



LIVING LEXICON FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

Plantation

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Patricius, an Indigenous Marind elder, is teaching me how to listen to plantations.¹ We are standing in a 50,000-hectare oil palm concession in the Indonesian-controlled region of West Papua. Before oil palm, this land was home to many of Patricius's kin—cassowaries, possums, birds of paradise, sago palms. Now, an uncanny silence presides in the plantation, interrupted occasionally by crashing bulldozers, roaring chainsaws, and effluents spewing from the mill. There are no animals to be heard or movements detected. Rows of identical, equidistant oil palms extend into the horizon. Every so often, a gentle breeze animates the canopy. A senescing frond creaks. An invisible cicada stridulates in the overstory. Otherwise, only silence and singularity. My gaze follows Patricius's arm as it unfurls slowly, capturing within its span the regimented landscape before us. "Welcome to the plantation," my companion declares, "welcome to the forests of the future."

As material formation and conceptual analytic, the plantation offers fertile grounds for reexamining "nature" as a site and subject of anthropogenic violence. First established in fourteenth-century feudal Europe, plantations became imbricated with the spread of racialized colonial modernity in the sugar, tobacco, hemp, and cotton landscapes of the eighteenth-century Caribbean and southern United States.² Today, monocrop oil palm, timber, and soy proliferation across the Global South is driven by a range of multi-scalar factors: global food security imperatives, national economic development prerogatives, international renewable energy targets, exclusionary fair trade and

1. Pseudonyms have been used for persons and places, except for major provinces and districts.

2. Manjapra, "Plantation Disposessions," 363; Moore, "End of the Road?"; Benítez-Rojo, *La isla que se repite*.

sustainable certification initiatives, top-down modernization agendas, and nepotistic alliances between state, military, and corporate forces.³

The conjuring of plantations as “capitalist natures,” in Arturo Escobar’s terms, routinely entails the displacement, dispossession, or exploitation of Indigenous peoples and other rural communities in the name of progress and development.⁴ It exemplifies the principles of ecological simplification, homogenization, and instrumentalization that characterize the “Plantationocene,” a spatio-temporal formation long described by Black scholars such as Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick and more recently rearticulated by Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and others.⁵ As projects of scale and desire, plantations are rooted in the logic of mastery, discipline, and control over environments deemed useful only insofar as they serve particular humans’ ends.⁶ In plantation regimes, the fates of uprooted and transplanted humans and plants become strangely intertwined. Simultaneously positioned as objects and subjects of extractive labor, their bodies and vitalities are put to work under the dictates of capitalist production and its limitless, linear, and singular arrow of time-as-progress.⁷ The plantation of the future is the plantation of the past and the present.⁸

But there is more to the plantation than extraction and extinction. Plantations have persistently proven potent birthing grounds for the emergence of multispecies resistance and resurgence. On Caribbean and American southern plantations, food plots cultivated by the enslaved became unexpected biocultural refugia nurturing oppositional modes of Black life grounded in more-than-human meshworks of kinship and care.⁹ Fugitive seeds and bodies became literally and figuratively entangled in marronage, as formerly enslaved Black women carefully concealed grains in their hair before taking flight in order to feed their children to come.¹⁰ Sorghum shoots, celebrated through the songs of enslaved Africans in Jamaica, became active participants in scenes of more-than-human commoning alongside tea, water, yams, provision grounds, and humans across both sides of the color line.¹¹ In indigo plantations, dark dyes seeped deep into

3. For examples from India, see Besky, *Darjeeling Distinction*; Galvin, *Becoming Organic*; Ali, *Local History of Global Capital*. From Latin America, see Aráoz, “América Latina”; Escobar, *Territorios de diferencia*, 93–138; Pérez, “La Mosquitia”; Leguizamón, *Seeds of Power*. From Southeast Asia, see Chao, *In the Shadow of the Palms*, “(Un)Worlding the Plantationocene”; Li, *Plantation Life*. From China, see Liu, “Forest Sustainability in China”; Xu, *Industrial Tree Plantations*. From Africa, see von Hellermann, *Things Fall Apart?*; Watkins, *Palm Oil Diaspora*.

4. Escobar, “After Nature,” 6.

5. See Davis et al., “Anthropocene”; McKittrick, “Plantation Futures”; Trouillot, “Culture on the Edges”; Wynter, “Novel and History”; Haraway, “Anthropocene”; Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt, “Patchy Anthropocene.”

6. Alimonda, *La naturaleza colonizada*.

7. Thomas, “Time and the Otherwise.”

8. McKittrick, “Plantation Futures.”

9. Davis et al., “Anthropocene.” See also Carney, “Subsistence in the Plantationocene”; Carney and Rossmoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery*; Wynter, “Novel and History.”

