

Water as Protagonist

Our goal is to create a prototype of an Indigenous-led community-based water monitoring initiative that is rooted in Indigenous laws, and is a practical expression of Indigenous water governance.

—Decolonizing Water Project, Toronto, Canada

If anything will level with you, water will.

—A. R. Ammons

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Kubla Khan”

Liquid Intelligence

The finite condition of natural resources increasingly presses down upon the here and now, wherein water stands as the symbol and vehicle for inequality, vulnerability, racism, labor, land-based relationality, and capitalist infrastructure. Infrastructure is often thought to be governed by the ghoulish science of logistics, a cornerstone of the MBA curriculum, but it is also a mode of natural relations in which other ways of knowing and being become visible and act upon the physical world. The differential knowledges accrued around the materiality of infrastructure are sedimentary; in their silt-laden layers they not only contribute to but also impede capitalist accumulation. An intertwined geology-genealogy of things-ideas, water as a protagonist breaks up the sanctioned worldview and its episteme, and it potentially interrupts the sheer power of accumulative flows. Water also facilitates narratives of religious purification and conversion, and it underwrites narratives of capitalist trade and triumph.

It overflows the banks of these conventional narratives. As water flows through “caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea,” it has its own stories to tell.

Water is both common and in the commons, inside and outside of us—in the rain and the clouds, in the rivers and the seas. Water is the great mediator and equalizer, around which cities grow and nations often form their borders, but it is also where empires crumble and pleasure domes collapse. Water levels. In scientific terms, water is the foundation, the magical liquid that sustains chemical relations of life on Earth. Follow the water: it is what astrobiologists at NASA look for when searching for signs of “alien life” in outer space, supposedly the common heritage of humanity. Yet, how is humanity defined? And whose humanity is being defined for them through water? Remember Flint, Michigan, as a localized and racialized space that contains such universalizing imaginaries.

Water is a conductor not just of life but of death and its cycles of renewal, a connector to the underworld and the overworld, a passageway to what lies beyond the visible or apprehensible. The capacity of water, its exceeding intelligence, lies precisely in its capacity to exceed capacity, to overcome structures of thought that seek to divide and classify the messy realities of lived and shared environments. Water spirits, observes Veronica Strang, inhabit nondualistic cosmologies that place humans within the natural world while simultaneously introducing alien powers and agencies.¹ How is water a protagonist in the history of the human?

Capital Flows

The worldly intelligence of water describes the flows and blockages of subjects and objects within a longer history of capitalist accumulation. As protagonist, water harvests deep processes; it lures by going phishing. But its intelligence is also more literal. Federal government and local officials may not level with the denizens of Flint, but their water supply will. Contaminated for more than a thousand days, the water supply of Flint—in its taste, color, and smell—gives its residents, predominantly black, a clear accounting of how much they are worth as citizens to the racial state. This contamination is part of a larger problem with a reductionist view of water that does not, cannot, see its inherent intelligence. Although the bottled commodity known as Smartwater is a recent invention of the Coca-Cola Company, water has always been *smart*. It has its own desires and agency. As Smartwater replaces intelligent water (exceeding the price of gasoline, liter for liter, gallon for gallon), there is the no-future future that awaits us all.

We need to oppose corporate movements to privatize water, backed by the state, across the planet. For the residents of the Cochabamba, Bolivia,

local control over their urban water supply became tantamount to protecting a sense of autonomous resource management, a right increasingly under duress. Massive popular uprisings over privatization of the resource led to dramatic confrontations with the neoliberal state, as well as state-sanctioned violence that expanded its purview and reach in response to such rebellions. Even after these social movements brought decolonization to the center of Bolivian visibility, capitalism prospered: despite concerted efforts to exert local control, water circulates as a commodity to be purchased under the radar of the common good.²

In the age of global warming, of drought and flood, of rising sea levels and the acidification of the oceans, the planetary water crisis becomes a crisis of capitalist distribution rather than redistribution for the social good. Stitched to the logics of energy securitization, an ill-framed discussion of water security is often absorbed into narratives of neoliberal development rather than analyzed as the effects of global capitalist systems of enclosure and dispossession, exploitation and profit. From Brazil to China, Colombia, Egypt, India, and the Philippines, damming rivers becomes the sine qua non for the leap into modernity, even while the colonial infrastructures of damming drain the life they are supposedly designed to facilitate. Framed in terms of scarcity, water becomes a commodity that the racialized poor cannot access against the bourgeois right to consume water seen as the urban lubricant for a healthy, even wealthy existence. Will water become as precious as gold?

