Remote-Control Plantations and Black Forest Relations in the Black Belt

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**Abstract:** This article examines the contemporary timber industry as a reproduction of plantation power via remote control, which occurs through absentee landowners, Black family land grabs, new markets for energy, and legal regimes designed to “devalue” common property in favor of individual ownership and profit-seeking productivity. Multi-generation Black homeplaces and communities possess alternative modes of land relations to sustain themselves despite the friction between the economic interests forced by racial capitalism and the ecological interests arising from long-standing forest interdependence. With the Alabama Black Belt and the larger US South experiencing expansion of concentrated forestland ownership and local divestment, most recently through the rise of the biomass industry, the reciprocal traditions of Black forest traditions represent modes of land relation and intervention that are necessary for livable futures.

**Keywords:** Black ecologies, forests, heir property, land tenure, plantation power, timber

The stretch of Highway 80 between Montgomery and Selma is a lush landscape almost unbroken by trees. The discernible crops, like the cotton for which the Alabama Black Belt region is infamously known, serve as a decoy of sorts for the crop that takes up the most (literal) space in the state: timber. Approximately 70 percent of the land area (or 23 million acres) of Alabama is timberland, 94 percent of which is owned by non-industrial private forestland holders (Bailey and Majumdar 2014; Bailey et al. 2021), who are defined as “any individual, group, association, corporation, Indian Tribe, or other private legal entity that has definitive decision-making authority over the land” (USDA nd). Sixty-two percent of these lands in Alabama are absentee-owned, or possessed by landowners who do not reside on or near the land (Bailey et al. 2021). The visual deceptiveness of the timber industry’s presence is achieved by the strong resemblance of tree plantations to forests. Forests are complex, self-sustaining, bio-diverse ecosystems which, in addition to providing sustenance to a variety of life-forms, also provide necessary climate regulation and natural barriers against weather events like hurricanes, flooding, and fires. By contrast, tree plantations are mono-crop landscapes that are difficult to support without chemical inputs, such as pesticides and fertilizers. The trees are planted in rows and the plantations provide very little biodiversity and viable habitat and sustenance for forest wildlife (Haskell et al. 2006).

Tree plantations are a current iteration of several modes of capitalist relations to Alabama’s indigenous forest landscape, much of which was initially cleared in the nineteenth century for
Remote-Control Plantations and Black Forest Relations in the Black Belt

the cotton economy (Bliss and Bailey 2005; Walker 1991), disrupting the life ways and food ways of thousands of plants and animals. For many Black people living in the Black Belt—the site of their ancestors’ enslavement mainly on cotton plantations—the contemporary timber economy signals a different iteration of plantation power. Instead of the planter class controlling land and labor in situ, most of the owners of the timberland in the Black Belt and the larger state live outside of the region and the state and employ relatively few people on a consistent basis (Bailey et al. 2021; Howze et al. 2003). The impact of such remote-control plantation power persists in its constraints over Black communities’ choices for the future of the places where they have long built safety, solidarity, and power. Nevertheless, the freedom praxes of Black communities cultivated for generations preserve the memory of these ecosystems and the relations that are integral to the ultimate physical survival of the region, particularly as industrial extractions precipitate compounding social and ecological consequences. Black forestland owners operating within this landscape face tensions between their own desires to sustain ownership of their family land and the benefits of its resources and the economic and political constraints on the larger region that have been placed in large part by forestland owners who do not live on the land.

Through a synthesis of extant literature on African American forestland owners and impacts of the timber industry on Black communities residing mostly in the Alabama Black Belt, this article traces the memory of Black Belt landscapes, from their forest origins to their plantation pasts and presents in relation to Black place practices. It follows the rise of the current timber industry and connects the practices of serial extraction to the complex and interrelated ecological and social consequences experienced by all who reside within those ecosystems. Collectively, these literatures have three major themes—Big Timber and Black land, Black “forest management,” and Heir property and land loss. The article demonstrates how Black communities have pursued interdependent, diversified economic activities on their forestlands despite the consequences of the current iteration of timber plantation power, in so doing creating an important template for interventions against plantation ecosystems and power that are applicable far beyond the Black Belt region.

Black Forest Ecologies

The literature on Black forestland owners focuses largely on descriptive characteristics of the owners, their activities, and the challenges they face in terms of participation in the industry. Notably absent are the histories of Black people’s unique and important relationships to forest ecosystems in the US South. To offer context to this literature, this section will focus on the histories of Black forestland relations, beginning in the antebellum era.

