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**COUNTDOWN TO AN IMPASSE: EXPERTISE AND THE  
MEDIATION OF INEQUALITY AT BRAZIL'S ALCÂNTARA  
LAUNCH CENTER**

**SEAN T. MITCHELL**

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# paper



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**COUNTDOWN TO AN IMPASSE:  
EXPERTISE AND THE MEDIATION OF INEQUALITY AT  
BRAZIL'S ALCÂNTARA LAUNCH CENTER**

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**Working Paper #413 – October 2016**

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**Keywords:** Brazil; inequality; technoscience; expertise; race; governance; ethnography

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the conflicts surrounding Brazil's Alcântara spaceport through an ethnographic analysis of an important meeting, and it advances some arguments about the use of expertise in social conflict. Conceived at the end of Brazil's 1964–1985 military regime, the spaceport has long been at the center of social conflict. Today it is utilized by Brazil's civilian and military space programs, often at odds with each other. When the base was built, some 1,500 villagers were removed from their land; other villages surrounding the base have resisted expropriation, assisted by a wide network of allies. During decades of conflict, villagers have increasingly come to mobilize around a contemporary ethnoracial identity, *quilombola* (escaped-slave descendant), prompted in part by a clause in Brazil's 1988 constitution that requires that the state grant land rights to *quilombo*-descended communities. I argue that: 1) participants in Alcântara's conflicts often frame their arguments by placing boundaries around technical, natural, and social domains—that is, by making claims about ontology; 2) such framing privileges varied forms of expertise; and 3) examining deployments of expertise is important for understanding relations of inequality in situations where globally dispersed technologies are significant (everywhere) and, also, when ambiguous, group-specific rights are involved (such as those of the *quilombolas*). In my consideration of the ontological character of some political claims, I briefly consider the so-called ontological turn in anthropological theory in order to argue against the construal of social differences as ontological ones.

## RESUMEN

Este artigo analisa os conflitos sociais engendrados a partir do estabelecimento do Centro de Lançamento de Alcântara por meio da análise etnográfica de uma reunião que ocorreu entre atores envolvidos no conflito. O artigo também tece considerações teóricas acerca da utilização do conhecimento técnico em situações de conflito social. Concebido no final do regime militar (1964–1985), o Centro de Lançamento está no bojo dos conflitos sociais da cidade de Alcântara. Atualmente, o Centro é utilizado pelos programas espaciais civis e militares, contudo, muitas vezes com desacordos entre eles. No momento em que a base foi construída, cerca de 1.500 moradores foram removidos de suas terras, no entanto, outros resistiram à desapropriação, apoiados por uma ampla rede de aliados. Durante décadas de conflito, os moradores resistentes fortaleceram sua mobilização por meio da identidade ethnoracial, quilombola, motivados, em parte, pela cláusula da Constituição de 1988 que protege a terra dos remanescentes das comunidades de quilombos. Isto posto, desenvolvo, no artigo, os seguintes argumentos: 1) Os participantes dos conflitos relativos à base de Alcântara frequentemente desenvolvem seus argumentos por meio do estabelecimento de limites técnicos, naturais, e sociais, isto é, por meio de reivindicações que utilizam argumentos de cunho ontológico; 2) Esta forma de argumentação privilegia várias formas de conhecimento técnico; e 3) Examinar a utilização desse tipo de conhecimento é importante para compreender as relações de desigualdade que se estabelecem em situações em que são significativas tanto as tecnologias dispersas globalmente como os direitos específicos de grupos ambiguamente construídos. Por fim, para desenvolver as minhas considerações acerca do caráter ontológico presente nessas reivindicações políticas, utilizo breves reflexões acerca da chamada “virada ontológica” que se estabeleceu no interior da teoria antropológica, no intuito de argumentar contra a interpretação que compreende as diferenças sociais como diferenças ontológicas.

A navigator in this city wishes to gauge his position by the sun. He is not in the port, where his ship is anchored, but with his feet on dry land. With tranquility and confidence, he takes his astrolabe in hand. And what happens? Something monstrous! One day he finds that Maranhão is at one degree, another day at half a degree, another day at two degrees, and another day at none at all. This is why navigators who are inexperienced on this coast get trapped in the sand, and why so many ships have been lost here. Even the sun—the trustworthy and inflexible measure of time, place and height all over the world—becomes a liar when it arrives in Maranhão. What truth could be spoken by those whose hearts and minds are influenced by that sun? Those who live in Maranhão suffer the same effects as do the navigators, and nobody here knows where they are or where they belong... One day you are at one level, and the next at another, because the lips [lábios] are like the astrolabes [astrolábios] Look and you shall find this an inescapable truth: there is no truth in Maranhão.  
Vieira 1951 [1654] <sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION: EXPERTISE AND HIERARCHY IN ALCÂNTARA

This paper is based on my long-term ethnographic research (from 2001 to this publication in 2016) on the conflicts around Brazil's spaceport on the peninsula of Alcântara in the state of Maranhão, on the stretch of coast where Brazil's northeast meets the Amazon. The spaceport was conceived in 1979 by the 1964–1985 military regime. In 1986–87, some 1,500 principally Afro-Brazilian coastal villagers were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to live in Air Force–built villages, *agrovilas*. Since then, other coastal villages have been slated for expropriation. *Agroville* residents were deprived of their long-standing access to the resources of the sea. Moreover, the *agrovila* households were given individual land plots—too small for the collective swidden horticulture practiced in the coastal communities. Although people in Alcântara's remaining coastal villages have maintained a robust subsistence economy, those in the *agrovilas* were reduced to a wage-dependent semi-peasantry. This relative impoverishment has fed vigorous opposition to future land expropriation in the area.

In recent years, that opposition has taken the form of mobilization around a clause in Brazil's 1988 constitution, the “*Quilombo Clause*,” requiring that the state grant “inalienable” land rights (*propriedade definitiva*) to *remanescentes das comunidades dos quilombos* (literally, remnants of escaped-slave communities). Mobilization around the *Quilombo Clause* has

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<sup>1</sup> This and all other translations from the Portuguese, of both written and spoken text, are my own.

produced significant ethnoracial transformation in those communities (S. T. Mitchell 2015, 2016), in Alcântara as in the rest of Brazil (Arruti 2006; Figueiredo 2011; French 2009; Kenny 2011). In their struggles, Alcântara's residents have also won many allies among Brazilian and foreign NGOs, anthropologists, and lawyers. Their resistance has helped forestall further land expropriations, yet, because of military opposition, no constitutionally mandated land titles have been issued in Alcântara.

The space program is itself divided. There have been many successful sub-orbital launches from the site but, as of yet, no successful satellite launches. Moreover, in 2003 Brazil's VLS satellite launch rocket exploded on the launch pad, killing 21 Brazilian technicians (S. T. Mitchell 2013). Until 1994, Brazil's space program was exclusively under control of the military. However, in 1994, under pressure from the United States to demilitarize the space program, the Brazilian government created a civilian space agency (AEB), which is nominally in control of the entire space program. This has left Brazil with, in effect, two space programs, one civilian and one military, each institutionalizing different visions of the space program's role in national development (S. T. Mitchell 2013).

