



## THE PLANTATION COMPLEX IN THE COLONY OF PUERTO RICO: ON MATERIAL CONDITIONS

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### ABSTRACT

This essay develops a loosely understood Marxist notion of material conditions in light of the Caribbean plantation complex. The racial order endemic to the plantation and its continuation in post-emancipation contexts undermines any spurious base/superstructure distinction at work in an understanding of material conditions even in some accounts of racial capitalism. Material conditions are as ideological as they are “infrastructural” (Sylvia Wynter) in being ongoingly articulated by anti-black coordinates of sense. The ongoing actualization of the racial order of slavery is understood not as required by altered material conditions, but rather as *altering* material conditions. The essay considers the continuity of the racial order of the plantation through the contract in a specific site, namely, post-emancipation Puerto Rico.

Keywords: Plantation Economy; Marxism and Ideology; Anti-blackness; Puerto Rico; Sylvia Wynter.

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Frank Wilderson III wields a crucial criticism of the Marxist productivist paradigm when in his seminal “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” he argues that:

one could say that slavery—the ‘accumulation’ of black bodies regardless of their utility as laborers (Hartman; Johnson) through an idiom of despotic power (Patterson)—is closer to capital’s primal desire than is waged oppression—the ‘exploitation’ of unraced bodies (Marx, Lenin, Gramsci) that labor through an idiom of rational/symbolic (the wage) power: A relation of terror as opposed to a relation of hegemony.<sup>2</sup>

The demand of the enslaved, he clarifies, is not that of the worker—“that productivity be fair and democratic.” Rather, it is that “production stop; stop without recourse to its ultimate democratization.” “Work,” he sums up, “is not an organic principle for the slave.” It is thus not a grammar of exploitation, but of “suffering beyond signification itself, a suffering that cannot be spoken because the gratuitous terror of white supremacy is as much contingent upon the irrationality of white fantasies and shared pleasures as it is upon a logic—the logic of capital.” Despite attempts to grapple with the centrality of race, Marxist discourse and praxis that continue to center the dynamic of exploitation—of labor in general and wage labor in particular—cannot account for the anti-blackness of the logic of capital.

Wilderson’s claim runs deep, dislocating not only the centrality of the dynamic of exploitation hence production in Marx’s and Marxist analyses. It also displaces an analysis of forms of primitive or originary accumulation that centers forms of violent dispossession that subtend the owner/non-owner distinction that makes exploitation possible in the first place. The dynamic of dispossession is still fundamentally linked to the dynamic of exploitation, where unfree labor is the condition of possibility for the creation and capture of surplus value in production. For example, when Nancy Fraser speaks of the two-tiered account of capital in Marx’s *Capital*, exploitation and expropriation, she tends to argue that the end of dispossession is incor-

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<sup>2</sup> Wilderson III 2003, 229-230. See also Sorentino 2019.

poration into the cycle of exploitation, funneling value in all senses—including laboring bodies—to the circuit of production.<sup>3</sup> This account cannot account for the fact that the gratuitous violence of white supremacy cannot be reduced to such incorporation. It cannot account for the fact that this non-reducibility indexes the logic of capital.

To dislocate the dynamic of exploitation as the center of an analysis of the material—hence institutional, symbolic, libidinal—conditions of modern capitalist life is not, however, to abandon the exploration of the work of apparatuses that serve the aims of the “legitimate distribut[ion] of property and right,” as Angela Mitropolous puts it, reinstalling a racial order central yet not subsumable to a merely productivist understanding of the logic of capital in its ongoing alterations: “(contractual) exchange conceived as the form of relation; of productivity as its premise and promise; and of the subjective homologues of marital, wage, social, and fiduciary contracts.”<sup>4</sup> Turning to Saidiya Hartman’s fundamental *Scenes of Subjection* is here essential. “[I]n considering the metamorphosis of chattel into man catalyzed by the abolition of slavery,” as she writes, “emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjugation.”<sup>5</sup> Hartman thus elucidates “the role of rights in facilitating relations of domination, the new forms of bondage enabled by proprietorial notions of the self, and the pedagogical and legislative efforts aimed at transforming the formerly enslaved into rational, acquisitive, and responsible individuals.”<sup>6</sup>

The contract is crucial for the forms of subjection through which anti-black violence and racial dispossession are ongoingly adapted, updated, actualized, constituting altered material conditions. It is at this juncture—where labor, production, the wage are displaced as the ground and goal of the logic of capital yet where the work of the contract in modalities of racial terror and dispossession is explained—that I’d like to raise the question of the meaning of a loosely understood Marxist notion of material conditions.<sup>7</sup> The plantation complex, as an economic system inseparable from the institution of slavery and its “afterlives” (Hartman), is an important site in undertaking such an endeavor. The plantation complex, as Kris Manjapra notes, flourished in abolition’s aftermath, “modes of racial labor command

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<sup>3</sup> See Fraser, 2015, 2014, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Mitropolous 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Hartman 1997, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See especially Marx, *The German Ideology* and Preface to *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 1859.

endemic to it” thrived in its aftermath.<sup>8</sup> I’d like to explore the case of Puerto Rico, understanding the latter as one site for the consideration of the Caribbean plantation economy. With this, I track the ongoing adaptation or actualization of slavery’s racial order in Puerto Rico’s belatedly developed plantation economy and process of emancipation in the nineteenth century as key for its transformation with US intervention in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Exploring Puerto Rico’s specificity is not a philosophical exercise in building universals from below. Rather, drawing from Celenis Rodriguez Moreno’s work, my aim here is to provide a reflection on racial dispossession and terror as forms of *experimentation* by which the racial norm of bourgeois whiteness central to modern capitalist life is articulated and stabilized.<sup>10</sup>

