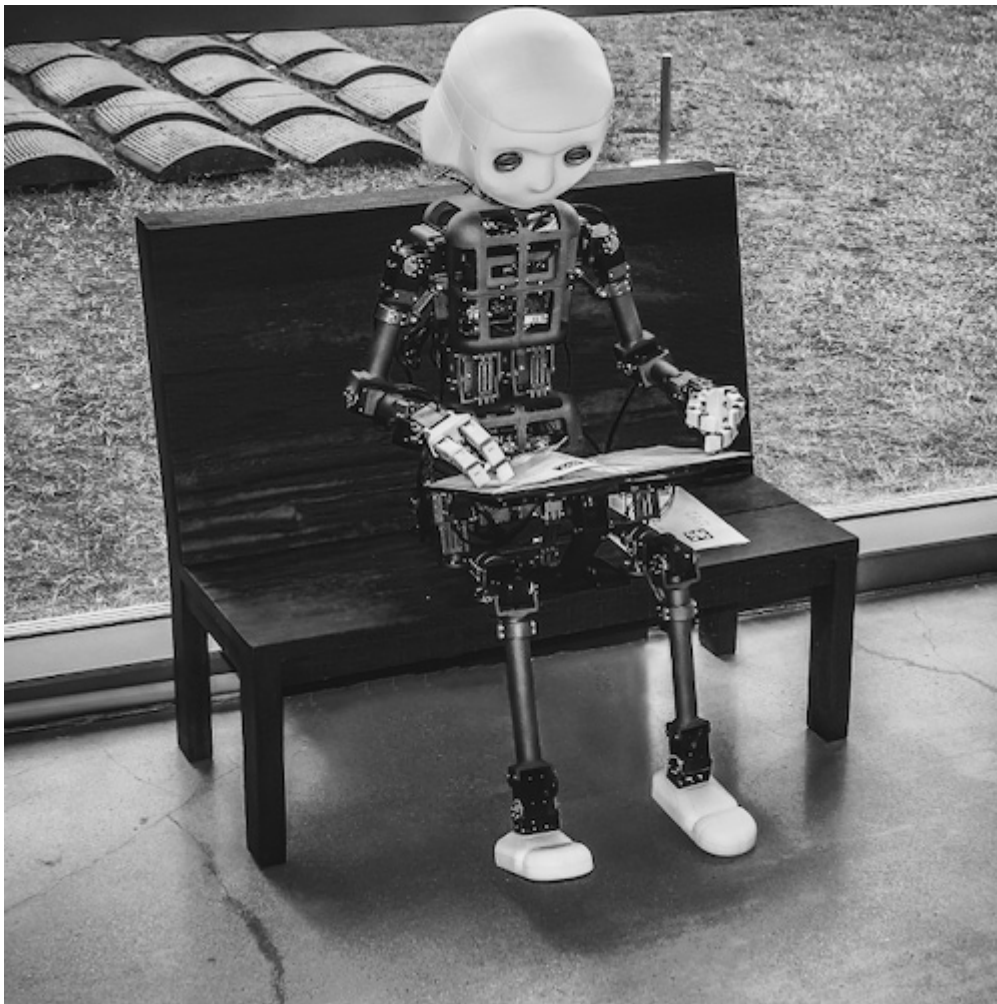




How Do Personal Data and Algorithms Influence Our Sense of Self?

Natalia Kucirkova
January, 2022



*All achievement is threatened by the machine, as long
as it dares to take its place in the mind, instead of obeying.*



*That the master's hand no longer shines forth in fine lingerings,
now it cuts to the determined design more rigidly the stone.*

Rilke, Sonnets to Orpheus, X (Second part)

Back in 1922, Rainer Maria Rilke warned that when machines become part of the human mind, they will, in effect, *become* humans. Fast forward to 2021, when algorithms select the texts you read and direct your attention to stories recommended 'just for you'. The automation progress has been astonishingly rapid since Rilke's times of first televisions: today we have private cinemas in our palms, netflixing our entertainment as we please. Poets often anticipate the future, but does the current era mean that we have relinquished our agency to machines?

I study the consequences of automation for children's learning (Kucirkova, 2021). I am most concerned about the use of personal data and algorithms for influencing what and how children learn. The combination of personal data and algorithms gives rise to *digital personalization*.

The Buildings Blocks of Digital Personalization

The unit of digital personalization is personal data, which, as the name reveals, is information that is related to one human being. In the case of children, personal data can be static, as in a child's date of birth or genomic sequence, and personal data can be dynamic as in reading scores over a school year, for example. Both static and dynamic data are invaluable for location and identification purposes, but also to offer the right treatment for a child or recommend the right learning resource. Data have always been here, whether in the form of oral reporting or written records or today's dynamic data stored on servers. The rise in data-



collection tools in the form of smart technologies reflects the usefulness of data for efforts aimed at wellbeing, decision-making, school or job performance, and general quality of life.

The quantity and complexity of personal data create a powerful paradox.

The problem with today's data is that they are being collected by too many actors and organisations, giving rise to an unprecedented quantity of complex personal data. The quantity and complexity of personal data create a powerful paradox: on one hand, the data can provide a precise picture of the uniqueness of an individual, and on the other hand, the data can remove or undermine this uniqueness. The first part of the paradox relates to the power of personalization that is being harnessed by personalized algorithms. The second part relates to the lack of agency embedded in current models of digital personalization.

The power of personalization

The last ten years have seen an exponential rise in data-collecting technologies. While policy-makers perceive data-driven decisions as particularly objective and actionable, having more data is not always better. Social scientists (e.g., Lupton & Williamson, 2017) point to two issues with the rising quantity of children's data. The first issue relates to the lack of privacy, security and respect for children's rights with current data collection techniques (Livingstone, Stoilova, & Nandagiri, 2020). A lot of children's data is being collected through children's technologies that use data for commercial purposes rather than children's learning.

Having more data is not always better.

The second major issue are the uncoordinated, unsystematic and often unjustified data collection practices that children are subject to. Various data-collection techniques are easily available with apps, positioning adults as monitors of



children's daily movements and everyday interactions. Children's data are sprinkled in various places, including on the private cloud servers of technology providers, health and education authorities, smartphones of family members and hard drives of schools. These diverse organisations follow different protocols for collecting children's data (Stoilova, Nandagiri & Livingstone, 2021) and although most organisations comply with the General Data Protection Regulation, the compliance in itself does not solve the issue of datafied childhoods (Macheroni, 2020).

The more power we grant technologies, the less power we grant individuals without them.

Political and commercial actors push forward data collection as a universally positive force, without questioning the possible side-effects of exponential data growth. The more power we grant technologies, the less power we grant individuals without them. Rilke captured this obvious limitation with surprising foresight when he wrote:

See, the machine:

how it turns and takes its toll

and pushes aside and weakens us.

(Rilke, Sonnets to Orpheus, XVIII , First part).

With so much focus on the data rather than the wholeness of a human being, we risk diminishing the rich inner life of each individual. Poet Michael Rosen fittingly conjured the sentiment in his widely shared poem 'The data have landed'.

*First they said they needed data about the children
to find out what they're learning*



*Then they said they needed data about the children
to make sure they are learning
Then the children only learnt what could be turned into data
Then the children became data.*

(Rosen, The data have landed, 2019, shared on Twitter by the author)

If, as Rosen writes, the data obsession takes people down a toxic spiral, towards reducing children to a simple statistic or data point, what remains of their humanity? The question seems particularly pertinent at times of a global health crisis. There is no doubt that data-based detection of patterns can be used for data control, new policies and law enforcement. However, we need to reflect on data ownership and data management in these efforts, and the question of agency.

Agency in personalization

Agency is an interdisciplinary term with various definitions in different disciplines, but in the context of digital personalization, it relates to an individual's ability to volitionally control what happens to their own data. If individuals are to manage their own data, they need to be provided with easy data access, and knowledge about how to manage various data points. Such 'Data Literacy' falls under the umbrella of media literacy and is continuously in flux, due to the increasing sophistication of technologies and the legislation regarding their distribution and deployment. What is interesting from the digital personalization perspective is how the sophistication of the algorithms embedded in data-collection technologies continuously challenges data literacy of adults and children.

In the context of digital personalization, agency relates to an individual's ability to volitionally control what happens to their own data.



Big data have grown so 'big' that they can be only managed by algorithms that categorize the data according to some pre-designed principles. With a very few exceptions, such as for example the [Quantified Self](#) project, the algorithmic principles of data collection are determined by the data collectors and processors, not by the data contributors. It means that the user's agency is undermined, if not completely removed. What is worse is that many algorithms are designed in ways that perpetuate socio-cultural biases, in which sexual, racial, and ethnic minority groups are subordinated to dominant groups (Noble, 2018). The algorithmic reality implies that the human agency is under existential threat as well as under the threat of being manipulated to promote less diverse environments. As Zuboff (2019) wrote, algorithms are designed to 'eliminate the messy, unpredictable, untrustworthy eruptions of human will.' The consequences of this algorithmic reality are massive in adults' lives, and possibly even more impactful in children's.

In my analysis of popular children's apps and educational programs (Kucirkova, 2018), I found minimal space for children's expression of agency. In addition, the algorithms processing children's engagement with an app or educational platform were exclusively designed to personalize, and not diversify, the content. The algorithms offer like-for-like, within a close system tailored to the preferences, qualities and history of an individual or a group of similar individuals. Such a design works well for a commercial model that aims to match the customer with a brand and offer them a product specifically tailored to their interests, geographical location, budget or previous shopping behavior. The same logic does not work for expanding children's learning and understanding of multiple viewpoints. Quite the contrary - such data-driven personalization removes the interest in others who are different from the individual. It risks promoting the negative side of empathy, one where people favour and promote those who are similar to them, such as family, friends and in-group members (Kucirkova, 2019).



What lies ahead?

The price for digital personalization gets bigger for children as they, unlike adults, have less life experience to draw on to interpret limiting or malicious behaviour. Even though children don't have the same purchasing power as adults, the personalized algorithms treat them as future customers. With content tailored to individual rather than collective data, children socialize in digital circles that reinforce their habits with sameness and regularity. Given that children typically start using personalized services with a less well-defined identity than adults, they need the support and prompts to think outside their schemas. Yet, with personalized algorithms, the commercial goal is the advancement of an individual rather than a group or a collective of diverse individuals. While personalized technologies can well support the learning of neatly defined educational objectives (for example Maths or science facts), they do so at the expense of social learning and identity development. The algorithms push the child's learning through a concentrated focus on the incremental progress of the child, following an individualized model of childhood, in which children's social learning and identity development suffer (Kucirkova, 2021).

We all, young and old, have succumbed to the allure of digital personalization. As



Rilke predicted, we are gearing up towards a new era that gives closure to times when human agency governed our decision-making. An era of extreme personalization that threatens the integrity of self and the cohesion of large-scale collectives. It takes away from an awareness of bigger collective dangers such as climate change. The cohesion comes in through collective engagement and this is especially important for children as they rely on adults to be introduced to social communication and self-regulation.

The sophistication of the algorithms embedded in data-collection technologies continuously challenges data literacy of adults and children.

The importance of agency in stopping the bandwagon behoves us to engage in a counter-movement that brings to fore the agency of all of us. Agency is not an absolute, it is a spectrum that includes complete and partial sense of volition, which guides an individual's meaning- and decision-making. What gives me a sense of optimism is the rise in technologies directly developed by users, including young children.

Challenges and contradictions of agency-driven design

The maker and coding initiatives are bearing fruit with a new generation of apps and programs that actively involve children in their design, including algorithms. With colleagues in the hyperlinked examples, we engage in participatory research where children, together with their teachers and professional designers, co-develop search engines (the [KidRec project](#)) or make their own stories with multimedia apps (the [Our Story project](#)).

Detection of patterns can be used for data control, new policies and law enforcement.



Childhood researchers have a long tradition of participatory inquiry approaches (e.g., Rowsell & Wohlwend, 2016) and these are being expanded to co-design of personalized technologies and children's direct participation in data collection. In projects that position children as co-researchers, children use cameras, fieldnotes, and other research techniques so that they can, together with adults, interpret the patterns they notice in their data, and jointly think about suitable ways for acting on the data insights (Collier & Perry, 2021). There has not been another time in history when the young generation had such big and powerful data banks at their disposal and it is time for them to be provided with the spaces where they can foster what previous generations failed to do: advance a human-machine dialogue where humans have agency, or at least, as much agency as the machines uniquely personalized to them.

