

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Beyond the Gates: Teaching Race and Politics in Brazil in a Prison Education Program

by Jaira J. Harrington



IN THE IMAGE "THE WORLD WITHIN REACH/O MUNDO AO SEU ALCANCE," CARIOCA COMMUNITY ARTIST DAYSE GOMIS SHOWCASES A BLACK MALE INCARCERATED STUDENT READING IN THE PRISON LIBRARY STACKS. THE IMAGES DIRECTLY BEHIND HIM—A GLOBE, THE MAP OF BRAZIL WITH ITS FLAG, AND A RENDERING OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENT—REFLECT THE CONTENT OF THE "RACE AND POLITICS IN BRAZIL" CLASS. THE COURSE TAKES A GLOBAL, DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO LEARNING, IN WHICH HE STUDIES ABOUT THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN BRAZIL. IMAGE BY DAYSE GOMIS

"...human beings in communion liberate each other."

- *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire (133: 2014)*

The project of liberatory education is fraught with complications in a Small Liberal Arts College or SLAC environment. Authors bell hooks and Paulo Freire look to an ethics of care, love, and mutual restoration of humanity through teaching openly and freely. My initial teaching experiences as an assistant professor revealed that this liberatory aim could not be fulfilled at my traditional college campus setting, so I taught in a prison college education program. The goals of this article are: 1) to elucidate the complicated relationship that a Black woman faculty member at the intersections of multiple identities has in adjusting to the liberal arts college environment; 2) to expound upon my weekly exit from campus and entry into prison education as a vehicle to advance institutional goals for outreach and social justice; 3) to interrogate prison education epistemologies and describe the counternarratives and practical strategies developed in a course on Race and Politics in Brazil to decolonize the curriculum; and 4) to express the realities of teaching a Black-centered, intersectional course to SLAC students in a men's maximum security prison setting. It was through this practical prison teaching experience that I stretched the limits of my practice of education and found a temporary home in which to do so.

The Quad Quandary: Conditionally Accepted

Villanova University is a Catholic liberal arts institution rooted in Augustinian traditions. It is also a predominately white and wealthy suburban university. Based upon the Villanova Office of Diversity and Inclusion Fall 2019 figures, three-quarters of the student body and 80 percent of the instructional faculty are white (Villanova University 2019). According to a *New York Times* investigation on student economic diversity and life outcomes, "The median family income of a student from Villanova is **\$195,800**, and **75%** come from the top 20 percent. About **1.3%** of students at Villanova came from a poor family but became a rich adult" (Aisch 2017). While students of low-income backgrounds are often encouraged to attend wealthy, private schools to leverage social networks, this evidence suggests that earning a college degree at a prominent liberal arts institution may not reduce class inequality. In fact, this institutional profile may reproduce inequity for the most economically disadvantaged students post-graduation (Hurst 2018). These results may stem from the pre-existing insularity of networks of wealth that are resistant to the integration of groups historically marginalized by class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and national origin.

Nestled in timbered, tidy, and opulent predominately white suburbs of Philadelphia, Villanova University is a stately and reverent institution. The juxtaposition between my West Philadelphia neighborhood and the campus were so stark that my daily public transit commute felt like an

alien encounter. As a first-generation college graduate, Black woman, junior scholar from a working-class background, my visible and invisible blended identities were estranged from the dominant wealthy, elitist attitudes embedded in campus life. I was faculty in Global Interdisciplinary Studies—a department with noteworthy racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. Given the context, it was an exceptional department. Senior administrators and colleagues reassured me that I could easily fit in. However, there were daily reminders that diversity is not tantamount to inclusion. I was granted limited permission to enter a different world in which I was only conditionally accepted.

In this space, I was only able to connect meaningfully with a few students and some junior faculty. I quickly learned that some perspectives of the perceived minority groups aligned with the dominant wealthy and white norm. I could understand the pressures to do so. My global studies courses explicitly brought marginal experiences to center by featuring authors including Edward Said, Patricia Hill Collins, Ella Habiba Shohat, and Toni Morrison. However, students in the socioeconomic, racial, gender, and sexual minority had been hurt so deeply and so often by institutional hostility and neglect that it was especially difficult to earn their trust. While I empathize with these nuances, I could not quite find my footing as a faculty member who values mentoring students. Further, I gained the impression that both students and junior faculty peers navigate the hostile climate by masking their personal challenges. With assimilation as an optional tool, some sought to dig their heels in more deeply with the social climb. Some made their grievances known but were drowned out by what appeared to be a one-sided debate. Others divested completely. With no appealing strategy to which I could adapt, I felt isolated.