10. Keeve, “Fugitive Seeds.”

11. Dillon, “Plantationocene,” 83, 91; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*.

the hands of enslaved women laborers, merging with fungible Black bodies in the making of porous part-human, part-vegetal beings.¹² Captive bodies-turned-flesh remained embedded in and running contiguously with other-than-human kinships and companionships, forged amid and against the unthinkable violence of racializing plantation logic.

Alongside grassroots movements of resistance and opposition, more-than-human protagonists continue to animate plantations in the present. Fungi, rodents, and reptiles sabotage the plantation dream by parasitizing on cash crops. Genetically engineered plants become vulnerable to herbicide-resistant weeds or lose the ability to reproduce without the assistance of human pollinators and machines.¹³ Other organisms like barn owls and pollinating weevils entertain mutualistic relations with cash crops. The biotic affordances of these critters, known in agronomic parlance as “beneficial species,” are leveraged in pest management schemes to counter the detrimental effects of plantation parasites. Plantations, then, are not entirely dead or deadly realms of “out-and-out exterminism.”¹⁴ They enable some communities of life to thrive at the expense of others.¹⁵ Just as there is no such thing as “the” plantation in a singular or timeless sense, so too, in Dale Tomich’s words, each plantation “produces its own nature.”¹⁶

Multispecies world-making practices disrupt the singularizing force of “plantation logic,”¹⁷ foregrounding human and other-than-human actors who together yet unevenly shape the plantation as a multiplicitous material-semiotic assemblage. They invite us to consider the possibility of multispecies justice within plantations as landscapes of empire that, while indubitably destructive, have after all never fully succeeded in dominating either plants or people.¹⁸ In the words of Alfred J. López, “There is no single or central ‘plantation’ or plantation image that we can privilege above all others.”¹⁹

Yet difficult ethical and political considerations crop up in storying the plantation in more-than-human terms. How do we grapple with dreaded comparisons between the spectacular violence of human enslavement under colonial regimes and the enslavement of plants, soils, and ecosystems under plantations past and present without “flattening,” in Janae Davis and colleagues’ words, the consequential differences and hierarchies within and between human and other-than-human communities of life?²⁰ How

12. King, *Black Shoals*, 111–40.

13. Beilin and Suryanarayanan, “War between Amaranth and Soy”; Taussig, *Palma Africana*, 75–76.

14. Haraway, cited in Mitman, “Reflections on the Plantationocene,” 10.

15. Chao, “Beetle or the Bug?”

16. Tomich, “Rethinking the Plantation,” 33–34. See also Clukey and Wells, “Introduction: Plantation Modernity.”

17. McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” 3.

18. Besky, *Darjeeling Distinction*; Dove, “Plants, Politics, and the Imagination”; Ferdinand, *Une écologie décoloniale*.

19. López, “Plantation as Archive,” 402.

20. Davis et al., “Anthropocene,” 5. See also Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself*; Jackson, *Becoming Human*.

do we navigate between stories of an unexpected politics of the possible and stories of irremediable finality?²¹ What is at stake in crafting plantation and counter-plantation stories? Who are these stories for, whom are they written with, and whom do they serve?

The significance of these questions extends well beyond the materiality of contemporary agro-industrial landscapes. As critical race scholars highlight, plantation afterlives perdure in the form of state and police violence, carceral infrastructures, and the normalization of premature Black death.²² No less innocent is the whiteness of academic institutions and academic theorization that mirror the ordering, narrating-historicizing-authoring, controlling, and managing of the plantation itself. Academic knowledge making is a systematic process of epistemic raking, sifting, pruning, disciplining, reordering, classifying, organizing, abstracting, generalizing, simplifying, and extracting. Plantation logic shapes not just the “nature” of the world but also how the dominant Western “we” represents it through its concepts and theories. Yet the multi-scalar transposability of theory can obscure the situated, fleshly specificity of more-than-human encounters in all their incommensurable interdependence, violence, and ambivalence. As material formation and conceptual analytic, the plantation calls for ways of living, thinking, and representing that eschew assumptions of mastery and control in and of the world. It is an invitation to listen to plantation pasts and presents through their consequential absences and silences. It holds within it the fugitive seeds of counter-plantation ecologies and stories that may promise different forest futures and future forests.

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21. Casimir, *La culture opprimée*; Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*; Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*; Woods, *Development Arrested*.

22. DeLombard, “Dehumanizing Slave Personhood”; Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*; McKittrick, “On Plantations”; Sharpe, *In the Wake*; Thiaw and Mack, “Atlantic Slavery and the Making of the Modern World.”

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