

Engaged Universals and Community Economies: The (Human) Right to Water in Colombia

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Abstract: While the United Nations' sanctioning of the human right to water was widely celebrated, many debate the adequacy and political potency of the rights discourse to frame water justice. Drawing on multi-sited, ethnographic-based fieldwork in Colombia in 2010 and 2011, and prioritizing activists' reflexivity, the paper explores how water activists in the 2007–2011 referendum campaign engaged the universal human right while making user-run community aqueducts more visible as place-based, not-for-profit, culturally attuned, and valid alternatives to the corporate model of water supply. This case study suggests that the human right to water cannot be separated from water commons, and that communal users and activists engage the universal under their own terms. It also suggests we think of these water models as “economic communities” in Gibson-Graham's sense: ethical spaces to make explicit our social relations with water, and to cultivate selves and practices that enact alternative socio-natural relations through water's circulations.

Resumen: La sanción del derecho humano al agua en Naciones Unidas fue ampliamente celebrada. Sin embargo, distintos analistas han cuestionado la capacidad analítica y la potencia política del discurso de derechos humanos para luchar por la justicia hídrica. Este estudio de la campaña del referendo por el agua en Colombia, basado en técnicas etnográficas en 2010 y 2011, explora el modo en que activistas movilizaron el derecho humano universal para visibilizar los acueductos comunitarios como alternativas válidas al modelo corporativo neoliberal de provisión de agua. Estos acueductos son organizaciones culturales locales sin fines de lucro. Este caso sugiere que el derecho humano al agua no puede separarse de la política de los bienes comunes. También sugiere pensar estos modelos hídricos como “comunidades económicas” en el sentido de Gibson-Graham: espacios éticos donde explicitar nuestras relaciones sociales con el agua y donde cultivar relaciones socio-naturales alternativas a través de la circulación del agua.

Keywords: water justice, human right to water, water commons, economic communities, Colombia

“This is the community appropriating its space, making it its own ... We want organized communities themselves to distribute and consume their own water”, Camilo, a community leader, told me in June 2011 while catching his breath.¹ We were hiking near the Colombian city of Medellín in the lush, humid forest of the Sabaneta hills that hosts hundreds of bird and tree species and generous springs that provide water to three community aqueducts in the county. Camilo and three other aqueduct members were taking me to see one of these springs and the aqueduct infrastructure: water inlets, chlorine tanks that make water soil free and potable, and the first portion of the network of pipes that carry water to households. As we were about to enter a muddy patch on the verdant trail, I noticed his t-shirt: “*Water. A Fundamental Human*

Right” it read on the front, and on the back, “*Community Aqueducts are public and social management of water. Let’s defend them!*”

The human right to water and the defense of community aqueducts (as Colombians call them) are entwined not only in Camilo’s thoughts and t-shirt slogans. Such was the case of the Colombian referendum campaign that took place between 2007 and 2010. Supported by the global water movement, on 24 February 2007, diverse activists came together to organize a national referendum to make access to drinking water a fundamental human right. They were inspired by emblematic Latin American “activist successes” like the 2000 Cochabamba water war and the 2004 Uruguayan Constitutional reform. They shared the name of those activists’ networks, “National Commission for the Defense of Water and Life”, and assembled similar types of social actors: environmentalists, public services organizations, human rights activists, small farmers/peasants, Afro-Colombians, youth, women’s, and indigenous groups, and the focus of this article: community aqueducts that supply water to roughly one-quarter of Colombia’s population.² After traveling along rivers, cities and towns, and starting conversations on water all over the country, these networked activists collectively drafted an ambitious bottom-up, five-point referendum proposal that besides establishing the fundamental right to water, guaranteed a free universal vital minimum together with sanitation to be provided by state companies or community-led systems. Seeking to integrate the ecocentric and anthropocentric divide that has characterized Latin American water struggles since the 1970s (Castro 2008a),³ the proposal also aspired to protect the ecosystems crucial to the water cycle and the cultural value of water for indigenes and Afro-Colombians as integral to their collective territories. In May 2010, after being endorsed by over 2 million citizens around the country, the referendum was rejected by Congress. A new awareness, however, outlived the legislative failure. For the first time in Colombia, water had become a political topic in and of itself, connected yet irreducible to “the problem of land” or the polluting effects of extractive industries like large-scale mining or biofuels production. And the vast but hidden experience of roughly 12,000 community aqueducts was made visible to the public gaze. As a community water activist named María told me in June 2010, “The referendum took us away from our isolation. We suddenly learned that we were not alone; we had thought we were the only ones with an aqueduct in the country.”

Like being free from torture or having access to adequate food, accessing safe drinking water and sanitation is a right that UN member countries are legally bound to guarantee to all of their citizens since 28 July 2010. This was the result of a global movement committed to translating moral arguments into workable claims while seeking a new water governance regime able to forge novel relations between citizens, states, and non-governmental and grassroots organizations. Often emerging from contexts where water privatization and high water prices in for-profit systems have led to massive inequities, water marginalization, suffering, and even death (Sultana and Loftus 2012:5), activists have struggled to frame water as “a common heritage of all humans and other species, as well as a public trust that must not be appropriated for personal profit or denied to anyone because of inability to pay” (Barlow 2008:xi–xii). I cannot elaborate at length here, but it is well known that water struggles have pervaded Latin America since the late 1990s (Assies 2003;

Castro 2008a; Ceceña 2005; DeVos et al. 2006; Perera 2010, 2012; Santos et al. 2006). The technocratic, top-down, usually undemocratically decided and implemented neoliberal water policies, coupled with the perception of widespread corruption that private sector participation brought about and the increasing evidence that neoliberal policies privilege transnational corporations at the expense of citizens, triggered protest, civil disobedience, and even open violence (Castro 2008b). The growing recognition of interculturality (Escobar 2010) underlying constitutional reforms in the Andean region has not translated into water laws and policies that include local, particularly indigenous, forms of water management. Therefore, especially in the Andean region, protests have included participation in legal reforms, where indigenous and peasant communities have sought “legal pluralism”—to propose alternatives to neoliberalism or to take advantage of decentralization mechanisms within neoliberal reforms by campaigning for inclusion of their customary laws and local frameworks of water management (DeVos et al. 2006). In the Colombian case I analyze here, indigenous or Afro-Colombians were not the most active players; and the local water systems that I discuss here are spread around the country, and not concentrated in indigenous or Afro-Colombian communities. As I elaborate elsewhere (Perera 2012), however, their notion of “territories”, a collective life project and a “subaltern strategy of localization” (Escobar 2008:59), was woven into the referendum text, discourse, and strategy.

