

**SPECIAL SECTION**

# Geographies of inland waterscapes: Thinking with watery places

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**Abstract**

Humans and water have a complex relationship that includes various dimensions such as sociocultural, political, legal and ecological. Considering the ubiquity of water, we need a more holistic perspective to help us see water not as a static entity but rather as one in constant movement, physically and conceptually; acknowledging the interplay between water and humans is essential to understanding societal narratives deeply embedded in places. In this special section, an interdisciplinary group of scholars explore inland waters, taking a water-centric view instead of a land-centric one. The special section delves into the emerging hydro-social connections, diverse forms of expertise, governance models, collective and spontaneous actions, and resilience strategies within the context of inland water bodies, exploring how canals, rivers and wetlands are experienced and represented as places. The papers in this collection show that any form of placemaking should take responsible stewardship of water, embrace its dynamic nature, and present a realistic pathway towards sustainable solutions for present and future water challenges.

**KEYWORDS**

human–water relationship, inland waters, placemaking, waterscape

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Water is crucial for sustaining life on the planet, appearing in various forms and states, from oceans and seas to rivers and canals, from lakes and reservoirs to groundwater and glaciers, and from fog to vapour. Water is also important in (re) creating various socio-cultural relations (Gandy, 2014; Krause & Strang, 2016; Neimanis, 2017). As Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha (2020) have noted, ‘wetness is everywhere’, and in a world where water has often been contained in favour of the earth, it is perhaps time for ‘a new imagination—a hydrologic one—that says we do not inhabit a surface but rather a ubiquitous wetness’ (2020, p. 139). As the living environments of both humans and non-humans are rapidly changing, we urgently need to respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene, one of which is reconsidering the varied human relationships with watery places.

Drawing inspiration from Kimberly Peters’ and Philip Steinberg’s insights into ‘the sea’s material and phenomenological distinctiveness [which] can facilitate the reimagining and re-enlivening of a world ever on the move’ (2015, p. 248),

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this special section, situated within the broader 'watery turn' (Visentin, 2018, p. 246), shifts the emphasis from maritime to inland waters—rivers, canals, lakes, estuaries, reservoirs and wetlands. It centres on water's dynamism as a crucial nexus in the interplay among water, humans and place, discussing water's role in placemaking. While the notion of dynamic and fluid places is not new, our water-centric approach introduces fresh insights for understanding, conceptualising and engaging with watery places. Embracing Stefan Helmreich's idea of water as an influential 'theory machine' (2011, p. 132), the articles in this section underscore water's pivotal role as a dynamic factor in the interrelation between people and places. They explore three themes: the temporalities of inland water, hydrological dynamics of the Anthropocene, and the legal and governance dimensions of water. This special section therefore seeks to broaden our perception of inland waters, not just as physical or material entities, but as dynamic socio-ecological systems, thereby enriching the ongoing discourse on water and its complex interplays in our lives.

## 2 | THE 'WATERY' CONTEXT: RESEARCHING INLAND WATERS

Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters advocate for a 'wet ontology' to 'reinvigorate, redirect, and reshape debates often constrained by terrestrial limits' (2015, p. 247). This perspective prompts a reimagining of water, not as a static element but as one in constant flux; this is especially relevant given that the majority of human geography, which is primarily land-based, tends to overlook the interconnected waterscapes integral to modern individuals' daily experiences (Anderson & Peters, 2014). The extant seminal work on wet ontologies and fluid spaces (Peters, 2016; Peters & Steinberg, 2019; Steinberg & Peters, 2015; Vannini & Taggart, 2013), however, predominantly addresses the oceanic and maritime, leaving a gap in research concerning inland waters such as rivers, canals, lakes, estuaries, lagoons, aquifers, and wetlands.

