The Journal of Peasant Studies

ISSN: 0306-6150 (Print) 1743-9361 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fjps20

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To cite this article: Kasia Paprocki (21 Jan 2026): Adaptation in the Plantationocene, The Journal of Peasant Studies, DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2025.2601963

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2025.2601963

Published online: 21 Jan 2026.

THE JOURNAL OF PEASANT STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2025.2601963

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

FORUM ON THE PLANTATIONOCENE

Adaptation in the Plantationocene

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ABSTRACT

Plantation logics have been responsible for devastating transformations of the planet including climate change. While they have shaped the current social and ecological conditions we live with today, they also shape the way we choose to live with those conditions. Among these choices are a set of strategies broadly referred to as climate change adaptation. I describe here how climate change adaptation is shaped by plantation logics through spatially uneven development, dispossession, and racialization. I develop these arguments through an examination of the adaptation regime and its uneven manifestation across the Global South and North. In the end, I turn to an examination of the fundamental limitations of the Plantationocene in capturing contingency, resistance, and alternatives to plantation logics shaping climate change adaptation.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 April 2024
Accepted 23 October 2025

KEYWORDS
Plantationocene; plantation logics; climate change adaptation; dispossession; racialization

How do plantation logics shape adaptation to climate change? As the authors of the introduction to the JPS Forum on the Plantationocene and many others have written, understanding the current epoch as the Plantationocene makes explicit how plantation logics have been responsible for devastating transformations of the planet including climate change (Chao et al. 2024, 9). What I set out to demonstrate in this article is how these plantation logics also shape the way we choose to live with these transformations. Contemporary climate regimes reproduce plantation logics, both building on the coloniality of existing political economies of development as well as offering new modes of exploitation and extraction (Ferdinand 2022; Perry 2021, 2023a; Sheller 2020).[1] Others have illuminated powerful ways that these plantation legacies have shaped the contemporary

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[1] I have used the terms "colonial" as well as "imperial"/"empire" throughout this piece; both have clearly profoundly shaped plantation production historically and in the present. While some scholars use these terms somewhat interchangeably, I have done my best not to do so here, despite the challenges of disentangling the legacies of each in plantation production and plantation logics. Both colonialism and imperialism involved extraction from a dependent place or people for the benefit of the colonising or imperial power. Colonialism is a specific system of governance of foreign territory through the use of the metropole's personnel and structures. Imperialism refers to the imposition of foreign power through political and economic means with or without territorial control (Gallagher and Robinson 1953). "Coloniality" refers to the persistence of global capitalism and the world order based on it established during the period of European colonization (Quijano 2000). Plantation production has facilitated resource extraction through each, though more detailed differences between them and their legacies are beyond the scope of this paper.

conditions of climate change. Building on this work, I am interested in demonstrating specifically how these logics shape *responses* to climate change through projects and practices collectively referred to as 'climate change adaptation.'

In this article, I examine how plantation logics shape adaptation to climate change through three propositions. First, adaptation in the Plantationocene generalises plantation logics through spatially uneven development. Second, dispossession is a key tool of adaptation in the Plantationocene. Third, adaptation in the Plantationocene is a mechanism of racialization and of the governance of racialized bodies. While I treat these propositions in turn in this essay, they are in fact nested, not discrete. In short, spatially uneven development is generated through processes of dispossession that rely on racialization as a logic of governance. Finally, while I attend to the ways plantation logics shape contemporary adaptation, I also demonstrate that these logics can be and are enacted in diverse ways and are in an ongoing state of reproduction. They are contingent and they are not totalizing (Curley and Smith 2024a, 2024b). In the end I turn to evidence of this contingency to understand how plantation logics are obstructed, redirected, and resisted both through and beyond adaptation.

In discussing climate change adaptation, I refer specifically to the set of dominant practices and discourses of adaptation that I have elsewhere described as the 'adaptation regime' (Paprocki 2021). The adaptation regime is not an inevitable response to climate change. Rather, it is a response to climate change that is shaped specifically by plantation logics. The adaptation regime is 'a socially and historically specific configuration of power that governs the landscape of possible intervention in the face of climate change' (Paprocki 2021, 7). As a mode of governance through plantation logics in the face of climate change, the adaptation regime: (1) shapes the way landscapes are understood and managed; (2) encompasses the scope of particular development activities considered suitable for climate change adaptation; (3) disciplines understandings of the futures and livelihood strategies that are seen as viable now and in the future; and it (4) facilitates accumulation by dispossession. An explicitly politicized analysis of adaptation such as this highlights the fundamentally uneven and unequal nature of climate change adaptation. All adaptation interventions benefit some at the expense of others (Eriksen et al. 2021; Eriksen, Nightingale, and Eakin 2015; Paprocki and Huq 2018; Taylor 2013). The broader political economy of development in which adaptation is embedded shapes this unequal distribution of benefits. The propositions put forward in this essay examine adaptation specifically through this context.

The adaptation regime reproduces long-standing development logics predicated on the integration of people of the Global South into capitalist markets and sustained patterns of accumulation in the Global North (McMichael 2009). I demonstrate moreover that these development logics are more specifically *plantation* logics. In their introduction to this Forum, Chao et al. write that the plantation still 'serves as an answer to the so-called 'problem of development,'' in the sense that plantation logics shape visions of development predicated on the expansion of large-scale, export-oriented agriculture and on ideas of nature itself and smallholder production systems as 'under-developed' (2024, 13). These same development imaginaries are reproduced under the contemporary adaptation regime, shaped by plantation logics that far predate them.

The Plantationocene concept draws our attention to how fundamentally a particular model of agrarian extraction has shaped the modern world historically and into the present, far beyond the spatial boundaries of plantations. As Lewis describes, it positions the plantation as a 'conjunctural phenomenon,' pointing to the importance of this history and how its legacies function in the present, even as they are not totalizing (Lewis 2024, 3). Thinking about adaptation through this lens draws our attention to the ways that the logics embedded in and reproduced through this model have shaped the way adaptation is conceived and designed, both in the Global North and Global South. Examining the adaptation regime through the lens of the Plantationocene illuminates important dimensions of the global logics of adaptation and the political economy of development in which it is firmly embedded. A nuanced engagement with the literature on plantations also tells us more about this political economy and the ways it is reproduced. In short, the adaptation regime is firmly entrenched in a development teleology reliant on agrarian extraction through dispossession and racialization. This extractivism far predates climate change itself or the advent of adaptation discourse as such. Rather, these discourses emerge from long histories of capitalist development and empire. Some work on the political economy of adaptation has already situated it in relation to these longer histories of capitalist agrarian political economy (Paprocki and McCarthy 2024; Taylor 2014). The Plantationocene expands our understanding of these histories to see how they are contingent on and propelled by racialization.

