

VISIONS OF WATER

Swimming in a drying Australian waterscape

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Camille Roulière

University of Adelaide <camille.rouliere@adelaide.edu.au>

ABSTRACT: Since the 1820s, the Murray Mouth (South Australia) has been subjected to such disfiguring abuse at the hands of colonists that it now faces an unprecedented health crisis. My research consists of implementing a liquid methodology to explore and illuminate this mouth's d(r)ying waterscapes. To borrow Celan's phrase, my words represent "attempts to swim on dry land": they speak of the harsh dialectics of drought and desertification, and yet, water shapes them as they crisscross pages and landscapes. In this essay, I discuss some of those "attempts to swim on dry land". I illustrate how I articulate and play with the vulnerable interface between (wet) theories and the (dry) realities of the Mouth's acoustic textures – or, more precisely, how I recorporealise the conceptual in the sensory. We need this recorporealisation because we need to keep trying to swim on dry land. Only through those attempts can we learn how to listen to the wet ontologies hidden behind the colonial veil of blue-green algae blooms, salt and the staccato pounding of the dredgers working hard to keep the Mouth open.

KEYWORDS: Water, Édouard Glissant, Murray River/Mouth, spatial poetics, sound philosophy

"Please consider even that which will come now, as attempts to swim on dry land", writes poet Paul Celan in *The Meridian* (2011, p. 168). I could not have found a better way to summarise my research, which consists of implementing a liquid methodology to explore and illuminate the d(r)ying waterscapes near the mouth of the Murray River. Celan's words eloquently encapsulate the nature of my onto-epistemological engagement with waters¹ and the ways in which this engagement comes to shape and define my writing practice. I use his turn of phrase as simultaneously metaphor, practice and theory. Because first and foremost, my research involves bodies; bodily involvement and relationships define me and my words. I swim. This is how knowing and being become entangled. As feminist theorist and philosopher Karen Barad writes:

There is an important sense in which practices of knowing cannot be fully claimed as human practices, not simply because we use nonhuman elements in our practices but because knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another one. Practices of knowing and being are not isolated; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. (2007, p. 185, original emphasis)

¹ My use of 'waters' in the plural is a way to semantically convey their diversity.

Shaped by corporeal sensibility, such an embodied form of knowledge production sharply contrasts with colonial practices of surveying and silencing. It places bodies in communion and highlights the symbiosis between cultural and environmental biodiversity. It also accounts for the fact that knowledge is not always expressible, especially when acquired through emotional and sensorial interactions with waters. Rather, knowledge is inked and inscribed in matter: it is of flesh and blood. It is what is contained in each breaststroke I take on desiccated ground, in each free-diving excursion I make in dry creek beds. My “attempts to swim on dry land” enable me to acknowledge that perceiving environmental loss goes beyond words; it is tacit.

As such, Celan’s phrase also denotes the role attributed to imagination in lieu of – or, more appropriately, as – analysis in my work. Imagination makes totality impossible to conquer and control; it stretches a totality through the avoidance of essentialist and global claims. In an academic context, it reminds (and reassures) me: even the most inclusive research cannot pretend to present an exhaustive – let alone a complete or definite – picture of its sub/objects of study. It seems primordial to be reminded of the key philosophical implication of such unboundedness in a world governed by scientific-based models “claiming to catch the movement in the act and translate this in terms of dynamic or dynamised structures”² (Glissant, 1990, p. 187). My role is to accumulate attempts and to unveil them in a temporary and unstable synthesis-genesis. There is no end to my text: it will forever remain a transilient/transitory object which refuses to be bound or bind what it is scrutinising. Imagination scratches out the conclusion.

The words that I write are thus truly attempts – bound to remain tentative, in-becoming, imperfect, unfinished. They refuse to conglomerate into essay sections: such sections carry connotations of linearity, finality and purpose. Rather, as I swim, I conceive how those attempts arrange themselves on the page as mirages, as *fata morganas* – as visions. They are furtive, partial, oriented, and not necessarily connected with one another. In that sense, they are analogous to philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s “moments” (2004). Moments do not require transitions. They value and privilege instants over duration. They account/allow for rupture, disruption, fragmentation, disparity, unpredictability, discontinuity and continuity: they carry their own rhythms of the collision between past and future in their midst. Moments are also paused in time: my attempts are written, immobilised on paper. They denote times of particular significance; times open to challenge; times of hinges and articulations where radical alteration (can) occur.

Imagination enables me to bring together and dive into undulating and shimmering layers of waters. As complex layers of spatiotemporalities mingle and respond to one another, I imagine movements of connection, friction and disjunction in between these layers. I imagine what takes form there, in interstices. Juxtaposing endeavours do more than blurring and undermining boundaries between aqueous geoimaginaries (rendering them porous). The unforeseeable nature of the encounters that they generate suggests and/or fosters, alongside the elements placed in contact, the presence and development of a flexible and polymorphic ‘other’ space (a space of [my] others), that is, an in-between space of creative frictions, attractions and repulsions. In this space lies the possibility of hearing – that is, of (re)imagining – silenced voices. This space thus represents a materialisation of a disjointedness through which I can be alert to what is not being spoken out loud, through which I can recover some of the inaudible and the gagged. Discussing her book *Bluff Rock*, cultural scholar Katrina Schlunke summarises these different arguments as she writes of

² All translations from French sources within the essay are mine.

her hope “that a gap, a space of improvisation, will be found, where stories emerge that speak of how they have been produced but also evoke something more” (2005, p. 14). Here, she combines both the notion of an imagined, open totality, and the power of leaving/creating interstices – or gaps – where the more-than-textual can be heard. As captured by Celan’s phrase, imagining becomes an exercise in (applied) theoretics, an exercise required to (re)articulate the watery memories, ghosts, echoes and traces trickling through(out) colonised waterscapes and their records.

