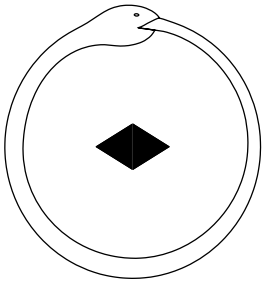


OVERFLOWS  
Nastassja Martin



notebooks  
SELVAGEM



## OVERFLOWS

Nastassja Martin

*The text in this notebook was adapted by Nastassja Martin from her speech given during the Motherwater crossing, which took place on 25 October 2025 aboard a ferry in Guanabara Bay, Rio de Janeiro.*



*El viajero entra a la quebrada bruscamente. La voz del río y la hondura del abismo polvoriento, el juego de la nieve lejana y las rocas que brillan como espejos, despiertan en su memoria los primitivos recuerdos, los más antiguos sueños.*

JOSÉ MARIA ARGUEDAS, *LOS RIOS PROFUNDOS*<sup>1</sup>

When you asked me to think on the subject of Water, the first word that came to mind by analogy was ‘abyssal.’ There are so many waters. The waters at the summit and the waters at the bottom, the frozen waters on the high mountains where I come from, the waters that are falling in swirling flakes right now over my house on the other side of this sea, the waters suspended in the sky, rising as vapor or falling on us in curtains of rain, the waters of springs, dew, streams, rivers, of the primordial ocean where the first beings met to create together a land to inhabit. There is also the vertiginous cosmic nature of the organic memories carried by Water, if we consider its magnetic relationship to lunar and planetary movements. Finally, there is the water I know best, that of my eyes, which cry with rage at the extent of the disaster, which cry with gratitude when love is called to mind, the water of my eyes that capture the day to remember the light and dream at night.

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1. *Suddenly the traveler enters the gorge. The voice of the river, the profundity of the dusty gorge, the sparkle of the distant snows, and the rocks that shine like mirrors all awaken in his mind primeval memories, the most ancient of dreams.* – JOSÉ MARIA ARGUEDAS, *DEEP RIVERS*

Water is abyssal, beyond imagination, not only because its metamorphoses and meta-stabilisations are so varied, but above all because the element of Water necessarily reminds us of the motif of origin. It is therefore not surprising that Western antiquity made water more than a mirror for Narcissus, more than a medium for incessant meditation, one of the main subjects of its philosophy. As is the case with mythical, poetic, and dreamlike thinking, philosophies of water such as Heracliteanism<sup>2</sup> have refused to abandon its place of native origin.

That said, the abyss that opens up beneath my feet as I navigate this aquatic proposition is probably primarily of a contemporary and political nature: how can we talk about Water in a world literally coagulated by fear? That is where I would like to begin: if Water is the source of life, fear is the source of extractivist materialism. The fear I am referring to here goes beyond individual subjectivity; it has infiltrated the memory of the modern social fabric, becoming *both* chronic and formless, liquid like water, but purged, purified of its nourishing powers: we no longer know which end to grab hold of. This fear multiplies by fixating on a crowd of disordered images, oozing and overflowing from every pore of the collective, generating repeated emergency policies intended to respond to uncontrollable states of alert. 'Security' has become the watchword par excellence, supposed to respond to 'instability at the borders,' at all borders. The *mainstream* narrative (the main river on which we are supposed to row) tells us that everyone necessarily aspires to a return to calm, to normality, to constants, to order, and to predictability. Yet it is precisely these seemingly 'pacified' states that continue to elude us. This is where I would like to focus my attention: if we take seriously the idea that current environmental and climatic changes are plunging us back into the age of myth, and if we acknowledge the dissolution of our personal and collective boundaries as our current *existential condition*, then perhaps we will be able to look this fear straight in the eye without immediately freezing – or dissolving, whichever you prefer.

