

Introduction:

WATER, LAND AND VAPOUR: ASSEMBLAGES AND THE IMAGINARY

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This journal, especially in recent volumes, has made a significant and fundamental departure from its initial focus on island geography. This started decisively in volume 6(1), where the concept of the aquapelago/aquapelagic assemblage was proposed (see Hayward, 2012), and was further explored in the dedicated online anthology (*Shima*, 2022a) that extended this new research interest. While reiterating the contents of the relevant articles here might be redundant, the focus of this journal has clearly been shifting towards discussion of what might be called 'the substantive of space'. The space of island is no longer a matter of gestalt between land and its surrounding waters; and economy, politics, tourism and music are no longer explored in a manner that reproduces the land-versus-water episteme. By contrast, the idea of the aquapelago takes water and land, as well as human activity, as an assemblage (rather than as essentialised and unresolvable entities). The notion of assemblage was further elaborated in the first mermaid themed issue of the journal - 12(2) - through the concept of the aquapelagic imaginary (Hayward, 2018). From this point on, this journal has become even more creative and productive in that the initial idea of viewing islands as assemblages as well as actants has been further extended. The mermaid and other types of mer-creatures are not merely the curious subject of fairy tales but are envisaged materialisations of the aquapelagic imaginary in which land and water are symbolically assembled into the half-human, half-ichthyologic figure. The mermaid is an icon of the aquapelago and it is the aquapelagic imaginary that generates her. As a consequence, what we have been thinking of as 'island' has become a figure of the aquapelagic imaginary as well.

The Venice issue - 15(1) - demonstrated how aquapelagic assemblages connect with broader issues and topics. Various aspects of this old city-state emphasise that we should no longer treat the place as simply a group of islands but as an assemblage of canals, lagoons, tides and transportation as well as rhizomatic cultural networking. This passage from the issue's introduction characterises the idea precisely:

Venice and its Lagoon are an aquapelago where humans connect with the amphibious landscape, in a balancing act between the longue durée of geomorphologic patterns and the evolution of societies, which become increasingly fast and uncertain in times of intensified socio-economic globalisation and anthropogenic environmental change. (Cavallo, Vallerani and Visentin 2021: 2)

In a sense, Venice is also a mermaid, a mer-creature, a rhythmic being of waves and tides. Both in terms of Anthropocenic environmental reality and as an icon of amphibious landscape, Venice has shown that lagoons can also be considered as islands. Venice as historical state presents a Western case of *shima* - a Japanese word that refers to a space of territoriality where livelihood takes place in various aspects (Suwa, 2006). In Venice, the actants, including humans, are assembled to interactively generate a distinct *shima*. In addition, in Venice the land is a fluid substance, and yet this fluidity is ever elusive since water – at least as envisaged in its pure form - is often compromised. Land and water lose territorial borders as they territorialise each other. Water can be flowing, surging, wavy, salty, muddy, sandy, icy, evaporating or humid. The aquapelago is assembled by an extension of various and multiple states of liquid and the various states of liquid produce the conditions for aquapelagos to exist. Therefore, any state of water is the key for assembling and generating the rhizomatic space of an aquapelago.

The articles included in the opening section of this issue result from the development of this journal over a decade as they encompass queries into what the aquapelago means for livelihoods in global context. These articles explore their issues with a pronounced interdisciplinary perspective that is distinct from the initial project of this journal. The articles also suggest that ‘watery stigmata’ are a distinct aspect of aquapelagic assemblages. Water can be considered as stigmata as it incessantly oozes out from the planet’s surface and, wherever water is sensed, the iconography of the island becomes evident. Watery stigmata highlight the elusiveness of waterscapes and evoke a polemic that can be connected with human security issues as they threaten to overflow the land. By the same token, the aquapelagic imaginary can be understood as a vaporous phenomenon generated from watery stigmata; it is the substance of the aquapelago as it inherits the process of signification and representation, and as it transmits and transforms to create a symbolic space. The water in aquapelagic assemblage is substantively dependent on its signifier. The aquapelagic imaginary floats in the air as vapours as we, living organism or not, become watery subjects. The aquapelago is substantive, iconic and allegorical simultaneously.