My “attempts to swim on dry land” are thus attempts to swim when there is not necessarily any physically palpable water left, where each breaststroke turns into a staggered breath in the dust, a gasp; where swimming happens in sound waves as much as in tidal ones. They are attempts to represent the unrepresentable: to signify the (ongoing) attempted ecocide promoted and carried out by a large portion of the settler imaginary to which I belong. As philosopher James Hatley writes:

the very attempt to memorialise the annihilated by giving them a body beyond their own within this poem or this essay would be a betrayal. Such a gesture would repress the very significance of the other’s vulnerability by acting as if the other’s nudity were somehow capable of even the most cursory translation, the most tentative appropriation, as if one could feel the pain of the other for her or him. (2000, p. 246)

I agree that vulnerability is precisely what must be protected. It is significant because it composes entanglements: it supports a form of knowledge production that requires openness and does not tolerate destructive, repressive, one-way exchanges. I do not give a (vocal) body to others’ pain and loss; I do not translate these – I base my approach on my own body. I speak of my own experience. I centre my words on my own body, on my “attempts to swim on dry land”. And if those attempts translate vulnerability, it is my own: treading on unceded Country³ is never an easy nor an anodyne act for a non-Indigenous person. And so, I keep swimming, because it highlights the ambiguity of my position. And so, I keep swimming, because the words I write are a performance and being performative represents a way to leave room for the unsaid and the unsayable (Denning, 2009). For suffering cannot be spoken or described; only hope, only presence, can (Glissant, 1969, p. 13).

With its length of 2,508 kms, the Murray River is the longest river in Australia. Due to an abundance of sustenance, its banks have been inhabited for over 40,000 years by a larger number of Aboriginal communities than elsewhere in the country (Berndt & Berndt, 1964; Murray, 1999; Weir, 2009). When European explorers stumbled upon the river in the 1820s,

³ ‘Country’ is a word used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to describe their traditional land (Dodson, 2013). My use of the term is non-proprietary. It is primarily ethical: it is my way to acknowledge the significance of the notion of Country in Australia and to respect the fact that Indigenous people use this word in preference to generic terms such as region or area, which are devoid of the connotations attached to Country. I also use the term to denote my own understanding of place in Australia: as a non-Indigenous person, I draw on this term, not to speak about Country, but to subjectively disengage from settler geographical conquest of Australia. Through this disengagement, my objective is to discuss the decolonising potentialities currently arising from the deconstruction of the settler legacy. Country is indeed a living entity where encounters between living things are recorded and, as a result, the “traumatic legacies of colonialism (are lying) silent in or addressing us through the continent’s ground” (Rose, 2004, p. 49, 163). Finally, this use is also poetic: Country is a place of creation, and only from such a place can this essay be written.

it represented an acceptable materialisation of their long-held dream: the physicality of the waters empirically substantiated the promise of riches and allowed for the projection of the squatters' expectations. As a result, this fertile region was promptly settled (Sim and Muller, 2004). An agricultural industry burgeoned. Water management –centred on irrigation needs – became indispensable to support this ever-expanding industry (*Living Murray Story*, 2011, p.vi) and the region was gradually transformed into what is colloquially known as the 'food basket' of Australia: a multibillion-dollar industry reliant on an assortment of engineered water-controlling structures.

This intensive agricultural development and expansion has had dire consequences for the region's environmental health. Forcibly entered into an intensive irrigation system, the Murray River is dotted with so many flow-altering structures that 40% of the time its waters are not able to reach its mouth (*Regulation Impact Statement*, 2012). As waters become increasingly scarce and contested, the impact of such practices is widespread: it affects Australians – and particularly Indigenous Australians – as negatively as the environment (Hemming and Rigney, 2011; Sinclair, 2001). The unsustainability of such ongoing colonisation of Australia's pulsative water ecologies, along with the need for managerial change, has been documented for decades (Norris et al, 2001; Gawne et al, 2011). As historian Michael Cathcart writes, this represents "White Australia's greatest folly" (2009, p. 7); a folly that has transformed a lush, fertile and densely populated homeland into a fragmented geographical space facing such an environmental crisis that the issue has been deemed a national priority (Weir, 2009, p. 40; Hammer, 2011; Murray, 1999).

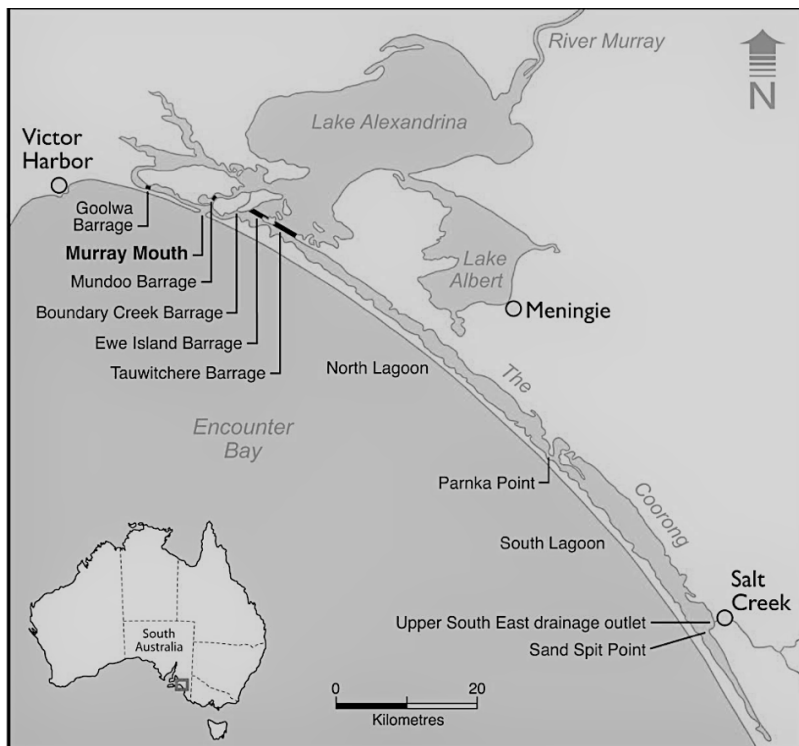


Figure 1 - Map of the Murray Mouth and its position in Australia (2012).