Addressing this gap is essential for a more holistic comprehension of water's role in our contemporary world. The water levels in academic scholarship are indeed rising, with an increasing number of studies focusing on inland water in both diverse contexts and across various disciplines (e.g., Chen et al., 2013; Cosgrove & Petts, 1990; Johnston et al., 2012; Mao & Richards, 2012; Scott & Larkin, 2019; Strang, 2023; Vallerani & Visentin, 2018) as a range of topics once seen as largely terrestrial matters are now firmly on the waterfront (Daniels, 2018). In human geography, a lot of important work has been done in the framework of political ecology (Swyngedouw et al., 2002), especially through the notion of the hydrosocial cycle (Linton & Budds, 2014), focusing particularly on the political governance aspects of water as well as the waterways' importance to planning, including its socio-ecological implications (Swyngedouw, 2015; Karpouzoglou & Vij, 2017). Extant research also deals with politics, policies, justice, inequalities and (mis)management of drinking water resources (Kaika, 2003; Sultana & Loftus, 2019; Ley & Krause, 2019; Scott & Larkin, 2019; Lavie et al., 2020), as well as the legal status (and rights) of water bodies (Charpleix, 2018; Boyd, 2017; Clark et al., 2018). Attention has also been paid to the geographies of those communities who permanently dwell on inland waters (Smith, 2007; Bowles, 2017; Roberts, 2019) or who engage with inland waters in the context of tourism and leisure (Prideaux & Cooper, 2009; Kaaristo, 2020).

Thinking about the strategies, practices and performances of living with volatile waters (Krause, 2017) has always been important; however this is now critical and in order to do so we need to pay more attention to the notion of place. While the common approach to apprehending places and spaces is often to take a terrestrial view, with land as its starting point (Anderson & Peters, 2014), it is increasingly important to take a hydro-perspectivist viewpoint—'looking landwards from a watery heterotopia, and commenting on terrestrial life based on aquatic experience' (Krause, 2019, p. 95) in order to better understand how water influences how we embody and think with water (Strang, 2023) as well as places. In the world 'divided between water and land with a line that could be drawn in a map' (da Cunha, 2019, p. xi), thinking with watery places would be an invitation to an approach to water that recognises that water and land are not distinct entities, but interconnected elements that undergo constant variations, modifications and displacements. Furthermore, water, or rather the 'absence and presence [of water] should not be considered in absolute terms but instead as relational; as such, they are continuously blurring the boundaries of natural and cultural, embodied and representational' (Kaaristo & Visentin, 2023, p. 99).

It is therefore important to apprehend inland waterscapes as changing, relational, processual and unbounded places (Massey, 2004, 2005) that consist of various hydro-social connections, forms of expertise, spontaneous action and a variety of practices. Thinking with watery places would also mean understanding and analysing a 'set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live' (Pierce et al., 2011, p. 54), as well as investigating their various collective and individual interactions and relationships. This means that attention needs to be paid to how the inland waters become places by focusing on for instance the notion of placemaking as a collective process whereby individuals modify (Wantzen et al., 2016), reimagine and recreate their

physical and infrastructural environs (Strydom et al., 2018), but also develop a shared understanding of place. Yet we also must not forget that it is because of water's inherent dynamism that it is so often commoditised. It is therefore necessary to explore from different angles and trajectories how water can condition and influence the political, legal, temporal, cultural and environmental approaches to places, but also to examine critically the ways places are developed, managed and governed (see for example McCann, 2002; Parker, 2008).

In human geography and related disciplines, waterscapes (Gandy, 2014; Karpouzoglou & Vij, 2017) need to be explored more in the context of the interaction between inland waters, society and the individual, studying the ways water travels in both space and time, how it is shaped and seen by a culture and society, as well as the physical and natural environment surrounding and interacting with it. Understanding the ways inland waters are experienced and represented as places has implications for the management, development, governance, policymaking as well as value (co)creation on the contemporary inland water bodies. As follows, we will discuss how canals, rivers and wetlands are experienced, narrated and represented as places and explore inland waterscapes as dynamic, multifaceted places that intersect in environmental-ecological, socio-cultural and governance-legal ways.

### 3 | STUDYING WITH WATERY PLACES: THIS SPECIAL SECTION

This special section explores the intersection of water, humans and place, delving into the multifaceted process of watery placemaking, and examining how water bodies are shaping human experiences of places and how they are also places in their own right. This is done by focusing on three core dimensions of watery place (making): the context of the Anthropocene, the temporality of human and water body interactions, and the legal and governance implications of such interactions.

The vulnerability of inland waters in the Anthropocene is increasingly evident in terms of both large-scale and small-scale water control, usage, management and engineering projects, further exacerbated by climate change. This is addressed by Karl Matthias Wantzen (2022), who focuses on threats to both riverine biodiversity and human water security by extensive modifications to watery landscapes (from dredging to building locks to constructing dams). He suggests that when managing watery places we should take into account a better understanding of hydrological rhythms, 'living with, not against, rivers'. The threats discussed by Wantzen become especially evident during large-scale, often repetitive, flood events, as is demonstrated by Mathew A. Varghese (2023), showing how the River Periyar in Kerala, India has been altered and modified by colonial, postcolonial and neoliberal forces, which have all profoundly altered this waterway and, in turn, also the human practices, activities and relationships taking place there. These interventions have transformed 'The temporal connectedness of socio-cultural activities to specific events of the annual water cycle has been and still is a strong determinant in some societies; however, once it is lost, it is very difficult to re-establish in modern societies' (Wantzen, 2022, p. 9).

