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READING FOR WATER

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Going below the waterline

hydro-infrastructures

hydrocolonialism

multi-spirited waters

reading for water

This introduction provides a wide-ranging framing for a set of essays that explores the topic "Reading for Water" in southern African literature. The introduction begins by demonstrating this method through snapshots of three seminal South African novels: Marlene van Niekerk's Agaat *(2006), A. C. Jordan's* The Wrath of the Ancestors *(1980) and J. M. Coetzee's* Life & Times of Michael K *(1983). This is followed by a discussion of Sarah Nuttall's essay on Namwali Serpell's* The Old Drift, *which establishes the framework for the essays that follow. These are discussed under four sections: Hydro-infrastructures, Multi-spirited Water, Bodies of Water and Wet Ontologies, and New Genealogies, New Chronotopes.*

This special issue is an experiment in reading for water, a method that follows the sensory, political and agentive power of water across literary texts. It

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follows rivers, rain, streams, tunnels and sewers; connects atmospheric, surface and ground water; describes competing hydrological traditions and hydro-epistemologies. It proposes new literary regions defined less by nation and area than by coastlines, river basins, monsoons, currents and hydro-cosmologies. Whether thinking along water courses, below the water line, or through the fall of precipitation, reading for water moves laterally, vertically and contrapuntally between different water-worlds and hydro-imaginaries. In so doing, it illuminates literary space as proprioceptive, volumetric and ambient.

These methods draw on an emerging range of elementally inclined literary approaches: critical oceanic studies, new materialisms, coastal and hydrocritical approaches, hydrocolonialism, black hydropoetics, and atmospheric methods.[1] This introduction builds on these models while bringing them into conversation with southern African literature, drawing out new genealogies and configurations, while inflecting and extending these approaches in new ways through that intersection.

1 For critical ocean studies, see DeLoughrey (2019); for coastal models, see Samuelson (2017); for hydrocritical approaches, see Winkiel (2019); on hydrocolonialism, Hofmeyr (2022); on new materialisms, see Barad (2007) and Bennett (2010); on black hydropoetics, see Bennett (2018); for elemental and atmospheric approaches, see Taylor (2016) and McCormack (2018).

The special issue is prompted by the felt realities of ongoing water crises in southern Africa, as they are being exacerbated and exaggerated by climate change. In the *Great Derangement* Amitav Ghosh (2016) critiques realist fiction for its failure to prepare readers for the most defining predicament of our time. The crisis is characterized by seemingly unlikely but in fact increasingly predictable extreme weather events, which realist fiction struggles to adequately represent because they stretch the boundaries of what constitutes the "realistic". How, we are asking, does Ghosh's critique apply to literary genealogies of southern African fiction? Is it as true here as elsewhere, as he argues, that climatic truth is stranger than fiction?

Contemporary southern African crises certainly include rare weather events, many of them to do with water, whether too much or too little, floods or droughts. The much-publicised "Day Zero" in Cape Town was the result of an unprecedented drought for which dam drawdown models had not accounted, as Hedley Twidle describes in his essay in this volume. As he also points out, however, climatic crises cannot be divorced from questions of historical, political and economic justice. Municipal water provision falls along the lines of colonial and apartheid divisions, and many in the Cape Flats have been experiencing "Day Zero" for much of their lives already. The issue is therefore further prompted by the urgent need to draw together decolonial and environmental approaches. As Lesley Green has demonstrated, "climate scholarship and decolonial scholarship share common cause: the unmaking of modernity-coloniality" (2020, 132). Climate change is entangled with histories of "settler-colonial environmentalism in South Africa" whose legacies "a climate-transformed" scholarship needs to confront (132). Although the "land question" has, and continues

to be, central to South African political discourse, water too has long been a vector of dispossession and inequality. Bringing water into the frame deepens, rather than detracts from, understandings of the afterlives of colonial violence.

We begin by demonstrating our incipient method in miniature, providing snapshots of what a reading for water can offer in three seminal South African novels: Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2006), A. C. Jordan's *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1980) and J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983).[2] These three readings demonstrate how the genealogies of the South African novel might shift as we take account of water. The farm novel becomes as much vertical as horizontal while, in Jordan's text, the saga of African modernities goes underwater. Temporal scales become enlarged, taking in ancestral and geological time, while material features of rivers inform narrative technique and notions of literary region. Water itself emerges as inspirited, pointing to the underwater as a site of popular memory and, as this collection shows, a trajectory for the South African novel itself.

After this montage of snapshots, we then proceed to a discussion of Sarah Nuttall's essay on Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*, which establishes the framework for the essays that follow. These are discussed under four sections: "Hydro-infrastructure," "Multi-spirited Water," "Going Below the Waterline," and "New Genealogies, New Chronotopes."

