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Anthropocene, Capitalocene, ... Plantationocene?: A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises

Janae Davis¹  | Alex A. Moulton² | Levi Van Sant³  | Brian Williams⁴ 

¹Department of Geography, Clark University

²Department of Geography, Clark University; and
Department of Geography and Geology, University
of the West Indies, Mona

³School of Integrative Studies, George Mason
University

⁴Department of Geography, Dartmouth
College

Correspondence

Brian Williams, Department of Geography,
Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH 03755.
Email: brianwilliams@gmail.com

Abstract

The “Plantationocene” has gained traction in the environmental humanities as a way of conceptualizing the current era otherwise nominated as the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, or the Chthulucene. For Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and their interlocutors, the concept suggests that our current ecological crisis is rooted in logics of environmental modernization, homogeneity, and control, which were developed on historical plantations. This paper argues that, while there is indeed a need to analyze the ways in which the plantation past shapes the present, current discussions of the Plantationocene have several crucial limitations. Here, we focus on two: first, the current multispecies framing conceptualizes the plantation largely as a system of human control over nature, obscuring the centrality of racial politics; and second, the emerging Plantationocene discussion has yet to meaningfully engage with the wide variety of existing critiques of the plantation mode of development. Thus, we draw on a deep well of Black geographic and ecological work that provides a powerful challenge to the ongoing colonial–racial legacies of the plantation, prompting consideration of white supremacy, capitalist development, and (mis)characterizations of what it means to be human. These approaches not only reveal a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the role of the plantation in current global crises but also

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highlight ongoing struggles and the possibilities of ecological justice in the future.

KEYWORDS

Anthropocene, Black geographies, Capitalocene, colonialism, ecological justice, environmental justice, plantations, racism, slavery, white supremacy

1 | INTRODUCTION

In October 2018, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a “Special Report on 1.5 Degrees” warning that “Limiting global warming to 1.5°C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” (IPCC, 2018). The target of 1.5°C reflects the scientific consensus on a threshold beyond which Anthropogenic climate change would imperil species survival. Since climate catastrophe appears as a universalized and universalizing threat, the notion of the Anthropocene may seem an appealing descriptor for an era of accelerating and converging environmental crises. The Anthropocene concept has gained traction far beyond its origins in the earth sciences, circulating through a wide range of disciplines and into broader public discourse. The concept, laid out initially by Crutzen and Stoermer (2000), argues that humans have become a geological agent, profoundly shaping the earth in ways that warrant the naming of a new planetary epoch: Anthropocene, “the era of humans.”¹ The concept builds on a long tradition of highlighting human influence on the environment (Marsh, 1864; Revkin, 1992; Sherlock, 1922) but does so through a rhetorically compelling keyword and in an explicitly 21st century context of growing concern about climate change, species extinctions, and general ecological crises globally.

Debates over the ontological significance, theoretical implications, and practical challenges of “living in the Anthropocene” (Kress & Stine, 2017) have enlivened scholarship in geography and allied social sciences (for reviews, see Castree, 2014a; Castree, 2014b; Castree, 2014c; Cook, Rickards, & Rutherford, 2015; Dalby, 2016; Lorimer, 2017; Schlosser, 2018; Swanson, Bubandt, & Tsing, 2015). Determining a date when humans irrevocably became a geological force demands and promises a union between social and physical sciences (Ellis, Maslin, Boivin, & Bauer, 2016). However, establishing a “golden spike”—a recognizable geological signature of undeniable global human influence—has been subject to ongoing debate (see, for example, Lewis & Maslin, 2015; Zalasiewicz et al., 2015; Waters, Zalasiewicz, Williams, Ellis, & Snelling, 2014; Waters et al., 2016). And as Castree (2017) has recently noted, “what counts as epochal change is a matter of perspective,” since it “emerges from judgements about when quantitative change emerges from qualitative transformation” (Castree, 2017, p. 249).

Indeed, the Anthropocene’s suggestion that “humanity” writ large is responsible for catastrophic environmental change has been the subject of extensive and indispensable critique. Malm and Hornborg (2014), for example, resist the supposed anthropos or mankind in question in the Anthropocene. They place the transition to a fossil fuel economy with its weaponization of steam-power squarely at the feet of “a clique of White British men” (Malm & Hornborg, 2014, p. 3). These debates have generated several alternative conceptions, including the Capitalocene, which highlights the destructive and accelerating logics of resource depletion and petrochemical dependency within capitalism as a world system (Malm, 2016; Moore, 2017). The Chthulucene, another designation, highlights multispecies unfolding and “tentacularity” connecting disparate realms of life in potentially collaborative and creative webs of kinship (Haraway, 2015; Haraway, 2016).

