



Resources are vexing!¹

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Abstract

Resource use and management are central concerns to environmental geography scholars, who have mobilized diverse approaches to examine the making, circulation, and socioecological effects of resources and resource systems. Informed by our reading of the resource geography literature and our experiences editing *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Resource Geography*, we reflect on the role of resources in the study of human–environment interactions. First, we outline what we mean by “critical” in critical resource geography and identify approaches scholars working in this area have taken to understand resources and the worlds that are created and undone through their production, circulation, consumption, and disposal. We then identify an aporia internal to critical resource geography that derives from the field’s centering of a concept—“resources”—that is fundamentally linked to the colonial and capitalist subjugation of peoples and environments. Building from this, we propose an orientation for the field that recognizes critique to be the starting point of a collective effort to “unbound” the World of Resources with the aim of making what are now familiar resource-relations unacceptable.

Keywords

Critical resource geography, resources, ontological pluralism, world-making, critique

Introduction

If *Progress in Environmental Geography* is envisioned as—in the words of the founding editorial collective—a “space for multiple strands of inquiry that address a wide range of human–environment interactions” (The PiEG Editorial Collective 2021, 1), then the pages of this new journal will doubtless be a home for the study of resources. Human–environment

geographers have long addressed questions of resource use and management. In recent years, researchers have brought diverse critical perspectives to examine how resources are

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made and circulated and with what effects (for appraisals of this growing literature, see Bridge 2011, 2014; Furlong and Norman 2015; Hayter and Patchell 2015; Huber 2018, 2019, 2022; Kama 2020). In this context, in late-2017 we embarked on an editorial project probing the underpinnings of this resource-centered scholarship. The product of this editorial work—*The Routledge Handbook of Critical Resource Geography* (Himley, Havice and Valdivia 2021), RHCRG from here on—brings together writings by more than 60 scholars that together constitute, as we note in the volume’s introductory chapter, “a polyvocal collection of scholarship that mobilizes the terms and framings of resource geography, while at the same time working to make sense of the deep-rooted tensions within this arena of research, teaching, and praxis” (Valdivia, Himley and Havice 2021, 12).

In this report, we draw on our experiences editing the RHCRG and our engagement with the resource geography literature more broadly to reflect on resources as an area of concern in the study of human–environment interactions. We first outline our usage of the term “critical” in the analysis of resources. We then identify common approaches that resource geographers have taken to understand not just resources themselves—what they are, how they are materially and discursively made—but also the worlds that are created and undone through their production, circulation, consumption, and disposal. We then identify a vexing aporia internal to critical-geographical analyses of resources: in their efforts to understand and “make strange” (cf. Li 2014) resources and resource systems, such analyses nonetheless center and reproduce a concept—“resources”—that is tied to the colonial-capitalist subjugation of people and environments. Dwelling in (and on) this aporia, we propose ontological pluralism as an orientation for critical resource geography (CRG) that recognizes critique to be *the starting point* of a collective effort to “unbound” resources

and the worlds within which they have been enrolled and co-constituted.

Resource geography and critique

Why *critical* resource geography? Why not resource geography? We (the authors) use the qualifier “critical” to name an intellectual project that uses the tools of social theory to probe and imagine otherwise the relationship between resources and socioecological change. While not all critical resource scholarship is the same, we note broad tendencies familiar to its practices and commitments that speak to scholars of environmental geography. This critical approach, for better or worse, has become endemic to the Anglo-geographic scholarship on resources, and has shaped both our own U.S.-informed academic trajectories and many of the lines of inquiry present in the RHCRG.

