

## Preface: A Diverse Urban World

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*Grounding Urban Natures: Histories and Futures of Urban Ecologies* grew out of an interest in getting serious about the diversity of urban experience and urban natures. In the last ten to twenty years there has been an increasing push to develop a global understanding of urbanization and how to solve a host of environmental problems. We thought it was time to dig down into the multiple histories through which urban natures, in their varied forms and connections to social and political processes, have been shaped across the world. Given our own empirical studies, especially in Stockholm and Cape Town, we wondered what we could learn by gathering together authors who had extensive knowledge of other cities around the world and who could write in textured ways, with historical depth, about urban nature and its politics.<sup>1</sup> How could this mode of writing *from* a particular location help us come to grips with the highly uneven mega-phenomenon of contemporary urbanization? Could such a grounded approach help to uncover a more comprehensive view of urban natures and their political ecologies, past and future?

Incidentally, we articulated these initial thoughts about this book project in a parking lot on the University of Cape Town campus, and this geographical position has continued to inform our work. Above us was the Rhodes Memorial, a symbol of the city's colonial past, representing the colonial benefactor who provided the land for the university on the slopes of Table Mountain. We found it disturbing to be subsumed, as it were, under his gesture—one that came from deep within the British imperial project and afforded us the chance to look out over—and to risk overlooking—the Cape Flats, a large expanse of windy and flood-prone land that since forced removals under apartheid in the 1960s has been the home to the majority of people, while considered, as John Western phrased it, the city's "outcast."

In taking in this view, *grasping* the city from a distance and detachment founded on a problematic legacy, we sensed an uncomfortable resonance with some of the frameworks being developed by scholars and colleagues in the environmental sciences—frameworks related to their (and our) concern for urban sustainability and yet, we thought, quite insensitive to the texture of the everyday comings and goings of urban life and the multiple histories of urban nature. Instead of promoting situated case studies across the world, we have witnessed the increasing circulation of simplifying models that gestures to be valid everywhere. This risks missing the very situated character of *how* urban nature is related to multiple meanings, various historical experiences, and different forms of politics based on race, gender, ability, and class. Simply put, the political stakes that are inherently attached to urban environments will be misunderstood or silenced as a result of simplification. There, between Rhodes and Cape Flats, we intuitively felt a need for a book that could problematize this environmental scientific gaze and break with ingrained bias and tradition on how cities and environments are thought and studied.

Metaphorically speaking, we wanted a collection of chapters that pushed us to think “the city” and “urban nature” more through the textured realities of Cape Flats than through the city’s historical “centre,” and that could demonstrate a range of methods by which our real concern for urban and ecological crises can be grounded. Thus, we asked authors from various disciplines to use their rich understanding about particular cities across the global South and North to speak of urban nature from those locations, bringing the texture of place and time to bear on how they theorize and understand urban nature.

Thematically the book is organized into three major parts: “Unexpected Natures,” “Popular Natures,” and “Technological Natures,” placed in between the introduction (part I) and the conclusion (part V). The thematic parts bring together studies and conversations on how to expand what can be considered as urban nature in part II, followed in parts III and IV with a focus on values, knowledge, and imaginations of urban nature through the perspectives of both ordinary people and experts. Emphasizing, as each author does, the grounded approach of their chapters, each chapter also demonstrates how different combinations of theory and method can be used to unpack urban nature. This has in its own right, apart from theoretical insights and

grounded narratives, produced a collection of methodologies that will be of inspiration to critical urban environmentalists.

Apart from the chapters, the introduction and the conclusion to this volume bring together thus far quite disconnected conversations. There we combine urban environmental studies on one hand, including the whole gamut of thought from “cyborgs” and “more-than-human” formations to “social-ecological systems,” and on the other the more recent developments in urban studies of postcolonial or “Southern” urbanism, which strives to retain the texture of places when theorizing the urban. Within this broader terrain of thought, we try to grasp the diversity of natures and urban worlds that we are now all firmly part of—how they are shaped and formed through time and place, and who can claim to have legitimate knowledge about them. Taken together, we believe strongly that it is important socially, environmentally, and politically to diversify the understanding of urban natures at this historical moment of worldwide urbanization—and *Grounding Urban Natures* is a contribution in this direction.

#### Note

1. For an extensive review of urban environmental studies, see the introduction to this book. For our own studies, see, for instance, Ernstson and Sörlin (2009, 2013) and Ernstson (2013), and the research-based documentary film *One Table Two Elephants* (von Heland and Ernstson 2018), which was filmed in Cape Town and situates questions about race, nature, history, and knowledge in a postcolonial city.

#### References

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