

The Class that Race Built: Putting Race at the Center of a Higher Education Course to Challenge Post-Racialism in the United States and Brazil

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There exists a perception that Brazil is a post-racial model. With the election of Barack Obama and some increased levels of educational attainment among racial groups, the United States is perceived as having achieved similar status. A problem in some US' higher education institutions is limited analysis of pedagogical approaches in courses that explicitly analyze race. This action research study informed by critical race theory analyzes a course that uses race as a central component within US history and current events. The data for this study include teaching observations and 48 anonymous evaluations from undergraduate students.

INTRODUCTION

On May 5, 2013, I stood on the stage at the University of Illinois at Chicago's College of Education graduation after earning my PhD in Policy Studies in Urban Education, with my right fist in the air. This gesture was symbolic of the struggles my ancestors had to endure and the faith they put in education to improve their lives and ameliorate racial conditions in the United States. For six years, I had imagined this moment. Standing on this stage I reflected back on all of the obstacles I had to overcome to reach this milestone. In the same year that I graduated with three other Black males, Barack Obama was sworn into office for a second term as President of the United States. Some will argue that these events all add to the evidence of the United States' transition to a post-racial society. Yet, a closer look at the non-impact of Barack Obama's election in underserved racially isolated communities, racial disparities in higher educational attainment, and the number of murders of unarmed Black youth and adults provides evidence that racism is alive and well in the United States. Despite an agenda to reflect a progressive post-racial society with the election of Barack Obama, the United States remains a country where race and racism play a significant role in the lives of many citizens. The US is not post-racial.

As a Postdoctoral Fellow in Teaching and Mentoring in the University of Illinois at Chicago's Honors College, I have observed the impact of dominant post-racial views upon students who decide to register for my course, *The Art of Human Expression in the United States and Brazil*. As Dawson and Bobo (2009) argue, the notion of the United States as a post-racial society is consistent with the beliefs of many White Americans and is often found in the op-ed columns of popular outlets like the *Boston Globe*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Times*. Influenced by these dominant fictional views, students enrolled in my class, often begin the semester reluctant to talk about the history of race and its contemporary implications. An objective of the course is to engage students in an exploration of historical and contemporary intersections of race and racism in the misconstrued post-racial societies of Brazil and the

United States. I created it in an effort to address the construct of post-racialism and its impact in higher education institutions in the United States and Brazil.

To assess my effectiveness as a teacher in a US higher education classroom, I pursued this study in alignment with the foundations of action research. Action research involves a systemic approach to analyzing a practitioner's ability to teach and create effective learning environments (Mills, 2007; Mertler, 2009). It is often employed by educators combining theory and practice to inform instructional methods that can facilitate improved student performance and comprehension (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Mills, 2007; Mertler, 2009; Parsons & Brown, 2002). In an effort to "look, think and act" (Stringer, 2007) action researchers can employ a variety of quantitative or qualitative tools. This study made use of observations and teaching evaluations in alignment with action research to address a problem in higher education.

A significant problem among some higher education institutions is limited analysis of pedagogical approaches in courses that explicitly analyze the contemporary impact of race in "post-racial" societies. The American Council on Education Board of Directors reports that colleges and universities in the United States must, "make a conscious effort to build healthy and diverse learning environments," (Harris, 2013). Courses that offer analysis of how race continues to impact American society are critical to building healthy and diverse learning environments on higher education campuses, because they offer insight to the experiences of students of color. These classes are also important, because they can propose solutions and inspire the future workforce to develop potential remedies aimed at addressing racial inequalities.

The aforementioned problem of the lack of attention to courses that explicitly analyze the contemporary implications of race inspired this action research study. As a Postdoctoral Fellow in Teaching and Mentoring guided by critical race theories and action research methodologies, I attempted to answer the question: How can I develop an undergraduate course that will increase social awareness, facilitate conversations about race, and build community among students who are better equipped to contribute a potential source of solution to racial inequalities in a misperceived "post-racial society" This is important for facilitators of undergraduate education who seek to develop courses that explicitly analyze race.

