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Introduction

Today, black rural communities across Brazil are seeking legal rights to land they have inhabited for generations. This is not a new struggle. Enslaved Africans brought to the country and their descendants have long sought access to land and striven to be independent agrarian producers, in and out of slavery. Land, they have long believed, is the basis of liberty. Then, as now, land and labor were linked. Abolition in 1888 resulted in freedom for enslaved Africans and their descendants, but was not accompanied by land reform, reparations, or other forms of compensation. There was no structural change to Brazil's racialized and concentrated landownership. Along the way, the Brazilian government has implemented policies to confiscate land that black communities historically settled, and it has denied Afro-descendants access to other resources they need for their livelihoods, thereby exacerbating racial inequality. Even so, black rural communities have challenged territorial dispossession by the Brazilian state, landed elite, and agribusiness through legal recourse, including claims predating emancipation, as well as long-term occupancy and histories of resistance to slavery and racial discrimination. But these efforts have had only mixed success. After centuries of political and economic exclusion, black rural communities deserve land reparations for slavery and for the ongoing seizure of territory that they have legitimately occupied.

This study examines the formation of black rural communities and their protracted struggle for land, livelihood, and citizenship rights in contemporary Brazil. It is a comparative study of the conflicts around black rural communities' struggles for legal recognition and land rights that, over time, have become part of a broader national demand for racial

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and social justice. The twelve black communities that form the basis of the study, in the states of Bahia (northeast region) and São Paulo (southeast region), are ideal sites to compare protracted struggles for land and autonomy. In Bahia, the eight communities are part of a group of sixteen communities in the Iguape Basin and Valley of the Bahian Recôncavo, the region bordering the Bay of All Saints, about 160 km from Salvador, the state capital. They are situated between the resource-rich mangroves and the Atlantic Forest. In São Paulo, the four communities are part of a constellation of seventeen communities in the Ribeira Valley, about 350 km from São Paulo, the state capital. They are nestled in the largest biodiverse area of the Atlantic Rainforest in Brazil. These black communities of the Iguape and Ribeira valleys have historical and political experiences of resistance against state policies and interventions that deprived them of land and citizenship rights; these experiences have formed part of their collective memory. This study shows that after emancipation black rural people did not forget their history, did not negate their blackness, and did not abruptly assimilate into the local peasantry, as the triumphalist Brazilian ideology of racial democracy heralded in the twentieth century.

For most of the twentieth century, Brazil's black rural communities were conspicuously marginal in academic studies, and enduring racial inequality and racial violence in the countryside were rendered invisible under the ideology of racial democracy – or harmonious racial mixture. According to this dominant national ideology (1930s–1990s), racism did not exist in Brazil because of intense miscegenation since slavery between indigenous Brazilians, Africans, and Europeans. Proponents of the racial democracy myth argued that Brazil's pervasive mixing of the races encouraged a pattern of tolerant race relations that was unique in the world. These ideas have continued to serve as a tenet of national identity and pride, despite overwhelming counterevidence (Butler 1998; Dzidzienyo 1971; Hanchard 1994; Sheriff 2001; Skidmore 1993; Telles 2004).

Thus, the ideology of racial democracy camouflaged racial discrimination by ascribing discrimination to class, gender, and other forms of oppression and allowed the Brazilian government to deny the existence of racism and racial inequalities. Scholarship on land struggles and land reform emphasized class-based politics and identified black rural communities solely as peasant territories, ignoring their blackness. Afro-descendants vanished into a large, poor, and landless peasant population. Similarly, in the research on peasant social movements and resistance, Afro-descendants were subsumed in the growing rural and urban labor forces. In the 1950s, they tried to improve their access to land by joining

