



The 2018 Neil Smith Lecture

“A plantation can be a commons”: Re-Earthing Sapelo Island through Abolition Ecology

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Abstract: This paper is based on the 2018 Neil Smith Lecture presented at the University of St Andrews. It considers the plantation past/futures of Sapelo Island, Georgia, one of the Sea Islands forming an archipelago along the US Southeastern coast. I work through the abolitionist efforts of the Saltwater Geechee’s who have resided there since at least 1803 to better understand how we can mobilise an emancipatory politics of land and property and to produce commons that work to repair and heal the violence done through enslavement and ongoing displacement. I weave together a series of historical threads to better situate linked ideas of abolition democracy and abolition geography, and to extend the notion of abolition ecology as a strategic notion to connect Eurocentric based political ecologies with the emancipatory tradition of Black geographies.

Keywords: abolition ecology, land, the commons, Black geographies

Introduction

In his 1976 poem “Sea Canes”, the St Lucian Noble Laureate Derek Walcott wrote: “The sea canes by the cliff flash green and silver; they were the *seraph lances of my faith*, but out of what is lost grows something stronger that has the rational radiance of stone, enduring moonlight, further than despair, strong as the wind ...” That sugarcane would be invoked as a *seraph lance of faith* is at first curious given the oppressive plantation relations that established the growing of the cash crop across the Caribbean and on St Lucia. To this end, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in Stockholm, Walcott (1992) said: “... since History is based on achievement, and since the history of the Antilles was so genetically corrupt, so depressing in its cycles of massacres, slavery, and indenture, a culture was inconceivable and nothing could ever be created in those ramshackle ports, those monotonously feudal sugar estates.”

The political ecological connections between the commodification of sugar that drove slavery and fuelled the expansion of what Robinson (2000) called racial capitalism into the US South offers a powerful lens through which to consider oppressive land and property politics based in the legacies of slavery but also the

abolitionist politics that still work toward freedom of that land and the people still living on it. According to Lowe (2015:149), racial capitalism “captures the sense that actually existing capitalism exploits through culturally and socially constructed differences such as race, gender, region, and nationality, and is lived through those uneven formations”. If we take Walcott’s lead, perhaps there is more than this exploitation; perhaps there are also emancipatory and liberatory politics we can also simultaneously locate within these histories given his invocation of faith offers us something to stretch for, to hope for, to organise for, to demand. Perhaps in line with McKittrick’s (2013:3) vision of plantation futures, which “demand decolonial thinking that is predicated on human life”, we can locate contemporary abolitionist politics in the ruins of those plantation sugar estates.

One day early in 2015 I was sitting at a kitchen table on Sapelo Island, a barrier island off the coast of Georgia, where for the next two and a half years I would spend many hours sitting, listening and learning about what abolition had been in the US South and what it looks like today. That table is located in the kitchen of Ms. Cornelia Walker Bailey, a widely recognised Gullah Geechee, or more specifically Saltwater Geechee, activist and author who for much of her adult life fought for the land and property of her community on Sapelo Island. Bailey was a *griot* in the tradition of her West African storytelling ancestors which meant storytelling for her was often political, aspirational and almost always emancipatory. Central to her stories was an ethos related to how her community had worked together for their survival. This matters because Sapelo Island maintains the largest, most intact, remaining Gullah Geechee community in the US, having been home to many generations who directly traced their ancestry to slaves brought there in 1803. The depth of Bailey’s geographical imagination as relating to modern forms of racial capitalism was central to the ways she taught me about abolitionist politics and notions of the commons.

During our early discussions Bailey conveyed in detail her disdain for us from the University who had come to her island and taken, taken and not given anything back. I wondered how I would be able to start to build trust, to try to start repairing these fraught relations. During these conversations I came to understand through Bailey’s experience that I was a trespasser, I was part of a group of people who had colonised Sapelo Island through science and through grant funding and through the veil of a teaching mission to educate, and in so doing had worked to isolate and alienate the Saltwater Geechee community. I could not dispute her charges and more importantly it became clear that I needed to own them. The realisation I had during this time is central to what Kohl and McCutcheon (2015:748) define as “kitchen table reflexivity, where through informal conversations, researchers critically and reflexively engage with the fluidity of their positionalities throughout the research process”. A sentiment that at the time I did not know how to articulate or grapple with is contained within something James Baldwin (1955:18) wrote in *Notes of a Native Son*: “The people who think of themselves as White have the choice of becoming human or irrelevant.”

Through many of these kitchen table discussions with Bailey until she passed away unexpectedly on 15 October 2017, I came closer to understanding what

Glissant (1997:146) means in *Poetics of Relations* when he said that the “politics of ecology has implications for populations that are decimated or threatened with disappearance as a people”. Glissant here punctuates the fortitude and emergency I have come to realise though my time on Sapelo but also the politics necessary to fight cultural erasure and the attendant grip of white supremacy that makes this possible. I have also come to better understand the responsibility white folks have in working to these ends and the accountability that must be exacted on that responsibility. With abolition and the unrealised promises of emancipation often driving her storytelling about the land and the labour that produced its value, abolition ecology is as concise a term as I can articulate to convey the lessons I learned from her and continue to learn from her surviving family members and neighbours about struggles over land and what in geography many of us call political ecology. To this end, Glissant (1989:105) argued that the “relationship with the land, one that is even more threatened because the community is alienated from the land, becomes so fundamental in this discourse that landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character”. Glissant (1989:105) declared that “describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history”.

