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Black place-making and epistemic decolonisation in Brazil: Rio de Janeiro's *Pequena África*

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ABSTRACT

This article approaches the interconnections between Black place-making and epistemic decolonisation in contemporary Brazil. It discusses a region popularly known as *Pequena África* (Little Africa) in Rio de Janeiro's harbour district. Taking Little Africa as a case study, the article contends that community organisers and members of the Black movement in this region are active knowledge producers via their everyday experiences and understanding of time and space. As such, the article suggests that acts of spatial reading and writing contribute to the decentring of Euro-Western perspectives and the valuing of subaltern epistemic projects. Considering these connections, it is argued that the social appropriation of space and meaning-making based on Little Africa's material landscape has gone hand in hand with forms of resistance, encounter, and anti-colonial thinking. Accordingly, and in close dialogue with theorisations from decolonial studies and Black geographies, the article concludes that processes of knowledge decolonisation occur when historically underrepresented communities assert their spatial and temporal existence.

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Introduction

A growing literature demonstrates the significance of embodied and localised experiences of Black subjects in the formulation of place (e.g. Bledsoe, Eaves, and Williams 2017; Bledsoe and Wright 2019; Hawthorne 2019; Hunter et al. 2016; McKittrick 2006, 2011; McKittrick and Woods 2007; dos Santos 2011; de Oliveira 2020). Scholarship in this line has pointed to the ways in which Black and Afro-diasporic communities produce their own sense of place by developing forms of social life in specific geographic locations. However, less attention has been paid to the processes by which the social uses of space relate to the challenging and dismantling of hegemonic epistemic orders. Attending to this gap and drawing upon ethnographic work undertaken in Brazil in 2019 and 2020, this article reflects on the commonality between geographic sense-making and epistemic decolonisation.

Specifically, the article discusses processes of spatial affirmation concerning Afro-diasporic cosmologies, traditions, and knowledges. The discussion focuses on a region popularly known as *Pequena África* (Little Africa), considered a stronghold of African heritage and culture in the port district of Rio de Janeiro (Friendly and Pimentel Walker 2022; R. Guimarães 2014; Racy and

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Rodrigues 2019). As a case study, Little Africa serves as an empirical window to explore the role that the assertion of Afro-diasporic memory and heritage plays in challenging and dismantling Eurocentric perspectives and modes of thought.

The arguments offered here aim to advance scholarship at the intersection of two disciplinary fields: Black geographies and decolonial studies. Broadly defined, Black geographies is an academic field and a set of theoretical concerns focusing on Black populations as constitutive of present spatial organisations. It addresses a wide variety of issues, including the spatial dimensions of racism and racial oppression (e.g. Bressey and Dwyer 2016; Kobayashi and Peake 2000; McKittrick 2006; McKittrick and Woods 2007), the plantation as a unit of time–space analysis (e.g. Butler, Carter, and Dwyer 2008; King 2016; McKittrick 2011, 2013), the geographic aspects of anti-racist and anti-colonial pedagogies (e.g. dos Santos and Soeterik 2016; Schein 1999), among other matters. Decolonial studies, in turn, is an intellectual current commonly associated with the tenet that there is no modernity without coloniality. Theorisations in this field have long discussed the imposition and maintaining in place of racialised, patriarchal, and class-based hierarchies that marginalise non-Western cultures and knowledges (see Grosfoguel and Castro-Gomez 2007; Lander 2003; Mignolo 2012; Mignolo and Walsh 2018). According to this view, the end of political colonialism did not encompass the end of colonialism in the realms of culture and epistemology. On the contrary, colonialism continued to reproduce itself in endogenous ways (Santos 2010). Decolonial perspectives thus serve as an analytical frame to understand the reverberations of colonial violence and racial subjection in contemporary times.

I begin this article by situating a case study and broadly explaining the socio-spatial configuration of Rio's port region. I continue with a discussion of the dialogues and points of convergence between Black geographies and theorisations in the decolonial tradition. Next, I address the three empirical cases and illustrate how processes of epistemic decolonisation are rooted in geographical spaces. Here, I review the idea of epistemic plurality and its particular application to the case of Little Africa. I conclude by emphasising that paying greater attention to the intersections between Black place-making and epistemic decolonisation can contribute to future studies of Black emancipation.