Water is instrumental, both as a barrier to trade and as its facilitator. If, historically, oceanic water has moved commodities and their supply chains, in the here and now it is even more finely instrumentalized. Water is a means for policing the traffic in commodity goods. Take the patented antitheft substance called SmartWater. (Please note that this is not the same as Coca-Cola's Smartwater.) SmartWater is a forensic liquid encoded with a unique molecular identifier that leaves a permanent unnoticeable coating visible only under ultraviolet light. SmartWater is often applied to metals used in construction, because there is a large black market in the theft, resale, and smelting of copper, lead, and other materials. The private corporation that makes SmartWater provides police departments with access to its database, so that the authorities can "read" the SmartWater coating and identify the owner upon recovering fugitive metals. Through this elemental, physical encoding process, SmartWater imprints the mark of ownership. It removes the materials it coats from the realm of circulation, a domain of human activity in which capturing value and capturing the future are often accomplished together.

SmartWater can also coat buildings, capturing and captivating our sense of the past. Consider the cathedral in Durham, England. It has dominated the town for over a thousand years. For centuries, to live in its

shadow or visit it on a pilgrimage was to seek out the aura of the unseen, anticipating a future happiness after mortal death. In this context, water brings obvious religious references and, along with it, a deep frustration about thinking through and trying to contend with a language of life that is not dependent upon the figure of Christ, redemption, and salvation absorbed in a narrative of pro-life. Perhaps a rethinking of the grammars of life not conditioned by the colonial artifact of religious encryption matters in the here and now. What is a planetary framework of futurity not predicated upon the reduction of life? A planet based on liquid swirls with the particular molecular structure that sustains us.

Nowadays, the architecture of the Durham Cathedral signifies in broader contexts. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is no longer a monocultural infrastructure for territorializing the Christian divine. If you look at the cathedral with a scrap metal dealer, he or she will at some point talk about the lead on the roof, how valuable it is. The roof of Durham Cathedral is undoubtedly coated with SmartWater. But if you visit the place with a group of seven-year-olds, they only see the architecture of Hogwarts, as this is where the Harry Potter movies were all shot. For the film's young fans, the building is a structure of enchantment, a space in which everything is potentially alive. Seeing the cathedral this way alerts us to the fabulative, antidualistic core of all efforts to territorialize the divine. Pre-Christian spirit forms associated with the water realm, such as wyrms and dragons, are part of the building's ecclesiastical purview in the here and now. As Strang explains, whenever a new bishop of Durham is installed, he must swear on the sword of Saint Cuthbert that he will kill the dragon.³

A longue durée thus opens up between residual figurations of “living water” (God is “the spring of living water” [Jeremiah 2.13], and the gospel is “living water” [John 4:10, NIV]) and the emergent logistics of “smart water.” Much is entangled, therefore, in observation that smarts is a new expression of added value. So water is not good enough on its own, but it has to have smarts, to offer us something extra. Was it deficient before? Did it have to go to school? Or does smartness function as a description that trademarks the necessary—the marketing of what life needs in order to live? What would dumb water taste like? Can we live without smart water? Is the plastic ocean dumb water?

