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## **Classics and White Supremacy: How Percy Jackson Supports Narratives of Western Civilization, American Exceptionalism, and White Supremacy**

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Classics and White Supremacy

How *Percy Jackson* Supports Narratives of Western Civilization, American Exceptionalism, and  
White Supremacy

Peyton McNulty

Classical Civilization Honors Thesis

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## **Introduction**

Rick Riordan's series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* has become a staple within the literary community over the past two decades. The series follows Percy Jackson as he discovers that he is the son of Poseidon and must defeat Kronos to ensure the survival of Western civilization. The series centers the Greek gods, who have most recently settled the heart of the West in America, as the very essence of Western civilization itself. Riordan employs the narratives of American supremacy and connection to the Classics throughout the series, utilizing American landmarks and modern language to make the Classics accessible to his young audience. The series has become a means of introducing young audiences to Greek mythology and Classics at large as it has grown in popularity and length. Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson, in their paper "'A God Buys Us Cheeseburgers': Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson Series and America's Culture Wars," write that the series is a means for "...high culture and the classical tradition... (to) be successfully transmitted to the masses."<sup>1</sup> The *Percy Jackson* series acts as a tool to engage young readers with ideas of classical connection by introducing the readers to why they should care about Greece and Rome, but in doing so, the series inadvertently perpetuates narratives of American supremacy and ideas of Western civilization.

Riordan's narrative relies on modern constructions of ancient identities, racial categorizations, and association with what is known as "Western" civilization. Western civilization is a nebulous concept used to describe various cultures and countries. Jackson Spielvogel discusses Western civilization as having evolved out of ideas from ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, but it was not until the Late Roman Empire that Europeans began to view themselves as belonging to a civilization distinct from

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson, "'A God Buys Us Cheeseburgers': Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson Series and America's Culture Wars," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 39, no. 3 (2015): 236.

others.<sup>2</sup> He indicates that a key component of Western civilization was the “...encounters with other peoples.”<sup>3</sup> Those who are included in Western civilization are categorized as such because they hold values and ideals they themselves view as unique and superior to others, creating a concept that is exclusionary and operates in a hierarchical structure. Western civilization is foundational to American culture and the way Americans view their own national identity. The concept of Western civilization allows Americans can connect themselves to the people of ancient Greece and Rome. In this connection to the ancients, Americans, as well as others included in the present identification of the Western world, view themselves as superior based on this heritage.

Riordan plays into this narrative of what Neville Morley calls “...a new myth of origin...” where the people of western civilization are “...the true and direct heirs of (that) classical civilization.”<sup>4</sup> In *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*, Riordan establishes that America is not only connected to this classical heritage but is the current center of Western civilization. Riordan states that “...America is now the heart of the flame. It is the great power of the West.”<sup>5</sup> He connects his characters to this narrative of supremacy and, in doing so, connects his audience to it as well. Riordan introduces his young audience to the classical world by bringing it into an enjoyable, modern setting that has the potential to entertain the young audience. It also strengthens the narrative surrounding America’s connection to the classics and its superiority because of it.<sup>6</sup> Riordan, like many other children’s book authors, has a

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2 Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization: A Brief History* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2017), xxxix.

3 Spielvogel, xxix.

4 Neville Morley, “What’s Wrong with Classics” in *Classics: Why It Matters* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2018), 11.

5 Rick Riordan, *The Lightning Thief* (New York: First Scholastic, 2005), 73.

6 Joanna Paul, “The Half-Blood Hero: Percy Jackson and Mythmaking in the Twenty-First Century” *A Handbook to the Reception of Classical Mythology* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 234.

“...commitment to making educational content fun and mythical material unthreatening...” but at what cost?<sup>7</sup>

Through my research, I aim to show that Riordan uses harmful narratives that support American exceptionalism and further white supremacy through his use of the classics. I examine how he employs Western civilization as a concept to create a plot in which his hero is a champion of America and the Western world, while intertwining ancient and modern identities to form these characters. I explore how he excludes and alienates groups that do not fit within the western borders, or the image of whiteness associated with Westernness. *Percy Jackson* has been a series popularized as a way to get children interested in Greek and Roman mythology but it accomplishes this goal by playing into dangerous, supremacist narratives.

### **Plot Summary**

*Percy Jackson and the Olympians* follows its title character, Percy Jackson, as he navigates his life as a demigod in modern America. We meet Percy in the first book of the series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*. In this book, we follow Percy as he discovers that he is a demigod and is introduced to the world of Greek gods and monsters. Percy visits the Greek and Roman wings of the Metropolitan Museum of Art on a school field trip. Mrs. Dobbs, a substitute teacher, reveals herself as the Fury Alecto. She attacks Percy over reasons he does not yet understand. This scene sets off a chain of events that lead Percy to learning that he is a demigod, battling the Minotaur, and eventually ending up at Camp Halfblood, a camp where demigods, children of the Olympic gods and mortals, go to learn about their heritage and train in combat. At camp, Percy learns all about how the gods have migrated and are currently residing in America. He also learns that they have children who possess unique

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<sup>7</sup> Shelia Murnaghan, “Classics for Cool Kids: Popular and Unpopular Versions of Antiquity for Children,” *Classical World* 104, no. 3 (2011): 347.

abilities. Percy's father is Poseidon, one of the "Big Three" gods of the series, which not only makes him superior to the other godly children, but also makes him a target. Percy is not supposed to exist due to a pact made between Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades after World War II to not have children because they are too powerful. Percy's existence attracts the attention of the gods, Zeus in particular, since his "master bolt" was stolen from Olympus during the winter solstice. Percy is blamed and, after only knowing about his status as a demigod for a few weeks, must go on a quest to return Zeus' master bolt to him by the time the summer solstice is over.

In *The Lightning Thief*, Percy travels across the country to enter the Underworld to confront Hades about stealing Zeus' master bolt. During this journey, Percy faces mythological monsters, often at significant American landmarks such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the St. Louis Arch. Percy travels to the Western United States to enter the Underworld, following the idea set forth by Homer that the Underworld was located at the end of the Western world. Percy believes that Hades, the outcast god, has stolen the bolt so that he might take over when the rest of the gods start a war. Percy learns, however, that it was not Hades, but Ares under the control of Kronos, who stole the bolt. Kronos intends to corrupt Ares was to start a war between the gods. This war would weaken the gods to the point where Kronos could take control. In the end, Percy successfully returns the bolt to Zeus and avoids starting a war between the gods that would have threatened the Western world. Once he has completed his quest and the rest of his summer at Camp Halfblood, Percy uncovers Kronos' plot to destroy the gods and the Western civilization. He confronts his former mentor, now enemy, Luke Castellan. The first book of the series ends when Percy accepts his fate as the hero of the story and the one who must save the Western world.

The rest of the books in the series follows Percy as he completes quests as he prepares for his final battle against Kronos for the preservation of Western civilization. In each subsequent book, Percy's quests follow those of mythological heroes. In *The Sea of Monsters*, Percy follows Odysseus' journey through the Sea of Monsters, now located in the Bermuda Triangle. Here he encounters Charybdis, Scylla, and Polyphemus while completing Jason's task of retrieving the golden fleece. Percy completes the labors of Herakles in *The Titans Curse* and takes on Daedalus' labyrinth just like Theseus in *The Battle of the Labyrinth*. Percy completes his heroic imitations by mirroring Achilles' arc in *The Last Olympian*. Unlike some of his heroic predecessors, Percy is successful in his quests and manages to escape death after each battle he faces. In the end of the series, Percy and the other demigods are victorious over Kronos, and they save the gods and Western civilization. The series establishes Percy as an ancient hero in a modern setting. Percy becomes the symbol for the Western world.

## **Plot**

### **Chapter 1: Western Civilization**

In *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, Riordan relies heavily on the concept of Western civilization as a plot device. The plot tying the series together is Kronos' attempt to be resurrected in order to destroy the gods and western civilization itself. When Percy is made aware of the Greek presence in America and his status as a demigod, Riordan introduces the concept of the "West" by attaching it to the movement of the Greek gods. Riordan does not provide us with a clear definition of what Western civilization is; he simply provides examples of what Western civilization has produced leaving us, as the audience, with the question of what Western civilization is and why should we care that the main villain of the series wants to destroy it.



One of the issues that arises when attempting to study and define Western civilization is that it is a recent and mutable concept. The term “western civilization” arose around the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Futo Kennedy writes that “western civilization”

“...refer(s) to the expansion of European settlers into the western part of the North American continent, a colonial adventure intended to settle the continent from sea to sea (sometimes referred to as ‘Manifest Destiny’) and to also displace or eliminate indigenous populations. The ‘civilization’ part was about founding small religious colleges in order to prevent the settlers from falling into ‘barbarism.’”<sup>9</sup>

Here, “Western civilization” refers not to a geographical location but rather the ideas and culture that are being introduced by a designated group of people, namely white Europeans during their movement across North America. The term carries an inherent sense of superiority and has been used to distinguish between peoples and cultures. Kennedy explicitly states that this term describes the movement of Europeans and their attempts to avoid falling into “barbarism” associated with the indigenous populations. When describing the indigenous peoples’ culture as barbaric, Europeans were highlighting the fact that indigenous people did not hold the beliefs necessary to be included in what the Europeans viewed as a civil and superior society. Europeans enforcing the narrative of Western civilization valued classical education as a civilizing force. This belief is reflected in narratives of Greek exceptionalism.

The “Greek Miracle” is one of Western civilizations’ founding principles. It is a theory about Greek cultural development created by “...German linguists and philologists, who

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<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Futo Kennedy, “‘Western Civilization’, White Supremacism and the Myth of a White Ancient Greece” in *Polarized Pasts: Heritage and Belonging in Times of Political Polarization*, ed. Elisabeth Niklasson (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2023), 94.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy (2023), 95.

confused language relationships with racial stick relationships.”<sup>10</sup> The “Greek miracle” is defined as “a singular flowering of freedom and reason exemplified...in the works and history of classical Greece (from the fifth to fourth centuries BCE), especially Athens and Sparta.”<sup>11</sup> The argument is that the Greeks developed the ideas of science, reasoning, and democracy within the borders of their own culture without the influence of cultures such as the Egyptians, Phoenicians, or even the Persians. This approach to Greek history and development ignores the multicultural origins of Greek ideas and influences. Those who buy into the “Greek Miracle” must come up with a reason as to why other contemporary civilizations did not claim this so-called miracle for itself, especially those who had been established for generations before the Greeks began to flourish and whose own culture the Greeks adopted and later identified as their own. Most do not provide a reasoning behind this inconsistency, but Nicholas Gage offers an explanation.

According to Gage, the landscape of Greece may have been the reason it was the center of Greek development; he posits that Greece is “not a place of extremes” which makes it a perfect place to foster the development of the beliefs we still value today.<sup>12</sup> This argument for the Greek miracle fits into the Greek belief of environmental determinism; the climate of Greece fostered the development of intellectual traditions that modern cultures appropriated as their own.

The traditions that started in Greece were thought to be passed down through Rome, then Europe and the United States. Today the term of Western civilization signals an appropriated heritage of the ancient world and is employed to justify colonialism and imperialism.<sup>13</sup> The northern and western Europeans used the classical past as a way to justify invading and

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10 Knight Dunlap, “The Great Aryan Myth,” *Scientific Monthly* 59, no. 4 (1944): 206.

11 Kennedy (2023), 96.

12 Diana Buitron-Oliver, Nicholas Gage, and National Gallery of Art, *The Greek Miracle: Classical Sculpture from the Dawn of Democracy: The Fifth Century B.C.* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1992), 17-20.

13 Kennedy (2023), 97.

conquering other people's land and culture; they felt that they had the right because their roots lie in ancient Greece, the birthplace of modern ideals. By claiming the ancient Greeks as their own, Europeans constructed a narrative in which the ancient Greeks were different from the other Mediterranean civilizations, and these differences made them superior. The act of making ancient Greece unique separates it from the broader context of Greece's place in the Mediterranean.<sup>14</sup> The act of isolating Greek culture from this broader context of the Mediterranean allowed colonial powers to deny the contributing role of civilizations the Europeans colonized. Europeans, and eventually Americans, worked to ensure that the Greeks were portrayed as superior because of their role in forming modern Western civilization. They created "a new myth of origin, presenting modern Europeans as the true and direct heirs of (that) classical civilization."<sup>15</sup> The classical past supplied modern people with "powerful, malleable material" which they were able to appropriate to fit into modern constructions of society.<sup>16</sup>

The malleable nature of Western civilization is addressed in the fact that Western civilization is not a geographical idea but rather a way of categorizing people based on their values and ideals. In *Western Civilization*, Jackson Spielvogel provides a definition for Western civilization that offers examples of values historians historically have associated with Western civilization. He defines Western civilization as having unique values of "the concept of political liberty, belief in the fundamental value of every individual, and a rational outlook based on a system of logical, analytical thought."<sup>17</sup> Donald Kagan, an American historian and Classicist, similarly defines Western civilization:

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14 See note 13.

15 Morley, 11.

16 See note 15.

17 Spielvogel, xxx.

“(T)he West has created institutions of government and law that provide unprecedented freedom for its people. It has also invented a body of natural scientific knowledge and technology achieved that together make possible a level of health and material prosperity undreamed of in earlier times and unknown outside of the West and those places that have been influenced by the West”<sup>18</sup>

Those who see themselves as a part of Western civilization value abstract concepts like freedom and reasoning, painting some cultures as liberated because they believe in and practice these ideas while the rest of the world remains unenlightened.<sup>19</sup> From these nebulous definitions, Western civilization is used to establish hierarchies and power over other cultures. Western civilization is not bound by geography. It moves with the people perpetuating the narrative of supremacy and inclusion. This idea opened up the possibility for Western civilization to move from one place to another. This also allows for the inclusion of people and places to change as well. Western civilization moves with the people who believe in it, and each time it does, the inclusion of people and places becomes more and more exclusive. Western civilization becomes a way for people to express their superiority.

A key component to the development of western civilization was defining western civilization in terms of what it was not. Spielvogel claims that the development of the unique attributes of western civilization were only developed and evolved into their modern perceptions through interactions with other people and cultures.<sup>20</sup> Cultures and peoples not included in the western civilization categorization are painted as either challenging the value in science, freedom, democratic government, or reasoning, or they are portrayed as being unaware of

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18 Donald Kagan, “CLCV 205: Introduction to Ancient Greek History,” Open Yale Courses, Yale, Accessed April 10, 2023, <https://oyc.yale.edu/classics/clcv-205/lecture-1>.

19 See note 13.

20 Spielvogel, xxx.

western ideals. The beginnings of a selective inclusion to the western world developed into the modern idea of “the West and the rest” where western cultures must overcome the ignorance and challenges of “the rest.” Through this developing narrative, new categorizations of race and culture emerged to fit the idea that those who belong to western civilization are superior due to their imagined heritage. This can be seen in the ways Germans constructed the theory of an Aryan invasion to provide themselves with a direct connection to the ancient world and the superiority that is associated with this connection.<sup>21</sup>

The categorizations that emerged can be best simplified into broad characterizations of “West” and “East.” Modern borders of the “West” are not physical but rather centered around colonist expansion. These borders, however, constantly change based on the political and economic beliefs of the different countries at the time. The framework of what currently fits in with the modern definitions of western civilization are “...created by the dominant group and reflect the interest of that group.”<sup>22</sup> Imperialism is at the center of the Western civilization narrative; the cultures and people included in Western civilization were the ones who were colonized or perpetrated violence against “uncivilized” cultures. The idea that the dominant culture, or perceived dominant culture, crafts narratives of superiority can be traced back to the origins of western civilization, the ancient Greeks.

Herodotus, a Greek historian from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, wrote a work called *The Histories*, which covers the tensions between Greeks and their non-Greek neighbors, culminating in the Persian Wars. Herodotus traveled recording the history and customs of the people and places he visited. When Herodotus presents these histories and information he claims to do so

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21 Dunlap, 206.

