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'A great many of them die': Sugar, race and cheapness in colonial Queensland

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Abstract

The frontier of colonial Queensland was pushed northward through the second half of the 19th century by proliferating sugar plantations. The cultivation of sugar cane for these plantations rested predominantly on the shoulders of unfree, racialized Pacific Islander workers. This history reveals dialectics of cheap lives and land, as nature was produced for exchange at the commodity frontier, unfolding in crises of disease, death and exhaustion. In exploring the story of this frontier, an opportunity emerges to begin a conversation between a recent return to materialism within Australian historiography and the traditions of eco-Marxism and Black radicalism. The contention here is that this engagement represents both 'urgent history' and 'truth-telling', as plantation socioecologies of cheapness continue to (re)produce the crises of the racial Capitalocene.

KEYWORDS

Australia, commodity frontiers, plantations, race, sugar, world-ecology

1 | INTRODUCTION

Between 1863 and 1906, a sugar cane industry expanded up the coast of the British colony of Queensland, pushed forward and reliant on racialized and unfree workers from the Pacific Islands. Known then as

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'Kanakas',[1] around 60,000 South Sea Islanders were brought to the colony from their island homes to cultivate cane, producing sugar through a plantation political ecology (Horne, 2007, p. 33). Transported from more than 80 islands, the majority were brought from now Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati and Tuvalu. The rise and fall of Queensland plantation sugar production speaks directly to many ongoing conversations in history and critical theory, with implications for the politics of the 'Capitalocene' (Moore, 2016); it speaks to conversations around the production of nature (Smith, 1984/2010), the materiality of race under capitalism (Robinson, 1983/2000) and the constitution of uneven development through commodity frontiers (Beckert et al., 2021)—all debates that have direct bearing on how we understand the origins and nature of our current conjuncture of socioecological crisis, spanning the reproduction of water, soil, biodiversity and climate in a world still defined by classed, gendered and racial difference. It is, in this sense, 'urgent history' (Rees & Huf, 2020). It also tells a complex story of the contested (re)production of racial hierarchies; capitalist production premised on stolen Aboriginal land, secured through great violence. In this way, it also contributes to the ongoing project in contemporary Australia of 'truth-telling' (National Constitutional Convention, 2017; Reynolds, 2021).

We begin from Jason W. Moore's assertion for 'the centrality of historical thinking in coming to grips with capitalism's planetary crises of the twenty-first century' (Moore, 2017, p. 1). This call is increasingly being answered through engagement with the history of 'commodity frontiers,' this approach identifying 'capitalism as a process rooted in a profound restructuring of the countryside and nature … connect[ing] processes of extraction and exchange with degradation, adaption and resistance in rural peripheries' (Beckert et al., 2021, p. 465). In this way, capitalism is apprehended as a way of producing nature (Smith, 2010) driven by the structuring power of value (Postone, 1993, pp. 17, 31). [Correction added on 3 May 2024, after first online publication: the reference year for Smith has been updated to cite the latest edition in the preceding sentence.] The contradictions set in motion by this specifically capitalist socioecology ramify through space and time, leading to the converging crises of the racial Capitalocene: species extinction, climate change, soil exhaustion, zoonotic disease, uneven development, multiplying ecosystem collapse, all unfolding over existing inequalities of class, gender and race (Moore, 2016).

Critical histories of capitalism have often been neglected in the local Australian historiography; at the same time, the history of Australian capitalism has rarely been connected to global conversations that query the origins of capitalism and the production of nature. While Australia has been central in the theorization of settler-colonialism (Wolfe, 1999), this extant attention to race can be usefully nuanced through conversations with the Black radical critique of capital (Robinson, 1983). [Correction added on 3 May 2024, after first online publication: the reference year for Robinson has been updated to cite the latest edition in the preceding sentence.] Considering a recent resurgence of historical interest in capitalism as a denaturalized, historically specific object within Australian history (Forsyth & Loy-Wilson, 2017, 2021; Huf et al., 2020; Rees & Huf, 2020), together with the political and theoretical necessity of an explanation for the origins of our current socioecological crises, the time is ripe for serious, historical, world-ecological contributions. This lacuna is also identified by Julie McIntyre, who notes 'Australian historians of labour and environment do not participate in international debates about whether or how to consider the historical intersection of nature and labour, or, indeed, nature, labour, and capitalism' (McIntyre, 2021, p. 73). This addresses this by beginning a conversation between theories and histories of Australian capitalism, world-ecology and racial capitalism. This is significant, as without attention to this case, global debates around the 'plantationocene' threaten to speak only to familiar contexts—North America, South America and the Caribbean—missing the global nature of plantation socioecologies of Cheap Nature, now so dominant in South-East Asia and the Pacific (Chao, 2022). How does colonial Australia, so frequently reduced to a colony of convicts and sheep, recast these global debates? And how does a socioecological critique of capitalism deepen local understandings?

In this context, guided by the racial nature of the Capitalocene, we arrive at 19th-century Queensland sugar plantation complex; in the words of Achille Mbembe (2017, 47), 'the plantation system … was the key to the constitution of

[1]Originating from Hawaiian, meaning 'person', this term became a tool of racialization, deployed in Australia by White settler-colonials to refer to South Sea Islanders in general. It is generally considered offensive today, although there have been Pasifika attempts to reclaim the word in some contexts (e.g., Fox, 2018). It is used in a limited way here, to capture this specific historical process of racialization, following other scholars in this area (Banivanua-Mar, 2006). It also provides a tool to pivot between the vantage point of capital and that of justice.

modern capitalism.' Capitalist socioecological relations of 'cheapness' gave the sugar frontier its dynamism, its spatial and temporal velocity. The contradictory dialectics of capitalist sugar production through Cheap Nature have seen the plantation deployed as a contingent articulation of the commodity frontier across the long history of capitalism. These same dialectics saw the plantation emerge as a socioecological fix to the contradictions of colonial Queensland, where it demonstrated again those qualities that defined it since Iberian sugar production on the Madeira islands—exhaustion, disease and a necropolitical ecology of death (Moore, 2000). Sugar capital demanded cheap lives, land and natures to fuel its rapid expansion, as capital has done repeatedly across space and time. For centuries, the sugar plantation demonstrated the socioecology of capital precisely because of this: Because on the plantation, the demand for appropriation to run ahead of exploitation was apparent. This history is a powerful vehicle to reveal tendencies elsewhere obscuredand a departure point for a broader re-telling of White Australian history attentive to the socioecology of racial capitalism.

What is at stake here? Why are engagements across these three literatures—world-ecology, Black radicalism and Australian history—needed? While this article does include some novel archival research, there is a rich extant historiography around Queensland sugar production (see especially Banivanua-Mar, 2006; Graves, 1993; Griggs, 1997, 2000; Saunders, 1984). That local literature remains disconnected, however, from broader conversations—those around Australian capitalism or world-ecological histories of capitalism. It should be noted that the global history of the plantation, and Pacific histories of the plantation—including histories of the present—is much stronger on these fronts (see especially Beckford, 1999; Li & Semedi, 2021; Tilly, 2020). But it would seem that a constant push to globalize our understanding of the plantation—its specificities and generalities—is necessary, with the editors of the recent volume *Histories of Capitalism* admitting the overwhelming focus of that literature on the Atlantic, posing 'how well does the concept of racial capitalism travel in global contexts' (Jenkins & Leroy, 2021, p. 16). So too with the emergence of the 'plantationocene' literature, indicated above. Through a conversation with a theoretical critique of capital—especially defined as a socioecology—we might better see the connections between this local history and the nature of capitalism today. These local histories have much to gain too from such a conversation. For example, Graves' (1993) *Cane and Labour: The Political Economy of the Queensland Sugar Industry* proceeds as a historical materialist critique of Whiggish histories that explained the end of the Queensland plantation complex as the triumph of urban, liberal politics. Instead, he traced the internal contradictions of that labour regime, noting the rising cost of 'Kanaka' labour. That these contradictions were *socioecological* is not drawn out, nor is the importance of appropriated social-reproductive labour. This piece does not labour the critique of these extant histories, but certainly an explicit eco-Marxist critique of capital is lacking. This article contributes to our understanding of how the racial Capitalocene emerged in Queensland and in-so-doing hopes to contribute to a politics that might transcend the contradictory and crisis-prone socioecological relations of Cheap Nature.

The development of the Queensland sugar industry, on the northern frontier of White Australia, rested entirely on unfree, racialized, cheap labour, through into the early 20th century. This paper does not delve into those thorny debates around the status of various forms of unfree labour under capitalism.[2] While this is worth further consideration, from the vantage point of world-ecology and through the lens of 'cheapness', these complications do not vitiate the argument made here. Through the categories of world-ecology, this moment in the history of Australian capitalism is rendered legible. Further, through exploring the socioecology of the plantation, much is revealed about the character of capitalism more broadly. Here, we can see the commodity frontier at work, producing landscapes, crises and profits through relations of cheapness: cheap nature, cheap land, cheap work and cheap lives. We see how cheapness is constructed, through the efforts of the state and capital, especially via the vehicle of racialization: racializing workers, and therefore within nature, outside of the sphere of value (Mies, 1986, p. 77). In telling this history, we will first situate the world-ecology of sugar and the plantation within the world history of capitalism in general terms and articulate some key eco-Marxist concepts. Second, tracing the movement of the global sugar frontier, we will account for the emergence of this industry in Queensland. Third, we will follow the development of the sugar industry from 1863 through to 1907, through three cycles of expansion and crisis, culminating in the end of the

[2]For a brief example of the debate on unfree labour, see these exchanges between Tom Brass (2003) and Jairus Banaji (2003).