This takes us to considering the temporal aspects of human interactions with water bodies as they can reveal intricate relationships between time and sociocultural practices. As highlighted by Mary Gearey, 'our human relationships with wetlands, across time, reveal a very particular set of engagements with waterscapes that differ from other landscapes or spaces' (2022, p. 2). Wantzen furthermore argues that the 'rhythmic pattern is universal to any kind of aquatic ecosystem; however, there are characteristic types of rhythms for each type' (2022, p. 3). The materialities and mobilities of water also play a role here: river waters are constantly (or temporarily) flowing and dynamic, creating a sense of place that is ever-changing (Wantzen, Varghese), while wetland (Gearey) or canal (Kaaristo) water is more still, fostering or stimulating different kinds of environment-human interactions.

Two more papers in this special section provide insights into temporality by focusing on rhythm and pace. Maarja Kaaristo (2023) offers a nuanced understanding of the links between placemaking and pacemaking on the canals of the United Kingdom, highlighting how the slow pace of mobility contributes to the formation and understanding of canals as linear, watery places. She proposes considering pacemaking as a temporal dimension of placemaking, showing how the slow pace of mobility of the canal boats plays a critical role in shaping places. On the other hand, Wantzen (2022) delves into the natural rhythm of wider hydrological systems, discussing how human culture has evolved in response to and in harmony with the varying hydrological rhythms and how various technological advances have disrupted these rhythms, leading to significant cultural and ecological consequences. Looking at rhythm and pace allows us to see not only how temporality unfolds, but is also actively re/created on the waterways, which directly influences how places are formed and experienced. The slow, rhythmic pace of water-based mobility therefore crafts a unique sense of place, which is distinct from that of terrestrial urban environments.

The exploration of these temporal aspects and their effects on our interactions with water bodies also forms a foundation for understanding the interplay between water systems and the legal frameworks that govern them. Any waterscape or landscape is inevitably also a 'lawscape' for humans. In their paper, John Page and Alessandro Pelizzon (2022) explore the legal and ontological nature of water bodies, highlighting that the traditional legal distinction between natural and artificial persons is insufficient to capture the ecological and cultural nuances of the bio-social and culturally pluralistic contemporary realities. Focusing on the examples of rivers from across the globe (Aotearoa New Zealand, Colombia, India, the United States and Australia), they show how spatial re-imaginings intersect with the law and how this leads to viewing the river as an entity is emerging in jurisprudence with a potential for legal personhood. This underscores the emergence of rights of nature and provides us with an important blueprint for environmental actions in the future. However, no water body in Europe has so far acquired legal personhood and while these discussions are ongoing, we need to better connect the bottom-up initiatives driven by citizens with any top-down, policy-driven actions. This can be realised by taking seriously the need to connect local and individual aspects of the waterside communities' relationships with their watery places and spaces, and address the public issues and challenges related to inland waters which, as presented by climate emergency, are becoming more and more evident.

A practical solution is offered by Federico Venturini and Francesco Visentin (2022) who show that the community participatory processes enabled by River Contracts can potentially contribute to a fluvial sense of place. River Contracts—voluntary agreements between different parts of the societies to facilitate managing water bodies—can increase the involvement of riverine communities in the decision-making processes through collaborative negotiated planning. The signing of a River Contract is not itself proof of an effective process; what matters is the quality of participation that comprises the process. Therefore, it is important to underline that participatory events and sharing information are not sufficient in themselves to achieve the active involvement of citizens. Different modes of public engagement led to different results of the placemaking process because 'different stakeholders hold different expectations regarding their participation' (Venturini & Visentin, 2022, p. 10) due to powerful dynamics developed by the different processes. The legal and governance implications of human and nature interactions, the environmental attitudes, communities and their participation have become sites of enquiries in the Anthropocene. To better understand how these community-based initiatives would work, it is important to pay attention to the variety of personal connections with the water bodies that emerge as a sense of place and placemaking.

