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'Fluid Dispossessions': Contested Waters in Capitalist Natures

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ABSTRACT

This special issue on '"Fluid Dispossessions': Contested Waters in Capitalist Natures" examines the multiple and mutable relationships between water, dispossession and property. We use 'fluid dispossessions' as an analytical prompt to examine the different ways in which water's biophysical properties, its material fluidity and movements (and the more-than-human species that move with it), shape processes of capitalist extraction, accumulation and dispossession. Fluid dispossessions go beyond the power politics of controlling water as a resource to include indirect and more-than-economic forms of dispossession. By analysing emic understandings of dispossession, we draw on 'fluid dispossessions' to reject binary categorisations of liquid:solid in order to reveal the diversity of ways capitalist extractive activities may disrupt existing affective, ecological, or spiritual relations with water. This can cause more-than-economic forms of dispossession such as the loss of social reproduction, emotional distress, loss of health, the rupturing of multispecies relations and local care practices of waterscapes.

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Introducing 'Fluid Dispossessions'

Water is as essential for all life and ecosystems as it is for the production of capitalist natures. Without water, industrialisation, agricultural (and aquacultural) extraction would be impossible (Bakker 2012: 616–17). With rising sea levels, irregular precipitation and increased frequency of extreme weather events, water scarcity and excesses disrupt not only everyday lives but also capitalist production. Corporations are adapting by expanding extraction to watery spaces as new frontiers: oceans, coasts, rivers,

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canals and aquifers – from fossil fuels to aquatic life – through discourses of 'blue growth'. Water is therefore increasingly contested as a resource and subjected to property claims to control it.

Despite such attempts at enclosure and extraction, water flows are unruly and frustrate attempts of human control through technological means (Bakker 2010; 2012). Water's biophysical properties, its material fluidity, eludes the fixity of capitalist property regimes through its transformative capacities, conductivity and connectivity (Strang 2011; 2014). Water links the tiniest microbe with human bodies, with ecosystems and with world hydrological systems (Helmreich 2009) and transcends any nature/culture/seawater divide (Helmreich 2011). As a vessel of toxicity, water carries pollutants and chemicals across cellular and bodily boundaries in ways that enable evasion from judicial responsibilities of contamination causing ecological devastation and ill-health (Hamdy 2008).

This special issue on 'Fluid Dispossessions': Contested Waters in Capitalist Natures examines diverse relationships between water, dispossession and property. We use 'fluid dispossessions' as an analytical prompt to explore the different ways in which water's biophysical properties – its material fluidity – shape processes of capitalist extraction, accumulation and dispossession. First, we argue that attention to the materiality of water helps make visible the effects of capitalist activities on entangled ecologies and more-than-human webs of life. Second, the unruliness of water is connected to its movement as well as with how its fluidity enmeshes it with the matter and organisms it comes into contact with. The results are multiple waters in processes of becoming. Water is therefore not simply a resource to be controlled through property rights and infrastructure. Third, by analysing emic understandings of diverse forms of dispossession we reject heuristic binaries of liquid: solid in order to reveal how capitalist extraction may disrupt existing affective, ecological, symbolic or spiritual relations with water. The ethnographic cases in this edited collection show the different types of dispossession that arise from such rupturing of more-than-human relations. This includes the loss of social reproduction, emotional distress, loss of health, harm to multiple species in wet ecologies as well as losing a cultural way of leading subsistence life through local care practices of waterscapes and more-than-human life.

The ethnographic contributions carefully examine the material properties of specific waterscapes – oceans, fjords, rivers, stillwaters, deltaic wetlands and coastal mangrove shorelines – each with unique sets of multispecies relational assemblages, temporalities and biophysical characteristics. They collectively pose a series of compelling questions: How do the materialities of particular waters shape processes of extraction, enclosure, commoning and ownership contestations? And, in turn, how do such capitalist activities affect different types of waters and the human and more-than-human life forms that are entangled in their webs of life? In other words, how can investigating the dual and conflicting meanings of *property* in relation to water – water as a property to be owned and water's fluid properties – help shed light on these complexities?

From Water Enclosure to Fluid Dispossessions?

