Brazil is the largest country in the Americas, the sixth-most populous country in the world with an estimated population of roughly 201.5 million (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística / Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics 2014), and largely recognized as a thriving democracy with a federal system of government comprising twenty-six states and Brasilia. It is now one of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), which means that it has enormous potential, and within the next decade it is expected to become an economic and political juggernaut. In the last decade, the Brazilian economy significantly expanded its presence in world markets and global trade (Montero 2005, 117). Its national identity is largely defined by its complex and diverse multi-ethnic citizenry, its world famous carnival season, its soccer prowess, its rugged national politics, vibrant social movements, and sophisticated and well-organized civil society groups. In October of 2010, Brazil elected Dilma Rouseff, from the left-leaning Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ Party), as its first woman president. She is a former guerrilla leader and political prisoner, and her rise to Brazil’s highest office opens a new chapter in Brazil’s long political history. In October of 2014, in a very tight election, Rouseff was narrowly reelected to a second four-year term. She follows in the line of her political mentor (both hail from the same
party), Lula da Silva, the former trade unionist, who led the country from 2002 until 2010.

The struggle for racial justice by Afro–civil society is the main concern of this book. From the 1930s until the middle of the 1970s, antiracist discourse and large-scale mobilization around racial justice was strictly limited in Brazil, first under the Estado Novo of the 1930s to 1945 and later during the military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. During these two historical periods open and free discussions regarding racial issues, attempts at grassroots mobilization, and attempts to organize political parties not sanctioned by the state were censured and denounced as subversive. However, the reconstitution of formal democracy following military rule from 1964 to 1985, and the emergence of Afro-Brazilian social movements during the final years of the dictatorship, propelled a series of burning questions into Brazil’s national discourse. Strong opposition to military rule peaked in the early 1970s, and by the end of the decade, the country had begun a process of liberalization that enabled a large cross-section of diverse groups to challenge political and economic inequality through social movement action. During the transition from military to civilian rule, Brazilian social movement groups sought to connect their struggle for democracy with their struggle for social justice (Andrews 1996). Issues of racial as well as gender equality emerged as important rallying cries for these new movements. Afro-Brazilians across the country joined labor leaders and church officials, as well as the rural and urban poor, and began an unprecedented dialogue on the role played by race and gender in structuring opportunities and rewards in Brazilian society (Lovell 2000).

Between 1974 and 1985 the process of political liberalization generated new space for racial contestation for Afro–social groups. An increasing number of Black movement groups and associations were formed in major cities across Brazil. Most were in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo (Caldwell 2007), and Salvador. It was during this period that the seeds of a new civil society infrastructure were taking root and Afro–civil society began to emerge. The emergence of a Black and women’s movement at this critical juncture played a key role in challenging centuries of racial and gender oppression. For example, the founding of
the blocos afros (carnival groups) Ilê Aiyê and Olodum in Salvador in 1974 and 1979 respectively; the birth of the Sociedade de Intercâmbio Brasil–África (Society for Brazilian-African Exchange) and the Instituto de Pesquisas das Culturas Negras (Institute for the Study of Black Culture) in 1974 in Rio de Janeiro (Romo 2010, 260); and the emergence of the São Paulo–based Movimento Negro Unificado (Unified Black Movement) in 1978 as well as a number of other Black activists groups during the 1970s ushered in a new era of Black consciousness, Afro-referenced identities, social protest, and antiracist politics.

As new civic actors these Afro–nongovernmental organizations, groups, and associations arose outside the formal realm of the state as autonomous social agents for change, and their work was premised on antiracist strategies and grassroots mobilization. These groups are therefore broadly referred to as Afro–civil society throughout this book. The concept of civil society in Latin America (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Feinberg, Waisman, and Zamosc 2006; Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Becker 2014) forms the conceptual underpinning to understanding democracy, social and cultural citizenship, grassroots mobilization, identity constructions, and human rights: Afro–civil society builds on these novel conceptualizations by linking issues of racialization, modalities of Black consciousness, the repertoire of various Black identities, Black oppression, grassroots mobilization, and the Black struggle for human rights to the core of civil society in the Americas. In doing so, Afro–civil society challenges the normative underpinnings of traditional civil society while at the same time making it more conceptually and theoretically relevant to Black peoples and their forms of organization.