Race, Racism, the Post-Racial United States and Higher Education

With certainty it can be argued that, within the United States, the social and cultural construct of race is a byproduct of conflicts between Europeans and non-Europeans supported with laws, policies, social relationships, and the economy. Others have defined race as an invented concept based upon perceived differences in human bodies codified via laws and cultural and material economies (Gotanda, 1991; Haney Lopez, 1996; Harris, 1995; Omi & Winant, 1994; Vaught, 2011; Winant, 2001). This definition can be expounded upon to define race as a political system, based upon social groupings and misinterpreted biological features (Roberts, 2011). Within the history of European migration to the United States lies evidence of the social and cultural construct of White identity. In 1607 Europeans arrived to North America as part of a variety of ethnic groups, but the first mention of the "White" race did not appear until 1691 with the prohibition of marriages between Europeans, Africans, and the Indigenous population (Douglas, 1999; Smedley 2012). The prohibition of interracial marriages was thought necessary to determine the social and cultural status of individuals who inhabited the early English colonies. Thus started the United States' history of defining, a person's race in relationship to ancestral lineage to geographical locations. Even though race cannot be proven by biological or scientific measures, it has shaped and continues to shape the human experience in the United States and around the world.

An offspring of the social and cultural construct of race is racism. Racism is a complex attitudinal phenomenon of cognitions and emotions that engenders individual and systemic acts of discrimination based upon perceived differences in human bodies (Allport, 1958; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996). It has also been defined as a system with cultural messages, institutional policies, and individual actions that provide advantages and disadvantages based upon race (Wellman, 1977; Tatum, 2004). Beginning with the institutionalization of slavery in the United States, racism has functioned as a means to assist the

dominance of persons racially identified as White. Racism allowed for the justification of enslaving Africans in the United States because individuals widely accepted the belief that Blacks were racially inferior to Whites, and they systemically supported these notions with policies and laws. Such perceptions continued in the Jim Crow era following the legal end of slavery and are perpetuated in different forms by individuals and systems today.

For many, Barack Obama's election as the forty-fourth President of the United States is a clear indicator of the United States' transition to a post-racial society. Evidence of this can be found in a variety of media outlets and comments by public figures like Rudy Giuliani who stated "we've moved beyond the whole idea of race and racial separation and unfairness" (Giuliani, 2008 as cited in Wise, 2009; Love & Tosolt, 2010). Despite the dominant rhetoric, Barack Obama's presidency did not cure racial separation, as many cities of the United States including Chicago, New York, Philadelphia and others continue to possess racially isolated communities (Logan and Stults, 2011).

According to the 2008 United States Department of Education report, some 32% of African-Americans, 26% of Latinos, 58% of Asian/ Pacific Islanders and 22% of Native American/Alaska Natives, ages 18-24, were enrolled in college when Barack Obama took office and the alleged post-racial society was achieved (Aud et. al, 2010). Yet 44% of White Americans, aged 18-24 years, were enrolled as undergraduate students in US colleges and universities. With the exception of some Asian/Pacific Islanders, there are more Whites enrolled in colleges and universities than students of color in this post-racial era of the United States. The racial disparity does not end with enrollment, however, it extends to degree attainment.

According to the United States Department of Education's 2013 report, the percentage of persons who have a bachelor's degree includes approximately 40% of Whites, 21 % of African-Americans, 16% of Latinos, 58% of Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 17% of Native American/Alaskan natives. The implications are far-reaching and pernicious. Not only do people with a bachelor's degree have more economically prosperous lives, they even live longer (Hummer & Hernandez, 2013). These statistics counter the notion that there has been equal attainment across different racial groups in the United States.

Race, Racism, and Higher Education in the Post-Racial Brazil

One of the first countries to gain recognition as a model for the United States, in regards to the post-racial societal construct, is Brazil. With the 1946 translation of Gilberto Freyre's *Casa Grande e Senzalas* text by George Putnam under the title *Masters and Slaves*, Brazil was depicted as a country that, despite the institution of slavery, managed to support the formation of positive relationships between whites and people of African descent. Gilberto Freyre argues that beginning with slavery, the formation of interracial families was encouraged which prevented the development of racism in Brazil. Downey (1947) regarded Freyre's study as the, "fruit of years of research," and as a result of this study, other countries like the United States began to take an interest in Brazil with the goal being to learn how to improve race relations. The study of Gilberto Freyre contributed to the formation of the "racial democracy" myth that supports the argument that Brazil is a country where race is insignificant.

