

## Notas de Pesquisa

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### Diasporic Africans and Postcolonial Brazil: Notes on the intersection of diaspora, transnationalism, and nation

Africanos diaspóricos e o Brasil pós-colonial: notas sobre as encruzilhadas de diáspora, transnacionalismo e nação

Yuko Miki<sup>1</sup>

ymiki@wustl.edu

Long before the current transnational turn in historiography, scholars of the African diaspora had been investigating the experiences of people of African descent across boundaries of empire, nation, and time. Recognizing the role of racial capitalism and imperialism in the creation of the African diaspora, their works, spanning many disciplines and regions, have placed women and men of African descent at the center of the making of the modern world. The concept of an “African diaspora” in such terms became established during the decolonization movements across Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, both overlapping and in tension with Pan-Africanist, black internationalist, and broader third world anticolonial movements. African diaspora thought was also built on the work of New World Negro scholars in the 1930s and 40s such as Melville Herskovits and Gilberto Freyre, who researched the relationship between specific African regions, traditions, and cultures and the descendants of enslaved Africans in the Americas. Whatever the differences in their approach, their work fundamentally challenged the prevalent idea of Africans as people without a past and recognized their importance in shaping societies in the Americas.

Needless to say, the “practice of diaspora” by the people of the African diaspora itself has been at the core of much of the scholarship (Edwards, 2003). The growing body of works on the revolutionary Atlantic world has revealed how events in Haiti inspired people of African descent from Jamaica and Cuba to the United States and Brazil to agitate for their freedom and claim their rights to citizenship, plunging slaveowners into fear of another Saint Domingue on their own soil. Thanks to these studies it is now unthinkable to speak of a slave uprising in the revolutionary Atlantic without reference to Haiti (Ferrer, 2009; Dubois, 2004; Geggus, 2001; Soares and Gomes, 2002). And in the last century, West

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor of History at Washington University in St. Louis.

Indian migrants “imagining home” forged a sense of place and kinship across imperial borders amidst their condition of ongoing diasporization by creating networks among the local chapters of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) throughout the Caribbean and the United States (Giovannetti, 2006). Significantly, Africa was not necessarily the focal point for these women and men, whose articulations of solidarity were often expressed in terms of their shared condition of enslavement or their political affiliations. Their stories nonetheless remind us that transnationalism – or transregionalism, perhaps – was envisioned and practiced by people of the African diaspora before historians called it by that name.

Brazil has occupied a somewhat ambivalent space in these discussions about the African diaspora. The richness of the works on the lives of people of African descent emerging from Brazil and the United States are nothing short of remarkable, and it is unfortunate that more Brazilian works have not been translated into English for a greater number of readers to appreciate. Yet historians (I am not speaking on other disciplines) working on African-descended populations in Brazil have with a few significant exceptions more readily embraced a national, Latin American, or more recently, Atlantic world framework of analysis while remaining noticeably reserved in engaging the African diaspora, even as many of them maintain explicit dialogues with the literature on the Caribbean, the United States, and Africa. Furthermore, although works on Brazil are enthusiastically welcomed in North American classes addressing the African diaspora, it is not certain that their authors had conceptualized their own work in those terms.

Is this because the African diaspora as a framework is somehow out of place in Brazilian history? How could this be the case, given the rich body of knowledge we now have about the fundamental role played by Africans and their descendants in shaping Brazil’s colonial and postcolonial history? This issue of *História Unisinos* offers an important opportunity to address this question. The rest of this article is based on my own research on slaves, maroons, and Indians, through which I discuss the tense nexus of African diasporic, Latin American, and Brazilian history and the possibilities and limitations of each framework.