22 Tanya Golash-Boza, “A Critical and Comprehensive Sociological Theory of Race and Racism,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 2, no. 2 (2016): 133.

without judgement; he simply presents the facts he knows, and the stories, opinions, and customs of foreign persons he has been told on his journeys. Herodotus examines the different cultures he encounters by arguing that status and character are mutable.<sup>23</sup> Herodotus' attempt at nonjudgmental writing of other cultures falls short, however, because he is operating within a Greek world where the Greeks held strong beliefs that they were fundamentally different from their geographical neighbors. Herodotus often invokes environmental determinism, or the belief that the environment determines bodies and determines customs.<sup>24</sup> While Herodotus never defines environmental determinism, the Hippocratic author of *Airs, Waters, Places* does. The author of *Airs, Waters, Places* provides evidence of how the climates of Asia, Europe, Egypt, and Scythia affect both the physical bodies and the temperaments of the inhabitants.<sup>25</sup> The work does not distinguish between the local populations and the Greeks settled on the same land. The author says that everyone who lives under the laws of these climates is affected both physically and culturally, regardless of a Greek or "barbarian" status.<sup>26</sup> The climate and laws of the culture affect the people who live there as well. These two ideas contradict themselves; the author distinguishes between Greeks and local populations even though he also states that everyone living in Asia Minor is affected by the climate and laws. If the theory of environmental determinism were accurate, there would be no distinction between Greeks and local populations. This discrepancy shows that environmental determinism is informed by the demands of identity.

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23 Rosalind Thomas, *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science and the Art of Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 117, 134.

24 Rebecca Futo Kennedy, "Airs, Waters, Metals, Earth: People and Environment in Archaic and Classical Greek Thought" in *The Routledge Handbook of Identity and the Environment in the Classical and Medieval Worlds*, ed. Rebecca Futo Kennedy and Molly Jones-Lewis (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 9.

25 Hippocratic Corpus, *On Airs, Waters, Places* 12-24.

26 Hp. *Aer.* 16.

Similarly, early European slave traders engaged in climate theories in order to justify the enslavement of people from Africa and Eastern Europe.<sup>27</sup>

Modern constructions of race create an opportunity for whiteness to be associated with narratives of supremacy and Western civilization. Race is a modern product of colonial encounters and is founded on the “socially constructed belief that the human race can be divided into biologically discrete and exclusive groups based on physical and cultural traits.”<sup>28</sup> Western civilization has become synonymous with the idea of whiteness, with the two terms being used interchangeably in earlier writings. Over time became the main word used to describe “white” or the white population in America.<sup>29</sup> Whiteness is not just a way to describe people’s skin tone. It is an identity associated with the inheritance of Western civilization and supremacy.

Interchanging ‘Western civilization’ and ‘white’ meant the Greeks and Romans then become white to ensure that white Europeans and Americans were able to be the heirs to Greek and Roman culture.<sup>30</sup> Assigning whiteness to ancient cultures allowed Europeans and Americans to claim superiority in the modern world. White supremacists often engage in classical narratives and histories in order to support their own superiority and power in the modern world.

White supremacists perpetuate narratives of a white ancient world in order to ensure they can still claim heritage of ancient Greece and Rome, challenging anyone who says otherwise. The field of Classics has recently been working towards dismantling harmful narratives perpetuating supremacy based on false claims and appropriated culture. Martin Bernal, a professor of Near Eastern studies, wrote a series titled *Black Athena* challenging the Aryan

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27 Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From The Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 20.

28 Golash-Boza, 130.

29 Kennedy (2023), 98.

30 Kennedy (2023), 101.

Model of Greek civilization formation and development. He argued that Greek civilization arose out of Near Eastern cultural influence.<sup>31</sup> The Aryan Model of Greek development posits an invasion of the Aegean by people from the North resulting in a population who developed into the ancient Greeks.<sup>32</sup> The work caused controversy within the Classics community as well as among those who claimed a classical heritage based on the idea of whiteness because it showed how entrenched whiteness was in the discipline.<sup>33</sup>

The white supremacy supported by the concept of Western civilization is not limited to extremist groups. Whiteness and Western civilization have become synonymous with each other, leading to the assumption that white supremacy was the foundation of the society in which we live. American civilization was founded upon the whitewashing of Greece and Rome, revealing that American civilization is also founded on white supremacy. American identity relies on the connection of American culture to ancient cultures in which the multicultural origins of ancient Greece and Rome have been erased and replaced with whiteness. This connection to the ancients and whiteness permeates narratives of American history and culture, narratives which Rick Riordan uses in the *Percy Jackson* series.

Riordan centers his series in North America, making his protagonist the hero needed to defend Western civilization. Riordan does not define what Western civilization is but rather relies on associations with government, architecture, and other cultural practices associated with Western civilization. Riordan relies on the belief that Western civilization produces a “civilized” culture associated with positive characteristics. Because American culture was founded with a

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31 Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots for Classical Civilization Volume 1* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 1.

32 Bernal, 2.

33 Sally Riad and Deborah Jones, “Invoking *Black Athena* and its Debates: Insights for Organization on Diversity, Race and Culture,” *Journal of Management History* 19, no. 3 (2013): 396.



connection to Western civilization, the audience is lead to associate the books and its characters with whiteness. Percy Jackson is the modern version of mythological heroes, placed in America in order to continue the narrative that western civilization has moved into America while keeping its classical heritage. Riordan brings his audience into a world where ancient gods and monsters occupy the same space as his readers, allowing them to be immersed in the same experiences as Percy. Riordan's use of the United States allows for a change in the way the classical past is delivered to young audiences. Joanna Paul says that "instead of transporting them to a distant, frequently alien, classical past, antiquity is brought to them (the audience) and made a part of *their* world."<sup>34</sup> Riordan inspires an interest in the classical world by placing it into settings familiar to the readers. He introduces his young audience to the connection between America and the classical past by making America the center of the "new classical" world. Riordan strives to "reenergize the nation by putting it in touch with the classical but also reenergize the classical by putting it in touch with American culture."<sup>35</sup> The series' goal is to not only spark children's interest in classics but also show them how America is intrinsically linked to classical past, glossing over the harm caused by colonizers who justified their actions though Western civilization. By not acknowledging the harmful aspect of Western civilization, Riordan perpetuates ideas of whiteness in the ancient world.

Riordan achieves this goal by providing physical manifestations of western civilizations in *Percy Jackson*. The clearest example is seen in how the gods are discussed in the series. The gods are the manifestation of Western civilization. Wherever they had moved, great civilizations categorized as Western flourished. The main villain of the series, Kronos, aims to destroy the gods and the Western civilization. Riordan provides his audience with examples as to what

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34 Paul, 234.

35 Morey and Nelson, 245.

western civilization is—art, history, politics—but does not explain what Western civilization is or why it should not be challenged. He simply presents it as the superior way of life—the place the gods occupy—as reason enough for Percy and the readers to want to preserve it. Riordan, whether purposefully or ignorantly, chooses to write a story that supports ideas of white supremacy and American exceptionalism. Riordan centers the story around a white boy who becomes the hero, the savior of Western civilization; in doing so he perpetuates narratives of white saviorism in connection to a classical heritage. He invokes images of American greatness in association with the literature, art, science, and democracy of the “West.” Riordan places America at the center of the Western civilization in order to make his manifestations of the western world accessible to the young audience engaging with the books.

## **Chapter 2: Gods and the West**

In the *Percy Jackson* series, at the heart of New York City stands the Empire State building, the latest manifestation of Mount Olympus. The Greek pantheon of gods are physical representations of “Western” civilization. Riordan comes to tie his idea of what “Western” civilization is with his representation of the Greek Olympians early in his series. The character Chiron, the centaur who trains the demigods throughout the series, tells the main character Percy:

“Come now, Percy. What you call ‘Western civilization.’ ...it’s a living force. A collective consciousness that has burned bright for thousands of years. The gods are a part of it. You might even say they are the source of it, or at least, they are tied so tightly to it that they couldn’t possibly fade, not unless all of Western civilization was obliterated. The fire started in Greece. Then, as you know...the heart of the fire moved to Rome, and so did the gods...The gods simply moved, to Germany, to France, to Spain, for a while.

Wherever the flame was brightest, the gods were there...Percy, of course they are now in

your United States...America is now the heart of the flame. It is the great power of the West. And so Olympus is here.”<sup>36</sup>

By establishing the connection between the concept of Western civilization to the Greek gods, Riordan capitalizes on the pervasive view of the Classics in America. American identity is partially shaped by the appropriation of the Classical past. Historians have explored how neo-classical buildings and monuments play a central role in privileging America’s connection to the classics, a connection that erased black history.<sup>37</sup> Riordan uses this neo-classical monument architecture to further connect his argument of Western civilization in America, in turn supporting a narrative of white, American supremacy. This chapter focuses on the ways Riordan uses the gods in *The Lightning Thief* as representations of Western civilization and how the monuments featured contribute to Riordan’s connection of America to the classical past.

In *The Lightning Thief*, the gods are linked with modern wars, politics, games, and essentially any idea Riordan associates with the Western world. Riordan’s reworking of Greek mythology “aims to attract readers with (the same) jokey, parodic, modernizing presentations of Greek gods and heroes.”<sup>38</sup> Riordan puts the first god we encounter in touch with America’s modern history and ancient memory, modernizing the gods in order to make them accessible to young audiences. The first god we are introduced to is Dionysus, a camp director at Camp Half-Blood.<sup>39</sup> He is described as wearing a “tiger-print Hawaiian shirt” and playing pinocle, a game which Dionysus describes as being “...along with gladiator fighting and Pac-Man one of the greatest games ever invented by humans. I would expect all *civilized* young men to know the

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36 Riordan, 72-73.

37 John Levi Barnard, *Empire of Ruin: Black Classicism and American Imperial Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 106-107.

38 Murnaghan, 348.

39 Riordan, 64.

rules.”<sup>40</sup> Even though the gods did not invent these games, Dionysus admires games attributed to cultures that are a part of the lineage of Western civilization. Riordan is letting the audience know that the gods are a part of these developments of society and endorse them even if they do not create the products themselves. The audience recognizes Pac-Man as a popular arcade game that was extremely popular in America even though it had been invented in Japan. The choice to use Pac-Man as the modern game Riordan associates with the gods is interesting because it was not invented in the West, in America. A young audience would not have the knowledge that the game was invented in Japan; they would have seen the game in arcades or restaurants. Using gladiatorial games for the Roman connection can be explained by gladiators being a popular image of Roman times for young readers, but it raises a narrative of violence for older readers who understand what the gladiatorial games entailed. Riordan wants to use imagery his audience would recognize to help them identify with Western civilization.

Riordan continues this connection between the gods and Western civilization by tying the children of the gods, particularly the gods referred to as the “Big Three.” He rewrites recent world history in order to assign the gods pivotal roles in these events. When discussing human history in this series, Riordan refers to the history of Western civilization and more specifically, American history. The main events discussed in *The Lightning Thief* and the following books in the series are World War II and the Civil War.<sup>41</sup> Riordan attributes World War II to a war between the sons of Zeus and Poseidon against the sons of Hades.<sup>42</sup> The sons of Zeus and Poseidon are said to be on the side of the Allies, while Hades’ sons were Nazis, a topic I further explored in Chapter Five. The gods were also involved in all the wars fought within the borders of Western

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40 Riordan, 65.

41 Referenced in *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters*.

42 Riordan, 114.

civilization, regardless of whether the wars were understood as East versus West. Riordan names and details the godly connections to World War II and the Civil.<sup>43</sup> When facing off against Hades at the end of the book, Percy comments on the type of skeleton soldiers that floor the throne room. Percy says, “skeletal warriors marched in, hundreds of them, from every time period and nation in Western civilization.”<sup>44</sup> Hades rules over them in the afterlife, but these warriors are also connected to the gods in their lives as well. Ares, the god of war, is featured throughout *The Lightning Thief* and is shown to have control over any soldiers fighting in wars. Ares is therefore connected to any war of the Western world; he is responsible for starting and participating in any conflict that arises within his domain. Ares’ and the other gods’ influence the culture of Western civilization. Riordan uses their mythological powers to tie them to modern wars.

The gods’ connection to Western civilization drives the plot of *The Lightning Thief*. The gods’ powers are tied to the essence of Western civilization, but their actions can also be responsible for its destruction. If the gods go to war over the stolen lightning bolt, the world would be “in chaos...Western civilization turned into a battleground so big it would make the Trojan War look like a water-balloon fight.”<sup>45</sup> The implication is that this war will result in the destruction of Western civilization because the gods would be focused on fighting each other rather than maintaining Western civilization. The gods and their power are intrinsically tied to the very being of Western civilization so that a war between them, or a challenge to them by Kronos, is a threat to the way of Western and American life. By linking Western civilization to the continuation of the gods, Riordan reinforces the idea that ancient Greece is both the beginning of Western civilization but also that America is the direct heir to both.<sup>46</sup> Riordan’s

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43 Riordan does not list the sides the gods fought on during the war.

44 Riordan, 311.

45 Riordan, 138.

46 See Chapter Four for discussion of the ways American identity and supremacy are connected to the Classics.

gods support this narrative by becoming the physical manifestations of Western civilization that now reside in America. The gods of the series are also described as white characters which leads them to become physical representations of white American's claim to antiquity and the superiority within America that is associated with this connection.

To further this narrative of American connection to the West and ancient Greece, Riordan alludes to Hesiod's five ages in *Works and Days*. Chiron tells Percy that the current age "...the time of Western civilization and the rule of Zeus, is the Fifth Age."<sup>47</sup> The Titans are said to rule during the Golden Age, named that not because it was a good time for humans but "because man lived innocent and free of all knowledge."<sup>48</sup> The Golden Age ended when the Olympians overthrew the Titans and humans began to evolve due to the gift of fire from Prometheus.<sup>49</sup> The evolution of humans and the ruling of the gods ushered in the birth of Western civilization, creating the age that Percy and the audience live in.<sup>50</sup> The use of Hesiod's ages links American life to an ancient source, but it also links the characters to Hesiod's last generation. Hesiod's Fifth Age, the Iron Age, is the generation that Riordan says is responsible for the development of Western civilization. Riordan uses Hesiod's generations, specifically the Iron generation, in a subversive way. Hesiod views this generation as inferior to the ones that had come before, but Riordan positions this generation as superior to the others because these men create Western civilization, while the Titans, specifically Kronos, serve as the main villains of the *Percy Jackson* series.

By asserting that this generation is superior and by claiming that this is the generation which has continued into modern America, Riordan is supporting claims of American

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47 Riordan, 155.

48 See note 47.

49 See note 47.

50 Riordan, 156.

exceptionalism. The same generation of gods that founded Western civilization is now in America continuing that legacy of isolated progress and engagement with the classical past. The demigods in the series belong to the last human generation and have a direct connection to the beginning of Western civilization. Western civilization as we understand it today did not exist to ancient Greeks, but Riordan writes his narrative as if it were ancient. The demigod's identity as a child of a god puts them in direct lineage of the rulers of Western civilization; their identity as an American allows them to claim Western heritage. They, like the gods, have a hand in the preservation of Western civilization and must work to prevent the downfall of the gods. Luke Castellan, the demigod working with Kronos to destroy the gods, tells Percy that "there is a new Golden Age coming" when he explains his plan to raise Kronos from the Underworld and destroy the gods.<sup>51</sup> He and Kronos want to destroy the age of the gods and Western civilization.

The audience of the series is not supposed to root for Kronos and his plan to destroy Western civilization. According to Luke and Kronos, Western civilization because it is "a disease. It is killing the world."<sup>52</sup> This assertion cannot be true in Riordan's fantasy world because Percy and the gods all belong to and represent Western civilization; Riordan has spent the book establishing that these characters are the good guys. Because they see the value and benefit of Western civilization, so should we. The gods and Western civilization are good because our main character believes they are, while the villain wants to create a new, unfamiliar world. Luke joins Kronos because he is resentful of his father, Hermes. He and other demigods who join the Titan's cause are shown to do so out of resentment for the gods' indifference towards the demigods and their use of the demigods to complete their bidding.<sup>53</sup> There are a few

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51 Riordan, 369.