The growing scholarship on faculty of color in the academy reveal that these sentiments are commonplace. The trending summer 2020 Twitter hashtag #BlackInTheIvory created by Black women academic friends Dr. Shardé Davis and doctoral student Joy Melody Woods fueled an online reckoning with anti-Black racism in academia. Research on the specific aggressions experienced by Black women faculty is well-documented (Gutierrez y Muhs 2012, Hoff 2020, Neimann 2020). Troublingly, daily departmental interactions upheld and reproduced the racial, gender, and class hierarchies the global studies curriculum expressly critiques. On one hand, it was permissible to teach about oppression and injustice in the abstract. On the other, it was considered taboo to call attention to my personal workplace struggles with those same injustices. I wanted to be a part of the new vanguard for change, but I realized that I would be fighting alone. The repression I experienced was its own confinement. I needed a lifeline. In the most unlikely place, I found my intellectual and pedagogical freedom: the off-campus prison education Graterford Program.

Teaching in the Graterford Program

In support of the institution's stated commitment to social justice, the Graterford Program was founded in 1972. Through competitive application, incarcerated men take

college-level courses and can earn a Villanova University liberal arts bachelor's degree at no cost to them. Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution (SCI)-Phoenix is the state's largest maximum-security prison. It starkly contrasts with the affluent, mostly white quaint suburb it inhabits: Collegeville—an ironic name. In Spring 2019, I visited the SCI-Phoenix campus to present a talk on the liberatory power of education using Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a reference. My conversation with the men inspired me to embark on a pedagogical journey that became one of the most challenging and rewarding teaching experiences that I have had to date. In Fall 2019, I taught a course on Race and Politics in Brazil.

To directly confront racism, anti-Blackness, and gender oppression, I included pertinent material in the syllabus. Not surprisingly, some prison education programs mirror the Eurocentric and Western-focused curriculum that provides little affirmation for the lived realities and identities of the students we educate. This common curricular bent affirms that esteemed scholarship and knowledge is European, white, and male. It also signals to students with marginalized backgrounds that their lived experiences are of little value. Darder argues:

...we find ourselves more deeply mired in Western ethnocentric (universal) notions of humanity, in which individualism (object-based, future-focused), and materialism counter the legitimacy of subordinate cultural community values and traditions. Additionally, this leads to the negation of our worldviews—including the marginalization of communal life, ancestral knowledge, or spiritual traditions that might enhance the teaching and learning of all...[students] (2015: 43)

With calls to decolonize the curriculum in traditional colleges and universities, extension programs can also benefit from critical reflection. Incarcerated people should also have access to a rigorous educational program that does not reproduce the standards and notions of elite whiteness.

For my course, I embraced a global, Black-centered, and African-diasporic perspective geared toward a predominately Black classroom. The readings and themes were diverse and varied (see appendix). Most importantly,

my course offered a fresh take on Black identity by framing Blackness as global. For most of my students it was the first time that whiteness—implicitly or explicitly—was not the center of dialogue. I also introduced critiques of American hegemony using historical and contemporary frames of colonization, slavery, and imperialism. Founded in 1500, Brazil's historical specificity of indigenous genocide, African slavery and regional influence bears many family resemblances to that of the United States. There were ample opportunities for comparative analyses that I leveraged with my students.

The syllabus also upholds a strong commitment to interdisciplinarity. We read texts from the Humanities and Social Sciences with quantitative, qualitative, interpretive, and humanistic methodologies. Ambitious in my goals, I sought to provide a wide range of materials so that students of varying abilities, backgrounds, and interests could connect. My approach was inspired by bell hooks:

Through the cultivation of awareness, through the decolonization of our minds, we have the tools to break with the dominator model of human social engagement and the will to imagine new and different ways that people might come together. (2013: 35)

Students were largely unfamiliar with the Brazilian context, so I had to creatively orchestrate methods to foster student connections with the material. I wrongly assumed that a class of predominately African American men with some college experience might have a working knowledge of United States slavery. With that background, I could have drawn comparisons between the United States and Brazil.