Because of their location at the very end of the river system in South Australia, the waters of the Murray Mouth are particularly damaged by this colonisation. Their health is principally determined by upstream water management and regulation. Such a geographically induced dependency means bearing the worst of the degradation, as upstream abuse combines with local abuse (*Regulation Impact Statement*, 2012: 13-16, 82; Strevens, 2006, p. 221-2). Despite their great diversity – as river, lake and lagoon waters stand alongside, and interact with the oceanic waters of the Great Australian Bight – the Murray Mouth’s waters thus remain particularly vulnerable to, and defenceless in the face of, mutating forms of colonialism.

Since the end of the Millennium Drought,⁴ the road to recovery has been slow and uneven. It has been seriously threatened by upstream states that regularly fail to hold up their end of the bargain when it comes to water extraction and redistribution. Beside this issue, the measures taken are also proving their limits: there is an ongoing exclusion of Aboriginal people despite their knowledge about these waters, as well as a misunderstanding of – and disrespect for – the relevance of this knowledge to natural resource management (Somerville, 2013, p. 7-8; Weir, 2009; Rose, 2004; Hattam et al, 2007, pp. 109-15). It seems that government agencies are still failing to move beyond a colonial frame of reference. New forms of settler colonialism continue to condition the overall vision for the Mouth’s waters; along with national ways of being around, and interacting with, these waters. It infinitely (re)iterates an insurmountable chiasmatic dissention between economy and ecology; between currencies and bodies.

My research addresses the need to deconstruct and move past these binary (re)iterations via its methodology. I call this methodology ‘liquid’ because it represents my attempt to craft a framework of academic deconstruction based on the textual translation (or the theoretical application) of watery movements – of flows and resonances, of evaporation and precipitation.⁵ Because, as philosopher Gaston Bachelard states: “(l)iquidity is a principle of language; the language must be swollen with waters” (1942, p. 258). My words translate “attempts to swim on dry land”: they speak of the harsh dialectics of drought and desertification, and yet, water shapes them as they crisscross pages and landscapes. I write in waves, to paraphrase philosopher and author Édouard Glissant (1990, p. 60). In this essay, I discuss some of those “attempts to swim on dry land”. And if those attempts are deeply personal, it is because as anthropologist Michael Jackson summarises, “(t)elling a story about one’s experience effectively substitutes words for the world. Words are more accessible and manageable than the world” (1998, p. 122).

Attempt 1: The Context and the Concept

I grew up near water, in between a stream and a river, next to ponds and wells, close to abandoned mills and washing places. My entire village used to kneel beside the running water with their notched wooden boards, as if in prayer. With my brother and cousins, we fished for gold, tadpoles, water spiders and crayfish so small you had to be a kid to spot them. We lived in water. I do not remember learning how to swim. It seems I always knew.

⁴ This drought lasted for over a decade (1996–2011) and led to the near death of the entire river system (Weir, 2009).

⁵ I use these physical and metaphorical movements of waters in an attempt - even if imperfect - to decentre the hegemonic voice of the (non-Indigenous, human) researcher and challenge the implicit crystallisation of academic writing within the “epistemic violence” of an ethno- and anthropocentric system of representation (Spivak, 1988).

We had a swinging rope tied to a tree from which we could jump into the middle of the river. We could fly for an instant. Our favourite game probably was the building of dams. We piled up stones and caulked the breaches with green algae that flowered white in late spring. Our aim was to create rapids so that we could flow down faster on our body boards: we wanted to control and shape water for our own enjoyment. Water transformed us into little almighty gods in the southwest of France.

Everywhere in the world, humankind replicates these childish games. We westerners are the product of our cultures. We extract water's divine essence and take it for ourselves. Our sour tendencies of geographical expansionism mean that it no longer matters where we stand: "(t)he West is not in the west. It is not a place; it is a project" (Glissant, 1981, p. 12 n.1). We dam, we cruise, we drill and mine; we pollute, we canalise, we desalinate and frack; and we have replicated these activities on a scale so large that it spreads across the globe. We are forever colonising waters.

From the paradisiac and pristine scenery of holiday postcards through to the devastated landscapes of post-tsunami news reports, whether in bodies, bottles or billabongs, water is everywhere we look and touch. Counter-intuitively though, experts have repeatedly stressed that "(t)he world is running out of water" (Barlow et al., 2008). It is therefore unsurprising that shifting our understanding, and subsequent use, of water has been described as one of the biggest – and most pressing – challenges of our time (Barlow, 2009; Weir, 2009).

Yet, destructive habits perdure as new forms of settler colonialism continue to condition the overall vision for Lower Murray Country. Its waters remain subjected to our reductive and narrow conceptualisations: an abstract number of gigalitres, a mute and uprooted natural resource deprived of agency; a commodity. Transformed into a descending line on a graph, these waters only speak via sterile series of paper trails. They are silenced. Their bodies are dismembered.⁶ Weirs, pipes, and dams constrict and clot their flows. These negated bodies become nobodies: they solely exist based on their value in a money-governed system, rather than as distinct (and yet interconnected) physical entities. Reducing bodies to data means that corporeality becomes merchandise; a currency that can be manipulated, traded, and eventually exhausted.

