



# Race, Land and Freedom

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## INTRODUCTION

'But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?' Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen! (Du Bois, 2016 [1920], 30)

In many areas of the southern United States, the per-acre value of Black land has increased exponentially over the last century. The value of Black lives, however, has not. The end of enslavement of Africans as chattel brought about new hopes for Black women and men to secure corporeal and economic freedom through the ownership of land (Du Bois, 1935). Post-war Reconstruction promised to fulfill those dreams through the redistribution of plantation lands to freed-people (Woods, 2017). In the Senate's Select Committee on Slavery and Freedom, where the bill establishing the Freedmen's Bureau (Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands) was debated, the view of some Senators that the Bureau be attached to

the Treasury Department captures the unfreedoms that endured beyond emancipation. Attached to the Treasury Department, African Americans would have found themselves jointly administered with 'abandoned' private property. That the Bureau was ultimately placed under the control of the War Department also highlights the ferocity of white opposition to Black freedom and foreshadowed the immense effort necessary to pursue Black equality.

Despite the struggles of the Bureau, Du Bois found that in Georgia alone, by 1874 'freedmen' owned nearly 350,000 acres. By 1920, African Americans owned 15 million acres of land and represented 14 percent of US farms. However, Black land, labor, and wages were quickly recaptured by the planter class through terrorism (lynchings, bombings, and mob violence), intimidation, as well as a variety of legal-economic regimes such as Black codes, voter suppression, sharecropping, and gang labor (Van Sant, 2016; Woods, 2017). One story occurring in

Hickman, Kentucky, uncovered by Barclay and Lewan (2001), demonstrates the conditions through which Black land was lost:

After midnight on Oct. 4, 1908, 50 hooded white men surrounded the home of a black farmer in Hickman, KY, and ordered him to come out for a whipping. When David Walker refused and shot at them instead, the mob poured coal oil on his house and set it afire. ... Walker ran out the front door, followed by four screaming children and his wife, carrying a baby in her arms. The mob shot them all, wounding three children and killing the others. Walker's oldest son never escaped the burning house. No one was ever charged with the killings, and the surviving children were deprived of the farm their father died defending. Land records show that Walker's 2 1/2 -acre farm was simply folded into the property of a white neighbor. The neighbor soon sold it to another man, whose daughter owns the undeveloped land today....

The overt racial violence that characterized slavery, Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow era has been repackaged in more subtle but no less destructive means in the post-Civil Rights era. Through a combination of trickery, legal loopholes, and systemic racial discrimination, developers and speculators have managed to swindle and out-manuever Black landowners to acquire millions of acres of land. Today, Black farms make up only 1 percent of rural landowners, 2 percent of farmers, and own a little over 1 million acres of US arable land (Love, 2017). Barclay and Lewan (2001) found that virtually all former Black-owned land, worth tens of millions of dollars, is now in the hands of whites or corporations. Increasingly, attention has turned to the role of Black land loss in the contemporary racial wealth gap in the United States (Newkirk, 2019; Rosenberg and Stucki, 2019).

In many cases, land dispossession has also led to a host of additional losses, including loss of freedom, mobility, and economic security. The struggles of the Reeles family demonstrate the ways in which forced land eviction can function as a mechanism for recapturing Black land, labor, and freedom. In 2011, Melvin and Licurtis Reeles were

jailed for refusing to vacate their land after it was unknowingly sold to developers. Their loss of freedom combined with constant surveillance on the disputed property resulted in irrecoverable losses to their family shrimping business, thousands of dollars in trespassing fees, forced sale of family assets and the necessity for some family members to move into low-wage labor (Presser, 2019).

Black land loss exemplifies how racial oppression functions as a prerequisite for, and outcome of, capitalism (Robinson, 2000). As Melamed (2015) argues, capital can only accumulate when it is flowing through and producing conditions of social inequality. Thus, expropriation, expendability, and racism create ideal environments for capitalism to thrive and function as key strategies for dividing the impoverished, working classes, and the dispossessed. Moreover, capitalism becomes a powerful medium through which white people gain and maintain power and privilege. Black land loss can be seen as a mode of accumulation by dispossession emerging from the post-Reconstruction project to restore the means of production and power to the white elite (Woods, 2017). As in the trials of the Reeles family, it can also serve to reproduce a racialized underclass, and thus relocate or dislocate blackness to its 'natural' place of landlessness and low-wage labor. This process outlines the parameters of what Robinson (2000) refers to as 'racial capitalism'. The view of capitalism from this perspective evinces a highly complex system of accumulation and simultaneous dispossession that is shaped by and reproduces racial inequity. This unequal distribution of resources and uneven development along racial lines underpins the capitalist economy.

If whiteness is, as W. E. B. Du Bois suggested, rooted in a belief of the ownership of the very earth as racial destiny, historical geography can play a part in uprooting this fatal delusion. All too often, however, the meaning of land is taken for granted, even in work which takes 'land' as its ostensible focus. To date, most historical geographies

that examine the interrelationship between race and land have focused primarily on landscape. Or, land ownership is taken for granted as an empirical dimension of racial inequality. Both approaches risk neglecting the consequential couplings of race and land-as-property formed through colonization and enslavement. In the process, a more expansive range of meanings and valences that coalesce around land remain obscured, or are instead assigned to the capacious yet sometimes-imprecise term 'landscape'. In this chapter, therefore, we focus specifically on the role of *land* in racial capitalism and geographies of liberation. By historicizing the politics of race and land, we seek to *ground* racial capitalism, emphasizing that racial capitalism is an extractive and death-dealing ordering of relationships between human and non-human life that obscures and forestalls the possibilities of land as liberatory and life-giving. We center land in the historical geographies of racial capitalism through a focus on the plantation regions of the US South and Caribbean.

