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## The Plantationocene as analytical concept: a forum for dialogue and reflection

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### ABSTRACT

This forum for dialogue and reflection invites empirical and theoretical inquiries that critically interrogate plantations in their myriad forms through the conceptual analytic of the Plantationocene. In doing so, we understand, and invite attention to, the Plantationocene, both as a key for interpreting histories of local to global development and for understanding the role of plantationlogics today. Not all contributors need agree that the Plantationocene is a useful concept. Rather, we envision the forum as providing opportunity for constructive debate and for highlighting the role of plantations across historical and contemporary sites, scales, and subjects.



### KEYWORDS

Plantationocene;  
plantations; extraction; racial  
capitalism; resistance

## Introduction

The coastal region of northeastern Brazil is home to one of the oldest plantation societies in the world. Dome-shaped hills are covered in tightly packed green stalks when the sugarcane is high or painted with long black lines of ash that follow the hills' contour lines after laborers burn and cut the crop. In the plantation interior, the Big House stands with improbable grandeur next to small, concrete row houses inhabited by sugarcane workers. Over the centuries, there have been local and regional attempts to dismantle or modernize northeastern sugar plantations, but most of these programs have come and gone, leaving little trace in terms of new techniques, labor relations, or economic development. The region is still firmly in the grip of plantation elites who rule through patron-client relations and overt partnership with state and federal governments and institutions.

Roughly 900 miles south and inland from the sugarcane fields of Pernambuco, the enormous soy fields of western Bahia spread out as far as the eye can see. These are perhaps the newest plantations in Brazil: a frontier region made viable for large-scale agriculture only with the development of a tropical soybean, aggressive use of soil treatments, and dependence on fungicides, herbicides, and insecticides. This new ultra-

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modern plantation frontier required extensive clearing of the Brazilian Cerrado, a tropical grassland which is the second-largest ecological biome in Brazil and a biodiversity hotspot. There is no Big House here, as farms are often owned by Brazilian or foreign farmer-investors who live hundreds of miles away, and yet, this is plantation agriculture: large-scale, organized for extraction, and premised on the availability of cheap land and local labor.

Travel now some 18,000 kilometers west of Brazil, to the Indonesian-occupied region of West Papua. Here, patches of lush, biodiverse rainforests once owned by Indigenous Peoples sit amidst a sea of monocrop oil palm, cultivated by laborers brought in from Java, Sumatra, and Nusa Tenggara. Known as the ‘tree of hope,’ the introduced oil palms that cover the land are routinely touted in corporate and government discourse as key to Indigenous Papuans’ progress, development, and incorporation into the modern nation-state – even as plantations are designed and implemented without their free, prior, or informed consent.

In southern Africa, Mozambique presents yet another face of the plantation: from colonial rule by the Portuguese through the independent socialist state and the dominance of neoliberal global markets today, plantations have served as the imagined ideal form of production, landscape, and labor management. With the exception of briefly-successful plantation experiments developed in the colonial concessions of the 1890s in central and northern Mozambique, this ideal has been mostly aspirational: cotton, sugarcane, coconut, soy, tobacco, and rubber production never fully translated into successful plantations. Instead, they produced local anxiety, exploitation and expropriation, often leading to various forms of contestation and rural migration. Throughout the long twentieth century, government officials and research agencies viewed local residents as fodder for plantations rather than as producers in their own right. Their labor, yoked to the land through state-led combinations of coercion and consent, has been oriented towards realizing the plantation ideal – an ideal no less seductive for remaining always just out of reach.

In Cambodia and Lao PDR (Laos), lush rice fields, forests, woodlands, and varied landscapes have been steadily erased to give way to monocultures of rubber, eucalyptus, cassava, corn, sugarcane, and other agro-energy crops. Millions of hectares of agricultural, forest, and common lands have been transferred to state and private companies for plantation development, generally referred to in official discourse as Economic Land Concessions (ELCs). The colonial legacy of raw material extraction to feed distant markets has morphed into national strategies and narratives of economic advancement and progress. ELCs are presented as pathways for modernization through their links to global markets and as opportunities to draw in the capital, technology and infrastructure needed to shed the sins of subsistence and under-development. But for directly affected local populations, agroindustrial plantations represent displacement, dislocation, destruction, capture, and loss.

As dissimilar as they might appear on the surface, the landscapes we introduce in these short descriptions have much in common. They are dominated by large-scale, extractive, monocultural enterprises. They produce raw materials for export and depend on production relations sustained by centuries of forced labor and systemic poverty. Laboring bodies are racialized in different ways across the regions. In the Atlantic world, enslavement was crucial to the history and logic of plantations, and the ongoing violence of

this racialization is evident across political, social, and economic dimensions of life in the Americas today. In Asia, Africa, and Europe, plantations were tied to colonial rule and local elites in ways that perpetrated racial hierarchies in many places but foregrounded class, ethnicity, and gender relations in others. Each site is connected to the world market through an agricultural production system that shapes the broader socio-economy, ecology, and governance of the region. These sites are not all economically profitable but plantations live on because they symbolize an ideal of rationally-organized labor and land that is woven into relations of status, privilege, and power. Each conjures in different yet interrelated ways the sedimented histories and enduring afterlives of plantations as material infrastructure and classed, racialized, and ethnicized logics.

This forum for dialogue and reflection invites empirical and theoretical inquiries that critically interrogate plantations in their myriad forms through the conceptual analytic of the Plantationocene. In doing so, we understand, and invite attention to, the Plantationocene, both as a key for interpreting histories of local to global development and for understanding the role of plantation logics today. In our introduction to the forum, we begin by tracing the emergence of the concept of the Plantationocene and the important debates that have arisen since the term's articulation. We then examine how the concept of the Plantationocene has helped us think through the continuities and ruptures that shape plantations in our respective fieldsites across Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Melanesia. We further identify five recurring dynamics of plantations that the Plantationocene analytic can help illuminate: scales of extraction and control; racial logics of production; power and pervasive inequality; degradation of human and ecological health; and resistance and reparation.