Agaat

Published in 2004 in Afrikaans and translated in 2006, *Agaat* has been hailed as a radical rewriting of the farm novel (Prinsloo and Visagie 2009; Prinsloo 2006). Rather than the saga of a male patriarch stewarding the farm for future generations, the novel tells the story of a female farmer, Milla Redelinghuys, and the relationship with her servant Agaat. Almost encyclopaedic, the novel depicts the farm as a sprawling assemblage. Old and virtually paralysed, Milla muses:

> If only I could once again see the places marked on the map, the red brackets denoting gates, cattle-grids, sluices, the red is-equal-to sign of the bridge over the drift, first and last gateway over which the livestock of Grootmoedersdrift move and will continue moving when I am gone. Sheep, cattle, cars, lorries, wire cars, mud and time. (Van Niekerk 2006, 69)

The novel is especially attentive to the farm as a configuration of the elements and works consciously with air, fire, soil and water. With regard to the latter,

2 This introduction proposes "reading for water" as a portable method and there is hence a wide range of texts that could have been included in this issue. As one of the readers noted, Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* features "drought, prophecies of rain, and engagements with Afrikaans-language poetry about the same". Olive Schreiner's *Undine* which, like Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* (discussed in this collection), is concerned with using water cosmologies for feminist ends; the word "undine" means a water spirit and the novel draws on northern European ideas of mermaids and sprites and Khoisan ideas of the *watermeisie* (Voss 2015). Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*, Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia*, much of Douglas Livingstone's *oeuvre*, Dambudzo

Marechera's *House of Hunger*, and many others – including in other regional languages – invite similar readings. We hope that the appearance of this collection will encourage others to follow these routes.

the narrative catalogues every possible order of water on the farm, whether elemental (rain, mist, cloud), naturally occurring (river, stream, pan, wetland, waterfall) or engineered (dam, ditch, furrow, reservoir, borehole, windmill). Indeed, one of the documents that the dying Milla most wishes to see is the "water map" of the farm.

> I think of the water map. I think of the underground water-chambers in the mountain, of the veins branching from them, of the springs in the kloofs, of the fountains of Grootmoedersdrift, the waterfalls in the crevices. I think of the drift when it's in flood, the foaming mass of water, the drift in the rain, when the drops drip silver ringlets on the dark water. (Van Niekerk 2006, 132)

The novel also brings in the sea, through family visits to a near-by small coastal resort and through a reminder of coastal/hinterlands links: the contours of the farm are measured in relation to sea level, while the stories of shipwrecks and undersea creatures live on in childhood tales. Indeed, these different water configurations function as precipitants, pretexts and analogues for aspects of literary form itself. One central focus is the Breede River and its catchment area, which suggests both a literary region and an analogue of narrative itself – just as a river has no one starting point, so too it is difficult to determine where a story starts. In another instance, a river in flood becomes an image of the novel form itself.

> Twigs and leaves and skeletons of small game, fallen nests and root-clusters, the whole battleground of a dry riverbed gathered in a roiling, rustling mass of words … the smells of wild bush: buchu, rooikat piss, khaki bush, torn away from the catchment area. (Van Niekerk 2006, 439)

Key turns in the plot depend on water configurations. The drift of the farm becomes the place where Milla's husband meets his end in a fatal motor accident. The implied hydrological cycle of rain, river and sea suggests geological timeframes, embodied in fossils and the slow process of rock becoming soil – anticipating Green and others' articulation of "soil justice".

Paying attention to water demonstrates how van Niekerk resituates the farm novel beyond just its human-driven plot. Following water through the text points to a radical rethinking of the space of the farm novel. Rather than just horizontal patches of land, the elemental dimensions reconfigure the farm as volumetric, underlain by groundwater and extending into the water vapours of the atmosphere. Temporal scales become radically enlarged, relativising just a human measure of the plot. Literary region becomes defined by river basin, while plot depends on water locales.

The Wrath of the Ancestors

A. C. Jordan's *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (1940) (translated as *The Wrath of the Ancestors* [1980]) is a classic of black South African literature, published first in isiXhosa. The story dramatizes the strained interactions between the Christian mission-educated elite and the "traditional" followers of the Mpondomise chiefdom in the Eastern Cape. The plot centres on a modernizing protagonist, Zwelinzima, who is thrust, somewhat reluctantly, into the chieftancy. The elders are adamant that he should take a royal wife. Zwelinzima, however, insists on marrying his beloved Thembeka, a commoner, whom he met while studying at Lovedale College. Things do not go well: Zwelinzima attempts to push through modernizing reforms, exciting opposition from traditionalists. Thembeka falls foul of the same constituency when she kills a snake (believed to be an ancestral emissary) that appears alongside her baby. Sent back to her family home and haunted by reports of Zwelinzima taking a second wife, Thembeka becomes depressed. On her return to the royal household, she kills herself and her child by jumping into a flooded river. A cousin of the chief who attempts to save the pair also perishes. Zwelinzima drowns himself in the same spot a week later. The bodies of the parents and the cousin are retrieved but the baby's corpse is never found.

Central to the story are the rivers and waters of the Eastern Cape area which wind through the novel, such that, like for *Agaat*, catchment areas define its spatial boundaries. Rivers are frequently named and demarcate different micro-ethnicities within the Mpondomise realm, while many scenes take place within sight of water. In a world without many bridges, the fords in the river provide crossing points that feature as pivots in the plot (rather like the drift in *Agaat* and, as we will see, *The Old Drift*): one chapter in which pro- and anti-Zwelinzima factions face off is titled "Watch the fords!" (Jordan 1980, chap. 8, 94–98). The antagonist of the piece, Mthunzini, gains his inspiration (which he believes is ancestrally inspired) on the banks of the Ngcolosi River. As already indicated, the tragic climax of the doomed romance takes the form of a flood narrative.

