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Imagining Water in the Anthropocene

Prologue/Kwe¹

The beginning is blue. A rush of water, or wind, or static on the audio channel, or another kind of planetary breathing. Our eyes are drawn down from the sky to a beach, scattered driftwood. A fire combusts in one of the piles. In the water, now: a woman is weighted down by wet matter – her soaked sweatshirt, jeans, the sopping bedclothes that are the ocean's almost-waves. The water is deceptively strong, and persistent. Stumbling, struggling somewhat, she manages to stand. The woman is deceptively strong, and persistent. She drags a bucket, brimming, out of the dark sea.

She steps across the broken branches and beach debris and the sounds of these elemental labours fade. The bucket is heavy. Closer. Drawing on a deep well of power, with a grunt, she flings the contents of the bucket at you. You might expect murky seawater to meet you, but instead a ropy dark red runs down the screen. Her silhouette fixes you, as she faces back through the membrane that keeps you on this side, mostly dry. Maybe, you look at your hands. Are they clean?

Art, too, might be a body of water that we can attune our bodies to, and describe. Rebecca Belmore is an Anishinaabe performance artist, and *Fountain* (2005) is a single-channel video installation, that continuously loops for around two and a half minutes. You can watch it on your computer from Belmore's website, but in the gallery the video is projected upon a four by three meter screen that is a wall of running water. Originally shown in the Canadian pavilion at the 2005 Venice Art Biennale, it asks questions about bodies that are not separate from the water, where embodiment – here, an Indigenous woman's body – cannot be taken for granted. 'It goes without saying,' writes Richard William Hill (2008: 69), 'that this blood will be read as a symbol of the violent history of colonial Canada flung in Canada's face'. But

this waterblood is also a palimpsest: body, upon body, upon body, upon body. For Belmore, performance is about her body. She notes: 'With my body I can address history, I can address the immediate, I can address political issues.' For Belmore, although 'performance is deeply personal' (Nanibush 2014: n.p.), her body is also riven through with a past, and is a resting place and conduit for the politics of coloniality that both precedes her, and follows her, and gathers her up. Her embodiment is also something more. This (which?) waterblood as a body of water, incorporated, over and over again.

This is to say: in Belmore's *Fountain*, water erupts as lifeblood, kinship, wound, burden, accusation, question..

What is water?

Some years earlier in a converted cold storage warehouse on the northwestern shore of Lake Ontario, Belmore erects *Temple* (1996). Here, hundreds of litres of water spill over a monumental wedge construction, housed in what is now Toronto's Power Plant gallery on Queen's Quay. This temple is a quiet tidal wave, contained for the time being within rows, like shingles, of plastic milk bags. The water they hold suggests rust-brown and piss-yellow. The water is not quite clear but nonetheless iridescent in the gallery light. Bagged up like the units of lifeblood that it is, all of this water is also us. These samples are tapped and sourced from the city of Toronto's drinking water supply (faucets, pipes, and the lake itself). In a reminder of this transcorporeal flow, a working drinking fountain is placed under the crest of the wave. Beyond this, against the gallery's far wall, a staircase ascends to a small platform, where a telescope affords a view of the grey roll of Lake Ontario.

What is water?

If you were to leave the Power Plant gallery today, and walk a few blocks through downtown Toronto, you might turn into any number of corner convenience stores, and look for something to drink. Your choices would be many. In the section where bottled drinks are stacked, at least one third of the space is probably devoted to bottled water. There is little I can offer in this chapter that would add much to existing explanations of the absurdity of bottled water economics, particularly in places where one is lucky to have safe and clean drinking water flowing from a tap just steps away. Others have explained this (and more) in detail (see Hawkins, Potter, and Race 2015), and even suggested very reasonable ways of making sense of these plasticized pleas for 'frequent

sipping'. What interests me here, however, is the way these little PET packages might offer an uncanny repetition of the aqueous imaginaries offered up in Belmore's artwork. There is an obvious repetition in play here, as the form we see in *Temple* – the milk bags lined up, row upon overlapping row, apportioning and transfiguring a dynamic flow into discrete, isomorphic units – is strangely reconfigured in the bottled waters lined up on the shop shelves.

I address the way that water has come to be dispensed as neat, exchangeable packages below. But I am also interested in another less obvious repetition at work across these plastic water bottles, and echoed in various kinds of advertising around them. One widely distributed brand of water by Nestle calls itself 'Pure Life', while another popular Canadian brand suggests we are 'Hungry for Life'. If we look across to the magazine rack, we might see these life-sustaining messages repeated again: in promotional campaigns by big corporations for World Water Day, in fundraising pleas for charitable 'development' organizations, in ads for office coolers and home water ionizers, and even one for a Giorgio Armani perfume – all of them telling us that 'water is life'. In this chapter I explore how certain aqueous imaginaries – those committed to an understanding of water as intimately, inseparably, tethered to *life*; those that course through the veins of Belmore's artwork, and are lit up, literally, as neon signs by activist of indigenous sovereignty movement *Idle No More* to proclaim that *Water Is Life* – are repeated by these plastic figurines and their discursive consorts. If we can reorient our relation to water, *as* bodies of water, by being attentive to artistic acts such as Belmore's, and even engaging actions of our own, what happens when this imaginary is repeated by these consumable units, and in popular discourses of water more broadly? What is the work of these repetitions?

What is water?

According to geographer Jamie Linton, water is what we make it. Belmore's art suggests certain understandings of how we've made water (to which we'll return shortly), but in his book *What Is Water* (2010), Linton unpacks a different story – perhaps even the 'backstory' of *Fountain* and *Temple*, and to an extent, of packaged water-life too. Linton's wet genealogy describes how once plural, emplaced, spirited, and storied waters are transformed into what Linton calls 'modern water'. In this chapter, I chart the emergence of modern water alongside colonial and 'global' water, specifically within the emergent

context of Anthropocene discourse. While dominant rhetorics (within both science and cultural theory) figure the Anthropocene as a primarily lithic phenomenon, here I turn to what flows beneath this stony and terrestrial tale. On the one hand, I want to redress the Anthropocene narrative's own 'forgetting of water' by considering how Linton's diagnosis of our contemporary water imaginary might coalesce into something called 'Anthropocene water'. On the other hand, I don't want the story I am telling here to be dominated by an Anthropocenic narrative, aqueous or otherwise. My suggestion is that the figuration of bodies of water that I've developed in preceding chapters might potentially challenge these contemporary aqueous imaginaries of water as discrete, contained, and exchangeable, and tell a different kind of story. This challenge, however, is not a claim that Anthropocene water is 'false'; the challenge is rather an acknowledgement that all imaginaries are a congeries of matter and meaning – ideas entangled with material situations that offer various orientations towards thickly emergent worlds. Our decision can be to orient ourselves in one way, or another. We cannot dictate, once and for all, how to understand water. Phenomenologically crafted alter-imaginaries, however, can be a part of making other worlds possible.

Belmore's work is part of this imagining – an invitation to respond otherwise, specifically in the context of a call to decolonize water as part of a larger anticolonial imperative. Like all bodies of water, however, anticolonial waters, and their insistence that 'water is life', is an orientation that can be appropriated, and reoriented in yet another materialization of difference and repetition.² A sketch of some of the problematic ways in which anticolonial bodies of water get taken up and repeated in a neoliberal frame of individualism and commoditization reminds us that outcomes of figurations such as 'bodies of water' are never assured in advance. They are but 'moveable bridges' as Elizabeth Grosz (2011: xx) would say, for alternative orientations – that is, opportunities and openings, but never guarantees.

Swimming into the Anthropocene

We might begin by returning to Linton's primary quarry: what is water? As noted, Linton's answer (in an unwitting rejoinder to Irigaray³) is that water

is 'not one.' Water, rather, is many, and according to Linton, what we make it. In other words, what water *is* is inextricable from how we imaginatively produce it. We can understand this claim in a number of ways, but Linton's emphasis is on the entanglement of social relations and discourses on the one hand, and environmental matters, on the other. The content of this word 'water', in other words, is neither neutral nor simply given. It corresponds to our values, behaviours, and orientations in regard to this wet substance that saturates our lifeworld. This doesn't mean we could include anything at all within this term; water has a materiality that places all kinds of limits on what can count as (what we now call) 'water'. We don't simply construct water *ex nihilo*. Linton's point is rather that what counts as water is changeable, and that water has a history. It is a substance, but it is also an idea. To ask what is water is thus to implicitly ask: what is water, in this place and at this time? Where does this idea come from and what does this idea *do*?

