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White Professor/(Mostly) White Students: Teaching Contemporary BIPOC Plays

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ABSTRACT

Teaching about race in a majority-white city at a majority-white university as a white cis-gendered woman is challenging. In this case study, I share an introduction to how and why I developed a course—Contemporary BIPOC Plays and Playwrights—at Utah State University in Logan, Utah, an overview of what the course covered, the experience (successes and failures) of teaching it, what I have learned from that experience, and some next steps. The goal is for other white teachers who teach mostly white students to learn from my mistakes and to pick up the mantle of teaching BIPOC plays/playwrights and anti-racism practices in their courses. As a dramaturg by trade, I approach the development and teaching of classes with a dramaturgical sensibility. As a white teacher, entering a majority white space tasked with teaching a new (and only) course in the department focused on race, here is what I would do differently and better in the future and hope others can learn from it. As a starting point: do more research (and more training), be even more

intentional with the course design and play selection, invite more non-white voices into the room, and create a community agreement with the students in the course at the start of the semester.

Teaching about race in a majority-white city at a majority-white university as a white cis-gendered woman is challenging. In spring 2021, at Utah State University in Logan, Utah, I developed and taught a course entitled Contemporary BIPOC Plays and Playwrights.[1] In this article, I share an introduction to who I am (more explicitly: who I am as a white cis-gendered woman), why and how I developed the course (including an overview of the course design), and what I have learned from the experience of teaching it (both the successes and failures). Presented in this way, it appears to have been a linear process, but I can assure you, it was not. From the short timeline to build the course, to tough decisions about content and materials, to difficult discussions in class (which at times led to tears), developing and teaching it was challenging. To other teachers who identity as white, especially those who teach mostly white students, and who have an interest in teaching BIPOC plays, this is for you. I hope white teachers can learn from my mistakes and pick up the mantle of teaching BIPOC plays/playwrights and anti-racism practices in their courses.

As a dramaturg by trade, I approach the development and teaching of courses with a dramaturgical sensibility. While I am still learning about teaching about race, what I know is dramaturgy—how to ask questions and how to search for answers. Maya Angelou said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” This quote has shaped my pedagogical practice throughout my career and it is the plan going forward: do better. I plan to **do more research** (and get more training), be more intentional with the **course design** and play selection, invite more **BIPOC voices** into the room, and create a **community agreement** with the students at the start of the semester. As a white teacher, entering a majority white space tasked with teaching

[1] Utah State University resides on the lands on of the Confederated Tribes of the Goshute Indians, Navajo Nation, Ute Indian Tribe, Northwestern Band of Shoshone, Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah, San Juan Southern Paiute, Skull Valley Band of Goshute, and White Mesa Band of the Ute Mountain Ute.

a new (and the only) course in the department focused on race, what follows is what I would do differently and better in the future in hopes that others can learn from it.

bell hooks tells us, “Teaching is a performative act” (p. 11). The performative act of teaching is one in which the identity of the performer matters greatly. hooks emphasizes the need for vulnerability in the classroom to create a progressive space and she does that in her work by pointing to where and how she is situated regarding her race, gender, and more (p. 21). More recently, scholars such as Gustave J. Weltsek (“The racialized roles we play: Owning the self through an emergent theatre project”) and Samuel Jaye Tanner (“Accounting for whiteness through collaborative fiction”) have provided various templates on how to speak to my whiteness. I am a white woman who grew up in a suburb of Louisville, KY (on the Indiana side), and who later moved to St. Louis, MO, where I graduated high school. This location change began to shape my understanding of race as I moved from a school with very little diversity to a school that bussed in students of color from all parts of the city. For the first time, I was aware of the implications of race in the classroom. While my classrooms in St. Louis were more racially diverse, the co-curricular activities such as choir, yearbook, and theatre, were not. It was in high school that I decided to be an educator and I eventually went on to teach high school theatre in Arizona and Missouri before returning to graduate school to become a college professor. I have moved through the world with privilege—the privilege of a strong family bond, the financial security of two-working parents with well-paying jobs, the expectation of, and support toward, a college education, and the privilege of whiteness. Those privileges have shaped my pedagogy and have asked me to teach topics related to race with an approach of continual learning and decolonization.

The move to Utah in summer 2020 created another shift in my racial awareness. It is not that Utah lacks all diversity, but it is a much less diverse place than other places I have lived and worked. The town where USU is located, Logan, is 86.6% white (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts).[2] The student population at USU is 84.3% white (“Office of Analysis, Assessment and Accreditation”). Additionally, the Department

[2] According to the United States census data (from 2019), the population of Logan, Utah is 86.6% white, 1.4% Black or African American alone, .5% American (*continued*) Indian or Alaska Native alone, 3.3% Asian alone, .5% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander alone, 15.3% Hispanic or Latino, and 2.9% Two or More Races.

of Theatre Arts is majority white: undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and staff.

