Racialized land tenure and the colonial present: Political ecologies of dispossession in Northeast Brazil

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Abstract
The article introduces the concept of racialized land tenure to illuminate how colonial land governance systems in Brazil continue to shape dispossession and ecological degradation in post-colonial contexts. Drawing from historical and ethnographic research conducted in 2018, 2020, and 2021 in the Afro-Brazilian coastal communities of Cabo de Santo Agostinho and Ipojuca, we trace how residents—many of whom have lived as *posseiros* (squatters) on former plantation lands for generations—have been displaced by the expansion of the Suape Port Industrial Complex. While framed as development, the port's expansion has resulted in the forced removal of over 26,000 people, enclosure of the commons, and the criminalization of subsistence practices. This violence reflects the enduring logic of racialized land tenure: a territorial regime that prioritizes capital accumulation while excluding Afro-descendant communities from land rights, environmental access, and political recognition. Situating this case within Latin American political ecology, the article contributes to the field's historical and decolonial turn by showing how racialized land governance is foundational to contemporary environmental injustices. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing postcolonial socio-environmental conflict, and for envisioning more reparative political ecologies grounded in Afro-descendant territorial epistemologies.

Keywords: Race, land tenure, Brazil, Pernambuco, African Diaspora, development

Résumé
Cet article présente le concept de propriété foncière racialisée afin d'expliquer comment les systèmes coloniaux de gouvernance foncière au Brésil continuent d'influencer la dépossession et la dégradation écologique dans les contextes postcoloniaux. En nous appuyant sur des recherches historiques et ethnographiques menées en 2018, 2020 et 2021 dans les communautés côtières afro-brésiliennes de Cabo de Santo Agostinho et d'Ipojuca, nous retraçons comment les habitants, dont beaucoup vivent depuis des générations comme *posseiros* (squatteurs) sur d'anciennes terres agricoles, ont été déplacés par l'expansion du complexe industriel portuaire de Suape. Présentée comme un projet de développement, l'expansion du port a entraîné le déplacement forcé de plus de 26 000 personnes, l'enclosure des biens communs et la criminalisation des pratiques de subsistance. Cette violence reflète la logique persistante de la propriété foncière racialisée: un régime territorial qui privilégie l'accumulation de capital tout en excluant les communautés d'ascendance africaine des droits fonciers, de l'accès à l'environnement et de la reconnaissance politique. En situant ce cas dans le contexte de l'écologie politique latino-américaine, cet article contribue au tournant historique et décolonial de ce domaine en montrant comment la gouvernance foncière racialisée est à la base des injustices environnementales contemporaines. Il est essentiel

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de comprendre ces dynamiques pour analyser les conflits socio-environnementaux postcoloniaux et envisager des écologies politiques plus réparatrices, fondées sur les épistémologies territoriales des Afro-descendants.
Mots-clés: Race, régime foncier, Brésil, Pernambuco, diaspora africaine, développement

Resumo

Esta pesquisa introduz o conceito de posse de terra racializada para iluminar como os sistemas coloniais de governança fundiária no Brasil continuam a moldar a desapropriação e a degradação ecológica em contextos pós-coloniais. Com base em pesquisas históricas e etnográficas realizadas em 2018, 2020 e 2021 nas comunidades costeiras afro-brasileiras do Cabo de Santo Agostinho e Ipojuca, o artigo traça como os moradores — muitos dos quais viveram como posseiros em antigas terras de plantações por gerações — foram deslocados pela expansão do Complexo Industrial Portuário de Suape. Embora enquadrada como desenvolvimento, a expansão do porto resultou na remoção forçada de mais de 26.000 pessoas, no cercamento de bens comuns e na criminalização de práticas de subsistência. Argumentamos que essa violência não é anômala, mas reflete a lógica persistente da posse de terra racializada: um regime territorial que prioriza a acumulação de capital, enquanto exclui comunidades afrodescendentes dos direitos à terra, do acesso ambiental e do reconhecimento político. Ao situar este caso na ecologia política latino-americana, o artigo contribui para a guinada histórica e descolonial do campo, ao mostrar como a governança racializada da terra é fundamental para as injustiças ambientais contemporâneas. Compreender essa dinâmica é essencial para analisar o conflito socioambiental pós-colonial e para vislumbrar ecologias políticas mais reparadoras, fundamentadas em epistemologias territoriais afrodescendentes.
Palavras-chave: Raça, posse da terra, Brasil, Pernambuco, Diáspora Africana, desenvolvimento

1. Introduction: Continual loss

In the early 2000s, Brazil was widely considered a promising young democracy with forward-thinking social and environmental programs (Bearak, 2004; Rubin, 2002; Smith, 2003). However, in recent years, the country has witnessed the enclosure and destruction of commons (Maia, 2021), escalating racial and economic disparities (Bledsoe, 2019; Silva & Larkins, 2019), and intensifying territorial disputes (Menezes & Barbosa Jr., 2021), leading many to question whether Brazil's 'precarious democracy' is unraveling (Jung *et al*., 2020). Some scholars have attributed these tensions to President Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) and his followers (Hita & Gledhill, 2019; Pompeia, 2025; Silva & Larkins, 2019). While Bolsonaro's administration undeniably intensified land conflicts and undermined environmental protections (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Rezende *et al*., 2024), we argue that his government was only the most recent manifestation of a much longer historical arc—one rooted in centuries of racialized land tenure and colonial dispossession.

This article introduces the concept of *racialized land tenure* to analyze how colonial ideologies have shaped enduring systems of land access, use, and exclusion in Brazil. These systems not only structure racial hierarchies and material inequalities but also underpin contemporary socio-environmental conflicts. We develop this concept in dialogue with Latin American political ecology (LAPE), drawing particularly on the work of Héctor Alimonda, Eduardo Gudynas, Maristella Svampa, Germán Palacio, and Guillermo Herrera. These scholars emphasize how colonial resource regimes—through the *coloniality of nature*—have produced enduring social and ecological injustices. We position racialized land tenure as a crucial yet underdeveloped analytic within LAPE for understanding the spatial and political organization of racial capitalism in postcolonial states like Brazil.

Our case study focuses on Afro-Brazilian "traditional communities"[2] threatened by the Suape Port Industrial Complex (Complexo Industrial Portuário de Suape, or CIPS), a mega-development project situated

[2] In Brazil, 'traditional communities' (*povos tradicionais*) are defined as "culturally differentiated groups that recognize themselves as such, that have their own form of social organization, that occupy and use territories and natural resources as a condition for their cultural social, religious, and ancestral reproduction, using knowledge, innovations, and practices generated and transmitted by tradition" (Ministério do Meio-Ambiente, n.d.). This term includes formal Quilombo and Indigenous communities, as well as those that lack recognition but practice natural-resource-based livelihoods.

in the coastal region of Zona da Mata, in the Northeastern state of Pernambuco. This region has cultivated, processed, and exported sugarcane since the 16th century (Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Rogers, 2010; Wolford, 2010) and remains structured by legacies of plantation capitalism. Today, the majority of residents are Black and mixed-race descendants of enslaved peoples brought to the region for plantation labor (Andrade 1989; Buarque, 2018; Micaelo, 2014). Many live as *posseiros*—untitled squatters—on abandoned sugarcane plantation lands, engaging in artisanal fishing and small-scale agriculture. These communities are increasingly dispossessed by industrial development tied to neo-developmentalist economic policies initiated under the Workers' Party (PT) governments from 2003 to 2016 and accelerated under Bolsonaro (DHESCA, 2018; Santos *et al*., 2019; Sobreira, 2021).

