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Racist comments directed at a classics scholar at a disciplinary meeting floor classicists in the room, at the conference and online

Submitted by Colleen Flaherty on January 7, 2019 - 3:00am

Classicists engage in frequent debate about whether the field is “too white,” whether Western civilization is a manufactured idea and what new lines of inquiry will ensure classics’ continued relevance -- or even its survival.

But at an annual gathering of classicists this weekend in San Diego, that debate crossed the line from professional to personal, from real inquiry to racism.

The incident involved an attack on Dan-el Padilla Peralta, an assistant professor of classics at Princeton University, by an independent scholar named Mary Frances Williams. It happened during a question-and-answer period at a panel on the future of classics Saturday at a Society for Classical Studies conference.

Panelists included Peralta, who spoke about an alleged incident of racial profiling at the conference site, in which two classicists of color were stopped and asked for identification. He also cited classics journal publication data showing that authors are largely white, and pushed for diversification of the field. Another speaker was Sarah Bond, an associate professor of classics at the University of Iowa whose research and public outreach often focuses on the idea that our notions of race in the classical world are much more informed by Eurocentric Renaissance views than historical reality.

During a discussion period, Williams spoke about the need to protect the idea of Western civilization, according to firsthand accounts, while Bond tried to

argue that that concept is a construct. (She's written about that for lay audiences [here and elsewhere.](#)) [1] Then Williams turned and addressed Peralta directly, declaring that she was “not a socialist” and that Peralta only got his job because he is “black,” those present said. (Peralta is Dominican by birth.)

Many in the room denounced Williams's comments as racist and she left the session. Word of the incident lit up Twitter, with many expressing disbelief and anger that an academic gathering could turn so uncivil.

Peralta declined an interview Sunday, saying he was taking some time out after the events of the weekend. But he has written about how classics helped shape [his own journey](#) [2] from living in a homeless shelter to a professorship at Princeton.

Bond, who was reluctant to talk before Peralta shared his own account, said Sunday that she remained “as appalled as anyone. I love my field. But we can and must address this and commit to being better. No more apathy or no more avoiding the issues of racism in our past and present. Otherwise we won't have a future.”

Helen Cullyer, executive director of the Society for Classical Studies, said via email that the association has notified the meeting attendee “who expressed her racist views” that she “may no longer participate in meetings and sessions at this San Diego conference because she has violated our annual meeting harassment policy.”

[That policy](#) [3] defines harassment as including but not limited to “sexual harassment, such as unwelcome sexual advances, or other verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature” and, relevant here, “activities/behaviors such as stalking, queer/trans bullying, or hostility or abuse based on age, disability, religion, race or ethnicity.”

By attending the meeting, the policy says, “all participants accept the obligation to uphold the rights of attendees and treat everyone with respect.” While the society does “not seek to limit the areas of inquiry of its members or

to curtail robust scholarly debate,” the group aims “to promote critical and open inquiry that is free of personal harassment, prejudice and aggression.”

The society's governing board also released a statement [4] Sunday condemning "the racist acts and speech" witnessed during the meeting. "There is no place for racism on the part of members, attendees, vendors and contractors at the meeting," the board said, reaffirming its 2016 [5] statement [6] against “the use of the texts, ideals, and images of the Greek and Roman world to promote racism or a view of the classical world as the unique inheritance of a falsely-imagined and narrowly-conceived western civilization.” (Some white nationalist groups have adopted symbols from the classical world to promote their cause.)

Reached via email, Williams said that it's important to unapologetically "stand up for classics as a discipline and promote it as the political, literary, historical, philosophical, rhetorical and artistic foundation of Western civilization and the basis of European history, tradition, culture and religion." She said she'd planned to make additional points on the classics curriculum during the session but was cut off.

Williams said she did not believe that her comments were controversial, and that she'd hoped to “get things going” during the group discussion.

Georgia Nugent, former president of Kenyon College and a classicist who attended the controversial session, noted that this year's meeting marked the classics association's 150th anniversary. She said the society is very engaged in diversifying, and that other conference sessions acknowledged the field's history of exclusion.