Importantly, the plot goes below the waterline. The novel opens with a discussion of the tradition of burying Mpondomise kings in the deep pools of rivers. One elder remarks: "the royal prince sleeps there … If you ever dared enter that pool you would never come out again" (9). He notes that "the wives of this house reverence the Thina River and never lift up their skirts when crossing it, as a sign of respect for the ancestors of their husbands who sleep there" (10). When the body of the drowned baby is never found, another elder observes:

> The child has gone back to the ancient custom of the Mpondomise, whereby our chiefs were buried in water. He was a Chief by birth, and through him our ancestors

> are reminding us of the customs we have rejected and violated. It is the will of our ancestors that he should perish in the waters, together with his mother. It was the mother who trampled custom underfoot, and in calling the child to them, our ancestors decreed that the mother herself should bring him. (Jordan 1980, 264)

As critics have observed, Jordan eschews simple binaries of tradition/modernity, muddying any neat separation between the two (Nyamende 1991). One site through which he effects this complication is water. The idea of rivers as the realm of ancestors and water spirits is generally taken as an index of traditionalism. Jordan shifts this perception, using the murkiness of the river depths to problematize the will of the ancestors. Antagonistic characters assert ancestral sanction for their actions, leaving the reader to ponder their relative claims. Indeed, across the novel, the underwater ancestors start to resemble the problem of causation in narrative itself. Did the ancestors "cause" the death of mother and child, or was it the larger structural contradictions of Zwelinzima thinking that individual romance could trump royal lineage demand? Submerging these questions underwater further complicates them. Are the ancestors akin to the political unconscious – the underwater an analogue for off-stage structural factors? Jordan's text raises the possibility of thinking about the South African novel as being distributed as much on land as on, and below, water.

Life & Times of Michael K

Most critical analyses to date have read J. M. Coetzee's novel *Life & Times of Michael K* for its dramatization of the problems of how the individual should be situated in relation to history, of interpretation and the appropriation of the other's story, and the force and eventual dissolution of political allegory (see, for example, Head 2009). In fact, it rains incessantly for the first thirty-nine pages of the novel and while it does so with the force of a structural condition and thus of the intensified social (K's mother Anna K "dreamed of escaping from the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues … sirens in the night, the curfew, the cold and the wet") (Coetzee 2004, 8), Coetzee does also attend to its material specificity: it is, for example, the combination of fine rain and mist on the escarpment that enables K to skirt a checkpoint as he heads away from the carceral conditions of his life in Cape Town towards the Karoo and his mother's birthplace. Despite all his attempts to keep her dry as he pushes her in a wheelbarrow out of Cape Town, the canopies and plastic aprons, it is the rain and cold that kills her before they pass Stellenbosch.

Once he finally reaches an abandoned farm, possibly of his mother's youth, and blue skies at last, he avoids the abandoned farmhouse, sleeps in a dry riverbed and must find a way to water the pumpkin seeds he

has kept in his pocket. He finds a "lonely dam" (49) and begins to wrestle with the dam pump until he discovers how the brake mechanism works. A minor water engineer, he learns how to control the dry spinning of the wheel and restores a system of furrows that could irrigate just enough land near the dam to grow his vegetables. Next he tackles the borehole, which had been pumped dry, yielding only "a weak and intermittent stream" (60). It becomes his deepest wish to restore "the flow of water from the earth" (60), as he imagines an inner sea or deep pool with no bottom beneath the ground.

K feels at home at the dam and thinks: "I want to live here forever, as my mother and grandmother did" (99). Yet the matriarchal line is not what he is after: the worst mistake, he tells himself, "would be to try to found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings out at the dam" (104). As the ex-farm begins to be surveilled by unseen forces in this unnamed "time of war" (7), K and his dam activities have to be rendered surreptitiously: "the vanes of the pump must never be seen to be moving, the dam must always seem to be empty" (102) except by moonlight.

Soon he enters captivity yet again, and it is the medical officer at the hospital to which he is taken for refusing to eat who tries to invent a story for Michael K as a universal or original soul. Interestingly, he does so oceanically. "There is no home left for universal souls, except perhaps in Antarctica or on the high seas", says the medical officer portentously; and, as a soul "without history", "You are the last of your kind, a creature left over from an earlier age, like the coelacanth" (151).

This re-reading of Michael K suggests how the farm novel itself was premised on the dam and the windmill while asking what will become of this hydrological infrastructure in a post-settler age. Michael K as a "minor engineer" suggests a scaled-down approach to technology while reminding us of the centrality of this figure to colonial histories of technological extraction.

Brought together, the three snapshots also suggest how these novels take shape at the point where institutions of the colonial encounter (the farm, the mission station, the chieftancy, ancestral traditions, the state) intersect with water. One rubric for such readings is hydrocolonial, a term that links sea and land, empire and environment (Hofmeyr 2022). Modelling itself on postcolonial theory while drawing on elemental media studies, the rubric explores the literary implications of overlaying the hydrological cycle onto imperial and post-imperial cartographies. A neologism, "hydrocolonialism" has a wide potential remit which could include colonization by way of water (various forms of maritime imperialism), colonization of water (occupation of land with water resources, the declaration of territorial waters, the militarization and geopoliticisation of oceans), a colony on (or in) water (the ship as a miniature

colony or a penal island), colonization through water (flooding of occupied land) and colonization of the idea of water (establishing water as a secular or private resource).[3]

3 The term "hydrocolonialism" is preferred over hydrocoloniality since the former works with ideas of entanglement between coloniser and colonised, while the latter articulates "a chasm, a radical opposition and a call for decoloniality, often based on indigenous epistemologies from the countries of the global South" (Appadurai 2021). Given that South African radical scholarly traditions have long worked with models of entanglement rather than binary separation, the term "hydrocolonialism" is more appropriate (see Marks and Rathbone 1982; Nuttall 2009).