52 Riordan, 365.

53 See note 52.

times in the series where concrete examples of the negative aspects of Western civilization are brought up as reasons to destroy Western civilization, but they are never the focus of the argument. In these moments, Riordan has Percy or Annabeth or another powerful demigod challenge Luke or Kronos' argument with reasons Western civilization should continue, often pointing out the fact that the gods are their parents and that their lives are better now than the lives of humans during the Golden Age of the Titans. Riordan's plot never adheres whether or not the beliefs and practices of Western civilization are good; he focuses on the idea that the desire to destroy the gods is bad because it would destroy the life with which people are comfortable and familiar. Luke and Kronos are challenging American life. They want to "...burn it to the ground, start over with something more honest."<sup>54</sup> The challenge is not just to the gods and Western civilization but to America's place in this narrative. If it is true that the gods and Western civilization are not viewed as infallible, it means that America is not either. American identity and exceptionalism are called into question when Western civilization is challenged. Percy and the audience must disagree with Luke and view his beliefs as stemming from an invalid or weak source in order to maintain a belief that Western civilization is something worthwhile and something worth saving.

Riordan supports his stance on the preservation of Western civilization by having Percy travel across the United States to see Greek influence. Monuments play an important role in the series and also play an important role in showing the importance of a Greek heritage through Western civilization. When Chiron introduced Percy to the idea of Western civilization, he specifically takes time to note how the architecture of "Western" civilizations emulates the architecture of the ancient world. He says "...All you need to do is look at the architecture...the

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<sup>54</sup> See note 52.



Greek facades of your government buildings in Washington.”<sup>55</sup> The notability of the architecture and important buildings in America is a direct embodiment of John Levi Barnard’s argument that the architecture of America directly connects it to the Classical heritage. Barnard’s argument is more fully explored in Chapter Four, but Riordan exploits the idea that the buildings of America are tied to the Classics and therefore the gods in *Percy Jackson*. Riordan utilizes all possible routes of connecting the classical past with the American present, leaving out how the true history of America’s connection to the classical past would align the gods with the villains of the series. Riordan does not explore how the American monuments he uses in the series were constructed to continue America’s connection to the classical past during a period in which claims of the Classics by white Americans were challenged. The monuments come to represent a way in which white Americans could portray a classical heritage that erased black Americans’ place in that heritage. The gods could not be associated with this aspect of Western civilization or American monuments because it would encourage readers to question which side had an accurate argument about Western civilization.

Riordan discusses the architecture of important American buildings, and specifically government buildings, while providing an explanation that only extends to fit within the narrative of the book. Riordan’s explanation is that the gods themselves allowed for the manifestation of ancient imagery in the modern world; the gods moved so therefore the imagery associated with their origins did as well. Since this is a children’s series, he could not fully explore the history of Classical imagery and its connection structural inequalities in American society.<sup>56</sup> Riordan understands the significance of these buildings and monuments enough to bring them into the conversations about how the center of the “West” is now located in America.

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55 Riordan, 73.

56 Barnard, 106.

The younger, as well as older, audiences of this book are introduced to this idea in the form of architecture of buildings and monuments are the physical representation of American ideals making his fantasy world real and relevant to young audiences.

Morey and Nelson's argument that Riordan is connecting the classical world to modern America is supported by Riordan's use of American monuments across the country.<sup>57</sup> Riordan uses these points throughout the country to connect his hero Percy to the past, both American and Greek. The audience learns about Greek mythology while also simultaneously being provided with a narrative of American supremacy and patriotism. Information about the monuments the characters visit is provided as they make their stops, for the audience, possessing this knowledge is just as important to the narrative as understanding the Greek side of the story. Understanding the American side of the narrative as it connects to the Greek side is important in the context of American exceptionalism in the story. It reinforces America's claim as true heir to the ancient world.

Throughout the series, Percy is sent on quest that takes him across the United States, making stops at monuments important to American life. Percy fights monsters at the Empire State Building, the St. Louis Arch, several Smithsonian Museums, the Hoover Dam, and others as he makes his way across the entire United States through the five books in the series. At each stop, the audience is given a detailed explanation of the appearance of the monument and is often provided with a brief history of each as well. The monuments used in the series are connected to American history and are either neo-classical or representations of the ancient world in modern design. The monuments have their Classical connection built into their architecture or Riordan creates a narrative about the architect that ties them to the ancients. Riordan uses American

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<sup>57</sup> Morey and Nelson, 245.

monuments as evidence for the argument that the Greek gods have moved to America, and, therefore, the seat of Western civilization now resides here too. This allows Riordan to link the past and the present by arguing that America's relationship to ancient Greece and Rome is central to beliefs of American exceptionalism.

Riordan's characters and plot marry the world of ancient Greece with modern and historical America. Riordan's goal appears to be the successful unity between the appropriated Greek heritage of Americans with real American history. According to Pierre Nora, history is a representation of the past while memory is the life of society.<sup>58</sup> In the series, Riordan relies on sites of memory that serve to erase American history of racism and slavery to connect the ancient world to modern America. These monuments relied heavily on classical themes as a unifying force while erasing the struggles of black people in the country.<sup>59</sup> Riordan contributes to this erasure by using his series as a way to further the connection between America and antiquity through his characters and the places they encounter. The combination of American history and memory results our hero Percy Jackson. Percy, and the other demigods of the series, are a result of a mix between a Greek god and an American mortal. The two sides of the demigods' identity can be seen as the two parts of Nora's argument. Their American side represents the history of America while their Greek side represents the memory of America tied to the ancient world. The demigods provide the young audiences a way to engage with their classical heritage as Americans. Percy journeys through America, stopping at popular monuments and interacting with the modern iterations of the Greek gods. Riordan uses these connections to drive his plot forward, putting Percy on paths that require him to visit these monuments and learn how the gods contribute to American culture. The tie between American life and the gods is integral the

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58 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 8.

59 See note 35.

main plot of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*; Percy must retrieve Zeus' stolen Master Bolt in order to prevent a war between the gods that would lead to the destruction of American life and Western civilization as Riordan presents it. This chapter focuses on the ways Riordan uses the gods in *The Lightning Thief* as representations of Western civilization and how the monuments featured contribute to Riordan's connection of America to the classical past.

While not a monument, the Metropolitan Museum of Art serves as the opening backdrop for *The Lightning Thief* and a confrontation between Percy and one of the Furies. The MET becomes an entry point for the rest of the story. We are drawn into the world of the ancient Greeks as Percy learns about Greek art and, more importantly, the story of Kronos and his children.<sup>60</sup> The MET is the backdrop for Percy's introduction to the Greek world, a world that is taught as distant, but it will soon be Percy's world. The MET works as a link between the ancient and modern worlds. The museum works to connect the two by housing the artifacts from the ancient Western world while being located at the center of the current Western one. When it is revealed that the West has moved to America and that the center of the gods' power is New York City, the MET takes on another level of influence: it is the place where the past and the present meet. The other monuments of the series work in the same ways. Riordan reaches into the history of American monuments to tie them to a Classical past, supporting narratives of American supremacy. The connection between American monuments and the Classical past strengthens the argument of American exceptionalism.

Riordan continues the connection between the Classical past and modern America throughout *The Lightning Thief* and the rest of the series in large and small ways. The demigods use drachmas when working in the Greek side of America, gold coins that have the gods stamped

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<sup>60</sup> Riordan, 5-6.

on one side and the image of the Empire State Building on the other.<sup>61</sup> Mount Olympus has moved to New York City above the Empire State Building, and it becomes the new symbol for Western civilization. Olympus itself is described as having kept its ancient Greek design, but its façade is completely modern.<sup>62</sup> Greek architecture is still valued and seen in the monuments that play important roles in the series but, like other aspects of Western civilization, the symbol of power changes to fit the seat of power. The Empire State building was the tallest building in New York City at the time of this book's publication; it symbolized a great feat of Western engineering and construction, making it a logical choice for Riordan's center of power. If the gods are supposed to represent the essence of Western civilization, then their center of power must hold the same level of power and respect. The other monuments discussed in *The Lightning Thief* do the same. Percy fights the Chimera, an ancient monster, at the top of the St. Louis Arch on his quest to the Underworld.<sup>63</sup> The Arch was constructed in commemoration of Thomas Jefferson's vision of the transcontinental United States.<sup>64</sup> The Arch is supposed to represent the national identity of the United States.<sup>65</sup> Riordan emphasizes Percy's stop at the Gateway Arch and makes a point for his audience to understand its importance. Westward expansion in the United States was viewed as American practices of manifest destiny. The Gateway Arch stands as a reminder that through the transcontinental railway Americans were fulfilling their 'manifest destiny' by expanding their civilization West and across the United States. It marks American fulfillment of manifest destiny and represents how they connected the expansion Westward to their ideas of supremacy. The Arch is not built in the style of Greek architecture but, like the

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61 Riordan, 149.

62 Riordan, 337-38.

63 Riordan, 207.

64 "About." Gateway Arch. The Gateway Arch, Accessed April 22, 2023.

<https://www.gatewayarch.com/experience/about/>.

65 "About." The Gateway Arch.

Empire State Building, it becomes a symbol for the connection of America to the classical past. The representation of national identity is a representation of America's connection to the classical past. The monuments show that Western civilization is connected to the world of the ancient Greeks.

The challenge when examining the evidence from *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* is the question often brought up when discussing the Classics: why does it matter? Chiron poses this question to Percy while they are at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He asks, "And why, Mr. Jackson, ...does this matter in real life?"<sup>66</sup> Percy does not have an answer for his mentor, but Chiron insists that the knowledge of the Greek gods and Titans is important to his life.<sup>67</sup> We learn as we continue reading the story that this knowledge becomes important in Percy's life because the world around him suddenly is filled with the manifestations of gods, monsters, and Titans from Greek myth. This question, however, has major implications for the children who read the series. Chiron's question is a plot device to further Percy's journey in the new seat of Western civilization. It also acts as a gateway for the children reading *Percy Jackson*: they begin to pay attention to the stories and characters from Greek myth because they are important to their lives now too. Young audiences learn and grow with Percy in his knowledge of this new world he enters. They begin to view this knowledge as vital, which can easily be incorporated into social narratives of American superiority due to its connection with antiquity and ancient cultures. This view is dangerous because this knowledge is presented through a lens that prioritizes America. Knowledge about Greek mythology and American history is stressed through the series, but Riordan presents the information about both in ways that are palatable to young readers. The harmful and gruesome aspects of both cultures and histories are left out to favor narratives of

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66 Riordan, 6.

67 Riordan, 7.

perfection and preservation, leading readers to believe the same. The series creates a narrative through which readers can support a classical connection in American society even if these connections are in support of dangerous practices such as white supremacy. Riordan's series encourages readers to defend the Classics and American exceptionalism based on the Classics without question.

### **Character**

#### **Chapter 3: Greek and Roman Identity**

The characters in *Percy Jackson* exist within two worlds, modern America and ancient Greece. By bringing the ancient world into the modern setting, Riordan creates characters that possess two distinct identities that must coexist: an American and a Greek. Race, sex, gender, social class, and other aspects that contribute to a person's identity and position in society in the ancient world do not map onto those of modern day. There are some areas of identity that overlap but the perception and implications of these identities are not the same. Identity in ancient Greece and Rome was built on comparisons to people deemed inferior. While modern cultures of western society have adapted many similar constructs of gender, class, race, and sex, ancient Greek and Roman identities were unique and based on their own social constructs and proto-scientific theories.

Ancient people did not use a system of categorization that reflects modern racial categories. Modern categories of race are supported by pseudoscientific, biological racism according to which there are meaningful biological differences between the racial categories and those differences create a hierarchy.<sup>68</sup> Environmental determinism, the idea that environment determines the appearance of people's bodies and determined customs was one of the ways the Greeks and Romans theorized difference.<sup>69</sup> The ancients constructed their categorizations of

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<sup>68</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 49.

<sup>69</sup> Kennedy (2016), 9.

people through observation of differences while attempting to maintain their own cultural identity. Greek beliefs in environmental determinism included the influence of the environment on a people, but it also attributed the nature of people to the laws that govern them.

The Hippocratic Corpus *On Airs, Waters, Places* provides evidence for how the Greeks used the idea of environmental determinism to describe other Mediterranean peoples. The author sets out to “show now how the peoples of each place (Asia Minor and Europe) differ physically from one another.”<sup>70</sup> He presents his evidence for differences among people by discussing their physical appearance, social characteristics, and government in order to support his argument. The author desires to describe the populations that he claims are “very different physically and culturally” from the Greeks while leaving out a discussion of people he views as resembling the Greeks in these categories.<sup>71</sup> *On Airs, Waters, Places* presents evidence for differences among the populations of the Mediterranean using underlying protoscientific theories of difference. Environmental determinism serves as the foundation for modern scientific racism: both seek to distinguish groups of people based on biological difference.

As stated above, *On Airs, Waters, Places* posits that climate is the driving factor for physical difference among people. The climate in which people lived determined these characteristics because climate determined the lifestyle. The author says that the region of Asia Minor in which the Phasian tribe lived was hot, marshy, and wet.<sup>72</sup> The region was subject to rainstorms all year round which created stagnant water, unripened fruit, and dirty air.<sup>73</sup> This results in physical bodies that are tall, fat, and jaundiced.<sup>74</sup> The author also tells us that the

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70 Hp. *Aer.* 12.

71 Hp. *Aer.* 14.

72 Hp. *Aer.* 15.

73 See note 72.

74 See note 72.



seasons of this region do not vary much, but the consistent rain of the climate encourages the development of these unfavorable traits. The people who live there are lazy as compared to the Greeks whose climate is consistent. The Greek climate produces ideal men who are hardworking, intelligent, and warlike.<sup>75</sup> The author says that the change of climate encourages the development of other favorable traits such as courage, endurance, and work ethic.<sup>76</sup> *On Airs, Waters, Places* shows how the Greeks viewed themselves within the context of the larger Mediterranean world.

Evidence of the belief in this theory can be seen in Herodotus' *Histories* as well as in Aristotle's *Physiognomics*. Herodotus discusses the differences between the skulls of the Persians and the Egyptians, citing the environment as the cause. He says "...the skulls of the Persians were so weak that, if you wanted to strike one with a pebble, you would pierce through it. The heads of the Egyptians, though, were so strong indeed you would hardly break through."<sup>77</sup> Herodotus explains the reasonings behind the difference by saying "The Egyptians, right from childhood, shave their heads and the bone is thickened in the sun...The Persians have weak heads because they wear felt hats from birth to shelter themselves from the sun."<sup>78</sup> More evidence for environmental determinism within Herodotus' *Histories* is seen during an episode in which Cyrus, the first king of Persia, is speaking to his people about the different types of men. Herodotus says that Cyrus tells his people, "That soft men tend to come from soft lands. It's not common for marvelous fruits and men courageous in war to grow from the same earth."<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Aristotle states that "stiff-winged birds are brave and soft-winged birds are cowardly...likewise, this can be seen among the races of men. For those men who dwell in the

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75 Hp. *Aer.* 15, 24.

77 Hp. *Aer.* 23.

77 Herodotus, *Histories* 3.12.

78 See note 77.

79 Hdt. *His.* 9.122.

north have stiff hair and are courageous, while those who dwell further south are cowardly and have soft hair.”<sup>80</sup> He also connects environmental determinism to the culture and governance that resulting from these different climates. Aristotle says the Greeks “are geographically in between Asia and Europe. They also are “in between” character-wise, sharing attributes of both—they are intelligent and courageous. The result is a continually free people, the best political system, and the ability to rule over others.”<sup>81</sup> The Greeks used the argument of climate variability to distinguish themselves from other populations by linking physical appearance to desirable traits.

