Liquidscapes of the City

Alex Wafer
Andrea Pavoni

The cistern contains, the fountain overflows.
William Blake, Proverbs of Hell

Yesterday, there was water running down the crooked and pot-holed path that cuts through the warren of small shacks, connecting the residents of Kya Sands informal settlement, Johannesburg, to a suburban tarred road – the only way into and out of the informal settlement. It was running because a communal tap, put in by the municipality so that residents have some rudimentary access to clean water, had broken. Possibly it had broken yesterday, possibly it had broken weeks ago. There is always water running down the path, creating a little stream of fetid water, over which residents must gingerly step, from which stray dogs drink, and from which mothers have to stop their children splashing. Several weeks ago, someone from the mayor's office had berated the local community for the constant breaking of taps, threatening them with the removal of the tap, letting slip that as much as 40% of municipal water is lost through broken infrastructures throughout the city. We are in the middle of a drought; and residents of the city at large have been told to expect water restrictions soon. By the end of the long dry winter this little path will be running like a raging river as the afternoon storms burst the banks of the nearby perennial river, on the banks of which the little settlement is located. Rain will leak into the gaps in the informal structures, flow under doorways, and drip through roofs of old corrugate steel. Last week the municipality tried to evict some of the shack-dwellers who live close to the river flood-plain, using violence and intimidation to do so. There is water everywhere, a resident complained, except where it is supposed to be.

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Cities are not born out of a clear demarcation between land and water. It was out of a more ambiguous formation, the *wetland*, 'between rivers' (*μέσος*, *mésos* + ποταμός, *potamós*), that ancient settlements did emerge: no separation between the dry and the wet, but a diffuse *wetness*, a seasonal rhythm of flows and overflows where the flood was not an unexpected and damaging boundary-crossing event, but the ordinary pulsation of a fertile land-water interaction. In this literally murky existence, James Scott writes, 'the work of civilization, or more precisely the state . . . consist[ed] in the elimination of mud and its replacement by its purer constituents, land and water'.[1] Yet this opera-

Alex Wafer is senior lecturer in the School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. His research work explores the relationship between the everyday materiality of the city and forms of subjectivity.
alex.wafer@wits.ac.za

Andrea Pavoni is post-doctoral fellow at DINAMIA'CET, Centre for Socioeconomic and Territorial Studies, at the University Institute of Lisbon. His research explores the relation between materiality, normativity and the urban.

andrea.pavoni@iscte-iul.pt

1 James Scott. *Against the grain: a deep history of the earliest states*. Yale University Press, 2017, 56; 'Beautified, ordered,

tion is never fully completed, the demarcation never fully accomplished, the excess never fully tamed.

Attending to this overflowing reality does not only mean to think the city as liquid, as itself a set of flows. We are not proposing flow and overflow as metaphors for the city understood as an elusive assemblage of fluid networks (although we recognise some useful and productive attempts to do just that).[2] Rather, we want to think about the materiality of the city as fundamentally a constellation of actual liquid flows, blockages and overflows. While there is of course a politics about access to water, there are also material everyday worlds in which liquid metabolisms are made possible, durable and even the subject of cultural performance. A broken tap in Kya Sands might indeed be the material manifestation of networks of power and capital and subjectivity. The water running down the rutted path may be a condition around which communities can build a politics, to hold authorities to account. But it is also a material presence that the body as bare life must confront. These material realities need not only be liquid; but we want to argue for the liquid as nevertheless fundamental to them.

The liquid reality of the urban has been often explored in the field of urban political ecology, which has considered the ways in which the city is actually stitched together or pulled apart by the physical flows of liquids, the submerged city made of pipes, tubes and sewers, a hidden network in which the drinkable and the wasted liquids intersect and flow asymmetrically. Many of these works have been crucial in embedding water in socio-political relations.[3] However, often at the cost of reducing water to said relations, falling short of attending to water's *agentic* capacity, failing to consider the *encounter* between those socio-political relations and the materiality of the liquid itself.[4] Usually framed through questions of power, inequality, consumption and cultural meaning, rarely these studies have engaged with the materiality and agency of urban liquids and, most crucially, with their *essential* capacity to overflow. In this propositional piece, we ask the question: what does it mean to think the city through its overflows?

