

## The Rudolph Masciantonio Prize for Inclusive Excellence in Latin and Classical Humanities

The Vergilian Society is delighted to award the first-ever Rudolph Masciantonio Prize for Inclusive Excellence in Latin and Classical Humanities to **Naija Bruckner**, a graduating senior in the class of 2022 at BASIS Tucson North in Tucson, Arizona. A student of Vergilian Society member and longtime Latin teacher Patrick Yaggy, Naija not only earned *Magna Cum Laude* distinction on the Keely Lake Memorial Translation Exam; she also submitted the following very compelling essay (which she has kindly granted us permission to repost here):

“So do you know any Indian languages?”

The answer is no. I speak English and German, but no Malayalam or Tamil or Hindi. Half my family is German, and the other half is Indian, but often, white people treat me as if I’m fully Indian and Indians treat me as if I’m German. And though many dismiss the classics as unrelated to my own background, through my experiences learning Latin and Roman history, I’ve come to realize that the perception of mutual exclusivity of cultures is a misconception prominent throughout history. Roman history acts as a case study of the intersection of different cultures.

In the same way people act as if I can only be one race, Octavian turned people against Marc Antony, as though Antony’s residency in Egypt defiled his Roman-ness. It was an issue of cultural identity and the belief that one must either be Roman or not Roman. The way we were taught it, Roman ideology was us (Romans) versus them (barbarians). And that carries over to the modern era, whether it be nationality or race. Why can’t Antony be a Roman living in Egypt? Why can’t I be German and Indian? The complexities of these questions really aren’t as new as we pretend they are.

Half of our AP Latin course was the *De Bello Gallico*, which implied a strong sense of Roman identity. While Caesar did show respect when describing some of the Gallic and Germanic cultures, he made sure to emphasize that they were separate, and not Roman at all. Similarly, as my class worked our way through beginner’s Latin, we read about the Siege of Masada. While we touched on the mass suicide of the Jews, the focus was on Emperor Titus and his Roman triumph. In both of these cases, we were taught the Roman side—the idea that the Roman side was almost always justified in its military action.

This portrayal can still teach us about current conflicts. While modern xenophobia is often based on skin color, much of Roman xenophobia was based on nationality or place of origin. But that wasn't the entire story. Though the Punic and Gallic Wars were prime examples of this us-versus-them mentality, Roman culture also absorbed aspects of Etruscan and Greek cultures. Colonization is not the lesson to learn, but Rome did undoubtedly benefit from its interactions with others. Would Vergil's *Aeneid* have existed without the inspiration from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*? Would the Romans have had their alphabet if not for the Etruscans (and the Greeks, and many more)? Perhaps not. By studying Latin, I have been able to see the influence of a combination of cultures and its positive impacts. I hope that we, as a racially divided society, can learn that lesson from the Romans—a divided society isn't a better society. Just as Rome's example demonstrates in some cases, we can also learn to recognize the benefits of a mixed society, of differing perspectives.

Though Roman history may not directly relate to my family's past, it is still relevant to my background. The way we move forward is by understanding each other's histories, not merely our own. And Roman history directly involves cross-cultural intersections, which are so necessary to study currently. I began studying Latin because I enjoyed reading Greco-Roman myths, but I stayed with Latin because of its modern relevance, ironically. So no, I don't know any Indian languages. And while I would love to learn Malayalam, anyone, not only Indians, can take the time to study it. Standing at cultural crossroads may open a number of different doors for mixed-race people, but to truly advance, everyone needs to seek out those crossroads.

Congratulations, Naija; you are an inspiration to us all! And while the present does evince all the challenges you enumerate, with young people like yourself to lead the way, the future—not only of our discipline, but of our world—looks very bright indeed!