If water is what we make it, Linton argues, then what we've currently made – at this time, in this place that is the Western-dominated globalized world in an era of something we could call late capitalism – is 'modern water'. No longer the 'culturally impregnated waters of places and times' described by water historian Ivan Illich, water was transformed by the eighteenth-century chemistry of Antoine Lavoisier and his followers into stripped down, scienced-up chemical compound known as H_2O . In the modern era, water becomes a substance that is 'colourless transparent tasteless scentless' (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, quoted in Linton 2010: 78) – in other words, an 'abstract, isomorphic, measurable quantity' that is reducible to a fundamental unit of matter (Linton 2010: 14). In short, the name 'modern water' underlines both the location of that idea within a particular historical moment, but also the imaginative content of that place-time – namely, an Enlightenment scientific postivism of *knowability*.

These eighteenth-century modern chemistry abstractions of H_2O were then further 'modernized' by the animations of nineteenth-century hydrology, Linton argues, and the popularization of the modern hydrological cycle. Contrary to what we might imagine, this cyclical imaginary did not reanimate the wilful waters of premodern times. Within the new scientific and everyday imaginaries of water engendered by this schematic rendition, the hydrological cycle – diagrams for which you have no doubt seen in basic science textbooks

or popular environmental literature – made water even more amenable to a new managerial discourse. ‘Like the resources of the land’, Linton (2010: 153) notes, ‘water now becomes available to central planners [both in the US, as well as in other nations] as a quantum’. Thus, not only is water rendered abstract, measurable, and knowable as a chemical compound; in the guise of modern water, water is also deterritorialized in a universalized and uniform cyclical schema, becoming ‘placeless’. One water is the same as any other (18). We might understand Rebecca Belmore’s *Temple* – a flow contained and measured out into discrete units – as a perceptive rendition of this abstract placelessness: when visitors to *Temple* looked through the telescope at the top of the stairs adjacent to the milk-bag life-blood monolith, many reported that they thought they were looking at a video, when what they were actually seeing was Lake Ontario, just on the other side of the Power Plant wall (Burgess 1999: n.p.). A distancing, indeed.

In Linton’s (2010: 14) genealogy, modern water becomes ‘the dominant, or natural, way of knowing or relating to water, originating in Western Europe and North America’. Importantly however, by the end of the twentieth century, modern water is also ‘operating on a global scale’. The culmination of this instrumentalized abstraction is thus the morphing of ‘modern water’ into ‘global water’ – that is ‘the abstraction and representation of the world’s total hydrological stocks and flows’ (22) and the entrenchment of ‘global hydrological discourse’ (163). Following the First World War, hydrological practice began to be deliberately coordinated on an international scale. This intensified in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the proclamation of the International Hydrological Decade by the International Association of Scientific Hydrology (167–172).

While modern water initiated the abstraction and interchangeability of water, global water scales this up, where we come to understand the world’s water crises as an overarching, global phenomenon. Linton (2010: 163) argues that global water is directly conditioned by modern water’s impetus to quantification and measurement, such that the driving question of global water is ‘how much water is there in the world?’ Moreover, the ‘new global water regime’, which seeks integrated and coordinated means of managing the (now rendered homogenous) water resources of the world, results in ‘a completely unworkable concept’. What human power would be practically

capable of managing the total amount of the world's water, or controlling it on a global scale? Citing global water critic Asit K Biswas, Linton underlines that 'a paradigm with such universal ambition suffers a critical breakdown when brought to bear on specific water issues' (217). When global water is understood as the amalgamation of millions of smaller units of an abstract substance called 'water', this gives us few resources with which to deal with issues as different and dispersed as contaminated tailings ponds in Canada's Athabaskan watershed; drought enveloping farmland in California; arsenic contaminated groundwater in Bangladesh; floods in the modern urban core of Toronto; a melting polar ice cap; or privatization of water supplies in South Africa. In other words, treating water as quantifiable and instrumentalized not only risks its exploitation and deterioration; it also belies a management paradigm that is ultimately unworkable and unresponsive to specific water challenges, in specific places at specific times. Disembodied and displaced, global water – again, in a version of Donna Haraway's (1988) epistemological 'God trick' – is everywhere and nowhere, and thus difficult to respond to with attunement, or curiosity.

One of Linton's key points is that by evacuating water of its social content, even well-intentioned efforts to address the 'world's water crisis' become mired in global water's unworkability. When the terms of what water is are already set, any pleas to manage this water *better* become stymied in advance by these same terms. In other words, global water, like modern water, becomes naturalized through repetition of the same ideas, institutions, and mechanisms that gave rise to this particular idea of water in the first place. This reinforcement is perpetuated even by institutions that are aiming for more ecologically sound and socially just relations to water. Linton argues that 'global water governance' regimes of the 1980s and 1990s could be understood as participating in this naturalization. As I have argued elsewhere (see Neimanis 2009, 2014), calls to recognize water as a human right – within UN human rights apparatuses, as well as in the context of activist transnational organizing and justice-oriented legal scholarship – are in many ways laudable. Yet similarly, insofar as many of these well-meaning claims take a quantifiable, abstract substance as their starting point, they can also further naturalize an imaginary that bolsters the very problem they seek to address. Water is reinstated as something 'out there' that we can claim, and remains abstracted

from our own implication in a hydrocommons with material contours and limits. Linton thus describes for us an aqueous imaginary – modern water and/as global water – that is not merely descriptively tied to contemporary water concerns and crises, but entangled in their very intractability.

Linton's analysis of what water is in our contemporary socio-historical moment spurs me to consider how his diagnosis of modern, global water might flow into emergent understandings of our current epoch as 'the Anthropocene'. The Anthropocene, as most of us are now aware, is the name for our new era of 'man-made' environmental and planetary disruption that experts are hailing from all corners (see Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Steffen et al. 2011). While the International Commission of Stratigraphy has yet to officially proclaim its arrival, and while the 'golden spike' starting line of the Anthropocene is still hotly debated, the term is commonly used in both scholarly and generalist literature to denote our current time of anthropogenic ecological disruption.

My suggestion is that the modern/global water imaginary described by Linton might also closely connect to what I'm calling 'Anthropocene water'. Exploring this connection does two things. First, it disturbs the dominant framing of the Anthropocene in geological terms. For certain, the lithosphere is the key slate onto which accounts of the Anthropocene are written – deciphered by present-day stratigraphers and to be read, presumably, by some distant future decoder of our fossilized remains (although if we humans are anthropocening ourselves out of existence, it does beg the question of who these future readers might be). Such geological thinking has, moreover, opened up rich and productive thinking about humans and how we might rethink our own human being and becoming in post-anthropocentric, and specifically geontological, terms (see Povinelli 2014; Yusoff 2015). But the dominance of the Earth's stony archive-in-the-making belies the water that flows through and beneath these accounts. My invitation in thinking about Anthropocene water is thus, in the first place, a suggestion to pay more attention to the hydrosphere as the (again, oft-overlooked) fascia that lubricates and connects the Earth's lithosphere to its biosphere and atmosphere, those more popular players in this Anthropocene drama. Rising sea levels, melting ice caps, parched interiors, rogue storm surges and strange weather, rapid aquifer depletion and massive-scale water rechoreographies through irrigation, dam-building, and riparian

‘straightening’ all remind us that our current epoch’s radical terraforming is often explicitly the work of water – and that these are labours in which we humans are variously entangled.

Water has certainly always been an intense site and agent of planetary terraforming, but in an Anthropocene narrative, this shapeshifting is figured either as a result of our attempts to control water (damming, irrigation) or as an out of control response by water to these attempts at control (storms, sea levels). Put otherwise, adopting an aqueous orientation to the Anthropocene reminds us that the keyword of this epoch is control – where, unsurprisingly, the perverse antidote to waters out-of-control is *more* control and managerialism (see Crist 2013) – such as Linton describes in terms of modern and global water regimes.

