

Diversity and Accessibility of the Classics

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[Latin for All](#)

Jul 13, 2023

“With our guests Professor Nandini Pandey from Johns Hopkins University and Ms. Michelle McPherson Miller from Waynflete Academy, we plan to discuss diversity in the ancient world and today! To promote diversifying access to the Classics, we will also be addressing program closures and creating more inclusive pedagogy” and attitudes in the classroom, as well as discussing and comparing concepts and prevailing attitudes about race and diversity across time periods.

Follow along using the transcript. This voice activated transcript may contain minor errors of spelling and has very little punctuation.

0:00

[Music] welcome to this inaugural edition of the

0:07

Latin for All podcast

Today I, Danny Kobrick ,am accompanied by two wonderful

0:13

guests to discuss diversity in the classical world and efforts to make the study of the classics more accessible

0:19

currently teaching at Johns Hopkins University Professor Nandini Pandey works as a

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pioneer in the field of race identity and diversity in the Roman world

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we are also joined by a former student of hers Michelle McPherson Miller who

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teaches Latin at the middle and high school ages thank you both so much for joining us

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here today and before we get into some more of the meat I just want to know what led you both to start learning

0:48

classics maybe Michelle do you want to answer that first and then I can loop my story

0:54

into yours okay sure I actually had always wanted to take Latin when I was in high school

1:00

but I didn't go to a school that offered it and I tried to homeschool my oldest daughter for half a fifth grade

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and all of sixth grade and so I thought well this is a great opportunity and I hired in a Latin tutor to teach both of

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us I ended up sending my daughter back to school and I held on to the Latin tutor because I so enjoyed it I think

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for me the thing that was so compelling was that my first degree is actually in

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aerospace engineering and as I began studying the language I felt like I was experiencing the language of Engineers

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the way that you have to think to understand Latin is a very engineering sort of mindset and it's not surprising

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to me that the Romans were amazing engineers because of the way that their language structures their thinking so I

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just continued studying it from that perspective over time I became really enthralled with the culture and the

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mythology as well but really my draw was loving the way that the language works

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with the engineering mindset that's wonderful I can definitely respond to Michelle I would say actually very

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similarly to Michelle I'm someone who grew up as a South Asian American in a

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culture and a place that was really rewarding stem pursuits and I definitely felt a lot of pressure for my family to

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do engineering or medicine or things like that and I do have a really good analytical brain as Michelle does and I

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loved math I loved logic problems I loved all that kind of stuff but I also really cared about the whys as well as

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the house and so I remember always being really intrigued by the question of how

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systems work and I love literature I never knew how to reconcile my love of literature with my love of math and

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science but I remember reading a lot and finding books like James Joyce's Ulysses

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that seemed to rely upon the reader knowing some bit of Latin to get the jokes and so I randomly signed up for

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Latin in my first semester of college thinking that I could and therefore understand the jokes in James' stories

3:02

better and what I found was this amazing insight into this really analytical way

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of thinking. I love that Latin is almost like a language puzzle; it's like an analytical puzzle where everything kind

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of fits together if you get it and it all makes sense and the kind of delight that I used to feel from math questions

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and from other kinds of engineering questions I was actually feeling the same way through Latin but I was also

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able to therefore connect with cultures that are far past and far distant from where we are today

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well it's really interesting how both of you had that similar stem background that led you to grow interested in

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learning Latin and for myself I guess I was very fortunate to be exposed from a

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young age at Middle School where I already love the Percy Jackson mythology novel so I was like hey I love to learn

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more of this culture and the language and the history I'm very thankful that at the middle school level that I was

3:58

able to start Latin yeah I think Percy Jackson is the entry drug right for getting into Latin um

4:04

which is great I mean there are lots of ways that we find our way into the classics but I like I do think that when

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I started studying Latin it was like the pleasure you would have in picking apart a clock figuring out how each of

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the parts work and how to put it all back together again and it was just

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um very much like an engineering problem so my you know I came out up from another angle but I know that many

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students come at it from the interest in in the mythology and the history

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well and I couldn't agree with Michelle Moore I mean I love that sense of you know if you're if you're a high school

