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Water is the stuff of catastrophic inundation and of salvation; the space of connection, rejuvenation and oceanic distance. It is a central element of ancient cosmographies and of modern technocratic reason. Water appears in explicit and implicit ways in literature, in humanities scholarship, in the arts, in social and natural sciences. Water is around us, part of us and indispensable to human, plant and animal life. In the past decade, much awareness has been raised about climate change and water shortages. We now have new areas of scholarship that examine issues of migration due to climate change and those of conflict caused by disagreements over water. These areas of study expand on the existing work done by anthropologists on water as a key formative element of both contemporary and ancestral identity formation, as a necessary prerequisite of organisation of urban spaces, and as a community resource. It is not surprising then that in the social sciences, research on water has taken place predominantly in the disciplines of development studies and geography. For example, a directory of social and cultural research on urban water in Australia shows that the most discussed themes and concerns in this area of research are those of water governance, sustainable management, and cultural values, beliefs and practices (Humphry *et al.*, 2011).

Studies of water inflected through the lens of gender have provided a cross-disciplinary approach that allows us to interrogate still overwhelmingly gender-neutral approaches to water in both scholarship and policy. Gender perspectives have challenged the nature/culture binary, where water falls on the nature side of the binary while cultivated land falls on the culture side; and they have challenged the image of man (and therefore 'culture') domesticating or controlling nature via dams, canal locks and the like. Feminist scholars have interrogated the implications such gender-neutral approaches have for access, distribution and control of water resources. They have illuminated the nexus between water and the formation of gendered identities of both women and men. The editors of *Gender, Place & Culture's* special issue on gender-water geographies suggest the pivotal political importance of gender-conscious analysis of water's production, consumption and management. Such an analysis challenges unequal power relations

exacerbated through neo-liberal policies of appropriation, privatisation and property rights over water (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2009).

In this themed issue we have taken up this challenge: to interrogate and hopefully shift the terms of the current scholarly debate on water. Instead of focusing solely on water management and governance through a feminist perspective, we opted for featuring works that bring back cultural, philosophical and literary perspectives to the debate on water. In so doing, we aimed to build a bridge between the strand of research that focuses on water management and governance and which highlights the emergence and formation of subjectivities, either individual or collective, via water. This might be perceived as a matter of opening up new analytical—and hence methodological—possibilities. While this is certainly the case, we would like to suggest that the stakes are also epistemological, in that the texts featured in this issue all intervene in how we conceptualise water, and ourselves in relation to water. By interrogating the formation of subjectivities, bodies and communities, starting with water, we begin to sketch a mode of analysis that would consider how human histories, cultures and politics are constituted by way of water and how they employ water. What we aspired to is, in Stefan Helmreich's words, to employ water as a 'theory machine' (Helmreich, 2011: 138) in order to develop analytical frameworks that do not separate meaning from materiality.

We are very excited that the articles in this special issue transcend disciplinary divides and proffer the pleasures of unexpected avenues and waterways into thinking about water. In her enchanting auto-ethnography, marathon swimmer and sociologist Karen Throsby writes about the pleasures of a body in water, and argues that the 'shifted sensorium of marathon swimming' provides a medium through which to understand embodiment in a way that transcends Cartesian mind-body divides. By de-familiarising the experience of a body in water, for example through a discussion of water temperatures, and making her readers familiar with the kinaesthetic pleasures of marathon swimming, Throsby also tells us a great deal about how swimming provides an alternative practice to the 'gendered rhetorics of mind over matter'.

Astrida Neimanis also engages with bodies, but as bodies of water. In her exciting challenge to various ways of imagining being in the world, Neimanis suggests that if we use what she calls 'a banal statement of fact' about our bodies being primarily made of water, we may be on the way to understanding the broader 'epistemological and ethico-political implications' of this figuration. She names 'a sixfold schematization of water's complex hydro-logics' as 'gestation, dissolution, communication, differentiation, archive [and] unknowability'. By thinking through these logics, Neimanis encourages us to rethink not only our feminist subjectivities, but how we relate to and locate ourselves in the world around us.

Subjectivity and womanhood in European philosophy are at the centre of Alexis Wick's article on the myth of Narcissus. Wick traces the story of Echo and Narcissus through a series of canonical European texts and the sedimentation of the image of Narcissus preferring the reflection of himself in water to the love of Echo in these texts. Wick sees echoes of the myth reverberating in the writings of Hegel, Marx and Freud's protégé, Sandor Ferenczi—and writes of the 'aquatic element' devising the difference between the dominated and the dominant, always gendered and determined through their location vis-à-vis Europe.

The politics of oceanic distance also frame Suvendrini Perera's affecting essay on the seaward journey of immigrants and refugees, and especially women's experience of such journeys. By examining a number of different works—films, images, stories—that examine the sea as the conduit for the migration of refugees seeking sanctuary, Perera tells us about the unspeakable horrors of the systems of control that figuratively and literally build walls on beaches to prevent unwanted travellers arriving on their soils. Perera and the people about whom she writes demand of us new 'counter corpo-graphies to those of nation and empire', and a recognition that 'the flotsam and jetsam of voyages through unknown seas' are our responsibilities.

Thinking with the poetry of Hawaiian poet and writer Nāalani McDougall, Michelle Peek similarly interrogates the effect of transoceanic empires. She argues that the flows of salt water and subterranean rivers suggest ways of reclaiming ancestral histories, ecological connections and human relations across the Pacific that the US imperial expansion into the islands of Hawai'i effaced. The revivification of trans-Pacific connections and flows in McDougall's poetry holds the promise of indigenous knowledges that are at once concrete and spiritual and which connect peoples, environments and their histories.

The governance of regimes of transboundary water distribution is the subject of Anton Earle and Susan Bazilli's contribution. Earle and Bazilli examine the masculinised practices that inform the 'hydraulic mission' of putting water to the use of men. Their critique of the military-style exploitation of water resources and the hierarchical style of governance is aptly illustrated via the cases of commissions working on Lesotho's Orange-Senqu River and Angola's Okavango River Basin.

The Open Space pieces beautifully pick up and engage with threads of argument and conversation already present in the articles. Shé Hawke draws on mythological, spiritual and psychoanalytic narratives about water to sing a call to arms about how we have commodified water, polluted oceans and waterways, and reduced access to this primeval, healing resource.

Rita Wong thoughtfully reflects on 'the Healing Walk' on the tar sands of Alberta, Canada, where First Nations communities from all directions gather to call for the protection of 'water, air and land for future generations'. Wong's piece reminds

us of the crucial centrality of clean water to all our lives and all the manners in which industrial modernity and capitalist profit-making have simply ridden roughshod over the common inheritance of all humanity, but especially of the Indigenous communities whose land, water and air are being polluted, appropriated and destroyed in order for oil companies to extract petroleum from tar sands.

Finally, Vanessa Rgger's Open Space piece calls for a queering of legal writings on water. Rgger shows us the clichd images of African women carrying water on their heads that appear when one searches the Web for 'gender and water' and the implicit invocation of rights to water. She argues that queering legal writing about water would entail questioning 'the historical image of women as victims' and asking serious questions about unequal relations of power embedded in the language of the human right to water.

We hope that the conversation we have begun here, the unexpected and surprising synergies between different writings of different disciplines and standpoints, can be continued in other spaces, when water is invoked.

references

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