

Afterword: Kinship Possibilities in Water Futures

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ABSTRACT

This special issue of Oceania interrogates the material and cultural factors underpinning water socio-economies in Australia; a critical project given the wet and dry crises now unfolding in the Anthropocene. Three themes inform the collection – materialities, imaginaries and temporalities – each of which animates a diverse array of ethnographic inquiry into transformative water futures. The radical potential of kinship is also a cross-cutting theme, with the articles collectively revealing how kin relatedness works to disrupt the categorical framing of ‘modern water’ as an extractive resource.

Keywords: Indigenous water, radical kinship, water futures.

The ‘Water Futures’ special issue in *Oceania* interrogates the material and cultural factors underpinning water socio-economies in Australia. This is an urgent project given the overlapping wet and dry crises now unfolding in the Anthropocene. The authors confront a history of settler-colonial land use practices, a hyper extractive political economy rooted in the most emissions-intensive energy system among OECD countries, and an environmental history of intensive resource use compounded by neoliberal commodifications from the 1980s; a model of market environmentalism that increasingly articulates with moves to recognise Indigenous rights to water. Attention is drawn to the multiplicities of water – as molecule, teardrop, mist, vapour, rain, sea, underground river – at the same time as the diversity of human engagements with aqueous natures is emphasised. Critically, the articles in this special issue are attuned to the inequalities perpetuated by the categorical framing of ‘modern water’ as an extractive resource, and collectively work to uncover alternative epistemologies and ontologies geared towards transformative water futures. Such an approach is enlivened through the concept of ‘waterworlds’, understood as ‘the bio-social importance and culturally imbued experience of water’ (Babidge, Eickelkamp and Connor, Introduction), where concrete ethnographic analyses reveal how water connects multiple realms of social life and co-configures human cultural worlds. Young’s description, for instance, of Country for Indigenous Australians in the Western Desert, shows how the land’s surface is always in a process of becoming, with rain a key agent in the ongoing transformation and a means through which Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people enact their relationship to Country.

‘Temporalities’, one of three main themes in the special issue, refers to the rhythms of water, and its stillness and mobility, wherein residence time in a hydrologic cycle can stretch to over one million years. Notably, water has memory and carries other materials and life forms with it. This temporal quality is explored in Dixon and Morgan’s account of the free swimming

Parisia unguis, a sightless stygofauna which has moved for millennia through the Mudburra underground riverways. In this subterranean environment, the prawn-like critters purify the deep water seeping and flowing through soft limestone, channels and caverns, occasionally surfacing in creeks and waterholes to nip unsuspecting Mudburra *karudarra* (children). The authors composed a stygofauna protest song in response to the ‘poisoning’ wrought by exploratory fracking, its urgent timbre conveyed by the voices of Mudburra school children. This ‘singing of water’ powerfully expresses deep emotions of loss in environmental demise and the unequal burden of species disappearance for Indigenous Australians. It also evokes past and future waterworld possibilities. A bi-directional structuring of time as a foundation for transformative action is also taken up in Eickelkamp’s account of environmental art that challenges industrialisation. Artistic work may, for instance, reveal the travelling of cultural histories along waterways or the uncovering of old stories to encourage ecological restoration, cultural repatriation and political conciliation. Ecological sites as well as people are crucial to future rememberings, yet both are rendered precarious in environmental destructions. In the portending anthropocenic demise of people and place, the spectre of a non-existent ‘afterness’ is indeed a haunting proposition.

Temporality is also palpably embedded in kinship reckonings. In contemporary environmentalisms, for instance, the future of reproduction and the future of the environment become entwined. In her research with people involved in environmental movements in Scotland, Dow (2016:653) challenges the reduction of Euro-American kinship to the passing on of biogenetic substances, instead finding an ‘ecological ethic of reproduction, which places the emphasis on considering the kinds of environments into which children are born’. This futuring ecological ethic, emergent in non-Indigenous environmental movements, may also extend across species boundaries. In her description of Janet Laurence’s sensory artwork, Bailey-Charteris identifies an ethic of multi-species care based on reciprocity, co-existence and the fundamentals of survival, with the art project actively caring for fragile objects and creatures. Kinship ethics, hence, become oriented towards multi-species engagements and the nurturing of aquatic environments. These reconceptions of Euro-American kinship urging responsibilities beyond humans, may, in a settler-colonial context, suggest opportunities for alliances with Indigenous peoples. An assumed environmental commensurability, however, must be approached with extreme caution in the context of material conditions that underwrite liberal property rights, extractive capitalisms, race-based inequities and imperialist ideologies. At the same time, an emphasis on connections and the redemptive power of art, may open the way for radical imaginaries.

