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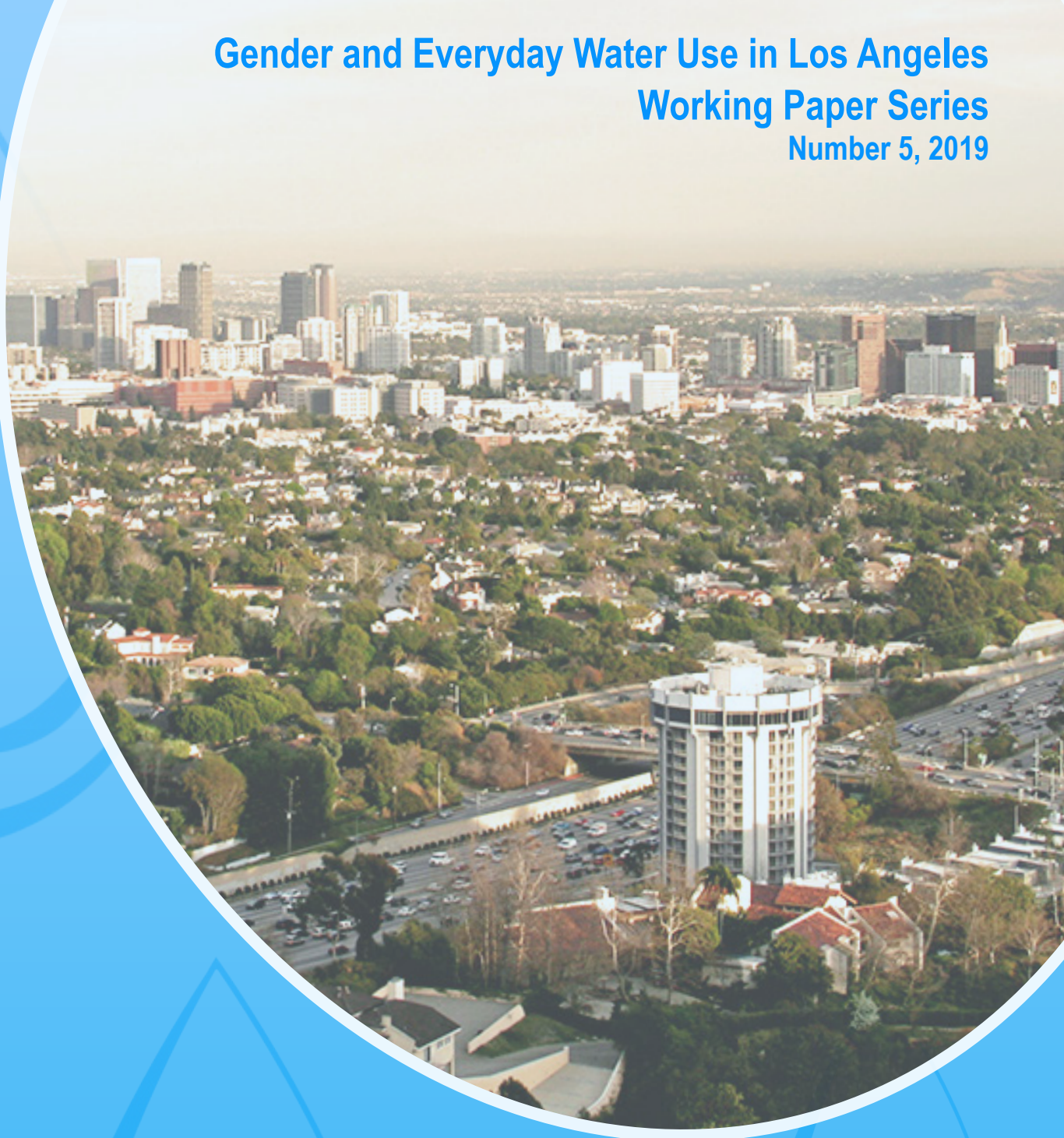
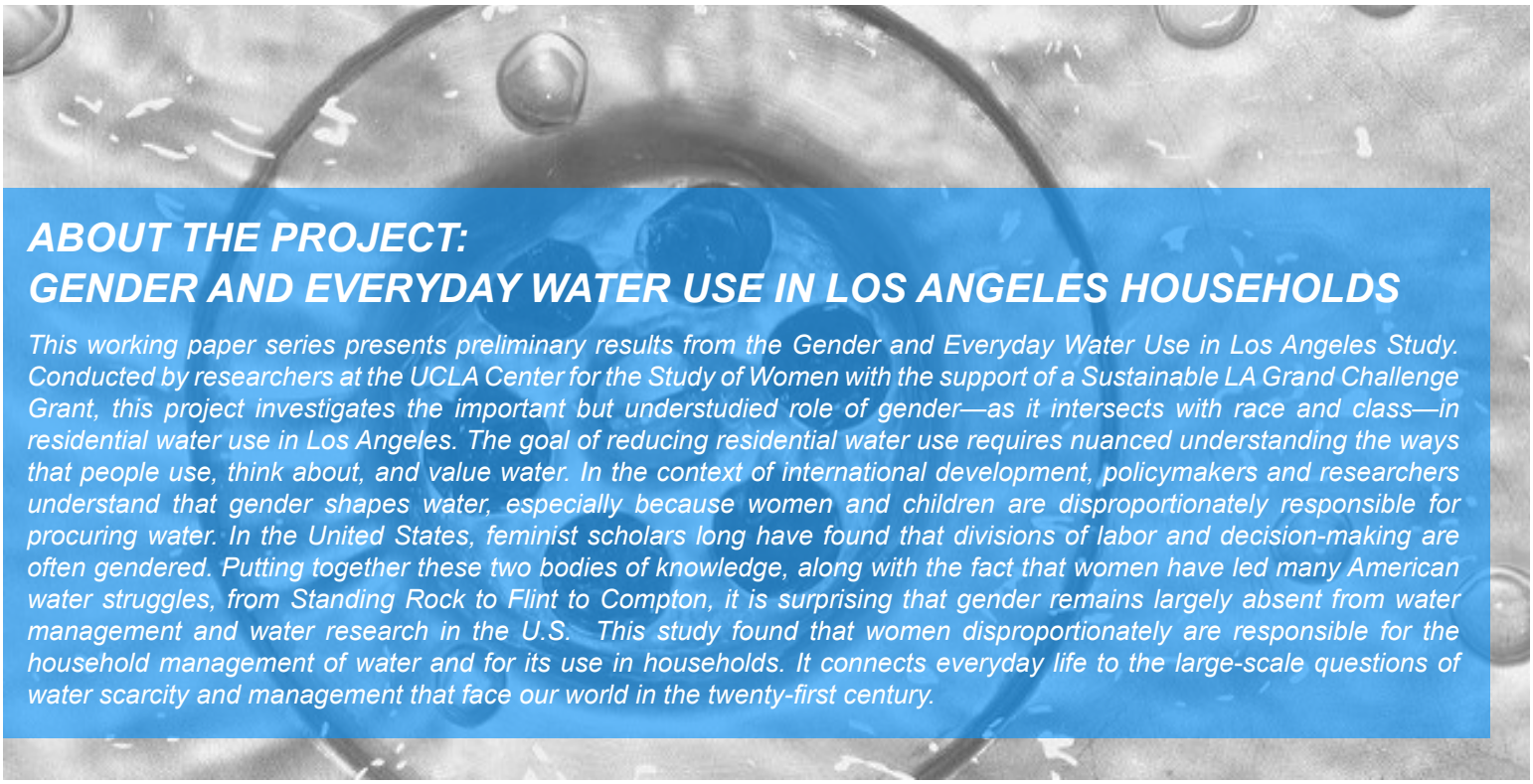