Throughout the 1980s there were also a significant number of Afro–civil society groups formed in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Salvador, and other parts of the country. While race continued to be highly contested during the 1980s and 1990s, the emergence of civil society during the 1970s was pivotal, as it facilitated debates over the meaning of race by providing a social frame that was more conducive to the articulation of oppositional racial discourse (Caldwell 2007; Covin 2006). By 1988, Brazil was a de facto democracy, and the Black and women’s movements, as well as other social groups, had become well established and
serious political actors (Caldwell 2007, 159). Along with a new constitution, 1988 marked one hundred years since the formal abolition of slavery, and there were commemorative events across the country. Contributing to the rise of civil society were the process of political liberalization, a new constitution, and the formation of new Afro–social groups. This new constellation of forces provided the newly emergent Black movements a social license and new democratic space to raise a series of critical questions pertaining to racial discrimination and social inequality; it is argued that many of these questions had been texturally submerged for centuries.

One of the first—and perhaps thorniest—questions to emerge was about the nature of the structural racialized oppression and systemic racial discrimination faced by Afro-Brazilians; the second was about which grassroots strategies and mobilization tools to rally, organize, and educate the Afro-Brazilian masses regarding questions of racial and gender inequality were most appropriate; and the third was about what role the intersection of culture and politics played in shaping Afro-Brazilian consciousness and social identity, and, equally important, whether they could be used as platforms of mass-based social mobilization and grassroots action. These questions are of course linked to broader discourses pertaining to human rights and social citizenship because Afro-Brazilians were simultaneously de jure citizens but de facto noncitizens. Against this backdrop, it is argued that Brazil, and Salvador da Bahia in particular, offers an extremely compelling site of investigation based on the following:

1. Brazil has had a long and complex history of social discrimination. Brazilian history is marked by factors that shaped the Afro-Atlantic World—slavery, resistance, a slave culture, the formation of new identities, racism, and problems of integration (Butler 2000). These sociocultural practices—historically and currently—are deeply embedded in racialized and gendered hierarchies that are currently being dismantled and challenged by Afro–civil society groups all over the country and in Salvador in particular.
2. With an estimated 120 million people of African descent, Brazil has one of the largest African-descendant populations in the hemisphere (much larger than that of the United States). Africans arrived on Portuguese slave ships to toil in sugar plantations that made Brazil one of the richer colonies, and Salvador one of the richer cities, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Butler 2000). And while Blacks are found in most of Brazil’s twenty-six states, Bahia and Salvador are largely recognized as a vibrant epicenter of Afro-Brazilian social identity and rich cultural traditions.

3. Brazil has recently enacted novel Black rights laws and legislation (antidiscrimination, affirmative action, and other measures). Brazil’s affirmative action laws in education stand as some of the most comprehensive in all of the Americas (Hernández 2013). In 2012, the Brazilian Supreme Court issued a series of important rulings regarding affirmative action. These measures are uneven and are now being hotly debated by many different groups with different social, cultural, economic, and political interests.

4. Afro-Brazilian politicians are now represented on the local, regional, and national levels (Johnson 2000, 2008). The number of Blacks elected to political office over the past twenty-five years has risen slowly, but their overall numbers are extremely low both proportionately and in absolute numbers. In Salvador, Afro-Brazilian politicians are found at all levels of the local and regional government. However, formal Black politics in Salvador traverses a broad and diverse ideological spectrum, and Blacks are active in many different political parties that span from the most conservative to the most progressive.

