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## Making Water Public

*Emily Potter*

### **Abstract**

The recent 11 years of conservative government rule in Australia was marked by what some commentators refer to as a 'hardening of hearts' and a notable decline in the public realm. At the same time, climate change and drought made an increasing impact on Australian environments and society. This paper responds to the overwhelming tendency, which it aligns with a retreat from the concept of public-ness, to instrumentalise efforts to remediate environmental decline. Focusing in particular on water - or the lack of it - in Australia today, the paper draws on innovations in cultural theory and research practice to return the question of public-ness to centre stage. This involves a reorientation of what it might mean to 'make water public' that is not reliant on the sole agency of humans.

**Key Words:** Culture, enchantment, ethico-politics, instrumentalism, more-than-human thinking, publics, water.

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### **1. Introduction**

The paper responds to what it identifies as the "disenchantments" of contemporary socio-cultural and political analysis, specifically as they relate to contemporary water cultures in Australia. It comes to this concern via a local situation: a specific milieu that affords not only the context for reflection, but more importantly provides the materials with which to think. In the happenings of a local situation that is placed and timed, a range of actors, discourses, and technologies assemble and interact in complex, contingent and micro ways that global accounts of a question or concern can overlook. It is in this "minor" register that the operations and effectiveness of cultural theory and practice - or what can be loosely termed 'cultural work' - is best observed.

There is an over-investment in instrumental reason across a host of pressing socio-political concerns in Australia that feeds this disenchantment: the predominance of quantitative and bureaucratic frames through which the world is understood, and in which ambiguous, incalculable and ephemeral actions and effects are rendered unproductive and without empirical value. What is at issue here is not instrumental logic itself, but the debasement of non-instrumental culture in relation to calculative reason. This paper offers a

challenge to this. As theorists such as Don Slater have argued, calculation is itself a performance, a form of cultural work as well as a technical strategy.

Can disenchantment and enchantment cohabit productively, where both the instrumental and non-instrumental work as techniques of investigation and meaning-making that reveal to us our own entanglements with the world? Jane Bennett suggests it is possible, pointing to affect as a powerful outcome of this relationship. "To be enchanted," she writes, "is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday."<sup>1</sup> Affect - and the capacity to be affected - is predicated not on a clinical distance from which we observe the operations of things, but on visceral, embodied and discursive immersions in their unfolding. This is a generative site of ethical dispositions and political formations, and one that unsettles traditional renderings of what constitutes the terrain of politics. It demands a shift in how we conceive of the political subject, no longer "individualised, autonomous and self-possessed," but instead situated and processural and profoundly interdependent.<sup>2</sup> Political agency, as I go onto advance, does not reside in any one human, thing or entity - rather it is relational, fostered through contingent assemblage.

My paper attempts to bring this entangled relation between the human and the non-human into the interconnected spaces of culture, politics and ethics. It follows a set of theoretical shifts concerning the constituency of ethics and politics, and relates this to the question of producing public life. These shifts relocate ethico-political matters to the terrain of ontology where the very constitution of a political agent becomes crucial to the making of political concerns. This constitution does not discriminate between "nature" and "culture", but instead takes place through the active arrangement of multiple entities, both human and non-human. This is what Bennett calls an "onto-story"<sup>3</sup> - a way of thinking about how things come into being. And how things come into being is of relevance to how things come to matter - how ethical and political life is formed around public concerns that are produced, in part, through the local arrangements and everyday practices of life played in a minor register. I put this thinking to work in the context of two prominent concerns in Australian political life: the frequently-termed "decline" of the public realm and the politicisation of water in the face of severe water shortages across South-Eastern Australia. While evidenced in many ways, the "decline" of the public realm can be understood in relation to the rise of neoliberal ideology and the ascendancy of market logic as the overriding frame for thinking and acting on social, political and environmental questions.

