

# Plantation Futures

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In 1991, the US General Services Administration began to unearth what is now known as the New York African Burial Ground at 290 Broadway in Lower Manhattan. In the cemetery, used between the late 1600s and 1796, between ten thousand and twenty thousand black slaves were interred before the land was filled in and built up in 1827, alongside other urban expansion projects. Since the unearthing in 1991, the handling and remembering of the dead bodies has unraveled into a series of contestations: as the black community staked a claim to the corpses and the burial ground to extend the political awareness of slavery, immense pressure was put on the scientific community to preserve the remains and gather data within a limited time frame (about one year). Few black scholars were invited to contribute to the excavation and analysis initially; indeed, the conditions under which the bodies were unearthed and preserved was said to be disrespectful and insensitive until Michael Blakey, an African American biological anthropologist, took the project to Howard University in 1994.<sup>1</sup> After the remains were analyzed at Howard, they were returned to Lower Manhattan, reinterred at an official memorial site, and commemorated with the “African American Homecoming” celebration. Clearly the dead slaves incite a commonsense intermingling of scientific excitement and community mourning. Here, the tension between ethically memorializing this history of death and learning from it is justified by scientific analyses of the corpses seeking to find, within and around the dead bodies, authentic facts such as documentation of malnutrition, evidence of religious and funerary practices, DNA confirmation of African bloodlines, the contours of muscle development (and thus corporeal connections to slave labor), and evidence of antiblack violence

<sup>1</sup> Warren R. Perry, “Archaeology as Community Service: The African Burial Ground Project in New York City,” *North American Dialogue: Newsletter of the Society for the Anthropology of North America* 2, no. 1 (1997): 1–5.

and wounds, among other things.<sup>2</sup> The memorial, unveiled in 2005, is a complex remembrance of black history, complete with a “door of no return”; it is also, according to the National Park Service website, intended to educate, preserve, spiritualize, map, and ritualize our memories of the black diaspora in an urban context and “return to the past to build the future.”<sup>3</sup>

## Plantation Time

I begin with the African Burial Ground to look at the ways it is an assertion of city life that opens up a spatial continuity between the living and the dead, between science and storytelling, and between past and present. While much can be said about the hecklings and disagreements and sorrow and hope and recovery that followed the 1991 unearthing, the site also underscores the ways the deceased and forgotten and now remembered bodies of black men, women, and children—still interred, still biologically decaying and brushing up against the concrete, still *there*—are necessary to thinking about the city as a location where new forms of human life become possible.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I read this site as anticipating what Stevie Wonder describes as “living just enough / just enough for the city”: it is a location of black death that holds in it a narrative soundscape that also promises an honest struggle for life.<sup>5</sup> 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. If, as it is claimed, the cemetery “provided a rare setting in which the enslaved could assert their humanity and respect their own culture” within a context of antiblack violence, the burial ground also reveals that in the Americas, it is impossible to delink the built environment, the urban, and blackness.<sup>6</sup> With this, the contemporariness of these corpses, the materiality cemetery, the rare setting of honoring the dead under bondage, and the willful memorialization of blackness push up against the science of taphonomy (the study of decay), necrology (the study of the death of an organism), and diagenesis (the changes that take place after the final burial); this brings into the production of space and the cityscape, into the soil, the physical, chemical, and biological remains of blackness. The burial ground tells us that the legacy of slavery and the labor of the unfree both shape and are part of the environment we presently inhabit. It also points to the plot of land where the enslaved are buried and provides an opening for what I am calling here “plantation futures”: a conceptualization of time-space that 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

2 See Jerome S. Handler, “Determining African Birth from Skeletal Remains: A Note on Tooth Mutilation,” *Historical Archaeology* 28, no. 3 (1994): 113–19; and Michael L. Blakey, “The New York African Burial Ground Project: An Examination of Enslaved Lives, a Construction of Ancestral Ties,” *Transforming Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1998): 53–58.

3 “The African Burial Ground: Return to the Past to Build the Future,” [www.africanburialground.gov/ABG\\_Memorial.htm](http://www.africanburialground.gov/ABG_Memorial.htm) (accessed 6 September 2010).

4 On disagreements about the African Burial Ground, see Nicholas Confessore, “Design Is Picked for African Burial Ground, and the Heckling Begins,” *New York Times*, 30 April 2005; and Kendall R. Phillips, “A Rhetoric of Controversy,” *Western Journal of Communication* 63, no. 4 (1999): 488–510.

5 Stevie Wonder, “Living for the City,” *Innervisions* (Detroit: Tamla Records and Motown Records, 1973). This essay can also be read alongside Elvis Presley singing, “Now come along with me / We’ll do the plantation rock / It’s easy as can be // . . . Now do the plantation rock.” Elvis Presley, “Plantation Rock,” *Elvis: A Legendary Performer*, vol. 4 (New York: RCA, 1983).

6 Blakey, “New York African Burial Ground Project,” 53.

of antiblack violence and death that can no longer analytically sustain this violence. For those of us interested in addressing race, space, and premature and preventable death, plantation futures demand decolonial thinking that is predicated on human life.

