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Political Ecologies of Race: Settler Colonialism and Environmental Racism in the United States and Canada

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Abstract: Drawing inspiration from popular efforts to connect a wide array of political struggles, this symposium examines the ways that racial-colonial politics unfold through nature and environmental practices linking past, present, and future across the United States and Canada. By way of introduction, we ask: *What does it mean to do political ecologies of race in Canada and the United States?* For us the response cannot be additive—merely grafting attention to racial/colonial politics onto established scholarly conventions. Instead, we aim for a deeper analysis that challenges and enlivens the field of political ecology. This introduction highlights what is at stake, and identifies the ways that the contributors' research pushes the field. Ultimately, we argue that political ecologies of race can help reinvigorate intellectual projects and build liveable futures by recognising and supporting the connections between ongoing struggles. We hope this symposium contributes to the task.

Keywords: political ecology, race, racial capitalism, settler colonialism, white supremacy

In a recent interview, Ruth Wilson Gilmore emphasised the ecological dynamics of mass incarceration that emerged from her prison abolition research. Reflecting on her efforts to enact "abolition geographies", Gilmore explained that the young (mostly Black and Brown) people she worked with in rural California described their greatest environmental threats as "police, prisons, and pesticides" (in Lambert 2019:17). This recognition neatly captures the ways that prison expansion is

tied to a toxic agricultural economy, and how they both drain the region's already over-taxed groundwater supplies. Gilmore offers an expanded understanding of nature and power:

> The struggle against arsenic in water is also a struggle over the well-being of a little rat … The struggle over having a decent place to live in which you can use the water and breathe the air is related to the fact that young people in the region were all being pushed out of school so they would have no choice but to work in the fields or be criminalized… (ibid.)

Drawing inspiration from efforts to connect a wide array of struggles, this symposium examines the ways that racial-colonial politics unfold through nature and environmental practices linking past, present, and future across the United States and Canada.

In doing so this project celebrates the vibrant and eclectic ways political ecology engages with race and colonialism as entanglements materialised in and through the environment. In fact, as editors, we acknowledge the path breaking work of "third world political ecology" and the nimble ways a small group of scholars engaged with critical social theory to conceptualise the power of race (and ethnicity) beyond skin colour. This contribution appears in a variety of political ecological understandings of biodiversity conservation, land struggle, Malthusian population control policies, displacement, wilderness, forestry and international development (Braun 1997; Jarosz 1992; Li 2000; Mollett 2006; Moore 2005; Neumann 1997; Sundberg 2004; Yeh 2007). Indeed, political ecology's breadth extends from insights brought to the fore through "liberation ecologies" and a focus on development processes in the rural global South. More recently, these insights shape a vast array of scholarship on the global North, such as urban and rural struggles for water, housing, land, infrastructure, industrial sites, and the like (Dillon 2014; Heynen 2016; Jarosz 2012; McCarthy 2005; Peet and Watts 1996; Perreault et al. 2015; Prudham 2007; Sundberg 2011).

As part of the extension of political ecology beyond the global South, contributing scholars to this symposium attend to Wainwright's (2005:1034) insistence that,

> … doing political ecology in postcolonial spaces carries the responsibility of engaging with colonialism, because we cannot understand these spaces outside of, prior to, or apart from the fact of the colonial experience … In this view, in order to analyze environmental politics in the colonial present, *we need to account for the practices that constitute spaces as such*.[1]

Indeed, the contributions to this symposium illustrate that political ecologies of race in Canada and the United States unfold in the context of ongoing colonial relationships and persistent racial violence that make reparations an ongoing mandate of any justice struggle. As editors, we have aimed to treat racial and colonial politics as related yet irreducible, and to conceptualise them as elements of dynamic formations with diverse mechanisms, regimes, and territories across the region. Our explicit attention to race and colonialism not only serves to illustrate the daily injustices faced by black and indigenous peoples, but also to

challenge the so-called innocence of whiteness and the invisibility of settler colonialism; to highlight how the myth of universal nature ignores the role of *terra nullius* in primitive accumulation and proffers a homogenised, liberal view of the subjects who are *environed*. While colonialism, and resistance to it, cannot be reduced to racialisation (Byrd 2011; Simpson 2014), we believe that attention to the articulation of racial and environmental politics is crucial to understanding settler colonialism. In part, this symposium responds to Slocum and Saldanha's (2013:7) call for "a political ecology attuned to the ways environmental injustice is globally [and, we might add, regionally] constituted *through* bodily differences". Contributions to this issue offer models for a political ecology relevant to the multiple, overlapping crises and everyday contexts of the present—often by highlighting how the past is present.