Governing excess

Especially engagements with the city of the global South have shown how traditional networked infrastructures and the so-called 'formal' city (read colonial city) leak and bleed outside of the ordered frames within which the *orderly city* might originally have been imagined. Liquid overflow may be physical, cultural, social or legal, and may materialise into flooding or scarcity, gentrification or intoxication, socialisation or excess. Overflowing occurs at the physical, semantic, and normative level: what an overflow is, after all, firstly depends on the lines and boundaries with respect to which the behaviour of a liquid is perceived and defined as over-flowing.

The grammar of landscape employed to define, delimit and manage water, for instance, is often found wanting. This is what Marisol de la Cadena finds in her investigation of the conflictual interaction between a mining corporation, environmentalist movements and the local population around the 'water' of a Peruvian lagoon, which 'the guardians of the lagoons' see neither as a resource to be exploited nor one to be protected or replaced by other sources of water: for them, 'it is local water, and as such, nature, yet untranslatable to H_2O'.[5] As Jamie Linton wrote in his seminal work, Western discourse did produce 'modern water' as a particular kind of abstraction, most explicitly symbolised

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aggrandized, and sublimated, the town opposes itself to the mud of the countryside', Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*. MIT Press, 2002, 40.

2 Matthew Gandy. Rethinking urban metabolism: water, space and the modern city. *City* 8(3), 2004: 363-379.

3 E.g. Filippo Meng and Erik Swyngedouw, (eds). *Water, Technology and the Nation-state.* Routledge, 2018.

4 Cf. Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters. Wet ontologies, fluid spaces: Giving depth to volume through oceanic thinking. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33(2), 2015: 247-264.

5 Marisol De la Cadena. Uncommoning nature. *E-Flux Journal 56th Biennale*, 2015, http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/uncommoning-nature/

by a chemical symbol (H_2O), and an ubiquitous appliance (the water tap).[6] Thus removed from place, time and relations, water has been discursively abstracted into a neutral matter that can be measured, assessed, controlled, and acted upon. Indirectly, this has shaped a disciplinary and repressive framework aimed at controlling the liquid's 'unruliness' and 'deviance' – that is, its overflow – mostly by means of imprisoning waters into physical, discursive and normative pipelines.

Phil Jones and Neil Macdonald read the modern history of water management as an attempt to control water's recalcitrant behaviour by intensifying repression and implementing a 'harsher disciplinary regime'.[7] Likewise, Antina von Schnitzler shows how the pre-paid water meter has emerged as a tool for the control not only of the 'excessive' use of water by poor communities in South Africa, but also for the governmentalisation of 'responsible' behaviour.[8] Overflowing water risks overflowing civil disobedience, as a sort of 'broken-window' approach is applied to the provision of basic bodily requirements. Again, an unquestioned grammar of landscape implicitly defines the overflow – the excess – and morally frames it only as a negative counterpart: an assumption that often spill over dominant attitudes towards poverty, working-class alcohol consumption, and so on. This grammar is shaped by the sense of security and control that comes with imposing a precise binary order on a fluid element, 'a false order upon a fluid milieu for which we lack an imaginative grasp'.[9]

For all their control, regulation and exploitation, macro- and micro-flows of urban liquids keep over-flowing

Yet, water's unruliness is not easy to define, let alone govern. For all their control, regulation and exploitation, macro- and micro-flows of urban liquids keep over-flowing. In his book on hydraulic citizenship Nikhil Anand portrays the liquidscapes of the city as always flowing, leaking and excreting through pipes and taps and sewers and pumps, and the resulting politics as one in which shitting, pissing and bathing are extremely curtailed and delimited possibilities for the majority of people.[10] Some populations are not even considered deserving of reticulated water, relying on a kind of officially-sanctioned 'overflow' for their endurance.[11] At other times, the overflow may become a site of community claims of belonging, in ways which also disrupt Western logics of the control of the environment.[12] Even a flood, in fact, may be overflown by a multiplicity of socio-natural meanings and relations that cannot be contained within alluvial definitions, to the point of appearing as 'the symptom', to paraphrase Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, of the series of efforts to create fixity in a terrain of change, to create hard edges in a world of flow, and to cordon of wet and dry spaces from what are in fact wet and dry moments in a temporal drama of ocean and estuary, coast and beach, rain and tide.[13]

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6 Jamie Linton. *What is water?: The History of a Modern Abstraction*. UBC Press, 2010.

