

‘WAITING FOR THE MASTER’S DAMS TO CRACK’:
HYDRO-DEPENDENCY, WATER AUTONOMY AND
WORLD-LITERATURE

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Abstract: This article examines ‘hydro-dependency’ in the neo-liberal era, exploring the cultural patterning and representations corresponding to the socio-ecological relations organising the extraction, production and consumption of water, both as commodity and as energy in the neo-liberal regime of the capitalist world-ecology. I investigate how specific infrastructures of riparian water management and hydropower – the pipeline and the dam – are mediated in world-literary hydro-poetry and hydro-fiction and the ways in which they are depicted as producing path-dependence and asymmetric distribution, often through tropes that evoke pathologised social addiction or exhaustion. However, I also demonstrate how texts reconceive water in terms of interdependence and hydrosocial interrelation, thus countering the hegemonic discourses through which flowing water is transformed into exchangeable, quantifiable commodities or forms of energy. As such, I argue that these water-insurgent texts turn on a dialectical tension between hydro-dependency and autonomy that mediates the contradictions facing the appropriation strategies of the neo-liberal hydrological regime.

Keywords: hydro-dependency, hydroculture, water crisis, Rita Wong, Fred Wah, Emma Ruby-Sachs, Karen Jayes

This essay examines ‘hydro-dependency’ in the neo-liberal era, exploring the cultural patterning and representations corresponding to the socio-ecological relations organising the extraction, production and consumption of water, both as commodity and as energy in the capitalist world-ecology. Geographer Jamie Linton has used the term ‘modern water’ to describe the dominant mode of ‘knowing and representing water’ in hydrological discourse, which ‘abstracts all waters from the social, historical, and local conditions in which they are produced and reduces them to a common abstract and timeless identity, which can be represented as H₂O’.¹ This reduction of the world’s waters to a ‘single substance’ functions to ‘render them commensurable’, an epistemological act of radical simplification that enables quantification, measurability and the conception of water as a ‘resource’ to be administered or sold by states and corporations (*Modern water*, p113).

‘Modern water’ as such is integral to the larger abstraction through which capitalism envisions Nature as a static, inert, set of inputs which can be

1. Jamie Linton, ‘Modern water and its discontents: a history of hydrosocial renewal’, *WIRES Water*, 1, 2014, p111. (Hereafter *Modern water*).

appropriated without cost, and has been central to the development projects of modern hydraulic-states and the neo-liberal enclosure of water. However, this paradigm faces mounting contradictions with the:

proliferation of hydrosocial hybrids such as the prevalence of water pollution, the gross disparity of access to adequate water and waste services between the rich and the poor, the sheer extent to which hydrosystems have been exploited and regulated by humans ... and acknowledgement that it is impossible to effect changes in the hydrologic cycle without effecting changes in society, the most obvious example being awareness of the social effects of large dams. (p114).

As Linton observes, while these contradictions are often characterised as a ‘water crisis’, it is more accurate to say that ‘what we are facing is a crisis of modern water’ – the particular set of social practices internalised in the control of water.

Building on Jason W. Moore’s argument about the crisis of ‘cheap nature’,² I have suggested that the ecological regime of the late neo-liberal period is marked by a decline of ‘cheap water’ – the relative exhaustion of water frontiers marked by the intensification of technologies of extraction, accelerating manufacture of water scarcity and rising costs of freshwater appropriation – and as such is integral to the larger productivity crisis confronting the capitalist appropriation of nature in the twenty-first century.³ The appropriation strategies of the neo-liberal regime of ‘cheap water’ are increasingly undermined by socio-ecological contradictions, including contamination, the over-extended hydraulic regimes of urban environments, the heightened variability of rainfall produced by climate volatility, acidification of oceans and rising sea levels, and have thus been succeeded by a turn to ‘extreme water’ (p110). ‘Extreme water’ denotes the technical intensification of capital-intensive, high-risk modes of extraction and production of potable water, including deep aquifer pumping of paleowater, pipeline and container ship transport of ‘crude water’, and megaprojects reengineering riparian systems through large-scale dams, river diversions and water transfer projects.

These technological ‘fixes’ to hydrosocial crisis are intimately bound up with fossil fuels and extractivist industries, in many cases directly modifying or intersecting those of oil extraction. Extreme energy and extreme water are frequently destructively co-dependent, and the unequal hydro-social relations underlying hydropower reveal it to be far from an unequivocally ‘clean’ or ‘perpetually renewable’ source of energy. Martín Arboleda’s work on the webs of infrastructure, labour and financialisation that drive resource-based extractive industries in the neo-liberal era of late capitalism highlights the centrality of the ‘reconfiguration of the entire hydrosocial cycle’ to the expansion of extractivism in countries such as Chile, where the technical revision of water laws has converted water rights into freely tradable private

2. Jason W. Moore, *The End of Cheap Nature. Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying about ‘The’ Environment and Love the Crisis of Capitalism*.

3. Sharae Deckard, ‘Water Shocks: Neoliberal Hydrofiction and the Crisis of “Cheap Water”’, *Atlantic Studies*, 16, 1, 2019, pp108-25.

property that could be transferred to 'high-value' corporate users to service the demands of expanding mining, energy and agribusiness sectors for large quantities of fresh water, thus privileging hydropower generation for extractive uses at the expense of other property rights or the rights of citizens and smallholders.⁴ Under the new market regulations, extractive industries can not only acquire water rights and secure free and permanent water provision, but stockpile water rights for future projects, thus transforming water provision system into 'a legal mechanism for expropriation among lower income groups and a catalyst for the untrammelled expansion of mining, export agriculture, and hydroelectric power generation through the accumulation and hoarding of water rights' (*Planetary Mine*, p163).⁵

4. Martín Arboleda, *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2020, pp161-2. (Hereafter *Planetary Mine*).

5. See also Jessica Budds, 'Water, Power and the Production of Neoliberalism in Chile, 1973-2005', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 31, 2, 2013, 1.

6. See, for instance, Tiffany Higgins, 'The Mundurucu People Against Brazil', *Granta*, 10 July 2018, <https://granta.com/mundurucu/>

In a similar vein, environmental journalist and eco-poet Tiffany Higgins uses the term 'hydro-extraction' to describe the intersection of Amazon hydro-dam construction with the intensification of extractivism in South America, underlining the hydro-dependency of exploitative industries within the export commodity economy, such as mining and agribusiness, to which the production of water as energy or hydro-power is central, while also highlighting the forms of protest from below that contest these intertwined forms of extractivism.⁶ Dam projects, as well as water abstraction and transfer projects that appropriate fresh water for corporate use in industrial mining and agribusiness or divert water to urban centres, displace indigenous and traditional riverine communities through flooding of their lands, and erode the web of life for human and aquatic inhabitants through the reduction of water quality due to sedimentation, algae blooms and chemical pollution. The intensification of hydro-extraction is not confined to large-scale mega-dams, but increasingly consists of a staggering proliferation of small- and medium-scale projects, as in the Tapajós River basin of Brazil, where 'indigenous and other river communities are struggling against a total of forty-three medium-to-large dam projects (proposed, implemented or under construction), as well as hundreds of small dam projects' (p5).

