

## **The Politics of Positionality: An Exploration into Black Personhood in Brazilian Universities**

**Ellen A. Gyasi, 2020**

Over the course of this summer, I conducted ethnographic research about black university students in Brazil employing a myriad of methods to collect my findings. Commencing in early June until August, I conducted interviews, took field notes and researched pertinent literature related to the lived experience of affirmative action students at the Universidade de São Paulo (USP) and Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP). On most days, I would spend my time observing the FFLHC (Humanities) ECA (Arts), and Arquitetura e Urbanismo (Architecture and Urban Planning) departments at USP recruiting participants for my study and making relevant connections. Moreover, I engaged in a number of recreational activities with my subjects including, visiting them at work, shopping, cooking dinner, attending family events etc. The purpose of my project was aimed at answering the following questions: “Are universities inclusive of afro-Brazilian identity? How is this seen (or not) within the institution of higher education? What challenges do these students face as result? And lastly, how do they ultimately find support?” What I found was that these issues go beyond unjust systems of power and racial tensions. The future of black university students in Brazil today is heavily dependent on the political, social and cultural factors that exist beyond the four walls of the classroom. Through my methodology, I was able to not only answer my questions but raise new lines of inquiry that I hope to explore in greater detail in the future.

Despite being a nation with a relatively progressive constitution, explicit affirmative action policies, and more than half of the population identifying as being of African descent, the Brazilian institution of higher education still favors a wealthy white elite. Brazil’s constitution states that 30% of vacancies in public universities should be allotted to affirmative action students. However, I found that there are discrepancies between the laws and their applications. The 30% of vacancies are separated into different types of scholarships. Some of these *bolsas* are allocated on the basis of family income (not unlike financial aid in the United States), while others are based solely on race and ethnicity. This creates a hyper selective process that can often be disadvantageous to the students who need the scholarships the most. Moreover, since students can only apply for one scholarship, the chances of a working class/ poor minority student to get into public school on a scholarship are halved during the application process. *Programa Universidade para Todos (Pro-Uni)*, is the program that oversees the allocation of university scholarships. Enacted in 2005 under the Lula administration, the program aims to integrate higher education and provide opportunities for Brazil’s most disenfranchised. The majority of the students I worked with were *bolsistas*<sup>1</sup> and that is by design. In the U.S, not every black student is an affirmative action student/ on scholarship, however, in Brazil it can be safely assumed that a black university student is a *bolsista*.

The *bolsistas* I worked with spanned different age groups and backgrounds; the youngest being 19 and the oldest being 27. These students were varied in their disciplines, skin tone, hometowns, and ethnicities. In most cases they studied humanities or social sciences. These students also identified as being from the *periferia*<sup>2</sup> and as such, remarked on some of the challenges this caused for their education. For example, some students described the long commutes they had between home, work and school as all day ordeals. Often starting around 6 in the morning and returning home after midnight, these students balance a school, home and work life that can consist of over 4 hours of commuting. This leaves many of them fatigued and preoccupied, affecting their ability to actively engage in extra-curricular activities/ diligently complete their assignments. All these factors coupled with the everyday racism that exist within the institution of higher education (elitism, classism, white superiority complexes etc.) affect the retention rates among black students. One of my subjects described her experience at PUC-SP as a “*segunda guerra* (second war)”, one that challenged her socially, physically, and emotionally.

Conducting a research project of this nature was insightful and personally fulfilling. I was able to be fully immersed in a culture that echoed the United States but differed drastically. As a black American

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<sup>1</sup> Affirmative action students

<sup>2</sup> Peripheries of São Paulo; working class neighborhoods

studying other black Americans, I was able to form a great rapport with the participants of my study because our experiences echoed each other. I learned that some of the hardships of being a person of African descent in a majority white space are present across different contexts. Feelings of alienation, rejection, guilt, and doubt are commonplace for black university students. However, despite these hardships students can form solidarity and support networks that sustain them through perpetually anti-black bias incidents that plague institution of higher education. Looking to the future, I am excited to explore some of the themes and experiences of this past summer in an independent study. I hope to draw upon the political and social histories that have informed education in Brazil and produce a longer journal about my findings. Moreover, I hope to return to Brazil after completing my undergraduate education to conduct research that will be used for a future dissertation.



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