## **2. Water in Public**

On a recent Sunday morning in the Melbourne inner city suburb of Northcote, a forty metre high fountain of water erupted from a leaking mains

pipe. It took authorities more than twelve hours to halt the flow, by which time hundreds of thousands of litres of water had run down the drain. The fountain caused a great deal of interest, and not just for the spectacular vision it offered. At a time when the whole of Melbourne was - as it still is - subject to water restrictions, it did not go unnoticed that the vast amounts of water thrown into the air in a single day made the personal water savings made by Northcote residents seem, if not futile, then of uncertain value.

The Victorian Government's "155 Litres a Day" campaign initiated in January 2009, which included an instruction pack for every household complete with an hourglass that counted down four minute showers, was at the forefront of residents' minds as they gave media interviews and posted to online forums. One Northcote couple made explicit reference to their disillusionment with their revised shower practices (at the Government's request), in the face of the apparent water wastage.<sup>4</sup> Others spoke of feeling disempowered by the sight of the fountain, while the State Opposition wasted no time in pointing to the holes in Government water strategy. "Victorians have been struggling on water restrictions, using every measure possible to save, only to see this incredible waste of millions of litres of drinking water", said Member of Parliament, David Davis.<sup>5</sup>

But frustration and disillusionment were not the only responses. Soon after the fountain shot into the sky, Northcote residents were heading down to the site or finding strategic positions along the path of the running water, to capture the errant liquid in buckets and even plastic "wheelie" (garbage) bins. Word of mouth prompted more and more people to collect, or in some cases divert to nearby parks and gardens, the runaway water. Postings to online forum "Mess+Noise" reveal the ironic humour, but also the affect that these activities generated: "some hippies should have a shower"; "might take my car down for a wash"; "I like the fact that people tried not to let the water go to waste."<sup>6</sup>

In a policy-framed and materially evident climate of water shortage in Victoria, and in Australia more generally, the burst main with its flamboyant "geyser" brought into relief the inadequacies of the prevailing water orthodoxy imposed by the State which promotes an ethos of individual self-regulation above the public life of water which, in the prevailing climate, is rhetorically and to a large extent politically reduced to the role of infrastructural service. The State-owned pipes (in Victoria at least) that carry this common resource are meant to be out of site, channelling water to the individual outlets that we encounter and use in our daily lives. Water in Australia has thus become a key site for ethico-politics, in which every day practices of living become the ground of political engagement.<sup>7</sup> Water may be a *public issue* in the media and everyday discourse but as far as our material relations with water go, these are routinely individualised, narrowed to the single tap and the exhortation to "save" water.

On that morning in Northcote, however, the public-ness of water took on a different meaning. As previously hidden water burst onto the public stage, it also entered into an assemblage of people, broken pipes, drains, authorities, discourse, buckets and wheelie bins, to produce water as a public *matter of concern*: all these elements, working in relation, contributed to forming a water public quite different to the public provision of water or water as a public issue. This was water as a distributed and dynamic participant in political process, rather than water as the passive stuff of governmentality and individual practice.

### 3. Where Has the Public Gone?

Much has been written in recent years about the decline of public life in western democracies. In Australia, as elsewhere, this decline has been tied to the rise of neoliberal ideology and the ascendancy of market logic as the overriding frame for thinking and acting on social and political questions. The eleven year rule of the conservative Liberal government under Prime Minister John Howard, which ended in 2007, accrued a plethora of euphemisms that described a country emotionally, socially and politically bereft. Robert Manne termed these the “barren years”, characterised by “the closing of minds and the hardening of hearts.”<sup>8</sup> Fellow journalist and broadcaster Phillip Adams seconded this: “[Howard has] done more damage to this [country] than rabbits, cane toads and half a dozen Cyclone Tracys.”<sup>9</sup> Adams’ analogous employment of environmental disaster was particularly apt: even as ecological problems mounted, the Howard government continued on with business as usual - refusing to acknowledge anthropogenic climate change and ramping up investment in non-renewable energies. The country’s new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has hardly deviated - except symbolically - from his predecessor’s line. While the ratification of the Kyoto protocol was one of Rudd’s first acts in office, he has focused on “solutions” that fit existing market logic, such as trading schemes for water and carbon dioxide emissions.