The Plantationocene concept also draws attention to a specific form of production and the far-reaching ways in which it has shaped the contemporary world. Of course, the plantation is only one among many agrarian social structures. Yet, it has disproportionately shaped the way that agrarian extraction has driven development since the age of colonization. As Ouma writes, 'no other formation better captures the extractive provisioning function of rural spaces than the plantation' (Verne, Marquardt, and Ouma 2025, 7). Plantation logics have and continue to exert outsized influence on the agrarian world and beyond through what Sharpe calls plantations' 'wake' (Sharpe 2016). Considering adaptation in this light draws attention to this influence. That is, agriculture is central to how visions of adaptation are imagined under the adaptation regime (Paprocki and McCarthy 2024), but not just any agriculture. Plantation logics shape the adaptation regime both through the agrarian extractivism they promote as well as the broader visions of development on which this extraction is contingent. While agrarian production is somewhat decentered in the move from 'plantation' to 'plantation logics' (this shift is examined further below), the Plantationocene concept reminds us of the fundamental importance of this form of production and its legacies in shaping how people live with climate change.

The nested propositions offered here are framed to draw attention specifically to these dimensions of adaptation. They are by no means a comprehensive framework for understanding the totality of adaptation in the Plantationocene. Other essential dynamics of the Plantationocene shape contemporary adaptation practice in ways not elaborated here such as: the politics of plantation science (W. Wolford 2025), ecological dynamics, including declining biodiversity (Zimmerer, Tubbeh, and Bell 2024), how plantation logics persist and are reproduced through infrastructures (Castro-Vargas 2025; Kay, Knudson,

and Cantor 2024), the financialization of risk management (Grove 2021; Perry 2023a), existing vulnerability and adaptive capacity (Dorkenoo and Res 2025; Robinson et al. 2023), and the role of the state (Chung, Mbilinyi, and Sulle 2025; Matusse 2024). Each of these dynamics of the Plantationocene plays an important role in shaping the adaptation regime, and I hope others will pursue these lines of research further. However, what the propositions offered here do is situate adaptation in relation to broader logics of capitalist development and the agrarian question,[2] and they do so in a way that particularly illuminates how these are shaped by the legacies of empire and practices of racialization.

Plantations and plantation logics in the Plantationocene

The Plantationocene indexes a series of distinct but interrelated historical and contemporary social and spatial practices that can be observed not only at the site of the plantation historically or today, but also as structures of power that shape development and strategies for living in the future. To engage this concept, I draw both on recent scholarship on the Plantationocene as well as longer genealogies of work on plantations and their afterlives, particularly in Black Geographies, to understand these distinct but interrelated material and epistemic practices. The Plantationocene is marked both by: (1) the plantation as a specific material form of production and agrarian social structure, and (2) plantation logics that persist in shaping political economies in the wake of the plantation. I will describe each in turn.

As a form of production and agrarian social structure, plantations shaped colonial extraction historically and continue to operate today (Li and Semedi 2021; Thomas 2019). As Li and Semedi describe, 'A plantation is a machine for assembling land, labor, and capital under centralized management for the purpose of making a profit; it is also a political technology that orders territories and populations, produces new subjects, and makes new worlds' (2021, 1). Plantations have taken on novel social formations across space and throughout history. From 1492 throughout the Americas, they fueled empire and thrived through the enslavement of Africans; they were the bedrock of colonial expansion across Asia and Africa; profits and commodities from plantations also powered the Industrial Revolution in Europe and fed the laborers who worked in its factories. Today, plantations as a form of production continue to manifest this diversity in their unprecedented expansion (Li and Semedi 2021). Many scholars of Caribbean plantations in particular have described plantations as the nexus through which market, class, and social relations of the capitalist world-economy were formed (Beckford 1999; Best and Levitt 2009; Getachew 2019; Mintz 1986; Tomich 2011). Some general features of this plantation form are: the monocrop production of agricultural commodities, organized for export and extraction; large-scale concentration of land ownership; and reliance on a racialized labor force through varying degrees of coercion and consent.

Yet even during the colonial period, plantations have also always been more than simply a form of production. Gilroy writes that 'plantation slavery was more than just a

[2]The classical agrarian question centered the social relations of agriculture in understanding trajectories of capitalist development more broadly. As McCarthy and I have argued elsewhere, today these questions are central to strategies for climate change adaptation and mitigation (Paprocki and McCarthy 2024).

system of labor and a distinct mode of racial domination, … it provided the foundations for a distinctive network of economic, social, and political relations' (Gilroy 1993, 54–55). In the wake of formal decolonization, a group of political economists known as the New World Group produced a body of work focused on understanding these relations, and how and why they transcend plantations as specific production units, often across the Third World (Beckford 1999; Best and Levitt 2009; Timcke 2023). One of its key figures, George Beckford, described the need for a range of concepts to understand these expansive dynamics, from the narrow 'plantation production' to the broader 'plantation system' and 'plantation economy' (Beckford 1999). Another key figure, Norman Girvan, explained that the theory of plantation economy extends beyond plantations and agriculture, with a focus on referencing the historical origins shaping contemporary political economies (Girvan 2009). While it is beyond the scope of the current essay to unpack the intricacies of these linked concepts, these insights of the New World Group laid the groundwork for a consideration of the wide-ranging influence of plantations beyond their specific spatial and temporal boundaries.