Literary and cultural critics have examined 'addiction' discourses surrounding fossil-fuel dependencies at length, but the ways in which hydro-dependency intersects petro-dependency, or petroculture is intrinsically interlinked with 'hydroculture', have been less examined, particularly in relation to literary representation. I am interested in the cultural particularities of the forms of social organisation and power that shape the history of the transformation of *waters* into water, which cannot be measured by quantitative water management metrics such as the 'water dependency ratio'. In contrast to ratios that reify water as a static commodity that can be contained within state boundaries, I envision 'hydro-dependency' not as 'dependency on a resource', nor as simply denoting the truth that we all bodily depend on water for life, but rather as describing the addictive culturing pertaining to the specific set of socio-ecological relations underlying the regime of 'extreme water' and perpetrating modes of hydro-extraction and distribution that are

fundamentally undemocratic, inequitable and non-renewable. Considering the problem of infrastructural projects such as pipelines that 'lock in' future dependency on fossil-fuel consumption, petro-critic Bob Johnson has recently observed that: 'We are rutted in, what we might call, *cultural path dependencies* as surely as we are in moribund energy networks. So how do we overcome this fossilised inertia?'.⁷ Considering the mega-dam projects that were integral to the 'glamorous hydrological regimes of independence' in many post-colonial nations, Rob Nixon has similarly reflected on how these projects have 'depended' in both physical structure and metaphorical discourse on 'submergence': of 'disposable people and ecosystems, but also on the submerged structures of dependence that lay beneath the flamboyant engineering miracles'.⁸

In this article, I wish to extend Johnson's and Nixon's observations into the ways cultural formations can contribute to the social lock-in of 'submerged' or less-than-visible infrastructures to an examination of the cultural path dependencies and discourses of addiction associated with representations of forms of extreme water and hydro-extraction in contemporary world literature from Canada and South Africa. In doing so, I draw on insights from the energy humanities, blue humanities and infrastructure studies. If 'petroculture' can be broadly defined as encompassing 'the social imaginaries constituted by the knowledge, practices, and discourses resulting from the consumption of and subsequent dependence on oil',⁹ then my use of 'hydroculture' for the purposes of literary analysis seeks to move beyond the hydrological science and water management paradigms captured by Linton's term 'modern water' in order to encompass the broader range of cultural representations and literary symbolic forms corresponding to hydro-dependency. The 'hydrological turn' occasioned by the rise of the blue humanities has led to new forms of hydrocriticism that are attentive to 'examining how narrative form registers the spatial strategies and geopolitics of water enclosure', serving 'to sustain dominant hydrological regimes' but also to 'anticipate alternative epistemologies and imaginaries of water'.¹⁰ As Alexandra Campbell and Michael Paye contend, a variety of hydrocriticism informed by a perspective of the *longue durée* of 'historically determined water relations within the capitalist world-ecology' can help make sense of the contemporary crisis of the neo-liberal hydrological regime by analysing how literary and cultural representations represent and criticise 'those systems of unevenness and inequality that have historically determined the rising, tempestuous, and toxified waters of our current epoch' (*Water enclosure*, p3).

Within a similar world-ecological approach to hydrocriticism that understands world-literary poetics as both mediating and co-constitutive of hydrosocial relations across the capitalist world-ecology, this essay reads contemporary poetry by Canadian writers Rita Wong and Fred Wah and a graphic poem by Rita Wong and Cindy Mochizuki alongside contemporary hydrofictions set in South Africa and Nigeria by Emma Ruby-Sachs, Karen

7. Bob Johnson, *Mineral Rite: An Archaeology of the Fossil Economy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 2019, p139. (Hereafter *Mineral Rite*).

8. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, London, Harvard University Press, 2011, p167.

9. See Karina A. Baptista, 'Petrocultures', *Global South Studies: A Collective Publication with The Global South*, 17 August, 2018, <https://globalsouthstudies.as.virginia.edu/key-concepts/petrocultures>.

10. Alexandra Campbell and Michael Paye, 'Water Enclosure and World-Literature: New Perspectives on Hydro-Power and World-Ecology', *Humanities*, 9, 3, 2020, p3. (Hereafter *Water enclosure*).

Jayes and Isidore Okpewho. The comparison of hydro-poetics and hydro-fiction provides insight into the different capacities of these genres to negotiate the formal challenges to representation presented by the sheer banality or ordinariness of such infrastructures as the pipeline or meter or tap. I will explore how specific infrastructures of riparian freshwater management and hydropower – the pipe grid and the dam – are imagined as producing path-dependence and asymmetric distribution, and the extent which these texts either mobilise or subvert the moralising language of dependency or addiction, in order to offer critiques of asymmetric distribution or to reconceive water in terms of hydrosocial interdependence. I argue that all these texts mediate the contradictions facing the appropriation strategies of ‘cheap water’ and ‘extreme water’, both in terms of the mounting ecological limits to the intensification of the technics of enclosure and extraction, but also by depicting the rising tide of collectively organised water insurgencies and hydro-political resistance to enclosure, and the increasing proliferation of cultural imaginations of autonomous water. At the same time, I would suggest that these texts are riven by a dialectical tension between the depiction of hydro-dependency – often in ways that struggle to escape the well-worn tropes of pathologised addiction – and autonomy, the desire for new forms of futurity rooted in the de-commodification and re-commoning of free-flowing water; the creation of more democratic infrastructures aimed at provision rather than profit, and the re-valuing of water not just as a human right but as good in itself. As Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás write of capitalist exploitation of saline waters, contemporary maritime regimes ‘contain a degree of path dependency which needs to be explained in connection with their past, but the dialectical relationship between capital and labour also means that these regimes are never entirely stable and are always in motion’.¹¹ The same must be argued of the hydrological regime corresponding to fresh water, which is not wholly determined by infrastructures or path dependency, and which contains the immanent potential for political disruption by collective organised resistance, but also by the ‘revolt’ of extra-human nature against technics of enclosure and extraction.

11. Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás, *Capitalism and the Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Making of the Modern World*, London, Verso, 2021, p100.

As such, these texts could be understood as embodying the deepening political unconscious within world-literature of the crisis of the neo-liberal hydrological regime, and are merely a handful of many that could be analysed to explore this burgeoning conscientisation. However, my rationale for selection is strengthened by the particular salience of the representation of and resistance to hydro-dependency and petro-dependency in the Canadian poetry, which emerges from its proximity to ongoing struggles in Canada by coalitions of Indigenous water protectors and environmental activists against both the pipeline development projects intended to lock-in dependency on the extreme energy of tar-sands extraction in Alberta, and against large-scale allegedly ‘clean’ hydro-projects, such as BC Hydro’s Site C Clean Energy Project. These struggles have been articulated through a politics that conjoins

anti-colonial resistance with climate justice and anti-privatisation, highlighting the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism internal to the Northern capitalist core of Canada and their intersection with new forms of resource extraction within the state, and in turn Wong, Wah and Mochizuki find new poetic forms to represent both these struggles and the infrastructures they contextualise.

Furthermore, by deliberately juxtaposing poetry from Canada with fiction from South Africa that represents the neo-colonial imbrication of transnational corporations and Northern state interests in new forms of hydrocolonialism, I seek to evoke the systemic relations of cores and peripheries within the neo-liberal hydrological regime of the capitalist world-ecology, both in the context of privatisation of water for consumption, and of water for hydro-extraction projects benefiting Canadian mining and energy interests, as well as the ways in which these new forms of enclosure and extraction have in turn been met by concerted political resistance of local populations. These novels include Emma Ruby-Sachs's *The Water Man's Daughter's* depiction of hydropolitical insurgency against the pioneering of the neo-liberal water market in South Africa through the privatisation of public water provision in the townships, or the representation of the construction and securitisation of pipeline projects by transnational corporations to extract water from rural hinterlands for industrial production and urban consumption, in Karen Jayes' *For the Mercy of Water*.

