The Power of Water
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"Whiskey is for drinking; water is for fighting," goes a frequently cited aphorism often attributed to American essayist and author Mark Twain.

It's a provocative assertion that evokes the culture of the 19th-century frontier outpost in the arid Western United States. And it effectively gives the Hollywood Western trope of the hard-drinking saloon an ironic twist: according to the aphorism, it's the thirst for water, not whiskey, that fuels conflicts on the high plains, whether they be lawsuits in the courtroom or brawls in the barroom. But it's also a problematic statement, and not just because there's no record of Twain ever having written it.[2]

The aphorism implicitly references a world that consists of 'resources' – valuable nuggets of matter, in this case water resources – that are found in-place in a fixed quantity. One fights over water, presumably, to control access to it. The quotation thus reproduces a *realpolitik* vision of the world, in which politics is a zero-sum game. Scarce resources (including, in this instance, water resources) are 'fought over' as each party attempts to assert power over others in an effort to increase its share. Furthermore, because the resource occurs unevenly in space, this competition is typically played out through efforts to obtain and control territory. Ultimately, the contest over territory, driven by a universal thirst for water (and other resources), feeds into a vicious circle: control over resources and territory generates enhanced power which, in turn, enables further seizure of resources and territory, etc.

In short, even as the quotation upends our understanding of the ways in which water and whiskey are enrolled in political conflict, it reproduces a number of 'common-sense' beliefs about the relationship between nature, place, society, politics, and power: *Nature* is understood as static and pre-social; *space* (or *territory*) is an object that one seeks to control in order to accumulate elements of nature that exist at specific points in space; *society* is inherently conflictual; and *power* is fundamentally a means to determine who gets how much of what and where. When viewed from this perspective, it is hardly surprising that, in an arid region like the western United States, water spurs fighting. The winner gets to invest in agriculture, industry, urbanisation, modernisation, development, and state building. And the loser seeks solace in whiskey.

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[1] I am grateful to Joe Williams for his comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

[2] According to the Quote Investigator website, the first known appearance of the aphorism in print was in 1983, 73 years after Twain's death, when the Aberdeen, South Dakota newspaper referenced it (without attribution to Twain) to South Dakota's Secretary of Water and Natural Resources (http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/06/03/whiskey-water/).

Notwithstanding the straightforward logic of this narrative, however, it is based on a number of assumptions that increasingly are being challenged by critical scholars, spurred on by the 'spatial turn' and the constructivist perspectives on power discussed by Coleman and Agnew in their introduction to this volume. For well over a decade, critics have been asserting that nature, and most particularly 'resources' (elements of nature that are assigned specific social value), reflect human as well as physical processes, to the point that all seemingly 'natural' objects and processes are 'social nature' (Castree & Braun, 2001) or 'second nature' (Smith, 2008). Indeed, the very idea of self-evident, ontological distinctions between the human and the non-human, and between the living and the non-living, have been called into question (Whatmore, 2002). A parallel critical lens has been applied to space, as Doreen Massey (2005) and others have urged that space needs to be understood not as a static background (wherein bits of nature are located) but as a series of relationships and environments that are forever being produced by human and non-human forces, across, and indeed forming, a range of scales (see also, Clark, 2011). Territory is similarly understood increasingly not simply as space that is bounded and controlled, but rather as space that is organised through a calculative matrix so as to serve specific social functions associated with modern norms and institutions of social power (Elden, 2013). And, most fundamentally, connecting each of these critical perspectives together is a nuanced understanding of power, outlined by Coleman and Agnew in their introduction to this volume, under which power is theorised not simply as a force that is applied to obtain something from the world (an *allocative* application of power) but rather as a *world-making*, or *generative* force. In the geographic context, this is a *geo-power*, a power that transforms, as well as reflects, the shape of the world.

Water provides a particularly rich example for exploring this generative perspective on power. Whilst water is at times an *object* of power (i.e. a thing for 'fighting [over]') it also generates power and politics in a host of ways, as it intervenes in and shapes ongoing relations between, and conceptualisations of, institutions of nature, space, territory, and social organisation.