The Greeks used environmental determinism to distinguish themselves physically from others, but they also believed that the customs contributed to the nature of people.<sup>82</sup> In his argument about the physical characteristics determined by climate, the author of *On Airs, Waters, Places* argues that the customs are also determined by climate. He attributes cowardness and lack of inclination to war of the people of Asia Minor once again to the consistency of the climate, but he also argues that the culture of the people adds to their behavior.<sup>83</sup> The people of Asia Minor live under kings. The customs of kingship in Asia Minor does not encourage people to appear warlike because they have no incentive to fight for themselves. They would fight for a king and any achievements or glory won in war would go to the king rather than the individual. They are not inclined to develop courageous, warlike qualities. The laws and climate work together in order to determine the appearance and characteristics of the people who live there. The author tells us that the climate may encourage a physical appearance and characteristics that the Greeks consider inferior, but laws and customs can challenge or support these negative elements. He describes people who live in mountainous regions as having the climate that would promote both

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80 Aristotle, *Physiognomics* 806b15.

81 Aristotle, *Politics* 7.5.6.

82 See note 77.

83 Hp. *Aer.* 16.

positive and negative qualities; they live in a place that encourages the development of courage and endurance but also savagery and fierceness.<sup>84</sup> He posits that the climate would push the development of the negative qualities more than the positive. With proper laws and enforcement, however, the people could become courageous.<sup>85</sup> *On Airs, Waters, Places* provides evidence for how the Greeks thought of themselves and the world around them in terms of appearance and characteristics. The work provides examples of the Greek way of viewing other cultures and peoples, but it is not the only source on how the Greeks viewed themselves and the people they interacted with. Other works, like Herodotus' *Histories* and Aristotle's *Politics* and *Physiognomics*, offer evidence for how environmental determinism interacted with cultural norms.

Greek theories of difference were dependent on the idea that climate affects bodies at the time of conception. Manifesting in immutable traits. A section in *Airs, Waters, Places* shows that the Greeks held some belief in the idea that there are biological differences between different populations. The work says that the semen of Europeans is thickened due to the extreme changes in the climate, and this leads to flaws and irregularities in the offspring.<sup>86</sup> In the same section, it says that the development of the embryo is also dependent on the climate.<sup>87</sup> The characteristics which a person possesses cannot be changed by simply moving to another climate. The environment in which conception and birth occurred was determined temperament and characteristics.<sup>88</sup> The author of *Airs, Waters, Places* describes the Scythians' appearance as evidence for how the climate changes the biology of the population. As Isaac notes, this

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84 Hp. *Aer.* 24.

85 See note 84.

86 Hp. *Aer.* 23.

87 See note 86.

88 Kennedy (2016), 11.

combination of environmental determinism with an association to inheritance “leads somewhat paradoxically to an assumption that characteristics acquired through outside influences then somehow are passed on to the next generation and become uniform and constant.”<sup>89</sup> Claiming distinct and unchangeable differences between Greeks and non-Greeks served to differentiate Greeks from foreigners; it also served as a means of claiming supremacy over other peoples.

Environmental determinism allowed the Greeks to create a hierarchy in which they were superior. Purity was an essential part of Greek identity, evident in its presence in Greek laws, stories, and myths. In his work *Works and Days*, the poet Hesiod describes the five ages of man that reflect the value of purity in Greek society. Hesiod uses metals to describe the different ages and to provide examples of how pure the generation is based on the purity of the metal assigned to it. Hesiod calls the first generation the Gold generation. The generation was created by the gods and lived prosperous and peaceful lives.<sup>90</sup> According to Hesiod, the generation had no faults, leading to an assignment of a metal with no impurities that is highly valued.<sup>91</sup> The lives the Gold generation lived were a reflection of the purity they possessed. They did not have to work hard in order to grow crops or raise their flocks.<sup>92</sup> The Earth provided them with everything they needed.<sup>93</sup> According to Kennedy, this generation did not know hardship or challenges because they were pure; they were created by the gods and did not mix with anyone outside of their community. Gold is also highly valued and rare, allowing Hesiod to distinguish this generation through its association to gold. The next generation, Silver, is cheaper than gold due to its abundance but is still a relatively pure substance. The faults of the Silver generation

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89 Benjamin Isaac, “Proto-Racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity,” *World Archaeology* 38, no. 1 (2006): 38.

90 Hesiod, *Works and Days* 129-147.

91 Kennedy (2016), 12.

92 Hes. *WD* 133-141.

93 See note 92.

manifest in their treatment of each other and their unwillingness to serve the gods.<sup>94</sup> The Silver generation was made to be like the Gold generation, made of pure metal but less valuable which was reflected in their behavior and eventual end. Hesiod's first two generations of man were pure, even with their faults, which gave them favor with the gods, but he continues his genealogy to show how mixing and impurity led to the ruin of man.<sup>95</sup>

Hesiod's third generation was Bronze, a metal made from a combination of copper and tin. He describes them as monstrous and inhuman with their favor for war and violence reflecting their physical appearance.<sup>96</sup> The Bronze age was the worst generation that Hesiod presents so far. The mixing of metal necessary to produce bronze can be applied to the nature of the men living in this time. Bronze itself is an impure, weaker metal. Likewise the men of this generation are weaker and prone to degeneration.<sup>97</sup> The generation that followed the dangerous Bronze age was the age of heroes, a generation that Zeus created and gave lives that were different than other men.<sup>98</sup> The heroes of this age were demigods, half man, half god offspring who fought and died in the great wars of the age like the Trojan War.<sup>99</sup> Hesiod viewed these heroes as possessing qualities that granted them superior status despite the fact that they were a result of mixing human and divine. The Heroic age was a generation full of men whom Hesiod saw as possessing the best qualities of man and divine; they were purer than the people of the bronze age because they were a mix of between superior beings, but they were not pure enough to be allowed to continue on earth. They were destroyed in favor of a creation of the last generation Hesiod discusses. Hesiod's generations tie to theories of environmental determinism. The levels of purity

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94 Hes. *WD* 155-157.

95 Kennedy (2016), 12.

96 Hes. *WD* 167-169.

97 Kennedy (2016), 12.

98 Hes. *WD* 181-189.

99 Hes. *WD* 181-187.

which Hesiod's generations possessed were connected to the material from which they were modeled. The generations made from the earth were purer than those made from trees, the Bronze age, or a mixing of gods and mortals. Hesiod's assertions of purity, and the implied superiority established through purity, are connected to the environment of Greece.

Hesiod belongs to the final generation of *Works and Days*, the Iron age. He describes this age as a time where men are always facing trouble. The gods send pain and annoyance.<sup>100</sup> He tells the audience that even good men during this time suffer at the hands of those who are committing acts of violence and who dishonor against the gods.<sup>101</sup> The impurities associated with the different generations depicted in Hesiod can be related back to ideas of environmental determinism. Hesiod states that the gold, silver, and bronze generations were made by Zeus and from the earth and earth born things.<sup>102</sup> The heroic generation, however, was made from the combination of two lineages, mortal and divine.<sup>103</sup> This distinction becomes important within the context of environmental determinism and connection to the earth. The Heroic generation which Hesiod describes is a result of a mixing of gods and mortal women; however, this generation is not considered to be purer than the generations that have come before. The Gold and Silver generations are described as having easier lives due to their connection to the earth; these generations were created out of earthly metals, making them free from the impurities of men. The Heroic generation, however, is born from women, which means they are inferior based on the natural impurities of man originating from their creation from trees. The change creating men from the earth to creating them from trees signifies a separation of man from their pure origins. Rebecca Futo Kennedy argues that this portrayal of the Heroic age population can be seen as

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100 Hes. *WD* 205-208.

101 Hes. *WD* 221-226.

102 Hes. *WD* 130, 148, 166.

103 Hes. *WD* 179.

“establish(ing) the principle that miscegenation between *genē* is bad and produces inferior, impure, peoples.”<sup>104</sup> Kennedy uses the term *genē* as a way to refer to the biology and genealogy of people that connects them through birth and decent rather than use the frequent translation of the term as ‘race.’<sup>105</sup> Kennedy’s distinction between the two translations of *genē* is important in the context of Greek identity. Translating *genos* as ‘race’ brings along modern notions of racial categories based on scientific theories which the Greeks did not believe; the distinction allows for an examination of Greek identity through terms that are closer to ancient beliefs rather than modern.<sup>106</sup> The mixing of different *genē*, a term which Kennedy connects to the biology and genealogy of a person, results in generations that are impure and inferior to the previous in the case of Hesiod.<sup>107</sup> The idea that mixing would lead to inferior people is central to how the Greeks understand themselves in relation not only to other people but also to the gods.

The Greeks began to view the connection to the earth as an important distinction between who was considered Greek and who was not. Athenians were particularly invested in the notions of purity of their population, specifically those considered citizens. Athenians believed themselves to be autochthonous, being sprung directly from the earth on which they lived.<sup>108</sup> Athenians insisted that their link to the land they lived on made them even more pure, allowing them to create a narrative in which they were superior and distinct from other people. The Athenian creation myth allowed them to view themselves as “a people uncontaminated by an admixture of foreign elements...therefore superior.”<sup>109</sup> The Athenians, as well as the Greek people who lived near them, believed that Athenian indigenous status granted them superior

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104 Kennedy (2016), 13.

105 Kennedy (2016), 10.

106 See note 105.

107 See note 104.

108 Kennedy (2016), 16.

109 Isaac, 39.

status within the Mediterranean world.<sup>110</sup> Athenian autochthony meant that the population had not mixed with anyone in order to produce the population who lived in Athens; they came from the earth on which they lived without any outside influence.<sup>111</sup> Evidence for this claim is found in ancient sources from both Greece and Rome, including Tacitus' comments on German people in which he describes people using Athenian discourses of being "indigenous and not mixing at all with other peoples through immigration or intercourse."<sup>112</sup> The superiority attached to an autochthonous ancestry came from the environmental determinism argument that the earth imbues the people who live there with innate characteristics.<sup>113</sup> Athenian supremacy was a combination of the two elements: they lived in a climate that promoted the development of ideal characteristics while having claim to an ancestry not mixed with inferior populations. Impurity within Greek society was feared; being impure or mixed was viewed as a weakness and a threat to the community.<sup>114</sup> Citizen laws passed by Pericles in Athens in 451 BCE limited citizenship to people who had citizen parents on both sides, both father and mother had to be Athenian.<sup>115</sup> These laws strengthened ideas of foreign difference as something that cannot be altered.

While my thesis focuses on Riordan's employment of Greek ideas and identities, it is important to consider identity formation throughout the ancient world. Modern constructions of American identity that use Classics engage with Roman works and ideas just as often as they invoke Greek. Identities of the Roman world took the ideas founded by Greek people and altered them to fit their own society. Like the Greeks, the Romans believed in climate theory, environmental determinism, and its effect on people, but they used it to support their own

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110 Isaac, 40.

111 See note 110.

112 Tacitus, *Germania* 1,4.

113 Kennedy (2016), 13.

114 Kennedy (2016), 16.

115 Isaac, 39; Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians* 26.



supremacy and need to conquer lesser people.<sup>116</sup> Roman identity, especially during the imperial period, was rooted in rule over others, and they contrasted their own culture and customs to those they conquered. Citizenship played an important role within Roman society as well.<sup>117</sup> Romans employed theories of environmental determinism to differentiate between true Romans and those who were other, even under the same rule. Cicero, in his discussion on the environment's effects on bodies, states that "these differences prove that the environmental situation has more influence on birth than the moon's state."<sup>118</sup> Other Roman authors such as Manilius and Seneca engage with similar language, citing the environment as the cause of people's traits and appearances. Manilius says that people are arranged based on their physical appearance which is influenced by nature; Seneca's argument follows the same argument, that the climate in which people lived affected their temperaments.<sup>119</sup> The Romans viewed other people as inferior based on their own environments, but they considered themselves superior due to their religious practices, leading them to conquer those who could not control themselves.<sup>120</sup> Both Greeks and Romans othered foreign populations in order to define themselves as superior.

Ancient racial categorizations were not based on the same scientific principles and categories seen in modern day. Modern constructions of race are based on biological characteristics, ascribing racial differences to aspects inherent to the human body.<sup>121</sup> The roots of modern racial constructions were established during the 15<sup>th</sup> century to support arguments of slavery and superiority.<sup>122</sup> The early forms of modern racism followed similar beliefs to those of the ancients, using arguments of climate theory to create categories of people that were inferior

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116 Denise Eileen McCoskey, *Race: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 48.

117 McCoskey, 71.

118 Cicero, *On Divination* 2.97.

119 Manilius, *Astronomica* 4.711-730; Seneca, *On Anger* 2.15.

120 McCoskey, 75, 82.

121 McCoskey, 2.

122 Kendi (2016), 23-24.

due to the environment and climate.<sup>123</sup> Different from the ancient theory of environmental determinism, climate theory posited that the conditions produced by the climate can be changed by moving out of one climate into another.<sup>124</sup> Climate theory, like environmental determinism, does not associate characteristics with skin color but rather with innate qualities; proponents of climate theory argue that hierarchies are created within nature and not by people who hold power within society.

Rick Riordan combines ancient and modern ideas of identity within *Percy Jackson* by utilizing some of the overarching beliefs of Greek identity formation. The main characters within the series are all demigods, or half-bloods as he calls them in the series. They best fit within Hesiod's third generation of men, the Heroic age, because they are a result of mixing between a mortal and a Greek god. Riordan does not use these terms to describe the demigods, but he does discuss the Gold and Silver Ages when talking about the gods, the Titans, and the development of Western civilization. Unlike Hesiod's assertion, however, these demigod heroes are portrayed as superior to the other categories of characters in the series. They possess special powers and abilities that set them apart from the mortals and other mythological creatures of *Percy Jackson*. The title character, Percy, is a demigod who possesses incredible power because he is the son of Poseidon, one of the "Big Three" gods of the series. The connection to his godly power imbues him with unique abilities that make him the ideal character to lift as the hero of the story.

The characters within the series do not just hold their superior position in the social hierarchy due to their godly parent. Their homeland also provides them with special status. Whether purposefully or not, Riordan establishes America as the seat of power by drawing upon the beliefs that bear similarities to environmental determinism. Americans adopts Athenian

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123 Kendi (2016), 20.

124 See note 123.

beliefs of superiority when Riordan states that the power of western civilization, the gods, now lies in North America. By personifying western civilization through the characters of the gods and connecting them to America, Riordan invokes the ancient ideas of environmental superiority. American land on which the demigods live holds power akin to the power that Athenian soil held. America is the center of Western civilization which means that anyone who lives on US soil would develop traits associated with a superior group of people.

These identities drawn from the ancient world work in tandem with the other part of the halfbloods' character, their identity as American. Riordan's fantasy world appears benign because he does not invoke modern scientific racism, but when looking at identity construction in the ancient world and how early slave traders tapped into these environmental theories to justify enslavement, Riordan's world becomes problematic. By setting the story in the United States and engaging with a classical identity, Riordan invokes narratives of American exceptionalism that Americans created through an appropriated connection to the ancient world. By mixing these identities together, Riordan creates a tension: did the gods moved to America because it was already exceptional, having a climate that produced exceptional people and ideas, or did America became the exceptional after the gods moved West? Regardless of how Riordan views the answer to this question the result is the same: America is exceptional and the halfbloods inherit a superior position in society because both identities originate from places that encourage the development of superior qualities.

#### **Chapter 4: American Identity**

*Percy Jackson and the Olympians* uses North America as the backdrop for reworking of ancient mythology. Riordan uses the landscape of America to write a story about a hero, Percy, who must navigate two worlds that have converged into one. Riordan follows Nathaniel

Hawthorne's formula of Americanizing Greek mythology while removing it from its ancient and unfamiliar constraints.<sup>125</sup> Riordan Americanizes the gods, monsters, and mythological creatures while retaining their more palatable Greek aspects to create an accessible narrative for his young audience. The most interesting characters in the series, however, are the demigods because they are a combination of both Greek and American identities. They possess parts of the godly parent's Greek identity while also being strongly associated with their American identity, an identity constructed from a connection to the classical past they are living in the present.