To connect Linton’s modern, global water to an idea of Anthropocene water thus allows us, secondly, to map the overlaps between the ‘makings’ that Linton discusses and the more general claims and imaginaries that are taking hold as an Anthropocene worldview. One place where Anthropocene research is specifically connected to water is in a short video called ‘Water in the Anthropocene’ (2013) – part of the online presence of *Welcome to the Anthropocene* (www.anthropocene.info). This film details some of the anthropogenically induced changes to the hydrosphere about which we should be concerned. It notes, for instance, that as of the time of the film’s making, 800 million people live without safe drink water, 2.4 billion people lack adequate sanitation, and 1.7 billion live in areas where groundwater extraction is happening at a faster rate than recharge. In earth-moving efforts of monumental proportions, we’ve erected 48,000 large dams worldwide and moved more sediment than natural erosion and rivers. Two thirds of all major river deltas are sinking, exacerbated by massive extraction and mining industries. Half of all of the wetlands in the world have been drained by us. And, as warmer temperatures result in higher amounts of water vapour into the atmosphere, the water cycle is intensifying – meaning that what is wet becomes wetter, while the dry turns to dust.

This video’s account of water in the Anthropocene flows neatly into the picture of global water that Linton has already sketched for us. We see modern/global water memes of depersonalized control, placelessness, and isomorphic abstraction not only represented but also amplified in the video’s computer-

generated graphics. Beginning as a dark circle, slowly illuminated by a beam of light that arises behind it, the globe begins to spin. We zoom in and out of its displays, circling and surveying the water crises that dot the orb's surface: large dams illuminated with shards of light; animated weather patterns announced in colour codes familiar to us from satellite weather maps; fractures of blue veins that retract and disappear. The blue, green, and brown planet rotates at a scale and speed mostly impossible to grasp, as though we might be holding it between our fingers, like a golf ball, or a ripening plum, checking it out from this angle, then from that. This is a perspective that our living, breathing, wet bodies (entirely absent from this show) could never inhabit. Modern water (exchangeable and isomorphic) and global water (undifferentiated in an amorphous blue – everywhere and nowhere in Haraway's 'God trick') are here rendered clear. Linton points out that within a global context of hydrology, quantities and flows become so abstract as to become meaningless. 'Water in the Anthropocene' – tellingly produced for the 'Global Systems Water Project' – uncannily visualizes this distancing and placelessness. Even if, as I argued in earlier chapters, becoming a body of water depends on stretching and torquing the bounds of our comfortable human perspective, 'Water in the Anthropocene' pulls out too far; we lose our embodied grip altogether; we are situated nowhere.

But Anthropocene water also adds something new to the imaginary of global water described by Linton. Importantly, the phenomena enumerated by the Global Water Systems Project are not just descriptions of a morphing planetary hydrosphere: they specifically underline changes to that hydrosphere that are anthropogenically induced. In short, this is a story of man-made water. 'We are altering the global water system,' the video's narrator tells us. A persistent – but undifferentiated – 'we' begins most of the video's sentences. *We* have done this; Anthropocene water is *our* accomplishment. In other words, Anthropocene water not only confirms that water is 'made'; it puts particular emphasis on the fact that this making is done *by us*. One important question begged by these formulations is thus *who is this 'we'*? The video does not provide an answer to this question, or even suggest that it might be one worth asking. 'In a single lifetime *we* have become a phenomenal geological force,' the Global Water Systems Project tells us. In an era of our collective making, in a lifetime indexed to the timescale of our own, this statement firmly tethers global, modern water

to the imaginary of the Anthropocene. According to an Anthropocene water imaginary – and this is my second point – *we humans are (uncritically) all in this together*.

This homogenization and levelling of human difference – what Kathryn Yusoff (2015: 4) names ‘the supposed unity of the “Anthropos” as it is gathered into the geologic’ – is characteristic of a more general Anthropocene imaginary (see Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hayes 2015), and neatly mirrors the homogenization of water as abstract, exchangeable, and isomorphic, as described by Linton. Humans, in the Anthropocene, are apparently no different. Geographer Lesley Head (2014: 2) refers to this characteristic of Anthropocene discourse as the ‘species error’. She writes, ‘we have conceptualized the Anthropocene with an undifferentiated human, again contrary to the abundant evidence of spatial and temporal differences in influences below the species level’. For Head, this homogenization of humans is in the first place simply false – what she calls ‘a category mistake in conceptualization of the Anthropocene’ (4). Head reminds us that the most common Anthropocene chronology dates this era to the Industrial Revolution and the rise of fossil fuels. Thus, ‘despite widespread recognition of human influences on fire and fauna in the Pleistocene, there is not a serious suggestion that the Anthropocene is a Late Pleistocene phenomenon’ (4) – underlining the point that an era named for human incursion only really means to implicate *some* humans, in an evolutionary and temporal sense.⁴ And, probably more significantly, even post-Industrial Revolution, our ‘togetherness’ in this mess is clearly a problematic claim. As Malm and Hornborg (2014: 3) note, and as Head underlines, ‘uneven distribution is a condition for *the very existence* of modern, fossil-fuel technology’. In other words, Anthropocene homogenization of humans is ironically lodged at a moment when differences among them become in one way notably amplified.

The issue of human difference in terms of anthropogenically induced change is of course both one of responsibility (which processes and modes of being, anchored in which situated communities, are exacerbating these changes?) and one of vulnerability and resistance (who is incited to forge new ways of being and becoming? who is bearing the brunt?). While social location (class, gender, age) is clearly salient here, global flows of colonial power are equally relevant. Indeed, the Anthropocene may also index an important

mutation in forms of colonial power, where colonizers need not physically occupy a place with their discrete bodies for the environmental effects of (neo)colonial power to be felt. This is underlined, for example, by returning to the case of ice thaw and climate change (two key actors in an Anthropocene imaginary that again bring the 'aqueous Anthropocene' into relief). Due to permafrost degradation among other factors, levels of mercury in the Arctic food chain are intensifying (MacDonald, Harner, and Fyfe 2005). Given the Arctic's low population and little industrial activity, this phenomenon begs questions of which bodies shoulder the heaviest burden of polar warming, and which bodies are most implicated in stoking those planetary fires. A related example I described in Chapter 1 concerns the bioaccumulation of various anthropogenic contaminants, making their way north from warmer regions. Hitchhiking upon atmospheric transport vectors, pollutants from the more temperate regions condense and concentrate in colder Arctic climes (Bard 1999; Hansen 2000). One result is a gendered, raced, and multispecies entanglement, biomagnified within a breastfeeding body. The breast milk of Inuit women, nourished by a staple diet of sea mammal fat, serves literally as what Foucault would have called a 'dense transfer point' of power – in this case materialized in the toxic waste matters that move slowly and stealthily from watery body to watery body, beginning in the industrialized and industrializing zones of the globe's temperate regions: human-machine assemblage, to waterway, to ocean and atmospheric current, to plankton, to whale, to breastfeeding body – only then to be downloaded to the infant body many times magnified (Hansen 2000; Trainor et al. 2010: 146–147). Indeed, at one point in the recent past, 'the greatest body burden known to occur from environmental exposure [was] found in Inuit mothers' (Dewailly quoted in Trainor et al. 2010: 147).

Within this example of toxic breast milk, a whole slurry of concerns swirl: biomagnification reminds us that not only is water itself a vector of contamination, but so too are the bodies of non-human animals. Toxic breast milk is also a clearly gendered issue, where sexual difference is indeed biologically marked (through lactation) but always within sociocultural valences of power. 'Body burden' is both a biochemical descriptor, but also a way of naming social, cultural, gendered, and species-related inheritances of response and responsibility. These examples foreground questions of

environmental justice, for sure, but to frame them as coloniality also marks the longer histories of human incursion in the 'New World' whose effects still condition this present. While the Arctic is 'generally considered to be one of the last pristine regions on Earth', its populations (human and more-than-human) again bear the brunt of global human imperialism. This kind of incursion 'at a distance', precipitated by massive fossil fuel burning, consumption, and toxic release into planetary waters and weathers (out of sight, out of mind), traces new vectors of coloniality, and emerging markers of vulnerability and survivance (Vizenor 1999) across difference. The more general point again is: in cases such as these, any human 'togetherness' is acutely riven with differences that matter. If we are all in the same boat, why do some of us seem to be (to quote poet Stevie Smith) not waving, but drowning?

