Adrian Parr

ADRIAN PARR, A POLYHEDRAL RELATIONSHIP WITH WATER

Adrian Parr is a transdisciplinary scholar who brings the design disciplines into conversation with the humanities, social sciences, and science. Rather than work within the clearly defined boundaries of a specialized discipline, her writings and movies create ethical montages consisting of theoretical criticism, poetics, imagery, and sound. The daughter and niece of two of Australia's most well-known contemporary artists, she has a sensitivity toward the affective potential of thought and ethical reflection. Her writings encompass a journey through the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, Deleuze, feminism, contemporary art, sustainability culture, urbanism, climate change, policy, collective memory, trauma theory, and Marxist thinking. Her films set out to humanize the water and sanitation statistics driving national and international policy. It is this work, in her capacity as a UNESCO Water Chair, to which we will turn to as the basis for the conversation that follows. Adrian, could you share with us when and how your interest in water began?

Growing up in Sydney, Australia, as an only child, I was sensitive to the importance of water for human and other than human flourishing. The rugged coastline was an important site of reflection for me as a kid growing up. The vastness of the ocean, the way it extended on past the horizon line, the deep darkness of the sea poised to engulf you should you let your attention slip, waters teeming with the rich vitality of oceanic life, and the affective immensity of losing oneself in the boundless smooth space of the Pacific Ocean. In all honesty, I think my love of water began here, floating on my back, drifting wherever the force of the tides took me, on the Southside of Bondi Beach. Then, on the weekends, another kind of phenomenon would appear: the burning bush. We would visit the Blue Mountains, where my parents have a small holiday house on the edge of the national park most weekends. During the summertime, the land would rapidly dry out. You could hear and smell the sound of the bushfires raging up the back of the block, engulfing the wildlife and the highly flammable gum trees bursting into flames as the eucalyptus oil in the trees fueled the flames. Or, driving through remote rural regions witnessing the parched and dusty landscape dotted with

Adrian Parr, a polyhedral relationship with water

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the decaying carcasses of animals who had suffered a terribly drawn-out death as their existence gradually shrank from dehydration. It was here, in between the expansive abundance of oceanic water, a radiating wilderness on fire, and the parched scarcity of drought that I formed an acute awareness of the destructive and productive potential of hydrological cycles as these connect with water flows and living systems.

HUMANISM-TRANSVERSALITY

The humanities can reinvent new human motivations that move away from predatory practices for the accumulation of capital. This is why we are fascinated by all the dimensions of your work because of two ideas: the magnifying mirror (denunciation and activism environmental and social); and the description of alternative values that reminds us of the need to invent a new narrative about what is progress (publications, debates, symposia, plans,...). To what extent do you think that your background in the humanities, specifically Continental Philosophy and Cultural Theory, has determined your world view? How would you define your role in today's society?

I think the nomadic philosophy of Deleuze has deeply influenced my thinking and practice. I often refer to what I do as promiscuous theorizing, bringing unlikely bedfellows into a relationship with one another. Nomadicism as a way to think transversally, rather than situate myself within a specific discipline; to wander amidst sometimes disparate philosophical perspectives, creating ensembles of thought and imagination that have the potential to resonate beyond the realm of theory and out into the world of public engagement and concrete practice. I have never been interested in remaining within the hothouse of theory. I have always been more attracted to destabilizing the ground of doxa.

The affective turn in philosophy has been enormously influential in my writings and the films I have been producing with Sean and Jon Hughes. For the UNESCO project, postcolonial theory and in particular the idea that colonial occupation is not merely geographical, it is also social and cultural, has been tremendously helpful. And I would be remiss not to also acknowledge the importance of feminist philosophy, which has encouraged me to address the triad of recognition, redistribution, and representation, and notions of performativity. More specifically, the incredible

[Fig. 1] Entering a slum in Nairobi Kenya (kenya_jch_nairobi_01.jpg)

contributions made by thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, Hannah Arendt, Gayatri Spivak, and Nancy Fraser have all provided me with philosophical sustenance over the years and I can only hope to make anywhere near the contributions and lasting impact they have made on how we understand and practice inclusive modes of sociality, justice, and emancipation.

