

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

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**Singapore: Plantation City?**

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Singapore is a plantation city. Literally built on plantations, Singapore’s land was covered in rubber and pineapple plantations until after the Second World War. Before that, it was gambier and pepper, nutmeg and coconuts (O’Dempsey 2014). More controversially, I argue that contemporary Singaporean society is shaped by the conceptual schema of the plantation. This indicates both the importance and the limits of thinking with the plantation. In the Americas, Kathrine McKittrick (2013: 3) has shown that, “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”. The question is what reverberates from historical plantation logics in a high-tech Southeast Asian city-state hailed as a developmental success? If thinkers like McKittrick demonstrate that the violent inequality and anti-Blackness that shapes the global present are rooted in the Atlantic plantation, we must also try to understand Singapore’s peculiar authoritarian modernity and urbanity in the wake of a different variant of the colonial plantation system.

Singapore is a plantation city both because it was created on and out of plantations and because the plantation condenses a set of values and assumptions that actively limit how the world can be imagined. The plantation itself, however, is largely forgotten in Singapore’s present. Barring the memorialization of the domestication of Pará rubber trees at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, and a new “Plantation District” at a major government housing development, the plantation is evident only as a faint memory of a superseded, and even quaint, colonial past. It nevertheless lives on in thick patches of abandoned rubber trees that

comprise much of the island's forests, neighborhoods like Yishun named after plantation owners, and an uncompromising economism that makes rapidly expanding productivity the highest social value of the state. To quote Lee Kuan Yew, the primary architect of postcolonial Singapore, in a speech to the national trade union council: "We must economise on labour in every possible way ... This has been Singapore's formula for success. We have never wasted any opportunity to ... be more productive" (in OTCi 2023: 72). As the origin of agro-industrial rubber cultivation, and a key location in the development of commercial oil palms, in Singapore plants and people have been chiefly defined by their utility for this continual scaling-up of production. As Anna Tsing has argued, the plantation is the paradigm of a logic of "scalability" that projects ever expanding self-interested simplifications onto an irreducibly interdependent world: "plantations developed ... [a] standardized and segregated nonsocial landscape ... that showed how scalability might work to produce profit (and progress)" (Tsing 2012: 510). In this respect, the plantation is foundational to the creation of "modernity" in its many senses. At the crux of this is the narrowing of discourses of proper purpose to economic ends and the insistence that other people, places, and species must be made to accept this goal.



**Image 1:** Plans for Housing & Development Board (state-owned housing) development  
(photo by author)

Critically for Tsing, the plantation is the result of a specific problem: the way attempts to discipline plants into commodities for European markets depended on the disciplining of racialized populations to maintain radical practices of ecological simplification ([see, in this collection, Bastos and Heath](#)). In Singapore, this meant importing racialized Asian workers to work. This influx of immigrants was regulated according to British preconceptions about

their differential “racial” ability to labor for British economic imperatives (Alatas 2013). Asian populations found themselves ordered within a hierarchy of racial value structured by their perceived willingness to labor and their susceptibility to discipline in terms of a racial capitalist logic imported from New World plantations. Formerly diverse groups of immigrants thus became simply Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO)—categories that continue to regulate Singapore’s present population (Chua 2017; Lees 2017). This “regimentation of populations”, according to Trouillot (2021: 2050), “is the defining moment of the plantation context” and what makes it a “race-making institution”. How this regimentation is done and the ways in which it shapes the subjectivities of those exposed to it is what reveals the afterlife of the plantation in the hypermodern city-state of Singapore.

Singapore is not only a plantation city, however. Founded in 1819, Singapore began as a British East India Company “free port”. Though initiated as an imperial commercial center, Singapore is also a successor to the “ports of trade” around which the pelagic kingdoms of Southeast Asia organized themselves in the early modern period (Reid 1993). Singapore therefore did not emerge out of the kind of unitary plantation context that dominated the Americas.

