Abstract

I propose a dialogue between new abolitionist approaches and black feminist theory on the one hand and anticapitalist critical urban social theory on the other. This dialogue has great potential to advance approaches that unhide the death dealing logics that shape city-making and also to identify and amplify the emancipatory potentialities and forms of cultural, social, economic, and political improvisation that can lead us to more positive futures.

Thinking about what the “critical” means in “critical urban anthropology,” we need to start by agreeing to move beyond the simple idea of engagement – and the tired old questions about engagement for whom, with whom, and about what – in order to advance a critical urbanist stance that takes inspiration from new trends in the field. Vital to this stance is a dialogue between new abolitionist approaches and Black feminist theory on the one hand and anticapitalist urban social theory on the other. This dialogue has great potential to advance approaches that unhide the death-dealing logics that shape city-making and to identify and amplify the emancipatory potentialities and forms of cultural, social, economic, and political improvisation that can lead us to more positive futures.

I am interested in elaborating this stance vis-à-vis my location as a scholar of US American urbanism and also as someone who lives and works in the United States and who is therefore doubly implicated in the death-dealing urbanisms that are foundational to the continental imperialism that unfolds routinely under the sign of “the United States.” I wish to make three quick points to suggest what the critical means in critical urban anthropology.

My first point is about the problem of US urbanism. To the extent that many of us work in, or engage with, US anthropology, we must take US American urbanism seriously because it presents a particular set of problems as we face the political challenge of responding both to centrist liberalism and to the angry politics of the reactionary right. The reactionary right’s view of US cities is that they are depraved centers of sin, elite cosmopolitan liberalism, and identity politics. Centrist liberals frequently respond to this charge by defending US cities as diverse, socially liberal, immigrant-friendly, inclusive, and
culturally-forward. But this hegemonic understanding of red state/blue state, urban/rural political polarization has just enough truth to it to make it very misleading. US metropolitan zones have long and noble histories as centers of freedom for queers, working-class women, Black Americans escaping plantation life, and other migrants. And many people settle in cities with the hope of escaping persecution of one form or another. But let’s face it: Most US cities are luxury lands for the rich, and even if they are not, they are deeply invested in antiblackness, xenophobia, exploitation, environmental degradation, queer-bashing, and other forms of violence. The cosmopolitanisms that are celebrated in the United States are frequently provincial, backward, violent, antidemocratic, technocratic, or elitist, and the polities associated with US cities are almost always less tolerant than they appear to be at first glance. US cities are also well-known for being laboratories of carcerality. Indeed, they are centers of the kind of carceral liberalism that has taken hold in the country since the 1970s that drove the wave of mass incarceration of the last four decades (Haley 2018). And this is perhaps why insurgent struggles are also frequently, but not exclusively, urban phenomena – because people are protesting things that are happening where they live, work, and walk the streets. We need a critical urban anthropological stance that contends with these dynamics, including the complicity of our urban universities in the broader system of carceral liberalism of which they are a part. The annual meetings of the AAA took place last year in Baltimore, though by design participating in them gave us very little sense of that city and the struggles going on there, as we were sequestered in a conference center and its nearby hotels.

My second point has to do with confronting how the urban is changing. Many urbanists are now directing attention to new interdependencies across metropolitan regions, the dispersal of urban architectural forms, infrastructures, and functions beyond the urban core, and the integration of formerly non-urban areas, such as rural industrial zones or wilderness, into urban networks. This is not just a simple matter of globalization or of tweaking the “global cities” paradigm. Urbanists have called for the rejection of “methodological city-ism,” which directs attention narrowly to the dense social, political, economic and cultural networks within cities, in favor of a focus on accelerating urban restructuring, the consolidation of new urban spaces, and the crystallization of new forms of urbanization (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015; Brenner and Schmid 2012). Yet the rush to capture the urban emergent is frequently framed through paradigms such as planetary urbanization that are almost always inattentive to lived experience and ignore the contributions of queer, feminist, postcolonial, critical ethnic studies, Native studies, and Black studies in theorizing about the urbanizing world, as Cindi Katz (2021) recently argued in her piece “Splanetary Urbanization.” Following Katz, who always insists on minor theory as an alternative to the “man-splaining”
of major theory, we need a critical urbanism that pays attention to agency, subjectivity, and improvisation and that emphasizes the “makings, undoings, contingencies and possibilities” of contemporary urbanization (2021: 600; see also Katz 1996; 2017). Julian Brash and I are developing a project of this sort, which we call “Mutations of Urbanism” to signal a non-deterministic and generative inquiry into the socio-spatial dynamics of lived experience across extended urban landscapes.1