You are the "Chair on Water and Human Settlements / Water Access and Sustainability" in UNESCO since 2013. Nevertheless, this position seems to be more related to disciplines such as geography or certain landscape engineers. What has been your role in the organization? What can the humanities do in this institution? What other disciplines do you miss there?

In my role as a UNESCO water chair, I study culturally and environmentally appropriate design and engineering solutions to water scarcity, flooding, sanitation, and climatic changes.

When I first began in my role as a UNESCO water chair back in 2013, there were not a lot of philosophers or cultural theorists at the table. I was the only chair at the time with a strong grounding in the humanities and social sciences. Over the years, UNESCO has been appointing more and more water chairs and it is refreshing to see that the disciplinary makeup of the chairs is also diversifying. My colleagues were primarily, and still are to a large degree, hydrologists or engineers. We might speak a very different language, but the power of film, and all art forms for that matter, lies in its affective capacity and as such it is well-positioned to traverse disciplinary and cultural divides. Using film as a philosophical tool to steer development and policy discourse in a more critical and humane direction. In my experience, this approach to international development has been something new in the context of the UNESCO water chair community.

You are currently working in an investigation entitled "The Intimates Realities of Water Project." So far, you have presented two phases of the project in the form of two film portraits where you humanize the statistics data around the water. In "Nairobi Slums," you show two informal settlements in the Kenyan capital. Can you explain this project to the readers? How has the public's response to these portraits been?

The Intimate Realities of Water Project really arose organically. It began when I was conducting site visits of the water and sanitation facilities in the Kibera and Dagoretti slums of Nairobi. I do not use the word 'slum' lightly here and am fully aware of the fact that the term is a contested one. I will add that the people I spent time with on and off over a four-year period also referred to the area they lived in as a slum, but described the individual shacks they lived in as their homes. Furthermore, the oft used term – 'informal settlement' – is not applicable for all slums, as many slums are not informal. For example, the housing in Dagoretti is formal – the land and home is privately owned. Whereas, in Kibera, the settlements were originally squatter settlements. Today, in Kibera the original squatter households now own their shacks but not the land on which the shacks sit. Despite these historical differences in settlement and property relations, Kibera and Dagoretti both share one common condition: inadequate potable water supplies for residents, degraded sanitation options, tight living quarters, homes made out of flimsy materials such as tin or

[Fig. 2] A water distribution point in the slum (kenya_jch_nairobi_02.jpg)

[Fig. 3] A woman carries the water from its source to her home in the Nairobi slum each day (kenya_jch_nairobi_05.jpg)

mud, lack of electricity, and poor stormwater and drainage conditions. It was these features of the built environment that I wanted to better understand when I first began visiting households there.

Basically, there are a myriad of social and cultural factors that preclude the full functioning of a given water and sanitation facility: cost of service, social stigma, distance from a household, the absence of natural lighting and ventilation, where the facility is sited, the construction materials used, the facility layout, the level of community input in the development of the facility, and whether or not women are involved in the management of the facility. In the context of the two slums I spent time in, I found that many of the households were female led. The husband or partner may have passed away or he had left the family for another partner. Women are also the primary water collectors, cleaners, caregivers, and cooks for a household. Of the households, I spent time in the smallest was two people (one mother and one child) or as large as fourteen (a mother, thirteen children, and one grandchild). The shacks are anywhere between 10ft x 10ft to 14ft x 14ft. In the case of the fourteen-person household, the mother had two adjoining tin shacks. Water is stored in large plastic containers and becomes an important interior design element – the containers are colorful and serve as surfaces to sit on, to prop up a table top, or are simply stacked along one side of the shack demarcating a kitchen area in the space. In this very confined area, bodily fluids and water resources are constantly mixing, from the child with a runny nose to the chicken wandering the dirt floor, both of who might drink from the same plastic cup filled with water.