More recent work in Black geographies has gone further to examine plantations as a social practice that has extended into the present through diverse material and epistemological forms of power. Inspired by Sylvia Wynter, a participant in the New World Group, Katherine McKittrick coined 'plantation logics' as a conceptual analytic through which to see the way these plantation afterlives shift across time and space in ways 'that spatialized the complementary workings of modernity, land exploitation, and anti-black violence' (2011, 951).[3] The plantation, as McKittrick describes, is both a historical artefact and a palimpsest that continues to shape contemporary life socially, spatially, and conceptually beyond the plantation form itself (2013, 5). While some post-colonial uses of the plantation concept have mobilized it essentially as a metaphor (Benn 1974), particularly in its more recent guises (Clukey and Wells 2016), I am less interested in the plantation as an analogy than I am in the concrete material and epistemological practices and their legacies that reproduce the plantation as a social and political economic project. In these more expansive analyses of plantation afterlives, scholars have described how plantation logics were not only foundational to colonial labor organization, but they have also shaped 'the infrastructures, practices, and processes of politics' of the post-colonial world (D. A. Thomas 2019, 10; see also Mbembe 2020; Williams and Freshour 2022; C. Woods 2017; Wynter 1971; Zeiderman 2025). Several scholars have taken up McKitrick's concept of 'plantation logics,' building on these insights to examine how the plantation operates as a social system, an imperative, and an ideal that shapes contemporary political economic structures and how the future is imagined and pursued (W. Wolford 2021; see also Bruno 2023; Carrillo 2025; Verne, Marquardt, and Ouma 2025).

Plantation logics reproduce a range of linked social and political economic dynamics. Some features of plantation logics that are foundational to the present analysis are that they map certain geographies as violent, unproductive, and/or uninhabitable, inscribing the uneven production of space (McKittrick 2013). They reproduce economic extractivism, both through the concentration of wealth and power within communities as well as through an unequal, even neo-mercantilist, global political economic order (Chao et al.

[3]McKittrick's coining of this term builds on her own and others' longstanding interest in the ways in which the spatialized conditions of the plantation "leak into the future" (McKittrick 2006, xvii).

2024; Lewis 2020). And they naturalize hierarchies between humans, racializing regimes of labor and social reproduction (Besky 2024; Goffe 2023; Li 2024).

The three propositions set forth in this paper are dynamics that emerge from these plantation logics through the adaptation regime. Developing each of these propositions allows us to see how the logics of contemporary climate change adaptation emerge from the socionatural form of the plantation and thus how plantation logics persist in the present. Briefly: we see that adaptation both within and beyond rural communities is contingent on agrarian extraction, with benefits of adaptation accruing unevenly across space. Moreover, this extractive model is fueled by dispossession, where some disproportionately bear the costs of others' adaptation. Finally, this dispossession is dependent on control of racialized labor and governance of racialized populations. Unpacking these processes allows us to see how they are linked and how plantation logics persist through the adaptation regime.

Collectively, these propositions specify the social relations through which climate change and responses to it are both produced and experienced. In doing so, they do a specific kind of work in highlighting the relations of control over people, land and resources in our present epoch. Specifically, contrasted with analogous concepts of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, the Plantationocene clarifies the important role of the agrarian world in shaping the modern era (Chao et al. 2024; Ofstehage 2024), and it does so through attention to unequal agrarian social relations. As Ouma writes, 'compared with the concept of the Anthropocene, the Plantationocene points out, first, that the terraforming of the planet cannot be thought apart from the categories of race, class and gender' (Verne, Marquardt, and Ouma 2025, 8). While several scholars have identified a willful racial blindness and inattention to power asymmetries in the Anthropocene concept (Davis et al. 2019; Karera 2019; Ojeda, Sasser, and Lunstrum 2020; Tuana 2019; Vergès 2017; Yusoff 2018)[4], the Plantationocene concept attends directly to these power relations, and specifically draws attention to their role in agrarian extraction and empire in collectively shaping the present (Moulton and Machado 2019).[5]

Yet other scholars, while sympathetic to the specific analytical foci of the Plantationocene concept, have critiqued it for its reproduction of a linear and universalizing grand theory of historical transformation (Curley and Smith 2024a, 2024b). Attentive to these assessments, my intention in engaging with the Plantationocene concept is not to offer a monolithic theory of everything. There are and have always been outsides to the plantation. In fact, plantations are fundamentally dependent on their outsides (Besky 2024; Carney 2021; Wynter 1971). Rather, I argue that we gain new insights about adaptation when we view it through this analytical entry point, which is one among many (A. Nightingale 2016). In this sense, I join Curley and Smith in thinking of the plantation as 'a method for uncovering unique configurations of hierarchy, power, and profit in places rendered into a special political economic configuration with former colonizing powers' (Curley and Smith 2024b, 2186). In the end of the article I

[4]While some have turned to the Capitalocene concept for its attention to the latter, Moulton argues that it is guilty of these same fallacies of the Anthropocene concept, accusing it of being "analytically anemic for a historiography of global ecological crisis" (Moulton 2024, 7). Though see also David and Dévédec for an examination of the Capitalocene and its foundations in racialized colonial plantation labor regimes (2025).

[5]It is worth noting that some literature on the Plantationocene has reproduced precisely this failure of the Anthropocene concept to attend to the centrality of racial politics (Davis et al. 2019).

turn to the question of resistance, which draws attention to the contingency inherent in practices of adaptation. The mobilization of these plantation logics must be continually reproduced through adaptation practice, and likewise it can be obstructed.

Proposition 1: ***Adaptation in the Plantationocene generalizes plantation logics through spatially uneven development***

Even as plantations are built on the ideal of the rationalization and standardization of production and maximization of productivity (Scott 1998), they do so in uneven ways within and between communities. Plantations, as Edgar Thompson wrote in his classic of historical sociology, *The Plantation*, are governed differently from their metropoles, and the spatially uneven development that results is by design ([1931] 2010). Thus, to understand this uneven development, it is necessary to examine areas both within and beyond the spatial boundaries of the plantation. Adaptation in the Plantationocene abides these same logics. The ways adaptation is practiced in particular places are shaped by global visions of production and social reproduction on a changing planet even as they are also particular to individual places and their histories.

Plantation logics normalize 'the uneven production of space' (McKittrick 2013, 9) through adaptation by rendering some places uninhabitable and others worth saving. As Williams and Porter write, 'plantation logics give rise to such geographies of extraction, rendering some places purportedly uninhabitable and lifeless to bolster geographies of possession and white wealth' (2022, 502–503). The coordinates of these uneven geographies are governed through visions of adaptation that are shaped by these logics. As climate negotiators from the global south and activists supporting them have long argued, support for adaptation in the present and future are in part driven by an acceptance of the failures of mitigation, effectively naturalizing climate crisis for some in order to sustain elite consumption patterns and promote the development of others (Cohen 2021; Sealey-Huggins 2017). Not everyone will suffer from climate change in this vision of adaptation. 'Some islands will rise,' in Mathew Schneider-Mayerson's prescient turn of phrase (2017).