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Street Affects in Kashmir

Bushra Punjabi

January, 2022



This piece offers an ‘inside-out’ perspective on everyday life in a militarized space. As a researcher and a Kashmiri, the writer is struggling to document the ordinary-everyday lives of people in an extra-ordinary violent setting of Kashmir. The idea of this piece was conceived in September 2019 when the writer visited Kashmir to check on her family after being unable to contact them for several weeks post consecration of residues of Article 370, [a temporary constitutional provision that supposedly conferred an ‘autonomous’ status on the region of Jammu & Kashmir within the Indian union]. Distance, disconnection and an overwhelming fear bring her home. As she walks through the city streets of



Srinagar she visualizes and relives what remains hidden from the world outside. A mundane practice like strolling brings out the play of power and violence. The desolation and hence the absence of life in the streets continues for more than a year. As she tries to reach out and touch the fading images the impish laughter of the emptiness and nothingness evoke feelings of dread and a sense of helplessness.

City streets carry the momentum of the life worlds of people inhabiting them. But what about deserted streets? If the consumption of space, by way of its use, gives an idea of a place, what do empty spaces convey? Walking through the streets of Srinagar during siege, emptiness strikes as a horrific allegory of violence. Long before a virus invaded the world, an entire population was already immobilized. Distanced even from their shadows. Access to public spaces denied. All and any form of communication snapped. Gathering of more than four people outlawed. While governments elsewhere were busy strategizing lockdown under the 'stay home, stay safe' slogan, an eight million people were caged in the protective bubble of home with the threats of destruction hanging in mid-air.

What tragedy has befallen this place? Wrecked by seven decades of violent conflict, Kashmir continues to be in a state of *disordered* order. Militarized, invaded, contested - a nuclear flashpoint, the current status of Kashmir echoes the violent past. The disorder is intrinsic to the arbitrariness of established control. The pattern of impunity combined with rhythms of violence animates order. Killing is the daily grind, repression a routine. Everything that happens here revolves around the twentieth-century accession fraud. That was 1947, the year of partition of the Indian subcontinent. Later in the same year, Indian troops infiltrated the region claiming control over everything. They came and stayed, for what seems like an eternity. Barricaded the entire valley. Set-up camps and check-points; diffused and scattered. Built ditches, fences and walls. Erected roadblocks. Spaces subverted. Roads defaced, streets forbidden. Blocked entry and exit points bear witness to the bating breaths fading into obscurity. Forced desolation became commonplace, a way of life. *Absences*, a constant visual trope.



The absence itself is a metaphor for the presence of something *undesirable*. Emptiness is a hidden transcript. Of terror. Leaking from all directions. Death and decay of social interactions. The immobile, deserted, empty streets filled with alien figures are more than just a representation of horror(s). They are the transparent texts that are being constantly overwritten to alter the geography and history of this place. Fetishes, sickening to hearts, are loaded at every turn demanding allegiance. Sovereignty claims visual convergence! There are other marks on the walls too, proclaiming: 'We don't belong to you'. To inject false consciousness, ill-legitimate vaguely worded prescriptions shoved down the throats: pledge or perish. There are no trials, only sentencing. Precarity rules!

In August 2019, the hustle-bustle of streets was muted for an indefinite period. *Hishie katha* - ordinary is what we get used to. Days before the valley was draped in the blanket of silence, people were asked to stock up their essentials for four months in anticipation of something ominous. Rumours floated in the markets. Lined up in queues at fuel and ration stations, people discussed war possibilities in a nonchalant manner. As if war doesn't scare them! They know their life worlds could explode, any moment, any time - in any direction. They can read the hidden inscriptions. The invisible death threats, ghosts lurking in silence, a parade of armed skeletons galloping towards them. Even when shut behind the doors of visibility they can see the unseen. The knowledge about the cosmos they belong to is passed to them in silence. This place is haunted. They want to scream but they are not allowed to speak more than they see.

Flying checkpoints were set up, even though many of them are already here. More paras called in. *Troop surges*. The mesh of razor wires spread throughout the length and breadth of the valley - North, South and Center. An entire population held hostage. Behind the magnificent frame, a crude bloodbath was planned. 'Shoot at sight', they commanded. Nobody stepped out. Donning the shrouds of silence, they didn't act. They know the consequences. Their death is scripted by the master-killers. Getting killed now is stupid. With bullets waiting around every corner they are all disposable. Pale-anxious faces sleepwalking like shadows in the mist, hungrily waiting for the spell to break. Eyes riveted on the



drones and jets circling overhead. On the morning of August 5, some five hundred miles away, abrogation of 'special status' was pronounced as the 'final solution', that would usher in an 'era of good governance'. The victory of 'good' over 'evil'. This could be it? People sighed in relief -less- relief.

Shuttered by a different kind of plague all sounds and movements were ground to halt. In stillness the uneasy calm of forbidden streets creeps in closer and closer. The maze of potent death traps is laid everywhere. You see them as you open the door while walking on the street. Right next to your favourite bakery, twenty-six battalion. Outside the community park, one hundred sixty-one battalion. While heading to work, fifty-two battalion. On the way to school or hospital, twenty-three battalion. Unsettling repetitions. Guided by the laws of oppression, these infinite anonymous faces are the architects of these military scapes. The encampments circled by armoured vehicles extend into the textures of ordinary-everyday life. Their perpetual gaze is felt through intrusive checkpoints and watchtowers. Reinforced by the writings on the heavily guarded walls, "Military Area/You are Being Watched /Armed Response to Trespassing." You cannot ignore the predatory warnings even if you want to. They are the constant reminders of everything wrong in this part of the world. Terror and its corollaries – fear, anguish, disquiet stir the consciousness of the passerby. The awareness of being watched by the figures as rigid as the concertina produces a knot in the gut. It makes you wary of your existence. You feel dizzy. With weapons pointed in every direction, you can get caught never to be seen again. If you stop with an awkward gait, you can get killed. If you dare not to stop you still get killed. Fight or flight? There is no easy way to navigate these geometries of violence. Outside a numberless battalion, boldly lettered in red, a sign on road blocker reads, 'Inconvenience is Regretted'.

To mute the stories of horror and misfortune, the staged performances of 'normalcy' are played on loop. In this theatre of the facade, a brigade of trolls and entertainers, reporters and bloggers are hired to flatten out the lived history of the oppressed, to project the oppressed as a vile threat to a sacred mother-land. The violence of *misrepresentation* continues. This dog-whistle politics is meant to



stoke passions and emotions of hatred setting up the stage for total elimination.

In the quiet neighbourhood, houses look disarrayed. Unspoken silences travel through the shattered window panes. Decrepit walls resemble our lives. Rusty tin roofs shimmer as the sun sets in. Scarred. Everything around us suffers. Blood, smoke, *blood*, septic wounds, putrid air, sordid streets hideous sheen. Horrid, rotten, nerve-twitching scenes. Everything testifies destruction ridiculing the sense of normalcy. The silence is interrupted, once in a while, by fierce barking. Meandering in streets and back alleys four-legged-beasts are fighting over a pick of their choice. Lucky dogs! The muezzin announces the death of the day with a call for the Maghreb prayer. Echoing across the landscape it travels through the sky fissured by the weight of unanswered prayers. Mournful gloom takes over, signalling the end of time. As the valley plunges into a slow-motion catastrophe, time freezes. And ticking stops.

Behind the latched doors and fragile walls, live bodies are trembling in fear. In an utter state of paranoia, a sense of insecurity prevails. Has God forsaken this place? The voice of a mother trails off as she lulls her baby to sleep. Tucking her in the warm bosom she tries to imagine the pain of all those mothers who watched their children slip in cold graves. Maybe we are stronger than we think we are. But aren't the moments of patience also the moments of potential collapse? What is it that they are afraid of? Demographic engineering? Genocide? War? To avoid immediate elimination they retreat in stunned silence. Locked themselves up and tossed the keys away. They stood their ground against devious plotting. Numbed to death, they resisted the resistance. The people known for their stubborn defiance are forced to continue with life rhythms in silence. The silence produces a vacuum that sucks in all the energies. A life lived under excesses creates a different type of fatigue. One that takes you so close to the vanishing point. To the point of no return.

Image: Srinagar, during lockdown. Photo by author (Cropped).



Living Water, living with lively waters (part 2)

Chakad Ojani
January, 2022



<https://vimeo.com/472845438>

In *What is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction*, geographer Jamie Linton (2010: 14) describes “modern water” as the following: “an abstract, isomorphic, measurable quantity that may be reduced to its fundamental unit – a molecule of



H2O". Ethnographers have increasingly taken their cue from such framings to foreground how modern water is but one among numerous possibilities, for instance by attending to the relational work involved in sustaining pressure, flow, and measurability (Anand 2017; Ballestero 2019; Barnes 2014; Stensrud 2016).

Philosopher Ivan Illich foreshadowed these studies in his eloquent 1986 book *H2O & the Waters of Forgetfulness*. He noted how "not only does the way an epoch treat water and space have a history: the very substances that are shaped by the imagination – and thereby given explicit meanings – are themselves social creations to some degree" (Illich 1986: 4). It is tempting to read this as a statement about water's susceptibility to take on multiple meanings. Yet, Illich moves beyond perspectivalism. His invocation of historical variability concerns the very "stuff" of water. Dealing primarily with urbanization in Euro-American settings, he shows how different urban environments yielded disparate waters. Concomitant with successive infrastructural transformations was the emergence of H2O as a scarce resource requiring technical management. Andrea Ballestero (2019: 15) makes a related point in her book *A Future History of Water*. A given water body, she explains, "is always a technopolitical entity." Far from given, it is the result of "scientific word and measurement," including "[l]egal and economic forms of knowing."

I saw the film as an exploration of how modern singularity never quite reaches closure; a multimodal inquiry into the multiplicities that remain below the radar.

Perhaps a symptom of my unfamiliarity with multimodal methods, and/or maybe due to my shallow understanding of the socio-political context surrounding Pavel Borecký's sonically and visually stunning documentary film, I could not help but watch *Living Water* with the aforementioned works as my north. Contrary to Geoffrey Hughes, I did not attend to the film with expectations about a total account of the post-colonial political context through which water scarcity is made to emerge in Jordan. Rather, informed by authors who aim to push beyond



assumptions about the other-than-human as passive resource for human contestation and management, I saw the film as an exploration of how modern singularity never quite reaches closure; a multimodal inquiry into the multiplicities that remain below the radar, despite efforts to choreograph such complexities away. I asked: what might *Living Water* bring to ongoing discussions about the ontological politics of environmental relations? What can the atmospheric affordances of multimodality do that textual accounts cannot?

I am tempted to pick up where the film ends, with the voice of Erga Rehns, an archaeologist who has lived in the village of Wadi Rum for some 23 years. She says:

I think people are caught in a trap. They don't truly see the world around them. If human beings would care more outside of what they have been told to care about, maybe the planet wouldn't be in so much trouble.

Like Hughes, I too am inclined to interpret this in light of Donna Haraway's work. Yet I do so not with an understanding of the latter's primary agenda as one of delegating responsibility for environmental calamity. Nor do I understand Borecký's film as blaming "humanity" – or any other, more narrowly defined group of actors for that matter. Something more original is going on in both *Living Water* and Haraway's work. For me, Rehns's closing remarks epitomise *Living Water's* underlying call for "response-ability" (Haraway 2017); that is, the cultivation of an ability to respond to and care for the "multiple water worlds" that defy silencing (Yates et al. 2017). This requires that we think beyond the singularizations assumed by the resource-trope: a modern "trap" – to invoke Rehns's metaphor – often granted trespass in anthropological analyses.

Rehns's closing remarks epitomise Living Water's underlying call for "response-ability" – the cultivation of an ability to respond to and care for the "multiple water worlds".

Rehns's voiceover helps to circumvent such pitfalls. Appearing in various parts of



the film, the archaeologist poetically narrates how she followed dried-out rivers in the Wadi Rum desert, and how what comes across as something of a semi-improvised method for archaeological inquiry led her to fossilized plants, shells, and sweet water turtles. “So imagine if the rivers appeared and the sweet water turtle would come back,” she then says, signalling the landscape’s prevailing, immanent potentialities for water-futures yet-to-come. The many reminiscences of a past when water was other than a (scarce) resource seem to suggest that such a future is what many of Borecký’s Bedouin interlocutors in Wadi Rum are hoping for.

Perhaps inspired by Rehns, Borecký holds on to such alternative water-futures, allowing them to haunt his journey across the various settings drawn together and reconfigured by the deep “fossil water” of the Disi aquifer – from Wadi Rum to a water station for Aqaba city 15 kilometres away, on to Aqaba itself, dispossessed farmers in Mudawwara, and Amman, among other places. Accompanying him on this voyage, we get a sense of how throughout the disputes between water authorities and the Bedouin, water becomes enacted as a resource to be managed, albeit continuously nudged by allusions to other, enduringly latent water-practices.