Of Williams's comments, Nugent said, “I believe the attitude is not very widespread, but I don't think it's nonexistent. But there are probably, perhaps, largely along generational lines, some who feel that some women got their positions that way, and that minorities did.”

At her own first faculty meeting in 1978, for example, Nugent said, her chair introduced her by saying, “And as you can see, she's a woman.” And that's

“fair indication of what it was like for me,” she added.

Of the more recent incident, however, Nugent said everyone she’s talked to has been “shocked and appalled” about this “very painful episode.” And part of that pain is the fact that classics is working so hard to move beyond its past.

“Classics has been so strongly identified as elitist. So our history is not one of being progressive, but of keeping the gates closed, keeping the field as the property of the elites. There was a perception that you could only get into this club if you were a member of the old boys’ network.”

Scott Jaschik contributed to this article.

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Links

[1] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/drsarahbond/2016/07/23/stevekingandthedarkages/#333810465980>

[2] <https://scholar.princeton.edu/dpadilla/home>

[3] <https://classicalstudies.org/annual-meeting/scs-annual-meeting-harassment-statement>

[4] <https://classicalstudies.org/scs-news/statement-racist-acts-and-speech-2019-scs-annual-meeting>

[5] <https://classicalstudies.org/scs-news/public-statement-scs-board-directors>

[6] <http://classicalstudies.org/scs-news/public-statement-scs-board-directors>

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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

RESEARCH

After Racist Incidents Mire a Conference, Classicists Point to Bigger Problems

By *Emma Pettit* | JANUARY 07, 2019

Claims of racism at a classics conference — which are being investigated by the two hosting academic societies — have prompted scholars to criticize the field on Twitter for what they say is a broader indifference toward race-related issues.

Two incidents happened at a joint meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America and the Society for Classical Studies, held this past weekend in San Diego.

On Saturday, at a panel called “The Future of Classics,” four scholars, including Dan-el Padilla Peralta, an assistant professor at Princeton University, fielded questions from the audience.

That’s when an independent scholar took the microphone, said she’s not a “socialist” who doesn’t believe in merit, and told Padilla he’d gotten his job “because he’s black,” according to multiple accounts. (Video published in February 2019 shows the scholar pointing at Padilla and saying, “You may have got your job because you’re black, but I would prefer to think you got your job because of merit.”) The speaker, Mary F. Williams, was identified by Sarah E. Bond, an associate professor at the University of Iowa who is chair of the classics society’s communications committee.

Williams did not immediately respond to a request for comment. (Reached by email, she told *Inside Higher Ed* that it’s important to unapologetically “stand up for classics as a discipline,” and that she didn’t think her comments were racist.)

On Monday, Padilla described the verbal attack in a *Medium* post. “What will be stored in the vaults of my memory,” he wrote, “are not just the accusatory words themselves,

but the expression on the face of their white-supremacist purveyor as she relieved herself of them,” along with “the looks on the faces of students of color in the room.”

“Most of all,” Padilla wrote, “I will remember the rage: not the impotent rage of Mary Frances Williams, but my rage on realizing that her personal assault would divert attention from the paper I had just delivered on the whites-only neighborhood of journal publication in classics.”

Williams was subsequently asked to leave the conference because she had violated the event’s harassment policy, tweeted Bond.

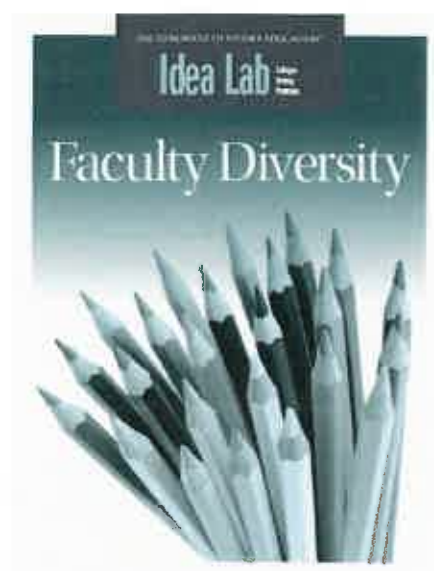
A More Persistent Truth

On Friday, two scholars of color, who were being honored at the conference for improving equality and diversity in the field, said they had been stopped by security guards at the Marriott hotel where the conference was being held. (The hotel did not immediately respond to a request for comment.)

