

**Agua-biographies: Derrida on Water, Ontology, and Refugees<sup>i</sup>**

Western metaphysics has long privileged solidity, presence, fixity, and substance, over the fluid, moving, intangible, and diffuse: over water.<sup>ii</sup> Levinas noted that Western philosophy seems so incapable of thinking the liquid, moving, and dispersed, that even when we try, we only reduce the elemental to a multiplicity of solids (water to droplets, dust to particles, gas to molecules).<sup>iii</sup> The problem, he concludes, is that water and other elements are “content without form,” denying our metaphysical preferences for solidity and fixed shape, even as they are not mere absence or nothingness.<sup>iv</sup> And still the elemental is our home, our condition of being. Irigaray further notes a “historical lag in elaborating a ‘theory’ of fluids” within the sciences, and suggests water is a “physical reality that continues to resist adequate symbolization and/or that signifies the powerlessness of logic to incorporate in its writings all the characteristic features of nature.”<sup>v</sup> This “historical ‘inattention’ to fluids,” or what Derrida might call a “calculated forgetting,” has characterized our inability to think otherwise than substance.<sup>vi</sup>

Birthed from the watery womb of this tradition, and following Levinas and others who first dove into the task of tracking (or shall we say marking, buoying) these exclusions, Derrida takes up his own critique of the metaphysics of presence and substance, sets deconstruction to the task of “problematizing foundations,” and fills his work to overflowing with references and attention to fluids.<sup>vii</sup> Water, canals, channels, troughs, springs, floods, geysers, streams, dams, rains, weather, pools, tides, wells, oceans, seas, shores, tears, and rivers meander through Derrida’s texts, precipitating an affirmation of difference, fluidity, absence, and movement.<sup>viii</sup>

Perhaps the text most saturated by water and fluids is his semi-autobiographical piece, *Monolingualism of the Other* (hereafter *Monolingualism*).<sup>ix</sup> Here Derrida gives a moving account

of his own conflicted experience as a Jewish-French-Algerian colonial subject connected to and separated from France through a series of literal and symbolic seas. I argue that by attending to Derrida's use of watery language and liquid logics in this text—and especially by analyzing his discussion of the relationship between water, land, and citizenship—we can read

*Monolingualism* not only as an attempt to think the possibility of autobiography in light of the elemental nature of language and identity, but also as a critique of particular ontopological configurations that secure belonging through solidity and the fixity of borders (or border walls).

In this brief voyage together, I will begin by reading *Monolingualism* as an ontopological analysis of the relations between land, language, citizenship, identity, and home. I argue Derrida's attention to waters precipitates a performative deconstruction of colonial ontopologies rooted in the solidity of nation-state borders. I look specifically at the ways Derrida deploys liquid thought to clarify the role of *différance*, the relationship between presence and absence, the failure of self-identity, and the relations between autobiography, land, and citizenship. But I will not divide the essay by these topics. Instead, in the first two sections, the essay flows through the different bodies of water Derrida traverses: shores, seas, tsunamis, waves, and canals, each of which gives insight into these themes. By playing in the puddles of both literary and philosophical analysis, these sections begin tracing the symbolic and metaphorical tributaries that course around and into Derrida's watery references, and to theorize how these waters irrigate his larger project of the critique of the metaphysics of presence and substance.

Yet, for Derrida, thinking with and through water is not just a theoretical exercise: it is also a response to an ethical and political call for resistance to the violent sedimentation of colonial ontopologies. So even as Derrida's analysis of the relation between solidity, identity, and safety stems from his personal experiences as a colonized subject (excluded and othered by

the lands, nations, and languages that were his home), he also helps to shed light on and critique contemporary violence against elemental, soggy subjectivities. Thus, in the third and final section, I use Derrida's work on water to explore and problematize U.S. discourse on migrants and refugees, a discourse which is saturated with the use of water and water metaphors. In particular, by looking at the U.S./Mexico border, and the "floods," "flows," and "rivers" of migrants crossing it, I argue that water language is used strategically to render certain populations ontological failures, and to justify damming them (and damning them) at the border. Finally, by articulating that water is to land as justice is to law, I demonstrate how Derrida's attention to fluidity, and to those on the shores of citizenship, helps us contest the flows of power that make migrants and refugees disposable.

