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Introduction

Water Ways: Critical Studies in Gulf and Arab History**

The Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Rubaiyat Qatar, and Qatar Museums co-hosted on 18-20 February 2024 a conference titled *Water Ways: Epistemologies and Aesthetics*. The conference focused on water studies in the context of environmental change and the emergence of the Anthropocene as its central theme. It explored how these global developments have shaped academic research agendas, as well as artistic and literary production, and the intersections among them.

This issue brings together a selection of studies presented at the conference, with a focus on social history through water as a key element in the formation of both material and symbolic social orders in the Gulf and Palestine. These contributions develop a theoretical and methodological framework that positions water as a starting point for conceptualizing the world, offering an alternative to what might be termed a “land-based” methodology.

Additionally, the studies highlight the importance of emerging forms of knowledge in relation to the phenomena they examine. Collectively, they raise critical questions about water as a site of profound epistemological, theoretical, and methodological inquiry. These include considerations of water’s materiality, its connections to time and space, the conditions that shape its production and critique, and the potential to conceptualize it in relation to land - whether as an extension of it or as something distinct.

Traditional studies on water have long been characterized by sharp disciplinary divides. For instance, geographical approaches to water have largely remained disconnected from historical and anthropological inquiries. These studies have often overlooked the epistemological potential of water, treating it merely as an object of study within a broader framework, rather than as a conceptual lens in its own right.¹ Until the late 2000s, water was not widely recognized as an intellectual starting point for understanding the world we inhabit. Nor was it afforded significant theoretical or methodological weight - weight capable of challenging established categories such as “homogeneous” dry land or the structural contradictions obscured by the metaphor of stable, “dry” solidity.

Nevertheless, this dominant framework did not entirely suppress the emergence of a critical discourse that acknowledged water as a material force with distinct characteristics shaping economic and social structures. This includes its influence on symbolic and semiotic systems that generate meaning in everyday life - whether through literature, art, or religious ritual.² What was once a prevailing paradigm accompanied by a fringe of sporadic critical engagements with water has, over the past two decades, begun to give way to a more robust and systematic body of scholarship. This ongoing shift reflects not only the formation of water studies as a multidisciplinary field, but also its emergence as a distinct epistemological site,

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¹ See for example: Kunlata Lahiri-Dutt, “Knowledge Others, Other’s Knowledge: The Need for a New Epistemology of Water,” *Ecology Economy and Society-the INSEE Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2 (July 2020), pp. 113-123.

² See for example: Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Dallas: Dallas Institute of the Humanities and Culture, 1999).

providing a mode of knowing that differs from and challenges the assumptions embedded in land-based methodologies, often taken for granted and rarely examined as such.³

Several factors from parallel fields - those not immediately associated with water studies - have converged to drive the emergence and development of the field as a distinct academic discipline. Environmental changes have been steadily intensifying, affecting the everyday lives of people across the globe, regardless of geographic location. What stands out is the sheer scope and complexity of these changes and their consequences. Existing economic, social, and political categories often prove inadequate for tracing, explaining, or conceptualizing this breadth. Among the most prominent elements of these climatic transformations is water and its natural cycle, both of which exert profound effects on human life. First, at the most fundamental level, water is a basic physiological necessity. Second, it underpins key material processes of production - such as fishing, agriculture, and industry - as well as transportation systems across water, air, and land. Third, water plays a vital role in shaping symbolic and semiotic systems, influencing language and discourse, ritual practices, and religious beliefs.⁴

We now live under the regime of late digital capitalism - a historical condition that shapes the very possibility of social action, particularly through its reformulation of such acts into digital commodities marked by fluidity and the seamless flow of matter, time, and space. In many ways, this condition mirrors the nature of water more closely than the solid, fixed forms that characterized earlier commodity structures.

At the same time, late digital capitalism has enabled - at times even necessitated - the restructuring of academic and other epistemic frameworks. Over the past two decades, there has been a widespread re-examination of theoretical, methodological, and empirical knowledge across the social sciences and humanities. This re-reading has given rise to numerous cross-disciplinary fields that integrate subfields from established disciplines, including memory studies, visual studies, material culture studies, queer studies, and cognitive studies.⁵

Another key dimension is the reformulation of the political field, its internal dynamics, its complex relationship with other economic, social, and cultural spheres of action, and the resulting impact on academic institutions and the forms of knowledge they produce. While some of the forces driving this reformulation are purely political, arising from within the field itself, what makes them particularly transformative is their intersections with social, economic, and cultural forces that, to some extent, operate independently of the political sphere.

At first glance, these transformations may suggest a retreat of the political field, signalling a major shift in its role, from managing public affairs to managing intractable conflicts between competing political forces. This shift has, in effect, led to a deconstruction of the political itself, replacing it with various forms of violence as the principal mechanism of governance.