It is the notion of Plantationocene, yet another alternative to the Anthropocene, that attracts our attention (Haraway et al., 2015; Tsing, 2015). The Plantationocene points to the ongoing socioecological consequences of

Janae Davis, Alex Moulton, Levi Van Sant, and Brian Williams should be considered joint first authors/equal authors.

plantation agriculture and the permutations and persistence of the plantation across time and space. Here, we affirm the merit of the Plantationocene concept and acknowledge the importance of analyzing the spatial history of the plantation in understanding the present. However, we argue that the emerging conceptualizations of the Plantationocene are limited in several important ways. Most pointedly, their multispecies framing minimizes the role of racial politics and leads to a flattened notion of “making kin” that is inadequate for the creation of more just ecologies in the plantation present.

In the following section, we review work that centers colonialism, racism, and enslavement in discussions of the Anthropocene. We then summarize the emerging discussion of the Plantationocene and suggest that it demands an attention to Black ecologies as innovative practices of resistance and kinship. Plotting within and against the plantation is a practice of

cultivating life and kin that challenges the intertwined death-dealing logics of racism and ecocide. We show how work in Black geographies and plantation histories of the Americas can contribute to both a more robust analysis of the present crisis as well as a more grounded response. The paper closes with a brief manifesto calling for ecological thought and action that is firmly rooted in struggles for justice.

2 | UNSETTLING THE ANTHROPOCENE

A vibrant and rapidly expanding body of work has questioned the racial and colonial logics of the abstract universal anthropos embedded in the notion of the Anthropocene. Importantly, such critique has emphasized the uneven causes and consequences of global environmental change, as well as the unmarked whiteness and Eurocentricity of Anthropocene discourses. To some, this represents a provocation to seriously consider the ways in which uneven political and economic relations mediate the consequences of global environmental change (e.g. Hecht, 2018; Nixon, 2017; Ogden et al., 2013; Purdy, 2015). Yet as Pulido has emphasized, when Anthropocene scholars mention such disparities “they typically emphasize the chasm between rich and poor, or ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries, as if the geography of wealth and power was somehow nonracial” (Pulido, 2018, p. 116). Work like Pulido’s centers colonization, enslavement, and racial capitalism as preconditions for the current socioecological formation, in which human-caused environmental change is global in scope and catastrophic in nature.

Lewis and Maslin’s (2015) identification of a so-called “Orbis Spike”—a sharp decline in atmospheric CO₂ in the early 17th century resulting from the depopulation of the Americas—has been influential for many scholars calling attention to the foundations of a world system built upon colonialism and enslavement in the constitution of the Anthropocene. They argue that newly colonized land in the Americas led to a surplus of cheap agricultural commodities and other raw materials in Europe, which “allowed Europe to transcend its ecological limits and sustain economic growth” (Lewis & Maslin, 2015, p. 177).² Other scholars have been more explicit about the logics and processes which constituted this radical shift in world ecologies. Davis & Todd (2017, p. 770) emphasize that the colonial underpinning of this transformation was dependent upon the “twinning process of dispossession and chattel slavery.” This was simultaneously an epistemological and material project, as colonists willfully refused to acknowledge Indigenous life on the land and instead forced “a landscape, climate, flora, and fauna into an idealized version of the world modelled on sameness and replication of the homeland” (Davis & Todd, 2017, p. 770). Whyte (2018) has similarly contended that narratives of the novelty of environmental destruction in the Anthropocene erase Indigenous peoples’ experiences of and resistance to settler colonialism: “...the hardships many non-Indigenous people dread most of the climate crisis are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured already due to different forms of colonialism: ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration” (Whyte, 2018, p. 226).

Elsewhere, Vergès (2017) has suggested the term “racial Capitalocene” in order to emphasize the ways in which colonialism, slavery, and “the global use of the color line” have led to a contemporary devaluation of both human life and the nonhuman world. In understanding contemporary environmental crises, it is crucial to remain attuned to the ways in which “destruction in the colonial era becomes visible in the postcolonial era” (Vergès, 2017, p. 77). Thus, the present-day climate crisis can be understood in part as a “seismic shock” originating from settler colonialism and slavery (Davis & Todd, 2017, p. 772).³ Pulido (2018, p. 117) maintains that the Anthropocene should be largely viewed as an outcome of race-related practices, since the “meta-processes which have contributed to the Anthropocene, such as industrialization, urbanization, and capitalism, are racialized.” Moreover, Pulido argues, since the negative effects of climate catastrophe and environmental degradation disproportionately impact people of color, racism serves as an ideology to legitimize and obscure the catastrophic effects of contemporary global capitalism (Pulido, 2018, p. 121).

The Anthropocene is clearly not the product of “human nature,” or humanity as a whole, but rather interrelated historical processes set in motion by a small minority. This privileged cadre provided the preconditions for the development of global

capitalism through processes of settler colonialism and enslavement, organized and rationalized by racism. Consequently, the centering of an undifferentiated humanity in much Anthropocene scholarship serves to reproduce white supremacist claims to universal knowledge. Moreover, it implies that the Anthropocene heralds a post-racial future of generalized climate catastrophe and the dissolution of binary categories delineating “humanity” and “nature” (see Leong, 2016; Luke, 2018; Mirzoeff, 2018).