### Seas and Shores

In the beginning of *Monolingualism*, Derrida tells us: "I have only one language; it is not mine.<sup>x</sup> But from where can he announce this? What ground can he stand on? Certainly, it is not from within the French language or as a French citizen, since that language is not his own. But nor is he strictly outside of that language, as he reminds us, in perfect French. Neither inside nor outside of French, Derrida has no solid place to stand or ground from which to speak.<sup>xi</sup> Instead he refers to the contradictory and conflicted experience of being produced in and through a language that simultaneously others him as an experience beginning "*on the shore* of the France language."<sup>xii</sup>

This shore is not a stark line, but a place of intermingling, of simultaneous presence and absence, where water and land comingle in wet sand, outcroppings jut into the ocean, and mist fills the air with water. It is a place where the uncertainty, instability, flow, and supposed absence or externality of water permeates the presence, stability, substance, and ontological security of

land. It is a place of contradiction, an affirmation of both/and. Derrida suggests that to say “I speak one language; it is not mine” is a “performative contradiction,” a “disorder of identity,” and a “mad law” that does not make sense to his interlocutors.<sup>xiii</sup> But he asks that we grant him this logic. For in order for Derrida to make visible his own duplicitous violation as a colonized subject, we must grant him a logic that is not controlled by the colonial terms of self-identity and solidity over and against absence, the fluid. So Derrida invites us onto the shore, to the beach that is this “other scene of demonstration.”<sup>xiv</sup> With its unstable, sandy ground, ceaselessly returning waves, high and low tides, and intermingling elements, the shore is the soggy stage for deconstruction in the text.

But even as the shore is figurative and metaphorical, it is also a literal shore: the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, which separates and connects Algeria and France. Derrida even sailed across this sea as a young boy, a journey which made him quite seasick, he tells us.<sup>xv</sup> These shorelines return, again and again, throughout *Monolingualism*, like waves, and as always both symbolic and material: a swampy sign, a symbol saturated by the real swells of a real place. The sea remains indeterminate, and we are never certain whether it is a mere metaphor or real a place; it is always both.<sup>xvi</sup>

Indeed, throughout *Monolingualism*, water might appear only as a metaphor for absence or difference. Thus, it might be understood only to signify *pure* absence or otherness, that which is never self-present. It also might seem performatively excluded, as that which is only ever treated as a specter. At the same time, *Monolingualism* might seem anchored in or grounded upon land and soil, the national and cartographic realities of France and the colonized North African region. In other words, perhaps the problem, for Derrida, is a lack of rootedness, an

expulsion to the shores but no entrance further inland, as if his identity is an onto-political failure.

But any of the above interpretations would be serious misreadings. Water is not pure absence, but, like other spectral figures in Derrida's work, represents the unthinkable or uncapturable within dominant metaphysical categories. In *Specters of Marx* (hereafter *Specters*) Derrida defines onto-politics as an "axiomatizing linking indissociably the ontological value of present-being to this situation, to the stable and presentable determination of a location, the *topos* of territory, native soil, city, body in general."<sup>xvii</sup> Onto-politics names the way nations, communities, and land are rendered through a metaphysics of presence and substance that assumes fixity, stability, and solidity.<sup>xviii</sup> But Derrida reads all national belonging as "rooted first of all in the memory of the anxiety of a displaced population."<sup>xix</sup> The stability of place and nation are but a processes "of stabilization, of sedentarization," or sedimentation, which the "local *différance*," the arche-original dislocation or flow, as the initiating act of stabilization itself, "constantly relaunches."<sup>xx</sup> If, in *Specters*, Derrida argues that it is precisely the trauma of uprootedness and non-solidity that conditions the possibility of sedimentation, then in *Monolingualism*, it is the water, the sea, that conditions our ability to think land, presence, nationhood.

