Urban Political Ecology from Below: Producing a “Peoples’ History” of the Portland Harbor

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Abstract: Urban political ecology scholars recognise that a historical perspective is central to elucidating processes of racialised uneven development. In this paper, I articulate a collectively produced “peoples’ history” of the Portland Harbor Superfund Site, recounting how over a century of industrial pollution in Portland, Oregon has disproportionately impacted Native, Black, immigrant and refugee, and houseless residents of all backgrounds—and has spawned collective work for a more just future. I argue that it is imperative for scholars to not only articulate such racialised pasts, however, but also to recognise how those working on the front lines of change draw on their own personal and group experiences to produce shared narratives, particularly across difference and in a context of depoliticised, ahistorical sustainability discourse. The case of the Portland Harbor Community Coalition reveals how the production of a shared history can be an important part of work to redress racialised dispossession and displacement in so-called green cities.

Keywords: uses of history, sustainability fix, uneven development, Portland, social movements, environmental justice

Portland, Oregon is a paradigmatic green city, with miles of bike lanes, a world-renowned farm-to-table movement, and a model climate action plan (Knox and Florida 2014; Metcalfe 2016). The opportunity to pursue urban swimming and kayaking in the Willamette, the river that flows through Portland’s downtown core, has recently become a central part of the city’s sustainability success story (Sullivan 2016). Yet, over a century of industrial pollution remains buried in the soil and sediment of the Willamette. Although recent major public infrastructure investments have made the river mostly safe for water-based recreation, subsistence activities continue to pose serious health risks. The Oregon Health Authority (OHA) advises against consuming any amount of resident fish, which feed on benthic organisms contaminated with PCBs and other hazardous substances (OHA 2018). Houseless people living along the river’s edge also face hazardous exposure to dioxins and lead in the soil.¹ In 2000, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) designated the Portland Harbor a Superfund site. With over 100 “potentially responsible parties”, this 11-mile stretch of the Willamette just north of downtown Portland is one of the most complex Superfund sites in the country. The EPA estimates it will take at least a decade-and-a-half and over a billion dollars to clean it up (see Figure 1).
Since 2012, the Portland Harbor Community Coalition (PHCC) has been fighting for a more thorough—and just—cleanup of the Portland Harbor. A community-based grassroots organisation, PHCC connects people from a wide variety of races, ethnicities, and class backgrounds, and with a range of motivations for seeking environmental change. As a central part of PHCC’s activism, participants have produced a new, shared narrative about the history of the Portland Harbor. This narrative complicates the mainstream storyline: that infrastructure improvements have enabled a once-sullied river to become an epicentre of urban recreation and pleasure for all. PHCC’s version, in contrast, recognises the endurance of Native Americans in the Willamette Valley over the last two centuries, despite exposure to disease, forced removals, and continually compromised traditional foods habitat; the survival of Black shipyard workers, their families, and descendants, notwithstanding workplace exploitation, exposure to industrial pollution, and serial displacement over the last several decades; and the more recent

Figure 1: The Portland Harbor Superfund Site and surrounding area (map by Dillon Mahmoudi) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
presence of food-insecure subsistence fishers, particularly immigrants and refugees who are exposed to toxins, despite water quality improvements. Furthermore, houseless people of diverse races and ethnicities seek refuge along the river, as they have periodically for over a century in Portland’s main watershed, and their lives are threatened when they consume contaminated fish, live in toxic soil, and experience police violence. Members of these groups make up PHCC’s core membership base, and they are fighting for a more just future.

PHCC’s historical narrative is not simply an additive one (i.e. Native history plus Black history, etc.), however. Rather, as I show in this paper, it is a joint history that has come into being through dialogue and collective action over the last six years, and it continues to evolve. As PHCC works to ensure that impacted communities collectively steer and benefit from urban environmental cleanup, the coalition draws attention to the racist, colonial past and present, in order to politicise the harbor’s future. But PHCC’s new, shared history did not emerge overnight. How did the coalition’s collective historical narrative come into being, and to what ends?

As in other contexts, agents of change who are working to transform the landscape and power relations of so-called green cities toward a more “just sustainability” (Agyeman 2013) engage in what social movement scholars call “micromobilisations” (Hunt and Benford 2004). They hold community meetings, form alliances, stage protests, write op-eds, submit public testimony, create political artwork, attend policy meetings, and produce counter-narratives. Although scholars have much to say about the macro-politics of grassroots struggles related to urban greening (e.g. Anguelovski 2016; Curran and Hamilton 2012), much less attention has been paid to the day-to-day labour and political subject formation that underpins social change in this context. Social movement undertakings do not appear magically out of social structural conditions, nor are people predisposed to activism. Instead, there is a process of becoming political, which entails interrelated collective identity formation and participation in collective activities (Hunt and Benford 2004; Rutland 2013).

This paper draws on the case of PHCC to examine how a process of becoming political is unfolding today in Portland, one of the world’s foremost green cities, as people from diverse racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds work together to push a city that purports to be sustainable for all to live up to its word. By centring grassroots activists working to re-shape urban space in Portland, this paper addresses the ways in which (green) growth regimes may be susceptible to challenges from below. It builds on previous research portraying sustainable development as temporary, prone to splintering when profit margins shrink (Hackworth 2007; Harvey 1989; Long 2014; Walker 2016; While et al. 2004)—or when communities rise up in an effort to reconcile the contradictions of uneven development (Davidson and Iveson 2015; Ekers and Prudham 2018).