When it came time to document the research, a proposal had to be passed through a standard ethics review process. It meant that when I returned to the communities of Dagoretti and Kibera, to people who I had now developed strong ties to, I now had a translator, a survey in hand with a list of set questions, and forms that people needed to sign to give authorization to be interviewed. For both the women I had spent time with and myself, I noticed how this dramatically shifted the power dynamic.

The problem was, people do not typically communicate using such a formalized format and structure, furthermore, it reinforced colonial power relations of a white person in an official capacity traveling into an African country using black bodies as research subjects. Previously, women had invited me into their homes, I would sit with them day in and day out, chatting, observing, eating, preparing meals and so on. I was basically in their homes as a guest and on their terms. What the formalized research structure did was invert this, whereby I became the outsider invading their space on my terms, not their terms.

As such, we needed to come up with a creative solution without violating research protocols or undermining the women who were sharing their lives with me. One of the most important contributions postcolonial theory has made concerns how power operates in the production of colonial spaces. Colonization entails two kinds of theft. The first is the theft of land and resources. The second is a cultural theft, whereby the colonizer steals the power of self-representation, the colonized subject is dominated as they are denied the right to represent themselves on their own terms. I was not interested in participating in the advancement of a long violent history of colonial objectifica-

tion, oppression, and exploitation. As such, it was important a format be used that allowed the women to decide how and what they wanted to be represented. We decided to use film. It was a collective decision to document their everyday life using a camera and to produce a series of cinematic portraits, that would be combined into a philosophical document. This way they could represent their own lives on their own terms. They led the camera. This shift was a crucial one for the integrity of the entire project.

When it came time to share the results the film was first screened back to the women who had participated in the project. It was a wonderful moment. Everyone dressed up for the occasion. After this event, a shorter version of the film was screened at the water day for the COP21 talks in Paris in 2015, then again at the annual UNESCO Water Chairs meeting, and later it went on to be screened at various independent film festivals across the US, where we won a variety of awards for directing, producing, writing, and narration. The film was not originally designed to be shown at the film festivals. This was the result of a friend suggesting I show it and it snowballed from there.

The first documentary set in Nairobi comparing two different slums have a common element that interests us: the complexity of the subject they deal with and how it cannot be addressed from a single point of view. For example, one might believe that improving access to water or electricity is improving the life of a community, but at the same time, it may be getting worse because these improvements may lead to an increase in the price of housing that this community cannot afford. How do you think this problem should be dealt with after what you have learned with these experiences?

Yes, this was an unexpected outcome, and really the result of several years of site visits where I had the opportunity to witness firsthand the rapid changes occurring throughout both Dagoretti and Kibera as a result of different development initiatives. One of the more troubling outcomes of the slum upgrading project was that it was leading to displacement. As electricity lines were installed and more water and sanitation points were added, the cots of rents increased. For shacks in closer proximity to a water pump and sanitation block the rent increase was as much as 1,000 Kenyan shillings (USD$9). For someone with several children earning USD$1.50 to USD$2.50 a day that is enough to financially tip them over the edge. So they are compelled to pack up their belongings and move to the outskirts of the slum, into areas of the slum that are more precarious, or to another slum further out of the city, which then also means they need to find a new job. Regardless, moving has the dire consequence of also needing to re-establish new social relationships and a new social support network. Many female-led households, even households where the couple remains together, rely upon sharing caregiving duties. For instance, a single mother may look after her neighbor's children when her neighbor goes to work, her neighbor then returns the favor when she has to go to work. If one woman is short on the rent one week, her neighbor or social network might pool their resources and help her out, she repays them by cooking them a meal or collecting water for them. There are all kinds of different transactions continually taking place. In conditions of extreme poverty, the social network and the invisible gift economy it facilitates, enables people to survive extreme scarcity.