This special issue contributes to scholarship analysing the appropriation of nature by capitalist processes. This encompasses a significant and still growing scholarship on 'land grabbing' and 'green grabbing' of land in the name of conservation (Benjaminsen & Bryceson 2012; Fairhead *et al.* 2012). In recent years, such scholarship has expanded to include more watery spaces and examine 'ocean grabbing' that deprive small-scale fishers of resources, dispossess vulnerable populations of coastal lands, and/or undermine historical access to areas of the sea (McCormack 2017; Barbesgaard 2018) as well as 'water grabbing' where powerful actors take control of inland freshwater resources (Mehta *et al.* 2012: 197).

To date, the literature on water and enclosures have focused on water as a natural resource to be controlled and distributed through technology and infrastructure (Reisner 1993; Mansfield 2009; Hidalgo *et al.* 2017). Water is embedded in historical, social and political structures: it both acts as a medium of power relations (Wittfogel 1957; Mosse 2003) and as a means of control and domination (Krause & Strang 2013). For example, infrastructural interventions on waters such as diverting and damming rivers facilitate capitalist production (Worster 1992) while sparking contestation (Dupuits & Garcia 2016; Boelens *et al.* 2019) as well as broad-based social movements protesting such dispossession (Baviskar 2019). These studies on power relations and control over water as a resource are examples of how humans by appropriating water's physicality for their purposes 'project on it both design and meaning' (See Ingold 2012: 432).

With 'fluid dispossessions' we want to expand on these political economy debates by conceptualising water as something more than a resource to be controlled. The contributions in this edited collection take seriously the way in which the material properties of water shapes different forms of dispossession that transcend that of loss of right and access to lands and natural resources. In doing so, we offer the notion of 'fluid dispossessions' as a conceptual device to think with rather than as a fixed analytical concept.

Each ethnographic case in the collection interrogates what constitutes fluid dispossession in their particular context as well as how different and multiple materialities of water shapes such processes. 'Fluid dispossessions' guides our analytical efforts to questions of how to think about accumulation, dispossessions, extraction, enclosures and aquatic commons.[1] With fluid dispossessions we do not seek to develop our own conceptions of capitalism, primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession but to use it to discuss tensions, challenges and potentials of more effectively engaging with these concepts (See Hall 2012: 1190) – especially since nature and social reproduction are taken as givens in Marx's *Das Kapital* (Harvey 2017).

Cross-cutting Themes

The articles in this issue contribute to these anthropological debates on water ownership and commodification by drawing on the notion of fluid dispossessions to reconstruct processes of accumulation and dispossession through locally-articulated

capitalisms (Fairbairn *et al.* 2014). They look at water as property and the fluid properties of water at once to highlight how water's materiality is integral to shaping processes of, or attempts at, enclosure, extraction and social reproduction.[2]

Fluid Dispossessions and the Materiality of Water

To understand the materiality of water 'is to be able to tell their [the materials'] histories – of what they do and what happens to them when treated in particular ways' (Ingold 2012: 434). With 'fluid dispossessions' we seek to bring out how it is not only a matter of working with matter [such as water] (Ingold 2012: 434), but that capitalist activities – from enclosure and property claims to extraction to pollution – changes the materiality of water in ways that impact the webs of life.[3] Through the notion of fluid dispossessions, this special issue brings into conversation debates on more-than-human webs of life centred on water's materiality with debates on ecologies as infrastructure that systematically integrate and organise the social relations of matter (Carse 2012; Anand 2017; Scaramelli 2019; Vaughn *et al.* 2021).

Centering 'fluid dispossession' on the materiality of water builds and expands on the notion that waters are socio-natural assemblages mediated between infrastructure, environments and human actors (Bakker 2012) – they are 'historically and geographically produced in a way that is simultaneously socio-natural and socio-technical' (Bakker 2012: 621). This is evident in flood-protection infrastructure such as embankments/sea walls where flood risks are as political as they are material (Dewan 2021; Ley 2021; Vaughn 2022). Water as a 'material socionature is unruly and difficult to control as it comes to have its own agency' (Bakker 2012: 621). Unlike land where most territory marked as property can be enclosed through terrestrial fences and walls to effectively enable ownership relations and restrict access, attempts to enclose water and enact boundaries at sea, in rivers or deltas – are much more complex and difficult.