Examining the quotidian work of change agents, themselves, heeds Pellow’s (2016) call to consider impacted communities’ intersectional identities and to take seriously the perspectives of those deemed “expendable”, to make environmental justice (EJ) movement scholarship relevant to the current era. At the same time, this paper responds to Heynen’s (2016:840) call for scholarship that “internal-iz[es]}
the deep historical spatial logics of the ‘ghetto’, the ‘plantation’, the ‘colony’ and
the ‘reservation’” in order to become more attuned to the “racialization of uneven
urban environments”, and to contribute toward an “abolition ecology”—an
ecology rooted in the liberation of oppressed people. In so doing, I strive to
heed Pulido’s (2018) urgent appeal for geographers to more fully address the
complexities of settler colonialism without resorting to standard binary (i.e. Native/
non-native) framings, as well as McKittrick’s (2011:959) insistence that scholars
avoid reifying narratives that obscure the “human relationality” of ordinary people
collectively engaged in struggle; Tuck et al. (2014) describe such a stance as a
“desire-based” as opposed to “damage-centred” analytical frame.

But I take Heynen’s provocation a step further in this paper, arguing that
contributions to an abolition ecology require attention to how different historical
threads get woven together, by, for, and with agents of change. Activists are
busy producing their own shared histories. These histories both comprise and
inform the ways in which people come together across difference in an attempt
to disrupt status quo urban greening narratives and activities. While scholars
may well play a direct or indirect role in the production of shared histories, it is
nevertheless a process that involves actors engaging in work. We need to have a
sense of what this process looks like—not just the outcome—in order to fruit-
fully contribute to it, or, following Tuck and Yang (2014) to know when to step
back, to “refuse”.

The case of PHCC offers one account of how shared history-making has con-
tributed to the formation of political consciousness and action in the sustainable
city. Drawing on four years of ethnographic, archival, and participatory action
research, I illustrate the process through which one coalition’s collective history-
making has evolved. Before diving into the case of PHCC, I first outline existing
theories of urban environmental politics and social movements, consider my own
and other participants’ positionalities in this work, and summarise one version of
PHCC’s collectively produced history of the Portland Harbor. I end with a discus-
sion of the vital role of the shared production of history within grassroots efforts
to redress histories of dispossession and displacement, particularly in a context of
ahistorical sustainability discourse.

Theorising the Production of History for a More Just
(Green) Future

Challenging the Urban Sustainability Fix

Since the 1990s, North American cities have adopted the discourse of sustainabil-
ity’s “3 Es” to attract investors, tourists, and highly educated residents, as well as
to address growing mainstream environmental concerns (While et al. 2004). Part
of “the same old growth machine but with a decorative skin” (Logan and
Molotch 2007:xx), “green” municipalities and private firms alike (and often in
partnership) seek to leverage eco-consciousness into profit by cleaning up former
sites of industry and devalued neighbourhoods—at least superficially—through a
“sustainability fix” (Smith 1982; While et al. 2004). Sustainability boosters appeal
to the green aesthetic and wallets of the “creative class” by developing green
features such as bio-swales, bike infrastructure, electric car charging stations, and urban agriculture (Bunce 2018; Gould and Lewis 2016).

Despite sustainability’s premise of social equity alongside environmental improvement and economic growth, the inherently political greening of cities (Heynen et al. 2006) has widened socioeconomic divisions along interconnected lines of race and class (Gould and Lewis 2016) through what Hern (2016:18) calls “the core of capitalism’s durability—its agility and malleability”. Public subsidies to clean up and “revitalise” previously disinvested neighbourhoods result in the displacement of lower-income and houseless residents, in processes of “eco-gentrification” (Checker 2011; Dooling 2009) and “accumulation by green dispossession” (Safransky 2014). Those who are displaced and excluded from green neighbourhoods are often the same residents who have suffered from years of exposure to pollution (Banzhaf and McCormick 2012; Dillon 2014). Regulators that might have helped lessen disparate impacts to pollution, such as the EPA, have been of little help (Pulido et al. 2016). Top-down urban greening initiatives therefore often reproduce racialised health disparities and housing instability.

Mainstream “postpolitical” sustainability discourse tends to gloss over these disparate impacts, suggesting that a rising green tide will lift all boats. Sustainability boosters render green development a relatively apolitical project, and omit the meaningful input of marginalised groups. Notably, mainstream sustainability discourse is by and large ahistorical; its gaze is set resolutely on a utopic green future, with little analysis of how to remedy historical and present-day disparities (Davidson and Iveson 2015; Swyngedouw 2007).

This is the context in which diverse actors are working to re-shape the urban landscape and related power relations. In recent years, scholars have described communities fighting against displacement, environmental racism, and other forms of sustainability-era exclusion and oppression as taking an approach that is “just green enough” (JGE) (Anguelovski 2016; Curran and Hamilton 2012, 2018; Wolch et al. 2014). Scholars first identified a JGE strategy in Brooklyn’s Greenpoint neighbourhood. Residents sought to curb displacement and ensure continued industrial blue-collar work following remediation of the Newtown Creek Superfund site, pursuing environmental remediation that would not “automatically or exclusively lead to the ‘parks, cafes, and a riverwalk’ model of a green city” (Curran and Hamilton 2012:1028). Indeed, grassroots groups are not only preoccupied with reducing urban environmental “bads” but also ensuring access to “environmental ‘goods’” in the green city (Carter 2016).

Yet, scholars have yet to fully consider the processes of such socio-ecological change work in green cities, particularly when people come together across difference to address an “urban land question” that is deeply entangled with interconnecting issues of capital and class, racism and colonialism (Safransky 2018). Agents of change are working in a context of what La Paperson (2014:117) calls “settler environmentalism”, which entails discourse characterising the land in dualistic terms: as simultaneously “desecrated, in pain, in need of rescue”, as well as “sacred, wild, and preserve-able”. Such discourses “justify re-invasion”. As they have for over three centuries, a triad of key actors is imbricated in today’s land use conflicts: white settlers “whose power lies in shaping the land into his
wealth”, Indigenous people, “whose claim to land must be extinguished”, and descendants of enslaved people, who “must be kept landless” (Paperson 2014:116). In coalitions like PHCC, members of these three groups, as well as immigrants and refugees of various racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds, are coming together in an attempt to hold industry, the state, and re-invading (white) environmentalists and sustainability advocates accountable—via implicit pursuit of an arrangement that does not merely redistribute land stolen from Indigenous people to other oppressed groups (see Pulido 2018; Smith 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012). How are these diverse actors reconciling the past as they work together to find a way forward?

