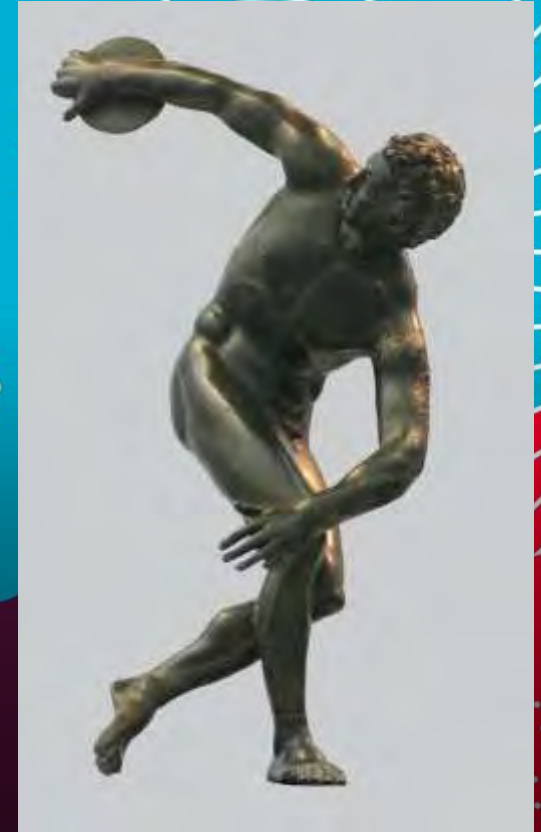


There is no such thing
as the perfect body, and
other lessons we can
learn from the ancient
Greeks...



Dr Marchella Ward, Worcester College, University of Oxford





Who are you?

- Dr Marchella ('Chella') Ward
- Tinsley Outreach Fellow, Worcester College (@WorcCollegeOx)
- Research: ancient disability (and its reception, especially modern ableism); bodies and myth (especially identities / prejudice); drama and spectatorship; classics and coloniality (especially borders and migration); classics and Islam
- Access and equality:
 - Worcester College's most recent intake: of the year group who began their degrees in October 2020, 83% state school, 36% BAME (of whom about 10 students are Black)
 - Decolonisation course
 - Anti-racism and inclusive teaching training



Today

1. Academic taster session
2. Q&A



First things first





Place and identity

There is no such thing as Western Civilisation – Kwame Anthony Appiah (2018)

For the Greek historian Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BC, the world was divided into three parts. To the east was Asia, to the south was a continent he called Libya, and the rest was Europe. He knew that people and goods and ideas could travel easily between the continents: he himself travelled up the Nile as far as Aswan, and on both sides of the Hellespont, the traditional boundary between Europe and Asia. Herodotus admitted to being puzzled, in fact, as to “why the earth, which is one, has three names, all women’s”. Still, despite his puzzlement, these continents were for the Greeks and their Roman heirs the largest significant geographical divisions of the world.

But here’s the important point: it would not have occurred to Herodotus to think that these three names corresponded to three kinds of people: Europeans, Asians, and Africans. He was born at Halicarnasus – Bodrum in modern Turkey. Yet being born in Asia Minor didn’t make him an Asian; it left him a Greek. And the Celts, in the far west of Europe, were much stranger to him than the Persians or the Egyptians, about whom he knew rather a lot. Herodotus only uses the word “European” as an adjective, never as a noun. For a millennium after his day, no one else spoke of Europeans as a people, either.



Α α	Β β	Γ γ	Δ δ	Ε ε	Ζ ζ	Η η	Θ θ
ἄλφα	βῆτα	γάμμα	δέλτα	ἑψιλόν	ζῆτα	ἦτα	θῆτα
alpha	beta	gamma	delta	epsilon	zeta	eta	theta
a	b	g	d	e	z	ē	th
[a/a:]	[b]	[g]	[d]	[e]	[zd/dz]	[ɛ:]	[tʰ]
Ι ι	Κ κ	Λ λ	Μ μ	Ν ν	Ξ ξ	Ο ο	Π π
ιώτα	κάππα	λάμβδα	μῦ	νῦ	ξεῖ	ὀμικρόν	πεῖ
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i	k	l	m	n	ks/x	o	p
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Ρ ρ	Σ σ/ς	Τ τ	Υ υ	Φ φ	Χ χ	Ψ ψ	Ω ω
ῥω	σῖγμα	ταῦ	ὑψιλόν	φεῖ	χεῖ	ψεῖ	ὦμέγα
rho	sigma	tau	upsilon	phi	chi	psi	omega
r/rh	s	t	u/y	ph	kh/ch	ps	ō
[r]	[s/z]	[t]	[y/y:]	[pʰ]	[kʰ]	[ps]	[ɔ:]



The Judgement of Paris

What does it say on the apple?

