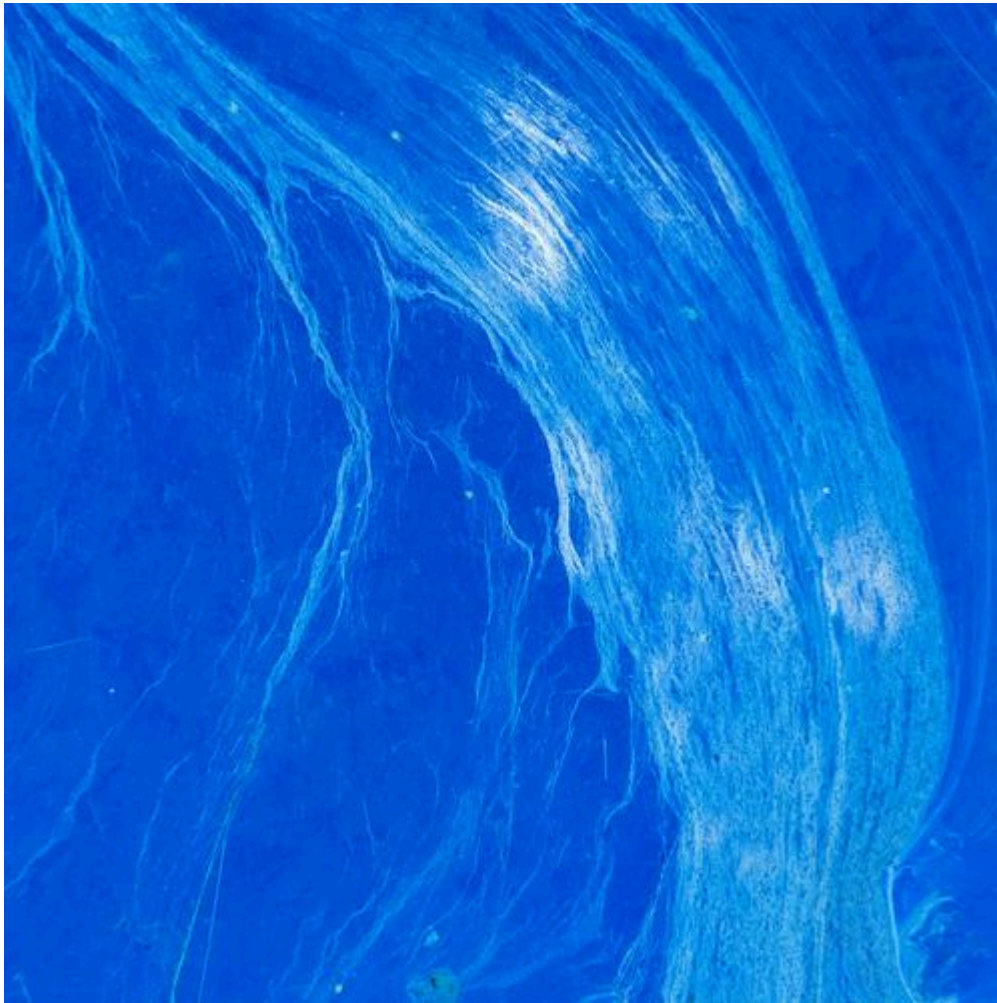




A future history of water: Andrea Ballestero's response

written by Andrea Ballestero
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When encountering the generosity of brilliant colleagues, one can only start with gratitude. Add to that a historical moment when a virus has reconfigured the languages, spaces, and physical encounters of sociality, and said gratitude multiplies. Each word written in response to my book is an act in time and space, a practice that has taken these three readers away from caring for loved ones, dealing with the asymmetric effects of the pandemic, figuring how to teach a class asynchronously, or connecting with friends or family in another city, country,



continent. Being on the receiving end of such generosity is humbling. It has been such a joy to rediscover my own work through Maura, Rachel, and Alberto's thinking.

This short text is a response to that gift. A thank you expressed through the ideas that their engagement ignites. Through their words, I've re-discovered the book it took me so many years to write. Its life has been expanded through their engagement.

Alberto Corsín-Jiménez, with characteristic acuity, centres on proportions as a way to think about relations; about the relations of differentiation that I delve into through the four techno-legal devices I study. In his rendering, proportionality is a form of relating but with a personality. Relationality has become a widespread concept to diagnose our social condition, often operating as a catch-all term, a transparent label intended to capture a form of connection. And yet, relationality is neither a transparent condition nor is it the same as connection. By thinking relations as issues of proportion we sidestep those assumptions. Proportionality is a relation with personality, with the valences of the worlds it is part of imbued into its very character.

