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Europe as a big house – examining plantation logics in contemporary Europe

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ABSTRACT

As a way to address the current postcolonial moment, characteristic of ongoing relations of resource extraction and border control, we turn to the metaphor of the plantation, offering an interpretation of Katherine McKittrick's idea of plantation logics. Plantation museums, centered on former planters' mansions (the 'big house') in the U.S., are important vehicles for narrating the historical period of slavery. However, such historical sites have traditionally steered away from addressing the role of enslavement in the production of the space of the big house. This erasure of the enslaved obscures the spatial and social relationality of the plantation. While continental Europe lacks these plantation houses and thus museums, it is no less important for the former colonial states in Europe to narrate their own historical involvement in slavery and, equally important, its contemporary legacies. In both contexts, we see a selective remembering of the past that is grounded in a spatial and temporal distancing of the plantation that renders the centrality of slavery to the production and reproduction of Europe invisible. In this article, we use the metaphor of the big house to illustrate how the logic of the plantation is replicated across scales of time and space. We argue that a failure to recognize the ongoing reality of the plantation logic as embodied by the European big house enables its reproduction, including in the environmental catastrophe of the Plantationocene. A consideration of Maroon geographies explores narrations of the plantation that point to a way forward to alternative futures.

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Introduction

In December 2022, the *New York Times* reported that French president Macron sought to increase deportations of migrants who are no longer legally allowed to stay in the country, while also making it easier to attract and keep migrants with 'needed skills' in the job market (Méheut, 2022). While this dynamic might seem paradoxical, Macron's plan employs a spatial ordering mechanism that provides France with its required economic resources. This mechanism has deep historical roots: France's colonialism enriched

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the home territory while impoverishing colonized nations. Disavowing its history as an imperial state allowed France to absolve itself from responsibility to those it impoverished, while simultaneously restricting the latter's mobility to the very state their labor and resources enriched, to the spaces they produced. Only the labor that is necessary for the country's local reproduction is allowed into France. The denial of the existence of this mechanism in France's authorized heritage discourse erases the relationality between French opulence and the poverty those immigrating to France seek to escape. This dynamic is common among (post)colonial powers. There is thus a need for former European colonial powers to narrate their own colonial histories and their associated legacies of spatial relationality in the present. However, narration is not a panacea, as it can be done in a way that denies relationality.

In this article, we explore these themes through a specific manifestation of colonialism, the plantation, by offering an interpretation of Katherine McKittrick's idea of plantation logics (McKittrick, 2011, 2013). To illustrate the challenges of confronting and narrating the plantation past, we begin in a context that clearly exhibits the plantation logic: plantation museums in the U.S. We then explore their relevance for understanding the contemporary situation in colonial Europe. Plantation museums, typically centered on former planters' mansions (the 'big house'), are important vehicles for the narration of slavery. However, such historical sites have traditionally steered away from addressing the centrality of enslavement to the production of the space of the big house. The resulting narratives have romanticized the 'Old South' by focusing on the opulence of the big house while ignoring the contribution of enslaved labor in building and operating both the mansion and the entire plantation. This erasure of the enslaved obscures the spatial and social relationality of the plantation. Even much of the critique of this erasure, in its focus on the contribution of the enslaved to the production of the local space of the plantation, tends to forget that slavery was central to the creation not only of the local plantation economy but also of the entire modern world. The point is that the relationality of the plantation exists at (and produces) various scales, implicating the colonial powers of Europe as much as the slaveowners in the southeastern U.S. and the bankers of New England.

Plantation museums in the U.S. have now begun to introduce enslavement into their narrations of the plantation era. While continental Europe lacks these plantation museums, it is no less important for the former colonial states in Europe to narrate their own historical involvement in slavery and, equally important, its contemporary legacies. In both contexts, we see a selective remembering of the past that is grounded in a spatial and temporal distancing of the plantation that renders the centrality of slavery to the production and reproduction of Europe invisible. This invisibility allows hegemonic representations of European heritage to ignore the central contribution to 'European civilization' of the global 'plantation,' as well as those who labored inside the 'big house' of Europe. In this article, we use the metaphor of the big house to illustrate how the logic of the plantation is replicated across scales of time and space. We argue that a failure to recognize the ongoing reality of the plantation logic as embodied by the European big house enables its reproduction, including in the environmental catastrophe of the Plantationocene.

We begin by presenting our interpretation and elaboration of the plantation logics idea and explain what we mean by relationality, by comparing the term with Lisa Lowe's (2015) use of 'intimacy' in a similar context. We then review the developments at plantation

museums in the U.S. to consider the ways in which they have sought, with mixed success, to narrate the history of slavery (and its ongoing legacies). We then turn to the European context and examine how the spatial dynamics of plantation logics are recreated at different scales in Europe. We conclude by exploring what we can learn from Maroon geographies for the task of narrating a history of oppression alongside its active resistance.

Plantation logics

Katherine McKittrick's idea of plantation logics (McKittrick, 2011, 2013) is inspired by the work of (among others) George Beckford and Sylvia Wynter. The idea is that the plantation represents a set of social relations and discourses that are built upon (and reproduce) a foundation of racialized ontology, oppression, exploitation, surveillance, control – and resistance. McKittrick (2011, p. 949) argues that

the plantation notably stands at the centre of modernity. It fostered complex black and non-black geographies in the Americas and provided the blueprint for future sites of racial entanglement ... that which 'structures' a black sense of place are the knotted diasporic tenets of coloniality, dehumanization, and resistance.

