

Indigenous water histories II: water histories and the cultural politics of water for contemporary Indigenous groups

Kate A. Berry¹ · Sue Jackson³ · Teresa Cavazos Cohn⁴ · Kenichi Matsui²

Published online: 18 February 2017
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2017

This is the second of two issues of *Water History* devoted to scholarship exploring water histories as experienced and understood by Indigenous peoples. The first special issue, published in December 2016, underscored the importance of oral histories, interpreted Indigenous perspectives, and, in doing so, revealed the complexity of waterscapes. Featured in the first special issue were water histories connected to: the *Ñuu Savi* or Highland Mixtec peoples of Oaxaca, Mexico (Jiménez Osorio and Posselt Santoyo 2016); the Ojibwe around the Great Lakes of Michigan, U.S. (Gagnon 2016); Indigenous communities from the Harding, Ord, Roper, and Gilbert rivers areas of Western Australia, Northern Territory, and Queensland, Australia (Jackson and Barber 2016); Indigenous communities from the Baucau Viqueque zone of Timor Leste (Palmer 2016); and the northern Arapaho and eastern Shoshone peoples of the Wind River reservation in the intermountain West, U.S (Cavazos Cohn et al. 2016).

This second special issue extends coverage to additional Indigenous groups and further examines water histories associated with: the Lumbee and Tuscarora Indians of North Carolina, U.S., as researched by William Maxwell; the Andean people of Tabacundo, Ecuador, as researched by Juan Pablo Hidalgo, Rutgerd Boelens, and Jeroen Vos; the Ngai

✉ Kate A. Berry
kberry@unr.edu

Sue Jackson
sue.jackson@griffith.edu.au

Teresa Cavazos Cohn
tcohn@uidaho.edu

Kenichi Matsui
kenichim@envr.tsukuba.ac.jp

¹ Department of Geography, University of Nevada, Reno, Reno, NV 89557, USA

² Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences, 1-1-1 Tennodai, Tsukuba, Ibaraki 305-8572, Japan

³ Australian Rivers Institute, Griffith University, Nathan, QL 4111, Australia

⁴ Department of Natural Resources and Society, University of Idaho McCall Field Campus, PO Box 1025, McCall, ID 83638, USA

Tahu (Maori) of the Waitaki River basin, South Island, New Zealand, as researched by Gail Tipa and Kyle Nelson; the Puyallup Tribe of the Pacific Northwest, U.S., as researched by Amory Ballantine; and the Yaqui people of Sonora, Mexico, as researched by Raquel Padilla Ramos and Jose Moctezuma Zamarron. While paying close attention to the significance of rivers, swamps, estuaries, irrigation, and other water systems for these Indigenous communities, each of the authors also stress the dynamics of settler colonialism within which conflicts over water arose and Indigenous resistance and re-appropriation took place. In other words, these articles examine the cultural politics of water from a historical perspective.

The nexus between the histories of waters and the cultural politics of water for contemporary Indigenous groups is the pivot upon which this special issue revolves. The cultural politics of water involves recognizing that, while attachment to water is essential and universal—spanning cultures, places, and eras—where, when, how, and why water is used, distributed, controlled, abused, and fought over transpires in many different ways, each of which speaks volumes about the peoples and waters involved and their constituent hydro-social relations. This nexus with the histories of water, then, provides a focus on water as a lens through which one can divine flows of power and their influence on economic and social relations. The longstanding unequal relations established by colonization, and their enduring effect on Indigenous authority and cultural practices, demand a critical perspective on water use and management. This collection drills deeply to uncover rich Indigenous water histories. The articles each offer important observations about past power struggles over the watery territories of Indigenous peoples. In addition, and they consider the significance of these observations for today's struggles by Indigenous peoples to reassert control and govern water in ways that accord with community values, customs, and preferences for meaningful livelihoods.

To start this off, this introductory essay considers what it is that makes water a good lens to examine the connections between historical processes, cultural attachments, and political dynamics. We then offer some interpretations about what these five articles say about settler colonialism and the transformation and regulation of water, as well as Indigenous resistance and place-making as these vital processes relate to water.

What can water histories tell us about settler colonialism and Indigenous agency?