The conflict in Alcântara is most often read by journalists and government representatives as a story of age-old traditions confronting space age technology (e.g., Ribeiro 2004), an interpretation that relies on temporalized tropes to place the *quilombolas* in the past and the Brazilian space program in the future—or, perhaps, a more recent “space age” past (e.g., Corrêa 2007). Anthropologists have, for a while now, generally rejected such analyses that render the writer and ethnographic subject non-coeval (Fabian 1983). There are more revealing ways of interpreting the conflict: as a conflict of interests among highly unequal groups (Almeida 2006); as a conflict over visions of the future of the Brazilian nation-state (S. T. Mitchell 2013); as one partially reflecting differing versions of “modernity” (Silberling 2003). But the conflict might also be viewed from an angle absent in other accounts: as a conflict among multiple kinds of expertise and versions of reality, as engineers, lawyers, anthropologists, and horticulturalists confront each other with claims about social, natural, and technical necessity and contingency.

Frequently when studying Alcântara's conflicts, where I had expected to encounter an argument about what *ought* to be—about what people or institutions *should* do—I encountered instead what seemed a technical assertion about what *is*. This paper examines the significance of such framing in Alcântara's conflicts, as well as in others with similar conditions. Max Weber

identified three ways in which domination could be legitimated: through traditional, rational, and charismatic means (1978 [1922], 212–54). In highly complex and heterogeneous social situations, expert knowledge is another modality through which domination and inequality may legitimated—but also contested. There are no reasonable grounds to assert the legitimacy of the impossible, so the authority to delimit the technically possible easily becomes a key basis of legitimation (Haugaard 2000, 74). In this paper, I make the following three arguments: 1) Participants in the conflicts surrounding Brazil’s spaceport in Alcântara, Maranhão, as in many others, sometimes frame their arguments by moving boundaries around technical, natural, and social domains. 2) Such framing legitimates and privileges the power of experts. 3) Examining deployments of expertise is particularly important for understanding domination and inequality a) in situations in which specialized, technical knowledge is in some way crucial, and b) when group-specific rights are involved, especially when the terms of groupness that delimit access to those rights is in some way ambiguous, as is the case in Alcântara.

At least since David Hume’s identification of the “is-ought problem” (1978 [1739]), much Western political philosophy has sought to demarcate the analytical divide between *is* and *ought*. Yet political claims (and, indeed, all social life) generally include a tangle of *is* and *ought* aspects—of ontological and normative claims. Any assertion of a divide between *is* and *ought*, between the *ontological* and the *normative*, the *technical* and *social*, the *immutable* and *mutable*, is a cultural and sometimes a political assertion—whether that assertion is true or false. Such divides are often objects of dispute and make for important anthropological objects of analysis.

## TECHNOLOGY, NATURE, SOCIAL RELATIONS, AND ALCÂNTARA’S HISTORY

I excerpted this paper’s epigraph from a famous sermon by the Jesuit Priest, Antônio Vieira. This “emperor of the Portuguese language,” as poet Fernando Pessoa called him, is today often celebrated in Brazil for his advocacy of indigenous Brazilians and for his accomplishments as author and orator. He departed from Bahia—then the heart of the Portuguese slave-driven sugar export economy—in 1653, the year before he gave this sermon, to arrive in a Maranhão mostly unexplored by the Portuguese. In seventeenth-century northern Brazil, Jesuits competed with colonists for control of the Portuguese Crown’s new land and subjects (Schwartz and Langfur 2005, 85–86), and Vieira dedicated his efforts to moralizing the colonists, missionizing the

indigenous people, and extending the Crown's territorial reach. In 1655, Vieira won concessions from the Crown, bringing indigenous people under Jesuit (rather than colonist) authority and placing limitations on indigenous slavery. Vieira's concessions from the Crown had a tremendous impact on Alcântara, then largely populated by Tupinambá. After 1655, the Jesuits (and later other Catholic orders) formed mission villages (*aldeias*) in the interior, forcibly grouping many of those Tupinambá into "indigenous peasantry," as Schwartz has put it (1978, 50). When indigenous Brazilians were declared formally free a century later in 1755 and the Jesuits expelled from Brazil in 1759 (Fausto 1999, 46), the former mission villages in Alcântara's northeast formed havens for Afro-Brazilians who escaped and otherwise left the region's plantations, contributing to the development of the mixed-race free peasantry that spread throughout the municipality of Alcântara as the region's cotton economy declined in the 1820s (Assunção 2010; Beckert 2014; Bethell 1984, 321–22; Furtado 1959; Viveiros 1954). Today this history forms the basis of the claim that Alcântara forms an "ethnic territory" that must be protected under the Brazilian constitution's *Quilombo* Clause, all of which has become central to mobilization around the spaceport.

In the "Sermon of the Fifth Sunday of Lent" from which the epigraph is taken, orating to the provincial elite in a nascent settler colonial society, Vieira posited a technological, human, and moral order to parallel the natural and celestial order. Adding a technological emphasis to the broader colonial anxiety about the breakdown of European order in the tropics (J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff 1991, 108; Silverblatt 2004), the priest suggested that Maranhão's proximity to the equator made elsewhere trustworthy astrolabes unreliable, leading ships astray and society into deception and disarray. In Maranhão "even the sun and the sky tell lies," Vieira proclaimed, describing a treachery of machines and humans made inevitable by the treachery of the skies.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Vieira's verdict on Maranhão—the "kingdom of lies"—is a familiar refrain in Maranhão politics and popular culture. Perhaps Maranhão's most famous contemporary musical export, for example, the Maranhão-born singer-songwriter Zeca Baleiro, frames a song, "A Serpente (Outra Lenda)," with quotes from the sermon. The song deftly combines the trance-like rhythms of the *Matraca*-style *Bumba-Meu-Boi* folk music from Maranhão with rock instrumentation and phrasing. Baleiro draws on macabre Maranhão mythology in a hymn to the serpent described by Maranhão folklore as growing beneath São Luís, the island on which Maranhão's capital city is located. According to legend, when the serpent has grown enough that its head reaches its tail, it will strangle the entire island, dragging it to the depths of the sea. Ambiguously joining a spirit of playful festiveness with nostalgia and a grim destructiveness, the chorus rousing implores: "I want to see, want to see the serpent wake. I want to see, want to see the serpent wake. So that the city might never again sleep. So that the city might never again sleep."

In choosing this epigraph for a paper that discusses both threads of deception and a Brazilian space program that is frequently criticized as a failure (Amaral 2009), I do not mean to add my voice to Vieira's pessimism about Maranhão. Instead, I include the famous sermon because Vieira's words suggestively invoke some of the paper's principal themes: the central—yet transforming—place of hierarchy in Alcântara's and Brazil's social relations; the social power of deception and confusion; and how assertions about relations between natural and technical domains are used to make arguments about social relations.

