

# Memory In the “Magic City”

## *The Naturalisation of Racial Capitalism and Environmental Racism at Heritage Sites in and Around Birmingham, Alabama*

Lucy Bond | ORCID 0000-0002-1705-5580

Institute for Modern and Contemporary Culture, University of Westminster,  
London, UK

*l.bond@westminster.ac.uk*

Jessica Rapson | ORCID 0000-0001-5779-5252

Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King's College  
London, London, UK

*jessica.rapson@kcl.ac.uk*

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### Abstract

This article explores the naturalisation of memories of racial violence at heritage sites in and around Birmingham, Alabama. Birmingham's cityscape has been forged from systemic processes of racial capitalism that have led to ongoing forms of environmental racism. Against this backdrop, prominent tourist attractions prioritise the celebration of industrial heritage above acknowledging past and present forms of racialised injustice – from slavery to convict leasing, segregation to redlining. These sites present a sanitised account of the city's iron and steel industry, resulting in a selective transmission and production of memories of industrial progress which obscures the operations of racial capitalism and the environmental racism it produces. This heritage, we suggest, cannot reconcile the brutality of inequitable labour systems, such as convict leasing, and the environmental violence of industrial production with the celebration of capitalist progress that positions Birmingham as the “Magic City” of industrial miracles.

## Keywords

memory – racial capitalism – environmental racism – industrial heritage

### 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Tangible and intangible heritage are fundamental components of cultural memory – the diverse assemblage of media through which collective visions of the past are constructed and contested. As Ali Mozaffari and Tod Jones assert, “[h]eritage is strongly implicated in power relations” (2023, p. 6); it “shapes and changes the world at different hierarchical and spatial scales” (2023, p. 13). The sociopolitical operations of heritage are particularly apparent in the Deep South of the United States. As Dell Upton argues, the memorial landscape of the South reflects a “dual heritage” in which white history is monumentalised and Black history is “treated as incidental to the ‘historical logic of whiteness’” (2015, p. 17).<sup>2</sup> Where markers to Black history do exist, they tend to prioritise “exceptional” figures (such as Martin Luther King Junior and Rosa Parks) or to commemorate (in)famous events from the Civil Rights era. With the exception of a handful of important counter-monuments and museums,<sup>3</sup> the heritage landscape offers little acknowledgment of the structural traumas perpetuated by the region’s history of racial capitalism and is exacerbated by ongoing forms of environmental racism. As Upton expands, “conventions of the Euro-American monument building tradition [...] were created to celebrate signal leaders and momentous, temporally and geographically constricted events such as battles, rather than long-term struggles by diffuse masses of people” (2015, p. 13).

The memorial topography of the Deep South thus affirms Rob Nixon’s contention that dominant frames of memory are ill-suited to the representation

1 The discussion here is based on fieldwork carried out in the Birmingham Industrial District in July, 2019.

2 This dynamic is particularly visible in Alabama, where the (white-centric) history of the Civil War and the (Black) history of Civil Rights run parallel to each other throughout the memorial landscape, but are never brought into conversation. As Upton (2015) contends, “the dual-heritage ideology necessitates that celebrants of each heritage refrain from criticizing, expatiating upon, or even directly acknowledging, the other” (17).

3 Examples of key counter-monuments include Maya Lin’s Civil Rights Memorial at the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Equal Justice Initiative’s National Memorial to Peace and Justice – both located in Alabama’s state capital, Montgomery. Examples of recent counter-museums include the Whitney Plantation in Louisiana and EJI’s Legacy Museum in Montgomery.

of “disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world” (2011, p. 11). The recent environmental turn in memory studies foregrounds the legacies of “slow violence” and their uneven, injurious effects upon human and more-than-human life. Nascent research in this field has focused on the conceptual and imaginative challenges posed by multi-scalar phenomena such as climate change, and the need to rethink orthodox models of mourning, agency, and responsibility in light of these developments (Bond, de Bruyn and Rapson, 2017; Cunsolo and Landman, 2017; Craps et al., 2018; de Massol de Rebetz, 2020). However, as we have argued elsewhere, “memory studies must also attend to real-world entanglements of lived experience and environmental catastrophe to understand how past and present modes of social and ecological violence intertwine” (Bond & Rapson, 2023, p. 80). Taking up this challenge, this article critiques the intersection of public memory and industrial heritage in Birmingham, Alabama, to underscore how the whitewashing of the past is fundamentally connected to the greenwashing of the present.