Portrait of a City at the End of the World: Los Angeles's Discourses of Disaster

By Dalila Ozier

ucla center for the study of women
35
35 Years of Research that Rethinks

UCLA Sustainable LA Grand Challenge



ABOUT THE PROJECT:
GENDER AND EVERYDAY WATER USE IN LOS ANGELES HOUSEHOLDS

This working paper series presents preliminary results from the Gender and Everyday Water Use in Los Angeles Study. Conducted by researchers at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women with the support of a Sustainable LA Grand Challenge Grant, this project investigates the important but understudied role of gender—as it intersects with race and class—in residential water use in Los Angeles. The goal of reducing residential water use requires nuanced understanding the ways that people use, think about, and value water. In the context of international development, policymakers and researchers understand that gender shapes water, especially because women and children are disproportionately responsible for procuring water. In the United States, feminist scholars long have found that divisions of labor and decision-making are often gendered. Putting together these two bodies of knowledge, along with the fact that women have led many American water struggles, from Standing Rock to Flint to Compton, it is surprising that gender remains largely absent from water management and water research in the U.S. This study found that women disproportionately are responsible for the household management of water and for its use in households. It connects everyday life to the large-scale questions of water scarcity and management that face our world in the twenty-first century.

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Introduction

On Christmas Eve, 1861, a biblical flood swept through the city of Los Angeles. Rain fell for twenty-eight days straight, causing water to bubble up from the city's muddy riverbeds and spill out across the countryside. Thousands of cattle drowned in the rising waters, while the cows that survived the initial deluge ultimately died of disease. After the rains came several years of drought that dried up the available grazeland, leaving "the bones of a million cattle bleaching the hillsides of Los Angeles County" (Davis 2006:107). By the mid-1860s, the city's rancho economy was on the brink of collapse. To pay their debts, impoverished *rancheros* offered up large tracts of land for as little as $2.50, yet found no takers (Netz 1915:55).

Desperate to attract more investment to the region, the city's oligarchs embarked upon an ambitious promotional campaign. With the bold flair of a carnival barker, Los Angeles's press circulated pretty lithographs of vibrant orange trees and golden rays of sunlight, painting the crumbling backcountry *pueblo* of Los Angeles as "a magical lotus-land of sleepy adobes" (Klein 2008:32), a "Mediterranean" paradise freed of its hardscrabble frontier past. Less than two decades after the collapse of the cattle industry, real estate agents in the area were transacting millions of dollars in land sales (Davis 2006:111)—several times what land in the region had once been worth.

Of course, Los Angeles's value to investors was necessarily built upon widespread delusions regarding the area's long-term habitability. Thanks largely to its Mediterranean climate (Wolman and Miller 1960; see also Davis 1998, Hewett 2014), Southern California features a broad variety of extreme weather events (e.g. drought, wildfires, flooding, mudslides) that are low in frequency but dangerously high in intensity. On top of this, the Los Angeles Basin is positioned directly above dozens of active fault lines, bestowing the region with frequent earthquakes that will only grow more frequent as the region enters a period of intense seismic stress (see Davis 1998, Dolan

2001). And then, of course, there's the fact that Los Angeles's infrastructure was and is insufficiently able to support its legion of residents, requiring the city to import much of its water supply from elsewhere in the country (see Deverell and Sitton 2016, Kahrl 1983).

The 2017 La Tuna Fire was the largest wildfire in Los Angeles history. Credit: Scott L., Wikimedia Commons.

But thanks to the boosterist rhetoric of the city's turn-of-the-century press, Los Angeles's history of poverty and disaster was erased by palimpsest illusions of utopia. "No place on Earth offers greater security to life and greater freedom from natural disasters than Southern California," the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in 1934—just one year after an earthquake in Long Beach resulted in the deaths of over 100 residents (Glaister 2008). Wildfires received a similarly obfuscatory treatment: rather than recognizing the innate environmental features that make Southern California naturally prone to catching fire (see Keeley 1989, Minnich 1988), local newspapers instead blithely tried to pin the blame on arsonists (Davis 1998:131-2). In this way, mythic landscape ideologies remained vibrant throughout the 20th century, neatly occluding Los Angeles's natural proximity to disaster.

In more recent years, the looming threat of climate change has fundamentally altered the mediated discourse surrounding natural disasters (e.g. Kurz 2010, Partridge 2017; see also Hulme 2009). In a modern news machine that weaponizes the apocalyptic imagery of wildfires and hurricanes to herald the coming of the Anthropocene (see Horn 2018, Heise 2016), California residents are more inclined to think of the region's itinerant disasters as indicative of the "new normal" presented by climate change.

But although this "new normal" rhetoric is certainly a step in the right direction—if only in that it has inspired the municipal government to finally address long-standing infrastructural issues related to disaster preparedness and water management—this narrative obscures the ways in which disaster has been tied to Los Angeles's ecosystem. By diagnosing water scarcity, wildfires, and drought as symptoms of recent environmental shifts, we ignore the ways in which this city has always existed on the brink of catastrophe.

In this paper, I will explore rhetorics of disaster that provide context for water use and knowledge in Los Angeles, and that appear in some of the interviews and water diaries of Los Angeles residents that were collected as part of the Gender and Everyday Water Use in Los Angeles study. In some cases, the way that Los Angeles residents talk about disaster makes the threat seem almost benign, whether by confining the idea of disaster to some nebulous future or past, or by minimizing or ignoring the threat that drought, water scarcity, and climate change pose to other regions of the world.