Matt Barlow illustrates a postcolonial landscape of Kochi, India. Since the city was constructed on the swampy lowland facing the sea, the history of the city is synonymous with human interventions into water. The rivers, inlets and canals divide the land. Moreover, Barlow’s analysis of Kochi’s aquascape avoids the naïve, idyllic, dichotomous scenario of Nature v Human and its subset of Water v City and regards Kochi’s waters as distinctly *impure*. This is because the sewer system, the city’s foremost important infrastructure and the main focus of civil engineering, is neither natural nor human but exists as a liquid interface between the two. Barlow characterises Kochi’s aquapelago in terms of “wetness and infrastructure [that] interrupt one another as they exist together at the same time” (Barlow, 2002, p. 36) and proposes its ethnographic space as one that is both “monsoonal and tropical” (Barlow, 2022, p. 41). In a related manner, Caitlin Vandertop (2022) resurrects colonial narratives on Suva (Fiji) that describe the condition of the colonial post as “terraqueous”. Suva was constructed upon a swamp as one of the oldest colonial posts in the region and it is still an important centre for Melanesian regional integrity in that it hosts a university, NPOs, and other cultural activities. The narratives of the early period of making Suva, which is given from multiple archival resources - a significant approach for a Melanesian town - portrays the city as a chimera-like product of intertwined accounts and suggest its isolation from the rest of the island. This case from Suva can be extended to other Melanesian colonial centres, such as Port Moresby, Rabaul (now abandoned), Honiara, Noumea and so forth, where the idea of

city was novel to indigenous peoples. Blackbirding and coolie labour were part of anthropogenic assemblages, being the agent to separate land and water in order to construct a comfortable colonial administration and economy.

Faisal Mallum discusses Green infrastructure (GI) with a case study from New Orleans. This American city might not be a 'post-colonial' location in the manner of the aforementioned Melanesian cities but its history as French outpost constructed on the mouth of Mississippi reflects a similar character to Suva and Kochi, dominated by humidity, wetlands and waterways. However, for New Orleans, GI is a recovery mechanism following the devastating hurricane that afflicted the region in 2005. As he asserts, "New Orleans faces social stresses from high levels of poverty, unemployment and violence. Although the city experienced a post-Katrina economic boom, only some of the population benefited. (Mallum, 2022, p. 69). GI is significant as it "mimics the dynamics of the natural ecosystem by managing stormwater runoff through a regenerative process" (Mallum, 2022, p. 61). Therefore, GI is an assemblage of livelihood elements, bridging the multiple actants of diverse groups, rather than an essentialisation of nature as a fetish subject for environmental protection. GI's true scope seems to be in enhancing the accessibility of urban areas and the new platforming of infrastructure might resurrect the city.

Camille Roulière takes the key from Paul Celan, the émigré Jewish-Romanian poet who wrote most of his important work in German while living in post-war Paris. "Please consider even that which will come now, as attempts to swim on dry land", writes the poet in *The Meridian* (Celan, 2011, p. 168). Roulière transposes Celan's phrase "to swim on dry land" onto contemporary arid southern Australian waterscapes around the mouth of Murray River, where the lagoon waters are d(r)ying as they are utilised as resource for hydro infrastructure. She contends that, in southern Australia, "we are forever colonising waters" and attempts to swim on dry land are, thus, "attempts to swim when there is not necessarily any physically palpable water left, where each breaststroke turns into a staggered breath in the dust, a gasp; where swimming happens in sound waves as much as in tidal ones" (Roulière, 2022, p. 78). Since the water is always being dried out, it belongs to the realm of images, in particular, sonic ones, such as the pouring rain, a richly flowing river or a flood. The drying water opens the whole epistemology of water ironically as well as iconically: "[p]rayering for waters becomes a form of pataphysics" (Roulière, 2022, p. 83). After Alfred Jarry (1911), swimming on dry land becomes a solid method of critique. Here, the waterscapes find a new realm of poetics and what the author terms *Toute-eau* (Roulière, 2022, p. 84, fn. 9) becomes a method of grasping and resonating with "our watery environments as we hear (feel) them and imagine them" (Roulière, 2022, p. 84).

