FEMINIST POLITICAL ECOLOGIES
Race, bodies and the human

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Feminist political ecology (FPE) is an interdisciplinary subfield that blends feminist theories and concepts with the wider field of political ecology, a conceptual framework linking political economy with nature and the environment (Neumann 2005; Peet and Watts 2004). In the subfield’s seminal text, Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues and Local Experiences (1996), Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter and Wangari maintain that gender is ‘a critical variable in shaping resource access and control interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change’ (Rocheleau et al. 1996, 4; see also Carney 1993; Jarosz 1992). 

FPE scholarship was shaped by a need to complicate the singularity of the ‘land manager’ category, once dominant in political ecology and frequently imagined as male. Feminist environmental movements around reproductive rights, food consumption and agricultural work also influenced policy shifts in women in development (and later gender and development), affirming women’s relationship to nature and the environment through their daily interactions. Such foci required attention to more than class dynamics (Gururani 2002). Overall, since the early 1990s, the feminist movement and scholarship have brought meaningful questions to FPE with regards to various kinds of oppression and the degradation of nature (Sundberg 2017).

In this chapter, we highlight how FPE advances from three scholarly angles: ecofeminism; feminist critiques of science; and feminist critiques of development. Ecofeminists argue that the oppression of women by men and the exploitation of nature by humans are linked. Such dualisms are believed to be a legacy of Western philosophical traditions, whereby:

the human capacity for reason and abstract thought as the grounds for transcendence and domination of nature … is framed as masculine through its opposition to and domination of all that is associated with nature, the body, reproduction, emotion and ultimately the feminine.

Sundberg 2017, 2
Second, feminist critiques of science maintain that gender and patriarchal norms influence knowledge production and shape whose knowledge(s) have value. In this vein, feminist scholars challenge the concept of objectivity and instead argue that all knowledge is partial, rendering objectivity mythic and comprised of the incomplete perspectives of Euro-American, White, heterosexual, property-owning men (Haraway 1991; Harding 1986; Sundberg 2017). Feminist epistemologies and methodologies align diverse interests in FPE, with a collective view that argues that all ‘knowledge is partial, situated, and emerges from embodied social locations’ (Resurrección 2017, 80). This perspective contributes to the commitments embedded in feminist knowledge production, which challenge latent relationships of domination within objective knowledge claims (Haraway 1988).

Feminist epistemologies also influence the ways in which feminist political ecology understands how power operates within the seemingly mundane spaces and ecologies of everyday life. According to Sundberg (2017, 5):

> The scale of the everyday is where social reproduction takes place, where subject identities and social orders are brought into being and contested. Attending to daily life allows FPE to shed light on otherwise neglected dimensions of environmental engagements.

The socially uneven terrain upon which natural resource struggles occur is constituted in large part through the everyday negotiations of ecological processes. Wangui (2014), for example, examines how the changing pastoral livelihoods in Kenya are shifting the labour demands on women and men. She draws attention to the everyday negotiations and performances that women partake in as they withdraw and contribute their labour to the household as a challenge to patriarchal relations inside the household and vis-à-vis the market. FPE thereby takes stock of the ways that scales are linked and both shape and are shaped by the everyday and intimate spaces of the globe, nation, region community, home, household and the body (Elmhirst 2011; Hawkins et al. 2011).

A third research direction employs FPE as a conceptual framework for international development critique. In this vein, FPE scholarship illustrates how women are consistently marginalized and exploited by sustainable development, population control, land titling and conservation projects, even when such projects are conducted in the name of gender and development and/or gender and poverty programmes (Carney 1992; Jarosz 1992). Moreover, this focus offers a feminist critique of development that is strongly influenced by the work of Chandra Mohanty and her critiques of development’s ‘Third World difference’, a representation of women in the Global South as ‘needy’ recipients of Western aid programmes. These images elide the plurality of women’s multiple social locations, experiences and knowledges that Mohanty charges are evidence of:

> assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of western scholarship on the ‘third world’ in the context of a world system dominated by the west on the other.

