**The Endless Knot, Episode 51: Race & Racism in Ancient & Medieval Studies, Part One: The Problem**

**Transcription**

MARK SUNDARAM: Welcome to The Endless Knot podcast –

AVEN MCMASTER: – where the more we know –

MARK: – the more we want to find out.

AVEN: Chasing serendipitous connections through our lives –

MARK: – and across disciplines.

AVEN: Hi, I'm Aven –

MARK: – and I'm Mark –

AVEN: – and today we're talking about race and racism.

MARK: Today's episode will be a somewhat different format: we've gathered a number of interviews with medievalists and classicists, and put together extracts from them, to form what we think is a quite fascinating exploration of this unfortunately topical subject.

There's so much to say that, in fact, we've created two extra-long episodes out of these conversations – and still left much unsaid!

AVEN: And remember, if you want some background, our episode 44 talks about the words for 'race' in Greek, Latin, and Old English, and sketches out the different conceptions of 'ethnicity' and 'race' in those cultures.

But before we tell you about the scholars we spoke with and get into the topic, of course, we have to talk about our cocktails.

Today we're drinking “conversation starters,” because that's pretty much what we're hoping to do with these episodes. We certainly know we can't solve everything – or maybe anything – with a podcast. But all of our interviewees stressed the importance of recognizing and talking about the problems we're facing if any progress is to be made, so it seemed an appropriate cocktail to choose.

All right, so what we've got is a cocktail that's vanilla vodka, brandy, triple sec, and Earl Grey tea, brewed and chilled, and to make it I also had to make vanilla vodka, [laughs] 'cause we didn't have any vanilla vodka, but we had a vanilla bean and vodka, and I don't love vanilla vodka on its own enough to go out and buy some, so I thought it would be better to just make it, though I think it's steeped long enough and is a small enough amount of vodka that I may have actually just made vanilla essence flavouring.

AVEN AND MARK: [laugh]

AVEN: Anyway, it's very “vanilla-y.” So that's the cocktail. It's very large, therefore, because it has tea in it, so… very carefully take a sip out of these very full glasses.

MARK: Ooh, weird.

AVEN: [laughs] I was going to say, “Ooh, nice!”

AVEN AND MARK: [laugh]

MARK: Not – not at all what I was expecting.

AVEN: What did you expect?

MARK: I don't know.

AVEN: [laughs] What did you get?

MARK: Well, the vanilla really comes through.

AVEN: Yeah. it's quite “vanilla-y.” You've not really had that warm tea cocktail, the blueberry cocktail.

MARK: No.

AVEN: Whatever it's called.

MARK: I may have tried it once, but–

AVEN: Yeah, which is made with hot Earl Grey that you add triple sec to –

MARK: Right.

AVEN: – and it tastes like blueberries, which is a strange, bizarre, thing. This has a lot in common with that, but it's cold.

MARK: Okay.

AVEN: 'Cause it's got the triple sec and the Earl Grey. So it didn't throw me particularly, I guess I'm used to having those –

MARK: Right.

AVEN: – drinks. Anyway, I think it's quite nice.

MARK: Yeah. It's interesting.

AVEN: [laughs] So you don't… [laughs]

MARK: Not my sort of drink, really, no. It's interesting.

AVEN: However, I think it lives up to its name. I think it would be a conversation starter –

MARK: Sure, mmhmm.

AVEN: **–** if you served it at a party or something. So let's see if it goes with this conversation.

All right. Let's get on to the interviews, then. So to set it up, we talked to three medievalists and five classicists. The medievalists were Asa Mittman, Damian Fleming, and Helen Young; the classicists were Dimitri Nakassis, Donna Zuckerberg, Katherine Blouin, Rebecca Futo Kennedy, and Usama Ali Gad.

MARK: They were in Canada, the US, Egypt, and Australia, and all of them have been thinking and talking and writing about issues of race, identity, and racism in their fields, some for a long time, some only recently. Full contact information and links to their various blogs and publications are in the podcast show notes and on our website.

Thank you to everyone who spoke with us. We learned so much from every discussion, and although we couldn't include all the material, we hope we've represented your views well.

AVEN: So, we asked all of our interviewees three questions: What do you think are the issues surrounding race and racism in your discipline today? What have your experiences been with these issues? And, what thoughts or suggestions do you have for addressing or improving the situation?

In today's episode, we'll be focusing mostly on that first question: What are the problems? So, to start off, we'll hear from Asa Mittman about what got him thinking about these issues more urgently, an event which was also part of our reason for beginning work on this series.

ASA MITTMAN: I think that I am not alone in having been a bit blindsided by a lot of the issues, and frankly, that failing is on me, as I think it is on our field in general.

We're all aware, and have been talking about for quite a long time, that Medieval Studies as an academic discipline lacks diversity, that the representation of people of colour, and of other marginalized groups, is very small in the field. Go to the conferences, look through lists of recent publications, and the whiteness of the field is pretty self-evident. And people have paid at least some lip-service toward doing something about it, though I don't think there's really been anything like a concerted effort in the field to really address that.

But then, Charlottesville happened, and everything changed, really – at least for me, and for several friends and colleagues that I've spoken with about this, and for quite a few who was worked up and reading online and various places, in that… we suddenly became newly aware of people we share some space with, of people who have some crossover interests with medievalists, and whom we are, I hope I can say, collectively horrified by.

So, as I'm sure you're aware, I'm sure your listeners all saw the events unfold in Charlottesville, just a few months ago now, wherein a large group of self-defined white supremacists, white nationalists, actual swastika-bearing Nazis – neo-Nazis, I suppose – and other members who have loosely gathered under the… I would say, euphemistic term “alt-right,” marched in the streets and first off, the most prominent thing they did was chant old Nazi-era slogans, things like “Jews will not replace us,” “blood and soil…”

Now that is, in and of itself, alarming, deeply concerning, as was a lot of the political response to it, but the other thing they did is, they carried medieval-style shields. They had banners and posters with medieval and classical symbolism on them. They had texts written on them, often in bad Latin, bad Greek, but quoting ancient and medieval sources. Some of them have runes, which are the writing system that was prevalent in the medieval north, you know, primarily in Scandinavia and England; they have them as tattoos, they had them on shirts, they had them on shields and banners. These people with whom I would like to say I have nothing in common seem to like some of the same visual imagery that I do. And this is appalling.

Well, what I think this did, though, is it revealed to us something that I think a lot of us just hadn't thought about, which is that white supremacy has had, for quite a while – at least since the Civil War era and before – a strong medievalist trend, theme, motif, focus, interest, which is rooted in an entirely fantasized version of the Middle Ages: a Middle Ages that is stripped of much of its actual content, richness, interests, and vitality, and turned into an emblem, falsely, of a white ethnostate. A white, particularly Christian – though not for all of these groups – but a white, predominantly Christian homogenate that certainly doesn't accurately reflect the Middle Ages and would not have been recognizable in any particular way to the people who lived in the period that I work on.

Once this was shown to us, thrown in our faces by the march in Charlottesville, I think a lot of us looked back at our field and saw it differently, and realized that while we may have never felt that we were fostering any of those narratives, if we weren't actually addressing them, we were, in a sense, allowing them to exist. We were providing a space in which those narratives could thrive if our work did not directly challenge them. I do think that the medievalists of colour group, unsurprisingly, was a little ahead of the curve on this, and I've had conversations with some friends who are left saying “Well, yeah, of course, you know, we – we told you, in essence, you know.”