The Judgement of Paris

Kallistei = for the most beautiful





A Greek riddle

If you look at me, I also look at you. You look with eyes,
but I without eyes – because I have no eyes.

Were you to speak, I would speak, but without a voice: you have a voice
but I have lips that open without sound.



Narcissus

“When my arms reach out to hold you,
you reach out yours too. I smile, and I am sure
that you smile back. I start to cry and tears
flow from your eyes. You nod when I say that
I agree. And when I look at your beautiful lips
I see them slowly repeating each of my words,
but I can never hear you repeat them!”



The problem of perfection

- “Not very politically correct, I know, but the horrible truth is that pretty Greek boys would have swaggered around convinced they were triply blessed - beautiful, brainy and god-beloved. So what made them fit? For years, classical Greek sculpture was believed to be a perfectionist fantasy - an impossible ideal, but we now think a number of the exquisite statues from the 5th to the 3rd Centuries BC were in fact cast from life - a real person was covered with plaster, and the mould created was then used to make the sculpture... The sheer number of mirrors found in Greek graves show that beauty really counted for something. Looks mattered. The Ancient Greeks were, I'm afraid, faceist.” – Bettany Hughes (from an article on the BBC website: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-30746985>)



Misleading assumptions

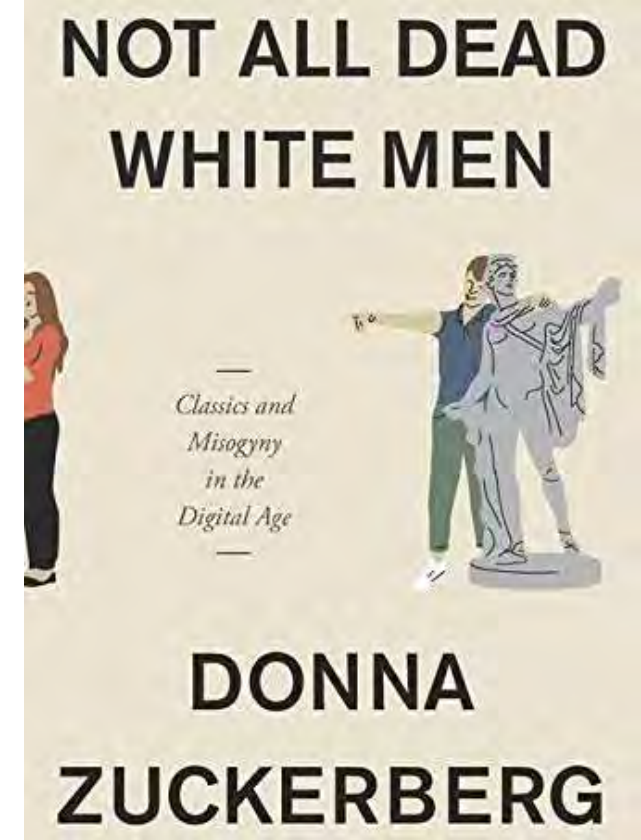
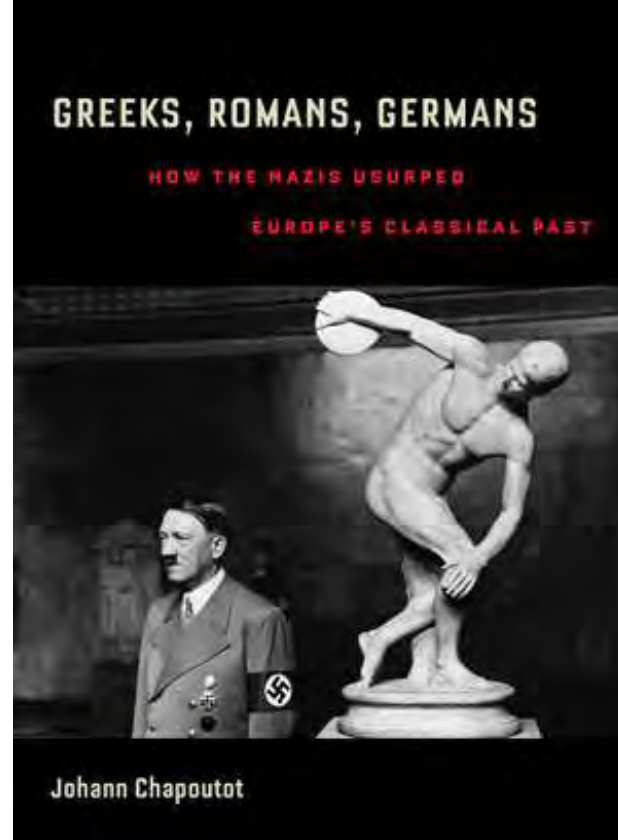
“Let’s take another example, which will come as a surprise to those whose mental image of Homeric Greeks is marble-white. In the *Odyssey*, Athena is said to enhance Odysseus’ appearance magically: ‘He became black-skinned (*melagkhroiēs*) again, and the hairs became blue (*kuaneai*) around his chin.’ On two other occasions when she beautifies him, she is said to make his hair ‘woolly, similar in colour to the hyacinth flower’. Now, translating *kuaneos* (the root of the English ‘cyan’) as ‘blue’, as I have done here, is at first sight a bit silly: most translators take the word to mean ‘dark’. But given the usual colour of hyacinths, maybe – just maybe – he did have blue hair after all? Who knows; but here, certainly, is another example of just how alien the Homeric colour scheme is.”