Part I: The Before and the After

> *"And it never failed that during the dry years the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years. It was always that way."*
>
> *East of Eden,* John Steinbeck

In late 2011, California entered the worst drought in a century's worth of recordkeeping (Hanak, Mount, and Chapelle 2016). Thousands of homeowners replaced their thirsty lawns with drought-tolerant landscaping, many of them encouraged by government-run lawn replacement initiatives (Vahmani and Ban Weiss 2016). After the state government blocked industrial access to rivers and reservoirs, desperate farmers in the Central Valley plumbed deeper into the water table, pumping out enough groundwater that the land sank several inches over the course of a year (Goldenberg 2015). As aquifers dried up throughout the state, households that had historically relied on wells were instead forced to make due with bottled water and donated plastic tanks (Associated Press 2017a).

Then, in April 2017, Governor Jerry Brown formally announced that the drought was over. In response to a blessedly damp winter—which

flooded multiple rivers and filled many of California's major reservoirs—the governor issued an executive order that rolled back statewide water restrictions and lifted the state of emergency in all but four California counties. "This drought emergency is over," he said in an official statement, "but the next drought could be around the corner" (Associated Press 2017b).

In truth, our next drought is much closer at hand than the governor's pronouncement made it seem. For one thing, the year that Governor Brown officially marked as the end of the drought was an abnormally damp one, with the amount of rain, snow, and runoff in the state rising to levels far above historical averages (Gleick 2017). In more recent months, dryness in the region has steadily ticked up toward pre-2014 levels, introducing the possibility that we are about to enter another prolonged dry period (see Figure 1). Additionally, years of poor water management have depleted California's groundwater basins and reduced snowpack storage in the mountains, leaving the state ill-equipped to satisfy the needs of all its residents. These issues will only worsen as climate change continues to boost temperatures in the region (AghaKouchak 2015, Diffenbaugh 2015, Cousins 2017, McEvoy 2017).

Drought in California by Percent Area Affected

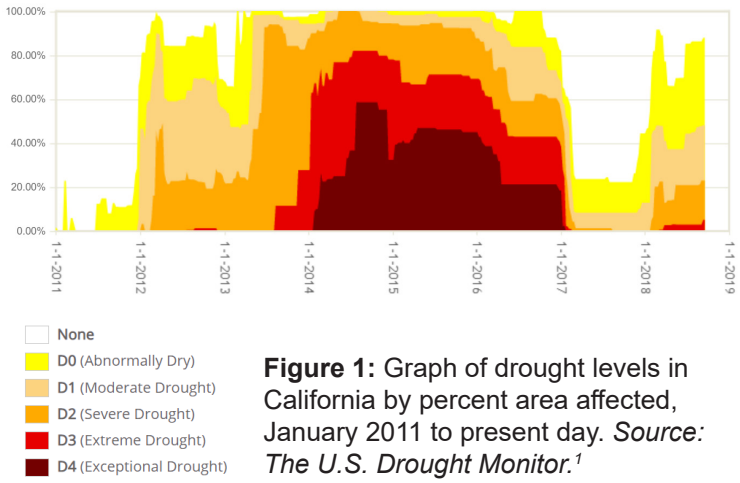

Figure 1: Graph of drought levels in California by percent area affected, January 2011 to present day. *Source: The U.S. Drought Monitor.*[1]

We are in the midst of a statewide catastrophe: as one *Wired* reporter succinctly puts it, "Demands exceed supply, disadvantaged communities don't have reliable access to safe water, ecosystems are dying, and our water systems are unsustainable and poorly managed." Despite this, some of the Los Angeles residents that we interviewed tended to talk about these issues in hypothetical terms, as if disaster was a looming specter rather than our current reality.

These speakers employed a set of rhetorical strategies that allowed them to present themselves as being temporally distant from the threat of disaster. These rhetorical strategies tended to fall into two categories: *perpetual antiquity*, wherein the speaker discursively confines the drought to the historical past; and *perpetual futurity*, wherein the speaker limits their discussions of the drought to some imagined future.

