
RACE AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: THE IMPLEMENTATION OF QUOTAS FOR “BLACK” STUDENTS IN A BRAZILIAN UNIVERSITY*

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ABSTRACT In 2003, some Brazilian public universities began to reserve a percentage of their posts (quotas) to “black” students, allowing them to be accepted with lower scores at the admission exam. These type of policies became common during the last decade as a way to fight against social inequalities, but have also become the object of public disagreement due to its potentially “racializing” character. The present article engages with the racial-quota debate, using some ethnographic data collected at the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro between 2007 and 2008. The author defends these measures as a way to diversify what have been traditionally-elite university spaces and as a way to increase chances of social mobility for lower-class students. These facts should be considered within a debate on affirmative action, without necessarily implying that racial quotas should be the best and only solution to address racial inequalities in Brazilian education.

KEY WORDS:

Brazil, race, affirmative action, university education, ethnography.

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RAZA Y ACCIÓN AFIRMATIVA: LA IMPLANTACIÓN DE CUOTAS PARA ESTUDIANTES “NEGROS” EN UNA UNIVERSIDAD BRASILEÑA

RESUMEN En 2003 algunas universidades públicas brasileñas empezaron a reservar un porcentaje de sus cupos (cuotas) para estudiantes “negros”, permitiéndoles obtener puntajes más bajos en el examen de admisión. La utilización de estas medidas ha aumentado a lo largo de la última década, como una forma de combatir las desigualdades sociales, pero esto ha llevado a desacuerdos públicos, debido al carácter potencialmente “racial” de esta política. Este artículo aborda el debate cuota-raza utilizando algunos datos etnográficos recolectados en la Universidad del Estado de Río de Janeiro entre 2007 y 2008. El autor en general sostiene que estas medidas diversifican los espacios por tradición elitistas de la Universidad y aumentan las oportunidades de movilidad social de los estudiantes de clase baja. Estos hechos deberían apreciarse a partir de un debate sobre la acción afirmativa, sin que esto implique necesariamente que las cuotas raciales serían la mejor y única solución para abordar las desigualdades raciales en la educación brasileña.

KEY WORDS:

Brasil, raza, acción afirmativa, educación universitaria, etnografía.

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Brasil, raça, ação afirmativa, educação universitária, etnografia.

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INTRODUCTION

FAITH IN THE MIRACLES OF RACIAL MIXTURE has survived until recent times in Brazil, even though a number of social scientists have warned about the impact of race on Brazilian social inequalities at least from the 1950s (Bastide and Fernandes, 1971; Nogueira, 1985; Costa-Pinto, 1998). Only in 2001, this pride appeared at risk quite seriously, once the law of the State of Rio de Janeiro introduced a system of quotas for “black” students and for other groups at a disadvantage to enter state public universities. This system was implemented for the first time in 2003 by the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), provoking a heated national debate about the advantages and risks of “racial” measures, in a country where racial identities are rather ambiguous (Sheriff, 2001; Fry, 2005). The present article aims to address this debate, discussing ethnographic data I collected at UERJ between 2007 and 2008.

Universities’ quotas can be understood as a way of repairing the ambiguities of the education sector in Brazil, where lower-class people (most of them black- and brown-skinned) have been largely excluded from access to public university, which is quite prestigious in Brazil (Rosemberg, 2004) and whose entry exam (*vestibular*) is particularly difficult. One of the reasons that can explain this situation is because lower-class students usually attend poorly-provided public schools and are not competitive enough to pass the tough selection process in public higher education. Most higher education openings in the Brazilian public sector, therefore, are occupied by middle- and upper-class students who come from high-standard private high schools and are predominantly light-skinned or white. Paixão and Carvano (2008) show that, despite a general growth in education for white and for non-white people (mainly browns and blacks), the gaps between the two groups have persisted substantially unaltered over this period of time since the beginning of the last century, both in terms of literacy rates and years of study. Although differences seem smaller in relation to the *ensino fundamental* (schooling of people between seven and 14

years old), data shows that white people over 15 years old in 2006 studied for an average of 8.0 years, whereas their non-white counterparts (brown-skinned + black-skinned people) studied for just 6.2 years (Paixão and Carvano, 2008: 70, 76). In addition, according to figures published by the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the percentage of non-whites (browns and blacks altogether) with a university degree in Brazil was just 4.0% in 2007, compared to 13.4% of whites. Such distribution does not proportionally reflect national demographic data, where non-white people represent approximately 50% of the Brazilian population according to the last national census in 2010¹. In a similar direction, Carvalho (2005) showed that the percentage of non-white university teachers in Brazil is still less than 1%.