## 2 Racial Capitalism in Birmingham, Alabama

Structures of racial capitalism have determined the possibilities (and impossibilities) of life in the Deep South since the arrival of the first European colonialists and the African men, women, and children they enslaved and brutalised. The concept of racial capitalism is most often associated with Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* (1983). Robinson argued that Karl Marx’s account of capitalism neglected “the ideological processes of slavery, racism, and nationalism” (Saldanha, 2019, p. 16), negating the experiences of non-white, non-European subjects. Although *Das Kapital* acknowledges that colonialism and slavery laid the foundations for industrial capitalism, Marx relegates this phase to the prehistory of “primitive accumulation”. Robinson, by contrast, argues that the “development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions” (Robinson, 2000, p. 2) from the start.

The idea of racial capitalism has garnered renewed attention in recent years as critical race theorists have reconsidered “the capitalism/racism nexus [...] in light of twenty-first century developments” (Fraser, 2019), such as the rise of white supremacist neo-nationalism. Nancy Fraser (2019) argues that attention to racial capitalism necessitates a differentiation between the “*exploitation* of wage labour in commodity production” and “capital’s *expropriation* of

conquered peoples". In thinking exploitation alongside expropriation, Fraser (2019) contends, we reveal the "structural basis in capitalist society for racial oppression". While these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the burden of expropriation has overwhelmingly fallen on minoritized racial and ethnic groups. As Fraser (2019) goes on to clarify:

Distinct from Marxian exploitation, expropriation is accumulation by other means. Dispensing with the contractual relation through which capital purchases "labour power" in exchange for wages, expropriation works by *confiscating* capacities and resources and *conscripting* them into circuits of capital expansion. The confiscation may be blatant and violent, as in New World slavery – or it may be veiled by a cloak of commerce, as in the predatory loans and debt foreclosures of the present era.

From slavery to convict leasing, industrial expansion to redlining, the Birmingham area of Alabama is a paradigmatic landscape of racial capitalism. Its role as the centre of heavy industry has its roots in the Civil War when the Confederate government invested heavily in iron and coal industries for munitions. Between 1861–65, over a dozen new iron furnaces were created in Alabama and industrial slavery replaced plantation slavery as the dominant mode of racialised labour.

Nearly all the early industrial facilities in the state were constructed by enslaved workers. As Douglas Blackmon reports:

Thousands of slaves had migrated into industrial settings just before and during the war. The extraordinary value of organizing a gang of slave men to quickly accomplish an arduous manual task – such as enlarging a mine and extracting its contents, or constructing railroads through the most inhospitable frontier regions – became obvious during the manpower shortages of wartime.

BLACKMON 2008, p. 44

The end of the Civil War brought a further expansion of industry as Southerners strove to free the region from a dependence upon agriculture that many saw as a key factor in the failure of the Confederacy. With the abolition of slavery, industrialists sought other means of conscripting cheap and disposable labour. Their answer lay in a legal loophole in the Thirteenth amendment, which decreed that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall

exist within the United States” (U.S. Const. amend. XIII). What emerged from this exemption was convict leasing: a brutal system of expropriation under which African Americans were arrested on spurious charges and leased to private employers for indefinite intervals.

Convict leasing transformed Southern penology, financially and demographically. Imprisonment became a profitable business, lining the pockets of lawmakers, landowners, and industrialists. While Black inmates made up less than 1% of the prison population prior to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, in the years after they numbered up to 90% (Childs, 2015, p. 9). This dramatic shift provided the politico-legal solution to a troubling convergence between an economic crisis of labour and a cultural crisis of white supremacy.

The practice of convict leasing proved indispensable to Birmingham’s industrial growth. As Brian Kelly expands:

Racial subordination and industrial exploitation were not discrete systems of social control operating independently in a haphazard fashion. Together they formed an organic and indivisible whole, constituting the cornerstone of the region’s plans for development and, ironically, the key element in its formula for “progress”.

KELLY 2001, p. 9

Working conditions in the mines and factories to which leases were condemned were grim, as “convict leasing adopted practices almost identical to those emerging in slavery in the 1850s” (Blackmon, 2008, p. 57). The consequences for Black workers were horrific: “in the first two years that Alabama leased its prisoners, nearly 20 percent of them died. In the following year, mortality rose to 35 percent. In the fourth, nearly 45 percent were killed” (Blackmon, 2008, p. 57). However, as we will see, this history is severely underrepresented in Birmingham’s industrial heritage, which is one of the main tourist draws in the city.

