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FRACTIONS OF BLOOD ON FRAGMENTS OF SOIL: CAPITALISM, THE COMMONS, AND KINSHIP IN THE CARIBBEAN

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The purpose of this paper is to argue that “family land” in the Caribbean has been, at least in part and especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, constitutive of a particular understanding of “family.” This understanding of family hinges on notions of blood relatedness and paternity. Jean Besson has argued that family land demonstrates the presence of cognatic or nonunilineal descent groups in Caribbean societies.¹ My purpose is not to refute that argument so much as to note that what anthropologists call cognatic descent is “kinship” itself, where kinship is taken to be the kind of biogenetic or “blood” relatedness western subjects presume when they draw family

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¹ See Jean Besson, “Symbolic Aspects of Land in the Caribbean: The Tenure and Transmission of Land Rights among Caribbean Peasantries,” in Malcolm Cross and Arnaud Marks, eds., *Peasants, Plantations and Rural Communities in the Caribbean* (Guilford: University of Surrey and Leiden: Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology, 1979), 86–116; and Jean Besson, “Land, Kinship, and Community in the Post-emancipation Caribbean: A Regional View of the Leewards,” in Karen Fog Olwig, ed., *Small Islands, Large Questions: Society, Culture and Resistance in the Post-Emancipation Caribbean* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 73–99.

trees and map out genealogies. As David Schneider² and Marilyn Strathern³ have suggested, once we realize that our cross-cultural studies of kinship rely on a root understanding of “kinship” as biogenetic relatedness, we can begin to interrogate the ways in which western peoples have come to “think kinship”—a model of relationship—as a matter of course and a “natural fact.” We can also speculate about why they might have done so, why they continue to do so, and why anthropologists have found it difficult to comprehend biogenetic models of relationship as cultural theories in themselves.

In land dispute cases from the British Virgin Islands, ideas about biogenetic relatedness sometimes clash and sometimes work in harmony with ideas about paternity.⁴ Regardless of how these ideas operate in particular cases, however, they have the net effect of asserting one overarching vision of “family” in family land, and may even enforce this vision in spite of the disputing individuals’ wishes. In this essay, I concentrate on the logic of one land dispute from the early twentieth century, in order to get at underlying understandings of “family.” In this land case, the partition of family land was determined by complex calculations that relied, on the one hand, on ideas about fractions of blood, and, on the other, on ideas about a first born son’s “closer” relatedness to his father compared to his other relatives. The case highlights the interplay of ideas about fractions of blood and ideas about paternity. I put forward an ideal-typic model of inequality in liberal capitalist societies to explain how blood relatedness and paternity work together to define “family” and to rationalize inequalities.⁵

Genealogical and Evolutionary Trees in Nineteenth-Century Free Trade Imperialism

The rise of kinship thinking in the Caribbean can be traced to the

² David Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984).

³ Marilyn Strathern, *After Nature: English Kinship in the Late Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁴ See Bill Maurer, *Recharting the Caribbean: Land, Law and Citizenship in the British Virgin Islands* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 174–175.

⁵ See Jane Collier, *Marriage and Inequality in Classless Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

post-emancipation period of “free trade imperialism.”⁶ Recent anthropological work on the creation of specific forms of racism in the late colonial period points toward the interconnection of free trade imperialism, the declining hegemony of local elites it fostered, and the emerging evolutionary paradigm in social theories of race and inequality.⁷ The particular liberal ideology encoded in free trade permitted constructions of race no longer tied to old hierarchical rankings of humans according to their presumed distance from God or proximity to tropical climes.⁸ Rather, liberal ideology, together with free trade, helped create a world in which evolutionary narratives made sense to thinkers attempting to understand why, for instance, the newly-freed in the Caribbean were not economically successful and did not become independent quasi-capitalist proprietors.

The Sugar Duties Act of 1846 eliminated sugar subsidies and consolidated the free trade regime in the British Caribbean. Susan Lowes chronicles the concomitant rise of norms of “respectability” among non-white elites attempting to maintain their social position in an economic milieu in which that position was no longer guaranteed.⁹ An emerging race/gender system of respectability, based on legal marriages, legitimacy, and religious education, ensured the exclusion of non-white lower classes from political participation.¹⁰ By the 1860s, free trade had so thoroughly decimated many of the Leeward Islands that even “respectable” non-whites had little chance of economic advancement. Many sent their children abroad, or simply left the islands altogether, while non-“respectable” West Indians attempted to

⁶ Bernard Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁷ Ann Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995); see also David Lowenthal, “The Wayward Leewards,” in Olwig, *Small Islands*, 179–187.