First, “critical” stands for a paradigm orientation seeking to identify misalignments, incongruencies, and power inequities (Carbado 2010) surrounding things that by habit and custom we call “resources.” Common-place understandings of resources are typically undergirded by an assumption that resources are already present (in actual or potential form) and that any person or group of people can and will relate to resources similarly. Take, for instance, definitions of “resource” from the self-proclaimed “definitive record of the English language,” the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Here, “resource” may refer to “a means of supplying a deficiency or need; something that is a source of help, information, strength, etc.” In the plural form, the term may refer to “stocks or reserves of money, materials, people, or some other asset, which can be drawn on when necessary” or to “the collective means possessed by a country or region for its own support, enrichment, or defence.”² In contrast, CRG adopts a relational analytic³ to insist that resources are not self-evident or already predetermined; rather, they are things (including,

but not limited to, physical entities) that are extricated from their existing interdependencies and incorporated within other sets of relations to fulfill a historically and geographically specific objective or desire. Or, as Joe Bryan (2021, 449) puts it, resources are “never immutable qualities of the world that they make, so much as they are expressions of a particular understanding of the world.” From this analytical perspective, resources are not “found” but “made” (see Kama 2021; Richardson and Weszkalnys 2014) and thus are an *achievement* of dominant socio-cultural systems—“the triumph of one imaginary over others” (Bridge 2009, 1221)—while at the same time being contingent to *resistance* against these arrangements.

Second, CRG questions not only how things are socially made into discrete resources, for what purposes, and with what effects, but also what is unmade and who and what is left out, erased, and eliminated in the process (Harris 1993; Smith 2012; Yusoff 2018). This orientation, along with CRG’s “sensitiv[ity] to the histories and geographies of the political economic setting” (Watts and Peluso 2013, 192), allows scholars to name and denounce the exploitation and injustice inherent to colonial-capitalist resource systems and, in doing so, to respond to a normative commitment to human “betterment,” broadly defined. In making dominant graphings of the world visible and turning attention to devalued or excluded perspectives and experiences, CRG’s aim is to interrupt oppressive systems that degrade socialities and preclude alternative futures (Bond and Basu 2021; Courtheyn and Kamal 2021; Naslund and McKeithen 2021).

Third, CRG examines how the making of resources typically requires the destruction and/or remaking of a broad swath of socio-ecological relations, involving, *inter alia*, knowledge practices, technologies, infrastructures, and new forms of state-citizen relations (Bryan 2021; Bustos-Gallardo 2021; Bridge 2015; Kama 2020). In her work on indigenous

cosmopolitics in the Andes, Marisol de la Cadena (2010, 343) describes this resource-making process as a “war” between worlds, not least because it often involves violence against humans and other-than-human entities. Yet, the elimination and remaking of worlds to allow for resources doesn’t have to be a war of open conflict; it can also proceed via more pedestrian channels: in the work of accountants, bureaucrats, engineers, scientists, corporate community-relations practitioners and others, whose often-unseen labor is oriented toward creating the conditions for resource-making and its normalization (e.g., Ballesteros 2019; Billo 2021; Hayden 2003; Johnson 2021). The concept of “resource assemblage” (Li 2014) is an example of how to reframe resources as a project-in-the-making that involves multiple kinds of agency and intentions. Through this lens, resources can be examined as collectives of things—human, non-human, organic, inorganic, technical, discursive, etc. (see Bakker and Bridge 2021; Bustos-Gallardo 2021; Grosz 1994; Probyn 2021)—that are made to come together into provisional, temporary, and revisable formations (e.g., Collier and Ong 2005) through power inequities and political reconfigurations.

The World of Resources

How and for whom do resources matter in the organization of human societies? Who governs the making of resources? Whose interests are served by resource-making? Answering these questions involves exploring the practices and frames that make resources and their effects possible in the world, and developing methods and pedagogies capable of documenting how resources move across space and how resource systems inform the “production, reproduction, and transformation of power” (Cresswell 2011, 75, cited in Schlosser 2021; see also Cowen 2014) across spatio-temporal contexts (Biermann, Lane and Lave 2021; Ciccantell 2021; Fabricant 2021;

Harrison and Snediker 2021). Methodologically, some of this work takes an historical or historical-materialist approach (e.g. Moore 2015; Oliveira 2021); some “follows the thing” in a commodity-tracing type of exercise (Cook 2004; Harrison and Snediker 2021); still other work crosses epistemic borders of academic and activist knowledge production (Bebbington et al. 2021; Courtheyn and Kamal 2021; Furlong, Verdy and Uribe-Albornoz 2021) and/or engages in “ethnographic sensibilities” (Berman-Arévalo 2021) that start from the experience of living within resource systems (Billo 2021; Johnson 2021).