### 3 Heritage and Racial Capitalism in Birmingham’s Historic Industrial District

Convict leasing was outlawed in Alabama in July 1928. Along with the Great Depression and the advent of international competition, the loss of this expropriated labour force ushered in a substantial decline in Birmingham’s

iron and steel manufacture, leading to the closure of many of its major sites of production. Today, much of the remaining industrial infrastructure, including furnaces and coke ovens, has been incorporated into public parks, both in the city and the surrounding area. In 1993, a study undertaken by the Birmingham Historical Society for the National Parks Service proposed the formal development of a Birmingham Historic Industrial District. It surveyed approximately 600 sites and highlighted those with the most national significance, noting:

The most interesting element of the industrial history of the District was the labour force, which primarily consisted of African Americans. Unlike their northern counterparts, the iron plantations and the burgeoning iron and steel mills of the Birmingham District harnessed the abundant regional labour force of slaves, before and during the Civil War, and the freed African Americans afterwards. The prevalent use of convict labour is an element of the New South which can also be told in the District. The struggles of African Americans to be recognized and given the same rights as their white counterparts are important historical events that are presented at the Civil Rights Institute which opened in 1992 in Birmingham.

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 1993, p. 4

Whilst concluding that the District's resources rendered it unsuitable for inclusion in the National Park System as a "service unit" the authors of the study recommended its preservation and encouraged further research into its labour history. The chairman of the steering committee Philip Morris argued:

In an area often stymied by difference, this District creates a common, cross-jurisdictional goal. In an aging industrial valley and an often-depressed coal mining district, the economic impact of local pride and confidence that can stem from these proposals could reach well beyond tourism.

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 1993, p. 4

Three decades later, Birmingham's industrial heritage has only marginally engaged with the "most interesting element" of this history.<sup>4</sup> Instead, sites of

4 Birmingham's Civil Rights Institute remains the primary space for representing the regional African American experience, although convict leasing is not a substantial theme in the Museum and the overarching narrative of civil rights as a *past* struggle for *present* equality elides the ongoing environmental racism faced by black residents in city.

industrial heritage have been branded primarily as locations of progressive change, providing opportunities for contemporary leisure activities. Across the Historic Industrial District, Birmingham's industrial history is framed by a spectacular narrative of progress that elides the realities of racial capitalism and the expropriated labour of convict workers on which industrial expansion relied.

Two key sites in the heritage landscape are Vulcan Park and the Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark. Vulcan Park is centred around the largest cast iron statue in the world, a representation of the Roman god Vulcan in the form of an aproned artisan metal worker. Commissioned for the 1903 World Fair to commemorate Birmingham's industrial heyday, the statue has a 'cheeky' aesthetic: Vulcan's naked buttocks are his most notable feature, and visitors queue to take selfies with these in view. “Come see the Magic City from Vulcan's view”, leaflets proclaim: “explore the city's only indoor and outdoor exhibits that feature the region's history as well as the story of the iconic 56-foot statue that has become the beloved symbol of Birmingham.” An observation deck at the top of Vulcan's pedestal allows visitors to enjoy “breathtaking panoramic views” of Birmingham. Outdoor exhibits signpost the location of other prominent industrial sites visible across the horizon. Merchandise representing Vulcan's posterior is also available to buy. A sign on “Memories of Vulcan” explains that throughout the statue's history, “Motorists from across the United States visited the Vulcan gift shop to buy low cost, one of a kind items inspired by the world's largest cast iron statue”.

From the early twentieth century, Vulcan's profitability as a tourist attraction was dependent on disavowing the structures of racial capitalism that were fundamental to the success of the industry the site commemorated. The commodification of “low cost” artifacts is eerily reminiscent of the devaluation of objectified Black life that led to the deaths of so many convict labourers – a process obscured and screened by Vulcan's successful rebranding of Birmingham's industrial horror as a subject for humorous consumption. There is, however, further information on iron industry labour in the indoor exhibit, where the materials needed to fuel Birmingham's industrial success are listed as coal, limestone and iron ore. A sign allocates “WORKERS” as the “FOURTH INGREDIENT” in this process, positioning (racialised) human bodies alongside other natural resources essential to the production of iron. The display reads:

In addition to natural resources, Birmingham's iron and steel industry needed an enormous amount of labour. Although the work was very difficult, people flocked to Birmingham to escape extreme poverty, pursue their hopes for a better life, and seek their fortunes. Blacks and whites,

and immigrants arrived to work in the growing industry. They worked long hours performing back-breaking tasks, with many labouring seven days a week.