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South Sea Islander slave trade.[3] Crucially, this story reminds us of the power of racialization to define value in a material way—something that continues to define the racial Capitalocene, the contradictions of which traverse socioecologies of race, class, gender, state and capital. Our theory of capitalism must be able to account for the role of race in cheapness, or the socioecology of capital will find spaces where these old strategies can again be deployed for profit, unchallenged—indeed, a defining characteristic of much agriculture in Australia today is its reliance on cheap, immigrant labour (Campbell, 2019; Stead, 2022). World-ecology reveals the origins of this reliance, shows how such strategies emerge from relations of Cheap Nature and points towards a politics that explicitly grapples with such relations.

2 | SWEETNESS AND CAPITAL: THE PLANTATION IN GENERAL

It has long been observed that sugar, the institution of the plantation and the emergence of capitalism are closely related. This historical observation has been a source of theoretical contention; many historical materialists define capitalism by the wage relation, which sits uncomfortably with the historical prevalence and persistence of unwaged work (Wood, 2002). Further, the question of periodization arises, with the bulk of the slave trade sitting outside temporal conceptions of capitalist origins. This is where the Black radical tradition cuts through theoretical equivocation to state plainly and politically that the plantation was capitalist. Eric Williams (1944, pp. 163–166), for example, argued that slavery, and the commodities it produced, were crucial to fuel the development of metropolitan capitalism, generating vast amounts of capital that might be ploughed back into expanded reproduction. In this view, 'without slavery there is no sugar, and without sugar, there is no industrialization' (Eichen, 2020, p. 39). The crucial implication of this Black radical argument is that the resistance of unfree, plantation workers—in the many forms that resistance took and takes—are anti-capitalist struggles (Clegg, 2020; Du Bois, 1935; James, 1963). Indeed, as this resistance often obfuscated the operation of the value-producing plantation, this resistance constitutes value-struggles.

The capitalist nature of the plantation is emphasized also by Sidney Mintz, who saw plantations not only as an engine of primitive accumulation, but also as a laboratory of modernity, pioneering a proto-industrial organization of production, as well as the distinct temporality of capitalist production (Mintz, 1986, p. 47). From a world-systemic perspective, too, plantations have long been seen as an important example of the logic of capitalism, with Braudel declaring them as 'capitalist creations *par excellence*: money, credit, trade and exchange tied them to the east side of the Atlantic' (Braudel, 1982, pp. 272–273). [Correction added on 3 May 2024, after first online publication: the reference year for Braudel has been updated to cite the latest edition in the preceding sentence.] Mbembe (2017, p. 47), as quoted above, summarizes these perspectives clearly: 'The complex of Atlantic slavery, centered around the plantation system in the Caribbean, Brazil, and the United States, was key to the constitution of modern capitalism.' It is no coincidence that the capitalist character of the plantation has been best apprehended by Black radical scholars. Of course, many investors and plantation owners putting Atlantic slaves to work in the fields used a material detour through the biophysical world of production other than that of sugar: Cotton, tobacco, coffee, tea, cocoa, opium and rubber were just some alternatives. That said, Jason W. Moore sees sugar as a particularly powerful example of the 'commodity frontier' of Cheap Nature at work, as 'few commodity frontiers have contained such expansionary and environmentally transformative logic as sugar' (2000, p. 413). This assertion begs further historical exploration. As such, this article asks what logics were at play in the expansion of the Queensland sugar commodity frontier?

What is it about plantations then that make them capitalist? This argument could be mounted on several grounds, as outlined above. But here, we will focus on capitalism as specific set of socioecological relations, a world-ecology of 'Cheap Nature'. This concept animates the general category of the 'production of nature for exchange' to detail what Neil Smith meant when he argued that 'it is the relative cheapness or expense of using various use-

[3] At least in that form, as these relations of cheap nature and cheap labour arguably dominate Australia's current reliance on immigrant labour across many sectors of agriculture.

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values that counts' (Smith, 1984/2010, p. 67) and builds on the insights of ecofeminist and postcolonial scholars who see capitalism as based on the unpaid world of 'women, nature, and colonies' (Mies, 1986, p. 77). Although chiefly associated with Jason W. Moore, these antecedents are important to note—indeed, the central argument here goes back to Marx, who noted the 'portion of constant capital that consists of fixed capital … [tends to] run significantly ahead of the portion consisting of organic raw materials, so that the demand for these raw materials grows more rapidly than their supply' (1967, pp. 118–119). This bottleneck to capital accumulation demands the expansive frontiers that have defined capitalist world-history, with capital drawn to those historically specific times and places where the stuff of production can be got for less. Importantly, this historical 'cheapness' is socially defined and constructed, often relying on the agency of states, empires, science and especially un (der)paid workers. As put by Moore, 'Capitalism's "law of value" [is], it turns out, a law of Cheap Nature. It [is] "cheap" in a specific sense, deploying the capacities of capital, empire, and science to appropriate the unpaid work/energy of global natures within the reach of capitalist power' (2016, p. 89). When we speak of the historically specific socioecological relations that define capitalism, 'Cheap Nature' is central to those relations.

A nested concept that follows on here is the 'commodity frontier', which names those moments where historical cheapness has been secured in a significant way. Taking Moore (2015, p. 54) again,

> *Cheap Nature is 'cheap' in a historically specific sense, defined by the periodic, and radical, reduction in the socially necessary labor-time of these Big Four inputs: food, labor-power, energy, and raw materials. Cheap Nature, as an accumulation strategy, works by reducing the value composition – but increasing the technical composition – of capital as a whole; by opening new opportunities for investment; and, in its qualitative dimension, by allowing technologies and new kinds of nature to transform extant structures of capital accumulation and world power. In all this, commodity frontiers – frontiers of appropriation – are central.*

It is the contention of this article that the historiography of settler-colonial Australia must grapple with the theoretical contributions of eco-Marxism, especially the value-theoretical category of Cheap Nature. And, indeed, that eco-Marxist, ecofeminist and postcolonial theorists ought to think through the story of Australian capitalism. Therein lies the crucial step in the 'dance of the dialectic' (Ollman, 2003)—the recurrent, reflexive move between theory and history, and vice versa. A sufficient eco-Marxist theorization of the capitalist totality is beyond us here; rather, our scope is to take these two categories outlined above and to see how they animate our history of 19th century Queensland sugar. And while race is certainly seen as a material determinant of 'cheapness' from the eco-Marxist perspective, that acknowledgement is enriched by returning to the literatures precede and inform that approach. By drawing on Black radical scholarship generally, local and regional treatments of race and the plantation and a historical attention to the specificities of racialization in the context of plantations on stolen Indigenous land in a settler-colony, the theoretical categories of eco-Marxism are usefully nuanced and specified. Indeed, in some ways, plantation studies might be understood as an antecedent to eco-Marxism.

With this theory in hand, let us dwell a little longer on the case of the capitalist plantation in general. That sugar cane was historically grown on tropical plantations, worked by racialized, unfree labour emerges from the collision of the law of Cheap Nature with the particular ecology of cane. It is important to understand that sugar cane dries rapidly when cut, and so must be milled within a maximum 48 h, though ideally 24. After the cane has been milled, the juice must be processed immediately, as fermentation will prevent crystallization (Galloway, 1989, pp. 16, 105). Plantations developed as a highly rationalized, time-disciplined and vertically integrated form of production, organized around the biophysical realities of the sugar cane plant, to maximize productivity and profits. Harvests were essentially continuous, with workers expected to function on little sleep and to work around the clock. 'This exhausting pace lasted Monday through Saturday, continuing for 8-10 months' (Galloway, 1989, p. 40). The centrality of boiling to processing meant that mills (and therefore plantations) had to be located near the coast or a river and also

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required the rapacious harvesting of forests as a source of thermal energy. Some estimates suggest that, in Brazil, every acre of sugar cane required between one and a half and two times as much forest (Schwartz, 1985, p. 170).

In this way, land had to be cheap for the sugar commodity frontier to expand, and dialectically, expansion was necessary due to rapid deforestation. We begin to see the particular socioecology of sugar; its tendency towards rapid deforestation is observable from the outset and is a generalizable trait. Take Iberian sugar production on Madeira: We see 'the first signs of the modern sugar-slave nexus in Madeira, whose rise and decline (1452-1520s) turned on rapid deforestation' (Moore, 2015, p. 183). Compounding the centripetal force of deforestation, a consistent characteristic of cane was its depletion of the soil—in the words of Williams, 'from the standpoint of the grower, the greatest defect of slavery lies in the fact that it quickly exhausts the soil' (Williams, 1944, p. 7). Note how Williams is thinking *socioecologically*, showing the coproduction of class and nature—an important antecedent of contemporary eco-Marxist thinking.[4] The inhumanity of the imperatives of capital is deliberately highlighted here by Williams—that the genocidal seizure of land, which the plantation rests upon, is *not* a defect of the system speaks to the necessary violence of Cheap Nature. From the standpoint of the enslaved and their descendants, and the Indigenous inhabitants of the land, this is surely its 'greatest defect'.