An important point here is that the plantation as a set of social relations lives on in new contexts – not unchanged, not 'twinned' (as McKittrick likes to put it), but as a recognizable 'blueprint' inherited from the past.

The plantation is in some ways a world unto itself, containing

a main house, an office, a carriage house, barns, a slave auction block, a garden area, slave quarters and kitchen, stables, a cemetery, and a building or buildings through which crops are prepared, such as a mill or a refinery; the plantation will also include a crop area and fields, woods, and a pasture. (McKittrick, 2013, p. 8)

The plantation also

spatializes early conceptions of urban life within the context of a racial economy: the plantation contained identifiable economic zones; it bolstered economic and social growth along transportation corridors; land use was for both agricultural and industrial growth; patterns of specialized activities – from domestic labor and field labor to blacksmithing, management, and church activities – were performed; racial groups were differentially inserted into the local economy, and so forth. (McKittrick, 2013, p. 8)

However, these 'plantation towns' are hardly isolated entities; McKittrick emphasizes their integration into broader transportation and economic networks and calls on Beckford's (1972) 'plantation thesis' to highlight the geographic reach of the plantation. The plantation thesis holds that

the plantations of transatlantic slavery underpinned a global economy; that this plantation history not only generated North Atlantic metropolitan wealth and exacerbated dispossession among the unfree and indentured, it also instituted an incongruous racialized economy that lingered long after emancipation and independence movements in the Americas; and that the protracted colonial logic of the plantation came to define many aspects of postslave life. (McKittrick, 2013, p. 3)

Thus, the plantation has a reach that is extensive in both spatial and temporal terms. The plantation idea is 'migratory,' as 'in agriculture, banking, and mining, in trade and tourism, and across other colonial and postcolonial spaces – the prison, the city, the resort – a

plantation logic characteristic of (but not identical to) slavery emerges in the present both ideologically and materially' (McKittrick, 2013, p. 3).

Plantations operate under a logic of 'racial surveillance, antiblack violence, sexual cruelty, and economic accumulation' (McKittrick, 2013, p. 9) as they turn the land of 'no one' into a land of 'someone,' producing simultaneously white agency and Black placelessness, as 'uninhabitable' places are tamed and made 'habitable' by and for Western (read: white) civilization. However, McKittrick forcefully argues that the plantation logic also includes the reality of Black agency and resistance. Referring to Wynter's essay on 'the plot and the plantation' (1971), McKittrick (2013, p. 10) describes these spaces as 'dichotomized and ambivalent geographies' where 'blackness becomes rooted in the Americas.' The small plots of land that some slaves were granted so that they could grow some of their own food became a locus of resistance and agency, where the enslaved could practice their culture and maintain a connection to the earth. In other words, the plot symbolizes the *life* of the enslaved, in defiance of narratives that focus on the plantation as inevitable and silent death. In this way, 'the simultaneous rather than dichotomized workings of the plot and the plantation ... recast the politics of resistance' (McKittrick, 2013, p. 11).

We read McKittrick as contending that the plantation logic necessarily includes the agency, resistance, and life-making activities of the enslaved, while at the same time, the plantation logic shapes public narratives that 'return to the plantation' in problematic ways, such that

the sociospatial workings of antiblack violence wholly define black history; this past is rendered over and done with, and the plantation is cast as a 'backward' institution that we have left behind; the plantation moves through time, a cloaked anachronism, that calls forth the prison, the city, and so forth. (McKittrick, 2013, p. 9)

Thus, returning to the plantation risks 'construct[ing] blackness as silent, suffering, and perpetually violated, just as it attempts to erase the ways antiblack violence is enacted in the present' (McKittrick, 2013, p. 9). Such narrations must be handled carefully, which we take up later in our discussion of the challenges of narrating plantations as historical sites.

It is important here to acknowledge the flexible constructions of 'race' in the plantation context, where poor white laborers and farmers were also seen as 'out of place' in the grand white-pillared estates of the planter class. Their liminal position as internal Others, however, played a significant part in upholding the plantation logic, as the allure of whiteness turned potential allies against their own self-interest (Zinn, 1980). This 'divide and rule' strategy continues to be effective today in operationalizing internal Others as agents of the binary (Edsall & Edsall, 1992; Hochschild, 2018). Indeed, 'the principle of differential rule' at the heart of the plantation logic 'has not only persisted but has become the foundational principle of every political regime from then on' (Azoulay, 2019, p. 36), a point also made by Deborah A. Thomas (2019) in her study of the political legacies of the plantation.

Because a 'forgetting' or denial of this history we have just mentioned is a recurring feature of historical and contemporary discourses, we find it helpful to recall Stoler's (2011) reading of the term 'colonial aphasia.' Colonial aphasia marks three key elements with clear relevance for our discussion: an active occlusion of knowledge, the difficulty in creating a vocabulary that allows for the association of appropriate words with their appropriate things, and a difficulty understanding the contemporary relevance of past

statements and analyses. Because of the severity of the injustices of the plantation, such a system would not be sustainable without its associated colonial aphasia, and thus we see this as part of the plantation logic.