A portable term, hydrocolonialism has thus far mainly been applied to the ocean, the coast and the port city. The opening essay of this issue by Sarah Nuttall transports the term to the Zambezi river basin and Kariba Dam, providing an exemplary hydrocolonial reading of *The Old Drift* that serves as a framework for the pieces that follow. As Nuttall indicates, the novel resituates a repertoire of themes on the Zambezi with "its rains and flooding, its river drifts, its mosquitoes, its colonial histories and inspirited waters, its Falls and eventually, its Kariba Dam." Through weaving a series of family sagas around the construction of Kariba, the novel centres questions of colonial hydro-infrastructure and its afterlives in an age of accelerating climate change. These configurations relativize the dry teleologies of colonial and anticolonial nationalism in terms of space, time, character and narrative method. One spatial measure of the novel is the Zambezi river basin, whose multiple and multiplying sources problematize the nationalist search for landed origins. Its implied time-scales are likewise epic, taking in mosquito time-frames of millions of years and mythical tempos (enacted in Nyaminyami, the famed river god of the Zambezi and supposed antagonist of Kariba). As regards character, the novel foregrounds the figure of the hydrological engineer while also adding in a chorus of mosquitoes. As Nuttall demonstrates, these non-human forces inform the narrative technique: the mosquito's compound eye splices "human and non-human life as intersecting and juxtaposed modes of being in the world" while mediating these through water: human worlds "are embedded in a set of relations woven around a river and a dam" while "mosquitoes are preoccupied with puddles". The drift of the title (which resonates with Van Niekerk and Jordan) constitutes a further water-related chronotope. The narrowest and deepest stretches of the Zambezi, a drift is a place of crossing, exchange, and colonial exploration (and as active, or "living water", possibly an ancestral abode). An epistemology of drift (rather than linear locomotion) informs the narrative architecture as a whole. As Nuttall observes, while the Zambezi rushes and glides, the human characters drift, narratively speaking, across the generations. With its multiple characters and incidents, the story "moves like a silt-laden river; it pools, leaks into its tributaries, it floods over, it stagnates" (Mohamed 2019). Vitally, like a mosquito swarm, the narrative hovers, drifts and returns elliptically to the founding scenes of the hydrocolonial.

In what follow we identify a series of thematic emphases and surface a number of undercurrents in the essays, offering useful rubrics for reading for water.

Hydro-infrastructures

We could take the *hydro-infrastructural* as a term denoting the politics and poetics of infrastructures with and in relation to water, including in its materiality. Infrastructures, following Brian Larkin (2013), are built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people or ideas. We might add: the flow(s) of water. The hydro-infrastructural implies subjecting the dominant analytical modes of the infrastructural to water, liquidity, wetness. The rubric of planned violence, for example, has encompassed how infrastructures materialize power relations and expand and cement territorial reach and control (Nuttall 2018). Viewed from the perspective of reading for water, we can immediately note the landedness of such work (as well as its general proscription by urban settings). Water infrastructures (such as water meters in South African townships) have been discussed by Antina Von Schnitzler (2008) in terms of hydraulic citizenship – showing, for example, how belonging to a city is enabled via social and material claims to the city's water infrastructure. Such work is attentive to the water-based apparatuses of governmentality but does not attend to the materiality of water itself. Other infrastructural topographies include roadblocks, which are subject to mud, and river flooding (see Nuttall 2021b); and the pothole, a "generic urban infrastructure" (De Boeck and Baloji 2016) which signifies infrastructural neglect – and which open and swallow earth, especially after heavy rainstorms and the soil erosion they cause, and to which we return in the closing paragraph. Significantly, too, cement dam and reservoir spill-overs actually cause worse flooding in heavy rain than the more absorbent "earth infrastructures" (Nuttall forthcoming) of the flood plains they have replaced.

Several of the essays in this volume advance (engineer?) our understanding of the hydro-infrastructural in southern Africa, as in other regions. One focus is gold mining, long recognized as the vortex shaping South Africa's labour regimes, but reconsidered here from the point of view of the water-intensive nature of its extractive processes. As Louise Bethlehem and Simon van Schalkwyk indicate, the demands of the gold fields influenced colonial and apartheid water policies, in turn "a hidden channel for segregationist land policies" and hence the longer trajectories of water and dispossession. As Bethlehem indicates, the demands of the mines played out across the hydroscapes of the city of Johannesburg: non-indigenous plantations planted for pit props "destabilized the local environment, choking the small rivers arising across the ridge of the Witwatersrand and desiccating the landscape". Today, polluted water from used mines degrades water sources, causing wide-spread acid mine drainage. As Bethlehem notes, "As water moves between tiers, sometimes rising from the depths, sometimes sinking into the earth, it generates powerful imaginaries that leak into the written and visual cultural representations of Johannesburg."

