

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

Edited by Alyssa Paredes, Sophie Chao, and Andrés León Araya

A House Pon the Hill: Refractions of Black Death and Desire through the Jamaican Plantation Great House

Kimberley D. McKinson

Department of Anthropology Vanderbilt University; kimberley.d.mckinson@vanderbilt.edu

In Kingston, Jamaica, grandiose homes belonging to the country’s elite populate the hills. These homes offer wealthy Jamaicans the opportunity to live high above the heat and congestion of the city and visually create an inescapable backdrop of wealth to life on the flat.¹ In sonic terms, these homes often feature significantly in Jamaica’s dancehall landscape as local DJs, who usually hail from inner-city communities, frequently sing about desiring to live in a “house pon the hill”. The “house pon the hill” thus looms large in Jamaicans’ socio-spatial imaginaries as something worth aspiring to. It architecturally invokes a valorization of prestige within the postcolonial city.

In this essay, I situate the “house pon the hill” in Kingston’s present-day racialized and classed landscape against a familiar colonial structure—the plantation great house—whose

¹ See <https://www.getkeez.com/properties/35998> (last accessed 12 December 2023) for the vista from a for sale single family hillside mansion located in the Kingston community of Plantation Heights. The images show the city below and a striking view of the horizon where the cerulean Caribbean Sea appears to gently kiss the sky above it. The listing describes Plantation Heights as an “upper echelon location” with “breathtaking views of the Kingston and St. Catherine plains”. It should be noted that Plantation Heights commands a view of what once was the Ellis Caymanas sugar estate which today serves as a horse racing track. The house is described as sitting on 10,000 square feet of land with seven bedrooms, six bathrooms, a pool, multiple balconies, and domestic worker quarters. The asking price is USD\$980,000.

elevation above the plantation served to reinforce it as an architecture of spatial power. In historiographically interrogating the “house pon the hill” across colonial and postcolonial landscapes, I consider how it recursively re-members Black death while expressing urgent Black desires. As such, this essay sits with untidy plantation histories that are refracted through the architectures of the postcolonial present ([see also, in this collection, Strange](#)).

I

During the 18th century, Jamaica was Britain’s leading sugar exporter. In order to maintain the “continuous rhythm of commodity production” (Beckles 2001: 223), Britain became dependent on the forced and free labor of African slaves on the geography of the plantation. It was the slave plantation, with its disciplined monoculture grid, that both undergirded Jamaica’s plantation economy and served to fuel the development of a plantation system which became the basis for an entire societal design (Mintz 1971).

On the plantation, Black bodies were subjected to microscopic governance ([see also, in this collection, Kumpf](#)). Moreover, it was on this geography where the material and discursive tools of white supremacy worked in calculated fashion to brutally un-make Black human beings as savage others. Black subjecthood on the plantation was actively constituted through practices of denial and dehumanization. If the plantation was *the* space of Black death, then it was the great house that served as its seat of authority. Hilltop sites were the preferred location for great houses. This vantage point made the great house something to behold. Describing the Rose Hall Great House in St. James Parish, English architect and illustrator, James Hakewill, who toured Jamaica in 1820, remarked, “It is placed at a delightful elevation, and commands a very extensive sea view. Its general appearance has much of the character of a handsome Italian villa” (Higman 1988: 234) (see Image 1). Quite importantly, the great house’s elevation above the plantation’s fields served to reinforce it as an architecture of surveillant domination ([see also, in this collection, Martinez](#)). Enslaved people—both those who labored in the fields and those who tended to white life in the great house—were acutely aware of this, and their attempts to gain freedom often targeted the burning of these architectures. Notably, during Tacky’s Revolt in

1760, “the fire of rebellion concentrated on the greatest symbols of white authority: great houses and overseers’ houses” (Nelson 2016: 45).