The reflections found here resulted from 5 months of ethnographic research undertaken in Rio de Janeiro's harbour region. My engagement with this area was part of my doctoral research project, which approached this part of the city as a place marked by the intertwined histories of colonialism, trans-Atlantic slavery, and Indigenous genocide. Hence, the study's attention was primarily focused on the spatial dimensions of colonial oppression and racial violence. The methodology consisted of ethnographic observation at three main sites: the Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site (*Sítio Arqueológico Cais do Valongo*), the New Blacks Institute of Memory and Research (*Instituto de Pesquisa e Memória Pretos Novos*, or IPN), and the Museum of Tomorrow (*Museu do Amanhã*). Likewise, I conducted in-depth interviews with staff members from the institutions mentioned above and residents of the Providência favela. Additional insight came from 20 guided and independent walks across Little Africa.¹

It is worth mentioning that I provide this analysis by recognising my respective positionality as a non-Afro-Brazilian² scholar. I am a white Latin American who immigrated to the United Kingdom and has intermittently worked in Brazil since 2009. Over the past

years, I have maintained strong personal and professional connections to this country. However, as a non-Brazilian, my experiences are those of an outsider who has gradually understood Brazil's social, political, and environmental particularities. Moreover, I have never been perceived as a member of any Afro-diasporic community in the Americas. Therefore, my theorisation is that of somebody who speaks about anti-Black violence and subjection from a privileged standing. The ideas I advance from this position aim to recognise the structures that sustain white supremacy and contribute to the collective intellectual, political, and pragmatic work needed to address and dismantle prevailing racial hierarchies.

Rio's port district and the background of Little Africa

Rio de Janeiro was once one of the largest slave ports in Brazil and the whole of the Americas (Friendly and Pimentel Walker 2022; Vassallo and Cicalo 2015). According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, more than 5.8 million Africans arrived in Brazil during the more than three centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (see Eltis and Halbert 2008). Only in Rio de Janeiro, over two million captives entered the continent between 1600 and 1850, with around 900,000 having disembarked at the Valongo Wharf, a stone pier built during the nineteenth century in the downtown area (Chuva and Peixoto 2020). After arrival, traders immediately led the captives to warehouses, where they were fed before being sent to work in sugar and coffee plantations or gold mines (Lima, Sene, and Souza 2016). However, many of the new arrivals would not reach the slave market as they would pass away from sickness or malnutrition. Their bodies would end up in burial grounds in the proximities of the port, including an area known as *Cemitério dos Pretos Novos*, roughly translated as the New Blacks Cemetery (Cook et al. 2015; Guedes et al. 2020).

Following the trans-Atlantic slave trade prohibition and the abolition of slavery in Brazil,³ Rio's harbour was primarily populated by Africans and their descendants. New residents also included migrants from Bahia State and other areas of the recently created republic (Sánchez and Broudehoux 2013). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, former soldiers settled on the Providência hill and built small mud-brick houses. That was the beginning of the Providência favela, considered Brazil's first favela and one of the most populous communities in the region today (de Queiroz 2011).

Throughout the twentieth century, the port region gradually established itself as a Black stronghold, where cultural and religious practices were grounded in the memory of slavery and African ancestry (Racy and Rodrigues 2019; R. Guimarães 2019). In the 1920s, the port became known by the name of *Pequena África* (Little Africa), a nickname frequently attributed to Heitor dos Prazeres, an Afro-Brazilian journalist and artist who lived and worked in the region (Moura 1983). To this day, this nickname speaks to the ancestral connections between America and Africa, referring to the emergence of African-based religions and practices like samba, capoeira, and candomblé⁴ (Assunção 2005; Jost 2015; Vassallo and Bitter 2018).

Today, Little Africa is commonly understood to cover four central districts (or *bairros*): Saúde, Providência, Gamboa, and Santo Cristo (Friendly and Pimentel Walker 2022). Across these districts, numerous landmarks serve as material evidence of the histories of violence, dispossession, and extraction that formed the basis of European colonisation in Brazil (Eichen 2020; Pádua 2017; Starling and Schwarcz 2018). As noted by de Oliveira, in

a country with a colonial background such as Brazil, which holds a history of more than 300 years of slavery, spatial formations bear the marks of socio-historical processes, including those relating to racial subjugation. In short, 'racism is inscribed into the social production of space' (de Oliveira 2019, 1, author's translation).

A case in point is the site known as *Pedra do Sal* (Rock of Salt), at the heart of the Saúde district. *Pedra do Sal* is a small square owing its name to a set of steps carved into granite rock that, according to oral tradition, were used by enslaved people when transporting salt from the cargo ships to the top of the Conceição hill. Recently, this small area was reclaimed 'as a social space for rituals, samba, and capoeira' (R. Guimarães 2019, 214). This appropriation brought about significant changes, including the site's recognition as a monument of Black culture⁵ and as an urban quilombo,⁶ an official category that grants land rights to descendants of maroon communities as a form of reparation for historical injustice (Adams 2021; Vassallo and Bitter 2018).