Abolition ecology, building from the tradition of abolition geography (see Gilmore 2017), is an effort to recognise the stories, experiences and connections, as shared and written about by Bailey and others, that bind the land on Sapelo “as a full charterer” to processes of “creating history” and fighting against the decimation of a people through their connections to the land. In this way, abolition ecology pushes discussions within political ecology to build on Lowe’s (2015:21) “intimacies of four continents”, which relies on “circuits, connections, associations and mixings of differentially laboring peoples, eclipsed by the operations that universalise the Anglo-American liberal individual”. Bailey’s politics inspired organising against ruin in the spirit of the abolitionists who preceded her to build a commons out of the ruins of the plantation that could sustain her community. It was through her vision of re-creating an agricultural commons, which she discussed as a process of “re-Earthing”, that one day in 2016 she asked me if I would help re-establish sugarcane on Sapelo Island, the staple crop of the plantation previously owned and operated on the island by Thomas Spalding during the early 1800s. Her ideas of re-Earthing also resonate with ideas Clyde Woods was discussing toward the end of his life about the political importance of the commons for Black geographies.

Drawing on Mollet and Faria (2013) who, among others, have argued that despite some progress questions of race continue to be neglected within political ecology, this paper works to stage a dialogue between ideas rooted in emancipation through DuBois’ notion of abolition democracy, contemporary thinking about the power of abolition geography from Gilmore as well as Bailey’s insights on re-Earthing to open up abolition ecology in a way that can speak to gaps and inattention to the way Black lives produce distinct political ecologies. Starting with Black ecological experiences with land to better understand political possibilities, abolition ecology works to expand understanding about how emancipatory

property politics can fight against white supremacist land ethics, thus responding to McKittrick's (2006:x) question about how do we "engage with a narrative that locates and draws on black histories and black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic"?

The next section of this paper establishes the political ecological history of Sapelo Island's property politics as it has evolved since emancipation. In so doing, I will work to generate an intellectual dialogue drawing on the thinking of primarily DuBois and Gilmore who can help direct scholars of political ecology to take more seriously the deep histories of race and white supremacy that are central to many stories of land and environment. Next I will move toward demonstrating efforts of Sapelo to prefigure an agro-ecological model of communing that contains within it the logics of liberation and freedom. This discussion will be animated by my efforts to stage a dialogue between Cornelia Walker Bailey and Clyde Woods.

Abolition Ecology and the Politics of Property

Sapelo Island is the birth place of the earliest known Islamic text in the Americas, a 13-page document of Muslim law and prayer written in the early 19th century by a West African man named Bilali Muhammad who was enslaved on the island from approximately 1803 until his death around 1855. Bailey and many others within Sapelo's Geechee community are direct decedents of Bilali Muhammad. Bailey often told me stories about how value of the land had been generated, circulated and valorised on Sapelo, starting with the knowledge of her Great-Great-Great-Great Grandfather Bilali Muhammad. She connected these stories with how value continued to build and grow through the ways Thomas Spalding, who owned the plantation on Sapelo, and Bilali Muhammad used African agricultural knowledge and labour to grow the first varieties of sugarcane in the US on Sapelo, which was also the site of the first sugar mill in North America where crystalline sugar was first produced for market. Following a similar history to other Sea Islands along the Southeastern US coast, after the invalidation of Special Field Order 15, which would have assured property rights for freed people after the US Civil War, wealthy, white capitalists started to purchase property all down the coast and on Sapelo Island. They continue to do so today at an alarming rate. It is against this backdrop that Bailey was interested in re-investing in an agricultural commons as a way to fight for land and build community capacity to fight displacement from the land. The deeper historic connections between Bilali Muhammad, Special Field Order 15 and property is important for thinking about abolition ecology on Sapelo Island.

Thomas Spalding was the first exclusive owner of Sapelo Island and his relatives continued ownership throughout much of the 19th century. Spalding and his family's primary activity on the island included operating a slave plantation growing rice and Sea Island cotton. Spalding also introduced the cultivation of sugar cane and the processing of sugar to North America, and because of his prolific documentation of what his slaves accomplished, he played an important role in the advance of US agricultural growth more broadly. While the original owner of

Bilali Muhammad, Spalding and his family owned 384 other slaves who were both the key to Spalding’s agricultural and financial success and played a central role in many of the technological innovations he made and published widely about. Bailey (2001:136) talked and wrote about the politics of misrepresentation that continues to maintain Spalding’s reputation which in turn supports living legacies of white supremacy: “Slavery was horrible in and of itself, so life on Sapelo wasn’t easy for black people even if Bilali was the head driver and even *if* Spalding was a little better slaveholder than some ... The view of Spalding as ‘strict but fair’ was passed down by his decedents and friends, not black people here.”

One of the stories Bailey shared with people as a way of conveying the historical struggles to fight for land on Sapelo prefigured contemporary political efforts related to her Great-Great-Great-Great Grandfather. While the historical record is thin, Bilali Muhammad appears to have been born between 1760 and the 1770s in Timbo, Guinea. There is some historical consensus that when he was fourteen he was captured in tribal warfare, enslaved and taken across the Middle Passage to Nassau, Bahamas. Bilali Muhammad was sold to Thomas Spalding who brought him to Sapelo Island in 1803 and by 1810, because of his intense work ethic, leadership abilities and intelligence he was assigned duties of overseeing all activities on the plantation as the lead slave driver. At the peak of his leadership, Bilali Muhammad oversaw up to 500 slaves. The story Bailey often shared was that during the War of 1812, British troops failed to invade Sapelo having been informed that Bilali Muhammad and 80 other slaves were armed and prepared to battle them. This bewildered the British, as Georgia was the only colony during the Revolutionary War that did not allow slaves to fight. Of her Great-Great-Great-Great Grandfather, Bailey (2001:135–136) wrote: “Most slaveholders would have been scared stiff to give their slaves firearms because their slaves could have easily used the firearms against them. Bilali must have been absolutely trustworthy.” Bailey would often say, “if Bilali would fight and die for this land we should be willing to do the same.” Bailey’s frequent invocation of Bilali and her telling stories of longstanding connections between Saltwater Geechee people and Sapelo Island is an effort to fight erasure and what Scott (2019:1096) calls “nowhere at all-ness” and how oral history can challenge “wrestling with a violently imposed spatial precarity”.