We draw attention to a formation that dominates agriculture and other extractive regimes in direct and indirect ways. Plantations are usually associated with a handful of tropical commodities, such as cotton, tobacco, and sugarcane. In this forum, we expand the focus from product to production, defining plantations as large-scale, monocrop farm entities geared towards extraction for distant markets. Plantations control land directly through occupation, but command influence more broadly by manipulating labor resources, setting political agendas, establishing world market prices, and influencing research, technological innovation, and development trajectories. Land not directly under the control of a plantation is often indirectly connected to (or organized in opposition to) plantation dynamics and interests. A significant portion of smallholder farmers worldwide are tied to plantations through contracts, although the number varies widely by country and crop. For these farmers, as well as for independent producers, the playing field is shaped by government preferences and privileges for large-scale monocultures.

A forum on the Plantationocene is justified not solely by interest in the concept of the Plantationocene itself, but also by growing theoretical and political activity around access to and control over agrarian land and life. Naming the modern era 'the Plantationocene' counters the tendency to think of plantations, plantation politics, and peasants as limited to the past or to 'pre-modern' sectors of developing countries. Trans-disciplinary deliberation over the meaning and materiality of life and livelihoods on the land has intensified in recent decades, from debates over food sovereignty to alternative development models, new social movements, the global land grab, dispossession and migration, and critical studies of climate change. Against this backdrop, we welcome contributions from scholars

across a variety of fields including agrarian studies, rural sociology, critical development studies, work studies, history, anthropology, political ecology, and development studies, whose research engages with plantation systems. Not all contributors need agree that the Plantationocene is a useful concept. Rather, we envision the forum as providing a timely opportunity for constructive debate on the Plantationocene and for highlighting the role of plantations in generating situated relations and global connections across historical and contemporary sites, scales, and subjects.

Our interest includes the role of plantation agriculture in shaping socio-natural life (relations to and between land, labor, and life), the gendered and generational dynamics of and in plantation households, communities, and spaces, and the role of plantations in shaping governance, political rule, bodies of knowledge, community norms, social reproductive labor, and social identities, relations, and exclusions. We are interested in processes of transformation (or absence thereof) in relations on and to land as production moves from 'traditional' plantations to more contemporary forms of agribusiness, finance capital, virtual land grabs, and urban speculation. We also invite pieces that interrogate and nuance the dominant binaries that frame plantation debates – from containment and cosmopolitanism, to standardization and heterogeneity, simplification and complexity, hegemony and coexistence, material and social values, land and Earth, and calculability and contingency. We further welcome submissions that center collective or community encounters with plantations, including relations of acquiescence, accommodation, and negotiation as well as relations of resistance, resurgence, and refusal in the face of plantation models. This conversation might foreground alternative forms of living, producing, consuming and relating with 'nature' in an age of agroindustrial domination.

### **The Plantationocene as analytical concept**

The concept of a Plantationocene was first coined by Donna Haraway in a conversation about the Anthropocene published by *Ethnos*. The Plantationocene, as Haraway et al. (2016, footnote 5) put it, referred to 'the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor.' It entailed 'the rapid displacement and reformulation of germ plasm, genomes, cuttings, and all other names and forms of part organisms and of deracinated plants, animals, and people.' For these scholars, the Plantationocene 'continues with ever-greater ferocity in globalized factory meat production, monocrop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like oil palm for multispecies forests and their products that sustain human and nonhuman critters alike' (see also Moore et al. 2019).

As these definitional glosses suggest, the concept of the Plantationocene was generated from a desire to recognize how plantations have influenced the pursuit of new territory, the settlement of and relationship with the land for all species, engagements with the world market, forced migration, and the use of racialized labor. While the early formulation focused more on ecological simplification than human enslavement (Aikens et al. 2019; Davis et al. 2019), the concept invites a focus on the ways in which the forced relocation, alienation, and enslavement of people, plants, and animals undergird the supposed efficiency, of the plantation. It highlights relations of control over people, land,

and resources as the premise from which the modern era is constituted and unfolds. That control over nature, population and space, together with associated temporalities and historical trajectories, are what define the Plantationocene (Wolford 2021a).

This brief initial conceptualization of the Plantationocene begs the question of how the concept compares to other terms articulated to describe the present epoch and its historical and political undergirdings, notably the Anthropocene and Capitalocene (Chwałczyk 2020; Haraway 2015). The Anthropocene, as conceived by Paul J. Crutzen (2006), has focused attention on the role of humans in inducing climate change, but has been critiqued for over-emphasizing population growth and industrial development as the drivers of ecological/geological change and for representing humanity as a homogenous mass, undifferentiated by wealth, power, or race (Yusoff 2019). Plantation labor regimes, for instance, have historically been anchored in and sustained by racializing assemblages that position Black bodies as 'fungible,' 'kinless' flesh and as 'thingified' resources (King 2016). The Capitalocene, as conceived by Jason Moore (2017, 2018), highlights the destructive nature of industrial production and draws attention to the material and social forces and relations of production, but the focus on capitalism has the potential to be reductive given how much of social life takes place outside of the capitalist economy or motivated by factors other than profit or market control (McKittrick 2013; Thomas 2023). Plantation elites, for instance, often operate in a shadow economy where influence, corruption, racial hatred, monopoly control, or state connections are the currency rather than capital (Li 2017; Li and Semedi 2021). These non-market factors help to explain why plantations are at the heart of every modern economic system, whether it be colonialism, capitalism, or socialism.

While there are overlaps between the concepts of the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and Plantationocene that render them productive to consider in a relational fashion, they do different kinds of work. Jason Moore argues that the Capitalocene is a theory that explains the modern era, while we argue that the Plantationocene is a concept that highlights a foundational and fundamental characteristic of the modern era. What makes the plantation distinctive, as Brass and Berstein noted many years ago, 'is the connection between organization of production (labor, tech, management) and character as a corporate enterprise (finance, shipping, manufacturing ...)' (1992, 4). That dual character, alongside the embeddedness in land, labor and ecosystem relations, allow the plantation to simultaneously control workers, managers, and technology within its own physical parameters and to extend this control across multiple scales and sites via market, technology and shipping. These are what make the plantation so enduring and so important to study. By integrating political ecology and race theory, we see that plantations work to control, simplify, alienate, and tame ecologies at the same time as they create and propagate constructions of race and racialized forms of work.

In addition, placing the Plantationocene alongside the Anthropocene and Capitalocene is ethnographically and theoretically productive in helping to clarify the role of agrarian societies in the making of the modern era. It shifts what is often a triumphal origin story focused in Europe – the story of the transition from feudalism to capitalism – to the margins where forced labor, theft, conquest, and dispossession in the New World, Africa, and Asia were essential to establishing modern societies and markets (Quijano 2000). To approach this formation through the lens of the Plantationocene complements and informs analyses anchored in concepts of the Anthropocene and

Capitalocene by conjuring the alienation of people, plants, and land, the domination of powerful and predatory institutions over workers and nature, the violent compartmentalization, hierarchization, and economization of human and other-than-human life in plantation societies past and present, together with their profound implications for social reproduction across ethnic, gendered, and intergenerational lines (Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt 2019). In signaling both to 'plantation' and to 'plant,' the concept of the Plantationocene further draws attention to the more-than-human dimensions of the plantation as an ecological formation that is shaped by the histories, movements, demands, and affordances of cash crops and other non-human organisms who are alternately threatened or sustained by their proliferation. Thinking-with the Plantationocene thus opens fertile avenues for engaging with the necrobiopolitics of the plantation as an assemblage of human and non-human life, whose fates and futures are thoroughly, if often unevenly and violently, enmeshed (Chao 2021a). In doing so, the concept invites a critical interrogation of the possibilities for social, environmental, and multispecies justice in plantations as 'landscapes of empire' (Besky 2013).

While the term Plantationocene itself is relatively recent, it builds on a substantial body of work related to plantations produced across a variety of fields, from anthropology and geography to critical race studies, Indigenous studies, literary studies, law, history, political theory, Science and Technology Studies, economics, and plant and soil science. A long history of Black scholarship across multiple fields, including Southern Studies in the United States and Black Geographies, highlights both the pervasive social and structural cruelty of plantation systems as well as the spaces enslaved persons and communities created for self-expression and survival (Beckford 1972; McKittrick 2013; Woods 2000; Wynter 1971). Agrarian scholars have focused on social conflict, gendered domination, and resistance within the plantation (Afrizal 2015; Brass and Bernstein 1992; Schwartz 1985; Sigaud 1979; Stolcke 1988; Stoler 1995). Political ecologists have asked how plantations shape and are shaped by people, ecologies, technologies, and markets (Aga 2021; Carney 2021; Grandin 2010; Peluso 1992). Colonial historians have studied the spread of plantations as a colonial and economic strategy (Behal 2014; James [1938] 1963; Robinson 2000; Tilley 2011). Environmental humanities scholars have attended to the multispecies dynamics of plantation systems (Beilin and Suryanarayanan 2017; Besky 2013; Chao 2022a; Kumpf 2021; Paredes 2023). Critical race studies scholars have examined how the plantation has and continues to shape questions of race and human difference (Allewaert 2013; Hartman 1997; Mbembe 2003).

The plantation, as such, is impossible to ignore. Our thinking about plantations and plantation alternatives further sits on the shoulders of thousands of activists across time and around the world who have fought – and who continue to fight – for access to land and freedom, including the right to inhabit, own, manage, cultivate, work, and dream about such lands according to the principles of sovereignty and self-determination. We invite submissions that acknowledge these important intellectual and engaged precedents in theorizing with the concept of the Plantationocene and in doing so, avoid replicating in scholarly analyses the violent exclusions and erasures produced by the plantation system itself.

Central also to this forum on the Plantationocene is the question of continuity and difference in plantation systems and societies across space and time. In different world regions, the term plantation indexes local histories in ways that are specific and situated.

In the United States, for instance, the plantation has a distinct historical and social place as co-constructing the US South, enslavement, and the confederacy (Davis et al. 2019; McKittrick 2011). In Africa and Asia, while plantations were at the heart of colonial rule, whether in the form of royal concessions or private affairs, their nature and role differed along various axes, shaped by imperial power, commodity, Indigenous-agrarian distinctions, differentiated internal relations, and forms of colonial intervention, whether settler, indirect, corporate, or – as in Portugal and the Dutch East Indies – effectively mercantile. In Latin America, work in agrarian studies on large estates is generally not framed in the language of plantations, but rather in terms of *latifundia* (Brazil) or *hacienda* (Spanish America), signifying large estates distributed through colonial rule, often with associated labor tributes.

And yet, these varied forms of colonial land occupation have much in common – both with each other and with many contemporary plantation regimes. They are large-scale, extractive units, generally organized around a single resource, reliant on forced labor, and protective of land claims through violence, normative constructions of profit and paternalism and licit manipulation of labor and property laws in favor of the planter class. Differences between formations of plantations and plantation economies are as illuminating as their similarities. In this spirit, we invite papers that deploy the interpretive framework of the Plantationocene to investigate plantation systems and societies through relations of sameness and difference across the past and the present, as these shape dynamics between plantation workers and plantation owners, state and market, and crops and land, generating different forms and possibilities of life, death, and afterlife.

### **Our own reflections on the Plantationocene**

The lines of inquiry we offer above, and throughout this paper, stem from our individual and collaborative research and engagements as scholars and practitioners with plantations and the Plantationocene across diverse geographies and temporalities.

Sophie Chao came to deploy the concept of the Plantationocene in her investigative and ethnographic research in the settler-colonized province of Indonesian West Papua (2022a), where monocrop oil palm developments are rupturing the intimate and ancestral relations of Indigenous Marind communities to their other-than-human kin (plants, animals, soils, water, ecosystems, spirits, ancestors, and more) and reconfiguring Marind's sense of place, time, personhood, and collective futures. Bringing into conversation Indigenous philosophies of more-than-human relationality with the attritive logic of Plantationocenic occupation, Chao's work points to plantation violence as a multispecies act. Introduced cash crops like oil palm come to constitute vegetal embodiments of the invasive force of settler-colonial institutions – even as these crops are themselves subjected to the extractive and simplifying logic of agroindustrial production. At the same time, ambiguity, strangeness, and uncertainly emerge as central motifs of life on the Papuan plantation frontier, where the promise of profit and progress afforded by cash crops sits awkwardly alongside the perils of dispossession, destruction, and loss (Chao 2021b; see also Rudge 2023).

Wendy Wolford's ideas on the Plantationocene (Wolford 2021a) are grounded in qualitative work on rural development in Brazil (2010) and Mozambique (2021b). In both places, plantations were the motivation for and the means of colonial rule. In Brazil,



plantations in sugarcane, coffee, cotton, and later soy and corn were predicated on and then facilitated high levels of inequality in wealth, land access, and social status. In Mozambique, the Portuguese saw their territories in southern Africa as engines for generating foreign exchange and early colonial officials recruited settlers and investors with descriptions of the land that highlighted their potential for planting tropical commodities. To this day, plantations are seen as the scientific, economic, and political ideal, even though the rural areas are and have historically been dominated by smallholders who themselves are unlikely to ever benefit from such a strategy (Shankland and Gonçalves 2016; Wolford and Nehring 2015). In part this is because plantations have created the conditions for their own reproduction – from scientific bodies of knowledge about certain plants and soils and not others, to government programs that treat local residents as plantation inputs (labor) rather than as farmers (Wolford 2021b).

For Andrew Ofstehage, ethnographic research with North American and Mennonite soy farmers in Brazil underscored layers of alienation – of not only farm workers and Indigenous and traditional communities from their land in the Brazilian Cerrado, but also of plants from the landscape, and even the farm owners themselves from their home communities (2016, 2018a, 2018b). The Plantationocene foregrounds the alienation of human and non-human labor, along with the hyper-flexibility promised by a model of farming in which location, crop choice, and community are all highly interchangeable. The modern soy farm in western Bahia is inhabited by strangers and nomads (see Stengers 2011) – from the farmworkers who come from southern Bahia and Goiás, to Gaucho tractor drivers and agronomists from southern Brazil, and the farm owners from Sao Paulo to the Netherlands. These strangers were brought to the Cerrado by years of government support from across the political spectrum in Brazil for agricultural research and credit that made industrial soy production prolific and profitable (Calmon 2020; da Silva and Sauer 2022; Lopes, Bastos Lima, and dos Reis 2021). Brought together as strangers, they often stay that way as farm owners rarely visit their farms (when they do, they often stick to their offices) and farmworkers move from farm to farm in search of better pay and working conditions.

For Shalmali Guttal, the Plantationocene is a continuous unfolding of invasion and resistance: invasion by capital, corporations, and the state of lands, territories, ecosystems, diversity, dignity, agency, and autonomy, and resistance by those who inhabit these territories and spaces and for whom these invasions result in myriad dispossessions. Central to the discourse of progress and modernity in the Plantationocene is the control of food, water, beings (human and non-human), and all that makes life possible. In Asia, Guttal and her colleagues in Focus on the Global South ([www.focusweb.org](http://www.focusweb.org)) support and co-document grassroots struggles against land, forest and territory-grabbing and the destruction of territorially embedded food systems through industrial and corporate agriculture, global commodity chains, large-scale investment projects, and neoliberal trade agreements (Guttal 2006, 2013). Local-regional food-agriculture systems embody relationships among people, communities, and nature, and are spaces where social relations and knowledge are shaped. Corporations covet these life systems: they seek to capture, disrupt, and simplify their diversities and complexities to a model that is legible to global capitalism and necessitates the alienation of people, work, nature, and place to create value in the forms and at the scale desired by global capitalism (Guttal 2011). But even as corporations rely on new technologies, international financing and economic

agreements, and narratives of poverty, hunger, climate change, and demographics to advance their interests, protagonists on the ground adapt to threats and challenges and re-organize and strengthen their capacities to reclaim their rights and agency (Guttal 2014, 2015). They put down new roots and branches by building place-based collectives and cross-place, cross-identity alliances.

Euclides Gonçalves examines the Plantationocene as a discursive formation and its effects in contexts without the physical manifestation of the plantation. As an aspiration, ideal, and symbolic blueprint, plantation logic has been deployed as a model of rural modernization and development (Shankland and Gonçalves 2016). In the Mozambican case, Gonçalves shows how the plantation model travels easily from the agricultural to the mining sector. Using the cases of ProSAVANA (a large-scale joint Japan–Brazil–Mozambique agricultural initiative in the savannah zone of Mozambique’s Nacala Corridor) and the Liquefied Natural Gas projects in Cabo Delgado province, Gonçalves (2020) shows how even when it is not materialized, plantation logic is used in policy design, simultaneously generating anxiety and dissatisfaction, violence and degradation, but also hope and reconstruction.

Fernanda Martins came to the Plantationocene through her ongoing investigative research on the relationship between the extraordinary growth of the ethanol industry during the 2000s in a non-traditional region of sugarcane, the state of Mato Grosso do Sul in Brazil, and the historical mechanisms of expropriation of Indigenous territories. Focusing on the materialization of the interests of the local ruling classes, Martins’ research aims to point out elements of the coloniality of power that, (re)articulated in each specific historical moment through a series of symbolic, material, and cultural relations, have perpetuated a logic of domination based on latifundia and racial ethnic hierarchies. By presenting ethanol as a ‘green solution’ to systemic crises, both government and industry have separated the product of labor from the land such that the link between the land issue in Brazil and the expansion of ethanol is erased. For Martins, the Plantationocene perspective contributes to reestablishing this connection, especially through an understanding of the continuity of colonial forms of domination as a condition for capital accumulation, external exploitation, and the maintenance of privileges.

The Plantationocene is good to think with. The Plantationocene brings Chao to interrogate the ethics and politics of who plantation stories are written with and for, and what purpose these stories serve in the more-than-human worlds that they describe. In Wolford’s work, the Plantationocene as conceptual analytic helps demonstrate the stickiness of the plantation, enduring through social and political change. In Ofstehage’s work, it helps uncover the flexibility of the plantation and its ability to adapt to new places, products, and producers. For Guttal, the concept serves to illuminate how corporate assemblages universalize and impose homogenous-global-food-systems models and developmentalist discourses that never fully eradicate territorially embedded food and agriculture systems and their multi-sited and scalar protagonists and collectives. In Gonçalves’ work, the Plantationocene helps demonstrate the centrality of the plantation logic in the modernization of rural areas and its effects in social and political organization - even when the plantation is not a material reality. In Martin’s work, the Plantationocene sheds light on how the articulation of notions such as private land, productivity, latifundia and classification schemes based on ethnic-racial hierarchies play a central role as mechanisms

for the revitalization of inherited structures of the colonial era. Taken together, our scholarship and practice offer indicative insights into how the Plantationocene as conceptual analytic can aid in understanding, addressing, and challenging the plantation form, which we hope will be taken up in different ways, and to different ends, by the forum contributors.

## **Plantations through the lens of the Plantationocene**

In inviting papers that engage with and problematize the conceptual framework of the Plantationocene, this forum welcomes contributions that critically reflect on what plantations are, do, and mean. Merriam-Webster defines a plantation broadly as: a usually large group of plants and especially trees under cultivation; a settlement in a new country; and an agricultural estate.<sup>1</sup>

This is a very broad definition of a plantation, but any definition has to be capacious enough to allow the variations found in different times and places, and which we aim to foreground in this forum. While many plantations in the early modern period relied on enslaved labor, not all did. And while many plantations constituted self-contained communities where laborers planted for their own subsistence in addition to planting the commodity crop, this was not always the case. This variety is important: plantations look different depending on local agrarian and ecological systems, race relations, market demands, colonial rulers and so on. Plantations, in other words, constitute constellations or assemblages of beings, forces, materialities, and ideologies that are situated in space and in time. Indeed, often they are not called plantations and named instead for the means of acquisition or sale: for instance, concessions, joint equity investments, large-scale land deals, commodity farms, and so on. Cognizant of terminological and substantive differences, we invite studies of plantations that are sensitive to local contexts and the particularities in which any single or regional plantation economy engages with broader regional or global markets. In particular, we are interested in papers that put to productive test the conceptual affordances of the Plantationocene in examining what we identify below as some key characteristics at the core of all plantations: scales of extraction and control; racial logics of production; power and pervasive inequality; degradation of human and ecological health; and resistance and reparation. Plantations did not create these dynamics - but they thrived on and perpetuate them.

### ***Scales of extraction and control***

The concept of the Plantationocene is helpful in grappling with the plantation as it moves between and beyond scales, from the world, national, regional, and village levels, to the level of gendered and racialized bodies, connecting these scales in turn to both global commodity chains and to on-the-ground encounters with, and exposures to, plantation chemicals, toxins, and pathogens (Agard-Jones 2013; Mintz 1986; Mitman 2021; Sen 2017). At the local scale, attention to place is important to understand the specificity of relations within a given plantation, including relations between the land, the planters, the planted, the laborers, and the market – the plantation ‘community’ or system, in

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<sup>1</sup>See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plantation>.

other words, inclusive of all its internal heterogeneities and differences across ethnic, gendered, and intergenerational lines. At the regional or national scale, the question is how and in what ways plantations shape the nature of state or regional governance, market dynamics, property norms, the production of scientific knowledge, and so on (Kirshner and Baptista 2023; Paredes 2021). This meso or regional scale is not simply the sum of multiple individual plantations but rather the assemblage of interests, actions and institutions that constitute and define national or regional trajectories. At the transnational and transhistoric scale, the question is to what extent plantations today continue to generate, feed on, and fuel logics and practices that have validated and motivated economic activity, political rule, and social behavior since the inception of racial colonial capitalism.

Large-scale plantations are designed for extraction and held up as models of efficiency in turning soil, seeds, and work into tradeable commodities and, in turn, money; even as this comes with suffering of both soil and worker. As Chao (2018, 2021c) uncovers in her research on oil palm monocrops in Melanesia, plantations control and simplify nature to make this efficiency possible. Monocrop stands of plants might lead to pest and disease outbreaks because of their genetic homogeneity, but they also make monitoring and harvest easy and efficient. Plantations dominate people as well. In both their older forms and newer representations, they depend directly on hierarchical and racialized control over the workforce, which, as Guttal's work in Asia identifies, is often embedded in turn within visions and narratives of 'progress,' 'modernization,' and 'development' (also see Ofstehage 2021, 2022). As such, plantations have historically wielded tremendous discursive power over plants and people as idealized landscapes of production, profit, and property, and of orderly or organized natures.

While it is clearly *not* the case that all colonial conquest happened through plantations or that all agriculture was or is in plantations, it is important to remind ourselves that colonial rule and plantations often went hand in hand, extracting resources from far-flung lands, feeding an increasingly integrated global market, and creating many of the divisions we have today - between rich and poor countries, the landed and landless, white and non-white, and rural and urban. Plantation production, aspirations, and circuits fueled global and regional geopolitical alignments or arrangements, past and present. They point to the defining impacts of plantations on the modern period. These impacts go well beyond the confines of the plantation itself as a mega-scalar system of extraction and control. They shape a broad range of societal norms, laws, and institutions that together constitute plantations' afterlives and that we also welcome as objects of inquiry within this forum.

Against this backdrop, we seek papers that work within and across different scales, demonstrating in the process how the physical manifestation of an agricultural plantation is only one of the various forms the plantation can take. Beyond or alongside its expression as a material formation, we also seek contributions that interrogate the force of the plantation as aspiration, ideal, and symbolic blueprint (Wolford 2021a). This blueprint is rooted in particular practices, mindsets, and policies as well as enduring colonial histories and contemporary agricultural economies. We are interested in problematizations of the definition of 'large-scale' and 'extractive control' in different historical and local contexts and investigations of how scale and control come to matter when relative size gives rise to (and feeds off of) inequality and when it amplifies the plantation's adverse impacts on ecosystems, landscapes, and people inhabiting these spaces

(Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda 2020). How, for instance, does the accumulation of vast swaths of land, wealth, and status in the hands of plantation owners shape control over territory and labor and also plantations' connections to the broader regional economy and government? How does dispossession bring land and labor together in plantations in historically and geographically specific ways? Conversely, what politics of 'acquiescence' emerge in the face of the plantation and associated political agendas, and how do they enable diverse plantations regimes to endure or (re)emerge over time and across geographies? How do we analytically and historically make sense of different histories of plantation labor while also centering relationships to land? What are the calculative practices used to determine the value of labor and land in plantation systems, and with what implications for alternatives and for political organizing?

### ***Racial logics of production***

Plantations take different shape across production regimes, time, and ecologies. They have given rise to entrenched racial and social-economic class hierarchies and violence within and across regions. The Atlantic slave trade and the labor of enslaved people transformed the global capitalist economy such that it is impossible to conceptualize capitalism apart from race and racism – even as the particular ways in which race and racism operate are contextually produced and shaped (Aikens et al. 2019; Bastos 2018; Krupa 2022; Li 2023; Robinson 2000). Plantations enforce and encode race-ethnic-class-based hierarchies that have cast a long shadow at multiple scales. At the local scale, where plantations dominated, enslavement and other forms of labor bondage normalized color-coded deprivation and co-dependency within tightly knit communities. In some places, the color-coding was black and white, in others dark and light, but coded nonetheless, despite promises by theorists of capitalism such as Milton Friedman that race would be inconsequential. At the global scale, plantations both justified and necessitated that post-colonial relations between nations retain the means to provision, and so resource extraction defines the relationship between 'developed' and 'developing' countries.

Colonization forcibly removed millions of people from their lands to labor and die on plantations elsewhere. Thus, the plantation depends on dispossession twice over - first of the workers from their own lands and second of the Indigenous inhabitants of the land that becomes the plantation, who may find themselves either forcefully incorporated under adverse conditions or excluded from labor opportunities as a result of racial prejudices or strategies to prevent resistance by local inhabitants. This dependence on total control over people deemed less-than-human under racial colonial orders becomes baked into planter mindsets, and because political control in so many places originated in control over land, the enslaver mentality influenced the formation of states, markets, and society. In yoking labor to plantations, European rulers uprooted native populations, destroyed Indigenous communities, and then fixed them again in villages, settlements, reservations, or towns. European notions of settlement were equated with civilization, and whiteness was key to all of this, carrying with it the right to subjugate and supporting the legitimacy of colonial land claims, against all other uses (Bhandar 2018).

This watershed moment, as Judith Carney (2021) says, normalized and naturalized what Katherine McKittrick (2013) calls a 'plantation logic'. Ofstehage (2018a, 2018b) saw this plantation logic at play in the Brazilian Cerrado. Farmers placed workers in dangerous

working conditions rife with the threat of mechanical injury and agro-chemical toxins, but also spoke of these workers as eminently replaceable and unskilled. Further, local Bahians were primarily limited to manual labor while white Brazilians from the south worked as tractor drivers, agronomists, and mangers. The plantation logic touched the way these Americans saw their work in Brazil as contributing, not unlike their ancestors in the American Prairie, to the civilizing and taming of a wild place.

Taking as our premise that racialized capitalism is redundant because there is no capitalism without racial politics, we welcome contributions that document and analyze enslaved labor, undocumented migrants, underpaid sweatshop labor, and other relations that trace their origins in the plantation and continue in fields and factories around the world. In placing the plantation at the core of the modern era, we aim to center what Brenna Bhandar (2018) calls 'racial regimes of ownership' and analyze the ways in which the 'original sin' of enslaved labor in the colonial period gave birth to a modern capitalist era infused with racial violence, coloring everything from policing to urban segregation and so-called third world under-development (Koshy et al. 2022). We also ask whether the term Plantationocene is relevant in places or times where enslavement is not part of the historical or contemporary record and 'race' not the preferred mode of understanding or constructing difference. We thus invite papers that harness the concept of the Plantationocene to underscore how plantation regimes bring different forms of force, violence, and racism to the fore. How, for instance, does racialization alternately justify the abusive exploitation of laborers or exclude them from the sites, circuits, and benefits of commodity production? How can we think about race and the plantation together while also holding them analytically distinct? If plantations are arguably the height of bending both race and ecology to the purpose of extraction, then how might the Plantationocene be useful in thinking race and ecology together?

### ***Power and pervasive inequality***

The third dimension of the plantation that we hope this forum will address is the way in which it still serves as the answer to the so-called 'problem of development.' Over the last hundred years, economists and policymakers alike have taken their cue from British history in attributing growth to the rise of private property, wage labor, and surplus capital. Development, therefore, is usually seen as achieved through the modernization of large-scale, export-oriented agriculture rather than through the cultivation of smallholder systems (Paprocki 2021). Land enclosures and related dispossessions are deemed necessary to creating a mobile wage labor force and efficient, large-scale agriculture. Rhetorics of development and modernization driving plantation expansion are often buttressed by imaginaries of nature itself as 'under-developed' or 'under-utilized,' in ways that are redolent of colonial concepts of *terra nullius* (Makki 2014). Plantation models of large-scale agriculture as the engine for economic growth have further contributed to rapid urbanization as the concentration of landholdings and modernization of production pushes smallholders, rural laborers, and other land-users into cities and slums.

