Alongside the right to water, a posthumanist feminist imaginary

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Arguing that a discourse of human rights may not allow for a robust understanding of water, this paper aims to expand the imaginary of what water can be, of what water might need, and of our human implications and responsibilities within a more-than-human aqueous ecology. It does so by offering posthumanist feminist theory as a means of troubling the anthropocentrism, individualism and nature–culture binaries of which human rights may not be able to divest itself, even when acknowledging community, relationality, and the rights of nature. At the same time, this paper acknowledges that the human right to water can be necessary and valuable, as it responds to a particular kind of relation between human bodies and watery nature. The posthumanist feminist aqueous imaginary offered in this paper is thus not a means of thinking against the human right to water, as much as it is a necessary thinking alongside it.

Keywords: *water, human rights, feminism, posthumanism, imaginary*

Despite a major victory for water activists in 2010, when both the United Nations General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council declared the right to water and sanitation to be legally binding, many supporters of the right to water remain critical of states' ineffectiveness at protecting and promoting these rights. While supporting the necessity of such critical calls for accountability and action, in this paper I suggest that the problem is not only one of political will or of implementation mechanisms; it may also be the inability of a human rights paradigm to respond robustly to water *as water*.

As a lively and unruly substance, water strains against the bounds of its geophysical containments – levees break, skies open, pipes burst – and this wilfulness pertains equally to water's capture by discourse. In the words of geographer Jamie Linton, '[c]ertainly, water is among the least cooperative of things when it comes to being contained in words and deeds'.¹ We might then ask: what dimensions of the aqueous cannot be captured by human rights discourse, where water is primarily figured as a resource essential for human health and well-being? Tracing the limits of a human rights discourse in relation to water is thus the focus of this paper's first section, where I suggest that the human rights paradigm, while laudable and necessary in many respects, may still distort or impede a more capacious imaginary of water. Even as calls for the right to water increasingly recognize the need to contextualize these rights within a more broadly conceived ecological interconnectedness, it may be that a discourse of rights remains grounded in a bifurcation between nature and culture, and as such, is fundamentally limited by an inevitable atomism and anthropocentrism. In light of this, the main aim of this paper is to expand the imaginary

1. Jamie Linton, *What is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction* (UBC Press, Vancouver and Toronto 2010), 4.

of what water can be, of what water might need, and of our human responsibilities within a more-than-human aqueous ecology – that is, an ecology in which humans and other bodies of water (animal, vegetable, meteorological, geophysical) are always already implicated, as lively agents, in one another's well-being.

Whereas alternative conceptualizations of water can be found in many places – within many indigenous cosmologies, spiritual writings, laws of antiquity, and certain positions within environmental ethics, to name a few² – in this paper I suggest that we might also turn to posthumanist feminism to guide this more capacious aqueous reimagining. A commitment to social justice for both human and more-than-human bodies, a strong tradition of thinking about nature and culture in co-emergent and entangled terms and a rejection of epistemological mastery provide the resources for imagining water as something more than an instrumentalized resource for human flourishing. Grounding all of these more specific orientations is posthumanist feminism's deep respect for the ways in which matter is a dynamic collaborator in the world, including within our theoretical frames of understanding. On this view, matter and meaning are always co-constituted and entangled. Following these posthumanist feminist flows, the second section of this paper dives deeper into the conceptual apparatus of posthumanist feminism, and explores how close attunement to water's matter can expand the imaginary promoted by a human rights discourse.

But does such a reimagining demand flushing the concept of human rights away entirely? In their important 2012 collection, *The Right to Water*, editors Farhana Sultana and Alex Loftus note that 'given the moral weight behind calls for the right to water, few would argue, unequivocally, against it: perhaps few would dare'.³ Along with numerous authors collected in that publication, Sultana and Loftus underscore that a discourse of rights is not an easy or perfect solution to water crises – neither for those disenfranchised by a lack of access to clean water, nor for the numerous non-human bodies that depend on a healthy and robust hydrosphere, nor certainly for water itself. Yet, in this early twenty-first-century moment, struggles for the right to water are at the very least bringing issues such as contaminated drinking water, poor sanitation, water privatization and commodification, and the impact of climate change on water resources, to the public agenda. As Karen Bakker aptly puts it, 'human rights are not *the* solution, but are rather a strategy for creating a context in which claims for social and environmental justice can be pursued'.⁴ Perhaps precisely *because of* these globally and locally articulated struggles for the right to water, alternative aqueous imaginaries can now find more widespread expression. It is in line with such cautious support of the human right to water that I offer my own critique here. This support, moreover, is not a reluctant compromise, but is resonant with a posthumanist feminist position that insists that discourse – such as the right-to-water paradigm – is a material-semiotic entanglement like all others. In the concluding section of this paper, I thus trace the legitimate and

2. The Blue Planet Project not only endorses the human right to water, but also campaigns for the recognition of water as a commons, as well as for the rights of nature (<<http://www.blueplanetproject.net/index.php/home/water-movements/>>). I argue that this kind of plurality – which I aim to extend even further – is vital to a robust understanding of water.

3. Farhana Sultana and Alex Loftus (eds), *The Right to Water: Politics, Governance and Social Struggles* (Earthscan, London 2012) 2.

4. Karen Bakker, 'Commons Versus Commodities: Debating the Right to Water' in F Sultana and A Loftus (eds), *The Right to Water: Politics, Governance and Social Struggles* (Earthscan, London 2012) 38.

sensible – albeit limited – way in which the discourse of rights and the matter of water respond to one another. The posthumanist feminist aqueous imaginary I promote is not a means of thinking *against* the human right to water, as much as it is a necessary thinking *alongside* it.

1 BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

For decades, a strong international case has been building for recognizing the right to water as a human right, in both national and international arenas. Arguably, because water is a basic human need, it should concomitantly be recognized as a fundamental human right.⁵ In recent years, significant successes have been achieved on both national and international fronts. Following on from the 2002 General Comment 15 of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that explicitly recognized the right to water as the cornerstone for realizing all other human rights,⁶ even more notable recent achievements are evidenced in the 2010 decisions by the United Nations General Assembly and Human Rights Council in declaring the legally binding right to water and sanitation.⁷ At the national level, the constitutional law of over fifty countries, either through an explicit right to safe water or implicitly through the right to a healthy environment, recognize water as necessary to the enjoyment of human rights,⁸ while some countries, such as South Africa and Uruguay, explicitly recognize a right to water (or to access to water, in the case of South Africa) in their constitutional law, or otherwise make water-related rights legally guaranteed at the national level.⁹ Such recognition of the right to water should, in theory, not only alleviate the burden of the water-poor¹⁰ and those most affected by destructive hydrotechnologies and water contamination, but also pressure governments as the assumed custodians of water and their populations' well-being to manage our planet's water more thoughtfully, effectively and equitably.

Not all those concerned for water view the promise of this human right so unequivocally. Some criticisms are lodged less against the right to water specifically, and more at the inefficacy of the international and national human rights machinery and its dubious enforcement mechanisms more generally. Thus certain critics ponder whether enshrining a more explicit right to water would remedy much in real terms.¹¹ In practice, advocates document that even in the case of water-rich countries such

5. Peter Gleick, 'Basic Water Requirements for Human Activities: Meeting Basic Needs' (1996) 21 *Water International* 83–92; Peter Gleick, 'The Human Right to Water' (1998) 1 *Water Policy* 487–503.

