Society for the Anthropology of Work

Working the Plantationocene

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A small group of young white North American farmers has migrated to Brazil to grow soybeans. These mostly unmarried men finished college and wanted to start their own farms; not happy to work on their parents' farms and unable to purchase land on their own, they were inspired by glossy pages of farm journals that showed lines of combines harvesting massive fields of soy. Reporters declared that ideal growing conditions and an agribusiness-friendly government made farming easy in Brazil. The farmers toured farms in Western Bahia, near the city of agribusiness, Luis Eduardo Magalhães, and at the frontier of soybean production in the Brazilian Cerrado, returning with dreams of ten thousand soy fields. They courted investors, often retired and active farmers from their home counties, and purchased massive tracts of flat, cheap land.

Their farms occupy upwards of thirty thousand hectares of farmland, employ from 50 to 160 farm workers, and feature vast plantings of soy, cotton, and corn. The majority of workers are field hands and cotton gin workers, although the farms also employ agronomists, tractor drivers, accountants, lawyers, and sometimes public relations officers. While these farms are not plantations, they resemble plantations in many ways: they hire a large, racialized workforce that lives on the farm; they plant monocultures of export crops; and they are marked by a class- and race-based hierarchical organization of owners, managers, and workers. In short, work here reflects a set of conditions that many are now calling *the Plantationocene*.

The Plantationocene describes the "ever-greater ferocity in globalized factory meat production, monocrop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like oil palm for multispecies forests and their products that sustain human and nonhuman critters alike" (Haraway 2015: 162). The plantation simplifies landscapes by removing indigenous plants, animals, and people and replacing them with workers and cash crops; alienates those workers and plants from places and purposes otherwise; and remakes them as plantation resources. Relocation and alienation of animals, plants, people, and microbes are key processes in the Plantationocene, and so is a racist division of labor founded on principles of slavery and settler colonialism (Davis et al. 2019). Like Elana Resnick's (2021) "racialized Anthropocene," the Plantationocene frame has the potential to center everyday enactments of racialized work in relation to production as well as waste. The plantation was made possible by processes of removal and recombination. Plantation owners appropriated land, cleared it of people and plants, and disrupted local economic flows, then replaced plants with commercial cash crops from afar, replaced original inhabitants with a racialized workforce, and

connected the plantation to global circuits of capital, all brought together, but alienated from place. The Plantationocene concept thus speaks to the power of control over landscapes, practices, and property (see Wolford 2021).

My aim here is not to gather up and enclose stories and life under a simplified narrative, as Mythri Jegathesan (2021) warns against, nor to advocate for the Plantationocene over sister terms of Capitalocene and Anthropocene, but as Kathryn Yusoff (2018) writes of the Anthropocene, to explore its contexts. These farms more closely resemble a twenty-first-century Iowa family farm than a seventeenth-century Brazilian sugar plantation, but they are the genealogical descendants of both. The farms continue a decades-long shift in U.S. agriculture toward fewer crops, more hired labor, and consolidation, even as they inherit a racialized division of labor, massive scale, and hierarchical farm organization from the Brazilian sugarcane plantation. So what is gained by asking how they are situated within the Plantationocene? And what is lost? I contend that the Plantationocene centers processes of alienation, separation, and recombination. It underscores racial and class dynamics of agriculture through a focus on work, power, and hierarchy; it also centers alienation of people from plants and soil. However, it also obscures the fighting back of people, soils, plants, animals, and microbes. In this essay, I will first explore the ways farmer-owners exploit workers, soil, and plants according to plantation logics. Second, I explore the ways that this project faces resistance to enrollment in the Plantationocene on the part of people, soils, and plants themselves.

Work

The plantation model of labor is deeply hierarchical. On transnational soy farms, foreign owners charge managers with overseeing tractor drivers (mostly white, recognized as skilled workers) and manual laborers (mostly Afro-Brazilians, perceived as unskilled and easily replaceable). Farm workers are divided into teams of hoers, machinery operators, cotton gin workers, agronomy advisors, managers, and front office employees, which include accountants, lawyers, and public relations staff. The clearest marker of these distinctions is race. White *Sulistas* (Brazilians from the southern states of Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul) operate heavy machinery and work in managerial positions, while local *Baianos* (primarily Afro-Brazilians) from the surrounding area south of Luis Eduardo Magalhães work as manual laborers. U.S. farm owners in Western Bahia have adopted this arrangement from neighboring Brazilian soy planters. They visit their farms a few times per week to meet with managers, check on progress in the fields, assure that things are in working

order, and make an appearance, but otherwise leave the fieldwork to farm workers from southern Bahia.

