

Neoquilombos & the Afro-Diaspora

“A society that lives in denial, or even in the glorification of colonial history, does not allow new languages to be created. Nor does it allow responsibility, rather than morality, to create new configurations of power and knowledge. Only when power structures are reconfigured can the many marginalized identities also, finally, reconfigure the notion of knowledge: Who knows? Who can know? Know what? Whose knowledge is it? - Grada Kilomba” (2019)

The Afro-Atlantic diaspora is a (dis)place and identity claimed as home by countless Black and Brown people. The term refers to the forced movement resulting from the trans- Atlantic slave trade, led by the major slave-master nations as follows (in order of extent of slave ownership and trading): the Portuguese, the British, the Spanish, the French, the Dutch, and the Danish. Due to this forced mass movement of peoples, the ability to trace our exact origins has been stolen from us. Many of us have not had the opportunity to confirm our ancestral heritage to anywhere more specific than “Africa”, our ancestors as “Negro”, or “Indigenous”, or both. This loss of identity- on account of the cultural erasure that was imperative to the “success” of the colonial project- has compelled thousands of individuals from the diaspora to create transnational communities that operate much like an extended family - as a network, and holding place for collective memory. Throughout Africa and its diaspora, socio-political and cultural communities- defined partly by the production and reproduction of Black cultural expressions- function as our “Quilombos” (the name for free communities established by enslaved Africans and African descendants).

I am a Black woman born in Bahia, Brazil. My country has the second largest Black population in the world, behind only Nigeria. But all over the world, people are still surprised when they meet a darker skinned Brazilian woman like me, especially wearing a turban. I am often asked “where are you from”, by people regardless of their background. They are surprised that someone of my complexion could be Brazilian. “There’s Black people like you in Brazil?” Yes, indeed. Darker than me, with stronger Black features than me. According to historian João José Reis (Salvador, 1952), the Americas received around 15 million African people during the slave trade, and 40% of them, about 6 million were taken to Brazil. It’s even more brutal to imagine this reality of collective kidnapping when compared with the current population of Ireland, which is nearly 5 million. Only 5% of enslaved people went to the US, 95% went to Central America, South America and the Caribbean. The first capital of Portugal’s Brazilian colony, Salvador de Bahia founded in 1549, is the third largest Brazilian metropolis with a population of more than three million the majority of whom have African ancestry. The general miseducation, or surprise, about the existence of Black Brazilians in 2020 is due to a number of factors including systemic

racism, social cleansing and whitening projects justified by eugenics, racist propaganda, mass media for e.g. Dinsey's negative Brazilian tropes, misrepresentation and the false notion of a "Brazilian racial democracy". Faced with erasure, Black Brazilians are learning how to exist loudly, to keep resisting and creating our own "NeoQuilombos".

As stated above, Quilombo (pronounced KI-LOM-BO) is the name for the free "maroon" communities established by enslaved Africans and African descendants who escaped captivity in Brazil. The concept was born from the Angolan language Kimbundu, meaning "war camp". Angola and Benguela (today an Angolan province) in Central-West Africa supplied most of the enslaved people used in all regions of Portuguese America during the 16th, 17th and the first half of the 18th century. Although the word Quilombo is specific to Brazil, maroon communities existed throughout the colonies in South America and the Caribbean - where Quilombos hold significant power as symbols of Black struggle, fugitivity, and freedom in the face of a racist colonial, slavocratic society. The most famous

in Brazil was the Quilombo dos Palmares, led by Zumbi and Dandara, developed from 1605 until its suppression in 1694. With numbers of inhabitants varying from 11,000 to 20,000, Palmares was "undoubtedly the largest fugitive community to have existed in Brazil - Stuart Schwartz". Quilombos were called Palenques in Latin-American Spanish-speaking countries. In Argentina the word quilombo has been used to describe "mess, hubbub, brawl, disorder, party, even brothel," a distortion likely rooted in racist misconceptions.

Abdias do Nascimento (March 14, 1914 – May 23, 2011), Black scholar, activist, artist, political exile, and politician from Rio de Janeiro coined the term Quilombismo in 1980. It describes his vision of a revolutionary socio-economic and cultural transformation of Brazilian society that is: "anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-landowning, anti-imperialist, anti-neocolonialist" in its foundations. The concept, as Nascimento (1980) writes is one where: "both the permitted and the "illegal" [black practices] were a unit, a single human, ethnic and cultural affirmation, at once integrating a practice of liberation and assuming the command of one's own history. To this complex of meanings, this Afro-Brazilian praxis, I give the name quilombismo." For Nascimento, the ideas and practices that shape quilombismo have the ability to mobilize the Black masses because they link memory, culture, knowledge, and lived experience with action, while also being rooted in the history, culture, and lived experience of Black Brazilians. The Atlantic woman, Beatriz do Nascimento, (12 July 1942 – 28 January 1995), an Afro-Brazilian academic and activist, also describes the Quilombo as a place of re-imaginative potential for Brazilian national identity. She explains that people of African origin lived in the Quilombos with Indigenous folks, alongside allied Europeans. Everyone lived together, collaborating and planting

outside the colonial system. The Quilombos emerge as the historical identity of Black Brazilians.

