

Rethinking River Resilience: The Lower !Garib / Orange River

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Introduction

In January 2020, I visited the Lower Orange / !Garib River (LOR) in preparation for a workshop convened by the Space in Time research project; my interest piqued by Giorgio Miescher waxing lyrical about a proposed dam at the Vioolsdrift/Noordoewer border between South Africa and Namibia.¹ Swayed by his enthusiasm, I joined the intrepid researchers with my camera in tow, hoping to learn more about the motivations for and prospects of this new dam, one of many on the highly built-up river. On-site, my findings were disheartening. Not only has the planned dam been promised for decades with no sign of progress; but along both borders of the river, awareness of and interest in talking about the dam was disappointing. Additionally, the region around the border area has not been at the centre of much research, complicating the pursuit of a small-scale, historicised approach to the proposed dam without longer-term research. Despite this, my participation in the research trip and subsequent workshop proved invaluable for fostering a unique geographical imagination, germane to rethinking the concept of resilience.

This chapter begins with an explanation of how I use the notion of geographical imagination to first describe my analytical attention to spatiality; the space in question being the understudied LOR region. The river is used as an epistemic environment to situate a rethinking of the concept of resilience. This is done in two ways: first, the proposed dam is approached as both a material object and a boundary concept – something that creates discursive space for (re)interpretation, (re)negotiation, and consensus formation among different domains of discourse.² Second, a speculative methodology of ‘conceptual dislocation’ is employed to plunge the concept into the river.³ In this way, resilience

1 An initial draft of this chapter was discussed at the *Rethinking Resilience* workshop hosted by Rhodes University between 5–9 October 2020; and a longer version first published in *Social Dynamics* (2022, Vol 48, No. 1, 70–84).

2 Westerink et. al. 2017

3 Jue 2020

is both removed from its usual contexts and juxtaposed with a brief consideration of another critical concept that has influenced environmental studies/humanities over the last decades: the Anthropocene.

Interspersed throughout are photographs, intended as a companion visual essay. Schwartz argues that since ‘photographs participated in the construction of imaginative geographies,’ they also merit attention in historical geography because they support the ‘virtual witnessing’ of landscape across space and time.⁴ This first photograph, for instance, was made on 24 January 2020, the final day of the Space in Time workshop in Oranjemund, during a tour of the river mouth and the nearby ruins of Hohenfels – a former police station during the time of the German colonial empire. Like the rest of the images, this photograph stands as a visual record of the LOR’s expansive history, one that can be measured against future changes but that also contributes to conveying ‘an overarching appreciation of the significance of space, place and landscape in the making and meaning of social and cultural life.’⁵

Fig. 1: Lower Orange River, Oranjemund, (January 2020) 35mm film (Sindi-Leigh McBride private collection).



Imagining an imaginary dam

In his analysis of visualised imaginaries of the South African military campaign into German South West Africa in 1914/1915, Miescher discusses the term ‘geographical imagination’ by describing the shift within the discipline of geography from ‘the positivist con-

4 Schwartz 1996: 19

5 Harvey 1990: 418

ception of space as a given, i.e. as an unmediated empirical reality, towards the idea of space as a socially constructed and mediated category of thought.⁶ He argues that this facilitates interdisciplinary dialogue by questioning 'how space is seen, perceived, visualized and mediated.'⁷ Linton's research on 'modern water' is useful for connecting this geographical imagination to the LOR, offering a way of relating to water by tracing ways of knowing, accounting for, and representing water.⁸ Leaning on these two concepts, I approach the LOR as socially constructed to expand how this understudied area is imagined and to juxtapose a historicised, concrete case of the proposed Noordoewer/Vioolsdrift dam within broader globalised discourses of resilience and the Anthropocene. After a brief description of the river and proposed dam, I contextualise both in terms of regional climate vulnerability before moving onto historical issues and opportunities to rethink resilience.