Water is lived with and through. The affective capacities of the film medium are especially apt for portraying the fragility of such conditions.

The film’s title gains at least two different meanings. On the one hand, *Living Water* tells of a recalcitrant, vital force that through its absence and flow may put an end to life. This is the liveliness of water. Immediately following one of Rehns’s snippets, the cracking sounds of dry branches reverberate this notion persuasively. But water’s animacy is also expressed through footage from news broadcasts relaying how flash floods sweep away parts of a village. This captures another central theme: the social challenges yielded by climate change and ensuing oscillations between scarcity and overflow. On the other hand, water is the condition of possibility for more-than-human sociality and life. Water is lived



with and through. The affective capacities of the film medium are especially apt for portraying the fragility of such conditions: vivid village soundscapes combined with shots of water pipes and complaints about insufficient pressure, followed by panoramic images of a small, illuminated desert village surrounded by ominous mountains and a starry sky.

These are the diverse waters that enactments of modern water claim to successfully displace. Such assertions assume different forms: fences around humming water stations, a mobile camera inspecting a well, and the use of instruments for detecting illicit connections. A 3-D model of the Disi aquifer, accompanied by a voice explaining the risks posed by unsustainable consumption, signals how such choreographing might happen through well-minded educational efforts to promote wiser water management. Even so, the liveliness of water seeps into modern arrangements too, regardless of efforts to sustain predictability. We get a sense of this from functionaries' references to residents tweaking and tinkering with pipes, modifying them towards their own respective ends.

In closing, let me return to Rehns's concluding remarks about people being caught in a trap, and try to convey what I deem to be the potentialities of Borecký's film by tapping into and pushing this metaphor further. In a piece that forms part of his more extensive work on entrapment as a heuristic of social process, Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2018: 56) contends that "modern knowledge is essentially a trap to itself, such that most forms of 'explanation' are guests unaware they are actually being hosted – predators who do not know their own condition as prey." Accordingly, if people are caught in a trap, as per Rehns's comments, then that very same trap is also the way out. For Corsín Jiménez, the trick is to come up with a mode of description that "aims to make the modern production of knowledge face up to the conditions of its own predation" (57), offering a sort of mirror that may body forth modern epistemology's recursive self-implosion.

These are the diverse waters that enactments of modern water claim to



successfully displace.

While Borecký's documentary film might fail to provide a full picture of the larger processes that generate ecological contradictions in the first place, what *Living Water* does accomplish is an evocation of the tensions that impede ontological closure. Through the aesthetic affordances of multimodality, Borecký brings water's liveliness to bear upon the viewer vicariously, thus hinting at how modern singularization harbours that which it designates as its other. The result is a film that evades the trope of total explanation. Instead, *Living Water* stays with the trouble by intimating alternative water-futures to be "trapped out" (65) from prevailing disjunctures – those that modern configurations resolutely deny but can never really do without.

This is the second article of a two-part symposium on Living Waters, [the first of which](#) was written by Geoffrey Hughes. You can also find out more about the film on its [website](#).

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Photo: Still from *Living Waters*, by Pavel Borecký.

Living Water and the politics and anti-politics of water in Jordan (Part 1)

Geoffrey Hughes
January, 2022



<https://vimeo.com/472845438>

We are often told that Jordan is one of the most water-poor countries on the planet and it is hard not to recognize the truth of this even as a relatively casual visitor. The first time I lived in Jordan, I wondered why I was so tired all of the time. Initially blaming Arabic immersion (which was certainly a factor), it eventually dawned on me that I was actually perpetually dehydrated. It wasn't just a matter of drinking more water, though. Living with Jordan's Bedouin completely changed my relationship to water. To this day, even living in verdant England, I still feel pangs of guilt every time I take a shower as I watch the torrent below circling the drain.



Such lingering embarrassment pales in comparison, though, to the time I fell asleep filling up one of the neighborhood water tanks. This time worn out from a long day helping some friends move some construction materials, I came home to find that the water authority had finally turned on our water supply. In the best of times, people in much of Jordan can expect piped water one day a week and in the summer this often stretches to every fortnight (or worse). When the water comes on, a clamor washes over settlements as residents rush to fill all of the water tanks that bedeck rooves throughout the kingdom. I clambered onto the roof, turned on the pump, and put the hose in the tank only to awake in horror hours later to see water pouring down my window. My neighbors, polite as always, tried to hide their disgust the next morning surveying the damage but it will probably always be one of those cringe-worthy experiences I cycle through in my darker moments.

Yet even more impressive is Borecký's ability to find the beauty and poetry in more mundane features of Jordan's environment: rust, mud, tire tracks and the little trickles of wasted water that inevitably overflow the country's taxed and aging infrastructure.

Such mortifying episodes came flooding back to me as I watched *Living Water*, a collaboration between Jordan University's Centre for Strategic Studies and Czech director Pavel Borecký. The film is a feast for the eyes and fans of experimental film in particular will appreciate the ethereal soundtrack and luxuriant long shots that capture Jordan's stunning beauty. This goes for the psychedelic swirls of the iron-rich sandstone surrounding the Disi aquifer deep in the desert and the horrific flash-flooding that can also bedevil the country. Yet even more impressive is Borecký's ability to find the beauty and poetry in more mundane features of Jordan's environment: rust, mud, tire tracks and the little trickles of wasted water that inevitably overflow the country's taxed and aging infrastructure.

Where Borecký shines through most as a gifted visual storyteller is in his depiction of the kingdom's various megaprojects that materialize the odd mix of



whimsy and monstrosity I associate with the best of the Jordanian oil economist-turned-novelist Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*. It is hard not to hear echoes of Munif's prophetic vision throughout the film. Explaining the title of his classic series of novels about the discovery of oil in the Arabian peninsula, he warned, "When the waters come in, the first waves will dissolve the salt and reduce these great glass cities to dust. In antiquity, as you know, many cities simply disappeared. It is possible to foresee the downfall of cities that are inhuman. With no means of livelihood they won't survive" (Ali 2004).

Borecký and his Jordanian collaborators seem to share this moral vision and it is indeed a powerful one. This is a story of human folly. Faced with hard ecological limits, we see a retreat into fantasy. A didactic voiceover whirls into action as a 3D model of Jordan and its subterranean geology rises from a dark abyss. We learn from the disembodied female voice speaking in an erudite register of Arabic that by tapping into the Disi aquifer Jordan is tapping an unrenovable resource of "fossil water," making the film's sweeping vistas of urban fountains and desert agricultural plantations all the more grotesque. A politics of accusation (Hughes et al. 2019) unfolds, with Disi's Bedouin (described as "indigenous" in the promotional materials accompanying the film) vying with urban planners to argue their case for why they have the most legitimate right to the water, while others are greedy and irresponsible.

Yet so immersed is the film in the "micro" (little trickles of wasted water, petty patronage politics, and even pettier acts of theft) that it risks missing out on all of the wider geopolitical context.

Yet if this was the only exposure one had to debates about water in the region, one might well come away with a highly distorted picture of the situation. In a poem written by the Archaeologist Erga Rehns that frames the film, we learn that "something happened and the rivers disappeared." The problem is that the passive voice here ends up doing a lot of work and we never really learn why this happened or who might be responsible. To be fair, there are occasional



intimations of a larger picture. Yet so immersed is the film in the “micro” (little trickles of wasted water, petty patronage politics, and even pettier acts of theft) that it risks missing out on all of the wider geopolitical context. While those watching closely will recognize that Jordan is ultimately in a race with neighboring Saudi Arabia to grab as much of the Disi Aquafer as possible before the other can exhaust it, the film studiously avoids any discussion of Israel’s diversion of the eponymous “Jordan River” to meet its own population’s insatiable thirst for gardens, swimming pools and, yes, long hot showers.

There isn’t even an attempt to explain why so many people have ended up living in such a parched and agriculturally unviable area in the first place until the end of the film when we hear obliquely about how 600,000 Syrian refugees will only complicate the kingdom’s water problems. There is no mention, however, of the millions descended from Palestinian refugees who were pushed into the desert by hostilities to the much better-watered west. The film ends up buying into a classic nation-state-centric conceit of much development discourse that James Ferguson critiqued in his classic deconstruction of the development discourse around the South African bantustans in *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994). It would be silly to offer an “ecological” explanation for why the Bronx is poor in relation to Manhattan, but draw an international border and push people over it and suddenly such explanations of marginalization are taken more or less at face value.

The key weakness of the film, then, is in how it ultimately wants to blame all of humanity indiscriminately. Returning at the end to Rehns’ diagnosis of the problem, we learn that “there are more people on the earth, more need for water, but there’s not enough” making Jordan a sort of microcosm of humanity’s foolish unwillingness to live within its means. She muses, “If human beings would care more about things outside of what they were told to care about, maybe the planet wouldn’t be in so much trouble.”

If everyone is responsible then, in a sense, who can really be blamed? Where could pressure be brought to bear?



Yet as an analysis this strikes this reviewer as embodying many of the shortcomings that Haraway (2015) and others have previously identified in concepts of the “Anthropocene” and “anthropogenic climate change.” If everyone is responsible then, in a sense, who can really be blamed? Where could pressure be brought to bear? The urge to anthropologize here ends up flattening much of the history of struggles that a more politically engaged film could have explored. Instead of seeing instances of poor water stewardship by some of the most frugal consumers of water on the planet as simply “human” we would see it more as the desperate struggle of a more transnational political order to maintain legitimacy amidst the forced displacement of millions of people struggling build new communities from the ashes. More attention to the wider post-colonial political context would reveal the persistence of coloniality that haunts the film’s subject matter. Looking at our largely blue planet, we might then instead turn away from neo-Malthusian nostrums about limited resources and see how the system of nation-states and its controls on free movement conspire to lock particular populations in intolerable ecological contradictions but that a politics of international solidarity could open up alternative horizons. *Living Water* should surely be commended for starting this conversation and exposing audiences to so many eloquent Jordanian voices, but it will not be the final word on these topics.

Read part 2 of this symposium [here](#). You can also find out more about the film on its [website](#).

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Photo: Still from *Living Waters*, by Pavel Borecký.

From Things and Stuff to Radically Optimist Multi-Modal Platform

Felix Girke
January, 2022



On May 20, 2021, Felix Girke, a member of our editorial collective, gave a presentation in the framework of the workshop “Multimodal Digital Publishing” hosted by the Working Group Media of the German Anthropological Society. In his talk, he presents our outlook on what we do and still want to achieve, contextualizes our call for radical optimism and extends an invitation to join our experiments in -yes- multimodal, nontraditional publishing.

The Working Group Media has now given us access to the recording; please enjoy ‘Allegra Lab - from Things and Stuff to Radically Optimist Multi-Modal Platform’.

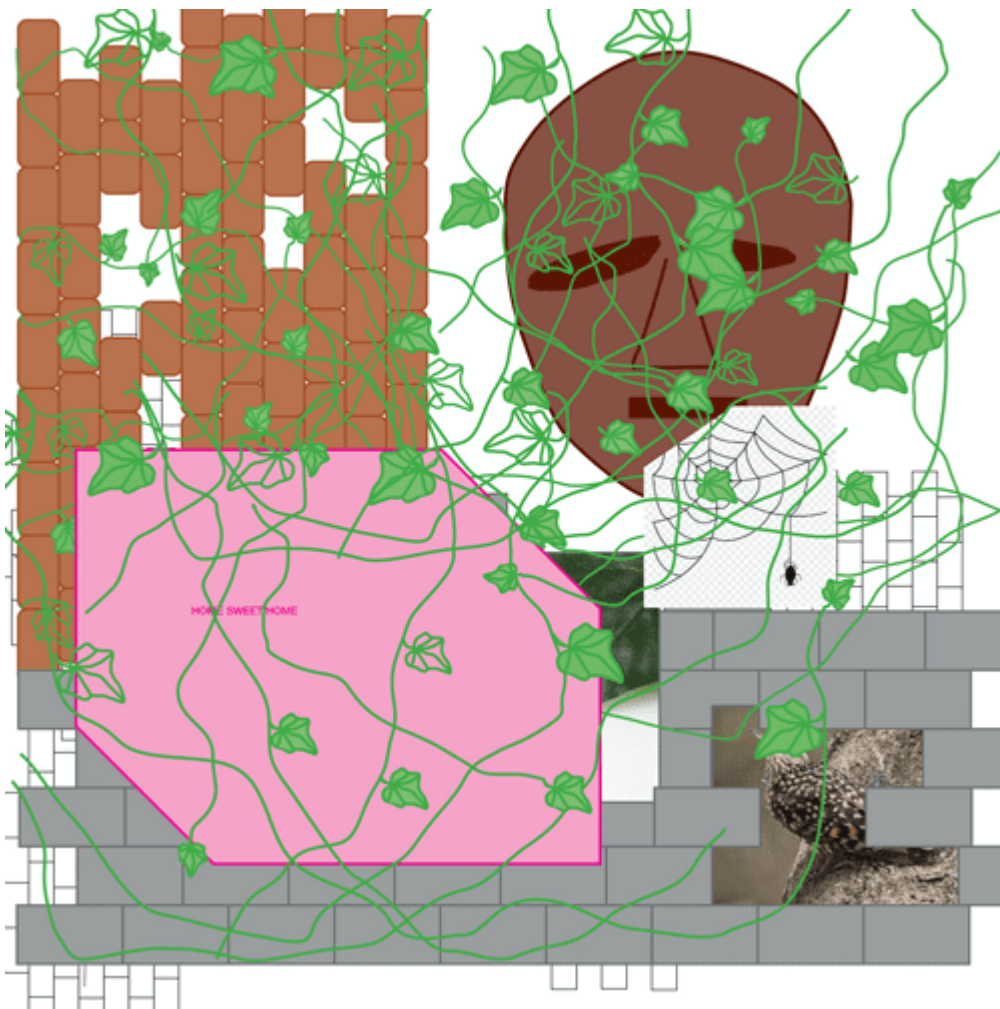
Comments are of course welcome.

https://youtu.be/C1d79N_E444



GAA 2021 Conference Diary: Atmospheric Discussions?