The human right to water sanctioned by the UN in 2010 was of course celebrated as a progressive move in the struggle for socio-environmental justice. Yet, some contest the language of human rights and whether this discourse is analytically useful and politically potent enough to frame water justice.⁴ Many have in fact interrogated the adequacy and potency of using human rights frameworks to redress injustices in the context of neoliberal globalization (Blackburn 2011; Goodhart 2003; Harvey 2000, 2008; Pollis 2004; Žižek 2005). This hesitation was largely discussed in terms of water justice. For example, in her widely read *Antipode* article, Bakker (2007)⁵ argued that even if worthwhile in an aspirational sense, the human right to water might be a necessary but insufficient claim in the current conjuncture; and using it within anti-privatization campaigns might not be the best strategy. The human right to water is individualistic, state-centered, compatible with private sector participation, and anthropocentric, thus limiting solidarity between humans and non-humans. A focus on property rights and on the commons might be a better principled and strategic option (Bakker 2007). Yet, Bakker later argued, the commons are not necessarily the antithesis of governments (or markets). In practice, water management through the commons or community-led supply systems are not necessarily equitable or democratic. Oftentimes discursively (ab)used by both right-wing technocrats and left-wing communitarians, “community management” can even contribute to creating entrenched two-tier systems and enable devolving the costs of water supply to the poor. Advocates of community solutions, thus, need to avoid endorsing divestment by the state (and by governing elites) of their responsibility for universal water supply as a material emblem of citizenship—and water activists should rather aim at “nested scales” that can include the commons as *one* level of water governance (Bakker 2010).

The frame of the commons, however, has enormous moral and political force. It obliges us to use the language of rights, entitlement, and justice, Blomley (2008) writes. And he adds: thick, ethnographic accounts show that the claims to the

commons of the poor are “based upon and enacted through sustained patterns of local use and collective habitation, through ingrained practices of appropriation and ‘investment.’” (2008:320–325) Many scholars have argued that “the human right (to water)” and “the commons” do not necessarily exclude each other because they are part of the same political culture of opposition (Bywater 2012); because if the right is to be materialized, the logic of the commons must be incorporated with a focus on citizens’ participation (Clark 2012); and because the right to water *should* include, Bond insists, “commoning” strategies of water both across the population and also “vertically from the raindrop or the borehole, all the way to the sewage outfall and the sea” (Bond 2012:198).

Along these lines, this article explores the political potency of intermingling the human right to water *and* the emphasis on the commons by drawing on multi-sited, ethnographic-based fieldwork in Colombia in June 2010 and June 2011 and prioritizing activists’ reflexivity. After discussing the relation between universal political claims and particular historical-geographical conjunctures drawing on Harvey (2000) and Tsing’s (2005) notion of “engaged universals”, I argue that during the referendum campaign, the human right to water effectively illuminated communal systems, thus making them visible to the public eye. I elaborate on how, between 2007 and 2011, Colombian activists mobilized the universal right to engage subaltern community aqueducts and empower them to start their own counter-network to resist dispossession and absorption by large private or public water companies. Some Colombians hesitated, however, about the mobilizing power of human rights to promote a meaningful public dialogue about water and defend community-led aqueducts. While I acknowledge and elaborate on this critique to note the legal tools still available for water activists after the referendum failure, I pay attention to the geography of law (Blomley 1998, 2004) at work in the referendum campaign to explore how activists’ engagement with legal discourses and practices contributes to re/produce water commons or place-based alternatives in the social production of water. The idea is “not that society produces water per se”, Linton writes, “but that every instance of water that has significance for us is saturated with the ideas, meanings, values and potentials” (2010:5) and legal discourses as well, that we confer upon water. Rather than a “thing” or a fixed representation, “H₂O”, I understand water as a socio-natural relation (Swyngedouw 2011) and a process (Linton 2010, 2012). Like every hybrid, water internalizes and combines “social” and “natural” processes in metabolic relations that defy binary distinctions between material and ideological, real and discursive (Swyngedouw 2004), that we can grasp with historical-geographical lenses. With Sousa Santos’ “sociology of absences” (2004, 2006) we can think of community aqueducts as counter-hegemonic experiences or not-for-profit alternatives that had been rendered invisible if not backwards and unproductive by the corporate model of water provision (Bakker 2010; Castro 2008a) in Colombia.⁶ In other words, these aqueducts illustrate Escobar’s (2010) hypothesis of post-capitalist or post-development forces embodied in some political projects in Latin America today that nourish relational, rather than dualist, ontologies. Using Gibson-Graham’s (2006) language, the aqueducts are “economic communities”—ethical spaces potentially able to make explicit our social relations with water, where individuals might cultivate selves that desire, and practices that enact, alternative socio-natural relations through water’s circulations.

A Note on the Field

From late-night 13-hour bus trips to rides on 1980s motorbikes, from interurban vans packed with peasants and hens and small boats crossing the Málaga Bay to BMW rides around the wealthy streets of Northern Bogotá, I travelled many different paths through Bogotá and its surrounding rural areas, Medellín and its suburbs, Santander, and the Pacific region. The diverse means of transportation I took are telling not only of my multi-sited (and multi-class) fieldwork, but also of the heterogeneous actors and spaces involved in community aqueducts. I visited more than 10 aqueducts of different sizes and one of their major threats: the large water companies in Bogotá and Medellín that aim to absorb them. I participated in activist meetings of six individuals to more than 200 concerning the referendum, community-led water supply systems, and related water struggles. I interviewed supportive and unsupportive aqueduct users, community organizers, public services activists, middle-class environmentalists, seasoned unionists, Afro-Colombian leaders, university professors, public intellectuals, government officials, and neoliberal advocates. My fieldwork and my focus in this article is to analyze the particular moment of the failed referendum and the possibilities that the engagement with human rights talk opened up for community-led water systems.

