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Abstract

Outside the region, the salt-water-imagining and imaging of the Caribbean is so powerful that the idea of water scarcity challenges belief; the recent years of drought were significantly under-reported. The Caribbean is a kind of blind spot in world water thinking; and even in regional perspective, it is not easily disaggregated from Latin America. The UN estimates the renewable water resources of the combined region as the second highest per capita in the world. In theory, then, the amount of water naturally available at any given moment is highly favourable to the local population.

RUSSELL MCDOUGALL

Caribbean Water and Hydro-Piracy

Outside the region, the salt-water-imagining and imaging of the Caribbean is so powerful that the idea of water scarcity challenges belief; the recent years of drought were significantly under-reported. The Caribbean is a kind of blind spot in world water thinking; and even in regional perspective, it is not easily disaggregated from Latin America. The UN estimates the renewable water resources of the combined region as the second highest per capita in the world. In theory, then, the amount of water naturally available at any given moment is highly favourable to the local population. But very few people across the combined region actually receive the allocation that this kind of arithmetic might suggest is their entitlement. In practice, more than 130 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean lack access to safe drinking water. The combined region has the greatest theoretical potential of naturally renewable water, but takes from that pool the least amount per capita of any region in the world (World Bank 2007).

Last year the Amazon River was at its lowest level in half a century, ‘with several tributaries completely dry and more than 20 municipalities declaring a state of emergency’ (Black online). The Negro River dropped over forty-five feet; and 215 thousand people in the region were reportedly affected as crops were decimated, forest fires clouded the air with smoke and normally flowing waterways were reduced to stagnating puddles (Messenger online). Yet, at the same time, tankers were quietly removing millions of litres of Amazon water for transport to Europe or the Middle East; and it is believed that this illegal trafficking in Brazilian water has direct links to the major multinational corporations based abroad (‘Trafficking in the Amazon River’ online).¹ A large oil-tanker, having divested itself of its export cargo, can take on approximately five million gallons of river water for refill for the return voyage. Approximately a quarter of the world’s bottled water — an industry with a market value already exceeding \$US100 billion, and rapidly escalating (‘Bottled Water’ online) — is consumed outside the country of origin. That accounts for the movement of some 30 million m³ annually. The movement of crude (as opposed to bottled) water accounts for 130 million m³ every fortnight! (‘Shipping Bulk Water’ online). Recently developed transport technologies have vastly increased the transport capability, placing the Amazon River reservoir at even greater risk of hydro-piracy. The Amazon River reservoir, This is the reservoir that contains around 70% of the world’s fresh water, and supplies as much as one fifth of the surface water entering the Caribbean Sea (Moore et al 2578).²

A fully-fledged poetics and politics of Caribbean water would be a vast undertaking, certainly beyond the scope of this paper. It would need to take account of salt as well as fresh water. Richard Watts, in his study of water as both commodity and sign in French Caribbean literature, concludes that the sea is constitutive of the modern Caribbean imagination, but that the literature of the Antilles has mostly tended to ignore the role of fresh water in its approach to questions of place, space and belonging (Watts 2007). This is perhaps not so surprising when the region is so well endowed with salt water and so under-supplied with fresh water. But the distinction is difficult to sustain, when so many Caribbean countries rely so heavily on seawater as the raw material for the production of their drinking water. Antigua depends upon desalination for 60–70% of its water supply; and on Barbuda every hotel has its own desalination plant. ('Water Resources Assessment'). To a greater or lesser degree, Barbados, Trinidad, Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands and Cuba all rely on desalination processes which, sooner or later, will prove unsustainable: they are high in energy consumption as well as carbon emissions. For large corporations based in Europe and North America the economies of scale are such that it is less expensive to import and 'purify' Amazon freshwater than to desalinate locally sourced saltwater. For Caribbean nations, however, it seems that the more water-stressed the nations become the more likely they are to resort to desalination. The Caribbean Water Association, which is the umbrella organisation for water production and distribution companies across the region, notes a particular concern with this increasing reliance on desalination.