See: Tim Whitmarsh - <https://aeon.co/essays/when-homer-envisioned-achilles-did-he-see-a-black-man>

Did the Greeks see colours differently to us? <https://aeon.co/essays/can-we-hope-to-understand-how-the-greeks-saw-their-world>



In Homer, the sea is wine-like (*oinos*); pansy-like (*ioeides*); purple (*porphureos*) – but it is never just blue!



Perfection and violence

- A extremely dangerous history of holding up “Greek” perfection as an ideal in (many different contexts) in the modern world.



Valuing difference

The riddle of the Sphinx:

“What walks on four feet in the morning, two feet in the afternoon, and three feet at night?”

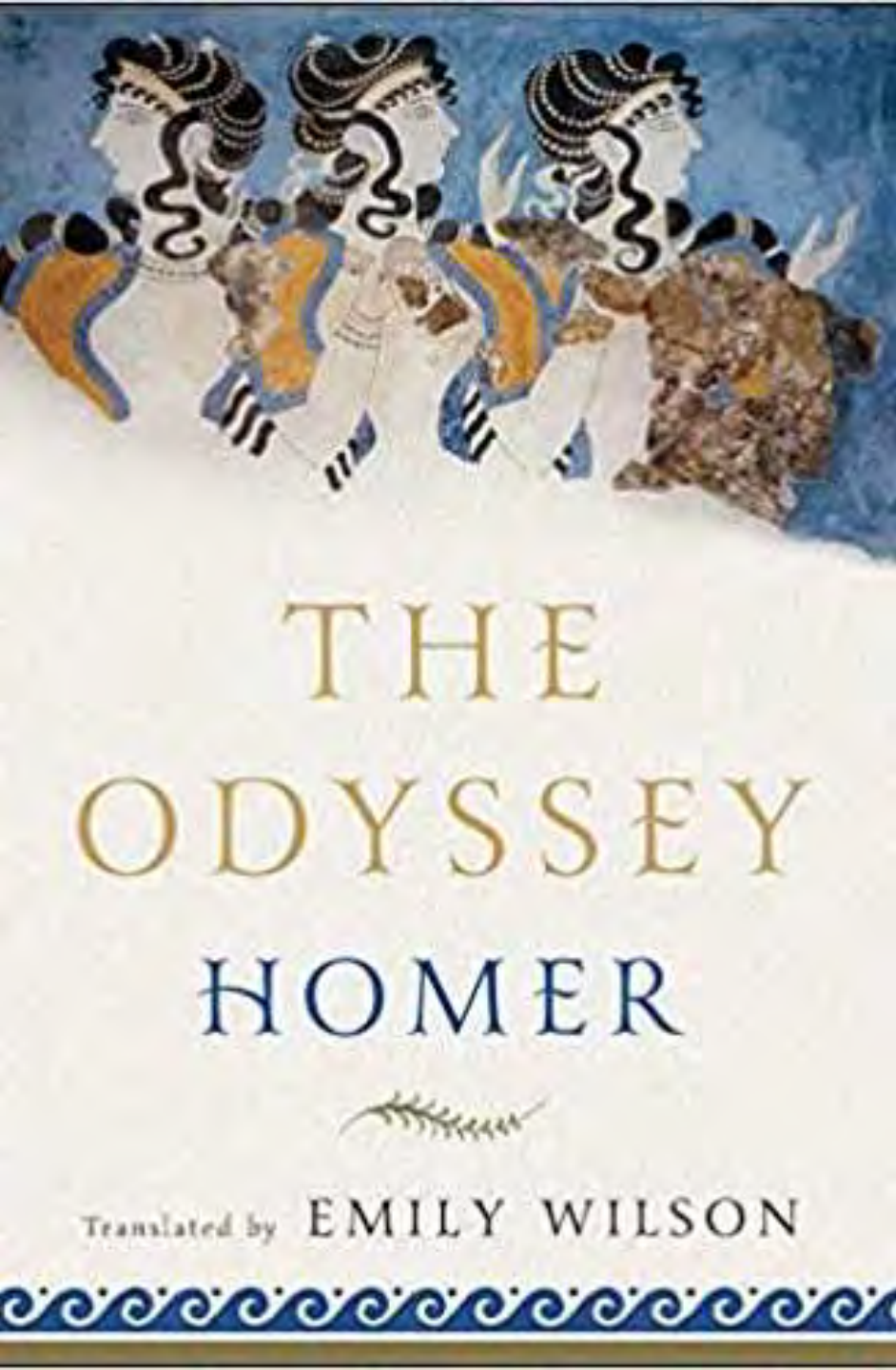
Answer:

