Urban political ecology II: The abolitionist century

Nik Heynen

University of Georgia, USA

Abstract

Attention to the urban and metropolitan growth of nature can no longer be denied. Nor can the intense scrutiny of racialized, postcolonial and indigenous perspectives on the press and pulse of uneven development across the planet's urban political ecology be deferred any longer. There is sufficient research ranging across antiracist and postcolonial perspectives to constitute a need to discuss what is referred to here as 'abolition ecology'. Abolition ecology represents an approach to studying urban natures more informed by antiracist, postcolonial and indigenous theory. The goal of abolition ecology is to elucidate and extrapolate the interconnected white supremacist and racialized processes that lead to uneven develop within urban environments.

I Introduction

What does race have to do with urban political ecology? The murder of Freddie Gray by Baltimore police on 12 April 2015 precipitated riots that have long been woven into the fabric of the city's urban environment. The expression of anger in the riotous streets of Baltimore was the most explosive since 1968, after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Burning cities offer urban political ecology (UPE) particular insights into the interconnections between infrastructure, property investment, property destruction, white supremacy and biological/chemical/ecological reactions (think habitat disturbance, toxic smoke plumes, dust, fire extinguishing water use, Co_2 pulses, etc.). Riots like these typically occur within the USA to mark boiling frustrations at perennial racial inequalities. And they precipitate a host of both intended and unintended socio-natural outcomes. In Baltimore, both the 1968 and 2015 riots led city managers, homeowners, renters and tourists alike to consider how these events would alter the flow of capital investment and simultaneous circulation of white, brown and black folks moving in and out of the city. Too often, riots are associated with the Schumpeterian 'opportunity' to start with a clean slate. This opportunity often comes at an incredible cost to the people and the city as a whole.

Just as interesting as the discourse connecting the 2015 and 1968 riots in Baltimore is the

Corresponding author:
Nik Heynen, Department of Geography, University of Georgia, GG Building, 210 Field St., Room 204, Athens, GA 30602, USA.
Email: nheynen@uga.edu

absence of discourse surrounding the Baltimore riot of 1861 – which was a conflict between those in support of, and against, the US Civil War. Notably, the 1861 Baltimore riot produced the first deaths by hostile action in the US Civil War. Thus, we can connect Freddie Gray's murder, and the urban political ecological impacts it precipitated, to the Civil Rights Movement and assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, and with abolitionist struggles that have been sewn into the very fabric of US cities since their beginning. This kind of an approach is in line with what Pulido (2015) has recently discussed as 'deep history'. Furthermore, this perspective raises the importance of Boone et al.'s (2014) effort to employ a long-term perspective to show how environmental inequity has been ever-present in Baltimore. Including the 1861 riot into this narrative reminds us that racial capitalism has always produced urban political ecologies. This then exposes, simultaneously, how important abolition ecology is for the future of urban nature.

II Metabolizing racialized nature in the city

In the first report in this series (Heynen, 2014), I set a course toward better embodying the emancipatory possibilities of 'creativity', as articulated by Neil Smith (2006: xi–xv) within 'urban metabolism' as one of UPE's central metaphors. And it is worth pointing out that since that first report there continues to be increased research that expands the theoretical and empirical reach of UPE (see Classens, 2015; Graham, 2015; Holifield and Schuelke, 2015; McLain et al., 2014; Mee et al. 2014; Rice, 2014, Sandberg et al., 2014). In this report I want to ask, specifically: how can internalizing the deep historical spatial logics of the 'ghetto', the 'plantation', the 'colony' and the 'reservation' push UPE to wrestle with both the racialization of uneven urban environments and also the abolition of white supremacy from the

metabolic processes that produce racially uneven urban environments? A review of the literature, as rich as a foundation as it provides, suggests opportunities exist for UPE to more deliberately engage the authority of racial capitalism and colonial rule on urban nature. While UPE is starting to have more of an 'inside' (work that explicitly uses the language of UPE), I want to insist that working within UPE necessitates drawing on work outside for the sake of growth.