**Micro-Processes of Socio-Ecological Change**

People engage in social movement work for a variety of reasons: to meet a tangible metabolic need (e.g. food, shelter, safety); to satisfy a desire for community; to address a concern over a particular social/EJ issue; and especially in response to “place” or “landscape” attachments (Anguelovski 2013; Dubet 1994, 2004; Rutland 2013). Given that emotional and moral connections to land, including via origin narratives (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014), often form the core of peoples’ collective identities and their guiding values, such attachments also sometimes form a basis for mounting challenges to oppressive regimes (Finney 2014; Safransky 2018; Wolfe 2006). This is the case even in the midst of disruption caused by settler colonialism and other violent forms of dispossession and displacement that complicate place-based relationships (Pulido 2018); although they may be “taking place in space”, land relationships—geographies—simultaneously intersect with “subjectivities, imaginations, and stories” (McKittrick 2006:xiii). Black people of diverse ethnicities in the US, for instance, report not only that they feel that they emerge from the land, on the one hand, or are “foreign” to it, on the other, but that they experience a sense of “becoming of the land”, independent of state-based citizenship or legal property claims (Tuck et al. 2014:68). The linkages between place attachment and social movement participation are therefore incredibly complex and multi-dimensional.

Adding to this complexity, people are never fully formed, nor internally homogenous, political subjects; notwithstanding the aforementioned motivating reasons for being active, social movement participants go through an ever-evolving process of becoming political (Rutland 2013). One’s resources and objective interests, social circles, and core dispositions are always in flux, independently and in relation to one another. At the same time, how people become positioned as political subjects is also heavily influenced by three enduring logics of white supremacy: “(1) slaveability/anti-Black racism, which anchors capitalism; (2) genocide, which anchors colonialism; and (3) orientalism, which anchors war” (Smith 2012:68). While these structuring logics “preclude easy solidarity” (Pulido 2018:311), it is within and against them that political subjects are “made and remade”, ever changing, managing several “discordant, even contradictory, logics of action” (Rutland 2013:998, citing Dubet 1994:22).
In diverse social movement groups, this “work on oneself” (Rutland 2013) inevitably occurs in relation to work with others, in part via formation of a collective identity rooted not only in anti-oppression, but also “around complicity in other peoples as well as [their] own oppression” (Smith 2012:70). Collective identity entails “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connections with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (Polletta and Jasper 2001:285). This “shared sense of ‘we-ness’” (Snow 2001) emerges through micromobilisations—work—that people undertake to “muster, ready, coordinate, use, and reproduce material resources, labor, and ideas for collective action” (Hunt and Benford 2004:438). In iterative fashion, a sense of collective identity informs engagement in social movement activities, and active wrestling with contradictions of working across lines of difference has the potential to strengthen a group’s collective identity (Hunt and Benford 2004). Whether formal or informal, “collective learning” is therefore a key activity for diverse grassroots groups, because of its fundamental role in collective identity construction (Kilgore 1999). Collective learning “occurs among two or more diverse people in which taken-as-shared meanings (including a vision of social justice) are constructed and acted upon by the group” (Kilgore 1999:191). In collective learning scenarios, each participant contributes different “socioculturally developed understandings” to the collective process, rendering the whole more than the sum of its parts.

I want to be careful not to oversimplify the challenges of working across difference, however, particularly around land-based organising in a capitalist, settler-colonial system in which “claims to land are based ... solely on prior occupancy” (Smith 2012:83). While collective learning does not offer a guarantee of materially different outcomes, Kilgore (1999:199) nevertheless argues that because people learn primarily by resolving contradictions, it is precisely the presence of difference that can push collective learning to transpire: social actors “produce meaning in the face of conflict”. Collective learning that starts with participants’ own “lives, experiences, and actions” (Choudry 2015:34) helps prime people to incorporate new ideas into existing schemas, strengthen relationships between participants, and build commitments to the group (Friere 2000; Horton and Freire 1990). These ingredients are crucial (even if not a guarantee) for solidarity to develop (Hunt and Benford 2004).

**The Uses of History in Grassroots Movements**

The personal connections invoked in collective learning often involve the past, including personal memories and group histories. Engaging with history has long played a crucial role in anti-oppression organising, in part because marginalised groups’ experiences are often written out of mainstream historiography, justifying colonial and racist rule (Choudry 2015; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Finney 2014). In undertaking their own historiography—“the writing of history” (Choudry 2015:68)—members of marginalised groups can collectively imagine and begin to shape a different future: invoking the past “is a way to say, ‘We were there’”,

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Finney (2014:66) asserts, ultimately allowing “for more control and power in deciding (collectively?) who we were and who we are”.

Sociologist George Lipsitz (1988:241–242) argues that eliciting a collective memory of the past can also serve as a “critique of the present”, and sometimes enable oppressed groups to “fashion a counterhegemonic struggle” despite seemingly insurmountable challenges. Collectively remembering the past can also help social movement participants maintain a sense of “movement continuity”, thereby strengthening collective identity and resolve (Gongaware 2010), particularly when events of the past “convey triumph over oppression” (Harris 2006:20). In addition, “group-based memories” can inform cooperative action by “operating as a retrospective lens where insurgents can articulate grievances, cement group loyalties, establish goals, evaluate new events, and reflect on the possibility for successful cooperation” (Harris 2006:22). In fact, Johnson (2008, cited in Pulido and De Lara 2018:83) suggests that Black and Brown people organising in Los Angeles “have consistently envisioned futures that include each other’s memories and histories, even when it wasn’t always a conscious choice”.