The article is organized in two parts that sketch what will be developed in detail in my ongoing research on Puerto Rico. Part one explores some features of the plantation complex in the Caribbean, stressing the plantation as a site for the stabilization of the norm of whiteness—the human, the subject of right, the wage—by producing and experimenting with modes of subjection and terror that exceed but drive the logic of capital. The work of George Beckford, Sylvia Wynter, and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson is here decisive. Part two draws from Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, emphasizing the contract as key to the actualization of the racial order endemic to the plantation through emancipation. With this, and in addition to Francisco Scarano’s work on slavery and the plantation economy of Ponce, I examine Luis A. Figueroa’s counterhistory of Guayama, Puerto Rico. Despite the complexity of the racial makeup of forced peasant labor parallel to slavery, Figueroa shows, the forms of subjection of enslaved and forced laborers reinstall the racial order endemic to the plantation. The (re)organization of material conditions through the proletarianization of the formerly enslaved is crucial when tracking the “afterlife of slavery” in Puerto Rico under US colonial rule in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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<sup>8</sup> Manjapra 2018, 361.

<sup>9</sup> For a good summary of the different iterations of plantation economies throughout the advent and mutations of capitalist modernity, see Manjapra 2018. For an account of the plantation complex in the context of US intervention in the Spanish speaking Caribbean, see Ayala 1999.

<sup>10</sup> See Rodriguez Moreno ms. For classic accounts of the plantation as a site of experimentation of specifically capitalist modernity, see Gilroy 1995; Blackburn 1998; Mintz 1985. The role of experimentation in Puerto Rico has been vast, from experimentation on women’s bodies (birth control pill) to military technology (US tested agent orange in the big island and used Vieques and Culebra as a military practice site for decades) and GMO seeds (Monsanto) to juridical, financial practice (the Insular Cases, PROMESA). See, for example, Suarez Findlay 2000; Briggs 2002; and Ramirez de Arellano 2011; McCaffrey 2002; Toruella 2018; Martínez Mercado 2011.

## 1. MATERIAL CONDITIONS REDUX: PLANTATION ECONOMY

The secret of capitalism is to be found not  
in the factory but in the plantation.  
— Sylvia Wynter, *Black Metamorphosis*

One could say, in fact, that, socially, the Plantation  
is not the product of a politics but the emanation of a fantasy.  
— Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

The plantation complex, “honed and streamlined in the Caribbean from the 1500s to the 1700s,” as Manjapra explains, “mixed together ecological extraction, racism, colonialism, financial and mercantile capitalism, militarism, and agricultural science into a destructive, cellular form that metastasized from the Caribbean across the Global South after abolition [].”<sup>11</sup> It entailed a “racial system of land appropriation from indigenous peoples, and savage techniques of labor control of kidnapped and shackled labor migrants,” thereby enclosing land for monocropping (most significantly sugar) meant for exportation. From the eighteenth century onward, the plantation complex became increasingly mechanized, integrating technologies of the industrial revolution.<sup>12</sup> This promoted rather than diminished the need for agricultural labor and increased the demand for enslaved labor. Beyond production, finance was key for the organization of the plantation complex and its racial order. The plantation complex involved, as Manjapra also notes, “outlay of huge amounts of credit, which served as a lever for vast infrastructure projects of agroecological transformation, including land enclosures, irrigation works, railways, and the dredging of ports.”<sup>13</sup> Credit and the development of insurance and financial instruments, as Ian Baucom has shown, were fundamental in and for the trade of captured and enslaved Africans at the center of the plantation complex.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Manjapra 2018, 363. See also Curtis 1990; Mandle 1982; Mintz 1989; Best and Polanyi Levitt 2009; Reddock and Jain 1998; Beckford 1999, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Ayala 1999, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Manjapra 2018, 363.

<sup>14</sup> See Baucom 2005.

George Beckford argues that the plantation is the site of the experimentation of capitalism as well as an eminently capitalist institution, not merely its precursor or condition of possibility. "Plantations," he writes, "were the first factories in the field in a real sense."<sup>15</sup> Considering the future of plantation societies in either a capitalist or a socialist key, Beckford explores how the plantation, as a laboratory for the factory, dislocates Marx's views on historical sequence driven by the contradictions of material life, driven by, as Marx writes, "existing conflict between productive forces and relations of production."<sup>16</sup> Marx does not center the plantation in his key works, but he aimed to understand its significance for the capitalist mode of production and indeed, as John Bellamy Foster has documented, its status as a variant of capitalism and colonialism.<sup>17</sup> Marx's analysis, Foster stresses, emphasizes the key difference between the worker and the enslaved for the creation of surplus value in the plantation production process. It is not only labor power that is commodified in slavery, since the enslaved were considered means of production. Because the enslaved were both "capital assets and labor," calculation regarding profitability in light of the replaceability of human chattel (and indeed the securities entailed), pressure on securing a labor force itself, and obstacles of industrialization and "industriousness" (given refusal and revolt) "cast[s] aspersion on manual labor itself."<sup>18</sup> The point is that given that the enslaved is both value and the producer of value, the mode of production, regulation, and management in the plantation complex differs from industrial capitalism. The plantation is a laboratory of the factory, then, as Beckford argues, since the enslaved "were machines driven by paid managers (attorneys) and foremen and unpaid (i.e., in money) 'drivers'. And the factories for processing raw sugar, cotton, etc. were industrial concerns."<sup>19</sup>

Beckford's account of the plantation complex as site of experimentation for industrial and, I add, finance capital is key.<sup>20</sup> However, rather than understanding such experimentation in light of the strictures of the factory, I suggest, with Manjapra, that "[w]e understand something fundamental about how capitalism works when we consider what it does to working peo-

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<sup>15</sup> Beckford 2000, 339.