Tabea Scharrer
January, 2022



In collaboration with the conference organisers, Allegra had reached out to a number of colleagues to submit some impressions in the form of “daily diaries” from the recent German Anthropological Association (GAA/DGSKA) 2021 conference “in” Bremen. Few of the people we approached felt able to give the



conference the sustained attention necessary over the course of a day. This post combines Frauke Stegmann's visual diary "Where are my People:Multi-Species", above, and Tabea Scharrer's textual reflections, below.

Friday was the last day of the conference and at the same time my first day of online presence. Online-conferences have, as we all have realised by now, one strength that is a weakness at the same time – it is easy to access them from almost everywhere, making conference-and-workshop-hopping possible. At the same time, the possibilities offered by being stuck in a place is lost, the serendipitous encounters, listening to topics one doesn't have time to read about as they are a little too far from one's own current work, and sensing the atmosphere emerging at a conference. I happily agreed to write this conference diary, as this meant to spend the whole day at the conference, not rationalising time again (as on the other days) and to get immersed at least digitally. It was great to see so many familiar faces, but I also sorely missed the directness of face-to-face meetings. The chat function was substituting this lack only partly – what remained, in many moments, was the sense that this could have been a great meeting.

The first panel I attended was the one I had co-organised with Antje Missbach on ['Transregional dimensions of forced migration: secondary movements, alternative routes and decision-making on the move within the Global South'](#). The regional scope of presentations ranged from Pakistan (Tauqeer Shah and Usman Mahar), to Syria and Jordan (Sarah Tobin and the TRAFIG team), to Niger (Laura Lambert). In all three presentations, it was shown that forced migration within these regions takes place within long-standing histories and networks of migration, imbuing the actual process of migration with specific structures, narratives and meanings. However, increasing enforcement and fortification of border zones is one aspect of the Anthropocene. In the case of Syrians in Jordan, a considerable part of the Syrian refugee population had already worked as seasonal labourers in Jordan before the civil war. For them, the category 'refugee' became only significant after the crossing of borders had become more difficult. For Pakistani migrants, social competition and the eldest son's responsibility of



providing for the family results in a high symbolic value of ‘successful’ migration. As deportations mean a loss of status and a devaluation of masculinity, many migrants rotate between countries abroad (mainly within the EU, but also the Gulf states) until they manage to settle down. In the case of Niger, the country is on the one hand a member state of ECOWAS which on paper provides for free movement of all citizens of its member states, on the other hand it has become a main field for EU externalisation policies, and UNHCR influence has risen as well over the last years. While the EU ‘safe third country’ rule does not officially apply, informally it is used as well to deter migrants, leading to distrust between forced migrants and those agencies influencing their migration trajectories.

Even though some discussion emerged during this meeting, my impression was that an in-presence conference would have sparked a much livelier debate.

After the panel and after grabbing a coffee, I quickly joined the [DFG talk](#) with Doris Dracklé and Ursula Rao, exploring the relationship between DGSKA and DFG (the German Research Foundation). It was discussed in how far those anthropologists active in the DFG structures are speaking in support of their own interests or that of the DGSKA. To advance that second alternative, more exchange within the DGSKA would be needed, as well as feedback from DGSKA members to those active in the DFG bodies, especially concerning broader questions of envisaged developments and research policies. Some of the points raised during the meeting were the creation of national research data infrastructures, the outcomes of open access policies, and the negative consequences of SFBs ([Collaborative Research Centres](#)) for teaching. Another question raised concerned the debate of what even counts as research and who should be considered (or *not* anymore) as a ‘early career scholar’ – the technical German term ‘Nachwuchswissenschaftler’ is [often considered demeaning](#), as it justifies dependence and infantilizes established researchers. Even though some discussion emerged during this meeting, my impression was that an in-presence conference would have sparked a much livelier debate, one which could have been a more precise [seismograph](#) (or barometer?) of the atmosphere among the



DGSKA members. That same impression was reinforced in the next session, which presented the opportunity to meet the team editing [Sociologus](#), one of the main anthropology journals in the German-speaking areas – while interest in the work of the journal was clearly there, the discussion merely meandered along.

This was again different in the following workshop on '[Atmospheres of Unruliness, Resistance and Desolation: Music Videos in the Anthropocene](#)', organised by Hauke Dorsch and Markus Schleiter. The two presentations by Yasmeen Arif on Pakistan and by Gerda Kuiper on Kenya showed that music videos and online discussions about them can also serve as seismographs of social atmospheres, even though they might be difficult to use as predictors of change. But they do transport discourses and hint at local responses, grounded in local histories, to global crises such as Covid-19 as a 'disease of the Anthropocene', topics which were explored further in the vibrant discussion. The following plenary about '[Zones of Extractivism: capitalism, territorial fragmentation and the normalization of \(soft\) authoritarian rule](#)', organised by Jens Adam, Ulrike Flader and Frank Müller, was a vivid example for what works well for an online meeting and which kinds of discussion are difficult to put into practice without being physically present. It started with focussed introductory statements by Erdem Evren, Eliane Fernandes, Kristof Szombati and Andrea Muehlebach: on extractive capitalism flourishing under authoritarianism and driven by financialisation and hyper-neoliberal policies, on the paradoxical role oppositional movements played in that development, on the increasing space for the domestic bourgeoisie alongside transnational capital, and on the social conflicts in the 'Hinterlands' frozen by the manufactured hegemonic consent. The following discussion highlighted the flexibility of authoritarian structures and the municipal level as the best place to witness this flexibility, as well as the importance of the scale of the actors involved in local processes. Even though this discussion had been planned as a fish-bowl to include voices from the audience, it was mostly the



speakers who discussed among each other – the big audience in combination with the online mode made it difficult to leave the structured discussion and use the space for spontaneous interventions.

Emotions are not subjective, not bound to individuals, but half-things that can be sensed as existing in the space of experienced presence.

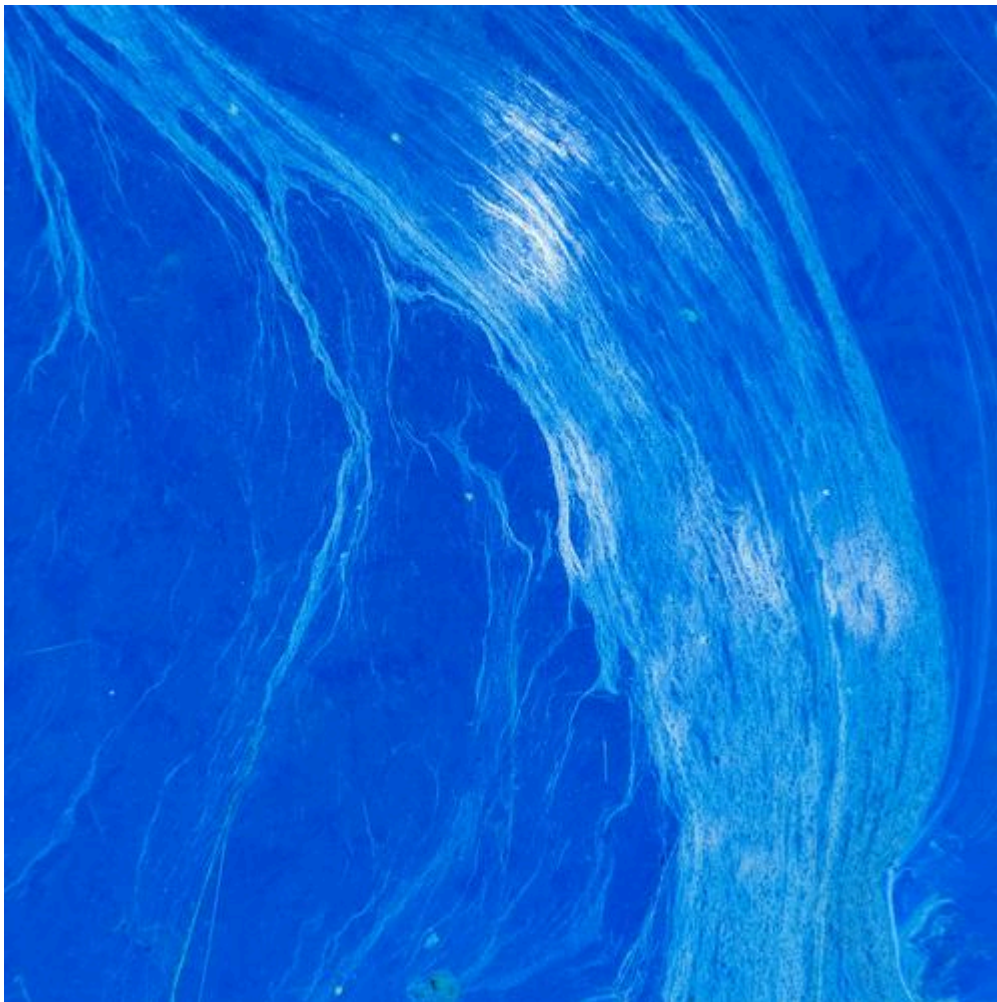
Concerning the ambiance in the various online meetings I attended, I had the impression that the digital format works well in smaller, focussed workshops, and less for bigger audiences and more open formats and discussions. This might well be explained by the very concept of atmosphere. The philosopher Schmitz, who aimed at developing a new approach to phenomenology, [considered 'atmospheres' as emotions spread out in space](#) and gripping everybody present corporeally. In that sense, emotions are not subjective, not bound to individuals, but half-things that can be sensed as existing in the space of experienced presence. Furthermore, such atmospheres have a homogenizing effect, resulting in situations in which collectivity is created. As during online conferences presence is experienced in a fragmentary way, this changes how atmospheres emerge and how they are perceived. These shifts might not matter so much for smaller workshops (especially when participants are already familiar with each other), because in these situations the virtual space is still somewhat contracted; but as this space widens with more people attending, not only is the possibility of atmospheres arising correspondingly diminished, but they also become less perceptible. So, with these kinds of atomised vibrations, the DGSKA meeting was in some ways also a barometer (a term better suited to the notion of 'atmosphere') of online fatigue.

Feature image: Where are my People, Multi-Species. Piece by Frauke Stegmann.



A future history of water: Andrea Ballesterro's response

Andrea Ballesterro
January, 2022



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.

Acting is a methodological skill that equips you to deal with the inevitable vertigo of having the responsibility of creating bifurcations.

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.



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 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, magnification, and wonder happen within the "intensities of technocracy, even as it remains unfinalized."

Through Rachel's lateral reading we see how action, magnification, and wonder happen within the "intensities of technocracy, even as it remains unfinalized."

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 techno-legal 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.](#)

The only lesson is that there aren't enough jobs

Daniel Souleles
January, 2022



Every so often something happens that perfectly encapsulates the consumptive death rattle that is the job market in higher education. A few weeks ago, the



department of anthropology at the University of Oslo of all places, served this ministerial function.

A year prior, in the Fall of 2020, 117 people applied for an associate professor position in social anthropology. 10 months later (!), in August of 2021 and in accordance with Norwegian law, the department sent a letter to all, rejected and otherwise, explaining in granular detail how two different committees had sorted each applicant, and then justified designating six people out of the 117 as qualified for an interview. Each step of this letter bears consideration, scrutiny, and, as is appropriate to any flex of illegitimate power, mockery.