The concept of quilombo has evolved into the “**Neoquilombos**” a term used to refer to the remaining quilombola communities around Brazil - nearly five thousand strong. It has also been expanded and redefined to include the trans-national array of actions, organisations and cultural practices that exist unashamedly as modes of Black resistance, having broken past the need to hide. The capoeira groups, candomblé houses, land rights movements, Catholic brother and sisterhoods, Black-run newspapers, anti-violence organisations, trans-national activist networks, Black political organizations, Black studies programs in universities, Black feminist and gender-focused organisations. The essence of quilombismo is also found in cultural practices such as the afoxés, maracatus, samba schools, and the hip-hop movement, headwrap classes and in countless other instances. Technology has also created space for many digital quilombos to emerge; every technological expression that makes an effort to produce discourses and practices with a clear focus on Black liberation - cultural, material, and epistemological: including this publication you hold in your hands - becomes a Neoquilombo.

I've created a Neoquilombo called Turbante-se through the ancient art of protecting and ornamenting one's Ori (Yoruba metaphysical concept, the word means “head”, but refers to one's spiritual intuition & destiny). The beauty and mystery of turbans & headwraps in the Afro-Atlantic diaspora, its traditions, new meanings and usages has been my research object since 2012. The power and potency of ancestral legacy in my work has inspired and empowered many Black people and people of colour to build better self-esteem. This means a lot, as we've been dehumanized by racism and capitalism for centuries - and still are. The turbans and headwrap is an essential component in the process of self-identification for Africans and the African diaspora. In the classical paintings of Colonial Brazil by French artist Jean Baptiste Debret or the German Johann Moritz Rugendas, we can identify different African ethnicities by their head The survival, preservation and inter- mingling of varied African cultural roots and ancestral heritages in the diaspora has been a

cornerstone of our collective healing and resistance. wrapping styles (mandatory for men and women), including the Muslim style or Malê, as they were known in Brazil. Scholars claim that Brazil received more enslaved Muslims than anywhere else in the Americas. It's important to remember that Portugal also colonised and exploited the East African coast, particularly the area currently occupied by Mozambique.

The Portuguese slave trade also established its machinery in the Gulf of Benin (present- day southwestern Nigeria), Benin, and its cogs kept turning. The Africans brought to Brazil belonged to two major groups: the West African and the Bantu people. I could be an Igbo, Ga-Adangbe, Yoruba, Fon, Ashanti, Ewe, Mandinka, or

from other West African groups native to Guinea, Ghana, Benin, Guinea-Bissau and Nigeria. I could also be Bantu, from Angola, Congo, or Mozambique. The survival, preservation and inter-mingling of varied African cultural roots and ancestral heritages in the diaspora has been a cornerstone of our collective healing and resistance. Most Nigerians would be surprised by the taste and presentation of Akara in Bahia, which we call Acarajé, the same way I was surprised to find Abará going by the name of Oleleh in Sierra Leone. They also would see that in Brazil, our Day of Iemanjá is also celebrated by Catholics. In Cuba, Brazil, Haiti and Trinidad, Yoruba religious rites, beliefs, music and myths are still strong. In Brazil the Yoruba were called Nagô. Their pantheon of deities called Orishas were reborn in Brazil within religions such as Candomblé and Umbanda, which trace their origins to the cults of Ifás, Voduns and Nkisis. In Cuba the Orishas were integrated into the Palo, and Santería spiritualities. In Jamaica, elements of Yoruba spirituality were incorporated into Obeah. Most of the time, these African religions became mixed with Catholicism. The development of Brazilian religious culture was marked by a series of cultural negotiations, exchanges and incorporations endowed with African, Christian and indigenous elements.

I am grateful for the resistance and resilience of my African and Indigenous ancestors. Thankful for the whole range of philosophical, artistic, aesthetic, musical, rhythmic, gastronomic, cultural, religious and matrilineal heritage that I have been born into. I would love to be able to know the traditional languages, the names and surnames that make up my own personal history. While I'm curing my colonial hangover, I'll keep searching for it. We have been experiencing how we can collectively heal, embrace and cultivate our creative expression, independent from imposed Eurocentric standards. Cultural preservation in the Afro diaspora has played a huge role in our survival, and in creating communities of Black resistance within western societies with violent colonial histories. The aesthetic realm (beauty, art and culture), has been forging critical pathways on this journey of self-love, cultural re-appropriation and knowledge exchange among our communities. We need to decolonise our existences while learning, and finding our own stories. The empowerment of groups that have been dehumanized starts with self-identity strengthening. Cultural heritage needs to be claimed in every aspect.

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