

# The General Strike as Crisis: Mapping a New Imaginary of the U.S. South and the Caribbean through Black Embodied Protest

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## Abstract

Thinking with W.E.B. Du Bois's elucidation of the General Strike, this essay is concerned with reading the Strike as constitutive of black embodied spatiotemporal crisis. In giving attention to Du Bois's descriptions of the embodied and spatial pedagogies of the enslaved in the landscape of the U.S. South, I contend that it was through these pedagogies of protest that the General Strike both disrupted and suspended a Western linear ordering of time and geographical space. In re-mapping the General Strike as crisis through attention to black embodied praxis, I consider the political reverberations of the Strike in the Caribbean which I read through Jamaica's Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 and a Black Lives Matter protest in Kingston during the summer of 2020. In tracing the linkages between the General Strike, the Rebellion, and the protest, I disrupt the spatiotemporally familiar in order to propose a cartographic and epistemological shift predicated on situating the U.S. South and the Caribbean as an imaginary. This imaginary resists both territorialization and chronology and compels us to be attuned to the entanglement of black radical historical actors, landscapes, and embodied practices across spacetime.

## Keywords

general strike, U.S. South, Caribbean, crisis, embodied praxis

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## Introduction

In his magnum opus *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, W.E.B. Du Bois narrates the rising up of black slaves against the tyranny of their enslavers in the U.S. South. In great numbers, enslaved workers abandoned the plantations that had once been the sites of their bondage and trekked north in search of freedom. This moment, which Du Bois elaborates on in his chapter titled, "The General Strike," featured no iconic spectacle of revolution. Rather, it was through the mechanism of the General Strike, a form of protest that arrested the plantation capitalist machinery, that the southern slave "transferred his labor from the Confederate planter to the Northern invader" (Du Bois 1935, 55) and in so doing, brought about his emancipation.<sup>1</sup>

In late nineteenth century America, the prevailing narrative was that the enslaved population both would not and could not overthrow the slave establishment. In "The General Strike," Du Bois details language from periodicals of the day corroborating this belief which was taken to be fact. The *New Orleans Crescent* articulated "the absurdity of the assertion of a general stampede of our Negroes" (1935, 57). Such thinking was not just localized to the South. Du Bois writes that in the North, the Negro was considered "a curiosity, a sub-human minstrel, willingly and naturally a slave" (1935, 56) and as one who "had not sense enough to revolt and help Northern armies, even if Northern armies were trying to emancipate him, which they were not" (1935, 56). Undergirding such reasoning was an evolutionary logic that rested on assumptions about the inferior and infantilized nature of the black mind. This thinking highlights the perception of an embodied and cognitive passivity on the part of America's southern slaves and an unwillingness and inability to mobilize collectively.

Du Bois was cognizant of why southern revolt would have made for an extremely difficult undertaking. He asserts that "nine-tenths of the four million black slaves could neither read nor write, and that the overwhelming majority of them were isolated on country plantations" (1935, 57). As such, Du Bois recognized that "any mass movement under such circumstances must materialize slowly and painfully" (1935, 57). Still, even as he concedes that southern slave mobilization would have undoubtedly been difficult, Du Bois nonetheless challenges the conclusions of the day by asking his reader to not only consider the General Strike as always having been distinctly possible but moreover, as a phenomenon that unmistakably presented itself as central to American and global history.

The reading of the General Strike that Du Bois offers in *Black Reconstruction* marked an intervention in the mainstream historiography of Reconstruction and analyses of slavery written in the Marxist tradition (Genovese 1974). Du Bois engaged the southern slave as black worker and as a modern radical subject, one who was integral to the making of modern industry and the modern world. It was black labor that became "the foundation stone...of the Southern social structure...of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale" (1935, 5), Du Bois writes. Thus, he positions the southern slave as constitutive of a modern proletariat and

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<sup>1</sup> While Du Bois styles the General Strike in common letters, I capitalize it as a way to reaffirm its significance to the making of the modern world.

urges his reader to remember that this “dark proletariat” (1935, 16) was the ultimate exploited. Of this “dark proletariat” Du Bois states that,

“As soon...as it became clear that the union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves, and that masters with all their fume and fury were uncertain of victory, the slave entered upon a general strike against slavery by the same methods that he had used during the period of the fugitive slave. He ran away to the first place of safety and offered his services to the Federal Army...this withdrawal and bestowal of his labor decided the war” (1935, 57).

Conceived in such terms, Du Bois illustrates why the General Strike cannot be read as “merely the desire to stop work” (1935, 67) on the part of the enslaved. For Du Bois, the General Strike represented collective labor action by a black proletariat, that is, “a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work” (1935, 67). As Du Bois further contends, this black proletariat deliberately desired to “stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantations,” (1935, 67) effectively extricating their labor and strategically transferring it from the Confederate planter to the Northern invader “in whose army lines...workers began to be organized as a new labor force” (1935, 55). Du Bois is clear that it was this strategic effort of protest by the South’s black proletariat that won both emancipation and the Civil War (Foner 1988; Hahn 2005). It is this action, radical in its very imagination, that Du Bois describes as “the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world had ever seen” (1935, 727).

Seventy years prior to the General Strike and some 1000 miles south, the world bore witness to another moment of black radical, collective, and emancipatory action when in 1791, the enslaved peoples in Saint-Domingue burned everything. The revolutionary moment was captured visually by Polish artist and army officer January Suchodolski in “Bitwa na San Domingo or The Battle for Palm Tree Hill” (1845). In the painting, European soldiers dressed in military regalia confront rebels who are barefoot with smoke billowing around them. The slaves attack with spears and machetes. Legally, they are considered property and in violation of a natural order. Elevated above the fracas, a slave stands tall on high ground. A musket hangs from his back and a machete is tightly gripped in his right hand. With his chest protruding, he defiantly raises his left hand into the air from which hangs the severed head of a white soldier.