The LOR rises in the highlands of Lesotho and discharges in the Atlantic Ocean at Oranjemund, Namibia. South Africa and Namibia share a 600km border along the lower and western reaches of the river, which falls within the winter rainfall area of southern Africa, forming a floodplain of islands and sandbars, a linear oasis in the arid southern Namib desert. The sole perennial river in the region, the lower part of the river is flanked by especially torrid landscapes as it approaches the coast.⁹ Historically, the flow regime of the river has been highly seasonal, characterised by strong variability: very low discharges during the dry winter months, high discharges and flood events during the wet summer months. Over time, this has been drastically changed by urban, industrial, agricultural and hydropower demands, and river regulation has resulted in an artificial hydrological regime characterised by both a lack of flow variability and decreased total water volume.¹⁰ An environmental assessment study by Luger and Brown investigated measures to improve the management of the river system, noting that regulation of the LOR is largely determined by dams in South Africa, resulting in socio-economic and environmental inefficiencies and reduced water security for Namibia.¹¹ In the river's catchment area, South Africa has 25 dams compared to Namibia's five, each exceeding 12 million m³ storage capacity. The proposed site for the planned dam is approximately 300 km upstream of the river estuary and about 6km downstream from the border post between Namibia (Noordoewer) and South Africa (Vioolsdrift).

Try to imagine the location: if you stand on the South African side of the river and enter an estimation of the proposed coordinates into Google Maps for a sense of where exactly this dam will be, it will lead you on a rugged dirt road. After passing through both large, lush commercial grape farms and tiny kraals marked by sticks stuck into the hard orange dirt, a rickety metal gate will appear, announcing open waterworks. Swiftly, you will find yourself stranded. This is where the satellite signal disappears and with it, any

6 Miescher 2012: 24

7 Ibid.

8 Linton 2013

9 For more, see: 'Orange River Mouth'. *Ramsar Sites Information Service*. Accessed at: <https://rsis.amsar.org/rsis/744> on 11 January 2021.

10 Putteman and Schepens 2010

11 Luger and Brown 2005

further indication of where this dam will be. However, if you walk a little bit further, the road starts to narrow, soon shouldered by a wide stretch of river and a slender artificial canal. To the left, the river is shallow but fast. To the right, the still canal is very deep. The incongruent symmetry of the channel, neatly corseted in concrete and interspersed with broad-crested weirs, against the craggy rocks with the Richtersveld mountains shimmering in the distance, is a stark reminder of the resilience of this body of water. This photograph of the site reveals no colour change, no difference in the eddies rippling along the river's surface. But below both the image and the water lurks the grim prospect of the planned dam altering its flow, like so many dams further up the river and further back in history.

*Fig. 2: Canal at proposed site of Noordoewer/Vioolsdrift dam (January 2020)
35mm film (Sindi-Leigh McBride private collection).*



The dam was first recommended in 2004, either as a small balancing dam or a large storage dam just above Vioolsdrift, an outcome of the joint South African and Namibian Lower Orange River Management Study, better known as LORMS.¹² At the time of writing, in October 2021, the most recent publicly available information on the prospects of the dam comes from a presentation by the Department of Water and Sanitation (South Africa) to the African Union Development Agency (AUDU)-NEPAD in May 2021.¹³ 69 transboundary infrastructure projects were adopted by Heads of State at the African Union Summit in February 2021, of which 16 are water infrastructure projects. The water sector meetings were intended to provide water sector project owners the opportunity to present on the status of project implementation and to discuss the level of support needed. A report from the meeting detailing the status of the project suggests that research into the construction of the dam is proceeding, with project needs specified as being further feasibility studies and funding for this. My visit to the LOR, a year and half before this meeting, coincided with the 2019 drought. Protracted dry spells are a common feature in the region, but this one was different. On both national and international news platforms, drought reports started as early as April 2019; by May 2019 the drought was declared a national emergency;¹⁴ and by July 2019 it was being reported that 36% of the Namibian population were at risk of hunger and dependence on drought relief support systems.¹⁵ Across the country, the drought was touted as the most severe in the last 90 years: rainfall in Windhoek was the lowest recorded since 1891.¹⁶

Vulnerability to climate change

Like many areas characterised by extreme weather, ‘since eternal times this region is subject to the eroding might of the weather.’¹⁷ Nakanyete et. al. explain that drought has been prevalent in the region for a long period of time and Namibia, known as the driest country in Sub-Saharan Africa, has been particularly hard hit, with variations in severity per season and variations in climatic conditions between regions.¹⁸ Namibia is an example of

12 For more on water management at Noordoewer-Vioolsdrift see “South Africa and Namibia ensuring enough irrigation water together” The Water Wheel (pdf) November/ December 2014.

