

Service and Solidarity, Past and Present: Understanding Contemporary Identity Through Classical Literature

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Ignatian Mentoring Program Reflection

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For my Ignatian Mentoring Project, I decided to re-examine the assignments from one of my Core classes: Classical Literature and the Moral Imagination. As part of the Ethics, Religion, and Society sequence of the Core Curriculum, this class is foundational to our Jesuit mission of preparing students for a life as engaged, informed citizens. My version of the course also carries a Diversity Flag and therefore aims to foster empathy with and appreciation of diverse perspectives. The Greeks and Romans used different axes of identity than we use today--in particular, James Dee has remarked on "the total absence of the kind of obsessive and corrosive concern with 'whiteness' and 'blackness' that so disfigures our modern world." Yet modern identity groups often draw on misleading depictions of the ancient Mediterranean to advance their divisive agendas. An understanding of Classical literature therefore (1) allows for informed dialogue on these controversial issues and (2) showcases the culturally contingent, constructed nature of identity. In keeping with the Jesuit legacy, two of my major goals in the class are to foster reflection and solidarity for and with others.

I first taught this course in Spring 2021 and was satisfied, though not thrilled, with the final project I had chosen. For this project, students worked in groups to investigate primary sources related to one of the major peoples of the ancient world. They read and discussed a selection of primary texts on their chosen identity-group and then presented their findings to the entire class. One goal of this project was to introduce the class to the many and varied ethnic identities of the ancient Mediterranean. Since this was a cosmopolitan, multicultural, multiethnic world, it would be impossible to do full justice to its variety in this class while simultaneously practicing the close reading and discussion of literature required to engage in "critical reflection on ethical and religious questions of social significance." The group projects were intended to allow students to become "experts" on ancient Greek and Roman perceptions of another identity group while the required presentations allowed the entire class to benefit from their expertise. The project was also designed as an opportunity to practice the skills in primary source analysis that the class had been developing over the course of the semester.

During the course of my Ignatian studies, I was inspired by a question posed by Robert Newton in his "Reflections on the Educational Principles of the Spiritual Exercises": "Do you teach in a way that challenges students to achieve a personal rather than a purely academic grasp of your subject?" This question particularly spoke to my understanding of *cura personalis* and the importance of considering the whole person, not just their academic goals. I realized that my goal in the "Peoples of the World" project had been to broaden students' understanding of the

past, not to consider the past's relevance for their present. I wanted students to appreciate the diversity of the ancient Mediterranean world and to "center the margins" through consideration of other groups besides the Greeks and Romans. Yet by structuring the latter half of the semester around this project, I was neglecting one of my own major goals, which was to bring the ancient world into dialogue with the present and invite critical reflection on the use of ancient ideas to explain or justify modern practices. Study of the ancient world can provide a window into power dynamics that are still present but rendered invisible by familiarity and normalization. The distance of the past allows those power dynamics to come into focus, and when issues of identity and power are addressed *through* the past, students are more comfortable and feel empowered to engage critically with the material. This project allowed students to observe the identity issues of the past, but without taking the crucial step of relating what they had observed to the contemporary world—and to their own lives.

I therefore redesigned the course syllabus so that one project (focused on the past) became two (focused on the present). The first was a "modern ethnography," in which students took their cue from ancient ethnographic writers like Herodotus, Caesar, and Tacitus, but wrote an ethnography of a modern identity group to which they belonged. The second was a video analysis of the representation of identity in a film related to the ancient world. These two projects addressed my goal of requiring students to make connections between past and present and used two separate, but related, approaches. The ethnographic project asked students to adopt the voice and perspective of someone unfamiliar with their chosen group and analyze its views and behaviors in an objective, impartial way. It therefore invites students to realize that their own experiences and perspectives are not universal or absolute and indeed might seem strange to someone from another culture, time, or place. To prepare for this project, students read a few articles from a Slate parody series titled "If It Happened There," which described American news and American cultural practices in the voice American journalists typically adopt to explain **other** countries. So, for example, the entry for the Superbowl described it as "a brutal contest of strength and strategy" characteristic of Americans' "proud but violent culture" and adds that "Millions of chickens are slaughtered to obtain only their wings—the traditional American delicacy consumed by fans at home."

The second project asked students to analyze the representation of identity in a film, TV episode, video game, or other screen media set in the ancient world. These media are the most accessible windows on the ancient world available—indeed, many Americans gain most of their information about the ancient Mediterranean from popular films like *Gladiator*, *Alexander*, and *Troy*. These media therefore shape popular perceptions of ancient identity, but they are also subject to the prevailing prejudices of the modern world (as shown by ongoing casting controversies). Students must bring the knowledge about ancient identity that they have acquired over the course of the semester into a modern context and consider how the popular imagination about the ancient Mediterranean might be shaped by these distorted spectacles. As with the ethnography project, students receive some foundation for this project in class: in a module on Greek culture, they watched Zack Snyder's *300* and discussed its (tendentious)

representation of Greeks and Persians, while in a module on Roman culture, they discuss controversies surrounding the casting of Cleopatra on film.

Students responded well to both projects. Their chosen topics for the ethnography covered a wide array of identities: from gay American men to servers at a particular Cincinnati restaurant, from car enthusiasts to “theater folk”, from Catholics to stoners, from lovers of the Marvel-verse or NCAA basketball fans to ROTC cadets. The results were creative and engaging, and students reported a high degree of enthusiasm for the project: many mentioned that, by stepping outside themselves to view their group as an outsider or impartial observer, they became aware of the behaviors used by their group to signal insider status—and exclude outsiders. The writer of the “theater folk” ethnography made a very astute observation on how her group “spoke its own language,” using slang and shorthand that would be unfamiliar or even incomprehensible to others. I am hopeful that students became more mindful of these exclusionary tendencies and will strive to be “for and with **others**” in the future.

Likewise, the video projects were engaging and nuanced, covering a wide range of films and exploring many different aspects of identity. For example, one student considered gender in ancient epic and modern film by drawing connections between Vergil’s *Aeneid* and the 2014 thriller *Gone Girl* (set in Carthage, Missouri). Another student focused on the Greek gods as represented by Disney’s *Hercules* (1997). He astutely observed that all the gods are brightly colored (e.g. Dionysus is purple, Poseidon is blue), except Zeus and Hercules, who appear Caucasian, and argued that this color scheme is meant to reinforce an implicit identification between Zeus and the Father of the Holy Trinity, with Hercules representing the Son. Students wrote a reflection on this project, and several mentioned that they felt they had become more aware of how identity is represented in modern film. One student specifically mentioned how Rome often appears starkly white in visual representations: white buildings, white sculptures, white togas, white people. But, as she said, she is now aware that those buildings and sculptures were painted, that only a small slice of the Roman population would have been eligible to wear the toga, and that the Roman empire was a multicultural and multiethnic society.

Overall, I was very satisfied with the results of both projects and would certainly use them again if I teach this course in the future. One change I would make is to more explicitly signal which earlier assignments are meant to prepare for and feed into the projects so students can be more mindful about the skills they will need to develop.