But I don't think that many of us saw it as clearly until literally, these groups were marching in the streets. I hope that marks... a kind of tipping point to see change in the field. I would note, though, there is one knock-on revelation that resulted post Charlottesville, that for me was actually the more troubling, the more upsetting, the more depressing – and there were Nazis, I'm not ignorant of this, or naive to this fact – I know there are white supremacists, I know that America has been a profoundly racist nation since its very founding; indeed it is one of the platforms of its founding. That wasn't news to me. The vigorousness, the presence of it, the visibility of it was a surprise.

But the other thing that really did get under my skin was the way that it drew out comments, responses, reactions from our friends and colleagues. I think I had just tacitly assumed that, you know, we were all on the same team here, you know? I mean, uh, Nazis are bad, right? Yes, it is the single most obvious statement in the kind of vision that I had of what America is: Nazis are bad.

That is profoundly obvious, and I'm not saying there's a lot of people in our field who have been saying “Oh, no, Nazis aren't that bad,” but when scholars – especially scholars of colour, but not exclusively – and I would also note that Jewish scholars are in a kind of curious middle place in this: not generally batched in the scholars of colour category, but certainly high on the Charlottesville march's lists of targeted groups – that when scholars of color, or Jewish scholars, or allies of those groups spoke up, and spoke out, and asked for statements of support… those statements of support were often rather slow in coming, rather modest when they arrived, and often arrived packaged in all kinds of white fragility and resentment, came in ways that made it clear that while most of our colleagues in the field are not actually, you know, marching with these folks in Charlottesville, that they, nonetheless, hold what are implicitly white supremacist ideas; that they, for example, do want to see the Middle Ages taught as a period of whiteness, as a period of Christianity. And this is really, really troubling.

We have this idea that we keep getting from the sort of popular media and culture that, you know, of “liberal academia,” and it's simply not true. That – that place doesn't exist. That is a fantasy construction of the right, just as the “racially pure and homogenous Middle Ages” is a construction of the right. Neither of these places exist in my scholarly or lived experience.

MARK: Helen Young also pointed to events of last year as revealing many longstanding problems in Medieval Studies as pressing issues.

HELEN YOUNG: Okay, well, I think there are several, and they're all interlinked. So, Medieval Studies has been going through, particularly in the last six months or so, some very, I would say, bitter and very painful… “upheavals,” is probably the best word I can think of, really around whether or not Medieval Studies itself has any responsibility to deal with questions of racism, to deal with what has historically been a very white field. And also a very sort of masculinist field as well. So there's been a lot of division between people who say, “Well, there's nothing wrong, we don't need to do anything,” and people who see problems in the field.

Some of those divisions have spilled over into things like doxxing, into… really active abuse and harassment online. Particularly directed at people who see problems in the field, and argue that we need to change. So Dorothy Kim has been, I think, the main target, or the most consistent target, but certainly most, if not all, medievalists of colour have been targeted in some way by harassment in some form online in the last few months. So there's, on one hand, there's this real – there's an ideological and a political perspective shaping how people think about their discipline, and how they think about the future of Medieval Studies.

And that division has implications for what happens in the classroom, for what happens in research, for what happens at conferences. It has implications for all of the core business of academia. But it's sometimes difficult to see what to do about these divisions and how to bridge them, is a really difficult sort of space. So, from my perspective – and my stance in these debates is pretty publicly clear – I think Medieval Studies has some very long histories of being very racist, and since about World War II, I would say, Medieval Studies has moved away from being overtly racist, but hasn't really come to grips with two-and-a-half to three centuries of racism really built into interest in the European Middle Ages. And to me, the really core issue in Medieval Studies, and in medievalism more generally, is a failure to really come to grips with, and to recognize, the really structural and systemic racism in those fields.

So when you start looking back to interest in the European Middle Ages, it really started to rise in the second half of the 18th century, and when that interest in the Middle Ages arose in the academy, in public culture, through the work of people like Thomas Percy, Richard Heard, Thomas Wharton, that was really deeply tied into scientific or early Enlightenment concepts of race as biology. I don't think it's a coincidence at all that interest in the European Middle Ages really started to become dominant right at the time that European ethnonationalisms started to be founded on the idea of racial dissent and the sort of move away from the Classical into the Medieval happened at about the time that political bodies needed to imagine worthy ancestors for themselves to be descended from. And I think Medieval Studies sort of grew out of that move, and we really are still largely failing to recognize what the foundations of the discipline were, and to properly tackle, "Well, what do we do about that? If we're standing on the shoulder of racist giants, what do we do about that?"

AVEN: And this issue of the discipline having its origins in an exclusionary ideology, of course, affects Classics too. As Usama Ali Gad points out:

USAMA ALI GAD: Actually, I have been told that Classics is exclusively European, and to teach it in this way. And I mean, I'm trying to get around this and tell the students that, “No, we have a claim here, and it is ours as anybody else's heritage.” To call the Classics, you know – to call a spade a spade, it's not Classics – it's Greek and Latin Studies, or it's a Greek and Roman heritage. I think this is more accurate than “Classics,” to see it as a classical European period of literature or whatever is not great, but it's a Greek-Roman heritage, you know.

When I began, I did have this view, I did have the same view, actually, when I was studying Greek and Latin literature, I did have this view that it's European. It's the Classics. My background – I was an English teacher, and I had graduated from the Faculty of Education with a specialty in teaching English as a second language, and the professor who was telling us about Hera and Zeus and all these gods was saying that these are not our heritage, it is something of the English culture. And this was the view that I took for four years until I graduated and began to ask, “Why are these not my culture?” Where's the Greek philosophy, you know, you have the Greek philosophy, and all this tradition, and how I was not comfortable with the idea that this culture and this literature is not my tradition.

So I decided to go on to study Greek and Latin, and to dig deeper in this, and I realized that, you know, the Iliad has been translated, and most of the Greek drama has been translated into Arabic; the Arabic reader can have access to this readership either in direct translation or in adaptions, you know, Tawfiq al-Hakim and these things. So, this is our modern culture. So… I began to realize that the main view is that it is European, it's not Arabic, it's not Islamic, but this is not – this is actually what I see: the print culture of modern Egypt has a lot of translation and adaptation of the Greek literature. So, why is this not our heritage? So, I began to go on deep and deep and even took my Master in Greek papyri and PhD in Greek papyri from Heidelberg University, and when I was there, I realized that it is viewed as exclusively European.

MARK: Usama's story illustrates some of the barriers to greater diversity in the study of the ancient world, and that how we conceptualize the discipline matters. Katherine Blouin has seen similar issues in her teaching in Toronto.

KATHERINE BLOUIN: Last year I taught an introductory course in Scarborough called “The Ancient Mediterranean World,” and on week one I always make it a point to really emphasize how, yes, we're going to talk about the so-called Greek and Roman world, but it's a much broader course going from the Mesopotamian world to early Islam, so it's a very panoramic view, but I really always emphasize how this is about diversity. That there's nothing new about diversity, you know. What is abnormal is absence of diversity, and monolingualism. This is, as far as I'm concerned, this is what is abnormal. So, I emphasize that, and at the end of class, a student of Asian background – Asian-Canadian, let's say – came to me to thank me for saying that, and he told me, “I grew up in Toronto, and I'm majoring in History right now, and until today, I purposefully avoided taking an Ancient History class because in high school, all I was told about the ancient world was that the Greco-Roman world were the ancestors of the West, and I felt completely alienated from the course. I felt the material was telling me that this is not about you, and so I had no interest whatsoever in Classical Studies, and now for the first time I'm realizing that wow, maybe there's more to it than that.”