The fates of forests and Black people in the US South are deeply intertwined. The plantation economies of the nineteenth century in Alabama and much of the Deep South cleared much of the region’s native pine forests to produce monocultures linked to the murder and expulsion of Indigenous peoples and the institution of slavery—cotton, sugar, tobacco, rice, turpentine, tar, and pitch, among other commodities (Tullos 2004; Walker 1991). Such extractive cultivation practices both brutalized and killed enslaved Black peoples and depleted southern landscapes through severe soil erosion and eliminating critical habitats for thousands of species. In the Alabama Black Belt, native forest clearing coincided with the military defeat and expulsion of the Creek, Cherokee, and Choctaw nations during the Creek War of 1813–1814 (Tullos 2004).

These Indigenous nations had centuries-long relations to the forest landscape and were forced off the lands as part of the US colonial expansion of the cotton trade, fueled mostly by textiles demand in Britain and Europe. “Alabama Fever”—the rush of planters from the Carolinas and
Georgia to colonize new lands for cotton production—led to the forced migration of enslaved peoples to the much larger cotton plantations in Alabama, which was officially admitted to the United States in 1819 (Tullos 2004). The Black Belt region, so-called first because of its fertile black prairie soil and second because of its high concentration of Black residents, became the epicenter of slavery in Alabama—over half of the state's enslaved population resided within the regions' ten counties (Tullos 2011). Despite their forced extraction of the deforested landscapes, Black people practiced relations to what remained of the forests that were substantially different and more reciprocal in nature. Just as their predecessors and contemporaries in the Coastal Carolinas and Georgia survived and escaped slavery by making their lives in the low-lying swamps or impassable highlands, Black peoples in the Black Belt relied on forests for a range of activities and resources that were integral to their physical, spiritual, and cultural survival.

Numerous scholars have detailed the myriad ways that enslaved Black people relied on forest landscapes for their survival. Mart A. Stewart details this complex relationship, beginning with the creation of the plantation landscape, which was “lifted from the forests and swamps literally on the backs of slaves,” who were forced to clear millions of acres of native Alabama forests to cultivate cotton plantations (2006: 10). But despite those beginnings, Stewart asserts enslaved Black peoples lived “closer to the ground and often understood southern crops and southern environments better than their masters” (2006: 10). While planters attempted to prohibit Black peoples from engaging with the forest landscapes off the plantation, these landscapes were the sites of various Black traditions, from planting small gardens to hunting and fishing to practicing religion. The foundations of what are now African American foodways were cultivated through these deep and intimate relations of Black people to the forest landscape, from growing foods such as sweet potatoes, okra, and rice to hunting deer, rabbit, and opossum (Giltner 2006; Proctor 2002). Songs and folk tales emerged from these knowledges as well, such as adaptations of the traditional West African tale of Br’er Rabbit to reflect the social relations of plantation life (Jones 1888; Stewart 2002: 178–179). Wild foods foraged in the forest by Black and Indigenous peoples became part of spiritual and medicinal traditions that had major influence on US medicine (Covey 2007).

Beyond the Black Belt, these extensive geographic knowledges of forest ecosystems also made escapes from slavery, temporary or permanent, more readily possible despite the vast reach of the plantation economy. Many enslaved peoples engaged in petit marronage, where the forest provided cover, shelter, and food for a respite from the plantation as well as an opportunity to reconnect with kin and other relations (Heuman 2013; Nevius 2020; Sayers 2014; Wright 2020). Burials and religious rituals played out under the cover of trees, and such strong attachments to specific lands—and threats of rebellion—led to some slaveholders ceding ownership of small portions of land to enslaved peoples, who often maintained residence and relation to those lands to pass along to descendants, generations of whom maintained residence after the Civil War (Stewart 2006). Such intimate and mutualistic ecological and social relations practiced as part of slavery’s survival meant that Black communities possessed a different orientation to place creation than the extractive legalistic relations practiced by the dominant planter regime.

From the Gullah-Geechee communities of the coastal Carolinas and Georgia to the Deep South, to the mid-Atlantic region, to live meant living off the land and/or the water and sustaining that life required strategies that led to regeneration rather than expiration or extinction (see, for example, Hosbey and Roane 2021; Roane 2018; White 2018; Winston 2021). Living in such complex and often dangerous terrain also meant that individualism was often trumped by collectivism, a sense of interdependence that maintained safety and sustenance for the people who lived together, and for those passing through. Historian J. T. Roane describes the “Black commons” existing along the Anacostia River near Washington, DC among Black peoples who
escaped from slavery, which included communal cultivation of food, sharing of water sources, and creating a sense of home that was predicated on reciprocity (Roane 2018). Despite the daily violence of the plantation and depending on the specific era and geography of slavery, many enslaved people maintained quarters that operated from different logics (Ellis and Ginsburg 2010). There were communal garden plots, forest rituals, and caretaking practices that countered the rote exploitation of their bodies and personhood experienced during the workday. These land relations across centuries and generations were a combination of cultural retentions from African origins, and the necessary and desired practices developed during chattel slavery and beyond it (Wynter 1971).