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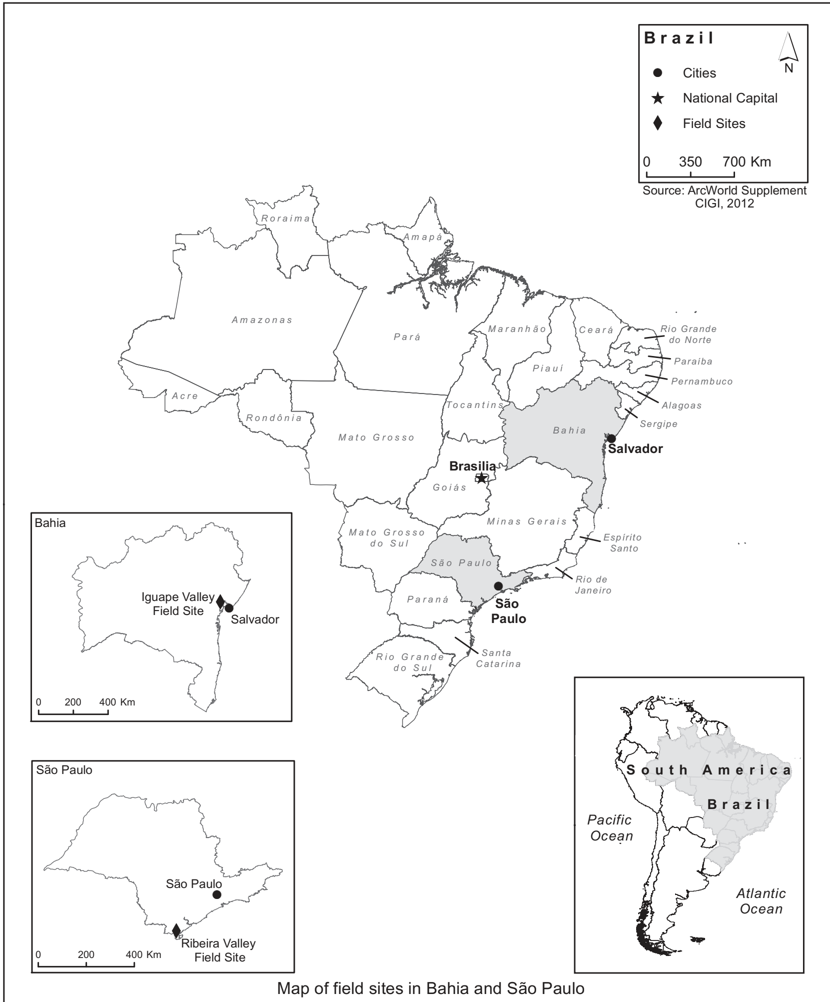

MAP 0.1. Brazil and field sites in Bahia and São Paulo

the Peasant Leagues, and in the 1970s they became members of rural trade unions to better their working conditions as rural workers and small farmers (Andrews 1991; Pereira 1997; Welch 1999). From the mid-1980s onward, the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (Movimento do Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or MST) recruited them to their organization of rural workers and landless farmers to fight for access to land (Ondetti 2008; Wolford 2010). In short, scholars deracialized land struggles and rural resistance – a phenomenon that this work accentuates.

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This study shows how powerful landholding families, political elites, and state modernization schemes encroached upon territory where black rural populations had established communities and transformed landscapes into productive farms. During the twentieth century, many black communities lost their places of origin. Afro-descendants hold historical memories of conflicts over land rights and resources with plantation owners, *fazendeiros* (large private property owners), ranchers, *grileiros* (persons who illegally claim property through false deeds), and mining companies that shaped black rural life. From the Getúlio Vargas dictatorship in the 1930s through the military regime in the 1980s, an onslaught of government modernization projects threatened black communities' subsistence activities in Brazil's hinterland. Moreover, black communities were displaced not only for state and private control of land for agriculture, but for water, forests, minerals, and other resources, as well as nonagricultural projects, including a naval base (Gomes and Yabeta 2017) and even a spaceport (Mitchell 2017b). Today these are all part of a global phenomenon of displacement popularly known as land grabbing (Borras and Franco 2012; Hall et al. 2015). For rural Afro-descendants, this phenomenon is part of their historical power struggle that has linked their livelihood and citizenship to land.

In the face of systematic attacks to drive them off their lands in the mid-twentieth century, black communities resisted by asserting their legal rights, even brandishing deeds, as well as enlisting the support of progressive sectors of the Catholic Church and rural trade unions. While these were important strategic allies, urban black activists and black political organizations also played pivotal roles in mobilizing and supporting black rural communities – a history that is not well documented but one that is emphasized in this study. By the 1970s, black militants, especially in the northeast states of Maranhão and Pará, were politically engaged with communities in the countryside that were fighting land evictions. Through the media and other venues, these activists made visible the continuing racial violence that rural Afro-descendants had experienced since the invasion of large farmers, ranchers, and mining companies under the Vargas government's frontier colonization program.