Writing in his own magnum opus, *The Black Jacobins*—which was published three years after *Black Reconstruction*—C.L.R. James noted that in Saint-Domingue, “the slaves destroyed tirelessly...they were seeking their salvation in the most obvious way, the destruction of what they knew was the cause of their sufferings; and if they destroyed much it was because they had suffered much” (James 1989[1938], 88). James reminds his reader that unimaginable smoke and flames covered the colony such that one could hardly distinguish day from night. In burning, the enslaved peoples of Saint-Domingue did not simply aim to change the means of production rather; they intended to entirely devastate them. It was through fire that the new black republic of Haiti was both forged and fortified. In masterfully narrating the story of the Haitian Revolution in *The Black Jacobins*, James positioned Haiti and the Caribbean as crucial, indeed, consequential, to world historical events and situated the Caribbean slave as a modern subject (Mintz 1985; Rodney 1981).

In truth, Du Bois, like James, subscribed firmly to the idea of the centrality of the Caribbean to the making of the modern world. In *Black Reconstruction*, he argued that Louisiana was acquired by the United States because "Toussaint L'Ouverture and the blacks of Haiti so broke the French colonial power and Napoleon's plans for American empire that he practically gave away French America to the United States and turned his whole attention to Europe" (Du Bois 1935, 451). Thirty-nine years prior, in his 1896 dissertation, he noted that "the role which the great Negro Toussaint, called L'Ouverture, played in the history of the United States has seldom been fully appreciated" (Du Bois 2007 [1896], 50). And, two years before his death he would reiterate the centrality of enslaved people in the Caribbean to hemispheric and global democracy in his essay "Africa and the French Revolution" remarking that "Africans and African slavery in the West Indies were the main causes and influences of the American Revolution and of the French Revolution" (Du Bois 1961, 136).

Standing before a rapt audience in June 1971, C.L.R. James invoked W.E.B. Du Bois' words and asked, "Did you ever think that the attempt of the black people in the Civil War to attempt democracy was the finest effort to achieve democracy that the world had ever seen?" (2000, 86). The occasion was the second of three lectures, titled "The Black Jacobins and Black Reconstruction: A Comparative Analysis," that James presented in Atlanta at the Institute of the Black World. James posed his question amid the Black Power Movement in the United States and approximately a decade after the first West Indian countries gained independence. Central to his lecture was a discussion of the Strike as an attack on global capitalism and an elucidation of the universal implications of the General Strike. James would go on to answer his own provocation by directly quoting Du Bois whom he notes described the General Strike as, "an upheaval of humanity like the Reformation and the French Revolution" (Du Bois 1935, 727). James confesses to his audience that when he wrote *The Black Jacobins* he could not conceive of such a comparison and admits, "Du Bois taught me to think in those terms" (James 2000, 86).

In performing an analysis of *The Black Jacobins* alongside *Black Reconstruction*, James dramatically juxtaposes the Haitian Revolution and the General Strike; the rebel enslaved of Saint-Domingue and the fugitive slaves on the American mainland; and the geographies of the Caribbean and the U.S. South. He offers his lecture not as an exercise in shallow comparison but as one in spacetime compression. That is, James rhetorically and cartographically opens up space for his audience to disregard the seventy years and 1000 miles acting as a spatiotemporal fissure between the Haitian Revolution and the General Strike in order to consider them—their actors, geographies, and emancipatory visions—as indissolubly conjoined. A Caribbeanist par excellence, James invites his audience to revisit and think the General Strike *from* the Caribbean. That is, the terms that he proposes center the General Strike as a black radical phenomenon critical to Caribbean history and contemporary life, indeed, a phenomenon just as critical as the Haitian Revolution.

It is to a consideration of these precise terms that I turn my attention to in this essay. Thinking with Du Bois's description of the General Strike, I call for a reading of the Strike as constitutive of black embodied spatiotemporal crisis. In doing so, I argue that it must not be understood as a mere past event but as a still emergent phenomenon that exceeds the bounds of an event and as having inaugurated a critical time that must be conceived of in plural temporal and geographic terms. In giving attention to Du Bois's descriptions of the embodied and spatial pedagogies of the enslaved in the landscape of the U.S. South, I

contend that it was through these pedagogies of protest that the General Strike both disrupted and suspended a Western linear ordering of time and geographical space. In re-mapping the General Strike as crisis through attention to black embodied praxis, I consider the political reverberations of the Strike in the Caribbean which I read through Jamaica's Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 and a Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest in Kingston during the summer of 2020. In reading the Strike, the Rebellion, and the protest as forms of black collective action which sought to imagine *other* political and socio-economic ways of being, I trace the linkages between these three entangled phenomena. It is in this spirit that I disrupt the spatiotemporally familiar in order to propose a cartographic shift predicated on situating the U.S. South and the Caribbean as an imaginary that resists both territorialization and chronology. This imaginary compels us to be attuned to the entanglement of black radical historical actors, landscapes, and practices across spacetime.