<sup>16</sup> Marx 1978, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Foster 2020.

<sup>18</sup> See also Mandel 1982, chap. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Beckford 2000, 339.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Baucom 2005 and Kish and Leroy 2015.

ple—how it fetches them, commands them, moves them, and socially reconfigures them.”<sup>21</sup> The plantation complex does not merely admit of race as an organizing vector—as that which distributes bodies along lines of exploitation or dispossession. In the case of the enslaved, both are operative. The plantation requires the invention of race: ongoingly actualizing modes of racial subjection and terror in light of the changing needs of capital, the needs of capital conversely ongoingly adapting to modes of racial subjection and terror.<sup>22</sup> In other words, what capitalism does to laboring beings requires ongoing update to its changing needs. Such ongoing actualization is of the racial order of slavery not in altered material conditions, but *altering* material conditions. The productive forces hence the relations of production that constitute the economic structure of society, to follow Marx, *and* its legal and political superstructure to which definite forms consciousness correspond should be understood, as Wynter suggests, as the “inextricability” of the “infrastructure” and the superstructure of capitalism.<sup>23</sup> “It is not the ideology (superstructure),” Wynter writes in *Black Metamorphosis*, “but the material base, the economic infrastructure, which is final determinant of the racism intrinsic to the capitalist system.”<sup>24</sup> Rather than following a spurious base/superstructure distinction, material conditions are as ideological as they are infrastructural. For Wynter, they are both “mechanisms for the extraction of surplus value.”<sup>25</sup>

In *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant speaks of the plantation as a “closed system,” “defined by boundaries whose crossing was strictly forbidden.”<sup>26</sup> It is an organization “formed in a social pyramid confined within an enclosure, functioning apparently as an autarky but actually dependent, and with a technical mode of production that cannot evolve because it is based on a slave structure.”<sup>27</sup> The plantation is structured around the aim of extraction without return, making possible the flight of capital while generating economic stagnation given the purported limits on industrial development resulting from slavery.<sup>28</sup> It entails predation, control, subjection. The

<sup>21</sup> Manjapra 2018, 364.

<sup>22</sup> See Best’s discussion of the plantation as a “total institution” in 1968.

<sup>23</sup> Wynter ms., 33. See Marx 1978, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Wynter ms., 33.

<sup>25</sup> Wynter ms., 692, 690.

<sup>26</sup> Glissant 1997, 64.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> See also Mandle 1982 for the argument concerning economic stagnation. Now, Glissant does not center political economy in his work. To be sure, he tracks how this form of relation—no-relation—nevertheless begets a world through creolization. For an important critique of Glissant, see Mendoza de Jesús ms.

point is that the social pyramid at the foundation of this economic system is a racial order. Glissant writes:

A pyramid organization: everywhere after 1848 the origin of the mass of slaves, then workers, was African or Hindu in the Caribbean; the middle level, managers, administrators, and overseers, were hired men of European origin, a small number of whom were replaced early in this century by people of color once again in the Caribbean; at the top of the pyramid were the planters, colonists, or *békés*, as they were called in the Antilles, who strove to constitute a white pseudoaristocracy.<sup>29</sup>

The plantation is a racial order, one irreducibly anti-black despite the racial complexity introduced by the move to indentured labor, for example, of Asian and South Asian origin, and other forms of coerced labor pursued before, throughout, and after emancipation. The basis of this racial order is anti-black, given not the labor power of the enslaved then coerced laborer, but the exchange value of the enslaved as both means of production and labor power in the trade.

In *Black Metamorphosis*, Wynter argues that “the plantation was the locus of the transformation of the tribal African into a Negro, a commodity (pure labor power).”<sup>30</sup> Unlike Marx, Wynter argues that the “main goods” or commodities of capitalist system is “slave labor power,” the price of which was determined by the capitalist market, “the same market which had fixed rates for free European labor.”<sup>31</sup> Being captured and transshipped to the plantations of the New World “began his metamorphosis from a human entity to a market one.” Being sold to the New World plantation, as she writes, “according to the labor power which he was estimated to be able to provide” provided the unit of calculation in the system of exchange—the “*pieza*.”<sup>32</sup> This “unequal exchange” grounds the “fiction of equivalence” in exchange of commodities, including the worker (waged labor).<sup>33</sup> It is unequal in collapsing rather than distinguishing use and exchange value, circulating as the measure for the circulation of the sine qua non commodity for the production of surplus value: labor. It is here, in exchange, rather than in production itself, Wynter thus argues, that the labor power of captured Africans was

<sup>29</sup> Glissant 1997, 64.

<sup>30</sup> Wynter ms., 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 33.



“devalued.”<sup>34</sup> It is here, she argues, that the “humanity” of the enslaved was literally devalued. It is not a reduction to labor power that Wynter’s text illuminates, however. Rather, it is the metamorphosis to blackness as rendered by and at the same time installing an anti-black world that structures the social pyramid in the plantation.