### THE PLACEMENT OF THE BASE

Accompanied by a number of people from Alcântara's *quilombo* movement, and some lawyers and activists from elsewhere in Brazil, I climbed into one of the few rickety Kombi vans that circulate as rental transport on the dirt roads of Alcântara's interior on a scorching Thursday morning in June 2005. We made the one-and-a-half-hour drive from Alcântara's small urban nucleus of about 5,000 to the coastal village of Mamuna, slated for expropriation since 1986. We were headed to an event that was billed as a very important meeting called by the GEI (Executive Interministerial Group), the federal government group then charged with settling Alcântara's seemingly intractable land disputes.

Towards the end of the meeting, a clearly frustrated Brazilian Air Force Lieutenant-Colonel, whom I call Anselmo,<sup>3</sup> was caught in what must have been for him an unexpected dispute with Machado, one of the leaders of Alcântara's *quilombo* movement. "Look!" the Lieutenant-Colonel exclaimed:

The Air Force got called to do this job because we know how to fly. Airplanes, you name it, we know how to fly it. So together with the [then] Ministry of Development and of Technology, and various other Ministries, we were one of many agencies involved in what was an activity of the entire government. Just like Franz [the head of the GEI] put it, the government tried to prepare the country for an activity that few countries in the world have developed.

But Franz said that this is the best place in the world and, well, it just isn't: because it's not on the equator. Back then, though, there was lots of interference from the Maranhão state government to bring Brazil's main launching base here. But [the State of] Amapá would be a much better place for it. The equator runs right through Amapá. But there was [political] interference [from the government] and we did our job.

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<sup>3</sup> All names of people who are not public figures or published authors are pseudonyms.

The airman and military bureaucrat was claiming that from a technical standpoint, Alcântara was not the best site for the base, a very surprising claim to be admitted publicly. The official line, repeated in press releases by the Brazilian government and by all official sources, is that Alcântara is the best launching location in Brazil and the Alcântara Launch Center the best-located launching base in the world. The advantages usually mentioned for the positioning of the base are its 2.18° distance from the equator (which gives geostationary launches a great boost and advantage in fuel efficiency compared to other launching sites<sup>4</sup>); its peninsular location (which facilitates a variety of launch trajectories); a nearby deep-water port and medium-sized city; low population density; and relatively stable yearly weather patterns (which make more-or-less predictable year-round launching possible). Yet for Lieutenant-Colonel Anselmo, it was the “interference” of Maranhão-state politicians that had brought the base here. From a purely technical standpoint, the base would be better located in the state of Amapá, where Brazil’s Atlantic coast meets the equator.<sup>5</sup>

Anselmo’s claim contained a threat, and was widely interpreted as such by people at the meeting: if Alcântara’s locals did not relent, the government would depart for Amapá, taking the promised development aid with them. Without the Space Program, Anselmo blustered: “Alcântara is just another municipality like thousands of others in Brazil, with all the same problems.”

Notice that Lieutenant Colonel Anselmo’s argument hinges on the dividing line between the technical and the social—the first presumed unquestionable and stable, while the second is considered prone to the whims of desire and politics. Here, Anselmo was asserting that a presumed technical issue, the location of the base, was in fact social and thus subject to political interference in an otherwise transparently technical project. At other times, he defensively made a converse claim: that new civilian-controlled launching installations could not be placed inside

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<sup>4</sup> Including the European space agency’s launching center at Kourou in French Guiana, which is 5.3° north of the equator.

<sup>5</sup> Anselmo was implying that it was Maranhão potentate, former Brazilian president, and national power broker José Sarney who brought the base, not to the Air Force’s preferred location, the state of Amapá to the north, but to Alcântara. A number of sources within the federal government later confirmed this claim, and I have no reason to doubt its truth. During the time of Sarney’s presidency, critics charged that he transformed the space program into a source of clientelist money for Maranhão. A 1989 article in the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper, for example, criticized the president: “The Brazilian Complete Space mission (MECB), which predicts the launch of the first national satellite in the second semester of this year, was reduced, during the Sarney government, to the mere inauguration of the launch Base in Alcântara, in Maranhão (the state where the president was born)” (*Folha de São Paulo* 1989).

the existing base for technical, rather than political, reasons and for those same technical reasons had to be placed on villager land. In both cases, however, he was asserting special technical and institutional knowledge or expertise. Additionally, in trying to undermine the villagers' leverage by declaring the base's placement political rather than technical, Anselmo was opening a debate that had never, as far as I know, been publicly considered in the struggles over Alcântara.

Later that evening, I discussed the day's events with some of the activists who had been at the meeting. Nothing else that government representatives had said at the meeting was taken very seriously by the activists, but Anselmo's implicit threat was a matter of real concern. "Is this true? Are there other places where they could put the base?" one community leader, Claudia, asked me, perhaps supposing that as an anthropologist from a foreign university I might have some relevant expertise, although I did not. Her face showed what I read as a mix of happy anticipation—since the base was the source of much local social strife—and fear—since the base was also supposed to be the source of many promised benefits. None of us could answer the question.<sup>6</sup> We had no expert or insider knowledge to match the Lieutenant Colonel's.

In so heterogeneous and technologically complex a conflict, access to relevant expertise is necessarily limited yet also crucial in structuring political outcomes. Expert arguments about technical necessity leave non-experts with limited options: such arguments can be ignored or greeted with suspicion, but they cannot easily be addressed or contested by non-experts on their own terms. Fortunately for the villagers, they too had a series of experts and arguments about technical necessity, as we will see.

### **SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE: COMPETING BLACK BOXES**

The technical complexity and specificity of satellite launching makes it an exclusive domain of highly trained experts. Scientific facts and technological objects—true and efficacious though they may be—are developed through the contingent activities of scientists and engineers (Latour and Woolgar 1979). When these painstakingly developed facts and objects move into broader political conversations or become objects of contestation, however, they privilege the

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<sup>6</sup> After consulting a number of experts about the matter, I do know the answers to these questions now. There are a number of places on the Brazilian coast offering equivalent gravitational advantages to Alcântara's (though it has always been highly unlikely that the Brazilian government would move such a costly installation). And there is enough space for two or three additional installations to be placed within the existing base. In fact, after a 2008 judicial decision, one was (S. T. Mitchell forthcoming).

perspectives of those who can claim relevant technical expertise. That no one on the *quilombola* side of Alcântara's conflicts has sufficient technical knowledge to contest space program representatives about satellite launching only increases the incentive for these representatives to frame arguments in technical terms, much as a rigid teacher might dismiss the argument of a contesting student.

