Classics, the University, and the Personal Essay:  
Eidolon’s Potential for Social Change

by

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Introduction

What is *Eidolon*, and why study it?

*Eidolon*, founded in 2015 by Donna Zuckerberg, is a free online publication dedicated to making the academic discipline of Classical Studies, or ‘Classics,’ more modern and accessible. Its content is mostly personal essays of 1500-3000 words about the study of Classics. Though the subject matter and tone varies, all of *Eidolon*’s articles have something to do with Classical Studies and many use Classics as a jumping off point to write about current events or phenomena that often have no immediate connection with ancient Greece and Rome. The site houses a wide range of articles, from humor pieces to political manifestos. Its submission guidelines page reads “if your idea might make a good article for a peer-reviewed journal, it probably isn’t right for *Eidolon.*”1 Its essays are often written from a deeply personal and identity driven perspective, which purposefully contrasts to the academic jargon of peer-reviewed journals.

In its first two years, *Eidolon* was primarily concerned with creating a space for writing about Classics for a wide audience. This was the idea that Zuckerberg brought to the Paideia Institute, a nonprofit that she and her fellow graduate students started in 2010. The mission of the Paideia Institute is to “promote the study of the classical humanities through academic programming abroad, US-based outreach, publications, and digital initiatives.”2 The Paideia

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Institute provided the initial institutional support for Eidolon and was a collaborator of the journal’s in its first two years.³ In 2017, Eidolon separated from the Paideia Institute and rebooted itself, releasing a new mission statement that officially identified it as a feminist and progressive publication. In total, the site ran from April 2015 to October 2020, when Zuckerberg announced that it would shut down.

One of the main reasons that Eidolon interests me as an object of study is that it is almost always attempting to explain or justify its contributors’ choice to study and dedicate their lives to Classics. Eidolon contributors are more often than not trying to assert that Classics is relevant to the current world, assigning value to this relevance. In my experience in some Classics classes and especially within the community of people who take those classes, the question of “so what?” is never far off from the study. I have heard this question answered in many different ways, by my peers and myself as well as by Eidolon writers and by my professors. The uncertainty comes from the knowledge that Classics has been an historically elitist discipline, with ancient literature and philosophy being used as shorthand for higher education and ‘knowledge’ by the educated upper class.

My interest in this project largely comes from my own experience as a student in a Classics department at a small liberal arts college. In my time in the Classics department at Wesleyan, Eidolon was a point of conversation among my fellow students and me. Though Eidolon articles were never assigned in any of

my classes, the odd essay would be sent around and discussed outside of the classroom amongst my peers. One article that I remember specifically talking about is “Re-Queering Sappho” by Ella Haselwerdt, in which the author talks about her frustrations with the world of (male) classicists suggesting that the notoriously queer ancient Greek woman poet Sappho was actually a man.\(^4\)

Haselwerdt reflects on why her desire to keep Sappho queer and female is so intense, and, in typical *Eidolon* article fashion, ends up reflecting upon queer and feminist issues of her own world through examination of and reception of the ancient Mediterranean. She acknowledges that, generally, scholars of ancient literature are taught to separate the poet as a person from the persona that they create with their writing. Still, she tells of the intense connection she, as a lesbian, feels to Sappho’s words. In the process, she gives a brief overview of ancient Greek gender roles and how Sappho’s poems subvert them, as Sappho’s expression of desire fits neither into the business transaction of the Ancient Greek heterosexual marriage nor the male homosexual custom of a rigid binary between the pursuer and the pursued.\(^5\) This existence outside of binaries and norms is one that Haselwerdt uses to connect Sappho to her own experience. The article ends:

> While the exclusion from dominant cultural power structures and paradigms can cause great suffering and disenfranchisement, it can also be a golden ticket to a life and a world free from arbitrary restrictions. By celebrating rather than dismissing an identification with Sappho’s lesbianism and the queer potential of the

\(^4\) Ella Haselwerdt, “Re-Queering Sappho,” EIDOLON (Medium, Aug 8 2016), https://eidolon.pub/re-queering-sappho-c6c05b6b9f0b.

\(^5\) Ibid.
fragmentary Sapphic corpus, we can honor the humanity of the past while finding pathways forward, opportunities to free ourselves from oppressive models, to thrive in the margins and the lacunae.⁶

These margins and lacunae as tools for liberation provide another lens through which we can examine *Eidolon’s* use of Classics.

I begin my many examples of *Eidolon* articles with this one to show that *Eidolon* is just as much about classicists as it is about Classics. This focus on the individual experience is a technique that traditional academic journals usually suppress as part of their academic methodology. *Eidolon*, by contrast, is not as concerned with making new discoveries within the field of Classics as it is with fitting Classics into the modern world of individuals as educated, racialized, sexualized subjects. I also show this first example of an *Eidolon* article to exemplify that, for its contributors, Classical Studies is a jumping off point to talk about issues that exist outside the world of classical texts. I argue that this creates a tension in the inside-outside academia binary. The *inside* of Classics academia holds the actual texts, institutions, and materials with which Classics concerns itself, and the *outside* of academia consists of a public and modern audience. In contrast to traditional academic journals, which are written by people on the inside for people on the inside, an *Eidolon* article typically tries to jump from *inside* to *outside*, while somehow giving the reader access to the sufficient inside knowledge in a concise and digestible way.

⁶ Ibid.
My Experiences and Motivations

I became interested in Classics after taking Latin my freshman year of high school. Unlike most public schools, Latin was a very popular elective. Aside from being a popular way to fulfill the school’s language requirement, the Latin Club had over 100 students each year and was a part of the social life of the school and even the town. Each Halloween, for example, the Latin Club built and hosted the town-wide haunted house. Every March, a student’s family would host a cake decorating competition in honor of Saturnalia, although it did not involve any observance of the actual ancient Roman holiday of Saturnalia which had nothing to do with cake.

When I started Latin in ninth grade, I excelled and, more importantly, loved it. It came easily to me and simultaneously carried the satisfaction of code-breaking, puzzle-solving, something to fully occupy my mind even if for the short moment of time it took me to translate a sentence. I loved seeing Latin everywhere in English and other languages, and recognizing the stories I read and symbols I became familiar with in every art museum. After two years of Latin, I enrolled in the Ancient Greek elective taught by my teacher. I loved Greek’s foreignness and familiarity, its complex participial system and previously untapped verb tenses and moods.

I did not begin to truly interrogate the study of Classics until I was within the Wesleyan Classics department. In a high school where it was common to take Latin, and where the teacher would endlessly spout about the superiority of the
language and culture of Rome, there was really no education about the
intersections of class and power matrices with what we were studying. Once at
Wesleyan, I became aware almost immediately of those things which had simply
never come up. Upon arriving for my first semester of college, not wanting to
give up my progress in Greek, I enrolled in a class on Euripides’s *Bacchae* and
loved it. I continued to take classes in the Classics department, mostly language
and literature classes, and developed close relationships with my professors and
fellow students. Conversations about the ethics of studying Classics were
common among my peers in the department. That is not to say that it was never
discussed within my classes: I can remember a few distinct discussions,
specifically in seminars that focused on social issues through the lens of Classical
texts. I also became acutely aware of the University as a systemic site of both
oppression and liberation, and of the fact that I was interrogating Classics and the
University within it. Despite, and perhaps because of, those questions, I have
loved studying Classics.

As my peers and myself were interrogating the study of Classics, so were
*Eidolon* contributors. *Eidolon* has its share of articles that set out to directly
answer the question of why its contributors, and sometimes to show why other
people ought to, dedicate their careers and education to ancient Greece and Rome.
Some are written by people of marginalized identities reflecting on their own
decisions to study Classics, such as “Classics Makes me Happy. Is That
Enough?”7 by Helen Wong, which I will talk more about later in the context of

7 Helen Wong, “Classics Makes Me Happy. Is That Enough?” EIDOLON (Medium, July 23,
2018), https://eidolon.pub/classics-makes-me-happy-is-that-enough-a5a9f19a63af.
Eidolon’s work on race in Classics academia. Many of them are written by Eidolon editors, including two by Zuckerberg from two different time periods. In the first of Zuckerberg’s two articles, “Why Study Classics?”, she reflects on the founding of Eidolon and on the fact that it was founded, in part, to answer the titular question. As with many Eidolon articles by Zuckerberg but also by other contributors, she reflects on her discomfort with Classics being posited as the foundation of Western civilization. Of herself, she says “I had my own answers, of course, some of which are more compelling than others.” In her second essay, “All The Reasons I Became a Classicist That Are Difficult to Justify” she clarifies what these “only slightly facetious” answers are.