Bethlehem suggests how these circulations may be used in narrative analysis. She points to the metalepsis of water in Johannesburg, via her re-reading of Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City*: how water becomes apparent in a compressed chain of reading from the grassy verge to the city's trees in its green belt, betokening water extraction and cheap labour. This inland city, and the regions' most narrativised urban space, is re-read, too, for its storm water drains, sewage and the subterranean itineraries they make available, and for the often toxic nexus of effluence/affluence of which the hydro-infrastructural speaks.

Charne Lavery offers a related form of metaleptic analysis, focused on wastewater, drainage and sewage – shifting from an elemental to an excremental reading of water. Examining Antje Krog's *A Change of Tongue*, she finds a formal and thematic inextricability of water and wastewater, such that reading for one entails being forced to face the grim materialities of the other. While Krog's experimental work is typically read as addressing primarily questions of land, including land redistribution and its links to identity and race, it is framed and infused by water. Focused on the small city of Kroonstad, it highlights municipal service provision in a way that is prescient of contemporary protests over waste disposal and water provision, as well as the current crisis of effluent outflow into the Vaal river. These themes are tied to those of language, genre and form, as sewage points to the key question of transformation: "what must be discarded in the process of change?" Krog posits writing itself as "digging around in sewers" if it hopes to convey truth that is stranger than fiction.

As mentioned earlier, Hedley Twidle directly addresses the more well-publicised crisis of the Cape Town drought of 2016–17, which also presents a crisis of language. The drought necessitated a "crash course in water literacy – in what human life entails hydrologically", and specifically a need to familiarize oneself with the hydro-infrastructural – pipelines, reservoirs, pumping towers, retrofitting water engineering systems. Twidle details the ways in which new languages of water come into public use, as well as infuse the ways in which we understand water at all. Here, as well as elsewhere in the collection, essays point to the diverse "water literacies" that we are required to learn, including the spiritual infrastructures that inform the waters of region.

Multi-spirited Waters

Letting water(s) into our analyses implies that we read for the ancestral, including the precolonial, and thus for the creolized dimensions of their

liquid histories. All of this implies, too, as the analysis of Jordan's novel in particular suggests above, that we adopt spiritual and mythic alongside immersive and material methods of reading for water, and several essays in this issue suggestively undertake such critical strategies.

Postcolonial theory has long sought to decolonize knowledge by making visible the colonial contours that shape existing curricula and canons. Similarly, hydrocolonialism seeks to critique colonial constructions and representations of water and to undo these. One method for relativising such constructions is to examine older indigenous epistemologies around water and the oceans while paying attention to the ways in which these precolonial and colonial hydro-epistemologies interact and creolize. In southern African waters this creolization has been especially intense: southern African waterworlds or hydro-cosmologies (both fresh and saline) bustle with congregations of deities, ancestors and waterspirits. Under Dutch and British imperialism, enslaved communities were transported from Southeast Asia, bringing with them Muslim ideas of water djinns. These hydrocosmologies interacted with Khoisan (First Nation) beliefs about water creatures, producing the idea of the watermeisie/watermeid (water girl/maid), as Mapule Mohulatsi's research (2019) has recently demonstrated. This figure is now widely believed to occupy large bodies of water and is a staple of vernacular mythologies found in most South African townships. In addition to these "indigenous" hydrocosmologies and slave understandings of water, ideologies of maritime imperialism and settler hydrologies inform notions of water, interacting to produce labile understandings.

Njabulo Ndebele's short story "The Prophetess" (1983) is helpful for thinking about the complexities of water as a social substance in southern Africa, specifically in its multi-spirited dimensions. Early on a Friday evening, in a small Transvaal township, a boy is sent by his mother to have a bottle of water blessed by the Prophetess. A formidable figure, she is believed to possess holy powers that can confer curative properties on ordinary tap water. The young boy nervously approaches her house and obtains the necessary blessing on his bottle of water. On the way home, he tarries and as darkness falls, he collides with a man on a bicycle and the bottle smashes. Not wanting to disappoint his mother, he takes a bottle from the yard and fills it from the street tap. None the wiser, his mother takes a sip and announces that she feels better already. On the one hand, water is a state-controlled commodity delivered through a street tap (indexing the resource inequality of apartheid – black households don't have piped water). On the other, water can be an inspirited and spiritual substance. Yet, at the same time, these two definitions are not neatly separable into "indigenous" and "colonial" (as models of decoloniality may sometimes imply). Instead, they overlap in entangled

ways: the Prophetess is avowedly Christian while drawing on indigenous traditions of water as an ancestral source. The municipal water can be made holy by the young boy himself since his travails with the bottled water embody his love for this mother.

By taking multi-spirited water as a framework, Confidence Joseph's essay opens up new insights on Yvonne Vera's much-discussed novel *Butterfly Burning*. Demonstrating how the protagonist Phephelaphi can profitably be read as a water spirit, Joseph shows how Vera uses water as a realm to explore states of becoming with strong feminist overtones. The musical form *kwela* extends these themes, acting as a medium in and through which Phephelaphi can find forms of expression. The hydrological cycle itself informs the architecture of the novel. Phephelaphi's suicide by self-immolation, however desperate, is construed as an act in which she "evaporates, condenses and comes back as rain", a feminist inhabiting of an elemental politics. Taken together, we might read these texts as imaginative interventions into the hydrosocial cycle itself. Rather like African ritual specialist rainmakers who intercede via the ancestors in the hydrological cycle, literary texts intervene in our understanding of the water cycle and its narrative possibilities.

