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# Dramatizing Water: Performance, Anthropology, and the Transnational

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Place: Athipatti, a fictional South Indian village  
Vellaisamy: Can I trouble you for a little water?

..

Vellaisamy: Why do you laugh when I ask you for water?

Kovalu: To ask a man for his wife is not a sin in this village. But to ask him for water is a great sin.

*Thaneer Thaneer (Water!)* Komal Swaminathan

## Abstract

“Dramatizing Water: Performance, Anthropology, and the Transnational” investigates how “dramatizing water” can act as a constellation that links the basic substance of life to translocal performances across a continuum that spans water in everyday life, in ritual, and as it appears on a formalized stage. A brief genealogy of examples is developed across the everyday and ritual, but the primary focus in on the late Tamil playwright Komal Swaminathan’s 1980 *Thaneer Thaneer (Water!)* and its relevance as a prototype for political drama on water. There is currently a profound global crisis around water distribution and “dramatizing water” indexes an attempt to chart the possibilities of moving toward a differently configured space for our water-practices, toward an alternative and more sustainable performative cartography of water.

“Dramatizing water” is a constellation that links the basic substance of life to translocal performances across a continuum that spans water in everyday life, in ritual, and as it appears on a formalized stage. Although “dramatizing” does indicate a process of “preparing for the stage,” it also encompasses the fundamental senses of “acting,” “doing,” or “working.” “Water” derives from two Proto Indo-European roots: *ap* (preserved in the Sanskrit *apah*, or animate) refers to water as a living force and *wed*, an inanimate substance. Water exists on a threshold that launches the animate out of the inanimate, and, as we know, there is currently a profound global crisis around water distribution and usage. “Dramatizing water”—as an artistic, theoretical, and heuristic device—indexes my attempt to chart the possibilities of moving toward a new space for our water-practices, toward an alternative and more sustainable performative cartography of water.

### ***Dramatizing Water across Borders***

For several decades, water has been a central topic on the international stage, spanning, most predominantly, science, engineering, history, law, and policy.<sup>i</sup> In an effort, for example, to respond to the urgent need for new direction regarding our water problems, on March 22, 1993, the United Nations General Assembly launched World Water Day, a set of internationally sanctioned events that focused on getting the message out about water as a basic human need, its cultural significance, and its growing scarcity. This celebratory day has continued to galvanize awareness through public forums, activities, and related research, including the implementation of UN recommendations about water. An important milestone occurred in 2010 when the UN Human Rights Council adopted a binding resolution that established that “the rights to water and sanitation are part of existing international law...It also calls upon States to develop appropriate tools and mechanisms to achieve progressively the full realization of human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation, including in currently unserved and underserved areas.”<sup>ii</sup> Water, then, has been established as a basic right and as a public good.

Today, in 2013, a quick scan of nearly any online news site—the Huffington Post, CNN, BBC, South China Morning Post, the New York Times, or the Times of India—indicates that, despite the progress we have made, we are far from solving our global water problems. Things, in fact, are getting worse. The statistics are alarming: 884 million people lack access to clean water<sup>iii</sup>; “more than 3.4 million people die each year from water, sanitation, and hygiene-related causes. Nearly all deaths, 99 percent, occur in the developing world”<sup>iv</sup>. “200 million hours are spent each day globally collecting water”<sup>v</sup>; by 2031, the demand for water will exceed the supply by 40% (Charting: 40). The privatization of water continues at an exponential pace.<sup>vi</sup>

“Water wars,” or a generally heightened state of conflict, have already resulted from the lack of access to water: in the US, from the Tennessee/Georgia border, Alabama/Florida, areas in southern California, to the Southwest; between Ethiopia and Egypt; Darfur, Sudan; between regions of China, and across areas of India, Pakistan, and Nepal. The race to engineer solutions in the form of massive dams (such as the Three Gorges Dam (Yangtze River) and the Sardar Sarovar Dam (Narmada River) in order to increase the supply of power and water to underserved regions has led to massive displacements of local populations, the submergence of abandoned villages, and technological complications that continue to unsettle, even destroy, the local riparian cultures as well as overall environmental balance.