Such epistemological blinders in Anthropocene scholarship to the role of racism and resistance are not simply academic oversights: They have implications for how we might envision (or fail to envision) just responses to global ecological change. As Haymes (2018, p. 35) charges, dominant discussions of global environmental crisis embed “axiological preferences for Western ‘holism’ regarding what is valued or worthy of moral consideration” to the exclusion of the “ecological experiences and cares of colonized non-Europeans, particularly Black communities of African descent [and we would add Indigenous peoples].” The recent nomination of the “Plantationocene” as a descriptor of this ongoing environmental epoch has the potential to center racial capitalism in understanding environmental crises, while drawing attention to the liberatory potential of Black ecologies. In the next section, we briefly survey emergent discussions of the Plantationocene, while calling attention to the limitations and pitfalls of existing work.

3 | ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES AND THE “MULTISPECIES” PLANTATIONOCENE

The term “Plantationocene” was first outlined in a 2014 interdisciplinary discussion on the Anthropocene and later released in the journal *Ethnos* (Haraway et al., 2015).⁴ The concept was proffered as a means of highlighting critical dynamics shaping the current socioecological crisis: the global circulation of people and plants, the simplification of plantation landscapes, and the role of long-distance capital investments in such processes of homogenization and control (Haraway et al., 2015). The term highlights the “historical relocations of the substances of living and dying around the Earth as a necessary prerequisite to their extraction” (Haraway et al., 2015, p. 23). According to Tsing, plantation logics are characterized by scalability and interchangeability: Scalability refers to the proficiency through which the plantation was able to expand using an established blueprint—the decimation of local peoples and plants, installation of plantation infrastructure on cleared lands, and importation of foreign people and crops; interchangeability refers to the ability to exchange one species for another, evident in the plantation practice of substituting cane stock for enslaved people (Tsing, 2015, pp. 38–39). In her conception, Haraway emphasizes the sympoetic elements of plantation processes, writing that “One must surely tell of the networks of sugar, precious metals, plantations, indigenous genocides, and slavery, with their labor innovations and relocations and recompositions of critters and things sweeping up both human and nonhuman workers of all kinds” (Haraway, 2016, p. 48).

The aforementioned work explicating the Plantationocene concept offers several important openings. First, as Haraway stresses, it provides a means of decentering the Eurocentric narrative by which coal, the steam engine, and the industrial revolution constitute the epicenter of global environmental change, instead pointing to the crucial role of plantation ecologies and politics in shaping the present (Haraway, 2016, p. 48). Second, the concept of the Plantationocene and Haraway’s associated focus on symposiis (Haraway, 2015; Haraway, 2016) calls attention to the networked relations forged across species lines, eroding the delineations of human embodiment and nature/society dichotomization. Instead, she develops a socioecological ethic based on the principle that we are, after all, human and nonhuman earth dwellers alike, compost (Haraway, 2015). Multispecies assemblages in their abundant trans-specific kinship relations offer for Haraway the only respite to the supposed cataclysmic end of all species life. Her “purpose is to make ‘kin’ mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy” (Haraway, 2015, p. 161).

However, if we think seriously about the Plantationocene, these new kinship relations portend contentious spatializations of human and nonhuman life and the politics of embodiment. We must ask then, what purchase the plantation has in nominating the geologic epoch it concerns and what is elided or obfuscated by current its conceptualization. Thus, we consider

whether and how the specificity of Black embodiment is treated in contemplating futures beyond the plantation logics that inform ongoing dispossession, environmental crisis, and white supremacy. It is only in a footnote for example, that Haraway (2015) addresses these plantation realities and even there the explication warrants interrogation. The footnote reads:

Scholars have long understood that the slave plantation system was the model and motor for the carbongreedy machine-based factory system that is often cited as an inflection point for the Anthropocene. Nurtured in even the harshest circumstances, slave gardens not only provided crucial human food, but also refuges for biodiverse plants, animals, fungi, and soils. Slave gardens are an underexplored world, especially compared to imperial botanical gardens, for the travels and propagations of myriad critters. Moving material semiotic generativity around the world for capital accumulation and profit—the rapid displacement and reformulation of germ plasm, genomes, cuttings, and all other names and forms of part organisms and of deracinated plants, animals, and people—is one defining operation of the Plantationocene, Capitalocene, and Anthropocene taken together. (Haraway, 2015, p. 162).

The scholars of the plantation and slave plot that Haraway (2015) alludes to remain unnamed. We see their nameless footnoting as part of a broader failure among initial Plantationocene scholarship to seriously attend to Black spatial and ecological thought and practice. Instead, the slave garden becomes part of a narration of networked kinship that transforms the reproduction of racial oppression and resistance into a flattened multispecies ontology—where difference among and between forms of life is obscured. The initial 2014 discussion (Haraway et al., 2015, pp. 22–23) concisely illustrates this tendency toward multispecies flattening:

Noboru (Ishikawa): To me, plantations are just the slavery of plants.

