

SEMINAR SERIES: THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

A future history of water, or, how to wonder with techno-legal devices?



photo: Andrea Ballestero

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How do people commit to intervening in the future while acknowledging its unruliness? I propose the figure of the techno-legal device as a lively space where we can learn how people constantly negotiate the form of the worlds they want to bring about. In this talk, I will focus on one device: a list of water types produced by Costa Rican congressional representatives during the discussion of a constitutional reform to recognize water as a public good and a human right. During the fifteen years it lasted, Libertarian representatives made a series of seemingly outrageous claims: they theatrically declared that if the reform passed, ice cubes would become state property; they claimed that since all human bodies are 70% water, the reform would automatically turn 70% of their bodies into state property. Session after session, they produced a typology of state-owned waters that challenged any definition of what water is, of where its borders sit, and of what liberal ideas such as public goods entail. In this paper I explore their list as a techno-legal device to ask how people establish relations with facts, matter, and politics. I will argue that when taken as a techno-legal device, the list helps us see the making of a future history of water, a series of preconditions that can only be recognized as meaningful in the yet to come.

Andrea Ballestero is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Ethnography Studio at Rice University. Her work looks at the unexpected ethical and technical entanglements through which experts understand water in Latin America. In recent years she has followed the paths of water pricing in Costa Rica, bureaucratic care for water in Brazil, and traveling water knowledge throughout Latin America. She is the author of *A Future History of Water* (Duke University Press, 2019).

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