

Humanities, Orature and Classics

This paper delves into the recent history of the teaching of canonical Greek works to consider how Classics courses might align with texts outside the Greco-Roman tradition, and thus be made suitable to a more diverse student population.

In 1992, a grant was received from the National Endowment for the Humanities to train faculty at Howard University to teach a two-semester humanities core course to be taken by all students at the Historically Black College and University. The resulting course – titled “Broad Sympathy” – was structured around two booklets, the course study guides and syllabi corresponding to classes on Orature and Tragedy, accompanied by a paperback reader, *Broad Sympathy: The Howard University Oral Traditions Reader*. All materials were compiled and edited by faculty from the Division of Humanities departments within the College of Arts and Sciences: English, Classics, Philosophy, and World Languages and Cultures.

Driven by the mission of Howard University, to promote the education and achievement of the peoples of the African diaspora, the Humanities courses model a unique approach to the comparison of ancient texts to premodern and modern writings. Orature - taken by the Howard faculty members to mean representations of the spoken word in literature - aligns genres such as epic, dialogue, story-telling, folklore and other conversational forms. The students in the course are invited to journey across almost three millenia, beginning with Homer’s *Iliad* and Plato’s *Apology*, moving forward through West Africa for the charter myth, *Sundiata*, and the anti-colonialist commentary of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, to terminate in the United States with Frederick Douglass’s memories and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

In considering whose voices should be represented from world literature and history, the selection of the Howard faculty reveals how ancient Greek spoken words anticipated yet

facilitate our ability to understand literary and historical readings from Africa and the African diaspora. In the second half of the twentieth century, Classicists inquiring into oral traditional poetry have inevitably constructed their theories and collections upon multicultural foundations, beginning with the Eastern European songs in Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales* through the online journal founded by John Miles Foley, *Oral Tradition*, which houses scholarly articles on oral traditional poetry from around the world. This scholarly line more closely embraced the African diaspora with the research of Roger D. Abrahams, such as *Conversational Genres*, and Viv Edwards and Thomas J. Sienkewicz's *Oral Cultures Past and Present: Rap and Homer*.

In light of the diversity already present in this vast range of oral traditional cultures, a second relevant question arises for Howard faculty and students: What obligations exist for scholars in Classics to maintain the contextual settings of such comparanda? To extract unity from multiplicity is to risk reducing, or at least diminishing, the authenticity of the marginal group(s) when brought into focus against the backdrop of the majority or dominant tradition. To assist students' individual abilities to evaluate these spoken-in-written form texts, the faculty further defined a series of themes applicable to the entire corpus based on societal, material, genealogical, ethical, and philosophical concepts that they deemed critical to the fair and equitable assessment of the texts.

That students at Howard University continue to benefit from these theme-based discussions of such varied readings is a testament to the common efforts of the Humanities professors. It also offers a way forward to new iterations and new comparisons between the known, ancient corpus and a broad range of later humanities texts, a path that all students in the twenty-first century may tread.