

Bodega Poetics Topical Background

Imagine a bodega; who is shopping there, what they are buying, who they are buying it from. If you are from an urban area, this is probably a familiar scene. Bodegas are also known as corner shops, convenience stores, markets, delis, and a plethora of other affectionate names, depending on who you ask. Bodegas and the terms we use to describe them are inexorable from their surrounding community. To quote poet Solmaz Shariff, “it matters what you call a thing.”¹ The bodega has also established itself as a cultural hub for migrants and immigrants; a space to buy familiar comfort foods and avoid the language barriers that ostracize them in a new country.² The first bodegas were owned by Puerto Rican migrants and quickly became a resource for shared identity within huge cities like New York.³ Simultaneously, bodegas are a response to food apartheid in poor urban areas. For every three bodegas in the Upper West Side, there is one supermarket. On the opposite side of the spectrum, there is a community district with fifty-seven bodegas for every supermarket.⁴ This makes healthy, affordable food for low-income families inaccessible. Bodegas are not just a symbol of community - they are a reflection of the limited socio-economic landscape migrant families must navigate.

Now, imagine a road in ancient Greece. Imagine a bodega on that road. If you’re imagining a convenience store, you’re wrong - what the ancient Greeks called bodegas, we now call wine cellars. How did this term travel 2,000 years and halfway across the globe to establish itself as city lingo? The answer lies within classical studies, a discipline dedicated to studying the ancient world, specifically Greece and Rome. Ancient history is all around us. Interdisciplinary research in cross-cultural classical studies calls upon the less visible influences on classical thought, beyond familiar names like Plato and Aristotle. Many assume classics to be unremovable from Eurocentrist historical narratives because of its visible influences on Western society.⁵ In reality, the discipline interrogates all individuals’ relationships to and within a new, more complete, cross-cultural understanding of ancient history.⁶ For example, ancient Egyptian influence on ancient Greek culture is rarely afforded attention despite the two empires existing at the same time.⁷ Dan-el Padilla Peralta, a classical studies scholar dedicated to defining the

¹ Sharif, Solmaz *Look* (Graywolf Press, 2016)

² Silverstein, Andrew. “Bodegas: An Icon of New York’s Hispanic Culture.” *Queen Sofia Spanish Institute*, 21 July 2021, <https://queensofiaspanishinstitute.org/history/bodegas-an-icon-of-new-yorks-hispanic-culture/#:~:text=Originating%20in%20Spain%2C%20%E2%80%9Cbodega%E2%80%9D,to%20Puerto%20Rican%20factory%20workers.>

³ Sanabria, Carlos. *The Bodega: A Cornerstone of Puerto Rican Barrios*. YouTube.com/watch?v=uqOpAow1Spk. Center for Puerto Rican Studies-Centro.

⁴ Hinterland, K., et al. *Upper West Side: Including Lincoln Square, Manhattan Valley and Upper West Side*. The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2018, pp. 1–20, <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2018chp-mn7.pdf>.

⁵ Stuhr, Rebecca, and Cheyanne Riehl. “Diversity in the Stacks: Ethnicity in the Ancient World.” *PennLibraries: University of Pennsylvania*, 2 Sept. 2020, library.upenn.edu/news/diversity-stacks-ethnicity.

⁶ Greenwood, Emily. “Reception Studies: The Cultural Mobility of Classics.” *Daedalus*, vol. 145, no. 2, Spring 2016, pp. 41–49

⁷ Stuhr, Rebecca, and Cheyanne Riehl. “Diversity in the Stacks: Ethnicity in the Ancient World.” *PennLibraries: University of Pennsylvania*, 2 Sept. 2020, library.upenn.edu/news/diversity-stacks-ethnicity.

intersection of the ancient world with contemporary Black experiences, will explore the intersection between his study of classics and contemporary Caribbean communities. These connections lie within the Caribbean diaspora; the continuing history of forced and voluntary movement of Caribbean peoples across international borders.⁸ The term diaspora to define this phenomenon also begs consideration for the movement of culture and cross-cultural interactions.⁹

Tonight's talk will be delivered in Dickinson College's Anita Tuvin Schlechter auditorium, which was constructed with the same tiered seating as ancient coliseums. The classical world is more accessible than it seems; classical themes, tropes, and characters are constantly adapted and reappropriated with wild success due to their cross-cultural appeal to human emotion.¹⁰ Ancient influences on contemporary society and culture are everywhere if you know where to look.

Additional References

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⁸ Simmons, Marlon. "CHAPTER EIGHT: Concerning Modernity, the Caribbean Diaspora and Embodied Alienation: Dialoguing with Fanon to Approach an Anticolonial Politic." *Counterpoints*, vol. 368, in Fanon and Education: Thinking Through Pedagogical Possibilities, 2010, pp. 171-89, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42980671>. JSTOR.

⁹ Kenny, Kevin. "What Is Diaspora?" *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford Academic, 2013, pp. 1-15, <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199858583.003.0001>.

¹⁰ Stuhr, Rebecca, and Cheyanne Riehl. "Diversity in the Stacks: Ethnicity in the Ancient World." *PennLibraries: University of Pennsylvania*, 2 Sept. 2020, library.upenn.edu/news/diversity-stacks-ethnicity.