The superiority of Alcântara as a launching site had long been taken for granted by participants in the debates over Alcântara, and the Air Force usually asserted that presumed superiority forcefully to make the placement of the base look like a *fait accompli*. In stating that the base's placement in Alcântara was partially the result of social interference, rather than presumptively unquestionable technical reasons, Anselmo—to borrow the language of actor network theory—was opening a black box, an assemblage of heterogeneous elements put together so as to be stable and solid, with its internal complexity unconsidered (Callon and Latour 1981, 285).<sup>7</sup>

In elucidating the concept of “black box,” Callon and Latour draw on Hobbes (1998 [1651]) who, in an inaugural move for social theory, tried to show how macro-actors—to rely on Callon and Latour's rather than Hobbes's terminology—are built by “translating” the wills of micro-actors into the single will of the Leviathan. For Callon and Latour, the process of translation is much broader. Actors become macro-actors by “translating” not only wills but “bodies, materials, discourses, techniques, feelings, laws, [and] organizations” into a single construction, or macro-actor (1981, 284). The trick to creating a durable macro-actor is to make these many translations unquestionable or unnoticed, to place them into black boxes.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of “black box” is in some ways similar to notions of “naturalization” or “*doxa*” (Bourdieu 1977), frequently used in the social sciences to describe the sleight of hand whereby social (and thus presumptively mutable) matters are made to seem natural, unquestionable—or even invisible. Although these concepts are useful and powerful, they rest on a taken-for-granted ontological divide among social, natural, and technical orders. And the distinctions between social, natural, and technical are part of what is in question in Anselmo's

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<sup>7</sup> Callon and Latour define a black box as follows: “A black box contains that which no longer needs to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference. The more elements one can place in black boxes—modes of thoughts, habits, forces and objects—the broader the construction one can raise” (1981, 285).

<sup>8</sup> For a brilliant synthesis and comparison of such an actor network perspective with a political economic perspective in Latin Americanist anthropology, see Ferry (2013).

assertions about the placement of a spaceport, with all their possible social and technical ramifications. The concept of black boxing—the creation of corporate socio-natural-technical “assemblages” (Franklin 2005; Ong and Collier 2005) or “leviathans” (Callon and Latour 1981; Golub 2014; Hobbes 1998 [1651]) and the concurrent obscuring of their historical and cultural character—has the virtue of bracketing those ontological distinctions. The materials used to construct the base and its location, the Brazilian nation-state, and *quilombo* identity are human, natural, material, and technical, as much as they are social.

The complexity of these constructions is also part of the reason for the centrality of the deployment of expertise at the meeting in Mamuna. Experts are the magicians of black boxes, the seers who can peer into and interpret assemblages that for most of us are undifferentiated and incomprehensible in their construction, like the arrangement of technical and political matters that Anselmo pried open at that meeting. Anthropologists of politics and development have long noted a tendency for bureaucracies to depoliticize political issues by rendering them as merely technical. Such “anti-politics,” as James Ferguson puts it (1994), however, do not eliminate the play of interests, but make experts, rather than politicians or citizens, the spokespersons for those interests.

On this surprising occasion Anselmo used his insider knowledge and technical expertise to open this particular black box, so painstakingly constructed by an Air Force that had long positioned the base as an unquestioned and necessary cornerstone of Brazil’s national power and identity, in a surprising bluff that his expertise would trump villager desire and that villagers would balk in their resistance if threatened with the real possibility of the departure of the base and the federal government. For the most part, the villagers did not balk.

### **SELLING THE ALCÂNTARA SPACE CENTER**

It was not only what Lieutenant Colonel Anselmo had to say at that June 2005 meeting that surprised me; I was surprised that he spoke at all. Although silent representatives of the military sometimes attended the many public meetings held to discuss Alcântara’s problems, this was one of the few occasions when I heard a military figure speak in public about the conflicts then raging in Alcântara.

Yet, while I was surprised by these few particulars, in most respects the events of that meeting and that day were typical of those I observed throughout my nearly three years of

ethnographic fieldwork. The meeting was one of many that I attended in Alcântara at which representatives of Brazil's federal government engaged in a failed attempt to convince the residents of one of Alcântara's most threatened villages that for reasons of technical necessity, personal gain, and national duty, they should accept a Space Program development plan that would entail the loss of an indeterminate (but undoubtedly significant) amount of their land.

It is because of that day's typical and exemplary character that I chose to describe the event here, drawing, at the suggestion of Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, loose inspiration from a famous article by Max Gluckman (1958 [1940]). Gluckman describes the ceremonial opening of the first bridge built in (then) Zululand, taking it as a token of a typical pattern of social interaction in colonial South Africa. Through his description of this event Gluckman "abstracts the social structure, relationships [and] institutions" (Gluckman 1958, 2), of a colonial society that he understood to be structured by "inter-dependent relations between and within colour-groups as colour groups" (Gluckman 1958, 2). This paper too analyzes the basic structure of interaction, interdependence, and hierarchy among extremely unequal social groups. But, far from finding any of the functional interdependence of social actors that Gluckman and his colleagues believed they had discovered in the Africa of the first half of the twentieth century, the instabilities in actors' identities renders such precise interdependence in Alcântara nearly unthinkable. While for Gluckman the coherence of group actors could be more or less taken for granted, in Alcântara the construction of group actors that people will find convincing (*quilombolas*, the nation, the state) is fluid, is much of what is at stake, and requires the work of a variety of types of socially sanctioned expertise.

The events at the base in Alcântara have also been affected by changes in Brazilian economy and governance over the last decades. The first two stages of villager relocation were organized by military agencies and carried out by enlistees on horseback<sup>9</sup> from Alcântara in 1986–87, just after the fall of the military regime in 1985. During the 1990s, INFRAERO, the public-private corporation created by the military government in 1970 to administer Brazil's commercial airports, was placed in charge of the base's expansion, a round of expansion that was never carried out. By 2005, after nearly two decades of political democratization, neoliberal

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<sup>9</sup> Horses were used because most of Alcântara's coastal villages were then inaccessible by car.

reform, villager mobilization, and launch failures,<sup>10</sup> the agencies responsible for carrying out the expropriation were a changing mix of civilian government, private groups, and NGOs.

Villagers had grown used to the changing array of military, civilian-government, and private agencies that had been announcing the imminent relocation of the villages spread along the peninsula's eastern coast. But these announcements existed for the villagers as pure and perpetual promise and anxiety, not as material reality. For due to a combination of village resistance, legal hurdles, and the chronic underfunding of Brazil's space program (S. T. Mitchell 2013), none of the relocation plans had come to fruition.

