11. The Capture of Time

We returned home after that week of fire-chasing still unsure of ourselves. It was perfect weather for writing: cool and rainy, ideal for staying inside, sitting by the fire. And then it just didn't stop raining. This is standard-grade coastal British Columbia fall weather – the rain locks in relentlessly for weeks at a time – but this was something different. The rain was heavy, and then got heavier, and then it got ugly.

Turns out we were in the middle of an 'atmospheric river' – a designation very few of us had ever heard of before – but was eerily descriptive. That's exactly what it felt like – the rain wasn't just coming down, it was all around, dumping a month's worth of rain in just two days. And then things got worse: the river-in-the-sky triggered landslides, vast flooding, dykes overflowing and mass evacuations all across the southwest of B.C.

Soon after we returned, the province declared yet another state of emergency, including travel restrictions and fuel rationing as supply lines were broken, all major highways and rail lines heading east were severed, and Vancouver was cut off from the rest of Canada.

The main devastation traced the exact route we traveled the week previous. Five people were killed on the Duffey Road by mudslides. Lillooet was swamped and people were still missing. All 7100 residents of Merritt were evacuated on short notice. The wastewater system was overwhelmed, and raw sewage flooded the waters as the main bridges out of town failed. People were told to go to Kamloops if their home address was odd-numbered and Kelowna if their address was even-numbered. Those places are between an hour and two hours away if the roads are

clear. The roads were not clear. Agricultural communities all through the Fraser Valley saw hundreds of thousands of farm animals drowned.

All of a sudden, our bland little corner of the world, where most people presume almost nothing ever happens, was making global headlines yet again. Friends were calling from all over wondering if we were ok and what the hell was going on. Those few months felt biblical, end-of-times: back-to-back-to-back states of emergency, one catastrophe after another, each exacerbating the previous one.

The floods of course were intimately connected to the fires. Mismanaged forests burn hotter and wilder than ever before, stripping the forest floor of the vegetation that soaks up water. These super-hot fires create hydrophobic (water-repellent) crusts on the soil, so that water cannot be absorbed and runs freely on the surface. Then waters rushing downhill add excess sediment and debris to rivers, reducing room for water, accelerating overflows, eroding banks and adding to property damage as rushing water bounces detritus off anything in its path. It feels like we have entered an ecological spiral, with one calamity triggering the next. The fantasy of borders, of imagining that somehow the performative enforcement of state territory is a realistic form for being together, for living through ecological crises, has never been more absurd.

Ursula K. Le Guin called freedom "that recognition of each person's solitude which alone transcends it"[1] and if nothing else, the pandemic taught us that none of us are alone, none of our bodies are exclusively ours. Our breath is your breath, we share viruses and water and air and land, humans and more-than-humans alike. We suffer alone, but that suffering, that exposure to grief, is maybe the only way we might be together.

All through that winter the water kept coming. More episodic floods rose and fell across British Columbia and of course, the water cared little for the border. In Washington State, record-breaking levels of rain and snow closed major highways, residents of several towns north of Seattle were forced to flee severe flooding and Governor Jay Inslee issued an emergency proclamation due to winter storms. And still the

1 Ursula K. Le Guin, The Dispossessed, New York: Harper and Row, 1974. 300.

atmospheric rivers flowed, arriving one after the other, exacerbated by startling high tides. In Seattle more than one early January tide was two feet higher than forecast: the highest ever documented in Puget Sound through more than a century of record-keeping.

The inundation was hardly unique to the Pacific Northwest, nor to that winter. Flooding and sea-level rise is one of the central features of climate change, and places across the globe are experiencing regular and unprecedented flood-events, from above and below. From Katrina to New York subways to the walls of water crashing into Zhengzhou to Pakistan to Burkina Faso, it's hard to find anywhere that hasn't been struggling though the 21st Century, swimming against the tides of flooding and historic levels of precipitation.

Global warming is obviously a prime culprit here: melting glaciers, wild rainstorms, newly unpredictable tides, destabilized weather are all part of a planet off-kilter. But disastrous flooding has always haunted humans. Everywhere, and all through history, there are horrific stories of rivers overflowing their banks, rushing through cities, drowning fields, bringing disease and famine. Some of these disasters are almost unimaginable in scale, causing millions of deaths and reshaping whole topographies.

But floods are also considered a regular blessing in many places. The flooding of the Nile is worthy of annual celebration – *Wafaa El-Nil* – the overflowing of its banks has been central to agricultural fertility for millennia. The Fertile Crescent was created by the Tigris and Euphrates, nutrient-rich American floodplains by the Mississippi spilling silt onto fields. Every river has adjacent ecological zones that are predicated on regular flooding, and people have always had to be attentive not just to the dangers but the blessings of floods, shaping and managing flows in something akin to relationships with 'good fires'.

Floods are of course also closely bound to metaphorical and spiritual narratives of end-times, of the washing away of enmities, of godly retributions and of rebirth. Stories of pissed-off deities punishing sinful people with floods are startlingly common. From Masai to Sumerian to Roman to Zhuang to Batak, essentially every culture – Indigenous and non – has deeply-embedded stories of the earth being cleansed by wa-

ter. These stories frequently feature a wooden boat or island filled with survivors to repopulate the land. Alternatively, or in combination, flood stories are often those of one brave person – a child or animal – desperately trying to warn people to flee the coming waters, only to be ignored.