First, it's worth noting that about a year lapsed between close of the application and selection of the shortlist. This means that someone who applied for a job in the Fall of 2020 wouldn't likely be able to start until the Spring or even the Fall of 2022. This is both inconsiderate and ridiculous. US Supreme Court justices get confirmed faster than this. Entire NFL career arc and end faster than this. Setting the dilatory pace aside, this timeline also means that people who want to leave their current jobs to work somewhere else for any reason, will need to wait two years for the uncertain chance to change employers. Any economist can tell you that this sort of "job lock" can be terrible for employees and suggests that all meaningful power is held by employers.

"Job lock" can be terrible for employees.

Next, on to the categories. The "Report for the Select Committee Appointed to Assess Applicants for Associate Professor [P]osition," helpfully explains the criteria by which committees evaluated candidates. The formal job criteria follow:

- The candidate must have a PhD in Social Anthropology;
- Outstanding research qualifications within social anthropology;
- A demonstrated ability to contribute to the long-term development of the Department's core research; and
- and the ability to participate in high quality teaching on both



undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Beyond the strict criteria, the committees allowed themselves the following considerations in weighting their decisions:

- An ability to contribute to a high standard of collegiality in the department;
- Passion for teaching and the ability to inspire students;
- Regional-ethnographic competence that will expand or broaden the Department's existing regional-ethnographic competence;
- Documented experience in the acquisition of external funding;
- Sufficient knowledge of a Scandinavian language to be able to participate in all the functions the position entails, including administrative tasks; and
- Documented pedagogical skills and an ability to take an active role in teaching, supervision and academic leadership.

Now it's unclear to me what the differences are between delivering "high quality teaching on both undergraduate and postgraduate levels," a "passion for teaching and the ability to inspire students," and "pedagogical skills and an ability to take an active role in teaching, supervision, and academic leadership." Does this imply that high quality teaching can be delivered without passion? And does this mean that those passionate few can effuse passively?

Does this imply that high quality teaching can be delivered without passion?

Similarly, isn't someone who "contribut[es] to the long-term development" of the department's research" not plausibly also someone who has the potential to "expand or broaden the department's existing regional-ethnographic competence"?

Perhaps more fundamentally: do you actually need a Scandinavian language to function in this department? Are we to imagine that there are administrative tasks that necessarily require just any Scandinavian language? And this being an



optional criterium, are we to presume that some foreign high-flyer who doesn't speak a Scandinavian language might just be hired and then excused from doing the bureaucratic work that a less-blessed Nordic colleague would have had to do? Finally, do we really believe that a department of Norwegians would rather listen to a colleague speak Danish as opposed to English?

Setting aside the Talmudic vagaries of the necessary and sufficient qualifications for this job, we might now turn to the actual sorting.

Each step of this letter bears consideration, scrutiny, and, as is appropriate to any flex of illegitimate power, mockery.

First and perhaps most simply, 19 applicants lack a PhD in Social Anthropology. This perhaps seems like the most innocent sieve of all. Still, it's worth remembering that Franz Boas's PhD was in Physics. If that's ruled unfair because one couldn't really get a PhD in anthropology in 1881, one might also note that James Scott holds a PhD in Political Science; Arjun Appadurai earned a PhD in Social Thought. Moreover, and for what it's worth, most intellectual vitality in anthropology, particularly over the last 50 years has not been home-grown. Rather, it has come from continental philosophy, history, women's studies, gender studies, ethnic studies, indigenous studies, and critical race studies.

After casually casting off the next Arjun Appadurai, the committee moved on to reject 23 applicants whose PhDs, though disciplinarily hygienic, were "very recent" and these candidates had "not yet documented outstanding research qualifications beyond their doctoral degree." The committee helpfully notes further that, "some with recent PhDs are [actually] included in the longlist, but they have achieved more in the last few years."

First, it's worth noting the cruelty of publicly listing people and saying that their work is of inadequate volume and insufficiently independent from their PhD work to merit a permanent position in anthropology. Specifically, we know this isn't essential to a good career in anthropology. Let's not forget that Emrys Peters was



the head of Social Anthropology at Manchester from 1968 to 1984. In his whole career, he published just six articles, all based on his 1951 doctoral thesis. These, and four other unpublished works, tinkered on through his long, cantankerous career, make up a posthumous volume and the sum total of his work.

No number of accumulated publications, grants, or distinctions will ever guarantee you a job as an anthropologist.

In dismissing these 23 people in this categorical fashion, not only is the committee ignoring the fact that exceptionally influential careers are possible that publish slowly and draw only on dissertation work, but they are actively and mercilessly disciplining their junior colleagues into academia's sick obsession with overproduction and the frenetic hoarding of achievement and accolades. The irony in all of this is that very simply, even for the people matching these absurdly high standards, *there are not enough jobs to go around*. Given that, no number of accumulated publications, grants, or distinctions will *ever* guarantee you a job as an anthropologist.

Doubling down on absurd cruelty, the committees found the next 34 applicants to have a respectable PhD age but publications that "cover a relatively narrow field, and/or have published significantly less, and/or have been markedly less prolific in the last five to ten years, than the other applicants." In addition to everything I said above about the idiocy of fetishizing productivity and academic accumulation, this dismissal of these 34 is particularly soul-rending. It's not terribly difficult to read a lack of productivity over the last five to ten years as another way of saying we're not hiring you because you had some kids or took care of some sick relatives over the last decade.

It sends the message that academics shouldn't have families, shouldn't have kids; and if they do, someone else should be taking care of these dependents.

In terms of life-stage—a topic which anthropologists are supposed to know



something about—the few years post-PhD is the time of life when we might expect people to either have kids, tend to ailing parents, or both. Dinging people for a lack of productivity during this time of their lives, and thereby keeping them from a permanent job in their chosen profession, is callous. Moreover, it sends the message that academics shouldn't have families, shouldn't have kids; and if they do, *someone else* should be taking care of these dependents so that the scholarly can continue to produce.

For those keeping score at home, even after the above categorization and exclusion of applicants, 41 hopefuls remain. Here, the committee does something honest, something interesting:

They give up.

The charade is too heavy and they just admit that, “the foregoing screening leaves the committee with 41 qualified applicants.” The committee then says that the Faculty of Social Sciences wanted a smaller shortlist—41 was just too many to evaluate. The Committee complains: “This is a tough competition.” The committee beseeches the pitiless heavens: “All the remaining 41 applicants, without exception, are impressive scholars and candidates.” Despite this, the committee does the dirty work, and somehow decides that “a number of applicants are deemed not sufficiently highly or broadly qualified for this particular post, to merit inclusion in the shortlist”. So, 28 more fall away. And, dear reader, in the culling of these qualified 28 is where I departed. (Given their work load, they probably missed earlier that my PhD is in Applied Anthropology.)

After this hollow spectacle, after the ritualistic display of disciplinary myopia, after the routine flagellation and humiliation of junior scholars, after the sexist culling of the caring, after the melodramatic capitulation of the selection committee itself, we're left with 13 applicants, who, in the committees' estimation, “fulfill the criteria and who have, accordingly been invited to submit publications and other material to the committee.”

These next steps merited a separate letter which reported the deliberations of yet



another committee to sift the lucky 13. At this stage, four people withdrew their application. We don't know why, and the committee does not speculate. In turn, the letter then explains again the criteria of evaluation, notes that some criteria are better determined via interview, and that here reviewers will pay most attention to:

- Whether regional-ethnographic competence will expand or broaden existing competences;
- Whether the candidate has experience in acquisition of external funding;
- Whether the candidate speaks/reads enough Scandinavian to participate in academic functions; and
- Whether the candidate has experience in teaching, supervision and academic leadership, and/or documented pedagogical skills.

The fun thing about these criteria is that this new committee can't even bring themselves to consistently apply them across the nine remaining applicants, of whom they eventually chose six to proceed.

The committee had noted a near total absence of departmental regional expertise in Asia, North Africa, West Africa, the Portuguese-speaking world, the entire Andean area, and the Amazon. This was contrasted with the department's competence in Norway, the Mediterranean, South and East Africa, Oceania, the Caribbean and the Americas. Nevertheless, one of the three rejected here was a China scholar; several of the anointed six work in either Scandinavia, the Mediterranean, or Oceania.

These people are overqualified for an entry level tenured position at the associate level.

Beyond the arbitrary application of self-designated criteria, what stands out in this last portion of the committee's report is the astounding accumulation of professional accolades most scholars here have—multiple books, multiple grants, executive administrative responsibilities, etc. These people are overqualified for



an entry level tenured position at the associate level. They would more appropriately be appointed to full professor or some manner of endowed chair—which some of them already have!

And here's where we come back to job lock. Last year, depending on how you count it, and to take an example, there were around 12 permanent jobs in anthropology departments on the US job market (perhaps three of those were open rank positions). We know that we graduate hundreds of PhDs per years; and this mismatch between academic jobs and degree awarding is plain for all to see. In turn, this is why we have this dumb spectacle of 117 people, everyone from non-anthropologists to Gods of the Discipline, applying for a mid-level academic position in the land of the midnight sun. Simply put: *there are no other jobs out there.*

We have this dumb spectacle of 117 people, everyone from non-anthropologists to Gods of the Discipline, applying for a mid-level academic position.

Anthropology takes deserved pride as a discipline in understanding the various ways that social reproduction happens cross-culturally. We've written humane kinship studies and esoteric rhapsodies on cosmological values; and yet we're slowly killing ourselves, year by year, as we fail to create jobs for those who want to be us, as we fail to reproduce. To close, I'm going to take a flight of fancy and imagine some ways out. Much of it may seem far-fetched and will read as radical; but that's the point.

First, we have to decide that this competition over jobs is bullshit. If you have a PhD, you are more than likely capable of having a perfectly adequate academic career. Given that, a permanent job should be available to anyone with a PhD who wants one. This should be the goal we shoot for - safe harbor to all academics. Promotion, publications, fame: we can compete over those. Regardless of the sort of university or economic system we're in, collective idea work is probably going to have some level of inextricable competition built-in, at least at the level of attention and in deciding what conversations and debates we'd like to enter. But



the basic guarantee of an academic life should not be negotiable. We claim to have values different than those of capitalist accumulators and their alienating markets for labor; our hiring practices (our social reproduction, really) should demonstrate that.

Anything to kill the competitive job market and to absorb the talent of all those seeking work.

The ways we could get there is myriad. I don't pretend to know exactly what the outcome of this commitment looks like. Most easily, schools could offer library access, email services, office space, and visa support to anyone with a PhD—affiliation on demand. We could imagine departments pooling their salaries, setting a minimum and maximum income, and then spending all they have left on new positions. We might imagine universities hiring only poorly-paid, part-time adjunct presidents and deans and using the subsequent savings on faculty positions. We could imagine converting every single job at the university into an academic position – academic service might then become spending a few hours a week doing administrative, or janitorial, or culinary, or pastoral work. Anything to kill the competitive job market and to absorb the talent of all those seeking work.

The thing about all this too, is that if this were a sector wide commitment, we could deal with the slack in our job market fairly quickly. 117 job applicants are overwhelming for any one university seeking to fill a single position, but imagined globally across all of higher ed, 117 applicants are a drop in the bucket, even restricted to anthropology departments. Surely some of those 117 would prefer to stay where they have friends and family rather than skirt the arctic circle in search of a life of learning.

Until we make a commitment to full academic employment, we're stuck with the equivocating bullshit that characterizes the search for academic work. Until we decide to do something about the fact that *there aren't enough jobs*, we're stuck with more of the same.