## Plantation Context

In his writings on black diaspora populations and economy, George Beckford persuasively argued that the plantation system during and after transatlantic slavery permeated black life by contributing to the interlocking workings of dispossession and resistance.<sup>7</sup> Beckford's research, in particular that published throughout the 1970s, brought into focus the ways plantations are linked to a broader global economy that thrives on the "persistent underdevelopment" and "persistent poverty" of black life.<sup>8</sup> In working through the socioeconomic logic of the plantocracies, he put forth what has become known as his "plantation thesis" or his "plantation economy thesis," which, in part, suggests that the plantations of transatlantic slavery underpinned a global economy; that this plantation history not only generated North Atlantic metropolitan wealth and exacerbated dispossession among the unfree and indentured, it also instituted an incongruous racialized economy that lingered long after emancipation and independence movements in the Americas; and that the protracted colonial logic of the plantation came to define many aspects of postslave life.<sup>9</sup> Beckford's research on the plantation sheds light on the ways painful racial histories hold in them the possibility to organize our collective futures. The plantation thesis uncovers the interlocking workings of modernity and blackness, which culminate in long-standing, uneven racial geographies while also centralizing that the *idea* of the plantation is migratory. Thus, 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.<sup>10</sup> With this, differential modes of survival emerge—creolization, the blues, maroonage, revolution, and more—revealing that the plantation, in both slave and postslave contexts, must be understood alongside complex negotiations of time, space, and terror.<sup>11</sup>

7 George L. Beckford, *The George Beckford Papers*, ed. Kari Levitt (Mona: Canoe Press, University of the West Indies, 2000); George Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World* (1972; repr., Mona: Canoe Press University of West Indies, 1999).

8 George L. Beckford, "Institutional Foundations and Resource Underdevelopment in the Caribbean," in *The George Beckford Papers*, 242; Beckford, *Persistent Poverty*.

9 Beckford, *Persistent Poverty*; Lloyd Best and Kari Levitt, *Essays on the Theory of Plantation Economy: A Historical and Institutional Approach to Caribbean Economic Development* (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2009).

10 Beckford, *Persistent Poverty*; Ian Gregory Strachan, *Paradise and Plantation: Tourism and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002); Robert Staples, *The Urban Plantation: Racism and Colonialism in the Post Civil Rights Era* (Oakland, CA: Black Scholar, 1987); Billy Hawkins, *The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports, and Predominantly White NCAA Institutions* (New York: Palgrave, 2010); Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories, 2003), 22–39.

11 The themes of creolization, marronage, revolution, and the blues—as outcomes of plantocracies—are well documented. The following texts have been useful to my thinking: Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso, 1998); Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society, 1770–1820* (1971; repr., Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2008); Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (1938; repr., New York: Vintage, 1989); and Michaeline Crichlow, *Globalization and the Post-creole Imagination: Notes on Fleeing the Plantation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). Interestingly, Crichlow seeks to conceptually flee the plantation. She persuasively argues that many theories of "creolization" all too often originate in, and thus stay tied to, the space of

It is the plantation that anchors a series of debates about the workings of antiblack racism and the knotted-creolized organization of diasporic life in the new world—knots emerging in plant and culinary life, representational politics and practices, transnational socioeconomic linkages, black Atlantic time-space, and more.<sup>12</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* touches on plantation "traces" in his study of black experiences and struggles in urban space.<sup>13</sup> The plantation also notably introduces Achille Mbembe's essay "Necropolitics" and thus provides the groundwork for his broader discussion of mortality and late-modern violence (urbicide, suicide bombs, drones).<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, too, begins his project on coloniality and visibility by thinking through the practice of "overseeing," simultaneously, blackness and plantation land—a history that eventually leads to his discussion of the necropolitical technologized and militarized management of chaotic bodies.<sup>15</sup> Two plantation schemas arise: the ways the plantation uncovers a logic that emerges in the present and folds over to repeat itself anew throughout black lives and the ways the plantation is a meaningful concept that, at least in part, launches postslave/contemporary theories of violence and urbicide.

The plantation therefore provides the context to put forth the following interconnected questions: What are some notable characteristics of plantation geographies and what is at stake in linking a plantation past to the present? What comes of positioning the plantation as a threshold to thinking through long-standing and contemporary practices of racial violence? If the plantation, at least in part, ushered in how and where we live now, and thus contributes to the racial contours of uneven geographies, how might we give it a different future? In this essay, I think about the conceptual work of black geographies and the plantation, noticing that the latter is a meaningful historical geography that has provided a theoretical framework for thinking about the ways black life and black histories link to postslave conceptualizations of geographic violence. Part of this work addresses the ways the plantation regulated and normalized violence and instigated resistance, while noticing that it can—at least conceptually—lead to a totalizing future of brutality. Indeed, because the inequities produced vis-à-vis the plantations of transatlantic slavery are long-standing and the plantation has provided a theoretical schema to think about a range of difficult struggles, it is also worth asking whether these inequities must negatively anticipate how we conceptualize our collective futures.

