Located within the field of environmental humanities, this volume engages with one of the most pressing contemporary environmental challenges of our time: how can we shift our understanding and realign what water means to us? Water is increasingly at the centre of scientific and public debates about climate change. In these debates, rising sea levels compete against desertification; hurricanes and floods follow periods of prolonged drought. As we continue to pollute, canalise and desalinate waters, the ambiguous nature of our relationship with these entities becomes visible. From the paradiiac and pristine scenery of holiday postcards through to the devastated landscapes of post-tsunami news reports, images of waters surround us. And while we continue to damage what most sustains us, collective precarity grows.

Breaking down disciplinary boundaries, with contributions from scholars in the visual arts, history, earth systems, anthropology, architecture, literature and creative writing, archaeology and music, this edited collection creates space for less-prominent perspectives, with many authors coming from female, Indigenous and LGBTQIA+ contexts. Combining established and emerging voices, and practice-led research and critical scholarship, the book explores water across its scientific, symbolic, material, imaginary, practical and aesthetic dimensions. It examines and interrogates our cultural construction and representation of water and, through original research and theory, suggests ways in which we can reframe the dialogue to create a better relationship with water sources in diverse contexts and geographies.

This expansive book brings together key emerging scholarship on water persona and agency and would be an ideal supplementary text for discussions on the blue humanities, climate change, environmental anthropology and environmental history.
Camille Roulière is an early-career researcher and creative writer whose work focuses on spatial poetics. She was recently awarded a University Doctoral Research Medal for her PhD thesis entitled “Visions of Water in Lower Murray Country” (The University of Adelaide).

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WATER LORE

Practice, Place and Poetics

Edited by Camille Roulière and Claudia Egerer
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are advised that this volume contains the names of deceased Indigenous persons.

Ngai tampinthi Kaurna miyurna yarta mathanya Wama Tarntanyaku.
I recognise that Kaurna people are the custodians of the Adelaide Plains.
Ngai tampinthi ngai Kaurna yartangka tikanthi.
I acknowledge I live on Kaurna Country.

I live and write on lands which were never ceded. I acknowledge the Kaurna people’s ongoing relationships with these lands and their connected bodies of water. I pay my respects to Kaurna Elders, past, present and emerging.

My co-editor Claudia and I would like to extent this acknowledgment to the multiple Indigenous Nations who have custodianship of the lands from which the contributors of this volume are writing, in Australia and elsewhere.

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Salt Water Kin

Jill Jones

As water turns & returns it changes from
ocean ground & sky onto
these beachside rocks as I taste salt water
kin of saliva (a memory of exploring rock pools)

I look into today’s pools they’re swirled clear
or gathered with irritant like pearl

as surge catches in sandstone sings hollows
where submerged grasses weep
posidonia sinuosia heterozostera tasmanica

★

What is a wave but a moment & a continuum
in wordless language swell pitch break
shaping its cold sweat on our cars our skin
as the city rolls into the gulf an abandoned water bottle
in the tide’s reach

★
Stray sky water falls on my cheek
   the truest fragment may be a rain drop
even if not transparent    it carries so much
maybe some days are grey for a reason

as this present fills up with pasts    sea past
   bird past    fish trails    rain history    in clouds
vapour    brine    erosions    cinders of trees & ice
tasting bitter    like everything we’ve had to swallow

like crust    of the pink lake we once passed
   clapped out memory of a green shore    slurries &
shams hunched on cracked industrial edges

* 

The sea has no nostalgia    its currents
   undo everything    strew & scrape    leavings
of the extinct    some things fresh

icecream wrapper    old bricks turned to pebbles
   new washed shells    plastic in forever colours
worn wood    cuttle bone

Today, seagulls steal garbage from our hands
we shout    ‘hey, here’    by the lagoon
   sandhills    the pier    as landscapes stretch
from us    watery    dry    across the world

Will the clear water return?