I

A typology of hydroculture should differentiate between depictions of infrastructures that produce water as energy versus those that transform water from provision to transportable commodity, 'abstracting' it from its original source. In the production of hydropower, the energy of rivers and oceans is 'captured' and made to 'work' through the technics of hydroelectric dams or tidal energy turbines. In the case of water as *provision* – essential to the hydration of human and non-human species, the irrigation of crops, the distribution of sediments and the cleansing of wastes – the liquid waters of rivers, lakes or aquifers are encased and transported through the extractive technologies of the pump, the pipeline or the tank. As Vandana Shiva writes: 'Free-flowing rivers are free, in the sense that they do not need capital investment, they are not enclosed, and their waters are accessible to all. Water locked in dams and canals are captive waters. They can be privatised, commoditised, bought, sold, and controlled by the powerful'.¹²

I want to begin by considering poetic depictions of hydro-dams, or 'Big Hydro'. Dam projects come in different scales and functions, and there may be a place for smaller-scale, less-intensive forms of hydro-energy that are cooperatively and democratically run and thus responsive to the needs of local communities and ecosystems, in a just socio-energetic transition from petro-dependence to renewables. However, the socio-ecological inequalities

12. Vandana Shiva, 'Resisting Water Privatisation, Building Water Democracy', paper presented at the World Water Forum, Mexico, March 2006, <http://www.globalalternative.org/downloads/shiva-water.pdf>.

13. See Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living*, New York, The Modern Library, 1999, p15.

14. Max Haiven, 'The Dammed of the Earth: Reading the Mega-dam for the Political Unconscious of Globalization', Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis (eds), *Thinking with Water*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013, p215. Emphasis original. (Hereafter *Dammed of the Earth*).

15. Rita Wong and Fred Wah, *beholden: a poem as long as the river*, Vancouver, talonbooks, 2019, p68. (Hereafter *beholden*).

perpetuated by mega-dams and the mass proliferation of hydro-extraction projects, including gravity-flow inequities and the siphoning of rural riparian systems for the production of hydroenergy, have been abundantly chronicled by critics such as Arundhati Roy.¹³ Reading the mega-dam as a key sign of the 'political unconscious of globalisation', Max Haiven uses a clever pun in his title, 'The Dammed of the Earth', that plays on Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* to invite us to consider dams as concretisations that 'harness, produce, materialise, and symbolise' (neo)colonial power relations. This concretisation can be interpreted literally, thinking of the mass concrete structures of mega-dams as what Bob Johnson calls 'congealed energy, or the deep energy of the exosomatic environment', a 'sublimated form of fossil fuels' that can be hard to detect, but which defines the infrastructure of modern life, the hardened surfaces of steel and concrete walls 'manufactured in the furnaces of the world's steel mills [and] cement factories' (*Mineral Rite*, pp150-4). However, Haiven pushes us to consider dams not only as 'real material manifestations of political, economic, and social power' but as 'fundamentally *cultural edifices*' that organise both waters and meanings and relationships.¹⁴ In particular, he argues that: 'Dams force us to attend to the interconnectivity of power, the ways sources of energy are converted into one another: from hydrokinetic to direct-current to alternating-current to thermodynamic; or between cultural, economic, historical, and material forms of power' (*Dammed of the Earth*, p214).

I turn now to a signal example of the poetic figuration of the complex interconnectivity of petro-dependency and hydro-dependency in *beholden: a poem as long as the river* (2018), an experimental image-poem co-written by Canadian poets Rita Wong and Fred Wah. Printed along a map of the entire Columbia River, *beholden* takes the form of twin lines of poetry, Wah's in type, Wong's in handwritten script, that twine and undulate along the curves of the river, spanning 137 pages in print. Wah's line poem is unpunctuated, while Wong's uses commas but rarely any full stops, and both use predominantly present-tense syntax, so that each line unspools without interruption, incarnating the poets' impressions in a fluid stream of consciousness as they travelled the river from source to mouth, and capturing the different nations, languages, and relationships that shape the river's history, the flora and fauna that inhabit or have vanished from its riparian ecosystem, and the infrastructures that colonise its waters. The poem's affect moves fluently between mourning for what is lost – aquatic species decimated by dams that 'wiped out more salmon than any single structure in American history',¹⁵ Indigenous nations dispossessed from flooded lands or living in contaminated watersheds – and joy in forms of everyday life that persist. However, the poem is perpetually punctuated by references to the dams which stop the river's flow, 'intervals of destruction for temporary power or storage that costs more than money can buy' (*beholden*, p23), and which produce industrial noise that drowns out the river's voice: 'high modernity riffing to a muffled humming under water' (p60), 'concrete drone of dam where it doesn't belong' (p68).

A trenchant example occurs where the map is scored with railway tracks, when Wah writes, ‘this quiet water maps diesel along the marshes of locomotion crossing North down the map of the River of Heaven’ (p5). In ‘Afterwords’, Wah describes the experience that inspired the line:

Seeing the diesel train, the tracks going alongside the river because the river has given them this graded bed of travel, those were always in my mind ... When we were out on Lake Windermere and saw the Canadian Pacific coal cars along the tracks, suddenly we heard that incredibly loud noise of the diesel engines disturbing this beautiful marshland. Getting that word diesel was a gift of the occasion ... ‘Oh diesel,’ the implications of power and oil. All of a sudden there’s this large resonance out into the world, of the river, and of course it is a mighty river. It has all kinds of industrial, agricultural, hydropower (*beholden*, p141).

This ‘diesel moment,’ as Wong labels it, encapsulates the intersection of petroculture, dependent on diesel fuel to power the trains that move coal from mines to factories along the riverside tracks, with hydroculture, the production of hydropower that relies on the damming of flow energy, and the exploitation of the river’s work in shaping its bed in order to overlay the infrastructure of the railway tracks.

beholden powerfully extends the ‘poetics of water’ developed throughout Wong’s wider body of work, including the poetry collection *undercurrent* (2015), and the graphic poem *perpetual* (2015) co-created with artist Cindy Mochizuki. Wong’s poetry consistently intertwines motifs of oil and water, instrumentalising the emotive resonances of pathology and addiction to conceive the intersection between fossil-fuel extraction and water contamination. In ‘Fresh Ancient Ground’, the poet contemplates the Alberta tar sands and mourns how ‘miles of living medicine made by rivers over millennia/are unceremoniously eradicated, annihilated, wasted’¹⁶ and describes the saturation of riparian ecosystems by polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs): ‘everything leaking everywhere it wasn’t meant to go ... held captive by toxic water, undrinkable yet thinkable’ (*undercurrent*). This process of terrible permeability and leakage both contradicts the illusion of control posed by water management discourses and accuses the state of ‘eliminating water/from legislation in the federal abdication of responsibility’ in order to develop the infrastructures of petro-dependency.

