

## Commentary

# Embodied urban political ecology: five propositions

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*This commentary makes a case for a more rigorous treatment of the body as a material and political site within the sub-field of urban political ecology. I propose an embodied urban political ecology grounded in a feminist, anti-racist and postcolonial approach consisting of five orienting propositions. They include attention to metabolism, social reproduction, intersectionality and articulation, emotion and affect, and political subjectivity. Although applicable to political ecology broadly, I focus on the urban because of how often the body is mobilised in conceptualisations of cities and infrastructure despite the fact that material embodiment remains under-studied and disparately theorised in the subfield. I suggest that theoretical and empirical attention to embodiment in these five key arenas can deepen understandings of the terrain of environmental politics and potential transformation within the subfield of urban political ecology.*

**Key words:** intersectionality, social reproduction, postcolonial urbanism, feminist political ecology, embodiment, metabolism

## Introduction

On the morning of 4 March 2015, Kalpana Pimpale died by falling through the collapsed floor of a multi-storey public toilet in her slum neighbourhood located in Mumbai's poorest ward. In a city where half the population lacks in-home sanitation and a single toilet is shared by up to 1800, such everyday metabolic functions are shot through with compounded relations of power and inequality. Although the *Swatchh Bharat* ('clean India') campaign of the present neoliberal Hindu Nationalist regime promises ecological deliverance through constructing toilets for all, the tragedy of this preventable death briefly exposed the betrayal of ostensibly inclusive urban development.

Indeed, prior to her death Pimpale might have been considered a lucky beneficiary of clean city infrastructure projects. The toilet block was constructed by an NGO that has been celebrated globally for its participatory best practices (Doshi 2013b). While the group was recently lambasted for project mishaps, the assignment of culpability belies processes that perpetuate displacement, dispossession and neglect. By privileging elite accumul-

ation, ameliorative developments mark a continuity with the violent ecologies of capitalism that endanger while also actively blaming and dispossessing the poor through class-biased 'greening' (Baviskar 2003; Doshi 2013a). Such are the contradictory ecologies of life and politics in much of the world.

What would it mean to learn urban political ecology through the experience of those like Kalpana Pimpale upon whose bodies environmental struggles are waged daily? Following Heynen's recent call (2015), I propose an embodied urban political ecology through five orienting propositions. This lens follows efforts to 'provincialise' urban political ecology (Lawhon *et al.* 2014) and engage racialised environmental injustice (Ranganathan and Balazs 2015) and feminist geographers' concerns over 'postcolonial intersectionality' (Mollett and Faria 2013) and embodiments of health, emotion, food, and resource and waste distribution (Buechler and Hanson 2015; Guthman and Mansfield 2013; Nichols 2015; Sultana 2011; Truelove 2011). Though applicable to political ecology broadly, I target the urban because of how often the body is mobilised in conceptualisations of cities and infrastructure while material embodiment

remains under-studied and disparately theorised. I begin with a foundational proposition.

### **Proposition 1: Metabolism is embodied politics not just a metaphor**

Since its inception, urban political ecology has deployed the Marxian metaphor of metabolism to describe how city natures are organised in relation to dominant socio-economic functioning of cities (Swyngedouw *et al.* 2006). Yet several scholars suggest correcting functionalist readings of urban metabolism through hybridised and relational approaches (Gandy 2004; Kaika 2005) and attention to subjectivity and environmental imaginaries (Gabriel 2014; Grove 2009). 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.

One example is Appadurai's (2001) notion of the 'politics of shit', which elucidates the contours of citizenship for postcolonial urban residents who – by virtue of their propertylessness and social locations (caste and gender) – cannot be distanced from the stigma and dangers of waste. As O'Reilly (2016) notes, however, technical fixes (like constructing more toilets) do not automatically eliminate insecurities. Nor does precarity equate to passivity. For instance, Desai *et al.* (2015) show how slum-based women in Mumbai may turn to open defecation – a stigmatising and dangerous activity itself – in order to mitigate the harms of badly constructed, under-maintained, ill-lit and over-burdened public toilets. That such actions are often vilified by elites whose exclusionary environmentalism threatens the reproduction of healthy life for many substantiates my second point.