The US Defense Intelligence Agency report on global water security released this year predicts that, in the coming years of world water scarcity, some nations will be destabilised by their lack of water, while others will wield water as a make-or-break weapon ('US Intelligence Report' online). Writers of genre fiction have been quick to provide us with dystopian visions of a world where access to water is no longer a human right.³ Take *The Water Thief* (2012), by Nicholas Soutter, for instance, a near-future speculative fiction set in a post-apocalyptic American wasteland, where governments are extinct and corporations have evolved and taken over. The world is divided into sectors, with only corporate identities permitted water rights: people known as colleagues, whose value lies solely in what they are able to contribute to production. A person with no rights, stealing water from a tank, is easily branded as a seditious, nostalgic for the long disqualified pagan heresy of human rights and the social contract. *The Water Thief* provides a rebuttal to Ayn Rand's objectivist vision of unregulated capitalism as the ideal moral system for a human society dedicated to the virtues of selfishness. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have been instrumental in driving privatisation of water utilities as a corollary of free trade agreements with developing nations, where the public sector often finds itself overwhelmed by the scale of the problems involved.⁴ The world of *The Water Thief* is only the

logical extension of this controlling free-market theology, where everything is commodified, and everything is for sale, including water.

The ‘first big water war of the 21st century’ (Transnational Insititute np) took place in the poorest country in South America, Bolivia, in the year 2000, following the US company Bechtel’s successful take-over of the city of Cochobamba’s water supply. Each side at the time accused the other of piracy: on one side, the corporate subject, the transnational privatiser, or if you like privateer — that is, a state-sponsored pirate — because that kind of piracy only proceeds with government approval, and most often through a formal public-private partnership; on the other side, the subaltern, whose act of piracy in the Bolivian circumstance may be nothing more than collecting rainwater in a tank.

The 2010 Spanish film, *Even the Rain (También la lluvia)*, directed by Iciar Bollain, clearly identifies the Bolivian water war as a repeat invasion of the Americas. Its title refers to the fact that, in Bolivia, ‘even the rain had been privatized’, the Bolivian people being banned from collecting rainwater so that they would have to buy from the company, a US company based in the Cayman Islands. On one level, the film is self-consciously a film about first-world filmmaking in the third and fourth worlds. Inspired by the first chapter of Howard Zinn’s historical work, *A People’s History of the United States* (2005), it depicts a Spanish film crew that has come to Bolivia to shoot a film about Columbus’s arrival on Hispaniola because labour in Bolivia is supposedly cheaper than it is in Haiti or the Dominican Republic. The director of this film-within-the-film expresses some embarrassment to be shooting the invasion in a completely land-locked country, twenty thousand feet above sea level, to which his producer responds: ‘From the Andes to the Pandes’ Who gives a fuck? They’re Indians — that’s what you bloody wanted’. For the outer film, however, the falsification of the Caribbean is significant. It is an aspect of what Joseph Vogel and his team at University of Puerto Rico calls geopyracy (Vogel 2008). The economic idea here is that the false attribution of location in a film potentially causes the people of the real location real harm. Its theoretical underpinning comes from Alfred North Whitehead, who identifies the ‘sin of economics’ (Georgescu-Roegen 320) as ‘the fallacy of misplaced concreteness’ that is, ‘neglecting the degree of abstraction involved when an actual entity is considered merely so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought’ (Whitehead 11). Thus, hypothetically speaking, a film set in the Caribbean but filmed in Bolivia might deprive the Caribbean location of income, not only in the first instance with the filming itself but also subsequently with the influx of tourism that might result from box office sales influencing the choice of holiday destinations.

The Geopyracy Project at the University of Puerto Rico — an interdisciplinary and international endeavour under the auspices of the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development in Switzerland — aims to cull films from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and systematise them according to a typology of

false attributions of location in the visual arts (Vogel & Hocking np). Vogel gives the example of *The Curse of the Black Pearl*, the first of *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, filmed on location in Dominica but adopting fictitious names like the Isla de Muerta. The IMDb breaks down the data on admissions by individual countries — the US box office, for example for *The Curse of the Black Pearl* was \$305 million. Vogel tells us that by toggling between the IMDb webpage and the economic data available on the World Tourism Organization website, ‘one can begin to specify a model of tourist destinations chosen by country of origin with a time series analysis run on the International Tourist Arrivals and the International Tourist Receipts before and after the international release of the film’ (Vogel et al, 395). The difficult question then is: ‘how much tourism would have been generated had there been faithful attribution of location (Dominica) rather than use of fictitious names?’ (Vogel et al, 395). One could disaggregate the Arrivals and Receipts data by the countries listed in the IMDb link for Pirates (for example, Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and the United States) and then test the before and after visits with the variable ‘geographic literacy’ for each of the nine countries listed. Then, from the variance in geographic literacy, one could infer how much more tourism would have been generated from faithful attribution.