Nafisa Essop Sheik takes up these themes of creolization and literary identity from the perspective of the Indian Ocean, raising the productive question of why South African literatures of indenture say little or nothing about the ocean. What can we learn from this missing ocean? In an original reinterpretation of the historiography on indenture in South Africa, Essop Sheik demonstrates how the ocean has been twice elided, first by the caste politics of crossing the *kala pani* and then by the conflation of indenture and slavery, a comparison which foregrounds the Atlantic slave trade and the Middle Passage. For upper castes, the *kala pani* not only destroyed caste but also erased time itself, removing the possibility of achieving spiritual perfection. For lower-caste indentured subjects, the Indian Ocean crossing offered "a space for transfiguration, of aspiration and mobility outside of the terrestrial strictures of castes". While anti-indenture activists often invoked slavery and the Middle Passage in their discourse, the comparison tended to silence indenture voyages. As Essop Sheik indicates, the Middle Passage spanned three centuries, while indenture lasted no more than eighty years. Any accounts of an indentured ocean crossing did not fit easily into the epic framework of the Middle Passage. This elided ocean produced a literature of "terrestrial bookending" with the sea passage largely erased. Water can only seep in incidentally. Drawing on Aziz Hassim's indenture novel, *Revenge of Kali*, Essop Sheik demonstrates how scenes of rain (largely imagined *à la* Bollywood) operate, obfuscating questions of elemental scale and time.

Going Below the Water Line

At the very end of *Life & Times of Michael K* the protagonist finds himself back at Sea Point, Cape Town after his release from the prison-hospital. He walks among the rocks, peering into the tidal pools, where he sees snails and anemones "living lives of their own" (Coetzee 2004, 177). Forced again into the role of vagrant or charity case, K longs to live a life of his own, as the sea creatures do. It is a moment in which the text veers underwater, away from the above-world of human terrestrial existence and social life. This conclusion implies an ontological shift that might be precipitated by going underwater, a method that has started to develop across the humanities. For instance, one method has been to immerse "dry technologies" to produce new modes of analysis (Jue 2020). Whether literally going underwater, travelling under water analytically, "thinking with" species like kelp, starfish or coral, or exploring underwater artists and aesthetics, these methods trace how, by what media and genres, with what effects, the aquatic is mediated to human audiences.[4] Whether speculative fiction, underwater photography, shipwrecks, conceptual poetry or harbour engineering, scholars explore how these forms mediate the undersea and how they deal with representational problems of scale, depth and visibility.[5]

In southern African literary criticism, Charne Lavery's work on oceanic depths and submerged histories (2020b), southern oceanicity (2020a, Samuelson and Lavery 2019) and Antarctic literary imaginations (2019) as sites of immersive methodologies has taken the field into uncharted waters. Her work is complemented in this issue in essays by Simon van Schalkwyk and Victoria Collis-Buthelezi in particular. Van Schalkwyk re-reads the poetry of Rustum Kozain for water. He begins by pointing out how very commonly readings of Kozain take place via a decidedly land-based politics of "development, displacement and dispossession" – and their "dispiriting barrenness". By reading for water, van Schalkwyk accesses instead Kozain's "hydrological imaginary" and in particular the "aquatic imaginary" that he invokes across the poems. Later, van Schalkwyk refers to this as Kozain's "hydrological bestiary". Drawing on Sharae Deckard and Kerstin Oloff's notion of the "oceanic weird", he goes on to read Kozain's octopus as "uninhabitant", the lobster and the coelacanth as an "alternate living present", an erased or concealed indigeneity that continues "alongside and in spite of settler colonial ruin", as he situates such non-human forms and temporalities in relation to queer ecologies of the ocean.

If the memories, invocation and incantations of ancient inland seas provide refuge from land-based authoritarian settler farm worlds, Victoria Collis-Buthelezi points to the ways in which watery zones might provide refuge specifically for black women, in the wake of patriarchal and racist territorialities embedded in the nation-state. She explores how "black bodies iterate

4 On diving, see Jue (2015, 1–12); on "thinking with", see Hayward (2008); see "coral imaginaries" from Khal Torabully, discussed in Ette (2017); on submarine aesthetics, DeLoughrey (2017). For a range of underwater artists, dances and sculptors, see "Pursuit of Beauty, Art Beneath the Waves," https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00013nr. See also Cohen (2017).

5 On speculative fictions, see Chan (2017); on underwater photography, Cohen (2019b); on aquariums and coral reefs, Elias (2019); on rococo decoration, Quigley (2019); on shipwrecks, Cohen (2019a); two examples of

oceanically linked conceptual poetry include NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (2008) and Bergvall, *Drift* (2014); on harbour engineering, see Hofmeyr (2020).

differently in different landscapes" and specifically how "land-rooted notions of blackness" often work to "nullify claims to blackness in the present that cannot authenticate themselves through the past". Thus, she is interested in understanding "waterborne, oceanic and sea forms of black belonging".

