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Subalternization of a Postplantation City

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This short piece for a special forum on the Plantationocene responds to Wendy Wolford's article in the *Annals* on this topic, with an appreciation of its conditions of possibility in the challenge that Black Geographies has made to the whiteness of Anglo-American geography. Rather than presuming a plantation logic, I suggest returning to the complexity of the agrarian Marxist tradition, also in geography, recognizing its failure to learn from the theoretical contributions of people of color who comprise the planetary majority. Shifting gears, I turn to a surprising historical geography of space making from the South African city of Durban, in which postplantation subalterns effected a surprising transformation in the peripheries and interstices of the racist city, through spatial practices that still hold the seeds of proletarian survival and collective Black liberation. *Key Words: Black Geographies, Plantationocene, South Africa.*

It could have happened before, and maybe it did, in a minor key. What began in a small, out-of-the-way, inconveniently scheduled session at the American Association of Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting, driven by a small, committed group of Black graduate students and junior faculty, has become a key aspect of the AAG and one of the main hiring imperatives in geography and adjacent fields.

The emergence of Black Geographies is a major event and one to be celebrated, but it is too soon to determine its significance. Black geographic scholarship reflects the range of analytical and political perspectives in the humanities and social sciences today, as well it should. Black as in Afrodescendant scholars are just as diverse as anyone else, as is the skill and talent evident in the Black Geographies Specialty Group of the AAG and its growing bibliography. The explosion of Black geographic thought, however, forces Anglo-American geography, once again, to confront its relationship to whiteness. Whether and how it does so is the real question.

In a recent provocation in the U.S. public sphere, Barnor Hesse offered a way of thinking of a spectrum of whiteness ranging from the overt defense of white supremacy, to the desire for “non-whiteness,” the liberal defense of fairness and equality that maintains white privilege, the private critique that maintains “white benefit,” the “white confessional” that seeks validation from people of color and particularly from Black people, the “white critic” who refuses the

racial regime, the “white traitor” who commits to subverting it, and finally the “white abolitionist” committed to its end.¹

Where might geography stand on this terrain of positions, and what might Black Geographies have enabled? Black Geographies might have pushed geographers' tacit affiliations into the middle of this spectrum, including support for Black hires tasked to do antiracist institutional and intellectual work, the liberal defense of equality in the discipline, the confessional hunger for validation and inclusion in a dynamic discursive field, and the beginnings of refusal of white liberalism from those who might have benefited from it. The point is not to determine who sits where on the spectrum, or to use this blunt device to amplify cancel culture. Hesse means to shake things up, but he is an astute political theorist. His spectrum gives us pause to think about all that remains to be done.

I begin with this excursus to suggest that, notwithstanding Wolford's (2021) careful argument for the efficacy of “the Plantationocene,” the point of the concept might not be that it is a better descriptor of our epoch (as Wolford [2021, 11] agrees) but that it has emerged as a symptom of the challenge that Black Geographies poses to a tenuously white discipline. Indeed, Wolford (2021) is persuasive in reiterating the importance of plantation regimes and their geographically differentiated effects, but this need not imply putting one's faith in epochal monikers. Wolford stages this case through rapprochement between, on the one hand, the environmental

humanities represented by Yusoff's (2018) critique of the Anthropocene and Black Geographies represented by McKittrick (2013) on "plantation futures," and on the other hand, the linked fields of agrarian studies, development studies, and political ecology.

What the agrarian Marxist tradition behind the latter fields accomplished brilliantly in its late twentieth-century revival was a differentiated understanding of political-economic and socioecological change. Black Geographies can learn from this by seeing "the plantation" as one of multiple sociospatial forms in the global history of racial capitalism. Holding the multiplicity of agrarian transitions and land-labor-capital formations in view, agrarian Marxists were carefully attentive to diverse aftermaths of colonial capitalism; to precise articulations of class, gender, ethnicity, caste, race, and other forms of difference; and to the persistence of unfreedom and structural violence. What agrarian Marxism failed to do, in the main, was to raise the theoretical contributions of people of color from the majority of the world. Invested in documenting ongoing processes of decolonization and recolonization, this tradition did not always pay much heed to the decolonization of epistemic formations, nor did it quite challenge the myth that theory comes from the Global North. These are tendencies that proponents of the Plantationocene concept would be wise to refuse. Wolford's (2021) "lusophone perspective" carries this hope of shifting the geographies of Geography.

There is a cautionary aside to be made here about the geographies of Black Geographies, and the risk of ontologizing U.S. Blackness. In an engaging progress report, Noxolo (2022) argued that:

Black Geographies ... are rooted in the powerful epicentre of US-focused Black knowledge production and are routing outwards from there to other centres of Black community. At the same time, Black Geographies' own anti-colonial and anti-racist logics always already resist and decentre this powerful US epicentering, re-reading Black Geographies as rooted in/routed through a more globalised and diverse vision of Blackness. (1233)

This is a generous possibility, one to be defended, but given the tension between "anti-colonial" and "US epicentering," I would like to think a bit more about this argument. Noxolo continued with, among other things, two important points. The first is to laud the institutional work of Black U.S.

geographers, particularly of Black women, and more specifically LaToya Eaves; this is possible because Black feminist and queer critique has been an insistent force within circuits of Black (radical) thought and action. The second is a hopeful assertion that "Black thought is no respecter of borders and 'borderization'" (Noxolo 2022, 1235); I do not think this hope can be sustained across forms of Black sovereignty and territoriality, even in radical form, because not all forms have the internationalist and intersectional commitment to radical change central to Noxolo's perspective. We might consider several examples in which the quest for Black (and, in fact any) sovereignty has brought its own Faustian bargain with power. In our world of academic labor, Black Geographies will mirror Noxolo's normative hopes only through the political work that makes internationalism and intersectionalism overtly present in its ongoing routing and rooting.