Against Fungibility

The end of slavery coincided with a significant quest for Black landownership, which did not materialize in the ways fought for—systematic turning over of former plantations to Black ownership—but did eventually manifest by the 1910s into the largest amount of property owned by Black people in US history, more than 15 million acres (Marable 1979). Alabama was a leading state in the pursuit of Black land ownership, spearheaded by Black institutions like Tuskegee University and the influential social experiments and investments of agricultural development advocates and educators Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver (Jones 1975; McNabb 2003). In contrast to the more commonly referenced narrative of the Great Migration of the early to mid-twentieth century, the post-Bellum era was associated with thousands of mini-migrations across the US South, as free Black people with the means to do so sought land on which to grow their own families and communities (Marable 1979). Carver himself was instrumental in teaching Black farmers about repairing soils depleted by decades of cotton monocultures, about crop rotation methods, and how to move towards self-sufficient farms (Hines 1979).

Black people often traveled to different Southern states to find family and work; many people traveled mere steps from where they were enslaved to establish new lives on the same land. The linkages between the plantation and the post-Bellum Black community or town are complex and fraught—enslaved Black peoples simultaneously created a sense of home, a community, cultural practices, burial grounds, and deep knowledges and relationships to the same landscapes that were the sites of persistent violence, exploitation, and unspeakable suffering (see Beckford 1999; McKittrick 2013). But the communities they established were far from bound to plantation logics; they were created with full intentions of practicing liberation, as places of what Black feminist scholar Katherine McKittrick calls “black livingness” (2021: 33), where new modes of living are created amid ongoing structures and experiences of violence and suffering. In this section, I attend to the distinctions between “property” and “homeplace” to more clearly articulate the relationships that Black people had to the lands purchased or deeded within the extant structure of capitalism.

The fungible conceptualizations of property harkening back to the European Enlightenment age and the market systems that support it neither contemplated Black landownership (i.e., Black people were legal property and thus could not be understood to “own” anything (Mills 1997)), nor adjusted in the post-Bellum era to accommodate the traditions within which Black people have historically related to land. Thus, the ways that Black people have practiced property “ownership” in the US has evolved over generations into the legal “problem” of heir property—land which is held in common by all the heirs of a decedent owner—that not only creates one of several documented ways that Black people lose land, but also engenders a dissonant
relationship between Black people and property that persists as an ordinary part of Black life. To be certain, even when Black people purchase land with aspirations for its fungibility, social science research has long demonstrated that such land does not appreciate in value in the same way that white-owned land does (in fact, it often depreciates), that it is often difficult for Black land owners to exploit the natural resources of their land for profit, and that such Black-owned land is also more vulnerable to takings from government and through private theft than white-owned land (see, for example, Massey and Denton 1993; Perry et al. 2018; Taylor 2014; Taylor 2019). It cannot thus be determined that a shift from long-held ethics of Black land relationships to capitalist land relations would provide vastly improved outcomes for Black landowners.

However, these old Black land traditions present a set of challenges and opportunities that are important for considering the ecological, economic, and social futures of the rural South, and the larger United States. Black forestland owners, properly contextualized within their relational histories to forests covered here, are demonstrative of these challenges and opportunities. However, as I will demonstrate, the extant literature on these owners tends to focus disproportionately on the problems—legal land tenure, relative lack of participation in forest management programs and timber extraction—they are perceived to face. In the midst of frictions between the economic pressures of racial capitalism encouraging extractive relations to land—which have disparate negative impacts on Black livelihoods and habitability—and the ecological interests arising from historic and contemporary Black quests for liberation via land relations, I argue that Black forestland owners in and outside the Black Belt, their histories, and present-day practices offer alternative modes of forest relations that have important implications for the future of Southern forests, particularly as related to the timber industry and ever-urgent challenges of climate change.

