Do the 'Write' Thing:
Utilizing Spike Lee to Read the Word and World

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Abstract: College writing is an essential skill by which college students should begin to craft and construct their academic voices as they see and interpret the world around them in a scholarly setting. At the same time, as a result of varying phenomena, students have struggled to articulate themselves in written form, often performing what some describe as 'writing apprehension'. In an effort to explore these phenomena, I developed a first-year seminar that allowed for both the concepts of race, ethnicity, identity and writing to come together in an academic setting as a way to have students understand identity and its complexities with specific regard to race as well as develop their voice as a scholar. The course, "Do the 'Write' Thing: Spike Lee, Writing and Identity", served not only as a first-year seminar to acclimate students to the college academic process, but also to introduce students to the field of Ethnic Studies as an academic discipline. As a way by which to engage college writing, I employed the life and works of actor and director Shelton "Spike" Lee. Lee is an Academy Award winning director noted for his works centered on discussions of race and identity in America. Lee's works are often heralded as visual works of racial commentary. Through the exploration of his works and focusing primarily on one of his most notable works, *Do the Right Thing*, students were able to engage with race, identity, writing and literacy as a transition into their college writing career. The course objectives were to lessen the fears that are often associated with the process of writing and discussions around race.

Keywords: critical race theory, writing, Spike Lee, pedagogy

Introduction

At the 91st Academy Awards in 2019, famed director, actor, and provocateur Shelton "Spike" Lee was awarded with Best Adapted Screenplay for his film *BlackKkKlansman*, the true-story film about a Black police officer that successfully infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan. Lee, who had been previously nominated for Academy Award nominations used the spotlight of his win to raise the awareness of race's impact on American society. In his acceptance speech, Lee said: "Before the world tonight, I give praise to our ancestors who have built this country into what it is today along with the genocide of its native people. We all connect with our ancestors. We will have love and wisdom regained; we will regain our humanity. It will be a powerful moment." (Sopan, 2019) [1]. This was not Lee's first engagement with the Academy Awards; nominated for best original screenplay in 1990, *Do the Right Thing* garnered no awards, yet sparked pressing conversations America was afraid to engage with around the realities of race and racism in America. In taking inspiration from the words of Lee, Do the 'Write' Thing sought to have students explore and recognize their humanity through writing, conversations, and film as we collectively engaged in antiracist writing and conversations. Similarly, hooks (2003) explores the notion of better understanding humanity in pedagogy when both the students and educator are conscious of their power and agency to be global citizens[2]. Through the use of interpersonal relationships, complete with complex, nuanced dialogue in the classroom, both educator and student in addition to learning the concepts and foundations of understanding anti-racist dialogues. Establishing community amongst students was central to our engagement with anti-racist learning. This practice of establishing community provides opportunity for everyone, both educators and students, to effectively connect and rely on a learning space that is inclusive and informative. These concepts served as the overlay for the course foundations of introductory college writing and the academic field of Ethnic Studies.

Critical Pedagogy, Consciousness, and Social Change

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[1] Sopan, D. "Spike Lee won an Oscar. Read his passionate speech. February 24, 2019. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/24/movies/spike-lee-oscars-speech.html

[2] hooks, bell. *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Vol. 36. Psychology Press, 2003.

This course, entitled "Do the 'write' Thing: Spike Lee, Writing and Identity" was constructed for the use of a first-year seminar as a way for students to get acclimated to college writing, as well as engage in topics that explore race and racism in an American context. While developed in part as a course to allow for a smooth transition for first-year students into college, the course was also created as an avenue through which students can build their academic confidence as writers, as well as explore topics of race in an educative format. These areas – both writing and race dialogue – were two avenues I noticed students struggling with throughout their matriculation as college students. As such, the aim was to construct a space by which students received in-depth attention and engagement with two areas that will profoundly impact not only their experiences as college students, but as a human in connecting with other lived experiences. Additionally, the course served as an introductory seminar to the field of Ethnic Studies, an interdisciplinary academic discipline centered on the role of race and ethnicity in national and global contexts. This included exploring how we individually understand our own identity, and our role in working to change the world. Further, "Do the 'Write' Thing" sought to incorporate critical media literacy – "a pedagogical tool to facilitate students' becoming critically conscious of themselves relation to structures of power and domination in their world" (Yosso, 2002, p. 59)[3]. To accomplish this task, I intentionally centered how students thought about and executed conversations and writings that interrogate race in approachable, very salient experiences. Additionally, by incorporating selected works of Spike Lee this served as the visual lens through which students have the opportunity to connect their understandings of race on a larger visual scale.

