

## I

## Assembling an Afro-Brazilian Economy

It is as if one had taken a cutting of Africa and rooted it in Brazilian soil, where it bloomed again.

— Roger Bastide, 1960<sup>1</sup>

African oil palms (*Elaeis guineensis* Jacq.) have thrived in rainforest communities in West and Central Africa for millennia. In biodiverse forests, dense groves, and isolated stands, traditional oil palm landscapes stretch from the Senegambia to Angola and deep into the Congo Basin. Africans began extracting and processing oils from the palm's fruit at least five thousand years ago, and when transatlantic slave traders began stealing away people for profit and colonization, the African oil palm joined an immense human and botanical diaspora.<sup>2</sup> The enslaved Africans that survived the brutalities of the Middle Passage arrived in the New World with diverse and sophisticated knowledge systems – including those related to the African oil palm and other tropical plants – which they relied on to survive in, and reshape, colonial environments.<sup>3</sup> *Palm Oil Diaspora* describes how partnerships of people and palms transformed an Atlantic World connecting western Africa to South America, from prehistory to the present, and offers insights for building healthier and more viable relationships within and among human societies and earthly environments.

<sup>1</sup> Bastide, *African Religions of Brazil*, 224.

<sup>2</sup> Corley and Tinker, *Oil Palm*, 3; Carney and Rosomoff, *Shadow of Slavery*.

<sup>3</sup> Watkins, “African Oil Palms.”

This book tells the story of Benta, a Black woman born into the cruel realities of Brazilian slavery in the eighteenth century. Benta lived and worked on a colonial sugar plantation in the heart of the Bahian Recôncavo – the fertile hinterlands surrounding the vast Bay of All Saints that lent the region its name. We know precious little about Benta’s life, but according to a probate inventory taken in 1790, she sold to her captors goods she produced on the plantation grounds, including beans and palm oil.<sup>4</sup> Buried in an archived account ledger, that mundane transaction recorded an enslaved “Creole” woman of African descent engaging in cultural creativity, economic accumulation, and environmental change. Woven throughout this book, Benta’s story opens a window into the palm oil cultures, landscapes, and economies that emerged in Bahia, as well as the broader networks and processes of exchange that coalesced to form an Atlantic World. Born in Brazil, Benta descended from ancestors torn from the African continent and trafficked in the transatlantic slave trade – an immense crime against humanity fundamental in the formation and ongoing reproduction of the modern world. By producing and distributing palm oil, a meaningful and nourishing food with deep roots in African cultures and landscapes, Benta actively participated in a global network of people, plants, places, and power to exercise a measure of self-determination and improve her conditions despite the violence and oppression of the colonial slave system. Her story provides a resounding illustration of African contributions to cultural and environmental change in the colonial Americas.

Benta’s legacy endures, and today palm oil remains fundamental in countless Afro-Brazilian cultural-ecological forms.<sup>5</sup> In Bahia, a centuries-old, biodiverse landscape supplies the region, along with much of Brazil, with distinctive red palm oil for ancestral culinary and religious expressions. Developed in dialogue with Afro-Brazilian cultures, Bahia’s palm oil landscapes stand as living monuments to the African diaspora as well as vital sources for local livelihoods.<sup>6</sup> Derived of plants and knowledge systems transplanted from Africa and nurtured in the Americas, the oil palm groves that Benta tended in coastal Bahia helped to form an intricate transatlantic economy of cultural-environmental exchange and innovation.

<sup>4</sup> Inventory of Felix Alves de Andrade, Cachoeira, 1791, APB, SJ, 2/706/1168/3. I am grateful to B. J. Barickman for this reference.

<sup>5</sup> Lody, *Tem dendê*; Lody (ed.), *Dendê*.

<sup>6</sup> Watkins, “Dendezeiro”; Watkins, “Landscapes and Resistance.”