Two more historical sites in Little Africa are the *Cemitério dos Pretos Novos* (New Blacks Cemetery) and the *Sítio Arqueológico Cais do Valongo* (Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site).⁷ As mentioned above, the New Blacks Cemetery is the name of a ground where, between 1769 and 1830, as many as 20,000 bodies of captives were buried (Bastos et al. 2011). The ground, which had been lost to layers of urban development, was uncovered in 1996 when a middle-class family incidentally found a series of human remains during the renovation works of their residence (Friendly and Pimentel Walker 2022). Following these findings, and with the support of the Palmares Foundation,⁸ the owners of the property decided to create a memorial museum and research institute, nowadays known as the New Blacks Institute of Memory and Research, or IPN by Portuguese acronym.

A few metres from the IPN, the Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site preserves the ruins of a stone pier built in 1811, which quickly turned into the busiest landing point for slave ships on the entire continent. The pier was buried under the city for decades until its ruins were unearthed in 2011 during the port's reformations in the run-up to the 2016 Olympics. In 2017, the wharf was listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, which described it as 'the most powerful memorial of the African Diaspora outside Africa' (UNESCO 2017, 13).

In sum, numerous locations across Rio's Little Africa illustrate how the violent histories of slavery, extractive colonialism, and Black dispossession were inscribed into space (de Oliveira 2019). Places such as the Rock of Salt, the New Blacks Cemetery, and the Valongo Wharf have been recognised as sites of significant heritage value and memory for Afro-diasporic communities in Rio de Janeiro and Brazil more broadly (Abreu et al. 2018; Racy and Rodrigues 2019). At this point, it is worth noting that alongside African people and their descendants, the Indigenous inhabitants of the Americas were on the receiving end of the brutal violence perpetrated by European colonisers. In the case of Brazil, Guaraní and Tupinambá peoples were consistently captured and subjected to slavery in plantations and mission villages, while all native groups in the subcontinent underwent slaughter, famine, and mass death from the rapid spread of diseases⁹ (Marcílio 1984; Starling and Schwarcz 2018).

Overall, there are grounds to argue that Rio de Janeiro's port district bears the material marks of genocide, resource extraction, and racial subjection in its current spatial configuration. Following this contention, the following section reviews scholarship focusing on Black experiences of space, interlacing it with theorisations on the

unsettling of Eurocentric perspectives and conceptions of the world. In other words, it draws the links between geographical dimensions of Black existence and debates on epistemic decolonisation. In doing so, it identifies some of the overlapping and mutually reinforcing perspectives within two strands of thought: Black geographies and decolonial studies. Concurrently, the section serves as a preamble to the article's empirical discussion.

Black geographies, *geografias negras*, and epistemic decolonisation

As noted above, a growing body of literature commonly referred to as Black geographies has been particularly attentive to the interconnectedness of race, space, violence, and power (e.g. Bailey and Shabazz 2014; Bonds and Inwood 2016; Bressey and Dwyer 2016; Gilmore 2007; Hawthorne 2019; Vargas and Amparo Alves 2010). Remarkably, a great deal of Black geographical research has looked into the spatial and temporal expressions of the African diaspora in the Americas. As part of this approach, scholars have explicitly attended to 'the many ways in which Afro-descendant communities seek to create their own sense of place and establish their own spatial praxes' (Bledsoe 2017, 32). After all, the 'diaspora is a fundamentally a spatial relation' (Hawthorne 2019, 5). Relatedly, Katherine McKittrick has put forward the concept of 'Black sense of place', which grounds a discussion about how Black cultural geographies may be at once circumscribed by oppression without being wholly defined by such violence. As she puts it (McKittrick 2011, 947), a Black sense of place draws attention to 'the ways in which racial violences (...) shape, but do not wholly define Black worlds'.

At this junction, it is important to note that, despite the plurality and extended scope of the Black geographies discipline, a sizeable proportion of its scholarly production has thus far been carried out in North American contexts and, to a lesser extent, in the Caribbean (Hawthorne 2019). Nonetheless, beyond the realm of Anglo-American academia, numerous interventions have been made. For instance, and as the works cited in this article show, critical geographers and other scholars based in South America have scrutinised the geographical dimensions of Black diasporic life across the southern part of the continent (e.g. Bledsoe 2017; Cruz and de Oliveira 2017; G. Guimarães 2020; Ratts 2020; dos Santos 2007; Smith, Davies, and Gomes 2021; Zavala 2021). A case in point is Brazil, where a generation of geographers has offered insightful enquires into the spatialisation of Blackness, consolidating a field now known as *geografias negras*.¹⁰ In the frame of this growing body of literature, dos Santos (2007, 2011; see also dos Santos and Soeterik 2016) has approached the concept of scale as both a form of political endeavour and a field of dispute. For his part, Denilson de Oliveira (2014, 2019) has offered detailed analyses of the spatialisation of racism in Rio de Janeiro. Similarly, and also theorising from Rio's urban context, Geny Guimarães has drawn attention to the ways in which Afro-diasporic populations engage in place-making processes when forming relationships with nature, memory, time, and space. As she asserts (2020, 30, author's translation), 'Black geo-graphies (*geo-grafias negras*)¹¹ are the readings of the marks (or graphs) that are left by societies in time and space', and it is from the reading of those marks that Black geographical knowledge emerges.