The discussion does not cite the plantation as a conceptual pathway that exclusively narrates an oppression/resistance schema; nor does it situate the plantation as the anchor to antiblack

the slave plantation, consequently stalling the dynamic, globally present postslavery workings of creolization. At the same time, she also suggests that the plantation limits how we conceptualize resistances—precisely because it overshadows the particularity of local struggles. However, Crichlow actually fails to flee the plantation; in this work, she remains beholden to its lingering geographic promise: a promise in which the plantation holds in it the possibility to rehistoricize creolization and bring into focus the *global* roots/routes of such black geographies in the present. Thus, this work thoughtfully reminds that the politics of fleeing is a disavowal with homing shadows.

12 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Judith A. Carney, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Ntozake Shange, *If I Can Cook, You Know God Can* (Boston: Beacon, 1998); Stuart Hall, "Creolization, Diaspora, and Hybridity," in Okwui Enwezor et al., eds., *Creolite and Creolization* (Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 185–98; Rinaldo Walcott, "Pedagogy and Trauma: The Middle Passage and the Problem of Creolization," in Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert, eds., *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 135–41.

13 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899; repr., New York: Schocken, 1969).

14 Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 131–51.

15 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visibility* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

violence and dismal futures. Instead, these approaches serve as the shadow to my tracing of the geographic workings of dispossession, which intends to contextualize the plantation as a location that might also open up a discussion of black *life* within the context of contemporary global cities and futures. It is important to note here that I move from the plantation to the city with crude intention and the plantation-urbicide moves of Mbembe in mind. While time-space is notable, it is also worth addressing the ways the plantation—precisely *because* it housed and historicizes racial violences that demanded innovative resistances—stands as a meaningful conceptual palimpsest to contemporary cityscapes that continue to harbor the lives of the most marginalized.<sup>16</sup> The contemporary city, as presented here, is not meant to be understood or theorized as the singular end-point to plantation theory; instead, I hope my thinking will foster other considerations of black and racial geographies—rural, suburban, gated, beyond the Americas, too—that might benefit from the sort of imagining of plantation futures I put forth.

Working with the writings of Sylvia Wynter and Dionne Brand, and soldering the theoretical to the creative, this discussion imagines black geographies as the sites through which particular forces of empire (oppression/resistance, black immortality, racial violence, urbicide) bring forth a poetics that envisions a decolonial future. Our future modes of being, if tied to the plantation and empire and violence, might not necessarily follow our late-modern necropolitics of the present into future-misery, wherein freedom is lifeless and racial terror is the act of realizing this freedom.<sup>17</sup> Instead, our future modes of being might hinge on a decolonial poetics that reads black dispossession as a “question mark”—punctuating postslavery violences and posed to our present mode of being—thus providing a critique of the very historical process that brought the Manichean workings of the plantation to “such heights of fulfillment.”<sup>18</sup> Reading the plantation and its future as put forth here—underwritten by life, the poetic, the theoretical, and the creative, and shaped by a history of violence—is guided by the hope that this discussion will, in a small way, enable a new discursive space.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it is precisely because the plantation has “a built-in capacity to maintain itself” that we would do well to reimagine its future.<sup>20</sup>

## Uninhabitable

Past colonial encounters created material and imaginative geographies that reified global segregations through “damning” the spaces long occupied by Man’s human others.<sup>21</sup> Here, damning can be understood in two interlocking ways: as a fencing in and as a condemnation of racial-sexual

16 Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006).

17 Mbembe, “Necropolitics.”

18 Sylvia Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” *Savacou*, no. 5 (June 1971): 97.

19 David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 96.

20 George Beckford, “Agriculture Organization and Planning in Cuba,” in *The George Beckford Papers*, 46.

21 Here I point to Sylvia Wynter’s terminology of Man, which is a twofold conceptualization explored in her “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337. This essay draws attention to the ways the sociospatial expressions of Western modernity—colonial encounters during and after the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; the Copernican leap and the ascent of astronomy, physics, and physical geography; the secularization of Man and his human others within a Judeo-Christian setting; territorial expansion and transatlantic slavery; industrialization; the rise of the biological sciences—accumulated and formed overlapping governing codes (Man1 and Man2) as overrepresentations of the