Slavery, the foundation of this pyramid organization, entailed not only the coincidence of value and the producer of value in the enslaved. It required the atomization and commodification of the body, not merely the capture of labor power beyond the wage, the outright interruption of kinship, and sheer terror as a mode of subjection.<sup>35</sup> The infrastructure of the plantation is thus just as much material as it is a “fantasy,” to return to the quote from Glissant that serves as an epigraph above, in generating, fine tuning, and trafficking with value in all senses including projection, pleasure, and the generation of desire. In *Scenes of Subjection*, introducing her seminal notion of “fungibility,” Hartman clarifies that the “relation between pleasure and the possession of slave property, in both the figurative and literal senses, can be explained in part by the fungibility of the slave—that is, the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity—and by the extensive capacities of property—that is, the augmentation of the master subject through his embodiment in external objects and persons.”<sup>36</sup> She adds that the fungibility of the commodity turns the captive into an “abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values.” Drawing from Hartman, I suggest that to say that the plantation is the emanation of a fantasy is arguably to say that in its organization it posits, sets into circulation, and makes operate coordinates of intelligibility, sense, meaning. These are dynamic coordinates of sense that imagine (hence materially install) a social order as a racial order, one fundamentally anti-black, thereby producing the normative universe at the center of modern capitalist life. This is not a matter of intelligibility merely epistemically understood, but of projection, pleasure, and the generation of desire driving unstable coordinates of sense in constant need of actualization, update, adaptation if this order is to be retained.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> See Patterson 1982.

<sup>36</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Baucom 2005 and his discussion of the epistemic universe necessary for and opened up by the role of finance in the trade, specifically in relation to insurance.

The plantation is not merely the product of a politics, or an economy, but of a fantasy in being a site of experimentation (producing, testing, circulating, updating) of the normative and libidinal coordinates of racial dispossession and terror, specifically anti-black, that indexes the logic of capital. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's notion of "plasticity" is indispensable here, as Rodríguez Moreno notes.<sup>38</sup> "Plasticity," Jackson writes, "is a mode of transfiguration whereby the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold: potentially 'everything and nothing' at the register of ontology."<sup>39</sup> Drawing from Stephanie Smallwood's work on the middle passage, Jackson explains that plasticity describes the "enduring project of Western modernity['s]" "use of black(end) flesh for 'probing the limits up to which it is possible to discipline the body without extinguishing the life within'."<sup>40</sup> For Jackson, the "black female flesh," more precisely, the "black(end) female," is the "matrix-figure" that makes possible the very "human-animal binarism" from which the "civilized subject" of liberal humanism endemic to capitalist modernity is constructed.<sup>41</sup> In a passage that Rodríguez Moreno cites to elucidate the operation of the race/gender norm in the Caribbean, Jackson writes that "the long arc of modern raciality reveals that the production of the 'civilized' subject of sex/gender and reproduction is a *retroactive construction* and dependent on modes of generating sex/gender and reproduction imagined as excessive to its proper domain or otherwise invisibilized."<sup>42</sup> The plantation, I suggest, might accordingly be seen as a site of experimentation that produces forms of control, terror, and subjugation through which the racial norm is retroactively posited. Whiteness is indexed to property, productivity, propriety through exercises of terror, control, and subjugation of specifically black bodies as well as through the contractual and legal binding of the emancipated person.

My point is this: the subject of whiteness—the sovereign subject, whether man or woman, the subject of right, whether man or woman, the subject of work, whether man or woman—is articulated through the fantasy

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<sup>38</sup> Rodríguez Moreno ms.

<sup>39</sup> Jackson 2020, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>41</sup> See *ibid.*, 4, 12.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 12.

(still material) of the plantation complex.<sup>43</sup> Whiteness as a norm, more precisely, is ongoingly defined, actualized, updated thereby stabilized and centered through positing, making operate, and updating racial dispossession (through law, through the contract) and outright terror (through white violence and the circulation of its images).<sup>44</sup> The plantation, then, can be seen as a laboratory beyond the organization of production, as Beckford argues, since the boundaries of the racial norm are ongoingly traced through practices endemic to the racial order of slavery, practices that necessitate and at the same time perpetuate the plasticity of “black(end) people.” This racial order depends on modalities of violence founded on but that exceed turning laboring bodies into commodities beyond the wage, then, generating a libidinal economy that subtends the normative order in its purported universality; in its exercise of power, control, and terror; in its generation of pleasure and desire; in its mimetic operation toward proximity in difference of the racial/gender norm.<sup>45</sup> This order is fundamentally anti-black, despite any racial complexity introduced by indentured labor and other forms of coerced labor in a pre and post-emancipation context, in creating the economic and legal bases of nonhumanity for the enslaved as the site for defining the boundaries of the humanity of the free. Material conditions, accordingly, are not merely sites of experimentation of a racial order. Their specific organization is owed to this experimentation, to articulating means and ends that establish it as a laboratory of the human in the nonhumanity of the enslaved.