Processes of racialized land dispossession, such as the theft of Indigenous lands and Black land loss, have been a defining feature of capitalism and its spread through the routes of colonial expansion. However, a focus on land expropriation told from a Eurocentric perspective, as Morgan, Farrales, and de Leeuw suggest in their chapter in this volume, often displaces 'those who may have experienced dispossession to the fringes' of Geography. Historical analyses that emphasize Indigenous peoples' stories of land evictions and the voices of Black families' ceaseless fight to belong on the land on which they toiled offer necessary correctives to the Eurocentric narration of capitalist and colonial development. Therefore, we stress that geographies of race and racism are not a footnote to geographies of land, but central to the ways in which land is imbued with racialized meaning and power. Examinations of the geographies of land must be situated in geographies of race, racial capitalism, and

freedom struggles if they are to be meaningful and attentive to justice. To ground our discussion, we first survey geographical work that has taken up the interwoven politics of race, land, and landscape. We then turn to work centered in Black and Indigenous studies, and Black Geographies, which have the potential to strengthen our understanding of the role of land in racial capitalism and everyday struggles.

## GEOGRAPHIES OF RACE AND LANDSCAPE

While land was the 'scene of the crime,' she was never the criminal. (Penniman, 2018, 8)

Landscape has long been a central analytic to dissect the ways power is articulated across space and time. As such, landscape is not simply a reflection of society's values but is an 'expression of power', and particularly of elite power. The very materiality of landscapes 'has the power to shape social life' (Allen, Lawhon, and Pierce, 2019, 1006). Its keen attention to the mechanics and mutations of power in a variety of contexts makes landscape analysis a useful frame for engaging with the relationship between race and land. Much of this work builds upon a trajectory of interpreting landscapes as perspectival, symbolic, and textual cultural products (Cosgrove, 1989; Duncan and Ley, 1993). Landscapes, in this tradition, are contested cultural products, and can serve to project power-laden imaginaries of racial and ethnic homogeneity onto the land (Daniels, 1993).

Landscape has also provided a key – yet, as we will argue, insufficient – analytic through which geographers unpack the relationship between racism and place. Examinations of race and landscape in human geography demonstrate that purportedly 'non-racial' landscapes are, in fact, profoundly racialized. In their influential piece on 'racism out of place', Kobayashi and Peake (2000) emphasized that the supposedly unmarked

landscapes of whiteness are constituted by racial exclusions, violence, and exploitation – the very means by which whiteness comes to ‘take place’ as a differential valuation of lives and places (Kobayashi and Peake, 2000, 393).

Landscape, therefore, has served as a key concept used by geographers to unpack racialized belonging and exclusion in relation to land and place (Schein, 2009). Geographies of race and landscape have examined themes as varied as civil rights memorials and the politics of commemoration in the US South (Dwyer and Alderman, 2008; Inwood and Martin, 2008; Wang, 2017), the racialized stigmatization of urban landscapes as derelict and abject (Andersson, 2017; Hackworth, 2018), and the ways in which the whiteness of rural spaces is signified and maintained (Duncan and Duncan, 2003; Knowles, 2008; Vanderbeck, 2006), just to name a few prominent themes. One distinguishing characteristic of many of these analyses has been an ability to simultaneously underscore landscape’s symbolic and material dimensions – landscape as a perspective, as a product of labor, and as a set of material relations surrounding land *as property* (Mitchell, 1996). As Mitchell and Sica assert in this volume, dominant landscape imaginaries can simultaneously conceal and reinforce material histories of alienation and expropriation. The racialization of landscape, Barraclough argues, becomes a powerful ideological and material force through which resources, wealth and power are channeled to certain spaces, ‘even as environmental hazards and unwanted land uses are channeled to others’ (Barraclough, 2009, 171).

Despite their contribution to studies of race and geography, landscape analyses have proven limited in their ability to highlight Black geographies ‘in a society that works to invisibilize blackness and black contributions’ (Allen, Lawhon, and Pierce, 2018, 1005). And while we are indebted to the insights and generativity of studies of landscapes and race, there is still a pressing

need for sustained geographical attention to the interrelations between *land* and race. Landscape analysis frequently fails to examine how the material and symbolic constitution of land as *private* property is deeply interwoven in racial inequalities. The representational dimensions of race and landscape do not hover over the land – rather, the formation of land-as-property is at once material and symbolic, and profoundly racialized. Even in otherwise critical research, however, the historical foundations of racialized and racializing assumptions about land and personhood can remain under-examined and insufficiently denaturalized. Land is not, naturally and inherently, reducible to private property or the foundation of the territory of nation-states, but discussions of land often leave these colonial and capitalist presumptions untroubled and unquestioned – though we review some important exceptions in the section which follows.

## COLONIALISM, ENSLAVEMENT AND LAND

This European opulence is literally scandalous, for it has been founded on slavery, it has been nourished with the blood of slaves and it comes directly from the soil and from the subsoil of that underdeveloped world. (Fanon, 2004 [1963], 96)

Drawing from Marx’s concept of primitive (or originary) accumulation, geographers often stress that dispossession is a precondition for capitalist relations of production. Industrial capitalism was dependent from its outset on plunder and enslavement, the theft of Indigenous lands, and the further entrenchment of racism as a system of control and division. Marx wrote of these processes: ‘The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the

commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production' (Marx, 1976, 915). Yet as Singh points out, Marx invoked primitive accumulation in the Americas as 'an indictment of capitalism, not an explanation of its dynamics' (Singh, 2016, 34). That is to say, slavery and colonization become part of capitalism's origin story, but are seemingly inconsequential to understanding how capitalism functions.

Similarly, when geographers focus on 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2005), they identify one of the central dynamics of racial capitalism, but often without the understanding that capitalism is fundamentally and *enduringly* dependent upon *racially-differentiated* expropriation of and control over land. In *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson presented a reconsideration of the very ontology of capitalism and racism through an in-depth examination of the origins of capitalism, viewed through Black theorizations and mobilizations for liberation. Rather than creating a homogenized working class through dispossession from the means of production, capitalism, from its very origins, depended upon and deepened racial distinctions (Robinson, 2000). The rise of capitalism was not a negation of feudalism, but 'evolved from it to produce a modern world system of "racial capitalism" dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide' (Kelley, 2000, xiii). Racialization is not an aberrant mutation of capitalism – rather, as Melamed puts it, 'capitalism is racial capitalism' (Melamed, 2015, 77). And as we will emphasize, struggles over land are at the heart of the historical development and reproduction of racial capitalism.

Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard provides a crucial reconsideration of Marx's theorization of accumulation by dispossession. In light of the history of settler colonialism in Canada, Coulthard emphasizes that Canadian colonial-capitalist development was oriented primarily toward securing *land*, rather than *labor*. Where Marx (and many

scholars in the Marxist tradition) understand the proletarianization and exploitation of workers as the central element of capitalist development, Coulthard emphasizes that 'dispossession, not proletarianization, has been the dominant background structure shaping the character of the historical relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state' (Coulthard, 2014, 13). This *ongoing* historical-geographical process is a central means by which racial conceptions are integral to the expansion and reproduction of capitalism. Settler-colonial relationships secure the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land and authority for self-determination (Coulthard, 2014; A. Simpson, 2014). Thus, the very relations of Indigenous life and survival are rendered as wastelands or wilderness, the uninhabited lands of no one, to be taken as property by white settlers and settler-colonial states.

Discourses of Indigenous 'savagery' in settler-colonial contexts serve to invalidate aboriginal rights to land, and present both *land* and its *inhabitants* as degenerate and in need of improvement (Bhandar, 2018). The interrelated doctrine of *terra nullius*, holding that Indigenous land is effectively uninhabited and therefore can be rightfully taken, served to position land as a 'free and fungible' commodity through the denial of myriad existing relationships and claims to land (Bhandar, 2018, 96). Emergent colonial (and geographical) technologies of the deed, the title, and the survey served to rationalize and codify dispossession through a regime of rendering *legible* white colonial claims to land, while denying or displacing Indigenous claims to land. In settler-colonial contexts, 'land is remade into property, and human relationships to land are restricted to the relationship of the owner to his property' (Tuck and Yang, 2012, 5). As Blomley (2003, 112) writes, the survey 'arbitrated between an acknowledged regime and those forms of property deemed to lie "outside" its frontier'. The survey thus 'serves as a form of organized forgetting' (Blomley 2003, 112), and a blueprint



for land speculation and theft. Speculation on unceded land fueled colonial-capitalist expansion: titles to property which had not yet been settled by colonizers frequently served to finance the very venture of colonization. The racialized and racializing logics of propertization therefore rendered land as a commodity ‘abstracted from any preexisting social relations or use, even before the arrival of the settlers’ (Bhandar, 2018, 94).

Both colonization and enslavement consequentially took form as racialized regimes of property: the former involving the seizure of land, the latter the appropriation of people as property (Harris, 1993, 1715). These processes are distinct, yet interrelated, as work in Black Geographies and Black Studies has stressed. In much of the Americas, the erasure of Indigenous lives and theft of Indigenous land went hand in hand with the institutionalization and rooting of chattel slavery and expansion of plantations (McKittrick, 2013). Indeed, early laws governing slavery in the Americas sometimes defined enslaved people as real estate, and not legally separable from the land of the plantations upon which they were enslaved (Copeland, 2010). Conceptions of Blackness as exchangeable and Black people as commodities anchor a colonial understanding of landscapes as appropriable and open to manipulation (King, 2016, 2019). ‘Black spatiality’, King writes, ‘is imagined as both outside of (ejected from living within) human space but necessary (in its negation) for its production’ (King, 2016, 5). Plantation and settlement arise ‘simultaneously through mutually constituting forms of violence’ (King, 2016, 13).

Thus, the institution of chattel slavery became central to colonization (Wolfe, 2001). Spatial alienation was central to the attractiveness of enslaved Africans for the plantations of the Americas. Colonist-enslavers believed that Africans could be prevented from escaping and establishing lives *outside* of enslavement and the plantation because they had no connections to the lands to which they were transplanted (Wolfe, 2001). As we

emphasize below, the enduring presumption and ambition of Black aspatiality and landlessness is a profound distortion (see McKittrick, 2006; Tuck, Guess, and Sultan, 2014). Crucially, however, the distinct racialization of Indigenous and Black peoples in the Americas was differentially linked to colonial conceptions of race and land.

While the racialization of Native peoples was oriented towards the settler-colonial desire to occupy and lay claim to land (hence, the impetus toward elimination, assimilation, and forced removal), enslavement is founded on depersonalizing human beings as property, as fungible commodities – not simply ‘labor’ (King 2016). Darius Scott describes this process as ‘a violently imposed spatial precarity’ (Scott, 2017, 3), and a ‘splintered emplacement’ (p. 16), as enslaved Africans were rendered landless, placeless, and ‘nowhere at all’ (Spillers, 1987, 72) in the transatlantic Middle Passage. The enslaved were moved from one plantation and were sold and traded at the will of the enslaver. This process of repeated separation sought to foreclose the establishment of affective ties between mother and offspring, siblings, and between enslaved lovers. When enslavers fathered children with enslaved women, these children were not considered offspring; rather, as property, they served to increase the profitability of the plantation operation (Douglass, 1845). Denied as legitimate progeny, they had no claim to the plantation or themselves. All the while, the enslaved person was to be an object with only loose kinship connections, fragile links to other Blacks based on proximity on the same plantation, but never as person. Affective and legal ties, claims, or rights to the lands on which they labored were denied and hidden.

As Harris (1993) argued, whiteness emerges as a form of property through enslavement of Africans and the seizure of Indigenous lands. As the racial dimension of chattel slavery was codified, the racial line between whiteness and Blackness ‘became

a line of protection and demarcation from the potential threat of commodification', and whiteness took shape as 'the attribute, the property of free human beings' (Harris, 1993, 1721). The seizure and settlement of Native American land, meanwhile, was supported by a legal and ideological regime which rendered only the cultural practices of Europeans as capable of establishing 'possession' of land.