What sorts of counter-hegemonic and emancipatory spatiotemporalizations does black embodied crisis make possible? Moreover, how must we begin to refine our analytical tools to study these spatiotemporalizations in their multiple manifestations? My impulse to ask these two questions and my theorization in this essay stem from two positionalities. The first, from my geographical location in the U.S. South in Nashville, Tennessee, the city in which I currently live and one whose present-day geographic landscape continues to exist in the shadow of African American Reconstruction dreams deferred. The second, from my positionality as an Afro-Jamaican cultural anthropologist concerned with studying the spatiotemporal entanglements of security and insecurity in postcolonial Jamaica while viscerally aware of the ways in which my black body is implicated in historical and present-day regimes of violence in the South. Central to my personal and academic life is a physical and cultural tracking back and forth between the U.S. South and the Caribbean. The journeying of my body between these two locales is meditated by a transnational and translational ethic. Moreover, I have learned that my experiences of space, time, and race continue to be profoundly transformed by my co-habitation of and border crossings between these two locales. My embodied praxis is undergirded by a black international orientation much like that which was crucial to Du Bois' method and to his political life. Recent scholarship seeking to highlight the significance of a Du Boisian geopolitics to political geography reminds us that such an orientation demands a commitment to understanding the global intersections of space, race, imperialism, and White supremacy. So too does it demand a commitment to transnational solidarity amongst peoples of color (Moore and Joudah 2022). Or, put simply, as Du Bois "theorized, organized, and acted from a diasporic perspective" (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020, 156), so too must we.

In this spirit, a question that preoccupies me is: What does it mean to write the Caribbean from the U.S. South? Here, I take the verb to write as an invitation to sit epistemologically and politically with the question of place and to sincerely consider not only what I write but also, where I write from. Such questioning, integral to the responsibility of the Caribbean intellectual (Kamugisha 2023), informs my turning to the General Strike and the embodied pedagogies which were enunciated through enslaved black radical praxis as a way to consider black crisis in the Caribbean. I argue that considering how the Caribbean exists in the spatiotemporal wake of the General Strike led by fugitive slaves that germinated on the edges of plantations in the U.S. South has clear implications for how we can re-think the spatiotemporal distinctions that have historically and geographically segregated the U.S.

South and the Caribbean. So too, does it have implications for how we must make sense of everyday black radical crises that continue to arise in these geographies.

### A Du Boisian Embodied Mapping of the General Strike as Crisis

The terms that Du Bois lays out in "The General Strike" ask the reader to conceive of the Strike as radical, universal, and possible, indeed inevitable, in the U.S. South. Du Bois effectively presents the strike as a crisis of humanity, a transformation comparable to the Reformation and the French Revolution. Such thinking illuminates the General Strike as a phenomenon that inaugurated an upheaval and that called into question not only the logic of American democracy and the southern plantation economy but also, the logic of global racialized capital. For Du Bois, the General Strike was an upheaval of humanity for America's southern slaves compelled the world to crisis and to grapple anew with what it meant to be human.

While the southern plantocratic regime would have certainly taken a general strike by enslaved peoples to be impossible, what Du Bois asks us to consider is how this very supposed impossibility of the General Strike is a defining feature of black crisis and it is this impossibility which opens up the very liminal immanence of black crisis. In highlighting the southern slave's agency, Du Bois depicts his radical black subject as cognizant of the immensity of the live crisis unfolding before her and deeply aware of the ways in which her own past, present, and future selves were imbricated with this crisis. Twenty-five years before the publication of *Black Reconstruction*, the idea of crisis certainly preoccupied Du Bois evidenced by the fact that he chose to name the flagship periodical of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), *The Crisis*. In his inaugural editorial published in 1910, Du Bois asserted that the periodical's title "takes its name from the fact that the editors believe that this is a critical time in the history of the advancement of men" (Du Bois 1910, 10). Du Bois's language of a "critical time" goes against common conceptions of crisis as an isolated moment of temporary disorder. Instead, Du Bois suggests that there is a critical temporality to every crisis. In the introduction to a special issue on black temporality in times of crisis, Habiba Ibrahim and Badia Ahad remark that Du Bois's notion of crisis speaks to an expressed urgency. Furthermore, they ask us to consider the ways in which crisis is tethered to black feeling and being and as such pinpoints "temporalities of transformation and times of action" (2022, 1) that signal the possibilities and precarities of Black life. Such scholarship suggests that there is a critical temporality to black crisis and to this I would add that there is a critical embodied and spatial reality to black crisis.

If the General Strike evidences a crisis of humanity, one which, from the geography of the U.S. South writes an attack on global racial capitalism while also writing the southern slave as radical proletariat into global history then, it becomes conceivable for us to imagine Du Bois's argumentation as imploring us to read the implications of the General Strike as existing beyond a fixed notion of a singular spatial event or temporary rupture. More precisely, Du Bois situates the General Strike as a spatiotemporal phenomenon itself, one that constitutes a critical time in the advancement of the United States' southern enslaved class, the United States, and the global world ordering. In fact, DuBois' intellectual thought in "The General Strike" urges us to consider the strike as provoking a black crisis, one that is performed on embodied, spatial, and temporal scales.

Central to the historiographical labor that Du Bois performs is a cartographic mapping that disturbs the general strike as an historico-political idea and event. In his 1971 lecture, C.L.R. James asserted that Du Bois knew well enough that 1905 was taken to be the first time that a general strike had taken place.<sup>2</sup> James states, "He knew that in 1905 that was the historical development, and it began there, but he says there was one *before* that. There was one by the slaves in the plantations" (2000, 93). James' emphasis on "before" situates it as a marker of the disruption of historiographical and genealogical time and speaks to the disarticulation of the general strike as an event tethered to the white, waged, male, and productive worker, and to its re-articulation as *the* General Strike, that is, as a spatiotemporal crisis intertwined with black ultra-radicalism and birthed from the geography of the plantation (Albernaz 2022, 539). Indeed, as James rightfully remarks in reference to the audacity of DuBois' historiographical project, "And that is the writing of history, that is the writing of history" (2000, 93).