An Engaged Universal

While the UN human right to water sanctioned on 28 July 2010 was celebrated by the global movement as a progressive step, many still doubted, if not contested, the analytical and political adequacy of such language to frame water justice. The human rights discourse has long been scrutinized in terms of how suitable it is for redistributive justice in the context of neoliberal globalization and its thrust to commodify almost everything that exists, from healthcare and education to genes and seeds. Harvey, for example, asks: “What do we make of these principles under contemporary conditions of globalization” that have “pose[d] the question of our ‘species being’ on planet earth all over again” (Harvey 2000:86, 91)? On the one hand, orthodox Marxist approaches downplay the transformational potential of human rights, at least in terms of redistribution, understanding them as always saturated by bourgeois institutions and thus unable to challenge capitalism itself; or colonized by a particular subject (the white male property-owner holding the right to exchange in the market, exploit workers, and exert political domination) that hegemonizes the universal form (Žižek 2005). On the other hand, theoretical sensibilities attuned to cultural difference might view human rights, like all universals, as always fraught with the burden of Eurocentric patterns of meaning and interpretation. For Sousa Santos (2006), “hegemonic, neoliberal monoculture” often makes universal the dominant scale of social life and deprives particular, local experiences of dignity and credibility as valid scales and modes of life, thus “wasting” them by erasing or shrinking human experience. Human rights are thus sometimes seen, like other universals, as flawed versions of Enlightenment thought and eighteenth century liberalism (Harvey 2000). Some have gone as far as arguing *against* human rights, viewing them as a symbolic fiction that prohibits elaborating collective projects of socio-political transformation and as an ideological expression of Western military interventionism that

pursues economico-political ends through depoliticized politics (Žižek 2005). Like universal Reason or progress under European colonialism, human rights have never been neutral. They are caught up with imperial modes of coercion and control, with neocolonial programs and internationally mandated standards of order. Yet the deep irony, Tsing writes, is that universals are associated with both imperial plans *and* emancipatory movements for justice and empowerment: “Universals beckon to elite and excluded alike” (Tsing 2005:9).

In this twofold expansion of power by the mighty and the disempowered, rights talk opens up a flurry of contradictions that can, eventually, transform societies and economies while setting in motion forces that oppose the workings of neoliberal capitalism. Epoch-making phenomena as diverse as financial crises, environmental catastrophes, information technologies, and the like, have brought to the fore the mismatch of scale between the modern locus of political sovereignty, quintessentially the nation-state, and our collective life as species-being (Fraser 2005). In other words, what we often call “globalization” has opened up a political and theoretical debate that makes it possible, if not necessary, to revise and redefine universal human rights. Globalization calls for human rights to become more robust; or at least to transform in times and places beyond their originary post-World War II milieu. Of course such transformations will only take place through social mobilization and political struggle.

If we are not, then, to throw out the baby with the bathwater, and we are not to do away with universals like human rights *tout court*, Harvey suggests we think dialectically between universals and particulars. Dialectics “teaches that universality always exists in relation to particularity” (Harvey 2000: 241). They might be two distinctive conceptual moments, or two stages of practical engagement, but they are always implicated in each other. Justice may become universal as it is abstracted from particular circumstances, but once it is actualized in the social world, it becomes particular again. From Afro-Colombians to Mexican Zapatistas, myriad social movements call for dignity and respect as universal rights while they simultaneously make claims embedded in their territories and grounded on their own particular cultural histories. The UN Declaration, Harvey says, has not paid enough attention to the many scales in which human association is possible and meaningful, nor to the infinite variations of ways of life and structures of feeling that are crucial and possible within human existence. The key to bringing the dialectic of universalities and particularities into play, then, is to build political forces able to engage in dialogues among different human scales. The key is to deepen and widen the scope of human rights in ways that can include the right to be different and the right to the production of space (Harvey 2000:86–94).

“To turn to universals”, Tsing continues with an ethnographic sensibility, “is to identify knowledge that moves—mobile and mobilizing—across localities and cultures ... The mission of the universal is to form bridges, roads and channels of circulation. Knowledge gained from particular experience percolates into these channels, widening rather than interrupting them” (2005:7). Tsing’s idea is that we think about the dialectics between universal and particular in terms of “engagement”, and that we see universals as aspirations, as always unfinished achievements, which are effective only within particular conjunctures that shape them and endow them with meaning. Tsing’s work encourages us to study *engaged* universals. Distanced from formal abstractions, we can look at how universals are mobilized and used; we can inquire

into how universals are charged and changed as they travel across difference. Tsing's invitation, like Harvey's, is to think *between* scales in order to see universals as hybrid, transient, and able to be reinvented through dialogues within particular political interventions.

Engaged universals travel. They do so within what Tsing calls "activists' packages", or to use the wording of collective action scholar Tarrow (2005), "repertoires", that, having emerged in one context, are dislocated and relocated to other places. Another way of putting it: engaged universals are "allegorical bundles" or "empowering narratives of political agency" that activists translate and resignify within their own contexts. The human right to water became such an "activist package" or "empowering narrative" that traveled to charge struggles against neoliberalism at the World Social Forum, and also journeyed into national and local struggles in Colombia for socio-environmental justice and substantive democracy, as it had done earlier in Uruguay. As it entered the Colombian political arena, even if not free of limitations, the human right to water made place-based communal water systems visible, expanding the political possibilities within the social production of water.

