

THINKING WITH WATER: AN AQUEOUS IMAGINARY AND AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF UNKNOWABILITY

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Today I am going to talk about water, knowledge and radical alterity. But before I begin, I, too, want to say a few words of thanks. To Cecilia Åsberg and Magdalena Görska, for their organizational efforts, and for their interest in my work, and to all of you for coming to listen. I also want to thank the co-authors of my paper, even and especially those who don't know about our collaboration. For example: a thermal hotspring in Iceland, a puddle, a ferry boat, my childhood swimming pool, and an irrational fear of sharks.¹ Also: Cecilia Chen and Janine MacLeod, who are the other two-parts of the three-headed hydra that has shepherded this body of work called ‘thinking with water’;² Jen Spiegel, whose paper on water contamination in Bhopal inspired me to think about Gayatri Spivak and planetarity in new ways;³ Stacy Alaimo's work in *Bodily Natures* that got me thinking about being materially invested by something that seeps beyond the limits of our knowledge;⁴ Lee Maracle and the other indigenous activist women who gathered in March 2012 in the Coast Salish territories also known as Vancouver and reminded me that in many Native languages, there is no word for ‘knowledge’;⁵ Rita Wong for noting that “water has a syntax I am still trying to learn.”⁶ This is a short and inadequate list, but already this is a too-long introduction. I know, however, that it is also an important one, in a context of a conversation on entanglements, but happening in a room in a building in an

¹ See Neimanis, “On Collaboration (for Barbara Godard)” forthcoming in NORA (2012).

² See thinkingwithwater.net and forthcoming publication from McGill-Queen's University Press (2013), *Thinking with Water* (eds. C. Chen, J. MacLeod and A. Neimanis). On the question of unknowability, I am also particularly inspired by Chen's work on the unintelligibility of waters, otherwise known as their “babble” (“Mapping Waters,” forthcoming in *Thinking with Water*.)

³ See Spiegel, “Subterranean Flows: Water Contamination and the Politics of Visibility after the Bhopal Disaster.”

⁴ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*.

⁵ See www.downstream.ecuad.ca

⁶ See D. Christian and R. Wong, “Watershed Mind,” forthcoming in *Thinking with Water* (eds. C. Chen, J. MacLeod and A. Neimanis)

institution in a system that encourages us to treat our ideas as singly authored property to which we must lay claim.

PART I: THINKING WITH WATER (AN AQUEOUS IMAGINARY)

I would like to begin by laying out a simple proposition:

“The way we live in the world is bound to what we imagine the world to be” (Tiitsman, 150).

How we *treat* the world is bound to how we *think* the world. And theory—ways, patterns and frameworks of and for thinking—is a kind of imagination. Through its imaginative choreography of ideas, theory organizes the world, bringing some parts of that world into focus, leaving other parts of it in relief. Theory involves the creative audacity to see connections and contradictions where others might see none. Theory, then, isn’t just a way of seeing the world; it tells us what’s important, what to value, what’s disposable, or insignificant. Without a theory of sorts, neither ethics nor politics would be possible.

The way we live in the world is bound to what we imagine the world to be.

My work as a writer and researcher in the past six years has been largely focused on one question: how might paying attention to water – really paying attention to it; how it moves, what it does, what it is threatened by, how it organizes itself and other bodies—how might this kind of ‘thinking with water’ open up a different sort of imaginative space, perhaps interrupting some of the foundational concepts and beliefs in dominant Western systems of thought that I have inherited?

In other words, I have been wondering: if I “water” my concepts—if I invite water to be a collaborator or an interlocutor in how I imagine, or theorize, the world—might I also treat water better? Might the concepts and theories I develop also help bring water out of the mute, passive, background to which it is too often relegated? For it is no secret that we haven’t been paying the right kind of attention to water lately. Water issues have become the most ecologically fraught question of the twentieth first century. It serves as the seemingly silent receptacle of the toxins we pass into the sewage system, the plastics we throw into our oceans. And just as we imagine that it will clean up all of our messes, we also somehow imagine it as quantitatively inexhaustible, pumping it through deserts, hauling it up out of ancient aquifers, bottling it in little plastic disposable cylinders, using three barrels of fresh water to extract one barrel of oil. According to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, water use has been growing at more than twice the rate of population increase in the last century. Intimately linked to climate change, and ineluctably affected by petropolitics and our dependency on fossil fuel, water seems to be at the short end of all of our planetary sticks.

