

## Buchbesprechungen/Reviews

**Muehlebach, Andrea: *A Vital Frontier: Water Insurgencies in Europe*.**

252 pp. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023. ISBN 978-1-4780-1983-1

How to govern the infrastructures that are essential for life? Andrea Muehlebach ponders this vital question in her book about water movements in Europe. The book is situated in the context of private investments in public utilities, a process she understands as part of the globally advancing financial frontier. Underlying her inquiry is a concern for value and its distribution: why allow private companies to make a profit from providing people with an indispensable substance like water? Since all life depends on it, is water not best managed as commons, rather than being subsumed by the exclusive logic of the market?

Histories of social struggle in three European countries (Italy, Ireland, and Germany) provide ethnographic sites for her to think through such fundamental questions. All three cases tell of people who ‘understood the privatization of their public utilities as an enclosure of a common good that should, under all circumstances, be kept public’ (p. 7). Against this enclosure, they took to the streets, wrote their own laws and, above all, refused to pay. By doing so, Muehlebach argues, they offered the world a radical gift: they ‘devised a language that allows for a renewal of critiques of capitalism and of ways through which the world and its life-giving substances can be imagined as inappropriable’ (p. 177).

Imagination plays a crucial role in the struggles covered in the book’s chapters. Throughout, Muehlebach is most interested in the political rhetoric, strategies and techniques that people use to defend their water. Accordingly, the chapters describe activism in terms of performance and its potential to reveal, to question, to unsettle. That is not to say that the struggles in which these performances emerge lack material foundations. On the contrary, Muehlebach is intent on positioning the ordinary household as the central site of accumulation and contestation, ‘from which wealth is extracted, bill by bill, month by month’ (p. 18). Financialization, she seeks to show, ‘sediments’ itself into people’s everyday lives, thereby constituting the seeds of resistance along ‘vibrant political and legal fault lines’.

Concretely, collective action crystallizes around particular objects, including public fountains, water meters, secret contracts and ‘crazy bills’. As ethnographic objects, these do crucial articulating and imaginative work between the author’s conceptual concerns and her interlocutor’s practical terrains. They also prove to be helpful guides as one reads through the book.

Public fountains in Italian cities share a long history, which Muehlebach extends with another chapter, her first. Focusing on the southern Italian region of Campania, the story centers on the 2011 national referendum, with which voters declared water to be a public good, but which was subsequently disregarded by governments and legislators. The fountains became a crucial symbol both in the struggle leading up to the referendum and in its aftermath. Their water was sprinkled on bystanders by priests and drunk on record by mayors; a public outcry followed when they were ordered to be removed. '[T]he old *fontanina* was a love object that stood for a kind of social contract where politics was oriented toward citizens rather than toward shareholders' (p. 62).

Chapter 2 takes place in Ireland, where people stood up against the water meters that were being installed in their homes. Meters enable utilities to calculate the cost of water for individual households and thus epitomize the 'sedimentation' of market logic. Common in most European contexts, they were notably absent in Ireland until 2014, as water was paid through the tax system. For the national water company, however, privatized in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, domestic metering promised a 'captive income stream' independent of the state, which they needed to attract capital. But people refused. In public acts of disobedience, they stood in the way of the company installing the meters, or removed the 'extractive devices'. They refused to pay for water their taxes had already paid for, and thus insisted on 'a reimagination of a politics of redistribution and social contract mediated by the state' (p. 87).

A secret contract, opposed by a group of activists called the *Berliner Wassertisch*, guides readers through Chapter 3. Their struggle began in 1999, when the city sold part of its water utility to private investors in order to restructure its public debt. During the following years, activists fought for the disclosure of the contract while the government stubbornly insisted on the privacy of its content. It took a series of court rulings and a popular referendum – which the *Wassertisch* gloriously won in 2011 – to impose the primacy of public interest. While a longing for transparency had articulated the struggle, in the end the referendum achieved much more: it was 'a public dramatization, not of contractual information (the content of which was already an open secret) but of the popular will' (p. 130).

'Crazy bills' take center stage in Chapter 4, which returns to Campania. Ordinary people called these bills 'crazy' because they reportedly made 'housewives' hands shake every time they opened an envelope'. The utility had sent them because water prices in previous years had not covered the full costs of operation, including a guaranteed share for investors. In the aftermath of the 2011 referendum, 'crazy bills' became 'the financial frontier's most emblematic material artifact', articulating acts of civil disobedience across the country. 'For many, these bills made manifest an economy that was the result of a particular kind of madness – that of global market actors who knew nothing about their local water, its histories, local meanings, and particular taste, and who were invested only in stripping it of its qualities in order to price and trade it' (p. 138).

