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# The racial division of nature: Making land in Recife

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In this paper I analyse the making and unmaking of amphibious urban modernity in Recife in the Northeast of Brazil between 1920 and 1950. I argue that the transformation of the city was predicated on an absorptive and eradictive notion of whiteness that necessitated the creation of dry, enclosed land. The process of urban transformation proceeded not only through a racial division of space, but through a racial division of nature. Racialised groups, and the houses, marshlands, and mangroves where they lived were subject to eradication not only as spaces but as ecologies and landscapes. Brazilian racial thought in the period was fundamentally imbricated with ideas about nature. Histories of coloniality, indigeneity, enslavement, and escape meant that forests, wetness, and the spectre of commonly held land were understood as threats to whiteness and its self-association with order, enclosure, purity, and dryness. To answer why the division between the wet and the dry was so important, and why whiteness needed dryness, I turn back to philosophical investigations of the foundational myth of Brazil. I argue that a peculiarly Brazilian philosophy of nature, which drew racial lines within nature itself, underpinned a familiar, if uncanny, white supremacy that ordered society along the material and symbolic contours of race. Under colonial modernity, this philosophy translated into a division of the pure – rational, cleansed, dry, modern, urban space – from the impure – muddy, fearful, tangled, forested landscape. Under the conditions of dependent capitalism, the process on which this racial division of nature relied was enclosure. Identifying the historical process of the racial division of nature is of particular significance in Brazil, given the still flowing undercurrents of racial oppression and environmental plunder.

## KEYWORDS

Brazil, race, racial division of nature, Recife, urban political ecology, whiteness

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<i>Recife</i>	Recife
<i> festa de poço</i>	party at the river bend
<i>música bandeira</i>	marching music
<i>primeiro amor</i>	first love
<i>Recife</i>	Recife
<i>greve no Porto</i>	Strikes at the dock
<i>conflitos na rua do Imperador</i>	clashes in Rua do Imperador
<i>Recife</i>	Recife
<i>maracatu</i>	maracatu
<i>com Rei e Rainha</i>	with the king and queen
<i>mexendo com o corpo</i>	moving with the body
<i>e alma da gente</i>	and soul of our people

(Francisco Solano Trindade, ‘*Canção a minha cidade natal*’ [Song to my hometown], *Cantares ao meu povo* [Songs to my people]. 1961)

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In this paper I analyse the making and unmaking of amphibious urban modernity in Recife in the Northeast of Brazil in the first half of the 20th century. I argue that the transformation of the city was predicated on an absorptive and eradicated notion of whiteness that required the enclosure of wet, amphibious space to make dry land. The process of urban transformation proceeded not only through a racial division of space, but through a racial division of nature. Racialised groups – of black, indigenous, and mixed heritages – and the houses, marshlands, and mangroves where they lived, were subject to eradication not only as spaces but also as ecologies and landscapes. My analysis draws on sources and writing from the 1920s to 1950s, during the rise to hegemony in Brazil of the notion of “racial democracy,” in that idea’s heartland of the Northeast. This period gave birth to Brazilian urban modernity and still dominant structures and notions of race in Brazil that are deeply imbricated with ideas about nature. Histories of coloniality, indigeneity, enslavement, and escape meant that forests, wetness, and the spectre of commonly held land were understood as threats to whiteness and its self-association with order, purity, and the possessive individual. The racial division of nature therefore operated through property and desiccation.

To answer the question of why the racial division of nature was so important, and why whiteness needed dryness, I turn to the hygienic, boundary-making practices of the Brazilian *Estado Novo*, positivist and eugenic visions of Brazilian colonial modernity, and to philosophical investigations of the foundational myth of Brazil. I argue that a peculiarly Brazilian philosophy of nature, which drew racial lines within nature itself, underpinned a familiar, if uncanny, white supremacy that ordered society along the material and symbolic contours of race. Under colonial modernity, this philosophy translated into a division of the pure – rational, cleansed, dry, modern, urban space – from the impure – muddy, fearful, tangled, forested landscape. Under the conditions of dependent capitalism, the racial division of nature relied on enclosure. Identifying the historical process of the racial division of nature is of particular significance in Brazil, given the still flowing undercurrents of racial oppression and environmental plunder.

In this paper, I first conceptualise the racial division of nature, before turning to how the landscape of marshes, mangroves, *mocambos* (informal dwellings), and *mocambeiros* (their inhabitants) was racialised in Recife. I then show how the racial division of nature was materially enacted through *aterramento*: land-making. I conclude by emphasising that this process, and these epistemologies of nature, have always been resisted and counteracted.

## 2 | CONCEPTUALISING THE RACIAL DIVISION OF NATURE

In 1979 the Afro-Brazilian feminist Lélia Gonzalez drew on Aristotle’s ideas of natural slavery to critique the racialisation of space in Brazil:

Different forms of economic production in Brazil produce different kinds of domination. However, they appear to coincide on the same point: the reinterpretation of Aristotle’s theory of the ‘natural place’. From the colonial

era to today we can see a clear separation in the physical space occupied by the dominated and the dominators. The natural place of the dominant white group are healthy dwellings, located in the most beautiful parts of the city or the country and protected by force ... the natural place of black people is the opposite, evidently: from the slave quarters to the favelas, tenements, land invasions, marshes and so-called housing estates ... the criterion is substantially the same: the racial division of space. (Gonzalez, 2019, p. 246)

With her emphasis on the intersections between race, place, nature, and ecology, Gonzalez introduces many of the key themes of this paper. As long ago as 1977, Manuel Castells noted that Latin American processes of urbanisation reinforced the “ecological segregation of the social classes” (1977, p. 57), but landscapes of segregation function not only along class, but, as Gonzalez insists, racial lines. Racial thinking proceeds through division, separation, and hierarchisation to produce forms of domination. These processes function in, and are reproduced by, spatial forms. Critical geographical work, and the literature of environmental justice, has extensively analysed race, white privilege, and white supremacy as a social and spatial phenomenon (Bonds & Inwood, 2015; Gilmore, 2002; Pulido, 2000). In analysing the production of race in the intertidal zone, I pick up Zeiderman's work on “submergence” in Buenaventura, Colombia (2016). As the social and the spatial cannot be separated from the natural, I pay attention here to the political ecologies of whiteness. I argue that racial thinking in Recife in this period was reproduced through divisions, separations, and hierarchisation within nature itself. The ecology of the spatial division noted by Lélia Gonzalez is diverse but specific. I put it into dialogue with Marilena Chauí's analysis of the foundation myth of Brazil, inhabited by the paradox between an identification of Brazil-as-Nature, and a racialised rupture within that nature, between dry land and swamp, and between backlands and coast.