American identity is a uniquely developed concept that was formed at the same time the country was born. Early Americans' desire to establish themselves as an independent nation separate from England did not preclude their claims to a classical heritage. Americans still worked within the narrative that they had a connection to ancient Greece and Rome through the appropriation of ideas presented in Greek and Roman texts. The founders of America saw a reflection of their own beliefs and desires within the Classics, leading them to create a nation that fostered cultures and political structures that embodied them. American identity is intrinsically tied to the Classics through the implementation of sociopolitical ideas posited by ancient Greeks and Romans with the aim to claim superiority because of it.

Claims of classical heritage date back to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to modern day. The appeal of the Classics has shifted throughout time, but the fascination and persistence of Greek and Roman culture have appeared to be irreplaceable within what we call Western society.<sup>126</sup> Though studies of art, architecture, and literature were prevalent when engaging with the Classics, Europeans, and eventually Americans, of the nineteenth century reignited an

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125 Murnaghan, 344.

126 McCoskey, 168.

interest in the concept of environmental determinism.<sup>127</sup> Interest in Greek and Roman theories of environmental determinism can be traced back to the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, predating the founding of the United States and the US slave trade. This is important because, by the time the United States was appropriating a classical heritage, classical literature and culture already had an established history of being used to support slavery and inequality.

Ibn Khaldun, an Islamic intellectual, invokes ancient climate theory in the 14<sup>th</sup> century to support his argument that the people of sub-Saharan Africa were naturally inclined to slavery; he claims that the climate in which the people of sub-Saharan Africa lived caused them to possess characteristics resembling wild animals.<sup>128</sup> Ibn Khaldun's use of climate theory deviated from the Greeks and Romans because he posited that, while these populations possessed traits that made them inhuman, they could physically assimilate into European culture.<sup>129</sup> Europeans, specifically Portuguese and Western Europeans, looked to Greek and Roman beliefs of environmental determinism to support practices of slavery. They used theories of environmental determinism to claim superior traits for themselves, while ascribing inferior traits that led to "natural slavery" to people they were enslaving. Arguments of natural slavery were not limited to the regions of sub-Saharan Africa but also extended to the regions of Eastern Europe. The region surrounding the Black Sea became an important contributor to the slave trade in Western Europe during thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, specifically the city of Caffa, modern day Feodosia in Ukraine.<sup>130</sup> The argument for the enslavement of Eastern European people, especially the Slavic people, was the same as the argument for the enslavement of African people; their climate produced people who

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127 McCoskey, 169.

128 Kendi (2016), 20.

129 See note 128.

130 Mikhail B. Kizilov, "The Black Sea and the Slavery Trade: The Role of Crimean Maritime Towns in the Trade in Slaves and Captive in the Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries." *International Journal of Maritime History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 212.

were naturally inferior. The shared climate between these two groups was the remote locations of the settlements.<sup>131</sup> The remote locations of these groups meant that they adopted the wild nature of their surroundings rather than a civilized culture associated with living around other people. However, Western European involvement with the slave trade of the Black Sea became less prevalent as Eastern European port centers became difficult to access due to defensive forts.<sup>132</sup> The Portuguese movement into west Africa changed the perception of natural slavery from justifications through climate theories to justifications based on skin color and biology. Europeans began to change the narratives of climate theory and natural slavery to center enslaved people coming out of western Africa, allowing the narrative to eventually be shifted to support modern racist ideas concerning skin color and biology.

Ideas about race that share similarities to modern racism forming the foundation of American discourses of racism can be traced to Portuguese works from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Author Gomes Eanes de Zurara wrote a biography of Portugal's Prince Henry who had been responsible for initiating the slave trade movement into Western Africa.<sup>133</sup> Zurara used this work as a means of defending African enslavement, telling the audience that, by bringing African slaves into Europe, they were removing them from a place that lacked customs and civility.<sup>134</sup> The goal was to create a narrative in which the Europeans were saving the enslaved people by bringing them into a place where they could assimilate into a superior, civilized culture. This argument still centered on environmental theories; the different groups of people being brought out of Africa were viewed as a monolithic, inferior people based on their origins.<sup>135</sup> The focus of the slave

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131 See note 130.

132 Kendi (2016), 23.

133 Kendi (2016), 22.

134 Kendi (2016), 24.

135 See note 134.

trade remained on Africa throughout the next few centuries as the Europeans who participated in these practices developed justification for enslavement by using classical literature such as Cato as evidence.<sup>136</sup> The engagement of the classics in connection to slavery led to the development of modern constructions of race and racism used to support the formation of American identities.

Classical engagement is a central tenet to historical participation in the practice of slavery in Europe and eventually America. The focus of slavery within this chapter is due to the fact that Greek and Roman culture were essential to the ways early Americans perceived themselves. Early Americans appropriated a classical heritage not in spite of the Greeks and Romans had slaves but, in many cases, because of these practices in antiquity. We cannot understand identity formation in the United States without understanding how slavery and racism informed identity both in the past and today. Engagement with classical ideas is central to understanding identity formation in America as early Americans saw themselves as heirs to Greece and Rome, both in terms of constitutional theory as well as slavery. The ancient Greeks participated in practices of slavery since the Mycenaean ages, as evidence from written documentation in Linear B tablets.<sup>137</sup> Slavery in ancient Greece was a practice that did not work in the ways modern slavery was practiced. The Greeks did not enslave people based on their country of origin, skin color, or race; the Greeks did not see a difference between enslaving someone from a culture they viewed as ‘barbaric’ or from a Greek culture.<sup>138</sup> Slavery was feared throughout the Greek world because it was a practice that removed a person’s autonomy and status as a Greek citizen, a status that

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136 Margaret Malamud, *African Americans and the Classics: Antiquity, Abolition and Activism* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2016), 68.

137 Page duBois, *Slavery: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 78.

138 duBois, 11.

allowed them to claim land, heritage, and a right to bodily protection.<sup>139</sup> Slavery in Greece was an essential part of their lives and culture, a practice that carried over into the Roman world.

Roman slaves operated in similar roles as they did in Greek society, but the Roman period saw an increase in the number of slaves as well as the brutality of labor they faced.<sup>140</sup> Roman slaves often worked on the farms of the ruling class of Rome that would buy large areas of land in order to make a profit off the produce they would grow and use slaves to tend the land.<sup>141</sup> The Romans viewed being enslaved similarly to the Greeks; they feared losing their autonomy and position in society which led some Roman writers to express empathy towards the position of enslaved people.<sup>142</sup> This empathy did not change the Roman position on slavery however, and the practice continued throughout Rome's history and beyond. Though the practice of slavery as a whole continued, Romans did practice manumission, or the freeing of a slave from their position. The freed slaves were known as 'freedmen,' a title that was associated with a new position within Roman social classes that came with some wealth, but they still had legal obligations to their former owners.<sup>143</sup> Slavery in antiquity was not justified by the ancients' theories of environmental determinism but the invocation of these theories by the Europeans became justification for the enslavement of people. Environmental determinism in antiquity was used to explain the physiognomy and disposition of people but not as a justification for slavery in the ancient world; anyone could be enslaved in antiquity. However, in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Greek and Roman environmental theories were linked to slavery as a means to justify enslavement of different groups of people.

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139 duBois, 90.

140 duBois, 95, 97.

141 duBois, 97.

142 duBois, 101.

143 See note 142.



Environmental determinism began to hold less sway as a justification for slavery as the European contact with Africans evolved and the Europeans began to look to skin color to justify slavery.<sup>144</sup> The search for the answer led to focus being placed onto theories of racial development that biologically separated people from one another. These theories provide insight into how biological arguments developed from beliefs about difference that were social and political in origin. One of these theories was the curse theory, a theory that originated from the Bible story about Noah's sons.<sup>145</sup> The theory stated that Noah cursed his son Ham and all his descendants, which Europeans argued were African people.<sup>146</sup> Christian European countries used this as evidence that black people were decedents of a curse that led to an evolution completely separate from white evolution. Another theory was that of polygenesis. Polygenesis was the theory that each race is a different species that was created and evolved independently of each other.<sup>147</sup> This theory was popular during the Enlightenment period but was also challenged by a theory supported by Darwinists. Darwinists saw that polygenesis theory was flawed but instead offered a theory that races were formed through natural selection.<sup>148</sup> All three theories offered explanations that fit the evolving need for evidence of separation of races as climate theory and environmental determinism became less credible. These theories could no longer be used to justify the enslavement of people as the slave trade moved out of Eastern Europe into Africa. Theories of climate theory originally posited that people of any extreme climate possessed qualities that made them "naturally slavish" but, as the slave trade moved to operate largely out of Africa, the justifications of slavery had to shift to exclude Europeans from a classification of

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144 Kendi (2016), 29.

145 Kendi (2019), 50.

146 Kendi (2019), 50-51.

147 See note 146.

148 See note 146.

being “slavish.” By creating a narrative of biological differences, Europeans and Americans aimed to provide evidence for their participation in slavery practices. Europeans and Americans wanted to be connected to ancient Greek and Roman slaveholders because they were viewed as socially, politically, and culturally privileged. The separation between Europeans and Americans from other groups of people allowed for them to create an exclusive claim to antiquity and the culture associated with it.

Europeans abandoned the narrative of environmental determinism in order to fit their own arguments of the superiority of the white race. Europeans began to think of themselves as heirs to Greek culture and the formation of biological races helped support this idea. Having established themselves as biologically superior, early Americans and Europeans established cultural supremacy by claiming ancient Greek culture as their own. By denying the cultural ties between Greece and North Africa, they were able to inscribe culturally what they believed manifest by biology: that they were biologically and culturally both distinct and superior. Europeans focused on the idea of the “Greek miracle” in which the Greeks developed the art, political ideologies, and educational approach the Europeans valued without outside influence.<sup>149</sup> The culture that was produced in Greece was viewed as unique and “set a standard for the civilizations that came after.”<sup>150</sup> The European desire to connect themselves to Greece was an attempt to connect themselves to these ideas they viewed as superior. They created a narrative of Greek exceptionalism that they were able to adapt to support their own practices of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery.<sup>151</sup> By claiming that Greece was an exception to the other societies within the same area and claiming that they were autonomous in their development, Europeans

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149 Gage, 20.

150 See note 149.

151 McCoskey, 170; Kennedy (2023), 97.

were able to associate what they considered important cultural developments for themselves. American perpetuated these ideas when founding their own country based on a classical heritage.

American identity is linked to the appropriated heritage of Greece and Rome through the implementation of practices of slavery and democracy. The founding fathers of America were classically educated and this education formed the foundation of beliefs and ideas such as architecture and the Bill of Rights.<sup>152</sup> American identity is heavily influenced by the classics and American use of classics. This can be seen in the practice of American nationalism. American nationalism hinged on white American appropriations of ancient culture, particularly in American implementation of popular sovereignty, the practice in which the people created and sustained the government; Americans viewed this as a practice the ancients had theorized but were unable to enact.<sup>153</sup> Americans also sought to imbue their founders with qualities they saw as originating from ancient works.<sup>154</sup> Qualities such as courage, patriotism, and justice were valued in American society because they viewed the origins of these qualities to be found in classical works.<sup>155</sup> Americans not only appreciated the culture of the classical world, they strove to carry out the ideas and theories of the ancients which led to an identity created from a connection to the ancient world of Greece and Rome.

The United States implemented ideals of Greece and Rome to support their claims of Classical heritage, even more than the Europeans who had claimed a Classical ancestry before them. American identity was being formed as separate from England and other European countries from which they came from; Americans were not only surpassing the Romans in their

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152 Paul MacKendrick, ““The Rich Source of Delight:” The Classics and the Founding Fathers,” *The Classical Journal* 72, no. 2 (1977): 97-100.

153 Carl J. Richard, *The Golden Age of Classics in America: Greece, Rome, and the Antebellum United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 106.

154 Richard, 110.

155 See note 154.

pursuits, but they were also surpassing the countries they left. Americans viewed their implementation of democracy as a direct link to the ancient world; Americans felt that the practice of democracy and the culture it created brought them closer to the ancients.<sup>156</sup> Americans valued the political practices of the ancient world, specifically Athenian democracy. The desire to implement democracy in the new country led to a direct connection between the Athenians and the Americans through democracy.<sup>157</sup> The founders of America established their new country on the principles found in the texts they studied to connect themselves to cultures they determined to be superior. The practice of theories put forth by the ancients created a direct line to the ancient world, allowing for further American appropriation of classical ideas.

The integration of Classical themes and ideas into aspects of American life and culture served a singular purpose: "...to reinforce the popular notion that the United States was the chief heir to the ideals of Greece and Rome, a classical republic reborn."<sup>158</sup> One of these themes can be seen in America's view of Rome as a model of expansionist nationalism, America's own Manifest Destiny.<sup>159</sup> Americans believed that they had to expand Westward in order to spread their new civilization and culture to the rest of the country.<sup>160</sup> Americans' expansion to the Westward parts of the country was another way white Americans believed they fulfilled their position as heirs to Western society and surpassed those who had come before them, both England and Rome. Their ability to spread their culture and civilization solidified their stance that they were the true heirs of the classical world; Americans were successfully able to practice and spread ideas created by the ancients to the new world in which they were living. Americans

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156 Richard, 117.

157 Richard 119.

158 Richard, 40.

159 Richard, 112.

160 Richard, 113.

created an identity that centered around their implementation and expansion of classical ideas that led to a desire to ensure that this connection continued throughout America's existence.

Americans turned to a classical education during the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a way to ensure the classical heritage that made America superior to others continued. The classical education of America during this time centered around a curriculum that democratized the classics.<sup>161</sup> Classical education became available to a larger population of white Americans and allowed for the new generation to develop a sense of identity around these ideas.<sup>162</sup> Richard states "...Americans were socially conditioned at schools, at home, and in society at large to venerate the classics."<sup>163</sup> Classical tradition permeated through American society in every aspect but there was a particular interest and push for education in the Classics for white Americans, both men and women. College curriculum in Classics was focused on the student's ability to understand the languages of the Classics as well as increase the student's knowledge of the Classics.<sup>164</sup> The study of the Classics and the languages associated with these works allowed these students access to the foundations and upward mobility in society. Classical education dominated "over the American educational system...but also spread their profound influence beyond previous confined to new regions and economic classes."<sup>165</sup> The Classics extended outside the world of white Americans, creating opportunities for economic mobility by possessing an elite education. A Classical education was associated with the upper levels of society and the reverence for the classics held by these members of society trickled down through American society which led to American's support of the Classics through all social classes of America.<sup>166</sup> A Classical education

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161 Richard, xi.

162 Richard, x.

163 Richard, 1.

164 Richard, 5-6.

165 Richard, 40.

166 Richard, 31.

granted Americans, specifically white Americans, the ability to understand the original works and continue to use them to grow and develop American culture in ways that emulate the ancient world.

Studying Classics allowed white men, and the few women who studied Classics, to further support their superior status because they studied these texts, understood the language, and were the heirs to these societies. In addition to the appeal of supporting their superiority with an education in Classics, the study of Classics also allowed for the continued enforcement of slavery and bolstered pro-slavery arguments. The general argument can be summed up in a quote by James Henry Hammond, a governor and senator from South Carolina from the time, when he said, “slavery is the cornerstone and foundation of every well-designed and durable republican edifice.”<sup>167</sup> As explored earlier in this chapter, ancient theories of environmental determinism justified the early slave trade, but these theories were replaced by biological theories as slavery expanded to different climates and environments that challenged the early theories of natural slavery. At the heart of this reasoning, however, was the idea that slavery was a “positive good” of the ancient world and, in the attempt to perfect the practices of the ancient world and be superior in the modern one, Americans had to participate in slavery as well.<sup>168</sup> Classics and a classical education carried respect and power in 17<sup>th</sup> century America. Not only did early Americans seek to model and surpass ancient Greece and Rome, civilizations in which slavery was deemed essential, but also believed that the knowledge of Classics itself allowed those who had access to it entry to the upper echelons of power and privilege. The Classics were a source from which people would draw arguments for superiority.

