

We have Never been Modern: Towards an Architectural History of the “Plantationocene”¹

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Fig. 1. Teams of two set at the edge of town by Jacqueline Tyrwhitt to map emerging “patterns” of urbanization.

On January 7th 1963, Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, urban planner and secretary of *Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM), landed in Gambia on a UN mission to devise a plan for the small colonial town of Kombo St. Mary and Bathurst.² Immediately dismissing the statistics provided to her by the planning office, Tyrwhitt assembled four teams of two men each and set them at four intersections at the edge of town for the next fourteen days (Fig. 1). Their task: to count all lorries, buses, motorcycles, pedestrian and animals going in and out of town. Looking at these observations,

¹ See Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” in *Environmental Humanities*, 6(1), 2015. pp. 159-165.

² Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, “Report on Town Planning for Bathurst and Kombo St. Mary, Gambia, West Africa, January 1963, Bureau of Technical Assistance Operations of the United Nations,” (New York: United Nations).

Tyrwhitt was to identify the “patterns” of urbanization plaguing St. Mary and Bathurst. We can dismiss this absurd exercise as a reflection of bygone colonial privilege. But that would be to miss the point. For, Tyrwhitt here is setting up terms of understanding a new global that is marked by a radical break from the colonial.

This is the same move, establishing new terms of a global disconnected from the colonial, that we see being deployed many years later by Rem Koolhaas as he flew over Lagos in a borrowed presidential helicopter.³ He too could ignore the quantitative history of colonization, its legacies carried out by a brutal police state, and the most entrenched territorial fighting between religious and political gangs, and simply claim in every traffic jam, every congestion, a sign of spontaneous creativity. This is also the same move that would be employed a few years later by his GSD student Kunlé Adeyemi, who in a 2013 MOMA exhibition claimed that these pangs of creativity would turn the floating slums of Makoko in Lagos, their endless shacks floating over stagnant and polluted waters of the bay, into likes of Amsterdam and Venice (Fig. 2).⁴ His firm even proposed a floating school as a solution to Makoko’s woes and displayed a copy at the Venice Biennale in 2016. But just when the school was being applauded at Venice, the actual school was being swept away by a storm. When asked about the disaster, Adeyemi respond that he was only proposing a “pattern” and the maintenance of the school was actually the responsibility of the community.⁵ Again, disconnecting

³ Rem Koolhaas’ “Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos,” and the “Harvard Project on the City,” in *Mutations*, (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2001). Also see the film that resulted from this trip: Rem Koolhaas and Bregtje v, d Haak (Directors) , *Lagos: Wide and Close* (2006): <http://lagos.submarinechannel.com>.

⁴ See *Uneven Growth: Tactical Urbanisms for Africa*, Exhibition at MoMA, New York, 2013: <https://uneven-growth.moma.org/tagged/africa>. Accessed July 20th, 2021.

⁵ Drew Zeiba has reported that “When confronted about the state of the floating school, NLÉ replied that it was the responsibility of the community to maintain the school, not them.” See Drew Zeiba, “How the floating (and collapsing) Makoko school was doomed from the start” in *The Architect’s News Paper*, March 2, 2018: <https://www.archpaper.com/2018/03/floating-collapsing-makoko-school-atavist-feature/>. Accessed July 20th 2021.

claim parading—well, floating in this case—around the world to suppress a connecting question: not only where was the money to maintain something like this going to come, but where had the money gone to produce Makoko in the first place?