It is not surprising that what manifests socio-politically also manifests spatially. Our “environments” in their broadest terms wear the mark of market calculations and the disenchantment of instrumentalist approaches to all facets of life. Grim statistics around the globe bear out the unsustainable nature of these dominant cultural systems, and in Australia, pervasive drought, record temperatures and dwindling freshwater levels across the South East of the country especially are taking a toll. Ecosystems are dying and many species are on the verge of extinction (more than 14% of vertebrate animals, and 12% of plants).<sup>10</sup> The social cost particularly in communities reliant on agriculture and tourism is high.

Meanwhile, in both our cities and regional areas, the curated spaces and structures in which individuals come together to live, work and play, tend

to collude to produce a society in which the individual and his/her trajectory through space is privileged over moments and forms of public gathering. The planar grid, the highly regulated flow of traffic, the corporatisation of public spaces via advertising and sponsorship, and the transformation of public lands into what sociologist Brendan Gleeson refers to as enclaves of the "communal realm" – common, but exclusive, spaces, where access is predicated on certain social signifiers of wealth and belonging,<sup>11</sup> are characteristic features of most contemporary urban environments in Australia and much of the western world.

#### 4. Water Ethics

Ong describes the impact of "market-driven rationality" on individuals and the health of public life thus:

Government is no longer interested in taking care of every citizen, but wants him/her to act as a free subject who self-actualizes and relies on autonomous action to confront globalized insecurities [by making calculations and investments in their life]. There is thus a fundamental shift in the ethics of subject formation... as governing becomes concerned less with the social management of the population (biopolitics) than with individual self-governing (ethico-politics).<sup>12</sup>

In Australia, the trend towards environmental policy that devolves responsibility for political change to the individual evidences this shift. Where water or climate change are made public issues by government address, the capacity of the individual to affect change, and his/her direct implication in the well-being of environments has been, particularly for the last decade or so, at the forefront of environmental rhetoric, "education" campaigns, and policy initiatives. While the Howard government refused to ratify Kyoto, they made it a priority to phase out energy inefficient light-bulbs in Australian homes.

The "155 litres a day campaign" is another case in point. Water restrictions imposed on homes are legislated in Victoria, however the 155 Litre campaign works through moral appeal with an eye to ethical transformation. The public is addressed on the campaign's website: "Climate change and the ongoing dry conditions means the way Victorians value and use water must change forever. We are in a serious situation and every person, every day, can make a huge difference by adopting simple water saving solutions."<sup>13</sup> This is what Foucault refers to a "technique of conscience" which seeks to activate new forms of practice and subjectification that emerge through self-regulation and discipline.

Individuals are encouraged to develop new habits that in turn initiate particular "regimes of living."<sup>14</sup> For cultural theorist Gay Hawkins, this is the terrain of ethics, not imposed from above, but generated in the practices and processes of daily life. Local situations and everyday practices are advanced here as the site of ethico-political formation, challenging the idea that transcendent moral codes or macro-political structures ultimately produce ethical and political subjectivities.

The problem with the reformation of the self as the premise for ethico-political change lies in its frequent framing as a transcendent obligation to an abstract "nature", and as an act of a single author - the subject being reformed.<sup>15</sup> A crucial distinction between the framing of micro-politics as the work *of* the individual and as work undertaken *through* the individual, and in which the individual participates, is the ethical modality mobilised in each situation: in the first instance, an ethics that is blind to the relations in which the individual is always caught up, and in the second, an ethics that takes shape *through* these relations. The practices and processes of subjectification that Hawkins identifies as crucial to ethico-political techniques do not occur in hermetic isolation. They always involve other actors, other agents, both human and non-human, and the dynamic relations between all of these. This is what environmental awareness campaigns rarely acknowledge, and what the Northcote "geyser" materially asserted. Here, in the rupture of water that triggered a series of reactions, practices and ways of thinking, involving a range of mundane technologies such as buckets, home-made barriers and cars, non-human matter entered into the making of ethico-political life.

