Arts & Humanities

The Turn of the Key

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|
Fall 2015

Dan-el Padilla Peralta, a scholar of ancient Rome, is convinced that studying classics can be about “the exquisite thrill of discovery: the pleasures of finding old bodies changed into new forms, to paraphrase Ovid.”

For Isaac Scott, who has a five-to-seven-page paper due for Padilla Peralta’s class, the old bodies in question belong to Antigone’s ill-fated brothers.

“My paper is going to be on the burial of the dead in Greek history, based on *Antigone*, by Sophocles,” Scott says, sipping a coffee at Joe’s, in Columbia’s Northwest Corner Building. Scott takes out a draft of his paper from a folder labeled “Humanities Texts, Critical Skills,” the name of an English course that meets on summer nights in Hamilton Hall.

“It’s an unwritten law of the gods that every dead person has the right to a proper burial,” says Scott, and reads from his draft: *If you were their family member or successor and you don’t properly bury them, the curse of the gods comes on you.* Scott would like to do more outside research, “but this guy won’t let me,” he says, pointing across the room at Padilla Peralta, who is in line for coffee. “I have to build an argument using *Antigone*; I have to use the text right here.”

Scott, who is thirty-two, also has an art show to attend later (he is an artist himself), followed by an overnight shift cleaning a bakery in Grand Central Station. He says that when he first went to college, he earned a degree in computer networking. He never studied literature, and while he loves to read, he always did it at his own pace. With this first big paper, he had “to plan how to attack it.”

“I’m going to use the same procedures I took when I was in prison and wrote letters,” he says. These included writing out his thoughts in the margins as they

came to him, and finding where they fit in afterward. “I spent seven and a half years in prison. As much as you can make yourself busy, you still have all the time in the world. Now I make sure no time is wasted. I try to do as much as I can.”

English 3002: Humanities Texts, Critical Skills is the very first course offered by the Justice-in-Education Initiative, a campus collaboration between the Heyman Center for the Humanities, the Center for Justice (an interdisciplinary group working to reduce mass incarceration in the US), and the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race. The class is open only to formerly incarcerated adults. Scott learned about the program from Teachers College professor Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, whom he met at a Columbia symposium called “Education Is Transformation!”

According to course administrator Christina Dawkins, students were all involved in “civil-service or community work” after their release, and are recommended for the course by various community partner organizations. Students who successfully complete the course earn four Columbia credits in English.

Twice a week, Scott and six classmates — three women and three men — meet Padilla Peralta and his co-instructor Emily Hainze for the full-credit night class. The syllabus is divided into themes like friendship, alienation, and rage. Padilla Peralta, who once lived in a homeless shelter as a child — and who is now a teaching fellow in Columbia’s Society of Fellows in the Humanities — is “thrilled” to teach this course in part because “people who have come out of prison are well situated to deliver powerful interpretations of these texts.” When his students read *Antigone* or Homer’s *Odyssey*, they confront “issues that range beyond incarceration to structural inequality, education, and marginalization.” In the process, Padilla Peralta says, his students generate “new perspectives on the crises we face” — such as the disproportionate imprisonment of those already marginalized by American society, particularly men of color like both Scott and Padilla Peralta, who are also more likely to live in poor neighborhoods and attend poorly funded schools.

Still, Scott doesn’t blame the system for everything. “The time I got was for what I did,” he says. “People make mistakes. Some mistakes cost you more. One person might have made a mistake that cost him ten years. Now, that doesn’t mean he is what he did. He wants to come home and do better. Teach him, so that he can come home and do better. Don’t make it so that he doesn’t know anything other than what he’s been doing in prison for the last ten years.”

While Scott writes about the curse of the gods, Padilla Peralta wonders at how criminality in America is presented as a stain that follows you, or an intergenerational curse. In this way, teacher and student “pivot,” as Padilla Peralta puts it, from the ancient text to social realities, and “do some work with it.”

Padilla Peralta recalls a particular class conversation.

“One of the concerns,” he says, “was the anxiety that Odysseus feels about going back home, and what lies in store for him there. We reflected on the very real prospect that things had changed, not only in the home but in Odysseus himself.” It was Scott who pointed out that this anxiety was a lot like “the anxiety people have when they get out of jail,” says Padilla Peralta.

“Reading the *Odyssey*, we can ask: do you really get to come back home, if home is not what it was before you left?”

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