However, across Wong’s poetic critique of petro-dependency, metaphors of addiction are frequently mobilised to characterise the extractive habits of the petro-state while lamenting the contamination of freshwater and the dependence on forms of extreme water infrastructure. Thus, for example, in ‘too long a sacrifice can make a toxin of the earth’, the Athabasca river is imagined as a ‘monstrous crime scene’, where ‘poison & violence leak’ into the river from open-pit mining of the Alberta tar sands. Contemplating

16. Rita Wong, *undercurrent*, Gibsons, BC, Nightwood Editions, 2015, p17. (Hereafter *undercurrent*).

Edward Burtynsky's photographs of the tar sands, the poet instrumentalises tropes of addictive dependency to imagine herself as 'the hostage of the petro-state' to which the 'necessary remedies/so terribly simple' are to 'kick the oil addiction for love of water' (p26). The poem characterises petroculture through repeated motifs of toxicity and addiction – 'an immature culture pumped... on hydrocarbon hubris' – and contrasts them with depictions of water as ancient medicine: 'where the poison is found, look for the cure nearby' (p27). Counterposing this use of the moralising language of substance dependency to depict dependence on tar-sands extraction and forms of extreme water, such as the 'arrogant' water expenditure of 'swimming pools in the desert' (p24) or the 'imperial delirium' of hydroelectric 'dams big enough to make the planet tremble', the poem juxtaposes an explicit invocation of 'autonomous water' (p27), conjuring the extra-human agency of the river as it flows and shapes the land, giving life to a multiplicity of 'downstream living bodies' (p26).

In *perpetual*, an intermedial hybrid of graphic poem and documentary comic, the addiction narrative is even more starkly deployed in a panel in which Wong's poetic stanzas are bifurcated by Cindy Mochizuki's illustration of four apartment tower blocks looming over a lone car travelling on a black highway. The poem self-reflexively emphasises the poet's own imbrication within the culture of petro-dependency through metaphors of addiction and recovery:

living in the belly of the
bitumen beast
driving and flying,
I am implicated in the oil addiction
that I critique.

my hands are reluctantly dirty, black with oil
and tar, but this is the first step in a journey of recovery
for an addict to move to renewable energies¹⁷

17. Rita Wong and Cindy Mochizuki, *perpetual*, Gibsons, BC, Nightwood editions, 2015, p 57. (Hereafter *perpetual*).

In Mochizuki's art, the asphalt of the highway dissolves into a black spectre with an ambiguously mournful or menacing face, suggesting a cloud of carbon, or oil itself – the bitumen beast that threatens to swallow the page. The intermedial form of the panel visibilises the energy congealed in the urban built environment and the networks of roads which enable petro-privatised automobility, thus positioning the poem's invocation of the addictive culturing and affects that shape individual life stories in relation to the infrastructures that sustain petro-dependence. Elsewhere in *perpetual*, the multi-form of comics is used to, in Mochizuki's words, 'hold together many voices, whether it be of creaturely life, the personal, the documentary' so that they can 'speak in unison through image and text to the preservation of our

waters',¹⁸ shifting between different scales, from microscopic perspectives of tardigrades up to mega-fauna such as whales, and moving between ecosystems and topographies, from the sewage systems of urban environments to the millions-year old rivers as elders.

Nonetheless, the poem on this particular panel, ending with an addict recovering by changing to renewable energies, seems to reinforce the tendency of dependency culture to cast what are actually *manufactured*, socially produced addictions – what Wong herself calls elsewhere 'manufactured discontent' (*undercurrent*, p24) – in terms of individual moral failure or entrepreneurial will, as if oil consumption were a drug and energy transition were a matter of choice for individual consumers. The discourse of substance addiction masks the extent to which the very production of dependency, like the production of socio-economic unevenness, is immanent to fossil capitalism itself. The invocation of renewables as 'cure' is also somewhat contradictory, or at least surprisingly simplistic, when elsewhere in *perpetual* Wong and Mochizuki are careful to underline the hydropolitics and social injustices threatened by certain forms of so-called renewable energy, such as the hydroelectricity provided to Vancouver by the WAC Bennett dam, which 'flooded the traditional territories of the TsekehNay' (*perpetual*, p78), or by the proposed Site C mega-dam in British Columbia, which would 'flood and devastate the Peace River's communities' (p79). As such, metaphors of addiction are always deployed in dialectical tension with the more explicitly political and collectivised rhetoric of *perpetual*'s attempt to conceive a 'watershed moment' that incorporates a new ethical relation of interdependence with water alongside collective action to protect watersheds, advocate for just energy transition, and demand restitution of Indigenous lands (p78).

The potency of the addiction narrative even in such a critical context as Wong's hydropoetics underlines its ideological purchase in public discourse. In *Lifeblood*, Matthew Huber incisively criticises the function of the oil-addiction metaphor in the context of US culture and politics, arguing that it frames 'oil as an uncontrollable thing trapped in the American bloodstream' and '*naturalises* petroleum consumption as an unavoidable aspect of life that cannot be changed through politics of culture'.¹⁹ As such, the addiction discourse is problematic because it 'presupposes a *physicality* that supposedly escapes psychology, culture, and politics' and imagines petro-dependency as a '*purely* material problem composed of the sheer amount of demand' (*Lifeblood*, p xi). Metaphors of recovery rationalise forms of 'technocratic behaviouralism' as the best prescription for material addiction, such as 'market mechanisms' like carbon taxes 'that put a price on ecological destruction' and deploy 'geopolitical discourse[s] of anxiety over dependence upon foreign sources of oil from racialised zones of the Middle East' in order to justify national extractivist projects and imperialist interventions in the name of energy independence (*Lifeblood*, p x). Nation states promote path dependency 'as

18. Cindy Mochizuki, cited in Ray McLaughlin, 'Water's Visual Potency', *The Town Crier*, 3 February 2016, <http://towncrier.puritan-magazine.com/reviews/ray-mclaughlin/>

19. Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom and the Forces of Capital*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013, px. (Hereafter *Lifeblood*).

offering dependable revenue streams' and nationalist myths of unity are deployed to 'naturalise the material dependencies concretised in energy infrastructures' so that 'infrastructure projects are always justified through pseudo-protectionist discourses of energy security or job creation – discourses that are as mobile and liquid as oil in a pipeline'.²⁰

I have focused on several instances of addiction metaphors in Wong's and Wah's poetry that represent the interlinked cultures of hydro-dependency and petro-dependency in order to test the limits of discourses of moralising discourses to capture the social formations and infrastructures through which dependence is produced. However, despite the prevalence of these tropes, the totality of Wong's work resists collapsing its critique into this narrative of individualised moral failure, continually insisting instead on the necessity of revealing the 'expanse of hidden relations disregarded for distraction' (*undercurrent*, p24) that structure the consumption and extraction of water. In an essay co-written with Dorothy Christian, she observes that 'empires and governments do not make water; they only redistribute what already exists in the living world'.²¹ Accordingly, her poems repeatedly cite what she calls 'systemic amnesia' (*undercurrent*, p24) and 'imperial delirium' (p26): the systemic, capitalist relationships underlying the manufacture of water scarcity and hydro-dependency from Canada to China, through the combined and uneven development of water infrastructure, the enclosure of water commons, and the dispossession of Indigenous and marginalised peoples through resource imperialism and hydro piracy.