The intuition that settler society has much to learn from Indigenous peoples is taken up by Strang, whose ‘Making Waves’ article addresses the ‘imaginaries’ thematic in this special issue. In the context of environmental degradation, Strang argues that Indigenous relations with non-human domains, as expressed through water beings, provide a more equitable and inclusive model than that afforded by a ‘western’ nature-culture dualism. Drawing in particular on Māori *taniwha* (spiritual guardian) and the Australian Rainbow Serpent as illustrations of global water deities, Strang explains how these beings personify both the generative and the punitive powers of water to shape human and non-human lives. Contemporarily, such water beings have become vehicles for expressing concerns about the exploitation of fresh and salt water and have been mobilised in Indigenous claims. In Aotearoa, for instance, moves to privatise water must take into account the Treaty of Waitangi and, in recognition of Māori claims, the Whanganui River has been granted legal rights of personhood; *taniwha* feature in both instances of recognition. In Australia, Tiwi Islanders successfully evoked their totemic Rainbow Serpent ancestor, Ampii, in response to Santos’s proposal for undersea mining. These advancements, Strang suggests, challenge an alienating dualism and signal a turn towards a ‘biocultural heritage’. Let us follow this

thread a bit further to see how, in line with other contributions to this special issue, these shifts towards recognition of Indigenous water entitlements variously unfold. First, I turn to my own fieldwork in Aotearoa.

Te Ataiorongo, an ancestor chief killed by his sister's husband who lodged a fish hook in his forehead, is one of four *taniwha* who mediate the relationship between Tainui o Tainui ki Whāingaroa (hereafter Tainui) and their seascape. Manifesting as a stewarding stingray, red fish as well as other sea creatures, his appearance corresponds with significant kinship events and, up to the 1980s, was often marked by the sudden abundance of fish. He was, for instance, observed when several Tainui soldiers returned safe, albeit badly injured, from the Second World War and again in the 1980s, when a member's *whānau* (extended family) moved from a farm on Te Akau peninsula to his father's mother's land on Karioi mountain. Sightings increased for a period in the 1970s when a wastewater treatment plant was constructed on his lair; the pond's effluent pipeline flows through Te Kopua (the site of an ancient Māori village and gardens, reclaimed by Māori descendants in 1987), dumping its waste in the Whāingaroa waters, rendering the seafood from this space *tapū* (taboo/to be set apart). Several local drownings are attributed to this desecration. Some four decades later, an effigy of Te Ataiorongo was erected overseeing the polluting ponds, the sword-like carving signifying a renewed challenge to the defilement. Te Ataiorongo also features in Tainui claims for customary rights orders under the *Marine and Coastal Area (tukatai moana) Act 2011* (MACA). The Act requires evidence that customary rights have been exercised in accordance with *tikanga* (custom) in a particular part of the *takutai moana* (foreshore area) since 1840 (when the Treaty of Waitangi was signed). It recognises that these rights may arise from a spiritual or cultural association *if* manifested in a physical activity or use related to a natural resource. Customary rights orders, hence, suggests a peculiar disavowal of the alienations of colonisation, a functionalist interpretation of Indigenous cosmology and, I propose, are constrained by an imperial bordering of property and kinship.

Stories of Te Ataiorongo, his genealogy, untimely death, son's revenge, and contemporary manifestations, form part of the evidence provided by Tainui in their MACA claims, though these marine histories of kin relatedness do not have a definitive pragmatic or functional orientation. Manihera Forbes, a master Tainui navigator, for example, describes captaining a treacherous expedition from Manukau to Wellington around the west coast of New Zealand's north island in 2007. Under pressure to hasten the voyage, Manihera decided to bypass the coastal towns of Whāingaroa and Kāwhia, and instead pivoted the *waka* (canoe) for the more southerly Taranaki. Immediately, in the midst of a worsening storm, the steering paddle broke, the substitute motor died, and the *waka* narrowly missed striking a small, offshore island, forcing the crew to seek refuge in a rocky point. The sailors were young Māori people from Whāingaroa and Kāwhia; west coast harbours peopled by Polynesians who arrived on the Tainui *waka* from Hawaiki to join those already living there. Today, the neighbouring harbours maintain multiple lines of kin connections as well as distinctive tribal identities that give genealogical priority to different ancestor lines. In explaining the precarious voyage, Manihera mused:

Half our crew was from Whāingaroa and half from Kāwhia, quite a bit of *whakapapa* [genealogy] on board...It was a respectful thing, we were not paying respect to everything on the coast; our *tūpuna* [ancestors], our *taniwha*, our *whānau* [extended families]. It was a way of knocking our heads together and making us pull in and pay homage (in McCormack and Paekau 2020).