As an artist and a filmmaker, Spike Lee often aims to provoke emotional responses in his viewers ranging from anger and outrage to compassion, laugher, sadness, empathy, and taking action. Frequently he courts these responses to make his viewer think about the issues presented – he wants viewers to mull over the role and importance such issues have in our lives. This was the same approach utilized in the class to show the complexities of the human condition, and to encourage students to critically engage in the writing process. This was presented in daily writing prompts that gave students the opportunity to free write about a particular topic that served as a way to jumpstart the writing process as well as talking points that could be used in

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[3] Yosso, Tara J. "Critical race media literacy: Challenging deficit discourse about Chicanas/os." *Journal of popular film and television* 30, no. 1 (2002): 52-62.

classroom discussions. The activity allowed for students to begin developing thoughts and reflections of the readings and assignments for the class. Students have the opportunity to ask questions, draw connections to current events or experiences in their own lives. Students kept these in a journal that also served as a way for students to communicate about their first-year experiences, and to document their growth not only as writers, but their scholarly development as well. Prompts included reflection on a student's writing process, expressing apprehensions about racism, or examining their growth and adjustment to the college experience. As Reid (2009) suggests, "Through directed reflection, students can see if and how a theory resonates with their actual experiences as writing-learners, and then learn how to translate that understanding into better practices or greater confidence" (p. 214)[4].

Many of Spike Lee's films thus qualify as artworks that encourage viewers to critically engage - to think deeply and intensely about fundamental human questions in ways that could potentially change our lives because, as a result of our reflections, our sense of the world and our place in it could change as well. By incorporating Lee's films into classroom spaces, there is the ability to utilize them as ways to visualize race in a collective learning atmosphere.

Critical Race Theory: A Conceptual Framework

The pedagogy of the course employed the usage of Critical Race Theory (CRT), a conceptual framework that accounts for the role of race and racism in American society. CRT imposes the conversations of race and its impacts on the experiences of people of color in praxis dynamic. Similarly, as previously stated, Lee throughout many of his films tackles the politics of race in a manner that is still considered 'bold' by some. "[But] race is still a big part of the fabric of America. Until we deal with it – until we deal with slavery – I feel that we are never really going to be as great as we can be as a country. It's important for all of us to be politically aware. You have to know how politics affects your life: what you become, where your children go to school, what kind of health care you can have – it's all shaped by politics" (Lee, 2005, p. 3)[5].

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[4] Reid, E. Shelley. "Teaching writing teachers writing: Difficulty, exploration, and critical reflection." *College Composition and Communication* 61, no. 2 (2009): W197.