The exposition thus implies that to work in Birmingham's mine and factories was an aspirational *choice*, which was not the case for expropriated workers trapped in the convict leasing system. It also suggests that hardships were experienced by all workers equally, regardless of colour.

The de-racialisation of convict labour is emphasised by the signs that follow: four male figures, two Black and two white, are positioned next to text describing the labour they undertook. The Black men are James Purdue, "Boilermaker", and Will Battle, "Scale Car Operator", the white men Clyde Love, "Coal Miner", and Jon Knox, "Convict Labourer". Knox's sign is used by the museum to provide the following general information about convict leasing: "From 1846 to 1928, over 100,000 men convicted of petty crimes, were forced to perform hard labour in the service of Birmingham's industry. There were many gruesome accounts of convicts who were worked to death". The exposition then goes on to describe how Knox was murdered in the mines as punishment for fainting at work, sparking public outrage and increasing pressure to end convict leasing. The museum's decision to make the only convict labourer in their exhibit a white man results in a colour-blind handling of the system, ignoring the fact that approximately 97% of county convicts in Alabama were Black. In telling only this story, the unequal nature of this society, as well as the convict leasing system it upheld, is rendered invisible by the museum.

A similar marginalisation of racial capitalism takes place at Sloss Furnaces, a collection of industrial ruins with a visitor centre containing a small exhibit on its history. Sloss's historic structures are maintained but heavily rusted – an industrial spectacle on a grand scale, comprised of towering boilers, furnaces, and blast stoves. As the attraction's website explains:

The dramatic scale and complexity of the plant's industrial structure, machines and tools make the Sloss collection a unique contribution to the interpretation of twentieth-century ironmaking technology and presents a remarkable perspective on the era when America grew to world industrial dominance. At the same time, Sloss is an important reminder of the hopes and struggles of the people who worked in the industries that made some men wealthy, and Birmingham the "Magic City".

SLOSS FURNACES NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK, n.d.



Sloss Furnaces was the property of James Withers Sloss, one of Alabama’s most prosperous merchants and plantation owners, and “the man more responsible than any other for the sensational economic boom of what was called ‘the Magic City’” (Blackmon, 2008, p. 308). Sloss co-founded the Pratt Coal and Coke Company. Together with his Furnaces, these two companies were the largest in the state by the mid 1880s, with a 90% Black workforce. A booklet about Sloss published by the Historic Landmark Foundation (and sold at the site) presents the industrialist as embracing the racist philosophy that African Americans were suited to strenuous labour in hot physical conditions, and less likely than white workers to strike: “the coloured man likes the furnace business; he has a fondness for it” (Sloss, cited in Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark, 2016).<sup>5</sup> The booklet explains that “however bad conditions might be, workers, primarily African American, saw this type of labour as preferable to the abject poverty they were experiencing in the countryside”.

Unsurprisingly, the publication makes no mention of convict labourers who were unable to exercise such a preference. There is also no inclusion of convict leasing in the exposition in the visitor centre exhibit that celebrates James Withers Sloss. Rather than integrate the history of convict leasing into his story, the Landmark has produced a separate booklet on “The Role of Convict Labour in the Industrial Development of Birmingham” (n.d. b), which the visitor is required to purchase in order to access the information. Indeed, Sloss Furnaces are keen to distance the site from the memory of convict leasing; as the “History” section of their website explains: “Sloss utilized the convict leasing system only in its coal mines” (Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark n.d.), effectively compartmentalising the issue and ignoring the inconvenient truth that the furnaces could not have operated without the materials produced by expropriated labour.

In addition to marginalising the racialised violence of convict leasing, both Vulcan Park and Sloss Furnaces draft Birmingham’s racial history into a teleology of civic progress. At Vulcan, race is a central theme in the museum’s exhibit on “Terminus Station: Birmingham’s Great Temple of Travel” a city landmark which was controversially demolished in 1969 having previously been the location of multiple civil rights protests against segregation. The exhibit briefly outlines the significance of the site for desegregation, and displays a copy of the Birmingham Pledge, which claims to be:

5 Such beliefs were commonly used as defences for slavery and the expropriated systems of labour that followed it, from convict leasing to sharecropping.

a personal renunciation of racism launched in 1998 as an initiative of Operation New Birmingham Community Affairs Committee. It is intended to help the world focus on and practice a non-racist philosophy. It has been signed by over 70,000 people from around the world.

The exhibit creates a self-congratulatory narrative that connects Birmingham's racial history to the wider story of the Civil Rights movement. In so doing, the museum erroneously implies that the struggle for racial equity has been won, displacing it from the labour history of the state and the legacies of environmental racism that continue to divide Birmingham's urban landscape.

