



Racial coastal formation: The environmental injustice of colorblind adaptation planning for sea-level rise



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ABSTRACT

The United States' deeply racialized history currently operates below the surface of contemporary apolitical narratives on vulnerability mitigation and adaptation to sea-level rise. As communities, regulatory agencies, and policy-makers plan for rising seas, it is important to recognize the landscapes of race and deep histories of racism that have shaped the socio-ecological formations of coastal regions. If this history goes unrecognized, what we label colorblind adaptation planning is likely to perpetuate what Rob Nixon calls the “slow violence” of environmental racism, characterized by policies that benefit some populations while abandoning others. By colorblind adaptation planning, we refer to vulnerability mitigation and adaptation planning projects that altogether overlook racial inequality—or worse dismiss its systemic causes and explain away racial inequality by attributing racial disparities to non-racial causes. We contend that responses to sea-level rise must be attuned to racial difference and structures of racial inequality. In this article, we combine the theory of racial formation with the geographical study of environmental justice and point to the ways racial formations are also environmental. We examine vulnerability to sea-level rise through the process of racial coastal formation on Sapelo Island, Georgia, specifically analyzing its deep history, the uneven racial development of land ownership and employment, and barriers to African American participation and inclusion in adaptation planning. Racial coastal formation's potential makes way for radical transformation in climate change science not only in coastal areas, but other spaces as situated territorial racial formations.

“Heard about the Ibo’s Landing? That’s the place where they bring the Ibos over in a slave ship and when they get here, they ain’t like it and so they all start singing and they march right down in the river to march back to Africa, but they ain’t able to get there. They gets drown.” – From an interview in the 1930s with Sapelo Island, Georgia resident Floyd White.

Granger, 1940

1. Introduction

As global sea level rises due to anthropogenic climate change, coupled socio-ecological coastal systems will face dramatic changes. Sea-level rise is already leading to forced displacement in the United States (Sabella, 2016a) and it is expected to continue to displace coastal residents, threatening some culturally-distinct groups (Maldonado et al., 2013; Sabella, 2016b; Shearer, 2012a). As many as 13.1 million US residents could be affected by the year 2100 with 1.8 m of sea-level rise (Hauer et al., 2016). How forced displacement unfolds for coastal

communities will take on multiple forms over the coming decades and will depend on competing discourses within governance processes (e.g., scientific vs. experiential knowledges; Hulme, 2011; Maldonado, 2014; Rice et al., 2015). More inclusive, collaborative, and democratic forms of governance, as opposed to top-down managerial approaches (Stehr, 2015), have the potential to yield more racially equitable outcomes. Achieving such success is often challenging, however, particularly across socially differentiated groups, especially when these differences are unrecognized or dismissed by those who hold power and access to resources. As researchers aim to aid communities and policy-makers with planning for these changes, it is important to recognize the landscapes of race and deep histories of racism that have shaped the socio-ecological formations of coastal regions.

If this deeply racialized history goes unrecognized, what we label colorblind adaptation planning is likely to perpetuate the “slow violence” of environmental racism (Nixon, 2011), which is characterized by policies that benefit some populations while abandoning others. By colorblind adaptation planning, we refer to vulnerability mitigation and adaptation planning projects that altogether overlook racial

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inequality—or worse, dismiss its systemic causes and explain away racial inequality by attributing racial disparities to non-racial causes. We draw on analyses of colorblind racism from critical race theorists, who critique the attribution of racism solely to individual acts of racial bigotry or prejudice rather than broader structural issues (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Gallagher, 2003; Lopez, 2003). In colorblind education policy, for example, racial differences in education outcomes are attributed to individual or class differences rather than greater structural causes (Lopez, 2003). Vulnerability to sea-level rise on the US East and Gulf Coasts cannot be disentangled from the histories of race and contemporary racial inequities that have shaped the socio-ecological formations facing inundation and other forms of change precipitated by a warming climate. To overcome colorblind adaptation planning through antiracist perspectives with what Heynen (2016) calls “abolition ecology”, we argue that vulnerability and adaptation to sea-level rise must be understood in terms of a *racial coastal formation*.

Many geographers have built upon the concept of racial formation developed by Omi and Winant (2014) to explore the spatial dimensions of the “sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed” (2014, p. 109). As a concept, racial formation asserts that race is not a mask for something else, being reducible to ethnicity, cultural difference, national identity, or class inequality (Omi and Winant, 2014). Racial formations are, by turns, durable and dynamic, constantly reshaped and restructured through historical geographical processes. We argue that Omi and Winant’s (2014) concept of racial formation can be extended beyond analyzing only social structures toward interrogating socio-ecological relations. By combining the analytical insights and potentials of racial formation with the geographical study of environmental justice, we point to the ways racial formations are also environmental. This merger shows that it is not just racial categories that are produced over time and through space via racial projects, but also the socio-ecological relations of racialized spaces.