1988, 63

This produces

> an analysis of ‘sexual difference’ in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance [that] leads to the construction of a similarly
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reductive and homogeneous notion of what I call the ‘third world difference’ – that stable ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries.

Mohanty 1988, 63

FPE critiques of development are also shaped by material concerns raised by feminist environmentalism, built on a global movement that challenges a society and world economy organized for the profit of a small number of:

white men [which] has created the conditions for widespread unemployment, violence at home and in the streets, oppression of third world peoples, racists attacks, inadequate food, housing and health care, and finally the ecological devastation of the earth.

Women and Life on Earth 1979, cited in Seager 2003, 948

Bina Agarwal’s contribution to feminist environmentalism is best seen in her text A Field of One’s Own (1994). Her work attends to the multiple relations of power that control women in private and public spaces. She maintains that, in the context of enduring environmental degradation, women’s share in the division of labour and the time for daily domestic chores in the household and in agricultural fields increases. This is particularly problematic because the fields are owned exclusively by men. Relatedly, Agarwal argues for women’s land rights. With such rights, women are better protected against food insecurity, because they have more say in decisions such as crop choices. They are also empowered within their households, making them less dependent on their spouses (1994). Land rights for women thus mitigate the patriarchal dominance and the embodied consequences of environmental degradation.

During the first 20 years of FPE, gender and gender inequalities preoccupied feminist political ecology development critiques. However, more recently, the subfield has re-emerged as ‘new feminist political ecologies’ with a profound commitment to Mohanty’s challenge and the intersectional nature of domination and privilege (Elmhirst 2011; Mollett 2010). In the challenge to ““mess” with gender by “doing race””, FPE takes seriously Sundberg’s argument that ‘processes of racialization articulate in and through the environmental formations and vice versa’ (2008, 579, cited in Mollett and Faria 2013, 118). For Mollett and Faria (2013, 118):

this means more than simply working in or writing about communities of colour. It necessitates recognition of the power inequities between global north and global south, shaped by the legacies of colonial racisms, as well as (colonial) patriarchies.

A call to multiple forms of power is bolstered through the growing influence of the concept of intersectionality in FPE scholarship. Borrowing from Black feminist thinkers, intersectionality as both conceptual framework and epistemology understands race, gender, class and ethnicity as interlocking forms of oppression and privilege that shape the multiple dimensions of people’s lives (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991). The concept offers us a way to understand multiple power dynamics as mutually constituted, and it helps to advance our knowledge of the daily lives of people across the globe and in the context of development programmes. For example, Mollett and Faria (2013) explore race as constitutive of gendered subjectivities and challenge the limited theorization of race in political ecology writ large. They write, ‘post-colonial intersectionality acknowledges the way patriarchy and racialized processes are consistently bound in a postcolonial genealogy that embeds race and gender ideologies within
nation-building and international development processes’ (Mollett and Faria, 2013, 120). Leila Harris insists that ‘FPE has the potential to unsettle and challenge dominant assumptions … Yet, to do so, the very understanding of feminism itself must be problematized and unsettled, moving towards intersectional understandings’ (2015, xx). Indeed, in the recent engagements with post-colonial and decolonial scholarship, FPE scholars are energizing forms of thought that challenge Western understandings of gender and development.

FPE and postcolonial and decolonial influences

Political ecology’s engagements with more-than-human nature is part of a decolonial aim to critique dualist constructions of culture and nature that underpin Euro-American knowledge production. Challenging dualist conceptions of nature and society helps to demonstrate how human and nonhuman natures are interconnected (Chagani 2014; Collard 2012). Feminist geographers contribute to these critiques through an array of approaches, such as animal and species geographies (Gillespie 2018; Hovorka 2012), and post-humanism and race (Anderson 2007) and Indigenous ontologies (Daigle 2018; Hunt 2014). For example, Sundberg explores the political ecology of the US–Mexico border in relation to how nonhuman-natures contend with boundary enforcement practices that then influence the ways that humans, technology and money are deployed in the interest of security (2011). Mullaney’s (2014) work on maize varieties in Mexico brings together post-humanism, anticolonial geopolitics and feminist political ecology to examine how crop seeds are linked to knowledge systems, cultural identities and labour structures in ways that challenge state and corporate control over agrarian and food systems. In a study of forest management in India, Münster (2016) highlights how the intimate working relationship between Indigenous forest labourers and captive elephants unfolds through both intimate and violent interaction. This work highlights how ethnography can move beyond ‘human’ observation to reveal that human and more-than-human relationships share collective histories of region and space that shape and are shaped by conservation management.

