

Hydropolitics, Colonization, and Frontiers: Reading Dystopian Landscapes in Hawai'i and India

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Abstract

This article presents a close reading of Haunani Kay Trask's book of poetry (*Light in the Crevice Never Seen*) and Komal Swaminathan's play *Thaneer! Thaneer!* (Eng. trans. *Water! Water!*). Both texts reveal water-scarce landscapes in Hawai'i and India that tell stories of colonization of local populations. In so doing, these foreground a certain hydropolitics: that water pollution and scarcity is the result of its commercialisation by global capital, which has despoiled ecological systems and the habitat of all species on the planet. Finally, this article foregrounds how writers like Trask and Swaminathan can actively draw their readers' attention to the environmental frontiers reached by such politics and help them reimagine alternative futures.

Keywords: Hydropolitics, Trask, Swaminathan, ecocriticism.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una lectura detallada del libro de poemas de Haunani Kay Trask (*Light in the Crevice Never Seen*) y de la obra de teatro de Komal Swaminathan *Thaneer! Thaneer!* (*Water! Water!* en su traducción al inglés). Ambos textos revelan paisajes de Hawái y la India en los que escasea y que cuentan historias de la colonización de las poblaciones locales. Al hacerlo, ponen en evidencia una cierta hidropolítica que revela cómo la contaminación y la escasez del agua son el resultado de su comercialización por parte del capital global que ha saqueado los sistemas ecológicos y el hábitat de todas las especies del planeta. Finalmente, este artículo resalta cómo escritores como Trask y Swaminathan pueden captar activamente la atención de sus lectores sobre las fronteras ambientales alcanzadas por dichas políticas y ayudarlos a reimaginar alternativas para el futuro.

Palabras claves: Hidropolítica, Trask, Swaminathan, ecocrítica.

As the gathering environmental crises deepen in the twenty-first century, critiques of our global economic and political system and its concomitant impact on the environment have intensified, fuelling much activism and debate. Scholars define this system as a form of latter-day imperialism involving the quest for land and extraction of natural resources, with major ecological consequences: acid rain, holes in the ozone layer, diminishing biodiversity, air pollution, global warming, fossil fuel exhaustion, and water crises (see Roos and Hunt 2; Harvey 145-152; Smith 84-85 and 89; Crist ch. 1; McBrien ch. 4; Foster 12; Purdy, 5-6). Such processes lead to mass-scale poverty, degradation of the environment, and ultimately climate change (see

Harvey 181-182; Smith 71; Foster 10-11; Roos and Hunt 3-4). Nowhere is the impact of climate change as evident as in the global hydropolitics of water: shifting precipitation patterns, increased melting of glaciers, disrupting upstream and downstream rivers, rising sea levels, flooding and drought, and decreased freshwater availability. All of these factors produce conflicts that fuel violent instability within and between states at the local, national, and international levels (see Michel and Pandya xii-xiii; Al-Muqdadadi 18). It is therefore necessary to examine unstable water systems—that are impacted by human activities—as areas to understand the geopolitics of the Anthropocene (see Clarke-Sather et al. 2; Al-Muqdadadi 9). As a global resource, water is unique in that it is essential for both human life and ecosystem function, but is limited as a resource (See Clarke-Sather et al. 3; Mahkahleng 38). Consequently, water wars have emerged wherever fragile human institutions fail to address water scarcity (Mahkahleng 40).

Clearly, the environment represents the next frontier in humans' understanding of their living possibilities on this planet in the twenty-first century. A frontier can be a boundary that functions as a transition between the known and familiar and the unknown and uncharted. It can signify the limits of knowledge in a particular subject, or a new field of study requiring exploration. All of these connotations are fruitful in describing our environmental crises in the twenty-first century which pose challenges of unimaginable proportions and require new ways of understanding relationships between human and nonhuman environments. So, what should writers and artists do in facilitating such understanding? Well, ecocritical scholars have specific opinions about what these responsibilities should be. Some opine that climate change threatens our current literary imagination (See Ghosh 6-7, 9). And so, writers must radically reimagine a politics of common responsibility that will merge ecological and social justice concerns (see Buell 6-7; Heise 252-253; Spivak 339, 342-6; Ghosh 32; DeLoughrey and Handley 29). Others assert that writers need to critique the destructive one-dimensional nature of the processes of globalization and the neoliberal state (see DeLoughrey and Handley 8; Heise 254). In so doing, they must facilitate a dialog of accountability amongst humans about their relations with a more-than-human world (see Buell 2; Spivak 348-350; Ghosh 79-80, 160; Glotfelty xix-xx; DeLoughrey and Handley 25-26). To do so, their imaginaries must be non-hierarchical, non-patriarchal, non-Eurocentric, non-linear, while also being diverse and spontaneous; writers must then be prepared to reinvent literary forms, experiment with genre, and force readers to change their act of reading (see Buell 8-9; Heise 258; Spivak 507; Ghosh 84-85, 161; Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbuster 12-13). In fact, a multiplicity of voices are required to address the problems that our world faces today (see Spivak 340; DeLoughrey and Handley 28). Such voices will create literature that is rooted to a place while also being interconnected to global and bioregional environments (see Buell 60; Heise 253; Barnhill 212-213; Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbuster 8-9; DeLoughrey and Handley 10).