In 2005, a new set of agencies unveiled their plans for the expansion of Brazil's equatorial space complex. In March and May of that year, some 20 federal government bureaucrats representing the ministries of the GEI held public hearings in the Igreja de Carmo—the once opulent eighteenth-century church in Alcântara's small urban nucleus—in order to present a series of policy innovations: 1) The government no longer intended to expand the existing military-controlled Alcântara Launch Center (CLA), but rather to construct a new civilian launching complex, the Alcântara Space Center (CEA), to be run by the civilian Brazilian Space Agency (AEB) for the partial use of private companies and foreign space agencies. 2) This new construction would not require the relocation of villages but, rather, the construction of facilities on parcels of land between the existing villages of Alcântara's coast. 3) The government recognized the validity of the claim to “ethnic territory,” as specified in the federally contracted anthropological study (*Laudo Antropológico*) (Almeida 2006); and the government planned to relinquish its claim on approximately 42,000 hectares of the 62,000 that had officially been expropriated (but never depopulated or occupied) for the base,<sup>11</sup> while the entire municipality (outside of that directly controlled by the space program) would win *quilombo* title. And 4) the government budgeted 26.8 million Reais (approximately 13 million US dollars) in development programs for the municipality, to be allocated according to its needs and desires as the community and its NGO and social movement mediators specified.

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<sup>10</sup> For analysis of the deadly 2003 launch failure, see S. T. Mitchell (2013).

<sup>11</sup> Although 62,000 hectares (more than half of the peninsula's 114,000 hectares) were officially expropriated for the base, the existing spaceport occupies only 8,713 of those hectares. The area then slated for new construction since the base's inception includes another 10,000–20,000 hectares, but the government has never intended to occupy or depopulate the remaining area.

On their face, these new plans appeared to be important changes in policy. The federal government was accepting Alcântara's social movements' most important ethnic and legal claims and conceding that villagers would not have to move. But villager distrust of the base and of the government had been building for more than two decades. At the March 2005 meeting at the Igreja do Carmo, the proximate cause of that distrust was a map featured in one of the hearing's dry slide show presentations. The map pictured five launching "polygons," each one set to host the space program of a different country.<sup>12</sup> Because each polygon was pictured as some 3,000 hectares in area, together they completely blanketed the peninsula's east coast. For villagers, this made the GEI's assertion that there would be no new relocations ring hollow. The map seemed to corroborate the widely held suspicion that even if houses would be left standing, the land and sea from which villagers won their livelihoods would be incorporated into a restricted launching zone and the villagers, like those moved to the *agrovilas* before them, would be rapidly impoverished.

The June meeting in Mamuna, held some three months after the first meeting at the Igreja de Carmo (where the GEI had presented the map that had upset the villagers), was crucial to the GEI. Mamuna is the village closest to the launching center and the then planned location of Ukrainian-Brazilian launching sites.<sup>13</sup> With a (still undecided) case about human rights violations in Alcântara pending before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and increasing bad publicity for the Workers' Party government about the fate of Alcântara's *quilombolas*, the members of the GEI wanted to get Alcântara's residents to signal their support for the current plan. The government representatives at the meeting claimed that the map that had so sparked villagers' distrust at the March hearing was a preliminary and inaccurate draft. They unveiled a new map, one that showed smaller launching installations and clear access to the ocean. They also brought a document they hoped community leaders would sign, endorsing the civilian launching center and accepting development aid.

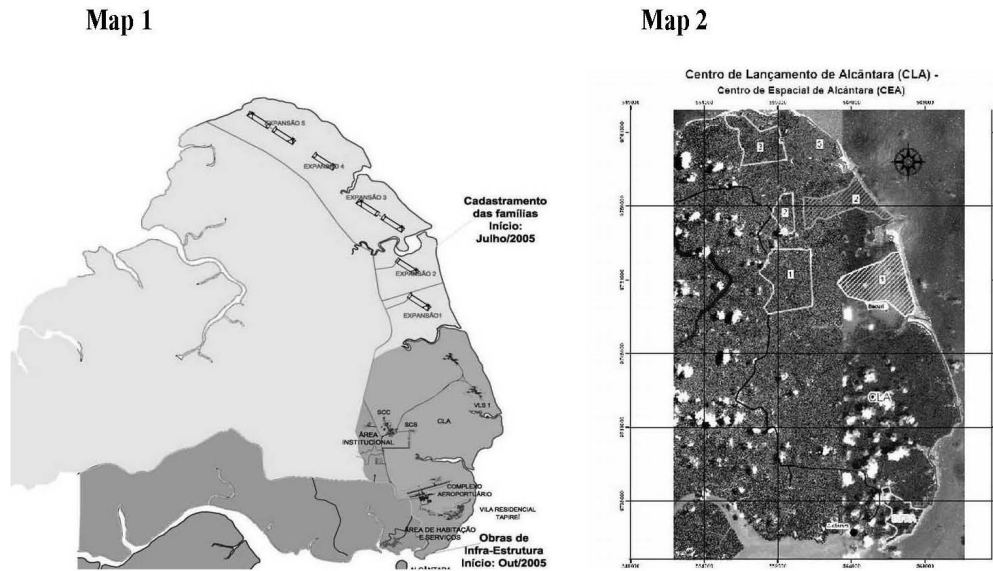
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<sup>12</sup> Because of Alcântara's excellent equatorial positioning, Russia, the Ukraine, the United States, China, and Israel, each with successful launch programs, have expressed interest in launching from Alcântara.

<sup>13</sup> In 2003 the Brazilian and Ukrainian governments formed a public-private corporation, Alcântara Cyclone Space, to utilize the Alcântara base as a commercial launching site. The Ukraine, unlike Brazil, has a successful launching program, but launches from Ukrainian soil are much more expensive than from equatorial Alcântara. Because of many setbacks, some stemming from the political conflict between the Ukraine and Russia, the company was disbanded in 2015, and the launch pad built for it awaits a new owner.

FIGURE 1

## THE FIRST AND SECOND GEI MAPS



These are the maps of the sites to be installed in Alcântara, taken from the first and second GEI documents. Although it is difficult to distinguish all the details here, these maps provide a sense of what the GEI presented to villagers. In the first map (Map 1), the eastern coast of the peninsula is blanketed by the CEA launch facilities, even though many people, including residents of Mamuna, live there. Notice that the boundary line that runs from north to south on the peninsula blocks access to the sea for many of Alcântara's villages. According to representatives of the federal government, it was a mistake that this map was presented. If that is so, it was an impressive case of bureaucratic bungling, for it contributed to the strong mistrust among residents of Alcântara's coast. Map 2, a satellite image, was presented three months later by the GEI at the meeting described here. Notice that the CEA's launching sites are now located in noncontiguous facilities along the coast, with institutional support provided by installations further inland. In Map 2, Mamuna can be seen just south of Polygon 1, a launching area that would limit the villagers' access to the sea and its important fish resources. The launching area also contains much of the land on which residents of Mamuna farm and gather. Representatives of the GEI asserted that villagers will be able to enter the launch areas in order to fish, except during launch periods. Just south of Mamuna is the Air Force controlled spaceport.

