
REVIEW ESSAY

Colin Hoag
Smith College

Worlds of Water

Crosscurrents: Law and Society in a Native Title Claim to Land and Sea
Katie Glaskin (Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing, 2017)

*The Geographies of Social Movements:
Afro-Colombian Mobilization and the Aquatic Space*
Ulrich Oslender (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016)

Water: Abundance, Scarcity, and Security in the Age of Humanity
Jeremy J. Schmidt (New York: NYU Press, 2017)

The anthropology of water is in a moment of intense theoretical development. Anthropologists have for many decades explored, say, seafaring, rainmaking rituals, or systems of irrigated agriculture—all phenomena that involve water in one way or another. However, it is only recently that anthropologists have begun to write about “water” directly and to practice a self-styled “anthropology of water.” This is partly owing to disciplinary trends, as subfields of “the anthropology of [insert natural resource]” proliferate these days. No doubt, too, the movement to study water directly derives from contemporary concerns about an Earth beset by water-related problems: rising seas, melting glaciers, droughts, floods, polluted water, and so on.

The three texts under review here all pose questions about how to account for water in human worlds configured by histories of colonialism, cosmopolitanism, and contested knowledge formations. Two of them, Ulrich Oslender’s *The Geographies of Social Movements* and Katie Glaskin’s *Crosscurrents*, do not analyze water per se. Rather, they examine territorial sovereignty among minority and indigenous groups whose lives and identities traverse terrestrial and marine space, outlining how their claims to political rights are adjudicated within dominant legal regimes that see land and water as fundamentally distinct. Jeremy Schmidt’s *Water*, by contrast, offers a timely intellectual history of the anthropology of water and its contemporary textures, contours, and commitments. That the three books can be grouped together as

anthropologies of water indicates the fluid boundaries of water studies, while also hinting at the importance of disaggregating “water” as an object of inquiry—questioning the extent to which anthropologists can use the single term to designate all things aquatic, marine, hydrological, and fluid.

Crosscurrents

Glaskin’s book is a meticulous legal anthropology of indigenous sovereignty in Oceania. It deserves to be read by anyone interested in using anthropological research to support claims of indigenous sovereignty. Not only does it provide a detailed account of one specific native title claim by Bardi and Jawi peoples, including the claim’s historical and political context as it was adjudicated in Western Australia, it also offers an intimate narrative of the legal process inside and outside the courtroom. The book is the product of the author’s many years of engagement with this and other native title claims, both as a scholarly researcher and as a legal professional. Glaskin shows how histories of settlement, land use, and cosmological propositions about the origins and ontology of landforms are all at stake in Australian land claims, and how such histories and propositions are both rendered invisible by a legal regime that admits only information deemed “objective” by its own standards.

The first chapter sets the scene and the research problem. Bardi and Jawi people in Western Australia lodged a native title claim in the 1990s covering both mainland and island areas and including the sea country in between—a way of defining territory that was not legible to existing legal apparatuses. This is followed by two historical chapters, overflowing with rich and carefully researched details about the establishment of indigenous people’s communities and the impact of missionaries and imperial agents from Europe on those communities. In particular, these chapters shed light on the horrifying effects of two different missions—one German, one British—that struggled financially and were partly funded by the exploitation of littoral resources, such as sea shells, collected by Jawi and Bardi people. Those same groups would later struggle for legal recognition of the importance, to their culture and identity as a people, of these same littoral resources.

The following chapters, forming the bulk of the book, focus on the legal case as it proceeded in court, including the justifications made by the claimants; the preparation of the claim; its reception and interpretation by the judge; and the successful appeal of the judge’s negative decision. Chapter 5 is particularly useful, as it parses in close detail what ethnographic evidence was seen as admissible in court, and why. The last two chapters reflect on what this case means for indigenous sovereignty cases at large, the possible role anthropology can play in furthering such claims, and what this case says about the politics of indigenous recognition in Australia. Significantly, the demands of making claims to territory for these two distinct social groups (Bardi and Jawi) led to their legal fusion as “Bardi Jawi.”