As he works to unsettle 1905 as the spatiotemporal point of inauguration of the General Strike as event, it is noteworthy that Du Bois makes no explicit mention of an actual start or end date of the crisis. It is thus imperative that we understand the General Strike as possessing the capability to disrupt its own temporality as a date (Gago 2020). Read as crisis, one intimately tied to black resistance and the plantation, the General Strike thus complicates any notion of beginning and end points. In this way, it must be understood as an ongoing assault on a capitalist time reckoning crystallized according to the rigid temporal rhythms of work performed on the agricultural grid of the plantation. The General Strike is an articulation of the ways in which blackness disorders temporality and is inherently linked to counter-hegemonic time (Ibrahim and Ahad 2022, 7). Even more, I contend that such an experience of atemporality was but an incontrovertibly appropriate experience of slavery.

For Du Bois, black embodied techniques given form in the insurgent extremities of the plantation are crucial to the disordering of a capitalist logic and the assertion of black spacetime reckoning that resonates as so critical to the development of the General Strike as black spatiotemporal crisis. In his description of the early rumblings of civil war in the United States, Du Bois writes that what the southern slave did was to "wait, look, listen and try to see where his interest lay" (1935, 57). Du Bois's prose enlivens the South's enslaved population as a black mass that, at the first gun at Fort Sumter, South Carolina began "not to move but to heave with nervous tension and watchful waiting" (1935, 59). Du Bois describes southern slaves as "having crouched consciously and moved silently, listening, hoping and hesitating" (1935, 61). This repertoire of practices constituted a mode of "onlooking" (1935, 62) that ultimately gave way to fugitive slaves who at first constituted "trickling streams" (1935, 64) which then "swelled to a flood" (1935, 64) and became a "stampede" (1935, 62), a "slow, stubborn mutiny" (1935, 80) that went "streaming" (1935, 82) into the Union. In Du Bois's reading, the southern slave emerges in the collective plural much like Toni Morrison's description of the escape of black chain gang prisoners in *Beloved* (1987) who emerged, as Elleza Kelley argues, "as a collective body and consciousness;...made one, in order to escape and to survive" (2021, 191).

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<sup>2</sup> Here, James is referring to the 1905 Russian general strike.

Du Bois's multisensory language brings the reader viscerally into the temporality of the southern landscape. That is, he asks us to imagine the sheer temporal force of black bodies moving across the southern geography and giving embodied life to the General Strike as a liberatory spatiotemporal phenomenon. In this reading, black flight and mobility emerge as a form of insurgent ecocriticism enabling fugitive slaves to contest Black spatial absence and death (Moulton and Salo 2022). Beyond the bounds of the plantation and on the move in the southern landscape, fugitive slaves cultivated non-plantation spatialities. In so doing, they charted new spatial imaginaries and reclaimed sovereignty much like the rebel slaves in Haiti did before them and like Haitian *cacos* (militant peasants) would similarly do decades after them (Moore 2023). In pushing their bodies irresistibly across the southern landscape, fugitive slaves claimed space, itself an act of capture. Rachel Goffe has suggested that we must read the act of capture as an alternate epistemology of land that "enacts spatial practices of varied temporalities" (2024, 18). Like Goffe's Jamaican interlocutors who are read by the state as "squatters" insisting that "we've always been *here*" (2024, 17), I take the collective embodied synchronization of southern fugitive slaves as a mode of capturing land. Their movements force us to not lose sight of the "unfinished project of freedom as a spatial practice" (Goffe 2024, 20).

In Du Bois' telling, the fugitive slave is not passive and neither does she possess an infantilized mind incapable of actualizing her own emancipation. Instead, Du Bois presents to the reader a portrait of the southern slave as strategically aware of the importance of critical time and the alert black body to this plan of action. Moreover, Du Bois presents onlooking not as passive but as a collective, embodied, and agential mode of being and doing that undergirds black resistance. In temporal terms, the southern slave's embodied practices of waiting and looking constitute a mode of protest and an instantiation of what Tao Leigh Goffe has called Maroon time, that is, a time defined by "an acute sensitivity to environment, and to observational praxis, that is determined by investigation" (2022, 126). As Goffe rightly argues, Maroon time is blackness working on the other side of time, the b-side of time, that is, counter-hegemonic time.

Du Bois's descriptions center the black body as crucial to a strategic onlooking. This embodied praxis was birthed long before the first gun was fired at Fort Sumter in April 1861. As Du Bois notes, even before the Civil War was officially declared, fugitive slaves in North Carolina had rushed into the North. The embodied praxis of the southern slave population that Du Bois illuminates must be read as an extension of what Vincent Brown (2020), in his analysis of Tacky's Revolt in Jamaica, has called the radical embodied pedagogy of the enslaved. This radical pedagogy was enlivened on plantations in the U.S. South as slaves undermined a disciplinary and capitalist spacetime reckoning through embodied political acts of malingering and idleness. It was animated in the withdrawal of sexual and reproductive labor by enslaved women (Weinbaum 2013). So too was it roused on ships that crossed the Atlantic Ocean when Africans flung their bodies in protest into the waters below where only sure death could ensure freedom. This radical pedagogy enlivened through the strategic black body in protest confounds notions of fixed space and linear time. Such an argument reminds us that we must read the black body itself as a critique of the fixity of time (Wright 2015).