The varied connections with water bodies can also bring about numerous contested and sometimes conflicting stories. This includes various perceived needs of different groups as well as meanings attributed to the natural and built environment. The wider practices and motivations of different individuals and community groups can therefore differ on the waterfront, and the everyday, small-scale responses and reactions to the global challenges can sometimes be contradicting. They reflect the complicated and complex relationships, tensions, juxtapositions as well as conversations between place managers and local residents that take place in the waterscapes as is further highlighted by Gearey (2022). In her study on English wetlands, Gearey shows how fully understanding a very diverse range of recreational activities taking place in English wetlands—painting, walking, photographing, sitting and reflecting, and also wild-camping, raving, poaching or partying—is crucial for governance officials and site managers. Such knowledge is instrumental for those responsible for wetland placemaking, enabling them to create more inclusive as well as sustainable place management and development strategies. Gearey defines placemaking as a conscious, physical and deliberate act to assert agency and ownership on-site, whereas place attachment captures more of the imaginative and emotional connectivity to places. Placemaking is a dynamic and adaptive process where each encounter with a place is slightly reconfigured each time, making the particular watery places she studies (the wetlands) different every time. This distinction is important as it underscores the dynamic nature of human interactions with watery places. On the one hand, humans actively shape water landscapes through physical alterations, legal definitions and cultural practices (placemaking), while on the other hand, these waterscapes evoke deep-seated emotional and cultural connections (place attachment), in turn influencing identities and behaviours.

To conclude, the unifying theme of this special section is the exploration of inland waters as dynamic, multifaceted places that intersect various ecological, socio-cultural and political realms. Each paper, while distinct in its focus and methodology, contributes to a broader understanding of inland waters as places and overall, to the 'watery turn'. The papers collectively build upon each other by offering diverse yet complementary perspectives on watery places. While Wantzen delves into the ecological impacts of human activities on inland waterscapes, Gearey and Kaaristo explore the temporality of the socio-cultural significance of these spaces in their respective articles, and Varghese and Visentin and Venturini examine the political discourse surrounding their management and governance, while Page and Pellizzon study the legal implications. This allows for a more comprehensive examination of inland waterscapes as places, highlighting their complexity and their interdependencies. To sum up, the articles in this special section contribute to our broader understanding of water's influence on

our perceptions and interactions with places from a geographical viewpoint. The papers underscore water's dynamic role in our society, offering a more fluid lens than a solely terrestrial perspective, which might be less sensitive to the current context of rapid transformations and environmental shifts, particularly those driven by the climate crisis. Therefore, this approach facilitates a multi-dimensional vantage point that we hope encourages readers to also think beyond disciplinary boundaries, fostering a more nuanced and interconnected view of watery places.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

We need to understand the vast range and diversity of individual activities taking place on or near inland water bodies, which in turn could help the policymakers and riparian governance organisations to better manage the watery places. The various individual and collective practices discussed in this special section can enhance resilience, give people a sense of purpose and help them to better deal with the uncertainty of living in the Anthropocene. The contributors of the section, presenting empirically grounded research of inland waters across the world, are discussing them as transformational places of dwelling, discussion, work, dispute, regeneration and leisure, rooted in various practices, materialities, rhythms, tempos, embodied experiences, mobilities and everyday experiences of living with water. They discuss inland waters as socio-natural entities formed in the interrelations between environmental processes, social interactions and cultural changes. While each published paper stands on its own merit, collectively they focus on what we propose are the three key elements of watery placemaking: the hydrologies of the Anthropocene, temporalities and the governance of water. Emphasising the need to discuss the diverse activities around inland water bodies, the special section highlights their role in shaping policies and governance, underlining the transformative nature of inland waters as contested places, influenced by social, environmental and cultural interrelations. Addressing the hybrid ontologies of watery placemaking, discussing and theorising living on, by and with inland waters, the papers propose an immersive and relational approach to inland water studies with empirically grounded research, suggesting ways for exploring the changing meanings of water bodies.

Moving forward, we need to acknowledge that water is so much more than a commodity or resource for governance. This would allow for a comprehensive examination of inland waterscapes as places, highlighting their complexity and the interdependencies of their ecological, legal, social and political aspects. This themed section invites us to consider placemaking as a process that would include responsive stewardship of this dynamic element and presents an opportunity to shift from a resource-oriented perspective to a relationship-oriented approach to water.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable – no new data generated.

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