

FEATURE

He Wants to Save Classics From Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?

Dan-el Padilla Peralta thinks classicists should knock ancient Greece and Rome off their pedestal — even if that means destroying their discipline.

By Rachel Poser

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In the world of classics, the exchange between Dan-el Padilla Peralta and Mary Frances Williams has become known simply as “the incident.” Their back-and-forth took place at a Society of Classical Studies conference in January 2019 — the sort of academic gathering at which nothing tends to happen that would seem controversial or even interesting to those outside the discipline. But that year, the conference featured a panel on “The Future of Classics,” which, the participants agreed, was far from secure. On top of the problems facing the humanities as a whole — vanishing class sizes caused by disinvestment, declining prominence and student debt — classics was also experiencing a crisis of identity. Long revered as the foundation of “Western civilization,” the field was trying to shed its self-imposed reputation as an elitist subject overwhelmingly taught and studied by white men. Recently the effort had gained a new sense of urgency: Classics had been embraced by the far right, whose members held up the ancient Greeks and Romans as the originators of so-called white culture. Marchers in Charlottesville, Va., carried flags bearing a symbol of the Roman state; online reactionaries adopted classical pseudonyms; the white-supremacist website Stormfront displayed an image of the Parthenon alongside the tagline “Every month is white history month.”

Padilla, a leading historian of Rome who teaches at Princeton and was born in the Dominican Republic, was one of the panelists that day. For several years, he has been speaking openly about the harm caused by practitioners of classics in the two millennia since antiquity: the classical justifications of slavery, race science, colonialism, Nazism and other 20th-century fascisms. Classics was a discipline around which the modern Western university grew, and Padilla believes that it has sown racism through the entirety of higher education. Last summer, after Princeton decided to remove Woodrow Wilson’s name from its School of Public and International Affairs, Padilla was a co-author of an open letter that pushed the university to do more. “We call upon the university to amplify its commitment to Black people,” it read, “and to become, for the first time in its history, an anti-racist institution.” Surveying the damage done by people who lay claim to the classical tradition, Padilla argues, one can only conclude that classics has been instrumental to the invention of “whiteness” and its continued domination.

In recent years, like-minded classicists have come together to dispel harmful myths about antiquity. On social media and in journal articles and blog posts, they have clarified that contrary to right-wing propaganda, the Greeks and Romans did not consider themselves “white,” and their marble sculptures, whose pale flesh has been fetishized since the 18th century, would often have been painted in antiquity. They have noted that in fifth-century-B.C. Athens, which has been celebrated as the birthplace of democracy, participation in politics was restricted to male citizens; thousands of enslaved people worked and died in silver mines south of the city, and custom dictated that upper-class women could not leave the house unless they were veiled and accompanied by a male relative. They have shown that the concept of Western civilization emerged as a euphemism for “white civilization” in the writing of men like Lothrop Stoddard, a Klansman and eugenicist. Some classicists have come around to the idea that their discipline forms part of the scaffold of white supremacy — a traumatic process one described to me as “reverse red-pilling” — but they are also starting to see an opportunity in their position. Because classics played a role in constructing whiteness, they believed, perhaps the field also had a role to play in its dismantling.

On the morning of the panel, Padilla stood out among his colleagues, as he always did. He sat in a crisp white shirt at the front of a large conference hall at a San Diego Marriott, where most of the attendees wore muted shades of gray. Over the course of 10 minutes, Padilla laid out an indictment of his field. “If one were intentionally to design a discipline whose institutional organs and gatekeeping protocols were explicitly aimed at disavowing the legitimate status of scholars of color,” he said, “one could not do better than what classics has done.” Padilla’s vision of classics’ complicity in systemic injustice is uncompromising, even

by the standards of some of his allies. He has condemned the field as “equal parts vampire and cannibal” — a dangerous force that has been used to murder, enslave and subjugate. “He’s on record as saying that he’s not sure the discipline deserves a future,” Denis Feeney, a Latinist at Princeton, told me. Padilla believes that classics is so entangled with white supremacy as to be inseparable from it. “Far from being extrinsic to the study of Greco-Roman antiquity,” he has written, “the production of whiteness turns on closer examination to reside in the very marrows of classics.”

When Padilla ended his talk, the audience was invited to ask questions. Williams, an independent scholar from California, was one of the first to speak. She rose from her seat in the front row and adjusted a standing microphone that had been placed in the center of the room. “I’ll probably offend all of you,” she began. Rather than kowtowing to criticism, Williams said, “maybe we should start defending our discipline.” She protested that it was imperative to stand up for the classics as the political, literary and philosophical foundation of European and American culture: “It’s Western civilization. It matters because it’s the West.” Hadn’t classics given us the concepts of liberty, equality and democracy?

One panelist tried to interject, but Williams pressed on, her voice becoming harsh and staccato as the tide in the room moved against her. “I believe in merit. I don’t look at the color of the author.” She pointed a finger in Padilla’s direction. “You may have got your job because you’re Black,” Williams said, “but I would prefer to think you got your job because of merit.”

Discordant sounds went up from the crowd. Several people stood up from their seats and hovered around Williams at the microphone, seemingly unsure of whether or how to intervene. Padilla was smiling; it was the grimace of someone who, as he told me later, had been expecting something like this all along. At last, Williams ceded the microphone, and Padilla was able to speak. “Here’s what I have to say about the vision of classics that you outlined,” he said. “I want nothing to do with it. I hope the field dies that you’ve outlined, and that it dies as swiftly as possible.”