The notion of a racial democracy is a fantasy as confirmed with the existence of a Brazilian census where people are racially categorized as Preto (Black), Pardo (Brown), Branco (White), Amarelo (Yellow), and Indigena (Indigenous). Unlike the United States, these racial categories were not solely determined by ancestry, but included physical features and social status (Nogueiro, 1985; Skidmore 1992). Pretos are often referred to as Afro-Brazilians and are the closest descendants of the enslaved Africans who were taken to Brazil and forced to work on plantations. Historically and in contemporary contexts they more or less occupy spaces of lower socioeconomic status within Brazil. People who are identified as Pardo are of mixed racial ancestry and while they experience some discrimination based upon their skin color and other physical features, they often possess an elevated social status in Brazil. Branco racially translates to White; Europeans, their descendants born in Europe or Brazil and who are often part of the middle and upper class are assigned this racial identity. Amarelos are persons with familial ties to Asia and the Indigena are considered native to Brazil. The social construction of these

racial categories in Brazil assisted in the justification of discrimination based upon perceived physical differences and superficial indicators of status.

Racism is often viewed as ahistorical to Brazil, because of the longstanding promotion of interracial marriages and sexual relationships between people of different racial backgrounds. When Brazil was colonized by the Portuguese government, policies were established to promote interracial marriages and sexual relationships between Europeans, Africans, and the Indigenous South American population. Telles (2004) as cited in Pazich and Teranishi (2014) indicates “as early as 1775, the king of Portugal had encouraged his subjects in Brazil to ‘populate themselves’ and ‘join with the natives through marriage’”. France Winddance Twine (1997) confirmed this perception via interviews with some members of the Afro-Brazilian community who provided comments that identified interracial marriages as a widespread symbol of racism’s absence within Brazil. As one of Twine’s study participants responded to the question ‘Does racism exist in Vasalia?’ with ‘No. Dating between the races is not prohibited here. I have a white boyfriend,’ it is clear that some Brazilians believe racism is correlated with the prohibition of interracial marriages (Twine, 1997, p. 52). Among some Brazilians racism is not viewed as systemic and or individual acts of discrimination based upon perceived differences in human bodies. These perceptions are the results of deliberate efforts through interracial sexual relationships and other means to increase the European population within Brazil.

Even so, the promotion of European migration to Brazil was part of philosophies, ideologies, and policies under the *Branqueamento* movement. *Branqueamento* is the Brazilian-Portuguese word for whitening. It is also used to reference methods employed with the support of Portuguese governmental officials to provide land grants and other incentives for Europeans to relocate to Brazil. Such land grants encouraged European immigrants to move to Brazil and discouraged people from Africa and Asia (Hernandez, 2014). *Branqueamento* also included policies that supported racial segregation in education, employment, and within public spaces such as restaurants. In regards to education, *branqueamento* policies encouraged the exclusion of Afro-Brazilian teachers, promoted the use of European textbooks, punished students of color for poor hygiene and directly prevented sick students from access to a public education (Hernandez, 2014; Maggie, 1992; Trochim, 1988). Similar to the United States segregation in public accommodations were maintained via “Whites only” signs and the refusal to serve people of color (Nascimento, 1980; Hernandez, 2014). The culmination of policies under the *branqueamento* ideology fostered the myth of the racial democracy or notion that racism does not exist in Brazil and status is determined by merit alone. Despite efforts to create the perception of a post-racial society, policies enacted with *branqueamento* ideologies promoted racial inequalities that still persist in educational attainment between races in Brazil.

The disparity in the literacy rates between Whites and Blacks in Brazil is related to the facilitation of systemic racism within the educational system. Following the legal end of slavery in 1889, the Portuguese government did not make an attempt to improve educational opportunities for freed people of African descent. Pavia (2009) as cited by Pazich and Teraninishi (2014) state that the Portuguese elite did not create policies that would assist formerly enslaved Africans in their transition to a competitive society; they were “left on their own to try to be members of an emerging competitive order” (Pazich & Teraninishi, 2014 p. 6). The impact of this failure to assist those who were formerly enslaved with adequate educational opportunities is a factor to consider with statistics that indicate 20% of Blacks compared with 8% of whites are unable to read in contemporary Brazil (Pazich & Teraninshi, 2014). High rates of illiteracy among Blacks is related to a history of failures within the educational system to address the needs of people of African descent.

