Supplement

Thinking with Water: Fluid Community, Protest, and Care

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On 4 March 1948, Aldo Leopold wrote in his Foreword to his timeless book *A Sand County Almanac*: "That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. That land yields a cultural harvest is a fact long known, but latterly often forgotten (Foreword xxii). Leopold's words encapsulate a seminal shift in ecological consciousness: land is not merely a resource, backdrop, or possession, but a living community to which humans belong and toward which they bear responsibility. His evocative call to "think like a mountain" subsequently became a touchstone for ecological ethics—an exhortation to adopt the long view, to apprehend the intricate interdependencies that undergird ecosystems, and to resist the shortsighted impulses of instrumental reason. Leopold's invocation of the mountain is more than a metaphor; it is a corrective to the narrow temporal horizons of human desire—an ethical call to reckon with the *longue durée* of ecosystems and the slow violence of environmental disruption. Yet while this perspective foregrounds ecological interconnection and balance, it also anchors ecological thought in a vertical register that

associates wisdom with altitude, detachment, and temporal depth. In this sense, “to think like a mountain” is to inhabit an imaginary of height—both topographical and epistemological—where temporal vastness and ecological foresight converge.

However generative, this vertical imaginary encodes certain assumptions: it privileges distance as a precondition for insight, detachment as a modality of care, and permanence as the ecological ideal. It implies that ethical clarity arrives from height, by seeing *from above* and *beyond*, rather than *with and through*. In other words, this perspective enacts a certain sovereignty of vision that risks overlooking the relationalities and vulnerabilities that lie below the treeline. It assumes the mountain’s solidity as both physical and moral high ground, a site where one might rise above the fray and attain coherence. But what if coherence itself is a fiction? What if clarity is neither static nor elevated, but submerged, something to be felt through immersion rather than discerned from afar? Leopold gestures toward such an understanding in his formulation of “land ethic,” which he describes as “simply enlarg[ing] the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (192). Yet, embedded in mid-twentieth-century ecological thought, his vision remains moored to solidity, verticality, and a contemplative detachment. This orientation requires reconsideration in an era of planetary turbulence, climatic destabilization, extractive violence, and cascading ecological loss.

In a world increasingly defined by the dissolution of

boundaries—between land and sea, nature and culture, human and more-than-human— the mountain's elevated stance falters as a guiding heuristic. The emphasis on verticality may inadvertently reinforce the very binaries that ecological thinking today challenges: above/below, human/nature, observer/ observed. Although, as Timothy Morton reminds us, "[d]istance doesn't mean indifference" (2010, 24), the view from the mountain — however ethically expansive—rarely accounts for those whose lives unfold in the deltas, estuaries, wetlands, and littoral zones: ecologies that are neither elevated nor fixed, but saturated, precarious, and always in negotiation with their conditions. To privilege the mountain is to risk overlooking the social, political, and ecological realities of those who dwell not on high ground, but in the interstices, in the margins, along the edges, and beneath the surface. The Anthropocene, marking the unsettled ecological condition of our time, has long unmoored the certainties once associated with land and stability. Even if, as Morton observes, "we think of ecology as earthbound" and "want ecology to be about location, location, location" (Morton 2010, 27), rising seas, shifting shorelines, and melting permafrost now render the ground less legible, less secure—no longer the fixed foundation of thought or dwelling it was once presumed to be. In such a world, the Anthropocene cannot be told solely as a lithic story. This is a time when "wet substance saturates our lifeworld," calling us to attend to "what flows beneath this stony and terrestrial tale" and to reconsider "our relations to the waters with which we live and upon which we depend" (Neimanis 2017,157; 156; 23). From this orientation, an

alternative epistemology has taken shape: *thinking with water,* as articulated within the Blue Humanities—a relational mode of thinking "based on notions of fluidity, viscosity, and porosity" (Chen, MacLeod, Neimanis 2013, 12). *Thinking with water* shifts scholarly attention toward fluid epistemologies, disrupts terracentric spatial and temporal scales, and institutes new discourses attuned to aquatic processes and agencies.

