

# Classics in African Diasporic Writing, with Justine McConnell – Podcast Transcript

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classics, literature, ajax, people, writers, sula, morrison, roman, engage, african diaspora, odysseus, called, antiquity, point, canon, toni morrison, elements, cyclops, work, odyssey

## SPEAKERS

Justine McConnell, Malin Hay, Shivaik Shah

### Malin Hay 00:01

Welcome to the Khameleon Classics podcast. I'm Malin Hay, the assistant producer. Today Shivaik Shah is talking to Dr Justine McConnell, Senior Lecturer in Comparative Literature at King's College London, about the many contemporary Black writers who have engaged with Graeco-Roman antiquity in their work. Justine is the author of the 2013 book *Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora Since 1939*, and her research interests include Caribbean literature, classical reception studies and postcolonial theory. Weaving together all of those interests, Shivaik and Justine will be talking together about why the ancient Greeks and Romans are such a rich source of influence for African diasporic writers, and how classical scholars can understand that influence without distorting its importance.

### Justine McConnell 00:46

Hello.

### Shivaik Shah 00:46

Hello, Justine. So to jump straight in, you know, there are a wide range of 20th and 21st century artists - Wole Soyinka, Toni Morrison, Derek Walcott, Bernadine Evaristo, that's just to list a few - who are interested in - these are African diasporic writers who were interested in Graeco-Roman elements in their books. And I suppose the question is why?

### Justine McConnell 01:06

So I think probably the most fundamental answer there is colonialism. So this is why the Greco Roman antiquity is there in so much African diaspora writing, because when the European colonisers invaded and oppressed regions of the world, they imposed their language, their religion, and very often the study of ancient Greece and Rome, on the peoples of those lands. And why Greece and Rome? Well, this is really because all over Europe, Classics, so called, was held up as the pinnacle of elite learning and culture, something that had currency among the elite. So then it was held up in the colonised lands as something that only the greatest and the best could aspire to. And the other reason why perhaps sort of Greek and Roman literature has particular force here is something that Barbara Goff in her book *Classics and Colonialism* has discussed, that Greco Roman literature had even more weight than other

canonical works, perhaps because they were part of a canon that's shared across Europe, with the united, albeit dead, languages of Latin and Greek.

**Shivaik Shah 02:15**

And I suppose one of the questions now is we have all of these texts, they're not so often engaged with - not many people know that there even is a wide range of 20th and 21st century literature of the African diaspora that engage with these topics. And that's problem number one. But as an academic who's working on this, it must be difficult to navigate, because of course, one has to appreciate the Graeco-Roman elements of it in some way. But one doesn't also want to distort or over-prioritise those aspects, because obviously in doing so - if one sort of over-prioritises those aspects, you actually remove the incredible aspects of the African diasporic writing and their own identities within the text. I think there's a brilliant quote by Henry Louis Gates: 'our goal must not be to embed, as it were, Europe in Africa and Africa and Europe.' So how do you navigate that that boundary?