By way of introduction, we ask: *What does it mean to do political ecologies of race in Canada and the United States?* For us the response cannot be additive—merely grafting attention to racial/colonial politics onto established scholarly conventions. Instead, we aim for a deeper analysis that challenges and enlivens the field of political ecology. In the US and Canada, state soils are saturated with blood, river channels are choked with the debris of white supremacy, and yet, new communities of opposition are born every day. As a collection, the contributors aim to counter the whiteness of North American political ecology—a field that, like many others, frequently minimises the role of racial and colonial power.

Political Ecology, Colonialism, and Race

Throughout the 2000s, a small cluster of scholars energised political ecological analyses through foci in three key directions, namely, the cultural politics of nature, racial narratives and embodied differences in environmental struggles, and the mutual constitution of race and gender in contests over access and rights to nature (Asher 2009; Braun 2002; Kosek 2004, 2006; Li 2007; Mollett 2006, 2010; Moore et al. 2003; Peluso 2009; Sundberg 2004, 2006). These studies show how "buried epistemologies" from colonial pasts produce contemporary landscapes of racial inequality. This move represents significant engagement with critical racial studies in the "big tent" of political ecology. By extension, scholarship on the colonial-racial formations of environmental knowledges and discourses remains prominent (Baldwin et al. 2011; Brahinsky et al. 2014; Escobar 2016), yet is sometimes overshadowed by the plethora of analyses which either ignore racial politics or treat them as the "cultural" debris of political economy (see, for instance, Robbins 2007). In contrast, this symposium brings together explicit attention to the ways that racial politics are fundamental to materialist analyses of environmental governance. Although rooted in various approaches, the papers show how settler colonialism and racial capitalism are co-constitutive of environmental politics: they are not merely cultural context or conjunctural qualifier, but structuring forces.

Growing attention to race in North American political ecology also creates productive possibilities for convergence with environmental justice scholarship. For example, over the past 20 years Pulido's (2000) interventions highlight the limits

of an earlier environmental justice focus on the intentional siting of hazardous facilities as the evidence of white privilege. However, more recently her insistence on the need to attend to a deep historical-geographical concern for structural processes of development that situate environmental racism in dynamic and diverse contexts of white supremacy are salient for political ecologists (Pulido 2015, 2016). Indeed, Pulido (2017:524) challenges us to "theorize environmental racism as a constituent element of racial capitalism". For political ecologists working in North America, "the time is ripe for a deep engagement with racial capitalism", which requires "greater attention to the essential processes that shaped the modern world, such as colonization, primitive accumulation, slavery, and imperialism" (Pulido 2017:526–527). Similarly, Kurtz's (2009) influential contribution to critical environmental justice also aligns with political ecologies of race. Kurtz highlights the need to question the racial state. Kurtz's intervention reverberates with a number of recent studies pointing to the failure, stagnation, or enclosure of traditional environmental justice paradigms, especially as institutionalisations of environmental justice concerns meant to address toxic disparities across the US have failed to meaningfully eradicate environmental racisms (see also Pulido et al. 2016). Furthermore, Carter (2016:4) characterises some of the shifts in a growing branch of critical environmental justice work to include "a move away from the reaction to urban environmental 'bads' in the city (e.g. polluting industries) towards a focus on the production of nature in the city" along with a growing interest in "strategies that are less dependent on the legal, bureaucratic, and technical 'regulatory route' towards a 'de-centring' of the state". Indeed, the growing scholarship on critical environmental justice points to important potential convergences of political ecology and environmental justice attuned to the constitutive roles of racial and colonial capitalism in first world contexts (Heynen 2016; Holifield 2015; Pellow 2016; Pulido et al. 2016; Ranganathan and Balazs 2015).