Several scholars have examined the uneven distribution of the impacts of adaptation in ways that exacerbate vulnerability of those who are already most vulnerable. Some approaches influenced by political ecology have identified the failure of adaptation programs to attend to underlying social dynamics shaping vulnerability to climate change (Bassett and Fogelman 2013; Eriksen et al. 2021; Ribot 2014; Thomas et al. 2019), including the legacies of colonial plantation production (Perry 2023a). While sympathetic to this orientation toward the political ecology of vulnerability, my interest here is less in examining the conceptualizations of vulnerability embedded in adaptation programs than it is on the plantation logics that shape visions of developed futures pursued in the name of adaptation. I thus turn to an approach that more explicitly addresses the political economy of development in which these programs are embedded, and thus recognizes that this unevenness is intrinsic to the adaptation regime. Perry has similarly described how current climate finance regimes 'reproduce the 'plantation' as a persistent zone of extraction' (Perry 2021, 364). My analysis builds on this work and that of others who have described how climate responses reproduce longstanding patterns of spatially uneven development (Rice, Long, and Levenda 2022; Perry 2024; Perry and Sealey-Huggins 2023).

While this unevenness manifests across a variety of different spatial formations, it is a fundamental characteristic of the contemporary political economy of agrarian change. The sacrifice of agrarian space for the sake of urban protection, and in particular the protection of elites, is by now a mundane trope of urbanization, now reinvigorated in the name of adaptation. Some examples: the Mumbai Coastal Road project, which began construction in 2018, has been celebrated by the government for its 'green' design elements including an elevated roadway and a 'green buffer zone.' However, Anand has written that this project privileges the convenience of urban elites and the movement of their private vehicles at the expense of the coastal area's large fishing community (and the ecosystems on which it depends) (Anand 2013). In the Bengal delta, adaptation and development planners celebrate agrarian out-migration and urban growth through the promotion of shrimp aquaculture (an ecologically destructive form of production requiring very little labor relative to agriculture) (Dewan 2023; Paprocki 2020). In Hanoi, the elite Ecopark housing development was made possible through the government-enforced displacement of thousands of peasant families, producing a green satellite city (complete with golf course and swimming pools) in service of Hanoi's master plan for sustainable development (K. A. Thomas and Warner 2019). In each of these cases, agrarian dispossession (examined further in the next section) serves the protection of cities and their elite residents, and profoundly spatially uneven development.

Contrast these visions of urban adaptation with dominant imaginaries of climate change in Tuvalu, a low-lying Pacific Island that cosmopolitan climate activists have already begun to eulogize as among the first places to disappear as sea levels rise. There are no golf courses or swimming pools in the imagined projections of Tuvalu's climate future. In the images illustrating popular media reports about climate change in Tuvalu, there are storm surges, eroding land masses, salinized soil, and homes and people submerged in water (not for leisure) (Farbotko 2010). As Farbotko has described, Tuvalu becomes valuable in these neo-colonial climate imaginaries only once it has disappeared. In these expressions of 'wishful sinking,' Tuvalu and its inhabitants are expendable (Farbotko 2010).

Yet these migrants are also indispensable to the agrarian political economy of the region's climate futures. As Kitara and Farbotko have described, migrant workers from Tuvalu and other Pacific Islands are crucial to Australia's horticulture industries and thus its food security (Kitara and Farbotko 2023). Yet, the conditions in which these migrants work have been referred to as 'modern slavery,' labor regimes shaped by longer colonial histories of indentured migration in Oceania (Kitara and Farbotko 2023). Today, Australian politicians (along with the International Labor Organization and United Nations agencies) celebrate these racialized regimes of agricultural labor as a climate change adaptation solution for the Pacific Islands and an alibi for Australia's failure to decarbonize (Coelho 2020; Kitara and Farbotko 2023). Responding to one politician's remarks regarding the country's benevolence to that end through allowing migrants to pick their fruit, indigenous artist Yuki Kihara wrote the following poem:

'Pick our fruit'

Dear Australian Deputy PM Michael McCormack,

Your fruit grows on lands that does not belong to you

> Your fruit is grown with the phosphate taken from the Islands of Nauru and Banaba where they can no longer bear fruit
>
> Your fruit has been picked by a generation of Pacific slaves
>
> Your fruit grows in abundance because you have taken ours.
>
> (excerpted in Kitara and Farbotko 2023; full version in Kihara 2019)

Kitara's poem both highlights and refuses the plantation logics shaping visions of Oceania adaptation through racialized migrant labor regimes. She highlights how these regimes are shaped by historical and contemporary political economies of extraction and spatially uneven development. The plantation logics of the adaptation regime in Oceania have marked the Pacific Islands as extractive zones to benefit Australia and its inhabitants. The political economy of this plantation imaginary not only anticipates the demise of the Pacific Islands, but materially prefigures this demise through wishful sinking and anticipatory ruination (Farbotko 2010; Paprocki 2022).

Proposition 2: ***Dispossession is a key tool of adaptation in the Plantationocene***

While it has been well established that the legacies of imperialism have shaped unequal vulnerability to climate dispossession (Bhambra and Newell 2023; Perry and Sealey-Huggins 2023; Sultana 2022), it is also the case that dispossession has become a tool of the adaptation regime itself. This is a consequence of the regime's formulation through plantation logics and grounding in capitalist political economies. The unevenness I examine above in Proposition 1 is often manifested through the dispossession of agrarian communities that is foundational to the adaptation regime.

Plantations have always relied on dispossession of humans and nonhumans to reshape landscapes, whether through the global traffic of slave labor or the displacement of indigenous plantlife. Wolford has described how historically and today, the plantation has functioned through 'the long-distance simplification of landscapes; alienation of land and labor; and transportation of genomes, plants, animals, and people' (2021, 2). As Wynter describes, in the plantation system, the people and social systems that compose it are adjuncts to the market and the commodities that they produced (1971). The dispossession of means of both production and social reproduction in and around the plantation is thus an imperative of plantation logics.