In sharp contrast to the traditional economies enduring in Bahia and their native Africa, palm oil has become a global source and symbol of capitalist extraction and social-environmental degradation.<sup>7</sup> By the early twenty-first century, oil pressed from the fruit of *Elaeis guineensis* outpaced soy to become Earth's most produced, traded, and consumed oilseed.<sup>8</sup> Agro-industrial oil palm plantations blazed into tropical rainforest biomes supply massive international markets but with devastating costs in deforestation, biodiversity erosion, land grabbing, and greenhouse gas release.<sup>9</sup> The global industry now centers on Southeast Asia where plantation monocultures in Malaysia and Indonesia produced 84.4 percent of the world's palm oil in 2019, but production continues to expand in Latin America.<sup>10</sup> Historically a minor player in international agro-industrial production, Brazil has recently renewed initiatives to subsidize palm oil development in its Amazon region, which according to government figures, has dominated national production since the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> The remainder of Brazil's palm oil comes from the northeastern state of Bahia, where it emerges from a complex mix of polycultural

<sup>7</sup> Pakiam, "Palm Oil's Journey"; Komolafe, "Problems with Palm Oil"; Zuckerman, *Planet Palm*. To be clear, agro-industrial palm oil development schemes and plantation systems are pervasive in Bahia and Africa as well where they have long threatened traditional landscapes and economies.

<sup>8</sup> For the twelve-month period ending in November 2020, global production of palm oil amounted to 75,188 million metric tons, while its nearest rival, soybean oil, registered 60,142 MMT; see *Table 11* and *Table 09*, respectively, in the monthly reports on world oilseed production published by USDA. [www.fas.usda.gov/data](http://www.fas.usda.gov/data).

<sup>9</sup> Fitzherbert et al., "Oil Palm Expansion"; Rival and Levang, *Palms of Controversies*; Linder and Palkovitz, "Threat of Industrial Oil Palm"; Li, "After the Land Grab"; Chao, "Shadow of the Palm."

<sup>10</sup> FAS, *Table 11*; Potter, "Managing Oil Palm Landscapes"; Castellanos-Navarrete et al., "Development without Change"; Mingorria, "Violence and Visibility"; Latorre, Farrell, and Martínez-Alier, "Commodification of Nature"; Marin-Burgos, "Oil Palm Expansion"; Romero and Albuquerque, "Impactos Socioambientales"; Taussig, *Palma Africana*; Hervas, "Land, Development and Contract Farming"; Johnson, "Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil"; Castellanos-Navarrete et al., "Impact of Oil Palm."

<sup>11</sup> Hartley, "Oil Palm in Latin America," 359–60; Balick, "Amazonian Oil Palms"; Villela et al., "Status and Prospects"; Backhouse, "Green Grabbing"; Córdoba et al., "Family Farming." According to Brazil's Agrarian Census of 1980, Bahia led the country in palm oil production, but by 1988, the first year for which annual palm oil production data are available, Pará state had overtaken Bahia and by then accounted for 60 percent of national production. Since then it has steadily increased its share. See IBGE, *Censo agropecuário de 1980, ... 1ª Parte, Bahia*; IBGE, *Censo agropecuário de 1980, ... Pará*; IBGE, *Produção agrícola municipal*, "Tabela 1613."

family farms, a few agro-industrial plantations, and the region's distinctive biodiverse palm groves.

Despite its global prominence and its fundamental relationships with Atlantic and Afro-Brazilian histories and cultures, we lack a comprehensive understanding of Bahia's palm oil economy. A common trope in academic, technical, and popular writing in and on Brazil holds that the oil palm "was brought from Africa," erasing with passive voice any trace of human-environmental agency and transatlantic exchange.<sup>12</sup> The details of the palm's diffusion to the Americas and the political-ecological development of its complex cultural landscapes remain unclear. Drawing on ethnography, landscape interpretation, archives, travelers' accounts, and geospatial analysis, *Palm Oil Diaspora* unravels the long and complex development of Bahia's palm oil landscapes, cultures, and economies in the context of an interconnected Atlantic World – from their prehistoric emergence in western Africa to their establishment in Brazil and their roles in ongoing modernization campaigns of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In so doing, this book reconstructs an environmental history of the African diaspora; connects Afro-Brazilian knowledge and cultural landscapes with ecological-commercial exchange in the Atlantic World; and scrutinizes the long-term politics of race, environmental change, and agricultural development in Brazil.