At Sloss, the history of race relations is also primarily included in the story of the site as a prelude to successful civil rights action and social unity. As one sign reads, "White workers attended fellow black worker's baseball games", and Sloss's living quarters are described as a site of activism and independence "that would prove vital in the future effort for civil rights". Furthermore, the same sign suggests that, "Serving as a home for multiple generations of Sloss employed African American families, [Sloss Quarters] helped to provide a relief from the suffering of the Great Depression".

The master-narrative of Birmingham's industrial heritage at sites throughout the Historic Industrial District thus occludes the history of racial capitalism through a series of important elisions: ignoring the link between industrial expansion, the Civil War, and the end of plantation slavery; downplaying the racialised nature of convict leasing and leaving the cemetery which contains the bodies of forced labourers from the Pratt Mines unmarked; and drafting the struggle for civil rights into a celebratory narrative which ignores the fact that "between 1947 and 1965, there were about 50 bombings targeting Black homes and institutions; some reports indicate that as many as 100 bombs were detonated in the city between 1955 and 1965" (Taylor, 2014, p. 177). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the link between industrial expansion and environmental racism also goes unacknowledged across Birmingham's heritage landscape.

#### 4 Environmental Racism in Birmingham, Alabama

The critical discourse on racial capitalism underscores the symbiosis of racial and environmental violence. Arun Saldanha draws an explicit connection between the brutality of colonialism and slavery and contemporary environmental racism. He argues, "Just like early-modern Europeans claimed entire continents and oceans and grew powerful from coerced labour, the

vulnerability to environmental disaster of some groups today systematically follows from the actions of still mostly white elites” (Saldanha, 2019, p. 8). From settler-colonialism to the present, racial capitalist systems have produced and perpetuated environmental racism across the Deep South.

The term “environmental racism” was coined by Civil Rights leader, Dr Benjamin Chavez, in 1982. As Robert Bullard defines it:

*Environmental racism* refers to any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or colour. Environmental racism combines with public politics and industry practices to provide *benefits* for whites while shifting industry *costs* to people of colour. It is reinforced by governmental, legal, economic, political, and military institutions.

BULLARD 1993, p. 23

Although a global phenomenon, critical accounts of environmental racism have often focused on the Deep South because of the particular history of the region. As Beverley Wright explains: “A history of human slavery spawned environmental racism” (2005, p. 87); a “colonial mentality exists in the South, where local governments and big business take advantage of people who are politically and economically powerless” (2005, p. 88). This mentality emerged from “the region’s earlier marriage to slavery and the plantation system – a brutal system that exploited both humans and the land” (2005, p. 88).

From the plantation economy onwards, the expropriated labour of the South’s Black population has been treated as a resource, ready for extraction, in much the same way that its raw materials – sugar, gas, iron, oil – have been exploited for profit. This violent metabolisation of human energy shares clear similarities with post-Emancipation practices such as convict leasing, under which Southern states harnessed the labour of imprisoned African Americans to power new industries such as coal, iron and steel, with disastrous social and environmental effects.

Today, environmental racism is one of the structural consequences of racial capitalism, as heavy industries across the Deep South continue to systematically devalue both Black lives and Black life-worlds. The disproportionate environmental risks faced by communities of colour are the result of decades of exclusionary zoning, injurious housing practices, and government and corporate corruption. The legacies of historic injustices are visible in the siting of majority Black prisons on toxic land where inmates work in harsh conditions for little or no remuneration. They are also palpable

in the widespread construction of petrochemical plants in close proximity to African American neighbourhoods. These low-income communities shoulder the environmental impact of these refineries, but receive minimal economic benefit from them (Bond and Rapson, 2023).

While Birmingham's historical development represents a paradigmatic story of racial capitalism, its contemporary landscape provides an archetypal case study of environmental racism. Katherine Webb-Hehn (2019) describes Birmingham as "one of the most segregated cities in the nation", and the racialisation of the urban environment stretches back to Birmingham's original incorporation in 1871. Anti-Black zoning ordinances were enforced across the South from the late nineteenth century. In 1915, a belief that Birmingham's Black population was growing too quickly led to a general zoning code, which enshrined segregation in law.<sup>6</sup> This was revised in 1926 to form a comprehensive racialised zoning ordinance. In 1944, the General City Code made it unlawful for Black residents to live in areas zoned A-1 or white. These laws effectively relegated Black residents to the least desirable and most hazard-prone land, which was ripe for industrial incursion.