From this perspective, Black geographical thought does not only refer to a set of systematised knowledges produced in academic bodies but also to the learnings that arise from the everyday life experiences of those who inhabit space. As Hawthorne rightly notes (2019, 3), 'Black geographic thought has existed (though under other names) for centuries, in formal academic environments, political struggles, and everyday practices of Black space-making. It simply has not always been legible to scholars working within the discipline of geography'.

The denial and under-recognition of non-hegemonic understandings of space – including Black geographical thought – resonates with conceptual developments advanced by proponents of the decolonial turn (e.g. Grosfoguel and Castro-Gomez 2007; Mignolo 2012; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Quijano 2007) and other critics of the epistemic foundation of Western science (e.g. Santos 2007, 2015). Theorisations from these fields have pointed out that the hegemony of modern science has rested upon 'the conversion of the knowledges of colonised peoples and the diversity of their cultures and cosmologies to expressions of irrationality and superstition' (Santos 2007, xxxiii). This hierarchical configuration has implied 'the self-constitution of science as a universal form of knowledge that claims the right to legislate over all other forms of knowledge' (xxxiv). Hence, for Western hegemony to position Eurocentric thought as universal, other forms of thought have had to be ignored, silenced, or considered, at best, folkloric (Grosfoguel and Castro-Gomez 2007; Walsh 2007).

As a counterpoint to the predominance of Western knowledge and its Eurocentric conceptions, Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has put forward the notion of a 'plurality of knowledges' or 'epistemic plurality'. With it, Santos has sought to contest the universal character of modern science and its self-bestowed 'power to define all the knowledges that are its rivals as particularistic, local, contextual, and situational' (2007, xl–xli). He has also used the notion of epistemic plurality to emphasise that 'all knowledges are situated' (xl–xli), that is, all knowledge systems – including Western science – carry the weight of particular cultural conceptions.

Seen from a geographical perspective, Santos' remarks on epistemic plurality illustrate that the ways in which subaltern and oppressed populations assert their understanding of space remain integrally linked to the decolonial endeavour of challenging the supremacy of Western rationality. Put differently, when historically underrepresented populations 'fashion places by inscribing them with their own interpretations, meanings, and cultural significance' (Hunter et al. 2016, 4), they directly strengthen processes that put into question the Western-centric epistemic domination of the world.

Overall, there are clear overlaps and exchanges between ideas on Black place-making and theorisations on the decolonisation of knowledge. Accordingly, processes of knowledge production within subaltern populations are integrally connected with their geographical life. From this perspective, the ways in which racialised, stigmatised, and often segregated groups – e.g. Indigenous, Afro-descendants, or peoples from the Global South – advance their own understandings of place cannot be reduced to Eurocentric conceptions of space and time.

Following this overview and drawing on empirical evidence gathered over 5 months of fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro, the following section considers Little Africa as a place where racist forms of spatial production have attempted to erase other ways of writing history and space. In parallel, it builds on the argument that such a 'deliberate attempt to forget' –

'*politica deliberada de esquecimento*' (de Oliveira 2019, 13) – has been met with the collective resistance of community organisers, grassroots organisations, and members of the Brazilian Black movement. As de Oliveira (2019) notes, members of the Black movement have sought to transform 'places of horror' into memory sites via anti-racist pedagogies grounded on the port's built environment.

Black geographies in Little Africa

As mentioned earlier, several historical landmarks across Rio de Janeiro's port are the material traces of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its dehumanising logics. These locations also give an account of the strategies of refusal and resistance in which the survival of Black communities was grounded. In what follows, I analyse the Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site and the New Blacks Institute for Memory and Research and discuss their protection and resignification as integral to the questioning and unsettling of hegemonic epistemic orders. Additionally, I review the case of the Museum of Tomorrow, a science museum built in Rio's port as part of the urban revitalisation project known as *Porto Maravilha* (The Marvellous Port). Specifically, I examine the museum's engagement with Little Africa's heritage and consider how the pedagogical practice of its staff attends to non-Western-centric forms of knowledge.

Moreover, I contend that the anti-colonial and anti-racist initiatives undertaken by cultural practitioners and members of the Black movement in Little Africa point towards forms of epistemic decolonisation. Along this line, I argue that Black place-making in Little Africa is not a completed process but an ongoing practice that continues to face significant barriers, including those related to the port's status as a place of capital accumulation. Overall, I suggest that whilst Rio's port remains subject to the forces of urban renovation, forced displacement, and social dispossession, anti-colonial and anti-racist interventions in the region have started to open cracks in the supremacy of Euro-Western knowledge.

The Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site

Until recently, the evidence of the Valongo Wharf's existence was restricted to written accounts, maps, and graphic depictions. This changed when, in 2011, the old pier ruins were unearthed during the port's reformation in preparation for the 2016 Olympics. The discovery was followed by a series of *in situ* archaeological enquiries conducted by Brazil's National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN), which encompassed not only the restoration of several layers of rock slates but the recovery of hundreds of objects that had belonged to the African captives (Lima, de Souza, and Sene 2014).

In parallel to IPHAN's research, the Valongo Wharf ruins started to gain prominence among practitioners of African-based cultures and traditions, including capoeira and candomblé (Adams 2021; R. Guimarães 2014; Honorato 2018). Gradually, the site became a place of encounter where members of the local Afro-Brazilian community gathered to reflect on their ancestral connections to the African continent. Clear evidence of this

process was that, in 2012, the wharf ruins were nominated as the place to celebrate the washing, 'a religious ritual practice associated with the processes of redemption and purification in *candomblé*' (Chuva and Peixoto 2020, 105).

Later, in 2017, the city council added the Valongo Wharf to Rio's Historical and Archaeological Circuit of African Heritage (*Circuito Histórico e Arqueológico da Herança Africana*), a collection of sites and urban landmarks of historical importance for African heritage in the port district (Honorato 2018). The circuit rapidly gained prominence within academic, activist, and touristic circles (Abreu 2021). Overall, the wide range of uses given to the Valongo Wharf – i.e. academic research, the promotion of cultural recovery, and political mobilisation – evidences a geographically based articulation of knowledges. These dynamics feed into a process of epistemic plurality in which 'the construction of new configurations of knowledge is anchored in local, situated, forms of experience and struggle' (Santos 2007, xxvi).

Nevertheless, the changing constellation of knowledge practices in the Valongo Wharf has not been a smooth process but one full of confusion, tension, and conflict. As Carlos¹² (personal communication, 10 January 2020) noted, urban transformations in Little Africa have manifested a flagrant lack of attention to the histories and legacies of trans-Atlantic slavery, a situation that has outraged some members of the Black movement. As a tourist guide who had been working at the New Blacks Institute for several years, Carlos was aware of the many controversies around the allocation of public funds to culture and heritage projects in the port. During our conversation, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the little attention that local and regional governments had placed on the Valongo Wharf and other architectural remains in the area: 'Here, projects related to African descendants are delayed even more than any other project. Our authorities avoid engaging with the traces of the trans-Atlantic slave trade because that would require a reckoning with all the forms of violence that colonisers exerted on the bodies of millions of African people'.

The opinions of my interlocutor resonate with observations made by Brazilian geographer Denilson Araújo de Oliveira, who has cogently argued that Little Africa's spatial transformation has encompassed systematic attempts to erase and negate Black agencies and subjectivities. In the case of Rio's port, colonial plans for urban development and redevelopment have implied the control and erasure of enslaved people's knowledges. As he notes, 'colonial violence has also used the configuration of space as a tool to deny that race has been historically deployed to subjugate people, control territories, and keep social hierarchies in place' (de Oliveira 2019, 4, author's translation).

In sum, the assertion of Afro-Brazilian cultures around the Valongo Wharf vestiges is integrally bound with transformations taking place in the realms of knowledge production and valuing. From this perspective, the pier's role in the collective memories of Rio's Afro-Brazilians, notably activists, community organisers, and members of the Black movement, shows that cultural and ethnic affirmation processes can be geographically grounded. As Santos (2007, xx) contends, 'the definition of the identity of peoples in the non-Western world and their collective rights tends to be strictly bound to a notion of "territoriality" (. . .). Differences between worldviews become explicit and turn into sites of struggle when the integrity of these collectives is threatened by alternative notions of relationships to territory and knowledges'.

The New Blacks Cemetery

Like the Valongo Wharf case, the burial ground known as the New Blacks Cemetery had been lost to layers of urban development during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Whilst there was a general idea of where the cemetery had been located, it was until 1996 that a series of casual excavations revealed its exact location. As revealed by subsequent archaeological and historical studies, the bodies found on the site belonged to African people aged 18–25 who had died during the long sea journey to Brazil or soon after arriving (Machado 2006; Vassallo and Cicalo 2015). Following this discovery, the property owners decided to create a museum to raise awareness about the violence of the Middle Passage. As a result, the New Blacks Institute of Memory and Research – or IPN – was created in 2005. As Marcia (personal communication, 6 January 2020, author's translation), noted during our interview, the IPN's mission is twofold: to serve as a reminder of the atrocities of the colonial regime in Brazil and to act as a politically committed organisation that seeks to challenge contemporary forms of anti-Black racism. In her view, as a member of the institution, 'the foundation of the IPN was backed by the moral imperative to show the material evidence of Black slavery to the broad Brazilian public. The founding members thought that [in visiting the IPN], Brazilians would better understand the history of slavery in Brazil and its multiple reverberations in our society today'.