[5] Lee, Spike. *That's My Story and I'm Sticking to it: As Told to Kaleem Aftab*. Faber & Faber, 2005.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) consists of six tenets that drive the conceptual framework. These include: the ordinariness of racism[6], challenging of dominant ideology[7], intersectionality[8], unique voice of color/knowledge of experience[9], colorblind ideology[10], and a commitment to social justice[11]. Collectively, these tenets offer a paradigm through which race and racism can be examined. A component of CRT is the knowledge of experience from marginalized groups when examining the role of race and racism in social contexts. As such, the films of Spike Lee serve as a conduit through which students can collectively have the same visual experience when grappling with what can seem like daunting or difficult engagement. Lee's films having strong emphasis on race, and more specifically the experiences of people of color offer the ideal format to present these topics. Lee's films are a platform that explicitly show how varied systems in a United States context normalize racism in everyday practice and also challenge the normality of this discriminative practice in nuanced, intersectional layers. These nuances add complexities that show racism beyond what is commonly thought to only be from an individual standpoint. This includes showing how individuals form systems that can include and exclude particular groups. Furthermore, CRT provides a framework for examining discussions of race, the pedagogy and learning of students, challenging hegemonic ideologies, exploring the usage of language and writing surrounding race amongst college students, and how these concepts inform how college campuses engage with race and identity[12]. CRT meets at the merging points of vulnerability and authenticity and centering the experiences of race through the usage of writing. Through engagement of the pen, students hone their writing skills in varied forms of writing (descriptive, analytical, persuasive, and critical) as well as their engagement with the

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[6] Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. *Critical race theory*. New York University Press, 2017.

[7] Solórzano, Daniel G., and Tara J. Yosso. "Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research." *Qualitative inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2002): 23-44.

[8] Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stan. L. Rev.* 43 (1990): 1241.; Bowleg, Lisa. "When Black+ lesbian+ woman≠ Black lesbian woman: The methodological challenges of qualitative and quantitative intersectionality research." *Sex roles* 59, no. 5 (2008): 312-325.

[9] Dunbar, Christopher. "Critical race theory and indigenous methodologies." *Handbook of critical and indigenous methodologies* (2008): 85-99.

[10] Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.

[11] Bell, Derrick A. "Who's afraid of critical race theory." *U. Ill. L. Rev.* (1995): 893.

[12] Quinney, Dominick N. ""Why Are All the White Students Sitting in the Back of Class?" A Critical Race Theory Approach to Race Dialogue in Ethnic Studies." *Ethnic Studies Review* 42, no. 1 (2019): 69-82.

sociological phenomenon of race in the form of narrative through the films of Spike Lee. Through writing, films that explore race in very real, tangible ways, and critical dialogue, students can collectively work toward active solutions that promote social justice. The classroom becomes a space to actively employ antiracist practices as a community of engaged learners.

Writing and Race: Apprehensive to Engage with Both

Writing, much like human identities and experiences, is complex and non-linear in its process and outcome. Additionally, education and literacy are strongly linked to institutional racism, which have been for some time linked to notions of power, access and opportunity, and have served as gatekeepers toward academic success. As such, this first-year seminar sought to provide an opportunity through which students can draw connections between identity, more specifically race and ethnicity and its connections to the writing process. It is important to note, however, that while race and writing are important concepts to engage with in classroom settings, both topics provide a great deal of apprehension as far as student engagement. Fears of not being an adequate writer or saying the wrong thing regarding race often influence the ways in which students participate in classroom learning. My aim was to assuage those apprehensions and have students work to find and strengthen their writing voice while utilizing their identity and participation as learners.

Daly (1979) defines writing apprehension as "the general avoidance of writing and situations perceived by the individuals to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential evaluation of that writing" (p. 37)[13]. It is often the case that students develop an apprehension to writing in their educational career – often through the experience of toxic feedback, an experience that can stifle even the most productive writer (Cole, 2009)[14]. Baldwin (1984) notes "any writer, I suppose, feels that the world into which he was born is nothing less than a conspiracy again the cultivation of his talent" (p.4).[15] This can lead to

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[13] Daly, John A. "Writing apprehension in the classroom: Teacher role expectancies of the apprehensive writer." *Research in the Teaching of English* 13, no. 1 (1979): 37-44.

[14] Cole, Joni B. *Toxic feedback: Helping writers survive and thrive*. UPNE, 2009.

