

The New Politics of Water

Fresh Water: New Perspectives on Water in Australia

Edited by Emily Potter, Alison Mackinnon, Stephen McKenzie and Jennifer McKay

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The editors and authors of *Fresh Water: New Perspectives on Water in Australia* write straight into one of the most discussed and contentious issues of our time: fresh water. The book is an edited collection of eighteen essays, by twenty-seven authors from around Australia. The authors write from professions and perspectives ranging across the visual arts, academia, Indigenous First Nation organisations, and government natural resource management. The book’s origins lie in a two-day workshop held in Adelaide, supported by the Hawke Research Institute at the University of Adelaide, the Academy of the Social Sciences, and the Academy of the Humanities. The workshop’s focus on ‘water justice’ translates to the essays in the collection, which illuminate issues over ‘fresh water’ (mostly surface river water), with concerns for current, past, and future social and environmental (in)justice in Australia.

Fresh Water attempts to create interdisciplinary conversations about water in Australia by bringing together such diverse perspectives. Underpinning the diversity of views is a bass chord that resonates with each essay. In introducing the collection Emily Potter and Stephen McKenzie highlight the deeper connection between the chapters: ‘At the heart of the book is the relationship between humans and water: the tensions born of an intimacy predicated on our physical needs and a Western cultural history of environmental exploitation’ (3).

The strength of this volume is that the authors do not shy from the big issues, the political and social entanglements of water in riverine communities, injustice in access to water, and the need for change in government policy and non-indigenous conceptions of water more generally. Deborah Bird Rose (whose chapter ‘Justice and longing’ begins the book) calls for a ‘new ethos’ of water that is ‘cross-cultural and inclusive’. Rose argues that we need to live for water, ‘not just make a living *from* it’ (original italics. 8). Drawing on her experiences working with Aboriginal communities on land claims from 1982 to 2006, Rose explores Indigenous connections with water, and what they reveal about western water values, as articulated in science, legislation, and everyday imaginings of water in Australia. Ecologists, such as those who worked to prevent irrigation dams being built upstream from Cooper’s Creek, recognised the need to conserve

'ecological connectivity' in management practices. However, Rose argues that the idea that water needs to be 'managed', in essence conceptualises water as a utility. Such conceptions conceal the connections of water to all life and land (13-15). Instead, connections to water need to exist in a 'new ethos' which recognises 'that all living things are manifestations of water', including humans, and that debt needs to be honoured. Rose describes a ceremony at a site named Therreyererte in Central Australia, where Aboriginal women danced a song-line of Rain Dreaming. 'They are dancing life and they are dancing water, and it is all one dance. This is the basis of a living water ethos: the dance of life and the dance of water is the same dance' (18).

While Rose takes to hand this larger need for change in non-Indigenous Australians' understandings of water, many of the 'middle' chapters of the book deal with close case-studies of particular community engagements with rivers and the conflicts that arise over rights and access to water. Geographically, the chapters cluster around the rivers of eastern Australia, particularly the Murray-Darling Basin. More particularly still, many of the essays explore changing (while enduring) connections of Indigenous groups with the Murray River, with an emphasis on South Australia and the Ngarrindjeri people (perhaps reflecting the location of the workshop in Adelaide).

One such chapter is 'Reconciliation? Culture, Nature and the Murray River', written collaboratively by Robert Hattam, Daryle Rigney, and Steve Hemming. These authors powerfully describe the Ngarrindjeri people's historical and current struggle for water (and political, legal, and social) justice in a government framework that does not recognize their valuing of Ngarrindjeri Ruwe (country—land and water). The arguments in this chapter echo Rose's by drawing attention to different values of water between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, where management frameworks reduce water to a utility. Water policies tend to write the Ngarrindjeri people (and other Indigenous groups) into the past. They are often barely included in management decisions and remain with limited rights to water. By relegating Indigenous peoples' connections to the environment to the past, the authors argue that management discourse, 'remains silent [about current Indigenous values and claims] and thereby excludes their intellectual, economic and political interests' (115-16). Although, 'Indigenous people have never ceded sovereignty of their land', the Ngarrindjeri nation has had to 'build relationships with governments, bureaucracies, interest groups and local non-Indigenous communities' in order to achieve a legal and political platform in water rights, and other natural resource debates and agendas (107 and 116). The chapter ends with the argument that, '[r]econciliation will only happen if and when non-Indigenous people begin to see their country in plural terms and as a regime of respect and toleration rather than one of assimilation, domination and control' (117).