As Arruti has argued, indigeneity and blackness had different connotations in relation to the emergent and desired whiteness of the nation in Brazilian modernity, and in the Northeast specifically. The production of whiteness in Brazil has for a long time been to some extent aesthetic: white supremacy functions through a form of colour-based racism, a kind of “pigmentocracy” underpinned by anti-blackness (Pinho, 2009). But colourism was, and remains, socially and spatially contingent: “white identity is produced as a class position and a way of seeing the world, ... associated with the forms of occupation and organization of space” (Maia, 2019, p. 257). In this view, white supremacy is not a question of colour, but of the racial ordering of the world. In the 1930s and beyond, Brazilian whiteness was devised by the bourgeois and oligarchical elite, and intellectuals, in relation to both indigeneity and blackness. Arruti argues that indigeneity was constructed as an absolute other, a primitive sign that had to be translated into the modern, into the nation state, while blackness was the unpleasant reflection of whiteness. White fears of “contamination” therefore functioned in opposite directions: the “Indian” could be the “object of contamination,” while blackness was the “agent of contamination” (Arruti, 1997, p. 10). For Richard Miskolci, the question of “contamination” was also one of sexuality: the abolition of slavery elicited white fears of an increase in interaction across race and class which risked a moral contamination of the rigid hierarchy of masculinist, white, heterosexualist desire (Miskolci, 2012, p. 61). The organisation and control of desire, Miskolci shows, was crucial to the foundation of a nation orientated always towards the future, towards whiteness, and guided by a fundamental fear of the Brazilian people – “*o povo*.” The crux here is the conceptual and political supremacy of whiteness, and its self-association with purity, even when modulated by an aesthetic, pigmentocratic adoption of *mestiçagem* (see also Miki, 2018).

These modalities of racial thinking were intimately connected to conceptions of landscape, tropicity, ecology, and climate. Through notions of purity and terraqueous ecology, landscape was profoundly racialised. As I will show, in Recife, the racial division of nature functioned through particular conceptualisations of landscape, and particular material transformations of terraqueous space. But why was so much at stake in dividing land from water? By turning to the philosopher Marilena Chauí, we can see that this question is inextricably bound up with the philosophy of nature, possessive individualism, and the ownership of rights. Chauí's work on the “foundational myth” of Brazil helps elucidate the racial division of nature. With colonisation, she argues, “three components appeared in the form of three divine operations that, in the foundational myth, were responsible for Brazil. These were: the work of God, or Nature; the word of God, or History; and the will of God, or the State.” (Chauí, 2011, p. 114) These three operations coalesced into the foundational myth of Brazil in the form of Nature as Nation, captured in the blue (seas), green (forests), yellow (sun), and – significantly – white (purity of soul) of the national flag. “This mythical production of the nation-garden throws us into the bosom of nature and, in doing so, it throws us out of the world of history” (Chauí, 2011, p. 117). Yet the new colony existed as an economic project whose functional form was enslavement. This raises a fundamental question. In Chauí's memorable formulation: “how can slavery be justified in paradise?” (2011, p. 118).

The answer lay in 17th-century theological niceties that justified a political economy based on enslavement of Africans. The question at stake was the nature of nature:

The natural juridical order reveals that nature is constituted by individuals who naturally subordinate each other ... The enslavement of Indians and Blacks shows us that God and the Devil do battle in the Land of the Sun. It could be no different, since the serpent inhabited paradise. (Chauí, 2011, p. 120)

The foundational myth of Brazil-Nature relies on this apparent paradox. “The cosmic battle between God and the Devil that appears at the start of the colonial period ... refers not to social divisions, but to *divisions of and in nature itself*” (Chauí, 2011, p. 120, my emphasis). Brazilian social space, for Chauí, is an edifice built on a racial division of nature. Chauí’s ecology of division has specific qualities. For a start, she understands the “New World” as predicated on a division between the coast and the “arid” backlands, “a place of evil ruled by the devil who is always ready to strike” (Chauí, 2011, p. 120). For her, the Jesuit José Anchieta is an archetype of these patterns of thought. In the 16th century, Anchieta argued that “Evil is spreading in the backlands or hiding in caves and swamps, from which it comes out at night in the species of a snake, rat, bat and leech. But the mortal danger is when these external forces penetrate the souls of men” (cited in Chauí, 2011, p. 120). Anchieta associated these external forces not only with “natural evil,” but with specific, racialised fears of both indigenous people and communities of escaped enslaved people. Richard Miskolci understands the later emergence of the Brazilian republic as “a historical event marked by fears of black revolt and revenge, as much as by elitist fantasies of the whitening of the population” (2012, p. 31). For Miskolci, white male fear was one of the key drivers of the desire that underwrote “an idea of the nation more as a biopolitical than a political entity” (2012, p. 32).

