

# LAND, BODY, AND COLLECTIVE CLAIM: READING *TORTO ARADO* THROUGH CHINESE XIANGTU THOUGHT

TERRA, CORPO E REIVINDICAÇÃO COLETIVA:  
A LEITURA DE *TORTO ARADO* A PARTIR DO PENSAMENTO  
XIANGTU CHINÊS

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## Abstract

This article reads Itamar Vieira Junior's *Torto Arado* through a comparative lens shaped by Chinese conceptions of land and xiangtu wenxue. In contrast to pastoral traditions that often imagine the countryside from a privileged, idyllic, or escapist distance, Chinese xiangtu wenxue traditions foreground a more material and socially embedded relation to land in a broader historical setting. Land is not treated as a passive rural backdrop, but as the basis of agrarian production, familial survival, community formation, and a sense of belonging forged through hardship. Drawing on both the representation of land in Chinese xiangtu wenxue and broader Chinese cultural conceptions of land, this article argues that such a framework helps illuminate how *Torto Arado* transforms land into a material and symbolic relation through which historical violence, embodied knowledge, and collective resistance are produced.

**Keywords:** Land, Body, Quilombo, Xiangtu Wenxue.

## Resumo

Este artigo aborda *Torto Arado*, de Itamar Vieira Junior, a partir de uma perspectiva comparativa orientada por concepções chinesas de terra e pelo *xiangtu wenxue*. Em contraste com tradições pastorais que frequentemente imaginam o campo a partir de uma distância privilegiada, idílica ou escapista, o *xiangtu wenxue* chinês enfatiza uma relação mais material e socialmente enraizada com a terra em um horizonte histórico mais amplo. A terra não é tratada como mero pano de fundo rural passivo, mas como base da produção agrária, da sobrevivência familiar, da formação comunitária e de um pertencimento forjado pela adversidade.

## Résumé

Cet article propose une lecture de *Torto Arado*, d'Itamar Vieira Junior, à partir d'une perspective comparative informée par les conceptions chinoises de la terre et par le *xiangtu wenxue*. Contrairement aux traditions pastorales qui imaginent souvent la campagne depuis une distance privilégiée, idyllique ou escapiste, le *xiangtu wenxue* chinois met au premier plan une relation à la terre plus matérielle et socialement inscrite dans un cadre historique plus large. La terre n'y est pas traitée comme un simple arrière-plan rural passif, mais comme le fondement de la production agricole, de la survie familiale, de la formation communautaire.

Com base tanto na representação da terra no *xiangtu wenxue* quanto em concepções culturais chinesas mais amplas, este artigo argumenta que esse quadro interpretativo ajuda a iluminar como *Torto Arado* transforma a terra em uma relação material e simbólica por meio da qual se produzem violência histórica, saber incorporado e resistência coletiva.

**Palavras-chave:** terra; corpo; quilombo; *xiangtu wenxue*.

et d'un sentiment d'appartenance forgé dans l'épreuve. En s'appuyant sur les traditions littéraires rurales chinoises et sur des conceptions culturelles plus larges de la terre, cet article soutient que ce cadre permet d'éclairer la manière dont *Torto Arado* transforme la terre en une relation matérielle et symbolique à travers laquelle se produisent violence historique, savoir incorporé et résistance collective.

**Mots-clés :** terre; corps; quilombo; *xiangtu wenxue*.

Itamar Vieira Junior's widely acclaimed novel *Torto Arado* recalls and reconfigures the tradition of regionalism in Brazilian literature. Set in the Chapada Diamantina region of Bahia, the novel narrates the multigenerational rural life of Água Negra through three distinct female voices: Bibiana, Belonísia, and the deity Santa Rita Pescadeira. Together, their narratives recount a long history of struggle and resistance against patriarchal, racialized, and post-abolition forms of oppression. At the center of this history lies a fundamental contradiction between the community's intimate, embodied attachment to land and the juridical structures that deny this attachment the status of ownership.