Borders, Dams, and What Leaks Through

In *Aguamiel: Secrets of Agave*, a forthcoming documentary about US-Mexico border towns, directors Jamie A. Lee and Adela C. Licona illustrate the particular architecture that organizes water as a form of colonial governmentality.⁴ Lee and Licona reference the arbitrariness of national

borders that produce the space of nation-states through colonial and modern infrastructures. In their framing, water possesses intelligence that cuts through national artifices, an intelligence that organizes geographies as its own logic and resource. Further, through scenes that are filmed on both sides of the militarized border, Lee and Licona depict the mighty flow of the Rio Grande as a potential connector and a unifying protagonist. Yet from a hegemonic viewpoint, the camera also focuses on warning signs that show how the river is used to divide the US from Mexico as a use-value mechanism, a geopolitical metonym that reinscribes the First World–Third World binary.

From the US side, the viewer becomes privy to a host of “Do Not Swim Here” signs because, as Licona ironically relates to Lee, there is “typhoid, diphtheria, and other harmful organisms to the human body.” The quotidian signs of everyday lives that catalog danger become complicit in discursively saturating the Mexican landscape with toxicity and disease. “These are *Third World* diseases, Jamie,” Licona emphasizes to Lee, as if to explain the unevenness of development that engenders (US) life on one side of the water border while rendering (Mexican) death on the other.

Similar scenes take place in the polluted excesses of runoff sewage from the border *maquilas* in directors Sergio de la Torre and Vicky Funari’s evocative documentary *Maquilopolis*.⁵ Here, the water supply that sustains everyday life within the improvisational *colonias* of transmigrants also produces indices of infant mortality at some of the highest rates in the Western hemisphere. Toxic runoff always leaves its mark, and it also produces resistance, such as from the environmental group Factor X that emphasizes the importance of clean water sources to maternal health, to young people’s livability, and to female vernacular practices. Rather than merely reproductive, water is a relational substance, the queer texture and nonconforming flowing force that ameliorates bad living.

Like national borders, dams represent infrastructures that block us from sensing this moving intelligence and rich relationality of water.⁶ In *Silenced Rivers*, Patrick McCully invites us to move beyond a paradigm of damming, a prescient offering given the book’s original 1996 publication date, way ahead of the current turn to the Anthropocene and environmental studies in the Western academy.⁷ McCully draws attention to the transnational activists of the International River collective that chronicles a number of global ecological movements by indigenous, Afro-descendent, and Mestizx peoples who live embedded within, as well as alongside, the flows of river dynamics. Mississippi communities share these connections. These groups draw attention to how the silencing of rivers becomes like silencing peripheral communities in the global South, or those sites and spaces not yet integrated into the commodity logics of the cosmo-

politan planetary. To see water as a protagonist is to detach it from a separating and extractive relation with the human species. It is to place it within a different sensibility, one that honors the living quality of water, the wetness that lives and dies with all species. Is this not what the North is constantly having to learn and relearn from those in the South—those who exist in relation to natural resources as living and dynamic systems often exceeding human comprehension, rather than as enclosable commodities available for extraction?

The differential approach to water, and the differential value attached to the commodification of both its flows and its meanings, works against the recent move in environmental studies to think the Anthropocene as an aggregate species-being under existential threat. As the (uneven) extinction of the human species becomes increasingly probable, maybe even necessary, the differential production of value inexorably frames the differential production of human life. The Third World and racialized poor become the shock troops of environmental disaster, as racialized death becomes an integral part of the story: the 2010 and 2008 earthquakes in Haiti and Sichuan, China, as well as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the Indian Ocean tsunami a year earlier. These human-nature disasters underscore the temporal impossibility of the *post* in *postcolonial*. The *post* is a receding dream of an enlightened earth radiating disaster triumphant.