At present, the State of Rio de Janeiro's law reserves 20% of places on each course for students self-identified as "*negros*" (Black) or *indígena* (Amerindian), a further 20% for students from public schools, while a remaining 5% are assigned to disabled people and other combined residual categories. Quota applicants at UERJ are not automatically admitted when applying for a place; they must achieve a minimum score in the vestibular exam. If they fulfill this requirement, then applicants are actually admitted on the basis of their position in the rankings within each quota category. Since 2004, all types of quotas at UERJ have followed financial criteria: quota applicants, independent of their color and situation, must prove that they are *carentes* (in need) on the basis of their family per capita income.

Although the main purpose of affirmative policies is to reduce the social differences between whites and non-whites, a fundamental question has been if these measures racialize universities in Brazil by encouraging people to feel "black" (Folha Online 2008; Fry *et al.*, 2007) for quotas and national censuses. Such questions make a particular sense in a country such as Brazil, which has widely built its national pride on ideas of racial mixture (*mestiçagem*), and where racial policies might actually essentialize racial divisions. Some other questions concern whether the introduction of affirmative action infringes the principle of merit and risk affecting university standards; whether student beneficiaries really belong to the deprived layers of society; and whether these measures are generally constitutional by treating some citizens preferentially. Other critiques, following Fraser (1997), claim that policies of affirmative action are neoliberal measures that "recognize" vulnerable groups but do not lead to structural transformation and redistribution in society (Folha Online, 2008).

1 Brazilian main population categories according to the national census 2010: 47.73% White (*branco*), 43.13% Brown (*pardo*), 7.61% Black (*preto*). Asian and Amerindian, altogether, represent less than 2% of the overall population.

Although questions remain about whether racial quotas (or quotas in general) are the best solution to redress social inequalities in Brazil, I argue that the quota system has been successful at promoting the access of vulnerable groups in higher education and diversifying university users. This has occurred without significantly affecting the academic standards of the university and without clearly racializing the student collectivity as expected.

The first part of the article defines the research problem: I present the general context of Brazilian race relations, sketch out the main points of controversy of the quota debate, and present the ethnographic methodology used. The second part of the article deals with some ethnographic findings of my research².

RACE RELATIONS AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN BRAZIL

In the 1930s, Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre promoted the idea of “racial democracy”, observing the substantial lack of racial divisions in Brazil, and emphasizing the intense racial miscegenation that occurred in the country through the mixture (*mestiçagem*) between people of European, African and Amerindian descent (1961). These ideas were deeply used during the authoritarian rule of Getúlio Vargas in the 1930s, when “mixture” was ideologically presented as a source of national pride and a unifying factor for the Brazilian state. The myth of racial democracy was firstly, significantly challenged by the UNESCO Project in the 1950s, when a number of social scientists such as Bastide and Fernandes (1971), Nogueira (1985) and Costa Pinto (1998) showed the salient presence of racism affecting black people in Brazil and its negative effects on their possibilities for social mobility. Their findings pointed out that Brazil’s racism was deeply disguised and therefore difficult to address.

The questioning of Brazil’s racial democracy was enriched with statistical and sociological research in the decades following the UNESCO Project. Hasenbalg (1979) and Silva (1985) carried out the first significant studies, stressing differentials in wealth and access to services between the white and non-white population. These authors also showed that such racial differentials can’t be fully explained by class divisions. Lower social indexes, racial constraints for social mobility and patterns of segregation for the Afro-Brazilian population were found in all sectors of social life, from incomes to access to the job markets (Telles, 2004; Paixão, 2003; Lovell and Wood, 1998). These studies have reinforced the claims of the black social movement, which has traditionally questioned Brazil’s masked racism and campaigned since the the 1980s for the use of iracially-based

2 A more extensive presentation and discussion of the findings contained in this article can be found in the monograph *Urban Encounters: Affirmative Action and Black Identities in Brazil* (Cicalo, 2012).

policies in favor of Afro-Brazilians (Nascimento, 1982; Medeiros, 2004). Activists have also claimed that the color division in national census white/brown/black (*branco/pardo/preto*) is fragmenting the back population and should be changed in a binary way, that would include g brown- and black-skin people into a black (*negra*) racial category (Nobles, 2000).