Within this dynamic transformation - and in its intersection with the digital capitalist order - the cultural field has emerged, and continues to function, as an alternative vector for direct political action, as traditional forms of political engagement have significantly weakened. This is evident in the professionalization

³ See: Peter Schulz & Alexis Gros, "Toward a Sociology of Water: Reconstructing the Missing 'Big Picture' of Social Water Research," *Water*, vol. 16 (2024).

⁴ For a general survey of the history of climate change, see: Antonello Provenza, *History of Climate Change: From Earth's Origin to the Anthropocene* (London: Polity 2023). For the intersection between climate change and social, economic, and political history, see: Sunil Amrith, *The Burning Earth: A history* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024).

⁵ One of the first sociological studies that linked developments in late capitalism and the use of water metaphors to describe the consequences of these developments for social and cultural processes was Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity*. See: Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (London: Polity, 2000). For the characteristics of digital capitalism, see: Sabine Pfeiffer, *Digital Capitalism and Distributive Forces*, Jan-Peter Hermann (trans.) (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2022).

of public affairs, where “cultural” professions increasingly govern through the deployment of expert knowledge rooted in the digital-cultural form. This evolving cultural condition has repositioned the academic establishment as a site of contradiction, shaped by the displacement of political activity into the cultural sphere, which now functions as its surrogate.

Experts have come to dominate academia, following a “CEO” model akin to that employed by large corporations. At the same time, the broader recognition of the political significance of knowledge producers has grown, yet they remain largely confined within the institutional walls of academia. As a result, academic “political” action has shifted away from contesting the nature, content, and discourse of knowledge, as it did in earlier phases, and now centres instead on managing epistemological affairs themselves.

This shift has given rise to new academic fields, which in reality represent a re-linking of subdisciplines that had been fragmented under the logic of traditional modernity. These subfields were previously separated into distinct specializations due to the tight coupling of academic structures with the demands of the public and private labour markets.⁶

Building on these factors and their varied dynamics, water studies has emerged as an independent academic specialization, giving rise to new sub-disciplines that define their fields of inquiry through the central lens of water, whether seawater, river water, or rainwater. Notable examples include Indian Ocean studies, Nile Basin studies, research on the Monsoon cycle and its impact on states and societies, studies of port cities, and the history of maritime trade.

This raises an important question: what is the nature of the epistemological value added by water studies and the sub-disciplines it has either established or reinforced? What follows is a preliminary attempt to outline the types of epistemological contributions that may emerge when water is taken seriously as a foundational lens for conceptualizing historical and social processes.

Water

Water is not only distinct from land in terms of its geographical coordinates; it is, in its very essence, a material substance whose characteristics are fundamentally different - and often incompatible - with those of land. The most defining of these characteristics is movement. In its natural forms, whether on the earth’s surface or in the sky, water is governed by the logic of movement. On land, it appears in rivers, seas, and wells; in the sky, it manifests as clouds, rain, and wind.

In its “social” state, however, the forms that water takes are shaped primarily by practices of storage and redirection, adapted to suit the needs of socioeconomic, political, and cultural systems. In this context, the dominant logic becomes the prevention and regulation of water’s natural movement. The degree of such intervention varies, depending on historical and technological conditions, but the aim remains consistent: to discipline and harness water according to socially constructed demands.⁷ However, a closer examination of the processes of storage and rechanneling reveals that these too constitute forms of movement, despite initially appearing to represent the opposite. What may seem like a dichotomy between “natural” and

⁶ For more on transformations in the political field under digital capitalism, see for example: Ulrike Klinger, Daniel Kreiss & Bruce Mutsvario, *Platforms, Power, and Politics: An Introduction to Political Communication in the Digital Age* (London: Polity, 2023); Michael Betancourt, *The Critique of Digital Capitalism: An Analysis of the Political Economy of Digital Culture and Technology* (New York: Punctum Books, 2015). On transformations of knowledge and the academic establishment under digital capitalism, see for example: Thomas Almer, “Academic Labour, Digital Media, and Capitalism,” *Critical Sociology*, vol. 45, no. 4-5 (2019), pp. 599-615.

⁷ The storage of water has long been considered a key measure of civilizational development. Initially, the concepts of storage and rechanneling were applied to the study of riverine societies. Over time, this conceptual approach was extended to encompass the storage and redistribution of other material and symbolic resources.

“social” movement will be further explored through three foundational dimensions of knowledge production: material/form, time/rhythm, and place/space, along with their various interconnections.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of water’s materiality is its lack of fixed form. It takes the shape of whatever contains it, yet never settles into that form permanently; instead, it changes each time it moves or is transferred to a new container, whether “natural” or “social.”⁸ In this sense, water resembles a dancer, whose trained and flexible body enables fluid performance, or an actor, whose adaptable persona can be deconstructed and reassembled to embody different roles. This stands in sharp contrast to figures such as politicians or ideologues, who often present a clear, fixed identity and maintain “principled” and unchanging positions - or to religious identities grounded in “absolute” faith in a particular doctrine.