Political work that connects the global contours of racial politics, the reproduction of colonial dispossession, and the "freedom dreams" of resistance struggles (Kelley 2002) has given rise to a new current of geographic research. This symposium joins these projects, drawing theories of racial capitalism, anti-Blackness, and settler colonialism into conversation with political ecological thought. We take inspiration from scholars like McKittrick (2011:949), who argues for bringing the spatial imaginings and practices of Blackness into the core of radical geographic thought—and to do so in a way that highlights the persistence of a Black sense of place in North America, where "the plantation notably stands at the center of modernity". In a similar way, Ranganathan (2016:19) makes the case that environmental racism must be read as "inextricable from the workings of liberalism, specifically *racial* liberalism as it took root in America's cities from the mid 20th century onwards". In so doing, critical scholars can refuse "the colourblindness of canonical knowledge" (Roy 2019:229). As a collection of papers, this symposium works against a disciplinary tendency to analyse "geographies of late capitalism without a theory of racialised dispossession" and to employ "a vocabulary of neoliberalisation that elides the repeated and current renewal of colonial expropriation" (ibid.).

Much of the scholarship that inspires this collection of papers draws from the subfields of urban geography, urban political ecology and environmental justice largely focused in the US/Canada. However, this collection inadvertently avoids some of the limits of UPE as outlined by recent critiques of the subfield. For instance, Doshi challenges urban political ecology, built largely from "first world" contexts, by problematising the ways that "the body is mobilized in conceptualizations of cities and infrastructure while material embodiment remains understudied and disparately theorized" (Doshi 2017:125–126). Lawhon et al. (2014:497) also note, "UPE tends to overlook the situated understandings of the environment, knowledge and power that form the core of other [non-Euro-American and Global South] political ecological understandings". Finally, a third critique offered by Safranksy (2017) argues that attention to "the ongoing racial ordering of land and territorial control" across urban political ecology is lacking. In contrast, the mutual attention to race and coloniality viewed through the specific material and embodied enactments of racial capitalism and settler colonialism by the contributors to this issue is salient. So too is the way, that much like early "third world political ecology", *history matters* to how we understand and illustrate the ways in which racial capitalism and settler colonialism shape environmental change (Moore 1993, 2005; Neumann 1997; Offen 2003, 2004; Peluso 1992; Walker and Peters 2001).

Still, it is important to note that an entangled focus on embodiment-as-materiality, race, coloniality and history have long been priorities among a small but cogent group of scholars that make up a much longer trajectory of "political ecologies of race" in the global South and in particular with a focus in/on Latin America. This scholarship draws from multiple theoretical lineages (critical race theory, decolonial, postcolonial, post-structural, indigenous, feminist) and complicates Marxian critiques of capital, even sometimes opting to attend to other, often more spatially sedimented—yet elided—forms of power (Asher 2009; Bryan 2012; Escobar 2008; Mollett 2006, 2010, 2011; Mollett and Faria 2013; Radcliffe 2015; Sundberg 2004, 2006; Wainwright 2008). In this work, frequently presented and understood through every day and quotidian practices, it is clear that land and territorial struggles in Latin America are not only about owning land and about demands for territorial legislation. In fact, indigenous, Afro-descendant and small-scale *campesino* struggles for land and territorial rights, illustrated through a plurality of spatial struggles over such things as customary land claims, displacement from tourism and biodiversity conservation enclosures, large-scale mestizo ranching and indigenous labor, state recognition of Afro-descendant territorial claims, and indigenous protests against mining contamination (to name a few) are simultaneously "imbued with the struggle to be recognized as human, [and] to disrupt a history that presupposes [indigenous and black] inhumanity in the present" (Mollett 2017:5; see also Bobrow-Strain 2007; Bryan 2012; Mollett 2016; Ojeda and González 2018; Valdivia 2018; Wainwright 2008). Such political ecological analyses disclose the ways in which the state and elite persistently imagine Afro-descendants, indigenous peoples and also *mestizo campesinos* (as subsistence producers) as obstacles to development and where such imaginaries

constitute a symbolic emblem central to the ways in which land, territorial and citizenship claims unfold in Latin America.

