



# What Is LAND?

a conversation with Tania Murray Li,  
Rafael Marquese,  
& Monica White

*moderated by Elizabeth Hennessy*

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Photo credit: **European Space Agency**, 2019.

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# Preface

We cannot understand the politics of land without understanding labor, property regimes, and ecologies. Land was the theme of the fourth roundtable of the Plantationocene series, held September 12, 2019. The Plantationocene Series aims to create a conversation about multiple forms of plantations, both past and present, as well as the ways that plantation logics organize modern economies, environments, and social relations. Joining me for a discussion of something often taken for granted were anthropologist Tania Murray Li, historian Rafael Marquese, and sociologist Monica White. The panelists brought diverse perspectives and wide-ranging geographies to the question of land, approaching it through their respective research on the politics of development and oil palm plantations in Indonesia, the Atlantic slave trade and Caribbean coffee plantations, and histories of Black agricultural social movements in the United States.

Land must be considered with an awareness of histories of dispossession—including the land beneath us as we spoke on the campus of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, a place known as Teejop to Ho-Chunk residents past and present. In addition to Ho-Chunk peoples, the Madison area was also the ancestral lands of the Peoria, Miami, Meskwaki, and Sauk peoples, who have persisted despite being forcibly displaced from their home areas through acts of violence and dispossession. Land is, as White said, “a scene of a crime”—and also a living being inextricably bound to social life.

**Elizabeth Hennessy**

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A pile of harvested palm fruit awaits collection in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. Photo by Tania Murray Li, 2009.

## **What Is Land?** A Conversation with Tania Murray Li, Rafael Marquese, and Monica White

### **Elizabeth Hennessy**

I want to begin with a question that might seem straightforward. It's a question that Tania posed in a recent essay, and that is: what is land? I think it's important to clarify, because most of us are accustomed to thinking of land as a kind of self-evident thing that can be divided into parcels, owned as property, used as a resource. But as Tania has written, land is a strange object. Each of you, in your work, pushes us to think beyond this conventional way of thinking about land, and instead to think of its social and material relationships. Could you each tell us a bit about how you understand what land is, and how you approach land in your studies?

**Monica White**

I meditated on the question, what is land? From African Indigenous cultures, land is a living being. To me, I also see it as sort of a scene of a crime, right? It's a scene of a crime and a strategy of freedom and liberation. So, we recognize land, this land particularly, as stolen land, using stolen labor. Our interactions and relationship with land has been one of extraction and not regeneration.

The current political moment, the current environmental moment, economic moment, every indication of our society, is fractured. I would argue that some of that is because we do not see ourselves as part of an ecosystem, we see ourselves as in control.

The people that I work with, the organizations that I work with, are trying to encourage us to pursue a more holistic, healthy relationship to land. And one that, as with the Indigenous idea of seven generations, has the implication that anything we do is making sure that we pass on the land better than it was when we found it. So, land is sort of everything, as young people say. It's everything, and how we treat the land, I think, also has indications for how we treat each other.

**Tania Murray Li**

I first started thinking about this question (what is land?) again from a kind of an Indigenous or fieldwork perspective. In the highlands of Sulawesi where I was working, there is no word for land. There's a word for soil, a sort of a material thing, and then the classification has to do always with people's relationship to forests.

There's primary forest, which means no labor has been invested there. There's secondary forest, which means someone once did the work of clearing the huge trees in order to plant a garden. There's the current garden, and there's the just left behind garden. But there is no abstract category, "land."

I was working in this area during a period when that category emerged. The idea of land as an abstract object which can have a value, which can be bought and sold, which can be treated in some respects like other forms of property, was something I saw emerge, and that made me reflect on it.

But then I thought, well, actually, there's always work involved in producing this category land. I also looked at the work done by the World Bank and others in the



context of the land grab. Where, suddenly—well, not suddenly, it's not new—up popped this category of “underutilized land.” And apparently, according to them, half the world's potentially arable land is not used at all, and most of the rest is “underutilized.”

