Moving Waters: Hydrosocial Relations in Contemporary North American Poetry

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Abstract

Water shapes human life, but human life also shapes water. In the past two decades, geographers and environmental scholars have popularized the terms "hydrosocial cycle" and "hydrosocial relations" to describe this co-constitutive relationship. In this thesis, I argue that three contemporary North American poets – Erin Robinsong, Claire Wahmanholm, and Natalie Diaz – invite readers to inform their relationship to water with an ethics of care. Through their attention to water's fluid transits through human, glacial, and riverine bodies and their critical engagement with the linguistic, representational, and political apparatuses regulating water, these poets cultivate an embodied awareness of hydrosocial relations. Cultural geographer Jamie Linton's relational-dialectical reading of water, Astrida Neimanis's posthuman feminist phenomenology, and John Durham Peters's philosophy of elemental media provide a theoretical framework for my argument, which places select poems from Robinsong's *Wet Dream* (2022), Wahmanholm's *Meltwater* (2023), and Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) in conversation with hydrology, physiology, time-lapse photography, environmental reports, and museums. Through comparative analysis grounded in diverse theoretical approaches, I argue that Robinsong, Wahmanholm, and Diaz powerfully influence our hydrosocial relations, in turn demonstrating poetry's unique capacity to shape environmental imaginations and invite new relationships with water to emerge.

Résumé

L'eau façonne la vie humaine, mais la vie humaine façonne également l'eau. Au cours des deux dernières décennies, les termes « cycle hydrosocial » et « relations hydrosociales » ont été popularisés par des géographes et des spécialistes de l'environnement pour décrire cette relation co-constituante. Dans ce mémoire, je soutiens que trois poètes nord-américains contemporains - Erin Robinsong, Claire Wahmanholm et Natalie Diaz - invitent les lecteurs et lectrices à configurer leur relation à l'eau à l'aide d'une éthique du *care*. Par leur attention à la circulation fluide de l'eau à travers les corps humains, glaciaires et fluviaux et par leur engagement critique avec les appareils linguistiques, représentationnels et politiques qui encadrent l'eau, ces poètes cultivent une conscience incarnée des relations hydrosociales. La lecture relationnelle-dialectique de l'eau du géographe culturel Jamie Linton, la phénoménologie féministe posthumaine d'Astrida Neimanis et la philosophie des médias élémentaires de John Durham Peters fournissent un cadre théorique à mon argumentaire, qui établira un dialogue entre, d'un côté, des poèmes de *Wet Dream* (2022) de Robinsong, *Meltwater* (2023) de Wahmanholm et *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) de Diaz, et de l'autre, l'hydrologie, la physiologie, la photographie en accéléré, les rapports environnementaux et les musées. Grâce à une analyse comparative fondée sur diverses approches théoriques, je soutiens que Robinsong, Wahmanholm et Diaz influencent puissamment nos relations hydrosociales, fournissant un exemple de la capacité unique de la poésie de façonner nos imaginaires environnementaux et de favoriser l'émergence de nouvelles relations avec l'eau.

Introduction

The Hydrosocial Cycle and the Watery Turn

In July 2023, a slow-moving storm inched its way across the Northeastern United States, traversing Vermont, a small, hilly state streaked with streams and rivers. The Winooski River, which courses through the state capitol, Montpelier, crosses several rural communities, and runs through urban farmland in the city of Burlington, leapt its banks, flooding towns, farms, and roads as it surged into Lake Champlain. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which regularly collects data at various points along the Winooski, the river crested at 23.28 feet as it passed the hydrological marker in the town of Essex Junction, exceeding the previous high-water mark from Hurricane Irene in 2011. Six months later, the Winooski River flooded again, cresting at 21.52 feet ("Winooski River at Essex Junction"). In July 2024, exactly one year after the 2023 flood, the Winooski crested at 20.48 feet, and Vermont was once again partially underwater ("Winooski River at Essex Junction"). What was once referred to as a hundred-year flood occurred three times in twelve months.

An increase in flooding and other water-related weather events is not isolated to Vermont. In *The United Nations World Water Development Report 2020: Water and Climate Change*, the UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme claimed that "water is the primary medium" through which climate change impacts are felt around the world (xi). The report identifies the role water plays in mediating Earth's climate, noting that the hydrological cycle controls "the interaction between the atmosphere and the land surface," and is consequently an essential component of the climate system, disruptions to which pose outsized risks to "the world's most vulnerable" (16, 179). Over 100 pages elaborate on those risks, detailing water's impact on infrastructure, human health and sanitation, agriculture, energy, and urban development. Notably,

pollution from industry, the expansion of oil and gas infrastructure, and most recently, lithium mining have already had catastrophic consequences on communities living on or near impacted lands and waters. Addressing the turbulent waters of climate change is not merely one of risk mitigation, but also one of environmental justice.

Although intensified weather events arising from climate change have pushed water into popular, political, and academic discourses in recent years, Indigenous scholars, leaders, and activists have long emphasized their communities' sacred relationships with water and water's value to all life on Earth. In a North American context, scholars including Jeannette Armstrong (Sylix Okanagan), Layli Long Soldier (Oglala Lakota), Mona Polacca (Hopi-Havasupai), and Renée Elizabeth Mzinegiizhigo-kwe Bédard (Annishinaabeg) have spoken and written powerfully about Indigenous water relations. Meanwhile, Indigenous-led movements for water protection and water justice have gained visibility around the world, such as Mní Wičóni (Water is Life) on Standing Rock; the Nibi Walk; the River Run, organized by Asubpeeschoseewagong First Nation; and the March for Water, Life, and Dignity for all Peoples in Ecuador.

In *What Is Water?: The History of A Modern Abstraction* (2010), geographer Jamie Linton draws attention to water's cultural significance in a Euro-Western context. Tracing water's sacred, secular, and scientific value from seventeenth century natural theology through the development of modern hydrology as a recognized scientific discipline, Linton unveils the various discursive frames influencing Western perceptions of water, with particular emphasis on the hydrologic cycle. Linton rightfully acknowledges that the hydrologic cycle was "an important scientific achievement in understanding the behavior of water in the hydrosphere" and continues to provide critical insight into water's movement through scientific measurement and quantitative approaches (106). However, he draws attention to the 1931 scientific paper that

formalized the hydrologic cycle in modern scientific discourse, authored by an American engineer named Richard Horton. This seminal paper, which introduced the circular diagram of the water cycle present in most elementary school textbooks in North America, described hydrology as a "pure science" responsible for "tracing and explaining the processes and phenomena of the hydrologic cycle, or the natural circulation of water in, on, and over the Earth's surface" (qtd. in Linton 131). Gesturing to the significance of discursive frames, Linton argues that this paper not only defined hydrology as the scientific study of water but also located that study primarily in the hard sciences.

Linton's history of water contributes to a greater body of scholarship exhibiting renewed interest in water as an object of cultural study. Like Linton, several geographers and environmental scholars (Karen Bakker, Rutgerd Boelens, Jessica Budds, Erik Swyngedouw) have recently advanced the concept of the hydrosocial cycle, or the "process by which flows of water reflect human affairs and human affairs are enlivened by water" (Linton 68). In contrast to the hydrologic cycle, which privileges the study of water as a chemical compound, the hydrosocial cycle is equally invested in how human culture, politics, and discourse alter the way water moves around the world. Beyond the fields of geography and environmental science, historians and journalists (Terje Tvedt and Eva Jakobsson, Donald Worster, Erica Gies, Mark Arax) have likewise illuminated the hydrosocial cycle through their scholarship on water management, water infrastructure, and water use in different social and historical contexts.

In literary studies, scholars working in ecocriticism and the blue humanities (including Astrida Neimanis, Steve Mentz, Serpil Opperman, Melody Jue, Hannah Boast, Lawrence Buell, and T.S. McMillin) have similarly engaged with the watery turn. A subfield of the environmental humanities invested in "describing the complex workings of water and imagining ways to change

our relationship to it," the blue humanities strives for a "poetics of planetary water" that "aims to clarify the relationships between humans and water in all its forms and phases" (Mentz 1, 2). Significantly, Mentz argues that the blue humanities "combines water with human ideas," which resonates with Linton's assertion that water is shaped by "meanings, ideas, representations, and powers" while remaining subject to "co-constitutive forces such as climate, season, air pressure, geomorphology, and countless other species that engage with water to make it what it is" (Mentz 2, Linton 34). Drawing from David Harvey's relational dialectics, in which "discourse [is] a fundamental moment of the social process," on par with "material practices, power, social relations, beliefs, and institutions," Linton argues that water is both a physical substance and a cultural idea that is subject to material and discursive influences (32). In a relational-dialectical framework, the hydrologic cycle, purely focused on water's materiality, is an inadequate heuristic with which to understand water. In contrast, the hydrosocial cycle and the blue humanities offer exciting potential, as they attend to cultural perceptions of water and their material effects.

Like Mentz and Linton, cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis is similarly invested in the material and discursive forces shaping human relationships to water. However, while Mentz and Linton attend primarily to the written, visual, and ideological forces shaping water's materiality, Neimanis is more explicitly focused on the transformative role of embodied experience, which she articulates through posthuman feminist phenomenology in *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (2017). Turning to the human body's naturally watery state, Neimanis questions how "our wateriness condition[s] how we live as bodies, and how we become implicated in the bodies of others" through shared fluids (41). Arguing that this requires us "to divest from the idea of bodies as only human," Neimanis develops a posthuman stance that

builds on an ecofeminist tradition conscious of "the connections between the derogation of certain kinds of human bodies, and a mistreatment of environmental bodies" (8). Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty's definition of phenomenology as described experience, Neimanis proposes that a posthuman feminist phenomenology, "as attunement, listening, and observation," can "put us in better contact with our bodies as implicated in those hard-to-fathom phenomena – climate change, ocean acidification, aquifer depletion, and toxic transits half-way round the world – which we are co-worlding all the same" (41). In sum, Neimanis argues that our ideas of water may be productively transformed by becoming more aware of our bodies' watery materiality.

However, Neimanis remains invested in the affective potential of the literary arts. Powerful amplifiers of embodied experience, art and literature can facilitate access to "experiences that are below or beyond human-scaled perception" but nevertheless implicated in the human body's watery materiality (54). Although Neimanis maintains that "stories are not substitutes for embodied experience," her argument that stories and aesthetics "can be avenues for de-sedimenting our human-scaled perspective" resonates with Lawrence Buell's assertion that "[t]he success of all environmentalist efforts finally hinges... on attitudes, feelings, images, narratives" (Neimanis 55, Buell 1). In a posthuman feminist phenomenology, the literary arts, coupled with embodied experience, become potent agents of change inviting a level of attunement that may allow us to imagine and perceive our world – and our material connection to other bodies – differently.

Of the many literary arts, my thesis focuses on contemporary North American poetry and its unique ability to influence our relationship to water. Although Linton and Neimanis are key interlocutors throughout, my research follows recent ecocritical scholarship invested in poetry's

formal affordances amidst the existential crises and material realities of environmental crisis. Anglophone nature poetry and ecocriticism traditionally follow the Romantic tradition, in which poetry "return[s] readers to a sense of being at home on earth... and allow[s] at least momentary solace and escape" from an industrializing world (Keller 10). However, In *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (2018), Lynn Keller identifies a contemporary movement away from this tradition in favor of "often more or less experimental" poetry that "acknowledges the beauty of nature within an exploration of unfolding ecological catastrophe" (19, 20). Likewise, Mandy Bloomfield proposes that contemporary ecopoets eschew the self-expressive lyric or pastoral to draw on the legacy of open-field poetics, better suited to "model more ethical forms of knowledge" amidst "the cognitive, ethical, and representational challenges of the Anthropocene" (71). Shifting fashions in poetic form thus reflect an aesthetic evolution, as poets and critics alike reflect on and interrogate an environmental imagination revolving around a falsely pristine "nature," instead grappling with an increasingly unpredictable, urbanized, and polluted biosphere inseparable from human life.

While less focused on experimental poetics, David Farrier, Margaret Ronda, and Nicole M. Merola are similarly invested in poetry's formal affordances amidst climate change. In *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction* (2019), Farrier claims that "poetry can tacitly assist in the difficult task of approaching the Anthropocene's complex, paradoxical temporality" (6). Literary forms also supplement scientific diagrams and popular environmental discourse that often communicate climate crisis, which Ronda and Merola identify. In *Remainders: American Poetry at Nature's End* (2020), Ronda places modern and contemporary poets in conversation with public figures including Bill McKibben, Rachel Carson, and Naomi Klein, proposing that poems "provide important historiographical

counterpoints" to popular environmentalist discourse and "generate distinct vantages on their contemporary conditions" (5). Merola makes a similar argument, placing literary forms in conversation with the Keeling Curve and other scientific technologies and modes of representation that "capture and make legible the effects of anthropogenic activity" (28). Although scientific discourse provides "baseline knowledge that underwrites environmental affect," Merola posits that the literary arts "trap the more embodied and personal forms that scientific technologies sieve" (28). Collectively, these scholars argue for poetry's rich potential to help us both understand and ethically respond to the environmental crisis, and my thesis floats in their scholarship's rippling wake.

Although there is a breadth of contemporary poets writing about water across oceans and continents,[1] my thesis focuses on Erin Robinsong's *Wet Dream* (2022), Claire Wahmanholm's *Meltwater* (2023), and Natalie Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020). These collections captured my imagination due to their prescient similarities and generative differences. Composed of relatively shorter poems and including a diversity of poetic forms, each collection engages with the human-water relationship through the affected and affective human body, which becomes a "site of exponential material meaning where embodiment meets water" (Neimanis 1). Due to the fluid transits between human bodies and planetary water, most obvious in *Wet Dream* and *Postcolonial Love Poem* but present in *Meltwater* as well, each collection emphasizes the permeability of the human body, troubling the human-nature binary to reveal the embodied implications of a changing earth. Critical differences also emerge: Robinsong makes scalar and sometimes abstract leaps, drawing connections between planetary rhythms and quotidian life,

[1] Alice Oswald, Jon Whyte, Julianna Spahr, Koleka Putuma, Tracey K. Smith, Craig Santos Perez, Erín Moure, Ofelia Zepeda, Stephen Collis, Dorsía Smith Silva, Lisa Robertson, Brenda Hillman, and Kaia Sand are but some of the contemporary poets who engage with water in their work.

Wahmanholm's serial poems are imbued with the responsibility and anxiety of motherhood, and Diaz's collection responds to, in part, a legacy of settler-colonialism. Collectively, the collections reflect the repetitive difference Astrida Neimanis identifies in water itself: all poets write about water, but differently. Reading them together illuminates water's social relations: although we are all made of water, how we relate to and represent water depends on history, context, geography, and language, factors that similarly influence how ongoing and accruing water crises impact individuals and communities differently and beget myriad responses of varying forms.

Chapter one considers two poems from Robinsong's *Wet Dream:* "A Reply," which opens the collection, and "Rain on the Inarticulate." Despite a dearth of critical scholarship on *Wet Dream,* my reading resonates with the insights of Emily Skov-Nielsen and Klara du Plessis, early reviewers of the collection who respectively identify Robinsong's "love for liquefying borders and distinctions" and praise *Wet Dream'*s astute attention to "the everyday delights equally as it expands towards the universal." Employing the water cycle as a heuristic lens while following Astrida Neimanis's posthuman feminist phenomenology, I propose that "A Reply" frames listening as an embodied, erotic practice, while "Rain on the Articulate" facilitates scalar transitions between the human and the planetary while interrogating the co-constitutive relationship between language and water. In addition to Neimanis, John Durham Peters's philosophy of elemental media, in which water and the body are critical media for communicating meaning, and Audre Lorde's conception of the erotic as a "source of power and information" inform my reading of "A Reply" (Lorde 12). In my reading of "Rain on the Inarticulate," I argue that watery imagery facilitates smooth scalar transitions between what Timothy Clark describes as the human scale experience and the planetary scale, locating bodily functions within the larger rhythms of the hydrologic cycle (100). Finally, I apply Jamie Linton's

concept of "hydrolectics" to read language and water as co-constitutive forces in "Rain on the Inarticulate," illustrating water's material connection to thought and speech through a relational-dialectical process.