And so to me, this anecdote really struck me, and I thought it truly is a good illustration of how by holding onto these notions that, as you say, fuel white supremacists' view of history, we also alienate a huge number of students, of people who were where they live, be it in Toronto or anywhere else, and for whom actually there is still – there is a lot of meaning in this history as well. So, it's brought about, you know, fueling a very negatively exclusivist, biased way of looking at history, and also depriving ourselves from many, many potential interlocutors and eventually other future scholars in the field as well.

I'm teaching at the Scarborough campus, at the undergraduate level here in Toronto, and the student body is incredibly diverse. You really, literally have students from almost everywhere. So I'm in this situation where it's incredibly diverse, and it truly leads to new conversations and different ways of engaging with how you teach Ancient History and how students relate to certain aspects of Ancient History and I really love it, and… one thing striking in Toronto, and I mean, it becomes really white, the student crowd here at the graduate level, the Department of Classics is almost exclusively white. I would say most years, the new cohort is entirely white. Yes, there are students from the United States, from Canada, sometimes from Europe, but the diversity you encounter at the undergraduate level is not matched. Something beyond the requirements of their program – something happens that leads a less diverse body of students to enroll in a Classics program at the graduate level. And this is not just an issue in Toronto, I'm sure, this is an issue all across the board. I guess this is, in my view, a symptom of the need for us to reflect more on these issues.

And then another issue that I've experienced has to do with the, let's say, the institutional standards within the field. So I'm going to give you an example. In the summer of 2016, the International Congress of Papyrologists – so people studying papyri – took place in Barcelona. And I organized a panel with my colleagues, Rachel Mairs and Usama Ali Gad, in which we basically proposed an analysis of all the proceedings and all the programs of the 28 International Congresses of Papyrology. So it started in the early 20th century, and we even included the 2016 program in it. And so we analyzed it according to different themes, you know, modern languages of the speakers, and ancient languages of the documents, topics, gender of the speakers, et cetera, et cetera, where the conferences were held, and so on and so forth.

And we tried to have, kind of a – we called it “Inside Out,” you know, after the movie to try [laughs] to have a kind of a psychoanalysis of the field, if you want. And one thing that struck me when I was preparing my part of the panel was that the International Association of Papyrologists to this day has never had at least one Egyptian as a member of its committee. And we are in a field where, let's face it, I mean, I would say if we include the Herculaneum papyri, I would say maybe 95% of the documents come from Egypt. If we exclude them, it's almost everything comes from Egypt. We also have, you know, papyri from, or papyrological documents from other Arab-speaking countries. And there is also a blossoming field now called Arabic Papyrology, 'cause there are a lot of papyri with texts in Arabic. So this is a field where Arabic and the Arab world is present in different ways, and this is a field where there are Egyptian papyrologists, so you know, if there would be a parallel, let's say, association in Greek epigraphy, I would be very surprised that there would never have been a Greek on the board or on the committee, right? Well, that's the case with papyrology and I thought, it struck me as kind of odd, and a bit strange, and likewise, the official languages of the conference are the usual four old European imperial languages, so French, Italian, German, and English, and so at the end of the panel, we suggested that perhaps it would be interesting to consider adding modern Arabic – at least symbolically; I'm not essentializing Arab speakers and saying you know, they would speak in Arabic – I give my talks in English and I'm a French speaker, so. But, you know, I thought, it would make sense, perhaps, to consider this, and why haven't we yet had an Egyptian member on the committee at least?

AVEN: How we think about our discipline doesn't only affect those inside the discipline either, as Rebecca Futo Kennedy knows well. As someone whose scholarly work on race and ethnicity in the ancient world has made her very aware of how it's addressed by the discipline and why that matters.

REBECCA FUTO KENNEDY: I think this whole white supremacy… summer of white supremacists scare has sort of gotten people to realize that the way we talk about this material from the Ancient world, where we see the reception of this material, I mean, I guess I was surprised at how few people actually recognized how much of this reception is embedded in, how much of this is reception of ancient ideas. I guess I thought it was obvious, but [laughs] apparently it wasn't, so, it's been kind of interesting to see this waking up to this complicity of our field, basically, in modern race issues. Whether it's through not recognizing that a lot of these ideas are manipulations that date back to the Classical period, some of them are prejudices, some of them are built on texts that don't have these prejudices, and some of them is just the way we choose to represent this concept of Western civilization and the place of the Greeks and Romans as that foundation and how we teach it.

So, I've sort of been enjoying the fact that other people are [laughs] getting – I don't feel like I'm speaking to the wilderness anymore, so that's why I sort of started the blog up again, because people are actually reading it now, which is a good thing.

MARK: Donna Zuckerberg is another scholar who's been working on these issues for a while now, and she draws a strong connection between the external and internal problems that face Classics today.

DONNA ZUCKERBERG: From where I'm standing right now, and I want to flag this at the beginning, with [laughs] a warning that my own thinking on this topic has been evolving very quickly over the past year. But I see two very large sets of issues which are interrelated more closely than I think that many people in the field would be willing to admit.

So, the first set of issues is this more obviously public-facing question of what is the discipline to do about the fact that white supremacists are so enamored of the Classical world? And that is a question that I've been focusing on in my research, and the book that I've been working on is very – is dedicated to that set of issues. Because even though the ideas that they are using about race in the ancient world are often incredibly superficial, if not flat-out wrong, they are activating ideas about antiquity and whiteness today in a very real, ideologically motivated way.

So that is the first set of issues, and obviously I can talk a lot more about that. But the connected set of issues that I think are spoken about less, is how white supremacy works within the discipline of Classics itself. So, the fact that the overwhelming majority of classicists are white, for example. So, there's the study of, you know, racial diversity in the humanities and Classics is one of the fields that is the least diverse. And then all of the factors that play into that: the fact that we still very much – we value study of Latin and Greek, which is wonderful, that's one of the things that makes our discipline special, but also there's this ideal of this student that's been studying Latin and Greek since middle school or high school, and that student is always sort of politically white. Of course, it doesn't have to be that way. If people in the field were to sort of sketch out their ideal student, I think you would find that demographically, the kind of students they're talking about are well-off students who go to fancy private schools and have the kind of affluence where maybe they've travelled to Greece and Italy a few times already.

AVEN: And this idea of white ownership of the discipline is borne out by the experience that Usama Ali Gad has had, learning and teaching Greek and Latin studies in Egypt.

USAMA ALI GAD: So, if you told me what is my view about the Classics now, I will tell you that I feel marginalized, myself and my students. Even in Egypt it's so, because I teach the students in Arabic; I am teaching them in a department called Ancient European Civilization. So, this is something, you know, to teach the students Classics as exclusively European – that bothers me, you know, because Classics, I believe – at least, this is what I believe, is not only European, it's a world heritage, it's a human heritage, you know. The Greek and Roman heritage in Islam and Arabic is – it's a common heritage, between us and Europe. How come this is only European? But actually, this is the most dominant view in Egypt, and all over the world, so I'm quite uncomfortable with this idea.

