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Affiliation: University of Michigan

Rank: Postdoctoral Research Fellow **Learning to Transgress: Law 10.639 and Teacher Training Classrooms in Brazil**

**Abstract:** Signed in 2003, law 10.639 makes the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture compulsory in primary school lessons. Training programs to educate teachers on this material have proliferated in the state of São Paulo and elsewhere in Brazil. This paper illuminates non-elite Brazilians' lived, personal engagements with ideas of racial inequality by way of these training programs. Participants in these classrooms did not express direct rejection or acceptance of these ideas, but rather relied on personal experiences to negotiate their conceptions of racial identity and racial inequality that deviate from traditional ideas of racial democracy. As Brazil instantiates further moves to take race into account when facilitating access to resources and directly confront racial inequality, it is imperative that the empirical and everyday iterations of this shift are understood.

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Within about the last ten years, Brazilian public universities have established affirmative action policies or quotas<sup>i</sup> to racially and economically diversify their students, which has unleashed unprecedented debates around the idea of race<sup>ii</sup> and racial identity in Brazil. Mala Htun has characterized affirmative action in Brazil as an “absolutist issue where people have firm opinions” (2004: 72). Indeed, the field is largely divided into two camps: those opposed to affirmative action on the basis that it is being imported from the U.S. and will introduce bipolar ideas of racialization in a country that has seen itself as racially mixed (Fry et. al. 2007; Kamel 2007) and those in favor of race based initiatives to generate increased Afro-Brazilian representation in higher education and further their access to upward mobility (Heringer 1999; Siss 2003). These debates play out within the public venues of scholarly books, newspaper articles, and television documentaries in both national and international venues.

While affirmative action has mobilized quite charged public conversations about Brazilian race relations and the nature of racial inequality, law 10.639 and the voices of everyday people have received less attention. This paper examines the dynamics of racial recognition in Brazil in two ways. First, this article draws attention to the role of law 10.639 within Brazilian racial policies. Law 10.639 was the first law that former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva signed to address the lack of Afro-Brazilian representation in the educational sphere at the primary school level. The law makes the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture compulsory in primary school curricula. Law 10.639 makes an intervention at the educational level by requiring teachers to diversify their classroom content with information that includes Afro-Brazilian images, perspectives, and experiences.

Second, this article aims to examine changing understandings of race in Brazil not as it transforms larger social and political structures, but as it is continuously reframed on the micro-social or everyday level. Various teacher-training programs have proliferated throughout the country in order to provide teachers with classroom material about Afro-Brazilian history and culture to satisfy the legal mandate of law 10.639. The teacher-training classrooms in which I participated were dynamic spaces of conversation, interaction, and engagement where ordinary Brazilians could encounter a way of thinking about race that ran contrary to the common belief that racism cannot naturally exist in a mixed race society. This article takes as a point of

departure the issue of the personal in an era of changing conceptions of Brazilian race relations. This shift involves not only the macro changes of law and policy, but also the personal, lived, everyday interactions of particular people. It uses the personal anecdotes, stories, and conversations of Brazilians offered during teacher training sessions to examine how social change is a personal matter and how it plays out within everyday interactions. I consider the “personal” to broadly reference the lived experiences of human beings. Within several instances the personal becomes the prism through which people may perceive or react to macro structural events and changing environments. I suggest that many Brazilians may offer more visceral responses to this shift from racial democracy based on local and personal experiences to account for the changes they are confronting.

Affirmative action, law 10.639, and other policies that recognize race are indicative of a general shift in racial dynamics characterized by a move away from racial democracy towards racial recognition. The national ideal of racial democracy in Brazil centralizes mixture between the Indigenous, African, and Portuguese populations within the heritage and identity of all Brazilians (e.g. Freyre 1944). Many Brazilians commonly believe that racial categories are indistinguishable due to this history of racial mixture and that racism cannot exist within a society without clearly defined racial identities. Scholars have detailed the various ways through which many Brazilians continue to interpret their social relationships and personal identities through the lens of racial mixture and how this narrative downplays or erases attention to racism and racial inequality (Twine 1998; Burdick 1998; Goldstein 1999; Sheriff 2000).