By giving in to the illusion of human control over all other components of the worlds, we have renounced mastery of a memory, the one

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2. A reference to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus (around 540 BC – 480 BC), whose core concepts include the existence of a universal flux that determines the constant transformation of things. (T.N.)

that shines at the moment of danger, muscles tensed, attention heightened, openness to the possibility of leaping, the one that kills or saves; the one that authorises rebirth. We have neutralised the beings and entities that gave fears meaning and direction, that framed them in space and time and made them livable, overcomeable. This neutralisation leads us to believe that we have eradicated the physiological fear produced by the feeling of being hunted, tracked down, overwhelmed, engulfed, burned, blown away by what exists outside of humanity. What have we gained in exchange? The daily normalisation of latent fear, the famous stress inherent in modern life, which infiltrates all strata of our lives and potentially saturates the entirety of individual and collective experience. Our condition of mammalian incarnation has not prepared us, nor any other living being, for that matter, to endure the regime of daily fear to which we have consented, which feeds on anything and everything. We have, if not emptied the world of its potencies – let's be serious, that's impossible – at least abolished our ability to connect with them.

My starting point is this: we are no longer used to connecting with the types of entities that are rising today, those that supposedly move without body or mind, the elemental potencies. How can we contain our fear in the face of the great geophysical flows that overwhelm us? Of the fires that consume and reduce entire ecosystems to ashes, of the dams that break and the waves that destroy, of the storms that ravage and the hurricanes that annihilate? Elemental forces always manifest themselves too quickly, too strongly, too brutally, too massively. In an instant, they have the capacity to destroy all the effort we have put into trying to channel them over centuries. Their movements, highly unpredictable, can be as sudden as lightning, brief, relentless, and inexorable. Think of the storm at the summit and the mudslide that buries the valley below. Think of the mountainside that collapses and cuts off roads. Think of the tornado that tears off roofs. Think of the giant wave that wipes a city off the map. Think of the volcano that explodes, reminding us of the terrified and petrified faces of the inhabitants of Pompeii on the day of the cataclysm<sup>3</sup>.

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3. In 79 AD, Mount Vesuvius erupted, spewing ash, rocks, and other volcanic debris over the Roman city of Pompeii. For hundreds of years, the city remained buried under a thick layer of debris and was rediscovered in the 18th century. (E.N.)

How strange, when we remember that we are the ones who *defeated* the elemental potencies at the same time as we defeated the dragons – defeated, in the sense of *keeping them down*. Managed. Engineered. Manipulated. Contained. Confined. Locked up. Controlled. These are the terms that govern our modern ‘security.’ And yet, despite all this engineering and the thick walls we have erected between ourselves and the world, can we claim to be safe? The answer is as brief and relentless as lightning: no. What are we left with? Fear as the ultimate and untouchable motive for the absolute need for security, which in turn justifies the evident need to continue managing and controlling elemental flows, to put them to work, to the point of geo-engineering<sup>4</sup> manipulation that should be able to direct and guide their movements.

The planning logics specific to the energy transition regime are supposed to respond effectively to the need for decarbonisation, although nothing could be less certain. They perpetuate and reveal the reductive relationship we have with elemental flows, which are viewed as inanimate resources available for appropriation and considered renewable because they are inexhaustible. Obviously, therein lies the rub. These flows, beyond the fact that they condition the habitability of Earth, have also become the protagonists of what we call climate change. They are the ones that manifest and force us to question the nature of our relationship with them, the type of capture, channeling, and manipulation we implement, capable of containing them while making them productive. Their breakout from the frameworks within which they were supposed to remain highlights the cracking of these limiting constraints. It is a commonplace to say that overly rigid boundaries imposed on living beings always end up being transgressed. Many mythological figures, such as tricksters<sup>5</sup>, have expressed this predisposition of beings to exceed their known capabilities, becoming something other than what humans expected. This commonality is evident today in the increase in climate disasters. Those who mani-

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4. Geoengineering is the deliberate, large-scale intervention in the Earth’s climate system, generally with the aim of mitigating the adverse effects of global warming, with consequences that have yet to be fully understood. (T. N.)