*A Vital Frontier* excels at drawing a broader frame through which to read these local struggles around a common substance of concern. Yet, as I read through the chapters

I kept wondering about that commonality across places and scales. My curiosity was sparked by the repeated mention of ‘resonances’ with related cases in distant times and places, from Bolivia to the advent of the industrial age. Usually, these resonances appear in the book in episodic form, as anecdotes of missionary priests or travelling activists, for example, whom we hardly ever meet again as we read on. I found myself longing to hear more about these figures and the stories they had to tell about how water had been governed and fought for elsewhere, and what that meant in the context I was reading about. With matters as essential as water, it occurred to me, connection is easily taken for granted rather than put up for question. The result can be a story in which a universal pattern (capitalism) governs a universal substance (life qua water) along expectable pathways.

To be sure, this is not the story told in the book, at least not only. In fact, Muehlebach pays impressive ethnographic attention to why, how and to what effect different people stand up for water. I particularly liked the story about an old man in an Italian village who drew up a sort of map to explain what the current situation was really all about. His drawing, signed with his initials P.C. (also the shorthand for the communist party), shows an old public fountain (with a pedal!) that stands as an alternative to corporate greed. The subtle details in such stories made me think about the unlikely characters involved in uncertain acts of resistance. They are not quite how anti-capitalist activism is usually imagined, and yet they are essential, as the capitalist logic pervades all aspects of life. What is it that people stand up for, or against? Or, how do old fountains articulate (with) financial frontiers? Maybe provoking such questions is part of the ‘radical gift’ that Muehlebach is trying to pass on from her interlocutors to readers like me.

As someone working on mining, I am used to frontiers taking more explicit material shapes. Yet, questions of sovereignty and value pervade both our fields of research, as do concerns and concepts around water and extraction. Muehlebach’s anchoring of her work in the anthropology of infrastructure and law is thought-provoking because, approached through utilities, water articulates such an intimate, almost immediate relationship between the state and its people. In the case of mineral extraction, which competes with local uses of water, quite the opposite is usually the case. Given that minerals are not locally bound but leave local traces, what would it mean to imagine them as public matters that do not belong to anyone in particular? Conversely, I think that the way in which diverse nations and states have made mineral resources *their* means of subsistence (see Koch and Perreault 2018) may provoke questions in cases where ‘vital infrastructures’ are at stake. Beyond the state-market binary, what ‘fault lines’ open up along the boundaries of the public domain, the ‘uncommons’, as some have come to call them (see Blaser and de la Cadena 2017)? I hope that such questions may nurture conversations about how vital matters like water – or minerals – shape capitalist frontiers across places and scales.

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## References

- Blaser, Mario, and Marisol de la Cadena 2017: The Uncommons: An Introduction. *Anthropologica* (59):85–193. <https://doi.org/10.3138/anth.59.2.t01>.
- Koch, Natalie, and Tom Perreault 2018: Resource Nationalism. *Progress in Human Geography* 43(4):611–631. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132518781497>.

**Born, Georgina (ed.): Music and Digital Media: A Planetary Anthropology.**  
542 pp. London: UCL Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-80008-245-8

Music is omnipresent in everyday life and enmeshed in the (digital) transformations of our day-to-day realities. It is therefore surprising that music continues to have a rather marginal position in anthropology. Starting from this observation, the book *Music and Digital Media: A Planetary Anthropology*, edited by Georgina Born, sets out to change this, but as the subtitle reveals, its ambitions go much further. By considering some implications that the study of music has to offer to the discipline, it aims to provide theoretical considerations for an assessment of digital media and their impact on society. Yet the book is not an ordinary collection of papers by different authors compiled at a conference or the like, but presents the results of ten years of research within the European Research Council (ERC)-funded project *Music, Digitisation, Mediation: Towards Interdisciplinary Music Studies (MusDig)*. By furthering and transforming some of her former theoretical innovations, such as the notion of relational musicology, and reconsidering the role of music and aesthetics as social mediators (e.g. Born 2010; 2017), Born is able to draw on several highly original case studies by her co-authors and herself.

These eight predominantly empirical chapters constitute the core of this multi-layered and ethnographically wide-ranging book. Each of them contributes very different aspects and perspectives to this collective anthropological endeavour. The themes range from entrepreneurship, recording studios and digital music production in the field of popular music in Nairobi by Andrew J. Eisenberg (chapter 2) via digitization within the independent music scene in Buenos Aires by Geoff Baker (chapter 3), to the challenges faced in the work of digitally archiving music from oral traditions in India by Aditi Deo (chapter 4). Furthermore, in several co-written chapters, Georgina Born examines online music consumption on platforms like Spotify and Jekyll together with Blake Durham (chapter 5), the aesthetics of and social mediation through music in music production with the ‘Max’ software together with Joe Snape (chapter 6), as well as the transformation of the perception and consumption of music through internet-mediated music genres such as ‘microsound’ or ‘chillwave’ together with Christopher Haworth (chapter 9). Two contributions on the (non-academic) electroacoustic scene in Montreal by Patrick Valiquet (chapter 7) vs. university education in digital art music in the UK by Georgina Born (chapter 8) add still another layer to this rich compilation.