When Padilla was a child, his parents proudly referred to Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, as the “Athens of the New World” — a center of culture and learning. That idea had been fostered by Rafael Trujillo, the dictator who ruled the country from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. Like other 20th-century fascists, Trujillo saw himself, and his people, as the inheritors of a grand European tradition that originated in Greece and Rome. In a 1932 speech, he praised ancient Greece as the “mistress of beauty, rendered eternal in the impeccable whiteness of its marbles.” Trujillo’s veneration of whiteness was central to his message. By invoking the classical legacy, he could portray the residents of neighboring Haiti as darker and inferior, a campaign that reached its murderous peak in 1937 with the Parsley Massacre, or *El Corte* (“the Cutting”) in Spanish, in which Dominican troops killed as many as 30,000 Haitians and Black Dominicans, according to some estimates.

Padilla’s family didn’t talk much about their lives under the dictatorship, but he knew that his mother’s father had been beaten after arguing with some drunken Trujillistas. That grandfather, along with the rest of his mother’s relatives, were fishermen and sailors in Puerto Plata, a city on the coast; they lived in what Padilla describes as “immiserating poverty” but benefited from a degree of privilege in Dominican society because of their lighter skin. His father’s people, on the other hand, often joked that they were “black as night.” They had lived for generations in Pimentel, a city near the mountainous northeast where enslaved Africans had set up Maroon communities in the 1600s and 1700s, counting on the difficult terrain to give them a measure of safety. Like their counterparts in the United States, slavers in the Dominican Republic sometimes bestowed classical names on their charges as a mark of their civilizing mission, so the legacy of slavery — and its entanglement with classics — remains legible in the names of many Dominicans today. “Why are there Dominicans named Temístocles?” Padilla used to wonder as a kid. “Why is Manny Ramirez’s middle name Aristides?” Trujillo’s own middle name was Leónidas, after the Spartan king who martyred himself with 300 of his soldiers at Thermopylae, and who has become an icon of the far right. But in his early life, Padilla was aware of none of this. He only knew that he was Black like his father.

When Padilla was 4, he and his parents flew to the United States so that his mother, María Elena, could receive care for pregnancy complications at a New York City hospital. But after his brother, Yando, was born, the family decided to stay; they moved into an apartment in the Bronx and quietly tried to normalize their immigration status, spending their savings in the process. Without papers, it was hard to find steady work. Some time later, Padilla’s father returned to the Dominican Republic; he had been an accountant in Santo Domingo, and he was weary of poverty in the United States, where he had been driving a cab and selling fruit in the summers. That left María Elena with the two boys in New York. Because Yando was a U.S. citizen, she received \$120 in food stamps and \$85 in cash each month, but it was barely enough to feed one child, let alone a family of three. Over the next few months, María Elena and her sons moved between apartments in Manhattan, the Bronx and Queens, packing up and finding a new place each time they couldn’t make rent. For about three weeks, the landlord of a building in Queens let them stay in the basement as a favor, but when a sewage pipe burst over them as they were sleeping, María Elena found her way to a homeless shelter in Chinatown.

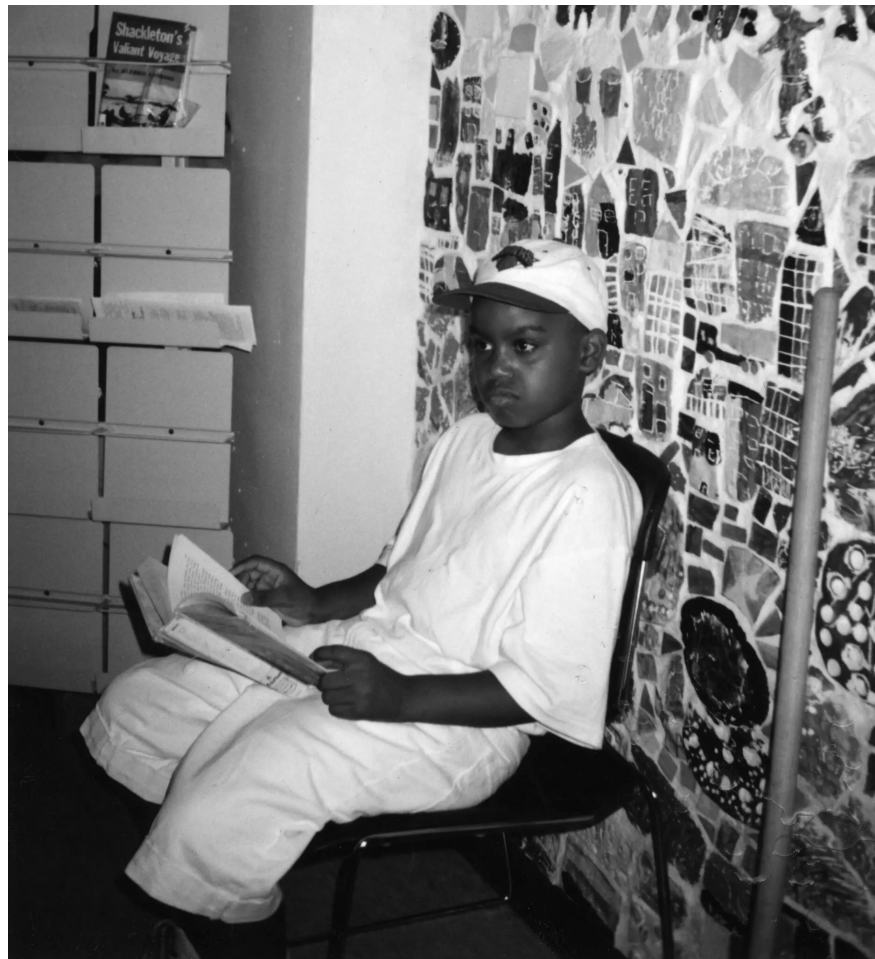
At the shelter, “the food tasted nasty,” and “pools of urine” marred the bathroom floor, Padilla wrote in his 2015 memoir, “Undocumented.” His one place of respite was the tiny library on the shelter’s top floor. Since leaving the Dominican Republic, Padilla had grown curious about Dominican history, but he couldn’t find any books about the Caribbean on the library’s shelves. What he did find was a slim blue-and-white textbook titled “How People Lived in Ancient Greece and Rome.” “Western civilization was formed from the union of early Greek wisdom and the highly organized legal minds of early Rome,” the book began. “The Greek belief in a person’s ability to use his powers of reason, coupled with Roman faith in military strength, produced a result that has come to us as a legacy, or gift from the past.” Thirty years later, Padilla can still recite those opening lines. “How many times have I taken an ax to this over the last decade of my career?” he said to me. “But at the moment of the initial encounter, there was something energizing about it.” Padilla took the textbook back to the room he shared with his mother and brother and never returned it to the library.