When exploring the state of higher education within Brazil, it is possible to challenge the notion of a post-racial Brazil. According to a National Household Sample Survey (2006-2008) taken among young people ages 18-24, 58% of Brancos (Whites), 26% of Pretos (Blacks) and 27% of Pardos (Browns) obtained an undergraduate degree (Lima, 2011 p. 11). White undergraduate students, aged 18-24, double the percentage of students in college when compared with people of color in Brazil. These racial disparities within higher education indicate that despite notions of Brazil as a racial democracy, race is a factor in determining who has access to post-secondary education and obtains a degree.

Despite the aforementioned racial realities in higher education, Brazil has maintained international status as a racial democracy or post-racial society. It is well documented that “over the years, delegations from the United States, South Africa, Malaysia, and other nations with long histories of racial or ethnic tensions have gone to Brazil hoping to learn the secret of its success and to be able to transfer that formula to their own countries” (Rohter 2010, p. 59). The success of the *Branqueamento* agenda has convinced government officials and others that racism does not exist in Brazil. Such perceptions are reinforced with dominant images of Brazil as a country with beautiful beaches, physically attractive people, excellent weather, and an abundance of wealth. It is often viewed as a paradise and little attention is given to economic disparities that stem from racial disparities in education.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND THE “POST-RACIAL” UNITED STATES AND BRAZIL

Critical race theory (CRT) has its beginnings in the 1970s as a response to critical legal studies, which took an elite and Eurocentric perspective that failed to address how race and racism influenced civil rights (Corbado, 2011; Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ortiz & Elrod, 2002). Developed largely by White male liberals in the 1970s, critical legal studies uses a Marxist lens, void of race, to analyze the legal system in the United States (Carbado, 2011; Jennings & Lynn, 2005; Tate, 1997). Critical race theory helps to explain the relationships between race, racism, and power and how they intersect to support social inequalities. By offering a critique of social inequalities and their supporting policies, critical race theory is a tool to work towards eliminating racism and the continued subordination of people of color in the United States and Brazil (Matsuda, 1995; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; Hernandez, 2011; Crenshaw, 2011).

Proponents of critical race theory held their first conference in 1989 with students, researchers, lawyers, and activists concerned about how race, racism, and power influenced social inequalities (Cho & Westley, 2002; Crenshaw, 2011; Harris, 2001). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) members of the critical race theory movement put forth five essential tenets of critical race theory to explain the relationships between race, racism, and power:

The first feature, ordinariness means that racism is difficult to cure or address. The second feature, sometimes called “interest convergence” or material dimension adds a further dimension. Because racism advances the interests of both White elites (materially) and working class people (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it. A third theme of critical race theory, the “social construction” thesis holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations. Another, more recent, development concerns differential racializations and its many consequences. A final element concerns the notion of a unique voice of color (p. 9).

These tenets have influenced many of the writings that provide the foundation for the critical race theory movement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Despite the critical race theory inaugural meeting that occurred approximately twenty-six years ago, the theory continues to be useful in the analysis of how race shapes the social and political climates of the United States and Brazil.

Critical race theorists often employ counter-narratives to make meaning of the permanence of racism, the failures of civil rights laws, misguided colorblind ideologies, the property rights of Whiteness and their impact on inequality in misperceived post-racial societies such as the United States and Brazil (Bell, 1992; Gunby-Decuir, 2006; A. P. Harris, 2001; C. I. Harris, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Crenshaw, 2011; Hernandez, 2011). By offering counter-narratives informed by voices of color, critical race theory challenges the claim that race is no longer a factor in the production of social inequalities in the United States and Brazil. These counter-narratives make use of the experiences of people of color and are especially important in understanding the continued impact of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Montoya, 2002). Counter-narratives provide insight to the systemic nature of racism, White supremacy, in the United States and international contexts (Gillborn, 2005) and expose the myth of a post-racial society.