Feminist political ecologists aptly suggest that, while complicating the dualist notions of nature and culture, post-humanist approaches (and more-than-human critiques) do not go far enough to decolonize knowledge production in the academy and the daily lives of people who are dependent on natural resources (Mollett 2017; Sundberg 2014). As such, feminist political ecological research is increasingly engaging with decolonial theorists and the field of Indigenous geographies. For instance, Indigenous geographies scholarship illuminates the practice of ‘epistemic ignorance’ and ‘epistemic violence’ in geography in the ways in which Indigenous knowledges are elided from post-humanist approaches and how ‘epistemologies or ontologies embedded in other worlds are not alive to us as resources for critical thought today’ (Sundberg 2014, 38; see also Hunt 2014). Feminist engagement with decolonial thinking influences the way that feminist political ecology calls for decolonial processes in the fields both out there and inside our academic and epistemic worlds (Asher 2017; Radcliffe 2015). Such a call aligns with post-colonial feminist thinkers, challenging Western feminism to dispel presuppositions about ‘third-world woman’ categories in both development thought and practice (Mohanty 1988). Post-colonial and decolonial insights increasingly shape feminist geographic discussions of nature and natural resource struggles (Mollett 2017; Zaragocin 2017). One of the ways in which these lines of thought merge is through a focus on the body.

In feminist geography, broadly defined, the body figures prominent in shaping understandings of subjectivity to ‘place the embodied subject and engage the body to better understand difference through a range of approaches’ (Mountz 2017, 3). Highlighting the immaterial, embodied and affective dimensions of environmental relations and struggles discloses how the body is a
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site and scale of analysis within environmental politics. In FPE, the body provides a scale and location upon and through which ideas, ideologies and politics unfold and are made visible, linking the global with the intimate (Mountz 2017; Pratt and Rosner 2006). The body is also a site where autonomy and sovereignty are manifest, a site of articulation of claims and resistance to the violent legacies of colonialism and transatlantic slavery (Goeman 2013; McKittrick 2006).

For many FPE scholars, the body figures prominently because struggles over resources and ecological processes are not simply economistic or ‘rational’ choices; they are influenced by the physicalities of bodies, imaginaries and conceptions of belonging, territory and ancestry (Doshi 2017; Harris 2015). Environmental politics and processes are visible in the ways in which women’s bodies are at risk of violence when engaging the most natural of activities, including urination, defecation and menstruation (Truelove 2011). Sultana (2011), for example, illustrates that suffering stemming from arsenic contamination of water in rural Bangladesh is unevenly distributed, and argues that emotions and embodiment crucially shape the reasons and conditions under which people access and use resources. According to Sultana:

Abstractions of ‘resource struggles’ and ‘resource conflicts’ are thereby grounded in embodied emotional geographies of place, peoples, and resources, enabling us to enhance our comprehension of the complex ways resources, bodies and emotions come to matter in survival strategies and everyday resource management practices.  

Feminist political ecology also concerns itself with how ecological processes shape and extend through bodies (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013; Sultana 2011). The body is imbricated in complex relationships with land and resources – and their life-sustaining qualities. It is often the foundation upon which environmental struggles are waged (Doshi 2017; Harris 2015; Sundberg 2008, cited in Mollett and Faria 2013).