This article presents two such writers through a close reading of their place-based texts: Haunani Kay Trask's book of poetry (*Light in the Crevice Never Seen*) and

Komal Swaminathan's play (*Thaneer! Thaneer!* Eng. trans. *Water! Water!*). Both texts reveal water-scarce landscapes that tell stories of colonization of local populations. Trask's poetry links the water depredations in Hawai'i to the U.S. imperial history of exploitation. Swaminathan's play exposes the systemic failure of postcolonial India through water-starved Athipatti, a fictional village. Trask and Swaminathan function like activists in drawing their readers' attention to the environmental frontiers reached by such hydropolitics: that water, fundamental to all species' survival and integral to all cultural practices, is polluted and made scarce; that ecological systems are despoiled; and that habitats as widely disparate as those in Hawai'i and India are similarly threatened through the activities of global capital. Studying their work is important because Trask and Swaminathan, juxtaposed together, expose the extent to which capitalism ravages the environment in different spaces on the earth. They also help their readers reimagine alternative futures. Trask presents vivid images of a tranquil bioregional landscape in harmony with itself that is an alternative to water pollution and commercial overuse. Swaminathan provides alternative possibilities to water starvation when underprivileged characters proactively create local solutions with whatever resources they have. In both cases, readers are encouraged to rethink other possibilities to the specific hydropolitical realities presented in these texts. These possibilities are indeed less hierarchical and patriarchal, while being more diverse and spontaneous. Therein lies the relevance of these writers and their work in the world today and the reason to study them.

Dystopic Landscapes of Hawai'i

Haunani-Kay Trask, a Hawaiian scholar, activist, and poet, writes poetry that ties Hawai'i's hydropolitics to its disempowered status as a U.S. colony. Her poetry collection, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*, was published in 1994, almost one hundred years after the U.S. annexation of Hawai'i in 1898: "During the course of little more than a century, the *haole* [foreigner] onslaught had taken from us 95 percent of our Hawaiian people, 99 percent of our lands and waters, and the entirety of our political sovereignty" ("Feminism and Hawaiian Nationalism" 907). Trask's poetry from the first two sections of her collection make visible to her readers the disastrous consequences of such colonization on the environment, especially in the toxic relationship's humans establish with nature through the trope of tourism as development. Her poems focus on how tourists misuse Hawai'i's water resources while trashing its beaches because they think of these as disposable commodities. Trask then ties such activities to the policies of land and coastal development pursued by politicians and capitalist developers from the time of Hawai'i's annexation. She conveys her message by using the Hawaiian *kanikau*, a type of dirge or chant of lament that evokes memories of death, loss, and grief and that may also evoke the elegy

within the Anglo-American poetic tradition.¹ It is important to list the common features in her poetry while undertaking a close reading of a few for purposes of unpacking Hawaiian hydropolitics. For instance, in her poetry Trask mixes American English with Hawaiian words and sometimes Hawaiian Creole English. Following the tradition of Hawaiian poetry, Trask interlaces her poems with italicized notes with historical information on specific political and cultural events and figures; these notes contrast visually and auditorily with the un-italicized poetry. Also, specific to the Hawaiian tradition, Trask traces the genealogies of people and places. Her poems are of varying lengths—short and imagistic as well as longer with subsections. The stanzas are composed in free verse, only sometimes regular, and there is no formal rhyme scheme. The sentences are often condensed and staccato, but they can also be long, flowing, and lyrical. The speaker is unnamed and often angry, grief stricken, and sorrowful, in line with the lament or the elegiac tradition. However, the perspective is often in the first person, which helps draw in readers by having them identify with the speaker's perspective.

In "Makua Kane"—a poem written in five sections with four stanzas in each section (barring the fifth which has five stanzas). and with each stanza having dominantly three lines but otherwise two, four, and at times five lines—the speaker in the third section accuses politicians of commercializing the coastline to ostensibly develop Hawai'i; they:

carve up land:
shoreline for hotels, valleys
for houses, underground for bunkers, sewers
miles of wire. (section III, ll. 10-13, p.5)

The land is metaphorically carved up and consumed just as one does meat. Meat as protein is the cornerstone of a non-vegetarian diet, and is of high value. Similarly, the land continues to yield high market value when its beaches, sandy shoreline, and green valleys are replaced with hotels and housing projects which involve miles of electrical wires and sewers. Military bunkers are strewn all over as reminders of Hawai'i's role as a military outpost for the U.S. during World War II. Further, the inhabitants of these hotels and housing complexes "... throw cans/cigarette butts/plastic" on beaches. (section III, ll. 6-8, p. 5) Their "screeching cars" "startled" the "little doves" darting in and out of "banyan" trees (section III, ll. 1-5, p. 5). These are dystopic images that speak to our senses of sight and sound to convey an impression of congestion, pollution, littering, and waste. This section contrasts with the peaceful, ecologically harmonious activities of the previous section in which we see an average day in the lives of Hawaiians as they dance, fish, tell stories while the sunset cloaks the hill in golden color. The first and fifth sections are tied together in a

¹ Trask's poetry draws upon Anglo-American literary traditions. After all, Hawai'i is a U.S. colony and Anglo-American knowledge dominates the educational system. However, Trask is also informed by a nearly two millennia-old Hawaiian literary tradition that is experientially bound to its specific bioregional landscape. For details on the complex and specialized Hawaiian aesthetic system see Brandy Nālani McDougal 1-47, and ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui 30-52.

prophetic dream of doom; what is revealed “in the stomach of/my sleep” in section I (ll. 3-4, p. 4) becomes “in the tomb/ of sleep” in section V (ll. 7-8, p. 6). In both sections there are references to rituals involving sea salt and taro.

The note attached to the poem explains that these are rituals conducted at the time of death. The reference to the canoe in the fifth section—“taking our canoe to sea” (l. 13, p. 6)—is also explained in the note as portentous of death. Such intimations of mortality have to be taken seriously. Section V offers stark images of an ecological dystopia:

turtles disappear
at noon, a parching sun
scours the land
[...]
with the dying
moon. (ll. 4-6, 14-15, p. 6)

Sea turtles naturally bask on Hawaiian shores everyday as a way of regulating their body temperature, digesting food, resting, and improving their immune systems. Their noontime disappearance is unnatural and symbolic. The sun's heat creates extreme dryness on the land that it scours abrasively, for the rivers and streams have dried up. These are consequences of unsustainable activities of tourists and developers, activities that the speaker fails to prevent as a lawyer and activist in section IV:

... I fight
for the land but
we feel there is
no hope. (ll. 8-11, p.5)

The tone is despairing. The note attached to the poem traces Trask's activism to a genealogy of such advocacy covering three generations of her ancestors who “lived in a white world that controlled our Native land” and who were “long-time fighters for our people” (7). The title of the poem itself is a reference to her father who died in 1977. Parents tie children to the land and to a continuity of culture, which is also simultaneously disrupted.

