

precarity becomes more widespread around the world, this book provides instructive lessons on thinking about the micropolitics of power and mobility.

**Jennifer Hart**

History Department, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg (VA), United States

E-mail: [jenniferhart@vt.edu](mailto:jenniferhart@vt.edu)

doi:10.1017/S0020859023000287

CANDIDO, MARIANA P. *Wealth, Land, and Property in Angola. A History of Dispossession, Slavery, and Inequality.* [African Studies Series, 160.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2022. xiv, 323 pp. Ill. Maps. £85.00. (Paper: £26.99; E-book: \$34.99.)

For more than seventy years, Africa has been regarded as a land-abundant and labour-scarce continent in mainstream economic and social history. This scholarship has been partially inspired by the Nieboer–Domar thesis, which, in short, contends that land surplus and insufficient manpower led polities, and economic and social elites, to invest in the accumulation of wealth in people rather than in amassing wealth in land. In the case of Africa, specialists hold that land abundance and people’s scarcity led to the creation of lineages and the establishment of dependency ties as a means to gather wealth. Wealth in people, on the other hand, has been regarded by scholars as one of the key explanations for the existence of widespread warfare, slavery, and other forms of dependency in the continent, and for the involvement of African polities and economic elites in the different streams of the commerce in enslaved Africans.

The new book by Mariana P. Candido, *Wealth, Land, and Property in Angola*, not only challenges this dominant historical narrative in various ways, but also unveils its colonial roots in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By so doing, it also calls for a “decolonization” and “gendering” of African economic and social history, and for the setting up of a research agenda in which African perspectives and knowledge are given their rightful place in the main historical narrative.

Firstly, by analysing in detail the rich evidence gathered from various Angolan, Brazilian, and Portuguese historical archives, Candido demonstrates that in coastal West Central Africa people accumulated wealth not only in people, but also in land. Rulers, elites, as well as commoners not only “claim[ed]” and register[ed] land [from as early as] the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries”, but also “entered into a series of disputes over property in the nineteenth century” with Portuguese colonial settlers (p. 1). This evidence attests not only to the importance given by West Central Africans to landownership, but also makes clear the existence of local landownership rights and regimes, and how these clashed with European property ownership ideas from as early as the precolonial era, and continuing into the colonial period (Chapter One). Simultaneously, the existence of these archival records is a testimony to how Europeans and Africans had to negotiate regimes of landownership and how African rulers, elites, and commoners made use of the judicial institutions,

and juridical ownership laws of the colonizers, to register property on individual terms as a means to safeguard their ownership rights vis-à-vis the Europeans, in the meantime creating an African bureaucracy and developing a written culture to prove ownership (Chapters Two and Three).

Secondly, the land claims filed by Africans, the land registers made in their names, and the land disputes between them and European colonial settlers also called into question the idea that land was abundant, and occupation and control over land was undisputed. On this point, Candido's argument is fourfold. On the one hand, she argues that "land was not easily accessible in West central Africa", unlike what has been posited by scholars do far. This situation was in part due to "[r]ides, warfare and political instability" (pp. 12–13). On the other hand, Candido contends that "warfare was also intended to expand territory, indicating that land control mattered" (pp. 12–13). In addition, she argues that nineteenth-century land disputes between colonizers and Africans are justified "given the scarcity of available land and thus the high value placed on it" (pp. 14–15). Together, these arguments challenge in various ways the land-abundance–labour-scarcity thesis.

More importantly, Candido shows that the idea of Africa as a continent where land was abundant, vacant, and underexplored is a narrative developed by the European colonial powers in the nineteenth century based on European assumptions, sanctioned by colonial scholars, "that non-European populations, in Africa, in the Americas, or in Asia, were incapable of comprehending and protecting the basic concept of ownership" (p. 5). Mariana goes as far as claiming that: "In many ways the recognition of private ownership of land in nineteenth-century Angola was a mode of dispossession that continued in the twentieth century and later" (p. 17), and, I would argue, facilitated appropriation of resources and labour during the colonial era. By unveiling the colonial roots of the land-abundance–labour-scarcity thesis Candido's book is, in my opinion, calling for a decolonization of African economic and social history and a renewal of this sub-field, which should pay more careful attention to African ideas, concepts, perceptions, uses, and practices in the reconstruction of the historical past of the African continent and its populations (Chapter Six).

However, the innovative character of *Wealth, Land, and Property in Angola* does not limit itself to questioning the land-abundance–labour-scarcity thesis. Candido's book also moves away from the most conventional narratives of African economic and social history in two other important ways. She does so, firstly, by refusing to look at Africans solely or mainly as sources of manpower, opting to pay attention to Africans as owners and consumers, not only of people (Chapters Four and Five), but also of land and other goods (Chapter Seven). Secondly, Candido refuses to write a male-centred African history. She shows that African women can be found in the archival paper trail not only as enslaved, but also as owners of people, land, commodities, and luxury items, and they defended their ownership rights in colonial institutions whenever these had been contested (Chapter Six).

One big question remains: Is Angola an exception or the rule? If it is the rule, then Candido's book makes a major contribution to the historiography of West Central

Africa, and proposes a radical transformation in the ways in which specialists look at the African precolonial and colonial past.

**Filipa Ribeiro da Silva**

International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam

E-mail: [filipa.ribeirodasilva@iisg.nl](mailto:filipa.ribeirodasilva@iisg.nl)

doi:10.1017/S0020859023000299

BROWN, KATHLEEN M. *Undoing Slavery. Bodies, Race, and Rights in the Age of Abolition.* University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia (PA) 2023. 446 pp. \$39.95.

How could the body not be central to histories of slavery? And yet, in her latest book on the abolitionist struggle in Pennsylvania and Virginia in the first half of the nineteenth century, Kathleen M. Brown argues that the body as an analytical category can be used to enlighten many more aspects of the discourse and daily practices of abolitionists, as well as the lawsuits held in this period fighting over the rights to freedom of enslaved men and women. Brown has written a comprehensive social, legal, economic, and medical history of the age of abolition, based on an extraordinary number of primary and secondary sources. This well-documented, readable, and multifaceted book aims to revisit the well-known fight against slavery and racism in the United States through the lens of the concept of “embodied self-sovereignty”. This “body-centered approach” (p. 7) to the abolition movement includes consideration of the major theme of birthright, the frequent mentioning of the body by abolitionists in regard to slavery’s physical violence, the physical effects of their exhausting activism and resistance, their healing practices, and overall the centrality of well-being and bodily integrity to a genuine exercise of rights. But this perspective also entails making connections with contemporary medical theories on blood and the racialized body. These informative links reveal how medicine and racism were inextricably entangled, and how they impacted on the metaphors used by abolitionists and on the ideas presented by “expert” witnesses in court cases revolving around race and the identification of enslaved people who had escaped.

The ultimate aim of this approach, Brown contends, is to argue against human rights scholarship that has neglected the body and focused only on the legal recognition of universal rights. Instead, the author aims to highlight the importance of the domestic and the intimate, such as family integrity, corporeal care, and the right to move freely, as necessary conditions for achieving these human rights, not as secondary aims to be fought for after securing these rights.

Although the choice of focusing on the body “on its own terms” (p. 4) and seeing the human body as having “its own stubborn logic” (p. 6) could have deserved more theoretical embedding (for instance, to explain whether the body is referred to in a discursive or more phenomenological way), overall this approach leads to a multi-layered and humane history featuring Black and white abolitionists, including men and women, such as Frederick Douglass, Richard Allen, and Sarah Mapps Douglass, but also doctors embracing increasingly racist ideas. The narrative pays