DuBois’ notion of abolition democracy as he detailed in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) is foundational to my thinking about Sapelo Island and a starting place to fight “nowhere at all-ness”. DuBois argued that freedom as imagined by Black folks fighting against slavery crumbled when they realised that the freedom they sought would never become realised unless the same so-called “democratic intuitions” that allowed slavery to exist and flourish were abolished at the same time that slavery was. This new political ideal, the simultaneous abolition of slavery and creation of an actual democracy, necessitated a complete reinvention of democracy itself to allow for freedom to prevail in everyday life. This for DuBois was “abolition democracy”. Central to this recasting of society in the US was the role enslaved people played in creating the circumstances of their own freedom by withdrawing their labour from the planter slave-owning class through what

DuBois (1935:57) discusses as the General Strike: “As soon, however, as it became clear that the Union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves, and that the masters with all their fume and fury were uncertain of victory, the slave entered upon a general strike against slavery by the same methods that he had used during the period of the fugitive slave.” This concerted effort paved the way for abolition democracy. Angela Davis (2005:95) argues that abolition democracy “reflected an understanding among former slaves that slavery could not be truly abolished until people were provided with the economic means for their subsistence” (see also Lipsitz 2004).

As one of the contemporary scholars most responsible for agitating for abolitionist goals and theorising the ramifications of these politics, any notion of abolition ecology builds on the discussions of abolition as put forth by Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Showing that the abolition central to the Black radical tradition is still the central tenant driving visions of freedom and emancipation, Gilmore argues that “[a]bolition is a totality and it is ontological. It is the context and content of struggle, the site where culture *recouples* with the political” (2011:258, emphasis added). To this end, Gilmore recently argued in a *New York Times Magazine* interview that “[a]bolition is deliberately everything-ist; it’s about the entirety of human-environmental relations” (in Kushner 2019). Through insisting Saltwater Geechee people should be allowed to geographically exist on Sapelo Island as they have been doing for generations gives historical weight to the totality of abolitionist politics as discussed by Gilmore. Extending from DuBois’ central notions, Gilmore succinctly argues that “since slavery ending one day doesn’t tell you anything about the next day ... Du Bois set out to show what the next day, and days thereafter, looked like during the revolutionary period of radical reconstruction. So abolition is a theory of change, it’s a theory of social life. It’s about making things” (in Petitjean 2018).

Abolition ecology builds from these sentiments to specifically capture the need for building intuitions focused on securing political ecological land rights. This notion was mobilised within this robust intellectual history to strategically orient scholars thinking about political ecology to take more seriously how internalising the deep historical spatial logics of the plantation can help scholars to better articulate how landscapes are racialised but also how we can better theorise the abolition of white supremacy from the metabolic processes that produce racially uneven environments (see Heynen 2016, 2018).

One result of the General Strike as discussed by DuBois related explicitly to reshaping land and property relations along the Southeast coast in a way that could have transformed the property relations for freed people. On 16 January 1865, Major General William Tecumseh Sherman (1865) issued Special Field Order 15. This brief declaration had immense yet ultimately unrealised emancipatory possibilities moving into Reconstruction and helps us think about the early evolution of racial capitalism as tied to property and ongoing connections to the land. Special Field Order 15 “reserved and set apart for the settlement of negroes now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States ... the islands from Charleston, south, the abandoned rice fields

along the rivers for 30 miles back to the sea, and the county bordering the St. Johns River, Florida”.

As a result of the initial implementation of the order “each family shall have a plot not more than 40 acres of tillable ground ... in the possession of which land the military authorities will afford them protection, until such time as they can protect themselves, or until Congress shall regulate their title”. This is the text that entered the term “40 acres and mule” into the reparation imaginaries still present today. By the middle of 1865 roughly 40,000 freed people had begun to build a new society on 400,000 acres of Southeastern US land. Sapelo Island is located in the central zone of what has become the Gullah Geechee corridor created through this order.

Sherman’s proclamation originated out of the condemnation he and the Union Army received for the loss of human life at Ebenezer Creek at a meeting in Savannah, Georgia on 12 January 1865. Present at that meeting were Sherman, President Lincoln’s Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, and 20 African-American leaders from within Savannah, many of whom were ministers. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss enacting emancipation and the political realities that would provide the foundation for Reconstruction. When Secretary Stanton asked the group of 20 men, “State in what manner you think you can take care of yourselves, and how can you best assist the Government in maintaining your freedom”, Reverend Garrison Frazier replied, “The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our labor—that is, by the labor of the women, and children, and old men—and we can maintain ourselves and have something to spare” (Reed 2015). While the conversation continued, the priorities of land, property and self-determination regarding both the physical and social reproduction of emancipated African-American people was resolutely inscribed onto the national conscious yet again and forever more onward through this meeting. This right to exist on this land is what Bailey fought so hard for.