More complex, however, are the mechanisms that facilitate a diverse group’s “memory repertoire” (Harris 2006:22) becoming a useful tool in fighting for a more just future. Feminist social movement scholar Chela Sandoval asserts that “differential consciousness” is precisely the element that has allowed “third world feminists” to effectively work together in solidarity across lines of difference to challenge mainstream, white conceptions of feminism. Differential consciousness involves reading “the current situation of power” and selecting “the ideological form best suited to push against its configurations” (2009:348). Strategically shifting from one ideology to another requires flexibility, strength, and grace, in order to form alliances with others—even when individual “readings of power” (ibid.) might be contradictory. Rather than fully give up one’s own ideology, participants instrumentally and temporarily assume each other’s principles. Sandoval (2009:348) explains: “As the clutch of a car provides the driver the ability to shift gears, differential consciousness permits the practitioner to choose tactical positions, that is, to self-consciously break and reform ties to ideology” in order to work cohesively across differences. Pulido and De Lara (2018) go a step further, drawing on Heatherton’s (2012) notion of “convergence spaces”—“sites where disparate radical traditions [are] forged into alliances, leading to unique modes of political mobilisation and the subsequent creation of new political theory” (Heatherton 2012:xvi). Examining convergence spaces of Black and Latinx EJ organising, Pulido and De Lara argue that radical imaginaries are relational rather than bounded; distinct radical visions actually converge to form “entirely new forms of opposition” (2018:83) through social movement organising around EJ issues.

Similar to the ways in which radical feminists strategically utilised what may appear to be conflicting ideologies as a means to an end, I argue that the process of producing a shared historical narrative, and the narrative itself, have enabled PHCC members to work together across lines of race, ethnicity, and class to challenge universalising and ahistorical sustainability discourses. This new historical narrative emerges out of—at the same time as it has helped foster—a space of
convergence. The centrality of a process of producing history, and in turn, evolving consciousness, for PHCC participants contrasts with standard EJ narratives, which often imply a sort of “aha moment” in which sudden cognisance of toxicity prompts people to act (e.g. Gibbs 2011; McGurty 2007). Instead of solely engaging in the discovery of facts, PHCC members have worked collaboratively to merge together their own and each other’s historical narratives. In the process of learning from one another, participants have gained consciousness about how systems of oppression intersect, which has shaped the group’s collective action.

That is not to say that internal and external conflicts have never threatened to derail the coalition’s work. But PHCC’s mode of historically rooted collective learning has opened space for a wide variety of issues to come to the fore, from inhumane treatment of houseless people, to access to land and living-wage jobs as reparations for displaced Black residents. Serving as a sort of clutch, PHCC members strategically invoke various historical threads tied to these priorities, and sometimes the coalition’s historical narrative in its entirety, at different moments.

A Note on Positionalities
Before moving on to PHCC’s collective history-making process, it is imperative to note that the particular life experiences, identities, and locations—the positionalities—of PHCC members and supporters, have been crucial to the particular content of the coalition’s narrative. As Rose (1997:308) notes, “siting is intimately involved in sighting”; that is, what one sees has everything to do with one’s vantage point, with regard to a host of mediating factors including race, ethnicity, gender, social and economic status, and so on. This is true for both “researcher” and “researched”, and indeed, “researcher, researched, and research make each other” (Rose 1997:316).

Some feminist scholars pursue “transparent reflexivity” in a principled attempt to fully know and situate themselves and the context in which a project takes place. But Rose argues such an undertaking is an “impossible goddess-trick” (1997:311). Through a lens of transparent reflexivity, the relationship between researcher and researched can be seen in only one of two ways: as one of difference, resulting in a distanced objectification of research subjects, or as one of sameness, falsely collapsing the researcher and researched into similar positions. Neither of these work, as they give no space for “understanding across difference” (Rose 1997:313). Instead, Rose implores researchers to take on the project of situating academic knowledge in order to “produce non-overgeneralizing knowledges that learn from other kinds of knowledges” (1997:313).

In what follows, I present an iteration of PHCC’s collectively produced history and the story of how it was produced as one narrative that has emerged from many different knowledges. For the past to serve a purpose in the present for cross-race, cross-class coalitions like PHCC, it must be excavated, remembered, communicated, negotiated—collectively produced. My role has been to help stitch various threads together, as well as to consult archives and secondary histories; synthesise insights shared via countless informal conversations and two dozen formal interviews with coalition members, hundreds of coalition meetings and
events, and dozens of collaborative film-making, letter-writing, and other creative projects; and put the case of PHCC in conversation with how others have used history in social movements. PHCC leaders have read and commented on various versions of this account. In dialogue with PHCC members and while writing this paper, I have also recalled my own childhood memories working in my family’s garden grown with water drawn from polluted tributaries to the Willamette River, following the traditions of my white, Euro-American great-grandmother; hearing tales from my white, Irish-Catholic great-grandfather about life in the Willamette’s swamplands in the days before the war ships arrived; and listening to stories about sick friends and co-workers from my white uncle, who worked in the shipyards for many years and, together with his bi-racial—Black and white—teenage daughters (my cousins), has participated in PHCC functions. The version offered here is therefore partly (though far from solely) my own, filtered through my own experience as a white researcher and nearly-lifelong resident of one of the whitest cities in the US, with my own complex ties to the harbor and PHCC.

Moreover, this version of the past is an impermanent one, an imperfect snapshot of a history that will continue to morph into new versions in unpredictable ways with each new contributor and audience. In fact, as I made final revisions to this paper, one of PHCC’s community organisers and I were writing a shorter version for an op-ed in Portland’s local street newspaper (Goodling and Smith 2018), and we were attempting to secure funds to hire a local comic artist to produce a visual peoples’ history of the harbor in collaboration with local youth, for PHCC to use in further engaging young people. PHCC’s shared history is therefore transforming into something new as we speak, as new knowledges “learn” from old knowledges and vice versa.

