

# Reflecting on the Future of Human–Water Relationships

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ANDREA BALLESTERO. *A Future History of Water*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019.

## INTRODUCTION

Water is sensational. Increasingly, social science scholarship on water is framed around explosive narratives like crisis, Anthropocene, extinction, and posthumanism (Bakker 2010; Kotzé 2014; Grear et al. 2021; Cowie, Bouchet, and Fontaine 2022). In this work, water scholars variously emphasize the dire state of the Earth's precious water resources and the need to rethink human–water interactions for a water-stressed future (Chellaney 2013). Some frame this imperative as a matter of survival, noting that without access to a safe and reliable water supply, human futures are impossible (Vörösmarty et al. 2010). Lately, those arguing for a reconceptualization of legal and social approaches to water point to possible new ways of relating to water as something with its own life essence and agency (Martuwarra RiverOfLife et al. 2021) rather than just a resource to be owned, used, or abused.

This scholarship, while challenging, important, and certainly interesting, is rarely concerned with the day-to-day performance of human–water relations, or what Andrea Ballestero modestly calls “the unremarkable” (preface x). Ballestero's new book, *A Future History of Water*, brings us back “down to Earth” (Bauer 1997) and reminds us that human–water relationships are constructed and constantly reenacted in myriad, often unseen, ways. She sketches out an ethnography of water in which human–water relationships are performed through writing on colored slips of paper, numbers in water meters, indices of household consumer items, posted water bills, and creative water analogies used in political posturing. The result, in this book, is a more nuanced understanding of water entanglements in which things are often not as they first seem.

Underlying Ballestero's book is a common paradox within popular and scholarly debate on water politics and law. That is, the framing of water as a fundamental or inalienable human right on one hand (see Langford and Russell 2017) and its

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framing as a fungible commodity that is best allocated via trade in markets on the other (see Godden 2010).

This paradox will be familiar to anyone working on water issues, and the two schools of thought are rarely brought into conversation with each other. Water is either a human right for all that cannot be bought or sold or a commodity like anything else that can have a price put on it for the purposes of trade (just like land, for example). But instead of detailing the ways in which law facilitates the public versus private dichotomy, Ballestero shows us how the practices of relating to water routinely entail both of these trajectories. Like most dichotomies, the public/private water dichotomy, on closer inspection, is overly simplified.

## AN INVITATION TO WONDER

In accepting the invitation to prepare this essay, I imagined quite a different book from the one I encountered, expecting a more conventional study of the application of water law in society, as is usual with much legal-anthropological literature. *A Future History of Water* sits firmly within the contemporary, ethnographic school, and although it engages with the everyday practice of law, it does not trace human rights in courts or commodities in markets. This book is a story about people and the ordinary ways in which they engage with water in the day to day. Yet, at the same time, the book challenges and extends legal theory—positioning diverse sociolegal phenomena affecting water as “devices”—a framing concept that works well across water formulas, indices, lists, and pacts. As a device, each of these things addresses the potential to change collective worlds though its “capacity to merge practices and desires with long-standing assumptions about sociality that have been embedded in legal, economic, and other technical vocabularies and institutions” (193).

The book also extends its analysis across temporal scales, at times deep into the past when colonial structures bearing on water sharing and enjoyment were laid down, as well as constantly reflecting on the (uncertain) future of water, which, Ballestero argues, is in an ongoing and interminable process of reenactment, as actors continue to engage in a never-ending process of creating “bifurcations” (6).

Ballestero can do all this because she doesn’t focus simply on law, politics, or narrative; she focuses on their performance. The book rests on in-depth anthropological fieldwork in Costa Rica and Brazil during which she worked alongside water lawyers, bureaucrats, politicians, social movements, and communities. For anthropologists, spending time in the place you are studying is expected. But increasingly, with global pandemics, family and work pressures, and assumed guilt around the carbon footprint of travel, there is less and less field-based experience supporting the social sciences. For Ballestero, this time in place was essential to deeply understanding the implementation of water relationships on the ground as well as providing the opportunity to reevaluate old dichotomies. It was also unavoidable for her as a Latin American scholar and close part of the communities and social systems she was studying.

In *A Future History of Water* Ballestero eschews sensationalism, disposing of crisis narrative in favor of a more constructive epistemic mood, which she calls wonder. Wonder, Ballestero explains, is an activity and not a condition. It allows researchers

to keep their options open so that there is room for the unexpected to happen. This methodology is critical to her work in this book of uncovering and making sense of the complex entanglements human communities find themselves in with respect to water.

## WATER DEVICES

Ballestero frames the book around four devices—ethnographic categories for us to think with when considering human relationships with water and attempting to make sense of the world—each of which is explored in its own chapter. These devices are not the usual sorts of things that scholars working on water rights and governance focus on like court decisions, legislation, declarations, or markets. Rather, these are the oft-unseen tools that help run our lives and also create new possibilities as we interact with water, being “highly effective in organising and challenging technopolitical work” (193). In studying these devices, Ballestero displays impressive interdisciplinary agility, drawing on schools of thought across law, governance, politics, and economics.