From Madeira in the 15th century, through the Caribbean in the 17th and Cuba and Jamaica in the late 18th and early 19th, the commodity frontier of sugar continued to search for places where Cheap Natures were available in the right combinations to allow for the insatiable hunger of the 'plantation machine' (Burnard & Garrigus, 2016) to consume ecosystems, communities and lives. This world history of shifting centres of primary commodity production help to explain the uneven development of capitalism, propelled by relations of socioecological crisis. As Moore goes on to summarize, 'Depending on supplies of uncommodified land, sugar planters under capitalist market pressures were forced to commodify and as a consequence degrade the land, thus setting the stage for further expansion …' (Moore, 2000, pp. 428–429). Cheap, exhaustible land and forests ready to fell might be one feature of the sugar frontier. But what about labour and lives? How might we understand the relation between free and unfree labour, the horrors of the slave trade and the tendency of plantations to consume bodies in what has been described as a 'necropolitical ecology' (Eichen, 2020, pp. 47–48)? We turn now to trace cheap labour on the sugar frontier.

How we ought to conceive of race and labour under capitalism is contentious. When looking at the commodity frontier of sugar, from the perspective of world-ecology, however, the category of race is obviously central and deeply material. As C.L.R. James emphasized, 'the race question is subsidiary to the class question in polities, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental' (James, 1963, p. 283). And yet, in the eyes of some, this has been excluded from view by European—and Eurocentric—Marxists: 'European Marxists have presumed more frequently than not that their project is identical with world-historical development' (Robinson, 1983/2000, p. 2). Some of the tension between narrow definitions of capitalism that wholly exclude slavery from analysis, and the arguments emerging out of the Black Radical Tradition such as James, might be eased by thinking about the organizing questions Marx was pursuing in *Capital*. This is the view of Mintz, who suggested that 'it was never Marx's sole or explicit intention … to draw an orderly contrast between slaves and proletarians in order to endow these terms with definitions that could become eternal verities' (Mintz, 1978, p. 83). Indeed, in correspondence, Marx acknowledges precisely this, that his categories might be organized differently if the articulation of free and unfree labour (and the materiality of race in constructing unfree labour) under the capitalist mode of production was the principle question:

> *Freedom and slavery constitute an antagonism … We are not dealing with indirect slavery, the slavery of the proletariat, but with direct slavery, the slavery of the black races in Sirunam, in Brazil, in the southern states of North America. Direct slavery is as much the pivot of our industrialism today as machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery, no cotton; without cotton no modern industry. Slavery has given their value to the*

[4]Williams, then, might be put alongside Marx and Lukacs, as early anticapitalist scholars who had a long-unappreciated sensitivity to the internal relations of 'society' and 'nature' (Altun et al., 2022; Burkett, 1999).

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> *colonies; the colonies have created world trade; world trade is the necessary condition of large-scale machine industry. Before the traffic in Negros began the colonies supplied the Old World with very few products and made no visible change in the face of the earth. Thus slavery is an economic category of the highest importance*
>
> (Marx, 1976, p. 167).

Here, Marx not only elevates the significance of slavery alongside those he wrote far more about—machinery, credit and commodity production—but he does so by acknowledging a fundamental: That slavery has historically been racialized. Indeed, going back to the Crusades, racialization has been central to facilitating the institution of slavery (Patel & Moore, 2016, pp. 180–185). In the specific case of plantation slavery, across commodity frontiers, a consistent argument by planters themselves is that such work would be impossible for White labour—something repeated in Queensland, explored further below. This discursive claim was, of course, false—as evidenced by the subsequent shift in race politics under the White Australia Policy. Racialization cheapens labour historically and is contested and constructed. The racialization of Black labour placed workers on the other side of the Cartesian dualism, as part of Nature. World-ecology, and the value-theoretical category of Cheap Nature, is closely attuned to the material significance of this process. Following Maria Mies (1986), capitalist accumulation by exploitation is seen as resting on a larger—and growing—base of appropriation of 'women, nature, and colonies'. As Marx noted above, unfree, racialized labour was a central pillar in the origins of capitalism—something our theorization of the wage-labour relation ought to be sensitive to.

In the struggle to comprehend our current planetary socioecological crisis, and properly account for its origins, world-ecology has offered the 'Capitalocene' as a superior analytic to the widespread use of 'Anthropocene' (Moore, 2016). Others have gone further, articulating the 'Plantationocene' as a more specific framing of the character and emergence of this period: It is the logic of the plantation that explains those socioecological relations that have produced this conjuncture and continue to define it (Barua, 2022; Chao et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2019; Haraway, 2016; Tsing, 2015). Without wading into the sea of proliferating geological–periodical neologisms too far, the concept of the Plantationocene does usefully bring our attention to key historical and current dynamics of capitalist socioecology. It brings together an appreciation of racialization as a state strategy, rationalization of landscapes and ecologies in the service of the commodity frontier and the overwhelming force of the search for Cheap Nature:

> *Over and over, combinations of expropriation, overwork, and disease cleared the native peoples from the land, reordering it, and turning trees into fields and fuels. Enslaved, isolated Africans were introduced for planting, harvesting, and processing a single, isolated crop: sugar … Not only was this plantation formula of labor replacement and carbon usage repeated across the Americas, but … it was later scaled up and transformed into industrial organization, and … provided the racializing violence and proto-spatialities of modernity*
>
> (Eichen, 2020, p. 42).

Eichen, his formulation of the racial Capitalocene produced on the plantation, reformulates Mbembe's 'necropolitics' (2003) as a 'necropolitical economy, a political economy (or ecology) of calculated death' (Eichen, 2020, p. 47). This captures the horror of equivalency under the law of value, which saw calculations made over and over, across 500 years of slavery, as to the worth of slave mortality and mutilation: How long do our slaves need to survive, and labour, to ensure the 'constant capital' they represent is recouped? How many slaves might be squeezed onto one ship, accepting the *cost* of lives lost through overcrowding (Burnard & Garrigus, 2016; Curtin, 1998; Schwartz, 2005, p. 243; The Illustrated London News, 1848)? Similarly, concept of the 'plantationocene', and its emerging literature, help 'to clarify the role of agrarian societies in the making of the modern era', upsetting a Eurocentric focus, shifting our attention 'to the margins where forced labor, theft, conquest,

and dispossession in the New World, Africa, and Asia were essential to establishing modern societies and markets' (Chao et al., 2023, p. 5)—and, indeed, the continuation of those modes of extraction today.

In this way, the history of sugar is the history of capitalism. Its ecology led to highly time-disciplined and rationalized production processes, which, when brought together with the exigencies of the capitalist search for profit, and with the institution of slavery, leads to the formation of the plantation. The plantation was Cheap Nature at work, and through deforestation and exhaustion, it drove the commodity frontier of sugar around the globe, devastating landscapes, cultures and peoples as it went. This cheapness was manifold:

> *On both sides of the Atlantic, labor produced outside the circuits of capital lowered the price of sugar. Labor reproduced outside of wage relations lowered the price of sugar. Food produced outside the wage relation lowered the price of sugar … Land appropriated from outside the circuits of capital lowered the price of sugar. These were all Cheap Nature*
>
> (Eichen, 2020, p. 47).

All of this was made possible—and legal (Bhandar, 2018)—by ongoing strategies of racialization, which made *lives* cheap for capital to consume. That is, by using racialization as a strategy to de-value the lives of some vis-à-vis others. Settler-colonial capitalism in the Australian colonies was already deeply racialized and had turned on various forms of unfree-labour (Edmonds & Nettelbeck, 2018), with the violence of the frontier turning on race and value (Clayton-Dixon, 2019; Reynolds, 2006; Wolfe, 2016). Although certainly not determined—with distinct strategies of racialization for Indigenous Australians and South Sea Islanders bumping up, blurring, and juxtaposing—this context provided fertile ground for attempts to re-articulate the plantation frontier in Queensland. Could Queensland planters establish socio-ecologies of cheapness 'down under'? Just as the question had been around abolition in the Americas, and across the British Empire, prospective planters were more concerned with the availability and possibility of Cheap Nature, than with supposedly shifting cultural norms in the metropole. And so, as we move now to explore the history of the sugar commodity frontier in Queensland, we do so attentive to historical cheapness and its construction by state, capital and everyday instances of racialization.