The slum population is not a horizontal social organization. There is not a universal slum dweller. Admittedly, the definition of slum housing might be able to be deployed in this way, but the intimate realities making up everyday life provide a much more complicated and nuanced picture of social and economic advantages that are not evenly distributed across slum populations. There is what I would call inter-generational slum social stratification. For instance, if your parents and grandparents grew up in the Kibera slum, they may own more than one shack (not the land as this is still owned by the government). They are therefore able to live in one and rent the other, or even rent both and have enough money to move out of Kibera and live in more formalized housing made of brick with running water, electricity and so forth. Dagoretti used to be a rural village not so long ago, so as it densified property owners built out what feels like every square inch of land they owned. This means that infrastructure has been developed along the main arteries between properties, but within the compounds of what used to be rural households with some land for subsistence farming, there are now shacks crowded on top of one another without water, sanitation, drainage, or electricity. These historical differences in how the two slums were constituted are important because it means that it is easier to 'upgrade' the housing of Kibera than it is in Dagoretti, simply because the government owns the land in Kibera, whereas in Dagoretti it is private property.

[Fig. 4] Adrian Parr interviews slum residents while photographer Sean Hughes records the meeting (Nairobi.jpg)

[Fig. 5] After gathering the water in the Nairobi slum, a woman must prepare meals and clean (Nairobi#1_jch_01 copy.jpg)

GLOBAL AND LOCAL

From another perspective, your global-local approach allows you to take into account this duality so important when addressing environmental issues. On the one hand, the need to understand that actions generate reactions that affect the global system of the planet. On the other hand, the solutions must be adapted to the environmental and socio-cultural conditions of each area. Understanding the idiosyncrasy of a population and the relationship with their environment (historical and current) is enormously important and this is reflected in your work.

The story showed in "Thirsty and Drowning in America" has been very revealing and relevant to us because, among other things, it focuses on "our backyard." It shows the multiple environmental impacts that different Native American communities are suffering in the United States, but the story could be extrapolated to many other countries and communities. The impact of floods, droughts, or water pollution is no longer an alien and distant issue for all of us -if it has ever been-, but a global problem that affects us all in an increasingly close and intense way. Do you think that people are beginning to be aware of these problems and are beginning to change their way of thinking and relating to water?

Upon completing the Nairobi slum project the time had come to take the lessons learned there and look more closely at the water challenges disadvantaged communities across the United States face, a country that I have been living in for nearly two decades. This was around the time of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, when the city began using the Flint River, instead of the Detroit water system, in an effort to save on costs. The water quality in Flint, consequently dropped to dangerous levels, subsequently leading to a public health crisis. As usual, it was the poorest communities that were disproportionately impacted. This event prompted me to investigate which US communities were the most vulnerable when it came to water contamination, poor sanitation, and flooding. I also realized the time had come to expand the work that I started with the first documentary into a project made up of different phases. The second phase would focus on the US and more specifically Native American communities, as I found they had been struggling with the health effects of contaminated drinking water, poor sanitation, and more recently flooding from climate change, for a very long time. The US might be a high-income country and one that people do not typically associate with slums, but it's status as a 'developed' country is a smokescreen for a long racist history that has resulted in many communities of color living in slum conditions.

The Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe in Southeast Louisiana is slowly disappearing into the ocean. They are hanging on as each year passes, and as hurricane after hurricane pounds the tiny quarter of a mile wide and half a mile-long strip of land making up Isle de Jean Charles where they live. This tiny strip of land connected to the mainland used to be 1,500 acres. Some tribal members are living in trailers lined with mold. Then there are 300 or so Inupiat villagers living in Shishmaref on a tiny barrier island off the coast of Alaska that is also disappearing as the seas rise from climate change. They are living in shacks no different to what I witnessed in Nairobi, and also without proper sanitation services. Then there are the Native American settlements that were literally drowned by large scale dam development in the Dakotas. Or, the violation of indigenous

[Fig. 6] An abandoned boat near a destroyed home on the Isle De Jean Charles, LA (Isle De Jean.jpg)
[Fig. 7] A portrait of LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, a Lakota historian and activist, near Standing Rock (LaDonna Brave Bull Allard.jpg)

sovereignty waged against the Standing Rock Sioux tribe who fought hard against Energy Transfer Partners building the Dakota Access Pipeline straight through their indigenous archaeological and burial sites, as well as threatening the tribe's primary water source. Oil pipeline leaks pose a real threat to both their land and water resources. All these communities and issues became the basis for phase two of the project: *Thirsty and Drowning in America*.