6. ECOSOC, *General Comment 15: The Right to Water* UN Doc E/C.12/2002/1 (20 January 2002).

7. UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/64/292; Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/RES/15/9.

8. John Scanlon, Angela Cassar and Noemi Nemes, *Water as a Human Right? IUCN Environmental Policy and Law Paper No. 51* (IUCN and UNDP, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK 2004) 42–50.

9. Bakker (n 4) 26; Gordon Young (ed), *Water: A Shared Responsibility. The United Nations World Water Development Report 2* (UNESCO/Berghahn Books, New York 2006) 64; Scanlon, Cassar and Nemes (n 8) 50; Sultana and Loftus (n 3).

10. See *Mazibuko v City of Johannesburg* 2009 JDR 1030 (CC) for an example of how such guarantees do not necessarily protect access to water for those most vulnerable or water-poor.

11. Bakker (n 4) 27; Young (n 9) 64.

as Canada, major deficiencies regarding the protection of the right to water certainly do persist.¹² Leaving these important debates to be continued elsewhere, the question I would like specifically to ask is: How effectively can the paradigm of human rights respond to water *as water* – that is, to what extent can it sustain and nurture a robust imaginary of water as not only necessary for human flourishing, but as an element to which we bear a far more complex relation, or even in which humans are not a central consideration?

One of the key criticisms of human rights is precisely this: they are for the prioritized benefit of humans. Water is clearly a pressing need for human bodies, but all life depends upon it. While some non-human animals are capable of surviving and even flourishing in degraded and contaminated water bodies, the meso- and megafauna of our planet, and many species of plant life, require reasonably healthy water. Geophysical bodies of water such as lakes, rivers, streams, glaciers and aquifers also depend upon a healthy hydrological cycle for their continued existence and for their ongoing ability to provide a nourishing milieu for the life forms they support. Even though a human right to water might be construed as a way of looking after water itself, in so far as water's own health and liveliness must be protected if human beings are to benefit from its life-sustaining properties,¹³ it may be, as both Bakker and Kotzé point out, that guaranteeing the right to water (for humans) will ironically further degrade the hydrological systems upon which the fulfilment of this right depends.¹⁴ Linked to the charge of anthropocentrism is the complaint that human rights are bound to Western liberal individualism. The logic of liberal individualism is recognized as impeding conceptions of justice that are more relationally or communally oriented,¹⁵ but an extension of this logic would also deny the interconnections between human and more-than-human bodies of water, all bound together in a complexly balanced hydrocommons. Here, a concern with anthropocentrism becomes linked to concerns with liberal individualism:¹⁶ while anthropocentrism privileges human bodies over non-human ones, individualism refuses to see that human bodies *are also* riven through, sustained, composed of, and produced by non-human bodies of water as well – rendering the notion of the individual a poor fit with aqueous ontologies and ecologies. In other words, all bodies of water (human and more-than-human ones) must be recognized as part of the same aqueous ecology. The entire watery web must be sustained if its watery nodes are to flourish.¹⁷

12. Meera Karunanathan and Johanna Willows, *Canada's Violations of the Human Right to Water* (Blue Planet Project 2011).

13. These arguments are articulated in terms of ecological integrity, which I take up more specifically below.

14. Bakker (n 4) 27. Louis Kotzé, 'Phiri, the Plight of the Poor and the Perils of Climate Change: Time to Rethink Environmental and Socio-economic Rights in South Africa?' (2010) 1(2) *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 135–60. Kotzé argues that the Phiri could be 'considered ecologically responsible and conducive to achieving inter-generational equity', 135.

15. Ramon Panikkar, 'Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?' (1982) 30 *Diogenes* 75–102.

16. Astrida Neimanis, 'Bodies of Water, Human Rights and the Hydrocommons' (2008) 21 *TOPIA: Journal of Canadian Cultural Studies* 161–82.

17. *Ibid.* I borrow this evocative metaphor of the knot (individuals) and the net (community or society) from Panikkar's (n 15) critique of the notion of individualism in human rights.

Questions about the anthropocentrism and individualism of human rights have been widely debated and nuanced elsewhere,¹⁸ and have arguably led to a notable recent shift in right-to-water activist discourse – namely, towards increasing recognition of the concomitant rights of other-than-human entities and a problematization of individualism. Barlow has recently written, for example, that '[w]eaving the rights of nature into the interpretation of the "right to water" is essential for the achievement of genuine water justice. Similarly, the realization of these new rights will require recognizing and honouring that some cultures place responsibility and relationship of community over the more "western" notion of individual rights'.¹⁹ Such calls are certainly welcome. Yet, while suggestions for recognizing 'third generation' rights of solidarity in some cases help move us beyond the frame of individualism,²⁰ the tethering of human rights to human need or use-value to humans seems more difficult to shake.

For example, Laura Westra powerfully argues that the concept of biological integrity can be drawn on as a way of promoting and protecting the rights of indigenous people not to have to suffer the effects of water rendered deadly – in the form of floods, desertification, or water contamination.²¹ In environmental scientific terms, biological (also called ecological) integrity refers to ecological balance and to the need to respect ecological limits, yet as Westra points out, it can also be understood as the sacredness of water espoused by many cultures.²² One might also, then, interpret biological integrity as an acknowledgment of the rights or needs of non-human nature. Westra persuasively asserts that biological integrity can be used not only to protect 'the immediate and obvious human need for clean drinking water'²³ but explicitly to 'protect water, understood as our common heritage'.²⁴ Yet ultimately, the point for Westra is that without such protection, waters are rendered 'unusable' and land unliveable *for people*. The 'our' she invokes in terms of a common heritage remains an implicitly human one. Even while emphasizing water's own vulnerability to forward this argument, the question of what water needs is ultimately forgotten. Here, anthropocentrism plays out as a prioritization of human need. But anthropocentrism enters Westra's arguments in a less obvious guise as well. The common thread in the three kinds of danger that Westra discusses – an overabundance of water in catastrophic weather events; desertification; and contamination and disease connected to industrial activities – is specifically that water is 'rendered deadly' or 'turn[ed] into a deadly threat' through anthropogenic intervention.²⁵ In other words, not only are humans the prioritized victim, but they are also the exceptionalized

18. See Anna Grear 'The Vulnerable Living Order: Human Rights and the Environment in a Critical and Philosophical Perspective' (2011) 2(1) *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment*. Grear's argument, while drawing on different philosophical resources, expands the imaginary in which we might understand human rights in ways resonant with my proposal here.

19. Maude Barlow, *Our Right to Water: A People's Guide to Implementing the United Nations' Recognition of the Right to Water and Sanitation* (Council of Canadians 2012) 4–5.

20. See e.g., Jamie Linton, 'The Human Right to What? Water, Rights, Humans, and the Relations of Things' in F Sultana and A Loftus (eds), *The Right to Water: Politics, Governance and Social Struggles* (Earthscan, London 2012).

21. Laura Westra, 'Climate Change and the Human Right to Water' (2010) 1(2) *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 161–88.

22. *Ibid.*, 171–72.

23. *Ibid.*, 162.

24. *Ibid.*, 172.

