Review of *Plantation Politics and Campus Rebellion: Power, Diversity, and the Emancipatory Struggle in Higher Education*

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*Plantation Politics and Campus Rebellions: Power, Diversity, and the Emancipatory Struggle in Higher Education* brings together a collection of inquiries that foreground the framework of “plantation politics” to highlight the pervasive nature of anti-Black racism in higher education spaces. This review traces the conceptual import of plantation politics and the theoretical and praxis-oriented questions the book raises. After a brief summary of the sections that animate the overall book, this review offers a Black feminist reading of “plantation politics” to suggest a possible opening gesture rather than critique.

*Plantation Politics and Campus Rebellions: Power, Diversity, and the Emancipatory Struggle in Higher Education* emerges ahead of what has been often labeled “unprecedented” times. This notion is often evoked rhetorically to reflect the socio-cultural and affective milieu evident in the disorientation of living in a global pandemic and living among others who have experienced its effects as the brutal reproduction of a global system of racialized capitalism and settler colonialism. Exposed within this global crisis is not only the perpetuation of Black death at the hands of the police, but the sustainment of antiblack violence across institutions, within law and social policy, and between our collective fantasies and desires. During this time, the world also witnessed the ongoing struggle to protect and defend Black life and livelihood against these regimes of terror through the work of community organizers and multiple protests, mutual aid practices, and forms of political education. What is it about a global crisis that exposes antiblackness in areas such as infrastructure (e.g., housing), medicine and healthcare, and schooling? And why is familiarity with the unprecedented intensified when analyzed through the lens of Blackness? This book would respond perhaps by suggesting that these manifestations lie within the *politics* of the plantation itself.

Noting calls for decolonization and abolition in curriculum, pedagogy, and higher education writ large, this book deploys the concept of plantation politics to describe the relations of power incipient in plantation management and racial slavery as a framework for theorizing antiblackness in higher education. Following the work of various higher education scholars engaging in the specificity of antiblackness and anti-Black racism, *Plantation Politics and Campus Rebellions* is notable in that it signals one of the first extended meditations on antiblackness in higher education in its collection of writings and engagements across disciplinary type. Further, what this text makes most crucially clear in its investment in mapping the power relations of plantation is an invitation to center the actions of Black people directly—often painfully absent in scholarship that attends anti-black racism. And for that reason alone, the text deserves more than credit. To set out this agenda, the editors organize the book around three broad themes: “Capitalism and the Colonial Vestiges of White Supremacy in Higher Education”, “Institutional Rhetoric and the False Promises of Diversity and Inclusion”, and lastly “Resistance and Repression: Campus Politics and Legislative Acts of Anti-Blackness”. What follows is a brief sketch of these themes with illustrative examples from the corresponding chapters.

In Part I, *Capitalism and Colonial Vestiges of White Supremacy in Higher Education*, the eponymous framework of plantation politics is traced for the reader through the architecture of U.S. chattel slavery as a social system. This section historicizes racial slavery to argue that it relies on the subjugation of Black people through mechanisms that maintain and secure the on-tologizing of Blackness as always, already abject—a requirement for realizing global socio-economic relations. Put differently, the plantation landscape is an allegory for contemporary race (as socio-cultural) and
capital (political-economic) relations that structure modernity. Under this frame of plantation politics, it is anti-Black racism specifically that enables a critique of race and its orders (through hierarchy) and how difference within this racial ordering corroborates the asymmetrical violence Black people experience ensuant from the allochronic pull of the plantation towards society’s present. Presupposing this, Part I examines how plantation politics informs pedagogy (as it traverses both the Caribbean and United States) and curricular desires. For example, this book highlights the fugitive acts that emerge at the site of the plantation to better characterize the tactics that lead to the disciplinary formation of Black Studies on college campuses. This section of the book makes evident plantation politics at the level of curriculum and teaching, one, and two, as an embedded ethos of institutional administration (the founding of Historically Black Colleges and Universities as a prescient example offered in the text) and general administrative practices. What makes these vestiges of chattel slavery in higher education so insidious, perhaps, is the inability to discern a line between the two or rather any difference at all.

The series of chapters in Part II, Institutional Rhetoric and the False Promises of “Diversity” and “Inclusion” elaborate the necessity of plantation politics as a framework in their attention to the (mis)appropriation of and capture of inclusive language and diversity rhetoric despite the ubiquity of anti-Black violence on campus. For example, one author (dis)articulates the senior diversity officer position by suggesting that this role reincarnates the same power structures that gave rise to plantation drivers. Similarly, a separate chapter makes the case that inclusion language despite its veneer operates within the logics of exclusion (as inclusion) so that these logics obscure the naturalization of race as a category of difference. Yet, this chapter also demonstrates that immanently within the plantation landscape is the possibility of resistance. As a cadre of authors attest, antidiversity work becomes an integral maneuver against the false promises of inclusion and towards a decolonizing higher education. Taking this imperative of thought (and practice) as a way through (and out of) the plantation, some authors in the book draw parallels between the Black Cultural Center as and the underground railroad itself as modes of fugitive action.