[15] Baldwin, James. *Notes of a native son*. Vol. 39. Beacon Press, 1984.

a complete disengagement with any writing, impeding on the growth process that comes with writing. Daly (1983) posits, "Within classrooms, apprehension affects satisfaction in coursework requiring writing, expectations of success in future writing courses…and enjoyment if out-of-class projects which ostensibly demand some writing" (p. 328).[16] Because writing is such an integral component of the college experience, students may see writing as a component of their identity, something that they may see as inextricably connected to their identity as a student, which can lead to poor development and competencies as a writer. Additionally, students' interests in writing may often decrease when students have difficulty connecting to the topics with which they may be required to write. Writing is often the mechanism through which students learn the ability to articulate themselves and the materials they have learned throughout their coursework. It is also the mechanism that many are assessed and evaluated, which can also have an impact on how students may see themselves as writers, and by extension, their identity, further intensifying the apprehension students may have in these spaces. Bennett and Rhodes (1988) call this "the dread of writing" (p. 25).[17] Formal and traditional spaces of education have at times meted out the creativity, personality, and by extension the ability to bring an authentic voice to writing. These apprehensions, coupled with the growing usage of technology have given way to what Rose (1984) describes as "blocking", or "difficulty commencing or continuing writing for reasons unrelated to a person's basic skill set or commitment.[18] Blocking can then lead to other writing challenges including: work apprehension, procrastination, restlessness or general dissatisfaction, impatience, perfectionism, evaluation anxiety, and belief in myths (e.g., only good writers can create perfect text).[19] As a mechanism for communication, the process of engaging with writing can be comparable to the experience of engaging in dialogue that centers on race and its varied impacts in society. The anxieties that surround discussing race often lead to a disengagement all together, maintaining status quo. The same can be said for the engagement with writing; the more interaction and engagement, the more writing can become fluid and a welcomed avenue for expression.

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[16] Daly, John A., and Deborah A. Wilson. "Writing apprehension, self-esteem, and personality." *Research in the Teaching of English* (1983): 327-341.

[17] Bennett, Kaye, and Steven C. Rhodes. "Writing apprehension and writing intensity in business and industry." *The Journal of Business Communication (1973)* 25, no. 1 (1988): 25-39.

[18] Rose, M., & Rose, M. A. (1984). *Writer's block: The cognitive dimension*. SIU Press.

[19] Boice, Robert. "Cognitive components of blocking." *Written communication* 2, no. 1 (1985): 91-104.

Freire (2018) suggests education is an act of knowing – and by extension, writing is a way to know the world, and how one may see themselves as a change agent in the world[20]. Freire posits, "we can go further, however, and say that reading the word is not only preceded by reading the world, but also by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it. In other words of transforming it by means of conscious practical action (Freire, 1985, p. 18)[21]. Effectively teaching students to read the world and word is a commitment to not only antiracist work, but building the faculties and confidence of students to become effective change agents in their classrooms and their respective communities. As such, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) lends itself to the opportunity to read the world as Freire suggests, and to also see the world for what it is. Lee's most notable film lends the ability to see the realities and consequences of race that is an all too familiar experience in the United States: the death of Black bodies at the hands of state sanctioned violence. Though the film was released in the late 1980s, the film's centering of race amongst a community serves as an image of an unchanging narrative of race relations in America.

Bolstering Academic and Antiracist Confidence

In an effort to combat these fears and apprehensions surrounding both topics so early in their college careers, part of the goal of the class was to develop a community of writers in which the goal was to develop students' faculties both as writers and critical thinkers. It was important to stress to students that writing is indeed a skill that is to be crafted and honed with continual engagement and practice. To achieve this, I had students write about a subject that they knew best: themselves. This included writing prompts about race that encouraged them to look at real-life situations and how they position themselves in the prompt. As such, students were able to critically examine their own thinking and question where and how they arrived at particular conclusions surrounding race. Similarly, Reeves (1997) suggests, "we are asking students to take ownership of their writing, to personalize knowledge, to write about their experiences, to be ore expressive. We are asking them to be more reflective, to look within themselves to find meaning" (p. 39).[22] This allows for students to find their authentic voice as writers, that will

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[20] Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury publishing USA, 2018.