Absent that ideal scenario, I found an opportunity to innovatively meet their educational needs.

For an historical overview of trans-Atlantic slavery in Brazil, we read the chapter "Kalunga" from *Run for It: Stories of Slaves Who Fought for Their Freedom*. This graphic novel by Afro-Brazilian author Marcelo d'Saete was essential in that it not only provided material for an excellent framing lecture on the breadth and brutality of slavery, but also the illustrations brought our conversation to life. The nuanced storytelling of historical fiction also invited complex discussions on gender roles and masculinity, romantic love, religion and spirituality, intimate partner abuse, bondage, oppression, and freedom.



IN THE IMAGE "WRITING FREEDOM/LIBERDADE DE ESCRITA," CARIOCA COMMUNITY ARTIST DAYSE GOMIS DEPICTS A YOUNG, BLACK MALE INCARCERATED STUDENT WRITING AT A PRISON LIBRARY DESK. HE IS SURROUNDED BY BOOKS AND IMMERSSED IN A CURRICULUM ABOUT DIASPORIC AND GLOBAL TIES TO BLACKNESS. THE BLACK EMPOWERMENT FIST WITH BLACK MEN, WOMEN, AND PEOPLE REPRESENTS THE STUDENT'S CHANGING INNER THOUGHT PROCESS. THROUGH WRITING AND REFLECTION, HE DISCOVERS A DEEPENING PERSONAL UNDERSTANDING OF AND CONNECTION TO A GLOBAL BLACK LIBERATION STRUGGLE. IMAGE BY DAYSE GOMIS

Unlike rote repetition with which many of my students were familiar in their coursework and their living conditions as incarcerated people, they struggled with there being no singular answer. To that, I reminded them that life is complicated. I would not shortchange them on a deep, challenging intellectual experience because they were not physically on a college campus. Albeit remotely under subhuman conditions, when I teach them, I am teaching SLAC students.

They rose to the challenge. To bridge multilayered discussions on Indigeneity and Blackness, Afro-Brazilian Quilombo Communities' Struggle for Land Rights, housing, and lived environments' racial justice, I selected the anthropological text *Black Women against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil* by Keisha-Khan Y. Perry. I attempted to push boundaries of racial scripts trapped within a U.S.-centered, and Eurocentric lens. The effects were dramatic and immediate. The students responded in class to CNN reports they viewed during their break time on the Amazon and current Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's inflammatory rhetoric.

In another book, *The Anti-Black City* by Afro-Brazilian professor Jaime Amparo Alves, my students learned about prison conditions, carceral systems, and racial injustice in São Paulo, Brazil. Comparative analysis broadened their worldview to understand incarceration beyond their experience in the United States. They began to consider a solidarity with incarcerated communities abroad. In sum, my students become more aware of global systems of power, tools to question the social order, and finding their place within it.

During classroom instruction, I openly shared my own views. I maintained a strong position, yet I was careful to avoid forcing my views upon my students. Force and coercion permeate their lived experience as incarcerated people. Thus, I sought to give them something different: reduce the power dynamics where possible with dialogue. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues the following:

[D]ialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's 'depositing' ideas in another nor can it become a simple exchange to be 'consumed' by the discussants. Nor yet is it a hostile, polemical argument between those who are committed neither to the naming of the world, nor to search for truth, but rather to the imposition of their own truth...It is an act of creation...[It] is conquest of the world for the liberation of humankind. (88-9)

I invited dialogue and open discussion with provocative texts. Each week the men were tasked with discussion leadership to take ownership of the conversation. This was my effort to integrate their situated knowledge and experience into the course. From my vantage point, I was able to ask questions and explore conversations that I did not feel free to explore at the main Villanova University campus. Though my SCI-Phoenix students were being exposed to these concepts and perspectives for the first

time in an academic setting, I discovered that the action of validating their lived experience activated an extraordinary depth of analysis. Freire offers the following perspective:

If true commitment to the people, involving the transformation of the reality by which they are oppressed, requires a theory of transforming action, this theory cannot fail to assign the people a fundamental role in the transformation process...Revolutionary praxis is a unity, and the leaders cannot treat the oppressed as their possession. (2014: 126).