3 | THE ROOTS OF CANE: CHEAPNESS AND RACIALIZATION

The first sugar cane grown in Australia was cultivated in 1822 by a Black former slave, James Williams, while he was imprisoned at the penal settlement of Port Macquarie (Christopher, 2020). Williams' experimental crop was destroyed by fire, and it would be several decades before this early development would become commodified. Rather, it would be in the new colony of Queensland that sugar would finally constitute a commodity frontier. From a world-ecology perspective, the sugar frontier was still consuming bodies, forests and soil elsewhere. Up until 1859, the frontiers of pastoralism had pushed into the northern part of New South Wales, but settlement beyond Brisbane was sparse compared with the more-fertile south, and state control over space also lagged. Sugar had been planted in small patches around Brisbane from 1825, but despite repeated arguments by politicians and prospective planters, that a plantation industry would be suitable in the north, the frontier was yet to be articulated (Griggs, 2000, p. 616). When Queensland became a separate colony in 1859, however, the historical cheapness of nature shifted—globally and locally—fostering the emergence of this new frontier. Specifically, in 1863, the Crown introduced the *Sugar and Coffee Regulations* within the colony, based on the 1861 *Cotton Regulations* act. The purpose of these new acts was to consolidate the frontier by bringing capital to bear in the production of space and nature. Under these regulations, planters could

> *lease one block of land between 320 and 1280 acres, limited to within ten miles of the coast or any navigable river. Once the lessee had convinced the government that one twentieth of the block had been*

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cultivated with either sugar or coffee and that a sum of twenty shillings or more for each acre leased had been spent on improvements, the freehold title to the block was transferred to the planter

(Griggs, 2000, p. 616).

In this, we see the environment-making state (Parenti, 2015) at work, consolidating state space and buttressing the invasion and seizure of Indigenous lands with the interests of capital.

Indeed, as with all settler-colonial Australian capitalism, the cheapness of land in colonial Queensland rests entirely on the appropriation and extirpation of Indigenous Australians. Although much sparser than the plantation frontier, the pastoral frontier of sheep and cattle brought the invasion of squatters into Aboriginal lands. With this expansion, the frontier wars were already ongoing when planters arrived. The apocalyptic violence of the frontier was perpetrated by squatters and planters alike—but especially by the Queensland Native Police (Graves, 1993, p. 14). In some cases, such as with 'The Ceders' and 'Fairymead', land that would later become plantations was the site of Indigenous massacres, prosecuted by squatters (Bottoms & Evans, 2013, pp. 25–26; Lack, 1964). In some instances in remote districts, planters violently secured their land against the traditional owners by marshalling their Islander workers as militia (Graves, 1993, p. 194). Resistance to dispossession continued late into the 19th century, when 'as late as 1885, the workers on 'Pyramid' plantation at Cairns fought a battle with local Aborigines who systematically set fire to the plantation's cane, speared its horses and terrorized its labour force' (Graves, 1993, p. 14). This continued resistance was a heroic but isolated case, in that the violence across Queensland was intense and genocidal. Reynolds (2006, p. 126) has noted that in instigation of responsible government in 1859 'removed many of the political constraints that had previously held back the full force of white violence'. This, together with the brutal efficiency of the Queensland Native Police (Burke et al., 2018), saw the territory that became Queensland seized. The very process of settler-colonial state formation was predicated on the extirpation of the original inhabitants. And though the focus of this article is on the socioecology of the 'Kanaka' labour regime, the land granted to planters, which facilitated this frontier, was made doubly cheap, through the cheapening of Indigenous lives.

The *Sugar and Coffee Regulations* began the cheapening of nature, specifically by providing uncommodified—and violently seized—land to planters, conditional on an injection of capital, and producing the socioecology of sugar (or coffee, or cotton). These land grants—up to 1280 acres—were of a significant size, considering that the average size of plantations in Jamaica, the Lesser Antilles and Natal were between 185 and 350 acres in the same period (Green, 1973, p. 461). Having such large grants—which in practice were often even larger, due to the practice of 'dummying', whereby proxies are used to secure extra land beyond those legally allowed (Kerr, 1980, pp. 27, 32)—was important, due to the rapacious socioecology of sugar: While not all the land was necessarily under cane, these grants often included timbered areas for fuel, as well as rotation options for exhausted soil (Griggs, 2007, 1995, p. 419). The land grants to sugar planters were successful for the state and for capital. The industry saw rapid expansion through to 1874, by which time 14,600 acres were under cane (Griggs, 2000, p. 617). This first 'boom' of the sugar commodity frontier saw the establishment of 45 plantations. Their average size was 514 acres, with five plantations exceeding 2000 acres in size (Griggs, 2000, pp. 644–645). These early plantations seized the most desirable river frontages, providing rich soils, ease of transport and a ready supply of water for the boilers (Hillard, 1979, pp. 256–258). These plantations were a vehicle to continue the kinds of accumulation pursued by imperial capital for centuries, with many of the early planters coming 'from a wealthy or aristocratic background' (Griggs, 2000, p. 623). Interestingly, many plantations were formed with capital accumulated through the pastoral frontier (Griggs, 2000, p. 624). Sugar was a very capital intensive, meaning financial capital was entwined with the sugar frontier from the outset (Nunn, 1988, p. 343); at the commodity frontier, we see a collision of existing class relations coalescing in the search for Cheap Nature—here, cheap land especially.

And yet, fertile land, no matter how cheap it is, does not cultivate and process sugar cane by itself. As Marx reminds us, 'a thing can be a use-value without being a value. This is the case whenever its utility to man is not mediated through labour' (Marx, 1867/1976, p. 131). Going further, labour is not only necessary to produce value; the

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specific dynamism of the commodity frontier is driven by the confluence of historical cheapness, in many forms. Queensland sugar was cheap in this way, not only due to free land (cleared of and secured against indigenous inhabitants by the state; Bottoms & Evans, 2013; Burke et al., 2018) but also due to its particular, racialized labour regime. It was cheapened through 'Blackbirding'—the recruitment, inducement and outright kidnap of South Sea Islanders, brought by ship to Queensland to cut cane—and the toil and death of the 'Kanakas'. In the contemporaneous words of Rev. Oscar Michelson, 'the margin of profit for the planters lies between what the Kanakas are able to bear, and what they are not able to bear, but are made to do … [profit is] proportionate to the number of Kanakas worked to death' (Michelson, 1898, pp. 155–156).

And herein lies one of the crucial elements of how the racialization of South Sea Islanders played out in Queensland. Before tracing this history, let us first define in general terms *how* the racialization South Sea Islanders proceeded, to create the possibility of profits at the sugar commodity frontier. In the first instance, the use of Islander labour was seen as necessary, to tame the landscape, to improve the land and to cultivate cane. This was justified as in the 'tropical districts', 'the climate is unfavourable to European fieldwork' (Bowen, 1883, p. 117). The uneasy and inconsistent racialization of the Queensland frontier is well articulated by Banivanua-Mar (2006, p. 76) and worth reproducing at length:

> *Armies of cheap, colored, but non-indigenous labor were therefore essential … A paid and regulated Aboriginal labor trade … [however] was an illogicality in a settler colony. Whether a mysteriously dying population or one that must be wiped clean from the path of settlement, it was inconsistent with the settler colonial project for indigenous peoples to openly and publicly supply necessary labor on the scale envisaged for the growth of cotton or sugar. After other avenues for obtaining colored labor failed, it was felt that western Pacific Islanders, being black, would withstand the appalling conditions of sugar labor. This was not just because, as an employer wrote in 1872, they were 'splendid-looking fellows, tall, muscular and wonderfully strong', but also because, as American and Caribbean slavery's legacy deemed, there was a certain naturalness to black field gangs. Moreover, the immediate and crucial benefit of imported indentured labor was that while cheap (black and relatively local), it was temporary and could be returned*
>
> (non-indigenous).

Strategies of racialization need not, however, be consistent. A crucial contradiction that sat at the heart of the racialization of the 'Kanaka' was between their simultaneous strength and their obvious mortality under this plantation regime (discussed further below). Somehow, the appalling conditions of the plantation—determined socioecologically through the imperatives of the value form (Moore, 2015; Postone, 1993)—and the mortality of Islander workers were kept apart, often by attributing their deaths to 'homesickness' or other vagaries (Shann, 1930, p. 243).

Crucially, however, the construction of the 'Kanaka' as a racial category ensured that these workers could justifiably be kept in unfreedom, be paid little or no wages, labour in intolerable conditions, be worked to sickness and death and—if they survived—be transported back to the Islands they were brought from. This racial project sat uneasily with the racialization of Indigenous Australians: Various logical inconsistencies were required to maintain the cognitive dissonance of simultaneously working actively to eliminate one set of 'Blacks', while deliberately importing another. Banivauna-Mar (2006, p. 72) usefully captures this spatially, by framing sugar towns as 'neither towns nor completely settled districts. They were spaces removed from Brisbane but still considered "inside districts" … close enough to Brisbane … [yet] nevertheless closer to the coal face of colonial invasion and more aware of the precariousness of their situation'. In this way, the contradictions of racialization for profit in a settler colony found their representation in conceptions of space.

The racialized, cheap socioecology of the Queenland plantation began on 15 August 1863 when the schooner *Don Juan* docked in Brisbane, carrying a cargo of 73 South Sea Islanders. One of these men died the following day, apparently exhausted from sea sickness. As announced by *The Courier*, 'She [the *Don Juan*] brings a number of the

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natives of those islands to be employed as laborers by Captain Towns on his cotton plantation, on the Logan River, at the remuneration of 10s. per month, with rations, as is currently reported' (18 August, 1863, p. 5). Towns—a wealthy capitalist, and the later namesake of Townsville—had taken up much land on the Queensland pastoral frontier. Wishing to diversify into cotton, made more appealing due to the world-ecological ramifications of the civil war in the United States, Towns was convinced, however, that this enterprise 'would never pay 'with labour at the rate of Colonial Wages' (Shinberg, 1976). And with this arrival, organized by Towns, the period of 'Blackbirding' began. While there was an element of the urban liberal bourgeoisie in Brisbane, and in the other colonies, who opposed this practice, the balance of class forces fell heavily towards the pastoralist and emerging planter classes (Select Committee Enquiry into Immigration, 1861). But the commitment to unfree, racialized labour in the colony of Queensland did not pivot solely on Towns' concern with the high rate of 'Colonial Wages.' Reiterating the centrality of racialization: through the long history of slavery in the history of sugar, a commitment to the idea that hard physical labour in the tropics would be impossible for White men was consistent:

> *Queensland possessed a sub-tropical physical environment where British labour seemed to them [pastoralists and planters] to be neither economically nor racially feasible. Therefore, in order to establish profitable industries, particularly sugar cane and cotton cultivation, it was deemed necessary to introduce the classical plantation system*
>
> (Saunders, 1984, p. 219).

