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Dwelling on and with water – materialities, (im)mobilities and meanings: Introduction to the special issue

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Abstract

This special issue explores the materialities, (im)mobilities and meanings of dwelling on and with water by asking how is water experienced, narrated, and understood. Water's physical qualities both afford mobility and create frictions, thus complicating the boundaries between moving and staying, while waterscapes are also full of political, socio-cultural, and metaphorical meanings. Dwelling on water presents a challenge to overwhelmingly sedentary states and their terra-centric logics, which compels us to further discuss water both in a phenomenological and a political manner. This special issue suggests avenues for studying dwelling on and with water by examining various practices of being on water with their related meanings (the liveaboard boating communities on inland waterways and surfers on the sea) as well as with(out) water in terms of water scarcity, thus underlining the need for an anthropology of water.

KEYWORDS: water, canals, boating, mobilities, drought, dwelling, materialities

Water is 'simultaneously an element, a flow, a means of transport, a life-sustaining substance, a life-threatening force, the subject, the object, and often the very means of social and cultural activity' (Krause & Strang 2016: 633). It can cement state power (Wittfogel 1957) or act as a conduit for resisting it (Bowles 2016), as its smooth boundary-confounding qualities (in a Deleuzo-Guattarian (1988) sense) and powers 'fuse with social, political, and economic processes in the pursuit of social dreams and fantasies nurtured by a diverse set of social actors' (Swyngedow 2015: 1). It is the laminar quality of water that makes various mobilities possible – but it also creates frictions, immobilities and moorings (Hannam et al. 2006) complicating the boundaries between moving and stay-

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ing, scarcity and abundance, “nature” and “culture”. As such, ‘water offers us an axis of comparison that is strikingly under-examined in the anthropological literature’ (Abram & Lien 2011: 12) and indeed, watery materialities have until very recently, not been the subject of intense anthropological scrutiny. Furthermore, Ingold (2011: 20, original italics) has pointed out that ‘the ever-growing literature in anthropology and archaeology that deals explicitly with the subjects of *materiality* and *material culture* seems to have hardly anything to say about *materials*’. We concur – and would also like to draw attention to the *matter*; addressing this gap in anthropological knowledge by discussing dwelling on as well as with this particular substance, water. Closer attention to the dwellers on and near water allows us to open up (an)other place in space that takes possession of differently structured temporalities. We will discuss the (im)mobilities, materialities, the power and politics, as well as the meanings and metaphorical potency of water, all of which help us to understand better ‘water worlds [that] often remain at the edge of everyday consciousness’ (Anderson & Peters 2014: 4).

This special issue is, therefore, a response to the recent turns in anthropology and other social sciences that have opened up a more theoretical space for researching populations who dwell on and with water. Such a moment, an opportunity to really bring to the fore that which is special about lives lived in the flow of waters, has come about due to anthropology’s growing attention to water, a significant milestone of which is Ashley Carse’s (2010) curated virtual issue of *Cultural Anthropology*, bringing together five articles from 1999-2009. This was, in turn, built on Strang’s research, particularly *The Meaning of Water* (2004); a work that takes seriously the materiality of water, particularly how its ability to bring life, to run across boundaries, and to confound channels, makes it a powerful material as well as a remarkably cross-cultural metaphor. Beyond a literal dialectical complicating of mobility and immobility (further complicated by the various moorings, ports, and other architectures that tie boats to the land), the waterscapes have to be acknowledged as a rich creative source for metaphors, discourses, as well as phenomenological realities. This special issue shall set out to deal with these vital and emergent themes.

While researching water and water-dwelling practices, the contemporary imaginaries and historical cultural narrations also have to be invited into this discussion. We are here referring to imaginaries as socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices (Salazar & Graburn 2014; Salazar 2012). Borrowing from lifestyle migration scholars, we could also talk about the ‘geographies of meaning’ (Benson & O’Reilly 2009: 6) of watery places in terms of cultural memory (Vallerani 2019) and sense of place (Visentin 2019). We also need to pay attention to the meaning of different waters and water bodies (potable water, the sea and its waves, the river, the canal, wetland, etc.). Specific geographic locations hold meanings in terms of their potential for self-realisation as people search for both ‘literal and figurative places of asylum or rebirth’ (Benson & O’Reilly 2009: 6) created through personal and wider cultural narratives. Following this line of thought, we could ask, what are the cultural narratives linked with water. How do they differ in relation to different water bodies and states of water, and how do they reso-

nate in the minds and practices of those who dwell on and with these waters?

