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Interweaving environment, heritage, and society through *Cultures of Water*. An introduction

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ABSTRACT

Cultures of Water provide a particularly useful lens through which to perceive environment, heritage and society in conjunction within the scope of cultural studies, with special consideration for an essential and powerful actor: water. This special issue provides examples of a myriad of perspectives, manifestations and consequences of what Cultures and Water have been, are, and can be. This introduction delivers an overview of the special issue, while also proposing ways that Cultures of Water can more broadly be seen as a connector and a useful concept for further studies.



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Introduction

Water is nature. Water is a liquid. Water is heritage. Water is a resource. Water is life. Water is politics. Water is history. Water is movement. Water is knowledge. Water is a surface. Water is culture. Access to water is a human right. Water is beautiful. Water is powerful. Water is kind. Water is harsh. Water is useful.

None of the above statements is free of value, interpretation, or perspective. And there could be countless more such statements, about what water is, what it gives, where it leads, what it does, where, how, when, whose it should be. In short, how water is perceived is culturally loaded, and in many ways culturally constructed (Willems and Schaik 2015). At the same time, as an undeniably essential part of human life, every culture has some

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relationship with water (Johnston *et al.* 2012, Wutich *et al.* 2018, Hein 2022). In the shifting and tense global political, economic, social and environmental climate, water has many roles: as a coveted resource, an energy-creator, life-giver and -taker, silent observer, carrier of vessels, food, refugees, and so much more. Climate change is altering the composition and absorption capacity of oceans, shifting the flows of water in the oceans and heightening their levels (Bijma *et al.* 2013, Boswell *et al.* 2022, Calvin *et al.* 2023, McVeigh 2023, Thunberg 2023). People's livelihoods along coastlines and riverbanks are threatened due to this alone. But there is also the relocation of fish, who follow the shifting warm currents rather than staying as their former homes become colder or follow the cold when that is their preferred habitat – thereby challenging fishing livelihoods (Papaioannou *et al.* 2021). Millions of people use water to cross continents, and conflicts frequently arise – often violent, sometimes between nations – over who can use which water for transportation (Partington 2024), for drinking, for cleaning and countless other activities (Sultana and Loftus 2012, Baer 2014).

Using the lens of Cultural Studies to look at water reveals the many shifting roles water takes within cultures as they adjust to changing circumstances or locations. At the same time, using water as a subject to explore Cultural Studies offers a powerful contribution to understanding how culture and the environment are intertwined. However, highlighting this relationship also presents challenges, as water raises questions that go beyond the traditional anthropocentric focus of Cultural Studies (Cord 2022). Engaging with such questions requires an expanded scope, capable of addressing both water as a non-human actor and the broader ecosystem of cultures in which water plays a crucial role.

This tension, while challenging, is also an opportunity. It highlights the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration to approach water in a more inclusive and comprehensive manner. Understanding the impact of climate change on aquatic ecosystems, for example, benefits from the insights delivered by environmental sciences pointing out human responsibilities and devising actionable solutions for affected societies and ecosystems (Thunberg 2023). Yet, the implications of these changes extend far beyond water as a physiological necessity for human and more-than-human survival. They disrupt ways of life, forcing communities to adapt – as fish and other beings migrate – challenging senses of belonging and reshaping cultural ties (St. Martin 2001). These transformations, which affect both human and more-than-human communities, underline the need for contributions from diverse fields of knowledge.

In this context, the triad of environment, heritage, and society serves as a unifying framework, connecting interdependent knowledge systems to address these complex realities. In this special issue, our contributors delve deeply into the human dimension, connecting cultural studies to key

questions of society and heritage in innovative ways. At the same time, we underscore the importance of not losing sight of the third pillar of the triad: the environment. By pointing to this pillar, we aim to inspire future inquiries that fully embrace the interplay between the cultural, the historical and the ecological, fostering a truly integrated approach to the study of cultures of water.