According to Hardy (2019), by August 1865 the number of freed people living on Sapelo Island was 352. Just four months later by the following December as many as 900 freed people were estimated to be living on the island (see Cimbala 1989; Duncan 1986). According to the US Freedman Bureau’s (1865) account, 745 acres of land on Sapelo was issued to 25 different families. Between the end of the US Civil War and 1912, approximately 13 communities across all portions of Sapelo Island were settled by former island slaves and their descendants with between 400 and 500 Geechee residents living on Sapelo (see Hardy et al. 2017; see also Bailey 2001; Crook et al. 2003; Sullivan 2001). This was the promise of Special Field Order 15 but also the resolve of Saltwater Geechee people.

There is important scholarship that situates this history within spatial processes of marronage and elucidates the accomplishments of alternative approaches to ecology and land rights that informs notions of abolition ecology. According to Bledsoe (2017:31), “[m]aroon communities, during the reign of chattel slavery, were those settlements established by runaway slaves, who sought to escape their condition as fungible, accumulated property”. While slaves on Sapelo were not runaways, they nonetheless started to build a new society within the shell of slavery. Bledsoe builds on Roberts (2015:5) to suggest marronage continues to serve

as spatial process of enacting freedom with fidelity to cultural and historically rooted “subversive speech acts, gestures, and social practices antithetical to the ideals of” marginalising agents. The spatial history of Geechee people on Sapelo also aligns with Wright’s (2019) notion that “what differentiates grand marronage from mere flight and escape is that it resulted in the production of an alternative geography, often in the form of a settlement prevailing on the peripheries of the plantocracy”. Here we can connect Bailey and other Saltwater Geechee political efforts back to Glissant’s notion of how their efforts embodied the land on Sapelo and across their communities as a full character in the story as opposed to simply a spatial context and backdrop.

Rufus Saxton had the title of Inspector of Settlements and Plantations when Sherman and Stanton had the meeting in Savannah. Given the obligations of his job, Saxton oversaw the settlement of the lands set aside for freed people through Special Field Order 15. Saxton, however, was decidedly pessimistic, as he did not believe the plan would succeed due to a lack of political commitment. Saxton reported reluctance after the process of settlement commenced, believing that regardless of any progress settling them freed people would ultimately be disposed of their new lands (Rose 1967:328).

Despite the order providing a spatial vision of reparations for emancipated people, US President Andrew Johnson, who replaced the assassinated Abraham Lincoln, revoked Special Field Order 15 later in the fall of 1865. Lincoln’s death led to despair among many freed people as they feared the progress they had begun to realise through Special Field Order 15 would be taken away. Many Black folks asked “Uncle Sam is dead, isn’t he?” and “The government is dead, isn’t it? We are going to be slaves again” (Rose 1967:346). Lincoln was not an abolitionist nor did he believe that Black people deserved the same rights as whites. Despite this, his election in 1860 helped open political dialogue and in combination with the General Strike of enslaved workers generated a new emancipatory ethos. As Oakes (2014) suggests, within this new ethos emerged the belief that “the rights of property did not include the right of one human being to hold property in another”. Abolishing the institution of slavery ultimately destroyed the political right of “property in man” and created a new set of relationships to land as a result; a new kind of ecology. Abolitionist politics was based on the idea that slavery was “theft” of the slaves’ property in themselves (Oakes 2014, 2015). This idea went beyond the goal of emancipation as freedom from enslavement toward the reparative step of restoring slaves’ rights to owning themselves, or toward self-ownership. Accordingly, through the process of granting freedom and emancipation, abolition was the “largest redistribution of wealth in American history” (Oakes 2014). At the same time, new rights and responsibilities to owning themselves required new calculations about how processes of social reproduction would be possible and how the “land question” as posed by Garrison Frazier in Savannah would be answered.

DuBois’ (1935:595) vision of abolition democracy embodied the politics of land, centrally saying that the “abolition-democracy itself was largely based on property, believed in capital and formed an effective powerful petty bourgeoisie. It believed in democratic government but only under a general dictatorship of

property”. He suggested that many of the most powerful leaders who argued for emancipation and had come to support the Radical Republican effort in the North lived on investments in land and property in the South. DuBois argued that these people did not believe in a fully and universal democratic movement as the transformation of these political ideals would have translated into the confiscation and redistribution of property. So central is land to the vision of abolition democracy that DuBois argues (1935:595) that “even here while they seized stolen property in human bodies, they never could bring themselves to countenance the redistribution of property in land and tools, which rested in fact on no less defensible basis”.

While much of the political discussion in the wake of Lincoln’s issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation revolved around the centrality of freedom from slavery, radical abolitionist groups and particular people, including Charles Sumner, Thaddeus Stevens, Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglas and Lydia Maria Child, made a range of parallel arguments related to land distribution. To this end, as Aptheker (1989:147) shows, in “An Appeal from the Colored Men of Philadelphia” in 1862 radical abolitionists argued: “We believe that the world would be benefited by giving the four millions of slaves their freedom, and the lands now possessed by their masters. They have been amply compensated in our labor and the blood of our kinsmen.” DuBois saw great potential in the creation of radical democratic institutions that were necessary to the emergence of abolition democracy. He argued that “[i]n the South universal suffrage could not function without personal freedom, land and education, and until these institutions were real and effective, only a benevolent dictatorship in the ultimate interests of labor, black and white, could establish democracy” (DuBois 1935:585). Thus, abolition ecology helps make legible the persistent contradictions related to land that processes of racial capitalism have blocked from being addressed amidst so-called emancipation.