Sound philosopher Fran Dyson denounces this corporatisation of corporeality on a larger scale and argues that data proves insufficient – and even inadequate – when it comes to comprehending and discussing eco-crises:

the word 'data' seems too simple, too fragile, too myopic to provide a foundation that could carry the weight and the gravity of the situation. 'Data' can be contested, re-presented, negotiated in a way that leaves the magnitude of the global crisis held within the humanised sphere of imaginable and knowable facts, and as such, can be hidden within or obscured by discourse. (2014, p. 148)

⁶ This concept of dismemberment links to philosopher and spatial historian Paul Carter's work on memory. Memory is comprehended as a material process that consists of putting scattered pieces back together. These different pieces are dis-membered, until memory re-members them (2004, pp 10-11). Dismembering then also implies trying to forget and precipitate into oblivion through physical action.

Philosopher Timothy Morton's notion of "hyperobject" echoes this inadequacy (2013). Hyperobjects are entities of such magnitude and scale that they cannot be grasped in their entirety. Viscous and global, they infiltrate and permeate everything everywhere and are perceived through a myriad of seemingly disconnected manifestations, rather than as all-encompassing phenomena. As such, the intangibility of hyperobjects defies – and mostly defeats – imagination. Yet, imagination does not have to go far to feed off manifestations of these hyperobjects. Dyson articulates the Earth's reaction – the increasingly more frequent natural 'disasters' punctuating and composing our routine – as a "voluminous response to the quiet conjectures of data". She continues and nuances: "(t)his is not a 'response', *per se* – there is no dialogue here" (2014, p. 149).

Cyclones, typhoons, floods and eroding coastal areas present themselves through volume. Waters pound and crash whatever lies in their way. They appear as loud scenes of madness on the news reports bringing them to my TV screen. They scar bodies, leaving palpable marks of destruction in their wake. In Lower Murray Country, though, this "voluminous" testimony to the "quiet conjectures of data" speaks from the opposite end of the spectrum. The issues arise from the lack of sonic volume; the expansive silence of places where waters used to flow, or the muted, salty shriek of dried dampness under the soles of my feet. Destruction feels more insidious when it does not yell through torn cliffs and house ceilings; but murmurs and casts over Country a quietness that sounds closer to a form of despair than to the end of the world as pictured in apocalyptic movies. When in Lower Murray Country, nobody is subjected to the roars of overabundant watery presence. I am reminded of psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's description of the devastating impact of colonisation on his Caribbean homeland:

Hostile nature, obstinate and fundamentally rebellious, is in fact represented in the colonies by the bush, by mosquitoes, natives and fever, and colonisation is a success when all this undocile nature has finally been tamed. Railways across the bush, the draining of swamps and a native population which is nonexistent politically and economically are in fact one and the same thing. (1963, p. 201)

The scenario of this particular colonial encounter is easily transposable to most – if not all – settler countries. While varying immensely in the details, each act of colonisation tailors the same overall outcome on whom or what it colonises. As Fanon hints, the colonial encounter aims to force what it touches, what is different and does not bend to its rules, into non-existence: loss is created. This loss is generally profound and severe. It is everywhere: there is a loss of biodiversity, of emplaced knowledges and relationships, of language, of connectivity, of plurality. It is both physical and metaphorical. In Lower Murray Country, this loss pretends to be invisible: missing species, wind erosion and jetties protruding on land are left there to bear witness to the colonisation of the waters. Their flow released based on an agricultural calendar, these waters feed crops. Flood markers are now scattered across the landscapes. They record the presence of waters that are no longer there. Memories of watery ghosts stagnate in between the gradients. These flood markers act as colonial signposts which infinitely (re)iterate an insurmountable chiasmatic dissention between economy and ecology; between currencies and bodies.

But as I stare at those markers, I do not want to hear yet another story of environmental doom and despair. Rather, I want to focus on the implications of philosopher Michel Serres's rhetorical, optimistic query: "(w)hat if the present crisis in turn sounded the end of the economy's exclusive reign?" (2014, p. 23). "Sounded" is a thoroughly appropriate term:

at a time of unprecedented environmental degradation, sound⁷ is often disregarded when it comes to ecocriticism – maybe because we take it for granted: sound reaches us without requiring any effort on our part. Yet, as it speaks to and beyond the static silence of literary and visual arts (including cartography), sound suggests other ways to explore and represent waters, as well as human and more-than-human relationships with these waters. Through sound, I can delve within data to extract and involve bodies – I can give primacy to the senses in a bid to decorporatise corporeality.

I swim. Travelling from micro to macro, from sky to earth, from me to (my) others, I articulate and play with the vulnerable interface between (wet) theories and the (dry) realities of the Murray Mouth's acoustic textures. I link physicalities and concepts, endless transforming (collapsing) one into the other. Such an approach rests on Lefebvre, who argues: “[i]nstead of going from concrete to abstract, one starts with full consciousness of the abstract in order to arrive at the concrete” (2004, p. 5). Through listening to sound and forms of sonority, this work thus stands in defence of abstraction, of imagination, of theory. I decorporatise to (re)conceptualise corporeality – or more precisely, I recorporealise the conceptual in the sensory. For how else are we to find a way to transcend and rebuild from the ruins of the present and the ashes of irreversible environmental degradation? We need this recorporealisation because we need to keep trying to swim on dry land. Only through those attempts can we learn how to listen to (or hear again) the polyphony of wet ontologies hidden behind the colonial veil of blue-green algae blooms, salt and the staccato pounding of the dredgers working hard to keep the Murray Mouth open.