7 Phil Jones and Neil Macdonald. Making space for unruly water: Sustainable drainage systems and the disciplining of surface runoff. *Geoforum* 38(3), 2007: 534-544.

8Antina von Schnitzler. Citizenship prepaid: Water, calculability, and techno-politics in South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 34(4), 2008: 899-917.

9 Matthew Wiener. Grounding Water. *Scenario 05: Extraction*, 2015. https://scenariojournal.com/article/grounding-water/

10 Nikhil Anand. *Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai*. Duke University Press, 2017.

11 Michelle Kooy and Karen Bakker. Technologies of government: Constituting subjectivities, spaces, and infrastructures in colonial and contemporary Jakarta. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32(2), 2008: 375-391.

12 Elizabeth A. Povinelli. 'Might be something': the language of indeterminacy in Australian Aboriginal land use. *Man* 28(4):679-704.

13 Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge. Wet Theory: a Foreword. In Anuradha Mathur and Dilip Da Cunha (eds.). *Soak: Mumbai in an Estuary*. Rupa & co. 2009, ix.

Nightmares of overflow

There is an argument to be made about how the material and elemental qualities of liquids have made cities, almost through their negation, containment and domestication (at least in Western planning logic), but also in their spectral and haunting qualities: the threat of bursting forth. Whereas the Frankfurt school and their acolytes were interested in the ways that the order – the rhythm – of the city is always shaped by the temporal and spatial rhythm of industrial capital, the flows and spillages of liquids in the cities of the global South expose that these orders have only ever partially pertained. Colonial authorities controlled the consumption of alcohol for indentured workers and subject populations, as well as delimiting access to 'native' parts of the city for fresh water. So the consumption of alcohol in many poor parts of the city on weekday mornings, the spillage of sewage from broken pipes, and the flowing of water from the broken communal tap shared by dozens of households for washing and laundry and drinking – all of these things expose other orders and normativities that produce the city not only as a controlled and governmentalised space, but as something that exceeds this, and that is produced by this excess, or rather, by its *relation* with this inevitable excess.

The fluid, liquid and overflowing quality of the urban appears as constitutive of it in ways that are more profound than simply being a negative counterpoint to urban governmentality. It also produces the possibilities for politics to 'overflow', as when residents are able to reclaim some degree of citizenship through diverting the flows of water, as Morten Nielsen has suggested describing how a massive flood that effectively destroyed a part of Maputo allowed for residents to reclaim access to parts of the colonial city in ways that contested the dominant social order but which was accepted by the authorities, because it maintained the spatial order of the old city.[14] Similarly, though less directly politically, the overflowing potholes in Kinshasa slow down traffic in certain busy parts of the city, allowing local traders to set up stalls selling cold-drinks.[15] While in many ways the city is the triumph of the control of these otherwise organic and uncontrolled flows, at the same time cities are reliant on them: dams, aqueducts, irrigation schemes, have all made urban settlement and civilization possible. So when they spill and leak, when they exceed the order that is imposed on them, they expose the underlying order inherent in the city. And this is not just broken infrastructures. The spilling of alcohol, the pissing and vomiting on street corners by drunken revellers on a weekend, all expose the order that contains and controls urban life.