Several cultural and historical aspects related to water have been analysed through the 'blue humanities' perspective, referring most notably to ocean waters, but also going beyond these. Steven Mentz (2019, 2024) recently emphasized the significant role of 'blue' cultural studies in establishing itself as a prominent force for examining the relationship between the natural environment, environmentalism, technological studies, and postcolonialism. In line with this, we can see for example studies such as Phiri's 'Reframing the black Atlantic' introduction and issue (2023), connecting cultural studies with postcolonial perspectives through the role of a key body of water in history. 'Blue cultural studies' then emerge as essential in comprehending the mechanisms involved in knowledge and culture formation. This methodological approach seeks to explore Cultures of Water while highlighting broader local cultures' vital role in shaping them. Similarly, Mentz's perspective endeavours to unravel the intricate connections between different species and the symbiotic relationship between humans and their natural environment, with particular attention given to indigenous (or local) knowledge, often marginalized in historical and contemporary discourses (Wall Kimmerer 2013, Brito 2023).

Seeking to connect to the cultural, environmental and social realities and the literatures described above, this special issue builds on the work initiated three decades ago in this same journal by Jody Berland & Jennifer Daryl Slack, who wrote their special issue 'On environmental matters' (1994). At the time, these authors and editors already highlighted the myriad important ways that the environment and cultural studies and practices can, and perhaps must, be thought of in conjunction. This present issue continues exploring the dialogue between Cultures of Water, composed of the triad of environment, heritage, and society through the lens of Cultural Studies. Even at the time Berland and Slack were writing, in the mid-nineties, to 'compose environmental matters in the rhythms of cultural theory' was no longer something unusual (Berland and Slack 1994, p. 1). As the dialogue between the 1994 articles already recognized and subsequent literature has further emphasized (Mignolo 2007, Pezzullo 2008, Shiva 2008, Junka-Aikio and Cortes-Severino 2017, Keskitalo 2023), the environment itself can be seen as a cultural construction, formed by human and non-human communities, their relationships, differences and similarities.

Cultures of Water interweave the various cultural aspects that converge when water is considered. The methodological and theoretical nature of

this special issue is based on the transdisciplinary dialogue of its editors, and the contributors and their work, who each have their unique intersections with cultural studies.

In part for this reason, a significant part of this issue focuses on the context of the Atlantic Ocean, encompassing diverse approaches and perspectives, which aligns with our intention to foster a broader and more plural understanding of this vast domain. Nonetheless, we recognize the essential and invaluable work conducted in other equally significant – and many times complementary – contexts, such as the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Dawson 2024, Diaz and Kauanui 2001, Linnekin 1990, Moorthy and Jamal 2010, Subrahmanyam 2004). Research on cultural, economic, and social exchanges over centuries, as well as themes like ecoculture, commerce, knowledge production, or connections among coastal communities, has also been explored by researchers investigating other regions (Subrahmanyam 2019, Bahl 2020).

These studies resonate with topics addressed in this issue, such as colonialism, cultural transformations, and labour dynamics related to Cultures of Water. Together, they underscore the importance of oceans in shaping global networks, highlighting their human and historical dimensions, and also the need to produce complementary knowledge in different geographic areas to achieve stronger and more grounded perspectives (Hofmeyr 2007, Raj 2013). When considered collectively, these works reinforce the idea that oceans are not merely spaces of transit and exchange but also central agents in shaping histories and cultures – as can be the case for other bodies of water, as is demonstrated by several contributions in this issue as well. Therefore, we also hope that this issue will serve as inspiration for further research into Cultures of Water in the vast geographical space that could not be covered here, and potentially to expand the conceptual and methodological horizons as well.

With all this in mind, then, the transdisciplinarity imprinted in this issue is intended to promote dialogue between areas of knowledge that coincide on the same theme – Cultures of Water – even if they vary significantly in time, space and methodology. In this sense, the contributions of this issue explore and relate different approaches to cultural studies, from the valorization of stories lived and told in the first person (Pickering 2009), to an analytical revisit with new perspectives on more distant historical contexts from centuries past. Each contribution to this issue provides its own cultural studies approach to communities connected to water. The transdisciplinary dialogue promotes a greater degree of understanding and possibilities for cross-dissemination between different disciplines, but is linked to the same problem to be answered: How can we observe and understand the multiple cultures connected to water? This special issue thus also brings together contributions that each highlight a specific aspect of what Cultures of Water entail. This introduction, in turn, builds on those contributions to more concretely

develop Cultures of Water as connectors. We turn first to an overview of the contributions made by the various articles, and then to Cultures of Water more broadly.