* 

Until everything silts up    this is what we do
   cup water to our mouths    & spill it
for ground    write in this salt    fresh    tongue
turn over its ancient syllables    without drowning
Images of water are omnipresent. However, increasingly, pictures of happy people enjoying pristine waterscapes make way for photographs depicting the ravages of tsunami-riven coastlines littered with plastic waste. In July 2021, Coleridge’s famous lines “water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink” (Wordsworth and Coleridge 153) have taken on an ominous tonality for Europeans when heavy rainstorms moved in over large parts of the continent, hitting Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium particularly hard, turning small rivers into torrential floods that destroyed entire villages and cost over 200 people their lives. For days, several of the flooded villages were without drinking water, and all of a sudden, it was painfully apparent that extreme weather events do not just happen elsewhere but that elsewhere may be, in fact, everywhere, and that at this moment in history elsewhere was located in the very heart of Europe. The global phenomenon of climate change, quickly turning into a climate crisis, has unpredictable effects on local weather in places we, normally sheltered Europeans, least expected. Debates in the scientific community have warned about this eccentricity of weather systems in the wake of changing climate, with floods and droughts increasing in both frequency and intensity. Over the European summer, these insights reached the consciousness of the general public in a far more visceral way, exposing the vulnerability of a lifestyle that has ignored the deep embeddedness of the human in their surroundings. The eagerness to engineer environments to fit our way of life comes at a cost: the fertilisers and pesticides we pump into the monocultures designed to feed thousands have now contaminated drinking water for entire regions. Instead of wetlands that would soak up the overflow of rivers and streams, it has now become plainly visible that our praxis of canalising bodies of water into submission has backfired, as waterways forced into corsets of concrete leave no space for excess water to drain away, which instead accumulates into torrents swallowing everything in their way, something Deborah Bird Rose neatly captures in her phrase that “[t]o create
order is to promote loss” (“Tropical Hundreds” 60). Water management, it would seem, is rather a mismanagement of water and needs to be rethought, just as the simplistic categorisation of human and environment into separate entities appears to miss the mark—because, as the authors of “Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities” point out, “what have traditionally been termed ‘environmental issues’ have been shown to be inextricably entangled with human ways of being in the world, and broader questions of politics and social justice” (1). Re-evaluating this anthropocentrism can be understood as the credo of the environmental humanities, deeply engaged in formulating new ways of thinking and new stories in conversation across disciplines.

*Water Lore: Practice, Place and Poetics* is firmly lodged in the environmental humanities and engaged in the rethinking of the human-centred ethics that has defined our disciplines for so long. Consequently, the two events that gave rise to this book, organised by the two editors respectively, brought together voices from different disciplines and locations. In September 2017, Camille Roulière and Jennifer Rutherford organised the “H₂O: Life & Death” Conference at the University of Adelaide, Australia, in association with the JM Centre for Creative Practice, the EU Centre for Global Affairs and the Global Academy of Liberal Arts. The interdisciplinary conference provided the perfect meeting place for historians, poets, literary scholars, artists, musicians, ocean engineers, painters, earth systems scientists and filmmakers, offering a polyvocal platform to voice and explore new imaginings of waters with the aim to articulate alternative—that is, decolonial—ways to relate and interact with these waters and the environments that they sustain. These encounters in turn influenced the “Deep Time and Deep Water—Water as a Being” workshop, organised by Claudia Egerer, Karin Dirke and Christina Fredengren at Stockholm University in May 2018. Informed by matters of ecology, religion and personhood, the workshop traced the ways in which relations with the water environment, above and below the surface, may have formed and transformed over deeper sequences of time. Going back to the very beginning, the Biblical creation story was brought into conversation with the Māori world view with its relational understanding of waterways as ancestors, characterised by the idea of “Ko au te awa, ko te awa, ko au—I am the river, and the river is me.” In this way, the workshop picked up on and deepened an intercultural and interdisciplinary conversation about human—water relations that was started at the conference.

This highly interdisciplinary volume both reflects and continues this conversation, situating water within lived communities, creating a space for practice-led research, art and critical scholarship to explore water across its scientific, symbolic, material, imaginary, practical and aesthetic dimensions. Our objective to examine our cultural constructions and representations of water in order to reimagine how we might better relate to waters can be seen in its wide geographic range of voices and perspectives, bringing together 23 established and emerging scholars and creative practitioners from seven countries (Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Sweden, the USA, France, Russia, South Africa) and 12 disciplines (history, earth system science, literature, history of ideas, poetry, visual art, creative writing,
music, anthropology, architecture, ethnography, cultural theory). The contributors engage with water informed by the environmental humanities’ philosophy which “positions us as participants in lively ecologies of meaning and value, entangled within rich patterns of cultural and historical diversity that shape who we are and the ways in which we are able to ‘become with’ others” (Rose et al. 2). To participate in lively ecologies of meaning and value “calls for an openness to that which exceeds definition and measurement, nicely touched on by DH Lawrence: “[w]ater is H2O, hydrogen two parts, oxygen one, but there is also a third thing, that makes it water and nobody knows what that is” (6710). Lawrence’s elusive “third thing” neatly paraphrases the question the volume engages with, teasing out waters’ ethical, poetic, aesthetic dimensions which will come to redefine/shape how we live with these waters, rather than through a limited understanding based on scientific (and often reductive) metonymies. Hence our key question—how can we explore and re-imagine what waters mean to us?—is addressed by poets, artists and thinkers, each from their own specific position, each speaking in their own voice, from their own practice and informed by their own politics. It is this vision of fostering an open space where diverse positions can interact freely that makes this volume an important contribution to the discussions within the field of environmental humanities: our aim is not to constrain individual voices into a generalising and overarching perspective, but to develop the open space where these different voices can meet and converse. We are convinced that these meetings will not only serve to unsettle “traditional” scholarship but facilitate new ways of inquiry, “including the questions that we ask and the ways in which we explore them” (Rose et al. 4). In other words, this plurality of voices and approaches given free range is key to our aim to generate new insights by encouraging reading and thinking across established boundaries.