Negotiations around adaptation are struggles over resources, their (re)distribution, and authority over their governance (Camargo and Ojeda 2017; Nightingale 2017). The adaptation regime also governs production and social reproduction through plantation logics that dispossess individuals and communities who are superfluous to value extraction in newly adapted ecologies. This dispossession is not a necessary consequence of climate change adaptation, rather it is the result of an adaptation regime that governs through these plantation logics. I describe below how these plantation logics manifest in visions of adaptation through a variety of different transformations of agrarian political economies, landscapes, and production relations.

There is an abundance of scholarship on the variety of ways in which measures for climate change mitigation drive agrarian dispossession, such as through land grabbing motivated by the global expansion of plantations for biofuels and 'flex crops' (Borras et

al. 2016; Lund 2018) and other technologies of energy transition (Arbeláez-Trujillo et al. 2025; Esteve-Jordà and Scheidel 2025; Galvin and Silva Garzón 2023; Singh 2025; Stock and Nyantakyi-Frimpong 2025; Wolford et al. 2025; Zoomers and Otsuki 2025).[6] Dispossession through the adaptation regime also operates through plantation logics; the two are fundamentally intertwined in the sense that the more the world fails to mitigate, the greater demands there will be for adaptation. Climate change planning and finance are embedded with normative development logics that may deem agrarian dispossessions through 'adaptation' to be more feasible climate planning interventions than rapid, large-scale mitigation among urban communities. The Green Climate Fund (GCF) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the centerpiece of the global climate regime's climate finance system, concretely demonstrates these trade-offs (Bracking 2015). As Bracking describes, the GCF relies on a logic that 'the opportunity cost of removing poor farmers from their land is worth the mitigation effect given the relatively greater ability of rich people to oppose change' (2015, 291). In this way, Bracking demonstrates that the plantation ideal is embedded directly in the logic of adaptation through the GCF, institutionalizing support for agrarian dispossession through extractive development, continued urban growth, and elite consumption. Perry has also described how disaster insurance, debt swaps, and other debt-driven financial instruments configured as climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies give rise to new forms of dispossession that extend longstanding extractive relationships of Caribbean plantation economies (2023a). These strategies are firmly rooted in plantation logics that fuel the extraction of agrarian surplus and dispossession.

Several scholars have described how large-scale political economic transitions carried out in the name of climate change adaptation have taken place through agrarian dispossession. Montefrio describes the Aurora Pacific Economic Zone and Freeport (APECO) in the Phillipines, a 'green economic zone' involving ecotourism projects and industrial spaces powered by clean energy technologies supposedly designed to provide adaptive alternative livelihoods for local communities. Despite claims to creating new livelihoods, the project has resulted in rampant land grabbing and resource enclosure, resulting in the exclusion and dispossession of smallholder farmers (Montefrio 2013). Uson describes how long-standing struggles for agrarian reform and land redistribution in the island of Sicogon shifted decisively through adaptation discourse in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan. After the storm, mechanisms of climate change adaptation and disaster risk management were mobilized with the support of humanitarian aid to bolster the land claims of powerful elites and diminish those of local fisherfolk and farmers. Ultimately, the state supported elite land grabs, bolstering a burgeoning tourism economy in the name of planned relocation of Sicogon's poorest residents (Uson 2017). In western Cambodia, Hunsberger and colleagues describe large-scale crop irrigation projects portrayed as climate change adaptation strategies for promoting food security and agricultural exports under conditions of increasing drought in the face of climate change (Hunsberger, Work, and Herre 2018). However, local villagers argue that these irrigation projects have been designed to serve a large cassava plantation that has been responsible for the displacement of over 8000 families, whose homes and lands have been bulldozed

[6]See also a parallel literature on colonial legacies shaping conservation-induced displacement (Collins et al. 2021; Milgroom and Claeys 2025; Kashwan et al. 2021).

with the support of the Cambodian military (Beban and Work 2014; Hunsberger, Work, and Herre 2018). Farmers who have been displaced from their homes to make way for these irrigation infrastructures have either not been compensated or have been forced into agreeing to inadequate compensation through intimidation and force (Hunsberger, Work, and Herre 2018). In each of these cases, adaptation is carried out through agrarian dispossession, motivated by political economic visions shaped through extractive plantation logics.

Alongside these transformations, we can also see the reconfiguration of agrarian landscapes in the name of climate change adaptation. One example is the transition from agricultural production to shrimp aquaculture, which shares many characteristics of plantation agriculture (Banoub et al. 2021; Pratheepa, Raj, and Sinha 2023). That is, aquaculture landscapes are 'large-scale, organized for extraction, and premised on the availability of cheap land and local labor' (Chao et al. 2024, 2). In Bangladesh, this dispossession is manifested through the displacement of agrarian communities from coastal regions threatened by sea level rise, replacing rice farming with shrimp aquaculture (Paprocki 2021). Shrimp is a far less labor intensive commodity (requiring 1-10% of the agrarian labor that rice agriculture requires), but it is a valuable export commodity. The expansion of aquaculture has been carried out through land grabbing and agrarian dispossession over the past four decades, now recycled as an adaptation solution, with the support of large development aid agencies including the World Bank and FAO. In Bangladesh, the adaptation regime pursues visions of development through which new and existing production strategies result in agrarian dispossession in the name of climate change adaptation.

Finally, plantation logics shape changing forms and relations of production carried out through the adaptation regime. There is a robust and growing literature on adaptation interventions labelled 'climate smart agriculture' (CSA) that examines how they shape these transformations. Broadly this literature examines a variety of ways in which agrarian dispossession is engendered in CSA through the marriage of discourses of climate change adaptation with neoliberal logics of economic efficiency (Borras and Franco 2018). Clapp and colleagues have describe CSA as a mechanism for reshaping markets, leveraging climate change as a new opportunity for accumulation (Clapp, Newell, and Brent 2018). CSA projects entrench patterns of agrarian differentiation and dispossession through existing paradigms of capitalist developmentalism (Clay 2023). A review of the literature on how CSA results in agrarian dispossession reveals that it does so through plantation logics. Some have found that CSA policies and discourses often serve elite farmers while excluding others (Chandra, McNamara, and Dargusch 2017), and have served as a conduit for corporate agribusiness investments into agriculture, entrenching the existing corporate food regime (Newell and Taylor 2018). According to Borras and Franco, 'CSA and CSA-friendly narratives, explicitly or implicitly, call for – and essentially require – the eradication of much of smallholder production systems' (2018, 1317). They find that CSA favors corporate agribusiness and 'modern' agricultural technologies at the expense of indigenous and traditional production systems such as shifting cultivation. Mills-Novoa has contextualized these efforts to transform smallholder production and promote agro-export production in relation to broader agricultural reforms carried out in the name of climate change adaptation, including through the reallocation of water toward large agribusiness (Mills-Novoa 2020). Rosén and colleagues (2018) highlight