Before I write any further, I want to acknowledge my privilege as a white person who has had the luxury to study Classics. The systems of historical oppression which I condemn and try to subvert in this thesis have necessarily benefited me throughout my life, and I write from within the neoliberal University as I critique it. That said, in examining Eidolon’s strengths and limitations I hope to act as an ally for liberation from those systems.

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9 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
Central Questions and Intentions

This thesis aims at situating *Eidolon* amongst systems that are all deeply intertwined: Classics, academic publishing, non-academic publishing, the history of the University, and the history of progressive reform in academic disciplines. In understanding these connections, one of my central tasks is to identify how the history of academia, and specifically Classics academia, has led to the founding of *Eidolon*. Furthermore, I ask what *Eidolon*’s material conditions are and how they manifest themselves, and specifically wish to interrogate how *Eidolon* as an institution mirrors or divulges from the academic institution of the University.

I hope to use my observations about the relationship between *Eidolon* and the academic institution and its history to ask what *Eidolon*, both in form and content, can tell us about the potential for making academia, specifically historically elitist academic disciplines, more accessible and progressive. In general, I interrogate what a study of *Eidolon* can teach us about the relationship between non-academic (or para-academic, as Zuckerberg calls it)\(^\text{12}\) writing and reform within the academy. Finally, I ask what *Eidolon*’s sudden shut-down can teach us about the potential for progressive social change in academic structures and disciplines.

In Chapter 1, I situate *Eidolon* within an academic history of Classics and its academic movements. Beginning with a discussion on the importance of Reception Theory within the academic discipline of Classics, I examine the

\(^{12}\) Donna Zuckerberg, “My Classics Will Be Intersectional, Or...” EIDOLON (Medium, December 4, 2020), [https://eidolon.pub/my-classics-will-be-intersectional-or-14ed6e0bcd1c](https://eidolon.pub/my-classics-will-be-intersectional-or-14ed6e0bcd1c).
opposition between “reception” as an historical and relativist way to view and interpret literary texts and “tradition” as a way of reading that treats texts as carrying a universal and static meaning. I give a brief historical overview of each of these methods and analyze Eidolon through their lenses. Specifically, I examine Eidolon’s mission statements and other articles to show how the site positioned itself throughout its various stages of life, paying special attention to ideals of Eidolon as a community of scholarly and social integrity.

In Chapter 2, I delve further into the economic and social conditions of the institutions of the modern American university and of the humanities within it. I use my research on the perceived humanities crisis in academia, neoliberalism’s impact on the University, and debates on literary canon reform to position Eidolon amongst its pressures. In light of these pressures, I analyze Eidolon’s announcement of its closing. Furthermore, I incorporate Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s The Undercommons to look at Eidolon in light of utopian theories of education.

In Chapter 3, I compare and contrast Eidolon’s various articles about social justice in Classics, particularly racial justice, in order to examine how it did and did not fulfill its mission of creating a more progressive space of Classics academia. Using Donna Zuckerberg’s final editorial, I also analyze the ways that Eidolon’s leadership conceived of Eidolon after the fact and interrogate this conception in terms of its initial mission and institutional realities. Furthermore, I look at an instance of an Eidolon contributor talking about activism in Classics for the New York Times.
Finally, a note on my terminology: I will be generally referring to the study of ancient Greece and Rome as “Classics” or “Classical Studies.” That is how *Eidolon* refers to it, and that is how universities categorize it and have categorized it as a formalized area of study. However, I, along with many professors in Classics departments across the country, do not think that this is a term that should be used to designate any discipline. The term, which implies that the texts and materials of the ancient Mediterranean are more “classic,” as in more quintessential, or have more intrinsic value than other texts, plays a part in the arbitrary elevation of the discipline over others. Other options include Ancient Mediterranean Studies or Greek and Latin Languages and Cultures, both of which I use in this thesis.

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Chapter 1

Reception vs. Tradition

Twentieth century social movements have given rise to new movements in academia that have impacted Classics and led to the niche of *Eidolon*. Specifically, in order to understand *Eidolon*’s existence and its position in relation to the discipline of Classics and to other Classics publications, we must understand the importance of Reception Studies as an academic movement. Reception theory is a branch of literary studies and Classics whose origin is attributed to the work of German literary historian Hans Robert Jauss in the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁴ The central idea of reception theory is that literary works are received and interpreted by readers differently based on their own expectations from their current knowledge, life experiences, and historical conditions.¹⁵ This concept contrasts with the idea of the classical *tradition*, which continually valorizes and canonizes classical texts and culture as a part of a mythologized Western tradition and allows participants in that belief to see themselves as embodying the spirit and values of the classical world. Maintaining the idea of classical tradition largely relies on the texts and ideas holding universal and ahistorical meaning and thus justifies elevating Classics.

The reception theory movement has had a huge impact on Classical Studies and has fundamentally changed the way classicists view themselves and

¹⁵ Ibid.
their discipline.\textsuperscript{16} Without reception theory, and therefore the imperative to be aware that Classical Studies is not the universal lineage of knowledge, 	extit{Eidolon} would not exist. The focus on reception leads to a focus on the individual receiving the text based on their personal experience, which is conducive to the personal essay format of 	extit{Eidolon} articles that are specific to the individual author’s experience and would not appear in a typical academic journal. In fact, many contributors to 	extit{Eidolon} have an academic background in reception studies. For example, contributor Mathura Umachandran, whose 	extit{Eidolon} contributions have been about white fragility in the field of Classics\textsuperscript{17} and about comparing discourses around race in American and British (Classics) academia,\textsuperscript{18} earned a masters in Reception of the Ancient World from University College London before pursuing her PhD in Classics in the United States.

In a recent article about reception theory’s influence on Classics, scholar James Tatum writes, “all these years we had been receiving classical literature and we didn’t know it until Jauss and company told us we had.”\textsuperscript{19} Jauss’s work in reception came out of an imperative to “meet the Marxist demand for historical mediations by situating literature in the larger process of events.”\textsuperscript{20} Tatum outlines the resistance that many classicists have shown regarding moving away from the idea of tradition, and the ways that the language of tradition still pervades

\textsuperscript{17} Mathura Umachandran, “Fragile, Handle With Care,” EIDOLON (Medium, June 5, 2017) \url{https://eidolon.pub/fragile-handle-with-care-66848145cf29}.
\textsuperscript{18} Mathura Umachandran, “More Than a Common Tongue,” EIDOLON (Medium, June 11, 2019) \url{https://eidolon.pub/more-than-a-common-tongue-cfd7ede6368}.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
The word “reception” has been criticized by scholars of Classics and called a “floating signifier,” which is to say that the word does not actually carry any meaning and rather “can mean different things to different people in different contexts.” This criticism is in the context of other academic terms which are so specific that they cannot be mistaken, and calls attention to the fact that the looseness of interpretation that reception makes possible is exactly the point: meaning of any text, as with any word/signifier, is subjective and dependent on the receiver/user. Tatum argues that, though the word for this relatively new practice does not have to be reception, the use of the word tradition contributes to a continuous assumption that the texts and their meanings are fixed.

The tradition to which reception is in opposition is clear through the history of classical pedagogy in the University, especially when looking at the history of education in Europe and, in more modern times, England. Disciplinary historian Christopher Stray argues that, though tradition (from the Latin traditio meaning ‘to hand on’) “is a two-way process since we cannot assume that learning or reception is passive,” handing on is often ritualized to the point that “neither teacher/transmitter nor learner/receiver questions, or even thinks about, the process in which both are involved.” According to Stray, who is one of the most prominent scholars of classical reception and education, the Classics, being the literature of Greece and Rome, began to be taught in the European university

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22 Ibid., 81.
23 Ibid.
in the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{25} Though Greek and Latin are believed to have been taught at the university level starting in the twelfth century, this was not necessarily the beginning of these texts being designated “the Classics” instead of simply being recognized as the literature of ancient Greece and ancient Rome. In the fourteenth century, Petrarch, calling for a revival of antiquity, defined “the Middle Ages as the period between ancient Greece and Rome, now seen as definitively past,” and said that his current time, the Renaissance, was “a present that could be influenced by the best that had been said and done in that past.”\textsuperscript{26} Other scholars say that antiquity itself faded in the Middle Ages, and ended when it (antiquity) was reborn in the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{27} Though it is disputed, it is important to distinguish between when the Greek and Latin languages and literatures were taught and when they were taught under the label of “Classics,” as this label changes the way they are valued as cultural objects by designating them more quintessential than other texts.