Although it is common for many Brazilians to disarticulate the links between race and inequality, research studies have documented the economic, material, spatial, political, and educational margins in which many Afro-Brazilians operate (Silva 1985; Andrews 1991; Lovell 1999; Mitchell and Wood 1999; Telles 2004). As scholars have found in Puerto Rico (Godreau et. al. 2008) and Ecuador (Johnson 2007; 2009), schools in Latin America are also sites that reproduce national narratives that privilege racial mixture while tacitly promoting whiteness as a positive identity. In the area of education, scholars have found unequal representation of Afro-Brazilians in didactic material and children’s literature used within many primary schools (Diero 1979; Negrão 1987; Munanga 1999; Lopes 2002). These studies demonstrate how Afro-Brazilians are either invisible in school textbooks or represented in stereotypical and limited roles when they do appear. Yet, despite academic and activist attention to racial inequality, many

Brazilians continue to deny that racial inequality plays a significant role in structuring opportunities for social mobility and accessing resources, like education, which animates their resistance to new policies, like affirmative action, that recognize and seek to remedy the racial exclusion that has plagued Brazilian life.

The issue of racial inequality began to receive more attention after Brazil's governmental shift from a military dictatorship to a democracy and with the election of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. As a graduate student, President Cardoso studied racial inequality in Brazil, which informed his openness to initiating and supporting affirmative action policies during his administration. Brazil's participation in the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa was a catalyzing force that propelled the shift from racial democracy to racial recognition as a governing principle (Htun 2004). Elected in 2003, President Lula continued the momentum for racial inclusion by supporting further reforms. Former president Lula has overseen the creation of SEPPIR (a special secretariat for the promotion of racial equality), signed law 10.639, and made November 20 a federally designated holiday called the Day of Black Consciousness. Central to creating the push for these policies and then implementing them has been Afro-Brazilian activists who have tirelessly advocated for the recognition of racism within everyday life and state policy (Hanchard 1994; Perry 2004; Caldwell 2007; Paschel and Sawyer 2008). However, the fact that these policies of racial recognition are gaining traction within the public sphere does not mean that more common understandings of what constitutes racism and racial identities undergo a total transformation. In short, ideas of racial democracy within the general populace do not disappear in light of these new initiatives. The voices of everyday people have been elusive within scholarship on the initiation of racial recognition policies in Brazil.<sup>iii</sup> I seek to place these shifts in racial discourse on empirical ground by stressing the lived, everyday engagement of people with these changes.

Academic studies have demonstrated the value of probing the personal and intimate dimensions of racial democracy and racial identity in Brazil and in Latin America. Peter Wade has argued that in addition to operating as a national ideology, *mestizaje/mestiçagem* is also a "lived process that operates within the embodied person and within networks of family and kinship relationships" (2005: 239). Patricia Pinho underscores Wade's point by recounting a family story in order to probe "the meanings of mestizo phenotypes." However, Pinho examines how racism can operate as part of intimate kinship relationships. Pinho insists that,

And following Gail Lewis, I am disclosing my family memories in order to scrutinize the *ordinariness* of racist practices. Our ways and visions of being in the world are structured through racialized and gendered discourses and practices that require a feminist approach of highlighting what is political in accounts of personal experience. Through this process, the private, ordinary, and apparently insignificant aspects of daily life can be understood as shared experience, worthy of being theorized. (Pinho 2009: 55-56)

Pinho and Wade maintain the centrality of the personal within notions of racial mixture and racial belonging in many Latin American countries where *mestizaje* defines the national narrative. This article builds upon this work by examining how people continue to live and think about these processes of mixture during the recent shift to state endorsed discourses of racial recognition in Brazil. A central premise of this article is that ethnographic treatment of people personally grappling with the move away from racial democracy is not only empirically valuable but also important to further our understanding of this social change. If the personal is one of the sites through which people think through these racial politics, then a great deal may be at stake in the way that Brazilians apprehend the shifting terrain of race relations.