While early UPE research implied the importance of uneven social power relations issues, at least such that Agyeman and McEntee (2014: 217) can say that 'race, class, and gender are already established parameters of UPE', framing gestures cannot ever fully articulate the complexity inherent in urban nature. However, over the life course of UPE, rich and vibrant theoretical expansion and empirical nuance has added to the ways in which UPE is starting to grapple with the connections between white supremacy and urban nature. Because UPE owes much of its roots to Marxist theory, even as UPE continues to expand beyond it, there exists the historical-geographical materialist ability to better articulate the contradictory dialectical relations of racial and colonial rule in tight contradiction with neoliberal capitalism.

In *The Wretched of the Earth,* Frantz Fanon said (1963: 39):

> The settler's town is a well fed town, an easygoing town; its belly always full of good things. The settler's town is a town of white people, of foreigners. The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame. . . . The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light.

He goes on to say (1963: 40): 'The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality, and the immense difference of ways

of life never come to mask the human realities.' This articulation of racial capitalism, and the unevenness it perpetuates within urban nature, is bolstered and named as such in the opening pages of Robinson's (1983) *Black Marxism*. On the opening page of Chapter 1 (1983: 9), Robinson proclaims: 'the historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism'. Add to this the urbanizing logics that we can draw from McKittrick (2013: 8) to see that 'the plantation spatializes early conceptions of urban life within the context of a racial economy', and we are closer to recognizing that we have foundational thought close at hand for expanding UPE's reach (also see McKittrick, 2006). Indeed, the tense and uneven socionatural relations inherent to Fanon's discussion of the colonial city continue to challenge geographic investigation of urban nature. Scholars interested in UPE and cognate sub-threads have approached many of the tendencies and relations inherent to his depiction.

Much of the research dealing with racialized and colonial UPE proceeds by detailing and describing the ongoing aftermath and resulting unevenness of the circumstances that produced the uneven urban natures in question. Because of the depth of empirical insight offered in these studies, there is now a robust foundation upon which to build a more attentive abolition ecology. UPE owes much to the literature explicitly dealing with environmental justice (EJ) but, as has been shown, more is needed to help these literatures continue to evolve in synergistic ways (see Holifield et al., 2009; Kurtz, 2009; Pulido, 2000). Some of the earliest work connecting race and UPE in North American contexts interrogated issues of urban form and function through the contexts of urban forests (Heynen et al., 2006, 2007), parks (Brownlow, 2006; Byrne, 2012; Byrne and Wolch, 2009), air quality (Buzzelli, 2007, 2008) and food politics (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015; Slocum and Cadieux, 2015).

In a recent special issue of *Antipode* entitled 'Race, Space, Nature', we see some new research in this area of scholarship (see Brahinsky, 2014; Dillon, 2014; Linke, 2014; Minkoff-Zern, 2014; Sasser, 2014). In their introduction, the authors describe their project as 'putting forth nested arguments about the way that racialization remains a powerful force in contemporary society, contending that intersections with space and nature offer important lessons about the (de)construction of race'. They argue that 'the pernicious character traits of racial constructs develop through spatial practices and intersect with ideas about "nature" and belonging' (Brahinsky et al., 2014). While there have always been important connections between UPE and EJ research, Ranganathan and Balazs (2015: 405) help strengthen these connections further when they suggest:

> While some have argued that the liberal political philosophy underpinning EJ is at odds with the Marxist roots of UPE (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003), we find this to be a narrow conception of both literatures, and one that is perhaps more true about their origins than their emerging trends. We thus aim to build on a repertoire of supple 'traveling theory' (Robinson and Parnell, 2011) that takes UPE and EJ beyond their respective 'home turfs'.

Beyond North American contexts, the internationalization of UPE into postcolonial geographies has also grown. Again, here too there are rich historical treatments of interconnected power relations shaping urban environments in expansive empirical ways with explosive potential for future development. Relatedly, Myers (2014, p. 129) suggests:

> . . . but the small volume of UPE in urban Africa is made particularly striking by what seems at first glance the rather evident potential given the magnitude of urban environmental-political

challenges and conflicts for scholarly work that examines urban environments from critical political perspectives that build from African conceptualizations.