In pursuing these themes, Collis-Buthelezi provides a careful reading of two novels that centre on Caribbean woman protagonists who end up in Cape Town: *Histoire de la femme cannibal* (trans. *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*) by the Guadeloupean novelist Maryse Condé and *The Woman Next Door* (2016) by Yewande Omotoso, Johannesburg-based novelist of Barbadian and Nigerian ancestry. Through these texts, Collis-Buthelezi troubles the supposed links between "*terrestriality* – quite literally the grounds of affiliation – and black women's fiction." Instead, she offers a reading of water as a challenge to "black authenticity" and who gets to occupy that space – looking to the "muddy waters" of Caribbean-South African black women's oceanic travelling narratives. In Condé's novel the protagonist, Rosélie, marries a West African reggae star in Paris and follows him to N'dossou where he abandons her. There she seeks refuge in watery zones, inhabiting a shantytown in the middle of a swamp and a bar on the seafront. As Collis-Buthelezi notes, "These zones are spaces of safety and respite for Rosélie [where] she gains female friendships that are more intimate and loving than any other she had known previously … watery zones are feminized spaces that represent black female subjectivity in excess of the national." These spaces of elemental liminality link back to Joseph's reading of *Butterfly Burning* and resonate with ideas of "coastal form" which, as Meg Samuelson has influentially argued, "muddle the inside-outside binary that delineates nations and continents, and which has been particularly stark in framing Africa in both imperial and nativist thought" (2017, 17).

If van Schalkwyk points to submerged multi-species life and Collis-Buthelezi to watery zones of blackness and femininity, Aghoghovwia directs our attention to water wars, and the relationship between deep water and deep time. Situating his work in the contemporary politics of water in South Africa, Aghoghovwia recounts water shortages experienced in Bloemfontein that speak directly to Twidle's essay on Cape Town. He uses the novel to foreground the neoliberal commoditisation of water and its capture by private corporations and how capital profits from "unpredictable ecological conditions". He insists on how the commodification of water augments the degradation of marginalized and vulnerable bodies through water deprivation. If water constitutes one of the "primordial principles of the commons", then the decoupling of water from the commons must involve war, the novel suggests, through Aghoghovwia's reading. Moreover, he suggests that the novel is less interested in material forms of water than in the covert processes of its "transfiguration into immaterial substance", deploying Nuttall's notion of pluvial time (2019, 2020, 2021a) which

speaks to the materiality of rain but also to the immaterial figurations of water. Analysing a passage where the journalist protagonist walks down a valley that was once glaciated, he suggests how a focus on water enlarges the depth and scale of narratives, with "fossilized water" bringing in deep time.

As Maria Geustyn (2020) reminded us at the workshop that led to this issue, Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) contains a similar narrative formation. In response to Lyndall's decrying of the dryness of history, Waldo looks at the stones and hills and wonders what we might learn if they could speak, conjuring up a geologic past that is submersive.

> "The 'Physical Geography' says", he went on now rapidly and confusedly, "that what are dry lands now were once lakes; and what I think is this – these low hills were once the shores of a lake; this 'kopje' is some of the stones that were at the bottom, rolled together by the water." (Geustyn 2020, 16)

Waldo imagines that the stones speak to him, and when they do they speak of water: "it seems that the stones are really speaking – speaking of the old things, of the time when the strange fishes and animals lived that are turned into stone now, and the lakes were here" (17). In fact, two to three million years ago, the area we now call Johannesburg was an inland sea whose advancing front helped concentrate the gold and other heavy metals. Bethlehem comments: "Looking to the deep past, the gold mine mediates between the time of an inland sea and the time of mining capital."

New Genealogies, Wet Chronotopes

Margaret Cohen (2007) has discussed "waterside chronotopes" produced by coastal morphologies: lagoon, estuary, delta, shoal, white water, and brown water. One function of this collection has been to outline southern African chronotopes of water. These include the undersea, the drift, the drain, the ancient inner sea, the swimming pool, living and "muddy" waters, the pothole. These bodies of waters, or ways of following waters, or of letting the waters in, enable us to work with multiply wet ontologies and to rethink definitions of space, including region, as well as time, as we re-read bodies of literature from a new and different set of vantage points, seeing many of their elements as if for the first time, in the aftermath of postcolonial critical vocabularies which encouraged land-based articulations and epistemological preoccupations.

Similarly, Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters (2015) propose drawing on the ocean's materiality, turbulence and motion to allow for new ways of thinking that are not possible when only thinking with the land. More

recently they have expanded these "wet ontologies" to include the ocean's other forms, its "*more-than-wet* ontologies" as solid (ice) and air (mist) (Peters and Steinberg 2019). In following water through the individual texts, this issue similarly addresses water in its various phases – solid, liquid, air; the different parts of the hydrological cycle – evaporation, dehydration, rainfall, erosion; and bodies – lakes, rivers, dams, seas, coasts, puddles, potholes. We opened this introduction with three novels which can be re-read for water, and, in this final section, we turn to two essays that begin to think *with* rather than *from* water. In the first, Michael Titlestad returns to Sheila Fugard's *The Castaways*; in the second, Meg Samuelson considers K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents*.

