

# Insouciant Water? Water fetishism in Fiji, New York and especially Singapore

**Martha Kaplan**

Professor of Anthropology, Vassar College



All humans need water. But water is more than good to drink, it is good to think with. Inspired by corporate imagery of nature, New Yorkers' love for Fijian Water, but not for Fijians, seems a classic instance of commodity fetishism (endowing things with life and denying social relations with producers), fetishism as powerful deceit, with dire environmental consequences. But there's more to consider about water fetishism. In New York some people have a lively relationship with their water coolers, endowing water with humanity. And what about the state? In Singapore, when the state began to add NEWater (high quality recycled sewer water) to the public drinking water

supply, water also became a living state symbol, the Public Utilities Board's mascot, Water Wally, an insouciant anthropomorphized water drop. Karl Marx showed how to see through fetishes, making social science a demystifying practice, anti-fetishism. Bruno Latour advises "anti-anti-fetishism" asking us to track actual histories and interpret situations without resorting to reduction. But most water scholars are suspicious of corporate, calculated fetishism though supportive of public enlivenings of the world. State water care in Singapore raises another dimension, at once disciplinary and surprisingly playful, explored ethnographically in this paper.

**Martha Kaplan** is Professor of Anthropology, Vassar College. A cultural and historical anthropologist who studies meaning in colonial and postcolonial situations, she is the author of *Neither Cargo Nor Cult: Ritual Politics and the Colonial Imagination in Fiji*, co-author (with John Kelly) of *Represented Communities: Fiji and World Decolonization*, and editor of *Outside Gods and Foreign Powers: Making Local History with Global Means in the Pacific*, an *Ethnohistory* special issue. Her current research and publications on the cultural politics of water, comparatively focused on Fiji, the United States and Singapore, consider water simultaneously as public and privatized, as necessity and object of fantasy and desire, as locus of exploitation and as source of postcolonial innovation, as a public utility and an environmental resource. She enjoys teaching "Anthropology of Water"! During her recent research in Singapore, supported by Fulbright and NSF, she was affiliated with the Asia Research Institute, NUS, and the Center for Livable Cities. She is writing a book on *Water Cultures: Fiji, New York, Singapore*.

**Wednesday, April 25**

**12:00 Noon**

**Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue**