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Keywords

adult education, adult learning, BIPOC, Clemente Course in the Humanities, continuing education, ethnography, higher education, humanities, liberal education

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"It's Part of Your Life Now Because Someone Has Exposed You to It": The Experiences of Adult Learners of Color in the Clemente Course in the Humanities

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Abstract

At 30 sites across the United States and Puerto Rico, the Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities provides economically and socially marginalized adults with a free college course in the humanities. The experience of non-traditional adult students, particularly adults of color, is often missing from academic literature, exacerbating past injustices and increasingly marginalizing the historically underserved people and communities of color by higher education. This paper, which draws from a two-year critical ethnography of Clemente courses, examines the perspective of the adult learners of color who participated in the course. Interview and participant-observational data indicate that adults enrolled in the course for various reasons, with little to no understanding of the term "humanities." Despite their initial lack of familiarity with the course content, learners engaged with and embraced the material, valued the cultural capital it imparted, and saw an important role for the humanities in their home communities. Though non-traditional adult students are typically tapped for basic skills, compensatory, or vocational programs, they can benefit profoundly from inclusion in rigorous humanistic inquiry and discussion like that offered by Clemente.

Keywords: Adult education, adult learning, BIPOC, Clemente Course in the Humanities, continuing education, ethnography, higher education, humanities, liberal education

> "I didn't even fully understand 'humanities,' what that actually meant before I started. But then understanding it and then just studying it, we studied, like, Shakespeare, Henry David Thoreau, and Gandhi, and, you know, Martin Luther King. We studied and read these things and just read about life, you know, philosophy. It just opens your mind in a different way and opens your eyes. … When I study humanities and see how it opens my eyes, it helps me to see things a lot differently now than I might have before."
>
> *– Cody, 2006 graduate, Black, age 38*

Introduction

Neoliberal discourse and policy have radically reshaped the field of education generally and adult education specifically (Bourdieu, 1998; Bowl, 2017; Giroux, 2004; Pata et al., 2021). Underpinning neoliberalism is the idea that the state should take a minimal role in the social world and instead should prioritize economic relations, which, proponents argue, benefits the national economy, develops human capital, and, in turn, fuels economic competitiveness. This logic has led to a general shift toward consumerism and instrumentalism in education, where the prevailing belief is that adult learning should serve largely economic ends. Adult education often emphasizes training for work, vocational skills, and employability rather than taking a broader view of learning for individual and collective development (Becker, 1975; Bowl, 2017; Coffield, 1999, 2000). Adults seen as lacking "basic," "functional," or "employability" skills—often historically marginalized adults of color—have become the prime target for education and training interventions.

The Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities (Clemente) has little in common with the market-driven logic that underpins most adult education today. At over 30 U.S. and Puerto Rico sites, Clemente provides economically and socially marginalized adults a free, yearlong, college-credit-bearing course in philosophy, literature, art, American history, and critical thinking and writing. The material in a Clemente course is comparable to most any college-level humanities survey class. However, for most of Clemente's adult students, the content could be more familiar and a world away from the basic education, credentialing, and job training courses into which they are frequently funneled (Cunningham, 1993; Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011).

Nearly 36 million adults in the U.S. have some college experience, but no degree, and adults of color are disproportionately less likely to enroll in college or complete a credential when they do (Person, 2019; Snyder et al., 2019). Indeed, while about 46 percent of White adults hold a college degree, the figures are considerably lower for Native American (22%), Latinx (24%), and Black (30%) adults (Person, 2019). Despite interest among colleges, universities, and policymakers in helping adults obtain postsecondary credentials, the field needs to understand what practices and program models best encourage, engage, and support adult learners (Parsons, 2022). The experience of adults of color in higher education is often absent from the research

literature. By omitting their unique and diverse perspectives and experiences, we risk deepening past injustices and increasingly marginalizing historically underserved people and communities of color through higher education (Person, 2019).

This paper aims to act as a corrective, centering and amplifying the experiences of adult learners of color in Clemente courses. Data from a two-year ethnographic study of Clemente reveal how the humanities, a field increasingly derided in popular American culture as "impractical" at best and "useless" at worst, is, in fact, deeply valued by the courses' adult learners. I sat alongside Clemente students during twice-weekly evening classes in the Midwest and Northeast U.S., re-learning material I had long forgotten and observing students' often infectious enthusiasm for the likes of Socrates, Cervantes, and Voltaire, and I talked at length with faculty and students, some of whom were a decade or more post-Clemente, from courses across the country. From those observations and conversations emerged a picture of an adult educative experience at odds with the narrow, neoliberal conceptualization to which we have grown accustomed.

In this paper, I present the Clemente Course as a case of humanities education for education's sake, not for its utility. I also examine the perspectives of adults of color who participated in the course. Participants came to understand and engage with the material, valued the cultural capital it imparted, and saw an important role for the humanities in their lives and communities. Exploring programs like Clemente is important not only because the educational experiences of adult learners of color are understudied—*especially* within the humanities—but also because better understanding the experiences of adults of color may challenge long-held assumptions about who *is* and *is not* worthy of rigorous, higher education in the humanities.

Background: The Clemente Course in the Humanities

Adult education has been viewed as a means of social reform and criticism, civic engagement, liberation, and personal and intellectual transformation (Czank, 2022). Such characterizations of adult education form the background and delivery model of Clemente courses, which have grown in opposition to circumscribed notions of adult learning for economic advancement. Clemente was established over 20 years ago by the writer and social critic Earl Shorris (1936-2012), who was inspired to start the course while researching a book on the causes of poverty. As part of his research, Shorris visited a maximum-security women's prison just

north of New York City, where an exchange with a prisoner would not only change the course of his book but also his life:

> I asked a prisoner, Viniece Walker, why she thought people were poor. Niecie … said it was because "they don't have the moral life of downtown," which meant Manhattan south of Harlem, where she grew up. Thinking she had probably undergone a religious conversion while in prison, which is not unusual, I asked rather casually what she meant by "the moral life." What a surprise when she said, "Plays, museums, concerts, lectures, you know." I said, "You mean the humanities." Furthermore, she looked at me as if I were some cretin: "Yes, Earl, the humanities." (O'Connell, 2000, n.p.)