Yeah, it's exclusively European, you know, even here in Egypt, and I say that, my students, they tend to tell me that, “How come this heritage is our heritage? We are – our heritage is Arabic and Islamic heritage, not the Greek and Latin, you know?” And I began to go onwards saying that philosophy has been translated into Arabic, the Greek philosophy has been translated into Arabic. Almost all non-secular literature has been translated into Arabic you know, a vast period.

And even today, in the modern period literature, you know, the Iliad is translated into Arabic – has just been translated into Arabic by classicists, you know, without an intermediate language, directly from Greek. So, now we have all the Classics, Greek and Latin – I mean, not all of it, but, I mean, the literature, the non-secular, the philosophy… so why to call it exclusively, or to view it as exclusively European? That's something that others made.

MARK: And that, in Katherine Blouin's view, is symptomatic of the larger problem in Classics.

KATHERINE BLOUIN: See, myself, I wouldn't have used the term race from the start in this. Not that it's not an important issue – it is – but I think the notion of race is intimately linked to other dynamics like nationalism, or if we go more broadly and more back in time as far as the origins of Classics and other disciplines related to antiquity and the medieval world are concerned, imperialism. And so, I would say that there's a close relationship between the development of racial theories and the development of European imperialisms, if we go back to the 18th and 19th century and so the disciplines kind of emerge within a very particular geopolitical context. And… I've come to realize, much more acutely these past couple of years, actually, that contrary to other disciplines, if we talk more specifically of Classical Studies – but I would say it applies to Egyptology and Papyrology, which I know quite a bit as well – and the fields have not decolonized themselves properly, and I mean, I have colleagues in the social sciences who would argue that even the disciplines like Anthropology are still not, you know, they've done a little decolonization effort a few decades ago, but there are still a lot of issues, but there certainly is a very conservative trend within the discipline, and much less awareness of where we're coming from and what are the issues pertaining to holding on to a certain old-school conception of scholarship.

And such conception can also still materialize even when under surface. People can, you know, pick certain topics that have more to do with social history, or you know, with multiculturalism, and yet, a lot of the fundamentals within the field are still very Eurocentric, are still very much articulated around a conception that the Greek and Roman worlds are the roots of “the West,” between quotation marks for whatever it means, and in general it means, you know, the white world, which is, you know, less and less defensible a construct nowadays. So I would say that the inability so far in the field of Classical Studies at large to properly engage with its relationship with imperialism is really a central issue. And it is certainly not disconnected from the question of race.

So it has a lot of repercussions. It has repercussions in the way the general public sees us, in the way the ancient world is portrayed in mass media, and in different TV channels, and in movies, which is not sometimes… some things, you know, can be entertaining, but there are subtexts too that are problematic. It has implications in who will want to enroll in our undergraduate classes, and before that, how are students trained in high school? What are they learning? Why do they end up in undergraduate classes? Who will then find it worth their time to actually enroll in grad programs in Classics? And so, ultimately you end up with a field that is, at the upper levels, much less diversified still than other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences.

This fetishization of greatness in ancient civilizations and this idea of civilization comes with this idea that there's a certain degree of cultural accomplishment, but that is often articulated around geopolitical and military greatness. So the idea of empire is always either looming close, or really at the heart of what makes the Classics: it's Athens at its peak, it's the Roman Empire – not the Roman, you know, not Archaic Rome, not what is now Late Antiquity but was called in French, not too long ago, Bas Empire: so, the Lower Empire that was starting to be a bit too mixed and too complicated to be considered great. There is this kind of mirrored effect between the modern or contemporary world that's so articulated more than it likes to think around imperial pursuit and power relationships on a geopolitical level, and this kind of quest of seeing where this is coming from, and how do we relate to these ancient peoples, but according to the same metrics of power and imperialism, well, by doing so you evacuate so much complexity, and you really, literally whitewash whole areas of what the Ancient Mediterranean, the Ancient Near East, and the ancient world in general was about, which was a world incredibly diverse! Linguistically, ethnically, on all levels with so much interconnectivity. So, so much movement of peoples, of goods, of ideas, of religious, trans practices, beliefs… this idea that there's “a Greek world” itself can be highly criticized and has been criticized.

So there is something problematic with this biological model of what the classical world was; there is something problematic with calling it the “classical world” in itself. And ultimately, as long as we won't face this properly, I think we will increasingly face difficulties in justifying why such ancient history still matters today. I think we have come to a point where it's truly about being able to properly articulate our raison d'être. And these issues are also posing this very question: that as long as you hold onto this idea that, “oh, the Classics are relevant 'cause it's the root of us today,” – 'us' the West, which is you know, by definition considered still to be overwhelmingly white – as long as you hold onto this, you like, you put your head in the sand, but once you actually start to – it's like if you go in therapy, a lot of people don't like to go to therapy because it's destabilizing; there are aspects of yourself you don't want to look at, but then once you start to dig, it's like a rabbit hole of readjustments, it can be painful and it's difficult, so it's just sometimes easier not to look the other way, right, and to pretend that everything is fine. So I feel like, you know, Classics needs therapy right now.

AVEN: This vision of the ancient world as only great and a model for western civilization can also come at the price of honest scholarship, as Dimitri Nakassis discusses in talking about how Greekness has been defined in the past.

DIMITRI NAKASSIS: You sweep certain kinds of evidence under the rug, you know, because you've decided it's not important, or it's not normal, you know? Like, sure, Pericles' father helped to crucify a guy and stone – you know, that's how Herodotus ends, right, or almost ends, famously with Pericles' father and the Athenians, and these local… are they Sestos, I think? They stone the son of a Persian while he's being crucified. It's like, “Yeah, but you know, the Greeks didn't really do that, that's the kind of thing Xerxes does, right?” Like, “Greeks would never do such a thing.” Yeah, I've given talks where I talk about the problem of doing this kind of black-and-white analysis, and people will stand up and they're like, “I think you're talking about a lot of exceptions, but the rule is different.” It's like, well, I mean, I can name a lot of communities that, you know, democratic Athens was all too happy to see destroyed, and the same thing for oligarchic Sparta, right? Here, look what Argos does in the 5th century, you know? There's like, swallowing – destroying communities and swallowing them up. So, Mycenae is destroyed, Tiryns is destroyed, before that, Asine; you know, we have a certain picture in our mind, and then that sort of itself reinforces over time, yeah.

MARK: So, to return to the basic problems, Rebecca Futo Kennedy lays out the issues in the field, and how this has grown out of reactions to societal changes, and Dimitri Nakassis expands on the anachronistic and ahistorical views of race that have developed in the last few decades.

REBECCA FUTO KENNEDY: I see it as a – it's a combination of problems, right? One is the fact that we have a statistically insignificant representation of people of colour in the field itself, whether that's Classics, Ancient History, Medieval Studies, even in things like Early Christian Studies, Late Antiquity, you know, it sort of runs the gamut. We tend to have a lack of representation, and this is in part – there's a couple of dynamics that go on, I think, that have led to that, and part of it is, one: how we actually represent and study the ancient world, how we present it to the public. It's having been tied very intensely to, in the United States in particular, to the Straussian school and to neo-conservative thought, to people like Victor Davis Hanson; there's sort of promotion of a certain way of viewing the world, and this idea of “Western civilization” as something that precedes the Cold War, which if you've ever listened to Kwame Appiah's Reith Lectures, he gives a really nice overview of this sort of development of the concept of “Western civilization” as a product of the Cold War, so that it's not something that dates back to the Crusades, and other things, at least in terms of Western civilization.