With its abundance of historical and local detail, *Crosscurrents* will be most valuable to area specialists—also because the general theoretical stakes of the text could have been stated better at the outset so as to draw in a broader audience. Those with interests in the legal anthropology of indigenous sovereignty claims will also find substantial value in this book, which also represents a valuable contribution to applied legal anthropology, as it explores the potential and pitfalls of using anthropological knowledge in legal contexts such as these. The book also, read as a contribution to the anthropology of water, shows how dominant legal regimes are confounded when sovereignty extends, cosmologically, into aquatic space. Conceptual implications can be seen here not only for political anthropologies of water, but also of the subterranean, of the atmospheric, and of outer space.

The Geographies of Social Movements

Oslender's beautifully crafted book is also the product of many years of research—and it likewise benefits from a depth of expertise. The book opens with a discussion of the 1991 Colombian constitution, which was remarkable for recognizing Afro-Colombian communities as a distinct cultural group with collective rights to certain coastal territories. This posed a legal and political question, however: How would blackness be translated meaningfully for residents of the Pacific Coast? The book then proceeds to consider how Afro-Colombian groups developed a spatial conception of themselves as a group with legal entitlement to certain lands, how place was leveraged by them to advocate for their own interests, and how bureaucratic institutions were established to govern their common property resources in articulation with “local aquatic epistemologies.”

Oslender is trained as a geographer, but the book is deeply ethnographic and will be of interest to anthropologists of water, space, place, and social movements. In beautiful prose, he recounts the way the tides configure everyday life among this fishing community, where both travel and livelihoods pulse with their rhythms, while arguing that peasant activism emerges from these specific contexts. The region's year-round humidity, he says, its mangrove swamps, and its river thoroughfares all shape social mobilization. He argues that these phenomena cannot be accounted for by conventional social movement theory, which emphasizes identity and tends to remove place from view in favor of seeing transnational connections and alliances. Oslender advocates instead for a “critical place theory.” In true ethnographic form, his interest in place-based understandings emanates not from theoretical speculation, but from the embodied experience of confronting the environment in the field—listening to the rains in the town of Guapi.

The first chapter presents an authoritative literature review of scholarship on place and space in the context of social movements. After a methodological reflection on his use of participatory action research in an interlude, the second chapter outlines what Oslender calls a “meandering poetics” of aquatic space. Here, he links the oral, poetic, and narrative traditions of this Afro-Colombian

community to their local conceptions of space, showing how tradition was mobilized in the process of seeking recognition for land titles. Oslender goes further, seeing in their folk music an everyday aquatic vocabulary for political resistance. The third chapter illuminates hidden geographies of the Colombian Pacific, including the kinship networks, slavery histories, and mental maps that give these riverine environments meaning for everyday people. Oslender shows how settlement patterns and everyday practices of river navigation give tangible shape to a sense of place, while describing this latter as following the “logic of the river.”

The final two chapters turn to consider how these poetics and geographies manifest in the form and management of community councils, through detailed ethnographic and historical accounting. As in Glaskin’s book, these chapters represent important contributions to activist and legal anthropology, and they should be of interest to anyone seeking to deploy ethnographic research as an applied science for social change.

Water Itself

Whereas Glaskin’s and Oslender’s books explore legal processes that awkwardly articulate with the social worlds of water, Jeremy Schmidt’s *Water* examines how these water worlds are conceived by anthropological theory. A bold and remarkable book, it offers a profound reassessment of central tenets within the anthropology of water, including disciplinary commitments to treating water as a “total social phenomenon,” and shows how these are often homologous with the globally hegemonic paradigm of integrated water resource management (IWRM). The book is an intellectual history, but it hews closer to science and technology studies than history of science in its philosophical concerns and theoretical ambition. It is required reading for anthropologists of water, as well as geographers, conservationists, and others interested in the management of water resources.