We argue here that a focus on the entanglements of bodies, difference and environmental struggles not only lays bare hierarchical relations between human and nonhuman nature but makes evident the human-to-human domination, subjugation and resistance. Relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we are particularly interested in how racial difference and the processes of racialization shape subjectivity as an intersectional and embodied process. We argue for more profound attention to what it means to be human (see McKittrick 2015). Thus, in the space below, we place feminist political ecology in conversation with Black Feminist Thought (BFT) to engage with the historically and spatially situated ways that race, patriarchy, sexuality and capitalism are entangled and classify some people as human and others as not. Embedded in our analysis is the historical and spatial fact that ‘the Human (and its meanings) comes through a system that has rendered Africans (and people of African descent) outside of humanity’ (McKittrick 2015; Mollett 2017, 13; Weheliye 2014). To illustrate, we flesh out how racialization, gender and sexuality are mutually constituted in the dehumanization of sex-trafficked Nigerian women within neoliberal tourism development in Spain, as part of a global patriarchal social-racial order.

Black feminist thought: embodied geographies of slavery

Black feminist thought (BFT) emerges from the intellectual and activist work of Black women and radical women of colour (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989; Spillers 1987). BFT challenges hegemonic images of Black women that justify their economic, political and sexual exploitation and highlights the rich legacy of Black women’s struggles for social justice (Collins
The entanglement of BFT with human geography offers insights into how space and place are imbued with meaning through Black women’s everyday struggles over livelihoods and belonging, while interrogating the hegemonic imaginaries that seek their subjugation (King 2016; McKittrick 2006). Such a focus both works against an epistemological tradition that has often ‘displaced, rendered ungeographic’ Black women and resists disciplinary tendencies to place race, as a form of power, and critical race scholarship at the periphery of knowledge production (McKittrick 2006, x). Black feminist thinking has long shaped feminist geographic scholarship, particularly with regards to the concept of intersectionality, since ‘intersectionality was, at its inception, already a deeply spatial theoretical concept, process and epistemology’ (Mollett and Faria 2018, 2; see also Kobayashi and Peake 1994).

The influence of BFT on geographic scholarship both challenges and makes visible the various ways in which Black people are not simply disavowed for their Blackness in a White supremacist patriarchal global social order but are misrecognized as less than human (Gilroy 2015; King 2016; McKittrick 2006; Mollett 2017). Black feminist understandings of the transatlantic slave trade illuminate how slavery was legitimated and sustained through the objectification of the captive Black body (Hartman 1996; McKittrick 2006; Spillers 1987). Women’s bodies and reproductive labour, in particular, represent the material, sociospatial and symbolic sites for the reproduction of slavery (Hartman 2016; Morgan 2004). Slavery transformed bodies into commodities in ways that illuminate both gendering and (un)genderings (Spillers 1987). Namely,

when it was profitable to exploit [Black women] as men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but [Black women] they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles.

*Davis 1983, 6*

Labouring in other spaces of the plantation as housekeepers, caretakers, nannies and wet nurses did not spare women of the distinct forms of violence and cruelty and domestic expectations of owners who reduced Black women’s value to their wombs, as their sexual reproduction created future slaves and wealth creation for slave owners (Davis 1983; Hartman 2016). White male consumption of Black slave women’s labour and bodies was not driven simply by economic rationale; as Davis powerfully argues, ‘[o]ne of racism’s salient historical features has always been the assumption that white men – especially those who wield economic power – possess an incontestable right of access to Black women’s bodies’ (1983, 175) that was ‘profitable’ and ‘pleasurable’ (McKittrick 2006, 71). The systemic sexual exploitation of Black women and the denial of their humanity is a lasting legacy of the past within a global imaginary of Blackness and Black femininity, manifest in the ‘afterlife’ of slavery (Hartman 2016). The mutual constitution of race, gender, capitalism and colonialism imbue spatial imaginaries and reproduce Black female representations as disposable, violable and subject to ‘multilayered and routinized forms of domination’ in their everyday lives (Crenshaw 1991, 1245). By bringing together FPE and Black feminist theorizing, we advance a feminist political ecology of race that simultaneously questions what it means to be human and clarifies the dehumanizing processes that place Black women outside of humanity. To illustrate, we briefly reflect on the forced migration and labour of Nigerian women in Spain. In doing so, we interrogate how bodies are unevenly situated in social landscapes through which environmental degradation and racial-sexual disposability are woven together.
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Sex trafficking and prostitution: from the Niger Delta, Nigeria to Alicante, Spain