“Waikīkī” continues this theme of water pollution and over consumption by tourists and land developers. The poem is written over twelve stanzas, with seven stanzas of four lines, two stanzas of three lines, and one stanza each of two lines and one line. The short length of each line within each stanza has a staccato effect that provides speed to the movement of images and ideas. The speaker speaks in the impersonal third person providing a bird's eye view of the hydropolitics on the Waikīkī beach. The tone is satirical, sarcastic, and angry as revealed through the deliberate choice of words. The first stanza hits the reader with information on how ocean waters are polluted—by pumping human waste into it:

all those 5 gallon
toilets flushing
away tourist waste
into our waters. (ll. 1-4, p. 60)

The overwhelming image is of 5 gallons of water wasted, as conjured by the phrase “5 gallon/ toilets,” when this water is bifurcated to service hotels and beach-front properties. Tourism developed in Hawai'i as a consequence of such commercialization, assert scholars like Ohnuma (365-394), Desmond (459-501), Poddar (51-64), and Hogue (144-152) who all share the following observations. That Hawai'i was marketed through the 1900s as quasi-primitive, erotic, utopic, and remote from the workaday world of the U.S. mainland. These images were orientalist projections of early European explorers who described Hawaiians as ideal natives or noble savages representing a pre-industrial, pastoral vision of harmony with nature. That mainland entrepreneurs, whose wealth was built on the toil of urban working classes, could escape the latter's demands by vacationing on Hawaiian beaches. The ostensibly simple, welcoming natives and unspoiled terrain offered to restore tourists with its balm of pleasures while maintaining the latter's ‘civilized distance’ from Hawaiian culture. However, Trask's poem offers graphic images of how these policies have transformed beaches like those in Waikiki. It is now “home/of the ali'i [chief]/ sewer center/ of Hawai'i” (ll. 5-8, p. 60).

The contrast is stark, even shocking. The poem provides a list of such images that sustain this shock value throughout the poem. Stanzas three and four assert that the “8 billion dollar/beach” (ll. 9-10, p.60) at Waikiki is actually a “secret/ rendezvous for/ pimps” (ll. 10-12, p. 60), “Hong Kong hoodlums/Japanese capitalists/*haole* punkers” (ll. 13-15, p. 60). Stanzas five and six expose how the condo units built on these beaches are vortices for

disease
drug traffic
child porn

AIDS herpes
old fashioned
syphilis
gangland murder. (ll. 19-23, p. 60)

These, Trask satirically asserts in stanzas seven to eleven, are the “gifts of industrial/ culture for” (ll. 24-25, p. 60) Hawaiians who are condescendingly perceived, by *haole* mainstream Americans, as a “primitive/ island people” (ll. 25-26, p. 60) with an inferior culture: their system of taro cultivation does not develop them economically; their political system of chieftains does not equip them with a sense of a larger world; their religious system with lowly gods is inferior to Christianity; and they are savages with sex lives who lack discipline and upliftment. The transformation of Waikiki as per the *haole* narrative is then justified as a testament to the superiority of Western culture. The spaces placed deliberately between words in these stanzas force readers to reconsider this narrative. Trask ends the poem with the line “the onslaught of barbarians” (l. 41, p. 61). But who is barbaric here? Trask indicts American culture by revealing the imperialistic politics underlying its popular narrative on Hawai'i that drives the business of tourism and in turn impacts its hydropolitics.

In the “Chant of Lamentation” taro terraces, now derelict, become a metaphor for Hawai'i's colonized condition. Taro is significant within the Hawaiian creation story; it grew out of the burial of a stillborn child by the sky father and earth mother. Historically, water from streams and rivers was used by Hawaiians to irrigate terraces for taro cultivation. However scholars point out, since the 1800s with the advent of U.S. entrepreneurs, water resources were bifurcated from taro cultivation to a flourishing plantation culture.² Extensive canal and tunnel systems were built to redirect water from mountain valleys to inland sugar and pineapple plantations:³ “Hawai'i's favorable climate and year-round growing season were perfect for cane; all the sugar barons needed was water to irrigate their fields” (Sproat 141). In many cases, entire streams were diverted, disconnecting ocean fish and shrimp species from their river nurseries. By the twentieth century, these streams were often polluted or running dry (Sproat 143). Water for multipurpose use by indigenous communities was less available and ground water supplies feeding nearshore marine ecosystems declined in both quantity and quality (Sproat 145). Such hydropolitics has been connected by scholars like Wilson and Soja to Hawai'i's location in the Pacific Ocean that served late-nineteenth-century U.S. expansionist policies requiring raw materials and consumer markets overseas. Wilson outlines the ways in which Hawaii served as an important location in the Pacific for the U.S. (521-524). Its ports allowed for an abundant flow of migrant labor from Asia and global trade in commodities. It connected shipping routes between the East and West Coasts. It served as a military outpost enabling the U.S. to dominate the American Pacific. Soja describes this time as disruptive (190), with uneven distributions of power, wealth, and resources across regions, when transnational capital started dominating local cultures; in the process Hawai'i became a periphery serving U.S. interests. These changes started its ongoing commercialization. The “Chant of Lamentation” addresses this current state of Hawai'i through an elegiac lament in free verse where the regularity of the stanzaic structure is broken several times through the poem; such breakage forces the reader to pay attention to the lines without taking their meaning for granted. There are two alternating sets of stanzas that act as parallel refrains: one set (containing six stanzas of mostly four and some three lines) starts with the phrase “I lament” while the other set (containing five stanzas of mostly three and some four lines) starts with the interrogative pronoun “who” but is followed by action verbs such as “comes,” “journeys,” “chants,” “tells,” and “parts.” The set of stanzas, marked by the phrase “I lament,” is filled with vivid imagery of a landscape that has turned against itself. The sky is “wounded,” “unnourished,” and “desolate” (ll. 8-9, p. 23). It falls drunk over “the iron sea” (ll. 10-11, p. 23). The past is “black and naked” with “a million ghosts laid

² For details about the history of sugar plantations in Hawai'i, see Dorrance and Morgan, *Sugar Islands*. For details on Hawaiian land dispossession, see Kame'eleihiwa, *Native Land and Foreign Desires*. See the Blount Report of 1893 for an analysis of the overthrow of Hawaiian sovereignty.