The rule of law, Harris writes, provides 'not only a defense of conquest and colonization, but also a naturalized regime of rights and disabilities, power and disadvantage that flowed from it' (Harris, 1993, 1723). Colonial modernity is therefore, as Bhandar writes, characterized by a particular relationship between subjectivity and ownership. One's subjectivity is 'defined through and on the basis of one's capacity to appropriate' (Bhandar, 2018, 4). Thus the 'self-owning, earth-owning individual' (Harney and Moten, 2017, 83) – white, western, bourgeois man – is overrepresented as the normative center of humanity itself (Wynter, 2003). In place of the myriad relations which sustain life, the notion of land as individual property is born terminally conjoined with the subject of the self-owning, earth-owning economic actor. *Homo economicus* owns land and self and, because he (understood to be a white male) makes 'rational' and productive use of it, is the supposed foundation of national wealth and state sovereignty (Bhandar, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). The violence of enclosure, theft and dispossession are therefore rebranded as progress (see Woods, 2017) – what Harney and Moten term the '(anti)social contract' (Harney and Moten, 2017, 87).

### FATAL COUPLINGS OF DIFFERENCE AND PROPERTY

Whiteness as property has carried and produced a heavy legacy. (Cheryl I. Harris, 1993, 1791)

We have thus far emphasized that the regime of land as private property emerged through colonization and enslavement. In this section, we emphasize that property, to paraphrase Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002), is fatally coupled to racial differentiation in ways that can reproduce racism even when it is absent of spectacular instances of racial violence. As Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson (2014) emphasizes, settler-colonial dispossession of land is not just about land, narrowly defined, but a possessive and individualizing system of denying relations. The transformation of land into a commodity and alienable property 'renders invisible (and severely constrains) the ways in which people live, act, (re)produce the conditions of their existence, and relate to one another in ways not confined to commodity relations of ownership and exchange' (Bhandar, 2018, 98–99). The regime of law which underpins private landownership, what Blomley (2003) and others have termed the 'ownership model', is taken as neutral and apolitical, but sustains and replicates racialized imbalances in wealth and power (Blomley, 2003).

Simultaneously, dominant accounts and understandings which treat property as a spatialized *thing* serve to naturalize the power derived through property ownership. The central relationship becomes that between the *owner* and that which is *owned*, a relationship that serves to 'suppress our understandings of the undeniable and often differential relations between the owner and other people' (Blomley, 2003, 6). When land-as-property is naturalized and unquestioned, dispossession is concealed as it is actively reproduced (Coulthard, 2014). This is one of the key, if often unacknowledged, modalities of racism: the reproduction of racially-uneven power relations through the control of land, even as these inequalities are ordered and rendered natural through ideologies of racial hierarchy. Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes racism as:

...a practice of abstraction, a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies within and between the planet's sovereign political territories.

Racism functions as a limiting force that pushes disproportionate costs of participating in an increasingly monetized and profit-driven world onto those who, due to the frictions of political distance, cannot reach the variable levers of power that might relieve them of those costs. (Gilmore, 2002, 16)

As Gilmore explains, land as private property is a *relationship*: ‘to nonowners, to other pieces of land, to mortgagers, and to land that is not privately owned’ (Gilmore, 2007, 28). The power of the state to organize or abandon factors of production, she explains, is not a thing but a capacity, based upon relationships which change over time. In order to understand shifts in the exercise of state powers, and to explain how the prison industry became so central to processes of land and capital, Gilmore centers her analysis of the crisis precipitated by the recession of 1973–75 on the management of surpluses. Beginning in the 1980s, she argues, the Californian state ‘built itself by building prisons fashioned from surpluses that the newly developing political economy had not absorbed in other ways’ (Gilmore, 2007, 54). Through racially-charged fears of supposed surplus populations, crime – rather than the crises of capital and erosion of the social safety net – was cast as the chief political problem. This enabled California’s violent solution: building prisons on surplus land to resolve the crises of finance capital, while confining populations of people considered ‘surplus’ to the demands of capital.

Gilmore’s work shows that racism, as the ‘state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death’ (Gilmore, 2007, 247), is thoroughly imbricated in geographies of land, power, and profit. Land is the ground on which citizenship and belonging is negotiated, not least because political status is so historically entangled with ownership. As right to space, a right to land as property and as a form of capital authorizes the performative and material acts of attachment to place. Richard Schein observes that ‘In many

ways, the United States’ system of land tenure adjudicates the Enlightenment subject – the supposedly autonomous individual in a democratic society’ (Schein, 2009, 815). This normative coupling of difference and property can have life-or-death consequences.

This can be seen in the rural western United States, where racialized regimes of property coincide with a regional cultural politics (wrapped up in the Jeffersonian homestead principles) that obscures the original acts of dispossession in order to authorize anti-government land management militancy (McCarthy, 2002). The occupation of The Malheur National Wildlife Refuge provides a striking example. In 2016, a white militia took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon to protest for the rights of two white ranchers, who had been charged with arson for setting fire to Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land (Gallaher, 2016). White militia groups around the country rallied to their defense, and against the supposed tyranny of an overbearing federal government, as represented by the BLM. Of course, those mobilizing for the privatization of federal land ignored the fact that the federal government established white dominance in the West by seizing Indigenous land and demarcating it for white use. This history underwrites both federal and private land in the west, and was rationalized by discourses of *productive* land use. Gallaher notes that Cliven Bundy, one of the leaders of the siege, rejected the Burns Paiute tribe’s claim to the land, declaring that ‘we also recognize that the Native Americans had a claim to the land, but they lost that claim’ (quoted in Gallaher, 2016, 303).

Such insurgent politics thereby naturalize white supremacist racial hierarchies and the settler project, under the guise of local land management and productive use. The white racial claim to ownership and the justification of armed occupation as an act of re-appropriation is obscured by a discourse of government encroachment. The federal government, in this instance, becomes a ‘symbol



of the other' (Gallaher, 2016, 300), 'the province of *takers* (environmentalists, the poor, city dwellers) instead of makers (ranchers)' (Gallaher, 2016, 301). Whiteness, in this instance, operates as an exclusionary claim to land-as-property, which naturalizes land-based inequalities and justifies taking up arms against 'outsiders'. It is revealing to contrast the Malheur operation with the range of forces arrayed against the Water Protectors at Standing Rock that same year. Lakota and Dakota peoples and their allies, gathered on unceded Lakota land to prevent the destructive passage of the Dakota Access Pipeline across the Missouri River, were met with the repressive force of police, national guard troops, and private security forces. In a reversal of roles central to the settler-colonial national myth, the aggressor (extractive industry and the settler state) instead becomes the victim (Estes, 2019). This claim of victimization based upon the naturalization of land theft justifies, in countless contexts, the use of violence in defense of resource extraction.