13 See: Report: Webinars on PIDA-PAP II Priority Water Projects (pdf), Held on 6 May and 18 May 2021. AUDU-NEPAD and Global Water Partnership Africa.

14 See: Tjitemisa, Kuzeeko. 2019. President declares state of emergency over drought. New Era, 7 May 2019. Accessed at: <https://neweralive.na/posts/president-declares-state-of-emergency-over-drought> on 11 January 2021.

15 See: Reliefweb (31 July 2019). Namibia: Vulnerability Assessment Committee Results 2019. Accessed at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/namibia/namibia-vulnerability-assessment-committee-results-2019> on 11 January 2021.

16 See: “Namibia’s devastating drought: Our strategy so far”, New Era, 07 June 2019. Accessed at: <https://neweralive.na/posts/namibias-devastating-drought-our-strategy-so-far> on 11 January 2021.

17 Demhardt 1990: p. 356

18 Nakanyete 2020

a country dominated by drylands, with intensifying aridity and drought conditions testament to rising temperatures and rainfall variability. As climate change intersects with and augments existing structural vulnerabilities, a corollary is that the natural characteristics of drylands, like those found in the Northern Cape and Namibia, further threaten vulnerable communities.

In the borderland region of the LOR – perhaps better described as the thirstlands – both South Africa and Namibia are haunted by severe poverty.¹⁹ Spear et. al. show how vulnerability to climate change is exacerbated by underlying structural factors, including histories of inappropriate economic policies, gender disparities and colonisation, which have led to chronic poverty and inequality.²⁰ The authors explore the impacts of and responses to climate change in different economic sectors, social and ecological systems, and observe that the LOR is particularly water-stressed without climate change; with it, the situation is dire. Barnes et. al. confirm this by predicting that surface water flows in the south of the Orange River system will decline by up to 15% by 2080.²¹ According to Turpie et. al., this situation will be further worsened by increased water demand from population growth, irrigation needs and urban centres struggling with heat stress.²²

When viewed along a continuum of climate adaptation actions addressing root causes of climate vulnerability, reported responses to climate change in both South Africa and Namibia have been largely short-term responses to hazards posed by droughts, floods and sea-level rise, often focused on commercial agriculture and project-based, rather than focused on the system level.²³ For example, a report by the Bank of Namibia outlined opportunities for ensuring food security in the context of persistent drought conditions inhibiting agricultural practices. The report recommended rivers, boreholes and dams as water sources – despite these already being in use and failing during drought periods.²⁴ This suggests that the complex longer-term impacts of climate change are either not prioritised, or not well understood.

Nakanyete et. al. analyse secondary data from various existing publications to explore the causes and forecasting of the 2019 drought, chronicling drought-related headlines in online news reports to assess the impacts of the drought.²⁵ The authors primarily focus on the impact of the drought, but also briefly discuss drought susceptibility in Namibia. This is explained as being caused by a combination of geographic positioning, land degradation, desertification, and overall climate change. In the LOR area, like in many other areas around the world, the latter three effects are often human-induced

19 See: Charmaine Ngatjiheue 'Severe poverty still haunts Namibians' and Roland Ngam 'The thirstland years are here – prepare for four more years of crippling drought'. Accessed on 11 January 2021.

20 Spear et. al. 2018: p. 3

21 Barnes 2012

22 Turpie et. al. 2010

23 Spear et. al. 2018: p. 27

24 See: Bank of Namibia, 'Feeding Namibia: Agricultural Productivity and Industrialisation', Windhoek, The Research Department of the Bank of Namibia, 21 September 2017. Accessed at: <https://www.bon.com.na/CMSTemplates/Bon/Files/bon.com.na/52/52c35978-5912-4429-9052-3c8f5cc7971e.pdf> on 11 January 2021.

