



# Urban political ecology II: The abolitionist century

Progress in Human Geography

2016, Vol. 40(6) 839–845

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DOI: 10.1177/0309132515617394

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## 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.

## Keywords

abolition ecology, antiracism, cities, environmental justice, political ecology, postcolonial, urban geography, urban political ecology (UPE)

## 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<sub>2</sub> 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

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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

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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