The possibilities for probing what we call the World of Resources—including the actors, logics, tendencies, and dynamics of the systems through which things (materials, processes, phenomena, ideas) are made and circulated as “resources” for the purpose of wealth accumulation (Valdivia, Himley and Havice 2021)—are legion. Here we highlight three (sometimes overlapping) lines of analysis prevalent within the CRG literature.

One common approach for critical resource geographers is to trace how resources and resource-making fuel and transform political economic systems. At “the scale of the world” (Agard-Jones 2013), scholars examining the *longue durée* of capitalism investigate the role of resources in (re)producing systems of coloniality, patriarchy, and racial capitalism. As Matthew T. Huber (2021, 167) notes, how “resources become resources has to do with what mode of production predominates at a given historical moment.” For instance, colonizing policies and practices, including the occupation of lands and the search for and extraction, harvesting, and trade of living and nonliving materials, nurtured emergent capitalist economies. This pattern is evident in the violent extraction of “raw materials” such as furs, silver, timber, as well as in the original accumulation of land as private property and pollution sink (Bernstein 2009; Galeano 1971; Liboiron 2021; Wolf 1982; Yusoff 2018). Tracing the origins and global movement of

resources offers analytical insights into the multi-scalar dimensions of global capitalist expansion *and* resistance against it at various administrative levels (Berman-Arévalo 2021; Johnson 2021; McKittrick 2011; Purifoy 2021; Wolford 2021). For example, Oliveira (2021) looks to the phases and sites of socio-ecological transformation (small and large) of soybean cultivation to track the intimate association between the territorial expansion of an extractive mode of production and colonialism. First domesticated and dispersed throughout present-day China through Han colonial expansion, cultivated soybeans later accompanied and fueled industrialization as Japan colonized Korea and “Manchuria” as well as the colonization of South American “hinterlands” (Oliveira 2021). Others examine the role of resources in consolidating configurations of political-economic power, such as geopolitical dominance, corporate structure and operations, and nationalisms (Bustos-Gallardo 2021; Campling 2021; Marston 2019; Nast 2021; Perreault 2021; Zalik 2021). Alternatively, taking the perspective of agency and “bodies in the system” (Agard-Jones 2013) can reveal how people move into and out of various conditions of resource-enabled capitalist expansion, degradation, and domination (Nast 2021; Zhu and Peluso 2021) and what they imagine might come after capitalist resource-based systems (Huber 2021). As Danielle Purifoy (2021, 123) writes, structural change “in human modes of being on the planet” must “be centered around the living of marginalized humans and nonhuman natures.”

Scholars thinking with resources also examine how resource-making is imbricated with the reorganization of life, value, and categories of human difference. Some of this work involves revealing the categorical, race-based oppression of enslaved and unfree people as part and parcel of resource-centered colonial-capitalist economies (Inikori 2020; Mintz 1986; Sharpe 2016). For example, scholars have documented the systematic efforts of merchants and enslavers

to design vessels to transport over 12 million forcibly displaced African people from the Continent (Rediker 2007); the forced relocation and erasure of Indigenous societies to secure land and resources for settler colonialism (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Lowe 2015; Wolfe 2006); the centrality of caste-based categorizations in the labor and property relations of urban India (Ranganathan 2022); and the long histories of Black- and Indigenous-led resistance movements that enliven already-existing alternatives to racialized and gendered exploitation (e.g. Hooker 2020). Resources are also intertwined with cultural notions of gendered boundaries and value creation, which, in the case of extractive industry, “reflects and reproduces heteronormative binaries among valued and unvalued natures, bodies, and forms of labor power” (Fent 2021, 103). That is, the webs and networks of power through which resources are made, assembled, and extracted shape *both* access to and control over nature *and* bodies. Or, as Mollett (2021, 94) notes, “Patriarchy, indigeneity, and blackness and their entanglements, take on symbolic and embodied meaning as part of the *longue durée* of coloniality embedded in contemporary extractive development processes” (see also Purifoy 2021).

