River Energies

Streaming Contested Waterworlds along the Ottawa River

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Abstract: From 2024 and its spring *débâcle* to 2025's first fall snow, an ethnographical collective of researchers from the University of Ottawa took off from campus for two "river semesters." Following a speculative drop of water taken from the Kichissippi River (the Ottawa River in English or *rivière des Outaouais* in French), we fieldworked in, on and around water for an experience in elemental anthropology. We engaged with the various circulations sustained by the river flow, at times geo-chemical, at times eco-cosmological, always anthropogenic. From the sacred Anishinaabe island of Asinabka, to the adjacent massive dam of Chaudière Falls, through the headquarters of Brookfield Energy (a major hydroelectricity trading firm), to the multimillion-dollar riverfront development called Zibi—with its net zero dream of community living and neighbouring toilet paper factory that heats buildings in the winter—we regarded this sensitive anthropological confluence as a saturated flow (following Ruiz and Jue (2022)). A flow where water is, disparately and at times concomitantly, looked upon as a natural resource, a valuable landscape, a precious witness of perilous climate events to come, an alluring promise, a discomforting oracle or a forthcoming expansion of capital. Along the flooded banks of this continuously changing watercourse, which once was a highway for Indigenous peoples to travel, trade, and strive, and where the parliament of a rather young state now sits, we investigate the pulsating milieu where everything that is to come seems to run from.

Keywords: elemental anthropology; Ottawa; waterworlds; infrastructure; energy; saturation; #River Semester

Résumé : L'Université d'Ottawa, comme la plupart des institutions qui peuplent la capitale fédérale, a littéralement les pieds dans l'eau, sise sur un enchevêtrement complexe de cours, de canaux, de ruisseaux, de rivières et de canalisations. Entre 2024 et 2025, un collectif d'anthropologues s'est embarqué

pour une série de "cours d'eau," tâchant de suivre et de problématiser les trajets complexes d'une goutte d'eau spéculativement prélevée dans le lit de la rivière Kichissippi (ou rivière des Outaouais, en français). Depuis l'île d'Asinabka, sacrée pour les Anishinaabe, jusqu'à l'imposant barrage, adjacent à cette île, des chutes Chaudière, en passant par le siège social de Brookfield Energy (multinationale qui commercialise, sur la côte est nord-américaine, ses puissances hydroélectriques) et le projet, riverain, d'aménagement de plusieurs millions de dollars appelé Zibi, nous nous attardons aux pulsations (anciennes, renouvelées, promises) d'une confluence anthropologique critique, saturation de flux et flux de saturation pour suivre Ruiz et Jue (2022). Flux tour à tour, considérés comme ressource naturelle à mettre en "valeur," paysage précieux à conserver, oracle des catastrophes climatiques à venir, promesse éternelle de profitabilité à réaliser. Le long de l'eau, au fil de la rivière, nous avons ainsi rencontré scientifiques, ingénieurs, surfeurs, traders, riverains, cyclistes, automobilistes et autres vivants tirant de ce territoire d'eau, si ce n'est directement leur subsistance, en tous cas les conditions de possibilités de nos habités contemporains.

Most clés : anthropologie fondamentale ; Ottawa ; Mondes aquatiques ; infrastructures ; énergie ; saturation ; #River Semester

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Water's nature is diasporic.
It transits and carries and adapts to environments
whether engineered, neglected, or carefully preserved.
Often, it misbehaves in such a way that reminds humans
of the limits of their own power and control.
Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart[1]

Its disobedience may be its magic.
Cymene Howe[2]

The earth is shaking under the feet of the Canadian federal capital. Once more. In the heavy rain of a late North American spring, exactly thirty seconds after twelve piercing alarm bells had echoed from shore to shore, a deafening explosion is heard by anyone roaming the city centre.

In recent months, the banks of the Kichissippi River have looked jagged and grim—blasted open with dynamite while kilometres of heavy piping are patiently inserted into the earth's guts. Stretching from construction site to construction site, a complex engineering chain is responsible for installing a

new air-conditioning and heating system that aims to make the region (and its 1.6 million square metres of offices and ministries) greener.

Again, the regulatory countdown preceding another large-scale blasting pierces the air. Thirty seconds later, a new hole.

Like many large modern cities, Ottawa sits on the banks of a mighty river. For the French-speaking Québecers historically settled on its north shore, this is the *Rivière des Outaouais*. For the Anglophones long settled in the south, this is the Ottawa River. For the Algonquins, who have lived there since time immemorial, this hallowed body of water is referred to as Kichi-Sìbì. For every enunciation of the word in those three different, though interconnected languages[3] lies an entire world of water consonances and dissonances.

Increasingly referred to as the Kichissippi River in several Canadian official communications—whose many governmental buildings lord over the watercourse, along with numerous world embassies—this quasi-*fleuve* constitutes the main artery of an immense hydrographic impluvium whose watershed covers an area comparable to that of the United Kingdom. Like many metropolises around the world, the capital's urban areas are here soaked, nourished, irrigated and largely "cleaned" thanks to the proximity of water[4]. If the last 800 years have seen the succession, along these same banks, of many ways of living, all of them share the characteristic of being, first and foremost, dependent on water.

Although life in the Ottawa-Gatineau region today might involve a car instead of a canoe, a cell phone rather than a paddle, or a roof of asphalt shingles rather than one of birch, water continues to mark the existences of every being. But today, these historical water arteries that render urban life possible now share their space with millions of artificial veins conducting gas, electricity, and heat, as well as grey, black, and rainwater pipes.

In the spring of 2024 and 2025, a group of anthropologists, embarking from the University of Ottawa's campus and its Rideau Canal "waterfront," which connects it directly to the Kichi-Sibi River, set out to engage with this *water*. This initiative was part of a campus-based anthropological project led by the HumAnimaLab.[5] Our idea, for those "river semesters," was that by following a speculative drop of water and its meandering course, its different usages and various relationships to both the land and the living this water sustains, something important for the understanding of our so-called modern conditions of existences could be approached—differentially, that is.

And so, just as the ice that annually covers the river's wintry waters began to melt, when the sometimes-torrential precipitation of spring contributes to the grand liquefaction of this confluent world, we set off, by waterways that is, for a River Semester. A semester wholly dedicated to exploring the pulsations of this *alter* territory, one of aquatic propensity—one that has bathed our university campus as well as all the strata a city usually composes with since its beginnings and which we barely notice anymore.

River Semester

From the sacred Anishinaabe island of Asinabka to the adjacent Chaudière dam falls, through the headquarters of Brookfield Energy (a prominent hydroelectricity trading firm for Eastern North America) and the multimillion-dollar riverfront development *Zibi*—with its net zero dream of community living and the neighbouring toilet paper industrial complex that heats its many buildings in the winter—we regard this sensitive anthropological knot as a saturated mix of sweat and death, capital and margin, dreams and inferno.