While the firing of the first gun at Fort Sumter may have marked the beginning of the Civil War as an historical event, we must understand the General Strike in more capacious

embodied and spatiotemporal terms – the very terms that Du Bois lays out in “The General Strike” and which inspired C.L.R. James in 1971. Rather than naming an event, what the General Strike does name is black crisis that exceeds temporal and spatial bounds and is intimately tied to and articulated through the embodied techniques of the black body. It is the black body as instrument that is both the site of this spatiotemporal articulation and the archive through which black crisis is performed. What Du Bois convincingly does in “The General Strike” is to present an embodied cartography that effectively un-maps the U.S. South as white supremacist plantation territory and remaps it as an “abolition geography” (Gilmore 2022) that enunciates itself through the moving and strategic black body in fugitive protest.

### Caribbean Crisis and Protest in the Wake of the General Strike

The embodied praxis of black bodies moving across the geography of the U.S. South that Du Bois describes as resulting in the ultimate emancipation of enslaved peoples in the United States reverberated immediately in the Atlantic world. Though enslaved peoples in the British West Indies were emancipated 30 years prior to those in the United States, in countries like Jamaica, the economic and political conditions of and opportunities for black Jamaicans remained dire. The General Strike in the U.S. South and the events following it served as an inspiration for the Jamaican peasantry. Protest writing and fervent debates about the place of blacks in Jamaica’s economic and political structure proliferated in the wake of the General Strike (Booth 2020). Even more, in 1865, reverberations from the U.S. South were notably felt in the parish of St. Thomas-in-the-East when the Morant Bay Rebellion rocked post-emancipation Jamaica and spotlighted the ways in which questions of power, labor, and race remained charged in the wake of the freeing of slaves in the West Indies.

Leading up to 1865, the black peasantry in Jamaica was forced to weather an onslaught of trials of seemingly biblical proportions. Flooding, drought, and a series of cholera and smallpox outbreaks tremendously hindered everyday life in the 1850s. In addition, in the early 1860s, the gradual increase in commodities such as flour, cornmeal, and cotton due to the disruption of trade caused by the American Civil War contributed to economic strife. Compounding this was the fact that peasants existed in a socio-economic structure governed by a colonial government and elites who insisted on low wages, were opposed to peasant proprietorship, and linked the grim misfortunes of the peasantry to racialized tropes of black laziness. The rebellion started with a fracas between peasants and local authorities at the Morant Bay courthouse in response to the hefty fines levelled on a young black boy for a case of assault and later, a black man for trespassing. Ultimately, blame for the altercation was directed at Paul Bogle, a Baptist preacher and peasant leader from nearby Stony Gut who had played an active role in critiquing the failures of the colonial establishment. The attempt to arrest Bogle resulted in the mobilizing of the peasantry who marched from Stony Gut to the Morant Bay courthouse on October 11 (Heuman 1994; Holt 1992, 263-309).

Like the enslaved in the U.S. South, a certain bodily praxis was integral to the making of the Morant Bay Rebellion as a moment of post-emancipation crisis. In his novel *Sixty-Five* (1960), Jamaican writer V.S. Reid illuminates the radical embodied pedagogies by which the peasantry unleashed war on local colonial authorities. Elucidating the rebellion through a mode of pedagogical historical fiction (Susan and Karah 2024), Reid centers the experience of his young protagonist Japheth, a boy of twelve years, who experiences the rebellion alongside his grandfather. Japheth describes the peasants who had marched from Stony Gut

to Morant Bay and peacefully gathered in front of the courthouse. A member of the crowd begins to softly sing a hymn. The act resonates as a quiet moment of sung protest, a manifestation of embodied emotional expression (Jolaosho 2015). Paul Bogle demands a meeting with the Vestry shouting, "We are free citizens—loyal to the Queen! We are not unlawful people!" (Reid 1960, 51). Japheth notes that this dramatic declaration "caught hold of all our throats and we were shouting too: We are not unlawful people!" (1960, 51). And so, the crowd that had previously been standing still now begins to heave. "And where most of us in the square had been standing still in yellow sunlight, movement was born and the whole crowd moved forward" (1960, 51), young Japheth tells us. On the appearance of the Custos who begins to read the Riot Act, a gesture which both asserts colonial power and marks the peasants as criminals, the crowd continues to push forward. The onslaught of shots from the muskets of colonial soldiers begin to pierce the crowd. As daylight turns to dusk, Japheth describes the embodied and sonic vibrations of the rebellion now in full force. He hears the orchestration of beating drums, singing, gunfire, and the blowing of conch shells. Soon, the peasants set fire to a schoolhouse whose hungry flames spread to the courthouse itself. It is then that Japheth recounts seeing the Custos flee the burning building and hearing "the great thrust of noise which went up from a thousand throats" (1960, 62).

In the end, seven militiamen and twenty-two civilians were dead and thirty-four injured. In the coming days, the furor would spread to nearby estates as some 1,500-2,000 African and creole women and men would become physically caught up in the crisis (Holt 1992). In response, the colonial government under the leadership of Governor Edward Eyre would lead a vicious retaliation. More than 429 peasants would be executed including Paul Bogle (Hutton 2015, 173). Still, caught up in their own moment of crisis, the embodied protest praxis of peasants in Jamaica would reflect onto the United States where the Rebellion would influence federal policy and Radical Reconstruction in the southern states (Rugemer 2019).