Critical resource geographers recognize that as the notion of what a resource is or might be multiplies, so do the potential effects of resources on the organization of human life. This scholarship pays attention to how new forms of value are attached to the material properties of resources (living and nonliving)—and to their transformation—to meet (new) capitalist promises. We observe such novel resource-making, for example, in the expansion of renewable energy projects (Anderson et al. 2019; Delgado 2021); in the development of new methodologies of resource valuation (Bond and Basu 2021); in the reframing of forests as “carbon removal” climate change mitigation strategies (Carton and Edstedt 2021); in the medical “resourcification” of human tissue and body parts (Fannin

2021); and in more. Such observations prompt critical resource geographers to ask future-oriented, speculative questions, such as: Will reinventing resources reproduce and deepen the power inequities of prior resource systems or open possibilities for more egalitarian resource governance (Bebbington et al. 2021; Delgado 2021)? Can natural capital accounting be reappropriated to support the struggle against extractivism (Bond and Basu 2021)? What new ethical concerns emerge from the proliferation of novel forms of resource-making, and might these sow seeds of resistance to historically uneven geographies of resources (Curley 2021; Shapiro-Garza et al. 2021)?

These lines of inquiry, and many others, converged in the RHCRG. To help make sense of them collectively, we developed a heuristic device that we call “resource-making/world-making,” which builds on the critical and relational approach to resources outlined above. This device combines two conceptual tools familiar in the field. The first is the “resource-making” frame developed in anthropology and science studies to focus attention on the practices through which heterogeneous physical features are “rendered into knowable and exploitable resources” (Kama 2020, 334). The second, the “world-making” frame, refers to the ways that socioecological worlds are (un)made in and through the extraction, circulation, consumption, and disposal of resources (de la Cadena 2015; Simpson 2017; Tsing 2015)—a perspective that allows for thinking with expanding possibilities of being otherwise (Müller 2021). Throughout the RHCRG, and most explicitly in its final section, chapter authors mobilize this heuristic device to analyze how resources, and the worlds in which they are recursively enmeshed, are not just “made,” but constantly “remade,” or made differently. For instance, Elizabeth Lunstrum and Francis Massé (2021) explore how making “wildlife” into a resource has

involved not only producing animals, conservation science, and militarized security, but also new categories of the human, namely, the poacher, while Lisa Campbell et al. (2021) trace how global maps of large-scale marine protected areas can perform a range of ocean worlds: an ocean conserved, an assertion of sovereignty by small island developing states, evidence of neocolonialism or NGO success, or spaces of management. More broadly, the resource-making/world-making heuristic opens an expansive approach to the study of resources, one that we hope is capable of making (more) visible the connections between the (un)making of resources and the (un)making of worlds.

Unbounding the World of Resources

I am so tired of waiting,
Aren't you,
For the world to become good
And beautiful and kind?
Let us take a knife
And cut the world in two -
And see what worms are eating
At the rind.