Stray outlines the ways in which Latin and Greek would be methodically taught in English primary and secondary schools in preparation for Oxford and Cambridge, which was the typical path of education for a boy in the English upper class. These methods changed over time, but nonetheless used the Greek and Latin languages to standardize learning for the educated classes. Long periods between the Middle Ages and seventeenth century valorized Latin as a spoken

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 10.
Of the typical student, Stray writes that “he (it was mostly he) did not so much study a distant world as inhabit a modern version of it, and the mastery of the language was part of a kind of puberty rite.” This quote calls attention to a few essential aspects of understanding classical education in European history. The first is, predictably, the gendered exclusivity of the rite of spoken Latin. The second is the creation and legitimization of a modern version of a distant world. That is to say that, rather than seeing the ancient Mediterranean as an object of study, these groups of teachers and students saw themselves as embodying the spirit and values of that world. To see oneself as an embodiment of that spirit and those values is to see oneself as a part of a rich legacy. The third aspect of this quote, which is intertwined with the other two, is Latin as a rite of passage. This view, especially enhanced by the addition of “puberty,” associates Latin with one’s growth into one’s rightful place in society, and says that to be an upper-class man of early modern Europe is to speak Latin.

In the world of spoken Latin in medieval to early modern Europe, inherent value is assumed of the language and adapted into a culture of superiority of the language and, thus, those who could speak it. The ability for Latin to exist as something both past and present is dependent on the idea that

an adequate resource in making sense of human life… needs to possess permanent and universal value so as to be proof against the corroding effects of change (the emergence of new social and cultural formations) and relativity…. Yet it must be flexible enough to adapt to new circumstances and to a wide variety of cases.

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 7.
As Tatum shows through examples of organizations of classical scholars taking on the word *tradition* and resisting reception, many classicists and their affiliations still hold the view that Classical texts and materials hold permanent and universal value. The idea that this value must remain through social and cultural changes highlights its use as security against those changes, and thus a conservative force. Conversely, the idea that this “resource” must also be flexible posits it as a tool to be used for a social and cultural purpose, for example the shaping of a future ministerial and gubernatorial class.

The expectation for pupils to speak Latin faded by the nineteenth century when Cambridge began to give written examinations instead of oral examinations. Concurrently, mass printing was on the rise and was being utilized to make cheap Latin textbooks, many of which were meant for autodidactic purposes. The conflation of the teacher and the student that came with these new resources for self-teaching destabilized the pre-existing power dynamic of these two figures, a dynamic which is a well-documented part of classical learning. Still, Latin and Greek learning remained a part of primary and secondary education throughout the nineteenth century and often was continued through University education. Though Oxford and Cambridge had institutional differences, perhaps the most obvious being Oxford’s focus on the tutorial system versus Cambridge’s emphasis on the central university, both received students who had likely started learning Latin at age six and Greek sometime after, and had

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31 Ibid., 9.
32 Ibid., 12.
33 Ibid., 9.
continued to learn and study the languages by rote. According to Stray, “in the first half of the century at least, almost nothing except classics was taught at the public (independent) schools.” The rote learning that occurred led to a discrepancy between students’ lower school educations and their University educations, especially those who went to Oxford and took the standardized course "Greats." "Greats" was a course almost entirely made up of ancient history and ancient and modern philosophy for which students who had had years of training in Latin and Greek grammar, translation, and composition were ill-prepared. Still, Oxford defined “Great” writers and ideas as mostly ancient Greek and Roman authors and granted access to those who had received that standardized education that led to Oxford.

The rigid tradition of classical learning was not exclusive to Europe, and was in fact mirrored in the American colonies and early United States. Caroline Winterer has written that “next to Christianity, the central intellectual project in America before the late nineteenth century was classicism.” From the founding of Harvard College in 1636 to the late nineteenth century, American students spent half of their college time on Latin and Greek learning. Though early colleges were geographically and religiously diverse (different sects of Christianity), this curriculum as well as the classical admissions requirements remained largely uniform. Before the mid-eighteenth century, college graduates

34 Ibid., 10.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 11.
38 Ibid., 2.
39 Ibid., 12.
were trained to be ministers. In the mid-eighteenth century, however, the focus of the postgraduate experience began to move away from a life in the church and towards a pre-professional or, in light of the American Revolution, political life.\textsuperscript{40} With the onset of the industrial revolution and the well-established democracy of the last third of the nineteenth century, classicism became an “antidote” of modernity, “a refuge from the present rather than a fund of immediately relevant political instruction.”\textsuperscript{41} Because Classics could no longer immediately prove its relevance in the industrial United States, it became a symbol of high culture, “valuable precisely for its uselessness.”\textsuperscript{42} This period of American classicism also shows an adoption of the German historicism, which did not catch on as much in the rest of Europe. The adoption of historicism can be seen as a precursor to reception studies as it emphasizes the historical specificity of all texts and materials and urges receivers to look at these texts and materials in their own historical contexts.\textsuperscript{43} Reception theory is distinct from historicism because it specifically emphasizes the experience and standing of the receiver.

\textit{Eidolon} as an institution stands for the opposite of the traditional system in Europe and the United States that I have just described. Not only is it reception-based in structure, but it also has published articles advocating for reception theory, such as “It’s Time to Embrace Critical Classical Reception” by Johanna Hanink in 2017.\textsuperscript{44} In the article, Hanink gives some examples of the ways

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 16-22.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{44} Johanna Hanink, “It’s Time to Embrace Critical Classical Reception,” EIDOLON (Medium, May 1, 2017), \url{https://eidolon.pub/its-time-to-embrace-critical-classical-reception-d3491a40eec3}. 
that the question of the valuation of Greco-Roman cultural inheritance has occupied much of public debate in recent years and wonders about the role of the Classicist in these debates. She writes that “classicists who want to reach a non-academic public are caught in a catch-22… [because] to attract an audience and hold its attention you have to convince people that you’re saying something interesting and important” without spouting “desperate insistences on the genius, exceptionalism, and ‘miracles’ of ancient Greece and Rome.” She goes on to suggest embracing Critical Classical Reception as one possible solution to this problem and praises *Eidolon* for enacting “reception with more bite and urgency: Reception 2.0.” Hanink here suggests that *Eidolon* is doing something that has been heretofore unarticulated. She suggests the name “Critical Classical Reception” in order to link it to other relatively new areas of critical study, such as Critical Race Studies and Critical Gender Studies and identifies three aspects of Critical Classical Reception that tie it to these other disciplines: (a) an openly activist agenda, (b) a strong personal voice and tendency for storytelling, and (c) an acknowledgement that “Greek and Roman antiquity have played a major role in constructing and authorizing racism, colonialism, nationalism, patriarchy, Western-centrism, body normativity, and other entrenched, violent societal structures.” Like many other *Eidolon* contributors, she believes that classicists are well-situated and well-equipped to fight these oppressive voices. Furthermore, she believes that *Eidolon* is already doing that work.

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
To further analyze the work that *Eidolon* set out to do and is doing, we can examine *Eidolon’s* two mission statements. The first was published at *Eidolon’s* founding in 2015, and the second in 2017. Through these articles, I will outline an understanding of *Eidolon’s* role in Classics publishing and how it evolved through its five-year life. It is worth noting that, though all of the pieces I will be examining in this section were written by either Donna Zuckerberg herself or in collaboration with the board that she heads, *Eidolon’s* content is much more than these minds or pieces. While I will examine a more diverse selection of *Eidolon* contributors and their work later in this thesis, at this point I am most interested in *Eidolon* as an institution, especially within the framework of classical studies at large. Stray writes that “classical culture may always be transmitted, in some sense, through individuals, but its transmission is modulated and shaped by national traditions and by institutions: schools, universities, academies, and more informal groupings or ‘schools.’” I am counting *Eidolon* within this informality grouping due to its online form and self-proclaimed separation from academic journals.