Crucially, an extension of kin relations through time, across terrestrial and saltwater environments, as well as human and more than human domains, exerted a 'pull' towards shore.

The MACA case is ongoing, and it is unknown whether Tainui accounts of Te Ataiorongo will substantially alter the outcome. The stories recounted here, however, illustrate a fundamental characteristic of Māori saltwater relations: the ability of Indigenous kinship to maintain difference, invoked in everyday life, at the same time as use this difference as a pathway to relationships. Merlan (2022) describes a similar ‘genius’ phenomenon in Indigenous Australian social organisation, and she includes kinship relations, alongside land, custom and language, as dimensions of difference that serve as modes of linkage as well as of demarcation. Meanwhile, Young (this special issue) shows how Ancestors, personified as *Wanampi* the Rainbow or Water Serpents, are at work in many dimensions, intersecting inside/outside boundaries. This capacity to border cross, evident in Māori kinship systems, is also pronounced in tribal sea estates.

The sea in Whāingaroa is the *rohe moana* (tribal seascape) of five *hapū* (sub-tribes) - Tainui o Tainui ki Whāingaroa, Ngāti Tamainupō, Ngāti Tahinga, Ngāti Whakamarurangi and Ngāti Mahanga. Each *hapū* is associated with a particular harbour area, extended families have rights over designated fishing grounds and gathering spots, and link genealogically with different marine birds and species. Overarching these distinctions is an emphasis on the sharing of resources as well as a propensity to coalesce as Tainui Awhiro, a clustering of *hapū*. This amalgamation occurs for political purposes, decolonial struggles, ceremonial events or, historically, to produce goods for large prestations to inland tribes.

Under the *Marine and Coastal Area (takutai moana) Act 2011*, customary marine title refers to unextinguished rights held in a specified area of the *takutai moana* in accordance with Māori *tikanga*. Claimants must show evidence of *exclusive use and occupation* from 1840 to the present without *substantial interruption*. Hence, while marine title might recognise that *hapū* are associated with particular areas of interest and that this holds ownership significance, it invisibilises the fact that the linkage of kinship relations also legitimates claims across difference. That is, there is a stark contrast in viewing kinship as an exclusive identity and property demarcator, and kinship as a network phenomenon (Merlan 2022). Indeed, for Yolngu in north Arnhem Land, it is the perpetual motion pattering of waves that distinguishes the sea tenure of different groups, while for other Indigenous Australians, it is the colour of water that differentiates (Young, this issue). With both colour and waves in ceaseless motion, it is not surprising that problems arise in attempts to categorise kin groups as exclusive property holding units.

An indigenous propensity to border cross can be further illustrated with reference to *pou whenua* in Aotearoa, boundary markers associated with significant ancestors and historical events. *Pou whenua* can be carved posts, hills, streams, creeks, rocks or other natural features and in contemporary mapping, are represented by points or even feathers. These markers, however, do not link to create a continuous line distinguishing *hapū* territories, their significance lies, rather, in the sites in and of themselves; as a communicative device their power emanates out. Crucially, *pou whenua* are pivoted towards the creation and maintenance of relationships: between neighbouring kin groups, between ancestors and descendants, and between people and environmental resources. Conversely, settler colonial bordering of kin and land relation differentiates, creating delimited units, with significant material consequences (McCormack et al. 2023).