Water's material unruliness pose challenges not only for legal property procedures and attempts at enclosure (Mehta *et al.* 2012; Strang 2014; Ballestero 2019a: 142) but also for the very functioning of capitalism. The Evergreen ship blocking the Suez Canal in 2021 underscored the importance of paying attention to the materiality of water: the size of vessels, the condition of the canals and the physical effects of silt all came together to halt the 'seamless' flow of global commodities via the seas (Leivestad & Schober 2021). So while the binary distinctions between land and water, solid and liquid and thus terrestrial and aquatic spaces, are deeply entrenched in global governance regimes (Steinberg 2009; Campling & Colas 2021), the biophysical fluid qualities of water not only make maritime and aquatic spaces unruly as objects of governance but they can significantly hamper capitalist processes of accumulation – as well as help to facilitate them (Kuyakanon Knapp this issue). Thus, our attention to dispossessions that arise from the materiality of water helps us demonstrate the different ways in which water's fluid properties may enable (or obstruct) capitalist activities, enclosures and extraction.

Fluid Dispossessions and the Multiple Becomings of Water

An attention to water's fluid materiality and movements also helps us think about other-than-human species (and the inorganic matter) that flow with water across geo-political boundaries and legal structures dividing land and sea. The articles collectively provide examples of how water not only moves but also carries with it other forms of substances and life forms with tides and currents, through wetlands, rivers and canals, from salmon (Lien 2023), trout (Nustad *et al.* 2023) and molluscs (Simon 2023) to sands (Kuyakanon Knapp 2023) and toxicants. For example, land-based industries' polluting activities do not stay within enclosed boundaries, toxic residues of hazardous materials, asbestos, crude oil, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and other carcinogens and persistent organic pollutants seep into waters and airs, travelling to distant soils and transform the qualities of surrounding humid airs, ground- and surface waters and soils in various entangled ecologies (Dewan 2023). Fluid dispossessions is thus expansive in its use of 'dispossession' to include diverse forms of more-than-economic loss and harm that may affect human and more-than-human physical, social, ecological, emotional and spiritual wellbeing and abilities to sustain life.

The ethnographic attention to water's materiality in the above cases show how water not only has a multiplicity of meanings (Strang 2011), but that there are multiple waters in processes of becoming. Fluid dispossession is therefore far more than a metaphor for shifting relations of dispossession as opposed to something that is stable and fixed. Rather, with 'fluid' we want to emphasise the biophysical fluid properties of water – its movement, its propensity to yield, its enmeshment with matter and organisms it comes into contact with – water is an example of a matter in movement, in flux and in variation (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). This helps to highlight how water is not an object or a thing that is complete and in a final form (see Ingold 2012: 435), but rather an example of substances-in-becoming (Barad 2003: 822) – its properties will depend on the assemblage it finds itself in (Barnes & Alatout 2012). Like mythological water serpents, water changes shape and also holds affective and spiritual values (Strang 2021). Thus the notion of fluid dispossessions is in conversation with how environments are always in a processes of becoming (Vaughn *et al.* 2021), where extractive industries are rapidly transforming assemblages of life resulting in both loss and forms of wonder (Ogden 2021).

Fluid Dispossessions: More-than-Economic Forms of Loss Beyond Liquid and Solid

With their concept of the hydrosocial cycle Budds *et al.* (2014) reject Cartesian dualisms: water and humans are not pre-existing entities affecting the sociomaterial life of the other from the outside, but are enmeshed in a process that constitutes humans and water alike. We extend this rejection further by expanding the relations of water beyond the human to entangled ecologies and more-than-human webs of life. Furthermore, with our focus on '*fluid* dispossessions' as a critique of the dichotomies between solid (land) and liquid (flowing waters) (Mukherjee & Ghosh 2020), we widen these

notions by building on decolonial scholarship from South Asia that show how water/land binaries impose artificial boundaries on complex ecologies from colonial times to the postcolonial present and fail to capture the complexity of deltaic flows of rain, glacier melt, saline tides, accreting sediment and fertile silt (D'Souza 2006; Lahiri-Dutt & Samanta 2013; Bhattacharyya 2018; da Cunha 2018; Mukhopadhyay 2017; Dewan 2021; Ramesh 2021).