A saturated *flowing* mix where water is apprehended, often disparately and at times concomitantly, as a natural resource to be either exploited or protected, a desacralized cosmic channel, a discomforting oracle of the perilous climate events to come, an undervalued landscape to upscale, an alluring promise of foreseen capital gain, or even a psychogenic manifestation of freedom to be reclaimed.

Along the flooded banks of this continuously changing watercourse—which was once an *incontournable* throughway for Indigenous families to travel, trade, and thrive, and where the Parliament of a rather youngish state now presides—we investigated the zones of indiscernibility where every envisioned future for the Ottawa region and its baroque assemblage of people seems to flow from. And run in.

Ethnographic Drifting (a Word on Method)

In exploring "aquatic becomings," our anthropological course confronts the challenges—and perhaps impossibilities—of crafting a well-defined ethnographic object. Engaging with a river leads us away from the "shore," where "terrestrial" concepts often prove inadequate (Jue 2020)[6].

Riparian *milieux* trouble strict aquatic-terrestrial binaries. They may be best approached in their porosities as "socio-natural" entities (Dewan and Nustad

2023), or, as Helmreich (2011) describes it, as a powerful "theory machine" that enables us to *think through* water and "operate 'athwart theory': that is, as tacking back and forth between seeing theories and explanatory tools and taking them as phenomena to be examined" (2011, 138–139).

Drawing from Bergson's caution not to imprison living things within rigid definitions (he is interested in the comic spirit of things, while waterworlding is our thing), we seek to question stationary depictions of water and aim to foster a more flexible and coherent relational understanding of the "ways" of water, akin to a practical and more intimate companionship.

> Our excuse for attacking the problem in our turn must lie in the fact that we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing. *However trivial it may be, we shall treat it with the respect due to life. We shall confine ourselves to watching it grow and expand. Passing by imperceptible gradations from one form to another, it will be seen to achieve the strangest metamorphoses.* We shall disdain nothing we have seen. Maybe we may gain from this prolonged contact, for the matter of that, something more flexible than an abstract definition – a practical, intimate acquaintance, such as springs from a long companionship. And maybe we may also find that, unintentionally, we have made an acquaintance that is useful (1911, 8).

Building on this blueprint, we follow up on media theorists Jue and Ruiz's (2021) invitation to engage in a dialogue that brings together "material and social forces" in cultivating a "trans-elemental imaginary" (2021,3). As they suggest "thinking with saturation" to highlight the "co-presence of multiple phenomena within the complexity of our symbiogenetic world" (2021, 3), we take inspiration from this concept creation exercise and aim to explore how those co-presences manifest as aquatic *media*, shaping and being shaped by various movements and emerging modes of inscriptions.

We believe that an important contribution to relational thinking is to show not only the actual zones of contacts and relationships between entities, but also to know how to think about the set of emergent properties inherent to those contact zones and activities (Cadieux and Jaclin 2025). To us, the idea of saturation suggests that thresholds, state, and potential are constantly at play. The result of these contiguities cannot in any case be understood in terms of elements alone. There is effectively another dimension, non-reducible to co-presences, but productive of them, that must be explained. In the case of

water: water and infrastructure. Water and cosmology. Water and shores, and local residents, and capital, and fear, promises, and thirst. Therein lie compositional powers we are interested in better understanding, in better sensing.

We draw on our experience with the waters of the Ottawa River to surf on the concept of ethnographic *drifting* (*dérive*), which we reactualize after Debord and the Situationist movement (1958). Debord (1958) defines the *dérive* as "a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances," characterized by a "playful-constructive behaviour" distinct from a conventional "journey or stroll." This technique is informed by the Situationists' ecological notion of "psychogeography," which describes how cities are dominated by "constant currents, fixed points, and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones." These "habitual axes" that attract and draw the *dériveurs* must be recognized and possibly broken from. Importantly, Debord also emphasizes that the dérive is not purely random but requires a critical awareness of these psychogeographical attractions, blending chance with intentional exploration to account for the deeper influences of urban environments.

While the Situationist concepts are useful for the articulation of our own practices, using drifting as an anthropological research method—or metaodos, which implies a "beyondness" (*meta*) and the idea of "moving along some traces" (*odos*) (Jaclin 2020)—entails inscribing our own drifting movement into a certain logos (as in anthropo*logy*). Becoming a "movement drawing upon other movements (or inscriptions of inscriptions). We go to the field, some things happen, and we, in response, inscribe the way they inscribe themselves, all co-animating a field".[7]

The "things that happen" might very well be attributed to an attraction or draw—a sort of "falling" into traces—towards what the Situationist calls the "habitual axes" of the urban environments. But the things happening, and the so-called environments, can also be understood as *assemblages* of companion species (Haraway 2003) and companion materials (Bennett 2010). By inserting ourselves into those assemblages, we engaged in a practice of rubbin' (*frottement*) and pattin' (*flattement*) in the perspective of developing and negotiating a form of familiarity or intimacy with the other-than-human forms that we encountered across multiple, yet related, riverine *terrains.*

Other anthropologists, such as Boyer (2018), have noted that these companionships are often subjected to a "careless manipulation" within a

posthumanist anthropocentrism. Instead of accepting this "careless manipulation," we explore the potential of (carefully) (re)valuing (Massumi 2018) these relationships—both for fieldwork practice and broader life experiences. A revaluation that must also consider the particularities of *dériveur* on watery terrains instead of the so-called urban environments. These terrains introduce distinct modes of existing in and with water, with their own intensities, and their related modes of inscription.

What are, for instance, the recurring modes of existences, and their related affective signatures, that live by a river? What are the ways in which water draws and records these inscriptions? What types of *signatures*—those signs, ciphers, or monograms etched onto things by time (Agamben 2011, 38)—does a river hold?

To explore these questions, we meander in water, highlighting how water, as both a physical and conceptual entity, is engaged with and recorded by its surroundings, human and other.