25 Nakanyete, et. al. 2020: p. 380

or exacerbated by human activity in areas that were once not regarded as ‘permanently arid’ but have since begun to develop desert-like conditions due to consistently decreasing or no rainfall. Aside from that brief mention, climate change is not referred to again in Nakanyete et al.’s (2020) paper. Much like the discourse I experienced from farmers and business owners during my research visit, both reportage and research on the 2019 drought in southern Africa is seldom contextualised in broader climate discourse.

But to the untrained eye (like my own) the river looked healthy enough, meandering along on both the South African and Namibian sides. Perhaps this was wishful thinking, but resilience, or the ability to spring back into shape, seemed coded into the way that the river was coursing along powerfully, seemingly oblivious to the drought. Wishful thinking indeed: Shikangalah observes that analyses made over the last decade show a continuous rise in temperatures in tandem with decreases in the annual rainfall from December to March, resulting in shorter seasons in Southern Africa.²⁶ A further decline in rainfall of up to 5% is expected over the southern African region; and future projections for the Namibian climate shows further, highly variable drops in rainfall amounts. Indeed, another photograph made at the ruins of Hohenfels former police station, but taken from another perspective, suggests that the river is much less powerful than at first sight.

Fig. 3: Lower Orange River, Oranjemund, (January 2020) 35mm film (Sindi-Leigh McBride private collection).



Worryingly, despite the arid conditions of the border region – where the Noor-doewer/Vioolsdrift dam would be built – existing studies about water use in the Orange River basin suggest that there is insufficient information about the potential for increased efficiency of water use, through dams or otherwise.²⁷ This complicates efforts to understand the impact of both dams and climate change on the lower part of the river system. This is problematic because the area is likely to experience significant impacts from rising temperatures and changing rainfall patterns; but if there is little publicly available research on this topic, it follows that there is probably a gap in local knowledge about plans to build the new dam, and water resource management more generally. The implications of limited awareness include limited opportunity for individuals adversely affected by water resource management (in both countries) to raise their concerns. It is also important to note that most research on or about the river concentrates on the upper reaches, making the dearth of readily available information for the LOR a significant barrier to understanding resilience in the region – both empirically and at a more abstract level.

Historicising the river

With this initial description of the LOR, the planned dam, and the context of vulnerability to climate change, it is possible to historicise the LOR. As the most developed of all the rivers in southern Africa, the (hydro) history of the river is both complex and long: the earliest remains of humans were found in the basin, near Taung in the North-west Province, but ‘it was only much later, about 1.5 to 3 million years ago, that the exploitation of the river started on a grand scale.’²⁸ The most prominent example of this was Orange River Project (ORP). Launched in 1962 (and publicised as “Taming a River Giant”), the ORP aimed to promote and stabilise irrigation along the Orange River and in the Eastern Cape, as well as to generate hydropower, to supply water to towns and industries, and to limit flood damage.

The historiography of Namibian-South African relations on regional/national levels is as compelling as the infrastructural development of the river. Saunders surveys both historical and contemporary aspects of the multifaceted relations between the two countries, noting that despite South Africa having more bilateral treaties and agreements with Namibia than any other country (over 60 in all); there is limited literature on the ambivalent, sometimes contradictory relationship between South Africa and Namibia.²⁹ He observes that:

on the one hand there are close ties, arising especially from perceptions of a common history and close economic links, while on the other there is, and has been in the past, tension and mistrust because, it is here suggested, of the unequal nature of the re-

27 See, for example: Mahasa et al. 2015

28 Turton et. al. 2004: p. 88

29 Saunders 2016: p. 348

lationship, a long-standing concern by Namibians to assert their independence from South Africa, and South Africa's failure to prioritise its relationship with Namibia.³⁰