Shorris initially believed the way out of poverty was politics, not the "moral life of downtown." However, his experience with Walker triggered an epiphany: If people experiencing poverty were to enter the public world and practice political life, it would require a "new kind of thinking—reflection" (O'Connell, 2000, n.p.). Humanities, the so-called "moral life of downtown," teach reflection. On the other hand, a basic or purely skills-based education leaves learners vulnerable because they are not allowed to think critically and reflect in the way that humanities courses encourage. The result, posited by Shorris (2000), was that adult learners "have neither the economic nor the intellectual resources to take and hold their fair share of power in a democratic society" (p. 9).

Believing, then, that the humanities could help underserved adults overcome the myriad forces that isolated and oppressed them, Shorris, with the help of the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center in lower Manhattan (after which the course is named) and writers and scholars who volunteered their time, established the first Clemente course in 1995. There needed to be more criteria for enrollment. Prospective students (1) were between 18-35 years old, (2) had an income at or below 150% of the U.S. Federal Poverty Level (FPL),[i] (3) were able to read a tabloid newspaper in English, and (4) expressed an intent to complete the course (Shorris, 1997). Except for the age cap, which has since been removed, the requirements for students remain largely the same today; a high school diploma or GED is not required. Transportation fare, books, childcare, and, at some sites, social service referrals and counseling are provided. Classes are held in the communities they serve and, thanks to an assortment of private and public funding, remain entirely accessible to admitted students.

A few days before the inaugural class was to begin, Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, located in upstate New York, offered to place the course under the school's "academic aegis" (Shorris, 1997, p. 136) and, since 2000, the College has conferred six transferable credits to Clemente graduates (Bard, 2022).[ii] It is important to note that courses operate with considerable autonomy. Bard approves syllabi and faculty for courses that bear the Clemente name, but individual sites are responsible for their recruitment, funding, budgets, and hiring.

Courses typically meet twice weekly in the evenings over an academic year. On any given class night, one will likely find 20 or so students seated seminar-style around a table or on a Zoom screen, engaged in a lively discussion with professors from local universities about, say, the cave paintings of Lascaux, Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, historic U.S. Supreme Court decisions like Plessy v. Ferguson, or Kant's categorical imperative. Students come to Clemente through various channels—as the result of seeing a flyer, through word-of-mouth, and via social service agencies, parole officers, or their local library—but they are all adult learners. Most are considered "non-traditional," an imprecise term used to describe students who delay enrollment in postsecondary education; attend college part-time; work full-time; are financially independent for financial aid purposes; have dependents other than a spouse; are a single parent; or do not have a high school diploma (NCES, 2015). As a whole, non-traditional students (also known as adult learners, mature students, and reentry students) are more diverse than "traditional" students with respect to age, work history, and life experience (Allen, 2021; Snyder et al., 2019).

In her book *Our Declaration*, Danielle Allen (2014), a professor of government at Harvard who taught in Clemente for a decade, recalled that her classes were filled with students with a host of life experiences and hardships: "[Students] were without jobs or working two jobs or stuck in dead-end part-time jobs while nearly always also juggling children's school schedules, undependable daycare arrangements, and a snarled city bus service" (p. 31). Nationally, Clemente students are primarily women of color with a median age of 39. However, as Allen's (2014) anecdote attests, any given classroom hosts a range of ages, races and ethnicities, abilities, educational histories, and motivations.

What We Know About Free Humanities Courses for Adult Learners

Several free and low-cost virtual seminars centering on the humanities gained momentum during the pandemic—for example, the Catherine Project, which teaches texts including ancient

Greek classics, Russian novels, and German poetry; Night School Bar, which tackles work on queer theory, anti-racism, and feminism; and Premise, which arranges its courses around "enduring questions" informed by both classical and modern books and films (Koenig, 2021). While the seminars are relatively new and lacking formal evaluation, anecdotal evidence suggests that the programs act as more than "a pastime for bookworms, or a profit-driven attempt to 'disrupt' the higher education market with some new kind of credential, these seminars serve to critique the modern university. … And they raise new questions, about *who should read those works, and how and why*" [emphasis added] (Koenig, 2021, n.p.). The popularity of these online seminars suggests that adult learners do not seek learning for financial gain alone. Roosevelt Montás, Columbia University senior lecturer and author of *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (2022), argues that curiosity does not necessarily wane as we age, and adulthood often offers the opportunity to contemplate questions we missed or did not have time for, earlier in life: "That hunger and that interest doesn't go away as you get older. In some cases, the settling of your life creates room for those questions to become more meaningful to you" (Koenig, 2021, n.p.).

Humanities courses like Clemente should be more studied, and our research typically draws from small and self-selected samples. Extant data demonstrate a positive relationship between course participation and various academic and social-emotional outcomes (AUTHOR, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023). This section highlights evaluations of Clemente and Clemente-inspired courses in Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, Oregon, and Wisconsin, as well as in Australia and Canada.

Madison, Wisconsin. An evaluation of the Odyssey Project, which is modeled on Clemente but affiliated with the University of Wisconsin-Madison, revealed that alumni (n=190) from classes spanning 2004-2016 reported a greater likelihood of continuing in college and earning degrees, improved economic stability, increased skills in writing, reading comprehension, and speaking; heightened sense of hope, fulfillment, and civic engagement; and profound influence on their children, family, and friends (Bell & Pribbenow, 2018). Importantly, survey respondents reflected the overall program population, which is primarily Black and women. Results showed that three-quarters of Odyssey Project alums continued enrolling in college coursework after the course, with a quarter of those earning a degree or certificate.

