



SIGNS OF WATER: COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON WATER, RESPONSIBILITY, AND HOPE

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II. FORMATIONS: Water as LifeBlood



Photo courtesy Robert Boschman

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Introduction

The water being shut off happens in the present moment, but addressing the shutoff means addressing a longer history that has been silenced in the process of re-vitalizing the city: Detroit's trauma is rooted in the past.

—C.R. Grimmer, Chapter 3

There is a long history of cultural disruption here. Problems seen today stem from imposed societal structures that replaced fundamental ways of being and knowing. Taking land from the people and taking people from the land are a pervasive theme and reality.

—Denise L. Di Santo, Chapter 4

When the fish cease to exist, the people also cease to exist.

—Marcella LaFever, Shirley Hardman, and Pearl Penner, Chapter 5

In the preceding chapter, Michaela Keck writes, “Wherever he swims, [Roger] Deakin carries out the central idea of *Common Ground* to speak up in creative ways for the distinctiveness, particularity, and heterogeneity of local, commonplace spaces as cultural and natural landscapes.” As Deakin’s political activism is one with his swimming in practice, and as Keck’s chapter itself transitions from theory to physical action, C.R. Grimmer’s analysis of the water shutoffs in Detroit, Michigan deals with the very real political complexities of water in the urbanized commons. Grimmer takes up water as a common right through not only recent histories in Detroit and Flint, but also a disparate pair of works that appeared at roughly the same time: Jim Jarmusch’s *Only Lovers Left Alive* and Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*. In the context of these two widely acclaimed works of art, Grimmer juxtaposes the formative experiences of Flint and Detroit residents in relation to water and access to water—this in the additional

historical frame in which 17,000 residents had lost access to water in their homes for delinquent water bills (p. 65). As is found in the preceding chapters, Grimmer argues against the convenient corporate lie that water can be “coded as a neutral life source” (p. 64).

Denise L. Di Santo also pushes against this misrepresentation of water as neutral and pure and a matter of choice, not of necessity, arguing instead that water is lifeblood. She too focuses on drinking water and access to water within the context of cultural and historical continuities, especially in the Tucson Basin and the Athabasca River Basin. Across Canada and the U.S., with specific attention paid to northern Alberta and Arizona as well as the Pacific northwest, Di Santo outlines how “Indigenous communities have found themselves on the frontlines to protect water and land, their very means of existence, since the arrival of early settlers. Despite regulation and protective guidelines to manage water, decisions that benefit the economy fail to account for how they adversely affect the environment—the very foundation of all human economies. There is a lack of accounting and accountability for the costs ultimately borne by local communities. It is time to change our relationship with water” (p. 86).

This call for change in the relationship between human community and water is powerfully echoed in the third and final chapter in this section. Here Marcella LaFever, Shirley Hardman, and Pearl Penner contribute important and original work as scholars and curators. In carefully documenting the voices of the Stó:lō peoples and other First Nations along the Fraser River who appeared before the 2012 Cohen Commission of Inquiry into the Decline of Sockeye Salmon in the Fraser River, these writers perform an invaluable service. They use the term “lifeblood” twice in their chapter: once to describe the Fraser River from the perspective of the Indigenous peoples who have lived in relation to it since time immemorial; and once to call on non-Indigenous Canadians to engage in a different kind of listening “to stories that express the values that are the lifeblood for Indigenous communities when engaging in business” (p. 140).

—Robert Boschman and Sonya Jakubec, editors