##### **5. Materialising Matter, Materialising Relations**

Bruno Latour's theory of object-oriented democracy which advances the participation and performativity of matter in political processes is helpful for thinking this through. Latour returns to the etymology of "republic" to point out the absence of "things" (the 'res' in *res-publica*) in western political thought.<sup>16</sup> Our traditions of Cartesian thought put humans at the centre of the story: agency and intention rest with them alone while non-human matter is a backdrop to, or passive material within, human activity. Latour has challenged this dichotomy as the basis for political analysis. Instead, he has developed an alternate ground for political inquiry and action in which an ontological premise of distributed agency generates ethical questions. That is, there are no easy binaries of nature/culture, human/non-human. Instead, contingent situations and changing compositions of ontological entanglements - of the capacity to affect and to be affected in the constitution of particular realities - reveal an assemblage of actants, rather than hermetic individuals. An actant, as Latour describes, is "something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation of human

individual actors, or of humans in general.”<sup>17</sup> This is fundamental rethinking of what prompts action and, in turn, what is made to matter in political process.<sup>18</sup>

The reaction of the Northcote residents to the fountain of water cannot be accounted for purely through moral indictment or other modes of governmentality. Rather, a host of affective entanglements between water, humans, and other non-human materialities were activated that generated new ethico-political possibilities. It was their frustration at the broken water pipe, the visceral impacts of whooshing water, and the visibility of water running down the drain that mobilized residents, as much as the discourse of water saving and the residents’ knowledge of drought. Affirming this politics Bennett writes, “(w)hat counts as an actor is no longer the individual but actants-in-assemblages.”<sup>19</sup> From here, the concept of public-ness is necessarily reoriented: matters of concern don’t just prompt a nascent public to form but instead actively and self-reflexively *produce* a public of response. This, according to Latour, is how we come to know a question at hand - by neither natural or cultural frames alone, but by what assembles around it. “Give me one matter of concern,” Latour writes, “and I will show you the whole earth and heavens that have to be gathered to hold it firmly in place.”<sup>20</sup>

Latour’s language here indicates the *work* undertaken by all that assembles as active, ongoing, processes of *temporary* stabilisation. For the world is not “firmly placed” as Latour knows. Entities, things, and subjects come into being at a particular time and place by a material gathering of objects, techniques, institutions and discourses, including calculation and other instrumentalist practices. For the researcher, this means embracing new methodologies, ones that register reality as continually enacted, and via the very methods by which we seek to make meaning. I want to end by reflecting upon the new modes of inquiry opened up by this shift in political thinking and the kind of public-ness it allows. The historical division between “nature” and “culture” in western thought has located the work of cultural research very much on the side of human-authored systems, meanings and interpretations. More-than-human thinking, however, disturbs the assumption that questions of “culture” exclude questions of “nature”. It asks that we notice first and foremost how arrangements of humans and non-human matter make themselves present *in* the research question itself. I have been working on two research projects that concern water in different ways, but both consider how non-human matter is active in posing questions and generating socio-political arrangements.

The first, a study of the water bottle in contemporary culture, employs a more-than-human methodology to explore the water bottle as an agent in social assemblages that are inherently political. This is not the bottle as a signifier or icon of cultural excess. Rather, the study examines the materiality of the plastic bottle and the water it contains as the stuff of

politics itself - as mediating and generating political configurations of body, water, plastic, public, and the many associations that the bottle itself, the *matter* of the matter of concern, makes present. Bottled water marketing, for example, amplifies or suppresses certain material qualities of the bottle and its water (the relationship between the healthy body and the water consumption, for example; or the petrochemical origins of plastic) that reveal the assembled nature of the water bottles as a site of ethical practice and political problematisation. These material qualities (rather than symbolic meanings) have an affective capacity - they can prompt habit formation and modes of self-regulation; they can produce a range of visceral or affective responses in the body of the consumer. It is this ephemeral and unquantifiable work that cultural research is well placed to study: the terrain of enchantment - the affects, the energies, and the surprising micro-political transformations that do not register in instrumentalist analysis.