While industrial soy farms depend on a racialized workforce and hierarchical organization, soy production is far less labor-intensive than classic plantation commodities like sugarcane, rubber, or cotton. Industrial soy production is mechanized, capital-intensive, and scalable, attribute that encourages both land concentration and the replacement of workers with machines (Hetherington 2019). Still, these farms use far more hired labor than family farms back in North America, even if it is spread across thousands of hectares. The owners had told investors that they knew how to farm and just needed capital for land, but they quickly learned that managing a thirty thousand hectare farm with more than a hundred farm workers is very different than operating a thousand-acre family farm in Illinois. Their farms cobble together displaced workers; soybean seeds bred elsewhere and then spliced with soil bacteria, and land that is not only dispossessed from local populations but also remains alienated from farm owners, who live either hours away in Luis Eduardo Magalhães or back in the United States.

In Brazil, North American farmers became managers of capital and dependent on outside finance, even if this financing came more often from neighboring farmers than from Wall Street. They adopted flexible farming as a strategy which minimized belonging, connection, and stability in favor of interchangeable parts (Ofstehage 2018a); they financialized their labor, values, and farm assets (Ofstehage 2018b). Within their families, the very meaning of farming came into question as older generations questioned what about this new way of life constituted farming, while younger generations argued that it represented the future. This alienation from work and land sets transnational farmer-owners apart from the attachments that are definitional to the plantation.

On these farms, workers are not expected to make a long-term commitment to the farm, nor is the farm owner expected to invest in the worker. Tea plantations in India, by way of contrast, provide hereditary employment, gardening plots, and other ways of connecting workers to the plantation (Besky 2017). Likewise, dairy farms in New York enroll farm workers in pseudo-familial relations, which include expectations of unpaid work and social commitments (Sexsmith 2019). But on the flexible farm, work is alienated from the farmer in a bureaucratization of worker relations, which are governed more by minimal requirements determined by Brazilian law than by reciprocal, if patriarchal, relations common to plantation economies. Three written

warnings are required for farmworkers to be fired; rural worker associations negotiate with farm associations to determine minimum wages; and regulations on farmworker housing stipulate a basic standard of living. While several North American farmer-owners described an interest in creating jobs in Brazil, they quickly lost interest in the well-being of workers because of the strength of the farm worker federation. In fact, owners I interviewed often spoke of labor-saving technology not as a means of reducing burden or even costs, but of reducing liability for worker protections. Labor regulations and labor power slow down the flexibilization of work, in that owners cannot treat workers as they please; they also forestall elements of the plantation in that farmers provide housing, wages, and job security not according to logics of the gift, but according to bureaucratic regulations.

Land

Protected by armed guards and barbed-wired fences built to keep out thieves from the countryside, beautified by lines of out-of-place palm trees, a U.S.-owned farm in the Brazilian Cerrado presents an image of a farm separated from its surrounding ecological and social world. In this vein, Bruno Latour has referred to the Plantationocene as “a historical ‘de-soilization’ of the Earth” (Latour et al. 2018). But while American farmers dispossess local communities from their land only to live at a remove from it, their encounters with Brazilian Cerrado soil require careful and intensive soil engagement. The flat landscape of Western Bahia allows for a simplification of production, as farm machinery can easily pass through a field. Large swaths of agro-ecologically consistent land encourage monocultural practices, and the amenability of the land to Green Revolution technology allows for both the implementation of industrial farming practices and the programmatization of farming tasks. Yet the soils, which owners call “barren,” counterintuitively call for more attention than those at home.

