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Constructing Another World: Solidarity and the Right to Water

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ABSTRACT *Globally, one in eight people lacks access to potable water; more people die from unsafe drinking water than from all forms of violence, including war. A substantial body of research documents that the privatization of water – led by global financial institutions working in collusion with governments and corporations – does not lead to more people gaining access to safe water. In fact, the opposite is true: privatization leads to both higher cost and lower quality water. For the past century, the dominant focus of transnational organizing has been "from the West to the rest," and the frequent attention to movements in the global North has led to the neglect of transnational linkages between movements. Drawing on fieldwork conducted on three right to water movements that span three continents (North America, South America, and Africa), this paper examines efforts to reclaim the water commons, and how struggles have been driven by grassroots movements demanding that democracy, transparency, and the human right to water are prioritized over corporate profit. As feminist scholars have pointed out, the "standpoint" offered by marginalized actors offers important insights into the operation of systems of power and the strategies of survival and resistance that less powerful actors adopt in order to survive and thrive. This paper explores how transnational movements around water and other basic rights engage with and learn from each other.*

KEYWORDS right to water movements; transnational social movements; solidarity; alter-globalizations; water; resource conflicts

Mulheres, Água e Energia Não São Mercadorias!
(Women, water, and energy are not commodities!)
Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens
(MAB or Movement of People Affected by Dams)

Water is life! Sanitation is Dignity!
Laila, member of African Women Water Sanitation and Hygiene Network/Environmental Rights Action Nigeria

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People can go a few weeks without food, years without proper shelter, but only a few days without water. Water is so fundamental we often forget how much we rely on it. Despite numerous studies showing that privatization decreases access to safe water and increases cost, multinational companies continue to privatize water systems around the world. Yet, people are also organizing to resist these policies and to reclaim the public sphere. Campaigns against water privatization – or "right to water" movements – speak to the idea of water as a human right, not a commodity: as a public good, not a private service. This stance challenges the predominant capitalist logic of the state. Campaigns opposed to water privatization are often campaigns countering neoliberal globalization generally and the privatization of other resources or energy structures in particular (Almeida, 2014; Barlow & Clarke, 2002; Olivera & Lewis, 2004; Subramaniam, 2014; Bakker, 2007). One body of literature suggests that because it is so central to people's basic survival the threat of water privatization is a type of privatization that elicits more social movement resistance than other resource conflicts around privatization (Almeida, 2014; Subramaniam, 2014).

This paper examines efforts to reclaim the commons of water, and how grassroots movements drive the struggle and demand the prioritization of democracy, transparency, and human rights over corporate profits in public policy. As feminist scholars have pointed out, the "standpoint" offered by marginalized actors offers important insights into the operation of systems of power and the strategies of survival and resistance that less powerful actors adopt in order to survive and thrive (Connell, 2007; Collins, 2002, 2012). This paper is part of a larger research project on movements fighting for the right to water, and explores the following questions: (1) How are transnational movements communicating and organizing around water and other basic rights? (2) How are movements engaging with and learning from each other, and in what ways is the "West to the rest" paradigm subverted in these interactions? Transnational social movement scholars have too often reinforced the idea that knowledge flows from the "global North" to the "global South," although a strand of research has critiqued this dynamic as incomplete and as an example of methodological nationalism (see Bracey, 2016; Connell, 2007; Desai, 2009; Escobar, 1988; Hughes et al., 2018; Schroering, 2019a; Mohanty, 2003; Smith, forthcoming; Smith & Wiest, 2005; Vieira, 2015).[1] Yet movements and ideas flow in various ways, including those not immediately measured or quantified. This is not a new process that I am describing; rather, I am challenging the literature on social movements that has suggested transnational movements flow vertically from

[1] While I find the global North/global South binary problematic in various ways, including that it is not geographically accurate, these categories are commonly used in scholarship and policy circles, and they do more to decenter the United States and Europe than the categories "developing versus developed" countries or "first world versus third world."

the North to the South. This work expands the empirical foundations that can help illuminate the complex and multifaceted ways by which information and knowledge flows through transnational movement networks, thereby contributing to learning that can disrupt prevailing power alignments and social relations.

I argue that people are linking their disparate fights together to win victories. The struggle is ultimately a conflict of power between *who* has a right to water. On the one hand are people and movements saying that access to water to meet basic needs is a human right. On the other hand, capitalists maintain that they have the "right" to profit from the privatization of water. Too often, governments collude with private interests for capital in so-called public-private partnerships or PPPs. This is a global movement, as I will detail later. As water justice and human rights scholars Farhana Sultana and Alex Loftus (2012) explain:

> Recognizing the right to water signals that authorities can be held politically and legally accountable, enabling those who are denied water to have means to contest and struggle for water. Opportunities can be created for marginalized communities and peoples to enter into (often elitist) decision-making processes of water policies, management systems and institutions. (p. 5)

This relates to what Jackie Smith observes of rights language: "despite some academic critiques that have dismissed the transformative potential of human rights, I saw activists embracing this language in an emancipatory way (see Santos, 2007; Rajagapol, 2006)" (Smith, 2017, p. 350). This becomes even more relevant as we see an international turn toward right-wing governments, with policies that place capital control and accumulation over life (Smith, 2018). Movements fighting for the right to water are part of a larger struggle for the right to livelihood. As Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee (2011) describes, there are numerous struggles across the continents against transnational corporations and governments for land, livelihood and, I would add, water. These movements are not only local or global. Instead, they are "translocal":

> Local communities living (and dying) in so-called democratic societies but governed in very non-democratic ways that are engaged in conflicts with both the state and the market, and sometimes even with 'civil society' while also making connections with other resistance movements in different parts of the world. (Banerjee, 2011, p. 331

This translocal resistance relates to the processes and discussions taking place in movements for the right to water. According to Banerjee (2011, drawing on Sassen, 2006), translocality captures the idea that there are "specific local spaces that are distributed across multiple nation states involving particular configurations of actors, resources, territory, authority, rights and relationships of power" (p. 331). Translocality provides for new

insights into understanding and analyzing change; of seeing (and participating in) movements as learning networks (Desai, 2015; Smith, forthcoming; Schroering, 2019b).