Attention to these populations can (essential for a developing anthropology of water) demonstrate the different ways of dwelling (Ingold 2000) both on and with water. The dwelling perspective, paying attention to the interaction between people and environments rich with various human, non-human animal, and material actants (Latour 2005), is a perfect vehicle for this investigation. In the 1980s, Ingold stressed the importance of bringing the environment, the human actor, and the multitude of materialities together to study the use of various objects and artefacts and their material properties in situative practices (Ingold 1988). In his later work, influenced by Gibson's (1986) notion of "affordances", Ingold (2000) discussed the material world that surrounds us in terms of medium, material, and surfaces, with the latter acting as a mediator between the rest of the two. Itinerant boat-dwellers (Bowles 2016) or holiday boaters (Kaaristo & Rhoden 2017; Kaaristo 2018) on the rivers and canals; liveaboards on the seas (Rogelja 2017) and international seafarers (Sampson 2014) all demonstrate particular new relationships with water, as does the work of Nikhil Anand (2012) with his interest in the inherent leakiness of water infrastructures. We are therefore interested in the ways in which all these different ways of dwelling on, near, and with water present a challenge to overwhelmingly sedentary states and their terra-centric logics. Considering different waterscapes as spaces of dwelling compels us to discuss them in both a phenomenological and politico-theoretical fashion; one perspective will not do. In addition to the political and the utilitarian, we also need to discuss the shared experiences, embodied movements and practical skills related to water.

We will start with the most obvious matter at hand: the material qualities of water. Scholars like Strang (2004), as well as the collaborators in Carse's (2010) volume, can all be seen as broadly connected to a "new materialisms" (Bennett 2010; Coole & Frost 2010) movement that seeks to put the matter of *matter* back into material culture studies. This new anthropology of water (Carse 2010) or amphibious anthropology (Krause 2017) takes water seriously as a materiality, and has provided a springboard for a new wave of scholarship that de-centres the agency of the human components of networks involving water and looks, instead, from the water outwards (Helmreich 2011; Petrović-Šteger 2016). Although most of the studies in this line of theorising are focused on domestic water provision rather than water as a conduit for dwelling, they are nevertheless foundational to the way that we, as editors of this issue, have come to take water seriously. What is more, we argue that it is essential to discuss all these different aspects of water holistically, to arrive at a better understanding of what water uniquely *is* and what water *can do* to and with those who interact with it. This means that we have to take seriously the point that water has, to paraphrase the title of John Wagner's (2013) edited volume, a developed social life. Institutions, communities, and lives are frequently shaped around the material qualities of water, which so often is an unremarked resource, taken for granted due to its sheer ubiquity.

Take, for example, Strang's (2009) study on Australian water basins that offers a comprehensive analysis of water as a source for physical, social as well as spiritual "regeneration". She focuses on diverse waterscapes, such as areas where rivers serve as set-

tings for adventure and self-realisation, for sports that reinforce masculine identities (jet skiing, rafting, speed boating), as well as places where one may simply enjoy the birds and wildlife and visually consume the waterscapes. All these diverse ranges of activities bring about a particular relationship with the substance, where ‘experiences of meditating upon or being immersed in water engender affective responses and a particularly powerful sense of connection’ (Strang 2009: 197). However, we should also pay closer attention to the myriad of physical properties of water, that is, water’s fluid and flowing materialities. Looking from the water, the land looks hard to separate from it as water laps at boundaries, erodes territories, breaks its banks and literally muddies its certainties.