A Peoples’ History of the Portland Harbor
The City of Portland completed a $1.4 billion infrastructure project known as the “Big Pipe” in 2011, substantially reducing toxic sewer and stormwater runoff into the Willamette River. Since then, the city’s main urban waterway has received growing attention as an ideal place to cool off on hot afternoons. Crowds of 20-somethings can be seen lining downtown docks, sipping beers and blasting music all summer long. Thousands of people also participate in the annual “Big Float” festival, filling the water with fluorescent pink and yellow inner-tubes every July. In spring 2016, mayor-elect Ted Wheeler even delivered his ballot via “tiny triathlon”, ceremonially swimming across the Willamette, biking along the waterfront, walking a few blocks to Pioneer Courthouse Square, and dropping his voting card in the box (Acker 2016a). A few months later, Mayor Wheeler took another public dip, starting what has become an annual tradition. He remarked: “Today we’re going to swim in the water, the water quality is very good. We’re not going to stop and eat mud on the bottom of the river” (quoted in Acker 2016b).

Wheeler’s quote sums up mainstream narratives of the Portland Harbor. It may well be true for the majority of Portland residents that toxins in the mud pose little danger. But they actually prevent thousands of people from safely engaging in cultural traditions and life-sustaining activities, like fishing (see Figure 2).
Moreover, what some boosters call the “Riverlution” is also part and parcel of the city’s green development boom—which has fuelled the displacement and exclusion of these same communities (Goodling et al. 2015). Zidell Yards, just south of the Superfund site, for example, is slated to become a waterfront industrial-hub-turned-mixed-use project, with 2.2 million square feet of residential housing, 1.5 million square feet of office space, and substantial retail and open recreational space. Anchoring the development will be an open-air swimming pavilion, located directly in the Willamette (Profita 2016).

To understand why PHCC members and supporters are not celebrating the Portland Harbor as an urban recreational paradise, in contrast to so many others, it is necessary to examine the history of the harbor from a “peoples’ view”—from the perspectives of those who have carried the burdens of pollution, dispossession, and displacement for decades and centuries. The current era of sustainability is only the latest chapter in a long history of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) in relation to the Portland Harbor.

Prior to the 1800s, approximately 3000 Multnomah-Chinook people called the present-day Portland metropolitan area home, as they had for generations. Thousands of members of other tribes travelled through the Willamette Valley for trading, fishing, and wapato-gathering. “We’ve always been here”, explains J R Lilly, a PHCC member and representative of the Portland Youth and Elders Council.

Figure 2: Signs throughout the Portland Harbor warn against consuming resident fish
[Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
But starting in the late 1700s, colonial explorers brought diseases, including smallpox and malaria, devastating Native populations. Ninety-two percent of Columbia River Valley Native Americans died by the 1830s, and disease reduced the Willamette Valley Native population from 15,000 to fewer than 2000 people. Then, beginning in the 1850s, the US government ratified treaties that eliminated access to resources and traditional homelands for Native people and displaced them to reservations around the region. This death-by-disease and forced removal process opened space for white Euro-Americans to establish the Portland Harbor as a main hub for the exportation of grain, lumber, and other commodities—as well as a primary site of wartime shipbuilding (Boyd 1975, 2013; Ellis 2013; Lang 2010; Spores 1993; Whaley 2010).

Portland would later become home to one of the largest wartime shipbuilding and shipbreaking operations in the US, thanks to the labour of thousands of working-class people, including Native Americans from across the country, Chinese and other immigrants, and roughly 23,000 Black workers who were only legally allowed to live in Oregon beginning in 1926 (Curry-Stevens et al. 2011; Gibson 2007). Whereas white people flocked to the state under the Oregon Donation Land Act (ODLA) of 1850, a clause in the state’s constitution excluded people of African descent from crossing state lines, under threat of the lash. The ODLA “promised free land to White settlers only”, codifying efforts to create a “white homeland” up until 1926 (Gibson 2007). A handful of Black people migrated to Portland in the late 1800s and early 1900s despite these discriminatory laws, but it was not until World War II that large numbers of Black people came to Portland—primarily to work in the shipyards. Workers were exposed to extremely toxic substances on the docks, such as lead and asbestos (Pearson 1996), as well as diesel emissions from harbor and freeway traffic in the nearby neighbourhoods where city statutes segregated Black residents after a 1948 flood destroyed their hastily-constructed wartime housing (Gibson 2007; Multnomah County Health Department 2014). Black shipyard workers were not allowed to join the Boilermakers Union, which meant lower wages and fewer workplace protections than their white counterparts (Pearson 1996; Smith and Taylor 1980).

Starting in the 1920s, just as the shipbuilding industry was gaining steam, public health experts, sanitary engineers, conservationists, and well-to-do anglers began a fight to clean up the Willamette. These early environmentalists’ concerns revolved less around the shipbuilding industry, however, and more around municipal sewage and toxic discharges from pulp and paper mills. Activists worried about the harmful effects of such contamination on commercial fishing, as well as on tourist and recreation-centred fishing, business, and swimming. In 1938, they succeeded in establishing the State Sanitary Authority, which mandated that pulp and paper industries stop dumping waste into the Willamette. Then, between 1947 and 1952, state-level officials impelled the City of Portland to spend $15 million (the equivalent of nearly $140 million in 2017) on a wastewater treatment plant—sited at the north end of the neighbourhood in which Black residents were being segregated (Hillegas-Eltling 2018; Stroud 1999).

These remediation efforts helped put Portland on the map as a leader in the nascent environmental movement, and National Geographic even featured
stewardship of the Willamette River in a cover article (Starbird 1972). A state-level mandate that local jurisdictions institute urban growth boundaries, and Portland’s adoption of a green growth strategy, including development of miles of bike lanes and transit, LEED-certified buildings, and community gardens through the 1990s and 2000s, would later cement the city’s reputation as an urban sustainability mecca (Slavin and Snyder 2011).

