

Teaching Observation

Dr. Erin Brooks

Opera & Race in the USA

MUCH 495

Feb. 5, 2021, 8:00 – 8:50 am

Class began at 8:00 with a request for announcements and check-ins. “What’s something positive that’s getting you through this week?” The students were immediately posting in the chat and feeding off of each other’s posts. For this class, the students had completed a reading and submitted responses online, for which Dr. Brooks will post formal grades and responses later

At 8:05, Dr. Brooks shared her screen to show a word cloud of what the students said they thought of when they thought of opera and race – an interesting and excellent visual representation of their first impressions of the subject. They will do this exercise at the end of the semester, too.

At 8:07, Dr. Brooks shared a slide with information on how to read articles (What is the author’s background and training? Where and when was this published?) and modeled using the reading they had done for that class. She also discussed how to skim for structure and take notes to aid comprehension and retention. The next slide contained extremely important guidelines on class discourse, active participation, critical engagement, and considerate and respectful discussion. As a personal aside, the world would be a better place if we all followed these guidelines.

At 8:13, the students were sorted in small groups into breakout rooms to discuss the responses to the reading they had posted the night before. They had about seven minutes to discuss their responses in small groups before coming back to share discussion as a whole.

At 8:20, the students started to return from the breakout rooms and were invited to unmute and begin sharing their discussion. Dr. Brooks commented on the first speaker and asked other groups who touched on the same topic to speak. As another student spoke, Dr. Brooks took notes and organized all the thoughts into specific topics that will be covered later. Students were also invited to comment in the chat and then called on to elaborate. Wonderful discussion ensued, with occasional elaborations/clarifications by Dr. Brooks. Dr. Brooks had a timer on the discussion but elected to extend. A wide variety of discussion topics came from the student responses to the reading, including Blackface, colonialism, racism at the Met, activism, realism in opera, and hearing opera but not really seeing it (the Met radio broadcasts and opera recordings).

At 8:41, Dr. Brooks played a portion of a video clip referred to in the reading: Leontyne Price’s farewell performance at the Met in 1985, “O patria mia” from Verdi’s *Aida*. The translation of part of the text is “Oh, my country, how much you have cost me,” which the author of the assigned reading (Naomi André) sees through the filter of Ms. Price’s life experience as a Black

opera singer. The class continues discussion of this poignant real-life parallel, with Dr. Brooks noting the author's point that this Italian opera from the 1800s can teach us something really important in 1985 because of the performer. This isn't about Verdi; it's about the singer.

At 8:50, the discussion ended with Dr. Brooks saying they'll continue next time with some of the topics they didn't get to and that she'd send an email reminding them what's due for the next class.

I would have loved to have taken this class at any point in my education. Dr. Brooks did an excellent job encouraging, facilitating, and guiding discussion, and organizing the students' thoughts into manageable topic areas. The materials involved in this class – both those created by Dr. Brooks and those she chose to include from others – were of the highest quality and served to create a foundation for a high-level discussion on difficult content. The students were engaged, thoughtful, and passionate in their comments and even an outside observer in the first week of class could see that students are taking this class because they want to, not because they have to. The combination of critically important and relevant content combined with creative, relatable, high-quality instruction led to a class that was enjoyed by all and was over too soon – no mean feat for an 8:00 am class!

Respectfully submitted,

Lorraine Yaros Sullivan
Associate Professor of Voice
Personnel Committee