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Life of the Indus River: A more-than-human ethnography

My research seeks to understand how Indus riverscapes come into existence through the material, ecological, symbolic, and sociopolitical practices surrounding the Indus river from colonial times to present. Amidst diminishing water resources, biodiversity loss, and the drying of the Indus delta in Pakistan, environment and water governance institutions have proposed technoscientific solutions restricted to dam building and other water storage infrastructure. This has been accentuated in the recent wave of dam building in Pakistan initiated by the former Chief Justice of Pakistan and led by the Prime Minister, mobilizing the largest ever charity campaign to raise fifteen hundred billion dollars. In media campaigns, the slogan “*water for future generations*” has become the *raison d’etre* for this effort. Such an approach conceptualizes the river as a resource for human use only, a reductionist framing with roots in the colonial era when such conceptualization was produced and enacted for the first time, leaving irrelevant and unthinkable the broader human and nonhuman relations that shapes the river.

Theoretically, the post-modern turn has shed light on how discursive practices shape human-nature relations, and the knowledge-power nexus underlying them. Recently, the ontological turn in anthropology and science and technological studies have called for a shift in focus from discursive politics to the role the material and multispecies world plays in shaping human practices and their engagement with nature or the river. My research builds on these approaches to ask, 1. How do water governance institutions enact the Indus river in their practices? 2. How do the materiality and multispecies world of the river shape those practices, while conforming to and/or evading these practices, and what does this reveal about the ontological character of the river? And finally, 3. How do the materiality and multispecies world of the Indus River shape the practices and experiences of indigenous fishing communities, and how do they make sense of the material and the multispecies relational world of the river? My research departs from recent social scientific studies of rivers which are humanist and heavily focused on narrative politics by reinvigorating the material and multispecies world and exploring the complexity of human-nonhuman interactions in shaping the Indus River. This research also has important implications for water governance, as it explores alternative ways of thinking about the existence of the Indus river, historically, ontologically and politically, in contrast with modernist conceptions of rivers as resources for human use only – thereby shedding light on possible avenues for transforming our engagement with the river.

This research is divided into three phases. In Phases I and II, I will conduct archival research and institutional ethnography, respectively, to address questions 1 and 2. In *Phase I* (June-July 2019), I will gather archival data on the institutional history and ecology of the Indus to explore the historical changes in the ecology of the river; how the materiality of the river has shaped the “thinking” of colonial and postcolonial governments; and to identify what governance and management practices developed in the process of negotiating with the materiality and multispecies world of the river, and how these practices in turn defined the river. Ecological data on river flow/discharge, fish capture and the condition of riverine and mangrove forests will be collected from the archives of the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA), Indus River System Authority (IRSA), and the Agricultural Department in Sindh. Data on the institutional history of the Indus will be collected from the Sindh Archives Department and Sindh Irrigation Department, with the aim of identifying how water governance institutions have struggled with the materiality and multispecies world of the river, transforming their plans and practices in the process while conversely shaping the river. Special attention will be given to how the materiality of the river shaped the construction of the Sukkur Barrage and its management., given the effect of the barrage in transforming the biophysical and ecological characteristics of the river. These data will be complemented by an institutional ethnography with these water governance institutions in *Phase II*, focusing on how they negotiate with the material and multispecies world of the river in the field and how those practices, in turn, define the river. During this phase, I will attend official meetings and conduct visits alongside technocrats to observe their encounters with the materiality and multispecies world of the river. Together these data will help to reconstruct the complexity of human-nonhuman interactions that have shaped the river. In Stage III, I will carry out ethnographic research with indigenous fishing communities at Sukkur

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to address question 3. In this phase, I will focus on form of materiality and the multispecies worlds evoked by fishing community ontologies, and what this tells us about how rivers may be known “otherwise”. This work aims to identify the “ontologies of becoming” of local fishing communities with respect to how riverscapes come into existence, and to observe their practices as they negotiate and contemplate the material and multispecies world of the river through participant observation.

My comprehensive exams and proposal defense are scheduled for Spring 2019, enabling me to start my fieldwork in June. This grant will fund Phase I fieldwork, allowing me to begin research while awaiting news on other grants (e.g. Wenner Gren), as well as to strengthen future proposals (e.g. August 2019 NSF) through preliminary data collection.