Tasked with developing the industries of the newly independent colony of Queensland, the governor George Ferguson Bowen, articulated this very commitment, to 'the utility and profitability of non-European servile labour for the tropical regions within the Empire' (Lane-Poole, 1889; Saunders, 1984). Robert Grey, a wealthy pastoralist and former planter, shared these views, but also spoke of the shortage of White labour in the northern colony: 'owing to the difficulty of obtaining white labour, I had obtained a few South Sea Islanders, whom I had indented when down in Bowen. They were from Lifu and Tanna. During the time they were with me they were very useful and were fairly good at lambing and bush work' (Grey, 1913, p. 117). And while Grey was a pastoralist—an industry marked by a very mixed and contingent labour regime, which also employed many Chinese immigrants and Indigenous Australians (Woollacott, 2018, p. 48)—the main destination of these newly recruited Pacific Islanders was the cane field: 'The Queensland planters from the outset relied heavily on indentured Melanesian laborers recruited mostly from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. Melanesians cost less to employ than Europeans, but it was also widely believed that Europeans were incapable of laboring in the tropics' (Griggs, 2000, p. 636). To take another example of this central argument, consider Clark:

> *The planters argued for coloured [sic] labour very much as the squatters had argued for convict labour in the period before the discovery of gold. They argued that Polynesian or some such description of cheap labour was essential to the successful working of sugar or other estates; they argued that without such a class of labour a serious loss to the colony would accrue …*
>
> (Clark, 1978, p. 355).

And so, with the birth of Blackbirding, and the introduction of unfree 'Kanaka' labour, the historical cheapness of the sugar frontier was compounded: Cheap land and cheap lives were brought together on rich, alluvial soil in a world-ecological context where the sugar frontier elsewhere had founded in crisis. Racialization is, of course, a complex, uneven and contested process, and the account of *how* that racialization proceeded specifically on the Queensland sugar plantation is only touched on here. Strong contributions to this task—locally, regionally and generally—are made elsewhere (Banivanua-Mar, 2006; Beckford & Levitt, 2000; Chao, 2022; McKittrick, 2013; Saunders, 2013). The particular focus for this article is to show the ways in which racial difference worked materially to produce Cheap Nature on the Queensland sugar plantation and to show how this particular project of racialization

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and commodity production was undone through specifically socioecological contradiction. The way these processes were reshaped and continue to this day is an important task for further work, as 'the plantation continues to expand across contemporary frontiers, remaking social orders and ravaging ecologies in the service of value extraction through commodity production' (Tilly, 2020, p. 67). That contemporary political story ought to be informed, however, by the origins of race and capitalism in Queensland settler-colonialism: the story of sugar.

Blackbirding was a commodity frontier in its own right; the captains taking their ships around the South Pacific, 'recruiting' islanders, were *paid* by the planters. Indeed, the upfront cost of purchasing a contract of indenture from the Blackbirder was the 'largest single component of the planters' labour overheads' (Graves, 1980, p. 44). At the height of the first boom, '[p]rices for attractive women were highest, about 13 pounds per head; for men, between 9 and 12 pounds; for boys and girls, from 5-7 pounds' (Horne, 2007, p. 34; Ross, 1964, pp. 71–2). These prices encouraged many ships to make those journeys. Reverend J. Copeland was living on the Pacific Island of Fortuna as a missionary and noted that in 1870, 51 vessels either called at the island or passed by, all engaged in the labour trade. The social and demographic impact on the islands was marked, with the population of Fortuna reducing from 900 to 150 in a few years:

> *The traffic disorganizes society … Husbands are left without their wives; more frequently wives are left without their husbands; children without their fathers, parents without their children … [Blackbirding was] depopulating the island*
>
> (Copeland, 1872).

It has been estimated that between 1870 and 1900, the population of the New Hebrides Pacific islands fell from 650,000 to as low as 100,000 (Randell, 2003, p. 168). This cannot be entirely explained by Blackbirding—disease and ecological change were key factors also, but these processes too were internally related to the ongoing 'slave trade in the Pacific' (Short, 1870). In this way, we see that the cheapness of the Queensland sugar frontier was due to the appropriation of lives and the appropriation of the *social reproduction* (Bhattacharya, 2017) of these Islander communities and peasant socioecologies. Indeed, the exhaustion of this frontier would play a significant role in the shift away from this particular formulation of plantation production in Queensland towards the end of the 19th century, when recruitment prices rose to as much as 30 pounds per worker by the late 1880s (Fletcher, 1886, p. 5). This was a specifically capitalist crisis of socioecology, due to the need for the frontier of appropriation to expand relative to the growth of commodified exploitation; there were simply not enough Islanders for the sugar frontier to expand indefinitely. We shall return to this point further on. At this stage, we can say simply that the first 'boom' of sugar production in Queensland began in 1863, with the confluence of cheap labour and cheap land. The cheapness of labour was created in part through the incomplete commodification of labour, but also through the racialization of these workers. While South Sea Islanders were not the same as the African slaves who worked Brazilian or Caribbean plantations, in the racializing eyes of the pastoralist and planter, they were: 'white men with West Indian backgrounds sometimes glossed "blacks" into one indiscernible mass when it suited them to do so' (Christopher, 2020, p. 234). In the search of cheapness at the frontier, it certainly did suit them to do so—for the Nindaroo Planters Association, 'the total amount paid to Europeans in 1888 … for wages and supplies [was] at the rate of £9 for every £1 paid direct to kanakas' (Paget, 1889, p. 270). Fuelled by cheapness of bodies, lives, soil and stolen Indigenous land, this period of expansion would continue until it was checked in 1874—this first crisis being especially socio-*ecological*. During the early 1870s, a crop disease known as 'rust' began to emerge.

4 | CYCLES OF SUGAR: CRISIS, CAPITALIZATION AND CRISIS

As we have seen above, the new colonial state of Queensland saw the promotion of sugar as a route to securing and improving its vast territory, as well as bringing significant capital investment. The sugar frontier was also the frontier

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of state formation. As Griggs notes, 'unlike cotton, maize, or fodder crops, sugar cane led to settlement and capital investment in the unoccupied, northern parts of the colony. The sugar plantation was an institution of the frontier' (Griggs, 1995, p. 417). The state was bound up with this commodity frontier not only in the provision of cheap land but also in the creation of the legal framework that facilitated unfree Islander labour—the state provided scientific knowledge and access to genetic material. By 1863, the Director of the Brisbane Botanic Gardens, Walter Hill, established 'a sugar cane plot comprised of several new varieties of cane newly introduced from the South Sea Islands and Mauritius. Hill had also begun distributing cane plants from this plot among intending cane growers' (Griggs, 1995, p. 418). In this way, the capitalist or pastoralist keen on driving their money-prime through the plantation machine did not have to send off overseas via ship to receive cuttings to start their cultivation: One could simply write to Brisbane and get fresh cane cuttings directly from the state. And while there were 16 varieties on offer by 1869, the logic of capital gravitated to one, just as it had in other sugar frontiers: Bourbon cane (Johnson, 1988, pp. 66–67).

> *Bourbon, since 1800, had become the universal favorite of planters throughout sugar-growing countries. It was quick to mature and required little cultivation, but after the first richness of the soil had been exhausted by continued planting, production rapidly decreased. Moreover, it was susceptible to disease. In one sugar-growing country after another, disease epidemics devastated the sugar industries and led to the abandonment of Bourbon*
>
> (Griggs, 1995, p. 419).

The Queensland sugar planters in many cases had direct experience of growing in other countries, especially the British colonies in the Caribbean. Despite this experience, planters chose to rely on monocultures of the Bourbon sugar variety despite its character, because of the socioecology of capital: Exhaustion and disease were long-term issues that the search for cheapness and profit could choose to ignore, especially when land and labour were so easily had. We ought not be surprised, then, that the socioecology of capital led directly to the first crisis of the sugar frontier.