Water quality in the Portland Harbor has improved substantially, and it is now considered safe to swim most of the time. But Portland’s sustainability successes, including river remediation, have had uneven impacts (Goodling et al. 2015). Notably, advancements have had little impact on pollution buried in the harbor’s sand and sediment. Extremely dangerous substances continue to accumulate up the food chain, ultimately poisoning the bodies of those who eat resident fish—largely Black and Native people, immigrants and refugees, and houseless people of all backgrounds (CRITFC 1994; PHCC 2015; Sundling and Buck 2012). “It was a past-time and a feeding”, explains Ms Wilma Alcock, a PHCC member, whose parents were some of the first Black shipyard workers to move to Portland; Ms Wilma and so many other people have fond memories of fishing in the Willamette (PHCC 2015). Many are unaware of risks, while others realise the danger but prioritise practicing important cultural traditions and/or accessing an affordable source of protein.

Portland’s houseless people, who are in contact with dangerous substances such as dioxins and lead in riverbank campsites, are particularly vulnerable. Houseless camping in the harbor is nothing new: the river’s bounty of fish and relative seclusion has enticed houseless people to call the riverbank home for over 100 years, especially in “Hooverville” encampments during the Great Depression (Rose 2016), and again beginning in the 1980s, due to Reagan’s rollback of funds for affordable housing and mental health services (WRAP 2010). Even earlier, at the turn of the century, The Oregonian (1909) reported that 5000 people lived in old ship skeletons along the river. From 1909 to 1911, Portland’s mayor ordered these “scows” and their residents removed. Workers set some shelters on fire and moved others to cheap plots of then-rural land six miles east of the river, in Lents (Blalock 2012). In 2015, a low estimate of around 3800 people slept on Portland’s streets or in a shelter during a point-in-time count, and approximately 12,000 people were doubled up or sleeping in unsafe conditions (Multnomah County 2015). Black and Native people are disproportionately represented (ibid.). As police violently sweep houseless people from inner-Portland neighbourhoods on a regular basis, the river maintains its draw for those seeking safe shelter. PHCC members worry, however, that sweeps will extend to the riverbanks with greater intensity in the years to come, as Superfund cleanup begins.

This brief “peoples’ history” corrects conventional narratives of the river’s cleanup. Make no mistake; PHCC recognise that past infrastructure improvements have laid an important foundation for continued remediation. Art McConnville, PHCC and American Indian Movement-Portland chapter leader, explains: “People can be healed, rivers can be healed” (PHCC 2015). But like mainstream national narratives, which are lacking not in their “facts, dates, or details” but rather in
their “essence” (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014), mainstream histories of the Portland Harbor obscure who has carried the burdens of harbor pollution—and who has suffered severely as a result of Portland’s greening thus far. Dunbar-Ortiz (2014:5) bluntly summarises the implications of such white-washed histories: they allow people to sidestep “questions of reparations, restitution, and reordering society”. Counter-narratives, like those produced by PHCC, do the opposite, serving an important role in work for a more just future.

**Producing History Across Difference**

Where did this peoples’ history come from, and what ends has it served? In this section, I illustrate some of the activities—the micromobilisations—that have helped produce various iterations of PHCC’s shared historical narrative, and I elucidate how the collective production of a shared history has been fundamental to diverse participants working together in an attempt to transform an urban watershed and associated power relations (see Figure 3).

**Becoming Active**

In late 2011 and early 2012, representatives of companies responsible for funding Portland Harbor remediation paid non-profits serving communities of colour to host educational events about the harbor cleanup. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the information presented was incomplete and misleading. One presentation led the

![Figure 3: PHCC members and supporters rally for a clean Willamette in summer 2014](https://wileyonlinelibrary.com)
mostly Latinx audience to believe that toxic substances, such as PCBs, heavy metals, and perchlorate—the main ingredient in rocket fuel—had become harmlessly integrated into the ecosystem. A local EJ leader in attendance alerted leaders of several small grassroots organisations representing urban Native, Black, Latinx, Iraqi, and Eastern European communities, as well as a houseless activist group. Several of these groups decided to form a coalition to ensure that impacted communities had a say in the cleanup planning process. Since then, PHCC members have convened on a near-monthly basis. In addition, PHCC has hosted close to 100 culturally specific events, panel discussions, festivals, marches, water ceremonies, strategy sessions, and other happenings.

Most participants have joined PHCC for predictable reasons. Some seek concrete material outcomes. For example, one Latinx member says: “The water is very polluted. We nor our children nor our grandchildren are able to eat the fish. And that’s why I like to participate”. Others engage in PHCC’s activities because of community connections. One person explains:

I was invited by Jeri to come to a—she just said a community meeting and that it was important that I be there. And since Jeri is part of the Native Community, whenever an aunt or an uncle asks you to do something, you just do it.

People also get involved because they are concerned about particular social or EJ issues related to the harbor. A community health worker in the Black community explains her motivation for working with PHCC:

I am here to make sure that we facilitate and leverage this Superfund site into something that actually benefits the displaced people who have been suffering not only from the toxins, but from the job loss, from displacement in housing, education, employment, children, the whole nine yards.

Nearly across the board, people identify an affinity for rivers, generally, and the Willamette, specifically, as a foundational driver of their participation. One participant, for instance, identifies connections between Portland’s river and those of Iraq, his home country, as motivating his involvement:

I remember in my country, we have two rivers: Tigris and the Euphrates. Old rivers, yes. They come from Turkish mountains, very clear water, very clean, and one of them passes into Syria lands, and passes into Iraq. When [the river] reaches the south of Iraq, it is polluted heavily. Many diseases. The water becomes bitter or salty, not good to drink, or not good to water even the plants. I make a comparison between the Tigris and Euphrates and Willamette. We are suffering the same thing. So I think they [should] take care, the government, if they warn people or notify them, “Please, you have to take care of the rivers”, not for Portland only, for all American states.