³ Sproat traces this history in connection to a legal petition in 2004 won by Hawaiian activist groups forcing the Hawaii Water Commission to restore water rights to indigenous communities by restoring continuous water flow to four streams bifurcated 150 years earlier.

out across the ocean floor” (ll. 15-17, p. 23). The streams are “blood-filled,” (l. 33, p. 24) the graves are scattered far, the earth is “stained and dying” (ll. 23-24, p. 23).

Trask uses metaphors and personification to make her point. For instance, the landscape is personified to represent the living entity that it is and that reacts to the impact of commercialized human activities. These reactions are in sync with the unnamed speaker’s overwhelming sense of horror and grief at the condition of Hawai’i. This strategy is not only a part of the Hawaiian poetic tradition but also resonates with the Anglo American tradition of the pathetic fallacy in which the grief-stricken, unnamed speaker projects these emotions onto the landscape, which shares in and amplifies them and so the entire ecological system participates in mourning this death of biodiversity:

I lament the abandoned
terraces, their shattered
waters, silent ear
of stone and blight. (ll. 1-4, p. 23)

These are sharp, catastrophic images. Traditional livelihoods are blighted by shattered streams that no longer irrigate now abandoned taro farms. These taro terraces are personified with ears that hear only silence for what remains is a stony landscape where nothing grows. In accordance with traditional Hawaiian poetry, Trask attaches a note to the poem. The note comments upon the second set of five stanzas, starting with the interrogative “who,” that also acts as a refrain. The first stanza within this set queries whether someone comes trailing after the winds that sweep through the now empty taro fields. The second stanza queries whether someone chants with the hollowed-out gourd that accompanies Hawaiian song and dance rituals. The third stanza asks if anyone journeys through the time of tradition, of the ancient chants. The implicit answer to these queries is negative for Hawaiian culture is being assaulted by American culture. The fourth stanza is a reference to the creation chant, the Kumulipo, in which life is born through a fusion of the human and divine. The implication is that now there is not much scope for such creativity. The fifth stanza is a lament for her ancestors whose bones are disinterred by land developers and archaeologists “to clear areas for hotels” (25). It is also a lament for the land which is “scarred by American greed” (25). She refers to Hawaiian genealogy, childless, emptied of its bloodline—“the flowers,/ a’ole pua” (ll. 21-22, p.23). This is potentially the condition of Hawaiian communities and other life forms within such an ecosystem.

Using the Hawaiian genre of the kanikau, that shares similarities with the genre of the Anglo-American genre of the elegy or the dirge, these poems from the first two sections of Trask’s poetry collection combine multiple histories: Hawai’i’s pre-colonial past, colonization by the U.S., the disempowerment of Hawaiian communities, and the misuse and abuse of the environment. The story of water and its politics is interwoven with these other stories and depicts the “mo’olelo” (a multi-layered term simultaneously meaning a story, history, literature, or any kind of narrative) of Hawai’i. In containing such themes, Trask’s poetry displays the “hulihia”

(rebellious) spirit, much like a volcanic eruption associated with the goddess Pele. Readers confront a frontier in the sense of a boundary or a limit reached within the environment when its resources are crassly commercialized and the ecological balance is disturbed. In telling this story, Trask is recording and preserving a living history as well as displaying a “kuleana” consciousness, which is an activist consciousness of the need to continue the fight for and revitalize Hawaiian culture, nation, and identity.⁴

Dystopic Landscapes of India

This section, in keeping with the previous section, analyzes the hydropolitics of Athipatti, a fictitious village in Komal Swaminathan's Tamil play—*Thaneer! Thaneer!* (or, *Water! Water!*) — to highlight the inequities of internal colonization in India. In so doing, like Trask, Swaminathan combines his creativity with advocacy: as playwright, filmmaker, and activist. *Thaneer! Thaneer!* was originally published in 1979 but later translated into English and other Indian languages. It was staged across the country through the decade of the 1980s and 1990s. The play is set in the context of the late 1970s and opens with Vellaisamy, a fugitive, arriving at Athipatti hungry and thirsty. He learns of their chronic water scarcity and offers initially to fetch water in a bullock cart from the nearest spring but later attempts to build a dam. His efforts are derailed by the government engineer and local politician. Eventually he dies of thirst in the forest on the run. Writing and publishing from the 1960s, Swaminathan combines biting social commentary with an absurdist laughter that can be attributed to multiple theater traditions. His use of absurdism may be linked with the theater-of-the-absurd,⁵ a mid-twentieth-century tradition which presents humans trapped in a world where actions are senseless, the cause-and-effect relationships between incidents are eliminated, language ceases to communicate, characters are archetypes, places are nonspecific, and the world is incomprehensible. Swaminathan's play presents such a world when it contemplates the absurdity of the postcolonial State. His use of absurdist laughter creates moments of self-reflexivity and awareness amidst the audience—effects that can be linked to other mid-twentieth century theater traditions. For instance, Bertolt Brecht's epic theater⁶ alienates audiences by making them conscious of the theatricality of the performance through use of a bare stage, exposed lighting and scenic equipment, and short scenes. Swaminathan uses similar staging techniques. In addition, Tamil theater is influenced by Dravidian lower-caste politics which insisted that stage characters represent

⁴ Trask is in sync with a number of Pacific Islander scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (*Decolonizing Methodologies*), Daniel Heath Justice (*Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*), Robert Warrior (*American Indian Literary Nationalism*), and ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui (*Voices of Fire* xxix-xxx), who insist that indigenous storytelling must combat poisonous colonial stereotypes and craft an indigenous Hawaiian literary nationalism that links the people, the land, and the cosmos together in a dynamic system of relationships.