For the sake of clarity, below I outline three separate cases, each on a different continent. The first is *Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens* (Movement of People Affected by Dams), located in Brazil; the second is Our Water, Our Right out of Nigeria; and the third is Our Water Campaign, located in the United States. What I advance is that these three cases actually reflect a single case of a translocal movement for the right to water, with the *National Summit on the Human Right to Water, Nigeria's Water Emergency: From Resistance to Real Solutions Against Corporate Contro*l held in Abuja, Nigeria from January 29-30, 2019 (referred to here as the Summit), as one specific convergence space of translocal organizing for the human right to water. Indeed, there is a growing body of literature that examines the shifting formations of transnational organizing and the need to examine the wide "*ecology* of organizations, networks, practices, and strategies" of movements (Evans & Rodríguez-Garavito, 2018, p. 10, emphasis in original). There is a convergence of campaigns and movements, with the Summit as a translocal space of encounter that shows how they flow out of and into the Summit. As Evans and Rodríguez-Garavito (2018) contend, it is insufficient to examine movements in isolation and as single points in time – to do so provides only a partial understanding of the larger story.

In the next section I discuss my data and methods, beginning with an overview of the cases of translocally or transnationally linked local water struggles. Next I move to a discussion of the Summit, and then address the importance of global solidarity in the fight for the right to water before concluding the paper with a discussion of why this translocal movement for water matters.

Data and Methods

Background on Cases

Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (MAB), formally founded in 1991 as a national movement for the rights of people affected by dam projects, coalesced out of existing struggles (beginning in the 1980s) located in proximity to Brazilian dams.[2] MAB leads the fight against the removal of families from their homes and opposes the privatization of water, rivers, and

[2] MAB organizes whole communities. They do have partner movements, non-profits, and unions who they work with in partnership, but the actual organization is of communities. MAB leaders said they couldn't give me an exact number of how many individuals this represents but definitely in the tens of thousands (and this number doesn't include the other partner entities). (fieldnotes, summer 2018).

natural resources – resources upon which the communities depend for their livelihood. The movement seeks not just to resist current energy policy, but also to articulate alternatives. Their motto is "water and energy are not commodities" (MAB, n.d.). In Brazil all of the corporations that construct, own, and operate dams are part of a large network of mineral companies, electric companies, and other corporate power. MAB argues that the *povo* (people) should have sovereignty and control over their resources and that they should not be for private gain. MAB also frequently participates in actions with both the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST), *Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores* (MPA) and the transnational social movement *La Via Campesina* (LVC), as well as various other social movements, unions, and human rights organizations (fieldnotes, 2018; Plataforma Operáia e Camponesa da Energia, 2014).

Our Water, Our Right (OWOR) began in 2014 when CAPPA (Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa) learned "that the Lagos state government had been secretly negotiating with the World Bank to hand Lagos water resources to privatisers under a globally-discredited Public Private Partnership (PPP) structure" (CAPPA, 2021). OWOR is a campaign of CAPPA,[3] and is in partnership with Corporate Accountability, a U.S. based NGO that is also connected to the Our Water Campaign in Pittsburgh and with Flint Rising in Michigan, both places with water contamination crises that involved Veolia.[4] Using language similar to that of water activists elsewhere, the activists in Lagos, Nigeria fight against the privatization of water and call for "transparency, accountability, and democratic public control in the management of public water infrastructure" (Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth, Nigeria, 2016, p. 3).

Our Water Campaign is a coalition of environmental, labor, women's health, racial justice, and other community organizations as well as individual residents, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Formally coalesced in 2017 under the banner "Our Water Campaign," the coalition came together to address the public health catastrophe of the announcement of Pittsburgh's lead in the water crisis (Pittsburgh United, n.d.a). The coalition fights to ensure that the city's water is "safe, affordable, and publicly controlled." The refrain of the importance of maintaining *democratically* controlled water is also used by OWC. The point that water should be for people not for profits is key to organizing efforts of the OWC. The coalition changed the name to Our Water, Our Rivers at the end of a 2018 planning retreat, merging it with another campaign of Pittsburgh United (the organization that "houses" the

[3] CAPPA was created in 2020 and was formerly known as Environmental Rights Action (ERA) Nigeria, founded in 1993. At the time of the Summit, CAPPA was known as ERA, but I use the current name in this paper (CAPPA, 2021).

[4] Veolia – a corporation involved in water privatization – is discussed at length later in the article.

coalition),[5] the Clean Rivers Campaign, which addressed sewage, stormwater, and green infrastructure issues (fieldnotes, 2018). This echoes arguments I have heard from other activists – initially in Brazil – that issues of drinking water and sanitation cannot be separated from each other. In January 2020 the coalition opted to return to the name "Our Water Campaign" (still keeping the campaigns merged), noting that the language of "our" water signaled the idea that all of the water system issues are interrelated.

MAB was not a part of the Abuja Summit. However, members of both CAPPA (who learned I did work with MAB) and MAB (who knew I was attending the Summit) asked me to connect them, which I have done. I am a part of the U.S. Solidarity Committee for MAB, and I include a discussion of MAB here, because as noted earlier I see my research and organizing as interconnected, and I posit that MAB is an important part of this broader translocal fight for water justice, even as my focus in this paper is on the Summit. As the paper progresses and concludes, my hope is that this will become clear.