So that sort of self-presentation of the field, I think, when the field started going into crisis in the 70s, in part because it started feeling in the late 70s and 80s under attack from the left for being this sort of bastion of whiteness, yeah, elitism and, and sort of exclusionism, and, you know, they're not wrong, right? The way that Greek and Latin has traditionally been used as a gatekeeper into higher education in colonial structures, et cetera. There were a number of scholars who did say, “Hey, you know, look, actually, there's this whole world of the ancient world that we don't normally present the study of, we could open that up [laughs] and make the field more inclusive by showing people that there is this whole world of antiquity that is not, you know, Plato and Cicero – and instead they sort of doubled down and hitched their world to this Western civilization narrative. There's a reason why we have a statistically insignificant representation of people in the field of colour, in part because of how Classics has presented itself and really since the 50s, but really sort of in the 70s and 80s, in crisis mode as a way to “save the field” has tried to show how it's – they've sort of bought into this narrative of Western civilization.

And so I think those are sort of two of the main problems that we faced and every time Classics goes into a crisis, it has to try to figure out how, once again, to reinvent itself, but part of that reinvention has not necessarily included the opening up of the actual source material that we study to a larger canon. The fact that we're still having this conversation right now in 2017 about things like polychromy, about things like, “what is the value of studying race and ethnicity in the ancient world?” You know, we just got, after decades of Barbara McManus trying, we just finally got women and gender as a recognized category of research by the SCS. [laughs] Like, you know, why are these areas still considered marginal when there's decades of scholarship to show that there's so much more there?

And of course, hooking ourselves to this academic kind of concept of Western civilization has left us wide open to the political use of the field outside of academia, and we haven't done much – the other dynamic, of course, is that credit isn't given for popular work and popularizing. So we've left the field in the hands of people who are willing to use it for ends that we may not agree with. And there's been a general fear of the fundraising wing of the SCS and other people to alienate those elements. I think we're in a moment now where they're not afraid to do that anymore – at least to an extent. So that's a good thing.

DIMITRI NAKASSIS: The thing that has concerned me the most, I guess, recently thinking about this, is the extent to which people in Classics and people outside of Classics conceive of the discipline as being a discipline about dead white men. And that's something that I had even internalized myself, so, you know, I sort of felt self-conscious sometimes, talking to people about being a classicist and the extent to which that meant that I was studying dead white men. But obviously, the idea of whiteness is a construction; it's a construction that's changed a lot even in the last hundred years, so something I like to point out to Greek-Americans or Greek-Canadians is that a hundred years ago, Greeks coming to North America were definitely not considered white. They were definitely considered a dangerous population, a marginal population, it was a lot of men – a lot of young men coming to the US and Canada without families, you know, there were race riots – there was a race riot in Toronto against Greeks. I think we're coming up on the 100th anniversary of that race riot. The Greeks and Romans weren't white [laughs] but it's very difficult to disentangle them from that, I don't know, that sort of strain: the straight line that people like to draw between the Greeks, the Romans, Medieval Europeans, you know, I guess the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and then Western civilization as a sort of more general concept.

It's so pervasive in the way that people think about the field, and the field, in the past, has benefited from that relationship, right? That Classics as a field can say, “Well, if you want to understand where we really come from, you have to come with us.”

So, I think, you know, that it's hard to break that association inside the discipline because people are probably reluctant to see that ground, and it can be difficult to break that relationship outside of the discipline because it's so hard for people not to think in terms of Greece and Rome being the sort of bedrock foundation of everything that we consider sort of “European,” and “Western.” So, that's the thing that sort of exercises me the most is thinking about ways to sort of draw attention to that as a problem. You know, in my teaching, and the way that I talk to the general public, that kind of stuff.

AVEN: Traditional views of what counts and what doesn't, what is taught, what is translated, and what is important – those shape the perception of the ancient and medieval world and therefore the construction of the Modern world. Most of the people we talked to had similar concerns about the both the internal construction of their discipline and about the way history is used and misused for ideological purposes. Here are some of their thoughts, beginning with Damian Fleming.

DAMIAN FLEMING: The perception of the subject which we study, as people who study the Middle Ages, that there's something non-racial about what we study – as if questions of race did not exist in the Middle Ages, or that there's no materials to study in the Middle Ages, because of this misperception of the white Middle Ages, or of Europe before the colonial period being this quote-unquote “more European” kind of place, where there's… homogeneity, yeah, somehow, that there's like a “Europeanness” which is, and again I need lots of scare quotes, which is somehow, like, “pure European.” This is the perception and the misperception: it was different back then, let's say. So, that's one issue is kind of addressing that, and being aware of that – as scholars of the Middle Ages, and how collectively don't necessarily do a good job – or I guess on the one hand, not even being aware that this is a potential problem, so that there are people – you know, people of white nationalist agendas, Nazis and neo-Nazis, who like to look to their version, their imagined version of the European Middle Ages, and imagine it kind of the way I described, this misperception, and then use that misperception to support their ideologies.

Among scholars of the Middle Ages, I think it's become pretty evident the last year or so that many, many of us – we're not fully aware of how frequently this happened, or that it was happening at all, and therefore we're just going about our business teaching medieval literature, medieval history, and not explicitly discussing issues of race, or issues of other types of diversity – not because we bought into this ideology, or this misperception of the past, just because we didn't necessarily see it as something we needed to talk about. And more recently, on the one hand, these types of ideologies – white supremacist ideologies – have become way more, I don't want to say prevalent, but more out in the open, way more visible, in a way that – and scholars, especially the Middle Ages, certain scholars of the Middle Ages have sort of stepped up, and stepped in, and said, “Look, this is what they're doing with the time period that we study, and we have an obligation to address it, you know, directly.”

So that doing nothing, like teaching Medieval Studies, teaching medieval literature, as if it were some apolitical neutral subject can actually feed into these types of ideologies, which I think you know, we – I can't speak for all scholars, but I would surely think a vast majority of us repudiate these types of ideologies. But by not actively engaging and being aware of how this material is being used, we're kind of choosing a side.

I guess they kind of come together. The one issue's the perception of what the past was like, whether or not it was a time when discussions of race and different types of diversity are irrelevant. And again, I think that most scholars of the past, if pressed, would say, “Well, of course these issues are relevant, like, we've all kinds of texts talking about difference in all kinds of ways: language difference and cultural difference and even racial difference.” And then, yeah, the very closely-related issue is the active use of this time period to promote these racially based ideologies in the 21st century.

DONNA ZUCKERBERG: A lot of the texts about the Classics that influenced white supremacists were written earlier in the 20th century. I've been rereading Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way* and *The Roman Way*, for a different project, and it's just amazing the way she talks about sort of “the Eastern Way.” Yeah. So that is what we're dealing with in terms of what has shaped the non-specialists', you know, enthusiasts' reading of the ancient world, including these white supremacist, non-specialist enthusiasts. And because that's sort of our disciplinary legacy, I think that the current practitioners of the Classics discipline have even more of an obligation to work to combat. So it's not enough simply to not perpetuate those ideas.

USAMA ALI GAD: I have seen that there's still a dominant idea of the centrality, you know: there's a center and there's a periphery. And as I am in Egypt, so I am living in the periphery, but there is a center for that knowledge production and all these things, you know, but this is not true. We are consuming knowledge, and we are also producing it in Arabic, yes, it goes unrecognized, yes, but it is still there. Someday maybe it will be recognized, you know.