In practice, it was incredibly challenging for students who were accustomed to being told what to do for their every move. However, they slowly became more comfortable challenging me and one another through thoughtful class discussions. I planned my lessons with the same level of care that I do in any classroom setting. Each lesson began with a written agenda on the whiteboard. At the beginning of class I collected the weekly reflection assignments. Each day before the students led discussion, I gave a framing lecture. Absent audio-visual equipment and Internet access and armed with only a whiteboard and marker to help contextualize Brazil, I had to use my framing lectures as an opportunity for creative imaginative storytelling. Each week the students wrote a reflection piece and after each unit they wrote a long-form response paper (see appendix). My class had not only high standards, but also clear rubrics with regular generous feedback for improvement. There was no wiggle room for nonsense and no time to waste in our 16-week course.

Main Campus in Focus: Impact and Insights

The impact of teaching in the Graterford program was like a stream that extended well beyond the prison and seeped into my experience with main campus. The strides I made with my SCI-Phoenix students rendered the shortcomings of main campus more distant. Interactions with campus colleagues had similar effects. One day when asked about my experience with prison teaching, a colleague disparaged my work suggesting that my students' collective engagement was due to them being "a captive audience." My senior colleague proudly chuckled at his own shallow wit. I could not even muster a smile to entertain the mockery made of both my teaching and the suffering of men in prison as worthy of humoring the cheap pun and his ego. Experiences like these made me question the general sentiment of this SLAC's disjointed relationship to this extension program and the latent colonial logics of paternalism that may be at play, even in a seemingly cosmopolitan Global Interdisciplinary Studies department.

The waters of experience and wisdom on the main campus also flowed back to my prison teaching. The internal dialogue I had between my educator self on main campus and at the prison grew into productive tension. As an advisor of senior thesis projects, I saw that working directly with vulnerable communities was a hallmark of the many main campus students' educational journey. Some even volunteered in men's and women's prisons. The desire

to help vulnerable communities was laudable; however, my conversations with some students lay bare an uncomplicated and uncritical understanding of dynamics of power, class, race, socioeconomic standing, religion, etc. in the name of goodwill. Though I reminded myself and my incarcerated students about these oppressive systems, was I affirming and participating in the promotion of that culture on the main campus?

Some students were motivated by this culture, which reinforced notions of superiority and paternalism. With time, my main campus teaching felt uneven because students were most comfortable with pedestrian intellectual challenges that appeal to their inherent goodness. When I pushed some students to question their assumptions about the populations with whom they work—community organizations in Philadelphia, literacy programs in Haiti, or incarcerated men, women, and people—I could sense discomfort and resistance. If the mission is well-intentioned while doing “good work,” the potential for or impact of harm is negligible.

During this same time, SCI-Phoenix students welcomed reflection. Not only did they become students of themselves, they became increasingly open to learning with and from one another. In creating a space for my SCI-Phoenix students’ freedom, I released myself.

Prison Education in Focus

Mass incarceration, criminal justice reform, police abolition, and prison abolition are predominant social justice causes of the moment. Taking cues from bell hooks and Paulo Friere, I sought to concentrate on the needs of a student population whose needs and desires are rarely centered. Some pedagogical efforts did not land as easily in the prison setting as they did in the traditional campus setting. The men were not surveyed about their educational experience and much of the feedback was verbal. I had asked the men to reflect upon where they wanted the semester to go to meet their needs. bell hooks reminds us:

Progressive professors working to transform the curriculum so that it does not reflect biases or reinforce systems of domination are most often the individuals willing to take the risks that engaged pedagogy requires and to make their teaching practices a site of resistance (2017: 21).

In the weekly reflections, some students called attention to their own heritage and backgrounds. Personal realizations stemmed from race as an analytical tool. This process was a step further than conversation around their theoretical oppression; my students of all backgrounds were able to grapple with the realities of identity and who they are.