In the context of emancipation, humanity as whiteness in the nonhumanity of the emancipated is in great part articulated by the wage form, binding anew whiteness and productivity, property, propriety through adapting modes of racial dispossession. Following one strand in Hartman’s text, the labor contract is one privileged site for understanding the continuity of the racial order of slavery post-emancipation. Rather than a general account, I’d like to explore one specific site, Guayama, Puerto Rico, in which the contract operates as key for the continuation of the racial order endemic to the plantation post-emancipation, despite the racial complexity introduced by modes of coerced labor parallel to slavery. Obfuscation of the anti-blackness that organizes such complexity is complicit in discourses of racial harmony and a view of *lo criollo* that have precluded an understanding of not only the contribution of afroboricuas to Puerto Rican culture, but the

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Rodriguez Moreno ms. Note Jackson’s discussion of “woman” as specifically distinct from “female.” “Woman” is constructed from the black(end) female. “Woman” is a product of the colonial project of Western modernity. See Jackson 2020, e.g., 8. See also Rodriguez Moreno 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Hartman 1997.

<sup>45</sup> See Rodriguez Moreno 2018.

dispossession and racial violence endured to this day. To be sure, the account of Guayama found in Figueroa's text is an account of the proletarianization of unwaged labor, enslaved and otherwise. One might argue that it corresponds to an account of what Marx understood as the formal then real subsumption of labor, leading to the US sugar corporation of the twentieth century and subsequent transformations in industries beyond the plantation.<sup>46</sup> However, the idea of subsumption erodes thinking the plantation as a laboratory of the racial norm. Instead of a defined system that captures or organizes labor processes to its image, the transformations in the material organization of life that installs a particular shape of capitalism should be seen as experimental practices that retroactively posit it as such.<sup>47</sup> As I have argued, the actualizations of the racial order that animates the material organization of modern capitalist life drives such transformations.

## 2. SCENE OF SUBJECTION: *CONTRATACIÓN*

It is, therefore, absolutely necessary that the *liberto* understand that from the moment that he begins to exercise the civil rights granted to mankind, he contracts the inescapable duty of respecting and complying with the laws that govern him; of respecting the authorities, his fellow citizens, property, and everything that is sacred among us; of forming, legitimately and religiously, a family; of supporting it with the product of his work; and of acquiring by habit the quality of being useful and industrious, to himself and to society as a whole.

These are the dispositions and advice that all the mayors should give to the *libertos* when giving them their citizenship passes.

—Quoted in Figueroa<sup>48</sup>

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman explains that

the paradox of emancipation involved the coupling of coercion and contract, liberty and necessity, equality and subjection. At the most basic level, this paradox was lived in planter opposition to a free labor system and the subjugation of free labor through contractual and extralegal means, the most notable examples of these efforts being compulsory labor schemes, [...] the predominance of non-wage labor,

<sup>46</sup> See Marx 1976, 1019ff.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Rodríguez Moreno ms.

<sup>48</sup> Figueroa 2005, 148-149.

vagrancy statutes that criminalized those not holding labor contracts, and the prevalence of white violence.<sup>49</sup>

Efforts to preclude access to land were of course also key.<sup>50</sup> The paradox of emancipation leads Hartman to an exploration of debt, economic and moral.<sup>51</sup> The “elasticity” of debt traverses economic, legal, and moral virtue and vice, legitimating modes of servitude, sanction, and punishment.<sup>52</sup> As a straightforward economic form, as in sharecropping, debt was fundamental to reenslavement after emancipation.<sup>53</sup> It also “fashioned obligation,” perpetuating forms of control and punishment. The paradox of emancipation did not merely express itself in forms of compulsion to work, then, but in the “transformation” of the formerly enslaved into “rational, docile, and productive working class—that is, fully normalized in accordance with standards of productivity, sobriety, rationality, prudence, cleanliness, responsibility, and so on.”<sup>54</sup> Proper conduct spanned from the economic to the hygienic.

The work of the contract in installing the wage form in the context of emancipation was coupled with the criminalization of “idleness.”<sup>55</sup> Such criminalization made possible controlling mobility, addressing refusal to be incorporated into contractual relations with former slaveholders, and undermining the ability to subsist outside of the wage relation.<sup>56</sup> With the aim of compelling submission to the wage form and appeasing anxieties about “black indolence” and refusal to work, laws treated idleness not only as improper but as dangerous and punishable. Beyond a process of proletarianization, then, I suggest, contractual relationality binds free labor (the wage) with whiteness through practices of renewed servitude, sanction, and punishment. The boundaries of the racial norm are further defined, stabilized, and centered through forms of subjection and control that service yet exceed

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<sup>49</sup> Hartman 1997, 127.

<sup>50</sup> See Ayala 1999.

<sup>51</sup> Debt makes the free subject responsible for its own fate in a system designed to undermine the now emancipated person. Hartman rewrites Marx’s quip on freedom in his account of the originary accumulation of capital. With the notion of “burdened individuality,” she notes the double bind of freedom as “freed from slavery and free of resources, emancipated and subordinated, self-possessed and indebted, equal and inferior, liberated and encumbered, sovereign and dominated, citizen and subject.” See Hartman 1997, 117.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 126. As Hartman puts it, “responsibility entailed accounting for one’s actions, dutiful suppliance, contractual obligation, and calculated reciprocity. Fundamentally, to be responsible was to be blameworthy.”