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167 Malamud, 105.

168 Malamud, 106.

In the period leading up to and during the Civil War, the assertion of slavery as a “positive good” was contested. This type of questioning brought up challenges to the very essence of American identity: if Americans were to be the true heirs of Greece and Rome how could they stop practicing slavery? Both abolitionists and those who supported slavery engaged with the Classics to support their arguments. Abolitionists made arguments using Classical evidence by attempting to show that slavery was the worst part of the Greco-Roman world.<sup>169</sup> Pro-slavery arguments centered on the fact that all ancient cultures that used slaves allowed for the people of that culture the time necessary to develop the ideas valued in modern times.<sup>170</sup> Both sides of the argument knew that using the Classics as evidence was important since the Classics were viewed as the foundation of American society and grounding their arguments in the Classics meant they held prestige. Both sides of the slavery argument during the Civil War focused on the Classics as a way to show how America’s connection to antiquity could persist even as this part of American culture changed. The end of slavery did not undermine the importance of Classics in the United States, but rather shifted the narrative of Americans’ relationship with the Classics.

After the emancipation of enslaved people in America, white Americans needed to find new ways to continue their connection to the classics that provided them with a claim to supremacy. White Americans began to manipulate the ideas of biological difference between the races to support their supremacy by centering the new narrative around intellectual ability. Thomas Jefferson wrote that he believed that “African Americans had less capacity for rational thought than whites.”<sup>171</sup> Jefferson predates the post-Civil War era in which this shift is occurring

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169 Malamud, 119.

170 Malamud, 134.

171 Malamud, 16.

but the foundation for this type of thinking about difference dates back to the founding fathers. This theory manifested itself in the belief that learning the Classics made a person fully human and so, because African Americans did not have the capacity to pursue a Classical education, they could never be fully human and liberated.<sup>172</sup> John C. Calhoun, a proslavery Senator from South Carolina, believed that African Americans were unable to learn the Classics and therefore they were not fully human and not worthy of liberty; he stated that only when he could “find a Negro who knew Greek syntax” could he “believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man.”<sup>173</sup> Classical education became a gateway into not only high society but society as a whole for black Americans. Access to this type of education, however, was a challenge due to the bar on nonwhite Americans entering college.<sup>174</sup> That did not stop black Americans from finding ways of gaining an education. Classical education became especially significant as Americans began to question the value of a classical education in the new market economy.<sup>175</sup> These new social shifts in American society helped to reinforce the superiority of the classics and a classical education. Classics became a status symbol not just of humanity but also wealth because that showed that people had the means of getting an education that was not focused on practical education. The American focus on the classics faded from the general population’s view but Americans did not lose interest in the superiority the Classics held as a signifier of wealth and affluence this wealth afforded.

*Percy Jackson and the Olympians* attempts to bring the audience into a narrative through which anyone could access the Classics. Classical education kept its superiority in American culture, retaining its association as a symbol of status and wealth. Riordan brings the world of

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172 See note 171.

173 Malamud, 10, 16.

174 Malamud, 26.

175 Malamud, 27.



classical mythology into a modern setting that is more accessible to the audience without removing the superiority associated with the Classics. The characters in *Percy Jackson* operate in a world that combines ancient Greece and modern America. The characters possess an American identity that supports and perpetuates America's connection to the Classics. Riordan's characters fit within a narrative of American connection to a classical heritage that is further supported by his use of American monuments.

During the Reconstruction era after the Civil War, American monuments were built to demonstrate the unity of the country post war. These monuments were constructed in the fashion of Classical architecture to signify the power and influence Classics still held in the United States. They can also be viewed as signifying a history connected to the whiteness Classics came to represent. These sites can be described as sites of memory that Pierre Nora describes as "...a capacious category, encompassing not only monumental structures like the Pantheon and the Arc de Triomphe, but also 'commemorations' and 'celebrations' of historical figures and events."<sup>176</sup> These sites are not built to represent the true history of a place, they are made to represent the memory of a community. Nora differentiates between memory and history; they are not the same and the way they operate in society is impactful on the production of monuments concerning them. Memory, Nora says, is the life of society; history is the representation of the past.<sup>177</sup> History and memory are opposites of each other which creates a challenge when viewing monuments built in celebration of historical figures and events. The monuments that can be seen as sites of memory become something more than representations of history; they stand to represent specific points in a society's collective memory. The American monuments that can be categorized by Nora's sites of memory attempt to unify American people from a white

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176 Barnard, 105.

177 Nora, 8.

American's perspective. The Classical motifs used in these monuments remind white Americans of their connection to a classical past, invoking memories associated with the appropriated history of antiquity, a history that played an integral role in facilitating and perpetuating slavery.

These sites of memory in America were built to reinforce the Classical heritage that had been challenged during and after the Civil War by abolitionists and black Americans who questioned the use of Classics to justify enslavement of people and undermine their humanity. Sites of memory were created to solidify American connection to the Classics while rewriting history to deny the space of black people in that history. White supremacists believed that “imperial power ...was understood to move progressively westward,” an idea that was folded into America ideas of nationalism and a means of moving forward after the Civil War.<sup>178</sup>

Monuments such as the Capitol, the Bunker Hill Monument, and the Washington Monument were all built in styles modeled after architecture from Greece, Rome, and Egypt. The use of this type of architecture invokes the association of America with the empires of the past, combining the past with the present state of America.<sup>179</sup> The new monuments were built to commemorate the history of America, but they also invoke the memory of America's classical heritage. The new monuments “...served as sites of memory through which blacks and their enslavement could be elided from the historical record, and around which whites could rally to re-establish a radicalized progress narrative for the nation.”<sup>180</sup> The monuments built during the Reconstruction era continued to reinforce the narrative that black people were not a part of the classical heritage Americans possessed. This narrative of exclusion was compounded by the belief that black people were less human because they could not read Greek. Some black people sought a classical

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178 Barnard, 77.

179 Barnard, 95, 109.

180 Barnard, 107.

education to prove Calhoun and pro-slavery Americans false but access to classical education for black people was limited either because they were not permitted to enter the institutions with a Classical education track or because they could not attain the prerequisites necessary to attain this education. The memory associated with the monuments, alongside the prestige associated with having the ability to earn a Classical education, led to a unique new way of understanding America's connection to the classical world.

America's belief in their ability to manifest the ideas presented in the ancient world led to the idea of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism is the belief that there is "something different about America or something special about America."<sup>181</sup> American exceptionalism is often discussed in terms of democracy, liberty, freedom, law, and justice.<sup>182</sup> The terms of American exceptionalism are similar to the ideas Americans use to tie themselves to a classical heritage. Americans saw their practices of democracy and freedom reflected in ancient Greece; the reflected values that Americans saw in ancient Greece allowed them to take this connection further. American belief in the "Greek miracle" was founded on the idea that Greece developed the culture of Western civilization independent of outside influence. Americans believed that they developed their country, culture, and values in the same way, independent from the influence of other cultures except for the influence of their Greek heritage. These connections allowed for Americans to develop the theory of American exceptionalism, the belief of American development that mirrors the "Greek miracle" development. If America was the true and direct heir of Greek culture, Americans inherited the miracle that had been assigned to Greece, now constructed as exceptionalism. The theory of the "Greek miracle" hinged on the

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181 Lall B. Ramrattan and Michael Szenberg, "American Exceptionalism: An Appraisal—Political, Economic, Qualitative, and Quantitative," *The American Economist* 62, no. 2 (2016): 222.

182 Ramrattan, 224.

denial of North African and Eastern Mediterranean cultural influence on the modern perception of Greek culture. Similarly American exceptionalism denies the role of enslaved and indigenous people in the formation of American culture. American exceptionalism was based on an identity that stemmed from a classical heritage, allowing for a new narrative of American supremacy to continue throughout the changes of American culture.

The American identity is a vital aspect of Riordan's characters in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. A major plot point of the series is that Western civilization is being threatened by Kronos, but, in the books, America is the new center of the West. By placing America as the center of the Western world, Kronos' threat of destruction moves from destruction of a nebulous concept of Western civilization to the destruction of America. The demigod heroes are then faced with double the reasons for defending the gods and the West. Riordan's demigods are placed in a unique position where they possess aspects of both Greek and American identities. Their Greekness acts as a way to bolster their superiority in the series, imbuing these characters with special abilities and a direct connection to the ancient world. This aspect of their character adds to their American side of their identity. All the demigods in the series have American parent and a godly Greek parent. Even when there are demigods that are black, indigenous, or Latinx, Riordan reminds the readers that they more closely identify with American culture rather than their ethnicity. The combination of these identities forms a special identity that joins a direct connection to antiquity to the appropriated classical heritage of America.

The creation of the demigods in *Percy Jackson* brings together two identities that imply superiority. Greek identity gives the characters a direct line to Greek ideals that America values. The American side of the demigods' identity stands to show that America was the true heir to Greek culture of Western civilization. The series plays into the belief that Classics belong to a

superior group in society, the elite that possess power because of their understanding of the ancients. The demigods form a new identity even more superior than a regular American. Their Americanness that mixes with their Greekness allows for the characters in the series to possess a heightened level of superiority. Percy and the other demigods stand as physical manifestations of American exceptionalism. They are the culmination of a fabricated narrative that places America as a superior nation due to its connection to antiquity; this same narrative allowed Americans to justify slavery and allowed white Americans in the Reconstruction Era to believe themselves to be intellectually superior to black Americans. Percy comes to represent a true American hero: a white boy who not only understands the classics but is a true descendent of Greek beliefs sent to save America and American culture.

### **Chapter 5: Mixing and Purity**

“Look, I didn’t want to be a halfblood.”<sup>183</sup> This is the opening line to the first book in the *Percy Jackson* series which immediately lets the audience know that Percy Jackson is not the mythological demigod the audience may be familiar with. Percy and his peers with a god for a parent are not demigods but halfbloods. Riordan introduces the audience early to the idea that there is something unique about his main characters. They are not introduced as demigods, as they would have been in mythology, but rather as “half-bloods,” a term that focuses on their status as non-human but not exactly gods. The distinction between Riordan’s modern demigods and their ancient predecessors allows for a new narrative of American supremacy to take shape, one that focuses on the characters’ connections to both the ancient and modern worlds.

The distinction between mortals, halfbloods, monsters, and other creatures from myth are clear and definitive, as they have to be in order to establish a hierarchy. The differences between

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183 Riordan, 1.

the character types stem from their perceived level of purity, which is viewed as their connection to the gods and the “West.” The gods are said to belong to the “Fifth Age” of the world, a categorization established by the ancient poet Hesiod and reinforced by Riordan.<sup>184</sup> Riordan says that Western civilization was born during this Age from the collaboration between the gods and mortals who lived during this time.<sup>185</sup> Hesiod’s Ages are categorized by the perceived purity of the mortals who lived during that time; the Fifth Age was the last generation Hesiod discusses and was the generation he considered to be the least pure of the generations he wrote about.<sup>186</sup> Riordan changes this perception and makes an argument that this age, the Fifth age, was actually an age with men pure enough to create Western civilization. By using arguments that resemble Hesiod’s levels of purity, Riordan begins to establish a hierarchy within the characters that appear in his series. The gods are at the top of the hierarchy, possessing the highest standard of purity because they are the direct connection to Western civilization. Within the gods we see additional layers between which gods are considered contributing to Western life and those who are of no consequence according to society. Flowing out from their purity comes our heroes, the halfbloods.

Annabeth Chase, a daughter of Athena and one of the main characters of the *Percy Jackson* series, explains to Percy that halfbloods are “...not totally human. Half-human...half-god.”<sup>187</sup> She tells Percy that they are not normal. They are special because of their parentage. Their godly parent separates halfbloods from their mortal peers and mortal parents through manifestations in their personalities and behaviors, but, in appearance, they are indistinguishable from other humans. Their name itself, calling themselves halfbloods rather than the mythological

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184 Riordan, 155.

185 See note 184.

186 See Chapter 3.

187 Riordan, 94.

term of demigod, helps the audience visualize exactly who these characters are and who they are associated with. While demigod may appear more accurate and more closely related to the gods, halfblood reminds the audience of their dual nature, they are both mortal and immortal. This reminder to the audience about the heroes' biology is integral to Riordan's goal of associating America with the classical past; it reinforces the idea that America is the unique heir of Greek culture. The demigods, like the monuments of the series, stand as another manifestation of American exceptionalism. The halfbloods are not just half-mortal, they are half-American which is a specific distinction and an important one. The historical desire for Americans to associate themselves with antiquity is embodied in the halfbloods. Their existence taps into theories of environmental determinism. The halfbloods possess perceived superior qualities that originate from their identities as both Greek and American. The connection to the ancient world and modern America through their parentage creates characters that physically represent American exceptionalism; the halfbloods are superior to other characters because they are both American and Greek.

The halfbloods are not only different from the mortals due to their godly parent, but they also possess personality traits and behaviors that contributed to their condition. Percy is told that halfbloods are often diagnosed with both dyslexia and ADHD, two signs that are almost a guarantee that a child is a halfblood.<sup>188</sup> Halfbloods have these disabilities when operating in the mortal world, but when placed into the world of the gods, they become assets. Percy is told that his dyslexia makes his brain "...hardwired for ancient Greek..." and his inability to sit still are "... (his) battle reflexes. In a real fight, they'd keep you alive."<sup>189</sup> Annabeth continues to tell

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188 Riordan, 88.  
189 See note 188.

Percy that he has attention problems because he “...sees too much...not too little.”<sup>190</sup> Learning disabilities turn out to be survival instincts that do not need to be treated as a setback. The inclusion and positive treatment of learning disabilities by Riordan help to broaden the narrative of who is connected to the classical past. Children who read these books with reading disabilities are brought into an elite narrative of America’s connection to ancient Greece. They have a claim to the superiority that comes with being an American, furthered now by being able to see themselves in characters that possess a deeper connection to the classical past.

Not only do the halfbloods’ disabilities provide them with superior traits for battle, but their godly parentage also contributes innate traits that separate them from the other characters in the series. During Percy’s time at Camp Half-Blood, his narration shows how the different halfbloods harness their battle skills and powers for survival. The halfbloods of *Percy Jackson* develop skills that align with their godly parent’s domain. The Apollo kids are naturally good at archery, Ares kids are stronger than other demigods, and Hephaestus’s kids are excellent at metalwork.<sup>191</sup> The halfbloods are born with natural inclinations to what their parents succeed at or are the patron of. Percy eventually finds that he has power over water sources; he can breathe underwater and control the water itself.<sup>192</sup> The halfbloods’ abilities are a result of their parentage and purity. They are half mortal, half god, a lineage that affects their abilities. The series features other mythological characters that are the product of a god and another creature or person, but none possess the level of superiority or power the demigods have.

The differences between the halfblood characters and the other children of the gods are shown through descriptions that tap into discourses similar to ideas of racial differences. The

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190 See note 188.

