Hello everyone! This is Clara. Thank you so much for having me. I am a white person with a round face, short brown hair, and blue eyes. I’m wearing…and sitting… You can turn on zoom’s live transcript by selecting the Live Transcript/Closed Caption button at the bottom of your screen. I’m also going to drop a link in the chat where you can download a word document of my remarks and slides with alt-text for each of the images as well as source information. If you are accessing this presentation via recording, my materials will be available on the APGRD website.

 Before beginning I want to recognize and acknowledge that I am on the lands of the Peoria, Kaskaskia, Piankashaw, Wea, Miami, Mascoutin, Odawa, Sauk, Mesquaki, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Chickasaw Nations. These lands were the traditional territory of these Native Nations prior to their forced removal; these lands continue to carry the stories of these Nations and their struggles for survival and identity.

As part of a land-grant institution, I have a particular obligation to recognize the peoples of these lands and the histories of dispossession upon which the University of Illinois rests. As a humanist I also recognize that the past is not past, and that no field or arena of inquiry is exempt from the responsibility of addressing the legacies of settler colonialism and its contemporary manifestations well beyond acknowledgments such as this.[[1]](#footnote-1) If you’re interested in learning more about how US institutions have profited from the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, a [2019 article](https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities) by Robert Lee and Tristan Atohne is in my bibliography.

Ok! [PAUSE] Posthumanism is a grab bag of theories, ideas, hopes, and fears. It encompasses transhumanism, the very real, on-the-ground attempt to transcend the limits of the human body through implants, genetics, and other transformations not yet even imagined; this is a type of posthumanism I associate with N. Katherine Hayles’ phrase “when information loses its body”; but posthumanism is also embraced by people in the academy looking for a new humanism, a new way of being human and of studying humanistic production that is not centered exclusively on human beings and perspectives—a Cary Wolfe type posthumanism and also one often silently indebted to Indigenous cosmologies, as scholars including Zoe Todd and Jimmy Snyder have argued. It’s a humanism that recognizes the harms some of us are wreaking on this planet while also trying to imagine a different world, governed by different relationships, structures, and ethics. A humanism that comes after.

My scholarship has primarily been posthuman in this sense, dedicated to decentering human interests (as much as I can unthink them) in my study of ancient Mediterranean texts and cultures. But recently I have been drawn to a more radical form of posthumanism, what Patricia MacCormack calls ahumanism, the “cessation of human existence.” Ahumanists are also looking for a humanism that comes after, after the disavowal of human supremacy and after the recognition of human harms, but they have taken this realization to a further conclusion: to decenter the human means to stop its reproduction, it means (to paraphrase Donna Haraway and Adele Clarke) making kin with nonhuman beings rather than increasing human population.

There is a lot I could say, and that has been said by others, against this idea: that racism and eugenics have motivated such arguments in the past; that certain human populations (eg those in the first world) have a much bigger impact on other species; that, as Jennifer Mae Hamilton has pointed out, “making kin” may reinscribe the very inequities in care work that feminism seeks to redress. But I find myself very attracted to the idea nonetheless, the injunction to “make kin, not babies (or population).” This slogan speaks directly to the guilt and dread I feel as a high-consuming, highly privileged human living in an ever-accelerating global environment crisis. If I must continue to exist, why replicate my behaviors by breeding someone else, why double my consuming and my harm?

But I haven’t taken on the idea, all the same. I am at this very moment trying hard to have a baby, one born from my body. A new human. A new piece of population. If I think I am convinced by the idea of ahumanism, I can’t be *really* convinced. My body resists.

And yet I keep returning to the idea, turning it round and around both to probe my resistance, to explore it, and because I have found it generative for thinking about art, classical reception in particular.

Because classicists are also at an impasse when it comes to our reproduction. Will we continue to make more of ourselves (more majors, more graduate students, more faculty) and will we continue to reproduce our canons? What is this lineage of which we have been told we are the stewards? What bloodlines will be perpetuated and which will be allowed to die? Feminists have long critiqued the cismasculinity of the canon, but now the voices of people of color are finally resounding in white ears. Classics has a whiteness problem. The classical canon as a body of work that gets reproduced and disseminated has a eugenics problem. Not because Greek and Roman authors ARE white but because they have been made white and mobilized for white power by those Europeans who claimed them as a heritage.

And here reception comes in. Because the classical canon is perpetuated through reception, its authority and ubiquity are reinscribed by reproduction. Homer is great, classicists say, by which we mean (in part) that the greatness of Homeric poetry is produced and confirmed through its million descendants: Derek Walcott, James Joyce, Madeline Miller, Nabila Lovelace, Louise Glück… Does the inclusion of Walcott and Lovelace in this list redeem its whiteness? If the list were entirely Black and Brown, would it be the same lineage, the same family?

I am not sure whether I, as a white person, should be a classicist, should make my living by reproducing the classical canon and lending my life to perpetuate its power. But I am doing it, I am reproducing it, and so this is the lineage I want to participate in: people of color making Greece and Rome their own.