ἄνθρωπος (Anthropos = human)

“If Hephaestus has so many stories, why should we believe that he was silenced in ancient Greece? If Hephaestus was so respected, so celebrated as a tradesman and an artist, why should we believe that craft and art, that rhetoric and expression were exclusively the realm of the ‘able-bodied’?... I want to suggest that the world we write (through our histories, our research, in our classrooms) partially constructs disability. So we can see disability as a deficit, or we can recognize potential. I argue for the latter.” – Jay Dolmage

Actaeon: the person on the inside





How Greek is this “Greek ideal” really?

- “I try to avoid importing contemporary types of sexism into this ancient poem, instead shining a clear light on the particular forms of sexism and patriarchy that do exist in the text. Many contemporary translators render Helen’s “dog-face” as if it were equivalent to “shameless Helen”. I have kept the metaphor (“hounded”) and have also made sure that my Helen, like that of the original, refrains from blaming herself for what men do in her name.” – Emily Wilson



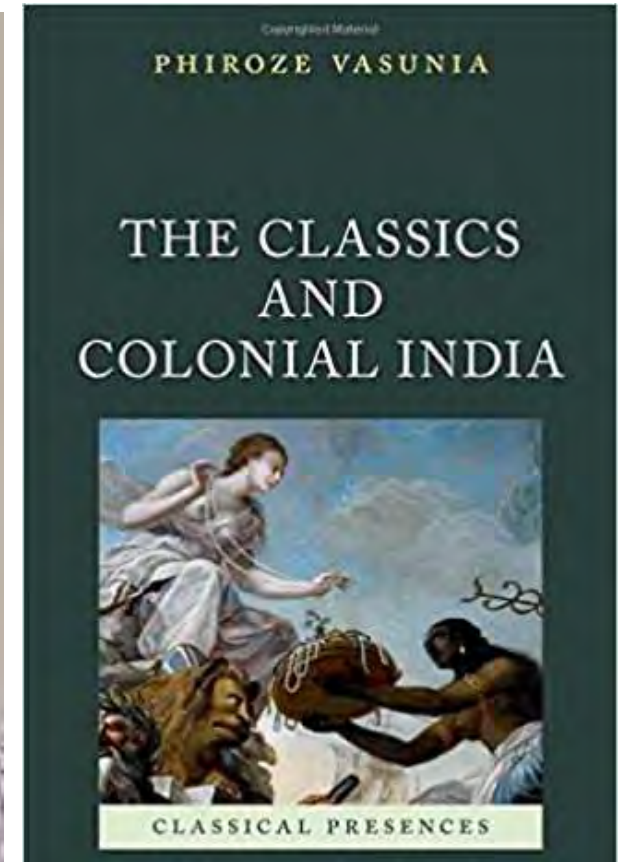
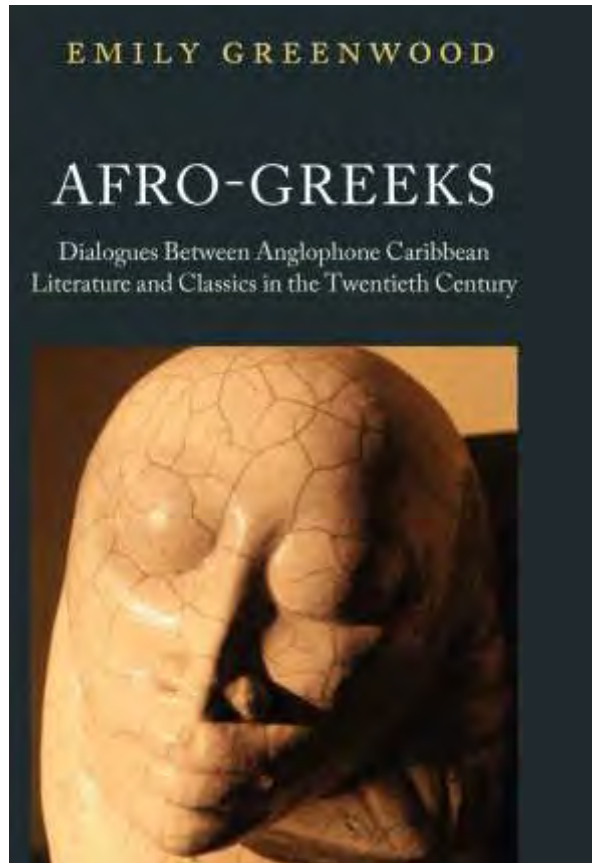
Classics and modern identities