Anna (Tsing)—I agree.

Donna (Haraway)—And microbes.

Human labor receives brief attention and is conceived as only one element within the broader constellation of exploited lifeforms underpinning historical and present-day plantation economies. Thus, the matters of Black embodiment and the disciplinary regimes of the slave plantation remain obscured. Rather than the human crisis of the plantation, slave plots—an ecological achievement of the slaves despite “the harshest circumstances” (Haraway, 2015, p. 162)—are foregrounded so as to acknowledge biodiversity and the role of the plantation in global movements of multiple forms of plant and animal life. Since the plantation was not a device of undifferentiated socioecological transformation, the lack of an analysis underscoring human embodiment and examining socioecological hierarchies as both causes and consequences of the plantation is a conspicuous absence.

Haraway et al.'s lack of engagement with the embodied politics of the plantation results in a cursory treatment of racial-sexual oppression and the ways it shapes and is shaped by plantation economies. This neglect advances a color-blind conception of the plantation in which a blanket notion of “equality for all” obscures the racialization of power (Rodriguez, 2006). In so doing, the racial ideologies that structure ideas of the human and nonhuman are disguised, allowing racial violence and its ecological implications to go largely uninterrogated: multispecies assemblages of “plants, animals, microbes, and people” (Haraway et al., 2015, p. 23) are flattened and simply appear as cogs in the wheels of capitalist destruction. In its color-blind conception, the Plantationocene diminishes the deep history of Black struggle and the ways that attention to slave life can provide guidance for cultivating worlds that support multispecies well-being.

Thankfully, there are several meaningful treatments of Black plantation life which highlight its role in the profound rearrangement of “germ plasm, genomes, cuttings, and all other names and forms of part organisms and of deracinated plants, animals, and people” (Haraway, 2015, p. 162). For example, in examining the afterlives of slavery, Spillers (1987) calls attention to the ways that lasting inscriptions of a code of power into the flesh beneath colored skin coincides with the epoch whose

name is being sought (Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene, or Plantationocene). Spillers (1987) rejects the “American grammar” of signifying and naming the captive body, which actively denies Black humanity, particularly women, by focusing on Black practices of kinship and genealogy that resist the plantation property regime’s rubric of Black (de)valuation (see also Jackson, 2016; King, 2016; Leong, 2016).

Sylvia Wynter (1971, 2015) also offers a starting point for thinking about both the differentiation and the possibilities of plantation life. The Anthropocene or the Plantationocene is “the underside costs of the aporia of the secular West” (Wynter, 2015, p. 222; see also Wynter & McKittrick, 2015, p. 43). For her, the plantation spatializes the myth of Western-bourgeois (neo)Liberal Man as the default human (the selected) to the othered (the dyselected) rest. She simultaneously considers the semiotics of the Black body, politics of relationality, and socioecological imaginations integral to fictional novels depicting plantation life. Thus, the plantation is subjected to an analysis that sets forth a new ethic of relationality. In doing so, Wynter insists that it is crucial to call the referent we (such as the “we” identified in many conceptualizations of the Anthropocene), into question, showing that we are only ever humans in the genre-specific terms of historical and geographical context. Wynter (2015, p. 213) insists on a shift from (over) analysis and representation of Man, to glimpse the “hybrid and uniquely auto-instituting mode of living” that has characterized Black post-Middle Passage life. Examining the underlife of the plantation, she argues, both reveals the racialological–ecological systems of plantation life and affirms a revolutionary praxis of kinship.

Thus, work like Spillers’ and Wynter’s in the emergent scholarship on Black geographies provides critical insight into both the plantation mode of development and possibilities for liberatory alternatives rooted in Black life and spatial thought. We review this work in the next section. This scholarship, we suggest, is central to an adequate theorization of the multiple crises of the Plantationocene.

4 | BLACK GEOGRAPHIES: KINSHIP, EMBODIMENT, AND THE PLANTATION (OCENE)

The works of Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods are central to both the development of the field of Black geographies as well as the resurgence of disciplinary interest in the plantation. McKittrick’s and Woods’ analyses, which are inspired in part by an earlier generation of Caribbean plantation scholars (Beckford, 1972; Mintz, 1985; Mintz, 1989; Williams, 1944; Wynter, 1971), suggest that the spatial history of the plantation is central to understanding the nature of power in the modern world and possibilities for more equitable futures. Together, this work highlights the ways that plantation dynamics have proliferated beyond historical slave agriculture in the Americas and, thus, has much to offer discussions of current global crises latent in the Plantationocene concept (cf. Mintz, 1985; Robinson, 1983; Fanon, 1963).