Clearly, then, this work – my “thinking with water” – is guided by a sense of environmental concern and ecological urgency. But for me, this is also a resolutely feminist inquiry – not only because the harm done to water is also harm done to human, sexually different bodies, who

bear this harm in gender-disaggregated ways, but also because thinking with water is also thinking about power and subordination, master models, binary oppositions, nature and culture – about who or what gets listened to, and who or what is relegated to this passive backdrop – and these are, every one of them, deeply feminist questions.⁷

Moreover, to address these hierarchies - *female/body/nature/black/indigenous/spiritual* etc, vs *male/mind/culture/white/colonizer/rational*, etc - we know, can not be a simple question of reversing them. It does us no good at all to say: “nature/female/spirit etc, isn’t bad, it’s good, it should be celebrated” —while keeping the sticky associations themselves in tact. Nor does it do us any good to say: “hey, wait, women and indigenous people are rational too” – for we know this only keeps the hierarchy intact, and always begs the question of who or what is still left outside of the valued position, as the definition of its limit. In both cases the conceptual apparatus itself is left in place. This is hardly a sustainable solution. Instead, we need to undercut this system altogether.

And undercutting this system is again, to call on the sort of audacious imaginative theoretical work I have already invoked. What we need, in the words of Karen Barad, “is a robust account of the materialization of *all* bodies—‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’”—and the material-discursive practices by which their differential constitutions are marked (Barad, *Meeting* 66). In short, thinking with water is a feminist question because if I am a feminist, opposed to injustice on the basis of a faulty binary and hierarchized system of thought, then looking at what we do to “nature” *and* the conceptual apparatuses that sanction these doings, must also matter to me.

And so, moving in this direction, today I want to talk about knowledge, and what water can teach me about both the denigration of the natural, and the incitement to know.

PART II: HYDRO LOGICS

My own work in thinking with water began by thinking through the question of embodiment. For, as soon as we consider, from a critical materialist perspective, that our bodies are mostly water, continuously transformed through water, and continuously giving back to other bodies of water, for better or worse (drinking, urinating, sweating, transfusing, ejaculating, siphoning, breastfeeding, sponging, weeping) it becomes quite clear that human bodies are hardly separate from the myriad other watery bodies - freshwater mussel, water filtration plant, seagrass, sunflower, raincloud, grandmother - with which we coexist, now and across other times as well.⁸

⁷ For further discussions of these debates, see Alaimo *Undomesticated Ground*, Sandilands *The Good-Natured Feminist*, Val Plumwood *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant *Ecology*, Greta Gaard *Women, Water and Energy*, among others.

⁸ See Neimanis, “We are all Bodies of Water.”

And as I began to tease apart the details of these imbrications and relations, it became clear that the ways and means through which we are connected are not uniform. All of these bodies of water- us included- exist according to various logics of water – what we might call our planetary *hydro-logics*. Such logics are the movements and modes of existence according to which bodies of water make themselves intelligible, and the patterns of existence according to which certain bodies come to *affect* other bodies. Bodies transform, and transform each other, through these different hydro-logics.

These hydro-logics seep through every aspect of our material existence. We experience these movements viscerally, in the superabundance, acute paucity, or mere banality of the rain, sleet and snow that dominate our daily weather reports. In everyday language, these transformations are described as “the” hydrological cycle, but this cycle is in fact a complex and multivalent choreography of qualities and modalities. Elsewhere,⁹ I have begun to make a provisionally schematized inventory (what Eve Sedgwick might have described as a sort of “nonce taxonomy”¹⁰) of these movements, even as I realize that water will always ultimately escape such taxonomic efforts. But, as with all nonce taxonomies, such categorizations give us tools for explaining our everyday lives, and their relation to broader political and ethical questions.

Among the various modalities of water I include:

1. *Gestationality*. Water’s gestational logic refers to a sort of watery posthumanist sexuality, a giving-milieu for the proliferation of life in myriad ways which are not limited to heteronormative reprosexuality. Gestationality is thus water’s capacity to bathe plural life into being, in a partial dissolving of itself into new iterations and manifestations. While this logic challenges the view of water as instrumentalized “passive backdrop,” it also (as Mielle Chandler and I explore elsewhere)¹¹ importantly challenges the binary structure of agency versus inertia, or the active versus the passive, to which much if not most new materialist thinking, in its emphasis on agency, acting and doing, still subscribes.
2. *Dissolution* is water’s capacity to wash away life and recycle its matter(s). Sometimes erroneously referred to as a “universal solvent,” water still can affect many other bodies by dissolving them altogether. In the language of meteorology, this also refers to tsunami, flood and hurricane. Water’s logics are neither benign nor benevolent towards all bodies.

⁹ See Neimanis, “Feminist Subjectivity, Watered” (in *Feminist Review*, forthcoming).