25. *Ibid.*, 188.

perpetrator. Please do not misunderstand: my argument is in no way aligned with climate change scepticism that denies human responsibility for the exacerbation of environmental crisis. We humans certainly have much to answer for. At the same time, the claim that water's deadliness is a human achievement (referred to by Westra in explicit terms of causality)²⁶ reveals anthropocentrism in a more insidious form. In this aqueous imaginary, water is denied the liveliness and agency that animates it as a life – and yes, also death – force. As we shall see below, the point is not to imbue water with human agency (which would be anthropocentrism in yet another guise), but to *rethink agency* in a way that does not begin (or end) with the human.

Nor is my aim to reject Westra's important contributions to these debates. Rather, I wish to exemplify the tenacity of anthropocentrism within human rights discourse – even in cases where the vulnerability of water itself is highlighted. We should also note here that this tenacious anthropocentrism is connected to an equally tenacious bifurcation between nature and culture. Even if we, like Westra and Barlow above, acknowledge indigenous and other cultural understandings of water in terms of community, relationality and sacredness, it is nonetheless difficult to find a way of articulating the human right to water without setting water apart – as something humans need to have, to protect, or to receive protection from: on such a view, humans stand outside of natural forces, either pulling their puppet-strings, or suffering their wrath – which in a circular logic, they are also deemed to be the cause of. As long as human bodies are set against the environment – regardless of whether this is in a relation of antagonism, cooperation, care, concern, or war – we remain entrenched in a paradigm where nature is separate from culture. While we need to ensure that human beings are made accountable for the damages they inflict on both human and non-human nature, fostering an imaginary that (ironically) puts humans in full control over nature, or renders them fully vulnerable to it, is an insufficient response. We must find ways of imagining watery nature as continuous with human nature, and therefore responsive to human actions, but in a way that does not deny waters their power and agency as collaborators in these (sadly, sometimes deadly) events. Otherwise water is rendered once again a passive and strangely instrumentalized backdrop for our human dramas.

As noted above, the problem with such passivity is that it reinforces a problematically anthropocentric view of agency, and denies water its rightful liveliness. At the same time, we would also be prudent to recall that within a more-than-human aqueous ecology, this anthropocentric severing of watery nature from human culture also has serious ramifications for our human selves. For example, the treatment of water as a passive instrument is also complicit in pollution rendering water unfit for human use, or the destruction of agricultural lands through unsustainable water diversions and drought.²⁷ The irony here, then, is that an anthropocentric view may not even be, ultimately, in our own (human) interest.

26. Ibid., 175. Westra also claims, for example, that it is 'deleterious human agency' that has changed water from 'being the "giver of life" in a specific location, to the source of a deadly threat', *ibid.*, 174.

27. Veronica Strang, 'Conceptual Relations: Water, Ideologies, and Theoretical Subversions' in C Chen, J MacLeod and A Neimanis (eds), *Thinking with Water* (McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2013). Strang gives the example of settlers in Australia, who used irrigation technologies to 'direct water into their own activities – even though, two hundred years later, the widespread ecological damage across the continent suggests there have been no winners in this contest', 195.

This imaginary of water/nature as something we humans can and should control infiltrates human rights discourse in a number of other ways, again shoring up the anthropocentric bifurcation of nature and culture. For example, the attempt to think about the human right to water in terms of access to a basic water requirement²⁸ also gets caught in this trap. This approach begins from the assertion that '[t]here is enough fresh water on earth to meet all of human needs'.²⁹ Here, the (once more) anthropocentric phrasing of these claims also belies an imaginary of water as quantifiable and interchangeable. Again, the ecopolitical motivation of this focus cannot be faulted; the question of equitable management indeed requires urgent attention. Such an approach, however, diminishes water, as well as all of the hydrological relations in which it is implicated, to knowable, measurable, and predictable entities; water becomes something reducible to metrics, and again under the control of the human hand. Again, not only does this impoverish our understanding and relation to water but it will also eventually backfire: water cannot sustain the role of human handmaiden indefinitely. When focused solely on human need, calculations of basic water requirements cannot adequately account for what more-than-human bodies of water are able to handle – before these waters cease to be 'useful' to anyone or anything anymore.

This impoverished understanding of water has a specific history, which Linton examines in his book, *What is Water?* According to Linton, water as we now conceive of it has been reduced to an abstract and unsituated resource he calls 'modern water'.³⁰ Linton traces the rise of 'modern water' to the rise of the modern state: '[e]ssentially', he claims, 'the state has materially engineered modern water as a resource, while water resources have strengthened the apparatus of the state'.³¹ With the rise of modern hydrological science and practice (amounting to state-sponsored projects to control and regulate the flow of water), water has been transformed from 'waters' (differentiated, diverse, sacred, unknowable, local) to an interchangeable and quantifiable resource. The culmination of this instrumentalized abstraction, according to Linton, is 'global water' – 'the abstraction and representation of the world's total hydrological stocks and flows'³² and the entrenchment of 'global hydrological discourse'.³³ This discourse is the product of 'deliberate coordination of hydrological practice on an international scale beginning after the First World War', further pushed in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the proclamation by the International Association of Scientific Hydrology of the International Hydrological Decade.³⁴ 'For the most part', notes Linton, 'the quantification of global-scale hydrological phenomena seldom occurred to people before the early twentieth century'.³⁵

Linton identifies several salient problems that have arisen in tandem with 'modern' and 'global' water. One of them – that it has been evacuated of its social content – I will return to address below. But in addition to this, 'global water' has also led us to treat the world's water crises as an overarching, global phenomenon. Such

28. Gleick (n 5).

29. Emilie Filmer-Wilson, 'The Human Rights-Based Approach to Development: The Right to Water' (2005) 23(2) *The Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 213–41, at 229.

30. Linton (n 1) 8.

31. *Ibid.*, 21.

32. *Ibid.*, 22.

33. *Ibid.*, 163.

34. *Ibid.*, 167–72.

35. *Ibid.*, 163.

abstractions on a global scale are, according to Linton, artificial and misleading. Moreover, the 'new global water regime', which seeks integrated and coordinated means of managing the (now rendered homogenous) water resources of the world, results in 'a completely unworkable concept'.³⁶ what human power would be practically capable of managing the total amount of the world's water, or controlling it on a global scale? Citing global water critic Asit K Biswas, Linton underlines that 'a paradigm with such universal ambition suffers a critical breakdown when brought to bear on specific water issues'.³⁷ When global water is understood as the amalgamation of millions of smaller units of an abstract substance called 'water', this gives us few resources with which to deal with issues as different and dispersed as contaminated tailings ponds in Canada's Athabaskan watershed; drought enveloping farmland in Australia; arsenic contaminated groundwater in Bangladesh; floods in the modern urban core of Toronto; a melting polar ice cap; mudslides on California's highways; or privatization of water supplies in South Africa. In other words, treating water as quantifiable and instrumentalized not only risks its exploitation and deterioration; it also belies a management paradigm that is ultimately unworkable and unresponsive to specific water challenges, in specific places at specific times. Abstraction is thus another problem tied to issues of quantification, instrumentalization, anthropocentrism and a nature/culture split.