What kind of object is it in which one scale of value means proper utility, versus under? Under for whom, in what ways, according to what metric? That really alerted me to all the work it takes to produce land as an abstract object, or (as I wrote about in that paper) to render it investible, the kind of thing you can speculate on in the stock market. That's not just there, given. That's the outcome of a process, and that was the sort of thing I was trying to track.

### **Rafael Marquese**

I have no better answer for this question than Karl Polanyi's words, which actually is what Monica was just talking about, land as a living being. Basically, for Polanyi, land is nature turned into commodity. I think this is a very simple, elegant way to put what we are discussing. We are discussing nature, but nature that was turned into something else due to economic, social, political relations, which we can call capitalism or the market economy, according to Polanyi.

I'd like to discuss Polanyi's terms, especially his kind of European “diffusionism.” When he was trying to describe how land is turned into a commodity, he was basically talking about the English countryside. His argument is really good if we are able to reconceptualize what he was talking about originally—about Europe—and put his argument in a broader frame, to think about the colonies. We can think about land being commodified in the first place, in the colonial world—not only in the metropole, not only in Europe, but in the world economy.

For sure, we can find throughout history, different land markets. Every time that you are selling and buying land some place, you have a market on land. But it doesn't mean that land was commodified through this market. I'd also like to put that point in our discussion this evening. I think that we should pay attention to a fundamental critique of Polanyi, in the sense that you can see land markets throughout history, but without being capitalist land markets. So, there's a difference between what is a market economy and capitalism.

And, thinking about the Plantationocene, and on this specific topic, land, it's a good way to think about these questions.

**Monica**

I forgot something important that I did want to share. In thinking about land, I thought immediately about the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery. So, if we see land as living, but also in terms of the receptacle of blood, sweat, and tears of those who labor, I think the words on the memorial's website really illustrate some of what I'm talking about:

"The legacy of enslaved Black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence."

If you're unfamiliar with this memorial, they have captured the land, the soil, from various points of lynching, and honor the legacies of those who were lynched as important. As painful as this part of it is—and that's why I talk about the scene of a crime—I also think that land is both a site and source of oppression and liberation. In talking and thinking about how movements are using land today, it's important to hold space for both of those.



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**Elizabeth**

Thank you all very much. I'll pick up on the idea of capitalist transformations and the violence involved in capitalist transformations. One of the motivations for this seminar series has been the rush of transactional land grabs, primarily for food and biofuel crops, that's occurred over the last ten years. Tania, your work on oil palm plantations engages directly with this. And, of course, land grabs have a long history. The effects of capitalist investments on socio-material landscapes are a dominant theme of your work, Rafael.

What are some of the specific ways that capitalist transformations are reshaping landscapes and livelihoods? What is particular about the capitalist market that changes, to use Polanyi's frame?

**Rafael**

That's a really good question, and I will try to address it by talking a little bit about my current project on the global history of coffee and slavery, and particularly on the making of coffee frontiers in the Americas. A good way to track these ways in which capitalist transformations associated with land grabs reshape landscapes is to think about specific moments, and how the specific moments operate in a given context.

For instance, what happened with coffee frontiers in the Americas and with Indigenous populations that lived in these areas before the coffee arrived? You can identify at least four distinct outcomes or processes in this story. Take, for instance, what happened in the Caribbean, the Indigenous holocaust in the 16th century. Without that holocaust, it would be hard to have the Caribbean slave plantation system built there in the 17th and 18th centuries. So, that's one way of dealing with this story.

But then, take a second moment: what happened in Paraíba Valley in Brazil at the beginning of the 19th century. There were Indigenous populations living there because of Portuguese colonizing. Due to the gold economy in the 18th century, the Portuguese authorities negotiated with the Indians to keep the Indians on the land in order to avoid gold smuggling. So, it was a policy of prohibited lands, in order to avoid smugglers operating through these lands. And this policy was what allowed, during the 19th century, the land grab of this very land for coffee. So, it's another relationship. You have former colonizers that were dealing with Indians to keep them on the land, and then in the second wave of expansion, you had to get them off of the land.

