

Seeing Yourself in the Text: The Role of Reception in the First-Year Undergraduate Course

When news broke nationally of the protests of Humanities 110, a year-long, required course for first-year students at Reed College, classicists had plenty of reasons to feel uneasy. Hum 110 (as it is commonly known) focused exclusively on the Ancient Mediterranean World, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to Apuleius' novel *The Golden Ass*, with particular emphasis on ancient Greece and Rome. In October 2016, a group of undergraduate students began an eight-month sit-in protest of the lectures, advocating for a course more representative of people of color. Holding signs saying "Hum 110 is white supremacist" and "We know enough about white history," at least some of the protestors insisted that the study of these materials was perpetuating racism and was doing psychological harm to students of color who were required to take the course. At the same time, white supremacist groups, including Identity Evropa, were plastering university campuses with posters featuring the Apollo Belvedere and Julius Caesar, urging people of European descent to "Protect [Their] Heritage." Caught somewhere between misappropriation by the Alt-Right and a damning critique from the left, classicists were compelled to engage in some long overdue soul-searching.

This paper will consider some of the ways that educators have sought to address the apparent lack of diversity in our classical sources and will argue that the most effective way of engaging students of color and other under-represented groups is through modern reception. One approach that educators have taken seeks to de-center Greece by focusing on cross-cultural interactions and the perspectives of outside groups, including the Egyptians and Persians. Another approach addresses race and racial thinking much more directly through "Race in Antiquity" courses, which highlight the ways that categories of human difference other than skin

color shaped the racial thinking of the ancients. Both of these approaches do very important work to better educate students in the cultural dynamics of antiquity and to destabilize narratives of western exceptionalism and “pre-racial” origins; both have important places in classics curricula. In my experience, however, these approaches fail to address one of the key concerns of the protesting students of color at Reed: that they were unable to “see themselves in the texts.” That is, the students felt the absence of characters and authors who, in modern times, would commonly be identified as people of color. This conspicuous absence created an additional barrier for many students of color, who were already feeling alienated and marginalized on a predominantly white campus: their classmates didn’t look like them and neither did the subjects and authors of their texts.

Modern receptions of classical materials by people of color and other under-represented groups offer a real opportunity for such students to “see themselves in the texts.” There is a long history of such receptions, but there has been a proliferation of them in the last twenty years that may be of special interest to today’s undergraduates. As an example, I will offer a class that I taught in Fall 2018 titled “Classics and Modern Social Movements.” This course was designed as a writing-intensive seminar for first-year undergraduates with no previous knowledge of classical antiquity. Classical texts were paired with modern receptions by women and/or people of color that offer a social commentary on contemporary issues of race, gender, and immigration. For example, the *Odyssey* was paired with Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Father Comes Home from the Wars*, Ovid’s tale of “Iphis and Ianthe” with Ali Smith’s novella *Girl Meets Boy*, and Euripides’ *Medea* with Luis Alfaro’s *Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles*. The paper will discuss some of the advantages to this approach, as well as some *caveats*. Certainly for classicists who are interested

in greater inclusion of marginalized groups – or for those who are simply interested in increasing introductory language enrollments – this is an approach worthy of consideration.