Although existing scholarship has recognized the novel's regionalist traits and emphasized its rural setting, the role of land itself remains less fully examined. This critical gap makes it productive to place *Torto Arado* in a lateral dialogue with Chinese thought and rural literary traditions. It offers a comparative lens for reading land not only as property or a "descriptive backdrop" (Canarinos, 2023, p. 147) as highlighted by regionalist tradition, but also as the central medium through which the novel connects history, body, knowledge, and community. Drawing on this comparative framework, this article argues that land in *Torto Arado* becomes a central relation through which historical violence, embodied knowledge, and collective resistance are produced. Land is not only an economic resource; it is worked, wounded, remembered, inhabited, fought for, and claimed. Yet this lived relation remains juridically invisible within a property regime that privileges legal title over cultivation, memory, and long-term occupation.

## Rethinking Land through Chinese Xiangtu Thought

Recent criticism has often read *Torto Arado* as a contemporary reconfiguration of Brazilian regionalism (Borgato, 2025; Canarinos, 2023),

a literary tradition considered to have declined after its mid-twentieth-century prominence. From this perspective, the novel inherits regionalism's function as social critique, as well as its concern with the ways specific local conditions shape human lives and give rise to distinct forms of social organization (Coutinho, 1986, p. 235). At the same time, critics have emphasized the novel's innovations within this tradition. For Ana Karla Canarinos, *Torto Arado* shifts attention away from the older regionalist concern with environmental determinism and foregrounds questions of gender and race. Rafael Borgato likewise notes a crucial divergence from earlier regionalism: marginalized and silenced characters gain voice, agency, and historical consciousness, rather than remaining passive subjects of social suffering. Other scholars have also recognized the importance of rural space in the novel, reading it as a site of memory (Lorenz, 2024; De Moraes, 2024), bodily violence (Celestino, 2026; Miranda, 2025), and economic oppression (De Oliveira *et al.*, 2024; Karam, 2022). Yet while regionalism helps situate the novel within a broader social and literary context of rurality, land remains underexamined as an organizing relation through which the novel rethinks rural life, memory, violence, and belonging.

To better understand how land connects various themes in the novel, Chinese *xiangtu* thought and *xiangtu* *wenxue* can serve as a useful comparative framework. Rooted in China's long agrarian civilization, this framework allows us to approach land affectively, to understand the communal bonds formed through it, and to examine its representation in modern and contemporary literature.

The formation of the Huaxia people has long been associated with agrarian civilization. As early as the Xia and Shang periods, political authority in ancient China was closely tied to agriculture and the cultivation of land. As stated in the "Xianwen" chapter of the *Analects*, "Yu and Hou Ji, on other hand, did nothing but personally tend to the land, and yet they both ended up with possession of the world" (Confucius, 2003, p. 155). This passage suggests that agricultural labor was not merely a means of material production, but also a source of moral and political legitimacy. In modern China, the sociologist Fei Xiaotong similarly argues that "Chinese society is fundamentally rural" (1992, p. 37), or *xiangtu* (乡土), a concept that links soil and land to homeland, family, and place-based belonging.

This attachment to land was shaped by thousands of years of small-scale peasant production. Characterized by intensive labor and the careful cultivation of limited farmland, this agricultural system fostered a close and enduring relationship between cultivators and the land on which they depended. In broad terms, it differed from the dominant agricultural trajectories of Britain and the United States, where livestock husbandry, mechanization, capital

investment, and commercial production became increasingly central. Chinese smallholder agriculture remained closely tied to household subsistence and the daily reproduction of rural life. Its influence therefore extended beyond material production, shaping modes of thought, collective values, and forms of social organization (Song & Lian, 2006).

Fei's concept of *chaxu geju* (差序格局), or the "differential mode of association," further clarifies how land mediates community formation. He describes Chinese social relations as concentric circles extending outward from the self, like "circles that appear on the surface of a lake when a rock is thrown into it" (1992, p. 62). In rural society, these circles do not exist in the abstract. They are anchored in concrete relations of land, labor, residence, inheritance, and ritual obligation. This understanding of land as a community-forming relation is especially useful for reading *Torto Arado*, where belonging to Água Negra is grounded not only in residence, but also in cultivation, memory, and collective struggle.