The main questions this book seeks to address are the following: First, how are Afro-Brazilians (specifically in Salvador, Bahia) reconfiguring or challenging notions of citizenship, racialization, gender, territory, belonging, and national identities? Second, what is unique about the social, political, and cultural history of Salvador? Third, what are some
of the key groups operating in Salvador, when did they emerge within the context of civil society, and what contributions have they made to Black social advancement? Finally, what are some of the key issues facing Afro–civil society groups and Black communities in Salvador, and how are they being addressed?

The main premise of this volume is that Afro-Brazilian civil society groups have matured since the 1970s and now are demanding and receiving some of the rights they were long denied and, at the same time, opening up new democratic spaces. This radical new space, it is argued, is the result of years of grassroots activism, political education, and mobilization across the country—and this new political transformation is rooted in concepts such as cultural citizenship, new citizenship, and active citizenship, each of which offers legitimation to claims of rights, space, and belonging in the dominant society. According to Blanca Silvestrini, these new forms of alternative citizenship refer to “the ways people organize their values, their beliefs about their rights, and their practices based on their sense of cultural belonging rather than on their formal status as citizens” (Silvestrini 1997, 44). The premise of this book is that by challenging and overturning racialized, gendered, and class structures, as well as by developing strategies of empowerment, Afro–social movements in Brazil are expanding citizenship and creating new democratic possibilities. Using Salvador as a case study, this book spotlights and explores the democratic challenges and possibilities for peoples of African descent in the Americas.

Theoretically, this research aims to contribute to Latin American critical racial theory and Black social movements by providing deep insights regarding cultural politics in Salvador, and to do so by exploring various forms of Black consciousness and cultural expressions, different levels of political action and social mobilization, and the role of Afro–civil society in relation to the state as well as by critically analyzing current debates on racial and gender discrimination and social inequality. Conceptually, this research seeks to break new ground by examining how Black politics (cultural and formal) are articulated and the ways in which the state is responding to various Black demands in Brazil, and particularly in Salvador da Bahia.

It is argued that over the past two decades African-descendants in
Brazil and Central and Latin America have been actively involved in the appropriation and articulation of Black identities for cultural and political ends. In many cases the assertion of Black identities in Afro-Latin communities and Salvador in particular has been closely tied to the increasing transnational circulation of Black cultural products and antiracist discourses. This study will amply demonstrate that Salvador da Bahia is emblematic of the articulation of new identities and antiracist discourses. The emergence of new forms of cultural politics in Black communities in Brazil and across Latin America necessitates the development of frameworks that examine the ways in which Afro-communities appropriate and articulate notions of Blackness (Gordon and Anderson 1999). It is argued that the construction and articulation of Afro-Brazilian identity in Bahia is inextricably linked to identity politics elsewhere in the African Diaspora in complex ways. In addition to Afro-Bahian cultural practices many Bahians of African descent also draw from increasingly globalized Afro-Diasporic discourses and practices as they construct and position their identities (Selka 2007, 135), and these discourses include narrative scripts on civil and human rights, police violence and criminal justice issues, affirmative action and education, Black cultural and formal politics, and economic survival; and the circuits for the articulation of Afro-Diasporic cultural formations include hip-hop, soul, reggae, slam poetry, and negritude, as well as cultural exchange programs, tourism, and transnational advocacy structures.

This study will place the global dimensions of Brazilians’ racial formation in conversation with racial formations in other African Diasporic communities in the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Americas. Paul Gilroy defines Diaspora cultures as countercultures of modernity that share a common backdrop of experiences that include memory of slavery, legacies of Africanism, the effects of racism and discrimination, and dialogue and exchange with other Diaspora Black cultures (Gilroy 1993). While there is some comparative scholarship on race and racism focused on the United States and Brazil, works examining race and racism within a Diasporic frame are more recent and remain scarce. Dixon and Burdick’s Comparative Perspectives on Afro-Latin America (2012) and Bernd Reiter and Kimberly Eison’s