

Contesting Citizenship: A Social Justice Themed Course for the Classics Curriculum

Who belongs? Who is considered equal? Who has a voice? Whose citizenship is conditional? These questions have been asked in ancient Greece and Rome and continue to be asked in our political landscape in the U.S. This presentation introduces a new course that explores how citizenship has been contested over time in three different places: classical Athens, first century Rome, and twenty-first century United States. Through comparison with distant cultures, students understand the historical contexts that shape current debates about citizenship in the US. At the same time, students engage with the local community, taking field trips to explore democratic places and spaces in the community, learn about the steps to citizenship from immigration lawyers, and listen to first-hand accounts of immigrants who have recently become US citizens. For their final project, students take what they have learned and translate it into action and positive social change in the form of social activism, direct service, community advocacy, or public scholarship.

This Second-Year Seminar (SYS) introduces students to civic engagement (from the Latin word *civis*, “citizen”), both in and out of the classroom, and asks them to cultivate and reflect on their capacity to practice it. Through historical documents, imaginative literature, art and architecture, legal texts, and personal interviews, students examine how concepts and definitions of citizenship have been constructed, policed, and contested in Athens, Rome, and the US. The course is constructed around a number of interlocking themes. The first, Origin Stories, compares the great man narrative (e.g., Harmodios and Aristogeiton) versus the importance of the collective in making democracy (e.g., routing Isagoras and the Spartans from the Acropolis in 507 BCE). Democratic Places and Spaces invites students to think spatially about the topographic features that encourage democratic dialogue, exchange, and protest. Third, symbols, such as Roman fasces or personified abstractions like Columbia or Lady Liberty, attest to the power of monuments and statues to shape historical narrative and encode community values. Fourth, clothing and dress codes (e.g.,

democratic nudity or the Roman toga and stola) reinforce social dynamics and embody gendered social expectations and political action..

The second half of the course tackles how states, both ancient and modern, create laws, regulations, and justifications for deciding who has full citizenship and those who might experience “partial” or “conditional” citizenship. This half of the course introduces the complexity of immigration by comparing the status of metics in Athens with modern categories of immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeker. Euripides’ *Medea*, Luis Alfaro’s *Mojada*, and select chapters from Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands* reveal the dilemmas that foreigners face in a new culture and open up the reality of blended identities. In this same section, students meet new citizens at a local non-profit that works with immigrants and hear their stories of coming to the US from places across the world. After the section on immigration, the course compares ancient and modern constructions of race and some of the ways that the dominant culture maintains and enforces its authority: removal, separation, containment, education, and violence. This last section of the course presents several case studies from Greek and Roman slavery and US history: Frederick Douglass, Native American boarding schools, Japanese internment, and Jim Crow lynching.

Finally, after engaging with course texts, local experts, and site visits, students complete culminating team projects that effect positive social change through social activism, direct service, community advocacy, or public scholarship. At the end of the presentation, I will share several examples of these projects.