¹⁰ Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses the concept of ‘nonce taxonomies’ to describe the makeshift ways in which we categorize things in order to make sense of our world. (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 1990).

¹¹ See Chandler and Neimanis, “Water and Gestationality: What Flows Beneath Ethics,” in *Thinking with Water* (MQUP, forthcoming 2013).

3. *Communication* refers to a logic whereby water is medium and messenger. As the bearer of both good and bad news, of communications both planned and unplanned (as ocean current carrying islands of plastic; as flooded lands bearing refugees and migrants; as acid rain bearing toxic industrial run-off; in the intercorporeal circulations within our bodies, as well as those that circulate, intracorporeally, among and with other bodies into which we pee or out of which we drink), water articulates certain bodies with others.
4. *Differentiation* is a tricky logic. It calls on us to recall that watery bodies do not all flow into one amorphous puddle. Each body takes up a new instantiation, in always new forms, discerned by various thresholds and membranes that function in accordance with water's various speeds and slownesses.¹² Bodies are only intelligible because they are differentiated, and watery bodies, no less. Attending to water's logic of differentiation reminds us to temper the romantic overtones of water's relational logic. Just as *dissolution* is a necessary counter—or simply the other side of the coin—to *gestationality*—, *differentiation* balances water's capacity for confluence.
5. *Archive* refers to water's material capacity for storage and memory. Not only are flotsam, chemicals, bodies, detritus, sunken treasure and other chronicles of our pasts harboured in the ocean's depths; water, as various oral traditions show, is a literal container of story and history that serve collective cultural remembrances.¹³
6. Finally, *unknowability*, somewhat ironically, refers to water's capacity to elude our efforts to contain it with any apparatus of knowledge. Unknowability is the logic of refusal. Or, put otherwise: despite all of our dam-building, mega-irrigation schemes, and cloud seeding efforts, water will always elude our total control, and our efforts to fully "know" it.

In these multiple translations and transformations, a six-fold schematization of water's complex hydro-logics thus emerges: gestation, dissolution, communication, differentiation, archive, unknowability. In one sense, these descriptions just restate the truths of science, and the banal facticity of water's existence. The importance of water for the maintenance and proliferation of life is not news to any contemporary biologist or ecologist, just as the fact that mammals pee, that water washes, that lakes evaporate, that pollution travels, or that the ocean is very, very deep, is no great revelation. But if we recall that how we act in the world depends on how we imagine it, I wonder: how can paying attention to the way in which water evidences these processes in its matter – in its matter that is also me, or at least about 70% of me – give me some new imaginative resources for rethinking both water, and the questions to which it asks me to attend (sexuality, death, communication, difference, story, knowledge)? And how might this encourage me to change my practice?

¹² See Neimanis, "Water, Human Rights and the Hydrocommons," in TOPIA: Journal of Canadian Cultural Studies.

¹³ See Jody Berland, "Walkerton: The Matter of Memory" ; Janine MacLeod, "Water, Memory and the Material Imagination"; and Peter van Wyck "Footbridge at Atwater."

In the second part of this talk, then, I want to spend some more time reflecting on just one of these modalities – that is, water’s unknowability.

PART III: WATER AND THE INCITEMENT TO KNOW

What does it mean to want knowledge? What can water teach me about the goal of knowledge? About the relationship between the knower and what she knows? What is the obligation of the knower to what she knows? Is everything meant to be known? What do we need to know, urgently, and what knowledge is better left unknown?

I came to look at the question of knowledge because I, like many of us here, work in a university – in a knowledge machine. I work in a place where I am paid to know – to create knowledge and impart it to my students. I get ranked on how much knowledge I make. It is a system that, for the most part, prefers quantity of “knowledge” to quality. And I am constantly fed the message that knowledge is always, unquestionably, a good thing. And these questions are particularly urgent for me because if academia is sort of a knowledge machine, or a knowledge beast, then right now I work in the belly of the beast: I work at London School of Economic and Political Science in the UK, a “world-class” institution that has graduated global leaders and Nobel laureates, but whose pockets these days are almost exclusively lined by the benevolence of big business. The campus bookstore sells a t-shirt that students proudly wear to declare their academic allegiance: £\$€ (LSE). In other words, I work in a place where knowledge is commodified, and where knowledge is seen as a means to an end, which is profit. Here, *more* knowledge is always *better*. Leave no stone unturned.

So it is on this backdrop that I began thinking about the question of what water might teach me about knowledge, and what it means to know something. Could water teach me to know not necessarily more, but *better*?