Indeed, Wong's work foregrounds a critique of capitalism itself – and a desire to imagine a post-capitalist world – as its political horizon. The poet herself is a dedicated activist who has joined the demonstrations of Indigenous water protectors and was recently jailed for 28 days after protesting against the TransMountain pipeline.²² At the same time, her poetics are rooted in feminist and indigenous ethics of reciprocity and respect in relation to water, conjoined with a potent conception of water's own power as an extra-human force. Thus, in *undercurrent*, Wong invokes water as avenging spirit to imagine the eventual destruction of the concretised infrastructures of hydropower: 'We are wet premonition, ferocious spirit waiting for the master's dams to crack,/the inexorable and unrepentant rain, the tidal waves taller than tankers'.²³ Here, Wong's invocation of the inevitability of the cracking dam is reminiscent of the abundance of narratives of dams bursting, exploding or cracking that appear throughout global and postcolonial hydrofictions: whether Isidore Okpewho's depiction of the blowing up of the Kwarafa hydroelectric dam in Nigeria in his novel *Tides* (1993), or Naijaamerican Nnedi Okorafor's imagination of the bombing of the 'Great Chi Wall' damming Lake Michigan in her futuristic short story 'Poison Fish' (2014), or Namwali Serpell's depiction of the ecotage of the failing Kariba Dam on the border of Zimbabwe and Zambia in *The Old Drift* (2019), to name but a few examples.

These spectacular blow-ups in hydrofiction perform a narrative function

20. Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson and Imre Szeman, *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, pp22-3. (Hereafter *Petrocultures*).

21. Dorothy Christian and Rita Wong, 'Untapping Watershed Mind', Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis (eds), *Thinking with Water*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013, p245. (Hereafter *Untapping*).

22. See Charlie Smith, 'Jailed pipeline protester and poet Rita Wong calls for more prison programs for fellow inmates', *The Georgia Straight*, 29 August 2019, <https://www.straight.com/news/1293131/jailed-pipeline-protester-and-poet-rita-wong-calls-more-prison-programs-fellow-inmates>.

23. Wong, *undercurrent*, p53. Emphasis original.

that is bound up with the inherent challenge of incorporating dam infrastructures at the level of plot or content in realist fictions: if the formal difficulty of a dam is that it just sits there, blocking the waters, then destroying it provides a jolt of sensational action to juice along the narrative. But they also perform a conceptual role in circumventing banality: as Michael Rubenstein, Bruce Robbins and Sophia Beal observe: 'Infrastructure is supposed to go unnoticed when it works; destroying it is simply one strategy for making it appear—representing it in a way that can hold our attention and converting it into a proper spectacle'.²⁴ Dam projects, whether 'public works' associated with the nationalist modernisation projects of post-colonial nations in the mid-twentieth-century, or privatised infrastructures reflecting the ever-growing demand of extractivist industries, as in the late neo-liberal era, are often constructed in enclosed, restricted, highly-securitised or militarised spaces, cut off from public view or photography, and difficult to reach for ordinary citizens. They create a physical blockage of once-flowing rivers, but they also create blockages for representation, which the plot device of the exploding or cracking dam is one way of negotiating and removing. Images of dam destruction also play a political function in interrupting the ontology of the present: a way of imagining the dematerialisation of the hydrosocial relations which are crystallised in their concrete structures, so suffused with banality and a sense of inaccessible longevity as to give an impression of what Fredric Jameson has called, in a musing on the demands of realism as a genre, 'a conviction as to the massive weight and persistence of the present'.²⁵ The fictional explosion, however, directly invokes the desire or capacity for deep structural social change, insists that even the seemingly obdurate concretisation of relations of infrastructure-produced path-dependency is prone to crack, decay or the lever of direct action by both political collectivities and ecological forces, that the temporality of the dam, or even the wide hydrological regime of which it is part, is not indeed 'perpetual', but shorter than imagined.

Wong's poetry, by nature of its genre, does not share hydrofiction's formal difficulty of needing to provide spectacles of immediate violence to drive on the narrative action, but it does face the same conceptual and political blockages that the 'damming' of the present represents. However, instead of images of explosions solely instigated by human actions within short temporalities, Wong's poem in *undercurrent* emphasises the power of water itself to sabotage structures over time, invoking the finitude of dams, their short lifetimes, against the longer *durée* of the fluvial lifespan, and the power of rains, floods and tidal waves to escape the limits of human environment-making, to swamp the 'tankers' which enclose both oil and water. Similarly, in *beholden*, she invokes the finitude of hydrocolonial projects they represent in a phrase that alludes to Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, but also imagines a process of collective transformation that is more democratic in its decision-making than the individualised actions of the eco-saboteurs in Okpewho,

24. Michael Rubenstein, Bruce Robbins and Sophia Beal, 'Infrastructuralism: An Introduction', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 61, 4, 2015, p576. (Hereafter *Infrastructuralism*).

25. Fredric Jameson, 'A Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion', Matthew Beaumont (ed.), *Adventures in Realism*. Oxford, Blackwell, 2007, p263.

Okorafor or Serpell, and which considers the needs of both the river and of the people: 'how to heal & respect the river? Which dams must go? Which dams can stay? Without maintenance, things fall apart' (*beholden*, pp73-4). Dams are not represented as timeless monuments, but last only as long as it takes for them to fill with silt, and their concrete to crack and bow. Wong reverses their cultural function as memorials to human ascendancy over 'nature' to emphasise instead the limits to particular infrastructures of human mastery or control of waters – refusing the cultural enclosure of futurity that the dam represents in order to imagine a time without them. Or to put it another way, she invokes the hydropower of the people – the dammed of the earth – in concert with that of the waters to refuse the hydrocolonial power relations concretised in the hydroelectric dam.

Her invocation of the 'ferocious spirit' of water is also redolent of the narrative incorporation of 'water-spirits' from local and Indigenous folkloric traditions as actors at climactic points of flooding or infrastructural destruction in many global hydrofictions. As Thomas Waller observes in his discussion of the role of these extra-human entities in Jorge Amado's *Mar Morto* (1936) and Pepetela's *O Desejo de Kianda* (1995), water-spirits are often figured in texts as a 'force to be reckoned with, inflicting damage and destruction in a most visible way on a society whose environmental depredations so often go unseen or ignored' and their figuration frequently serves to reconceive water 'as a site of extra-human protest and class conflict' that 'contests the reproduction of capital by confronting neoliberalism's extractivist ecology with images of nature-in-revolt' in tandem with organised human struggles.²⁶

In *undercurrent*, Wong's invocation of the 'ferocious spirit' of water occurs not as plot point, but as part of her poetic re-imagination of political subjectivity. The line appears within one of the italicised blocks of prose-like poetry, narrated in the first-person plural, that punctuate *undercurrent* at intervals, appearing as a kind of chorus in between the titled poems. The 'we' of the passage's persona – '*We are wet premonition, ferocious spirit waiting for the master's dams to crack*' – invokes a sense of collective resistance, both in terms of human organisation, and of transindividual interdependence with aquatic cultures, so that the speakers are both the humans '*who cannot be bought, the ones who will not sell out*' and the water itself, '*we are both freshwater & saltwater ... your very breath, the ancestral memory you inhale*' (*undercurrent*, p53). Throughout these interludes, Wong foregrounds the political organisation of human beings in concert with the physical activity and energy of water to resist and transform the infrastructures of containment. In the choral interlude following 'Declaration of Intent', Wong imagines human agency as merging with the biophysical power of water, whether storms – '*Maybe we are the/Thunderstorms that precipitate when too much had been repressed*' – or floods – '*Maybe we are/ flash floods, demoralised workers*' – in order to effect systemic change: '*Maybe we are/ system change as well as climate change. Dripping & spitting, we rise*' (p16). This imagination of Nature's force, exacerbated by climate instability, is neither

26. Thomas Waller, 'The Blue Cultural Fix: Water Spirits and World-Ecology in Jorge Amado's *Mar Morto* and Pepetela's *O Desejo de Kianda*' *Humanities*, 9, 3, 2020, p12.

ecophobic nor apocalyptic. Instead, it suggests the capacity of hydro-poetics to disrupt the culture of extreme water by imagining the crisis of modern water strategies and dam infrastructures as an opportunity for social intervention.