To explore the socio-ecological legacies of racialized land tenure, we draw on archival and ethnographic research, including 40 qualitative interviews conducted between 2018 and 2021 with plantation workers, fishers, *marisqueiras* (shellfish collectors), small farmers, and other residents of Cabo de Santo Agostinho and Ipojuca. We analyze how Suape's expansion—like other port megaprojects in Pecém, Açu, and Sudeste—has resulted in the violent expropriation of over 26,000 Afro-descendant people from their ancestral territories, destroyed coastal ecosystems, and enclosed traditional commons. These processes have taken place through a logic that views untitled Black rural communities as disposable obstacles to industrial growth—echoing the long-standing colonial designation of such territories as *terra nullius*.

We argue that understanding contemporary land conflicts in Brazil requires historicizing how race has long structured land governance—who is entitled to own, use, or steward territory. By conceptualizing racialized land tenure as a spatial expression of coloniality, we illuminate how plantation logics have migrated into modern infrastructure projects, sustaining cycles of ecological degradation and economic exclusion. The case of Suape reveals that racialized dispossession is not an exception but a norm—structured and legitimated by the Brazilian state across regimes and development paradigms.

The article proceeds as follows: first, we outline the connections between colonial racial ideologies and land tenure in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Second, we examine the historical political ecologies of race and land tenure in Northeast Brazil, demonstrating how racial logics shaped the Portuguese *sesmaria* land-granting system and later the 1850 Lei de Terras, which formally excluded Black and Indigenous people from land ownership. Third, we consider the limitations of agrarian reform and constitutional land rights in redressing historical inequalities. We then turn to ethnographic evidence from Cabo and Ipojuca to show how Afro-Brazilian and mixed-race traditional communities remain disproportionately vulnerable to expropriation, ecological degradation, and state-backed violence. In conclusion, we suggest that racialized land tenure is a vital analytic for future political ecology research in postcolonial and racially stratified societies.

2. Colonial logics and the plantation system

Understanding the extent of racial inequities in Brazil requires historicizing how colonial ideologies shaped enduring systems of land access and governance (Bispo, 2015; Gonzalez, 2019; Martins, 2010; Perry, 2013). Across Latin America, plantations were racial institutions, engineered to consolidate European control over natural resources by subordinating Indigenous and African labor through violence, surveillance, and spatial exclusion (Mignolo, 2010; Mollett & Faria, 2013; Quijano, 2010; Sundberg, 2008; Tomich, 2011). This racially organized access to land and labor laid the foundation for what has been termed racial capitalism—an economic model in which capital accumulation depends on racialized labor hierarchies and territorial expropriation (Robinson, 2000; Maia, 2021). Colonizers enforced a European notion of "appropriate" resource use that cast Indigenous and Afro-descendant practices as unproductive or illegitimate (Carneiro, 2011; McKittrick, 2013; Sundberg, 2008). These epistemologies informed formal land governance systems—such as Brazil's *sesmaria* land grants—that restricted ownership to white Europeans while enslaving non-white populations (Ferraz, 2008). The imposition of these frameworks not only displaced people from land but also redefined land itself as a racialized and commodified object (McKittrick, 2006; Mollett & Faria, 2013; Sundberg, 2008). The notion of racialized land tenure thus refers to legal, spatial, and ideological systems that govern land through racial logics—excluding certain populations from ownership, participation, and decision-making.

We elaborate this concept in dialogue with Latin American political ecology (LAPE), especially the contributions of Alimonda (2015, 2019), Svampa (2012, 2015), Gudynas (2018), Palacio (2012a, 2012b), and Herrera (2003). These thinkers argue that enduring territorial conflicts must be understood as legacies of colonial domination—what Alimonda (2019) terms the coloniality of nature—whereby European systems of land control continue to shape political, ecological, and social structures. Rather than viewing the environment as external to political history, LAPE centers how natural landscapes are co-produced through colonial hierarchies and extractive imperatives (Alimonda, 2015; Gudynas, 2018a; Svampa, 2015, 2019).

As Palacio (2012a) and Herrera (2003) emphasize, historical political ecology is indispensable for understanding these processes. Without situating current territorial disputes in a longue durée analysis of colonial violence, scholarship risks reproducing the very abstraction that enables dispossession (ibid.). Our study contributes to this approach by demonstrating how the plantation as a spatial form and a political logic persists today through projects like the Suape Port Complex. Racialized land tenure is not simply a residue of past governance; it is a system actively reconfigured by contemporary development agendas that rely on the same territorial logics: concentration, exclusion, and commodification.

The continuity of these patterns is especially evident in Brazil, where colonial land systems transitioned seamlessly into modern commodity dependency (Cooney, 2016; Heredia *et al*., 2010). As Cooney (2016) and Svampa (2015) note, Latin American economies have been reprimarized—that is, shifted back toward raw material exportation—even under so-called progressive regimes. This 'commodities consensus' has justified massive land grabs and infrastructural megaprojects, leading to the enclosure of commons, degradation of ecosystems, and renewed violence against traditional communities (Gudynas, 2018a; Oliveira, 2015; Svampa, 2015). Brazil's Workers' Party governments—despite their social policies—endorsed neo-developmentalist agendas that deepened extractive frontiers in the name of economic growth (Paula *et al*. 2020; Pereira, 2013; Saad-Filho, 2020).

Within this context, the Suape Port Complex is not an anomaly but a paradigmatic example. Like ports in Pecém, Açu, and Sudeste (among others), Suape was expanded under the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC, Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento) and supported by alliances between the state and agribusiness. These projects share a common logic: displacing Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities deemed obstacles to national economic development. The designation of these communities as *posseiros* or "squatters" on *terra nullius* is a direct legacy of colonial racial geography—a spatial regime in which Black and Indigenous presence on land is rendered invisible or illegitimate unless backed by formal titles (McKittrick, 2013; Farfán-Santos, 2015).