DIMITRI NAKASSIS: I mean, I know when I teach Greek history, for example, I don't really teach Hellenistic history in a significant way. I mean, there are good reasons for that too, I mean, it's much harder to – you know, everything kind of goes crazy after the Peloponnesian War, it's much harder to provide students with a coherent narrative. So, you know, there are reasons for that too, but the periodization we still use is Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic, right? And so that presumes a certain kind of development and puts value judgments on those different periods. So, you know – and then if you look at the sort of institutional structures of Classics and Classical Archaeology, they tend not to presume a knowledge of Modern Greek, and they tend not to presume that knowledge of Modern Greek is very useful, so, you know, if you look at the language exams that graduate programs require, the standard is still kind of French and German; those were the exams I took when I was in grad school. I suppose if I'd made a fuss, I could have insisted that Modern Greek count, but, you know, I need to learn German and French and Italian, so I wasn't going to, you know, insist.

But if you think about that, if you think about the way that traditionally – I mean, this isn't the case any more – but the past 30, 40 years, you had to take an Ancient Greek exam to get a fellowship at the American School, but knowledge of Modern Greek didn't count at all, didn't matter. I mean, it used to, back in the old, old days – they would give exams in Modern Greek – but, you know, the structures of the institutions that sort of shape our field tend not to pay a lot of attention to Modern Greek. And the assumption is if you want to learn it, you can kind of do it on your own time.

And this has to do with the fact that Greece is – and this is not just the way Europeans and Americans think about Greece, but the way Greeks think about Greece as a kind of split, as both European and both not European. As a place that has either been colonized directly, or sort of indirectly colonized. You know, the first – the king of Greece was Bavarian. So, and yeah, you know, there's this kind of split between associating with the classical past, associating with the Byzantine past, conflating those in some kind of weird ways.

One of my favourite stories to tell is a story my dad told me, that my dad – who's Greek, who grew up in Athens – went to go see the shadow puppets with his father, my grandfather. And so there's a dragon that's ravaging the land, and the local pasha says, “Whoever can kill the dragon will receive half of my kingdom, marry my daughter, and receive the rest of the kingdom when I die.” And Alexander the Great comes on a white horse and kills the dragon, and the pasha says, “Oh, well, here's my daughter, all that stuff.” And Alexander says, “Thanks but no thanks, because I was born a Christian, and I'll die a Christian,” and that's the end of the play. [laughs] And my grandfather was outraged by this, you know? This, like… ahistorical conflation of Greekness with Christianity, so much so that Alexander the Great becomes a Christian. But there's a complexity there; yeah, it's sort of difficult to untangle.

The other example I was thinking of is something that's closer to my interests. So I work on the Late Bronze Age, primarily, and when Linear B was deciphered and it was determined that Linear B was used to write an early form of Greek, you might have expected people to draw a straight line between the Late Bronze Age and later Classical Greece, let's say. But what actually happened was something quite different, which was that people realized, “Oh, you know, the structure of this society is quite different from what we get in Homer,” say. And so you have someone like Moses Finley giving an interview to the BBC, and the first thing he says to the interviewer is, “The most important thing about the Mycenaeans is that they were not Greeks.” And the reason they're not Greeks, according to Finley, even though they're Greek speakers, apparently: they don't have a connection to what we think of as being distinctively Greek.

And so what he says – and you know, he's not entirely – he's not wrong about this, in some ways – but what he says is that the Mycenaean world looks much more to the East, to the Ancient Near East, than it does to Iron Age Greece. So, that's another way in which Finley has decided – he's not alone in this, right, he's decided that what's important about studying the ancient world, the ancient Greek world – it's like, democracy and philosophy and an economy which is primarily focused around markets, and private individuals, and so the Mycenaeans are not Greeks because they don't have anything to do with that.

I mean, I think he's wrong about all of those things [laughs] actually, but on the basis of what he knew in the 1950s, yeah, and what he knew about the Ancient Near East too, right – I mean the Ancient Near East [laughs] is super interesting, and it's not what Finley thought it was – but the fact is that when you decide that the reason to study the ancient Greeks are X, Y, and Z, then certain periods just don't matter anymore, right? So for Finley, the Late Bronze Age kind of doesn't matter anymore. You know, the only reason the Late Bronze Age existed was so that the palaces could be burned to the ground and then we could get to the real stuff.

And I think, to return to the concept of race, Finley's conception was of a “West,” a Europe which is historical and dynamic and values the individual and all of that stuff, and then “East,” which is always already static, and despotic, and all of those things. And so Finley's conception is of an East vs. West, right, and I think partly that's because Finley was a Marxist, and he's probably thinking of the Asiatic mode of production, right, and all of these other ideas you find in Marx and later writers – you know, this strain that Marx picks up that distinguishes between a “dynamic West” and a “static East.” So from my own research, you know, those kinds of distinctions bother me, because I think it's a way of oversimplifying, kind of stereotyping periods within Greek history, in addition to then stereotyping periods and places outside of Greek history.

USAMA ALI GAD: We have in Egypt for example the papyri, the Greek papyri, and I cannot understand how these historical documents are said to be not Egyptian. [laughs] Because it was found in Egypt, you know, written in Greek, okay, that's multicultural for Egypt, you know, but it's historical documents of Egypt. This is not to say that the papyri is something that's exclusively Egyptian; it has a culture value also, but it is a historical document that has been found in Egypt, written in Egypt, and it tells a story of – actually villagers, mostly villagers, you know, and of humans in many places.

MARK: These may not be new issues, but it feels like there's a new urgency to them as Dimitri Nakassis points out.

DIMITRI NAKASSIS: Dan-el Padilla Peralta was in Boulder recently for the Jaipur Literature Festival, and he and Donna Zuckerberg and Johanna Hanink were in a panel called “Living the Classics.” And Dan-el had a really good comment, I thought, that really made me think a lot, and I'm thinking about it still, obviously. He was saying that we need to put Classics to a test, that the challenges of breaking it away from these narratives that we're so comfortable with is a kind of a test of the discipline, and if that discipline survives the test, it'll be all the more vibrant and powerful because of it.

But there's such a temptation to cling onto these old narratives because they're easy for us to repeat, they're easy for people to understand. But the discipline doesn't grow intellectually, it doesn't flourish that way, right? It flourishes if we can put it to the test and really push it, and when it comes out on the other side of that test – you know, assuming that it does, it will really be something whose value will be – we can articulate to a broader community that maybe isn't so enamored of the sort of “rise of Western civilization” narrative. That's a nice way, I thought, of thinking about what it is that some of us are trying to do.

When I teach Classics, you know, I'm an archaeologist and a historian so I tend to historicize, and one of the things I always underline to my students is just the radical difference between our world and their world. So, for example, I talk a lot about – there's this very famous passage where Odysseus is talking to Nausicaa about what a good marriage is, and you're reading along and you're like, “Yeah, this is great!” You know, a man and a woman have the same thoughts and they think alike, and Penelope is Odysseus' intellectual equal – you know that, right, if you've gotten to the end of the Odyssey already and you're reading this again.