Woods (2007, p. 56) argues that permutations of the plantation now characterize “enclosures and reserves; industrial estates and mill villages; free-trade and export zones; enterprise and empowerment zones; ghettos and gated communities; suburbanization and gentrification; game preserves and tourist resorts; pine plantations and mines; and migratory and prison labor.” For Woods, these institutions and modes of production reproduce “the basic features of plantation capitalism: resource monopoly; extreme ethnic, class, racial, and gender polarization; an export orientation; and the intense regulation of work, family, speech, and thought” (ibid). Woods is not content with naming and diagnosing the plantation as a site of racial oppression, extraction, and socioecological violence. Instead, his work is rooted in the “Blues tradition” of explanation and action, which was developed “within, and in opposition to” the plantation regime of the United States South (Woods, 1998). Woods develops the concept of the “blues epistemology” as an African American tradition of geographical knowledge, practice, and worldmaking. Through the blues epistemology, African Americans confronted the racial violence, spatial containment, and dispossession developed on historical plantations and in the process enacted a just and equitable tradition of development through practices of community building and alliance (see also Woods, 2002; Woods, 2017).

McKittrick emphasizes the “placelessness and constraint” that formed the foundation of the plantation’s “uneven colonial-racial economy” and argues that those same dynamics are central to the increasing rate of Black incarceration and “inner-city

annihilation" (McKittrick, 2011, p. 948). Her conceptualization of plantation futures "tracks the plantation toward the prison and the impoverished and destroyed city sectors and, consequently, brings into sharp focus the ways the plantation is an ongoing locus of antiblack violence and death that can no longer analytically sustain this violence" (McKittrick, 2013, pp. 2–3). In illuminating the plantation as an institution and modality of racial oppression, McKittrick shows why a flattened multispecies conceptualization will not do. The dispossession of Indigenous peoples, the enslavement of Black peoples, and the propagation of nonhuman life on *encomiendas*, plantations, and reservations are interrelated, yet distinct, processes in service of the colonial–racial, capitalist project (Bledsoe, 2017; Woods, 1998; Woods, 2017; Wynter, 1984).⁵

However, McKittrick's work also insists on the significant role of historical plantation geographies in imagining possibilities for life in the present (2013). If the Plantationocene is meant to signal a global history of the present then, "the geographies of slavery, postslavery, and Black dispossession provide opportunities to notice that the right to be human carries in it a history of racial encounters and innovative Black diaspora practices that, in fact, spatialize acts of survival" (McKittrick, 2013, p. 2). She offers a schematic of the plantation as a racially and economically ordered space, which violently structured differentiated life. At the same time, she insists that such violence "cannot wholly define future human agency" (McKittrick, 2013, p. 11); refusals, ruptures, resistance, and openings inhere in Black life on the historical plantation and beyond.

5 | THE PLOT: EMBODIED PLANTATION ECOLOGIES

To highlight the ecological implications of "plantation futures" (McKittrick, 2013), we elaborate a vision of the multispecies plot that might guide socioecological justice in an age of global crises. We focus on the plot as it manifested through embodied plantation ecologies in the United States South and Caribbean to demonstrate how an attention to the ways that the enslaved cultivated alternative ways of being while confronting, refusing, and resisting racial violence disallows a move toward multispecies flattening. Instead, it compels a conception of plantation economies that considers racial, sexual, and ecological difference and hierarchization, resistance, collusion, and struggle. It also offers direction for promoting multispecies well-being. While we recognize elements of slave and maroon life that undermined emancipatory forms of kin-making (e.g., planter-maroon alliances, abolitionist practices which perpetuated white supremacy etc.), our project here is to highlight liberatory acts that provide guidance for practicing a relational mode of being.

For Wynter (1971), the plot—a space within the plantation where slaves cultivated their own foods—was a site for nurturing an oppositional mode of Black life. Thus, it offers an analytic to contemplate socioecological justice, reparations, and webs of differentiated kinship. Following Wynter, McKittrick (2013, p. 10) reminds us that plots "became the focus of resistance to the overriding system of the plantation economy ... the plot illustrates a social order that is developed within the context of a dehumanizing system as it spatializes what would be considered impossible under slavery." The plot is fertile, a demonic ground, in Wynter's and McKittrick's words (McKittrick, 2006; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015), for such contemplations. Plantation (ocene) futures demand "creative and geographic" plotting and plot-living (McKittrick, 2013, p. 11). For Wright, "Black ecologies encapsulate new potentials through the abolition of hierarchical spatial categories" and demand "a complete regeneration of the understanding of humanness" (Wright, 2018, p. 14).

Wynter (1971) explains how fictional accounts present the plantation economy as a "superstructure" masking "secretive histories"—the spatial histories of slaves' self-making in the plot. The "plot" can also be understood as a rhetorical tool for a retelling of history that disrupts myopic narratives of Black suffering, violence, and death. It is within the plot that we find relational modes of being, multiple forms of kinship, and non-binary ways of engaging the world that foster ethics of care, equity, resilience, creativity, and sustainability. It is absolutely crucial to recognize that the ethics of the plot are forged in and articulated through grounded racial–political struggles (Escobar, 2008; Fanon, 1963). Thus, the plot offers a challenge to ethical visions that minimize or obscure unequal relations of difference, and it might help conceptualize multispecies

assemblages that lead out of socioecological crises toward better futures—assemblages that are not just envisioned but lived and that simultaneously tend to the needs of social reproduction, social justice, and ecological care.

