



## Creative Intervention

### Water Ethics: Think Like a Watershed

JESSICA HALLENBECK

University of British Columbia, Canada

*Water Ethics: Think Like a Watershed* is the fifth and final video developed for *Urban Water: Innovations for Environmental Sustainability*, a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) that explores urban solutions to the global freshwater crisis, characterized by a dwindling supply of and access to freshwater.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Karen Bakker, the professor of the course, approached Lantern Films to create a series of videos on the topic of water and the built environment. Lantern suggested a film series that featured Vancouver-based innovations to water infrastructure and design; from a building that uses captured rainwater, to an energy utility that utilizes waste thermal energy to heat a neighbourhood, the videos focus on local urban innovations that reduce freshwater consumption. While the first four videos used in the *Urban Water* course are heavily focused on the built form – buildings, energy utilities, neighbourhood design, and creek regeneration – *Water Ethics*, featuring interviews with Secwepemc scholar Dr. Dorothy Christian Cucw'la7 and poet Dr. Rita Wong, asks us to critically think about our relationship with water.

Dorothy Christian brilliantly reframes the discussion about water, moving away from a supply and demand framework to one based on ethics, rights, and relationality. “When I think about ethics, for me it’s a right relationship with the water. For me to be in right relationship with the water is to be sure that I am taking care of it, as it will take care of me” (*Water Ethics*, minute 1:04). Dorothy’s words are a call for us all to resituate our connections with water by engaging in participatory water ethics: visiting where the water we drink comes from, understanding its flow, and acknowledging how it has been cared for. In the context of Vancouver, which is unceded Coast Salish territory, resituating our relationship with water also entails fundamentally

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<sup>1</sup> The video discussed here – *Water Ethics: Think Like a Watershed* – may be accessed at <https://vimeo.com/198392259>



centering x<sup>w</sup>məθkwəyəm (Musqueam), S<sup>k</sup>w<sup>x</sup>wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliiwətaʔl (Tsleil-Waututh) law and stewardship of water. In their introduction to the book *Downstream, Reimagining Water*, Christian and Wong argue for a move away from presumptuously “knowing about water to humbly learning with and through water opens new possibilities that would be foreclosed by a colonial mindset” (Christian & Wong, 2017, p. 10). In British Columbia, water is part of a colonial system of governance.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous laws and knowledges are largely excluded from decisions about water (Harris & Simms, 2016). While the aforementioned urban interventions successfully reduce freshwater consumption, they are still based on a colonial mindset of “knowing about” water. What Christian and Wong are advocating for is a decolonial relationship with water.

Inspired by what Christian and Wong had shared, the filmmaking team decided that we wanted to mirror this relationship with water in the film itself. As the directors, cinematographers, and editors of the short film *Dave Shortt* and I felt that it was important to visually create an affective relationship with water. We visited and filmed water in different areas of the Vancouver watershed. We recorded the sounds of water from the places that we visited, and synced them up with each place, because ethically we wanted to respect the fact that the sounds of water change with each place and with each listener. We also wanted to film a festival that brought people together to care for water, highlighting the ways that this ethic of care, or “right relationship with the water” is being cultivated. Essentially, the film was intended to reframe the discussion of water rights by asking all of us to affectively enter an emotional relationship with water: to visit it, to listen to it, and to engage with our responsibilities to water.

## References

- Bakker, K. (2003). *Good governance in restructuring water supply: A handbook*. Ottawa: Federation of Canadian Municipalities.
- Christian, D., & Wong, R. (Eds.) (2017). *Downstream: Reimagining water*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Harris, L., & Simms, R. (2016). ‘All of the water that is in our reserves and that is in our territories is ours’: *Colonial and indigenous water governance in unceded indigenous territories in British Columbia* (project report). Vancouver: Canadian Water Network & Water, Economics, Policy and Governance Network, University of British Columbia.
- Lantern Films (2015) *Water Ethics: Think Like a Watershed*. Vancouver, BC: Lantern Films/University of British Columbia.

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<sup>2</sup> “Colonial water governance refers to systems of water governance implemented by colonial governments in Canada, understood here as: “The range of political, organizational and administrative processes through which communities articulate their interests, their input is absorbed, decisions are made and implemented, and decision makers are held accountable in the development and management of water resources and delivery of water services” (Bakker, 2003, p. 3).