'Water draws to itself all images of purity', Gaston Bachelard wrote, emanating a kind of 'natural morality' against which water's uncontainable, uncompressible and alive quality manifests itself in its internal composition, in its capacity to become foul, poisonous, and lethal.[16] The rivers and the streams that run through cities have often been things abandoned, left to be fouled and polluted. Early urban planning and public health in the 18th and 19th century was an obsession with these flows. John Snow's famous discovery of the cholera epidemic in London in the 1850s was connected to the contamination of pump water by a fetid stream that ran under the city. The birth of alcohol may as well be tied to the need to respond to the toxic potential of water via the purifying (albeit intoxicating) capacity of yeast, the 'divine parasite' that prevented death by contamination, by making dark water drinkable.[17] Until the 18th century, in places like London, beer consumption was no mere

14 Morten Nielsen. Mimesis of the state: From natural disaster to urban citizenship on the outskirts of Maputo, Mozambique. *Social Analysis* 54(3), 2010: 153-173.

15 De Boeck, Filip. '"Poverty" and the politics of syncopation: urban examples from Kinshasa (DR Congo).' *Current Anthropology* 56, no. S11 (2015): S146-S158.

16 Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter.* Pegasus Foundation, 1983: 14.

17 Michel Serres, *The Parasite Vol. 1*. U of Minnesota Press, 2013.

matter of recreation but also a way to hydrate oneself while avoiding the city's dangerous waters.[18] Alcoholic flows, however, in turn trigger different overflows that will have to be differently contained, repressed, or indeed exploited: the urban is traversed by flows of alcohol as well as other addictive liquids (coffee, tea, energy-drinks, sugar-based sodas) that it capitalises upon and that may as well overflow in the form of violence and disease, degradation and waste.

Overflow is the *eventful* disruption of an ordered system of circulation, an eruption, but also an interruption, one that may take the form of a local solidification that blocks or impairs the flow. In the smooth circulation of waste that occurs under the urban surface, this 'static overflow' may be most remarkably seen in the *fatberg*, gigantic formations made out domestic and industrial liquid fats that agglomerate and then solidify by congealing, to the extent of blocking circulation in the sewers. Here waste takes a new life, i.e. the overflowing vitality of bacteria, flies, moths and worms that thrive in these emergent ecosystems.[19] So foreign to the crystalline morality of water, *fatbergs* may assume mythical morphologies as in the 'Whitechapel Monster', as heavy as 130 tonnes of weight and measuring more than 250m of length, whose 'monstrous' characterisation spells the moral injunction to not succumb to the temptation to 'feed the fatberg'.[20] This overflow does not flow past a given edge, but rather occurs by overflowing a certain degree of internal composition to the point of triggering a change of state, a solidification. Overflow as a change of state: is this what Bachelard pointed to, when reflecting on the profound force of a matter that is liquid insofar as de-forming or form-less, that is, insofar as exceeding formation?

Attending to the overflowing liquidscapes of the city might not constitute an exhaustive theory of the contemporary city, but it does say something about its material presence and the forms of inequality and endurance that constitute everyday urban life. It is about exploring water not 'simply as H_2O, showing how it flows through multiple spaces, materially and discursively, and how it flows in and out of different meanings'.[21] It is about considering not only the material agency urban liquids but also their 'immaterial power to shape the way we think about stasis and movement in time and space'.[22] It is about the way we conceive notions of wild and civilised, life-giving and life-threatening, order and disorder, as always overflowing – and about how we think and attend to these persistent overflows.

18 Matthew Green. The Lost World of the London Coffeehouse. *The Public Domain Review*, August 7, 2013. https://public-domainreview.org/2013/08/07/the-lost-world-of-the-london-coffeehouse/

19 Fatberg, a conversation between Natsai Chieza and Mike Thompson. *Mold Magazine* 3, 2018.

20 In the words of Thames Water's Becky Trotman: 'This display is a vivid reminder to us all that out of sight is not gone forever, so please help keep London and all the sewers flowing – don't feed the fatberg.' Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-42986433

21 Christopher Bear and Jacob Bull. Water matters: agency, flows, and frictions. *Environment and Planning A* 43(10), 2011: 2261-66, 2262.

22 Steinberg and Peters. *Wet Ontologies*, 257.