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Title:	For Want of Water: The Cultural Politics of Water Management in the American West
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Subjects:	Cultural anthropology (/jspui/browse?type=subject&value=Cultural+anthropology)
Issue Date:	2014
Publisher:	Princeton, NJ : Princeton University
Abstract:	Water scarcity is a longstanding problem in the American West, defined by limited supplies and growing demands in the midst of environmental change. To remedy this crisis, technocrats and officials have devised "water transfers," whereby water is being channeled from agricultural irrigation districts to urban water agencies in exchange for financial compensation. This dissertation is an ethnographic and historical study of the cultural politics informing the largest farm-to-city water transfer in the United States' history. The transfer is moving water from the Imperial Irrigation District to metropolitan water agencies in San Diego, Los Angeles and Palm Springs. The prospects of the water transfer are varied: draining wetland habitat, exacerbating air pollution, imperiling Imperial's rural economy, and securing urban growth. The dissertation is based on sixteen months of ethnographic research among activists, water managers, and public officials in this region. I also pursued archival research on the recent and long-term histories of local water management, with a particular focus on the (un)natural history of the Salton Sea. The dissertation chronicles the political, legal, and social dynamics that have made the water transfer possible and documents how poor communities are contending with its devastating present and future ecological effects. I show that the transfer is legitimized by hierarchical cultural norms that downplay the value of rural space in the region's development and by neoliberal governing practices that elide public scrutiny and debates over water rights, thus serving "free market" ideals and interests. I then show how residents of peripheral areas combat the water transfer by making specific claims to environmental protection and stewardship. In dialogue with cultural anthropologists and theorists of urban and environmental change, the dissertation theorizes the contingent and unexpected socio-cultural processes that, alongside technological, economic, and legal developments, frame and underlie these water politics. I argue that these processes are integral to contemporary power realignments, institutional formations, and shifts in social imagining that both realize and recognize a regional, interdependent ecology that is at once natural, cultural and political. The dissertation contributes to academic and public debates at the interface of environmental change, capitalist development, and grass-roots politics.
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