We would also add an environmental aspect here. The plantation did not only rely on the systemic destruction of non-European life and culture; it also led to the destruction of ecosystems through practices of monocultural agriculture. In this way, environmental and cultural destruction are linked:

The plantation and its accompanying rearrangements of life, are produced through processes of land alienation, labor extraction, and racialized violence. As such, the plantation marks an important site to consider the ways in which land, labor, and capital have been ordered to profit some, while imperiling the lives and livelihoods of others, across the globe. (Moore et al., 2021)

The concept of the ‘Plantationocene’ captures the unequal human contributions to what is otherwise often called the Anthropocene. For example, Barua’s (2023) reading of the idea shows how the Plantationocene expresses the connections between planetary transformation and colonial history and postcolonial political economy.

Let us now summarize the main elements of plantation logics. A plantation logic normalizes exploitative social relations as well as the exploitation of nature (degrading the environment); it naturalizes racialized subjugation through the simultaneous production of white spatial agency and Black placelessness/aspatiality; and it racializes space along colonial racial hierarchies and requires the surveillance and control of othered bodies (and spaces), while at the same time requiring those bodies for the very functioning of the plantation. The geographic logic of the plantation connects the local plantation to the national and global economies, coupling the containment of othered bodies in local spaces with the accumulation of wealth far beyond the plantation itself. At the same time, a colonial aphasia denies the relationality of this geographic logic that couples the production of opulence for the exploiters with the creation of misery for the exploited, and hinders the development of a language with which to understand the brutality of the system. Plantation logics also shape their narrations when we ‘return’ to the plantation, tending to reproduce the image of Black bodies suffering passively.

McKittrick fights against this tendency by centering Black resistance in plantation logics, and she also problematizes the dichotomous nature of the analytical tools we use when narrating the ‘plantation’ (past or present). She also highlights the relational nature of plantation logics (social/economic/environmental). However, we want to bring these two insights together, such that we would add an additional ‘logic’ to this framework: narratives that follow plantation logics tend to *deny* the very relationality that constitutes plantation logics.

This article addresses two of the above elements. The first regards the migratory aspect of plantation logics and the extent to which the plantation can be understood as active today in the postcolonial European context. The second regards challenge of narrating the plantation past that highlights its relationality in a way that is relevant to addressing structural racism today. Before we move on to that analysis, we will first clarify what we mean by ‘relationality.’

Relationality and intimacy

Lisa Lowe (2015) explores the ‘intimacies of four continents’ created by colonialism, and much of what she discusses here connects to our understanding of relationality. Lowe

(2015, p. 1) points out that Fernando Ortiz (1995/1995) had previously called sugar 'mulatto' because it was produced by peoples from the world's four 'corners' for European consumption. Around the same time, C. L. R. James (1938) noted that eighteenth-century slave society in Santo Domingo connected Europe, Africa and the Americas, such that the fortunes created by slavery gave rise to the bourgeoisie in France (cited in Lowe, 2015). What is 'relational' here is the states of being of peoples connected by the processes of colonialism; the wealth, status, and power of (e.g.) the bourgeoisie was reliant on the enslavement of other humans to provide the labor for the plantations. This relationality is simultaneously social and spatial, as it is produced by a colonialism that 'operates through precisely spatialized and temporalized processes of differentiation and connection' (Lowe, 2015, p. 8).

The processes of differentiation and connection that comprise relationality consists have material and discursive aspects. The material aspects are highlighted by Ortiz and James above. Noting the connections between the material and discursive, Lowe (2015, p. 3) critiques the 'economy of affirmation and forgetting that structures and formalizes ... liberal ways of understanding' (p. 3), and we can clearly see the affirmation and forgetting in the case of the narrations of plantation museums. Lowe (2015, p. 16, emphasis added) continues:

What some have represented as a linear temporal progression from colonial abjection to liberal freedom actually elides what might be more properly conceived as a spatial dynamic, in which forms of both liberal subject and society in the imperial center are only possible in relation to laboring lives in the colonized geographies or 'zones of exception' with which they coexist, *however disavowed*.

It is this very disavowal that will be a focus of our analysis for the coming sections.

While Lowe uses the terms 'relationality' and 'connection,' she uses 'intimacy' as a heuristic to examine the ways in which colonialism brings people together, a strategy that 'involves considering scenes of close connection in relation to a global geography that one more often conceives in terms of vast spatial distances' (Lowe, 2015, p. 18). The 'intimacies of four continents' signals 'the circuits, connections, associations, and mixings of differentially laboring peoples, eclipsed by the operations that universalize the Anglo-American liberal individual' (Lowe, 2015, p. 21). Our understanding of relationality encompasses these kinds of intimacies, though our focus in this article is on the enslaver/enslaved relationship and their geographical analogies rather than on the relations between oppressed peoples. Colonialism and the logics of the plantation are grounded in a relationality that simultaneously generates the wealth of the core and the poverty of the periphery, a process that in turn depends on an 'economy of affirmation and forgetting' that praises the agency and innovation of the core and finds the poverty and 'backwardness' of the periphery regrettable (absolving the core of any past or present responsibility). We emphasize that these processes are still ongoing, as Thomas (2019) work shows, in which case their relationality still holds.