Lawhon et al.'s (2014) discussion of 'provincializing UPE' through explicitly African urban theory adds important insight to the growth of these postcolonial approaches. While African cities have always been central to the development of UPE, there are other contexts increasingly playing a role in the growth of this research. There have, of course, been discussions of water issues in South Africa (Loftus, 2007, 2012; Smith, 2001), but also in Nepal (Domènech et al., 2013) and Mexico City (Delgado-Ramos, 2015). There have been discussions about waste politics in Oaxaca (Moore, 2009), specifically plastic bag waste, and urban forestry in Nairobi (Njeru, 2006, 2010), informal recyclers' health in Buenos Aires (Parizeau, 2015), air pollution in Delhi (Véron, 2006), and everyday environmental struggles in Managua (Shillington, 2011). Other important and notable contributions to more broadly conceptualizing urban nature in postcolonial contexts include Williams and Mawdsley's (2006) discussion of postcolonial environmental justice in India as well as Doshi's (2013) discussion of environmental subjectivity and graduated citizenship.

III Toward an abolition ecology

In perhaps one of the most important books written about US post-Civil War Reconstruction, DuBois (1995 [1935]) outlined the notion of abolition democracy in *Black Reconstruction in America*, which holds an important forward looking logic for urban political ecology. DuBois discussed how, after they were granted their freedom, many former slaves quickly realized that freedom as they had imagined it might be impossible. The kind of freedom that could ameliorate past uneven development, which had been brought on by white supremacy, would be

impossible because so many of the political, economic, and cultural institutions within the South were based in an ideology of African-American inferiority in the first place. DuBois implied that an end to slavery did not equal freedom and that a politics that kept struggling toward abolition of inequality was necessary. Safransky (2014: 239) shows us how correct DuBois was when she suggests:

> Today, we see the racialized dimensions of settler colonialism in the abrogation or containment of native rights, the racial geography of cities, and the selected absorption of immigrant populations (Obenzinger, 2008) and, I would add, in how postindustrial urban greening and market-based planning function as technologies of erasure in the creation of a new frontier.

A UPE attentive to racial and colonial capitalism, or an abolition ecology, can continue to build from these foundations toward an approach more capable of articulating how cities have been produced through racialized logics that have been engineered into their building blocks, facades, plumes of dust, streams, forests, and air circulation. More importantly, this approach can provide revolutionary ideas about how we can recreate urban nature free from white supremacist logics in the future. In order to keep making progress, I argue that more effort is needed to work through intellectual silos toward more heterodox political theory. Here I am talking explicitly about urban nature and urban political ecology taking deeper insights from both early and contemporary perspectives on the racialized city (see Anderson, 1978; Clark, 1965; Drake and Cayton, 1945; Finney, 2014; Shabazz, 2015). The same commitment to literatures on postcolonial urbanism (see Blaut, 1974; Jacobs, 2002; Roy, 2011; Yeoh, 2001) and indigenous political theory (Alfred, 2005; Coulthard, 2014; Smith, 2005) are just as necessary for realizing the broader potential of UPE. UPE is uniquely situated to draw together multiple currents of theory

toward active and dynamic understandings of socioecological processes and spatial forms. UPE also continues to be positioned to reveal how abolitionist ecology can offer more emancipatory insights into the uneven development of urban nature via the contradictions of racial capitalism.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

References

Agyeman J and McEntee J (2014) Moving the field of food justice forward through the lens of urban political ecology. *Geography Compass* 8(3): 211–220.

Alfred GR (2005) *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*. Peterborough, ONT: Broadview Press.

Anderson E (1978) *A Place on the Corner*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Blaut JM (1974) The ghetto as an internal neo-colony. *Antipode* 6(1): 37–41.

Boone CG, Fragkias M, Buckley GL and Grove JM (2014) A long view of polluting industry and environmental justice in Baltimore. *Cities* 36: 41–49.