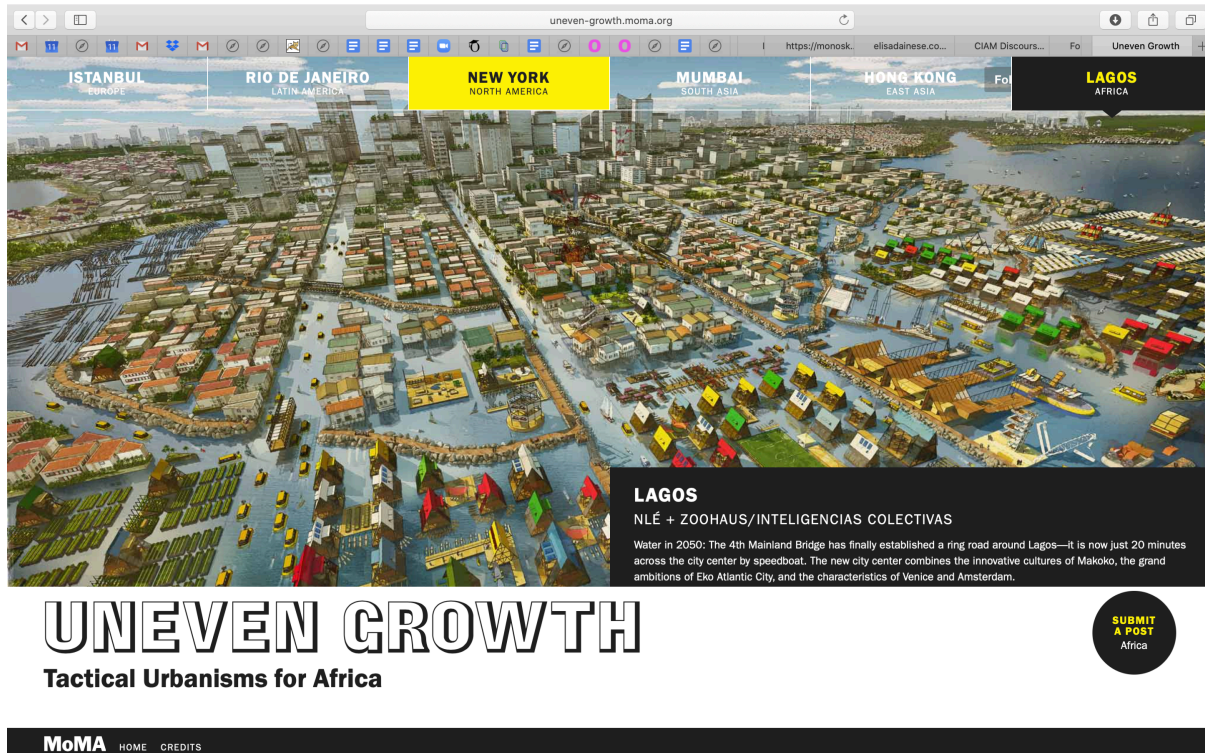


Fig. 2. For Kunlé Adeyemi, design can one day give Lagos’ slums “characteristics of Venice and Amsterdam.”

Utsa Patnaik has meticulously examined the import and export records of the British empire over its last 200 years in India.⁶ She shows that between 1765 and 1938, the British empire drained \$45 trillion from the Indian economy, that’s not counting the cumulative effects this money would’ve had if it had been invested in India. This theft was carried out with the shiftiest of accounting practices. The government first taxed the Indian exporters, deposited that money in the British

⁶ Utsa Patnaik, "Revisiting the 'Drain', or the Transfer from India to Britain in the Context of Global Diffusion of Capitalism," in Shubhra Chakrabarti and Utsa Patnaik eds. *Agrarian and Other Histories* (Tulika Books, 2017). pp. 277-317.

banks, and then used the same money to pay for the Indian exports. \$45 trillion is 17 times the current GDP of Britain. So even if Britain wanted to return it, it can't.

Why doesn't the trillions drained by Britain from India not weigh on the consciousness of every descendent of the empire and the colonial native elite who benefited from it? Closer to our disciplinary concerns, why doesn't this amount appear as an immediate cause of the conditions that we seek to correct, or explain, through design or writing, in the decolonized world? Is it simply of problem of research, a lack of historical information? Would it be corrected by returning to the ledgers with clearer accounting? Or is this a problem of imagination itself? The loot of past centuries upholding the division between the industrial and industrializing, developed and developing, First and Third worlds is not our burden because our imagination cannot jump the schism between the colonial and the contemporary global world, a schism that is itself a product of our imagination, our own conceptualizations of colonization and globalization.

The necessity for this schism was felt at the Bretton woods economic conference when the leading economists of Allied powers, from Harry Dexter White to Maynard Keynes, met after the Second World War to devise a system of global finance after colonialism. The deficit accumulated by Europe during the war could be erased by grants like the famous Marshall Plan. This could be done, because, despite the war's tremendous destruction, its monetary costs were still paltry compared to the collective loot of colonialism. The decolonizing world, therefore, was given the doctrine of "development," an unusual idea that capital growth can happen out of nothing, that, if the decolonizing world put things in line, it could come out of its colonial deficit with its own efforts.