Local Engagements (and Drawbacks)

When I arrived in Bogotá for my second fieldtrip, it was clear that "the referendum on water" had failed. "The Founding Fathers drowned it in Congress", I heard an activist sarcastically say. The campaign had been "the most important environmental mobilization in the last ten years", a former public official told me in June 2010. Water activists had traveled the country and navigated the most important rivers to host public forums to collectively draft an ambitious bottom-up, five-point referendum text that was later endorsed by more than 2 million citizens. Few voices, however, were critical about this activist frame. Historian and public intellectual Jorge Orlando Melo, for example, feared that the referendum would "reinforce the tendency that Colombians have to shift problems from the world of politics to the judiciary, [and] to believe in the magic of the law and constitutional fetishism". The rules of public debate for the constant (re)definition of policy, and the room of manoeuvre of legislators, are undermined if moral and political values, like the access to water as a fundamental right, are enshrined in the Constitution, Melo argued. In this case, activists' constitutional faith, together with their energy, global financial and political support produced a bold proposal that, besides the human right to water, included the protection of the ecosystems crucial in water's circulation; the watersheds damaged by pollutants from large-scale mining and biofuels production; and the cultural meanings that Afro-Colombians and indigenous groups give to water. The referendum also included a free universal vital minimum and its mandatory provision by the state (or by organized communities). Once inside Congress, legislators rejected it. The ruling coalition created a legal labyrinth that first modified and thinned down the original text drafted by movements and endorsed by citizens, and later in May 2010 denied the possibility of discussing the referendum proposal at all. When I inquired about the reasons for the rejection, I was told that while some legislators were just negligent about water issues, others wanted to protect the participation of the private sector in public services. "We got very defensive", a neoliberal government

official told me in June 2011. “We rushed to defend the water framework that we had created with Law 142 in 1994”. Other legislators, my interviewees said, could have followed what Weber (1968 [1946]) calls an “ethic of responsibility”, fearing that the human right, the universal minimum, and the state mandate put together would unleash “an avalanche” of writs for the protection of fundamental rights—“acción de tutela o popular”, in Spanish, a legal mechanism, inaugurated and widely used since 1991, that entitles citizens to ask the maximum authority in Constitutional matters, the Constitutional Court, to protect their fundamental rights. “Think about small communities in remote areas of the Amazon or the Pacific Basin”, a former Environmental Minister (who supported the referendum) told me in June 2010. “They are unable to build their own aqueducts. If an individual from those communities files such writ and the Constitutional Court grants it: Can the national government assume the financial and technical responsibility of bringing water infrastructure to her? No! So the specter of this obligation deterred many legislators.”

Activists were well aware that legislators and officials had argued that, if such writs were indeed massively granted, it would become impossible for the government to rationally plan water infrastructure.⁷ Yet, they stressed time and again that they valued the referendum process beyond the outcome, as an exercise: a democratic one, to defend “the territories”. As I expand below, if we pay attention to the relation between law and space, and we think of legal discourses as modes of place-making where boundaries are not only established but also lived and negotiated (Blomley 2004, 2008), we see that engaging the Constitution became a means for activists to claim water commons for the poor based on patterns of collective appropriation and use. Engaging the law in “an alternative way”, to use their words, became a way to defend the right of communal water users *not* to be excluded from the use of their water commons.

Anticipating “an avalanche” of writs for the protection of fundamental rights was not, however, a completely unlikely possibility. In fact, the Constitutional Court, very active in environmental matters since its inception, ruled to protect the right to access water with such writs, even before the referendum talk started in 2007. Protecting rights to life, dignity, health, or a healthy environment—with their obvious relation to the right to access drinking water—the Court ordered, for example, large water companies in Bogotá and Medellín, and smaller providers as well, to reconnect households that had been disconnected because of their inability to pay.⁸ The Court even commanded government funding of water infrastructure. In 1994, it instructed the Department of Cundinamarca to fund the construction of a rural community aqueduct.⁹ It is not surprising that in 2010, when it was clear that the referendum had failed in Congress, the Court openly endorsed the human right to water, arguing again that rights like education or cultural identity could not be materialized without the right to water.¹⁰

All in all, the referendum to constitutionalize the human right to water was an empowering activist package, in Tsing’s sense. Its five ambitious points tied together as part of the same bundle, however, might have ended up undermining its own success. What happened after this failure? Among activists there was, unsurprisingly, a deep sense of defeat. All conversations I had were marked by indignation with the national administration, frustration with “how democracy works in Colombia”, some

self-directed rage, and even concerns about possible fines for exceeding the financial limits each organization is legally allowed to contribute to a referendum campaign. But the failure left a “legal pedagogy”: even if more scattered than within the referendum bundle, there still are legal resources for water activists to seize, and they have become somewhat familiarized with them. Access to drinking water has been part of the Constitution since 1991 as a *social* responsibility and financial priority of the state (that, like other public services, can also be supplied by organized communities).¹¹ The Constitutional Court has been active in protecting the right to water and even endorsed it as fundamental right. It was symbolically important for the referendum to reiterate safeguarding the ecosystems vital to the water cycle, but, like former Environmental Minister Manuel Rodríguez reminded me in June 2010, that is already part of environmental legislation. And there are diverse legal tools to support the visibility that community-led systems gained during the referendum campaign: the 1974 Code of Natural Resources; the 1994 Law on Agrarian reform; even if vaguely, by Law 142, and later emphasized by decree 421 of 2000; and by the Constitutional Court in 2003 (Salazar Restrepo 2011: 9–10, 18). Also, the 1978 Water Code establishes human, domestic and communal use of water as a priority within criteria for resource concessions.¹² All these pieces of legislation acknowledge the community aqueducts to which I now turn.