Here, Black epistemologies provide an essential counterpoint. As Nego Bispo argues, "we extract life from the earth, they expropriate the earth from life" (Bispo, 2015, 17). This perspective reframes land not as a commodity but as a life-giving intergenerational responsibility (Bispo, 2015). Similarly, Pernambuco Quilombo[3] leader Givânia Silva has publicly critiqued both state neglect and formal recognition processes that fail to materialize in territorial protections (Ramón, 2022). Rather than merely quoting these thinkers, our analysis builds on their worldviews to challenge the deep ontological rift between Afro-Brazilian territoriality and the extractive capitalist state (Gudynas, 2018b). Their insights expose not only the legal failures of recognition but the epistemic violence embedded in how development projects define, value, and appropriate territory (ibid.).

By placing racialized land tenure at the center of our analysis, we argue that current expropriations—like those in Cabo and Ipojuca—are not isolated or incidental. They are structured by centuries-old plantation logics (McKittrick, 2013) that continue to govern land, labor, and development in Brazil. Situating these practices within historical political ecology helps illuminate how colonial violence becomes modern policy, how dispossession is routinized through legal and economic rationalities, and how spatial and racial hierarchies are continually reproduced under the banner of progress.

[3] Quilombo broadly refers to African-descendent communities initially comprised of individuals who escaped slavery and formed organized settlements (Farfán-Santos 2015). Today they often (though not always) live off the land and have shared cultural traditions.

3. Terra Nullius: Political ecologies of racialized land tenure in Brazil

This section examines how the logic of terra nullius has structured the racialized production of space and land tenure in what is now known as Pernambuco, from colonization to the present. Drawing on political ecology, Black geographies, and historical analysis, we argue that modern Brazilian territorial governance—whether under colonial, imperial, or republican regimes—rests on a foundational erasure of the presence of Black and Indigenous peoples. Rather than offering a straightforward chronology, the subsections that follow excavate key moments when land law, political authority, and racial ideology converged to reinforce the spatial dispossession of racialized communities in Cabo de Santo Agostinho and Ipojuca. By framing these processes as political ecologies of racialized land tenure, we emphasize how material environments, political and legal frameworks, and racial hierarchies have been mutually constitutive across historical eras.

The Portuguese land-granting system: Sesmarias *and the foundations of racialized land tenure*

The Portuguese *sesmaria* system formalized a regime of racialized land tenure by granting vast swathes of land to white European settlers while violently displacing Indigenous peoples. This system enshrined a legal fiction of *terra nullius*, portraying cultivated and inhabited Indigenous lands as vacant and available for donation (Rapoport Delegation, 2008). Through these land grants, colonial legal structures naturalized territorial conquest and encoded racial hierarchy into the emerging plantation economy. What follows traces how this legal-spatial framework was implemented in Pernambuco, with a focus on Cabo de Santo Agostinho and Ipojuca, which are emblematic of this enduring political ecology of racial exclusion.

When Pedro Álvares Cabral landed in Northeast Brazil (Figure 1) in 1500, the Portuguese already had extensive sugarcane cultivation from "offshoring" sugar production in the Atlantic Islands since 1433 (Rogers, 2010). In 1534, Dom João III divvied Brazil into 15 captaincies and granted predominantly white Portuguese gentry land and executive privileges (Taylor, 1978, 17). Novo Lusitânia—eventually named Pernambuco in 1575—was once the largest captaincy in colonial Brazil, and its *donatário* (or land grantee) was the Portuguese nobleman Duarte Coelho (Dutra, 1973). The captaincy stretched along the coast of Brazil, starting just south of Cabo de Santo Agostinho and reaching present-day Alagoas (Ferraz, 2008). The Portuguese crown expected Coelho to conquer the donated territories by engaging in warfare with the Indigenous communities residing within them (Ferraz, 2008, 61). The land grants gave the captains judicial, administrative, and political powers, and the grantees were expected to administer justice within the captaincy and collect rents for the Portuguese crown (ibid.). The donatários received "personal use of 20 percent of the land, 50 percent of the value of extracted products, and civil jurisdiction within specified limits" (Taylor, 1978, 17).

In 1534, King Dom João III authorized the Portuguese to distribute land to other settlers through the *sesmaria* system. The *sesmaria* system was a racialized land tenure system where lands (presumed 'terra nullius') were "donated" to white European settlers, who used the land to establish sugar plantations (Dabat, 2007; Ferraz, 2008). Coelho distributed the land to white noblemen and wealthy European families who planned to develop sugarcane plantations and militias (Ferraz, 2008, 64). The captain brought these families to the captaincy through enticing offers of marriage within the parentage of *donatário* and a *sesmaria* to establish sugarcane plantations or pursue military campaigns to capture and enslave Indigenous peoples (ibid). In the 16th century, bartering with populations for plantation labor devolved into enslaving people for sugar production (Andrade, 1989; Dabat, 2011).

Like other areas in the captaincy, the *sesmaria* system in Cabo began with violent military campaigns against Indigenous groups, followed by Coelho "donating" the land to Portuguese military officers to establish sugarcane plantations (Dabat, 2007; Ferraz, 2008). Portuguese campaigns in Cabo technically predated even Coelho, as a Portuguese commander had claimed the land for the crown as early as 1521 (Ferraz, 2008, 67). The Portuguese eventually launched two violent military campaigns against Indigenous peoples, conquering present-day Cabo de Santo Agostinho between 1560 and 1571. After military conquest, Coelho distributed land through *sesmarias* to generate wealth via sugarcane plantations (ibid.). Coelho ensured the first recipients of the *sesmarias* territory were the conquistadors who helped him defeat Indigenous tribes, and by 1573, the region was already administratively organized around sugarcane production (Ferraz, 2008, 62). By the 1570s, around

700 Portuguese families lived in the Pernambuco captaincy; each sugarcane plantation had 20-30 laborers and between 4,000-5,000 enslaved Indigenous and African peoples residing within the settler territory (ibid.).

Figure 11: Brazil (top) and Pernambuco (bottom), highlighting Cabo de Santo Agostinho, Ipojuca, and the Suape Port Complex. Created by Shelly Annette Biesel.

Brutal slavery characterized much of the 17th and 18th centuries, in which the planter class benefited from violent, racially discriminatory land tenure systems of the previous century (Dabat, 2007). Land grants in Pernambuco were "the basis of power" from which the planter class exercised "nearly absolute" political control (Eisenberg, 1974, 134). As sugarcane production generated more wealth, new villages and settlements emerged, accompanied by an increasing number of plantations. Ipojuca was established with a *sesmaria* at the beginning of the 17th century, with the founding families continuing the local tradition of establishing sugarcane plantations (Ferraz, 2008). In the early 17th century, northeast Brazil experienced an extensive sugar boom that did not subside during Dutch colonization between 1630 and 1654; its popularity was related to an insatiable European market for sugar (Mintz, 1985; Rogers, 2010).

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Portuguese continued to import thousands of enslaved Africans annually to work on cane plantations (Eltis & Richardson, 2010). Conservative estimates of the number of enslaved people who journeyed through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade to Pernambuco to be around 818,000 individuals (ibid.).[4] Competition from Caribbean producers contributed to a decline in sugar production at the turn of the 18th century; nevertheless, Pernambuco's planters did not abandon sugar as their primary export crop (Rogers, 2010).