Data and Methods

This study of translocal organizing and its influences on flows of knowledge and strategic learning draws from my participatory research in two organizing settings, Pittsburgh, United States and Brazil. While I focus on a particular convergence of activists at the Human Right to Water Summit in Abuja, Nigeria, January 29-30, 2019, I understand and treat the Summit as an instance or space of translocality and intersecting learning networks that connect Pittsburgh with Nigerian and Brazilian activist networks. I have been an "observant participant" with Our Water Campaign since its inception in 2017, attending and participating in meetings, planning retreats, actions, lobby visits with elected officials, other public meetings, community canvassing, and additional activities. My engagement with OWC led to my participation as an invited delegate from Pittsburgh to the Water Summit in Nigeria. I was also invited to attend pre and post strategy meetings of Our Water, Our Right. I spent two weeks in Nigeria, visiting Lagos, Ibadan, Calabar, and other towns, meeting with Nigerian environmental activists and seeing firsthand some of the challenges around gaining socio-environmental justice. I have also made three research trips to Brazil between 2018 and February 2020 as part of my research on grassroots struggles over water and resources, conducting nearly 40 semi-structured interviews with members of

[5] Pittsburgh United is a coalition of organizations (labor, community, faith, environmental) in the Pittsburgh area that works to create "a community and economy that works for all people" (Pittsburgh United, n.d.b.).

MAB and affiliated movements in Brazil.[6] I also conducted hundreds of hours of participant observation of daily activities, meetings, and trainings, and many informal conversations. The descriptive detail in this paper draws from this work.

The interactive dynamics of knowledge and power are well-studied and understood; however, following the critique by Raewyn Connell (2007), academia all too often fails to incorporate voices (i.e., knowledge) from the periphery. Before beginning my scholarly study of social movements, I worked for eight years as a student and community organizer, and I have continued organizing work during my doctoral studies. My positionality as a white, cis-gender woman researcher from what is now called the United States shapes my perspectives, my objectivity, and my subjectivity. Race, class, gender, sex, and geographic location all matter. Indeed, there is a substantial body of work that calls for considering positionality when studying movements, and argues that knowledge production needs to come with and from the community (see Bejarano et al., 2019; Collins, 2015; Conway, 2017; Dalsheim, 2017; Escobar, 2008; Markoff, 2003; Mohanty, 2003; Santos, 2004; Vieira, 2015; Watkins, 2018). As Belinda Robnett (1996) writes, "it is equally important to analyze the different movement experiences as determined by one's race, class, and gender" (p. 1663).[7]

Just as water conflicts involve power, power is also present in social movement resistance. It is present in activist discourses and assumptions, as well as in how scholars write and think about the movements they study (Krishna, 2006). As Paulo Freire (2018) outlines in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* a neutral education process does not exist. Neither does neutral theory, neutral methods, or neutral sociology. I maintain there is a place for scholarship that is transparent and says, "yes, I am emotionally invested in this work, and the world as it is makes me angry." Anger is an important catalyst, as Rachel Watkins (2019) powerfully states: "there's a political knowing that comes out of anger." This relates to both theory and methods. Watkins speaks of the need for "ethical epistemology" in scholarship – of producing knowledge with and from the community being studied (Watkins, 2018, p. 43). Patricia Hill Collins (2015) argues that "intellectual activism" is needed in scholarship.

I cannot be a post-colonial, post-imperial, post-white supremacy, post-capitalism scholar. I live in a world where those systems are very much alive and at work, and where my positionality means that I benefit from these oppressive systems. My positionality not only gives me certain privileges, it also shapes how I see the world, no matter how reflective and critical I am.

[6] Interviews were conducted in Portuguese and lasted between 25 minutes and two hours (with the average being an hour).

[7] I have explored this idea of knowledge production and what academics can learn from movement actors using the specific case of MAB in a recently published paper (Schroering, 2019a).

What I can be, however, is a scholar and person who interrogates the world-historic structures that shape what I see and what I know. I can seek with intentionality to be anti-colonial, anti-imperial, anti-white supremacy, and anti-capitalist.[8] This is not just a theoretical stance; it is one lived out in praxis, and that also means that theory and praxis cannot be devoid of taking an ethical stance. To be clear: what I am calling for here is not new. W.E.B. Du Bois rejected disciplinary fragmentation, served as an extraordinary public intellectual, and saw theory and praxis as intertwined (Du Bois, 1952; Rabaka, 2006; Stewart, 1984). Feminist scholars, decolonial scholars, Indigenous scholars, and critical race theorists have built and used anti-colonial research methodologies and constructed theories grounded in praxis and collaborative research methods for decades. Social theory production can be a part of transforming society. Yet, while things are shifting, the practice still remains in most of academia that there is somehow a detached neutral researcher who critiques their research subjects. And all too often the work of scholars who do this work – especially Black women and scholars from outside the United States and Europe – is either discounted or unknown.

In this paper, I am both researcher and movement actor; I choose not to separate my militancy and my scholarship. Or perhaps, as Freire (2018) might say, I cannot in fact separate the two. The bifurcation of research and practice has depoliticized research and enlisted scholars in the work of reproducing hegemony, which works to the advantage of the hegemonic powers (who also fund research and academic institutions). The aim of this writing is to produce something that is engaging for academics and activists alike, for both need to be engaged in a conversation aimed at building shared knowledge. Its focus is the idea that water is a human right, not a commodity. That argument is directly at odds with a capitalist logic that says capitalists have the right to privatize water, to turn it into a commodity, and to make money from it. There are two competing logics here: the capitalist logic that says someone has a right to make money with water versus the logic that says human beings have a right to water. I am doing this work because I am interested in furthering the second logic: how do we build a world where people have a right to water? And the right to livelihood in general?