Many slaves advanced a theoretical and practical framework that guided human interaction with the nonhuman world toward fostering multispecies well-being. Its approach recognized social and ecological difference, how they were intimately intertwined and also mediated by various forms of social, ecological, and spiritual power. Moreover, it is important to recognize that “land” was a unifying medium bringing humans and nonhumans together in socioecological assemblages of reciprocity.

For Millner (1995), the socioecological ethos of the enslaved can be traced to the indigenous West African concept of “good use.” This principle was founded on the belief that land is a source of spiritual and material nourishment connecting families to past, present, and future. As such, humans were responsible for its protection through the enactment of spiritual rituals and other practices to assure its use for collective benefit. Contrary to the idea of “rational use” motivating colonial expansion which promoted the seizure, enclosure, privatization, intense cultivation, and commodification of land as a means of European accumulation (Locke, 1980), “good use” principles assigned moral, spiritual, and relational meanings to land that assured its more-than-economic value. Land was sacred, as evident in observations of African women ingesting soil prior to being forced aboard slave ships. In the Americas, indigenous Africans and African Americans adapted good use tenets and practices to cultivate new socioecological realities (Carney & Voeks, 2003; Watkins, 2018).

Throughout the transformations endured by the enslaved, land continued to hold value intimately tied to the spiritual and ancestral realms, corporeal freedom, social cooperation, and familial cohesion. Millner maintains that African Americans remained a people “of the land” even as they toiled under whip and gun. Some slaves advocated for the “righteous” use of the land, that is, the belief that working the land was a good thing when it is done to benefit the community that God blessed those who worked the land with food and materials to sustain themselves, and as such, the land should be treated with respect. Other elements of the nonhuman world also served as a moral compass. For Maryland slave Charles Ball (2010), plantations were synonymous with barren wilderness where planters lacked the integrity to maintain the soil's fertility. Slave women imparted tales such as such as Br'er Fox and Br'er Rabbit and stories of evil spirits and animals inhabiting the woods to teach White children about the impartiality of heaven and the consequences of slavery (Blum, 2002).

For West Africans and their enslaved descendants, the principles of “good use” advanced a non-binary socioecological awareness deeply rooted in a spiritual code of reciprocity. The human, nonhuman, and spiritual worlds, while distinct, were also co-creative (see Haymes, 2018). In this lifeworld, co-creation meant that the fate of humans and nonhumans were intertwined, and thus, a moral consciousness was needed to direct thought and action toward what might be called “multispecies well-being.” The plot here is prescriptive, for it directs us to think about the current socioecological crisis as a moral and spiritual dilemma as much as it is an economic one; capitalist exploitation is the cause and consequence of an inner crisis playing out within the human mind, heart, and consciousness. It points to the self, community, and cultural work needed to address broader social, economic, and ecological challenges.

The plot also served as a creative source of hope, vision, and perseverance. Within the plot, we find relational modes of being central to the emergence of radical foodways enabling survival and social cohesion. Slaves often hunted, fished, and gathered surreptitiously, for sustenance lacking in foods provided by the master (Glave & Stoll, 2005). As Carney and Rosomoff write, “The complex relationships of plants and people that were sundered by the Middle Passage were quietly recast by enslaved Africans and their descendants in the food fields and kitchens of plantation societies” (Carney & Rosomoff, 2011, p. 186). African staples—including black-eyed peas, okra, tamarind, sorghum, millet, watermelon, rice, banana, and yam—adapted alongside food crops cultivated by Indigenous peoples in the Americas, provided sustenance in a plantation regime that was hostile to life that could not be commodified. Even if plantations were geared toward monocropping regimes of export-oriented commodity production, they were sustained by the cultivation of foods and animals practiced by enslaved peoples in the interstices, plots, and edges of plantations.

The plot's creative dimensions also manifested in the ecologies of the body and mind as the enslaved arduously navigated sexual and reproductive oppression. Many slave women refused to yield their bodies to sexual exploitation. For example, Harriet Jacobs, writing under the pseudonym Linda Brent, writes of resisting such violence by hiding in her grandmother's garret (Jacobs, 1987). For 7 years, she contorted her body to fit the 9'x7'x3' attic until she was able to escape to freedom. Her story reveals the creation of alternative physical and psychic spaces where one could not only define and imagine a better life but also transcend extraordinary physical and psychological obstacles to create a new material reality (McKittrick, 2006; Millner, 1995).