There are few disciplines which are as good at putting things in line as architecture, including architectural history. I have written at length on how architecture and planning have been the primary mediums of instruments of imagining this schism, making this plausible argument, that something can be born out of nothing.⁷ “Self-help” architecture, “climatic” design, “tropical architecture,” “linear cities,” “open-ended” planning, were all presented as self-growing devices to make the implausible plausible, to make the deficit of colonialism disappear from memory and economics, to render the slate of history clean. Koolhaas couldn’t just fly over Lagos one fine day issuing proclamations on uninhibited Third World creativity, unfettered by the burdens of the past. That perspective has been put in place for a long time by not only the countless architecture and planning projects headed by modern architects working for international development agencies like the UN, the Ford Foundation and the World Bank, but also a wide body of architectural scholarship, both textbooks and journal papers, that have presented Third World modernism as just a problem of finding the right cultural expression.

Why was architecture the primary instrument of this imagination? Because numbers alone are never enough. For capital itself never operates by economic “exploitation” alone. Its “exploitation” has always been saturated with hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality. In the post Bretton Woods era, these categories needed to be expanded into categories of creative communities, participatory development, entrepreneurial individuals who make their own houses, villages, towns and cities. Even these categories merely grasp at the excess of social relations captured by capital. Marx had pointed to this excess by treating the cycle of capital as an open-ended chain.⁸ Althusser too drew attention to this gap. His model of capital is usually described as a two-tier system (a scientific base

⁷ See Ijlal Muzaffar, *The Periphery Within: Modern Architecture and the Making of the Third World* (University of Texas Press, forthcoming Spring 2022).

⁸ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Scattered Speculation on the Question of Value” in *Diacritics*, Winter 1985. pp. 73-93.

of capital and an ideological superstructure). What is ignored is the gap between the two levels that points to what could never be captured by any structural science, but only grasped at through imagination.⁹ Rather than be the medium of such a counter imagination, architecture history and practice in the global mode has long served to suppress it.

GAHTC has tried to provide such an imagination. But it too faces a structural limitation. All global history projects must take a view from nowhere to put things in a dialogue. It is the supposed neutrality of this view that allow us to put places in dialogue in the first place. And this is the difficult part: whether we like it or not, there's a shade of this forgetting in this view too, this schism, is in our global history project as well. I don't need to convince this audience that this view from nowhere of the globe on our website, from where we judge, set in comparison the whole world, without identifying the position we judge from, is only possible from the spaces of privilege we occupy. In other words, this view is intimately tied to not only the institutional and financial legacies of colonialism, but also to theoretical discourses, not matter how self-critical, those resources have enabled. Now, you might say, this is not what we do, we criticize colonial histories, identify its legacies. Yes, we do. But we tell them in a format which asks us to forget the continuing positioning of privilege, this view from nowhere, from where we speak. This unavoidable neutrality is always threatening to separate our presence from the past we narrate. We are bound to use this privilege just as we criticize it. It is our *pharmakon*, a poison and a cure, that enables to us challenge what we must also utilize. This poison is always threatening to spread, the forgetting always pressing to turn into amnesia.

⁹ William Corlett has made this argument in "Containing Indeterminacy: Problems of Representation and Determination in Marx and Althusser," in *Political Theory* 24, no. 3 (1996): 464-92. Louis Althusser, *Reading "Capital,"* trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979).

And nowhere is this slippage more likely and immanent than in the classroom. We might stress the presence of other non-Western “renaissance” in history, that European dominance was not always a given, but those argument turn into dust as we approach the presence. New burdens of change, recast with ever pressing needs to attend to climate change and the age of Anthropocene—keep being displaced onto the global South. As architects fly over Third World cities, take sustainable and participatory design studios across the world, as historians recast architecture in the global South as a problem of culture, Third World becomes more and more a site of global redemption, and with it, become more and more detached from its continuing linkages to the deficits of colonialism and slavery.

It is hard to recall global histories of indigenous imaginations while also remembering that the very concept of the globe we employ itself is a spatial abstraction, a legacy of colonialism devised to put the world into a singular frame of time. One of the primary shortcomings of global history is its need to tell every story in spatial sections. To tell what was happening across the world at a certain point, we must take spatial cross-sections and related thing in a shared time frame. But what if the time of colonialism overlaps with the time of decolonization and is discontinuous with that indigenous thought? What if we explain one thing in one imagination, other imaginations of time cannot be captured through it? Can we really tell the history of Haida indigenous imagination of time, their belief in the continuity of the ancestral spiritual world and their own, by locating the map of Haida Gwaii on the map of British Columbia? In putting them on the map in Canada, we end up privileging the very colonial concept of time and space that we seek to criticize. And this temporal (dis)continuity is not just a problem of locating indigenous imagination of space and time with that of the global. It is also the problem of locating colonial legacy within the present.