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student and you don't have a lot of power over your circumstances the ability to like unpick language and
4:47
unpick words and why they mean what they mean and unpack systems and try to
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understand based on a longer history like why things are the way they are today like that was really attracted to
5:00
me as a student and you know I came from a place I mean I went to a public school we did not have a Latin program
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in my high school like I took French and it was a kind of like very messy system
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without a textbook and I kind of really was gravitating toward the rigor of
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Latin and the way that it was so systematic and so beautifully organized
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and also like gave me this insight and a way of communicating with a world like far beyond my own so I I think that
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we're Michelle and I are very similar in that way that we have like analytical brains and we love to understand how
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systems work and the challenge of understanding a system that is like not only beyond us in terms of like you know
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um like it's immediate ramifications but also in terms of time like to look back in time and like unpack a culture that
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is so distant from our own through this amazing basis of language is just like a
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fascinating problem and it's like the best possible like algebra mystery
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um like all sorts of problems like all combined into one speaking of analyzing this classical
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past in the present recently in the last couple years even I'd say there's been a
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lot of more discussion I'd say about learning and studying diversity and recognizing how in the present we
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analyze ancient Roman ancient Greece I guess what led you Professor Pandey to
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start really to start learning about that and what drew your interest
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I mean that's a fantastic question and I think it actually began much earlier
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than they recognized because I remember being an applicant for a Rhodes Fellowship and doing a sample kind of
6:55
mock interview at my college that I went to and one of their first questions was like what does someone like you have to
7:02
do with Classics and at the time I was really offended I was like how dare they
7:08
question me and you know why should I as a South Asian American have to justify
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my interest in this field but actually it's a question it's a kind of like haunted me productively over the years
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and I didn't realize when I got into Latin um that this was a field that has
7:27
historically been associated with white people and has been thought of as the heritage of white people. Like I got
7:32
into Latin because I love the language and I love the analytical problem and I
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loved the ability commune with a far distant place so it never occurred to me
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to think about like race or ethnicity as any aspect of my learning and I loved it
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I did it I just I just adored it right but um but then having that question
7:54
asked to me like not only by that mock interview committee but also by like subsequent professors and you know like
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search committees in the field what I'm trying to get jobs that that has been really formative for me and
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I find that I think that people from all cultures
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can get so much from communing with a deeper past and I really want to I mean
8:24
I think that my um I'm sorry I'm being a bad interview here you're gonna have to edit
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um I my life's mission right now is to
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ensure that people from any culture from any skin color from any language from
8:40
any religious practice can all see that actually Antiquity in an age
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before there was race in an age before there were these Global inequities that we see today that actually provides us

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with a model of human understanding and community that is

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so precious and so valuable so I mean I work on Roman diversity in part because

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it's kind of a late answer to that question that I got from that interview committee much earlier right like people

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were asking what does someone like you have to do with our field um like to me the field of Classics has

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wrongly been coded as the heritage of white people only and it's wrongly been

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associated with a history of white supremacy but I really want to make sure

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that this field acknowledges the real cultural diversity of the ancient

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civilizations of Greece and Rome the fact that they constructed themselves in communion with many other civilizations

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in Asia and Africa and Northern Europe but I also like just want to make space

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for people to like recognize that there is so much cultural conversation and

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community happening around these areas and around this field of study and I

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find that as an Asian American I can have insights into some aspects of the ancient world that frankly sometimes

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people who are the children of professors who like take for granted

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the relevance of Classics their own life might not see so I'm trying to expand

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the archive of Classics and to go beyond the very like kind of elite landed male

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attitudes that we find represented in our literary sources and ask the questions about like who else was

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sustaining this Roman world like who are the women and the enslaved people and the other people that are like

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sustaining this achievement that we think of as Rome and can we give some credit back to them as people that were

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equally part of the Roman Empire were equally part of creating this classical hair because I do think that the

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classics is actually like an example of the way that there is learning through diversity in a way that

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we don't always reflect in our current modern understandings of America and its

11:09

own racial problems what would you say are some of these let's say common misconceptions that you

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notice as you're undergoing this study of diversity I mean I think that there is a very long

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history through cinema through video games through many media that Associates

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Classics with whiteness and I think that there is a long history of basically in

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in movies around ancient Rome it's always kind of British very Posh people

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that are playing the Roman aristocrats right and everybody else doesn't matter

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we still have not gotten over the assumption that Classics classical statues or whites even though we know

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that they were polychromous like that they were painted many colors that they had skin tones so there is a

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long-standing um of like association wrongly between Classics and the sort of

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beauty of this white form and what I would like to do is to use this as a

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way to um I would like to get my students and your listeners to think

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about how that history evolved, like how did that happen, because in ancient Rome and

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Greece it would have been totally foreign to them to think that white is beauty; in fact white would have been a

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really freaky skin tone that they would never see because they were from a Mediterranean climate right and so

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there's a really interesting history to be unpacked about how Greeks and Rome

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became associated with whiteness and also how that whiteness became