Krause has made a critical intervention in this direction with Strang, suggesting that, ‘rather than treating water as an object of social and cultural production—something produced through social relationships and imbued with meaning through cultural schemes—we consider water as a generative and agentive co-constituent of relationships and meanings in society’ (Krause & Strang 2016: 633). We, as editors of this special issue, are indebted to this hydro-centric approach, as lives lived on water are led through engagement with this fickle and active substance, that seafarers, boat-dwellers, divers and fishermen will tell you has a mind of its own. It is therefore essential to consider the agency of water and its capabilities within the actor-networks (Latour 2005) as well as human and non-human assemblages (Deleuze 1997). There is something special about the agency of a waterway: it is palpable and physical, it demands response, action and reaction (Edgeworth 2014).

The land is full of rain and dew and water-vapour and the humidity of the air; nothing outside of the desert is ever dry. Drying the land and managing water, keeping it in its place, thus begins to look like a doomed struggle against a fluid entropy; a literal and metaphorical holding back of the flood-waters, a finger in the dam, or King Canute failing to hold back the tides. Both anthropologists, as well as other cultural and social theorists, have developed several metaphors related to water in order to think critically about the globalisation, mobilities, post-colonialism and post-socialism. For example, in Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of “liquid modernity”, liquidity and fluidity, water’s properties that most catch our imagination, are central and extremely powerful metaphors:

Liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape. Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time. While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade significance, of time (effectively resist its flow or render it irrelevant), fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but ‘for a moment’. In a sense, solids cancel time; for liquids, on the contrary, it is mostly time that matters (Bauman 2000: 2).

Bauman celebrates the constant movement and change and discusses the rapidity of the mobility of people, images, information, goods, or capital as a means for the liberation from physical spaces and places. Water is thus permeating different realms and embodying different forms – liquid, solid, and vapour – it streams through people, animals and plants, it forms physical water bodies, and informs various imaginative, sym-

bolic, mythological and spiritual domains (Petrović-Šteger 2016). The watery metaphors are also often used by the states that parallel the mobility of refugees with the flows and flooding of water that needs to be controlled (Abid, Manan & Rahman 2017).

Indeed, in much of the water scholarship so far, water is the Other of land, reproducing a reductive land–water dichotomy. Social scientists often tend towards a land-based, frequently sedentary perspective and look to ascertain how water is a special case or, more extremely, a state of exception. This reinforces the idea of land as stable, hierarchically organised, capitalist, state power, and often clock-time dominated. Furthermore, describing water as liminal also implies stable categories of “water” and “land”. However, when viewed from the water, all phenomena are complex and ever-changing vectors (Deleuze & Guattari 1988). It is clear that many people are positioned somewhere between the solidity of land and the fluidity of water, and that their sociality comes to be shaped by this constant negotiation and engagement. However, what of those who have gone, to a greater or lesser extent, more or less permanently, onto the side of water? What of those who have come to dwell on waterways, to reject the terra-centric logics of states, to become permanently or temporarily resident on waterways?

Water is always becoming Other (Deleuze & Guattari 1988); its meanings are always multiplicities. This both normalises and legitimises the land in that it takes water to be liminal and time on water to be a liminal condition. If time spent on water is liminal, this implies that it is time spent outside of the stable and fundamentally more *real* categories that can be found on land. This, we argue, is why those who are at home on water are radical and allow us access to truly novel perspectives. From the perspective of the water, looking back at the land, we can see what the land is and what it is not. For water-dwellers, time on land may be the liminal condition, as in David Whyte’s (2019) work in this issue in which surfers who are prevented from the practice due to injury experience their absence from water as the liminal condition, not time in water. Time on land may be uncomfortable; bodies may find it hard to adjust (for example, disembarkation sickness, the oft-neglected inverse of seasickness), land logics and sedentary temporal constructs may make less sense. As Steinberg and Peters (2015: 250) note, the sea is a ‘hydroelemental assemblage [that] allows us to rethink motion and matter and how it shapes the world as we know it.’ From the water, we cease to normalise the land. No longer do we take as “natural” the static quality of land. From the perspective of water, the subdivisions on land appear rhetorically vibrant but invisible in reality; things that are “static” and “unchanging” are actually shown to be the temporarily stable form of a transforming and mobile phenomenon.