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Alberto powerfully describes how the making of relations confronts one with the vertigo of bifurcations. This vertigo is the uneasiness of living and learning in a world that demands action. In this world, not acting puts you at fault. At bureaucratic, technocratic, or political fault; nevertheless at fault. My challenge was how to write an ethnography that conveyed that condition. I was not interested in offering observation or critique from the comfort of the desk. Rather, I aimed to remain at the verge, close to the place where you experience the vertigo of effecting a bifurcation. I was interested in figuring the kind of crucial thought that is possible from that condition. At the verge, I learned from the question my interlocutors face daily: how do you shape the world when all you



have at hand are techno-legal devices? As Alberto writes, in large part, their answer is methodological. If you cannot trust your acts because they are unlikely to bring about the desired effects, then you think about ways of approaching action better. In this world, subjects are not entities that come “ready to act.” Acting is a methodological skill that equips you to deal with the inevitable vertigo of having the responsibility of creating bifurcations. As a skill, it needs cultivation, and that cultivation happens in specific locations.

Maura Finkelstein’s moving reflections position us squarely in one of the sites where that cultivation takes place. A location that also happens to be one of the spaces of wonder that we retain in our work: the classroom. The ubiquitous plastic water bottle that grounds her students also grounds a tactical intervention by the international activists from whom I have learned so much. The plastic bottle, generic and yet so widespread that it is now intimate, has inspired volumes of academic, political, and market research. What are we to do with that bottle in the classroom? Through an implosion, Maura tells us, it becomes defamiliarized. One implosion looks back and reveals the material, human, and more than human histories that make it possible for US college students in Pennsylvania to direct their imagination to the water bottle. Another implosion projects forward and explores futures, rather than histories, attempting to trace the material, political, and affective threads the bottle throws into the yet to come. I think of that projection as a way to establish the preconditions of the future. In the classroom, thinking of those preconditions effects an implosion where what is inside (a concept, a technology, a material) is thrown outside, reaching towards people and beings in distant temporal or geographic locations. In the classroom, this time-space travel is possible. The bottle makes that travel easy because it is always there available for departure. The bottle makes that travel odd because its mystique is as impenetrable as the plastic that keeps water from its tendency to change form.

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Maura brings into relief this multidirectional temporality. She turns the implosion of the future into a moment of wonder. That is, a moment where futures are made, not merely described. It is in the interstices of the worlds that are – be they classrooms, laws, or international meetings – that different worlds are made and spatiotemporal implosions ignite. Maura also suggests that what is cultivated by this form of being is a form of action. Here, action is no longer an inherent property of a universal subject that just needs to be switched on. Action, in wonder, is a method that attends to how other beings sculpt the world according to their own material, affective, and creative desires and possibilities.

Rachel Douglas-Jones' ends her marvellous commentary with a pie-chart. What a great place to start! How does one look at a pie chart in a United Nations Report on the global water crisis? A pie-chart that sits in between glossy pictures in a PDF file and maybe shares a split screen with the hashtags that are now a condition of possibility of something akin to a digital public sphere. One way to read the pie chart is to call out its shortcomings: its flattening powers, its reductive display, its lack of contextualization. And yet, through Rachel's imagination, the pie chart becomes an index of the work of creating the preconditions of the future.

Those preconditions, however, emerge from a labor of tweaking, adapting, and shifting. In her powerful analysis, Rachel pulls out and dwells on the tactical magnifications that I perform in the book. By spending time with magnification, she calls our attention to how the tendency to move too quickly to the question of relevance or adequacy results in some generic commitment that renders ethnographic engagements unnecessary to arrive at an interpretation of the world around us. Tactical magnifications, in Rachel's text, move us from generic commitments to specific ethnographic accomplishments. Dwelling in tactical magnifications is a form of cultivating ethnographic engagements that refuse to be subsumed under generic commitments. Tactical magnifications make the messiness of everyday life in Costa Rica and Northeast Brazil more apparent and allow one to see how people attempt to and create differences that matter politically and materially. Through Rachel's lateral reading we see how action,



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It is from those intensities that one can shift from taking technocracy as the ultimate wonder-killer to considering it as a wonder-inducing form of sociality—a move from theological commitment to ethnographic accomplishment. Rachel dwells in the political valence of this gesture, describing its power to refuse the black-boxing of technocratic and bureaucratic worlds. Rachel’s reflections on *A Future History of Water* are a powerful example of how a universalizing assumption can be punctured, and her detailed plucking of concepts and propositions is an inspiring re-charting of the problem spaces I spend time in through the book.

During pandemic times when lives, devices, and rights are being discussed in the public sphere, my three colleagues have expanded not only the scope and reach of the book. They have also offered a powerful vocabulary to think of the technolegal worlds we are currently embedded in. They have provided reprieve from the vertigo of action, offering the power of magnification as a way to wonder about the worlds that might be possible. Hopefully, with this response, I have managed to show a level of gratitude that is proportional to their generosity.

This piece is the last installement of a book symposium on *A Future History of Water*. Read the other reviews by [Alberto Corsin-Jimenez](#), [Maura Finkelstein](#) and [Rachel Douglas-Jones](#).