

Challenges to Affirmative Action: An Analysis of Skin Color and Verification at the Universidade Federal do Paraná in Brazil

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Historically, Brazilian racial identity has been constructed from a color continuum rather than discrete categories. To this end, self-identification often differs from the perception of another. In light of the newly instated affirmative action policies, many have questioned the reliability of applying concrete racial categories to a country that rose out of profound mixed ethnic and racial origins. The inclusion of a verification system has generated a serious debate on the foundation and limits of racial identity construction. How does one construct their racial identity for the purpose of affirmative action? What are the advantages and limitations of verifying an individual's identity? This paper analyzes the unique dual identification process that exists at the Universidade Federal do Paraná drawing from four qualitative interviews from the Center for Afro-Brazilian Studies located within the university.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Brazilian racial identity has been constructed from a color continuum rather than discrete categories. To this end, self-identification often differs from the perception of another. This was evidenced in the 1995 Datafolha survey, which concluded that 19% of self-identified *pardos* (meaning brown) and 2% of self-identified *pretos* (meaning black) were viewed as white by interviewers (Racusen, 2010, p. 95). In light of the newly instated affirmative action policies, this margin of error concerned politicians, intellectuals, and prominent journalists who questioned the reliability of applying concrete racial categories to a country that rose out of profound mixed ethnic and racial origins. How could racial lines be drawn? This was the argument of the *Folha de São Paulo*, the nation's most widely read newspaper. Although the *Folha* believed that unbridled racism still pervades on a national level, it claimed that centuries of miscegenation had blurred racial boundaries beyond recognition. Color ambiguity quickly became apparent when in the first year of implementation the Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro reported: "some candidates darkened themselves, changing from white to brown or black, and some lightened themselves, changing from brown or black to white" (Racusen, 2010, p. 102). It was clear that the delicate line between self-identification and external classification in the construction of a racial identity captured national attention and called for fine-tuning.

After nearly a decade of fruitful debate on the subject of racial classification, one issue is clear: racial dynamics today are an irrevocable product of the myth of racial democracy that reigned for the greater part of the 20th century. The term "racial democracy" hails from the work of Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre. He popularized the notion of Brazil as a racial paradise where "men regard

each other as fellow citizens and fellow Christians without regard for color or ethnic differences" (Freyre, 1959, p. 7-8). This notion was nourished for years by the ruling elite and the State itself. It masked racial tension and reduced the race issue to one punctuated by class disparities. In the late 1950s, sociological studies contracted by UNESCO began to reveal that Brazilian society was heavily marked by white supremacy. The exalted image was meticulously cultivated by the State building an aversion to 'blackness,' both socially and linguistically. Even today, one of the greatest challenges of the black movement is to 'reinterpret' the black identity and promote a positive black image.

This paper analyzes the unique identification process that exists at the Universidade Federal do Paraná. The system incorporates a dual system of self-classification and verification of that claim addressing both components of racial identity. First, candidates are asked to self-identify using the same terms used in the country's demographic census: *Branca* (white), *Preta* (black), *Parda* (brown), *Amarela* (yellow), *Indígena* (Indigenous). Then, candidates must verify their identity claims in front of an evaluation panel consisting of "internal and external members of the community" (Amendment 37/04-COUN). The inclusion of a verification system has generated a serious debate on the foundation and limits of racial identity construction. How does one construct their racial identity for the purpose of affirmative action? What are the advantages and limitations of verifying an individual's identity?

It is my assertion that the myth of racial democracy provides a "cognitive framework" (Bailey, 2008, p. 3) for understanding racial dynamics, and that the inclusion of an effective verification system requires an investigation of the historical foundation of racial ambiguity in contemporary society. I investigate the purpose and

accuracy of the verification system from an empirical viewpoint of identity construction. In accordance with extensive literature on the subject of verification and racial identity construction in Brazil, I draw from four qualitative interviews from the Center for Afro-Brazilian Studies at the university in Paraná.

METHOD

The in-depth interviews were conducted at the Center for Afro-Brazilian Studies (NEAB) at the Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR) to gain greater knowledge on the criteria and evaluation process conducted at UFPR. The interviews included one undergraduate student, two graduate students, and the founder of a local social movement organization. The undergraduate student is an intern at the NEAB and conceded to an interview, although the student admitted that he was “still getting to know the process”¹ of affirmative action. Both graduate students are pursuing a Master’s in Education at UFPR. The graduate thesis of one of these students was an integral asset to the production of this research. The second graduate student participated in the evaluation panel in the academic year of 2011 and related first-hand experience of the general criteria used in the verification system. The last participant is the founder of the Cultural Association of Blackness and Popular Action of Black Pastoral Agents (ACNAP), a non-profit organization that offers a number of opportunities for black people to strengthen their self-esteem, identity, and culture.