A CRT post-racial perspective complicates the election of Barack Obama and examines the multiplicities of its significance. Interest convergence within the context of CRT is especially useful in

understanding the election of Barack Obama and how it assists the promotion of the post-racial myth in the United States. Bell (2004) argues that interest convergence is the notion that strides in racial equality occur only at times when they directly benefit the status-quo. Stated differently, while political and career advancements benefit some people of color, they ultimately benefit whites. In Derrick Bell's *Silent Covenants*, he uses the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* as a historical example of interest convergence to argue that the decision to end racial segregation in schools "with all deliberate speed," was less about improving educational opportunities for people of color and more about improving the image of the United States engaged in the Cold War with the former Soviet Union. It is feasible to assert that the election of Barack Obama is less about racial progress and more about improving the image of the United States, which was significantly damaged during the Bush administration. Interest convergence helps us understand how the election of Barack Obama facilitates a post-racial myth in the United States.

A critical race theory analysis of race and the position of Black women in Brazil exposes the fallacy of its image as a post-racial country. Many Afro-Brazilian women are subject to sexual objectification and/or employment as household caretakers. Making use of data from Brazil's Census Bureau, Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), "government statistics reveal that Afro-Brazilian women are worse off in the labor market than white women and men of all races because they disproportionately work in the informal labor market without rights to unemployment insurance and maternity leave" (Hernandez 2011, p. 1431). Afro-Brazilian women and men often possess lower socio-economic status as a result of systemic racism in education, the judicial system, the employment sector and other facets of Brazilian society. Critical race theory helps us to understand how such realities are the result of consistent intersections between race, racism, and power in Brazil, which contradict the notion of a racial democracy or a post-racial society.

ACTION RESEARCH FOCUSED ON RACE

During the summer following my graduation, I acquired a position as a Postdoctoral Fellow in Teaching and Mentoring with the University of Illinois at Chicago's Honors College. It offered an opportunity to develop courses in alignment with my research interests of critical pedagogy, African studies, and post-racialism in the United States and Brazil. This postdoctoral position was different from others that emphasized research, because it focused on teaching, academic advising, and developing co-curricular programs for undergraduate students. The teaching component of the position required the creation of two courses that met the general education requirements of the university for students enrolled in the Honors College. Academic advising included providing course suggestions, offering career advice, and facilitating general counseling to a cohort of thirty first year Honors students. The program developing experience came in the form of co-directing an co-curricular mentoring initiative called the Chicago Signature Honors Program, which provides students with an opportunity to engage in some of the city's diverse collection of plays, dance performances, college lectures and other events identified as intellectually or culturally significant. Despite the various facets of my position, the focal point was to provide high quality courses for undergraduate students.

The course where the data for this study was collected is called *The Art of Human Expression in the United States and Brazil*. As stated in the course syllabus, it explores the impact of race and the enslavement of Africans in relationship to poetry, music, dance, and self-defense expressions in the United States and Brazil. It builds upon an understanding that the United States and Brazil share a similar history via the exploitation of African labor to assist European expansion efforts in North and South America. This course examines the political and social landscapes of Brazil and the United States to analyze the construct of post-racialism in history and current events. It makes use of film, music, poetry, dance, and self-defense expressions to illustrate how various forms of art in Brazil and the United States can serve as resistance to race and racism.

The participants for this action research study were forty-eight undergraduate students between the ages of 18-25 enrolled in the Honors College and registered for the course *The Art of Human Expression in the United States and Brazil*. Video documented observations of my instructional methods and teaching

evaluations administered by the university were used to conduct this research. Each of the students in this study voluntarily completed online teaching evaluations and participated in video observations. The students were from a variety of academic backgrounds, because the course fulfilled three hours of the general education requirements for all Honors students during the 2013-2015 academic terms. In the two semesters where the data for this study was gathered, students racially and ethnically identified as African-American or Black, White, Latino/a, Middle Eastern, and Asian-American. A critical component of the study's objectives is to analyze an approach to creating higher education classrooms that explicitly discuss race and dispel myths of the post-racial society. Undergraduate students who participated in such courses offer potential insights to the value that other students may place upon similar courses and the effective teaching approaches to inform others.