difference. The uninhabitable—in particular, the landmasses occupied by those who, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were unimaginable, both spatially and corporeally—is the geographic (non)location through which the plantation emerged. From Caliban’s “uninhabited” island in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, to the regions within Africa identified as too hot to be livable, the landmasses deemed uninhabitable presented a geographic predicament upon “discovery.”<sup>22</sup> As we know, the occupants of the uninhabitable, indigenous to Africa and the Americas, were cast as barbarous and irrational, while their lands were transformed into profitable colonial outposts and settlements. Rather than rehearsing this difficult but familiar story in detail, a meaningful thread to think about is the ways “the lands of no one” came to be bound to a geographic language of racial condemnation. The Americas and Africa, for example, were tagged as geographically inferior, based on an “Old” World European temporal schema that deemed the biospheric matter of these regions “newer” than the soil, earth, air, and water of Europe. This geographic presumption, in part, contributed to the “old” European worldview that those indigenous to “new” landmasses in Africa and the Americas also have nascent, and therefore unsophisticated and underdeveloped, worldviews.<sup>23</sup> So what was geographically at stake when the European center extended itself outward, toward a space that was at once “nowhere” and inhabited by “no one,” yet unexpectedly “there” and “inhabited,” are race and racial geographies. Indeed, a “new symbolic construct of race,” which coincided with post-1492 colonial arrangements, organized much of the world according to a racial logic.<sup>24</sup> Native reservations, plantations, and formal and informal segregations are just some of the ways the lands of no one were carved up to distinguish between and regulate the relations of indigenous, nonindigenous, African, and colonial communities, with some geographies still being cast as uninhabitable for particular groups; sites such as reservations, slave quarters, and auction blocks were considered alongside racial specificities. The geographic process after the rush to colonize the lands of no one unraveled into New World cultural exchanges that settled into a rigorous nonhomogeneous human model: geographies for white men, white women, indigenous men, indigenous women, black men, and black women. Of course there were overlapping geographic experiences and peoples that troubled these seemingly discreet spaces, but this overlap is accompanied by an overarching system wherein particular spaces of otherness—for purposes here, black geographies—were designated as incongruous with humanness.

The interlocking workings of human worth, race, and space demonstrate the ways the uninhabitable still holds currency in the present and continues to organize contemporary geographic arrangements. The colonial enactment of geographic knowledge mapped “a normal way of life”

human. These governing codes produced racialized/non-European/nonwhite/New World/Indigenous/African peoples as, first, fallen untrue Christians (in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) and, later, as biologically defective and damned (most markedly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries).

22 While the location of the play is the “still-vexed Bermoothes,” the scene setting (following the list of *Dramatis Personae*) in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*—the indigenous life-home of Caliban and his mother Sycorax—is “an uninhabited island.” William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (1623; repr., New York: Macmillan, 2008), 21, 32. See also Matthew Sparke, “Everywhere but Always Somewhere: Critical Geographies of the Global South,” *Global South* 1, no. 1 (2007): 117–26; Nicolás Wey Gómez, *The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

23 Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 5–8, 116–18.

24 Sylvia Wynter, “1492: A New World View,” in Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford, eds., *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 34 (emphasis mine).

through measuring different degrees of humanness and attaching different versions of the human to different places. More clearly, the extension of what some European explorers assumed was “nonexistent” was a geographic system that came to organize difference in place and to regard this differential process as a commonsense or normal way of life. This normal way of life is rooted in racial condemnation; it is spatially evident in the sites of toxicity, environmental decay, pollution, and militarized action that are inhabited by impoverished communities—geographies described as battlegrounds or as burned, horrific, occupied, sieged, unhealthy, incarcerated, extinct, starved, torn, endangered.<sup>25</sup>

What stands out are the ways we can trace the past to the present and the present to the past through geography. The historical constitution of the lands of no one can, at least in part, be linked to the present and normalized spaces of the racial other; with this the geographies of the racial other are emptied out of life precisely because the *historical* constitution of these geographies has cast them as the lands of no one. So in our present moment, some live in the unlivable, and to live in the unlivable condemns the geographies of marginalized to death over and over again. Life, then, is extracted from particular regions, transforming some places into inhuman rather than human geographies. Or, those who have lived outside what is considered normal and those who continue to inhabit the uninhabitable are so perversely outside the Western bourgeois conception of what it means to be human that their geographies are rendered—or come to be—inhuman, dead, and dying. We can collectively think of several places that are considered lifeless—without history, geography, or suitable capitalist life-support systems: war-torn countries, reservations, ghettos, what is referred to as “the global South.” Most explicitly, the not-so-present and popular push to “save” ailing Africa and its children reveals it as a continental human geography that is not human at all but an unlivable space occupied by the racially condemned, the already dead and dying. This suggests that the spaces of otherness have hardened through time, often with black, “wretched” bodies occupying or residing outside the lowest rung of humanness and thus inhabiting what most consider inhuman or uninhabitable geographies. This is the mutual construction of identity and place writ large. If some places are rendered lifeless in the broader geographic imagination, what of those inhabiting the lifeless? And what of the worldview of those who occupy the wretched category—is this worldview also lifeless because the geographies surrounding the marginalized are rendered dead? How does the dehumanization and racial marking of some communities follow the colonial logic that the human in human geography is a direct reference to Man, who not only represents a full version of humanness (the *us*, in the *us and them*) but at the global level *naturally* inhabits the livable, wealthy, overdeveloped countries? In what ways does this colonial logic imply that Man’s human others (the *them* of the *us and them*) *naturally* occupy dead and dying regions as they are cast as the jobless underclasses whose members are made to function as our “waste products” in our contemporary global world?<sup>26</sup> Thus condemned, most of the world’s population,

25 Clyde Woods, “Life after Death,” *Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (2002): 62–66; Laura Pulido, “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 1 (2000): 12–40; Mbembe, “Necropolitics”; Davis, *Planet of Slums*.