Third moment: what happened in the western lands of São Paulo, this huge coffee boom of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This happened in lands that belonged to the Kaingang, nomadic Indian communities that had been living there since the turn of the 18th century. They were also resisting. They were nomadic Indians that resisted against the Guaranís, who had submitted to the Jesuit missions in Paraguay during the 17th century. What happened with the Kaingang is the classical story of extermination and land grabbing. So, it's another outcome.

The fourth outcome: what happened in Guatemala, at the end of the 19th century, when you had to colonize the Indians in order to produce coffee. But these Indians are not occupying the coffee lands, so they have to be engaged in order to produce



coffee. What the Spaniards did was to recover a system that was applied in the 16th century. The mandamientos system in Guatemala is more or less what was the encomienda system in the 16th century.

Long answer for a short point. What is my point? We have to understand completely, in each spot, how these relations operated, how land grabs reshaped landscapes. There's no other way to do that, but by taking a close look at what's happened in each spot, at each time. You can have processes happen again, maybe with the same one, in another context.

### Tania

I agree with you about the very specific ways in which the land, labor, and capital are assembled in sort of different configurations. Your opening comment, Monica, that it's stolen land using stolen labor, I think in the Asian plantation context, it is this. It was very memorably described by Syed Hussein Alatas as the myth of the lazy native. So, the concept, the foundational concept of the plantation, is the colonial notion that the natives on the spot are always deficient. They're lousy farmers, and that's why you have to take the land from them to utilize it efficiently



A plantation worker housing block in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. Photo by Tania Murray Li, 2009.

and fully for the production of crops and profit. They're also bad workers, which is why you have to bring in migrants from elsewhere, whether they're indentured or under whatever conditions they are. They're always migrants; they're never the natives on the spot.

So, from that point of view, a plantation is always theft, right? It's based on the assumption that the natives on the spot are poor farmers and poor workers, and can therefore legitimately be swept out of the way so that a more efficient form of production, engaging more efficient kinds of workers, can take its place. So, it is always theft, and that colonial notion is endemic in all contemporary plantations. You couldn't have a plantation, unless you have the assumption that the natives on the spot can't do it.

But that story occludes the history in which the natives on the spot are often already doing it, and often out-competing the plantation. But you have to misrecognize their productivity, their activity, their desire to be capitalist market subjects, you have to basically ignore whatever the natives are doing, in order to sustain this premise that only a plantation can do the job. So, it is theft.

### **Monica**

I'm from Detroit, and that's where I earned my political stripes. I was in Detroit during a very big, controversial land grab of a land speculator, and I was the first person to call the meeting in response to communities that were negotiating. There were so many ways that residents were trying to access available land in Detroit, but somebody with big dollars comes in and says, "I want to buy this plot of land," and there were no expectations, no rules, and no justice. To me, things come down to justice. Community organizations were saying, in order for me to get the lot next to my house, it costs so much more. It was just a lot of red tape. And a lot of the things that they were willing to ignore, for this billionaire, ignored the use of land for residents.

One of the ways that capitalism transforms land grabs and creates landscapes and livelihoods is exclusion. We talk about genocide, and we talk about displacement and dispossession and disrespect, but I also think that the current climate crisis is indicating climate migrants, who, by no fault of theirs, are forced into situations. We have a catastrophic event, I get on the plane to escape the catastrophic event, and I am asked to remove myself, to disembark. Or even listening to folks talk about whether or not water is a human right and questioning





An oil palm seedling nursery lies beyond a bamboo fence and a sign reading “Welcome” in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. Photo by Tania Murray Li, 2009.

access to clean water. Environmentally, capitalism allows us to shape and create landscapes and livelihoods that are for the benefit of some, but detrimental to others, and it’s catastrophic.

I have often heard folks in movements articulate the relationship. They say, “To see ourselves as connected to land means we treat land differently.” To use a capitalist frame, it means we pollute it, we exploit it, and we disregard the impact on our lives and landscapes. This environmental justice conversation becomes really critical in response to the ways that capitalism has transformed landscapes and climates.

### **Elizabeth**

I want to talk about responses to dispossession. Monica and Tania, you both work directly with communities who have gone through these histories. I’m curious to



know, what's the labor of resistance that you have seen, and what are communities doing to push back against this?