Reading Derrida's articulation of onto-politics in *Specters* together with his deeply personal residual anxieties and colonial trauma in *Monolingualism*, highlights the role colonialism and settler colonialism play in solidifying land (and citizenship) into something that is fixed, present, and permanent, rather than likewise characterized by movement and flow. When Derrida recalls that nation-state's process of sedimentation, he also recalls the material flows through which, for example, settler colonial populations in the United States actively

channel/ed Native peoples away from their lands to reservations in order to represent the U.S. nation-state as pure and solid. But land can only serve this role in colonial ontologies if it is contrasted with and prioritized above (rather than likened and set in relation to) water. It can only serve as colonial ground if it is stripped of its dynamism, affects, and movement. This colonial understanding of land lies in stark contrast to that of most North American Indigenous nations, who understand land as relational, dynamic, spiritual, and changing, moving with the coursing of the seasons, kinships, and other affective elemental forces. Brian Burkhart gives voice to this alternative land ontology when he claims that “being-in-the-land and being-of-the-land” are the primary structuring relations of Indigenous communities, central to restoring Indigenous sovereignty and ecological relations. Derrida’s characterization of the solid as always already *sedimenting* not only prompts a critique of the phantasm of the nation as originary and fixed, but also points toward alterative, anti-colonial concepts of land.

Thus while Derrida’s story is about “birth as it relates to soil,” it is not *just* soil.<sup>xxi</sup> *Monolingualism* does not strictly lament Derrida’s lost relations to land, but shows that his identity, and all identities, are characterized by *shores* of presence and absence. Derrida’s experience on the beach mobilizes a water-logged logic of deconstruction that is concerned with dispersal and flow, and with the perpetual interplay of materialities and forces as lively and affective. In the spirit of *différance*, water seems to ground, or rather, precisely not ground, but move, irrigate, and deepen Derrida’s own relations with identity and autobiography, or what might better be understood as an *agua*-biography. Derrida rests his story, his subjectivity, and the whole mad law of deconstruction birthed from these contradictions, precisely in the wet, soggy, salty sands at the edge of a sea.<sup>xxii</sup>

### Floods, Canals, Tsunamis

If I were Derrida, I would already be suggesting we “begin again”—like waves, repeating with a slight difference, returning each time anew.<sup>xxiii</sup> And indeed Derrida does use waves—along with floods, canals, and tsunamis—to think through the non-solid, elemental nature of language and self-identity, and the possibility of autobiography. For example, Derrida suggests that water represents the reserve of alterity and irreducibility held back by a floodgate in his own self presentation.<sup>xxiv</sup> Derrida recalls that when he speaks—in French, but with an accent—he is colonizing his tongue and tone to conform to a proper and pure French language. He describes this self-colonization as the installment of a precarious floodgate or dam [*barrage*, dam, or *écluse*, a canal lock] to control the flow of water. The force of this watery reserve and supposed absence—his singularity/alterity, and all that is remaindered and unintelligible in proper French—is nevertheless quite present and tangibly felt on his tongue when he speaks. This stoppage is “a boom for waters that are not very navigable,” a boom that is always threatening to give way.<sup>xxv</sup> The lock which controls the flow of water into the canal, the tongue which controls the flow of difference and alterity into the language, is always precarious. The trace of the unnavigable, watery remainder is present as absence, heard and felt in every word, and always threatening to break through.<sup>xxvi</sup> The relationship between the fixity of a canal lock and the mobile force of water it channels, allows Derrida to think identity as something that is *both* directed and enabled, *and* captured or blocked by language.

This relationship between waters and locks—between one’s own unnavigable alterity and the impossibility of making oneself fully present in language—raises the very possibility of autobiography as a question. How can one write a memoir when one has no “authorized mother tongue”?<sup>xxvii</sup> How can one write or speak from nowhere, when one has no land and no place?

Derrida is placed under a double interdict: he is denied any language *other* than French (Arabic, Barber, Hebrew), even as he is denied total access to the only language he does have—the language not his own.<sup>xxviii</sup> How does one say, “I recall”—how does one begin an autobiography—when one must “invent both one’s language and one’s ‘I’” at the same time and “beyond the *surging wave* of amnesia that the double interdict has unleashed”?<sup>xxix</sup>

Now water is figured as a wave of amnesia that makes a unified subjectivity, even coherent memories, impossible. Instead, it holds the possibility of such a subject under erasure—under a wave of amnesia that is not “mere forgetfulness” or a mere absence, but a “generative fury.”<sup>xxx</sup> Derrida suggests this amnesia...“ebbs and flows like a wave that sweeps everything along upon the shores I know too well...it carries away, brings back, departs and becomes swollen again with what it has dragged away.” This “surging wave [*déferlement déchaîné*]” might better be translated as a tsunami, a massive arrival.<sup>xxxi</sup> Here water helps clarify the impossibility of a past that is fully present, helping one cohere to oneself. Even as the tsunami of amnesia undermines the stability of a solid, coherent subject, it also clarifies that the marine, the moving, the always arriving waves of that which can never be fully present are the forces which “give place and give rise.”<sup>xxxii</sup> This watery amnesia is not pure absence, pure forgetting, but is creative, active, and constitutive.