Thinking with Water

As the editors of *Thinking with Water* (2013) clarify in their introduction, the goal is not to *think of* or *about* water since such thinking risks reinstalling "the assumption that water is a resource needing to be managed and organized" (Chen, MacLeod, Neimanis 2013, 3). Rather, to *think with* water is to cultivate "a more collaborative relationship with the aqueous, actively questioning habitual instrumentalizations of water" (4). To *think with water* is to deepen ecological ethics through immersion, and to refigure ethics as responsive rather than removed, permeable rather than elevated. It is to relinquish the illusion of solidity and to embrace a world continually made and unmade through flows, absorptions, erosions, and entanglements. Such thinking draws us toward water's material capacities to shape, connect, dissolve, deposit, and displace, while existing simultaneously as medium, archive, and agent. Water's dual nature, as both a physical force and a conceptual medium, shapes our epistemologies, cultural imaginaries, and ethical responsibilities. Water infiltrates, seeps, saturates,

floods, evaporates, and returns. To think with water, then, is to become receptive to its movements, fluidities, and cycles so as to deepen our understanding of change, relationality, and resilience.

Unlike the mountain's elevated perspective, water does not command a vista; it demands intimacy, drawing one into contact, entanglement, and a participatory mode of being. Water reflects our impermanence, prompting recognition of ourselves as transient dwellers. Flowing within and beyond us, water blurs the boundaries of individual and collective, human and more-than-human. Our flesh is saturated by the same elemental substance that composes rivers and rains, seas and tears. Unlike terrestrial imaginaries rooted in cartographic certainty, such hydrological understandings open up relational ways of becoming through fluid attachments, liquid affinities. Yet, as Astrida Neimanis maintains, water is neither inert nor innocent. It "both connects us and differentiates us" (2017, 111), carrying entangled histories of both violence and care, from colonial trade routes carved across the Atlantic to the nurturing springs of local ecosystems. Water thus becomes a medium of shared vulnerability, a site where ecological and social injustices converge and spill over. Reckoning with water's histories, including its inheritances of violence, extraction, rupture, and survival, reveals that water carries more than nutrients or life; it carries memory. It bears the weight of what Christina Sharpe calls *the wake*: the ongoing resonances of colonialism, displacement, and racialized dispossession that linger in the afterlives of transatlantic slavery and oceanic migration.

In this context, acknowledging our entanglements with water compels us to confront how we alter its flows, degrade its quality, and disrupt its ecosystems. This reciprocal awareness challenges us to move beyond the anthropocentric assumptions that have enabled hydrocolonialism, urging instead the cultivation of a more relational understanding—what we have come to know as *thinking with water*—that affirms water's agency and our entanglement within its cycles circulating through bodily fluids, atmospheric vapors, freshwaters, and oceanic currents. Each alteration in water's composition reverberates across the fabric of existence. Thinking with water and aquatic species thus becomes an ethical imperative—an effort to attune ourselves to their presence and ensure their dignity and survival. This perspective widens the horizon of meaning toward the relational ecologies of watery worlds, calling for responsible action as co-inhabitants of a shared and interdependent planet. It fosters modes of thought that traverse human and more-than-human realms, affirming the right to life and continuity for all beings. To think with water is also to enter a conceptual and material medium that refuses the fixities of dominant epistemologies, destabilizing the foundational premises of Western thought: solidity, separability, continuity, and mastery. Water does not yield to anthropocentric meaning-making. With tides, confluences, eddies, and undercurrents, it resists containment, both literal and figurative, and affirms permeability; its opacity is part of its force. As such, water is future-bearing and past-saturated, always in transit, always becoming.

Thinking Like a Mountain

Thinking with water, then, is not simply a thematic shift but a transformation in perception. It reconfigures the figure of the human from a rational sovereign standing *before* the world to an immersed and vulnerable being *within* it. Methodologically, this means attending to water's tides, rhythms, contaminations, salinities, as well as its affective registers: grief, immersion, awe, dread, and longing. This is a methodology that is iterative and responsive. In embracing this fluid praxis, one begins to see the world not as a stable assemblage of discrete parts, but as a web of interrelations constantly in flux. This is not merely an ecological insight, but an ontological and ethical proposition that compels a shift from mastery to collaboration, from observation to immersion, from autonomy to interdependence. Such a vision resists the anthropocentric logics of separation and mastery, offering instead an experiment in solidarity, attunement, and resistance. It calls for an ontological humility and a readiness to dwell within flux, opening the conceptual space for reimagining world-making in ways that are supple, shared, and radically responsive. This is to imagine *world-making* not through foundations, but through flows. In such a world, the community refuses enclosure and coheres through mutual exposure and care. No longer a fixed structure, it becomes a fluid collective, formed through bonds of reciprocity, buoyed by care, and sustained through shared acts of resistance. In this aqueous imaginary, community emerges as both a mode of coexistence and a praxis of protest and care: a refusal to yield to the violences of enclosure, extraction, and exclusion, and a commitment to remain in relation,

even as the currents shift. As a contingent confluence, always forming and reforming, such a community enacts a *praxis of protest* that defies the imperatives of containment and affirms a politics of relation, as exemplified by the Dakota Access Pipeline protests in 2016. To envision and inhabit such communities is to attune to the hydrosocial relations that sustain them, as demonstrated by Native American protestors at Standing Rock.