Materialities and imaginaries are further key themes in this special issue, drawing attention to colonial histories, dispossessions, and industrial misappropriations. This theme also points to the diversity of water, providing a lens for considering ecological and human difference at the same time as the material, political, governance and infrastructure consequences of these delineations. Jackson, O'Donnell, Godden and Langton (this issue) and Garlett and Holcombe (this issue) both reveal the entrenched history in Australia of mediating Aboriginal interests in water through the refraction of a colonial modality of resource

extraction. Jackson, O'Donnell, Godden and Langton, for instance, show how new waves of dispossession, exacerbated by neoliberal economic demands, have rearticulated Aboriginal interests in water as 'residual interest'. Whilst reserving water for future use appears to advance Aboriginal enterprises that require a water entitlement, this recognition is underpinned by a neoliberal propensity to financialise the environment; an imaginary in which reserved water is traded to non-Indigenous enterprises to generate Aboriginal revenue streams. A similarly distorted Indigenous recognition is explicit in New Zealand's *Iwi* (tribal) fishing quota, introduced some three decades ago to settle Māori claims to fisheries using the logic of Individual Transferable Quota systems in managing commercial fisheries. Of the 58 *iwi* (tribes) who received settlement quota, only eight percent have the capacity to fish, with the vast majority of tribes future trading catch rights, wealth which trickles down to coastal fishing *hapū*. Only two Māori commercial fishers remain in the West Coast harbours of Whāingaroa, Kawhia and Aotea, signifying a new wave of dispossession rooted in the articulation of an Indigenous settlement with the financialisation of saltwater nature in Aotearoa (McCormack 2017; Reid et al. 2019).

In Garlett and Holcombe's research in Western Australia's Pilbara, a region wherein mining, pastoralism and native title determinations overlap, multiple conflicting pieces of legislation are shown to be used to determine water extraction and preservation. Underlying these regulations, Garlett and Holcombe argue, is a dichotomisation of Aboriginal Traditional Owners' water entitlements into economic and cultural spheres. This essentialisation follows a neoliberal logic wherein Indigenous economies become incorporated into the national economy whereas 'culture' remains the purview of the dispossessed. Garlett and Holcombe end their article with an astute list of recommendations that pay close attention to the voices of Indigenous people calling for water justice.

Materialities also refers to 'what water is and what it does – how it is experienced as material presence and agency' (Babidge, Eickelkamp and Connor, Introduction). In this context, Reardon-Smith's analysis of how wet and dry seasons are differently experienced by communities in Cape York is an important contribution to understandings of the multiple ways in which people negotiate the existential and lived reality of anthropogenic climate change. Graziers, for instance, reject the language and concept of climate change, instead framing their experience of recent water extremes in terms of 'natural cycles'. This obfuscation, however, does not suggest a commitment to climate denialism or climate delayism. Rather, as a consequence of working the land in a region where life is shaped by aqua-seasonality, graziers' rejection hinges on their association of climate change discourse with a 'green ideology', long seen as threatening to settler-descendant ways of life in Cape York. Conversely, for Aboriginal rangers, local observations of climate variability are explicitly linked to anthropogenic climate change. Reardon-Smith encounters a 'kind of syncretism of a belief in the power of ancestral spirits and acceptance of the Western scientific models of climate change'. Notably, it is not anthropocentrism that differentiates the two groups, but rather the capacity in Indigenous kin reckonings to incorporate dimensions of difference that simultaneously serve as nodes of connection. This agility in border crossing enables contemporary Aboriginal communities in Cape York to enact a kind of 'ethnoclimatology', oriented towards caring for their material cultural heritage as well as their land and waterscape.

The possibilities in Indigenous kinship systems are again explored by Wissing and Webb in the context of scientific explorations on an island environment. Wissing and Webb adopt an approach centred on sea water to situate contemporary gene drive field trials within broader historical and cultural understandings of the Torres Strait. Synbio scientists, having identified this island region as a key site of international and intraregional biosecurity interest, are engaging in conversations with Traditional Owners and Indigenous environmental

organisations. For Torres Strait Islanders, the sea is a water passage or bridge through which kin and cultural connections are maintained. This kin-connected view is again more creatively positioned to: first, comprehend and, second, tackle, climate induced boundary changes – the blurring of land/water boundaries as species enter previously out of place areas or the saturation of terrestrial edges by saltwater – rather than research agendas that position islands as fixed entities, contained by water, ripe for research and experimentation.

The articles in this special issue collectively point to how crucial it is for Western researchers to make the links between water governance regimes, epistemologies and ontologies and to show how these travelled *via* the complex machinations of European imperialisms and worldviews, as well as the imposition of these on contemporary water relationships in Australia. The urgency of this endeavour is pivotal in Poelina, Toussaint and Muecke's three-way conversation challenging ethnographic practice and anthropological work in the context of climate demise, a discussion that deserves our utmost attention.

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