These are the fears that mark the racial division of space in the history of Recife and the Northeast. In Recife, these fears had a location, and a landscape. Marshy, mangrove, and muddy landscapes, associated with *quilombos*, have come to represent a dangerous space explicitly linked to amphibianity (Farfán-Santos, 2016, p. 88). Tales of “*moradores de água*” (water dwellers) are described in Portuguese colonial accounts of the Brazilian Northeast (Chakravarti, 2017, pp. 20–23); Schwartz tells of fears of forest *quilombos* in the planter economy (1985, pp. 471–472); and Marcos de Carvalho recounts early 19th-century campaigns against mangrove *quilombos* near Recife (Carvalho, 2006, p. 17; see also Nascimento, 1982). All link threat, race, and terraqueous landscapes. In Recife’s urban transformation the conflation of pollution, race, and nature had specific political meanings and philosophical routes. The philosophical principles that pertain to the dominion over the earth have an ecological element deeply implicated in the geography of the Northeast of Brazil and in the ecology and aesthetics of marshes and wet landscapes. The threat associated with such landscapes has a long epistemic history: sites from where the devil of promiscuity, disease, and revolution may emerge, and that threaten the mortal danger of external forces. Nature is deeply imbricated in the processes of white supremacy on which Brazilian modernity was built.

### 3 | RECIFE, AMPHIBIOUS SPACE, AND THE RACIALISATION OF LANDSCAPE

Recife is one of the largest cities in Brazil, and one of the oldest. Its historical geography is marked by its status as one of the leading ports of Brazil, with attendant trends of political radicalism and infrastructural contestation. It has a deep tradition of leftist thought and artistic, intellectual, and cultural dynamism. Recife is also a centre of Brazilian black culture, albeit a less prominent one than its neighbour to the south, Salvador. It is an estuarine city, built at the flat meeting grounds of Northeastern rivers and Atlantic trading routes. One of the key sites in Brazil’s slave and sugar trades, Recife can be understood as a plantation metropole: a diverse and productive urban nexus sitting between the plantation and the colonial metropole. Centred on its port – the epicentre of political organising, including strikes and resistance – the city was an infrastructural hub, built at the confluence of the Capibaribe and Beberibe rivers, in a low-lying, mangrove forested area. Recife was never a space merely of distribution, or a smooth point of infrastructural throughput, but rather one of densities, junctions, and blockages within the historical geographies of racial and colonial capitalism. The rivers themselves were one crucial part of an export infrastructure. The radical Northeastern geographer Manuel Correia de Andrade called them the “rivers of sugar” (Andrade & Andrade, 1957). As well as the rivers, there were railway lines and key road routes. As Recife expanded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in syncopation with the sugar and cotton trades, new arrivals clustered in marshy and muddy landscapes along rivers and among mangrove forests. Periodic drought drove migrants from the dry backlands and the coastal zone into the burgeoning metropolis. It was in the infrastructural space around these routes that tens of thousands of inhabitants and new arrivals made their homes, finding work in the export economy (Melo & Freyre, 1961). These groups were differentially racialised (Dávila, 2003; Skidmore, 2005, pp. 182–192), but collectively constituted as racial others by the European-oriented, eugenically inclined white elite. Many of these people lived in what came to be called *mocambos*, a word that designated an informal dwelling, but came to mean much more. The population

of the *mocambos* included not only black Brazilians, but *sertanejos* from the backlands, black and indigenous *caboclos*, and others of the myriad intersecting groups that make up Brazil's population.

Landscapes at the interstices between earth and water – mud flats, tidal zones, marshes, swamps, and mangroves – have often functioned as the necessary outsides to modernist systems of social and political ordering. Marshes have a long association with paradox, duality, ambiguity, and uncertainty: “as landscapes [marshlands] have been presented as unfixed and unstable, subject to contestation,” liminal spaces “from which *something begins its presencing*” (Oliver, 2014, p. 190, emphasis in the original). In the early 20th century, Recife's marshes and mangroves were marked as beyond and outside urban modernity and a Brazilian national identity coded as white. They were marked as such through a racial division of space consolidated, constituted, and enabled by a racial division of nature. Enclosure was the crucial mechanism of this division. The Recife geographer Josué de Castro contended that the mangroves were a kind of commons (Castro, 1959). This was only half true. Not only were most *mocambeiros* charged high rents for dire housing, but the very amphibiousness of territory was deployed against them to produce commodified land out of common mud. In Ananya Roy's terms, “the foundational dispossession” of racialised *mocambeiros* was “constitutive of liberalism and its economic geographies” in Recife (2017, p. 9). This dispossession was one of “banishment,” but that functioned not only through a “persistent racialization of space” (2017, p. 8), but also of nature. The city's destructive modality of urban transformation targeted not just people and dwellings but population, landscape, and ecology. Informal, “amphibious” urbanism threatened hygienist visions of urban modernity.