<sup>53</sup> See e.g., Kish and Leroy 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Hartman 1997, 127.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

incorporation into the wage form. However briefly, I seek to explore how these processes unfolded in Puerto Rico, where capitalism can be said to be installed belatedly, and not fully, with the plantation complex in a pre-US invasion context in which slavery coexisted with coerced labor, in which emancipation coexisted with the derogation of a coerced labor code.<sup>57</sup>

In Puerto Rico, the sugar plantation flourished after the successful slave revolt in St. Domingue in 1791 and, as a result, the founding of the Republic of Haiti in 1804, and after Great Britain's end of the slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery in 1833.<sup>58</sup> Despite the fact that Spain agreed to heed Great Britain's ban on the slave trade in 1817, illegal importation of enslaved Africans continued through 1845 in the Spanish colony of Puerto Rico. Enslaved labor remained essential to the plantation in Puerto Rico throughout as well as after abolition in 1873. A coerced labor code, *Reglamento de Jornaleros*, that aimed to form a dispersed peasant population into a viable working class coexisted with the intensification of slavery in the mid to late nineteenth century.<sup>59</sup> The complexity at hand was successful in actualizing rather than qualifying the racial order of slavery, further defining, stabilizing, and recentering the racial norm. The forms of racial subjection and racial terror tested in the plantation informed coerced labor. Conversely, the coerced-labor code informed forms of servitude, sanction, and punishment in the transition to wage labor in the context of emancipation.

Scarano's landmark study, *Sugar and Slavery in Puerto Rico: The Plantation Economy of Ponce 1800-1850*, dismantles the view that slavery had been a "minority affair" in Puerto Rico and that it had a "humane" face.<sup>60</sup> In addition to documenting the rise of the enslaved population unaccounted for in official documents, he exposes the labor and living conditions of the enslaved as well as the financial structure of the plantation economy also tied to the illegal trade. Refuting false notions about slavery in Puerto Rico furthermore entailed tracking the justification of slavery in Spanish colonies in the context of "international agitation" over the expectation of British abolition, especially from often-cited sources.<sup>61</sup> George Flinter's work, heavily

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<sup>57</sup> The US invasion in 1898 and the introduction of sugar corporations capitalized on the already proletarianization of the coffee *hacienda* in the highlands and the sugar *ingenio* in the coast. The *central*, the automatized US articulated sugar plantation, exacerbated dispossession of *libertos* and day laborers whose incorporation into wage labor delinked them from land that they did not hold but that they nevertheless lived. See Cesar Ayala 1999.

<sup>58</sup> For the impact of the Haitian Revolution in Puerto Rico 1981, esp. chap. 1. See also Díaz Soler 1998); Morales Carrión 1983; Pinto 2012; Belmonte Postigo 2018.

<sup>59</sup> See Gómez Acevedo 1970.

<sup>60</sup> Scarano 1984.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

cited within the scholarship on plantation labor, argued that “the convenience and happiness that black slaves enjoy in this island and in all the Spanish colonies” resided in the fact that enslaved people were treated humanely in observance of laws; that enslaved people generally owned property and lived in family units; and that any rise in the population was not due to new importation of enslaved people or introduction by new colonists.<sup>62</sup> The reality was of course very different. Illegal trade of enslaved Africans made possible, for example, a 623% population growth of enslaved people in Guayama, 296% in Ponce, and 288% in Mayagüez from 1812-1828.<sup>63</sup> Victor Schoelcher, French abolitionist, counters Flinter’s work in a 1841 visit where he states that “41,000 overworked, mistreated slaves of Puerto Rico, by themselves and without any significant collaboration from the peasantry, produced at least two-thirds as much sugar as the 78,000 slaves of Martinique.”<sup>64</sup> Flinter also documented the “exceedingly brutal” treatment of the enslaved.<sup>65</sup>

Still, by 1840, a “labor supply problem,” as Figueroa puts it, was at hand.<sup>66</sup> Scarano explains that despite planter preference for enslaved labor, given its profitability, there existed a large peasant population, “a potential supply of nonslave labor,” that was not an “effective labor supply.”<sup>67</sup> This was especially the case given that land to “own” or “squat” was readily available, and that subsistence farming was preferred over plantation work, even if there indeed was some waged peasant labor on plantations throughout.<sup>68</sup> This “largely mixed-race” “semi-nomadic” population, as Figueroa explains, also briefly settled on farms or ranches in exchange for cultivation or ranching services since early colonial times. This early practice of the “*desacomodado*” or “*agregado*,” Figueroa argues, owning or squatting land, and the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 27; I am following the text quite closely.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>65</sup> Scarano quotes Schoelcher citing Cornelius Kortright: “One is tempted to praise the charity of our planters when one sees how unhappy creatures bowed under the great evil of slavery are treated in Puerto Rico. Completely given over to the discretion of the master, their work is only limited by his pleasure. At harvest time one sees the blacks going to the mill by three o’clock in the morning and continuing until eight or nine o’clock in the evening, having as their only compensation, the pleasure of eating cane. They never even get twenty-four hours of respite during the year. On Sundays and feast days they still have to go to work for two hours in the morning and often for two hours in the evening” (ibid., 29).

<sup>66</sup> Figueroa 2005, esp. 73.

<sup>67</sup> Scarano 1984, 32.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 33.

“Crown’s inability or unwillingness to foster the foundation of *pueblos*,” created a “highly dispersed” potential agricultural work force.<sup>69</sup> In addition to forming and disciplining a suitable workforce, Scarano argues, coercive measures were imposed to “hold down the price of wage labor” and, more significantly, “to force *jornaleros* into a slavlike productive system on the plantations.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, with the 1849 *Reglamento de Jornaleros*, the Spanish colonial government sought to “force smallholders and landless peasants to become plantation day laborers.”<sup>71</sup> This coerced-labor code forced peasants with access to less than two acres of land to “hire themselves out” as day laborers (*jornaleros*) in sugar plantations. A *libreta de jornal* (day laborer workbook) functioned as a record of labor and moral conduct.<sup>72</sup> It tracked movement between municipalities. Being found without the *libreta* was punishable by eight days of public labor at half pay. The *libreta* system, like slavery, was abolished in 1873.