Hydrosocial Community: Protest and Care in the Wake

If water teaches us anything, it is that connections need not entail sameness, nor does cohesion imply fixity. Accordingly, community, understood as a hydrosocial formation, is not a stable, self-identical entity bound by territorial edges, but a fluid and uneven configuration continually reconstituted through flows of relation, memory, and movement. Water's relational ontology undoes the myth of bounded autonomy, revealing how bodies, places, and histories are joined through circulation and confluence. Community, in this register, is not a noun but a process: a continual negotiation of permeability, responsibility, and interdependence. Just as rivers shape and are shaped by the lands they pass through, communities formed through water-thinking are shaped by mutual exposure and collective vulnerability. These are not sanitized visions of harmony, but configurations forged through sedimented histories, contested currents, and shared risk exposure. Such hydrosocial imaginaries are not abstract. They are lived in

the salt-marsh solidarities of coastal communities resisting displacement, in the mutual aid networks that emerge after floods and droughts, in the ancestral kinships that bind Pacific islanders to oceanic routes rather than terrestrial borders. Indigenous cosmologies, particularly those rooted in coastal and riverine lifeways, have long offered models of such fluid relationality, where water is not a resource but a relative, not a boundary but a conduit.

In contrast to community as enclosure—where borders define belonging and difference is managed through exclusion—hydrosocial community embraces porosity. It recognizes that bodies and worlds leak into one another, that solidarity is not predicated on uniformity but on reciprocal recognition of vulnerability and care. This fluid form of community is not fragile; rather, its resilience lies in its capacity to adapt, to absorb, to redistribute, and to flow around obstructions without dissolving. To reimagine community in this way is to relinquish the fantasy of sovereign cohesion. It is to accept that community, like water, is always provisional, always remade through tides of resistance, rupture, and repair. And in this remaking lies its political potential, for it is precisely through the refusal to harden into enclosure that such communities become sites of generative protest and radical care.

In this register, protest is not merely oppositional; it is tidal, sedimented, and continuous. It moves with the rhythms of grief and resistance, refusing the erasures that dominant histories seek to enact. Within this fluid horizon, *care* cannot be disentangled from *protest*. Both emerge

as responses to violence, as intertwined forms of world-making amid unmaking. If protest is a refusal to acquiesce to the terms of ecological and social disposability, care is the labor of tending to what those terms would render invisible, voiceless, or broken. In their entanglement, protest becomes an act of love, and care, an act of defiance. This convergence finds poignant expression in the resonant echoes between Bergamo in northern Italy and Bergama on Turkey's Aegean coast, two geographically distant yet symbolically entwined sites where communities have mobilized against the erosion of their ecological and cultural lifeworlds. Bergamo, nestled at the foothills of the Bergamasque Alps and bisected by layered urban terrains, became its people's frontline during the pandemic, emerging as one of the early epicenters of coronavirus. In that suspended stillness, grief pooled like alpine runoff. Meanwhile, far-off Bergama (the ancient city of Pergamon 26 kilometers inland from the Aegean Sea), lies within the Bakırçay River basin, where local activists resist extractivist pressures, particularly gold mining, which imperils groundwater reserves, aquifers, agricultural livelihoods, and ancestral ecologies.[1] In both places—though Bergamo is mountain-bound and Bergama shaped by the Aegean currents—

[1] See "Controversial Gold Mine in Bergama, Turkey." *Global Extraction Networks,* November 29, 2017. http://globalextractionnetworks.com/controversial-gold-mine-in-bergamaturkey/
and "Opposition to gold mining at Bergama, Turkey." *Environmental Justice.* February 27th, 2013. http://www.envjustice.org/2013/02/opposition-to-gold-mining-at-bergama-turkey/
Also see for Bergamo, Italy: https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/italy-covid-green-pass/

water flows not simply as a resource, but as witness, participatory medium, and carrier of resistance, bearing the histories of struggle and the sedimented layers of care. Water inscribes these histories of struggle and sedimented layers of care into the very landscapes.

