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# Natura Urbana: cultures of nature vs. nature beyond culture

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Matthew Gandy's *Natura Urbana* tries to balance the two seemingly contradictory tasks: for those who research urban ecologies, should our priority be 'cultures of nature' or 'nature beyond culture'? In particular, Gandy finds a 'systems-based' approach to urban ecology insufficient; while scholars working in this field have been successful in highlighting the co-evolutionary processes between human intervention and other-than-human operations, they have failed to take account of 'the specific cultural, historical, and material dimensions of urbanisation' (p. 25). For instance, the universalising tendency of 'ecology' as nature-human coevolution cannot register the historic harms caused by colonial powers and the economic actors enabling racial capitalism. A case in point is Gandy's reference to environmental injustice literature pioneered in North America, where predominantly African American communities have been disproportionately affected by the harms of toxic pollution.

On the other hand, Gandy remains equally dissatisfied with a neo-Marxist approach—of which 'social constructionist' argument, at times, feels detached from what's actually happening on the ground. Commenting on Neil Smith, who emphasized how nature is produced under capitalist urbanization, Gandy asks: 'Is there all there is?' (p. 43). In his discussion of novel ecologies springing up in the 'wastelands,' or what he re-terms as 'void space,' new materialist and neovitalist interpretations of urban space win the debate, as nature

beyond culture inspire new epistemologies and languages that reframe how we relate to our local environments. As he put it: 'This diverse alternative lexicon for marginal spaces also intersects with emerging ecological insights that seek to valorize specific forms of biodiversity or the serendipitous aesthetic effects of 'nondesign' … for example, conservation biologists have sought to replace the term 'brownfield' with 'open mosaic habitat' as a part of a scientifically driven effort to modify dominant attitudes towards void space in land use planning' (p. 88).

This forum's reviewers recognise the book's tension between cultures of nature and nature beyond culture. Mark Usher (in this issue) restores the notion of 'political' in political ecology as pluralist ontology (Barry, 2002; Lake, 2024)—and how we as researchers should harness ecology's unpredictable, and therefore subversive, lifeforce energy: 'New materialists seek to provide voice to the mute nonhuman world, to expand the meaning of democracy and politics, and articulate more efficacious ways of living in an entangled, interdependent world.' At the same time, however, Usher recognises the analytic rigorousness and insights that UPE has usefully brought upon to urban studies and beyond: 'Is Marxian UPE the most powerful theoretical framework available for analysing socio-environmental change in the city? Most likely, I would venture. Can its incisive political economic analytics explain everything pertaining to urban nature? Certainly not.'

Upon embracing this dilemma, the critical question remains as to which kinds of research practices may be commended by Gandy's 'ecological pluriverse' approach. Usher (in this issue) notes that such a practice would ask academics to step down from their 'theoretical expertise', through which 'knowledge' and 'technics' of how we understand and manage our material problems are democratised. Daniela Perotti (in this issue), similarly,

considers Gandy's book to be a composite of different worlds and ways of knowing, where a form of 'modernity' that a researcher may adopt in their practice is only 'one of many'. Marit Rosol (in this issue) reviews a plethora of perspectives on 'nature' that they have encountered throughout their career—which has contributed to their research practice in different ways; both system-based ecology's emphasis on empiricism and UPE's focus on agonistic conflicts have strengths of each own.

Amidst of ever-expanding knowledges in interaction with ever-evolving material surrounds, however, a researcher is constrained in their time and energy. In my reading, there exists a tension between 'ecological loitering' versus 'forensic ecologies', the research methods put forward by Gandy. Forensic ecologies, as opposed to taking time to notice 'nature beyond culture' (as in 'ecological loitering'), is fundamentally purpose-driven: there is a purpose in piecing together the 'crime scene' of major polluters, via detailing the material processes that amounted to a particular tragedy. There is first a problematic situation that a community finds to be worthy of investing their time and attention, then follows the investigation and research that serve the purpose of legal redress. This was the case in Gandy's two examples of Diamond, Louisiana and Denton, Texas, where communities took over the effort to record and monitor the environmental impacts of unwanted facilities. 'Evidentiary materialism' and 'field causality', which Gandy sees as the contribution of forensic architecture, are in fact reminiscent of Colin Koopman's transitionalist pragmatism (Jon, 2023), where an emergent problematic situation triggers a research practice that genealogically traces the historical conditions of why things had to unfold the way they did. The urgent human need to address a problematic situation, or a collective acknowledgement of something as problematic, mobilises resources and networks that lead to a forensic research project.

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‘Don’t get caught’, says a bus driver in Pontypridd (approximately 16 km northwest of Cardiff), who was trying to help my journey to the Craig yr Hesg, a working quarry managed by the Hanson-Heidelberg cement group. ‘Nobody likes that quarry, so they don’t want people hanging around there. What they’re doing is basically fracking … fracking the ground for stones.’ And he continues, ‘There are some positives, though: it creates jobs; it keeps lolly drivers employed.’ Stepping towards the site, I see the warning sign: ‘By court order, you are prohibited from entering or remaining on any part of Craig Yr Hesg Quarry.’ The Craig yr Hesg became the subject of media attention and political debate when the expansion of the current working quarry was approved. Air quality and dust pollution were the main concerns raised by the residents; the expansion would mean its impact, heightened during the blasting times, would get closer and closer to the residential area. The vibration and the quake were vividly felt as I was walking in the Craig yr Hesg Nature Reserve, serving as a buffer between the quarry and the residential zone. The concerns around monitoring air quality—who monitors, where and how—are relevant exactly as they appear in Gandy’s story of Denton, Texas (p. 178). The unequal consequences affecting communities differently—as in, how quarrying remains commonplace in suburban Wales for the price of building more in other wealthier parts of the UK—is a direct counterpoint against apolitical ecology, of which links to fascism were problematised by Gandy (p. 126).

On the left side of the Craig yr Hesg Nature Reserve, the continuing woodlands are called ‘Lan Woods’. Of particular interest to me in this area is Lan Quarry, known as ‘The Darren’, a disused quarry popular amongst climbers (Figure 1). The site seems promising for the investigation of novel ecologies, as nature has now colonised the remnants of a destructive human intervention. As Gandy notes, the ‘unproductive’ characteristics of abandoned landscapes are ‘useless’ only relative to their former uses. They can also become ‘places of unease and symbolic signification, less easy to categorize or identify, that connect with memories, inspire Ballardian psychogeographies, or functions as spaces of autonomous social and cultural life’ (p. 88). As much as I enjoyed basking in this sensorium, I was immediately called out of my epistemic bubble as my colleague and I drove past a nearby commercial seed bank. The subject land—and the ownership over the land’s value generation (via seed bank activities)—remains controversial, as the new land owner and the beneficiaries of the land’s production are found to be foreign to the locals. Whose nature, or whose environmental problems, should a researcher commit their time to? If we were to choose Stengerian ‘deceleration’, or to slow down and find value in ‘marginalia’, how would we justify such time commitment in the knowledge of the communities currently undergoing material loss and tragedy—in need of more attention, resources, and power? *Natura Urbana* may not provide a direct answer to this, but it certainly contributes to opening up that very debate.

Figure 1. Lan quarry (aka ‘The Darren’). (Source: Author)

**References**


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