Power and Flow

Water is never *just* an object of politics. Water occurs in specific environments – both physical and political. Attempts to harness it for social purposes transform those environments, regardless of whether there is overt conflict. The classic account of this is Karl Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism* (1957), where he argues that the challenges posed by arid environments legitimise state expenditure in water infrastructure. In such environments, 'despotic' regimes emerge to translate this infrastructural power into other, related domains: taxation, militarisation, land management, and ultimately the wide-ranging control of social institutions and populations. For Wittfogel, water management is a key source of social power, a weapon of the powerful, a component of state ideology, and an arena in which control over territory is contested and exercised. Donald Worster (1992) has extended this perspective to the western United States in

Rivers of Empire, in which the 'whiskey is for drinking, water is for fighting' maxim is illustrated through a history of regional water policy.

Since Wittfogel and Worster, a large number of subsequent studies have been conducted in rural and urban areas on the politics of managing water supplies (e.g. Bakker, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2004). A central theme of this work has been to connect flows of water, and the drive to control these flows, with flows of capital and ideology across a range of scales. And yet, for those seeking a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between water and power, such studies fall short in some respects. As John Agnew (2011) notes, scholars of water politics tend to reproduce a focus on power as an allocative mechanism, even (or perhaps especially) when it is analysed in the context of political economy. However, according to Agnew, power, even when exercised in the context of resource competition, is not always a negative force. Water resources that cross borders (whether within states or between states) are as likely to highlight shared interest and build recognition of a need for cooperative institutions as they are to spur tension and conflict.

The other shortcoming of a perspective that focuses solely on struggles for access to water resources is that the material properties of water become dissipated amidst an abstraction of flows (Linton, 2010; Marston *et al.*, 2005). Water's liquidity, its depth, its force, and quite literally its power to shape places – both physically by eroding landscapes and affectively by giving those landscapes meaning – are elided when water is conceived solely as an object that is encountered through acts of consumption and when the connection between water and power is associated solely with struggles over allocation. In a space like India's Mughal Gardens, it becomes impossible to separate the affective powers emerging from manipulation of water from the social power that this control both facilitates and represents (Wescoat & Wolschke-Bulmahn, 1996). Stephanie Lavau (2013) considers this explicitly when noting how part of the power of a river lies in its capacity to be much more than a carrier of water. Rivers are places in their own right – breeding grounds and habitats, wayfinding points and agents of erasure, barriers and connectors, sites of tragedy, sustenance, and memory. The key aspect of a river, then, is its 'ontological multiplicity' (Steinberg & Peters, 2015, p. 257) and this both generates power and makes water the object of power in a way that exceeds its utility as a consumable resource.

Power and Invisibility

A second commonplace association of water with power lies in the ways in which its surface, seemingly free from physical barriers and national borders, facilitates the projection of power to distant lands, through both military and commercial adventures. Whether heralding the enduring significance of sea power (e.g. Mahan, 1890) or proclaiming its decline (e.g. Mackinder, 1904), geopolitical theorists have long turned to the sea as the antithesis of land, a space that power can be projected *across* so that it then can be applied in the construction and protection of landed territory, but not a space in which power itself is constituted.

This perspective is elaborated on by Carl Schmitt (2003, 2014), who asserts that the ocean's tendency to facilitate the *projection* of power but not its generation lies in its material properties that resist inscription. For Schmitt, "the sea has no *character*, in the original sense of the word, which comes from the Greek *charassein*, meaning to engrave, to scratch, to imprint….On the waves there is nothing but waves" (Schmitt, 2003, pp. 42-43, emphasis in original). In one sense, this accurately describes the challenges that the ocean's materiality impose on those would seek to territorialise it. Efforts to divide the ocean into bounded spaces, whether to delimit sovereign territories or to define zones for managing resource extraction or environmental protection, are confounded by states' inability to mark the sea and, at least until very recently, by difficulties inherent in locating oneself on its vast and seemingly undifferentiated surface (Steinberg, 2001, 2009). Furthermore, even now, when satellite technologies can be used to ascertain the location of boundaries and ships with relative accuracy, enforcement remains weak due to difficulties in policing ocean-space (Langewiesche, 2004).