Third, we need a critical urbanism that is attuned to the emancipatory potentialities and egalitarian experiments that metropolitan life makes possible. New abolitionist paradigms and recent work in Black and Native Studies can help us see the incipient, unruly, and beautiful forms of “livingness” that people improvise as they refuse the death-dealing logics of white settler colonialism and antiblackness (McKittrick 2006). For example, Saidiya Hartman directs our attention to the intimate lives of Black women who fled the plantation system in the postbellum US south and arrived in northern cities in search of new kinds of freedom. They found themselves enclosed by the carceral state, a labor regime that relegated them to meaningless and demeaning domestic work, and respectability politics. And they responded with waywardness, which Hartman defines thusly:

Waywardness: the avid longing for a world not ruled by master, man or the police. The errant path taken by the leaderless swarm in search of a place better than here. The social poesis that sustains the dispossessed...Waywardness articulates the paradox of cramped creation, the entanglement of escape and confinement, flight and captivity. Wayward: to wander, to be unmoored, adrift, rambling, roving, cruising, strolling, and seeking. To claim the right to opacity. To strike, to riot, to refuse. To love what is not loved. To be lost to the world. It is the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies; it is the lived experience of enclosure and segregation, assembling and huddling together. It is the directionless search for a free territory; it is a practice of making and relation that enfolds within the policed boundaries of the dark ghetto; it is the mutual aid offered in the open-air prison. It is a queer resource of black survival. It is a beautiful experiment in how-to-live.Waywardness is a practice of possibility at a time when all roads, except the ones created by smashing out, are foreclosed. It obeys no rules and abides no authorities. It is unrepentant. It traffics in occult visions of other worlds and dreams of a different kind of life. Waywardness is an ongoing exploration of what might be; it is an improvisation with the terms of social existence, when the terms have already been dictated, when there is little room to breathe, when you have been sentenced to a life of servitude, when the house of bondage looms in whatever direction you move. It is the unrelenting practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive (Hartman 2019: 227-228).
Behold the political sensibility elaborated in these two keenly written paragraphs. We need to build a critical urban anthropology around this sensibility, with its attention to spatial enclosures, movement and escape, and unruliness in the face of captivity. Similarly, Sarah Haley’s (2016) work on carcerality and the role it played in creating the industrialized capitalism of the late 19th and early 20th century, what she calls “Jim Crow modernity,” also shows how gender ideologies played their role in forms of punishment and incarceration affecting Black women in the US south, chronicling Black women’s recriminalization as gender non-normative. Importantly, Haley also directs our attention to Black women’s sabotage praxis, by which she means their efforts to dismantle and escape from the punishment regime, and to the blues and other aesthetic forms and practices through which they protested their captivity, inverted the lens on crime and moral responsibility, celebrated their labor, and transmitted an emancipatory sensibility across generations and communities. What we can see in Haley’s work, and in that of Hartman, is the teasing out of a political imagination beyond refusal, one that emphasizes “urban livingness,” a sensibility that Kathrine McKittrick also elaborates to great effect (2006, 2021).

What I would like to see is the development of a critical urban stance that is inspired by the kind of political sensibilities that Haley, McKittrick, and Hartman bring to their work. One direction this work points towards is a new anticapitalist critique. There is a long tradition in urban studies that pays attention to regimes of accumulation, spatial fixes, and class struggle, which remains essential and urgently relevant. But this focus is not always as attentive as it should be to race, gender, nationality, queerness, or mobility. Ruthie Gilmore’s abolition geography, her critique of racial capitalism, and her focus on state abandonment of racialized groups offers a blueprint for a new anticapitalist stance, as does Melissa Checker’s environmental anthropology, which unhides the accumulation of contradictions manifested in new urban sustainability agendas (Checker 2021; Gilmore 2021).

Leith Mullings’ work on social reproduction, health, and Black freedom movements is also essential and should not be sidelined by newer, more trendy approaches that ignore class, dismiss Marxian theory simplistically and unfairly as a unitary antiblack intellectual formation, and are disdainful of politics and collective action (Mullings 2005a; Mullings and Wali 2001; Mullings and Schulz 2006). Importantly, Mullings, a leading urbanist of her generation, insisted that collective political action was the solution to the multiplicative oppressions bearing down on Black working class women (Mullings 1987, 2005b, 2020). This scholarship can serve as a new grounding for a critical emancipatory urban anthropology that seeks to tease out the concrete utopianisms, to borrow a term from Gary Wilder (2022), that surface in the paradoxical spaces of violent antiblackness, capitalist triumph, environmental catastrophe, xenophobia, class division, racial inequality, cisheteropatriarchy, and the political violence that is on the rise across the world.
Obviously, there is far more that must be included in a critical emancipatory urban stance, as other contributors to this conversation make clear. What I would like to encourage is using the newly renamed Critical Urban Anthropology Association as a space where we struggle together to sharpen our critical sensibilities, collaborating and supporting each other as we try to drag anthropology towards a more free and egalitarian future.

Note

1 Julian Brash and I developed a proposal for a short seminar on the theme of “Mutations of Urbanism: Urban Anthropology Beyond the City” for the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, NM. The seminar has yet to take place because of the extended COVID emergency.

References Cited