Since its foundation in 2000, the Center for Afro-Brazilian Studies (NEAB) has promoted seminars, courses, and debates about Afro-Brazilian culture and identity and has established partnerships with leading black social movements in Paraná. It serves as an academic hub, gathering students and professors from a number of departments—Education, Anthropology, Social Sciences, History, and Medicine—to promote research and extension projects in Afro-Brazilian studies. Since 2002, the focus and struggle of the Center has turned to the debate and implementation of affirmative action policies. In May of 2004, the “Target Plan of Social and Racial Inclusion” was officially approved for a provisional period of ten years (Marçal, 2011, p. 101). The NEAB played an integral role in the implementation and evaluation process for the quota system, and has struggled to promote the quota policy in a positive light since 2005. It attempts to encourage students to self-identify and promote a better understanding of the challenges that the black population faces in the state of Paraná and within the country of Brazil. The Center struggles to educate black students about their right to use this system given the historical foundation of racial discrimination and prejudice that is deeply ingrained in Brazilian culture.

BLACK SOLIDARITY & THE MYTH OF RACIAL DEMOCRACY

The power of group solidarity is remarkable. On the whole, Brazilians are an extremely patriotic people. This is undoubtedly due to the influence of the nationalistic period in the 1930s, which constructed a unified people that was indeed mixed, but united into one—“a racial paradise.” Black identity and solidarity concurrently weakened during this period. By law, it became politically incorrect to assert one’s ethnic difference. The Black Power Movement was forcibly disbanded and the assertion of one’s blackness “was transformed into an act of civic upheaval and anti-patriotism” (Reiter & Mitchell, 2010, p. 4). The following decades were marked by an authoritarian military dictatorship that suppressed labor and racial groups with extreme force. Prosecution, imprisonment, torture, and even death awaited those who dissented. It was not until the late 1980s that civil society began reorganizing for the return of democracy.

On the whole, the political movements had a profound effect on Afro-Brazilians. It weakened their ability to congregate as a group, eroding their appreciation of their shared heritage and delegitimizing their rightful place in Brazilian society. The past century was marked by discriminatory political policies and false promises of social mobility for individuals of color, contributing to a devalued image of the black race, as a whole.

The State’s unwillingness to recognize racial categories had a profound effect on black identity. The absence of legal racial distinctions and the promotion of racial miscegenation meant that no discernible target existed “against which identity formation and mobilization could be directed” (Htun, 2004, p. 64). Afro-Brazilians’ weak racial identity eviscerated a collective action against social inequalities, such as unfair employment treatment and educational opportunities. Since the 1970s, some political organizations, such as the Unified Black Movement (Movimento Negro Unificado), explicitly tried to promote racial consciousness as a means to secure political change, but these organizations failed to unify the masses to a scale comparable to the U.S. civil rights movement (Htun, 2004, p. 65). This was partially due to weak racial consciousness, but also due to the negative connotation of the black racial term and religious divisions.²

Although the widely accepted racial democracy thesis was unmasked in the late 20th century, vestiges of this notion are interwoven into the national identity and social dynamics. Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre is credited with diffusing this idea among the ruling elite, although the term “racial democracy” was not present in his works. He presumed that Brazil was composed of a “meta-race” resulting from the miscegenation of three races—African,

European and Indigenous. All of these races contributed equally to the mixture of Brazilian society. He proposed a hybrid race of people “with equal opportunity regardless of race or color” (Freye, 1959, p. 7). The view of “equal opportunity” in a society that was clearly hierarchical in nature eclipsed the social reality. It assumed that Brazilians were able to freely move between social classes. The racial democracy was considered the essence of ‘Brazilianness’ and served to strengthen the national image (Bailey, 2009, p. 2). From this idea, two influential paradigms take shape. First, the construction of lines between skin colors became ambiguous due to miscegenation. Second, a presumed cordiality and acceptance of all skin color types existed, implying an equal chance at securing one’s socio-economic prosperity.

