Race, Affirmative Action, and Higher Education: Brazil and the United States
Book Review by Rebecca Tarlau

Both Brazil and the United States have long histories of slavery, racism, and discrimination. In the United States, slavery formally ended in 1865; however, segregation and discrimination against Black populations continued throughout the 20th century through Jim Crow laws, the "one-drop rule," *de jure* segregation, *de facto* segregation, and institutionalized racism. In Brazil, currently the country with the largest Afro-descendent population outside of Nigeria, slavery only ended in 1888. The racialization of the Brazilian population was also starkly different than the United States, as racial discrimination was denied for decades through the myth of "racial democracy," promoted by Gilberto Freyre (1933), who argued that racial distinction in Brazil was being erased through miscegenation. Nonetheless, while light-skinned Brazilians embraced the idea of a "racial democracy," Afro-Brazilians faced

acute discrimination in the labor market, housing, and through general social and economic exclusion (Telles, 2004). In the educational sphere, in both Brazil and the United States, these histories of racial discrimination have produced huge gaps in educational access and achievement between white and non-white populations. In higher education, these disparities have been even more extreme. However, the past 15 years has shown a sudden divergence in the politics of race and higher education in these two countries, with affirmative action in the United States increasingly challenged, while in Brazil the federal government has succeed in implementing the most expansive affirmative action policies in the world.

Thus, the 2015 publications of Ollie Johnson and Rosana Heringer's *Race, Politics, and Education in Brazil* and Alicia C. Dowd and Estela Mara Bensimon's *Engaging the "Race*

Question": Accountability and Equity in U.S. Higher Education are timely. Although these books address very different aspects of the "race question"—Johnson and Heringer focus on Brazilian policy changes while Dowd and Bensimon analyze several institutional-level interventions to promote racial equity—the underlining problem that both of these books address is the same: the lack of equality in access to higher education between racialized groups and the segregation both between and within institutions of higher education. The different scopes of these two books, in terms of the solutions they propose and the theories of change they employ, offer interesting insights into how the issue of racial discrimination in higher education has played out in both countries. Johnson and Heringer focus on the macro-level changes in affirmative action and other higher education laws in Brazil, and these authors prioritize the historical role of grassroots movements fighting for these institutional changes. Dowd and Bensimon analyze the individual and institutional-level changes that practitioner-researchers can implement, and these authors prioritize the positive role of "race-conscious inquiry." Together, these two books provide different but complementary solutions to the endemic problem of structural racism in higher education institutions across the Americas.

Johnson and Heringer's *Race, Politics, and Education in Brazil* recounts the history of affirmative action policies in Brazilian higher education, highlighting the historical role of the black movement in advocating for these policies. These authors explicitly attribute Brazil's success implementing the "most expansive affirmative action policies in the world" to the organizing efforts of these grassroots groups and their rejection of the racial democracy myth. Johnson and Heringer unapologetically argue that, "the recent passage of affirmative action represents a victory that will contribute to a more socially just and egalitarian society" (p. 3). Rather than assessing the merits and drawbacks of

affirmative action (although some of the contributors do evaluate these policies), Johnson and Heringer take the position that these policies have been important for addressing racial discrimination in Brazil. Thus, the main focus in this book is on describing the diversity of affirmative action policies adopted in Brazil between 2001 and 2014 and the reasons for these institutional gains.

Johnson and Heringer's "theory of change" is that, "as a result of the work of black activists and politicians, practically every election in Brazil since 1982 has led to a new governmental agency or public policy combating racial inequality and questioning the myth of racial democracy" (p. 6). This does not mean that these gains have been easy. As Johnson describes in Chapter 1, Afro-Brazilians continue to be underrepresented in all branches of government. Nonetheless, the advocacy of key black legislatures has been critical in pushing forward institutional gains in the educational sphere. Chapters 2-4 discuss the organizing efforts of these black activists