If Fei Xiaotong conceptualizes *xiangtu* as a social formation, modern *xiangtu wenxue* (乡土文学, native-soil literature) explores how the relationship between people and land is experienced, remembered, and contested through narrative. Emerging during the May Fourth period and the 1920s, *xiangtu wenxue* made the countryside a privileged object of literary representation and social reflection. Mao Dun argues that this literature should reveal a broader "struggle with fate" shared across human experience (1980, p. 241), not merely offer local color. More specifically, it uses rural life to explore questions of national identity, historical change, ethical relations, and the transformation of everyday life. Since the 1980s, the household responsibility system and the expansion of urbanization have complicated the relationship between humans and land without displacing its centrality in literary writing (Hao, 2019). Writers such as Ye Wei, Yan Lianke, Mo Yan, and Jia Pingwa continue to depict rural landscapes while exploring new narrative forms that respond to contemporary social change. As Xu Zhiwei argues, Chinese *xiangtu wenxue* over the past century has been rooted in the modernization of rural life: it is both a product of this transformation and an active force in imagining and reshaping the modern rural landscape (Xu, 2023, p. 5). This literary tradition offers a way to read *Torto Arado* as a narrative in which land functions as a corporeal counterpart to human suffering and survival, as witness to historical violence, and as a sacred presence through which community, memory, and resistance are articulated.

Taken together, Chinese social theories of *xiangtu*, the *xiangtu* literary tradition, and the broader cultural attachment to land provide a comparative lens to read *Torto Arado*. This framework encourages an alternative understanding of land not simply as property or an economic resource, but

as a material, historical, affective, and communal relation. Chinese *xiangtu* thought therefore shifts attention from land as an object of legal possession to the broader social relations through which land becomes a lived world.

This comparative framework does not suggest that Brazilian and Chinese rural experiences are historically equivalent, nor does it equate Brazilian quilombola communities with Chinese peasant society. It serves, instead, as a lateral comparative perspective that makes visible dimensions of land and rural life that are less emphasized in dominant readings of *Torto Arado*.

## Land as Corporeal Archive

The opening chapters of the novel narrate a childhood accident involving the two young sisters, Belonísia and Bibiana, who, out of curiosity, place an ivory-handled knife in their mouths and cut their tongues. As a consequence, Bibiana is injured, while Belonísia permanently loses part of her tongue and, with it, the ability to speak properly. Seen within the broader structure of the novel, this accident becomes more than a personal trauma. It turns the body into a site where histories of racial violence, silencing, labor, and dispossession are materially inscribed. This section argues that the novel figures land as a corporeal archive: a material surface through which bodily injury, labor, memory, and dispossession are recorded and transmitted.

The close relation between body and land is not new in Chinese *xiangtu wenxue*. Hu Zhiming and Gong Mengjiao state that since the New Period, representations of the body in Chinese literature have increasingly followed a secularizing trajectory, producing a more material and tangible mode of narration (Hu&Gong, 2023). The body becomes a concrete site through which the crises of rural life are made visible. Jia Pingwa's *Gao Laozhuang* (高老庄), for example, uses pathological representations of the body to metaphorize the declining vitality of the countryside. Similarly, in Yan Lianke's *Riguang Liunian* (日光流年), the illnesses afflicting the residents of Three Surnames Village are not merely individual conditions, but symptoms of the broader environment, poverty, history, and power structures that shape the community.

*Torto Arado* depicts the relation between body and land from a different angle. As the novel states, “a terra era seu tesouro, parte do seu corpo, algo muito íntimo” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 246). Here, land is not simply an external environment that sustains the physical body. It becomes an extension of the body: a material surface that records blood, injury, and traces of dispossession, preserving the physical marks of historical violence through corporeal forms of manifestation.

For example, when Belonísia steps on a snail shell while crossing the marsh, her blood marks the soil: “Um sangue grosso e substancioso deixava meu corpo pintando a terra com seu vermelho cor de pássaro” (Vieira Junior,

2019, p. 51). Later, after Severo is murdered, the blood flows into the wound-like crack in the earth beside his body: “A terra seca aos seus pés havia se tornado uma fenda aberta e nela corria um rio de sangue” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 199). In both scenes, blood turns the land into a participant in human suffering. The boundary between body and soil becomes blurred, suggesting that the violence inflicted upon Black rural subjects also leaves marks on the territory they inhabit. Land and body thus share a common historical destiny: both are cut, opened, and made to bear the traces of violence.