Fluid dispossessions help us attend to the particularities of specific assemblages of water. So far, the anthropology of water has focused on water as a liquid substance (Paerregaard & Uimonen 2021: 10). Several of the contributions rethink the division between water and land, liquid and solid and that there is a division between 'a terrestrial western ontology' shaped by colonial irrigation projects and techno-scientific expertise and an 'amphibious Asian ontology' (Morita & Jensen 2017) – e.g. Kuyakanon Knapp (this issue), Dewan (this issue) and Simon (this issue). Amphibious refers to something that is related to, or living, or suited for both land and water – but that presupposes a clear separation of the two. Franz Krause suggests that 'amphibious anthropology' may instead be used to transcend the land-water opposition through its attention to the interplay and intermixtures among people, water and the land from where human lives emerge (Krause 2017: 404). Others suggest that the blurry divisions between land and water can be seen as 'muddiness and stickiness' that make life difficult (Ballestero 2019b: 408). Yet, different bodies, different authors, experience the environment differently (Vaughn *et al.* 2021). Rather than muddy or sticky, we seek to understand emic understandings of waters in becoming with different forms of silt, alluvium, currents and more-than-human life.

Fluid dispossessions can therefore also be understood as encompassing discursive dispossession (West 2016) that ignore the complex and dynamic relations inherent in emic concepts, where affective, more-than-human and spiritual relations are ignored by terracentric property rights regimes. The notion of fluid dispossessions enables us to explore how water's materiality results in different imaginaries of capitalist extraction, both as a commons and frontier – and the discursive dispossession that arises from different (mis)translations of diverse water worlds and the more-than-human life forms that inhabit them (Lien, this issue). Such discursive elements of fluid dispossessions and their imaginaries of waters as providing possibilities for limitless expansion excludes and transforms other life forms while global narratives of 'conservation', 'protection' and 'development' can come to dispossess people from traditional care practices of subsistence. Furthermore, the focus on fluid dispossessions and the materiality of water also reveals how certain forms of water can resist efforts to scale up aquacultural extraction of various multi-species assemblages. Reflecting on 'fluid dispossessions' thus help us take into account local, situated, and embodied forms of experiences of how capitalist modes of extraction are shaped by the material specificities of waters.

The Articles

In 'Fluid scalability; frontiers and commons in salmon water worlds', Marianne Lien asks how more-than-economic forms of fluid dispossession follow in the wake of

extractive marine industries and river management. Engaging the notion of ocean frontiers and aquatic commons, the article draws on ethnographic research on Norwegian salmon aquaculture and Sámi river entanglements to show how the intrinsic and relational elusiveness of water facilitates processes of fluid dispossession. Lien describes how the Norwegian nation-state's vision of limitless possibilities for aquacultural expansion ignores interspecies entanglements that are likely to prevent further growth. But dispossession is enacted through mistranslations that ignore the complex and dynamic relations inherent in vernacular Sami concepts such as *meahcci* and result in discursive dispossession including the right to know, define and predict Deatnu salmon. Through her attention to the material properties of water, Lien describes how different types of currents sustain farmed versus wild Norwegian salmon. 'Good currents' flow constantly supplying fresh oxygen to underwater salmon cages and transport excrement and excess feed out of the pen. However, the very same currents that transport water also transport microorganisms such as sea lice to waters that may infect wild salmon smolt. The article concludes that fluid dispossession involves more-than-economic relations, and that while ocean-as-infrastructure invites capitalist imaginary of endless expansion, aquatic resources have limits too.

In their article 'Hatching Conflicts: Trout reproduction, aquatic conditions, and property ownership in South Africa', Knut G. Nustad, Duncan Brown and Heather Swanson argue that the South African state's assertion of a special connection among trout, private property and state control reflects a long history of using trout as mode of making property claims and appropriating landscapes in the process of dispossessing Black communities. While contemporary white discussions of trout elide this history, they point toward the long-standing and ongoing links between these fish and property claims. Fluid dispossessions here comes to the fore by showing the ways the biological properties of trout and the physical properties of the aquatic environments in which they live shape contestations of property claims. Examining the relationship between these dual meanings of property – as control over resources and land and as the properties or traits of fish and water shows how bio-physical parameters play a substantial role in how people try to remake ecologies through private property claims and their contestations. The physicality of water matters strongly to the process through which trout were introduced to South Africa.