[21] Freire, Paulo. "Reading the world and reading the word: An interview with Paulo Freire." *Language arts* 62, no. 1 (1985): 15-21.

[22] Reeves, Minimizing writing apprehension in the learner-centered classroom. The English Journal, 86(6) 38-45.

guide them through their matriculation as college students and beyond. Building student confidence in their writing gave way to students building their confidence as scholars who can articulate their understandings as a social participant in the topic of race. In building their confidence, it was important to let students know that regression is a part of the growth process; sometimes mistakes are made with writing, as well as how we articulate discussions in race – from the most proficient to the beginner – growth is not linear, but it all is part of the growth process. Additionally, in a means to be transparent about the writing process, I shared with students my own writing to show that it is indeed a process; that they should not expect their first draft to be their final draft. Often times when students engage in reading of other's work, its usually at a finished stage, and no signs of process or development is evident. This was to convey to students that no matter who is writing, there is a process involved, and that everyone has space for growth and improvement, no matter what level of experience they may have.

One of the main components of the course was to be taught using an intentional anti-racist pedagogy. Kendi (2019) argues anti-racism as the active process of locating and addressing racist measures, policies and beliefs that uphold racist actions and ideologies.[23] It is important to note that antiracist pedagogy (and anything antiracist for that matter) includes a component of action, as talk and discussion are but a component of this work. As Kishimoto (2018) posits:

> Anti-racist pedagogy is not about simply incorporating racial content into courses, curriculum, and discipline. It is also about how one teaches, even in courses where race is not the subject matter. It begins with the faculty's awareness and self-reflection of their social position and leads to the application of this analysis not just in their teaching, but also in their discipline, research, and departmental, university, and community work. In other words, anti-racist pedagogy is an organizing effort for institutional and social change that is much broader than teaching in the classroom.[24]

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[23] Kendi, Ibram X. *How to be an antiracist*. One world, 2019.

[24] Kishimoto, Kyoko. "Anti-racist pedagogy: From faculty's self-reflection to organizing within and beyond the classroom." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 21, no. 4 (2018): 540-554.

Antiracist education requires consistent work and action, not only on the part of students, but as the educator as well. Throughout the semester, I emphasize the importance of being race-conscious rather than an ideology of colorblindness, a concept that allows for racist measures and policies to maintain themselves in society. Students are often jolted out of their comfort zones when one of the foundational components of the course is to recognize difference rather than to ignore it. Colorblindness represents a comfort and repression of true realities often experienced by communities of color and marginalized groups, of which some students experience on a regular basis. What is not seen or recognized cannot be addressed or corrected, and antiracist education challenges that very notion with regard to racism, making the phenomena transparent and often tangible experiences. Antiracist education is not simply discussing racism, but collectively working toward ways to eliminate the pervasiveness of racism throughout American society. More specifically, by introducing antiracist education at the beginning of the undergraduate experience in a first-year seminar, students will have a foundational course in antiracist education that can be incorporated into much of their coursework throughout their matriculation toward graduation.

Keeping in mind that students have apprehensions with both writing and discussing race, I developed assignments that center their experiences with both in a central assignment. It is important to note that having a smaller sized classroom (about fifteen students) provides opportunity for more in-depth, intimate engagement with the materials and one another, a critical component of healthy dialogue. The overall objective with this assignment is for students to begin getting familiarized with academic writing as well as exploring their engagement with discussing and writing about race. Students begin writing in the course about their apprehensions with both topics in a free writing session, with the agency to choose how they choose to express themselves (writing a letter, a poem, a song, etc.). Additionally, students are introduced to reading materials and course discussions that introduce Critical Race Theory to them, and serve as a guide through which they are able to use to develop and/or strengthen their articulations of race. As an instructor it was important to note that race must be discussed in a manner that disrupts the Black/White binary. Often in dialogue regarding race there is a lack of discussion regarding the nuanced complexities of race, including people and experiences beyond that of Black and white. Just as Lee demonstrated in the film, race is complicated, beautiful, ugly, scary, empowering, harmful, and many other experiences that cannot be reduced to the