In chapter two, I turn to Claire Wahmanholm's *Meltwater,* which draws together the divergent timelines of human growth, parenthood, and environmental degradation. Like *Wet Dream,* there is scant published scholarship on *Meltwater,* a lack that extends to Wahmanolm's earlier collections *Wilder* (2018) and *Redmouth* (2019). However, Kathryn Nuernberger's identification of Wahmanholm's ability to "rouse a reader's complacency with a clarion call... assigning humans a place in the ecosystem that is responsible, responsive, and life-giving" in her review of *Wilder* extends to *Meltwater* (186). Among the many dazzling poems in the collection, I focus on "Glacier" [We waited behind the velvet rope] and "Glacier" [It is everywhere] from the four-poem "Glacier" series, originally inspired by Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch,* an installation art project that extracted glacial ice from Greenland to display in outdoor exhibitions around Europe **(**Wahmanholm, "Interview with Claire Wahmanholm about *Meltwater"***)**. I read the "Glacier" poems in conversation with yet another form of glacier art: James Balog's Extreme Ice Survey, a time-lapse photography project tracking glacial recession around the world. Although both Wahmanholm's poems and Balog's photography attempt to capture the "slow violence" of glacial recession, I argue that Wahmanholm's poems more effectively represent glacial recession's conflicting temporalities and bewildering consequences through their attention to human emotion and experience (Nixon 3). In conclusion, I propose that despite the relative accessibility of time-lapse photography, poetry is better equipped to represent and respond to large-scale environmental calamity, and thus has much to offer environmental discourse.

Chapter three attends to Natalie Diaz's tremendous *Postcolonial Love Poem.* Of the three poets I consider in this thesis, Diaz has received the most critical attention: *Postcolonial Love Poem* was short listed for the National Book Award and won the Pulitzer Prize in 2021. My reading of "The First Water Is the Body," first written in response to the 2016 #NoDAPL movement and the Standing Rock water protection camps, follows Stephanie Papa's exemplary reading of the poem as an act of translation. However, while Papa reads the poem as a "cartographic 'wondering' across linguistic and human/non-human bodily landscape," I engage Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel de Certeau's conceptions of *bricolage* and "making do," coupled with Arseli Dokumaci's theorization of shrinkage, to interpret "The First Water Is the Body" as an act of poetic improvisation (Papa 242, de Certeau 29). Although the English language does not offer the same affordances as the Mojave language, Diaz subverts these constraints through repeated translation and poetic technique, repurposing the English lexicon to convey the Mojaves' embodied relationship with the river to the English-speaking reader through a poetic *bricolage.*

Likewise, I argue that in "*exhibits from* The American Water Museum," Diaz improvises within the confines of the museum, poetically repurposing institutional space to reveal the reader-visitor's embodied relationships with water. My interpretation resonates with Audrey Goodman's argument that *"exhibits from* The American Water Museum" "dismantles the premise of the museum" to establish "new spaces for paying tribute to the elemental foundations of land and life" (Goodman, "Poet Warriors" 47). Further, I follow Amy Lonetree's proposal that museums, while often imbued with harmful colonial legacies, are spaces that can be powerfully reclaimed. Building on this scholarship, I read "*exhibits from* The American Water Museum" as a creatively curated poem that, like "The First Water Is the Body," works under an existing

constraint – that of the institutional space – yet nevertheless poetically repurposes that space through poetic *bricolage,* inviting an alternative understanding of water and power in a settler-colonial context.

Coupling an ecocritical approach with a diversity of theoretical lenses, each chapter follows an interdisciplinary method that heeds Hannah Boast's call to "push against conventional disciplinary boundaries of academic research, which restrict our ability to understand and respond to the environmental crisis" (6). Integrating basic hydrology, physiology, and cultural geography while drawing from media studies, critical improvisation studies and posthuman feminist phenomenology, I argue that Robinsong, Wahmanholm, and Diaz contribute to a radical reconstitution of our hydrosocial relations. Through their creative engagement with the water cycle, glacial recession, and the various apparatuses regulating water's inequitable flows, their poetry portrays water as at once embodied, omnipresent, and animate. As Robinsong, Wahmanholm, and Diaz invite their readers to attune themselves to their own watery bodies, they support the development of new relationships with water as it drips, gurgles, and surges through our bodies and our world. In turn, they reaffirm the power and potential of poetry, which like science, political action, and policy reform, affords an opportunity for meaningful material change.

Chapter One

Poetic Mediations: Permeable Bodies and Liquid Relations in *Wet Dream*

Rich with intimate descriptions of the human body and reverberating with meteorological and atmospheric forces, Erin Robinsong's *Wet Dream* (2022) adopts an intimate and erotic approach to global phenomena. Embodied descriptions of liquids, leakage, and language resonate throughout *Wet Dream* as Robinsong deftly locates the individual human body in the planetary rhythms of the water cycle. Inviting a deeper connection to our watery environment, *Wet Dream* utilizes the affective and affected human body as a medium through which to realize the intimate relationship between human and planet. Like water, *Wet Dream* flows together in cyclical continuity. Although divided into five sections, liquid imagery circulates throughout the collection like water and air circulating the globe. Formal choices undergird the collection's thematic continuity, as the use of repetition, wordplay, and the relative lack of punctuation invite the reader to approach *Wet Dream* as a related whole composed of different parts. Even the table of contents in the printed edition forms a spiral, a continuous and nonlinear form that appears throughout the collection via direct reference and through the repetition of critical themes and concerns that create a sense of circularity and return.

While all of *Wet Dream* deserves attention, this chapter focuses on "A Reply" and "Rain on the Inarticulate." These poems reflect critical concerns that resonate throughout the collection: poetic form, the human body, sound and language, and scalar transitions. The first poem in the collection, "A Reply," emphasizes the act of listening and the liquid human body's connection to the Earth, anchoring the collection in the body while emphasizing sound, voice, and relationality. "Rain on the Inarticulate" engages more deeply with the transition between human and planetary scales and the dialectical relationship between water and language. Both poems relocate the

human experience in the rhythms of the planet and remind us that our liquid, porous bodies are, like water and poetry, media for connection and transformation. Further, both poems employ a form of poetic citation, referencing William Wordsworth ("A Reply") and T.S. Eliot ("Rain on the Inarticulate") to remind readers that poetry, like water, moves through time and space in different repetitions.

Water is a powerful heuristic for *Wet Dream*, as its movement through the water cycle provides a conceptual framing for the repetition and scalar transitions that occur throughout the poems. Water moves in a cyclical pattern as it falls from the atmosphere as rain, exists as fresh or saltwater on Earth, freezes and thaws, and evaporates to return to the sky. Cycling through oceans, rivers, and air, water naturally transitions between scales and repeats continuously through different iterations:

> We know that water on the earth is finite... all water that is here, on, in and hovering above our planet, has always been here. *Each watery singularity has been somewhere, sometime before.* Yet, while the water that moves through these cycles is always 'the same', it is by no means undifferentiated. What repeats is always difference. (Neimanis 86)

Water cycles through the human body in a similar series of repetitions. Bodily water establishes a material continuity between the human body and the environment: we imbibe water through drinking, our intestines extract water from food, and we excrete water through our pores and our bladders in a constant state of fluid exchange. These watery connections between human and planet shape *Wet Dream's* conception of the erotic. Although the title wryly gestures to a literal wet dream and its associated bodily fluids, Robinsong's emphasis on continuity and intimacy resonate with a Lordean erotic that transcends a purely sexual realm to become "a well of

replenishing and provocative force" (Lorde 11). In *Wet Dream,* water – appearing as drool, sweat, fluid in the brain, ocean waves, vapor, and river water – provocatively bridges the scalar gap between human and planetary, resulting in an intimacy that empowers the reader to attend to water with love and care.

Sound, air and language are equally significant in Robinsong's poetry. In *Wet Dream,* speaking, listening, thinking, and writing poetry are embodied, physical, and relational experiences not unlike the processes of drinking, excreting, and cycling water through the human body and the water system at large. Like water, language and sound create embodied, intimate relations. Yet water remains central: a medium of perception and communication, water facilitates thought and language on a physiological level. The scholarship of John Durham Peters, Astrida Neimanis, Audre Lorde, Timothy Clark, and Jamie Linton informs my reading of *Wet Dream,* in which the body, the planetary waters that course through it, and poetry itself become media through which to connect with and relate to our watery world across multiple scales of being.

John Durham Peters's philosophy of elemental media provides a theoretical framework for reading the body and water as media for intimacy, communication, and connection. In *The Marvelous Clouds* (2015), Peters argues that all media, whether natural or digital, are "vessels and environments, containers of possibility that anchor our existence and make what we are doing possible" (2). Citing scholars ranging from the classical pragmatists to Martin Heidegger, Peters reminds us that "[w]ell into the nineteenth century, when one spoke of *media,* one typically meant the natural elements such as water and earth, fire and air" (2). As "repositories of readable data and processes that sustain and enable existence," the elements, like newspapers or the internet, afford communication, influence our behaviors, and thus "anchor our being

profoundly" (4, 14). This is especially true of the human body, which Peters describes as "the ultimate infrastructure" (14). Disclosing being through speaking, listening, or simply existing, the body's "meanings are not principally those of language or signs," but emerge from "vaguer limbic fluids" (14, 6). In "A Reply," that limbic fluid – water – becomes a medium for thought, communication, and meaning as it cycles through body and planet.

Liquid Sound: Embodied Listening in "A Reply"

Through its emphasis on listening and voice, "A Reply" creates a sense of relationality and attunement between the reader, the poet, and the larger planetary rhythms influencing the poet's craft. The title "A Reply" suggests that the poem, and consequently the collection, is part of a pre-existing, ongoing verbal exchange, while inviting connection to William Wordsworth's "Expostulation and Reply," which opens the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. "Expostulation and Reply" is a fitting poem to reference at the beginning of *Wet Dream* for reasons other than the resonance between titles. Wordsworth incorporates the voices of two human speakers, creating a plurality of poetic voices while simultaneously gesturing to connection and correspondence with more than human voices: it is "things forever speaking" that invite him to "dream [his] time away" (lines 26, 32). Likewise, connection and correspondence are paramount in "A Reply": geometric parallels between water waves and sound waves establish links between the human and the planetary, while the use of repetition and wordplay generates sonic and rhythmic relationships between words and lines. "A Reply" simultaneously foregrounds the human body through the image of the ear and the concept of leakage, establishing the body as a porous site of liquid potential.

The image of the ear in the opening lines of "A Reply" introduces critical themes that resonate throughout the rest of *Wet Dream*: sound, the body, and water. The conduit through

which the human body receives sonic vibrations from the surrounding environment, ears afford the acts of listening, reply, and response. Hearing is also deeply entangled with waves and water: "[v]ibrating objects produce sounds... this vibrations [sic] pressure pulses into air molecules, better known as sound *waves*," which ultimately "transform into *liquid* vibrations in the inner ear and the cochlea" (Sánchez López de Nava & Lasrado, emphasis mine). The ear is thus a critical symbol through which to begin "A Reply" and *Wet Dream*, as sound, communication, and water coalesce within it. Robinsong's early emphasis on the ear invites further connection to "Expostulation and Reply," in which the poet-speaker states that "We cannot bid the ear be still; / Our bodies feel, where'er they be" (lines 18-19). Wordsworth's description of the ear's capacity to hear and sense the natural world, which prompts embodied feelings "Against or with our will," foregrounds a permeable human body and the affective power of sound (line 20).

While the ear's appearance in "Expostulation and Reply" is brief, Robinsong uses the ear as a grounding device in "A Reply," repeatedly returning the reader to the human body. This is particularly apparent in the opening lines, in which the repetition of the word "ear" anchors the stanza in the act of listening:

> I laid my ear on the ground
> my ear on the ceiling
> my ear on your voice I could no longer hear
> I heard it, and I lay (Robinsong, "A Reply" lines 1-4)

These lines produce a sense of spatial disruption as the poet-speaker seems to simultaneously lay their ear on the ground, the ceiling, and the distant voice itself. While this creates a somewhat disorienting effect, the repetition of "ear" and the stanza's lone rhyme, between "ear" and "hear," draws the reader's focus not to where the poet-speaker is, but to how they listen (line 3). The

bracketing of the stanza with “I laid... I lay” similarly encourages the reader to focus on the acts of listening, as the poet-speaker lays their ear against a surface, and lying, grounding the reader not in a particular place, but in specific bodily practices (lines 1, 4).

The use of repetition and wordplay in the second stanza further emphasizes the ear’s importance, grounding the poem and the reader in a liquid human body. The ear in question is not only the ear in the poem, but the ear of the reader, as Robinsong utilizes sound and rhythm to generate connections between seemingly disparate words and lines. While formally separate, the first and second stanzas are sonically connected through enjambment: “I lay // my whole ear” (lines 4-5). Later in the stanza, the sound “ear” repeats, but in a different iteration:

> the space and slept eerily in those folds
>
> and slept in those eerie folds (lines 7-8)

In these lines, paronomasia allows for a connection between two seemingly distinct words – “ear” and “eerie” (lines 1, 7). While the auditory connection is clear, a physiological connection is also present: human ears possess anatomical folds, including the antihelix, which “represents a folding of the conchal cartilage,” and the helix, or the rolled exterior rim (National Human Genome Research Institute). Robinsong thus invites the reader to use their ear to make the connection between the two stanzas and between the words “ear” and “eerie” (“A Reply” lines 1, 7). While this alone invites the reader back into their own body, the physiological connection between “ear” and “eerie folds” further centers the body as the site of connection and attunement (lines 1, 7).

Turning its attention to the voice that the poet-speaker listens for, the third stanza utilizes the repetition of specific geometric forms. The repeating image of the wave and the spiral suggests that through listening, one connects to water as it cycles through the planet on a larger

scale. Since sounds, including voices, move along the pattern of a wave, a geometric continuity immediately arises between the voice and water. The spiral creates another geometric parallel that allows relationships between the human, the voice, and water to emerge. Appearing in watery iterations such as whirlpools, nautiluses, and sea snails, the spiral also appears in both the human and the voice: "The voice I heard spirals, you could / say drills" (lines 9-10). Later, Robinsong utilizes epistrophe to further associate human life with the motion of the voice, as the poet-speaker claims that being a person is itself a "spiralic task / ridiculous task / often very shitty task" (lines 14-16). Repetition is also present in the voice's cyclical movement, which mirrors the incessant, cyclical course of ocean water: "it moves away and returns / away and closer," the movement away always associated with a coming closer and a return, albeit differently, like waves breaking along a shore (lines 20-21). Through this geometric and auditory connection, a deeper relationship between human, voice, and water emerges, in turn facilitating a deeper connection to the planet at large.

While "A Reply" undoubtedly emphasizes listening and sound as means of connection and embodiment, the ear reminds us that bodily fluids are another media through which to form connection. Robinsong elaborates this through the concept of leakage, which implies a permeable boundary: water leaks through the roof of a dwelling or out of a pipe or bag while sunlight leaks through a window or under a door. Leakage is also bodily, as tears leak from ducts or urine leaks from a full bladder. While the geometric continuity between wave and spiral creates a formal relationship between the listener, the voice, and the cyclical, spiraling water cycle, the material, fluid process of leakage embeds the body in the environment, establishing a material and embodied relationship between human and planet.

In “A Reply,” leakage first appears when the poet-speaker writes that their brains are “leaking outwards across the day” in a “leakage of brains” (lines 23, 25). Like the ear, the brain is significant on multiple levels. Critical to perception and understanding, the brain requires a substantial amount of fluid. Furthermore, the brain is the neural site through which humans process language and is integral to speaking and listening. The image of the leaking brain thus implies a physical, embodied reply, as the fluids that govern language and response leak into the environment. Other bodily fluids soon follow, further emphasizing the body’s permeability as human liquids meld with the environment:

> The green milk
> of me wove
> into a wave of this place
> an ear of it (lines 29-31)

The word “wave” connotes water’s continuous motion, suggesting that the place into which the poet-speaker’s milky, material wetness weaves is similarly watery. While the place is not explicitly an ocean, lake, or river, it shares the fluid motion of water, and the form of the wave reminds the reader both of water’s omnipresence and the fluid connections between human and place. Furthermore, by weaving into “an ear” of the place, the poet-speaker becomes a vessel for listening, rather than speaking (line 31). The poet-speaker awaits a reply from the place, rather than attempting to speak for it, which suggests that the place possesses its own voice and refigures the place of the poet in the relational acts of speaking and listening.

If listening and replying are critical to developing relationships and connection, the body is also essential. Recalling Peters’s description of the body as “the ultimate infrastructure,” the liquid ear in “A Reply” demonstrates how bodily fluids receive sound and language, while the

leaking brain illustrates the fluid connections between human and environment (14). The porous, moist body in the final stanzas further reveals the body's role in relating to and engaging with a place through fluid, rather than verbal, exchange:

I laid it down

on the topmost layer
of time where this
era is hotly composting

and I dampened it
I dribbled on it
I leaked
I gave it my moistures
I gave it my heat (Robinsong, "A Reply" lines 32-41)

Evoking the erotic through the words "moistures" and "heat," these lines imply a sensuous and intimate exchange between the poet-speaker and the place (line 40, 41). Rather than speak to the listening place, the poet-speaker leaks. Listening through leakage emphasizes both water and the body's role in hearing, replying, and relating to the surrounding world.