Plantation museums

The foundation of the plantation was the (re)productive labor of enslaved men, women, and children of African descent. The elements of a typical antebellum plantation consisted

of residences for the enslaved as well as the overseers, gardens, fields, refineries or mills, auction blocks, links to transportation, and, of course, the big house (McKittrick, 2013). These spatial units form the foundation for how plantation museums across the south-eastern U.S. are interpreted today (Eichstedt & Small, 2002). There are over 375 plantation sites across the U.S. that offer tours (Alderman et al., 2015). With a few notable exceptions, these tours have tended to ignore most of the elements comprising the plantation to focus instead on the big house (Eichstedt & Small, 2002).

Because the majority of the people who lived on the plantation did not live in the big house, the decision to focus on the home of the enslavers reveals much about narrative priorities. However, this does not automatically imply a complete erasure of the enslaved. The fact that some people who were enslaved as cooks, servants, seamstresses or caretakers inhabited the big house provides a potential opportunity to tell their stories. Moreover, informing visitors of the contribution of enslaved labor to the production of the plantation's wealth helps to put the big house in perspective, as its grandiosity would not be possible without the work of the people in 'the back of the house,' as it is often put euphemistically – nor would it be possible without the enslaved labor in the fields.

While the big house could potentially offer an interpretation of the lives of enslaved people, the vast majority of plantation museums have trivialized, marginalized, or completely ignored the enslaved (Eichstedt & Small, 2002). The unapologetic focus on the white family residing in the big house in the tours constitutes a denial of the plantation logic, grounded in an inability to conceptualize the relationality of the positions of the enslaver and the enslaved. In other words, one is led to see the big house as a white space despite the fact that it depended on Black labor.

The conceptualization of the big house as a white space is evident in the tour narratives. Guests are often welcomed into the house through the main door, tracing the footsteps of the enslavers, by guides dressed as 'Southern belles.' This introduction immediately indicates that the story will be told from the perspective of the enslaving lady of the house. The narrative often revolves around architecture, period furniture, the relations between family members, and their social stature (Adamkiewicz, 2016; Autry, 2019; Buzinde & Osagie, 2011; Eichstedt & Small, 2002; Hoelscher, 2012; Potter, 2016; Rapson, 2020). Visitors learn about the political, economic and intellectual achievements of the master family as guides note important guests, significant decisions allegedly taken in particular rooms, or books that were written there. This is especially the case if the plantation was owned by a well-known businessman or politician, such as former presidents, governors or founding fathers. The gaps in this narrative can be likened to colonial aphasia, as Black agency is erased. Such narratives obfuscate present-day inequalities which are themselves the legacy of slavery, an obfuscation that enables the ongoing exploitation of Black communities (Rapson, 2020).

Systematic pressure to modify these narratives began with the Civil Rights Movement (Hoelscher, 2012), and African Americans were later joined by academics and other activists as popular interest in the history of slavery emerged against the backdrop of ongoing racism (Berlin, 2004). These efforts were given new urgency by the 2015 Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church massacre, when nine Black worshipers were murdered by a white man who idealized the Confederacy and frequented plantation museums. This horrific act of violence opened a conversation about Confederate iconography, the Lost Cause narrative, and the narratives of plantation museums.

The increased attention paid to the ongoing reproduction of the Lost Cause narrative has led to a wider effort to challenge representations of this false historical interpretation. In addition to the removal of Confederate iconography and place names, the romantic Old South imagery promoted by plantation museums (often through their function as wedding venues) was widely challenged (Olson, 2019). The extra scrutiny also pushed some plantation museums to start narrating slavery (Carter et al., 2014; Cook, 2016; Dwyer et al., 2013; Eldar & Jansson, 2021, 2022; Hanna et al., 2018). This includes adding interpretations to the big house as well as other plantation elements (such as the quarters of enslaved people).

While the inclusion of slavery in plantation museum narratives is a positive step, it is not free of problems (Eldar & Jansson, 2021). One of these relates to the mismatch between the expansive geography of the plantation and the compartmentalized geography of the narratives. The emphasis on the plantation as *the* geography of slavery ignores the relationality of the plantation with the rest of the U.S. and with Europe through national and trans-Atlantic investment and trade (cf. Baptist, 2014; Beckert & Rockman, 2016; Inikori, 2002; Mintz, 1986; Williams, 1944). Without accounting for slavery's true geography, 'Europeans' and (non-'Southern') 'Americans' position themselves on the moral high ground of the 'moral landscape of uneven racism' (Jansson, 2017) that absolves them from addressing their own historical role in the plantation economy, and its contemporary legacies.

Indeed, plantation slavery would not have been possible without its vast network of ports, banks, insurance companies, markets, and various industries such as textile and metal, as well as political and intellectual advocacy to legitimize the enslavement of African people. As such, the confinement of the idea of slavery to 'the South,' implying a disconnection from 'the North' and 'Europe,' mimics the same logic that denies the relationality between the fields and the big house, while erasing those who labored in the big house itself.

While this spatial displacement can be seen as part of the plantation's heritage and its ongoing legacies, the tendency to museumize the plantation risks adding a temporal displacement (Inwood, 2018) that relegates the plantation to the past. This displacement cements a creation of 'pastness' (Trouillot, 2000) that situates the plantation as belonging to an ontologically separate temporal realm than the present, as something purely historical rather than a phenomenon that continues to inform the present. 'What is lost in the process' writes Clyde Woods (2017, p. 42) 'is not only an appreciation of the continuity of plantation-based economic systems and power relations but also the critique of these relations.' Narrating slavery in the big house without linking it to its vast geography and without discussing the ways in which the plantation's heritage continues to manifest itself in these geographies, risks obfuscating ongoing plantation-like dynamics.