5. A trickster is a mythological archetype – a god, spirit, or human – who uses cunning, mischief, and wit to challenge authority, break taboos, and disrupt the status quo. (T. N.)

fest it are the ones who have no mouth to speak, no eyes to see, no ears to hear, and no skin to feel.

By following in the footsteps of humans who have never stopped questioning the potencies that co-create their worlds, we understand that, for many communities, elemental manifestations respond to a dialogue that has become impossible between beings and entities of different compositions, a dialogue that is nevertheless necessary to maintain a habitable Earth. What does this reflective stance tell us if we apply it to ourselves? What happens if we take seriously the idea that elemental flows are responding, through their outbursts, to the normalisation of the economy of fear – and thus to the disruption of dialogue – in which and for which we live? A relatively simple idea emerges: we are in the process of purging debt. If the way out cannot be found through technosolutionism, because it only imitates and reproduces the axioms of an obsolete ontology, then perhaps we need to dive deeper, tip over the block of granite that seals the entrance to the cave and camp there, facing the rising tide, jumping into the unknown as one jumps into the sea.

Let's imagine our own bodies as boats. The hull would be the ribs, the mast, the sternum, the lungs, the sails. The captain of this boat would be the heart. It is the heart, with its flame, that sets the rhythm of the internal blood tides on which our vessel sails, opening up the possibility of breath by inflating our lungs and pushing air upward, towards the voice, towards the possibility of an encounter. Think about what happens when water-blood loses its fluidity by coagulating untimely. Clots form and clog our arteries: they prevent the metronomic action of the heart's fire that pulses life within us; by smothering the fire, they compress our breathing. We are literally breathless, gobsmacked, our voice/path fades and dies. Through this image, which may not be one, and this boat that rocks more and more often on a rough sea, too salty, too hot, too acidic, stripped of the diversity of its vitality, I wish to point out that it is the whole of our relationship with the elemental potencies, within and outside of us, that is out of balance. One of the questions motivating my current research might be put as follows: How can we create openings wide enough for Water to seep in once more, cracking the concrete of our most ingeniously designed internal and external struc-

tures? Can we reconnect with the most widely shared anthropological principles regarding water, and once again ask Water to nourish us, purify us, heal us and regenerate us? ‘Elemental illnesses’ must, still and perhaps especially today, be cured by ‘elemental medicines’.

In French, we have this evocative expression, a formula for salvation to follow when everything collapses inside and outside: ‘*retourner aux sources*’ [return to your sources]. Returning to the sources, to fundamental origins, means literally making the effort to climb the mountain to the headwaters, laying down offerings, bending down to drink the water and do your ablutions, and then finding yourself regenerated and healed. Think of the hundreds of miraculous fountains and magical springs throughout France that were long reputed to cure a myriad of ailments of the body and soul and restore the fragile alchemical balance between the four elemental principles within us. From this ‘return to the source’, we derive another expression in French: ‘*se ressourcer*’ (to recharge one’s batteries). Literally, it means drawing new strength from a reservoir of infinite potential; emerging renewed if we have managed not to dissolve, to transform ourselves because we have washed ourselves deeply. The water from springs and fountains is the vehicle for a new initiatory birth, allowing us to die to an old version of ourselves in order to be regenerated.

From the possibility of this ‘ressourcing’ from the origins derives another word, so weakened that it has come to erase the agentive and animated potency of the element of Water: ‘resource’. With this term, we refer to everything we can use at will in our frantic quest for safety, every time we cover our eyes with our hands and hide under the covers, as children do when they are terrified. If everything, absolutely everything that exists on Earth, has been forcibly converted into a ‘resource’, even humans (human resources), if we can draw on you and any other being as if you were a reservoir with infinite potential at any given moment, this trait is even more pronounced when we talk about the elemental potencies. In the heart of the vestiges of the Western world, neither Water, Air, Earth, nor Fire are animated anymore; we no longer ask ourselves whether we should listen to them; they are pure matter or simple geophysical flows immediately available for appropriation. This

is precisely where the machinery jams and reveals the shameless lie we have agreed to believe: the wind blows, the sea rises, the thunder rumbles, the earth trembles.