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One day in the summer of 1994, a photographer named Jeff Cowen, who was teaching art at a shelter in Bushwick, where María Elena and the boys had been transferred, noticed 9-year-old Padilla tucked away by himself, reading a biography of Napoleon Bonaparte. “The kids were running around like crazy on their after-lunch sugar high, and there was a boy sitting in the corner with this enormous tome,” Cowen told me. “He stood up and shook my hand like a little gentleman, speaking like he’s some kind of Ivy League professor.” Cowen was taken aback. “I was really struggling at the time. I was living in an illegal building without a toilet, so I wasn’t really looking to be a do-gooder,” he said. “But within five minutes, it was obvious that this kid deserved the best education he could get. It was a responsibility.”



Dan-el Padilla Peralta in 1994 at the Bushwick shelter where he lived with his mother and younger brother. Jeff Cowen

Cowen became a mentor to Padilla, and then his godfather. He visited the shelter with books and brain teasers, took Padilla and Yando roller-skating in Central Park and eventually helped Padilla apply to Collegiate, one of New York City's elite prep schools, where he was admitted with a full scholarship. María Elena, elated, photocopied his acceptance letter and passed it around to her friends at church. At Collegiate, Padilla began taking Latin and Greek and found himself overwhelmed by the emotive power of classical texts; he was captivated by the sting of Greek philosophy, the heat and action of epic. Padilla told none of his new friends that he was undocumented. "There were some conversations I simply wasn't ready to have," he has said in an interview. When his classmates joked about immigrants, Padilla sometimes thought of a poem he had read by the Greek lyricist Archilochus, about a soldier who throws his shield in a bush and flees the battlefield. "At least I got myself safely out," the soldier says. "Why should I care for that shield? Let it go. Some other time I'll find another no worse." *Don't expose yourself*, he thought. There would be other battles.

Years passed before Padilla started to question the way the textbook had presented the classical world to him. He was accepted on a full scholarship to Princeton, where he was often the only Black person in his Latin and Greek courses. "The hardest thing for me as I was making my way into the discipline as a college student was appreciating how lonely I might be," Padilla told me. In his sophomore year, when it came time to select a major, the most forceful resistance to his choice came from his close friends, many of whom were also immigrants or the children of immigrants. They asked Padilla questions he felt unprepared to answer. *What are you doing with this blanquito stuff? How is this going to help us?* Padilla argued that he and others shouldn't shun certain pursuits just because the world said they weren't for Black and brown people. There was a special joy and vindication in upending their expectations, but he found he wasn't completely satisfied by his own arguments. The question of classics' utility was not a trivial one. How could he take his education in Latin and Greek and make it into something liberatory? "That became the most urgent question that guided me through my undergraduate years and beyond," Padilla said.

After graduating as Princeton's 2006 salutatorian, Padilla earned a master's degree from Oxford and a doctorate from Stanford. By then, more scholars than ever were seeking to understand not only the elite men who had written the surviving works of Greek and Latin literature, but also the ancient people whose voices were mostly silent in the written record: women, the lower

classes, enslaved people and immigrants. Courses on gender and race in antiquity were becoming common and proving popular with students, but it wasn't yet clear whether their imprint on the discipline would last. "There are some in the field," Ian Morris, an adviser of Padilla's at Stanford, told me, "who say: 'Yes, we agree with your critique. Now let us go back to doing exactly what we've been doing.'" Reformers had learned from the old debates around "Black Athena" — Martin Bernal's trilogy positing African and Semitic influence on ancient Greek culture — just how resistant some of their colleagues were to acknowledging the field's role in whitewashing antiquity. "Classicists generally identify as liberal," Joel Christensen, a professor of Greek literature at Brandeis University, told me. "But we are able to do that because most of the time we're not in spaces or with people who push us about our liberalism and what that means."