While we argue that a return to the plantation to tell the stories of the enslaved is necessary, we want to consider McKittrick's discussion of the risks of this return. We can perhaps see the trend toward narrating enslavement at plantation museums as a way 'to seek consolation in naming violence' (McKittrick, 2013, p. 9). There is a grave risk, however, associated with the focus on violence and death:

when racial violence is the central analytical query (in the humanities and social sciences), the dead and dying black/non-white body becomes the conceptual tool that will undoubtedly

complete, and thus empirically prove, the brutalities of racism. This analytical logic can only 'end' with black death which, interestingly, reifies the very colonial structures that research on racial violence is (seemingly) working against: that bifurcated – segregated social systems and thus biological differences rooted in race and phenotype result in the real/empirical and analytical death of blackness that is walled in by decay. This is to say that analyses of racial violence require the conceptual and thus material subordination of the black/non-white human to extra-human violence which positions the ontological stakes of liberty as decidedly oppositional to black sense of place. (McKittrick, 2011, p. 953)

What is the solution to this dilemma? One suggestion McKittrick offers is to tell the stories of 'racial encounters and innovative black diaspora practices that, in fact, spatialize acts of survival' (McKittrick, 2013, p. 2). We will return to this challenge in the section on Maroon geographies, but first, we evaluate the European scene from the perspective of plantation logics.

Plantation Europe

In October, 2022, a European Union diplomat from Spain, Josep Borrell Fontelles, told a gathering of 'aspiring European diplomats' that Europe is a garden, and the rest of the world a jungle (Stevis-Gridneff, 2022, emphasis added):

'Yes, Europe is a garden ... We have built a garden. Everything works. It is the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion that the humankind has been able to build – the three things together.'

'Most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden,' he added, calling the young European diplomats 'gardeners' who 'have to go to the jungle ... Otherwise, the rest of the world will invade us, by different ways and means.'

A more revealing statement of plantation logics and colonial aphasia in contemporary Europe would be difficult to find. The garden/jungle binary conveniently erases the contribution of the 'jungle' to the 'garden,' while positing the imminent threat to the latter by the former. The binary also has a historical relevance, as plantations were often seen as 'gardens' where modern techniques of control, over humans and over nature (as discussed above), would tame wild spaces and keep out threats (from the 'jungle') to 'civilization' (Rusert, 2009), contributing to the Plantationocene.

The 'European experience' with plantations and colonialism involves a complicated mix of connected processes of racialization and territorialization, constituting 'gardens' and 'jungles' both near and far. Cedric Robinson (2021) famously pointed out that England established plantations in Ireland already from the 1500s, supporting De Genova's (2016, p. 84) observation that 'an essential feature of European history has always been the subjugation of some Europeans by others.' As a result, white supremacy does not guarantee equality for all 'whites,' as some whites (e.g. Eastern Europeans) occupy a liminal position as internal Others. As in the original plantation society, this positioning encourages 'liminal whites' to distance themselves from Black and brown people in order to assert their whiteness (De Genova, 2016; Fox & Mogilnicka, 2019). The point here is to understand that 'Europe' is not a monolithic category but is rather an idea riven by internal divisions and contradictions – but nonetheless an idea that is mobilized repeatedly in the service of projects of domination.

New articulations of the garden/jungle binary were refined during the colonization of the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Early efforts of European explorers to map lands previously

unknown to Europeans often featured empty wastelands, or lands occupied by savages (Mills, 1997). The construction of these 'uninhabitable' geographies (McKittrick, 2013, p. 5) was pivotal for legitimizing the exploitation of both the land and its 'inhuman' residents, normalizing the assumption of an unequal production of space along racial hierarchies (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019; McKittrick, 2013; Mills, 1997). Central to this new map was the racialization of space and turning space into time. Here non-European space was condemned and seen as backwards on an imaginary linear temporal trajectory led by Europe (Chakrabarty, 2000; Mills, 1997). By placing European bodies in the lands occupied by those who are incapable of producing history, white settlers turned these 'uninhabitable' lands into spaces of 'someone' (McKittrick, 2013). In this process, McKittrick (2013, p. 6) writes, European colonizers also had to decide what to do with the Others with which they now shared this space. This led to particular spatial units designated for different beings:

Native reservations, plantations, and formal and informal segregations are just some of the ways the lands of no one were carved up to distinguish between and regulate the relations of indigenous, nonindigenous, African, and colonial communities, with some geographies still being cast as uninhabitable for particular groups.

The segregation of space along racial hierarchies regulated the relations between 'humans' and 'inhumans' and the spaces they occupied. This regulation relied on 'racial surveillance, antiblack violence, sexual cruelty, and economic accumulation' (McKittrick, 2013, p. 9). The plantation thus attempted to set both the subjective and physical limits to Black existence in the Americas – one confined to the estate and to a life as property of white people (McKittrick, 2011). Anywhere outside of the plantation was therefore constructed as a space where Black people would be transgressors and 'out of place.'

