

DISCUSSION

Exhaustion in the Plantationocene

Comments on Guno Jones 'Plantation logics, Citizenship Violence and the Necessity of Slowing down'*

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Thanks to the organisers for the invitation to comment on Prof. Guno Jones' dense and important reflections on Anton de Kom's *Wij Slaven van Suriname/We Slaves of Suriname*, and on his lecture in February 2023. Because this article is based on my comments of this lecture, I prefer to use the 'you-form', addressing Guno Jones.

I would like to highlight two themes. The first regards your suggestion that 'the plantation' has an afterlife in how the 'Empire's unwanted citizens' get worn out under neoliberalism capitalism. I would like to connect such exhaustion to the notion of the 'Plantationocene', which has been put forward to address how our age is one in which not only part of humanity is being worn out (in connection to their dehumanisation as 'means of production' – *human resources*), but in relation to which we could speak of ecological exhaustion on a planetary scale. Secondly, I would like to bring up a question about the role of religion in Citizenship Violence, connecting your reading of De Kom and his rendering of the Dutch colonial situation with Mohamed Amer Meziane's reconstruction of how religion and race were intertwined, or even co-constitutive in the French-Algerian colonial context.

1 The Wearing out of 'Empire's Unwanted Citizens' of Multispecies Assemblages and of the Planet in the Plantationocene

In your lecture, you address your own and others' wearing out, the wearing out of those you call 'the Empire's unwanted citizens'. You refer to those challenging dominant discourses and practices as well as to the refugees on the borders of the Global North. You note: 'I see exhaustion all around me', adding that this is about a structural afterlife of the plantation, touching all, because it is the ground for the conception of the subject under neoliberalism. Taking Anton de Kom's anti-colonial and anti-capitalist critique one step further, you argue, we can see that a 'redistribution of the fruits and means of production is not enough, we should question the cultural valuation of production as inherently good. The valuation of production, accumulation, acceleration, competence, competition, self-aggrandisement, and excellence is untenable, depletes us all'. Referring to

* I would like to thank Professor Jones and the organisers of the symposium for the opportunity to comment on his important article.

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Tricia Hersey's notion of grind culture, which she sees as 'one of the afterlives of the exploitation and commodification of racialized bodies during slavery and under racial capitalism', you argue that 'we should claim the right to slow down, wander aimlessly and rest. Not as ways of recharging to become even more productive, but because our bodies do not belong to capitalism. We must reclaim our bodies and finally leave the plantation behind'. How central the plantation was to the genealogy of capitalism has become an insight beyond plantation and Black studies only in the last decades, while it had been addressed by Black thinkers long before. One of them was Anton de Kom, as you draw out in your lecture, who addressed all the layers of exploitation of enslaved and indentured workers, as well as the exploitation of the natural world in Suriname, already in the 1930s.

In the field of current studies concentrated on the intertwinement of human practices with geographical change, and with interspecies interdependencies and ecological destruction, the concept of the Plantationocene has been suggested as one of the alternatives to the more broadly known notion of the Anthropocene. The latter notion has been broadly criticised for making people who had and have no part in causing ecological destruction responsible for it, while hiding the most evident causes of global warming from view.¹ Geographer Jason Moore proposed an alternative to the 'Anthropocene' with the notion of the Capitalocene, which is concentrated on the 'cheapening' of nature and humans as part of it in 'the web of life' under capitalism.² However, to draw more attention to the fact that plantations were conditional to and also laboratories for the expansion of capitalism, Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway have proposed to talk of the 'Plantationocene' and an engaging scholarly debate has followed since. With this concept, they drew attention to how fundamental exploitation and exhaustion of living Nature and the Earth are under capitalism. As Donna Haraway has formulated it:

So, when I think about the question, what is a plantation, some combination of these things seems to me to be pretty much always present across a 500-year period: radical simplification; substitution of peoples, crops, microbes, and life forms; forced labor; and, crucially, the disordering of times of generation across species, including human beings. I'm avoiding the word reproduction because of its productionist aspect, but I want to emphasize the radical interruption of the possibility of the care of generations and, as Anna taught me, the breaking of the tie to place – that the capacity to love and care for place is radically incompatible with the plantation. Thinking from the plantation, all of those things seem to be always present in various combinations.³

- 1 See Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London and New York: Verso, 2015) and Jason Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).
- 2 Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.
- 3 Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, *Reflections on the Plantationocene. A conversation with Donna Haraway & Anna Tsing moderated by Gregg Mitman* (Madison: Edge Effects Magazine & University of Wisconsin, 2019), 5.

I would like to suggest that exhaustion is a fundamental aspect of the Plantationocene in the understanding that Haraway offers, when she notes how the plantation causes the ‘radical interruption of the possibility of the care of generations’, and of ‘the capacity to love and care for place’. A fundamental exhaustion of living beings and the Earth through being forced to produce, disjointed from rhythms of regeneration, care and self-care, through extractivism and exploitation, is not an accidental characteristic of the plantation and the Plantationocene, but is fundamental to them, it is the organic dimension of surplus value.