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2004) sees the World Social Forum (WSF) process as providing spaces for the articulation and advancement of "epistemologies of the South." Santos uses the space of the WSF to discuss how it engaged in what he coins the "sociology of absences" (2004, p. 14) through its intentional process to lift up voices previously marginalized and made invisible within global capitalism. He also sees the Forums as spaces for the "sociology of emergences"(Santos 2004, p.14), where social

[8] See Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2014) *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* for an excellent discussion that delves into ways in which scholars can work to be anti-colonial and fight against epistemicide in their own work.

movements engage with each other and demonstrate alternatives to current (capitalist) social relations. In these spaces, movement activists and groups from around the world both imagine and create empirical possibilities outside of the present reality, and develop networks and strategies aimed to help put these into place. This process is also about developing theories (created and lived out in praxis) to envision new futures.

The Summit: A Fight Against Corporate Power

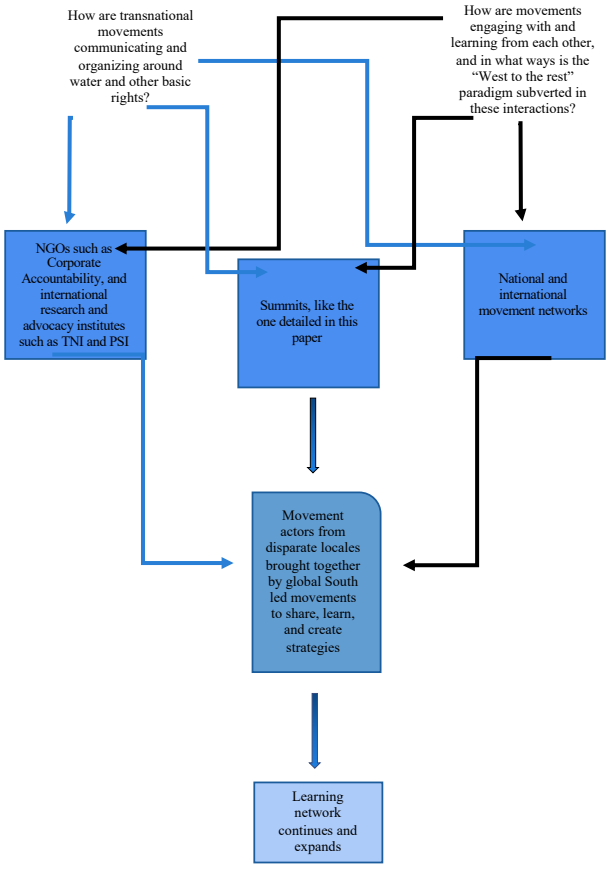

Figure 1. Translocal Learning Networks.

Figure 1 explains how the Summit served as a translocal space for the sociology of emergences. The Summit, co-organized by AUPCTRE (Amalgamated Union of Public Corporations, Civil Service Technical and

Recreational Services Employees), Corporate Accountability, CAPPA, and Public Services International (PSI), brought over 150 people together from around the world to fight against water privatization and create solutions for public water (Weinman, 2019).

Figure 2. Nigeria International Petroleum Summit Poster, Abuja Airport (photo: Caitlin Schroering).

Pittsburgh activists with the OWC received an invitation to attend the Summit to share experiences of PPPs, and their struggles and victories to reclaim their water. When three other activists from Pittsburgh and I landed in Abuja and exited customs and immigration, a billboard advertising the Nigeria International Oil Conference (co-sponsored by Shell) greeted us (see Figure 2). Their conference occurred at the same time as ours, with attendees staying at the same hotel. Given Shell's horrible human rights and environmental record, especially in Nigeria,[9] it was significant that we shared space with that conference. It details the competing discourses of human rights and environmental rights versus corporate profit from extraction, control, and privatization of resources.

Multiple speakers – both in person and through pre-recorded video messages – highlighted the importance of the Summit for everyone present. A video message from Representative Grijalva from Arizona noted that the fight in Lagos – where millions of people are not receiving water – is an essential struggle for justice and for human rights. He also noted how privatization will not solve the problem, because corporations want to maximize profit at the expense of public health. Grijalva also argued that the issue is international and climate change will only make it worse. Millions of citizens in the U.S. also do not have access to clean water, especially Indigenous communities, communities of color, poor communities and rural communities. As Grijalva said, the story of Flint happens time and time again around the world: "it's important for you to know that you have allies." Water is a human right and government has a responsibility to ensure that right happens, he noted.

Akinbode "Bode" Oluwafemi, Executive Director, CAPPA chronicled the failed history of PPPs in Lagos and noted that while the City has been the site of progressive struggles, it has also become the symbol of capitalism. Lagos is "Nigeria's Big Apple" and the target of corporations. It is a megacity, and it is also mega-poor: 60% of residents live in slums and in poverty. Bode stated: "the battle in Lagos is that of reckless capitalism and our common humanity… We used to joke it was not a crime to be poor… now it is." He continued, "capitalism can kill people." Summit participants also made the point that colonialism takes a new form today via World Bank and other financial institutions pushing for PPPs (Weinman, 2019). This statement reflects what Rob Nixon (2011) calls "slow violence," a term used to describe the suffering, disease, violence and environmental destruction caused from toxins, climate change, war, etc., that capitalism causes (see Figure 3). Conference participants also discussed how these effects are intensified in the era of climate change. Indeed, as the *U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on*

[9] I recommend looking into the life and work of Ken Saro-Wiwa to learn more about this history, including Saro-Wiwa's diary, *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (1995) and *Ogoni's Agonies: Ken Saro Wiwa and the Crisis in Nigeria* (1998), edited by Abdul Rasheed Na'allah.

Climate Change (IPCC) noted in 2015, "the world has not really woken up to the reality of what we are going to face in terms of the crises as far as water is concerned" (Bhalla, 2015).

Figure 3. Slide from Summit on Capital and the Market (photo: Caitlin Schroering; source: CAPPA. Reproduced with permission).