The oil and gas sector in Nigeria accounts for 80 per cent of the state’s income, 40 per cent of the country’s GDP and yet employs only 4 per cent of the population (Oluduro 2014). Despite its expansive energy section, the (mal)distribution of oil wealth has meant that 62.6 per cent of Nigerians continue to live in poverty (IMF 2018). Economic disparities have been exacerbated by the devastation of the socio-environmental integrity of the Niger Delta (Ugor 2013). Export-oriented agriculture managed by international agribusinesses uses vast amounts of land and water. Monocropping and oil extraction have degraded the land and polluted the water and soil with disastrous effects on those with farming- and fishing-based livelihoods (Oluduro 2014). Resistance to disenfranchisement and environmental destruction in the region is countered by state and non-state violence, which has left millions of people displaced from their homes and many dead in the Niger Delta (Egharevba and Osunde 2001; Nixon 2011; Watts 2005).

Environmental degradation and income disparities exacerbate the existing ethnic, class and gender hierarchies (Watts 2005). For example, unemployment is drastically high in the region and is particularly stark among women, who have low rates of employment in the formal sector and are not considered for work in the oil sector (Ikelegbe 2005; Ukeje 2004). Women in the Niger Delta suffer the gravest consequences of water and land pollution, because they are responsible for agricultural labour, household water provision and all domestic work (Egharevba and Iweze 2004). Oil spill-related harms are linked to increased neonatal mortalities in the region, speaking to the ways in which the political ecologies of oil extraction are gendered and embodied (Hodal 2017).

The economic and ecological harms of resource extraction faced by women in the Niger Delta have also increased their vulnerability to other kinds of exploitation. In Benin City, the capital of Edo State, which has the highest unemployment in the country (Omorodion 2009), one in every three girls/women between 15 and 20 years old has been contacted to travel to European countries by a recruiter working in organized crime (IOM 2006). Young girls are targeted for forced sex work, often by the deception of promises of jobs in domestic work such as cleaning and nannying. Poverty, ethnicity, illiteracy and high unemployment rates among youth make Edo women vulnerable as targets of transnational sex trafficking (Omorodion 2009). This has led some to deduce that ‘[Nigerian] women have become the new natural resource for exportation’ (Elabor-Idemudia 2003, 104). But, such trafficking of bodies is not new, as Nigeria’s Atlantic coast was a crucial site of transatlantic slave capture in the colonial period and remains a significant location from which Nigeria women are trafficked to Europe for sex work in the twenty-first century (UNESCO 2006; see also Delicado-Moratalla 2017).

The Global Slavery Index (2018) reports that most Nigerian women are trafficked from Nigeria not knowing that they will work as prostitutes in European cities. Many travel in the expectation of working in domestic service. Of those who make it to Spain, many left their rural areas of the Niger Delta voluntarily for Benin City, where they learned that they had been deceived by their family members and neighbours, who had recruited them under the pretence of working in domestic service in Europe to secure a better life (Benavides 2018; Delicado-Moratalla 2017). However, the women quickly find that their lives are in danger. Many young ethnic Yoruba women, after being kidnapped in Benin City, undergo a juju ritual, sometimes undertaken first in their home village, where their bodies, in part and in full, are doused in animal blood. As part of the ritual, traffickers obtain their pubic hair, fingernails and/or menstrual blood, which are stored and recorded under their name (UNESCO 2006). According to
the well-known Spanish publication *El País*, this ritual gives traffickers both an embodied and psychological hold over young women and girls to increase their submission (Domínguez and Gálvez 2017). After being forcibly taken by crime networks in Edo State, women and their traffickers cross the Mediterranean Sea in small, clandestine ships from northern Morocco to Spanish cities like Barcelona and Alicante. During this crossing, they are frequently raped and often arrive pregnant, and are forced to give up their babies (Women’s Link Worldwide 2014). This journey leaves the women locked into enormous debts to the traffickers, supposedly for their travel costs – a discursive justification that the traffickers use to coerce them into prostitution (Euroweekly.com). Intensifying women’s vulnerability, traffickers steal and retain the women’s passports upon arrival (UNESCO 2006). Their precarious immigration status makes it extremely difficult for trafficked women to secure protection and situates them as even more vulnerable to violence and coercion within their forced participation in commercial sex.