And when I think knowledge with water, the feminist and anti-colonial preoccupations with power and responsibility that motivate my thinking with water again swim to the surface – urgent questions circulating where knowledge and water collide. For, it also seems crucially important to know more about what we are doing to water, and to ourselves, as bodies of water. We *do* need more knowledge about the causes and effects of the pacific garbage patches, of the catastrophic damage being done by the Tar Sands in Northern Canada or the oil fields in the Niger Delta, about the levels of poison in our drinking water, about the levels of water in our aquifers that were draining far too rapidly. And again, these are ecological questions, but they are also feminist, and anti-colonial. This is because the harm that we do to water is never equally distributed across human bodies. The flows of biomatter also chart the flows of global power.

But at the same time I started reading about things like the Census of Marine Life that promised to document every single species of life in the ocean; about exploratory vessels being sent into

the depths to invade these fragile ecosystems. And I heard more and more so-called knowledge that was supposed to convince me that climate change was a hoax, or that mega-dams were “necessary” and “beneficial” - despite the documented loss of human life and livelihood, alongside the massive ecological upheaval, that such dams have brought in the Three Gorges region of China, the Narmada Valley in India, or the James Bay region of Northern Quebec in Canada.

The relationship between knowledge and water didn’t seem so simple. Understanding this relationship seemed also a question of distinguishing kinds of knowledge – knowledge that colonizes, knowledge that generates necessary anger and action, knowledge that heals. Knowledge that builds communities, or knowledge that fractures them. Knowledge that responds, or knowledge that masters.¹⁴

In asking these questions – here, today – I engage in a thought experiment of sorts. I want to bring together critical materialist¹⁵ understandings of water as a matter with distinct physical properties, with Gayatri Spivak’s thinking on subalternity and her concept of “planetarity.” As with all thought experiments, they don’t always work out exactly right, and as always, they are fraught with pitfalls and dangers – bad translations, appropriations, unfelicitous associations, to name but a few.¹⁶ But even if these theories or ways of thinking might not fit together perfectly, I am interested in seeing what they illuminate about each other, and specifically, how feminist critical materialism might work with feminist thinking on coloniality – and how both, together, might inform an epistemological project. If critical materialism is going to be a viable feminist practice, for me it also has to meaningfully engage with these questions of anti-coloniality and global justice.

To move towards this, I want to return to water’s logic of unknowability, and explore in more depth how this logic is manifest in water’s material properties.

In the first place, water’s unknowability is a geographical question, connected to the question of what is liveable. The different bodies engendered by water (human, sunflower, toad, jellyfish) also display different capacities to live *with* water, and to live *in* water. Bodies are oriented in and towards water in species-specific ways; humans, it follows, are situated in relation to water in a very human-specific way.¹⁷ For example, while our kinship with air-

¹⁴ The relationship between epistemology and the quest for mastery, and ecological issues, is foregrounded in Lorraine Code’s *Ecological Thinking* – a project that is deeply resonant with my own thinking in this paper.

¹⁵ For various reasons, I prefer this terminology to that of ‘new materialism.’ In referencing this body of work, I invoke thinkers such as Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, Vicky Kirby, Iris van der Tuin, and Elizabeth A. Wilson – although this list makes no pretensions to comprehensiveness, nor agreement amongst these thinkers on preferred terminology.

¹⁶ Here, my caution is particularly inspired by Gayatri Spivak’s work. See, for example, “The Politics of Translation.”

breathing whales is well-documented and routinely mythologized, we eventually have to let go of the dorsal fin: the whale will always outswim us, diving to depths our own bodies could not fathom. Even the most sophisticated deepwater submersibles and assisted breathing apparatuses will only ever take us so far, for so long—just as a fish out of water suffocates, and dies, we too can only be fully immersed in water as a temporary gesture. Perhaps it is telling that the depths of the oceans remain less charted than the surface of the moon (the ‘final frontier’ was less final than we thought). The seas are teeming with events that we will only ever glimpse. Water serves as a *limit* for all living bodies that determines which milieus are habitable, withstand-able, and thus knowable. Water remains one step ahead of, and beyond, the limits of any body (regardless of their watery orientation). In this way (and in resonance with other feminist epistemological projects of ‘situated knowledges’¹⁸), the grammar of water necessarily rejects total knowledge by any body. Because each body has a different relation to water *as a matter of survival*, no body can do the God Trick. No body can ever fully know water. For me, this underlines questions of incursion, hubris, and humility, as a necessary consideration for any epistemology.