⁸ Verena Stolcke, “Talking Culture: New Boundaries, New Rhetorics of Exclusion,” *Current Anthropology* 36, no. 1 (1995): 1–24.

⁹ Susan Lowes, “‘They Couldn’t Mash Ants’: The Decline of the White and Non-white Elites in Antigua, 1834–1900,” in Olwig, *Small Islands*, 31–52.

¹⁰ See Mindie Lazarus-Black, *Legitimate Acts and Illegal Encounters: Law and Society in Antigua and Barbuda* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); and Karen Fog Olwig, *Global Culture, Island Identity: Continuity and Change in the Afro-Caribbean Community of Nevis* (Philadelphia: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993).

create lives for themselves on the ruins of the plantation system.¹¹

What is the nature of the connection between this complex historical situation and liberal ideology? Allow me to construct a model of liberalism which helps illuminate rationalizations of inequality under free trade regimes. Liberalism declares all people free and equal, but, in so doing, leaves people with only themselves to account for their failings.¹² In a free-trade world where large numbers of people were suddenly “failing”—local elites no longer propped up by sugar subsidies and local popular class people no longer “protected” from the market by their position as slaves—evolutionary narratives functioned to rationalize those failures by naturalizing them. Evolutionary theories justified exclusion and hierarchy—and labor-force segmentation—based on kinship and gender. In a world where inequalities are not presumed to be God-given, but “natural,” kinship provides framework for understanding difference which can serve to explain inequality. People who fail, considered by definition to have “faulty natures,” are taken to pass these natures on to their offspring.

Evolutionary theories demand careful attention to procreation and gender relations, and especially emphasize monogamous, heterosexual marriages, because the chief explanation for inequality lies in notions of biological inheritance. Straight and clear “blood-lines” prop up the claims of the successful to be “naturally” successful, while “messy” or questionable bloodlines, or bloodlines that begin from “failed” individuals, allow for naturalized explanations of the poor’s failure. Social relations become, in R.T. Smith’s term, “biologized.”¹³ Kinship, defined as a natural fact, becomes an important domain of social life.

A “genealogical imaginary” was the logical corollary of evolutionism and free trade liberalism. But there is another dimension to the nineteenth-century construction of kinship as a means of rationalizing inequality. For people whose condition as slaves had denied them humanity by denying them, among other things, the “freedom” to make

¹¹ Lowes, ““They Couldn’t Smash Ants.””

¹² Verena Stolcke, “Introduction to the Second Edition,” *Marriage, Class, and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989).

¹³ R. T. Smith, “Race, Class, and Gender in the Transition to Freedom,” in Frank McGlynn and Seymour Drescher, eds., *The Meaning of Freedom: Economics, Politics, and Culture After Slavery* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 257–290.

“families,” family after emancipation became a key site for the creation of identity. Family and evolutionary trees may have served quite well the interests of scientific racists attempting to “explain” the “failings” of the black, brown, and “swarthy,” but also could be appropriated by subordinate groups wanting to emphasize their “free” humanity. The genealogical tree, a symbolic representation of kinship thinking, could serve as a representation of identity and freedom. As Besson writes:

For the slaves and their descendants trees had a spiritual dimension and, like the eternal land, symbolized the continuity of kinship groups and communities. This is perhaps best illustrated by Accompong’s sacred Kindah Tree, which represents the continuity of the community and its family lines in this oldest surviving post-treaty corporate maroon polity. In the post-slavery era, trees, like land, also symbolized the fruits of freedom.¹⁴

The concoction of kinship thus should not be taken to be an ideological imposition upon a hapless population buffeted by the winds of free trade. In her recent work on the promotion of “peasantries” by the Colonial Office after the collapse of elites, Riva Berleant-Schiller shows how the struggle for land became central to people’s attempts to carve out niches for themselves.¹⁵ Jean Besson has long maintained that customary tenures which grew from this struggle became a means of solidifying kinship and community as plantations declined. Family land provided people with symbolic property that enabled them to claim status as full, proprietarian persons. Family land was also a process of “rooting” and “uprooting:” the system which gave symbolic value to land ownership depended on migration to prevent competing economic claims from destroying newly-crafted kinship and community ties.¹⁶ Among former slaves and their descendants, kinship and gender emerged as key loci for the configuration of identity, through the emphasis on respectability,¹⁷ and the imagination of extended kin ties articulated around family land.