Attempt 2: In the *Toute-eau*

This attempt is drenched in imaginary aerial waters. After yet another summer of catastrophic bushfires and below-average rainfall, I long for a storm. I need to be reminded of the sound of water drops tapping against my tin roof. They are an infinitude of ‘G’days!’ Such greetings would calm me down, something that the droplets of perspiration running along my back as I write these words simply cannot do. I dive into the pages of notes I have been taken over the years and unearth *Prayer for the Rain*, a piece composed over fifty years ago by Miriam Hyde (1970). Its lyrics speak of the land’s thirstiness, of dead dehydrated fauna and “pulverised earth”. They implore the rain to “oh come/ come soon!” Over five decades ago, already, waters were a thing of prayers rather than of reality. The quest for waters can no longer be confined to the ground. Explorers have long been and gone. Their desiccated faces are imprinted on the clouds. I imagine them smiling as rain pours: rivers will flow and run again; they will flood the veins of Australia and Australians. Praying for waters becomes a form of pataphysics. It conducts and dictates behaviours. (It also makes for lovely sounding, augmented chords.) Because if it does not happen on the ground, it must eventually happen above. Rivers in the sky must loudly compensate for the silence of rivers on the ground. They will drop, reconnecting dry patches, creating one giant puddle after the other. The equilibrium is restored; the equilibrium is kept, or, as chemist Antoine Lavoisier so eloquently stated that it has become an idiom in French: “in nature, nothing is created, nothing is lost, everything changes” (1789, pp. 140-141). Waters flow in between these lines. “(N)othing is created, nothing is lost, everything changes.” Because the sky

⁷ Sound is used in a general sense, as everything and anything that is audible and belongs to the sonic realm—including musical sound. Throughout this essay, I think about sound, as much as with and through sound, to delve into the entanglements between humans and more-than-humans. As such, my understanding and use of the term “sound” reflects an acoustic turn that connects with the concepts and approaches discussed in Bernd Herzogenrath’s edited volume *Sonic Thinking* (2017).

reaches other horizons. The rain must come from elsewhere. Waters run and circulate through Country; they converge and diverge, in a sinuous calligraphy of bodies meandering over and retracting from the land. Their flows are inherently rhythmic: etymologically, rhythm means flowing, moving in time.⁸ Waters have and are rhythms; and they carry these rhythms onto Country, giving it a tempo.

This attempt is my chant of and for the waters of Lower Murray Country. This chant is born in the Glissantian *Tout-monde*. I hear its echoes within the waters of Lower Murray Country. It is where (my) *Toute-eau*⁹ finds its roots and routes. Glissant explains:

I call Tout-monde our universe as it changes and persists while exchanging; and at the same time, the 'vision' that we have of it. The totality-world in its physical diversity and in the representations that it inspires us: how could we sing, speak and work in pain from our place alone, without diving into the imaginary of this totality. (1997, p. 176)

Realities and imaginaries are intertwined. They flow into each other, while simultaneously receiving each other within their own flows, in an endless, constantly self-actualising loop. One does not (cannot) exist without the other. The waters contained in my *Toute-eau* illustrate the same principles as Glissant's *Tout-monde*. *Toute-eau* is our watery environments as we hear (feel) them and imagine them. It is our watery environments as they fill and surround us. I swim. *Toute-eau* is a *Tout-monde* of waters; a *Tout-monde* where waters inundate bodies and swirl them (with)in their sonic flows. It is an imaginary realm of creativity that emerges from the forever-expanding totality of all waters, in both space and time. I swim. My attempts open totality: they sketch a totality (never totalising) that is boundless. I can only draw near it, but never reach it.¹⁰ I continue swimming.

This world I imagine and inhabit, though, somewhat diverges from the *Tout-monde*. Consonants are softened as an 'e' is added to Glissant's 'tout'. While the noun 'world' is masculine, 'water' indeed belongs to the feminine realm in French. I am pleased about this. If I echo Glissant (if I repeat myself¹¹), it is *au féminin* (in the feminine form). I grow out of the *Tout-monde*, as much as I grow against it. I am not Glissant, and I cannot parrot his words without making them mine; without integrating them within my own and transforming them in the process – as much as each of them changes me. For I am a woman, and that fact should be stated: it bends every sound I hear and shapes every word I write.

⁸ From the Greek *ρυθμός* and the Latin *rhythmus*.

⁹ I decided to coin and use the term in French so that my reference to the Glissantian *Tout-monde* never fades away as I progress through my attempt and build on this term. *Toute-eau* also functions because it is ambiguous and contains a dual translation that elegantly reflects the unity-diversity of waters: 'Whole-water', which brings forth the unity to be found in waters, and 'All-water', which accentuates their diversity.

¹⁰ Glissant writes: "[t]otality is not what we said the universal was. It is the finite and realised quantity of the infinite detail of the real" (1997, p. 192).

¹¹ Attempts are inevitably characterised by repetition: how else could they forever tend towards expressing a totality? Repetition is excess – it represents an excessive proposition which enables me to accumulate meanings, and thus to capture the endless, boundless nature of a quest for totality. Repetition also represents a protective mechanism. I swim. I repeat myself, constantly. I repeat myself, but every time I repeat myself, I add a layer of meaning to what I am saying, slightly shifting it, making it more complex and consequently impossible to appropriate or reduce. Along with poetics, I thus use repetition as a tool of (academic) freedom and decoloniality.