I agree with Linton when he writes elsewhere that the 'right to water' is not a static idea, but one open to transformation and reinterpretation.³⁸ It is not an inevitable destiny that the human right to water will only – or best! – be fulfilled through water's abstraction, quantification, instrumentalization and colonization for human need. At the same time, a paradigm of the universal human right to water is not unconnected to this 'new global water regime', and to the problems Linton underlines. The affinities between these two discourses are telling: their common claim to globalism; their tendency towards quantification and erasure of specificity or difference; individual redress in the case of human rights and individual units in the case of global water; their foregrounding of the human actor as the privileged consumer and controller of water resources. If we recognize the problems of modern, global and abstract water that Linton diagnoses, then it seems that we also have cause to be cautious towards the human right to water as a remedy for these and associated water woes. In other words, the affinities between modern, global water and human rights suggest to me that we require *more* than a discourse of the right to water if our goal is not only the redress of human inequity and suffering, but also a healthy hydrocommons where water inevitably has a will of its own to be respected.

To reiterate: my aim is not to denigrate the importance of biological integrity, to suggest humans do not need minimal quantities of water, or even to claim that anthropocentrism is all bad, all the time. Concern for equitable and socially just human welfare and well-being is necessary and laudable, and all the more so when contextualized within concepts such as biological integrity. While admittedly, my primary concern here is for the more-than-human water bodies that a right to water might unintentionally harm, as noted above, this harm is also, ultimately, harm to ourselves – and can even result in increasing difficulty in delivering this right that was our aim in the first place! My point is that within a human rights paradigm, it is – perhaps unsurprisingly – impossible to imagine humans out of this central position. It may be that the human

36. Ibid., 217.

37. Biswas, cited in *ibid.*, 217.

38. Linton (n 20) 45; Sultana and Loftus (n 3).

rights imaginary in fact depends on anthropocentrism, and on its concomitant concern for equitable, just relations between humans. The issue is not how to curtail this concern, but rather how to ensure that this concern does not always trump the needs of a more expansive aqueous ecological community of *which we are an inseparable part*, or denigrate water itself. Such denigration includes an understanding of water as inert matter, with no intelligence or agency of its own.

The answer here may not be a more broadly applied anthropocentrism (such as an extension of ‘human rights’ to nature, or assumption of human responsibility for all of nature’s ragings) but rather the nurturing of alternative and complementary ways of imagining water that trouble, rather than reinstate, a cut between human culture and watery nature. In the following section, I examine how posthumanist feminist perspectives draw our attention to different kinds of watery matters. In doing so, I suggest, they can provide theoretical resources for engendering a more capacious aqueous imaginary – with richer implications for imagining the human right to water, as well.

2 POSTHUMANIST FEMINIST FLOWS

The idea of posthumanism has been taken up in greatly varied ways – from the technophilic transhumanist fantasies of uploading brains into remote locations,³⁹ to anxiety and fear of human extinction coupled with a xenophobic nostalgia for a pure human-ness we never really had in the first place.⁴⁰ While there is no coherent or authoritative definition for posthumanist feminism, the above positions are not ones typically adopted within a feminist frame.⁴¹ Feminist approaches to posthumanism often emerge from feminism’s general disquiet with the Enlightenment project that named Universal Man as the hegemonic subject. One reviewer of *The Posthuman* – the most recent book by eminent European feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti – puts it aptly thus:

The myth of one humanity, based on universal values, an essential human ‘nature’ and human exceptionalism with regard to nonhuman others, has always worked to exclude some humans that didn’t correspond to the ideal which tacitly underlies the apparent universalism: there have always been fine gradations within the category of the human, according to gender, race, class, culture, nation, etc.⁴²

Drawing on the longstanding feminist critique of the myth of Universal Man, posthumanist feminist positions generally seek to develop postanthropocentric ontologies, ethics and politics that embrace difference as a positive value, without winding up at an unworkable relativism.

Despite the lack of a common definition (or consensus on which theorists might belong to, or even count themselves within, this ‘camp’), posthumanist feminist theory might be understood as a gathering place for on-going scholarly conversations

39. See, for example, George M Martin ‘Brief Proposal on Immortality: An Interim Solution’ (1971) 14(2) *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 339.

40. See, for example, Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (Picador, New York 2002).

41. Cecilia Åsberg, ‘The Timely Ethics of Posthumanist Gender Studies’ (2013) 31(1) *Feministische Studien* 9–10.

42. Stefan Herbrechter ‘The Roar on the other Side of Silence... Or, What’s Left of the Humanities?’ (2013) *Culture Machine Reviews* 6 <<http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/495/516>> accessed 16 July 2013.

around questions of common concern.⁴³ Such questions might include: what, from a feminist perspective, is the relation of nature to culture? How and to what effect is a cut between human and non-human nature enacted? What obligations does feminism – as committed to social justice of all kinds – have to its non-human others? From a feminist point of view, then, posthumanism might best be conceptualized as an expansive, inclusive and non-hierarchical way of thinking about the situation of the human in a more-than-human world. Posthumanist feminisms (because there are several variations)⁴⁴ seek to decentre human privilege, authority and agency, while still acknowledging the specific role and responsibilities of human bodies, and calling them to account for the ways in which they affect other bodies of all kinds.⁴⁵ At the same time, their challenge to a hierarchized ontology of bodies cannot, for posthumanist feminist positions, result in a flat ethics: non-hierarchy does not mean homogenization; difference and differentiation are still fundamental and necessary facets of embodied being and relationality. Posthumanist feminisms are thus against anthropocentrism, while still recognizing the ways in which different humans importantly affect and are affected by more-than-human bodies and phenomena that are also not all the same.⁴⁶ Despite important overlaps between the body of scholarship known as ‘ecofeminism’ and posthumanist feminism, the latter is generally uninterested in an essentialized relation between ‘woman’ and ‘nature’. Posthumanist feminists generally espouse neither that women are naturally better custodians of nature, nor that they are closer to nature, nor that nature is a benevolent Mother to us all.⁴⁷ Posthumanist orientations are more interested in problematizing the bifurcation of human and non-human nature as part of a larger feminist project of challenging the naturalization (and concomitant subjugation) of otherness, while at the same time developing an ethics and politics that would challenge human exceptionalism. Concurrent with these objectives are epistemological concerns about production of knowledge and (human) authority and mastery: humans will never ‘know’ it all!⁴⁸ While a more comprehensive outline and evaluation of posthumanist feminist orientations is not possible within these pages, a closer look at four pivotal concepts within posthumanist feminisms – naturecultures, intra-action, transcorporeality, and material agency – help establish this theoretical ground.

43. I adopt this line of reasoning from Donna Haraway’s comments on the ‘posthumanities’, Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2008) 308.

44. Terms such as ‘feminist new materialisms’, ‘material feminisms’ and ‘post-constructivist feminisms’ are sometimes used interchangeably with posthumanist feminisms, or in close alliance with them. On these alternative terms, see respectively: Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, ‘The Transversality of New Materialism’ (2011) 21(2) *Woman: A Cultural Review* 153–71; Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (eds), *Material Feminisms* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2008); Nina Lyyke, ‘The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism’ (2010) 18(2) *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 131–36.