Since 1988, when a new Federal Constitution was introduced, thousands of black rural communities across Brazil have petitioned for legal recognition and land rights on the basis of Transitory Article 68 of the constitution, which requires the state to grant inalienable land rights (*propriedade definitiva*) to *remanescentes das comunidades dos*

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quilombos, or quilombo-descended communities.[1] By law, the Brazilian government is required to confer such rights to black rural communities that can prove they were former quilombos established by runaway slaves. Even this belated promise was not a gift, but the fruit of protracted black struggles. On the eve of the adoption of the new constitution, black activists across Brazil, who had partnered with black communities since the 1970s, lobbied the government to include protective legislation that recognized the territorial and cultural rights of quilombo-descended communities. The constitutional clause promised official redress of the political and social invisibility in which Brazil's quilombo-descended communities had lived for centuries. But it was a major compromise that would haunt the black movement for years to come: The provision recognized land only for black rural communities that could prove they were former authentic quilombos. The majority of black communities, which were formed by fugitive slaves, freed blacks, and free blacks, were excluded.

The Brazilian government claimed, however, that the 1988 constitution and related statutes show a will to fully include communities that had been excluded from full citizenship rights. According to this argument, state recognition of quilombo descendants formed part of a renewed vision of Brazilian society that was inclusive, multicultural, and democratic following years of military rule (1964–85). Even so, the Brazilian government recognized only communities seen as having a distinct cultural or ethnic identity (i.e., quilombola[2] and indigenous people). Officially, therefore, quilombolas deserved rights because of a perceived possession of a distinct cultural group identity, not because of a history of political exclusion or racial discrimination.

For many scholars, the Brazilian government, like others in Latin America that adopted "multicultural constitutionalism" (Van Cott 2000), has used cultural recognition and identity politics as part of a series of neoliberal policies that officially guarantee rights to marginalized groups in constitutions without any real structural change (Farfán-Santos 2016; Hale 2005; Hooker 2005). They are partially correct. The

[1] Scholars have used different translations of *remanescentes*: "reminders" (Arruti 2006; Leite 2015), "survivors" (Linhares 2004), "remnants" (Gomes and Yabeta 2017; Véran 2002), and "descendants" (Farfán-Santos 2016; French 2009; Mitchell 2017b). I use quilombo-descended communities, but there is no consensus on the translation of the term.

[2] As a noun, *quilombola* refers to the people who are members of a quilombo or a quilombo-descended community. *Quilombola* can also be used adjectivally, as in "quilombola community."

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quilombo clause did not lead to land reform for black rural communities or serve as a base for structural change to the racial hierarchy of concentrated landownership. Three decades after the constitution was introduced, the number of quilombo-descended communities granted collective land rights lagged woefully behind the number that claimed cultural recognition. Yet residents of the black rural communities in this study did experience unwanted structural changes in the years between official cultural recognition and landownership. They found themselves in permanent stasis in the land entitlement process and under government pressure to make compromises that jeopardized their access to resources necessary for their livelihoods and social reproduction.

Federal and state government agencies have coerced black communities into making concessions on the road to becoming land rights-bearing quilombo-descent communities. In the Bahia and São Paulo communities in this study, the Brazilian government implemented far-reaching structural changes after the communities were culturally recognized as quilombo-descended communities; these led to further dispossession of land, loss of access to critical natural resources, replacement of food crops with the cultivation of cash crops, and transformation of the communities into ethnic tourist sites. Furthermore, even the quilombo-descended communities in São Paulo that managed to obtain collective land titles were not exempt from more threats to their autonomy and possession, illustrating that conflict did not end with titles. Government takeover of community territory and resources for state parks and ecotourism, in conjunction with illegal mechanisms of confiscation, hollowed out collective land titles. These structural changes paradoxically took place under the then-governing leftist Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT) and its multicultural, redistributive, and antipoverty programs (Ansell 2014).

It should not have turned out that way for black rural communities, especially those recognized as quilombo-descended. Farmers, fishers, wageworkers, and other dwellers believed Article 68 of the constitution held enormous promise. After centuries of political and economic marginalization, they were finally supposed to be accepted as citizens with constitutional rights to territory they had long occupied. From the beginning, however, bureaucratic inertia, controversial cultural screening criteria, shifting institutional responsibility and entitlement procedures, resistance from the rural caucus in Brazil's Congress, and foreign agribusiness interference ensured that the quilombo clause would not easily be enforced. For almost ten years, juridical debates on quilombo

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authenticity allowed the Brazilian state to defer implementation of the law. It was only after the black movement's mobilization of tens of thousands of people for the historic 1995 Zumbi March against Racism and for Citizenship and Life, whereby black activists demanded concrete policies for black populations that drove then-president Fernando Henrique Cardoso to grant the first land titles to a handful of quilombo-descended communities.