The white cartography that divides the world into racialized and allochronic spaces that warrant dispossession, surveillance and exploitation is not relegated to history but has become a crucial component of our global capitalist system (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019). Globally, the 'uninhabitable' colonized world is marked by war, disease, environmental crisis, and famine. The confinement of its condemned inhabitants, through legal and physical practices of bordering, ensures its ongoing position as a site of primary product production, mineral extraction, and disposable labor (Besteman, 2019; Bledsoe & Wright, 2019; Mbembe, 2019; McKittrick, 2013). Importantly, the construction of Black people as aspatial and ahistorical provides capitalism with new frontiers for expansion. As Bledsoe and Wright (2019, p. 12) write,

With regard to the question of space, anti-Blackness helps us understand how the afterlife of slavery (Hartman, 2007, p. 6) leads to Black populations being conceptually unable to legitimately create space, thereby leaving locations associated with Blackness open to the presumably 'rational' agendas of dominant spatial actors. Black populations, then, serve as the guarantor of capitalism's need to constantly find new spaces of accumulation.

The systematic destruction of Black-produced space by European colonialism and the global capitalist world order resulted in many new spaces for accumulation throughout the 'Global South.' What Stoler (2008) calls 'ruins of empire' include export-oriented mines and factories, monocultural agriculture, and vast dumping grounds for the rich world's waste. These sites of accumulation are often unrecognized as part of Europe's imperial heritage, as postcolonial discourses naturalize their existence and 'un-recognize' them as ongoing imperial formations.

A narrative that perpetuates imperial formations is that of ‘development aid’ which positions ‘the West’ as a benevolent and generous role model to ‘the Global South.’ This narrative obscures the enriched world’s continuous reliance on the (re)productive labor from the ‘back of the house’ to maintain its standard of living, thereby naturalizing (for whites) this radically uneven production of space, an understanding that enables the reproduction of this spatial inequality. One example of the use of labor from the ‘back of the house’ is discussed in Kesha Fikes’ (2009) study of domestic labor in Portugal. Fikes argues that the majority society in Portugal found the visibility of poor Portuguese women laboring as domestics to be problematic, as it seemed to contradict Portuguese modernity. However, when poor African women began to be employed as domestics, their presence served to confirm Portuguese modernity.

In addition to ‘human resources,’ natural resources in other parts of the world continue to be exploited disproportionately by Europe (and the ‘developed’ West). Approximately 75% of the world’s cobalt is mined in the Congo, often by peasants and children in deplorable conditions (Kara, 2023). To better grasp the magnitude of this extractive relationship, it is useful to think of the relation between the enriched world and the spaces and peoples it depends upon for its overdevelopment as ‘global apartheid.’ Catherine Besteman (2019, p. 28) explains the merits of using this conceptual framing:

the term ‘apartheid’ shifts the frame to capture the use of race and nativist language to structure mobility, belonging, elimination, and extermination, as well as the relevance of border controls and the hierarchical modes of excluding or incorporating racially delineated people into a polity for labor exploitation.

The plantation logic is evident in this arrangement, as it is founded upon a social order based on ‘mutually exclusive legally defined identities and the sorting of those identities into geographically demarcated areas through mandated residential racial segregation’ (Besteman, 2019, p. 28).

The work of dividing space along artificial lines fosters mechanisms of ‘bordering, ordering and othering’ (Van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002). The production of space (via bordering) simultaneously results in the othering of the people relegated to that space. This dynamic resonates with early the settler colonial regulation of space and Indigenous and Black populations discussed by McKittrick (2013), a regulation that orders who is allowed where and under what capacity.

The work of b/ordering and othering is evident in contemporary efforts to limit the entrance of the unwanted to ‘Fortress Europe’ through borders, diplomacy, high-tech surveillance, land and sea patrols – all increasingly taking place outside Schengen territory (Besteman, 2019). Building on the work of Sonia Tascón, José Arce and Julia Suárez-Krabbe (2018, p. 110) write:

Today’s migrants and refugees braving through the borders of Europe face problems similar to those faced by enslaved Africans and indigenous people (past and present): forced exile; displacement; imposition of non-citizen status codified in law and justified along racial lines; and labor exploitation and subjection to laws that control their movements and mandatorily detain them in particular racialized spaces such as plantations, reservations and camps.

As Europe continues to push those seeking a better life into ever-greater precarity, more die en route as they try to reach the opulence and safety of the big house. For those who successfully make it, awaiting them is another racialized division of labor.

Through the construct of race, geography becomes embodied, as those originating from 'condemned' geographies are seen by the white observer as carrying 'the jungle' within themselves (Mills, 1997). Bordering is also central to this process, as Sandra Ponza-nesi and Bolette B. Blaagaard (2011, p. 3) explain:

Borders are therefore moving from physical (the gate to European territories and citizenship) and symbolic (the myth of Europe and its idea of superiority) to material borders (the marked body of foreigners, immigrants and asylums seekers) which become 'border' figurations (construction of otherness, foreignness, alienness).

As such, the epistemic framing enables the reproduction of the legitimizing narrative that condemns non-European space as sites for control. Exploitation is then replicated at ever smaller scales – from the global to the national, to the urban, and finally to the individual.