Fresh Water also includes chapters that analyse non-Indigenous environmental values. Helen Cheney, Natalina Nheu, and Lorien Vecellio's chapter looks at community groups' attitudes towards the possible removal of four weirs by the government to increase environmental flows in the Hawkesbury-Nepean watershed. The authors present the results of social surveys and research, describing the conflicting views within the community and between the community and government. Their study emphasises the need for ongoing communication between those who live with the rivers (including irrigators, other industry water users, local residents, several Indigenous groups, and community groups) and government decision makers.

The authors place their study within an historical framework, locating some of their respondents' answers in a colonial context. The weirs were originally planned in the late nineteenth century to ensure the equitable distribution of water. The authors note that, '[a]t the time of their building these colonial structures represented water justice and, as we shall see, their legacy lives on' (190). Expectations of consistent river flows have continued, but more interestingly what comes out of the surveys is an attachment by some groups to the weirs themselves as structures. The weirs were also valued by many as a recreational space and for the fishing opportunities they created. They were also seen to be important to the health of rivers by providing a steady source of water to animals, fish, and vegetation. Further, the weirs supplied water to an irrigation industry that contributes to the local economy. Most wanted the weirs to stay, however some groups supported their removal. For example, one 'group in favour of environmental flows felt that the weirs were "not appropriate for this river system"' (197). The chapter presents some of the tensions with governments and within the community at a time of imminent local environmental change and in the midst of national and global environmental uncertainty.

Other chapters take readers to Western Australia, and stakeholder conflict over surface and ground water in Gingin shire, north of Perth; along the 'long community' of the Murray (Kay Lawrence and Nici Cumpston, 'A Story is Like a River: Weaving the Murray', 240); into the National Archives of Australia; to Federation Square in Melbourne; and briefly to New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

In the conclusion Alison MacKinnon and Jennifer McKay reflect on the fact that the authors 'spoke in different languages'; different professions and disciplines used different language and terminology. But amongst the semantics, authors 'agreed that certain key issues need to change' (273). There is a positive side to the language fissures: it is that the guts of some issues raised in one chapter, are taken up in others in a meaningful way. The authors have tried to understand each other. MacKinnon and McKay conclude that talking and listening across disciplines, cultures, communities, and bureaucracies is not an option, it is a

necessity. They also argue that it is important to consider 'water itself as a stakeholder' (274). This is a good point and aims to propose ways we might value ecologies in management frameworks (similar to current allocations of 'environmental flows'). However, the stronger point could be made that the idea of the environment or water as a 'stakeholder' is itself a problematic concept that perpetuates a management framework and discourse that Rose and Indigenous people have argued against. Instead, water (and environments generally) is (are) the basis upon which other interests are built and on which they depend. If issues of water justice in Australia are going to have a chance at equitable resolution, it is crucial that we try to see different perspectives than our own and consider our environments, to use Hattam, Rigney, and Hemming's term, as 'plural'. It is also important to consider the multiplicity of both human and non-human voices. By presenting different perspectives, *Fresh Water* is a positive example of its own arguments. The difference in the authors' language perhaps also points to another step towards water justice: the need to find a common language through which people can communicate across a range of disciplines, professions, and cultures.

Fresh Water is topical and largely addresses issues of water and water-justice head-on. It offers insights into a diversity of issues that confront Australia's river communities and the nation as a whole. In an era of environmental uncertainty, *Fresh Water* is all the more valuable.

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