Black Forestland Owners and “Big Timber”

Black forestland owners tend to be based in the US South (Butler et al. 2020), to be older (50+ years), to have smaller land holdings (<50 acres), to reside on or adjacent to the forestland, to be educated (Gan and Kolison 1999; Gan et al. 2003; Schelhas et al. 2012), and to have heir property held in common by multiple generations of their families (Butler et al. 2020; Dyer and Bailey 2008; Gordon et al. 2013). In their surveys and interviews of over 200 African American forestland owners in the twelve traditional counties of the Alabama Black Belt, J. Gan et al. (2003) found that most respondents had at least a bachelor’s degree and that 45 percent had owned their land for more than twenty-five years. However, the length of ownership was negatively correlated with education and income levels—the longest landholders were less likely to be educated and had lower incomes. Additionally, many Black forestland owners in the Black Belt, along with their peers in other southern states, participated in the timber economy in some way, though many also sought other forms of forestland usage, including cattle grazing, hunting, recreation, and watershed protection (Butler et al. 2020; Gan et al. 2003; Gordon et al. 2013). These characteristics are important context for the focus of most of this scholarship on Black participation in forest management programs and deepened involvement in the timber industry. The relative longevity of these forestland owners, often across several generations, and their existing forest practices indicate a relationship to the forest that has been both viable and suited to the landowners, even if, as indicated in the literature, many have been interested in generating higher profits from their land. What appears to pose a major challenge to Black forest landowners is the heavily concentrated commercial timber industry in the Black Belt, in Alabama, and across the US South, which has implications both for the viability of Black
participation in the timber industry and for the livability of the places where these forestland owners reside. The expansion of concentrated absentee landownership, often in the form of tree plantations, is missing from the extant literature on Black forestland ownership, thus rendering analyses of Black land loss incomplete and displacing accountability for land loss prevention on individual Black landowners, rather than on an international industry poised for extensive land grabs.

Timberland "represents 99.7 percent of all forestland in Alabama" and a significant portion of forestland in the US South (Bailey et al. 2021), nearly all of which is privately owned. Rural sociologists and forest scholars have identified concentrated timberland ownership as a critical driver of disinvestment in and underdevelopment of the rural US South. Applying anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt’s hypothesis that “quality of rural life suffers where ownership or control of land is highly concentrated in the hands of absentee corporations” (Bailey et al. 2021: 50-51), Conner Bailey et al. outline three studies observing the connections between private timberland ownership and quality of life in Alabama. Mary Sisock (1998) and John Bliss et al. (1998) found that highly concentrated forest ownership was distributed across the poorest counties in the state. Additionally, the forest industry’s immense political power resulted in generally low property taxes and large tax breaks for the pulp and paper industry, which meant chronic underinvestment in public services and resources, including schools, infrastructure, and other forms of economic development directed by the communities residing in those counties. A 2014 study by Conner Bailey and Mahua Majumdar updated the previous studies, using property tax records for 50 of Alabama’s 67 counties to assess the character of timberland ownership, and found that “61 percent of timberland in those counties was absentee owned and 36 percent of this total involved out-of-state owners” (2014: 141). What this meant for residents of these counties is low per capita income and education levels, and high rates of student eligibility for free or reduced meals in public schools. The detachment of absentee landowners from the communities where their lands were concentrated, combined with the displacement of most forestry jobs by new technologies, receding populations, and chronically low property taxes in these counties, resulted in similar levels of disinvestment and crowding out of other opportunities for economic development.

The fourth study of Goldschmidt’s hypothesis, by Bailey et al. (2021), builds on the previous three to assess both concentration of landownership and absentee landownership—two facets of Goldschmidt’s hypothesis—in all parcels of private timberland across 48 rural counties in Alabama, including the Black Belt. Like the previous studies, the authors found support for the hypothesis, as the counties with the highest concentrations of private landownership and absentee landownership were connected to many adverse outcomes in those communities, including food insecurity, unemployment, low education attainment, poor support for infrastructure and service needs.

Goldschmidt’s hypothesis as applied to the forest industry forms a major part of the background context for contemporary Black forestland owners. Since the post-Depression era, the secondary forest ecosystem that emerged in the wake of the nineteenth-century plantation regime has been a target for capitalists taking advantage of the growth of various large timber industries, including paper and furniture. The immense soil erosion and depletion of the plantations meant that in the aftermath of the Civil War, planters often relocated to other regions to restart their enterprises, leaving the forests to regenerate (Walker 1991). The simultaneity of new forest formation with the mass migration and land settlement of free Black people within the South meant that many of the Black forestland owners surveyed in the extant literature and their ancestors likely had to contend with an array of challenges to their ownership, including vicious, but legal, and sometimes deadly land grabs (Falk 2004; McIver 2003) that were linked
to the expanding and ever-concentrating timber industry (Bailey et al. 2021), all of which likely impacted both the scale and depth of involvement of those owners in the current industry.