A second project, initiated by a group of artists and researchers, sought to bring a non-instrumentalist strategy to bear on the concern of drought in the North-East Mallee country of Victoria. It set out to do this with a poetic approach to the problem that didn't look to tools, technologies or policies for answers, but instead, drew on creative methodologies in which artistic practice - in this instance, painting, photography, dance, and sound production - would work to materialise the history of water in this place. This was undertaken through the assemblage of the multiple ways in which water in a time of severe drought was made present. This presencing was done in a collaborative process that exceeded its human participants. The materials with which the artists worked - charcoal, salt-encrusted lake beds, the sound of the wind whipping through abandoned and broken down dwellings - and what they produced, gathered together in unpredicted arrangements when we began to notice the ways in which water was made present - and public - in this environment. This was water in an array of material forms and ephemeral affects: from the sign inscribed with boating regulations that overlook a long-dry lake; to the design of architecture and imposing streetscapes expectant of rain and its economic benefits, to the local water authorities who drive into small Mallee towns, now dwindling in population, to hand out buckets for collecting and reusing shower water. These assemble with other materials, technologies, associations and stories, to produce water as a matter of concern, an apparent absence recollected as a presence through which a public begins to emerge.

To pay close attention to what assembles is an empirical tactic as well as an ethical one. Here, in the scenarios I have described, water as a public issue exceeds an individualised, economic and moral register of value, to manifest as a participant in political life that materialises the mutually constitutive collaborations through which it becomes known. At a time when water is a heightened issue - from the pipe, to the bottle, to the land - these

collaborations reframe human relations with water as mutually constitutive, forcing us to revivify and rethink what it means to make water public.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> J Bennett, 'Edible Matter', *New Left Review*, vol. 45 (May-June), 2007, 12/11/08, <http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2674>.
- <sup>2</sup> N Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Bennett, op. cit.
- <sup>4</sup> ABC Evening News, 'Northcote Burst Water Main', Melbourne, January 25, 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> N Higginbottom, 'Burst Main in St George's Rd, Northcote, Sends Water Down Drain', *Herald Sun*, 1/02/09, <http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,21985,24960819-661,00.html>.
- <sup>6</sup> M+N Events Listings: Discussions, 'Geyser in Northcote!', 2/02/09, <http://www.messandnoise.com/discussions/3486779>.
- <sup>7</sup> A Ong, 'Mutations in Citizenship', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 23, issue 2-3, 2006, p. 501.
- <sup>8</sup> R Manne, *The Barren Years: John Howard and Australian Political Culture*, Text, Melbourne, 2001, p. 7.
- <sup>9</sup> P Adams, 'The Boy from the Bush', *The Weekend Australian*, 30-31 March, 2000, p. 24.
- <sup>10</sup> D Lindenmayer, *On Borrowed Time: Australia's environmental crisis and what we must do about it*. Penguin: Camberwell, Vic., 2007, 36.
- <sup>11</sup> B Gleeson, *Australian Heartlands: Making space for hope in the suburbs*. Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, 2006, p. 82.
- <sup>12</sup> Ong, op. cit., p. 501.
- <sup>13</sup> 'Our Water, Our Future', 4/02/09, <http://www.ourwater.vic.gov.au/home>.
- <sup>14</sup> G Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How we relate to rubbish*. UNSW Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 33.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 13.
- <sup>16</sup> B Latour, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public', in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Deomocracy*, Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds), MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2005, p. 16.
- <sup>17</sup> B Latour, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, 75.
- <sup>18</sup> For an extended application of Latourian object-oriented democracy in relation to the agency of non-human matter see Gay Hawkins, 'The Politics of Bottled Water: Assembling bottled water as brand, waste and oil', *Culture and Economy*, forthcoming (2009).
- <sup>19</sup> J Bennett, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> B Latour, 'Why has Critique Run Out of steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, 2004, p. 246.

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