Fundamentally, *Palm Oil Diaspora* examines relationships among humans and environments and the communities and economies they nurture across time and space. Centering palm oil as an analytical motif and material agent, this book maps the formation of a complex cultural-ecological-economic system – what I call an Afro-Brazilian economy – within an Atlantic World linking people, plants, places, and power. To conduct this interdisciplinary analysis, I convene a variety of otherwise disparate conversations and concepts. Among them, this study builds on assemblage and complexity thinking to analyze cultural landscapes and economies shaped by relational power and resistance. Bridging interdisciplinary literatures on Black geographies; Afro-Brazilian and Atlantic studies; political ecology; and decolonial theory and praxis, I argue that only by connecting across these concepts and disciplines can we fully

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Peixoto, *Breviário da Bahia*, 80; Cardoso, *Contribuição ao estudo do dendê*, 10; Carneiro, *Ladinos e crioulos*, 72; Amado, *Bahia boa terra Bahia*, 139; "Dendê, fruto estratégico," *Veja*, March 26, 1969, 22; Homma and Furlan Júnior, "Desenvolvimento da dendeicultura," 197–200.

appreciate the power, complexity, and knowledges that constitute Bahia's palm oil economy.

This introductory chapter unpacks and integrates those and other concepts, theories, and fields to situate the analyses laid out in the subsequent chapters. It devotes detailed attention to the inextricable and co-constitutive relationships linking societies, environments, and power. Along the way, this chapter introduces the real and conceptual places involved in the study, and their interrelatedness, especially Bahia, the Atlantic World, and the African diaspora. It then concludes with a discussion of methods and methodology and an outline of the book's structure.

#### PLACING AFRO-BRAZIL

Bahia's Afro-Brazilian economy is diasporic. Derived of ancestral ecologies in western Africa, it roots in the Atlantic shores of tropical South America.<sup>13</sup> Scholars from W. E. B. Du Bois to Paul Gilroy to Katherine McKittrick have long emphasized the multiplicity and simultaneity of the African diaspora – at once commemorative and innovative, connected to both histories and futures, and emerging from relations of power.<sup>14</sup> As Patricia de Santana Pinho's study of Blackness in Bahia makes clear, "*culture is political*."<sup>15</sup> Landscapes and economies are political, too; woven from the symbiotic networkings of humans and environments, in and across places.

The Afro-Brazilian cultures, landscapes, and economies analyzed in this book manifest as African-inspired philosophies, ecologies, politics, materials, and ways of life refracted through prisms of Indigenous American and European knowledge and practices, among others. They emerge from (post)colonial power configurations and lived experiences in the transatlantic slavery economy and the construction and reproduction of Brazilian society.<sup>16</sup> In Bahia, they contribute to what McKittrick deems a "Black sense of place" – African diasporic spaces and ways of life

<sup>13</sup> Walker (ed.), *African Roots/American Cultures*; Carney and Voeks, "Landscape Legacies."

<sup>14</sup> Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 3; Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*; McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

<sup>15</sup> Pinho, *Mama Africa*, 3, emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup> Reis and da Silva, *Negociação e conflito*; dos Santos, "Diaspora"; Fraga Filho and Albuquerque, *História da cultura Afro-Brasileira*.

shaped by racial entanglements, anti-Black violences, resistance, and creativity.<sup>17</sup>

The northeastern state of Bahia is the heart of Afro-Brazil.<sup>18</sup> Popular maxims such as the “Black Rome of the Americas” and “Mecca of Brazilian Blackness” place Bahia at the center of African diasporic creation and manifestation.<sup>19</sup> Among the more salient materials and symbols of Afro-Brazilian expression is palm oil – known in Bahia and throughout Brazil as *dendê*, or more precisely *azeite de dendê*, derived by combining the Arabo-Iberian word for olive oil with a Central African Kimbundu term for the fruit of the African oil palm.<sup>20</sup> Following the Portuguese convention, the palm that yields the oil became the *dendezeiro* in Bahia.<sup>21</sup> Today, locally produced palm oil remains the lifeblood of many Afro-Brazilian culinary and religious traditions. In many parts of Bahia, “*azeite*” refers only to palm oil, while *azeite doce* (sweet oil), *óleo* (oil), or *óleo de gallo* can connote olive oil.<sup>22</sup> Palm oil has become a popular symbol of both Afro-Brazilian culture and the state of Bahia as a whole. To say something is “of dendê” is to qualify it as absolutely Bahian and

<sup>17</sup> McKittrick, “On Plantations,” 949.