The failure of Special Field Order 15 was central to how in 1912 Howard E. Coffin was able to purchase much of Sapelo Island despite extensive Geechee settlement. Coffin was executive of the Detroit-based Hudson Motorcar Company. After he lost much of his fortune in the Great Depression, Coffin sold Sapelo to tobacco heir Richard J. Reynolds, Jr. in 1934. These land transactions, and many like them on land previously set aside for formerly enslaved people is crucially important to understanding Northern industrialist investment along the Southeastern coast. While the State of Georgia acquired much of Sapelo Island in two separate purchases in 1969 and 1976 the actions of Reynolds led to massive displacement and put the Geechee community’s future in perilous danger.

Throughout his 30-year tenure as principal landowner and primary employer on Sapelo, Richard Reynolds Jr. relocated all but one of 13 Geechee communities, consolidating hundreds of Geechee people from the remaining postbellum communities into the Hog Hammock community. His motivation was to create a beautiful resort island similar to Sea Island and Jekyll Island, which had both become elite spaces along the Southeastern coast and also developed by the same sorts of wealthy northern elites DuBois saw as central to contradictions inherent in abolition democracy. Bailey (2001) wrote about how R.J. Reynolds

used coercion, threats, and false promises of new electrified homes to obtain such extensive land holdings on the island. Through his strong-arm tactics, Reynolds paid Geechee families a fraction of what their land was worth, robbing them of their wealth and forcing them to live where they did not want to (Schnakenberg 2010). Bailey (2001:255) juxtaposed life on Sapelo in the mid 1960s with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act and the ways in which Richard Reynolds continued life as if the Jim Crow South was still the norm: "The whole island was run like his private paradise. It was totally controlled. The jobs, the company boat, *everything*."

McKittrick (2013:8) helps us understand these processes of erasure when she says: "This is a meaningful geographic process to keep in mind because it compels us to think about the ways the plantation became key to transforming the lands of no one into the lands of someone, with black forced labor propelling an economic structure that would underpin town and industry development in the Americas." Sapelo was first the plantation that Thomas Spalding brought Bilali Muhammad to, and despite emancipation, the same plantation through which Richard Reynolds dispossessed many Geechee families of land and wealth. We can name these logics as central to racial capitalism and see them as informing the manner within which dwindling numbers of Geechee residents, the descendants of Bilali Muhammad, continue to be pushed off their land by wealthy white families through dispossession by exurbanisation. Pulido (2017:526–527) argues that "a focus on racial capitalism requires greater attention to the essential processes that shaped the modern world, such as colonisation, primitive accumulation, slavery, and imperialism ... By insisting that we are still living with the legacy of these processes, racial capitalism requires that we place contemporary forms of racial inequality in a materialist, ideological and historical framework". While I have worked toward such a focus so far in this essay, other narratives can further bring the goals of abolition ecology into greater clarity, especially in regards to Baily's notion of reestablishing an agricultural commons, or re-Earthing Sapelo Island.

Re-Earthing the Commons

Sapelo Island exists within a chain of barrier islands on the Georgia coast. Given its deeply racialised history and its relation to the Metropole, it makes sense to imagine this archipelago as spatially connected to the colonial history of the Caribbean, which is in part why I opened this essay with Walcott's poem. I want to again invoke McKittrick, who here is mobilising Sylvia Wynter's concepts of the "uninhabitable and archipelagos" for thinking about the production of space and the production of Sapelo Island. McKittrick (2006:128) suggests that the "interrelated quest to map the unknown—the geographic unknown, the corporeal indigenous/black unknown—sets forth what Neil Smith calls 'uneven development', albeit from a very different analytical perspective: the systematic production of differential social hierarchies, which are inscribed in space and give a coherence to disproportionate geographies". Building on Smith, McKittrick (2006: xiii) suggests: "That black lives are necessarily geographic, but also struggle with discourses that erase and despatialise their sense of place, is where I begin to

conceptualise Geography.” It is in the face of this erasure, that I want to turn to a set of discussions I had with Bailey related to her notion of “re-Earthing” and the ways she saw working in common on common land was central to this maintaining cultural presence. I want to connect these conversations to the ways Clyde Woods thought about the commons toward the end of his life as a way to spark dialogue and situate Bailey’s ideas in a broader geographic context that can help add further coherence to notions of abolition ecology.

By the May of 2017, I started to understand more fully what Bailey was telling me and trying to teach me about land, property politics and the commons. Somehow she saw this in my face, in my body language, in my response to her questions, and she decided that we could work together, we could work toward something new, that the University could help repair some of the damage it had done. She thought I could help by assisting her and other members of the Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society (SICARS), a Geechee-run non-profit organisation, re-establish sugarcane on Sapelo Island, the staple crop of the plantation previously owned and operated on the island by Thomas Spalding during the early 1800s. Bailey also thought we could help produce Geechee red peas, sour oranges, indigo, garlic, all for market that could, after a period of “incubation”, become cash crops to secure full-time farm jobs on the island for Geechee descendants. When I shared my nervousness, concern and what felt like archetypal white anxiety about the history of these crops as I understood them, asking her, would it be okay for *me* to help bring these crops back to Sapelo, seeking some sort of permission that would ease my association not only with the colonising ethos of my university but of *my* people as she had regularly been clear to situate my race, she said yes. On this day she explained how Bilali Muhammad helped establish the wealth of agricultural knowledge and experience that made Thomas Spalding’s plantation so productive and this knowledge was her knowledge and the knowledge of other Geechee descendants on Sapelo to benefit from; that this experience could not be relegated to the history of white supremacist slave owners but could be, had to be, re-oriented. During this time, I also started to work very closely with one of Bailey’s son, Maurice Bailey, to start implementing her vision. This relationship with Maurice continues to be one of my most important and generative relationships.