The racial logics embedded in the *sesmaria* system laid the foundation for modern exclusionary land regimes. These included the 1850 Lei de Terras, which explicitly prohibited land acquisition by formerly enslaved people and Indigenous groups, and would later support the categorization of landless Afro-descendant communities as "squatters" (see next section) (Rapaport Delegation, 2008; Reydon *et al*., 2015; Silva, 2015). While the *sesmaria* system was eventually formally abolished, its core structure—racialized access to land justified through colonial violence—has persisted through successive legal instruments (ibid.).

Abolition and the maintenance of social and material inequities

> Abolition is told as something that brought only benefits to Blacks, when in fact, the way in which abolition was executed left Blacks on the street, homeless and landless. That remains so. — Givânia Maria da Silva, Pernambuco Quilombo member and Executive Director of the National Coordination of Articulation of Black Rural Quilombos[5]

Brazilian abolition overwhelmingly failed to redress the deep land inequities entrenched over centuries of plantation slavery (Dabat, 2007; Perry, 2013). In Northeast Brazil, more than 240 years of reliance on enslaved African labor were followed by a "transitional stage lasting nearly 80 years," during which profound wealth disparities between white landed elites (*latifúndia*) and landless Afro-descendant populations remained largely intact (Dabat, 2011; Taylor 1978, 27). A key legal mechanism of this continuity was the Lei de Terras of 1850, enacted nearly four decades before the formal end of slavery (Reydon *et al*., 2015; Silva, 2015). While the law formally ended the *sesmaria* system, it replaced it with a private property regime that only deepened exclusion (Rapaport Delegation, 2008). Developed by elite landowners and sugar planters, the law prohibited land claims through occupation, blocking access for Afro-Brazilians and Indigenous peoples (Rapoport Delegation, 2008; Reydon *et al*., 2015; Silva, 2015). As Martins (2010) and Silva (2015) argue, this law ensured that formerly enslaved persons and incoming European immigrants alike would remain economically dependent on landholding elites. Martins (2010) called this enduring condition the "captivity of the land." By design, the land market became even more concentrated, exacerbating historical disparities and legally barring marginalized communities from territorial restitution (Rapoport Delegation, 2008, 12; Martins, 2010).

Although the slave trade ended in 1850, slavery itself persisted in Brazil until the Lei Áurea (Golden Law) of 1888. As in the United States, abolition was not accompanied by any comprehensive land reform or material reparations (Dabat, 2011; Miles, 2018). Sugar plantations in Pernambuco remained intact, sustained by land tenure systems like the *morada* system, in which laborers were permitted small subsistence plots in exchange for continued plantation work (Dabat, 2007; 2011). These informal arrangements provided no legal claim to land and tethered workers to the estates of *latifúndio* elites—fulfilling the original intent of the 1850 law (ibid.).

By the mid-20th century, Pernambuco's plantation economy and racialized land tenure regime remained largely unchallenged, fueling rural unrest (Galileia, 2017; Rogers, 2010). In response, the Peasant Leagues (*ligas camponesas*)—organized by the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) and rural workers' movements between 1945 and 1947—emerged to contest the state's protection of sugar capital over the lives of rural laborers (Buarque, 2018; Scheper-Hughes, 1992). These leagues demanded radical agrarian reform and a more equitable

[4] To put this in perspective, the number of enslaved people forced to journey across the Trans-Atlantic slave trade to the United States is estimated at 387,000 (Eltis & Richardson, 2010).

[5] Quoted from Da Silva's interview in National Geographic (Ramón, 2022).

land distribution. In 1955, a new generation of activists occupied the Galiléia plantation in the Zona da Mata, reviving the symbolism and urgency of the earlier movements (Galiléia, 2017). However, the 1964 military coup backed by the USA brought these efforts to a halt. The dictatorship (1964–1985) criminalized rural organizing, dismantled reform momentum, and reinforced elite control over Brazil's land markets (Alvarez, 1990; Martins, 1984). Despite democratization in the 1980s, the state's core land tenure architecture – and its racial logics – remained largely unchanged.

The shortcomings of agrarian reform and constitutional land rights

In many ways, Brazil's repeated efforts at agrarian reform—and later, constitutional recognition of land rights—have failed to dismantle the territorial inequalities produced by centuries of racialized land tenure in Cabo de Santo Agostinho and Ipojuca. During the military dictatorship (1964–1985), the state pursued what Welch (2011) calls a "depoliticized version of agrarian reform," designed less to address historical land injustice than to modernize agriculture and industrialize the countryside (p. 30). The regime established the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) in 1970, with the stated goal of resolving rural land inequality. However, its efforts focused on relocating landless peasants to Amazonian frontier zones, not on redistributing land in historically unequal regions like the Northeast (ibid.). At the same time, agrarian reform policies subsidized agro-industrial modernization, including infrastructure development, chemical inputs, and mechanized equipment (Martins, 1984). These reforms were not redistributive, they were extractive.

In Pernambuco, this industrial turn converged with elite-led infrastructure planning. Mayor Eraldo Gueiros Leite (1971–1975)—a former state prosecutor during the dictatorship—initiated plans for the Suape Port Industrial Complex (CIPS, in Portuguese) to optimize sugar export logistics (SUAPE, 2020). Under the guise of agrarian reform, CIPS exemplified how military infrastructure policy often displaced the rural populations it claimed to assist. The dictatorship's conflicting aims—expanding agro-industrial development while resettling landless workers—ultimately spurred mass rural-to-urban migration throughout the 1960s–1980s (Alvarez, 1990; Welch, 2011).

The return to democracy in 1985 brought renewed political pressure from rural social movements. Groups like the Landless Workers Movement (MST) pushed for socialist agrarian reform to be enshrined in the 1988 Constitution (Micaelo, 2014). While the constitution formally recognized the land rights of Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities (Farfán-Santos 2015), its language was narrow and ambiguous. Redistribution was limited to specific conditions, and the definition of land rights beneficiaries remained contested (Welch, 2011).