Additionally, all survey participants said they believed their writing skills improved due to taking the class, and nearly all felt more confident and better prepared to pursue additional education. Course benefits appeared to extend to participants' family members: more than two-thirds believed their Odyssey experience heightened their children's interest in attending college, and nearly all alumni said it helped them better support their children in school. Alumni felt that the humanities curriculum opened their minds and inspired new perspectives, as a student from 2011 noted: "I never felt embarrassed to share my thoughts because I was finding my place in this life like a seed was being planted. What I loved the most was the *Allegory of the Cave*. That was when the light bulb turned on in my life. I have never been the same" (Bell & Pribbenow, 2018, p. 5)

Illinois. An evaluation of Illinois's Odyssey Project—an initiative of Illinois Humanities, the state humanities council, with courses at five sites in Chicago and one in Urbana-Champaign, and no relation to the Madison course despite the name—reported similarly positive findings for its alums. (Until recently, Odyssey was affiliated with Bard; the course now grants credit through the University of Illinois-Chicago). The evaluation, which examined program outcomes for Odyssey participants from 2000-2019, included an alum survey (n=451) and telephone interviews with course coordinators and staff (n=5). Of those who responded to the survey question about race/ethnicity, over 47 percent identified as a person of color or mixed race, 23 percent identified as White, and about 30 percent chose "not specified"; notably, about 35 percent of survey respondents did not answer the race/ethnicity query at all. Evaluation findings indicate that the course positively impacted participants' attitudes about education, academic and professional skills, self-confidence, civic engagement, and the pursuit of additional education and training. For example, an alumnus responded: "[Odyssey Project] gave me confidence. It gave me a space to learn and be scholarly when college was closed off to me. It exposed me to people in my community that loved learning for the sake of learning" (Zacharia & Harnett, 2020, p. 15).

Survey data and data from staff interviews demonstrate that Odyssey provides effective and engaging educational programming and is considered valuable by participants (Zacharia & Harnett, 2020). On this point, an alumnus commented that they are eager to bring the arts and humanities into their home community and schools: "It [Odyssey Project] has made me look at

the need for education in the arts and humanity [sic] in my community and the schools. This is my newest challenge: 'how to level the playing field'!" (Zacharia & Harnett, 2020, p. 35).

Australia. In Australia, over 500 adults have enrolled in Clemente courses since the program's inception in 2003 (Australian Catholic University, 2019), and most of the research has focused on participants' journeys. Homeless students (n=9) reported experiencing positive personal changes, and some reported concurrent bodily changes (e.g., straightness of back, deportment, walking with purpose) as a result of their participation in the course (Stevenson et al., 2007). Students (n=18) also reported positive changes in their learning, social connectedness, and quality of life (O'Gorman et al., 2012). Additional qualitative research determined that the course was "life-giving" to its students (n=6) and afforded them a supportive learning environment where they developed cherished relationships with one another (Gervasoni et al., 2013).

Canada. Humanities 101, a free humanities course modeled after Clemente, now operates at eight sites across Canada (Lakehead University, 2019). Canada's free humanities courses offer a unique curriculum, but most programs resist the traditional humanities canon, recognizing the value of incorporating feminist, Indigenous, and postmodern perspectives into their courses (Czank, 2022; Meredith, 2011). Based on semi-structured interviews with students (n=15) from Calgary's course, Groen and Hyland Russell (2009) concluded that participants most valued the opportunity to reflect critically—that is, "gaining insight into oneself, learning to open up to dialogue, becoming aware of oneself concerning others in society" (p. 6). Additional Canadian studies have found that students came eager to learn, viewed the instructor as pivotal in alleviating their fears and creating a comfortable learning space (Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2010), and shifted their beliefs about themselves and their abilities (Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015).

Other Sites. An evaluation of the first Clemente class (n=17) in New York demonstrated significant growth in students' self-esteem and problem definition and formulation. At the same time, their use of verbal aggression as a conflict resolution tool decreased significantly ($p<.061$) (Shorris, 1997). A longitudinal evaluation of three of Massachusetts' courses reported that the lives of alums and their families were positively impacted, and three or more years after graduation, the course continued to affect most students' self-confidence positively and helped

them foster a connection to the humanities (Rosi, 2011). An unpublished national pilot survey of Clemente students (n=160) across the country found significant improvement in their comfort communicating with people in positions of authority and their academic motivation, preparation, and confidence. Similarly, pre- and post-surveys of disadvantaged adults (n=15) participating in a Clemente-inspired course in Oregon demonstrated significant improvement in their volunteering, enrollment in college classes, life satisfaction, and verbal ability (Katzev et al., 2009). Prison inmates (n=15) who took the course while incarcerated likewise reported improvement in their critical thinking and life satisfaction and an increased desire to volunteer and vote in the future (Katzev et al., 2009).

Methods

Critical Ethnography

This study is an ethnography, a method that allows the researcher to study a cultural group or particular phenomenon in a naturalistic setting, using primarily participant-observational data and interviews to gather information over an extended time (Madison, 2012; Patillo-McCoy, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). Immersed in a culture and social system, data collection clearly describes people and their environment (Geertz, 1973; Heath & Street, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). A significant advantage of ethnography is that research is relatively flexible and allows participants' realities to emerge and evolve in their natural context (Creswell, 2003). Employing ethnographic methods in this study afforded me access to Clemente students' natural context (primarily the classroom). It allowed me to observe and interact with participants in a way that did not seem unnecessarily forced or artificial.