Diverse components of Cultures of Water

Water has been identified as a connector between geographies and cultures, today and in the past (Subrahmanyam 2007). This special issue reflects on this aspect of Cultures of Water from coastal, cross-coastal, landlocked and on-the-water perspectives. Human relationships with the oceans, seas, rivers and their ecosystems range from the great crossings of cargo ships and the relationship of its crew between oceans (Markkula), to the environmental and political role of landlocked ponds (Vokurka). Globally, they are shaped by changing local economies (Ferreira) and politics (Vokurka), by shifting intertwining of fishing and architecture developments (Tavares and Nouvet), and by artistic media interventions (Gago and Marques). Historically, Cultures of Water have been extremely impactful in shaping the Anthropocene, though this process has also been very Eurocentrically understood at least in its academic renderings (Polónia). Each article makes its contribution to a better understanding of what Cultures of Water can entail (an understanding that this introduction will further reflect on in a more general sense as well), while each also makes a key stand-alone contribution to Cultural Studies.

The first three articles address insights into more social dimensions of Cultures of Water, providing diverse examples of cultures emerging among populations living on, along and from water, shaping their livelihoods, architecture, economics, education, colonial relations, and social relations (Tavares and Nouvet, Ferreira, Markkula). Next, Vokurka explores a more political dimension in the context of the ponds, and Gago and Marques the arts and digital worlds in the context of oral traditions surrounding various water sites. Finally, Polónia provides a macro-historical perspective by reflecting on the Anthropocene and the importance of the oceans for the construction of a globalized world. We now give a brief introduction to each contribution.

André Tavares and **Alice Nouvet** analyse Cultures of Water based on the relationship between architecture and fishing. Following the fish – in this case, sardines – across geographies, leads to an analysis of the way in which architecture and fishing are interconnected. The authors demonstrate how architecture in South Brittany had to adapt to the needs that sardine fishing generated, particularly during the 1887 crisis. They highlight how what happens in the water has significant repercussions for the shape of life outside the water – and not only in practices but also in physical construction. The sardine's sensitivity to increased water temperature and other

environmental conditions led fishermen to follow the sardine to other territories, again following the fish, and the authors once more demonstrate how architecture responded to ecological fluctuations of fish.

António Ferreira explores Cultures of Water in one family's context, both divided and united by migrations between continents in the modern colonial period and its aftermath. He (auto-) ethnographically describes a situation in which family sustenance comes from an art essentially linked to water, namely artisanal shipbuilding, and through this ends up telling a much broader story about a town, and its national and international networks, the economy and culture of which shifts in ways such that livelihoods are increasingly locked into pre-set paths due to regulations on education, ship-building practices and environmental change. These pre-set paths are focused on production and competition to such an extent that extractive practices are given preference over artisanal, creative and slow ones. Ferreira's contribution thus makes accessible a deep understanding of the complexities and consequences involved in shifting Cultures of Water – intertwining education, livelihoods, economics, migration and family networks – through the in-depth exploration of one family's trajectory.

Johanna Markkula takes Cultures of Water to another vantage point, via 'Cultures on Water', readjusting the issue's focus from cultures near water to what happens on it. She immerses herself in, and analyses, the maritime lives of ship workers, whether the ship is their workplace or their home (even if this is not by personal choice of the workers, but due to circumstances and everyday working life). The researcher's proximity to this reality and the workers who are part of it, through ethnographic methods, helps us to break down myths and a romantic view of the lives of the people involved in a culture that is built and moves, on water. The present and the historical contextualization of the sea as a key factor in the transport and communication of people, goods, and ideas, and the understanding of the very structure of ships, gives us an important basis for understanding the social relevance of the cultural relationships motivated by the daily lives of these workers for centuries.