45. See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, Durham 2006); Cecilia Åsberg, Redi Koobak and Ericka Johnson, ‘Beyond the Humanist Imagination’ (2011) 19(4) *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 218–30; Astrida Neimanis, ‘Feminist Subjectivity, Watered’ (2013) 103 *Feminist Review* 23–41.

46. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Polity Press, Cambridge 2013).

47. Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2000).

48. Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’ (1988) 14(3) *Feminist Studies* 575–99; Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford University Press, New York 2006).

As noted above, posthumanist feminisms are concerned with the bifurcation and concomitant hierarchization of nature and culture – a split which is foundational to Western cosmology, but which holds up poorly under the close scrutiny of our common lifeworld. Not only is this distinction difficult to pinpoint (phenomena as diverse as gardens, epigenetics and climate change all underline a slippery overlap and co-constituency between the two), but that which we usually consider eminently cultural – i.e. human beings – are hardly removed or separate from the biological, ecological, and otherwise material milieu we call ‘nature’. We, too, are dirt made flesh; iron made blood; water made tears, sweat and urine. In Braidotti’s words, ‘not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that’.⁴⁹ And, as feminists have underlined,⁵⁰ this is not only an ontological problem; it is an ethical one, too, as the separation of nature from culture results in denigrating one side of the binary – nature – and a valorization of all that is associated with culture in other similarly bifurcated pairs: man (not woman); civilized (not savage/indigenous); white (not black); mind (not body), and so on. In response to this bifurcated logic, Haraway has suggested we are all *natureculture*.⁵¹ This term recognizes that there is at times a usefulness in recognizing two modes of being (theorist Karen Barad calls this ‘agential separability’⁵² – more on this below), but we cannot ultimately separate out their entanglement. There is no pure nature, no pure culture. In Haraway’s words, ‘there is no border where evolution ends and history begins, where genes stop and environments take up, where culture rules and nature submits, or vice versa’.⁵³ From this perspective, we can make a set of related claims in regard to water: there is no border where water ends and culture begins; where non-human bodies of water stop and human bodies of water take up; where natural forces rule and humans submit *or* where human culture rules and nature submits. Water is eminently naturalcultural. For certain, water pre-exists human existence, and will (hopefully) outlive us. The point here, however, is that humans are also ‘natural’ (we are largely composed of water, for one), and that water is also ‘cultural’. The latter can be understood in two ways. First, we could return to Linton’s criticisms of modern, abstract and global water, where he complains that within this paradigm, water has been evacuated of its social – that is, cultural – content. ‘Water’, insists Linton, ‘is what we make of it’.⁵⁴ Linton approaches water ‘primarily as a process rather than a thing’.⁵⁵ Doing so allows us to realize that:

Every instance of water that we can think of occurs as a product of the water process and various kinds of social processes and practices. It is in this sense that we discuss the social nature of water – not that society produces water per se, but that every instance of water that has significance for us is saturated with the ideas, meanings, values, and potentials that we have conferred upon it.⁵⁶

49. Braidotti (n 46) 1.

50. Åsberg (n 41) 7; Barad (n 45) 33; Neimanis (n 45) 24–25. Arguments about the feminist ethical implications of thinking beyond anthropocentrism are also prefigured in ecofeminist work such as Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, New York 1993).

51. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness* (Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago 2003).

52. Karen Barad (n 45) 175–77.

53. Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (Routledge, London and New York 2004) 2.

54. Linton (n 1) 4.

55. *Ibid.*, 4.

56. *Ibid.*, 4–5.

On this view, to say that water is always cultural means that it is only intelligible to us in the context of (human) cultural meanings. 'Water' itself is a cultural construct in this sense, in that it is a human decision to gather so many diverse matters, places, processes and forces within this word as a coherent phenomenon.

While I agree with Linton, his claim also suggests that if humans did not exist, some purely 'natural' form of the substance we humans call water might remain. Given that my discussion here is taking place in a context where humans have been, are, and will continue to exist, this critique may be irrelevant. At the same time, it invites us to consider a second understanding of how water might also be considered 'cultural' from a posthumanist feminist point of view. In Kirby's terms, nothing is outside of nature. Instead of facing nature off against culture, she asks: What if nature writes, thinks, is literate and numerate, produces patterns and meanings, expresses sociality, intelligence, changeability, invention? What if that which cultural constructionism positions as the purview of (human) culture were actually always already there, in the complex unfoldings of 'life at large': neural plasticity in brains; natural selection in evolutionary biology; code-cracking and encryption capacities of bacteria?⁵⁷ Or, we might add: a glacier's long-term memory; the social promiscuity of bodily fluids; the river writing the canyon, in a slow-motion, cursive script. All of these processes attest to creativity, culture and 'language skills' before or beyond something called the cultural human. Indeed, that phenomenon we call the cultural human can also be understood as just another instance of nature writing, reading, rewriting itself. From this more radical point of view, anthropocentrism is not simply displaced or deferred. All bodies are also 'natural', with all of us vitally engaged in a robust and multivalent 'cultural' milieu, too. To think about ourselves, and water, as natureculture in the first place problematizes any hierarchy that an anthropocentric discourse explicitly or implicitly installs. It also complicates the image of humans as standing off against a watery nature that is either too violent or too poor to be useful to them. It also means that the individualism and atomism of human rights discourse can be reimagined in terms of inescapable co-implication, mutuality and entanglement (I return to this point below).

In considering how such naturecultures come to exist in the first place, a second posthumanist feminist term is helpful: this is Barad's concept of intra-action.⁵⁸ Importantly, intra-action is not *interaction*, which we might understand as a meeting between distinct entities. 'Intra-action' posits fundamental entanglement, whereby individual entities do not exist as *a priori* things-in-themselves. Admittedly, this concept can be difficult to grasp, as it demands the suspension of our commonplace atomistic ontologies that foreground discrete entities over processes – such as we might find in the individual before the law, the perpetrator of the crime, or the holder of a certain right. In intra-action, relationality trumps entities, which can only come into being through their co-constitutive relations with other entities.⁵⁹ In Barad's words, 'the very nature of materiality is an entanglement'.⁶⁰ The basic unit of analysis is thus not the thing, but the phenomenon that takes shape through relational intra-action. This phenomenon is an event, a happening, a doing, or in Barad's terms a

57. Vicki Kirby, 'Natural Convers(at)ions: Or, What if Culture Was Really Nature All Along?' in S Alaimo and S Hekman (eds), *Material Feminisms* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2008) 219.

58. Barad (n 45) 33, 197.

59. *Ibid.*, 128.

60. *Ibid.*, 392–93.