Although the *libreta* system, according to Scarano, ended the circuit of sugar and slavery in Puerto Rico, as noted above, only a fraction of laborers in the sugar plantation were day laborers.<sup>73</sup> Puerto Rico’s leading sugar plantations continued to rely on enslaved labor as the “medullary nerve of production.”<sup>74</sup> Despite the fact that the enslaved population represented a small minority of the total population (10%, according to Scarano), “the wealth of its dominant class rested largely upon this small minority.”<sup>75</sup> The relation between these distinct forms of labor in relation to the racial order endemic to the plantation can partly be discerned in the work of the contract. As intimated above, forms of coercion articulated by the *libreta* system were implemented in the treatment of *libertos*, while coerced labor had been articulated in light of the modes of control, subjection, and indeed terror of enslaved labor. This relation among both labor forms manifest in post-emancipation *contratación* aids the maintenance through adaptation of the racial order endemic to the plantation. The racial complexity introduced by peasant labor actualizes rather than qualifies the anti-black order of the plantation. Post-emancipation *contratación* is one site in which the humanity of the free is redefined and recentered by installing the nonhumanity of

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<sup>69</sup> Figueroa 2005, 33.

<sup>70</sup> Scarano 1984, 34.

<sup>71</sup> Figueroa 2005, 73.

<sup>72</sup> See Dietz 1989, 45. See also Gómez Acevedo 1970.

<sup>73</sup> See also Scarano 1984, introduction.

<sup>74</sup> Cited in Figueroa 2005, 51.

<sup>75</sup> Scarano 1984, 121.



the emancipated person in the contract itself. This redefinition and recentring further binds whiteness to productivity, property, propriety.

Figueroa's study of Guayama, "one of the three most productive sugar areas of nineteenth-century Puerto Rico," is helpful here. Although *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* contains theses that require criticism—most notably, an argument against Orland Patterson's notion of alienation as one of the defining features of slavery—it provides a "counterscript" of Puerto Rico's supposed racial exceptionalism given the purported minor impact of slavery.<sup>76</sup> Guayama, like Ponce, troubles this fantasy. It challenges the view that slavery had been a minority affair or a humane institution. Likewise, it shows that the process of proletarianization was not a peaceful process in which planters affirmed free labor. Neither was it accompanied by a process in which enslaved people were able to access freedom through manumission and *coartaciones* (self-purchase) and access land through autonomous economic activity. Rather, emancipation and proletarianization were processes of legal, economic, and social control devised by planters in negotiation and confrontation with the Spanish crown.<sup>77</sup>

The Abolition Law of 1873 freed the enslaved but imposed a transition system of forced government-supervised labor contracts until 1876.<sup>78</sup> The 1873 *Reglamento para la Contratación del Servicio de los Libertos* is significant. It laid out thirty-seven articles that imposed strictures on the transition to waged or semi-waged work. Within the process of *contratación*, heterogeneous arrangements were made, from "regular day laborer work contracts for wages, with or without nonmonetary compensation, to work in exchange for training as artisans to sharecropping arrangements."<sup>79</sup> The *Reglamento* established that the contract was to be negotiated individually, "barring any sort of collective bargaining on the part of the libertos."<sup>80</sup> The contract was

<sup>76</sup> Figueroa explains that Puerto Rico's exceptionalism was rooted in being "not a society based on an export agricultural economy mounted on the importation of African slaves and consequently Africanized in radical and substantive terms, but a society dominated by white (or nearly white, light-skinned mulatto) settlers and their descendants, a veritable pearl in a sea of blackness. This vision, furthermore, would have as one of its fundamental tenets a clearly racist view of its surrounding, largely African, Caribbean neighbors, haunted by the specter of slave and free-colored insurrection and the extermination of an Occidental settler society" (2005, 37).

<sup>77</sup> For a discussion of *colonos* or planters in Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, see chap. 5 of Ayala 1999. For a classic discussion of abolitionism, see Williams 1944.

<sup>78</sup> See Figueroa 2005, chap. 3. The 1870 Moret Law freed enslaved people determined to be over sixty years old and infants born after September 17 1868.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

also to be formalized in town halls, in the presence of town officials and a protectorate or delegate, the "*síndico protector de libertos*."<sup>81</sup> There were three functionaries islandwide. The *síndico* was a "carryover" from slavery, when "the slaves' interests were supposed to be looked after by a prominent local figure appointed for that purpose by the municipal council."<sup>82</sup> The *síndico* in fact represented pro-slavery interests. Breaking contracts or refusing to enter into contracts was fined, payment drawn from *peculio* or personal savings accumulated from autonomous economic activity and, if none were available, from daily wages. These were also grounds for incarceration.