The discourse of perpetual antiquity was most common among those who were long-time residents of Los Angeles, many of whom drew parallels between the most recent drought and other dry seasons they'd experienced during their time in the region. For example, when asked if he'd altered his water use after learning about the most recent dry period, one participant downplayed the drought emergency by citing a historical framework:

> *I mean, we've gone through droughts before….there was a drought in the late 80s and then in '92 we had a whole bunch of rain. And then there was another [drought] in the 90s, and we had a whole bunch of rain in 1999. It's, like, a seven-year cycle.*

Aside from issues with factual accuracy—with the speaker referencing a drought in the 1990s that didn't actually happen—this narrative also minimizes the seriousness of the 2011-17 drought by presenting it in connection with historical dry periods that were markedly less severe. By understanding the current water crisis within the context of the historical past, speakers are able to make the threat of drought seem like less of a present danger.

Similarly, the discourse of perpetual futurity shifts the threat of drought out of the present and into the future. Participants who used this mode of discourse tended to have pessimistic views about California's prospects, identifying drought and related calamities as a looming threat that would eventually make social change a necessity. However, this focus on "future" problems obscures the present reality of disaster, thereby making it seem more benign. For example, when asked what she and her husband thought

1. The U.S. Drought Monitor is jointly produced by the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the United States Department of Agriculture, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Data visualization courtesy of NDMC, https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/Data/Timeseries.aspx.

about drought-tolerant landscaping, one participant explained, “We toyed with taking [our lawn] out last year, and I said, ‘Well, let’s see if the drought ends before we do that.’” Then, of course, Governor Brown ended the state of emergency, and she and her husband decided that there was no longer any need for them to install low-water landscaping. Perhaps someday, she said, they would have to start thinking more seriously about water conservation...but not just yet.

In the preface to *Between Past and Future* (1968), Hannah Arendt references a short story by Franz Kafka wherein a nameless man is trapped in an endless cycle of time, with the future pressing in from in front of him and the past pressing in from behind. Arendt extends this metaphor to explain humanity’s experience of time, arguing that we are forever suspended within a period of “now” that separates us from both the “not anymore” and the “not yet.” I would argue that by orienting themselves to imagined futures or pasts, these Los Angeles residents construct a bubble of safety, preventing the threat of disaster from encroaching upon their lived present.

Part II: Only Us

> *“Los Angeles gives one the feeling of the future more strongly than any city I know of. A bad future, too, like something out of Fritz Lang’s feeble imagination.”*
>
> *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare,* Henry Miller

Until fairly recently, the city of Cape Town served as the gold standard for sustainable water management. The municipality reduced pipe bursts and water leaks by replacing over 250 kilometers of water pipelines, thereby curtailing water waste in the city. It also drastically improved the efficiency of the area’s irrigation system, allowing for the production of more high-value crops (Callaway 2009). While some aspects of Cape Town’s infrastructural waterscape have served to reproduce historical inequalities in the region (see Mahlanza 2016, Smith and Hanson 2003), Cape Town’s sophisticated water system was hailed by many as proof-positive that careful planning could help urban areas weather the deleterious effects of climate change (see Aleem 2018 and Jaglin 2014).

However, Cape Town had an Achilles’ heel. Whereas other cities can draw water from multiple sources—e.g. oceans, groundwater, snow melt—Cape Town lacks desalination plants and runoff collection facilities, and

Molteno Reservoir in Cape Town, South Africa photographed by Jean Van Der Meulen.

its water table is heavily polluted by sewage (Joubert 2003). Because of this, the city relies almost entirely on rainwater, which fills a sophisticated network of government-owned reservoirs. Altogether, these reservoirs provide a whopping 99% of the city’s water supply.

Total Volume of Reservoir Water in the Western Cape

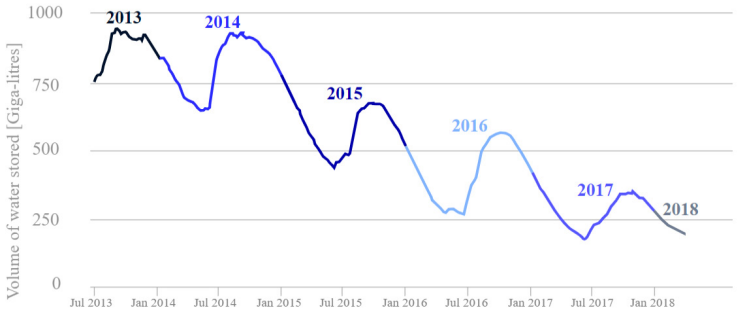

Figure 2: Graph of total reservoir water stored in the Western Cape’s largest six dams from 30 June 2013 to 31 March 2018. *Source: Wikimedia Foundation. Data obtained from the Climate Systems Analysis Group (CSAG).*

This might have been fine if Cape Town had continued to receive sustainable levels of rainfall. But beginning in 2015, the Western Cape region of South Africa entered a years’-long period of drought, severely diminishing Cape Town’s water supply (see Muller 2018, Wolski 2018). In the year before the drought began, the city had nearly 1,000 gigaliters of water in storage; by March 2018, the volume had dropped below 250 (see Figure 2). As the city’s reservoirs slowly emptied, government officials grimly prepared for Day Zero: the day when Cape Town would finally run out of water.