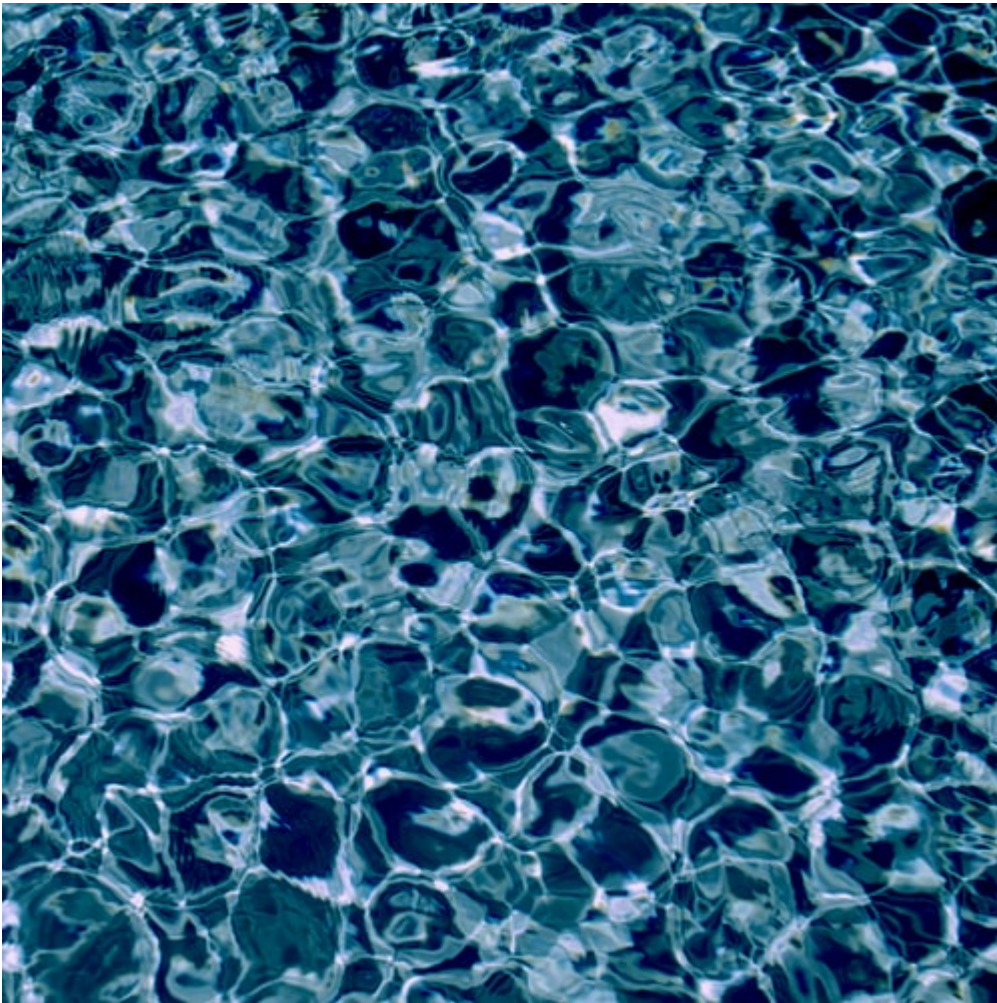


NB: Some fellow travelers may object to singling out the University of Oslo in this way, and say that, unlike the American or Danish hiring process, at least here there is transparency. To that I say, thank you. Somehow, for that admirable ethical commitment, you still manage to perpetuate an exploitative, exclusionary, and elitist system of overproduction that rewards superstar academics. At least you're giving us the dignified opportunity to talk about it.

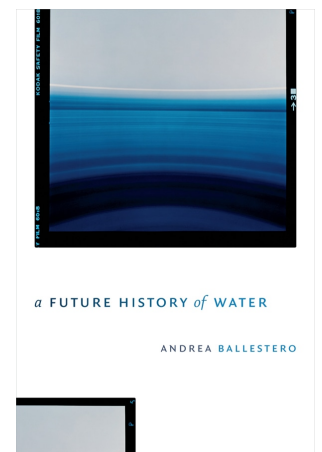
Featured image by [Michal Matlon](#), courtesy of [Unsplash.com](#)

A future history of water: Strange thing full of water - Alberto Corsin-Jimenez's comments

Corsin-Jimenez, Alberto
January, 2022



Andrea Balletero (2019). [*A Future History of Water*](#). Duke University Press.



As I write these lines, my home city, Madrid, is covered in a thick blanket of snow. In just under thirty hours, it has been overtaken by the heaviest snowstorm of the past half-century. Overnight, the city came to a frozen standstill. A novel landscape of white silhouettes and silvery perspectives rearranged our skylines.



With not one car in sight, people took out to the streets with skis, sledges and snow rackets, setting in motion novel habitats and habitus of orientation, displacement and play in the city.

Yet it was not all joy and snowmen. For a city unprepared for such weather extremes, the storm triggered an infrastructural catastrophe. There were roadblocks, buildings collapsed, logistical distribution and transportation came to a precipitous and unexpected halt. Schools closed, supermarkets ran out of stocks, hospitals saw a sudden surge in the number of traumatological emergencies (from ice slipping). One of the leafiest metropolitan areas in the world, at least one-third of the city's trees were damaged or fell during the storm. Overwhelmed, the government declared disaster-zone status for Madrid.

As we all awaited with consternation the gradual melting of the snow, some municipal officials alerted that the city was at risk of flooding and inundation. The strange landscape of whiteness was now menacing to turn the city into a strange thing full of water too.

"A strange thing full of water" is how Michel Serres once described the discovery of the *logos-proportion* by Thales of Miletus, the origin myth of the birth of physics and mathematics (Serres 2017, 188). The Nile floods that Thales witnessed washed away the field's crops, and Thales' proportion came to the rescue of, indeed, a strange thing full of water: a world that demanded a new logos to measure the land, re-establish the cadastral register, and net out outstanding balances between creditors and debtors. The proportion helped separate that which had melted; it was used to dehydrate and re-engineer that which had liquified. The proportion bifurcated the world anew.

Ballestero returns to the question about the "sizes" or "proportions" through which her interlocutors imagined social fairness or equilibrium—through the technical figurations and material accretions that turn mathematical formulas or consumption indices into adequate descriptors for society



Proportions and bifurcations play a central role in Andrea Ballestero's mesmerizing and indispensable monograph on the practical futures of water governance. Take the regulators working at Costa Rica's public services authority (ARESEP). Theirs is the responsibility for calculating the formula that sets the price for water provision in the country. The formula, which Ballestero studies in-depth, is used to draw the line separating a good price, a price that consolidates the status of water as a public good and a human right, from a bad price, a price that converts water into a commodity and a private good. The formula holds in 'harmony and equilibrium' the relation between society and water (48-53). To this effect, regulators keep a vigilant eye on the mathematics of R , the variable that stands for surplus in the pricing formula. Too much surplus turns R into a profit, too little cannot yield sufficient development for the water system. As Ballestero puts it, the 'right magnitude of R —displaying the right proportionality—is a moving target for which a vigilant eye and a continuous implementation of the principles of harmony and equilibrium are necessary.' (53) Societal well-being nets out as a proportional effect of water management.

The question of proportionality returns in another of the devices studied by Ballestero, the calculation of the Consumer Price Index and its impact on the price of water via the inflation rate. "Water services" compute for 1.41 per cent of the index in Costa Rica, which otherwise stands as a sociological proxy for the average consumption basket of an idealized household. The weight accorded to different items in the basket reproduces another version of the proportional imagination. In Ballestero's words: 'These proportional relations [between items] are the specific moments at which the concrete needs of life—eating, drinking, caring for others, having the luxury of enjoying leisurely goods—meet specific financial conditions of possibility.' (93) We may think that social relations are imbricated in and carry through modes of material livelihood, but it would seem that is actually "proportionality" rather than "relationality" that lends dimensional concrescence to our lives.

If our worlds are expressions of the semiotic and material proportions through which we negotiate social encounters and navigations, then it only makes sense



that proportions should play some part in our analytical toolkits too. Ballestero thinks as much. In a wonderfully suggestive conclusion to the book, she returns to the question about the “sizes” or “proportions” through which her interlocutors imagined social fairness or equilibrium—through the technical figurations and material accretions that turn mathematical formulas or consumption indices into adequate descriptors for society. As she puts it: ‘What parameter determines what is its “adequate” size? Put differently, we can only see aggrandizing [a question or its mode of description] as problematic if there is another scale that we accept as adequate. But what is that other more adequate scale?’ (196) Indeed, what may it mean to speak of description as a problem of scale, to inquire into the secret proportions subtending our own languages of sociological intelligibility?

What may it mean to inquire into the secret proportions subtending our own languages of sociological intelligibility?

As it turns out, the language of proportionality does participate in a distinguished epistemological tradition. As Serres intimated in his history of geometry, the proportion is the logos-foundation of our physical imagination. The history of techno-science is a history of sociological proportions. So is the figure of bifurcations that accompanies it. ‘What does science in essence amount to?’, Serres asked in the preface to the monumental history of scientific thought which he edited: ‘Totally unexpected bifurcations.’ (Serres 1991, 18, my translation).

Ballestero puts bifurcations to a novel anthropological use, a much-needed figure for the description of separations before-and-after entanglements. Yet I would like to suggest that her ethnography offers us a quiet refuge from the vertigo of bifurcations too. Whilst her focus is the granular and concrescent purchase of “devices”, her ethnographic sensibility actually carries itself through and subtly acquiesces as a method for other methods in the book. For there are as many methods as there are devices in her account; methods and methodologies are a constant concern of her interlocutors and friends. And Ballestero’s ethnography



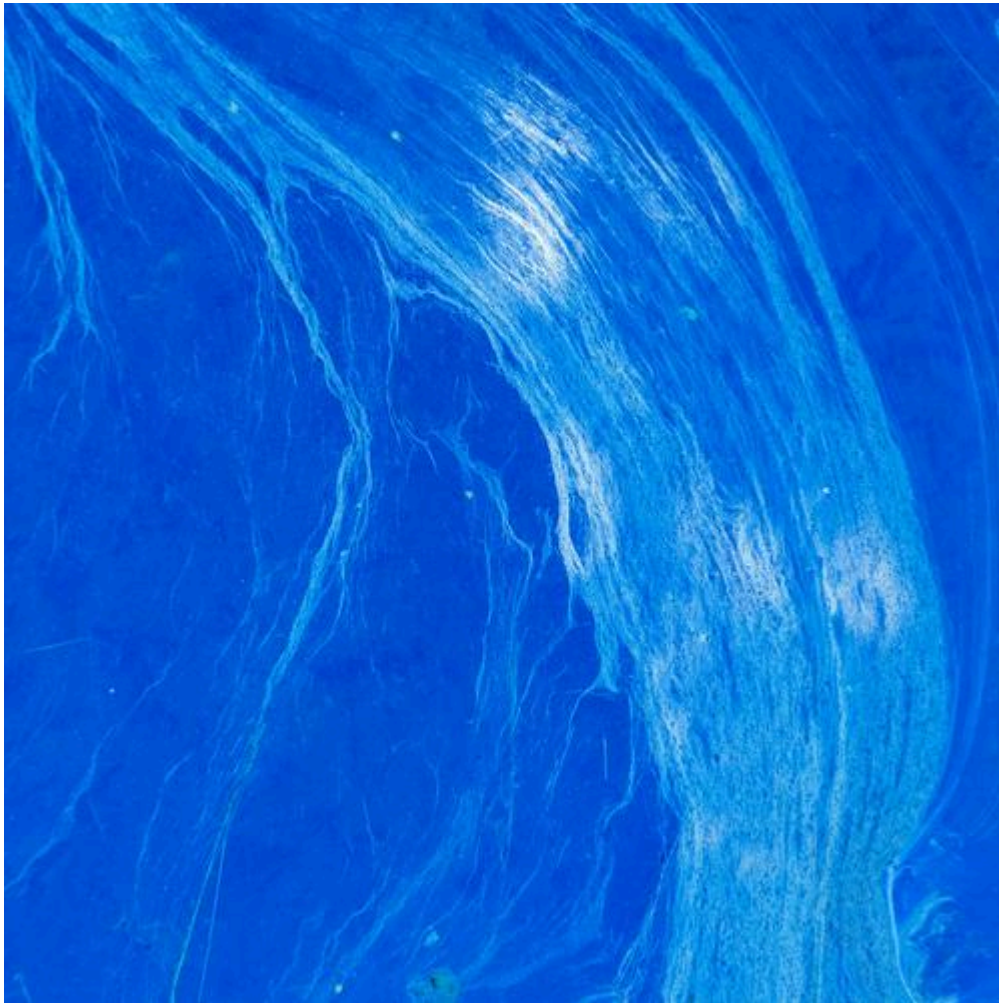
becomes a hospitable language for them all. Such is the virtue of this wondrous book: an ethnography of proportions that is disproportionately rewarding.

This review is the first of three in a book symposium on *A Future History of Water*. Read the other reviews by [Maura Finkelstein](#) and [Rachel Douglas-Jones](#), or read Andrea Ballestro's response.

Photo by [Cia Gould](#) on [Unsplash](#) (cropped and modified).

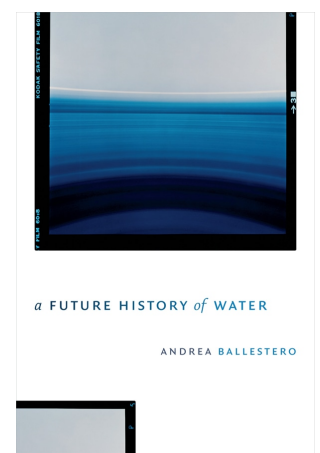
A future history of water: Maura Finkelstein's comments

Maura Finkelstein
January, 2022



Andrea Ballesterio,(2019). [*A Future History of Water*](#). Duke University Press.