Ethnography, however, seeks merely to describe and explain a specific culture or group, and this project moves a step beyond that to *critical* ethnography (Taylor et al., 2007). Critical ethnography derives from research approaches that recognize that society dominates individuals either overtly or covertly and, rather than simply identifying the imbalance, seeks to foster social change (Carspecken, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Smyth & Holmes, 2005). More specifically, critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain. Madison (2012) defines this "ethical responsibility" as "a compelling sense of duty and commitment based on moral principles of human freedom and well-being, and hence a compassion for the suffering of

living beings" (p. 5). The conditions for existence within a particular context are not as they could be for specific subjects; as a result, the researcher feels obligated to contribute to changing those conditions toward greater freedom and equity (Madison, 2012). Given that adult education is marked by layers of inequalities, from how programs are staffed and funded to the kinds of courses and resources available to non-traditional students and the kinds of beliefs people hold about their abilities, the analysis and transformation of inequity are particularly important for adult education research.

Because critical ethnography is a methodology for conducting research focused on "transformation, empowerment, and social justice," it is grounded in a social-constructivist epistemological framework in which knowledge generation is understood as an "active, context-based process influenced by the values, histories, and practices of the researcher and of the community in which the research is conducted" (Barton, 2001, p. 905; Pizarro, 1998). Critical ethnography emerged in the education research literature in the 1980s as a fusion of critical theory and ethnography in response to conducting empirical research in an unjust world (Barton, 2001; Nobilt, 1999). At the time, ethnography was challenged as overly functional, too apolitical, and overrun with hegemonic practices and methods (Anderson, 1989; Lather, 1991). Critical theory, on the other hand, was labeled as overly idealistic and lacking an empirical method (Anderson, 1989; Nobilt, 1999). The merger of the two allowed ethnography to move into the political realm and critical theory to develop an empirical basis.

Barton (2001) identified four major principles of critical ethnography: (1) Critical ethnography is situated within the belief that all education and research is fundamentally political and steeped in cultural beliefs and values; (2) Critical ethnography is based on a vision of praxis centrally about a "political commitment to struggle for liberation and in defense of human rights" (Trueba, 1999, p. 593); (3) Research is framed through the agency of the researcher and the researched. All participants can and should act for themselves and others; (4) Critical ethnography supports the oppressed in ways that embrace their histories, cultures, and epistemologies. (pp. 906-907) At its core, critical ethnography is focused on documenting oppression and empowerment, "accelerating the conscientization of the oppressed and the oppressors," and "sensitizing the research community to the implications of research for quality of life" (Trueba, 1999, p. 593). In this study, critical ethnography documents the marginalization

and empowerment of adult learners and, in many cases, the positive changes students experience and attribute to Clemente.

Data Collection

Over two years, data were gathered via:

(1) Approximately 400 hours of participant observation of two-course sites in major cities in the Midwest and Northeastern U.S., as well as field trips and events, tutoring sessions, faculty meetings, and annual retreats.

(2) Informal conversations and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with students and graduates (n=10), non-completers (n=2), and staff (n=10) at the course site in the Midwest. Students in the 2014-2015 cohort were interviewed following graduation during the summer of 2015 and again one year later during the summer of 2016.

(3) Informal conversations and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with students and graduates (n=24), non-completers (n=3), and staff (n=6) at the course site in the northeast. Students in the 2015-2016 cohort were interviewed during the fall of 2015 shortly after class had begun, again during the summer of 2016, and briefly during the early fall of 2017.

(3) Telephone interviews with students and graduates (n=37) at course sites *other than* my two field sites in the Midwest and Northeast.

(4) Telephone interviews with staff (n=24) at course sites other than *other than* my field sites.

(5) Publicly available secondary sources, such as course websites, newsletters, and Facebook pages.

I conducted 150 interviews ranging from half an hour to two and a half hours, with 116 individuals associated with Clemente courses past and present.

Sample

Nearly all of the Clemente students and graduates in the sample were people of color, and nearly all the staff were White, both of which mirror Clemente nationwide. Most Clemente students are women, which reflects higher education in the U.S. About 72% of the students I interviewed were women; the sample was 72.4% Black, 11.8% Latinx, and 15.8% other. (This

paper focuses exclusively on students of color). Students' ages ranged from 19 to 70, with 40 being the average. Of the staff I spoke with, 72.5% were White, 12.5% Latinx, 2.5% Black, and 12.5% Other, and most (67.5%) staff members I spoke with were women.

Data Analysis

This naturalistic study involves "an inseparable relationship between data collection and data analysis" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 114). The data collection and analysis processes were interactive, which led to adjustments in interview questions and observational strategies as new information emerged. Curry and Wells (2004) offer guidance for researchers who analyze interviews and field notes through a transformative learning lens; they ask, "How has the topic of investigation operated in this person's experience? What kind of transformation did this person experience, and how did this experience change how this person interacted with their world?" (p. 81). These were critical questions for me to consider as I analyzed the data.

I used NVivo for data analysis and followed Creswell's (2007) six data analysis steps: (1) Organized and prepared the raw data. Digital recordings were transcribed verbatim by a transcription service per IRB specifications regarding confidentiality. To protect each participant's identity and still differentiate between each interview, each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and each recording was given a non-identifying numbered descriptor before analysis; (2) Closely reviewed all transcripts, field notes, and memos; (3) "Chunked" the information into meaningful categories in order to allow for the examination and interpretation of the data; (4) Described the physical setting(s), the people involved, the events that took place, and the experience as a whole; (5) Created narration, allowing the researcher to make meaning of the data through the discovery of emergent themes and patterns. Data were synthesized to make it a "real" experience for the reader, and (6) Interpreted and drew conclusions.

Coding followed the techniques outlined by Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory for data analysis: open coding, focused or selective coding, and axial coding. Initially, I did open or line-by-line coding, considering the data in detail while developing some preliminary categories. Later, I moved to more selective coding, "the process of selecting the central or core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development," and coded for core concepts (e.g., students' engagement as citizens and parents, personal transformation, and salient aspects of the

program (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116). I created selective codes by connecting and consolidating axial codes and abstracting them from the evidence contained in the data. Themes became apparent from the analysis of interviews and observations. They were continually refined until a generalized pattern of the students' experiences was established—a laborious and time-consuming process given the significant quantity of textually amassed.

