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Charles Darwin University

**Keeping Climate Futures Open  
Managing Waters on an Aboriginal Island**

Spencer, Michaela; Danyi, Endre

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# Keeping Climate Futures Open: Managing Waters on an Aboriginal Island

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Michaela Spencer, Charles Darwin University, Australia  
Endre Dányi, Goethe University, Germany

## INTRODUCTION



In this presentation I draw on project work that we have been involved in to think through some of what it means to 'do difference in the making of climate futures'.

And to explore the notion that working on and towards new climate futures in situations of radical difference involves *Cosmopolitical work* that can be carried out in better and worse ways.

As a way to start, I'll just take a quick look back through the literature... Since the enlightenment there have been a number of very eminent scholars who have articulated particular – and quite different – Cosmopolitical imaginaries

- In his 1795 essay 'Perpetual Peace' Immanuel Kant outlined a program for the achievement of global social order led by experts and based on a singular world knowable by science.
- About 200 years later, in the post-Cold War context, Ulrich Beck developed a pluralist revision of Kant's proposal, continuing to assume a given external world, but admitting the possibility and desirability of co-existence between those with differing perspectives on it.
- Recently in response, Bruno Latour has gone to great pains to problematize the notion of a singular world as a natural given, suggesting instead that in the face of impending global crisis, a common world is something that must be carefully collectively composed.

Paying attention to these Cosmopolitical imaginaries, we have found ourselves grateful for the way that they can help to sensitise us to particular relations of knowledge and governance which may be actively being assumed and produced in particular times and places.

And at the same time, have been consistently prompted by episodes arising in our ethnographic work, to start questioning or reconsidering the preferencing of an implicit consensus politics which seems to run through all of these.

So this paper, we explore another reading of contemporary Cosmopolitics, and do this through telling a brief ethnographic story of climate futures and water research in northern Australia.

## BACK STORY



- For the last year or so, myself and Endre Dányi have been involved in a project we have called 'Landscapes of Democracy'. This is an umbrella term for a variety of ethnographic research engagements carried out at the intersection of differing traditions of knowledge and governance
- One of these engagements has involved working with our friend and colleague Nori Hayashi on a project concerned with cross-cultural management of freshwater on the remote Aboriginal island of Milingimbi, off the coast of Arnhem Land, northern Australia
- This project was funded by the Australian Research Council and has brought together a quite large group of Hydrogeologists and water managers from the utility company Power and Water, as well as Yolŋu elders, Traditional owners and community members from Milingimbi Island.
- It has been over the course of this ethnographic work that we have begun to notice certain stakeholders involved in the project arranging scientific experiments and programs oriented around promoting positive climate futures in Milingimbi as weather and water patterns begin to change. HOWEVER, in the process they have found themselves encountering other sets of world-making practices with quite different metaphysical/spatio-temporal commitments

## BY THE PAPERBARKS



Our story of Cosmopolitics and climate futures starts off in the Milingimbi paperbark swamp...

Here we are at the paperbark swamp, about 20 mins drive from the centre of town on Milingimbi Island. We are standing around, talking about a large scientific measuring tower that may soon be

erected in this spot. It would be one of three such towers soon to be established in different locations across the island.

The Balanda (non-Indigenous) coordinator of the Milingimbi ranger group is pointing up to where the top of the large tower might eventually stand, and beside him is one of the lead hydrogeologists working on the water management project. Surrounding these two figures, listening and contributing to the conversation, are also other scientists from the project, as well as a number of Yolŋu Aboriginal rangers, and several of the Traditional Owners for this place.

Earlier in the day we had visited several other sites important to knowing and managing freshwater flows on Milingimbi Island. We had been to the water tower and pumping station, which helps to keep a consistent flow of water through the community's pies and taps. We had also been to Nilatjirrwa, a billabong where brackish water collects and which is central to Yolŋu ancestral creation stories and songlines for water on the island.

Now having arrived at the paperbark swamp, the discussion turns to some serious negotiations about exactly where the measuring towers might stand. The scientists had gone to great difficulty to bring these towers with them on this trip, and they were hoping they could be set up in three locations and to measure the amount of water that vegetation drew from the aquifer through transpiration.

## CAREFUL NEGOTIATIONS

At this initial stage, the **hydrogeologists** were interested in getting right their experimental set up. They wanted to measure the effect that vegetation had on the level of the water table, and wanted to measure transpiration rates across the island, and it was important to make sure the towers were positioned at experimentally significant locations. Perhaps there was more or less water escaping through the leaves of paperbark trees than there was from acacias – a predominant vegetation type growing in another location. When measuring transpiration rates, they were interested in gathering reliable data enabling a comparison that would produce statistical significant data.