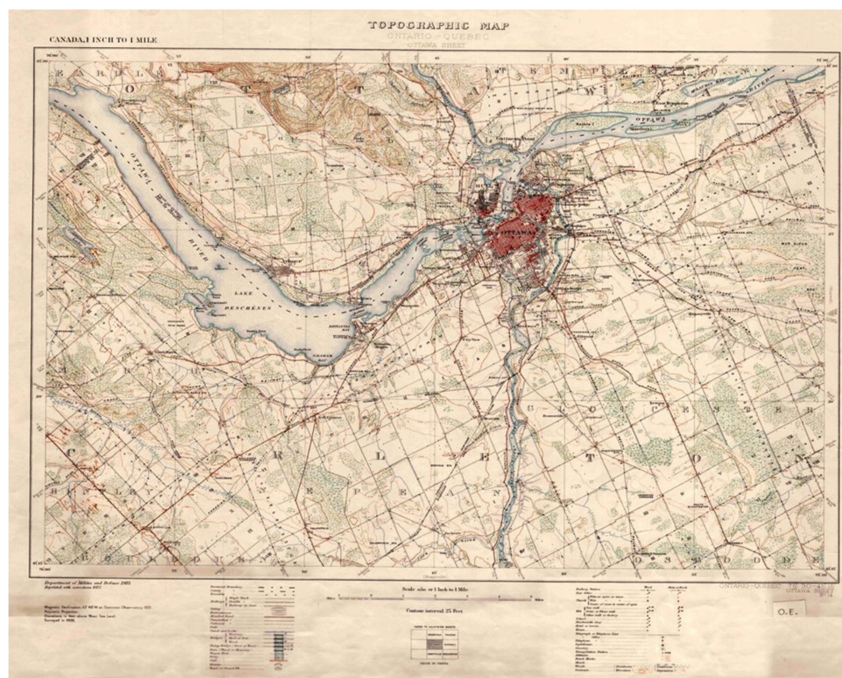

Image 1. Driftings. 1922, Topographic map of the Ottawa Region, Department of Military and Defense.

In this map, as in many maps, we cannot help but notice the difference between the lines of nature and the lines making up the map. Human lines are straight, water lines meander. As anthropologists, we thought there was something important to be said (and possibly followed) along such a distinction. The maps and photographs we are using are less representational than relational; our intent on using them is to open up the ways waterways were turned into streetways and infrastructural "ways."

Let's go back to the riverbanks and follow the various layers of habitation that the excavators and their dynamite mentioned in our introduction have just revealed (and will soon reseal).

Drinkable? Flush, Flow, and Feces...

Who would have thought? Who is *actually* thinking of water's origins and circuits while brushing their teeth, washing lettuce, or flushing the toilet? In an intricate web of engineering marvels, rusty piping systems, an immense hydrological privilege, and a lot of ecological ignorance, water flows out of a tap as easily as the light turns on when a switch is flicked.

Among those in charge of this miracle is Hiran Sandanayake. He works as a manager for Ottawa's Water Resources Planning and Engineering Branch. Bent over an iPad, Hiran guides us through the multiple layers of infrastructure that run beneath our feet, under a ground where kilometres of piping convey potable water, grey and black water, as well as a complex network of rain sewers. In addition to being rivered in by the Kichissippi, the Ottawa region has received a lot of sky water in the summer of 2024 (much less in 2025). With 405.4 mm of sky water, summer 2024 has been Ottawa's fourth wettest in recorded meteorological history.[8]

"Right now, we are actually standing in water," asserts Hiran as we stand on land by the Rideau Canal. Hiran challenges our land/water dichotomy: "There is a lot of water in the air, and the more the temperature rises with climate change, the more water the air can hold. In some areas, you'll experience wetter conditions. In Ottawa, based on our climate projections, we might see more thunderstorms, less snowmelt, and shifts in where and how water falls from the sky."

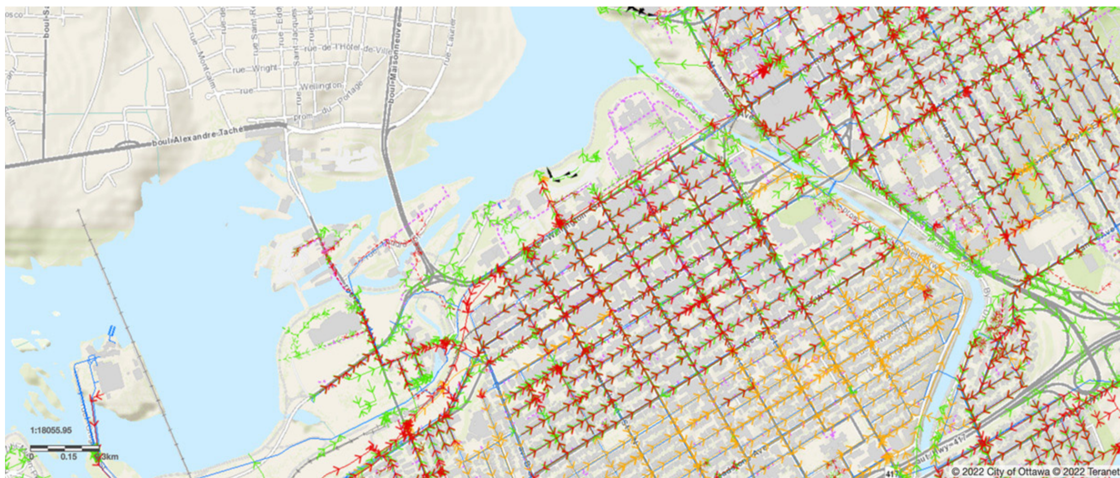

Image 2. A digital version of Ottawa's underground infrastructure can be accessed by anyone interested in pipe.[9]

The city has experienced increasingly intense rainfall events leading to flooding in recent years. Assessing flood risks and making the city more resilient to climate change is precisely Hiran's role. He often refers to the most recent flooding event, on 10 August 2023. What causes a flood, he explains, cannot be reduced to the volume of rainfall alone. It also depends on the intensity and duration of the rainfall, the drainage area's capacity, and the degree of impermeability of hard surfaces—such as roads, sidewalks, and roofs—which prevent rainwater from penetrating the ground.

Rainwater accumulates, trapped by infrastructure designed without adequate consideration for water permeability. Flooding is not a "natural" disaster; it is a consequence of the built environment and its containment-focused design. This approach aims to keep water and its contaminants underground, but these same containment strategies exacerbate flooding and the risks associated with contaminants and debris carried by running water from rain and melted snow, or when stormwater causes sewers to overflow.

Mouth open to the rainy sky, as if to take a bite or sip, a student from our group recalls how, during a previous downpour, the raw, unfiltered, untreated rainwater she tasted carried a subtle taste of gasoline. For Iris, another student, tap water is a matter of dis/trust. Having grown up in Ottawa, she doesn't second-guess the water from the tap. Her mother, however, still takes the precaution of boiling it to kill potential pathogens.

Right across the river from the city of Ottawa, in Hull, water supply became a significant concern in the late nineteenth century. When the population exceeded 10,000, well water frequently became contaminated and insufficient—not only to quench thirst but also to combat recurring fires in the city[10] (Gosselin 2005, 16). Two water pumps were installed upstream from the Ruisseau de la Brasserie to address the issue, causing discontent at the Henry Walters and Sons Axe Factory, whose production relied on the water's kinetic power, which was diminished by the pumps (Gosselin 2005, 16).