Conflicts around water are also conflicts around larger issues of equity, power, and access. One critical player in this conflict is Veolia, one of the largest corporations involved in water privatization, currently on the shortlist to privatize water in Lagos. In Pittsburgh, the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority (PWSA),[10] plagued by administrative problems and financial distress caused by the interest rate swap die-off involving hundreds of

[10] PWSA is a municipal authority with public governance.

millions of dollars in debt, entered into a PPP with Veolia. Pittsburgh hired Veolia in 2012 to manage operations, and the contract stipulated that Veolia would get to keep up to 50 cents to every dollar saved under its management (Lurie, 2016). As Aly Shaw with the Pittsburgh OWC shared at the Summit, Veolia did not invest anything into the system. Instead, PWSA (under the management of Veolia), laid off workers and made an illegal chemical switch that spiked lead levels. The City terminated the contract with Veolia, and shortly after the news broke of the city's lead problem. The OWC emerged soon after, and activists realized that the only way to solve the problems was to make the water authority more public and democratic. There have been subsequent attempts by water and gas companies to privatize the water, but the community has been successful at pushing back, and officials have backed off privatizing for now (Schroering, 2019a; Shaw, 2019). While Veolia North America announced in February 2018 that it would stop "Peer Performance Solutions" (PPS), a form of PPP, due to public relation difficulties in Pittsburgh (Global Water Intelligence, 2018, p. 12; Global Water Intelligence, 2019), the struggle is not over, and OWC continues to monitor and organize against privatization. OWC – and other participants from around the globe – were invited to the Summit to share their failed experiences with Veolia.

Summit speakers noted repeatedly that PPPs never work out to the benefit of the people. As one speaker noted, "PPPs use what you have, run it down" and then leave. All of the risk turns over to the government or public side, with all of the profit given to the corporation. Globalized policies of privatization threaten human rights everywhere, and as climate change progresses resources will become even more scarce, with more of a push from corporations seeking to control and commodify water. Indeed, on October 5, 2020, Veolia acquired 29.9% of the shares of Suez, another water multinational, with plans to eventually obtain full control (Macleod, 2020; Veolia, 2020).

In response to resistance to privatization schemes and evidence of the failures of privatization to deliver on its promises, there is a global trend of remunicipalisation. TNI (Transnational Institute) and PSI (Public Services International) detail how by the end of 2019 there are 1,408 cases of remunicipalisation or municipalisation globally, encompassing over 2,400 municipalities in the world (Kishimot et al., 2020, p. 22). One of the principal reasons for this trend is because privatized water services have almost always generated an increase in price and cost cutting that compromises water quality (Food & Water Watch, 2016). Activists use these figures to help make the case for why water privatization is undesirable and ineffective – if those who had privatized their water systems are now remunicipalising, who would want to privatize in the first place?

On the first day of the Summit, a participant from Los Angeles, representing Black Lives Matter Los Angeles and Corporate Accountability said, "I am here to say that BLM stands with struggle here [in Nigeria]. [and

we] see the lack of access to water as violence. Can't have corporations controlling this precious resource." This point relates with what Nnimmo Bassey, then Chair of the Board for Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria asserted: "all of the polluted waters in this country have been privatized by polluters" – and then oil companies use that water as a place to dump oil. This means a future of violence, illness, and poverty for children. He explained that we must fight against this and defend the human right to water at the regional, national, and international level, including working to clean up the Niger Delta and all polluted waters in Nigeria and the world. The Summit, Bassey reminded us, was a place to share strategies and prepare to defend rights. The solution? Water systems around the world must be modernized in a way that places control in the hands of people and is transparent and democratic. This is the only way to ensure the human right to water is recognized. Our Water, Our Right is a campaign to emphasize that no one has a right to privatize water.

This resonates with what people in Brazil told me. As one member of a human rights organization (*Centro de Defesa dos Direitos Humanos* or Center for the Defense of Human Rights) that partners with MAB shared with me, "violations of human rights can occur in all places… people have the right to education, health, housing, work, to not be victims of violence." This relates to the quote discussed earlier from one of the leaders of CAPPA who put it simply: "capitalism can kill." Or, as a social media post from OWC on October 9, 2019, put it: "No Matter How Green We Make Our Lifestyles, Capitalism is Not Sustainable."

To be clear, the violence of capitalism is not new, as Cedric Robinson so meticulously details. The current global system of racism and capitalism, as Robin D. G. Kelley writes in the foreword to *Black Marxism,* "did not break from the old order but rather evolved from it to produce a modern world system of 'racial capitalism' dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide" (Robinson, 2000, p. xiii; Murphy & Schroering, 2020). Following Debadatta Chakraborty (2020), I argue we ought to add patriarchy to this list. As one participant at the Summit noted, "we fight for our water [and] our life… need to fight for dignity for women and other disenfranchised groups." Summit speakers noted at various points the gendered dimensions of access to clean water and sanitation and asserted that women and children are most affected. Water justice is also racial and gender justice. Systemic injustice in its various and interrelated forms, including imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, and racial capitalism is not new; but it is also true that the particular form of finance capital does create a different form of rapaciousness. There is a narrative that public services do not work and that the private sector can do it better, when in reality, the evidence (including the trend of remunicipalisation) shows the opposite. As one of the Abuja Summit participants noted, a few decades ago, when he was a child, there was a pump at the end of each street in Lagos. Each home did not have piped water, but each street did. People had access to clean, affordable water. Now they do

not. Why? Because a complicated process of neoliberal austerity measures led by the World Bank and IMF and other financial institutions working with governments and corporations have made sure that public investment in infrastructure stopped.

The "right to water" is a message embraced by movements opposed to its privatization. A majority of these actions to date have occurred in the global South but they are also becoming more common in the global North, particularly in response to the intensification of neoliberal policies, aging urban infrastructure, and state austerity programs (Sultana, 2018, p. 486). This same austerity process is now unfolding in the United States as inequities in municipal maintenance coincide with collapsing municipal budgets. As an article published in *The Guardian* by Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Brenda Lawrence noted, water should be a human right, but in the U.S., it is treated as a for profit industry. Together with Representative Ro Khanna, they introduced the WATER Act that would allocate up to $35 billion a year to overhauling the nation's water infrastructure (Sanders & Lawrence, 2020).