**Justine McConnell 03:02**

Yeah, it's a very interesting one and a kind of important one, there are a couple of aspects here. And I suppose fundamentally, we can be led by the work itself, these writers have done it for us, they've shown us how to do this. So one way that we can be careful if we're looking at this is taking a kind of comparative approach, which means not only looking for the Classics and the Greco-Roman, right, and not thinking that Classics will hold the key to these works. Often it's a strand in the works, but it's just one strand. And we can kind of be guided towards this by the writing, as I say, because what a lot of these writers have done is engage with Classics, partly because it was a tool that had been used to oppress. And so this can be this really powerful manoeuvre, right? So you take something that has been used to oppress you, and you not only make it your own, but you cast a new light on it. So the people suddenly wonder about their own previous readings of it, the most striking of which is perhaps Aimé Césaire's long 1939 poem *Cahier du retour au pays natal*, so 'Notebook of a Return to my Native Land'. And while it's not explicitly an odyssey by any means, Aimé Césaire was very heavily trained in Classics and he is reflecting on his own homecoming back to Martinique, and what he does there, it seems, is rewrite the Cyclops episode from Homer, but by drawing on what is in Homer, right, so suddenly, we see the Cyclops as being different, okay, not because of a single eye, but this difference standing in for a kind of racial otherness, and the Cyclops as victim, right? What is Homer's Cyclops doing? He's sat at home, he is in his own cave, he has done nothing wrong. Odysseus and his men effectively invade his home, they start eating his food. They're behaving exactly as they're not meant to. They're behaving exactly like the suitors are behaving in Odysseus's palace. And what Aimé Césaire does is remind us of that, and remind us that the reason they think they can do this is because they see him as somehow other, whether he's got one eye, or they're basing it on the grounds of racial difference. So Aimé Césaire sort of embeds this, in a sense, within his poem. And by doing so he shows just how much he can claim Homer, how much the Greek literature is his as much as it is anybody else's. And so that's not only about resisting oppression, although it is that, it's also a really fundamental position, which is, why would writers of the African diaspora not engage with Graeco-Roman antiquity, just as they engage with the literature and ideas from a wide range of times and places? And that's what we need to pay attention to, right, not to just look at the Graeco-Roman strands, but to try and look at all of them. And if we can do that, by our own study perfectly, but we can also work collaboratively with others, we can engage with others, we can draw on other people's

expertise, so that we don't distort these works and say, ah, Aimé Césaire's Cahier is about the Odyssey. It's not, it's not at all. But that's a strand within it.

**Shivaik Shah 06:08**

I think something else that's interesting you pointed out there is that he's not just making a postcolonial or anti-colonial response. I'm going to quote you back at you, but you write: 'Responses to the Odyssey on the part of writers of the African diaspora reveal plurality, rather than homogeneity. And there is no postcolonial response to Homer, nor even an anti-colonial response to the Odyssey, there is rather a multitude of postcolonial and anti-colonial responses that differ radically from one another.' I think that's really interesting, because at points, you know, it's not just an instinctual reaction that all the same diaspora have to exactly the same story. Each of them is, in themselves, their own story that does something new and in their own right, with this same, perhaps the same source text. But it's not just the same sort of postcolonial or anti-colonial response to each and every one.

**Justine McConnell 06:52**

Exactly. And we kind of really need to kind of pay attention to that, so that we're not taking a position rooted in the Graeco-Roman rather than rooted in the work itself. And, and this perhaps gets to, you know, you quoted him earlier, but Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and particularly in his *The Signifying Monkey*, where he talks about, he's talking specifically about African-American literature, but he says it can apply more widely. And what he suggests is that works signify upon each other. That is, they engage with them, and they repeat them with difference, right. And in his work, it's African-American writers turn to vernacular black traditions, and to the Western canon. And the vernacular enables them to grant their work outside of a European tradition. And I think that's what we very often see if we look comparatively, it's not just about the European traditions, it's repeating with difference or, as a playwright, Suzan-Lori Parks calls it rep and rev, repetition and revision. And that seems to be a kind of model to me for what classical reception is doing, really.

**Shivaik Shah 07:59**

Yeah, and in the introduction, he talks about, you know, double-voiced two-toned heritage, as he says, something that he talks about the Black literary canon as having a sort of double formal antecedent of both the Western and the Black, and it's not one or the other, and it's not drawing on one or the other. And he quotes: 'The postcolonial legacy, which requires us to show that African literature is worthy of study because it is fundamentally the same as European literature. That's what needs to change. And what you're saying about this double-voiced, two-toned heritage is, it's not putting it within the context of Western literature. It's realising that it very much exists, in not even just a separate way, but in both ways simultaneously.

**Justine McConnell 08:37**

Yeah, exactly. And I think, you know, we see this throughout, if we look at some of these sort of modern, 20th-, 21st-century African diaspora works that do do engage with classics and Graeco-Roman literature.

**Shivaik Shah 08:49**

You talk about Toni Morrison, her *Sula*, and you point to: this is a novel that really well describes this sort of two-tongued, two-levelled approach to a text, because it's neither one or the other.