*Divergent confluences
Running towards one another
Avoiding
And dissolving into the other
Ad libitum*

The *Toute-eau* is turbulence.¹² Waters generate whirlpools that rise against linearity – they stand as a defence against the many gaps of the colonial narrative. My discourse circles from their abyssal depth to their surface. It adds to its core with every passage. Time no longer matters. For how could there be a beginning if there is no end to the transformations that are taking place? I am writing a Möbius strip of text.

But watery spaces also speak for themselves. They must – or this text would not exist; it could not come to life. As philosopher Jacques Derrida writes: “(m)ore than one, I beg your pardon, it is always necessary to be more than one in order to speak, several voices are necessary for that” (1993, p. 15). Alone, one voice cannot speak; it cannot say anything. And Serres injuncts: “(o)ur voice smothered the world’s. We must hear its voice. Let us open our ears” (2014, p. 42). Atmospheric rivers stretch for thousands of kms; they account for over 90% of the global water vapour transport. They travel from the tropics, and drench coasts from North America to Europe. They pour and scream in deluge over the “quiet conjectures of data” produced about Lower Murray Country’s lack of waters. Uprooting floods cry for bygone nourishing heavy rainfalls. Extreme precipitation is occurring at an increased rate. Rhythms are bolting. Cycles are disturbed. North America receives the water that disappears before reaching the Murray Mouth. Pacific islands sink while Lower Murray Country dies of thirst.

Five barrages enclose the mouth of the Murray River. Their names are: Goolwa, Mundoo, Boundary Creek, Ewe Island and Tauwitthere. A total of sixty gates dots these five barrages. On average – and more often than is sustainable – barely any are open. When they are, though, beautifully organised and equidistant waves flow through. Clearly delimited by concrete and metal bars, their volume is engineered: from pianissimo to fortissimo at the push of a button which conducts the waters, day and night, night and day. The changes in the rhythmic character of these waters alter their metrical nature. Their music becomes measured, fine-tuned and controlled to suit the ongoing performance of the colonial act of ‘discovery’. The unending repetition of such a performance is not without physical consequences: lived terrains are d(r)ying. Such a design is effectively turning Australia into the silent continent that settlers thought it was. For it is easier to speak over silenced entities – it does not require yelling. There is a reservoir in the Barossa and if I whisper to the giant concrete wall on one side of the dam, I can be heard at the other. It holds its waters well – they behave. I feel, rather than hear, the detonating calm of their stagnant surfaces. Barely any water gushes through the Murray Mouth. Wind dominates these engineered environments. It bites my ears ferociously. Muted bodies of waters become ill bodies. Eulogies are composed – eerie echoes resonate and fill the void (e.g., Richard Coates Quintet, 2009). As author and philosopher Aldous Huxley states in his well-known

¹² Turbulence has its aesthetics: the world is *Chaos-monde*. Glissant writes: “I call *Chaos-world* the current collision of so many cultures which set each other ablaze, repeal each other, disappear and yet persist, fall asleep or transform, slowly or at lightning speed: these slivers, these bursts whose principle and economics we have not started to understand, and whose impulse we cannot foresee” (1997, p. 22).

aphorism: “(a)fter silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music” (1931).

Attempt 3: Of Echoes and Rhythms

The constant back-and-forth rhythm of tidal movements lingers in these echoes. The sound of waves is eternally present, even if all else falls silent: waves pound and lap and lick the shores and the horizon tirelessly. Boundaries melt under their restless caress. In their refrain, they recite tales of another dimension: they murmur of a suspended immensity where the separation between water, earth, and sky fades away. Their porosity is audible. They blur segmentations, both conceptually and physically, and highlight the porous nature of arbitrary delimitations.

In the Coorong, these sonic traces write themselves on Country. They scarify bodies with salt. I hear this salt when I walk on crushed shells: if I was to glue them back together and bring them to my ear, maybe I could still hear the whisper of the waves that they used to contain – the physiological structures of tympana and seashells are so similar: conch connects with *concha*, ocean connects with river, water connects with dirt, humans connect with more-than-humans. Bodies fuse in the sound of waves. This cartography of sound becomes a chorography of Country. It encapsulates and prefigures the topography of this incomplete, frustrated estuary; it echoes the estuary’s single line of shore deposit. Barrages alter its morphology, dredgers punctuate its music: this estuary can no longer be the highly dynamic and mobile area that it used to be. Its desire to move (escape) and open elsewhere, as visible in its migration of nearly 2 km since the 1830s, is now denied. The Mouth can no longer speak. In 1981, it closed for the first time in recorded history. Actions were taken to force it to open again. For nearly two decades, it has been threatening to close again but for the continuous staccato intervention of dredgers.¹³ How to translate such rhythmic disfigurements?

Bachelard writes:

Visual art needs to develop from reflections, music needs to develop from echoes. It is by imitating that we create. We believe that we are following ‘the real’, and we translate it humanly. (1942, p. 259).

As the rhythms of waters are humanly translated, musical creation is redefined as a form of recuperative and restorative collaboration whose aim is to (re)compose¹⁴ the waters of Lower Murray Country through rhythmic accumulations and proliferations of ontological significance, as both the environment and its traditional custodians contribute to its formation.¹⁵ These compositions act as records of change. They retrieve and revisit shards of histories buried in the waters; and translate them acoustically to render them audible again—to open them to interpretation.

¹³ Dredging first started in October 2002 and ran until December 2010. It then started again in January 2015, in response to concerns that the mouth had been “constricted” since 2013.

¹⁴ I use the term (re)compose to convey that this process happens on a space which is not empty but has already been carefully composed over many thousands of years.

¹⁵ See for instance the work of composers Barry Conyngham (2009), Dave Dallwitz (1976) and Becky Llewellyn (1998).