The urban transformation of Recife between 1920 and 1950 has been the subject of research in both history and urban geography (Castilho, 2014). Zélia de Oliveira Gominho (2012) characterises the city's transformation through the oscillation between its twin faces of “*mucambópolis*” and *Veneza Americana* (the Venice of the Americas). Brodwyn Fischer (2014) and Joel Outtes (1997) have explored how the destructions of Recife's informal urbanism were political projects rooted in eugenic hygienism and anti-Communist, authoritarian capitalism. The destruction and reconstruction of urban space was an archetypal form of accumulation by dispossession in which, in the words of Paulo Cavalcanti, a Communist leader in Recife at the time, “the monopoly over the use of the land increases [the urban landless] suffering, living out the same problems which afflict the landless peasant of the interior” (2008, p. 75). *Mocambos* were seen as taking on the function of slave quarters, the *senzala*, the place where exploited labour was kept out of sight. They were also spaces of ambivalent freedom: the inheritance less of the *senzala* than of the *quilombo* – the community of escaped slaves. Nevertheless, “*mocambo*” has important etymological and historical intersections with “*quilombo*” (Lira, 1999), and the two words have often been used interchangeably (e.g., Schwartz, 1985). Topographically, for obvious reasons of self-defence and clandestinity, *quilombos* have associations with forests and marshes (Schwartz, 1985, p. 319). As Schwartz puts it in his history of the Bahian sugar industry, “they dotted the margins of the *engenhos* [sugar mill complexes] and *fazendas* [plantations], tucked in marshes and woods but relatively close to the plantations and towns, which they raided for supplies, arms, and new recruits” (1985, p. 470). The association between escape and liberation and terraqueous landscapes is not limited to Brazil (Golden, 2018), but has a particular history in the Northeast of Brazil. Over centuries various *quilombos* have existed in the area around Recife, including in the forests around Recife, for instance the *quilombo* of Catucá (Carvalho, 2006; Moura & Moura, 2004, p. 260; Verardi, 2019). The geography of *quilombos* – near but hidden, in forests, marshes, and along rivers – is mirrored in the relationship between visions of urban modernity and the *mocambos*. As much as it functioned as an architectural and spatial designation, the word – like *favelas* – designated a racially marked site of (potential, imagined, and real) political resistance and revolution. Not least through its association with the *quilombo*, the mangrove/*mocambo* can be written in to a history of destruction and persecution (Correia, 2011; Lopes, 2003), as well as the potential for resistance liberation (Farfán-Santos, 2016, pp. 30–44). Indeed, we could extend Yuko Miki's analysis of the postcolonial history of Brazil to see the urban mangrove/*mocambo* as a kind of frontier: “the very space in which the relationship between race, nation and citizenship were daily tested and defined” (2018, p. 8). The idea of the urban landscape in Recife as dotted with frontier-spaces helps understand the politics of eradication that emerged. The landscape and ecology of these settlements was central to this process. As Maria Kaïka notes, the history of burying rivers in London was associated with clearing informal urbanism; purifying and cleansing nature were connected with similar social goals (2012, pp. 60–75). This duality has long applied in Recife: clearing mangroves and clearing *mocambos* were processes joined at the root: produced as abject space beyond urban modernity, together they became the target of a selective urbicide (McKittrick, 2011).

In the first half of the 20th century, the *mocambos* of Recife were the subject of political debate and anthropological interest, notably between two intellectuals, Gilberto Freyre and Josué de Castro, both from Recife. The regional question of *mocambos* was deeply embedded in, and productive of, national debate on *mestiçagem* and racial democracy. Gilberto Freyre was perhaps the single most influential figure in producing this defining national myth in Brazil. In 1936, he wrote a book on the *Mocambos do Nordeste* that configured the *mocambo* within an assertion of Brazilian forms of popular

architectural expression that valorised African and indigenous elements. Freyre characterised *mocambos* as “extremely primitive” (1937, p. 12) “nests” (“*ninhos*”), though in certain contexts – on beaches, between palm trees – they are “pure” and “romantic.” We can see here the marks of what Arruti theorises as differential modes of contamination, and the ambivalent dimensions of indigeneity and blackness in the Northeast. Freyre attempts to see the *mocambo* as part of a picturesque otherness. He deploys it as a vehicle for his socially conservative argument about the society of the Northeast of Brazil, “the *mocambo* is the humble home of the romantic family: husband, wife and children” (1937, p. 30). Freyre folds the *mocambo* into his vision of Brazilian society along two vectors: a fallacious understanding of the positive dimensions of the sociology and history of Brazilian slave-society and the idea that Brazilian society should incorporate African and Indigenous dimensions into a tropical whiteness.

Often at intellectual and political loggerheads with Freyre (Vasconcelos, 2001), Josué de Castro wrote very differently about the mangroves and *mocambos*. While for Freyre *mocambos* were essentially a Romanticised rural form, for Castro – as we can see from his earliest writings in the 1920s and 1930s (Castro, 1959) through to his latest jottings for unfinished research projects in Paris in the early 1970s (Castro, 1969) – they were thriving social worlds and profoundly urban communities, with all of the political and social ramifications of that designation. In the 20th century the relationship between the rural and the urban was a key organising category of the debate over Latin American urbanisation, marginality, and informality (Fischer et al., 2014, pp. 41–42). Placing the *mocambos* within the city’s urban geography, Josué de Castro saw a much more diverse and conflictual social and human landscape. He analysed Recife as “amphibious”: built half in and half out of the water, inhabited by *homem-caranguejos* – men-crabs – scrappy, resistive people on the muddy edges of the city living in the “cycle of the crab”: crabs living off the detritus of society and people eating crabs to survive, staving off starvation but staying hungry on a thin diet of crab meat (Castro, 1954, 1970). We can read into the *homem-caranguejo* a different vision of *mestiçagem*, in which a mixed Northeastern identity is shaped by struggle, exploitation, and the relation with social nature. The *homem-caranguejo* become, metabolically, half crab flesh themselves within the “geography of hunger” forged by colonialism and the spatial forms of social injustice. Emerging from attention to social dynamism and political agency, the man-crab is distinct from the racist animalisation I discuss below. Since Josué de Castro wrote, it has become a symbol of resistance in the city, an amphibious, liminal figure living in and out of the mud, defined by a relationship with both the river and the sea, like the crabs who live among the mangroves. The mangroves themselves are a transatlantic, terraqueous plant, circulating as rhizomatic fragments on oceanic currents, and living on the margins of salt- and fresh-water environments. They are the lynchpin of coastal biodiversity, functioning as spawning grounds and habitats for both coastal and oceanic creatures. The crab is the archetypical mangrove creature, scuttling among the roots and digging in the mud.