In the next section, I continue my examination of how literature might conceive of hydro-democracy rather than capitalist hydro-dependency by analysing depictions of pipelines in Wong's poetry in conversation with hydrofictions in South Africa. I explore how their representation of neo-colonial water infrastructures provides further insights into the ways in which pipelines concretise relations of unequal power, but also serve as sites of resource struggle against new waves of hydro-colonialism in the peripheries of the capitalist world-ecology.

II

Writing on the visual culture of oil, Graeme Macdonald suggests that: 'As a rule, pipelines are dull. They are neither transparent nor particularly distinctive. Many are buried. Those running above ground are often located in remote and/or private terrain. The lay viewer must guess what liquid(s) runs inside'.²⁷ In the case of oil pipelines, this banality serves an ideological function, to render oil unobtrusive, naturalise its movements and obscure the environmental impacts of its extraction in peripheral sites. Similarly, in their special issue on 'Infrastructuralism', Michael Rubinstein, Bruce Robbins and Sophia Beal assert that infrastructure is 'supposed to be boring ... when it's in fine working order', so that it only seems to 'appear' when it is either destroyed or decayed, or when it transitions from a 'public work' whose 'unsexiness' derives from 'its distance from the glamor of the commodity and its alignment with the commons and the common good' into a privatised structure of control and coercion operating within the sphere of commodity relations (*Infrastructuralism*, p576). Indeed, they credit the emergence of 'infrastructuralism' as a field of interest for humanities scholars to the historical acceleration of water's commodification over the neo-liberal era, and the correspondence in increasing literary representation of the hollowing out and decay of existing public infrastructures after four decades of neo-liberal capitalism and the new forms of infrastructural violence being imposed in the present in the form of privatisation (p576).

In this section, I will focus on depictions of the pipeline that turn on optics of containment and revelation, demonstrating how they emerge from the desire to expose the 'planned violence'²⁸ of water infrastructure and to imagine how excavation of the submerged structures of dependence might lead to new conceptions of collective autonomy. Wong's hydro-poetics and the descriptive devices of the two South African-set-hydrofictions to which I turn next both work to accord water pipelines a textual prominence that resists banality, emphasising their role as an infrastructure of violence, of draining, or dispossession, as well as sites of potential obstruction or occupation, even

27. Graeme Macdonald, 'Containing Oil: the Pipeline in Petroculture' in Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman (eds), *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, p42.

28. Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies (eds), *Planned Violence: Post/Colonial Urban Infrastructure, Literature and Culture*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2018.

when the larger formal tendencies of these two novels often act to recontain political possibility in problematic ways.

In Wong's 'take a stand', from *undercurrent*, the poet walks the streets of Vancouver, listening for the sound of buried creeks, the hidden rush of water beneath manhole covers, noting the smell of sewage wafting up from beneath the concrete. The complex network of the unseen water system is imagined as an 'indifferent pipe grid pipe grind/your teeth pipe miles and miles of pipe underneath our feet' (*undercurrent*, p60), differentiated into sewage and potable water, with the material of the lines themselves constructed from petroleum-derived-plastics: 'one pipe carries drinking water/another carries away your toilet flush/pipe down, pipe plastic, pipe slime, pipe/time' (p60). The phrases pipe grid and pipe time capture the paradoxical imposition of the Cartesian grid on to flowing bodies through the containment infrastructure of the pipeline, fixing water in rationalised space-time. Meanwhile, the imprisonment of buried tributaries beneath the city's concrete surface gestures not only to the rationalisation of urban water but to hydrocolonialism, the appropriation of the waters and territories of Indigenous peoples: 'what's lost not just the streams but the people/who stole them from the salmon who swam them' (p60).

Yet, the poem also gestures to the failure of containment, when 'the hydrant burst chlorinated/water shoots exuberant into sky', asking whether it could be read as a kind of return of the repressed, or an assertion of the agency of water: 'coincidence, haunting, or the stubborn stream's refusal to be/confined?' (p60). As Dorothy Christian and Rita Wong write in 'Untapping Watershed Mind':

The dominant colonial systems we've inherited run on a somewhat predictable logic: capitalist, hierarchical, predatory, exploitive. But underneath them, quietly persisting, are the watersheds and the underground streams, reminding us that another world is possible, and will indeed continue with or without us. The streams might be piped now, but unless they are painstakingly maintained, the pipes will leak and eventually burst. Before the water was piped, it was wild. (*Untapping*, p245).

Donald Worster has memorably characterised water 'as participating in an unending dialectic with human history ... that is, as intertwined in an ongoing spiral of challenge-response-challenge, where neither nature nor humanity ever achieves absolute sovereign authority, but both continue to make and remake each other'.²⁹ In Wong's poem, the hydrant burst breaches the underground occlusion of the pipe network, rematerialising water as a biophysical and historical force that periodically refuses capitalist regimes of enclosure, and emphasising that even the seemingly impermeable urban environment is vulnerable to spills and ruptures, that containment strategies might falter in the *longue durée*.

29. Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the West*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p22.

A similar moment of water's fleeting autonomy, made visible through its release from the submerged grid of pipelines, occurs in the first chapter of Canadian writer Emma Ruby-Sachs' *The Water Man's Daughter* (2011), but here the emphasis is on how the grid is being constructed as a part of a new frontier of water privatisation in South Africa: if Wong's poem looked back to the colonial origins of the network from the vantage of the present, Ruby-Sachs's hybrid water crime/thriller looks to the moment of enclosure itself in the periphery. The novel opens in a black township of Johannesburg, South Africa, where an activist in a women's organisation watches as men working for the ironically titled *Amanzi*, the local subsidiary of a transnational Canadian water company, install the pipe grid for a new for-profit water system that will replace public taps with private metres:

Nomsulwa doodles in the sand at her feet, committing to memory where the pipes attach, at what angle they enter the ground, and how many minutes it takes to dig the ditches they are housed in. She counts the parts – fourteen on this street. Fourteen large steel pipes to facilitate Phiri's new water system. Once the steel is laid the digging begins again ... Periodically, the men use a hose connected to a truck behind them and water the area, persuading the earth to congeal and pack each crevice of the ditch. There are eight layers: dirt, then water, then more dirt, until finally the sand is flat ... The foreman barks an order and the hose abruptly shuts off. There are rivers cascading through the newly laid earth, and, as the men begin to congregate around their trick, children materialise from doorways of the tenant housing complexes nearby and run to the muck. They play in the wet sand, using sticks to create patterns, while the workmen drink water on the break ... [Finally] a new contraption, wide and flat, is pushed across the wet ground so that the design disappears and the dug up stretch matches the even height of the rest of its surface.³⁰