None of these questions – coloniality, race, gender, species, class, culture, taste – is separable from the others, and importantly, none of them is separate from us, who may be reading this at distances thousands of kilometres from the source. As I explored more thoroughly in Chapter 1, the problem of the 'we' has long been acknowledged by some feminist theories as the most difficult, but also urgent ethical and political question. This is all the more salient once we understand that identity and difference, or commonality and separation, exist in exasperatingly incommensurable ways, right up inside of one another. As black feminist Audre Lorde championed, we may share many things as women, but we are also striated by our differences – differences that are vital strengths. These cross-cutting tangles of mutual implication and ineluctable alterity demand, among other things, that we acknowledge how oppressions or vulnerabilities that affect others also affect us, *and are affected by us*. Black feminism and the idea of a politics of location (Rich 1986) gave us tools for thinking through the tricky business of interconnection but also the specificity of social justice movements. It now behoves us to bring this theoretical agility to Anthropocene thinking, where difference and connection are also material, and connected to hydrological, geological, and other kinds of environmental movements. Lorde reminded us that 'there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives' (1984: 138). The intersecting axes that she refers to must now also be thought across species and elemental lines, across timescales both vast and molecular, across generations and geographies. We are both intimately situated bodies, but

also transcorporeally inserted into the lives of all others. Living this kind of multiscalar and multivalent ontology is one of the key challenges of the Anthropocene.

Toxic breast milk also illuminates how incursions into the 'earth' and other (always different) human bodies are not discrete questions, in either their inter- or intra-relations. Too often, Anthropocene thinking lacks attention to the ways in which circuits of matter and differentiated flows of human power are entangled. A notable exception is a recent proposal by geographers Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin (2015), who explain the Orbis hypothesis – that is, that the Anthropocene's 'golden spike' might in fact be the arrival of Europeans in the 'New World' and the advent of the modern 'world-system' of globalization, trade, and colonialism. As Audra Mitchell (2015: n.p.) notes, the crucial point of the Orbis hypothesis is its linking of 'forms of agency, power, and violence that have contributed to the Anthropocene'. She further underlines two key points about Lewis and Maslin's argument. First, it 'draws a direct link between the constitutive violence of colonialism' and the idea of earthly Anthropocenic changes – in other words, that interhuman violence is a question that must be considered when thinking about any kind of golden spike. As Mitchell points out, this opens up an important new register for critique. Her second key point is closely connected, namely that 'the wounds inflicted by colonization' upon humans also remain 'engrained in, and integral to, very lively Earth systems that persist today and will continue far into the future'. The violent legacy of colonialism persists and rebounds not only (following Aime Cesaire and Frantz Fanon) on the colonizers, 'but on the global, interspecies populations of generations' that follow. Mitchell also sounds a cautious note: we shouldn't take this to mean that the colonization of the New World 'caused' the Anthropocene – the entanglement of worldly forces is too complex for such direct causal proposals. This founding violence, however, needs to be braided into any necessarily pluralistic account of Anthropocene onset.

Mitchell does not suggest that we name the Anthropocene after this colonial game-changer, but her analysis echoes other propositions to do just that, as a way of marking these important interhuman faultlines. Head points to other such nominations of our contemporary era – the Capitalocene (Huber 2008; Malm 2013; Moore 2013) or the Econocene (Norgaard 2013),

for instance – as additional attempts to implicate more specific social and economic drivers of Anthropocenic change. Here, it is a specific mode of being human (not only colonialism, but also late capitalism and the biopolitical ‘resourcing’ of any lively matter that capitalism can get its hands on, including water) that most deserve our critical focus. Donna Haraway (2015) reminds us that the ‘Plantationocene’,⁵ with its indictment of slavery-dependent plantation enclosures, has also been suggested as another way of naming this era (which, she hopes, may be a boundary event that with any luck will be as short and thin as possible). These terminological challenges all signal a growing call to acknowledge that not all humans are in this together, in exactly the same way.

For Head (2014: 4), moreover, the conceptual error of the collective ‘we’ is not the only concern. In the second place, she notes that this indiscriminate implication of humans is a political question that can result in ‘political paralysis’, insofar as papering over important differences among humans as drivers of anthropogenic planetary change limits the ‘potential to mobilize the kinds of political action that its constituent evidence demands’ (3). If all humans everywhere are both the cause of the problem *and* the problem’s undifferentiated receiving end, one likely response, notes Head, is a paralytic fatalism. Other critical and cautious takes on an Anthropocene imaginary buttress this position. Connecting again to Linton’s claims regarding the distancing effect of global hydrological calculus, the abstraction and scale of climate data as a key trait of the Anthropocenic view results in similar political disconnection (see Duxbury 2010; Neimanis and Walker 2014; Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hayes 2015). While one orientation of such responses can be a kind of Anthropocene denialism (where environmental change is too big, or too distant, or too abstract to be ‘real’), a second orientation is the easy consumption of apocalyptic doom. Claire Colebrook (2011: 53) for instance discusses a growing cinematic imaginary of the world’s end in terms of an orientation where ‘there is neither panic nor any apparent affective comportment that would indicate that anyone really feels or fears [this threat]’ – what she refers to as ‘hyper-hypo-affective disorder’ (45). (Moreover, this helps us to see how these ‘no future’ scenarios are precisely invested in the future – a future that the hailing of the Anthropocene seeks to guarantee by proselytizing its End. In ostensibly affirming that we’re all doomed, an Anthropocene imaginary

actually seeks to ignite the belief that we're not. Not unlike watching those same Hollywood blockbusters, proclaiming the 'Anthropocen-ocalypse' acts as a kind of inoculation to that same reality. The horror of it all paradoxically comforts us: it's not really going to happen.) A key point in these scenes of 'paralytic doom' is their lack of specificity. If Anthropocene water is a giant tsunami that washes equally over us all, what is left to be done?

In short, just as Linton argues that a homogenized global water cannot result in workable solutions to problems of water management, Head and others suggest that addressing the problems of the Anthropocene to a homogenized humanity are just as likely to result in political entropy, ineffectuality, or plain old missing-the-mark. Yet, Linton suggests that global/modern water is the dominant kind of water that we've made. We might add to his proposal the idea of Anthropocene water – a dominant imaginary that is flooding how we orient ourselves towards our planetary hydro-commons. The question again is not whether this imaginary is 'right' – it just *is*. More helpful is asking: what kind of alter-imaginaries might gestate other kinds of worlds?

Learning from anticolonial waters

If concepts and figures help us make sense of the world, they do so by selecting, foregrounding and allowing us to appreciate certain aspects of a phenomenon, while necessarily backgrounding or de-privileging others. Elizabeth Grosz (2012: 14) suggests that 'concepts do not solve problems that events generate for us', but 'they enable us to surround ourselves with possibilities for being otherwise'. Concepts – including feminist figurations as embodied concepts – open for us ways of ethically and justly living with the paradoxes and knots of the problems that are the very air we breathe, and the water that buoys us. Concepts, in Grosz's words, are 'modes of address, modes of connection: they are "movable bridges" between those forces that relentlessly impinge on us from the outside to form a problem and those that we can muster within ourselves to address such problems'. But as I also argue, this force we muster is also a lived materiality that too is of this world, even as we have to torque these materialities through new imaginative mangles.

Somewhat unlike Grosz (and her Deleuzian inspiration), I suggest that concepts are always also material.

This does not mean that concepts are simply given; their materiality is as lively and multiple as any other. In staking out the contours of a specific imaginary, concepts give us a handhold for engaging with the world, in certain ways, on certain terms. While Linton describes modern, global water as 'the' way we currently relate to matter, he also makes clear that other competing imaginaries precede it. Less central to his account, but crucial here, is the recognition that many alter-imaginaries still flow in modern/Anthropocene water's undercurrents – other material-semiotic configurations that might orient us otherwise. Similarly, while the Anthropocene discourse is beginning to solidify a certain way of responding to a set of ecological crises that are increasingly colliding in an image of planetary distress, this hegemonic view is contested by other conceptual apparatuses. For example, Donna Haraway (2015: 160), suggests that an alternative to the kinds of Anthropocene thinking outlined above might be something she calls Chthulucene. Against the homogenization and anthro-po-centring of the Anthropocene, and even the pessimism, resignation and/or regret of the Plantationocene or Capitalocene, Haraway's Chthulucene invites multiple stories of worlds that will allow us to 'make kin' with and as 'something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy' (161). This making means the remembering, acknowledging, and further fostering of relationships between humans and non-humans. It seeks to rebuild real and imagined places of refuge for weathering this storm and nurturing multispecies ecojustice with whatever grace we can muster. It is not only attentive to, but is impossible without, the differentiations that so much Anthropocene thinking elides.