In spite of this growing debate on Brazilian race relations, a real shift in Brazilian racial politics occurred only in the last decades of the twentieth century, when affirmative action policies began to “black” people (*negros*). This shift, according to Htun (2004), was chiefly influenced by the Durban Conference against Racial Discrimination in 2001, when Brazil officially admitted the existence of racism and promised to undertake actions to redress its racial inequalities. This moment coincided with the expansion of multicultural and ethnic politic in Latin America (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992), along with the growing network of black and indigenous political activism at a transnational level (Paschel and Sawyer, 2008; Sansone, 2003). Racially-based affirmative action was eventually implemented in 2003, when the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) had to apply the early-mentioned state law on quotas. This action produced a chain effect among other Brazilian states: by May 2008, 69 of the federal, state and municipal higher education institutions had already established racially-based affirmative action of some sort, in addition to or in alternative to other socially-inclusive measures. Over the same decade, the law 10639/2003 introduced the compulsory teaching of Afro-Brazilian culture and history in public schools, while the Statute of Racial Equality sanctioned in 2010 promotes further legislation in matters of racial equality in the access to several fields of social life from mass media to health and education. In April 2012 Brazil’s High Federal Court sanctioned the constitutionality of racial quotas in Brazilian universities while, in the same year, a federal law has anticipated the use of quotas for all universities and technical high schools which are subject to federal legislation. Still in 2012, the state of Rio de Janeiro introduced quotas for black and indigenous candidates in the civil service exam (*concurso público*). In spite of these legislative changes, the debate around the foundations of the quota system in Brazil is still very lively.

METHODOLOGY

Ethnographic research on Brazilian race relations has been mainly carried out by non-Brazilian researchers (Landes, 1994; Fry, 2005; Sansone, 2003; Goldstein, 2003; Sheriff, 2001; Twine, 1998; Burdick, 1998) and is still relatively narrow³. This fact may be partially related to a discipline culture in Brazil, where

3 For an example, see Carvalho (2005) and Maggie (2006).

race relations are more typically the field of sociology. Skepticism toward the use of ethnographic methods in the study of race relations usually concerns the little statistical significance of the samples used and the limited weight of the data for generalizing about larger populations. Having said this, ethnography offers a deeper insight in the life and opinion of informants, and can be a useful method to research about identities and the experience of social policies.

When I approached my research topic for first time, in 2005, the debate around quotas had a predominantly-philosophical character, which discussed the possible risks and benefits that measures of affirmative action might imply for Brazilian society. In contrast, there was little research about the real impact that these measures had on university settings and their users. Although some applied studies were published in the following years (Penha-Lopes, 2007; Schwartzman, 2009), no studies significantly relied on ethnographic methods. By using ethnography in my research, I expected to be able to combine interview data with participant observation. I also hoped to enter the life of a defined number of participants in a way that no other research on affirmative action had done until then. To achieve this goal, I carried out one year of research fieldwork at the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro between 2007 and 2008. Only some of my results are presented in this article.

I initially conducted research within different undergraduate programs, but eventually focused more on the Law Department. Law was one of the undergraduate programs that, according to informants, was still popular among the (“white”) middle class and had been changing quickly with the implementation of the quota system. This undergraduate program, consequently, offered rich opportunities to explore the way that elite academic spaces diversify through affirmative action. I eventually decided to focus my research more intensely on first-year students. These students caught my interest by being a group “in transition”, which had entered university with ambitions amid the social stigma due to their educational weaknesses. Another advantage of focusing on this group was that classes remained quite compact at that first stage of the course: the same group of students attended courses together everyday, making systematic research on a defined group easier.

Fieldwork primarily involved attending classes with the cluster of first-years that studied during the morning shift (between 70 and 80 students). Among them, I researched more closely a group of 20 quota students (*cotistas*) of different skin color and then more closely, a group of ten, the majority of which were female students. Although my study privileged lower-class first-year students in the Law Department, I also socialized and carried out interviews with academic and administrative staff, as well as quota and non-quota

students from several departments and years. I also attended conferences where the topic of quota was discussed. Finally, I engaged with other social research and some statistical data provided by the Vestibular Office. Using different scales of research helped me to grasp information from the “particular”, while keeping a larger view, in order to maximize the significance of the limited sample used. Ethnographic methods included participant observation, as well as formal and informal interviews and socializing with informants both within and outside the academic setting.