the Malthusian concerns embedded in some CSA discourse, which they link to an agenda of agricultural transformation through increased productivity (and associated loss of agricultural livelihoods). Taylor (2018) describes a radical policy shift through CSA that orients agricultural productivity increases around 'resilience' and reduced carbon emissions, while leaving modernist visions of agrarian transformation largely intact. Putting these competing visions of agrarian change through adaptation into stark relief, he predicts that 'CSA will unavoidably become a battleground for conflicting visions of agrarian futures' (2018, 103).

Collectively, these visions of adaptation reveal processes of agrarian dispossession through the transformation of agrarian political economies, landscapes, and production relations. This dispossession is shaped by plantation logics through the adaptation regime. Understanding these plantation logics as distinctly agrarian, related to but also separate from more general logics of capital accumulation, helps us to see how adaptation logics are also premised on agrarian accumulation by dispossession. Recognizing these dynamics is essential not only for understanding the material impacts of adaptation, but also for challenging the broader plantation logics that frame climate response in the Plantationocene.

Proposition 3: ***Adaptation in the Plantationocene is a mechanism of racialization and of the governance of racialized bodies***

We've established that the political economy of adaptation shapes spatially uneven development through processes of dispossession that sort the subjects of adaptation into winners and losers. Here I describe this sorting as a process of racialized governance. While some have drawn attention to the more-than-human politics of the Anthropocene (Haraway et al. 2016), by contrast, attending to the racializing logics of the Plantationocene allows us to see that the category of 'human' itself is unsettled in a world where some are determined to be worthy of protection while others are displaced to facilitate new kinds of extraction (McKittrick 2013; Tilley et al. 2023). Several scholars have found critical resources in Black feminist geographies, inspired in particular by Wynter's reconstructed humanism, for examining how these constructions of race through plantation logics shape life in the time of climate change (Davis et al. 2019; McKittrick 2006; Vergès 2017; Wynter 2003). Plainly, the biopolitics of adaptation allow for the selective protection of certain bodies while subjecting others to acute risks.

Thus, in confronting the future threats of sea level rise, these racialized logics make it possible to imagine a sea wall wrapping around the coast of Manhattan, protecting the inhabitants of Wall Street (DuPuis 2025; Goh 2021; Koslov 2016), while simultaneously imagining Bangladesh's coastline being entirely inundated, displacing millions (Paprocki 2021). It is not only the physical landscapes that make this inundation imaginable, but the racialized bodies who inhabit them. Examining this process through the Plantationocene concept draws our attention to the ways in which the geographies of adaptation are not only unevenly *spatialized*, they are also fundamentally *racialized*. Davis and colleagues have described how the power of the Plantationocene concept is in its possibilities for illuminating how these processes are linked through plantation logics (2019). Work in Black ecologies and related Black geographical scholarship has powerfully illuminated the specific ways in which the fundamental racialization of environmental logics can be

traced through plantation logics historically and into the present (Freshour and Williams 2023; Hosbey et al. 2023; Hosbey, Lloréns, and Roane 2022; Moulton and Salo 2022). Building on these insights, the Plantationocene concept has served as an invitation to scholars of agrarian studies to place dynamics of racialization more centrally in their analyses than they have historically (Carrillo 2025; Davis et al. 2019; W. Wolford 2021).[7]

Several scholars have demonstrated that the impacts of climate change are and will be unequally distributed along racial lines (Bonilla 2020; Pulido 2018; Sultana 2022; Yusoff 2018). Yet others have pointed out that this unequal distribution is not a unilinear process of environmental processes having racialized impacts, but that racialization and environmental processes are mutually constitutive (Collins 2023; Quiroga Manrique, Ojeda, and Camargo 2025; Sundberg 2008; Zeiderman 2025). This latter insight is particularly relevant to understanding adaptation in the Plantationocene. Here I argue not only that the politics of adaptation are shaped by an already racialized global political economy, but more specifically that adaptation itself (as a process of responding to and transforming the social and material world) shapes contemporary constructions of race. That is, responses to climate change are themselves enrolled as tools of racialization. In what follows, I describe how this racialization is embedded in the adaptation regime through the governance of (1) labor and agrarian production systems and (2) populations and borders.

First, adaptation shapes racialization through interventions in agrarian production that reproduce racialized regimes of ownership and racialized labor forces. Drawing on Robinson's concept of 'racialism,' Li investigates the Plantationocene through contemporary governance of plantation labor in Indonesia (Li 2024). While a race-centered understanding of the Plantationocene has been developed by scholars primarily working in the Caribbean, Li demonstrates how analytically useful it can be in Southeast Asia, where the legacies of colonial-era racial formations continue to shape life on and off the plantation. Robinson describes racialism as both a fundamental dialectic of empire as well as a form of labor discipline (Robinson 1983). Li attends specifically to the latter, describing racialism as 'the practice of forging differences among people for the purpose of extraction, although treating such differences as innate' (Li 2024, 2194). Observing plantation logics embedded in contemporary agricultural adaptation programs reveals these practices.[8] Canfield has offered a detailed analysis of these practices of racialization through the Gates Foundations' interventions in food systems through ideologies of 'innovation' for agricultural development (2023). He describes how this adaptation ideology marginalizes racialized peasants by discrediting their forms of agricultural knowledge, renewing racial regimes of ownership, and drawing on these forms of racialization to legitimize the expansion of capitalism. In this way, Canfield demonstrates how visions of capitalist agricultural development under the adaptation regime feed on and reproduce plantation logics of racialization.

