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Abstract: Reading for the Plantationocene (SAA 2024)

Missionaries and the Rhetoric of Plantation in the Early Modern Atlantic

My paper will compare the ecological rhetoric of missionaries on two early modern colonial plantations: the reformer John Bale in mid-1500s Ireland and the Puritan John Eliot in mid-1600s Massachusetts. These two zealous Johns both depicted religious conversion as a kind of “planting” that accompanied, and justified, settler occupation. As Bale put it, his mission was “to extirpate idolatry and to plant the true religion” among “the ruffianes of that wilde nacyon.” This religious planting, far from being merely figurative, helped shape the ecological form of early modern settler colonialism: the forced replacement of native peoples’ supposed nomadism with settled agriculture. Eliot wrote that he undertook not only the conversion of the Massachusetts tribes, but also the “civilizing of them, by training them into fixed dwellings.” From these perspectives, colonization seems to entail modernization, the imposition of “new” beliefs and ecologies on “old” ones. However, I will argue that Bale and Eliot also used these plantation tropes to look backwards, not only forwards. Even as they envisioned a newly planted Ireland and New England, both frequently remembered England itself as colonized territory. Bale repeatedly referred to the former Catholicization of England as a “plantation,” portraying his nation as a subjugated realm under ecclesiastical colonization. Eliot, meanwhile, echoed many others in valorizing the Roman occupation of ancient Britain as a model for *new* colonization. Reading these missionaries’ ecological rhetoric as a tool for both colonial promotion and national remembering, I hope to show how religious and historical ideas informed the environmental transformations of the early Plantationocene. By emphasizing this rhetoric as past-oriented, not merely future-oriented, I will ask (tentatively) whether there are any drawbacks in teleological approaches to the early Plantationocene as a threshold of the modern. After all, as Maan Barua, Rebeca Ibáñez Martín, and Marthe Achtnich write, “the Plantationocene point[s] to processes that can be nonlinear rather than teleological.”

Ryan Campagna
University of Chicago

I examine the rhetoric of natural disaster (floods and storms) in pair of sermons preached to the Virginia company in 1622 in the wake of the “Virginia Massacre” (one by Patrick Copland, the other John Donne). I consider how this Biblically citational rhetoric serves to contribute to a larger propaganda campaign by the company at this time and how natural disaster and crisis in these publicly printed sermons mobilize idealizations of the plantation and attempt to stabilize the colonial project for the company at this time. How does the imagery of natural disaster and emergency strangely supplement the extractive ambitions of the colonial project and actual natural disasters it will come to foster? How does the rhetoric of natural disaster in these contexts foreclose/obscure/trouble the possibility of imagining actual environmental and climate emergency?

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Marketing Sassafras:
Seasoning and Deforestation in Early Virginia

Virginia Ferrar – daughter of Jamestown investor Nicholas Ferrar as well as correspondent with Lady Berkeley, cookbook compiler and wife of Virginia’s governor – took her family’s financial ventures seriously, turning her pen to promoting goods from the New World. Ferrar celebrated America’s bounty in print, concentrating on sassafras in hopes of building her family’s fortune. Ferrar’s broadside *The Wonderful and Admirable Vertue of the Sassafras-Tree in Virginia* (1650) takes a two-pronged approach to conveying the fertility of the land for which she was named, concentrating on the native sassafras tree. She praises sassafras not just as a powerful – and potentially profitable – medicinal cure, but as a reason that English people should not let fear of disease keep them from venturing to Virginia in their own right. Though she had never crossed the Atlantic, she repeats the Jesuit Monardes’s story of the Spanish in Florida learning to use sassafras to cure “all their Infirmities and Diseases that befell them, (chiefly by drinking raw waters) as *Agues, Feavers, Dropsie, Scurvey, Swellings, loss of Appetite to Meat, Dulnes and Lasiness, ill-colour in Faces, Fluxes, Opulations, much Windyness in their Bodies, & c.*” The indigenous knowledge of sassafras, she stresses, allowed Europeans in Canada and Virginia to thrive as well. Sassafras was so key to the survival of these Europeans in America that they came to call it “the Tree of Life,” lauding it for its power to ease them past the troubles of “seasoning.” This descriptor, later applied to the process of subjugating newly-arrived enslaved Africans to their captivity on American plantations, described the dangerous fevers that English colonists endured during their first months in Virginia – fevers which sassafras was said to cure.