'worlding' of 'differential patterns of mattering'.⁶¹ The conditions of possibility of any phenomenon rely on an entanglement, a dynamic system of forces and flows. On an intra-actionist view, then, nature and culture do not just 'mingle' (nature affecting culture, culture impinging on nature): rather, they constantly world one another. Natureculture is constantly remaking itself, through an ongoing unfolding of forces and events – a process called intra-action. Elsewhere, I have referred to intra-action as a posthumanist mode of collaboration: the co-making of the world through the labours of us all.⁶²

As I noted above, this does not mean that we never make 'cuts' between the terms that are ultimately entangled. We do, of course. In many ways it makes sense to speak of 'water' and 'humans,' or 'nature' and 'culture,' as different entities. This is 'agential separability', in Barad's terms – a concept that 'rejects the geometries of absolute exteriority or absolute interiority'.⁶³ But even as we make these cuts (and are made by such cuts), 'what is on the other side of the agential cut is not separate from us – agential separability is not individuation'.⁶⁴ This brings us to a key point in Barad's theory, and back to one of the salient points of a posthumanist feminist imaginary: intra-action is also an ethical proposition. Intra-actions, along with the agential separability they entail, are not neutral, but affective. As human bodies, we have the opportunity to direct and control some, but not all, of the intra-actions in which we are entangled, and as such, we must remain accountable for these choices. As Barad writes, '[w]e (but not only "we humans") are always already responsible to the others with whom or which we are entangled, not through conscious intent but through the various ontological entanglements that materiality entails'.⁶⁵ And, since these entanglements reject atomistic individualism, 'ethics is therefore not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part'.⁶⁶ Such an ethical position is non-negotiable within feminist posthumanisms.⁶⁷ In the first place, these orientations remind us that our own bodies always exist in complex entanglements with water, but also that these entanglements are bound up with ethics as well. The ongoing intra-actions that world the hydromcommons as it worlds us – building a mega-dam, weathering a cyclone, preserving a wetland, imposing water rate hikes, plumbing greywater guerrilla-style, buying bottled water, flushing leftover medications down the toilet, splashing in a rain puddle – all of these pertain to ethical engagements of responsivity between bodies of water (which we all are). Moreover, if our relation to water is one of intra-action, then we are not the masters of water, nor are we its hapless victims. We co-emerge with the watery world we participate in bringing about, and we have responsibilities within these intra-actions. Like the idea of natureculture, these intra-active co-labourings invite us to imagine the relation between our human bodies and watery nature in ways impeded by the human rights discourse outlined above. Our hydrocommons – if depleted, dangerous, or deadly – is something we are worlding, as it worlds us. Such a view orients us away from

61. Ibid., 140.

62. Astrida Neimanis, 'On Collaboration (for Barbara Godard)' (2012) 20(3) *NORA – Nordic Journal for Feminist and Gender Research* 215–21.

63. Barad (n 45) 176.

64. Ibid., 393.

65. Ibid., 393.

66. Ibid., 393.

67. Åsberg (n 41) 11.

atomized schema of nature and culture, the perpetrator and the victim, the cause and the effect. If water is not responding to us in the way we need it to, we may not be responding the way water needs us to. There is no guarantee of ‘right response’, but we might consider engaging different responses, not only to re-world the hydro-commons, but to re-world ourselves – recognizing, of course, that we are never in full control of these worldings.

A third, related concept that helps us forge a more capacious aqueous imaginary is Alaimo’s notion of transcorporeality.⁶⁸ In terms of transcorporeality, ‘the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from “the environment”’.⁶⁹ Transcorporeality, too, opposes atomistic ontologies; its concern is rather for the movement of matters across, through and between bodies of all kinds, and the effects engendered by such transits. Water is surely a transcorporeal substance *par excellence*. Just as the many waters we ingest have travelled from and through other watery bodies (aquifers, rivers, reservoirs, treatment plants), so too do we return these waters to other bodies – albeit in new mixtures – to be taken up and absorbed into other human and non-human bodies: mother’s milk to a hungry infant, pharmaceutically-laced urine to a plumbing system, tears of grief, or elation, to a growing garden. Cloud becomes rain becomes puddle becomes frog becomes bird becomes human becomes river ... to become all over again. Transcorporeality, in other words, expresses the imbrication of human and non-human natures. It again rejects the idea that human bodies are somehow outside of the natural milieu that travels through and ultimately sustains them. Such an understanding disturbs the concept of the individualized human subject upon which much of human rights discourse relies: ‘[u]nderstanding one’s self as interconnected with the wider environments marks a profound shift in subjectivity’,⁷⁰ argues Alaimo. Who, in such cases, may be conferred rights, and who can we be sure is accountable? In a transcorporeal sense, our subjectivity is dispersed through, and dependent on, the multivalent hydrological cycles of which we are a part.

While Alaimo’s own elaborations are primarily spatial, as she examines the transits of toxins between human and broader ecological communities, we must also insist upon transcorporeality as a temporal phenomenon: while falling rain can become a flash flood in a matter of minutes, many transcorporeal transits occur according to slower-moving times. Scientist/writer Kandel provides this example: ‘Somewhere at the bottom of the sea, there must be water that sank from the surface during the “Little Ice Age” three centuries ago, carrying with it traces (isotope ratios) of those colder climes. The ocean remembers’.⁷¹ In other words, when these transits are slow enough, water is also a repository of material memory, journeying not only across bodies but through times as well, connecting bodies in a multigenerational aqueous community.⁷² Moving through space, transcorporeality bonds us through waters which collectively bathe us; moving through time, transcorporeality reminds

68. Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2010) 2.

69. *Ibid.*, 2.

70. *Ibid.*, 20.

71. Robert Kandel, *Water From Heaven: The Story of Water from the Big Bang to the Rise of Civilization and Beyond* (Columbia University Press, New York 2003) 132.

72. On water and multigenerational memory, see Janine MacLeod, ‘Water and the Material Imagination: Reading the Sea of Memory against the Flows of Capital’ in C Chen, J MacLeod and A Neimanis (eds), *Thinking with Water* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2013).

us that the waters we consume and of which we are comprised are at least as thick as the blood that courses through our veins. Just as the ocean remembers the ice age, our own bodies remember deep genealogies of watery bodies – slime molds, prehistoric creatures, floodwaters, a mother’s watery womb – that have come before. Such insights encourage us to significantly expand how we understand water and our relation to it. The existence of these traces and memories refute the idea that water can be broken down into individual units and simply exchanged. Specific waters hold not only specific meanings (spiritual, philosophical, mythical), but they also harbour particular matters: corals and grasses, mussels and plankton, mineral concentrations, pathogens, DNA. In this sense waters are intensely situated and specific. Yet, these same waters are also radically promiscuous, digging stealth channels and surfing ocean currents, catching a storm front or sluicing through wastewater and filtration systems. Transcorporeality illuminates the particularity of the local, even as it insists on movement through the global.

Like Barad’s intra-action, a transcorporeal consciousness is not only a theoretical exercise; transcorporeality can also engender ethical responsivity.⁷³ In Barad’s notion of ‘agential separability’⁷⁴ ethics emerges in the ways different collaborators are ‘cut together and apart’,⁷⁵ as Barad says – that is, in the ways we are both provisionally separable, but always entangled. Transcorporeality offers its own version of ‘agential separability’, as it rejects any careless slip from connectivity and entanglement to homogenization and non-difference. Even as transcorporeal, we do not all flow into one amorphous pool of watery matter; bodies of water encounter breakers and boundaries of difference at every turn: a weather front, a seawall, a raincoat. The situated specificity of waters, noted above, speaks to this membrane logic. In Alaimo’s terms, this is also a distance that connects, whereby we can still recognize ‘environmental ideals of wilderness, or the respect for the sovereignty of nature’.⁷⁶ By accepting that there is a watery world that is beyond our reach, we can protect such aqueous natures ‘from human exploitation and degradation’.⁷⁷ For Alaimo, ‘it is still possible to argue both for the value of places in which nonhuman creatures are sovereign or wild and human impact is minimal and, at the same time, to reconceptualize – in terms of transcorporeality – ‘various routes of connection to that seemingly distant space’.⁷⁸ In other words, even as the promiscuous waters of the hydrocommons connect all bodies in our water world, this does not mean we humans have – or should have – open access to them all. This ‘cutting together apart’⁷⁹ that characterizes Barad’s agential separability is also sometimes a call to leave well enough alone, as a kind of ethical responsivity. This is a sentiment that echoes through Glasberg’s writing on the frozen waters that make up the Antarctic continent, after venturing there on a voyage of discovery: ‘I heard Antarctica’s icy shores endlessly repeat a simple message: “go away”’.⁸⁰ For Glasberg, water’s unknowability (uncolonizability, unconquerability)

73. Alaimo (n 68) 2.

74. Barad (n 45) 176.

75. Ibid., 179.

76. Stacy Alaimo, ‘Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature’ in S Alaimo and S Hekman, *Material Feminisms* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2008) 258.