The creation of Eidolon

*Eidolon* was founded in 2015 by Donna Zuckerberg. Zuckerberg, aside from being the editor-in-chief of *Eidolon*, is a classicist and writer. She received

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her PhD in Classics from Princeton University in 2014.49 Her dissertation was on Greek drama and identity, and her 2018 book Not All Dead White Men, inspired by her work on Eidolon, focused on classical reception in online Red Pill communities. Red Pill communities refers to “men connected by common resentments against women, immigrants, [and] people of colour.”50 She is the sister of Mark Zuckerberg and is the only one of her four siblings who does not work in the tech field. In fact, she is quoted saying that social media has allowed the misappropriation of classical texts by Red Pillers to happen, though she does not comment publicly on her relationship with her brother, who obviously holds massive responsibility for social media as it is today.51

The first mission statement, from 2015, also functions as an introductory post and a call for submissions. Its subtitled tagline and descriptor of Eidolon is “a modern way to write about the ancient world.”52 Judging by this first sentence, it is clear that Eidolon attempted to emphasize its uniqueness as a publication first and foremost, as well as the wide range of possibilities that are possible with such a vague tagline. It goes on to say that “Eidolon is a home for scholarly writing about Classics that isn’t formal scholarship. Our goal is to create a platform for essays that have a strong authorial voice and a unique point of view.”53 She then gives a list of categories for possible submissions:

51 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
❖ Explorations of how the ancient world relates to modern life
❖ First-person, anecdotal accounts that bring pieces of classical art or literature to life
❖ Personal approaches to academic topics, especially those that embrace marginalized voices
❖ Risky, provocative arguments that push the boundaries of accepted consensus views
❖ Creative and funny pieces that don’t take the Classics too seriously.  

These guidelines show the wide range of topic, style, and tone for potential Eidolon articles. The bend towards social progressiveness is teased with the call for marginalized voices and risky, provocative arguments, but will not be made explicit until the release of the second mission statement.

After giving these suggestions for submitters, she transitions into a section entitled “why create a new kind of academic publication?” This section highlights the online aspect of Eidolon. Specifically, it cites as a virtue the quick turnaround of articles that the site offers. Because of their peer-review structure, traditional academic journals typically lack this speed. For example, Zuckerberg says, “a comparison between the [January 2015] Charlie Hebdo massacre and the execution of Socrates won’t be as meaningful if it isn’t available until Spring 2016.”  

In this way Eidolon adapts the form of the academic journal to fit its function of a modern way to write about the ancient world. Zuckerberg and her colleagues do not condemn the peer-review process, but rather see their speed as a tool in applying Classics to current events for a wide audience as a supplement to the work of the academy.

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54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
Eidolon’s comment policy is “in place of peer-review”\textsuperscript{57} and attempts to foster scholarly accountability through community. The original mission statement also states that the Eidolon team chose to publish on Medium, a blogging platform founded in 2012 by one of Twitter’s co-founders,\textsuperscript{58} because of its user engagement-conducive format. The article encourages readers to use Medium’s ‘note’ feature to comment on specific parts of Eidolon articles. This community is, ideally, a “wider audience [than just academics]: not just classicists, but anybody who is intellectually engaged and has an interest in ancient Greece and Rome.”\textsuperscript{59} The pride that Eidolon takes in this commenting system is important because this space of free commenting will create the issues that drove the Eidolon staff to launch Eidolon’s new generation in 2017.

The evolution of Eidolon

The updated mission statement takes this ideal of modernity in a different direction. Whereas at the start of Eidolon modernity meant the adaptation of Classics to the modern technological world of the internet, its evolution identified modernity with social progress. Zuckerberg elaborates on this in her accompanying statement, “Welcome to the New Eidolon!” The 2017 post “Eidolon’s Mission Statement,” reflects upon Eidolon’s founding: “When we first

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Zuckerberg. “About EIDOLON.”
launched in 2015, the fact that no equivalent publication existed gave us the freedom to make up the rules as we went along. We’ve come up with a few since then, and we’d like to share them with you as a new and improved Eidolon.”

These “new rules” are referring to Eidolon’s newly explicit commitment to progressive-leaning politics. This commitment also manifests itself in a new comment policy which reserves the right to moderate and delete comments more heavily than they did previously and ban “those who are obviously Nazis or other types of despicable humans” from Eidolon. It is unclear what exactly changed on this front, as Eidolon always had a policy of deleting hateful comments, but the explicit new policy put into writing that Eidolon would take power over the interactions of its community. Ultimately, the new mission statement and comment guidelines are a part of an effort to “push the discipline forward” and thus drive it further from its problematic history.

In Eidolon’s view, a moderated community of respectful classicists and those with interests in Classics is essential for its success.

The second mission statement is framed as an update of the original mission statement. The Eidolon team felt it was necessary to write a new mission statement because, according to “Welcome to the New Eidolon!”, they found that the work that they were most proud of was the pieces in which writers “try to define the complicated and problematic role of the classicist in twenty-first

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62 Ibid.
century society.”  

So, where the first mission statement of *Eidolon* identified it as an alternative to the academic journal in form and content, the second aligns the journal with “progressive, feminist” politics and “a commitment to social justice.” Though much of the content was explicitly aligned with these values already, the new mission statement did the job of aligning *Eidolon* as an organization with those values.

Much of Zuckerberg’s accompanying statement anticipates criticisms of this commitment by those who believe that the changes will limit *Eidolon*’s content and, as a result, sacrifice ideological diversity and objectivity. She attempts to counter these imaginary critics, saying “making ideological diversity a primary objective is fundamentally incompatible with fighting against racism, sexism, and other forms of structural oppression, and we choose to prioritize the latter.” This is anticipatory, but also reflects the events that led to a change in structure. Reflecting on their previous comment policy, Zuckerberg writes, “unfortunately, when you allow open comment sections on the internet, truly lively and respectful discourse becomes impossible. A few condescending, trolling comments can have a profoundly chilling effect on the conversation.” At this point, Zuckerberg’s book about classical reception in online Red Pill communities was already under contract, so it is safe to assume that her research had an impact on *Eidolon*’s choice to explicitly align itself with social justice. She writes that “Classics as a discipline has deep roots in fascism and reactionary

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64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., emphasis my own.
66 Ibid.
politics and white supremacy, and those ideologies exert a powerful gravitational pull on the discipline’s practitioners. If we want to fight those forces, we need to actively work against them.”67 This is an encouraging statement that both acknowledges the power of the problematic roots of Classics and the power for collectives to fight against those roots.

The two mission statements show a changing methodology and idealism with regards to community-making. In the first mission statement and beginning of Eidolon, Zuckerberg and her colleagues trust that the Eidolon community will hold itself accountable. After two years of operation, the Eidolon team had to accept that a functional and fruitful intellectual community precludes some exclusion. In the next chapter, I will examine Eidolon’s shut-down and the corresponding articles, keeping in mind the two mission statements and the ideal of fighting against the deeply influential and harmful forces that have created the current world of Classics scholarship.

67 Ibid.
Chapter 2

The Dubious Humanities Crisis

The imperative to keep Classics alive, which is an imperative *Eidolon* participates in for the most part, is an extension of the drive to keep humanities departments alive. As we have seen through examinations of English and American university history, Classics and the humanities were largely synonymous until the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Since the mid-twentieth century, decreased undergraduate enrollment in humanities classes and majors has led to a perceived crisis in the humanities. There has been much writing about this crisis, both in academic journals and in more widely read publications such as the Atlantic and the New Yorker. There has also been much written about the volume of writing about this crisis, and the idea that “once an affliction, crisis has become a way of life” for humanists.68 Whether or not the humanities are in any actual danger, and indeed many scholars and writers do not believe that they are, this alarmist discourse is a key component of understanding ideologies around the humanities and Classics and, by extension, *Eidolon.*69

Pieces about the crisis in the humanities often assert the value and, more importantly in the case of *Eidolon*, relevance of the humanities. One 2017 essay on the importance of the humanities written by Gerald R. Green, Senior Associate

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Dean for Academic Affairs at Syracuse University (and introduced by Valerie Strauss) argues that studying the humanities “opens one to the examination of the entirety of the human condition and encourages one to grapple with complex moral issues ever-present in life,” and that “given the state of the country and the world today, [the humanities] are more important than ever.” I connect this fight for relevance to Eidolon because a significant portion of Eidolon’s content is endowed with the idea, either explicitly or implicitly, that Classics is relevant to the present day if only we can find the right connections.