This unknowability is also connected to water’s gestational capacity – that is, the fact that water is always bathing new life into existence, facilitating plurality. Water is always proliferating something new. But the point here is also that this plurality, and the bodies and forms that water takes up are always part of a future still to come, and as of yet unknown. Water returns, and repeats—but always different. Despite all of the harm we do to it, in one sense water *is* inexhaustible—the things that it does and the bodies it proliferates cannot ultimately be predicted. Again, water is one step ahead of any body. Water evidences the impossibility of complete knowledge; as Karen Barad would say, it reminds us that the world is “not a secret to be revealed” by us humans (Barad, “Living” 174). It is rather in a constant process of intra-active emergence. Ultimately, it defies epistemological capture and containment – despite our best efforts.

So thinking with water, I suggest, might help me imagine, and cultivate, a much-needed *epistemology of unknowability*. Such an epistemology would be put into necessary conversation with dominant Western paradigms of knowledge. It would be, at its most basic, an understanding of and respect for what human beings do not and cannot know, as a necessary counter to our contemporary technocapitalized drive toward mastery, *to know it all*.

To explore this proposition further, I draw on the work of postcolonial feminist critic Gayatri Spivak to suggest that close attention to water’s own grammar of unknowability might teach us something about this incitement *to know*.

¹⁷ I am thinking here of Sara Ahmed’s excellent discussion of orientations in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), rehearsed as well in her essay “Orientations Matter” (*New Materialisms*, eds. Coole and Frost, 2010).

¹⁸ See, for example, Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges.”

PART IV: “THE MOVING WEAVE OF THE WATER”: UNKNOWABILITY & PLANETARITY

One of Spivak’s most recognizable contributions to (post)colonial theory and contemporary critical theory more broadly is her questioning of whether or not the “subaltern can speak.” In her classic essay whose title asks this very question,¹⁹ Spivak suggests that “giving voice” to subaltern subjects—the most marginal of the marginalized, in a (post)colonial context—is impossible, because the conditions of being heard have already been set by those who construct the dominating discourse. Here, I want to diffract my questions about unknowability and water through Spivak’s thinking about the unheard voices of the subaltern, and specifically, her separate but related discussion in an essay on ‘Responsibility,’ published in the late 1990s, that looks at the Flood Action Plan in Bangladesh.

This Flood Action Plan (FAP) was part of a major development joint initiative in the early 1990s, and involved a major rerouting of deltaic watercourses in Bangladesh in an effort to mitigate flood hazards. This Flood Action Plan (FAP) became the subject of major contestation and discussion within communities in Bangladesh, government authorities, and the international development and donor apparatuses.²⁰ Of interest to Spivak is a specific conference, organized by the Green Party and held at the European Parliament in 1993, where “project opponents [had] the opportunity to present their case directly to many of the governments funding the scheme” (quoted in Spivak, 46). The FAP and associated processes come under attack by Spivak because of the silencing of the subaltern voices that attempted to speak out against them. In the language of the World Bank and global development, the subaltern’s concerns for themselves and the land-water could not be heard.

In Spivak’s critique, the subaltern certainly refers to specific human voices—“the fisher and the grass-roots peasant” (55) whose basis of livelihood is to be destroyed by the FAP. It also refers to as Sattar Khan, an aging leader of the rural Bangladeshi peasant movement, “staged as a slice of the authentic” (55). But Sattar Khan’s “silence” or his “inability to be heard” bears some further contemplation. As Spivak tells us, this “staging of a slice of the authentic” went slightly awry. Sattar Khan did not follow protocol. He did not “stick to his time allotment.” He did not speak in the technocratic language of those in charge. In fact, he did not speak English at all—and no one had thought to have a translator. After a bumbling out-of-sync and ad-hoc translation broke down as Khan began (under pressure to “keep time”) to read his speech at breakneck speed, Spivak notes that “‘European’ discipline” too, “[broke] down” (61).

This anecdote illustrates precisely what I take to be the key point of Spivak’s question, can the subaltern speak. On my reading, Khan’s speech clearly demonstrates how the question of whether or not “the subaltern can speak” is more precisely about the ability to listen. For of course Khan is speaking—at breakneck speed, and at considerable length, we are told! The subaltern is speaking all the time. To frame this question from the perspective of “listening”

¹⁹ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

²⁰ See Farhana Sultana, “Fluid Lives” and “Water, Culture and Gender.”