<sup>18</sup> Carneiro, *Candomblés da Bahia*; Kraay, “Introduction: Afro-Bahia, 1790s–1990s”; Afolabi, *Afro-Brazilians*; Jorge Amado, *Bahia de Todos os Santos*; Dawson, *In Light of Africa*; Dixon, *Afro-Politics*.

<sup>19</sup> Quotes in Sansone, *Blackness without Ethnicity*, 70, and Pinho, *Mama Africa*, 43, respectively. *Roma Negra* remains a popular term for describing the deep connections between Bahia and Africa, but according to Bahian anthropologist Vivaldo da Costa Lima, the original expression, as coined by Candomblé and community leader Mãe Aninha in the 1940s, was *Roma Africana*, see Pinho, *Mama Africa*, 48–49. On Bahia within the African diaspora, see Pierre Verger, *Trade Relations*; Mann and Bay (eds.), *Rethinking the African Diaspora*; Polk, Conduru, Gledhill, and Johnson (eds.), *Axé Bahia*.

<sup>20</sup> Schneider, *Dictionary of African Borrowings*, 129, 131, 220, 253, 261–62.

<sup>21</sup> I refer to the “dendezeiro,” “dendê,” and “azeite de dendê” to signify the African oil palm and its fruit and oil as established and produced in Bahia. “African oil palm” and “palm oil” refer to the tree and the oil more generically. While the *Elaeis guineensis* found in Africa and Bahia remain genetically and biologically identical, the nominal distinction employed here attends to the intertwined social and ecological histories that define dendê as a specific Afro-Brazilian creation rooted in Bahia, the African diaspora, and the Atlantic World. Brazilian government agencies assert a similar distinction. Brazilians refer to palm oil used in cooking unconditionally as “dendê,” or “azeite de dendê,” yet the Brazilian government’s recent palm oil development project refers to the more internationally recognized term in its title, “Programa de Produção Sustentável da Palma de Óleo [Program for Sustainable Production of the Oil Palm]”; see Brasil, *Diagnóstico da produção*.

<sup>22</sup> *Gallo* refers to the iconic Portuguese rooster, a national symbol emblazoned on a popular tin of olive oil.

with fundamental connections to Africa and its diaspora.<sup>23</sup> A recent example is Vale do Dendê, a celebrated startup accelerator and consulting firm supporting entrepreneurs from neglected neighborhoods around Bahia's capital city, Salvador. Launched in 2016, the firm's name combines a reference to California's Silicon Valley with a nod to the distinctive symbol and flavor of Afro-Brazil.

Brazilians refer to traditional foods cooked in dendê simply as Bahian food, or *comida baiana*. Bahians themselves often celebrate their Creole cuisine as *comida de azeite*, invoking dendê oil as the definitive component. Like its antecedents in West Africa, the viscous red palm oil produced and enjoyed in Bahia contrasts from the industrially refined, bleached, and deodorized palm oils traded internationally. Locally produced, unrefined dendê oil invigorates many of Bahia's most revered recipes with E vitamins, antioxidant provitamin A carotenoids, and metabolism-boosting medium-chain fatty acids.<sup>24</sup> Popular Afro-Brazilian dishes such as *caruru*, *vatapá*, *farofa de dendê*, *xinxim de galinha*, and especially the ubiquitous seafood and fish *moquecas* are unimaginable without azeite de dendê.<sup>25</sup> And yet the relevance of dendê oil transcends food cultures, filtering through many diverse and popular expressions. For example, Afro-Brazilian religions venerate the oil as a sacred sacrament, it is celebrated in many traditional *sambas*, and the Afro-Brazilian martial art *Capoeira* recites dendê in many of its *corridos* – the ritual choruses sung during matches.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Evocative works by the versatile Bahian artist Ayrson Heráclito emphasize these connections, especially the role of dendê within Afro-Brazilian spirituality, materiality, and cultural histories. See his videos on [vimeo.com](https://www.vimeo.com); a catalog of his works, *Ayrson Heráclito: Espaços e ações*; and his 2017 installations at UCLA's Fowler Museum, published in Conduru, "Ayrson Heráclito."