A racialized logic of relentless improvement, control, enclosure, and extraction threaten, on profoundly unequal terms, the reproduction of life itself on a global scale (Davis and Todd, 2017; Davis et al., 2019; Harney and Moten, 2017). Is this a surprise when dispossession and violence are encoded as value and right, the properties of and in the individual? The ownership of land as property can only be seen as apolitical because of a systematic amnesia at the center of the ownership model. Nick Estes points out that 'settler narratives use a linear conception of time to distance themselves from the horrific crimes committed against Indigenous peoples and the land' (Estes, 2019, 14). At the same time, enslavement denied (or attempted to do so) African peoples their history and relations to land (Scott, 2017; Spillers, 1987; Tuck et al., 2014).

Since capitalism is dependent upon *ongoing* relations of racialized conquest (Bledsoe et al., 2019), the presumptions that

colonialism is a finished accomplishment and that Black people are placeless and landless is a historical amnesia that functions to naturalize relations of inequality. The invention of 'the Negro' was an antihistorical and antirelational construction (Robinson, 2000); mindful of the importance of African peoples' relationships to land and past, enslavers were eager to replace these relations with a naturalized fiction of historical abjection.<sup>1</sup> This historical amnesia, bolstered by racial assumptions, persists. Bobby Wilson shows that 'to avoid a critical discourse on race, the U.S. has become a society – a land – "without memory." History disappears; the past is dead and is represented to us in this post-modern world as a series of glossy images and commemorations' (Wilson, 2002, 32). The property model of land embeds this systematic forgetting and historical distancing, encoding historical and ongoing processes of dispossession as a seemingly self-evident foundation for contemporary social relations. Without an understanding of how property functions as a nexus of power and belonging, racial inequalities may be treated as the product of *differing human capacities* rather than racism as a death-dealing exercise of power. In the next section, therefore, we consider the role of land in Black struggles for freedom and collective development in the US South and Jamaica. These struggles offer diagnoses of the role of land-as-property in relations of unfreedom, and the necessity yet insufficiency of land in struggles for freedom, community autonomy, and collective flourishing.

## BLACK GEOGRAPHIES OF LAND AND FREEDOM

For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity. (Fanon, 2004 [1963], 44)

As the previous sections indicate, the liberal conceptions of property which undergird the

ongoing history of European colonialism, slavery, and capitalism are fundamentally racialized – and racializing. Particularly important here, the liberal notion of freedom was conceived as a negative one – freedom *from* slavery – where such liberty was (ostensibly) guaranteed to those considered white citizens and enabled their capacity to exercise exclusive ownership (of people, commodities, capital, land, and labor). The ownership of land is crucial to liberal freedom because it both allows for the fiction of individual autonomy, and serves as the material infrastructure of colonial-capitalist territorial control. Yet, as the quotes by Fanon, above, and Hamer, below, indicate, there is a counter-history to this liberal framing of the relationship between land and freedom – one where those dispossessed by colonial property regimes (Indigenous peoples, slaves, women, indentured servants, and even some poor whites) struggled to reconceptualize land, freedom, and their interrelation. From Martinique to Mississippi, the ongoing struggles for Black land and freedom share striking similarities and offer important lessons. In these Black ‘freedom dreams’ (Kelley, 2002) – which parallel in important ways the Indigenous land epistemologies described by Leanne Simpson (2014) and Glenn Coulthard (2014) – land is more than just wealth and individual autonomy. It is a communal space, a territory for self-determination. In these visions, land is necessary but insufficient for radical freedom – which is more than just *freedom from* slavery, but the *freedom to* belong, to live a dignified life.

### ***Black Land and Freedom Struggles in Colonial Jamaica***

The Black peasantry in the Caribbean in general, and Jamaica in particular, was born out of the struggles for land in reaction to the plantation economy. Land and the struggle for land are imbricated with value as much more than real estate. Human worth,

community, familial relationships, and social reproduction are as important as notions of land as property, capital, and commodity. Slave provision grounds – small plots – became the second sphere of a dual system of production; monoculture plantation production for export and production of diverse crops on the plot for local consumption. Work on the plot was driven by a sense of escape and freedom from the plantation that energized production for the subsistence of the Black community. The plots were envisioned by the planters as an easy way to reduce their provisions to the enslaved, but the effects escaped the initial vision of the planters. The food from the provision grounds did not simply nourish the enslaved body; production of the food on the provision grounds was an exercise of relative freedom. Freedom to have relations to land other than as chattel. Freedom to sustain oneself and community. Freedom to eat more than what would have otherwise been provided (Davis et al., 2019; Wynter, 1970). Selling the produce from the plots at the market familiarized the enslaved with the dynamics of the market. In Jamaica, for example, by the late eighteenth century the enslaved controlled one fifth of the national currency (Besson, 1987; Long, 1774).

However, access to plots of land, with the allowance to engage in market transactions to dispose of the produce of working those plots, did not equate to freedom. The plots cultivated by enslaved people did not *belong* to them and they, by law, could not even own their own labor not fruits of such labor since they themselves were considered property. Moreover, the local markets in which the produce from the plot were sold, were not immune to the fluctuating fortunes of sugar production. The production of the enslaved in one sphere – that of their unfreedom – affected their fortunes in another – the one of their relative freedom. As enslaved property, these Black farmers were not considered a true peasantry, but transitted to a ‘proto-peasantry’ or ‘proto-proletariat’ after

Emancipation in 1834, reconstituting the not quite peasants into peasants (Craton, 1994; Mintz, 1961, 1983). Yet even Emancipation and its requisite four-year apprenticeship, did not eliminate the paradoxes of land access and Black labor for the Black community on the one hand, and unfreedom and social immobility on the other. These tensions fomented the post-Emancipation uprisings that held a more expansive notion of freedom as the ultimate goal. From the 1849 uprisings in St. Lucia against increased taxes on provisions grounds, to the the 1862 Vox Populi riots in St Vincent for restored access to the provisions grounds, to the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica over long working hours and low pay, to the 1876 Barbadian Federation Riots for better wages, the Black masses recognized that the simple absence of legalized slavery was not in itself freedom (Craton, 1994; Holt, 1992; Mintz, 1979, 1983).

