

Modern Water on occupied Turtle Island

Colin Tucker

This event investigates the politics of what geographer Jamie Linton calls “modern water.” Modern water is “the dominant... 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 20th century.” Modern water is a way of organizing practice that proceeds from “the presumption that any and all waters can be and should be considered apart from their social and ecological relations[,] and reduced to an abstract quantity.” The technoscientific basis for modern water approaches “all water... as an abstract, isomorphic, measurable quantity that may be reduced to its fundamental unit — a molecule of H₂O — and represented as a substance that flows in the hydrologic cycle.” As a principle that regulates practice, modern water names socio-ecological relations between humans, water, and other entities, relations that have “far-reaching consequences” across fields ranging from “economic development, urbanization, agriculture, transportation, public health, and flood control.”¹ By the 21st century, modern water is deeply sedimented into infrastructure and knowledge, official and unofficial, to the point where “many of us...survive without having to think much about it.”²

Modern water not only organizes particular areas of practice, but also participates in the formation of Society and Nature as ontological positions defined by their categorical distinction. Linton writes that “even though it flows constantly through our bodies and our psyches, in the modern cosmos, water has been banished to the Cartesian realm of extended substance,” or in other words Nature with a capital N.³ Through modern water, Society constitutes itself by making water legible as secular Nature. As part of Nature, water is often inscribed as inanimate matter. Elizabeth Povinelli, an anthropologist working with the Indigenous Belyuen community, calls this Nonlife.⁴

Water’s position as Nonlife is not a given, but is actively created by specific conceptual and technological apparatuses. While influential analyses of modernity by Achille Mbembe and Michel Foucault have focused on the importance of necropower and biopower, respectively,⁵ Povinelli argues that both are subtended by geontopower, or the power to make distinctions between Life and Nonlife. In a famous passage, environmental historian Donald Worster reads the Friant-Kern canal, as a microcosm of modern water’s production of water as Nonlife: “the modern canal, unlike a river, is not an ecosystem. It is simplified, abstracted Water, rigidly

¹ Jamie Linton, *What is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction*, 13, 14

² *Ibid.*, 19

³ *Ibid.*, 18

⁴ Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*

⁵ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*

separated from the earth and firmly directed to raise food, fill pipes, and make money... tall chain-link fences run on either side, sealing the ditch off... large, ominous signs are posted: 'Stay alive by staying out.' The intention of the signs is to promote public safety... however their darker effect is to suggest that the contrived world of the irrigation canal is not a place where living things, including humans, are welcome."⁶

At this point, I want to complicate the terms of Linton's and Worster's writings. While these analyses do not center racialization and colonization, they do depend fundamentally upon a Society/Nature binary, which is ultimately inseparable from racialization and colonization. Linton and Worster write primarily about Settler-Conquistador nations, where full participation in society is historically contingent upon Whiteness. However, it would be too simple to say that racialization and colonization positions people on the side of Nature within the Society/Nature binary. For instance, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson writes that categorical distinctions between Human and Animal, and Human and Matter, are possible because of the positioning of Blackness as what she calls an "abyss" separating these terms. In this position, Blackness often becomes intensely gendered and sexualized. For Jackson, Blackness both embodies *and* threatens the Nature/Society boundary; anti-Blackness is an attempt to stabilize this boundary. In other words, Nature is not docile and legible until Blackness's imagined threat has been neutralized.⁷

In a parallel but distinct example, the inscription of Turtle Island with Settler-Conquistador ideas of Nature has been a crucial component of colonization. On this continent, Nature with a capital N is often actualized as wilderness. As Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd writes, wilderness is frequently invoked as a metonym for indigenous "past perfect completion and death."⁸ To put it more bluntly: on colonized land, wilderness is inseparable from genocide. The possibility of imagining land or water as a resource, or as empty space for so-called settlement, depends upon a brutal, centuries-long project of conquest, a project that has intensified in the wake of recent resource colonialism.

In this event, I'll be investigating water as a site where colonization and racialization are enacted. I'll be focusing on occupied Turtle Island, over a broad historical frame. The historical scope of the Visual Studies Workshop's archives is limited by the histories of particular media technologies, primarily photography and film. I want to contextualize this archive's sources in a more expansive historical purview, by drawing on analytical frameworks that implicate broader

⁶ Quoted in Linton, 19; original in Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 5

⁷ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, 12; Jackson, "Outer Worlds," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*

⁸ Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, 7

histories of imperialism in the so-called New World, with a particular focus on the Settler-Conquistador nation-state of the United States.⁹

I will take, as points of departure, two propositions. First, the historical roots of so-called contemporary water crises are long, and these can be traced easily to the 19th century, if not to the beginnings of imperial modernity in the 15th century.¹⁰ Second, modern water and its discontents are inseparable from racialization and colonization. In other words, environmental racism is a feature, not a bug, of modern water, and of the broader Society/Nature binary. Together, these propositions suggest that the dismantling of environmental racism may require much more than policy changes within the Settler-Conquistador nation-state. It may require a radically different Turtle Island, one which proceeds from Indigenous sovereignty, the radical Black ecologies, and the abolition of Whiteness.

Methodologically, I make this work by proceeding from my own position as a White Settler living on occupied Seneca and Haudenosaunee land. I'm considering both modern water and White Settler-Conquistador positionality as being intertwined realms of practice structured by implicit knowledge. By excavating the otherwise taken-for-granted contours of this knowledge, I hope to open up avenues for dismantling it. I'm approaching modern water and White Settler-Conquistador positionality as material, ecological, and relational areas of practice, in order to contest Society/Nature and Subject/Object binaries. In particular, Whiteness's enactment through the self-determining subject can easily insulate against critique. By thinking about interdependence through ecology, fluidity, and infrastructure, I aim to open up avenues for mapping Whiteness differently, and more critically.

In excavating White Settler-Conquistador positionality, I am deliberately engaging with fields where this position has been theorized in unflinching, anti-humanist terms: Indigenous studies and Black studies. While artistic exoticism and classical anthropology position racialized and colonized people as objects to be quote unquote discovered by White people, in this event I position Black and Indigenous authors as theorists of White Settler positionality. These are frameworks to which White Settlers are already accountable, and which have been historically neglected. In developing this event as a whole, I have drawn upon writings that map White

⁹ In this approach, I'm indebted to radical Black thought, such as writing by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Tiffany Lethabo King, Christina Sharpe, Hortense Spillers, and Sylvia Wynter, and also to the critical archival practice of Ariella Azoulay.

¹⁰ For instance, early, often apocalyptic weaponizations of water are discussed in Diana Leong, *The Salt Bones: Toward a Slave Ship Ecology*; Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert & David Schechter, "The Environmental Dynamics of a Colonial Fuel-Rush: Silver Mining and Deforestation in New Spain, 1522 to 1810," *Environmental History*; on the broader environmental apocalypses of early modernity, see Zoe Todd and Heather Davis, "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *ACME*; Kathryn Yusoff, *One Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

Conquistador positionality in specifically ecological and relational terms: writings ranging from Dakota scholar Kim TallBear's analytics of relation to Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson's *White possessive*, from Elizabeth Povinelli and Belyuen colleagues' geontologies to Métis scholar Michelle Murphy's alterlife, from Tiffany King's geographies of porosity to Denise Ferreira da Silva's excavations of racialized subjectivity, from Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's *black mater* to Willie Jamaal Wright's *anti-Black habitats*.¹¹

I draw upon anti-humanist analytics for another reason as well: in order to avoid a shortcoming of fields like Whiteness studies and Settler-Colonial studies. In the former field and related artistic practices, White people study Whiteness using White methods, creating a closed circuit that leads to more of the same. Charles Mills writes that "whites will cite other whites in a closed circuit of epistemic authority that reproduces white delusions."¹² In order to break this feedback loop, I deliberately center analyses of White Settler-Conquistador positionality which challenge its fundamental humanist presumptions.

Now I want to introduce the archival excavations. In the next video, I'll talk about how the excavations relate to the experimental music form of the event score. Here, I want to introduce how the videos investigate intersections between modern water, colonization, and racialization.

In the first four videos, I trace modern water's obsession with boundaries, particularly with the Society/Nature binary. Society's distinction from Nature is constituted in part through the self-determining, transcendent Subject. Denise Ferreira da Silva excavates how this subject becomes intrinsically racialized. Self-determining transcendence is continually haunted by its inherent impossibility. For instance, the realities of ecological interdependence continually contradict assertions of self-determination. As a result, the production of self-determination requires not only a sleight of hand but violence. The White Conquistador subject makes himself, as self-determining, by figuring Black and Indigenous bodies as outer-determined, or affectable in Silva's terminology. The transcendent subject's categorical distinction from Nature is secured by positioning racialized and colonized bodies as nature-driven, or, in other words, as a boundary between Society and Nature.¹³ As the videos explore, Settler-Conquistador society

¹¹ Kim TallBear, "Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming," *Kalfou*; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*; Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*; Michelle Murphy, "What Can't A Body Do," *Catalyst*; Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*; Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*; Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*; Willie Jamaal Wright, "As Above, So Below: Anti-Black Violence as Environmental Racism," *Antipode*

¹² Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, 34

¹³ Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*; Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals*

positions water alternately as a threat to White self determination *and* as a tool for racializing and colonizing violence. Water's fluidity makes it a site of affectability; Conquistador society responds by minimizing its threat to White self-determination, and maximizing its capacity to write Blackness and Indianness as affectable. From this standpoint, the harms of environmental racism are not merely the results of bad actors, such as opportunistic corporations or negligent state regulators; rather, the underlying libidinal economy of Settler-Conquistador Whiteness is implicated in these harms.

The next four videos excavate relations between modern water and the colonization of Turtle Island. These videos take as a point of departure the writing of Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd. Settler-Conquistador society attempts to write Indigenous people into a past that, according to Byrd, is “outside of temporality and presence.”¹⁴ Byrd argues that this writing is made possible through Settler-Conquistador notions of Indianness, which “figures American Indian lives as ungrivable in a past tense lament that forecloses futurity.”¹⁵ As such, paradigmatic Indianness is central to the making of the United States as a nation, in the past and the present. While normative Settler-Conquistador discourse figures the Indian with a capital I as absent, Byrd instead understands Indianness as a “dense presence” in all aspects of US society.¹⁶ However, locating traces of Indianness is not necessarily straightforward. Byrd writes that “Indianness can be felt and intuited as a presence, and yet apprehending it as a process is difficult... precisely because Indianness has served as the field through which structures have always already been produced.”¹⁷

These four videos unearth entanglements and co-constitutions between Indianness and modern water, across the Settler-Conquistador everyday on occupied Turtle Island. These videos investigate how modern water's positioning of water as Nature presupposes paradigmatic Indianness. Whether water is figured as a resource, or as an aesthetic object, the archival documents examined in these videos approach water through a framework of wilderness. Wilderness is predicated on a paradigmatic Indianness; wilderness empties the lands of Turtle Island and makes them into a *terra nullius* that is imagined to be awaiting European settlement and exploitation. From this standpoint, the seeming banality of modern water is not an ahistorical given; rather, modern water's everydayness is actively produced through ideas of Indianness that legitimate continuing structural violence against Indigenous people.

The event's last two videos unearth, within modern water, a secular, imperial metaphysics of work and waste. With origins in 19th century imperialism and continuing reverberations today,

¹⁴ Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, 6

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xxxv

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xviii

this discourse insists on maximizing work and minimizing waste. This work/waste metaphysics has been influential over matters ranging from labor and infrastructure, to race, gender, class, and colonization. Work has been understood as a kind of secular virtue, while waste has been equated with sin. This pertains not only to human laborers, but also to the earth: so-called “waste places” like deserts need to be put to work, via agriculture, mining, dams, and more. Exploitation of the earth can thereby be figured as a kind of virtue; those who do not exploit the earth, such as Indigenous people, can be framed as lacking virtue. This paradigm of work and waste also extends to racialization, through stereotypes of racialized bodies as lazy. As the 20th century created waste and toxicity on unprecedented scales, this association of racialized and colonized bodies with waste ensured that environmental racisms of the 20th and 21st century would not be scandals to White Conquistador Society.¹⁸

Regarding the format of this event: it may or may not be productive to watch the videos all at once. The material is sometimes dense, oblique, and unsettling, so I could imagine that it could be productive to move it in a less linear fashion, perhaps like with an exhibition. In any case, I hope that watching the videos is productive for you.

Finally, in solidarity with organizers working on related issues, I'll be donating a portion of my fee to the Indigenous Environmental Network and the National Black Environmental Justice Network.

¹⁸ On these metaphysics, see: Cara New Daggett, *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work*; Carl Zimring, *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States*; on race in relation to these metaphysics, see Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* and Edward Said, *Orientalism*; on Indianness and colonization in relation to these principles, see Melanie Yazzie (Diné), “Decolonizing Development in Diné Bıkeyah,” in *Environment and Society: Advances in Research*; Dian Million (Tanana Athabascan), “We are the Land, and the Land is us,” in *Racial Ecologies*; Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*;