Social Water

by Jamie Linton

“He longed for the river. Because water always helps.” (Roy 1997, 113)

I began a book, published in 2010, by writing: “Water is what we make of it” (Linton 2010). Since then, while not quite regretting this statement, I have been thinking it over. Because in a strict sense, we have to admit that the opposite is equally true: Indeed, we are what water makes of us. This essay represents an attempt to reconcile this apparent contradiction while keeping in mind that it is the political dimension of these matters that counts.

Water is Social (1)

The statement that water is what we make of it represents a constructivist argument: We can never quite get at the actual reality of water, or anything else in what, by this way of thinking, becomes “nature”. Instead, we apprehend the world via the cultured perceptual apparatus that mediates our every engagement with it (Castree 2005). In every instance therefore – including the modern, scientific reduction of all the world’s waters to a chemical compound of hydrogen and oxygen – water must be a co-construction/production that occurs when people and water meet. The actual reality of water – like people – I argued, is a process rather than a thing. It is when this process engages with the processes of human perception and intellection that specific ideas, representations and notions of water are formed. That these human processes occur in a cultural medium means that a wide variety of ideas, representations and notions of water have occurred in different times and places throughout human history. My book was an effort to define the particular idea of water that has predominated in what can be described as modern Western culture, to describe the consequences of this idea, and to consider possibilities for alternative meanings and worlds of water.

When referring to the cultural medium in which water becomes what it is, I mean the knowledge, representational practices, technologies, legal frameworks, types of expertise and structures of social power that are dominant in any given time and place. Altogether, these produce a kind of relational coherence/matrix, associated with a particular way of knowing, representing, controlling, and allocating water. And by the same (relational) token, the cultural medium is reinforced by means of the “water” that it helps construct conceptually, and produce materially (Linton 2014; Linton 2017).

This approach is useful for analysing and critiquing water politics. It begs the unavoidability of certain questions: Who gets to define the use and value of water in any given set of circumstances? How are particular knowledges conducive to particular ways of using and distributing water? And more generally, how and in what ways is social power exercised to know, define, represent and control water? Likewise, by this approach, doing (progressive) water politics is a matter of deconstructing, and then reconstructing and reproducing wa-

ter in ways that are conducive to socially progressive outcomes (Linton 2010, chapter 10; Linton and Budds 2014). Because every instance of water occurs at the nexus of the water process and the various social processes comprising the cultural medium, water and water politics can be transformed through a wide variety of different means. As David Harvey (who inspires much of this work) claims, "there is no moment within the social process devoid of the capacity for transformative activity" (Harvey 1996, 105). In brief, this approach defines water as a resolutely social matter, and one that is therefore open to transformation from any number of purchase-points in the social process.

Water is social (2)

But there's another – perhaps more basic – way in which water is social. I stated above that water must be a co-construction/production that occurs when people and water meet. But this notion of water and people meeting is problematic when we consider the well known but perhaps less well reflected upon fact that we are ourselves made up largely of water. Water is the most abundant molecule in the human body, making up between 55 and 65 precent of adult body by weight, depending on body type. We feel thirsty as soon as we have lost two or three percent of our body-water. Thirst therefore might help us keep in mind something Jane Benett wants to remember:

> "It is very hard to keep focused on the oxymoronic truism that the human is not exclusively human, that we are made up of its. But I think this truism, and the cultivated talent for remembering it, forms a key part of the newish self that needs to emerge, the self of a new self-interest. For what counts as self-interest shifts in a world of vital materialities." (Bennett 2010, p. 110)

The vital materialities Bennett refers to are part of a growing awareness in (at least) the social sciences and humanities that the distinction between mind and matter – and more generally between culture and nature, which has been with us approximately since Aristotle, and receiving a huge boost from Descartes – is full of holes, and that our work to elaborate the social construction of nature, while not wrong, doesn't give us the whole picture. The whole picture is becoming more obvious on the outside with things like climate change and the anthropocene, and on the inside with things like thirst. Moreover, with such things, it is becoming more and more obvious that the very distinction between inside and outside is problematic.

These questions were immediate to me this summer as I found myself returning time and time again to sit and read by one of the fountains in the Jardin de l'Évêché of Limoges. As fountains go, this one isn't particularly beautiful. But, like almost every fountain I've known, it does the trick. After a few visits, I realised that from my apartment, this was the nearest place where I could go and sit in proximity to a lively body of water. (It's funny that we call it a body of water in English. The French, perhaps more hobbled by their Cartesian heritage, allow themselves only "une masse d'eau".)