Findings and Discussion

This section integrates findings and discussion in the spirit of critical ethnography. Separating the findings from the discussion, typical in research papers, often feels fragmented because essential concepts may be raised but must be discussed in context. Combining these sections enables richer engagement among findings, concepts, and theory.

The Humanities: "I, honestly, back then, didn't know what that meant."

The public discourse around the humanities has tended to focus on its alleged state of "crisis." According to the Humanities Indicators, a project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences that provides information on the state of the humanities, the number and shares of students earning humanities degrees at the bachelor's and master's levels have decreased over time, reinforcing the narrative of decline (American Academy, 2022). While it is true that the number of students majoring in the humanities in the U.S. is down from its peak in the 1960s, the "crucial drop" occurred in the 1970s and early 1980s, not in the last decade, and that drop was from an unprecedented historical high. Since then, enrollments have been fundamentally stable (Meranze, 2015, p. 1311). Despite this relative stability, American colleges and universities have closed and revamped humanities departments and cut faculty positions for several years, propelled by politicians who question humanities programs because a degree in art history or philosophy is impractical.

Although the health, future, and utility of the humanities have been a topic of conversation in higher education and political circles, Clemente students enter the class largely unaware of the discourse and with little to no understanding of the term "humanities." When asked what they thought when they first learned that Clemente was a "humanities" course, respondents fell along a continuum. At one end were those who did not know what the "humanities" entailed and, because of that, were not attracted to the course for its content:

Tim: At that time, no, I did not know what it meant, absolutely not. … I was confused because, at first, I was like, "OK, so what is *humanities*?"

***

Alejandra: I, honestly, back then, did not know what that [humanities] meant. The only thing that made sense to me that attracted me to the program was the college credits and the support I would get to finish the courses.

In the middle were those who were unsure but could make an educated guess as to what "humanities" meant and were sufficiently intrigued:

Inez: No, to be honest with you, it did not [matter]. …, I would imagine, if I had to take a wild guess at it, that it meant dealing with human issues. Yeah, just the word itself; I just thought it has got to be something awesome because it will reveal our inner parts.

***

Tameka: It made me curious. It made me very curious. I went to find out what it [humanities] was about and why they call it that. That was one of the first classes; the orientation class was excellent. Because they cleared everything up for me, it made me want to return.

At the other end of the continuum were a minority of students who were familiar with the term "humanities" from some prior experience, whether self-education or high school or college-level classes and were attracted to the course precisely because of its content:

Chadwick: It was great because I took Humanities 101 in the early '80s. … I did not get a lot out of it, but I liked learning about art, and I could tell it was, as you could put it, a worldly craft, a worldly opportunity for me.

***

Carla: It was so attractive to me. It was one of my favorite things in school. I had a humanities class in high school that I loved. Everything that's a part of it, all the different categories, is so interesting. It is just like an indulgence, a thing that I would be lucky to get to do.

A handful of students were attracted to Clemente *because* it was a humanities course. However, most applied for different reasons: they were in a "transition" period, wanted to do

something "productive" with their time, or wanted to *finish* something. The educational trajectories of nearly all Clemente students have been interrupted at some point by various life circumstances: physical and mental illness, familial obligations, pregnancy, and subsequent childrearing, substance abuse, incarceration, educational debt and transcript holds, poverty, indecision, and academic failure.[iii] With lives marked by numerous false starts and premature stops, seeing the course through was an important goal for many students:

Jimena: I wanted to get into something and complete it.

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Luisa: That is part of the reason why I applied. I want to finish the course, unless something happens that really can keep me from continuing to go on, I plan to finish.

***

Rick: So, that is what I am looking to get from this, if nothing else, to start and finish something.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that when disenfranchised adult learners enter the course, the "humanities" as a term or a field of study is mainly unfamiliar. This could result from several things, like a K-12 educational experience devoid of the arts and humanities or life choices or circumstances that took individuals in a vocational direction. Nevertheless, there is also the possibility that students' unfamiliarity with the humanities is, by design, that the elite *tr*ies to keep the humanities out of the orbit of historically marginalized communities. The American cultural historian and scholar H. Bruce Franklin (1975) argued that the humanities are not taught to adult primary education students because the elite presumes disenfranchised adults "are too stupid to understand such lofty ideas. Besides, they would have no use for the humanities.

Furthermore, the humanities would unfit these people for useful labor. It might even make them so discontented with their lives they might get rebellious" (p. 11). Indeed, keeping humanities education in traditional academic environments may be an institutionalized way of ensuring that marginalized adults never pose a threat to the classes "above" them. Regardless, Clemente students' initial lack of familiarity with the humanities and varied reasons for enrolling make their eventual embrace of humanistic inquiry more remarkable.

The Curriculum: "Looking at the material, I feel like it doesn't matter who wrote it."

The material covered in class varies by course site, and there is considerable debate among course directors and faculty about what should be taught. Each year, Bard College hosts course directors for a weekend in New York's Hudson Valley to discuss their courses, including best practices and challenges. My field notes from an annual meeting illustrate the discussion that often takes place among the directors about the canon and its place in Clemente courses:

> Suzanne, a long-time academic director, states that "pairing [canonical] texts with non-traditional texts is fantastic." Robert, who is also a long-time director and who has been doodling in his notebook all morning, looks up and agrees. "I choose non-Western texts to go with canonical texts, like *Oedipus*," he says. Valerie, one of the few women of color in the room and with a shorter Clemente history than many others, says, "We need to step back and look at our biases as academics: How much have we inherited what we think is important? Why is it that we privilege certain knowledge over others? It is a dangerous line to say [to students], 'This is what you have to know.' At our site, we are intentional about questioning the canon. … I would love to teach Clemente completely outside the canon, but I cannot." What she means is that her course would lose its university affiliation, and thus its ability to award students college credit, if she were to abandon the Western canon entirely.
>
> Robert has stopped drawing but still holds his pen in his hand, and it punctuates each word he says, "The end in mind isn't that they'll be fluent in the Western texts but that they'll be able to question *power*."
>
> Annie, a director of a course not affiliated with Bard, joins in: "I've seen people fall in love with *Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, and St. Augustine. I question the canon, and I wish we had more time to question the canon, but I see what it gives students." Suzanne, who earlier stated that pairing canonical and noncanonical texts is "fantastic," agrees: "Students feel *pride* in knowing these works. … They say, 'I know what people at Bard know.'"
>
> Valerie is still trying to get her point across, "But perhaps there is knowledge from *other* cultures where students can still think critically, ask questions, where students can see themselves." There is nodding and agreement, then a pause.