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associated with a dominant power um in my opinion and my work is

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driven by this question. Right, like I'm like thinking about how Rome actually

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enfranchised and involved people from three different continents right like Romans and Emperors and people at the

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highest level of Roman society are coming from Europe but they're also coming from Asia and from Africa this is

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one of the most truly multicultural many colored societies that the world has

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ever known and they did not think about color difference

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the same way that we do in modern America and in in a way even though their society revolved around slavery

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and all these other horrible things like they did not have a race-based association with class and I find that

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that's very helpful for me and my students to rethink some assumptions that are kind of like inbuilt into

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modern America right um so for instance like we grow up

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with this understanding of blackness and whiteness which would have been totally foreign to ancient thinkers they did not

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think of it that way because true black true white those are not actually skin colors that exist in the world and so

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thinking about thinking about antiquity actually helps us un-think some of our modern

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assumptions around ethnicity around race around class

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differentials in a way that I find very helpful for instance it makes us recognize that race is something that

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wasn't intrinsic to human history race had to be invented it was invented in

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the age of colonialism and actually Rome and Greece are pre-race and they help us

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envision models that have their own inequities for sure but they are kind of

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beyond the categories that we impose upon our own modern communities so in

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that sense I find it really interesting as a tool to think through

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so I've read something about how this whitewashing also played a role during

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the Enlightenment and I know you mentioned colonialism would you say that's where I guess it originated or

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around that time period that it was used as a justification let's say for

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European actions yes absolutely there's an amazing podcast that I can send you

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the link for by

i

Ibram Kendi and other scholars that talks about where race

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came from and I will say there was not a sense of race as we know it in antiquity race was basically invented

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the concept of blackness was first invented as a justification by the

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Portuguese to justify their enslavement of black

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Africans from various different communities within Africa to their slave

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trade so the whole concept of race actually was constructed as a

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justification for people and power to commodify and use and trade human beings

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and interestingly the concept of whiteness was evolved much later than the concept

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of blackness um as a sort of similar construct that was thinking through issues of like

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beauty and privilege and other sorts of things so there are a lot of stories to

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to tell here but I think that the invention of race and blackness and

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whiteness began with the age of colonialism of the west of Western European powers upon Africa and it's

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very interesting to see how a power like Rome which is an Empire that's also

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exploitative in many ways and that is also slave based did not actually follow

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the same models of race and racialism that we do today so

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It is not like Rome has this like ethical

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like impetus that is like far higher than our own but Rome

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basically like helps us think through the ways that power affects the way that

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we classify human beings and it affects the way that we treat human beings and their way of doing that in Rome although

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it was horrible and unfair too it's actually very different than our own and

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I find that my students are really responsive to the idea that um these classifications like Black,

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White, Latino, etc, those are not inbuilt assumptions within like human the human

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Race, these are very late classifications in the modern like 20th-21st century

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and they are not part of the way that humanity kind of has classified itself

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over the long duration.

I see and I know through various of your

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own projects you've tried to spread this message such as through past and perfect the column that you've co-founded and

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then also through your new book can you elaborate on those two missions

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I used to feel this discrepancy between my intellectual output as a scholar of

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Latin literature and my first book was about Virgil and Ovid and all these like awesome poets as they dealt with power

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but then as I got older in the field and as I thought more about my position and as I had more students of color that

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were gravitating toward me because they hadn't seen other classicists that looked like me I began to really take on

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board the fact that we as a field of Classics need to do better at welcoming

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people from other perspectives and so that was what motivated my desire to do

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the second book for Princeton on Roman diversity and it's kind of a two-part

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project in a way because on the one hand I'm trying to look at the true diversity

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of ancient Rome and thereby counter some very alt right assumptions about Rome

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There's a belief for instance that Rome fell because they let too many immigrants in right, so

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this kind of rhetoric was being used um within recent elections; it's still very much part of our Aura

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today that we all live in so I really want to counter that and I want to make everybody know that actually the Roman

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Empire was incredibly multicultural and they did a better job in many ways than we do right now of including and

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listening to various people in fact the way that you have a long-lasting Empire, for better or ill is to actually take on

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board and provide room for people to have their own self-expression.