[7]Though for examples of scholarship in critical agrarian studies that do address race as a central analytic, see DuPuis, Van Sant, and Keeve (2025), Dieng (2025), Eddens (2019), Minkoff-Zern (2018), and Freshour and Williams (2023). There is a more extensive scholarship on agrarian political economy among scholars of race with which critical agrarian studies would benefit from engaging more thoroughly (e.g. McCutcheon 2019; Heynen and Ybarra 2021; Gilmore 2007; Du Bois [1935] 1992).

[8]Relatedly, Lévy (2025) describes how the Plantationocene concept draws our attention to the mutually constitutive violence of landscape transformations for monocropping and plantation labor discipline.

Climate change adaptation, like the plantation, affords the right of sovereign violence, of the governance of making live and letting die. As Tilley and colleagues have written, 'the traps set by global structures of race often direct mainstream climate solutions back towards the expropriation, premature death, or prevention of birth of peoples of color' (2023, 150). A primary way that this racialized biopolitics has manifested in climate response is through the discourse and governance of 'climate refugees.' Through these practices, adaptation projects not only govern climate response and vulnerability along existing racial lines, but they also produce a spectacle for audiences elsewhere of climate vulnerability and strategies for containment of the racialized climate subject (Cons 2018).

Climate migration has been proposed contradictorily as a way to adapt to climate change, and as an outcome that adaptation seeks to preclude (Baldwin and Fornalé 2017; Paprocki 2021; Rahman et al. 2024; Bettini 2014). In both cases, the figure of the climate migrant (and the perceived threats of this migrant to receiving communities) is deeply racialized (Baldwin 2013, 2022; Hiraide 2023; Bettini 2013). Perry analyses this racialization within the United States by juxtaposing two essential elements of Democratic climate policy under the Obama and Biden administrations. On the one hand, he examines efforts to prevent Caribbean 'climate refugees' from coming to the US, depicting them as a security threat. On the other hand, he examines programs to generate green jobs programs in white communities in the US. Ultimately he argues that this vision of a 'just transition' is predicated on the management of racialized populations and is a manifestation of contemporary plantation logics (Perry 2023b).

By contrast, in Bangladesh, Ahuja (2021) describes how these racialized migrants are figured as a security resource at the confluence of, on the one hand, neoliberal adaptation strategies oriented toward export-led economic growth, and on the other, long-standing migration routes fueling the growth of Gulf States through extraction of both oil and precarious migrant labor. These conditions operate together as 'ongoing practices of extractivist empire' (Roane 2023, 169). While plantation logics reshape landscapes they also reshape populations through immigration, as people are moved or kept in place to meet requirements of production. The disposability of these racialized migrants is made explicit within this paradox between agrarian dispossession examined above and xenophobic development policy pursued by international development agencies in Bangladesh (Paprocki 2021, 74). While donors and development agencies promote rural outmigration from the coastal regions deemed uninhabitable (and therefore available for the expansion of extractive industries), at the same time these agencies identify the immigration of Bangladeshi climate migrants to their own countries in the Global North as an impermissible outcome against which adaptation and climate geopolitics must be oriented.

While these spectacular images of the racialized climate migrant fuel adaptation planning and xenophobic migration policy in the Global North, racialized adaptation governance also takes place through more obscured practices of racial governance. For example, Hardy and colleagues describe how a 'racial coastal formation,' shaped by legacies of the plantation system in Sapelo Island, Georgia (USA), shapes 'colorblind adaptation planning' approaches that focus on technocratic interventions at the expense of attention to racial inequality in land ownership. Attention to this racial coastal formation and the ways it has been shaped by plantation histories, they explain, could facilitate race-aware adaptation

planning which is necessary to the pursuit of climate justice (Hardy, Milligan, and Heynen 2017).

Examining these racialized logics of adaptation sheds light on how adaptation manifests plantation logics not only through the uneven production of space, but also through the racialization of populations laboring across and inhabiting that space. This highlights what McKittrick describes as 'the mutual construction of identity and place writ large. If some places are rendered lifeless in the broader geographic imagination, what of those inhabiting the lifeless?' (2013, 7). Adaptation not only responds to these conditions of racialization, but it actively produces them through its dystopic imaginaries of climate futures in the Plantationocene.

Alternatives

The Plantationocene is a lens through which to see how the contemporary world is shaped and governed through plantation logics. Yet, both humans and nature are unruly, and neither fully abides these logics. While the three propositions outlined above allow us to see how adaptation is governed under the adaptation regime through them, this is a fundamentally partial view. Here I turn to the dynamics that such a lens obscures. That is, I examine: (1) contingency of and resistance to the adaptation regime and its plantation logics, and (2) alternative imaginaries of living with climate change that operate outside of and confound these logics. These might be understood as alternatives within and beyond the adaptation regime. Examining these contingencies and alternatives demonstrates that while plantation logics do exert power over the governance of climate change adaptation, they do not do so in a linear or monolithic way; rather, plantation logics are variegated, and they require constant reproduction.

An emerging literature in critical studies of adaptation has examined how peasants have challenged the hegemonic logics of the adaptation regime. Several scholars have identified emerging coalitions of groups similarly denouncing these adaptation strategies and pursuing alternative visions of climate justice that implicitly or explicitly reject plantation logics (Clapp, Newell, and Brent 2018; Newell and Taylor 2018; Tramel 2016). For example, La Via Campesina has denounced several land and nature based solutions to climate change adaptation including Climate Smart Agriculture and other forms of industrial agriculture as 'false solutions' to the climate crisis (Borras 2023a; McKeon 2015). In their review of 20 studies of resistance to dominant climate change adaptation interventions, Mills-Novoa and Mikulewicz find that many of the ways that peasants resist climate change adaptation are motivated precisely by their resistance to the plantation logics that inform them (2024). For example, peasants resist adaptation projects pursued in the name of agricultural modernization, and resulting agrarian dispossession and displacement (2024).