What do you notice about these two buildings?

From *Superior: the return of race science* – Angela Saini (2019)

- “When medical doctor, collector and slave owner Sir Hans Sloane bequeathed the British Museum’s founding collection upon his death in 1753, an institution was established that would come to document the entire span of human culture, in time and space. The British Empire was growing, and in the museum you can still see how these Empire-builders envisioned their position in history. Britain framed itself as the heir to the great civilisations of Egypt, Greece, the Middle East and Rome. The enormous colonnade at the entrance, completed in 1852, mimics the architecture of ancient Athens. The neo-classical style Londoners associate with this corner of the city owes itself to the fact that the British saw themselves as the cultural and intellectual successors of the Greeks and Romans.”
- “Walk past the statues of Greek gods, their bodies considered the ideal of human physical perfection, and you’re witness to this narrative. Walk past the white marble sculptures removed from the Parthenon in Athens even as they crumbled, and you begin to see the museum as a testament to the struggle for domination, for possession of the deep roots of civilization itself. In 1798, when Napoleon conquered Egypt and a French army engineer uncovered the Rosetta Stone, allowing historians to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs for the first time, this priceless object was claimed for France. A few years after it was found, the British took it as a trophy and brought it here to the museum. They vandalized it with the words “Captured in Egypt by the British Army” which you can still see carved in one side. As historian Holger Hooch writes, “the scale and quantity of the British Museum’s collections owe much to the power and reach of the British military and imperial state”.”