In their analysis of forest transitions in the US South from 1968 to 2017, John Schelhas et al. found an expansion of forest cover coming “almost entirely from increases in planted forests, which were almost entirely softwoods . . . planted native pine species” (2020: 8), with high concentration in the Black Belt region. While planted forests, or tree plantations, contribute to forest cover, they cannot be considered the equivalents of natural forests, both because they offer “fewer environmental benefits”—including biodiversity—and because they are planted for inevitable clearcutting and harvest for wood products (Schelhas et al. 2020). This shift from natural to planted forests is a critical indicator of the increased concentration of landownership for the commercial timber, with all the social and economic impacts on residents’ livelihoods, per Goldschmidt’s hypothesis.

Despite this context and generations-long forest relations among Black communities, scholarship on non-industrial Black and “minority” forestland owners in Alabama and the larger US South from 1985 to 2021 mostly centers its inquiry on the challenges individual Black or non-white forestland owners face in maintaining land over time and deepening profit relations with the lands they have, including through involvement in the timber industry. While the literature demonstrates a resonance of these concerns among Black forestland owners, the absent discussion of the larger economic and political settings within which they live and manage their forests distorts the perspective of the challenges they face by narrowing the scope of inquiry to their individual actions. An approach to Black forestland owners that accounts not just for individual consequences but also the sociopolitical structures creating the boundaries within which these forestland owners operate, as well as the historic relations of Black communities to forest ecosystems, is necessary to provide a more nuanced and useful view of this phenomenon.

“Forest Management”

A 1985 profile of Black woodland owners in North Carolina begins with the question—“Why aren’t black landowners more interested in managing their woodlands?” (Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985: 674). The question poses Black forestland owners as individual actors making similar, presumably independent decisions that in the aggregate nonetheless demonstrate a general lack of serious engagement with the forests that many had owned for multiple generations. The authors profile seven Black forestland owners with different histories and approaches to forest management, from “the logging operator” whose business is being crowded out by larger logging companies to “the land steward” who wants to diversify his forest stock and encourages Black churches and landowners to “invest in land and manage it to provide leisure outlets, camps, retreats, hunting, fishing, and other recreational opportunities” (1985: 676–677). What is notable just from this one article is both the evidence of extensive experience with timber and expertise about the forestland among the respondents, which demands more specificity of the initial question posed. Indeed, the very definition of “forest management,” as articulated by the authors and other scholars, appears tethered to higher profitability and to specific programs that train forestland owners towards that goal, which likely requires a different, more deeply capitalist set of forest relations than those practiced by the Black respondents.

The question Joyce Hilliard-Clark and Clyde Chesney posed in 1985 is demonstrative of the questions forestry and rural scholars have asked consistently of Black forestland owners for the ensuing 37 years, which center on a problem of low profitability and its perceived connections to
Black land loss. Jianbang Gan and Stephen Kolison's (1999) survey of minority forestland owners in two Alabama Black Belt counties—Macon County and Bullock County—characterized minority forestland owners as being constrained by lack of knowledge of forest management in addition to marketing and access to capital. They argued this despite demonstrating that 48 percent of respondents indicated “their ownership objective as for timber production or wildlife (hunting),” with recreation and fuel wood being a secondary popular objective (1999: 176). A more expanded study by Gan et al. in 2003 demonstrated that 28 percent of African American forestland owners across all twelve Alabama Black Belt counties used their land for timber, with an equal percentage using for recreation, watershed protection, and hunting, yet emphasized in their recommendations “the potential for improving the productivity of their forestland and enhancing their income from forestland through more intensive management, which can be achieved through technical assistance” (2003: 43).

Beyond Alabama, Colmore Christian et al. assessed African American forestland owners across the US Southeast region, characterizing them as “underutilizing” forest resources, having “low participation” in forest management programs, and coming from a culture of forest ownership that is “family driven rather than economically driven” (2013). Similarly, in Sarah Butler et al.’s nationwide assessment of minority forestland owners, the authors claim that though these groups of people have some similar objectives and concerns as non-minority forestland owners, “the biggest differences are in terms of participation in technical and financial assistance programs and forest-management practices” (2020: 71). Analyses of African American forest landowners in Mississippi and Georgia by Jason Gordon et al. (2013) and Noah Goyke and Puneet Dwivedi (2021) offer a bit more nuance to Black forestland owners’ relations to their land as “a place to escape oppression and where family and community values could be affirmed” (Gordon et al. 2013: 478), and asserting that “The goodness of forest management is determined by land owner objectives and includes considerations like esthetic preferences, recreational preferences . . . and family dynamics” (Goyke and Dwivedi 2021: 7).