The title of this article references bell hooks's treatise on educational practices called *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), in which she connects knowledge, education, and teaching to a struggles for social justice. In the book she finds the classroom to be a "radical space of possibility" and discusses teaching practices and critical pedagogy "that enables transgression – a movement against and beyond boundaries" (1994: 12). Hooks champions teaching practices that enable students to "know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable" (1994: 12). In Brazil, "acceptable" ways of understanding race relations continue to be attuned by racial democracy. Silencing articulations of racism and racial inequality is one of the myriad ways this boundary is socially enforced. Robin Sheriff defines this silence as "cultural censorship" in that "the avoidance of open discussions on racism is directed towards the containment of racialized oppression" (2000: 121). In the same vein, Kia Lilly Caldwell links this pervasive silence about racism to, what she outlines as "mestiço essentialism," a set of discourses that "privilege a hybrid racial essence and, by so doing, both obscure racism and foreclose discussions of racial difference" (2007: 18). France Twine found

that Afro-Brazilians rarely discussed racism with their children. She argues that, “Their silence, although strategic for the purposes of retaining employment and sustaining harmonious relations with the white elite, ultimately sustains white domination. These experiences disempower Afro-Brazilian children and adolescents, who learn that their experiences with racism are a taboo subject for discussion with their parents and peers” (Twine 1998: 152-53). The maintenance of racial democracy works within and through silencing, avoiding, and dodging open discussions of racism and racial difference making the work of talking about issues of racial inequality a potentially transgressive act.

In this paper, I emphasize learning about, and the responses of learners to, subjugated knowledge and alternative experiences as a critical practice that has the potential to transgress boundaries of belonging and recognition of racial difference in Brazil. In these teacher-training classrooms participants were systematically exposed to a counter-hegemonic narrative of racial recognition through activities, information, curricular material, and personal stories about the experiences and histories of Brazilians who are racialized as black. Thus, the material presented in the classrooms made interventions at the level of the classroom curriculum, but also at the level of the teachers general understanding of race and race relations in Brazil. Trainers attempted to move participants beyond the hegemonic discourse of racial democracy by informing them about the fact of racial inequality and its manifestation within the school and other aspects of social life. Trainers also shared material that teachers could incorporate into the classroom lessons that would give visibility to Afro-Brazilian history and culture. Teachers’ engagement with the trainers and this discourse of explicit racial recognition incited spirited and dynamic debates within the classroom. While I would not say that these conversations were always successful at producing a shared understanding of the ways in which inequality can be tracked along racial lines, these teacher training classrooms became sites and spaces of struggle over the limits and meanings of racial democracy and racial recognition, informed by the participants personal experiences of race that they frequently voiced.

### **The Teacher Training Program**

Before discussing the activities in the teacher training classrooms, I will briefly outline the structure of the teacher training programs and the setting. The teacher training programs in which I was involved took place in a city 100 miles north of the city of São Paulo called Flor do

Campo.<sup>iv</sup> The inauguration of the training program resulted from demonstrations by local black activists who insisted that their city municipality ensure that the schools followed law 10.639 by integrating their curricula with Afro-Brazilian history and culture. The municipality finally conceded to these demands and approved a teacher training initiative, entitled *Ação Africa* or Action Africa.