Finally, this critique of the possibility of a solid subject is a critique of the metaphysics of substance, and of the possibility of a subject who is “transparent to itself” or “dogmatically presupposed” as the basis of identity, politics, ontology, and national belonging.<sup>xxxiii</sup> This tsunami animates the logic of *différance*, which works like waves, clarifying that identity is not built “on the basis of the present, or of the presence of the present”—on a stable and pure ‘now’—but must be articulated in terms of a “past that has never been fully present.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>



*Différance* always “splits and delays” presence, dividing it spatially and temporally, making it always difference-deferral, much like waves (and the wave of amnesia) (2011, 75). Thus *différance* not only avoids pure presence and essence as such, but as waves threaten the solidity of the shore, *différance* “threatens the authority . . . of the presence of the thing itself in its essence” (1982, 25-26).

### **Rivers, Streams, and the Rio Grande**

As Derrida himself is evidence, the privilege of the ontopological and the stable over the fluid and moving makes it difficult to render intelligible bodies, identities, and lives that lack (or have been dispossessed of) “proper” attachments to substance, land. Specifically, asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees, whom I will collectively call refugees, are often rendered intelligible as ontopological problems precisely through the language of and their association with water. Though I could consider any number of crises in which water metaphors were used to render refugees unintelligible (or intelligible as expendable), in light of the U.S. government’s abominable plans to build a wall (or is it a dam?) between the U.S. and Mexico, I want to speak about the *Rio Grande*, and the migrants and refugees that “flow” across it.

The language of water is used across the political spectrum to describe refugees coming from South and Central America.<sup>xxxv</sup> These “seas of refugees” are understood to be “flowing” north, or to come in “flows”<sup>xxxvi</sup> of varying sizes, and to constitute a “growing stream.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> They are no longer “trickling in.” Now their numbers “surge” as the “river of migrants”<sup>xxxviii</sup> or “waves of migrants”<sup>xxxix</sup> keep “pouring in.”<sup>xl</sup> The “flood” of migrants are understood to be “flooding” across the U.S. border.<sup>xli</sup> The debated solutions to what has become known as a “border crisis,” include building a wall (or dam), or, to use a common idiom, “opening the floodgates”?<sup>xlii</sup>

While the problems faced by refugees result from the relation between the nation-state, sovereignty, and geographical borders more generally, and are thus not specific to migrants and refugees; and while Derrida is not the first to critique this problematic, his analysis of the way waters represent the other of colonial concepts of being, permanence, and stability precipitates unique insight into the ways and reasons refugees are ubiquitously associated with water. In particular, the use of water metaphors renders refugees intelligible as ontopological problems, and beings out of place and time, without the solidity of coherent memory, language, autobiography.

These watery refugees are out of place in several ways: they violate the colonially sanctioned ontopological processes, agreed upon by nation-states, through which coherent, controlled citizens—intelligible as belonging to one clearly defined country and language—can petition another clearly defined country, in that country’s clearly defined language, for acceptance as a citizen. This is the way ontologies of present-being regulate the stable, presentable determination of the relationship between territory, soil, body, and citizenship.<sup>xliii</sup> The movement of refugees and migrants outside of agreed upon channels and dams meant to direct them in colonially authorized ways renders them legible as ontopological failures.

Refugees are often understood as less solid, liquid identities because they out of place or land. The place whence they came was not their home—it was already displacing them, constituting them as out of place through political or gang violence, ecological disaster, domestic abuse, economic disenfranchisement, and so on. Their migration elsewhere seems evidence that the topos of ontopology is for them either a memory or a fantasy—something present only as absence—but not something currently possessed. They are rendered without a home-land, without land, lacking a solid place to stand or belong.

