

Book Review: A Future History of Water by Andrea Ballestero

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Ballestero, Andrea. *A Future History of Water*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2019. xvi + 232. Paperback, \$25.95.

In *A Future History of Water*, Andrea Ballestero navigates the technopolitical landscape of water access in two Latin American countries—Costa Rica and Brazil. The aim of the book is to elucidate: “if water is to be a human right, and not a commodity, how do you differentiate these two legal and economic formulations? And more generally, how do people create distinctions and why?” (p. 3). In this work, these field sites are deemed critical for another reason; in both Costa Rica and Brazil, an explicit recognition of access to water as a human right is not formally incorporated in the national constitutions. Ballestero skillfully operates with this situation through deft methodological inventiveness.

Given that the countries do not rely on the symbolic significance of law to cater to the problem of water access and provision, the ethnographic lens allows the author to explore unconventional avenues such as NGOs, bureaucratic offices, scientific institutions, and international networks like the World Water Forum where the struggles over differentiating between regimes of value that make water into a right versus a commodity unfold. Her interlocutors include economists, lawyers, engineers, environmental scientists, philosophers, sociologists, farmers and high school teachers. It is at these diverse sites that Ballestero traces the “effective epistemic and political work of making distinctions matter” (p. 4).

By examining this work, *A Future History of Water* elaborates how water is “kept mattering” through quotidian bureaucratic and technical decisions and how it’s very materiality changes through the work of making bifurcations. The analytic of bifurcation further compels the framework of “future history” as it is through these very decisions and distinctions that people connect their everyday work to a future that is yet to be. It is in this situation that her collaborators’

work becomes “a constant effort to make distinctions recognizable, since the more you try to clarify and separate, the more you bring about mutuality, these differentiations struggles turn water into a planetary archive of meaning and matters. An archive that is constituted through ongoing processes of abstraction and materialization, where word and matter, formalization and substance are inseparable” (p. 7).

A critique of liberal fantasies of control over nature is woven throughout the ethnographic episodes of the book. Through interviews and interaction, Ballestero, at various points, clarifies that the subject position of her interlocuters is far from any idealized imagination of the modern liberal individual. Instead of a mastery of history, the projects that her interlocuters participate in “locate the possibility of change not in a historical metanarrative, but in concrete junctures where she conducts everyday political and epistemic labor to affect bifurcations” (p. 8).

Ballesteros conceptualizes these junctures as “technical devices;” the devices function as heuristics around which each chapter, namely: “Formula,” “Index,” “List,” and “Pact,” respectively, is organized. Like her interlocuters, the author does not take a metahistorical approach to the devices under consideration. Instead of a top-down theorization where devices become subtexts of overdetermining political and economic structures, the focus is on attending to the morphology of the device itself as it emerges in various ethnographic encounters. The ethical rationale of this methodological choice is summed up by Ballestero in a pithy statement: “while we search for new macro schemas to adequately address ongoing struggles over things as basic as water, many fundamental questions of our times are being answered quietly, most inadvertently, through devices like the ones I study” (p. 8). Far from being a panacea, the devices that the author turns to are humble and precarious in nature. Despite this precariousness, her interlocuters, push these devices to their limits, knowing that they are not always going to succeed.

One of the key ideas of the book is that the politics of the device is not predetermined; rather, it unfolds in time and the interlocutors who work with them do not have a monopoly over the future. At times when water's tendency to change form disorients our inherited political and environmental categories, such a temporal orientation, according to the author, is crucial to interrogate the contradictory possibilities of technological processes. In addition to this, while the devices foreground the material entanglements of water, *A Future History of Water* is not simply satisfied with enumerating them. The deeper question that the book asks is: "what do people do when entanglements are part and parcel of their sense of the world?" (p. 15). Each chapter answers this question by examining the ways in which devices are mobilized, what they allow the social actors to do and what escapes their grasps. For instance, Chapter One, "Formula," examines the work of economic regulators in calculating the price of water for human consumption. It highlights how mathematical calculations become enactments of humanitarian commitments as through these very calculations' numeric demands of pricing water in legal and economic contexts are determined.

This specific treatment of the technical device and temporality allows Ballesterio to develop an analytic of the device as an "ethnographic category," a formulation that seems critical for anthropological studies in/of increasingly unstable ecological circumstances beyond existing theories of new materialism and actor-network theory. Technical devices are practices in the world, a world they affect by creating new categories of difference. The author argues, "they help us (ethnographers) create concepts to make sense of the world, and they make words in relation to concepts" (p. 11).

In addition to this, the move from 'histories of the future' to 'future histories' further opens up the scope of ethnographic inquiries by demonstrating frameworks of analysis that can consider the

unpredictability of the future—“the non-imaginable dimension of the future” (p. 26). Importantly, the non-imaginable is not non-analyzable; Ballestero traces it in the thick networks of everyday lives of her interlocuters. The author says, “my conceptualization of a future history signals happenings that will be recognizable as meaningful only from the future...The devices that are analyzed, have the potential of becoming that future history, or at least of creating its preconditions (p. 26). To conclude, through the analytic of bifurcation, technical devices and a future history, Ballestero’s ethnography indexes ways of writing from the conditions of uncertainties, from entanglements that might become a potential present as new categories, as technical labor and struggles are being waged to secure basic conditions of life in increasingly precarious environments.

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