Relatedly, OWC also connects its work to the growing national discussion surrounding the affordability crisis: water rates have increased 80% in the past decade and two out of five U.S. households have trouble paying their water bills (Lakhani, 2020). This is especially heightened amidst Covid-19, with OWC joining efforts to fight against water shutoffs (Murray, 2020). There is also an explicit connection between race and water affordability, with Black communities and other communities of color disproportionately impacted by rising costs in the United States (Montag, 2019).

Water is about power (Sultana, 2019). It is instructive to think about power in the context of a space like the Summit in Abuja: on the one hand there is the power of capital, as exemplified by the Shell conference and the ongoing threat of water privatization; on the other hand, there is the power of people to bring about change, bringing together people from many different countries (mostly in Africa) and three continents (Africa, North America, Europe). Corporations work across geographic borders, so too must the resistance. Spaces like the Summit show that movements and activists are united, and that this movement is growing. They are also tools for building unity and growing the movement. As one participant stated in a question and answer section, "we need to work together because corporations work together" (fieldnotes, January 30, 2019). This illustrates a point made by the water justice and human rights scholar Farhana Sultana (2018):

> Getting involved in local or regional water justice efforts can be a good start. But this requires recognition that water justice is never only local, but cross-scalar and global. It is also critical to pay attention to the ways that water is about gender, class, race, ethnicity, identity and place, and appreciate how it is linked to broader issues of social justice. Such action and advocacy can foster collectivizing, alliances, and working with others to promote equity, human rights, and justice.

> Changing institutions, laws and norms are long-term goals that require sustained involvement, which is important to cultivate and support. (p. 489)

As there are systemic forces engaged via corporations and global financial institutions, this struggle is not only local. Movements also learn from each other and form coalitions through solidarity. The Summit focused on how to resist privatization of public water supplies. On our last day in Abuja, Nigeria we learned about another dimension of water commodification and privatization: bottled water. Over a dozen of the U.S. participants (plus members from CAPPA) rode in a van – escorted by civil police – over an hour away to where Nestlé has one of two water bottling plants in the country. When we arrived, we stood outside of Nestlé for a few minutes (surrounded by armed police) holding up signs that said, "Nestlé Take Your Hands Off Our Water" and "Water is a Human Right." We next visited a community adjacent to the Nestlé plant. While there, we met the chief. Nestlé has given him an old packing container for an office. It served, essentially, as a dehumanizing attempt to buy him off. Nestlé had built new water pumping stations, although no water flows from the taps. A plaque on the pump showed the date January 30, 2019 – two days before we had arrived. When we asked one of the Nigerian activists about this the answer was simple: "they have spies. They've been watching us and suspected we would bring you here."

Bottled water is an insidious piece of the conversation about water as a right versus commodity. Companies like Nestlé and Coca Cola have worked hard to create the idea that only commodified water (that they have often stolen from aquifers and bottled with fewer safety regulations than public tap water) is safe. Not to mention all of the horrible plastic waste, which requires petroleum to produce. Nestlé (and others including Coca Cola) do this in Nigeria, in Brazil, and in the United States.[11] From Michigan, United States to Abuja, Nigeria to the Guarani Aquifer in Brazil, multinational companies seek to commodify and profit off of water by bottling and selling it.[12] These companies then use marketing to convince people bottled water is better. Sometimes bottled water is a safer option – but this is because of the lack of investment in public water infrastructure. I include this discussion of bottled water because it illuminates both how corporate players engage in similar activities transnationally, as well as how activist conversations in particular spaces connect and learn from each other to fight these forces.

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[11] Nestlé, for example, owns 77 different brands of water, including Perrier and Poland Springs, and controls around half of the market in the U.S. Coca Cola owns, among others, the popular brand Dasani. In London, Dasani is actually just tap water, and most of the water sold in the US under the label of Dasani is also tap water.

[12] A recent ruling from a Michigan court, however, has asserted that Nestlé cannot claim their activities constitute an "essential public service" (Perkins, 2019).

My conversations and participation with other U.S. participants highlighted how the Summit shifted their own thinking about organizing and how the struggle was not just local. As one Pittsburgh activist attending the Abuja water Summit said:

> We can't drink the water here… or in Flint… or in Pittsburgh… that is [something that is] shared. So we need to think about it globally… I'm thinking about what's going on and how I'm going to put a global spin on everything now.

Another Pittsburgh organizer stated on the first day that participating in the Summit leads to "a different way of seeing the world which leads to a different way of organizing." As another person asserted: "corporations want us to feel small and like we don't have power but when we come together, we do have power" (Schroering, 2019b). When I asked about the role of international solidarity, OWOR activists said that international solidarity needs to not just be a blip but something sustained. I also met people at the Summit who know and work with MAB, and we discussed the importance of movements in the global North learning from and working with global South movements.

The Right to Water is a Global Fight to Create Another World(s)

The Summit served as a place to collectively create a path for solutions. One aspect of this is the public statement that participants drafted through a collective process on the last day. This statement affirmed the human right to water and opposed all privatization and corporate control of this life sustaining substance ("Communique", 2019). Shortly after returning from Nigeria, OWC planned a lobby day training with local officials and created a pledge for officials to sign committing they were against privatization – and detailing exactly what we mean by that. We visited with over a dozen public officials, many of whom signed the pledge. The biggest victory, perhaps, was that the mayor – to everyone's surprise – signed the pledge (see Figure 4). On April 2, 2019 the industry trade journal *Global Water Intelligence* updated Pittsburgh's status on its project tracker to "PPP option now looking unlikely" and cited the mayor signing the pledge as the reason (Global Water Intelligence, 2019). I observed that this event and planning was influenced in part from the transnational connections made at the Summit: Pittsburgh activists returned energized: thinking about the issue in new ways and strengthened in a better understanding of the threats of PPPs; planning and scheduling a week of lobby visits to coincide with world water day; updating the Facebook page for Our Water Campaign with a photo from the Summit with us all holding up signs reading "United For Water Justice."