⁵ For more details on absurd theater, see Esslin, *The Theater of the Absurd*.

⁶ For more details on epic theater, see Brecht, *Brecht on Theater*.

ordinary people, that dialogues be de-Sanskritized, that the dominant themes concern self-respect for lower castes.⁷ We certainly see these characteristics in *Thaneer! Thaneer!*. Swaminathan was also influenced by left-centric, socially-realistic, experimental modern Indian theater.⁸ Notably, the IPTA (Indian Political Theatre Association), Vijay Tendulkar's plays of the 1960s and 1970s, and Badal Sircar's idea of a Third Theater⁹ focused on the struggles of the rural and urban working classes and used theater as a tool for social change by attacking the status quo. Their vision also provided the groundwork for Swaminathan's play. For purposes of the larger argument on hydropolitics, colonization, and frontiers, this section will closely read three instances of dialogic exchanges in the play which combine absurdist laughter with social realism to expose the systemic failures of the state and its consequent water crises.

The first instance of absurdism mixed with social realism occurs in Act 1, between scenes 1-4. These scenes, which are short and enable the plot to move quickly, create a detailed context for the play through the villagers' ironic comments in their interaction with Vellaisamy, the outsider who visits their village. In fact, the dialog evolves with villagers responding to Vellaisamy's questions and assertions with answers and counter assertions. This back and forth sets the tone for what is to unravel. Speedily, readers get a sense, enabled by the villagers' grim, socially realistic descriptions, of a setting which has been water-deprived for five years:

Vellaisamy: What are you saying? Is there no water in the village?

Adaikappan: We've been suffering for five years without any water. Once upon a time we too were farmers. But in the last five years there's been no rain and the land has turned into a desert. (5)

In the ensuing conversation between Vellaisamy and other villagers, the readers learn many facts about the village. The fields lie fallow and parched. The wells have run dry. Villagers have to walk fourteen miles daily on a round trip to fetch water from the nearest spring. Life has become unsustainable, fueling migrations to cities; many work for daily wages as porters in markets nearby because farming is impossible, while others have sold their cattle and agricultural implements. The only well with water reserves is polluted with fluoride and poisons those who drink from it. This well, used by lower caste communities, is the first to be polluted and so their inferior status exacerbates their water crisis. This is the first indication that caste politics creates unequal privileges in the play.

⁷ Of relevance to the play is the Dravida or Self Respect movement, which attacked caste hierarchies. Founded in 1921, it influenced the formation of political parties, such as Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1944 and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in 1972, in Tamil Nadu. The play espousing the underdog was well received precisely because of the consciousness-raising activities of the Dravida movement.

⁸ For political theater in India, see Nandi Bhatia, *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance*; for social realism, see David Forrest, *Social Realism*.

⁹ Third theater focused performance on the actor's body; sets, lights, costumes and background music were minimal; ticket prices were low or free. The purpose was to engage audiences about their responsibilities and rights as citizens. Thus, the play could be performed in any space. For information on the Third Theater, see Kundu, *So Near, Yet So Far*.

Within such a context, when Vellaisamy starts hiccupping and gasping for water in scene 2, no one is prepared to give him any until Sevanthy, the only female character in the play, gives him some water from her pot. The probability that he might have choked to death is very real. However, the villagers berate him for his carelessness in almost dying on their premises.

Vellaisamy: I don't understand. Take pity on me—some water, please.

Adaikappan: You scoundrel! You come here, eat and start this bloody hiccupping ...
Now you'll hiccup and hiccup and die of your hiccupping! (4)

When Vellaisamy asks for compassion, Kovalu, another villager, reminds him: "You question our compassion! Yet the millions who live outside this village have no compassion for us" (4). Living in extreme deprivation makes people inhumane where having water—a very basic need—is more precious than possessing gold:

Vellaisamy: Is washing your face a luxury?

Adaikappan: Yes. In this village, bathing or washing your face is a luxury. (14)

These exchanges bring home the point that not only has the state failed to provide the infrastructure where water can be brought to meet basic needs, but it also refuses to accept its responsibility in creating feasible conditions for life in remote areas. The conditions in which these villagers live are horrifying and thus absurd. When the villagers present their needs in a memorandum to the minister, they face crippling red tape and nothing happens. No newspaper reports on their plight because their needs are not deemed newsworthy by news editors next to celebrity culture: "Actress Sukanya wears only red saris when she goes out on shooting on Fridays" (6). This is the society of the spectacle when the reading and viewing public live vicariously through images of lifestyles far beyond their reach.¹⁰ Such image consumption when juxtaposed with the spectacularly grim images of a water-starved village forces the audience to confront the differential access citizens have to natural resources based on their caste, class, and location.

The second instance of absurdity mixed with social realism is revealed, in scenes 10 and 14, through darkly comic dialogues between Naicker, the politician, and his Athipatti electorate regarding elections. In scene 10, readers are introduced to Velusamy Naicker, "one of the most powerful men in this region" who has "in his pocket" the local collector, MLA, and ministers (27). Velusamy Naicker comes to Athipatti to ask all members of the Naicker caste to vote for a fellow member of their caste—Sithaiyya Naicker—who is the electoral candidate of the region and owner of a matchbox factory. If elected, Velusamy expects that Sithaiyya Naicker will distribute government jobs and land among other Naickers. However, there are class divisions within caste groups. Adaikappan reminds Velusamy "All that's for the rich Naicker. Not for Naickers like us who work ourselves to death for a pittance" (29). He further accuses Velusamy of bringing caste differences into a village where different castes

¹⁰ In *The Society of the Spectacle* (pub. 1967) Guy Debord reveals how in modern society social life between humans and their environment is replaced with its representation in media images. So instead of living their own lives, humans are obsessed with a passive identification with the spectacle that they consume.