Despite constitutional guarantees, implementation has been weak (Rapaport Delegation, 2008). More than 30 years later, "less than 10 percent" of Afro-descendant communities have received legal protection from the state (Ramón, 2022, 7). In Cabo and Ipojuca, communities lacking official recognition as Quilombos are often designated *posseiros* and remain vulnerable to expropriation.[6]

During his 1989 campaign, a Worker's Party (PT, in Portuguese) candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (PT) promised a "radical definition of agrarian reform" aimed at confronting structural inequality between landed elites and landless workers (Welch 2011, 27). His government advanced a vision of "neo" or "social developmentalism"—economic growth tied to social and environmental objectives (Paula *et al*., 2020; Pereira, 2013). Yet in practice, the Lula and Rousseff administrations reproduced the contradictions of earlier regimes (ibid.). Brazil's export economy remained dependent on commodities, forcing the PT to court alliances with agribusiness and construction interests (Saad-Filho, 2020). The Growth Acceleration Program (PAC, in Portuguese) became the central vehicle for this agenda, delivering major state investments in industrial infrastructure, including mega-developments (Marquetti *et al*., 2019). Among the beneficiaries was the Suape Port Industrial Complex (hereafter CIPS), which was transformed from a small port into a 13,500 hectare major

[6] Expropriation—the act of dispossessing people from the territories in which they inhabit—happens when the "loss of land occur[s] against the individual's or community's will and undermine[s] their capacity for subsistence" (Federici 2004, 68). This often transpires through using violent or coercive measures to enclose common-use land and designate it private property (ibid).

industrial hub under PAC and PAC-2. New infrastructure included the Alagoas-Pernambuco and Pilar-Ipojuca pipelines and the Abreu e Lima oil refinery, completed in 2014 (PETROBRAS, n.d.).

By 2016, CIPS housed more than 100 industries and had become a key node of national trade, partially funded and managed by the Brazilian state (Lazerri, 2017; Ministério da Infraestrutura, 2022). Yet this expansion came at the cost of displacing traditional communities whose lands were deemed untitled or unproductive. The PT's developmentalist agenda, like its authoritarian predecessors, clashed with the territorial claims of frontline communities. In Cabo and Ipojuca, racialized land tenure systems were not dismantled—they were simply retooled in the language of modernization and export-led growth.

Austerity and Authoritarianism

The PT's concessions to unsustainable megaprojects and agribusiness were central to its political unraveling. Dilma Rousseff's administration (2011–2016) initially attempted to stimulate growth through state-led investment, offering tax breaks and subsidies to major corporations and financial institutions (Bastos, 2017; Marquetti *et al*., 2019). However, the global financial crisis and rising fiscal deficits forced Rousseff into a neoliberal turn during her second term. She reversed course, implementing austerity measures and cutting subsidies, which alienated corporate allies—including the powerful Federation of Industries of São Paulo (FIESP) (Bastos, 2017). Her failure to appease different sectors of Brazil's bourgeoisie opened the door for a broader elite consensus around impeachment (ibid.). The Lava Jato (Car Wash) corruption scandal provided the pretext for delegitimizing Rousseff's government, despite a lack of direct evidence against her (Bastos, 2017; Marquetti *et al*., 2019). In 2016, Rousseff was removed from office through a soft coup.

Rousseff's successor, Michel Temer (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party, PMDB), ushered in a phase of "authoritarian neoliberalism": the intensification of market reforms without democratic consent (Saad-Filho, 2020). Temer's administration implemented sweeping austerity policies that slashed social spending. Labor protections were dismantled, access to social security and unemployment benefits was restricted, and federal budgets for health and education were dramatically reduced (Marquetti *et al*., 2019). These reforms disproportionately impacted the rural poor, particularly Afro-descendant and traditional communities in Pernambuco, many of whom began experiencing food insecurity and hunger due to wage stagnation and inflation. This local suffering mirrored national trends that worsened under the Bolsonaro administration (Flexor *et al*., 2024, 19–20).

Far-right President Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) deepened this crisis by systematically dismantling Brazil's environmental governance (Flexor *et al*., 2024). His administration appointed anti-environmental officials to key institutions, undermined legal protections, and refused to demarcate new Indigenous or Quilombo lands (Menezes & Barbosa Jr., 2021). Bolsonaro's rhetoric dehumanized environmental defenders and traditional communities, calling them enemies of national progress (Bledsoe, 2019; Hita & Gledhill, 2019; Pompeia, 2024). Land titling slowed to a halt, and proposals were introduced to open protected territories to agribusiness and mining (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Though Lula narrowly won the 2022 election, his administration inherited the entrenched legacy of *agro-Bolsonarismo*—a far-right coalition of rural elites, agribusiness firms, and conservative landowners who oppose land reform and ecological protections (Pompeia, 2024). These political forces remain powerful, particularly in regions like Pernambuco, where rural resistance to land rights continues to operate under immense pressure.

Across the past two decades, Brazilian land politics have oscillated between authoritarian repression, democratic expansion, and technocratic development—yet the structural logics of racialized land tenure have remained firmly in place. From Lula's growth agenda to Bolsonaro's environmental rollback, state-led development has consistently prioritized private accumulation over territorial justice. Communities like those in Cabo and Ipojuca have borne the brunt of these shifts, navigating uncertain legal status, environmental degradation, and political neglect. The following ethnographic section explores how residents are responding—materially, symbolically, and politically—to the cumulative impacts of racialized land tenure.

4. Contemporary outcomes of racialized land tenure

Tenuous land rights

Over the past two decades, the expansion of the Suape Port Industrial Complex (CIPS), coupled with intensifying cultural backlash against traditional communities' land rights, has had devastating consequences for thousands of residents living in the coastal villages and former sugarcane plantations (*engenhos*) of Cabo de Santo Agostinho and Ipojuca. These territories—predominantly occupied by Afro-descendant and mixed-race "traditional" communities—have been subject to systematic expropriation under the pretense of development. CIPS has forcibly occupied their ancestral lands, treating them as inconsequential within the national landscape of progress.

These communities emerged within the physical and social boundaries of Pernambuco's centuries-old plantation economy. After abolition in 1888, wealthy landowners maintained control over sugar mills (*usinas*) and *engenhos*, continuing to rely on Black manual labor (Dabat, 2007; DHESCA, 2018). Former enslaved persons and their descendants were allocated small plots of land near plantations, giving rise to subsistence-based agricultural communities (DHESCA, 2018; Ramalho, 2005). As Pernambuco's sugar industry declined in the late 20th century, many plantations were abandoned, leaving behind unpaid debts and degraded land. Yet many Afro-descendant workers remained, continuing to steward the land and surrounding mangrove ecosystems. Over generations, they developed artisanal farming and fishing practices that sustained entire communities (Ramalho, 2005).

Among these traditional settlements is Ilha de Mercês, a recognized quilombo that has cultivated and fished the surrounding waters for more than a century. The gradual retreat of landowning elites opened space for new forms of rural autonomy: small-scale agriculture, shellfish collection, and mangrove-based livelihoods persisted even in the absence of formal land titles. Residents are often labeled as *posseiros*, obscuring the deep historical ties and territorial practices that shape their relationship to the land.

As elsewhere in Latin America (Figueroa *et al*., 2024), Brazilian artisanal fishing communities are often excluded from formal planning processes. In Cabo and Ipojuca, *posseiro* is not a singular legal identity but a diverse set of tenuous land tenure arrangements. Some families are engaged in long-running legal battles to secure recognition from absentee landowners. Others maintain precarious tenancy agreements that allow for continued sugarcane cultivation in exchange for remaining on the land. Whatever the arrangement, these communities live from the ecological abundance of the territory—raising livestock, gathering wild foods, fishing, and caring for landscapes passed down across generations. Yet these very communities, lacking formal legal recognition, have been precisely those targeted for removal by CIPS.