The sample for this study included 48 students who were enrolled in my course, *The Art of Human Expression in The United States and Brazil*, during the 2013-2015 academic terms. They voluntarily participated in video documented observations and completed the anonymous online teaching evaluations distributed at the end of the semester. Video observations of my instructional methods occurred four times throughout each semester and with advance notice to the students. On filming days, the camera was positioned in the classroom to prevent revealing the physical identity of students. Students' experiences as documented in the online teaching evaluations were collected anonymously by the university. The results of these evaluations were reported to me without any student identifiers and offered confidential analysis of course content and instructional methods.

Teaching evaluations are administered at the end of the semester to students via their university email addresses. The results of these evaluations are completely anonymous and provided to the instructors at the end of the semester after the deadline to submit final grades. After submitting an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application it was determined that this study was exempt from IRB approval, because teaching evaluations make use of unidentifiable data. The dates to conduct video observations were identified at the start of the semester and indicated in the course syllabus. A week prior to the observations, students were provided with a reminder of the video observations that would take place. On the four days of video observations, I solicited a student volunteer to ensure the camera maintained its focus on my position in the classroom.

The data gathered from the teaching evaluations and video documented observations were analyzed at separate points in the semester. After teaching this course for the first time in the Spring 2013 semester, the results of the teaching evaluations informed my instructional methods for the consecutive semesters. Observations documented via video were analyzed in the seven days that immediately followed filming and allowed for improvement of methods and the learning environment prior to the end of that semester.

Video observations were stored on a 64 gigabyte video storage card and secured in my university office. With the assistance of my personal laptop computer, I was able to open the files, view the video footage, and interpret its impact on the learning environment. In my analysis of the observations, I focused on my verbal dictations and clarity when explaining concepts and histories within the United States and Brazil. I paid particular attention to the way I enunciated race, racism, power, and the property rights of Whiteness and how I conveyed their importance in understanding the social realities of people in the United States and Brazil.

The data for this study, online teaching evaluations and video observations, were organized on a password protected external hard drive. This drive allowed me to facilitate an analytic plan that allowed me to review the material from my university and home offices. Within the hard drive, I created folders labeled with the date of the observation and a title for the lecture that was provided to students. For example, I labeled one folder "November62013racialdemBraz." This helped me to identify that the video was taken on November 6, 2013 and a lecture that focused on the notion of a racial democracy in Brazil. The online teaching evaluations provided at the end of the semester were added to separate folders and saved as Adobe PDF files under the names that corresponded with the semester and year the course was offered.

The video analysis of the data gathered for this study occurred throughout the Fall and Spring semesters from 2013 to 2015. As I reviewed the video observations, I made note of the instances where I

assessed “good” and “an opportunity to improve” in my instructional methods. I defined “good” as moments when I placed the emphasis on a key racial term, I saw students’ heads nodding in agreement, or when students asked for clarity of a concept and I provided a clear, direct response. Observations defined as “an opportunity to improve” were noted if I saw a student’s attention begin to drift and/or I perceived a lack of clarity with an explanation of an idea or concept. Whereas video observations were analyzed throughout the semester, teaching evaluations were analyzed at the end of each semester.

Online teaching evaluations administered by the university provide a good start to assess teaching effectiveness, but they are not comprehensive. It is often stated in academic circles, that teaching evaluations provide little to no insight on effectiveness to disseminate information to students. One of the open ended questions of the evaluations asked students to “comment on specific characteristics of the course that were most beneficial to you.” Questions like these allowed me to read direct responses from students about what did and did not work throughout the semester. I paid particular attention to comments that mentioned the concepts of race, racism, power, the property rights of Whiteness and other major themes that were consistent in my efforts to use my classroom as a counter-narrative to the post-racial rhetoric of Brazil and the United States.