Family, once constituted in kinship idioms, can have paradoxical

¹⁴ Jean Besson, “Land, Kinship, and Community,” in Olwig, *Small Islands*, 93.

¹⁵ Riva Berleant-Schiller, “From Labour to Peasantry in Montserrat after the End of Slavery,” in Olwig, *Small Islands*, 53–72.

¹⁶ Besson, “Land, Kinship, and Community.”

¹⁷ Lazarus-Black, *Legitimate Acts*.

effects. Because kinship depends upon notions of biogenetic relatedness that are seemingly all-encompassing, as well as notions of “mother,” “father,” “child,” and so forth, that limit the expanse of the genealogical grid, kinship can be taken to ground different conceptions of “family.” “Family” can refer to everyone on a genealogy; or family can refer to only those persons related “by blood” to a particular ancestor. Furthermore, some people can be deemed “closer” to other people based on these presumed blood ties. The land dispute case I examine next demonstrates the contentious and conflicting definitions of family and relatedness that kinship thinking can present. It also shows, however, that notions of kinship figured in terms of genealogies and those that stress the importance of particular ancestors can be reconciled in terms of the model of liberalism I have presented above.

The Windy Hill Case

Land disputes in the British Virgin Islands from the early part of the twentieth century reveal several paradoxes about conceptions of land and family. Disputes concerning communally held property invariably took place among “blood” relatives. But analysis of court cases demonstrates that the dispute process itself led people to certain conceptions of blood relatedness and definitions of family. In a sense, “family land,” when under dispute, created “family,” as a stable, common ground, a set of assumptions about relatedness that appear rational, natural and unquestionable. This deep understanding of “family” as given and natural was fostered even as the disputing process led relatives to experience a falling-out with each other and an erosion of “diffuse, enduring solidarity.”¹⁸ Particularly interesting are those cases where, in the process of adjudicating a land dispute, lawyers, judges, and disputants alike conjured up complex systems for measuring degrees of relatedness based on presumed blood ties and the importance of paternity. It is the emergence of these understandings of relatedness that makes family land a key element of an overarching, structuring system of inequality.

In 1927, just months before his death, Richard Morgan gave a parcel of land in Windy Hill to his wife and four children. This parcel consisted of forty-one acres “or thereabouts” and was granted by Richard to his wife Joanna, and his children Edgar, Wesley, Connie, and Molly,

¹⁸ David Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

and “their heirs and assigns forever [. . .] without any manner of condition whatsoever.” The family lived on the land after Richard’s death. Molly, the youngest daughter, died in 1933, without leaving a will. From 1933 to 1950, Joanna, Edgar, Wesley, and Connie each began paying one fourth of the land tax each year. Joanna died without leaving a will (or, “intestate”) in 1951. From that time onward, the children began paying one third of the land tax each.

In the mid-fifties, the siblings, who were still living on the land, decided to try their hand at cattle ranching, and mortgaged the entire estate in order to get cash to build paddocks and to develop the pasture areas of the land. The indenture of the mortgage considered the three siblings as a corporate unit, referring to them as “The Borrower” rather than “borrowers.” According to the records left behind from this case, all three enjoyed the pleasures and profits of the new pasture lands “equally.” Shortly thereafter, they changed their method of paying the land tax: from 1962 on, they alternated their responsibilities for paying the entire tax. Edgar paid it all in 1962; Connie in 1963; Wesley in 1964. In 1965, they decided to “divide the estate equally.” And, of course, they ended up in court. They did so, however, because each had slightly different understandings not only of how to divide the property, but how to measure degrees of relatedness between themselves and their parents.

The main dispute was between Edgar, on one side, and Wesley and Connie, on the other. Wesley and Connie thought that the estate should be divided into thirds. Wesley testified that since they had been paying off the mortgage “equally” and had “used the paddocks equally” and “agreed to divide up the lands into three equal portions and each of us would take one of the three portions as his or her interest in the lands,” that each was entitled to an equal area of land. “Equal,” for him, had a mathematical referent: it signified “equal thirds.” It did not signify a non-quantifiable, abstract sense of “equal sharing” that anthropologists frequently ascribe to “family land,” or that common law definitions of land tenure might proscribe.¹⁹

¹⁹ See Maurer, *Recharting the Caribbean*, 193–196; see also G.C. Cheshire, *Cheshire and Burn’s Modern Law of Real Property*, 13th edition (London: Butterworths, 1982). According to the common law of real property, people own “estates,” not the land itself. Estates are conceived as temporal abstractions, not physical areas. In “holding” an estate, one is entitled to possession of real property for a specified length of time. Partition and division of estates has to

Edgar, on the other hand, felt that, as the eldest, he was entitled to a larger share. He did not contest the notion that the idea of partition contained within it certain mathematical referents; he just disagreed about what those referents were.