Brahinsky R (2014) Race and the making of southeast San Francisco: Towards a theory of race-class. *Antipode* 46(5): 1258–1276.

Brahinsky R, Sasser J and Minkoff-Zern L-A (2014) Race, space, and nature: An introduction and critique. *Antipode* 46(5): 1135–1152.

Brownlow A (2006) An archaeology of fear and environmental change in Philadelphia. *Geoforum* 37(2): 227–245.

Byrne J (2012) When green is white: The cultural politics of race, nature and social exclusion in a Los Angeles urban national park. *Geoforum* 43(3): 595–611.

Byrne J and Wolch J (2009) Nature, race, and parks: Past research and future directions for geographic research. *Progress in Human Geography* 33(6): 743–765.

Buzzelli M (2007) Bourdieu does environmental justice? Probing the linkages between population health and air pollution epidemiology. *Health & Place* 13: 3–13.

Buzzelli M (2008) A political ecology of scale in urban air pollution monitoring. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33(4): 502–517.

Cadieux KV and Slocum R (2015) What does it mean to do food justice? *Journal of Political Ecology* 22: 1–26.

Clark K (1965) *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power*. New York: Harper and Row.

Classens M (2015) The nature of urban gardens: Toward a political ecology of urban agriculture. *Agriculture and Human Values* 32(2): 229–239.

Coulthard GS (2014) *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Delgado-Ramos GC (2015) Water and the political ecology of urban metabolism: The case of Mexico City. *Journal of Political Ecology* 22: 99–114.

Dillon L (2014) Race, waste, and space: Brownfield redevelopment and environmental justice at the Hunters Point Shipyard. *Antipode* 46(5): 1205–1221.

Domènech L, March H and Sauríc D (2013) Contesting large-scale water supply projects at both ends of the pipe in Kathmandu and Melamchi Valleys, Nepal. *Geoforum* 47: 22–31.

Doshi S (2013) Resettlement ecologies: Environmental subjectivity and graduated citizenship in Mumbai. In: Rademacher AM and Sivaramakrishnan K (eds) *Ecologies of Urbanism in India: Metropolitan Civility and Sustainability*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. 225–248.

Drake S and Cayton H (1945) *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

DuBois WEB (1995) *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Fanon F (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth, trans*. Farrington C. New York: Grove.

Finney C (2014) *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Graham S (2015) Life support: The political ecology of urban air. *City* 19(2–3): 192–215.

Heynen N (2014) Urban political ecology I: The urban century. *Progress in Human Geography*. 38(4): 598–604.

Heynen N, Perkins HA and Roy P (2006) The political ecology of uneven urban green space: The impact of political economy on race and ethnicity in producing environmental inequality in Milwaukee. *Urban Affairs Review* 42(1): 3–25.

Heynen N, Perkins HA and Roy P (2007) Failing to grow 'their' own justice? The co-production of racial/gendered labor and Milwaukee's urban forest. *Urban Geography* 28(8): 732–754.

Holifield R, Porter M and Walker G (2009) Introduction: Spaces of environmental justice: Frameworks for critical engagement. *Antipode* 41(4): 591–612.

Holifield RB and Schuelke N (2015) The place and time of the political in urban political ecology: Contested imaginations of a river's future. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105(2): 294–303.

Jacobs JM (2002) *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*. London: Routledge.

Kurtz HE (2009) Acknowledging the racial state: An agenda for environmental justice research. *Antipode* 41(4): 684–704.

Lawhon M, Ernstson H and Silver J (2014) Provincializing urban political ecology: Towards a situated UPE through African urbanism. *Antipode* 46(2): 497–516.

Linke U (2014) Racializing cities, naturalizing space: The seductive appeal of iconicities of dispossession. *Antipode* 46(5): 1222–1239.

Loftus A (2007) Working the socio-natural relations of the urban waterscape in South Africa. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31(1): 4–59.

Loftus A (2012) *Everyday Environmentalism: Creating an Urban Political Ecology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McKittrick K (2006) *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McKittrick K (2013) Plantation futures. *Small Axe* 17(3: 42): 1–15.