My priority was to collect and observe data in their ethnographic context, enhancing opportunities to establish solid relations with informants. In this way, I had the chance to explore the same matters with the same people over a number of times, individually or in groups, across the academic year 2007-2008. I was then able to observe possible contradictions and variations in the answers given due to the context, but also observe opinion changes as well as clarifications of previous statements made during fieldwork. Another advantage of systematic socializing with informants was the opportunity to explore research questions without constantly asking a question. In a number of cases, I limited myself to observe situations and dialogues between informants, without intervening directly in such situations.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS ON AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF RIO DE JANEIRO

At the time of fieldwork, there were crucial doubts about the social background of quota users and their academic profile. Further concerns were related to the effects that racial policies have on “forcing” black identities on users, and to the racialization that these measures might encourage at the university and in Brazilian society at large. These areas will be addressed in the remainder of this article with the use of some ethnographic examples.

Social and academic considerations about quota users

As the process of participant observation and socializing at UERJ highlighted, the large majority of quota students came from regions of Zona Norte, Zona Oeste and Baixada Fluminense, all areas of Rio de Janeiro that are typically associated with lower-classes. Most *cotistas* lived in female-headed, monoparental families, and they often were the first family members to join a university. Without access to higher education the career chances of lower-class students seemed more typically circumscribed to the low ranks of the tertiary sector. Accordingly, students’ decisions to attend university

were generally encouraged by a project of rising socially, to contribute to the family income and to fulfill the dream of moving to wealthier neighborhoods in the metropolitan area⁴; as a law quota student Anita points out:

...I want to leave this place [her neighborhood]...help my mother [whose employment was precarious]...pay for her medical insurance...give her a better life...I didn't get a good education because public schools are bad quality (*ruim*)...It seems that everything was working to prevent me from getting something better in life...After finishing high school, I spent several years in a job fixing printers...This was the future that was "assigned" to me...but I really didn't accept that for myself...I wanted something different in life.

At the same time that there is an empathy process with their household vulnerability (and, more frequently with their mothers), students such as Anita dream to take a very different pathway from the one of their family members. Particularly female students look for financial independence from men and their decisional power, something that most of their mothers could not reach, while for lower-class boys social mobility is described as a general way to achieve a better life and become reliable breadwinners, for girls this is also a consistent way to change the long and unequal gender relations which they have often experienced in their households. "For girls, access to university is extremely important," Martha says, "because, in the end, it's always the man who leaves the household".

On the basis of 2007 data provided by the Vestibular Office, there is an age difference of over three years between quota and non-quota first-years in the Law Department (approximately 22.0 and 18.3 in 2007). This gap is even more significant when taking into account gender: in 2007, female non-quota students entered university at the average age of 17.7, while male quota students at 23.4. The average age for female quota students is something intermediate between these values: 20.5⁵. Informants explained the age gap between quota and non-quota students by the greater effort that quota students have to make in order to prepare for and to pass the entry exam, and to save enough money to survive financially during university courses. A different reasoning was used to explain the age difference between male and female quota students. Some informants

4 71% of black-quota students among law first-years declared that in their households there were not cars or motorbikes; only 52% of them had never worked; while 81% of them declared that their mothers did not study further than high school. Source: vestibular data 2008.

5 Vestibular data 2007.

simply commented on the fact that girls are “more studious”; while other informants added that the lower-class male labor can be more immediately requested on the market and better paid (often relying on physical strength and resistance), while lower-class girls have less profitable options in the job market, mainly as maids, nannies and shop assistants. Due to their less promising employability, “the household might tolerate a prolonged presence of female members as dependants and invest in their education”, a quota student described. “Boys, in contrast, are early encouraged to be income providers for the household and tend to join university only after years spent in precarious jobs”. Regardless of this age gap between male and female quota students, the gender percentage distribution at UERJ appeared to be substantially even in 2007-2008, both in the Law Department and at UERJ overall⁶.

Additional considerations can be made about the factors that impact quota students’ ability to survive financially during courses. At the time of my fieldwork, quota students received a modest scholarship (about 125 USD monthly) for the first-year, which seemed clearly insufficient to cover their needs. For this reason, most informants had to work part-time, the large majority of them as shop-assistants and telemarketers. That said, students’ chances of surviving at university dramatically depended on the support they managed to achieve from their social network. Anita, in addition to her part-time job as a guardian in a sporting center, received financial aid from relatives in order to buy books, while other members of her social networks lent her money to pay bills. This made Anita’s reduced presence on the job market less detrimental for the entire household.