The embodied, liquid intimacy and erotic undertones in these concluding lines invite a connection to Astrida Neimanis's posthuman feminist phenomenology[2] and Audre Lorde's

[2] Neimanis locates her phenomenology in the tradition of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whom she claims "taught us that existence *is* embodiment – that we only know the world through our experience of being embodied" (59). Her specific phenomenology is posthuman, as it engages with both human bodies of water and nonhuman bodies of water, and feminist, in so much as she situates her work within an ecofeminist tradition. In her reading of shared waters, she draws from Gilles Deleuze's theory of repetition in *Difference and Repetition.*

conception of the erotic. Like Robinsong, Neimanis and Lorde continually return to the body as a site of potential. Although Neimanis's work is posthuman, she emphasizes the body in her approach. For Neimanis, "changing how we think about bodies means changing how we think about water," an epistemological shift that is not only "an ontological imperative, but an ethical one" (19, 42). Bodily attunement allows radical care and reciprocity to emerge between human and planetary bodies of water.

Although Lorde is equally concerned with the body, she is more interested in its erotic potential than its wateriness. However, similarities exist between these seemingly divergent concerns. While for Neimanis, we all "gestate in water" and share in its creative and nurturing force, for Lorde the erotic is similarly "the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge" (Neimanis 86, Lorde 14). Like water and sound, the erotic crosses boundaries and forms connections between seemingly disparate spheres:

> The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic – the sensual – those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings. (Lorde 14)

While Neimanis suggests that incomplete attention to our shared wateriness inhibits an ethical connection to planetary water, Lorde argues that a failure to attend to the erotic prevents radical connection between the spiritual and political. In both scenarios, embodied experience – whether connection with physical wateriness or the sensual attunement to deep feeling – allows for seemingly disparate bodies or spheres to come into relation with each other.

"A Reply" achieves the bodily awareness Neimanis and Lorde champion through the image of the ear, the leaking brain, and the damp, moist body. Meanwhile, the erotic appears in Robinsong's attention to sensation, feeling, and connection through the embodied acts of listening and replying through fluid mediation and exchange. Lorde reminds us that this attention to the body, and to feeling, is powerful, as "[r]ecognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world" (17). Likewise, recognizing our own liquidity invites a deeper connection between human and planet. The sonic, geometric, and fluid transits in "A Reply" foreground our liquid bodies as media for connection and communication, allowing us to imagine a different way of being in relationship with our watery world.

Peristaltic Waves and the Sweat Cycle: Scalar Relations in "Rain on the Inarticulate"

"Rain on the Inarticulate," while equally concerned with water, sound, and language, engages with another critical concern that proliferates in *Wet Dream:* the question of scale. Scale poses a variety of conceptual and material challenges, and numerous scholars grapple with scale in relation to climate change, history, ethics, literature, and art (Horn, Chakrabarty, Nixon, Shotwell, Morton, Neimanis, Clark). Of these many approaches, Neimanis's posthuman feminist phenomenology and Timothy Clark's literary-critical framework for reading scale provide useful yet divergent frameworks through which to read scale in "Rain on the Inarticulate." Focused on both human and non-human bodies of water, posthuman feminist phenomenology strives to make "hard-to-grasp scales of living in which our watery bodies participate become less abstracted, potentially more sensory," thus bringing the human experience in touch with the planetary (Neimanis 42). Seeking a smooth scalar transition between human and planet,

Neimanis attempts what Clark deems nearly impossible in his analysis of scale in *Ecocriticism on the Edge: the Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015).

Clark identifies three scales of critical reading: the personal or individual scale of the human psyche, the spatial scale of culture, and the planetary scale of Earth and its inhabitants. While Clark suggests that the second scale – that of culture, which situates a storyline within the social historical context of its time – is the most broadly accepted and utilized by literary critics, the first and third scales are most apparent in "Rain on the Inarticulate." In Clark's analysis, reading literature at the first, or individual scale, ultimately inhibits any sort of appreciation for larger scale forces. Rather, the first scale privileges personal relationships between individuals and families, leading to "entrapment that forecloses the thinkability of other modes of life" (100). In the context of everyday survival, family drama, and interpersonal conflicts, large scale climatic events fade to the background, "almost something to laugh at or dismiss in anger in the struggle for economic safety" (99). On the contrary, at the third, or planetary, scale, "scale effects and a certain impersonal ecological dynamic start to become visible and shade out more conventional considerations" (100). Larger forces come into view, while the nuance of interpersonal relations or contemporary social concerns fall to the wayside. Spatially and temporally expansive, this scale compels the reader to situate a literary work in a deep-time context far beyond the first scale's interpersonal intimacies. For Clark, a reading on the third scale "does not deepen so much as flatten" the human experience to amplify more-than-human processes such as hydrologic and geologic changes, technological impacts, and extraction (104). Individual actions and feelings fade as material agency enters the foreground.

Robinsong's attention to the planetary scale in "Rain on the Inarticulate" does not flatten the human experience, as Clark suggests, but amplifies intimate, embodied experience as a

means for more deeply connecting with the planetary scale. While Clark asserts that reading at "the third scale underlines the fragility and contingency of effective boundaries between public and private, objects and persons, the 'innocent' and 'guilty', human history and natural history, the traumatic and the banal," Robinsong manages to dissolve these boundaries through the human body's wet materiality (106). Rather than sacrifice the human for the planetary, Robinsong uses the human body as a medium through which to establish affective connections between the seemingly disparate scales, deepening the sense of intimate and embodied relationship established in "A Reply."

On a formal level, "Rain on the Inarticulate" resembles the cyclical, repetitive nature of the water cycle and critiques firm boundaries between human and planet. The poem is written in couplets, which provide a sense of formal repetition. However, the lack of end-stopped lines creates a continuity between the couplets that render them difficult to read in isolation from each other. Where Robinsong does employ punctuation, it occurs mid-line, further disrupting any formal isolation the couplets could afford. Anticipating and underscoring the poem's thematic engagement with the continuous relationship between bodily and planetary fluids, this formal leakage formally embeds the human body in larger planetary concerns. The couplets' continuity mirrors water's continual, cyclical transit through the water cycle, wherein all water remains connected and repeats in different iterations, not unlike the couplets themselves.

The poem's opening lines employ human tears and perspiration to establish a connection between the human body and the ocean. Like "A Reply," geometry and physiology facilitate this scalar transition:

In the dream my eyes emitted a fluid

That was a fractal of the sea cried to scale

In a liquidity lent everywhere, a sea folded

In and leaked in return, perspired by way of

Turning round, as hydrology's juice, as galactic

Pigment, as a tear is the totality of oceanic

Feeling. The eye the organ most limited to surfaces

Has another sense which emits a liquid exigence ("Rain on the Inarticulate" lines 1-8)

The ocean's salty totality materializes in the human tear, which is "a fractal of the sea" and a bodily expression of emotion (line 2). An apt metaphor for scalar significance, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a fractal as "a mathematically conceived curve such that any small part of it, enlarged, has the same statistical character as the original" ("Fractal, N."). Through the fractal's mathematical continuity, Robinsong correlates the ocean, which may be perceived as a non-human, unfeeling expanse, with the emotional fecundity of human tears. Meanwhile, the eye's physiology deepens the connection between body and planet. Like the ear, the eye is an organ of perception that requires liquid to function, made explicit in the eye's "liquid exigence" (line 8). Not only does the tear mirror the ocean in its totality, eyes require water to perceive the world.

A scalar mirroring similarly occurs in the opening lines' description of perspiration. In describing perspiration as the "sea folded / In and leaked in return," Robinsong creates another parallel between the planetary water cycle and the cycling of water in and out of the body: water enters the body to exit as sweat, a continual exchange not unlike rainfall and evaporation (lines

3-4). Beyond the scalar parallel between the hydrologic cycle and physiologic cycle of sweating, the porous relationship between body and environment becomes clear, as a direct exchange of fluids occurs through perspiration's liquid transit. Perspiration highlights the similarities between bodily water, oceans, and rainfall, all of which contribute to the infinite cycling of water through human and nonhuman bodies across different scales of experience.

The final three couplets of "Rain on the Inarticulate" form another scalar transition between body and ocean while reemphasizing the body's porosity through peristalsis. Initiated by swallowing, peristalsis is a series of involuntary wave-like muscle contractions that move food and fluids through the body's intestines, extracting liquid and nutrients. Reminding us that the body ingests water through drinking and eating and excretes it through digestion, peristalsis, like perspiration, reveals the body's ongoing, fluid exchange with the environment. Perhaps counterintuitively, this involuntary, embodied process allows the speaker to grow closer to planetary waters and rhythms:

> [...] I grow whet & planetary
>
> As a creature
>
> Whose organs clean the water
>
> On a Monday as perpetual liquid vastness
>
> Passes through borders of continuous peristalsis (lines 62-66)

While tears and perspiration open the poem and connect the body to the ocean, the body's internal rhythms close the poem with another reference to water – through peristaltic waves. The body once again becomes a fractal of the ocean in its wave-like motion, linking the individual,

embodied experiences of digestion, sweating, and crying to the larger movements of planetary water. Rather than flatten the human experience to privilege the global, Robinsong amplifies our intimate, bodily connection to the rhythms of planetary water, locating the human experience in the vast cycling of fluid that sustains life, thought, and language across all scales.

Fluid Mediations: Language, Water, and Oil in "Rain on the Inarticulate"

Like "A Reply," "Rain on the Inarticulate" is also concerned with questions of sound and voice, specifically language. The title, a reference to T.S. Eliot's poem "East Coker,"[3] gestures to the poem's deeper concern with the dialectical relationship between language and water. Describing the challenges of expression and articulation, Eliot writes:

> [...] And so each venture
>
> Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
>
> With shabby equipment always deteriorating (lines 181-3)

Drawing from these lines, Robinsong writes:

> In this rain on the inarticulate, as Eliot almost said
>
> To soften the shabby equipment, swell it, warp it ("Rain on the Inarticulate" lines 13-14)

Like the reference to Wordsworth in "A Reply," Robinsong's reference to Eliot achieves multiple ends: first, she creates a form of poetic repetition, in which Eliot's words repeat differently, mirroring the water cycle's different repetitions. Second, Robinsong implies that water is a medium for language, and consequently, for communication and perception. Reading the shabby equipment as language itself, rain softens language, and will ultimately "rot it, make it sprout," composting one linguistic regime and generating another, possibly more capacious iteration,

[3] In the notes to *Wet Dream,* Robinsong writes that "rain on the inarticulate" is a reference to "raid on the inarticulate" in Eliot's "Burnt Norton," the first poem in his *Four Quartets.* However, when searching for this line myself, I found it in "East Coker," the second of the *Four Quartets.*

which water facilitates as language literally “Surfaces from water’s warpings” (lines 15, 16). If language orders social experience, water does too. This recalls Peters’s elemental philosophy of media, in which media do not only sustain and enable existence but are “civilizational ordering devices” (5). While references to physiology in “A Reply” and “Rain on the Inarticulate” illustrate how water sustains us biologically, in these lines water sustains language itself.

The poem’s structure reflects the relational, cyclical rhythms permeating the relationship between water and language. Shortly after Robinsong references Eliot, she acknowledges the power of speech to shift how we imagine our watery relationships, and in turn, water itself:

> To speak of water’s entanglements is to dissolve
>
> All lineation. Relation is osmotic, cosmic, contagious (lines 19-20)

Although water is critical in these lines, speaking is equally important. Following Neimanis’s argument that “writing, images, objects, and other art forms can [give] us access to an embodied experience of our wateriness that might otherwise be too submerged, too repressed, or too large and distant... to readily sense,” language becomes as critical as water in governing our relationships and structuring our worlds (55). However, as the poem continues, Robinsong returns to water as the ultimate mediator, asserting that “Water is the transportation // System of all thought” (lines 34-35). Language and poetry may be able to intervene in how we understand our watery relations, but only in so much as water enables their existence.

Jamie Linton’s concept of hydrolectics helps clarify the relationship between water and language in the poem. Like Peters, Linton views water as a medium that organizes and influences human life. Like Neimanis, he argues that discourse about water is equally influential, particularly regarding our relationship to water and nature. Linton resolves this tension through relational dialectics, which “dissolves such dualisms by considering how each term of the binary

is dependent on – and is internally related – to the other" (28). Furthermore, the relationship between water and language allows thoughts and ideas to emerge. In Linton's relational dialectics, thoughts and ideas "are realized in the marriage of the spiritual and the physical" (40). Thoughts therefore "cannot be considered to occur independently of their relations with the materiality of non-human nature, the material practices of people, discourse, representation, and so on" (41). Robinsong's movement from water to language to water again reflects this internal relation. Water makes language sprout, while language facilitates new forms of understanding water, which are in turn transported by water across space and time.

In a hydrolectical framework, thought and being are watery and material processes. Linton reminds us that "every cell of our body contains water and functions by virtue of water" (223). The references to our liquid physiology in "A Reply" and "Rain on the Inarticulate" likewise assert the body's material entanglement with water and identify water's role in our ability to perceive, think, and communicate. Although we mediate water through language, engineering, and science, water is always mediating us, which Robinsong explicates in the following lines:

> [...] Like a ferry that is the water itself
>
> Up hydrology's workings we rose
> Or sank, lugubrious
>
> Or levain, in flesh's sodden opulence
> Appearing as a solid, then a vapour ("Rain on the Inarticulate" lines 36-40)

Dictated by hydrology's ebb and flow, our "sodden" bodies rise, sink, and move from solid to vapor (line 39). Like water, bodies move in cycles, growing, living, and dying, whereupon their matter ultimately emerges in a different iteration.

However, water is not the only mediating substance "Rain on the Inarticulate" considers. Although oil is the "only nonhydrophilic substance" on Earth, and is radically different from water, both fluids operate across multiple scales and influence thought and language (line 58). The poem recounts a 2021 keynote Robinsong attended at the Oxygen Art Centre, in which qʷn̓qʷin̓x̌n̓, a member of the sn̓ʕay̓čkstx (Sinixt) and former environmental planner for the Colville Tribe Government in what is now known as Washington State, discussed pollution in the Columbia River. During her keynote, qʷn̓qʷin̓x̌n̓ recounted the "century / Of toxic slag in her traditional territory" and the eventual court battle against Teck Smelter, in which the tribe had "to prove / Water flows downriver" (lines 21-22, 25-26). Somewhat like the poem's opening lines, which connect the human tear to the ocean and create a scalar connection between the human body and the environment, Robinsong describes this specific history as "A droplet of the state // Of colonial decrepitude," a somber reminder of the many injustices to land and water that proliferate across the world (lines 26-27). What seems like a mere drop, magnified across several scales, spells ecological disaster.

Unlike water's fluid relations, a fantasy of separation and impermeability emerges from humanity's entrenched relationship with oil, which Robinsong describes as "400 years of a dry dream / Of discrete, of leakproof" (lines 48-49). This leakproof, dry delusion becomes a self-consuming "airtight nightmare", as pollution and extraction ultimately destroy those implicated in its oily processes (line 53). Unlike bodies that rise and sink along water's rhythms and return to Earth in cyclical repetition, oil is not cyclical but "Of singular dosage, you eat yourself" (line

54). In contrast to a fluid, watery connection that invites intimacy and care, oil dependency fuels a fantasy of impermeable borders that ultimately self-destructs.

"Rain on the Inarticulate" locates the human body in the planetary scale and considers how fluid media – including oil and water – interact with thought and language to enable or disable fruitful relationships with the Earth. Like the water cycle, the poem repeats differently. Beginning at the site of the human body and its fractal tear, the poem concludes with a different iteration of the body, returning from its liquid voyages to the fleshy materiality of human digestion. Like "A Reply," which continually grounds the reader in the body via the act of listening and the concept of leakage, "Rain on the Inarticulate" remains grounded in the body's wavelike, rhythmic, and watery processes.

Conclusion: Repetition and Return

Like "Rain on the Inarticulate," *Wet Dream* ends by returning to the beginning. Repetition and return are especially clear in the relationship between the opening poem, "A Reply," and the long poem which closes the collection, "Language of the Birds." The close relationship between these poems befits *Wet Dream,* in which thoughts, liquids, shapes, and sounds are constantly leaving, transforming, and returning. "A Reply" begins with an act of listening: "I laid my ear on the ground" and later notes, "let me say / speaking is a ray" (line 1, 28). "Language of the Birds," like its title suggests, largely concerns itself with voice, communication, and the movement of sound waves through air, as the poet-speaker listens to "The dawn's language / Of birds" (lines 175-6). Speaking is once again compared to a ray in a close, but not exact, repetition of line 28 in "A Reply": "Speaking is a ray – say it, say" ("Language of the Birds" line 91). The closing lines of the poem, however, most powerfully connect the final poem with the first, as the poet speaker concludes:

All of this saying

Is about saying

And if I could

And how I would

And when I did what I

Said was speak to me (“Language of the Birds” lines 229-234)

Reading “this saying” as *Wet Dream* in its entirety, these closing lines speak to the collection’s endeavor to both speak and listen to the reader, inviting a connection and exchange built not only through our shared watery connections, but through the simultaneously embodied and immaterial act of speaking and listening, as words and song travel through the atmosphere on waves, mirroring the movement of water. Water and air are media through which connections and intimacies form, not only between speaker and listener, but between human and planet. Both “A Reply” and “Rain on the Inarticulate” emphasize the importance of water and language in cultivating intimacy between humans, other species, and the planet at large. We not only share water in an intimate cycle of liquid relations, but share the air, which reverberates with voices, language, and poetry borne through body after body, like water, on waves.

Yet how does the intimacy and connection emerging from Robinsong’s poetry affect material change? Linton reminds us that how we know water, and thus how we use and treat water, emerges from “our own circumstances and modes of knowing” (223). Science is an apt example, as it has “produced a distinctive way of understanding and representing water that makes it appear timeless, natural, and unaffected by the contingencies of human history” (74). In

contrast, the intimate, erotic, and embodied scale of *Wet Dream* invites a deeper attunement to our entanglement with water, which is not “out there” but in us. Resisting the abstraction of science, Robinsong utilizes poetry to intervene in such modes of knowing. In *Wet Dream,* poetry, like water and the bodies it cycles through, becomes a medium for reimagining our embodied and material connection to the Earth.

Chapter Two

Poetic Apprehension: Glacial Representation in the Extreme Ice Survey and *Meltwater*

Oscillating between the human scale of parenthood and the planetary scale of species loss and glacial recession, Claire Wahmanholm's *Meltwater* (2023) tracks the accelerating yet divergent timelines of human growth and environmental degradation. The formally diverse collection includes abecedarians, erasure poems, and prose poems, and shares *Wet Dream's* concern with language and repetition. Serial poems, including the "Meltwater" series, alphabet series, "In a Land Where Everything" series, and "Glacier" series repeat throughout the collection in different iterations and, like *Wet Dream,* formally reflect the repetitive difference of the water cycle. However, while Erin Robinsong's use of repetition implies a cyclical return, Wahmanholm's serials are laced with a sense of irreparable loss and transformation. Loss, change, and liquidity run through the "Meltwater" erasure poems and the "Glacier" prose poems, which as their titles suggest, are concerned with glacial melt and consequently, water on a planetary scale. The seven "Meltwater" poems are erasures of Lacy M. Johnson's essay "How to Mourn a Glacier," and with each poem more and more words disappear, reflecting the progressive loss and dissipation of glacial ice: like bergs melting into the sea, words melt into the page and grow ever more distant from each other. Likewise, the prose poem form of the "Glacier" series similarly underscores the loss of ice, as the poetry melts into a continuous, prosaic flow like ice crystals losing their form and melting into water.

In chapter two, I read two of Wahmanholm's four "Glacier" poems alongside James Balog's Extreme Ice Survey, a time-lapse photography project aimed to capture multi-year glacier melt on a visually and temporally conceptual scale. Placing these media in conversation amplifies poetry's unique ability to conceptualize and account for climate change in persuasive

and affective registers. Both poetry and photography engage with water and the water cycle through the medium of the melting glacier, which reflects the massive scale and unique temporality of anthropogenic climate change. Formally, both employ a time-lapse – Balog practices time-lapse photography, while Wahmanholm uses a poetic time-lapse, or interval, between the "Glacier" poems, which are spaced throughout *Meltwater*. Despite these similarities, critical differences emerge, most notably in how Balog and Wahmanholm respectively engage time and represent the glacier.

Balog strategically places cameras near ice sheets and glaciers around the globe to capture the scalar aesthetic of glacial melt. Focusing directly on the glaciers themselves, his photographs obfuscate the relationship between his viewers and the glaciers, eliding any human-glacier connection. The photographs similarly obfuscate the glacier's relationship to the hydrologic cycle, as the glacier's distant impacts on coastlines and storm systems escape the camera's frame. In contrast, Wahmanholm utilizes the human-scale perspective of the poet-speaker to expose our fraught intimacy with melting glaciers. Her poetic descriptions locate the glaciers' icy bodies in forms of water humans regularly interact with, such as storms, floods, and rain. Consequently, the "Glacier" poems critically engage with the hydrosocial cycle, or "the process by which flows of water reflect human affairs and human affairs are enlivened by water," whereas Balog's work, although inherently hydrosocial in that it involves human activity, omits any trace of human intervention from his camera's frame, thus amplifying the hydrologic cycle's portrayal of water as scientific and separate from human culture (Linton 68). Due to Balog's and Wahmanholm's respective engagements with time, perception, and the glaciers themselves, Rob Nixon's definition of slow violence, Margaret Grebowicz's engagement with the interval, or

lapse, in Balog's photography, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's and Eva Horn's conceptions of timescales, and Astrida Neimanis's *Bodies of Water* (2017) inform this chapter.

The representational challenge of slow violence provides a particularly apt framework through which to read both Balog's and Wahmanholm's approaches to glacial melt. In *Slow Violence: The Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon defines slow violence as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Glacial melt is an apt example – occurring at latitudes distant from most human communities and unfolding over decades, ice loss wreaks havoc on the earth system yet is not "immediate in time" nor "explosive and spectacular in space" (2). Further, glacial melt, like slow violence, is "attritional but also exponential": the positive feedback loop of sea-level rise, increased ocean temperatures, and reduced reflection of solar energy fuels more warming and more melt, generating "long-term, proliferating conflicts in situations where the conditions for sustaining life become increasingly but gradually degraded" (3). Even when spectacular, like hurricanes and tropical storms, the impacts of glacial recession are hard to perceive with the naked eye and are difficult to spatially track to their point of origin. Consequently, glacial melt and slow violence pose similar representational challenges, as both require "arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the persuasive but elusive violence of delayed effects" (3). Grasping the magnitude of glacial melt is, like slow violence, a problem of scale, time, and perception.

The Extreme Ice Survey: The Primacy and Limitations of Visual Perception

The Extreme Ice Survey addresses the representational challenges of glacial melt on the visual plane, photographically capturing glacier melt and compressing its long temporal scale

into digestible video clips. First inspired by James Balog's 2005 trip to Iceland to photograph glaciers for *The New Yorker* magazine, the Extreme Ice Survey developed into a global project. In 2007, the Survey included 43 time-lapse cameras in North America, South America, Europe, Greenland, and Antarctica, typically "anchored on cliff faces above the glaciers" (Earth Vision Institute, "About EIS"). Equally concerned with science and aesthetics, the project aestheticizes and documents climate change, describing itself as "an innovative, long-term photography program that integrates art and science to give a 'visual voice' to the planet's changing ecosystems" (Earth Vision Institute, "Extreme Ice Survey – A program of Earth Vision Institute"). The project's website emphasizes the Survey's affective potential, noting that "the creative integration of art and science can shape public perception and inspire action more effectively than either art or science can do alone" (Earth Vision Institute, "Extreme Ice Survey – A program of Earth Vision Institute"). Of the many time-lapse videos on the website's associated Vimeo page, I will focus on Balog's time-lapse video of the AK-05 Mendenhall Glacier in Juneau, Alaska, filmed between April 1st 2007 and June 28th 2017.

In the Mendenhall video, decades-long ice loss unfolds with dramatic efficiency as Balog warps the slow violence of ice loss into the accessible medium of time-lapse photography. Composed of a series of time-lapse photos, the Mendenhall video compresses ten years of glacial melt into a 57-second video, accelerating the slow time of glacial melt into a short, highly digestible time frame on par with the "cultural milieu of digitally speeded up time and foreshortened narrative" (Nixon 13). The photographs track the changes and fluctuations in the glacier and its environment: in the opening still, the viewer sees snowcaps, pine trees, grey water, and bits of sky. As the film proceeds, the passing of time is notable not only in the loss of ice but also in the mists lifting and rising over the mountain tops and the flashes of snow and sun that

indicate the cycling of seasons. Seasons repeat, the glacier freezes and thaws, and with each passing time-lapse more ice disappears while the frame of the image gradually and almost imperceptibly narrows around the shrinking glacier.

Additional editing formally amplifies the intensity of loss. Ten years of melt are subsumed in 45 seconds, at which point the film stops. At 46 seconds, Balog places a red line on the screen that indicates the glacier's size in April 2007. The red line exceeds the frame of the camera, amplifying the extreme, attritional loss of ice in the preceding decade. Adding a certain shock factor to the decade's worth of ice loss in the preceding seconds, the red line creates what Nixon describes as "instant sensational visibility" (2). At 47 seconds, Balog rewinds the film at a further accelerated pace, rebuilding the glacier in five seconds, only to pause and replay the initial footage in another five second window. The constantly accelerating pace of the video mirrors the ever-increasing pace of ice loss and sea-level rise, while the red line and Balog's moment of rewind further emphasize the intense change between 2007 and 2017.

Sound, or lack thereof, is also critical in the Mendenhall video. Ironically, the Survey's website asserts that the project is "a voice for landscapes that would have no voice unless we gave them one," yet the photographic medium itself omits the sound associated with the landscape and fails to capture the other ways glaciers exert their voice around the globe – through storms, hurricanes, and coastal erosion that exceed the camera's frame (Earth Vision Institute, "About EIS"). The lack of sound further emphasizes the visual, following what Nixon describes as "[a]n influential lineage of environmental thought" that "gives primacy to immediate sensory apprehension, to sight above all, as foundational for any environmental ethics of place" (14). Deploying the visual to draw a distant viewer to the "place" of the glacier, Balog

employs time-lapse technology and strategically placed cameras to bridge the spatial and temporal gaps between the human viewers and the distant glaciers.

Further emphasizing visual primacy, Balog affirms that "seeing is believing," and upon viewing the Mendenhall video, one might assume a total knowledge of the ice loss afflicting the Mendenhall glacier between 2007 and 2017 (Earth Vision Institute, "About EIS"). However, due to their remove from most human communities and due to the timescales on which they form and recede, glaciers resist total human knowledge and evade easy visual perception even when photographically captured. This unknowability appears – perhaps unintentionally – in Balog's work via the time-lapse. In her 2014 article, "Glacial Time and Lonely Crowds: The Social Effects of Climate Change as Internet Spectacle," Margaret Grebowicz reminds us that time-lapse photography allows the viewer to perceive the gradual loss of glacial ice over long time scales precisely due to what we can't see – the intervals that remain uncaptured between each frame: "[t]he lapse in time, or everything that is left out, is precisely what creates the effect of sped-up reality" (4). Consequently, a tension between knowing and not-knowing arises, as Balog utilizes that which is not visually perceptible – the unknowable interval of time lost to the time-lapse – to render the glacier visually perceptible.

A similar tension appears between the local and the global in Balog's work. Although the global scope of the Survey reflects a planetary sensibility, the individual photographs themselves are hyper-local, focusing on the specific glaciers that occupy the camera's frame. However, the spatial limits of the frame undermine this attempt at locality: the glaciers' material connection to their local surroundings are imperceptible to the viewer, and both local and global ramifications of glacial melt remain obscure, further obfuscating the consequences of ice loss. Although Balog artfully sensationalizes and accelerates the slow violence of glacial melt for the modern viewer to

visually grasp, the film's rapidity obfuscates the related, durational casualties of glacier recession, often felt in human communities who, like the viewer, are spatially removed from the glacier itself and absent from the camera's frame.

Through this obfuscation, Balog troubles the representational efficacy of his own work. Although occluding the wider consequences is perhaps a limitation of Balog's medium, as the camera can only capture what appears within its frame, the Mendenhall video reveals the limitations of the visual to adequately apprehend slow violence, the threats of which are "often imperceptible" (Nixon 14). Overcoming this invisibility "requires rendering [these threats] apprehensible to the senses," and thus demands a multisensorial approach that challenges visual primacy (14). Since apprehension is not merely sensorial but "draws together the domains of perception, emotion, and action," Nixon turns to the literary arts, arguing that "[w]riter-activists can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses" (15). Literary work is thus an essential tool with which to apprehend and represent slow violence.

Although Nixon focuses on writer-activists engaged with issues of environmental justice in enclaves of the globe historically marginalized by a Western "rich-country conservation ethic," which Wahmanholm does not specifically address, his emphasis on the literary arts as a representational tool well-suited to slow violence is relevant to *Meltwater* (23). Like Balog, Wahmanholm works to apprehend the timescale of glacial melt, however, in contrast to Balog's emphasis on visual spectacle, Wahmanholm's poetry employs emotion, simile, and sound to engage the reader's imagination and encourage a deeper sensorial apprehension of glacial melt, including the glacier's material impacts on the hydrosocial cycle, its temporal extension into the past, its fraught grasp on the present, and the future uncertainties that accompany its recession.

The "Glacier" Poems: Auditory and Embodied Apprehension

Through vibrant simile, metaphor, and metonymy, the "Glacier" poems locate the glacier in the rhythms of both the planetary water cycle and quotidian human experience, highlighting the temporal dissonance between the deep timescale of glacial formation, accelerating glacial recession, and the uncertain yet inevitable future. Similar in length and sharing a title, each "Glacier" prose poem crystallizes around a unique throughline relevant to the human experience of glacial melt: the body, time, violence, and the question of representation. Although these concerns may initially seem more abstract than Balog's attention to observable physical change, the "Glacier" poems address the emotional and material impacts of glacier melt that Balog's photographs occlude. Grounded in the human perspective of the poet-speaker, Wahmanholm engages with longer timescales of generations and epochs, embodied in both the human body – through parenthood – and in the glacial body's layers of ice.

Although Wahmanholm's engagement with time diverges from Balog's, the time-lapse, which underscores Balog's project by enabling time's compression, also features in the "Glacier" poems, albeit with a different effect. The "Glacier" poems are spaced at intervals throughout *Meltwater*, creating a lapse in time between the reading of each poem that invites the reader to engage in a durational, temporally extended engagement with glacial recession and its accompanying emotions of bewilderment, loss, and shame. Using the time-lapse to extend the experience of the "Glacier" poems' representation of glacial melt provides a critical counterpoint to the Mendenhall video, in which the time-lapse accelerates melt into a shortened experience that the viewer can discard after a moment of discomfort. Rather, the poems unfold on what Jane Robbins Mize describes as "the timescale of the body" (159). This corporeal temporality amplifies the human-scale, emotional, and embodied responses to climate change that Wahmanholm's verse accentuates. While all the "Glacier" poems merit attention, I focus on the

second and fourth poems, “Glacier” [We waited behind the velvet rope] and “Glacier” [It is everywhere]. The temporal questions, embodied sensations, and challenges of articulation expressed in these poems materialize glacial melt on an intimate, human scale, locate the glacier in the larger water cycle, and offer a poetic counterpoint to Balog’s visual methodologies of representation.

“Glacier” [We waited behind the velvet rope]

Hinging on an imagined moment of glacier tourism, “Glacier” [We waited behind the velvet rope] gestures to human complicity in environmental catastrophe while highlighting a collective inability to fully comprehend or articulate its bewildering manifestations. The question of time, the embodied connection between human and glacier, and the glacier’s relationship to the hydrologic cycle resonate throughout the poem. The long durée of anthropogenic climate change and the uncertainty of the future coalesce around the poet-speaker’s experience awaiting, and ultimately observing, an anticipated moment of glacial calving, while the acts of tasting, swallowing, and drinking expose the poet-speaker’s embodied relationship to the glacier. Sound is also critical in the poem; unlike the noticeably mute Mendenhall video, Wahmanholm’s description of the sounds and noises associated with calving invite a multisensorial experience of glacial recession. On a formal level, Wahmanholm’s use of simile facilitates connections between human, glacier, and other bodies of water, while the prose form underscores the poem’s thematic concerns of confluence and continuity, as the poem’s lines flow together without discernable separation.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Eva Horn provide a critical foundation from which to consider the confluence of past, present, and future in “Glacier” [We waited behind the velvet rope]. In *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (2017),

Betasamosake Simpson reminds us that "Indigenous thought doesn't dissect time into past, present, and future," invoking a Nishnaabeg understanding that "[t]he future is here in the form of the practices of the present, in which the past is also here influencing" (Betasamosake Simpson 213).[4] In her 2020 chapter "Scales II: Deep Time," Eva Horn offers a similar reading of time. Writing that "[t]imescales are not just a matter that concerns the past, they are equally important for our relationship to the future," Horn argues that present-day global warming emerges from the past and present use of fossil fuels while simultaneously derailing "the temporal horizon of all established forms of prognostication and planning" and with them, a sense of future security (158, 165). Although these understandings of time emerge from different intellectual traditions, both suggest that present environmental disruptions, including glacial melt, are inextricable from the timescales of the past and of the future, therefore problematizing conceptions of linear temporal progression. Wahmanholm's mediation of time in the poem reflects these nonlinear temporal relations.

Specific verbs and images trouble linear time and draw together dissonant timescales from the poem's beginning. Whereas the Mendenhall video accelerates time, the opening line of the poem, "We waited behind the velvet rope," immediately foregrounds the act of waiting, which suggests patience and a loss of control, as the poet-speaker anticipates something expected yet unpredictable (Wahmanholm 31). Explaining that "The calving had to happen naturally," the poet-speaker elaborates, "No dynamite, no artificial summering. This meant waiting. Our tickets could only guarantee a weeklong window" (31). The explicit dissuasion of "artificial summering" draws attention to the past, particularly the legacy of human activity from which the

[4] See Jane Robbins Mize's article "The Deep Time Trap: Retracing Settler Colonialism in Lorine Niedecker's 'Lake Superior'" for further reading on Indigenous understandings of time in the context of contemporary environmental humanities scholarship.

supposedly natural event emerges – since the present scale of glacial calving and recession are largely the result of human activities since the mid nineteenth century,[5] "artificial summering" is already at work (31). Meanwhile, the "weeklong window" creates a sense of temporal unpredictability, as the experience is contingent on time and cannot be repeated (31). Unlike the Mendenhall video, which provides a digital archive that can be accessed at will and revisited at one's leisure, this unguaranteed window resists any attempt to capture or archive the glacier and points to the irreparable losses associated with its recession.

Although the image of the velvet rope suggests a near dystopic futurity, in which glaciers are cordoned off by ropes and the public can purchase tickets to watch them calve, Wahmanholm's reference to a coveted viewing window reflects the contemporary boom in glacier tourism accompanying accelerated glacial recession. A 2024 CNN article attributes this trend to the uncertain future of climate change, indicating that melting glaciers are "becoming the poster child for last-chance destinations," fueling an increase in glacier tourism at rates "around 20% or 30% every year" motivated by significant human desire to witness, observe, and experience the glaciers before they disappear (Paddison). Past, present, and future coalesce in a troubling cycle: as glaciers melt due to anthropogenic climate change, tourists burn more carbon to see them before they disappear, further destabilizing future planetary equilibrium.

Critically, the CNN article acknowledges a collective difficulty in recognizing one's material connection to the glaciers and consequently, the impacts of human actions on the natural world, gesturing towards the difficulty in articulating or representing the human-glacier

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[5] The beginning of anthropogenic climate change is a contested date. Paul Crutzen famously argued that climate change began with "James Watt's invention of the steam engine in 1782" (16). However, the Anthropocene Working Group took the period from 1492 – 1950 under consideration in their initial review of epochal beginnings (Yusoff 12). Further troubling this temporal contestation, Kyle Powys Whyte reminds us that if the Anthropocene invokes dystopia, "some indigenous peoples already inhabit what our ancestors would have likely characterized as a dystopian future" (207).

connection in a meaningful way. The article notes that "a round trip flight between New York and Anchorage in Alaska, for example, results in a loss of about 70 square feet of Arctic ice" (Paddison). However, as a guide quoted in the article explains, "[p]eople usually don't make that connection, that they themselves are the reason why we have these disappearing attractions" (Gössling qtd. in Paddison). "Glacier" [We waited behind the velvet rope] attends to the challenges of articulation and disconnection. Through sound, sensation, and simile, Wahmanholm reveals the material connection between the glacier, the hydrologic cycle, and human life while framing glacial recession as a crisis that, despite arising from human action, exceeds human understanding and resists representation.

This is particularly clear in Wahmanholm's use of metaphor and simile to describe the sound of calving. The simile illustrates the glacier's resistance to representation while establishing a connection between the glacier and everyday human experience. Describing the "thunder" of the calving "Like deep static, or wind against a microphone" suggests that audiovisual media cannot capture the true sound of the glacier: static is an unsettling noise, while wind is equally jarring when transmitted through a microphone (31). In contrast to the smooth silence of the Mendenhall video, this sonic dissonance suggests that glacial melt resists and exceeds representational media. Furthermore, the simile draws a meteorological event (thunder) into relationship with an object of human creation (the microphone), enabling a scalar transition between the human and the planetary. The emphasis on sound creates a deeper sensory engagement for the reader, inviting apprehension through multiple means of perception and locating the noise of the calving in the soundscape of daily life, albeit one distorted by static.

Other similes further draw the glacier into close relationship with water's many forms, implicating the glacier in the wider hydrologic cycle. The poet-speaker employs riverine and

atmospheric imagery to describe “the ice running like a river of sand, churning into low clouds,” effectively evoking the spectacular visuals calving creates while gesturing to the meltwater’s eventual incorporation into the hydrologic cycle as rivers and clouds (31). The simile thus works on two levels, helping the reader visualize the spectacular moment of calving while reminding us that glacial recession has a material impact on the water system at large. Rather than isolate the glacier in a singular camera frame, the simile invites an expansive understanding of the glacier and its relationship to the flows of water around the globe.

The transformation of the glacial body into rivers, clouds, and meltwater recalls Astrida Neimanis’s reading of water’s repetitive, timeless movement in *Bodies of Water* (2017) and invites a connection between time and water’s materiality. Neimanis emphasizes water’s repetitive difference as it cycles through different iterations – including ice, seawater, rain, and bodily water – in its continuous movement through human and planetary bodies. Consequently, Neimanis urges us to understand water “as not only engendering difference (as the gestational ‘was’) but also as its expression (the gestated ‘is’) and its potential (the unknowable ‘yet-to-come’)” (88). In “Glacier” [We waited behind the velvet rope], water’s past, present, and future temporalities permeate the poet-speaker’s life as snow, glacier, ice, and meltwater represent the was, the is, and the yet-to-come, drawing together the past, present, and future in liquid relation.

Time and its uncertainties persist through the poem’s later references to dreams, ghosts, and geologic time. Unlike sensory perception, dreams offer an escape from one’s immediate material surroundings into imagined or remembered realms. In “Glacier” [We waited behind the velvet rope], dreams become a medium through which one can apprehend that which lies “beyond our sensory ken,” and facilitate an emotional connection between the poet-speaker and a distant epoch’s cold temperatures and stable ice sheets (Nixon 15): “I dreamed I lay bedded

beneath sheets and sheets of ice. I dreamed of epochs of snow, atmospheres and winds whipping above me like the millions" (Wahmanholm 31). The thick ice deposits and atmospheric weather events populating the dreamscape reveal the long, slow time of glacial formation that eludes visual, auditory, or tactile perception and asserts the glacier's omnipresence through time and space. Although the glacier form disappears through calving and melting, the water composing the glacier remains, transformed into seawater, vapor, clouds, and rain: "In the morning the room was full of ragged clouds, washcloth-heavy. When I wrung one out onto my face, I felt like a ghost: ancient, dizzy, almost a hologram" (31). Rematerializing as a wet washcloth, the ghost-like feeling the glacier begets in the poet-speaker facilitates a convergence of glacial and human timescales. As the meltwater touches the poet-speaker's face, she seems to sense her own future ghostliness, as individual human lives naturally end and the ecological conditions for collective life unnaturally dwindle. Yet this ghost-like sensation applies to the glacier as well, as its ancient ice sheets melt into flickering, watery ghosts of their former solidity.

Past, present, and future timescales coalesce once more through the image of the ice cube, which, like the damp washcloth, furthers the connection between human and glacier. As the poet-speaker imbibes the cube, she tastes "the Miocene's kelpy tang, the lonesome chalk of the Pliocene, base notes of bedrock and urchin," as the deep time scale embedded in the ice registers on a physical level (31). The act of drinking implicates both poet-speaker and glacier in the cyclical, transformative repetitions of the hydrologic cycle, as the poet-speaker incorporates the ice cube into her body. Yet the following lines resist this circular motion and instead create a sense of urgency and strangulation: "The bluer the ice, the less air it holds. Like our own faces, our own cold hands dropping stones into the well of the future to see how much deeper it goes" (31). The lack of air implies a sense of precarity that the simile underscores, as the well's

unknown depth reflects future uncertainty. The simile also furthers the embodied relationship between human and glacier, as the blue ice resembles human faces and hands.

The sense of strangulation continues as the poet-speaker's attempts to swallow the ice cube further resists the water cycle's circular logic, in which ice melts and eventually freezes again. Unlike a regular ice cube, which melts in one's mouth, the poet-speaker cannot thaw this cube:

> I swallowed and swallowed but it wouldn't thaw. I stood outside and pointed my chin toward the sun but the numbness had already reached my lungs. My breath bloomed before me like a sad planet, its latitudes shrinking and blue. (31)

In this scenario, the ice lodges in the poet-speaker's throat as persistent numbness, which is significant due to the throat's role in mediating speech and breath. The lodged cube changes the nature of the poet's breath and consequently, her voice and her poetry. Unlike Balog's Mendenhall video, which leaves no physical mark on the viewer and affords a continued disconnection between human behavior and glacial recission, the persistent numbness in the poet-speaker's throat represents the embodied relationship between human bodies, the melting glacier, and poetry itself, a liquid liaison that stubbornly persists through time.

"Glacier" [It is everywhere]

The fourth and final poem in the series, "Glacier" [It is everywhere], further emphasizes the inescapable connection between the human, the glacier, and water itself, as the liquid consequences of glacial recession permeate the physical space of the poet-speaker's life. Wahmanholm's decision to place this poem last contributes to the series' spiraling finality: the poet-speaker struggles to articulate the manifestations of glacial melt and the immensity of climate change to her young daughters, while the glacier itself is no longer a solid form but, fully

melted, inundates the space of the poem as storm clouds, water, and encroaching uncertainty. Whereas the other "Glacier" poems position the poet-speaker as a visiting observer in close proximity to a glacier, "Glacier" [It is everywhere] unfolds in quotidian and domestic spaces, wherein the glacier, rather than the poet-speaker, is the visitor. Juxtaposing the finality of glacier recession with the potential of her daughters' lives just beginning, "Glacier" [It is everywhere] illustrates the glacier's planetary reach, locates its meltwater in a disrupted hydrologic cycle, and grapples with the confluence of loss and beginning.

The melted glacier is omnipresent from the poem's opening line, transcending spatial boundaries to encroach on environments historically distant from its point of origin. Just as "We waited behind the velvet rope" opens the second "Glacier" poem with a sense of anticipation, patience, and extended time, "It is everywhere" troubles the reader's perception of the glacier as a frozen, immovable form spatially distant from human experience (31, 71). Rather, the glacier exceeds its geographically specific location to materialize in the water, sky, and air that the poet-speaker interacts with:

> It is the water I am trying to teach my daughters to float in. It is the sky I tell them to keep their eyes on. It is the air I tell them to seal in their mouths should they slip underwater. (71)

Wahmanholm's use of metonymy in this passage locates the glacier in manifold forms that exceed spatial and temporal bounds. Markedly different from Balog's Mendenhall video, in which the glacier is spatially bound to the camera frame and temporally bound by the length and duration of the video, these lines implicate the glacier in the planet's larger hydrological and meteorological rhythms while creating a material connection between the poet-speaker and the glacier, mediated by water and breath.

The glacier's expansive presence has a defamiliarizing effect, as what was once relatively static becomes fluid and mobile. This defamiliarization is both material and discursive, as the poet-speaker struggles to articulate the glacier's scalar breadth to her daughters. Lacking sufficient terms with which to describe the glacier's incursion, she relies on metaphor and simile:

> I am a leaky boat, but I am trying to answer their questions. *As deep as thirty Christmas trees. As deep as twenty giraffes standing on each other's backs.* There hasn't been a sea here for seventy-five million years. I cannot explain that number. (71)

Although these lines employ familiar terms, they betray uncertainty. The poet-speaker as "leaky boat" primarily implies limited time and compromised affordances (71). The boat, a symbol of security, safe passage, and human ingenuity, erodes into a precarious and faulty vessel, generating a sense of urgency which mirrors the poet-speaker's flawed attempts to provide clear answers to her daughters' questions. The object of measurement, the disorienting depth of which the poet-speaker attempts to explain in familiar terms, is also uncertain: the poet-speaker may be articulating the depth of meltwater surging into an ancient sea, or the depth of glacial ice extending below the ocean's surface. While this amplifies uncertainty, it simultaneously furthers the connection between the glacier and water, troubling the distinction between the two forms and building on the opening lines' references to the glacier's liquid omnipresence. Although the poet-speaker's reliance on simile suggests an inaccurate and speculative measurement, empirical measurements also fail her: despite knowing the exact number of years since water last inundated the ancient sea – "seventy-five million" – she still "cannot explain that number" (71). Neither imaginative simile nor empiric measurement can adequately articulate the scale and immensity of the glacier or its meltwater, reflecting the material and discursive defamiliarization glacial recession creates.

The urgency of explanation present in the poem both complicates and resonates with Rob Nixon's description of slow violence. For Nixon, slow violence involves a politics of externalization, in which violence unfolds in distant locales and marginalized bodies and is thus easy to disregard, eluding even the affective discourse of "intergenerational aftermath" (13). Consequently, the creative representation of slow violence is significant, as it not only brings the barely perceptible into focus but entails "redefining speed," including "attempts to recast 'glacial' – once a dead metaphor for 'slow' – as a rousing, iconic image of unacceptably fast loss" (13). While Nixon argues for different aesthetic and narrative strategies to shift our perception of space and time, Wahmanholm's poems reveal that climate change itself is redefining the spatial and temporal contours of our world. In "Glacier" [It is everywhere], what was once an easily externalized, slow moving threat that extended beyond the reach of an individual's lifetime or unfolded at significant geographic remove accelerates into intimate and unavoidable proximity.

Wahmanholm maintains a sense of urgency and acceleration throughout the rest of the poem. Noting that her daughters are already "sinking into the beryl water," the poet-speaker cryptically yet logically states, "No one can float forever," implying a limited time frame to life above water – and perhaps to life at all (Wahmanholm 71). The repetition of similes in the following passage, formally amplified in italic text, recalls the repetitive motion of the water cycle and reveals the poet-speaker's multiple attempts to articulate the complex temporalities and stark inevitabilities of ecological loss, the immensity of which precludes a singular explanation and thus requires repeated attempts:

> I am trying to say it's too late without making them too sad. *It's like how you can't take the blue out of the white paint, like how you can't hear your name and not turn around.*

> The calving of glaciers is the loudest underwater sound on Earth. I dip my daughters' ears beneath the surface to let them listen. *It's like how you can't put a feather back on a bird, like how the bird won't fit back into its shell.* (71)

The first two similes underscore the future's inevitability, which becomes as irreversible as tinting white paint and as expected as turning towards the sound of one's name. The similes that close the passage similarly highlight a sense of inevitability while gesturing towards the irreversible progress of time in terms of both growth and decay. Life and death coalesce, as the loss of feathers implied in the first clause suggests damage and decay, whereas the bird emerging from its shell gestures to the rapid pace of new life beginning. Further, all four similes formally reflect a dearth of knowledge about the future, which cannot be explained except in terms of something else. This is relevant to glacial recession, the consequences of which are widely studied and inevitable yet uncertain, as one cannot be sure of what they will truly look like or when exactly they will arrive.

Notably, the similes bracket a material and embodied form of engaging with the glacier – the act of listening. The poet-speaker's reliance on her daughters' auditory senses reflects the need for multisensory, embodied engagement with glacial recession, for which verbal descriptions are insufficient. Sound originating from the glacier itself generates an auditory intimacy with the poet-speaker's daughters. Recalling "Glacier" [We waited behind the velvet rope], in which the poet-speaker visually perceives the calving from a close location, in "Glacier" [It is everywhere] the poet-speaker's daughters experience the calving on a sonic, rather than visual, level. Physically engaging with the glacier through the act of listening supplements the verbal representations the poet-speaker strives for through simile, as water becomes a medium for connection, intimacy, and comprehension. Transcending the distance

between the poet-speaker's home and the physical site of calving, water affords auditory connection and allows the poet-speaker's daughters to physically apprehend what their mother attempts to describe through simile.

Water remains a medium for intimacy as the poem progresses. Just as the sound of calving travels through water, the glacier itself arrives at the family's home, which is newly subject to the glacier's incursions: "We step backward into the house. I wring the glacier out of their suits. I wring it out of their hair. I wipe it from their faces, but it is everywhere" (71). The metonymies that follow further emphasize the glacier's omnipresence: "It is the storm, it is the drowned harbor, it is the current, it is the bathwater that the baby slurps before we can stop her" (71). The inability to prevent the ingestion of bathwater recalls the sense of inevitability present in the image of the leaky boat, as the parents cannot control or prevent the glacier's incursion into their children's lives. Meanwhile, the active nature of storms and currents implies an intensification that mirrors the intensification of climate impacts. Rather than merely melt, which implies passivity or even victimhood, "The glacier hammers the roof, the glacier soaks a corner of the bedroom ceiling, which greens with spores" (71). Finally, associating the glacier with other watery iterations one engages with more regularly on familiar ground – storms, currents, and flooding – sharply focuses its relationship to the hydrologic cycle. Water is everywhere, and so is the glacier.

Wahmanholm reaffirms the speed and intensity of environmental transformation through repetition and metaphor. Early in the poem, the poet-speaker describes a map covered in pushpins, suggesting a command of geography and the ability to understand and orient oneself in space. However, the use of simile troubles this sense of knowledge and security, as the "pushpins skewer patches of icy green like rare moths" (71). The simile betrays that ice is as rare – and

perhaps as swiftly disappearing – as an endangered insect, destabilizing the map's seemingly solid geography into rapidly changing, unstable terrain. As the poem closes, Wahmanholm returns to the image of the map, the contours of which have notably changed: "On the map, the pushpins hover over green air, the green air is a spreading shroud" (71). The dissipation of "icy green" in the short time span of the poem reflects the accelerated progression of glacial melt, while the shroud amplifies the significant consequences of this acceleration, associating air, a medium for life, with grieving and loss (71). As the metaphor of the shroud warps our understanding of air as life-giving, the change in the map observed over the course of the poem reflects the warping of space and land due to glacial recession – a change that occurs rapidly, rather than slowly, and manifests in the space of a few sentences.

The poem's final lines assert the bewildering and unfamiliar effects of rapid ice loss while reengaging the reader's auditory and olfactory senses. Wahmanholm describes the glacier as a storm that "surges ashore, mercurial and summer-smelling," engaging the olfactory senses and anticipating a world with stormy, agonistic summers (71). The simile in the final two lines reemphasizes the defamiliarized landscape made new by meltwater's incursion: "We are not accustomed to the sea, so we describe it like a sky. The waves are tornado green and loud. In the water, the polar bears look like clouds" (71). The atmospheric imagery operates on multiple levels, reflecting the poet-speaker's lack of vocabulary adequate to such massive change, underscoring the uncanny landscape wrought by climate change, and gesturing once more to the enduring relationship between the sea, the sky, and the glacier.

In the "Glacier" poems, Wahmanholm embraces auditory, emotional, and imaginative modes of apprehension. In contrast to the visual primacy in the Mendenhall video, the poems utilize poetic form and specific imagery to engage questions of temporality, trouble the human-

nature binary, and locate the glacier within the larger rhythms of the water cycle, offering an intimate and multisensorial window into the emotional and material impacts of glacial recession and climate change at large. Embracing a perpetual "not-knowing" through simile, metonymy, and metaphor, Wahmanholm invites the reader to apprehend, rather than merely visualize, glacial recession. The many kinetic and auditory references in the poems, including the numbness of the ice cube and the thundering of the calving, support a multisensorial engagement, while the images of the velvet rope and the ancient sea invite the reader to flex their imaginations, moving beyond the visual to engage emotional, imaginative, and embodied responses. Through this attention to the human mind and body, the "Glacier" poems amplify the liquid connection between glaciers, storms, and human life that Balog's Mendenhall video elides, and invite an ecological engagement deepened through embodied apprehension.

In another contrast to Balog's Mendenhall video, which captures the slow temporalties of durational change while appearing to control time, Wahmanholm's poems suggest that time is inherently out of our control and perhaps, like the glacier itself, beyond our full understanding. While Balog accelerates, rewinds, and mediates time through specific technology, Wahmahnolm gestures to a confluence of temporalities that perplexes and bewilders. In "Glacier" [We waited behind the velvet rope], the poet-speaker is at the mercy of time, waiting for calving and later, waiting for a lodged ice cube to thaw. In "Glacier" [It is everywhere], time accelerates, just as it does in Balog's Mendenhall video. However, it catapults the reader into the future, rather than capturing the past, and relies on poetic form and the repetition of language, rather than the photographic medium and the repetition of images. Finally, the undercurrent of uncertainty lacing "Glacier" [It is everywhere] suggests that time's acceleration cannot be mediated by human actions, but runs on, unchecked, unpredictable, and inevitable.

A poem may seem an unlikely medium through which to apprehend the scale and magnitude of glacial recession. At first glance, Balog's crisp, informative video seems to provide an affective visual, rendering the glacier's durational recession legible in under one minute. Yet despite Balog's creative harnessing of slow time into a fast medium, Wahmanholm's "Glacier" poems more accurately reflect the nuances and complexities of human relationships to both glaciers and time. As words flow together in the prose poems, past, present, and future coalesce alongside human and glacier, reaffirming the liquid and embodied connections between glaciers, the water cycle, and human life while reflecting the fraught temporalities of climate change – the drama of storms and calving commingled with the sense of waiting, wondering, and struggling to understand.

Wahmanholm does not show us the glacier like Balog but invites us to feel it – in our own liquid bodies as we imagine numbness, in our everyday lives as we drink water from a tap or dry off after a bath, and in our imaginations, as we struggle to conceptualize a rapidly changing, melting world. Reading Balog and Wahmanholm together invites a consideration of media, representation, and ultimately, our relationship to water and to the glacier. The "Glacier" poems illustrate poetry's potential to help us apprehend, and hopefully respond to, that which exceeds visual perception yet is nevertheless entangled with our everyday lives. Simultaneously, Wahmanholm's poems refuse to separate the glacier from the poet-speaker, the reader, or its other watery iterations, reminding us of our liquid, embodied connection to the glacier and to the water cycle at large.

Chapter Three

Poetic Improvisation: Language, Water and Institutional Space in *Postcolonial Love Poem*

Natalie Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) traverses the fluid contours of multiple cosmologies and geographies. The title's reference to the love poem, which Diaz describes as "maybe at war with the colonial State" and "a return to the body, and so also a return to the land toward a different way of being," signals critical throughlines that course through the collection ("This Body Is a Gift: Natalie Diaz"). Rippling with references to water, the desert, and the body, *Postcolonial Love Poem* indeed invites a different way of being as Diaz constellates desire, rage, humor, and memory in rich poetic language. Greek myth, Mojave cosmology, and references to Catholicism animate the poems, many of which dialogue with or pay homage to a range of poets, including Ada Límon, John Ashbery, and Mahmoud Darwish. Although *Postcolonial Love Poem* is self-consciously grounded in place, attentive to the Colorado River and the Southwestern desert where Diaz lives, the collection presents a broad thematic scope and impressive geographical breadth, transporting the reader to a hotel in New York City, the Standing Rock encampment, Flint, Michigan, a crane sanctuary in Kearney, Nebraska, and the Milky Way. These cosmologic and geographic forays reflect the collection's rich engagement with a diversity of forms and themes and allow the collection to move freely through space and time, somewhat like water.

Although the collection's thematic diversity invites multiple readings and points of engagement, this chapter focuses on the poems "The First Water Is the Body" and *"exhibits from* The American Water Museum." As Audrey Goodman and Stephanie Papa identify, these poems are notable in their engagement with the human-water relationship, translation, and the space of the museum. I build on Goodman's reading of how Diaz "re-populates places appropriated by

settlers, collectors, and tourists" and Papa's description of Diaz's translations as "interrogative elucidations" by arguing that Diaz engages in poetic improvisation (Goodman, "What Is a Feminist Landscape?" 431, Papa 238). I draw from Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel de Certeau to define poetic improvisation as a form of *bricolage* or "making do" under conditions of constraint (de Certeau 29). For Lévi-Strauss, *bricolage* occurs when a *bricoleur,* or improvisor, uses "the tools at hand" to create "a new arrangement of elements" and enrich existing spaces or materials with new meaning (21). This resonates with de Certeau's description of an everyday improvisor, who "can find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place or of the language" (30). In poetic improvisation, a poet-*bricoleur* rearranges language to create new meaning despite lexical or formal constraints.

Arseli Dokumaci's argument that improvisation occurs when an environment's affordances disappear, creating conditions of constraint or "shrinkage," further informs my definition of poetic improvisation (53). Following James Gibson's definition, affordances are "possibilities of action that emerge from the reciprocity between the properties of the organism and those of the environment" (qtd. in Dokumaci 6). In the context of translation, affordances may be understood as possibilities of meaning emerging between the idea and the lexicon, while in the context of a museum, affordances may be understood as possibilities of knowledge emerging between the exhibits and the visitor. When a language like English does not offer the same affordances as a language like Mojave, or a museum fails to adequately convey meaning, translation and curation become exercises in improvisation.

In "The First Water Is the Body" and "*exhibits from* The American Water Museum," Diaz, as a poet-translator-curator, creatively improvises with the English language and the space of the institution. Despite the constraints of the English lexicon or the confines of the museum,

Diaz creatively repurposes these "tools" to powerfully shift our understanding of the human-water relationship. In doing so, she generates new arrangements, revising dominant assumptions about water and bodies as separate, discrete entities within the space of each poem. Consequently, both poems highlight the opposition between two divergent forms of hydrosocial relations: one in which water becomes a mere resource, where its control is co-opted as a form of state power, and one in which water is uplifted and respected as an essential, embodied element in human lives – particularly in the lives of Native peoples.

Throughout this chapter, I engage with Jamie Linton's *What Is Water?* (2010) and Astrida Neimanis's *Bodies of Water* (2017). Both Linton and Neimanis identify the flows of social and political power entangled with water management and water discourse – the former through cultural geography and the latter through a phenomenological lens – and thus provide a helpful theoretical framework through which to approach these poems. Diaz's own writings on language revitalization, Jobb Arnold's concept of land affect and John Durham Peters's philosophy of elemental media inform my reading of translation as improvisation in "The First Water Is the Body," while Amy Lonetree's scholarship on museums informs my reading of "*exhibits from* The American Water Museum" as a reformulation of institutional space.

In his definition of modern water and the modern water paradigm, Linton provides valuable historical and cultural context on the hydrosocial relations undergirding the perception of water-as-resource. Linton defines modern water as "the dominant, or natural, way of knowing and relating to water, originating in western Europe and North America, and operating on a global scale by the later part of the twentieth century" (14). According to Linton, these epistemological and relational frameworks are governed by a specific paradigm – the modern water paradigm – and manifest in three critical streams: "increases in water withdrawals" from

natural sources, an emphasis on "engineering increases in water supply to meet anticipated growth in demand," and "central state planning, funding, and administration of water projects" (52). In the United States, this paradigm emerged "in association with efforts by the state to gain control of the nation's waterways," and was closely linked to early American environmentalism (149). Citing the American conservationist W.J. McGee, Linton explains that the early twentieth century conservation movement "envisioned river basins as complete units and called for the rational control of water within the basin so as to maximize utility" (151). Conservation was thus connected to power and utility, as the American environmental movement, the modern state, and the quantification and control of water flowed together.

The relationship between state power and water management resonates with Astrida Neimanis's discussion of difference and repetition in *Bodies of Water*. Neimanis questions how "both our difference and commonality as bodies of water" might foster "more attentive relations to other bodies of water, both connected to and different from us" (67). The difference and commonality – or repetition – between bodies of water, in this context, evokes the more obvious differences between human bodies and non-human bodies like lakes, rivers, or streams. However, Neimanis ultimately asks for a greater level of attunement in her acknowledgement that "[t]he harm we do to water is never equally distributed across human bodies. The flows of biomatter also chart the flows of global power" (146). In "The First Water Is the Body" and "*exhibits from* The American Water Museum," the ways in which we talk about water are inseparable from the settler-colonial context of language erasure, water diversion, and the disenfranchisement of Indigenous bodies and voices. Themselves reconfigurations of space and power, these violences contribute to a cultural discourse that occludes Indigenous histories, presents, and futures in favor of what cultural studies scholar Jobb Arnold calls "the colonial

fiction" (101). "The First Water Is the Body" and "*exhibits from* The American Water Museum" counter this fiction through their respective improvisations with language, translation and sites of cultural production, such as the museum.

Translating the Language of Water: "The First Water Is the Body"

"The First Water Is the Body" draws connections between language and water as systems and forms with which we share an embodied, energetic connection. Highlighting the role of language in mediating our relationships to water and to our bodies, the poem recalls Erin Robinsong's engagement with the language-water relationship in "Rain on the Inarticulate" and Claire Wahmanholm's use of simile to articulate glacial recession in "Glacier" [It is everywhere]. However, Diaz's engagement with ongoing settler-colonialism in "The First Water Is the Body" differentiates the poem in significant ways, particularly in her attention to critical differences between languages and consequently, between relationships to what Neimanis calls the "planetary hydrocommons" (62). Although we all use some form of language to communicate in our shared, watery world, the linguistic differences Diaz highlights through translation reflect our different positions and privileges within those commons, which, as Diaz reveals, are often mediated by language and water.

Throughout "The First Water Is the Body," repeated acts of translation foreground the Mojaves' embodied relationship with the river, gesture to the universal need for clean water and highlight the limits and potentialities of language itself. The poem, which reads like a prose poem, unfolds over multiple pages of short stanzas grouped into eighteen sections, which incorporate Mojave language and elements of the Mojave Creation Story. Like a meandering river, the poem oscillates between questions of imperfect translation, water justice, and the tension between Mojave and American epistemologies, central themes that repeat in different

iterations as the poem progresses. Improvising within the confines of both language and form, Diaz invites the English-speaking reader to grasp the energetic relationship between language, water, and the human body, offering a poetic revision to environmental discourse that treats water as an externalized, quantifiable resource.

The poem's opening line, "The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the United States–" invites an immediate connection to an existing environmental document: the 2017 "Most Endangered Rivers" list put forth by the conservation group American Rivers (Diaz line 1). In a 2017 press release identifying the Lower Colorado River's endangerment, American Rivers remarked on the river's provision of "drinking water for 30 million Americans," irrigation of farmland producing "90 percent of the nation's winter vegetables," and the risk of "severe economic impacts to farms and cities across Arizona, Nevada and California" (Kober). This was not the Colorado River's first (nor last) appearance on that list – it topped the list in 2015 and again in 2022 and 2023 (Petri).[6] Despite the repeated efforts to raise awareness of the river's plight, the language American Rivers employs illustrates the tractability of the modern water paradigm. Although American Rivers moves away from said paradigm in its advocacy for more holistic river management, including the removal of dams and floodplain restoration, positive community outcomes, and durable environmental protections, this language still frames the river as a resource upon which economic and agricultural production depend.

However, if the modern water paradigm arises from specific epistemological and relational frameworks, as Linton argues, these frameworks can be revised and redone. Reading the opening lines of "The First Water Is the Body" in conversation with the 2017 American

[6] Since 1991, the Colorado River has appeared on the Endangered Rivers list 12 times (Lakhani).

Rivers press release frames the poem as a poetic effort to reconfigure relationships to water and invite a new way of engaging with, and caring for, the river:

> The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the United States–
>
> also, it is a part of my body. (lines 1-2)

The first line of the poem reflects the language of the 2017 "Most Endangered Rivers" list and consequently mirrors mainstream environmental discourse. In the second line, Diaz articulates her material connection to the river, which exceeds a purely scientific or resource-based understanding of the hydrological problem, amplifying the significance of the river's endangerment. Further, the juxtaposition between lines one and two underscores the failure of mainstream discourse to account for the embodied relationship Diaz articulates. American Rivers' 2017 press release reflects this amnesia: although the report recognizes the river's "particular importance to the region's Latino communities," it does not delve into the river's significance to the Native communities living in the Colorado River Basin (Kober). Although the opening lines reflect the biases and shortcomings of environmental discourse, Diaz creatively repurposes that discourse to begin offering a revision that continues through repeated acts of translation throughout the poem.

At several points in "The First Water Is the Body," Diaz uses Mojave words and phrases, accompanied by English translations, to emphasize the Mojaves' embodied relationship to the river while underscoring language's critical role in mediating that relationship. This is first apparent in the third stanza, where formal choices affirm the human-river connection while gesturing to the conceptual limits of the English language:

> When a Mojave says, *Inyech 'Aha Makavch ithuum,* we are saying our name.
>
> We are telling a story of our existence. *The river runs through the middle*

of my body. (lines 4-6)

In contrast to the continuity and cohesion of the end-stopped line opening the stanza, in which Diaz uses Mojave language, the enjambment between lines five and six interrupts the English translation and separates river and body onto two different lines. The formal contrast between the Mojave phrase and the English translation highlights the latter's incapacity to adequately communicate the depth of the relationship between the river and the Mojave. The English lexicon lacks the same affordances as Mojave, creating a situation of linguistic constraint.

As the poem progresses, Diaz employs simile and animate description to overcome these constraints. Explaining that "When Mojaves say the word for *tears,* we return to our word for *river,* as / if our river were flowing from our eyes," Diaz relies on simile to elaborate the affinity between the tears and river in the Mojave language (lines 30-31). While the simile further develops the embodied connection between humans and water, as human tears become watery iterations of the river, it simultaneously illustrates the role different languages play in mediating cultural relationships to water. Diaz uses a similar technique to further elaborate the connection between body and land:

> In Mojave thinking, body and land are the same. The words are separated only by the letters 'ii and 'a: 'iimat for body, 'amat for land. In conversation, we often use a shortened form for each: *mat-*. Unless you know the context of a conversation, you might not know if we are speaking about our body or our land. You might not know which has been injured, which is remem- / bering, which is alive, which was dreamed, which needs care. You might not know we mean both. (lines 55-61)

While the detailed translation Diaz offers highlights the linguistic and cognitive parallel between land and body in Mojave language, the description of both land and body as injured, remembering, living, or dreaming imbues the land with a level of animacy the English language often reserves for human bodies. Despite the lexical limitations of the English language, Diaz improvises with specific words and simile to evoke the Mojaves' embodied connection to the river. These translations emphasize the Mojaves' embodied connection to land and water in overlapping iterations, revising the perception of water as an external, disembodied resource through poetic *bricolage*.

Diaz employs similar techniques throughout the poem, further illustrating water's animacy and strengthening the connection between language and water. In another act of translation, Diaz explains: "I mean *river* as a verb. A happening. It is moving within me right now" (line 48). Since the verb "to river" does not exist in the English lexicon, Diaz uses simile to evoke the river's energetic movement within her. The simile simultaneously gestures to the transformative power of language: as a noun, the river may be relegated to passive object or resource, but as a verb, the river becomes an energetic, moving body. Language thus possesses the power to energize or pacify the beings or objects it describes, and Diaz's translations illustrate how language can be poetically repurposed to achieve specific meaning.

While Diaz's poetic improvisations with the English lexicon reveal the nuances between different languages and their role in mediating perceptions of water and land, the 2018 article "Hear Our Languages, Hear Our Voices: Storywork as Theory and Praxis in Indigenous-Language Reclamation," of which Diaz is a co-author, includes a larger discussion on the vital role of language in the context of Indigenous rights. The article notes that the United Nations' *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007) asserts the right of Indigenous peoples

"to revitalize, use, develop, and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures" (United Nations 12-13**).** Significantly, the article indicates that this right "goes unchallenged" for languages like English, but "is systematically violated for speakers of Indigenous languages...through policies designed to eradicate linguistically encoded knowledges and cultural identifications" (McCarty et al. 160-161). Since language mediates relationships to oneself, to one's community, and to the natural world, the loss of a language represents a loss of affordances both linguistic and material that necessitates improvisation.

"The First Water Is the Body" and "Hear Our Languages, Hear Our Voices" underscore the role language plays in mediating the human-water relationship by establishing a clear continuity between language, water, and the human body. In *Bodies of Water,* Astrida Neimanis reminds us that "coloniality courses through the flows of water justice"; the UN Declaration reveals that coloniality courses through language justice as well (172). Following Diaz's assertion that "[l]anguage is more than an extension of the body; it *is* the body, made of the body's energy and electricity, developed to carry the body's memories, desires, needs, and imagination," the erasure of language contributes to a larger erasure of bodies and cultures (Diaz line 54, McCarty et al 163). However, the revitalization and use of these languages, which Diaz engages with both in and outside her poetry, resist and revise harmful narratives of erasure that relegate Native bodies, languages, and relational frameworks to the dustbin of history. Recalling Jamie Linton's emphasis on the relationship between water management and state power, both water and language are means of exerting power in the service of oppression yet also become means of resistance.

Diaz's concern with effective translation – "not in words but in belief" – speaks to translation's ability to remediate relationships to water with powerful consequences, underscoring the significance of translation even under situations of lexical constraint (line 63). Further, a translation that exceeds a purely linguistic realm resonates with John Berger's discussion of translation as a layered, triangular process, which Diaz quotes in the poem. For Berger, true translation "*is not a binary affair between two lan- / guages but a triangular affair"* that "*demands a return to the pre-verbal"* (lines 65-66, 68). In the context of "The First Water Is the Body," translation's triangular affair necessitates a return to the energizing force behind both body and language, which is the river itself:

> We must go to the point of the lance entering the earth, and the river be-
> coming the first body bursting from earth's clay body into my sudden body.
> We must submerge, come under, beneath those once warm red waters now
> channeled blue and cool, the current's endless yards of emerald silk wrap-
> ping the body and moving it, swift enough to take life or give it. (lines 73-77)

Diaz's affirmation that "We must submerge" suggests that a form of embodied experience is necessary to achieve a true translation (line 75). This resonates with Jobb Arnold's argument that land affect, or "nontechnologically mediated experiences of affective energy" prompt "the growth of nervelike connectivity between people and the land, transmitting powerful affective pathways that can flow through multiple possible trajectories, or even create new connective pathways" (98). In this analysis, land, water, or fire become what media scholar John Durham Peters describes as "vehicles that carry and communicate meaning," not unlike language itself, and can powerfully reconfigure human relationships to land and water when experienced on a bodily level (2).

In lieu of her readers' literal submersion, Diaz enriches the stanza with physical sensation. Rather than use color alone to describe the river, Diaz employs the adjectives "warm" and "cool" to encourage an embodied awareness of the water further heightened by the metaphor of silk fabric, which evokes the current's soft, flowing touch (lines 75, 76). Further, the stanza is rich in images both sensual and spiritual. The images of the "lance entering the earth" and the river "bursting from earth's clay body," which reference the Mojave Creation Story,[7] imbue the stanza with erotic sensuality, evoking both a moment of conception and of subsequent birth (lines 73, 74). Meanwhile, the moment of submersion recalls Catholic baptism, its associated holy water, and spiritual rebirth. Through poetic description, Diaz improvises a substitute for the material experience of submersion, affording the reader opportunity to experience a fuller form of translation within the supposed constraint of the poem.

Diaz's use of color imagery further amplifies the translation's effect. Early in "The First Water Is the Body," Diaz describes how the Colorado River, once "silt-red-thick," has become a "dammed blue river" (lines 11, 15). The contrast between red and blue and the paronomasia in line 15 reflects the settler-colonial transformation of the river, in which the sediment rich river is spiritually and physically damned into the unnaturally still, blue water siloed behind the dam. While Diaz's poetic description of the red river recalls its freely flowing past, red perpetuates racialized stereotypes in the settler-colonial imaginary, in which images of "a magical red Indian... or a fake Indian in a / red dress" allow Native people to be "dismissed as myth" (lines 24-25, 27). Although Diaz notes that "the only red people I've seen / are white tourists sunburned

[7] Earlier in "The First Water Is the Body," Diaz writes that the Mojaves' Creator "loosed the river from the earth and built it into our / living bodies," (lines 17-18) while in *"exhibits from* The American Water Museum," she explains how "the Creator pressed his staff / into the earth, and the earth opened –" to reveal "earth's most radical bloom: *our people*–" (lines 32-33, 35). The Mojave Creation Story is not mine to tell, but you can listen to Simon Garcia Sr., a member of the Fort Mojave Indian Tribe, tell the story at the Native Memory Project: https://nativememoryproject.org/story/creation-stories/.

after staying out on the water too long," her translation further revises racist discourse, returning the reader to a vibrant pre-verbal moment, "the place where the body was yet a green-blue energy green- / ing, greened and bluing the stone, red and floodwater" (lines 15-16, lines 88-89). While the "green-blue" further associates the body with water and is a corrective to the racialized red body, the subsequent anthimeria and final reference to "red and floodwater" returns the river from its still, dammed state to a vibrant, multi-colored flow (lines 88, 89). Color, anthimeria, sensual and spiritual imagery, and reference to the Creation Story are all elements in Diaz's poetic *bricolage,* through which she endeavors to return the reader to the pre-verbal, and subsequently, furnish a full translation.

"The First Water Is the Body" is in many ways an improvised translation, as Diaz operates within lexical and formal constraints while endeavoring to translate the Mojaves' embodied relationship. However, Diaz attends to another form of improvised translation in "The First Water Is the Body": the provision of human rights to bodies of water. Improvisational in that it employs existing legal systems and legal language – an example of "tools at hand" within a potentially constraining institutional framework – granting human rights to water represents a significant step forward in reconfiguring human-water relationships (Lévi-Strauss 17). As the poem draws to a close, Diaz draws a comparison between New Zealand, India, and Slovenia, countries that recognize the rights of rivers and the right to clean drinking water, and the United States, where the government is "teargassing and rubber-bulleting and kenneling / Natives trying to protect their water from pollution and contamination at / Standing Rock in North Dakota" (lines 123-125). This visceral description accurately reflects police brutality during the Standing Rock Protests[8] and recalls Jamie Linton's argument that "modern water...contributed to making

[8] In August 2016, the North Dakota Governor declared a state of emergency to respond to the Standing Rock Protests, which included three protest camps comprised of several Native tribes and non-Native allies. The

America the foremost economic and military power in the latter part of the [twentieth] century" (161). Although Linton is referring to the mid-twentieth century dam projects that enabled massive reserves of hydroelectric energy, pipelines share a similar relationship with state power. The government's violent disregard of the Standing Rock Sioux's right to protect their water displayed a continued commitment to treating water as a resource to be used or abused in the name of enhanced political and economic power, and demonstrated the outsized physical harm sustained by the bodies of water defenders. Water's embodied connection to Native peoples and significance to all humankind clearly has not translated to the United States government.

If treating water as a resource co-constitutes the modern American state, understanding water as a part of one's body may allow new social and political frameworks to emerge. As Peters reminds us, media, including water, "are civilizational ordering devices," which the following stanza reflects (5):

> We think of our bodies as being all that we are: *I am my body.* This thinking
> helps us disrespect water, air, land, one another. But water is not external
> from our body, our self. (lines 133-135)

Perceiving water as an internal and sacred entity versus an external resource might mediate a network of relationships – a form of civilization – in which Diaz wonders if "our brown bodies and our blue rivers be / more loved and less ruined?" (lines 117-118). An effective translation of water's meaning and value, whether through land affect, poetic devices, or legal frameworks, may facilitate this alternative civilizational order, and demonstrates the significant consequences

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camps were in opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline, designed to transport oil from Canada to the Gulf Coast while traversing sacred waters on sovereign land. Under the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, North Dakota enlisted "more than seventy-five law enforcement agencies from around the country, as well as the North Dakota National Guard, Border Patrol, and Homeland Security" (Estes and Dhillon 4). Law enforcement utilized sound cannons, concussion grenades, rubber bullets, tear gas, water cannons, and surveillance, and hundreds of Water Protectors were injured or arrested (Dakwar).

of translation, or lack thereof. Consequently, translation is necessary, even when it requires improvisation.

Throughout "The First Water Is the Body," Diaz articulates the embodied relationship between the Mojave and the Colorado River while emphasizing the power and potential embodied in language, water, and translation. Although the translations in the poem gesture to the limitations of the English language, Diaz "mak[es] do" with those limitations in spectacular and compelling ways, effectively translating the Mojaves' embodied relationship to water into a language and form accessible and familiar to an English-speaking reader (Lévi-Strauss 17). Through poetic improvisation, Diaz endeavors to revise our perception of both water and language, contributing to a larger shift in the epistemological and relational frameworks governing our relationship both to water and to those bodies most intimately connected with it, while revealing the critical role language – Mojave, English, or legal – plays in our understanding of bodies, water, and land as interconnected, animate beings.

Revisiting the Museum: *"exhibits from* The American Water Museum"

"*exhibits from* The American Water Museum" engages similar themes as "The First Water Is the Body," but it invites the reader to discover the link between river and body as if wandering through a museum, an institutional space that it poetically repurposes. The multi-page poem's short stanzas are grouped into "exhibits," each of which contains one to ten stanzas. Audrey Goodman argues that the exhibits, which appear in nonnumerical order, reflect "the failure of institutions and their pedagogical models" ("Poet Warriors" 46). However, I read Diaz's organization of the poetic exhibits in a more positive light. First, the exhibits invite the reader to encounter the carefully curated verse as separate yet connected components of a larger exhibition. The poem's form thus invites the reader to engage their bodily senses as if wandering

through a museum with auditory, visual, and participatory exhibits. Second, the exhibits are their own form of *bricolage,* as Diaz rearranges the museum through poetic curation.

Situating the poem in/as a museum is signficant. Amy Lonetree, a scholar of Native American history, notes that museums are "intimately tied to the colonization process," not unlike the regulation of language and water (1). However, Lonetree simultaneously acknowledges that due to Native activism and leadership, Native people are increasingly more involved in curating exhibits, "chang[ing] the way Indigenous history and culture are represented" (1). While Lonetree, a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation, points out that this has "redefined our relationship with museums," she also points that these efforts are "linked to the larger movements of self-determination and cultural sovereignty" (1). Museums are therefore potentially rich sites to create space for untold histories and develop new epistemological and relational frameworks that support such movements, despite legacies of institutional harm. The poetic museum Diaz creates in "*exhibits from* The American Water Museum" affords space to interrogate and rework these frameworks, just as "The First Water Is the Body" interrogates the mediating role of language and engages in poetic improvisation to subvert the English language's lexical constraints.

Although "*exhibits from* The American Water Museum" does not explicitly engage with translation like "The First Water Is the Body," the museum becomes a place of translation in that it endeavors to make embodied relationships to water legible. In *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (2012), Lonetree builds on Patricia Pierce Erikson's assertion that museums "reveal a process of collaboration between diverse peoples amid conditions of unequal empowerment. Native American museums/cultural centers are both translators and translations, agents of social change and products of

accommodation" (qtd. in Lonetree 3). Poetic or otherwise, museums, like effective translations, can allow different perspectives to come to the surface, highlighting submerged histories and diverse experiences despite their historically harmful legacy.

Museums often create a sense of pastness, nurturing assumptions that objects within the museum are separate from the external world, enclosed for viewing or display. In this sense, the museum refracts modern relationships to water in which water is an external resource. However, in *"exhibits from* The American Water Museum," the museum does not contain water as an aesthetic object behind a glass plane nor frame it as an external resource. The museum bleeds into real life as museumgoers realize "they have entered The American Water Museum not as / patrons but rather as parts of the new exhibit," complicating the idea of the museum as a space separate from everyday life (lines 118-119). The relational dynamic between the reader/museumgoer and water is particularly clear in exhibits 4 and 5. The former describes a guidebook with a single entry indicating that "*There is no guide. / You built this museum. / You have always been / its Muse and Master"* (lines 20-23). Although the single entry locates the reader in the establishment and perpetuation of the museum itself, the lack of a formal guide suggests that the exhibition is evolving and consequently invites our relationship with water to evolve as well. In contrast, exhibit 5 reveals water's return influence on human bodies: "Admission is general and free / except for what the children pay– / and they pay in the kidneys" (lines 25-27). The poetic museum becomes a site of continuous, fluid exchange between reader and water, in which the water on display is not separate or past but responding to and impacting the reader/museumgoer.

My reading of "*exhibits from* The American Water Museum" focuses on exhibits engaging with the state-water relationship and water's memory. Since museums are often state-

building projects, the multiple exhibits unveiling the state's co-option and manipulation of water to exert power is notable and reflect another form of improvisation. Diaz's transformation of the museum resonates with Michel de Certeau's discussion of "transverse *tactics"* as a form of *bricolage* that does "not obey the law of the place" but rather "manipulate[s]... and divert[s] these spaces" (29). As exhibits 78, 123, 205, and 365 reveal the state-water relationship in overlapping iterations, the museum becomes a site of subversion, deconstructing rather than uplifting the state. Exhibits 88, 3000, 301, and 11 similarly reconfigure the museumgoer's understanding of water as they engage water's memory while gesturing to its continual progression into the future. Memory is significant in the context of the museum, which can serve as a repository of cultural memory and, through its exhibits, alter what is remembered and what is not, while the sense of continuance transforms the exhibition into a space in which alternative futures, mediated by shifting relationships to water, emerge. Notably, these exhibits simultaneously address the human-river relationship, continually reemphasizing that embodied connection in a pattern of repetitive difference.

Exhibits 78 and 205 reflect and build on the concerns with language and liveliness that "The First Water Is the Body" engages, framing both in the context of state power. In Exhibit 78, Diaz writes, "The first violence against any body of water / is to forget the name its creator first called it. / Worse: forget the bodies who spoke that name" (lines 39-41). Language becomes a foundation for violence exerted on water and bodies, illustrating the material consequences of discursive choices. Renaming facilitates what Diaz describes as the "American way of forgetting Natives: / Discover them with City. Crumble them by City" (lines 42-43). By highlighting linguistic amnesia as the first act of violence, Diaz points to the discursive foundation beneath the material and infrastructural elements of displacement and dispossession: once settlers

become “the new Natives of your new Cities” they will “Let the new faucets run in celebration, in excess,” linking the control and misuse of water via modern infrastructure with the establishment of a settler futurity (lines 44, 45). People are not the only beings displaced through this act; water is similarly dispossessed, as exhibit 205 indicates that “The water piped into every American city is called *dead water”* (line 95). Although water appears in these new cities via pipes and plumbing, this water has been stripped of its liveliness and dispossessed from its territory through diversion and quantification.

The political impetus behind this diversion is apparent in exhibit 123, which directly addresses the American imperial project and links the violence towards Native Americans with United States foreign policy. In both exhibits, Diaz foregrounds the government’s control of water as a means of controlling and harming Indigenous people while perpetuating a wider political project. Exhibit 123 makes visceral connections between the control of water and the harms exerted on bodies, particularly Indigenous women and girls:

Marginalia from the BIA Watermongers Congressional Records, redacted:

To kill [redacted] take their water

To kill [redacted] steal their water

then tell them how much they owe

To kill [redacted] bleed them of what is wet in them

To kill [redacted] find their river and slit its throat

To kill [redacted] pollute their water with their daughters’

busted drowned bodies washed up

on the shores, piece by piece (lines 85-93)

By framing this exhibit as "Marginalia from the BIA Watermongers,"[9] Diaz critiques the government's stated commitment to support Native Americans, instead illustrating how federal regulation of land and water underscores dispossession, ongoing debt, and the outsized level of violence directed at Native women (line 85).[10] "Bleed them of what is wet in them" and "find their river and slit its throat" highlight the fluid relationship between Native people and their water, underscoring that harm exerted on water begets generational cycles of physical violence (lines 89, 90). In this stanza, government water policy transforms water, a life-giving medium, into a medium for violence and control.

Exhibit 365 identifies the relationship between water control and state violence in a different geographical context. By locating government control of water in different locations, Diaz reflects what Jamie Linton describes as "[m]odern water's hegemony," a perception of water-as-resource exported abroad for political and economic purposes (59). Several similarities appear between the two exhibits, underscoring this hegemonic approach. Like exhibit 123's marginalia, exhibit 365 is a material artifact – a "Photograph from a South American newspaper" (Diaz line 193). A connection between water control and a larger imperial project becomes apparent as Diaz explains that "US-headquartered companies bought the rights / to water in other countries," a repetition of BIA policy that expands the United States' economic power (lines 194-195). Although the companies are "strangers to the gods of these waters," they nevertheless attempt to violently control them (line 196):

The US-headquartered companies announce,

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[9] "BIA" stands for Bureau of Indian Affairs. The BIA is a bureau within the United States Department of the Interior. Their stated mission is "to enhance the quality of life, promote economic opportunities, and to carry out the federal responsibilities entrusted to us to protect and improve the trust assets of American Indians and Alaska Natives" (U.S. Department of the Interior Indian Affairs, "Bureau of Indian Affairs").

[10] For more information on the movement for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) in the United States: Native Hope. "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW)." *Native Hope.* https://www.nativehope.org/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women-mmiw. Accessed 2 December 2024.

with armed guards, *You can't drink from this lake*
anymore. The Natives gather rain instead, open
their beautiful water-shaped mouths to the sky,
catch it in curved, peach-colored shells, in halved
gourds, in their water-shaped hands. (lines 200-205)

Like exhibit 123, this stanza illustrates how controlling water can become a means of violence, present in the "armed guards" who enclose the once common lake (line 201). However, the embodied connection between the Natives and their water remains apparent through their "water-shaped" mouths and hands (line 205). Exhibits 123 and 365 reflect two opposing forms of hydrosocial relations through their engagement with violence and use of corporeal imagery. On the one hand, they illustrate government or corporate control over water through which water is "stripped of its complex social relationships such that it may be managed by experts who are not necessarily directly involved in these relationships" (Linton 58). On the other hand, they simultaneously reveal the deep cultural significance water holds for those who live in close relationship with it. These opposed relationalities trouble the hegemony of modern water, creating space for the reader to grasp the significance of water for Native peoples and recognize how water management practices are deployed as forms of violence.

Highlighting water's memory similarly troubles the hegemony of modern water, in which water is a lifeless resource that can be quantified and controlled. In exhibits 88 and 3000, memory expresses animacy and endurance, as water's memory facilitates a return to loved ones and serves as an archive of connection and continuity that persists through time, wherever water finds itself. In a footnote to exhibit 88, Diaz indicates that the exhibit is "The last love letter written to the last river," elaborating that "It was the wish of the last river that the letter not be

made public until 100 years after her death" (69). The river's wish implies a sort of humanistic agency, further blurring the human-water divide, while the river's death 100 years in the past reflects exhibit 205, which informs the museumgoer that piped water is "*dead water*" (line 95). Although the letter-writer speaks to the river's memory – "You remember everything" – the letter itself becomes a time-capsule, through which the museumgoer might remember the river's animacy and intention as she "suffered to return" to her lover (lines 178, 181). Remembering the river as a lover and a provider invites the reader to consider water as an animate, sentient being.

As the letter concludes, the lover/writer reaffirms the close relationship between water and humans, claiming that "Like me you are a fast body" (lines 186). Shortly thereafter, the writer notes that "I laid [sic] in your bed. / I kept you for myself," suggesting an act of human invasion and possession (lines 188-189). However, the lines immediately following, "except you are myself / and kept me instead," point to the river's power to regulate human life and resist control (lines 190-191). Although the lover attempts to possess the river, the river ultimately possesses them. Exhibit 3000 similarly illustrates water's ability to hold or possess human beings: "Water remembers everything it travels over and through. / If you have been in water, part of you remains there still" (lines 241-242). As a liquid memoir "of an indissoluble relationship with the world," water becomes a moving archive of our embodied interconnectivity (lines 243). Although we may think we can gain ownership or control over water, water possesses us through its memory.

As the poem concludes, exhibits 301 and 11 gesture to the enduring presence of Native peoples and the possibility for both humans and waters to heal. Exhibit 301, "The Magic Show," reflects the co-constitutive relationship between water, humans, and the spiritual realm (line 245). The stanza opens with the assertion that "*Only water can change water,* can heal itself*"*

which may be read as a form of externalization or the obfuscation of responsibility – if only water can heal itself, any human efforts are null and void (line 246). However, the closing line, "Or maybe God is water, because I am water, and you are water," counters this assumption (line 248). This reflects one of the closing stanzas in "The First Water Is the Body," in which Diaz writes, "What we do to one–to the body, to the water–we do to the other" (lines 140-141). If humans are water and only water can heal itself, human beings are necessarily implicated in the healing process.

Exhibit 11, "*Art of Fact,"* closes the poem with a final nod to the human-water connection in the context of memory and continuance (line 250):

> Let me tell you a story about water:
>
> Once upon a time there was us.
>
> America's thirst tried to drink us away.
>
> And here we still are. (lines 251-254)

This is an apt exhibit with which to conclude the poem for several reasons. First, Diaz's wordplay in the exhibit's title warps the word "artifact" into "art of fact." Deconstructing the perceived stability of an artifact, "art of fact" demonstrates how aesthetic practices – like art, poetry, and even improvisation – shape what we perceive as factual or real. The "story" in the stanza's opening line builds on this, as the discursive practice of storytelling shapes realities and perceptions of history, present, and future (line 251). Framing the story as "about water," Diaz reaffirms the human-water connection through the pronoun "us," which gestures to both water and Native peoples. Although "America's thirst tried to drink us away" through quantification, diversion, and displacement, both water and Native peoples are still present (lines 251, 252, 253). Exhibit 11 responds to the poem's revisionary project, revealing the role of discursive,

aesthetic, and curatorial practices in shaping what is perceived as fact. Further, the exhibit reaffirms the human-river connection while establishing a sense of continuity and futurity, as both water and the bodies most intimately connected with it persist in the face of erasure and dispossession.

"*exhibits from* The American Water Museum" takes the reader on a multisensorial journey through a carefully curated, imagined museum[11] that poetically unveils the relationships between water, humans, and power. Despite the limitations of the written medium, Diaz creates an embodied experience for the reader through references to sound, voice, and interactive exhibits. The poem's form underscores this embodied experience. Taking the reader on a poetic walk through The American Water Museum, the poem invites a rediscovery of one's material connection to water, to other bodies both human and non-human, and to the land while unveiling injustices both historical and ongoing. Like "The First Water Is the Body," *"exhibits from* The American Water Museum" is a poetic improvisation, occupying and transforming the space of the museum into a site of relearning relationships to water through its auditory, interactive, and archival exhibits.

Conclusion

In *What Is Water?* Linton uses the example of the *odeyak,* a canoe built by Cree and Inuit communities in Northern Québec and paddled to New York City in protest of hydroelectric dams on the Great Whale River. Linton argues that this action reminds us that dominant forms of understanding water may be challenged by "alternative waters" that are placed "directly in our line of vision" (12). I read this canoe trip as a form of performative revision: by demonstrating the value of those waters for First Nations via the *odeyak's* journey, the campaign helped revise

[11] In the notes to *Postcolonial Love Poem,* Diaz credits Luis Alberto Urrea for first making The American Water Museum "a real space in my wonders" through the title of his story collection, *The Water Museum* (99).

the watery imaginary of a majority of the Canadian public, who lived far from the proposed dam sites and were accustomed to viewing water merely as a resource for hydroelectricity. Diaz's poems offer a similar revision. "The First Water Is the Body" adopts the clear language of a report or public document while poetically revising dominant discursive frameworks and highlighting the embodied continuity between water, language, and the body. "*exhibits from* The American Water Museum" demonstrates how aesthetic practice and cultural creation actively inform our everyday experience, and how the space of the museum and other sites of cultural curation impact how we move through the world.

Both poems reclaim critical sites through which the uneven "flows of global power" historically course – language and museums (Neimanis 146). By reformulating both the English language and the museum as media of expression and representation that afford a different understanding of water and our shared, yet different connections to it, the poems challenge the epistemological and relational frameworks that undergird the modern water paradigm. Animating our embodied relationship to water and unveiling water's relationship to the modern state, "The First Water Is the Body" and "*exhibits from* The American Water Museum" demonstrate the potential of language, cultural production and poetry itself to powerfully intervene in cultural perceptions of water. Although "You cannot drink poetry," poetry can shift how water appears in our environmental imaginations, and consequently shape the injustices associated with attempts to control water's unruly, energetic flows (Diaz, *"exhibits from"* line 163). Reading these poems as necessary improvisations that revise our understanding of water illustrates how poetry, language, and sites of cultural production are infrastructural media, shaping our lives like water, dams, and pipelines. *Postcolonial Love Poem* demonstrates how these media can be revised and reformulated to destabilize the epistemological and relational frameworks undergirding what

Jamie Linton calls modern water. In doing so, poetry and language may allow other modes of relating to and caring for water and for each other to emerge.

Conclusion

Toward Better Relations

In the final chapter of *What Is Water?,* Jamie Linton turns to a report produced by the Global Water System Project, an international water research group. The report speaks to the increased role of human activity in the hydrologic cycle, citing various human activities, including pollution and engineering, that impact how water moves across earth and through the atmosphere. Linton gestures to an image included in the report, which unlike Richard Horton's original diagram of the hydrologic cycle, slots "Human Components" into its circular representation of the water cycle (230). Consequently, Linton argues that the authors "have themselves transformed the water cycle," relocating human activity in water's planetary circuits through their report and its associated visuals (230). Just as Horton's diagram formalized water "in the anglophone hydrological tradition" in which the water cycle is "present in nature and requiring the application of correct scientific method in order to be revealed," the image in the Global Water System Project report formalizes the role of human activity (126). Like the human behavior the authors cite, their report – in parts both discursive and visual – similarly shapes how we understand and imagine water.

If scientific research, discourse, and diagrams can revise Horton's hydrologic cycle into a hydrosocial one, as Linton argues, the literary arts have a similarly urgent role to play in reconfiguring relationships to water. Throughout this thesis, I've endeavored to illustrate how poetry participates in this critical and creative reimagining. As Erin Robinsong, Claire Wahmanholm, and Natalie Diaz respond to the turbulent waters of climate change, they participate in the urgent work of transforming our hydrosocial relations. These poets invite readers to reimagine the materiality of our embodied relationship to water, which flows through

their formally diverse collections as drool, sweat, glacial ice, and river water. In doing so, they exhibit what Min Hyoung Song describes as "climate lyricism," or the "perpetual project of making yourself and others aware of the changes occurring in the physical world" (2). Further, their poetry imbues water with "the kinds of powers that humans are traditionally thought to be the only ones capable of possessing," resisting a discourse in which water is an externalized resource subject to quantification and control (2). Instead, water emerges from the pages of their collections as an animate being with which humans share an embodied, ever-evolving relationship. Attuning readers to our connection with the natural world and our complicity in climate crisis, these poets labor towards an ecological ethics of mutual care.

In *Wet Dream,* water and air become media for connection and communication, facilitating forms of intimacy that move across scales to locate the leaking, perspiring human body in the planetary rhythms of the water cycle. Through my close reading of "A Reply" and "Rain on the Inarticulate" in chapter one, I argued that Robinsong emphasizes the biological workings of the human body, remaining attuned to our ongoing fluid exchanges with the natural world. Further, Robinsong's use of paronomasia, relatively little punctation, and repetition of specific words, sounds, and images establishes a sense of simultaneous continuity and difference that mirrors water's different repetitions throughout the hydrologic cycle. The formal parallels suggest that language, and consequently poetry, materially shapes our world, like water. Drawing poetic attention to our entanglements with water, both embodied and linguistic, *Wet Dream* reminds us that poetry can powerful mediate our relationship with water in its many forms.

Poetry's mediating potential is similarly apparent in Claire Wahmanholm's *Meltwater.* Placing Wahmanholm's "Glacier" poems in conversation with James Balog's time-lapse photography project, the Extreme Ice Survey, provides an apt demonstration of poetry's unique

ability to help readers conceptualize climate change effects, particularly when they unfold over long, slow temporalities or at distant geographic locations, and are thus challenging to perceive. In chapter two, I followed Rob Nixon's argument that these "often imperceptible threats" become "apprehensible to the senses through the work of scientific and imaginative testimony," proposing that poetry affords apprehension in ways other media, including photography, do not (14). However, I argued that Wahmanholm's poems, written over a decade after Nixon coined the term "slow violence," trouble that temporality to reveal the newly accelerated pace of climate impacts, glacial recession included, in an affective and effective manner (3).

In many ways, my third chapter is a different repetition of chapters one and two, further elaborating the embodied human-water relationship while illustrating poetry's unique formal affordances. Building on my discussion of poetic form and language in chapters one and two, I propose form and language become tools with which a poet might improvise or make do under lexical constraints, engaging in a form of *bricolage* I call poetic improvisation. I suggest that Natalie Diaz engages in poetic improvisation in "The First Water Is the Body" and "*exhibits from* The American Water Museum" to articulate the Mojaves' embodied relationship to the Colorado River and the necessity of water to all human life. These poems navigate questions of power and privilege, gesture to a settler-colonial legacy of water diversion, language erasure, racism, and physical harms. However, Diaz navigates these constraints through poetic improvisation, reconfiguring the English language and the space of the museum, an institution closely linked to the settler state, to produce new forms of understanding and relating to water.

Wet Dream, Meltwater, and *Postcolonial Love Poem* illustrate critical, yet different ways in which water amplifies embodied experiences of climate change. However, as the UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme reminds us, water is inseparable from climate change, and

consequently, these poets attend to wider environmental crisis. Robinsong's work establishes a shared watery intimacy between the human body and the hydrologic cycle – as we sweat, imbibe, listen, and cry, we implicate ourselves in the watery planet. Attuning her readers to these liquid intimacies through erotic, playful verse, Robinsong invites an ethics of care towards an ailing planet we are materially connected to. Wahmanholm's "Glacier" poems use a melting glacier to engage questions of time and complicity, grappling with the long timescales of ice accretion while attending to human actions and emotions coinciding with today's accelerated glacial recession, only one symptom of human actions over timescales both long and short. Finally, Diaz attunes her readers to the political aspect of climate change, reminding us that controlling and regulating water often comes at the expense of those who live in closest relationship with it. By reconfiguring relationships to water through poetic improvisation, Diaz illustrates how aesthetic production can resist and revise dominant narratives.

Collectively, these poets show us that amidst a dire environmental crisis, poetry matters. Discourse – whether popular, political, scientific, or poetic – can transform the way we perceive water, our bodies, and our environment, and can consequently contribute to material change in the face of climate catastrophe. While some may argue that we should focus our energies on large scale technological and scientific solutions to our environmental problems, reimagining our relationship to land and water is equally essential. Erin Robinsong's, Claire Wahmanholm's, and Natalie Diaz's poetry contributes to powerful shifts in our hydrosocial relations, attuning us to our liquid relations, aiding our apprehension of distant or slow-moving climate impacts, and improvising to convey meaning despite legacies of political and lexical constraint. Through these mediations, their poetry affords an opportunity to begin a radical revision of our relationship to water, and consequently, to the planet at large.

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