191 Riordan, 108.

192 Riordan, 212-13.



other characters who possess a god as a parent are established to be biologically different from the halfbloods based on their other parent; this type of discourse relates to how the halfbloods represent American exceptionalism. Only the halfbloods possess parents who are both part of the American narrative of Western civilization leading to representations of appearance and abilities that center these identities. *The Sea of Monsters*, the second book of the series, focuses on cyclops and how they relate to the halfbloods. The cyclops are said to be "...children of nature spirits and gods."<sup>193</sup> There is a distinction between the halfbloods and cyclops in the fact that the cyclops are part nature spirit as opposed to part mortal. The mortal part of the halfbloods' identity can be seen as the differentiating factor. The halfbloods' parents are all assumed to be American mortals, creating a unique identity for these characters. Not only do they have a single identity as a halfblood in America, but this identity is a combination of an ancient Greek identity and a modern American one. Riordan's difference between halfbloods and monsters that are children of the gods can be viewed through a lens of environmental determinism; the American mortals reflect the belief of cultural influence while the nature spirits reflect the belief of environmental influence. Riordan's theme of fundamental differences within his characters finds support in ancient texts and beliefs. Riordan finds his source material for *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* in ancient Greek texts. Riordan's series brings the ancient past together with the American present in ways that can be viewed as supporting American exceptionalism and white supremacy. One of the ways the series does this is by using ancient ideas of difference in a modern setting. The ancient Greeks believed in the prescientific idea of environmental determinism, the belief that the environment determined a person's temperament and characteristics. Evidence for this belief is found in the Hippocratic work *Airs, Waters, Places*; the

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193 Rick Riordan, *The Sea of Monsters* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 2006), 46.

work provides examples of different people the Greeks interacted with, pointing out the ways in which they are fundamentally different from the Greeks. The goal of these comparisons was to separate the Greeks from the other people and make the argument for their superiority through innate qualities all Greeks possessed. *Percy Jackson* establishes a narrative in which halfbloods, mortals, and monsters are fundamentally different from each other, and those differences have significant impact on the ways they are presented and treated throughout the series. The nature spirits that parent the monsters like the cyclops are implied to be carried over from ancient Greece with the movement of Western civilization. The movement would lead to an assumption that these spirits possess the supremacy ascribed to everything connected to Western civilization, but the narrative of *Percy Jackson* focuses on Greek heritage as it has manifested in America. Riordan's portrayal of the cyclops and other mythological creatures that he cannot give an American connection to are presented as inferior to the halfbloods. They are shown to be a part of the Greek culture that persisted through Western civilization, but they are inferior to the halfbloods whose American identity renders them exceptional.

Satyrs are another character type featured in *Percy Jackson* that can be viewed through a lens of racial difference based on biological factors. Riordan rewrites the narratives of satyrs for his series to fit into a child friendly adaptation, but his representations do not exempt him from falling into representing them as less than human. One of the main characters in the series is Grover Underwood, Percy's best friend who also happens to be a satyr. Satyrs of Greek mythology have a complex history of portrayal and connotations that Riordan conveniently disregards. Greek satyrs were portrayed as sexually deviant creatures that were unable to control their behaviors and bodies.<sup>194</sup> They often appear in comedy to convey to the audience the danger

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194 Amanda Herring, "Sexy Beast: The "Barberini Faun" as an Object of Desire," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 25, no. 1 (2016): 39.

of not having control of oneself while also associating their condition with being impure. Satyrs are half man, half goat creatures that have their animalistic side and tendencies on full display in Greek representations, either physically or in their behavior. Vases depicted satyrs overindulging in realms of sex and drinking with implications that they are unable to control their desires but also that they feel no need to because they exist outside the bounds of civilization.<sup>195</sup> They are one of the physical manifestations of how not to act as a Greek male; they represented behaviors that were considered outside of the boundaries of Greek society.<sup>196</sup> In *Percy Jackson*, Grover and the other satyrs in the series still keep their physical appearance of half goat but Riordan does not employ their original characterization of uncontrollable creatures that tended to warn men of the dangers of lack of restraint.

When it is revealed to Percy that Grover is a satyr, he explains that he had been sent to protect Percy and eventually lead him to Camp Half-Blood. Riordan completely changes the way in which satyrs are viewed in this series; gone are any notions that satyrs will behave as sexual deviants or outcasts of society; they are an integral part of the protection of half-blood children. However, their new role in the American version of ancient Greece does not completely remove their animalistic nature. During the episode where Percy is introduced to camp and his new life, one of the characters he is introduced to is Dionysus, or Mr. D to the campers. Dionysus holds the position as head camp counselor as a punishment from Zeus but what is important in this episode is how Grover behaves while around him. Percy describes Grover as being nervous and not challenging how Mr. D is speaking.<sup>197</sup> It is later revealed that Grover's actions stem from the fact that all satyrs are followers of Dionysus; they obey his commands and support his actions as

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195 Herring, 41.

196 See note 195.

197 Riordan, 66-71.

they did in mythology.<sup>198</sup> Grover and the satyrs also will be described as eating things that are often seen when creating caricatures of goats. In the same introduction scene, Grover asks to have Mr. D's can of Diet Coke when he finishes it, an ask which he is granted and then proceeds to chew on the aluminum can.<sup>199</sup> When Grover and the other satyrs are speaking it is often interrupted by onomatopoeia of a goat bleating, particularly when they are in situations of high stress and emotion. Riordan's writing of the satyrs in *Percy Jackson* is constructed in a way where audiences accept them as a part of Western civilization but are reminded that they are biologically distinct from the demigods.

Riordan's satyrs fall into themes that support ideas of biological difference between races, or in this case, mythological creatures. He does not describe his satyr characters as possessing any Eastern features or features that would remove them from their association with the good characters, but he does ensure that they are shown to be different.<sup>200</sup> They can wear hats and fake shoes to cover their horns and hooves, but the audience is always reminded of and aware of their difference from the pure characters of the series. Satyrs are not halfbloods, not mortals, and most definitively not the gods. Their heritage is never explained in the series as other impure characters are, yet their position within the hierarchy of characters clearly shows that they are less valued than others based on their disconnect from American culture and society. Riordan does not exempt any of his characters from the narrative of purity and characterization; he lets his audience know that satyrs are good but will never be as good as his heroes because they are not fully human.

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198 Rick Riordan, *Battle of the Labyrinth* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 2008), 339-341.

199 Riordan, 67.

200 See Chapter 6.

Riordan often reminds the audience that the halfbloods of the series are superior to all the other non-divine characters by discussing what the other characters lack. The mortals of the series are often the main point of comparison for how the halfbloods are superior. Most mortals are unaware of the fact that the world of ancient Greece continues to exist in America, but their ignorance does not remove them from a classical heritage. They are unaware of this world because of the “the Mist” that shrouds the classical world from the daily American world. The Mist works to “...obscure(s) the vision of humans.”<sup>201</sup> Even without being able to see the “true” world around them, American mortals that coexist during the events of the series are still categorized into the “Fifth Age,” the era of Western civilization.<sup>202</sup> These mortals are part of the generation of mortals that created Western civilization and continue to contribute to it. The American mortals that are unaware of the classical world that exists around them are still able to claim supremacy traced through antiquity. They are still connected to a classical past that sets them apart from other cultures and people.

Halfbloods are biologically distinct from an American mortal. Their godly parentage provides them with a direct link to the ancient world which Americans claim through appropriations of history. Halfbloods produced from an American mortal and one of the Greek gods are born with the traits and powers analyzed above but they are also biologically different from both their parents. Halfbloods fight with weapons made of celestial bronze, a metal that is “...deadly to monsters, to any creature from the Underworld...But the blade will pass through mortals like an illusion...” and, as we learn later in the book when Percy is fighting Ares, this metal can harm gods.<sup>203</sup> The metal of many halfblood weapons is crafted to harm their

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201 Riordan, 155.

202 See note 201.

203 Riordan, 154, 330.

mythological enemies but not the mortals that do not threaten their lives. This metal, however, can harm halfbloods. When learning about his own weapon, Percy is told that "...as a demigod, you can be killed by either celestial bronze or normal weapons. You are twice as vulnerable."<sup>204</sup> Mortals, on the other hand, cannot be harmed by celestial bronze because "they are simply not important enough for the blade to kill."<sup>205</sup> The halfbloods are different from their parents because of their mixed heritage. They are more important than their mortal parents, which manifests in their powers and ability to be harmed by weapons designed to combat mythological creatures. They are also different, not necessarily more important, than their godly parent by their ability to be harmed by mortal weapons and by their ability to move freely through all the domains of the Western world, often to complete quests for the gods.<sup>206</sup> Halfbloods are both the combination of their parents and something else entirely, a new identity that can argued to represent something superior to what came before them.

The series is marketed towards children and is many people's introduction into the Classical world at large. Riordan's treatment of the Classics in *Percy Jackson* serves as a way to teach children mythology but also introduces them to the American narrative of Classics, particularly around identity. The children who read the series often see themselves in the main characters such as Percy and Annabeth, the characters who represent the American connection to the West in the books. Halfbloods are a product of mixing the physical manifestation of the West, the gods, with a mortal who possesses qualities that draw the gods attention, Americans. By taking these representations together, it can be argued that the halfbloods are the purest representations of Western civilization. The gods represent the idea of Western civilization,

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204 Riordan, 154.

205 See note 204.

206 Riordan, 145.

American mortals represent the lineage of the West, and halfbloods are the perfect combination of the two. They are the ones who are able to protect and carry on its legacy; the children who read the series who see themselves reflected in these pages are led to believe the same. Satyrs, cyclops, and other monsters are offspring of the gods but not of American mortals. The lack of having two parents connected to Western civilization denies these characters access to all of the benefits of Western civilization. They are foreign, impure and therefore cannot fully participate in the idea picture of the “West.”

By connecting these characters and the audience to the purest representations of Western civilization through an American lens, Riordan also succeeds in creating a narrative of American exceptionalism by making America as the heir of Western civilization. By creating halfblood who are the physical embodiment of the West, Riordan’s narrative ensures that America is centered in the discussion of Western civilization and the supremacy attributed to the concept of the West. In doing this, Riordan plays into American history that uses the Classics to create an identity that can be traced through antiquity with the goal of appearing superior because of this history. The American identity created from the classics was done so by white Americans, for white Americans. This historical aspect of American identity continues to hold implications that, in order to be truly connected to the classical past, you must be white. America’s historical use of the Classics in monuments and educational practices served as ways to deny black Americans access to a classical heritage. The Classics were appropriated by white Americans to support their own superiority and connection to the ancient world while simultaneously erasing black Americans from this narrative and denying their humanity based on the ability to learn Classics. The majority of the halfbloods in *Percy Jackson* are depicted as white or their whiteness is

assumed by default.<sup>207</sup> By centering America and its connection to the classics, the series “...centers Whiteness as an unexamined default that serves to both maintain and reproduce the status quo.”<sup>208</sup> Riordan’s halfbloods work to continue the belief in American exceptionalism based on their connection to ancient Greece by showing how ancient Greece never left Western civilization; it only evolved to live in America. They also work to support claims of white supremacy in the classics by appearing as white. The white characters that are featured in the books are often the most powerful and the main heroes. The white halfblood heroes of American civilization work to reinforce beliefs of American and white supremacy in the young audience by operating in a narrative that shows they are on the winning side and are defeating the villains who present differently than them.

### **Chapter 6: Eastern Appearances and “Otherness”**

In *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, Rick Riordan uses narratives about Western civilization and America’s connection to the classical world in order to build a new world in which his young audience can see themselves. The plot of the book focuses on the importance of Western civilization to American life and culture while the characters embody the identities of ancient Greeks and modern, white Americans. The resulting world is one where young readers, particularly white readers, can see themselves represented in the characters and understand why they should be invested in ideas of Western civilization and America’s identity in connection to antiquity. These two ideas are intertwined with each other, but Riordan furthers this connection between Western civilization and a character’s identity through their appearances. The characters of *Percy Jackson* bring young audiences into ideas of American exceptionalism by inviting them

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207 The casting for the TV show is important because people of color have been casted into roles that were understood as white in the books.

208 Sara K. Sterner, “The Phenomenon of Reading Whiteness: A Post-Intentional Phenomenological Exploration,” *Journal of Children’s Literature* 45, no. 1 (2019): 64.



to see themselves as the halfbloods, showing the readers that they, like the halfbloods, are connected to Western civilization through their own identities.

Appearance plays an important role throughout *Percy Jackson*, particularly when it comes to distinguishing between those who are good or evil. The first book, *The Lightning Thief*, sets up a convention that the characters who are evil, or at least not fully good, will not share physical characteristics with the good characters. *The Lightning Thief*'s approach to differentiating between good and evil characters manifests itself as a portrayal of characters as appearing traditionally "Western" or "Eastern." The following books in the series do not follow this theme as blatantly but the differences are implied when descriptions arise since they've already been established in the first book of the series. The evil characters of the series are seeking to destroy "Western" civilization meaning that they cannot be portrayed as belonging to it in the first place.

Riordan's depiction of evil characters as appearing as different than the main characters that fight for the "right" side supports the foundational belief system behind modern racism. Modern racism, as examined in Chapter Three, is built upon pseudoscientific claims of fundamental, biological difference between groups of people. Racial categories do not just carry indications of skin color. They imply that a person possesses morality that can be reflected in the color of their skin.<sup>209</sup> The characters in *Percy Jackson* are both identified by their skin color and exhibit qualities associated with that categorization. Richard Jenkins states that "identity is produced and reproduced in the course of social interaction."<sup>210</sup> People self-identity as belonging to a specific community but the interactions and responses they experience from other people

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209 Golash-Boza, 135.

210 Richard Jenkins, "Rethinking Ethnicity: Identity, Categorization and Power," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17, no. 2 (1994): 209.

play a role in individual identity. The interactions that help shape identity are often mediated by assumptions based on gender, class, race, sexuality, and disability that result from identification into a racial category. Identity, however, is not always imposed; the people placed racial categories have “embraced these racial identities and transformed them into positive group-based identities.”<sup>211</sup> Previous chapters have explored ways whiteness and purity form the foundations of plot development and character formation. In this chapter, I examine how Riordan engages with controlling images of various groups to establish characters as good and evil. The different identities which people hold are used in racial categorizations, categories that Riordan uses to further distinguish between the characters in his books.

As stated above, Riordan heavily uses the dichotomy of “East” versus “West” appearance when describing his good and evil characters, particularly in the first book of the series. The first prominent use of this literary tool is when Percy, Annabeth, and Grover encounter Medusa at her store. Percy describes Medusa as “a tall Middle Eastern woman...she wore a long black gown that covered everything but her hands, and her head was completely veiled...her coffee-colored hands.”<sup>212</sup> Percy also claims that “her accent sounded vaguely Middle Eastern, too.”<sup>213</sup> The combination of her appearance, her skin tone, and her accent leads Percy to assume that she is Middle Eastern, not white or American. Riordan ensures that she has an appearance that does not match with the appearance of other characters we have met so far in the book. Medusa falls into the trap of Tanya Golash-Boza’s idea of controlling images.<sup>214</sup> Golash-Boza defines controlling images as “portrayals of people of color in the media (that) are raced, gendered, and classed—meaning the representations vary by race, class, and gender, and they influence how we think

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211 Golash-Boza, 137.

212 Riordan, 172.

213 See note 212.

214 See note 211.

about racial groups in this country.”<sup>215</sup> The controlling images that the media portray often reinforce negative stereotypes about different racial groups in order to highlight the positive traits of white characters. The media “depictions shape our perception, and portray white characters with more depth and redeeming qualities, they work to justify the fact that whites tend to do better on nearly any social measure.”<sup>216</sup> The media uses controlling images in order to reinforce negative stereotypes, but the images also have an important role for writers in the plot and development of characters as they signal to the audience particular character qualities without having to be explicit.

Percy makes an assumption about Medusa’s racial category based on her first appearance. As cited above, Medusa is described as wearing a long black gown and a veil that covers her face. From mythology, we understand that she wears a veil as to not prematurely turn her victims to stone, but Percy’s description implies that she is wearing a veil in a possible religious observance. One of the controlling image archetypes for Middle Eastern women, as Percy assumes about Medusa, is that of a “veiled victim.”<sup>217</sup> Riordan describes Medusa as a Middle Eastern appearing woman dressed in a veil because she are unable to break free from a misogynistic oppressor. This creates a disconnect in the episode with Medusa; she is an evil monster but initially presents herself as a harmless woman who can be seen as in need of help. Percy looks at Medusa’s hands and states that “her coffee-colored hands looked old, but well-manicured and elegant, so I imagined she was a grandmother who had once been a beautiful lady.”<sup>218</sup> Medusa appearing as a harmless old woman allows Percy and Annabeth to trust her, entering her lair in order to eat and help her with whatever she asks. Riordan plays into the ideas

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215 Golash-Boza, 134.