TEACHING THE CLASS THAT RACE BUILT

I will never forget some of my early experiences with undergraduate students who inspired the curriculum for Honors 127, *The Art of Human Expression in the United States and Brazil*. In my first year as a Postdoctoral Fellow I was invited to provide a lecture that offered advice to incoming freshman students and a preview of the content I taught in my courses for the Honors College. After I offered advice about the importance of setting priorities and establishing goals, I began to discuss the history of race and its contemporary implications. When I discussed a CRT claim that racism is a permanent epidemic one student, a white male, responded, “if we talk about race, aren’t we being racist?” I responded with an explanation of how racism includes acts by individuals with power and systems based upon perceived differences in biology; it is more complex than simply talking about its existence. As I continued my lecture another student added; “the importance of race will end when our parents die.” I internally laughed at this student’s proposed solution to racism, but I was aware that such comments were reflective of post-racial ideologies and the necessity for courses that critically analyzed how race continues to influence our society.

In a response to early lectures and research interests, I designed a course that provided opportunities to engage in conversations about race and for re-examining the histories of the United States and Brazil via a critical race theoretical perspective. We read portions of Howard Zinn’s “The People’s History of the United States,” Larry Rohter’s “Brazil on the Rise,” and “The Brazil Reader” edited by Robert M. Levine and John J. Crocitti to identify contemporary and historical examples of how race played a role in identity formation, politics, social and economic opportunities. As the first line of the course description on page one of the syllabus reads, “this course will explore the impact of race and the enslavement of Africans in the United States and Brazil,” a focus of the class was to provide insight to the invention of race via an analysis of the enslavement of Africans in the United States and Brazil.

As a facilitator of Honors 127, I made a conscious effort to provide consistent collaborative class activities that made use of contemporary art to explicate race in the United States. Teaching evaluations reveal that the use of poetry, music, and dance assisted the students to engage the presented material. One of the open ended prompts from the teaching evaluation states, “Please comment on specific characteristics of the course that were most beneficial to you.” One student responded “I really loved his creative way of teaching style. We had debates, games, watched films, played instruments, wrote poetry, and so many things to learn and engage in the materials.” Another response from the teaching evaluations states, “It was interesting to understand the different concepts of racism and the expression of social realities. I enjoyed learning about the history and the importance of certain forms of art.” These student responses reveal that some students enjoyed the use of creative class activities to engage conversations about race.

Teaching evaluations also reveal that some students felt more informed about the social realities of people in the United States and Brazil. One student provided the comment “This course has opened my eyes in relation to Brazil and America. I did not know that these types of problems occurred in Brazil, but through this class, I was able to develop more knowledge.” Another response from the evaluation reads, “We talked a lot about race and racism and I thought that was very relevant to my current understanding of the world.” These comments indicate that there was some success in making the material relevant to the lives of students and the course was effective in expanding perspectives of the United States and Brazil. Of the 48 respondents to the class evaluations, the majority were positive and offered me insights to my instructional strengths.

The teaching evaluations also indicated how some students believed the course could improve. With regard to the assigned reading materials one student commented, “Maybe different books will make the course more easy to follow while keeping it interesting.” Another student also mentioned the reading assignments in response to the open ended prompt that asked for suggestions for course improvement. They stated, “Some of the texts that were assigned were very difficult to read, primarily due to the amount of knowledge presented.” As action research requires practitioners to evaluate and make changes based upon findings, I read these student responses and decided to use a different set of texts for future semesters. These evaluations helped me to understand the importance of selecting the right texts to guide a class of undergraduate students in the process of learning. Teaching evaluations can help reveal some important perspectives for action research educators, but they are not comprehensive.

Documenting Observations

Observations documented via video assisted me to assess teaching methods and make adjustments in the current semester to better address the needs of individual students. In an effort to engage students in a creative activity to explore the notion of a racial democracy in Brazil, I incorporated the African Brazilian martial art of Capoeira. Capoeira has origins within the enslavement of Africans in Brazil and it combines, music, dance, acrobatics, and self-defense movements. It served as a tool for Africans to resist racism and to create cultural cohesion. As a student of this art form for the past nine years and someone who began to learn it when I was similar in age to my students, I decided to teach the students two basic movements and how to play three capoeira instruments in an effort to explore the history of race and racism in Brazil.