Let us return to our roots. The higher octave of *returning to our roots* for the possibility of ‘resourcing’ is the possibility of a deluge, whether intimate or collective: one era ends, another begins. While small fountains and streams nestled in the hollows of hills, mountains and cliffs heal minor ailments and have the power to wash away the dross from the body and soul, large bodies of water – floods, torrential rains, tsunamis – have the immense power to erase history. The gentle waters of springs restore the dreamer to a new state once he has drawn on their memory; the great waters terraform<sup>6</sup> the common ground, sweeping away everything that has taken root in their path, leaving only ruins as a reminder. I think of the story of Daria in Kamchatka in the late 1960s, of the river that overflowed after ‘a great anger,’ in her words, and swept through the taiga like a thousand galloping horses, tearing everything away, erasing in one fell swoop the Soviet attempt to establish a state farm deep in the forest. Even the bones of the dead buried underground were brought to the surface and forced to dissolve. Nothing remains from that era, says Daria, Water washed everything away. I still think of Saint Christophe en Oisans, a small mountain village next to mine, of the high-altitude subglacial lake that burst last year, of the raging river that poured downstream like a vengeful dragon, razing a village that was seven centuries old. The heart of the church now stands open to the sky, the river having cut the building in two and carried half of it away in its currents.

When we hear about such events, it is not surprising that manifestations of elemental potencies can be thought of as responses – in this case, angry responses. If we take seriously what many indigenous communities have been saying for so long, using this term is neither metaphorical nor symbolic. The Earth responds through its fluids and flows, and the question remains: how far must we go to hear this response? The animated potency of Water is not, in fact, thought of at all times

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6. To terraform is to hypothetically modify the atmosphere and temperature of a celestial body (planet or moon) so that it acquires the conditions necessary to support an ecosystem for terrestrial life. (T.N.)

and in all places. An entity that presents itself as fluidity, ‘flowing from the source’, like a smooth and continuous language, is unlikely to be identified as the speaker of a response. As Henri Corbin says, ‘the agency of Water is not thought of in its infinity, but at the place where it breaks’<sup>7</sup>. The *tabula rasa* that results from the response of the great waters to our breakdowns in dialogue is tragic, but it is also an opportunity to start thinking again with the entities that compose our worlds, and to reconquer the territories of dreams in order to work towards futures other than that of a waterworld populated by rich investors who share the remains of the cake until it is all gone.

Water and dreams, then. Gaston Bachelard said that water is a *kind of destiny*, a dream that has no beginning and no end, whose repeated sanding and dissolving constantly metamorphoses the substance of being. Thus Heracliteanism becomes an anthropological philosophy: we never bathe twice in the same river because human beings share the metamorphic destiny of flowing water. Heraclitus of Ephesus said that the soul, temporarily detaching itself from the sources of living fire in sleep, ‘momentarily tended to transform itself into moisture’. If we accept that to dream deeply, we must dream with the elements, then water becomes a very concrete protagonist in our story. Let us ask ourselves this question: what if it was Water that dreamed in our eyes? The French poet Paul Claudel said that water was the gaze of the Earth, its apparatus for looking at time. The poet, like so many indigenous groups, said that the true eye of the Earth was Water. His poetry was geography in the literal sense: he dreamed of the Earth, which dreamed of him in return, and applied himself to working on a ‘geoneiric’ of the Earth. Let us listen to the literalness of this formula: ‘it is water that dreams in us and outside us, for water is the eye’<sup>8</sup>. Let us now ask ourselves which side the metaphor and symbol fall on, when we hear talk today of a geography whose surface cartography has made it forget that it was supposed to be thinking about something other than land use planning. Let us continue with Claudel for a few moments, and this intuition which again brings him closer to a ‘mythical geoneiric’ that should resonate here in

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7. Our translation of ‘l’agentivité de l’eau ne se pense pas dans son infinité, mais à l’endroit où elle vient se briser’. (T.N.)