This use of water language also figures refugees as out of time or arriving at the wrong time. Like floods or waves, they are unpredictable forces that do not conform to the calculated temporalities of state and national apparatuses. They are out of time, cheating time, by jumping ahead in the long line of those who want to become citizens “the right way.” They do not patiently exchange citizenship through documentable processes through which they are made transparent to themselves and the state. As out of place and time, they are uncontrollable, unwieldy, and amorphous forces who violate U.S. sovereignty and law, and the entire ontological schema through which nation-states justify their existence.

However, even as their lack ontological solidity is understood as a problem or even a threat, the U.S. uses this without-place-ness strategically in several ways. First, by placing border patrol stations at the most *hospitable* geographic and geologic points of entry, the U.S. literally channels flows of migrants to the most precarious, dangerous places to cross the *Rio Grande* and the deserts beyond. It is no accident that so many refugees die in the rushing waters of the *Rio Grande* or the inhospitable deserts (at least inhospitable to the underprepared), as the state weaponizes those geographies precisely to drown flows of migrants,<sup>xliv</sup> or else turn them to dust.<sup>xlv</sup> At the same time, the gradual shifting or drifting of these checkpoints from prior locations (in the 80s and 90s) to their current sites reminds us that the nation-state’s illusion or phantasm of absolute, clear borders is nevertheless also characterized and maintained by flow and movement.

Second, as numbers of refugees have grown in recent years and are met with increasingly xenophobic and racist U.S. sentiment and policies, border tactics have shifted yet again. In response to the supposedly amorphous and unstoppable elemental force of refugees, whether understood as arriving in a collective tsunami or as a slower drip and trickle (still strong enough

to eventually carve through stone), the most recent shape of U.S. border politics includes the building of a wall and accompanying detention camps in order to *dam* the incoming flows. This has had the effect of *damning* many to long periods of time in unconscionable conditions without access to basic care or legal protection. This play on the auditory kinship of “dam” [*barrage*] and “damn” (a move Derrida would no doubt appreciate) can be found in news stories with titles like Amanda Sakuma’s piece, “Damned for Trying.”<sup>xlvi</sup> Sakuma notes that as countries have not been able to “shut off the flows” and “waves” of refugees that come “crashing” and “spilling” across borders, they are instead “channeling” and “funneling” refugees toward camps where they are both “dammed up,” in the physical sense of being captured, but also damned, in the sense of being trapped and condemned to an intermediate non-place and non-belonging. Yet as the logic of dams rests on their ability to facilitate the controlled release of waters, so too is the U.S. attempting to regulate the elemental figures behind a dam in order to (at least ostensibly) release them at state designated, regulated, and authorized times. President Trump himself declared that detention centers constructed along the U.S./Mexico border were to “control the tide of migration.”<sup>xlvii</sup> The explicit purpose of these camps is to manage the unstable waters of refugees by forcing them to conform to the ontological fixity and solidifying apparatuses of the state. In short, keeping in mind what we have learned from Derrida about the association of land with proper, defensible citizenship, and identity, I argue that the relation between damming and damning represents more than just a catchy pun for the sake of headlines: it points toward the very real way in which detention centers, like those in Texas on the U.S. border, deliberately use the constructed lack of ontological solidity and elemental representation of refugees as beings out of or without a proper place-time to justify effectively dooming them to an ongoing and inescapable state of being without or between land, citizenship, and nation. If they are already

without land and time, then stopping, capturing, or pooling them at borders is simply an extension of their elemental nature.