> "This makes me think of Descartes' *Meditations*," Annie says. "One of our students was in an abusive relationship, and she just kept saying to herself, over and over again, 'I am a thinking being. I am a thinking being.' And it gave her the courage to leave. Some texts that we see as outdated can impact them in ways we wouldn't guess."

One of the pedagogical concerns of anti-canonism is marginalized students' understanding of themselves. According to this position, students from marginalized groups should be allowed to develop self-awareness and personal identity, which means confronting their oppressed status and working through it. However, when immersed in the Western canon, marginalized students are "denied exposure to political diversity … but denied an opportunity to find their true identities" (Casement, 1996, p. 55). Anti-canonists argue that students from marginalized groups need curricula that emphasize "countercultural, that is, counter canonical, works on race, gender, and class" (Casement, 1996, p. 55). Reform canonism rejects anti-canon extremes but suggests that works by women, people of color, and other historically marginalized groups should be subject to re-review and inclusion (Casement, 1996). Most Clemente faculty and course directors seemed to embrace a revised canon version, teaching some classical Western texts and works from other traditions and cultures. As one long-time course director stated:

> Everybody should read the *Allegory of the Cave*. They need to read some Shakespeare, *Antigone*, the Declaration of Independence, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, you know? Those are the things that should be part of any Clemente course. However,… I do not teach the dead White guys to deconstruct them, either. That can be part of it, but I think it is essential for all of those [students] to understand where these ideas came from. … I think it is a great thing to debate, and we [Clemente faculty] should keep having it, and we will always insist that some examples of the canon are taught. … I understand the concern but see it as *both-and*, not *either-or*.

Unlike the faculty and course directors, though, any controversy related to curriculum and the canon debate seemed lost on the students and graduates in the study. Most argued that the course covered a sufficiently diverse range of authors, artists, and philosophers. However, it was the *content*, not the race, ethnicity, gender, or background of its creator, that mattered:

> Tisha: Looking at the material, it does not matter who wrote it. I will read it if I understand it and am intrigued by it. … I feel like that speaks more to me

> than Black, White, male, female. … I do not think someone will slow down and say, "Wait, this is written by someone Black?" … It does not matter to me. I feel that for the subjects being covered [in Clemente], it is best that the people [teachers] who presented this material presented it so that people can understand what happened, why it happened, and why it is relevant today.

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> Duke: Enough was brought in so that I did not feel that any one group was being excluded or slighted. … I think that the class was for getting people up to speed on what has gone on, what has passed, what has happened in the past, how it relates to what is happening now, and how that might affect the future. … There is no way you can bring everything in. However, what the class did for me in particular was it made me hungry for more, so I am looking for other people to read. If a class can do just that for someone, it would have the desired effect.

A long-time Clemente literature professor echoed these students' sentiments about the canon when she stated, "What is interesting is that in the Clemente classroom, students … are just not interested in those distinctions." Among the vast majority of students of color that I observed and interviewed, the canon vs. anti-canon debate was not particularly interesting.

A handful of students felt that the curriculum presented to them was appropriate because the Clemente course was designed to mirror the college experience, and what they were taught was also what a traditional undergraduate would be taught. This was a point that many students of color took pride in—that they were engaged in *higher* education—and their responses indicated that they saw little to no problem with being taught texts from the Western canon.

> Rick: I saw it as “This is college, and this is what college teaches. This is what college is; this is the curriculum that college generally teaches. … As long as the person [student] comes to it with an open mind and does not come into it with, "See, they are talking about a bunch of dead White men." No. You have to look at it from a perspective that you perhaps had no idea about, you know, who Socrates was or is, who Plato was, or who is Kant.

You cannot come into it saying, "I want to listen about, I want to hear about Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King." No. You will not appreciate it if you come into it with that mindset.

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Luciana: A friend of mine who is an Ivy League graduate told me the concept of Clemente and that it was to allow us to learn what they teach at universities around the country. Now I heard that they are trying to see if they can teach this to anyone, especially low-income people who do not have access to this type of education. So to say, "Now we should assign African American philosophy," blah, blah, whatever it is, that takes away from what you are trying to teach and expose us to. The material is appropriate if designed to give us the same education a university student gets. … We came to learn philosophy, which they taught us. Philosophy is all of these, you know, White, older men. … I do not know, are there any Black authors that are philosophers, or African American or, you know what I mean, other races?

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Roger: Well, it was very diverse. … I mean, you can be offended because it is not about African Americans, Hispanics, or Latinos, whatever nationality you are. However, these were the [White] people who started to create the world and how it looked next. It is just what it is. There have been people who have come along between them who also have made some changes to it, but for the most part, it started a certain way. … I had no issue with any of the information in the stuff that they were giving us. It was fun for me. … It usually is those who do not participate in it [Clemente] … that have an opinion about it. … They are sitting back just critiquing and do not understand the dynamics of the individuals sitting in the classrooms.