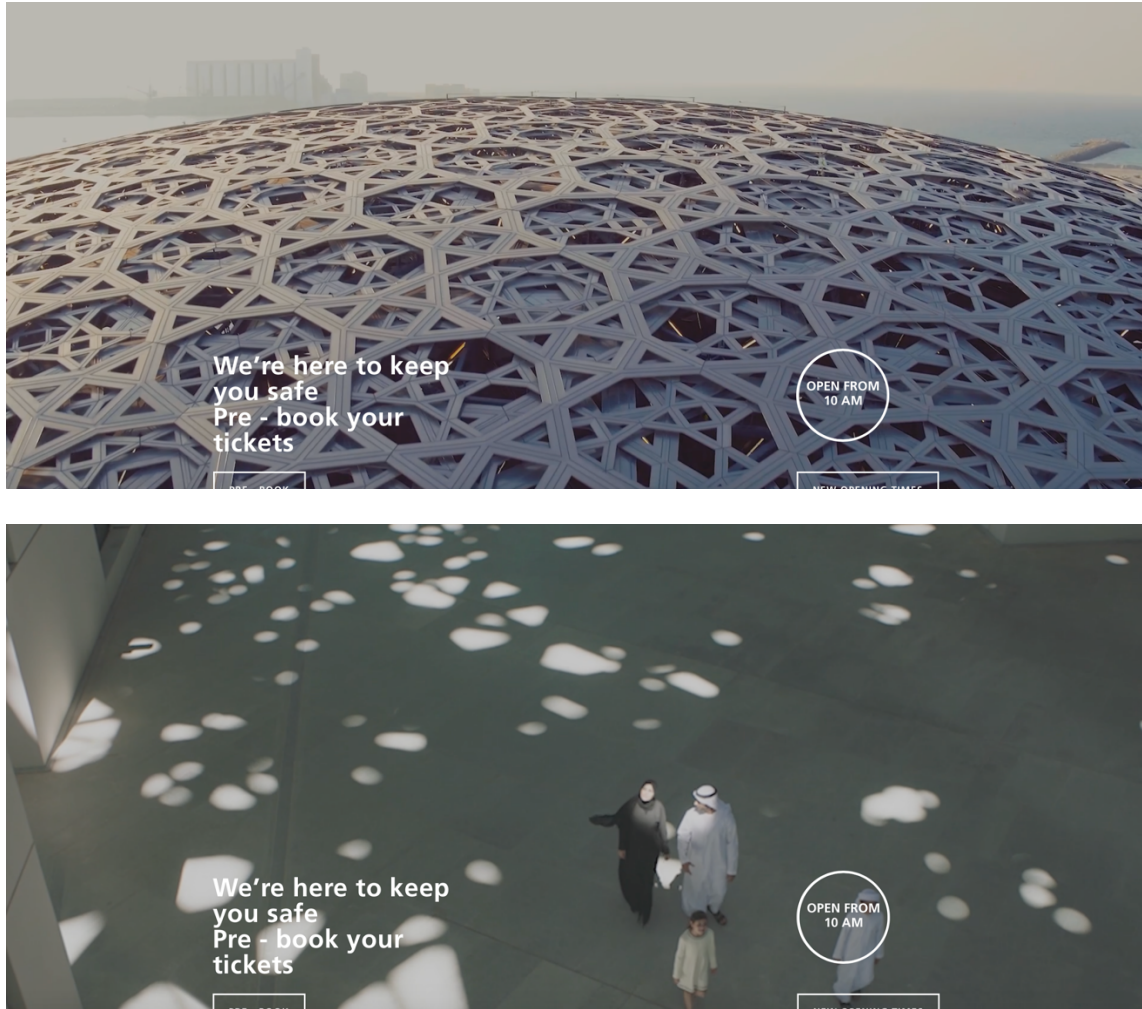


Fig. 3. The Louvre, Abu Dhabi was design by the office of Jean Nouvel and completed in 2017. Its lattice canopy is supposed to invoke the cooling shade of an oasis in the desert.