These are not only old stories. This general sweep is eerily redolent of many renditions of global warming, with human sin being washed away by a Gaianistic deity finally irritated beyond all patience, and a few brave souls helplessly trying to alert us to the danger.

End-times stimulate rhetorical flourishes, and it's no wonder that water remains maybe the most heavily drawn upon well of cliches. Whether it's Bruce Lee demanding we 'be like water' or some right-wing hack brandishing images of their precious nation being swamped by 'floods of immigrants' instigating 'waves of crime', water is equated with fluidity, passing, travel, and rebirth.

If Hannah Arendt said that all politics rest on movement, maybe we can renovate her claim to suggest that it is *water* that is "the substance and meaning of all things political." If water is closely tied to notions of freedom and release – from dreamy, time-free vacations by the ocean to flowing away on a boat – water is equally used as a border guard. Whether it is Mexicans wading the Rio Grande, Africans in rafts trying to get across the Mediterranean, Rohingyas swimming the Naf River trying to get into Bangladesh, or the bodies of Syrian children washing up in the waves on Greek islands, water is deployed as an instrument of violence and containment.

The idea that anything is fixed in place – spatially or temporally – is a particularly colonial pathology. Water defies all fixities in its very composition – it really is literally true that you can never step in the same river twice – and the command and control of water is always an extension of colonial spatial fantasy. If capitalism fetishizes the capture of time – what is a boss or a wage other than the command of time? – then the experience of water is precisely the fluid antagonist of capture.

The thrust of Bergsonian duration calls on imagination to grasp the unspooling of time that defies causal determinisms. Time flows river-like, enduring attempts to arrest and document it at specific junctures,

and defying mechanistic interventions. Bergson's duree is precisely the notion that freedom and mobility are temporal as much spatial.

The spread of empire is not just the capture of space and territory, but the keeping of time, constrained within matrices of minutes, hours and weeks that can mark the march of productive progress. The production of coordinated GMT time produces specifically indexed ways of being in the world, suspending subjectivities into grids and google-calendars and synchronized schedules, but also pious demands for 'slowing down' or 'life-work balance' in this 'fast-moving' world, as if there was a single people-moving conveyor belt for which we just need to find the right modulation.

Conservation and conservatism speak to the same desires: to return the world to how it once was, to the 'good-old days' when everything and everyone was in its right place, to a timelessness that resisted movement. These warm evocations are the lingua franca of ethno-nationalists and racist environmentalists alike, preserving time and place in cocoons of surety. This same language permeates discourses of global warming with escalatingly shrill claims that 'time is running out', there are *these* thresholds and *that* timeline and *this* tipping point, with the only antidotes being new schedules and different timelines for 'sustainable' development.

But for *whom* and *what* is time 'running out'? The claims to 'emergency' after four-hundred years of genocide and empire and pillage and species collapse and ecological catastrophe often ring hollow. And what precisely is the world 'we' all have to scramble to save: current configurations of capital, debt, surplus labour value-extraction, patriarchy, etc.? Is the argument that if we can all mobilize to solve global warming, then we can sort the rest of all that out at some later date? As Claire Colebrook writes:

> Rather than follow Martin Heidegger who argues that an animal is "poor in world" – because its range of decision and potentiality does not harbor the sense of possibility of a radically free existence – it would be better to think of "world" as the horizon of what matters, with *some* versions of world producing the neoliberal values of privacy, autonomy, and individualism. "End of world" culture – from post-

> apocalyptic cinema to daily press releases warning of *future* resource depletion and scarcity – presupposes the world of hyper-consumption in which each person is composed from a series of individual choices [...] Faced with the end of "the world" where all that matters appears to be this horizon of distinct life choices and in a milieu of privacy and personal decision, it is time to ask about what other worlds might be possible.[2]

Speculative futures are hardly the exclusive province of science fiction and critical theory. In December 2020 water futures were, for the first time, made available for trading. Launched by the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME), the first tranche of these commodified water contracts was limited to five districts in California but are surely the thin edge of the wedge. With this new market, traders can take a stake in the future value of water, and CME Group executive Tim McCourt speculates that pricing water risk will be a business that expands well beyond California. McCourt called the market "liquid and transparent" and noted that,"With nearly two-thirds of the world's population expected to face water shortages by 2025, water scarcity presents a growing risk for businesses and communities around the world."[3]

Seneca, quoting Epicurus, once said that "The fool, with all his other faults, has this also, he is always getting ready to live".[4] But there's just too much money lying around out there not to be looking just a little into the future, getting ready to profit on future disasters, water-saturated and otherwise. Speculation captures the future as powerfully as debt, and markets are very actively shaping and reshaping what other worlds might be possible.

If floods – like fires – are a constantly active agent remaking our worlds, predictably unpredictable, undercutting systemicities and ruining landscapes, is there an imagination that does not hate floods,

2 Claire Colebrook, The Personal and the Political, Women's Studies, 50:8, 805–811, 2021.

3 Don Pitts,' Can Wall Street help us find the true price of water?' CBC News, January 11th, 2021.

4 Maria Popova, 'A Stoic's Key to Peace of Mind', The Marginalian, August, 2017.

that does not spend every last possible resource trying to contain and suppress them? The question of how to be-together cannot restrict itself to just being with other humans, or even animals, plants, or what we imagine to be alive. Floods and fires are not our kin.

Nation, state, belonging and kinship have proven themselves wildly inadequate to the task of being-together, reconstituting the same idealized renditions of fixed identity in new guises, but there have to be possible worlds where floods and fires and all the rest of the more-than-human world are our friends.