

Water Rites

Robert Heinlein's celebrated 1961 novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, tells the story of a human baby that is marooned on Mars and raised by native Martians. Upon his return to Earth, he must acclimatize to human culture and customs, including the cavalier relationship that humans have to water. On his native Mars, an arid planet, the sharing of water with another person is a ceremonial gesture which, when completed, cements the two individuals together with the new and sacred title of "water brother". Science Fiction provides many such examples of encounters between disparate cultures, usually exacerbated by differences in resource management or law. Few of them address, with such solemnity and rigor, the extent to which the extreme scarcity of water – a resource most of us take for granted – can produce and encode such morally-ordered social interactions. Another example from literature is given in Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), where certain curious social gestures develop on the arid fictional planet of Arackis to show respect, such as spitting at the feet of another person in lieu of hand-shaking (as an offering of your inner water to them).

Speculative fictional gestures, such as this hold a mirror to our own culture. They ask us to question our own relationship to water. Consider the hydrology of our planet: Earth boasts 1.34 billion cubic kilometers of water. 96% of that water is salty and undrinkable. 70% of the remaining fresh water is frozen in ice-caps. Most of the remainder is only available as moisture or is hidden in aquifers too deep for humans to reach. Ultimately, less than 1% of the water on Earth is potable and available for human use.¹ This water is mostly found in lakes, rivers and accessible underground aquifers. A marginal amount of this water is sustainable—regularly renewed via the natural hydrologic cycle. And yet, human demands on fresh water are increasing at completely unsustainable rates, to accommodate people's consumption needs, but also for many manufacturing and industry needs. To further complicate matters, the population of the Earth is expected to increase dramatically by 2050² and the climate is warming and destabilizing. 'Water' occupies an ambiguous territory between a public trust and a private commodity which is metered, monitored and distributed by governing bodies, depending on the needs of the region. Every country is at work, trying to prevent water crises in their region by investing in new methods of water management and treatment.

Now consider California alone. In California, we face enormous challenges adapting our inefficient water management system to contemporary conditions. The state continues to grow and urbanize, and it is thirsty. Most of Southern California's water is imported via several of the state's surface water conveyance systems, including the State Water Project, the LA Aqueduct and the Colorado River delivery systems. Groundwater is also being pumped at unsustainable rates, in some regions. Conveyance systems are susceptible to long periods of drought, making water scarcity an occasional reality. The frailty of Southern California's water situation is encapsulated in the management of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. If the Delta's weak levees were to fail in a large earthquake, for example, the region would be flooded with salt water. A

¹ Igor Shiklomanov (1993), Peter H. Gleick, ed., *World fresh water resources, in Water in Crisis: A Guide to the World's Fresh Water Resources*, [Oxford University Press](#), pp. 13–24

² "[International Data Base \(IDB\) — World Population](#)". Census.gov. 2010-06-28. Retrieved 2010-08-01.

huge percentage of Los Angeles' water supply would be cut off for months or even years.³ Urban water-use efficiency and reclamation methods are improving, but still, major infrastructural changes are necessary to prevent cataclysmic disturbances in LA's water supply (not to mention the environmental and agricultural impact).

It is not outrageous to imagine a merging of the contemporary urban landscape of Los Angeles with the elaborate water-sharing ceremonies of Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, or Herbert's *Dune*. Los Angeles has always been a locus for a wide variety of communes, "intentional communities" and alternative spiritualities. The unique geography and liberal urban ethos of the city have always nurtured this disposition. The history of the city is peppered with examples such as those of the Source Family or the Nature Boys as well as scores of bohemian and beatnik enclaves. On a more casual scale, one can observe the increasing adoption of spiritual practices into secular life – if only to reap the health benefits. Yoga, meditation and vegan/vegetarian lifestyles are just a few simple examples of such 'civil religion' practices. Consider this openness to new spiritualities in context, i.e., with Los Angeles' growing austerity and conservation efforts around urban water use and reclamation. It is challenging enough for people to accept changes in the status quo or be forced to change their habits, giving up activities or ways of living and acting which they are accustomed to. One can imagine a situation in which pseudo-spiritual rituals evolve to celebrate or consecrate water. That assumption is the point of departure for this work.

Water Rites addresses the social response to the diminishing quantity of a resource. Following the logic of Heinlein or Herbert, when something is scarce it becomes culturally precious. Making, moving and most notably, sharing it, carries with it a heightened social significance in the moral order. The piece is comprised of four DIY devices that are partially electronic (two mobile water-purifying devices, one "altar" and one tool for communal drinking), and a two-channel video installation. Each channel follows one of two individuals—presumably romantic partners—as they prepare a water source for a specific ceremony. The ceremony combines many of the common stages found in religious and secular rituals. These include, but are not limited to the establishment of an *intention*, the defining of a *sacred space*, the *invocation* of greater energies, *concretion* of a substance, washing, *cleansing* and ultimately, conclusion of the ceremony by recounting the initial intention and leaving the space with an *offering*. The main purpose of the ceremony is for the two individuals to engage in an act of bonding using water. The decision to combine water sources and drink together is a symbolic act that codifies their relationship and gives it meaning. It is left intentionally ambiguous whether or not this is a ceremony that has been practiced by many people over many years, or simply something these two people invented together that has special meaning only to them. In the end, one might ponder: Is this implying a dystopian vision of Los Angeles, considering our current trajectory of poor water management? Could this be ushering us into an alternative present? Perhaps a more appropriate question to ask is: Why would it be *surprising* if such a practice existed today?

³ Ellen Hanak, Jay Lund, Ariel Dinar, Brian Gray, Richard Howitt, Jeffrey Mount, Peter Moyle, Barton "Buzz" Thompson, Managing California's Water From Conflict to Reconciliation, San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 2011