While some forms of resistance to adaptation suggest fundamentally counter-hegemonic politics, others identify engagement with the adaptation regime as evidence of both resistance and accommodation. Naess and colleagues describe how climate interventions both open up and close down spaces for negotiation around power and resource access in pastoral communities (2025). Similarly, Mills-Novoa and colleagues describe a series of 'counter-conducts' through which the supposed beneficiaries of adaptation projects resist, leverage, and rework interventions (2023). In Cartagena, Quiroga Manrique and

colleagues find that Black women have appropriated state-led mangrove restoration projects in the name of climate change adaptation to reassert territorial rights to their homes (2025). They demonstrate how in the face of historical and ongoing racialized dispossession, these communities have found ways to use these adaptation programs to pursue territorial defense and agrarian justice. While some analyses of negotiations over adaptation demonstrate opportunities for resisting plantation logics, others find that such negotiations may not be fundamentally oppositional. For example, Camargo finds that in confronting the adaptation regime in Colombia, peasants 'adopt, resignify, and repurpose' the concept of adaptation in ways that position themselves as rural entrepreneurs reproducing agrarian capitalism (2022).[9] In each case, we can see that plantation logics are neither monolithic nor inevitable, rather they are constantly reproduced, redirected, and/or obstructed.

By contrast, some peasant movements and communities have offered alternative imaginaries of climate futures that articulate explicitly in opposition to the plantation logics of the adaptation regime. In some cases they have drawn on or resignified the language of adaptation and climate justice, and in other cases, scholars have identified their alternative visions of agrarian futures as visions of climate justice. For example, La Via Campesina and the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Climate Change have contributed to global climate negotiations specifically in opposition to the plantation logics of climate action under the adaptation regime, using these negotiations as a platform for advocating for agrarian justice (Claeys and Pugley 2017). Borras and Franco have described this convergence of demands as 'agrarian climate justice' (Borras 2020). For example, some have proposed small-scale regenerative agriculture as an alternative approach to addressing climate crisis and pursuing agrarian climate justice (Newell 2022, 919). Some rural social movements in India have demanded agrarian reforms as a means of addressing climate vulnerability that seek to disable plantation logics through land reform, protections for agrarian laborers and smallholders, and protections from subsidized foreign agricultural imports (Taylor 2013). Landless movements in Bangladesh have mobilized to demand the redistribution of land and resources to make a return to agriculture possible, in opposition to dominant plantation imaginaries supporting shrimp aquaculture under the adaptation regime; I have elsewhere described these as alternative visions of climate justice (Paprocki 2021). Similarly, Perry has traced plantation logics through economic analysis of 'loss and damage' and post-disaster needs assessments in the aftermath of hurricanes in the Caribbean. He suggests the need to see agrarian social formations beyond the plantation as alternative visions of climate futures, writing: 'through communal land ownership, ethical care, and community-rooted social institutions, Caribbean communities enact forms of emancipatory climate justice in response to oppressive socio-ecological, imperial and global market pressures' (Perry 2024, 799). Drawing these demands together, Borras and Franco urge climate justice movements to engage more directly with movements for agrarian justice; likewise, they suggest that movements for agrarian justice must embed their struggles within broader demands for climate justice (2018).

[9]Relatedly it is also true in general that in the context of climate change, peasants not only resist capitalist agriculture and its plantation logics, but they also participate in, reproduce and reapproriate its logics and technologies in a variety of ways (Shattuck et al. 2023; Werner 2025).

More attention is needed to such struggles against the plantation logics of the adaptation regime, their politics, and emerging coalitions. Literature on plantations, particularly Black geographies inspired by Wynter's description of the plantation and the plot, offers a window into how plantation logics exert power, but also how to resist that power through struggles against and within the exercise of plantation logics (e.g. Bruno 2024; Lewis 2024; Purifoy 2022; Roane 2018; see also Borras 2023b; Borras and Franco 2024). This work demonstrates that understanding how plantation logics operate also reveals how they can be resisted, and what alternative futures might look like (Borras and Franco 2024; Wolford 2021). As Wolford describes, 'if plantations are large-scale, capital intensive, agro-industrial extractive production sites dependent on forced, usually racialized labor, then alternatives might logically be small-scale, labor intensive, participatory, and diverse' (2021, 1633). While cautioning against romanticized localisms and the sometimes exclusionary nativisms they can entail, Wolford's attention to alternative futures in the Plantationocene suggests that adaptation alternatives might involve both opposition to plantation logics as well as more autonomous struggles for subsistence and the production of life against and within the terrains shaped by those logics.

Conclusion

The Plantationocene lens facilitates a deeper accounting of the political economic and ecological legacies of plantation logics and how they inform the present and future. What it does not do is offer a vision of repair beyond those logics (Lewis 2024). Critically, as I have demonstrated, adaptation itself does not offer such a vision of repair beyond those logics, either. So while thinking with the Plantationocene is useful as a method for understanding these legacies and how they shape contemporary visions of responding to climate change, it is ultimately limited as a source of political visions for thinking beyond the plantation (Curley and Smith 2024b).

Yet despite its limitations, the Plantationocene concept draws our attention to the ways that extractive logics of colonialism have shaped the present, and the ways that they are fundamentally racialized. Tracing these histories and how they inform responses to contemporary crises facilitates an alternative analysis of possible solutions. It also underscores the importance of centering questions of racial justice, land justice, and food sovereignty in our conceptualizations of climate justice (Ody 2025; Borras and Franco 2018; Purifoy 2021; Rojas Herrera 2025; Woods and Robbins 2025). We should not look to the Plantationocene concept to describe all aspects of agrarian production or adaptation in the past and present. But we might look to it to consider how legacies of the past shape the present, and to use this historicization to reorient our politics for the future.

By understanding how plantation logics operate today as a set of technologies and modes of exercising power, rather than as a discrete space, we can see that these logics profoundly shape life in the face of climate change and climate change adaptation. I have described in this paper how plantation logics constrain adaptation to climate change, generating injustice, in three specific ways. First, adaptation in the Plantationocene generalizes plantation logics through spatially uneven development. Second, dispossession is a key tool of adaptation in the Plantationocene. Third, adaptation in the

Plantationocene is a tool of racialization and of the governance of racialized bodies. Understood as a set of technologies that are practiced in the present and which are contingent and constantly being reproduced, we can see that there are multiple possible futures, none of which are inevitable. Plantation logics shape our contemporary world, but they are not totalizing. They can be resisted.

Acknowledgements

For their generous feedback and insights, I am grateful to: Majed Akhter, Rebecca Elliott, Liz Koslov, Tanya Matthan, Jake Subryan Richards, Wendy Wolford, participants at the 'Conversations on the Plantationocene' workshop organized by Cornell University, the editors of JPS, and two anonymous reviewers for the journal who offered exceptionally incisive and generative critiques of earlier iterations of the piece.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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