McLain R, Hurley PT, Emery MR and Poe MR (2014). Gathering 'wild' food in the city: Rethinking the role of foraging in urban ecosystem planning and management. *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability* 19(2): 220–240.

Mee KJ, Instone L, Williams M, Palmer J and Vaughan N (2014) Renting over troubled waters: An urban political ecology of rental housing. *Geographical Research* 52(4): 365–376.

Minkoff-Zern L-A (2014) Knowing 'good food': Immigrant knowledge and the racial politics of farmworker food insecurity. *Antipode* 46(5) 1190–1204.

Moore S (2009) The excess of modernity: Garbage politics in Oaxaca, Mexico. *The Professional Geographer* 61: 426–437.

Myers GA (2014) Toward expanding links between political geography and african studies. *Geography Compass* 8(2): 125–136.

Njeru J (2006) The urban political ecology of plastic bag waste problem in Nairobi, Kenya. *Geoforum* 37: 1046–1058.

Njeru J (2010) 'Defying' democratization and environmental protection in Kenya: The case of Karura Forest reserve in Nairobi. *Political Geography* 29(3): 333–342.

Obenzinger H (2008) Naturalizing cultural pluralism, Americanizing Zionism: The settler colonial basis to early-twentieth-century progressive thought. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107(4): 651–669.

Parizeau K (2015) Urban political ecologies of informal recyclers' health in Buenos Aires, Argentina. *Health & Place* 33: 67–74.

Pulido L (2000) Rethinking environmental racism: White privilege and urban development in Southern California. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90(1): 12–40.

Pulido L (2015) Geographies of race and ethnicity I: White supremacy vs white privilege in environmental racism research. *Progress in Human Geography*. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0309132514563008 (accessed 29 October 2015).

Ranganathan M and Balazs C (2015) Water marginalization at the urban fringe: Environmental justice and urban political ecology across the North–South divide. *Urban Geography* 36(3): 403–423.

Rice JL (2014) An urban political ecology of climate change governance. *Geography Compass* 8(6): 381–394.

Robinson CJ (1983) *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Robinson J and Parnell S (2011) Traveling theory: Embracing post-neoliberalism through Southern cities. In: Bridge G and Watson S (eds) *The New Blackwell Companion to the City*. London: Wiley, 521–531.

Roy A (2011) Slumdog cities: Rethinking subaltern urbanism. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35(2): 223–238.

Safransky S (2014) Greening the urban frontier: Race, property, and resettlement in Detroit. *Geoforum* 56: 237–248.

Sandberg LA, Bardekjian A and Butt S (2014) *Urban Forests, Trees and Greenspace: A Political Ecology Perspective*. London: Routledge.

Sasser J (2014) From darkness into light: Race, population, and environmental advocacy. *Antipode* 46(5): 1240–1257.

Shabazz R (2015) *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

Shillington L (2011) Urban political ecology in the Global South: Everyday environmental struggles in Managua, Nicaragua. In: Edensor T and Jayne M (eds) *Urban Theory Beyond 'the West': A World of Cities*. London: Routledge, 295–310.

Slocum R and Cadieux KV (2015) Notes on the practice of food justice in the US: Understanding and confronting trauma and inequity. *Journal of Political Ecology* 22: 27–52.

Smith A (2005) *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Smith L (2001) The urban political ecology of water in Cape Town. *Urban Forum* 12(2): 204–224.

Smith N (2006) Foreword. In: Heynen N, Kaika M and Swyngedouw E (eds) *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*. London: Routledge, xi–xv.

Swyngedouw E and Heynen N C (2003) Urban political ecology, justice and the politics of scale. *Antipode* 35(5): 898–918.

Véron R (2006) Remaking urban environments: The political ecology of air pollution in Delhi. *Environment and Planning A* 38(11): 2093–2109.

Williams G and Mawdsley E (2006) Postcolonial environmental justice: Government and governance in India. *Geoforum* 37(5): 660–670.

Yeoh BSA (2001) Postcolonial cities. *Progress in Human Geography* 25(3): 456–468.