co-exist in peace. Kovalu, another villager, accuses Velusamy of false promises before every election: "What did you do to bring water to this village? During every election, they say 'Just let the elections be over, and water will pour into this village like a waterfall in the hills.' The only thing pouring in this village are our tears" (29). The image of the waterfall is one of natural abundance, which contrasts with an abundance of tears signifying deprivation and sorrow. So, these exchanges set the stage for a manipulative, self-serving, casteist politics that benefit members of the upper class, a politics incapable of representing the interests of other classes. Velusamy Naicker is tone deaf in his responses to these questions: "That's why we've put together the Sixth Five Year Plan" (30) [...] "The current plan has a budget of 90 thousand crores" (31). Naicker is referring to the system of planned economic development over 5-years adopted since independence by the Indian government. However, the common grievance with such a system of planning is that it has failed more than it has succeeded; the state has done little to alleviate poverty or guarantee the fundamental rights of vulnerable citizens.

Adaikappan: Listen to you! You're talking of 90 thousand crores to people who haven't seen a ten-rupee note [...] you use all the money to improve the lives of people living in places like Bombay, Madras and Delhi. What's going to change in this remote village? (31)

Indeed, for those who live a hand-to-mouth existence with little cash flow, what is the buying power of large sums of money? How should Ahipatti dwellers demand accountability of local government officials for implementation of government schemes? After all, in the context of prolonged deprivation, five-year plans with welfare schemes do not make sense. Velusamy Naicker represents the interests of city dwellers who are recipients of most of the funds set aside for development. He cannot really see his electorate as equal to himself nor is he sensitized to their needs. In scene 14, he gets angry when his candidate loses the elections and his henchmen beat up Vellaisamy and destroy his water-carrying cart and ox. His anger exposes his indifference to the plight of the people who constitute his vote bank, "What does not having water have to do with voting? Who told them to remain in that wasteland, outcasts that they are! Why don't they go to Madurai or Madras and beg in the streets?" (37-38). Madras (now Chennai) and Madurai are cities where displaced villagers do indeed often end up begging on the streets, destitute and starving. Naicker is unwilling to connect the villagers' survival to their access to natural resources like water, to infrastructural support from the government, and to his failure to support and sponsor responsible politicians. His outburst is absurd and is darkly humorous because it exposes how the villagers' lives are rendered abject and meaningless to the postcolonial state when these systems of support are fragmented by casteism, and exploitation.¹¹

¹¹ In a growing body of scholarship centered on social marginalization, the concept of precarity names extreme conditions in life when the act of living itself is precarious. For instance, Judith Butler asserts that precarity points to "the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from

The third instance of absurdity occurs in scene 27, when the state intervenes to disrupt Athipatti dwellers' efforts to build a micro dam that will supply water to their village. This intervention is especially significant against a context of pro-urban biases in developmental projects that ignore villages like Athipatti. Throughout the play, readers see Vellaisamy as a fugitive and a bond slave who finds shelter in Athipatti and who offers micro-level solutions to their water crises. He raises money to invest in a bullock cart to transport water from the river. He convinces villagers to join him in digging a canal that will connect their village to the river: "Man has leveled mountains. He has cleared forests and made the land cultivable. With his two hands he has wrestled with nature and turned it into his convenience" (10). As a discourse, this appears to belong to the post-independence official narratives of nation-building through the taming of nature. However, Vellaisamy is not arguing for big dams. Nor do government officials sympathize with his vision. In fact, the civil engineer destroys the canal because the villagers have not acquired a license for it:

Engineer: I am a PWD engineer. I've come to throw all of you in jail.

Vaithilingam: To throw us in jail? Why would you want to do that?

Engineer: Whose permission did you take before digging the canal?

Vaithilingam: Do we need to ask someone? This land belongs to the public.

Engineer : You did say it belongs to the public, didn't you? Now, is that land your ancestral property? That is government land.

Adaikappan: We don't have a government here. We are the government.

Engineer: You are the government?! Look at your arrogance! It was wrong of you to cut a canal on government land without government permission. It was wrong of you to dig up the hill without government permission. All of this is illegal.

Vaithilingam: Yes, it is a crime. When a canal is needed we are supposed to tell the government. They are supposed to call for a tender. The contractor gobbles up half the money. You engineers, clerks, and revenue inspectors each gobble up a little. With taxpayers' money, you buy gold necklaces for your wives. Of course it's illegal for us to dig a canal, leaving you with no opportunities for all this. (61)

His exchange with the villagers is not only satirical but also absurd. The canal is built on land not owned privately and so historically it is the commons and belongs to all people and anyone can claim access to it. However, the government as the representative of the state claims ownership of all property not privately owned and thereby eliminates the rights of villagers to it. In demanding that villagers request permission to use the commons for their self-help schemes, it acts like a landlord and treats villagers like tenants who can be evicted because of defaulted rents. Such a demand is absurd because the government is absent when people are water deprived and starving. Its tangled bureaucracy is mixed with red tape, corruption, favoritism, and underhand deals where public funds are siphoned out for private consumption. It is thus unable to gauge or respond to people's needs. It will rather destroy self-help efforts of the people using legal loopholes than laud and strengthen such initiatives at nation-building. The petty, thoughtless nature of these actions point to a failing

failing social and economic networks [...] becoming differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (*Frames of War* 25).

system which is certainly not pro-people. In fact, in 1996, journalist P. Sainath published *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, a reputable collection of stories of micro struggles over water resources in rural India based upon his research (from a *Times of India* fellowship) between 1993 and 1995. He details the effects of the government's development policies: destruction of traditional irrigation systems, deforestation, villagers' loss of control over common water resources, private contractors' misuse of drought-relief funds, and contradictory conditions within districts of abundant rainfall and acute drought. He concludes that drought relief is rural India's biggest growth industry where the poor are never consulted and conflicts arising from man-made drought have increased. Sainath's book was a seminal publication on the hydropolitics of rural India. The conditions he describes in the villages he visits in the 1990s are very similar to Swaminathan's late 1970s fictional Athipatti.