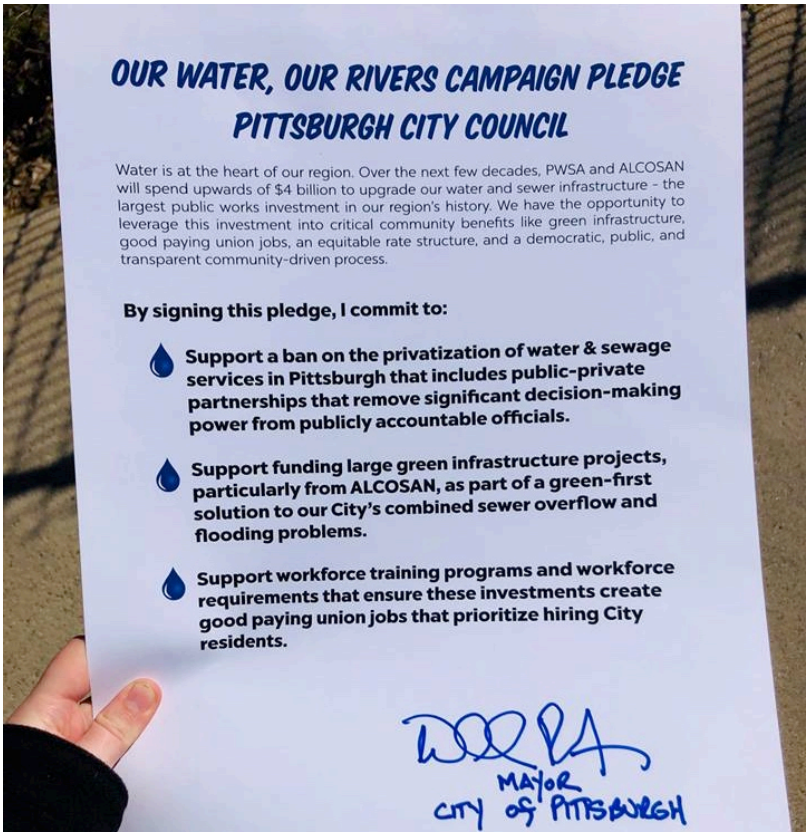

Figure 4. Pittsburgh Mayor Pledge (photo: Caitlin Schroering).

Connections made at the Summit also resulted in featuring OWC/Pittsburgh by TNI as a case of remunicipalisation of public services with Pittsburgh included in the Water Remunicipalisation Tracker website ("Pittsburgh", 2019). This site also highlights two cases of remunicipalisation in Brazil (where I first learned about remunicipalisation) and the writer is also a part of MAB ("Itu", 2019; "Tocantins State", 2019). This is a small but important example of how movements are organizing and working with each other, and with entities like PSI, TNI, Corporate Accountability and others, who work in a way that helps to put information into a central place, and to enhance connections. It shows how struggles in the United States, Nigeria, and Brazil (and many other locales) are all part of this global movement of remunicipalisation and reclaiming resources for the public good rather than for private gain. I contend that this movement is an illustration of how the sociology of emergences that Santos (2004) describes can take place. As noted earlier, as a result of the connection with Veolia, Corporate

Accountability is also a partner of the Our Water Campaign in Pittsburgh, bringing national and transnational aspects to an otherwise local campaign. Many (if not most) of the examples of anti-water privatization movements qualify as place bound because they focus on local (or national) struggles for control of water. Yet, their issue identification is not bound only to place, as these groups articulate an interest in connecting their local effort to a broader, global struggle for water as a human right (Desai, 2015; Escobar, 2008; Smith, 2017b; Smith, forthcoming).

The focus in social movement studies is often on outcomes (Staggenborg & Lecomte, 2009; Wood et al., 2017). For sure, outcomes matter; outcomes can also be challenging to measure or see. How many movements did in fact change something – but it cannot easily be proven or measured? Does it count? If so, how do we count it? Is it possible that the focus on specific policy outcomes perhaps misses other less easily measured but still transformational changes? As Kelley (2002, p. vii; see also Rabaka, 2006, p. 738) puts it:

> Unfortunately, too often our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they "succeeded" in realizing their visions rather than on the merits or power of the visions themselves. By such a measure, virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations they sought to change remain pretty much intact. And yet it is precisely these alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change.

One essential aspect of these right-to-water movements is tangible policy and system-level changes; another aspect is the path of getting there, of envisioning a new world. As MAB activists would say, it is a process of creating a "*novo caminho*" – a new path (MAB, 2017, p. 32). This work can go by various names including "alter-globalizations," "globalization from below," or "counterhegemonic globalization." I have not often heard these terms used by movement actors; instead I hear the same sentiment expressed in different forms: the idea of "creating a new world," "another world is still possible," or a "new path" (see Figure 5).

As Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) wrote, articulating a new vision is the first step in building a new world; a revolution is a process and that process is transformational (p. xi; see also Rabaka, 2006, p. 737). The work described here is about creating new forms of living and relationships in the present moment, a piece of which includes people developing shared understandings of oppression and exploitation and becoming empowered leaders in their communities. The potential transformative capacity of this process where people stand together against greed and for the right to survive and thrive ought not to be overlooked. As one presenter at the Abuja Summit asserted: "[we] need to build revolutionary force. But today… we will use a rights-based approach." Another person stated, "we want to put alternatives on the table that aren't available to the ruling class!" (fieldnotes, January 30, 2019). One of the most powerful short-term results of this Summit was how it served

as a place for this international solidarity to be built; for people not to just hear of struggles elsewhere, but for people from Flint and Pittsburgh to meet people from Lagos and vice versa, and to learn about how much we share in our struggles. The discussions at the Summit relate also to Marina Sitrin's (2012) work on autonomous movements in Argentina. She writes about new solidarities and "*el otro soy yo*" (the other is me) (Sitrin, 2012, pp. 47-48). This relates to MAB's "*todos somos atingidos*" which literally translates to "we are all affected" but better translates to "everyone is affected – even if indirectly – by these large dam projects."

Figure 5. Another World is Possible (source: OWC).

Conclusion

The struggle for the right to water is driven by grassroots movements demanding that democracy, transparency, and the human right to water are above corporate profit. I argue that the movement for the right to water is important for three main reasons. First, attention to water is critical in the face of climate change. Some regions will have too much, others too little, and conflicts will worsen. Second, conflicts around water are also about equity, power, and access. Organizing around water implicates a range of

other important dynamics, including trends of market deregulation, privatization, and austerity measures. Third, movements fighting for the human right to water today represent a radical and transformative position in the face of recent government trends toward right-wing authoritarian governments that run on rhetoric of "law and order" and seek to further shrink the public safety net and impose harsh penalties on social movements fighting for the basic right to survival.

When I think about the most basic things to survival, air and water are what come to mind. And in so many places everywhere on the globe, both of those things are polluted. Air and water do not know geographic and political boundaries, and they flow where they want. The number of people on the globe suffering the consequences of polluted air and polluted water is only increasing. Of course, the other truth is that the communities disproportionately affected – both in the United States and globally – are poor, are Black, are brown, and many are geographically in the global South. Each community, each country, certainly has its own histories and present realities (in which colonialism and racial capitalism play a significant part) that mean we should be cautious with making broad brush-stroke comparisons. Each locality has its own distinct challenges.

Yet, there is a need to acknowledge how these problems are global, and develop an analysis that addresses the root of the problem: capitalism. Capitalism uses racism, white supremacy, patriarchy, xenophobia, colonialism, imperialism and other systems of oppression to operate and grow. It always has, and it always will.[13] We cannot recycle our way out of the problem or make individual choices that are going to fix it. The OWC post I noted earlier put it succinctly: "capitalism is not sustainable" (fieldnotes, October 9, 2019). In other words, we need a paradigm shift, and we need to de-theorize and to reinvent new ways of understanding and living in our world (Goodman & Salleh 2013, p. 413). As Leonard Figueroa-Helland, Cassidy Thomas and Abigail Pérez Aguilera (2018) put it:

> Anticipating the global convergence of crises,[14] counterhegemonic social forces have solidified their challenge against the anthropocentric/patriarchal/(neo)colonial/capitalist world-system. LVC and affiliates like Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST), or others like the Zapatistas (Chiapas, Mexico), tie food sovereignty to defending Mother Earth, decolonization, depatriarchalization, and indigenous revitalization. (p. 182)

[13] See Cedric Robinson's (2000) work on racial capitalism and the Combahee River Collective (1986).

[14] These crises include the following: global food, water, environment and climate, economic inequality and financial instability, energy and other resource exhaustion or depletion, livelihood and health, refugees and displaced populations (Figueroa-Helland et al., 2018, p. 174).

MAB also succinctly makes similar arguments in a statement produced at the end of a summit on water, held in the United States in 2017:

> Our analysis is that capitalism is going through a productive crisis of character and provokes terrible consequences in society, spreading itself into a crisis of civilization and proving that, besides being unsustainable, it expands armed conflicts around the world, intensifies the destruction of nature and increases societal inequality, religious persecution and persecution of people of different sexual orientations, racism, patriarchy, sexism, xenophobia and all kinds of discrimination. This system is not able to provide for the basic demands of humanity such as food for all the population, health, education, dignity, liberty and justice. Therefore, it is the working class who pay the bill of the crisis and suffer the consequences of capitalism, especially Black and immigrant populations and traditional and indigenous peoples. ("Letter From The II International Seminar", 2017)

There is a present global movement right now against police brutality, racism, and anti-Blackness (especially in the United States, Brazil, and Nigeria) that is building momentum and gaining more attention (A Planet, n.d.). The struggle for the right to water is connected to this fight. This fight for the right to water and sanitation is also a fight for the right to education, transportation and healthcare. It is the right to be free from police violence. It is a fight against the systemic realities that produce violence in all of its forms (see Figure 6).

As noted, Black Lives Matter is a movement linked to OWOR and to the Nigeria Summit. There is a growing movement to #defund and to ultimately #abolish the police. BLM and other activists are calling for the diversion of money from policing into other places like housing and education. The excuse that there is not money to invest in public water infrastructure simply is not true. There is always money. The questions are: Who has the power? Who is choosing where to spend money? Who is profiting off of the current socio-economic-political system? Who is not?

To create a world where the right to water for all becomes a reality, we might consider Connell's (2007, p. 383) imperative for a "new language for theorizing," which she argues would jettison imperialist and colonialist thought. The ability to imagine a different reality is a driving force for the movements fighting water privatization. Boaventura de Sousa Santos' idea of "epistemological imagination" is both insightful and encouraging. That is, the idea that we must urge the acknowledgement of multiple ways of living, different perspectives, and reservoirs of collaborative knowledge (Santos, 2004, pp. 28-29). With this acknowledgment, and by engaging with and sharing experiences, a sociology of emergences (Santos, 2004) to reinvent new ways of living and being becomes possible. Other worlds are possible, and the roots to create those worlds are planted and growing.

Figure 6. OWOR Post to Social Media on Oct. 13, 2020 **(**source**:** CAPPA, which spearheads the OWOR campaign).

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