The presumption of forest management as the essential future of Black forestland, while reflective of economic realities for many Black forestland owners as well as many of their desires, ultimately jumps to the “solution” without contextualizing the “problem,” which is that Black land losses are likely gained mostly by white landowners with higher concentrations of forestland, and who are more likely to be absentee. The scholarship testing Goldschmidt's hypothesis, as connected with historic Black land relations outlined earlier in this article, offers a fuller picture of why many Black forestland owners find difficulty sustaining multigenerational forest practices and may be compelled to pursue “forest management.” Such subsistence, communal, and relatively lower income practices harkening back to the antebellum era are threatened when most of the land is dominated by owners who have little interest in building a local economy that would allow for more landowners, critical local investments in infrastructure, schools, and other forms of commerce. In that context, Black forestland owners, many of whom still reside near or on their landholdings, are often hindered not only from influencing and connecting to alternative forms of local development, but also from retaining younger generations to continue traditions of Black forest management and help to create the economic and ecological conditions to support those traditions. Indeed, in some of the articles on Black forestland owners, respondents cite the challenge of being unable to keep younger generations connected to the land because of lack of interest and common purpose (Dyer and Bailey 2008; Gordon et al. 2013; Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985); but those same places are also sites lacking viable educational and employment opportunities for younger people, as well as a generally lower quality of life associated with local divestment (Bailey and Majumdar 2014; Bailey et al. 2021).
Heir Property and Land Loss

A major concern articulated in the Black forestland owners’ literature is the prevalence of heir property and its hindrances of dominant forest management practices. Of the articles reviewed between 1985 and 2021, only two did not explicitly mention heir property as a limit on “the ability of its owners to engage in many forestry activities, including conservation program participation and timber sales” (Butler et al. 2020; Hitchner et al. 2017), and as a “leading cause of land loss” (Dyer and Bailey 2008; Gordon et al. 2013; Thomas et al. 2004). The characterization of heir property as a “problem” of hindered capital to be resolved through “clearing land title” to more singular entities—people or organizations—summons a loss of a Black land practice that was not simply due to failures to write wills or lack of access to viable attorneys but was also part of a different valuation of and relationship to land for Black families—an integral part of the “Black commons” (Roane 2018).

The aftermath of slavery created a first opportunity for most newly freed Black peoples across the Western Hemisphere to establish places where they had control over their time, their labor, and their futures. Having been severed from generations of family spread across slaveholding and “free” geographies, the family became a central focus of land relations. The purpose of owning land was not to profit from its sale, but to maintain a place of safety, security, and preservation of legacy for generations (Bailey et al. 2019; Dyer and Bailey 2008; Hitchner et al. 2017). Critically, Black women have been central to shaping these “homeplaces” as a means of rebuilding the privacy and dignity of family life that was stripped during slavery. As bell hooks describes:

[W]e [black people] could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that “homeplace,” most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits. This task of making a homeplace, of making home a community of resistance, has been shared by black women globally, especially black women in white supremacist societies. (1990: 384)

Black landholders attempted to codify the homeplace for their descendants by either creating a will that bequeathed the land in collective ownership of their family members or by dying without a will, thus passing the land to heirs by default. The deed—the legal instrument utilized to create title or ownership to land—is used to reinforce individualist, fungible land relations. Though more than one person can share claim to a deed and be said to have “clear title”—meaning the ability to freely dispose of land according to one’s own discretion—such cooperative land models are less favored by US property law, as they are interpreted as hindrances to the “alienability” or free market exchange of property (Dyer and Bailey 2008; Mitchell 2000). There exists no form of land title designed to uphold Black people’s use value of land for family preservation and living across generations. The absence of such provisions thus places Black landownership in a structurally antagonistic relationship to the dominant property regime. Consequently, families possessing heir property are restricted from capitalist forms of wealth building, development, and security, including prohibitions on mortgage financing, infrastructure construction, home construction, and homeowners’ insurance (Carrera and Flowers 2018).

A commitment to family-centered land relations is thus often a commitment to landscapes and living conditions that look radically different from those standardized by legal codes enforced by public officials and reinforced by public trends in spatial and architectural aesthetics. But as with the impacts of absentee timber regime, the reasons are structural. For instance, many residents of Black homeplaces on heir property frequently live in mobile homes because
by law they cannot secure financing for brick-and-mortar homes without full consent of all heirs, who may be unknown or simply too difficult to reach for consensus (Dyer and Bailey 2008). Similarly, installing or upgrading infrastructures, such as water and sewer lines or even septic systems are largely prohibitive on heir property for the same reasons (Carrera and Flowers 2018). In more recent years, several scholars have documented the intimate connection between heir property restrictions and higher incidences of poor sanitation, such as raw sewage pooling in yards, either from straight piping waste from the inside of homes or due to failing septic tanks that cannot be repaired or replaced (Carrera and Flowers 2018; Flowers 2020; Winkler and Flowers 2017), though these issues are likely overdetermined by other conditions, such as high land concentration and absentee landownership, which leads to general divestment in local infrastructures and development.