This logic of transferred violence is most evident in Belonísia’s childhood accident. Her loss of speech is not only an individual injury; it becomes a figure for the historical silencing of the community itself. Yet the object that produces this silence is worth noting. The ivory-handled knife hidden in Donana’s suitcase carries a layered history of domination and revenge. Donana had stolen the knife from her master and later used it against the white man who raped her daughter, Carmelita. The knife therefore condenses racial violence, sexual violence, and a brief reversal of power: in Donana’s hands, an object associated with the master’s authority becomes an instrument of retaliation. But this stolen power does not disappear without residue. When Bibiana and Belonísia place the knife in their mouths, the object becomes the medium through which historical violence is transmitted across bodies, turning the accumulated violence inward and wounding the next generation.

This intergenerational transmission becomes explicit when Belonísia later imagines her injured tongue as an “arado torto”: “Era um arado torto, deformado, que penetrava a terra de tal forma a deixá-la infértil, destruída, dilacerada” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 127). The image is central to the novel’s symbolic structure, translating bodily trauma into the language of cultivation. The body that cannot speak becomes a crooked plow that cuts into the earth and leaves it “infértil,” “destruída,” and “dilacerada.” In this way, speech, labor, body, and land are brought into the same symbolic system: a wounded tongue becomes a damaged instrument of cultivation, and the violence imposed on the body is transferred to the land it works.

The word “infértil” does not mean that the land lacks productive capacity; rather, it names a social condition in which productivity cannot be converted into security, ownership, or a stable future for the workers themselves. This interrupted fertility is visible in the material life of both houses and crops. Belonísia once admires the generative power of the land, which gives rise to two fundamental necessities of human life: food and dwelling. “Via como um encanto uma casa nascer da própria terra, do mesmo barro em que, se lançássemos sementes, veríamos brotar o alimento” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 142-143). The image brings habitation and cultivation together: the same mud that receives seeds and produces food can also rise into walls

and become shelter. Yet neither food nor shelter becomes a stable foundation for life in Água Negra. Given that they lack legal ownership, the land cannot secure intergenerational stability.

The workers may build with mud, forked branches, and reeds, but not with masonry, and their houses are therefore destined to erode under rain, sun, and time (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 183). As Pereira et al. argue, the precariousness of these dwellings does not result from technical deficiency, but from the absence of definitive possession and the political exclusion that prevents the community's presence from becoming durable (2024, p. 522). Under the logic of plantation power, the workers may inhabit the land, but they cannot inscribe themselves permanently into it. The same logic governs agricultural production. The crops cultivated by the workers, as well as the produce they gather from the land, remain exposed to seizure by Sutério, even when they do not belong to the landowners' agreed share. The earth's fertility is therefore trapped within a system that converts growth into vulnerability. What the land gives can be taken away; what the workers build can be made to disappear.

Given this precariousness, the fact that the land receives the community's dead does not only signify affective belonging or ancestral attachment. It also turns the land into a space of confinement, one that blocks alternative futures for its inhabitants. As Belonísia observes, Água Negra is “onde enterrávamos os restos de nossos corpos. Para onde todos desceriam algum dia. Ninguém escaparia” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 20). To be born on the land, to work until exhaustion, and finally to be buried in the same soil becomes an unbreakable life cycle. Land thus appears ambivalently: it is the ground of memory and belonging, but also the space in which racialized dispossession reproduces itself across generations. The body returns to the land not as the fulfillment of rootedness alone, but as the final stage of a life materially enclosed by the plantation order.

These bodily and material images are not only symbolic. They point to the historical and juridical conditions that made Black rural attachment to land socially necessary but legally unrecognized. Formal emancipation in 1888 in Brazil did not provide formerly enslaved people with land, education, employment, or material compensation. As a result, many remained tied to the same estates or neighboring farms under new forms of dependency, without the economic means to acquire land of their own. This situation was rooted in the Lei de Terras of 1850, which made purchase and sale the primary legal means of acquiring land, thereby excluding both enslaved people, who lacked juridical personhood, and freed Black people, who generally lacked the economic resources necessary to buy land (Karam, 2022). In this sense, *Torto Arado* connects the disposessions in Água Negra to a historical-juridical

order in which formal freedom did not produce material autonomy. Hence, the novel exceeds both regional description and local color: it transforms rural life into a field where body, land, and historical fate become inseparable.