Geopiracy, in these terms, is a form of epistemic violence committed against the people who belong to the place misrepresented, simultaneously producing a kind of geographical illiteracy in viewers, which can lead to further economic exploitation. The film, *Even the Rain (También la lluvia)*, makes this connection between geopiracy and violence directly, by having the fictional film producer of false representations underpay his indigenous actors for a repeat performance of their real history as brutally colonised subjects of European imperialism. What he does not bank on, however, is the outbreak of the Bolivian water war, which interrupts his shooting schedule and threatens to blow the budget out of the water. As the riot encroaches upon the local government reception for the film crew, the governor confesses his embarrassment with the backwardness of his people, their insistence on playing the victim in the face of modernity. The film director points out to the governor that people on the average income of two dollars a day cannot afford a 300% hike in their water bill. To which the governor responds: ‘Funny, that’s what I heard you were paying the extras’.

Who are the real pirates? Columbus and the Europeans, who send the locals to the river to collect gold rather than water, quite literally measuring their productivity in a drinking cup, and then making them slaves? Is it the IMF and The World Bank, commodifying and driving up water prices in developing countries by lending money for privatisation schemes that ultimately rob them of their rights. Or is it the film industry, and by implication, all those other Western media that trade even more obviously in the business of false representations of place and person?

In Bollain's film, *Even the Rain*, the contrast between water regimes is stark: an Indian family takes water from a barrel; their visitor, the actor who plays the indigenous lead, drinks from a plastic bottle. Later, as blood spills in the streets, redemption is coded symbolically through water: the Spanish actor who plays Columbus, a drunk and a cynic to this point, defies and confuses the troops by offering his water bottle to a fallen Indian in the street. At that moment water becomes the redemptive sign of a redistributed wealth. The final scene of the film sees the producer in a taxi heading for the airport through the burnt-out cityscape of the water wars, unwrapping a parting gift from the lead Indian actor, the water activist: the producer — a man who has only ever seen value in what he produces — unfurls the string, cracks the box open, and lying inside, wrapped in straw, as if it were precious wine, he sees a bottle of clear bright liquid. What looked like wine is really something much more precious — water without berries.

If it were wine it would be the sign of blood, in accordance with the theology that underwrote the first colonisation of the Americas. But it is not wine; it is water. I read that reversal — of wine and water — as an act of 'reverse transubstantiation', which has a particular origin in the narrative arts of the Caribbean, as Wilson Harris has demonstrated over and over, in what he calls 'reversible fiction': where characters are not fixed in position, but exist in terms of mutuality, where they elude narrative control, or mastery.⁵ The last word the producer speaks, holding the bottle up to the light as we witness his face reflected in the Indian taxi driver's mirror, as if it were our own, is a word in the local language — *yaku* — the indigenous word for water. Thus the film ends with a recognition of water rights, which at the same time signals a rejection of the colonising culture of narcissism, where water functions as a reflection and serves to designate the problematic of self and other.⁶ In this way, the film offers a powerful counter-discourse to the economic fundamentalism of the World Bank.

John Mihevc argues in *The Market Tells Them So* (1996) that the 'structural adjustment agenda' of the World Bank is not just an economic strategy but a religious vision, based on unquestioning faith in development and free trade. The discourse of water privatisation operates as a colonialist discourse always has, by seeking to naturalise the order of its own assumptions and so de-legitimise all opposing voices, the voices of the water-justice groundswell, like those of the National Youth Council (NYC) in St Lucia; or of the labour alliance of public corporations in Puerto Rico; or the voices of liberationist theology in the time of Arastide's presidency of Haiti; the voices of water democracy as opposed to water dictatorship, and of the community rather than the corporation.

Hydro-piracy is a form of geo-piracy, working on two levels, one empirical the other representational. Coca Cola decides to bottle and sell a new flavour of water in Mexico, Angola and Morocco and call it 'Jamaica'. The water in that bottle, to which Jamaicans have no access and from which they can expect no profit, robs them of their name, place and person. This re-presentation works by re-branding

Jamaica, America's original land of forest and waters, paradoxically confirming the essential nature of the commodity as a privilege for which one must pay to access. What flows from this is money, not water, from the Global South to North, while in rural Jamaica less than 50 per cent of the rural areas had access to quality potable water. In Clarendon, one of Jamaica's most heavily populated parishes, even those who pay for connection to the public supply find water unavailable half the time (Jamaican Information Service). Yet the State's idea of piracy is two women in Rocky Settlement, disconnected from the grid for payments in arrears that they almost certainly could not afford, who decide at length to reconnect without official sanction.⁷ False representation, as we see in George Lamming's *Water With Berries*, is 'an unholy conspiracy' (44) — the conspiracy of capitalism — that robs a person of his or her identity, forces him underground, and, when he fights back, calls him a terrorist, or a pirate. It forces resistance into secret gatherings in the shadow-world of Plato's Cave, where geography and justice are disconnected from reality.