**Tania**

It's an interesting question, because in the plantation expansion I'm currently examining in Indonesia, on the one hand, social movements have been questioning plantation expansion for decades. And they have, sadly, completely failed to stop it or slow it down. Although there's been decades of critique and resistance, it hasn't stopped the train. Whatever people are doing, it isn't working, because this train is still going forward: 15 million hectares of oil palm plantations now, 20-30 million projected, half of that already leased to companies, just not developed yet.

It's massive. There's no bigger agrarian transformation, other than maybe the Amazon, at the moment. Resisting is a complex thing when you're up against a machine like that.

There's another element, which is also complex, and that is that in every plantation transformation, some people benefit. It's not a uniform dispossession; there are always winners and losers in this. That is usually instrumentalized very deliberately by companies and government officials that want to secure the land, to fracture communities, set one group off against another, promise jobs, promise benefits. This is absolutely routine and documented as part of the strategy.

So, this idea that you could have something like free, prior, and informed consent—you know, the nice liberal notion—it assumes that there is a moment of decision, at which an assembled community will decide something. Whereas actually these processes are far more insidious. They take years. Agents working for the companies buy a bit of land here, they buy off someone there, they fracture something else. There's a lot of uncertainty about where the plantation will be, and who's going to get what. So, there's never free, or prior, or informed consent. None of that actually happens in practice. That's a difficult kind of thing to resist.

Another element of that that I've been quite interested in is this idea that land grabs happen slowly. The idea of a grab makes you think that the catastrophe is immediate and one-off. But what I've seen is that an initial frontier plantation all on its own, well, the local people might just be able to shuffle out of the way. They

might even see some benefit, because now they get a road, because there has to be an infrastructure. But 30 years later, one plantation has become ten, and the land is now saturated. And the people who initially could shuffle out the way are now squeezed into little tiny enclaves and have now become landless. But it took a generation.

So, where was the point in time at which this was actually experienced as a definitive dispossession? Actually, it's often 30 years later. It's the second generation, which now says: because of who knows what shenanigans, whatever our parents agreed to, or who agreed to what, we don't know, but what we know is that we now have no possibility for a farming future. But it wasn't so obvious to their ancestors. When they signed it away, as one of the elders in my research said, "We thought our land was as big as the sea." They couldn't imagine that it could end. And so, they didn't hold onto it so tightly. Why would they? There's plenty of it. If you're on a land frontier, land is not scarce.

This kind of intergenerational dynamic is part of what makes the concept of resistance a bit too simple. You know, like you don't fully understand in the moment the future that lies 30 years ahead... no one understands these things.

Another point on this is extent. Can you picture what 30,000 hectares looks like? No one can. So, what is informed consent, when you can't even imagine what that kind of extent looks like? Can you picture the meaning of a 60-year lease? These are quantities which are actually beyond even our imagination, and we have maps and whatnot. So, just imagine, someone cannot really know what they are doing.

### **Monica**

To talk in a US context about land dispossession, and Black farmers especially, necessarily means also talking about the USDA, and the ways that the USDA has historically exacerbated and contributed to land dispossession for Black farmers.

I do see folks resisting. I see a history of resistance, inasmuch as folks are thinking about two things: one, the idea that to own land is offensive, but to think about how we might care for land. It's difficult in a capitalist system, but it is an idea: how can we steward land in a way that isn't inconsistent with our morals and our values? But I also see, as a strategy, historically, Black folks who've pooled their resources together, to buy land, to share land, to share resources, and to live collectively and cooperatively.

One of my dear friends, Dara Cooper, at the National Black Food and Justice Alliance, argues that individual land ownership makes you vulnerable. Collective, cooperative land ownership is a buffer, a way for us to withstand some of the onslaught. It is a strategy to collectively respond to some of the attacks against the capacity to be in control of whatever land we have access to. So, the dispossession has to also include government entities that are accessories, often with markets. This, sometimes, gets lost.

### **Rafael**

I'd simply like to thank both of you, because I had a chance to read your books, because of this meeting, and I learned a lot.

