

PART III

Cultural Currencies

CURRENTS MOVE. They circulate, inundate, ebb, and flow. Currencies delineate and differentiate. They also unite. They bring societies into material and symbolic contact with the energy stores they possess, the values and wants to which they aspire (money, time, life, belief, resource, rule), and the resources they can expend and need to preserve. Circulating, currencies determine discourses of interchange, and as they do so, they index, activate, and define culture (Lee and LiPuma 2002). The three chapters in this section focus on the multiple meanings suggested by the idea of “currencies” when culture leads discussions of value in water policy and management strategies. Authors in this section re-endow the idea of currency with its literal meanings: circulation, flow, and acceptance. These essays conclude the volume, inviting reflection on all nine chapters as a collective hydrohumanities body of work.

By way of the hydrohumanities, scholars in this section stake claims on currencies that subvert the term’s commonplace economic, capitalist, and remunerative material value. This body of study recalls a historiography of cultural critique from the nineteenth century forward: from the socioeconomist Thorstein Veblen (1899), who described capitalist economics as a predatory system of control realized through class structures built upon behaviors that establish social status over others, to the dialectical-historical materialism of twentieth-century critical theory, and into new materialisms emerging in the current century (e.g., Jay 1996; Coole 2013; Lettow 2017; Cotter, 2016; Ballesterio 2019). Even today, when humanities scholars are defining posthumanist modes of inquiry, problem-solving, and exchange (e.g., Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedrén 2015), capitalism and the cultural institutions it has borne, including practices that exhibit dominance over

nature, still carry significant value in the undercurrents of critical social discourse. Considering human and nonhuman natures together as “naturalcultural” (Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedrén 2015, 82) is becoming a commonplace imperative, proposed in the interest of renegotiating currencies of predation toward economies of integrated cultural circulation.

These authors propose a heightened focus on humanities scholarship that accelerates inclusion of culture—broadly defined—into public policy and management of water. They provide evidence for past, present, and proposed futures and offer promise for resolving current environmental problems that pose uncertainty with respect to water futures, advocating for strategies based more on cultural interrelationships with water than on dominance over nature.

At the level of a localized region—the state of California—Rina C. Faletti focuses in chapter 7 on water problems made visible by photographers. The images under discussion engage potent issues introduced on the one hand by hydrological science and, on the other, by agricultural fieldwork, revealing social inequities and cultural values related to large-scale industrial water supply development. Faletti anchors her analysis on a now-historic photograph, published in 1977 by a hydrogeologist, whose circulation ultimately influenced policy changes grounded in restructured thinking about groundwater use and water security. She connects this image to a history of agricultural documentary photography in California: “From images of transient Dust Bowl and Great Depression workers, to photographs of Mexican braceros, interned Japanese farmers, Black and Filipino migrant laborers, and United Farm Workers, photographers exposed a previously invisible social landscape and the faces of the laboring classes who bolstered massive-scale water extraction schemes.” These images have unveiled previously unseen water-related crises, from geological to social, exposing them as cultural problems, and leading to mindful policy changes: “The photographic image opens critical questions onto a host of scientific and cultural concepts at once, questions that lead to action through exposure and discussion of the once-invisible problem.”

At the regional and national level in the Indus Valley, James L. Wescoat Jr. and Abubakr Muhammed show in chapter 8, through a historical and systems management analysis, that, from the beginnings of human interaction with waters in the Indus Valley, water management has been most healthy when aligned with the cultural form of the irrigated garden. Yet, more than a century of technocratic water management in the region has led not only to inefficiency, but also to “unfair competition, unbridled capital accumulation, and oppressive power relations.” The authors advise reincorporation of the garden idea into future policy thinking, so that “in place of the illusory goal of optimizing economic development or romanticizing traditional landscapes, the cultural approach espoused here helps articulate the ‘purpose’ of a river basin’s existence, the ‘meaning’ of its people’s aspirations, the moral dangers of mismanagement, and the aesthetic prospects of the irrigated garden model.” This movement toward cultural models promoted by

transdisciplinary humanities research and toward “jointly humanistic and scientific ideals,” argue the authors, will better meet regional water needs in this region.

On the global scale, Veronica Strang in chapter 9 examines her experience as an invited expert involved in crafting the 2017 United Nations Principles for Water, a process that included explicit delineation of cultural aspects of water. Defining water’s cultural uses reached beyond limited characterizations of water “culture” as ornament and recreation, for example, to consider water a key to environmental well-being. Strang argues that “it is in bridging these gaps, between different ideas about value, that the theoretical frameworks and the cultural translation provided by the social sciences and the humanities is vital.” She evaluates how water-as-culture should bear upon policy-making decisions that guide global practices of water use and management into the future, observing that “deeper cultural values are not readily quantified. Social scientists and humanities scholars bring to the table robust qualitative methods that can make more complex values visible and comprehensible.”

The outcomes suggested in this section necessarily involve increasing the demands and risks in the emerging realm of the hydrohumanities, as humanists reexamine the roles and responsibilities of environmental scholarship. The essays in this section, and indeed in this entire volume, ultimately propose that the hydrohumanities, in centering on water, can contribute to articulating problems and to inspiring creative solutions toward more inclusive water currencies.

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