As we chart the shifting demographics, increasing populations, and the impact of the global economy on the distribution of water, it is very clear that it is not a simple physical limit of a vital material substance, but also the result of the impacts of a complex web of technical, social, political, and cultural systems that have led to and promulgate the current dire water shortage. Without a

reconfiguration—one that relies in some part on an alternative enactment of “dramatizing water”<sup>vii</sup>— we will fail to honor what environmentalist David Abrams has termed “our ongoing reciprocity with the world” (56), truncate the possibilities of recuperating a living relationship with water at the threshold of the animate and inanimate, and narrow the emerging geography of water to an “epistemic” of the manageable.

In “Species Nova [To See Anew]: Art as Ecology,” David Haley, for example, notes: “It is ten years since the Earth Summit in Rio [held in 1992] popularized the notion of sustainable development and introduced Agenda 21 as a strategy to achieve it. Sadly, culture and art, two of the systems that define humanity, were not mentioned among the necessary tools for building a better future”(144). It is, then, to the re-creation of such systems that we must turn for a series of translocal and transnational solutions to the water crisis, which will depend on both global agreements and microprocesses in the local context. How can we create new stages—in the theaters, in the university, in the city and village streets, and on the web—for telling our (local and global) stories about water and generating new forms of action? The story, on its own, is not sufficient.

A shift in social, political, and cultural dynamics around water practices can help us find ways to bridge the science, art and religion<sup>viii</sup> divide that, unmitigated, will continue to haunt our water problems and limit our capacities to find new responses in a timely fashion. Haley both cautions and invites us into new territory:

[T]hat our societies tend to value economics over ecology, and monoculture and agro-industry over diversity and permaculture, is certainly worthy of ethical attention. Here I want to invoke a call for integrating art as a necessary contribution to ecological intervention. I consider how artists may engage uncertainty, and how art may be used to develop new ways of seeing and ‘drawing.’ This is art for evolutionary survival, not commodification. Art that practices care, shared responsibility, and diversity in the pursuit of eco-centric cultures. (143)

Water is a substance always aligned with meaning; therefore, the performative aspects of creating cultural responses to, and from, water will be essential if we are to change pathways toward a more sustainable future.

The water issue is one of the clearest indices that we have of the profoundly transnational character of our attempts to build a new commons. In hopes of provoking for new “lines of flight”<sup>ix</sup>, I am situating this project in the context of theory of “dramatizing water” in and across what can be termed a “translocal” geography (Brickell and Datta: 3).<sup>x</sup> Translocality “deliberately confuses the boundaries of the local in order to capture the increasingly complicated nature of spatial processes and identities, yet it insists on viewing such processes and identities as place-based rather than mobile, uprooted or ‘travelling’” (Oakes and Schein, 20).

As we “dramatize water,” we become ever more cognizant of the fact that its use is always intertwined with the question of the porosity of borders or the lack of borders, as issues of privatization, distribution, and human rights begin to contest one another. How will this fundamental and essential human good be distributed across and within borders when the planetary climate systems pay no attention at all to the politics of borders?

### ***Art Responds: Dramatizing Water***

#### *The Everyday*

What might it mean, then, to examine and then to respond to contemporary water dilemmas as dramas of daily living, if water itself becomes an activated character in its own dramatization? There are, certainly, the diverse water stories of the everyday—across daily use, natural disasters, and landscape and urban spaces—that we learn about from the news, documentary films,<sup>xi</sup> extended anthropological and scientific fieldwork,<sup>xii</sup> travel, and a range of transnational academic and artistic networks and partnerships. In order to establish a framework for an anthropology of water in which it might become possible to intervene in the technology and culture of water in more reciprocal and sustainable ways, Ben Orlove and Steven Caton write that “[w]e propose to study water as a ‘total social fact’ (Mauss 1990)” (402) and describe a broad systems approach water as an engagement with “waterworlds” (Hastrup’s term, cited in Orlove and Caton: 403).