In Mozambique, where Wolford has worked over the past several years, Portuguese scientists and politicians catalogued the different regions of the territory in the early 1900s not to understand what was already there but to decide which cash crops could be grown most profitably for the European market (Wolford 2021b). Over the course of

almost a century, colonial plans for cotton, tobacco, coconuts, and rice failed to make the Portuguese rich but this has not stopped the independent state from mimicking the colonial one in agriculture. In the contemporary period, though, the scientists are rarely Portuguese. Instead, they are Brazilian or European or American, funded by aid agencies and still focused on large-scale agricultural estates that will modernize production and employ the rural poor as contract farmers and laborers.

In these and other respects, we invite papers that examine how the twinning of plantations with settlement held empires together, justifying and pairing exploration, conquest, and extraction with tropes of ‘improvement.’ We also welcome analyses that uncover and unsettle the partial connections between plantations and aspirations today, as large-scale monocrop agriculture continues to colonize the global imagination, including in the form of solutions to problems defined as objective conditions such as hunger, scarcity, and poverty, rather than as relationships of inequality, monopsony, dependence, and violence (Kenney-Lazar and Ishikawa 2019). We seek submissions that harness the Plantationocene as a conceptual framework to re-insert the importance of agrarian relations in a world where the rural has always been a partial society, on the margins or awkward in some way, or a historically necessary space to feed the demands of urban ‘civilizational’ life. How, for instance, does the concept of the Plantationocene help illuminate the co-constitution through agrarian relations of the market, nation-state, economy, and community? How does it uncover the outlines and impulses of the plantation in sites and processes that remain obscured in much modern social theory – from deforestation and climate change to wet markets, pandemics, and sweatshops, as well as grassroots demands for food sovereignty and organized movements for environmental, social, gender, racial, and multispecies justice? In what ways does a Plantationocene framing relocate the origins of these processes in the so-called periphery rather than in the center, while also interrogating what and where, the periphery and center are located, and for whom?

### ***Degradation of human and ecological health***

Plantations and plantation crops dominate agricultural and industrial production around the world. Almost all public or charitable funding goes to just six commodity crops – cotton, wheat, rice, corn, sugar, and soy, in part because these crops are amenable to processing, serving both industrial and agricultural or livestock needs and feeding into a massive global system of processed and refined foods (Borras et al. 2016). On the face of it, the productive capacity of this system is impressive, and yet almost one billion people go hungry and another one billion are considered poorly nourished. Dependence on plantations has shaped a biopolitics of rule by extraction (forced labor, dispossession, and displacement) and charity (welfare, development, and humanitarian aid). From the ‘Victorian Holocausts’ in India (Davis 2001), to the Irish Potato Famine (Nally 2008), to the disruption of peasant forms of subsistence and survival in Africa (Watts 1983), the management of hunger created by plantation agriculture through *more* plantation agriculture serves as a key mechanism of population control (Chao 2021d, 2021e; Hetherington 2020). Alternative proposals for addressing hunger, such as attempts to redistribute land, have, in almost every case, been reversed or undermined

(De Janvry 1981; De Janvry, Sadoulet, and Wolford 2001; Prosterman, Temple, and Hanstad 1990).

Matthew Canfield, Anderson, and McMichael (2021) have written about the United Nations Food Systems Summit, arguing that in spite of significant evidence suggesting that reliance on these crops is unhealthy for humans and for the planet, they continue to be privileged by global scientific networks and by national and international agricultural policies. At the same time, many scientists have documented the relationship between deforestation, plantation production, and disease. In Ireland in the 1800s, the transition from smallholder production to large-scale, monocrop estates made agriculture vulnerable to the late potato blight and set off the Irish Potato Famine. Recent work on California strawberry farms (Guthman 2019) demonstrates the impossibility of keeping up with diseases and pests in monocrop fields. Work on monocrop fields of soy in Paraguay demonstrates the killing power of soy for both non-crop life and people (Hetherington 2020). This relationship extends from plant diseases to human diseases. New research on COVID-19 suggests that the virus is at least partly due to deforestation and agricultural intensification pushing the rural poor in China into smaller spaces where the hunt for wild species is increasingly difficult and wet markets are increasingly crowded (Plowright and Hudson 2021; Wu 2021).

With ecological and human health concerns in mind, we invite submissions that consider through the analytic of the Plantationocene how plantation agriculture embodies a particular (western) ideal of subduing the land and its implications for land use and maintenance and for the wellbeing of land's human and other-than-human inhabitants. In what ways, for instance, have large farms and the dominance of a small handful of commodity crops affected local communities' and workers' nutritional outcomes? How do we reconcile plantations' direct contributions to climate change with their concomitant role as biofuels and sources of renewable energy? In what ways is plantation-driven deforestation resulting in increased exposure and the spread of zoonotic diseases? How is the radical re-ordering of nature under plantation regimes belied by the equally consequential realities of plantation epidemics, parasitic infestations, ecological vulnerabilities, and other instances of meaningful failure?

### ***Resistance and reparation***

The story of the modern era would be incomplete without a discussion of the constant and ongoing resistance generated by land dispossession and forced labor, which constitutes a fifth dimension of the Plantationocene. This entails understanding and remembering the suffering of plantation slaves and workers while avoiding what Katherine McKittrick (2011, 948) calls the 'paradoxical preoccupation with the suffering/violated black body and the stubborn denial of a black sense of place.' The large-scale organization, simplification, and domination of human and ecological nature is impossible to sustain without investing significant resources into violent coercion (e.g. enslavement), and so an anti-plantation politics has many forebears. Dances, plays and festivals gave expression to experiences not contained by planter dictates. In the U.S., while leading public marches and sit-ins for civil rights, African-Americans also promoted an agenda of social change through jazz, rock, soul, and rap music (Vail and White 1978; Woods 2000). Enslaved persons and forced laborers dragged their feet, ran away (Bledsoe



2018), killed the planters (Stoler 1995), and organized for labor reforms (Maybury-Lewis 1994) or for an end to the system (Wolford 2010). At the same time, plantations were complicated spaces, serving as home, community, and subsistence in ways that generated feelings of ‘ambivalence’ (Wynter 1971) even among those forced to labor there. Outright acts of resistance were often not successful. Even in cases where communities have won rights to plantation land and facilities, it is difficult to disentangle structures laid down by centuries of plantation rule (Striffler 2001). In northeastern Brazil, landless and worker mobilization resulted in the widespread expropriation of sugarcane plantations in the early 2000s but the regional economy had been organized around sugar production for almost five centuries, and when sugarcane prices became viable again, most land reform settlers turned back to the crop they knew best (Wolford 2010).