I was hired to fill a gap in the department. The department needed someone who could head the BA Theatre Arts program, teach courses in theatre history, and pick up courses in the BFA Theatre Education program. I occasionally teach a special topics course related to theatre history and literature, which was part of my role assignment for spring 2021. The development of this course came during the aftermath of George Floyd's death and the racial tension during the summer of 2020. It came after the We See You White American Theatre (WSYWAT) statement in June 2020, which was a call to theatres and theatre programs to do better. The demands of WSYWAT are listed in a 31-page living document, which includes demands in academic and professional training programs. This section of the WSYWAT demands calls for the "decentering of whiteness in curricula and pedagogies." It demands we, as theatre educators, make anti-racism an "explicit core value" that goes beyond performative statements and goals, but "this must become central to your [our] mission as your [our] standards of excellence." Beyond missions, it specifically demands the "immediate decentralization of whiteness and the white/Western aesthetic as the default" and "an audit of your [our] pedagogy to ensure the inclusion of BIPOC writers in the canon" beyond simply adding "August Wilson to your syllabus and calling it a day" (We See You White American Theatre). For me, this work meant analyzing the courses and texts I teach. After reviewing my course reading lists, and the course lists of several other Utah State University theatre faculty, it was clear the special topics class should be focused on contemporary plays written by Black, Indigenous, and playwrights of color. At the time I named the course, "Contemporary BIPOC Plays and Playwrights," I knew of the complicated uses and feelings surrounding the acronym "BIPOC." NPR's *Code Switch* podcast investigates language and specifically POC and BIPOC in several episodes including "Is It Time to Say R.I.P. to 'POC'?" The hosts shared responses from listeners regarding the use of POC and BIPOC. The consensus in that episode is there is no consensus; that identifying terms are just as individual as the people who use them. "Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC)" was the language of the WSYWAT call when the group of theatre artists introduced the statement and the demands, that were "culled from years of discussion between members of the Black, Indigenous and People of

Color (BIPOC) theatre communities immersed in the dynamics of which they speak, and bears the contradictions of our many concerns, approaches, and needs" (We See You White American Theatre). The acronym "BIPOC" is utilized over 300 times in the WSYWAT demands, so that was the language I chose to use.

Due to the tight timeline from when I began at USU to when the course would be taught, I immediately began to research, which leads to the first piece of advice: **do more research**. Pedagogy often builds on the work of others; therefore I researched how others taught similar courses, what plays they used, and what scholarly articles and books they assigned. I was frustrated, though not surprised, to find a lack of publicly available syllabi for courses similar to the one I proposed to teach. While the syllabi search was a starting point, I also researched what it means to be a white teacher teaching mostly white students about race and employing anti-racist pedagogy. In 2020 and 2021, there was a flood of articles on these topics on blogs, forums, and news websites including *The Atlantic, Edutopia,* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* I employed lessons from many of these sources. One article spoke of the need to go beyond the well-known, "iconic" names of a movement to provide students with a broader look at history (Roth). From this, I ensured that my reading list not only included "iconic" BIPOC playwrights such as David Henry Hwang (which I did include), but also playwrights my students may be less aware of such as Sylvia Khoury. Another article, similar to the WSYWAT statement, argues for challenging the canon, going beyond the text for research, and asking questions (Simmons). These suggestions helped shape the course with a dramaturgical approach by framing discussions with questions asked not only by me but also by the students. There was a thread through much of the scholarship that articulated the need for white professors to push past their discomfort and uncertainty to learn, research, and implement anti-racism practices (Akamine Phillips). The literature of this course fell within my comfort zone as a scholar and dramaturg, but the teaching of it did not. I am still learning and unlearning knowledge and histories related to communities of color, anti-racist practices, and the history of race in theatre. This journey is ongoing but includes research, training, and conversations. I encourage others to do the same and to identify gaps of knowledge and seek to fill them.

The **course design** was based on my research and the creation of the reading list. My booklist was due mid-October 2020, therefore I had

less than six weeks to choose texts.[3] The parameters I created included contemporary published plays (or at least accessible plays via playwrights, New Play Exchange, playwright agents), diversity among the playwrights, and diversity of genre.[4] Additionally, with the thousands of plays that fit within these parameters, I also chose plays that do something interesting with structure or storytelling, that address various issues related to race, and that came from playwrights whose work I admire. The structure of the course emerged as I started to design the reading schedule.