Since its creation, the IPN has consolidated as an exhibition space where objects and explanatory text introduce visitors to the development and operation of the trans-Atlantic slavery system in Rio de Janeiro. Currently, the organisation is a modest space comprising two galleries, a library, and a small canteen. Two glass cases on the ground show some of the human remains found during the archaeological excavations. Small bone fragments, ceramics, and other relics are displayed on wall cases. Apart from the exhibition of human remains and objects, the IPN carries out a wide range of pedagogical activities concerning the study, preservation, and dissemination of the African legacy in Rio de Janeiro. In addition, the institution offers walking tours, workshops, reading groups, and academic courses on Black history and culture throughout the year.

Despite enduring a precarious financial situation (Honorato 2018), the IPN has become one of the most significant memory sites in Little Africa. Black activists and members of the local Afro-diasporic community have embraced the museum with enthusiasm, using it regularly as a venue for spiritual offerings and celebrations like jongo, maculelê, capoeira, and samba. Given these dynamics, there are grounds to argue that the IPN is not only a space of research and documentation; it is a site where the assertion of African-based identities and subjectivities is continuously taking place.

The Museum of Tomorrow

The third site approached by this research was the Museum of Tomorrow, a science and technology museum built in the port region in 2015 in the frame of an ambitious urban revitalisation project known as *Porto Maravilha* (The Marvellous Port). Whilst the emergence of this institution did not directly respond to the memorialisation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade nor the celebration of Afro-diasporic cultures, its geographic location prompted a series of disputes among the institutions and collectives working in the area. Some of those tensions were brought up during my conversations with local inhabitants. For instance, Camilla

(personal communication, 12 December 2019, author's translation), a community organiser and a resident of the Providência favela, felt dismayed with the asymmetrical allocation of resources and the forced removal of residents that the port's revitalisation entailed:

The birth of the Museum of Tomorrow was absurd for this city. It was outrageous in many respects. If only all the money allocated in the museum had been invested in public health, many favela residents could have access to medical attention. People in this favela have been waiting for ten years to get surgery. We lack a good quality health system and a good quality education system. The museum's creation was full of abuses. It was built by a mayor whose policies caused the highest number of forced removals in the history of this city.

According to its website, the Museum of Tomorrow is a place 'to explore, imagine, and conceive all the possibilities for constructing the future. An experimental museum, where the content is presented through a narrative that combines the accuracy of science with the expressiveness of art, using technology as a support in interactive environments and audiovisual and gaming facilities'. Its permanent exhibition comprises five main thematic areas, each of them addressing a different topic: the origins of the universe, life on planet Earth, the advent of the Anthropocene, global trends, and sustainable futures.

As my observations and interviews revealed, the museum's permanent exhibition does not directly engage with Rio's role in the Atlantic World, nor does it explicitly mention Little Africa as a stronghold for Afro-Brazilian history, culture, and identity. To delve into this blind spot, I interviewed Lucas and André, two of the museum's education assistants who self-identify as Black. During our conversation, they noted that a part of their pedagogical practice concerned the disconnections between the Museum of Tomorrow and its immediate context. To clarify his point, Lucas (personal communication, 8 October 2019, author's translation) addressed the Evidence of Black Cultures programme (*Evidências das Culturas Negras*), a seminar series he helped organise every month.

The Evidence of Black Cultures seminar series was born around Black Awareness Day, celebrated on November 20 in Brazil. It responded to the lack of mention of Afro-Brazilian culture and heritage at the permanent exhibition. In 2016, another Black staffer and I organised this activity programme to bring the public closer to Black social, political, and geographical existence. The first seminars addressed issues such as Afro-Brazilian storytelling, Black feminism, Black pop culture, and carceral geographies, to name a few'.

Following the momentum of the seminars, the museum launched the *Comissão de Matriz Africana* (roughly translated as African Matrix Commission), a committee formed by curators, staffers, members of the Black movement in Rio, and representatives from local organisations, including the New Blacks Institute and the *afoxé* group *Filhos de Gandhi*.¹³ Since 2016, the commission has organised activities that foreground the social reality, contributions, culture, and identity of Africa, Africans, and Afro-Brazilians with a particular focus on the city's port. Moreover, and according to André (personal communication, 6 December 2019, author's translation), the African Matrix Commission has encouraged the museum staff to let their pedagogical practice be informed by Afro-Brazilian memories, identities, and experiences. As a result, some curators and education assistants have organised workshops and guided visits to memory sites nearby. In André's words, these interventions have been grounded on a thoughtful consideration of Little Africa's socio-spatial configuration:

The territorial dimension is inextricable from the history of slavery and the heritage of Afro-diasporic communities in Rio. Black resistance and anti-colonial initiatives in Little Africa have long been grounded in geographical spaces like the Valongo Wharf or the Rock of Salt. My pedagogical practice directly deals with these connections. It relates to the local inhabitants and their emotional cartographies, for example, individual and collective memories linked to specific places in Little Africa. These are also forms of knowledge-making.