prior to the year 2000, thus offering the reader context for understanding the more recent institutional changes in higher education policy. In Chapter 2, Amilcar Pereira describes the long history of Afro-Brazilian activism in Brazil, from the founding of the Brazilian Black Front in 1931 to the establishment of the Untied Black Movement in 1979. As Pereira argues, "There have been black movements in every period of Brazilian history, all of which merit more research" (p. 64)—and, he also argues, more emphasis in the history curriculum. In the next chapter, Vera Lúcia Benedito describes how black activists entered the Brazilian state, first in São Paulo in the early 1980s and then at the federal level in the 1990s. Thus, Benedito argues, "Though Fernando Henrique Cardoso [Brazilian president from 1995-2002] will go down in history as the president who finally sanctioned affirmative action policies, in reality, it was the Afro-Brazilian activists in his administration who strategically paved the way for the implementation of equal opportunity policies." Both Benedito and Flavia Piovesan, the author of Chapter 4, acknowledge the importance of the international arena in these national developments. Piovesan analyzes the shift in international human rights discourse to an acceptance of "positive discrimination," which helped garner support for affirmative action policies in Brazil. Piovesan also argues that the World Conference Against Racism, which took place in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, "served as the catalytic force with regard to Affirmative Action" (p. 103). Therefore, these authors argue, it was not only the national-level black activists but their international supporters that opened up the possibility for affirmative action to be embraced in Brazil.

Together, these early chapters offer extensive background on the struggle for black rights in Brazil before the more expansive adoption of affirmative action policies in the 21st century. In Chapter 5, Rosana Heringer directly analyzes this expansion of affirmative act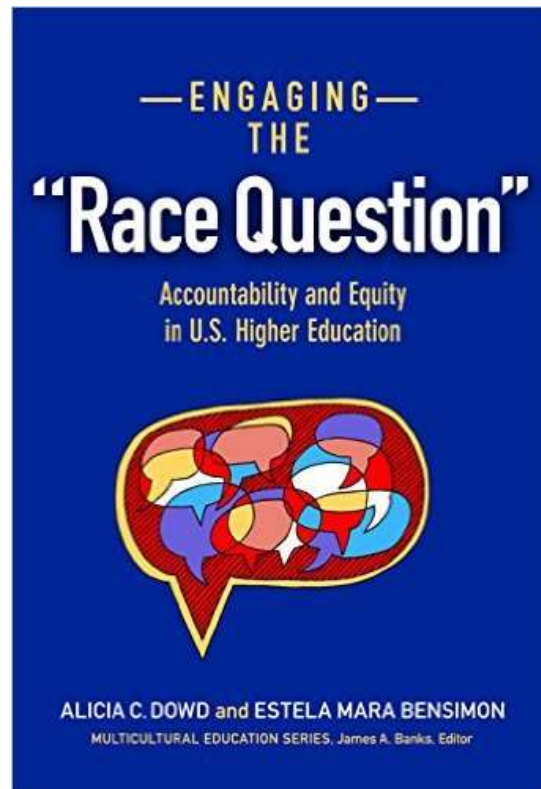ion and the rapid growth of Brazilian higher education during this period. Similarly, Erich Dietrich in Chapter 7 analyzes this progression of affirmative action policies in the 2000s, including the first adoption of quotas by several state universities in 2003, the creation of the federal program PROUNI, which offers fellowships for K-12 public school graduates to attend university, the constitutional upholding of affirmative action in 2012, and the mandate in 2012 for all federal universities to include quotas in their admissions process. However, both Heringer and Dietrich also describe the current limitations of these policies. Heringer focuses on the lack of financial support for the much-needed retention services for poor and black students in these university programs, while Dietrich argues that affirmative action is not yet an universally adopted and accepted policy. As Dietrich argues, "This research indicates that when given the opportunity, Brazilin universities of greater quality cling to a maintenance of the status quo in higher education, which is to say, they continue to adhere to policies that reproduce social and racial inequality" (p. 166). The most elite Brazilian universities, all located in the state of São Paulo, have been the most resistant to the wave of support for affirmative action.

While Heringer and Dietrich describe the current status of affirmative action in Brazil, other authors attempt to offer preliminary findings about the consequences of these policies over the past decade. In Chapter 6, Gladys Mitchell-Walthour illustrates that while income, age, and education continue to influence the varying levels of Afro-Brazilian support for affirmative action, "it is undeniable that support for affirmative action has increased over time." In Chapter 8, João Feres Júnior and colleagues offer several findings about the 2012 quota mandates. Importantly, they find that the score gap in the college entrance exam between quota students and non-quota students is

marginal and that in many courses quota students do better than non-quota students. These authors also disaggregate data from college entrance exams to show that although more Brazilians support quotas for public school students (not racial quotas), "Quotas only for those who attended public high schools would not sufficiently benefit black, brown, indigenous, and/or low income students" (p. 194).