Specific to the LOR, this ambiguity manifests in interesting ways. First, in the unresolved border dispute between the two countries. In 1990, at the time of Namibia's independence, South Africa claimed that the border between the two countries ran along the northern bank of the Orange River and not, the middle of the river, which was the accepted position in international law. As this was based on the 1890 Heligoland treaty drawn up by the German colonial government, the issue was referred to a joint technical committee resulting in South Africa accepting the middle of the Orange River as the boundary in 1992, but with no consensus reached on the boundary out to sea.³¹ Still, both boundaries remain a site of contestation. While this border dispute does not directly relate to accessing water resources on the river – as there are numerous binding international contracts defining the rights to the water that are not contested by either country, the course of the river and where one country ends and another begins is relevant in respect of land rights, infrastructure development, and the offshore use-rights at the mouth of the river.

Reporting on the intensification of tension in regions where rivers form borders, Kings notes how rivers became convenient borders in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region during the colonial divvying-up in the late 1800s.³² 12 SADC states share 21 river basins, with most of these crossing more than two countries, and increasingly, climate change is testing their water agreements. Today, South Africa maintains that the border is on the high-water mark on the Namibian side while Namibia maintains that the border is in the middle of the river. Namibia, however, relies on its larger southern neighbour for trade and food imports, so it has little political capital, especially when compared to the economic clout wielded by South Africa which maintains the status quo (relative hegemony over water resources) in respect of transboundary water sharing in the SADC region.³³ Rickard explains that Namibia is unlikely to push this issue at the level of international law after taking a similar border dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to decide which side of the border between Namibia and Botswana a mid-river island fell.³⁴ After the ICJ's 1999 ruling in favour of Botswana, Windhoek is probably not keen to go up against Pretoria, leading to an 'incongruous status of political suspense.'³⁵ Border dispute negotiations between the two countries are treated as top secret by Namibia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while in South Africa, opposition parties have called on the Department of International Relations and Cooperation to speed up these negotiations.³⁶

30 Saunders 2016: p. 348

31 Saunders 2016: p. 348

32 Kings 2016

33 Kings 2016

34 Rickard 2015

35 Hangula 2010: p. 195

36 See: 'DA: DA calls on government to give clarity on the Namibia border dispute'. *Polity*, 1 November 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.polity.org.za/article/da-da-calls-on-government-to-give-clarity-on-the-namibia-border-dispute-2018-11-01> on 11 January 2021.

This border dispute is particular to the colonial and apartheid history of South Africa and Namibia, but the fact of it being situated in the river raises broader questions about rivers as non-human entities. How they are embroiled in politics, despite resisting the boundaries of ownership or citizenship. How finding the exact middle point of a river – to demarcate its international boundary – might make sense to political geographers but appears ludicrous to those navigating its surface or drawing from its depths for daily use.

Beyond these questions, the relevance of this historical dispute to resilience along the river is well articulated in a study by Grainger and Conway who highlight the paradox between the stability needed for a boundary and the dynamism of fluvial landscapes in times of climate variability.³⁷ Their work on the historical and legal role of International River Boundaries (IRBs) is useful for understanding the consequences of climate change for transboundary water resources, particularly through the effects of extreme events, such as droughts. The authors assess the potential challenge that climate change represents for physical and socio-political risks associated with IRBs and identify the LOR region as a situation where aggregate regional risk is high. Based on the assessment of the biophysical and socio-political characteristics of the region, they observe that the LOR is ‘clearly vulnerable to climate change given its geo-graphical configuration, extreme climatic regime’ and warn that ‘in the future, states may undertake hard engineering measures to secure access to increasingly scarce water resources, and simultaneously ‘x’ their boundary,’ which is of concern for the high potential for knock-on environmental and social effects downstream.³⁸

Rivers are dynamic systems, and the natural variability of fluvial processes has historically led to a number of riparian responses and disputes, and with continuing human modification of the environment the resilience of political structures is uncertain. These natural landforms serve as catalysts to connect, but also separate people, cultures, and communities.³⁹