Collectively the papers in this symposium position racial capitalism and settler colonialism as parallel processes that sometimes intersect. As such this collection complicates racial inquiry in political ecology moving beyond the limits of *only* seeing race as embodied difference and the political debris of capitalist exclusions. However, the mutual constitution of racial capitalism and coloniality, including settler colonialism could be made more visible in future work on the political ecologies of race in North America. We argue that scholarly work on land and natural resource struggles in Latin America offers cogent insights in this regard. Latin American political ecologies of race illustrate how Afro-descendant and indigenous peoples' dispossession and resistance are intimately woven in space and time through multiple colonial racial ideologies and regimes such as *limpieza de sangre* ("purity of blood") and post-conquest settlement, *mestizaje* and nation-building, neoliberal multiculturalism and "progressive extraction" (Escobar 2008, 2010; Hale 2011; Mollett 2020a; Valdivia 2015). The recognition that black and indigenous subjugation and resistance are intimately intertwined, so much that blackness and indigeneity are relational and for some, imbued in the same body (i.e. Garifuna Peoples; King 2019; Mollett 2014) should rouse attention among scholars of political ecologies of race in North America. Such insight offers future research directions in "first world" and urban political ecologies and represents fertile ground for geographic research into more relational, intersectional and hemispheric political ecologies of race in the Americas (see Mollett 2020b).

A Historical Geography of the Present

In 1763, following the defeat of French forces at Quebec, the United Kingdom signed the Treaty of Paris with Spain and France. The Creek Nation, upon hearing word of this geopolitical power shift, immediately sent emissaries north from present-day Georgia and Alabama to Canada in order to confirm intelligence of this transition with other Indigenous peoples (Ethridge 2004). The Royal Proclamation of 1763 established the eastern subcontinental divide of North America as the western limits of permitted colonial settlement, with lands west of the divide demarcated as "Indian lands" (Ethridge 2004:196). Until this moment, Indigenous peoples and Black slaves confined to plantation systems in North America were situated in a highly varied and contested landscape, shaped by the competing and overlapping claims of three European colonial powers with divergent regimes of rule (Hahn 2004). Over the course of the next century, Anglo settler colonialism became the dominant political force in the parts of North America that are now claimed by the US and Canada—articulating through continual displacements of Indigenous peoples, forced migrations across the Atlantic or beyond the Mississippi, and the production of carceral spaces, plantations, and reservations; in short, the racialised control of populations and territories (Davis et al. 2019; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; McCutcheon 2019; Mollett 2017, 2020a; Pulido 2017; Van Sant et al. 2020).

While this regional framing rests on deep continuities, it is crucial to distinguish between the multiple and overlapping strands of racial-colonial formation present in the US and Canada today—from a wide variety of (im)migrant, refugee, and settler populations to Indigenous peoples and the descendants of free and enslaved Africans. While it is important to recognise these differences among and between racial formations in the US and Canada, we aim for a relational approach to the political ecologies of race in North America. As Daigle and Ramirez (2019:81) argue, "In weaving a fabric of decolonial geographies in the North American context, it is necessary to consider these multiple geographies of Black, Brown and Indigenous peoples in relation to one another to illuminate the interconnected struggles for land and space … " (see also Nishime and Hester Williams 2018; Pulido 2018). Ultimately, this approach highlights the ways that the region is produced through distinct but related processes of racialisation and colonisation, which are simultaneously challenged on multiple and overlapping fronts. All of these processes demand political ecological inquiry.

Entanglements: Extraction, Governance, and Environmental Justice

The papers in this symposium contribute to a rethinking of some of the core themes of political ecology: extraction, environmental governance and environmental justice. Our collaboration began from the burgeoning and constructive conversations fostered through sessions at the Dimensions of Political Ecology Conference in Lexington, KY and the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers. As in our conference discussions, this collaboration is attentive to how racial capitalism and settler colonialism, blackness and indigeneity are related yet irreducible.