Behind the humanities crisis is a complex set of economic conditions that have changed the structure of the University. A college education in the United States, both public and private, has gotten astronomically more expensive over the last 50 years. This is in part because of the decrease in federal and state funding to universities. Many education scholars refer to the economic and structural changes of universities as the neoliberalization of the university system, which began in the 1970s and has escalated continually since then. Neoliberalism is concerned with “extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social actions.” As a result, the neoliberalization of the university refers to the university system’s participation in a free-market economic landscape on a


globalized scale, which promotes free competition in business and thus the increased competition between universities.\textsuperscript{74} On the individual level, because of the institutional practices and rewards for participating in neoliberal social values, students come to think of themselves as “entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life,” and come to see their actions as rational entrepreneurial behavior conducted towards a calculated benefit.\textsuperscript{75} This idea of the individual as an entrepreneurial actor which must invest in itself, in combination with a slowing economy, has made it more common for students to take out loans for higher education and more difficult for students to pay off those loans. As a result, students are more likely to choose a major with a perceived higher salary after graduation. These majors are typically business or STEM, and thus declining enrollments in humanities courses have continued.\textsuperscript{76} Some theorists and scholars place blame on the 2008 recession because, although the anxieties about a humanities crisis have been growing for many years, the 2008 recession changed the way young people view the economy and job market, and thus caused them to choose majors that are perceived to be more career-oriented.\textsuperscript{77}

The crisis in the humanities is often referenced in \textit{Eidolon} articles about saving Classics, though there are not many articles that specifically focus on the humanities. One of these articles, “Burned at the Stake: How Do We Determine the Value of the Humanities?” by Donna Zuckerberg takes a similar approach to

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{76} Hoffower, “College Is More Expensive than It's Ever Been…”
the issue as many other writers who are partial towards the humanities: that humanities disciplines teach skills such as writing, analysis, and argumentation. She writes, “our ability to theorize is our greatest asset.” 78 She means this in a general sense and also within the debate about the humanities. She takes issue with the ways that defenders of the humanities have engaged in the debate on its own terms, urging them to instead deconstruct the rhetoric of the debate with this ability to theorize. 79 Rather than accepting the hierarchy of value that social and economic conditions have created, Zuckerberg advocates for humanists to use their skills to call that hierarchy into question. Furthermore, she argues that, though it is a difficult task, humanists are especially equipped to determine what is meaningful, although she does not explain this further. 80

Whereas Zuckerberg’s article enforces the humanities/STEM binary, Digital Humanities attempts to combine the two as a solution to the fight for resources. The Eidolon article “Big Data, Big Problems” by Elizabeth Wueste also addresses the survival of the humanities through a digital humanities lens. 81 Digital humanities is a relatively new discipline that seeks to use technology to advance and, ideally, democratize the humanities. Digital Humanities uses technology to process large amounts of data and then disseminate the data, often into online spaces that are open to the public. Wueste reflects on Classics’s hesitancy to adopt Digital Humanities and on the discipline as a whole as already

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
“historically prone to exclusionary mistakes,” and wonders if giving data over to computer programs for interpretation will reproduce these exclusionary mistakes by focusing on the big picture and losing the individual perspectives of those who have historically been excluded. Ultimately, Wueste warns her classicist readers against reproducing the same dynamics with this new technology, because the scholar is still choosing which data sets to analyze. Digital Humanities in general has been criticized for being a tool of neoliberal attitudes towards education. This critique states that since “neoliberal policies and institutions value academic work that produces findings immediately usable by industry and that produces graduates trained for the current requirements of the commercial workplace,” technological innovation for the humanities tends to be geared towards a “corporatist restructuring of the humanities" that is less about research questions than it is about other factors that benefit the neoliberal University.

The reality of lower enrollment consequent cuts to department funding has threatened the lives of humanities departments and fueled debates over the concepts of literary canon. These debates over what should or should not be included in the canon are not new by any means, but the battle for relevance in the humanities crisis has further called into question the content of humanities programs, at least partially in an effort to save the humanities. Originally published during the culture wars in 1993, Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation by John Guillory offers a useful framework for

82 Ibid.
understanding canon debates. Because these debates often implicate classical texts and the ways they are problematically labeled as the foundational texts of Western civilization, and thus are continually canonized in humanities programs, these debates have direct implications for the discipline of Classics. Thus, Guillory’s work can help us get closer to understanding the place of Classics according to Eidolon, which is itself partially a product of the humanities crisis.

Guillory builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the post-Marxist concept of cultural capital, which argues that culture is disproportionately distributed through educational institutions in a way that reproduces and reinforces unequal social structures of a state.84 For Bourdieu, this cultural capital is distributed by the school in the form of language and is a locus for the power of the state in standardizing this language and designating its proper forms.85 Guillory echoes the view of language as the mechanism for epistemological power in his discussion of Antonio Gramsci, substituting language for reading and writing.86 To apply this concept, it is helpful to return to our overview of the history of Classics pedagogy in England and the United States and the ways that language/reading/writing is used as a tool to produce and reproduce class structures.

The main players in the canon debate of Guillory’s framework are (a) progressive reformers who reject the overwhelmingly white and male syllabus that has historically been regarded as the Western canon in favor of a more

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86 Guillory, Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation. 48, 54.
diverse and representative literary syllabus, and (b) reactionary critics attached to continuing to value this previously valued syllabus. Of the latter, Guillory gives the example of the conservative former director of the National Endowment for the Humanities and former U.S. secretary of education, William Bennett, asking “if the purpose of the institution is not to transmit [an ideal of classical/Western] culture, then what is the institution’s purpose?”

Guillory gives an in-depth analysis of the progressive reformers’ politics, aligning the desire for a literary syllabus to be more representative of a diverse group of readers with a liberal politics of representation that are modeled after governmental structures. While canon reform is political, he argues, the liberal pluralist goal of representation in the canon does not institute the same structural change as representation in government does, and to see that structural change we must look further towards the institutional forms of the school.

In other words, the politics of canon formation are a “politics of the image” which participate more in a symbolic struggle than in a material one. Critics of Guillory have argued that, in transferring the argument from the syllabus to the school, Guillory underestimates the “felt need in and outside the academy” for a critique of the Western culture vs. multiculturalism binary on the landscape of the syllabus. With these criticisms in mind, Guillory’s argument is useful for analyzing Eidolon as a product of a liberal pluralist politics in relation to the larger structure of the school.

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87 Ibid., 21.
88 Ibid., 7, 38.
89 Ibid., 8, viii.
To return to the question of the institution’s purpose, Bill Readings argues that part of the widespread anxiety about a humanities crisis comes from the fact that the university “no longer participates in the project of culture,” and rather participates in a project of “excellence.”91 By this, Readings echoes many critics of the neoliberal University in arguing that the University is no longer a locale for cultivating an ideal and enlightened citizen, the student as a member of a community, and is now about commodified and marketable knowledge, with the student as a consumer.92 On a larger scale, Readings argues that the social role of the University as an institution has been destabilized and, most relevant to this thesis, that an internal legitimation struggle in the humanities “would not take on crisis proportions were it not accompanied by an external legitimation crisis,” which is to say widespread cultural uncertainty of value, in the role of the University.93 To say that the University no longer participates in the project of culture also implies that it no longer designates viable cultural texts, objects, and ideas. Applying this idea to Classics, or any other humanities discipline, creates a distinction between the culture and a culture. In Stray’s and Winterer’s history of Classics, Classics is the culture, used to unify the elites into a community of knowledge. In the current and progressive Classics communities that Eidolon reflects, Classics is one of many cultures that can be studied as, to use Guillory’s words, its own discrete research project.94 Furthermore, it reflects the mission of

92 Ibid., 11.
93 Ibid., 2.
94 Guillory, Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation, 15-16.
reception studies and of *Eidolon* itself, as it denies that any culture is universal and monolithic.

*Eidolon* directly participates in the canon debate by its very existence, as well as in individual articles. I say that it participates with its very existence because Classics is always implicated in the canon debates, as it is the historically defined abstraction of Western civilization with which canon reformers contend. The shutting down of *Eidolon* offers an opportunity for its board and contributors to reflect on its participation in these debates. Through Donna Zuckerberg’s announcement of its closing in her goodbye letter, we can examine how the institutional realities that we have seen thus far have played into *Eidolon*’s life and death and its ability to make a positive impact in the field of Classics and through the field of Classics.