In summary, *Torto Arado* does not romanticize attachment to land. The intimacy between body and soil is real, but it is produced under conditions of racialized dispossession. Land sustains life, receives memory, and anchors belonging; at the same time, it bears the blood, wounds, fragile dwellings, seized crops, and buried bodies of those denied legal permanence. *Água Negra* is rendered not as a picturesque rural world, but as a historical terrain where the afterlives of slavery are inscribed into bodies and soil. Land thus becomes a corporeal archive of a history of oppression in which Black bodies are made to labor, suffer, remember, and claim permanence.

## Land as Embodied Knowledge

If the previous section examined land as a corporeal archive of historical violence, this section turns to land as a field of embodied knowledge. In *Torto Arado*, land is known not abstractly but through repeated bodily contact, labor, and attention. Despite being indispensable to survival, the novel also shows that such knowledge remains subordinated to institutional forms of authority, like schooling, standardized Portuguese, official history, written documents, and property law.

Fei Xiaotong's discussion of *xiangtu shehui* (乡土社会) offers a useful framework for understanding this form of knowledge. In his account, rural society is grounded in soil, familiarity, repetition, and long-term relations to place. "Staying in the same place for such a long time, the people there seem to intermingle with the earth itself" (Fei, 1992, p. 57). Knowledge in such a world is not detached from land; it develops through continuous residence, bodily practice, and practical adaptation to the environment. At the same time, Fei's reflections on the relation between writing and rural society help clarify the ambivalent status of literacy in *Torto Arado*: written knowledge can provide access to institutional power, but it can also estrange rural subjects from the forms of knowledge through which they understand their own world. Read through this lens, *Água Negra*'s land becomes an epistemological environment, one that is read, touched, listened to, and learned through repeated bodily engagement.

This embodied knowledge first appears in the childhood play of Bibiana and Belonísia. In the yard and the surrounding forest, the sisters collect clay, stones, branches, leaves, and leftover wood, transforming these materials into imagined stoves, tools, furniture, cultivated fields, and domestic objects (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 22-23). Their play is not merely recreational, nor does it simply imitate adult life. It functions as an early training in the

material logic of rural living. Through play, the children learn the plasticity of clay, the uses of wood and stone, the organization of domestic space, and the connection between household labor and agricultural production. The land thus becomes an informal school, where knowledge is acquired through touch, repetition, gesture, and material transformation.

The same embodied epistemology appears more explicitly in Belonísia's relation to Zeca Chapéu Grande. If written culture teaches students to read letters, Zeca teaches Belonísia to read land: soil, dryness, moisture, seasonal change, and subterranean signs. His teaching gives concrete form to a *xiangtu* mode of knowledge grounded in familiarity, repetition, and bodily attunement. When he teaches Belonísia to lie on the ground “com o ouvido voltado para seu interior, para decidir o que usar, o que fazer, onde avançar, onde recuar” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 100), the body becomes an instrument of reading, and the land becomes a text whose signs are perceived through touch, hearing, posture, and movement. This scene is central to the novel's understanding of knowledge because it unsettles the documentary and bureaucratic logic of modern authority. Belonísia does not know the land by looking at maps, reading property titles, or consulting official records. She knows it by placing her body against the earth, listening to its interior, and interpreting signs that are not available to distant owners or bureaucratic institutions.

However, the novel does not romanticize agrarian knowledge as sufficient in itself. Although the community's embodied knowledge sustains everyday life, it does not automatically grant legal ownership, institutional authority, or social mobility. Those who know the land most intimately remain vulnerable to the documents, titles, and bureaucratic procedures through which dispossession is maintained.

The novel therefore does not oppose embodied knowledge to literacy as if one were authentic and the other corrupt. Rather, it exposes a hierarchy in which written and institutional knowledge becomes the only form recognized by school, law, and the state. The school in Água Negra is established through negotiations with the white farm owner and the mayor, and it initially carries Zeca's hope that education might offer the children access to social mobility and rights. But for Belonísia, school becomes a site of alienation. The written word appears to her as “as letras embaralhadas” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 98), a confused and distant system that does not translate her world. Standardized Portuguese belongs to the universe of masters, officials, judges, teachers, and state institutions. It is the language through which rural Black subjects are governed, but not necessarily the language through which they are able to narrate their own experience.

The violence of institutional knowledge becomes even clearer in the history lessons Belonísia receives at school. The curriculum presents Brazil as a harmonious mixture of “índios, negros e brancos” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p.