**Justine McConnell** 09:01

Yeah, exactly. I mean, I think very much of her work sort of embodies this, and *Sula* in particular, so as people may know, Toni Morrison minored in Classics at Howard University, a historically black college in the States, and Graeco-Roman antiquity is woven throughout her work. As a terrific 2013 monograph by Tessa Roynon on the topic kind of explores, and perhaps for Morrison's best known, well, actually probably her best known novel, possibly anyway, but certainly for classicists, is *Beloved*. So you know what she does there is take inspiration from the story of Margaret Garner, who became known in the press as the 'modern Medea' in the 19th century. Margaret Garner escaped from slavery, and as she and her family were about to be recaptured, Margaret Garner killed one of her children to prevent them from being re-enslaved. Right. And the press labelled her as the modern Medea. And this is a sort of jumping off point for Morrison. So I mean, they're like really grounded in African-American history right? And the not so so very distant history, you know, 100 years before.

**Shivaik Shah** 09:01

Yeah.

**Justine McConnell** 09:03

But if we look at a lesser known novel, one of her earlier novels, *Sula* from 1973, it's not an adaptation of Greek and Roman literature. And certainly that isn't the core element of the novel. But that is there. And Morrison plays, in my view, a very particular game with her readers here. So within the the novel, there's a character called Ajax, only quite late on we, alongside *Sula* herself, discover that he's not called Ajax at all. Rather, his name is Albert Jacks, A. Jacks. So why this confusion? What's the point going on here? I mean, there are many ways one could read it, of how little *Sula* actually knew of Ajax, who is her lover at the time, but in particular, for me, it does a couple of things simultaneously. So finding out that Ajax is not Ajax, in the novel, reminds me not to think that Greek literature will function as a key to the novel or give us any answers, but it could mislead us if we think that that's where we've got the clues. And yet, in the novel, there is an Ajax-like figure, and he's in the character called Shadrack. So if people know the story of Ajax in the *Iliad*, but very famously, in Sophocles's tragedy *Ajax*, when he's not awarded Achilles's weapons, the gods send out a kind of a hallucination of madness to him and he tries to take revenge. He thinks he's killing his fellow soldiers, he's not, he's killing a load of sheep. And he he dies by suicide in that play, rather, in the middle of the play. Morrison actually keeps the structure of *Sula* dying rather early in her novel, strangely, even though she's the protagonist, so we might have a reflection of Ajax there. But more importantly, what you can see in Ajax, of course, is that he's suffering from combat trauma because of the Trojan War. And what Morrison has is this figure of Shadrack, who returns from the First World War suffering from combat trauma as well. And his way of dealing with it is to instigate something called National Suicide Day. So that's the kind of ritual in which he wards off his fears by containing them into one day, it's a day on which no one dies by suicide, but it's a ritualised moment. And so in effect, it's how Shadrack copes with his combat trauma. So is he not, there, a kind of Ajax figure? And what he also is, is that Shadrack, quite famously, might take you to the Bible, sure, but perhaps more directly to Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail, where he discusses the Biblical trial of Shadrach, who escapes from the

furnace that Nebuchadnezzar condemned him to. So I see Morrison having perhaps, in Audre Lorde's terms, dismantled the master's house, in effect, because she she takes it apart. Ajax isn't Ajax, he's not who we think he is. These stories are all scattered throughout the novel into a new form, but she also puts them back together into new ways. So Audre Lorde said that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. And Henry Louis Gates Jr, in a different work of his, says that basically, going against Audre Lorde, only the master's tools will dismantle the master's house. And to me, Morrison is doing both of those things simultaneously. So she takes apart Greek myth, and she puts it back together in new forms that change it and combine it - combine the different elements, create something new, that fits with Morrison's idea of remembering as remembering, but also putting back together the different limbs from other places. One other thing I wanted to mention about Sula is something that brings us to another terrific work, which is Bernadine Evaristo's verse novel *The Emperor's Baby*, published in 2001, because both writers give us a female epic journey. Now, that in itself needn't be Graeco-Roman, but Morrison does give us an indication that she has Greek epic in mind, because when Sula returns home after 10 years, she says to her Gran, 'I'm probably slightly misquoting here actually, but: 'don't you say hello to nobody, when they come back after 10 years?' And to my ear, the 10 years, which is, you know, the time of Odysseus's travels, that 10 years combined with the mention of 'nobody', which is Odysseus's famous kind of pseudonym with the Cyclops, brings the *Odyssey* to mind, and asks us whether and how it fits with Sula's journey. And if it doesn't fit, why doesn't it? Is it about her being African-American, is it about her being a woman? Why doesn't this work? And Evaristo's first novel is set in ancient London, and the eponymous Emperor's baby is Zuleika. She's the lover of the Emperor Septimius Severus. Zuleika is Evaristo's own invention, but as she has discussed, one of the things she was so keen to draw attention to in that novel is the history of black people in Britain, and that it extends so much further back than people often acknowledge. So right back here to the third century CE, at least when Severus was in London, and Zuleika in the novel is the daughter of Sudanese immigrants to ancient Londinium. And in her kind of use of slang and her stance, she seems to syncretize third century CE and 21st century London. So in Evaristo, it's a black woman's epic journey that is at the heart of the story. And while each of them kind of draw on Graeco-Roman literature, that is by no means key, instead, it's kind of a jumping-off point. And then they go from there.