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So that's one part of my project and another part of my project is to counter the assumption that Classics belongs

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only to white people. I think it's a field that historically has not been so welcoming to people of color and so one

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thing I want to do with my book is provide my own narrative of how I ventured into the field partially

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because of a sense of cultural inadequacy which I now realized was wrong and self-imposed right but I was

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really interested to unpack what is this Western Civilization thing that everyone is talking about and so I ended up

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getting into Classics as an attempt to sort of reconcile my heritage as an

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Indian immigrant with the cultural discourse that was all around me that was connoting what was valuable and so I

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kind of ran with that I was really good at it but I noticed that that other people of color don't always feel very

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welcome in this field and I just want to make sure that I can create a space that honors and values the experiences that

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immigrants people of color people of various religions and languages have to

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bring to this study because actually Rome was exemplary in those things like

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Rome was very happy and willing to benefit from the diversity of people

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that were bringing their talents in and so in a way I think that um

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I think that recoloring our mental image of Rome recoloring our mental

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image of Classics is only going to be wonderful for the future of the field of Classics and also for our understanding

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of our own societies.

If I can jump in and maybe share a few

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thoughts um on top of what Professor Pandey has said; one thing that I always emphasize

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when I'm discussing slavery and the practice of slavery and what that looked

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like in ancient Rome, it's important to realize that the wealth that Rome was harvesting from the

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countries that it conquered was often human capital; it was human beings

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that were being enslaved and brought into Rome to do the jobs they didn't want to do so these are people from

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Britannia and from Gallia and from Germania and they are most likely

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fairly blonde hair blue-eyed lighter skinned enslaved people

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and I um you know I just kind of think that's an important point to make that

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if in the end it's your status within Rome that was the most important and you

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had the opportunity to buy your way out of slavery by doing good deeds or by serving faithfully or by saving up

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enough money I mean there are plenty of ways that you could get out of slavery and as soon as you're un-enslaved

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manumitted then you have a new status and you are welcomed within the community of Romans and you can

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become a Roman citizen this is so like paradoxical I think for us and it's

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hard for us to wrap our brains around this because the use of um African slaves or enslaved people out

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of Africa is a way of making sure that you never get freed you can because you can never

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shed your skin right and um it is a very if you actually think about the way and

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I'm not advocating slavery but if you think of the way that the Romans

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um allowed slavery to be a stepping stone for Roman citizenship and their

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openness to that versus the American approach to slavery which was there you

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know that we don't have this whole manumission in America because we didn't have the practice in America.

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We had emancipation which is a very different, we use a different word because it's a different process

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um that this is a very like a very distinctly different and far more

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cruel form of human enslavement and I'm not saying that slavery

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being you know enslaved in Rome was it was a picnic it certainly was not but there were shades of better and worse

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whereas being enslaved in the United States was not pretty sight

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well I mean I think that's such a valuable point because the way that Romans men emitted I mean

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there are no Roman laws governing manumissions or enslavement by race so they

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they had enslaved people from blondes far Northern and Britain and Northern

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Europe right but they also had enslaved people from Africa and actually there's

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no laws on the books that are making differential rules about who can marry

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whom or what happens you know it's basically like the promise of manumission of getting out of slavery that was actually like this amazing carrot against a lot of sticks right of

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being a slave but it means that there is a kind of a way to rise beyond your

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status and to become Roman so the idea of you know even if you had been a

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slave you would probably be stigmatized for the rest of your life but maybe your kids could get a better opportunity and

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maybe your kids could actually become even more advanced in society and maybe eventually you know like there are

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Roman emperors who are like African right so there was a way that um race

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like that what we would sorry I don't even know how to talk about this but like what we would now think of race

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which was actually a kind of a color question maybe then those things do not map onto your social

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advance ability ,whereas right now in the U.S because of this long history that we've

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had of inequity where we have this kind of theoretical emancipation of black

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people which initially was a war measure designed to undermine the South because

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I'm right now zooming in from the state of Maryland which is a state that retained slavery even when I mean

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it was a Union state but they had slavery and the union was

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freeing the slaves from the south from other places but people were still enslaved in Maryland like within the

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Union, right, so this question of like who counts as a human like you know is a

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black person like a full human or three-fifths of a human like these are questions that have been so

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horrifyingly discussed and complicated by this American Mid-Atlantic passage

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and all of the history that we have that maps blackness upon a lower class and so

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the thing that I find really interesting about talking about Rome is that what

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what Rome does is like it disengages color from class in a really interesting

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way so you can have enslaved people who are black or white or whatever and you

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can have Emperors who are Black or White or whatever, it just kind of looks really different from our modern society where

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actually having a heritage of slavery having a heritage of blackness like does

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actually affect your possibilities within society it affects your life it affects your ability to like go about

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your life un-harassed by the police it affects like so many aspects of like every possible part of your life and so

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in a really interesting way like Rome shows us a model of how a society

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can be diverse and functional and have a sense of identity but without the kind

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of racialized violence that we see all the time in modern America and I'm not

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saying that Rome is a is a good example because it also relied upon amazing amounts of like inequality and state

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violence and like non-save violence but it helps my students at least rethink

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the kind of very like kind of naturalized assumptions that we might have being born into this

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like mess-up society of America like around things like color and class and

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your right to basic livelihood yeah I think you both bring up this

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really interesting distinction that can often be overlooked you know if you learn in

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middle school or high school with the Romans had slaves you'd I guess probably associate it with here in America the

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way slavery worked whereas in reality it wasn't based on race.