Before the construction of a system of conduits and canals in the 1870s to supply homes and buildings with drinking water, a privatized system of "watermen" delivered barrels of water to residents. This water was drawn from sources notorious for being dirty and polluted by the coal and wood industries, and by poorly controlled sewage discharges. In 1902, a water tower to filter the city's water supply was built on the premises of the axe factory after its owner's death (Gosselin 2005, 17).

Water and its arteries are vectors of life as much as of contamination and disease. In Ottawa, water flowing in and out of the city's infrastructure before and after consumption is, for that reason, highly monitored. Before consumption, water pumped from the river undergoes several processes at drinking water treatment plants: it is treated with coagulants to remove impurities, ozonated, and passed through UV reactors. Post-consumption, and prior to being released back into the river, water going through wastewater treatment plants[11], on the other hand, faces a range of "emerging" issues—problems that have only recently gained scientific attention and lack established solutions. One such issue is the proliferation of algae and cyanobacteria, partly linked to climate change, which contaminates drinking water. Plastics are another emerging issue. Found in all environmental matrices—water, soil, and air—they are difficult to characterize and remove from water. Fresh plastics, as opposed to weathered plastics (altered by exposure to sunlight or organisms), are particularly challenging to capture. Their surface properties hinder aggregation with coagulants.

But norms adapt, and it becomes clear that water "quality" is anything but a fixed, transparent state. Rather, what is deemed *potable* today will have to cope with the presence of eternal pollutants. At the same time, the amount of chemical magic that is required to keep water safe to drink will also move along lines unforeseen.

How many drops of water to be considered rain? How many cubic metres of its river flow render a dam worth building? How many trees have to be replanted for a sacred-island-turned-into-a-contaminated-industrial-site to regrow and become more than another settler infrastructure? How many eternal pollutants in our water for it to become unsafe to drink? How many megawatts for a city to keep running its electric life? How many corporate profit gains for its workforce not to be liquidated? How many rooms with a view overlooking water to be a riverfront city? How many kilometres of piping for a neighbourhood not to be flooded?

All those questions… and just *a* river, ever flowing through its rhizomatic tributaries. And yet, asks anthropologist James Scott: "Can a river transformed by dams into a linear chain of lakes, often completely detached from one another, even be called a river? […] Only when the dams fail, in, say, a massive flood, do we witness a river that has reclaimed its watershed" (2025, 173).

The Rust Banks (First Overflows)

In the Ottawa Valley, a first wave of industrialization began at the turn of the nineteenth century, coinciding with the establishment of the first large-scale European settlements, such as Hull Township in Lower Canada, and soon after, Bytown in Upper Canada (today Gatineau, Québec and Ottawa, Ontario). Faced with the 1806 continental blockade imposed by Napoleon, which cut off access to Baltic timber, the British Empire turned to North America to meet its timber needs, particularly the large pines required for its naval industry.

In the middle of the century, a second wave of industrialization developed around the trade of sawed wood and its by-products, such as matches. Throughout these two waves, complex industrial infrastructures were developed around the Chaudière Falls: timber slides, canals, a hydroelectric dam, sawmills, factories, and their socio-political byproducts (capital, class, education, space segregation, police). Several industrialists, such as Wright, Booth, and Eddy, often referred to as "lumber barons," gave shape to an economy and a landscape of the region that spans generations and continues to inform contemporary ways of living today *by* the river.

So, between these two waves of industrialization, the contours of the territory and its conditions of habitability were shaped. Along the rivers, which facilitated the movement of people, materials, capital, and promises of development, the political and social structuring of riparian worlds took root, worlds whose complex and multiple layers we inherit today.

"In the Chaudière Falls area, associated with E. B. Eddy,[12] and what was once called the *Eddy village*, almost all of the industrial heritage has disappeared, except for a few buildings, such as the theatre," explained Michel Prévost, president of the Outaouais Historical Society, during a day commemorating the 100th anniversary of the 1924 matchgirls' strike. This important milestone in Canadian political and social life has faded from the collective consciousness in recent years—recalled only by a street name (*le boulevard des Allumettières*) today. So the theatre remained. And it is by staging a day in the life of the matchmakers at Eddy that the *Théâtre Dérives Urbaines* revives the memory of those who became symbols of women's mobilization, whose names mark the post-industrial landscape of the falls: Allumettières Boulevard, Donalda Charron Library, Place des Contremaîtresses, Giorgianna Cavana Street, and Alzire Deschênes Street in the Zibi neighbourhood.

Following the river's flow, the Théâtre Dérives Urbaines performance plunges us into the toxic atmosphere of the working conditions that women, rendered invisible by Eddy, were exposed to six days a week, 12 hours a day, amid the noise, dust, and fumes of white phosphorus that ravaged the matchgirls' health.[13]

The disfiguring toxicity of white phosphorus was known to all under the name "phossy jaw," also called "the match disease" by the workers. But with the speed of work being a priority, "when you're paid by the piece, you keep quiet, sit on your chair, and endure!" exclaims a factory worker portrayed by an actress. So they endured and "remained"—in the sense of inhabiting and lasting—in a hostile environment (Guimond and Desmeules 2018). In the absence of downtime, the homogeneous, regulated, and accelerated work time became murderous, disconnected from the rhythms of life. De-potentialized labour, that is, labour rendered into a commodified, inanimate, and dead resource, that, indeed, systematically killed, is what anthropologist Ryan Cecil Jobson (2021)[14] calls, in the wake of Marx, a form of "dead labour" that constitutes a capitalizable energy resource essential to capitalist accumulation and which, in this case, was indispensable to Eddy's rise.

Never given a respiratory break, the matchgirls worked in toxic[15] conditions to keep an industry running that supplied all of Canada with matches. The energy history of match factories, powered by the labour force of female workers, along with the kinetic energy of the river's waters, is also a history of air conditioning, of air management, of environments to be developed for, but also by, the production of wood. By supplying households with light and heat,[16] the timber industry and the work of the matchgirls who kept it running gave rise to what media theorist Yuriko Furuhata, in another context, calls "thermostatic regimes" (Furuhata 2022), as well as "the first forms of anthropogenic 'climate change'" (Pinkus 2016, 12).