Community Aqueducts and Their Own Counter-Network

According to the Office of Household Public Services (Superintendencia de Servicios Públicos Domiciliarios) there are roughly 12,000 community aqueducts (Giraldo 2009) in rural and semi-urban areas of Colombia that provide water to an estimated 12,000,000 inhabitants, or 26% of the population,¹³ in communities ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand people. These neighborhood-based, family, or communal enterprises with popular histories (Correa 2006) were built, approximately, in the last 70 years with voluntary community labor and scattered (often meager) financial support from development, health, and environmental agencies at the national, departmental, and municipal level. Even if they vary in terms of infrastructure, community aqueducts basically consist of inlets in the sources of water; networks of pipes that can go a few kilometers from water sources to households; storage tanks; and plants to make water potable with varying degrees of chemical purification. The quality of the water they provide is supervised monthly in government-run labs. Few aqueducts have their own labs to test water quality weekly. Community aqueducts are always run by paid employees, mostly members of the community, who have some formal training and abundant practical knowledge gained over the years. Some communities take care of their micro-basins with reforestation initiatives.

Since 2007, community aqueduct activists and users had been participating in the referendum campaign. They were first invited to the weekly meetings with water activists from other organizations and movements to discuss the concrete wording to change the Constitution. Once the five points were finalized, they tabled events and stood on street corners and in plazas to collect the roughly 2 million signatures necessary for the referendum to be considered by Congress. While doing so, community water activists learned about each other, inspired each other, and developed trust

in one another. Their own counter-network began to take shape in late 2008, first in Bogotá, Cundinamarca, and Medellín, and soon in Santander and the Pacific region. It is “a child of the human rights referendum”—to use Camilo’s words—that struggles against co-opting forces not only of the local government communal councils (Juntas de Acción Comunales) with long histories of clientelism, but also of leftist political institutions that attempt to organize communal systems under their hierarchical party system. Even if it was at first fueled by Ecofondo and other environmental NGOs with close ties to global, mainly European, organizations, monies, and expertise, and animated by the presence of celebrity activists like Cochabamba leader Oscar Olivera, their counter-network became a slow-paced, bottom-up, and autonomous space that attracts water community activists who have made it their own strategy to resist dispossession and absorption by large water companies.

Market reforms started in Colombia in 1994 with Law 142 that re-regulated all public services (water, electricity, gas, and telecommunications) to enable private sector participation and public–private partnerships (Salazar Restrepo 2010). Four years later, a business plan encouraged the entry of “specialized providers” to supply water to 87 municipalities, especially in the touristic Caribbean cities. But the neoliberalization process became robust in 2007 when the Water Development Plans (WDPs) stated the government’s intention to create economies of scale for water provision and to centralize water infrastructure, management, and funding at the departmental, instead of municipal, level¹⁴—a crucial step to privatization. Of course activists understood the WDPs as a threat to the survival of community aqueducts and the dispossession of collective wealth and public infrastructure “built with people’s monies over generations”. WDPs lasted only 4 years: they were cancelled in 2011 after 42% of municipalities had resisted joining them, and the national comptroller denounced misspending and corruption from banks and departmental administrations. But activists understood that the centripetal disposition of the government en route to privatization would continue, and together with the absorption impulse of large public water companies, they had become a threat that pushed community aqueducts to start and strengthen their own centrifugal counter-network in 2008.¹⁵

Contemporaries

A sponsor in the field had told me I would be meeting “a public official who had worked a lot in water issues”. I was unaware, however, that the public official who gave me an interview at a fancy café in the wealthiest neighborhood of Bogotá had written the 2007 Water Department Plans referred to above. My interviewee struck me as a kind and well intentioned young man. But as I recalled my breakfast with community aqueduct activists and my uneasy impulse to pay for all of them, I thought: “A white man in his 30s, trained in economics at Boston University, driving a BMW, cannot design policy and make binding decisions for people for whom a one dollar breakfast is painfully unaffordable”. The point is not only that a person driving a BMW is incredibly detached from the everyday experience of the small, overcrowded buses that service the impoverished neighborhoods that rely on community aqueducts. The important point, to use the language of Sousa Santos (2004, 2006), is that the hegemonic voices of neoliberal rationality and monocultural

knowledge and productivity call the communal experience of aqueducts “backwards”. These voices talk modern science, capitalist productivity, linear time, and a dominant universal (or national) scale of social life. They render all counter-hegemonic knowledge and practices as residual and too informal, unintelligible if not ignorant, unproductive, and “too local” (Sousa Santos 2006:23–26). When the neoliberal water reformer—be it a World Bank employee, a US-trained neoclassical economist advising the Colombian government, or a manager of a large water company—encounters the communal experiences of place-based aqueducts, the latter are labeled as “primitive”, “unproductive”, and “too fragmented”. Rationalist policies tend to either ignore local normative systems or perceive them as “obstacles” to desired efficient futures (DeVos et al. 2006). What activists are trying to make visible, to continue with Sousa Santos, is that the community aqueduct user is *contemporary* to the neoliberal reformer—the practitioner of a form of sociability that lives the relation between humans and water in ways that are less individual and more collective, less detached and more emotionally engaged, less technically mediated and more intimate. Activists politicize community aqueducts as spaces of ethical considerations and direct and substantive democracy, where users are “economically-in-common” with water, where the price, the necessary labor, and the type of enterprise to distribute water are alternative-to-capitalist practices (Gibson-Graham 2006).¹⁶

Autonomy and Place-Making

Water or the idea of water that began to emerge at the time of the Scientific Revolution, Linton (2010) argues, has become an abstraction, an intellectual achievement, a way of knowing that induces profound habits of thought and action. “Modern water”, Linton writes, is:

the presumption that any and all water can be and should be considered apart from their social and ecological relation and reduced to an abstract quantity ... Another characteristic ... [is] its deterritorialization ... The conquest of water by means of its conceptual abstraction and technical control has broken relations that otherwise bind specific groups of people to the waters of particular territories. A corollary of the placelessness of modern water (perhaps best symbolized by the tap) is the transfer of water control to placeless discourses of hydrological engineering, infrastructural management, and economics. Kalaora describes this in terms of a “déresponsabilisation” by which we have left all the responsibility of maintaining relations with water to experts ... [All this has] enabled many of us to survive without having to think much about it (Linton 2010:18–19).