The logics of racialized land tenure remains evident in CIPS's approach to territorial acquisition. Because many residents are poor and undocumented as landowners, their territories are still treated as terra nullius—empty lands awaiting productive development (McKittrick, 2013). CIPS deemed these coastal populations disposable: residents were neither consulted nor invited to participate in environmental reviews or planning decisions. Their customary uses of land and sea—as commons for farming, fishing, and family life—were rendered invisible.

The results have been profound. As CIPS expanded, this triggered cascading injustices. A national human rights investigation (DHESCA, 2018) found that the port:

(1) failed to comply with environmental licensing procedures;
(2) withheld information about biodiversity risks;
(3) militarized access to forests, water, and mangroves; and
(4) made it dangerous—sometimes impossible—for local residents to continue fishing, farming, or gathering.

Many community members were harassed, threatened, or physically attacked for trying to sustain traditional lifeways. This form of neocolonial enclosure—justified through economic growth—has become a primary vector of displacement in Pernambuco. The Pastoral Land Commission—an NGO that tracks land conflicts in Brazil—reports that CIPS accounted for 98% of land conflicts in Cabo de Santo Agostinho in 2021 and 100% in Ipojuca in the same year, with over 2,445 families affected (CPT, 2021: Figure 2).

Ecological devastation

CIPS's transformation into an industrial manufacturing and export hub has irreversibly damaged lands and waters that hold deep ecological and cultural meaning for local Afro-descendant and traditional communities. Though the coastline has changed dramatically in recent years, it remains embedded with memory. For generations, residents have relied on the mangroves, forests, and ocean not only for sustenance but for intergenerational learning, spiritual grounding, and collective life. Within these landscapes, knowledge is carried across generations. In many communities, children begin around age ten to learn how to read the weather and tides (*maré*), how to locate shellfish and wild fruits, and how to move safely within intricate coastal ecosystems (Ramalho, 2005). These are not simply environmental skills—they are ways of relating to territory through intimate, embodied experience. Yet Suape's industrial expansion has disrupted this transmission. The destruction of land and seascapes has made it nearly impossible for families to pass on traditional ecological knowledge or maintain traditional practices.

The opening of the Abreu e Lima oil refinery in 2014 marked a critical turning point. One of the largest petroleum refineries in the world, Abreu e Lima processes up to 230,000 barrels of oil per day (PETROBRAS, n.d.). Its operations have introduced unprecedented levels of toxic effluents into the air, soil, and water (Santos *et al*., 2019). The refinery sits near densely populated coastal settlements, polluting the ecosystems that residents depend on for fishing, farming, and gathering (ibid.). In its wake, residents have reported a surge in health problems: respiratory illnesses, nausea, fainting, gastrointestinal issues, and chemical skin irritation (Bezerra 2021, 2022).

For residents whose lives and livelihoods unfold outdoors, the exposure is constant and disproportionate. As one fisherwoman, Matilde,[7] explained:

> A lot of people never got sick [before the refinery]. You did not see anyone with asthma. And now, if you go to the health center and spend ten minutes in front of the emergency room, you will see many people coming in with asthma. We did not have this problem, because we had ventilation, we did not have anything toxic…after the port arrived, this pollution [arrived]. (Matilde, interview, 2-10-21) [8]

Beyond toxic emissions, CIPS has physically reshaped the coastal environment. Dredging operations to accommodate cargo traffic have destroyed vast stretches of mangroves—vital not only as ecological buffers but as critical harvesting zones for shellfish, fish nurseries, and medicinal plants. The cumulative effects of dredging, pollution, and forest removal have severely undermined food security, altered microclimates, and driven biodiversity loss. These changes are not isolated incidents; they form part of a larger strategy of erasure. The industrial landscape—factories, oil pipelines, port terminals—has been superimposed on territories that, for centuries, sustained communal life. In this context, the violence of dispossession is not only material but ontological. It severs relationships to land and water, breaks cycles of knowledge transmission, and transforms shared worlds into zones of extraction and exclusion. Residents are not only displaced—they are disoriented, their futures made uncertain by the disintegration of ecologies that once sustained them.

[7] All interlocutors have been given pseudonyms.

[8] CIPS has the technology to lessen emissions that would improve the health of residents. They constructed an emissions abatement unit to about 70% completion but never finished it; it remains unused (Bezerra, 2021).

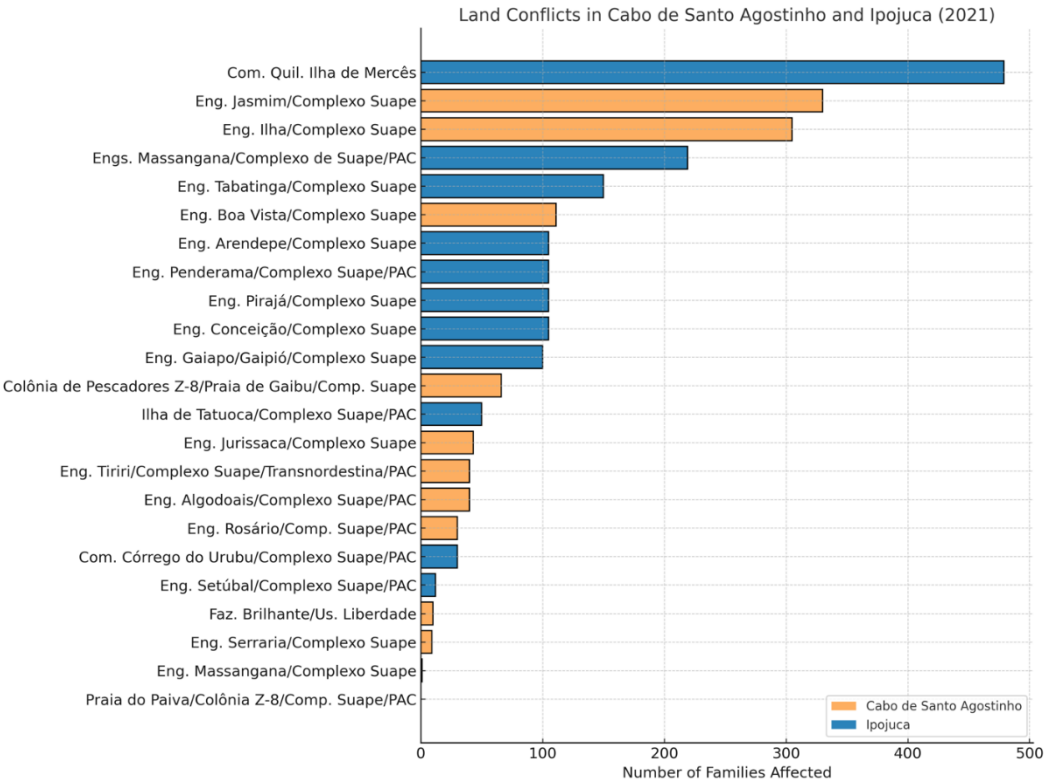

Figure 2: Number of families affected by land conflicts in Cabo and Ipojuca in 2021. Data sourced from the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT, 2021).