This approach to the “total social fact” of water informs a number of contemporary art practices. This type of dramatization that revolves around capturing *in situ* actions in photographs, installation works that invite audience interactions, video work that tracks the actions of ordinary people, or complex and beautiful movement pieces that render meditative engagement with water, or a range of dramas focused on bringing together lived experiences heightens perception and challenges our cognitive engagements with water. For example, in “Early Man at Ganga,” images of Delhi-based performance artist Inder Salim, Salim swims in the polluted and shrinking waters and removes garbage from the Ganges River. Japanese installation artist Ichi Ikeda, who has created more than forty of works on water in order to put in motion an extensive water network, recently completed a provocative work in Aso, Japan, “L-Shaped Walks of Peace,” a localized response to the March 11, 2011, earthquake, subsequent Tsunami, and disaster of a nuclear power generation in Fukushima. In Dublin, the 2011 Science Gallery exhibit “Future of Water,” “Water Catchers,” a video by Kay Westhues, focuses on people who collect water from artesian wells in the Midwest of the United States. Two of Eiko and Koma’s movement pieces, *River* (1995) and *Water* (2011), are profound site-based performance meditations on the power of water as elemental partner and the ways in which we are both in and of the landscape.

These works—all of which tap into the elemental—remind us of the stark and troubling contradictions of our current situation. At the same time they unsettle and reorganize our perceptual systems as they recalibrate our momentary, fleeting, and more persistent engagements with our “waterworlds.” Consequently, as we move toward a new performative cartography, the perceptual dynamics of these *in situ* actions accrue, predispose us to new forms of action, and, over time, lead to a deepening of the interactions between communities, water activists, policy-makers, scientists, and artists.

### ***Ritual***

Ritual is codified behavior that provokes the sacred or generates a secular experience of community. There are many ritual uses of water, from baptism in Christian Churches, the collection of water in India from nearby rivers to take in jars to Shiva’s temple, to the protective rites of Tin Hau in Hong Kong, and MamiWata, the divinity of water in parts of western Africa. In a number of countries, there are water festivals such as Chaul Chnam Thmey (Cambodia), Songkran (Laos), Thingyan (Myanmar), Aluth Avurudda (Sri Lanka), Songkran (Thailand), and Puthandu (Mauritius, India, Malaysia, Singapore and India).

In my own performance work on water—influenced by the methodologies of Rudolf Laban, Anna Halprin, Augusto Boal, and *butoh*—my choreographic explorations veer toward the ritualistic. In “Hong Kong Water Works,” a dance piece shown at the 2010 Hong Kong-Shenzhen Biennale, for example, incorporated large puppets and short films of the front doors of the temples of Tin Hau, the sacred space of the sea goddess, as we performed in the developing space of the West Kowloon Cultural Center in a provisional pavilion next to the harbour that faces the laser-lit skyline of Central.

A 2011 dance film on water in Hong Kong—shot on top of a building in the village of Tai Po—shows dancers drifting along the crumbling roof top walls with fish bowls full of water that captured the upside down reflection of the Hong Kong building-scape. In this performance, touch acted as a method for tracing a kind of imaginal history of water that was conveyed in the setting of literal rooftops of Tai Po and metaphorical images of the upside down buildings in the fish bowls. The always developing cityscape has created its own stranglehold on itself, and, as we see in the last image of the film, a rusty water faucet against the skyline, it is running out on itself. These projects, as I seek to invoke a liminal space for water—at a threshold that launches the animate out of the inanimate—will ask “what ‘new body’ must we dance from and within order to recover our senses and re-enchant our relationship to the built and natural environment, especially given the escalating array of water issues?”