Ms. Bailey argued that re-purposing this agricultural knowledge could help the Geechee residents still living on Sapelo to save their land and it would take all kinds of people working in solidarity, including me, to make this possible. She said that in order to save the land, for her people to save themselves, Sapelo was going to have to be re-created, the land was going to have to be re-imagined, the resources re-directed, the knowledge re-calibrated, ultimately she said the earth itself was going to have to be created anew and it is out of her imagining of a total and complete transformation of space that we started to talk about the idea of “re-Earthing”. I see her notion of re-Earthing in line with Wright’s (2019) argument about how marronage constitutes the “production of an alternative geography”. By re-Earthing she was imagining a re-configuration of the power, land and outcomes of a people and the world they live in. Re-Earthing is a politics of reparation as Bailey imagined it, one that was based on a common effort on

common lands. It was then I began to see how Bailey saw sugarcane as a *seraph lance of faith* and imagined alternative political ecologies. It was also through these conversations I started to connect re-Earthing with something Clyde Woods had discussed nearly a decade earlier. On 26 March 2009, on a panel organised to discuss the 25th Anniversary of Neil Smith's *Uneven Development* at the Las Vegas AAG, Woods said that "a plantation can be a commons, a ghetto can be a place of refuge and resistance, affirmation". Speaking to what others since have helped elucidate around the Black geographic power relating to marronage (Bledsoe 2017; Wright 2019), Woods helped situate what had largely been European political economic theory within the Black geographic tradition of abolitionist politics.

Given the centrality of property ownership and associated resources in the rise of variegated forms of racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy over the last five centuries, it is necessary to clearly situate whose ideas about common property rights and the commons have most loudly resonated and informed how the politics of the commons within political ecology and beyond have unfolded. The short answer to this question, as to so many other questions across human history, is that white men talking about European property have mostly discussed the commons. There are strong threads of this discussion that weave together the ideas of Karl Marx, Karl Polanyi, and E.P. Thompson who often get associated with having set up the history of the commons as well as connected discussions of enclosure to English and German lands that started to be taken into private property relations in the 1600s through changes in property law.

While I contend there is important political insight from these thinkers, these Eurocentric ideas are limited given the histories they draw upon. The dominant narrative of the commons also fails to capture the misogyny and patriarchy bound up in this history, which becomes clear through the work of Federici (2004). One thing we can see though is how the most contemporary prominent discussions of the commons are based in Eurocentric frameworks that do not take seriously either the uneven power-relations of colonial history, white supremacy or patriarchy as defining societal characteristics of property relations, law or any of the interconnected institutions of society in between.

A case in point would be a brief examination of Ostrom's (1990) hugely influential work on the commons and to consider the eight fundamental principles she argued for managing a commons through game theory that has been central to much political ecological thinking (see Clement et al. 2019; Forsyth and Johnson 2014). She suggested it was necessary to: define clear group boundaries; match rules governing use of common goods to local needs and conditions; ensure that those affected by the rules can participate in modifying the rules; make sure the rule-making rights of community members are respected by outside authorities; develop a system, carried out by community members, for monitoring members' behaviour; use graduated sanctions for rule violators; provide accessible, low-cost means for dispute resolution; and build responsibility for governing the common resource in nested tiers from the lowest level up to the entire interconnected system. These widely accepted parameters laid out here for understanding the commons require legibility and structuring not feasible under

propertied forms of slavery certainly. But even reading the sophisticated geographies of marronage post-emancipation amidst the failure of Special Order 15, it is hard to imagine the uptake and adherence to these principles of governance for freed people living forms of racial capitalism amidst the structuring of Black Codes and Jim Crow. We can see the ways in which a Eurocentric imagination of the commons and their uptake and discussion has shaped contemporary discussions within political ecology out of a lack of inclusion of Black geographies.

Building backward through his notions of abolition democracy and to the evolution of cooperative endeavour within Black communities as directly tied to property relations, we can begin to think more seriously about the notion of the abolitionist commons. As important as *Black Reconstruction* is, a report DuBois (1907) published nearly 30 years prior entitled *Economic Cooperation Among American Negroes* also offers important insights to this discussion. In this report, “cooperation” started in the church for DuBois. He says that “[i]t was the church, too, or rather the organisation that went by the name church, that many of the insurrections among the slaves from the 16th century down had their origin: We must find in these insurrections a beginning of cooperation which eventually ended in the peaceful economic cooperation” (DuBois1907:24). He goes on to say that “we find that the spirit of the revolt which tried to co-operate by means of insurrection led to widespread organisation for the rescue of fugitive slaves among Negroes themselves and developed before the war in the North and during and after the war in the South into various co-operative efforts toward economic emancipation and land-buying” (DuBois 1907:26). By synthesising his notions of abolition democracy and thoughts into the evolution of cooperative endeavour within African-American communities directly tied to property relations, we can begin to think more seriously about the commons as in line with abolitionist politics around land and property.

But even here in this important text we must see the lingering sentiments of white supremacist logic at work in the way DuBois opens up this book with two curious quotes from Friedrich Ratzel, one of the foremost geographers responsible for the development of logics of environmental determinism. Published in 1898, DuBois quoted Ratzel’s *History of Mankind, Volume 3*. The quotation he opens the book with is: “Among the great groups of ‘natural’ races, the Negroes are the best and keenest tillers of ground.” He then proceeds to quote: “The market is the center of all the more stirring life in [African] Negro communities, and attempts to train him to culture have made the most effectual start from this tendency.” The reason DuBois quotes Ratzel is worth expanding on to show the ways hegemonic white supremacist thought often operates.