Running deep, waters carry the memories of Country. To paraphrase poet and playwright Derek Walcott: they *are* history (2014, pp. 137-139). Author Toni Morrison writes:

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. (1995, p. 99)

Waters are witnesses. Saturated with unarticulated and temporally disparate memories, they struggle against colonial limitations. Sometimes, this saturation can no longer be contained: the memories that they carry burst out of their colonial bonds and scream across the land. 1956. Queensland's pouring rain gallops down watercourses. Riverine regions go underwater; South Australia is no exception. 1956. Author Colin Thiele narrates:

It all began with rumours and stories. Far away in the eastern mountains of Australia, thousands of kilometres up the tributaries of the Murray and the Murrumbidgee and the Darling, it had been pouring with rain. Gutters were turning into drains, and drains were becoming creeks, and creeks were becoming rivers. There was water cascading down the steep mountain streams, water pouring from cliffs and canyons, water raging white and angry in the gorges. And it was all making for the plains where sooner or later it had to find its way into the Murray. (2002, p. 100-1)

1956. Upstream, downstream, towns are submerged. The river does not remain tucked in its bed. In places, it goes over 100 km away from its usual course. For over 7 months, it keeps screaming, refusing to go back to its bed. Pubs are open, though: boats are tied to the balconies of the second floor. Fish swim above the ground floor. Each current compresses and extends spatiotemporal distances. Floods regurgitate everything simultaneously and, as the waters retreat, everything is taken back within their folds. These transformative back-and-forth movements multiply sonic meanings: environments and sonorities that have been muted by the colonial racket are sounded and resounded, that is, endlessly revisited and (re)interpreted.

The physicality of these waters connects memory and body. Imagining and feeling coagulate together: I (re)embody these waters within my own bodily sensibilities. My breathing is cyclical; it is timed with the passage of each row of waves, each tide. What my body perceives and transcribes is a continuous reverberation of memories across a space-time continuum shattered by watery eruption. As I use my body to go past the mechanical rhythms that have obliterated and overwritten the organic ones, I engage in what Lefebvre defines as "rhythmanalysis": a mode of research where rhythm is not simply reduced to the ob/subject of analysis, but is also turned into a mode and a tool of analysis (2004, p. xii, 3).

Such a rhythmic, body-based approach to analysis resonates with Serres, who argues that the body is the mediator between language and the sounds of the Earth (1985). It is through the body that sound can first be apprehended and then emerge as language – be translated into language. Writing a rhythmanalysis becomes analogous to writing memoirs. The rhythmic memory of waters guides the writing hand. It gives it its tone. In that respect, rhythmanalysis joins with an ethics of remembering: it gives voice to an emotional ecology

which focuses on perception to acknowledge and (re)invent rhythms within and beyond arrhythmic degradation. My body responds to its duty: the past is never forgotten, but constantly and selectively – that is, subjectively – (re)interpreted. Such an endeavour responds to the need to recognise and celebrate the plural, diverse and polyphonic existence of waterscapes, and relationships with these waterscapes.

Attempt 4: Swimming on Dry Land

If, as philosopher Pierre-Jean Labarrière writes, “at the beginning is relation” (1983, p. 124), it is equally true that at the beginning is also water, it “precedes every form and sustains every creation” (Eliade, 1991, p. 151). Without waters, there is no possible relation; there is no life. Waters make and define relations – both imaginarily and physically. Depending on where we stand, waters appear as an element, an entity, a space. They belong to a fluid category, breaking disciplinary boundaries and earthly dykes alike. They make separate worlds – such as ‘academia’ and ‘Country’ – porous. Waters are indeed prime zones of contacts and transformations; they favour movements and exchanges: colonisation starts with, and happens through, them. In the history of European expansionism worldwide, there is an abundance of stories relating how Indigenous peoples helped the newcomers locate water so that they could survive; and describing how the ‘taming’ of this water played an instrumental role in the success of their settlement (Dunlap, 1999).

For waters are not always easy to locate when perception is deterred by set ideas. In roots, underground, in seasonal springs and billabongs, they were at first invisible to explorers in Australia. The colonial eyes were yet to adjust. The colonial ears did not fare much better. The soundscape of the Murray Mouth did not exist (it was silence): the first European boat crews in the vicinity repeatedly missed it. Captain Matthew Flinders sailed past aboard the *Investigator*. He did not chart it as he did not see it, let alone hear it. Neither did fellow explorer Nicolas Baudin when he also sailed past aboard the *Géographe*. These two legendary figures, tasked with (and now best known for) charting Australian coasts, both failed to identify an estuary. It was not by lack of proximity to it. In April 1802, both men met and shared the data that they had gathered from their respective scientific surveying. Their meeting was peaceful, despite the war raging between their two nations. Flinders named the place where they crossed paths Encounter Bay. It is less than thirty kms away from the Murray Mouth.

During his trip, Flinders also ‘discovered’ Kangaroo Island, an unpopulated island¹⁶ located just off the coast from Encounter Bay. Whalers and sealers were already using this place, which provided an ideal location to launch their expeditions. These whalers and sealers did not know about the river either. They knew about the Coorong though, and encounters continued to occur there. These encounters were far from being as pleasant as the polite exchange of information between Flinders and Baudin. The silence of the ‘undiscovered’ Murray Mouth rapidly filled with gunshots and blood-curdling screams. Whalers and sealers came ashore to kidnap women from the local Ngarrindjeri Nation and took them to their base on Kangaroo Island, where they were already holding kidnapped Tasmanian women. One of them drowned while attempting to swim back home, as if forced into a macabre colonial parody of the Ngarrindjeri story of Ngurunderi and his two wives (see South Australian Museum, 1989).