77. Ibid., 258.

78. Ibid., 258.

79. Barad (n 45) 179.

80. Elena Glasberg, *Antarctica as Cultural Critique: The Gendered Politics of Scientific Exploration and Climate Change* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2012) xiii.

expresses itself in a 'provocation to desist'.⁸¹ I suggest that such a provocation can cultivate an imaginary of our relation to water that is significantly different from one in which it is something to which we have a 'right'.

This respect for the sovereignty of matter or non-human nature beyond the human brings us to our final concept: material agency, a concept that is widespread in post-humanist feminist thought, although sometimes under different monikers: Alaimo most often simply calls it 'material agency',⁸² while Barad calls it 'agential realism';⁸³ Haraway refers to it as matter's 'independent sense of humour',⁸⁴ and Vicki Kirby elaborates it as the idea of 'originary humanicity'⁸⁵ and a cultural or creative capacity; Elizabeth A Wilson discusses it in terms of 'organic empathy',⁸⁶ or matter's capacity to 'problem solve'.⁸⁷ This recognition of liveliness, agency, and intelligence is perhaps the most vital ingredient for a more capacious imaginary of water. Water is not mere mute backdrop, awaiting take-up as human resource. It is not inert, powerless, or submissive. While water certainly can be shaped, transformed, re-choreographed and contained by humans to varying degrees, water also has a will of its own. This is evidenced in the spontaneous eruption of a rusted pipe, or in the suction pull of an abyssal ocean. An acknowledgement of matter's liveliness also returns us once again to Barad's notion of agential separability, and Alaimo's insistence on the connecting distance as a necessary part of a transcorporeal orientation. These boundaries that provisionally differentiate aqueous matter also evidence a certain hubris: there is sovereignty to a flood, a drought, a stormy sea, that eludes our powers of persuasion. There is something uncontainable, something uncontrollable, that persists in water, even if that water also constitutes us humans – even as this is a difference that also entangles.

At the same time, material agency is not an attempt to anthropomorphize water, where it would be another 'free autonomous subject'.⁸⁸ Nor should we be lured by some sense of heroism or rebellion that might accompany an image of purposeful activity, whereby the material agent would set itself apart from the 'passivity' with which 'brute' or 'inert' matter is often associated. Material agency is not just a (masculinist) kind of action. Material agency might be better described as responsiveness: the capacity to engage with other material bodies and substances and respond by doing (or not doing, as the case may be) something. Elsewhere,⁸⁹ I have written about this phenomenon specifically in relation to water as material sociality: the capacity of non-human matter to responsively engage with other kinds of bodies. While there is a sovereignty to a storm front, there is also something more-than-human in the life-generating powers of amniotic fluids and primordial seas. In bathing new life into being, water does something that far exceeds a human-engineered

81. Ibid., xiii.

82. Alaimo (n 68) 3.

83. Barad (n 45) 132–85.

84. Haraway (n 43) 593.

85. Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Duke University Press, Durham 2011) 20–21.

86. Elizabeth A Wilson, 'Organic Empathy' in S Alaimo and S Hekman (eds) *Material Feminisms* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2008) 373.

87. Elizabeth A Wilson, 'Gut Feminism' (2004) 15(3) *Differences* 80.

88. See Alaimo (n 76) 246.

89. Astrida Neimanis, 'Morning Sickness and Gut Sociality: Towards a Feminist Posthumanist Phenomenology' (2013) 13(1) *Janus Head: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenological Psychology, and the Arts* 223.

design. This might also be called a watery fecundity, sexuality, or what Mielle Chandler and I have theorized as watery gestationality⁹⁰ – a capacity that isn't precisely 'active', but which 'does something' nonetheless. Water's material agency is also, crucially, a facilitation, a giving of itself to other lifeforms, a proliferation of plurality, and of new life, that is very often hidden or effaced. Our own bodies, which owe four-fifths of their matter to the aqueous element, are a prime example of the invisibility of this facilitative agency.⁹¹ It is precisely because this kind of watery agency or responsivity is so often invisible that we need to cultivate an aqueous imaginary where we can acknowledge, respect and honour it.

To acknowledge the material agency of water is thus also to acknowledge the impossibility of maintaining the more insidious kind of anthropocentrism discussed above, in terms of Westra's claim to human causality. Respecting the agency of non-human natures increases the sense of our shared presence and shared making of our hydrocommons. Material agency also reminds us that despite all of our attempts to know water, it will always be one step ahead of us, unknowable. Despite our attempts to name it, it will exceed these names; despite our attempts to quantify it, it will exceed these numbers. And, despite our attempts to commodify it, corral it, contain it and control it, it will always trickle, seep, or burst beyond these bounds. This unknowability – which we might also call fecundity, risk, or the sacred – means that our interactions with (and as) watery bodies will always transpire within a context of uncertainty. This uncertainty must also infuse our ethics, and ecopolitics, which is not a simple matter. In Alaimo's words, 'the material environment is a realm of often incalculable, interconnected agencies' which demands that 'we must somehow make political, regulatory, and even personal decisions within an ever-changing landscape of continuous interplay, intra-action, emergence and risk'.⁹² Such realizations, I reiterate, do not annul the need to think in terms of the right to water. Its advocacy, promotion and implementation may indeed be one of those political, regulatory and personal decisions we have to make. But the context of uncertainty underlined by a posthumanist feminist imaginary reminds us that there is always an outside, an excess, and a necessary 'alongside' to such an ecopolitics. It is this more capacious, never-fully-knowable aqueous planetarity that this paper invites you to imagine.

3 DISCURSIVE MATTERS AND THE RIGHT TO WATER: WHAT WE 'CANNOT NOT WANT', EVEN AS WE IMAGINE ALONGSIDE IT

In the introduction to this paper, I suggested that close attunement to the matter of water might enable us to create a more capacious aqueous imaginary than that afforded by the discourse of human rights. It might seem strange, then, that in order to do so, I have relied upon theories and concepts. How do these bring us any closer to the matter of water?

If concepts help us make sense of the world, they do so by selecting, foregrounding and allowing us to appreciate certain aspects of a phenomenon, while necessarily backgrounding or deprivileging others. Elizabeth Grosz suggests that 'concepts do

90. Mielle Chandler and Astrida Neimanis 'Water and Gestationality: What Flows Beneath Ethics' in C Chen, J MacLeod and A Neimanis (eds) *Thinking with Water* (McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2013) 70.