As helpful as sassafras proved in nursing those arriving in Virginia, however, the tree’s anti-seasoning powers were of no value in the English market, which was soon full of its medicinal bark. Its scarcity in early seventeenth-century recipe manuscripts testifies to the marginal success of initial efforts to popularize sassafras as a medical treatment. By the late seventeenth century, however, these manuscripts began to integrate sassafras more regularly, combining it with other ingredients imported from the Americas, like sarsaparilla and Jesuit root; such concoctions were in turn touted as cures for diseases associated with colonies in America. Deforestation soon followed, illustrating how the links between the sassafras tree and ailments associated with American lands – links that were themselves continually reinforced by domestic recipe manuscripts and popular publications – helped reinscribe the rhetoric of the Plantationocene.

Catastrophe's Empire:

Reading Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* in the Plantationocene

John Yargo

Abstract: This paper recovers the premodern relationship between environmental catastrophe and plantation ecologies in Behn's *Oroonoko*. Increasingly throughout the seventeenth century, the plantation catalyzed the profound re-organization of social, political, and economic life, driving environmental destruction and anti-Black violence from centralized commercial hubs like London to the peripheral sites where that commerce was generated such as Surinam. Complicating the flat generalization of the Anthropocene, scholars have proposed the Plantationocene as an analytic for capturing the role of racial capitalism in the history of anthropogenic climate damage. In my reading of Behn's novel, environmental catastrophe serves as a radical line of flight from emergent colonial imperialism, a kind of ecological escape hatch from the systemic hierarchies which structured "the geological era of the plantation:" freedom and slavery, alienation and belonging, subject and object. In the context of the greater Caribbean's ecological devastation in the late seventeenth century, known historically as "The Great Clearing," Captured through the melancholy young narrator's perspective, the landscape of Surinam as collapsing under the environmental pressures brought on by this ruthlessly extractive system, as well as how the region's ecologies outside the plantation provide a refuge for Oroonoko and Imoinda. Behn's narrative sharply contrasts the plantation's constricting effect on the human and non-human alike against Oroonoko's gigantism from within the natural-growth forests beyond the edges of the colonial settlement. When the war between slave-owners and the revolting slaves leaves the woodlands scorched, the plantation is exposed for what it is: a state of war, a martial ecology. Finally, I turn to Imoinda's death through what Jill H. Casid has called the "double edge of landscape's queer necropower."

Kyle Grady
University of California Irvine

Mixedness, “Peopl[ing],” and Plantation in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*

This paper will focus on the intersection between racial construction and developing early modern English notions of population, particularly as it is represented in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Inasmuch as early modern English interest in plantation was spurred by the idea that the domestic population risked outstripping the country’s resources – particularly during the economic crises of the late 16th century – its settler colonial projects were envisioned with attention to the demographics necessary to facilitate that planting. As Jennifer L. Morgan demonstrates, such demographic considerations arose alongside and were informed by the transatlantic trade and the development of hereditary based slavery. The practice of counting and hierarchically categorizing people were – and in some ways remain – entwined projects. This paper will consider how these overlapping early modern projects leveraged the inherent flexibility of racial constructs. It will focus in particular on the figure of Caliban, whose racial incoherence, I argue, is tied specifically to the vision of “people[ing]” offered in the play. While Caliban’s at times almost paradoxical rendering is often understood as fantastical, this paper reads it as representative of the racial mixing inherent to the early Black Atlantic and the settler colonial plantation. This paper will consider how pliable notions of “people” helped racially stratify intermixing settler colonies to better facilitate the project of plantation.

The Spice of Verisimilitude: Theatre, Indigo, and the Plantationocene in the Age of Garrick

Ellen MacKay

I am grateful that this seminar provides me the occasion to begin the third in a sequence of three essays about Shakespeare as a resource for the plantationocene. The first is on *The Tempest* and the theatrical manufacture of enchanted labor, the second is on *The Merchant of Venice* and the 'estate of exception,' and this last is about the scene of performance as resourced by plantation-based commodity production. To make this argument, I focus on North American indigo, and the notoriously noxious process of extracting its dye, as the backstage precondition for the staging of "blue coats" (the mark of service) and blue cloaks (the tool of deception in the proverb iconography of cuckoldry). The larger aim of the project is to illuminate in some detail the infrastructure of enslaved labor entailed by the onstage use of blue textiles in a particular play or series of plays. To do so I hope to be able to source the fabric used in costumes, props, or scenography back to a particular plantation in Louisiana, Florida or the Carolinas. In advance of this research, my aim is to address the coincidence of the heyday of American indigo (1740 – 1786) and the shift in Shakespeare production aesthetics toward an increasingly bespoke stage environment that supports and 'serves' the text. I contend that theatre is a demonstrative expression of the American dogma that plantation labor is a necessary and inevitable prerequisite for new world-making or world-building. Because it emanates from production practice, an undiscussed way that things appear, this justification is a particularly effective resource for the maintenance of the plantationocene.