A century and a half after the events in Morant Bay, I found myself reflecting on the radical embodied praxis of protest enlivened by Jamaica's black peasants as I watched a video of a protest that had taken place in Kingston in front of the US Embassy on June 6, 2020. Approximately one month before, I, like countless others, had borne viral witness to the murder of George Floyd by white police officer, Derrick Chauvin, in the streets of Minneapolis. For me, a Jamaican living in the United States, and for Jamaicans on the island, our witnessing of Floyd's death through *sousveillant* mobile technology (Richardson 2017) was intimately tied to the murder of another—Susan Bogle, a disabled Jamaican woman who was killed two days after Floyd in her home during a police operation in her inner-city community of August Town. The 2020 protest in Kingston was in response to the callous and casual murders of both George Floyd and Susan Bogle (Thame 2021). Like the enslaved in the U.S. South and the peasants in Morant Bay, the Kingston demonstrators—many in face masks due to the threat of COVID-19—stopped from work. Their actions resonated as a display of transnational solidarity similar to the other BLM protests that were taking place across the globe during the summer of 2020.

The US embassy in Jamaica is located in Liguanea, a section of uptown Kingston that houses and caters to the island's affluent. The embassy sits on an expansive compound that is hidden from public view behind towering walls that are securitized with barbed wire up high and by armed security guards down below. The BLM protestors took to the street across from the embassy and as they mingled side by side, they raised hands and placards in the air

with declarations that read: "ALL BLACK LIVES MATTER," "#InnerCity Lives Matter #WeNahStopTalk #BlackLivesMatter," and "SUSAN BOGLE JUSTICE NOW." At one point, many kneeled as they chanted "I Can't Breathe! I Can't Breathe!" in repetitive fashion amplifying George Floyd's last words. The act of kneeling resonated visually as an embodied moment of resistance that was a deliberate gesturing toward NFL player Colin Kaepernick's own kneeling during the playing of the US national anthem as a way by which to protest American police brutality in 2016.

Caught up in a globally recognized moment of black crisis, a collective embodied praxis pulsed amongst those gathered as they disrupted the daytime traffic. In a singsong rhythm, one brown-skinned female protestor repeatedly called, "Say her name!" which was followed by spirited responses of "Susan Bogle!" as the arms and placards of those gathered were pumped into the air.<sup>3</sup> Likely not lost on those gathered was the uncanny way in which the surname Bogle tethered both Susan Bogle, a black woman killed by the police in 2020, and Paul Bogle, a black preacher executed by colonial authorities in 1865. One young black man decried the scourge of colorism and classism in Jamaica as allies gathered around him fervently nodding in agreement and giving shouts of approval. A black father and his two sons came to the protest dressed in ankh (the Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol for life) chains and black masks branded with the words "Mi caan breathe" and "Yu a choke mi." The father remarked,

"I came out to support not only because what is happening in America but what is happening globally and in Jamaica and let them understand that we as three generations...we must ensure that future generations [do] not have to go through what our forefathers and ancestors have gone through. We stand with Paul Bogle and Sam Sharpe and all these guys who fought for freedom, we benefit from it...so we are just here to ensure that support is here 200 years after."<sup>4</sup>

Later on, protestors took to collectively singing the lyrics of "Never Get Weary," a 2003 record that was released by the roots reggae band Culture. Like the Morant Bay peasants who had engaged in sung protest, the demonstrators channeled the voice of lead singer Joseph Hill as they chanted, "Never get weary yet, never get weary yet, I was down in the valley for a very long time, and we never get weary yet." As the protestors sang, some danced, some clapped their hands, some shook their heads, while others beat drums to produce a Rastafari Nyabinghi rhythm as all recited the lyrics in elegiac unison.

In refraining from work and taking to symbolically kneeling, dancing, singing, chanting, shouting, and drumming across from the embassy's compound, the protestors deliberately practiced a collective, embodied, and strategic form of protest like that which had gripped the peasants in Morant Bay and the fugitive slaves in the U.S. South before them. The global rallying cry of "I can't breathe," its patois translation of "Mi caan breathe", and indeed, the accusatory assertion of "yuh a choke mi" ("you are choking me") resonated as commentary in protest of the violent constriction of black bodies. As the young father suggested in calling

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<sup>3</sup> In Jamaica, being brown-skinned or light-skinned is typically associated with privilege.

<sup>4</sup> Sam Sharpe was an enslaved Jamaican who led the Christmas Rebellion (1831-32). Today, he, like Paul Bogle, is honored as one of Jamaica's national heroes.

attention to the legacies of Paul Bogle and Sam Sharpe, radical embodied protest was not only his and his sons' birthright but also that of all Jamaicans. The bodily praxis given form at the summer 2020 protest was revelatory of the legacy of the peasants in Morant Bay. Indeed, for this father to black sons, the 200-year spatiotemporal divide between the events in Morant Bay, Minneapolis, and August Town collapsed under the reality of how colonial violence against black bodies continued to linger in the postcolonial present. Just like Paul Bogle's death, Susan Bogle's killing illustrated in fine form the unrelenting precarity of poor black Jamaicans as well as the ways in which their bodies continue to remain the landscapes on which state violence plays out (Thomas 2019). Moreover, the parallels in the killings of Susan Bogle and George Floyd were a reminder, as Deborah Thomas has argued, that white supremacy is a global phenomenon and that "geography mediates the experiences of racialized abjection" (2022, 19). In this regard, for the protestors in Kingston, the "black lives" that mattered spoke just as much to an African American man killed thousands of miles away in the street by a white police officer in a majority white country as it did to a black Jamaican woman killed at home by black police officers in a majority black country.