Early reports of 'rust' (actually a mite) began to emerge in the early 1870s. For the first few years, individual planters had outbreaks and suffered significant losses, but the issue had not yet become generalized for the frontier, or the regional ecology. Also, the expansion of the frontier, with more plantations beginning production, served to mask the emerging crisis in the aggregate statistics; while the total production of the colony increased from 7986 to 12,098 tons between 1873 and 1874, a contemporaneous account argued that this output would have been as high as 16,000 tons in 1874 without crop losses to 'rust' (Gregory, 1877, pp. 1037–1038; Griggs, 1995, p. 432). But by 1875, rains and flooding led to further spread of the mite, reaching pandemic levels and creating a deep crisis for the sugar industry. Production halved to 6322 tons and stayed low in 1876 as well (Griggs, 1995, p. 432). There was a significant contraction of capital investment, with disease cooling speculative interest and excitement in this commodity frontier; socioecological crisis had impacted the historical cheapness of money at the frontier, as banks stopped issuing credit (Moore, 1985, p. 109). 'Planter insolvencies and mill closures caused by the disease brought capital investment in the colony's sugar plantations to a halt and cost the Queensland economy approximately £115,000 in lost earnings from reduced exports of rum and raw and refined sugar' (Griggs, 1995, p. 437). Those planters that pushed on to try and re-establish the conditions of cheap nature that drove the commodity frontier eventually shifted to different, lower yielding varieties. This was facilitated again by the efforts of the state to resolve this crisis. The Queensland Board of Inquiry into the Causes Affecting Livestock and Plants arranged the procurement of new varieties, especially from America. Those new varieties were quickly planted by Walter Hill, chief botanist at Brisbane, to see which would best suit the climate and the needs of the planters (Gregory, 1877, pp. 1037–1038). With reports that new varieties were ending the epidemic of rust, the colonial government also opened new regions to the north of Cardwell for plantation land grands. These new lands also offered more 'cheap nature' in the form of virgin alluvial soil, one of the 'cheaps' that drove the first phase of expansion (Griggs, 2000,

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p. 627). The shift to new varieties, and the expansion of cheap land, led to the restoration of production totals—18,714 tons in 1879—saw this crisis 'fixed', and the commodity frontier roared back to life. It was not, however, unchanged.

The crisis had manifold impacts, but a significant one for our interests here is that the losses and insolvencies experienced by many planters during the 'rust' outbreak led to a shift in the class composition—and therefore socioecology—of the sugar frontier during its subsequent recovery and the second phase of its rapid expansion. The 'pioneering' planters of the first phase of expansion had demonstrated that the plantation model was profitable in the north of the Australian continent. With the sugar frontier's first crisis resolved—even if that resolution meant lower yields per acre—the historical cheapness drew the attention of bigger capitals, often proprietary companies in Victoria or Sydney (Griggs, 1995, p. 437). With the development of urban financial capital in the southern colonies, off the back of other colonial commodity frontiers, the many frontiers of Australian capitalism became further entwined. The socioecological crises of Cheap Nature are often 'fixed' through deepening commodification and expanding appropriation (Moore, 2015, pp. 94–97). So too here do we see much greater investment in mechanized production, as well as a more expansive search for racialized labour to appropriate. The second phase of the sugar boom was being 'incorporated'.

Plantations during the first phase of expansion required more capital than other comparable frontier industries, but not more than could be brought to bear by families and individuals. By the 1880s, however, increasing mechanization and rising labour costs meant large amounts of capital investment were required. As a result, the second phase of sugar expansion generally attracted companies rather than families. Indeed, in 1884, more than six million pounds were invested in sugar plantations across Queensland, far outstripping pastoral investment (Parsons, 1973, p. 33). This expansion in size and capitalization also led to more rationalized production, incorporating greater economies of scale (Griggs, 2000, pp. 632–633). Perhaps the best example of this new phase of plantation sugar production by larger, incorporated capital is the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR). CSR was founded in 1855, taking over the assets of the embattled Australasian Sugar Company. The company was directed by Edward Knox, who provided a third of the £150,000 of capital the company incorporated with (Irvine, 2012, p. 199). The company was initially involved with sugar milling on the north coast of New South Wales, but with the rising importance of Queensland as a sugar frontier, CSR was anxious to be expand into the northern colony—and to expand its activities into cultivation. With the new lands available to the north, Knox instructed his officers to find and acquire suitable land with good water frontage (Knox, 1881). Successful in their search, the company founded three Queensland plantations in the 1870s, at a cost of £600,000 (Knox, 1889b; Robertson, 1991, pp. 3–11). This investment of capital demanded that production not only reproduce itself but to seek expanded reproduction, delivering profits to facilitate dividend payments. CSR as capital demanded a socioecology of profit, and that profit turned on Cheap Nature. Indeed, the company continued to articulate the necessity for indentured labour in order to meet these commitments:

> *the company employed an economic rationale, based on accounting numbers, to justify the employment of Pacific island labourers: first in cutting labour costs in order to ensure high profits and dividends for its shareholders; second, in promoting an economic argument to lobby for legislation that would ensure access to indentured labour; and third in motivating managers to improve profitability by keeping the cost of labour low*
>
> (Irvine, 2012, p. 200).

The employment of cheap, unfree, racialized labour on its Queensland plantations was driven by the search for cheapness—and it was successful. But cheapness at the frontier is not simply explained by the mundane actions of capital to minimize costs and maximize profits. Rather, here cheapness is contested and created, with CSR 'lobb[ing] for legislation that would ensure access to indentured labour' (Irvine, 2012, p. 200). That lobbying included ongoing appeals to the state based on strategies of racialization. The company was consistently profitable during the resurgence of the frontier, post-'rust', paying dividends at a rate of 7% (Knox, 1889b). CSR was noted for paying much

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higher dividends than many other companies in the period, and by 1888 the company was making an annual profit of £125,000 (Knox, 1889a). Such high profits allowed the company to pay out high dividends *and* invest in expanded reproduction. In 1882, through direct lobbying of the Queensland government, the company secured a special Act of Parliament, giving CSR additional land grants, on the condition that CSR would spend '£200,000 within five years on the clearing and cultivation of that land and erection of plant' (Docker, 1970, p. 99). The company chose a 5000-acre piece of land, eight miles upstream of Geraldton (now Innisfail), and dismantled plant from one of its NSW mills, which was then transported to the new site, named 'Goondi' (Irvine, 2012, p., 202). Cheap Nature at the frontier is not merely cheap in terms of price but rather speaks to the way that socially necessary labour can be reduced through the dialectical enmeshing of appropriation *and* commodification. Here, we see that deeper investment into expanded reproduction, as well as the appropriation of new lands, were being deployed to propel the frontier further and continue the historical cheapness of sugar, produced by racialized, unfree hands.

Black radical scholarship has always brought attention to the agency of unfree, racialized workers. Here too in Queensland, this highlights important conditions of the commodity frontier, for South Sea Islander resistance to the plantation regime both challenged and enabled the cheapness of sugar. As put by Saunders, 'the Melanesians … employed complex patterns of resistance to render their servitude bearable and to allow a modicum of dignity in a violent, exploitative and alien environment' (Saunders, 2013, p. 127). These forms of resistance included physical and violent struggles with overseers, work-slow and refusal to work strikes, industrial sabotage and occasionally (and rarely successful) escape. But similarly, the use of traditional medicines, cultural practice and collective gardening were all ways to struggle through and against their conditions of indenture. For example, J.M. Knox of CSR wrote in his private letter book that the 'Kanaka' workers were 'giving a great deal of trouble' at 'Victoria' plantation, 'taking advantage of a scarcity of labour to strike work now and then to "skulk"' (Knox, 1883–1885, p. 427). This reference to 'skulking' is likely a reference to the common practice of working very slowly, or pretending not to understand instructions, with many references to 'Kanakas' working 'sullenly' or 'shirking' (e.g., Davitt, 1898, p. 273)—although not an organized form of industrial action, this kind of work-slow practice ought to be thought of as resistance to the exigencies of capital, especially as it was often pursued against violent enforcement. Further, such strikes were often strategic, as they 'were frequently times to coincide with vulnerable moments in the production cycle' (Graves, 1993, p. 197). Whether as violence or working slow, however, these forms of resistance were insufficient to challenge the conditions of cheapness at the frontier in a generalized way. Unlike other instances of anticolonial resistance and rebellion, it is hard to see concerted Islander agency as the driving motor of crisis or change across this regime (cf. Gopal, 2020). As put by Banivanua-Mar (2006, p. 12) 'searching for signs of historical agency should not preclude the ongoing recognition that the labor trade was premised on a determination to be profitable, which ultimately rendered negligible (unless profitable) the existence of agency'. That is, while a Black radical perspective brings out attention to struggle, that struggle can still be, historically, frustrated. The commodity frontier was buttressed by the violent enforcement of discipline by the state through the *Masters and Servants Act* (1859). In fact, in some ways, Islander attempts to make plantation life more manageable reinforced the cheapness of the frontier, rather than challenge it. An example of this was the common practice for Islanders to grow their own gardens—a process noted elsewhere as general to the Plantationocene (Carney, 2020). This was often a response to the wholly insufficient rations provided by planters. As one planter noted, '… with little encouragement [the workers] grew their own vegetables, and hardly drew on the store at all' (Eden, 1872, p. 328). While not universal, this common practice—together with the use of leisure time for fishing—saw the cost of social reproduction of the Islander labour reduced for the planter. For, grimly, in a political economy where it is cheaper to work workers to death—rather than provide fully for their needs in terms of food, shelter, rest, clothes and medicines—that agency deployed to enable *survival* paradoxically leads to more value for the planter.