The first device that Ballestero studies is the economic formula used by water regulators in Costa Rica to set the price of water for households. In her discussions with regulators, she challenges long-standing debates about the point at which a price affirms water as a basic human right and the price at which it represents commodification, excessive profit, and rampant capitalism. In fact, she finds that the process of regulators trying to find a price at which water is affordable affirms the material reality of water as both a human right and a commodity, one that is not technocratic but value laden and charged by social relations, trade-offs, and political compromise (45).

The second device, index, shows how regulators determine how water is deemed affordable in Costa Rica, determined as no more than 3 percent of household income. This 3 percent benchmark is adjusted with reference to the inflation rate via the consumer price index. Through this process a list of average costs for ordinary household objects has extraordinary consequences, marking the difference between a humanitarian and nonhumanitarian price (105).

The third device, list, concerns water’s material definition emerging from parliamentary debates about constitutional water reform in Costa Rica. It directly addresses how people feel about water and the limits of the law when attempting to fix water in law as a public good to which all are entitled. Here, Ballestero entertainingly recounts the conscious framing of water as a public good rather than human right in parliamentary processes and the constructive and disruptive tactics deployed by libertarian politicians to limit the scope of law. This discussion was familiar, with my legal background, and permitted me to reflect on the way lawyers and courts construing statutes constantly ask themselves, “now, what was Parliament thinking when it wrote this law?” This chapter helps the reader to reflect again on water’s materiality—from water in pipes to water in our bodies—and the consequences of drawing lines around the water than can be owned or governed by individuals *vis-à-vis* the State.

The fourth and final device discussed by Ballestero, pact, describes the large-scale process undertaken in Brazil to reframe water, not as a right but as something that people have an obligation to care for. This device seemed to me at first sight to hold more promise than the other devices as something potentially transformational,

a possible new way to transcend the right/commodity dichotomy. Something more directly framed around peoples' relationality with water (Macpherson 2022a), something more "bottom up" (Easterly 2008) that comes from communities that wish to make promises about how they will care for their waters. Ballestero, too, seemed captivated by the potential of the pact to suggest a new water future, but her investigations revealed the pact process to be too abstract, too universalized, and too disconnected from place and from people to maintain long-standing buy-in and promote transformational change. The process of making water pacts has not turned out to be a predominant or even convincing model for reimagining global water futures, perhaps because of the symbolic and ultimately unenforceable legal status of a water pact. As a reader I was left wondering about the cost of the pact-making processes and whether it provided benefits that are difficult to measure, like the performance of human–water relationality that could have further unseen and potentially beneficial consequences.

### THE FUTURE HISTORY OF WATER?

All the collaborators implicated in Ballestero's book seem to want the same thing—a better future for water and water-related people. There is a continual sense in the book of a need to do something different, and the book regularly revisits the tension between transformation and incrementalism, whether water futures should be improved via gradual, never-ending processes or a monumental, one-off change (6).

The human right to water may at one time have been expected to provide the change that was needed to solve the global water crisis, but human–water entanglements (15) are too complex for such a universal answer. Ballestero's study of water devices shows the reality that differences are made in unremarkable ways and the assumptions inherent in debates around neoliberalism and human rights were probably not right in the first place. In Ballestero's ethnography, there are no clear definitional or practical boundaries between water as commodity versus water as a public good, human right, or gift—all of which seek to universalize and homogenize, performing "the magic of equivalence by erasing the marks that birth, gender, social rank, education, and political affiliation leave on our embodied experience" (21). This is fitting, given water's lack of fixity (13) as a fluid material that resists being captured and restrained in set states or categories.

Although Ballestero's book invites readers to wonder about the future of human–water relationships, there are important threads left hanging, which should be picked up in others' wondering. What future is there for a human right to water, especially giving the universality of international human rights and their disconnection from the ordinary, place-based realities Ballestero is concerned with? Does the ongoing bifurcation of water as a human right into a biocultural right to water (Gear 2015) offer something new, something more connected to the everyday ordinary practice of human–water relations through a range of cultures and worldviews that might be considered more sustainable or ethical than global water capitalism (Bavikatte and Bennett 2015)? What are the implications of the book for the crisis narrative, for which Ballestero expresses clear unease (30), and does the spectre of the Anthropocene in fact offer a strategic

opportunity for more imaginative thinking beyond water as a commodity for humans and even beyond the idea of humans as water stewards, which itself is a problematic, colonial construct (Dehm 2022)? The Brazilian water pacts may not have realized their potential in terms of disrupting dominant water politics, but since their time the global rights of nature movement has exploded and a number of countries have recognized the living status and personhood of water entities like lakes and rivers (sometimes as an attempt to approximate Indigenous and chthonic worldview; Macpherson 2022b). Do rights of nature and legal personhood offer more promise for the future of human–water relations, or is this just another case of “what from a distance seem to be clearly distinct ideas, upon closer inspection are far from that” (3)?

*A Future History of Water* is an ethnographically rich and incredibly humble book. It tells a story about small details that have huge consequences—the book reminds those of us fighting for water justice in the halls of government or the rooms of court that what’s at stake for many is actually water coming out of the taps or the river running dry. The title *A Future History of Water* emphasizes the need to pay close attention to water bifurcations that continue to be produced and the need to turn to wonder as we observe future histories develop. It is a fascinating, provoking, and accessible read and should be essential reading for water scholars, practitioners, and activists across a range of disciplines and cultural contexts.

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