However, this perspective rests on broader, less tenable, assumptions about the power of invisibility, and the invisibility of power. According to Schmitt and others, the power of the ocean to facilitate the projection of some forms of social power (e.g. the movement of naval forces and merchant vessels) and hinder others (e.g. the extension of state policing power) lies in the ways in which it supports invisibility. The ocean is perceived as flat and undifferentiated. To the extent that it is understood to have features, these are understood as monotonously repetitive (see also Barthes, 1972, and Lévi-Strauss, 1973, as cited in Steinberg & Peters, 2015). Thus, according to Schmitt, neither the ocean nor objects placed on the ocean can be attributed with the level of social meaning that can be associated with features emplaced on solid ground. Nor can areas of the ocean gain the political status that accrues on land when 'places' are mapped and enclosed. For Schmitt, while power on land is achieved through visibility ('inscription'), the power of the ocean (and water more generally) is a kind of anti-power. Power in the ocean cannot possibly result from any forces or meanings generated on or by its waters because, even if power is applied to transform the sea, such transformations cannot be made visible. Because the ocean is immune to inscription it can be neither a source nor site of power. Rather the geopolitical significance of the ocean lies in how it facilitates the projection of externally generated forces across its expanse. The ocean then becomes materially insignificant, a space with no properties other than abstract distance and linear time. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, the ocean is understood as devoid of water (Steinberg, 2009), a perspective that informs not just geopolitical theorists but also oceanographers who, working from the Eulerian perspective on fluid dynamics that dominates the field, model water as an inert mass, a space upon which forces act but whose essential physical state is stasis, not movement (Steinberg, 2013).

At one level, this perspective on the ocean (and, in fact, any water body) can be critiqued for its empirical naiveté. Anyone who has spent time at sea will know that the ocean is not a flat, monotonous, static surface and that one cannot

engage it without considering the material properties of water (Anderson & Peters, 2014; Brown & Humberstone, 2015). Indeed waves themselves are features that draw upon and construct the ocean's verticality, its temporality, and the incessant movement of its molecules (as well as a range of other hydrographic, atmospheric, and celestial forces that extend beyond the spaces typically designated as 'ocean'). From the repetition of wave after wave to the changing characteristics of waves before, during, and after a storm, waves have a complex ontology that engages both time and space at multiple scales (Helmreich, 2014), insinuating the ocean's physical geography into the ongoing social dialectic of reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) attribute to the ocean. A focus on contemporary encounters with the sea further direct attention to its depths, and the ways in which these depths mediate relations not just with the surface but with worlds beyond, on land, in the atmosphere, and in the bodies that engage maritime space (Squire, 2016; Starosielski, 2015).

However, simply acknowledging the empirical richness of water – and, in particular, its depth and its temporalities – does not, in itself, fundamentally move us beyond an understanding that locates the ocean's power in its tendency toward invisibility. Indeed, while recognition of depth may lead to an understanding of the ocean as immersive and haptic (e.g. Merchant, 2014; Squire, 2016), alternately recognition of depth may buttress an idealisation of the ocean as a space of invisibilities and disappearances (Alaimo, 2014; Peters & Steinberg, 2014).

The challenge, then, is not for critical geographers to add a third or fourth dimension to our understanding of water. Such a shift does not, in and of itself, advance us beyond an understanding of water as a substance whose power emerges simply from the way in which it facilitates movement across (or through) its ideally formless mass. Instead, the remainder of this chapter suggests two different approaches for engaging the relationship between water and power. The first turns to water's material properties, not simply as a space of flows but as a space of dynamic matter, with particular geophysical and molecular properties that generate power through the construction of space, and that construct space through the generation of power. The second turns to water's discursive force, exploring the power of water to spur how we think about, and through, space.