“Where has water come from?” was the introductory essay in the first issue of *Water History*. The article drew attention to how “the relationship between water and humanity has always been inextricably intertwined throughout history” (Tempelhoff et al. 2009, p. 1). As a result, work on water history has the potential to illuminate connections between physical and human worlds within specific temporal and spatial settings (Tempelhoff et al. 2009). It is worth adding that as cultures and politics vary (spatially and historically), there are water histories—plural—rather than water history—singular—to be uncovered (Hamlin 2000). Further reinforcing the role of culture, politics, and other social matters, geographer Jamie Linton’s 2010 book—*What is water?*—asserts that water is what we make of it: better understood as a process than a thing and always bearing “traces of its social relations, conditions, and potential” (Linton 2010, p. 7).

We pose a question here informed by these earlier ideas and questions, yet one that is more specific as well: what can water histories tell us about settler colonialism and

Indigenous agency? The short answer is that water histories may underscore the complexities of encounters, processes, and meanings in ways that other types of histories do not. Why is this so?

First, consider the characteristics of water itself. Water is mobile and complex; it is the substance from which the construct of fluidity originated (Berry 2014). Given that water is dynamic, moving four-dimensionally (within space and time) in ways that are incredibly intricate and only occasionally visible, people must necessarily deal with water differently from land and other more static and stable natural resources. Water governance has always had to come to terms with the tendency of waters to flow, just as the cultural politics of water reflects an inherent lack of fixity. Consequently, water histories which appreciate the mutability of water are well positioned to recognize and tap into the fluidity of people and their shifting relations with one another with respect to water. For example, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1972) shows that comparing water and irrigation traditions can render visible cultural and political differentiation in ways that bind together the dynamics of peoples with that of water. Water histories, then, are likely to reveal different chronicles than those based solely on land as they uncover the vicissitudes of water and peoples with respect to one another and the many ways in which both water flows to and reflects power.

The unique ways in which water reflects human fluidity and social power leads us back to the question about what water histories can tell us about settler colonialism and Indigenous agency. Settler colonialism is manifest in a number of forms (Wolfe 1999): it has never been singular or monolithic and is perhaps better characterized as multifaceted and opportunistic. This characteristic called for diverse and strategic responses from Indigenous peoples, responses shaped by diplomacy, political philosophy, cultural practices as well as pragmatism. While different Indigenous peoples have repeatedly responded across the centuries and invoked solutions related to water, the type, timing, and meaning of such responses has varied greatly. As Matsui observes, creating the “culture of colonialism has never been a homogenous, one-way process” (2009, p. 7), instead, both colonialism and Indigenous agency reflect an amalgam of cross-cultural interactions. Looking through the lens of water, then, can expand what is visible about settler colonialism and Indigenous agency, providing evidence of the particular motivations, decisions, and encounters that drove histories and which, in many instances, continue to underpin contemporary situations. Because of its essential nature, water histories have the potential to reveal details about settler colonialism and insights into Indigenous resistance, re-appropriation, and restoration that are not often evident in other histories. The five articles in this special issue exemplify this as they have much to say about settler colonialism with respect to the transformation and regulation of water and about how Indigenous resistance and place-making have been connected with and inspired by water.

Settler colonialism and the transformation and regulation of water

In an analysis of irrigation in his book, *Rivers of Empire*, historian Donald Worster (1985) stresses the ways in which peoples define and re-define themselves over time through attempts to transform and regulate water to accommodate human demands:

Irrigation, on the other hand, is a type of water control that is constant, pervasive, and more socially demanding. Unlike flood protection, it leads in all cases to communal reorganization, to new patterns of human interaction, to new forms of discipline and authority. The difference is between holding an umbrella over your head and making

the rain go somewhere else. The first is a momentary defense, the second a concerted attempt to control and defeat a threat once and for all. Consequently, nothing suggests more clearly than the study of irrigation in history how dependent societies may become, not merely on water, but on their manipulation of its flow (Worster 1985, p. 20).

In deploying Karl Wittfogel's concept of hydraulic empires within the context of the western U.S., Worster delves into settler colonialism, although he did not label it as such. Worster considers how ideologies, material conditions, and institutional arrangements transformed and regulated water and in so doing facilitated the development of settler colonialism. In turn, settler colonialism influenced additional transformations in ideologies, material conditions, and institutions that reinforced the fluidity of these processes. The articles in this issue contribute to better understanding these dynamics.

Ideology, which we see broadly as a set of dominant ideas that come to be established at particular times and places (Loftus and Lumsden 2008), are fundamental to the transformation and regulation of water in settler colonialism. In this issue, Maxwell discusses the ideologies surrounding the drainage movements and crusades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which developed as a means to solve what were viewed as the problems of swamps. The "common sense" of the time dictated that swamps in general, and the Back Swamp in particular, were unhealthy, dangerous places, harboring bad odors and worse. These notions and popular fears justified the transformations that followed and the regulations which facilitate taking the swamps away from the Lumbee and Tuscarora peoples, who as it turns out had quite different ideologies associated with the Back Swamp.