In 2017, the office of the French architect, Jean Nouvel, designed the new museum of Louvre, Abu Dhabi (Fig. 3). The building was commissioned, built, and is run by the government of UAE. But UAE has been willing to pay 1.2 billion to use the Louvre’s brand and borrow from its collections. Many of the highlighted artifacts transferred to the new Louvre are from ancient Egypt and Syria.¹⁰ They had, however, made their way to Louvre collection by none other than Napoleon’s “campaign” into Ottoman territories in 1798. That campaign was not just a result of military

¹⁰ These can be seen highlighted on the Louvre Abu Dhabi’s website: <https://www.louvreabudhabi.ae>. Accessed July 20th, 2021.

brilliance or an overreaching ego, but was intimately tied to another campaign of global slavery and environmental destruction. Historians usually only count the strength of colonial navies, not what they were made out of. Not all wood is equal. French, British, and Spanish navies had acquired global dominance because of the unlimited supply of ancient mahogany timber, an unusually hard and water-resistant wood, that made their ships. That wood came from islands of the Caribbean as they were denuded of ancient forests one after another. The most lucrative of this enterprise was the island of Hispaniola (present day Haiti and Dominican Republic). The French navy drew its strengths not from the ships it constructed from mahogany, but also from the cargo they carried, both to and from Hispaniola. The speed and the scale of plundering of Hispaniola was possible only through employment of massive slave labor, which in turn was only possible because of the hundreds of slave fortress crowding the west coast of Africa, each with their “door of no return,” within canon-shot of each other.¹¹

¹¹ Katharina Schramm has argued that the Door of No Return has anchored the myth of “homecoming” for African Americans and others in the African diaspora, “refer[ing] to the cultural amnesia and sense of disconnection that slavery and the Middle Passage stand for.” Schramm has examined how the rhetoric of the (Pan-)African family, contested and shared between Diasporan returnees and African hosts, is sustained through various practices, from appropriation of slave forts to marking of “emancipation” days and demands for reparation. See Katharina Schramm, *African Homecoming: Pan-African Ideology and Contested Heritage* (Left Coast Press, 2010).



Fig. 4. Cape Coast Castle, the Gate of No Return. Though Cape Coast Castle was controlled over time by the Swedes, Dutch, Portuguese, and the English, it was within cannon shot of about sixty such forts, many controlled by the French with their own “gates of no returns.”

At the height of this slavery driven deforestation and plantation enterprise, mahogany became not only the most sought-after naval material, but the most fashionable material for all sorts of new furniture. As slaves travelled to Caribbean and cleared mahogany forests and planted sugar plantations, more mahogany ships were added to the French navy to carry sugar and rum back to Europe, and more mahogany furniture appeared in Paris to store and display those spoils.¹² It was this cycle of addiction, destruction, and display that led Napoleon to walk back on his promises of emancipation of slavery in Haiti to Toussaint Louverture, the leader of the Haitian revolution that had made possible the French revolution. Louverture’s forces persisted and fought Napoleon naval

¹² Jennifer Anderson has explored how mahogany extraction from the Caribbean turned barren one island after another and flourished a new culture of display and claims of refinement in both North American and European colonial centers. See Jennifer Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

assaults even as Louverture himself was captured and taken back to Paris on those mahogany ships.¹³ But Haiti had already paid the price of its freedom many times over. If we look at Haiti from space, we can see its barren landscape contrasting from the bordering Dominican Republic. Without this cycle of destruction, enslavement, and military and domestic production, there would have been no resources, nor cultural appetite, for Napoleonic campaign into Ottoman territories in Egypt and Syria, without which there would be no looted Egyptian antiquities in the Louvre's collection, in Paris or on loan in Abu Dhabi.