### **Elizabeth**

I want to talk a little bit about the social politics of land. Because one of the things that, to me, comes out of all of your work, is that it's really important to think about racial and ethnic politics in order to think about how we understand land. Because dispossession doesn't happen equally to everyone. How can we come to appreciate and understand these very different histories that you all are working in and talking about? I wonder, are they very specific? Can we make comparisons, is that a fair thing to do? How would you think about the politics of race and slavery? What kind of lessons can we take away from that?

### **Rafael**

I think these are specific histories. And my point's more or less like the old Eric Williams point on this idea, on the thesis of functional racism. Capitalists are, in one sense, colorblind. They are going to mobilize any kind of laborers at their disposal, regardless of their race. But on the other hand, capitalists always play the card of racial management to achieve their goals. So, this is how I read this thesis of how capitalism and slavery have played both directions throughout history.

But, again, these are always specific histories. There's a tremendous book that was published three years ago in Brazil, unfortunately only in Portuguese, by a U.S. anthropologist who works there, Karl Monsma, called *A Reprodução do Racismo: Fazendeiros, Negros e Imigrantes no Oeste Paulista, 1880-1914* [*The Reproduction of Racism: Planters, Blacks, and Immigrants in Western São Paulo, 1880-1914*]. It's a tremendous book. Why? Because he is analyzing the crises of slavery in Brazil, and—now I'm adding the crises of slavery produced by the U.S. Civil War, that's not his argument, that's my argument. But anyway, and then planters, the frontiers,



were desperately searching for an alternative for slavery. In racial and non-racial terms. They tried with coolies, but it didn't work because at that point British imperialism in China was blocking that option for Brazil, and there were a lot of racist arguments: "We don't want these yellow laborers here." But the planters were desperately searching for any kind of dispossessable laborers within the world market to work on their land frontiers.

And then, finally, they got the Italian solution, the massive Italian migration that started to arrive in Brazil in the very last years of the slavery crisis. Italians working side-by-side, more or less like the Mississippi Delta, there was an experience like that during Reconstruction. But what happened in Brazil was this massive, massive migration by the state, by the planters themselves, in order to substitute Italians for the slaves.

What is amazing about this book is that there wasn't actually a racial choice by the planters in order to choose Italians. Because, for the planters, Italians were actually nonwhite people. They were looking for Germans or Scandinavians; the Italian had the Mediterranean heritage they really wanted to avoid. And then, once these Italians got into the frontier—and that's the very story of my family, working in the plantations and so on—immediately, the whole slavery heritage started to operate, the very old sense of reproducing racism as a way of racial management and controlling labor. There was a kind of internalization in the Italian migrants of buried values of racism from former planters.

It's a fantastic ethnographic work because he shows that the first Italians that arrived, they weren't what we call racist, at all. Because they didn't have this contact with African American people, and so on. But through the very operation of the plantation economy, they started to incorporate the very same values of their patrons. So, again, these are very specific histories, and I would keep in mind, for this specific topic, Williams's argument on the place of functional racism for capitalism.

### **Tania**

I think that's a fascinating story, and I guess I've seen something similar in the sense of the morphings of the different positions that people occupy. Again, in the Asian plantation context where I'm working, the indentured workers who were brought in from other Asian countries, from China, and then from Java, when they arrived in these plantations in Sumatra in the 1870s, they were regarded as

utterly pitiful by the local Indigenous population. I mean, the word “coolie” is a rootless person who just works for someone else under appalling conditions. So, the locals see themselves as superior to the plantation coolies, and the coolies, given the chance, would abscond and join the local population and try to farm independently, or work for local farmers for better wages.

But now, 100 years later, the locals are now landless, and would like to work in the plantation, but are not hired, because the planters still prefer migrants and bring in Indonesians from other islands who see themselves as the hardworking tough guys who are going to do this plantation work and get good wages, whereas they see the natives on the spot as lazy. So, these are all inter-Asian movements, and they’re not racially constant over time. Who is the privileged, who is the despised, who’s the pitiful, who’s understood to be lazy or hardworking, these categories shift. There’s a continual work of distinction, but it’s not consistent which group will occupy what position.