The intersection of the cosmopolitan Southeast Asian free port and the colonial plantation, conceptually and practically, explains much of Singapore’s distinctiveness. Trade brought together diverse populations from East, Southeast, and South Asia in the shadow of British colonial economic goals. The plantation was the conceptual template through which these populations were integrated into a colony organized around disciplining Asian bodies into fulfilling British extractivist purposes. With the rise of rubber at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the plantation became hegemonic, making Singapore into the chief port of Malaya, Britain’s most profitable colony (Lees 2017). Rubber wealth also ensured a flood of migrants who further expanded and remade the population. It was in the context of the collapse of rubber after the disaster of the Second World War that contemporary Singapore was born.

Post-independence Singapore has inherited plantation logics through, first, a focus on disciplining a racialized population into productive workers, and, second, intervening in the environment to reduce it to a stage for economic value. In contemporary Singapore such regimentation is for the sake of development. Development—“nation building”—is a particular model of value—a “technicist, universal narrative of progress, [and] freedom from

present limitations” (Wee 2007: 53). At its heart is a colonially inherited notion of a pyramid of human deservingness defined by the expendability of those who do not submit themselves to the imperatives of the global economy. Every success is greeted with renewed calls for vigilance, while the quality of life is assessed in terms of economic infrastructure like highways, ports, and subways. With this comes an abiding distrust of the population such that they must be paternalistically coaxed towards economic ends. To quote another Lee Kuan Yew speech (this one from the mid-1980s):

I am often accused of interfering in the private lives of citizens. Yes, if I did not ... we would not have made economic progress ... We decide what is right. Never mind what the people think. (in CNBC 2015)

This obsession with economic development has fostered a surveillance mentality that punishes its way to social cohesion for economic growth. Though the economy has moved from plantation to finance, the underlying demand that racialized populations be managed for economic progress has become Singaporean commonsense. Just as “colonial governance” over Malayan plantations “deepened its control of labor through its mandate to safeguard workers’ welfare, as well as through penal sanctions” (Lees 2017: 89), so the Singaporean state has made itself into a paternalistic authority that provisions public housing and health care in exchange for labor discipline.



**Image 2:** Security cameras on a Singaporean beach (photo by author)

This prioritization of economic value is built on a sweeping remaking of the environment, facilitated by the presence of so many abandoned—but not uninhabited—plantations throughout the island that enabled the state to claim eminent domain in the 1960s. The wholesale environmental destruction of the plantation period gave the state a blank slate on which to create a landscape stripped of history. They did so in the name of “racial harmony” and the production of the right kind of orderly heteronormative family (Chua 2017). Now

almost 80% of the population lives in state-owned housing in a dense urban space where even forests are engineered to accord with government regulations. In parallel with how plantation owners attempt to level places into wholly controlled spaces of production, so Singapore has pursued the wholesale reconstruction of the urban environment into a model of economic control.



**Image 3:** Abandoned rubber plantation cleared for a block of flats (photo by author)

All of this has left Singaporeans feeling disconnected from their history and fearful about the future. Though proud of their wealth and modernity, a pervasive anxiety and persistent sense of loss shadow many, to which they often only can reply: “*Bo pian*” (Hokkien: “No choice”) ([see also, in this collection, Chao; Rudge](#)). Singapore is a plantation city because it has been scaled to a global economy that will never respect any rich local specificity or depth of feeling beyond GDP. Migrant workers who make up a third of the population still live in racialized barracks; Singaporean citizens themselves dwell with the persistent inequalities of

a racialized past and capitalist present. Learning to recognize the consequences of the plantation in a cosmopolitan financial center like Singapore where it has apparently been transcended is a vital reminder of how plantations have made contemporary cities. No matter how complex Singapore is, the fabric of the city and the values that justify and structure its urban life continue to evidence the radical reductions of the plantations on which it is built. Singapore's governing limitations are as often as not a direct reflection of this history. To understand them is to uncover these connections. Singapore is a plantation city not because it literally is a plantation but because it would be unthinkable outside of the plantation history upon which its vision of modernity has been built. Thinking with the plantation is critical for revealing this submerged structure of value, and the feeling of loss it imposes, despite the gleaming façade of economic progress with which the city-state faces the world.

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