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Sarah Lempp (Bayreuth)

With the Eyes of Society? Doing Race in Affirmative Action Practices in Brazil

'For the first time in Brazilian history, it can be an advantage to be black.' This is how many of my interlocutors described one of the crucial outcomes of the introduction of affirmative action policies in Brazil. While public universities established such policies from the beginning of the 2000s, they were introduced into the public service only in 2014. Since then, 20 per cent of the job openings in the federal public service have to be reserved for Afro-Brazilians. This 'first time ever' advantage soon led to debates about whether all those who declared themselves negro (black) in the course of the application procedure 'really' fulfilled this criterion. Since 2016, so-called verification commissions – whose practices are the object of analysis in this paper – therefore have to decide whether those who applied for affirmative action vacancies for black candidates 'correctly' declared themselves as such.

Drawing on ethnographic observations of Brazilian verification commissions, I will examine how they enact the cotista – and hence, how this legal category, that is strongly linked to the body as well as to the racialized category negro, comes into being in these classification practices. Discussing the tension between the idea of a social gaze – due to which 'everybody' knows who is black in Brazil – and that of a skilled gaze one has to learn in order to work in a verification commission, I show how the latter arises from the attempt to handle the contradictory demands the commissions are facing and how it helps to 'objectivize' the commissions' decisions.

Sarah Lempp is research associate and PhD candidate at the Institute of Anthropology of the University of Bayreuth. In her dissertation project, she investigates racial assessment practices in Brazil's affirmative action policies and analyzes how the category of race is translated into bureaucratic and legal indicators. Her research interests include classification practices, race and racism, Science and Technology Studies and postcolonial theories.

Institutskolloquium Sommersemester 2019 (Leitung: Heike Drotbohm)

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Wo? Hörsaal 14 / Großer Übungsraum (Raum 01-715), Forum 7, Becherweg 4, 1. Stock,

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