Holding on to their land by tenuous threads of law, luck, and labor, the villagers knew that they stood in real danger of being pushed into the ranks of the vast and squalid urban poor in shantytowns of tide-pool stilt houses (*palafitas*) on the urban periphery of the state capital of São Luís—a fate villagers dreaded. The bureaucrats faced no equivalent danger if they failed. Although some clearly felt strongly about the importance of Brazil’s space program, the stakes for representatives of the GEI were much smaller than for Alcântara’s villagers. Nonetheless, despite the clear power differences between the bureaucrats dispatched to Alcântara and the villagers there, the villagers were by no means powerless. With help from a network of Brazilian and foreign NGOs and experts—principally intellectuals and lawyers, as we will see—they managed to win important (though tenuous) concessions from the government.

Notably, in 2008 machines were being moved to the forest between the communities of Mamuna and Baracatatiua for construction of a launch site by the now defunct Brazilian-Ukrainian company, Alcântara Cyclone Space. Although there was ample space on the existing base, the military objected to the construction of this civilian and international launch pad on the Air Force-controlled base. Villagers and their allies staged a blockade, preventing construction and, aided by their allies, won a 2008 court decision that required that the launch pad be built within the spaceport’s existing area (Costa 2013; Lima 2008; S. T. Mitchell forthcoming).

### THE REALITY OF EXPERTISE

My arguments in this paper are not anti-realist; all claims about reality are not equivalently true. A character in George Bernard Shaw’s *The Doctor’s Dilemma* famously quips that professions are “conspiracies against the laity” (1911, 32). The idea that professional expertise and institutions exist to delude everyone else has a populist appeal and, undoubtedly, some truth. But professional expertise is not *merely* a performative form of power.

It is self-evident that all societies depend in different ways on the specialized knowledge of practitioners, who in many cases provide “the laity” with help that wouldn’t otherwise be available. But the opacity of this can be a patient’s dilemma. At the dentist’s recently to get a cavity filled, I certainly hoped, as the dentist stood above me with an arcane assortment of numbing drugs and whirring drills, that her expertise was not merely marshaled in the service of a conspiracy to win money from me and my dental insurer. But I will never know, since I was

also reliant on the dentist's machine-mediated analysis of my teeth that identified a dangerous cavity in what had until then seemed my perfectly functional and comfortable mouth.

Expertise functions as a mastery of black boxes, specialized knowledge of assemblages of human and non-human actors (teeth, X-rays, bacteria, germs, dental assistants, medical education, insurance bureaucracies, etc.). It also must be performed to be made socially real for other experts and non-experts alike. My dentist's white coat, her self-assured demeanor, the clean professional office, the diplomas on the wall, and her title of doctor were part of a semiotics of expertise that conspired to put me at (relative) ease as she drilled holes in parts of my body that I would have much preferred to keep intact.

Expertise is not *merely* a "conspiracy against the laity" because the elements placed in black boxes are not merely contingent and arbitrary whims of power; they, like my teeth, have non-contingent properties. But expertise can also sometimes function in a conspiratorial and adversarial way. And experts can only exist *qua* experts when there also exist non-experts who do not possess the means to open the experts' black boxes (Carr 2010, 22; T. Mitchell 2002).

I should add that paying attention to performances within genres of expertise is not simply the interpretive whim of an anthropologist who has to write about the conflict in Alcântara in multiple articles and books—although this is my own professional requirement as a presumptive expert on the conflict, and I am duly doing my best to perform that expertise in this article. Most matters of crucial global concern (over the reality and character of global climate change, say, or HIV, or global wealth disparities) are domains where experts assemble mutually contradictory black boxes for wide-ranging constituencies, a problem that has become central to science and technology studies (Collins and Evans 2002; Wynne 1996).

Most of us do not have the technical expertise to see very far into the black boxes of climate scientists about the nature and causes of global climate change, for example. Consequently, those opposed to the economic and social ramifications of that science are able to raise doubts by funding their own black boxes (e.g., Oreskes and Conway 2011). Which climate scientists are non-experts to believe? Which of the seemingly irreconcilable evocations of Science as a final arbiter of truth are we to accept? That most of us already know our own answer to this question reflects the outcome of performances of expertise by and within different "epistemic cultures" (Knorr-Cetina 1999), or "credibility economy[ies]" (Shapin 2007, 181), as much as it does the understanding of the complexities of human-climate interaction among "the laity." I do not mean

to imply that all climate science black boxes are equal. Powerful interests are at play here, just as powerful interests are at play in Alcântara. The stakes of this are, obviously, very high. So, understanding how black-boxed versions of reality are made, unmade, and understood begs for ethnographic attention to the ways in which expertise is performed and for whom.

### GROUP-SPECIFIC RIGHTS IN AN AMBIGUOUS CONTEXT

A dynamic similar to that favoring expertise and fact-based assertions by space program representatives holds for the anthropologists and lawyers representing the *quilombos*. Such expertise is obviously important where highly technical knowledge is important, in domains such as satellite launching. It is self-evident that societies dependent on specialized technologies require far-flung specialized experts for their governance and maintenance. But I also argue that there is something special about contemporary forms of governance in Brazil which, as scholars of neoliberal governance the world over have observed, privilege the self-sufficiency (Ansell 2014; Muehlebach 2012; Wofford 2005) and group-specific status of groups understood in terms of ethnoracial difference (J. L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff 2009; Hale 2002; Žižek 1997).

The rights that are claimed by Alcântara's social movements are not universal rights but what Kymlicka has called "group-differentiated rights" (1995). The rights of Alcântara's villagers, grounded in the Brazilian constitution's *Quilombo* Clause, are contingent on the objective nature of their race/ethnicity and history. Yet that ethnoracial identity is highly fluid and that history highly contested. So, arguments about rights in Alcântara are frequently framed as expert claims about ethnic and racial identity, farming, the history of slavery, and the nature of the law; these arguments slide from arguments about rights to arguments about facts, from arguments about *ought* to arguments about *is*.

The experts deployed and authorized by state agencies to validate villagers' claims include: 1) *experts of locality*—the villagers themselves, as well as *quilombo* movement representatives—who are frequently required to provide evidence of rural authenticity to legitimate claims to ethnic distinctiveness and consequent legal rights; 2) *experts of the law*—a team of lawyers from a number of NGOs based in the cities of southern Brazil who advocate *quilombo* legal claims both to villagers and to outside actors; and 3) *experts of difference*, or as

Peter Fry (himself a participant in these disputes [Fry and Vogt 1996]) has called them, “cartographers of social difference” (Fry 2005), namely, anthropologists.

### ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND *QUILOMBOS*

Anthropologists, in particular Alfredo Wagner Berno de Almeida, have been an important part of the conflicts in Alcântara since they began in the early 1980s. In Alcântara, they are cartographers, too, in the most literal sense. A map of Alcântara was affixed to the cracked plaster wall at the back of the room on the day of the June 2005 meeting, in which contested areas were marked “ethnic territory”—a provocative rejoinder to the Air Force “security zone” that surrounds the base and covers more or less the same area. This map was developed by the peripatetic Almeida and his research team<sup>14</sup> as part of his *Laudo Antropológico* (Anthropological Assessment). For a brief time, I was part of Almeida’s research team and was primary author of a document on Alcântara produced by the team (S. T. Mitchell et al. 2008).

