



**“THE LAND IS OURS AND WE ARE FREE TO DO ALL THAT WE WANT”: QUILOMBOS AND BLACK RURAL PROTEST IN AMAZONIA, BRAZIL, 1917–1929<sup>1</sup>**

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In *Race in Another America*, a fundamental synthesis of race relations in Brazil published in 2004, sociologist Edward Telles states that the recognition of black rural communities descending from runaway slaves, called *quilombos* or *mocambos* in Brazil, was “the one area in which the federal government was active in explicit support of the black community” during the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of Article 68 in the Transitory Dispositions of the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 granting collective land deeds to the descendants of *quilombos* paved the way for the relatively successful political mobilization of hundreds of black rural communities across the country.<sup>3</sup> During those years the definition of *quilombo* gradually changed from communities that descended exclusively from runaways to black rural groups in general, and the joint pressure of the communities themselves, intellectuals, activists, and occasionally policy-makers, led to a significant stream of legislation at the federal, state, and local level, focusing not only on the grant of land deeds, but also on housing, sanitation, schooling, cultural activities, and income-generation programs for the *quilombos*.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the regional differences in governmental action, and the often overwhelming challenge of transforming the letter of the law into effective action, the contrast to the controversial application of affirmative action policies is clear. Since Brazil re-entered democracy in 1985, the implementation of affirmative action agendas in education and public institutions has met the opposition of significant sectors in Brazilian society due not only to its mixed-race population, but also to its national narrative of racial democracy. While by 2002 more than 30 *quilombo* communities had received their collective land deed and some states had implemented comprehensive legislative programs for *quilombos*, only the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) had started an affirmative action program.<sup>5</sup>

The significant institutional impact of black rural communities in the 1990s has led many scholars to focus on how during that decade many Afro-Brazilians living in rural areas adopted a new identity as descendants of *quilombos*.<sup>6</sup> Aided by black movements, and seeking to become valid recipients of the collective land deeds, a number of mixed-race rural hamlets with few memories related to slavery or marronage imagined and endorsed such a past as they organized themselves as *quilombo*-descendants. But while the 1990s were indeed an important period of identity-building