A different and crucial area of the quota debate relates to the academic performance of quota students. From October 2007 until July 2008, I accompanied the course evaluations of first-year students and I cannot forget the expressions of disappointment when quota students got their assessments back. It took some time for quota users to adapt to the academic system. This was also the time when lower-class students started realizing that they had to reduce part-time working shifts in order to spend more time for course preparation. Before the second evaluations of the first semester, I noticed a strong solidarity among first-year quota students who in some cases were helped by non-quota students with similar social backgrounds. Some quota students gathered in groups at the university in the afternoon in order to discuss course topics and help each other. In general, I also

6 However, there are courses where women (e.g. social work) or boys (e.g. engineering) traditionally prevail.

noticed strong support from some teachers whose constant encouragement became vital for student motivation. In the second round of assessments in each subject, quota first-years improved notably, and in some cases scored very high marks. In the second semester, half of the quota students still had to struggle, while others were already settled and, in specific cases, performed extremely well. The performance of the quota students improved more consistently in the second and third year of the course, narrowing the gap between quota and non-quota students:

When I look at the scores of the exams I don't see any real difference between the marks of the *cotistas* and ours. I think many of them are even doing better...you see in the class that the *cotistas* write down every word the teacher says, often with their exercise book on a pile of texts they've just got from the library... (Flávio, third-year non-quota student)

Similar testimonies came from university teachers, who generally pointed out that quota students performed sufficiently well:

If I talk from a political point of view, I believe that quotas are not the best way to fight inequality in Brazil...However, if I talk by looking at the results, my testimony has to be different. Quota students are, overall, very motivated students from the beginning of the course. In comparison to the catastrophic predictions when the system was introduced, these students do quite well [at the end of the course]. I don't see many differences with other students and I believe that many of them will be excellent professionals. (Constitutional Law teacher)

The data about students' performance and drop-outs recorded between 2003 and 2007 confirms these observations⁷. Although differences can be observed depending on the course, the average performance coefficient calculated over 49 courses was slightly higher for quota students: the academic performance of public-school quota students and black-quota students, on a scale from 0 to 10, was respectively 6.56 and 6.41, while it was actually lower (6.37) for non-quota students (data DINFO 2007). These figures do not take into account differences across courses. In elite courses like law, in fact, non-quota students still had the best performance (7.9 versus 7.1 for public-school and black-quota students). However, this is an average calculated over the total of the years in the Law Department and does not reflect

7 Data DINFO (2007). DINFO is the UERJ Informatics System. The data was provided to the author through the organization Educafro in late 2007.

the situation at the end of the course. The generally-good performance of quota students can be explained by the fact that, in spite of their easiest access to a university course through affirmative action, quota students still have to achieve a reasonably-high score in the admission exam to compete with other quota candidates and pass a minimum threshold for admission. In addition, many *cotistas* manage to pass the entry exam only after attending preparation courses and take the admission exam several times before being successful. Other interesting data relates to the course dropping-out rates at UERJ, which turned up being higher among non-quota students: between 2003 and 2007, 17% of the non-quota students over 49 undergraduate courses dropped out versus less than 13% of the quota students. As philosophy quota student Rogério observed, this trend could be explained by the fact that

Access to university represents a unique chance of social mobility that lower-class students cannot really miss. Wealthier students, on the other hand, have more options to transfer to other courses that fulfill their social aspirations or find a good job.

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Racial identities among quota users

One of the typical concerns about racial quotas is that these policies may create an identity manipulation situation, encouraging mixed-race and brown-skin people to identify as “black” in order to enjoy a policy advantage (Folha Online, 2008). Racial quotas, in this sense, might produce a process of black-and-white racialization at the expense of racially-mixed identities.

In the ethnographic process at UERJ, it emerged that several students who self-identified as brown in interviews had used “black” quotas. Nonetheless, the use of racial quotas by brown-skin informants seemed to have little influence on the way these students saw themselves. It was clear, instead, that these students had used a black identification strategically for quotas, while preserving brown and racially-mixed forms of identification in everyday life. When I asked Susana why she had used black quotas, her answer was “because I’m *negra!*” However, she kept describing herself consistently as *morena* (brunette), *mestiça* (mixed-race) and *parda* (brown) in everyday interactions at university, often contradicting the statement by which she justified her use of a racial quota:

I’m *morena!* I’m *parda!*...*Negro* is something different. It’s something more African [meaning darker-skin and pointing to another student]. (Susana, law black quota student)

Other students confirmed this pattern, by clarifying that the way students describe themselves for a quota application has not necessarily to do with the way they normally identify. “Many students write down that they feel black, but that [black declaration] is just for an administrative form!”, quota student Michele says.

