



Toward an Abolition Ecology

by **Nik Heynen**

Abolitionist politics continue to evolve in response to the ways racial capitalism exploits, oppresses and commits violence through uneven racial development. As environmental relations have always been part of this, in this short essay, Nik Heynen starts to grapple with what an “abolition ecology” would look like.

[image above: Battle at the Troup Hurt house in Atlanta on July 22, 1864 — from the Battle of Atlanta Cyclorama, 1886. Image via Daniel Pollock’s Southern Spaces (<https://southernspaces.org/2014/battle-atlanta-history-and-remembrance>).]

On January 16th, 1865 Major General William Tecumseh Sherman issued *Special Field Order 15*. This short decree had vast, yet ultimately unrealized, emancipatory possibilities moving into *Reconstruction*. Had his order been carried out to its most egalitarian ends it might have changed the trajectory of rampant uneven development via the proliferation of racial capitalism in the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War. *Special Field Order 15* “reserved and set apart for the settlement of negroes now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States...the islands from Charleston, south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back to the sea, and the county bordering the St. Johns River, Florida.” As a result of its initial implementation, which included that “each family shall have a plot not more than (40) forty acres of tillable ground...in the possession of which land the military authorities will afford them protection, until such time as they

can protect themselves, or until Congress shall regulate their title," by June of 1865 roughly 40,000 freed African-Americans had begun to imagine and build a new society on 400,000 acres of Southeastern U.S. land. This land *could have* been the start of a path toward reparations both of wealth and ecological self-determination for people long enslaved through the logics of white supremacist exploitation and oppression.

In the months prior to January 16th, 1865 Sherman's Army had both won the *Battle of Atlanta*—forever changing the fabric of the city and the urbanizing logic of the Southeast more generally—and completed their *March to the Sea*. When taken together, these penultimate events precipitated the end of the Civil War and helped secure the abolition of slavery. Through the *Battle of Atlanta*, which occurred in July of 1864, Sherman's forces crushed what had become the most important transportation and supply hub of the Confederacy thus sending southern capitalism spiraling into deeper crisis. The capture and scorching of the "Gateway City of the South" was especially important for President Lincoln as he was in a contentious election campaign against the Democratic opponent George B. McClellan. Given this, we can draw a direct historical connection between the destruction of Atlanta and the permanent abolition of slavery.

Two distinct moments foreshadowed Sherman issuing *Special Field Order 15* that demonstrated the interrelated and interconnected tensions surrounding land and property in the immediate moments following emancipation. First, there was a calamitous, albeit easily preventable, event through which hundreds (some estimates say thousands) of recently freed African-Americans drowned as they attempted to cross Ebenezer Creek while following Sherman's Army toward the coast. The large trailing column of freed people, having no resource base of their own to sustain their lives, were dependent upon Sherman's troops for both sustenance and security. The mass-drowning event happened because engineers disassembled a pontoon bridge once Union troops had crossed the creek to dissuade the newly freed people from trailing them in December of 1864.

The second moment that informed Sherman's proclamation of *Special Field Order 15*, and stemmed from the criticisms he received for the loss of human life at Ebenezer Creek, was a community meeting in Savannah on January 12, 1865. Present at this meeting were Sherman, Lincoln's secretary of war, Edwin M. Stanton, and twenty African-American leaders from within the Savannah community, many of whom were ministers. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss enacting emancipation and the political realities that would provide the foundation for *Reconstruction*. When Secretary Stanton asked the group of twenty men, "State in what manner you think you can take care of yourselves, and how can you best assist the Government in maintaining your freedom," Reverend Garrison Frazier replied, "The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our labor—that is, by the labor of the women, and children, and old men—and we can maintain ourselves and have something to spare." While the conversation continued from there, this question of land, property and self-determination regarding both the physical and social reproduction of emancipated African-American people was resolutely inscribed onto the national conscious yet again and forever more onward.

While uneven racial development produced much of the foundation for U.S. history, too many of these moments and episodes remain absent from our collective geographical and political ecological imagination when considering the interconnected ways property relations are directly enmeshed within the broader environmental politics that force ongoing harm and suffering through racial capitalism. The historical circumstances surrounding *Special Field Order 15*, as do the Hunkpapa Lakota and Yanktonai Dakota's contemporary direct action and broader circumstances surrounding Standing Rock, offer important insights about how we can build upon past colonial and white supremacist logics of property relations and the cascading connections between property and the sustenance of populations.



(<https://i1.wp.com/abolitionjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/standing-rock-protectors.jpg?ssl=1>)

Standing Rock water protectors at the Sacred Stone Camp (image via Overpass Light Brigade)

Related to this, I want to draw on something George Shulman asserted in his book *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* to help make this point. Shulman said: "It is strange really: Theorists read Agamben or Arendt on a genocide that Americans did not cause or experience directly, but do not read [Frederick] Douglas, W.E.B. Dubois, [James] Baldwin, or [Toni] Morrison, who draw on prophetic idioms to address the racial holocaust that Americans caused and experienced directly, whose legacy still grips the life of each and all" (2008: 27).