But one of the most shocking things, which does seem to be constant, is the absorption of the colonial posture towards plantation workers. The plantation managers, who are now all Indonesians, basically act Dutch. People describe them as that; they say, “Oh, he’s got the colonial in him.” Because they boss people around, you know, they expect people to not stand, but to crouch in front of them, and all of these ways of expressing physical subservience, which have just been adopted by the Indonesian plantation managers. The way that race works through these different positionings and morphings is part of the story. These are not fixed. As you say, they’re always in operation. Some form of distinction is always being made. The question is what form, by whom, and for what purpose? What’s it enabling?

### **Monica**

In thinking about the relationship between race and slavery, and asking the question where the opportunity is to learn something... One, I want to say, I’m grateful to see the conversations around 1619 taken seriously by some of us and elevating the importance of reparations discussion as a part of that.

We’ve heard the numbers. In 1910, 14 million acres were owned by Black folks, and we’re now down to 1.4% of products coming from Black farmers in the US. The part that I like to pay attention to is around agroecology and movements. Movements, thanks to the internet and other mechanisms, are allowing us to

create food strategies that are more sustainable for communities and the environment. But also, these movements are sharing ideas around ways to resist, how do we resist, what's the language of resistance, and then organizing in those contexts. So, while when we look at the forest, we feel that there's a lot of loss that's taking place. If we look at the leaf, we can see how one leaf is influencing other leaves. And we're cheering for the leaves, cheering for those who are organizing movements and seeing this relationship as an opportunity to speak up, to stand out, and to be in solidarity with other folks in other lands, given our shared histories.

### Elizabeth

Thank you all very much. I want to ask about the idea of the Plantationocene, coming off this discussion. Because the theme of our Sawyer seminar is, of course, Interrogating the Plantationocene. I'm curious to hear what you think of the utility of the concept. It's been critiqued for not engaging with histories of, particularly in the U.S. context, America's Black scholarship on plantation life. What is the utility of it? Is it useful?

### Monica

So, I'll admit, the first time I heard the word used in a contemporary sense, Plantationocene, I was like, "Well, wow... Who would do that?" Right? I get it, right, but for those of us that are descendants of enslaved Africans, to label something in that particular sense, it made me feel like they did not ask community members, "How do you feel when you hear this?"

Now, I will admit that the farmers in the South—generational farmers, Mr. Ben Briquet, fourth generation Black farmer—uses the word plantation. I don't know if



Activist, community organizer, and Civil Rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer founded Freedom Farm in Sunflower County, Mississippi in 1967. Photo by Louis Draper, 1971.



that's a Northern Black thing. But to use the phrase Plantationocene without any explanation, it's not self-explanatory, which I think is part of the problem.

As someone who considers myself an academic and an activist, I want folks to read the words and to hear what it means without needing to pull out or to read 15 pages in. For me, it's important for people to see it, for you to understand it, and hopefully have a visceral response. So, I think that it illustrates a disconnect between those of us in the academy creating concepts that are important packages, they're important to help us convey a lot with a little, but also making sure that the way we do that is clear, and is helpful and useful.

### **Tania**

I thought about, well, what would this mean in Indonesia? Indonesia is currently, by far, the largest frontier of plantation expansion. What's interesting is that most Indonesians have never seen a plantation, and don't live near one, and never think about them. Plantations are still kind of out of sight and out of mind, even in a country which is the host, because it's a big place and they're in out-of-the-way corners of it.

So, it's not a term which would have a local resonance. People in Indonesia think they're living in the era of the city, the internet, and modernity. They don't think they're living in an era of the plantation, even though many of their countrymen are, but they're other folks, out of sight, out of mind. I don't know that it would work, you know, as an emic term, really.

But the other thing I was thinking about was, well, what's its polemical value? One potential benefit of it would be to think, for example, of palm oil which is in half of all the products that we buy in the supermarket, in food, soaps, detergents. Half of the products you buy every week have it. But who ever thinks about where it comes from, how it's grown, who grows it, under what conditions do they live, what's this doing to the land, et cetera, et cetera?