In the final section of the book, Part III, Resistance and Repression: Campus Politics and Legislative Acts of Anti-Blackness, the question of ethics (political-juridical) comes to bear in the now of the plantation-cum-university. This section makes most apparent the ethical dilemma we all inherit in the in the afterlife of the plantation landscape. How do we contend with resistance in post-plantation higher education? Or rather, how does racial slavery frame how modes of resistance manifest on college campuses today? Broadly, Part III wrestles with cyclical politics of resistance and student activism in the wake of anti-black racism and the ensuing repression of these insurrectionist acts. And here I lean on the multivalence of repression as a dominating force (of violence) and that which is “expressed” only through and as an effect of psychic resistance. What this section foregrounds is the impossibility of disentangling violence from racial Blackness. In addition, this section highlights the paradox of (higher) education as constitutive of anti-Blackness and conversely as a site of rebellion to perhaps make the University more livable and curriculum more relevant. This is illustrated in this section’s interrogation of confederate statue removals on college campuses, the university response to resistant acts such as these, and how within this tension, students gesture towards otherwise spaces and the emancipatory horizon of higher education altogether.

It is at the level of ethics, however, that I argue the text presents a closure through its insistence on the horizon of an educational freedom that might exceed the necessity of resistance. I suggest we read this closure as a symptomatic disavowal of what animates the socio-economic bend through which racial slavery is understood in the development of this plantation politics framework. Specifically, I ruminate on this text’s emphasis on the horrific profitability of Black/Slave labor. To lay this out, I revisit the propulsive, yet cogent and haunting conclusions Saidiya Hartman delineates in her monograph Scenes of Subjection. In this text, Hartman lays the groundwork for her often cited (as evidenced in this book) analytic of the afterlives of slavery (Hartman, 2007). Hartman (1997) recalls the abolitionist John Rankin and his charges against the institution of slavery as a primal scene that further rehearses how antiblackness structures our fantasies of justice, emancipation, and even abolition. What is haunting about Rankin’s abolitionist desire is not a betrayal of (his) conscious interest or dedication to the abolition of racial slavery; it is that for the suffering of the slave to be made legible within (his) fantasy, the empathic identification with the slave must be severed in the process. Thus, the condition that necessitates rebellion (i.e. chattel slavery) is made subjacent to the affective world that emplots Rankin himself outside the captive position of the slave. In simpler terms, antiblackness within the psychic economy of fantasy and desire, facilitates the capacity to feel itself. Blackness must be refused to ful-
fill the fantasy that emancipates the slave from conditions of enslavement. Said a different way, it is the fungibility of the Black body and its capacity to be harnessed for any end(s)—towards justice, emancipation and slavery, and abjection and abolitionist claims—that inaugurates plantation politics. This foregrounding of the psychoaffective dimension of slavery becomes so crucial for a theory of plantation politics that attends to both racial subjugation and claims around coalitional resistance.

It is not so much that this book desires to escape the plantation through recourse to coalitional, emancipatory futures (although this theme runs throughout). It is rather the unconscious desire to distance the university from the quotidian terror of the plantation (towards one that privileges the spectacle of violence) that also enacts a turn away from the normativity of absolute domination that provides the condition of possibility for the neoliberal university itself. In this way, the text hesitates to sit with what engenders not only the politics of the plantation, but the hold of the ship, the prison, the healthcare system, the school, and the university—the irreducibility of antiblackness to the social and economic let alone psychoaffective. What makes antiblackness and the politics of the plantation subsist is occluded from the figuration of the plantation-cum-university via the socioeconomic frame. Because of this tension, I too wait at the plantation’s edge praising this book for its opening in the field of higher education research an urgency to think with and through the analytic of antiblackness. Yet, I also ruminate here (as I invite the readers of this book to do as well) on what might also by virtue of its circulation within the knowledge economy (of which I am also situated) repeat a desire of and for the plantation itself?

Thus, I’m left with, delightfully, more questions than answers after approaching this book. What does a theorization of plantation politics from the socioeconomic perspective and the psychoaffective terrain do to enrich our conceptual considerations of the power dynamics that sub tend current socio-symbolic order? And revealed in this thinking, can we illuminate a different relation to the educational prerogatives set before us that configures abolition on a trajectory of creation and openings rather than a projected closure? Plantation Politics proffers a path through which we might assemble a new line of questions for higher education scholars that aspire towards the incommunicable.

References


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1 I borrow this phrase from Reid-Pharr. For a reading of his commentary on the state of the plantation in relation to the University. see Reid-Pharr, R. F. (2015). Primitive at the plantation’s edge. Callaloo, 38(3), 583-588.