancient ideas constitutes the final three weeks of the course.

Antiquity provides us with quite a few approaches to how to think about the subject. The Greeks and Romans used mythical genealogies and foundation stories, considered the impact of descent and selective breeding (a type of eugenics), and how customs and languages bind peoples together. Perhaps the most prevalent theory for what made groups of peoples different was what we call environmental determinism. Each of these approaches were trying to explain both physical differences and perceived differences in the inherent character of peoples—an important component of racism today—differences supposedly shaped by birth, environment, and culture.

For example, Hippocrates, the Greek physician, tells us that Scythians (a name that designated nearly all northern European peoples in the 5th century BCE) are red, flabby, unhealthy, and filled with water because they live in a cold, wet climate ([Hipp. Aer. 15](#)). Vitruvius, the Roman architect, explains that people from hot, dry climates, such as the Ethiopians, are long-lived and healthy, dark skinned (because of sunburn), intelligent, and cowardly because they don't have a lot of blood to spare—the heat dries it up. Germans, on the other hand, had red hair and were pale because of cold burn, dull-witted, and courageous—wet climate means more blood, which means they didn't worry about losing it in a fight (*Vit. de Arch.* [6.1](#)). Herodotus ends his history with a story that tells us that harsh lands breed hard people and bountiful lands breed soft ones ([Her. Hist. 9.122.2–3](#)).

Environmental determinism is [very widespread in our ancient sources](#) as the ancients often considered geography and climate, coupled with descent, as the primary factors in shaping physical and cultural difference—the above examples are only three. Of course, it wasn't the only way the ancient Greeks and Romans understood human diversity—politics (a type of cultural environment) could impact people as well. Having a single king instead of an oligarchy or democracy could make a people “slavish” instead of “free,” as Herodotus, Hippocrates, Livy, and many others tell us.

The Athenians elevated the issue of heritability and gene pool above other factors in trying to preserve their indigenous, environmentally determined character through [restrictive laws on immigration and citizen purity](#). But the Athenians were unusual in classical antiquity in their privileging of indigenous status. Other peoples—such as the Thebans, Argives, and Romans—inscribed their histories with narratives of immigration, ethnic/racial blending, and inclusion—an interesting notion if physical environment really was thought to determine identity.

The Romans, of course, are probably the most famous “mixed” people from antiquity and told in their histories and arts that they originated from immigrants and refugees. [Aeneas migrated with the last of the Trojans](#) (Phoenicians) to Italy from Troy, and he had a child by a native Italian woman who founded another city, Alba Longa, from which eventually came Romulus and Remus. Romulus founded Rome by killing his brother and then inviting in any bandit or criminal who wanted to join him. They then [kidnapped the neighboring Sabine women](#) and married them once they realized a city couldn't perpetuate itself without women. They also had Etruscan kings, and many of the cities they incorporated in southern Italy were Greek colonies. These myths mirrored Roman reality.

The Roman practice of incorporating non-Roman peoples as citizens—both the descendants of freed slaves and people of other ethnic groups in the provinces—over the course of most of their history also reflects a tradition of not basing Roman identity on a concept of racial or ethnic purity. You could be a Roman and be Greek, Syrian, Judean, Gallic, German, Spanish, Numidian, Nubian, Ethiopian, Egyptian, and more. While Romans wrote a lot about non-Roman peoples, what constituted a Roman *per se* was never defined as a single ethnic group—foreigners could become “Roman.” Places could “become” Roman, too, through engineered environments. This doesn't mean Romans did not have prejudices, it just means those prejudices didn't impact whether one was or was not or could become a Roman.

Someone will surely object, “You teach this class because you want to force modern ideas on the ancient past, because you hate the field of Classics, and want to discourage people from studying it!” (I received such comments in email after my [last *Eidolon* article](#)). That is not, in fact, my agenda. I want just the opposite. I want more students to see that the Classical world is not owned by one group of people and embrace it as interesting and useful. A narrative of a monoethnic and monochromatic Classical world is demonstrably false and, frankly, boring.

I love Classics, in part, because of its endless variety, because it both offers us a mirror for reflecting upon our own racism and because it offers us alternatives for how to think about human difference. We just need to be honest when we teach it about both the good and the bad and be critical of our sources as well as in awe of them. [The debate at Reed college over the place of the Classics in their curriculum](#) should remind us and make us conscientious of the consequences of yoking the ancient Greeks and Romans to the modern construct of “western civilization” and “whiteness.” The Classical texts and peoples themselves are not inherently “Western” or “white,” but there is a reason some people think so and we need to do better at teaching Classical antiquity in all its diversity and showing that we understand and own its racist uses—past and present.

[The Reed situation](#) raises the stakes, I think, of asking why do readers attack, threaten, and/or denigrate scholars who try to share this broader evidence and reality of the diversity of classical antiquity with the general public? Does it give fodder to those who take as an attack on white people any suggestion that the Classical past was not as “white” as modern enthusiasts of classics seem to be? Or when we acknowledge and discuss openly how [Classics has been complicit in maintaining a narrative of white superiority historically in Europe and America](#)? Or when we remind people that the category “white” is a modern invention and has itself been altered over the course of the [last century to incorporate Mediterranean peoples](#) when they had not been considered “white” before?

The reaction comes in part because the ancient world as it existed and as scholars recover it is not the world that gets represented in popular culture, in neo-Nazi and white supremacist bubbles, and, frequently, in high school and even college classrooms ([our medievalist colleagues share this problem](#)). And, clearly, there are many who would still like to see Classics remain fodder for [justifying theories of modern Euro-American superiority](#). Otherwise, they would not get their knickers in a twist over polychromy and other evidence—visual and literary—that shows that the ancient world was filled with racial/ethnic diversity and that the ancients didn’t typically think that was a bad thing.

Pointing out the reality of where the ancient world was not racist, but pluralist and diverse [seems to offend people even more](#) than pointing out where it was racist. That resistance should be evidence enough of racism in the study of the Classical world and is reason enough for why we need to keep teaching and writing about race and ethnicity in antiquity. It doesn't make someone who enjoys the Classics today—or who thinks the sculptures are beautiful when white—racist to admit to the sins of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is a different story, however, when we moderns become overly invested in a belief that ancient Greeks and Romans are the foundation of a “white,” “western” (Christian) civilization that belongs somehow to white people and white people alone. Denying the multiethnic nature of the Classical past and trying to keep it “whites only” is racist.

The ancients were fascinated with understanding human variation, what we call race and ethnicity; the sources are clear on this. By teaching the ancient evidence on it and by getting students to tackle the questions that the Classical sources raise, we can make our field more open and inclusive and also engage the public in a dialogue about the interconnectedness of ancient and modern racism, while also introducing alternative models from the multiethnic ancient Mediterranean for thinking about race today. Whether as a stand-alone class or integrated into history, literature, or language classes, engaging with issues of race and ethnicity across our Classics curricula is remarkably easy and meaningful.

The problem of white supremacy is not going away, and Classics has found itself (once again) in the fulcrum. So, if a side consequence of teaching about human diversity in the ancient world is the disruption of contemporary white supremacists in their attempts to continue a narrative of superiority based on their misappropriation of the Classical past, I'll take it.

Rebecca Futo Kennedy is a classicist and ancient historian who enjoys a nice glass of wine and a hammock whenever possible. She writes and teaches about law, politics, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and women in ancient Greece and Rome. She also has a blog, [Classics at the Intersections](#), which includes a continually expanding bibliography of scholarship on race and ethnicity in the classical world.

Eidolon is a publication of Palimpsest Media LLC.