In Jamaica, the mid-nineteenth-century struggle to realize meaningful freedom and not simply greater accommodations in a system that preserved white supremacy was perhaps informed by the situation of the Maroons. The Maroons were a group of Taino Indigenous peoples and Africans who escaped enslavement beginning in the sixteenth century and formed communities in the mountains of the island. These relatively inaccessible areas were viewed as the wild frontier. A Taino 'Maroon' group had emerged in response to Spanish colonialism. The influx of Africans changed the composition of the Maroon groups. The influx was due to Black flight from the plantations and an influx of Blacks who had been freed by the Spanish to help ward off a British invasion in 1655. Most of the newly freed Blacks chose to join the Maroons who fought with the Spanish against the British. Particularly, in the 1680s, the now essentially Black Maroons engaged in a guerilla war against the British who had been successful in dislodging the Spanish. The Maroons controlled large swathes of land and were perhaps the

second largest group of landholders on the island after the Crown, if only by preventing occupation of land patented to white settlers by the fear of death they inspired (Campbell, 1988; Long, 1774; Watts, 1990). The Maroons had won concessions early in the eighteenth century with treaties in 1739 with the British that conferred a special status on the Maroons and gave them territorial rights to tracts of land forever (Carey, 1997; Kopytoff, 1976a, 1976b).

While not quite an Emancipation Bill for the Maroons, some of whom had been born in freedom in the interior of Jamaica, the treaties served a similar function. Maroons were mandated to preserve their freedom by capturing and returning enslaved people who fled the plantations. The Maroons were forced to assist in quashing Black revolts, even by other Maroons who had breached their treaties. In this way, the freedom the Maroons enjoyed was a freedom that was rather limited and contingent on other Black unfreedom. Further, the Maroons learnt that forever can be a short time when the British tried to retake their land and force their assimilation with the Maroon Lands Allotment Act of 1842 (Besson, 2016; Campbell, 1988; Carey, 1997; Kopytoff, 1976a, 1976b). The Black masses who had lived in the shadow of the Maroons no doubt saw in the history of the Maroons a case study of how the trajectory of access to land and privilege can arc away from abolition. Maroons illustrated and inspired contemplation of the meaning and possibilities of Black freedom and inalienable rights to land. In other Caribbean islands where there were no Maroons, and even in Jamaica, free people of color and skilled enslaved Black artisans also offered illustrations that relative privilege and exemptions from the worst kinds of bondage was not freedom (Holt, 1992; Petley 2005).

The localized post-Emancipation agitations by the Black masses across the British Caribbean, therefore, did not simply seek land or changes in conditions they experienced as laborers. These Black movements

demanded the dismantling of the white supremacist regimes of property more broadly (Craton 1994; Phillips, 2010; Potter et al., 2015). The struggles were for new relationships to land, for abolition of legalized and institutionalized Black oppression, for participation in the political process, and for rights instead of privileges. In their transformation from enslaved people to free agricultural laborers, the formerly enslaved masses received no assistance and were left to either move into dependent relationships with planters as wage laborers or tenant farmers or expand the scope of provision grounds in the rugged interior of the Caribbean islands (Besson, 2002; Mintz, 1979; Weis, 2006). The reconstituted peasants expanded the pattern of land ownership that was an alternative to the coastal, large-scale, monocrop pattern of white land ownership. Despite the challenges to Black access to land and meaningful Black freedom, the emerging peasantry 'was transformed not into a docile and mobile labor force, but rather into the beginnings of a thriving network of independent and relatively self-reliant local farming communities that consolidated the production of crops for Black households and local markets' (Phillips, 2010, 184).

Though a collective ethic of working the provisions ground had emerged as early as the plots had, by the mid-nineteenth century this ethic came to be strengthened by the fervent post-Emancipation affirmations of Black freedom, Black humanity, and Black community-building. From this post-Emancipation era and onward, the production and reproduction of community pivoted on collective decision-making about agricultural practices, creation of roads connecting the emerging interior villages and farm plots, reciprocal labor arrangements where farmers work together on each others' farm on a rotating basis for free, and the sharing of indigenous technical knowledge (Besson, 1984, 2002; Potter et al., 2015; Weis, 2006). This essential collective mediation of land and freedom was tied to spiritual practices

and knowledges such as obeah-myah, which became syncretized with Baptist Church orthodoxy. In this system, the Baptist Church facilitated the purchase of land for the Black congregation. But these Black congregants reinterpreted Baptist Christianity through their Afro-Jamaican knowledge systems, which were very much tied to the land (Besson, 2002). A system of family land developed from the church-communal purchase of land. However small and marginal in quality, family land or communal land, as land acquired by the ancestors against the dominance of the plantation bloc, is not merely about the possession of inalienable property, but has symbolic value. This system of family land ensured that two crucial and interrelated bases of identity – land and kinship – were given space. The land secured and preserved by this ethic serves as a central mechanism through which identity, belonging, and property has been articulated.

The momentum of the peasant struggles from the Emancipation era continued until the final decades of the nineteenth century, when economic depression brought on calamitous declines in commodity prices and the collapse of the plantation economies of the Caribbean islands. The Black masses sought work on railroad and canal construction in Central and South America and in the more successful Caribbean islands of Cuba and the Dominican Republic, which enjoyed favorable treatment by the United States. In addition to encouraging migration, the crisis created an opportunity for transnational corporations, namely, American Fruit Company (later United Fruit) to acquire Crown land cheaply and to redirect the agrarian metabolism of the Caribbean toward banana production. The control of land and influence on policy exerted by the corporations delayed meaningful land reform, choked the expansion of the peasantry, and reinstated a racialized regime of property, so that in Jamaica, for example, by the second decade of the twentieth century, United Fruit Company was the largest landowner on

the island (Holt, 1992; Hudson, 2017; Potter et al., 2015; Weis, 2006).