26 Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory and Re-imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being of *Désêtre*,” in Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, eds., *Not Only the Master’s Tools: African American*

a population Sylvia Wynter describes as the dysselected/imperfect/less-than-human, inhabits not cosmopolitan cities but slums.<sup>27</sup> How, in the present, have the lands of no one emerged and normalized a mode of organizing the planet according to life and lifelessness?

## Plantation Logic

It is the descriptive statement identifying black geographies as dead spaces of absolute otherness that has prompted my return to the plantation—precisely because in my research the plantation is cast as the penultimate site of black dispossession, antiblack violence, racial encounter, and innovative resistance. Indeed, it is the plantation that was mapped onto the lands of no one and became the location where black peoples were “planted” in the Americas—not as members of society but as commodities that would bolster crop economies.<sup>28</sup> Within this geographic system, wherein racial violence is tied to the administration of economic growth, the “protean capabilities” of black humanness are lived.<sup>29</sup> As I note in *Demonic Grounds*, the plantation is often defined as a “town,” with a profitable economic system and local political and legal regulations.<sup>30</sup> The plantation normally contains a main house, an office, a carriage house, barns, a slave auction block, a garden area, slave quarters and kitchen, stables, a cemetery, and a building or buildings through which crops are prepared, such as a mill or a refinery; the plantation will also include a crop area and fields, woods, and a pasture. Plantation towns are linked to transport—rivers, roads, small rail networks—that enable the shipping of crops, slaves, and other commodities. This is a meaningful geographic process to keep in mind because it compels us to think about the ways the plantation became key to transforming the lands of no one into the lands of someone, with black forced labor propelling an economic structure that would underpin town and industry development in the Americas. With this in mind, the plantation spatializes early conceptions of urban life within the context of a racial economy: the plantation contained identifiable economic zones; it bolstered economic and social growth along transportation corridors; land use was for both agricultural and industrial growth; patterns of specialized activities—from domestic labor and field labor to blacksmithing, management, and church activities—were performed; racial groups were differentially inserted into the local economy, and so forth.<sup>31</sup> In *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation*, Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsberg examine the architecture and landscape of plantation towns in North America, adding to the racial economy by noticing “the hand of enslaved workers in transforming (literally) the land[,] . . . the efforts of pro-slavery agents [in shaping] environments that facilitated control and surveillance of slaves’ activities[,] . . . slaveholders adapt[ing] old building types and develop[ing] new ones with

*Studies in Theory and Practice* (London: Paradigm, 2006), 123–24.

27 Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” 319.

28 Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” 95.

29 Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 22.

30 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 75.

31 The patterns of early urban life noted here (identifiable economic zones and growth, transport, and specialized activities) are based on the themes put forth in Nicholas R. Fyfe and Judith T. Kenny, eds., *The Urban Geography Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2005).



the purpose of employing architecture to subjugate and control their human chattel.”<sup>32</sup> These features—the economy, the landscape, the architecture—go hand in hand with different kinds and types of racial violence, what Saidiya Hartman describes as “scenes of subjection”: the mundane terror of plantation life; the brutalities perpetuated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property; the suffering, rape, and depersonalization; the “brutal exercise of power that gave form to resistance.”<sup>33</sup>

While plantations differed over time and space, the processes through which they were differentially operated and maintained draw attention to the ways racial surveillance, antiblack violence, sexual cruelty, and economic accumulation identify the spatial work of race and racism. In many senses the plantation maps specific black geographies as identifiably violent and impoverished, consequently normalizing the uneven production of space. This normalization can unfold in the present, with blackness and geography and the past and the present enmeshing to uncover contemporary sites of uninhabitability. Yet to return to the plantation, in the present, can potentially invite unsettling and contradictory analyses wherein: the sociospatial workings of antiblack violence wholly define black history; this past is rendered over and done with, and the plantation is cast as a “backward” institution that we have left behind; the plantation moves through time, a cloaked anachronism, that calls forth the prison, the city, and so forth. These contradictions keep in place, to borrow from Kara Keeling, “common memory images” that are habitually called forth to construct blackness as silent, suffering, and perpetually violated, just as it attempts to erase the ways antiblack violence is enacted in the present.<sup>34</sup> Put differently, this kind of analytical framework is unsettling because it simultaneously archives the violated black body as the *origin* of New World black lives just as it places this history in an almost airtight time-space continuum that traces a linear progress away from racist violence.

Within this framework there is an underlying push to seek consolation in naming violence. This carries with it an expectation that the road to recovery is an evolution toward a mode of humanness that is produced through inequities. I am not suggesting that we forget violence or that the practice of returning to the brutalities of plantation life is unethical. I am suggesting that when the lands of no one were transformed by plantocracy logics, firming up racial hierarchies of humanness, the question of encounter is often read through our present form of humanness, with spaces for *us* (inhabited by secular economically comfortable man and positioned in opposition to the underdeveloped impoverished spaces for *them*) being cast as the locations the oppressed should strive toward. In this formulation three curiosities arise: the enslaved who were planted in the Americas, and their sense of place, are cast as normally lifeless, over and done with, ungeographic, and left behind; our contemporary struggles with racial violence and blackness are denied a context; and the mythical-biological Darwinian contours of our reading practices reveal that “the fittest” is a

32 Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsberg, introduction to Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsberg, eds., *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 2–3.