Project for Racial Consciousness (*Projecto para Consciencia Racial*) won the contract to organize the teacher training programs in Flor do Campo. PRC is a business in the city of São Paulo that works in the area of diversity training and research about the Afro-Brazilian population and inequality. Flávia Gomes, an Afro-Brazilian woman, is one of three people who run this business and she invited me to attend the training sessions that she facilitated. In addition to running PRC and facilitating teacher training programs throughout the state of São Paulo, Flávia has organized conferences on the theme of Afro-Brazilian popular culture, spoken at various organizations and gatherings on the topic of racial equality, and she has been invited to national and international conferences to present her research and talk about struggles for racial recognition in Brazil. Flávia has a PhD in Communications from the University of São Paulo. Another researcher introduced me to Flávia when I began research in São Paulo in 2005 and since then she has generously invited me to participate in her activities when I am in Brazil. I accompanied Flávia to her training classes, where I sat among the teachers and followed the lessons as a participant in the classroom. I chatted with the teachers during breaks, and before and after class. Upon Flávia's request I gave a lecture to the class and led one of the discussions.

Action Africa was set up to run for six weeks in Flor do Campo. Teachers were to attend two classes per week for a total of twelve classes to complete the entire training program. Upon completion of the program, teachers received credit to maintain their certification as educators in the municipality's schools. The program offered several different time slots for classes to accommodate the seventy-seven teachers that participated and their hours of availability. We taught a total of ten classes per week over a four-day time period, with five classes on one lesson and five classes on another. On Wednesday we taught three classes from 9-11:30 am, 1-3:30 pm, and 5-7:30 pm. On Thursday we taught from 9-11:30 am and from 5-7:30 pm. We followed the Wednesday schedule on Friday and the Thursday schedule on Saturday. On Wednesday and Thursday we would teach the same lessons and on Friday and Saturday we would teach the same

lessons. During the breaks we ate lunch and had an afternoon snack and then saved dinner for after the last class. We saw the same teachers at least twice during the week.

Teachers were given a workbook of about fifty pages filled with power point slides that contained content for the classes. There was also room for teachers to write in the workbooks. Flávia commonly supplemented these workbooks with academic research articles, newspaper stories, movies, and other popular media. Teachers received the content in class and did not have any homework or outside research to do. Flávia explained that the curriculum needed to require little from teachers beyond their presence and participation in the classroom, because their primary responsibility was teaching their classes.

Themes of the lessons centered on the structural inequalities through which blackness is stigmatized and that pattern Afro-Brazilian student experiences as other or marginal. The lessons were constructed to illuminate the ways in which racism was manifested through the curriculum, in teachers' actions, and within the interactions of the students. In doing so, they also pointed to larger social structures and patterns of speech that infer racial preference and indicate a general racism within everyday acts and sayings. In this way, racism does not remain a phenomenon uniquely manifested only within the confines of the school, but rather the school reproduces larger social and cultural patterns of racial discrimination. Teachers were also given materials, such as movies, maps of Africa, ideas and information for lessons, songs, and techniques, to incorporate information about Afro-Brazilian history and culture into the classroom.

Many teachers claimed that they had not taken classes on this subject matter so many of them were confronting this type of material in a systematic way for the first time. Typically, Flávia always began the first class with an introduction to Law 10.639 and its goals to promote anti-racism in the classroom. After these talks, she asked the teachers if they had ever encountered this type of material. Normally the teachers would shake their head no, but in one session a teacher raised her hand and claimed, "my education was not anti-racist, but that doesn't mean it was racist either." Many Brazilians resent the implication that they are exhibiting racist behaviors, which sociologist Florestan Fernandes famously described as the prejudice against having prejudice (*preconceito de ter preconceito*). Another teacher in another session defended the schools by saying: "We don't see this [racism] with the children. In my school we have one dark skinned girl (*pretinha*). Her father is black (*negro*) and her mother is white (*branca*). She gets along fine with the other students. We just don't see this in the school." The second



teacher's attempt to defend the school relied upon narratives of racial mixture and apparent cordial relations between the students to support her claim. Teachers were not openly hostile to this information presented by Flávia, but they did express resistance to considering how their schools could promote racial exclusion rather than harmonious race relations. These responses are consistent with ideals of racial democracy that seek to deny the veracity of racism within social lives and everyday settings. In the next section I turn to ethnographic descriptions of the teacher training classrooms in order to present the lessons and conversations that emerged in these spaces. I also seek to show how everyday Brazilians are grappling with the shift from racial democracy to racial recognition.