8. Our translation of ‘c’est l’eau qui rêve en nous et hors de nous car l’eau est l’œil’. (T.N.)

Guanabara Milky Bay: he spoke of the river as ‘the liquefaction of the substance of the Earth, the eruption of liquid water rooted in the depths of its folds, milk under the pull of the ocean that suckles.’ The image of water as milk allows us to immediately grasp its nutritional principles. Water becomes ultra milk, the milk of the mother of mothers. If we exaggerate, we could even say that of the four elements, only Water can cradle us. Cradle us like a mother. The water that carries and cradles us makes us our mother. It also returns to the Earth itself, which becomes alive by drinking it.

But to dare say all this is irrational, isn’t it? Aren’t these merely associations of ideas, sensitive and poetic expressions that have no scientific validity? Yet these correspondences come from afar, persist despite the steamroller of modern rationality, and withstand the wear and tear of time as well as the annihilation of cultural diversity. The possibility of a dialogue based on correspondences between beings and entities of different composition is physically nonsensical and physiologically unacceptable; and yet, it is the only dreamlike, poetic, and mythical truth capable of still resonating *between* worlds.

Let’s look at the facts: We find ourselves in a state of *ontological embargo*. Bruno Latour used to say this: Modern is the one who believes that others believe. Modern is the one who sees others as beings strangely attached, mired in belief and passivity. That is the crux of the matter. We have indeed stripped belief of its ontology, by separating objects and subjects and by inventing the symbols and representations that in turn explain why humans believe. The subjects of these beliefs – Water, Wind, Stones, Lightning, the Rainbow, the River, and so on – have, for their part, been drained of their generative potencies, the very potencies that cut across territories and eras. From there, let us ask ourselves once more: what is it that terrifies and astounds us at the thought of reopening the world by relativising the effective causalities described by modern science? And where does it come from, this notion of belief, into which all communities that forge relationships outside the realm of modern causality continue to fall? The notion lies in the distinction between lore and illusion. And this idea raises a significant problem, which many researchers and indigenous people have highlighted: the practical,

embodied lives of everyone – modern people and others alike – do not fit within this distinction, which literally implodes when humans ‘are with’ or ‘are amongst’. It is another form of life that maintains the distinction: the theoretical form of life.

Saying this does not solve the problem. Why is it impossible to abandon the tear between lore and belief, and if we do so, which map shall we use to navigate? If we define politics as the gradual construction of a shared world, it is rather difficult to begin by demanding that all those who aspire to be part of it relinquish the relationships that hold them alive. Moreover, we are careful not to apply to ourselves the detachment we impose on others: like it or not, we continue to be summoned by nature and society, and by necessity and freedom supported by the modern model of abundance. So that’s globalisation: fuelling the myth that the shared world will be the extension and implementation of one of these two realms. Recall the old maxim that is constantly being revived: liberating resources and people by putting them to work.

What, then, should we do? We are certainly not obliged to revere spirits, or the images and symbols in which they are depicted or even embodied, in order to breathe new life into the world. But we can do something else: conceive of the possibility of performative connections that bring a world into being. We can focus our attention on what is created *between* beings and entities of different constitutions. You may be following me, but fear is beginning to rear its head once more. Are we not in the process of drifting, of sliding from ontological pluralisation towards ontological laxity? Do we not have far too many things to take into account if the historical and situated bonds woven with lightning, spirits and mountains are to coexist with the modern ‘style of veridiction’? We are tempted to turn back. The causal chain wasn’t so bad after all; more reassuring, at any rate. The symbolism and ‘cultural diversity’ that colour the world in a thousand shades – that was quite enough. We desperately do not want to return to the mists of mythical times, where the boundaries between beings dissolve. But is this not precisely what the current crisis is forcing upon us? To reflect on the reconfigurations demanded by a world in which beings and entities are breaking free from their usual constraints and

shifting our common understanding? Perhaps, but that will only be one step. We will then need to map out the contours of this cartography, which I would like to call constellation-like.