216 Golash-Boza, 135.

217 See note 216.

218 Riordan, 172.

of the “veiled victim” of a Middle Eastern woman with Medusa, having his heroes trust her and feel a need to help her out with her shop because she is alone. Riordan plays into these moral assumptions of Middle Eastern characters when it is revealed that Aunty Em is Medusa, using her appearance as an important role in her behavior.

While Riordan does not immediately use this connection, Medusa immediately raises alarms in the audience when depicted as Middle Eastern because the controlling images of Middle Eastern characters as terrorists and seductresses.<sup>219</sup> Medusa is not introduced as herself at first. She presents herself as “Aunty Em” to the heroes in order to lure them in. Interestingly, Riordan has a disconnect between his narrative of the heroes’ treatment of Medusa and the audience’s perception of her. The irony of the situation is that we do not trust Aunty Em while the characters do. Riordan cues his readers to dramatic irony through controlling images. This device not only clues the audience into her nefarious plans but by presenting her as “other.” Riordan is tapping into stereotypes in order to drive his plot forward. He uses these stereotypes in order to reaffirm reader’s expectations based on racism rather than undermine them. Medusa’s appearance alone is supposed to create the dramatic irony necessary to create the suspense and tension of this interaction. Percy trusts Medusa regardless of the signposting of her appearance which leads to him almost being turned to stone, but the audience does not because of our associations with Middle Eastern characters and evil. Riordan is creating a tension between Medusa’s appearances. She is evil because she is associated with the East rather than the West, but she is simultaneously a veiled victim which makes her less threatening. It appears that the audience is supposed to focus on the fact that she is from the East while the characters focus on

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219 See note 216.

her status as a veiled victim, creating dramatic irony Riordan uses in the ultimate reveal of the character.

Because of her appearance as a Middle Eastern woman, the audience has a sense of wariness as we move through the Medusa episode, even before we come to know that she is a villain. Inclinations and fears of the audience are confirmed when Medusa's true identity is revealed. She switches from the helpless, "veiled victim" to a dangerous monster that better fits the dangerous images associated with Middle Eastern terrorist controlling image in media. When she reveals herself, Medusa's physical appearance changes to better fit the immoral nature of her character. She retains her Middle Eastern skin coloring and accent but her hands "...turned gnarled and warty, with sharp bronze talons for fingernails."<sup>220</sup> Her headdress also falls away revealing to Percy in a reflection her face and hair that was "...moving, writhing like serpents."<sup>221</sup> The reveal of her identity and the monstrous traits Medusa possesses solidifies the feelings of distrust the audience and the heroes felt for her. The distrust before the reveal stems from her Middle Eastern identity.

The character of Aunty Em did not give any indication of being a mythological monster that wanted to kill our heroes before the reveal that she was, in fact, Medusa. She was introduced as an old woman who ran a gardening center, specializing in stone statuary. She brings in the three lost heroes of the book, gives them food, and offers any assistance that she can to the kids. Aunty Em does not give any indication that she wishes harm upon the young demigods and satyr, but the episode is supposed to give off a feeling of unease and distrust for this strange woman. This has to come from her appearance as a Middle Eastern woman. Up to this point in *The Lightning Thief*, we have only been introduced to characters that are presented as morally sound

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220 Riordan, 179.

221 See note 220.

and appear white, even if they originate from Greek myth. The introduction of a character that is not described as white, or assumed to be white, raises concern in both the audience and the main characters. Medusa does not fit into the narrative of moral characters that Riordan has begun to establish in the first 150 pages of the book. She stands as a signal to the audience that those who do not share the same moral values as the heroes will appear differently. She works as a tool to support the moral superiority of the white characters of the book.<sup>222</sup> Medusa stands in opposition to the heroes' success and their quest to defend Western civilization from destruction. Medusa challenges the ideas of Western civilization and the American supremacy that has become a part of the narrative of Western civilization. In the *Percy Jackson* series, she is the first representation of the uncivilized, Eastern characters who are seeking to destroy the gods and the culture they manifest themselves as.

Riordan continues to use this type of characterization of his villains to differentiate them from his white, morally superior main characters. The monsters that Percy faces in *The Lightning Thief* are described in ways that separate them from the white main characters. Not many are described to the same level of detail or specificity as Medusa, but Riordan ensures that the descriptions that are provided communicate to the audience that the reason these characters appear differently than the moral characters is because of their immorality. For example, Percy fights Echidna, the mother of monsters, and the Chimera at the St. Louis Arch on his way to the Underworld. Percy describes Echidna as having "...beady eyes; pointy, coffee—stained teeth..." and makes a point to let the audience know that she is fat.<sup>223</sup> Percy points out the ways in which Echidna is different hygienically, but it can be read as a manifestation of her immorality. She is not described as appearing Middle Eastern but, because of the audience's familiarity of Medusa's

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<sup>222</sup> See note 216.

<sup>223</sup> Riordan, 205.

appearance, she takes on an implication that she too would be Eastern in appearance. Echidna, like Medusa, does not have the same morality as Percy or the people who are fighting to defend Western civilization.

Riordan continues this trend with the giant Procrustes, the mythological giant who tried to kill Theseus. The trio runs into him when they reach Los Angeles trying to find the entrance to the Underworld. Percy also makes sure to describe the giant to the audience, noting the ways his appearance signals his immortality. Percy says Procrustes "...looked like a raptor in a leisure suit. He was at least seven feet tall, with absolutely no hair. He had gray, leathery skin, thick-lidded eyes and a cold, reptilian smile."<sup>224</sup> Procrustes, like Echidna and Medusa, attempts to kill the heroes and stop them on their quest to defend Western civilization from destruction.

Procrustes is not described as being strictly Eastern either but, again, his appearance is important for the audience to take note of because it reflects his morality and intentions with the demigods and the civilization they represent. The bodies of enemies in the series are marked in some way to signal to the characters and the audience that they are untrustworthy. This marking becomes significant and dangerous when they are not monstrous but rather Middle Eastern. Their appearance reinforces harmful racial stereotypes that perpetuate violence against people of color. The monsters of the series must take on either a physical Eastern appearance or the implication of one in order for Riordan to make his argument for their opposition to the gods and their Western civilization.

It is not only monsters who receive this treatment, however. Gods, Titans, and other demigods who challenge Western civilization are also described in terms that would invoke negative stereotypes. Riordan seems to view the Underworld as a place that does not belong to

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224 Riordan, 277.

his vision of Western civilization. Percy's quest to the Underworld is based on the idea that Hades stole Zeus' master bolt in order to start a war between the gods that would lead to the destruction of Western civilization. The idea that Hades was the one to steal Zeus' symbol of power is central to the plot of *The Lightning Thief*. This assertion insinuates that Hades and the Underworld, the domain which he rules over, is disconnected from Western civilization for an unstated reason. Charon, the ferryman to the Underworld, is described as having "chocolate-colored skin..." and a "strange accent—British, maybe, but also as if he had learned English as a second language."<sup>225</sup> Charon works for the gods and contributes to Western civilization, but because he works for Hades who is associated with wanting the destruction of Western civilization, Charon must be shown as being separate from the expected image of Western civilization. Charon has dark skin, like Medusa, and has an accent. Charon does not present as being a typical member of Western civilization, who, up until this point, have been white Americans. His appearance, like the other monsters in the book, raises alarm in the audience that he may not be completely trustworthy. He does not present like our main heroes, but he also does not match the presentation of the immoral monsters who sought to stop and kill the trio. Charon's appearance could possibly be explained simply by his proximity to Hades, who also does not fit into Western civilization nicely, or by his desire to be paid for his services, a trait that could make him appear immoral. Whatever the reason is for Charon's appearance, he also comes to show that our heroes are unique among the Greek world in which they operate.

By using the logic that the Underworld and everything included in it is excluded from the narrative of Western civilization, the audience has to assume that Hades is partially or fully excluded from the idea that the gods are physical manifestations of Western civilization. His

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225 Riordan 284-85.



appearance adds to the assertion that Hades and his domain are not part of the Western civilization which Percy and the other demigods are fighting to defend. Hades is said to “...resemble(d) pictures I’d seen of Adolph Hitler, or Napoleon, or the terrorist leaders who direct suicide bombers.”<sup>226</sup> Riordan, through Percy’s narration, associates Hades with dictators and terrorists which the audience understand to be immoral and evil people. In the associations of Hades to the terrorists, Riordan employs similar imagery as he did with Medusa; he implies that Hades appears Middle Eastern enough to resemble “terrorist leaders who direct suicide bombers.” Riordan does not want the audience to trust Hades, so he places him in a category that invokes images of violence and fear. Interestingly, Riordan puts the description of terrorists last. He wants us to connect Hades with this racial group, but he prioritizes other aspects of his appearance first: his whiteness. Riordan wants the audience to think of Hades as a white character with associations to terrorists rather than as an Eastern appearing person who is connected to Western civilization. Hades cannot appear as anything other than a white person in order to fit Riordan’s argument of the gods’ connection to Western civilization and America.

Before Percy puts Hades into a category of violent dictators and terrorists, he describes his physical appearance. Hades was “...at least ten feet tall...his skin was albino white, his hair shoulder-length and jet black.”<sup>227</sup> Hades is still a Greek god and so he must be associated with Western civilization and, more specifically, America, in order for Riordan’s narrative to work. Riordan therefore makes Hades white but in such a way that is not natural. Hades is “albino white” which allows for him to be included in Western civilization but signals that he does not quite fit in with the expected image. America’s connection to Western civilization and the classics is founded on white Americans’ connection to the classical past which means that the

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226 Riordan, 309.

227 Riordan, 309.

gods, all of them, must fit the image of a white American. Hades, as much as he does not fit into the supremacist narrative of Western civilization, must be included in order for the plot to make sense. All of Greek civilization, including Hades, moves with Western civilization, ending in America in order for the plot and characters of *Percy Jackson* to exist. Hades is brought into Western civilization but not willingly. Riordan's description leads Hades to fit in better with the monsters that are described as appearing as "other" to distinguish them from the white main characters. Hades, like Medusa and the other monsters, is marked as other. The same as the monsters, Hades' morality and his connection to Western civilization can be derived from his appearance. Hades' whiteness provides him with that link to Western civilization but the albino nature, the unnatural appearance of his white skin, signals that he does not fit with Western civilization or hold the same morality as the characters who fully belong to Western civilization. His albino appearance signals his deviance. He can be seen as responsible for the worst parts of Western civilization's history with his associations with Hitler and Napoleon but even these show that he does not fit into a narrative of superiority associated with appearing as a white American in Western civilization. Hades acts as a scapegoat in Riordan's series. Hades' extreme whiteness signals to the audience the dangers of extremism in a way that allows Riordan to avoid addressing the critical issue with the narrative he capitalizes on: white supremacy and the erasure of people of color from American history and exceptionalism. These narratives were used to support Nazism and fascism in American as well as around the world.

After *The Lightning Thief*, the monsters of *Percy Jackson* are not as explicitly described as being Eastern but the implication of their connection to Eastern cultures remains. *The Lightning Thief* and its portrayals of monsters as Eastern invokes the cultural narrative of "the West versus the rest," the "rest" meaning Eastern cultures. Eastern cultures come to represent challenges to

Western civilization's power and supremacy in the world. Due to America's claim that they are the current center of Western civilization, Eastern cultures are therefore challenging America's supremacy and their connection to the ancient world. Riordan uses these beliefs in his creation of monsters and challengers of the gods. These characters want to see the destruction of the gods and the demigods who fight for them so, by assertion of the series, these characters want to see the destruction of Western civilization. These characters are described in specific terms so that they are excluded from a narrative of American identity which therefore denies them access to a claim of American exceptionalism. They do not fit into the image of a person who embodies Americanness and American exceptionalism so they must take on the role of challenging the heritage that is foundational to America.

By challenging American beliefs about themselves and their heritage, these characters also work in supporting white supremacy. The characters that do not fit the category of Western civilization are described in ways of comparison to the main characters who are white. Like Medusa, these comparisons aim to support ideas that the white characters are morally superior. The superior morality of these white characters that is highlighted by the immorality of the non-white characters can be viewed as contributing to white supremacy by using classical evidence. Riordan's narrative relies on the appropriated classical heritage of America. In order for the series to work, there has to be a belief that America is the true heir to Greek civilization and that the power of Western civilization now lies within America and its citizens. The monsters of the series serve as a physical representation of non-Western civilizations and operate as a tool to demonstrate how white Americans are superior. The halfbloods hold the moral high ground and physically defeat the monsters in order to continue on their journey in order to save Western civilization. The main characters who are white, part-American, and part-Greek god persevere

against non-white, Eastern challengers who seek to destroy the culture which both the characters and the audience values. They are defenders of America's connection to the classical past and the superiority it holds because of this link.

### **Conclusion**

Through an examination of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*, I drew parallels between Riordan's use of the Classics and supremacist ideas. For the plot of the book, and subsequent series, to appeal to an American audience Riordan tapped into America's long history of appropriating the Classics. This appropriation is connected to beliefs of American exceptionalism and white supremacy which stem from narratives used by the founders of America when forming a national identity. Early, white Americans looked to the Classics in order to shape the new nation, ingraining a classical heritage into the foundations of the country and the white Americans who held power. Riordan uses this underlying heritage of the Classics to construct characters and a plot to which American readers could relate.

The *Percy Jackson* series presents itself as a story that retells mythology in a way that is accessible to a young audience but, by tying it to American society, it also becomes a story of American history. The books tell the story of white American history. Riordan engages with American history in connection with the Classics by citing positive aspects of American development that are associated with the ancient world—democracy, architecture, scientific development—while dismissing the negative sides of America's manifestation of the ancient world. Riordan erases how white Americans included practices of slavery as one of the major ways America was connected to the ancient world. The early, white Americans believed that they were superior because they were the true heirs of ancient Greece through their implementation of ancient practices such as slavery and democracy, claiming exceptionalism through these

enactments. They constructed American connection to the ancient world through narratives of biological difference and exclusion of people of color, a belief that persisted even as slavery was abolished, and black people began to be integrated in American society. Riordan erases these negative parts of American history to lift Percy and the other characters associated with Western civilization into a place of superiority. These characters defend Western civilization, dismissing the fact that there are negative aspects of the construct that are harmful towards people who are not white. It also reinforces the idea that those who challenge white supremacy are un-American. The series reinforces ideas that Western civilization and America are superior and that the harmful and dangerous periods of history can be ignored in favor of the positive aspects of Western civilization and America. By reinforcing these narratives, Riordan limits the audience's view, leading them to defend Western civilization and America, perpetuating violence towards communities that have historically been excluded and harmed by them.

Riordan's series prioritizes and privileges associations of whiteness and Western civilization. The gods residing in America shows the physical connection between America and the ancient world, but it raises questions of America's claim to exceptionalism within the series. The gods are said to move wherever Western civilization is the strongest, a reasoning that remains vague and lacks a physical attribute for connection, but this raises the issue of whether the gods came to America and made it exceptional or if America's innate exceptional which made the gods move West. Either explanation remains problematic because the history of America's exceptionalism is reliant on practices of slavery and inflicting violence on people of color. Both explanations would unravel Riordan's argument that the West is worthy of defending because the true history of America's appropriation of the Classics would destroy the credibility of the gods' morality or it would challenge the foundations of supremacy associated with

American identity. Riordan does not discuss the impact of the Classics on black Americans because it would undermine his plot and characters, so he appears to continue practices of erasure to uplift his white heroes.

Rick Riordan wrote *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* as a way to engage young audiences with the Classics, but he does so by using harmful narratives of America's classical past. Riordan appears to be operating within the perception of a white Americans' engagement with the Classics and racial stereotypes in his series. Riordan's own comments about the series and the Classics appear to be consistent with an understanding of the Classics in connection to American culture. His apparent understanding of the Classics perpetuates harmful narratives which Riordan is either aware of and chooses to ignore or of which he is ignorant. Regardless of the reasoning behind Riordan's engagement of the Classics in *Percy Jackson*, we have to be aware of the dangers and falsehoods this type of engagement supports.

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