33 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1–78, 62.

34 Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 74.

mode of being human we strive toward. These curiosities, as usual, are articulated alongside the discourse that things have gotten better because time has progressed. What if the plantation offered us something else? What if its practices of racial segregation, economic exploitation, and sexual violence mapped not a normal way of life but a different way of life? What if we acknowledged that the plantation is, as Toni Morrison writes, a space that everybody runs from but nobody stops talking about, and thus that it is a persistent but ugly blueprint of our present spatial organization that holds in it a new future?<sup>35</sup> Finally, if this conceptualization is possible, how might contemporary expressions of racial and spatial violence and black city geographies be grappled with anew?

### Plot-and-Plantation

In her 1971 essay “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” Wynter explains that not only does the rise of the plantation correspond with the rise of the novel—which points to two new socioeconomic systems of world making—but the plantation itself was the contextual setting through which many fictional books revolved. She goes on to say that the market economy of the plantation, and the stories that explain the value of the economy of the plantation, unraveled into a justified and “official history of the superstructure” that hid—but did not erase—what she calls “secretive histories.”<sup>36</sup> Secretive histories can be found in the *plots*: the plot or the central narrative of the plantation novel that contextualizes its economic superstructure while developing a creative space to challenge this system; and the plots of land that were given to some slaves so that they could grow food to nourish themselves and thus maximize profits—plots of land that also became the focus of resistance to the overriding system of the plantation economy. In both cases, 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 actual growth of narratives, food, and cultural practices that materialize the deep connections between blackness and the earth and foster values that challenge systemic violence. The plot and plantation are, on the one hand, dichotomized and ambivalent geographies, and, on the other hand, the locations through which blackness becomes rooted in the Americas: “For African peasants transplanted to the plot[,] . . . the land remained the earth. . . . [They] used the land to feed [themselves]; and to offer first fruits to the earth; [the] funeral was the mystical reunion with the earth. . . . Around the growing of yam, of food for survival, [they] created on the plot a folk culture.”<sup>37</sup>

Wynter’s insights are useful because she does not return to the plantation to name and thus centralize antiblack violence, nor does she provide us with a reading of the novel and the plot that hastily celebrates subaltern resistance. At the same time, her analytical provocations are not, in my view, beholden to a linearity that relies on a plantation logic that is informed by, and inevitably leads to, unending black-death. Instead, she produces the theoretical scaffolding that rethinks how our

35 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 13.

36 Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” 101.

37 *Ibid.*, 99.

present spatial struggles around race, segregation, and violence might be reimagined. My thinking is clarified reading “Plot and Plantation” alongside Wynter’s discussion of “deciphering practice”:

A deciphering practice takes the existing inequalities of our order, both as the expressive enactment of the governing code of life and *death* as the *index* of the “rhetorical mystifications” that must be at work, in order to determine *how* that order should be normatively felt about and known, if the collective behaviors that bring the structuring processes of the order into being are to be dynamically induced and stably replicated.

A deciphering practice proposes, therefore, that the *ways* in which each culture-specific *normal* subject knows and *feels about* its social reality . . . should in no instance be taken as any *index* of what the empirical reality of our social universe *is*.<sup>38</sup>

Deciphering a plantation logic, then, works across three thematics: it identifies the normalizing mechanics of the plantation, wherein black subjugation and land exploitation go hand in hand and shepherd in certain (present) death; it notices our collective participation in and rhetorical commitment to reproducing this system as though it is natural, inevitable, and a normal way of life; and it imagines the plot-and-plantation as a new analytical ground that puts forth a knowledge system, *produced outside the realms of normalcy, thus rejecting the very rules of the system that profits from racial violence, and in this envisions not a purely oppositional narrative but rather a future where a correlated human species perspective is honored.*

The forced planting of blacks in the Americas is coupled with an awareness of how the land and nourishment can sustain alternative worldviews and challenge practices of dehumanization. It is worth repeating that these alternative worldviews were not sealed off from or simply produced in opposition to the plantation; rather, they were linked to the geographies of the plantation economy and the brutalities of slavery. It is through the violence of slavery, then, that the plantation produces black rootedness in place precisely because the land becomes the key provision through which black peoples could both survive and be forced to fuel the plantation machine. Analytically, the simultaneous rather than dichotomized workings of the plot and the plantation, understood alongside the creative work of the fiction plot, recast the politics of resistance. Wynter’s essay suggests that plantation futures can go two ways at once: first, where the basic system is left untouched and we are left to defend and justify it and, second, where the awareness of the workings of the system are engendered in a (creative and geographic) plot-*life* and, at the same time, challenge this long-standing logic.<sup>39</sup> The latter future offered, I suggest, cannot withstand inevitable black-death because it asks that we imagine black-*life* as anticipatory. In this formulation, the figure of the black subject—within slave and postslave geographies, in life and in death—is indigenous, is planted, within the context of a violence that cannot wholly define future human agency.