A letter dated 31 November 1905 (in Aptheker 1973:115) addressed to DuBois stated: “Upon my return I find a letter from you asking for a list of the best works on Negro anthropology. The fact upon this subject is very incomplete and unsatisfactory. The best brief article with which I am acquainted will be found in the *History of Mankind*, by Ratzel.” This letter was written to DuBois from Clark Wissler, who worked at the American Museum of Natural History as a Curator in ethnology from 1902 to 1907. As this letter suggests, given his position at the Museum, DuBois reached out to him for advice. Wissler’s biography however is

replete with his involvement in US eugenics movement and that he espoused white supremacist logics regarding US conservation practice (see Shapiro 1985).

While DuBois offers important thoughts to build discussion of co-operative efforts toward the commons in line with Bailey's ideas of re-Earthing, I also want to mobilise Woods' thinking about the commons. On 26 March 2009, Clyde Woods was one of the panellists on a session I organised with Scott Prudham and Neil Smith on the 25th Anniversary of Smith's *Uneven Development*. While most of us on the panel wrote essays that were published in a special issue of *New Political Economy*, Woods had too much going on and was not able to contribute. However, what Woods said that day has influenced my thinking about the idea of abolition ecology and more specifically thinking about the commons in ways that align with abolitionist goals. Given Woods never wrote up those particular comments before he passed away, I feel fortunate to have had recorded his comments (the full audio can be found at <https://blackgeographies.org/black-geographies-recorded/>). Because it was never published, I want to share an extended excerpt from Woods' (2009a) comments:

First there was the discussion of the commons. Part of the analysis, and probably I am misreading it, is that as capitalism extends outward, the plague of locust, destroys one commons after another. But I also think, that in that process, it is creating commons. The commons is not just a pre-capitalist formation. It's creating the idea, by the people who are displaced by this process, its creating the idea that there are new alliances to create new commons, but it's also creating new commons themselves, on the margins, in the swamps, as they say in New Orleans, but through a number of different ways by working class communities.

New commons were created based on enclosures but also the understanding of the rationality of capitalist and chaotic nature of capitalism itself particularly for racialized communities there is this constant search for a new common and because they are also enclosed, you know spatially enclosed, even within these enclosures created by capital, they create commons within these enclosures.

So a plantation can be a commons, a ghetto can be a place of refuge and resistance, affirmation, so this commons is created both theoretically but also in fact by the very process of the extension of capitalism and is the original extension of its reproduction.

So when you look at the African American community, which is one of the original working classes of the world, they are constantly, not only just recreating commons and intellectually theorizing about commons but also developing intellectual traditions and new traditions of geographical thought and so this idea that there's just one geography is limiting.

I think there are multiple systems of geography, multiple traditions of geography, and they particularly come from these racialised communities as they encounter capitalism and these enclosures of necessity. So there will be an African-American tradition in geography that is old.

The generative value of Woods' intervention becomes more clear when we recognise that Smith only makes a singular reference to the commons in *Uneven Development*, and that this does not occur until the Afterword for the second edition of

the text published in 1991, when he says that the “agricultural regions of the Great Plains in the United States are being fragmented amidst a tumultuous economic and financial, environmental and climatic crisis in the production of nature, leading some to advocate a return of the Plains to a buffalo commons” (Smith 2010:219). As such, Woods’ engagement with Smith’s production of nature thesis transforms it into its own set of ideas to be harnessed and mobilised moving forward to fill the gaps I have highlighted.

That same year Woods published two essays in *American Quarterly* in a special issue focused on post-Katrina New Orleans in which he developed other theorising about the linked dynamics of enclosure and the commons. He said that “[t]hroughout history, social-spatial enclosures have been used by dominant social movements to establish stable control over specific territories and their populations. This process typically involves the reorganization of property relations through the destruction of collectively held property, the commons” (Woods 2009b:774). We can read much of the socio-spatial formation of Sapelo Island through the logic of enclosure and the way resistance to that was made via the spatial logics inherent to marronage as opened up through Woods’ ways of more concretely linking the long history of theorising the commons with political ecology through Eurocentric ideas more squarely to Black lived experience and Black geographies across the US South and elsewhere.

In his posthumous book edited by Jordan Camp and Laura Pulido, *Development Drowned and Reborn* (2017), Woods contributes more toward thinking about the racialised politics of property. In their Foreword, Camp and Pulido summarise Woods’ deeper logic connecting enclosure and the commons by suggesting that “[t]his form of what he called ‘trap economics’ extracts wealth from the racially subordinated poor and working class by privatizing social goods formerly held in common, such as public schools, hospitals, housing, transit, and parks, and increasing expenditures for policing and prisons” (in Woods 2017:xxvi). These are the institutions DuBois saw as central to be rebuilt and built up in the move toward abolition democracy. Woods clarifies the stakes of these politics and their broader relational dynamics between enclosure and the commons, which in turn helps connect threads of history and theory. Camp and Pulido go on to suggest that Woods shows how organic intellectuals in New Orleans promoted “working class leadership, social vision, sustainable communities, social justice, and the construction of a new commons” (in Woods 2017:xxviii).