Community-based aqueduct users in Colombia, contrarily, take responsibility for imagining and materializing relations with water in their own terms; and activists struggle to make that humans-water-relational imaginary visible. “We have a history that gives us a sense of belonging, we have better conservation practices, we already defend water as a public good, not as a commodity like our government that follows neoliberal models does”, my activist friend María told me in Bogotá in June 2010. Proud of the language her studies in sociology were giving her to talk about her community, she added, “I am persuaded that aqueducts are a success story of the government of the commons”. In principle, and in a non-perfect practice, community

aqueducts make decisions with participatory mechanisms of direct democracy. Rather than common being, the practice is about being-in-common, sharing an “inessential commonality”, and being-explicitly-with in relationships between humans and non-humans (Gibson-Graham 2006).

Like all human communities, aqueducts’ collective management is far from flawless. I heard complaints about the lack of participation in assemblies (the supposedly ultimate decision-making body), arbitrary decisions by the executive bodies, the need to strengthen penalizing mechanisms for uncaring users in the community who waste water or want to take more than their fair share, and users who do not pay what and when they should. But communal systems are about more than (imperfect) local self-management techniques. Communal water users (and activists) understand their community aqueducts not *as part of* their place, but *as* their place. They relate to water as something they own collectively and know intimately because of their physical life experience in their own *barrio* or *vereda* (rural plot). Like an umbilical cord, water is a conduit to their territory and to others within it.

Rather than leaving all ethical decisions and management responsibilities—about how to access and distribute water; about the types of necessary labor involved; about costs and prices; about required levels of investment in infrastructure; about quality; and about types of enterprises best suited for provision—to placeless discourses and abstract techniques coming from Bogotá offices or Washington desks, community aqueducts’ users themselves engage water in their own terms. Against the national modernizing forces that attempt to measure, quantify, aggregate, homogenize, and detach water from communal habits, users of community-led systems struggle for autonomous, place-based management and organization. “We have allowed ourselves to be governed but *we* are the government”, a rural community aqueduct user told me in a small town in the department of Santander in June 2011. “The national government came to test our water, for example, and established that it is not fit for human consumption. But we have been drinking this water in the community for fifty years and nothing has happened. So the main thing is to defend our autonomy.” A peasant from another *vereda* told me, “The government comes and measures everything: how many cows, hens, and trees we have, how big is our land. We do know what we have, and we know that the spring belongs to us, and we know how to take care of it.” Self-management, however, does not mean that community aqueducts aspire to be off the books, part of the informal economy. Communal users of water (and activists) fiercely debate whether “to become formal” or not. While few of them fear losing autonomy vis-à-vis the state, most communities have in fact already formalized their aqueducts or are in the process of doing so. Formalization takes energy, time, and money: someone has to travel to government offices, wait in lines to be helped, fill out forms, and pay fees to register. But against the deterritorialization of modern water, formalizing communal systems becomes a means of producing territorialized water. Becoming formal empowers community-based systems to negotiate with the state on a stronger footing: to eventually access public monies and to protect themselves from the “the neoliberal, privatizing octopus”, as the activists say. Becoming formal is “an alternative way of using the law” to produce alternative-to-hegemonic spaces; to make place; to enact and protect the commons for the poor and their right *not* to be excluded.

Much More Than Money

“Social class is no abstraction”, I wrote in my journal when returning from an activist event in a small town in Santander. That life chances are not just about the jobs you might get but about the amount of protein you might ingest or the quality of water you might drink became an embodied insight to me. I had put my well fed, well cared for, middle-class body in motion and at risk trying to share with communal water users not only an activist encounter to strengthen their counter-network, but an ordinary world of cold winter showers, scarce and dirty toilets, and not enough water to stay hydrated. I had participated in a regional meeting of community aqueduct users and I felt I had understood with mind and body something new. Environmentalists from Bogotá and Santander had organized and funded this encounter (the local NGO in the town of Santander reminded me of the Cochabamba Environmental Forum of concerned professionals that had been so crucial in the 2000 Water War):¹⁷ a space where community water activists met to see and be seen. I had already known, like many insisted many times, that this encounter was a space to strategize and become stronger against what activists read as the government’s push towards a corporate model of water provision that would eventually absorb community aqueducts. But this time I had understood that radical, activist words had intimate, bodily meanings. At stake was a struggle to control the very quotidian—perceived as overwhelmingly out of control, in the hands of always hostile others: the wealthy, the powerful, the government, the mayor, the paramilitary, guerrillas. I had understood that what was at stake in defending communal waters was people’s desire to defend something they felt was already their own, something they felt they should have control over, something that, despite the government’s neglect, they had themselves achieved. Like Blomley’s (2008:320) urban commons of the poor in Vancouver, “By virtue of being in place for a long time and using and relying upon the commons, [Colombian communal water users] both acquire and sustain a legitimate property interest” that they can support with the scattered pieces of legislation that recognize them.

But the government was pursuing the opposite relationship between people and institutions. Barbara, an environmental lawyer from Medellín I spoke with in June 2011, explained changes in the legal framework for water provision. The “decertification mechanism” that had already dismantled public municipal healthcare and education services was now also in place for the water sector. That is why, she added:

We insist that the most important thing is that aqueducts become visible. We need to show this society, this country, the world, that these water models exist, that they had existed before the [142 privatizing] law that now regulates them; and that they are key for our communities and our territories. Because if aqueducts remain invisible they will be taken over or annihilated.