97), a blessed nation supposedly founded on coexistence and racial mixture. The “fantasiosas e enfadonhas” (p. 97) stories of bandeirantes, soldiers, teachers, doctors, and judges belong to the archive of the dominant nation. They celebrate figures associated with conquest, state power, and professional authority while excluding the rural Black workers whose labor sustains the land. For Belonísia, this national narrative appears “mentirosa” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 99) because it cannot account for the suffering embodied by Água Negra: slavery, rape, torture, displacement, land dispossession, and continuing labor exploitation. The school thus reproduces the myth of racial democracy, transforming national history into a story of mixture and progress while silencing the violence that made such a nation possible.

Modern Chinese rural writing offers a useful parallel for understanding this conflict between official knowledge and rural experience. The countryside often becomes a site where narratives of national progress are tested against the material lives and practical knowledge of rural people, who are frequently represented by dominant discourse as ignorant or backward. This tension is evident in the writings of Lu Xun and Xiao Hong, where rural life exposes violence, exclusion, and the limits of inherited social beliefs. Chen Zhongshi’s *White Deer Plain* offers another version of this encounter between modernity and rurality. Through its representation of moral decline, tragic destiny, and the disintegration of local order, the novel recognizes the ethical structures and practical wisdom that emerge from long histories of agricultural life and attachment to land, even as it refuses to idealize them. Similarly, in *Torto Arado*, Água Negra challenges a unified national history that celebrates racial mixture and progress while erasing slavery, sexual violence, land dispossession, and labor exploitation.

Bibiana’s trajectory complicates this opposition. Unlike Belonísia, literacy gives her access to political consciousness and a means of mobilization. She eventually becomes a political leader in Água Negra against the landowner. Her story shows that institutional knowledge is not inherently oppressive; it can be reappropriated as a tool of struggle. Yet the novel also makes clear that literacy alone cannot overcome racialized exclusion, given that Bibiana is still marginalized in the society and could barely make ends meet. In this sense, *Torto Arado* refuses both anti-modern nostalgia and naïve faith in education. Agrarian knowledge sustains embodied relation to land, while institutional knowledge provides tools for legal and political intervention. Neither is sufficient by itself.

The conflict between these epistemological systems is central to the novel’s broader critique. *Torto Arado* does not oppose knowledge to ignorance, or rural life to modernity. It asks which forms of knowledge are recognized as valid, and who has the power to convert knowledge into rights. The

tragedy of *Água Negra* lies in the gap between knowing the land and being authorized to claim it. The workers cultivate the land, read its signs, build with its materials, bury their dead in its soil, and transmit its memory across generations. Yet from the landowners' perspective, they remain "forasteiros" (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 183) while owners who rarely inhabit the property are recognized as legitimate insiders. The term "forasteiro" thus exposes the violence of property logic: belonging is determined not by labor, memory, habitation, or knowledge, but by legal title.

## Land as Collective Claim

The question, then, is how Black communities can resist institutional and racialized oppression and transform their relation to land into a political claim. In *Água Negra*, the force of resistance emerges from the conversion of labor, memory, ancestry, and embodied attachment into collective struggle. The community does not claim land merely as legal property, but as a lived world produced through generations of cultivation, suffering, burial, care, and belonging. This claim also draws strength from the quilombola tradition, which provides a historical language of solidarity and defiance through which Black cultural memory confronts dominant systems of property, race, and power.

This logic is most forcefully articulated in Salu's declaration, "eu pari esta terra" (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 229). Speaking to the wife of the new plantation owner, Salu grounds authority in the bodily experience of labor, birth, care, and endurance. She asks whether the owner's wife knows what it means to give birth: "Alimentar e tirar uma vida de dentro de você? Uma vida que irá continuar mesmo quando você já não estiver mais nesta terra de Deus?" (p. 229). Through this maternal language, Salu presents land not as an object externally possessed, but as a world brought into being through bodily and collective labor. To say that she "gave birth" to the land is to claim that *Água Negra* exists as a social and historical world because generations of Black workers have cultivated it, inhabited it, buried their dead in it, and sustained life through it. Yet this claim remains precarious within a legal order that recognizes title over memory, property over cultivation, and documentation over lived relation. Her speech therefore marks the point at which embodied belonging must be transformed into collective political struggle.