30. Emma Ruby-Sachs, *The Water Man's Daughter*, Toronto, Emblem, 2011, pp8-9. (Hereafter *Water Man's Daughter*).

Here, mapping of the water system has a vital political significance, enabling Nomsulwa to return later that night with a line of volunteers in order to dig up each pipe and render the system unusable, thus blocking the privatisation of the township's water. The passage's careful 'recording' also reflects on the processes through which the violence of enclosure is rendered invisible. In counting each layer of dirt and water that buries the pipes, it reverses the optics of concealment. At the same time, it sets up an opposition between containment and freedom, embodied in the play of the children who react to the sudden abundance of water with an outpouring of creativity, before the hose is shut off, and they are consigned again to scarcity. The imagination of free-running or spilled water – as in Wong's burst hydrant – is not associated with dread or excess (as might be a leaking oil pipeline), but rather with exuberant autonomy. Finally, the emphasis on animate energy in this scene, the 'exhaustion' of the men, 'the way the sweat drips through their shirts

and down their legs' (p8), serves to emphasise the extent to which the water system is a product of social labour, and visibilises the class relations implicit in water management, since the men sweating to construct the pipelines for the transnational company that will profit from their labour are forced into the work as one of the few sources of employment, but are still more economically advantaged than the township residents.

The novel is set in the post-apartheid era, characterised by Michela Marcatelli and Bram Büscher as a period of 'liquid violence' marked by the rapid privatisation of former public resources such as electricity and water through new water-pricing pilot projects overseen by transnational capital, which resulted in the production of 'structural and racialised water inequality in contemporary South Africa'.³¹ However, even as this period has given rise to new forms of water apartheid disproportionately impacting urban black African populations and migrants, and accelerated by climate-change-related warming temperatures and drought, it has also witnessed a surge of grassroots political organisation focused on demanding connection to basic services such as water and sewerage, and articulated through what Z'bu Zikode, a spokesperson for the Abahlali baseMjondolo movement, calls a 'living politics' that 'knows that we have no water but that in fact we all deserve water' (*Infrastructuralism*, p580).

The *Water Man's Daughter* is scathing about the discourses of water conservation which are deployed in contemporary South Africa to justify privatisation in the context of urban drought heightened by global warming, as when a shill for Amanzi argues that forcing the township residents to register for water meters 'helps us regulate their water intake. Also, having them pay teaches them a new level of respect for water conservation' (*Water Man's Daughter*, p139). Nomsulwa's fellow activists are quick to counter the rhetoric of waste and efficiency through which the company seeks to rationalise the commodification of water:

For most families around here, this meter runs their life. They check the box every day. They scramble for pennies to pay the water man ... Before Amanzi took over the water was provided free all year around. The cut-offs came with the private company. I help people distribute the water so that they can survive even when theirs taps have been turned off. (pp150-1).

The new metres are depicted as manufacturing precarity, not security, of water access. Furthermore, the corporate rhetoric of Amanzi makes clear that the project of water infrastructure development is intended to ensure the social lock-in of dependence on privatised water provision: 'This pipe will feed clean water to all of the houses in this neighbourhood. Once it is laid, it will last for generations before repairs must be done. This way the township builds solid infrastructure to assist development' (p140). As such, the novel suggests that the containment technology of the pipeline also functions as a

31. Michela Marcatelli and Bram Büscher, 'Liquid Violence: The Politics of Responsibilisation and Dispossession in South Africa', *Water Alternatives* 12, 2, 2019, p760.

temporal enclosure of the future, which the direct actions and sabotage by the grassroots movement seek to disrupt and block.

What is curious about this novel, however, is the extent to which its initial emphasis on the visibilisation both of the structural violence of water apartheid via the installation of grid and meter and the representation of collective organisation is increasingly displaced by, or exists in tension with, the narrative emphasis on spectacular violence and the protagonist Claire's individual quest to understand the murder of her father, a water company executive. The novel implies in its opening chapters a dedication to the revelation of the slow violence of water dispossession, but the logic of its generic conventions gradually override its political impetus, increasingly focusing less on the capacity of the crime novel for 'social detection' – in this case, of what Hope Johnson, Nigel South and Reece Walters have identified as the surge of 'eco-crime' following water privatisation, leading to corporate water crime and water theft 'in a world of unequal distribution'³² – and more on the plotted sensations of the thriller following the endangered white Canadian protagonist as she delves into the mystery of her father's death.

An equivalent tension between revelation and containment occurs in South African novelist Karen Jayes' *For the Mercy of Water* (2012), although this novel's emphasis is not on the installation of water systems in urban contexts, but rather on the new frontiers of extraction in the rural hinterlands created through the enclosure and piping of water from rural villages into metropolitan centres or to transnational companies for industrial use. As a water company guard explains to the journalist protagonist:

In the years of the drought, when the company started to secure the water, we employed village people to help us. The first pipes and pumps were built by village men and boys. But then, when the work was finished, the company left. The people still had to pay for the water. So the men and boys and some of the women left, to look for work in the cities, so they could pay for the water that they had helped to secure. But the grandmothers stayed behind ... and the youngest girls.³³

If one of the central material functions of water pipelines is to transport water invisibly from the hinterland to sites of metropolitan consumption, hidden from the public eye (*Petrocultures*, pp7-8), Jayes' novel redirects attention to the peripheral site of extraction and enclosure, reversing the unidirectional flow of the commodity to foreground its origin and to explore the fundamental asymmetries produced by technologies of water management that designate some lands as 'deserted' or 'desert' space in order to justify further draining their water to export it to more productive spaces. The zoning of rural sites for hydrological extraction fragments the web of relations between human and extra-human nature that constitutes a sense of lived place, as John Berger powerfully describes:

32. Hope Johnson, Nigel South and Reece Walters, 'Eco-crime and Water', *Greening Criminology in the 21st Century*, Mathew Hall et. al. (eds), London, Routledge, 2016, p41.

33. Karen Jayes, *For the Mercy of Water*, London, Penguin, 2012, Kindle edition. (Hereafter, *For the Mercy*).

Extensive areas, which were once rural places, are being turned into zones ... The initial dismembering ... always comes from elsewhere and from corporate interests pursuing their appetite for ever more accumulation ... People in such zones lose all sense of residence ... Each year of such accumulation prolongs the Nowhere in time and space.³⁴

34. John Berger, *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance*, New York, Pantheon, 2007, pp122-3.

In Jayes' novel, the enclosure of water takes place in rural villages in an arid climate, where villagers previously had no access to any water infrastructure and relied upon traditional methods of rainfall collection or labour-intensive water-carrying from local rivers and cave aquifers, whose levels fluctuate throughout the year. The installation of the new water infrastructure is rationalised by the transnational company to which the state has granted licences as necessary due to a prolonged drought caused by decreased rainfall and warming temperatures, but the advent of pipelines does not 'secure' the villagers' own access to water for drinking and farming, but rather removes the grounds of their own subsistence, prompting de-ruralisation and exacerbating migration to the already water-stressed urban centres. The majority of the pipes carry water away from the region to the cities, a 'water grab' that intensifies desertification and drought in the rural regions, and transforms the villagers' autonomous, dynamic relation to the variable levels of water in their environment to one of dependence on corporate infrastructure.