The conclusion ends where the book begins, with Brazilian politics. In this chapter, Sales Augusto dos Santos and colleagues illustrate how despite some institutional gains, Brazilian politicians who oppose affirmative action continue to wield tremendous power in Brazil. Consequently, the Racial Equality Statue, finally passed in 2010 after 10 years of deliberation, is a much weaker version of the original proposal. Perhaps surprising to those readers who think of the left-leaning Workers' Party (PT) government as leading the way in supporting these policies, Santos and colleagues argue that President Lula did not actively advocate for this Racial Equality Statue. Consequently, "Without the active support of the Lula administration, and relying on very few deputies, especially black legislators (who were and still are rare in the Brazilian Parliament), many policies to promote racial equality in the statute were cut, especially those regarding affirmative action" (p. 217). Thus, a continual theme throughout *Race, Politics, and Education in Brazil* is *both* the tremendous gains that Brazil has made addressing racial inequity in higher education and the continual gap between these gains and the desired outcomes that grassroots movements promote.

In contrast to Johnson and Heringer, Dowd and Bensimon focus on addressing racial equality from a completely different level of analysis: individual and institutional change, not national policy shifts. Dowd and Bensimon's *Engaging the "Race Question": Accountability and Equity in U.S. Higher Education* is a must-read for policy-makers, university and community college faculty, and other

—ENGAGING—
THE
"Race Question"

Accountability and Equity
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ALICIA C. DOWD and ESTELA MARA BENSIMON
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institutional actors who are working in higher education and care about issues of race and equity. This book offers a series of concrete steps to address "accountability" in higher education, a concept the authors redefine as the "responsibility of educators and policymakers to hold themselves and one another responsible for creating and sustaining just, caring, equitable, and effective postsecondary learning environments in America's colleges and universities" (p. 1). The fundamental starting-point in this book is that structural and institutional racism exists in U.S. institutions of higher education *and* that it is within our power to address these equity issues. As the authors put it, "Racial segregation in U.S. higher education is entrenched and growing" (p. 7). The solution that these authors propose is *inquiry*, or action research that is focused on equity-mindedness (rather than deficit-mindedness) that helps groups of stakeholders define the equity problems in their institutions and then support possible interventions. The goal is to move beyond a "diversity" framework that focuses

on "intercultural understanding" and instead implement concrete equity initiatives that "focus on reversing the college education gap for American Indians, African Americans, Latinos, and other subordinated racial/ethnic groups to reduce racial polarization" (p. 4).

This book recounts several concrete attempts to address racial equity gaps, through the "Equity Scorecard" that these authors developed at the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education. Thus, *Engaging the "Race Question"* provides important lessons about both the real possibilities and the limits of these types of "action-research" interventions. In the introduction, the authors describe three theories of justice—as fairness, care, and transformation—arguing that all three forms of justice are critical for addressing racial inequities. In Chapter 2, the authors argue for applying a critical race theory framework to action research, which focuses on developing organization's capacity for "race talk." As Dowd and Bensimon write, "We believe the White privilege that serves to silence discussion of race can be actively deconstructed in a process of expansive learning through action research" (p. 57). This action research can help practitioners and policymaker reflect on the histories of discrimination in their institutions and how these histories contribute to structural forms of racism in higher education. As Dowd and Bensimon convincingly illustrate, although everyone is concerned with "diversity," many faculty—especially white faculty—do not feel comfortable talking about race, nor do they have the professional development and capacity to do so.

Dowd and Bensimon provide three in-depth case studies of how they have tried to intervene in institutions of higher education and "engage the race question." These cases can be described as partially successful, successful, and unsuccessful. The most interesting part of the book is the authors' analysis about the reasons for these different outcomes. Next, the authors examine an example of an individual-level intervention through "justice as care": helping faculty members in community colleges California evaluate their syllabi and change them to be more inclusive of "subordinated racial/ethnic groups." The "equity-minded" questions that faculty use to evaluate their syllabi, outlined on pages 66-67, could be useful for university faculty reading this book. However, this intervention was only partially successful because while faculty members did acknowledge the lack of "care" in their syllabi, and in response wrote more meaningful descriptions of the importance of diversity in their classes, there was also a general refusal to explicitly address race. This illustrates the limits of individual-level interventions.