It was important to cover a wide range of topics related to race, ethnicity, culture, and religion. Beginning with some introductory days and discussion of terms (race, ethnicity, BIPOC), we would then read one play a week. The final structure: introduce a topic (i.e. race and current events) and read a play on that topic (i.e. Tearrance Arvelle Chisholm's *Hooded, or Being Black for Dummies,* a play that references Trayvon Martin and the murders of unarmed Black and brown men by police). This structure, topic + sample play, has worked well in other courses. This framework allows for a broad introduction to a topic with scholarship, news articles, podcasts, videos, and more. Then we would discuss and analyze a play, which addressed each topic. In the future, I would adjust the topics and plays for the course, as broad topics such as "Latinx Theatre" were too large for the amount of time I scheduled to discuss it. In addition to the content, I would change the approach. By centering the topic, the course became less about the plays and playwrights and more about debates related to each topic. For example, after reading *Yellow Face* by David Henry Hwang, the discussion went awry with opinions, sometimes shocking ones, about race and casting. One student shared that they have been told they are "ethnicity ambiguous" and can "go for" non-white roles, despite identifying as white. This led to re-centering the discussion around ourselves and our experiences, which was not the goal. And while I have experience with classroom management, at times I was so taken aback that it would take time to refocus the discussion. If each day began with the play, then hopefully the conversations would focus on the history, dramaturgy, and

[3] The course will not be listed in the catalog until books are posted (or until it is noted that no books are required). Additionally, it is *strongly* discouraged to add additional costs to the class, such as the need to purchase additional texts, after registration begins.

[4] For purposes of this class, I defined "contemporary" as the last twenty years.

topics within the context of the play. My limited knowledge of the students, my passion for the material, and my optimism about how students *might* engage with the material, informed my pedagogical approach (structure and content) for the course but also became a challenge in teaching the course. I was not prepared for students to argue against notions such as "actors should only perform in roles of their own race," as some did in the discussion of *Yellow Face.*

A safe assumption in building this course was that most of the students would be white. The courses I taught in fall 2020 were filled with almost entirely white students. Nineteen students (fourteen undergraduate students, five graduate students) enrolled in the course, which had an enrollment cap of twenty. The high enrollment in the course fed my optimism for teaching the course and reinforced the need for it. All nineteen students visually read as white, though two students shared that they had more diverse cultural backgrounds from their grandparents (i.e. "I am a quarter _____.") or in earlier generations in their families (i.e. "My great-grandfather was half _____.") as the course unfolded. These revelations caused tension in the classroom as some students viewed that information as a claim to diversity that was not part of the way those students moved through the world. Both students who shared this information generally identify as white. From the start of the class, I used language such as "in a mostly white classroom" or "in our primarily white department" to not assume everyone's identity.

The one exception to the mostly white space was the Undergrad Teaching Fellow (UTF, essentially an undergraduate TA) who is a person of color. In our department, the role of UTF is often not competitive. In my four semesters, I have had at least one UTF each semester and generally, it has been a student who has previously taken the course, was successful in the course, and requested to be my UTF. The student of color who became the UTF was a student who was interested in taking the class, but was already enrolled in several classes and asked if they could be the UTF for the class instead of enrolling in it. I agreed and was grateful to have assistance with the course and hopeful that this student would have insights, beyond mine, as a person of color. It is standard practice in our department that UTFs assist with attendance, technology, feedback on assignments, and some teaching. In this class, more so than any other class I have taught with a UTF, it was difficult to balance the relationship of the UTF as a peer of the

students enrolled, while also in a position of authority. Students often looked to the UTF for opinions and answers (which the UTF articulated their discomfort with) and at other times their presence as a person of color was ignored. I will be forever grateful for this student, their presence, and their contributions to the course, but, in the future, I would not put the weight of the class on one undergraduate student of color and I would advise other professors against it as well. Alternative options would be to co-teach the class with a BIPOC faculty member, hire a BIPOC graduate teaching assistant, and/or secure funding for BIPOC guest speakers.

From the start, I planned to bring in **BIPOC voices**, in addition to the UTF. I received funding to invite three guest artists to join the class via Zoom. The guest speakers included Andi Meyer, an Asian American theatre maker, activist, and arts educator from Kansas City, MO; Sylvia Khoury a New York-born writer of French and Lebanese descent who wrote *Against the Hillside,* which we read; and Joe Ngo a LA-based Asian American actor/writer/musician who originated and developed the role of Chum in Lauren Yee's *Cambodian Rock Band,* which we also read. Students wrote questions to ask our guests and the speakers shared their experiences, insights, and advice. The days of the guest lectures were arguably the best; the bright spots of the course indicating the need for more diverse voices.[5]

In addition to inviting more experts into the space, with the class I would create a **community agreement** to define our values, guidelines, and boundaries for classroom discussion. I prefaced the class with a statement about the difficulty of participating in conversations about race, but did not create a community agreement. On the first day of class, we did introductions, I went over the syllabus, and assigned homework, which asked students to write a short response to questions about the need for equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racist practices in theatre and what they hope to learn in the course. The students shared troubling, compelling, and honest responses. When we returned the next day, I shared their anonymous responses, which included comments such as: "I want to unlearn some of what was taught and drilled into me as someone from a small, white, religious town," "Sometimes these topics feel a little uncomfortable and I don't love being

[5] I have been offered continued funding to bring in guests in future iterations of the course.

uncomfortable, but I am willing to take this one for the sake of education," and "I am both excited and afraid to learn of the unintentional ignorance I have allowed myself to live in." This allowed the students and I to be vulnerable, but also to find a starting point for the class. Some were excited to build on previous knowledge, others were anxious about having conversations about race. It was helpful to glimpse how students were feeling and thinking about the course.