When Josué de Castro coined the term man-crab in the early 1930s, the city was in the midst of political turbulence. As land values increased, the city expanded, and anti-Communist politics intensified, pressure on amphibious space intensified. *Mocambos* became increasingly controversial in the 1920s among the state and elite (Barros, 1972; Lira, 1994). The national revolutionary moment of 1930 and the local, abortive, Communist revolution of 1935 heightened class tensions. The mangroves and *mocambos* came to be seen by the elite as threatening political spaces of potential class struggle, and by Communist organisers as fertile (if difficult) territory (Introduction in Fischer et al., 2014). The processes of incorporating these spaces into legible forms of control were underwritten by a fervent anti-Communism. Daniel Bezerra described the 1930s as “a period of great worry” for people living in the *mocambos*: “there was great pain and many tears” (1965, p. 44). With the instalment of the authoritarian Estado Novo regime in 1937, and its project of creating a “new man,” hygienist modernisation gathered speed. In July 1939, the proto-fascist administration (Julião, 1972; Lira, 1994) of Agamenon Magalhães, put in place by Getúlio Vargas’ repressive *Estado Novo*, launched the *Liga Social Contra o Mocambo* (Social League Against the Mocambo, LSCM). The League emerged out of a tellingly named “Crusade” against the *mocambos*. The LSCM exemplifies the “authoritarian thinking” (Chauí, 2011) of the *Estado Novo*; it denied political subjectivity to inhabitants as authoritarian state bureaucrats advanced programmes of urban modernisation (Pandolfi, 1984, pp. 66–67). The corporatist vision of society, in which certain groups of workers were to be embraced within an elite-led vision of the nation, was in this period butting up against rising working-class organisation. During the *Estado Novo*, in line with a conservative, positivist national discourse of “order and progress,” two of Magalhães’ priorities were the cleansing of public space and the promotion of Catholic religiosity (Almeida, 1998). The former involved the destruction of black and mixed race communities, and the latter involved oppression of Afro-Brazilian religious practices (Silva, 2008, p. 23). These underwrote a destructive urban policy (Fischer, 2014). Much of the LSCM’s rhetoric was ostensibly pro-worker; it recognised that many inhabitants of the *mocambos* were employed, and the limited building projects of new housing funded by the state and businesses were often named after the trade of the workers who they were built for. Yet the LSCM as urban policy fell far short of in fact providing new housing for the working class. The Communist *Folha do Povo* reported on the

threat and reality of evictions, and grassroots movements struggled against the destruction of their communities. The *Folha do Povo* called the LSCM “demagogic” and “fascist” (Anonymous, 1947, 1948). Rather than a genuine embrace of the need for proper housing for workers, the project was orientated around racial ordering.

Magalhães wrote a series of editorials arguing for urban cleansing in the *Folha da Manhã* newspaper:

The men of the Northeast look to the banks of the rivers and mangroves where a sad and miserable humanity lives, and think of the possibility of the resurrection of all of it, of being able to scratch out that vegetative and inferior life and replace it with a more dignified life through the transformation of the environment. The *mocambos* of Recife will come down. And there will rise another city: clean, fed, without children with distended stomachs, face down in the mud, catching crabs. (Magalhães, 1939b, n.p.)

The real “men of the Northeast” are contrasted to an inferior form of semi-humanity. Catching crabs is a racialised activity, associated with histories of slavery, as across the Northeast enslaved peoples relied on crustaceans for survival (Schwartz, 1985, p. 77). In recent forms this has been reclaimed in various ways, as catching crabs remains a form of subsistence with a dense cultural reference in the Northeast of Brazil, not only of racialised poverty and existing *quilombo* communities (Farfán-Santos, 2016, pp. 88–111), but cultural production and urban pride. In Magalhães' discourse, ecology, landscape, and racial hierarchy combine; mud and snarled roots and dirty, vegetative masses are tangled up in language. Magalhães characterised the people of the *mocambos* as vegetal and subhuman: “a submerged species of humanity” (1939e, n.p.), in contradiction with “*o novo homem*,” the “new man” that the *Estado Novo* explicitly sought to create in Brazil (Leite, 2010).

*Mocambos* were characterised as repellent, unhygienic, and dangerous: “the *mocambo* which repels. The *mocambo* which is the tomb of a race ... a sombre landscape of human misery ... which mutilates human energy and annuls work ... which is ‘a cell of social discontent’” (Magalhães, 1939d, n.p.). The LSCM couched its civilisational, modernising mission in the conjuncture of techno-scientific discourses of medicine and planning with clear eugenic tones (Dávila, 2003, pp. 32–39; Outtes, 1997). Hygienism drew on a bio-political conception of the body in urban space. Long part of the urban process in Recife (Outtes, 2003) and Brazil (Chalhoub, 1996), it marked the *mocambo*/mangrove as the target for the cleansing power of urban modernity. Germany and Richmond have recently argued that thinking with Brazilian *higienização* is a necessary amendment to debates over gentrification (Germany & Richmond, 2020). One of its pretexts has long been public health. Censuses were crucial to attempts to impose hygienist governance on the amphibious city (Ghertner, 2015, p. 159), and the LSCM commissioned a fresh census of the 45,000 *mocambos* in the city. They brought the *mocambos*/mangroves into being as objects of knowledge on behalf of the economic elite and local, national, and international capital. In the 1923 census in Recife, “of 39,026 dwellings surveyed, 51.1% were considered ‘deficient’ *mocambos*.” The census, for instance, was half funded by the State's Directory of Sanitation (Meade, 1997) and proceeded on the basis of zoning conducted by the service against Yellow Fever, continuing a history going back to the 17th century of the planning of the city emerging from the spatiality of disease (Outtes, 1997, p. 21). Public health was bound up with eugenics (Stepan, 1991) and clearing mangroves was a key tool of this hygienic drive (though ironically, the destruction of mangrove forests probably increased disease risks; Dean, 2008, p. 197).