The Material Power of Water

The relationship between water and power has a long history. For millennia, humans have used the force of falling water to power mills that process grain, timber, and other raw materials. In today's hydroelectric dams, the role of water is not much different, even if the end product is electricity rather than mechanical action. Similarly, the source of energy that powered the industrial revolution – the steam engine – depended on harnessing water to generate power. With the invention of the steam engine, heat, rather than gravity, became the catalyst and the effect on turbines was brought about by a transformation of water's state (into steam) rather than by force generated from a fall in elevation.

However the underlying relationship remained fundamentally unchanged from the days of the water wheel: humans harnessed natural forces to change the position of water molecules so as to produce energy that could be utilised for other purposes. Even today, some of the most sophisticated forms of energy generation are dependent on water, including hydraulic fracturing (fracking) which uses the injection of water into rock to release gasses, and nuclear power, in which water plays a key role in cooling fuel sources and controlling reactions. In short, the links between water and contemporary forms of power generation run deep, whether through water being a source of power (e.g. hydroelectricity), a precondition of power used in extraction (e.g. fracking), production (e.g. biofuels), or electrification (e.g. thermoelectric power), or a bearer of power (e.g. hot water heating of urban districts).

In this context, many environmental management proponents refer to a water-energy (or, in some iterations, water-energy-food) *nexus* of mutual interdependence (Hoff, 2011; Leck *et al.*, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2011). Leaving agriculture out of the equation for the moment, this relationship between water and energy goes in both directions. The production of water in a particular place – whether by desalination, groundwater extraction, or transportation from a distant source – requires significant energy resources. As a result, and because of the relatively low economic value of a given unit of water relative to its weight or volume, it is often most efficient to 'move' water through indirect means. For instance, in the southwestern United States relatively inexpensive power from inland hydroelectric dams is used to power desalination plants that provide water for communities that are thirsty for both water and power (Williams *et al.*, 2014). Water is thus 'moved' from the inland desert to the coastal metropolis, but only through its embedding in the power grid. Completing the cycle, agriculture is a major consumer of both water and power. Nexus theorists thus emphasise that an increase in one component of the nexus necessitates an increase in the others, whether because the industry in question (water provision, energy generation, or food production) needs new inputs or because, after making investments in fixed infrastructure, it requires new markets.

This 'nexus', however, just scratches the surface of the ways in which water and power are imbricated with each other. It is not just that water enables the generation of power, through hydromechanical or hydroelectric dams, or through serving as a coolant or medium for generating plants. Water also can lubricate the links between electric (or mechanical) power and social power. As Williams *et al.* have written,

> The multifarious and complex interactions between water and energy, or what has come to be known as the *water-energy nexus*, are hotly contested, reflective of struggles between interest groups, and always develop through the exercise of political and economic power. Indeed, by its very conception, 'the nexus' betokens political terrain. (Williams *et al.*, 2014: 3)

In short, water is not just an *object* of power, but also a substance that generates and transfers power, and moves power between both geographic and political-

economic domains. But this suggests that water's significance, and its role as a source, locus, and object of power, lies not just in the resource that it provides to users but also in what it materially *is,* a collection of molecules that have unique properties not just because they form a substance that is crucial for human life, but also in the ways in which they change shape and physical state, in the process interacting with and transforming the material and social world around them.

Water beyond Liquid

To explore this point further, it is useful to recall that part of the power of water results from the fact that it is *not* always in a liquid state. Water also exists in gaseous and solid forms, and in these forms – and in the transformations between these forms and its liquid state – water takes on new capacities to impact social behaviours, political institutions, and physical environments...in short, to generate power.