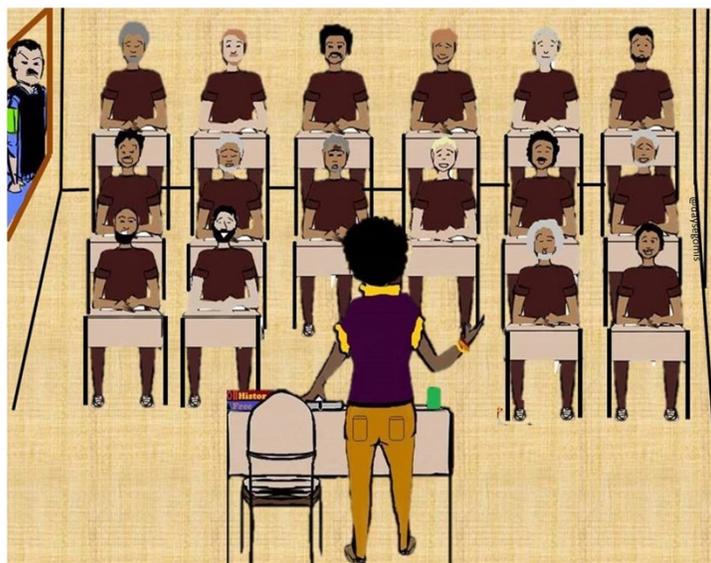
In my willingness to take risks, I also had to confidently face the possibility of failures and false starts. Sometimes there was the outright rejection of this intellectual autonomy through dialogue, but I did not take any of it personally. I was made aware of racial and gender sensibilities that were planted in their home communities that are also reconstituted within a strict men’s prison setting. For some of my students, the adage applied: “All Black people are men and all women are white.” At times the men parroted gender discussions, carefully selecting the “right” responses to appeal to a Black woman professor while diluted chauvinism seeped into classroom dynamics. There were also men who were genuinely curious about my experiences teaching and living abroad, and instead of roundly denying and minimizing the validity of my experience as a Black woman, they embraced the opportunity to learn another perspective. I created an environment to invite all perspectives without punishment or reward so that they might discover their own voice.

I also had the opportunity to learn. In the chapter “Love as the Practice of Freedom” in *Outlaw Culture* bell hooks reminds us that:

Whenever those of us who are members of exploited and oppressed groups dare to critically interrogate our locations, the identities and allegiances that inform how we live our lives, we begin the process of decolonization. If we discover in ourselves self-hatred, low self-esteem, or internalized white supremacist thinking and we face it, we can begin to heal. Acknowledging the truth of our reality, both individual and collective, is a necessary stage for personal and political growth (2015: 248).

As hooks describes, teaching in the prison offered a complicated

space for healing. I was able to reflect on the profoundly different contrasts between main campus life and prison conditions.



IN THE IMAGE, “TEACHING AND LEARNING UNDER WATCHFUL EYES/ENSINANDO E APRENDENDO SOB OLHOS VIGILANTES,” CARIÓCA COMMUNITY ARTIST DAYSE GOMIS ILLUSTRATES THE IN-CLASS EXPERIENCE OF INCARCERATED STUDENTS. THE CLASSROOM IS SHOWN TO HAVE STUDENTS OF VARYING RACE, AGE, AND EXPERIENCE. THE STUDENTS ARE DEPICTED AS CONTENTED, MOTIVATED, AND OPEN TO LEARNING. THE BLACK WOMAN PROFESSOR DIRECTLY ENGAGES THE STUDENTS. AN ONLOOKING CORRECTIONAL OFFICER IS SHOWN CAREFULLY MONITORING THE CLASSROOM THROUGH A SURVEILLANCE WINDOW. IMAGE BY DAYSE GOMIS

Unforeseen Challenges to Teaching

Although my presence as an instructor was a benefit to the social justice outreach objectives of the institution, there were few resources for me to personally adjust as a Black woman professor in a prison setting. Law enforcement officials are hardly objective. Biases both implicit and explicit still intervened. Race, socioeconomic status, gender expression, ability, perceived national origin, perceived age, religion, and citizenship status all intersect in complicated ways for any instructor in this setting. Whether in a suit, cardigan, button up, or sweater, with either box braids or an afro, I am read as a Black woman and my immersion in an unknown culture was different than for my white colleagues.

Policing, screening, and surveillance were tight at a maximum-security prison, but I felt like an unwelcome guest. Like all who entered, I was screened regularly to enter the prison campus. However, power plays of race and gender crept up to provide additional barriers—I had to advocate for every aspect of my experience from check-in to exit. I was invited to come but not welcome to feel comfortable or at ease at any point in time. The implication by prison staff of all levels was that I was not worthy of dignity. After opening up, I was told by my students how I am perceived: “Dr. Harrington, you look like our visitors.”

