

Hydroperformativity and the mirage of hydro-power

Hydroperformativity and the mirage of hydro-power: How water speaks

Małgorzata Owczarska

• -



Original research article

Hydroperformativity and the mirage of hydro-power: How water speaks

Małgorzata Owczarska¹

Abstract
This article asks how water speaks and relates to Central European people, especially those who have experienced displacement, totalitarianism, droughts, or floods. Based on ethnographic research conducted within the framework of blue anthropology, it focuses on Pilchowice, a postindustrial village in Poland, introduces concepts such as hydroperformativity, water worlds, and water as a transsubstance, and challenges the mirage of hydro-power formed in human–water relations since the nineteenth century. It illustrates how such illusions lead to paradoxes, unconventional industrial landscapes, and eerie practices of dwelling degradation. Water in this context actively cocreates hydrosocial realities that consistently evade control and transcend time, allowing us to reflect on human dreams of prosperity and today's water permacrisis.

Keywords
Hydroperformativity, water worlds, blue anthropology, hydrosocial relations, environmental humanities, transsubstance, floods, droughts, water crisis, hydro-power

Water usually does not speak to Europeans. In modern Western cultures, it is deprived of a voice. In fact, it might seem almost a form of madness to consider asking how water speaks in a postindustrial, post-socialist, and capitalist settlement community in Poland. And yet I think it worthwhile—not as an inquiry into technoscience beyond human or the dynamics of emotional interaction (Kuhse, 2013) but as an exploration of how agential, transubstantial water engages, performs, intervenes, and multilocally responds within local communities across time and space—and how, in doing so, it co-creates socio-material worlds, material memory, and contemporary human and nonhuman practices. I am particularly interested in the material, relational, and socio-epistemological potential of (information) exchange between humans and water, which I develop here as hydroperformativities (cf. Karen Barad's [2007, 2003] "performativity"). Do "we"—as much as the process is problematic and its verge—as so-called Western people, enter into communication with water at all? If so, how? While it is evident that we have a relationship with it, the terms and nature that this relationship takes are not necessarily obvious.

¹University of Warsaw, Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Warsaw, Poland

Corresponding author:
Małgorzata Owczarska, University of Warsaw, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of Culture, Żurawia 41a, 00-580 Warsaw, Poland.
Email: mowczarska@uw.edu.pl

- [1]

Publisher: [SAGE Publications](#) [2]

Year of publication: 2026

Book/ journal title: Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, online 27.02.2026

Original Language: English

Abstract

This article asks how water speaks and relates to Central European people, especially those who have experienced displacement, totalitarianism, droughts, or floods. Based on ethnographic research conducted within the framework of blue anthropology, it focuses on Pilchowice, a postindustrial village in Poland, introduces concepts such as hydroperformativity, water worlds, and water as a transsubstance, and challenges the mirage of hydro-power formed in human–water relations since the nineteenth century. It illustrates how such illusions lead to paradoxes, unconventional industrial landscapes, and eerie practices of dwelling degradation. Water in this context actively cocreates hydrosocial realities that consistently evade control and transcend time, allowing us to reflect on human dreams of prosperity and today's water permacrisis.

Keywords

Hydroperformativity, water worlds, blue anthropology, hydrosocial relations, environmental humanities, transsubstance, floods, droughts, water crises, hydro-power

Source URL: <https://www.etnologia.uw.edu.pl/en/publications/hydroperformativity-and-mirage-hydro-power>

Links

[1] <https://www.etnologia.uw.edu.pl/en/publications/hydroperformativity-and-mirage-hydro-power>

[2] <http://doi.org/10.1177/02637758261426808>