



Shadow of a drought: Notes from Cape Town's water crisis

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SHADOW OF A DROUGHT: NOTES FROM CAPE TOWN'S WATER CRISIS

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Cape Town
day zero
infrastructure
South Africa
water crisis
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This essay reflects on the water crisis experienced by the Cape Town metropolitan area in 2016 and 2017. It explores how the question of access to water is implicated in the city's colonial and apartheid history, and then considers how the spectre of "Day Zero" (the day when the taps would, supposedly, run dry) was invoked in political debates and the media.

Cape Town's most neglected heritage site can be found in a subterranean shopping mall near the central rail station. Tucked under an elevator between braiding salons and smartphone shops is a crumbling wall under glass: the remnants of a water reservoir built by the Dutch East India Company in the seventeenth century. Before the downtown district of the Foreshore was reclaimed from the sea, this spot marked the Atlantic

Ocean’s edge, and was where ships would stock up with fresh water that had been channelled down from Table Mountain.

It is a forgotten reminder of why the city exists where it does. Other bays up the west or east coasts provide better anchorage in storms; but here was where a steady supply of drinking water could be guaranteed all year, gushing down the mountain slopes in winter, trickling out the sandstone in summer. Today’s urban centre was a place once called Camissa – “place of sweet waters” – by the indigenous Khoekhoen herders who were gradually driven away from the pastures below what they knew as Hoerikwaggo, or “Sea Mountain”. Dutch settlers laid claim to the lushness created by its rain shadow, now some of the city’s richest, greenest suburbs.

If you approach Cape Town International airport from the right angle, you can see some of the water infrastructure built by the next colonial presence, the British. A series of small dams are set high up into the mountain chain like shards of mirror. Walled with granite blocks hauled up by nineteenth-century cableway, they are beautiful No Swimming swimming spots, filled with cola-coloured liquid. But as the plane wheels round to land on the sandy, much drier Cape Flats, they are mere handfuls when seen against a metro that has now grown to some four million people, and which, not too long ago, came close to running out of water altogether.

Cape Town today is fed by a network of much bigger, twentieth-century dams in the escarpment some 100 kilometres to the north. But as with many global cities, the pace of twenty-first-century urbanisation has outstripped infrastructure, and the climate is changing. The winters of 2016 and 2017 were spent watching weather apps only to see the promised cold fronts downgraded from an 80 per cent to 20 per cent chance of rain as they approached, then to drizzle and then not even that: just an ominous steam coming in from the sea as the fronts released their contents much further south, and uselessly, into the sea.

City authorities explained that the water system had been “future-proofed” to take account of a one-in-fifty-year drought; but that we were now in the midst of a one-in-a-thousand, “unprecedented multi-year drought event”. As the hot weather arrived, residents were bombarded with the threat of Day Zero: the day when taps would stop working and everyone would have to queue for their daily water ration under military guard. Though, as some pointed out, thousands of poorer residents of the city have been living Day Zero for decades, collecting water from communal standpipes in informal settlements across the Flats. That reality, and resilience, was simply beginning to steal over larger parts of the city. Nonetheless, politicians and radio stations rallied around “#DefeatDayZero” as if it were a mythological dragon to

be slain. But then it was repeatedly recalculated, moved out, postponed. Some rains came the following winter and then the slogans along the highway read “50 litres a day keeps Day Zero away”: more a bogey man used to scare adults into opting for dusty cars or waterless hand sanitiser in perpetuity, and signs of a new, drier normal.

Within the wealthier suburbs, the older water system of mountain streams and springs came back to life during the water crisis. For some of those queuing with plastic jerry cans, it was a way of saving money on water tariffs. For others it was a symbolic return to places from which their family had been forcibly removed under apartheid. Local papers monitored the mood at Newlands spring in the southern suburbs – the parking infractions, the frayed tempers, but also the small kindnesses and small talk – as indications of how things might go in a dehydrated future. In one of the world’s most divided cities, a fragile sense of commonality was being forged, then unravelled again, then cautiously reaffirmed – depending on who you spoke to. The south-easter inflamed the mountain slopes, kicking up more dust than usual, and working on everyone’s nerves. For a while it was hard to talk or think about anything except water. The municipality created a water map in which you could track your neighbour’s usage; the press published lists of water offenders by street address. Facebook groups good-naturedly amassed water-saving tips. Water, water – there’s no real synonym, so in writing about it you can’t avoid a kind of slow-drip water torture.