The play, in one act with 29 scenes, generates a deconstructive laughter that exposes the absurdity of failed systems. Absurdism, or a philosophy of life as absurd, influenced many genres of literature. The play critiques the absurd top-down practices of the postcolonial State that occlude participation of those who are most affected by these. Critics of the postcolonial State often accuse its ruling elite of exploiting the underclass in the same manner as did the foreign colonizers after the transfer of power with independence. These are conditions of internal colonialism, a phenomenon leading to complex, structural inter-regional inequalities that have persisted through the 1980s and 1990s.¹² These conditions of internal colonization serve as the backdrop to the unevenly developed landscapes of the play where pockets of abundance (usually urban) are surrounded by vast areas of scarcity (usually rural).¹³ Using the language of theater as a tool, *Water! Water!* exposes the failure of the postcolonial State by presenting landscapes of extreme man-made water scarcity. It reveals the differential access to natural resources that citizens have based upon their caste, class, gender, and locational affiliations. This hydropolitics mirrors a frontier reached in the world today with the threat of water scarcity and climate change.

The Environmental Crises, Frontiers, and Writing as Activism

This paper juxtaposes Trask's poetry with Swaminathan's play to draw attention to capitalism's repeated ability to create similar dystopian landscapes in

¹² For further explication on the concept of internal colonialism, see Fanon's chapter "The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness," *The Wretched of the Earth* (97-144).

¹³ Scholars trace such landscapes of uneven development to lopsided colonial policies favoring the landed elite, many of whom retained their privileges post-independence. Consequently, land redistribution reforms were inconsistent. Attempts to provide universal education, healthcare, and employment were ineffective. Heavy industrialization trumped agriculture. The green revolution was partially impactful. The bureaucracy was corrupt. Certainly, Swaminathan evokes these debates while portraying the hydropolitics of Athipatti. For details, see Chakravarty, *Development Planning* and Kohli, *State-Directed Development*.

disparate parts of the world. Both texts provide images of places of plenitude and scarcity that are unevenly developed, illustrating the complex ebb and flow of capital between varied landscapes. Therefore, U.S. businesses control all resources in Hawai'i, disinvest in Hawaiian communities, and invest in the mainland. In India, resources are siphoned to cities like Chennai or Madurai while villages like Athipatti become unsustainable. Hawaiian and Indian activists attribute this to the imperialistic process of capital accumulation, which creates resource-rich centers with poverty-stricken peripheries. Both texts show certain aspects of capitalism. First, resources are unequally divided between classes, castes, races, and genders within such centers and peripheries. Second, fundamental to creating profit is the devaluation of the labor of the marginalized and dispossessed. Third, nature becomes a commodity when natural resources are placed on the market: as the landscape of a holiday resort; as seawater polluted by resort toilets; or as a water-scarce, drought-ridden village. Fourth, these landscapes are environmentally degraded as products of violent histories of internal/external colonization. Fifth, each space is physically produced because of specific histories associated with the nation-building activities of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century U.S. and mid-to-late twentieth-century India. Sixth, these nations are part of a capitalist, globalized system and function as its agents, after all the State controls the physical terrain upon which capital operates. Finally, the State legitimizes exploitation and appropriation in the name of nation-building, modernization, and development. It is possible to conclude that these past two centuries have ushered in the age of capital, which is characterized by human-centric thought, scientific discoveries, technological innovation, industrialism, global conquest, commoditization of nature, economic growth, and consumerism. In such an age, human actions have the same impact on the planet as geological forces. In other words, we have reached a frontier in our understanding of how we should live on this planet and of how we should relate to both humans and nonhumans.

This article turns to debates among environmental activists and scholars who attempt to address some of these concerns by examining the interrelations between the local and the global on the one hand, and the local and the bioregional on the other. Some critics note that the global ecological crises have problematized the concept of place (Heise 253; Buell 59-60). Others note that a localized sense of place is incomplete unless augmented by a sense of its integration into the wider global network of cultures and economies; likewise, the idea of the global becomes oppressive and homogenizing unless linked to local cultures (DeLoughrey and Handley 25, 27; Diaz and Kauanui 318-321). Further, Spivak introduces the concept of planetarity to describe how all local cultures exist in alterity with each other, without hierarchy and without any normative center, and that this concept of planetarity replaces the idea of the global (338-339). Ethically responsible relationships are only possible within such a conceptual framework. Some others put forward the idea of bioregionalism, which is a body of thought connecting human cultures in a socially just, sustainable manner to those region-scale ecosystems in which they are embedded (El Dessouky 256-257; Barnhill 212-213; Lynch, Glotfelty,

and Armbuster 9-11). Unlike other political movements, bioregionalism accords the non-human a decisive place in conceptions of human polity. In all of these debates scholars emphasize the need for ethical activism.

Can playwrights or poets act ethically by raising awareness of this ecological crisis amongst their readers? Scholars such as Dobrin and Weiser, Nixon, and Schneiderman believe that writers can be activists. After all, assert Dobrin and Weiser (576), writers, as members of discourse communities, operate as fundamental units within these systems. They are not only forged by these systemic ideologies, but can also potentially alter them. Yes, indeed writers may be activists, reiterates Rob Nixon (14-37), but it is not easy for them to represent ecological challenges. After all, climate change, he explains, is oblique and slow-acting over centuries, posing formidable imaginative difficulties for writers and activists alike in an age of the instant and spectacular. Nixon elaborates that environmental storytellers must overcome such obstacles by creatively drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. Jill Schneiderman (83-97) offers a creative example of such activism by combining Buddhist thought with geological expertise and insights. Armed with the knowledge of the Noble Eightfold Path, geoscientists can offer scientific knowledge that will render visible global environmental degradation over time; armed with such geological insights, Buddhist practitioners can provide examples of ethical conduct, compassion, and wisdom in action and thought that will counter the slow violence of climate change. Drawing upon these debates, this article presents Trask and Swaminathan as writers who actively engage their environments by adopting creative measures to draw their audiences' attention to the imperialistic hydropolitics at work in Hawai'i and the South Indian village of Athipatti—a hydropolitics that exacerbates the slow violence of climate change.