In the backdrop of Nazi racism in Germany and Jim Crow laws in the United States, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) funded an extensive research project to investigate Brazil’s presumed racial paradise. The conclusion of this research pointed to a society that was indeed mixed, but one that was underpinned with racial prejudice and negative attitudes toward Afro-Brazilians. The physical features of Afro-Brazilians were “universally considered ugly” (Wagley, 1952, p. 152). Nevertheless, UNESCO regarded racial tensions and conflict as “especially mild” (Wagley, 1952, p. 7) in comparison to the United States’ rigid segregation laws and flagrant racial prejudice. In the end, the study concluded that class was the root cause of stratification of Brazilian society. Regardless, the rise of the authoritarian government in the 1960s meant that Brazilians remained largely uninformed of the new findings since the government refused to accept criticism of the country. As such, the racial democracy myth persisted until the late 1980s when black movement activists started to regroup.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AT UFPR

In light of the national push towards affirmative action in 2001, UFPR initiated preliminary seminars to discuss the possibility of racial quotas. In January of 2004, a final proposal was drafted and accepted for the academic school year of 2004/2005, and in May of 2004 UFPR officially approved the reservation of 20% of its vacancies in undergraduate and technical courses to black students for a provisional period of ten years. The amendment was known as the Target Plan of Social and Racial Inclusion. For the section on racial inclusion, the first article identifies the beneficiary group as “the color black or brown that has phenotypic characteristics that belong to the African racial group” (Amendment 37/04-coun). Under this amendment, students are required to provide self-identification from one of the demographic census terms. If students pass the first phase of the vestibular, an evaluation panel, composed

of “internal and external members of the community” (Amendment 37/04-coun) validates applicant’s claims.

According to researchers at the NEAB, the exact operation of the amendment was left relatively open-ended. In the first article, students are required to self-identify their race under a given census term. This issue alone causes some controversy as student interpretations of those categories often differ from those intended by policy makers (Swartzmann, 2009, p. 221). It is often noted that university policy is expected to “see like the state” through “categorical and statistical simplifications of social reality” (Schwartzman, 2009, p. 223). To apply such “hard politics” to the contextualization of identity construction, a range of social and ethical questions begin to surface, and, as the NEAB concluded, they remained largely unanswered.

One of the questions central to the designation of beneficiaries is the evaluation of identity claims: should affirmative action candidates rely on the primacy of self-identification or the view of the “other”? This pivotal issue in the debate complicates the formation of a comprehensive method for interpreting racial classification. Should self-identification within a particular census category be sufficient for an identity claim? The Universidade Federal do Paraná declared that further evidence was necessary. Devising a holistic approach to identity construction, the university introduced an evaluation panel, or “verification committee,” which helped substantiate the claims.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

According to social psychologists Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, social identity is a person’s knowledge that he or she belongs to a given social category or group (Stets & Burke, 2005, p. 225). A social group is understood as the following: “A set of individuals who hold a common social identification, or view of themselves as members of the same category” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). The concept of social identity relies on the self as a reflexive object that “can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 224). Therefore, the construction of an identity is achieved through self-categorization within a specific group and designation of an “in-group” in relation to an “out-group.” The in-group is comprised of members with perceived similarities to other in-group members with an accentuation of similarities in the form of “attitudes, beliefs, values, affective reactions, behavioral norms, [and] styles of speech.” Consequently, the out-group characterizes people who differ from the in-group ideals.

Furthermore, one analyzes the concept of social identity depending on the point of view. Therefore, an internal identification concerns the way in which one perceives oneself in relation to a group. It is the assertion of one’s identity to the outside world. It assumes that a shared

commonality for social group characteristics is either accepted or denied. External identification refers to the identification of others in relation to oneself. For social identity purposes, it is the way in which a person or group defines another as a member of the in-group or out-group. Referring to Cornell and Hartmann's (1997) term, external identification relies on an "assigned" identity that is recognized by another.

Racial identity, in particular, requires further examination within the identity sphere due to the influence of external appearance. Cornell and Hartmann (1997) claim that race frequently relies on assignment by others. Therefore, the flexibility that Brazilians exercise when classifying themselves is often constrained by their physical appearance. Conversely, their subjective identities influence how others perceive them (Racusen, 2010, p. 90). Identity is thus "fully contextual and relational" (Racusen, 2010, p. 90), assuming high levels of ambiguity. Furthermore, the subjective internal definition and the 'objective' external definitions are not always consistent with one another, and as a result the boundaries that emerge are formed by "looser and tighter divisions" (Bailey, 2009, p. 48).