### **Everyday Racism**

One of the lessons, entitled "Culture and Ethnocentrism" covered the topics of race relations in Brazil, Eurocentrism, and the stigmatization of blackness. This class was meant to act as a foundational introduction for teachers to understand how racism operates and some of the mechanisms that continue its existence. It was positioned early in the curriculum in order to make teachers aware of the conditions that necessitate the curricular intervention of law 10.639. In other words, before teachers were introduced to teaching material, the trainers sought to impart on teachers the need for these policies and diverse material in the classroom. The overall goal of the lesson was to show teachers that ethnocentrism in Brazil worked through the privileging of Brazilians of European decent and the stigmatization of blackness. This ethnocentrism is communicated through references and actions during daily life.

A slide in the teachers' workbook defined ethnocentrism as "privileging the universe of representations as a model and reducing the significance of other universes and cultures that are perceived as different" (Carvalho 1997). The trainer, Flávia, explained that European culture and representations are privileged in Brazil and that this situation constitutes ethnocentrism. She then said, "the goal of law 10.639 is to not erase Europeans and their culture, but to include others." She then moved on to discuss the interpretation of Brazilian race relations as harmonious due to racial mixture. The trainer invoked the work of Gilberto Freyre and his well-known *The Masters and the Slaves*, in which he argued that miscegenation between Portuguese slave owners and enslaved Africans produced the cordial race relations and a mixed race population that uniquely marks Brazilian society. The trainer then said that this racial mixture was achieved through rape:

“mesticagem was done through rape. People say that the Portuguese fell in love with the Indians. The Portuguese fell in love with blacks. But it was through violence and rape.” This phrasing disrupted the romantic picture that Freyre constructed by acknowledging the power relations and inequality that underwrote these sexual relations. During this part of the lecture the classes remained quiet and listened to the trainer speak.

Flávia then went on to define race and ethnicity and bring them into relationship with the idea of stereotypes and prejudice, discrimination, and inequality. She invited teachers to think about some sayings that were common to many Brazilians that reflected prejudice against a group of people, particularly Afro-Brazilians. One of the teachers voiced the phrase “Black with a white soul” (*negro de alma branca*) and another said “To turn black is to turn bad” (*Tornar negro, tornar ruim*). The trainer asked people to consider these sayings within the context of the class material, saying that these sayings are quotidian or everyday phrases that express a stigma against Afro-Brazilians. “Racism works through this kind of speech,” Flávia stated. This speech gives preference to or valorizes whiteness.

The trainer then moved on to discuss inequality and race in Brazil. She brought in an article from the newspaper, *Folha de São Paulo*, with the headline “Mortality of Blacks is greater than Whites” from August 25, 2005. She asked the teachers to take a moment to read the article. The article explained that the main cause of death among blacks was violence. Flávia said, “the reasons are not biological, they are social. Blacks have less money, they live in the periphery, and they don’t have access to health plans. We have to ask why? Why aren’t there public policies that address Afro-Brazilians in the area of health?” This part of the lesson came towards the end of class and discussion in one of the classes became very animated after this moment. One of the teachers, a gym teacher, began the discussion by relating an experience she had in a clinic: “I was in the waiting room of a clinic and I saw that a darker skinned black woman got treated worse than I did.” But then she seemed to veer off the original theme of the conversation: “I was watching the 8pm soap opera, and the main actor is black and has a baby with the actress who is white. I have a black parent and a white parent and I am very brown. The baby on television is darker than me, and I think the baby should be lighter.” This comment sparked a lively conversation on the subject of color. Another teacher chimed in: “My father is very dark (*Africano bem brava*) and my mother is brown (*morena*) and I am the color I am.” Then a third teacher said, “well two people can have twins of different colors.” Someone pointed

to Juliana (a woman with slightly olive skin and straight dark hair) and shouted, “Well look at Juliana, she clearly has a foot in the kitchen (*pé a cozinha*),” a term commonly used to imply black ancestry within one’s heritage. A black teacher stood up and stated, “No! This is a political matter. Juliana is seen as white and I am seen as black!” Finally, a black female teacher got in the last word with a personal testimony.