Thinking of his family's own history, Padilla became interested in Roman slavery. Decades of research had focused on the ability of enslaved people to transcend their status through manumission, celebrating the fact that the buying and granting of freedom was much more common in Rome than in other slaveholding societies. But there were many who stood no chance of being freed, particularly those who worked in the fields or the mines, far from centers of power. "We have so many testimonies for how profoundly degrading enslavement was," Padilla told me. Enslaved people in ancient Rome could be tortured and crucified; forced into marriage; chained together in work gangs; made to fight gladiators or wild animals; and displayed naked in marketplaces with signs around their necks advertising their age, character and health to prospective buyers. Owners could tattoo their foreheads so they could be recognized and captured if they tried to flee. Temple excavations have uncovered clay dedications from escapees, praying for the gods to remove the disfiguring marks from their faces. Archaeologists have also found metal collars riveted around the necks of skeletons in burials of enslaved people, among them an iron ring with a bronze tag preserved in the Museo Nazionale in Rome that reads: "I have run away; hold me. When you have brought me back to my master Zoninus, you will receive a gold coin."

By 2015, when Padilla arrived at the Columbia Society of Fellows as a postdoctoral researcher, classicists were no longer apologists for ancient slavery, but many doubted that the inner worlds of enslaved people were recoverable, because no firsthand account of slavery had survived the centuries. That answer did not satisfy Padilla. He had begun to study the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which had shaped his mother's mystical brand of Catholicism. María Elena moved through a world that was haunted by spirits, numinous presences who could give comfort and advice or demand sacrifice and appeasement. For a while, when Padilla was in high school, his mother invited a santero and his family to live with them at their Section 8 apartment in Harlem, where the man would conjure spirits that seethed at Padilla for his bad behavior. Padilla realized that his mother's conception of the dead reminded him of the Romans', which gave him an idea. In 2017, he published a paper in the journal *Classical Antiquity* that compared evidence from antiquity and the Black Atlantic to draw a more coherent picture of the religious life of the Roman enslaved. "It will not do merely to adopt a pose of 'righteous indignation' at the distortions and gaps in the archive," he wrote. "There are tools available for the effective recovery of the religious experiences of the enslaved, provided we work with these tools carefully and honestly."

Padilla began to feel that he had lost something in devoting himself to the classical tradition. As James Baldwin observed 35 years before, there was a price to the ticket. His earlier work on the Roman senatorial classes, which earned him a reputation as one of the best Roman historians of his generation, no longer moved him in the same way. Padilla sensed that his pursuit of classics had displaced other parts of his identity, just as classics and "Western civilization" had displaced other cultures and forms of knowledge. Recovering them would be essential to dismantling the white-supremacist framework in which both he and classics had become trapped. "I had to actively engage in the decolonization of my mind," he told me. He revisited books by Frantz Fanon, Orlando Patterson and others working in the traditions of Afro-pessimism and psychoanalysis, Caribbean and Black studies. He also gravitated toward contemporary scholars like José Esteban Muñoz, Lorgia García Peña and Saidiya Hartman, who speak of race not as a physical fact but as a ghostly system of power relations that produces certain gestures, moods, emotions and states of being. They helped him think in more sophisticated terms about the workings of power in the ancient world, and in his own life.

Around the time that Padilla began working on the paper, Donald Trump made his first comments on the presidential campaign trail about Mexican "criminals, drug dealers, rapists" coming into the country. Padilla, who spent the previous 20 years dealing with an uncertain immigration status, had just applied for a green card after celebrating his marriage to a social worker named Missy from Sparta, N.J. Now he watched as alt-right figures like Richard Spencer, who had fantasized about creating a "white ethno-state on the North American continent" that would be "a reconstitution of the Roman Empire," rose to national prominence. In response to rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe and the United States, Mary Beard, perhaps the most

famous classicist alive, wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* that the Romans “would have been puzzled by our modern problems with migration and asylum,” because the empire was founded on the “principles of incorporation and of the free movement of people.”

Padilla found himself frustrated by the manner in which scholars were trying to combat Trumpian rhetoric. In November 2015, he wrote an essay for *Eidolon*, an online classics journal, clarifying that in Rome, as in the United States, paeans to multiculturalism coexisted with hatred of foreigners. Defending a client in court, Cicero argued that “denying foreigners access to our city is patently inhumane,” but ancient authors also recount the expulsions of whole “suspect” populations, including a roundup of Jews in 139 B.C., who were not considered “suitable enough to live alongside Romans.” Padilla argues that exposing untruths about antiquity, while important, is not enough: Explaining that an almighty, lily-white Roman Empire never existed will not stop white nationalists from pining for its return. The job of classicists is not to “point out the howlers,” he said on a 2017 panel. “To simply take the position of the teacher, the qualified classicist who knows things and can point to these mistakes, is not sufficient.” Dismantling structures of power that have been shored up by the classical tradition will require more than fact-checking; it will require writing an entirely new story about antiquity, and about who we are today.

To find that story, Padilla is advocating reforms that would “explode the canon” and “overhaul the discipline from nuts to bolts,” including doing away with the label “classics” altogether. Classics was happy to embrace him when he was changing the face of the discipline, but how would the field react when he asked it to change its very being? The way it breathed and moved? “Some students and some colleagues have told me this is either too depressing or it’s sort of menacing in a way,” he said. “My only rejoinder is that I’m not interested in demolition for demolition’s sake. I want to build something.”