By the 1960s, Birmingham was routinely referred to as "Smoke City" (Byington, 2017). Many of the worst toxins were expended into Black communities. Steel mills and related industries were barely regulated, and the topographical make-up of Jones Valley and the mountains surrounding the Magic City exacerbated air pollution, trapping toxic effluents in the city. As Pat Byington (2017) comments, "The combination of heavy industry and our natural landscape created a lethal toxic brew throughout the valley that had a devastating impact on people's lives". By 1970, levels of pollution had become so bad that the University of Alabama's Dr Ben Branscomb, a world-renowned pulmonologist and one of the area's first clean air advocates, estimated that 27% of all the patients in Birmingham Veterans Administration Hospital had been diagnosed with emphysema. The city was subsequently regarded as "ground-zero for the new 1970 Clean Air Act" (Byington, 2017), which was passed by the newly established Environmental Protection Agency. The Clean Air Act was put to the test in November 1971 when Birmingham's pollution was so bad a local federal judge ordered the closure of 23 industrial plants in an effort to protect public health.

Today, Birmingham remains a highly polluted city. As Dennis Pillion (2019) remarks, "Alabama industrial facilities released more than 82 million pounds

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6 These exclusionary land-use practices were paralleled by unequal labour laws that prevented Black industrial workers from unionising with white colleagues. See McIven (1995) and Kelly (2001).

of toxic material into the air, land and water in 2017”. That same year, “Alabama had the fifth highest volume of toxic releases into waterways [in the US] at 11.2 million pounds, and the fifth most toxic substances released into the air with 27.1 million pounds”. (Pillion, 2019) Majority-Black neighbourhoods like North Birmingham bear the brunt of this pollution. Matt Smith (2018) notes that being “among the poorest pockets of one of the poorest states, [...] North Birmingham has long been a hotbed of environmental injustice”.

In 2018, this majority African American neighbourhood had a poverty rate of 85%, more than double that of the rest of Birmingham. According to Angela Caputo and Sharon Lerner (2021), “The neighbourhood faces a toxic threat both past and present. Poisonous remnants of heavy metal production at facilities long since closed – carcinogens like lead and arsenic – lace the soil. But there is also pollution that is ongoing and severe”. Furthermore:

There has been so much industrial churn in North Birmingham over the past century that the EPA can’t pinpoint the exact source of the contamination. By the agency’s calculation, the area has featured at one time or another: 20 foundries and kilns; seven coal, coke, or byproducts facilities; 26 scrap and metal processing plants; and four chemical plants.

CAPUTO & LERNER, 2021

Two plants still operate on the north side of the area, ERP Compliant Coke and Drummond Coal’s ABC Coke, the largest producer of foundry coke in the US. These plants, which have been running for more than a century, emit tens of thousands of pounds of toxic chemicals a year. In 2011, after the EPA found toxic contaminants leaching from one of the sites, it added 1,000 acres of North Birmingham to its emergency Superfund programme. In order to qualify for long-term remediation, Superfund sites need to be added to the EPA’s National Priorities List. However, in North Birmingham corporate corruption has caused this action to stall, meaning residents remain exposed to damaging pollutants without heavy industry being held responsible. In 2017, an executive from Drummond Coal, two attorneys, a state representative and a regional EPA administrator were found criminally responsible for encouraging elected officials to prevent further EPA action. They had also been instrumental in intimidating North Birmingham residents. A combination of criminal negligence and weak enforcement of environmental regulations has thus left the residents of North Birmingham fighting for their lives.

North Birmingham is a key example of the kind of place that Geoff Ward describes as a “microclimate of racial meaning” (2016, p. 575). Such sites illustrate how the legacies of historic injustice correlate with contemporary

suffering. From convict leasing to segregation and redlining, racial capitalist structures have exposed Black labourers and communities to highly unsanitary air and polluted land and waterways, generating an ongoing chronicle of environmental racism. As Ward explains, “areas marked by [...] pronounced histories of racial violence remain distinct on various measures of contemporary conflict, violence and inequality” (2016, p. 576). He argues that we should thus comprehend “the history of racial violence as a dimension of toxicity in our environment” (2016, p. 576) – both literally and metaphorically.

