



Water cultures as assemblages: Indigenous, neoliberal, colonial water cultures in northern Australia



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ABSTRACT

The hydro-social cycle has offered a productive analytical framework for understanding human-water relations in a range of contexts within geography. While there is emerging use of assemblage thinking in this area, there is substantial scope to connect human-water relations to this literature. Further, the way culture is situated within hydro-social analyses invites closer examination. This article offers a critical examination of water cultures, as produced through assemblages in the Ord catchment, northern Australia, to tease out the ways in which power circulates in this context, and to trace the historical trajectories that have led to tensions between current water cultures. Indigenous water cultures are resilient to multiple impositions of colonising and neoliberal water cultures in the Ord, and Miriuwung Gajerrong peoples continue to assert their rights to water irrespective of a lack of broader recognition. An assemblage approach to water cultures shows that what is conceptualised by some as appropriate water policy is embedded within colonial and neoliberal practices.

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1. Introduction

Geographies of human-water relations continue to be a strong focus of important geographic work on human-nature connections. Much research on hydro-social relations focuses on assemblages of practices through examining a particular materiality, for example a dam (Sneddon, 2012), a pump (Barnes, 2012) or a desalination plant (Swyngedouw, 2013). These studies have provided useful insights into hydro-social cycles and furthered our understanding of what water is (Linton and Budds, 2014). Somewhat differently, this article critically examines water cultures as produced through assemblages in a catchment, rather than deploying an analysis of a particular materiality. The analytical power in analysing water cultures stems from the way that certain values and practices around water are institutionalised in dominant natural resource management practices, sometimes resulting in marginalising multiple water engagements. I choose to analyse water cultures, rather than hydro-social cycles (Linton and Budds, 2014) or hydro-cosmological cycles (Boelens, 2014), to emphasise cross-cultural water engagements, and tease out how these have changed over time. Following Li (2014), there is analytic value in establishing the components of assemblages for, in seeing how particular entities

are put together, then we can simultaneously see how to take apart practices and forces of change that are deleterious to particular groups and individuals.

Water cultures in northern Australia include Indigenous water cultures, colonial water cultures, conservation water cultures, modernist agricultural water cultures, and more. To explore these, this article makes four key contributions: first, I outline the intersections between a water cultures lens and assemblage theory; then, I examine individuals and communities encountering, and forging, new water cultures in the Ord during the early days of expansion of the northern frontier; third, I analyse how different groups have negotiated or ignored particular water cultures in the twentieth century as agro-industrial activity intensified and power relations shifted in this part of northern Australia, and; last, I examine the colonising and resilient water cultures that are evident in the contemporary wetlandscape, which remains contested. These four lines of analysis together provide valuable insight into the way water cultures operate as assemblages, illuminating the processes by and through which multiple elements combine to co-produce waters. By showing the antecedents to current water cultures within the Ord context, this article shows how Eurocentric, modernist water cultures have been assembled and resisted over time and space.

The focus on water cultures within this article contributes to geographic work that unsettles the nature/culture binary; this

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article, by arguing for a hybrid notion of intermingled water cultures, builds on geographic work that has been pursued within the Australian context (as well as elsewhere) for some time (Castree and Head, 2008). A 'water culture' is an assemblage of physical and cultural dimensions, material and immaterial facets, that intertwine to produce a particular form of human-water connections. Humans create water cultures whenever we engage with water and these are always contingent on environmental contexts. I conceptualise water cultures as a 'set of practices which apply power' (Grossberg, 1993:4), be that *power over* or *power with* water. For example, colonial expansion within Australia relied upon co-option of Indigenous water knowledges and enclosure of access to water supplies, imposing cultures of water use that were extractive and Eurocentric (McKay, 2005; Goodall, 2002; Goodall, 2008). While surface water that flows in rivers or is contained in water holes forms the focus of this article on water cultures, groundwater and other water contexts also foster water cultures.

This article draws on ethnographic research and analysis of policy material to trace emergent and ongoing water cultures. Ethnography in 2001, 2005 and 2006 occurred with research agreements between Miriuwung¹ and Gajerrong peoples, their institutions, and me. Policy documents include the Australian Government's Green Paper on northern development that was open for public comment until August 2014 and which placed 'water' as one of six 'broad policy directions'. Water cultures in the Green Paper are constructed by neoliberal, colonising discourses that advance concern for agro-industrial development and mining as of most value, at least from an Australian government perspective.