These two social roles operate according to different governing principles, yet they do not negate one another. Instead, they are constituted through an ongoing relational process. When considering the materiality of water as a socially and historically situated substance, just as with the materiality of land, water’s formlessness and land’s form should not be understood as pre-existing material givens. Rather, both are socially constructed forms of presence and exchange par excellence.

Traditionally, this relationality has been, and continues to be, reduced to a single pole: the form of land as the primary site of knowledge production. In contrast, the pole of water’s formlessness has been systematically elided from the institutional and academic sites. The added value lies precisely in conceptualizing this ongoing relationality - the spectrum of interactions between form and formlessness - as a continuous process of formation from which social and other phenomena emerge.

When investigating a social, cultural, political, or economic phenomenon from a social sciences or humanities perspective, it is useful to evaluate it along the spectrum of formlessness and form as a process through which its material presence is shaped and made socially legible. For instance, if adolescence is examined through this lens, the adolescent body can be understood as undergoing continuous transformation, producing multiple successive forms in rapid succession. This rapid metamorphosis can create a state of confusion between the different forms the body might assume - so much so that formlessness itself becomes perceptible, especially when this “confusion of form” renders the body non-circulable within the social context under study.

There is no singular or fixed time or rhythm governing the “natural” or “social” movement of water. Rather, this movement can be shaped by multiple temporalities and rhythms. On the one hand, seasonal water movement follows a cyclical rhythm, such as the rainy season and the forms of agriculture dependent on it. Similarly, river water flows in a linear direction, with its rhythm sometimes interrupted and reshaped by dams that regulate or redirect its flow to generate alternative forms of energy. In contrast, the sea embodies overlapping and intersecting temporalities, producing a hybrid time that gives rise to various rhythms: the linear time of maritime transport, the cyclical rhythm of seasonal fishing, and the undulating rhythm of waves, each with its own internal logic and variation. On the other hand, the storage and rechannelling of water introduce imposed rhythms - ones external to water’s natural flow and shaped instead by the dominant temporalities of land. Chief among these is the “zero-rhythm” of storage, a suspended temporality from which various forms of fluid movement are later reactivated through processes of rechannelling.

It thus becomes clear that the movement of water is composed of multiple, simultaneous times and rhythms that cannot be reduced to the singular time/rhythm or operating logic of storage. Instead, the movement of water should be understood as a temporal form that operates within, and in relation to,

⁸ For more on the concept of materiality, see: Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). For more on the concept of “formlessness”, see: Yve-Alain Bois & Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

other forms. This perspective allows us to conceptualize time/rhythm as a temporal-rhythmic compound composed of various layers and directions - even as the modern land-based system attempts to impose a homogenous, linear time that advances unceasingly forward.

The added value lies in expanding our understanding of this temporal/rhythmic compound. While it certainly includes linear time, it also exceeds its limitations, unfolding along multiple axes of horizontal and vertical fluidity, much like a musical phrase. Every phenomenon is constituted, in part, by its own unique time/rhythmic compound. It is the task of the researcher to identify and analyse this compound to grasp the phenomenon critically.

Returning to our example of adolescence: if measured according to its time/rhythmic compound, we can distinguish at least the following rhythms - those of the physical, organic body and its transformations; the rhythm of the self and its development; the time/rhythm of the family (which may be in its early stages or at other points along its trajectory); and the broader time/rhythm of society itself. Together, these elements constitute the temporal/rhythmic compound of the adolescent in modernity, helping to explain why this period is marked by an especially intense temporal and rhythmic experience.

At first glance, the place/space of water appears clearly defined. It is possible to identify its “natural” locations - seas, lakes, rivers, springs - and likewise to classify the “social” spaces through which it is regulated, such as wells, dams, channels, and various types of containers.⁹ However, even a preliminary examination reveals a necessary distinction between places/spaces that *contain* water and those that *arise from* water itself - spaces fundamentally characterized by movement.

An analysis of water’s interaction with its immediate environment reveals that it transforms the places it enters, forming new compounds. When water meets soil, for instance, it produces mud. It thus becomes difficult to speak of a place or space that is purely of water. Rather, water is always entangled with the spatial environments it traverses, generating diverse compounds that contribute to the formation of new places and spaces. While the places that *contain* water emerge from a conceptual framework rooted in land, the places *generated by* water and its movement highlight water’s capacity to reshape and be reshaped by its environment.