Langston Hughes, "Tired" (1994, 135)

The point of naming the oppressive systems responsible for the making of resources and resource worlds is to change them. Yet, there is an internal aporia troubling CRG: in placing "resources" at the center of its intellectual-political mission, CRG operates within and reproduces the colonial framings and logics that parse the world into inputs (resources) for capitalist purposes (Curley 2021; Shiva 2010; Simpson 2019). While editing the RHCRG, this aporia felt like being trapped in a vexing no-way-out situation. Paraphrasing Jodi A. Byrd (2011, 14), we could say that resources are an "ontological trap." That is, in applying

the tools of critique to resources—asking the what, how, and why of resources—we risk (further) entrenching the supremacist colonial-capitalist ontology in which "resources" makes sense (see below; also Vázquez 2017). We even engage in a kind of "speaking for" (Morris and Spivak 2010) resources, a ventriloquist trick that assumes the inability of entities that become resources to speak for themselves—because the grammar of geo-colonialism prevents it (de la Cadena 2010; Povinelli 2016). More broadly, critical scholarship has been called out for lacking a normative direction to orient practical "progressive action" and for producing a form of detached knowledge that names but does not stop the violence of social injustices (Shapiro-Garza et al. 2021). It also has been questioned for reproducing moves to "innocence" that skirt around power, privilege, and white supremacy (Fabricant 2021; Leonardo 2004; Tuck and Yang 2012). Have critical resource scholars become so accustomed to the disciplinary rhythms of Eurocentric academic critique that we struggle to imagine alternative intellectual-political paths?

Critique is a sharp tool of modern thinking. It relies on the separation of subject-object/nature-culture; the authoring of free and autonomous positions; and the reduction of relational complexity into a dialectical synthesis of oppositions (Byrd 2011; Dunning 2021; Miller 2019; Povinelli 2016). Critique seeks to disrupt the certainty of the status quo and, in doing so, holds space for sensing (and for the potential to be affected by) ontological difference (Berman-Arévalo 2021; Schlosser 2021; Ureta and Flores 2018). For example, a differential shift in consciousness can emerge from critical attention to "cracks" in cosmological systems (Anzaldúa 2015), from philosophical aporias (Ballesterro 2019), and from "restless thinking" (Castree and Wright 2005, 2) that "reads" through layers of domination to get to the architecture of power (Perry 2018). Yet, critical analyses of resource geographies offer no guarantees of restoring or transcending

to more desirable socioecological relations. Adopting Langston Hughes' (1994) famous words, critique then is about making a *different* cut of the world, to see what is eating it and to allow this encounter to guide the next move. Intellectually-embodied exercises that use diverse critical tools to confront ossified power configurations, interrogate the status quo, and reorient epistemological groundings, are necessary to imagine the end of the world and the making of a new one (EZNL 2016). For this reason, we (the authors) are not ready to abandon the project of critique-as-method. But, we underscore, critique is not an end—it is a point of departure. What is next then?

Here's the orientation we propose: ontological pluralism. "Resource," as a world-making category, makes sense within the One-World World (OWW) (Escobar 2018, Law 2015), the idea that everyone and everything exists within a single world, made up of a universal reality that is differentially experienced (see also Blaser and de la Cadena 2017; Durand and Sundberg 2019). The imperative of this OWW of resources is the colonial and extractive logics of capitalist economies: carving things out of existing relations (gold, land, river basins, salmon, natural gas, helminths, etc.) and binding them to new ones in ways that perpetuate the increasingly growing differential accumulation of wealth as *the* condition of living. To move beyond this OWW of resources requires ontological pluralism that decenters the prevalence of the triad of separation-control-appropriation. The move to unbound the ontological trap of resources is speculative and transformative (Valdivia, Himley and Havice 2021). It is indebted to social movements (Courtheyn and Kamal 2021) and to decolonial, antiracist, Indigenous, feminist, and post-humanist scholarship (Todd 2016) that starts from the position that the end of the OWW of resources is already here (e.g., Baldy 2014; Fiskio 2012; Gumbs 2018; Roy 2006; Saunders 2013; Tsing et al. 2017).