Until it was superseded by a 2003 presidential decree, which made “self-identification” the principal legal criterion for the identification of *quilombo* communities, raising the stakes for “experts of locality,” the previous 2001 decree regulating the titling of *quilombo* land required that an extensive study (*Laudo Antropológico*) be carried out in order to determine the veracity of claims to *quilombola* identity and delimiting the boundaries of *quilombo* communities. The job of identifying anthropologists to carry out this task was largely taken over by the Brazilian Anthropological Association (ABA). Even today, although auto-identification is the key legal criterion for the identification of *quilombo* communities in Brazil, anthropological studies are required for delimiting the boundaries of such communities.

Anthropologists have long provided such state-sanctioned expertise in Brazil. In 1988, under the presidency of Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, ABA signed an agreement with the federal government, agreeing to appoint anthropologists knowledgeable about particular areas or indigenous groups to work on land disputes. Even before this, there was a long-standing tradition of Brazilian (and foreign) anthropologists defending indigenous land rights, and they continued

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<sup>14</sup> While I lived in Alcântara, Almeida frequently traversed Brazil for political and scholarly activities. He held successive professorships at the Universidade Federal Fluminense in Rio de Janeiro and the Universidade Federal de Amazonas in Manaus; he also gave an extended seminar to students at the Universidade Federal do Maranhão. He often returned to Alcântara—a region where he has been conducting field research for more than three decades and of which he has encyclopedic knowledge.

to do so independently after the establishment of this formal government role (M. Cunha, personal communication). ABA's partnership with the government agencies responsible for *quilombo* communities—the FCP (the Palmares Cultural Foundation, a unit of the Ministry of Culture) and INCRA (National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform, a unit of the Ministry of Agrarian Development, or MDA)—has followed from this long-standing anthropological role (Oliveira 2005, 227–29).<sup>15</sup>

Out of his own pocket, Almeida spent far more than the government awarded to produce the extensively documented two-volume study (2006), which is both a primary data object and a source of secondary data for my work on Alcântara. His principal argument in the *Laudo* is that Alcântara forms a single interdependent “ethnic territory,” which would lose its identity and social coherence if it were segmented into titled and untitled segments: an argument about the technical necessity and necessary interdependence of *quilombola* land and identity throughout the peninsula, a black box like that of Lieutenant-Colonel Anselmo—though I will add my own anthropological expertise to this black box's solidity to say that I also believe Almeida's claim is true.

Although the *Laudo* has been accepted as the final word by at least some important institutions of the Federal Government, others have opposed it, and consequently, as of this publication, no land titles have been awarded in Alcântara. Despite these problems, villagers asserting their right to the land on the basis of this evidence conferred by anthropological science would sometimes brandish photocopies of Almeida's voluminous study as though it were the very land title itself.

For example, one of the anthropologists involved in providing support for Alcântara's villagers frequently declares authoritatively at meetings of villagers and bureaucrats: “The communities aren't reversible; the base is,” arguing that, because of the villagers' unique history and an unassailable legal claim to the land, the government is powerless to remove them—although it could remove the spaceport. Like Anselmo's, this claim marshals the social authority of science, law, and insider knowledge in order to delineate the accepted boundaries between

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<sup>15</sup> I should mention here that I was also an actor in these conflicts. I frequently used my anthropological authority and expertise to aid in the struggles of the *quilombolas* while in Alcântara: helping MABE (the Movement of those Impacted by the Space Base) write a successful grant application to a German NGO; conducting interviews in Alcântara's communities and, on that basis, helping MABE and community leaders draft the document sent to the federal government's Fundação Cultural Palmares affirming the communities' auto-affirmation as *quilombolas*; and other activities.

technical and social domains—with the former taken to be immutable, or at least unquestionable, and the latter, mutable and contestable.

### **STRUCTURAL HETEROGENEITY/ ONTOLOGICAL CONTINUITY**

Reflecting a highly influential recent tendency in anthropology, often glossed as the “ontological turn,” some anthropologists have sought to explore how human groups actually inhabit “multiple ontologies,” literally live in different worlds (e.g., Viveiros de Castro 2012). Although in this paper I try to show how conflicts such as the one in Alcântara are often waged through the making of ontological claims, I want to push against the tendency to read social difference in terms of multiple ontologies. While the participants in Alcântara’s conflicts have many differences, conceptual and material, they do not inhabit separate ontologies. To regard human worlds as ontologically distinct is to imagine them consigned to irreconcilable fortresses. But processes of dialogue and discovery across human groups presuppose a common ontological grounding—as do processes of deception and domination across those groups. Moreover, in the specific case I discuss here there is considerable social continuity among the groups in conflict. Indeed, the very social and ontological continuity of their world creates an important incentive to frame arguments in ontological terms.

At the beginning of the June 2005 meeting in this paper, only two members of the federal government groups involved with Alcântara had shown up: Franz, the head of the GEI, the federal government group responsible for Alcântara’s conflicts, and Amélia, a biologist who worked for the civilian space program. Although Franz stressed the importance of the meeting, he claimed that only he and Amélia were able to attend because the annual São João festivities soon to begin in Maranhão (a major tourist draw) had left other federal officials without seats on commercial flights into São Luís, the state capital. Since members of the federal government often flew directly to the base on Air Force planes, bypassing commercial flights and the capital, a number of the activists expressed skepticism about Franz’s excuse, suggesting that the real reason for such a poor showing must be that their case was not important enough to warrant protracted attention from many representatives of the government.

As the meeting began, Franz listed a series of benefits that the new construction would bring (in particular, development aid, transport, and education) and made his best argument that construction of launch facilities on villager land must proceed because of the importance of the

space program to the nation. As I have shown elsewhere (S. T. Mitchell 2013, 2015, and forthcoming), these arguments about what the villagers *should want* largely fell flat, and I assumed I was in for one of many dull and uneventful meetings.

I was wrong. Soon, curiosity built as the rare sound of a large motor approached—always then a cause for excitement in Mamuna, located as it was at the end of a long and difficult earthen track, at that time seldom braved by vehicles other than motorcycles. An Air Force truck eventually drove into the center of the village, and Anselmo stepped out into the morning sun. I have already mentioned how rare it was that a representative of the Air Force was both present and vocal at a meeting in Alcântara. The director of the spaceport while I lived in Alcântara had a reputation as a hard-liner. Members of the Air Force were prohibited from granting me interviews (although I managed to have many conversations with members of the Air Force off-base, as well as interviews at the Ministry of Defense in Brasília); the base also had turned away National Geographic (Ribeiro 2004), the BBC (Kingstone 2004), and even ESPN-Brasil.<sup>16</sup> When Anselmo arrived at the scene just after 9:30 a.m., he did not enter the site of the meeting but instead sat outside one of the glassless windows in camouflage fatigues and dark sunglasses, smoking cigarettes and snarling at the proceedings. His stance seemed to invoke both a disdain for the process and a populist solidarity with the crowds around the windows.