I consider myself black (*negra*). I arrived at this because I was the darkest in my family and people considered my sister and I the blacks of the family. My mother is Portuguese descendent and mixed with Indian and my father is black and mixed with Indian as well. Being black can also have something to do with hair. My sister’s hair is straighter than mine, so she may not be considered black. For my mother’s family I was considered black and for my father’s family I wasn’t considered black. Suddenly, I arrived at a crisis and wanted to know who I was. This search is a journey for all Afro-descendants (*Afro-descendentes*).

This conversation surpassed the 5:30 ending time of the class. After this teacher’s statement, the trainer ended the lesson quickly with a lesson she attributed to Steve Biko, a South African freedom fighter that I had become accustomed to her referencing. She said, “Many blacks may look at their histories politically. When you claim your blackness (*assumir negro*), you have to say that you are not inferior.” Then everyone quickly packed their bags and exited the classroom for the customary *cafezinho* (coffee) and *biscoito* (cookies) with which we typically ended the sessions.

I stayed in the classroom and helped Flávia clean up. She said, “Sometimes the teachers act more like their students by veering from the topic of conversation. It can be so difficult to keep them focused.” Flávia was referring to the discussion at the end of the class in which the students did not seem to consider the dilemma of Afro-Brazilian mortality and the lack of public assistance directed at Afro-Brazilians that Flávia laid out for them. Instead their comments seemed to replay some of the common sayings surrounding race in Brazil, such as the foot in the kitchen comment and the constant references to racial mixture and skin color. At the end of the lesson, no consensus was reached and it was unclear to Flávia and I whether the students actually understood the theme of the lesson – that race and inequality are linked and that everyday racial discourses have racial implications by tacitly reproducing assumptions about black inferiority.

I joined the teachers outside having coffee and I struck up a conversation with two of them. In trying to rectify what I considered the misunderstanding of the class lessons, I explained to the two female teachers that racism was an institutional and structural aspect of social life. I tried to impart that racial inequality made up part of a system and was less about individuals. One of them immediately said, “I don’t see racism – except that my father didn’t like blacks and didn’t allow for me to play with the neighbors who were black.” The other teacher chimed in with the anecdote that when she worked in a bank, a black person was promoted to a higher position and the bank managers did everything they could to get rid of him. Then everyone started to separate and pack up to go home for the day.

### **The Color of Culture**

During another one of the scheduled sessions Flávia presented the teachers with a movie called Everyone’s Heroes (*Heróis de Todo Mundo*). This movie features prominent Afro-Brazilians and explains their role in national history. Flávia told teachers that this movie was a resource that they could show in their classrooms or they could use the information from the movie to integrate within their lessons. In this session Flávia did very little lecturing and facilitated little discussion. She showed the movie, which gave her and the teachers a break from the fast pace of the class schedule.

The description of the video says:

No, this is not a series about Superman or Batman. Everyone’s Heroes is a series of programs that wants to show the common public that here, in Brazil, heroes really existed. Heroes because they broke barriers, who were successful regardless of the enormous obstacles they confronted, who fought for a better life for all. Ah! And they are black (*negros*).