Author's photograph

Being near a body, or current, or stream of water has always made me feel alive, and barring the odd flood and occasional bouts of seasickness, it has made me feel better. And I'm not alone. My brother, who is a real estate agent in Canada, tells me that merely being able to see a body of water from a property increases its value in proportion to the proximity of the property to the water. Undoubtedly there is some cultural content in this. Canadians, for example, have a thing about water. Despite having very large quantities of the stuff, they steadfastly and somewhat unreasonably refuse to export a drop of it to the United States (Julien 2015). But there's something more-than-cultural in it too. The first example given by Rachel and Stephen Kaplan in their important study, *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective,* is the common preference for being near water:

> "The presence of water is highly likely in a made-to-order preferred landscape. It can be an ocean, a big lake, a small lake, river, stream, or pond; it might be placid or fast-moving, tranquil or falling, with trees reflected or with rapids. Water is a highly prized element in the landscape… The fondness for the water seems to hold whether it is a place for active water sports or not, whether one plans to be "using" the water or is unlikely to ever directly interact with it … Water provides an excellent example of an aspect of the natural environment that is highly preferred." (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989, p. 9)

Why this preference? In what sense, and why, do we feel better when we are near water? A clue – a poster near the Vienne River placed by the City of Limoges as part of a project to develop an urban park along the riverfront – suggests it might be linked to our health. Although focused on "natural spaces" rather than water per se, the poster, (placed on the right bank of the river) affirms that, among other benefits, "people who reside within 1 kilometer of a natural space feel better and suffer from lower rates of depression."

Author's photograph.

Epidemiological studies have indicated an association between green spaces and various health outcomes or health-promoting behaviours such as physical activity. And a recent, well-reported study has shown a relation between increased urban greenness and decreased cause-specific mortality among urban Canadians (van den Bosch 2017). The epidemiologist Dan Crouse, who led the study, is now investigating findings that merely having a view of open water can have positive health effects, including reduced stress levels (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2017).

Several years ago, Veronica Strang, in her wonderfully titled article "Common Senses: Water, Sensory Experience and the Generation of Meaning" argued that water has certain characteristics that determine the generation of some common, cross-cultural meanings. "These commonalities" she argued, "appear to arise directly from two major factors. One is the observable and experiential characteristics of water: its essentiality; its fluidity and transmutability; and its aesthetic qualities… Equally important are human sensory and perceptual experiences of the qualities of water.

Though – like its qualities – these are shaped and influenced by particular cultural landscapes and engagements with water, it appears that common human physiological and cognitive processes provide sufficient experiential continuity to generate common undercurrents of meaning" (Strang 2005, p. 115).

We thus find that researchers in fields ranging from environmental psychology to epidemiology to cultural anthropology are exploring how the conjunction of the material qualities of water and the physical particularities of the human organism give rise to epiphenomena such as the production of meaning and the expression of preference that appear to be common to people of all cultures. Returning to the fountain at the Jardin de l'Évêché, there is no doubt that I feel this conjunction within myself and in the attraction I have to this place.

As it happens, I spent a good many hours by the fountain this summer reading Tim Ingold's *The Perception of the Environment* (Ingold 2000).
Among other things, Ingold explores the sense in which the world does not signify but *is*, and how it may be apprehended in a phenomenological sense through the process of engagement, i.e. through physical relatedness. Ingold's "ontology of dwelling" rests on the contention that "apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement."

> "This ontology of dwelling, I contend, provides us with a better way of coming to grips with the nature of human existence than does the alternative, Western ontology whose point of departure is that of a mind detached from the world, and that has literally to formulate it – to build an intentional world in consciousness – prior to any attempt at engagement. The contrast…is not between alternative views of the world; it is rather between two ways of apprehending it, only one of which (the Western) may be characterised as the construction of a view, that is, as a process of mental representation. As for the other, apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement, not of building but of dwelling, not of making a view *of* the world but of taking up a view *in* it." (Ingold 2000, 42)

Ingold doesn't get into the political implications of his notion of dwelling as opposed to building. But the dwelling perspective might suggest that access to and engagement with the elements that constitute our-environment-and-ourselves should be considered a right rather than a privilege. If it is indeed "the nature of human existence" to dwell in this fashion, then this type of access should be considered an existential right. This accords with another, more popular work that draws from the same phenomenological sources as Ingold, and which also served as fountain fodder this summer. "The simple premise" of David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* "is that we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human" (Abram 1996, ix). There is the criticism that in leaving other humans out of this this picture, Abram supports what he purports to dissolve – nature–society dualism. Nevertheless the political implications, which Abram also declines to go into, are the same: If being fully human is a matter of this contact, might it not be considered a human right to have access to such conviviality?

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