## **Theatre**

Theatre provokes.<sup>xiii</sup> It acts as a vehicle for carrying (cross) cultural stories and images and igniting the emotional spheres of one's lifeworld. One of the most significant dramas on water that provides a prototype for thinking through political dramas late Tamil playwright Komal Swaminathan's 1980 play *Thaneer Thaneer* (Water!), a work that investigates the impact of government apathy on a remote Tamil village that had been without water for five years. Already a successful play in the early 1980's, it was made into a film by the Tamil filmmaker K. Balachander. Significantly, in addition to the fact that the themes of the play are relevant today, the play is also being revived. The Madras Players, under the direction of Pennathur Ramakrishna, produced Subramanian Shankar's English translation in Chennai in late 2012. Swaminathan's daughter Lalitha Dharini plans to reform Swaminathan's theatre group, Stage Friends, and open the new season with a re-staging the original version of the play in the near future.

Swaminathan, one of the leading Indian dramatists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is most well-known for this play, and Subramanian Shankar's translation is a powerful rendition of the original play. The play was initially banned from production; it was very critical of both the Indian government and seemed to be calling for a revolution through the voice of one of the characters. After some modifications, the play was allowed to go forward. It has been published six times and has been performed over 250 times both on stage in Madras and in the surrounding villages. It has also led to activist work on the part of slum dwellers (Swaminathan/Shankar: 124).

When the story opens, we learn that for the villagers of Athipatti, who have been without access to water for five years, the seemingly simple request of "troubling" one of the villagers for water (as outlined in the opening epigraph above) is no simple matter. Although the villagers have already exhausted the usual governmental channels of appeal, they gain a temporary reprieve when Vellaisamy, a stranger, decides to stay in the village and help them find solutions to their water problems. First, Vellaisamy helps them build a water cart and purchase a bull that he then daily runs to the waterhole seven miles away. Later, Velusamy Naicker, a rich man from a neighboring village and a politician, who retaliates because of the lack of endorsement of the villagers, sends his men to rough up Vellaisamy while he is at the water hole and also destroy the cart and kill the bull. Meanwhile, the villagers have discovered that Vellaisamy is a fugitive murderer, but after a village council and vote they decide to maintain their allegiance because of the ways in which he has befriended the village. As a final option to solving the village's water problem, Vellaisamy organizes the village to start building their own canal. Just as the village readies to blow up the boulder that stands in their way and that would reroute the water, both the police and engineers intervene. Vellaisamy—on the lam—dies in the desert.

The situation is dire. Shankar notes that two central figures attempt to defy the status quo. Vellasiamy is one of midnight's children, born on the eve of India's independence, and despite the fact that he is a fugitive from the law he plays the role of harbinger of new future. An ethics of the possible overrules the rule of the law of the status quo. Sevanthi is the village woman who gives Vellasiamy water when he arrives. She supports his effort to collect money to build a cart and buy a calf so he can go daily to get water for the village, and she later disavows her husband when he wants to take Vellasiamy in as a wanted fugitive.

Vellaisamy fails. He is after all a double criminal, as fugitive and as community leader who leads the village efforts to reroute the canal and to blow up the boulder in the stealth of night without proper permission. But we watch how the law fails the villagers. Because the village is rendered powerless three times: 1) through the first government appeal (before the play proper, 2) through the destruction of the cart and bull, and 3) through the stopping of the rerouting of the canal, we see the need drives the villagers and we see the consequences of acting outside the law. Though the play works to bring empathy and attention to the villagers, the play is already an inversion. Vellaisamy, who thinks he can use the tools of the master to shift the course of the river, must in the end fail. More engineering, in other words, may well not be the answer to the problems of lack of access to water.<sup>xiv</sup>

Nirmal Selvamony notes the significance of *tinai* in early Tamil literature, and he writes:

The Tamil oikos, namely, an early Indian social order was based on five basic ecological regions: scrub, mountain, arid tracts, riverine plains, and the sea coast (*tolkaappiyam III.1*). Before the introduction of the caste system in India most parts of Indian society were ordered eco-regionally... Each of the eco-regions (oikoses) has its own water source. (89-90)

The inhabitants knew how to work with the water available. This practice of working with, that is in a form of common relation, lead to a deep bonding between water, the land and the humans in each region. This form of bonding is what Selvamony notes bioregionalists now urge when they emphasize the importance of "dwell[ing] in the land" (90). These modes of bonding, based on *tinai*, promoted bonding with water, which was seen not as an object manageable by scientific policy, but, instead, as spirit.