In 'Shifting sands, land from the sea: a microhistory of coastal land titling in Thailand', Riamsara Kuyakanon Knapp shows us how the biophysical fluidity of water plays a key role in the politics and legal procedures of enclosure, where the shifting boundaries of coastline provide an arena for property claims contestations amid entanglements of legal semantics. Through careful attention to place and people-based history on the small-scale, Kuyakanon Knapp questions whether theories of primitive accumulation (Marx 1976 [1867]), or accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005) can suitably capture the formation of property rights. Her paper demonstrates how 'assumptions about who carries out primitive accumulation, and who opposes it, are problematic in a rural Southeast Asian context', and that '[u]sing primitive accumulation to understand concrete historical situations is … trickier than is generally recognized' (Hall 2012: 1189). Through attentiveness to the material and conceptual role of

water in alluvium formation, and her close reading of the Thai definition of alluvion (which lends the water an agency more explicit than in English), she illustrates how what is considered land can be defined by the water's movement, how Thai legal semantics around the 'shoreline' prefigures socio-natures ideas and analyses, as the fluidity of water challenges the property laws underpinning capitalist social relations. In recognising the co-agency of the currents, sand and the trees in creating the alluvion and blurring the distinction between human and non-human agencies, the article raises new questions for understanding socio-natural agency and property contestations in an era of accelerated coastal change.

In 'Toxic Residues in Fluid Commons: More-than-Economic Dispossession and Shipbreaking in Coastal Bangladesh', Camelia Dewan explores how dispossession is related to the more-than-economic forms of loss by people living in, and off, a wetlands ecology materially transformed by pollution. Drawing on the lived experiences of shipbreaking workers and marginalised fisher communities, Dewan argues that the circulation of toxic residues materially transforms the 'fluid commons' that sustain life and provide the means of social reproduction in ways that extends beyond the denial of access and use rights to land that diminish economic livelihoods. 'Fish and rice make a Bengali', but what if that fish is poisonous? Following Ojeda (2021), social reproduction is about sustaining life – and what is life without health? Here health is not limited to humans – but also includes the more-than-human (fish, birds, waterbodies). More-than-economic dispossession pays attention to the affective experiences of pollution and its deleterious impact on more-than-human life. The article suggests that 'more-than-economic dispossession' can be used to understand the emic and affective experiences of dispossession as the loss of an ability to sustain life due to water becoming materially contaminated as a form of 'fluid dispossession'.

In 'The Art of Gleaning and Not Becoming Domesticated', Sandro Simon shows how women in the Sine-Saloum Delta use mollusc gleaning as a way of responding to various dispossessions. Mollusc gleaning is currently the most important female livelihood practice and is in 'attunement' with the moving molluscs, water, soil, wind, spirits and other gleaners. The article shows the agency of these women gleaners as they actively choose which practices of 'domestication' to adopt so that they themselves can 'accumulate' from mollusc collection while at the same time maintaining their gleaning practice as their economic mainstay. As Simon astutely describes through his conceptualisation of 'insides' versus 'outsides', the fluidity of water makes the separation of oysters from the waters they live in impossible. Thus, water's unruly nature hinders domestication attempts of molluscs as oyster cultivation rarely succeed. This contribution highlights the importance of paying careful attention to the ways in which the temporality and materiality of water counteract attempts towards domestication and how women gleaners faced with scaled-up male-dominated cultivation projects strategically resist discursive dispossession.

In the afterword, Franz Krause shares his reading of the different contributions as 'wet ethnographies' that show how the hydrosocial overflow of politico-economic activities emerges from internal relations of wetness and politics and produces more-than-human and more-than-economic effects that cannot be contained.

Notes

1. Marx's concept of 'primitive accumulation' refers to processes where 'peasants enjoyed the right to exploit the common land, which gave pasture to their cattle, and furnished them with timber, fire-wood, turf etc', and where enclosure entails expulsing the peasantry from the land using extra-economic force (Marx 1976: 1:877). Harvey's (2005) concept of Accumulation by Dispossession (ABD) further extends Marx's primitive accumulation by incorporating global capitalist financial processes since 1973 where over-accumulated capital find new outlets and appropriated nature is converted into financial investment and speculation. Levien also suggests that ADB includes the use of extra-economic coercion to expropriate means of production, subsistence or common social wealth (Levien 2012: 940).
2. The notion of materiality both encompasses 'the material or physical component of the environment' and 'emphasizes how those material properties are enrolled in the life projects of humans' (Jones 2002: 168–82 cited in Ingold 2012: 431–32).
3. This concern with the materiality of water is different from material cultural studies focusing on people's relations with finished artifacts and instead draws on environmental anthropology's approach of materiality that focuses on how human, more-than-human life forms and things are bound in webs of life through flows and circulation of materials on which life depends (Ingold 2012).

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