The sex trafficking of Yoruba women in Spain, as well as the desperation that drives family and friends to recruit these women for the traffickers in exchange for compensation, is linked to the environmental harms and impoverishment tied to extraction production in the Niger Delta; their economic and environmental precarity makes possible their captivity. Such transactions are followed by more-than-human rituals; dousing bodies in animal blood and drawing upon religion and faith in ways that compel these women to acquiesce to their subjugation. Such is reinforced by invented debt bondage that further strengthens the traffickers’ supposed ownership of these women and their bodies. Furthermore, the dehumanization of the women in Nigeria transforms them into a recognizable sexual symbol on the streets of Spain’s cities ‘that turns Blackness into an ideological currency that moves beyond the [original] moment of sale’ (McKittrick 2006, 78).

*La Calle de las Negras*: ‘This is not my way, I don’t like it, I want to leave’

Spain is a vital hub for prostitution in Europe (Cacho 2010). In recent years, the increasing number of brothels, escort services, dance clubs and massage parlours has expanded sexual services throughout the country. Spain is also a top sex-tourism destination, generating roughly $22 billion dollars a year and rivalling the ‘drug and arms trade in terms of prevalence and profit, according to Spain’s National Rapporteur on Human Trafficking’ (Domínguez and Gálvez 2017). In 1995, commercial sex was decriminalized, creating an environment in which prostitution is tolerated and unregulated. While there are some exceptions that fall under municipal jurisprudence, such as the Ley Orgánica 4/2015 de Protección de la Seguridad Ciudadana (Constitutional Law for the Protection of Citizen’s Security), which prohibits engagement with prostitution in specific public spaces, a lack of regulation bolsters sex trafficking. Journalist Lucia Benavides of *Bright Magazine* argues that ‘90% of sex workers could be under the control of organized crime networks’ (2018). The change in the racial composition of sex workers over the last 30 years has transformed the landscape of commercial sex. Where once European and Spanish women dominated the trade, today immigrants from Latin America, former Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa comprise the majority of women working as prostitutes in Spain.

On the Mediterranean coast of Spain lies the south-east port city of Alicante (population of 300,000). Situated on the Costa Blanca, the city is known for its warm waters, Mediterranean climate and decadent beach vacations frequented by international and domestic tourists. Alicante is a key destination in a global sex-trafficking network thatkidnaps and smuggles poor, ethnic Yoruba-Nigerian women, who are then forced to work in the sex trade as street prostitutes. For them, the region is a dangerous place for prostitutes: between 2010 and 2015, Costa Blanca had the highest incidence of prostitute homicide in the country (Feminicidio.Net 2016). In 2017, ten people were arrested and suspected of forcibly trafficking ‘dozens’ of Nigerian women, coerced
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into prostitution for as little as €5 per transaction and ‘under conditions of absolute slavery’ (Shedrofsky 2017). Despite the many brothels in Spain, in Alicante the Nigerian prostitutes work on the street. The Nigerian women occupy a street near the centre of the Alicante sex industry, La Calle de las Negras (Black Women’s Street). According to Maria, an Edo girl from Niger working on La Calle: ‘I need money, I need a job … this is not my way’ (Delicado-Moratalla interview 2017). Another Nigerian woman, Eugenie, similarly states, ‘This is not my way, I don’t like it … I want to leave’. Eugenie describes how she was very ill. Eventually, the Red Cross unit found her homeless, starving and infected with HIV (Delicado-Moratalla interviews 2017). According to social workers at the Red Cross, which often provides services to prostitutes and sex workers in Alicante, the women of La Calle de las Negras fear violence and certain death if they try to break from their pimps and traffickers. Many of the women working on La Calle are girls in their mid-teens, forced to provide sex for particular men on a regular basis. While La Calle de las Negras is a site of commercial sex and forced prostitution, their services are also sold on the internet very cheaply (Ranea Triviño 2017). According to the women, the ‘johns’ (mostly White male tourists) do not wear condoms and, indeed, stories of HIV infection among the women are common (Delicado-Moratalla interviews 2017).

