



African American Experiences and The Classics Project Proposal

Dear Provost Lynch,

I write with the hope that the available grant money for projects using HistoryMakers at Brandeis has not been all claimed and that even if it is still limited, the following proposal will be considered.

The Problem

I left the presentation during the first faculty meeting with the idea of the HistoryMakers project in my mind--as a Homerist who works on issues of tradition and social memory, the project appealed to me. As a Brandeis alumnus, I was also proud that our community can be part of this essential project. Nevertheless, I struggled to articulate an approach to the material that wouldn't seem merely superficial, or worse, tokenist.

I have been mulling over the idea in my head and combining it with problems in my own field. Classical Studies as a discipline has a diversity problem that is quite severe. Part of this has structural causes in the ways that we educate our population based on demographic differences that straddle class and race; a measure is due as well to changing emphases in what we expect education is for. But at the same time there is a significant problem in public perception that is also structural: Classics is perceived as a discipline that is strictly European, largely male, and whose interests are esoteric at best (if not directly contributing to some of the forces and ideas that support racism, sexism, ableism, etc.).

As a discipline, we have done far too little to understand the roots of our diversity challenges. This broader cultural narrative--which is certainly well earned--runs against my experience with the literature as a student and teacher and against my knowledge of the experience of artists of color in previous generations who receive, challenge and translate European traditions (e.g. Franz Fanon, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison). Indeed, many artists like Rhodessa Jones are [still receiving, retelling, and instrumentalizing the Classics for social justice](#).

The Project

My initial searching in the HistoryMakers database has shown that across class spectra the oral histories position classical literature and learning as moments of liberation through education. Although this reception is fraught and should be framed in larger cultural narratives in which the oppressed 'master' the language of their oppressors, the evidence itself should be gathered and presented as evidence of the complex engagement between people of color and the Classics during the past century.

This project will collect, categorize and present references to Classical authors and education in the HistoryMakers database. In partnership with a graduate student who will do the work alongside me, I will use this information to prompt conversations about historical and contemporary diversity and the Classics through a series of blog posts building toward an article on pedagogy and classical reception. (I run a website that has over 10,000 views a month. This in turn would help further publicize the HistoryMakers initiative for the Classics community.)

My hope is that we can use the testimonies available in the archives to make policy recommendations to the professional organizations in Classics that support outreach (e.g. Society for Classical Studies,

Classical Association of the Atlantic States, etc.). I have published on pedagogical initiatives before and have a unique perspective on issues of diversity after teaching at a minority-majority institution for nearly a decade (where I also served as an equal opportunity advocate for three years).

The Request

I am requesting \$2500 dollars to pay a graduate student research assistant during the summer term 2017. The project would be completed by the end of the summer.

Thank you for taking time to consider this request. I believe it offers a service to my discipline and to this University. I am happy to discuss this at greater length.

Best,

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Abstract: Society for Classical Studies Annual Conference Proposal

Even though we are members of a discipline and a profession at risk, Classicists seem to dedicate ourselves too little to issues of social justice and inclusion. Nevertheless, Classical scholars have long been present in social issues from abolition to LGBTQ+ rights (for more on Classics and modern politics, see, Meckler 2006). Our ability to continue this work has become limited, however, by our demographics; Classics is demonstrably less diverse than other fields from its student body to tenured professors (“Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Advanced Degrees in the Humanities”). Addressing this issue is critical not just for ensuring the persistence and relevance of Classics in subsequent generations, but it is also essential for allowing us to engage in the critical social and political issues of our time. This project grapples with these issues by considering personal narratives about Classics and Classical education from African-Americans outside the discipline and how those narratives can inform the approach of the discipline as it attempts to be more inclusive.

The work of several scholars has highlighted the experience of African-Americans working within the discipline of Classics and their reception of ancient literature (e.g. Malamud 2016; Ronnick 2004). Autobiographies and memoirs from Classicists of color provide more personal insights from a wide range of time (Scarborough 2005; Padilla Peralta 2015). There is less scholarship, however, regarding the impact and perceived value of Classics and Classical education among African-Americans who did not pursue academic careers in the field. Cultural narratives and oral histories provide important data about these groups which is otherwise overlooked.

The HistoryMakers (TheHistoryMakers.com) is a database of oral histories collected from over 1,700 prominent African-Americans by Brandeis University and Harvard Law School alumna Julieanna Richardson. The collection includes over nine thousand hours of recorded interviews with individuals whose lives span the better part of the 20th century. The oral histories detail personal events from early childhood, education, and careers which serve as powerful testimonies to many aspects of African-American lived experience, and they provide unique evidence for the impact of Classical education in these lives and the social place of the Classics in their collective narratives. From searching this archive, I have found abundant references to Classical authors, education based in the classics, and specific narratives from antiquity. My project first sets out to survey and catalogue such references and situate them within larger cultural narratives concerning race and education in the 20th century. I aim to show the profit of using oral histories and evidence from those outside the discipline of Classics to understand and highlight the reception of Classical material in marginalized communities. Based on these findings, I argue that the demographic and diversity issues which Classics experiences are not inherent to the field; rather, they come from problematic presentations of material which alienate participants from marginal backgrounds and reify the field’s perception as monolithically white.

This project has important implications for Classics and social justice. The narratives I have found approach Classics from an aspirational perspective, often positioning its content in moments of epiphany, intellectual liberation and personal growth. This project and similar endeavors can help to demonstrate the complex function and reception of Classics and Classical education to indicate its appeal across boundaries of class and race. Such research can also demonstrate that classical education can contribute positively to the pursuit of social justice as a means of coopting cultural authority.