So I think it's a

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wonderful point that you both brought up right and you know Latin the study

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of Latin we're talking a lot about culture but in order to understand any language you have to understand the

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culture of the of the people that you are learning the language about

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um so this is one of the foundational they're like five C's you know for language teachers for the things that

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you have to be able to do to understand a language and you have to understand culture I mean it's just bottom line so

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understanding the nuances between Roman slavery and American slavery is really

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essential because otherwise you're going to come into your understanding of Latin with a misconception about what

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slavery actually looked like and how it functioned and how things worked

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um and so I think it's really important that we understand these nuances and we're very careful to

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teach these cultural aspects as part of the language learning as well I would

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like to say that I think part of the reason that we are as a Classics Community we are struggling to find a

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way to be open and welcoming to people of color is that we're also using

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pedagogy strategies that very much preference entitled white students

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and that is something that is really essential for us to look at is why is it because in no other language that you're

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learning not Spanish nothing else would you start with reading because the

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human brain is designed millions of years of evolution have primed the human

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brain to take in language hourly first and then to have faulting attempts at

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speaking before you go to the third step of reading a language so when we jump right in and say we're going to start

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with reading it's preferencing students that already have extremely strong reading skills that have strong decoding

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skills and that preferences kids that grow up in environments where they've

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had exposure to books and literature and it makes it harder for a kid who has

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a mom that's working three jobs and is cobbling together daycare and doesn't necessarily have enough resources to

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bring in books and to read books every single day those students are then disadvantaged and I don't mean to say

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that sorry black and brown people are financially disadvantaged compared to whites because that's not true I mean

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that universally that's not true but if um we have to think about the way in which

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we teach so that it preferences all students equally and gives opportunities to all students equally and I think that

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um the whole grammar translation method that has been traditionally taught within Classics is problematic because

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of that I think that's a really powerful point and I would actually ask you Michelle to expand a little bit for us

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you make a really good point about these kinds of biases behind the whole thing

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but then like have you seen biases within our textbooks or our teaching tools what do you think that we should

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be doing better as a field to be able to target Latin learners or like language

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learners that are from other cultures so I mean this is actually like the um the crux of why I do what I do; I have I try

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very hard to actually to do spoken Latin within my classroom because I have found that that opens up the doors to everyone

32:02

because I had this great experience when I was I don't know about 22. I went to Morocco with my brother and a friend and

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you know we're fresh off the boat and we get like Shanghai'd by these two little street urchins that their job was to

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rope us into a rug shop and so I tried to pretend that I didn't understand them that I was from the

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Netherlands and I spoke Dutch so then they started speaking to me in Dutch I'm like oh yeah so I tried to pretend I spoke

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French they spoke French I tried to pretend I spoke German they spoke six languages; these are like 12 year old

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kids that have probably never seen the inside of a classroom but they could navigate and negotiate any tourist

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coming from anywhere in Europe into their workshop I still have the wrong by the way I will tell you

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um so it you know but I and you think about so how is it that these kids these unschooled children can speak six

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languages and it's because the human brain is designed to acquire languages and languages are the only thing that we

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actually acquire we don't learn we can learn about them at some point but we

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acquire them naturally the other thing that's really interesting as you begin to study language acquisition and that's

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a field of study it's not language learning language acquisition is that one side of your brain is receptive has

33:21

has receptive language capabilities and the other side of your brain has productive language capabilities

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and I see this all the time with immigrant students they completely understand Hindi Tagalog Spanish

33:34

whatever language it's being spoken at home but they cannot speak it

33:39

and if they try to speak it they sound like a toddler because you actually have to sound like a toddler and move through

33:46

that phase because there's a hard divide in your brain between the productive and the receptive language so this is just a

33:53

human thing this is a human thing so I think about this in the way that I design my classes is to make sure that

34:00

I'm hitting receptive tasks and production tasks So reading and listening versus speaking and writing

34:07

but I try to have both sides of the brain working but I honor the

34:12

natural process of language acquisition by first speaking to my students getting the sounds into their ears expecting

