Classics and Social Activism Proposal

Given the current political climate and the recent appropriation of Classics by white nationalists, it is increasingly important that scholars of Classics use their expertise and passion to correct misunderstandings of the discipline and to affirm the relevance of Classics to current struggles for social justice. Scholars of Classics are reaching out to prisons, expanding further into primary and secondary education, staging plays, leading reading groups, and giving lectures in order to reach people who would otherwise not have been exposed to the ancient world and who might find it a source of strength, understanding, and motivation. Likewise, our understanding of ancient material is continuously informed and rejuvenated by our present circumstances and preoccupations. In a mutually enriching exchange, dialogue with the past invigorates our understanding of the present and the present informs the past.

The aim of this panel is to create a platform on which we may discuss our work so far and our goals going forward. We plan to have brief talks followed by discussion. Descriptions of the specific are as follows:

Greek Tragedy for Social Reform

This paper will provide a brief overview of several U.S. theatrical productions that have used Greek drama as a medium to inspire social and political reform. Drawing on material from my forthcoming book publication, I will present images from these performances as a way to illustrate the work of theatre artists, such as Luis Alfaro, Aaron Mark, and Debra Ann Byrd. The aim is not to examine any one production in detail but rather to trace a trajectory of socially-engaged, contemporary performances of Greek tragedy that have been produced by and for minoritarian communities over the last decade in the United States.

A Capstone Course for Students in Prison

In fall of 2017, I plan to teach a course in a prison in which selected students matriculate and earn an undergraduate degree. My personal goal is to introduce the students to a participatory pedagogy, "Reacting to the Past," developed at Barnard College and widely instituted at the University of Georgia. We will address such topics as: what kind of *polis* do we want, who should qualify for citizenship, and what kind of foreign policy should we have. Through the Reacting component, which involves public debate and position papers and comprises less than a third of the class meetings, students will study the late fifth century as if they were living in those times and as if they had the agency to shape their political world.

Registering for Expose Your Professor

The history of Classics as a discipline is hardly progressive; indeed, as Christopher Stray (1998) and others have argued, it was used as a gate keeper, a force to construct an elite. More recently, the attack on the Humanities and the demand for practical studies has rendered Classics almost irrelevant.

However, to the extent that pedagogy can transform students, it is political and can make Classics a

progressive force. In this brief talk, I will discuss radical uses of classics to inspire critical awareness and perhaps activism, in two different settings—a course on Tragedy at an elite liberal arts college and a volunteer book discussion group in a medium-security state correctional facility.

Sexual Assault and Nonnus

This presentation is an account of a reading group of *Dionysiaca* 48 for survivors of sexual assault, run in Cambridge from February through June 2016. The rape of Aura is one of the most disturbing episodes of the poem; this swirling narrative of shame, trauma, self-destruction, and vengeance is not only fertile ground for intellectual inquiry, but also a deeply relatable and believable account of sexual assault and its aftermath. Through engaging with the text, survivors navigated their lived experiences as part of the human experience of trauma. The reading group also brought an ancient text out of the classroom and into the public sphere; it provided an alternative model of Classical outreach for social justice which affords non-Classicists greater control over how they engage with ancient literature. Program participants were able to shape and control interpretations of an ancient poem that is not a part of the canon. In so doing, they created the compelling, grassroots model of engagement with Classics which is presented in the paper.

Bibliography:

Stray, Christopher (1998) *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England, 1830-1960.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.