For Patrick Wolfe, “race and place are inextricable” (2016, p. 16). Moving beyond this, Katherine McKittrick emphasises the “dimension of geography ... in order to call attention to the ways in which the black body often determines the ways in which the landscape around the black body is read” (2006, p. 4). Concurrently, certain landscapes have been imagined as white: we might think of Kelly Lytle Hernández's work on how turn of the 20th-century Los Angeles was produced as the “Aryan City of the Sun” (2014, p. 425). We can see the process of racialising landscape at work in projects that explicitly sought to destroy the *paisagem* – the landscape – of the *mocambos* among the mangroves and mud flats. This landscape was centrally connected to infrastructure: the decree of 1934 by Governor Novais Filho specifically banned *mocambos* within 200 metres of railway lines, tramways, and roads (Gominho, 2012, p. 61). Infrastructural space and the modernising visual aesthetic intersected. But for people living in the *mocambos*, life in the mud was to exist in a state of fundamentally contested humanity, cast as conditional, compromised, or deathly: an “inhuman geography” (McKittrick, 2013, p. 7). In the white elite's discourse of racial supremacy, the masses were not only “submerged” and animalistic but “vegetable.” They were seen with disgust (Fischer et al., 2014, pp. 18–22), as an “Arabian urbanism” (Marianno (filho), 1933), “an African village” within the modern city, and as the “*mocambos* of the monkeys” (Cavalcanti, 1979). This is part of a long Brazilian history of representing darker-skinned peoples and the urban poor as animals (Rocha, 2012). The first half of the 20th century saw a consolidation and crystallisation of eugenicist science and policy in Brazil. These were the decades of the *embranquecimento* of the Brazilian population through public policies of immigration, miscegenation, and



sterilisation (Stepan, 1991). Urban transformation, too, was aimed at whitening and Europeanising Brazilians (Meade, 1997; Skidmore, 2005, pp. 131–132).

This white supremacist ideology was inseparably a politics of nature. Magalhães wrote:

The idle life, the life that the income of the *mocambos* provides, is a life without restlessness and without greatness. It is a life of stagnant water. ... [that] generates in its breast the venom of larvae, which are the enemies of life. Enemies of life, as are the *mocambos* and the sub-soil of cities, where the polluted waters contaminate pure waters, which come from the deepest layers of the earth. (Magalhães, 1939c, n.p.)

Contamination here is inseparably about race – recalling Arruti, above – and about nature, and particularly the hermeneutics of water. The mangrove's liquid materiality is the root and branch of a racialisation of landscape. Thirty years earlier the influential engineer Saturnino Brito had in fact argued that the subsoil and waters of Recife, though in places toxic, had an undeserved reputation as intrinsically unhygienic (Brito, 1917, p. 14, 19). Gilberto Freyre also argued that the *mocambo* was in fact a healthy, well-ventilated architectural form, appropriate for the Northeastern climate (1937, p. 30). He in fact positioned himself against the processes of urban eradication led by the LSCM and the *Estado Novo*, arguing that the waters of Recife were healthy and positive, and that the crusade against them was misguided (Oliveira, 2011). Brito saw his role as a sanitary engineer as protecting and healing the relationship between the physical, moral, and environmental conditions of urban life (Brito, 1943, pp. 9–11). However, for Magalhães the science of nature was not as important as a necro-political racial ideology of nature. The obsessive repetition of “life” does not hide the fascination with death. He wrote to President Vargas seeking federal support for the LSCM:

Out of the physical conditions of the city of Recife – low-lying and invaded by the tides – originates its typical dwelling: the *mocambo*. ... To overcome the *mocambo* it is necessary first of all to modify the physical conditions which give origin to it, and it is necessary to do away with the low lands ... and the marshes which deform and make ugly the principal districts of the city. (1938, n.p.)

This is a determinist ideology and aesthetic of nature – marsh creates *mocambo* creates *mocambeiro* – to be rid of one, you must destroy the other (Marianno (filho), 1933).

A cultural and epistemological racialisation of nature is at work here. In his 1950 poem *O Cão Sem Plumagem* [The Dog Without Feathers] – an uncanny animalisation of the river Capibaribe – the Recife poet João Cabral do Melo Neto wrote that the river “opens out into flowers / poor and black / like black people” (Neto, 2011, p. 24). The mangrove's materiality is the root and branch of the racialisation of the mangrove landscape, which intimates belonging while producing blackness as part of nature. Gilberto Freyre used the same racist manoeuvre in *The Mocambo of the Northeast* (1936): the *mocambo* is hygienic because it is a direct extrusion of its inhabitants and their “natural” relation to the region's climate and ecology. Freyre “fixes African descendants in the northern Brazilian *terra* [land or earth]” (Isfahani-Hammond, 2008, p. 51). He relies on a racialisation of landscape and ecology to produce “a model for national identity that is both assimilationist and genetically ‘white’” (Isfahani-Hammond, 2008, p. 52). Magalhães' purifying vision connects with the incorporating lusotropicalism of Freyre, for whom the bodily relations between Europeans and African descendent people – including, infamously, through the white children of plantation owners having black “wet nurses,” and through sexual relations between young white “masters” and black domestic (formerly enslaved) servants – led to a tropical civilisation whose whiteness was predicated on a ghoulishly literal idea of incorporation. There is no contradiction when Magalhães sees *destruction* as transformation: the construction of Brazilian whiteness – in the city and the body – is premised on both absorbing and eradicating blackness.

#### 4 | **ATERRAMENTO: MAKING AND RESISTING THE RACIAL DIVISION OF NATURE**

Having seen, therefore, how the landscape and ecology of the city came to be associated with racial hierarchy, I want to turn now to how that ideology became material. Attempts to “cleanse” the city functioned through a distinct process: *aterramento*, the making of land. As a material transformation, *aterramento* can offer insights into “the interconnections between infrastructure, property investment, property destruction, white supremacy and biological/chemical/ecological reactions” (Heynen, 2016, p. 839). It is in the midst of the process of enforcing a division between land and water that the operation of the racial division of nature can be identified. As Vera Candiani argues, “drainage and desiccation works are

especially revealing in that they transform the very building blocks of ecology – land and water – and therefore fundamentally and irreversibly alter how humans will relate to nature” (2014, p. xvi). Or as 1990s *mangue beat* [mangrove beat] musicians Fred Zero Quatro and Renato Lins put it, “the fastest way also to obstruct and evacuate the soul of a city like Recife is to kill its rivers and fill up its estuaries” (quoted in Galinsky, 2002, p. 127).