By coming together, however, the matchgirls formed another source of heat: one of protest against the toxic climate regime that Eddy contributed to. The strike, this refusal to work, is a way of being "in waiting, useless yet usable," which Pinkus, following Aristotle and Agamben, calls "potentiality" (2016, 25). The actresses on strike embody and, in turn, reactivate a labour force that remains unexploited, an unrealized potential.[17] This ability to (not) act, to hold back one's energy, enables interventions in regimes (and crises) of climate that are inseparable from air conditioning regimes, which in turn rely on the

Image 3. 1963, The Ottawa River Parkway, Photograph by Alex Onozko. City of Ottawa Archive

accumulation and exploitation of dead labour, reduced to mere fuel, stripped of its autonomy and the fire of its creativity.

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Following a stream, named the *Ruisseau de la Brasserie*, that flows north through the downtown area and around the old theatre where the performance began, we pass the boulevard des Allumettières and arrive at the *Robert Guertin Arena*, a sports complex built in 1957. Known affectionately as the Old Bob (*le Vieux Bob*) by fans of the local hockey team, for decades the arena was an emblematic gathering place for Hull's working class. Now abandoned and awaiting imminent demolition, the site has become a makeshift camp, home to

a collective *bigaré* that the pandemic will have weakened once more, helping spin hundreds of precarious existences into the street.

Encampment (or the Impossibilities of Autonomy)

"There's fuck all water here! And yet there are pregnant women, including one about to give birth," comments a resident of the camp who has just been denied access to the toilets of the temporary accommodation centre adjacent to the camp—the *Gîte Ami*.

In the camp's courtyard, the palpable humidity in the air signals an impending downpour, the hyetal remnants of Storm Debby that recently swept across southern Québec. Blackflies buzz about relentlessly, feasting on exposed ankles. "Don't forget that Hull was built on a swamp," remarks Manon, an elderly resident, a plastic water bottle in hand, a bandage protecting the elbow she bruised when she fell and was pushed along the bike path that runs alongside Brewery Creek bordering the camp.

Brewery Creek takes its name from the ethylic activities of a man known in the early nineteenth century as the King of Liquor, Philemon Wright. With two distilleries and a network of taverns, Wright's beer and whisky irrigated the region during the Rideau River Canal's construction between 1826 and 1830. Flows of alcohol circulated via the same bridges that connected the area's seven islands and allowed the circulation of materials used to build the canal, which eventually led to the booming industrial region of the Great Lakes (Jaclin and Valeur, 2021). The town's hydraulic infrastructure was thus also, from its inception, an ethylic one, so to speak, allowing the flow of illegal but tolerated liquor north of the river to Wrightstown, where Irish soldiers and workers—dispatched south of the river, to Bytown, during the day—commuted to at night (Gosselin 2005).

This stream, usually just a trickle of water, has been swollen by the torrential rains of the past few days. Since spring, temperatures have been well above what is still sometimes referred to as the "seasonal norms." In this humidity- and heat-saturated atmosphere, gentrified houses, apartments, and individual cars are becoming small "islands" of coolness. Hilo (playing on the French homophone *îlot*, "small island") is in fact the name of Hydro-Québec's smart-home app, a system that allows users to remotely modulate their home's temperature so that it is warm in winter and cool in summer before they even set foot inside. These microclimate-regulated interiors, these bubbles of

conditioned air, constitute what anthropologist Ségolène Guinard calls "apparatuses of habitation" (*dispositifs d'habitation*) (2021, 143), which are intended to be detached or disinscribed from the Earth, that is from the f(r)ictions that its "natural" environments impose on colonial enterprises. These hermetically sealed air-conditioned bubbles make it possible to acclimatize without exposing oneself to an "outside" world, in this case, that of the Robert-Guertin arena camp, although social workers insist that the camp is a world "not as wild" as it may seem.

At the campsite, other types of accommodation are being improvised and cobbled together. Directly on the asphalt,[18] campers have pitched, or more accurately screwed down, their tents, parked their trailers, and set up tarps, furniture, a small vegetable garden, a drum kit, and a kennel for a young Husky. What was initially known as the Ruisseau de la Brasserie encampment in the 2010s has been the site of repeated attempts to dismantle and "clean up" those deemed harmful to others and to the environment, and whom the media have constantly reduced to a health and safety hazard.

According to Kevin, a street worker whom we meet on site, the camp has been in existence for decades, except that "people [of the camp] used to be in the woods, we didn't see them. We'd hear about them when there was a fire, something major." The city's interventions have brought them out of the woods, making visible those public opinion preferred to ignore. Past dismantling efforts forced homeless people to move away from the creek banks, leading them to stick to the concrete of the Guertin arena parking lot.

During the storm, Kevin was on site to help people stay dry by putting up tarps and positioning sandbags and large blocks of wood to build small dikes against the rising waters. When such temporary structures prove inadequate to keep them dry, the camp's residents generally seek refuge, though often in vain, at the nearby video-monitored temporary shelter—called the *Friend-Cottage* (*Gîte Ami* in French)—around which the camp is being established within the public space.

The shelter is an oasis on the region's *itinerant* circuit. Its sixty beds provide its residents, eternal newcomers, temporary relief from the elements, while also aiming to transition homeless people back into society's circuit of productivity. And yet, community workers are not blind to the structural conditions that lead to homelessness. Jade, Alex, Catherine and Gary, whom we meet at the shelter's

reception desk, blame the housing crisis: "People are no longer able to pay their rent," and add to that the rising cost of living, as well as the opioid crisis.

The shelter has long been running out of space to cope with the demographic pressure of the homeless population. It is saturated, overwhelmed by the flow of people in need of a roof, which the staff struggle to quantify. "150, 200, 300 people," Jade, Alex, and Gary estimate. "Easily twice as many as last year," according to them, and nearly ten times the 30 people counted in the spring of 2015.[19] Staff must regularly deny campers access to the toilets and common room due to "repeated messes." "During storms, a lot of people who don't have a room just want to take refuge inside or dry off their stuff, but unfortunately, we can't because there's too much... it's too much... it's [a] touchy [subject]. Otherwise, [the residents] have access to water in the same way," at two drinking troughs.

In the central room where the shelter's social workers gather, several screens relay images from a dozen surveillance cameras. Like a prison, "everything is locked up, and we have all the buttons to let people in and out," explained a social worker as he pressed a green button to let a man into the shelter's eating and resting area. A sort of prison, perhaps, but an inverted one at best, where the devices serve less to contain than to control the pressure from outside the shelter, exerted by campers who are not part of the "user list."

When a resident's stay comes to an end, joining the camp that overflows outside of the shelter becomes an option of last resort, allowing them to stay close to essential services offered by the shelter as well as community organizations such as the soup kitchen and the nearby "heat stop" (*halte-chaleur*), a warm-up or cooling area (depending on the season) which, this summer, has lately been providing water bottles.