Not until the Great Depression and the British West Indian labor unrest of 1934–39 would land reform and the plight of the Caribbean peasant be given serious consideration again. The 1945 full ‘Moyne Report’ called for widespread land reform and political reform to redirect the productive forces of the Black masses (Critchlow, 2005; Edwards, 1972). The Report echoed the sentiments of the earlier Report of West India Royal Commission (1897: 18) which had concluded that ‘no reform affords so good a prospect for the permanent welfare in the future of the West Indies as the settlement of the laboring population on the land as small peasant proprietors’ (1897: 18). The reports, coupled with the foment of Black nationalist visions, the growing demands for Universal Adult Suffrage, and the formation of the West Indies Federation, pushed the Caribbean toward independence. The workers’ unions of the Caribbean became the bedrock of political parties and elected politicians in a post-independence era of land reforms, Black political leadership, and social development (Buddan, 2004; Critchlow, 2005; Phillips, 2010; Weis, 2006).

The Black land and freedom struggle in the Caribbean, as in Jamaica, has been one of a struggle between the plantation and the plot. From their experience of laboring in the two opposing spheres – plantation and the provision grounds (Maroon territory) – the wider Black population and the Maroons developed a vocabulary of freedom, sovereignty, belonging, and folk culture that informed discourses and performances of Caribbean Blackness (Wynter, 1970). However small or marginal the provision grounds were, as plots that were tied to the Black struggle against the domination of the plantation and its afterlives, they constituted spaces of Black performances of self-determination and personhood. Rather than an anachronism from an African past or a colonial holdover, family land remains an experimental space for what freedom and

property holding can mean. The history of struggle over land held by Blacks, secured either through treaty, squatting, purchase, or government allocation shows that access to land and possession of land does not simply lead to freedom. While land might have symbolic and material value, it is the conversion of land, materially and metaphorically, into a space for the enactment of notions of personhood, instantiation of kinship, and reinforcement of community that opens the doorway to meaningful freedom (Besson, 2002; Davis et al., 2019; Holt, 1992).

### ***Black land and Freedom Struggles in the Mid-twentieth-century US South***

Despite the significant differences in time and place, the Black struggle for land and freedom in the mid-twentieth-century US South shares striking similarities with the Jamaican efforts discussed above. Just as in Jamaica, the Black land and freedom struggle in what is now the US South is rooted in the Middle Passage and the moment of enslavement. In places of intense plantation cultivation, Black people outnumbered whites and other racial groups, beginning in the eighteenth century and oftentimes for long periods after Emancipation. Similarly, enslaved Africans developed intimate environmental knowledges and, in some places, cultivated a profitable market in fresh produce. After Emancipation, freedpeople across the US South also turned their attention toward gaining control over land as a key part of their struggle for autonomy and self-determination. Just as in Jamaica, this often took the form of collective property ownership which aimed to limit the alienability of land and foster community solidarity.

Of course, elite whites worked to counter the Black freedom struggle, recruiting poor whites and the capitalist state in their effort to reproduce the region’s plantation dynamics. In the 1870s and 1880s liberal reformers



across the United States withdrew what had always been partial support for Black freedom, enabling Jim Crow racial rule marked by *de jure* discrimination in social, political, and economic life across the US South. Enforced by the constant threat of lynching and violence, the political disfranchisement of Jim Crow severely limited Black struggles for land and freedom, but it could not extinguish them. In the middle decades of the twentieth century ‘the land question’ was rearticulated as a central part of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. This era witnessed a range of proposed solutions to the land question from within the Black freedom movement, which can be roughly divided into Black Nationalist, Black Marxist, and Black cooperative projects. While they often disagreed sharply and looked very different in practice, they shared a common goal of struggling to realize a radical freedom – not just freedom *from* slavery but freedom *to* belong, to live a dignified life. And land was central to each of these visions because it was seen as more than just a source of wealth or individual autonomy, but as the ground for collective self-determination.

Black Nationalist visions were often rooted in disillusion with the possibility of achieving freedom and justice in US cities. Many Black people who had fled the Jim Crow South in the early twentieth century found better jobs and more autonomous communities in Northern cities, but over the course of the 1950s and 1960s these spaces of possibility started to shrink. State-sanctioned police repression, racist ‘urban renewal’ projects, and white/capital flight hollowed-out thriving Black urban spaces. According to Russell Rickford (2017), in the late 1960s and early 1970s this reality combined with both disillusion in faltering federal racial reforms and inspiration from Third World decolonization movements to spur a Black Nationalist revival of interest in the land question. From the Republic of New Africa (which rallied around the slogan ‘Free the Land!’) to the

Congress of African People (which insisted ‘The land is gonna change hands!’), US Black Nationalists argued that a rural land base would provide ‘a place where Black people could be made whole’ (Rickford, 2017, 959–960; see also McCutcheon, 2013). Though Black Nationalist land projects in the mid-twentieth-century United States ranged from capitalist to separatist, Rickford argues that they were limited by ‘agrarian nationalism – a veneration of the countryside’ (2017, 957–958) that offered a simplified and inadequate solution: mass resettlement in the rural South. Whether imagined as communitarian or commercial, agricultural or industrial, the ideologues of Black Nationalist land projects in the 1970s asserted that rural life was more authentic and occasionally resorted to moralistic critiques of Black urbanites. ‘We shall re-educate those millions who we hope will soon come to the promised land’, argued the leader of the Republic of New Africa, ‘acculturating them to a creed and a pattern of life that will ensure that we shall bring the ruins of Harlem to the virgin expanses of Mississippi, the heartland of New Africa’ (quoted in Rickford, 2017, 971).