After the scientists had left the island, it would be the Yolŋu staff of the local **Ranger** group who would look after these towers. The rangers were normally employed to carry out a range of natural resource management (and hunting) activities, but now they would also come and collect measurements of rainfall and transpiration at regular intervals, keeping a log of the data and sending it off for analysis. As they stood at the now paperbarks, they wanted to get the details of this work clear, and to see whether it would be viable or not, and what it was likely to involve. Particularly paying attention to how they might protect the towers from kids (or kids from the towers) once the word got out that there was some new and expensive climbing equipment that had been installed just out of town.

Having talked all these things through, and seemingly solved all presenting problems, the group looked set to go home when – surprisingly for some – another aspect of the negotiations suddenly arose. Having got a handle on the situation, the **Traditional Owners** started to negotiate amongst themselves the boundaries of their ancestral clan estates. The towers were a new ontological participant in place, and it was important to be clear where they were, who would have responsibility for these objects, and who should collect the leasing fees associated with their presence.

Working out the clan ownership of the places where the scientific towers were to be put up would take time (there were no simple lines drawn on a map to refer to), and would require the involvement of various other authorities (such as elders and kin relations, as well as anthropologists from the Northern Land Council who could make Western legal determinations on such matters). It was indeterminate how long the process would take, and while the scientists had brought their towers with them, nothing could go in the ground until this matter was sorted out.

## **AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INQUIRY**

My question, which is really at the heart of this talk, is how to appropriately account for this moment of rupture? A moment which seems very small and almost insignificant, but when read through an STS lens seems to reveal a tension between quite different sets of relations of knowledge and governance.

Initial discussions about the towers, concerned how they could be located and cared for so as to provide accurate measurements of groundwater. The data produced from the towers would come to exist as information that could travel. It would be sent to Power and Water, and would circulate within government. In doing so, it would be likely to have a significant impact on future policies and potential restrictions on water use as the population of Milingimbi increases and the climate changes.

However, the discussions initiated by the TOs as we stood amongst the paperbark trees, was not about how to inform policy or management. Rather it concerned the implications of an imminent new ontological change in the configuration of place itself. A change which needed to be negotiated and squared, so relations of responsibility and reciprocity constitutive of both people and place, could be realigned, straightened out again and continue to exist as they always had, and always should.

## **ACCOUNTING COSMOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE**

Each of the Cosmopolitical imaginaries I have mentioned in the introduction provide means by which this episode can be read and potentially judged. Although, for each there seem to be aspects of the story which evade what they might take account of.

- The imposition of a Kantian enlightenment cosmopolitanism – would assume a singular world, in which a changing climate is a natural imperative that requires all citizens to have protection available to them under the guidance of experts. Within this configuration there is little grounds for the legitimacy of the politics of the Traditional Owners, whose concern is not primarily for the general epistemic order the scientist are in the process of generating, but concerned with quite different political and epistemic matters.
- A Beckian revised cosmopolitanism – Would recognise the political arrangements and negotiations of the TO's as legitimate, but as unable to interact with that of the scientists and rangers. Here the object of the measuring tower itself as BOTH an epistemic participant in producing research for climate futures, and a new ontological participant in the performance of ancestral clan estates could not be dealt with at all.
- A Latourian cosmopolitics – suggests that an assumed common world does not exist as a given, it is something that may be composed out of heterogeneous pieces, with scientists, rangers, TO's ethnographers, water towers and others coming to agreements about how shared futures may be produced. However, while in the case of this story all these participants went on together - the tower was quite soon put up - they certainly did not achieve any general agreement about the character of the world or the significance of climate change and water use within it.

## **NEGOTIATING CLIMATE PRESENTS...**

Our suggestion is that this brief ethnographic episode both problematises standard Cosmopolitical imaginaries, and exemplifies a possible fourth mode for doing cosmological difference.

It became briefly clear at the paperbark swamp, that differing knowledges also meant differing politics. It was these differing politics, these differing worlds, which were momentarily present in making a decision about where the tower could go and how the research could proceed.

Within the practices of the Australian Research Council funded water management project, negotiations around climate futures cannot only be empirically recognised as assuming or deferring one enactment of the world, or one mode of epistemic priority. The water project has worked to produce and maintain BOTH good practices of scientific inquiry and evidence based water governance, as well as reaffirming ancestral relations constituting land and its ownership for Yolŋu clan groups.

It seemed to be these located negotiations that brought climate futures down to earth, enabling negotiations within which radical traditions of knowledge and governance could be brokered and sustained. And could perhaps be read as offering a call for the possibility of maintaining differing worlds in the doing, not of climate futures, but of climate 'presents' carefully negotiated in-place and amidst difference in the here-and-now.