34:18

them to respond back to me and speaking to me in Latin before we even get into reading when you just put a book in

34:24

front of a kid you're assuming there are a lot of things in place that kids understand grammar that they understand

34:30

punctuation that they you know there are a lot of things that are not necessarily required to take in and acquire a

34:37

language so I find particularly with immigrant

34:43

students to try and teach them Latin through English when they're actually thinking in their native tongue is

34:50

putting so many barriers in place for them that it makes it very difficult for them to succeed in a Latin classroom now

34:57

if I eliminate the English and come at them with Latin they understand perfectly well and they're very

35:03

successful so that pedagogical choice opens up the possibility for immigrant

35:09

students to be more successful so I just think that that's a really important thing that we have to think

35:15

about and re-examine our pedagogy universally and you know what's super interesting is that Professor

35:22

Pandey is brilliant she's much better at Latin than I am but she can't do what I do

35:27

like if I try to speak to her she's like or if you can't speak that it's not that

35:33

she can't she just hasn't yet developed those skills right totally and you know one thing I would add to any if it's

35:39

okay is that you know this is an example of a student who's exceeded the teacher right and I remember still very

35:47

much Michelle and I met long ago in the University of Wisconsin-Madison and I

35:53

was signing up for a sailing class and she was there too and you know it turned

35:59

out that she's a far better sailor than me and rescued me for my boat capsizing and all sorts of other things but over

36:06

the course of this really very physical and very intensive um set of days on the lakes of Wisconsin

36:13

you know in Madison we realized that she was actually going to study Classics and

36:21

she would be my students and I'm so humbled from what I've learned from

36:26

her I mean it's extraordinary the pedagogical ramifications and applications that

36:33

Michelle has been able to tap into and like I I'm actually like a very embarrassingly like a very standardly

36:40

trained classicist right like I did the degrees from Oxford and Berkeley and blah blah blah

36:46

um but it's so traditional right and you just learn how to like read a text that's dead on the page and you

36:53

learn how to translate it so that you can pass your exams and you learn how to analyze it but what Michelle is doing is

37:00

so inspiring to me and so much further beyond what I can do and I'm constantly

37:06

odd and humbled by her efforts what she's doing to open up the study of

37:12

language to multiple populations so people from different levels of privilege is is just

37:20

actually so inspiring to me and I'm just in awe of her work and I'm so glad to be

37:27

able to be in conversation with her and with you Nandini I mean you're

37:33

amazing these are skills that had I not been trying to teach a different kind of

37:38

student you know at the University level you're getting kids that are coming in that are already like well primed to

37:44

learn the way that the classics have always been taught right but when you're teaching at a

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different level at middle school and high school you're dealing with a very different brain and so it's kind of

37:56

just been a matter of how do I actually get this information out how do I make this work and just realizing that that

38:03

this doesn't really work for everybody and having to kind of move off that Mark but you know at the end of the day all

38:09

learning is a very social and a very emotional process and the thing that

38:15

I think is really essential for opening up the classics is having teachers and professors who have an open heart and an

38:22

open mind for students of color and for students that don't come with the same advantages because if a kid doesn't

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actually feel wanted or welcomed in the classroom or is embarrassed that they don't know the difference between a noun

38:36

and a verb and quite frankly I've got tons of kids that still don't know the difference between a noun and a verb but

38:41

they're too embarrassed to let that out they're not going to hang in there for the distance and I would say like to pick up on that

38:48

I think that learning is a privilege that is like not one of the basic necessities of life and we need to make

38:53

sure that our students have their basic needs cared for you know that they have adequate like physical and emotional and

39:01

mental health that they have meals that are healthy that they have like enough time to sleep that they have housing

39:08

security like all of these things are factors that actually do dis-privilege certain populations and so

39:15

when we think about like why there aren't more black or brown classicists that are full professors like it

39:21

actually goes really far down into inequalities in our whole system and our

39:27

whole country and so I love the work that Michelle does to make sure that

39:32

there's access and to reach people from various backgrounds and I also think we just really if we do want to see a more

39:39

diverse Classics which I think is such an admirable goal like we actually have to refocus on people's material needs

39:47

like you can't think great thoughts if you don't have your basic needs cared for it's such an obvious thing but I

39:55

worry that so many fellowships so many like academic experiences are based on how much do you want to aim to do it's

40:03

all about ambition it's all about pressure and what I would love to make with your help Danny and Michelle is

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like a more Humane Classics where we can actually look after each other as humans

40:16

first and then we can have these great conversations that channel through

40:21

Antiquity but also think about our modern lives because I actually think that's frankly like yes