Although liquid is generally considered the normative state of water, in fact almost 69 percent of the earth's freshwater is in a permanent frozen state, in ice caps, glaciers, or permanent snow (Shiklomanov, 1993). This tendency of freshwater to be in solid form, however, is rarely noted in studies of municipal and regional water provision, even when water management is placed within an explicitly global context. A similar acceptance of water's liquid state as normative occurs in scholarship on the ocean. Even though 15 percent of the world-ocean is covered by sea ice for at least part of the year (U.S. National Snow and Ice Data Center, n.d.), only one of the 320 articles in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (United Nations, 1982) acknowledges that the ocean can have a frozen state. In this one instance (Article 234 of UNCLOS), the only power attributed to sea ice is the power of *disruption,* in particular the power to disrupt modern maritime navigation (Aporta, 2011). Sea ice certainly has these powers – unexpectedly early winter freezing can lock in ships, multi-year ice makes some areas of the ocean impassable to all but the strongest icebreakers, icebergs send the occasional vessel to the bottom of the sea – but the perspective forecloses consideration of a range of other ways in which sea ice, as a particular form of (semi-)solid, both impacts and reflects social power relations.

It seems likely that some of the myopia in perceiving the complex powers of sea ice originates in seeing ice as the solid, static antithesis to liquid, dynamic, and continually flowing water. However, just as water is never a simple field of abstract flow, ice is neither truly solid nor static. The retreat and growth of a glacier may exist in temporary equilibrium, giving the appearance of stability, but even 'permanent' ice is forever in formation and forever on the move. Put another way, ice is no more a static, solid barrier than liquid water is a formless surface of flow. Rather, like liquid water, frozen water exerts power in a complex matrix of effects wherein its own mobilities intersect with the mobilities of those who navigate its expanse.

This is perhaps most evident when turning to non-human residents of icy regions, such as polar bears. However humans as well can have their mobility

facilitated by the presence of ice. The Inuit of North America and Greenland, for instance, utilise seasonal, annually occurring trails to travel across sea ice and ice-covered lands (Pan Inuit Trails, n.d.). Indeed, for many northern peoples, winter, when the ground and water are frozen and thus easily traversable, is the time to go out to hunt and pay visits to distant communities (Krupnik *et al.*, 2010). Even navigators from outside these traditions have found ways to use the power of sea ice – as a specific, re-forming substance that both locks things in and moves them – to facilitate navigation. As Kimberley Peters (2015) has shown, sea ice is particularly well suited toward the practice of drifting, a navigational technique that reworks the assumed relationship (in Western navigation) between a static ocean and a mobile vessel. Drawing on the explorations of Fridtjof Nansen in the late nineteenth century, who embedded his ship in drifting pack ice as a means to explore otherwise inaccessible frozen oceans, Peters demonstrates how frozen water, like liquid water, exerts powers that *both* hinder and enable mobility, but in different ways than occur in the liquid ocean.

The powers of frozen water are multiple. In addition to exerting power over the mobile ship (or mobile hunter) and thereby making certain relations possible while forestalling others, the changing state of water between liquid and solid, like the exchange between liquid and gas that occurs in a steam engine, exerts power on a range of other relationships, while, at the same time, reflecting the environment of social power in which those social relationships occur. And, as in the broad framework of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), while one aspect of the power of water emanates from its constitution through ongoing processes of *becoming* (i.e. ontogenesis), where water is continually moving between states, this power is realised through a process of *definition* or *being* (i.e. ontology), where water is defined through absolute (if arbitrary) association with categorical states like 'liquid' or 'solid'.

Defining a strict separation between 'ice' and 'water' is anything but straightforward. Ice is rarely entirely frozen through its entire volume. Even at the surface, where it is most apparent whether water has predominantly solid or liquid properties, ambiguities persist as when, for instance, primarily solid ice has puddles of liquid on its surface (a condition that complicates efforts to ascertain the presence of ice from remote sensing of albedo reflectivity (Breivik *et al.*, 2010; Howell *et al.*, 2005)). These ambiguities are magnified when one proceeds from defining whether a series of water molecules are liquid or solid to defining whether an *area* is ice-covered, a key designation in marine spatial planning and certain aspects of ocean law. Even if albedo reflectivity is correctly correlated with the presence of ice, there is no conventional standard for defining the threshold percentage of ice extent that permits an area to be classified as 'ice-covered' – typical definitions range from 10 percent to 30 percent (United States National Snow and Ice Data Center, n.d.). In many cases the threshold will change depending on how the user seeks to interact with the environment (Steinberg *et al.*, 2015). For instance, a shipping company might like to see a threshold set at 10 percent, since at that point the presence of sea ice might present enough of a hazard that it would add an intolerable amount of risk