While Black Nationalism and Black Marxism were not entirely distinct political ideologies, the latter often critiqued the capitalist, separatist, and culturalist positions on the land question offered by agrarian nationalists. For Black Marxists, many of the agrarian nationalist projects were fatally flawed by their abstraction from the material realities of the urban Black poor and working class. South Carolina’s New Yoruba community of Black agrarian nationalists, for instance, banned electricity within the compound in an effort to restrict ‘Americanization,’ an ethic of self-deprivation that was not attractive to many Black urban poor and working-class recruits (Rickford, 2017, 976). Similarly, many Black Marxists insisted that there could be no meaningful freedom without an end to capitalist imperialism. ‘To talk about land in isolation and as an end, as nationalists do, is the height of naivete and reveals the blurred

misunderstanding of class forces', argued Earl Ofari, 'Until imperialism is destroyed there can be no independent farm, let alone an "independent" black nation' (Ofari, 1972, 41–42). Thus, for Ofari and other Black Marxists, rights to land were an important goal but would only lead to liberation if Black Americans could also join with other oppressed peoples to overturn the inherent inequalities of global capitalism.

In contrast to the majority of Black Nationalists and Marxists, the Black agricultural cooperative movements of the mid-twentieth-century US South were made up of rural Black farmers and farmworkers from the region. They were also not as deeply engaged in ideological debates, but were instead practical experiments in everyday struggles to survive rural white supremacy and enact a meaningful freedom. As Monica White (2018) shows, Black agricultural collectives like the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, the North Bolivar County Cooperative, and others recognized that land was necessary for the freedom to create collective economic systems and alternative political visions. For instance, Fannie Lou Hamer, a sharecropper and Civil Rights organizer from rural Mississippi, organized the 680-acre Freedom Farms Cooperative in 1969 as a way to support Black farmers and farmworkers who were threatened with eviction for registering to vote. Freedom Farms was organized around collective principles to support self-determination, with a pig share, community gardens, a sewing cooperative, affordable housing, and much more. Land was foundational to these principles of freedom through cooperative development. In Hamer's words:

In order for any people or nation to survive, land is necessary. However, individual ownership of land should not exceed the amount necessary to make a living. Cooperative ownership of land opens the door to many opportunities for group development of economic enterprises, which develop the total community, rather than create monopolies that monopolize the resources of a community. (Hamer, 2011 [1971], 142)

The Black agricultural cooperative movement in the US South was not interested in self-deprivation or cultural essentialism. As Priscilla McCutcheon (2019, 211) notes, Freedom Farms was an effort to build a Black agrarian geography 'that is reflective of struggle and the hope that can arise from it'. As such, the collective practices of Freedom Farms and other Black agricultural cooperatives of the mid-twentieth-century US South continue to inspire food justice and community resilience movements across the United States and beyond (White, 2018).

There are obvious and important differences between Jamaica and the US South, between nineteenth-century Maroon communities and twentieth-century Civil Rights organizers, but the similarities are also revealing. Across centuries and continents, Black people in the Americas have put control over land at the center of their freedom struggle. They have also oftentimes realized the limits of landownership under racial capitalism and worked to imagine and enact alternatives to liberal freedoms. These Black struggles suggest that radical freedom demands an engagement with the conditions through which property is implicated in unfreedom, and demonstrate that land is central to relations of individual and collective belonging.

## CONCLUSION

When W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that 'the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line', he was not simply issuing a prescient warning about race in America (Du Bois, 1903, vii). Instead, the 'color line' was (and is) closely tied to the colonial and capitalist politics of land. This problem, first articulated by Frederick Douglass, was popularized by Du Bois and other members of delegates of the First Pan-African Congress in 1900 in a statement which condemned the exploitation of Africa by European colonial powers (Walker, 1917). Du Bois returned to

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this theme in a 1901 essay which reflected on the deferred promises of freedom in the United States after the abolition of slavery. The promises of Reconstruction, true freedom, and full citizenship were inexorably linked to the redistribution of land and power. Du Bois wrote that:

The vision of landowning, however, the righteous and reasonable ambition for forty acres and a mule which filled the freedmen's dreams, was doomed in most cases to disappointment. And those men of marvelous hind-sight, who today are seeking to preach the Negro back to the soil, know well, or ought to know, that it was here, in 1865, that the finest opportunity of binding the black peasant to the soil was lost. (Du Bois, 1901, 361)

The radical vision of freedom entailed the redistribution of land as property, and redefinition of Blacks as not property, but property owners. However, this vision itself leaves unacknowledged the means by which those lands had been acquired and made property. The soil to which 'the Negro' now projected a hope was stolen ground. The unsettled white control of American land as property and province of whiteness 'as the ownership of the earth' (Du Bois, 2016 [1920]) haunts the attempts to realize Black freedom. Our discussion of Black claims to land, and land ownership as necessary for freedom is not meant to suggest a Black right to land over and against Indigenous peoples. In that approach, Black 'replacement' of Indigenous peoples authorizes Black right to land. Rather, a grounded discussion of race and land shows precisely the possibilities and limitations of ownership as the basis of freedom. If citizenship and full humanity are founded upon ownership (even *equal* ownership) of stolen land, they will always remain conditional, revocable, and premised upon continued dispossession (see Tuck et al., 2014).

Grounding our discussions of the historical geographies of racial capitalism in the material struggles for Black land and freedom helps clarify the stakes. As both inputs and products of racial capitalism, racial landscapes are not simply racially coded cultural

terrains but sites constituted through violent and mutually contingent processes of material dispossession and accumulation. Yet a grounded examination of racial capitalism shows in definitive terms that abolition is an ongoing struggle, and Black liberatory geographies persist despite the ceaseless war on Black freedom and belonging. By centering the politics of land and freedom, we highlight some of the ways that racial capitalism shapes Black geographies in the Americas – including the tensions of belonging that emerge from racial and spatial intimacies cultivated on stolen land. These Black geographies enact and anticipate the liberation of land and peoples from the dis/possessive logics of racial capitalism; that is, an end to 'the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!' (Du Bois, 2016 [1920], 30).

### Note

- 1 Here, our reading of Cedric Robinson's conception of racism and historical memory was developed in conversation with Theresa Rocha Beardall and Carrie Freshour, and is indebted to their insights.

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