While *For the Mercy of Water's* setting is deliberately unnamed and cultural details are abstracted, pitched at a more allegorical level in contrast to the specificity of *Water Man's Daughter's* local grounding in a particular township of Johannesburg, it can also be read as an attempt to subvert apocalyptic discourses like 'Day Zero' – the alleged day on which water will 'run out', according to South African newspapers – which have been used to justify securitisation in water-stressed countries.³⁵ In the novel, the securitisation following the installation of pipelines is explicitly portrayed as leading to not only slow violence – the acceleration of desertification as the rivers and aquifer's waters are drained and piped away, and the disruption of the villagers' cultural practices – but also intensified forms of gender violence and militarisation. The pipes become a site of resource insurgency against hydrocolonialism, primarily led by the grandmothers and women who have stayed behind:

'They dig with the spades and hoes they used for farming,' [the guard] said. 'They tamper with the pipes, and they reroute sections. When we check the meters, we know they've been there. But when they started, some time ago, we didn't know where the water was going. They laid the new pipes under the ground and covered them. Then they collected the water at secret points, underground' (*For the Mercy*).

Here, the optics of 'concealment' are once again transformed, in this instance

35. Naomi Meyer and Karen Jayes, 'Water crisis: a country at war', Litnet, 15 February 2018, <https://www.litnet.co.za/water-crisis-a-country-at-war/>

through the collective political activity of the women, so that 'underground' becomes laden with the resonance of resistance, rather than the banal efficiency of the operations of the extraction cycle 'buried' from public view. The women seize control of the infrastructure, reconfiguring the physical pipelines to their own needs, but also appropriating the ideological strategy of containment to hide their own labour, while drawing on their alternative knowledge of the watershed – since they *do* 'know where the water was going' (*For the Mercy*) – to contest the rationalised water management of the company.

However, this contestation is met by an escalation of physical violence to protect the company's fixed capital investments, targeting the bodies of women and young girls through sexual assaults, beatings and femicides, instrumentalising misogyny as a tool to not only stop the occupation of the pipelines, but crush the spirit of resistance: 'The extermination of the will of the grandmothers was written into company policy long ago, the will to collect water against the company rules, the will to fight' (*For the Mercy*). As the novel progresses, the company becomes ever more militarised in its 'protection' of the pipelines, actively pursuing armed conflict as a method of 'clearing' other villages for future water grabs, while locating the caches of 'hidden water' and using them to secure even greater profits. In response, the women elders develop both new forms of feminist care – informal schooling for young girls, support for those traumatised by assault – and alternative technics to collect water outside of the infrastructures of its privatisation, culminating in 'the dew dish':

'[A] grandmother from this valley invented the dew dish ... The dew dish is made of the wood from the desert trees ... It is carved in a perfect circle ... The grandmothers put it out at night to catch the dew that falls and the wood ... It draws this water to the centre ... The water from these dishes ... is highly prized. Those who drink it, they can see things ... They dream about where the water lies ... underground,' he said ... 'It is a gift from the clouds'. (*For the Mercy*)

The dew dish functions in the text not just as a tool which enables the resistance at the heart of the plot, but as a symbolic locus for the articulation of an alternative relation to water that counters the containment and abstraction represented by the pipeline. It is circular, instead of linear, intended to collect minimal waters in a set location, without producing a rift in the hydrosocial cycle; it draws waters to its centre, rather than carrying water away in one direction and draining the local ecosystem; it is low-scale and non-invasive, its manufacture neither energy-intensive nor dependent on petroleum-derived plastics and industrial production; it is handcrafted from wood from trees which have evolved to survive in situations of water variability, like the women themselves. At the same time, the mystical dreams born of drinking the collected dew invoke a different knowledge to water, as 'gift' and vision

rather than commodity, and implies the possibility of ‘seeing’ an alternative future, unenclosed by dependence, thus breaking the social lock-in of the pipeline infrastructure.

As such, in the passages I have cited, the novel foregrounds the pipeline not only as a technology of violence, but rather as something which can be obstructed, sabotaged, diverted or occupied, not just obscured. Its infrastructural imaginary does not stop at the mere obstruction of existing or proposed infrastructures, but gestures to the necessity to think beyond the pipeline to other modes of communal organisation and relation to water, founded in positive interdependence and attuned to the variable water needs of different ecosystems: to conceive of new forms of water habitus, rather than hydro-dependency on ‘secured’ water.

This is despite the fact, as Hannah Boast has argued, that the novel concludes somewhat unsatisfactorily, with a quasi-spiritual eulogy to the ethical symbolism of water and its association with ‘natural renewal’ in tropes rather too reminiscent of an ‘idealistic vision of a post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission renewal of South Africa’:³⁶

for the mercy of water the life is still here ... And because of this ... I felt safe. For the beauty in each piece of the earth was so close, so close ... and it moved with a knowing that crushed to dust any human act’ (*For the Mercy*).

This closing soliloquy, focalising the personal epiphany of the protagonist after she has restored an orphaned child to the village from which she had originally been dispossessed by the Company, seems to displace the earlier emphasis on the collective agency of the women to resist the violence of dispossession and enclosure through a politics of life in favour of a more quiescent, apolitical desire to dwell and heal whilst waiting for the external nature of the hydrological cycle to repair itself of its own accord, a vision that is Romantic or pastoral rather than inflected with a nuanced view of the co-production of environments through human labour and extra-human activity. The final emphasis of the narration is on the solitary ‘I’ of the narrator’s ego, imagined as distinct from external nature, as opposed to the collective ‘we’ of Wong’s ferocious spirit of resistance, within the more malleable form of Wong’s hydro-poetics – whose poetic fluidity is liberated from the demands of plot and character resolution, and whose form experiments with visualisation and embodiment through its own visual layout, finding new ways to circumvent the conceptual ‘blockages’ of infrastructural representation.

The dialectical tension between visibilisation and containment which I have traced in the two hydrofictions in this section can be seen at the level of form and the tendency towards plots that conclude in ideological recontainments of the political prospects intimated earlier in the narratives, and can be

36. Hannah Boast, ‘The Water Wars Novel’, *Humanities* 9, 3, 2020, p12.

understood, I have suggested, as embodying the political unconscious of the crisis of the neo-liberal hydrological regime. On the one hand, this regime shows all the signs of 'cracking', like the dams on which it relies, its techniques of appropriation increasingly confronted by the limits of human political organisation and class struggle on the life-making terrain of social reproduction, and by the increasing resistance of biophysical forces to enclosure and extraction in an age of climate volatility. But on the other, the regime endures, driving forward newer and intensified forms of extraction and appropriation, concretised in infrastructures that seek to lock-in path dependence and further congealed in cultural productions that communicate myths of the inevitability of addiction to existing regimes of energy and water. In hydro-poetry and hydro-fiction both, these hydrosocial contradictions are mediated in the play of opposing ideas of dependency and autonomy, so that even those texts whose conclusions or generic conventions enact formal compromises are nonetheless redolent with associations of water's autonomy and power and saturated with intimations of not only possibilities for anti-systemic resistance in the present, but also futurities organised around alternative conceptions of hydro-democracy and equitable distribution.

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