Enclosure and dispossession

When CIPS began its territorial expansion, thousands of residents across Cabo and Ipojuca were offered indemnification payments in exchange for their homes and land (DHESCA 2018; Santos *et al*. 2019). On paper, these payments were framed as compensation—but in practice, they often operated under conditions of coercion. Residents who refused the offer or challenged the amount were met with escalating threats. CIPS hired private security contractors to harass, intimidate, and in some cases, physically assault locals until they agreed to leave (ibid.). In many cases, homes were demolished while residents were at work or running errands, with no advanced notice.

For families who had lived on and cultivated this land for generations, the destruction of homes built by hand was devastating. The fear of returning home to find one's house in rubble became a daily anxiety. Inês captured this sense of dread:

> [I feel] sadness and fear. Fear because when they arrive, they come by car with the police and everything, and they come to knock it down [homes]. My in-law had lived across the street for 55 years... they took it [the house and land] from here in front all the way to the farm... Then when my family went to build a house there, Suape came to tear it down. He made a wooden gate in front, and Suape broke it... When we bought this here, we made a board shack, it was made of bricks. They came and knocked it down. They came and tore it down. (Inês, interview, 03-10-21)

The violence of removal did not end with displacement. Those who accepted compensation found themselves barred from returning to their ancestral territories. Forest paths were blocked, streams fenced, and public beaches converted into restricted zones. These formerly shared commons were enclosed, and residents discovered that even small acts of subsistence—planting cassava, collecting fruit, or tending livestock—had become grounds for surveillance and expulsion. As Artur explained:

> It would be great if I could buy a little place for myself because you cannot put up a fence around here. Suape comes and takes it. Suape comes and takes it. In many places around here, Suape tore out banana tree stalks, and the stalks of the coconut. One day we went up there and made a wire fence so the oxen wouldn't get out. Suape came and cut it out. (Artur, interview, 03-09-21)

For those resettled in urban peripheries, the transition was equally harsh. In neighborhoods where residents were relocated, agricultural land was scarce or nonexistent, and what food they had once grown had to now be bought at supermarkets. Cátia, who had previously relied on wild food collection and cultivation, lamented the shift:

> We had trees, we had forests to collect and plant cassava and fruits. There [urbanized districts where people relocated], we do not have anything…the best fruit is something you buy. People have to purchase [food]; they do not plant anything. (Cátia, interview, 03-19-21)

Dispossession occurred not only through removing people from their homes and ancestral territories but also through criminalizing and policing access to the natural resources central to their survival, making these activities *subversive*.[9] The ocean, mangroves, and estuaries that sustained generations of fishing and shellfish harvesting became militarized zones. CIPS and its contractors erected toll points, fences, and concrete barriers to limit entry to once-accessible beaches. Private security patrolled these areas, issuing warnings, threats, and in some cases forcibly removing people who attempted to re-enter their traditional territories. These actions targeted longstanding subsistence practices. Communities that had fished, collected, and farmed for generations were now surveilled and punished for doing so. Even portions of the ocean were effectively privatized. Cátia recounted one such encounter:

> Sometimes when people fish there close by (to the port), they take you and make you leave. The people there, the Port security. If I go fishing there close by, they make me leave. (Cátia, interview, 03-19-21)

The impacts of this enclosure were immediate and compounding. The closure of access to natural resources pushed many into food insecurity and deepened poverty. Families who once relied on land and sea to supplement income or survive difficult seasons could no longer do so. Wild crabs, mangrove fruit, shellfish, medicinal herbs—all became inaccessible. The traditional safety nets that had sustained Cabo and Ipojuca's communities for generations were systematically dismantled by a port complex that claimed to deliver development but instead intensified exclusion.[10] In this way, CIPS's expansion did more than displace—it transformed longstanding forms of stewardship into criminal behavior, recasting Afro-descendant and mixed-race residents not as caretakers of territory but as trespassers on their own lands.

[9] Similarly, in *Swamplife*, Ogden (2011) illuminates how hunters suddenly became poachers when conservation laws banned traditional hunting practices in Florida mangroves and swamps. For Ogden, the "subversive landscape" is the context in which simple ways of relating to nature become criminalized (2011, 138).

[10] Northeast Brazil's oil spill in 2019 made accessing large sections of ocean and mangrove territory increasingly impossible, exacerbating existing poverty and food insecurity.

The unmet promise of employment

Many residents of Cabo and Ipojuca initially greeted the Suape Port Complex's expansion with cautious hope. The promise of job creation held out the possibility that long-marginalized communities might benefit from infrastructure investment and regional development. However, this hope quickly faded as it became clear that CIPS was not built to employ or uplift local Afro-descendant fishing and farming communities. Residents soon discovered that they lacked the formal education or technical training required for most positions at the port and its affiliated industries. In many of these coastal communities, high rates of illiteracy—rooted in the long-term absence of state investment in rural Black populations (Meek *et al*. 2024)—meant locals were categorically excluded from skilled work. While the port's discourse promised opportunity, what was made available to residents were the most precarious roles: temporary, underpaid manual labor with no benefits or upward mobility.

Residents noted that CIPS largely offered working-class locals roles as day laborers—if they were hired at all. The better jobs, they explained, went to outsiders. As Tomás and Camila reflected:

> It's not development. Development how? If the population doesn't participate in this development? They are going to give some employment to people from elsewhere, the better ones (jobs). And we see that they leave the worst jobs for those who live in the state. When they constructed these things there, we saw even engineers being hired from outside. 'Oh, because people from here aren't qualified.' Because we never had the opportunity to become qualified. (Tomás and Camila, interview, 03-22-2021)

Those who did get hired found that the work was irregular and often grueling. Men were hired for short-term construction contracts or as *peões* (pawn laborers)—a term locals use to describe expendable workers, much like the lowest-ranking piece on a chessboard. Women, meanwhile, were sometimes hired as domestic workers in nearby hotels or as cleaning staff for port facilities. These jobs offered neither long-term stability nor meaningful income. When the Lava Jato scandal, from 2014, implicated Suape in corruption, and economic contraction worsened during COVID-19 from 2020, even these limited opportunities dried up. CIPS's failure to deliver consistent employment pushed many families back into low-paid sugarcane labor, the same exploitative work that had sustained the region's economy since slavery. As one cane worker put it: "This *usina* is what sustains the people… this *usina* is the mother of the family because it sustains the people." (Lia, interview, 03-25-2020). Despite decades of promises of modernization and uplift, sugarcane remained the only employment option available to many. Yet even that sector could not absorb the growing ranks of the unemployed. As Diana explained:

> We still have loads of families who are still unemployed. So the jobs, for example (Usina) Salgado even closed…in Ipojuca, Usina Trapiche has eight or ten *engenhos*… I started at the Usina, and it already had workers from the one that closed. But it's insufficient; it doesn't have the capacity to hire all the unemployed… There are lots of people unemployed still" (Diana, interview, 11-26-2020).