By focusing on a particular place, the Ord, and its peoples, I delve into the agency of Indigenous people who have resisted the colonial imperatives of a state trying to settle. In doing so, I invert the prevailing paradigm of failed northern developments, and argue that the ongoing efforts to intensify exploitation of socio-ecological systems that align with neoliberal, modernist frontier expansion are resisted and renegotiated by Indigenous peoples (Hill, 2011). Here, I trace the historical trajectories of water cultures to dissect processes of changing society-water relations in a geographic framework. In doing so, this article unpacks several assemblage qualities of a hybrid entity (Whatmore, 2006). The Ord catchment has two dams that has reshaped its hydrology: in 1969 the Kununurra Diversion Dam was completed as a run-of-river dam that allowed the first irrigation efforts in the Ord to occur, and; the Ord Main dam was finished in 1972, making Lake Argyle – a water body that fluctuates between nine to twenty times the size of Sydney Harbour in a catchment that is 46,000 km² (Wasson et al., 2002). Ramsar sites are recognised for Lake Kununurra, the lower Parry Floodplains and Lake Argyle (McLean, 2012). Importantly, the Ord is also known as Gunanurang by Indigenous peoples in the area (Smith, 2016).

2. Assemblages and water cultures

Assemblage thinking continues to emerge within geographic enquiry. An assemblage is 'an aggregate with a certain consistency being created from an active, *ad hoc* and ongoing entanglement of elements' (Bingham, 2009:38); the connection of multiple heterogeneous components creates a compound, or assemblage, qualitatively different to that which characterises individual components. The contingency and specificity of assemblages works to create the dimensions of that entity, so understanding component parts is a necessary but not sufficient step in understanding the

whole. Just as assemblages are built from heterogeneous elements, these combinations can be taken apart (Li, 2007, 2014). The analytic value in assemblage thinking includes the capacity to 'tease apart' (Li, 2014: 590) the components that form those assemblages, building an understanding of the practices and thinking behind modes of water cultures. Here, I discuss how geographers have engaged with the notion of assemblages, to what extent assemblages in water related geographies are understood, and establish how I work with assemblage theory in this article.

2.1. Assemblages, geography and spatiality

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) forwarded assemblage thinking in their 'A Thousand Plateaus' text. The spatial qualities of their argument and that text, with each chapter situated as a 'plateau', place assemblage theory as an apt tool for geographic thought. The term assemblage was translated from Deleuze and Guattari's writing on 'agencement', such as in Deleuze and Guattari (1987); they used the metaphor of a book to introduce the idea of 'agencement', which was later translated by Massumi as assemblage:

'In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitutes an assemblage. A book is an assemblage of this kind, and as such is unattributable. It is a multiplicity—but we don't know yet what the multiple entails when it is no longer attributed, that is, after it has been elevated to the status of a substantive.' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 4).

An assemblage carries multiplicity, formed through lines of flight, 'movements', and constant becomings, or, as Perkins et al. (2015:88) state 'constantly composing themselves in a process of becoming as all organic and inorganic participants'. Reading water cultures as assemblages invites such an interpretation: water cultures are forged through lines of flight and movement, perpetual becomings of humans and more-than-humans. In this way, their contingency is formed, and ongoing, as water cultures are always a result of construction and being-made rather than set in fixity.

Studies of assemblages in human-nature systems are diverse. Li (2007) deploys an analytic of assemblage to unpick the gap between the will to govern and the countering resistance to it within the context of community forestry. In arguing that there are six essential elements in any assemblage (forging alignments, rendering technical, authorising knowledge, managing failures, anti-politics and reassembling), Li (2007) presents a compelling case for a global theory of assemblage thinking. One qualification on this generic system for understanding assemblages that may be worth establishing here is that not all six elements are necessary in each and every assemblage for it to work as an assemblage. The almost universalising structure of such thinking does not easily marry with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) process-driven analysis.

Assemblage theory provides a tool-box that researchers in different disciplines adapt to particular questions. Within geography, Gibbs et al. (2015) advance geographies of assemblage with their analysis of camel country in central Australia, arguing that assemblage theory allows us to see agency between multiple species and reveals aspects of stories of colonisation and oppression that may be difficult to confront. Before this, and in a very different context, Colin McFarlane (2011) offers an analysis of the differences and connections between critical urbanism and assemblage

¹ Miriuwung is often also spelt 'Miriwoong'.

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