I have an exercise I like to assign to my students, one that I have adapted from Donna Haraway, Joe Dumit, and Chris Roebuck, among others. Dumit (2014) calls this an “implosion exercise” and it asks students to choose an everyday object – their iPhone, a bottle of suntan lotion, their Chemistry textbook, etc, and “implode” it. I give my students a list of “dimensions” (political, economic, technological, historical, environmental, symbolic, etc) and ask them to choose three. They then trace these dimensions to and from their object, exploring how the thing they have chosen to focus on come to be as a social object. Inevitably, half my class will choose plastic water bottles and I





rarely encourage them otherwise. I love watching them realize how absent water is from the object they hold in their hand. Their wonder, upon discovering this reality, is both delightful and tragic.

The water bottles are empty of water, filled only with coins. That is the tragic point of this metaphor and arrival story.

I thought of this exercise while reading Andrea Ballestero's powerful and provocative book, *A Future History of Water*. Early into her luminous ethnography of the work of water access, rights, and commodification in Costa Rica and Brazil, Ballestero introduces a plastic water bottle filled with coins, a rattle of protest made and used by activists at the 2006 World Water Forum in Mexico City. The water bottles are empty of water, filled only with coins. That is the tragic point of this metaphor and arrival story.

Similar to my students' realizations after imploding their water bottles, there is very little water present throughout Ballestero's ethnography. But unlike the plastic water bottles filled with coins, water itself is not a metaphor: this absence is critical. While many water-based studies of recent years explore pipes, dams, water-ways and shorelines, *A Future History of Water* implodes a different dimension by following the economic and political threads of water rights and commodification into the offices of economic regulators, legislators, activists, government officials, and consultants.

What unites them is not ideology or language or labor or location, but instead their active participation in international networks and the "imaginative work they do to create... valued distinctions between the categories of human rights and commodities"

Herein lies the tension that both enlivens and haunts the pages of Ballestero's book: how can water be both a human right and a commodity? This question is nowhere near as simple as it may appear, but instead a riddle that cannot be



undone, an entanglement that cannot be untangled. Like the collision of an empty water bottle and a handful of coins, the book shows how our perceived and constructed distinctions are never as clear, never as bounded, as we may think they are. This argument is built into the foundation of Ballestero's fieldwork: there is no bounded site, instead the book moves between Costa Rica and Brazil, blurring the boundaries of space through multi-sites ethnography. Additionally, there is no distinct "community" or "culture," instead her informants are "economists, lawyers, engineers, environmental scientists, philosophers, sociologists, farmers, schoolteachers" and work from various locations: "NGOs, bureaucratic offices, scientific institutions, and even their respective congresses" (4). What unites them is not ideology or language or labor or location, but instead their active participation in international networks and the "imaginative work they do to create... valued distinctions between the categories of human rights and commodities" (5).

These disparate yet united actors are involved in constructing a "future history," which is created "not by talking about what that future looks like, but rather by acting in the present with all its constraints and limitations" (27). This lesson is a useful one, not just for ethnographic analysis, but also for survival in our current moment of COVID-devastation, prevalent right-wing populism, and ongoing environmental destruction (to name only a few crises). This is not to claim we should not dream of wide, elliptical, expansive future possibilities, but instead to say, along with these future imaginings, what does future-building *look* like? Ballestero answers this question for us through the work of her interlocutors, who strive towards incremental changes within the limitations and constraints of the present moment. These forms become ethnographic categories, "devices," ("formula," "index," "list," "pact") that order and structure the book into stories of often-mundane bureaucratic work.

This is not to claim we should not dream of wide, elliptical, expansive future possibilities, but instead to say, along with these future imaginings, what does future-building look like?



These devices are assemblages of everyday practices and herein lies the wonder Ballestero promises: her informants, through their cubicle and desk work, strive to “differentiate the world that already is from the world that should be” (188). Such an engagement is one of fundamentally transforming what is possible in the future, even if these modifications are seemingly small in scope. In this way, the plastic water bottle becomes the perfect metaphor to describe the future-work of Ballestero’s interlocutors: “Inhabiting the space previously occupied by water, the coins inside the bottles insinuated that water had been transubstantiated into money, the ultimate commodity” (2). This transubstantiation is the site of wonder: “that condition where it becomes imperative to think carefully about things that were presumed totally ordinary, and for that reason self-evident” (32). This is not about “awe and acceptance,” she tells us, but instead of “curiosity and puzzlement that can bleed into dismay.”

Towards the end of the book, Ballestero suggests that wonder is an “activity, not a condition” (199). I cannot help, then, but fixate on the image of protestors shaking water bottles full of coins in Mexico City, these few moments of activity before security guards have them removed, before (relative) quiet returns to the convention center lobby. It is easy to see the wonder in this moment of transubstantiation. And yet, Ballestero reminds us that we cannot just see wonder in these performances, we must also find it in the water meter readings rendered onto excel spread sheets; the price index used to set water rates; the lists determining water’s material conditions; and the Water Pact designed to encourage care, conservation and water protection. And then, my own dismayed students, holding their own bottles of water in a college classroom in Pennsylvania. These are also moments of wonder. And of future-history making.

Dumit, Joseph. 2014. “Writing the Implosion: Teaching the World One Thing at a Time.” *Cultural Anthropology* 29 (2): 344–62

Photo by [Daniele Levis Pelusi](#) on [Unsplash](#)



This review is the second post of a book symposium on *A Future History of Water*.

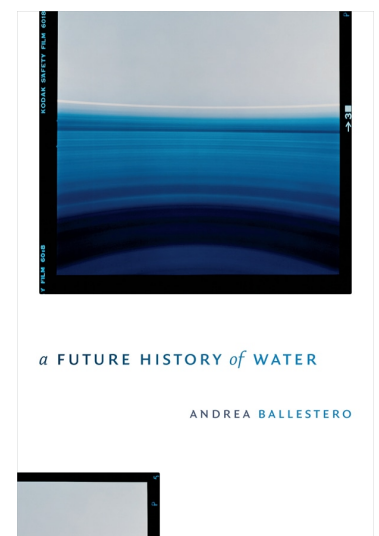
A future history of water: Rachel Douglas-Jones' comments

Rachel Douglas-Jones

January, 2022

As I finished reading Ballestero's *A Future History of Water*, the world observed World Water Day 2021. Organized by the United Nations, it has been observed annually each March since 1993, and is described as a means of "focusing attention on the global water crisis". This year's focus was *Valuing Water*, which, amongst other local events, meant inviting global publics to reflect on what water meant to them by tagging contributions with #Water2me. Perhaps the "one true value of water" (WWD 2021:1) could be found on blogs, LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit?

Ballestero's book is about how the work of valuing water is done, away from the glossy images, hashtags and videos of a single day campaign. An early decision, Ballestero tells us, was that her 'ethnographic account was going to focus on the dimensions of water that would never make it into *National Geographic* pictures', nor would she entertain the call of 'watery mystique' (187). Instead, *A Future History of Water* charts the 'enormous amount of "deskwork" (186) that goes into working with the 'fairly unexciting matter of the technical concepts that organize water's availability' (187). While its largest framing is the way the categories "right" and "commodity" manage (and are





managed in) the making of water futures, the work that fascinates her – to which she brings her ethnographically attuned wonder – is seemingly mundane, taking place in the ‘back corners of bureaucratic offices and in Kafkaesque congressional procedures’ (195). In those corners, offices, and meeting rooms, she sits, listens and talks with activists, experts and public officials as they tweak, adapt and change their tools for engaging the vast issues of what it means to pay for, care for, and manage water in the now.

Devices

As a fellow ethnographer of bureaucracies and form, I am deeply appreciative of Ballestero’s careful articulation of what the term devices mean to her (9), her informants, and what attending to them demands of the ethnographer (10). This spelling out is necessary, because the book itself is organized around four “devices”: the formula, the index, the list and the pact. Devices are found objects of the field, “critical passage points in bureaucratized processes” (11). They are instruments in daily use by her informants, and are used to ‘pull [her] deep into technicalities’ (194). They are *how* the futures of water are done, negotiated, defined, brought under new regimes of governance or expelled from them. Through her beautifully narrated ‘collection of oddities’ (33) Ballestero invites us to consider ‘what is at stake in procedure’ (139).

Ballestero offers the device as a contribution to scholars studying topics far beyond water. It should be of particular interest to students whose dreams of long-term embedded ethnography may have shifted during the pandemic towards studying documents, policies, powerpoint slides, white papers that shape the worlds in which we all live. For those fieldworkers in particular, her reminder that devices do not have ‘great causal powers on their own’ (196) is germane. Despite ‘tactical magnification’ for the purposes of her analysis, devices are, she argues, necessarily seen as nodes of ‘temporalities and passions’ (9). Devices, Ballestero argues “can open spaces for new future histories” (9).

A Future History of Water charts the ‘enormous amount of “deskwork” that



goes into working with the fairly unexciting matter of the technical concepts that organize water's availability

Spaces

How do devices *open* spaces when formulas, indexes and lists are so often relied upon to do the work of creating 'conditions that make some decisions predictable' (10)? Ballestero makes clear that yes, the mechanics of social form are part of technocratic formulations, showing us how "practices and desires [merge with] long standing assumptions about sociality that have been embedded in legal, economic and other technical vocabularies and institutions" (9). But from this predictability, she points us to a space of "structured improvisation", somewhere for the "tweaks" and "hacks" (9) she has observed, ready for the ethnographer's attention to 'semiotic charge', 'technicality and 'political capacities' (10). She is less interested in diagnosing entanglement than in the work of undoing, of *separating* to relate, transforming 'fusions into momentary separations' (15). At a moment when the more-than-human world of scholarship, particularly the internationally emergent field of environmental humanities, points repeatedly to entanglement, Ballestero's analysis is valuable for attending to how people push for or against separations. Many of people she works with who use these tools know that entanglement is a given, the task at hand is how to enact separations, folds and tweaks that produce meaning.

Wondering at Histories

In each of the chapters, these folds and tweaks are presented. We see the temporary accomplishments of price adjustment regulators (106) and the public mockery of melting ice cubes (128). Through those working with, on and through devices, Ballestero shows us how new future histories come about. Throughout the ethnography, people are working difference from *within* (24), doing 'tactical', technocratic work. As she seeks to capture the 'instabilities of the present', and the 'selective activation' of certain histories concerning water (13), Ballestero wants us to 'recognize the efforts people make to set up future differences or at



least to create their preconditions' (29). The weight of this work – the toll these efforts take – comes across. There are no easy resolutions to these future histories, which are 'simultaneity[ies] full of conditionals, dependencies and uncertainties that cannot be compressed into an image' (28), temporality always in sight.

What *A Future History of Water* shows us is that these experts, at work in their technical craft, are shaping water futures. Reading across the chapters, we see that no *one* device could ever frame the question of how water futures will come into being. The invitation of the book is to continue the study of this work: transformation, we are encouraged to see, can come from the intensities of technocracy, even as it remains unfinalized. It is here Ballestero ends her book, resisting the will to synthesis and remaining open to the continued lives of the devices she analysed. She consciously offers her readers the 'sense of fragmentation (195) that her informants live with, aligned with her anthropological refusal to reduce worlds – "even if those worlds are technocratic! – (196) 'to already existing schemas' (196).

To do this, Ballestero offers her readers an element of the weird, the 'strangeness of the ties that keep [the world] together and break it apart (199). For ethnographers of bureaucracy and the similarly "mundane", this is affirmation of technocratic work not as a "wonder killer" but a "wonder-inducing" site (32). Wonder is an ethnographic disposition, unevenly distributed. It is a means of tackling the familiar, often selectively embraced across topics for its connotation of admiration. What it does here is political, an intervention into given determinisms of the bureaucratic, holding open a 'rich technopolitical universe' (199).

For ethnographers of bureaucracy and the similarly "mundane", this is affirmation of technocratic work not as a "wonder killer" but a "wonder-inducing" site



Images

Finishing this review, I have kept the Twitter search #Water2me refreshing in my browser. Scrolling the results, Ballestero's opening observation is in evidence: water 'rights and commodities have been conceptualized homologically, that is, as operating on similar principles or structures' (21). Here they are, side by side, the rights and the commodities, their homology of form easily subsumed under the hashtag. Nestlé's corporate account for Central and West Africa weighs in with photographs from Abidjan and Dakar. In a cheerfully boppy video, full of kingfishers and lakes, Borut Pahor, President of the Republic of Slovenia declares Slovenia the 2nd EU member state to enshrine the right to drinking water in the Constitution, and reminds viewers that "Water is the source of life. Water is irreplaceable". The timeline fills with 'watery scenes', the hashtag itself 'fluid locations,' (15) in the 'magic of equivalence' (21).