Though scholars have rightly argued that the quilombo clause was not written in ethnocultural terms, the clause was shaped to create a distinct ethnocultural identity for quilombo descendants. The Brazilian government's emphasis on ethnic cultural identity, reinforced by the Brazilian Anthropological Association (Associação Brasileira de Antropologia, or ABA), resulted in the Ministry of Culture administering the recognition of quilombo territories rather than the Ministry of Agrarian Development, the federal bureau responsible for agrarian reform. Thus, quilombo-descended communities were treated as ethnocultural entities inhabited by traditional populations instead of historically marginalized black communities deserving land reform and agrarian development. Moreover, the quilombo clause was shaped to undermine quilombola racial identity and silence the history of racial discrimination against black rural communities. Indeed, the dominant ethnocultural discourse surrounding quilombo-descended communities was an updated version of racial democracy in its denial of blackness and racism.

In the 1990s the national quilombo movement, the National Coordination for the Articulation of Rural Black Quilombo Communities (Coordenação Nacional de Articulação das Comunidades Negras Rurais Quilombolas, or CONAQ), challenged the ethnocultural discourse of quilombola differentiation by articulating a counternarrative that emphasized quilombo-shared common experience of blackness, racial discrimination, and struggle with other Afro-descendants in Brazil. CONAQ leaders understood that ethnocultural identity could not address the historical structural changes necessary to overcome centuries of Afro-descendant economic and political marginalization. Yet CONAQ's demand for affirmative action for black rural communities was inadequate. While black urban activists demanded affirmative action in education and employment, black rural communities deserved land reparations to secure their access to land and other resources, as argued here.

In twenty-first-century Brazil the powerful Bloco Ruralista, or rural caucus, in Congress, representing large landowners and agribusiness, has continued to manipulate the legal and political systems to block black

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communities' land claims, revoke granted titles, and prevent land reform. Despite agroecological counterevidence, the dominant narrative has portrayed black producers as economically inefficient and black rural production systems as ecologically destructive. Even the progressive PT governments accepted the backward black peasant thesis when it prohibited Afro-descendant farmers from practicing shifting cultivation and other sustainable agriculture techniques on their farms. In the current context, black rural communities have linked their historical struggle for land rights to enduring production systems rooted in ancestral knowledge of tropical ecosystems and mastery of subsistence production. By highlighting their agroecology credentials, black rural communities in Bahia and São Paulo hope to defend their land and livelihoods. That is their plan.

Yet these land struggles have taken place in a changed rural environment. Black rural households have fewer opportunities than in the past for wage work and off-farm employment to complement farming and other self-employment activities. Their present livelihoods are threatened because of reduced wage employment opportunities, in addition to restricted access to land and other natural resources. In Brazil, as elsewhere in Latin America, capitalized and technically advanced capitalist farms dominate the countryside. These agribusinesses employ far fewer wage laborers – even casual laborers – than the large estates of the past that offered workers access to plots of land for their subsistence. The studied households in Bahia and São Paulo communities confirmed that their standard of living had fallen in the last two decades because they had less access to wage jobs to complement their agriculture and fishing activities. Wage labor-poor, some communities have adopted ethnic tourism in the hopes of increasing and diversifying revenue-generating activities. Thus, any meaningful agrarian reform for black communities has to link land and labor.

CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP ON BRAZIL'S QUILOMBO COMMUNITIES

Historians and anthropologists have dominated the growing field of contemporary scholarship on Brazil's quilombo communities and produced ethnographic studies on culture, identity, displacement, inequality, and the law, among other issues (Ansell 2014; Arruti 2006; Farfán-Santos 2016; Fiabani 2005; French 2009; Mitchell 2017b; O'Dwyer 2002; Oliveira 2016; Reis and Gomes 1996, 2016). This study moves in new directions with attention to the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, and class in a context of rural land inequality. By comparing the political

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economy of constellations of quilombo communities in different regions of Brazil, from slavery to the present, it aims to be representative of the country's diverse black communities and their protracted struggles for rights to land and livelihood.

