

**Intervention Symposium—“Plantation Methodologies:
Questioning Scale, Space, and Subjecthood”**

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Introduction

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After decades of scholarly inquiry, recent intellectual discourse has reconverged on the topic of the plantation. As work continues to emerge out of different geographic contingencies, historical contexts, and political commitments, several questions are newly pertinent: What methods ought to undergird the study of the plantation and its divergent afterlives? How does thinking about industrial monoculture as affective infrastructures invite, enable, or require us to question the plantation form in new ways? What work does theorizing plantations across spatiotemporal divisions do for radical and coalitional knowledge production?

Birthered in the sugar, hemp, cotton, and tobacco estates of the 18th century Caribbean and US Southeast, and since metastasized across the Global South, plantations have long been crucibles for the formation of social inequalities, global divisions of labor, and attendant registers of resistance (Beckford 1972; Gilmore 2017; Mintz 1985; Woods 1998). Renewed interdisciplinary interest in recent years has underscored how industrial plantations undermine conditions of life at a planetary scale through the radical simplification of

¹ Curatorial responsibilities for this collection, including authorship of the Introduction, were divided equally between the three co-editors.

environments, the forced displacement of Indigenous peoples, the production of surplus populations, and the naturalized exploitation of human and non-human vitalities (Casid 2005; Davis et al. 2019; Haraway 2015; Li 2010; Tsing et al. 2019).

While much of the literature has centered on plantations as “factories in the fields” (Williams 2000), parallel scholarship at the intersections of anthropology, geography, and critical race studies has expanded presumptions about the types of spatiotemporal formations that constitute the plantation in the first place, bringing to the fore important questions regarding where plantations begin and end (Heynen 2021; Thomas 2019). No longer confined exclusively the agricultural enclave in the eyes of critical scholarship, plantation logics and politics feed into the geographies of carceral and criminal justice systems, the police-patrolled streets of urban neighborhoods, and the university, its classrooms, and its athletic fields, in what has become known to some as “The New Plantation” (Clukey and Wells 2016; Hawkins 2010; McKittrick 2011; Williams et al. 2021). For others, the specters of the plantation live on in the corporation and the “military-agro-industrial complex” (Ballvé and McSweeney 2020; Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda 2020; Ouma and Premchander 2022).

Many of the struggles for social, agrarian, and environmental justice that have emerged at the forefront of public life are grounded in these shape-shifting forms of plantation colonialism—from the exploitation and extermination of human and other-than-human beings, to the racialized and dispossessory logics that undermine democratic practices, sovereignty, and recognition worldwide (Gilbert 2023). As physical landscape and enduring ideology, plantations are thus increasingly recognized as hallmarks of an Anthropocene that is profoundly racializing and capitalistic in nature—and, consequently, as crucial geographies from which to reckon with multiple, intertwined forms of violence, extraction, and dispossession (Goffe 2023; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Phillips and Soederberg 2023). The intensifying expansion of monocrop plantations globally, together with its ongoingly attritive effects on marginalized lifeforms and landscapes, render the question of plantations and plantation methodologies both timely and pressing.

This Intervention Symposium makes an innovative, multidisciplinary contribution to plantation-centered scholarship by reflecting on how plantations are experienced, understood, researched, and theorized across space and time. It does so by examining plantations through the interconnected lens of scale, space, and subjecthood. Scale brings us to problematize,

rather than take for granted, how the spatiotemporal reach of plantations and attendant supply chains shape their social, ecological, and economic repercussions in and across different places, periods, and communities of life (Brenner 2001; Hecht 2018; Herod and Wright 2002; Marston 2000). Space brings us to consider how plantations reconfigure the spatial and geographic positioning and interconnections between the diverse entities who benefit or suffer from plantation proliferation, both human and other-than-human (Heynen 2018; Li 2018; Sheridan 2016; Wolford 2021). Subjecthood brings us to consider the kinds of beings, persons, and relations produced or undermined by plantation expansion, together with the agencies afforded or denied to them under different plantation regimes (Li and Semedi 2021; Sharpe 2010). Together, these three elements form the core of our critical reflections on the methodological opportunities and challenges involved in investigating the plantation across its diversely situated manifestations.