**Shivaik Shah 15:45**

That's really interesting. And I think the way that you position the two ideas of you can't, you have to use the tools and you can't use the tools - in *The Signifying Monkey* Gates writes: 'Our writers use that impressive tradition to define themselves both with and against their concept of received order.' What do you think, is that, you know, this idea of received order is in itself a construction, there is nothing received, you know, it's all a construction. But there is this sense of received order, the sense of Graeco-Roman superiority, the sense that it belongs in the western canon, it's the birth of the Western canon. I wonder if you have any thoughts on that, both in general and related to the way that both Bernadine Evaristo and Toni Morrison do that?

**Justine McConnell 16:28**

I mean, one of the factors that's true is that that received order, as you say, already betrays our own bias, whether it's a bias imposed by our education system or not. And it's an - I mean, many people do think of the Western canon as being, you know, at the heart of lots of literature, it's only so because of

power dynamics, not because of something innate to that canon. And if you look at the kind of history of canon formation, they have always changed. But it's within the interests of a canon to pretend that that is not so, right. So you pretend that they are unchanging, and you keep trying to consolidate them. And they are exclusive, often they are trying to define themselves by what they're leaving out. But it's not, it's not really a true impression in some senses. So if we know that better, it's, you know, say European text better in a Western canon, it's up to us to do the work, you know, and it's not hard in a sense to do the work, to find what else is out there. Because there's been great anthologies of literature from all over the world, that can be a kind of good starting point, or a good teaching point. And we're giving an awful lot of time to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. here, but he, in his book *The Loose Canons*, discusses exactly that the reason he and colleagues created the anthology of African American literature was so that nobody had an excuse not to teach that anymore. Nobody could say, I don't know about this literature, I don't know where to start. It is there. So although I take the point of people were, you know, perhaps asking, you know, like what are you guys doing? My question would be to them would be why, why are they so invested in seeing Graeco-Roman literature as somehow better, superior or different? And if they say they're not, then their question no longer holds, right. It's just another kind of form of literature. And I think Morrison and Evaristo show us this again and again, because they don't say that one of these has the key. But what's really fascinating is bringing lots of them together with their own originality and creating something new. And that's what you guys are doing too, right, you know? Bringing together different elements to create something new. That's kind of what it's all about.

**Shivaik Shah 18:45**

For a moment, if we flip that on its head completely, which is not that we shouldn't do it, because, you know, we don't have access to the canon. But flip it for the idea of why would we do it because is partaking in negotiating when using in some way the Graeco-Roman antiquity as a model or as - this is only for us - directly using that story. But as you point out, different writers use it to different levels. Is that not in some way, us succumbing to or even inadvertently promoting the superiority of the canon? And why is it that writers - because obviously, you know, you need to certainly if you look at the cases of turn of the last century or in you know, the British Empire in India, you needed to speak Latin, you needed to have an understanding of Classics to partake in this colonial system. Is that sort of a leftovers of what we're doing now, it's a very complicated question, but you see where I'm getting at?