Melanie Sommerville (2018) and Kai Bosworth (2018) each approach extraction and production in the Canadian prairies, developing sophisticated analyses of the environmental politics of settler colonialism. Sommerville examines the ways that financial actors involved in a contemporary large-scale agricultural investment project use claims to be repairing the violent histories of colonialism to reinscribe core elements of these histories. Taking up Pasternak's (2015) framing of a conjuncture where "capitalism will save colonialism", Sommerville's meticulously researched article traces the double movement of "naturalising finance" and "financialising natives" in rural Saskatchewan and Alberta, showing how colonial and racial channels of capital accumulation and valuation are revitalised through claims to repair.

Grounded in a similar space, Bosworth explores the whiteness of environmental populism in protests against the flow of petroleum extracts from the Canadian tar sands through the Dakotas. Challenging facile narratives about solidarity and romantic notions of populist challenges to the Keystone pipeline, Bosworth assesses the correlations between whiteness, property, and populism. The essay challenges the "transparent subject" of political ecology's whiteness by tracing the desires at work in settler claims that "they're treating us like Indians!" As Bosworth's essay shows, any rigorous analysis of North American resource extraction

must also be attentive to the "the production of race in correspondence with broad and interlocking processes of capital accumulation, slavery, settler colonialism, and state violence".

Levi Van Sant's (2018) essay returns to a foundational topic in political ecology —soils—to rethink the field's conventional analyses of extraction and production. He situates the 1899 founding of the US Cooperative Soil Survey in the context of "post-frontier" white anxieties and traces the evolution of this state technology from the "modernising white nationalism of the first decades of the 20th century to the decentralised, racial liberalism of the New Deal era". Along the way, he shows that soil surveys are not only a crucial "basemap" for agricultural production but also for the reproduction of white nationalism and its territorial ambitions. Like Sommerville and Bosworth, Van Sant's approach to the political ecology of extraction and production offers a working conception of nature, state, and economy that illuminates the racial politics of capitalism.

Environmental governance is another foundational theme of political ecology. Whereas Van Sant's empirics focus on the historical foundation of modern environmental governance technologies, several essays in the collection turn to more contemporary projects. Andrew Curley (2019) examines the complex practices of Western water law in the US as an ongoing 21st century example of colonial enclosure. His analysis of water law from the Colorado Compact of 1922 to present struggles reads water settlements as a technique in the "tradition of white supremacy" to deny aboriginal sovereignty, "alienating and quantifying natural systems into 'scientific' forms of management". Curley's analysis demonstrates that US water governance is a crucial component of racial governance, whereby the exclusions of "Indigenous water claims in the US Southwest are part of the maintenance and reproduction of racial capitalism in the United States". This approach to the political ecology of water resource management highlights that such legal interventions by the state are not merely biased and inadequate. In fact, they are crucial to the expansion of settler-colonial forms of rule: "With Indian water settlements, the law produces environments", structuring both "Indigenous and settler-colonial relationships with the land and the environment".

In another paper that investigates the politics of water governance through the lenses of both racial capitalism and settler colonialism, Tyler McCreary and Richard Milligan (2018) analyse the limits of liberal forms of recognition through a comparative study of Vancouver and Atlanta. In the Vancouver case, the authors conceptualise the contemporary practice of pipeline permitting as part of the long history of colonial dispossession. In the Atlanta case, they argue that recognition of environmental justice occasioned by wastewater infrastructure is inadequate to rectify disparities in impacts of sewage spills. Whereas Curley elucidates a contemporary process of enclosure on Navajo territories, McCreary and Milligan point to the political foreclosures at work in both the institutionalisation of environmental justice in the US and in the formal recognition of Indigenous rights in pipeline permitting in Canada: "Recognition in environmental governance stabilises a racial and colonial order—ossifying Blackness and Indigeneity as markers of particular forms of eco-social vulnerability while obscuring power relations—instead of

disrupting systems that perpetuate environmental racism and territorial displacement".