My own proposition is less *cene-ic*. Bodies of water, as figuration, invite us to amplify a relational aqueous embodiment that we already incorporate, and trans-corporate. Bodies of water ask us to imagine these corporeal waters as part of a hydrocommons that we make, and that makes us in turn. This conceptual, yet embodied commons that I've developed through a feminist posthuman phenomenology in the preceding chapters, seeks to get us out of the discrete individualism that underpins dominant Western theories of body-subjects as discrete and autonomous. At the same time, it attends to the anthropocentrism of a nature/culture split, and offers a different kind

of environmental imaginary that draws on a feminist lineage of relational ethics and distributed bodies. In a feminist tradition of a politics of location and assemblage (Haraway 1988; Lorde 1984; Puar 2012; Rich 1986), it seeks a version of embodiment that acknowledges both common matters and unknowable alterity. Bodies of water recognize the need to understand waters as emplaced, specific, and contingent on relations, but they reject the binary of 'local' and 'global' as well. Resonant with Sandilands's (2001) understanding of queer ecologies, bodies of water as figuration asks us to respond to wounds of other bodily waters in which we are implicated, even at a distance. Rather than responding to the alarm clock ring of the Anthropocene with a quick insistence that we are all in this together, this figuration seeks to acknowledge the unsettled terms in which we live as bodies of water, with other watery bodies that materialize in temporal and spatial tangles. The figuration of bodies of water, as I've described in earlier chapters, is mobilized through the intra-corporeal logics of posthuman gestationality and difference.

Bodies of water, I suggest, can be an alternative to the dominant imaginary of the Anthropocene. While I do not dispute the 'facts' of the aqueous Anthropocene, and agree that we are currently exacerbating many kinds of water crises that urgently need to be addressed, I am reminded by Haraway that it matters what kinds of stories we tell. There is a fine line between critiquing a problem and reinstalling the terms that inevitably sustain it, and recapitulate it anew. To call for more attention to the 'aqueous Anthropocene', as I do above, is thus a fraught endeavour. Kathryn Yusoff (2015) saliently reminds us that whatever our critiques of Anthropocene-talk might be, this term is also a 'password' for rethinking what it means to be human in distinctly posthuman, geontological terms. Similarly, I think the aqueous Anthropocene can be a 'door' or a 'threshold', as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would have it, for reimagining our embodiment as aqueous all the way down, across times, bodies, and places. In some ways, the Anthropocene forces us to consider how our differences as bodies are crucial to any kind of planetary future, yet simultaneously to reflect on our commonality as planetary species (see also Chakrabarty 2012). Yet at the same time I want to step back from Anthropocene talk to allow different kinds of stories to do their work – perhaps to begin to dissolve the hegemony of the Anthropocene, even if this can only be a slight blurring of its edges.

'Bodies of water' is thus one alternative, but it supports and flows into others. Although my understanding of bodies of water, as an antidote to Anthropocene water, emerges primarily through philosophical and phenomenological explorations that I detail in earlier chapters, and charts a path through feminist theories of relational embodiment, my advocacy of this figuration is sustained by the conversations and commitments it shares with those other imaginaries that disturb the Anthropocene narrative. One example of this is the *Kwe* worldview offered by Rebecca Belmore.⁶ I don't claim to speak *for* this imaginary, but as anthropologist Margaret Somerville (2014: 407) reminds us (also in relation to water and indigenous imaginaries), artworks are gifts, or transitional objects, and 'a way of bridging different cultural understandings, relationships and knowledges.' Artworks such as *Fountain* and *Temple* are thus for me sites of collaborative inquiry that can introduce me to Anishnaabe understandings of water without any pretense of full knowledge or subsumption.⁷ In a posthuman phenomenological orientation, I can engage these artworks and allow my own bodily uptake of them to open glimpses into other kinds of imaginaries that might resonate with my own. I don't engage them in order to distil some kind of grand proclamation about indigenous cosmologies of water, but to read them as concrete exercises in ways of being in the world (to paraphrase Stephen Muecke 2004: 11), that can give me insight into the context they emerge from – a context that also imbricates me.⁸

For, I also flow through the water that fills the plastic bags of *Temple*. This water is certainly, at one level, a comment on drinking water quality that has been a hot-button question of indigenous environmental justice in Canada for years. In the same year as Belmore produced *Fountain*, over 800 members of the Kashechewan First Nations community of Northern Ontario (Canada) were evacuated when *E. coli* bacteria was discovered in the water supply. Along with around 100 other First Nations communities, Kashechewan had been under a long-term boil-water advisory due to inadequate treatment facilities and/or training of those people in charge of maintaining them. In 2013, the local paper of the city (in prosperous, cosmopolitan Southern Ontario) in which I mostly grew up reported that most of the people living on the Six Nations reserve, just a thirty-minute drive down the road from me, lived without access to clean water. In Southern Ontario, nestled between the world's largest reservoirs of freshwater and intersecting gridlines of the some of the world's

most modern hydrological infrastructure, this lack is certainly not an issue of geographic remoteness. Again, coloniality courses through the flows of water justice, but its spatiotemporal logics don't fit any simple map.

Belmore's art joins numerous forms of protest from indigenous people and their supporters against these settler colonial double standards. Her bags of water contain these current events, but they also gather up more than questions of infrastructure. 'Contamination' is not just a biophysical question, but pertains to other kinds of survival as well. As Anishinabe scholar Deborah McGregor (2009: 39) notes, 'from an Aboriginal perspective ... Water is a living, spiritual being with its own responsibilities to fulfil'. Water, in an Anishinabe context, 'is not just an environmental concern; it is a matter of cultural survival' (37). Survival here unfolds in many guises – cultural, which is also economic, political, individual, as well as straightforward biophysical endurance. In the understanding recounted by McGregor, water is an integral part of spiritual life, but these questions are not separable from quotidian experiences of boil-water advisories. McGregor explains how her own formal involvement in First Nations water issues came in the wake of the Walkerton Inquiry in 2000, after *E. coli* (again) in the municipal drinking water supply of that Ontario town resulted in the deaths of seven people and illness of thousands more (damage to non-human water bodies was not enumerated). Yet again, the terms of this inquiry underscore the sense in which 'water is, and always has been, viewed as precious by Indigenous communities' (McGregor 2009: 37); *E. coli* is one face of a much more multifaceted relation to water. Belmore's *Temple* evokes the intricate weave of these questions. What is it, she asks, that we have come to worship at this 'temple'? Water's holism as contiguous with Creation? Massive hydrological infrastructure as the 'temples of modernism'? The 'fit and healthy body' of the late capitalist consumer, needing regular 'hydration'? Something else? Maybe each of us – indigenous or not – is interpellated by all of these questions, but in different ways and to different effect.

As we noted earlier, water in the Anthropocene is focused on questions of control, and can be emblemized in terms of a 'drinking water' – the PET bottle of water a fitting symbol for the aqueous Anthropocene where the key concerns are: How will we humans remain hydrated? What provisions will we humans need to weather this storm? Belmore's *Temple* doesn't dismiss the importance of clean drinking water and the technologies needed to ensure it;

rather she places these questions in the context of other nested questions from which they can't be extracted.

As McGregor makes clear, water is not a static 'thing' about which First Nations communities (also far from static) are concerned. Water is also multiple. Even as one of its aspects comes into focus in a specific situation (say, water as a storied ancestor, or water as a problem in the tainted contents of a plugged chlorine injector), all of its aspects are latent in water's depths. Moreover, water isn't something that we simply act on (or act for, or against). McGregor stresses that water has its own responsibilities to fulfil to other beings of Creation. Water is not, in this sense, a passive backdrop or 'resource'. 'Water is a relation,' writes McGregor (2009: 37). The double entendre (whether deliberate or not) of this phrase is telling: water is both what connects different kinds of bodies and water is also kin or one of our 'relatives', a body in its own right. These multilayered logics and orientations of water are evoked in Belmore's *Fountain*. Here, blood turns to water (water is our literal kin), but water also turns to blood: an indictment, a wound, a violence, a colonial incursion. In both McGregor's Anishinabe account and in Belmore's art, watery relations are also gendered. There is a specific responsibility here that is borne by sexually different bodies (recalling the gender-specific 'body burden' of toxic contamination evoked earlier). Josesphine Mandamin and other First Nations grandmothers who have undertaken arduous walks around the Great Lakes in order to heal those water-relations again materialize this responsibility as differently moving with differently gendered bodies. In the past years, many other water walks, river walks, and healing walks have been organized, primarily by indigenous women, as a reminder of our human responsibilities to water.