Early historiography described fugitive slave communities as attempts to recreate Africa in Brazil through the formation of autonomous and geographically isolated communities dedicated to the overthrow of the slave plantation system (Kent 1965). The model was the Quilombo dos Palmares, Brazil's most famous maroon community, which was the largest and longest-lasting quilombo in the Americas. Dubbed an African State in Brazil, the 11,000-inhabitant-strong Palmares was located in the hinterlands of the Brazilian northeast and existed for almost the entire seventeenth century, resisting repeated Dutch and Portuguese military attempts to destroy it. Eventually, the Portuguese crushed it in 1695, and its leader, Zumbi, was killed. Both Palmares and Zumbi are now revered symbols of slave resistance in Brazil's Black Movement.

Historians have long argued that Palmares was the exception in its size and duration (Gomes 2015; Guimarães 2016; Schwartz 1977, 1992). Most quilombos in Brazil, they claimed, were not as large, long-lasting, and autonomous as Palmares. Rather, most quilombos during slavery were integrated into the wider society. Even denizens of Palmares – which cultural historians previously described as a totally isolated slave society – raided coastal plantations and seized cattle. As Stuart Schwartz (1992) documented, they also traded with traveling merchants, kidnapped slaves, recruited indigenous members, and incorporated Europeans. Other historians have argued that some fugitive slaves settled in remote areas, but in most cases, they located near urban centers, plantations, or ranching and mining zones, from which they could extract a part of their subsistence (Fiabani 2009; Reis and Gomes 2016). Counterintuitively, some quilombolas even set up camp on slaveholders' property that was proximate to estates where they were previously enslaved in a practice that Yuko Miki (2018) has described as fleeing into slavery, whereby fugitive slaves offered their labor to planters in exchange for shelter, munitions, and food.

The new historical studies offer fresh perspectives on quilombo formation, geographic locale, and quilombo economy, which are relevant issues in this work. Through careful analysis of colonial documents and archival research, historians have shown that most quilombos during slavery were formed by runaway slaves, freed blacks, and free blacks, contrary to the popular perception of quilombos formed exclusively by fugitive slaves (Fiabani 2009; Gomes 2015; Gomes and Yabeta 2017; Miki 2018; Reis

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and Gomes 2016). Over time, quilombos forged relations with black communities of freed and free blacks through marriage, labor supply, and trade – just as they did in the Iguape and Ribeira case studies.

Recent historical research also illustrates that quilombo communities were not isolated, but coexisted with slave owners, black communities, and indigenous people. Historian Flávio dos Santos Gomes (2016) introduced the concept of the *campo negro*, or black encampment, to refute the conventional wisdom that quilombos existed in isolation from the world of slavery. He describes how quilombos forged social and commercial ties with planters, merchants, and plantation slaves in the Iguaçu lowlands near Guanabara Bay in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Gomes argues that these symbiotic relationships shielded quilombos from slave hunters and allowed them to maintain autonomy. This work builds on Gomes's concept of *campo negro* to illustrate the complicated and contradictory relationships between black rural communities (inhabited by escaped slaves, freed blacks, and free blacks) and landowners: Black inhabitants sold their labor to local planters, farmers, and miners, and they produced food crops for slave plantations and mines. Moreover, as this study reveals, the complex relationship went beyond the sale of labor and crops to the sale of land. Some plantation owners in São Paulo's Ribeira Valley sold land to former slaves, with deeds, which allowed them to expand their production. Although such transactions were not frequent, they did take place in other regions.

Black rural producers practiced subsistence agriculture, but some also sold their surplus production in nearby local markets. In their edited collection, Reis and Gomes (1996; 2016) show that even though most quilombos practiced agriculture for subsistence and sale, many other types of activities prevailed in the quilombo economy, including the collection and sale of wood, breeding of cattle, and panning of gold. According to Matthias Assunção (2016), quilombos in Maranhão developed a veritable gold-trading network linking peddlers, merchants, and landowners in the coastal towns of Santa Helena, Carutapera, and Turiaçu, in addition to establishing barter trade with black rural populations living on the margins of slave society. The conclusions drawn from the Brazilian case studies in the Reis and Gomes (1996, 2016) volume support the argument made in this study that quilombos today, as in the past, are diverse units, with socially differentiated dwellers dependent on a mixture of farming and nonfarming activities for subsistence.

In her groundbreaking study on the intertwined histories of black and indigenous people in nineteenth-century Brazil, Yuko Miki (2018) also analyzes how quilombos interacted with the wider society. Focused on the

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