Water scarcity is a global concern. For a

murderer's row of reasons—widespread pollution (see Barlow 2009, Shiva 2016); overpopulation and rapid urbanization (Saeijs and van Berkel 1995); irresponsible water use, such as wasteful irrigation systems (Luz and Ferreira 2018) and the overpumping of groundwater (Famiglietti 2014)—freshwater resources are becoming more and more limited. Nearly 80% of the world's population face serious threats to their water security (Vörösmarty 2010). As of 2014, more than 2 million people die each year due to lack of clean water; by 2020, the death toll is expected to rise more than twentyfold (Cain 2014).

Despite this, some of the people that we interviewed possessed an autocentric understanding of the global water crisis. For example, when asked to discuss the issue of water scarcity as it relates to other American cities, one participant dismissively said, "It's not like here, where you would be weeks and months without one drop of rain. *They* still get rain." A different participant made a similar observation when asked about the difference between living in California and living elsewhere in the United States: "It rains a lot on the East Coast...The necessity for water conservation just isn't there." While the Los Angeles Basin does indeed possess a unique relationship to disaster--in that the region faces persistent threats from drought, wildfires, and earthquakes--this truth does not negate the critical need for infrastructural redevelopment and improved water management in other areas of the country and of the world.

As these statements illustrate, there are multiple issues with the prioritization of the "local" when discussing transnational issues like water scarcity or climate change. For one thing, this type of narrative minimizes the global nature of the ongoing ecological crisis, thereby encouraging speakers to introduce micro solutions to a macro problem. Additionally, the inequitable distribution of power and capital increases the likelihood that wealthy communities will redirect funding toward "local" disaster recovery efforts, rather than toward the less wealthy communities who are likely to be most affected by climate change (Sovacool 2018; see also Davis 1998:47-55).

To be clear, not all of our research participants shared this autocentric perspective with regards to global water crisis; indeed, many Los Angeles residents directly critiqued said perspective during the course of their interviews. And in many cases, any interviewees who presented an autocentric view of the world would be immediately rebuked by their family members. For example, when one of our participants mentioned that she takes long showers whenever she travels outside of Los Angeles, her husband was aghast: "You waste water on purpose?" he said to her, frowning. "Just because you want to?"

She shrugged. "In places where it doesn't matter, yeah."

"You waste water *on purpose*?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I take long showers because I know it doesn't matter."

"That's where you're wrong." He turned to us, jaw set. "Educate her, please, because it *does* matter."

Conclusion

In *The History of Forgetting* (2008), cultural theorist Norman M. Klein refers to Los Angeles as "the most photographed and least remembered city in the world" (Klein 2008:250). A kind of cultural amnesia surrounds the place, with our knowledge of Los Angeles's history shifting along with the city's near-constant restructuring of its cultural and material landscapes. Every razed building rewrites the story of this city, layering erasures over erasures until only illusions of memory are left. These illusions, Klein argues, affect not just how we *think* about the city, but also how we *act*—the politicians we vote for and the ones we vote out; the neighborhoods we develop and the ones we let decay.

Thus, the stories we tell ourselves about this city affect the development of its political and economic infrastructures, shaping the way Los Angeles grows and changes over time. Similarly, the way we talk about disaster affects how we think about the risks posed by climate change, the state of our city's water infrastructure, and what actions (or inactions) we should take in response to the looming threat of disaster (see Leiserowitz 2005, O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009, Spence and Pidgeon 2009, Weber 2010). As such, it's critically important for us to identify the ways in which existing discourses of disaster affect how Los Angeles residents respond to the water crisis.

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Dalila Ozier is currently a PhD student in Anthropology.

UCLA Center for the Study of Women
1500 Public Affairs Building
Box 957222
Los Angeles, CA 90095-7222
Phone: (310) 825-0590
E-mail: csw@csw.ucla.edu

csw.ucla.edu

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