This relates to the second hydro-political history issue in the LOR: the experiences of those displaced by dam construction on the river have been devastating. The hearings from the World Commission on Dams held in November 1999 are a window into the social implications of dam construction, in particular community accounts of the impact of dams in the region.⁴⁰ For example, members of communities affected by the Gariep and Van der Kloof Dams higher up on the river stated that they were not consulted when the dam was planned. They were simply told to move from the farm they were living on, forced to sell or leave their cattle behind; and because of the pass laws of the time, farmworkers on impacted farms could not readily resettle in the towns. White farmers were, of course, consulted in good time.⁴¹ While the hearings highlighted some of the positive aspects of

37 Grainger and Conway 2014

38 Grainger and Conway 2014: p. 843

39 Grainger and Conway 2014: p. 846

40 See: “The Report of the World Commission on Dams” (2000). Accessed at: http://awsassets.panda.org/downloads/wcd_dams_final_report.pdf on 11 January 2021.

41 Turton et. al 2004: 258

the dams for communities who were not displaced, for example, reliable water and electricity supply, the negative impact on the people living in the areas affected by the dams raises red flags for future dam projects.

Already, the residents of Goodhouse on the banks of the Orange River are unhappy about the planned construction, wary that it will change their way of life forever – given the risk that the settlement may disappear as it lies directly in the dam's flood plain. Residents are especially unhappy at not having been consulted or considered, despite being the most affected.⁴² Writing on the impact of major dams in Africa and how they affect local communities, Hitchcock notes that even when resettlement is an option, this is a complicated process, often extremely hard on the people who are relocated.⁴³ A major problem with the dislocation that comes with many dam constructions is that planners tend to focus attention on loss of residences (i.e., homes) rather than on loss of access to the means of production (especially land, grazing resources, and wild resources on which people depend for subsistence and income).⁴⁴ This is especially true for regions characterised by extreme climate conditions, where whole sections might dry up. As Roy states in her polemic against the big dam industry:

Anyone who has loved a river can tell you that the loss of a river is a terrible, aching thing... for the people who've been resettled, everything has to be re-learned. Every little thing, every big thing: from shitting and pissing... to buying a bus ticket, to learning a new language, to understanding money. And worst of all, learning to be supplicants. Learning to take orders.⁴⁵

The river itself is ordered by the mechanisms mastering it. But in changing climate conditions, observing the impact of this is tricky. Distinguishing between differences in variation of water flows due to dams and due to climate change is difficult because, like river communities forced to reckon with the impact of both dams and climate change, river morphology continuously adapts to changing discharge conditions. According to Grainger and Conway 'climate change could therefore exacerbate underlying weaknesses and in some cases dramatically alter political and social landscapes at boundaries.'⁴⁶ For instance, the proposed border dam in a region plagued by drought and subject to erratic weather variability. Indeed, in late 2020 and early 2021, long and heavy rains led to flooding – affecting both southern Namibia and parts of the Northern Cape. While this does not directly impact the long-term effects of the drought, expectations of normal to above-normal rainfall between October 2021 and March 2022 across the bulk of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region are likely to influence perceptions of risk associated with the building of the dam.⁴⁷

42 Hendricks 2018

43 Hitchcock 2011

44 Hitchcock 2011

45 Roy 1999

46 Grainger and Conway 2014: p. 844

47 See: World Meteorological Organization, Normal to above-normal rainfall forecast for much of southern Africa, September 2021. Accessed at <https://public.wmo.int/en/media/news/normal-above-normal-rainfall-forecast-much-of-southern-africa>.

Rethinking resilience

Imagining the impacts of the proposed dam on the future of the LOR benefits from the field of elemental media which thinks about how elements themselves function as media and what this means for questions of representation. Jue's science fictional strategy of 'conceptual displacement' developed in *Wild, Blue Media*, proposes imaginatively submerging familiar terms into the ocean to see how they hold up and how our understanding of them necessarily shifts.⁴⁸ Following this, I similarly submerge resilience into the epistemic environment of the LOR. But rethinking resilience in the dynamic context of a marginalised fluvial landscape under climatic and economic pressure requires a brief consideration of the Anthropocene, the contested geological time period advanced in 2000 by Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and ecologist Eugene Stoermer who argued that the Earth is now in a new, unprecedented geological epoch, triggered by human actions.⁴⁹ Haraway explains that the Anthropocene thesis gained purchase in popular and scientific discourse in the context of urgent efforts to find ways of talking about, modelling and managing Globalisation, while Satgar similarly demonstrates how Anthropocene discourse is ideological, with serious consequences for how we understand the contemporary climate crisis.⁵⁰