One day last February, shortly before the pandemic ended in-person teaching, I visited Padilla at Princeton. Campus was quiet and morose, the silences quivering with early-term nerves. A storm had swept the leaves from the trees and the color from the sky, which was now the milky gray of laundry water, and the air was so heavy with mist that it seemed to be blurring the outlines of the buildings. That afternoon, Padilla was teaching a Roman-history course in one of the oldest lecture halls at the university, a grand, vaulted room with creaking floorboards and mullioned windows. The space was not designed for innovative pedagogy. Each wooden chair was bolted to the floor with a paddle-shaped extension that served as a desk but was barely big enough to hold a notebook, let alone a laptop. “This was definitely back in the day when the students didn’t even take notes,” one student said as she sat down. “Like, ‘My dad’s going to give me a job.’”

Since returning to campus as a professor in 2016, Padilla has been working to make Princeton’s classics department a more welcoming place for students like him — first-generation students and students of color. In 2018, the department secured funding for a predoctoral fellowship to help a student with less exposure to Latin and Greek enter the Ph.D. program. That initiative, and the draw of Padilla as a mentor, has contributed to making Princeton’s graduate cohort one of the most diverse in the country. Pria Jackson, a Black predoctoral fellow who is the daughter of a mortician from New Mexico, told me that before she came to Princeton, she doubted that she could square her interest in classics with her commitment to social justice. “I didn’t think that I could do classics and make a difference in the world the way that I wanted to,” she said. “My perception of what it could do has changed.”

Padilla’s Roman-history course was a standard introductory survey, something the university had been offering for decades, if not centuries, but he was not teaching it in the standard way. He was experimenting with role play in order to prompt his students to imagine what it was like to be subjects of an imperial system. The previous week, he asked them to recreate a debate that took place in the Roman Senate in A.D. 15 about a proposed waterworks project that communities in central Italy feared would change the flow of the Tiber River, destroying animal habitats and flooding old shrines. (Unlike the Senate, the Princeton undergraduates decided to let the project go ahead as planned.) Today’s situation was inspired by the crises of succession that threatened to tear the early empire apart. Out of the 80 students in the lecture, Padilla had assigned four to be young military commanders — claimants vying for the throne — and four to be wealthy Roman senators; the rest were split between the Praetorian Guard and marauding legionaries whose swords could be bought in exchange for money, land and honors. It was designed to help his students “think as capaciously as possible about the many lives, human and nonhuman, that are touched by the shift from republic to empire.”

Padilla stood calmly behind the lectern as students filed into the room, wearing rectangular-framed glasses low on his nose and a maroon sweater over a collared shirt. The stillness of his body only heightened the sense of his mind churning. “He carries a big stick without having to show it off,” Cowen, Padilla’s childhood mentor, told me. “He’s kind of soft on the outside but very hard on the inside.” Padilla speaks in the highly baroque language of the academy — a style that can seem so deliberate as to function as a kind of protective armor. It is the flinty, guarded manner of someone who has learned to code-switch, someone

who has always been aware that it is not only what he says but also how he says it that carries meaning. Perhaps it is for that reason that Padilla seems most at ease while speaking to students, when his phrasing loses some of its formality and his voice takes on the incantatory cadence of poetry. “Silence,” he said once the room had quieted, “my favorite sound.”

Padilla called the claimants up to the front of the room. At first, they stood uncertainly on the dais, like adolescents auditioning for a school play. Then, slowly, they moved into the rows of wooden desks. I watched as one of them, a young man wearing an Army-green football T-shirt that said “Support Our Troops,” propositioned a group of legionaries. “I’ll take land from non-Romans and give it to you, grant you citizenship,” he promised them. As more students left their seats and began negotiating, bids and counterbids reverberated against the stone walls. Not everyone was taking it seriously. At one point, another claimant approached a blue-eyed legionary in a lacrosse sweatshirt to ask what it would take to gain his support. “I just want to defend my right to party,” he responded. “Can I get a statue erected to my mother?” someone else asked. A stocky blond student kept charging to the front of the room and proposing that they simply “kill everybody.” But Padilla seemed energized by the chaos. He moved from group to group, sowing discord. “Why let someone else take over?” he asked one student. If you are a soldier or a peasant who is unhappy with imperial governance, he told another, how do you resist? “What kinds of alliances can you broker?”

Padilla teaching Roman history at Princeton in 2016. Princeton University/Office of Communications/Denise Applewhite

Over the next 40 minutes, there were speeches, votes, broken promises and bloody conflicts. Several people were assassinated. Eventually it seemed as though two factions were coalescing, and a count was called. The young man in the football shirt won the empire by seven votes, and Padilla returned to the lectern. “What I want to be thinking about in the next few weeks,” he told them, “is how we can be telling the story of the early Roman Empire not just through a variety of sources but through a variety of *persons*.” He asked the students to consider the lives behind the identities he had assigned them, and the way those lives had been shaped by the machinery of empire, which, through military conquest, enslavement and trade, creates the conditions for the large-scale movement of human beings.