Image 1: A view of Rose Hall Great House as illustrated in James Hakewill’s *A Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica, from Drawings Made in the Years 1820 and 1821*, published in

1824 (source: Yale Center for British Art;

<https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/catalog/orbis:1266998>)

The plantation great house continues to loom large in Jamaican mythology. The most well-known folktale surrounds Rose Hall and Annie Palmer, known as the White Witch of Rose Hall. Palmer is said to have been skilled in Haitian voodoo and to have taken pleasure in witnessing spectacles of slave torture from the balcony of her great house. According to lore, she is said to have killed three husbands and taken many slave lovers whom she also killed. Murdered by one of her slaves, it is said that Palmer’s spirit still roams Rose Hall. In the tale of Annie Palmer and

Rose Hall, the great house emerges as a central protagonist that reverberates as a haunted architecture of white terror and Black death.

II

In postcolonial Jamaica, the legacy of slavery's racialized plantation system (Beckford 1972) has come to be animated through what is known as the uptown/downtown paradigm (Robotham 2003). This splintering, articulated along color, class, and space lines, indexes "uptown" as affluent upper-class sections of the city historically situated on the northern section of the Liguanea Plain. In the social lexicon, the term also marks the country's white, brown-skinned, and privileged elites, though it should be noted that in present-day Jamaica, many uptown residents are also wealthy Black Jamaicans. In contrast, "downtown" geographically situates low income and inner-city locales located in close proximity to the Kingston harbor that have historically been associated with political tribalism and crime. Moreover, downtown has come to signify individuals who are taken to be poor, "ghetto", and Black.

One of Kingston's most desired and established uptown residential areas is Cherry Gardens. The community lies in the shadow of what was once the Gomersall sugar estate which at its height in the 17th century, included some 300 acres. The estate's Cherry Garden Great House, a two-story Jamaican-Georgian structure, still stands to this day (see Image 2). The large hillside homes and gated communities that are located in Cherry Gardens typically boast upscale architectural features and manicured lawns—which are maintained by the labor of poor Jamaicans—that invoke an aesthetic aligned with the generational wealth and respectability politics associated with Kingston's uptown elites (see Image 3).



Image 2: The Cherry Garden Great House located in the uptown community of Cherry Gardens.

Following emancipation in 1834, the house was administered by Scottish attorney Joseph Gordon who fathered a son with an enslaved woman, Ann Rattray. That mulatto son, George William Gordon, would later purchase the property and live there until his death by hanging for his alleged involvement in the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865. Today, George William Gordon is honored as one of Jamaica's national heroes (source: author's photograph)



Image 3: An upscale home located in the uptown residential area of Cherry Gardens (source: author's photograph)

In contrast, many of the hillside homes in Kingston's Red Hills offer a different picture of wealth in Jamaica. Red Hills is located to the west of the Liguanea Plain in an area not traditionally taken to be uptown Kingston (see Image 4). Furthermore, the wealthy communities in Red Hills, with swaggering names such as Plantation Heights and Belvedere, are not bastions for Jamaica's brown-skinned elites.² These communities speak not to established wealth but to new wealth as well as to the aspirational desire for a "house pon the hill" possessed by many upper-middle- and upper-class Black Jamaicans. These homes complicate the rigid divide between "uptown" and

² Belvedere comes from the Italian "bel" (beautiful) and "vedere" (view).

“downtown”. Furthermore, unlike the homes in Cherry Gardens, many of those found in Red Hills present as sprawling mega mansions sometimes boldly combining multiple aesthetic styles that to the lay eye appear to eschew the work of formally trained architects. These mega houses take up space and command to be seen. In no uncertain terms, they explode the scalar proportions of the “respectable” uptown hillside home by indulging unapologetically in spatial and architectural excess (see Image 5).



Image 4: Sign showing the way to Plantation Heights in Kingston’s Red Hills (source: author’s photograph)



Image 5: A mega house located in Kingston’s Red Hills (source: author’s photograph)

III

In his 2013 song “House Pon the Hill”, dancehall artist Munga Honorable perfectly teases apart the socio-economic agitations and aspirations tethered to this architecture in Jamaica. Honorable contextualizes the life experiences of the Jamaican underclass as one plagued by poverty (“we come from the trenches, the gutter”); poor housing (“board house and zinc fence, we know bout that”); violence (“When 100 and Common Sense a blow gunshot”);³ and disillusionment with the political establishment (“government nah no conscience, a we dem a hold back”). Honorable