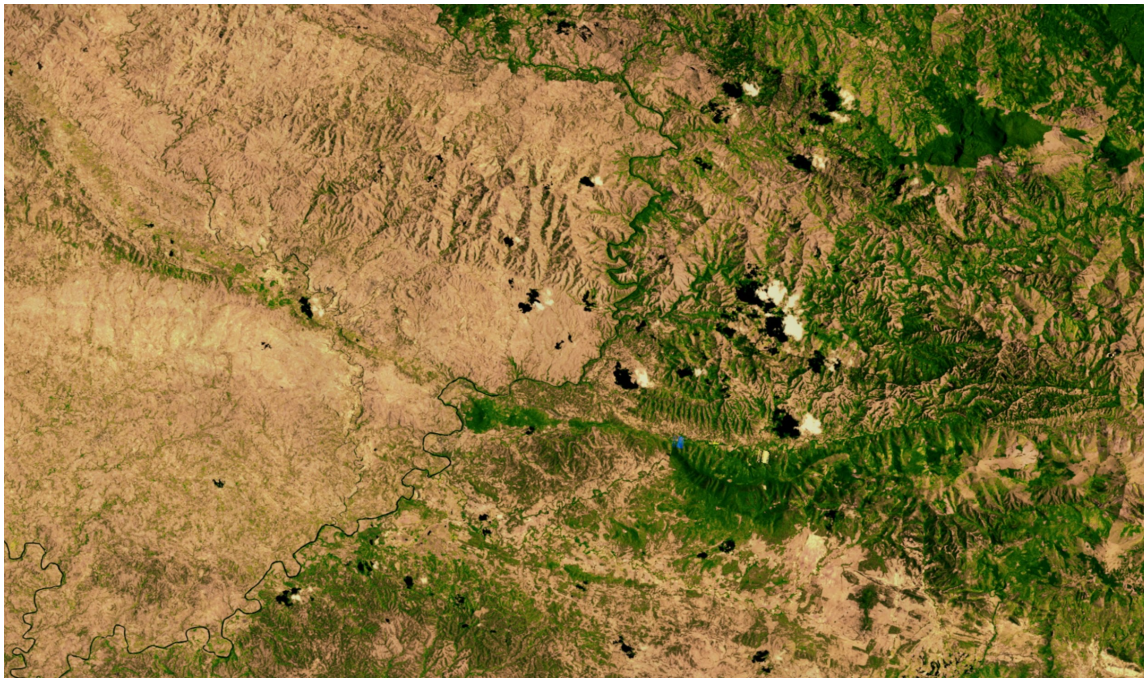


Fig. 5. Legacies of French colonialism: We can see shadeless and denuded landscape of Haiti differentiated from that of the Dominican Republic from space.

There is a connection between a mahogany bureau sitting in a bourgeois home in Paris, the sunshine percolating through the latticed roof canopy of the new Louvre in Abu Dhabi and the scorched

¹³ See Lauren Collins, “The Haitian Revolution and the Hole in French High-School History,” *The New Yorker*, December 3, 2020; and Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

shade-less landscape of Haiti visible even from space. They are all intimately connected in the circuit of long colonial time. This is not to say that decolonization and independence doesn't mean anything. No. But it also doesn't mean that the time of colonization has passed. When Haiti finally won its independence in 1804, France imposed a war reparation of \$21 billion, which Haiti was forced to pay over six generations. Should the \$1.2 billion Louvre plans to collect from UAE for lending its name and collection be considered a partial repayment of that \$21 billion?¹⁴

Donna Haraway has argued that to call our present-day global predicaments the era of Anthropocene is to erase the continuing effects of colonialism and slavery in the present.¹⁵ For Haraway, we are still in the "plantationocene." We are still living in the legacy of the plantation economy. This view, of our globe, is still from the master's house. This is not globalization but the continuation of plantationization. From this perspective, we have to first establish the plantationocene history teaching collaborative before we can start the work of a global history teaching collective. For Utsa Patnaik too, we are still living in the legacies of colonialism.¹⁶ We still have to account for its theft and the structural deficiencies it has produced across the world. I am here arguing to shift the orientation of global history itself, to pierce its spatial cross-sections with other imaginations that grasp at the continuing trajectories of colonial or indigenous times, so all global maps too look like lattice works from which the light and dark of countless other histories pierce through.

¹⁴ See, Dan Sperling, "In 1825, Haiti Paid France \$21 Billion To Preserve Its Independence -- Time For France To Pay It Back," in *Forbes*, Dec 6, 2017: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2017/12/06/in-1825-haiti-gained-independence-from-france-for-21-billion-its-time-for-france-to-pay-it-back/?sh=1435d4c4312b>. Accessed July 20th, 2021.

¹⁵ Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Utsa Patnaik, "Revisiting the 'Drain'," *op. cit.*

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Fig. 1. from Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, “Report on Town Planning for Bathurst and Kombo St. Mary, Gambia, West Africa, January 1963, Bureau of Technical Assistance Operations of the United Nations,” (New York: United Nations).

Fig. 2. Screenshot of the exhibition website: *Uneven Growth: Tactical Urbanisms for Africa*, MoMA, New York, 2013: <https://uneven-growth.moma.org/tagged/africa>. Accessed July 20th, 2021.

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Fig. 4. Photo: James Dimengo, from GAHTC lecture module on “Sites and Systems of Global Colonialism” by Patrick Haughey and Robert Cowherd.

Fig. 5. Haiti from space, image from Google Earth, from GAHTC lecture module on “Sites and Systems of Global Colonialism” by Patrick Haughey and Robert Cowherd.