**The concept  
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So, if it serves as a reminder of how every item actually comes from some form of plantation... We are seldom forced to think about the industrial conditions of everything that we consume. So, if it has that polemic value... but, as you say Monica, that's like 15 pages in. It would take a while to explain why that's a useful way of thinking about the contemporary era, to be aware of the basis, the material and the human basis, on which we live our comfortable lives. It takes some doing.

### **Rafael**

So, I had more or less the same reaction as Monica. My first reaction when I heard this concept—and this was when I was invited for this seminar—was: what a strange word, strange concept. Let's try to figure out what it is. So, what I did was, I did my homework. I went to the Anthropocene debate that happened in Denmark. If I'm not wrong, that's the first time when the concept shows up in the discussion. Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, who were here, they launched the idea.

To me it shows clearly that it was an indirect outcome of the so-called new history of capitalism that's going on here in the west right now. Merging that in a creative way into the core problem of our global crisis, which is the Anthropocene. So, that's a creative way of putting side-by-side, merging together, two distinct public discourses—which are actually academic discourses—trying to be innovative and, at the same time, with a clear engagement with the present.

There's a lot of benefits with the concept, especially the amplification of a debate that tends to be narrow. I'm thinking about the slavery and capitalism debate, despite the really huge audience it has already reached, thinking about the whole discussion on 1619, and newspaper articles, and so on and so forth.

But there's a lot of drawbacks as well. Again, it seems to me that the concept has a problem with the absence of historical specificity. It's at the risk of being just another label, destitute of real historical content. I'm being really harsh, but I think that's the very idea of this roundtable discussion, the whole seminar.

Why am I saying that? Now I'm going to recover part of my ongoing discussions with my colleagues and friends of the history of capitalism. We're part of the same crew, discussing these things. The whole problem is that, with this recovery of slavery and capitalism, there's a tendency—I'm not saying that they do that—but



A dilapidated sugar and rum factory on the grounds of an old plantation in Mariënborg, Suriname. [Flickr](#).

there's a tendency to treat capitalism and slavery as given, immutable relations and forces that do not change throughout history. And my hope was to treat capitalism as a historical relation, to pay attention to how Wallerstein, Arrighi, Braudel, all those guys, for a long time, called attention to the very historical character of capitalism—capitalism changes throughout history. It has a core component: accumulation as an end in itself, finance, and so on.

We can have different definitions of capitalism. But it's important to call attention to the very theories of how these relations change through time.

And the very same thing happens with slavery. We have slavery in the Roman world, the Classical world, but it's not the same as colonial slavery. And 19th century slavery is different from colonial slavery. To treat these as historical relations is important.

And then we come to the point. The plantation also should be treated as a historical relation. The plantation's not always the same. There's this famous book



by Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, and the very title, I think, has a problem, but I am using it as an example. So, when you think about the plantation, think about these integral features that repeat themselves throughout history. And this is not the point, you should treat the plantation as a historical relation that has common features, but is changing every time. And one way to grasp this point is to treat the plantation through a theory of historical time, and move through historical time, through the multiple layers of time.

And there's another point. A world economy based on colonialism and the compulsory racialized labor of colonial subjects was not exclusively based on the plantation. Capitalism as a bundle of relations was more than colonialism. Colonialism was crucial; we all agree on that. But capitalism is more than that. And we should pay attention to this specificity.

So, we must keep the idea of the Plantationocene as food for thought, see the plantation as the first global move in the process of turning nature and human beings into commodities of a capitalist world economy. So, that's my first intervention: how to put Polanyi in this conversation when we think of the plantation. The privatization of land happening not in Europe first, but the colonies, and then being brought back to the metropole.

But again, we should keep history in the front line. The plantation was not always the same. For me there's a clear divide between the preindustrial colonial plantation, which includes the 18th-century Caribbean sugar plantations—which actually were quite industrial, regardless of labor management strategies that were applied and so on—and the industrial plantation after the 19th century. And keeping laborers, it's the curse of the plantation. Labor changes, as well as the world economy to which the plantation belongs.

So, that's my point about the Plantationocene. It's a good provocation, but we should be careful about that.