These questions of intersectional and internationalist political work inside and outside Black Geographies help clarify what I mean by a political rather than anthropological Blackness as the ground for this project. I am in full agreement with Noxolo that the work and thought of Afrodescendant people is and should be central. The radical edge of "Black" as a political concept, however, and I am thinking primarily from South Africa but also Britain, was that its address could be legible to a variety of people committed to Black liberation, not for their personal benefit but precisely to broaden space for Afrodescendent flourishing in a world shaped by the converse. The challenge that lies before Black Geographies is whether it can successfully stave off the methodological nationalism endemic to U.S. scholarship in general, to join such a project.

Above all else, the debate about the Plantationocene concept indexes the ongoing work of decolonization central to our contemporary disciplinary unconscious. Recognizing this would mean not reading McKittrick as a general theorist, whose reflections on plantation aftermaths read through specific places and texts demand the assertion of a plantation logic on a planetary scale. Rather, we might read McKittrick (2013, 10–15), and her reading of Sylvia Wynter, for their refusal of facile conceptions of subaltern resistance as well as of unending and everywhere racial violence. McKittrick (2013) poses as an alternative a "spatial politics of living just enough ... a political location that fosters more humanly workable, and

alterable, geographic practices” (15). This is not quite a logic writ large, but a call to attend to more prosaic alternatives forged in seemingly marginal spatial practices.

I shift gears in the second half of this short article to offer a very brief account of a process of space making from the South African city of Durban, in which postplantation subalterns effected a surprising transformation in the peripheries and interstices of the racist city, a set of spatial practices that held the seeds of collective proletarian survival as well as of Black liberation. For a time, a political conception of Blackness drew in a variety of people of color into this shared affirmation of a Black political project; although the limits of this Black solidarity were tenuous and strained at various points, I pose this account as a way of holding onto the unending diversity of outcomes on the planet, and the unruliness of social change, against the odds.

Subalternization in a Postplantation City

Early twentieth-century Durban was wrapped in a racial fantasy in which a mixed population of Black² people seemingly surrounded and besieged a white and English city. This fantasy saturates the archives of City Hall. An exhaustive and global historiography shows us that turn-of-the-twentieth-century imperialism routinely shifted fears of imperial instability into the registers of race and gender, as threats of interracial working-class solidarity threatened the sinews of imperial power. In South Africa’s main port city, an iteration of this yearning for imperial stability fixated on a growing multiclass presence of people from British India who had come to Southern Africa. Some of them had come as indentured labor principally to the plantations of colonial Natal; others paid their own passage and were called passenger Indians. In time, the more successful among them built a presence in Durban’s central business district, including the Grey Street Mosque complex, to the deep consternation of the racist City Hall.

Robinson’s (2007) last book on “forgeries of memory and meaning” centered on representations that dissimulate the process in which “racial regimes tend to wear thin over time” (iii). City Hall’s fantasy of a white city in South Africa relied on multiple forgeries of the realities of an industrial port reliant on Black labor, a bustling multiracial mercantile center,

and the enforced movements of multiracial working classes through the city and its peripheries. Even as City Hall’s fear and loathing honed in on the Indian merchant elite, it missed a more slow and deliberate subaltern transformation including former indentured workers in the plantations north and south of the city.

There is much to say about the approximately 150,000 people from colonial Bihar and Madras Presidency transported to Natal between 1860 and 1911, lives during and after plantation labor. Scholars, poets, and novelists have noted the importance of the slave plot for survival across the global plantation belt, but what Durban’s former indentured laborers, now periurban peasant workers, effected was a slow and steady generalizing of the subsistence plot across the unwanted peripheries and interstices of the city. The white city relied on cheap produce from these “Indian gardens,” even as it decried Indian peasant workers as prone to Chayanovian self-exploitation. European anti-Semitism provided the racial form through which the idea of the Indian as embodiment of economic and biological threat circulated widely (Soske 2017); but the dispersed rural–urban geography of fruit and vegetable farming and marketing provided its spatial integument.

Chari (2021, forthcoming) detailed this as the beginning of a slow and steady process of spatial transformation. Derided and scorned, these subalterns built a parallel city, an Afro-Indian Durban. We know from the foundational work of Vahed (1995) that their public life was extremely syncretic, much to the consternation of Hindu and Muslim social reformers coming to South Africa. In the 1910s, these religious reformers were desperate to stamp out syncretism such as Hindu participation in the Muslim festival of Muharram. While trying to change practices, they inadvertently linked dispersed devotees in an emergent associational life across market gardening areas. Despite the reformers’ efforts, demotic forms of religiosity became a means to claim urban space, much to the consternation of defenders of a white city that was not to be.