In this way, the sugar commodity frontier was contested and constructed. Overwhelmingly, however, this profitable commodity frontier rested on the shoulders of indentured labour. The success of this strategy might be noted in the decision by CSR to go beyond simply chartering Blackbirding ships to bring South Sea Islanders to their plantations, instead purchasing their own ship for this purpose (Knox, 1889b; Robertson, 1991, pp. 3–11). Racialization

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and unfreedom were contested, historically specific attempts to cohere the commodity frontier. This is illustrated in the searching attempts by capital to overcome the emerging limitations to the 'Kanaka' labour regime: 'In 1888, the workforce at Goondi comprised 175 Europeans, 50 Chinese, 70 Aborigines, 325 Melanesians and 50 others, including Malays and Javanese' (Irvine, 2012, p. 203). These other sources of indentured labour were never as successful as the use of Pacific Islanders, however. These shifting strategies of racialization and unfreedom emerged at this time, as by 1888, the historical cheapness of labour at the Queensland sugar frontier was beginning to tighten. There was a 'great rise' in the cost of recruitment, 'because of demand for kanakas' (Forrest, 1894). The company estimated that the cost of acquiring South Sea Islander labour was between £25 and 35 per head and that the annual cost of keeping (reproducing) that labour was £26 (Forrest, 1894; The Editors, 1894). These figures correspond to those offered by Graves, who noted that 'costs rose from approximately £5 per recruit in the early years of the labour trade to as much as £30 per recruit by the late 1880s' (Graves, 1980, p. 44). The availability of credit, the entrance of incorporated capital and the expansion of land grants for plantations contributed to an explosive period of growth, especially between 1879 and 1885: 'this speculative phase was marked by a quadrupling of cane acreage over the period and increase in the number of operational mills from 68 … to 166 …, and the consolidation and extension of the plantation system' (Graves, 1980, p. 44). But this period of growth was quickly checked by the socioecological contradictions set in motion by the reliance on racialized, indentured labour. This led to a period of crisis and contestation in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Deepening this crisis further was unfolding soil exhaustion: 'In Queensland, a condition of agriculture so crude as to have led to the relative exhaustion of the soils is combined with a rate of compensation for field labour which has no parallel in any other sugar-growing country' (Maxwell, 1901). Indeed, in the Herbert region by the late 1880s, yields had dropped from 40 to 12 tons per acre (Maxwell, 1901). The Queensland sugar frontier had relied on cheap land, money, labour and lives from its beginnings. Planters and politicians alike argued that without 'coloured' labour, the sugar industry could not exist. And yet by 1906, the Pacific labour trade was ended, and 1907 saw the repatriation of most remaining South Sea Islanders workers. How might we account for this? And what might this crisis reveal about the socioecology of capital? We turn now to the second crisis of Cheap Nature on the Queensland sugar commodity frontier: the crisis of cheap labour.

5 | WHITE AUSTRALIAN CAPITALISM

The sugar commodity frontier, fuelled by Cheap Nature—especially lives, land and money—had spread up the northern coast of the new Queensland colony and along its rivers. It had deforested as it went (Griggs, 2007; Steel, 1895), it had stolen land from Indigenous peoples and it had depleted soil (Maxwell, 1901), brought disease (Knox, 1884) and consumed bodies (Knox, 1897)—all in the service of Cheap Nature and profit. In this way, the case of Queensland closely follows the patterns of the world-ecological sugar frontier, going back centuries, going back to the Iberian Madeira. As in those other cases, it had relied on racialized, unfree labour; as put by Christopher above, 'hard labour at the cane break was not an occupation free men generally chose' (Christopher, 2020, p. 235). And yet, those familiar with the political history of settler-colonial Australia know what is on the horizon for the British colonies 'down under': the federation of the Australian colonies and the 'White Australia Policy.' This political outcome would be predicated on the end of the Pacific Island labour trade and the end of the 'Kanaka' plantation labour regime. Is this history simply one of the planter fractions of capital losing out to stronger, more-liberal fractions down south in the cities of Sydney and Melbourne (Shann, 1930)? Or should this transition be explained by reference to either the racism or the rational self-interest of the White working class (McQueen, 1986)? World-ecology offers a compelling, alternative explanation: The crisis of this particular commodity frontier was not externally imposed but emerged from the socioecology of Cheap Nature, 'so rendering all the sound and fury of planter and moralizer as irrelevant as most arguments about what is good and fair and just' (Clark, 1978, p. 356).

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In 1884, the world sugar price fell by a third, caused in part by European governments beginning to subsidize the export of beet sugar; these subsidies would continue for two decades, keeping sugar prices low (Griggs, 2000, p. 637). This price squeeze compounded the larger crisis for plantation sugar production in Queensland: rising labour costs. As we have seen above, 'recruitment' costs had been steadily rising since the inception of the industry. Blackbirders were sailing further and further afield to meet the demands of the planters. The expansion of the sugar frontier and the expanded reproduction of existing enterprises meant that sugar capital needed greater and greater throughputs—and in this grim circumstance, the key throughput for this circuit was racialized, unfree bodies. Less Islanders were being brought to Queensland, just as the demand for them expanded, which led to increased costs for the planter. In some regions, planters even colluded to set a maximum price for labour, to counteract this (Cairns Morning Post, 1897). Further, Blackbirders were bringing younger and frailer workers, which increased the risk that they would not realize the full value of their cost. Vividly representing the violence of capitalist socioecologies, Planter E. Drysdale complained that

> *the class of Kanakas is not as good as it ought to be, nor can we get sufficient supply of them … A great many of our boys are of poor physique and under-age; the consequence is that a great many of them die. Out of one lot of seventy-eight boys that we got last year, twenty-three were dead within ten months after they came. That, of course, is a very heavy loss to us. We lost their labour and what we had to pay for them in the beginning*
>
> (Drysdale, 1897, in Parliamentary Debates, 1889).

Faced with these constrains, many planters reduced the already meagre conditions 'Kanakas' were provided with, cutting back on clothing, accommodation, medical care and food (Graves, 1993). Here, we see a crucial element of the racialization of these unfree workers:

> *It was therefore not the nature of coloured labour so much as their expendability and the cheap conditions under which they could be kept that made Islanders essential to the economic mobility of the sugar industry … during times of economic recession … planters could employ such cost-cutting measures as reducing food and clothing rations, providing the cheapest sanitation … refusing adequate and expensive medical care … Kanaka standards were therefore cheap standards, and they enabled the sugar industry to survive in a global context that still in part used slave labour*
>
> (Banivanua-Mar, 2006, p. 134).

When we argue that racialization made South Sea Islanders 'cheap', this goes beyond a simple argument that low wages were justified by reference to skin colour. Rather, the 'kanaka' was a complex racial category, which justified unfreedom, facilitated transportation, explained mortality and allowed a callous disregard towards those workers producing such profits for the planter. It explained and was established through violence and layered on top of existing racial hierarchies within settler-colonial space and capitalism. To reiterate Rev. Oscar Michelson, above, profit was 'proportionate to the number of Kanakas worked to death' (Michelson, 1898, p. 156).

Interestingly, one of the reasons profit could continue despite such brutal, racial disregard was the role of 'Kanakas gardens' in buttressing the social reproduction of the South Sea Islander workers. Land was often left aside on the plantation, or simply claimed, for the Islanders to grow their own food, supplementing the (insufficient) rations the planter was legally obliged to provide (Robertson, 1991, p. 10). Put another way, commodity frontiers were supported by frontiers of appropriation, relying on the social reproduction of Islander communities, whether back at home or on the plantation itself. Nevertheless, in many cases, these survival strategies were insufficient, and South Sea Islanders were worked to disease and death. In an enquiry in 1889, the Queensland registrar general estimated that at least one fifth of people transported from 1868 had died in the course of their work, while also acknowledging that the real figure was likely higher, masked by limited reporting (QVP, 1889, p. 38). Worse still, mortality on the

CSR Goondi estate between 1883 and 1885 was as high as 60% (Banivanua-Mar, 2006, p. 13). The cheapness of the plantation socioecology was grounded in the graves of 'Kanakas', who, despite being racialized as strong and well suited to tropical work, were not afforded sufficient social reproduction, to avoid its cost. And that very mortality was allowed through racialization that rendered them expendable.

Labour costs were rising, and availability of new Kanakas recruits insufficient. One response to this tightening crisis of cheap labour was to induce those workers who had finished their term of indenture to continue on. Up until the 1880s, the vast majority of workers were 'first contract' workers, but increasingly, there was a reliance on 'time expired' workers, who were employed for another 3-year period—re-engaged by the planter at higher rates of pay, squeezing profits further. Graves notes that 'at the beginning of the decade, "time expireds" [sic] comprised approximately 10 per cent of the workforce whereas by 1888 the numbers within the two categories of immigrant labour were about equal' (1980, p. 45). All these factors, together with the collapse of the world sugar price, put the industry in a distinct depression. This was heightened by the debt burden of the previous expansion phase—the rapid expansion of the late 1870s, and the entrance of larger entities, with larger land grants, meant that the industry was highly indebted. Many mills closed and production stalled: Overall acreage contracted by 10,000 between 1884 and 1888 (QVP, 1888).