This brief example of trafficked Nigerian women and girls exemplifies more than the racial and carnal forms of dehumanization. In fact, as McKittrick (2015) explains in the context of nineteenth-century US slavery and the auction block, the ‘moment of sale’ satisfies more than economic aspirations. It also speaks to the role of sexual desire imbued with ‘the repetitive and sometimes mundane economic exchanges’ that we argue give meaning to the street name itself, La Calle de las Negras, it involves sexual desire. La Calle is a place of multi-scaled violence, where the sex trafficking of Nigerian women and girls extends beyond the ‘moment of sale’ (McKittrick 2006, 71). Like the violence that comes after slave markets, the ‘moment of sale’ ‘obscures Black humanity by violently transforming human beings into commodity objects through the act of economic exchange’, intensifying racial sexual difference and gendered disposability (McKittrick 2006, 73; see also Razack 2016). A racialized, patriarchal system materializes a process of dehumanization through a variety of practices that, so often repeated, may go unnoticed: the kidnap and theft of women’s bodies, including hair and blood, raping as a form of terror and subjugation in transit, the separation of mothers from their children and placing women and girls on the street and internet to be ‘rented’ for sex by a largely White, male, tourist market. Such a process is aided by a patriarchal elite state and its neo-colonial foreign and national investors, who destroy homelands and displace and make vulnerable the ethnic minority populations once economically and culturally tied to this environment (Nixon 2011).

Final thoughts

Since its emergence in the early 1990s, feminist political ecology (FPE) has foregrounded how environmental processes and subject formation are co-constituted. We do so here in a way that makes clear the embodied consequences of environmental devastation and poverty. The ways in which young, poor and ethnic minority women in Nigeria are disproportionately vulnerable to sex slavery and the violence of human trafficking are an extension of the environmental degradation of their homelands. Our work here responds to Doshi’s (2017) insistence on the embodied attributes of uneven development within political ecology and brings modern slavery to feminist political ecological critiques of development. As is captured by the United Nations’ adoption of the eradication of human trafficking as a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) (Global Slavery Index 2016), recognizing sexual slavery as an environment-development challenge advances our understanding of the connections between environmental degradation
and bodily harm. Our contribution reveals how control over the land’s natural resources not only means embodied consequences but demands attention to how the control over natural resources often extends to the control over the very bodies, constructed as different, that depend on them. FPE is a promising corrective to the technocratic and positivist approaches that pervade environmental policies and sustainable development agendas.

Thus, we draw insights from the overlapping contributions of FPE, decolonial and post-colonial thought and Black feminist thinking about the body and slavery. These scholarly conversations suggest that future entanglements between FPE and Black feminist thinking will prove instructive to deepen our work and justice-oriented scholarship around human rights. That the category of ‘human’ is contested means that feminist political ecologists are well placed to interrogate how some humans are misrecognized as less-than-human, offering a novel path for advancing feminist critiques of international development in intersectional and embodied ways. Such a focus is at the centre of our critique and speaks directly to the complex challenges of human lives.

Note

1 Fieldwork in Alicante was conducted using participant observation while volunteering at the local Red Cross unit, which provides basic healthcare support and language-learning skills to women involved in street prostitution. During fieldwork, Delicado-Moratalla interviewed ten Nigerian women involved in street prostitution. Most of them were originally from Benin City.

Key readings


References

Sharlene Mollett et al.