A major moment was the struggle around formalizing the trade of “Indian” fruit and vegetables, shifting street hawking to the covered “early morning market” on Victoria Street, next to the Grey Street Mosque (Vahed et al. 2011, 16.) The “squatters’ market,” named for sellers who squatted on the ground, became an institution threatened

periodically with removal but remaining at the heart of the city. Connected to this defense of marketing are a series of covered markets that continue to give Black African women a safe and secure place to transact at the very heart of the city. This remains perhaps the greatest victory of the Durban working class, with Black women at the center.

There is much more to say about this history of space making, but what is crucial is that by the 1930s, the late imperial circulation of Indian social reformers quickly came to an end. Working-class diasporas were of little use to an anticolonial nationalism that became much more territorially eugenic. These and other indentured migrants became “Indians” in racial and quotidian terms, with the capacity for antiracist critique, precisely as they became irrelevant to anticolonial nationalism in India (Kelly and Kaplan 2007, 315). This antiracism would become important later for the antiapartheid movement (Chari forthcoming).

There are some ambiguities in this account that mirror McKittrick’s (2013) conception of “a spatial politics of living just enough,” in the interests of a humanness to come that animates McKittrick’s Wynterian/Fanonian imagination. Removed from the fantasy of a white city, the social and cultural infrastructure that I have described was repurposed in the 1970s and 1980s for a coalitional Black politics to end the apartheid regime. Nothing of this was guaranteed, and this coalitional conception of Blackness remains a political ideal at a distance from a reality of intensified inequality and suffering borne differently by Africans in contrast to working-class Indians.

There are other traces, however, of the remarkable event in which the vegetable gardens of recent indentured laborers became the building blocks of a dispersed subaltern geography, a city just removed from the putatively white city. In a work of great insight on marronage in South Africa, Baderoon (2014) dwells on the impossibilities of affirming two centuries of Indian Ocean slave-holding on South African social and cultural life. Like McKittrick, Baderoon is interested in finding ways of short-circuiting historiographic and poetic truths, in affirming Indian Ocean histories of slavery and indenture. The subalternization of postplantation Durban history shows us that the affirmation of Indian Ocean forced migration might take slow and subtle form, and that holds the possibility of rearticulating a different, capacious Black geographic politics.

Concluding Thoughts for a Geography Yet to Come

Rather than proposing all-encompassing plantation logic in a differentiated world, the poetic thought of people like McKittrick and Baderoon helps us much more if we engage them precisely as poetic thinkers. To discern the actual differentiation and diversity of spatial practices, imaginations, and forms of life around us, these thinkers help us expand our engagement with Black and subaltern archives and political imaginations.

Consider another place, next to the sprawling covered markets at the center of Durban, the Mazār of Badsha Pir, the tomb of a Sufi mystic. This tomb is in fact the grave of an unknown indentured Indian retrospectively recast as a wandering Sufi mystic, an emplaced saint necessary to the cosmology of South Asian Islam, and key to Indian Muslim settlement on African shores (Green 2011). As people pay tribute to Badsha Pir each day, consider that they also pay silent tribute to an unknown indentured laborer, sacralized and gently worked into the fabric of a subaltern city that became a key node of Black liberation.

Might we then read this religious practice as a prosaic call for the abolition of all plantation futures? Might this provocation help us imagine a practice of geography that begins with a refusal of complicity with racial regimes in our objects of study as well as in our discipline as a whole. Dismantling whiteness would then mean more than finding a magic category; it would mean raising Black and subaltern theory and practice by widening our scholarly acuties, stretching our linguistic and cultural archives, and looking at the prosaic practices, including in our institutions, that have sought nothing less than the theory and practice of abolition.

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Notes

1. Summarized in *Intercultural Communication Weekly* June 3, 2020, 2. Accessed January 15, 2021. https://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/images/publications/IC_Weekly/June_2020_IC_Weekly.pdf.

2. I cannot do justice to the multiple conceptions of Blackness in this short piece, but point the reader to Chari (forthcoming). Brusquely, “Black” became a capacious political concept in the 1970s through the Black Consciousness Movement centered on Bantu “Steve” Biko, for which Black referenced an antiracist project open to people of diverse backgrounds who refused the negative category “non-white.” Perhaps willfully, I read this back into a different time. Angela Davis comments on similar shifts in radical Black power politics in the United States; in Britain, Stuart Hall saw similar shifts as the end of an “innocent” conception of Blackness. In these radical reformulations, the affirmation of Afrodescendant people remains central, but Black as a political category could draw in multiple constituencies, not all of who were from Black communities. Indeed, the disruption of the notion of Black community had already been made possible by Black Marxist, queer, and feminist critique. In Durban, many young people racialized Indian or Coloured chose affiliation with this Black project, not without its own risks and evasions. This was and remains a marginal project, and its politics have shaped my use of the concept, but with no sense that my choice is sacrosanct or the only antiracist way.

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