And then Odysseus says that a good marriage couple is a source of great joy to their friends and a source of pain to their enemies. And like, all of a sudden you realize, “Oh my gosh, this is a totally different value system,” you know? I don't think anybody would say, “You know what's great about our marriage is our enemies rue the fact [laughs] that we're a couple.” I mean, nobody thinks that way now, so you know, you get these moments in classical texts that feel, I don't know, so modern or timeless or whatever, but then the sort of – the cultural context that produced them is so radically other for us in the 21st century. That tension, I think, is a productive one if we embrace it, we understand it – or try to understand it, anyway, the best we can.

AVEN: As Asa Mittman said at the beginning of this episode, one of the real triggers for many of us to think about these issues has been the growing public profile of white supremacist movements and their seeming fascination with the Middle Ages and the ancient world. Donna Zuckerberg explains how she stumbled onto the early stages of these developments because of her online journal *Eidolon*, which publishes articles about Classics in the modern world, and watched the connection between Classics and the alt-right grow.

DONNA ZUCKERBERG: So, I launched *Eidolon* in April 2015, but in August 2015 we published an article that was, for a very long time, our most-viewed article ever, called “Why is Stoicism Having a Cultural Moment?” by Chiara Sulprizio, and it was a really interesting article about the neo-Stoicism movement, and I was looking at the traffic for the article, and then sort of using analytics to find out where the views were coming from, and I discovered this weird spike that was coming from Reddit. So this particular Reddit spike was coming from the Stoicism subreddit. And the Stoicism subreddit – which I think currently has 40,000 subscribers, so Stoicism is, in fact, having a cultural moment. There was a thread where people were talking about the article, and not everybody agreed with it. A lot of people were taking issue with the fact – they were saying that this is not so much a rise of Stoicism as a sort of renaissance after a dormant period; that stoicism was never really out. But one person had a comment – all the way at the bottom because it had been downvoted a whole bunch of times – about how the rise of Stoicism was due to interest from the Red Pill movement. So the Red Pill is a community of men who have had their eyes opened, Allegory of the Cave style, to the fact that men are oppressed in our society. And at the time, it was very much along this gender axis. It was very much about men, and the “manosphere” was an almost synonymous term for the Red Pill community at the time. Men's rights activists, pick-up artists, men going their own way, all those groups.

So I read this, and my first thought was, “Well, that's weird,” because Stoicism and the Red Pill movement don't seem like an obvious pairing. Most people would think of men's rights activists as being a pretty angry group, and that's not inaccurate. Anyway, so I started looking into this strange interest, and along the way I also discovered that the pick-up artist community is quite into Ovid – that was when I started studying this topic. And then I started writing my book about it, about Classics and the Red Pill, in late 2015.

So, over the course of 2016, I guess I was visiting these websites on a pretty regular basis to do research for the book, and I saw this gradual, but definite shift from mostly anti-feminist rhetoric to white supremacy, culminating, obviously, in the election of President Trump. That tracks with how this movement works. So, the group grows gradually over time, but also there are events which are sort of considered larger-scale events that “redpill” a whole bunch of men, who are then brought into the community. But then gradually, the specific hatred or bias of the community can shift. It's not specifically a movement about feminism or anything else. So, Gamergate in 2014 was a really big Red Pill moment for a lot of young men, and then various other events, but obviously the 2016 election was a big one. And then sometimes you see this rhetoric come up with, you know, the Google Memo, and Google firing the author – there's a lot of rhetoric about this group, they were “redpilling” a whole generation of men.

So that is how I became aware of white supremacy in Classics, yes. I had been already working on that for about a year before the election, and that was I think when other people started becoming more aware. Because that project, when I was working on it, when I used to speak to my colleagues about it, I would get a lot of comments to the effect of, “Huh, well that's interesting.” Or maybe, “Better you than me.” Or, “Don't you think if we just ignored these guys they'd go away,” that sort of thing. And then after the election, the tone of how people responded to my work became much more like, “Well, this is so important.”

MARK: The interaction of these groups with the Middle Ages is often mediated through “medievalism,” the reworking of Medieval Europe in fantasy in particular. And this creates a particular set of problems because of the roots of modern fantasy, which are grounded in Medieval Studies, but in a very particular view of the European Middle Ages, as Helen Young explains.

HELEN YOUNG: I think medievalists, and I think scholars in general, are used to and have worked quite hard to make it seem like their discipline is separate to what happens in popular culture, what happens in mass culture, and I think that division is not nearly as clear as we would perhaps like it to be sometimes. So for me, the really key figure you can never get away from in either Medieval Studies or fantasy is Tolkien, whose work is so influential in popular culture versions of the Middle Ages. Certainly in fantasy, but his sort of vision of the Middle Ages is one that really, I think, has shaped popular culture, medievalism in general, even outside that genre. And it was built, really on the scholarship of the 19th century, which was really openly and overtly… what now just reads like straight-out white supremacy when you go back and look at some of the texts from the mid-to-late 19th century that were absolutely standard Medieval Studies texts and really shaped how – certainly how people in the academy thought about language, thought about history, but then also how the general public thought about medieval language and history, because a lot of these texts were used in both spaces. They're very much tied up in arguments that… particularly that English is a language that's superior or more advanced than anything else, and they really openly engaged in imperial projects, in colonial projects, in racist views of the world.

And a lot of popular culture – not just through Tolkien, but he's sort of the one that everybody knows about – draws on that vision of the Middle Ages as being a whites-only space. And that's really what you get just layered over and over and over through fantasy, so it becomes a conventional thing, and then the convention gets repeated, and even though when you look at some fantasy novel from the 80s, it's really a long way from medieval history. There are particular tropes, I guess, that – you can trace these particular tropes right back into medieval history; you can trace those tropes right back into the historiography of the Middle Ages that's being produced in the west. And the thing that's consistent is that they're whites-only spaces. The only time you ever see a person of colour is as an outsider, usually as an enemy, and that's the vision that is really put into the fantasy genre. So when you start looking at fantasy that does things differently, people stop talking about it as being medievalist. So when you get somebody who writes, imagines a world that is otherwise quite medieval, but the people have brown skin, nobody talks about it as being medievalist. So there's a really strong sort of connotation of whiteness with the medieval to the degree that you call it something else if the people aren't white.

DAMIAN FLEMING: The notion of, like, in a fantasy world based on the Middle Ages – so Tolkien is the easiest default: he was a medievalist, he kind of canonized high fantasy in this particular way. And so when you say, “Why is *The Hobbit* so white, you know, when they make a movie of it?” And people say, “Well that's the way the Middle Ages were, and this is based on the Middle Ages.” Or you know, people have asked us about *Game of Thrones*, and they say, “Well, that's how the Middle Ages were, therefore, that's the way this fantasy literature should be.”

And I mean it's just so – like, two seconds of reflection on that argument makes it so laughable; the notion that diversity in a fantasy world is unrealistic in the same fantasy world that has dragons, and wizards that live for hundreds of years, and various races of humanoid peoples – that all of that is acceptable, but the notion of, yeah, racial diversity.

HELEN YOUNG: About as early as, I think it's the 1990s, in *Inventing the Middle Ages*, Norman Cantor writes about Tolkien and Lewis. He says that Tolkien and Lewis' work has more influence on popular ideas of the medieval than any of the other major figures that he's written about in this book.

And that was the better part of 30 years ago now, and before Peter Jackson took up Tolkien's work and did something different with it, but laid on some other racist stereotypes onto Middle Earth. You know, absolutely Lewis is part of that, and Robert Howard was the other author, sort of – the author of Conan – and was really overtly and quite openly racist. You know, he grew up mainly in Texas, was writing in Texas, in the early 20th century, under Jim Crow, and his personal politics were much more overtly racist than, say, either Tolkien or Lewis.