Together, these essays suggest how reading for water opens different genealogies for the southern African novel. As J. M. Coetzee has noted, much South African writing has been shaped by the absence of water. Metropolitan views of landscape presupposed large reflective surfaces of water, something seldom found in the dry interior of southern Africa. Colonial writers grappled with how to render the flat and dry landscape *as* landscape. From Schreiner onward, the South African novel has often been imagined as dry. The essays here reference this theme while resituating the novel in terms of the coming extremities of the Anthropocene, of too little or too much water, conditions exacerbated by the structural conditions of the global South. As Meg Samuelson notes, the South has been immiserated by a world-system that has "rendered it vulnerable before the deranged climatic forces that this same imperium has unleashed." The two final essays suggest ways to locate the southern African novel in the Anthropocene imperium.

Drawing on his rich work on maritime literature, Michael Titlestad returns to the theme of shipwreck, a long-standing theme in South African literature. While promoting the romance of maritime manliness, the shipwreck narrative simultaneously bore testimony to the uncertainty of the imperial venture itself. As Titlestad's forthcoming work indicates, shipwrecks and the stories about them called port and harbour development into being as a way of obviating further disasters at sea. In some instances, actual shipwrecks close to the coast were used as the basis for land reclamation, the submarine remains being filled with stones to create a foothold for artificially extending coastal terrain. The port and its infrastructure sought to overwrite the shipwreck, enabling settlers of the right race and class to experience the colonial adventure of arriving on the coast and moving into interior without getting wet, and hence to gain traction on the land; in colonial discourse, to be dry is to be "civilised". The institution through which many settlers ultimately achieved this landed state was the farm, and as Coetzee (2017) has argued, the farm novel in turn became an important intellectual instrument of land possession and dispossession. One trajectory of the shipwreck narrative, then, is the venture to the interior and the farm novel (Hofmeyr 2022).

Using Fugard's novel, Titlestad suggests a different end point – the mental hospital. The protagonist Christiaan Jordan is a psychotic inmate of a mental institution and his framing narrative is populated with a range of voices, often of men linked to a shipwreck. Drawing together shipwreck as a sea event as well as a metamorphised psychic state, a "foundering of the self", Titlestad interweaves a moving account of his own degenerative neurological condition with an analysis of the novel. His essay begins: "I am not going mad because I am a white South African, but it has structured my madness." The narrative technique of the novel is oceanic in the sense that it mimics a pressurized immersion to which there is no outside. The coherent sign of the dry settler is fragmented, and shipwreck becomes the pathological condition of whiteness.

This entanglement of oceanic matter and meaning is deepened in Meg Samuelson's astute reading of *Thirteen Cents*. Demonstrating how water is not only thematically but also formally central to the novel, Samuelson develops the idea of inundation as narrative and reading technique, inviting us to think with watery materiality. The novel ends with tsunami-like waves which engulf Table Mountain and the protagonist Azure is left scrambling for higher ground along with lizards and frogs. Samuelson comments:

> Readers seeking a foothold in Azure's perspective instead find themselves slipping and sliding through a muddy and soaked confusion. It is not ultimately clear what has happened or how it should be interpreted, but the shared exposure to this saturated and turbulent state brings some form of understanding of what it means to inhabit a world of enduring and escalating chaos and calamity – while the ability to exit it that (some) readers (for now at least) may enjoy might provoke a renewed sense of responsibility towards those for whom inundation is unbidden and unconditional.

Focusing on the politics of containerization both in the shipping industry and in the commoditisation of "captured water" (swimming pools, commercial bottles of water), Samuelson demonstrates how "the inundation of focalization in *Thirteen Cents* floods the hermeneutic infrastructure that would extract such contained flows."

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to stay with *Thirteen Cents*, which in its ending deploys perhaps the most South African of chronotopes – the pothole. Just before the tsunami-like ending of the novel, Azure finds himself thirsty and so he drinks from a pothole. He comments: "The water tastes funny and I can see red salt around the edges" (Duiker 2013, 128). At this point, Azure is on Table Mountain, so it is unclear exactly what kind of pothole is being invoked. It is tempting to read it as referencing the decayed roads and urban fabric that are increasingly common across South Africa, and the rest of the continent. It is also tempting to read the red pollutant as

invoking acid mine drainage, one tell-tale sign of which is red, yellow or orange tailings. It is possible, though, to read the pothole as depression in rock caused by the movement of water, the erosional forces of turbulence. The pothole evokes at once the scale of municipal maintenance and the geological eras which allow water's inscription on the earth itself.

The pothole hence embodies several time/space configurations at once, and forms part of what Samuelson notes as the silted character of the text that draws in "the planetary disturbance of the Anthropocene as a universal condition of 'being at sea' through the historical and place-specific portal of the Cape: the conduit of both the capitalist world-system and the maritime invasion of southern Africa." Samuelson continues: "The catastrophic waters of its concluding scene are thick with the sediments of these histories: churning through them are numinous figures drawn from the deep past of indigenous habitation at the Cape along with debris from the calamities of capitalist extension, colonial invasion and chattel slavery that continue to wash up on its shores." Whether in rock or road, the pothole decocts epic timescales: directing our attention upwards to the elements, downwards to mining and its contamination of ground water, and inwards to some die-hard water spirits who might still linger, waiting to join the great tsunami. As this collection as a whole seeks to demonstrate, even the most modest piece of southern African water opens up rich and suggestive vistas.

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