³ 100 is likely a reference to the inner-city community of 100 Lane.

critiques the inequality of the neoliberal machine (“the likkle bit weh dem a share”) and confidently asserts that “poor people want more than that”. From there he sings:

Ghetto youths want house pon the hill
Yacht pon the seas
Drop mi inna Italy
Fly go Belize

Honorable positions asset acquisition and travel—the very things that Jamaica’s uptown elites are able to enjoy—as deeply desired by the urban poor. In this rendering, it is the “house pon the hill” that becomes a key marker of the good life (Fischer 2014). Moreover, Honorable situates Jamaican ghetto youth subjecthood as articulated not only through poverty but also through the aspirational desire for the good life.

If there is a forcefulness to Honorable’s demand for the good life that the “house pon the hill” can secure then it is because there is an urgency to the “sufferation” (Lewis 2020) that ghetto youths know well. In light of this socio-economic reality, the “house pon the hill”, as aspired to by Jamaica’s urban poor, registers as more than just an infrastructure of capitalistic accumulation and materialism. Rather, it emerges as a transgressive architecture in postcolonial neoliberal Jamaica. That is, when aspired to by ghetto youths, the “house pon the hill” disturbs Jamaica’s socio-spatial and class divide while affectively giving life to the desires of those who have long been excluded from having access to the good life.

IV

As the Bajan poet Kamau Brathwaite argued, the plantation “does not contain all that is planted. Therefore it is essential that our concepts and models, when made and applied, should be applied not only to the outer field of reality, but to our inscapes equally” (2021: 93). Brathwaite’s words call for greater methodological attention to the inner plantation, that is, the “cores and kernels; resistant local forms; roots, stumps, survival rhythms; growing points” (2021: 96). Attention to the “house pon the hill” as an architecture revelatory of Black inscapes reminds us that even as it

echoes the spatial politics of the plantation great house it is firmly rooted in the abolitionist politics of the plot—that critical geography of the inner plantation where slave resistance and secretive histories existed as antithetical to the plantation superstructure (Wynter 1971). Indeed, in aspiring to own a “house pon the hill”, Jamaica’s underclass and the country’s Black middle class unsettle the hill as a geography of colonial white surveillance—just as Jamaica’s Maroons have done for generations—and postcolonial uptown exclusivity, and appropriate it as a geography of insurgent Black desire. Furthermore, they compel plantation scholars to take seriously the worthiness of Black desire that is not articulated through a compensatory framework of reparations. Situated at the fraught intersection of Black death and Black desire, the “house pon the hill” offers a vision for “plantation futures” (McKittrick 2013) and the life affirming possibilities that prevail in the shadow of the great house.

References

- Beckford G (1972) *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Beckles H (2001) “War dances”: Slave leisure and anti-slavery in the British-colonised Caribbean. In V A Shepherd (ed) *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean Africa and the African Diaspora* (pp223-249). New York: Palgrave
- Brathwaite E K (2021 [1975]) Caribbean man in space and time. *Small Axe* 25(3):90-104
- Fischer E F (2014) *The Good Life: Aspiration, Dignity, and the Anthropology of Wellbeing*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Higman B W (1988) *Jamaica Surveyed: Plantation Maps and Plans of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press
- Lewis J S (2020) *Scammer’s Yard: The Crime of Black Repair in Jamaica*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- McKittrick K (2013) Plantation futures. *Small Axe* 17(3):1-15

Mintz S (1971 [1966]) The Caribbean as a socio-cultural area. In M M Horowitz (ed) *Peoples and Cultures of the Caribbean: An Anthropological Reader* (pp17-46). Garden City: Natural History Press

Nelson L P (2016) *Architecture and Empire in Jamaica*. New Haven: Yale University Press

Robotham D (2003) How Kingston was wounded. In J Schneider and I Susser (eds) *Wounded Cities: Destruction and Reconstruction in a Globalized World* (pp111-128). Oxford: Berg

Wynter S (1971) Novel and history, plot and plantation. *Savacou* 5:95-102