When functioning as intended, infrastructure tends to efface itself and become invisible. We may notice pylons and flyovers and dam walls in passing, but we don’t really *see* them, or think of them as physical artefacts, until they stop delivering what they are expected to, until the flows of consumption and distribution they enable have been arrested. As a result of the one-in-a-thousand, multi-pronged drought event, many of us living here have found ourselves in an unexpectedly intense relationship to distant, previously ignored things and places: the pipelines and catchment areas beyond the escarpment, the many dams cupped between the mountains inland that feed the city’s water system.

Via the city’s online “water dashboard”, residents could monitor daily fluctuations in dam levels with the kind of long-term obsessiveness normally reserved for the Twitter feed of a frenemy. What are the evaporation rates? The monthly agricultural drawdown? Why hasn’t there been a level bump in response to the latest rains? We are now emotionally connected to these once inert spaces on the other side of the watershed: reservoirs that have been photographed from every available angle, surveyed by drones and helicopters, snapped by passing motorists who pulled onto the verge to watch the uncanny spectacle of dust clouds roiling across Theewaterskloof, the city’s

main water reserve. For months, the pumping towers stood like ramparts in the desert, ringed by the tiniest of moats.

The crisis also served as a crash course in water literacy: a swift education in what a human life entails, hydrologically, and how little the average person knows about this. We can now talk grey water and dual reticulation systems. We have stats on the world average for municipal water lost through leakage at our fingertips (25 per cent). The madness of using potable water to flush toilets has set in, especially when seeing drone footage of enormous sewage plumes just off some of the city's most famous beaches. The property on the Atlantic seaboard is too valuable for the necessary sewage works to be built there; but increasing volumes of untreated sewage might rule out desalination plans, hamstringing tourism and destroy property values. Capetonians were congratulated for heroically halving the city's water consumption, and then threatened with a doubled water tariff as the City attempted to make up the fiscal shortfall. These are the kind of paradoxes thrown up as new ecological and old economic imperatives work at cross-purposes.¹

1 As Aghoghowia explains in this issue, in South Africa “citizens/individuals pay their utilities’ rates and taxes to the municipal government, which in turn pays to the utilities companies that deliver these essential services.” In the case of Cape Town, water tariffs have remained the same since 2017, and have not been reduced to pre-drought levels, even after several years of good rains. The City of Cape Town argues that this is partly because some 40 per cent of households in the metro (classed as low-income or “indigent”) do not pay any water tariffs at all. And so the variable rates for water usage across the city are also in effect a form of

As is often the case with environmental reporting, the temptation is to veer in one of two directions. Either we are headed for a *Mad Max*-like dystopia: a world of water barons and social meltdown. Or else towards a miraculous fix of hydro-modernist geo-engineering, a utopian cure-all like the stillsuits of desert-dwellers in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, which magically convert all urine and bodily secretions back into drinking water. The reality – and this is the harder thing to write, or to picture – is likely to be something other: a messy and overlapping series of small stories and accommodations; a mixture of slowly retro-fitting existing systems and gradually modifying what once seemed to be natural behaviours.

The 7–11 shop down the road from me was routinely mobbed for its crates of mineral water, but I took pride in never buying so much as a five-litre bottle. This was because I had a deep throat in the water policy world. He maintained that every good water system on the continent was the result of a crisis, and was adamant that Day Zero would never actually happen. It was a social and political fiction. But he added, it was a necessary fiction, and if too many people came to see it for what it was, then it risked becoming a reality. This is the odd challenge of thinking ecologically, and the strange quality that environmental messaging takes on as it addresses collective action problems, or tries to make visible the slow violence of climate change. Psychologically, you experience the combination of “it will never happen” and it *is* happening – but not quite as imagined, and not quite as real. All through the drought event, the lawn in our apartment block stayed intensely,

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‘cross-subsidisation’, whereby more affluent parts of the city make up the shortfall, and redress a historical lack of investment in water infrastructure. See Jones, (2018) and Petersen, (2021). magically green, fed by some invisible underground stream, by some of the millions of litres still running under the city and out to sea each day.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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