The physical characteristics that are deemed important and the social implication of one's racial identity are entirely dependent on the society. Blanco (1978) argues that self-identification is likely to change in response to how an identity may be received in a given context, triggering a surprisingly fluid membership among loosely formed racial groups. Furthermore, identity construction reflects power relations within a country. It is not surprising that Brazilian citizens frequently change their racial identification depending on their socio-economic class. In *Estimating the Stability of Census-Based Race/Ethnic Classifications: The Case of Brazil*, researchers claimed a dark-skinned person is likely to be classified, and classify himself, as preto while a person of high social status with the same skin tone is likely to be classified and consider himself pardo (Carvalho, Wood, & Andrade, 2004, p. 333). The authors concluded that subjective identity is based on physical appearance and a number of other factors, such as "income, education, and related insignias of social rank," and could change over time with upward mobility (Carvalho et al., 2004, p. 333).

With the advent of affirmative action, the construction of identity was put to systematic examination. The discrepancy between internal and external identification stimulated a heated debate: how should race claims be evaluated incorporating the fluidity of identity? What methods exist and do these methods attempt to fulfill both the internal and external components of identity formation?

VERIFICATION OF IDENTITY CLAIMS

Verification of beneficiaries has generated a great deal of controversy. Is verification necessary? If so, what is the

most accurate and holistic way to verify identity claims if the lines between target groups have been historically blurred? The reality of the situation is that many universities have a moral obligation to verify claims due to the highly competitive nature of university admission, but at what cost? In places such as UFPR where the verification system is in full force, will Brazilians become more aware of racial divisions?

It is undeniable that identity has become a source of manipulation since the introduction of racial quotas. Consider the translated passage taken from Black Movement activist Carlos Medeiros in his book *Na Lei e na Raça: Legislação e Relações Raciais, Brasil-Estados Unidos*:

In the case of the Rio de Janeiro universities [UERJ and UENF] the law used the criterion of self-classification, through which the person declares his/her race/color. This ended up generating fraud, as we saw in the news, with people who are phenotypically brancas (white), that had obviously never seen themselves or presented themselves to the world as anything else, suddenly take out of the closet [‘do fundo do bau’] a forgotten and often despised negro great-grandfather just to guarantee a benefit which was originally intended for those who face the obstacles imposed by racism" (as cited in Schwartzman, 2009, p. 230).

The number of false identity claims initially surprised black activists since many hypothesized that "black phobia" was too deeply entrenched in society. Many assumed that no white individual would feign a black identity, even for the purpose of gaining benefits (González, 2010, p. 130). However, in the initial years of implementation, numerous cases of the strategic use of identity surfaced and ignited a passionate debate regarding the potential need for a verification system.

Verification of beneficiaries serves to curb the number of students accepted on illegitimate grounds. There is a subtle difference between the assertion of one's identity and the construction of one's identity for a specific purpose or gain. The latter has established the pressure for verification of claims in places such as UFPR. Internal identification, in this case, must be considered within the context of a competitive admissions process, and in a larger sense it must be considered within the context of the country's history of racial discrimination. In the Universidade Federal de Brasília, many students who were admitted under affirmative action quotas "were whites who had been counseled by university professors to darken themselves for the purpose of admission" (Racusen, 2010, p. 103). Policy makers must be mindful of this temptation. In such a competitive atmosphere, there is an urgent need for the verification system in order to counteract the strategic use of identity, but one must question the productivity of such a system at promoting racial equality.

Verification is a delicate issue. Some have claimed that the evaluation and designation of beneficiaries may possibly create “reverse discrimination” (Torres Parodi, 2003, p. 13). They implore that verification is likely to make beneficiaries “the object of increased racism” (González, 2010, p. 131). One proponent is José Roberto Pinto de Goés, a history professor at the Universidade Estadual de Rio de Janeiro, who believes that “giving preferential treatment to some because of their race is an act of racism in itself” (González, 2010, p. 131). I would agree with Goés that distinguishing one group from another based on racial appearance is the foundation of racism, but this program marks a hundred and eighty degree turn in racial politics. Instead of using race as a source of socio-economic deprivation, it provides a radical attempt at reparation for a history of systematic oppression and neglect.