On that same day, we talked about the We See You White American Theatre statement and demands. It was during this discussion where the division between students began and where a community agreement would have been especially helpful. Some students fully supported the movement, others pushed back, while a few simply did not understand it. In an interview, Jennifer Patrice Sims, an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Alabama at Huntsville, offers suggestions on how to handle resistance such as centering facts and stats and turning questions from students as probes back to them (Supiano). I attempted these techniques, but tensions remained high. What I quickly realized, through the first two weeks of the semester, was their desire for concrete answers. The "gray" area—the lack of a widely accepted definition of a term, the lack of a monolithic representation—was challenging for students. My UTF also noted there seemed to be more talking—and often debating in search of the one right answer—than listening. They wanted me to tell them what they could and could not say; what terms they could and could not use. For example, the students understood the varying opinions about the acronym BIPOC, but then what? "What are we supposed to say?!?" This never got easier throughout the semester. I tried to teach them to approach these topics with a dramaturgical sensibility—to ask questions, to research, to talk to individuals—and to live in the discomfort of not having an answer or sometimes having an answer, but still getting it wrong. They did not like this. There was a sense of, "Well you're the teacher, you tell us." And in my head, I was screaming, "This is the work. It's hard! It's gray!"

After a few tough days of high tensions, frustrations, and interruptions, I was panicked. The discussions, which were how the class was mostly structured, were not going well. Together with my UTF, we created what we called our "Rules of Engagement;" our attempt at a variation of a community agreement that I should have set up from the start. It read:

Before speaking…
- Slow down, pause
- Think, ask yourself…
  - Will this cause harm?
  - Am I just playing the Devil's advocate? Does the Devil need an advocate?
  - Does it need to be shared?
  - Is it on-topic?
  - Does it advance the conversation?
  - Is it a comment, a question, or a provocation?
  - If I have already spoken, are there others who might want to speak?
- Formulate thoughts (maybe even write them down)

Then...
Raise your hand

Did it help? I like to believe so, but according to the students' weekly journal responses, not entirely. That was how the semester began, which was one of the tougher starts in my fifteen years as a teacher (four years as a high school teacher, six years as a graduate student teacher, and five years as a college professor). My advice: do not wait for things to go south before creating guidelines. My optimism and excitement for the course overshadowed my need for a community agreement. I always entered that class excited, nervous, and well-prepared. I left that class occasionally inspired, often disheartened, and always emotionally and mentally exhausted. I was asking a group of almost all white students—most with senioritis, who had not fully engaged with their craft in over a year, going to school in person during a pandemic, being introduced to concepts, terms, plays, and people they did not know—to not jump to the defensive, to recognize their privilege, and to go with me on this process of learning and growing.

Was it worth it? Of course. We had some lows and highs throughout the semester. There were lows such as the time, when discussing feminist plays, several students made an argument that *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams is a great example of a feminist work. And there was no shortage of frustration and sometimes hurt expressed in the weekly journals. But there were highs too, which included getting to share these incredible plays with my students, most of which they were unfamiliar with. We also had a lively (though

stressful) discussion about Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* as several students in the class were able to see the New York production. The guest lectures, as I noted, brought in welcomed perspectives. And one joy of mine was watching a group of students fall in love with Lauren Yee's *Cambodian Rock Band.*

I, we, survived the semester. "Survived" may sound hyperbolic, but it is also how it felt. There were days in which I was sure the class would implode. There were days when I barely made it to my office before the tears came. I believed in what I was teaching and the importance of it and when I made identified failures in my teaching, I was affected by it. Student evaluations are a small marker of the success or failure of a course and I received several critical comments related to workload (amount of reading, assignments) and understanding (empathy, care of students). However, these few comments were in contrast with the overwhelmingly positive feedback related to the expanse of knowledge gained in the course, the suggestion that it should be a mandatory course for all theatre students, and a desire for a second semester of this course to cover the content more deeply.

So, what's next? Do better. I plan to take my own advice offered here. I plan to do more research and attend more trainings, continue to develop the course structure and content, find more BIPOC collaborators and artist to invite in, and implement a community agreement with the students.

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