The State names off-the-grid citizens who seek to circumvent or counter-act the exploitation of their local water resources for profit as 'thieves' or 'pirates'. Corporate hydro-colonialists, like earlier generations of pirates, focus their activities on a quest for 'treasure' — in this case, 'blue gold'. The resistance, preferring to think of these same resources as their rightful heritage, reassigns the label: it is the corporate capitalist who is the pirate, in 'unholy' alliance with the State. The twenty-first-century 'water scramble' for Africa's hydrological systems inevitably recalls the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century land 'Scramble for Africa'. Independent African states, sponsoring this piracy, legitimate it in a way similar to the English crown in its issuing of letters of marque to license the piratical activities of seventeenth-century 'privateers' and buccaneers in the Caribbean. But today's territorial acquisitions are really about water ('buried treasure') rather than land. Henk Hobbelink, Co-ordinator of the international NGO, GRAIN, which assists local communities to maintain or regain control of their food systems, warns: 'If these land grabs are allowed to continue, Africa is heading for a hydrological suicide' (qtd in Tran online). Something similar might be predicted for the Caribbean and Latin America if the drive towards water privatisation in the region continues. Water is at the core of the Caribbean imaginary, a key source of ideas and images in constant flow through the literature and visual arts, which not only connects and shapes the region but also underpins its most successful industry: tourism. The literary imaginings of Caribbean water and desertification suggest both utopian and dystopian potentialities, with a clear indication of what is at risk.

NOTES

¹ 'In the Serra da Mantiqueira region of Brazil, home to the "circuit of waters" park whose groundwater has a high mineral content and medicinal properties, over-pumping has

resulted in depletion and long-term damage. In 2001, residents investigating changes in the taste of the water and the complete dry-out of one of the springs discovered that Nestlé/Perrier was pumping huge amounts of water in the park from a well 150 meters deep. The water was then demineralized and transformed into table water for the “Pure Life” brand’ (‘Corporate Crimes: Illegal Extraction of Groundwater’ online).

- ² The Orinoco and the Amazon river-systems are linked. One arm of the Orinoco — the Casiquiare — flows into the Rio Negro, an affluent of the Amazon. The discharge of the Orinoco River contains organic sediments that have been found to stimulate the growth of plankton far out into the Caribbean (Müller-Karger et al, 1989). Satellite imagery of the Caribbean Sea reveals spatial patterns of coloured water mass associated with the discharges of the Amazon and Orinoco Rivers, with patches of low salinity occurring as far as 2000 km away from the mouths of these rivers (Chuanmin Hu et al, 2004).
- ³ On 27 November 2002 the United Nations recognised water as a human right rather than an economic good, a commodity simply to be bought and sold. A number of countries subsequently sought to define the nature of this right in law. But the implementation of the right to water has been fraught with difficulty, (Bluemel) so that in 2010 the UN moved to enshrine the principle explicitly within international human rights law. Yet billions of people still lack access to clean drinking water and commodification proceeds apace.
- ⁴ In 2005, the government of St Lucia arranged a loan of \$8 million from the World Bank to improve its public water and sewerage utilities in preparation for auctioning them off to private investors. When the bidding opened in December 2008, there were three offers, from three of the biggest global water corporations, two based in France, and the third in the UK. The process stalled and was eventually terminated in March 2009. (Had it proceeded, the government would have lost 80% of its financial interest in local water utilities (Long online). After the 2010 drought, however, the public utility was declared insolvent; and earlier this year a local cable TV news poll found that 61% of voters were in favour of the government re-opening the debate on privatisation.
- ⁵ For further discussion of ‘reversible fiction’, see McDougall, ‘Walter Roth, Wilson Harris and a Caribbean/Postcolonial Theory of Modernism’, and Vera M. Kutzinski, Vera ‘Realism and Reversibility in Wilson Harris’s *Carnival*’.
- ⁶ In Western cultures, water functions symbolically as a locus for reflection on identity, with the Narcissus myth serving as the primal scene of tragic distinction between self and other (see Spivak 1993).
- ⁷ Caribbean water utilities have some of the highest levels of unaccounted-for water in the world. Economists estimate the optimum level of unaccounted-for water in a well-managed urban utility should be no more than 20 per cent. Estimates of unaccounted water in Cuba and St. Lucia are as high as 40%. In St. Lucia, the public utility company is unable to account for 40%. In Trinidad and Tobago, the figure is closer to 50%, and in some areas of Jamaica as high as 70% (*Progress in the Privatization of Water-Related Public Services*).

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