Once the students had left the room, accompanied by the swish of umbrellas and waterproof synthetics, I asked Padilla why he hadn’t assigned any slave roles. Tracing his fingers along the crown of his head, he told me he had thought about it. It troubled him that he might be “re-enacting a form of silencing” by avoiding enslaved characters, given the fact that slavery was “arguably the most ubiquitous feature of the Roman imperial system.” As a historian, he knew that the assets at the disposal of the four wealthy senators — the 100 million sesterces he had given them to back one claimant over another — would have been made up in large part of the enslaved who worked in their mines and plowed the fields of their country estates. Was it harmful to encourage students to imagine themselves in roles of such comfort, status and influence, when a vast majority of people in the Roman world would never have been in a position to be a senator? But ultimately, he decided that leaving enslaved characters out of the role play was an act of care. “I’m not yet ready to turn to a student and say, ‘You are going to be a slave.’”

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Even before “the incident,” Padilla was a target of right-wing anger because of the blistering language he uses and, many would say, because of the body he inhabits. In the aftermath of his exchange with Williams, which was covered in the conservative media, Padilla received a series of racist emails. “Maybe African studies would suit you better if you can’t hope with the reality of how advanced Europeans were,” one read. “You could figure out why the wheel had never made it sub-Saharan African you meathead. Lucky for you, your black, because you have little else on offer.” Breitbart ran a story accusing Padilla of “killing” classics. “If there was one area of learning guaranteed never to be hijacked by the forces of ignorance, political correctness, identity politics, social justice and dumbing down, you might have thought it would be classics,” it read. “Welcome, barbarians! The gates of Rome are wide open!”

Privately, even some sympathetic classicists worry that Padilla’s approach will only hasten the field’s decline. “I’ve spoken to undergrad majors who say that they feel ashamed to tell their friends they’re studying classics,” Denis Feeney, Padilla’s colleague at Princeton, told me. “I think it’s sad.” He noted that the classical tradition has often been put to radical and disruptive uses. Civil rights movements and marginalized groups across the world have drawn inspiration from ancient texts in their fights for equality, from African-Americans to Irish Republicans to Haitian revolutionaries, who viewed their leader, Toussaint L’Ouverture, as a Black Spartacus. The heroines of Greek tragedy — untamed, righteous, destructive women like Euripides’ Medea — became symbols of patriarchal resistance for feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, and the descriptions of same-sex love in the poetry of Sappho and in the Platonic dialogues gave hope and solace to gay writers like Oscar Wilde.

“I very much admire Dan-el’s work, and like him, I deplore the lack of diversity in the classical profession,” Mary Beard told me via email. But “to ‘condemn’ classical culture would be as simplistic as to offer it unconditional admiration.” She went on: “My line has always been that the duty of the academic is to make things seem more complicated.” In a 2019 talk, Beard argued that “although classics may become politicized, it doesn’t actually have a politics,” meaning that, like the Bible, the classical tradition is a language of authority — a vocabulary that can be used for good or ill by would-be emancipators and oppressors alike. Over the centuries, classical civilization has acted as a model for people of many backgrounds, who turned it into a matrix through which they formed and debated ideas about beauty, ethics, power, nature, selfhood, citizenship and, of course, race. Anthony Grafton, the great Renaissance scholar, put it this way in his preface to “The Classical Tradition”: “An exhaustive exposition of the ways in which the world has defined itself with regard to Greco-Roman antiquity would be nothing less than a comprehensive history of the world.”

How these two old civilizations became central to American intellectual life is a story that begins not in antiquity, and not even in the Renaissance, but in the Enlightenment. Classics as we know it today is a creation of the 18th and 19th centuries. During that period, as European universities emancipated themselves from the control of the church, the study of Greece and Rome gave the Continent its new, secular origin story. Greek and Latin writings emerged as a competitor to the Bible’s moral authority, which lent them a liberatory power. Figures like Diderot and Hume derived some of their ideas on liberty from classical texts, where they found declarations of political and personal freedoms. One of the most influential was Pericles’ funeral oration over the graves of the Athenian war dead in 431 B.C., recorded by Thucydides, in which the statesman praises his “glorious” city for ensuring “equal justice to all.” “Our government does not copy our neighbors,” he says, “but is an example to them. It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few.”

Admiration for the ancients took on a fantastical, unhinged quality, like a strange sort of mania. Men draped themselves in Roman togas to proclaim in public, signed their letters with the names of famous Romans and filled etiquette manuals, sermons and schoolbooks with lessons from the classical past. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, a German antiquarian of the 18th century, assured his countrymen that “the only way for us to become great, or even inimitable if possible, is to imitate the Greeks.” Winckelmann, who is sometimes called the “father of art history,” judged Greek marble sculpture to be the summit of human achievement — unsurpassed by any other society, ancient or modern. He wrote that the “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” of Athenian art reflected the “freedom” of the culture that produced it, an entanglement of artistic and moral value that would influence Hegel’s “Aesthetics” and appear again in the poetry of the Romantics. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” Keats wrote in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

Historians stress that such ideas cannot be separated from the discourses of nationalism, colorism and progress that were taking shape during the modern colonial period, as Europeans came into contact with other peoples and their traditions. “The whiter the body is, the more beautiful it is,” Winkelman wrote. While Renaissance scholars were fascinated by the multiplicity of cultures in the ancient world, Enlightenment thinkers created a hierarchy with Greece and Rome, coded as white, on top, and everything else below. “That exclusion was at the heart of classics as a project,” Paul Kosmin, a professor of ancient history at Harvard, told me. Among those Enlightenment thinkers were many of America’s founding fathers. Aristotle’s belief that some people were “slaves by nature” was welcomed with special zeal in the American South before the Civil War, which sought to defend slavery in the face of abolitionist critique. In “Notes on the State of Virginia,” Thomas Jefferson wrote that despite their condition in life, Rome’s enslaved showed themselves to be the “rarest artists” who “excelled too at science, insomuch as to be usually employed as tutors to their master’s children.” The fact that Africans had not done the same, he argued, proved that the problem was their race.