Michal Vokurka highlights the importance of ponds and pond management in a landlocked country. He also shows how ponds were instrumentalized politically to deal with climate change topics at a national level. In particular, Vokurka demonstrates how politics chooses to frame pond management in ways that avoid climate change discourses, and attempts to simplify the debate rather than recognizing its complexity. In his own words in the article, 'the historical experience and apparent stillness of ponds – in fact, an illusion – appear as a metaphor for the supposedly stable policy offered by political leaders.' Vokurka highlights the particularities that arise in Cultures of Water related to artificial freshwater sources, and the cultures and politics surrounding water in a landlocked country like Czechia.

Ana Gago and **Diogo Marques** explore the reciprocal creation between Cultures of Water and the participatory use of media arts, and how this reveals unique potential for activating heritage. Through their case study of a participatory artistic research project studying the legends of Enchanted Mouras with local embroiderers in the Algarve region in Southern Portugal, the authors demonstrate how Cultures of Water can be represented through a combination of long-standing legends with contemporary artistic technologies, thus bringing heritage into contemporary Cultures of Water. These legends frequently play important roles in weaving together important themes that make up local culture, and the cultures that have joined from various places to create a unique local connection: speaking of gender roles, sexuality and religion, for example, as represented in specifically water-related legends. For the issue, they contribute the essential connection of Cultures of Water with participatory arts and legend and their water-related manifestations (e.g. in wells), and the telling and retelling of stories and histories through diverse mediums.

Amélia Polónia establishes a dialogue between Cultures of Water and the Anthropocene, a concept with multiple faces, most commonly applied in so-called 'hard' sciences, but analysed here from a cultural-environmental perspective well aligned with this issue. The author argues that the Humanities must participate in these dialogues, in defining the concept of Anthropocene through the study of knowledge exchanges generated in the encounter between Europeans and non-Europeans. For Polónia, these cultural encounters generated globalization. Thus, she argues that the coexistence of colonizers and colonized, operative concepts, resulting, to a large extent, from oceanic expansion, were the key elements in the creation of a globalized world. Water, in the shape of the great mass that is the ocean, became the link between individuals who, between 1500 and 1800, gave shape to a closer world, in which the exchange of knowledge, goods and ways of knowing was a structuring element. Polónia demonstrates how water was simultaneously a barrier that generated distance and separation between individuals, and the element that allowed them to come together.

Cultures of Water as connectors

The above section, and this special issue as a whole, demonstrates the broad spectrum of what can be considered part of Cultures of Water. What is it that brings together this broad spectrum, and this overall diversity? And how might it be understood in relation to Cultural Studies in particular?

As noted, the central question in the concept of Cultures of Water is dedicated to the relationships created between human beings and water, in all its forms, which can be revealed through traditions, memories, arts, history, practices and imaginaries that are most notable among populations living

close to bodies of water (Wutich *et al.* 2018). In previous work, we have discussed ways that Cultures of Water can be woven from various and changing water-related practices and traditions over time, and the importance of trans-disciplinary perspectives for this (von Schönfeld *et al.* 2023). We developed our approach and gradual conceptualization of Cultures of Water always in consideration of the need to cross not only disciplinary boundaries but also to help bridge the gap between academia and society. A series of additional elements have emerged as crucial for further conceptualizing Cultures of Water, though given their diversity, it is neither possible nor desirable to generate a fixed definition. Cultures of Water are, one could say, as flowing and changing as their namesakes. However, there are some structuring elements to Cultures of Water that can be identified and considered in diverse contexts.

First, the crucial crossing between environment, heritage and society: no Culture of Water can escape this triad, bringing together the natural essence of water, its deep embeddedness in the historical relationships it has developed with humans, creating material and immaterial heritage, and the ways those humans – the societies they form – have come to shape their lives and livelihoods around it (Blackbourn 2006, Nicholas and Brown 2023).