**Justine McConnell 19:40**

Yeah. And there is a history of that literature that is really problematic, that has been utterly elitist, and in all senses, excluding people on grounds of gender, race, class, you know, but I don't think it's innate to the literature. So that the history we can see that's an 18th and 19th century configuration, the truth - which most people agree with now, but I'm going to claim it as the truth - yeah, is that antiquity in classical Greece and Rome, people were engaging also with people in in Africa, right. So this was not ever uniquely oppressive, or white, or male, or any of those elements. And that's something that has happened subsequently, really problematically and that we need to look at. But what you can do now is, following the footsteps of what these writers are doing and taking from it, which doesn't embed it as any better, just takes what it was, that it belongs to everybody and to nobody. And so the question suggests that it is somehow better, right, you know, and that you are doing this because it is somehow better than something else. No, it's an interesting jumping off point. It's one. There are many other possible ones. There is a benefit of recognisable works and canonical works, because they can be accessible to

lots of people in other ways. They also have a flexibility, where if you can assume that an audience is going to have a broad outline knowledge of something, you get to flag up the differences. We're back to Gates or Suzan Lori Parks, repetition and revision, make a change. And Ralph Ellison, the African American writer, has an essay called 'Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke'. You make a change, and you get rid of its oppressive nature. And so it doesn't seem to me that to see another Medea, for example, is re-endorsing Euripides's play Medea as crucial. You could do that, people do do that. Sometimes it depends what you do with the production.

**Shivaik Shah** 21:47

It depends whether you're using Classics to get some kind of kudos, to revert to Classics in a way to try get that weird class and superiority element. And I suppose as you say, we're not doing that, obviously. And, and it's how we negotiate that relationship.

**Justine McConnell** 22:03

I guess there is a point, you know, having sort of defended the position that - I mean, I do worry, well, I actually just wish that there was more theatre going on at the moment, which obviously that can't be because of the pandemic. But it is a pity when big theatres revert again and again to the old favourites rather than looking at some new works, that's where it can be a problem. But, you know, people are doing that less, people are more aware of that than they were. And so they usually do some interesting things with with these works. Now.

**Shivaik Shah** 22:33

I mean, obviously, we agree with you, that's exactly what we're doing. But I do think it's interesting to, to investigate. And I also think that, you know, we needed to take the time to scrutinise that. I think that's another very important process, both for people of colour and white artists engaging with the Classics, is to really investigate why one is choosing to engage with them. Because it's so easy to fall into the very set trap, the structure of thinking, that you're doing them because they're ipso facto better, because they're Greek or whatever it is, but also that, you know, there isn't as much of a right. It doesn't belong to anyone, and therefore us engaging with it is no different from anyone else engaging with it, as long as it comes from, I think, a more aware space.

**Justine McConnell** 23:14

Yeah, for sure, one needs to kind of reflect and be aware also, because it'll affect how you produce the play you're going to write. If one doesn't think about that, then one might start falling into this accidental kind of reinforcement of dynamics that you're not wanting to reinforce. And because it's kind of good for all of us to reflect on it, because it makes us realise our own kind of positionality bit more, where our biases lie. What you know, if, if we've made an assumption isn't like, Whoa, why why did I make that assumption? or Why did I, from the example going back to Cesaire before, so, why is that an unusual Cyclops? Well, because we're always taught, and we always see, even when we're kids, we see the Cyclops presented as not quite human, even though the Greek's really quite precise that he's - a huge man, but he's a man, he's a human being. But you know, if you think of the way he's often depicted, it's, it's more monstrous than that. So it's kind of interesting to kind of reflect on that.

**Shivaik Shah** 24:12

I think we've probably got a lot of students listening and probably some academics as well. What would you advise, as someone who works on this, I'm sure I fell into the trap that the quote I put earlier, which is, you know, trying to make something fundamentally European as the only way I know how to access the text. And I think that's certainly for a student an understandable trap to fall into, because that's what you're taught, right? You're taught to put things within the European context as an isolated English within the English canon. And then from that perspective, you can engage with the text from the perspective of the heritage of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, from what you know - the way you know how to analyse primarily white texts and then engage with texts, even very earnestly trying to - even when you're very honestly trying to engage with them. It's so easy to fall into the trap of forcing them within a Western tradition to then analyse them and - you know, what do you suggest, as someone who writes on this so, so eloquently? And so often? What is the way to not fall into that trap? You mentioned comparison as one method, but I think it'd be nice to elucidate some ways to get out of that trap.