<sup>24</sup> Mba, et al., "Palm Oil."

<sup>25</sup> *Caruru* is a spicy stew of greens, okra, and palm oil; *vatapá* is a mash of manioc flour, peppers, palm oil, and either fish, shrimp, or animal fat; *farofa de dendê* is toasted manioc flour seasoned in palm oil; *xinxim de galinha* is a chicken fricassee seasoned with palm oil; and perhaps the signature Bahian dish, *moquecas* are stews of fish or seafood seasoned in palm oil, olive oil, coconut milk, and peppers. See Querino, *Arte culinária*; Amado, Damm, and Carybé, *Bahia boa terra Bahia*; Costa, *Comida baiana*; Lody, *Santo também come*; Lody, *Brasil bom de boca*; Fajans, "Can Moqueca"; Câmara Cascudo, *História da alimentação*.

<sup>26</sup> Common *corridos* include "Capoeira tem dendê," "Vou tirar dendê," "dendê maré," "Lá na Bahia côco de dendê," and "Bahia que tem dendê." Traditional *samba de roda* groups – such as Samba Chula de São Braz, Rua da Palha, Suspiro do Iguape, Aparecida, and Barlavento – all sing about dendê. See Assunção, *Capoeira*; Browning, *Samba*; Iyanaga, "O samba de caruru da Bahia."

Those Afro-Brazilian expressions emerge from the social, economic, and environmental histories and geographies of the African diaspora to reveal creativity and resistance amidst violence and dispossession.<sup>27</sup> Enslaved Africans began arriving in Brazil by the 1560s, and by the end of that century captive women, men, and children had become central to Bahia's burgeoning colonial economy and society.<sup>28</sup> Whether on sugar plantations in the bayside Recôncavo, subsistence farms on the Southern Coast, or as porters in the urban capital, Salvador, enslaved Africans built the region's export and domestic markets.<sup>29</sup> Over nearly three hundred years, the transatlantic slave trade abducted and trafficked an estimated 5.5 million Africans to Brazil, and 1.7 million of them, nearly one-third of the total, disembarked in Bahia. That means roughly 14 percent of all enslaved Africans that arrived in the Americas did so in Bahia (Table 1.1).<sup>30</sup> Along with Indigenous Americans and Europeans, Africans and their descendants transformed the demography, cultures, and landscapes of Bahia – as elsewhere in the Americas – despite the mundane brutality and oppression of the transatlantic slave economy.<sup>31</sup>

Transformations began in the first decades of Bahia's colonization. Already by the 1580s, Portuguese Jesuit Fernão Cardim estimated the population of enslaved Africans in São Salvador da Bahia de Todos os Santos and its rural environs at “three or four thousand,” enough to exceed the approximately three thousand households of Portuguese colonial settlers.<sup>32</sup> Subsequent visitors to Bahia's capital were routinely astonished at the prevalence and mobility of Black people, traits that distinguished that city from almost any other in the colonial Americas.<sup>33</sup> As the transatlantic slave trade to Bahia was finally coming to a close in the second half of the nineteenth century, German physician Robert Avé-Lallemant described Salvador as a Black city. “If one didn't

<sup>27</sup> Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*; Thornton, *Africa and Africans*; McKittrick, “On Plantations”; Carney and Rangan, “Situating African Agency”; White, *Freedom Farmers*.

<sup>28</sup> Emory University, “Estimates Database,” [www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org).

<sup>29</sup> Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations*; Schwartz, *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels*; Mattoso, *To Be a Slave*; Barickman, *Bahian Counterpoint*.

<sup>30</sup> Emory University, “Estimates Database,” [www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org).

<sup>31</sup> Carney and Voeks, “Landscape Legacies”; Klein and Vidal Luna, *Slavery in Brazil*.

<sup>32</sup> Cardim, *Tratados*, 288.

<sup>33</sup> Pinho, *Mama Africa*, 191–97. Early racialized impressions of Salvador include Dampier, *Dampier's Voyages*, 386.