The students' responses, in different ways, surface the issue of race. Like most Clemente students, each respondent is a person of color (Rick and Roger are Black, and Luciana is Latinx), and each pushed their own racial identity to the background when talking about the course

content. Rick argued that Black students should not enter Clemente aiming to learn about Black history. Roger seemed to say, albeit erroneously, that the reason there were fewer Black and Latinx individuals in the curriculum was not because of choices made by the professors but because people of color played a lesser role in world history. Furthermore, Luciana, after explaining that she understood philosophy to *be* "White, old men," ended her response by asking me if there are, in fact, any Black philosophers. These responses show adult learners of color who have been socialized to believe that White scholarship *should* be more prominent in postsecondary syllabi. Because Clemente students need to learn what they do not know, they are often unaware of the material that has been excluded.

Cultural Capital: "It's part of your life now because someone has exposed you to it."

With historically marginalized adult learners immersed in traditional canonical texts, one might wonder the degree to which Clemente acts not as a transformative force but as a colonizing one. Traditionally, courses in the humanities hoped to introduce students to texts in which they could appreciate "high culture" sensibilities and participate in the community of the political and economic elite (Alford & Elden, 2013). Without explicitly using the term, students and graduates consistently referenced the concept of dominant cultural capital—powerful, high-status cultural attributes, codes, and signals—and how students had acquired and activated cultural capital through Clemente (Carter, 2003; Yosso, 2005). Cultural capital was popularized by Pierre Bourdieu, who argued that individuals from different social locations are socialized differently. As Prudence L. Carter (2003) succinctly summarized, “Cultural capital provides individuals with an ability to 'walk the walk' and 'talk the talk' of the cultural powerbrokers in our society" (p. 138). Clemente detractors might argue that the course inculcates seemingly vulnerable adult learners into the "civilizing" force of the humanities. However, the students seem to overwhelmingly value the cultural capital transferred to them through the classical knowledge and seemingly elite cultural experiences of Clemente rather than feeling that they are dominated or unwittingly imposed upon them. Through Clemente, students were exposed to so-called high culture. They studied the classics and were allowed to participate in cultural spaces, like plays, symphonies, poetry readings, and museums, that before seemed off-limits.

Jason, an art history professor, explained that he *wants* to transfer cultural capital to students. “I want them to be able to walk into a museum and feel like they *belong* there, to walk

into a gallery or walk into an artist's studio and kind of think that it has some relevance to them," he said. And he felt he had been successful in that regard: "They [students] say, 'This is the first time I've been here, and I feel like I know what I'm doing' or 'This is the first time that I've been able to walk through the doors and have something to say about the artworks.'" Priscilla, a 2015 graduate in her forties, and Brenda, a 2016 graduate aged 61, said something similar:

> Priscilla: I have passed by the art museum. I do not know how many times. To have someone take me in and stop and explain everything … is not as intimidating. It is no more part of just background scenery, you know? It is part of your life because someone has exposed you to it.

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> Brenda: Going to the art museum … that was phenomenal. My family and I came to this city in 1957. I was two years old. *I had never been to that museum*. We got to see great plays and the symphony. I had never been there. I had never been there and got front-row seats. … I just learned so much. I was like a little girl.

Many students also reported that knowing the humanities, notably philosophy, opened up opportunities for conversation and helped students understand cultural references they did not understand before Clemente.

> Luciana: Sometimes people reference things, and now you understand where these references come from. So, it makes me feel brilliant. I say, "Oh yeah, I know what you are discussing. That is what I saw in so-and-so book." Yeah, it just makes you feel smarter. It cultures you.

Similarly, a history professor recalled how two Clemente graduates who worked at a nursing home were able to speak with the residents about content they learned in the course:

> Liz: I remember two women, they work as CNAs, Certified Nursing Assistants, in like a nursing home or something. The TV was on in somebody's room, and Plato was mentioned. And they were like, "Plato? I know all about the cave!" So, some little keys to society have been opened to them.

Clemente provides all course materials to students, and, during interviews, numerous graduates referred to the physical presence of their books, for example: “Even like right now, to this day, I still have my books sitting right by my bed and now and then I still open them up, and I will reread those stories, go over the lessons. … to gain more understanding, and I pass the information on to others as well." The books, which function as cultural capital in an objectified form, are meaningful to the students, and it was clear from our conversations that students were proud to have them in their possession. Rick, a Black male student, recalled with pride how a Clemente professor gave him her copy of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, which subsequently sparked a conversation between him and a stranger on a train:

> Rick: Even the book she [professor] handed me, she let me have the *Leviathan*. Then someone saw that book. I was on the train, reading, and then they said, "Oh, you are reading *that*? What are you doing?" Furthermore, it opened up a door for a conversation. … You know, on the train, just like [previously], I was reading Plato, and someone said, "Hey, that is Plato. What are you doing? Where are you going?" So, the material that I had gave me a sense of strengthened my confidence. It gave me some more confidence. It made me want to read the material, like, "Wow, they [others] see that. How do you read this thing? What is this about?"

Students' own words suggest that they did not see their exposure to elite culture as colonizing or oppressive but, instead, as a way to participate in society more fully; so many things, as Priscilla said, were no longer "background scenery" but instead became a part of their life. Peter Powers, dean of the School of Humanities at Pennsylvania's Messiah College, cited a potential consequence of inculcating students in a foreign culture: creating conflict for them in their communities. "It may look like just acquiring cultural capital to us," Powers argues, "but it can create isolation and cognitive dissonance for them within their home communities" (Lederman, 2013, n. p.). Course directors recounted how, at various times, students had abandoned relationships, quit jobs, and even left churches (and religion altogether) after the Clemente course. In such cases, the students attributed the humanities course to their life changes. Aurora, a 2005 graduate, speculated that relationships can become fraught when one member tries to better herself, which may contribute to course attrition:

> Many times, too, you are already in a relationship. You are either married or may have a significant other. They knew you when you were just you. Nevertheless, now your eyes are wide open. You are becoming educated, coming home talking about Camus and talking about, you know, the *Allegory of the Cave*. You are talking about all of these great things and, you know, Plato. All of those are awakening. You begin to speak about those things, and then the person you are with ends up feeling, oh, you know, that they will be left behind. So, many times, because we do not want to hurt them, and because they have been in our corner, and we have been together all the time before this happened, you bow out, gracefully bow out.

