

Reflections on Taking Race Out in the Open

Yesterday I held my last class of the semester in front of Silent Sam. The class was Anthropology 490, a special topics course that I taught on “Race and the United States.” We examine arguments about what race is and how it works in a variety of contexts, which made Silent Sam a perfect venue for exploring some of the course themes. In fact, Tuesday wasn’t the first time we had been to the monument. I took the class there on our first day together in August, which was also when a group of students were camped out there to protest the existence of a tribute to the Confederacy on Carolina’s grounds. Although my class arrived unannounced and on a rainy day, the student activists were eager to give us what I considered a deft analysis of race, space, power and history through the prism of Silent Sam. But today, we were on our own to do the analytical work. Actually, my students did the critical thinking so much so that I was moved by that outdoor classroom conversation in ways I have never before been in my 20 years teaching at UNC. We covered everything from whether Silent Sam will ever come down to best practices for university diversity initiatives to the messages of difference conveyed in the updated Sakai page to personal and unsettling insights about race and privilege that some gained through the class. Here is what really moved me: to honestly discuss race in the current climate is almost necessarily to make oneself vulnerable but the students’ passion and deep concern for the discussion --through their vulnerability—were palpable. They wanted to be engaged in that space in a candid dialogue about the uneasy topic of race. All of us who teach know the rustle of papers and the sound of backpack zippers in the 2-3 minutes before class concludes. But at that monument today, no one was preparing to leave. When I signaled that it was time to end, one student capped things off with the question that still lingers for me: Can the University create more spaces like our classroom where students can come together and grapple openly and deeply with these very thorny topics? Students clapped as the class closed but actually, I applaud them for their hunger and willingness to interrogate race in the U.S. —including on UNC’s campus — self-reflexively and critically. I share their sense of urgency about the vital importance of this work.

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