To return to her essay about the crisis in the humanities, Zuckerberg concedes “perhaps I’m not qualified to talk about it, because I’m not part of an academic department and I haven’t seen the decline. If anything, as part of the Paideia Institute, I’ve seen astronomical growth.”95 As we examine her goodbye letter to *Eidolon*, it is worth keeping in mind this disconnectedness to the University and thus disconnectedness to the community of scholars who write for *Eidolon*.

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95 Zuckerberg, “Burned at the Stake: How Do We Determine the Value of the Humanities?”
“Teach Me How to Say Goodbye”

On October 8, 2020, Eidolon published “Teach Me How to Say Goodbye” by Donna Zuckerberg. In the editorial, she announced that she would step down as editor and, as a result, Eidolon as a whole would shut down. Zuckerberg’s farewell post is written, as is the primary form of Eidolon, in the personal essay format. Because of this, the essay heavily from the first person point of view. Rather than talking about why Eidolon is shutting down, she talks about why she is leaving. “How can I,” she begins, “spend my energy reading Greek and Latin when a pandemic has killed hundreds of Americans?”96 The use of I and my immediately frames the project of Eidolon as a personal project for Zuckerberg. This framing foretells the reveal later in the essay that without Zuckerberg there will be no more Eidolon.

The shuttering of Eidolon is also the shuttering of its community. Eidolon attempts to construct a community using its form, as is clear from the two mission statements and the Code of Conduct. Essential to this community, or rather to the original ideal of an informal and collaborative community of scholars and others with an interest in Classics, are its aspects that come from its online form, such as the comments section under any given post, limited but still present since the changes in the comment guidelines, or the easy shareability through social media. Eidolon articles often also link to each other, creating a sort of coherent network of ideas. Zuckerberg has written about this hyperlink format and how Eidolon citations exist to aid the reader rather than prove expertise in the field, as is the

purpose of citations in dissertations or many scholarly articles. She has asserted that *Eidolon* attempts to be a different type of community from The Academy, one that is hopefully more diverse, accessible, and progressive. The meaning and possibility of this community is called into question in light of Zuckerberg’s retreat and resulting end of *Eidolon*.

Though Zuckerberg cites a discussion with the board of *Eidolon* about the publication’s future, invoking a collective, they reportedly decided that they “weren’t able to visualize” the publication without her at the helm. What are the conditions that have caused a publication that was founded to be a dialogic collective, and that has become explicitly an advocate for the voices of groups marginalized from the academy, to rely on one person? Materially, they are easily traceable. Donna Zuckerberg, who is the sister of Mark Zuckerberg and whose husband also works in tech, is wealthy. She translates this fact into the piece by citing her “position as an independent scholar with the resources to run” *Eidolon* without pay, which is “highly unusual.” Additionally, Zuckerberg writes that the *Eidolon* team “felt that under a different kind of leadership the publication would probably change to the point where it wouldn’t really meaningfully still be *Eidolon.*” It is unclear whether this is the case because of Zuckerberg’s independent wealth, or because of her vision for the publication. If the former is the case, then *Eidolon*’s closing calls into question the possibility that social justice and community-driven publications can function without independent

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97 Donna Zuckerberg, “We can’t cite everything- but should we even try?” EIDOLON (Medium, August 31, 2016), https://eidolon.pub/we-cant-cite-everything-but-should-we-even-try-11a950cb9a55.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
wealth. If the latter is the case, then this goodbye essay stands in contradiction to the mission statements of *Eidolon*, which minimize Zuckerberg’s position as a maker of the publication and emphasize its collaborative and communal nature.

*Eidolon*’s inability to continue without Zuckerberg implies that the community of classicists dedicated to social justice need her in order to survive. It is not only the need for *a* leader, but the need for *her as a leader*. In this way, Zuckerberg as a leader is aligned with *Eidolon* itself, making them one and the same. This fact evokes questions about the possibility of a community’s survival: how does a community construct an identity away from its leaders? Can a publication like *Eidolon*, which attempts to make an historically oppressive intellectual and cultural tradition more accessible, exist without the resources and social standing of a benevolent leader? Can an anti-elitist movement succeed without the help of the elites?

I turn to Adriana Cavarero’s essay “The Human Reconceived: Back to Socrates with Arendt” to synthesize these questions of a collective versus individual within the discipline of Classics. The essay is situated in *Antiquities Beyond Humanism*, an anthology dedicated to an “asynchronous” approach to antiquity with the goal of advancing Classical studies in a different way. Specifically, the anthology attempts to get beyond humanism as it is “historically defined,” which is to say the possibly problematic and exclusive tradition, or paradox, of humanism as individualism. Cavarero joins this effort by placing

102 Ibid., 6.
Plato and Socrates in conversation with Hannah Arendt. To be clear, Arendt’s own work is not previously devoid of classical references; however, Cavarero examines Arendt’s work on totalitarianism from a more pointedly Platonic perspective. She cites Arendt’s work on the deconstruction of the category of the “human” at the hands of the Nazis. To summarize Arendt’s argument, it is the construction of the “human” and the resulting trajectory of Western thought that allowed the Nazis to create a “posthuman artifact.” In creating a category of “human,” necessarily a non-human, or in this case “posthuman,” is created. It follows that because antiquity’s “Western” philosophy legacy has privileged the human individual and as a result never had a pure concept of the “political,” Arendt argues, there is not a working concept of plurality.

Arendt’s (and subsequently Cavarero’s) argument that “human plurality… succumbs under the solitary noetic world of the philosopher” is very present in my examination of Donna Zuckerberg’s penultimate address to the Eidolon community. Though Eidolon is ideally a plurality, there is not a framework for it to work without the vision of a singular person. Though I do not believe that this is the truth of all collectives, or even all collectives that are oriented towards the continuation of an academic discipline, I do not think it is impossible to ignore that Classics is literally the study of this Platonic tradition. That is not to say that Classical scholars must subscribe to it or use it in their theory; Antiquities Beyond Humanism is an active attempt to move away from this idea of a monolithic

104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., 39.
“Western” philosophical (Platonic) tradition. It is, however, easier said than done to deviate from what one has been systematically taught, and Zuckerberg’s goodbye essay is a perfect example of this.

Interestingly, Cavarero’s essay connecting Plato/Socrates and Arendt, a more modern philosopher, with Cavarero’s own progressive pluralist ideals toward the world, is not dissimilar to the quintessential Eidolon article. These similarities in strategy lead to questions about the differences in effect and positionality between the two types of writing. Eidolon has identified itself as a supplement to the academy. However, can Eidolon’s stated mission to make Classics more progressive really succeed without the high level of theory that is possible in an essay like “The Human Reconceived”? Though it is true that any given Eidolon article is more readable, and therefore more accessible, than the typical academic peer-reviewed paper, what is lost in this accessibility? Perhaps the only way to make Classics more progressive without falling into the typical traps that Eidolon falls into is through highly academic theory that, like Guillory’s work exemplifies, calls the whole system into question. This presents a paradox that shows in much of Eidolon’s content.

The Undercommons and Eidolon

One landmark text that has inspired and guided this thesis is The Undercommons, by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. Similarly to Cavarero’s work, Harney and Moten offer a more involved critique of the institution of the
University than *Eidolon* does and *The Undercommons* is a useful tool for theorizing *Eidolon* in relation to the University. The book was published in 2013 and has become one of the most widely read texts about Black liberation within and from the academy, governance, and capitalist logistics.

*The Undercommons* advocates for use of the university as a resource to “steal” from, and enact an “abuse of [academia’s] hospitality.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, *The Undercommons* theorizes that the modern institution of the University is a place of refuge, which holds capital and knowledge that can be used for liberation, but that it also must be subverted. So, the scholarly mode of being for which Harney and Moten advocate is to “be in but not of” the University.¹⁰⁷ One of the first questions I asked of *Eidolon* was whether it achieved this goal. Though it is not affiliated with any University and does not use University funding, its mission still relies on its contributors being in possession of knowledge that is usually gained from a University education. Additionally, though *Eidolon* pays its contributors per article, their contributors generally still have to keep day jobs and are mostly professors or teachers. In this way, *The Undercommons* helps us ask questions about what it really means to be in the University: does it only mean to be physically within its walls? Or, in the case of *Eidolon*, does use of the University’s resources require a conscious flight from the University? Though Classics, as Classics teachers and professors will tell you when advocating for its study, pervades everyday life, its tools and content are primarily reproduced within the University. It is for this reason that most writers for *Eidolon* are either

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¹⁰⁷ Ibid.
professors of Classics or teachers of Latin and/or Greek. But does *Eidolon* automatically separate itself from the University just by not being physically within it or funded by it? Does *Eidolon*, in imagining itself as a refuge from the University, unknowingly reproduce the power structures that the University does?