If we believe that the city is the commercial expression of the plantation and its marginalized masses, and that the plantation is a persistent but ugly blueprint of our contemporary spatial troubles, Wynter’s essay asks that we seek out secretive histories that are not invested in rehearsing

38 Sylvia Wynter, “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes towards Deciphering Practice,” in Mbye Cham, ed., *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1992), 271 (emphasis in original).

39 Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” 102.

lifelessness, the violated black body, and practices of resistance rooted in authenticity. The plantation town draws attention to a narrative of blackness that is implicit to modernity and indigenous to the Americas—and thus a conception of the city that is imbued with version black history that is neither celebratory nor dissident. This black urban presence—black life—uncovers a mode of being human that, while often cast out from official history, is not victimized and dispossessed and wholly alien to the land; rather, it redefines the terms of who and what we are vis-à-vis a cosmogony that, while painful, does not seek to inhabit a location closer to that of “the fittest” but instead honors our mutually constitutive and relational versions of humanness. The plantation that anticipates the city, then, does not necessarily posit that things have gotten better as racial violence haunts, but rather that the struggles we face, intellectually, are a continuation of plantation narratives that dichotomize geographies into us/them and hide secretive histories that undo the teleological and biocentric underpinnings of spatiality.

## Plantation Futures

So, what kind of future can the plantation give us? If black geographies are conceptualized as mutually constitutive of broader geographic processes, how does Wynter’s framework allow us to grapple with historically present practices of racial exclusion without condemning the most marginalized to spaces of absolute otherness? I conclude by turning to Dionne Brand’s long poem *Inventory*, reading it as a creative work that intervenes in the commonsense teleology of racial violence. Extending decolonial politics and decolonial thinking—the coalitional effort to understand decolonization and modernity as unfinished projects—I identify *Inventory* as a text of decolonial poetics: this poetics dwells on postslave violences in order to provide the context through which black futures are imaginable.<sup>40</sup> The decolonial work of *Inventory*, therefore, does not lie in archiving and naming violence; the decolonial work of *Inventory* lies in the analytical possibilities that arise from reading casualty-data as soldered to the creative. With my prior discussion in mind, I consider *Inventory* to be a creative work that is produced outside the realms of normalcy, one that rejects the rules of the system that profits from racial violence and in this envisions a future where a corelated human species perspective is honored. It is as *the text turns itself toward its reader* that the possibilities of corelatedness emerge—giving the plantation a different analytical future.

*Inventory* has seven parts. Part 1 begins, “We believed in nothing.”<sup>41</sup> From there, Brand takes her reader to several locations, from the hopeful disappointments of the civil rights movement to the mourning of singer Nina Simone and activist Marlene Green. The poem moves from the criminalized black Canadian urban space, the Toronto neighborhood Jane and Finch, to fingerprinted travelers. Here Brand also writes the streets of Cairo, Baghdad, and Darfur. Across these streets and narratives we are able to track Stevie Wonder’s inner-city blues, Miami houses clamped to the earth,

40 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique—An Introduction,” *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 2 (2011): 2.

41 Dionne Brand, *Inventory* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006), 3; hereafter cited in the text.

John Coltrane's *Stellar Regions*, unremitting malls, and the science-fiction tales of democracy, New Orleans storm shutters, and bombs. Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, the 1960s, and the invasion of Iraq make difficult appearances throughout the long poem. In part 3, the narrator sits by the television, weeping, counting bombs and bomb deaths: a fire bomb in Nashville, a bomb at a football stadium, twenty-three killed by a suicide bomb, eight killed by a suicide bomb, two men and a child by a car bomb, bomb-filled shoes:

eight hundred every month  
for the last year, and one hundred  
and twenty in a brutal four days  
things, things add up. (52)

*Inventory* is a difficult text—it is difficult because it documents, in an empirically poetic sense, our unbearable world. It is difficult because it is an intelligible and exhausting list of despair:

She's afraid of killing someone today,  
picked up laundry, ate pasta,  
and a citrus tart,  
bought a book, drove a street. (76)

Brand's long poem could easily be identified as a tabulation of urbicidal acts:

Consider then the obliteration of four restaurants,  
the disappearance of sixty taxis each with one passenger  
of four overcrowded classrooms, one tier of a football  
stadium, the sudden lack of, say, cosmeticians

.....  
vanished, two or three hospital waiting  
rooms, the nocturnal garbage collectors gone. (78)

Indeed, the long poem draws the reader to the violent acts, the despair, and the hopelessness that make the poet's inventory possible—one can mathematically calculate, and gather, death:

still in June,  
in their hiatus eight killed by suicide bomb at  
bus station, at least eleven killed in Shula at  
restaurants, at least fifteen by car bomb. (25)