Belonísia and Bibiana develop this claim in two distinct but interconnected directions. Belonísia carries the ancestral and corporeal force of resistance, transforming inherited suffering into historical memory and communal anger. Bibiana, by contrast, helps translate this embodied inheritance into literacy, organization, and quilombola political consciousness.

Belonísia gains the strength to resist imposed violence through the female lineage of Donana and Salu. When confronted with the threat of

domestic violence from Tobias, she refuses submission and declares that she “não tinha medo de homem, era neta de Donana e filha de Salu, que fizeram homens dobrar a língua para se dirigirem a elas” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 121). Her defiance is therefore not merely individual; it is inherited from women who confronted racial, sexual, and patriarchal violence before her. Donana and Salu become models of refusal, teaching Belonísia that violence is not a fate to be silently endured, but a structure that can be resisted. Through them, the past does not remain behind her. It enters her body as strength, anger, and survival.

Belonísia’s damaged voice gives this ancestral inheritance a bodily form. Although her childhood injury deprives her of ordinary speech, it also turns her voice into a medium through which the pain of earlier generations returns. Reflecting on Tobias’s violence, she recalls:

Agora, com os mau-tratos de Tobias, elas se tornaram mais vis, eram gritadas por minhas ancestrais, por Donana, por minha mãe, pelas avós que não conheci, e que chegavam a mim para que as repetisse com o horror de meus sons, e assim ganhassem os contornos tristes e inesquecíveis que me manteriam viva (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 128).

Her voice therefore does not belong to her alone. What appears as broken speech becomes a channel for the silenced words, wounds, and memories of the women who came before her. The injury that takes away her ordinary voice also transforms her body into a site of ancestral transmission.

This transmission expands Belonísia’s suffering beyond individual victimhood. Through pain, she recognizes her bond with others who endure the same structures of dispossession:

Só assim poderia experimentar o sofrimento como o sentimento que unia a todos que viviam em Água Negra ... O sofrer vinha das coisas que nem sempre davam certo, me fazia sentir viva e unida, de alguma forma, a todos os trabalhadores que padeciam dos mesmos desfavorecimentos (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 141).

The novel does not glorify suffering, but it shows how shared suffering can produce recognition. Belonísia comes to understand her own pain as part of a collective condition, linking her body to other workers, the living to the dead, and Água Negra to a longer history of Black dispossession.

This is why Belonísia can be described as “a fúria que havia cruzado o tempo” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 261). Her anger is not merely personal resentment; it carries the force of historical memory. She is “filha da gente forte que atravessou um oceano, que foi separada de sua terra, que deixou para

trás sonhos e forjou no desterro uma vida nova e iluminada” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 261). The passage connects her rage to the Middle Passage, forced displacement, slavery, and the survival of those who endured “a crueldade que lhes foi imposta” (Vieira Junior, 2019, p. 261). Through Belonísia, inherited trauma becomes an active force of resistance.

This ancestral force reaches its most dramatic expression in the revenge against Salomão. The killing is not presented as an act of private vengeance alone, but as a form of ancestral retribution carried out through Belonísia’s body under the force of Santa Rita Pescadeira. A comparison with the white deer spirit in White Deer Plain helps clarify the sacred function of land in this scene. In both novels, rural space is not a neutral setting; it becomes a sacred archive of historical memory. Yet the narrative functions of these sacred figures diverge sharply. The white deer operates primarily as an ethical and cultural witness: it mourns suffering, sanctifies sacrifice, and encodes the decline of a Confucian agrarian order. Santa Rita Pescadeira, by contrast, is not merely a witness to violence, but an embodied return of the repressed. Through possession, she transforms Belonísia’s wounded body into the medium of collective and ancestral justice.

Significantly, a conflict that begins with land also ends through land: Salomão’s death takes place through a trap opened in the earth, turning the soil itself into the instrument of retributive justice. His death gives narrative form to a justice that the law fails to provide. Through Belonísia’s possessed body, the land, the deity, and the violated community act together against racialized violence from outside the institutions that have historically protected landowners. Yet this act of revenge does not resolve the problem of land ownership. It can punish a murderer, but it cannot by itself transform embodied belonging into recognized rights. For this reason, the novel must move from Belonísia’s ancestral retribution to Bibiana’s work of political organization and quilombola claim.