Schmidt shows how important scientific and governmental figures such as John Wesley Powell, William J. McGee, and Gilbert White, who were in close conversation with each other, notably at the Cosmos Club in Washington, DC, shaped a new approach toward what he calls “normal water” in the early twentieth century. Three key judgments undergird this conception (and organize Schmidt’s argument): namely that water was once abundant, has now become scarce, and is therefore a matter of security concern. This was a moment of intellectual ferment and disciplinary formation, but also, not incidentally, one of US settler colonial exploitation of the West. Deployed as a tool of conservation and nature management, “normal water” facilitated the US government’s settlement and exploitation of the West and turned water into a “resource,” while presenting a set of criteria for assessing how humans interact with and respond to their environment. Schmidt argues that “normal water,” as a product of debates between these figures, has since become a dominant global paradigm. Normal water, thus, refers to “the program for

bringing water's social and evolutionary possibilities into the service of liberal forms of life" (p. 6).

The introduction and first chapter chart this theoretical terrain and the philosophical implications of anthropological commitments to normal water. The second and third chapters respectively highlight the work Powell and McGee, two important early figures at the Bureau of American Ethnology and the US Geological Survey, who worked at the intersection of geology and anthropology. Through their work determining how to theorize and administer "natural resources"—especially water—in the US West, they saw themselves as mending a divide wrought by thinkers who separated mind from matter, such as Rene Descartes. Their notion of "Earth making" depicted agency as a property of not only humans but also living non-humans and abiotic processes, and landforms were therefore to be understood through anthropological and geological lenses. Because water connects land to social life, water management was seen as the medium through which the United States could proceed beyond mere civilization to enlightenment, "reckoning the agency of the Earth to liberal democracy" (p. 89). In this view, water was seen as a social phenomenon, and watersheds could be used as units of social life through which water could be marshalled to industrious, egalitarian, and patriotic ends. American liberalism and water management co-constituted each other.

Chapters 4 and 5 describe how these ideas, first organized around a conception of water as abundant and naturally replenishing during that period of westward expansion and exploitation in the early 20th century, were later converted to concerns about scarcity and, eventually, security. The implementation of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) constituted a mature realization of McGee and Powell's effort to fuse democratic liberalism with watershed management through "multipurpose water basin development," later to be known as IWRM. The TVA was then exported as a postcolonial project for the newly independent Third World, along with its liberal sensibilities, but only as "Rational Planning" rose to become its guiding concept. At the first UN Conference on Water in Mar del Plata in 1977, "Rational Planning" coded water as a resource that was only abundant to the extent that it was valued correctly. An emphasis on water resource planning efficiency therefore helped usher in a notion of water as a scarce resource just as IWRM was being exported globally as a tool for the twin project of development and national security.

His final two chapters and a brief epilogue return us to the philosophical terrain of theorizing humans' relationship to their environment and its significance for environmental conservation debates. Powell and McGee's debates across geology and anthropology anticipated contemporary thinking about the Anthropocene within anthropology, Schmidt argues, but they are inefficacious when it comes to water. This is because normal water has always been hitched to a conjoined geologic-social imaginary that resists a

nature/society dualism. What is needed instead, he says, is to disrupt the liberalism at the heart of normal water and open space for forms of life that it oppresses: alternate conceptions of water's relation to life.

Conclusion

Schmidt's intellectual history is radically distinct from the activist and applied ethnographies of Glaskin and Oslender. Yet, all three demonstrate the critical importance of making visible the legal, cosmological, and political contours of diverse water worlds, which are obscured by dominant technocratic perspectives. Moreover, they attest to the potential for ethnographic methods to do that work. More valuable than answers, perhaps, these texts generate sharpened questions that demand anthropological inquiry. If political commitments and cosmologies configure dominant perspectives on water worlds, how might other conceptual tools be built to see them differently? What is called forward in appeals to "water" as an object of study? In relation to what precisely, is water understood? Now and in the aftermath of this expansion of the anthropology of water, what might be needed is not a consolidation of terms but rather a proliferation of approaches, a disaggregation of the concept of "water" according to its various (even unknown) modalities, and a perpetual reconstruction of water's boundaries, significations, and possibilities.