The title Water Lore: Practice, Place and Poetics signals the overall focus on water and stories, and their entanglement with practice, place and poetics. Practice invokes the importance of material engagement with all the other components, not least Place, which stresses the physical and spiritual embeddedness in both the specificity of geological place and place as that particular feeling of belonging. Place, seemingly a very simple idea, comes with a complexity of its own, and a critical understanding of place is “indispensable to rethinking the human relationship to the world,” a task structuring all inquiries in the environmental humanities (Emmett and Nye 23). Place is, as we know, deeply marked by a history of colonisation (think terra nullius, which was perceived “empty land” ripe for the taking) construed as a commodity to be used at will. With many contributors living in Australia, the notion of terra nullius, literally “land belonging to no one,” rings particularly painfully and is countered with an understanding of place infused with “the decolonizing ethic indebted to Australian Aboriginal practices of taking care of country and accounting for generations of entangled human and nonhuman entities” (Haraway, “Speculative Fabulations” 99).

Place, from the perspective of taking care of country, is intimately interwoven with practice. Practice is first and foremost a careful attendance to how reading,
thinking and writing are embodied activities and dependent on situated knowledges, in Haraway's understanding of an embodied, located subject. In her words, “limited location and situated knowledge . . . allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (“Situated Knowledges” 583). The key here is responsibility, “being called into account” (Haraway, “Situated Knowledges” 583), and that is one way to understand practice in this volume. Another is to see practice in relation to poetics, for example hybrid forms of writing where practice-based research engages questions of relations between critical and creative modes of writing. As Tom Griffiths summarises:

you will discover what you want to say, and how to say it, through the writing process itself. You don’t have to come ready and finished to the page. You are not “writing up”. You come to the page prepared to explore, to imagine, to journey. It is your workshop, your office, your chopping block. Your words will be like splintered wood, the casual by-product of your engagement with the page.

Poetics in this sense makes obvious the infinite process of unveiling that is indissociable from practice, from our engagement with our environments. It highlights the need to disallow and recast representational models (patterns) which reproduce and sustain the destructive subjugation of waters at play in any instance of domination. This understanding invokes Glissant’s “poetics of Relation”—both aesthetic and political—as a transformative mode of history, capable of enunciating and making concrete a French-Caribbean reality with a self-defined past and future. Glissant’s notions of identity as constructed in relation and not in isolation highlights that relation in all its senses—telling, listening, connecting, and the parallel consciousness of self and surroundings—is the key to transforming mentalities and reshaping societies.

In addition to Glissant’s “poetics of Relation” and Haraway’s poetics of cultivating “a practice of decolonizing responsive attentiveness” to country (“Speculative Fabulations” 98), we draw on Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes’ injunction that the task of decolonial artists, scholars and activists is not simply to offer amendments or edits to the current world, but to display the mutual sacrifice and relationality needed to sabotage colonial systems of thought and power for the purpose of liberatory alternatives.

Indigenous art, they claim, “evokes a fugitive aesthetics that . . . chooses refusal and flight as modes of freedom” allowing them to create “a present future beyond the imaginative and territorial bonds of colonialism” (4). In the volume, we stretch their statement to apply it, not exclusively to Indigenous art, but also to indigenous art, as in located, grounded practices—practices which emerge from place through poetics, that is through languages. Our use of poetics thus closely ties language
and water, as is particularly palpable in our Foreword and Afterword composed of poems by Jill Jones and Em König, respectively. Language becomes water; it is water. The seamless interweaving of languages throughout this volume (including, for instance, English, Kaurna, Ngarrindjeri, Hawai‘i and Māori) also illustrates such an understanding of poetics, where each language sits on the same plane and only exists in relation to the other, as part of an emplaced language for and of each body of water. It must be noted as well that the term “poetics” also works in a more traditional sense to highlight the two main approaches this book presents side by side—academic and artistic, inviting new ways of seeing and thinking about water and our relations to it.