Southern Epistemes of Infrastructure

In a recent essay that revisits Boaventura de Sousa de Santos's work on southern epistemes, some questions on the problems with the capitalist pursuit of the "good life" invite us to consider a global South viewpoint on infrastructure:

What does real democracy look like? Is globalization sustainable? Is the "good life" sustainable? What are the alternatives to capitalism? What are the alternatives within capitalism? What would a university look like if it were a democracy? Is the Southern (Hemisphere) perspective more ethical and culturally sensitive than the Northern? And how would the world be different if the Southern Hemisphere were in charge?⁸

Some of these questions suffer from an essentialist and teleological framing of the Southern Hemisphere as the moral space of planetary consciousness. Yet the conditions of cultural sensitivity are obviously not uniform. Corporate states, elites, military subjects, and thieves often participate in the ideological reproduction of a good life that is disconnected and alienated from the primitive accumulation of resources extracted from subaltern populations and indigenous territories. Yet, the proposition of experiential alternatives to capitalism from within a global South frame-

work (including communities of color and transmigrant and subaltern populations within the global North) is certainly possible if we define these spaces as the geophysical geographies whose cultural memory is cathected to living and imagining capitalist alternatives.

The logic of damming and resistance to hydroelectric power are precisely the kind of terrain that we have to theorize in order to produce something like an infrastructural theory of the global South. This is a monumental project calling for new frames of knowledge. Let the water pour over, let it level, let it write an agenda to decolonize itself.

Down by the Riverside

In the African American spiritual “Down by the Riverside,” water features as a protagonist in the stories of fugitive slaves who cannot be captured when stepping into the water. Erasure. Imprinted. Traces. When the river is silenced, these histories seep into and become part of the music as oral histories of disaster and death. Such subtle expressions of fugitive histories and narratives allow for a different telling about the riverbanks and the submergence into water. If water is a protagonist, then what other kinds of stories emerge that renarrate through the Gospel? Water songs like “Down by the Riverside” suggest practices around moving water that convert repression and racialized violence into black survivance.

We must read water along a line such as “I ain’t going to study war no more.” How can we think about being down by the riverside alongside a desire to reach for peace? Water carries with it the heavy burden of slavery, its memory, and its afterlives. If water is intelligent, must it, too, remember? M. NourBese Philip rhymes the territorial “exhume” with an oceanic “exaqua.”⁹ Christina Sharpe, picking up Philip’s provocative coinage, theorizes the “residence time” of the waters of the black Atlantic.¹⁰ Along the Gulf Coast, early colonization left many traces, and yet the seashells of its original inhabitants stand as powerful monuments against war. Against the paradigm of war, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres observes, to speak of the long genocidal and global war against black and brown peoples, we might imagine another mode of engagement.¹¹ This mode differently approximates the substance of life without passing through the study of war. An old flamenco song speaks of water’s scarcity in these terms: “Agua que va por el rio, para beberla no conviene. . . . Hasta que no los has perdido, nadie sabe lo que tiene.” *You cannot drink water that passes through the river. Until you have lost it, no one knows what they have had.*

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Gonna lay down my sleepy head
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside

Gonna lay down my burden

Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside

I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield

Down by the riverside

I ain't gonna study, study, war no more

I ain't gonna study war no more

Ain't gonna study war no more

I ain't gonna study war no more

I ain't gonna study war no more

Ain't gonna study war no more

I ain't gonna study war, no more

Gonna lay down my burden

Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside

Gonna lay down my burden

Down by the riverside

I ain't gonna study, study, war no more

I ain't gonna study war no more

Ain't gonna study war no more

I ain't gonna study war no more

I ain't gonna study war no more

Ain't gonna study war no more

I ain't gonna study war no more

Gonna stick my sword in the golden sand

Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside

Gonna stick my sword in the golden sand

Down by the riverside

I ain't gonna study, study, war no more
I'm gonna lay down my sleepy head
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside

Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See “How This Text Was Written” (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Strang, “Reflecting Nature,” 257.
2. Another way to discuss this is by considering the term “First-World problems.” See also the 2014 and 2015 protests against water charges in Ireland.
3. Lee and Licona, *Aguamiel*.
4. Strang, “Reflecting Nature,” 269.
5. Funari and de la Torre, *Maquilopolis*.
6. Gómez-Barris, *Extractive Zone*, chap. 5.
7. McCully, *Silenced Rivers*.
8. de Sousa de Santos, “Is the ‘Good Life’ Sustainable?”
9. Philip, *Zong!*, 201.
10. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 19.
11. Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*.

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