Antiquities

40:28

really interesting to think about in itself but I think it always needs to wrap back to who we are and I am someone

40:37

who came through a long journey like I think that I actually came to Classics from a point of rebellion against my

40:43

Indian Heritage but it's actually brought me back to getting more in touch with my roots and my family and I would

40:52

wish that for any of my students and in fact I see that happening all the time

40:58

I'm sure we've all had experiences with people who say you know why speak or

41:03

learn Latin it's a dead language I guess Michelle especially there are even Latin teachers who say you don't really speak

41:10

Latin anymore let's just learn how to translate and read what's on the page what would your response to that be

41:18

well I mean it's a language right so the reason people will say that

41:23

is because they just haven't actually tried to learn how to speak it right and so maybe that's out of

41:29

laziness or just out of tradition or whatever that is um but it is a language it's not

41:34

meant to just be read it's meant to be used for dialoguing and there are many

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people that are really using spoken Latin and finding how powerful of a tool it is to go back to speaking in Latin

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is really an art that was really only lost or in the last 200 years being able

41:52

to speak in Latin so all the efforts that people are making to go back to spoken Latin I think are really valuable

41:59

so I I don't agree with this idea that oh it's just a dead language there's no value to it any language has value

42:05

because any language every single language has something very unique about the way in which it communicates an idea

42:14

and it's um it's really fascinating to understand how we can't actually

42:20

conceive of something that we don't have a word for and the way that the Romans

42:26

the way they conceived of ideas is not I mean there's such a value and

42:31

understanding the way that they thought about things and also the way in which they

42:36

were able to communicate in such a compact way that takes us so many more

42:42

more words to be able to say and it and it just loses the grace and the

42:47

beauty of the way that the Romans were able to communicate it's not dead it's

42:52

not dead it's um very much alive and I think the more that you study Latin the more English suddenly comes into color

42:59

and you didn't even realize that you were thinking in black and white I love that I feel exactly the same way

43:05

and I think that the trainings that you get through Classics of sensitivity

43:11

toward words and word choices and out of the whole realm of possibilities of how you could express this like why did you

43:17

use this one way um that that stuff actually really

43:22

enlivens my life in the world and I feel like I'm a better reader and

43:28

understander of modern culture because of my training through Classics and I

43:33

feel like our students get that too I bet Michelle that you have the same thing where we're kind of um training

43:42

people in these skills that are actually very fundamental to democracy right like we're training people to understand

43:49

rhetoric to understand claims to evaluate evidence and put it in

43:55

context to learn how to talk about their ideas to learn how to express

44:01

disagreement in a way that is still civic and polite I mean I think these

44:07

are really important skills that I would love to see more cultivated within our democracy and I think that we are so

44:16

well positioned as classicists to give that to other people well in addition to that the

44:24

um the studies that people are doing about the way that language informs thinking is really important for

44:30

ideas of justice so for example cultures that um use the passive voice more than

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we do in English have very have a very different sense of justice and right and wrong and they

44:44

also have very much lower rates of incarceration than we do we think that

44:50

if something bad happens someone must be responsible and we must name and shame and like hold that person

44:56

accountable as opposed to um you know that the idea that oh that

45:02

was just a thing that happened like in many languages you can't say I broke my

45:07

arm because who would actually go out and break their arm right why do we say I broke my arm no my arm was broken right

45:15

I didn't choose to break my arm but um so why is it that we structured our

45:20

language this way but because our language is structured so actively and

45:25

we're constantly being told don't use the passive don't use the passive we think about Justice very differently so

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studying another language and understanding the structure of that language changes the way that we think

45:37

about everything that's fascinating and of course it maps on a really meta way onto race right

45:43

because it's like in antiquity it's just like there isn't people are better or

45:49

worse it's just those people do things this way because the climate is is making their body react this way and

45:56

these other people you know their blood is like running thinner because like climate is you know it's like they

46:03

really thought that all humans were effectively the same and they're just like growing up and responding