### **Proposition 2: Social reproduction matters for urban ecology**

Feminist theorists have shown how the 'fleshy, messy and indeterminate stuff of everyday life' (Katz 2001) and labour within the 'global household' (Safri and Graham 2010) is a political sphere that is too often ignored in masculinist production-centric analyses but central to capitalist accumulation (Federici 2004), much like nature itself (Moore 2015). Meanwhile, the majority of the world's informalised poor – increasingly rendered into 'surplus populations' by successive rounds of dispossession – are denied minimal livelihoods and supports promised by development. An excellent recent volume edited by Meehan and Strauss (2015) builds

connections between embodied precarity and social reproduction highlighting the ways that 'life's work' (Mitchell *et al.* 2003) is burdened by sharpening socio-spatial inequalities. Embodied ecologies reveal power-laden processes that differentially value and devalue the labour of those who are routinely exposed to harm through informal waste work, for instance (Gidwani and Reddy 2011). Subjects who toil in social reproduction are marked by gender, race, caste or ethnicity in ways that naturalise labour devaluation and uneven resource distributions (Fredericks 2014; Heynen 2009; Jewitt 2011). Thus my next point.

### **Proposition 3: Multiple, interconnected relations of difference and power shape urban ecologies**

Mumbai's toilet collapse may be seen as yet another instantiation of state-sanctioned, group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death, Gilmore's (2007, 28) definition of racism. Northern environmental racism scholarship shows how violence is perpetuated through policing and differential exposure and access to the means of health, conditions that are deeply imbricated in racial capitalism (Pulido 2016; Heynen 2015). In the case of Mumbai and other Indian cities, concrete repercussions for communities among the poor who are additionally marginalised due to ethnicity, religion and caste include being targeted for eviction and excluded from public water, sanitation and resettlement. Such dispossessions arise from structures of discrimination in urban policy, socio-spatial segregation and ethno-nationalism with gendered ramifications that are often left untouched in women-focused interventions (Doshi 2013b). Accordingly geographers have used the frameworks of intersectionality and articulation to push the boundaries of singular class, gender and race analyses (Casolo and Doshi 2013; Mollett and Faria 2013; Nightingale 2011). Identity-based marginalisations also increase vulnerability to sexual and other violence, conditions that are steeped in racial-gender regimes that deny many the basic status of humanity (Mollett 2016). The embodied implications of such intersections underscore two additional arenas: affect and subjectivity.

### **Proposition 4: Affect and emotion are also material and embodied**

Traditional political ecology analyses focused on struggles over resources and environmental harm have generally paid less attention to emotion. Recently, however, new research agendas focus on how visceral experiences – a relational field of emotion and corporeality – connect

with structural and discursive spheres (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013). Relatedly, Sultana (2011) charts how suffering caused by arsenic contamination and unequal water distribution in rural Bangladesh traverses emotional and embodied-material domains with often counterintuitive results. Women overburdened with the emotional labour and stress of accessing clean water may resort to contaminated sources, causing further suffering. Here suffering stretches beyond the individual through conflict-ridden, socio-physical waterscapes to influence responses to environmental change. Urban political ecologies can usefully draw on these insights for understanding how affective intensities work through and shape infrastructures and socio-natural flows. Research on emotion/affect is especially useful for investigating claims to the city, hence my final proposition.

### **Proposition 5: Bodies are sites for the formation of political subjectivities with sometimes contradictory desires**

When thinking through embodied ecologies we must take care to not slip into naturalisations and eschew political agency (Simonsen 2013). Differentiated embodied experiences result in a range of claim-making practices including collective demands for land, resources, dignity, health and safety. Alternative arrangements of (non-) human natures – urban school and community garden, alternative food and non-violence movements (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013; Moore *et al.* 2015) – produce ecologies of care that challenge neoliberal modalities of engaging with self and others.

However, embodiment also forces attention to contradictory and regressive logics (Pudup 2008). For instance, in Mumbai, women slum residents have pursued elite-biased redevelopment in the aspiration of attaining better living conditions through resettlement, sometimes at the expense of other embodied needs and more marginalised urban residents. Meanwhile others contest displacement and ethno-religious discrimination (Doshi 2013b). Attention to embodiment helps avert dualistic framings that oppose docility and resistance. Embodying urban political ecologies in theory and practice thus deepens understandings of the terrain of political transformation.

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