How might we rethink the instances of dialogue between beings so different that they are not supposed to be able to communicate? How might we make room once more for performative bonds without falling into a lax relativism where ‘anything goes’ – the characters of World of Warcraft<sup>9</sup> as much as the ramblings of a Trump? To renew performative relationships within a constellation-like methodology, we must retrace memory. Retrace the path, follow the thread back and anchor it in a depth of multiple affects, multiple compositions and multiple sites. We must make the effort to retrace the journey, each time, to distinguish healthy relationships from those that are toxic. Empty relationships from full ones. In short, we must return to ethnography and conduct the investigation.

Non-modern constellations heal us because they nurture entities in multiple and fragile states, without demanding that they persist obstinately or that they originate solely from our psyche. Why? Because the question is not posed in those terms. This is not the point; it is about how it feels, about regarding them as potencies that transform our own lives, about what it opens up as a register of practice and thought: an enrichment. If this stance is maintained, pure extractivism, consumerism, availability, conservationism, all this become impossible. We find ourselves in situations that require us to resume dialogue and make room for what bursts into our lives.

To conclude, let’s head to Socoroma and leave behind once and for all the abstractions that fit so neatly into the Excel driving force of the transition. Socoroma, a small *Aymara*<sup>10</sup> village on the border between Bolivia and Chile, means ‘there where Water flows’. The mountains and the springs that flow from them await the offerings to come during the Cruz de Mayo ritual. Except that there are no longer any places outside the Age. A year ago, a tanker lorry full of oil overturned on the steep

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9. It is an online role-playing game. Players explore the vast fantasy world of Azeroth, battling monsters, completing quests and developing their characters in real time, often in groups. (T.N.)

10. The *Aymara* are one of the oldest indigenous communities in the Andes. Their history is linked to various pre-Columbian cultures that flourished long before the *Inca* Empire. (T.N.)

road overlooking the village. The Rain, though rare, was falling. The oil seeped into all the springs, spreading across all the crops. Corn, potato and oregano plants around which people dance every February to encourage them to grow, to perpetuate the possibility of life at these high altitudes. The water supply was cut off in Socoroma. The land, polluted. In your opinion, what is on the inhabitants' minds? The *manqha pacha*, the potencies of the underworld, materialised in a very concrete way *in the event* and in the black, viscous substance that does not mix well with life. Who will have to find ways to re-establish dialogue with the potencies underground in order to make amends and purify the water? Them. Because this is the situation. There is nothing imaginary or mythical about it: our world is the village of water mired in oil, whilst others, a little further afield, speculate on the future of the transition.

NASTASSJA MARTIN

Nastassja Martin is an anthropologist, writer and filmmaker. She is interested in the relationships between Indigenous cosmologies, colonial history and systemic crises in the context of climate change. She is the author of two essays, *Les Âmes sauvages – Face à l’Occident, la résistance d’un peuple d’Alaska* (La Découverte, 2016); *A l’Est des rêves – réponses Even aux crises systémiques* (La Découverte, 2022), in addition to a literary narrative, *Croire aux Fauves* (Verticales, 2019). She has produced two documentaries [*Kamchatka, a winter with the Evens* (51’, ARTE); *Kamchatka, a summer with the Evens* (50’, ARTE)] and a feature-length film, *Tvaïian* (90’, ARTE), yet to be released. She currently holds the CNRS Chair in Earth’s Habitability and Fair Transitions, and is affiliated with the ISJPS (Sorbonne, Paris 1).

TRANSLATION

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