The plot's deep well of creativity was forged in the crucible of Black bondage and suffering. It emerged as a necessity for navigating everyday crises of enslavement and remains an ethico-political vision relevant to the plantation present. It demonstrates the necessity of struggle to rethink our place in the world. The political component provides an analysis of power that indicates unjust conventions, institutions, and laws, while the ethical component enables us to find and harness the affective resources necessary to imagine alternatives and accomplish the seemingly impossible. Thus, the plot provides a vision of making kin as an ethico-political project; one where intimately sharing oneself with others has enormous creative potential for the cultivation of new forms of cooperation necessary for a just and sustainable future.

The plot reveals the roles of both humans and nonhumans in acts of resistance and refusal. For maroons, life in exile was the key to liberation from the racial oppressions that plagued both unfree and free worlds (Bledsoe, 2017; Diouf, 2014). The need for secrecy and the specific ecological composition of their environments forced maroons to devise ways of occupying and utilizing forests while simultaneously concealing their presence (Bedasse & Stewart, 1996; Carey, 1997). Thus, their lifestyles give new meaning to "leave no trace" and "sustainability" ethics, as circumstances mandated that both small and large communities find ways to live lightly on the land as they consumed its resources for years.

Runaways made kin among Blacks, Whites, and Indigenous peoples (Snodgrass, 2008). "Conductors" along the Underground Railroad often risked fines, imprisonment, and death to assist runaways to freedom (Foner, 2016). Many were abolitionists who willingly placed themselves in harm's way to bring about the end of slavery. The work of Railroad conductors and abolitionists shows that making kin goes beyond simply befriending or sympathizing with another being. It means becoming an ally or a conspirator; it means being willing to experience discomfort and to place oneself at risk to realize a greater vision of multispecies well-being.

Just as the plantation lives on shaping the lives and life chances of Man's human and nonhuman Others across time and space, so do the embodied ecologies of the plot. If the plantation can be tracked through the racialized and spatial processes that have led to urban containment, disinvestment, and militarization, so too can the "secretive histories that are not invested in rehearsing lifelessness" (McKittrick, 2013, pp. 11–12). African Americans who migrated to urban centers often invented new practices based upon ecological traditions cultivated on plantations, while maintaining kinship ties which connected urban spaces with the rural South. These practices, Haymes argues, were "about assembling plants, animals, water, land, and human beings into spaces of care and nurturance" (Haymes, 2018, p. 41). Since the 1970s, the Great Migration of African Americans moving north and west has turned back on itself. The percentage of African Americans residing in the South is the highest it has been (57%) since 1960 (Tavernise & Gebeloff, 2011). The lack of economic opportunities that plague many places in the South, especially rural areas, is outweighed by the desire to reconnect with family and land (Johnson & Bowker, 2004; Stack, 1996). This homecoming reveals that for many African Americans, a better quality of life rests on reestablishing bonds of kinship with humans and nonhumans. It also affirms the cultural significance of Black socioecological practices still enacted in the South (see Davis, 2018; Finney, 2014; Hurley & Halfacre, 2011).

This return migration coincided with the birth of the environmental justice movement in 1973 when African Americans in Warren County, North Carolina ignited in protest after learning of plans for the installation of a landfill for the disposal of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in their community (Bullard, 2005). Making kin is at the heart of the movement as activists have created global networks of cooperation across cultural difference. Good use principles adapted during enslavement along with complementary socioecological concepts held by non-African American activists have been integrated into the movement. Its proponents uphold “the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction” (First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991). Thus, human well-being is inextricably tied to and dependent upon the regulation of capitalism and the impact of its externalities on both human and nonhuman worlds. This advocacy work requires that frontline communities understand and engage the nonhuman world in a variety of ways, including coping with toxin-derived diseases, promoting citizen education and science focused on toxic waste disposal, and developing scientific framings of their claims. Through these engagements, the nonhuman world transforms the materiality of human life and is mobilized in ways that generate new models of citizenship (Marres & Lezaun, 2011; Vasudevan, 2012). For environmental justice communities, there is no conflict or inherent separation between nature and society, rather making kin across social and ecological difference, while confronting racial-economic privilege and power, is key to multispecies well-being.

6 | CONCLUSION: A MANIFESTO FOR ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE IN AN AGE OF GLOBAL CRISES

The Black ecological practices highlighted in this essay offer guidance for constructing an ethico-political vision that addresses the multiple global crises of the plantation present. These practices are founded upon a basic understanding that ecological care, multispecies kinship, and social justice are fundamental to the development of a human praxis that promotes well-being. As such, they go beyond theorization and provide some of the “how to’s” for realizing this vision. As outlined by authors in Black studies, these practices illuminate the critical role of racial struggle, borne on colonial plantations, in producing a more relational world. Hence, we are dissatisfied with theorizations of the Plantationocene that minimize the ways in which racial politics structure plantation life (both human and nonhuman). Such approaches limit a more nuanced and grounded understanding of the ways that the plantation inflicts socioecological violence as it simultaneously prompts differentiated, multifaceted, and relational ways of being. Sustained attention to race in Plantationocene scholarship is therefore crucial to the conception and practice of socioecological justice and multispecies kinship.