One process through which the centrality of the plantation logic of racial division and control in space manifests is residential segregation, whereby bodies racialized as Other are confined to particular parts of the city, such that 'there are areas where non-European migrants are more or less excluded from entry' (Andersson et al., 2018, p. 271). Even citizens of color are often relegated to underserved and stigmatized neighborhoods (Blakley, 2009; Nimako & Small, 2009; Pitts, 2019). The racialization of space also functions as a way to police non-European people's mobility, through the use of security forces to remove non-white bodies from 'white' areas and the creation of physical barriers, such as lack of public transportation (Dikeç, 2007; Pitts, 2019; Trafford, 2020). This policing also creates a hostile sense of place, where overt and covert racism signal to those racialized as Other that they do not belong (Adisa-Farrar, 2017; Listerborn, 2015; Skinner, 2019).

The confinement of non-white bodies to underserved neighborhoods increases inequalities, replicates a racialized division of labor, and creates a pool of surplus labor (Buonaiuto & Laforest, 2011; Danewid, 2020; De Genova, 2016; Small, 2018). Practices of spatial exclusion also reproduce the spectacle (and white expectation) of the presence of racialized and sexualized bodies in 'white spaces,' not as equal members, but as a serving class (Kilomba, 2008; Wekker, 2016). This dynamic of stigmatization, spatial exclusion and subsequent division of labor (the served and serving) points to the legacy of the plantation logic operating at the scales of both the colonial periphery (the 'back of the house') and the postcolonial metropole (the big house) (Buonaiuto & Laforest, 2011; Danewid, 2020; Trafford, 2020). In addition, it reflects that even formal citizenship status does not guarantee equality in the face of white supremacy (Buettner, 2016, 2018; Small, 2018).

This is perhaps not surprising given the nation-state's historical origins. The fusion of blood and soil against the backdrop of imperial expansion and the creation of the exploitable Other linked whiteness and citizenship almost from the onset of nationalism (Besteman, 2019). Moreover, the creation of a unified national identity by juxtaposing it to an external one obscures internal differences (Van Houtum, 2010). These differences were already difficult to articulate for those with roots in the 'back' of the imperial house, as former imperial states insist on narrating their history from the territorial confines of the nation-state (Bhambra, 2017; Gilroy, 1990); that is, narrating the big house without accounting for the 'back of the house' or those Others who sustained it from within.

Through the 'decision to remain in the space of the European nation-state,' Charles Mills (1997, p. 74) writes that the

connection between the development of this space's industry, culture, civilization, and the material and cultural contributions of Afro-Asia and the Americas is denied, so it seems as if this space and its denizens are peculiarly rational and industrious, differentially endowed with qualities that have enabled them to dominate the world.

Violent exploitation is not the only way Europe relied on other(ed) parts of the world for its 'development.' Prior to the European expansion to the Americas, Europe did not stand out in terms of intellectual achievements, technological advancements or standard of living (Blaut, 1993). It was only when Europe needed to legitimize its exploitation of those constructed as 'non-Europeans' that it began disavowing the various intellectual and technological innovations it borrowed from other parts of the world and the 'non-Europeans' residing within it (Otele, 2020; Robinson, 2021).

The result of this revisionist construction of Europe was a whitewashed story: Europe stands at the top of civilization, as glorious as a white-pillared plantation house, a celebrated symbol of success earned by hard work and innovation. Its beauty represents the advanced civilization of its inhabitants; its size, their power and influence. Absent from this depiction are the hundreds of enslaved men who built the house with their labor. Missing are the women who made the running of the house possible by their cooking, serving, and cleaning. Invisible are the field workers, clearing, tilling, planting, cultivating and processing, enabling their enslavers to make fortunes, endowing them with leisure time to think about politics and philosophy, to write books and to write history.

In colonial Europe, the plantation logic is so deeply engrained, and so thoroughly denied, that one can still speak of 'development aid,' 'debt forgiveness,' and various civilizing missions to save the 'developing world' from itself. Through the erasure of Europe's dependency on people of color within and without, white European voters can cultivate a nostalgic myth of an era 'gone with the wind,' when a harmonious Europe was free of migrants. In Europe, governments can still openly announce a 'ghetto plan' to dismantle racialized parts of the city (Seemann, 2021), use racial slurs while authorizing excessive force against their own citizens (Dikeç, 2019), or even revoke citizenship altogether as a way to disavow actions of the European-born and raised as somehow 'un-European' (Kennedy, 2021).

The denial of the plantation logic's relevance to Europe does not only whitewash Europe's modernity, it also greenwashes it. The framing of the current environmental crisis as the 'Anthropocene' obscures Europe's disproportional contribution to this geological epoch, starting with the plantation:

the slave plantation system was the model and motor for the carbon-greedy machine-based factory system that is often cited as an inflection point for the Anthropocene ... 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. (Haraway, 2015, p. 162)

Here too the discourse of European benevolence and innocence enables neocolonial projects such as the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation in developing countries (REDD+). Aimed to 'encourage developing countries to contribute to climate change mitigation efforts,' (FAO, n.d.) the project has been criticized for allowing 'the powerful capitalist countries to maintain their current levels of production,

consumption and, therefore, pollution.’ In a letter from the State of Acre (World Rainforest Movement, 2011), stakeholders affected by REDD + write:

Historically responsible for the creation of the problem, they now propose a ‘solution’ that primarily serves their own interests. While making it possible to purchase the ‘right to pollute’, mechanisms like REDD strip ‘traditional’ communities (riverine, indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities, rubber tappers, women coconut gatherers, etc.) of their autonomy in the management of their territories.