Most students and graduates, however, reported talking to their family and friends about the humanities and did not report experiencing isolation or cognitive dissonance. Students argued that the course could play a vital role in their communities; most commonly, they said that the humanities could help to "empower," "enlighten," and "inspire" others of similar backgrounds. As Jay, a 2016 graduate in his early twenties, said, "It motivates people. It gives people hope." Other students of color echoed his response:

> Estelle: They will [humanities] empower you to see that where I am now is not where I must be. … It gives you the confidence to take the next step and ask those questions that pertain to you. You get to where you need to be. It makes you hungry for more.

Some believed a humanities course would benefit students because it exposes them to new perspectives. As Chadwick, a 2014 graduate, commented, "It just opens the person up to all kinds of other avenues." Brenda and Duke, recent graduates in their 60s and 40s, respectively, similarly expressed that the humanities expose students to different viewpoints, and Luciana, a Latinx mother of three in her early forties, argued that exposure to the humanities could help one think more critically:

> Brenda: What I love about Clemente is for the urban community; this is an opportunity that, without Clemente, people like myself could not afford. … I think people want stuff; we do not know where it is. And you know what? Truthfully, if you only hang around your people, you are so limited, so limited.

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Duke: Often, people in low-income communities do not read. They are in an echo chamber and hear things from each other that reinforce their negative views of the outside world…. I think being introduced to history, literature, art, and other people who write … from a different perspective … Any contact someone in the community can have with that information can only improve things for them.

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Luciana: Even now, what I tell people is that what you get is exposure. Because of philosophy and talking about the good life … I tell them what they find is relatable. It just helps you think better and broader, which I tell them.

Some students believed that members of historically marginalized communities feel profoundly discouraged and ashamed, and that Clemente can help pull individuals out of those feelings by encouraging them to ask questions and examine themselves. This idea is in keeping with Bell Hooks (2003), who argues, "Like all members of subordinated groups who must cope with the negative stereotypes imposed upon them in circumstances where dominators rule, African Americans have suffered and continue to suffer trauma, much of it the re-enactment of shaming" (p. 94). To this point:

Ann-Marie: Many of our people in the low-income community are discouraged. … Sometimes, they are closed-minded or ashamed, or they have just been so oppressed that they turn into something they do not even realize they have turned into. … [Through the humanities], they get to look at themselves, examine themselves, and ask themselves questions: *Why do I exist? Why do I want to do this?* It helps them to get a better understanding of what will make them better. It will not be material things because sometimes when you are deprived, all you want to do is have. … So, it is to get them to understand what is important. Most of the time, they probably have what is essential but cannot understand because they focus on what they do not have.

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Ornella: So very often, people slip through the cracks, and Clemente is a way to get people thinking about things they never even thought about, a world they did not even know existed.

An overarching theme of students' responses was that an education in the humanities encourages individuals to ask questions and make connections between the course material and their own lives and encourages rational, well-reasoned thought, all of which, students argued, is needed in their home communities.

Conclusion

When we think of "adult education," a Clemente classroom does not typically come to mind. We more commonly think of practical instruction, discrete skills classes in literacy and math, or vocational training to "upskill" workers. This thinking is primarily due to neoliberal discourse: "Knowledge is reduced to information, thus making it variously transferrable, replaceable, and disposable" (Merriam & Grace, 2022, p. 108). Adult education is seldom seen as a means of self-exploration and improvement, nor a process through which learners are developed into knowledgeable and well-rounded citizens. Although higher education was once conceptualized as a *public* good, it is increasingly seen as an *individual* good. A college education is a way to theoretically climb the economic ladder and contribute to the nation's prosperity.

Clemente draws a range of adult learners of color, and students take the course for various reasons, but only some take it *because* it is a humanities class. Critics may see Clemente as a colonizing force, imposing dominant cultural values on potentially vulnerable, disenfranchised adults. Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire would likely agree. He saw society controlled by a dominant elite that foists its culture and values on the masses: "Similarly, Ira Shor (1993) argued that in curriculum, "culture is defined scholastically as the Great Books, or as a Great Tradition of literature, music, and painting, or as the correct usage of the upper classes, or as the information and experience familiar to the elite" (p. 31). But this culture and language, Shor says, are "alien" to the lives of most students (p. 31). Indeed, many Clemente students remarked that taking the course was "like learning a new language" and that reading Shakespeare for the first time "was like reading Chinese," but, time and again, students commented that until Clemente, classical texts seemed off-limits to them, many cultural references went over their

heads, and museums felt like places they did not *belong*. Students repeatedly commented that the course pushed them to feel more confident, empowered, and knowledgeable, not oppressed and dominated.

In the U.S., humanistic study is often associated with small, private, and expensive liberal arts colleges and privileged students. Adult learners, however, are thought to need educative experiences that can be more accurately described as training rather than education. Clemente turns that notion on its head by offering non-traditional students a rigorous humanities education in community centers and local libraries nationwide. Negative assumptions about the intellectual capacity of marginalized communities have led large segments of the student population to be excluded from demanding academic curricula from the primary grades onward. However, my time with Clemente demonstrates that adults with little to no knowledge of the humanities can come to not only understand what the "humanities" are but to embrace and ultimately advocate for all that it entails. What is more, my time alongside Clemente students underscores not only the need for a range of adult education opportunities from skill-building to deep intellectual inquiry but also the need to amplify students' voices so that higher education administrators, policymakers, and practitioners can better understand how to engage, challenge, support, and retain adult learners of color.

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[i] For a single-person household in 2023, 150% of the FPL is $21,870; for a five-person household, $52,710.
[ii] Classes typically meet at least 55 times for 110 hours of instruction.
[iii] See Griffith (2016) for commentary on low-income students and transcript holds.