Thus, we acknowledge the need for a radical awareness of the plantation’s role in producing global environmental change. However, an interest in ecological ethics must not overshadow attention to the dynamics of power (racial, gender, sexual, or otherwise). The destructive impacts of these processes stem, in no small part, from nature-society dualisms. In the quest to dismantle this binary logic, we must recognize the numerous Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples who have, for many years, advanced non-binary conceptions of the human–nonhuman relationship.

Authors in nature-society disciplines would do well to seek guidance from scholars and organic intellectuals from these groups in finding alternative ways of living in relation. For example, scholarship in Black studies shows that fostering relational modes of being demands that narratives of social and ecological death, decay, and destruction must be emphasized and also further understood as fertile ground containing possibilities for life, wellness, and wholeness emerging from collective struggle. Moreover, an examination of Black plantation ecologies reveals the necessity of vision (or theorization) as well as everyday practice (e.g., reflexivity, self-discovery, creativity, solidarity work, etc.) in making kin. This often involves breeches of power as norms, rules, and law must be transgressed. Thus, taking risks and striving collectively is necessary for cultivating relationships across difference.

Through a focus on plantations in the U.S. South and Caribbean, we draw attention to the myriad openings Black ecologies enact in confronting racial oppression and environmental destruction. These urgent problems cannot be understood as isolated processes. We echo Daigle & Ramírez, 2019, p. 79) emphasis that Black geographies are “spatially woven in relation” with geographies of whiteness, Indigenous geographies and those of other dispossessed peoples, and suggest the need for further work linking resistance movements against the plantation in the United States South and Caribbean to other situated struggles. As environmental precarity increases, hope lies in the articulation of struggles, strategies to cultivate more just futures, and alternative ways of being. While this paper does not propose a means for resolving the uneven roots and effects of environmental crisis, the practices of making kin that inspire it will be crucial if we are to navigate the overlapping crises of the plantation present.

ENDNOTES

¹ For more recent debates on the epochal geological implications of human activity and periodization of the Anthropocene, see, for example, Ellis et al., 2016; Lewis & Maslin, 2015; Zaliwski et al., 2015; Waters et al., 2014; Waters et al., 2016.

² The Orbis Spike identified by Lewis and Maslin points to the depopulation of the Americas caused by diseases and violence and a resultant decrease in atmospheric CO₂ because of reforestation and a decline in agriculture. Lewis and Maslin also identify the increasing stratigraphic presence of Old World plant pollens in New World sediments, and vice versa.

³ Here, Davis and Todd are drawing on Sharpe's concept of “wake work” of a past that is never past returning to “rupture the present” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 9).

⁴ The discussion included a biologist (Scott Gilbert) and a geographer (Kenneth Olwig), along with several anthropologists (Anna Tsing, Donna Haraway, and Noboru Ishikawa). ⁵ Wynter insists on positioning encomiendas and plantations in an archipelago that migrates beyond the New World. In Europe, for example, she identifies the manifestation of the logic of ordering and dyselection in the death camps of the Holocaust. See also Scott, D. (2000). The re-enchantment of humanism: An interview with Sylvia Wynter. *Small Ax*, 8(120), 173–211., and Wynter, S. (2003). Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Toward the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument. *CR: The new centennial review*, 3(3), 257–337.

ORCID

Janae Davis  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3869-9481>

Levi Van Sant  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8270-8659>

Brian Williams  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7722-4174>

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Janae Davis is a PhD Candidate in the Graduate School of Geography at Clark University. Her work draws on political ecology, development geography, environmental justice, environmental history, and Black and indigenous studies to examine and address issues of identity and social equity in biodiversity conservation. Presently, her research seeks to understand the processes by which conservation-development projects in the Northern Cape of South Africa produce labor inequities and the possibilities for grassroots approaches for promoting economic opportunities aligned with the social, cultural, and political needs of local indigenous communities.

Alex A. Moulton is an assistant lecturer in the Department of Geography and Geology, at University of the West Indies, Mona and a PhD Candidate in the Graduate School of Geography at Clark University. His research interests sit at the intersection of human-environment geography and social theory, particularly around agriculture, global change, environmental politics, and Black geographies. Presently, his research examines indigenous knowledge systems and protected area management in Jamaica.

Levi Van Sant is an assistant professor in the School of Integrative Studies at George Mason University. His research analyzes the racial and political ecologies of agriculture, particularly in the coastal US South.

Brian Williams is a postdoctoral fellow in Geography at Dartmouth College. His research interests bring together political ecology, environmental justice, agri-food geography, and Black geographies. His current work centers questions of racism and justice in environmental politics and traces the ongoing implications of racism and agrarian capitalism in the development and contestation of chemical-intensive cotton production.

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