Having mentioned these examples of “strategic” use of blackness for quota purposes, a portion of self-identified brown students at UERJ had avoided racial quotas by not identifying as black, as also pointed out by Schwartzman (2009). Some of these brown students (likewise some black-identified first-years in my research) had preferred to use public school quotas by considering this system color-blinded and ethically fairer. Other students had not used quotas at all, particularly when doing the entry competition for less demanded courses such as social work, education and math (Cicalo, 2012: 108). It should be also noted that, due to the criterion of self-declaration on which the racial quota system is structured at UERJ, nothing would technically prevent white students from using racial quotas⁸. In fact, there were a couple of cases in the Law Department where students who were perceived as white by most peers had used quotas for *negros*. In this sense, no obvious correspondence can be imagined between the collectivity of black-quota users at university and the collectivity of those students who identify as black in everyday life. Consequently, to assume that racial quotas clearly end up “racializing” the university community is problematic.

If the use of black quotas seems unable to shift students’ racial identities and to define a “black” group of users a different question is whether some students may develop racial consciousness at the university. Particularly students in their late years showed that joining the university—and particularly engaging with academic subjects and with the university’s black movement—may contribute to reinforcing or building black identities:

I already had some [black] consciousness from before, but then you arrive at university, you meet people and study academic subjects...we read and comment on texts, we get to know very good black authors through the *grupo de estudo* [study group on racial issues]...so you start organizing scattered information that you already had, you start creating analogies, getting a deeper knowledge, even disagreeing with your other peers... (Gabriela, law black-quota student)

8 Self-declaration is the main strategy by which universities select black-quota candidates. The different experience at the federal University of Brasília, where candidates were selected on the basis of photos and interviews, has been highly contested. In 2012, the Brazilian Law that regulates quotas for Federal Universities established that the criterion of self-identification is the only possible to select black-quota candidates.

It is clear that the presence of quotas (particularly racial ones) has raised the numbers of black students, enhancing the context of identification for black university users, for example through social activities and discussion groups organized by the university black social movement, and its campaigns to introduce Afro-Brazilian topics in academic curricula⁹. On the other hand, the process of developing a black identity at the university may perfectly involve public-school quota users such as Renee, or students who do not rely on the quota system.

During my whole life I felt pressure to straighten my hair and be as white as possible...I always said that I was "*parda*" (brown) because, in spite of having black features (*feições negras*), my skin is quite fair. When I joined university, however, all this changed. I started seeing lots of people like me, and many beautiful girls with their hair kinky...particularly people from the [black] movement. I had not expected to see as many of them...I thought that was cool and I found the confidence to free my hair...I gradually came to see myself primarily as "*negra*"...I started investigating more about the slave origins in my family...before I did not have any interest in it. (Renee, philosophy public-school quota student)

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A related point is whether the developing of black identity at university for some students will automatically imply their militancy in the black movement. As history student Mariele observes,

[The Black] movement is not my cup of tea (*não é a minha praia*) because I'm not interested in politics in general. However, my black identity has grown here and it will grow more. The opposite would be impossible, considering the huge amount of reading we have to cope with [in our courses].

Other students, in contrast, stated that some black radicalism might be a typical initial stage for students who get involved in black politics, but they change their approach with time, taking on a less confrontational attitude:

At first, I was politically very belligerent and radical. I know that there are moments when we need to ask for "all or nothing" (*tudo ou nada*) and make lots of noise in order to make people notice us...However, now I've changed. I think that after the stage where you make noise, you also need to be able to negotiate and be diplomatic...This is to me a more sensible approach that not everybody understands within the black movement...For example, established "anti-white" attitudes become counter-productive after a certain point...If you're very much like that you won't go anywhere, politically speaking. (André, history student)

9 In the interviewing process, some black students complained that there was still lack of supervisors who could support them for dissertation about "black" topics.

Spatial distribution and inter-group socializing among students at the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro

At a public meeting about quotas at Fundação Getúlio Vargas in 2008, the UERJ dean Ricardo Vieiralves said that the “UERJ, finally, has the face of Brazil” (*por fim a UERJ tem a cara do Brasil*). This statement highlights the social and color diversification that the introduction of quotas has produced in the academic setting, particularly in highly-demanded courses where admission competition was particularly fierce and the university community was more typically white middle class before the introduction of quotas. As a law teacher observed, “in the past you could see two, three black students in my classrooms. Now there are many more”. This teacher, like many other members of staff, found that UERJ reflected more faithfully the racial composition of Rio de Janeiro since 2003. Some non-quota students also appreciated the mixture of the academic setting; they also mentioned that this was making them more aware of social realities that they considered distant from their own. In a burst of UERJ pride, non-quota student Vivian stated that “other public universities [which did not implement quotas at that time] were boring and people looked all the same [meaning mostly white and wealthier]”.