The added epistemological value lies in understanding that fixed, systemic places and spaces are only one pole in a broader spectrum. The other pole is the ongoing process of transformation produced through the dynamic interaction between water and its surroundings. When investigating a phenomenon through the lens of place/space, it must be measured, first, by the space that contains it; second, by the space it itself generates; and third, by the interactions between these two.

In the case of adolescence, analysing its spatial coordinates through this relational lens reveals a wide range. On one end are the spaces that externally contain the adolescent and their experiences, such as the family, which they may openly reject yet still cling to. On the other end are the places and spaces the adolescent creates from within, through interaction with chosen worlds they seek to build - worlds that are always temporary, continually replaced as new ones are discovered.

This preliminary sketch has highlighted the epistemological value that emerges when “land”, as an epistemological foundation, is opened - relationally - to “water”. While this outline still requires further development, testing, and calibration in order to produce a fully articulated theoretical and conceptual framework, it already suggests that many social, economic, political, and cultural forces remain invisible when research phenomena are examined solely from a land-based perspective. What distinguishes this

⁹ On the concepts of place and space in late capitalism, see for example: Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 154-180; Harvey, pp. 201-323.

relational approach is its ability to uncover the simultaneity of different forms, rhythms, and spaces within a single phenomenon. This stands in contrast to the dominant land-derived paradigm, which tends to operate through a uniform mode.

This shift in perspective calls for the development of new tools of measurement - ones that adopt a logic of multiple indicators, approached both successively and simultaneously. These distinctive features gesture toward the interpretive potential made possible by thinking through the relationality of water. Moreover, the epistemological “recognition” of water may open the door to other such recognitions, of air, for example, or of outer space, which could profoundly reshape the types of knowledge we produce.

Special Issue

This special issue comprises four studies that explore various social and historical phenomena in which water plays a central role. Three of these studies focus on different aspects of Gulf history, spanning from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century. They trace historical developments rooted in the relational dynamics between sea and land, examining the systems that operated within each domain and the strong interconnections that linked them. In his study *“The Sailing Scribe: Mansur al-Khariji and the Oceanic Worlds of the Gulf”*, Fahad Ahmad Bishara presents the observational writings of Kuwaiti sailor Mansur al-Khariji (1879–1954) to explore the maritime landscape from epistemological, institutional, economic, and social perspectives. Anchored in the themes of movement and circulation across various political and economic land-based systems, Bishara argues that al-Khariji’s reflections reveal a complex temporal/rhythmic compound.

In *“The Drought Years: The Forgotten Economic Transformations in Gulf History”*, Amna Abdulla Sadiq traces the transition from a pearl-diving economy to an oil-based one, shifting from a maritime economy to one firmly rooted in land. She examines the implications of this shift for British colonial policy, particularly in its interactions with Gulf inhabitants and political systems. Sadiq argues that a degree of autonomy persisted as long as the sea and its associated economic activities remained central to Gulf social and political life. However, with the rise of the oil economy, this margin of independence nearly vanished, at least during the historical period in question.

Faozi Al-Goidi’s study, *“The Sea vs. the Desert: Rahmah ibn Jabir and the Dialectic of Piracy and Maritime Influence”*, examines the phenomenon of “piracy” in the Arabian Gulf, so labelled by British archives, at the turn of the 19th century. Through a critical reading of the biography of Rahmah ibn Jabir (1756–1826), Al-Goidi challenges conventional narratives by introducing the concept of the “maritime sheikhdom” as distinct from both piracy and land-based sheikhdoms. He outlines its defining characteristics, emphasizing its remarkable capacity to navigate between diverse systems and spaces, thereby establishing a form of maritime influence grounded in liquidity as its core logic.

In *“Star-Tied Water: Tracing Life in a Colonized Palestinian Village During the Anthropocene”*, Yasmeen Qadan explores the contemporary life of a Palestinian village through the cultural significance of water and the alternative rhythms of life it sustains under a late colonial-capitalist system. She examines various material, temporal, and spatial relationships that exist beyond the confines of capitalist-colonialist structures within the Anthropocene, framing them as emancipatory spaces. Qadan argues that water - through its materiality, temporality, and spatiality - offers Palestinians a means of stepping outside the accelerating rhythm of colonialist capitalism and into a slower, alternative rhythm. This “space of water” becomes, at least in a ritual sense, liberated from the power and tempo of colonial capitalist time.

These studies uncover the epistemological significance of water across various contemporary and historical contexts, revealing dimensions that remain hidden when viewed solely from the traditional epistemological “land” that continues to dominate. They bring to light material forms, rhythmic patterns, and spatial movements that shape the practices and rituals of social, economic, cultural, and political life, emerging from the relational interplay between water and land. In doing so, these studies pose a new challenge to researchers in the social sciences and humanities: to critically reconsider the one-dimensional reliance on land as the starting point for research, and to imagine new epistemological foundations for the inquiries of today and tomorrow.

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