Rather than seeing these bodies and experiences as antithetical to or lacking a proper citizen's relation to land, I follow Derrida in reading the entire project of citizenship through the elemental figures of those out of place and time: the soaking wet migrant, the colonized, the refugee, the Jewish-Algerian boy on the shores of belonging and afraid of the sea. These figures "destabilize, complicate, bring out the paradoxes of values" at work in the ontological phantasm of nation-state citizenship, which, mirroring Derrida's argument about law in "Force of Law," is ultimately a deconstructable, foundationless foundation.<sup>xlviii</sup> I propose that as justice is the undeconstructable, mystical foundation of law and the possibility of deconstruction; water (displacement), is the misty foundation of the security of land and citizenship. Like justice, water is deconstruction, and the soaking figures on the shores of citizenship are its harbingers, enabling a critique and "*desedimentation* of the superstructures of citizenship that both hide and reflect dominant economic and political aims."<sup>xlix</sup> They reveal that the stability of place and nation are but constantly shifting processes of sedimentation, of never fully securing citizenship but constantly relaunching its borders—trying to capture waves. And if national belonging is, as Derrida claims, rooted in the memory of the anxiety of the displaced, then those on the literal *Rio Grande* river-banks of belonging return us to this anxiety, reminding us of the impossibility of a pure "inside" to citizenship. If we have a task, it is not to build dams to control belonging, but to track the channels that strive to, revealing their ties with power, and their ultimate impossibility: since it is precisely their impossibility that is condition for the possibility of community and belonging at all.

Alas, I have no solid ideas about legal or geopolitical ways to move forward. But Derrida's analysis prompts a vigilance against claims that we either set sail and leave the shore entirely, abandoning the framework of citizenship altogether, or alternatively, uncritically absorb these fluid groups into the supposed solidity of U.S. citizenship. Still, understanding citizenship through the elemental figures on its shores challenges us to rethink models of belonging based on the solidity of colonial ontologies; it challenges us to ask how to affirm the fluid, circulating identities among, within, and between us, without rooting, grounding, anchoring them in an exclusionary politics of (dry) land. How might we, following Derrida, become comfortable with the discomfort of our own *agua*-biographies, our fluid relations with language and land, and make the watery, unstable shore our home?

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<sup>i</sup> This was first presented at SPEP, in what is now called Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on the lands of the Monongahela peoples. Also, like the rivers that meet in Pittsburgh, that land was a meeting ground for many Native peoples including Iroquois, Seneca, Oneida, Shawnee and others who regularly gathered equitably in a conference of tribes.

I am a settler of European descent, currently living on Kalapuya land in Eugene, Oregon, participating in ongoing settler colonialism and the exclusionary politics of the U.S. nation-state on Turtle Island. Among other things, I hope this reading of water and citizenship challenges settler comfort in calling this land home.

<sup>ii</sup> Despite notable exceptions, Western philosophy seems to have largely forgotten its amniotic birth by Thales, who affirmed water was the arche principle.

<sup>iii</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers [1969] 1991), 131.

<sup>iv</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 131.

<sup>v</sup> Luce Irigaray, “The ‘Mechanics’ of Fluids,” *The Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 106.

<sup>vi</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, [2006] 2008), 11.

<sup>vii</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law,” *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 8.

<sup>viii</sup> I specifically track the waters in *Monolingualism* (at the exclusion of other texts), and focus on water, rather than fluids more broadly (like blood, which is about 50% water, anyway). Future work will turn to liquids in Derrida’s other texts, and attend to the ecological dimensions this project.

<sup>ix</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other OR Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press [1996] 1998).

<sup>x</sup> Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 1.

<sup>xi</sup> Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 2.

<sup>xii</sup> Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 2; emphasis mine. Full quote: “it is *on the shores* of the French language, uniquely, and neither inside nor outside of it, the unplaceable line of its coast that, since forever, and lastingly, I wonder if one can love, enjoy oneself, pray, die from pain, or just die, plain and simple, in another language or without telling anyone about it, without even speaking at all.” As I have written elsewhere (2019), this question of the possibility of living and dying in another language and on the shores of France connects Derrida’s identity (and the structure of citizenship) to that of “the animal” in several ways. For example, in *The Beast and the Sovereign Vol. 1* (2009), Derrida returns us to these French beaches when his discussion of the French sovereign (*Dauphin*) begins with a mournful reflection on a real pod of dolphins (“thus named by man,” “held to be so human, so intelligent, almost as intelligent as man”) who, just weeks before his lecture, “obstinately became beached” on these very same shores of France (253). Like Derrida, dolphins lie (and die) on the shores of belonging.

<sup>xiii</sup> Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 1, 3, 14, 10.

<sup>xiv</sup> Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 6.