Material conditions are of obvious importance within settler colonialism, given the need for physical means through which water gets transformed in the name of commodifying natural resources for imperial markets. In this issue, Padilla Ramos and Moctezuma Zamarron address the material conditions that facilitated settler colonialism in northern Mexico. They explain how the ever-increasing drive to construct infrastructure to slow, store, and divert water flows, established over the decades on the Yaqui River, transformed the waterbody from a source of sustenance, pride, and inspiration for the Yaqui people into polluted trickles. Also in this issue, Ballantine examines a long history of industrial development and urbanization that materially converted the waters, estuaries, and marshes in the Puyallup River into real estate and commodities. These conversions came at the expense of the Puyallup people's ability to fish and sustain their identity and livelihoods.

Institutional arrangements can organize, legitimize, and reinforce settler colonialism, and may include a wide variety of water institutions. In this issue, Hidalgo, Boelens, and Vos write about the Andean people of Tabucundo, who viewed (and continue to view) settler colonial institutions associated with water use, distribution, and allocation as being outgrowths of the *pishtaku*. The *pishtaku* is a mythical Andean vampire, who drains away their water, taking away their life energy and wealth. Also in this issue, Tipa and Nelson describe historic initiatives of government institutions that, while facilitating settlement of the South Island of New Zealand, directly and indirectly jeopardized the waters, foods, and lifestyles of the Ngai Tahu (Maori).

Indigenous resistance and place-making

Other dimensions of the cultural politics of water considered by these authors include Indigenous responses and resistance against settler colonialism and their part in shaping places. In the re-making of places, the articles describe the deployment of historical knowledge. Tipa and Nelson's work with the Ngai Tahu provides an example of this as they examine how historical knowledge of water has recently been integrated into eco-cultural restoration, which aims to simultaneously restore ecosystems and Indigenous culture. For example, within the Waitaki river catchment/watershed, work to support *mahinga kai*, or places where foods and cultural materials are procured, has involved efforts to restore traditionally-relevant species, both aquatic and terrestrial, as well as initiatives to restore access to the Ngai Tahu.

Hidalgo, Boelens, and Vos explain a strategy used by the Andean people of Tabacundo in which they established their own institution to wrest control of the administration of an irrigation system that had previously been prioritizing water deliveries for export-oriented flower companies. This involved forcibly taking control of the infrastructure and redesigning water allocation and delivery schemes so that Indigenous customs and rules became fully integrated.

Ballantine describes the Puyallup Tribe's resistance strategies to change the water by improving its quality at the same time as they sought to alter their subordinate position in the management of water resources. Their strategies included 'fish-ins' during the 1960s and 1970s, in which tribal members stood up to armed state representatives to defend their fishing rights. The Tribe also deployed litigation successfully to reaffirm their sovereignty. As a result of this litigation, Puyallups can fish without interference from the state of Washington and laid the groundwork to better protect water quality and restore aquatic habitats. Moreover, the Puyallup have benefited from federal legislation that identifies hazardous materials associated with part of their waters and which mandates environmental remediation efforts. Each of these initiatives was guided by historical knowledge of water that connected to a vision for future generations of place.

The Yaqui people look to their namesake as a river of knowledge. Despite supporting so little water at present, the Yaqui River has been the fount of their identity and remains the basis of many symbols, myths, and rituals. Over the decades, conflicts over water have influenced the Yaquis' approaches to re-make place and secure their territory. Without the river, efforts to reshape places cannot be fully realized so their struggles continue. Struggles in support of the Yaqui River are often spearheaded by their traditional authorities, so that many leaders and heroes of the Yaqui have been (and still are) considered first and foremost as defenders of water.

Maxwell reminds us about the fluidity of people and their relationships with water. Swamps, or what today are more often labelled as wetlands, are neither water nor land and yet they are both. The Lumbee and Tuscarora Indians' relationship with swamps has evolved over time. Settler colonialism imposed unfamiliar ideologies, material conditions, and regulations in an effort to convert the Lumbees and Tuscarorans into farmers so that "progress and prosperity were intimately linked with a cleansing of the body of the earth, cleansing away of the swamps, in order to rid the [Indian] farmer of ecological miasmata." The Back Swamp, in particular, has variously served as their place of refuge; their place that provides an assortment of foodstuffs and water to consume; their place that provides water for their crop plants; and their place associated with tribal heroes. As Maxwell notes, over time the waters of the Back Swamp have been transformed for the Lumbee and

Tuscarora Indians from “a substance with the power to envelop and contain into a substance that must be kept in a constant state flow.” Yet even today, the waters of this swamp suggest resistance, as reflected in the name and imagery of a musical band from this region, Dark Water Rising.