Second, another triad comes into play: that between perspectives (both the frames of thinking shaped by broader cultural backgrounds, and the practices performed from different locations from which water can be perceived, be they near, on, or across water, for instance; see Vokurka; Markkula), manifestations (where Cultures of Water manifest materially or immaterially in legends, ships, ponds, fishing practices and more (see Gago and Marques; Tavares and Nouvet)), and consequences (ways that Cultures of Water alter that which goes beyond it, such as the broader environment, the more-than-human beings dependent on them, and more (see Ferreira, Polónia)).

Water has been recognized as a connector between geographies and cultures (Subrahmanyam 2007, Mentz 2019), often becoming a point of contact in the process of encounters between cultures. A contact zone in which we can observe the processes of knowledge construction. Broadly speaking, then, we are here seeing Cultures of Water as *connectors* between environment, heritage, and society – across whichever geographies and irrespective of the shape of water involved, irrespective of whether this shape emerged with or without human intervention.

As demonstrated throughout this special issue, cultural studies, as both a method and theoretical tradition, offer valuable tools and perspectives for defining and analysing questions related to Cultures of Water, sustainability, adaptation, and innovation. This interdisciplinary approach brings several key contributions to the discussion, as the authors on this special issue demonstrate. By understanding signifying practices, cultural studies emphasize the

symbolic meanings of water in different cultural contexts, uncovering the complex social, historical, political, and ecological dynamics shaping human interactions with water (Ferreira; Tavares and Nouvet). Exploring cultural representation (Hall *et al.* 2013) can reveal underlying power dynamics, ideologies, and narratives that influence water-related perceptions and behaviours (Markkula, Gago and Marques). Materialism and non-reductionism (Milner 2002) in cultural studies advocate for an approach that considers the material conditions and forces shaping cultural practices and meanings, such as access, distribution, and environmental impacts, alongside cultural discourses and representations (Ferreira, Markkula, Vokurka). Through articulating identities and power relations, cultural studies examines how identities, including social, cultural, and political identities, are articulated and negotiated – as approaches to Cultures of Water do in relation to water specifically. By studying the intersection of water with issues of race, class, gender, and nationality, cultural studies shed light on power dynamics and inequalities in access to and control over water resources (Polónia, Ferreira). By examining how individuals and human groups construct their subjectivities and identities in relation to water, cultural studies also explore narratives of belonging, displacement, and environmental consciousness, illuminating the subjective experiences and cultural meanings attached to water. And finally, by promoting a critical perspective, and a reflexive engagement with cultural phenomena, cultural studies challenge dominant narratives and foster alternative perspectives (Mignolo 2007). By drawing on these methodologies and theoretical frameworks, cultural studies offer a rich and nuanced understanding of Cultures of Water, enabling researchers to address pressing environmental and social challenges with depth and complexity (see in particular these special issues in Cultural Studies relating environmental and cultural issues: Berland and Slack 1994, Pezzullo 2008, Junka-Aikio and Cortes-Severino 2017).

Finally, then, this special issue hopes to inspire further engagement with Cultures of Water, the further exploration of examples and diverse contexts, perspectives, manifestations and consequences across geographies. As discussed above, while this issue has been able to provide insights from various contexts, such as Portugal, Czechia, France, international waters and geographically cross-cutting themes such as the Anthropocene, it would be extremely enriching to consider very different geographical contexts as well.

This special issue may contribute to the development of an analytical model that can be replicated in other parts of the world. While the relationship between people and water varies according to geography, there are certainly common points of connection. The articles in this special issue demonstrate the ability to approach the theme of Cultures of Water in a trans-disciplinary way, using diverse analytical models. However, they all share a

central concern: understanding how human groups have related and continue to relate to water.

Furthermore, the Editors are aware of at least one crucial context that could not be included in the present issue: cultural experiences shaped by the notable *scarcity* and *lack* of water. One special issue can – perhaps thankfully – not explore every aspect at once. Thus, the Editors would like to end this introduction with a call for further explorations of Cultures of Water, including a further conceptualization thereof – though with a slight warning, perhaps, that such a conceptualization can likely not benefit from being more static than water itself. After all, even still-looking ponds are never fully static, let alone the lives, histories and environment surrounding them.

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