My doctoral dissertation, “Insurgent Geographies: Blacks, Indians, and the Colonization of Nineteenth-Century Brazil,” focuses on a region that has been virtually absent from studies of African-based populations in Brazil, not to mention the nation’s history in general: the borderlands of Bahia and Espírito Santo provinces. At first glance this is a peculiar choice. Long considered a *sertão* (hinterland) “infested” by hostile indigenous populations generically known as the Botocudo, the region remained

largely unsettled until the late eighteenth century. After independence, the state and settlers endeavored to facilitate its economic development and territorial incorporation into the newly independent Brazilian nation, unleashing a new cycle of conquest and colonization (Langfur, 2006; Paraíso, 1998; Mattos, 2004). Historians of slavery and emancipation have largely overlooked the region, understandably, focusing instead on the prominent centers of free and enslaved blacks in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, and Minas Gerais. But the archival sources reveal a history that fundamentally contradicts the idea of the region as an uneventful backwater. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Bahia-Espírito Santo borderlands were, in fact, home to an astonishing number of *quilombos*, slave insurrections real and feared, and other acts of violence by and against slaves. And who were these slaves? Among enslaved Africans were those whose origins were recorded as Angola, Nagô, Jeje, Moçambique, Haussa, and Guiné; there were also *crioulos* and *pardos*; and, given that this was still largely indigenous territory, the sources also mention *curibocas* (an offspring of a *mameluco*, or white-Indian mixed-race person, and a black person). From the eve of independence all the way to the post-emancipation years, these African-descended populations of the region were at the helm of numerous episodes of unrest in the region, from creating *quilombos* that served as their base for attacking local properties, to collaboration with popular abolitionists in the last years of slavery and Empire.

Being neither a major commercial, economic, or political center of activity, one wonders why an enslaved population became established there in the first place. For this we must look back to the turn of the nineteenth century. From the era of Pombal until independence, the region, consisting of the southern Bahian *comarca* of Caravelas and the northern Espírito Santense *comarca* of São Mateus, had been the separate captaincy of Porto Seguro, sharing deep economic, political, and social ties that lasted long after São Mateus was reincorporated into Espírito Santo in the 1820s (Barickman, 1995). The borderlands had been sparsely populated until the mid-eighteenth century owing to the tenacious resistance of the indigenous population, who thwarted prior settlement attempts, and to Crown policy, which had deliberately sealed the region off in order to prevent the smuggling of gold and precious stones from Minas Gerais to the coast. With the decline in mining output in the 1750s, however, the region was successively opened up in a violent contest for land and resources (Langfur, 2006). State agents and individuals alike made numerous attempts to clear roads and rivers that would allow easy access of Minas products to coastal ports along Bahia and Espírito Santo, and in this process they began eyeing this hitherto “hostile” land as

a region of untapped opportunities. In order to fulfill these ambitions, labor was needed to clear the forests, protect the settlers from Indians, and tend the newly planted fields of manioc and coffee, leading to the introduction of slaves.

Populating the region was as much a racial project as an economic one. One of the main initiatives taken by the Crown in the final years before independence was the granting of land (*sesmaria*) to a group of German and Swiss immigrants in 1819 in the far south of Bahia, along the Peruípe River. Colônia Leopoldina, as it became known, was an early experiment in northern European immigration, decades before large populations of immigrants began arriving to the coffee regions in the Center-South. The colony's intended goal was the introduction of economic and racial progress to a region considered socially and economically backward in comparison to urban centers. In other words, although relying on slave labor, the state hoped that the European immigrants would not only introduce innovative agricultural practices but also, over time, phase out the undesirable residents of the region who were largely black, indigenous, or of mixed race. Colônia Leopoldina continued to grow into the mid-nineteenth century, its expanding coffee exports to other regional markets bringing considerable wealth to the settlers. However, the Brazilian state's initial enthusiasm about the colony as a successful immigration experiment began to fade as it became increasingly apparent that instead of encouraging their countrypeople from Europe to join them on Brazilian soil, the immigrants were comfortably increasing their slave ownership. In 1832 the colony counted 86 whites and 489 slaves; that number expanded to 200 whites and nearly 2,000 slaves by 1857. According to linguists Alan Baxter and Dante Lucchesi, available inventories indicate that the proportion of African slaves on the colony remained at around fifty percent of the total adult slave population until the late 1850s (Baxter and Lucchesi, 1999). Hence, in the middle of what was still largely indigenous territory in the nineteenth century was an expanding slave-based coffee plantation worked by Africans and crioulos.