As the letter shows, European efforts to subjugate people and land to its own self-interest never go unopposed. It is to this opposition that we now turn.

Maroon futures

Cedric Robinson (2021) argues that the Europeans were unaware that alongside what can be called the ‘plantation logic seed,’ they also facilitated the Black radical tradition. The marrying of various African cultures, histories, and cosmologies aboard the slave ships and on the plantation provided the ground for resistance and pathways for alternative ontologies.

A physical manifestation of these alternative ontologies is represented by the garden plots enslaved Africans cultivated alongside the plantation. Whereas the plantation marked the beginning of the white man’s destructive domination over nature and his fellow humankind, Sylvia Wynter (1971, p. 99) writes that the plot provided a space to nurture both ecological diversity and African worldviews. The garden plot therefore constitutes a site of resistance to the plantation logic and provides ‘the focus of resistance to the market system and market values’ (Wynter, 1971, p. 99) that the Europeans promoted. The plot also echoes Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2017, p. 432) view that ‘freedom is a place.’

Alongside the plot, self-emancipating enslaved Africans created places of freedom in various Maroon societies where ‘Black people as well as Indigenous and poor White people ... sought protection from White- and capitalist-dominated slave societies’ (Winston, 2021, p. 2185). These Maroon geographies, Celeste Winston (2021, p. 2186) writes, ‘must be understood not just as a fleeting practice of flight but also as a significant method of producing place.’ This place, she continues, ‘is an ongoing, expansive, and fundamentally spatial practice of building alternative worlds in service of liberation’ (p. 2187).

Europe too contains multiple sites of Maroonage and abolition. From the ones daring to transgress the increasingly militarized ‘color line’ of the ever outwardly expanding European border (Stierl, 2019), to those refusing deportation and detention (Elsrud, 2020; Spena, 2016), and those who refuse to stay in their assigned place in European society (Sobande, 2018; Van den Bogert, 2021). Maroonage can also be found in musical expression, in streets and clubs, in defiance of marginalization and confinement (El-Tayeb, 2003; Pardue, 2012; Sedano, 2019). Across Europe, places that defy oppression and white supremacy exist in entrepreneurial projects, art studios and galleries, intellectual and activist centers, and political organizing (Adisa-Farrar, 2017; Blakley, 2009; Ellerbe-Dueck, 2011; Hawthorne, 2021; Pitts, 2019).

These sites and their associated epistemologies offer pathways for liberation, as Paul Gilroy (2004, p. 61) suggests:

At this point, colonial and postcolonial folks can acquire a distinctive mission. Our modern history as disenchanted descendants of people who were themselves commodified for sale on an international market or deemed expendable within the larger racial logic of Europe-centered historical processes, gives us ready access to a fund of knowledge that is useful in a number of areas. These insights are not ours alone but will belong to anybody who is prepared to use them. This history of suffering, rebellion, and dissidence is not our intellectual property, and we are not defenders of cultural and experiential copyright.

The question remains, however, whether Europe is prepared to use these insights against its own plantation logics and the injustices they produce.

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to elaborate on the idea of plantation logics to demonstrate its contemporary relevance, but we also want to be clear about its limitations. Here we turn to McKittrick (2011, p. 951):

I am not suggesting that maroon resistances to slavery and the Detroit riots are one in the same, that the big house closely resembles gated communities, or that the auction block replicates contemporary staged presentations of blackness. I am not claiming that the plantation and contemporary geographies in the Americas are indistinguishable or identical. Rather I am positioning the plantation as a very meaningful geographic prototype that not only housed and normalized (vis-à-vis enforced placelessness) racial violence in the Americas but also naturalized a plantation logic that anticipated (but did not twin) the empirical decay and death of a very complex black sense of place.

Likewise, we do not mean to gloss over differences between experiences in the Americas and Europe, but we do find the parallels to be instructive and potentially constructive for movements for justice. And let us not forget that plantations still exist, and still supply the West with raw materials (Li, 2023).

As the plantation logic proliferates across the Atlantic, so does resistance to it. The Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd in May, 2020, provide a powerful example of this transatlantic resistance. Central to these protests was the demand to change the narrative that whitewashes the history of anti-Black violence. Calls to remove Confederate iconography in the U.S. echoed the demand that 'Rhodes must fall' in Africa which resonated with protesters across Europe wishing to do away with various statues immortalizing enslavers on pedestals in European cities.

While the various Maroon geographies across Europe continue to be written 'outside the official tenets of cartography' (McKittrick, 2011, p. 949), it is not the Black spaces in Europe that are 'empty' and apt for redevelopment. Instead, as reflected by the uninhabited pedestal, 'emptiness' is perhaps what best characterizes Europe once its foundational myths of self-made greatness are challenged. It is the European space that must be re-thought, reconfigured and re-interpreted. For pathways forward, one can look for alternative futures cultivated in places that continue to resist the plantation logic and the destructive power of the Plantationocene. Distinctly, these emancipatory futures rely on rich, multi-geographical histories of Black creation, oppression, survival and perseverance. And these histories, in turn, must be told and retold in the European big house.

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