When describing his pedagogical practice, Lucas also highlighted his concern with the geographic context of the museum:

I am interested in addressing and understanding socio-spatial processes, including the spatial manifestations of environmental injustice. For this reason, I work in deprived areas, like favelas. Favelas are a clear manifestation of environmental racism because, generally, an ethnic group – Blacks – makes up the bulk of a favela's population. As irregular settlements, favelas get less sanitation or waste collection services than other city areas. The museum's permanent exhibition covers issues such as waste management. As part of my practice, I bridge those issues with reflections on the Black geographical experience. I draw attention to the fact that environmental challenges are also geographic matters that run along racial lines.

Overall, the ideas shared by my interlocutors at the Museum of Tomorrow resonate with theorisations from Black geographies scholars, whose work has analysed how Black communities create spaces of endurance, belonging, and resistance through social interaction across the Americas. It thus can be argued that Black place-making in Little Africa encompasses the ways in which staff from cultural institutions and members of the Brazilian Black movement relate to places by inscribing them with their own interpretations and meanings. As Vassallo and Bitter (2018, 112) remark, 'struggles for the recovery of Black memories and ancestral knowledges are also forms of resistance against racial inequality and in defence of Black agency in contemporary times'.

Conclusions

This article has addressed the geographic dimensions of creative, spiritual, and pedagogical practices across a region known as Little Africa in the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro. Drawing upon ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews, I have contended that the collective valuing and appropriation of local sites of memory has opened windows into the knowledges, imaginaries, and experiences of historically underrepresented communities in Rio de Janeiro, most notably those pertaining to the African diaspora. Along this line, I have sought to illustrate how the stories, languages, and modes of negotiation of Black activists and their allies form part of a constellation of non-Western-centric spatial imaginations. In sum, I have argued that Black forms of enactment and spatial resignification directly feed into a landscape of 'epistemic plurality' (Santos 2007).

In particular, I have engaged with three locations in Little Africa: the Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site, the New Blacks Institute, and the Museum of Tomorrow. Firstly, I have shown that the socio-spatial engagement of activists, religious leaders, and museum educators with the Valongo Wharf exemplifies a form of 'Black diasporic claim to space' (McKittrick 2011, 8). Secondly, I have addressed the New Blacks Institute (IPN), a museum and memory site whose operation illustrates that, in Rio de Janeiro's port region, anti-

colonial and anti-racist practices and narratives are territorialised. As de Oliveira (2019) puts it, the IPN is a site where the writings of time and space (*geo-grafias*) that had been silenced by slavery and racism are acquiring new strength.

Thirdly, I have considered the Museum of Tomorrow, a science museum created in 2015 as part of an ambitious urban regeneration project known as *Porto Maravilha*. Given its ties to the *Porto Maravilha* project, the museum has been the target of harsh criticism from a wide range of voices in Little Africa, including some of my interlocutors. Meanwhile, as I observed, some of the museum's staff members have not only acknowledged those criticisms but also undertaken curatorial and pedagogical interventions focused on Afro-descendant memories and heritage and their spatial expressions in Little Africa. What these antagonisms and tensions exemplify is that whilst the Museum of Tomorrow operates within a broader machinery of spatial and epistemic violence (Acioly Jr. 2001; Friendly and Pimentel Walker 2022; de Oliveira 2019; Sánchez and Broudehoux 2013), the anti-colonial and anti-racist practices undertaken by some of its staff presents a direct challenge to the supremacy of Western-centric narratives and worldviews.

Furthermore, in undertaking a geographical approach to Little Africa, I have drawn on conceptual developments from the academic subfields known as Black geographies in North America and *geografias negras* in Brazil. Notably, I have drawn upon ideas developed by several geographers (e.g. Cruz and de Oliveira 2017; G. Guimarães 2020; de Oliveira 2019; dos Santos 2007, 2011), whose extensive body of work has shown how Afro-diasporic communities resist, contest, and circumvent hegemonic versions of history while putting forward counter-narratives of their lives in the Americas.

Related to the above, and in close dialogue with theorisations from decolonial studies, I have contended that community organisers and members of the Black movement in Rio de Janeiro are active knowledge producers through their everyday experiences and understanding of time and space. Indeed, members of Afro-diasporic groups and other militant collectives – including the New Blacks Institute and the African Matrix Commission at the Museum of Tomorrow – read the written traces of history to value and assert their understanding of the world. Through these acts of spatial reading and writing, they contribute to the decentring of Euro-Western perspectives and the valuing of subaltern epistemic projects.