A different question is whether the introduction of the quota system has effectively created a harmonious community where people eventually mix independently of class background and color. Ethnographic observation of law first-years showed that the spatial distribution in the classroom clearly reflected urban differences. Paradoxically, since 2003, this happened at UERJ much more strikingly than in the past, when the law student group was more typically an elite space.

The most striking aspect of the resemblance between the university and the divided metropolitan space could be seen by observing the spatial distribution of first-year law students in the classroom. This group of lower-class students (mostly quota users) tended to occupy the first five rows of the classroom, while non-quota first-years clustered in the following rows¹⁰. As a quota informant explained, “we come from the worse schools and have less access to books than the rich guys...for this reason we need to sit in the front, to focus more on the lecture and to take notes carefully”. This also explains the image (quite diffused at UERJ) of quota students as particularly zealous, in contrast to wealthier students who nonetheless tended to get good grades even if apparently they were less committed.

10 Similar patterns were described and observed in other classes, where the division was sometimes between the right and left side of the classroom and, in some cases, reversed in their order. What is presented here is the generalization expressed by student views. Participant observation confirmed the overall validity of these students' comments but also pointed out that division was much less striking than stated by informants.

The classroom spatial division, which was acknowledged by the same students and by most of the academic staff interviewed in the Law Department, reflected variables such as socio-economic status, school and neighborhood of origin, academic performance, including score in the vestibular and kind of quotas used¹¹. The transport used for university also was a powerful way to shape and reflect such social divisions because, to quote a student's words, "the train is what the poor use [to go to university]"¹². This student meant that lower-class students tended to build solid friendships also by sharing long journeys on the train from the metropolitan periphery to the university, often facing difficult conditions due to heat, packed compartments and delays. In contrast, wealthier law students tended to go to university by the underground or in groups by car.

First-years also observed that there was little interaction between the two groups of students: people from the same social cluster hung together and generally expressed limited interest in the other group (Cicalo, 2012: 62-63). Such pattern was reproduced in the extra-academic life of law first-years: students of a different background tended to visit separate venues, and there was little interaction between the two groups outside the university. This was, to some extent, also an effect of socio-spatial divisions between these groups in the city, including distance between neighborhoods, transport costs and lack of finances for less affluent students to enjoy pricey attractions in Rio de Janeiro. In this sense, the fact that many teachers and wealthy students showed satisfaction for attending a socially-mixed university (as mentioned earlier) does not automatically lower social barriers that are historically crystallized in the metropolitan space.

Students tended to explain classroom divisions in class terms, downplaying "race" as a factor for socializing. Interviews confirmed this pattern also observed by other researchers (Schwartzman and Silva, 2012). Interviewees did realize that almost the majority of non-quota students in their classroom were white but they also observed that the lower-class student group in the law department was quite heterogeneous in terms of phenotypes. The racial variable, in contrast, emerged more strikingly during participant observation, which detected the importance of the racial aspect for socializing also within the lower-class group. For example, I noticed that darker-skin students tended to cluster in particular areas of the classroom space. Some students confirmed this pattern.

11 See also Valentim (2005) and Holanda (2008).

12 The train is a typical transport that connects suburbs and inner city in Rio de Janeiro, serving the Maracanã area, where the university is located.

Black students sit in the [very] front [rows]. However, there are some of them sitting at the margins of the classroom, by the door, or even hidden in the very back of the room...then, there is a group of three black girls who sit together by the window and—I can't say why—they hardly relate to anybody else. (Daniel, law)

Only after intense interaction in academic and extra-academic activities with students, I realized that this minimization of the relations between race and space in the classroom was not casual; discourses of race appeared mediated by a process of cultural censorship, politeness, discomfort and silence that has been largely described as typical of Brazilian race relations (Sheriff, 2001; Goldstein, 2003). For example, in a classroom discussion that a teacher promoted about the quota system, the debate remained very vague: only some first-years expressed their opinions, but nobody made specific reference to “racial” policies¹³. Racial discourses emerged more explicitly mostly during face-to-face interviewing, or were paradoxically enhanced by “silence”.