Some critical authors have brought up that in their discussion of the Plantationocene, Haraway and Tsing, concentrated as they are on drawing attention to the multispecies agency and the agency of ‘things’ in the web of life, and getting away from the Nature/Culture divide, fail to pay enough attention to the deep racial inequalities which were fundamental to the plantation. This has been argued, for example, by geographers Janae Davis et al., when they underline the need for ecological justice, arguing that ‘the current multispecies framing conceptualizes the plantation largely as a system of human control over nature, obscuring the centrality of racial politics’, as well as that ‘the emerging Plantationocene discussion has yet to meaningfully engage with the wide variety of existing critiques of the plantation mode of development’.⁴ With you, then, Prof. Jones, I would like to suggest that exhaustion, and a detailed analysis of all the factors causing exhaustion, such as De Kom’s, merits serious attention among such critiques.⁵

Bringing together Black radical thought and political ecology will be an important step for such work. The political ecologist Malcom Ferdinand, in his *Decolonial Ecology*, for example, proposes to introduce the notion of the ‘négroçène’, as ‘the other side of the Plantationocene’, naming the ‘era when the productive work of the “Negro”, directed at expanding colonial inhabitation, played a fundamental role in the Earth’s ecological and environmental changes’.⁶ ‘It describes *an unjust way of inhabiting the Earth* where a minority feed upon the vital energy of a majority

4 Davis Janae, Moulton Alex, Van Sant Levi and Williams Brian, ‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene, ... Plantationocene? A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises’, *Geography Compass* 13/5 (2019) e12438: 1.

5 A more recent work concentrated on the fatigue caused by racism, is Mary-Frances Winters, *Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2020).

6 Malcom Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology; Thinking from the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 58, 60.

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that is socially discriminated against and politically dominated.⁷ Ferdinand's emphasis on domination as the 'feeding upon the vital energy' indicates how central exhaustion is for the plantation, and by extension, in the Plantationocene.

To bring this more to the legal context, it could be important to connect exhaustion to conceptions of property. I would like to suggest a way of thinking here. As you remind us in your reading of De Kom, Prof. Jones, in chattel slavery, the binary inherited from Roman law, between 'slavery' and 'freedom/citizenship', was taken to an extreme in the typically modern way. A legal binary was created between 'citizens', defined as 'legal persons', owners of their own body and with rights to property, and those not having the ownership of their own body, and neither of the things around them.⁸ The rights of citizens, then, and the right to property specifically, had in themselves a specific way of being violent, because the rights of some human beings as 'citizens' implied the rightlessness of other human beings and all others considered 'things', the division into *persona* and *res* in slavery being the terrible legal language for this violence. And this is, if I understand you correctly, Prof. Jones, what you call the 'citizenship catastrophe', which caused that non-citizens were not only excluded from, but were also produced by these legal categories, as 'things', or, as Ferdinand puts it, as 'off-worlders whose energy is forcibly dedicated to fuel the lifestyles and ways of inhabiting the Earth of a minority while being denied an existence of their own in the world'.⁹

As Anton de Kom analysed, once defined as 'property', humans and non-human animals alike are being defined as the opposite end of the binary between 'persons' and 'things'. They are literally understood as 'things' with which the owners can do as they please. The 'right to property' then included a nearly unlimited 'right to exercise violence' and to punish and torture the enslaved, who were opportunistically considered 'subjects' when related to 'crime', and considered 'objects' when related to will and work. Cheryl Harris discussed this unlimited license when discussing

7 Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology*, 59. As Grâce Ndjako has emphasised in the context of the translation into Dutch of Frantz Fanon's *Peau Noire Masques Blancs*, it is important to note that the French word *nègre*, surely important for Ferdinand as well, who wrote his book in French, has a connotation of slavery, more so than in English and Dutch. The word *négrier* means 'slave-trader'. The words *noir* and *Noir* came to be used as alternatives in the *négritude* movement, by Fanon and many other Black people. See Grâce Ndjako, 'Fanon: gevangen in de witte blik', *De Nederlandse Boekengids* 5 (2019), available at: www.nederlandseboekengids.com. This connotation in French could have been a reason, Ndjako argues, to leave the word *négrocène* untranslated in *Decolonial Ecology*; as it is precisely the connection with slavery and forced labour that Ferdinand evokes with his notion of the *négrocène*. The translation may be offensive to readers who could otherwise feel very close to the important book by Ferdinand.

8 As Guno Jones reminds us, in response to questions from members of Parliament regarding the nationality status of the enslaved population in the colony, the Dutch government stated in 1821: "They [the enslaved] are the property of their masters: *non sunt personae sed res*" (They are not persons but chattel, things), quoted in Eric Heijs, *Van vreemdeling tot Nederlander. De verlening van het Nederlanderschap aan vreemdelingen 1813-1992* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1995), 34. This is the legal expression of what Césaire called 'thingification', which he equated with colonialism, see Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 42.