Jefferson, along with most wealthy young men of his time, studied classics at college, where students often spent half their time reading and translating Greek and Roman texts. “Next to Christianity,” writes Caroline Winterer, a historian at Stanford, “the central intellectual project in America before the late 19th century was classicism.” Of the 2.5 million people living in America in 1776, perhaps only 3,000 had gone to college, but that number included many of the founders. They saw classical civilization as uniquely educative — a “lamp of experience,” in the words of Patrick Henry, that could light the path to a more perfect union. However true it was, subsequent generations would come to believe, as Hannah Arendt wrote in “On Revolution,” that “without the classical example ... none of the men of the Revolution on either side of the Atlantic would have possessed the courage for what then turned out to be unprecedented action.”

While the founding fathers chose to emulate the Roman republic, fearful of the tyranny of the majority, later generations of Americans drew inspiration from Athenian democracy, particularly after the franchise was extended to nearly all white men regardless of property ownership in the early decades of the 1800s. Comparisons between the United States and the Roman Empire became popular as the country emerged as a global power. Even after Latin and Greek were struck from college-entrance exams, the proliferation of courses on “great books” and Western civilization, in which classical texts were read in translation, helped create a coherent national story after the shocks of industrialization and global warfare. The project of much 20th-century art and literature was to forge a more complicated relationship with Greece and Rome, but even as the classics were pulled apart, laughed at and transformed, they continued to form the raw material with which many artists shaped their visions of modernity.

Over the centuries, thinkers as disparate as John Adams and Simone Weil have likened classical antiquity to a mirror. Generations of intellectuals, among them feminist, queer and Black scholars, have seen something of themselves in classical texts, flashes of recognition that held a kind of liberatory promise. Daniel Mendelsohn, a gay classicist and critic, discovered his sexuality at 12 while reading historical fiction about the life of Alexander the Great. “Until that moment,” he wrote in *The New Yorker* in 2013, “I had never seen my secret feelings reflected anywhere.” But the idea of classics as a mirror may be as dangerous as it is seductive. The language that is used to describe the presence of classical antiquity in the world today — the classical tradition, legacy or heritage — contains within it the idea of a special, quasi-genetic relationship. In his lecture “There Is No Such Thing as Western Civilization,” Kwame Anthony Appiah (this magazine’s Ethicist columnist) mockingly describes the belief in such a kinship as the belief in a “golden nugget” of insight — a precious birthright and shimmering sign of greatness — that white Americans and Europeans imagine has been passed down to them from the ancients. That belief has been so deeply held that the philosopher John Stuart Mill could talk about the Battle of Marathon, in which the Greeks defeated the first Persian invasion in 490 B.C., as one of the most important events in “English history.”

To see classics the way Padilla sees it means breaking the mirror; it means condemning the classical legacy as one of the most harmful stories we’ve told ourselves. Padilla is wary of colleagues who cite the radical uses of classics as a way to forestall change; he believes that such examples have been outmatched by the field’s long alliance with the forces of dominance and oppression. Classics and whiteness are the bones and sinew of the same body; they grew strong together, and they may have to die together. Classics deserves to survive only if it can become “a site of contestation” for the communities who have been denigrated by it in the past. This past semester, he co-taught a course, with the Activist Graduate School, called “Rupturing Tradition,” which pairs ancient texts with critical race theory and strategies for organizing. “I think that the politics of the living are what constitute classics as a site for productive inquiry,” he told me. “When folks think of classics, I would want them to think about folks of color.” But if classics fails his test, Padilla and others are ready to give it up. “I would get rid of classics altogether,” Walter Scheidel, another of Padilla’s former advisers at Stanford, told me. “I don’t think it should exist as an academic field.”

One way to get rid of classics would be to dissolve its faculties and reassign their members to history, archaeology and language departments. But many classicists are advocating softer approaches to reforming the discipline, placing the emphasis on expanding its borders. Schools including Howard and Emory have integrated classics with Ancient Mediterranean studies, turning to look across the sea at Egypt, Anatolia, the Levant and North Africa. The change is a declaration of purpose: to leave behind the hierarchies of the Enlightenment and to move back toward the Renaissance model of the ancient world as a place of diversity and mixture. “There’s a more interesting story to be told about the history of what we call the West, the history of humanity, without valorizing particular cultures in it,” said Josephine Quinn, a professor of ancient history at Oxford. “It seems to me the really crucial mover in history is always the relationship between people, between cultures.” Ian Morris put it more bluntly. “Classics is a Euro-American foundation myth,” Morris said to me. “Do we really want that sort of thing?”