I read both the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion and the 2020 BLM protest in Kingston as signaling the same embodied and spatiotemporal disruptions that were made manifest when fugitive slaves moved, as Du Bois described them, as a stubborn mutiny across the U.S. South in search of their freedom. Fugitive slaves in the U.S. South, black peasants in nineteenth century Jamaica, and protestors who took to Kingston's streets during the 2020 summer of racial reckoning each consciously inhabited a moment of black crisis. Precipitated by long and ongoing systems of structural violence against black bodies, they all adopted fugitivity, what Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton (2023) describe as, a method of kin-making and place-making. Indeed, in stampeding across the United States' southern landscape; in marching from rural Stony Gut to the town of Morant Bay; and in chanting and moving in the streets of Kingston, these black radical actors used their bodies to claim space. In each of these geographies, black embodied practices of resistance created the possibility for imagining liberatory futures. In collective embodied communion, these actors articulated new visions for black humanity and in this way, they represent an unbroken continuum of black resistance.

In her examination of exceptional violence in Jamaica, Deborah Thomas maintains that moments of structural violence against black bodies lead to "an experience of time neither as linear nor cyclical, but as simultaneous, where the future, past, and present are mutually constitutive and have the potential to be coincidentally influential" (2016, 183). What are the implications of reading the General Strike, the Morant Bay Rebellion, and the 2020 BLM protest in Kingston at this scale of thought? It means resisting violent, colonizing, and totalizing temporalities and spatialities in favor of seeking more spatiotemporally capacious visions of black embodiment, place-making, liberation, and futurities (Curley and Smith 2023). Such visions would suggest that the embodied and spatial praxes that animated the General Strike, the Morant Bay Rebellion, and the 2020 BLM protest all call back and forward to each other producing still ongoing reverberations that highlight complex entanglements between the U.S. South and the Caribbean. Such entanglements, I suggest, should be read as more than just affinities. Rather, they are illustrative of the need to consider how the embodied and spatial practices of black bodies caught up in crisis point to the urgency of cartographic projects that reconfigure how we delineate the U.S. South and the Caribbean.

## Re-mapping the U.S. South and the Caribbean as a Spatiotemporal Imaginary

The defined borders that segregate the Caribbean and the U.S. South represent the legacy of colonial and imperial projects whose enterprises were undergirded by the logic of taming disruptive space and disciplining time. However, what constitutes the Caribbean and the U.S. South is less a matter of politico-geographic demarcations and more a matter of perspective and context (Girvan 2001). Both resonate as an idea or, what Michel Rolph-Trouillot (1983) called “fabricated areas” whose delineations speak not to fixed spatial configurations but instead to extended exercises rooted in colonialism and the plantation complex. Indeed, the Caribbean islands and the U.S. South were both once sites of European colonial exploration, competition, and conquest. So too did they both represent points of connection that were important to British colonial space in the Atlantic leading up to the American Revolution.

Significantly, the U.S. South and the Caribbean were foundationally shaped by their plantation economies. As Caribbeanist scholarship has shown, the plantation did not merely represent an agricultural system but a socio-political and economic structure that extended beyond estates and was invested in perpetuating still enduring patterns of inequality and fractured sovereignty (Beckford 1972). In highlighting the plantation economy’s unrelenting commitment to extraction and to racial capitalism as its *raison d’être*, such analysis emphasizes the plantation as a global institution embedded in the world economy. Crucial to the plantation economies in the U.S. South and the Caribbean was the fungible black body, that is, what Tiffany Lethabo King illumines as “the unfettered use of Black bodies for the self-actualization of the human and for the attendant humanist project of the production and expansion of space” (2019, 24). In this sense, the laboring black body was taken to be inherently replaceable, interchangeable, and singularly reducible to its use value in service to plantation capitalism. The material legacies of the plantation point to the recursive nature of this geography. In other words, the still ongoing embodied, ecological, and spatial effects of the plantation suggest a layering of imperial dispossessions over space and time. These afterlives remind us that it is blackness spatially rendered through the plantation that “has produced untidy historically present geographies that are predicated on difficult encounters and our entangled common histories” (McKittrick 2011, 950).

The intimate tethering of the map to the geographical body of the nation remains one of the enduring inheritances of present-day cartographic practice (Thongchai 1994). Similarly, contemporary historiography continues to live in the shadow of the 19th century emergence of the discipline as a practice of writing the history of the nation. In response and in recognition of the ways in which the Caribbean and the U.S. South have always historically and culturally bled into each other, critical humanities and anthropological scholarship has illuminated the convergences between the two regions (Munro and Britton 2012; Regis 2006; Smith and Cohn 2004). This scholarship points to the need for greater hemispheric, intersectional, and relational thinking and mapping (Mollett 2021).

The cartographic and epistemological project that I am proposing in this essay would require, as the anthropologist Faye V. Harrison has suggested a “de-territorializing of the sociocultural and structural features typically associated with the two regions and re-territorializing and remapping them across the coordinates of interlocking transnational fields of identity, sociocultural dynamics, power and political economy” (2006, 7). Still, my articulation of black embodied spatiotemporal crisis names an orientation that is decidedly

not simply transnational. It is invested in both collapsing and maintaining an irreverence toward the geographic and national boundaries that have historically distinguished the Caribbean and the U.S. South and which the transnational necessarily acknowledges. Rather, my cartographic epistemology is concerned with how the configurations that these geographies exist within necessarily layer them and black bodies across spacetime in ways that exceed the logic of transnational flow.