In sum, CIPS failed to provide the long-term employment it promised, instead reinforcing the very racialized economic hierarchies it claimed to transform. While technical and managerial jobs went to middle-class professionals from Recife and other regions, Cabo and Ipojucans were either locked out entirely or relegated to unstable manual labor. For many, the only remaining options were the informal economies of cane, fishing, and collecting—livelihoods now threatened by the ecological destruction, enclosure, and surveillance brought by Suape's expansion. The port's unfulfilled promise of employment thus became a second layer of dispossession. First displaced from their lands, communities were then excluded from the vast economic development initiatives surrounding them. In this way, CIPS not only failed to redress poverty—it deepened it, maintaining a centuries-old logic in which Afro-descendant communities are cast as necessary for capital's expansion but undeserving of its rewards.

5. Conclusion

Cabo and Ipojuca's centuries-long regime of racially discriminatory land tenure—one that prioritizes capital accumulation over the well-being of Afro-descendant communities—persists. The logic of racialized land tenure was evident from the founding of these territories, when the Portuguese Crown "donated" land through the *sesmaria* system to European nobles, erasing Indigenous occupation and repurposing landscapes for sugarcane plantations and militarized expansion (Ferraz, 2008). Over the next three centuries, this plantation economy deepened through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, embedding a regime in which land ownership was tied to whiteness, nobility, and resource extraction.

The legacies of these racialized land tenure systems remain visible. Afro-Brazilian and mixed-race communities were legally barred from owning land until well after abolition of slavery in 1888—354 years after the original grants were made. Today, despite the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 guaranteeing land rights to Quilombo and other traditional communities, most still await formal land titles (Micaelo, 2014; Ramón, 2022). Many others live as *posseiros*, cultivating land and managing ecosystems for generations without legal recognition. These communities practice small-scale farming, fishing, and foraging, often on ancestral lands. Yet lacking titles, they remain vulnerable to legal expropriation and forced displacement. The ideological framing of these lands as terra nullius—empty, unproductive, and available for development—remains central to their dispossession (McKittrick, 2013). *Posseiro* territories are not actually empty, but they are constructed as such through racialized logics redeployed in contemporary development schemes.

Despite efforts by Lula and the PT to regularize land rights, the broader neo-developmentalist agenda—with its focus on infrastructure and agro-export—ultimately reified longstanding patterns of territorial exclusion. In Cabo and Ipojuca, the expansion of the Suape Port Industrial Complex (CIPS) since the early 2000s has displaced thousands of *posseiros*, whose lack of formal titles left them defenseless against state-backed expropriation. The case of CIPS underscores a core paradox: even as development is invoked to uplift marginalized communities, its implementation often reproduces the same structural exclusions that created their vulnerability. Residents were promised jobs, public services, and economic opportunity. In reality, CIPS enclosed ancestral commons, devastated coastal ecosystems, and offered mostly precarious, low-wage, short-term employment that failed to improve long-term livelihood security. The plantation economy was not dismantled—it was rebranded.

This contradiction reveals how contemporary infrastructure projects like CIPS are embedded in long-standing political ecologies of racialized land tenure. Development cannot be understood outside the historical and territorial regimes it extends. As Hall (1980) reminds us, economic systems must be understood as situated within broader social structures and power relations. In Pernambuco, capitalist modernization has consistently relied on racialized frameworks of exclusion to discipline labor, enclose the commons, and displace communities. Brazil's insertion into the global economy further reinforces these dynamics. As Gonzales (2020) notes, Brazil's neocolonial dependence on commodity exports requires cheap, flexible labor, and this demand is overwhelmingly met by racialized workers. Decades of exclusion from land, education, and employment have stratified the labor force, ensuring that Afro-Brazilians and other marginalized groups remain concentrated in the most precarious forms of work (Bernardino-Costa, 2014; Carneiro, 2011; Gonzalez, 2019, 2020). CIPS exemplifies this: jobs offered to local residents were overwhelmingly manual, temporary, and poorly compensated—failing to provide a dignified alternative to sugarcane labor. And yet, even amid dispossession, communities continue to organize. In Cabo and Ipojuca, *posseiro* residents have resisted expropriation through legal, cultural, and political means. They have formed collectives, pursued land rights through courts and state agencies, and mobilized narratives of historical belonging to counter state claims of land abandonment. These efforts illustrate not only the continuity of exclusion, but also the creativity and resilience of those navigating its impacts.

Scholars in political ecology and critical geography have long debated the ways colonial pasts persist into the present (Biersack *et al*., 2008; Borras *et al*., 2011; Escobar, 1995; Quijano, 2010; Mignolo, 2010; Mollett, 2017). This article argues that one critical mechanism of continuity is racialized land tenure—a historically specific formation in which land distribution, legal recognition, and racialized dispossession operate as co-constitutive processes. The case of the Suape Port Complex demonstrates how historical racial ideologies

continue to structure who has access to land, and under what terms. While the language of development has changed on the surface, the underlying political ecology of racialized land tenure remains deeply familiar.

In this sense, the article contributes to the historical turn in Latin American political ecology (LAPE), which seeks to connect environmental governance with long-term histories of coloniality, race, and land (Alimonda, 2015; Palacio, 2012; Gudynas, 2018; Castro Herrera, 2021). It offers racialized land tenure as a conceptual lens that brings together history, political economy, and environmental transformation under a shared analytic. By centering race not as a background variable but as a structural condition of land governance, this work expands political ecology's capacity to engage with postcolonial injustice and Afro-Latin American territorial struggles. This study also affirms the importance of historical political ecology as a method (Mathevet *et al*., 2015). Uncovering the temporal depth of dispossession—not just how land was taken, but how its loss was encoded in law, policy, and infrastructure—enables a clearer diagnosis of contemporary inequalities. Latin American development cannot be decoupled from its colonial scaffolding (Alimonda *et al*., 2017). Indeed, repair must begin by recognizing how land continues to be governed by its racialized past.

Ultimately, Cabo and Ipojuca are not marginal cases but emblematic of how Brazil's racial injustices continue to organize land, labor, and livelihood. From the first *sesmaria* to the most recent pipeline, the state has pursued development through exclusion. Yet resistance remains. In the face of centuries of dispossession, Afro-Brazilian communities continue to assert alternative ways of knowing and relating to land—not as a commodity, but as kin, history, and the ground of collective autonomy—offering vital epistemological and political challenges to the enduring logics of racialized land tenure.

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