The judge's decision, and the solicitors' arguments, are preserved in a rather impressive paper trail left from the original case and archived in the Registry of the High Court. The first point of interest here has to do with the nature of "common" tenure. The judge, like the parties to the case, believed that holding land "in common" meant holding "equal shares:" partible, measurable quantities of land, not abstract "interests" (as should have been the case at common law).²⁰ He decided that the original conveyance from Richard gave the estate to five people "in equal shares" in spite of the fact that the deed defined the estate as consisting of a number of acres "or thereabouts." In other cases from this period, judges and lawyers emphasized the "more or less" clauses of deed to argue against an estate's physical divisibility.²¹ In those cases, judges decided that the indeterminate quantification implied in the deeds made fractional division of the actual land impossible. In the case at hand, however, the judge took as given that the estate was capable of being partitioned.²² Throughout the twentieth century, as the doctrine of temporal estates weakened, and as land tenure questions became more and more the province of "national development" and "resource management," notions of the land as an objective, measurable, and natural entity came to dominate western legal, nationalist and popular thinking.²³

According to Wesley's lawyer, at the initial conveyance of the estate, each of the five inheritors were entitled to one-fifth of the land. When Molly died, her one-fifth ought to have been divided among the four

do with divisions in time, not space. Rather than throwing up its hands at the sight of a physically indeterminate piece of land, the common law would assume that questions of ownership naturally belong to the temporal dimension of the estate, since the physical dimension is unknowable. As Cheshire demonstrates, however, the doctrine of estates has been considerably weakened since the late nineteenth century such that presently the common law tends to collapse temporal estates into physical space for convenience.

²⁰ See Maurer, *Recharting the Caribbean*, 193–196.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 177–179.

²² See note 19 above.

²³ See Maurer, *Recharting the Caribbean*, 209–226, on the cadastral survey of the BVI, which solidified this conception of land as an objective entity.

survivors, so that each survivor would have then possessed $\frac{1}{5} + (\frac{1}{4} \times \frac{1}{5})$, or one-fourth of the estate. When Joanna died, her one-fourth should have been similarly divided, so that each should have then possessed $\frac{1}{4} + (\frac{1}{3} \times \frac{1}{4})$, or one-third. Hence, each was now entitled to one-third of the estate.

According to Edgar's lawyer, the case was not so simple. He agreed that, at the initial conveyance, each was entitled to one-fifth of the estate. But when Molly died, he claimed, her one-fifth should have "reverted" back into her deceased father's estate—in spite of the fact that he was, of course, dead. In effect, the lawyer assumed that Richard had never really alienated his claim to the estate divided up after his death.²⁴

Furthermore, inheritance laws had changed in 1945, eliminating special provisions for first-born sons in cases where property holders died intestate:²⁵ before 1945, first-born sons were entitled to intestates' estates; after 1945, intestates' estates were to be divided equally among all heirs. Since Richard and Molly had both died before 1945, the lawyer reasoned, the new "estate" provided by Molly's death should have devolved to the first-born son, Edgar. At Molly's death, then, Edgar would have been entitled to his own one-fifth share, plus Molly's one-fifth share. When Joanna died, after the inheritance laws changed so that intestates' estates would be divided equally among all heirs, her one-fifth should have been divided into thirds. Edgar thus should have had $\frac{2}{5} + (\frac{1}{3} \times \frac{1}{5})$, or $\frac{7}{15}$, and Wesley and Connie each $\frac{1}{5} + (\frac{1}{3} \times \frac{1}{5})$, or $\frac{4}{15}$.

The judge found in favor of Edgar, and the estate was physically divided accordingly. The best pasture lands, however, were set aside and divided up separately, so that no one person would end up with all of the best pasture. The judge also ruled that the house plot ought to be held, undivided, by the three siblings "in common."

