DISSEbATION ABSTRACT

In my dissertation, I argue that blackness is an accumulable cultural resource that perpetuates racial and class inequality. The overarching question I ask is what determines who benefits from blackness, black bodies or dominant resources? To answer this question, I first develop a framework that integrates cultural capital theory with two streams of research within the sociology of race – ‘racialization’ and ‘race as a resource.’ Next, I demonstrate my argument and address secondary theoretical goals – in globalization and race in Brazil, with an empirical study in the context of cultural tourism.

I examine how individuals transform capoeira into a racialized cultural resource through connections to symbols of blackness and the meanings these symbols provoke, within the tourism market in Salvador, Brazil. Capoeira is a globally popular Brazilian martial art often linked to blackness, which brings American and European tourists together with Brazilian practitioners in an interactive setting. Many Westerners now view cultural symbols of racial difference, including blackness, as valuable, and tourism exemplifies the growing value of racial otherness. Salvador, Brazil is a central site in the framing of blackness for Westerners. Introducing the city, the popular Lonely Planet Guide to Brazil proclaims that the city is “the African soul of Brazil…[where] the descendants of African slaves have preserved their cultural roots more than anywhere else in the New World, successfully transforming them into thriving culinary, religious, musical, dance and martial art traditions” (Louis, Chandler et al. 2005: 413). Tourist settings allow us to examine how individuals acquire embodied cultural capital through experience with cultural others. Brazil is an important empirical context through which to extend cultural capital theory to racial symbols and bodies. Many scholars connect Brazil’s extreme social inequality to both race and class, and they reveal a profound ambiguity over racial identity and racialized cultural heritage in Brazil. This creates a context where Brazilians of diverse racial and class backgrounds may benefit from racialized culture.

How do racial meanings emerge as divergent sets of meanings (tourist and Brazilian) interact during this enactment and consumption of capoeira, how does blackness becomes valuable as valuable a social, cultural, or economic resource for both producers and consumers, and which actors benefit from this racialized cultural capital? With funding from the National Science Foundation, I answer these questions through comparative participant observation and interviews at three capoeira studios. Long-term participant observation allows us to focus on the embodiment of experiences and the important how of cultural valorization. Racial constructions were objects of investigation. Comparative ethnography can best provide insight into how individuals, groups, and organizations put cultural capital to practical use to control and limit resources, allowing for two layers of analysis – one, of interactional meaning making and cultural enactment processes and the other, a cross-group comparison of these micro-level processes. Broadly, I find that the benefits of racializing cultural capital do not map onto one racial category or group, but onto the Brazilian middle class. This cultural capital grants benefits only to Brazilians with dark skin tone that have access to middle class resources.

After formalizing my theory of RCC in chapter 1 and outlining the racial structures of Brazilian society in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 provides an overview of the racialized cultural structures which inform the tourism market. I present findings from a frame analysis of culture in Salvador in three types of tourism sources: state-sponsored tourism materials, private tourism materials, and foreign tour book and travel reviews. The following three ethnographic chapters show that middle class Brazilians best benefit from this racialized cultural capital because they successfully combine middle class economic and cultural resources with symbols of blackness, including black bodies. The lower class studio, which has more black bodies and is perceived as “authentic” by tourists due to its poverty, is far less successful with tourists. This is because the group has little access to the cultural knowledge and distinctions of Western middle class tourists and cannot provide consistent and coherent cultural cues for tourists. Rather than benefitting blacks as a group, transforming capoeira into racialized cultural capital benefits only those black bodies that also have access to middle class resources.