Work in environmental history by Kahrl (2012) traces the social and political processes along the southern US coast that historically dispossessed racial minorities through land grabbing practices. Many communities along the US East Coast and Gulf Coast regions were predominantly black-owned prior to the 1920s, but through the coercive and corrupt business practices of what Kahrl calls “coastal capitalism” these properties were purchased at low prices and access to investment opportunities and amenities were limited for many African Americans. Although migration of affluent white people to the coasts since the 1920s has facilitated the loss of many waterfront properties by people of color, the non-white population of US coastal counties is still 48%; fourteen percent are African Americans (US Census, 2010). In the US South, African Americans comprise 20% of the population in coastal counties extending from Virginia to Texas, which is considerably higher than the percentage of African Americans nationally at 13.6% (US Census, 2010; Fig. 1). This suggests a definitive potential for non-white homeowners to be affected by rising seas in the coming decades, but also by a broader set of impacts on everyday life.

Overlooking everyday life in climate change adaptation planning has been referred to as the “climate gap”, which is the “gap between the large amount of attention given to climate change [science] on the international scene and everyday concerns of vulnerable communities” (Gaillard, 2012, p. 261). We extend the argument of the “climate gap” to include race by examining the intersection of racial inequality and vulnerability to sea-level rise in the United States. Several sea-level rise studies have examined the everyday life/science disconnect in vulnerable communities (e.g., Miller Hesed and Paolisso, 2015; Paolisso et al., 2012; Shearer, 2012a), but few, if any, have substantively engaged with critical race theory regarding the effect of systemic racism on the formation of vulnerability in relation to rising seas. We argue that understanding the “climate gap” as it relates to sea-level rise vulnerability in US coastal regions necessitates fulsome recognition and engagement with uneven racial development (Smith, 2008; Woods, 2002).

In this article, we work to bring critical race theory and

vulnerability scholarship into conversation with recent studies that have begun to demonstrate the increased potential for harm to people of color from climate-related hazards (e.g., Bullard and Wright, 2009; CBCF, 2004; Shepherd and KC, 2015). These studies extend the work originating in the field of environmental justice and critical race studies, investigations that have demonstrated how racism operates through not only overt acts of violence and white supremacy, but much more subtle means of hegemonic, structural, and colorblind forms (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Omi and Winant, 2014; Pulido, 2016, 2015, 2000). Based on numerous studies, environmental justice research has demonstrated the ubiquity by which people of color have been disproportionately affected by environmental hazards including, but not limited to, toxic substance releases, poor water quality, and extreme weather events (e.g., Bullard, 2008, 1996; Bullard et al., 2008; Pastor et al., 2006; UCC, 1987). Critical race theory interpretations of the disproportionate burden experienced by African Americans in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, for example, highlight how this significant event triggered an awareness in the US population of racial inequality as bigger than individual acts of bigotry, but that it did not result in a transformation leading to a post-colorblind world (Bobo, 2006; Lieberman, 2006).

Through producing uneven racial development, structural and colorblind forms of racism affect everyday lives and opportunities of racial and ethnic minorities (Derickson, 2016a; Woods, 2002), but especially African Americans in the US South due to its history of racial violence and legacy of slavery (Derickson, 2016b; Gilmore, 2002; Greene, 2006; Robinson, 2000). We recognize the dangers inherent to the “myth of southern exceptionalism” (Lassiter and Crespino, 2009), an “internal orientalism” in which an overemphasis on the racism of the US South negates the broader systems of racial violence pervading all regions of the racial state (Jansson, 2017, 2003; Kurtz, 2009). Studies of the US South, however, continue to document the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow legal systems in, for example, political attitudes (Archarya et al., 2016) and higher rates of African American poverty (O’Connell, 2012). Given how structural and colorblind forms of racism facilitate the persistence of white privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Omi and Winant, 2014; Pulido, 2015)—and the effect that this has on livelihood choices and life chances (Bonilla-Silva, 1997)—we argue that these systemic forms of racism work to reproduce racial inequalities by limiting opportunities to address and alleviate uneven vulnerabilities to sea-level rise through adaptation planning with underrepresented communities.

Our goal in this article is to develop the concept of racial coastal formation—as a particular form of a broader notion of territorial racial formation—in order to extend Omi and Winant’s (2014) concept of racial formation into analyses of socio-ecological relations. If race and racial identities are always in formation then African American (and other non-white groups’) vulnerability to sea-level rise is also always in formation in coastal regions. Our empirics derive from field research¹

¹ The lead author has worked on projects related to sea-level rise vulnerability on the Georgia coast since 2008. For this research specifically, the lead author conducted fieldwork for nearly a year on the Georgia coast in 2014/2015—six months based on Sapelo Island—including over 100 h of participant observation, 41 semi-structured interviews with local residents, researchers, and people in management or government positions, and holding a workshop on Sapelo. In interview and informal conversations, questions were asked about the local community and government and more specifically about climate change, environmental change and hazards, sea-level rise, adaptation planning, and race relations. Beyond the interview’s questioner/respondent format, this work includes narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) of everyday conversations and field notes from informal discussions with many island residents, including 22 African Americans in the coastal region on or near Sapelo Island. Informal engagement that elicits narration and storytelling and an interplay between two participants was a particularly effective approach with Sapelo Island participants due to “research fatigue” stemming from the extensive number of interviews by journalists, historians, and social science researchers documenting Geechee life and culture over the past century (e.g., Crook et al., 2003; Granger, 1940). All transcripts and field notes were analyzed for narratives on themes related to race, vulnerability, and sea-level rise, with particular attention to references to race relations and environmental knowledge.

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