For many, inside the academy and out, the answer to that question is yes. Denis Feeney, Padilla’s colleague at Princeton, believes that society would “lose a great deal” if classics was abandoned. Feeney is 65, and after he retires this year, he says, his first desire is to sit down with Homer again. “In some moods, I feel that this is just a moment of despair, and people are trying to find significance even if it only comes from self-accusation,” he told me. “I’m not sure that there is a discipline that is exempt from the fact that it is part of the history of this country. How distinctly wicked is classics? I don’t know that it is.” Amy Richlin, a feminist scholar at the University of California, Los Angeles, who helped lead the turn toward the study of women in the Roman world, laughed when I mentioned the idea of breaking up classics departments in the Ivy League. “Good luck getting rid of them,” she said. “These departments have endowments, and they’re not going to voluntarily dissolve themselves.” But when I pressed her on whether it was desirable, if not achievable, she became contemplative. Some in the discipline, particularly graduate students and untenured faculty members, worry that administrators at small colleges and public universities will simply use the changes as an excuse to cut programs. “One of the dubious successes of my generation is that it did break the canon,” Richlin told me. “I don’t think we could believe at the time that we would be putting ourselves out of business, but we did.” She added: “If they blew up the classics departments, that would really be the end.”

Padilla has said that he “cringes” when he remembers his youthful desire to be transformed by the classical tradition. Today he describes his discovery of the textbook at the Chinatown shelter as a sinister encounter, as though the book had been lying in wait for him. He compares the experience to a scene in one of Frederick Douglass’s autobiographies, when Mr. Auld, Douglass’s owner in Baltimore, chastises his wife for helping Douglass learn to read: “‘Now,’ said he, ‘if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave.’” In that moment, Douglass says he understood that literacy was what separated white men from Black — “a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things.” “I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing,” Douglass writes. “It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy.” Learning the secret only deepened his sense of exclusion.

Padilla, like Douglass, now sees the moment of absorption into the classical, literary tradition as simultaneous with his apprehension of racial difference; he can no longer find pride or comfort in having used it to bring himself out of poverty. He permits himself no such relief. “Claiming dignity within this system of structural oppression,” Padilla has said, “requires full buy-in into its logic of valuation.” He refuses to “praise the architects of that trauma as having done right by you at the end.”

Last June, as racial-justice protests unfolded across the nation, Padilla turned his attention to arenas beyond classics. He and his co-authors — the astrophysicist Jenny Greene, the literary theorist Andrew Cole and the poet Tracy K. Smith — began writing their open letter to Princeton with 48 proposals for reform. “Anti-Blackness is foundational to America,” the letter began. “Indifference to the effects of racism on this campus has allowed legitimate demands for institutional support and redress in the face of microaggression and outright racist incidents to go long unmet.” Signed by more than 300 members of the faculty, the letter was released publicly on the Fourth of July. In response, Joshua Katz, a prominent Princeton classicist, published an op-ed in the online magazine *Quillette* in which he referred to the Black Justice League, a student group, as a “terrorist organization” and warned that certain proposals in the faculty letter would “lead to civil war on campus.”

Few in the academy cared to defend Katz’s choice of words, but he was far from the only person who worried that some of the proposals were unwise, if not dangerous. Most controversial was the idea of establishing a committee that would “oversee the investigation and discipline of racist behaviors, incidents, research and publication” — a body that many viewed as a threat to free academic discourse. “I’m concerned about how you define what racist research is,” one professor told me. “That’s a line that’s constantly moving. Punishing people for doing research that other people think is racist just does not seem like the right response.” But Padilla believes that the uproar over free speech is misguided. “I don’t see things like free speech or the exchange of ideas as ends in themselves,” he told me. “I have to be honest about that. I see them as a means to the end of human flourishing.”

On Jan. 6, Padilla turned on the television minutes after the windows of the Capitol were broken. In the crowd, he saw a man in a Greek helmet with TRUMP 2020 painted in white. He saw flags embroidered with the phrase that Leonidas is said to have uttered when the Persian king ordered him to lay down his arms: *Molon labe*, classical Greek for “Come and take them,” which has become a slogan of American gun rights activists. A week after the riot, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, a newly elected Republican from Georgia who has liked posts on social media that call for killing Democrats, wore a mask stitched with the phrase when she voted against impeachment on the House floor.

“There is a certain kind of classicist who will look on what transpired and say, ‘Oh, that’s not us,’” Padilla said when we spoke recently. “What is of interest to me is why is it so imperative for classicists of a certain stripe to make this discursive move? ‘This is not us.’ Systemic racism is foundational to those institutions that incubate classics and classics as a field itself. Can you take stock, can you practice the recognition of the manifold ways in which racism is a part of what you do? What the demands of the current political moment mean?”

Padilla suspects that he will one day need to leave classics and the academy in order to push harder for the changes he wants to see in the world. He has even considered entering politics. “I would never have thought the position I hold now to be attainable to me as a kid,” he said. “But the fact that this is a minor miracle does not displace my deep sense that this is temporary too.” His influence on the field may be more permanent than his presence in it. “Dan-el has galvanized a lot of people,” Rebecca Futo Kennedy, a professor at Denison University, told me. Joel Christensen, the Brandeis professor, now feels that it is his “moral and ethical and intellectual responsibility” to teach classics in a way that exposes its racist history. “Otherwise we’re just participating in propaganda,” he said. Christensen, who is 42, was in graduate school before he had his “crisis of faith,” and he understands the fear that many classicists may experience at being asked to rewrite the narrative of their life’s work. But, he warned, “that future is coming, with or without Dan-el.”