This photograph, made at the Augrabies Falls National Park, is resonant with both fluvial and geological echoes of Anthropocene considerations. The park is home to fascinating rock formations, and Echo Corner is one of three viewpoints to see the Orange River thunder through the park, sometimes cascading powerfully and at other points a mere trickle. The visual and aural display is second only to the sight and sound of the river meeting the ocean, but as the name suggests, Echo Corner produces resounding eerie echoes that loop around as a reminder of the intertwining of space and time.

48 Jue 2020

49 See: The International Geosphere–Biosphere Programme (IGBP) May 2000 newsletter. Accessed at: <http://www.igbp.net/download/18.316f18321323470177580001401/1376383088452/NL41.pdf> on 11 January 2021.

50 Haraway 2016; Satgar 2018.

*Fig. 4: Empty Echo Corner at Augrabies Falls, Northern Cape (January 2020)
35mm film (Sindi-Leigh McBride private collection).*



While Yusoff's highly influential critique problematises the politics of the Anthropocene, deflating the heady politically infused geology and scientific/popular discourse that has accompanied it; considering resilience within this discourse has its benefits.⁵¹ First, Fagan questions the 'who' of the Anthropocene, to demonstrate the mobility of the human/nature border and the ways in which the non-human (like rivers) can/should be brought into Anthropocene politics, and acknowledged as integral to dominant political conceptual structures (like resilience).⁵² Secondly, Nixon describes the Anthropocene's transition from an interdisciplinary idea to one that has permeated the public sphere, as filmmakers, curators and public intellectuals use the concept as a prism 'to give immense biomorphic and geomorphic changes a granular intimacy.'⁵³ It is in granular attention to a proposed new dam, a non-human object brought into being by human activity with significant implications for the future of the river, that resilience can be conceptually rethought. Thirdly, Goudie and Viles' work on direct and indirect human actions influencing geomorphological change in the Anthropocene is useful for thinking about the implications of building a new dam in an arid area like that surrounding the LOR, from the perspective of the Anthropocene hypothesis.⁵⁴ For example, the authors observe that it can be difficult to recognise human impact on geomorphological processes because this often manifests as an acceleration of natural processes. To emphasise this point, it is helpful to think about the historical power of this river, which has sculpted both human and non-human environments historically, affecting everything from religious practices to industrial development. The counterpoint to this is the widespread evidence of hu-

51 Yusoff 2017

52 Fagan 2019

53 Nixon 2014

54 Goudie and Viles 2016: 130

man dominance in fluvial records. Brown et al. explain this back and forth as a major challenge in demarcating the Anthropocene, because

the balance between human-influenced and natural processes varies over spatial and temporal scales owing to the inherent variability of both human activities (as associated with culture and modes of development) and natural drivers (e.g., tectonic activity and sea level variation).⁵⁵

Dams are hydrological disturbances that act as both a direct influence on the morphology of the river (by changing its annual runoff, sediment load and channels) but can also be an indirect influence on the future of the river in a multitude of ways, ranging from modifications of river flow regimes and channel dimensions to riverbed aggradation.⁵⁶ Goudie and Viles suggest that geomorphological change is often neglected in accounts of human impact in discussions of the Anthropocene, especially when looking at changes in the riverine landforms, which have no ubiquitous markers – every river must be recognized as unique in its response to the human disturbance.⁵⁷ This brings to mind Didion's obsessive interest

not in the politics of water but in the waterworks themselves, in the movement of water through aqueducts and siphons and pumps and forebays and afterbays and weirs and drains, in plumbing on the grand scale.⁵⁸

Looking into the river's complex system of reservoirs, transfer schemes and irrigation canals to explain the impact of a new dam is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is an interesting place to situate a theoretical investigation of what exactly resilience represents. In this instance, it provides a way into thinking beyond human activity, and towards considering the river's own agency and the interplay between the two in the context of the Anthropocene thesis and resilience as a theoretical/ conceptual structure.