Janice Dyer and Conner Bailey, two rural sociologists observing how heir property was categorized as anathema to development or profitability in rural lands, including forestlands, explain its import beyond profit-seeking activities: “A housing counselor working in rural Alabama says ‘if there’s a bright side to heir property,’ she says, it’s that heirs ‘have a place to live.’ They can put a trailer on the property or build a ‘shack or shanty.’ For many, she acknowledges, they do not have any other options. ‘No matter how small that interest,’ she states, ‘they have just as much right to it as anybody else’” (2008: 320).

Similarly, in a study of the implications of heir property for Black management of forests, six interview participants living on homeplaces that are classified as heir property—two from Alabama and four from South Carolina—discussed their families’ extensive use of the forests on their land for subsistence and communal sharing, including harvesting herbal medicines, hunting, fishing in the creeks, foraging for food, climbing trees, and swimming (Hitchner et al. 2017), similar to the forest relations of their ancestors. Though many families had some experience with harvesting and selling timber, most of the authors’ participants had participated at only a small scale to make extra income on an as-needed basis.

In a second study using the same interview data, the authors found that for Black forestland owners with interest in more profit-centered forest management, their efforts were complicated because heir property created challenges of consensus and because some family members did not have full information about the nature of the timber industry. But the respondents also noted a deep mistrust in the fairness of the business for Black people and a lack of access to information and programs to help them get started (Schelhas et al. 2017). Those reservations were also echoed in other scholarship on Black forestland owners, specifically long histories of systemic exclusion from forest management programs, from rural programs operated by federal agencies like the US Forest Service or the US Department of Agriculture, and hostilities and intimidation from white forestland owners (Butler et al. 2020; Gordon et al. 2013). Importantly, to the extent that the landowners were interested in forest management in the future, there was also an interest in ensuring the preservation of wildlife and the forest aesthetics to which they had been accustomed for generations. As one participant from Alabama articulated, “We want to be good stewards of the land. I love the trees . . . I love the animals. I love the turkeys and the squirrels. The Lord gave us this land, so we want to take care of it” (Schelhas et al. 2017: 31).

Though the aims of scholarship on Black forestland management in the US South are ostensibly interested in identifying ways to rectify racial inequity in the forest industry by addressing the related inequities of Black land tenure through adjusting heir property laws and to achieving higher rates of Black enrollment in forest management programs, the underlying premise of the research is that the desirable outcome is for Black landowners to attain clear title to their land and to participate as equals in the timber industry. In other words, the ultimate outcome is for Black people’s land relationships to resemble more closely that of their white counterparts.
Aside from the challenges of gaining Black participation in “sustainable” forest management, there is little critique of the timber industry at large, much less any discussion of what might be desirable about current and historic models of Black forest relations. The model of sustainable forest management is presented as one that Black landowners automatically do not fit, despite having what Bailey et al. estimate to be over one million acres of intact forestland across thirteen states of the US South (2019). Such presumptions not only negate generations of wisdom and practice among Black landowners, assuming them to be simply “victims” of racial inequity rather than active strategists and architects of their land and their futures, but also negate both history and contemporary facts on the ground.

**Black Forest Futures Beyond the Plantation**

Based on the several studies of Black forestland owners across the US South and larger nation, and the relative low rates of Black participants in the commercial timber industry, one might surmise that a significant portion of Black-owned forest land is naturally recurring, perhaps untouched over several generations, or as regrowth from abandoned farmland (Hitchner et al. 2017; Schelhas et al. 2017). The most common histories of Black forest relations reflected in these studies are about interdependence—relying on the forest for food, water, medicine, shade, shelter, moderate timber harvests, and allowing the forest ecosystem to continue unimpeded by over-extraction or destruction of habitat so that it would provide the same sustenance to future generations.