Since the beginning of August, the water at the shelter has no longer been drinkable. Campers and social workers alike tell us about cases of gastroenteritis. In just two weeks, Kevin has taken nine people to the pharmacy for severe diarrhea and dehydration.

This cooling area (*halte-chaleur*) is a construction trailer guarded by two workers who register and regulate entries and distribute bottled water. Last week, they received a supply of 45 cases of small water bottles, which they hand out slowly—one bottle per person per day. According to Angèle, one of the social workers, handing out more than one is a waste. Not all uses of water are considered legitimate. Angèle has been working here for a year, always on

weekends, with her colleague, Bouraka. She's always watching "who comes in and who goes out." And if anyone's missing, she goes around the camp to check if they're not overdosing.

Angèle knows everyone in the camp. For her, like for Kevin, the camp is their "world," their "little family." The camp's residents are indeed "family," and community, but in a different way, laterally, interstitially, in a context where the dominant housing model is organized according to exclusionary principles—of nuclear family and private property. Kevin confides that he trusts anyone here more than he trusts society. When it comes to the criticism often found in the media about salubrity, Kevin and other residents point to the lack of infrastructure. The compost and recycling bins set up by camp residents were nonetheless recently removed by the city.

To address issues of artificially created insecurity and uncleanliness by the municipality's withdrawal and negative media coverage, in the winter for 2023 community organizations partnered with the construction developer Devcore Group to install toilets and heated tents for 56 residents. Kevin notes that while Devcore's intervention helped improve conditions, it also came with stricter regulations. Some community organizations worry that the private sector's approach could exclude more vulnerable individuals who cannot adhere to the camp's rules. Social workers sometimes invoke a penitentiary imagery to talk about how this informal camp space, which emerged from real estate and "opioid" pressures, has transformed into an open-air prison, an inverted carceral space. Nonetheless, residents of the camp continue to evoke a collective mode of habitation, even as their existence fluctuates with the fickleness of political and philanthropic promises. The community of campers tries hard to stay afloat in a vacant lot, an undefined territory constantly threatened by dismantling and surveillance, holding onto and anticipating the next hot meal or cold shower.

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Just a few hundred metres to the east, on the other side of Old Hull Island—once a working-class neighbourhood, now largely replaced by federal government buildings since the 1970s—stands the Evolugen tower. Overlooking the main arteries of Gatineau's downtown, where tens of thousands of cars commute daily, moving back and forth from one side of the river to the other, this subsidiary of Brookfield Corporation, one of the largest investment management companies in the energy sector, manages several dams along the Ottawa River and its tributaries. Far from grappling with the water supply issues

faced by its neighbours on Brewery Creek, Evolugen channels millions of litres of water per minute, continually irrigating a sprawling financial ecosystem.

From the height of Evolugen's headquarters, we can grasp how hydroelectric infrastructure catalyzes not only accelerating capital flows, but also the desires and fantasies of nation-states (Larkin 2013). We are attentive to the way in which water infuses dreams (Bachelard 1942) of hydro-futuristic quality into imaginaries and other "machino-theorical" arrangements (Helmreich 2011), transducing a river into an asset, an asset into a possible valorization, a valorization into a program, a program into a world.

It is, then, a question of pausing for a moment to consider another particular "mode of habitation"[20] (Guimond and Desmeules 2018)—an expression of the (post)colonial relationship to the territory (Giroux 2019)—through which the river waters are "frozen" into (hydro)electric assets. Here, the water flows are "stored" or "glued" into an infrastructure, or rather, into an "energopolitical process" (Boyer 2018, 226) that enables the actualization of (electrical and financial) power. A process of holding and counting flows that requires constant handling and maintenance of the fragile (infrastructural and onto-epistemological) systems of containment and capitalization, thus bringing to the surface the territory's aquatic and extractive memory (Ingold and Simonetti 2022).

The Aquarium

In the reception hall of the Evolugen-Brookfield tower. A man's face timidly emerges from behind a desk filled with surveillance screens. He guards a set of turnstile doors, forming a kind of dike-station to control the daily stream of some 525 employees pouring in at regular working hours. As irregular visitors, our group receives the necessary badges to navigate the many doors and checkpoints across the floors. Our host, Frédéric, Evolugen's then Chief Financial Officer, lightens the mood: "Here, it's like the Hotel California." Just as in The Eagles' song (1977) and the eponymous film by Herbert Ross, every door, every elevator, and every staircase is locked. "We are all just prisoners here of our own device"…

Control stations for remote-controlled hydroelectric dams are accessible only through automatic gates, serving as the first filter point for the flow of employees and visitors. The gates of what resemble miniature dams now open and close as we pass. They emit an alarm sound, and a red light turns on. We step back before moving closer. The turnstile dictates our speed. A green light comes on. The valve opens. We pass through.

As we climb the corporate tower, we pass a woman pushing a cart filled with mops and buckets of soiled water, used to wash the various work areas where the branded “clean energy” is marketed. It is here, on the second floor, at the real-time trading desk, that the traders do all the transactions, the forward and spot transactions. “We examine the electricity markets in Canada and the United States, 24 hours a day—weekends, holidays, Christmas, you name it,” explains Christian, one of Frédéric’s colleagues. From their monitors, employees follow the curve of the water 24 hours a day, its movement fluctuating according to demand, a demand to which the staff of the third floor—also called the “fishbowl room” or “aquarium”—respond by modulating the water supply, opening or closing the valves of the various water dams.

Water flows, leaks, and overflows, making permanent storage impossible. It is, we believe, the sound of these flows transcribed as electrical information on the third-floor servers that we can hear, coming from a room next door. The power station and dams’ remote-control stations have become large computers whose sounds partially cover our human voices as we comment on the transparent walls of what the employees call the “fishbowl room.” Behind the glass of the fishbowl, a multiplicity of screens. Some are suspended at the back of the room, relaying even more digital information about the river waters passing through Brookfield’s dams. Others are oriented in semicircles, forming a control station that, through the liquid crystals of the screens, shows the digitized watercourses whose flows are coded in data. The fishbowl is a digital aquarium—a meta-aquarium of sorts. Employees control, empty, and refill water remotely while keeping an eye not only on the financial flows, the prices driven by market demand, but also on the pressure and temperature sensors and cameras that compose the transduction apparatus enabling remote immersion (Helmreich 2007).

Employees can only leave the “aquarium,” that is, the dams’ remote-control room, for a very short time, no more than five minutes. Five minutes is, in fact, the time it takes to update the water value. The fishbowl room is where market information affects water levels. As Antoine, who oversees the operations in the aquarium, explains, that is why “[there’s] a whole security system. There’s a whole… different mindset to security, to physical security. These computers can cause fatalities, damage networks.” “The six sides of the room,” specifies Antoine as he speaks of the space in terms of volume, “give no access to the outside, and even if we opened the roof,” he adds, “we couldn’t go any further.” The aquarium is a bubble with no exit, a space sealed off from the rest of the company, or almost.