Today, peasant organizing is some of the most active and politically salient, in many cases outpacing the factory floor as a site of mobilization. Rural organization surprises many and the demands strike some as traditional – the longing for land of one’s own, including claims by Indigenous Peoples and women for agency and autonomy over territories. From the Levelers and Diggers to the Underground Railroad and the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement, humans and non-humans who would live on the land differently, outside of and in opposition to plantations, continue to abound and even flourish. Across Brazil and Mozambique all the way to Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines, there are proposals to counter the hegemony of plantations, giving people the tools to grow, eat, and exchange in diversified, sustainable communities (Monjane and Bruna 2019). Not everyone wants to work on the land and not every small-scale agrarian society is progressive but reorganizing the economy to provide space for those alternatives would build a system not based on colonial or capitalist forms of exploitation.

The analytic of the Plantationocene helps highlights the urgency of already-existing struggles for land around the world that have the capacity to unite wage workers, small-scale farmers, peasants, sharecroppers, Indigenous communities, rural women, and others because these labor relations are all internal to plantations around the world, although in different ways depending on location and time. We invite contributions that attend to how equitable, inclusive, and diversified alternatives might serve as a form of both repair and reparation today, anchored in a reckoning of the plantation’s perduring effects across social, economic, political, and ecological settings. Social movements against plantation proliferation show us the possibilities for new relations of production and social reproduction and challenges to patriarchal divisions of labor, but wider political support for such alternatives is needed to provide resources and space for them to flourish. In this respect, the Plantationocene as conceptual framing exhorts us to attend to plantations’ connections to some of the biggest structural issues facing humanity today – climate change, disease, racism, patriarchal resurgence, migration, inequality, and land degradation, among others.

To this end, we welcome contributions that connect land-based and territorially embedded movements around the world to movements fighting for fair wages, an end to racism, patriarchy and human rights violations, secure housing in overcrowded cities, climate justice, and more. As Guttal’s activist research highlights, participants in these movements may include organizations of peasants, agricultural workers, fisherfolk, Indigenous peoples, rural women, and civil society who are renewing calls for redistributive agrarian reform, blue justice, radical climate justice actions, autonomy in the

governance of their territories, diverse feminisms, and the dismantling of proprietary control over seeds and breeds. These initiatives point to the plantation as more than just a zone of extraction and extinction, and also one of counter-hegemonic emergence (Chao 2022b, 2020c).

Acknowledging these diversely situated struggles for justice, we ask: How can the concept of the Plantationocene help us theorize reproduction in, on, and of the plantation – through the construction of norms, laws, imaginaries, academic disciplines, and economic and governance systems, but also through the generation of counter-plantation alternatives, socio-economic relations, and alliances? In what ways do counter-plantation dynamics reveal plantations' susceptibility to failure, contingency, and patchiness – even as they leave behind damaged ecologies and communities? Through what processes does life seep out and endure within the plantation, the plots, and the edges in between? Why are the plantation form and imaginary so enduring, including when plantations are not necessarily profitable? How do we follow plantations even – or especially – when they do not materialize? What do stories of plantation success and failure – however defined – tell us about the epoch we inhabit?

### Closing remarks

From oil palm, rice, and soy plantations to new financial tools for investing in land, large-scale, landed production regimes, like zombies, are on the rise. Their return makes us realize they never really went away (Benítez-Rojo 1996; Edelman and León Araya 2013; Thomas 2023). In bringing together scholars from diverse fields and fieldsites through this forum on the Plantationocene, we hope to forge coalitional understandings of the histories that have produced this particular present and its possible futures, at the edge of what people describe as a crisis cliff, where science and technology have made it possible to wring enough food, fuel, and fiber out of the land to feed and clothe billions of people while actively allowing climate change, environmental degradation, racialized social and gender inequality, poverty, discrimination, dispossession, and violence. We invite submissions that deploy or challenge the conceptual analytic of the Plantationocene in examining plantations as institutions that vary across place and time, yet that remain cause and effect of many of the defining characteristics of modernity – from the global spread of the market economy to the simplification of ecosystems, the ambitions of nation-states, the distinction between development and under-development, and the struggles for social, environmental, economic, gender, racial, and multispecies justice undertaken by activist movements in the midst and wake of agroindustrial expansion.

In these and other respects, we welcome submissions that engage with and contribute to growing interdisciplinary debates surrounding the Plantationocene as a comparative analytical lens and the plantation as an object of study (Jegathesan 2021). How, for instance, does the Plantationocene inform our understanding of scale, theoretical precision, historicization, and contingency across space and time? To what extent can a Plantationocene framing help center racialized relationships as intimately connected to economy, society, and ecology? How do we avoid romanticizing or trivializing the brutality of a production form based on enslavement and ecological devastation in our plantation narratives? What kinds of mechanisms of control and occupation shape relations of

living, working, and dying on plantation frontiers? How do collusion, resistance, resurgence, and survivance manifest in plantation landscapes? What possibilities exist for post-plantation futures, anti-plantation futures, or plantation futures otherwise in the teeth of racial colonial capitalism, and amidst the uncertainties of climate change and global ecological unravelings? In calling for papers that explore these and other questions, we aim to stimulate meaningful debate, generative conversation, and collaborative thinking around an enduring system that has and continues to threaten not just the workers and the land, but all life as we know it.

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