experiences of only some. Age, geographic location, sexuality, faith, gender and other facets of identity give way to how we formulate our identity, and provide us with a unique worldview of how we see ourselves and others. This assignment is spread over several weeks throughout the semester, and is comprehensive as the semester progresses. Students learned various forms of writing within the same paper (personal narrative, comparative, developing and defending arguments, research/statistical) so as to get a range of writing styles. By starting the assignment about twenty percent of the way into the semester (about three weeks into a fifteen-week semester), students have been familiarized with key terms and concepts as they connect to understanding race and racism. Writing and learning about race and racism have similar learning patterns in that neither have linear processes; for many, the process is recursive. The process of brainstorming, writing a draft, edits, re-writing, researching, and more writing mirrors a similar process in engagement with race dialogue; the learning process includes learning new information, challenging previously held understandings and unlearning old ideas, but also learning to incorporate new perspectives. Consistent engagement with both writing and learning about race provide the skills to gain proficiency at both tools that are foundational to the college experience. Students begin the assignment with free writing about their apprehensions with discussing race (Estrada & Matthews, 2016; Rothschild, 2003)[25]. They are then encouraged to discuss writing about how their identities were/are formed and how they came to understand race, particularly exploring their own families and communities as starting points for writing. This gives students agency in writing about a familiar topic: themselves. It also allows for students to write about an experience that may be a strong focal point of experience for some, and what may have been a nonfactor for others. Students are encouraged to utilize the usage of the first person, a writing technique that is sometimes discouraged by high school teachers. This small shift in student's writing added a depth to the student's relationship to writing, making the process more personable and familiar. Once a draft has been established, they are placed into mini writing groups (no more than five in a group) that will serve as their accountability partners,

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[25] Estrada, Fernando, and Geneva Matthews. "Perceived culpability in critical multicultural education: Understanding and responding to race informed guilt and shame to further learning outcomes among White American college students." *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 28, no. 3 (2016): 314-325.
Rothschild, Teal. ""Talking race" in the college classroom: The role of social structures and social factors in race pedagogy." *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 31, no. 1 (2003): 31-38.

but also discussion and editing groups. The familiarity of groups builds a closer-knit group that transparency and the ability to be more open-minded with a smaller community provides the opportunity to have more meaningful, in-depth conversations that encompass the topic of race.

Students write what is called in the course a "Political Autobiography". The autobiography is political in that what students choose to share in a writing is indeed political.[26] Students are encouraged to continually assess their personal development, confront weaknesses, and reflect not only within the course, but throughout their lives their experiences as a racialized being – something that may be new or unfamiliar for students. Students are encouraged to see how race has also impacted other spaces of their identity including social class, gender, and other intersections they are comfortable with discussing. Students are also prompted on how experiences with race may shape their future interactions with people that may be different from themselves. What students choose to share with me and how they choose to share are indeed choices that set up frames through which we begin to see one another. Within their smaller writing groups, students are able to read one another's work and develop discussions that give opportunity for students to ask questions and elaborate on topics that may not have been clear, or to gain deeper insight. This assignment is made due by the middle of the semester once key terms and concepts have been introduced to students. I assessed students not on their experiences with race, but rather on how well they constructed their topics, supported their claims, and critically engaged the impact of race in the formation of their own identity.

Do the 'Write' Thing

In an attempt to fuse race, writing, critical pedagogy, critical race theory and critical media literacy, I utilized Spike Lee's most seminal film, *Do the Right Thing*. The film, deemed by the Library of Congress as "culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant", is "a day in the life if a racially-mixed neighborhood in New York City in 1989 in which Black, white Puerto Rican, and Korean residents struggle to eke out a living and find a jot of meaning in their lives" (Sullivan & Boehrer, 2003, p. 144)[27]. The film examines racial tensions over a twenty-four hour period on the hottest day of the year in a Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. Lee (1989) wrote:

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[26] Hamp-Lyons, Liz. "The scope of writing assessment." *Assessing writing* 8, no. 1 (2002): 5-16.