First, clearing the Cerrado is required to open the land for production. Then, heavy application of lime raises the pH of what are called the “acid lands” of the Cerrado. Finally, workers apply massive amounts of fertilizer and implement no-tillage practices to build up the soil. Owners and managers adapt new practices to make the Cerrado productive to industrial agriculture; they also adopt narratives of improvement in their relation to the land. As Katherine McKittrick (2013: 6) reminds us, plantations are built on exploited labor and on what she terms “the lands of no one.” For many farmers, this connected family histories of settling the American prairie with their own story of clearing the Cerrado. The Plantationocene, like the Anthropocene, proves to be a

dystopia for indigenous people and plants (Whyte 2018), but an aspirational dream for farmer-owners and their ancestors (as well as mine). Here, discourses of land and soil improvement lend legitimacy to further exploitation and to practices that entrench industrial agriculture in formerly marginal lands.

Beyond the putative social value of improvement, the clearing and fertilization of the Cerrado also confers speculative value. Land speculation sets transnational farms in the Cerrado apart from both Brazilian sugar plantations and Iowan soybean farms. For many farmer-owners, the primary sales pitch to investors was not high agricultural yields or commodity prices, but adding value to cheap Brazilian land by making it fertile, building farm infrastructure, and assembling land titles.

Plants, Generativity, and Plantations

Soy is the ideal monocrop in many ways, allowing it to work for the plantation and also minimize work for the plantation (Hetherington 2020). The package of genetically modified seeds, herbicides, and no-tillage reduces the need for manual weed removal and thus drastically reduces farm work. This agronomic simplification allows farmer-owners to depend on technology and machinery to minimize labor compared to a true plantation, even as the massive scale of these farms requires a greater workforce than a typical U.S. Midwestern farm. But despite farmers' efforts to simplify agrarian landscapes, monocrops remain weedy. Fertilization and low plant competition favors quick-growing annual plants, and uniform plant populations are ideal hosts for diseases and insect pests—given little biological control and endless food. In recent years whitefly, a tiny sucking insect not affected by most insecticides, has become a scourge for soy growers in Western Bahia. Soybean rust also spread rapidly through Brazil in the 2000s, requiring constant observation and expensive fungicide applications. The plantation is designed to alienate and separate, but once outside of the plant science greenhouse, diseases, insects, and plants complicate this separation. Soy is put to work for the plantation (cf. Besky and Blanchette 2019), and yet its production still requires constant maintenance.

On one side of the Plantationocene is the process of simplification and control of assemblages of things and people; on the other is the life that proliferates from the ecological spaces created by simplification. Together, simplification and proliferation remind us that while plantations aim to alienate, that process is always incomplete as life makes space for itself. It is not easy to consider what life is generated by the proliferation of transnational soybean farms in Brazil, because the farms are readily connected to processes of deforestation, dispossession, and displacement. But to

disregard processes of generation misses the power of Cerrado life to transform even as it is destroyed, and of workers to resist even as they are exploited.

The soy plant, alienated first from East Asia and then from U.S. soy fields on its way to Brazil, is also not totally out of place. Decades of breeding directed by the state agricultural research body, Embrapa, has produced new varieties of soy that are suited to the day length, soils, and pests of the Brazilian Cerrado. Nor is the Cerrado land wholly alienated; this is apparent in the annual fight to “build” the soil so as to make it productive and painfully obvious when prairie fires remind farmers that the Cerrado was never tamed. Workers, too, in resisting relationships of reciprocity in favor of legally defined worker rights backed by farm worker associations, defend their own rights, labor, and existence.

Author Bio

Andrew Ofstehage is a postdoctoral associate in the Department of Global Development at Cornell University. His research among transnational soybean farmers in Brazil incorporates training in agronomy and anthropology and asks how transnational farmers engage with soils and landscapes in Brazil; become managers of workers and investors; and create and recreate agrarian communities out of place.

Preview Image

Photo by Andrew Ofstehage.

Open Review Statement

This essay went through a process of [open peer review](#); two reviewers (Kregg Hetherington and Andrea Rissing) commented on an earlier version of the manuscript, which was then revised into the version published here. To read the reviewers’ comments and the author’s responses to them, you can expand the Comments section at the bottom of this page, click the funnel icon, and then enable “Browse archived comments.” To see the submitted version, you can click the clock icon at the top of this page and then select “Release #1.”

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