**Justine McConnell 25:12**

Yeah, I mean, realistically, one's going to come from one's position of expertise at some stage. And depending what education system you've gone through, you may know more about certain elements than others. But if you're wanting to study, then it's your kind of duty to look further. And it's not hard, because there's been so much great work done on it. And so you can kind of start looking at canons from other places if you want to, or seeing the connections, and it's okay to draw on one's own expertise. Right? You will start by by doing exactly what you said, I mean, everyone almost has to start from their position of knowledge. And seeing, oh, how do I understand this, this new literature or whatever new element of literature you're exploring, and you're always going to compare it to what you know, but then saying, okay, so if I know if I've got expertise here, it's now my duty, if I'm going to do classical reception, I mean, this is what, you know, I was always told when I began doing it - if you're going to do classical stuff, you've got to make yourself an expert in whatever your two or more areas of expertise are, right? You can't come along as a classicist and talk about postcolonial literature, unless you've just spent an awful lot of time understanding about postcolonial theory, knowing what other people have written. Otherwise, you're in danger of taking a more arrogant approach.

**Shivaik Shah 26:33**

Re-colonising the text. I think I read somewhere, you know, you're in danger of re-colonising the text, which I thought was a really, really finite way to put basically what happens when non - supposedly non-Western canonical texts are forced back into the canon. I think that's a succinct way of basically putting what happened. Let's jump to a to a bigger perspective question just to round up. We mentioned Howard earlier, obviously, we're recording this at a time where Howard's Classics department has just, you know, made Classics no longer a major, and Classics is changing very, very rapidly right now. And very necessarily, I'm sure anyone listening to this podcast would agree, in light of your work, which is obviously more comparative, and really draws Classics into the worlds of - the spheres of so many different study areas. From this sort of perspective where is, or perhaps the question should be, where should classics be going today to encompass all of these things that we've discussed so far?

**Justine McConnell 27:31**

Let's go for this, Shiv, because I hope it's going to go in positive directions. And I will say that there's been so much creative work already done by by artists, writers, playwrights of colour engaging with



Graeco-Roman antiquity, that I hope that academia will be led by their precedent, right, it's kind of already been done for us, we've seen how we can do it so often, and, you know, it's it's very much the case in this instance, artists, writers, theatre practitioners tend to lead the way and academics follow behind, which is okay, you know, there's, there's a reason why there's that kind of division, but I really hope that we will follow and kind of learn from what these writers have done. So if we take our cue from Suzanne Walcott, Morrison, Evaristo, Soyinka, any of these writers, then what we'll see is that we can become an expert in Classics if we want, but we need to see what else is going on. And we need to allow the foundations or sort of confidence in the foundations of, classical foundations to be shaken a little bit, not to be so sure that they are going to provide all the keys or that they are necessarily always the most valuable literature. And I wouldn't want to make Graeco-Roman literature less valuable. It's more about instead of having it on a pedestal and other things beneath, it's more about everything that one is interested in being up there. And how do you do that? Well, you don't need one individual to do it. That's why we need to work a bit more collaboratively together. And you know, students can follow their own interests and see where that leads them, you know, and people kind of working together. But I think the work is already there. And the kind of artists that we've been talking about today have shown us how some of the pernicious elements of Classics as a discipline can be kind of declawed, if you like, if we only listen to the example that they've shown us,

**Shivaik Shah 29:32**

I think that that's a great way to draw to an end, all the work is already there, it's already been done. And on that note, Justine has very kindly provided reading lists - an extensive reading list that is attached to this podcast if you do want to look into any of these subjects further, and there's a lot of work that's ready to be really engaged with. It's not the case of waiting on anything. It's all there and all we need to do is just put the time and effort into changing, shifting our focus a little bit and really engaging with the wealth in all the meanings of that real wealth of material that is already out there. And with that, Justine, thank you so much for your time today and thank you for such an enlightening podcast about our topic today.

**Justine McConnell 30:13**

Thank you. It's been terrific and good luck with the film.

**Malin Hay 30:18**

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