While the language of gendered responsibility can jar against contemporary Western feminist theories (particularly in a posthuman vein) of gendered relations to the environment, I am equally wary of a view that would categorize these responsibilities as signifying an 'essentialist' indigenous view of either sexual difference *or* water. I am instead interested in how this *Kwe* engagement with water nonetheless resonates with my own understanding of bodies of water, as also situated in the context of sexual difference. When Mandamin asserts that 'as women, we are carriers of water', she means something different than I do when I talk about water, gestationality, and sexual difference in previous

chapters of this book. But we are both responding to the connection between gestationality and water, enacted in different ways across sexually different bodies. Essentialism, like gender, and women, and difference, and water, is a floating signifier, constantly realigning and resignifying in context. Nor should these descriptions be misinterpreted as just another romanticized view of the 'ecological Indian' (Krech 1999). Belmore's work is fiercely contemporary and decidedly unromantic. (There is nothing 'authentically Indian' about the putrefaction of water contained in plastic bags on a wave-shaped concrete plinth – but nor is this 'un-Indian'.) Belmore (quoted in Hill 2008: 69) herself has said that her relationship to traditional Anishinabe culture 'is marked as much by rupture and dislocation as it is by continuity'. In our current situation of planetarity, this is the likely situation of us all in relation to the cultures we 'come from', although to different degrees. A refusal of the ecological Indian doesn't make Belmore's work 'less indigenous', whatever that might mean, but rather reminds us that these indigenous engagements with water respond to a context that is very much *now*, even as it also holds deep pasts. 'Ancient' and 'modern' are false binaries that serve certain ends, usually colonial ones (Muecke 2004), and the alignment of these terms with those of 'ecological' and 'destructive' are similarly untenuous.⁹

I will have to leave the troubling question of whether First Nations and other indigenous people are closer to Nature or better custodians of the Earth to others more willing to engage with those terms of debate. My intention here is rather to underline that the imaginary of water that imbues the accounts offered by Belmore and further elaborated by McGregor is markedly different from Anthropocene water. In these various indigenous understandings, water is understood as alive, rather than as mute matter; it is a relation, rather than a thing. It is emplaced, rather than substitutable. Water 'manifests a relational ethic that connects human and non-human realms' (Strang 2013: 190); it is part of 'all our relations' (La Duke 1999). While McGregor directly affirms these commitments, and *Temple* and *Fountain* more complexly question the ways in which these commitments are variously under occupation, Anishinabe and other indigenous understandings of water render palpable a sense that *water is life*.

I sketch out some of these contours of a water imaginary from a *Kwe* perspective for two reasons. In the first place, I have to acknowledge that my elaboration of 'bodies of water' as a figuration has a long a line of debts, both

direct and indirect. As I've noted, my thinking in this book does not emerge from indigenous traditions, and looks instead to primarily Western feminist and other philosophical resources to articulate a certain kind of alter-imaginary to global/modern water and its Anthropocene counterpart. At the same time, the continued insistence that there is another kind of relation to water that informs other ways of being in the watery world by artists such as Belmore and scholars and activists like McGregor, Grandmother Mandamin, and many, many others clears space for thinking differently with water. I am interested in how a posthuman feminist phenomenology of water, as lively, as gestational, and as relational might intersect with (and learn from) indigenous understandings of water. Secondly, I describe this 'water is life' imaginary in order to think further about the work of aqueous imaginaries in the entanglements of Anthropocene waters. 'Water is life' has become a refrain for many different kinds of protest spearheaded by *Idle No More*, a grass-roots indigenous sovereignty movement that began in Canada in 2012 with a series of teach-ins in the province of Saskatchewan, but has since grown into one of the largest mass indigenous movements in Canadian history. Along with its allies, *Idle No More* seeks a resurgence of indigenous nationhood specifically in the context of protecting the lands and waters from corporate, government, and other forms of environmental exploitation and degradation. Protecting waterways has been one main area of focus. 'Water is Life' is an alternative to modern/global and Anthropocene water. In the repetition of 'water is life' across texts, bodies, and other media, *Idle No More* is an explicit 'doing' of an imaginary that might take greater hold in the traces of these repetitions: *Water is life, water is life, water is life*.

Water is life? Commodity, charity and other repetitions

As Haiven and Khasnabish remind us, radical imagination (i.e. those imaginaries that seek transformation) is something we *do*; it is not a possession to be 'had', but a process that must be continually engaged and reengaged, negotiated and renegotiated. The cultivation of a shared imagination is 'an active process, not a steady state' (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014: 7), and always exists in tension with competing imaginaries. To facilitate its transformative potential requires active sustenance.

I like Haiven and Khasnabish's description of the radical imagination because it tempers a phenomenological reading of my 'bodies of water' figuration as primarily descriptive. As I stressed in Chapter 1, 'bodies of water' is both something we already are and a certain embodied orientation and potential we can amplify. Convoking this embodied figuration with Haiven and Khasnabish's 'radical imagination', we can think harder about how we might enact the kinds of embodied ethics that 'bodies of water' articulates; we can think about the work, or politics, required to sustain the aqueous imaginary it incites. By politics, I quite simply mean those actions we take and decisions we make that are always inadequate to the problems and issues they confront – but which need to be made and taken nonetheless. If ethics are always aspirational and incomplete, politics is what we have to do to 'stay with the trouble', as Haraway would say (2015), with whatever kind of grace and concern and curiosity that we can summon. This work can be – and most often is – partial, strategic, and compromising (in both senses). These actions, or tasks, or materializations, are never in themselves a perfect metonym of an imaginary (i.e. a part that faithfully and felicitously condenses the whole) because this would imply that the imaginary comes first, before the work required to enact it. The work of politics here might be better understood as a trace (a mark, an impression) that signals the imaginary that one hopes to build and sustain. This 'doing' of an imaginary can't present an imaginary wholesale, but engages the work required to keep negotiating it, and proposing it anew.

To think about politics as a trace that marks or impresses also reminds us that these traces work on bodies, situations, and worlds (Ahmed 2004). We might understand this in the terms of the Deleuzian difference and repetition that I outlined in Chapter 2, where every repetition necessarily recasts that which materially conditions it and writes it anew. This understanding of difference and repetition is helpful in thinking through the figuration that 'we are all bodies of water' – yet bodies who are not the same. It might also help us think through how aqueous imaginaries are emergent – coalescing through the work of these bodies, but as Haraway alerts us, with no guarantees. Repetitions have no teleology, no set course, and are always worlded in relation to other repetitions. Repetitions can go askew. New possibilities for materializing bodies emerge, and co-emerge. In short,

while the dominant effect of repeated traces is the reinforcing of a norm, the necessary underbelly of the repetition is its potential unmooring. Bodies of water as an imaginary must swim into being, but the 'doing' of this figuration can also be done 'badly' – that is, reoriented otherwise, again. *That* we repeat and world other bodies and imaginaries is not in question; the question is rather *how*. Not: *will* I repeat as a body of water, but: *how*.

Rebecca Belmore's *Fountain* is one response to this question of 'how'. Her artwork, like the *Idle No More* activism that in part fills out her work's context,¹⁰ engages in the 'doing' of an imaginary that avers that 'water is life'. As noted earlier, this refrain aims to strengthen an alternative to modern/global water, and Anthropocene water, where water is abstracted as nothing more than a resource for human use and human control. On billboards, in tweets, on posters and flyers, on T-shirts, in speeches and teach-ins, in flash-mob performances and round dances, in poetry and in academic scholarship, *Idle No More* participants and supporters *as* bodies of water enact the angry, hopeful, contagious power of this refrain. These bodies repeat this imaginary – 'water is life' – as one way of orienting ourselves to and as bodies of water, in thoughtful relations of care and concern. But Belmore's artwork also does something else: in *Temple*, for example, she provides an uncanny repetition of Anthropocene water as well. All of those little plastic sacs of life, abstracted and contained, displaced from the lake just on the other side of the wall, also repeat the PET bottles that are the metonyms of Anthropocene water – abstracted, controlled, and contained, for human consumption and 'survival'. In the space of *Temple*, Belmore thus opens another space to think again about the work of repetitions.