[27] Sullivan, Dennis, and Fred Boehrer. "Spike lee's do the right thing: Filmmaking in the American grain." *Contemporary Justice Review* 6, no. 2 (2003): 143-167.

The idea for *Do the Right Thing* arose for me out of the Howard Beach incident. It was 1986 and a Black man was still being hunted down like a dog...Nothing has changed in America...But what if a racial incident like Howard Beach or the Edmund Perry and Eleanor Bumpers murders had happened on the hottest day of the summer? The "what if" is the basis of *Do the Right Thing*. I decided the entire film had to take place during a twenty-four hour period: a day in the life of one block in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York. (p. 118)[28]

Being that most of the students in a first-year seminar were not alive at the debut of the film, it was important to provide a historical context of life in New York in the late 1980's with respect to race, class, gender, and other facets of social identities. I introduce the film at around the last third of the semester (week ten out of fifteen) so that students have some engagement with terms and concepts that will assist them in developing a language through which to articulate their understandings of race as the watch the film. Before watching the film, students are instructed to write about what it means to in fact, 'do the right thing'. This was supplemented with quotes Lee placed at the end of the film from slain civil rights leaders Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. and Malcolm X, both of which represent varying dialectics on race relations in America. King states:

Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by destroying itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. (King, 1964)[29]

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[28] Lee, Spike, and Lisa Jones. *Do the right thing: A Spike Lee joint*. Simon and Schuster, 1989.
[29] King, Martin Luther. *Nobel lecture*. Harper & Row, 1964.

The quote of Malcolm X follows, stating:

> I think there are plenty of good people in America, but there are also plenty of bad people
> in America and the bad ones are the ones who seem to have all the power and be in these
> positions to block things that you and I need. Because this is the situation, you and I have
> to preserve the right to do what is necessary to bring an end to that situation, and it
> doesn't mean that I advocate violence, but at the same time I am not against using
> violence in self-defense. I don't even call it violence when it's self- defense, I call it
> intelligence. (X, 1964, p. 13).[30]

The quotes highlight the often-presented ideologies of both leaders in a manner to show the varied ways in which what is considered 'right' can be interpreted. Students are directed to include their own understanding of 'right' within their own lives, and explore the possibilities of how these quotes can be understood in real-life racial context. For example, as an introductory engagement with race and its engagement with American citizens, we discussed the racial uprisings with regard to George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Breonna Taylor in Louisville Kentucky, Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland, and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Students were provided with the demographics of either city including race composition, median income, educational statistics, and health information. This activity allowed for students to learn analyzing data, in addition to statistics that show racial realities of America. From this, the class collaboratively worked together on how to incorporate information to support their arguments that explore the systemic racial inequalities presented through real data. The statistical data also served as a way through which students can learn about systemic racism – racism that infects structures of our society, which includes wealth, education, healthcare, criminal justice, housing, as well as access to opportunity and advantage. The conversations around racism then have the ability to see racism beyond an individual level, but to see how people and their ideas and beliefs are a part of larger systems that then influence how we think about the world in which we participate.

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[30] Malcolm, X. "Communication and reality." *Malcolm X: The man and his times* (1969): 307-20.

The next step was to provide the details of what made each of these locales epicenters for racial insurrections, and drawing connections to the death of the character Radio Raheem. Lee (1989) writes:

> If a riot is the climax of the film, what will cause the riot? Take your pick: an unarmed Black child shot, the cops say he was reaching for a gun; a grandmother shot to death by cops with a shotgun; a young woman, charged with nothing but a parking violation, dies in police custody; a male chased by a white mob onto a freeway is hit by a car (p. 33)[31]

The extensive list alone highlights the normality of which racial inequality exists, a foundational tenet in CRT. From this, we examined the racial demographics and information about each of the locations, and how other inequalities permeated and impacted other facets of living in these locations, drawing the connection to how spaces contribute to how location can define aspects of the human experience that shape how we view ourselves and interact with the world around us. Collectively, through classroom dialogue and writing, students were able to draw connections to the same experiences highlighted in Do the Right Thing. CRT provided the framework through which white students actively listened and learned the experiences of students of color, while students of color had the opportunity to share their lived experiences. Collectively students were able to learn how to soundly have conversations that were of mutual benefit.