Additionally, *The Undercommons* as a utopian academia text is useful to look at *Eidolon*’s own utopianism. Both *The Undercommons* and *Eidolon* strive to create an ideal through community that deviates from the existing societal norms, with the end of an abstract future knowledge that is liberating and fulfilling for its people.\(^{108}\) As with many utopian texts, *The Undercommons* does not assert a belief that utopia is possible. In fact, in the introduction to the published text of Fred Moten’s 2016 lecture *A Poetics of the Undercommons*, Harney says that “here utopia stands for an impossible time and place where we live together in peace and harmony.”\(^{109}\) *Eidolon* shares this utopian impulse. Though much of *Eidolon*’s content is concerned with the oppression of members of minority groups within the University, as an institution it strives to be an alternative and supplement to the work of the University rather than subvert it altogether.\(^{110}\) Still, its utopic impulses to be a community of refuge are clear. *Eidolon* writers often cite each other’s articles, often in a laudatory sense but sometimes critically.

*The Undercommons* does not talk extensively about how the internet fits into its frameworks. *Eidolon*, by contrast, relies heavily on the abilities that the internet provides to give space for academic-adjacent writing and for community.

\(^{108}\) Ibid., 27.
The words *internet* and *online* appear only a few times in *The Undercommons*, and neither is exhaustively explained or theorized. From its few mentions, the book shows the internet as both a place of anarchy with potential for revolution and a site for potential abuses of knowledge-power. Both of these things can be true in the case of *Eidolon*, and thinking about the internet as a space for both of these things is a necessary part of analyzing *Eidolon*’s mission and whether or not it fulfills it.

Following “Teach Me How to Say Goodbye,” *Eidolon* posted a couple of months worth of content and officially became a static archive in December. This content includes some pieces that were on the queue to be published as well as many odes to *Eidolon* and after-the-fact groupings of articles, which can be found at the bottom of the homepage. Zuckerberg’s final piece, “My Classics Will Be Intersectional Or…” is one of these odes to *Eidolon* and tells the story of its evolving mission and eventual decline. Through examination of this piece, and the work of other *Eidolon* contributors, in the next chapter with a special attention paid to the idea of intersectionality that Zuckerberg invokes, we can start to analyze how *Eidolon* was or was not able to fulfill its mission of social justice given its structural facts.
Chapter 3

Zuckerberg’s final editorial

The end of Eidolon calls for an examination of how it did or did not fulfill its social and political mission. In order to do this, we must keep the evolving mission statements in mind while analyzing how Eidolon has defined itself and its work upon the fact of its ending. Additionally, it is useful to compare the politics with which Eidolon defines itself with that of some of its contributors. As we have seen, Zuckerberg’s October 2020 goodbye letter shows that the main reason that Eidolon shut down was that she no longer believed that, for her, studying Classics can be a form of activism in an unjust world. She cited the Covid-19 pandemic, Breonna Taylor’s unavenged murder, the fires in California, and the “growing danger of an autocratic coup by the Trump administration” as some of the world events that have contributed to her cynicism about whether or not social justice-focused Classics scholarship can make a difference in the world.111

Following that “penultimate e(i)ditorial,”112 as she called it, Zuckerberg posted her final editorial. This essay was entitled “My Classics Will Be Intersectional Or...”113 and attempts to tell the story of Eidolon’s life and its evolving public political stances. This article is enlightening in that it shows how Eidolon sees itself from start to finish. Additionally, Zuckerberg outlines how she as the creator and the Eidolon staff define their own politics historically and presently. In this

111 Donna Zuckerberg, “Teach Me How to Say Goodbye.”
112 Ibid.
113 Donna Zuckerberg, “My Classics Will Be Intersectional, Or...,” EIDOLON (Medium, December 4, 2020), https://eidolon.pub/my-classics-will-be-intersectional-or-14ed6e0bed1c.
way, the article narrativizes *Eidolon*. Furthermore, through this narrativization, Zuckerberg’s final editorial shows one of the key issues with *Eidolon*: the fact that the space that exists for authors and classicists of marginalized identities is dependent on the will of a rich white woman.

In the editorial, Zuckerberg explains that, though feminism was always implicit, she and her team were careful for it to remain implicit before their 2017 evolution. In hindsight, she writes, “it was the right choice to not yet openly claim that *Eidolon* was feminist, because it forced my editorial team and I to radically reimagine what it would mean to claim a feminist politics and a mission explicitly focused on social justice.” She cites the 2016 presidential election as the turning point at which *Eidolon* became an explicitly feminist publication after much deliberation by the board. She then tells the narrative of *Eidolon* becoming more and more progressive, and receiving more and more criticism for it. This criticism came from both right-leaning classicists, who believe that this would be alienating to many people interested in Classics and therefore contribute to the downfall of the field, and the left, who feel that “there’s a limit to how radical a wealthy Ivy League-educated white woman can be.” Indeed, this is a view that I have expressed myself about Zuckerberg being the main voice of *Eidolon* as the editor-in-chief publishing monthly editorials. Showcasing her self-awareness of this, she writes, “I’ve always known this was a valid concern, and for a long time I felt that as long as I was doing more good by amplifying voices than I was sucking up oxygen, I should keep doing this work, and when I stopped being sure

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114 Donna Zuckerberg, “My Classics Will Be Intersectional, Or...,”
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
then I should step back. And now that time has come.” Unfortunately and paradoxically, her decision to stop taking up so much space led to the deletion of that space as a whole.

Zuckerberg’s editorial is an indicator of how she sees the work of *Eidolon* after the fact. Though she uses the word “intersectional,” she only mentions race twice, class and disability once, all in passing. I do not mean to take away from the intersectional work that *Eidolon* has published, but I find it ironic that this final article summarizing *Eidolon*’s history does not explicitly talk about race given the success and, in my opinion, superiority of its content that is written by and about classicists of color on race. This imbalance of Zuckerberg taking up oxygen versus amplifying voices is shown through *Eidolon*’s work on race. So far, we have seen how the current institutional structures of the University shape *Eidolon*. In this chapter, I will examine some different articles about race in order to show *Eidolon*’s politics in regards to systemic racism and outline its strengths and limitations with regards to these politics.

“Why I Teach About Race and Ethnicity In the Classical World”

One type of *Eidolon* article that focuses on race is that of classicists correcting perceptions of race in the ancient Mediterranean. This is largely done in opposition to views that Classics is the origins of white culture that have contributed to white supremacy. That mythologization is the area of interest of
Zuckerberg and her book. Rebecca Futo Kennedy’s article “Why I Teach About Race and Ethnicity in the Ancient World,” is an example of this type of article. Kennedy is responding to a recent online controversy over polychromy, or the findings of archaeologists that state that ancient Greek and Roman statues were vibrantly painted. Specifically, Kennedy is responding to the reception of the article “Why We Need to Start Seeing the Classical World in Color” by Sarah Bond and builds off of it by giving her own observations about the manner in which white audiences react to assertions that the ancient Mediterranean was racially diverse. Kennedy reflects that “people are more comfortable with antiquity being racist (and sexist and classist) than they are with it being diverse.” The use of the word “diverse” is worth noting because, though it is a word that scholars of race in the ancient world, including Kennedy, often use to describe ancient Greece and Rome, it is a part of our modern vocabulary of race and our modern understanding of difference.