to a planned sailing. On the other hand, an Inuit hunter might set the threshold at 90 percent, since any concentration below that would likely pose a hazard for someone travelling by dogsled or snowmobile. Furthermore, even once a decision is made regarding the ice extent threshold, the designation of an area as 'ice-covered' for legal or planning purposes is complicated by seasonal variability, random and secular interannual variance, and decisions regarding the size of the area to be designated.

As Steinberg and Kristoffersen (forthcoming) discuss in the context of Canadian and Norwegian sea ice mapping initiatives, efforts to define and map the presence of sea ice both reflect and generate embedded power relations. As various definitions and standards are applied for different purposes, the bodies of ice (or water), as well as the map, ultimately become actors that transform and translate relationships between political economic interests and state power. Steinberg and Kristoffersen thus contrast the case of Norway, where marine management maps for the Barents Sea have changed over time to show a decline in sea ice, with Canada, where the national atlas, somewhat counterintuitively given global patterns of climate change, has changed over time to depict an *increase* in ice extent. There are legitimate reasons for the changes in maps in both cases: In Norway the area of sea ice definitely has been receding, and in Canada the shift reflects a change in methods to better align national maps with accepted scientific standards. However, the changes also reflect some very specific political objectives. In Norway, the Lofoten-Barents Sea Management Plan restricts oil and gas exploration to open waters, and so it is in the interest of the government (which is a strong supporter of resource extraction) to highlight the extent of sea ice retreat. In Canada, by contrast, the presence of sea ice supports Canada's claims that the waters of its Arctic archipelago are its internal waters by suggesting a liminal surface that extends notions of territory normally associated with solid land to the waters that permeate this space. Furthermore, the image of ice-infested northern waters buttresses Canada's assertion that the Northwest Passage is not a navigable waterway and therefore should not be subject to UNCLOS' provision guaranteeing all nations' vessels unregulated transit passage through straits that are used for international navigation.

In both of these examples, power is being exerted not just over *control* of water but over its very *definition*: Different interest groups are making claims about water as a means toward achieving an objective.[3] The cartographic conflicts in Canada and Norway are not struggles over access but rather struggles over water's meaning, a meaning that accrues (and is employed) with specific reference to perceptions and representations of water's geophysical state. As such the power of water is not just material, but discursive, not just allocative, but generative. The definition of water and the meanings and qualities that are ascribed to water in these debates are not just outcomes of politics, or indicators of differential levels of power. They are also are among the means by which

[3] There are parallels here with the ways in which the geophysical category of 'wetland' similarly creates a singular spatial abstraction out of a complex set of interdependent processes and geomorphologies, and then applies these for planning purposes (Robertson, 2000).

these differential levels of power are constructed. In other words, water not only has the power to shape landscapes and reproduce power differentials. It also has the power to define the world in which that power is contested.

The Discursive Power of Water

As the above discussion demonstrates, although struggles over water are frequently characterised by efforts to control water and determine who has access to it, they also are characterised by efforts to define it. And the way in which we define water matters because water has the power to change not only the way the world is organised and regulated (i.e. through laws and regulations like UNCLOS or Norway's Lofoten-Barents Sea Management Plan) but also the way that the world is perceived.

