

Symposium: Critical Restoration Geographies

**“I would make a home for them”:
On Crip Interdependence and Abolition Ecology**

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In Black History Month in 1999, Leroy F. Moore Jr., founding member of Krip Hop Nation and Sins Invalid, asked a simple rhetorical question: “Do black disabled people have a history?” (Moore 1999).

Of course, the answer is yes. And the violent co-production of race and disability is well documented (see, for example, Ben-Moshe 2020; Bogdan 1988; Clare 2017; Erevelles 2011; Garland Thomson 1997; Kim 2015; Metzl 2011). Yet, while Moore’s question was concerned with the ongoing omission of disability and disabled people within popular histories of black life, perhaps more so, it pushed his readers on a critical *geographic* question about radical place-making at the intersection of race, gender, and disability.[1] In his rebranding of Harriet Tubman – arguably one of the most celebrated leaders of emancipatory place-making in American consciousness – as a disabled abolitionist, Moore’s question might be rephrased for *Antipode* readers as:

Do black disabled people *make* history? Are black disabled people *geographic*?[2]

These are questions worth amplifying twenty years later.[3] Two central texts from our reading collective – McKittrick’s (2013) “Plantation Futures” and Heynen and Ybarra’s (2021) syncretic article on “Abolition Ecology” – deal with the place-making dialectic of white supremacy and black and Indigenous resistance. Each article is a corrective to disciplines (geography and political ecology) that have often sidelined race as under-interrogated context and black and Indigenous life as “silent, suffering, and perpetually violated” (McKittrick 2013: 9). However, in arguing for a methodology that traces the “persistent but ugly blueprint” (McKittrick 2013: 10) of white supremacist plantation and settler colonial spatial formations and logics “through time”, and in pairing this historical analysis with a land-based and coalitional embodied praxis of “radical place-making” (Heynen and Ybarra 2021: 21), disabled life goes unremarked.

Additional reading across the five-paper symposium on abolition ecology[4] reveals that, despite a focus on disabling places (prisons, plantations, uneven cities), disabling environmental racisms (pollution, climate change, policing), and radical counter-lifeways, disability is mentioned once. Further, prominent articles shaping the “radical place-making” methodologies and imaginaries of abolition ecology emphasize pasts and tasks that risk being ableist and inaccessible in their contemporary reimagined forms,[5] including “re-earthing the commons” (the reclaiming and thus turning and tilling of plantation lands) and marronage/fugitivity (the seeking out of specifically uninhabitable or unruly sites illegible to state and capital for hideout communal place-making) (Bledsoe 2017; Heynen 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020; Wright 2020).

The above work is necessary, inspiring, and offers grounded radical (re)turns – restorations! – away from the compounding racialized and capitalist patterns of state violence,

climate change, incarceration, and dispossession. However, disability activists Mia Mingus (2017), Eli Clare (2017), Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2020) and Liat Ben-Moshe (2020) argue that abolition and justice work cannot continue to neglect ableism and disability in their citations, intersectional analyses, and coalitional counter-acts of place-making.[6] Able-bodied and sanist supremacy (the “Cure” power-bloc) is co-constitutive of white supremacy (the “Bourbon” power-bloc). Together, they make *inaccessible and racialized places*. Alternatively, cripistemologies and disability justice’s focus on interdependence (the “Crip” power-bloc) co-constitute blues epistemologies and black struggles for freedom (the “Blues” power-bloc).[7] Together, they make *freedom as an accessible place*:[8] worlds where 1. all body-minds have intrinsic place-making value and capacity, and 2. accessibility is a spatial, relational, and logical baseline.

In short, an accessible abolition ecology that is led and informed by crip interdependence struggles is a more radical abolition ecology. Critical crip/mad scholarship and mobilizations model radical place-making alternatives and continue to pose important questions for the difficult yet life-giving work of seeking abolition ecologies, questions like: Who do our histories, theories, imaginaries, and practices of radical place-making bring along with them? How are disabled lives being centered, when, and on what and whose terms?

Let’s return to Harriet Tubman, the disabled abolitionist. In her chapter framing abolition geography, Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2017), like Moore, also turns to Tubman (the abolitionist) to articulate what it looks like to truly, radically make freedom as a place. Tubman is quoted talking about a displaced and recently released “criminal” / ex-convict:

I was a stranger in a strange land ... But to this solemn resolution I came; I was free, and they should be free also; *I would make a home for them.*

Here we glimpse the *already existing* radical potential of crip interdependence within abolition ecology. It just requires attention. Black disabled people have a history, make history, are unquestionably geographic.

Notes

[1] Moore is still doing this work; see his new book, *Black Disabled Ancestors* (Moore 2020).

[2] I take inspiration here from McKittrick's (2006) work on the critique of rendering black women as ungeographic.

[3] My aim is not to claim these ideas as my own, nor do I claim to be a critical disability scholar nor a black geographies scholar. Instead, my aim is to use my privilege – as a white settler scholar with a presently managed disability who has the time, resources, and support necessary to think and write across these incredible texts – to “advocate, refine, and disseminate” (following Collins 2000: 37) scholarship and activism by black and disabled intellectuals that deserve more attention and cross-pollination within *Antipode* and its readership.

[4] See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/14678330/2021/53/1>

[5] Critical disability scholars have argued that pre-capitalist pasts may have been more disability-friendly than even the most accessible spaces of today, with disabled people more integrated into the social fabric than dominant imaginations (shaped by a history of eugenics and capitalism) allow us to recognize and imagine. Thus, it's not that these strategies are inherently inaccessible, it's that in their reimagined forms, with contemporary ideological baggage (such as the stubborn biologization and individualization of disability) and without critical analysis of the place of disabled people in emancipatory pasts, they risk injecting ableist relations into what was perhaps a more accessible original arrangement. I thank my friend and colleague, Corin De Freitas, for this nuance. For more on this, see Everelles (1996).

[6] See the “Building Interdependence + resisting normativation” meander reading list for more on what a critical disability framework can offer abolition ecology.

[7] I take inspiration here from Clyde Woods (an “abolition ecology” influence) and his regional analysis of the Bourbon/Blues dialectic, whereby his critical historiography centers place-making conflicts between a white supremacist plantation power-bloc and a black working class power-bloc. I extend this frame to argue for an analysis of the overlaps with critical disability’s cure/crip place-making dialectic (see Woods 1998, 2017).

[8] Taking inspiration here from Heynen and Ybarra’s (2021) title and their building from Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2017) work on abolition geography as a theory of “freedom as a place”.

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