This article is one of many Eidolon articles that are concerned with destabilizing power matrices by showing that the systems are not fixed through time and space. Kennedy uses her own experience teaching and researching about race and ethnicity in the ancient Mediterranean to make clear that ancient Greece and Rome did not have the same constructed meanings of race and whiteness as we do, but were also not “colorblind” societies either and in fact had their own ideas about racial difference. She writes that ancient Greek and Roman

societies “absolutely had concepts akin to modern race/ethnicity, even if they weren’t the specific type of cultural and ‘scientific’ categories we have today. And, what’s more, they seemed to consider them subjective concepts, not objective. Teaching these complexities can have an impact in our classrooms.”¹¹⁹

The subjective/objective binary is a modern one, and is used by Kennedy to help her audiences understand rather than as an actual fact. Kennedy is concerned with showing that understanding of race in antiquity “has been an important area of scholarship almost since the field came into being and it has almost always been political.”¹²⁰ Interestingly, she also denies the credibility of critics who say that Bond and other scholars who write about the ancient world as a diverse place are pushing their own liberal political agenda in writing the article.¹²¹ Kennedy refers to this as “when members of our profession are attacked for doing their job.”¹²² ¹²³ In this way, she identifies the job of the professor as a sort of truth-telling. That is not to assume that Kennedy sees her fact-checking as apolitical, but she does criticize people who claim that it is overtly and solely political.

The Personal Experience Essay

Kennedy’s article is one of many Eidolon articles which identify larger oppressive structures of Classics and seek to rectify them. The flip side of this

¹¹⁹ Ibid.
¹²⁰ Ibid.
¹²¹ Ibid.
¹²² Ibid.
¹²³ Ibid.
technique is found in the *Eidolon* articles that are personal essays about the experiences of marginalized people in Classics. Both of these approaches are based in reception theory, but the essays about personal experience as a person in Classics, often centering the author’s marginalized identity, fulfill the aspect of reception theory that advocates for incorporating the reader/writer/student as a social subject. *Eidolon* editor Yung In Chae has written that “everyday experience is both the scene of the crime and the entry point into a larger system of racial oppression.” This idea separates the personal experience essay from essays like Kennedy’s and is a useful way to look at those essays that are deeply rooted in daily experience and the experiencer’s perception of those experiences. For example, “‘The Board is Well-Reminded’: What It’s Like to Be the Only Classicist of Color in a Faculty Meeting” by “Sankarshana” (a pseudonym) describes an instance in detail of being the only classicist of color in a room. The author, as the elected Graduate Student Representative, sits at a Classics department meeting at a “pretty famous university with a pretty famous Classics department.” During the discussion about the burgeoning work of the Diversity and Equality committee, “Sankarshana” spoke up about how the department’s diversifying efforts should move beyond syllabus reform and into structural and institutional reform, namely into hiring a permanent faculty member who is a person of color. The main point of the article is the author’s intense anxiety at the situation, specifically his anxieties about isolating possible allies, making the

126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
meeting members uncomfortable, diminishing the struggle of other
underrepresented demographics, and being predictable as the only person of color
in the room and the one to bring up race. Ultimately, he writes that he does not
have a solution to these anxieties or a happy ending to the story. In this way, the
article occupies the space of experience fully, which is to say that it privileges the
personal voice of a marginalized person over the scholarly voice of an article like
Kennedy’s.

“‘After Careful Consideration’: Trying to Get Hired as a Black Latin
Teacher” by John Bracey is similarly structured using the personal essay
format. In the essay, the author describes his experience applying and
interviewing for Latin teacher jobs around Boston, breaking the essay up into
sections for each interview or application experience. Like the previously outlined
personal experience essay, “‘After Careful Consideration,’” is firmly rooted in the
emotional experience of the author. Bracey describes his growing feelings of
discouragement throughout the application and interview process. He ends with a
list of his observations and conclusions, in which he calls out the lack of diversity
in hiring committees and already employed Latin teachers and implores his
readers to change the lack of diversity in Classics by hiring classicists of color
like himself, or else “Classics as a discipline will continue to die a slow death on
the hill of white exclusivity.”

128 Ibid.
129 John Bracey, “‘After Careful Consideration,’” EIDOLON (Medium, April 22, 2019),
https://eidolon.pub/after-careful-consideration-7e50172d0aa3.
130 Ibid.
Another one of these personal experience essays is “Classics Makes Me Happy. Is That Enough?” by Helen Wong, subtitled “An Undergraduate Student of Color Examines Feelings of Guilt.” In the essay, Wong writes about her experience sitting at the Classics table at the majors fair on Admitted Students Day at her university, during which only two out of over thirty students that she met had been non-white. She reflects on her own academic journey towards being a Classics major and her hesitance; she writes, “I didn’t think I would ever really have a place studying something I thought was made by white people for white people.” She documents the transition of this feeling from hesitance to guilt. She mentions contacting Dan-El Padilla Peralta, a frequent Eidolon contributor and scholar of Roman History, who tells her that the feeling of guilt never really goes away and it is a personal choice.

On the Front Lines of Classics Activism

Padilla is one of the most widely known classicists in opposition to white supremacy, and has even been profiled by the New York Times. The fact that this piece, entitled “He Wants to Save Classics From Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?”, was published in the New York Times rather than Eidolon allows it to separate from any loyalty to Classics as a discipline, which is always lurking

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132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
underneath in a publication that is dedicated to Classics. The article specifies a bit on what destroying the field would mean materially, raising the possibility of or combining it with other departments or reassigning its faculty into related departments, such as history, art history, archaeology, and language or linguistics. The profile shows him expressing many of the same sentiments as he does in his *Eidolon* articles. The article even links to “Barbarians Inside the Gate, Part I” an *Eidolon* article of his about immigration in ancient Rome and today, which is also one of the articles on the editor’s choice list. This NYT profile also transmits Padilla’s views on the type of *Eidolon* article that exposes false notions about race in the ancient world in response to racist movements claiming ancient Greece and Rome as origins of white culture, which I exemplified before with my discussion of Kennedy’s article:

Padilla argues that exposing truths about antiquity, while important, is not enough [to keep white supremacists from yearning for the myth]. Dismantling structures of power that have been shored up by the classical tradition will require more than fact-checking; it will require writing an entirely new story about antiquity, and about who we are today.

Padilla here emphasizes the ineffectiveness of taking a simple fact-checking approach to white nationalists who attempt to appropriate world history, but does

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138 Rachel Poser, “He Wants to Save Classics From Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?”
not advertise an alternative to help prevent them from appropriating it. Rather,

“Padilla is advocating reforms that would ‘explode the canon’ and ‘overhaul the
discipline from nuts to bolts,’ including doing away with the label ‘Classics’
altogether.”¹³⁹ So, Padilla advocates possibly taking an abolitionist stance towards
the field in order to fulfill the larger goal of racial and epistemic justice rather than
using the discipline as it already exists as a weapon. I end this chapter with
Padilla, the celebrity of radical Classics, to show how individual activism can be a
backbone for an abolitionist approach to Classics academia which fights the
discipline’s white supremacist history.

¹³⁹ Ibid.
Conclusions

_Eidolon’s_ journey from attempting to be apolitical to being overtly political and feminist shows a growing pessimism, which happens to many individuals on the left studying Classics including myself, on a collective and organizational scale. Though we must remember that _Eidolon_ attributes their shut-down to the extenuating circumstance of Zuckerberg’s decision to step down, and further to _Eidolon’s_ dependence on the independent wealth of its leader, it is hard to ignore the fact that _Eidolon’s_ increasing political leftness was ultimately self-destructive. _Eidolon_ gave a voice to classicists of marginalized identities on a free and widely accessible platform, and in giving this space necessarily altered the extra-academic landscape of Classics. Yet, _Eidolon’s_ growing political leftness forced its leader to face the fact that it was _not left enough_, and perhaps could never be.

I connect this phenomenon to the history of niche publications. For example, the punk and riot grrrl zines of the 1980s and 1990s functioned as spaces for critique of the larger counterculture that its contributors were a part of, but those attempts at subversion often resulted in exclusion of more marginalized identities.¹⁴⁰ This is certainly a risk that _Eidolon_ faces in its mission to put a feminist spin on writing about Classics: though much of its articles discuss intersectionality, the way it centers feminism often carries the risk if pushing other social categories such as class and race to the side.

Cynicism aside, I believe in the good work that *Eidolon* has done. Before it had to shut down, *Eidolon* published work by marginalized classicists for which there was no better space or infrastructure. And, if nothing else, *Eidolon* has provided a new angle from which we can interrogate Classics, the University, and social justice in the age of the internet. On the history of journals as a way to connect communities of scholars, Stray writes that “the history of failure is as important as the history of success: if we want to understand what the scholars of the period were trying to achieve, we need to recover evidence of projects that failed.”[^1] I conclude my discussion of *Eidolon* with this not to categorize it as a failure, but to embrace a shuttered publication as a step on the way to liberation.

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