

PART I

Agency of Water

TO WRITE OF WATER'S AGENCIES is to incorporate the physical properties of water into scholarship beyond the domain of the natural sciences, and in doing so, to decenter the human in the humanities. As such, attending to material agency is a defining characteristic of broader "new material," "nonhuman," and "posthuman" turns (Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2016; Coole and Frost 2010; Grusin 2015). Agency in these traditions has generally been uncoupled from intention, with the very distinction between animate and inanimate subject to critique (Chen 2012). For scholars grappling with how more-than-human entities like water might have "desires" or "needs," it might make sense to simply ask how water might "come to matter" (De Wolff 2018). How does water not merely reflect human culture, but itself actively make a difference? Each of the three essays in this section emphasizes a different facet of water's agency, together demonstrating what water can do—for itself and for the hydrohumanities.

As accounts of materiality in the humanities have proliferated over the past few decades, there has been a tendency for discussions of materiality to become divorced from power. Chandra Mukerji's work stands apart. In her chapter 1, the material agency of water and the emergence of new forms of state power are inseparable. Water is a powerful substance whose properties—of motion, velocity, and change—can be harnessed by humans through hydraulic engineering. At the same time, water is a "trickster" that, "acting independent of human will," proves nearly impossible to govern. For Mukerji, water's agential autonomy is embodied by resistance: even as water becomes an agent of the state, it still "does what it wants," flowing over, under, and around human design. These tensions between water and human agency are a reminder of the limits of human control.

They are a reminder of the dangers of massive environmental interventions, where water may be an important—and impersonal—source of social change, but remains “an unruly material that defies easy control.”

As the concept of logistical power carries through Stephanie C. Kane’s chapter 2, water not only asserts its own agency, but also teaches us about the unintentionality of human agency. The story that unfolds on the slippery terrain of melting sea ice is an elemental reminder that liquid is not water’s only state. As the icy territories of Arctic Indigenous peoples dissolve into warming seas, they open new channels of exploitation. Here, water in solid form slips between the dualistic water-land ontology grounding international legal rights frameworks. Kane challenges us to envision “a drama in which both humans and ice/water have agential powers that form and act materially and culturally on the stages of earth’s amphibious crust.” To understand such intertwined geo-cultural transformations requires expanding notions of human agency: though climate change is anthropogenic, humans have caused it unintentionally. The move toward a more “equitable” division of human-water agencies can help us to productively approach environmental crises in new ways: “shocking stories of climate change . . . can be told otherwise, and perhaps better questions can be asked.”

While it is tempting to talk about *the* agency of water, or reduce its powers to gravitational forces, in chapter 3 Irene J. Klaver insists on the agency of water in all its multiplicities, where “water is relational.” For Klaver, water is inherently “radical,” because of its irreducibility to a singular root form, such as H₂O. Despite modern attempts to limit water into submission, water resists linear simplifications: “It challenges clear-cut divisions and oppositions, undermines categorizations, messes up lines of separation, laughs at institutions, builds and resists infrastructures. It leaks, overflows, erodes, spreads, disappears, dilutes, and pollutes.” In doing so, water thwarts the ordered structures—both material and conceptual—of modern management. Klaver urges hydrohumanists instead toward slow, “meandering” relationships *with* water, relationships instigated by water itself: “Stressed to its limit, water demands radical change . . . in our thinking and doing.”

Though each chapter emphasizes different implications for understanding water’s agencies, collectively they insist that water cannot simply be conceptualized—or treated—as a passive substance to be exploited. These chapters point to at least three ways that hydrohumanities scholars can take the lead: First, by insisting that hydraulic infrastructures—whether canals, ports, shipping channels, levees, or land claimed from the sea—are infrastructures of social and political power. And so, too, are knowledges that make hydraulic infrastructures and that are made about them. As Jessica Budds (2009) has documented, this holds even with seemingly objective environmental knowledge: the rationality of water is the product of the scientific practices that render it measurable, not an inherent quality of water itself. Second, by resisting this deradicalization of water to an exploitable singularity, we can see instead how water “teaches us relationality, it

teaches us to change: to live *with* it, instead of controlling it.” As Klaver suggests, it is multiplicity that is an intrinsic property of water. A plurality of waters reduced to a singular, homogenous water can be traced to modern infrastructural ideals and colonial practices (Linton 2010; Walsh 2018). Third, by following water’s lead—by making water and ice allies—we can rethink human-water agencies. As Kane asserts, humanists may have an advantage in understanding “significant unintentional drivers” of ecological crises. Though scholarly hope may lie in thoughtful human action, we cannot, she warns, “be so arrogant as to assume that the ability of humans to intend is sufficient.” Through thinking and acting *with* water, the hydrohumanities can help define “environmental” problems and shape responses in their many entanglements.

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