My work in this regard is now centered not on texts but on monuments, monuments that span the ancient Mediterranean. I am looking for and trying to understand how modern and contemporary artists from marginalized standpoints are reimagining and remaking these structures. I want to make of their making a new canon of wonders, one modeled on the lists of seven wonders created by Greek writers in antiquity. Like the original seven wonders my list is organized by my gaze, by my power. But also like the seven wonders my list is a bit surprising, a bit subversive in its embrace of a wider Mediterranean. [Slide 1] The Statue of Zeus at Olympia was the only one on the Greek mainland. All the others—from the Great Pyramid of Giza and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon to the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, the Colossus of Rhodes, the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, and the Lighthouse of Alexandria—were situated in non-Greek or hybrid cultural contexts.

I’m interested especially in the way artists from marginalized standpoints find possibilities in these and other monuments of the ancient Mediterranean. Reception is always asking “what if” of its source material, but artists who engage Mediterranean monuments discover possibilities unique to their perspective and experience. To borrow Wai Chee Dimock’s words, artists from marginalized standpoints create “virtual sites,” “airy vehicles,” and “thinkable versions” of the past—versions that *can* be thought, but have not been before.

[Slide 2] One of these new versions of the past is *Hive*, a site-specific installation created by sound artist and Roman historian Lakshmi Ramgopal and sculptor Nancy Davidson. The piece was commissioned by Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and co-curated by myself and Amy Powell, Krannert’s curator of modern and contemporary art. *Hive* was installed in the Kinkaid Pavilion of Krannert in January 2020; we expected to keep it up until the end of 2020, but because of the pandemic the installation was extended through May 2021. [Slides 3-4]

Ramgopal and Davidson worked together to reimagine two ancient monuments, the caryatids of the Erectheion on the Athenian Acropolis and the cult statue of the goddess Artemis as she was worshipped at Ephesus, in what is now Turkey. [Slide 5] Like the caryatids, Davidson’s inflatable sculptures sport long, elaborate braids and appear to hold up the Egyptian revival porch in which they are suspended. [Slide 6] But Davidson’s version of the Artemis of Ephesus is even more interesting, abstracting and expanding the mysterious breast-like protuberances on the cult statue. [Slide 7] While Davidson, a white woman in her 70s, thinks of the *Hive* figures as straightforwardly maidenly, that is young and cisfeminine (the pinkness here is important), Ramgopal’s sound composition queers this interpretation, employing an ensemble of cis, trans, and nonbinary vocalists with a wide range of racial and sexual identities. Play 30 sec sound

Ramgopal’s focus on human breath was inspired by the mechanical sounds of the machines inside each sculpture as well as the ventilators used by her grandmother in a hospital setting. If Davidson’s sculptures bring Artemis to earth and humanize her as a young woman, then Ramgopal’s composition asks visitors to consider what we mean by “human” and “young” and “woman.”

Working together, Ramgopal and Davidson materialize the nonhumanness of the original ancient sculptures, emphasizing both their associations with divinity (the goddess Artemis, the temple the caryatids support) and the inorganic material of ancient sculptural bodies. Ramgopal’s composition brings the human into dialogue with the machine, while Davidson’s abstraction of the Artemis of Ephesus’ many “breasts” reinvigorates scholarly debate about what exactly these breast-like objects are: Beehives? Bull testicles? Dedications?

 And yet despite the defamiliarizing work of the installation, *Hive* was also widely relatable, drawing a huge response from the campus and surrounding community. These alien beings were not alienating, but inviting, familiar. Kin, you might say. That was certainly how I related to the experience of installing *Hive*: as a three-day birth with numerous co-parents [Slide 8]: the artists of course, assisted by the sewing of Katie Nettie; the curators, Amy Powell and myself; Walter Wilson and Tim Fox, who oversaw installation design, and Elisabeth Horan and Salem Turchan (not pictured) who assisted them. Also on scene were photographers Kim Sissons and Stephen Signa-Aviles.

 The nonhuman kin we birthed together blended artistic and academic lineages, raced and gendered experiences, and versions of feminism. These kin were animated by the deep love of the birthing team, but the daily work of their care and attention fell primarily to the museum’s guards. Because of the pandemic, *Hive* received admirers mostly at a distance, these visits mediated by the glass walls of the Kinkaid Pavilion or the museum’s website.

The installation of *Hive* taught me that the making of nonhuman kin was both like and unlike the making of human kin: because this birth was nonbiological it was easier for me to see the people I just named as co-equal laborers, but it was also just as easy to erase the work of later, lower-status carers—only in writing this talk and reflecting on the process of installation did I realize how many people I had never mentally credited with keeping *Hive* going.

But what surprised me most in this experience was the way my sense of ownership came in and out of focus. I wasn’t one of the artists, but *Hive* was also somehow mine—I both contributed to how viewers and listeners (including the artists themselves) would understand the piece, and yet I didn’t determine its meaning or have control over its fate. I was terribly said when my kin fell silent and withered into pink sacks. [Slide 9] Their nonhuman life was just as ephemeral as my own.

Thank you.

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1. Adapted from <https://www.iprh.illinois.edu/about/land-acknowledgment> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)