Roy Pascoe, who identified as Native and white, also expressed an affinity for the land and the river as driving his participation. Roy lived along the Willamette’s banks and in other nooks and crannies of the city for several years prior to his 2016 death from lung cancer. He was one of PHCC’s most dedicated members. The last time I saw Roy, three weeks before he passed, he pounded his fist on the table in a coffee shop a few blocks from the Willamette, saying: “Damnit. If I
wasn’t fighting for my life, I’d be fighting for the river” (Goodling 2016). He loved the river, and he loved the people who call it home.

A reverence for the river also drives participation for Ms Wilma, who we heard from above. Ms Wilma has fond memories of eating fish from the river as a girl, and she recalls her parents working in the shipyards, chipping lead paint off the ships, in the years before urban renewal policies and green development gentrified Portland’s historically Black neighbourhood, Albina. Ms Wilma explains:

My hope is that [the river] gets back to where it once was, where it can be life sustaining for people. Because really, actually, progress just—it doesn’t sustain people … If I’m talking about progress when you’re displacing something and putting something else, it usually doesn’t last … Give it 25 years, those [new condos] are going to be housing that people with no income and little income will be living in. Because [developers] will go on to the next cherry.

Ms Wilma centres the Willamette’s remediation as one important component of restoring the health and spirit of the Black community in the midst of serial displacement.

Revolving around instrumental, affective, moral, and landscape commitments, PHCC members’ rationales for getting involved align with what we might expect. Given that PHCC members speak with such fondness for the river, it is not surprising that it is the basis around which a collective identity has formed for the diverse coalition.

But there is labour involved in turning these motivations—which are entangled with participants’ personal histories—into a collective identity and commitment to sustained action. Next, I examine some of the micromobilisations that have transformed individual affinities for the river into a shared, collectively produced history of the harbor that informs political consciousness-raising and collective action across difference.

**Producing History, Becoming Politicised**

PHCC leaders nearly always start coalition meetings with an ice-breaker that helps build relationships and orients new-comers to the group’s work. Questions such as “What is your earliest memory of the Willamette?” open space for participants to hear each other’s connections to the river. In response to this prompt, one participant, originally from Oaxaca, Mexico where there are no rivers as large as the Willamette, recalled that when she arrived in Portland, she was scared to cross the bridges. Another, who grew up in Portland and has experienced houselessness off and on for the last 10 years, recollected hunting and fishing along the river as a boy. Another person, a Native woman, remembered swimming in the Willamette as early as 1967. A formerly houseless PHCC member recalled seeing raw sewage discharging into the river prior to the Big Pipe construction; she was living outside, and felt threatened.

PHCC has made such dialogue about members’ personal histories more formal and public as well, including in a short film that undergraduate students and I
helped produce in 2015. While brainstorming ways to communicate about the Superfund site in coalition members’ own words with PHCC members, I suggested that students in my upcoming course could assist PHCC with the creation of popular education materials. Together we decided to produce a short film—A Peoples’ View of the Portland Harbor—that would communicate four things: (1) a brief history of the harbor and Superfund site from PHCC’s perspective; (2) the origins, mission, and membership of the coalition; (3) PHCC members’ concerns about the contamination and cleanup process; and (4) PHCC members’ hopes for the future.2

One foggy Saturday morning, 30 PHCC members convened on the banks of the river to interview one another for the film. Participants brainstormed interview questions and practiced telling their stories. When everyone felt ready, students filmed the interviews. We ensured that everyone who participated featured in the film, even if it resulted in redundancies. The end product is a 22-minute, documentary-style film that loosely covers the history outlined in this paper, in coalition members’ own words. About a dozen interview clips make up most of the film’s contents, and one of PHCC’s community organisers narrates additional historical details. Throughout the film, Ms Wilma intermittently reads from poems she wrote about the river and her experience as a member of Portland’s Black community. Visually, the film is composed of footage of interviews, integrated with photos and film clips of people working in the shipyards, fishing in the river,
and participating in PHCC functions. Spanish and English subtitles run along the bottom. Acoustic guitar blues riffs, recorded in a single-room-occupancy hotel bathroom by a formerly houseless PHCC member, purr in the background (see Figure 4).

Throughout the entire film-making project, participants were “made and re-made” (Rutland 2013), including through learning each other’s stories, helping to make editorial decisions, and watching the finished product. Multiple histories co-exist in the film’s single narrative, in conversation with one another. By bringing attention to cumulative and intergenerational trauma, these personal histories help link individual stories to oppressive systems. When PHCC members and I showed the film and spoke with undergraduate students in spring 2016, a Latinx PHCC member, someone who had never experienced houselessness herself and who was not involved in activist work prior to joining PHCC, eloquently summed up the triple-burden of toxic exposure, police violence, and displacement that houseless people living in the harbor face. She also explained how displacement has impacted the Black community for generations. Her synthesis of intersecting issues for multiple, overlapping groups served as a powerful demonstration of the type of cross-race, cross-class understanding that has unfolded through the coalition’s activities.

Taking Collective Action

The shared historical narratives that have evolved out of informal dialogue, this filmmaking project, and many other activities help convey a much more complex story than mainstream narratives depict. PHCC’s shared history-making process and the historical content of its narrative(s) have, together, also laid groundwork for the coalition’s course of action.

In early 2016, when it became clear that City officials would not meaningfully engage impacted communities in the harbor planning process without escalated tactics, 40 PHCC members and supporters gathered on the front steps of City Hall for a rally and press conference. Afterwards, the group took turns directly addressing City officials. A dozen people spoke about their communities’ historical and present-day connections to the harbor. One participant summarised the spectacle: “We spoke 20 different languages, babies and children climbed on the tables, and some people hadn’t showered since last Christmas. We scared them”. The critical mass, bolstered by a local news article empathetic to the coalition’s cause (VanderHart 2016), made an impact. Soon after, the City agreed to release over $65,000 in grant funds to support community organisations’ Superfund-related outreach to underrepresented groups.