The scholars, Djesika Bel Watson and Stefani Echeverría-Fenn, founded The Sportula, an organization that helps undergraduate classicists pay for tuition, textbooks, and other expenses. Bel Watson and Echeverría-Fenn had received a professional-equity award for their work, presented by the Women’s Classical Caucus.

The security staff members asked to see the two scholars’ badges, The Sportula tweeted, while many white and “non-working-class-dressed” scholars without badges were

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standing around them. “Still confused as to why your security felt fit to question us alone out of all of the guests that were on the balcony today without name badges,” Bel Watson tweeted at the Marriott account. “I’ll wait for an answer.”

Both academic societies said they were investigating the incidents, although details were sparse. “All our welcome at our meeting,” the groups said on Twitter. “We expect all our attendees to follow our guidelines on respectful behavior ... It is our practice to investigate reports of incidents that affect our attendees, including those that involve our contractors and vendors.”

“We’re talking with the hotel right now about this incident, and will provide updates when we have them,” the Society for Classical Studies tweeted on Friday. The Board of Directors “condemns the racist acts and speech that occurred,” the organization also tweeted.

Some classics scholars said the incidents should not be viewed in isolation. The episodes are not anomalies, they said, but evidence of a more persistent truth — that the predominantly white discipline often falls short on issues of race. (Medieval studies has faced similar critiques. A cohort of scholars spoke out during its annual conference last year.)

Classics has a diversity problem, said Young R. Kim, a historian who now works at a nonprofit organization and was in the audience at Saturday’s panel. When Williams reached the climax of her tirade, Kim said, he and others moved toward her to take the mic away.

Kim said that he was angered by Williams’s comments, but also that he wants a broader conversation about racism in the discipline. “If the field is to survive and thrive into the next 150 years,” he said, “what will it have to look like?”

‘Rampant With Discrimination’

Padilla said this wasn’t the first time he’d heard the accusation that he had achieved something because he’s black. Many scholars of color, he said, had told him they’d heard the same claim. (He also argued in the *Medium* piece that his “Afro-Latinity” is, in

fact, a valid reason to hire him.)

Padilla hoped, he wrote, that what had happened to him would spark an “honest conversation” about the classics colleagues who hold beliefs similar to Williams’s. In recent years, he said, racist views have been posted on *Famae Volent*, an anonymous blog devoted to the classics and archaeology job markets. The blog — known across the profession for its tendency to devolve into vitriol — shut down in April. What had once been the occasional “problematic post” had crossed the border into “more serious territory,” the blog’s anonymous architect wrote.

As loud as the pushback against Williams was in the moment, tweeted Scott Lepisto, a visiting assistant professor at the College of Wooster, most classicists aren’t on Twitter. “Most who hold the same views as the racist won’t say them in public,” he said, “and way more people hold those views than most either realize or want to admit.”

“Most who hold the same views as the racist won't say them in public.”

Though the racist events at the conference were “appalling,” tweeted Christopher Polt, an assistant professor at Boston College, nobody should be acting surprised. “The field is rampant with discrimination,” he said. “Ask any minority or working-class classicist, and they can give you countless stories.”

Sharmila Sen, executive editor at large for Harvard University Press, who immigrated to the United States from India, identified with Padilla’s experience. “Too tired to feel outrage at racist incidents at #AIASCS,” she tweeted. The expectation to be “poised & eloquent” and to “supply solutions” is something that people in the United States who aren’t white have to carry.

“Our additional baggage fees,” she said, “are astronomical.”

Updated (2/28/2019, 10:01 a.m.) with a link to video of the interaction at the conference.

Emma Pettit is a staff reporter at The Chronicle. Follow her on Twitter