

PREFACE

Ruth Mostern

Water is an exceptional subject for contemporary and interdisciplinary humanistic thinking. When faculty and graduate students affiliated with the UC Merced Center for the Humanities began discussing potential topics for a two-year seminar, we sought an area of focus that would exemplify the urgency of humanistic scholarship in troubled times. Moreover, we envisioned a concentration that would permit diverse participants to engage with the world around them while framing critical and enduring questions about aesthetics, value, and power. Based at a recently-founded campus with an interdisciplinary and community-serving mission, we were determined to engage with the broadest possible constituency. We wanted to host a humanities seminar that welcomed the arts and social sciences, involved colleagues from science and engineering, and extended off campus to embrace farmers, artists, activists, land managers, and other members of our rural community. Water was the perfect topic.

The importance of water as an area of inquiry begins with its ubiquity on and beneath the surface of the earth and in the cells of living beings. Water's periodic extremes of drought and flood have shaped social change, water travel has supported both trade and conquest, water has inspired art and music, and it has served as a site of exploration and play. Evoked in rituals like rites of passage, baptism, and ablution and in metaphors about "sea changes" and "ebbs and flows," water is symbolically and metaphorically significant as well. I was honored to preside over the seminar as Interim Director of the Center during the 2015–2016 academic year, and to participate as a Seminar Fellow during the 2016–2017 year.

We wanted to explore a wide breadth of topics about water and culture and to invite as many people as possible into that conversation. To do that, we hosted an

eventful program of activities. An art exhibit about colonial depictions of waterscapes and wet bodies in West Africa, Hawai'i, and India launched a collaboration among an art historian, a historian, and the university library. Interdisciplinary art and science field trips on endangered seasonal wetlands at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains invited youth and adult participants to make art, watch birds, and perform science. One conference took agricultural land managers, National Park Service staff, farmers, curators, and artists to Yosemite National Park and the Merced County Courthouse Museum to talk about water's numerous social meanings in the highly managed California landscape. Finally, we offered space to UC Merced faculty and graduate students, and to visiting speakers, to present research: on the patron saints of Haitian fishermen, the history of California water rights, activist resistance to fracking, historical gardens in the Punjab, contemporary refugees at sea in the Mediterranean, and many more topics besides. In short, at a time when common ground is often elusive, the topic of water allowed us to share ideas about how to sustain our lives and communities.

Inspired by our collective thinking and conversation about widely diverse aspects of water, we focused upon a substance that supports human existence and all life on earth. Our geographical vantage point, in the center of California's ecologically and socially fragile Central Valley, attuned us to the unpredictable arrival of rainstorms every winter and the shock of wildfires every summer. These harsh seasonal rhythms, upon which well-being in the Central Valley and the Sierra foothills depends, characterize a region where everyone talks about water. The seminar allowed us to make meaning in conversation with the farmers, workers, scientists, and activists with whom we shared that space. When we gazed through the windows of the campus conference rooms where we held our events, we saw the waterscapes we were discussing: reservoirs, canals, and sluices; the ranchlands they irrigated; and the egrets, cattle, and bobcats that congregated around them.

In keeping with contemporary humanistic theory, the Water Seminar allowed us to enact a more-than-human humanities. Treating water as an active agent of social change and centering on water as the focus of our questions allowed us to talk about H₂O molecules, fungi, ships, and concrete along with people, without assuming that humans deserved primacy in our narratives. We blurred the imagined divide between nature and culture, and we explored how humans, trees, and soil mutually constitute one another. We learned how people transform water when they dam, pollute, and channel it, and when they sing about it and sail upon it, too. We also came to nuanced understandings of how water shapes culture: inundating the homes of the most vulnerable people, turning turbines for the benefit of state power, and irrigating farmland as sites of profit, food, and backbreaking labor as well as habitats for plants and animals. People make and move water on every scale, and they do so in the context of their aesthetics, values, power relations, and politics. Water in turn makes and moves people. These dynamics

are multidirectional and perpetual. Relationships between water and people are never static.

We hosted the Water Seminar during a time of both planetary and academic peril. We are living in an epoch of climate disaster and in an age of retreat from the liberal arts as a shared public good. We launched the seminar during the final year of a historic California drought, and we completed it amidst floods, fires, and landslides. It is in this context that this volume of essays seeks to understand how humans subsist in watery landscapes together with other beings, and what courses of action humanists envision and propose to activate more just water futures. Water, unpredictably excessive in some places and conspicuously absent in others, will transform human and planetary futures ever more dramatically in the decades to come. I am confident that the humanities, and the essays in this book, will play an important role in shaping our collective sense of what we desire and what we can imagine in our relationships with water.