### Elizabeth

Fair enough. We have time for one more question, so I'll do a lighting round. We often try to close these roundtables with a question about hope, to leave us with a sense of optimism. Monica, that's really fundamental for your work. But instead of asking each of you about hope, I want to ask about politics, because I think it's important to combine hope with action. In North America right now,

there are significant movements for the decolonization of Indigenous lands, and reparations for generations of theft from Black families. So, I'm wondering what kinds of politics—I don't necessarily mean big-P electoral politics—are necessary to create the justice that we were talking about earlier on? How can we make some steps to go there?

**Rafael**

I'm living under the nightmare of Bolsonaro. To talk about hope, right now, is quite difficult for me. But anyway, I will keep the big politics at the front, because we are dealing with resources and so on. What Tania's work shows us is how big politics is important to resistance and also to the power of the capitalists. So, I would like to hear from you both on that, but I think we should keep big politics in the front line of our discussions, talking about the state and all that.

**Monica**

I often use the phrase "land, food, and freedom" as a part of what I hear movements talking about. But, before I get to the happy part, I do want to acknowledge that, for many, we have been disallowed the opportunity to connect to land. It's been through various forms of removal, dispossession, and even in contemporary examples of land grabs, folks use the word gentrification—though one of my farmers told me to look up the word gentry, and I stopped using gentrification—these are all acts of violence. Let's be clear: these are acts of violence.

For the organizations that I've studied and the ones with whom I work, this relationship to land is essential as a part of a freedom strategy. The National Black Food and Justice Alliance sees land as liberation. We could talk about conversations around Free the Land and what does that mean. It means that Black folks want a space that's free, like a safe space. How can we carve out a piece of this, so that we can speak freely, live freely, and come up with strategies around self-determination and self-reliance?

The National Black Food and Justice Alliance talks about their relationship to land. It says, "Historically affirmed by leaders like Malcolm X, land has been the root of dominion and as such, the root of revolution and self-determination. Displacement pre- and post-colonialism continues to deracinate our ability to take root, reclaim, liberate exploited land and call it home. Our connection to, relationship with, and access to land is an essential source of our healing, power, and ultimately our liberation. As land-based Indigenous people, Black

communities have a deep connection to the earth, with land, as a source of spiritual, economic, cultural, and communal grounding. We work to build healthy, ecologically sound connections to the land in all its manifestations.”

And that’s the work that gives me hope.

### **Tania**

As usual, I’m not very hopeful. It’s really hard, because, Monica, you’re dealing with the context of reclaiming and reparation, and I’m working in a context where this dispossession is happening now. It’s current, it’s ongoing, it’s rapid, it’s vast. It’s one thing to think about how you could reconstitute and reclaim, and I’m trying to figure out, how could you stop the train? There’s already so much that’s taken place, but how do you stop more and more and more of it?

That really comes down to the equation of land, labor, and capital. Under what political conditions is land so cheap, or virtually free, to the plantation corporation? That’s a domestic political problem, to do with the derecognition of customary land rights. Under what conditions is labor so cheap that plantations are so profitable? And that has to do with, again, a domestic configuration in which there are no significant unions, no protection for workers.

So, the hope, it’s sort of a weird thing. I was invited to Peru last year, and learned that a Malaysian plantation company has set up in the middle of the Amazon, and I was thinking, “Wow, I wonder why?” Because the infrastructure is enormous to get anything out of the Peruvian Amazon to the coast, you can imagine. But secondly, no Peruvian Amazonian will work for two dollars a day. And if that is—coming back to your point, Rafael, about global competition—the effective global price of plantation labor, established by the horrendously cheap price of labor in Indonesia, it’s awful for Indonesia, but most of the world is probably safe. Because these plantations will not be profitable. They will not be able to complete unless they have this unique configuration of horrendously cheap land, cheap labor, and a disempowered population.

So, it’s a really desperate situation, and it’s really hard to see how you change that configuration.

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The **Plantationocene Land Roundtable**, a discussion held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on September 12, 2019. From left: Elizabeth Hennessy, Monica White, Tania Murray Li, and Rafael Marquese.  
Photo by Rachel Boothby, 2019.