A second case is presented, involving an attempt to transform higher education at the institutional level through a framework of "justice as fairness." More specifically, the authors work with a team of practitioners and policymakers from the University of Wisconsin system to assess the institutional inequities in their university—through "race-conscious" data collected by the "Equity Scorecard"—and then determine possible solutions to these equity gaps. This results in real improvements for students of color, as this team assesses that there are disproportionally fewer students of color in the honors program, and based on this assessment, reform how students are invited to participate in the program. As one member of this team reflects, the "equity scorecard allowed me and the team to dig into unseen effects of policies that are overlooked" (p. 101). Dowd and Bensimon argue that there are four key conditions that allowed for this successful intervention: (1) system leadership; (2) ongoing inquiry involving data disaggregated by race and ethnicity; (3) professional development to acquire the cultural competencies for equity work; and, (4) professional networking in an organizational field committed to equity (p. 114).

Finally, in perhaps the most important case in the book, the authors describe attempts to implement "justice as transformation" in two higher education systems. In Wisconsin, equity-based research reveals the racial inequities in college transfer policies, and in California this research reveals the need for bilingual basic skills courses for Latino community college students. In both cases, policymakers and institutional stakeholders fail to make meaningful interventions. As Dowd and Bensimon argue, "Institutional racism is difficult to address on a system level absent a coordinated political process that will generate impetus for change from within and from outside colleges and universities" (p. 117). Thus, although action research enables policymakers to "move past historical amnesia and apathy to address higher education's role in segregation" (p. 154), the potential of these projects to make changes was "dampened by political considerations and limitations of political organization" (p. xxv). More simply put, determining the problem and proposing an intervention did not create the political will to implement change.

It is in this last part of *Engaging the "Race Question,"* when Dowd and Bensimon begin discussing the *limits* of action research and equity-mindedness, from which these U.S. scholars could draw on lessons from Brazil. Dowd and Bensimon argue that their "theory of change relies on the power of practitioner inquiry that is structured using critical action research protocols as a driver of change" (p. 23). Indeed, by drawing on concrete evidence of racial discrimination, Dowd and Bensimon illustrate how policymakers and faculty have made critical interventions in their colleges and universities. However, when it comes to "justice as transformation," these inquiry-based initiatives seem to fall short. In contrast, in *Race, Politics, and Education in Brazil*, Johnson and Heringer's theory of change focuses on the role of grassroots movements in promoting broad-based affirmative action policies. Here, justice as transformation is the clear outcome. Nonetheless, in Johnson and Heringer's account of racial justice we lose the fine-grained attention to the experiences of students of color in these institutions of higher education and how faculty are (or are not) transforming their classroom practices to support the increasing numbers of black and brown students in their universities. Thus, while the problem both authors are confronting is similar (segregation between and within institutions) and the authors' framing of the issue is also compatible (inequity as a result of structural and institutional racism), the solutions offered in these books are radically different. Yet, the "policy" versus the "institutional" emphases in these two books do not have to be mutually exclusive. On the one hand, in the United States, the recent rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and other grassroots organizations fighting for black and immigrant rights have the potential to transform the discourse about educational equity in higher education. Furthermore, many of the gains in racial equity in U.S. higher education can already be attributed directly to the mobilizations of these community of color. On the other hand, in Brazil, the probable shift to more conservative policymakers at the national level in the near future might mean that affirmative action advocates have to increasingly work inside their institutions to transform racial inequities. Additionally, as Pereira shows in his chapter, many of these black activists were already working with teachers and institutional actors to support race-conscious educational policies in schools. Therefore, it is fair to say that policymakers, activists, faculty, and students in both Brazil and the United States have always engaged the "race question" by simultaneously utilizing these inside and outside strategies—and that they should continue to do so in the future. These books will help in this effort by offering important insights about two very different strategies for racial equity in higher education in Brazil and the United States.

References

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About the Reviewer

Rebecca Tarlau is a Postdoctoral Scholar in Education at Stanford University, affiliated with the Lemann Center for Educational Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Brazil. Rebecca's research focuses on the relationship between states, social movements, and educational reform. Rebecca's most recent project was a subnational comparative ethnography of the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement's (MST), examining the movement's attempt to transform public schools throughout the Brazilian countryside.

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