



# Urban political ecology III: The feminist and queer century

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## Abstract

Given the ongoing importance of nature in the city, better grappling with the gendering and queering of urban political ecology offers important insights that collectively provides important political possibilities. The cross-currents of feminist political ecology, queer ecology, queer urbanism and more general contributions to feminist urban geography create critical opportunities to expand UPE's horizons toward more egalitarian and praxis-centered prospects. These intellectual threads in conversation with the broader Marxist roots of UPE, and other second-generation variants, including what I have previously called abolition ecology, combine to at once show the ongoing promises of heterodox UPE and at the same time contribute more broadly beyond the realm of UPE.

## Keywords

feminist political ecology, feminist urban geography, queer ecology, queer urbanism, urban political ecology (UPE)

## I Introduction: What does feminizing and queering have to do with urban political ecology?

I am framing this final report within what Nagar calls 'radical vulnerability', which is for me best captured by a question she asks:

Can notions such as solidarity and responsibility, trust and hope, vulnerability and reflexivity serve a useful purpose in ethically navigating the forms of epistemic violence in which metropolitan academics are, and will always remain, complicit? (2014: 3)

My argument in this report is that if the future of UPE is going to keep pace with the ongoing production and reproduction of uneven urban natures, it must continue developing in relation to the embodied and heterodox politics central to these metabolic changes. Working toward a

further reaching and more comprehensive analysis of urban nature is central to how I discussed UPE in the first of these reports (Heynen, 2015), as well as in relation to abolition ecology, which I discussed in the second report in this series (Heynen, 2016). To expand on this heterodox imagining of UPE, then, in this final report it is necessary to focus on the uneven patriarchal and hetero-normative development of urban environments through a focus on feminist and queer UPE.

There are, minimally, four nodes of thought that I want to bring into dialogue in this report,

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including feminist urban geography, feminist political ecology, queer ecology and queer urbanism. Each body of literature has made important contributions independently and at the same time created possibilities for feminist and queer urban political ecology to emerge. It is useful to begin with Rocheleau's bridge-building logic when she suggests:

The center of gravity is moving [in political ecology] from linear or simple vertical hierarchies (chains of explanation) to complex assemblages, webs of relation and 'rooted networks' . . . with hierarchies embedded and entangled in horizontal as well as vertical linkages. (2008: 724)

In this spirit, this report seeks to bring together the important ways feminist and queer theorizing offer politically creative ways for articulating how the uneven production of nature creates interdependent and interconnected problems for people living in cities but also possibilities of creating a better, more egalitarian world.

## II Metabolizing feminist nature in the city

Situating and internalizing women's lives and uneven gender relations within urban space took as long as the 1980s and 1990s to occur in earnest (see Massey, 1984; Monk and Katz, 1993; Kobayashi, 1994; Hanson and Pratt, 1988; Gilbert, 1997; McDowell, 1999; Katz, 2004). Taking gendered urban space seriously as a terrain for making connections between broader urban processes and the spaces that had been formerly thought of as women's spaces, like the space of 'the home', laid a necessary foundation for understanding the metabolic creativity that can be extended toward analytically splicing socio-natural processes together within UPE. At the same time, the abundance of innovative feminist urban geographic research that continues to be produced offers transformative ways for expanding these theoretical boundaries of

feminist urban space (see Datta, 2016; Werner et al., 2017, and many others).

If gendering urban space was slow relative to other urban geographic traditions, the gendering of nature, specifically in geography, took even longer. While there were important precursors (see Merchant, 1980, 1992; Haraway, 1991), Rocheleau et al.'s (1996) landmark collection naming feminist political ecology as such is the most generative collection for bringing the importance of political ecology and gender into conversation. In the introduction, Rocheleau et al. (1996: 4) first helped to establish what had come by saying 'Political ecologists have focused largely on the uneven distribution of access to and control over resources on the basis of class and ethnicity (Peet and Watts, 1993).' Then, they helped foster a vision for important work that followed by suggesting:

Feminist political ecology treats gender as a critical variable in shaping resource access and control, interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change, the struggle of men and women to sustain ecologically viable livelihoods, and the prospects of any community for 'sustainable development'. (1996: 4)

Elmhirst's (2015: 520–21) review of the state of feminist political ecology makes the point that while relatively little research self-defines as 'feminist political ecology', there are significant theoretical and political 'family resemblances' (see Watts, 2000: 271) to those ideas framed as feminist political ecology. Elmhirst (2011) discusses research spanning 'gendered resource access and property rights (water and land) to the dynamics of gender in policy discourses, collective action and social movements, much of which might be regarded as FPE but is not named as such', even while some do identify with FPE (see also Carney, 1993; Harris, 2006; Nightingale, 2006; Jarosz, 2011; Truelove, 2011). Mollet and Faria's (2013)

recent intervention is pushing feminist political ecology, as well as UPE. They argue for the need to internalize a broader set of contradictions beyond those specific to gender relations and that researchers should work to problematize myriad other forms of difference including ethnicity, kinship, caste, nature and race, in conversation with class and gender, in ways that would more comprehensively articulate socio-natural problems, as well as possible political solutions.

Grove (2009: 207) helped explicitly to bring UPE into dialogue with feminist political ecology, critical geopolitics, as well as other post-humanist approaches to political ecology (Rocheleau et al., 1996, Dalby, 1990, 2002; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Escobar, 1999; Agrawal, 2005). He suggests doing so

holds out possibilities for addressing this lacuna and reconceptualizing urban environmental politics. The anti-essentialist approach to politics found in the former focuses on cultural meanings and practices of 'nature' that constitute identities which legitimize some ways of acting in the world, and delegitimize others (Escobar, 1998; Rocheleau et al., 2001). (Grove, 2009: 207)

While other important scholarship putting gender, nature and cities into conversation continues to offer insight and overlap (Biehler, 2009; Buckingham and Kulcur, 2009; Di Chiro, 2008), there is now a growing body of explicitly feminist urban political ecology, including the work of Hovorka (2006), Shillington (2008, 2013) and Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2013). Working on a similar register to that of Mollett and Faria (2013), Doshi's (2016) recent intervention powerfully slams the door open and forces a deeper consideration of embodied urban political ecology jumping off from both robust feminist traditions but with an increasing attention to anti-racist politics within urban political ecology. To the end, she suggests:

Embodied urban political ecology fuses early commitments and new turns in the field by connecting socio-natures of consumption, waste and resource distribution with the intimate, meaningful and power-laden embodiments of such flows among differently situated groups. (Doshi, 2016)

### III Metabolizing queer nature in the city

While the longer history of feminist scholarship has helped shape UPE in important ways, so too has queer theory made important contributions. Much of what has become associated with queer theorizing relates centrally to Butler's contributions in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and other early work. Butler's notion that identity is performed, as opposed to resulting from a fixed essence, permeates queer theoretical contributions and has generated important other openings for UPE. Jumping from this more general notion, according to Sandilands, queer ecology

refers to a loose, interdisciplinary constellation of practices that aim, in different ways, to disrupt prevailing heterosexist discursive and institutional articulations of sexuality and nature, and also to reimagine evolutionary processes, ecological interactions, and environmental politics in light of queer theory. (2016: 169)

Queer ecology, as she describes it, is 'on the verge of something new' due to the unstable connections between 'LGBT histories and communities and more recent challenges to these terms and political affinities' (2016: 171). Central to these changes, Sandilands draws on Hogan (2010) and Sbicca (2012), to suggest new forms of specifically ecoqueer activism are helping to prefigure new coalition politics and solidarities standing together in opposition to status quo homonormative agendas connected to 'violence, space and, food' (see also Di Battista et al., 2015; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010).