91. *Ibid.*, 77.

92. Alaimo (n 68) 21.

not solve problems that events generate for us', but 'they enable us to surround ourselves with possibilities for being otherwise'.⁹³ Concepts, such as those I outline above, are 'modes of address, modes of connection: they are "movable bridges" between those forces that relentlessly impinge on us from the outside to form a problem and those that we can muster within ourselves to address such problems'.⁹⁴ In other words, concepts do not invent the world *ex nihilo*, nor do they merely describe it. In sketching out the contours of a specific imaginary, concepts give us a handhold for engaging with the world, in certain ways, on certain terms. We can only act and respond to a world that we can also imagine. Perhaps then, we require multiple imaginaries to attune ourselves to the multivalent and complex ways in which we relate to water, and in which we are also bodies of water in a watery world.

A posthumanist feminist conceptual apparatus selects and foregrounds entanglement over radical exteriority; mutuality over causality; and emergent responsiveness over certainty of 'right response'. It selects and foregrounds a deliberate decentring of the human within the hydrocommons, so that we might pause to appreciate all of the wondrous watery worlds that have very little to do with us, our needs or our 'rights'. But in this decentring it does not erase us altogether. It asks that we track our own trickles, and follow where they flow. Full knowledge of these transits, it reminds us, is impossible.

Thinking alongside the right to water, posthumanist feminist concepts thus open up ways for shifting how water is often – implicitly or explicitly – imagined within a right-to-water paradigm. At the same time, there will be times and places where we will want the certainty of 'right response', and where we will need to act in ways that make cuts between nature and culture, between human vulnerability and water's necessity, or between the power of human action and the effects this engenders in the world. I am cognizant that dreams of new imaginaries will not clean a bitumen extraction tailings pond or keep a drought at bay. I cannot imagine clean drinking water into the households of my Six Nations neighbours, who live less than 50 km down the road from my own home in Southern Ontario, and who are forced to depend on bottled water in one of the most affluent – monetarily and aqueously – countries of the world. For this reason, this paper is anything *but* a call to abandon action and thinking that would increasingly effectively guarantee the equitable and thoughtful access to water resources, particularly for the most vulnerable populations.

The human rights discourse around water is neither wrong nor false – not even from a feminist posthumanist perspective. Although it may impede certain dimensions of an aqueous imaginary, 'human rights' is not a concept that has been fabricated solely by human grey matter, in an abstract laboratory of ideas; it is not a concept that now inappropriately smothers, as it were, a purer, more 'real' aqueous nature. We recall that a key tenet of posthumanist feminism is a refusal to bifurcate nature and culture as mutually exclusive realms. In this sense, Barad argues that discourse is not an exclusively human fabrication: 'Discursive practices are not speech acts, linguistic representations, or even linguistic performances'.⁹⁵ Importantly, '[d]iscursive

93. Elizabeth Grosz, 'The Future of Feminist Theory: Dreams for New Knowledges?' in Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni and Fanny Söderbäck (eds), *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2012) 14.

94. *Ibid.*, 14.

95. Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter' in S Alaimo and S Hekman (eds), *Material Feminisms* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2008) 140.

practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another'; they are 'mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity'.⁹⁶ In other words, discourse – such as the human right to water – is not mere words to be placed upon the external reality of water, in yet another version of culture framing nature. Discourse, in a posthumanist feminist sense, emerges through an entangled relation with the material reality it helps to constitute. Water does not precede the discourses we use to engage with it, no more than the discourses fabricate material reality. Discourses are, in Haraway's and Barad's terms, boundary-making projects and practices⁹⁷ through which the contours of a phenomenon become meaningful, intelligible, sensible.

Just as posthumanist feminist theory is a discourse, responding to the matter of water, so too is the human right to water. Human rights more generally, as a concept and legal mechanism, were not invented out of the thin air, but emerged from various intersecting material realities: usurped property, despotic monarchies, gas chambers, tortured bodies, colonial violences. While the genealogy of this paradigm has been written in different ways and from many perspectives, none of these accounts presents an abstract thought experiment; in each case, a material situation (anything *but* abstract) gestates the roots and shoots of what has come to now be known as human rights. The specific instance of the human right to water similarly responds to a material situation. While water crises (contamination, scarcity, inundation) are nothing new, rising populations, urbanization, large-scale industry (including industrial agriculture) and increasing anthropogenic impact on meteorological systems – all accompanied by a growing alienation of many human communities from geological, biophysical and ecological rhythms in the more-than-human world – have increased pressure on the biological integrity of water and its multivalent flows. This is not to claim that there is a static, purely 'natural' hydrological balance which humans have now single-handedly upended; to claim this is again to give humans too much power, and to deny both the cataclysmic and slow-moving ways in which the planet's watery climates and choreographies have *always* been changing. The claim is simply that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, human exacerbation of these changes has made a poor fit with other rapidly changing human situations – such as growing, inequitably situated populations' need for water. As a result, the vulnerability of the human biota to major changes in the more personal hydrological cycles (for drinking, eating, hygiene, habitation) that sustain these individual bodies and their communities, has become amplified. This human vulnerability is what the discourse of human rights selects and foregrounds.

As a naturalcultural entanglement, the human right to water is entangled not only with these matters, but with other discourses too: certainly, an existing discourse and institutional framework of 'human rights' more generally, but also the rise of 'the global water regime' explicated by Linton, as well as a globalized development industry, global capitalism, privatization, and many different local and global social movements – each of which is a material-semiotic entanglement of its own. The key point here is that the human right to water is neither purely human invention, nor 'naturally existing' fact: it is also a naturalcultural phenomenon that is both sensible and meaningful.

But at the same time, as the second section of this paper illustrates, there are many other lively materialities evidenced by water to which this discourse responds rather

96. Ibid., 140.

97. Haraway (n 48) 595; Barad (n 95) 139.

poorly. In its perhaps inevitable focus on guaranteeing (non-specific, exchangeable and quantifiable) water as a resource to mostly individual humans, the human right to water dams other aspects of a more robust aqueous imaginary: water's agency and intelligence; its specificity; its posthuman gestationality and sexuality; its deep memory and thick time; its unknowability. In troubling the abstraction and anthropocentrism of human rights, a posthumanist feminist imaginary of water can work to expand and complement the right to a water paradigm. It is possible to be critical of the ontological premises and presuppositions of 'human rights' without negating the hard-fought political traction that this social justice discourse has at last garnered in a global context. Indeed, the human right to water paradigm has engendered a far-reaching, multivocal debate on our relation to water, and in this sense it has 'worlded' new spaces and opportunities to give voices to alternative imaginaries such as we find in feminist posthumanism. Both discourses gather each other up, in non-linear time, and respond to the silences – and *silencings* – of the other. Working out ways in which they might productively cohabit remains an on-going project. We can recognize that human rights are what we 'cannot not want', as Wendy Brown (paraphrasing Gayatri Spivak) has suggested,⁹⁸ even as we also imagine something more robust, something beyond the limits of our own selves, alongside them.

98. Wendy Brown, 'Suffering Rights as Paradoxes' (2000) 7(2) *Constellations* 230–41.