



**Case Watkins.** *Palm Oil Diaspora*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xix + 347 pp. \$80.00, e-book, ISBN 978-1-108-80829-3.

**Reviewed by** Oscar de la Torre (UNC Charlotte)

**Published on** H-LatAm (July, 2022)

**Commissioned by** Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

Case Watkins's *Palm Oil Diaspora* interrogates the significance of *dendê* palm oil to Afro-diasporic landscapes and economies in the Brazilian state of Bahia over the last five centuries. Watkins employs a number of approaches from different disciplines and thematic fields to produce a cunningly structured and meticulously researched monograph. This is not only the study of a single crop across time and space. It is also a multifaceted analysis of the landscapes created around palm oil, an economic history of the palm oil trade, and a social history of Afro-Brazilian farmers navigating subsistence, trade, and modern agribusiness while they erected African spiritual geographies in a corner of Brazil where Blackness is both used in discourses of liberation and commodified by market and state forces.

The African Oil Palm, or *Elaeis guineensis*, originated in the areas of transition (or ecotones) between the forests and the savannas of the African tropics. Over the last millennia West and West Central Africans planted it alongside many other species and used its fruits to make oil, turning this product into not only a staple of local cuisine but also a medical remedy and a key element and symbol of the cosmology and the spiritual practices of Yoruba and Bantu-speaking Africans, to

name just a few. As transatlantic exchanges deepened in the 1500s, palm oil “followed the transatlantic slave economy through Africa, at sea, and on arrival in the Americas” (p. 69), given its sustained use as a source of food, as a spice, as a medicine—now adding a macabre use as an unguent to anoint the bodies for sale of enslaved African workers. There is evidence that by the 1500s palm oil was present not only on the Portuguese-colonized islands of coastal Africa such as São Tomé but also in coastal Brazil as well, at the time in the process of colonization and settlement. The first unequivocal account of the *dendê* palm in Brazil dates from 1699, when English privateer William Dampier described large numbers of them near the provincial capital of Salvador—an unequivocal sign that the palm had been cultivated for decades, as the tree itself needed at the time some years to become a productive, seed-bearing adult.

Once in Brazil, the *dendezeiro* became key to what Watkins conceptualizes as a process of landscape creolization, a modification and restructuring of local landscapes due to the arrival of African and European species and socioecological practices through mechanisms that went well beyond the control of Luso-Brazilian elites. While Watkins

discusses this process in chapters 3 and 4, it is in the latter that the historic, social, and ecological centrality of dendê to the Afro-Brazilians of Bahia truly emerges before the reader's eyes. While by 1800 the plant was present throughout coastal Brazil, it was mainly in Bahia where dense and productive groves abounded, attesting to the importance of dendê oil to Black Bahians—be them free or enslaved. It was they who planted groves of dendê next to mangroves, for example, an ecotonal agroecological strategy with clear West African origins. Many Afro-Brazilians also cultivated groves of dendê palm next to their manioc grounds, be it under slavery, as free smallholding farmers, and even as maroons trying to carve a livelihood away from slaveholders. While Bahian elites preferred European olive oil, Black and mixed-race *bahianos* opted for dendê oil instead, gradually creating “landscapes of resistance” where the palm was cultivated on the margins of sugar monoculture. Groves of *dendezeiros* became home to temples of *candomblé*, Brazil's Yoruba religion, and the oil was used in rituals dedicated to the orishas Ogum, Oxóssi, and others. Dendê oil thus became not only key to an “ancestral ecotonal subsistence strategy” (p. 132), but also the embodiment of Afro-Brazilian resistance to “European regimes, diets, and economies” (p. 133).

Watkins then shifts gears to discuss dendê's commercial history from an Afro-diasporic perspective. Not only did a transatlantic trade of palm oil develop in tandem with the slave trade, he argues. The exports and imports of this oil in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also attest to the formation of commercial linkages between Bahia and West Africa that bypassed Portugal, honoring this state's traditional emphasis on its deep and meaningful ties with the original continent. Gradually, however, the rise of European colonialism in Africa undermined this trade in the late 1800s, and Black and mixed-race producers and merchants transformed Salvador into an important hub of dendê production and trade. Before abolition, enslaved Afro-Brazilians also relied on

dendê oil as a resource to collect resources in order to pay for their own freedom and that of their families. Despite the reasonably well-documented trade of the oil, during the nineteenth century its production is somewhat harder to document in the archival record, as the groves of *dendezeiros* were often “stubbornly illegible” (p. 208) to property appraisers describing agricultural sites in commercial transactions and probate inventories. The invisibility of dendê production and of dendê producers was a function of Brazilian anti-Black racism, Watkins claims, showing the historic work of racist ideas in the Brazilian countryside.

It was only after World War II that palm oil production attracted the attention of agribusiness companies and the Brazilian state. The postwar decades brought successive studies of commercial viability, and by 1960 the industrialization of palm oil mills led to the arrival of monoculture and industrial processing under the control of large agribusiness conglomerates such as Opalma. Despite the shocks and the encroachments that modern agribusiness caused to Bahia's small producers, mostly Afro-Brazilian farmers, Watkins claims that the traditional dendê economy did not disappear: in the present most producers are still smallholding farmers growing the palms in biodiverse groves and selling the oil in regional markets. The activity is considered key not only to the present-day *bahianas de acarajê*, Black women street vendors who proudly display their Afro-Brazilian roots in urban spaces, but also to the state-recognized Black rural communities known as *quilombos*, who also perform dendê production to audiences that visit them seeking agri-tourism and roots-tourism activities. However, Watkins forewarns the reader that dendê producers remain under multiple threats in the present, including climate change, unhinged oscillations of global market forces, and still, incredibly, an official undercounting and even invisibility of household oil production for the different agencies of the Brazilian state.

In sum, Watkins has produced an exuberant study about a key product in the history, the economy, the geography, the social ecology, and the spirituality of Afro-Brazil and of Bahia. The author's willingness to connect with concepts coming from different disciplines occasionally leads to chapters that discuss dendê production, trade, spiritual use, social circumstances, and ecosocial aspects simultaneously, but overall the final result is a rich and suggestive product. I suspect that the invisibility of dendê in probate records and com-

mercial transactions might have diminished had he accessed the descriptive memorials of land deeds (*títulos definitivos*) that exist in the different Brazilian states' land bureaus, although the accessibility of those sources varies significantly according to multiple circumstances both past and present. Nevertheless, this is a tasty, multifaceted, and original analysis of dendê oil from a historic, geographic, and Afro-diasporic perspective that is sure to become a work of reference in the near future.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

**Citation:** Oscar de la Torre. Review of Watkins, Case. *Palm Oil Diaspora*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. July, 2022.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57002>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.