Boaters on London’s canals, who know that their mobile community is a thing of flux and inherent change, look at the authorities as representing the rigidity of state authority and law and see only contradiction and inconsistency as Bowles (2019a) shows in this issue. This is seen whenever governing authorities on the waterways come and go with the tide of political expedience and transform their policies whilst trying to forge themselves, against the facts, a sense of historical depth and unwavering right (Bowles 2014; 2016; 2019b; Hadzi 2019). Water-dwellers and their perspectives are vital for up-setting traditional regimes of power, but when we break down unstable hierarchies from the land, new hierarchies and ways of distinguishing do, of course, arrive. This can be

seen in Laura Roberts' (2019) work in this special issue, in which London boat-dwellers have experienced a flattening of some traditional hierarchies, only to have other hierarchies built around gender roles, assumed expertise and length of experience come to the fore. It would be a mistake to think of water as truly "flat" and thus to exoticise it again. Rather than flat, it is sometimes flattening, becoming Other, being multiple, allowing us to think otherwise, to take the other perspective without the analytical baggage of sedentarism. Water is a materiality that is in constant change and movement while also moving other materialities, people and ideas; the vessels on water, therefore, become homely and safe mobile places with their myriad of entangled relationships that emerge on-board.

We are thus encouraged by anthropology's movement towards taking water seriously as an agentic co-constituent of environments. An important aspect here is water's role in governance, work that revives Wittfogel's hydraulic hypothesis (1958), of which special issue 'Water, Infrastructure and Political Rule', edited by Obertreis et al. (2016) for *Water Alternatives* is a particularly fine example. Water is not a separate and inert matter, as sometimes imagined in the water management studies, but instead a lively matter (Bennett 2010), part of an agentic assemblage (Gibbs 2013). There is not any simple relationship between water and state power, as the control of water can be a tool of the state, and just as often water, as well as discourses about it, can be hard to control and to govern, as Win-Ping Kuo (2019) demonstrates in this issue. His work shows the metaphorical and narrative potential of water infrastructure and its governance in powerful political narratives of water scarcity. We should also acknowledge the difference between water as *source* and water as a *resource*. These are essential considerations that should be considered together with the worlds of dwelling and interactions between humans, non-human actants and watercourses (as well as water in different forms including clouds), and not separately as various water anthropologies have tended to do.

To conclude, water and water-bodies do not carry stable meanings, and in the same way, its multiplicities of unstable meaning flow from culture to culture, disrupting boundaries as they travel. We agree with Visentin (2018) that time has come for the "watery turn" of humanities and social sciences, we need to take water more seriously; and we propose thinking (with) it as a materiality, mobility and meaning. Water is a conduit for nostalgia and identity, moral issues such as environmentalism and questions of consumption, as well as (national) politics. Considering waterscapes as spaces of dwelling compels us to further discuss water both in a phenomenological and political fashion. Can dwelling on water open up (an)other place in space? Water is poststructural to the extent that it throws light on the quiet, unremarked upon structural logics embedded in terra-centric scholarship. If we stand on water, in the flux and the flow, and we look back at the land, we can begin to see a radically ontologically different world, one that provides us 'a new look at our terrestrial assumptions' (Krause 2019: 98). This volume brings out some of these necessary and urgent water-borne perspectives.

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Izveček

Tematska številka obravnava materialnosti, (ne)mobilnosti in pomene bivanja na vodi in z njo z vprašanjem, kako vodo doživljamo, pripovedujemo in razumemo. Fizične lastnosti vode omogočajo mobilnost in ustvarjajo trenja, kar otežuje meje med gibanjem in bivanjem, medtem pa so vodne pokrajine polne tudi političnih, družbeno-kulturnih in metaforičnih pomenov. Bivanje na vodi predstavlja izziv prevladujočim sedentarnim stanjem in njihovi teracentrični logiki, ki nas sili k nadaljnji razpravi o vodi tako na fenomenološki kot na politični ravni. Ta tematska številka predlaga načine za preučevanje bivanja na vodi in ob vodi s preučevanjem različnih praks bivanja na vodi z njihovimi pomeni (skupnosti, ki bivajo na vodi na celinskih plovnihih poteh in deskarji na morju), pa tudi bivanja z/brez vode v smislu pomanjkanje vode, kar poudarja potrebo po antropologiji vode.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: voda, kanali, življenje na vodi, mobilnost, suša, bivališče, material

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