²⁴ The lawyer was relying on the doctrine of estates, discussed in note 19. He assumed that Richard possessed what is known as the "fee simple," a temporal estate of indeterminate and potentially infinite duration. The fee simple is the longest estate one can possess; it is held by the owner of the fee simple so long as that owner has living heirs. For further discussion, see Cheshire, *op.cit.*, and Bill Maurer, "Recharting the Caribbean: Land, Law and Citizenship in the British Virgin Islands," PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1994, 95–101.

²⁵ Bill Maurer, *Recharting the Caribbean*, 199–200.

Clearly, much more than the land itself is at issue in this case, although it is significant that the land is conceptualized throughout as an object capable of physical partition according to an objective plan based on fractional interests. My research on land disputes in the BVI suggests that this conception of land as an objective entity capable of physical division according to different interests is a relatively recent one.²⁶ It is certainly a recent one in the history of the common law of real property, which only in the late nineteenth century abandoned the notion that property owners own interests in “estates,” temporal abstractions of rights to possess land, rather than owning physical property itself.²⁷ Regardless, the court in this case, and the parties to the dispute, seemed to hold in common a notion of land as objective, real, divisible, and fixed. But how did they conceptualize “family?”

At first glance, two distinct notions of relatedness seem to be put into play. On the one hand, the equal division of shares supports a genealogical reckoning of relatedness according to which a set of persons are considered “siblings” because they are held to share equally of their “parents’ blood.” This is such a common-sense notion to most western subjects that it becomes difficult to write about it analytically. I, like the parties to this case, simply “believe in the intrinsic meaning of blood ties,” as Lisa Douglass nicely puts it for the case of Jamaican elites.²⁸ One intrinsic meaning is that children do or should share equally of their parents’ substances, whether those be biological or proprietary, like land.

On the other hand, the primogeniture rule of pre-1945 inheritance law, and Edgar’s activation of it, speaks to another genealogical reckoning of relatedness according to which some persons on genealogical trees are deemed closer relations than others by virtue of their presumably closer connection to a paternal ancestor. This is a common-sense notion to westerners, too, once we consider the primacy given paternity in western systems of patronymic naming, for instance, and conceptions of families “headed” by paternal male ancestors.²⁹ An intrinsic meaning encoded here is that some children are closer to their fathers

²⁶ Maurer, *Recharting the Caribbean*, 208ff.

²⁷ Cheshire, *Modern Law*, 86.

²⁸ Lisa Douglass, *The Power of Sentiment: Love, Hierarchy, and the Jamaican Family Elite* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 21.

²⁹ See Carol Delaney, “The Meaning of Paternity and the Virgin Birth Debate,” *Man* (n.s.) 21 (1986): 494–513.

than others, because they will or ought to assume their fathers' positions as "heads" of families, and therefore also deserve a larger portion of their father's land.³⁰

Primacy of paternity and the "facts" of genealogy seem to me to come together, however, as parts of one overarching and ordering system of inequality tied to the contradictions of liberalism. Liberalism can ground "substantive equality" in notions of biology and genealogy: we are all equal because, as humans, we share genealogical and "species" substance. Chandra Jayawardena, in his classic discussion of substantive and formal equality, invokes Shylock's speech, which conveys this sense of shared, biological human equality ("if you prick us, do we not bleed?").³¹ But notions of substantive equality mesh quite nicely with notions of evolutionary inequality when some of the "bloods" we all purportedly share are not deemed to be as suitable for (economic) success as others. The carving-up of the great genealogical tree of humanity into separate "families" figured through paternal ancestors serves to introduce a rationalization for inequality among "naturally" equal humans. Some paternal lines, once imagined, can be deemed weaker than others and thus less "fit." And some individuals can be deemed "closer" to presumed paternal ancestors, and thus closer to the "source" of their weaknesses or strengths.

In the Windy Hill land case, Edgar's presumed closeness to *pater* served his interests rather well. The judge accepted as implicit ground the "blood ties" making up "family" in order to come to his decision on the case. He also implicitly adhered to the principle that children should share equally of their parents' substance: Joanna's portion of the estate was divided among her children in equal thirds. This was in accordance with the 1945 Intestates' Estates Act's legal "recognition" of blood ties. But the judge also preserved the pre-1945 legal notion of "family" by granting Edgar his claim to Molly's share. The underlying logic in this instance was that Edgar, as the eldest son, was heir to his father's position as head of the family, and so entitled to whatever lands his father would have been entitled to at Molly's death, had he been alive. Finally, the judge upheld the sense of family as "diffuse, enduring solidarity" by ruling that the house plot should not be partitioned but held "in com-

³⁰ And, at common law, would be holders of the father's fee simple.