The colony was marked by unrest from its early years, but the greatest turbulence took place in the 1880s, in the last decade of Empire, when many of the Leopoldina planters steadfastly continued to resist the rising tide of abolitionist activity sweeping the nation. Although there is no indication that they harbored any ideological commitment to slavery, the lack of an available labor force to replace their slaves was the most likely explanation for their resistance to emancipationist efforts. The opening of the Bahia-Minas Railroad in late 1882 connecting the town of Ponta de Areia near Caravelas to Aymoré in northern Minas seemed to usher in a new

period of progress and prosperity, but also exacerbated an already tense atmosphere. Several slave uprisings erupted on the colony around this time, culminating in April of 1884 in the spectacular murder of the Swiss planter José Venerote by his own slaves. Venerote was one of Colônia Leopoldina's largest slaveholders and had been directly involved in putting down prior uprisings, thereby making himself the object of the slaves' growing animosity.

The most astonishing aspect of Venerote's death was that the perpetrators had beat him to death and placed a whip - the most despised instrument of their degradation and the symbol of slavemaster power - under his nose, leaving him to fester under the sun in a calculated spectacle. Much has been written about the public torture and execution of slaves throughout the African diaspora, performed by masters and the state in order to orchestrate a reign of terror over the bodies and souls of the enslaved (Brown, 2008; Paton, 2001). The evidence indicates that Venerote's slaves were fully versed in this language of terror and deliberately inverted it in staging his execution. The act was not only a declaration of their refusal to accept their enslavement any longer, but also a striking claim of the law and the nation that it represented. For just two and a half years later, in October 1886, the use of the lash as a punishment for slaves crimes would be officially outlawed. In this sense, it is possible that the slaves were claiming the law before it was formally recognized by the state itself - in other words, they were ahead of the law. That they murdered their master, a crime punishable by death since the aftermath of the Malé uprising of 1835, and made only minimal effort to conceal their deeds also suggests that they were cognizant that the political tide was now turning in their favor. This incident thus allows us an important glimpse into what Laurent Dubois has called the "intellectual history of the enslaved," one through which we can understand how enslaved people of African descent both claimed and reshaped the laws and the state (Dubois, 2006). In doing so they exposed and challenged the fundamental contradiction of their status in Brazilian society, according to which they were people who were denied the rights of citizenship.

Although the Bahia-Espírito Santo borderlands have often been dismissed as an uneventful, "empty" backwater by state officials and historians alike, the enslaved and quilombolas of the region imbued the geography with an entirely different significance. From the time of independence, they regularly criss-crossed the region to visit family, flee from expeditions, and sometimes to foment an insurrection. The most remarkable example of the complex and sometimes even contradictory social networks established by the quilombolas can be seen in the life of Benedito, a famous maroon born in Caravelas and residing

in São Mateus, who succeeded in eluding the authorities for over eight years in the 1870s and 80s thanks to the highly diverse group of people who protected him from the authorities, including family, girlfriends, slaves, abolitionists, and in some cases even slave owners. The most striking aspect of Benedito and his fellow female and male quilombolas was that they never traveled very far, opting to flee onto properties, many of them slaveholding, within and around São Mateus. Their ability to create spaces of freedom within their locus of enslavement fundamentally challenges the prevailing idea that maroon communities were geographically isolated or, at best, on the peripheries of towns. Their claiming of the geography illuminates the ways in which slaves and quilombolas rewrote the boundaries of captivity and freedom even as their masters and the state sought to keep them in bondage.