¹⁶ See Taylor (2015) for discussion of the indigenous inhabitation of Kangaroo Island in previous epochs.

By fostering the meeting of sounds from disparate times and spaces, sound artists compose (or highlight) infinite resonances between places, times and entities – between vocal bodies (Ladd, 2000). Geographically distant worlds and cultures collide and merge sonically. Through music, connective and cumulative polyphonies can be brought to the fore and heard. Such site-specific compositions exemplify how noise is never simply noisy, but forms part of a relational complex of sounds, each with a meaning and an impact on its surroundings. Sounds evolve in parallel, and what affects one sound affects all the others. This represents a sonic materialisation of the interconnectedness of all elements – destructive separations fade away in this language that constantly remake waters (and our relationships to waters) by re-writing encounters.

The mass killing of fish around Menindee in early 2019 (Garcia, 2019; Jackson & Head, 2020) echoes the 20,000 km² dead zone at the Mouth of the Mississippi in mid-2019 (Bruckner, 2019). Both are record-breaking and both are due to a lack of oxygen: not enough precipitation in the first case, and too much in the second, as fertilisers and pesticides flooded in mass down the monstrous river.

Everything is contained everywhere. Every drop of water contains the imprint of others in its composition; and what impacts it radiates too. Parenthetical sounds – sounds that have, until recently, been ignored by the colonial imaginary – (re)emerge: they pass through the body and acquire (become) meaning (Serres, 1985). I think of Glissant, who articulates parentheses as breathing spaces (1969: 50): these sounds evoke the breath of waters. Their progressive (re)inclusion into the score of Country prefigures the listeners' auditory (re)integration within their sonic environments. By offering listeners another way of perceiving what surrounds them, sound art also presents them with another way of living with(in) their watery environments.

Sound artists have started collaborating with scientists.¹⁷ Such exchanges bear witness to the mutual feeling that there is a need to find other ways to express – that is, to record and convey – a message (an urgency) that is not being heard; to capture a resurrected water-based spatiality that is, once again, seen as defining the shape of the future on this blue planet: the *Toute-eau* speaks. It speaks of the interdependency of cultural and environmental biodiversity.

Under the impulse of Ngarrindjeri Elder Major 'Uncle Moogy' Sumner, *Ringbalin* has been revived. It aims to regenerate and revitalise the waters and peoples of the Murray River. For this purpose, dancers and musicians perform traditional songs and dances as they journey along the river down Country. The revival of this ancestral river ceremony in 2010 marked the end of the Millennium Drought. Dancers stomped the ground, musicians made the air vibrate and then, rain fell. I am here for it in 2017.

Rain falls again. Clapsticks ring hard against my ears. I forget whether they beat with the dancers' feet or the lapping waters behind them. This is where Ngurunderi crossed over. Sumner speaks and I hear him loud and clear: as people nurture Country, Country nurtures them. Ecological and socio-cultural worlds collide in reciprocal and entangled processes of care. Ill bodies have caretakers. It is as such that the Ngarrindjeri Nation articulates "feeling-as-knowing" (Bell, 1998, pp. 219-25). Towards the end of the ceremony, the audience is invited to take part in the performance. Men are taught to perform the kangaroo dance, women the emu. Sumner reiterates that we are all living together on

¹⁷ See for instance the work of composers John Luther Adams (2014) and Matthew Dewey (2013).

Country and that, as such, we must care for it together as well. We dance together on the sand. We stay close to each other to repel the wind. There are people of all ages: each moves how they can. Toddlers and elderly people are slower; teenagers do not seem to be able to stop jumping. We all show (Country) we care in our own way. There is an intrinsic inclusiveness in a rhythmic (body-based) approach to environmental care.

Attempt 5: A Coda

It is difficult to conclude, because the conclusion that I attempt to compose keeps flowing with the shifting music of waters. It rises with melted icecaps, as much as it retreats in drought. Between absence and overabundance, how am I to find the appropriate melody to textually materialise infinite and humid sonic geographies? I swim. I write of/from the *Toute-Eau*.

Sound extends beyond rationality. Ephemeral, unstable, performed, it enacts plural realities. Differences simultaneously and endlessly collapse, while at the same time, an irreducible and tangled diversity emerges from former absolutes. Sound, as constant change; sound, in all its nuanced savagery and excess, generates an ethics of permanent making over restoration. It offers an avenue to hear and generate construing and actualising movements of remembrance and creation that orchestrate sonic interstices for imagining sustainable futures, lying in wait, somewhere within waters. It dives into what author Patrick Chamoiseau has qualified as “the unthinkable” (2015, p. 323). The unthinkable does not mean that it cannot happen; it simply reflects the fact that it is impossible to foresee the outcomes of exchanges. As Glissant writes: “(b)ut the Earth is different for each and every one. There are so many Earths: the totality comes (rather than from their sum) from their as-yet-to-be realised relationality. We cannot conclude” (1969, p. 90). Listening to sound provides me with a sphere where I can move towards decoloniality; a sphere where I can move beyond the limitations of my mythological framework and imagine – or perhaps rediscover – watery futures beyond apocalyptic predictions. Glissant writes:

If you find the solution difficult, even impractical, do not go instantaneously yelling that it is wrong. Don't use the real to justify your shortages. Instead realise your dreams to deserve your reality. (ibid, p. 245).

Transformation assuredly begins in imagination: it is there, in imagination, that is nested the ability (the power) to shift mentalities and behaviours. Wet ontologies are (still) audible in Australia, if only we persist in our attempts to swim on dry land. Or, as author Alphonse de Lamartine states, “(t)he real is narrow, the possible is unlimited” (1860, p. 80).

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