Just as Marx's political narrative was greatly influenced by the revolutionary efforts to abolish slavery (see Blackburn et al 2011), ongoing violence committed through racial capitalist logics compels contemporary scholars and activists to keep abolition at the core of antiracist, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist politics (see Woods 2002). However, given all we have learned, there also seems to be a range of ways we can imagine, articulate and enact variegated abolitionist politics. From this more

granular, yet always interconnected perspective we can think more deeply about the abolition of prisons (see Gilmore 2007; Davis 2012; Camp 2016; Critical Resistance (<http://criticalresistance.org/>)) the abolition of police brutality (see Chaney and Robertson 2013; Campaign Zero (<http://www.joincampaignzero.org/>)), but also abolitionist politics as they apply to property and environmental relations. Given that political ecology has largely evolved from insights about the interrelated and interconnected politics of property rights, commodification and the configurations of social and environmental changes driven by and resulting from these dynamics (see Watts 2013, Mansfield 2009, Prudham 2015), it is peculiar how little attention has been paid to racialized property relations and the resulting ability of communities to not only survive, but thrive (see McKittrick 2013, Van Sant 2016). It is odd that Sherman's *Special Field Order 15* has been so little mentioned regarding the intense urbanization of Atlanta and the Southeast more generally, especially given the tremendous unevenness of these processes of urbanization regarding racial and income inequalities. The lack of attention to this moment is especially peculiar given that *Special Field Order 15* led to the clarion call of the reparations movement, "forty acres and a mule," even if Sherman did not mention the mule. That said, it is promising to see how much support and attention the mobilization at Standing Rock is receiving.

As historic and geographic insights into racial capitalism help illustrate, radical struggles for anti-colonial and antiracist socionatural change have always required thoughtful political vision, strategic political organizing and necessarily, forceful agitation to help spark consciousness and facilitate direct action and bring about legislative changes. W.E.B. DuBois' (1935) discussion of "abolition democracy" offers important ways of continuing to think through revolutionary change as a driving force behind ongoing efforts for the idea of "abolition ecology."



(https://i2.wp.com/abolitionjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/dubois_original.jpg?ssl=1)

W.E.B. DuBois, c. 1911 (via
Wikipedia)

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._E._B._Du_Bois#/media/File:Motto_web_dubois_original.jpg)

In *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) DuBois illustrates how the freedom dreams underlying African-American's fighting against the Confederacy were dashed through the collective recognition that the self-determination they sought would be implausible if the very democratic fabric of the U.S. was not also simultaneously abolished along with slavery given its inherently white supremacist logics and traditions. DuBois calls this political vision 'abolition democracy.' Joel Olson expanded upon DuBois by suggesting:

The abolitionists' principles and achievements make them an important, if underappreciated, source for new democratic politics for in the process of challenging slavery and racial prejudice they challenged white citizenship itself, thereby creating space for expanded democratic practices. There are three elements of abolitionist praxis that are particularly relevant for today: their model of the political actor as agitator, their emphasis on freedom, and their willingness to follow the radical implications of their demands. (2004: 135-136; see also Lipsitz 2004)

This more specific idea of abolition ecology then is rooted squarely within these ideals of W.E.B. Dubois. This notion is to push forward through well-informed and deliberate organizing and continued theorizing against and about the continued existence of white supremacist logics that continue to produce uneven racial development within land and property relations. How can abolitionist ideals inform contemporary political ecological struggles around air quality, soil quality, water pollution, inadequate shelter, food insecurity and hunger that continue to ravage communities of color and poor communities? Because the formation of the U.S. is territorially based in forms of oppression and violence against indigenous nations and communities of color, there are indeed many sources of insight to look to for connections between colonial and racist ideology and environmental contradictions.

A driving notion of abolition ecology builds on direct action traditions that began in the abolitionist movement against slavery, were core tactics during the Civil Rights Movement and continue today through Black Lives Matter—because as human history shows rights are seldom just granted; they are won through struggle. Building upon DuBois, toward abolition ecology is an effort to take abolitionist ideas created through hard-fought struggles to better organize around the racialized questions of who gains from and who pays for, who benefits from and who suffers from particular processes of political ecological change. While scholars and activists organizing around contemporary environmental problems continue to have episodic victories, there still is great

revolutionary promise in fidelity to what is at stake in the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and bringing in the prefigurative abolitionist logic of direct action politics as a way to keep moving forward toward egalitarian political ecological goals.

I reflect on Sherman's *Special Field Order 15* in this brief essay to consider the prefigurative possibilities of what forms of social reproduction and political ecological politics might have transpired via the abolition democracy had Rev. Garrison Frazier's thoughts about land been woven into the democratic fabric of *Reconstruction*. While only referenced in one paragraph in *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois (1935: 393) is clear to make the point "...the government broke its implied promise and drove them [freed people] off the land." Just as telling are the continued political ecological consequences of having those lands ripped from their possession as the order was rescinded in December of 1864 via President Andrew Johnson who insisted confiscated lands had to be returned to former [white] owners. Racial capitalism won another victory when President Johnson suggested that despite losing their new lands, freed people occupying those land should be offered contracts to work that land for the original owners (many instances their former Masters), which was tantamount to a new form of wage servitude that quickly evolved into sharecropping.

Recalling this history is in line with Cedric Robinson's engagement with DuBois, when Robinson (1983: 207) says "...unless we continue to evoke a consciousness of the historical moment in which DuBois was working, we have little chance of recognizing the nature of thought to which he addressed himself in *Black Reconstruction*." From here, and keeping with theme, we could just as easily pivot to how in the late 1860s, after the Civil War, Sherman was responsible for ordering the killing of nearly 5 million bison in a strategic military effort to drive them into extinction as a way of containing First Nations' people living on the U.S. Plains and as a result force them onto reservations. The possibilities of continued abolitionist progress will certainly be premised upon internalizing these histories and the agitation, clear articulation of freedom dreams and ongoing fidelity toward the radical implications of abolition.

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