Water has long had a prominent role in the philosophies and cultural attitudes of Western societies based in continental mainlands. Schmitt's denigration of the ocean as a space beyond inscription, and hence without politics, has its origins in a broader set of attitudes not just toward the ocean but toward the very substance of water, as simultaneously a force, an environment, and a vehicle for other forces and environments. Amidst this confluence of meanings, water emerged in the writings of Immanuel Kant and many others as a 'theory machine' (Helmreich, 2011), a signifier in which the dynamism and indeterminacy of the physical environment becomes both transparent and opaque, and which thereby can be used to both dislocate and locate social institutions and behaviours. Likewise, in Romantic era art and literature water was the quintessential space of the sublime, a substance that was understood as having an emotive power that overshadowed, and indeed inhibited, rational understanding (Steinberg, 2001). In this context, depictions of water and thoughts about, or inspired by, water have shaped not just how societies have perceived water as a marginal, and in some sense, antithetical space but also how they have perceived themselves and the terrestrial world they inhabit.

However, this perspective on water, as a space of evocation but not essence, a tool for theorisation but not an environment of practice, is itself rooted in a Western, continentalist ontology where politics and society occur on land. Not surprisingly, cultures in which livelihoods more thoroughly encompass watery spaces associate water with a richer set of meanings, grounded in both water's materiality and in the way that it is encountered in the course of everyday life (Hastrup & Hastrup, 2016; Strang, 2004). In this light, scholars of island societies and archipelagos offer a particularly provocative critique, stressing not only that water is incorporated into island residents' lifeworlds but also that water plays a specific role *both* in defining distinct (but also essentially similar) islands *and* in creating a means for theorising their connection and their existence in a broader geopolitical and geophysical system (Deleuze, 1997, 2004; DeLoughrey, 2007; Hau'ofa, 2008; Stratford *et al.*, 2011). As Stratford *et al.* note, the island is the paradigmatic space that contrasts a bounded 'inside' against an all-encompassing 'outside' (see also, Steinberg, 2005, 2009). However, when placed in the context of the archipelago – a universe of endless repetitions and differentiations, barriers and flows, land and water – the ontology suggested by

the archipelago (and, importantly, the one that is lived by archipelagic residents) presents a powerful tool for rethinking the very idea of singular political communities.

Thus, water is not simply a liquid. It is an entity that exceeds itself and its fundamental liquidity, as it carries its influence into livelihoods and geophysical processes on land, as it crosses borders and physical states, and as it maintains its role as a crucial input for everything from the maintenance of electricity generation and distribution systems to the maintenance of human bodies. Amidst its various flows, between places and between geophysical states, the preeminent power of water may not be its contribution to any one industry or to shaping landscapes but rather its capacity to change the way that we *think* about the world. In its dynamism and its incessant recomposition, in the ways in which it fosters mobilities and connections while also defining distinct entities, and in the ways in which it serves as an environment, element, and object of contestation, water has a power that goes beyond the coursing torrent carving a landscape, the plume of steam engaging a turbine, or the river sucked dry for irrigation. Water is not only an object of power, a thing for 'fighting', but also a source of power, the power to revision the world.

This point is taken up by Steinberg and Peters (2015) in their call for a 'wet ontology' wherein they argue that the voluminous and dynamic properties of the ocean can be engaged not just for enhancing our understanding of the world's 'wet' spaces but, more profoundly, for reconceptualising the world:

> Thinking from the ocean [is] a means toward unearthing a material perspective that acknowledges the volumes within which territory is practised: a world of fluidities where place is forever in formation and where power is simultaneously projected on, through, in, and about space. A wet ontology can bring geographic theory to the sea, and bring the sea to geographic theory. (Steinberg & Peters, 2015, 261)

Although referring specifically to the ocean, and focusing implicitly on water's liquid state, this invocation of the materiality of 'wetness' is generally relevant to water more broadly, in all its states, environments, and salinity levels. We live in a world where conceptions of space and instruments of power are designed almost exclusively with an understanding that solid, surficial land is the essential space of society. As this perspective is increasingly challenged by heightened global flows, unprecedented anthropogenic change, and the continual blurring of boundaries between the human and non-human, a recognition of water's 'wetness', and all the dimensions of volume, mobility, volatility, and indeterminacy that this implies, can empower the articulation of a new ontology that recognises the complexities and interdependencies that constitute, reflect, and enable expressions of power.

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