The interface of land and water in Recife has been contested since the mid-17th century. The modern European – importantly, Dutch – city materialised on new, drained land (Melo, 1978, pp. 53–56). The Dutch, Josué de Castro argued, could “build almost in the water itself” (1954, p. 108). Land reclamation technologies were co-extensive with accumulation in both metropole and the colony (Mello, 1976, pp. 124–126; Radkau, 2009, pp. 53–56). Bezerra wrote that during evictions in the mangroves “the privileged classes ... expell[ed] the *caranguejos*, the *siris*<sup>1</sup> and the *mocambeiros*, without greater concern that of increasing their own wealth” (1965, p. 34). Yet the mangrove proved a challenge to modernising technologies. American-made drainage equipment blocked and snagged amid mangrove roots as urban visions were imposed on a recalcitrant ecology (Anonymous, 1940). The vigorous rhizomatic ecology of the mangrove, and the resistance of human populations, consistently got in the way of eugenic hygienism. Twentieth-century violence – social and natural, against ecology and community – continued the previous century's urbanisation: “making land, invading the mangroves and spilling blood over the marshlands of Recife” (Bezerra, 1965, p. 39).

I hesitate to translate *aterramento* as “land reclamation.” “Reclamation” occludes the initial amphibiousness of territory and presupposes a right to “reclaim” land from some state of lack, overriding the intrinsic right to exist of amphibious ecology or dwelling. It sees amphibious space as unpeopled, while it was populated and used. Not so much “reclaiming” land, *aterramento* created new kinds of landscape. Nevertheless, for Magalhães, adopting and misusing Josué de Castro's terms, it was the vital primary tool: “we must close the cycle of the crab, *aterrando* [earthing] the inundated areas and the marshes of the city” (Magalhães, 1939a, n.p.). In the same period, Mussolini's project to turn the “death-inducing swamp” of the Pontine Marshes into an ideal landscape similarly figured wet landscapes as degenerate, infertile wildernesses. As in Recife, environmental transformation was embedded in an authoritarian idea of modernity (Caprotti & Kaika, 2008, p. 620). *Aterramento* continued under different regimes, but each administration brought the same: “one road more, one marsh less in the landscape of the city” (Cavalcanti, 2008, p. 78). The destruction of amphibious space, as in Gandy's analysis of 20th-century New York, “enhance[d] the economic efficiency of urban space for capital investment” (2003, p. 37). It also sought to produce a pure, cleansed urban landscape: a white urban landscape.

*Aterramento* highlights the intersection of race, law, and political ecology within the dynamics of possession. When Josué de Castro wrote of the amphibious city that “in the mangrove, the land is no-one's, it is the tide's” (1959, p. 26) he was both right and wrong. Ownership was contested and muddy, but not absent. Enclosure was predicated on the production of dry space. The yearly reports of the LSCM include detailed reports of *aterramento*, listing the area covered in metres squared and – amphibiously – the volume of land produced in metres cubed (LSCM, 1944). Transforming land aimed to transform society.<sup>2</sup> Yet transformation did not even need to be material to release profits; control over space could equate to the material process of environmental transformation. It was “good business to make land from mangroves and divide it up, or even to divide up the mangroves without even making land” (Bezerra, 1965, p. 39). According to Bezerra, “the marshes of Recife, as marine lands, are the property of the Nation. Legally, they are under a regime of settlement and occupation.” If the lands are water, they are owned by the state, and if they are land, they can be private property. Bezerra notes that “the question of the dominion of the earth, as respects to its possession ... in the case of Brazil has its origins rooted in philosophical principles” (1965, p. 55). This takes us back to Marilena Chauí.

Enclosure divides space not only into who owns what, but who owns and who does not. As Zeiderman (2016) has argued in Buenaventura in Colombia, the socio-material conditions of the intertidal zone produce conditions of particular political intensity. In terraqueous space, enclosure divided the material world itself into land and water. This process of enclosure inhabits the division that racial thinking is itself predicated on. Patrick Wolfe has argued that communally held space – even the threat of it – has long been connected with the production of race, most strikingly in the USA where, through their “commitment to collective ownership ... the Indians were the original communist menace” (2016, p. 171). We can recall Brodwyn Fischer's characterisation of the *mocambos* as a site of “red menace,” the fear of *quilombos*, and the threat inherent in the animalisation of the amphibious landscape that Agamenon Magalhães consistently reiterates. In McKittrick's terms, “the connections between what are considered “real” or valuable forms of ownership are buttressed through racial codes that mark the black body as ungeographic” (2006, p. 4). Turning common mud into owned, dry land was a prerequisite for the *embranquecimento* [whitening] of urban space. Race and ownership are densely, geographically, connected:

Having ‘things’, owning lands, invading territories, possessing someone, are, in part, narratives of displacement that reward and value particular forms of conquest ... [this returns us to] the where of blackness, not just as it

is owned, but as black subjects participate in ownership. Black diasporic struggles can also be read, then, as geographic contests over discourses of ownership. (McKittrick, 2006, p. 3)

In its turn, the racialisation of the landscape of the urban mangroves was configured as a conflict over ownership that proceeded not only through a racial division of space, but of nature.

The ontologies and epistemologies of race that produced this division of nature were resisted. There are gaps in the archives of grassroots resistance, but we can turn to two black writers from the urban Northeast of Brazil, Beatriz Nascimento (1942–1995) and Francisco Solano Trindade (1908–1974). Nascimento was an activist, writer, and filmmaker. She grew up in another Northeastern coastal city, Sergipe, before moving to Rio de Janeiro. As well as being a key figure in the Brazilian black movement, in her work she investigated *quilombos* as socio-territorial spaces of liberation and insisted on the connection between emancipated blackness and transatlantic spiritual identification with ecologies and landscapes.