Other examples abound, from the water protectors at Standing Rock, who stood against the Dakota Access Pipeline, invoking the sacredness of water as both life-giver and ancestor, to the small-scale fisherfolk resisting industrial overfishing and toxic runoff in coastal Turkey. These struggles are not simply environmental; they are hydrosocial acts of resistance, grounded in alternative ways of knowing and inhabiting aquatic worlds. They reassert community as shared exposure and collective response. Furthermore, protest and care in watery registers do not always manifest as spectacle. Sometimes they unfold as quiet endurance: the slow restoration of wetlands, the planting of mangroves as buffers against rising tides, and the storytelling that refuses to let drowned lands and drowned lives be forgotten. These aqueous forms of praxis are shaped by repetition, vulnerability, and resilience. They do not seek to return to a lost stability but strive to inhabit instability with attentiveness and commitment. To inhabit this state of flux is to dwell in the wake, not only to mourn, but to persist. It is to recognize that the waters we inhabit are thick with entanglement, that the work of care and the urgency of protest cannot be neatly separated. Together, they form the currents of an alternative politics, a movement toward relational repair, survival, and transformation, away from dominion or purity.

Toward a Fluid Politics of World-Making

If water unsettles the foundations upon which dominant modes of world-making have long stood, such as sovereignty, mastery, permanence, then to think with water is to seek political forms adequate to a world always in motion. A fluid politics does not aim to solidify control but to navigate interdependence. It invites us to let go of the fantasy of impermeable borders, singular origins, and linear progress. Instead, it offers modes of living that are provisional, responsive, and attuned to the unpredictable rhythms of a more-than-human world. In fluid politics, water can be forceful, disruptive, and resistant. To embrace its logic is to reconceive it as emergent rather than imposed. A fluid politics recognizes the political stakes involved in who has access to water, who is rendered vulnerable, and whose histories are pushed to the margins. It also demands a revaluation of time. The pace of water is not the clockwork of empire or extractive capitalism. Its temporality is cyclical, interstitial, interrupted. Water resists the accelerationist imperative of progress, instead gesturing toward rhythms of care and endurance. The fluid poetics of world-making, in this sense, becomes a project of arranging and re-arranging relations, responsibilities, and interconnections within shifting tides. Such a politics would prioritize solidarities formed through mutual obligation and sustained resistance. It would also recognize the necessity of repair not as a return to an imagined wholeness, but as a continuous and unfinished act of relation.

In conclusion, reimagining world-making in the face

of ecological and social rupture requires more than new tools; it requires new metaphors, orientations, and modes of attention. While “thinking like a mountain” taught us to perceive the intricacy and durability of ecological interrelations, “thinking with water” invites us to dwell within their flux, move with their changes, and recognize our porousness within them.

Turning to water, we embrace a mode of thought that resists finality, accepts the instability of its own boundaries, and finds in this instability generative potential. Community, in this watery vision, is neither a bounded enclave nor an idealized commons; it is a confluence of struggles, solidarities, and acts of care that persist through loss and turbulence. It is a praxis of living together otherwise: refusing enclosure, embracing entanglement, and remaining in flow. As sea levels rise and certainties recede, thinking with water calls for fluid politics that does not fear dissolution but learns how to compose anew. In this lies an invitation to inhabit the world not from above, but from within—to move, resist, and care together, in the currents we share.

Biographical Notes

Serpil Oppermann is Professor of Environmental Humanities and Director of the Environmental Humanities Center at Cappadocia University. She served as the 7th President of EASLCE (2016–2018) and is recognized as a leading figure in material ecocriticism, an ecocritical theory that examines the expressive creativity of more-than-human agencies at the intersections of science studies, environmental humanities, and blue humanities. She has edited or co-edited seven collections and authored over 100 essays and articles on ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and blue humanities. Her collections include *Material Ecocriticism* (Indiana UP, 2014), *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), both with Serenella Iovino, and *Turkish Ecocriticism: From Neolithic to Contemporary Timescapes* (Lexington Books, 2021) with Sinan Akıllı. She is currently co-editing *The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Blue Humanities* (forthcoming, 2026). Her monographs *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene* (West Virginia UP, 2023) and *Blue Humanities: Storied Waters in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge UP, 2023), have been widely influential in contemporary environmental thought.

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