Selvamony tracks the ways in which the move to a colonial state lead to the destruction of the communally managed system to one run centrally and intervened in technologically.<sup>xv</sup> As the modes of governance changed to a state structure, power had to be deployed to manage water which has led to a—deeply agonistic relationship (96).

Gender, race and ethnicity also play an important role in *Water!*. It is Sevanthi, a woman who has been walking the seven miles one way to get water;



and, today, the burden of collecting water still falls on the women. Selvamony notes that “[e]ven water is casteized. The only well that with water in the village is in the *dalit* (untouchable) settlement...The ” caste Hindus” do not draw water from this well for fear of contamination (Cuvaaminaatan 27)” (98).

The “casteization” of water continues. The *Times of India* notes, for example, in a July 2011 article, that: “*Dalits* of Yanamalai Kodikulam village have been prevented from fetching water from a well by non-*dalits* to protect the 'sanctity' of the well. For decades, *dalits* of the village, have not been allowed to use the well, the only source of potable water in the village, about 12km from Madurai” (Ramanujam). Today, the water situation in India has continued to worsen; in the peak of summer the water shortage is so acute that there is a need to bring tankards into various regions and the violence is growing. People, as they rush toward the tankards, are killed. Clearly, the play, as it brings attention to “unserved and underserved” and the layers of uneven distribution of power and access, continues to reverberate beyond its historical moment both in India and elsewhere.

At the end of the play the journalist OV finishes his chronicle of what has happened to the villagers since Vellaisamy’s death. He notes:

And the questions in the minds of all these people: Will we never see better days? Are we not worthy of living? Will our condition never improve? Society must put a full stop to these question marks at once...Otherwise, the day will undoubtedly come when these marks of interrogation turn into marks of violence. (173)

OV speaks as a friend for the villagers from within the play, but he is also a double for Swaminathan and his own outcry against the injustice the socio-economic conditions that hold in place a perpetual lack of water, a lack that eventually destroys the village.

Those final cries of “Water!” are channeled through OV as a summative statement for the play’s storyline. Water, as materiality, means something different to the politician, the engineer, the villagers, and the fugitive. OV’s words arrive to us today belatedly, distant, too late for the villagers of Athipatti. We can only partially hear the last words of the play as the question marks they are before the “marks of violence” will erupt again, as they have in many places since the play’s inception. Water, though, is a key metonymy for the promise and failure of contemporary life and—as the title suggests—its rallying cry.

### ***Re-Configuring the Water Drama***

We need, at this moment in our globalized and local histories around water, to develop new theatrical practices, critical inquiry, and forms of cultural diplomacy that attend to exchanges across a set of transnational pathways. Arjan Appadurai writes that “The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social

fact, and is the key component of the new global order" (31) and imagination must, therefore, interact always with the rapidly changing cultural, political, and global flux caused by technology, capitalism, and the movement of people, ideas, money, and products. Rather than map "water" as some measurable indicator of a specific nation state, we can, instead, map the flows, migrations, crossings, and cultural exchanges at work, and then find ways to give body to these emerging story-maps in performances both onstage and in everyday life.

Given these transnational flows, there are pressing questions regarding the emergence of an alternative and more sustainable performative cartography of water. Erika Fisher-Lichte notes:

"The interweaving of cultures in performances quite often creates an innovative performance aesthetic, which establishes and gives shape to new collaborative policies in society. It probes the emergence, stabilization, and de-stabilization of cultural identity. Here, the aesthetic and the political merge" (400).

What does it mean to affiliate, or even to intervene, in the context of the translocal—as a stranger, as an artist-academic-activist, as friend? It is not enough to argue for new relationships with our local spheres of water alone; we must also generate translocal points of contact across communities and regions.