In her film, made with Raquel Gerber, Nascimento says that “the *quilombo* is a geographical space, where man can feel the ocean.” She speaks over Caetano Veloso's song *Terra*, and images of mangroves, rivers, riverbeds, coastlines, and a Brazilian urban landscape. For Nascimento, the *quilombo* is tied to a telluric conceptualisation of identity: “black people are connected to the earth, the people who know the earth most deeply ... the colour of mud, the colour of earth” (Gerber & Nascimento, 2008, pp. 36.01–36.55). As well as the complex work of situating Nascimento's ideas in histories of black radicalism, there is a vital distinction to be made here between actually existing historical *quilombos*, recent struggles over *quilombola* identity, and the mobilisation of the *quilombo* as a symbol of the black struggle in Brazil (Leite, 2015). Yet for Nascimento, the *quilombo* was the symbol for a liberated space that was both territorial and spatially extended (Smith, 2016). It is not necessarily a communally owned space, but it lies beyond mechanisms of colonial domination, resists enclosure, and re-organises social relations beyond the figure of the possessive individual. The *quilombo* is a territory achieved through an escape from the bounds of colonial society and racial supremacy (Ratts, 2007). It is an escape that is angled inwards, as well as outwards: into the interior of the Latin American continent (Palmares), out to its edges (beaches, mangroves, urban peripheries), and across transatlantic space (towards Angola). This is not to say that such geographies of escape are easily legible in the archival traces of the destruction of Recife's urban mangroves. But we can identify forms of communal life in the blurry interstices of muddy forms of ownership. We can see the *quilombo* among the *mocambos*. As McKittrick puts it, “a black sense of place might not be read as ... a truth-telling conceptual device [rather it] ... evidence [s] protean plantation futures as spaces of encounter that hold in them useful anti-colonial practices and narratives” (2011, p. 951). When Josué de Castro wrote that “*no mangue, o terreno é de ninguém. É da maré*” [in the mangrove, the land is no one's, it is the tide's], he was articulating a space and ecology that gestures beyond ownership. A territory defined by an ecology that resists the normative modes of spatial division and enclosure, which are inextricably bound up with the racial dynamics of Brazilian modernity.

Francisco Solano Trindade was a black poet and activist from Recife involved in the founding of the *Frente Negra Pernambucana* [The Pernambucan Black Front] in the 1930s. His most famous poem, “*tem gente com fome*” [hungry people] articulates a geography of Rio de Janeiro<sup>3</sup> as a metropolis spatially defined by injustice. The poetic voice rides an urban train speaking the incantatory refrain of the title. As Josué de Castro attested in his seminal *As Condições de Vida das Classes Operárias do Recife* [The Conditions of Life of the Working Classes of Recife] (1935), the same urban geography of hunger applied in the Northeast. The poem I take as the epigraph of this paper shows Trindade drawing on Afro-Brazilian traditions, urban cultural dynamism, and class struggle. It draws autobiographically on his time as a poet and organiser in Recife. Against eugenicist hygienism, Trindade's poem re-peoples the streets of downtown Recife – *Rua do Imperador* – not only with black people, but with solidarity and political resistance. I bring Nascimento and Trindade in not to try, here, to fully articulate their particular, and different, characterisation of blackness within the wide framework of debates over race in Brazil in general and the Northeast of Brazil in particular (see for instance Perry, 2013; Pinho, 2010). Rather, I bring them in to emphasise the absolute contingency of the white supremacist epistemology of nature which played out in the destruction of Recife's urban mangroves. Where for Melo Neto, Freyre, or Magalhães the connection between race and landscape is biological and aesthetic, for Nascimento and Trindade the geographies of blackness run through political resistance and socio-economic history.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The production of clean and healthy urban environments is, and has long been, crucial to black and indigenous people in urban Brazil. As Perry puts it, “black neighbourhoods desire clean urban spaces that include black people rather than exclude them” (2013, p. 159). Wet, littoral territories are laced with spiritual associations, as well as spatial amenities and

economic advantages. In particular, “the sea, specifically its relationship to African cosmologies, yields an indispensable source of spiritual, material, and political nourishment in the lives of black women in Bahia” (Perry, 2013, p. 160). To defend communities living in “amphibious” sites is to demand environmental justice and infrastructure that enables healthy urban environments and high standards of infrastructural and service provision. None of that necessitates the destruction of amphibious ecologies and landscapes. This, indeed, was an argument that Josué de Castro made in 1936. In the heated debate about what to do about the *mocambos*, he wrote, “in my view, the best solution at the moment for the problem of the *mocambos*, is concern ourselves with other things and not mess with the *mocambos*” (1936). It is to the processes that drive social, ecological, and spatial injustice that we should turn.

Recife's processes of urban dispossession and ecological and social cleansing were embedded in a historically and geographically specific, exclusionary conflation of race and nature, filtered through ideas of political authoritarianism, nationhood, and purity. The destruction of Recife's mangroves and *mocambos* was not an isolated form of urban hygienism. This racial division of nature – in alliance with, bound up with, a racial division of space – facilitated the production of specialised white supremacy, and what Clyde Woods called “racially defined zones of destruction” (2002, p. 63). These processes took place through a racial division of nature embedded in Brazilian concepts of nature as nation, global flows of colonial modernity, and a wider historical geography of colonialism and racial capitalism. In a society built on, and still expanding through, the exploitation of racialised people and the ransacking of nature, the racial division of nature remains at work. In Brazil, as elsewhere, anti-racism and political ecology are necessary allies.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data were produced for this paper.

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## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Species of mangrove-dwelling crab.

<sup>2</sup> *Mocambeiros* often made land themselves (Gominho, 2012, p. 15), using techniques arguably brought along slave routes (Carney & Voeks, 2003). Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities continue to inhabit and make land in mangroves and deltas (Farfán-Santos, 2016; Fortin, 2014). The land produced by *mocambeiros* was predominately use value; for the state, *aterramento* made land as exchange value. Law and property remain central to peripheral urbanisation in Brazil. Ermínia Maricato, for example, has long argued that land law in Brazil is applied arbitrarily, unevenly, and partially (Maricato, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond places the poem in Recife. However, like many Northeasterners, Trindade spent much of his life in Rio de Janeiro and the poem is set there. As Ney Matogrosso's interpretation makes clear, it is a Rio trainline Trindade voices: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5FUX3e089I>

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