Examining the history of the Bahia-Espírito Santo borderlands through the lens of the African diaspora thus enables us to reconsider what we have deemed to be geographically, and indeed historically, “peripheral.” For although the women and men of African descent whose lives are at the center of my research were not criss-crossing the Atlantic and engaging with revolutionary discourses circulating between the Caribbean and France, and indeed largely lived and died within the limited geographic space of this particular region, their experiences speak to, and are clearly in dialogue with, the lives of other communities of the African diaspora. The quilombolas’ decision to flee into town provides a counterpoint to the isolation of maroon communities in Jamaica or Suriname. Enslaved people claimed the law and their rights to citizenship in these so-called hinterlands just as they did in the revolutionary French Caribbean, thereby challenging the very limitations of a supposedly universalist discourse emanating from the metropole/capital. And information about the slaves’ African origins always promises fascinating new avenues of trans-Atlantic and diasporic inquiry. Therefore, in spite of there being no explicit articulation of a shared consciousness among these diverse enslaved populations, the inherently transnational and transregional nature of the African diaspora as a method of analysis enables us to appreciate the fundamental role played by those women and men of these allegedly “backward” Bahia-Espírito Santo borderlands in shaping their nascent Brazilian nation, as they did elsewhere in the diaspora. Through their lives, then, we are able to reimagine the geography of Brazil, and of the African diaspora itself.

Having said this, however, I must also recognize the limitations posed by this extremely expansive framework of the African diaspora. This has to do with the ways in which Brazilian and, to a larger extent, Latin American historiography has been conceptualized in terms

of their subaltern populations, particularly in the post-colonial period. For as much as the diasporic framework allows us to appreciate the lives of people African descent in the largely overlooked Brazilian hinterlands, there has been no dispute over the basic idea that Brazil itself has a large African-descended population. Within the context of Latin America in general Brazil and Colombia are identified with blackness and black-based race mixture, in contrast with the Andean and Central American nations identified with indigenous populations (Weinstein, 2007). Our historical training reinforces this racial-geographical dichotomization of Latin America, a practice that, I believe, comes at the cost of a significant omission.

I speak of the Brazilian Indians. As I mentioned in passing in the preceding text, throughout the colonial era the Bahia-Espírito Santo borderlands remained largely indigenous, being home to many Indian groups who were generically known as the Botocudo. Their lives were violently transformed beginning in the turn of the nineteenth century as their lands became the target of aggressive colonization efforts. However, because of our historical specialization; the separation of documents on black and indigenous populations in the archive; and most importantly, because of the abiding idea that Brazilian Indians had become largely extinct by the nineteenth century, except in the Amazon region, we historians have been complicit in reinforcing the notion that subaltern populations in nineteenth century Brazil were almost exclusively of African descent.

In the course of my research on enslaved populations in southern Bahia and northern Espírito Santo, it became increasingly evident that it was impossible to write about their struggles without investigating the indigenous population, with whom their lives were geographically, socially, and politically intertwined. The concept of quasi-citizenship that has prominently figured in many recent debates about slavery and post-emancipation societies can gain greater nuance, I believe, when considered in conjunction with the fact that Brazilian Indians, although nominally citizens, were legally considered orphans without full citizenship. Furthermore, in a place like the Bahia-Espírito Santo borderlands, where the labor scarcity was chronic, indigenous people were actively sought out as servile laborers, with state-appointed Capuchin missionaries playing an active role forcing them into labor regimes in the name of catechism and civilization. That such conditions of second-class citizenship and servitude of indigenous people existed alongside the enslavement of people of African descent does not challenge the importance of the African diasporic framework. Rather, it is my belief that the creation of new conditions of subalternity within the context of postcolonial Brazilian

nation-building involving both black and indigenous populations can enrich our understanding of the lives of people of the African diaspora and the myriad ways in which they intersected with others.

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