Everyone’s Heroes features prominent Afro-Brazilian historical figures who had contributed to Brazilian history and culture, like the writers, Auta da Souza and Carolina Maria de Jesus, and the geographer, Milton Santos. Various prominent Afro-Brazilians (like the soap opera star Thais Araujo) interpret the roles of the historical figures by delivering a monologue about their life and accomplishments. At the end of the monologue they declare the name of the historical figure and that they are a black Brazilian citizen. For example, Milton Santos is interpreted by

Kabengale Munaga, a professor at the University of São Paulo known for being outspoken about race relations and racial inequality. The monologue recounts Santos' many accomplishments as one of the most prominent Brazilian geographers, and then ends stating, "I am the geographer Milton Santos. I am a black Brazilian citizen." (*Sou o geógrafo Milton Santos. Sou um cidadão negro brasileiro.*) This DVD presents both a commitment to educate viewers about Afro-Brazilian historical contributions, but also attempts to destigmatize the declaration of a black (*negro*) identity. The video educated its audience about the racial identity of the historical figures, which many people recognized as important Brazilian figures, but may have been unaware that they were black.

After showing the video Flávia said a few words: "Violence is to whiten black heroes. This silences the place of blackness in the classroom. Machado de Assis, Lima Barreto. There is no way to silence this. (*Não dá para silenciar.*)" One of the classes was composed of five women. After showing the video and saying her short commentary one of the teachers raised her hand and Flávia called on her. She was actually a principle at an elementary school and she was taking the classes to oversee these curricular changes at her school. Before saying anything she began to sob, taking the entire class by surprise. "I feel so troubled because I didn't know these people had been left out. I have heard of them, but didn't know they were black. I liked reading the poems of Auta da Souza, but I always pictured her as white. The lack of information that we have..." Her comment broke off and she wiped her tears. Flávia appeared shocked as well and she added a few words about using this video in class in order to educate the children about the people presented in the movie. Then she ended class.

### **Hair Today**

One of the classes centered on the theme on valuing black hair or *cabelo crespo*. Flávia brought an Afro-Brazilian hair stylist, Mariana, who specializes in hair braiding, into the class to teach participants about valuing different hair types and styles in the school. Flávia told teachers that they can express preference for certain children by touching some children on the head, but not others. She also discussed how children of African descent can feel ashamed of their hair texture or receive taunts from classmates because of it. The aesthetic hierarchy that privileges whiteness as the standard of beauty and devalues blackness has been well documented by scholars (Simpson 1993; Burdick 1998; Caldwell 2007). Nilma Lina Gomes found that many

Afro-Brazilian women associated school with negative experiences surrounding their hair. She concludes that school is not a place where “black people and their aesthetic are viewed positively” (Gomes 2003). While this scholarship details the racialized standards of beauty that leave out Afro-Brazilian men and women, these findings are not common knowledge to many Brazilians. Thus, this class sought to inform teachers of this differential aesthetic value and how actions within the school reinforce and exacerbate it. They also acted to teach participants about how to value black hair, by showing them the technique of braiding as a specialized beauty practice.

Mariana lead the interactive part of the class. First, she asked for a volunteer. That person would become the model on which she would braid their hair. For one of the classes no one volunteered and so Mariana volunteered me to be the model. I sat in a chair and all the students circled around as Mariana braided my hair. She talked through each step of the style as she slowly wove sections of my hair into two neat, parallel, plaits. After Mariana’s demonstration, participants broke up into pairs or small groups and practiced braiding each other’s hair. Male teachers practiced on women’s hair, but then did not have their hair braided. The idea was for teachers to practice, even if they could not create a braid that resembled Mariana’s work.

During one of these lessons that focused on issues of black hair one of the more vocal teachers, Lourdes, started to discuss her daughter’s hair in the group in which I was participating. As I watched Lourdes practice braiding Fabiana’s hair she told us that her daughter absolutely hated her hair. She explained, “I cannot convince my daughter that her hair is beautiful. It has really effected her self-esteem.” At that point her face had become quite strained from the concern over her daughter’s feelings towards her hair, as she looked like she was about to cry. About two weeks before this hair lesson, during the first week of classes, Lourdes adamantly denied that racial difference and racism existed in Brazil using as proof her own marriage to a black man. She claimed that her daughter was not black or white, but mixed. However, during this lesson on hair, she recounted her own mixed race daughter’s struggles with self-esteem due to her curly hair. Lourdes did not articulate a connection between her daughter’s hair issues and the lesson about how black features can be aesthetically devalued. But she did make a personal connection to the lesson and the issues it raised through the experience of her own daughter.