Queer ecology in conversation with queer urbanism offers yet another theoretical move

UPE is benefiting from. Oswin (2008: 91) suggests: ‘One frequent deployment of the term “queer” is as a synonym for non-heterosexuals. In geography, this usage is evident in the dominant equation of queer space with gay and lesbian space (particularly in urban contexts)’. Oswin goes on to argue:

Once we dismiss the presumption that queer theory offers only a focus on ‘queer’ lives and an abstract critique of the hetero-sexualization of space, we can utilize it to deconstruct the hetero/homo binary and examine sexuality’s deployments in concert with racialized, classed and gendered processes. Queering our analysis thus helps us to position sexuality within multifaceted constellations of power. (2008: 100)

The queer urbanism literature has smashed historically intact urban theoretical binaries, thus helping prefigure more analytically inventive possibilities for understanding the politics of urban space (also see Binne and Skeggs, 2004; Browne, 2006; Brown, 2012, 2013; Doan, 2007; Nash, 2013; Oswin, 2012; Rushbrook, 2002).

The ways these ideas are coming together within urban political ecology, and further extending the theoretical and political terrain of the ‘second generation’ of UPE, is indeed exciting. Central to this effort, as it has been to all other phases of UPE, is Gandy’s (2012: 736) question: ‘What are the political implications of queering urban nature?’. Moving toward an answer, he suggests that:

by moving analysis beyond queer space as a politics of spatial appropriation towards an enriched engagement with the complexity of urban nature itself we may be opening up hitherto unnoticed lines of dialogue and intersection. In particular, we may begin to bring some of the political dimensions of urban ecology into closer alignment with the cultural and material complexities of urban space. (2012: 736–7)

Also foundational to developing queer urban political ecology has been Patrick’s (2014a,

2014b) work in New York. Patrick (2014a) uses queer ecological theory to investigate displacement and gentrification in relation to New York City’s High Line by building on discussions of ‘ecological gentrification’ (see Bunce, 2009; Dooling, 2009; Quastel, 2009), and further opening the ways we can understand the uneven social production of urban nature. Patrick convincingly argues that the growth of a ‘weed’ (*Ailanthus altissima*) offers a path toward queering not only urban ecology but, more specifically, processes of gentrification. To this end, he concludes by suggesting:

Perhaps now we can begin to imagine a specifically queer resistance to homonormative gentrification on the basis of both historical communities of sexual difference and nascent theories of urban ecology, which emphasize the material and symbolic exchanges that shape historical configurations of matter and energy in anthropogenic environments. (2014a: 935)

Patrick (2014b) additionally expands his analysis to think through the High Line by bringing queer urban political ecology into conversation with discussions of urban forestry, thus linking to other earlier UPE research.

Finally, Shillington and Murnaghan’s (2016) efforts to further develop queer urban political ecology beyond Gandy and Patrick focus on the ways children’s lives can expand our understanding of urban nature. They suggest:

To queer nature requires disrupting the human/non-human categories, the relations between the two and the relations each has with other categories, such as gender, sex and, in this article, children. Similarly, queering children entails detaching children from their position as non-adults, presumed heterosexual and innately connected to romantic nature. (2016: 2)

They argue:

We contend that urban political ecology’s approach to seeing nature as always implicated in complex networks of humans and non-

humans, unafraid of the physical materializations of these networks, can contribute to children's geographies by producing more nuanced understandings of children's socio-natures. (2016: 4)

#### IV Toward a feminist and queer urban political ecology

UPE can continue to make substantial progress in helping theorize the uneven development of urban nature through taking seriously the notions of creativity within ideas of metabolization, as I discussed through Smith (2006) in the first report in this series (Heynen, 2015) and Nagar's (2014) notion of 'radical vulnerability' that I started this report with. While Marxist urban theorists engaging the environmental consequences of uneven development helped generate the early foundations of urban political ecology, we continue to build more expansive and solidarity-centric models for thinking through the politics of urban nature and urban geography more broadly. The heterodox ideas that spring from feminist and queer UPE offer abundant potential for enacting the sorts of UPE analysis and political solidarity consistent with the arguments made by Rocheleau et al. (1996), Mollett and Faria (2013), and Doshi (2016), without abandoning early Marxist anti-capitalist and abolitionist antiracist commitments. Indeed, building more expansive forms of solidarity through heterodox forms of UPE is the best hope of understanding and combatting the ongoing uneven production of urban nature.

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