TABLE I.1 Estimated number of enslaved Africans by zone of disembarkation during the transatlantic slave trade

	1501-1600	1601-1700	1701-1800	1801-1866	All years	% Brazil Total	% Total
Brazil	29,275	784,457	1,989,017	2,061,625	4,864,374	100	45
S.E. Brazil	4,770	221,083	756,561	1,281,500	2,263,914	47	21
Bahia	5,647	313,473	815,904	415,331	1,550,355	32	14
Pernambuco	18,571	246,522	329,336	259,404	853,833	18	8
Amazonia	0	1,096	71,738	69,397	142,231	3	1.3
Br. unspecified	287	2,282	15,480	35,992	54,041	1	0.5
British Caribbean	0	310,477	1,813,323	194,452	2,318,252		22
Spanish Americas	169,370	225,504	145,533	752,505	1,292,912		12
French Caribbean	0	38,685	995,133	86,397	1,120,215		10
Dutch Americas	0	124,158	295,215	25,355	444,728		4
Mainland N. America	0	15,147	295,482	78,117	388,746		4
Danish West Indies	0	18,146	68,608	22,244	108,998		1
Africa	0	3,122	2,317	150,130	155,569		1.5
Europe	640	2,981	5,240	0	8,861		0.1
TOTALS	199,285	1,522,677	5,609,868	3,370,825	10,702,655		100

Source: Emory University, "Estimates Database," [www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org).

know the city was in Brazil, one could take it, without much imagination, for an African capital; seat of a powerful Black prince, through which passes practically unnoticed a population of white foreigners. It seems everyone is Black.”<sup>34</sup> Centuries of population figures corroborate those travelers’ accounts, and people of at least partial African descent have held majorities in Bahia since the first censuses distinguishing race and legal status appeared in 1775 (Table 1.2).<sup>35</sup>

Today Bahia remains the cultural and demographic epicenter of Afro-Brazil.<sup>36</sup> Combining the official census categories for Black (*preta/o*) and Brown (*parda/o*), Brazilians of African descent accounted for 76 and 79 percent of the populations in Bahia and Salvador, respectively, in 2010, and 85 percent of the rural populations at the heart of this study (Table 1.3). According to that inclusive Afro-descendant composite – known in Brazil as *população negra* or *afrodescendente* – Brazil as a whole is now home to the largest concentration of Black people outside of the African continent.<sup>37</sup> Such a uniform accounting of race, however, masks differences across the broad range of phenotypes and experiences encapsulated in the *parda/o* and *preta/o* signifiers, reminding us of the “inevitable slipperiness of racial categories,” in Brazil as elsewhere.<sup>38</sup>

Still, Blackness persists as a valid and revealing social category in Brazil where unjust racial hierarchies and anti-Black violences remain deeply entrenched. As Keisha-Khan Perry demonstrates in her study of racial and environmental justice in Bahia, ambiguous framings of race in Brazil risk obscuring the racialized experiences of Brazilians who code or identify as Black or Afro-descendant. “It has not been difficult for poor Black people in Brazil to decipher who is Black in Brazil, since they see and feel race and class structures in their everyday lives *na pele* (in the skin). Nor do policy makers, development agents, and the police have much difficulty deciding who is Black.”<sup>39</sup> Contemporary relationships between Bahia and Blackness emerge from the racialized brutality of the transatlantic slave economy, honed and reproduced in (post)colonial structures and

<sup>34</sup> Avé-Lallemant, *Viagem pelo Norte I*, 20.      <sup>35</sup> Reis, *Rebelião Escrava*, 22–24.

<sup>36</sup> Boxer, *Race Relations*; Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations*.

<sup>37</sup> The term “Afro-descendant” includes Africans and their descendants in the Americas, and is used here as a cognate to its Brazilian form, *afrodescendente*; see Reiter and Simmons (eds.), *Afro-Descendants*.

<sup>38</sup> Pinho, *Mama Africa*, 15. On race and skin tone in Brazil, see Telles, *Race in Another America*; Bailey, *Legacies of Race*. For a comparison of race and the census in Brazil and the United States, see Nobles, *Shades of Citizenship*.

<sup>39</sup> Perry, *Black Women against the Land Grab*, xix; see also Smith, *Afro-Paradise*, 13–15.