In discussing three wetland sites in England as "ludic spaces", Mary Geary utilises the Foucauldian concept of 'heterotopia'. The value of these wetlands is due to their becoming a place for ludic activities that "enable the flourishing of other selves and support alternative imaginative possibilities of sustainable futures" (2022, p. 1). Foucault's term 'heterotopia' - or 'heterotopolody,' meaning an epistemological turn on heterotopia - notably displaces the 'real world' by acting as a mirror. Geary starts with an interesting case of Neolithic wetland imprints and contends:

We appreciate that our reading of space, and human use of space, is always tainted by our own paradigmatic way of understanding ourselves and the motivations of others (2022, p. 8).

As a contemplation of places where “our everyday selves [can experience] that nature is intrinsic to our spaces of ludicity” (2022, p. 8) Geary’s theoretical treatment of heterotopic English wetland parks is valuable in deepening discussions around the aquapelagic assemblage/imaginary.

When a large corpus of literature is present, historicity plays an important role in generating aquapelagic imaginary. Arup K. Chatterjee takes an example of the shoal bridge between Tamil Nadu, the Indian subcontinent, and Sri Lanka. As the shoal bridge known as Ram Sethu has a rich literature stemming from the *Ramayana*, it instantaneously evoke a particular kind of sentiment that assembles colonialism, nationalism, Hinduism, and so forth, and the bridge project on the chain of islands becomes the arena of contesting discourses. Here, the bridge articulates between Indians and Sri Lankans, mythical time and modernity and colonialism and post-colonialism. The bridge project oxymoronically becomes the focus of division rather than unity and harmony. The bridge becomes an elusive entity in that it exists in mythical reality but is also, simultaneously, a disputed and contested material entity.

Benjamin Kidder Hodges discusses Penglai island in the Yellow Sea. The island, with its tombolo, is named after an ancient image of the island of immortals. Penglai can be considered an atmosphere in the sense that:

[t]he affects that accompany them can paradoxically be both elusive and pervasive too. They can surround us and appear on the horizon forever out of reach. (2022, p. 120)

Penglai is depicted as being covered with mist and hazy clouds, and embodies a quality of humidity. It is related to the legend of a giant mythical clam that generates the mirage of a city by breathing magical mist. From here, the aquapelagic imaginary finds allegorical and factual association with the methane bubbles under the sea, which draw political attention as well as nationalist territorial imagination for the stakeholders surrounding the Yellow Sea. Penglai continues to territorialise the dreaming realm of mythical geography and pipes up dreams of iconicity of island-ness.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art has an ink painting of Penglai by Edo artist Suzuki Kiitsu, entitled (in English translation) ‘The Isle of Eternal Youth’. Employing the manner of decoration of Buddhist sutra, the painter uses a sheet of indigo paper and paint in golden ink to paint a boulder thrusting from a wavy sea. A few pines are growing from the rocky surface and two cranes are hovering in the dark sky, for these images symbolise eternal life. The painting shows a remote island that is ever elusive and is depicted as extremely rocky, as if a small mountain. In fact, although Penglai is an island, it is colloquially known as Penglai Shan (‘Mount Penglai’), as in the original title of Kiitsu’s painting. In East Asian symbolism the aquapelagic imaginary seems to involve rockiness or the mountainous, and the wavy and vapourising waters appear to convey a symbolic meaning that has been paid relatively minor attention and merits further research within the frameworks established in the articles in this theme section of the journal.

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