If *Inventory* can be read as a systemic tabulation and enumeration of racial violence and death, it might also be read as speaking for life. More specifically, *Inventory* documents *and* undoes the aforementioned linear progress toward unending death. Perhaps Brand's poetic inventories can reveal what Kenneth Hewitt calls the mortality of place. In his work on area bombing, Hewitt identifies the connectedness of biological human life and place: "Places share the problems of survival and mortality in our biological existence. Just as biological life may be called a set of activities

intended to resist death, so our place and the world are at least partly a means to resist psycho-social and cultural dissolution."<sup>42</sup>

One way of disclosing the mortality of place is through expressive texts such as Brand's *Inventory*. These narratives, texts that would otherwise be considered ungeographic and politically detached from the empirical work of city plans, bear witness to the destruction of place by invoking the stakes of human struggle. The reading-work *Inventory* asks us to do might not simply be to consume transparent enumeration but rather to engage cooperative human efforts and turn the practice of accounting for the brutalities of our world toward the reader. Reading the text—"our grief will dry lakes" (61)—demands the reader register the data by asking why the poet would acknowledge, make plain, and versify this data. To turn to decolonial poetics produced by diasporic communities who have survived violent displacement and white supremacy allows us to identify unseen and uncharted aspects of city life and, in doing so, depict city death not as a biological end and biological fact but as a pathway to honoring human life and what W. E. B. Du Bois called our sorrow songs—"the expression[s] of human experience" that have been neglected, misunderstood, despised.<sup>43</sup> Brand's long poem suggests that black perspectives on the city reveal spaces of absolute otherness, so often occupied by the racially and economically condemned, are geographies of survival, resistance, creativity, and the struggle *against* death. In other words, we might read the poem *not* as a text that tracks a linear progression toward death but rather as the creative consequences of the plot and the plantation—a conception of the city imbued with a narrative of black history that is neither celebratory nor dissident but rooted in an articulation of city life that accepts that relations of violence and domination have made our existence and presence in the Americas possible as it recasts this knowledge to envision an alternative future.

*Inventory* demands ethical engagement. Brand's work often refuses a commitment to our present order of things; she writes geography and her own political affiliations to space, as assertions of humanness rather than tacked to one side of an insider/outsider world.<sup>44</sup> This positioning of the poet is important, because it refuses to venerate the comforts of us/them paradigms as Brand herself writes cities and other spaces anew vis-à-vis her black diasporic history. This is, at least to me, a radical politics in that it asks not simply that we track future-misery but that we witness our difficult present in order to think both the plantation and the city differently. Read without certain nation-affiliation, read without the profits of witnessing enumerated deaths, read as decolonial poetics that remembers antiblack violence and couples this with the Iraq Body Count Project, news feeds and birds flying from tree to tree, the city deaths compiled in *Inventory* require being read through a different register.

The lists and catalogues, the dead and dying, might be read as a way to identify that acts of genocidal and ecocidal violence, to return to Wynter, "should in no instance be taken as the index

42 Kenneth Hewitt, "Place Annihilation: Area Bombing and the Fate of Urban Places," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 73, no. 2 (1983): 258.

43 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Vintage, 1990), 180–81.

44 Leslie Sanders, "What the Poet Does for Us" (keynote lecture at "No Language Is Neutral: A Conference on Dionne Brand," Toronto, Ontario, 14 October 2006); Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who: Writing Black Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Insomniac, 2003), 43–55; McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

of what the empirical reality of our social universe *is*.<sup>45</sup> The aesthetics Brand provides us with in *Inventory* can thus be imagined as a route to noticing how the normalization of body counts and city deaths in fact disclose the ways our present systems of urban planning and its attendant modes of city life—the normally good cities and the normally bad cities—effectively bind us to a process of morally geographic superiority and inferiority, where place mortality is cast as disadvantageous. Put differently, Brand’s poetics uncover the normalizing work that human death and city death can do when they are cast as an index of how human life is constituted. It follows, then, that Brand’s long poem might be read as an inventory that calls into question the grounds through which urbicide is made possible and commonsense. Read in this way, what the decolonial poetics of *Inventory* demand is that we, its readers, be held accountable for the deadly moral codes that regulate, profit from, and conceptualize spaces of absolute otherness as they are inhabited by the unsurviving. The body count that frames much of *Inventory*—800 every month for the last year, 120 in four days—is thus also about survival and human life, or a new math-space, where the calculus of human actions and cooperative human efforts encounter poetry to reinvent the unambiguous dead-end culmination that is so often coupled with analyses of violence (21–52). Working with *Inventory* requires honoring and living city life differently. The difficult poem demands imagining cities and global struggles, plantation pasts and futures, as predicated on all-of-human-life—even in death—and the work of survival. Here, we envision a life on the edge, a geography that demands you stay alive yet threatens your physiology, a spatial politics of living just enough, just enough for the city: this is a political location that fosters more humanly workable, and alterable, geographic practices.

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45 Wynter, “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics,’” 271 (emphasis in original).