This watertightness was reinforced in the wake of the 2001 Enron scandal. Since then, new regulations have been introduced in North America to limit the leakage of information between the transmission network and lines, and traders who might take advantage of it to manipulate the markets. The power plants (control operations) and the trade (or market operations) departments, located on different floors of the company, are isolated from each other to avoid information leaks, "to such an extent," insists Frédéric, "that we (the traders) don't know [the control operations staff]. The aquarium staff have their own cafeteria, and Antoine is the only one the traders know." (Water)proofing the aquarium—with the transparent (fishbowl) window walls—reflects an ideal balance of (in)visibility perpetuating the capitalist ideal of a natural economic equilibrium, which is the rational counterpart to the unpredictable "Mother Nature." Philosopher Mireille Buydens writes that,

> ([s]ince Adam Smith, economists have identified transparency as a fundamental condition for pure and perfect competition. When the market concerned homogeneous goods, transparency of supply and demand made it possible to achieve absolute economic optimum, ensuring the best allocation of resources and the greatest satisfaction for consumers. Transparency thus allowed the "invisible hand" of the market to pull the strings of economic life, ad maximam gloriam œconomici hominis (2004, 66).

But beyond a neoliberal ideology, for Buydens (2004), who draws inspiration from Henri Bergson, the ideal of transparency and immediacy of vision stems from a Cartesian metaphysics that privileges the intellect—relying on the "purely quantitative and countable exteriority" (77)—over the affects of the senses and the materiality of the body. This framework leads to a conception of time, and we might say—in this case—of a watercourse that is no longer cyclical but linear: "dazzled [by] excessive clarity: the intellect works by transparency, stopping time and things to better grasp them, but in doing so, the reality of duration evaporates under the spotlight of reason" (77).

Conflictingly, however, it is these attempts to "linearize" the river, to containerize it against the dread of flooding, that exacerbate the occurrence of overflow (Scott 2025, 176–181).

The debacle. "It happens every three or four or five years—some other debacle happens, and then people come out of it and things get regenerated," writes finance anthropologist Karen Ho (2009, 278). At Evolugen, it happened

Image 4. 2024, Financial and digital mapping of North American energy markets and stocks, UOttawa/Hal

the day after our visit. We learned via X—in a "Tweet" that quickly disappeared, diluted in the sea of information, perhaps deleted—that a wave of termination swept across Evolugen, dismissing five percent of the staff. An article from Radio Canada relayed the information: "The sector of the company that will henceforth be responsible for 'negotiating renewable electricity' for North America will now operate its activities south of the border."[21] The wave of termination includes our host Frédéric, who has also been "liquidated." The wave broke without warning, and in a context that seems paradoxical, given that on 1 May 2024, just one week before the announcement of the terminations, Brookfield was celebrating a new $10 billion contract with Microsoft to supply the latter's data centres with renewable energy.[22]

But job insecurity is intrinsic to the unstable and unsustainable world of finance, and as Ho (2009) has shown, waves of layoffs are just as likely to occur when markets are rising as when they are falling. Getting rid of the fungible mass of employees is, in the jargon of finance, a "market signal" for investors. As Ho explains, "redundant" jobs during periods of market expansion are "liquidated" without notice to intensify the market expansion and avoid "the dilution of the bonus pool" (240).

By generating their own crisis, financial firms demonstrate a "strategy of no strategy," (Ho 2009, 249–282) as Ho explains, which consists in laying off as many people as possible during a period that seems propitious (the spendings on salaries are significantly reduced in the books, which renders even more profitable the figures geared toward selling the company, at least its attractiveness to investors), only to rehire on a massive scale later, even if it means losing the knowledge accumulated by the dismissed employees (2009, 274–286).

Although these temporary excesses, always evaluated in the short term, run counter to the company's long-term interests, the programmed liquidation initiates a *cyclonopedic* movement (Negarestani 2008) along which a capitalist regime and those who inhabit it reinvent themselves depending on their own degree of… liquidity.

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The financial and itinerant collectives we encountered share more than just geographic proximity. Their existence is framed by the vocabulary of "management": *asset* management and *crisis* management, both seeking to contain uncertainty or instability, volatility or precarity, while advocating for resilience or reintegration. Here, a f(r)iction of maximizable control forces elements, people, and capital into a dance where liquefaction reigns supreme.

As we resume our walk and descend the few metres separating Evolugen from the river, we come across the Kruger pulp and paper mill, a relic of a golden industrial age when fortunes—and local inequalities—grew at a dizzying pace. Today, the factory, considered an essential service, produces astronomical quantities of toilet paper, which, after use, disappear into the depths of urban sewers. Back to the river.

Interestingly, a portion of the byproducts from the process of transforming wood pulp into toilet paper (which consumes significant amounts of river water) is now redirected towards a new urban development. From its liquid state to its vaporous form, water is rerouted once more toward heating and cooling systems, toward privileged humans, running the transduction of its potency/latency into a highly engineered network of climatic and thermostatic becomings.

Zibi

Garlands of sodium-colored lights hang overhead, while a jazzy Christmas song pulses in the air. The combination of brick, old metal, and wooden floors lends a gritty charm to this multi-story industrial building, now repurposed

as a second-hand market. “And if you look out the window, you’ll see moving water—it’s just… right there… it’s touchable,” marvels Julia before showing us a vintage snakeskin purse whose dried skin she spent two weeks moisturizing. Like many other items at the market, the snake turned into an artifact, its skin “restored, fixed, and cleaned up to bring it back to life”.

Several times a year, during flea markets or Christmas markets, artists and artisans take over the brick walls of what might have been once part of the old Eddy complex on Albert Island. Vendors sell everything from obsolete video games to century-old reconditioned tools, books, and magazines. Some of these retro bric-a-brac items—discarded treasures now given a second chance—are over a hundred years old, while others date back to the 1950s.

Events like this are part of Zibi’s real estate development enterprise, aimed at revitalizing the historic industrial area into a sustainable community. Massive “carbon-neutral” condominiums are being constructed by the water. Admittedly, ”the artists are the ones who would appreciate living here,” concedes Greg, a vendor from the Tool Library. And yet, none of the craft makers we spoke with live in the neighbourhood. “They can’t afford it,” Greg said with resignation. As we write, the cheapest rental unit we could find was a bachelor apartment (called a 1½ in Québec) priced at $1,300 on the Québec side of the neighbourhood.