### **Pedagogical Possibilities**

As part of one of the classes a preschool teacher came and demonstrated one of the exercises she used in her classes that she created to value all of the children. She worked with children up to five years old and she noticed that when she asked them to draw pictures of themselves, some of the black children would draw themselves with blonde hair (*como loiras*) and blue eyes. “I guess that’s how they see themselves,” she said. “Or how they want to be,” Flávia added. This pattern of self-representation as white with some of the darker children concerned her so she developed an activity to encourage the children to draw themselves with more fidelity to their actual skin tones and features.

She presented a doll making activity. She brought in a variety of different colored fabrics for students to choose from to make a doll in their own likeness. Before they could choose the fabric, she would read a story to them about the various colors that make up Brazil. The story was printed on construction paper and she included pictures cut out from magazines. She would read this to the children and show them the pictures to the children as they sat on the floor around her in a circle. Then she would have the children look at themselves in the mirror and, while looking at their reflection, choose a color from the fabric available that most closely resembled their shade. The children would proceed to make the dolls and she would display them around the room for a couple of weeks. After which the children could take the dolls home. Following these actions, she found that students would create dolls that looked like them, which she thought would help to validate all the children’s looks and self-esteem.

### **Conclusion: Ambivalent Recognition**

The ethnographic vignettes presented here highlight the ambiguous reception of these lessons on racial difference and racial inequality presented in the teacher training sessions I attended. Contrary to the polarized viewpoints on affirmative action presented by its most vocal proponents and opponents, there were few definitive moments where a participant declared their allegiance to recognizing racial difference and that racism operated in systematic ways. Rather, teachers engaged with the information in personal ways and interpreted the material through the lens of their own experiences or that of their own personal relationships. Classrooms were spaces of ambiguity – they were conversational and flowing. While racial recognition policies are making headway within official spaces of public life, discourses that rely upon racial mixture continue to endure within some Brazilians conceptions of themselves and their social relations.

Attempts to move beyond racial democracy must somehow contend with people's personal investment in racial democracy as a feature of their individual identity and social relations. Recognizing racism may be a personal matter, as in the teacher who left the class sobbing upon realization that she was unaware of the black racial identity of a common Brazilian historical figure with which she had been familiar. Although governmental initiatives and support are opening spaces to promote an agenda of racial inclusion, for many Brazilians, recognizing racism is a learning process. This process may come with all the attendant feelings of uncertainty that can result from being asked to transgress familiar discourses, ideas, and ways of (not) talking about race in order to embrace an open conversation about the legacy of slavery and the endurance of racial inequality that has been silenced for so long. Teachers are being asked to see race in new ways and this requires learning and adjusting oneself to new and different ways to think about and talk about race.

As I have maintained in this paper, our understanding of contemporary shifts surrounding racial policies in Brazil must be complicated by taking into greater consideration the lived ways in which Brazilians are negotiating these changes. The social changes invoked by recent racial policies are entangled into the personal lives and experiences of Brazilians, and this entanglement indicates a potential site to which trainers could take into account when shaping their lessons. As recent laws and policies that take race into account generate talk and discussion among many Brazilians about the role of race and racial identity in producing social inequality, it is imperative we comprehend this shift beyond polarized narratives and as an ongoing process that implicates the personal as well as the political. (6249 words)

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<sup>i</sup> For more information on affirmative action or quotas in Brazil see Pagano (2006) and Martins et. al. (2004)

<sup>ii</sup> I use race not to indicate a biologically fixed category, but a socially constructed and shifting set of discourses that stratify society and produce social inequality.

<sup>iii</sup> Some notable exceptions include Baran (2007), Schwartzman (2009), and Collins (2011)

<sup>iv</sup> I have used pseudonyms for the names of people and places.

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