Attempts to reinstate the *libreta* system, specifically around vagrancy laws that regulated movement and controlled conduct, also perpetuated the racial order of the plantation in this context. Refusal to work, an exercise of free will of *libertos*, was bound to "roaming," "licentiousness," "libertinage," "vagrancy," and "prostitution."<sup>83</sup> Forms of indebtedness that exceeded state-imposed coercion around debt and around housing was also key, as in plantations across the Americas. Planters sold basic goods in credit, demanding that they be repaid in labor. Housing in old *cuarteles de esclavos* (barracks) retained this purportedly free labor force on the plantation. Restriction on mobility across municipalities was a site of contestation of planters. Casting the exercise of the *liberto's* will as an "inability to comply with obligation," "lack of obligation," "absolute lack of responsibility," "relaxation of family and civil ties in which he lives," planters argued that the formerly enslaved compromised the production process. Beyond the interests of the government in tracking this new work force for purposes of taxation, for example, these restrictions further defined, consolidated, entrenched the racial norm. They bound whiteness, property, productivity, and propriety through the contract, in the wage, beyond the creation of surplus value in the workday.

These material and legal practices stabilize whiteness, experimenting with and thereby producing the nonhumanity of the emancipated person in adapted continuity with modes of subjection and control in a plantation structured around the institution of slavery. As Figueroa shows, these practices were crucial to the construction of the "mythical figure of a white male

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 125.

*jíbaro* living in the interior mountains [...] as the essence of Puerto Ricanhood.”<sup>84</sup> More than reifying whiteness, more than disavowing an afro-Caribbean foundation born from the plantation, the *jíbaro* is the product of the actualization of the racial order of the plantation through post-emancipation experimentation. It is not the roaming peasant, then, but the enslaved African and the emancipated person who define the boundaries of the racial norm. Such boundaries are drawn not through exemplarity but through material hence ideological extraction, an extraction that covers over an adapted hence perpetuated material, symbolic, and libidinal violence. Figueroa’s material counterhistory speaks not of disavowal, therefore, but of economic, legal, political, and social practices of policing and punishment, access to land, and sheer terror that construct whiteness as indexed to work, property, propriety. Stereotypes about vagrancy, idleness, and refusal to work that still today seek to control and eradicate resistance to and flight from the world of capitalist modernity are sites of the ongoing actualization of the racial norm.

### CONCLUDING REMARK

A view from the Caribbean plantation complex unsettles the spurious infrastructure/superstructure distinction reproduced by critiques of political economy even within some literatures on racial capitalism. Ideology is just as much infrastructural in organizing life through anti-black coordinates of sense. The imperatives of capitalism, that is, the material organization of life in capitalism, are articulated through those coordinates. Anti-black forms of sense, of intelligibility, track altering material conditions that include the gratuitous terror of white supremacy as endemic to yet not exhaustively explained by a productivist paradigm. The organization of labor in a post-emancipation context, the installation of the wage form through the contract, unfolds in light of those anti-black coordinates of sense. The contract is one site for exposing the actualization, the update, of the norm of whiteness constructed through practices of control and terror in slavery now nestled in a post-emancipation context. The “form where form shall not hold” of black(end) people, specifically of the “black mater(nal),” as Jackson shows, continues to be the site of experimentation hence norm construction through the reorganization of labor in the wage.<sup>85</sup>

Glissant’s image of the plantation complex as a closed system is an important key for tracing its continuity in “the prison, the city, the resort,” to

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>85</sup> See Jackson 2020, 39.

quote Katherine McKrittick.<sup>86</sup> The plantation economy continues in tourism, mining, finance (tax havens), adapting its structures of extraction, predation, terror, and punishment. Interests of the metropolis as well as corporations, international institutions, and powerful individuals perpetuate its racial order by organizing material life in the region anew. This actualization is more precisely the adaptation, the update, of a racial order that alters material conditions. In Puerto Rico, the plantation economy today continues through forms of capture made possible by a debt crisis.<sup>87</sup> The history of resistance, refusal, and revolt in Puerto Rico is long and deep, however, challenging the processes that I have only begun to discuss.<sup>88</sup> In his counterhistory of Guayama, Figueroa discusses forms of resistance, revolt, and refusal of enslaved and emancipated people: from labor organizing to setting plantations on fire, from shifting municipalities to seeking housing and work in urban contexts (mostly available to women) away from the agro-export economy. Any counterhistory of Guayama, or Puerto Rico, for that matter, requires centering black resistance, undermining fantasies of whiteness that drive official and otherwise naturalized histories. This history of resistance, refusal, revolt likewise continues today not only in altered material conditions—the new plantation manifested in a debt crisis through which the colony and its racial order is perpetuated. One hopes that the continuity of resistance alters those conditions.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Katherine McKrittick writes: “The plantation thesis uncovers the interlocking workings of modernity and blackness, which culminate in long-standing, uneven racial geographies while also centralizing that the idea of the plantation is migratory. Thus, in agriculture, banking, and mining, in trade and tourism, and across other colonial and postcolonial spaces—the prison, the city, the resort—a plantation logic characteristic of (but not identical to) slavery emerges in the present both ideologically and materially. With this, differential modes of survival emerge—creolization, the blues, maroonage, revolution, and more—revealing that the plantation, in both slave and postslave contexts, must be understood alongside complex negotiations of time, space, and terror” (2003). Cf. Benítez Rojo 1989.

<sup>87</sup> See Zambrana 2021.

<sup>88</sup> See, e.g., Baralt 1981; Nistal Moret 1984; Picó 1983, 1993, 2000 for the many ways jornaleros avoided the libreta system.

<sup>89</sup> I am deeply grateful to Celenis Rodríguez Moreno for her work and for the many conversations we have shared about the arguments of this essay, as well as to two anonymous referees for helpful suggestions.

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