As mentioned earlier, to incorporate these relevant topics to the film and to provide context for students, part of the goal was to time travel with students to have them feel as if we were back to 1989 the year of the film's release. This included examining some of the social context Lee included into the writing of the film. The experiences of Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Korey Wise (collectively known as the Central Park Five), the death Yusef Hawkins, the atrocity at Howard Beach, and the death of Michael Stewart all laid a foundation through which students were able to understand the racial climate of the time. Each of these cases provided the opportunity for students to draw connections between race and the law in a very tangible manner.

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[31] Lee, Spike, and Lisa Jones. *Do the right thing: A Spike Lee joint*. Simon and Schuster, 1989.

To apply further context, students are introduced to a historical context of the culture of hip-hop. Through the hip-hop group Public Enemy's anthemic *Fight the Power*, students are presented with an example of socially conscious music that served as a thread for the entire film. Through critical media analysis, students deconstruct the song at several levels including lyrics, message, visual content, and an exploration of the group itself. Chuck D, front leader of the group was quoted as saying, "You've got to fight the powers that be that keep you from moving forward" (1989)[32]. Students were once again presented with another avenue through which to engage writing, race, and identity that expand their understandings of social phenomena. In each of these engagements and discussions, the overarching goal was to bolster student confidence as writers and antiracist change agents. For some, the course served as an introduction into these topics. For others, it was a space through which they were able to put words to their experiences. Collectively, both educator and students were able to learn from one another in a manner that fostered community and collective change. While it was important to celebrate students' progress and growth, it was important to inform students that this was only the beginning. Their work in both areas required dedication if they were to in fact commit to antiracist work.

"Where do we go from here?" Growth as an Ongoing Process

Upon completion of the film, students are reintroduced to the quotes of King and X to re-explore again their assessment of what is considered 'right'. The second examination of the quotes calls on students to highlight a central character in the film to compare the student's understanding of 'right' to theirs. Students learn to strengthen their ability to compare and contrast, as well as develop arguments based on what can be a real-life situation.

The writing process and conversations regarding race and ethnicity in America are ongoing; just as students build their proficiency in writing over time, so will their articulations of thoughts on identity, more specifically race. It is important for both students and instructors to know that one class is not enough; it will be imperative for students to consistently practice and hone their skills as not only writers, but also in the engagement of conversations that many are fearful of. Educators must be patient with the fact that students are learning, and that their development in race proficiency will only build over time as they continue to engage the topics

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[32] Enemy, Public. "Fight The Power '(1989)." *Fear Of A Black Planet*.

and sharpen their skills as writers. Through consistent practice, students will build a proficiency that over time will quell fears and apprehensions about writing and articulation. This course served as an introduction to college writing and the field of Ethnic Studies as a mode of academic inquiry, and students were encouraged to maintain a writing schedule, and that conversations of race and identity can be had anywhere beyond the classroom – in cafeterias, in resident floor hallways, in library commons spaces, and wherever else social participants engage race. As such, race is a real and tangible experience for many, primarily people of color in America. In light of recent events both domestically and internationally, the act of antiracist pedagogy and writing ensures that students are equipped with the faculties necessary to effectively change how society responds to racism – through action. Stressing the importance of being persistent in describing and utilizing the tools necessary to transform the communities students regularly engage with, starting with the classrooms within which they learn. This creates an atmosphere of belonging, which in turn creates a holistic learning environment that is safe, inclusive, and informative.

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