AVEN: So, what happens when scholars of these periods realize or are confronted by the ramifications of their discipline's origins and structural racism? Why is it so hard to talk about these issues or even acknowledge them sometimes?

HELEN YOUNG: You know, I guess a lot of us, sort of before we go into academia kind of absorb that, I don't know, media presentation of universities as a very left-wing space, and all academics are very progressive and left-wing and it's really not true. Dorothy Kim and Eileen Joy have written about the white supremacist connections of Allen Frantzen's work, which are really just, you know, one step away from white extremists. There was a trail in the footnotes that's always been there, but nobody's gone looking. And I think that's one of the things that really – Medieval Studies, I think, has so many problems with race and racism now because historically, it's combined kind of putting its fingers in its ears and shouting “La la la!” and really actively working not to engage with fields that might have shed light on unpleasant things in the history of the discipline and the legacies that are still there.

It is depressing, you know, when you start looking at it: “Aw, but this is the field that I love, and the field that I work in,” and I think that is one of the reasons for some people that it's really hard to come to grips with a problem in the field, because you know, as medievalists we work really hard and we – nobody goes into Medieval Studies to make money, or because they think it'll advance their career. We go into it because we love it, we're interested, we become invested in it, and when somebody starts to say, or when you start to realize, hey, this discipline you love is really structurally flawed… it's very confronting and people can find it very difficult to kind of acknowledge that there's a problem to address, because you feel like, “Well, if my field is racist, does that make me racist? If my field is misogynist, does that mean I'm misogynist? But I'm not like that, so it can't possibly be.”

ASA MITTMAN: They don't want to change the texts, they don't want to change the sources they deal with, they don't want to change the way that they teach the subjects they cover: “Well, I'm not a post-colonialist, why should I have to deal with this issue?”

“Because you're talking to students!” is one good answer right off the bat. I am a post-colonialist, that's sort of been one of the parts of the work that I've been doing for about fifteen or twenty years, so to me, the idea of talking about power imbalances amongst different groups, however they might be artificially divided by concepts like religion or race or nationality, you know, that's been what I've been doing, but there are lots of ways what I have been doing has also not addressed these issues.

One of the things that I really never just thought about in this way – so I, for a long time, referred to myself as an Anglo-Saxonist, which in Art History is a pretty small subcategory of the field, but I did my training, I studied Old English, and I worked on a lot of manuscripts from England, from the 9th, 10th, 11th century, and so it seemed to me a perfectly logical designation. And I did this without any cognizance that to the vast majority of people in this country, Anglo-Saxon means something completely different from what I was using it to mean. It means this artificially-created, constructed, racial group – that is, then, which is the basic function of race – declared superior.

And so, God knows how many times I said to somebody, you know, just some person I met on a plane flight or something, “Oh, what do you do?”

“I'm an Anglo-Saxonist.” God knows what they may have been thinking! So now I've had some conversations with some Anglo-Saxonists and they say, “It is what the period should be called, there's nothing wrong with that, we should call the language that.” I'm sure you're aware there's this interior debate, “Should we call it Anglo-Saxon or call it Old English?” which has been around for a long time, and I've always bought the “We should call it Anglo-Saxon” line of this thinking, because it is a very different language and to call it “Old” implies a sort of teleology that implied that it was a precursor – a necessary precursor that hadn't yet fully developed into its form, its glorious form which is present-day English, so I liked calling it Anglo-Saxon instead – but oh my God, that's less important than making my students think that I support Nazis!

[sputters] We've got to weigh these things on the scales and figure out which things are more important to us, and you know, Chico State is now a Hispanic-serving institution. When I first arrived here ten years ago, I went into my first class I was teaching – and it was a big class, you know, 120 students or something – and I walked in, and I come from Arizona State, it's my first day here, and I walked into class and genuinely, the first thought I had when I looked out at the class was, “Oh my God, everybody's white!”

But that is definitely no longer the case, we're now a Hispanic-serving institution; something on the order of 40-50% of our student body is Latinx, and other students of colour are present in much more robust numbers, and this is a deeply welcome change to the campus, from my perspective. But what it means is, when I get up in front of a group and say, “Oh, I'm an Anglo-Saxonist,” various groups in the room, various people in the room may be hearing this from very different perspectives, and I will no longer allow people to make what they will of that and take from that what assumptions they might. So now I make very clear what I work on, and I define my field in a slightly different way, as if there's some horrible thing in saying instead, “Oh, I'm an art historian and I work on early medieval England.” Really, how hard is that?

MARK: The scale of the problem can seem overwhelming, but Usama Ali Gad says, what that means is that we need to find a way to contribute to larger efforts, come together to start to work with others to make things better.

USAMA ALI GAD: This is a big problem, you know, because it is an institutional problem, not just, “Yes, these words will make us feel good,” but again, what is applicable as you said is the most important thing to do in this regard. And as I can see, it is a problem that is a very deep one, deep-rooted in our institution now. Even in Egypt itself, you know, I feel it's a big problem. In order to introduce these ideas – because the history of the university, the history of the disciplines themselves, you know – either you have studied Arabic or you have studied Classics, but very rarely the two of them, and if you have studied the Classical Arabic you will not have a chance to study the Modern Arabic, the living tradition itself, and so on.

So, I think it is a very big problem which is not exclusively Egyptian or European or Australian; it is now a world problem, a universal problem, of how we view the Classics, how we view our discipline, and the interpretation of our discipline to the culture of the people. So, I think this is something that has to involve all of us beyond our day-to-day activities, which it itself a problem, because we are tenured professors or part-time or whatever we are; we are working in the system that we have to – well as you know, we have families, we have obligations, we have teaching responsibilities, we have this and this and that. But we have a moral obligation, an ethical obligation of how to find the balance. This is very important, and how to gather together in order to do something is very important. By conferences, by workshops, by whatever we are doing now – the available means to do this.

AVEN: And it is to the question of what to do in response to the problems articulated here that we will turn in the next episode. We'll hear about individual experiences in teaching and scholarship, and suggestions for how people can try to work to improve things in small ways and in more structural ways.

So thank you again to everyone who spoke to us: Katherine Blouin, Damian Fleming, Usama Gad, Rebecca Futo Kennedy, Asa Mittman, Dimitri Nakassis, Helen Young, and Donna Zuckerberg. More information about all of them are in the show notes, but in particular, we'd recommend you check out these blogs: *Everyday Orientalism*, to which both Katherine and Usama contribute; *Classics at the Intersections*, by Rebecca; *Aegean Prehistory*, by Dimitri, *Classics in Arabic*, by Usama, and the online journal *Eidolon* edited by Donna. Also, look for Helen's book *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* and Asa Mittman's several books on medieval monsters, including *Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript*. Also, all of them, except Asa, can be found on Twitter – info in the show notes. We especially recommend following Damian at @FW\_Medieval for a wide range of delightful medieval manuscripts and language and more. And finally, we'll be putting a number of links in the show notes to further reading on these topics; in particular the website *The Public Medievalist* has been running an amazing series on Race, Racism, and the Middle Ages, which we highly recommend.

MARK: We'll be back in two weeks with the second part, which hopefully will be a bit more uplifting than this one. Thanks for listening!

AVEN: Bye!

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MARK: Bye!