46:09

differently to different environmental impetuses and it's such a really
46:15
interesting and refreshing contrast to this like baked in model within many
46:21
systems including America that there is some kind of like qualitative difference between
people so the question of like
46:27
where did where did that idea arise that there are races of people and that some
46:34
are better than others that that is not a classical thing that is actually a very post classical
thing and I
46:41
I think it's pretty interesting insight into the development of that and also
46:47
into a world that was prior to these horrific divisions that we face in our
46:53
own societies building on this idea of spreading
46:58
access of Classics I know that in some universities for example they've been de-emphasizing
the importance of
47:05
learning the language where do you think that comes from and how can we expand this
learning of Latin in the younger
47:12
age like K through 12. I think it's interesting so I was a public school teacher in Wisconsin in
Madison and my
47:20
program was eliminated and I think part of the reason that that happened is because there
was a
47:26
perception that this was for the white kids this was a subject for the white
47:32
kids it was privileging the way kids and the administrators actually did not understand that I
was making tremendous
47:39
inroads into black and brown the black and brown communities within my school
47:44
um they just had this presumption that oh Classics is you know this is a white
47:50
supremacy thing as opposed to understanding that that there are people within the classics
that are working
47:55
against that um and that the classics themselves have been co-opted by white supremacists
but
48:02

that doesn't mean that the classics are about white supremacy um so it we need to own that dialogue we

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need to own the classics and say what Classics really is about and it's not about white supremacy it's been used by

48:17

white supremacists but that doesn't invalidate the value and um the contributions the classics can give to

48:25

our societies so we have to be really I think um upfront and fight

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against the notion that it's um it's for white people by white people because it's simply not and reclaim classics

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for the value that it brings for us understanding culture for us understanding history for us

48:46

understanding the way that language informs our thinking there's so many incredibly valuable things that we can

48:51

do within Classics but we do have to stand up against that I couldn't read more I couldn't agree

48:58

more with Michelle and I will say there are also systems of power here to

49:04

think about so you know there are Departments of Classics that have money from donors that want to have a very

49:11

traditional model of what authority means imposed upon students right and

49:18

um It's tricky because even for someone like me like who

49:24

has a tenor tenured position right like I'm in a Classics department and there's

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so many parameters about what I'm allowed to teach and like what is kind of beyond the edges and also I actually

49:38

don't even know how to formulate this properly but I'm trying to do a really

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open classes and to involve students in thinking through the evolution of race

49:51

and their earlier conceptions of identity that happened in Classics but I

49:58

can tell that my type of analysis is actually deeply threatening to a lot of established classic scholars because

50:05

they don't want their way of doing things to be threatened and they like to

50:10

just look at their texts and read their texts and not be bothered right and so they don't they actually don't

50:17

welcome the impetus to kind of race criticize some of these texts so I mean

50:25

as someone who's like actually a fairly established scholar like I still feel like I have a lot of uphill battles to

50:32

fight because I've been told from senior people to me that like race and Classics

50:38

is just a trend or I've had a lot of people in power over me say like well

50:44

like why should we care this is a flash of the pan this isn't real Classics and

50:50

these are real problems that like as a tenured professor at Johns Hopkins like

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in a way of won the lottery right but actually it's hard here because this is

51:01

an institution founded on slave money and it's not Institution that ever had

51:06

any courses about race and Classics until I arrived and they don't necessarily want to be dealing with that

51:13

because it's a problem but I'm doing my best like within the parameters to

51:19

involve students and I actually think that students are the best impetus forward because they really want to ask

51:25

these questions and they love it you know the thing that I love about my

51:30

students here is a because this is a rich institution it is actually like able to have very diverse students with

51:38

without debt right that's amazing and so I've never had more diverse classes and

51:45

I have these amazing students that want to like bring their experiences into the classroom and I actually think that my

51:52

faith is in the students more than the institution in um thinking through like what do these

51:59

conversations mean for them because it's not just about Classics it's about how the past affects the present it's

52:07

about how we critique the narratives that we've received and how we can gain some sense

52:15

of agency over categories that are being imposed over us like I mean I think

52:20

these are big questions and I really think that Classics can provide some

52:25

answers and I think that my students would agree so I just want to thank you both so much

52:32

for discussing your own connection with Classics and your own efforts through

52:37

this really in-depth discussion that I feel people just don't know about in

52:43

general and that we're able to uncover whether it's the diversity or the lack

52:48

of access and I really appreciate these two very unique views well and thank you

52:54

so much for your very thoughtful questions and for putting this podcast together we really

appreciate that yeah

53:00

I mean it's a, it's a problem that has a collective solution and you're part of it both of you it's

wonderful to be in

53:07

conversation with your audience and I just want to reiterate that everybody is

53:13

welcome into Classics and Michelle and I would be so delighted to hear from any

53:18

of you it's been such an honor to be part of this yeah thank you so much thank you

53:24

that concludes our first episode of the Latin for all podcast thank you to our

53:30

two guests for your time and insights if you would like to learn more about Latin for all go to

53:37

latinforall.org stay tuned for the next episode

53:44

[Music]

English (auto-generated)