(and translation) is thus to interrupt the power dynamics that many readers of Spivak attribute (in my view, mistakenly) to her discussion of the subaltern—whereby speech would be the index of power, and silence the sign of oppression or marginality. On such a view, voice belongs to the empowered – and as such must be the goal of the disempowered. But being heard – speaking speech – is not the only way to interrupt a system of power and control. Close attention to the “breaking down” of “‘European’ discipline” noted by Spivak begins to reveal alternatives to this view of power/speech. Here, Sattar Khan’s words, although remaining unintelligible to those in the room, at the same time serve as a silent (but still speaking) interruption into the paradigm of knowing-speaking that the FAP conference attempts to instate. Attention to the silence-speech (silence that nonetheless makes noise; speech that is not heard) shows up a different sort of relationship to power. It is this different configuration of power around questions of speech and silence that I propose can lead me towards thinking a relationship to knowledge that provides an alternative to the one presumed both by the power dynamics of the FAP conference, and contemporary Western epistemologies more generally.

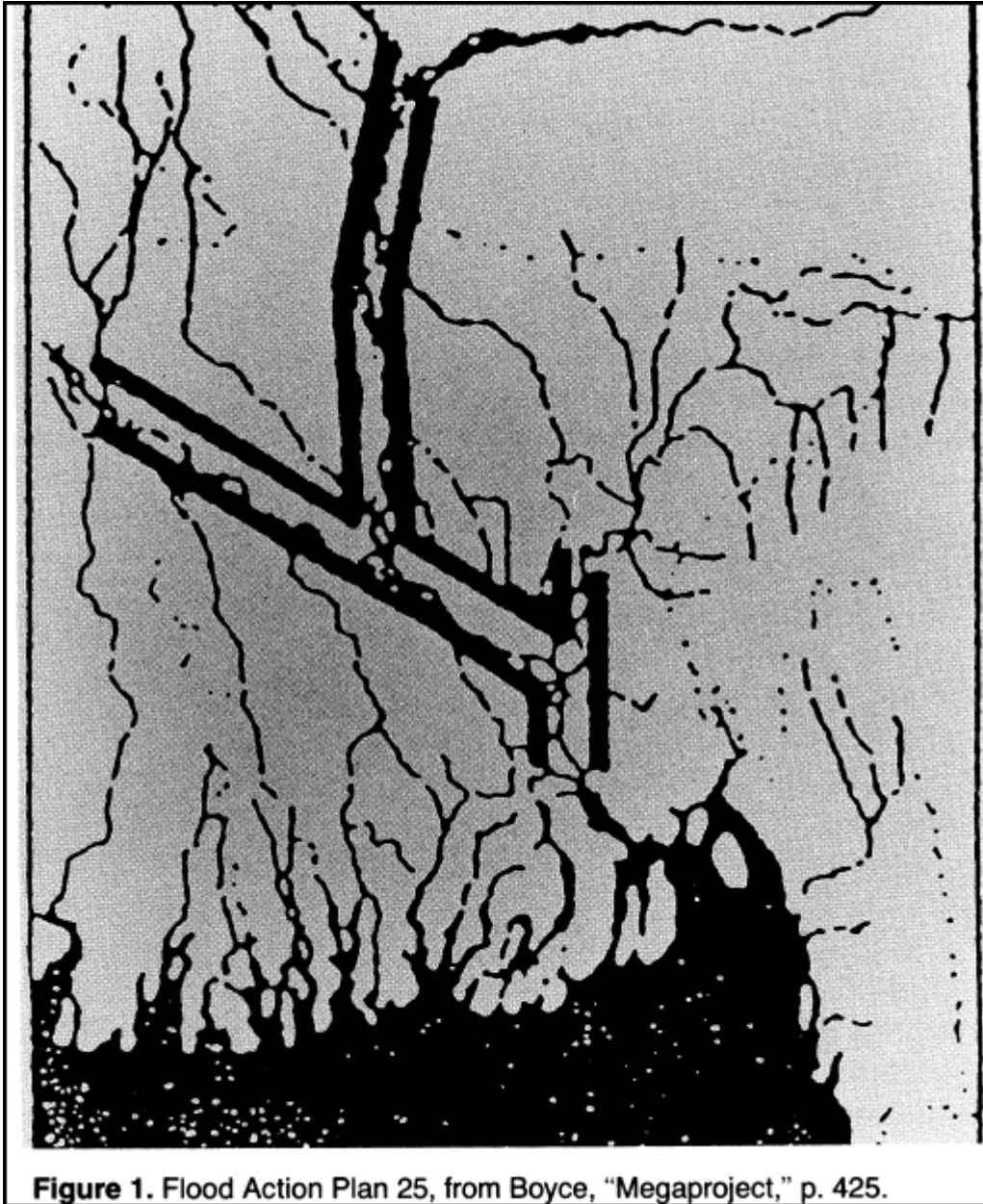
The reconfigured relationship between power, speech/silence and knowledge becomes clearer when we consider how this silence-speech functions elsewhere in Spivak’s account of the floods in Bangladesh. Consider her description of the benevolent gift of “superior civilization” to the landless Bangladeshi farmers, in the form of a more modern (better) seed to sow, and the context in which this gift was taken up and thwarted:

Living in the rhythm of water, the Bangladeshi peasant long sowed two types of rice paddy seed. One of them survived submerged in water, the other came to full growth after the season of rain and flood. In 1971, agri-cultural reformers introduced a different variety of rice for a single high-yield crop. In the intervening years, the peasant has quietly and gradually shifted the time of sowing of this modern crop to Phalgun-Chaitro (February- March). As was their established custom, accommodating the play of land and water, they now sow pulses and vegetables before this. And now, at the reaping time of the new crop, the old flood-seed is sown, so that in the rain and flood-time, the fields are once again full of that submersible paddy. (By contrast, the land "protected" from water by the embankments loses the fertilizing algae, thus providing an opportunity for the enhancement of the debt trap and the destruction of the ecobiome by the peddling of chemical fertilizers.) I hesitate to call this silent interruption “flood management.” (55-56)

What Spivak describes here is two-fold: on the one hand, this “mis-use” of the “superior civilization’s” gift (i.e. the “modern seed”) is again a “silent interruption” of the power that (here) the development industry has over the subaltern. We begin, then, to see an alignment or an association here, in Spivak’s account, between Sattar Khan’s interruption to the FAP knowledge machine, and the farmer’s planting practices: just as Khan disrupted the knowledge-power machine by speaking (silently) out of turn, here the farmer (silently) interrupts the power-knowledge of the “superior civilization” by planting the seed according to a different

logic than intended. But I want to propose that this “silent interruption” is also an appropriate response to water’s logic of unknowability. Here, this silence (the planting), which is also speech, interrupts the knowledge of control over the land-water, and instead engages in a more humble learning-with-the-water, learning-with-the-land. The deltaic floodplane is a crucial collaborator here in the generation of knowledge – the farmer “accommodates the play of the land and water.” In this way of knowing, more speech (read: more control) does not generate better knowledge. Speech-domination does not equal more wisdom. Here, the landless farmer engages in what Spivak describes as a “space of intimate learning, of human-animal-watery ground” that “is, after all, an ongoing response to the weave of land and river by the landless and on common waters” (58). This “intimate learning” understands that “flood management” is a language that an epistemology of unknowability does not speak. Such learning is rather an “ongoing response”; a response-ability to water’s refusal of capture by our systems of knowledge-control.

Crucially, for Spivak, not only are Sattar Khan and the landless farmer the objects of the (attempted) silencing. The very land-water itself is subjected to the violence of colonial knowledge-control. The FAP, after all, plans to straighten the tangles of the watery deltaic threads with a logic literally built from concrete; “To impose upon the changeable riverscape the straight lines of massive ‘pharaonic’ embankments is the plan” (49):



(image copied from Spivak, "Responsibility" 50)

This might, of course, lead one to wonder whether water itself can be read as akin to the subaltern here – that is, as a strange, more-than-human kin. I am not invested in insisting that water is a subaltern, for I am well aware of the problems of applying this term willy-nilly, all over the place (as Spivak also repeatedly cautions). And just as we shouldn't take 'the subaltern' and make it apply to any oppressed body we choose, nor should we try too hard to fit water – in all of its unruliness, in all of the logics I've already described to you – into this human-oriented term. But I do think there is something to be gained by thinking water with subalternity, and from seeing what insights we gain from Spivak's concept of subaltern speaking can in terms of how we might think the question of water, knowledge and unknowability.

When I do this, this is where it leads me: Spivak refers to these riparian rechorographies –this straightening out of the river – as themselves another violence, against a more profound knowledge that is beyond our grasp: “Let us think of these stupendous drains,” she writes, “driving the continually shifting text-ile waters by the violence of reason into the shortest route to the sea as the violence of Reason itself, driving the continually differentiating text-ile of meanings into the shortest route to Truth” (62). In other words, the proposed concrete channels of the FAP drive water to Sea in the same way colonial Reason drives meaning to the Truth. This “management” of the river here is tellingly linked directly to epistemic violence, and the violence of Reason. Reducing the rivers, or the planet into “whatever can be fed into Geographical Information Systems” (54) (one of Reason’s tools of mastery) is an arrogance, Spivak warns us—a colonial conquest of another kind. Or perhaps of the same kind, in a different guise.