Trask adopts several creative measures by which she fixes her readers' attention to the complexity of her subject matter. The third and final section of her poetry volume—"Light in the Crevice Never Seen"—Trask presents sharp images of a luminous natural landscape evoking beauty and pleasure while powerfully triggering historical connections in her Hawaiian readers. She also invites her non-Hawaiian readers to perceive this landscape through the five senses. This is a landscape awash with color. The moonlight glitters over the water turning it "gold on black" ("Moon Over Manana" l. 2, p. 71). However, this beauty is not merely visual but an olfactory, tactile as well as an auditory experience. The fog through Hina's estuary is "moist, reedy" and the *hunehune* [delicate, misty] winds are "shade cool" ("To Write by Moonlight" ll. 7, 10, p. 89). The "freshest seas" "sting" ("Open Your Weariness" ll. 8-9, p. 92). The shadows exude a musky "hot perfume," "tight-winged" birds cry out, their cries are akin to the feel of "flickering tongues" on "damplit skin" and "the seep/of summer thirst" ("Where the Fern Clings" ll. 5-6, 8-13, p. 93). The carnality and fertility of the sea is underscored by "the water/milky sperm dissolving/in spurts/of gelatine" ("So Tight is My Love" ll. 10-13, p. 76) with "the sexual/squid squirting his ink// to the stars" ("So Tight is My Love" ll. 20-22, p.76). The association

with sperm and amniotic fluid suggests a hydrological cycle that is fertile, life-enhancing, and creative. Is this place and vision worth fighting for? Yes it is, Trask opines. In "Writing in Captivity," she declares that resistance to and freedom from North American white settler colonial control of Hawai'i entails: "[...] a celebration of [...] the lavish beauty of our delicate islands [...] and, of course, the mana (spiritual power) that is generated by human beings in love with, and dependent on, the natural world" (19). Trask's critique is bioregional in that her poetry holistically integrates humans with all life in the bioregional Pacific world of Hawai'i; it provides a deep-rooted sense of place, reclaims cultural stewardship, and puts indigenous discourse at the center. She embraces the past of Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander cultures, for these histories contain the seeds of their future ("Feminism and Indigenous Hawaiian Nationalism" 913). In all of these practices, Trask can be aligned with other Pacific Islander writers who also contextualize Hawai'i in the midst of a larger Pacific World or Oceania, in which each island retains its own cultural specificity amidst a larger overlapping culture (Diaz and Kaunui 318-321).

Similar to Trask's poetry, Swaminathan's play also attracts his readers' attention by creating alternate possibilities despite its tragic ending. The central character, Vellaisamy, is born into slavery because his father and grandfather, poor farmers, had mortgaged their land and labor for high interest loans from the rich, local landlord. In return, they became bonded laborers working through their lifetimes to pay off the interest.¹⁴ What are his options within such a script? Not a lot, obviously. However, there is much in the play outside the typical script of postcolonial underdevelopment. Vellaisamy is educated with a little of the precious resources of his father, an unusual situation in the case of bonded laborers. In a society where bonded laborers lack agency, Vellaisamy does not wait for someone to empower him. He uses his education to successfully create his own water business. He negotiates a safe harbor in the village in return for his services as a water gatherer. He is so successful that his efforts get publicized beyond the village. Vellaisamy becomes an unlikely role model for all villagers in teaching them to become creative, self-reliant, and entrepreneurial: "There's nothing that human beings cannot achieve" (scene 3, p. 10). The villagers do get water for their basic needs. In return, the villagers overcome caste and class barriers to protect him from the brutality of the police and of the government. The result is an unprecedented change in people's circumstances. The play won accolades when screened as a film at the Kolkata International Film Festival in 1982. Shankar, the translator, notes in his introduction that after viewing the film, residents of Dhideernagar, Pondicherry, collected a rupee from each of the 500 households in the area to lay a pipeline of their own connecting to the main water

¹⁴ Bonded labor was historically associated with rural economies where peasants from economically disadvantaged communities were bound to work for the landlords. Although the system of debt bondage can be traced back to ancient India, it was exacerbated under colonial rule. Additionally, the social inequalities perpetuated by the Indian caste system in contemporary India ensures that this practice persists despite efforts to enforce labor laws by activists, NGOs and government offices.

supply, while in Bangalore, slum dwellers started agitating for water (xix). Swaminathan's work cannot be described as bioregional. His play does not discuss humans' relationships with the nonhuman world. By default, the absence of biodiversity is implicated in the absence of greenery. This is a dystopian world without water, the product of the ongoing colonizing practices of the nation-state. However, any discussion of the nation illuminates its relationship to the global circuits of capital, and so the links between the local, national, and global spheres are also illuminated.

Climate change is an ongoing process through these past two hundred years of industrialization. By the twenty-first century, it has changed and continues to change the habitat of all species, and so has caused all species to reach a frontier. For humans, this is a frontier where they confront unknown/unimaginable changes in their living conditions on this planet. They have to rethink their relationships with other species and with the ecosystem. That implies a rethinking of their economic systems of production and resource extraction, political ideologies ratifying the accompanying relationships of exploitation, and customs that are born and normalized out of these relationships. For writers, the responsibility is to find appropriate language that can force their readers to confront and rethink such relationships. Trask and Swaminathan function as activists. Trask uses the genre of the chant of lament with its elegiac overtones and Swaminathan uses the genre of socially realistic and absurd theater to educate their readers about the links between a colonial/neocolonial nation-state, corporate globalization, loss of biodiversity, the pollution of water resources, and the assault on indigenous cultures and their resources. Such rethinking may help readers to act responsibly by protesting policies promoting ecological despoliation and social injustice.

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