The works of Indigenous scholars and their allies and comrades offer a helpful path forward for this departure. In the Americas, Jaskiran Dhillon (2018) writes about witnessing how Indigenous youth at the Standing Rock Sioux struggle make "anti-colonial entropy": critical mass organizing, guided by other-than-human relationality, that unsettles and degrades racist capitalist extractive industry projects in order to create different futures. Vanessa Watts (2013) starts from the Mohawk and Anishinaabe position that non-human beings have thoughts about and can determine how they inhabit the world, developing ethical relationships with humans and other non-humans. She contrasts this framing to Eurocentric epistemology, which she argues rests on the capacity to imagine oneself as being able to perform the Kantian trick of separating oneself from the world, as its observer, in order to perceive it. Such separations—and concomitant simplification of the world into discrete units of knowledge—are moves to innocence that hide the violent extraction that authorizes some worlds to end others (Ahlborg and Nightingale 2021; Simpson 2017).

The inseparability of place and thought is also present among Quiché Maya women in Guatemala (Cabnal 2017) and Quechua women in Perú (Stavig 2022), who put forward body-land-territory relationality as an alternative ontology to the capitalist violence that separates bodies (agents) from the land (resources). The healing network Tzk'at, for example, denounces the false separation between patriarchal violence against indigenous women and girls and the extractive violence of resource mining. And, in Wallmapu, where Joe Bryan's (2021) epistemological register was confronted by the aporia of mapping the existence of resources in order to make Indigenous land claims thrive, the inseparability of life-giving stories and place is present too. For the Mapuche, territory is not a "checklist of resources"—a container where individualized objects can be identified, cataloged, and carved

out of the webs of relations that constitute them. Land (*mapu*) and people (*che*) are ontologically inseparable; becoming *Ta iñ fijke rakizuame-luwün* (to think ourselves collectively through difference) disrupts the colonial present of land-people occupation, and is a means to perform Mapuche resurgence that counters global extractive capitalism (Comunidad de Historia Mapuche 2013).

Moves toward ontological pluralism are happening beyond Indigenous-centered scholarship too and in relation to various sorts of resource-becomings. Skye Naslund and Will McKeithen (2021), for example, make room for naming the worlds emerging from biosocial relationships between humans and helminths, intentionally orienting their proposition *of* and *for* a (brave) new world that goes beyond capitalist value and beyond the ontology of resource-as-commodity. Similarly, the Earthseed Collective, based in Durham, North Carolina, seeks connection through communion with land, rather than through the self-evidence of property as belonging to someone or something (Ranganathan and Bonds 2022), and through the understanding that social collapse, due to exploitation, devastation, and mass privatization, has already occurred (Purifoy 2020). In other words, intentionally existing *differently* within the OWW habitat holds the potential to recompose its web of constitutive relations. To imagine the end of the World of Resources is to “risk what one is—and thus risk a certain form of extinction—to go against one’s habitat. Courage and dissent are not enough. The point is to constitute different habitats in which other forms of action and relation become more possible” (Miller 2019, 137).

Imagining the unbounding of resources and resource systems is not impossible. These brief examples demonstrate that understanding ourselves in relation to each other and in the ordinary aspects of social life is a first fundamental step to recognizing that the World of Resources is not inevitable, but a “constellation of (particularly powerful) articulations among many that are

continually emerging and becoming undone” (Miller 2019, 136). Through our work on the RHCRG and our engagement with resource-focused scholarship more broadly, we (the authors) have come to consider the dual-desire to know the World of Resources and to counter its hegemony through ontological pluralism to be a central tension of CRG. The goal of this and cognate arenas of critical environmental scholarship should be to remain engaged in the kind of restless thinking that this tension generates, with an ongoing commitment to making familiar habitats strange and what have become familiar resource-relations unacceptable.

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Notes

1. Our title is inspired by Imani Perry's *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation*, which models a critical practice of reading key terms and concepts to understand how these work and to learn about structures of dominance. Our essay engages in this sort of critical reading practice with resources.
2. For a deeper analysis of the definition of "resource," see Valdivia, Himley and Havice (2021).
3. In relational analyses, material conditions (and ideas about them) are assumed to be constantly in flux: the one constant is that the world is always changing (Marx and Engels 1970). For further discussion in the context of resources, see Valdivia, Himley, and Havice (2021).

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