*Water Lore* is divided into three sections which overlap and invite readers to cross back and forth between them at will. The first section, “Water Stories: (Re)presenting Waters,” illustrates different ways in which narrative—storytelling—adds layers of complexity to the vexed issue of water. With contributors from Sweden, Australia, the USA, France and South Africa, this section presents a geographical spread as well as a disciplinary one. Karin Dirke is a historian of ideas, Claudia Egerer a literary scholar with deep affinities with the sea, Meg Samuelson a literary scholar just as Diane P. Freedman and Camille Roulière, who explores how humans interact with their environment through art, and Nicole Larkin is a practising architect. Their methodologies range from variations of close readings of fiction and nonfiction to interventions through art and reading coastal landscapes in terms of a language of connection between intertidal landscapes and community.

Looking back, Dirke’s opening chapter argues that popular stories about the sea in the first half of the 20th century, with their focus on, for example, Heyerdahl’s *Kon Tiki* expeditions and deep sea adventures, affected a change of perspectives. Water, and the sea in particular, is then traced as a connective between the aesthetics of 1950s Hollywood productions and scientific advancement, which ultimately paved the way for the incipient environmental movement in the 1960s. In Chapter 2, Egerer’s focus is on a number of affinities between water and imagination in contemporary climate fiction and nonfiction, proposing a thinking-with-water reading, in an attempt to story multispecies worlds where human and nonhuman are linked through water as a main connective and where the collective “we” eclipses the individual “I.” Chapter 3 is concerned with the challenges of rising waters from the perspective of the “oceanic south.” Samuelson turns to the South African novel *Thirteen Cents* in search of new perspectives, proposing inundation instead of submergence in order to facilitate diffractive readings. In Chapter 4, Freedman’s piece takes us back to Thoreau’s Walden, celebrating the pond for its timeless qualities and its engendering new questions, sending us back and forth between pond and book. Roulière’s Chapter 5 uses water movements to shape her text to explore how sound provides ways to expose plurality and compose beyond the exploitative shadows of the Murray Mouth, a space devastated by salinity. Through sound, this chapter argues, it becomes possible to shift and reconfigure how we perceive and relate to such a space; through sound, we can invent and sustain new languages of awareness and care which do not occupy these watery
spaces, but nurture them through rhythmic layering. As such, paying attention to sound responds to the need to develop (or perhaps rediscover) new ways to imagine ourselves in waters, beyond the limitations of our current position. In Chapter 6, Nicole Larkin tells the tale of the links between water, identity, love and community by stating that “if our surroundings speak of who we are, ocean pools tell of our love affair with the coast.” The coast referred to is located in New South Wales, valued for its 60 ocean pools, a unique part of the cultural heritage that The Wild Edge project examines as well as works to protect and revive.

The second section, “Water Law and Lore: Waters and/in Cultures,” engages with water lore in connection to specific local geographies, foregrounding a multiplicity of Indigenous voices from Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Hawai‘i. The disciplinary variety is impressive: Gini Lee is a landscape architect, Dan Hikuroa an earth systems scientist, while Billie Lythberg works at the interface of economic anthropology and art history. Stephen Muecke is an ethnographer and cultural theorist, Brandy Nālani McDougall a poet scholar, and Ali Gumillya Baker, Simone Ulalka Tur and Faye Rosas Blanch are part of the Unbound Collective, a group of Aboriginal women artist academics. The methodologies in these chapters blend practice with poetics and place, and range from mapping Indigenous water lore to exploring water through Māori perspectives to readings imbued with examining magical practices, using lyrical practices, or, in the case of the Unbound Collective, conversation, creative performativity and protest.

Chapter 7 launches this section with Lee’s WaterLore Project. The focus is on mapping “collected expressions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous sacred lore of water-made places” in order to learn from the people living in close connection with the land in already dry places. Listening to what she calls water-driven knowledge may help to develop less-unsustainable practices in a world in the grip of global warming. In Chapter 8, Hikuroa and Lythberg narrate the hope-ingesting tale of how Māori perspectives about relational perceptions of rivers are transforming understandings of water Aotearoa New Zealand. In particular, the Te Mana o te Wai—The Charisma of Water has an impact on policy of freshwater planning. As the authors note, it is a question of putting water first, and in this regard, Aotearoa New Zealand has taken a huge step forward. Muecke invokes the ancient practice of water divining in Chapter 9, arguing that while this practice may have made room for the technologies of modern hydrology, science has not completely erased the enchantment of water. Indigenous language, Muecke argues, still has the words and the worlding to see and value powers in objects and things that have no place in rationality. In a similar vein as Hikuroa and Lythberg, McDougall employs the power of Indigenous culture in Chapter 10 to counter the ravages of modern water (mis)management. Using three poems and a critical artist’s statement, she argues for freeing the fragile ecosystems. Chapter 11, concluding the second section, is a conversational reflection by Baker, Tur and Blanch on the Unbound Collective’s third performance of their performance cycle, Sovereign Acts III: REFUSE, pushing the boundaries of creative-academic-protest-poetic practices in an impressive collective piece that makes a powerful claim for Indigenous sovereignty.