For, if we look beyond the invocations of *Idle No More*, we see that 'water is life' as an imaginary – or a concept for living otherwise – is indeed being amply repeated. As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, Nestle, a leading multinational bottled beverage company is also selling us 'Pure Life', while filtration systems and ionizers remind us that 'water is life', too (so buy me!). One way of approaching this phenomenon is through the analytic of lively commodities, where, if water is indeed 'life', we might consider what we are doing in the appropriation, buying and selling of this lifeblood. The crucial and timely debates about the commodification of life have been engaged with care elsewhere.¹¹ Here, I am rather interested in the repetition of 'water is

life' as an imaginary. What possibilities are affirmed in this commoditized repetition, and which ones are foreclosed?

Before turning to this analysis, let's consider a few of the other ways in which this repetition happens. While the PET water bottle is one popular canvas for turning 'water is life' into a commodity, we should note that not all bottled water is solely geared towards the bottom line of corporate profit. A new wave of 'ethically branded bottled water' (Hawkins, Potter, and Race 2015) has arisen in the past decade, where consumers are implored to buy specific brands whose profits will be directed towards water-related charitable causes. Choosing a specific brand 'is presented as an act of generosity and connection' (Hawkins, Potter, and Race 2015: 191). While the tagline 'water is life' is not used directly, one of the world's leading purveyors of 'ethical water' is One Water: 'When you drink One, the world drinks too'. The imaginary on offer draws explicitly on the 'water is life' ethos, reminding us: water sustains us all; *we are all in this together*.

I'll return to the implications of this idea, but for now I want to use ethically branded water to make a link to other kinds of philanthropic work that addresses water-related crises in part through promoting the idea that 'water is life'. For example, as water crises mount and access to drinking water around the globe comes increasingly under pressure, 'water is life' has become a campaign slogan for various development organizations and charities focused on Africa and Asia. 'WATERisLIFE' is in fact the name of one large US-based charity whose mission is 'to provide clean water, sanitation and hygiene programs' through 'community-driven' and 'community-engaged' activities in Africa (<http://waterislife.com/about/why-wil>). My aim is not to pass judgement on the efficacy of some of this organization's individual programs – distribution of water filtration drinking straws, pump repair, and water source fencing, just like the donation of bottled water profits, may seem like good enough ideas, and may very well bring some reprieve to parched bodies in dry lands. I am interested rather in how 'water is life' is not just a statement, but like other repetitions, it is the gathering of those that came before, but put forth anew. I am interested in how difference and repetition here are once again shown to be not the autopoietic reworking of a bounded matter simply recapitulating itself in different ways, but always, in feminist terms, made and remade in context, and oriented by various valences of power. In one notable promotional

video of its work, for instance, WATERisLIFE (2014) presents 'The Girl Who Couldn't Cry'.¹² This 1:20 minute video depicts a 'first person' account of a girl 'born into the [unnamed] slums of India' who doesn't cry – not when she finds out 'what [her] mother's job really was' (i.e. a physically abused sex worker), nor when her brother dies a violent death on the slum streets (we're not exactly sure from what; we see only his face-down bloodied corpse as spectacle for the gathering slum-dwellers), nor when she is forced into child marriage to a man with a greying beard (him grinning, her terrified), nor when she, as a young teen, holds her own baby child. The punchline of the video? The lack of crying was 'not because [she] didn't want to, but because [she] couldn't'. The screen then shifts to text that tells us: 'Extreme Dehydration prevents the body from producing tears.' While the work of WATERisLIFE may at first appear to be on same page as *Idle No More* in protesting lack of water infrastructure for communities that have borne the brunt of coloniality and its accompanying gender, class, and racial oppressions, the details of this promo reel show how the repetition of this imaginary goes considerably astray. Rather than *Idle No More's* call for nation-to-nation sovereignty, we have a repetition of racist discourses of white saviourism and of a gendered, brown body. 'White men saving brown women from brown men', indeed (Spivak 1988).

Or, we might also look at 'The Future We Want: Drop by Drop' campaign (2012) organized by the UN Conference on Sustainable Development as part of its Rio+20 activities. This action featured a Europe-wide competition to design a print advertisement that 'inspires the European public in a positive way' ... 'to preserve water, now and for future generations' (<http://www.dropbydrop.eu/en>). Among hundreds of entries (by both amateur and professional designers), many offer renditions of the pervasive 'blue planet', or remind us that 'water is precious', and entreat us to 'save water'. Teardrop shapes are plentiful. Unsurprisingly, one of the key messages of the campaigns is that 'water is life' – a phrase that repeats over and over again in the Drop by Drop images. Of interest to me here is the way that the sheer volume of entries enables us to catch the mobility of this concept in action: single frames of the message are transformed into a moving image, animating the ways in which this phrase becomes variously storied, when scrolled through at speed.

First, while blue is a popular theme colour, the more entries we look at, the more we notice that blue is soon outpaced by white, and even the absence

of colour altogether – a crystal clear transparency. At once reminding us of the ‘modern’ water described by Linton (tasteless, odourless, colourless, placeless, meaningless), we also see how this abstraction of water connects to an imagined sense of purity. Where other colours (brown, black) are used, the deployment is mostly predictable: a black-lipped black mouth is filled with parched and cracked dirt; brown children scrounging the last drops of water from broken earthen vessels. One print titled ‘the global unconscious’ features an unclothed black child sipping directly from a dream-like pool. Here, a blue imaginary lines up with and serves as a point of confluence for greenwashing, whitewashing, and other projects of capitalist and colonial cleanliness. We might contemplate, then, the stakes of claiming that ‘water is life’ in the context of a highly racialized imaginary, or in the context of its corollary – the purported negation of race and its dematerialization surfing across an undertow of transparency and purity.

As repetition continues to do its work, we also note how ‘Water is life’ morphs, in more than a few cases, into the slogan ‘choose life’. Teardrop shapes transmutate into wombs, holding small blue bodies. Water replaces amniotic fluid, or is infused into watery blue babies through a hydrological umbilicus. In other words, a ‘water is life’ imaginary is not all that repeats. We also get a repetition of decades-old anti-abortion imagery that sacralizes the (usually floating, non-contextual) foetus. Here we could ask: what are the stakes of claiming water is life on a terrain where ‘life’ has already been dangerously co-opted?

And again: it is impossible not to note that while some designs feature brown children, these are primarily as parched and dehydrated symbols of loss, misery, and death, yet beacons for the future are blue/white. We can better understand the tethered logic of a white ‘pro-life’ storyline with a brown ‘no future’ message if we consider them in the context of reproductive futurism. One poster featuring a foetus curled up in a blue drop/womb makes this clear: ‘Don’t touch my future’, it insists. Lee Edelman (2004) has argued that we should be suspicious of political agendas that make pleas for the ‘social good’ through the mobilization of a naturalized child-figure. While environmentalism may not have been Edelman’s main target, Nicole Seymour (2013: 7) points out that Edelman’s theory ‘certainly has the potential to spark objections to environmental agendas grounded in heterosexist, pro-reproduction rhetoric’.

Referring to environmental campaigns that often feature ‘children of the future’, Seymour notes that in images such as these ‘concern for the future qua the planet can only emerge, or emerges most effectively, from white, heterosexual, familial reproductivity’ (7). While the children featured in the Drop by Drop campaign are not explicit products of heteronormative unions, the very reliance on the child calls compulsory hetero- and reproductivity into service. In this use of children, environmental problems are moreover ‘domesticated’, rather than being linked to larger structures such as sexism, racism, and classism (Seymour 2013: 7; see also Sheldon 2013). In the context of these arguments, the campaign’s parched brown bodies on the brink of death, alongside its white foetuses floating in pure amniotic waters, are clearly more than statements of fact. Instead, they shore up an imaginary of reproductive futurism that implies whom the future should be for.

A racialized reproductive futurism also helps us make sense of the Drop by Drop winning entry, whose copy reads: ‘Wasting water will kill the future / Change begins at home’. The image features a hand (body out of view) holding a blue (water?) gun, pointed at the head of a white, cherubic baby. The non-sensical deployment of a water gun pointed at a baby in order to signify ‘wasting water’ aside, the fact that this image was chosen as the best hope to ‘inspire’ us to change our orientations to water is troubling in the gendered and raced messages it distils. So, what are the stakes of claiming ‘water is life’ where life-fulfilment is drenched in heteronormativity and family values, saturated by straight time and a progress narrative of messianic future orientation? We might also note that ‘a jury of experts led by France’s advertising guru, Mr. Jacques Séguéla chose the ad from more than 3,500 ads submitted to the competition from 45 European countries’, and the winner took home 5,000 Euros. Not only in the pixels of this picture, but also in the context of its reproduction, questions of for whom and in the name of what this ‘inspiration’ is intended are amplified.