In the classroom itself, there were lingering issues. I was teaching men with extreme life experiences, unresolved traumas, and sparsely supported life difficulties. One downside of the program is that I was thrown into the mix with little training or support to cope with my own experience. However, my experience with main campus dynamics of care were reproduced in this prison teaching arrangement: no follow through or follow up, just a pat on the back for participating and being resilient. Care was not a part of the agreement. Fortunately, that was not a deterrent.

Conclusion

I experienced pride in what we achieved. From the final reflections and kind notes that some students shared, 16 weeks made an impact on them, but I know for sure, it certainly changed me. The takeaway that the students gave me was “less is more.” Looking back, I was very ambitious, and yet, I was at peace with my efforts. More than anything, I wanted to extend to them the humanity and grace that I was denied. Many students showed the same care in return. By comparison I could not fully understand or comprehend their plight and I likely never will. And still, the opportunity to present a new world, an analytical toolkit, and a perspective to the curious, intelligent, and deeply introspective group was one of the most rewarding teaching experiences of my life. The shortcomings that I experienced in a SLAC campus setting were offset by the challenging and beautiful experience of teaching with a prison education extension program. It was behind those gates that I found a reciprocal space for healing and freedom.

Acknowledgements

Dayse Gomis (Dayse Ellen Gomes de Moura), creator of the images in this article, is a visual artist, activist and Black feminist. A proud resident of the Fallet Fogueteiro favela in Rio de Janeiro, Dayse is involved in her community as a member of the Aqualtune Black Women’s Collective, the State Forum of Black Women in Rio de Janeiro (FMENRJ) and the Protestant Cartoonists Collective of Brazil. <https://instagram.com/dayseqomis>

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Appendix

Weekly Reflection Example:

Weekly Reflection Assignment (75-100 words): We've discussed the importance of political representation for marginalized communities in Brazil. Are media and culture representations significant as well? What do the readings tell us? What are your thoughts?

Response Paper Prompt Examples:

Word count: 1250-1500 (**not** including the source reference(s) at the end of your paper. Look to our article readings to see how you can cite in your paper.). Cite your sources, make certain that your work is legible and include a word count at the end.

Choose **one** of the following prompts to which you will respond:

The Law and the Land

The Amazon Rainforest and Quilombos are hotly contested territories with both domestic and international calls for specific protections. What is their value to Brazil? What is their value to the global community? Who are the stakeholders? Make reference to the readings in stating your claims. Both the Amazon and Quilombos are linked to indigenous and Black communities in Brazil. Both groups were slaughtered, enslaved, dispossessed, and robbed of dignity during the period of colonization and thereafter. Although we mentioned multiple methods of restitution from the state via reparations to these historically afflicted groups, we considered the right to land as an option. Make the case for **or** against land ownership rights and entitlements for the indigenous and Afro-Brazilian groups as a form of reparations. What are the limitations to both arguments?

A Seat at the Table: Intersectionality and Black Women in Brazil

Define intersectionality and apply the concept to any of our readings including *The Anti-Black City: Police Terror and Black Urban Life in Brazil*, *Black Women Against the Land Grab*, *Negras in Brazil*, *Health Equity in Brazil* and/or "A Place of Their Own: Black Feminist Leadership and Economic and Educational Justice in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil." How is it that understanding the interactions among categories such as race, gender, class, etc. inform a more equitable approach to criminal justice, economic policy, health policy, housing, and land rights or any other socio-political problem we have studied? Choose an issue, a reading, or a set of readings to deeply examine Black women's inclusion/exclusion and their experiences at the seat of socio-political issues in Brazilian politics.

Media, Culture and Representation

It has been argued that representation and visibility through media, culture, and arts is critical to democratic inclusion as well as the more traditional means of politics.

Using the articles "Encountering Exceptionalism: Afro-Brazilian Responses to the Rise of Obama in São Paulo Brazil," "Resistance Televised: The TV da Gente Television Network and Brazilian Racial Politics," and/or "Hip Hop and the Reconfiguration of Blackness in São Paulo and the Influence of African American Political and Musical Movements in the 20th Century," make your case. What do you observe? To what extent is visible representation of Afro-Brazilians in media, culture, and arts a political issue? Do you see any commonalities with the U.S.? What are the limits to its significance?

Selected Course Texts

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