The verification system is needed in order to verify legitimate claims, maximizing the opportunity for beneficiaries and eliminating false identity claims. In 2010, the *Folha de São Paulo* noted that out of the fifty-one institutions with affirmative action programs, only six verify candidate claims (Racusen, 2010, p. 104 as cited in Gois, 2008). Of those institutions, there are three methods that have been predominantly employed. The following section provides a brief outline of two of the methods followed by an extensive look at the third method currently in place at the Universidade Federal do Paraná.

The first method is verification through official documentation, which is used by the Universidade Estadual de Goiás. Afro-Brazilian applicants must show “an official public document that confirms the candidate’s black identity, such as a birth certificate or marriage certificate” (Racusen, 2010, p. 107). This method is founded on the notion that all Afro-descendants, regardless of their degree of phenotypic characteristics, are to be given the privilege to apply under the quota system. This is a delimiting approach because the existence of a black or brown ancestor does not necessarily mean the candidate should benefit from this system. Also, as Medeiros’ comment suggests, African heritage can be used for personal gain. In order to avoid this situation, one’s personal history requires further scrutiny in order to reveal a candidate’s motive, and currently, this method does not require such information.

The use of photographs is another method that was widely used in the early years. Of the three universities that have used it to identify candidates in the past, only one still does. Photographs may be useful for determining external classification, but this method fails to address the individual’s internal identification. How does the applicant view their racial identity? The ability to defend one’s identity based on experience is vital in such a delicate issue. These two methods are therefore considered supporting evidence that may contribute to the overall argument of the applicant, but they do not provide the primary evidence that the last method supplies.

VERIFICATION AT UFPR

The interview method used at UFPR to determine racial identification is suitable to appreciate the subjectivity of internal and external identity within the frame of a loosely defined racial group. In this case, “subjectivity” refers to the communication of one’s perspective, feelings, and view-point. This method draws on self-referent behavior through reliance on a candidate’s “internal frame of reference” (Davis, 1999, p. 33). Remarks such as “in my opinion...” or “the way I see it...” allow an external viewer to formulate the candidate’s attitude based on personal experience. This is an empirical view of identity that relies on a candidate’s familiarity with common attributes of the racial/color group. It implies that candidates are directly affected by the color of their skin.

This method reveals a person’s attitude on the subject, which is one of the most important issues during the verification interview. The candidate’s favorable opinion of the quota system is an essential factor in their acceptance in the program. At the most basic level, questions are strategically posed in order to provoke the candidate’s perspective. Students must support the system that is granting benefits to a racial group to which they claim membership. Then, the candidate must respond to questions such as “why do you consider yourself black” to provide an evaluation of their internal identity. The committee is able to compare their physical appearance to the candidate’s experience, thereby providing the foundation for external validation.

A candidate’s claim is addressed within the context of Brazilian society, which is predominantly visually based. The committee attempts to mirror the common perspective in order to estimate whether the candidate’s claim is backed by physical appearance. As one advocate of the quota system claimed, “there is no line [dividing who is Negro and who is not]. It has always been diluted. One certainty is this: the more a person approximates the African phenotype, the less opportunity he/she has in Brazilian society and the more a person approximates the European phenotype, the more opportunity that person has in Brazilian society” (Informant 2). The origin of a person does not provide sufficient evidence of discrimination. The candidate may claim heritage to a black relative, but the objective of the quota system is to consider a candidate’s opportunity in today’s society, which is heavily weighted in physical appearance.

As this informant claims, the verification system is in place “not to judge, but to verify.” He continues: “no one will tell you what you are or what you are not. The committee will say: ‘if I was to see you in the street, I would not be able to tell if you were of African descent or not.’ ” Physical appearance limits one’s opportunity in Brazilian society. The committee strives to mirror the lens constructed by their society. Another graduate student relates this directly to the job market. She claims that

candidates of the same academic caliber, qualifications, and attire are not competing on the same playing field strictly because of their skin color. On average, blacks earn “60 percent of the earnings of their white counterparts” (González, 2010, p. 131).

Verification is necessary to curb attempts to enter on the grounds of illegitimate claims. As one informant noted, many candidates applying under the quota system are ‘well-versed’ and prepare specifically to respond the interview questions using phrases such as “my black roots...,” in order to construct a black identity, but their experience reflects their outward appearance and the benefits or limitations that image provides in Brazilian society. Another informant explained that in 2010, thirty spots were reserved for his major, yet only three were accepted into the university. A number of reasons could have explained such a low acceptance rate, but the most pertinent is the number of candidates who assumed a false racial identity. One graduate student who sat in on the committee in 2011 claimed that it was “very difficult” given that she considers self-identification sufficient for identity claims, but she agrees that a filter is necessary.