Places like North Birmingham reveal the social and environmental toxicity of racialised microclimates, as registered in contemporary lived experience and mnemonic erasure. Throughout Alabama, Black communities shoulder the ongoing burden of the state’s industrial past. Corporate tax breaks have in turn led to the ongoing relocation of toxic waste from across the US to majority African American areas such as Uniontown, near Selma. As Oliver Millman (2019) remarks, “Alabama has gained a reputation as the dumping ground of the US, with toxic waste from across the country typically heaped near poor, rural communities, many with large African American populations.” Today, Alabama has 173 operational landfills, many of them clustered in the Black Belt – a region with low land values and extreme poverty. These manifestations of contemporary environmental racism are closely tied to the state’s industrial history – and yet this continuum of racial capitalism is repeatedly marginalised at heritage sites across the Birmingham District.

## 5 Heritage and Environmental Racism in the Birmingham District

The Birmingham Historic Industrial District has a rural counterpart to its urban heritage-scape. Outside the city, major nineteenth-century furnaces have been incorporated into historic state parks. In its new iteration, the industrial infrastructure of the iron and steel industry has become a backdrop for nostalgic rural pastimes. Tannehill Ironworks State Historic Park constitutes a notable example of this form of industrial heritage. Originally a critical site for the production of iron for the Confederacy, Tannehill is now largely a centre of outdoor recreation (fishing, hiking and camping) scattered with approximately forty historic buildings, including the largest collection of nineteenth century log cabins in the South (some of which have been converted into rental accommodation).

The Iron and Steel Museum of Alabama is located within the site. Neither labour nor the environmental impact of industrialisation are prominent themes in the museum. Exhibits on the area’s geology and the technicalities of

iron forging and casting take up the majority of the space. However, a sign on “Alabama’s Iron Boom” outlines how, from 1880:

Ironworks, rolling mills and factories began to spring up in and around Birmingham utilizing easy access to coal, iron ore, rail lines and inexpensive labour [...] the opening of Pratt Mines in 1879 assured the new industries a reliable supply of coke for fuel.

There is no mention of why the labour was so “inexpensive” (convict leasing), the conditions workers were exposed to at Pratt Mines (a notoriously brutal and dangerous site), or how the natural resources mined at Pratt and elsewhere would contribute to Birmingham’s metamorphosis from “Magic City” to “Smoke City” by the mid-twentieth century.

The framing of Tannehill on its website exemplifies the rhetorical naturalisation of heavy extractive industry:

Nature has blessed Tannehill. The beautiful tree-lined valley, hillsides rich in ore and swiftly flowing Roupes Creek made this a perfect setting for a successful iron making operation, as the early settlers realized. The same ingredients afford today’s visitors a pleasurable escape from modern life [...] Steeped in history, Tannehill feels timeless. The cotton gin, pioneer farm and working gristmill preserve a long-gone way of life. Hiking trails retrace historic roadways. Artifacts of Alabama’s 19th century iron industry displayed in the Iron and Steel Museum put in perspective the massive stone furnaces, Tannehill’s awe-inspiring centerpiece.

TANNEHILL STATE PARK, n.d.

In mnemonic terms, Tannehill is a somewhat contradictory space. Simultaneously “timeless” and “steeped in history”, the site fetishizes the machinery and infrastructure of extraction whilst offering visitors an “escape from modern life” – a retreat to the past prefigured by the pastoral countryside. Although marketed as a celebration of history, the Park has become a site of state-sanctioned forgetting. The “awe-inspiring centerpiece”, the furnaces, were constructed by enslaved people from sandstone they had cut and transported, yet the signage on the structures instead honours the “major” contribution of the furnace’s output to the Confederate cause. A marker is also “dedicated to the valiant men and women who served the Confederacy in this area”. The site thus omits mention of slavery at the same time as valorising a cause which was substantially motivated by the desire to uphold enslavement as a fundamental pillar of the Southern economy and industry.

As James Bennet and Karen Utz note:

Somewhat ironically, the Tannehill site may contribute more to the state's economy as a state park than it did in antebellum times as an iron furnace and foundry. Each year more than 450,000 people visit Tannehill Park or attend events there, making it Alabama's largest Civil War era attraction [...] the Tannehill project has become a national model for how local governments can turn abandoned industrial sites into tourist attractions and outdoor recreational facilities.

BENNET & UTZ 2010, p. 24

Other sites have attempted a similar rehabilitation. The remains of the Bibb Naval Furnace, the only ironworks owned by the Confederate Army, are the centrepiece of Brierfield Ironworks Historical State Park. The park is advertised as combining the "feeling of history long past with the excitement of a modern park setting. Visitors can view the furnace ruins, hike, swim, camp and enjoy the Alabama outdoors in one of the most peaceful and tranquil settings in Central Alabama" (Birmingham 365, 2023). Signage highlights the Confederate purchase of the ironworks just after their construction in 1862, although fails to mention that enslaved workers were included in the price paid. Brierfield also features a handful of other historic structures including a Church and Post Office, several birding trails, and a swimming pool. Signs advertise for Civil War Enthusiasts to join the park's re-enactment events.