<sup>xv</sup> Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 44. As if to emphasize the importance of water in Derrida’s life and work, the documentary, *D’ailleurs Derrida* (1999), is filled with images and sounds of water, including the many beaches in Derrida’s life: from Irvine, California, to Algeria and France. Early in the film, Derrida is interviewed in front of an aquarium full of fish, coral, and other aquatic life, and speaks over the sound of dripping water.

<sup>xvi</sup> Derrida’s discussion of water resembles other specters from his work: animals, ghosts, even justice. Water is another elemental, misty, or hazy appearance that does not need to be made solid in order to matter. Perhaps Derrida’s philosophy could be understood more generally as a philosophy of the elemental—of that which is excluded by the dichotomy between pure thought and matter, instead hovering on the shores between.

<sup>xvii</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, [1993] 1994), 82.

<sup>xviii</sup> Brian Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy Through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019).

<sup>xix</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 82.

<sup>xx</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 82.

<sup>xxi</sup> Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 13. After all, Derrida reminds his readers that even the supposedly self-present territories and nations from which he is excluded are multiplicitous in their colonial histories, geographies, and languages. Rather than strictly juxtaposing land to water, Derrida reminds us that lands (and nations) are not pure, solid, or stable, but are also characterized by fluidity.

<sup>xxii</sup> This sea returns again in Derrida’s discussion of the hyphen in his Franco-Maghrebian identity. Like the Mediterranean, the hyphen connects and separates these two countries, marking their irreducible differences, and the colonial passage that connects them.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 30.



- xxiv Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 48.
- xxv Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 48.
- xxvi The whole phrase is “*parler de barrage pour des eaux peu navigables*”: speak of a damn for little (barely or low) navigable waters.
- xxvii Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 38.
- xxviii Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 31.
- xxix Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 31; emphasis mine.
- xxx Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 31.
- xxxi Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 31. In French, the words are *déferlement* (wave; breaking); *déchainé* (unleashed), an unleashed wave; ebbing and flowing, *Elle roule, elle se deroul* (literally rolls and unrolls, or comes and then unwinds). *Plages* are beaches, or shores, and *vague* is a wave.
- xxxii Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 82.
- xxxiii Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 14. It might seem transparency is more characteristic of liquids than solids. Yet water has only deceptive or duplicitous transparency, since even the clearest, stillest waters bend and refract light, distorting the location, shape, and size of what is visible. Thus, unlike the transparency of solids like glass, liquid transparency more obviously troubles absolute visibility and presence.
- xxxiv Derrida, “Force of Law,” 21.
- xxxv This is a small but representative sample of the countless uses of water and water metaphors to describe migrants and refugees.
- xxxvi Ari Shapiro, “Has Mexico Succeeded in Slowing the Flow of Migrants Trying to Reach the U.S.,” *NPR: All Things Considered* (July 9, 2019).
- xxxvii Maya Averbuch, “Threatened by Trump, exhausted by caravans, Mexico struggles with migrant surge,” *The Washington Post* (April 5, 2019).
- xxxviii “Migrant Caravan: What is it and why does it matter?,” *British Broadcasting Corporation* (November 26, 2018).
- xxxix Kirk Semple and Elisabeth Malkin, “First Wave of Migrants in Caravan Reaches U.S. Border in Tijuana,” *New York Times* (November 14, 2018).
- xl Dara Lind, “Trump’s latest tweets about the migrant caravan, explained (and debunked),” *Vox* (October 18, 2018).
- xli Argen, “Caravan migrants flood Southern Mexico.”
- xlii Kevin Johnson, *Opening the Floodgates: Why America Needs to Rethink Its Borders and Immigration Law* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).
- xliii Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 82.
- xliv Patrick Timmons, “‘The river is treacherous’: the migrant tragedy one photo can’t capture,” *The Guardian* (June 26, 2019a); “‘People with no names’: the drowned migrants buried in pauper’s Graves,” *The Guardian* (June 29, 2019b).
- xlv In addition to prosecuting aid workers who leave water in the desert, border patrol agents also empty water containers left for migrants.
- xlvi Amanda Sakuma “Damned for Trying,” *MSNBC News*, May 19, 2016.
- xlvii Anne Flaherty, Katherine Faulders, and Quinn Owen, “Trump administration proposes longer term detention of migrant families,” *ABC News*, August 2019.
- xlviii Derrida, “Force of Law,” 8.
- xliv Derrida, “Force of Law,” 13.