EDUCATION, CONSCIOUSNESS AND LEADERSHIP

Many parts of the work to be carried out to achieve the equity -to which we referred previously -are framed in these concepts: education, consciousness, and leadership; and Adrian Parr plays an essential role in all of them. That multiple vision and experience allow you to work with more tools than other types of professionals, for example, regarding education. You have had a long relationship with academia previously holding positions at Savannah College of Art and Design and the University of Cincinnati, and currently as Dean of the prestigious College of Architecture, Planning, and Public Affairs (CAPPA) at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, all in the United States. What do you think is the role of the University is in this context of crisis? Do you see a post-neoliberal future? How should it build?

Thank you for this question. It is an important one, as it casts a spotlight on the transformative role education can play socially, economically, culturally, and environmentally. Higher education offers fertile terrain for students and faculty alike to take intellectual and creative risks, experiment with new ideas and practices, challenge the status quo, and engage in provocative debate. Whether we are speaking of the specialized knowledge arising from a specific discipline, or more transdisciplinary approaches to knowledge production that bring different viewpoints and disciplinary approaches into relationship with one another, there is a level of critical inquiry and imaginative exploration that takes place within the realm of higher education that is central to how social change occurs. Higher education involves developing the capacity to critique, think, problematize, and re-imagine how the world works and on a more elemental level, to change people's lives. As both a Dean and previously as a Director of a humanities research center, I have been committed to bringing higher education out of the hothouse of the institution and into the public realm, whether that is developing dual credit programs for high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as CityLab in Dallas, or founding a Louder Than A Bomb program in Cincinnati that allows youth a platform on which to develop their literacy and public speaking skills through the spoken word format. Leaders in academia are enormously privileged and along with that comes a responsibility to put that privilege to work in the service of less privileged groups, to directly engage and methodically transform the very systems of power-producing massive exploitation and inequity.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

We think that the work and thought aforementioned should be understood as a medium-long-term investment. Trying to unravel what steps are needed to overcome this situation is one of the biggest challenges we face as a society. These challenges are played in the urban and natural environment, taking into account the environment and the societies that inhabit it, combining development and cultural identity, and addressing the global and the local.

Yes, indeed. As a society, we urgently need to engage with trans-spatial and trans-temporal thinking and practices. For instance, if we have any hope of slowing or even reversing climate change, we are going to need to think transgenerationally, adopt transpeciesist ethics, and introduce policies that require a transnational commitments. The current environmental crisis is also an economic crisis

[Fig. 8] The tribal burying ground on the island of Shishmaref off the coast of Alaska south of the Arctic Circle (Shishmaref#2.jpg)
[Fig. 9] Part of the residential area on the island of Shishmaref (Shishmaref#3.jpg)

resulting from decades of free-market economic policies; a social crisis resulting from neoliberal forms of governance that advance a fractured social field made up of individual actors all operating in competition with one another; a political system that advances the interests of the wealthy few; and a cultural malaise that relies upon an apocalyptic imagination, as I have argued in *Birth Of A New Earth*, at the expense of a transformational emancipatory imagination.

And as the last question, what do you think the city of the future should be like? How do you think there should be a sustainable relationship between nature (understood in the broad sense of water, vegetation and animals) and urban settlements?

What a great closing question. The cities of the future that occupy my imagination are cities populated with exhilarating open spaces and wilderness zones; cities that exhale clean air; cities that serve as carbon sinks and water filtration systems; cities that provide abundant habitats for other-than-human species; cities that advance a basic level of flourishing regardless of wealth, health, sexuality, age, race, species, or employment status; cities that foster environmental awareness in place of endless consumption; cities that encourage wandering and discovery; cities that unravel the physical and social borders distinguishing urban/suburban/rural/wild spaces; cities that welcome strangers; and urban projects committed to extinguishing the multiple forms of cruelty currently in operation.

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