55 Brown et al. 2016: 73

56 Brown et al. 2016: 73

57 Goudie and Viles 2016

58 Didion 2009

Fig. 5: *Augrabies Falls Northern Cape (January 2020) 35mm film (Sindi-Leigh McBride private collection).*



Joseph argues that the conceptual basis of the term ‘resilience’ amounts to very little because not only is it a shallow concept but also a shifting concept. This is a useful reminder that conceptual frameworks are grounded in changeable cultural specificities, historical underpinnings and of course, geographical imaginations.⁵⁹ Pendall et al. survey literatures from disciplines including ecology, psychology, disaster studies, geography, political science and economics to understand how they see resilience. Their work reveals that resilience is broadly understood as a buffer capacity for preserving normality, or what we have, and recovering to where we were, without much thought to or questioning of what exactly *normality* entails.⁶⁰ Specific to this investigation of resilience in and of the LOR, it is not easy to define ‘normality’, given the precarious weather conditions in the region, and the long history of human activity on the river steadily increasing the river-system’s vulnerability to the effects of climate change. In their critique of neoliberal resilience, Evans and Reid lament how *normal* vulnerability and precariousness have become, with both appearing not only as endemic and inevitable but also as *necessary* to the recovery part of the resilience schema.⁶¹ But for both river systems and the human and more-than-human communities that depend on them, what used to be normal is long past: whole natural drainage basins, which once responded to grand seasonal cycles of summer floods and winter droughts now respond meekly to the whims of water managers seated in control rooms that govern sluice gates in tens of thousands of large dams.⁶² The resilience of naturally occurring watercourses is no longer only determined by seasonal change but shaped by human consumption and human construction.

59 Joseph 2013

60 Pendall et al. 2010

61 Evans and Reid 2013

62 Lynas 2011

Fig. 6: Natural hot spring Riemvasmaak, Northern Cape (January 2020) 35mm film (Sindi-Leigh McBride private collection).



This photograph of two swimming pools constructed at Riemvasmaak Hot Springs, invites visitors to relax in the natural wonder of these therapeutic waters, a product of volcanic eruptions that have long since ceased, but continue to be heated by deep underground activity. Riemvasmaak is close to the Namibian border, situated between the LOR and the now dry Molopo River; a haunting reminder of both the timelessness of geology and the ephemerality of fluvial forms.

Conclusion

Like the harnessing of natural springs for holiday resorts, the construction of dams is an intervention that fundamentally changes the biophysical properties and geomorphology of a river system. How can we make known the resilience of fluvial forms, with complex politics and long histories, in the face of these changes? How can we understand and relate to the context of increasing climate variability and plans to further change the geomorphology via inventions like dams? How can we trace the history of modern dams

on ancient rivers? This chapter meditated on these questions to rethink the LOR as more than just an environment under climatic stress, but also to consider it as an epistemic environment to situate a rethinking of the concept of resilience. Speculatively historicising and theorising the LOR and submerging the concept of resilience into this milieu contributes to geographic imaginations of this area, by paying attention to an understudied area in southern Africa. Additionally, focusing on the proposed Noordoewer/Vioolsdrift dam at the border between South Africa and Namibia revealed a nexus of issues that open questions about the meaning and potential of the term resilience, ranging from community impacts to landform transformations. Accompanying photographs contributed by speaking where words cannot, articulating that ‘resilience is a narrative, a collective fiction of the possibility for surviving present and future disasters.’⁶³ The enormity of thinking in planetary scales imposed by the climate crisis often makes it difficult to imagine the impact of human interventions of earth-systems, like rivers. As such, the exploratory insights discussed reveal the importance of small-scale studies when exploring water infrastructure resourcing issues (like plans to build a dam) in the bigger picture of global climate change. This is true for rethinking the meaning of resilience on the Lower !Garib / Orange River in this region and in the world at large.

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