9 Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology*, 60.

‘whiteness as property’: ‘Having a thing’, when understood as ‘property’, is connected to having it at one’s license, as a legal rule, and such having characterised the white habitus and partly still does. One does not have the responsibility to explain how one treats one’s property, or this responsibility remains very limited in any case. This is what Harris called ‘the unfettered right to exclude as a legitimate aspect of identity and property’.¹⁰

Today, we increasingly realise that the property imaginary still works when we regard people as ‘human resources’ in relation to their labour power, in how we treat non-human animals in intensive agriculture, and with regard to the natural world. The property imaginary and the laws and habits connected to it still play a huge role in the imaginaries of citizens from the Global North, in relation to their habits, countries, wealth, tax systems, etc. Increasingly, with the growing pull to the right of the right, citizens stick to this imaginary without questioning the huge inequalities that still follow from it. This imaginary is exacerbated through neoliberal and far right politics across the US and Europe. German sociologists Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen call this the ‘Imperial Mode of Living’, and Brenna Bhandar has analysed the deeply colonial dimensions of the ‘lives of property’.¹¹

The unjust way of inhabiting the Earth, in Ferdinand’s words, rises out of the work of Anton de Kom. His many evocations of the natural world in Suriname, and the lives and resistance of the non-citizens in *We Slaves of Suriname* are surely more than a background for Citizenship Violence. They show the possibility of a way or mode of living where ‘having’ is not about ‘property’, exhausting people and the natural world, but one where ‘having’ can be something like being connected without domination, shared among all.

2 Race and Religion

Secondly, I would like to address the relation between race and religion in Anton de Kom’s view, and by extension, your own analysis of whether and if so, how, religion plays a role in Citizenship Violence in the Dutch colonial context and in Suriname in particular. I would be interested to know a bit more about the role of religion and of religious conversion in Citizenship Violence. In a recent reconstruction by philosopher Mohamed Amer Méziane, in the French-Algerian context of the second part of the nineteenth century, a secular colonial approach came up around the 1850s where policies of non-conversion, ‘respect of religion’, replaced a Catholic, conversion oriented colonialism. However, non-conversion turned into a specific form of racialisation: Muslims ‘could’ not only remain Muslims, but they were also being defined as Muslims, and therefore, even if they could become ‘French’ by nationality, they could not become citizens. In 1870, after the conferral

10 Cheryl Harris, ‘Whiteness as Property’, *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993): 1733.

11 Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, *The Imperial Mode of Living; Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2021); Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property. Law, Land and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2018).

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of citizenship rights to the Algerian Jews, a new legal category was established, where the colonial subject, the *indigène*, became defined as *musulman français non citoyen*.¹² This category formed part of the institution of the so-called *indigénat* and the codification of Islam in terms of the *Code de l'Indigénat*. Thus, the *indigènes* were excluded from French citizenship, in connection to the use of the category of 'nationality' and making religion into the distinguishing factor for 'assimilation' into citizenship. Méziane argues that this was the moment when Islam became racialised, and being 'musulman' became a status with entangled legal, racial and religious dimensions. The muslim became imagined as 'inconvertible', not only to Christianity, but to citizenship (and 'civilisation').

In tandem with the absence of rights and the differential treatment of citizens and nationals, violence against the *indigènes* became normalised. It was justified in terms of the defense of secularity against religious fanaticism. 'Islam' thus became the religious area that was seemingly 'protected from' proselytism and conversionism because the French state took up modern, liberal and secular policies, but at the same time, it also became the category to indicate the 'location' of the political resistance of the indigenous population against colonial occupation. As a consequence, being a Muslim became deeply securitised: not their political orientation, but their religious 'fanaticism' came to be seen as the cause of their resistance, as one of the co-effects of their being excluded from citizenship.¹³ Thus, 'religion', thoroughly complexified under secular expectations, became increasingly intermingled with an imaginary and legal institutionalisation infused with race and social hierarchy. I would like to suggest that for understanding more about Citizenship Violence, it could also be important to know more about how these processes worked in the Dutch case.¹⁴ For example, could De Kom's infrequent mentioning of Calvinism have not only moral, but also legal consequences regarding the definitions of citizenship with intermingled racial-religion dimensions?

12 Mohamad Amer Méziane, *Des Empires sous la terre. Histoire écologique et raciale de la sécularisation* (Paris: La Découverte, 2021), 110-120.

13 Méziane, *Des Empires sous la terre*, 110-120.

14 A lot of work in this area has been done by Michiel Bot, see for example 'De natiestaat als olifant in de kamer van de postkoloniale rechtsstaat. Over nationaliteitsdiscriminatie, institutioneel racisme en het recht', *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor de mensenrechten/ NJCM-bulletin* 47 (2022): 78-94.