Dramatizing water—in the everyday, through ritual, and through staged performance—provides a constellation for building transnational intercessions around our many stories of water, as the problems we face with water are certainly not bound by the space of the nation-state. This type of exchange, although often fraught with the historical and geographical incommensurabilities, triggers new forms of cross-disciplinary sharing on water issues and artistic practices. We need different maps, networks of artistic and community action, ways of speaking, and a new set of friendships. As we learn, again, how to become the friend of water, we will develop new forms of working-with that will offer a different relationship between art, science, policy, and religion that will, in turn, co-create more sustainable spaces of water practices.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> For more on pertinent conversations regarding the performance of science, see Sue Ellen-Case's *Performing Science and the Virtual* and Bruno Latour's *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*.

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/pdf/human\\_right\\_to\\_water\\_and\\_sanitation\\_miles\\_tones.pdf](http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/pdf/human_right_to_water_and_sanitation_miles_tones.pdf), p.3, accessed June 12, 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/pdf/human\\_right\\_to\\_water\\_and\\_sanitation\\_media\\_brief.pdf](http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/pdf/human_right_to_water_and_sanitation_media_brief.pdf), Accessed June 10, 2013.

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<sup>iv</sup><http://water.org/water-crisis/water-facts/water/>, Accessed June 10, 2013.

<sup>v</sup><http://water.org/water-crisis/water-facts/women/>, Accessed June 10, 2013.

<sup>vi</sup><http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/private-vs-public/>, Accessed June 13, 2013.

<sup>vii</sup> There is a developed body of theory and practice on the intersection of visual art and the environment as well as environmental humanities. The field of eco-performance (Theresa Mays, UnaChaudurai, Downing Cless, Wendy Arons, Downing Cless, Baz Kershaw, Nirmal Selvamony) is still emerging. Less, however, has been written on water and the arts. David Clark's *Water and Art*, seminal in this area, makes scattered references to examples of the intersection of water and performance.

<sup>viii</sup> Numerous works chronicle the divide between the global economy, the technical, and the religious and its disastrous consequences. See for example Vandana Shiva's *Water Wars*, David Haberman's *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India*, and Richard Foltz's *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: A Global Anthology*.

<sup>ix</sup> "Lines of flight" derives from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. For more see *A Thousand Plateaus*.

<sup>x</sup> For more on how I am developing the terminology of the "translocal" in relation to tracking alternative histories and the emergence of forms of performance-based transdisciplinary practices, please see my forthcoming work, *Transnational Avant-Garde Asian Performance Histories* (with Iris Tuan) and *Dramatizing Water: Performance, Science, and the Transnational*.

<sup>xi</sup> Examples of films include: *Blue Gold: World Water Wars*, *Flow*, *Poisoned Water*. See also film shorts at: <http://waterfortheages.org/water-films/>.

<sup>xii</sup> See, for example, Lyla Mehta's *The Politics and Poetics of Water: Naturalising Scarcity in Western India*.

<sup>xiii</sup> There are a number of provocative dramas on water: 1) David Diamond's Vancouver based *Headlines Theatre*, which draws on the approaches of Theatre of the Oppressed and Legislative Theatre, created *THIR\$TY*, a 2002 dance/theatre work that used a fifty foot pool of water as its setting and addressed the privatization of water. 2) In March 2013, at the Greer Garson Theatre at Santa Fe University, a documentary theatre work "Cold Water" (March 2013), directed by Victor Talmadge, based on interviews and found material, charts the story of the village of Aqua Fria, N.M., and their struggle to survive without sufficient water. 3) "Water Ways," by the Cleveland Public Theatre (2013) directed by CPT directors Raymond Bobgan and Chris Seibert, is a devised theatre that uses a range of multi-media approaches to engage audiences in poetic, associative, and non-linear explorations of who owns the water and what happens when the new well just dug up turns out to be dry.

<sup>xiv</sup> In a personal interview with Nirmal Selvamony, November 2011, he notes that the play is deeply indicative of the Tamil environmental ethos. Nevertheless, he is under-convinced by Swaminathan's consideration of Vellaisamy's way out is through the use of more engineering.

<sup>xv</sup> The work has been extensively examined in a number of important works, including, for example, Vandana Shiva's *Water Wars*.

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