Overall, this contribution has sought to portray Little Africa as a region where the social appropriation of space and meaning-making based on the material landscape have gone hand in hand with forms of resistance, encounter, and anti-colonial thinking. From this perspective, the ways in which knowledge production practices are interfaced with spatial configurations provide the evidence to affirm that epistemic plurality can be geographically grounded. In this view, a geographic and decolonial reading of Little Africa provides insight into the acts of resistance and refusal through which members of the African diaspora (and their allies) interrogate and resist contemporary forms of oppression.

Notes

1. I undertook three types of walks across the region. The first type consisted of open-guided tours offered by the New Blacks Institute to a broad audience, including international tourists, Brazilian visitors, residents of Rio de Janeiro, students, and researchers. The second type of walk was akin to what Evans and Jones (2011) call the walking interview. I conducted this

exercise with three of my interviewees. Unlike the group tours, this one-to-one engagement allowed me to record the conversation and delve into specific questions concerning the research site. Lastly, I undertook around 10 independent strolls across the port. These walks helped me become acquainted with the area and take a visual record of buildings, street art, and the social uses of space.

2. Throughout this article, I use the expressions Black Brazilian and Afro-Brazilian interchangeably. However, I acknowledge the nuances of this approach as, for example, not all Brazilians of African descent self-identify as Black.
3. In Brazil, the prohibition of the trans-Atlantic slave traffic began in 1831 and officially ended in 1850. Specific laws freed some enslaved people in a legal reform process that ended with the abolition of slavery in 1888.
4. Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian cultural practice – simultaneously a fight and a dance. As suggested on the entry for ‘capoeira circle’ on UNESCO’s website, it can be interpreted as a tradition, a sport, and even an art form. Candomblé is a ‘religion derived from African animism, of totemic and family origin, in which the deities – known as *orishas* – are worshipped’ (Starling and Schwarcz 2018).
5. This recognition was given by the state heritage agency INEPAC (Institute of Artistic and Cultural Heritage of the State of Rio de Janeiro) (Chuva and Peixoto 2020).
6. Quilombos were groups of slave escapees who fled from plantations, mines, or domestic serfdom, searching for freedom. At present, Brazil’s Federal Constitution explicitly recognises ‘quilombo remnant communities’ as ‘communities whose ways of life [are] reminiscent of the quilombos of the past’ (Bledsoe 2017, 37).
7. Other sites of historical relevance in Rio de Janeiro’s port include the House of Tia Ciata, the Valongo floating gardens, and the Cultural Centre José Bonifácio (Vassallo and Cicalo 2015).
8. The Palmares Cultural Foundation is a federal public entity devoted to preserving Afro-Brazilian culture. This institution is also entrusted with issuing official certificates to quilombo remnant communities (Friendly and Pimentel Walker 2022; Hatzikidi 2019).
9. It is beyond the scope of this article to consider the similar or divergent ways in which Afro-descendant populations and Indigenous peoples endured colonial violence in the Americas, or more specifically in Brazil. Undoubtedly, Native and Black communities have been impacted by 500 plus years of white supremacy, anti-Black violence, settler colonialism, and genocide. It is precisely from the recognition of this common ground that Tiffany Lethabo King, Andrea Smith, Jenell Navarro (2020), Christina Sharpe (2016), and many other scholars and activists have pushed for a generative dialogue between Native and Black studies. As they convincingly argue, these academic fields can offer ‘conceptual space to acknowledge philosophical, literary, and historical traditions that can attend to histories of both enslavement and colonialism’ (King, Navarro, and Smith 2020, 5). Put another way, in considering the relationship between Indigenous genocide and anti-Blackness, these thinkers have called for an approach that further explores the complexities of the Indigenous–Black relations and hence the political possibilities that emerge from such questions. While these exchanges have primarily focused on the North American context, some parallels can be drawn with the southern sub-continent (see, for example, Wade 2018).
10. For an in-depth account of *geografias negras* in Brazil, see Volume 12 of the Brazilian Association of Black Researchers (ABPN) Journal, edited by Anna M. Canavarro Benite, Cintia Camargo Vianna, José Antonio Novaes da Silva, and Mércia Otaviana Barbosa de Sá Figueiredo: <https://abpnrevista.org.br/index.php/site/issue/view/38>. See also Issue 104 on Geography and ethno-racial relations in the Sao Paulo’s Geographical Bulletin (*Boletim Paulista de Geografia*): <https://publicacoes.agb.org.br/index.php/boletim-paulista/issue/view/167>
11. Guimarães purposely writes *geo-grafias* with a hyphen to stress the action of reading graphs (signs) on the landscape.
12. The names of all participants have been anonymised with pseudonyms. The author obtained written informed consent from all interviewees, who authorised the reproduction of all or part of their interviews.

13. *Filhos de Gandhi* is a street-dancing group associated with Yoruba religion and culture.

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