A few months later, the coalition’s official testimony letter submitted to the EPA included a version of PHCC’s shared historical narrative of the harbor, which stood in stark contrast to the complex graphs and charts on display at EPA public hearings. The letter tied together the histories of impacted communities:

Many of our people face cumulative and intergenerational impacts from Portland Harbor pollution, and some of these harms are compounding pre-existing harms. Decades and centuries of displacement away from the harbor area also means that
impacted communities cannot be easily mapped and tracked—which means that not all impacts can be measured.

No studies have directly linked higher cancer rates in communities of colour to the river, and PHCC lacks the substantial resources required to mobilise such quantitative data. And because impacted communities are dispersed across countless zip codes, and because people suffer from cumulative and intergenerational impacts, the coalition could not have simply hired a GIS expert to map disproportionate impact. But producing a historically rooted narrative and communicating it via public testimony was within the coalition’s means. The coalition demanded that the EPA make decisions based on historically rooted stories, rather than “distant statistics” (Finney 2014).

Foregrounding collectively produced histories during confrontational engagements with public agencies has helped marginalised groups gain legitimacy. In 2017 the EPA released a Record of Decision that doubles the volume of sediment to be dredged from the river compared with earlier plans. While far from perfect, PHCC considers this decision a moderate victory. EPA officials publicly stated, to a room of local public agency officials, EPA staffers, polluters’ representatives, and community leaders, that public outcry—which was mobilised largely by PHCC, working with conservation and other community groups—substantially influenced the agency’s decision to strengthen the cleanup plan (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5:** One PHCC member demands a harbor cleanup that benefits diverse impacted communities in their comment letter to the EPA [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
Regardless of forthcoming fights to maintain PHCC’s legitimacy in the eyes of public agencies, and the ongoing difficulties of community organizing with scarce resources in the face of multiple forms of oppression, the shared history that PHCC members produced in the years leading up to the EPA’s public comment period has laid crucial groundwork for members to work together across lines of race, ethnicity, and class for years to come. At a fall 2016 meeting immediately following the comment period, PHCC members reflected on the coalition’s collective learning, rooted in the past, over the previous few years. One participant, a Black woman, explained: “There were layers of pre-existing environmental pollution and contamination that we learned about, and we’re still learning about how to get these [multiple] communities’ messages amplified”. Another participant, also a Black woman, immediately connected this reference to the past to making change for the future, emphasising solidarity across difference: “Yeah, and we need to band together to get anything accomplished as far as community organizing, getting policy change, anything. I mean, it’s up to us to get together ... We’ve learned to stand up for ourselves and to stand up to injustices built into the system”.

Conclusion
In this paper, I have illustrated a process of collectively producing a shared historical narrative, and in turn the role of this new history in the formation of political consciousness and as the basis of political action in a paradigmatic green city. This is not merely a story about the discovery of facts, but rather the collective production of historical facts that correct mainstream narratives—and form a basis for re-envisioning the future. Freire (2000) asserts: “Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world”. Linking personal histories to violent planning and policy decisions—sharing personal histories in order to name the world—has helped PHCC members stitch together a critical analysis of environmental injustice, laying a foundation for collective action. While PHCC has not entirely given up on public agencies to act on members’ behalves, the coalition also sometimes operates in a more confrontational, or oppositional, way in its engagements with public agencies; fundamental to this more conflict-oriented approach has been the politicisation of the coalition’s members and supporters. The collective production of history has been at the core of this politicisation process.

I have argued that articulating not only the legacy of “historical spatial logics” (Heynen 2016:840) in the present, but also the process by which narratives about them come into being, from below, is an urgent task for critical geographers if we are to fruitfully support abolition ecologies. At the 2018 meeting of the American Association of Geographers, George Lipsitz asserted that geographers need to produce “work that’s of use to communities in struggle”. The case of PHCC helps drive home that, as critical EJ scholars, it is imperative that we pay attention to the micro-processes involved in social movements, in order to avoid fetishising activist work and taking the hard work of political subject formation for granted; indeed, it is in paying attention to the mundane details of the day-to-day, like ice-
breaker questions at the beginning of meetings, that we can see the ways in which shared historical narratives facilitate collective action for a more just future. Such details reveal clues about how our own work as historically attuned researchers might contribute. A word of caution is in order, however, that such attentiveness will also offer cues—or full-on warnings—on when to step back, “to refuse” (Tuck and Yang 2014), to use the tools of social science to turn stories into data that do not “attend to expressions of complexity or desire” (Tuck et al. 2014). It is imperative that critical EJ scholars heed such signals.3

Lipsitz declared: “We need to change the objects, purpose, and social relations of research. We need to write WITH rather than ON communities in struggle. There are many tools for this work”. The account detailed here is one example of what this might look like. While long-term impacts remain to be seen, the case of PHCC sheds light on how a shared history-making process has unfolded in a paradigmatic sustainable city, where mainstream sustainability narratives perpetuate a white-washed version of history. It illustrates how a new, collective history has helped stitch people together across difference, contributing to fights for a more just, green future.

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Endnotes
1 I follow the lead of houseless-led activist organisation Right 2 Survive, one of PHCC’s core member groups, which refers to people living without shelter as “houseless” rather than homeless: home is where the heart is, the thinking goes, and just because someone lacks a house does not mean they lack a heart.
2 A Peoples’ View of the Portland Harbor can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVCpynBNx8 (last accessed 8 October 2018).
3 In my own experience being interviewed about the harbor cleanup following the EPA’s Record of Decision, for example, I refused to serve as an “objective expert” who could “corroborate” PHCC members’ stories, as repeatedly requested by the journalist; doing so in this context would have done nothing to advance PHCC toward its objectives, and would have undermined the authority of PHCC members who spoke for themselves.
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