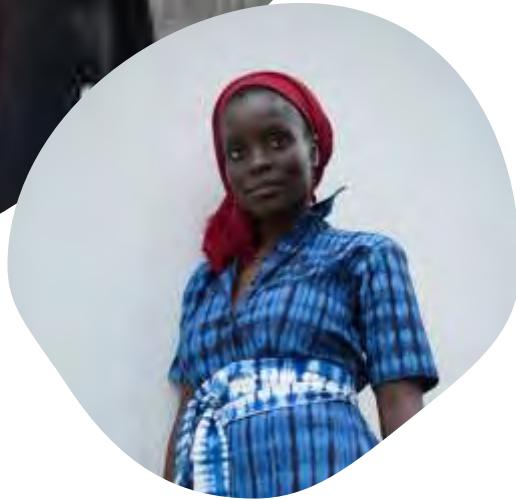
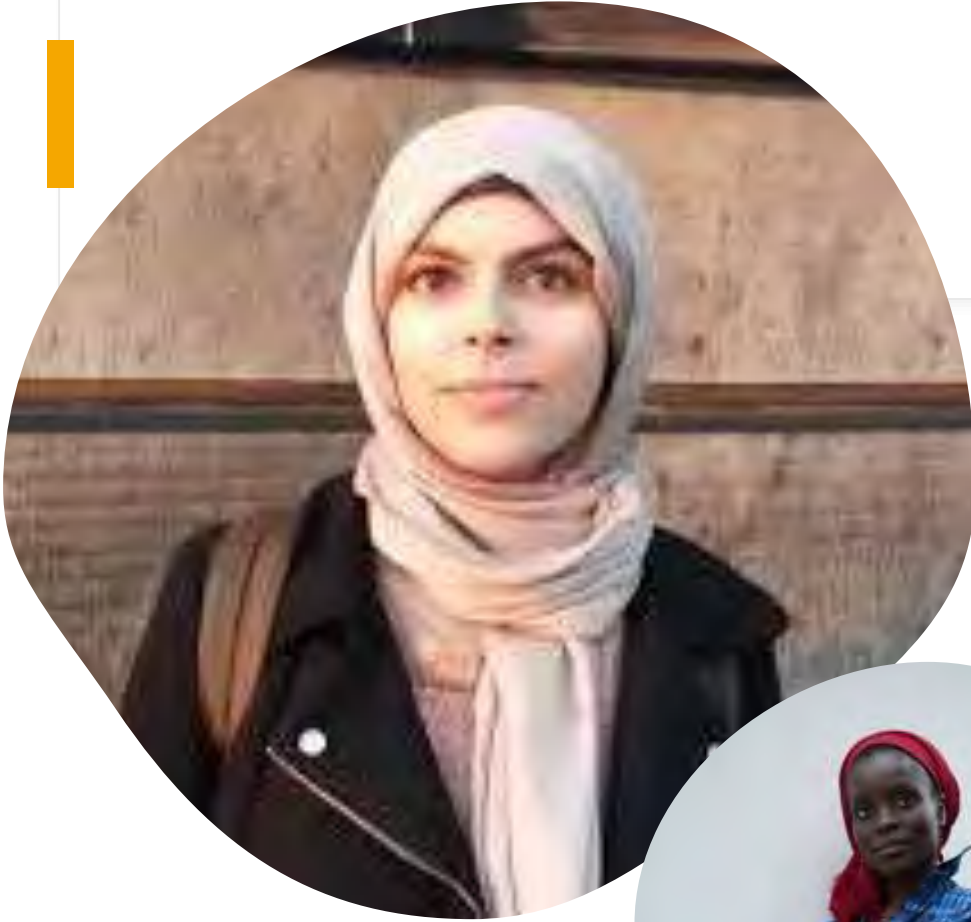


Classics against this narrative

Growing body of work on Classics and coloniality

Rethinking Museums

- “Museums are not neutral in their preservation of history. In fact, arguably, they are sites of forgetfulness and fantasy. The way exhibitions are constructed usually assumes a white audience and privileges the white gaze. The white walls signified the choices of white people, their agency, their museum collections, and the endeavours of colonialists. To many white people, the collections are an enjoyable diversion, a nostalgic visit which conjures up a romanticised version of Empire.
- For many people of colour, collections symbolise historic and ongoing trauma and theft. Behind every beautiful object and historically important building or monument is trauma. As the historian and writer, Nana Oforiatta Ayim has said: “In the British Museum, you have the African galleries, and it’s like, ‘This drum is from 1500 Ashanti,’ but there is nothing else about it. You don’t know what it is used for, what context it’s from, how it was brought here, who stole it. The museum as it exists today is so much an imperialist project and is so much about power”. The craftsmanship, the display case, the beauty of the institution that collects and protects its imperial hoard: the way items are described, the way they are catalogued and what gets shown and what remains hidden; all work to deny, retreat, and forget.” – Sumaya Kassim (2018)





To conclude

- The idea that the Greeks were the originators of bodily perfection has been extremely dangerous
- Not only is this idea deeply political and ideological, but it would have seemed very strange to many Greeks!
- Part of the role of the classicist can be unpicking the ways that power shapes narratives of what the ancient world was like – and how the modern world can be.

superior

the
return
of
race
science

'roundly
debunks
racism's
core be-
reni-
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angela
saini