But the water of the rivers (there is more than one here: the delta in question is fed by the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, and the Meghna) resists these containments. The deltaic terrain is no terra firma of certainty that can be known and mastered. Tellingly, the environmental scientists describe this “land” as behaving more “like viscous fluids rather than soils” (quoted in Spivak, “Responsibility” 47). Water quite literally disturbs the solidity of the ground beneath one’s feet. Even as the FAP “crosses out” the land on which the Bangladeshi deltaic habitants depend, this groundedness was already precarious – it “has been already, and is being crossed out, by the moving weave of water” (Spivak, “Responsibility” 47). Living with such precarity, rather than “containing” it, was the point. It was the farmers’ response to a watery world that resists us as much as it comprises us. Importantly, under the colonial management of this land-water, not only the river, but this way of responsive knowing, is, too, subjected to “straightening.”

Like the speech-silence of Khan, the “silent interruption” of the rice-planting farmers can also be read as a sort of silent-speech that interrupts a certain logic of power. And, if this interruption by the farmers can be read as a negotiation with the logic of unknowability that water teaches us, then in the building of the FAP’s concrete walls, we bear witness to the site of this teaching. The river delta is “not heard” through these concrete incursions, but surely she continues to speak. The river gurgles, and sometimes roars, and sometimes just swishes by. And the river speaks in anger, and frustration, or in less anthropocentric terms, in plain old river-y refusal to be contained: every levee, we know, breaks. Every dam busts. Water remains always one step ahead of our knowledge-control.²¹ The river’s refusal to be silent points us towards the need to cultivate a relationship to knowledge that does not always presume mastery, and that instead comes from an “ongoing response” to water itself. Water babbles in languages we do not fully comprehend, but instead of the violence of translation – into concrete embankments – we might do better just to learn to listen.

²¹ See Cecilia Chen, “Mapping Waters” for a discussion of “the babble of waters” in relation to intelligibility.

The final link that I want to make back to the question of knowledge is facilitated through one more conceptual tool suggested to me by Spivak. This is her concept of planetarity. In the third chapter of her book *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak argues that instead of being global, we should strive to be planetary: “The globe is on our computers,” she writes. “No one lives there. It [“the globe”] allows us to think we can aim to control it” (Spivak, *Death* 72). But, she continues, “The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan” (72). To put it otherwise, the language of “globalization” for Spivak is strongly linked to what I have been calling the logic of knowability and knowledge-control. It presumes a world that can be laid out, grid-like, plotted on our GPSes and ultimately comprehended-conquered. Spivak counters the image of the globe (“even though it is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe”) with planetarity: “Planet-thought opens us up to embrace an inexhaustible taxonomy of the names [of radical alterity]” (73). Planetarity is “(im)possible” to represent because of this very inexhaustibility. It is always more than it is. But key for Spivak is the fact that this “beyond” is also lived, it is also of us, with us, through us, alongside us (hence the “im” of the possible is couched only in a parenthetical signpost). This alterity—what is “above and beyond our reach” (73)—is “not continuous with us, as it is not, indeed, specifically discontinuous.” Formulaic, codified, categorizable access to planetarity is not possible – there is no overarching knowledge that could contain it, because by definition it is in us *and* beyond us.

This is the species to which water, in its logic of unknowability, belongs as well. Perhaps rather than stuffing water into the humanist concept of subalterneity, we can instead think of it as part of this planetarity. This “of me yet beyond me” is the unknowability to which water asks that I attend. Water as planetarity also suggests to me an epistemology that is engaged, embedded, embodied; a way of knowing that is somewhere, situated, implicated—but this is also a form of knowledge in which that location will always exceed my bounds (as even this “my” leaks out of my watery body beyond the realms of any knowability.)

CONCLUSION: [SLIDE]

“If you want to learn, be quiet and pay attention.” (Andrea Smith, 134)

So this is what I have concluded from this little thought experiment:

1. Water—like all of the more-than-human world—is a collaborator in what we know and how we know .
2. To colonize water is to colonize certain forms of knowledge, and the ability to know differently than our western paradigms of knowledge insist we must.
3. Understanding what we don't or can't know opens up space for knowing differently.

And if, as I claimed in my introduction, how I think with (/as) water might change how I act with (/as) it, I can only hope that this rethinking of knowledge, as illuminated through this watery foray into Spivak's (post)colonial criticism can help me approach this planetary lifeblood with more humility, generosity and curiosity. My thinking (writing, theorizing) can guide my actions, but never replace them.

After all, as Spivak closes her essay on "Responsibility," "these words, too many, can only point you toward such silences"—silences, that are also, I have argued, spoken loudly, asking to be heard, even if they are in a language we cannot – indeed, should not – ever master.

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