These practices can be understood as strategies for Black livingness within the US system of racial capitalism and the continuation of plantation power, manifested most prominently in this case by the timber industry. They are also practices that belong to a deep lineage of Black ecological strategies designed through principles of reciprocity, non-impingement, and continuity (see, for example, Heynen and Ybarra 2021; White 2018). The Black commons, described by Roane as “reciprocal social relations between [Black] people” which have the power to “sustain . . . human relations and the biosphere” (2018: 24), often occurred within what Winston calls “maroon geographies,” places that “advance alternative ways of understanding and producing space against and outside of these structures of racial violence rooted in the history and legacies of slavery” (2021: 3). The homeplace frequently represents all three of these Black ecological strategies—the maroon geography dating back to the antebellum era that required alternative relations to land to create collective safety, the Black commons wherein land and its cultivation were a shared social enterprise to maintain interdependence, safety, and longevity, and the interdependent forest relations to maintain essential sustenance and protection for multiple generations.

Within this matrix of Black ecological practices, the contemporary timber industry might be interpreted more as a threat to the integrity of the homeplace than as an opportunity for its future viability. The replication of the plantation regime—operated via remote control—poses a parallel ecological threat to the homeplace, the region, and ultimately the planet because of its compounded social, economic, and atmospheric impacts that increase vulnerability to storms, to poverty, to illness, to exploitative labor relations, to species loss, to premature death. Newer iterations of the timber regime in the Black Belt and the larger US South, such as the growing biomass, or wood pellet, industry, effectively recreate the international plantation relations of the cotton belt and the paper and pulp industries, albeit with more sophisticated technologies and different (yet still exploitative) labor relations. As the United Kingdom and significant parts of Europe have increased demand for biomass as an alternative to fossil fuels contributing to
climate change, they have become major drivers of timber plantations in the US South aimed at manufacturing and transporting biomass to replace coal in their power plants. These biomass manufacturing plants are frequently located in Black communities across the more timber-dependent regions of the US South (Koester and Davis 2018), where they produce substantial noise and toxic emissions, including greenhouse gases that do not factor into the emissions accounting in the UK, Europe, or the US (Alakoski et al. 2016; Anderson and Powell 2018; Koester and Davis 2018). Participation in these forest industries, which have been linked to respiratory illnesses, lower quality of life, and premature death, are most profitable for forestland owners fitting the “Goldschmidt” profile—high concentrations of land managed via remote control (Bailey et al. 2021). The communities living with the impacts of these industries—which include many Black forestland owners—are among the least likely to benefit from them. Indeed, Katherine Egland, Co-founder of the Economics, Environment, Climate, and Health Organization (EEECCHO) in Mississippi, where the biomass industry is growing, connects the reliance of the United Kingdom on biomass to their previous dependence on cotton:

I am reminded with the wood pellet trade, if you look at the map of the wood pellet trade states and the former cotton trade states, they are the same,” she said. “The UK ignored the human rights abuses of the cotton trade, with slavery, now they are imperiling the descendants of that same population with the wood pellets. [The US South] also happens to be the most climate vulnerable region in the nation. (Purifoy 2020b: np)

Though biomass has come under significant scrutiny in the last decade due to its dubious benefits compared to coal and other fossil fuels, it is still hailed as a renewable energy and a justification for further displacement of natural forests for planted forests. Though a recent study confirming a shift in southern forests from a carbon sink to a carbon source from the 1980s to the 2000s did not indicate whether the vast growth in planted forests was the cause of that shift, it does raise important questions about the impacts of natural forest displacement on the region’s ecosystem and the larger atmosphere (Schelhas et al. 2021; but see Liao et al. 2010). Carbon storage is a critical feature in controlling greenhouse gas emissions, and having biodiverse, natural forests with a mix of pine and hardwoods also forms stronger barriers to the impacts of major storms and floods, which have become more frequent due to climate change (Liao et al. 2010; Purifoy 2020a). Overall, this current model of timber production appears to leave residential communities at least somewhat more vulnerable to toxic pollution and climate change impacts, and with fewer of the natural resources on which they often depend to live. For Black forestland owners, most of whom still either live on their land or have deep social and familial connections to those who live in impacted regions, the choice between higher profitability and sustaining traditional forest relations, particularly in the most timber-dependent regions, remains a critical tension that would be difficult to reconcile without structural change to dominant land relations.

What remains evident is that Black forestland relations, as they are known and documented, possess a strategy of abundance and life that have preserved the integrity of forest landscapes for multiple generations, with important consequences for the sustainability of family land tenure and for the overall health of the forest ecosystem, which is essential for protections against climate change. Future scholarship on Black forestland owners—and forestry more generally—would benefit not only from attending to the structural economic and political dynamics shaping livability and opportunities in timber-dependent communities, but also attend to the possibilities created by forest relations that are far less “profit-driven” and “managerial,” and more in alignment with sustaining the livingness of the landscapes and the people who live there.
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References


