

## **Changing the Narrative: Water and Aesthetic Activism**

SANAS Symposium & AGM

Saturday 30 November 2019. 10-17h

University of Geneva

Uni Bastions. Room B104

In recent years the US Supreme Court has been the site of intense debates over rights to water: from challenges to the Clean Water Act – and the Environmental Protection Agency mandated to enforce it – to the latest in the long history of disputes among southern and southwestern states (*Georgia v. Florida* and *Texas v. Colorado* and *New Mexico*) concerning the distribution and supply of fresh water. Reflecting the urgency of the water crisis, 2018-2028 has been declared the UN International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development,” following the International Decade for Action, “Water for Life” (2005-2015). The threat to fresh clean water is intensified by the effects of the climate crisis and by human interventions such as the displacement of waterways to serve expanding cities, the privatization of water supplies (a cause of the tap-water crises in Flint, Michigan and Newark, New Jersey), and industrial pollution (like the leakage of hazardous waste into the floodwater that inundated Houston during Hurricane Harvey and the spillage of toxic coal-ash from Duke Energy sites into major North Carolina rivers in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence). The threat of similar pollution (of the waters of the Great Lakes) is driving opposition to Enbridge Energy Partners' proposed new Line 5 pipeline across the Straits of Mackinac, the same environmental motive that has driven intense opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline (the #NODAPL movement, 2016-?) – which carries oil from the Bakken oil fields in western North Dakota to the Patoka oil tank farm (also serving the Enbridge, Keystone, and Trunkline pipelines) in southern Illinois. The threat to water of leakage from Line 5 into Lakes Michigan and Huron, from the Dakota Access Pipeline into the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers and Lake Oahe, near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, have received a great deal of publicity. What has not been clearly highlighted is the profound threat to the existence of Indigenous nations posed by these threats to water: a relevant example is the flooding of significant portions of the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River Reservations by the US Army Corps of Engineers some 50 years ago to create the Oahe Dam and Lake Oahe. This kind of assault on Indigenous territorial, legal, cultural, and spiritual sovereignties continues through such actions as the desecration of burial grounds and other sacred sites, and the US violation of the terms of historic nation-to-nation Treaties.

Water then lies at the center of a complex network of issues that show the US in conflict with sovereign tribal nations as well as internally at the levels of federal and state government. The non-violent #NODAPL protests at Standing Rock were met with intense US military opposition, and subsequently efforts have begun to criminalize popular protests against oil and gas pipelines. Certainly, this conflict puts into question the validity of the US claim to “popular democracy”: peaceful mass activism at Standing Rock and elsewhere is motivated by heightened public awareness and popular mobilization. That is to say, the multi-faceted water crisis provokes powerful means of storytelling that bring aesthetics into relation with activism. From the Facebook check-in at Standing Rock for virtual water protectors to Leslie Marmon Silko's environmental justice epic *Almanac of the Dead* and Elizabeth LaPensée's recent video game *Thunderbird Strike*, storytelling is being used to raise consciousness and to “change the narrative” concerning the values of water. This symposium asks how aesthetics are engaged in the interests of social activism, specifically as it relates to the ongoing water crisis in the US and globally.

### **SPEAKERS**

Professor Elizabeth LaPensée (Michigan State University)

Professor Joy Porter (University of Hull)

## **SPEAKERS**

Professor Elizabeth LaPensée (Michigan State University, odamino@msu.edu) is an academic and creative artist working in the media of games, transmedia, comics, and animation. Her creative work includes *Honour Water* (2016), an Anishinaabe singing game for healing the water and *Thunderbird Strike* (2017), a 2D sidescrolling videogame that positions the player as a thunderbird protecting the lands and waters of Turtle Island: the game has been maligned as “an eco-terrorist version of *Angry Birds*” by oil-industry advocates.

Professor Joy Porter (University of Hull, Joy.Porter@hull.ac.uk) is an interdisciplinary researcher and teacher of Native American Indian history in relation to war, modernity, literature and the environment. She is Co-Principal Investigator of the University cluster *Treatied Spaces: Environment & Peoples in America, 1607-1890*. Her latest book is *Native American Environmentalism* (2014).

## **SCHEDULE**

09:15-10:00 SANAS Board Meeting

10:00 Welcome, Coffee

10:30-11:15 “The Political Ecology of Decolonizing Water”

Professor Joy Porter

11:15-12:00 Discussion

12:00-13:30 Lunch – Reservations to [deborah.madsen@unige.ch](mailto:deborah.madsen@unige.ch) by **THURSDAY 21 NOVEMBER** please! Please also indicate any dietary restrictions.

13:30-14:15 “From Water Walkers to Water Protectors in Indigenous Games”

Professor Elizabeth LaPensée

14:15-15:00 Discussion

15:00-15:30 Pause, Coffee

15:30-17:00 SANAS AGM

**Participants wishing to join dinner (self-pay) with the speakers after the AGM should mention this, too, when signing up for lunch.**

## **DIRECTIONS**

Uni Bastions

Rue De-Candolle 5

1211 Genève 4

<https://www.unige.ch/presse/plans/uni-bastions/>

Public Transport:

From Geneva main train station (Gare Cornavin) take tram 18 (direction Bachet-de-Pesay) four stops to Place de Neuve. TPG (Transports publics genevois) information: <https://www.tpg.ch>

You can then either:

- walk into the Parc des Bastions and along the Promenade des Bastions to find the entrance to the building on your right (directly facing the Mur des Réformateurs), or
- walk ahead and around the corner of the park, on to Rue De-Candolle and find the entrance to the building on your left.

Room B104 is on the first floor. There are stairs at each side of the main entrance hall and an elevator opposite the cafeteria on the ground floor.

Parking space is difficult to find; the closest parking garages are:

- Parking David Dufour, entrance on Rue Jacques-Balmat (see the map below), and
- Parking de Plainpalais, entrance on Avenue du Mail (located outside the limits of the map below).

Detail of the map found at <https://www.unige.ch/presse/plans/uni-bastions/>