We envision this collection as a reunion for coalitional work. Drawing linkages across colonial and disciplinary divides, we leverage the question of methodology to burst open “regional closets” (Jegathesan 2021) that have siloed studies based in the Atlantic-, the Pacific-, and the Indian-Ocean worlds. Bringing together a culturally diverse cohort of junior and senior scholars, we think about the possibilities that arise in attempting to do justice to the continuities and ruptures that undergird plantation societies across spatiotemporal sites, subjects, and scales.

The 12 contributions in this collection span a wide breadth of geographical locations and temporal scales. Each text explores the different landscapes, political effects, and situated affects that are created by plantation logics, taking us through India, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and West Papua, through Hawai’i, Jamaica, Guiana/Suriname, and Sao Tomé, to Brazil, Paraguay, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Honduras, and finally Portugal, Italy, and the United States.

We begin our methodology with introspection. On the plantation, spatial dislocation, melancholy, longing, outrage, and regret marks social life not only for the humans who dwell in and toil there (Chao), but also for the researchers who try to make sense of those sensations over the *longue durée* of ethnographic fieldwork (Hetherington). The everyday workings of intersubjectivity across different sites and subjects surfaces through contact with the plantation’s human and other-than-human dwellers and those living at its periphery (Rudge).

It finds expression in plantation laborers' fraught relationship to non-secular beings such as insect deities, whose presence sustains plantations' ecosystemic health while also entrenching extant regimes of exploitative labor (Kumpf). These uncanny encounters compel us as researchers to interrogate the plantation as a frontier and to ask what and who is considered rightfully "inside" or "outside" it.

Intersubjective affects become powerful entry points for reflecting critically on the presumption of spatial and temporal limits to the plantation form and for surfacing the historical processes that transcend them. Trans-historical and trans-scalar parallels link plantation and post-plantation societies in important and striking ways. Inheritances from the "Long Green Revolution" create connective threads that continue to manifest in the form of violence and war in palm oil fields in Colombia (Caicedo and Ojeda). In Central America, local economies may have sought a way out of plantocratic hegemony, but the plantation continues to haunt those alternative economies (Guillén-Araya and León Araya). Sustainability initiatives in Brazilian sugarcane industry reveal the plantation's intransigent nature as both the poison and the proposed remedy, drawing direct links between the colonial and the neoliberal (Labruto).

Even in cases where agricultural fields have given way to urbanization, as in the city-state of Singapore, vernacular understandings of urban life and the attendant abetting of authoritarian political regimes echoes a plantation past considered long gone (Strange). A striking parallel is present-day Jamaica, where the plantation's controlling gaze persists in the urban infrastructures of living and securityscape (McKinson). In post-emancipation America, meanwhile, informational practices for policing Black life were simultaneously transported to the Philippines, where they supported both the rise of the hacendado class and American Empire in Asia (Martinez). This impulse to surveil bodies and constrict their movement is not limited to police states alone, for beyond the plantation forms of entertainment bespeak ludic logics that link Philippine agrarian life with American sports in surprising ways (Paredes). Ultimately, crops and societies co-produce each other through formations that crisscross plantation and counter-plantation worlds in Guiana/Suriname, Hawai'i, Sao Tomé, and Portugal (Bastos and Heath).

In interrogating plantations through the lens of scale, space, and subjecthood, the collection offers important springboards for ongoing debates in the study of the plantation,

particularly regarding the question of how to expand the scholarly field of vision without losing sight of the contingencies of socio-ecological form and without reducing the plantation into mere metaphor. From a place of reflexive avowal and reckoning, we have proposed a plantation methodology that breaks out of conceptual and regional closets by: [i] attuning to how affective infrastructures and more-than-human intersubjectivity trouble the presumed boundaries of the plantation's insides and outside; [ii] interrogating how historical legacies and landscapes of the plantation manifest beyond the agricultural field and become ossified even in social institutions that position themselves as alternative or curative; and, finally, [iii] foregrounding how logics that travel between plantation and post-plantation worlds connect apparently disparate parts of the world not just metaphorically but materially and infrastructurally. Taken as a whole, this Intervention Symposium contributes radical approaches in geography and its allied disciplines, while offering a unique set of tools for scholars to conduct research from a place of coalitional, decolonial thinking, relating, and acting, attentive to the divergent lives and afterlives of plantations as ecological form and enduring logic.

Contributors

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