OXFORD

INVENTING THE BARBARIAN

GREEK SELF-DEFINITION THROUGH
TRAGEDY



The
Subversion
Power
of the
Ancient
Myths

ANTIGONE RISING

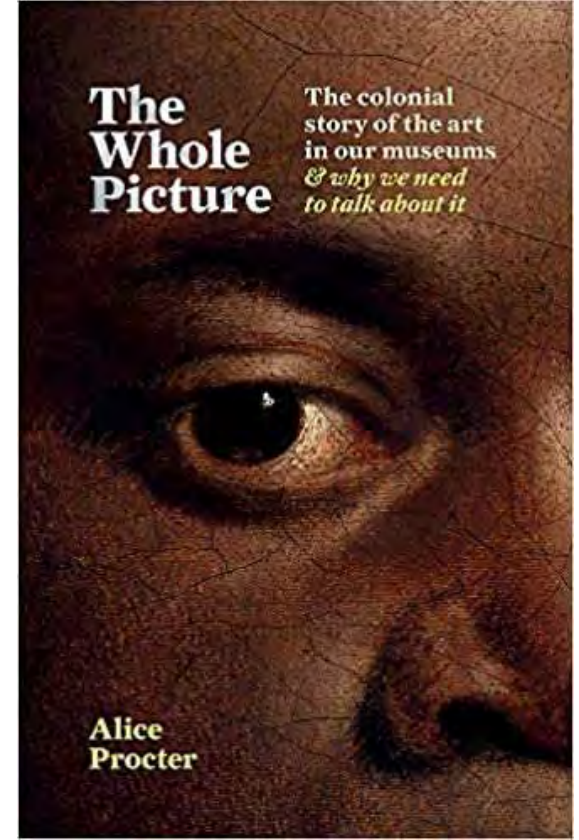
Helen Morales



The Whole Picture

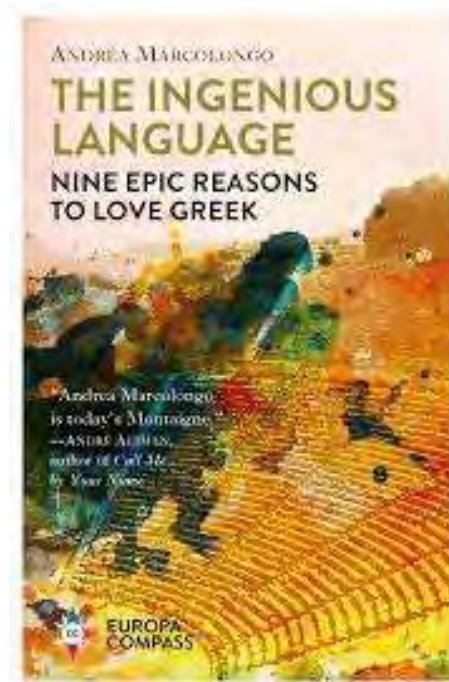
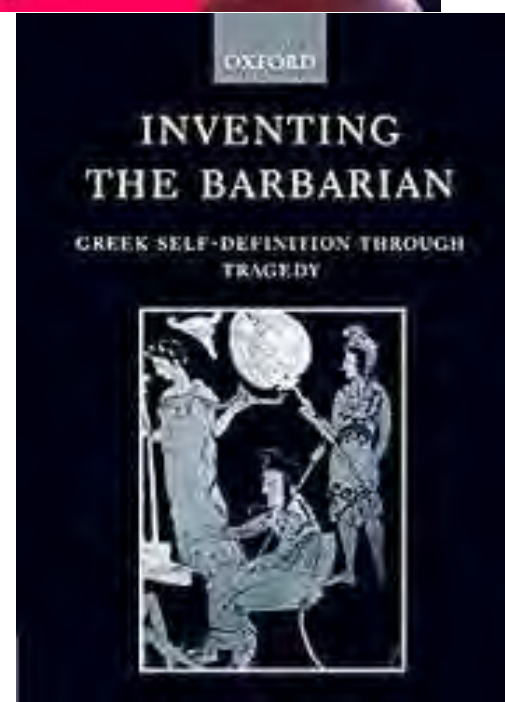
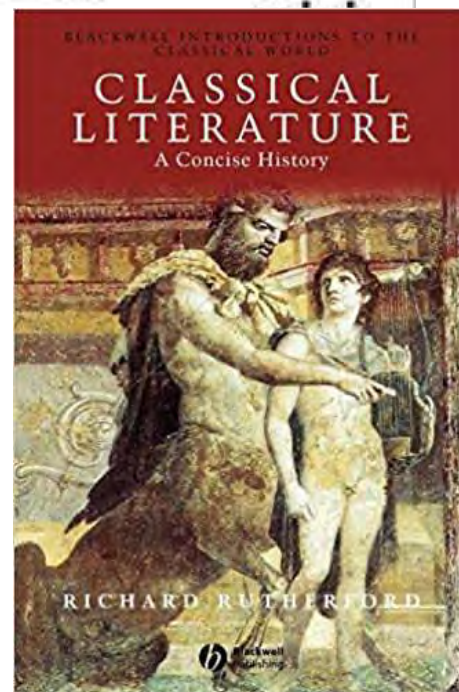
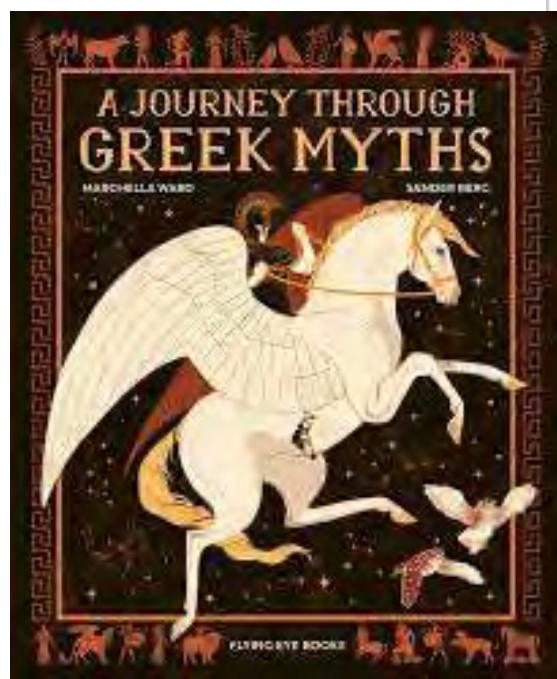
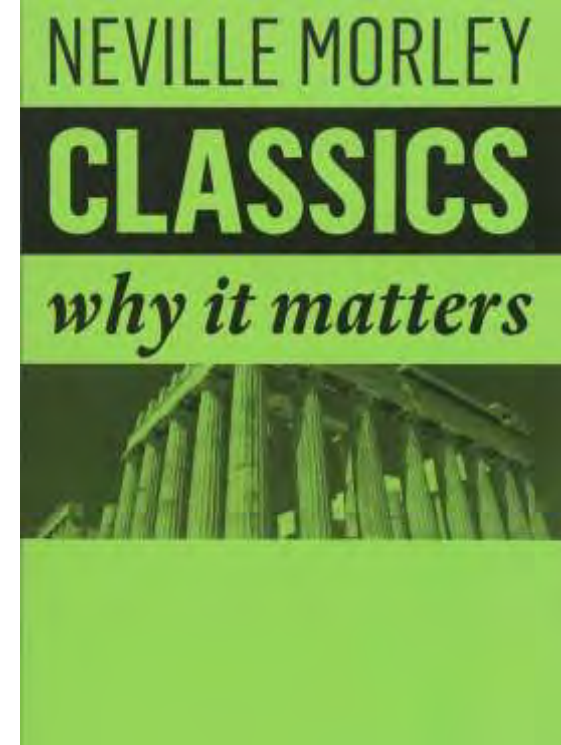