The fear of being annihilated, or “the terror of privatization”, to quote a peasant from Santander, activates the counter-network. If the large water companies in Bogotá or Medellín take over an aqueduct (as they are working to do), or if a community aqueduct becomes a trading company, giving in to government pressure, the community loses the collective property, control, and management of its small infrastructure: its water inlets, pipes, storage tanks, and purifying systems; the knowledge and intimacy with its sources of water. Moreover, if a community aqueduct is taken over by large companies or turned into a business, the community’s capacity to

establish what investments are needed and when, and the possibility to determine how much to pay for water, are also gone. Of course, many users are highly interested in not paying more for their water, and this pushes them to protect and politicize their community aqueducts. Unlike urban middle classes who might not pay attention to their water bills, community aqueduct users, who are almost always poor, are highly interested in keeping the power to control the alternative-to-capitalist transaction (Gibson-Graham 2006). They are invested in shaping the agreements under which they exchange water for money following principles like “*ánimo de lucro y sin ánimo de pérdida*” (not-for-profit but not at a loss either), that, while avoiding profit maximization as prime arbiter, would still enable the sustainability of the communal water system.¹⁸ For market reformers, water tariffs are not only the revenue that allows investors to recover investments, but also strategies to discipline and rationalize consumption. “Either there are prices or there’s war!” a neoliberal government official told me in Bogotá while rejecting the free universal vital minimum. For market reformers and communal water users alike, then, the price of water is of ultimate importance: it is the ground over which battles of sovereignty to shape and control the terms of water transactions are played.

But the anxiety over “losing the aqueduct to a large private or public company” is not only a question of water prices or the type of transaction (capitalist or alternative) involved. The anxiety is at once material and emotional, concrete and symbolic. This is not because community aqueduct users necessarily have “spiritual connections” with their waters. Some aqueducts, given the highly populated areas where they are located, might even have polluting impacts on underground waters, like one in the hills of Bogotá (Millán Guzmán 2010:43–45). Aqueduct users value and respect water because it is obviously scarce, and always the result of collective toil. If swallowed by large companies, community members lose the sense of control that grows out of being able to make their own decisions in assemblies where, at least in principle, every member is entitled to an opinion and a vote irrespective of how much money or stock they own. If taken over, community members lose a possible outlet for collective decision-making and autonomy. Like ancient Romans for whom bathing together in the public baths was a shared civic experience (Sennet 1994), for community members “an aqueduct is not only a place where you get water”, Diego, an activist from Bogotá, told me. Rather, it is a place of participatory potential: “An aqueduct is a place to discuss our problems; an aqueduct allows us to self-convoke ourselves with the excuse of water.” Along these lines, others have argued that “water is not about water”: water management is about communities building self-respect (DeVos et al. 2006) and people’s power to take control over decisions.¹⁹

Besides prices, then, what is at stake when defending communal water systems is the chance and the practical knowledge of organizing provisions as a service to all in the community. At stake is the pleasure of nourishing and belonging to the solidarity and popular economy. At the regional encounter in Santander that I mentioned above, my friend María said:

Many times we are told we are not efficient. But what does that mean? Efficiency within the market economy means investing little and profiting a lot; efficiency within the solidarity economy we are part of means being true to our own communities, being true to our knowledge, and for that, we have to value ourselves.

Here, economic entitlement is entwined with emotional gratification. The chance to establish how much to pay for water is knotted with the joy of not having to sacrifice water provision on the altar of profit and stakeholders, the freedom to redefine efficiency and productivity. Protecting aqueducts and the community's sovereignty to decide the price of water is about more than money. It is a way of protecting spaces to create economic communities in Gibson-Graham's sense of the term: sites of ethical decisions where "all economic practices are inherently social and always connected to 'the commerce of being-together'" (Gibson-Graham 2006:88, quoting Jean-Luc Nancy).

Political Engagements, Legal Geographies, Economic Communities

When activists engaged the human right to water as a framework for water justice, some hesitated about its analytical rigor and political efficacy, their doubts resonating with both Marxist-minded and postmodern theoretical sensibilities that suspect the redistributive capacity of the human rights discourse, and more broadly, the transformative potential of universals. While acknowledging the importance of these critiques, I suggest we understand universality as always implicated with particularity (Harvey 2000) and we think beyond formal abstractions to focus on the ways in which universals, like the human right to water, engage particular historical geographical conjunctures that shape them, charge them, and empower them to make distinct political interventions (Tsing 2005). After the successes of the Cochabamba water war, the Uruguayan Constitutional reform, and amidst burgeoning water struggles in Latin America, the human right to water became in Colombia the activist package, in Tsing's sense, to organize a referendum campaign, and the most important socio-environmental mobilization in the last 10 years.

The ambitious scope of the proposed referendum within a country with already progressive environmental legislation and an active Constitutional Court, however, could have had weakening effects for water struggles within an already antagonistic Congress, neglectful of water, if not all issues of environmental justice, as some interviewees told me. Some parliamentarians refused the referendum to protect the market framework they had created in 1994. Others feared an avalanche of writs for the protection of fundamental rights. If the referendum prevailed, the Constitutional Court, vigorous in environmental matters since its inception, and grounded on the fundamental right to water to be materialized in a free universal vital minimum, necessarily provisioned by state-owned companies (or community-led systems), would make the government financially and technically responsible for drinking water infrastructure and supply to all Colombians. Nevertheless, after the referendum failure, there remain significant, if scattered, legal instruments available for water activists to use as leverage: Access to drinking water is a social right granted in the 1991 Constitution; the Constitutional Court has shown a sustained disposition to protect individuals' access to water; and diverse pieces of legislation recognize community aqueducts as legitimate water providers.

The referendum for the human right to water failed. But if we think about the geography of the proposed Constitutional reform, we open up the multivalent political possibilities of activists' engagement with legal discourses and practices. If we abandon the prevalent view of space as an inert and pre-political surface upon which something more interesting, "law", unfolds (Blomley 2010), and we think instead about law and space relationally, *this case suggests that the human right to water cannot be separated from water commons and, by the same token, communal users and activists engage the universal under their own terms to (re)make their place with autonomy from the market and the state, and to open up the moral and political force of water commons.* The referendum campaign "gave birth to the community aqueducts" and "took them away from their isolation", to lean once again on my interviewees Camilo and María. These small-scale, place-based, culturally attuned, not-for-profit community-controlled water systems had hitherto been wasted, to use the language of Sousa Santos. The campaigners created the conditions for their own counter-network to grow as a slow-paced, bottom-up political strategy to "use the law in an alternative way", and to resist dispossession by the corporate model of water provision. "Becoming formal" is now a strategy for the poor to defend their right to water commons gained by being in place over time and through entrenched patterns of appropriation and material and emotional investment. Given their recognition in several pieces of legislation as legitimate providers of water, "becoming formal" entitles them to public monies and to the right *not* to be excluded.