³¹ Chandra Jayawardena, "Ideology and Conflict in Lower Class Communities" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 10 (1968): 413–446.

mon” and not according to any abstract fractional system of shares. One wonders how enduring and solidary family relations were after the conclusion of this dispute!³² In any case, taken as a whole, the judge's decisions seem reasonable and eminently logical, both in terms of the changing inheritance laws but also, and more importantly, in terms of kinship thinking. The case highlights blood relatedness and paternity as apparently contradictory conceptions of family and relatedness, and at the same time demonstrates their utter reconcilability.

Conclusion

Jean Besson's initial formulation of the solution to the family land “problem” implicitly rested on a liberal model of equality.³³ She argued that family land became symbolically central to ideas about autonomy and individual liberty as former slaves and their descendants constructed identities against oppressive plantation regimes. Family land arose, she argued, because of the overall scarcity of land available for individuals to lay claim to in establishing their sense of autonomy and freedom. Since the amount of land people could lay claim to was limited, many people were compelled to hold parcels in common with each other. What is important is not the land's value as an economic resource, but its value as a symbol of freedom for all those who are able to call themselves “owners” of family land.

Besson's argument nicely demonstrates that the conception of freedom being articulated in the Caribbean relied on liberal understandings of personhood. The “free person” in this model must be a proprietor: one who owns.³⁴ The fact of ownership is more important than the nature of the thing owned. It is more important to be able to claim, “I have family land at Salt Bay,” than to use that land for productive pur-

³² I was unable to locate surviving relatives of the disputants in this case; the land in question appears to have reverted to the Crown. I did, however, ask one of my main informants on land disputes (who had been a clerk when the case came to court) about the case. He remembered the details recorded here – especially the fractions (the 7/15ths stood out in his mind!)—but had little to add to the documents preserved in the court registry.

³³ Besson, “Symbolic Aspects of Land,” 86–116; and Jean Besson, “Family Land and Caribbean Society: Toward an Ethnography of Afro-Caribbean Peasants,” in Elizabeth Thomas-Hope, ed., *Perspectives on Caribbean Regional Identity* (Liverpool: Center for Latin American Studies, 1984), 57–83.

³⁴ C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

poses. The claim to family land establishes the claimant as a free individual, who possesses rather than being possessed.

To accommodate as many claimants as possible on a piece of family land, Besson observes, Caribbean people seem to have developed an unrestricted cognatic descent system. An unrestricted cognatic descent system allows the greatest freedom of possible kinship systems for individuals to consider themselves included in a “family.” It does so because it maps exactly onto the genealogical grid. Anyone who can be connected by “blood” or “marriage” to the “family” is considered a part of it, and, thus, can lay claim to family land. Notions of the genealogical grid can work in concert with notions of paternity, however. While a group of people can be deemed to be related “by blood,” some can be deemed to be closer than others to important ancestors. These ancestors are male; they are often the ones who give the family name, a patronymic, to “family land.”

My model of inequality in liberal societies aims to show that cognatic descent, the genealogical tree itself, makes sense as a system of relationship that rationalizes inequalities created by free trade regimes. It does so by working together with notions of paternity encoded in blood relatedness. All are “equal” in that all are part of the same “family tree,” but some are closer to the trunk than others and so, in this case, deserve more land. In the heyday of scientific racism, such a logic would have well served those who would claim that some people were inferior to others because not “clearly” connected, through straight “bloodlines,” to an important, high-status—probably white and free—male ancestor. In its creole appropriation in Caribbean family land, however, the logic of kinship and paternity simply work to create a “natural” basis for sorting out land claims and ascribing identity.

Cognatic descent is a pure expression of Schneider’s “kinship thinking,” for a cognatic descent is precisely the system of biogenetic relatedness anthropologists (and other western subjects) assume when they draw kinship diagrams and genealogies. Schneider and Strathern both point out that biogenetic connections drawn on family trees represent only one model of relatedness.³⁵ Where Besson’s work points toward the liberal assumptions of possession and personhood in the “land” of family land, I hope to have made a case for the liberal foundations of the “family.”

³⁵ See also Delaney, “The Meaning of Paternity,” and Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane Collier, “Toward a Unified Analysis of Gender and Kinship in *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 14–50.

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