Although Tannehill and Brierfield are amongst the most substantial parks in the Birmingham District, a plethora of others are dotted across the rural area surrounding the city, including Shelby Ironworks Park, Red Mountain Park, Lewisburg Coal Ovens Park, Ruffner Mountain Nature Centre, and Blocton Coke Ovens Park. In addition to the historical erasures they perform, these sites manifest a displacement of the memory of heavy industry away from neighbourhoods that are still contaminated by its legacies and exposed to ongoing pollution from the corporations, that have succeeded Pratt and Bibb as Birmingham's industrial powerhouses. While the iron and steel industry of the Birmingham District was the driving force for the extensive exploitation and extraction of natural materials, with the exception of Vulcan Park and Sloss Furnaces, the appeal of its heritage is predicated on an escape *into* nature. It would be impossible for any visitor to Tannehill or Briarfield to discern a connection between this industry and the "lethal toxic brew" it unleashed, which continues, in the form of contemporary environmental racism, to be its most pernicious legacy. Instead, industrial heritage has been merged seamlessly into present day eco-tourism.



## 6 Conclusion

As we have seen, racial capitalism has operated as the structuring principle of life in Alabama since the arrival of the first European settler-colonialists. The economies of plantation slavery and the extractive industries that followed it were dependent on the devaluation of Black life and the expropriation of racialised labour. They were also reliant upon the exploitation of the natural environment, first in the production of cash crops produced by enslaved labour, and second in the extraction of mineral resources such as coal and iron that were necessary for the manufacturing of steel. However, neither the human cost of expropriated labour nor the environmental (and social) impact of exploited land feature within the heritage narrative of Birmingham’s contemporary memory industry. Instead, as we have seen, at rural and urban tourist attractions across the Birmingham area, the history of convict leasing and the lived experience of environmental racism are marginalised in favour of a celebratory, naturalised narrative of industrial and racial progress.

It is our hope that, in highlighting the connection between historical whitewashing and contemporary greenwashing, the burgeoning field of environmental memory studies might provide a forum for reclaiming the disavowed violence perpetuated by the inequitable structures of racial capitalism. It is only by attending to real-world entanglements of lived experience and environmental catastrophe, and by foregrounding the exhausted lives and landscapes marginalised by hegemonic heritage practices, that we can begin to understand how past and present modes of social and ecological violence intersect.

**Lucy Bond** is Reader in Literature and Memory Studies at the University of Westminster. She has published widely on memory and trauma, particularly as they relate to terrorism, race, and social and environmental justice. Lucy is the author of *Frames of Memory after 9/11: Culture Criticism, Politics and Law* (2015) and co-author of the Routledge New Critical Idiom guide to *Trauma* (2020, with Stef Craps). She is editor of *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders* (2014, with Jessica Rapson), *Memory Unbound: New Directions in Memory Studies* (2016, with Craps and Pieter Vermeulen), *Planetary Memory in Contemporary American Fiction* (2018, with Rapson and Ben de Bruyn), and *The Palgrave Companion to Literary Memory Studies* (2024, with Rapson and Susannah Radstone). Lucy is a partner in the Mnemonics Network for Memory Studies and a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Memory Studies*. Her current project, *Processing Memory: Heritage, Industry, and Environmental Racism in the American Gulf States* (with Rapson)

focuses on the remembering and forgetting of racial and environmental violence in the aftermath of slavery and colonialism.

**Jessica Rapson** is a Senior Lecturer in Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King's College London. Her monograph *Topographies of Suffering: Buchenwald, Babi Yar, Lidice* (Berghahn, 2015) examined the environmental dynamics of Holocaust commemorative landscapes. She has edited collections on the *Transcultural Turn in Memory Studies* (de Gruyter, 2014, with Lucy Bond) and *Planetary Memory in Contemporary American Fiction (Textual Practice, 2017, with Lucy Bond and Ben de Bruyn)* and published a range of chapters and articles on the political and environmental issues pertaining to commemoration and difficult heritage. She is a partner in the London Consortium for Cultural Memory Studies and the Mnemonics network for Memory Studies. She is currently working on a British Academy/Leverhulme sponsored project entitled 'Processing Memory: Heritage, Industry, and Environmental Racism in the American Gulf States' with Lucy Bond (University of Westminster).

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