If social movements (or activists' endeavors, for that matter) do not exist only as empirical objects "out there" but as a potentiality of how politics and the world could be (Escobar 2010:13), the community aqueducts' counter-network enunciates alternative knowledges and practices in the social production of water. Against what Linton (2010) calls modern (and deterritorialized) water, community aqueduct users engage the process of water to produce their own territory. Rather than leaving all responsibilities and decisions about water prices, investments, necessary labor, and types of organizations to abstract and placeless discourses, users of community-led systems get involved on their own terms. Establishing the level of water tariffs is enormously important for them. But there is much more at stake, also for the activists who support them. At stake is a struggle to build decision-making power and to control the most fundamental flows of everyday life. Unlike other crucial struggles in Latin America today, indigenous and Afro-Colombians were not the most active part of this referendum campaign, let alone the community aqueducts counter-network. Yet, like other Latin American struggles led by indigenous and Afro-descendants today, at stake is a political project that displaces the centrality of the corporate or capitalist model (of water provision). These struggles nourish instead the pleasures and promises of economic communities we are only beginning to imagine, the chance to cultivate selves that desire and practices that enact spaces with no essential commonalities but still enable being-in-common, among humans and non-humans.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Colombian water activists, especially those from community aqueducts who shared time, experience, and struggles with me. I am the responsible author but this

work is nonetheless collective. Anonymous reviewers gave me powerful insights. The Robert O. Fehr Professorship from SUNY Purchase funded my research. I am also thankful to Purchase colleagues Jason Pine and Chrys Ingraham for our (intellectual) friendship; and to Guillermina Saravia for unwavering support of all sorts.

Endnotes

- ¹ All names are pseudonyms.
- ² Unlike in Colombia, in Cochabamba, peasant/indigenous irrigators formed “the backbone” of the water war (García Linera 2005) and in Uruguay, members of the ruling leftist party *Frente Amplio* were crucial to undo the neoliberalization of water. In Cochabamba, the privatization contract was cancelled, the US-led transnational water corporation evicted, and water supply by the municipal company reestablished. In Uruguay, after privatization had begun in 1993 in the wealthy, touristic Maldonado County, in 2004, access to drinking water and sanitation was made a fundamental human right to be exclusively and directly provided by state actors.
- ³ For the whole text drafted by activists, see http://www.ecoportel.net/EcoNoticias/texto_del_referendo_del_agua_en_colombia (last accessed 28 January 2014).
- ⁴ Similar debates take place in relation to world hunger, food justice and security (Mowbray 2007; Haugen 2012).
- ⁵ Revised and expanded in Sultana and Loftus (2012).
- ⁶ Following Castro (2008b) and Bakker (2010), I use the term “corporate” as the opposite of “community”, referring to both government and private suppliers organized in formalized management hierarchies and large-scale technical systems, oftentimes *de facto* delivering services on the basis of commercial principles and abandoning the notion of water as a social right, let alone a human right. As both authors acknowledge, there are of course important differences between government and private suppliers. In Colombia there are very few private providers on the Caribbean Coast. Yet the technological expertise and business models of large public companies in Bogotá (Acueducto de Bogotá) or Medellín (Empresas Públicas de Medellín), for example, make these authors’ point about the “reification” of the differences between ‘public’ and ‘private’ (Castro 2008a); and about “corporate” being the single best conceptual term to distinguish from community models (Bakker 2010).
- ⁷ <http://www.censat.org/articulos/10024-analisis/140-Dogmas-sobre-el-agua-y-el-referendo-del-agua> (last accessed 12 June 2013).
- ⁸ <http://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/2010/T-717-10.htm> (last accessed 8 June 2013), <http://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/1994/T-463-94.htm> (last accessed 8 June 2013).
- ⁹ <http://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/1994/T-244-94.htm> (last accessed 29 May 2013).
- ¹⁰ <http://english.corteconstitucional.gov.co/sentences/T-616-2010.pdf> (last accessed 8 June 2013).
- ¹¹ Chapter 5, articles 365–366, <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Colombia/colombia91.pdf> (last accessed 17 January 2014).
- ¹² http://www.minambiente.gov.co/documentos/dec_1541_260778.pdf (last accessed 10 June 2013).
- ¹³ <http://censat.org/articulos/10054-videos/10343-tejiendo-redes-del-agua-fortalecimiento-a-los-acueductoscomunitarios-en-colombia> (last accessed 18 January 2014).
- ¹⁴ <http://www.carlosvicentederoux.org/apc-afiles/d1d179e48988931192d79ba046874e0/Conpes%203463%20Planes%20Departamentales%20de%20Agua.pdf> (last accessed 26 November 2012).
- ¹⁵ <http://censat.org/articulos/10024-analisis/10359-fin-de-los-planes-departamentales-del-agua-continuidad-dela-privatizacion-directa> (last accessed 27 July 2012).
- ¹⁶ Drawing on Nancy and Agambem, and within their project of a diverse economy that challenges capitalocentrism, Gibson-Graham (2006) elaborates on the notion of community economy as an ethical and political space that resists the pull of sameness, and the

- fantasies of salvation, completion, or higher totality, and focuses instead on the social interdependence, the being-in-common of economic subjects.
- ¹⁷ See Ceceña (2005).
- ¹⁸ In fact, when drafting the referendum text, community aqueduct activists showed some hesitation about the free vital minimum, arguing that they needed to charge something and would not be able to provide free water without state support. Other activists reassured them that the state, and not community aqueducts, would be responsible to finance such a minimum. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point, which I later confirmed with key informants in the field.
- ¹⁹ [http://www.cseindia.org/userfiles/Drinking%20water%20parliament%20feb%2006\(2\).pdf](http://www.cseindia.org/userfiles/Drinking%20water%20parliament%20feb%2006(2).pdf) (last accessed 17December 2012).

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