These findings suggest that urban social divisions of Rio de Janeiro are now more clearly reflected within the university setting, particularly in elite courses such as law, where the access of the lower-class was more difficult before 2003. Such divisions, however, are not an effect of quotas; they are an effect of the urban divisions that quota policies aim to redress. It should be also observed that, at the same time that quotas make urban differences more visible in the law course, they also allow for their negotiation: the increased presence of lower-class and black students in undergraduate courses, in fact, subverts typical patterns of urban distribution, allowing the lower-class to socialize with the middle upper-class outside models of subalternity that typically are those of servants and service providers. In the words of a first-year informant, when the quota students enter university, “they share a space of educational excellence with the kids of the[ir mum’s] employer” (*a gente vai pra aula com o filho da patroa*)¹⁴. Although deep socialization between students of different backgrounds is not the rule at UERJ, some change can be seen particularly in the last years of undergraduate programs. Among my informants, I identified at least a couple of examples of stable inter-class (and inter-racial) socializing between students. These social encounters, that are important to mention, are more common when they are proactively favored by the staff, for example, when they organize socially-mixed study groups and promote joint student gatherings outside the university.

13 During a student group presentations for the course Law of Political Thought, some a group of wealthy first-years gave a presentation about hip-hop. No reference to race was made by students during the talk, while this music genre was related to the lower-class in North American ghettos.

14 The *patroa* would stand as the female employer of quota students’ mothers, stereotypically imagined as ‘cleaners’.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of affirmative action at the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro has produced a consistent diversification of the student community, increasing the chances of social encounters between students of different backgrounds. Such diversity is generally appreciated by the UERJ users, although the presence of a quota system in the academic setting does not automatically erase social (and racial) barriers between students. The academic performance of quota students at UERJ has been sufficiently satisfactory until now, without significantly affecting the academic standards of the university courses. As an example, after the introduction of quotas, the UERJ Law Department has maintained a leading position in the Rio de Janeiro's OAB, the public examination that graduates should pass in order to work as lawyers¹⁵. On a different level, it is not obvious whether the implementation of racial quotas favors the racialization of the student community at UERJ. The data presented indicates that students do not clearly shift their identity depending on the use of administrative quota categories, although the overall experience of university education might raise the "black consciousness" of some students.

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Almost the majority of first-year informants that were part of my research between 2007 and 2008 have now concluded their courses or are close to conclusion. Most of them have been able to do paid law internships during their course and found a job in their field, contributing to the family income and increasing their chances of social mobility. These students have also become the point of reference for other young people from lower-class neighborhoods who decide to undertake a university degree. These considerations show the transformative impact of the quota system, at least in the life of beneficiaries and in the academic setting I observed.

An open question remains of whether universalistic and class-based policies, instead of a racially-based approach, should be the best solution to redress inequalities in Brazilian education. People may easily agree that if Brazil had an improved public-school system, quotas would be less necessary and candidates will be able to compete more equally regardless of their social background and color. Improving the public school system, on the other hand, would require a gigantic financial investment something that does not seem realistic in the short term in Brazil. In addition, it is not clear if an improved public-school system would make lower-class applicants competitive enough in relation to wealthier students, who come from expensive private schools and will still enjoy a disproportional educational advantage to access the more prestigious undergraduate courses.

¹⁵ www.sejabixo.com.br/vestibular/mural2.asp?id=13077

Related but separate questions are whether specifically the “racial” quotas are acceptable, and whether quotas should be instead only income-based, or address exclusively those people who study in the deteriorated public school system. As a black-quota student reflects:

It is not a question of liking or not liking racial quotas. I don't even like these measures myself...However, racial quotas are necessary. Imagine, for example, that a white and a black lower-class student apply to the *vestibular*. White students, due to their appearance, will have more options to find a better job to pay for a good preparation course or study languages...in fact, all this provides them with better chances to pass the *vestibular* and survive at university. (Gabriela, law)

In their book *Color Conscious*, Appiah and Gutmann (1998) explain that although racial policies imply some risks of reifying “race”, relying on a “class”-based approach would not be very useful in redressing racial inequalities. This is because “class” is not a monolithic concept that produces the same effects on everybody, and black people experience class in a very particular way. These authors discuss, for example, that in a situation of economic crisis, black people will be more likely the first to lose their jobs. In relation to relying only on public-school quotas, on the other hand, Guimarães *et al.* (2009) show that the use of affirmative action for this segment of students at Unicamp (University of Campinas) tends to favor light-skin students from the public school system and only marginally black students (2009: 3-6). This may happen especially in cases where the less-deprived strata of the lower-class are disproportionately lighter skinned (Telles, 2004), and will end up enjoying better access (e.g. in terms of economic resources and information) to the opportunities that affirmative action opens¹⁶. ✱

16 Telles also notes that the wealthier sectors of the Afro-American collective tend to be lighter-skin (2004: 266).

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