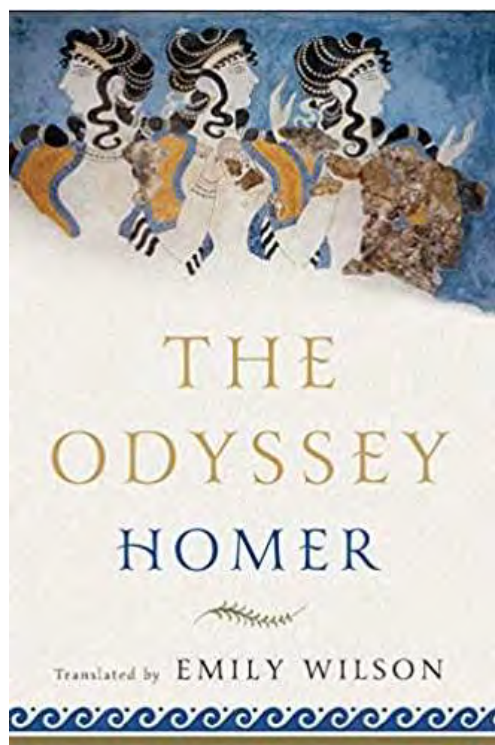
The colonial
story of the art
in our museums
& why we need
to talk about it

Alice
Procter



Further reading

- You can find Edith Hall's *Inventing the Barbarian* for free online:
<http://edithhall.co.uk/books/inventing-the-barbarian>



EIDOLON

Articles About Race & Classics

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Questions?

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