My main point here, though, is that when the repetition of ‘water is life’ is in the service of a racist, colonial, and heteronormatively domesticated reproductive futurism, we start to see how the imaginary offered by *Idle No More*, or explicitly articulated in an Anishinabe worldview, holds no guarantees. The invocation of a reproductive futurism itself alerts us that the future is never simply given, but like water, is made and unmade, and can be oriented through the kinds of imaginaries we support and the conceptual contexts (indigenous

sovereignty, or development messianism?) that they buttress. Similarly ‘water is life’ can be repeated, but to very different ends. As Hawkins, Potter, and Race (2015: 192) argue, the success of ethically branded bottled water (ironically) relies on the contagion of affect and information that have been generated by anti-bottled water activists. Selling water depends on a ‘misrepetition’ or a repetition, redirected. As with bottled water, so too with the Drop by Drop campaign: repetition of ‘water is life’ is both an alibi, and a diversion.

And finally, when we think about the messages propagated by these diversions – ‘when you drink One Water, the whole world drinks too’ – we might be struck to find that in exploring alternatives to an Anthropocene water imaginary, we have uncannily wound up back at that very same place. As the founder and CEO of the ethically branded One Water has argued, ‘people have recognized that water is water; why wouldn’t you opt to buy a brand that changes people’s lives?’ (Fry, quoted in Hawkins, Potter, and Race 2015: 189). Water is water, one water is same as the next – isomorphic, exchangeable, displaced, abstracted. In a queer way, ‘water is life’ comes to support the very idea it hopes to challenge. At its heart, all repetition harbours the potential not only for productively differing, but also for unimaginable mutation – joyful or otherwise. As with all repetitions of ‘life’, germ-lines are not easily contained.

We may start to wonder about the possibilities for reimagining water, when imaginaries and figurations are as vulnerable to redirection as the flows of the river themselves. Yet, with the drums of a round dance echoing in our ears, or the remnants of the ropy red liquid flung from Belmore’s *Fountain* still almost-running down our hands, we might also ask: what are the stakes of giving up on reimagining, and just walking away? Even though imaginaries hold no guarantees, part of my argument in this book is that they are one of the best lifeboats we’ve got. So, perhaps we turn into the rapids, and hold on.

Material imaginaries and other aqueous questions

My wager in this book has been that the figuration of ‘bodies of water’ might enable us to create a more capacious aqueous imaginary for being responsive to other human and non-human bodies with whom we share a planetary existence. ‘Bodies of water’ can be an alternative to the idea of Anthropocene

water, and can resonate with other alternative imaginaries, such as ‘water is life’, despite the risks of co-optation that this involves. But this raises a question: how can figurations – concepts or theories – bring us any closer to the matter of water? Isn’t ‘bodies of water’ just another concept amongst those others – modern water, global water, Anthropocene water – that it seeks to upset? Given the vulnerability of figurations and imaginaries that we’ve just outlined, it may seem a strange place to pin our watery hopes.

My reason for nonetheless pushing the idea of this figuration and the imaginary that ‘bodies of water’ offers is related to the idea that concepts are shot through with materiality. They are inextricable from the matters they ostensibly only ‘theoretically’ describe. Karen Barad’s (2007) theory of intra-action has been widely taken up as a way to think through the entanglement of matters – how, for example, fish are not ‘in’ rivers, but how fish and rivers *world* each other. Rejecting the *a priori* atomism of things, Barad insists that relata do not precede relations; things are rather perpetually worlding – that is materializing from the intra-actions of always emergent things-in-phenomena (136). Intra-actionism, in short, is a helpful framework for getting a grip on the co-extensiveness of worldly matters. Equally helpful, though, is an application of intra-action to conceptual worlds, where figures or concepts also follow from co-emergent entanglement. On this account, we need to consider that concepts do not invent the world *ex nihilo*, nor do they merely describe it. They too are co-emergent with the materialities they grapple with.

As Barad (2008b: 140) argues, ‘discursive practices are not speech acts, linguistic representations, or even linguistic performances’. Importantly, ‘[d]iscursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another’; they are ‘mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity’ (140). Which is to say: Water does not precede the concepts we use to engage it, any more than the words we use to fabricate material reality. Discourses are, in Haraway’s (1988) and Barad’s (2007) terms, boundary-making projects and practices through which the contours of a phenomenon become meaningful, intelligible, and sensible. Concepts and figurations co-habit our world as various companion species, fulfilling various needs and offering different orientations.

Imaginaries, concepts, discourses, and figures all function as invitations to imagine otherwise. They are all moveable bridges; they are normative forces.

If I deploy these terms somewhat loosely, it is specifically because I wish to stress that all of these notions – so often relegated to the side of culture, the immaterial, the representational, and so on – are material-discursive phenomena, tethered to materialities they might purportedly only describe. Throughout this book I have stressed that concepts are embodied – but this doesn't mean that they are simply given. Words too – a theory, a concept, a poem – are multivalent intra-actions of matter and meaning. In this sense, I feel compelled to pull back slightly from Linton's key claim that 'water is what we make of it'. This is of course true, in a number of senses (we imagine water in ways that affect what it is and can be; we make it through our anthropogenic material incursions from megadams to toxic spills to wetlands restorations projects; we also make water in the sense that our own bodies give it shape and form – we are bodies as which it can live). But perhaps Linton does not sufficiently stress that water also makes the 'it', whatever that be. If water is an idea, it is a material, embodied idea. As such, it expresses limits and capacities and potentialities that in part determine which discourses, ideas, concepts, or figures can emerge.

Imaginariness expressed through discourse and concepts – such as 'modern, global water' or 'Anthropocene water', or even 'bodies of water' and 'water is life' – are not mere words to be placed upon the external reality of water, in yet another version of culture framing nature. Imaginaries are made through the entanglements of matters – both wet and wordy. The point here is that Anthropocene thinking and (modern, global) Anthropocene water are not 'false'. Importantly, these are concepts or figures that are entangled in the specific matters of the world to which they respond. 'Water is life' responds to the lively and essential qualities that water holds; but it also responds to a survivalism that is entirely congruent with Anthropocene thinking. We have to acknowledge that Anthropocene water has taken hold because, as of yet, the materiality of water also accommodates this imaginary: water's ontological specificity – its fluidity, gestational capacity, and ability to respond to what and how we make it – is also what makes it a good tool for Anthropocene imaginings. Water *can* be bottled and sold, evidently. Mighty rivers *can* be dammed, for a certain amount of time anyways, and rivers *can* be rerouted to make deserts bloom. Water *can* take an unbelievable amount of our shit – literally and figuratively – and life *can* also mean neoliberal survival in a

colonial world. This material potentiality is what Anthropocene water – with its attention to malleability and control – selects and foregrounds.

Although we may disagree with or challenge many aspects of this worldview, Anthropocene water *does* exist. It is not ‘just’ an idea, fabricated solely by human brains, in an abstract laboratory of thought; it is no less genuine than bodies of water, or Kwe, or *Fountain*. These all emerge from various intersecting material practicalities and possibilities. Material, worldly waters intra-act with human apparatuses of framing, agency, and knowledge (also material) in an articulation that becomes Anthropocene water – or something else. Anthropocene water is not an imposter that must be pushed aside so that the ‘real’ water can stand up. But there is much about water’s materialities to which Anthropocene water as a figure responds rather poorly. In its focus on guaranteeing (non-specific, exchangeable and quantifiable) water as a resource to mostly individual and non-differentiated humans, Anthropocene water dams other aspects of a more robust aqueous imaginary: water’s transcorporeality, its posthuman gestationality, its unknowability, and necessary tracing of difference. In troubling the abstraction and homogenization of Anthropocene water, a posthumanist feminist figuration – bodies of water – can suggest different orientations; different selections of water’s materialities and logics, and an amplification of those.

All of this to say: an imaginary and its figurations hold no guarantees. No imaginary can be installed simply with a triumphant flourish. The answer will always be a question.

What is water?

*here/not here/and mine/not mine/and
(it belongs to itself, Lee Maracle reminds us)¹³ and*

What is water?

(KWE)

What is water?

tiny ocean, and sweat, and pipe, and urine, and PET bottle, and stream, and

What is water?

an alibi, a lover, a debt, a promise,

What is water –