Bibiana and Severo contribute another dimension to this process by activating quilombo as a political language of memory, organization, and territorial claim. Their role is not to replace embodied memory with formal politics, but to make that memory collectively intelligible and politically actionable. Quilombola self-identification allows the inhabitants of Água Negra to understand themselves not merely as tenants, laborers, or dependents tolerated on someone else’s land, but as members of a historically dispossessed Black community.

Although the term “quilombo” was historically associated with communities of Black fugitives under slavery, Nascimento insists that quilombo did not disappear with abolition. It became a continuing form of Black organization, memory, and resistance against racial and cultural domination.

As she writes, “Quilombo came to be synonymous with black people, their conduct, and the hope for a better society. It became an internal and external crux for all forms of cultural resistance. In the search for greater recognition of black inheritance, everything, from attitude to association, became quilombo” (Nascimento, 2023, p. 255). Reading through Nascimento’s formulation, the movement in Água Negra can be understood as quilombola resistance because it transforms dispersed suffering into collective self-recognition.

Quilombola identity is also a legal strategy for claiming land rights. According to Article 68 of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, “aos remanescentes das comunidades dos quilombos que estejam ocupando suas terras é reconhecida a propriedade definitiva, devendo o Estado emitir-lhes os títulos respectivos.” This constitutional language gives juridical form to a relation to land that has long existed through labor, habitation, burial, and ancestry.

The comparison with Chinese *xiangtu* society also clarifies the specific nature of communal solidarity in Água Negra. Fei Xiaotong’s concept of *chaxu geju* (差序格局), explains a rural social order in which personal relations are anchored in land, labor, residence, inheritance, ritual obligation, and, most importantly, blood lineage. In this structure, the household functions as the basic unit of production and social reproduction, while lineage ties organize the transmission of property, ancestral land, and communal responsibilities. As families divide across generations, they remain connected through shared land, village residence, ancestral memory, and ritual practice. Land therefore becomes a medium through which personal relations are stabilized into a community.

This framework helps illuminate Água Negra as a community formed through land-based relations, while also making its difference more visible. Unlike the lineage-centered solidarity described by Fei, the collective life of Água Negra is not primarily grounded in blood descent, inherited property, or patriarchal clan organization. It emerges from the shared historical conditions of slavery, racialized labor, dispossession, common worship, and quilombola resistance. The inhabitants are bound together not because they possess land through lineage, but because they have collectively worked it, suffered on it, buried their dead in it, and struggled to claim it against an oppressive system that continues the violence of slavery in new forms.

Taken together, Bibiana and Belonísia show that resistance in *Torto Arado* requires both memory and action directed toward the future. Belonísia carries the force of ancestral suffering through her wounded body, damaged voice, rage, and attachment to land. Bibiana, through literacy, mobility, and political organization, helps transform this inheritance into a collective demand for land, dignity, and historical legitimacy. The community must remember the violence endured by its ancestors, but it must also convert that

memory into a political claim. Quilombola resistance is therefore not merely a return to the past; it is the means through which Água Negra actively resists dispossession in the present and imagines a more just future.

To summarize, the comparative framework of Chinese *xiangtu* thought and *xiangtu wenxue* allows us to revisit the central role of land in *Torto Arado*. Land is not merely the background of rural life, but the ground through which history is registered. It is also an epistemological space where the characters learn the world, inherit ancestral knowledge, and form a collective sense of belonging. The novel does not simply assert that cultivation produces ownership in a legal sense. Rather, it redefines legitimate relation to land through cultivation, bodily labor, long-term occupation, ancestral memory, and collective survival. Through this relation to land, the Black rural community of Água Negra claims historical legitimacy, political visibility, and the possibility of a future.

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#### **Declaração de Autoria**

Tingting Lyu, declarada autora, confirma sua participação em todas as etapas de elaboração do trabalho: 1. Conceição do projeto, pesquisa bibliográfica, análise e interpretação dos dados; 2. Redação e revisão do manuscrito; 3. Aprovação da versão final do manuscrito para publicação; 4. Responsabilidade por todos os aspectos do trabalho e garantia pela exatidão e integridade de qualquer parte da obra. Declaro ainda que este artigo recebeu apoio do Projeto de Grande Porte do Fundo Nacional de Ciências Sociais da China, “World Literature Reconsidered: Archival Compilation, Multifaceted Genealogies, and Conceptual Reframing” (nº 24&ZD243).

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