Several of the papers in this symposium also rethink conventional treatments of environmental justice, with broader implications for the field of political ecology. For instance, Erin Goodling's (2019) paper examines struggles for environmental justice in the Portland Harbor. Like McCreary and Milligan, her analysis focuses on the deep history structuring urban environmental racism. Her deeply-participatory work with activists documents struggles to coordinate anti-racist and cross-race, cross-class responses to profound and traumatic histories of toxins, disinvestment, and dispossession. These injustices are only further aggravated by the role of environmental improvements in precipitating further injustices of gentrification and displacement. Goodling shows how efforts to construct a shared historical narrative are central to the coalition-building necessary for these struggles. Ultimately, she challenges political ecologists committed to excavating "deep historical spatial logics" (Heynen 2016:840) to also commit to understanding the *processes* by which shared historical narratives are negotiated and produced, led by those on the front lines of change.

Pavithra Vasudevan's (2019) paper also tackles a common topic of concern for environmental justice movements, industrial toxicity. However, her analysis of racialised exposure in the aluminum town of Badin, North Carolina pushes conventional treatments of industrial toxicity by emphasising its material-affective dimensions—working across scales of state, corporation, town, home, and body. Drawing on Black geographies and feminist theory, she outlines "an intimate inventory of race and waste" that shows how "innocence, care, and pleasure have been distorted to serve racial capitalism". Thus, she complements the political, legal, and economic analysis of conventional approaches to environmental justice with attention to the ways that racialised toxicity is spread through care work and produces feelings of complicity, shame, and guilt in Black workers, even though they had no knowledge of the industry's dangers. At the same time, Vasudevan's "intimate inventory" finds possibilities for solidarity through the experience of shared vulnerability.

Drawing on a similarly novel set of inspirations—Black creative works, Black geographies, and theories of (anti)Blackness—Willie Wright's (2018) paper questions institutionalised conceptions of environmental racism. He suggests that the focus on contaminants misses the ways that many other forms of anti-Black violence—such as killings by police, mobs, and white vigilantes—are both enacted through and result in grave environmental manipulations. Thus, he provocatively extends a central claim of political ecology (that "nature" is everywhere, and everywhere political) to argue that "the pollution that happens within the ground … also occurs above as water, trees, and the earth itself are used to assault Black people". Wright warns that existing policy approaches cannot fully address environmental racism by themselves, and argues that a more fundamental social reckoning is necessary: "a complete regeneration of the notion of humanness in such a way that Black people and their communal spaces are not viewed as waste …".

The symposium closes with a piece by Mollett (2020b) in which she looks to the region of Latin America in arguing for a more hemispheric, relational and

intersectional conceptualisations of the entanglements of race and coloniality in the Americas.

Conclusion

We argue that increased attention to the political ecology of race in the US and Canada is an important part of efforts to renew the broader field in the 21st century, both intellectually and politically. Political economy should remain central to these broad efforts, but must take into account the ways that capital-in-motion is always articulated in and through racialised processes of "organized abandonment" (Gilmore 2007). Thus, we argue that abstracting capitalism from the spatial history of racism limits analyses of political-ecological violence *as well as* efforts of resistance and refusal (Du Bois 1998; Robinson 2000; Simpson 2017; Woods 2017). To paraphrase Frieda Knobloch (1996:11), we aim for a method that analyses "not the determination of … [geography], but its overdetermination".

Despite the meaningful contributions of what follows, there is only so much that a scholarly collection can do—and this one clearly has limits. There is very little attention here to Orientalist racialisations. Similarly, Latinx, immigrant, refugee and border politics are crucial components of North American political ecologies but are not given the attention they deserve (but see Pulido and de Lara 2018; Sundberg 2011). There is also more work needed to understand the ways that North American racial formations are connected to global racial projects (Ferreira da Silva 2007). Here, work in feminist geography provides important ethical and methodological guidance (see, for instance, Hart 2018; Sundberg 2015). We hope that this collection will open a space for more work on mobility, borders, supranational institutions and the broader suite of global dynamics that shape North American political ecologies.

Overall this symposium enlivens debates about racial politics and suggests new understandings of what constitutes "the environment" in political ecology. As the opening of this introduction suggests, political ecologies of race can help reinvigorate intellectual projects and rebuild planetary futures by recognising and supporting the connections between existing grounded struggles. We hope this symposium contributes to the task.

Endnote

[1] We read "postcolonial" here as signifying the historical dynamics initiated by US and Canadian independence from the UK, not an assumption that settler colonialism ended.

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