On November 18, 2014, I prearranged with students to document the class with a video camera to assist me in exploring the effectiveness of capoeira as a pedagogical tool and to interpret the strengths and weakness of my teaching methods. I strategically placed the camera in the classroom to view the perspective of the room, where I would stand and provide the lecture. This room was equipped with floor to ceiling windows on three of the four walls. Pairs of students sat at brown rectangular tables arranged in the shape of the letter “U.” From a tripod that was placed in the opening of the students’ tables the camera was positioned to view a white projector screen, two rectangular tables where capoeira instruments were placed, a white board installed upon a red brick wall, and a speaker’s podium. The camera’s location was optimal for capturing the lecture and ensuring the privacy of students who did not want to be captured in film.

The lecture on November 18, 2014 began with making a comparison between Brazil and the United States with regard to how race was codified in law. My opening statement as recorded in the video was, “I know that many of you are wondering about the connection between the United States and Brazil.” Standing to the right of the *Powerpoint* projection of key dates in the history of slavery in the United States and Brazil, I explained how the enslavement of Africans influenced the social, cultural, and political construct of race we understand today. The classroom was silent as I explained the historical significance of events and policies enacted with Branqueamento ideologies in Brazil. As I checked in with students by asking, “are you following me?” and some responded “yes,” I interpreted this as an indicator that my instructions were clear.

The lesson plan for this lecture included an ample amount of opportunities to have conversations and discussions with students about the content of the presented material. Eleven minutes into the lecture, I

invited students to ask questions about any of the information presented up until this point. One student posed whether or not women were and are active participants in capoeira. Making direct eye contact with the student, I responded “Absolutely. There are women who practice capoeira. Has this always been the case, it is difficult to say with certainty.” Watching the video I believed that I adequately addressed the student’s question, because she nodded in agreement as I provided a response to her question. After addressing additional questions of the students and listening to their opinions for three minutes, I proceeded to the next component of the lecture.

This lecture was designed for mentally and physically engaging activities to assess a variety of instructional methods. It included time for lecture, class discussion and hands-on activities that offered an opportunity for a kinesthetic experience with capoeira. At fourteen minutes later in the video, I attempted to engage students in the instruction of the physical movements of capoeira. I prompted students to get ready by saying, “okay this is what I need you to do. I need you to stand up.” Without hesitation students stood and prepared themselves for the instruction. I explained a basic movement in capoeira and I could hear on the camera laughs and giggles which I interpreted as indicators that they were enjoying the activity. Participating in the physical movements of capoeira allowed for students to have a tangible experience with the material used to explore the history of race and racism in Brazil.

CONCLUSION

In 2013 when I graduated from the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Policy Studies in Urban Education doctoral program, it was an interesting time in the post-racial movement. As Obama had recently, began his second term it was becoming increasingly popular to advance the notion that race was no longer a factor in the production of social inequalities. His political achievement and racial status as a Black male was conflated as a marker that all people of color had the same opportunities as Whites in the United States. It wrongfully asserted that with the right education and hard work anyone can achieve their dreams in the “post-racial” United States. The fist that I put in the air at my graduation was meant as a symbolic gesture to infer that the struggle for equality continues and I would do my part in using education to address racial injustices.

As a Postdoctoral Fellow in Teaching and Mentoring with the University of Illinois at Chicago I sought to understand how instructors in higher education can create environments to candidly discuss race. I framed a course in the histories of race in the United States and Brazil intentionally, because they share a similar history in the enslavement of Africans and the institutionalization of racism. Understanding this history of enslaving Africans in the United States and Brazil is essential to exploring the evolution of how race shaped and continues to influence these societies. The literature of CRT to analyze history in the United States and Brazil can offer insight to effective pedagogical tools in higher education classrooms.

Teaching evaluations and observations of the instructional methods for the higher education course, “*The Art of Human Expression in the United States and Brazil*” reveal that there is a need to engage young people in conversations about race. They indicate that race is still a factor and of interest to people who live in the “post-racial” United States. These action research oriented methods offer insight to improving classrooms where young people feel comfortable crafting a counter-narrative to dominant rhetoric that misinterprets the election of Barack Obama as an indicator that race is a problem of the past. Evaluations and observations illustrated that students appreciate the use of poetry, music, dance, and self-defense expressions to convey racialized experiences and stimulate classroom discussions. Despite the promotion of post-racialism, higher education should serve as a space where the truth about racism is illustrated and students are encouraged to present remedies.

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