The industry would not collapse entirely, and some plantations continued operating on the plantation model through to 1906. The conditions of Cheap Nature had, however, been largely exhausted in little more than two decades from the emergence of this commodity frontier. This material reality has direct bearing on our explanation of the end of the Pacific labour trade and also our understanding of racialization by, and racism of, state, planter, urban capital and White working classes. For most of the plantation period, 'organized opposition [by white settlers] to the Islanders in Queensland was confined to periods of high unemployment in the sugar districts' (Graves, 1980, p. 49). Explanations for the racial determination of working class movements, and the co-evolution of the Australian Labor Party and the White Australia Policy, need to account for this period of silence—indeed, it has been noted that urban liberal humanitarians were perplexed by the general apathy of the White working classes during much of the 19th century (Connolly, 1964, p. 43). Accounting for this history, Graves argues the case for a material explanation:

> *But why … did organized labour's antagonism to the labour trade become so concerted and effective after 1890 … ? The evidence suggests that the fervour, organization, specific goals and expression of trade union opposition to Pacific Island workers, articulated directly with the transformation of the sugar industry from plantation production to the farm-based central-milling system*
>
> (Graves, 1980, p. 50).

That is, during the plantation period, White workers were happy to accept the racialized hierarchy of the planters' ideology, which rested on the belief that White workers could not do hard labour in the tropics. During this crisis, however, the land-holding regime began to shift, with planters leasing small plots to tenants, or even breaking up their land, creating a class of smallholding cane farmers (Griggs, 1997). With the emergence of a central-milling system, and a greater number of White workers having a stake in land and the profitability of the industry, it became increasingly in their class interest to organize and struggle against the continuation of the plantation. Further, mechanization was changing the nature of work, with 'changes in the methods of sugar production, the introduction of machinery for the clearing and ploughing of the land, and the hoeing and transport of the crop, were gradually making it possible for the planters to use white labour' (Clark, 1978). A fuller world-ecological account of the pivot to industrial capitalist sugar agriculture, and the shifting terrain of racialization that facilitated this change, is the task of future research. What we can say is that this re-organization of race, class and ecology facilitated a third phase of expansion on the sugar frontier. In 1893, there were only 366 small cane farmers, whereas this figure had grown to 3300 in 1906 and up to 4328 in 1911 (QPP, 1906, 1912; QVP, 1893). This was also the most rapid spatial increase in terms of cane acreage seen yet on the commodity frontier, from a peak of around 60,000 acres in 1884 to more than 150,000 acres by 1913 (Griggs, 1997, p. 52). In this way, the plantation period came to an end, as did

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the reliance on cheap, unfree, racialized labour for profit. In a late expression of the expendability that defined the racialized 'Kanaka', thousands of Islanders were forcefully ejected from the colony. Islanders deployed their agency to struggle against this—a petition with 3000 Islander signatures was even presented to the King (Graves, 1993, p. 209)—and the perseverance of South Sea Islander families and culture in northern Queensland is testament to this. The Human rights and Equal Opportunity Commission conducted a census in 1992, revealing a community of around 12,000 descendants of unfree South Sea Islander workers (Menzies, 1992). While more racially diverse than often assumed, the expulsion of most South Sea Islanders saw a transition to a regime of small cane farming, supported by centralized milling, which continued for the entire 20th century and into the 21st (Menzies, 1992, p. 57).

A world-ecological account of this new regime, this new frontier, is the task of future work—but the successful re-articulation of the frontier in the early 20th century demonstrates the key contribution of such an approach. The appropriation of unpaid work and social-reproductive energies that was facilitated through the racialization of the 'Kanaka' drove the frontier of sugar plantations north, up the coast of Queensland. But this socioecology was riven through with contradiction, and this production of cheapness could not hold. If the new arrangement saw an acceleration of land-use, this does not undermine the dynamism of the Kanaka frontier. Rather, it challenges future research to explore whether socioecologies of Cheap Nature define the following period as well. An overly positivist reading of this history focuses on an observed increase in the rate of land-clearing and cultivation risks obscuring the origins of those relations that propel such expansion. Here we have found those relations in the Queensland sugar plantation complex, defined by a socioecology of cheapness, expansion, exhaustion, appropriation, exploitation and mortality.

6 | CONCLUSION

How and why did the commodity frontier of sugar produce space and nature north, up the coast of colonial Queensland? These are the questions this article has grappled with, showing the historical force of Cheap Nature to degrade landscapes and lives. This article follows Moore, who asks us to 'consider capitalism as a *world-ecology*, joining the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co-production of nature in dialectical unity' (Moore, 2015, p. 3, emphasis in original). The contention here is that Moore's formulation holds significant utility, that capitalism is best conceived of as the socioecological relations of Cheap Nature, but that these relations also sit within a broader totality—including projects of territoriality, imperialism, racialization, epistemology and more. The materiality of that project of racialization is made more clear with attention to the traditions of Black radical scholarship and plantation studies, which have long considered these questions. By considering the commodity frontier of sugar within the colony of Queensland, we see the motion of the socioecological contradictions that have pushed sugar around the world, over a period of some 500 years. This was not a functional or determined process, however. Indeed, the history unfolded here illustrates the contradictory and crisis-prone socioecology of capitalism, and the contingent way in which Cheap Nature is produced at the commodity frontier. This is revealed by the theoretical tools of world-ecology, so that we might attend to the way racialization was weaponized in the search for Cheap Nature. The Queensland sugar commodity frontier was a horrific example of the way the structuring power of the value form consumed whole islands—their peoples, cultures and lives. These exhaustive relations that define the totality of capitalist socioecology would later continue: Extraction of life-energies would again fold the South Pacific in to fix other Australian commodity frontiers, with the British-Australian imperialism of the phosphate trade (Teaiwa, 2015). Crucially, as put by Lisa Tilley (2020, p. 67), 'the plantation is still with us'. It is these connections through time, space and politics that emerge when Queensland sugar plantations are viewed from the vantage point of eco-Marxism, from the relations of Cheap Nature.

As it had for centuries, across the world, the search for and production of Cheap Nature realized the possibility of capitalist sugar production in Queensland, where it demonstrated its rapacious qualities all over again. It demanded cheap lives and land to exist, showing the reinforcing co-existence of capitalist value and unfree labour.

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While the planters might have insisted that their workers were paid a wage, Clark rejects that mean definition. The 'Kanakas' were working

> *for wages so small that they were scarcely wages at all only served to gloss over the enormity of their recruitment, the desolation of their homes, the ransacking and burning of villages, the drunkenness, fraud and dishonest artifices to procure these men, and their being carried like cattle to the sugar ports of Queensland where they were sold like merchandise to the planters*
>
> (Clark, 1978, p. 355).

As cheap as they were, cheapness is historically constituted; it is as much social as it is ecological (and hence the two must be conceived of in dialectical unity). The first phase of the Queensland sugar frontier drew on several cheaps: cheap land, violently seized from the Indigenous inhabitants; cheap nature, with virgin alluvial soils so quickly stripped by Bourbon cane; and cheap labour and lives, with sugar from the outset relying on unfree, racialized Kanakas labour. That first phase exhausted much of this cheapness, stripping soil, and consuming the bodies and lives of those early Islander workers. The expansion of the frontier was checked by disease, in the form of 'rust', which demanded a shift towards a lower yielding cane. The second phase of expansion was also powered by cheap money, and further horizons of cheap land, as the state opened more land for lease, and financial capital became entangled more consistently in production. Scales increased, and as such, frontiers of appropriation had to expand apace of this new capitalization: Blackbirders went further afield, bringing more and more indentured 'recruits', but already the ability of the unpaid social reproduction of Islander communities to cheapen labour was diminishing. This brought a crisis of profitability—a crisis of *Cheap Nature*—to the frontier, which ultimately saw the end of the plantation model. Not only were sufficient 'Kanaka' workers unavailable, but through the contestation of the White working class, racialization no longer offered the kind of historical cheapness that it once did to planter capital. This led to a new period of small-holder, industrial-capitalist production, defined by a different mode of racialization. This article has attempted to show how the commodity frontier of sugar in colonial Queensland was driven north through a socioecology of cheap, racialized, unfree labour. The argument is that the forces driving and shaping colonization were the structuring power of the value form and the capitalistic colonial state. This history is rendered legible through the explanatory power of world-ecology, Black radicalism and eco-Marxist thought—theoretical frameworks that demand further historical application, that we might be better equipped for our contemporary struggles against the racial Capitalocene.

This article has sought to contribute to both 'urgent history' and 'truth-telling', as plantation socioecologies of cheapness continue to (re)produce the crises of the racial Capitalocene. In this way, it joins with vibrant literatures that emphasize the ongoing role of the plantation, racialization and socioecological crisis across Oceania and South-East Asia (Chao, 2022; Li & Semedi, 2021; Stead, 2022). It tells this history because it is still with us. And it does so using the tools of eco-Marxism and Black radical scholarship, as these are—it is argued—the tools that might best equip us for the struggles of the present. If the approach of eco-Marxism has anything to offer the rich specificity and attention to justice prevalent in the contemporary plantation studies literature, it is the ability to connect these forms of racialization, ecocide and extraction to a broader totality of capitalist socioecology. The struggle against the palm oil plantation is also the struggle against 'carbon colonialism' (Lyons & Westoby, 2014) and against the commodification of water (Moore, 2023)—and a thousand other fights. They are all struggles against the racial Capitalocene.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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