One prospective limitation of this system is that it gives power to a select panel of “judges.” In the case of UFPR, the evaluation panel is made up of “internal and external” (Amendment 37/04 COUN) members of the university. The internal members are usually composed of graduate students and professors in the fields of education, anthropology, sociology, and law who are part of the Center for Afro-Brazilian Studies (NEAB), while external members often include social activists within the black movement. As Maio and Santos (2005) remark, members connected to the black movement provide the most effective assessment for identifying interest groups.

Although these select persons act as “the eyes of society” (Maio & Santos, 2005), their interpretations of racial identity have important consequences for the future. Defining an identity, which is intimately connected to an individual, still lies in the hands of an external entity. Regardless of the skin color of this “judge,” at the most basic level, the final decision of what someone “is” is determined by another. This process determines the likelihood of acceptance into the university through the quota system, which can have profound consequences for the life chances of those individuals. One question that arises is whether this process can also affect a person’s self-perception. How will candidates view themselves after being subjected to an evaluation of their most intimate self?

The advent of affirmative action requires one to think about the “uses and abuses of anthropology,” since anthropologists have been called upon for their “racial expertise” (Maio & Santos, 2005, abstract). The verification system at UFPR attempts to incorporate the fluidity of Brazilian color system in the most methodical manner, uniquely joining both internal and external

identification in order to offer benefits to those who rightly deserve them. The core intention is to understand how blacks feel and how they view themselves within society. The definition of this identity is not always a question of the external; instead, it probes the internal identity of who an individual feels he/she is and recognizes that this internal identity affects how a person acts and relates with others in the world. In turn, empirical evidence becomes an essential component for the evaluation of racial identity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The extensive literature of race relations in Brazil, statistical findings of racial inequality, and personal accounts of both explicit and implicit racism indicate that the implementation of affirmative action was an immediate plan to correct historical inequality and injustice. The policy is “corrective” in that it is “utilized to ensure the end of discriminatory practices” (Torres Parodi, 2003, p. 12) and affects the well-being of future generations. As one graduate student acknowledged, there is a definite “change in skin tones in the university setting” (Informant 3), although the number of black students who are educated at UFPR is relatively small considering Afro-Brazilians encompass fifty percent of the population. Prior to the 21st century, UFPR was characterized as an exclusively “white university”; any black students present were international students from African universities.

The changes have been slow, but the push towards diversifying the student body has already generated heated discussions about issues once considered taboo. The same graduate student commented that often times it is the *cotistas*³ who provoke the professor to address issues concerning the black population or race relations within the general population. I experienced this directly while taking an “Anthropology and the Environment” class at UFPR. During a discussion on indigenous land rights, one student brought up the question of Afro-Brazilian land rights to *quilombos*.⁴ The professor responded with keen interest and added a discussion day on the subject. At the time, I considered this a legitimate question, but in hindsight I realize this may have caused quite a stir for other students. Overall, the inclusion of differing voices in the student body generates fruitful discussion of the recognition of the history of Afro-Brazilians and their contribution to Brazilian society.

The reigning myth of racial democracy has left indelible marks on racial dynamics today. The absence of legal racial distinctions served to blur lines, but the discrimination against Afro-Brazilians has persisted. Since the abolition of slavery, the implementation of several influential political movements by the State routinely excluded the Afro-Brazilian population. To this end, a hierarchy took form that left the black population underrepresented and largely invisible in areas of power and prestige in present day. White preference has been an

unrelenting source of oppression in the educational, economic, and social spheres. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) discuss the influence of oppressive power schemes in their exploration of the root of democracy. They argue that oppressive relations must be made visible, re-negotiated, and modified. It is my belief that affirmative action policies serve this purpose by decentering the power of white privilege while providing the educational opportunities to integrate qualified black individuals into positions of economic security and importance. Likewise, their place in the university setting ignites fertile debate on the subject of black rights, and over time they may serve to alter the social paradigm.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the translations from Portuguese in both the academic literature and personal interviews were completed by the author.

² Black activists attempted to regroup the masses by appealing to African religious traditions, but a large number had converted to Catholicism, and therefore their attempt was largely dismissed.

³ *Cotistas* are students that have entered the university through the quota system.

⁴ *Quilombos* were communities organized by fugitive slaves. The Quilombo of Palmares was the largest and most famous, reaching close to 20,000 members.