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Kris Manjapra, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of History

Tufts University, Medford

Born in 1978 in Nassau, Bahamas

Studied History at Harvard University

Global Travels of the Plantation Complex

My project seeks to explain how "Antillean discourse" (Glissant) traveled the world from the 18th to the 20th century. Plantations provided the lifeblood for the emerging Europe-centered imperial capitalist system since the 1500s. Forms of unfree labor, including slavery, debt servitude, and indenture, made new kinds of human existence, displacement, and exploitation possible, as sugar became the original "white gold" of the modern economy beginning in the 16th century. But sugar would soon be followed by lucrative commerce in other agricultural commodities, such as cotton, indigo, tobacco, coffee, tea, opium, and rubber.

Whereas the counterpoint between sugar and tobacco production characterized modern plantation economies by the 18th century in the Caribbean, the plantation complex would explode across the globe in the period from the 1830s to the 1930s. Of course, what is most interesting in studying this explosion is the adaptations of the plantation to local conditions of land tenure, to different modes of colonial occupation, and to specific forms of resistance from peasant and indigenous communities.

During this time, the modes of industrial and agricultural organization, the regimes of labor, the managerial techniques, the crop sciences, and the financial and capital services that had been honed and perfected in the Caribbean came to travel and transplant themselves across the globe, especially across Asia. The circulation of millions of "coolies" from India and China to plantations in Southeast Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific Islands in the 1830-1930 period can be set in the context of the circulation of the "plantation complex" itself, as it moved across the globe with the force of empires.

By the nineteenth century, retail goods on European markets often combined the labor and agricultural products of plantations from around the world and especially from the regions of the Caribbean Sea and the Bay of Bengal. For example, sugar from plantations in Trinidad was packaged in bags made of woven jute, grown on plantation complexes in Bengal. The tea of Assam and Ceylon was stirred in London cafes with the crystals of sugar obtained from the work of laborers in Demerara. Likewise, cotton picked in the American South was brought to Manchester and Lancashire to be soaked in the indigo dyes obtained from plantation workers on the Indian subcontinent. Exploring the history of the most elementary unit of modern global capitalism, the plantation, gives us a transnational vantage point to understand the history of globalization from the "bottom up".

I take up this journey in an intellectual-history mode, attuned to the study of discourses, representations, cultural meanings, and interpretations. My work sheds light on the long history of "third-worldification" taking place in both regions from the 18th century on, which bound diverse histories together and helps to explain the alignment between "Blackness" and "Asianness" in the age of imperialism and globalization, even as ideas about the racial difference between Blacks and Asians solidified increasingly from the 1860s on.

Recommended Reading

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