Conclusion

In many instances, the ideologies, material conditions, and institutional arrangements used to transform and regulate water were simultaneously part of the policy programs and land use initiatives designed to re-shape Indigenous peoples. These efforts started with the early acts of ‘civilizing’ and ‘improving’ that often involved converting Indigenous peoples into certain kind of water users and have more recently been transformed by neoliberal efforts to induce efficiency as the yard stick of legitimacy in irrigation water distribution (Boelens et al. 2006). This nexus has been at the core of settler colonialism and continues in postcolonial forms. Yet, clearly the picture is not unidirectional. Much of what has developed has been adapted or turned on its head in efforts to support Indigenous peoples and re-make watery places aligned with their traditions.

There is now much interest in water from social researchers, many of whom are concerned about the lack of attention to the connections between hydrology and society in the natural sciences and in environmental management policy. Researchers attuned to water’s capacity to highlight relationships (see for example Krause and Strang 2016; Jackson 2006; Johnson and Fiske 2014) see the importance of learning from Indigenous understandings of the central role of water in human lives and histories. Indigenous water histories have important contributions to make in this regard. Moreover, they may reveal more about the fluidity of peoples as well as water. As editors, it is our hope that these five explorations of Indigenous water histories will provide novel insights and significant information about the cultural politics of water for contemporary Indigenous groups.

References

- Berry KA (2014) Actor-network theory and traditional cultural properties: exploring irrigation as a hybrid network in 19th century, Hawai‘i. *Hum Geogr* 7(2):73–87
- Boelens R, Chiba M, Nakashima D (eds) (2006) *Water and Indigenous peoples, knowledges of nature 2 series*. UNESCO Press, Paris
- Cavazos Cohn T, Wyckoff W, Rintella M, Eitel J (2016) ‘Seems like I hardly see them around anymore’: historical geographies of riparian change along the Wind River. *Water Hist* 8(4):405–429
- Gagnon V (2016) Ojibwe *Gichigami* (“Ojibwa’s Great Sea”): an intersecting history of treaty rights, tribal fish harvesting, and toxic risk in Keweenaw Bay, United States. *Water Hist* 8(4):365–384
- Geertz C (1972) The wet and the dry: traditional irrigation in Bali and Morocco. *Hum Ecol* 1(1):23–39
- Hamlin C (2000) ‘Water’ or ‘waters’? Master narratives in water history and their implications for contemporary water policy. *Water Policy* 2:313–325
- Jackson S (2006) Compartmentalising culture: the articulation and consideration of Indigenous values in water resource management. *Aust Geogr* 37:19–32
- Jackson S, Barber M (2016) Historic and contemporary waterscapes: Indigenous attitudes to dams and water diversions in north Australia. *Water Hist* 8(4):385–404
- Jimenez Osorio LL, Posselt Santoyo E (2016) The sanctuaries of the Rain God in Highland Mixtec, Mexico: a review from the present to the precolonial past. *Water Hist* 8(4):449–468
- Johnston B, Fiske S (2014) The precarious state of the hydrosphere: why biocultural health matters. *WIREs Water* 1:1–9
- Krause F, Strang V (2016) Thinking relationships through water. *Soc Nat Res* 29:633–638

- Linton J (2010) *What is water? The history of a modern abstraction*. University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver
- Loftus A, Lumsden F (2008) Reworking hegemony in the urban waterscape. *Trans Inst Br Geogr* 33:109–126
- Matsui K (2009) *Native peoples and water rights: irrigation, dams, and the law in western Canada*. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal
- Palmer L (2016) Subterranean waters and the 'curation' of underground histories in Timor Leste. *Water Hist* 8(4):431–448
- Tempelhoff J, Hoag H, Ertsen M, Arnold E, Bender M, Berry K, Fort C, Pietz D, Musemwa M, Nakawo M, Ur J, Van Dam P, Melosi M, Winiwarter V, Wilkinson T (2009) Where has water come from? *Water Hist* 1(1):1–8
- Wolfe P (1999) *Settler colonialism and the transformation of anthropology: the politics and poetics of an ethnographic event*. Cassell, London
- Worster D (1985) *Rivers of empire: water, aridity and the growth of the American West*. Pantheon, New York