On 20 November 2017, I found myself planting sugarcane alone in a cold damp field on an overcast day in which I could taste the pungent sulphur in the air from the adjacent salt marsh so prominent on Sapelo. I was planting sugarcane against the sounds of the tide coming in off the Atlantic Ocean, reflecting on Walcott’s “Sea Canes” (1976) and thinking about what solidarity means. Those sugarcane plants I was planting that day should have been planted a month earlier in October but were not. They had not been planted on time because the field we had prepared to plant them in had been flooded by a six-foot tidal storm surge heaved up by Hurricane Irma in September. A month after Hurricane Irma, Bailey passed away and it took us time to figure out how to proceed, or to proceed at all. As I was working that day, one of Bailey’s Grandsons,

who I had spent time with by that point, joined me and worked with me planting the cane and covering the rows. I asked him about the legacy of Bilali Muhammad because I was feeling the weight of this moment and what he thought about his Grandmother's plan to grow sugarcane. He made a joke about the tiller I was using and threw dirt at me. The ways everyday life is taken up in these politics are important to recognise because working in common as I am learning requires bonds, connections and humour, and being in common amidst the vast differences between us. So I did what any respectable geographer/wanna be farmer would do, I threw dirt back at him.

In logic resonant with Bailey's notion of re-Earthing, Mbembe (2017:182) says: "to build a world we share, we must restore the humanity stolen from those who have historically been subjected to processes of abstraction and objectification. From this perspective, the concept of reparation is not only an economic project but also a process of reassembling amputated parts, repairing broken links, relaunching the forms of reciprocity without which there can be no progress for humanity." Sugarcane has been, and is still, an object central to great harm and oppression, so that it being mobilised as a vehicle for reparation will probably always confuse me, even as I continue to build competency in growing it. This contradiction is in part in line with the ways in which Pulido (2000:13) discusses "white privilege" which "enables us to develop a more structural, less conscious, and more deeply historicised understanding of racism". Also though, perhaps my confusion on this is in line with the faith that Walcott alludes to with his invocation of seraph lances and now seems necessary to begin to reestablish, relaunch, and repair relations between the University and the Saltwater Geechee community of Sapelo in a way that the menacing the University must own given its colonial history.

Conclusion

The last time I sat at her kitchen table with her, one month prior to her passing, I did my best to assure Bailey that we would keep pursuing her vision of growing sugarcane, peas, and other crops in the wake of Hurricane Irma. When she unexpectedly passed away, while we were shocked, Maurice and I came together to think about how best to continue down the path she had put us on, how to continue trying to fight for Geechee land, how to establish and grow a commons that might make a difference. In the spirit of building institutions that could help support the vision of abolition, Maurice and I together created the Cornelia Walker Bailey Program on Land and Agriculture based at the University of Georgia. We co-direct the Program. Working in a model of community-based social science, the program works to address important questions on the history, present status, and future of agriculture, property politics and related issues on Sapelo Island. The program facilitates partnerships among UGA faculty and students, the staff of the State of Georgia's Department of Natural Resources, the staff of the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve and residents of the Hog Hammock community. This is an effort to institutionalise our efforts toward reparative politics. Together and with abundant help and effort from many

people, we now have fields under cultivation and designated to be under cultivation that have capacity edging close to 40 acres.

McKittrick (2006:xxiii) suggests that the “poetics of landscape allow black women to critique the boundaries of transatlantic slavery, rewrite national narratives, respatialise feminism, and develop new pathways across traditional geographic arrangements; they also offer several reconceptualisations of space and place, positioning black women as geographic subjects who provide spatial clues as to how more humanly workable geographies might be imagined”. Cornelia Walker Baily’s life is illustrative of the powerful ways “black women and cartographies of struggle” can connect to historical political projects and make them vibrant, extending through the current conjuncture and into the future.

Today there are fewer than 50 full-time Geechee residents on Sapelo Island. The combination of the aging of the Geechee population and the ongoing displacement from private property by non-descendant residents is creating a frightening future scenario for a community that the state of Georgia has called one of its most culturally important (see Hardy et al. 2017). That Geechee now live in Brunswick, Savannah, Atlanta and beyond and not on Sapelo is central to the cultural genocide that Bailey feared was underway. The property dynamics unfolding unfettered on Sapelo relate to all too common narratives of gentrification in which property taxes continue to rise as wealthy off-island investors drive property values up. These processes though have a much deeper connection to the legacies of colonialism, slavery and racial capitalism across the South. Bailey (2001:272) captured these relations when she said that “Gullah and Geechee people were being pushed off land they’d owned since Reconstruction all through the Sea Islands, so that fancy new developments could be built in places like Hilton Head and Daufuski Island in South Carolina”. Derickson’s (2017:236–237) sentiments are useful for expanding upon Bailey when she suggests the importance of “historicizing the present and orienting analyses to the cultural and political economic geographies that produce and depend on oppression rather than the enumeration of its effects”. Abolition ecology is in part an effort to reclaim and amplify radical abolitionist politics about land redistribution and continue the struggle for emancipation in the face of dispossession and exploitation of the value much Southern land has come to contain through the knowledge, labour and generational care of enslaved peoples and their descendants.

Gilmore (2017:227) recently wrote that “abolition geography starts from the homely premise that freedom is a place”. Inspired in part by Gilmore, abolition ecology then is rooted squarely within these sentiments as well as within the ideas and ideals of DuBois’ notion of abolition democracy. As McCutcheon (2013) has shown, organising around land, property as central to transforming it in ways that align with the long-standing goals of emancipation continues to drive political efforts across the US South. Thinking to what Reverend Garrison Frazier told Sherman and Stanton that led to Special Field Order 15—“The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our labour ... and we can maintain ourselves and have something to spare”—means that land has always been central to emancipatory Black politics, Black ecologies and Black futures.

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