An epistemological and cartographic orientation capable of grappling with the Caribbean and the U.S. South as such calls to mind an archipelagic perspective. This would mean taking the archipelago not as a geographical formation but as an invitation to imagine relationalities across spacetime. In seeking to imagine the U.S. South and the Caribbean relationally beyond colonial and universal prescriptions of space and time, the archipelago offers itself as a method by which to study, map, and connect places and histories waiting to be freed from the continental boundaries that have been imposed upon them (Glissant 1997). Archipelagic mapping of the Caribbean and the U.S. South allows us to read the black radical actors caught up in crisis in each geography as intimately linked though physically separated by immense spacetime. In essence, such an imaginary would take these segregated black radical actors and their geographies as constitutive of a singular entity. I offer that a project of un-mapping the U.S. South and the Caribbean as segregated regions that align with established geo-political binary distinctions (e.g. Global North and Global South) and re-mapping them as a spatiotemporal imaginary would not require an anti-map disposition. Recent scholarship (Hawthorne and Lewis 2023) reminds us that mapping is not only grounded in the material politics of representation but also, in the poetic. Mapping the U.S. South and the Caribbean anew as a spatiotemporal imaginary would beckon us toward refashioning our historiographical and cartographic tools of representation with an eye toward black embodied protest praxes and thus toward what Édouard Glissant called an “insurrection of the imaginary faculties” (2005, 24-25).

Radical black bodies necessarily expand notions of space, time, and what is possible. Reading the U.S. South and the Caribbean, their actors, and their transformations without regard for chronological time and fixed space but as constituting a spatiotemporal imaginary is a reminder of the ways in which the temporal and the spatial are never separate from the embodied. Indeed, it is a reminder that the black body distorts canonical time and space. An historiographical mode undergirded by hegemonic and capitalist renderings of time and space can only envision singular historical trajectories that adhere to notions of before and after. Such a mode can only read the General Strike as temporally disconnected from the Morant Bay Rebellion and the summer 2020 protests against anti-black violence. In such an imagining, the South and the Caribbean remain stubbornly segregated, each within their separately demarcated geographies. This ultimately forecloses the possibility of reading the General Strike, the Morant Bay Rebellion, and the 2020 protest in Kingston; the fugitive slaves in the U.S. South, the black peasants in Morant Bay, and the protestors in Kingston; and ultimately the U.S. South and the Caribbean as spatiotemporally pleated. As such, the imaginary that I have argued for in this essay demands more than an acknowledgement of the transfer of the radical ideals of the fugitive slaves in the U.S. South to the peasants in Morant Bay, and more than a recognition of the ways in which the peasants in Morant Bay inspired protestors in Kingston in 2020. Instead, it speaks to the entangled spacetime that black embodied crises evoke that reveal the interconnectedness of black worlds that fugitive

slaves, their ancestors, and their descendants in the Caribbean and the U.S. South actively inhabit. In truth, this mode speaks not simply to re-ordered spaces and timelines, but to our presumptions about what kinds of spacetimes are in fact possible.

## Conclusion

In the midst of the global racial reckoning and less than a year after the killings of George Floyd and Susan Bogle, the imaginative possibilities of urgently representing the Caribbean and the U.S. South as a spatiotemporal imaginary were made manifest in the exhibit *Surreal Black* which premiered virtually at the National Gallery West in Montego Bay, Jamaica in January 2021. The exhibit showcased a diverse set of visual art works produced by Jamaican and naturalized Jamaican artists that spanned the 1960s to the 2000s. Taken together, the art pieces challenged the stereotyping of the black body and ventured a response to systemic racism in both the United States and Jamaica.

In promotional materials, the exhibit's curatorial team positioned the surreal not as a nod toward impossibility but rather as an attempt to configure "dreamlike or irrational juxtapositions and abstract expressionism, to symbolize and critique real world phenomena" (National Gallery West 2021). Working across painting, sculpture, and photography, the pieces, in the words of chief curator O'Neil Lawrence, "illuminate[d] dissonances and present[ed] alternative narratives of the lived realities of those that inhabit black bodies" (Lawrence 2021). Within the walls of the gallery, the spatiotemporally familiar was virtually suspended, rendering the U.S. South and the Caribbean inescapably entangled. As I visually took in the exhibit from afar, I was able to grasp the radical power of a surrealist epistemology to reveal seemingly absurd and unanticipated connections and in so doing challenge the known, allow for the discovery of new and uncanny perspectives, and critique traditional notions of representation.

In considering the General Strike and the Haitian Revolution as comparative upheavals of humanity, it is not far-fetched that perhaps C.L.R. James, like the Jamaican curators of *Surreal Black*, was also inspired by the radical possibilities of the surreal in black worlds. So moved was James by Du Bois' elucidation of the General Strike in *Black Reconstruction* that he proclaimed at the end of his 1971 lecture, "The American black man will make it in the United States or the black man will make it nowhere" (2000, 98). James' statement is a call to a broader and more diasporic understanding of the geography of the Americas. His words compel us to take seriously how collective black identity and radical black history transcend national boundaries. James asks us to re-envision how we map not only black shared pasts and struggles but also black liberatory futures to contest taken for granted historical and geopolitical narratives. Such questioning, un-mapping, and re-mapping have clear implications for how we read the mandates of Caribbean Studies and African American Studies.

Much more than pointing to new avenues for interdisciplinary research, conceiving of the Caribbean and the U.S. South as a spatiotemporal imaginary gestures toward the need to make sense of Caribbean Studies and African American Studies as a shared intellectual project. Such a project necessitates the development of robust frameworks and innovative methodologies that transcend national borders to think with and through the interconnectedness of black radical experiences, landscapes, and bodies across spacetime. A U.S. South-Caribbean intellectual project would re-evaluate historical periodization and

geographical fixity in order to understand spacetime as lived. Quite importantly, a shared Caribbean and African American Studies project suggests clear directions for how we must be attuned to present-day black crises and solidarities that continue to bind, layer, and entangle what we take to be the U.S. South and the Caribbean.

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