Yet when we broke for lunch and, as was typical at these meetings, the participants segregated between those of us who would pay for a meal (from villagers who had prepared food for the occasion) and the Mamuna residents eating in their homes, the Lieutenant-Colonel retreated to his truck to be thronged by young village men, eager to get a peek at the truck and martial technology and to find out about opportunities in the Air Force.

Although military service is nominally mandatory in Brazil, in places with few economic opportunities such as Alcântara, many more young men apply for positions as soldiers than there are positions available. When, each year, the Air Force would hold tests for new recruits, it was hard to find a young man in Alcântara who was not trying to get in. Winning such a position would mean up to four years of relative wealth and prestige, as well as technical training.

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<sup>16</sup> Although ESPN, the sporting network, would seem an unlikely source for journalism about a place like Alcântara, the network had produced a one-hour television show about Alcântara. It was part of a series led by the famed retired Brazilian soccer star and journalist, the late Sócrates, to promote sporting activities in poor municipalities throughout Brazil. Alcântara, which is as photogenic as it is cash poor, was one of the 10 municipalities chosen.

Mamuna, for all its hostility towards the base, had four young men working as soldiers on the base during the period that I lived there. All bought motorcycles on which they returned to the village on weekends, to the envy and admiration of many.

More significant here was how easy and friendly the interaction between the Lieutenant Colonel and those young men was. I wandered over to the group a number of times, hoping to participate in the conversation, but Anselmo made it clear that he did not want me around.<sup>17</sup> Because of this, I did not hear much of the conversation. But I could see that Anselmo and the young men were laughing and exchanging loud hand slaps for almost the entire lunch hour. Indeed, despite the structural opposition of the Air Force and Alcântara's villagers, officers and those villagers often engaged in very warm forms of exchange. On weekends, officers would often come to Mamuna's beach to drink beer, play soccer, and fish with Mamuna residents, paying them to prepare and cook the fish.

Scholars have long noted how vast gulfs of inequality are in Brazil often accompanied by an easy intimacy that belies those gulfs (Freyre 1933; Holanda 1979). For example, Roberto DaMatta contrasts a US form of racism based an ideology of "separate but equal" to a Brazilian form of racism based on an ideology of "together but unequal" (1997). Similarly, James Holston has argued that the historical model of citizenship in Brazil is "inclusive in membership and massively inegalitarian in distribution," in contrast to historical forms of citizenship in France and the United States that historically restricted membership (2008, 7). A common theme of this literature is that Brazilian history has forged models of interaction among the weak and strong, poor and rich, black and white, that do not presume any rigid social separation among those groups. Such analysis is somewhat oversimplified for so large and varied nation as Brazil (S. T. Mitchell, Blanchette, and Silva n.d.), but it is the case that, despite political enmity and vast inequality, when they were together, Alcântara's residents and Air Force representatives often got along very well and shared many common cultural reference points.

The participants in Alcântara's conflicts do not inhabit separate ontological worlds. Yet the groups involved in the conflict (bureaucrats, urban activists, academics, lawyers, *quilombola* villagers, military officers, engineers, etc.) are so structurally heterogeneous, and their interests so at odds, that agreement about what *ought* to be seems impossible. This structural divergence makes claims about what *is* a more plausible ground of contestation. The participants in the

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<sup>17</sup> Months later he refused to be interviewed in Brasília.

conflicts over Alcântara are Portuguese-speaking Brazilians,<sup>18</sup> inheritors of a society formed out of slavery that has long privileged an ideology of cordiality, intimacy, and mixture across deep divides of social inequality. The participants in this conflict are certainly *Others* to one another, but they are intimate Others, inhabiting a cultural world with broad continuity, despite its massive inequalities. These groups cannot be convinced to desire the same things, given their *structural heterogeneity*, but they might be convinced to believe the same things, given this *ontological continuity*.

### CONCLUSION: EXPERTISE AND POWER

Arguments about the reality and inevitability of *quilombo* land rights made by the lawyers and anthropologists allied to Alcântara's *quilombolas* have largely been incorporated by the *quilombo* movement. For example, during another meeting in the *agrovila* Marudá, called by MABE and MOMTRA (the Movement of Women Rural Workers of Alcântara), Dalma, an activist from the *agrovila*, Só Assim, spoke at length:

We are *quilombolas* in our community and we have our culture and our practice of working, so I have to self-identify myself as *quilombola*, and *quilombolas* won't leave here because it has been determined in the decree that the land is ours and it can't be divided.... We know that the government can't take the land from us.... [Anthropologist] Alfredo [Wagner Berno de Almeida] and Machado [an important *quilombo* movement activist in Alcântara] are always telling me that I have to read a lot, and I know that the land has to be collective.... So this question of collective land is very serious and I believe that we in the movement, we have to orient people to this a lot more, do more consciousness raising.... Or people won't understand that the land is all ours.... I might understand but others won't understand.

Note that Dalma articulates a vision of the inevitability and solidity of *quilombola* communal land rights, rooted in history, a relation to the land, and the law. She does not need to convince others of an ethical or political position, just to teach them what is true. The anthropologists, social movement lawyers, and villagers who attended the meeting at which Dalma spoke insist on the technical inevitability of *quilombola* identity and *quilombola* possession of their land, deploying law, biology, shared agricultural techniques, local experience, historical precedent, and feelings of sympathy to make *quilombo* identity as durable and

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<sup>18</sup> They are all Brazilians with the exception of a few Portuguese-speaking foreigners, such as me.

unquestionable as possible. Likewise, the representatives of the base deployed national sentiment, law, rocketry and gravitational science in an attempt to make the base seem not only inevitable but an essential aspect of Brazilian nationhood.

The social deployment of this expertise has *partially* structured the conflict in Alcântara. Villagers would likely not have retained their land up to now had they and their advocates not made such persuasive public arguments about the legal inevitability of their ethnoracial claim to land possession. Similarly, space program advocates' arguments about the equatorial advantages of the base keep much of the Brazilian press sympathetic to the Air Force and civilian space program.

Nonetheless, I do not want to overstate the importance of the deployment of expertise, which is only part of the story of Alcântara's impasse. The conflict has also been structured by power. Villagers in the 1980s were forcibly removed from their homes and made to accept insufficient land—against the protestations of some state-sanctioned experts who warned that the land amount was insufficient to support a family (see Andrade 2006, 17). The Air Force was also forced to accept civilian launch installations inside the Air Force base, against the protestations of its own experts. Experts may give us black-boxed versions of reality, but those black boxes can also be broken or pushed aside by force.

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