That the World Water Day event went out to ask "people around the world" about how *they* value water reflects the underlying assumption that valuing water is normally "complex and often left to policymakers and experts from environmental, engineering, scientific, finance and legal sectors" (WWD 2021: 1). But it is precisely these sites of complexity that Ballestero makes ethnographically vivid, studying devices that hum in the background, making "the sublime measurable, the sacred regulatable" (33). I click through to the synthesis report the data people have diligently produced for the UN: how has the 'morphological indocility of H₂O be[en] domesticated'? (34). It hasn't, of course. But an ethnographer attuned by Ballestero's capacity to illuminate the technocratic arts would now find in this pie chart compression of the words of water something they previously wouldn't: wonder.

References

World Water Day. 2021. Listening Exercise Summary [WWD2021_listening exercise summary.pdf](#)

Photo by [Tim Zänkert](#) on [Unsplash](#)



This review is the third of three in a book symposium on *A Future History of Water*.

Collaboration and Creativity

Veronica Ferreri
January, 2022



It was already dark when I entered the small shop in the informal camp in rural Lebanon, where Khulud was waiting for customers. This was my first return to the field after more than a year of absence, and it was emotionally overwhelming. Khulud smiled and kissed me several times on the cheeks. I was visiting her together with her son, Abu Younes, who sat next to me while Khulud arranged food for us. I was surprised by her invitation to eat, a practice of hospitality I had only encountered at the beginning of my stay with the community when I was undoubtedly considered a foreign guest, a social standing I had thought altered



by all my shared moments with Khulud.

That I wasn't the only one thinking this way was confirmed a little later. I was still eating when Abu Younes lit up a cigarette, a gesture to which Khulud reacted by whispering something in his ear. His irritated gaze reached her as he spoke: "She is family!" I looked to Abu Younes for an explanation. He said that Khulud was upset that he had stopped eating before me, the guest. She lamented his refusal to perform one of the duties of hospitality. But Abu Younes interpreted his own gesture not as a refusal of tradition but of her imposition of the host/guest framework. For him, I was not a guest because of my social and political role within the community. My presence in the family's everyday life was combined with my work at the informal school the community had created where I had helped plan the artistic programme, as well as draft and translate reports for international organisations and statements to Lebanese religious authorities regarding the hardships faced by displaced Syrians. My role was constantly renegotiated: sometimes, I was washing the dishes with Khulud's daughter-in-law, and at other times I was sipping coffee with Abu Younes and other Syrian elders to discuss the situation in Syria, the challenges of their displacement in Lebanon, their engagement with Lebanese authorities, and social relations with the broader Syrian exile community. My role in family life sealed a level of trust and care that went beyond political work, yet it also made possible the role I performed within the school.

This reflection from Veronica Ferreri's fieldwork is, in some ways, a story shared by many ethnographers. We come to the field and over time develop intense and shifting relationships with a range of people. We are drawn, by choice and by necessity, into the lives and projects of our interlocutors, all the more so when we have certain technical competencies that can work to the advantage of those we work with, or when we have explicit political commitments to our interlocutors. Veronica's collaborations were organic, ad-hoc, programmatic in the flow of ordinary life, or else reactive, responding to events, like the rumours of possible camp raids and evictions, as well as the closure of Syrian informal schools.



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In the text that follows, co-authored by Veronica with Fuad Musallam, Ella Parry-Davies and Nadine Plachta, we bring this sense of ethnographic collaboration – forged in the crucible of familial, social, and political commitment – in conversation with the other three authors’ collaborations: a participatory archive in Lebanon, a set of collaborative soundwalks in London, a work of speculative photography in Nepal. These collaborations are multimodal, participatory, and co-constituted, and they are explicit attempts to produce specific things that can then have political effects for collaborators. They occur alongside, sometimes as part of, discrete political engagements, whose ambiguities are also central to the development of relations that feed into the political and creative work carried out by the communities and ourselves as researchers. Across them, we explore how similar re/negotiations are practised wherever collaboration is central to ethnographic work. In particular, we attend to the material conditions of collaboration – spatial, social, temporal and political – and how these shape and constrain the modes of engagement that take form. The following three reflections are on more time-bound collaborative projects, but framed by the opening vignette, they show how collaborative dynamics are informed by and also bleed into the “everyday” of ethnographic relationships. The reflections develop in open-ended ways, through the ebb and flow of the negotiation of roles, positions and modes of action, which have material contexts and conditions. This ebb and flow can even exceed what we think of as a discrete collaborative project and its intentions.

Materiality and tangibility

If Veronica’s leaving the field shifted her position within Khulud’s family, it was Fuad’s return to the Beirut-based Migrant Community Centre ([MCC](#)) that made an archival collaboration there possible. In fact, in the years between first



spending time at the MCC in 2013-14 and returning in 2018, almost all those members Fuad had developed friendships with had left: deported, or granted asylum elsewhere, or no longer living near enough to the Centre, or simply moved away from the Centre's activities. Nevertheless, his recollections of the Centre as a hub of activity (a yearly calendar of marches, demonstrations and celebrations, a weekly calendar of meetings, classes, services, and leisure, and the daily experience of a site thick with photos on every wall) informed the initial idea of a participatory archive of the Centre, curated and organised with members. In the context of a high turnover in membership and an always precarious existence, long-time members participating in the collaboration then pushed to find ways to teach newcomers what the Centre had achieved and commemorate the legacy of those people who helped it do so, especially those no longer present.

If the high turnover and uncertain situation motivated the collaboration, then material conditions contoured the actual form it took: two changes of location in six years, a space too small and constantly in use for different activities, things moving and being moved. Between changes of building, lack of storage, and the physical space in constant use, whole years of time were (materially) unaccounted for. Archivable material was found tucked away in children's colouring books, or in drawers where it had been tidied away in haste when a room was needed for some other activity. MCC members involved in the archiving project tried to find times when one room or another was free to hold archiving sessions, but for month-long periods rooms were fully booked, often to create new things like posters and placards for demonstrations, but so too for the language classes, members' meetings, or medical check-ups that made up the weekly and yearly political calendar of migrant community organising.

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emerged from those conditions. Collaborators responded to what they found: a history of the MCC became a visual primer of MCC's activities, its form a response to the Centre's polyglossia and the resonance of photos as a record of the collective past. Meanwhile, the idea to exhibit placards and posters in the Centre was wholly serendipitous, a product of members in one archiving session suggesting something be put up in the room where the session took place. In a context where the possibility of migrant worker cross-community organising was a precarious achievement, the collaboration created tangible things: the protest paraphernalia up on the wall, the poster formatted and ready to print, the archive safely stored, accompanied with resources for how to use it. Material constraints were also sites of possibility, then. But the collaboration was, importantly, only ever one (small) part of the MCC as a space, and the lives and activities of members, even those actively collaborating. This should give pause for thought to consider the way that a collaboration relates to its object, and the social and political relations in which it is embedded.

The materiality of time

The noisy and stuff-filled life of Sundays at MCC belied silent weekdays when its members were at work elsewhere. Here wage labour shapes the time and space where collaboration can occur, pointing to temporality itself as a material concern. The question is acute when the community of collaboration is defined by their category of labour, and face severe forms of exploitation and oppression. This was the case for many MCC members who were subject to structural violence tied to misogyny, racism, and precarious migration status. Ella's research involved making collaborative soundwalks with migrant domestic workers in Lebanon and in the UK. The soundwalks attempted to generate a mode of listening attentive to participants' experiences and their decisions about self-representation. Soundwalk-making involves going for a walk and recording a conversation in a place a domestic worker has chosen for its significance, often a site of activism (either quotidian or organised). The recording is then co-edited with the collaborator, and the finished soundwalk is uploaded to the project



[website](#) along with instructions and a map, so that listeners can return to the place in question, playing the edited soundwalk through headphones as they re-trace the initial walk.

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While the finished soundwalks were between two and twenty-five minutes each, participants spent up to thirteen hours editing them. Making sure they would be remunerated for this time involved negotiations concerning research ethics, where the importance of non-coercion, and the principle that the collaboration involved more than a financial transaction, had to be balanced against recognition of their creative labour. Audio editing is extremely labour-intensive, and the collaborative intentions of the project were at times compromised by the realities of precarity, unpredictability and transience. If domestic workers' employers had unexpected guests, a day off would be retracted at the last minute, without pay. If their migratory status came under review, concerns about visibility and deportation might make somebody withdraw from the project entirely. Attending to these limitations recognises the uneven efforts of different bodies in collaboration and considers creative agency and labour as two sides of the same coin.

Collaboration, anticipation, and their limits

Each soundwalk expresses just a fragment of a person's narrative. As listeners, it asks us to acknowledge the limits of our understanding, a question that is underlined by the ambiguity of sound and the absence of the dominant visual sense. These uneven efforts at collaboration shift our gaze to issues of intention, reception, and audience. Collaboration can produce anticipation both towards the final product but also in relation to how a project is perceived by those we engage with in the process. This became apparent in a collaborative ethnographic project



on the affective economies of road construction that Nadine and Konstantin Ikonomidis carried out. As a social anthropologist and an architect interested in infrastructure development, they wanted to draw attention to the challenges road construction poses for people's livelihoods and the environment in ecologically fragile Himalayan valleys. Roads, they contended, do not necessarily bring the development and economic benefits they promise. Their construction entails multifaceted processes that create and reproduce vulnerabilities and have many unintended outcomes.

Nadine and Konstantin's collaboration reflected their individual disciplinary background. Nadine, who has been engaged with people living in Nepal's Tsum valley since 2012, contributed to the project with the intimate knowledge of a place and the skills of creative ethnographic writing, while Konstantin drew on his training in architectural sketching, photography, and the creation of digitally enhanced images. Their research was based on fantastical and speculative images that rendered different infrastructures (highways, bridges, apartment buildings) in the local mountain landscape to allow people to imagine, consider and see versions of the future. That is, the images were meant to inspire people to speak out about their hopes and expectations as well as fears and doubts in regard to road construction.

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The content of the images was constantly negotiated and renegotiated; they were created, exchanged, and revised in conversation with the people Konstantin and Nadine had met in Tsum. For example, an image depicting a road next to a pilgrimage place led one local resident to demand a sidewalk for the protection of pedestrians, something they included in the subsequent version of the image. Another person feared the consequences of pollution and dust on agricultural



production, so they created an image featuring a bridge across fields to prevent negative environmental effects. An important part of the design and development process of the renderings, then, was how infrastructures fit into the landscape and how they will function.

But Konstantin and Nadine also came to realize that the images did not straightforwardly bring to life details about the future in their audience. Documenting and communicating ideas of progress and change in a geographically marginal region through digitally enhanced images offered an ethnographic space to negotiate the future, but also had its limits. People in Tsum had been mobilizing for a different alignment of the road to avert significant damage to culturally and architecturally important buildings and the environment. As a result of their political activism to press for an alternative route, however, some Tsum residents were subjected to threats from the government. They expressed disenchantment and exhaustion and hesitated to talk to Konstantin and Nadine, causing the ethnographers to reflect on their own positionality and how collaborative fieldwork is perceived under conditions of risk and uncertainty.

Conclusion

In all these stories, collaboration is born out of a combination of ethnographic research and political engagement: uncertain and open-ended, problematising or exceeding both positions. As Veronica's return to the community she worked and lived with shows, complex roles are formed through different modes of engagement, from participation in political struggle to care for quotidian family life. As social relations morph across time and space, so too do the political projects we, as ethnographers and researchers, inhabit and – at times – share



with the communities we work with.

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In Fuad's collaboration, we see attempts to retain the material record of political organising and social life in the face of loss of persons, places, and objects. To produce tangible things is to render that history into the present for new members of the community, to show that this history is theirs, too. Ella's work with migrant domestic workers also points to a range of material intentions, from making politicised self-representation audible, to the transformative effects this can have for individuals. Nadine's collaborative project is an attempt to make imaginable what the future can and should hold, an exercise that unintendedly materialised the fatigue of the community in resisting a future in which their political agency would be in question. The ambiguity of "collaboration" and its ties to creative and political work offer insights in the multitude of conditions that shape our engagements and their outcomes.

Image: mural by George Fox students Annabelle Wombacher, Jared Mar, Sierra Ratcliff and Benjamin Cahoon , photo by [Tim Mossholder](#) on [Unsplash](#).