As of 2024, most residential and commercial spaces are still vacant. The site is home to around 500 residents, a tenth of the people this community hopes one day to accommodate. The (post)industrial and (post)colonial imagination of the Zibi enterprise still struggles to take root, establish itself, and (de)toxify the river through environmentally-friendly dwellings.

In the One Planet Living sustainable development centre opened by and for the Zibi community, One Planet Ambassador Britanny and Ali, an architect, took us on a journey into the invisible infrastructure of this (still mostly) imaginary carbon-neutral district.

In the basement of the Zibi Community Utility District central plant, green, orange, blue, and white pipes crisscross in a dense rhizome of circuits in which our guides, Britanny and Ali, sometimes lose their way. Britanny reaches for one of the pipes that snakes around the power station. “Here, this silver pipe [conveys] thermal energy directly from Kruger.” Britanny raises her voice over the deafening noise of the machine. “The green pipe network, on the other hand, runs towards Québec. Each pipe is colour-coded,” she explains, “so that it can be located among the various water circuits. In winter, river water pumped

and heated by Kruger's plants flows from Québec to Ontario. In summer, thermal energy is also captured from the river's cool water and reinjected as air conditioning for the district's residential and commercial units.

The Zibi eco-district covers an area of 14 hectares, and like Gatineau and Ottawa, this neighbourhood is located on unceded Algonquin Anishinaabe Territory, this time on a sacred site that has long been (and still is) a gathering place. The project takes its name from this heritage. Zibi means river in Anishinaabemowin. In the wake of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation initiatives and (mostly failed) promises, attributing an Anishinaabe name to the condominium project symbolically evokes (and simultaneously revokes) the site's pre-colonial past by leaving intact the material conditions of dispossession on which the project depends. Such toponymic (re)inscriptions exemplify the form of non-reciprocal, state-managed recognition that Coulthard (2104) argues functions to "domesticate" Indigenous claims without disrupting the colonial relationship (40).

The dream—of a carbon-neutral district whose heating and cooling system is powered primarily by river water—is simulated by an immersive digital animation connected to a stationary bicycle. The simulated bike ride takes the viewer through pixelated and gentrified streets. Images of scattered trees and narrow strips of grass confined to the concrete lining the streets and buildings coexist with pedestrians and cars. The imagined future looks all too familiar. Nothing is subversive about the proposed "mode of habitation" in this immersive installation. The digital editing does not disrupt any established order; instead, it reaffirms a dominant, urban, consumer-driven habitation, comfortably sheltered from the untimeliness of a waterworld where one never truly gets wet.

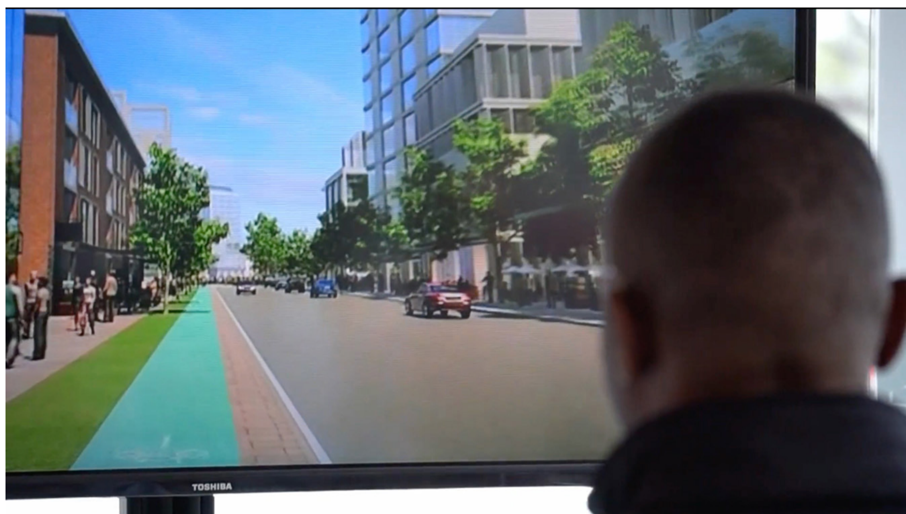

Image 5. 2024, Commercial holography of Zibi real estate community dream, UOttawa/Hal

A few steps from the One Planet Living sustainable development centre, in the Zibi House, another virtual infrastructure production, no longer made of pixels but of paper, showcases this urban vision. A scaled-down model of the architectural project provides an overhanging view of the water, the dam, the bridges, and the riverbanks. High-rise towers in tones of beige and brown realistically depict existing buildings. Whereas white residential towers stand for a ghost city, ghostly in its paper virtuality and its current vacant occupancy, those already erected contrast with their plain white counterparts: the projected constructions, slowed down by the pandemic, as explained by our hosts. These towers “to be” are the main features of this ghost town, a barely inhabited place that exists mostly as a paper model.

This ghost town is also haunted by the river and its (un)predictable floods. Like a *ritournelle* (refrain), the architects of Zibi like to recall the irony of popular predictions stating that the banks “are supposed to flood once every 100 years, [even though floodings of this magnitude] have already occurred twice in the last ten years.” The district has been built according to forecasts of future rainfall, “the rains of 50 years from now, the centennial rains, the millennial rains,” based on statistical data from a river that, elusive, never ceases to change. These statistical models aim to minimize risk and maximize what generates value: the surface area, the orientation of units, the view of the river and of its features. According to anthropologist and writer Amitav Ghosh (2016), the construction of waterfront cities is characteristic of colonial (port) settlements (67). A landscape featuring a view of the sea or a river, rich with the symbolism of mastery and conquest, generates real estate value.

It is along these waters that the region’s colonization developed in the nineteenth century through the forest industry, which transported its production by taking advantage of the current’s flow. From this industry arose the E. B. Eddy Match Company, founded by Ezra Butler Eddy, an entrepreneur from Vermont. The Eddy quickly expanded its operations to include sawmilling, and pulp and paper manufacturing. Today, in addition to the hydroelectric exploitation of the falls, now managed by Hydro Ottawa, only the Kruger pulp and paper mill remains as a testament to the continuity of wood-related industrial activity along the banks of what is now the urban centre of Ottawa-Gatineau (most of the architectural and artefactual traces of this past were not deemed interesting by any governmental body or anyone else and have been consistently demolished over the years).

It is on the remnants of the pulp and paper industries and on the site of the Eddy (1854–1927) that the eco-district Zibi is now being built, about a hundred years later. With Zibi, one is left to wonder if a settler-colonial regime is once again being reinstated, albeit differently, in the ever-shifting waters of a river powering "atmospheric bubbles" (Furuhata 2022, 1), ways of living animated by a desire for climatic control.

The architects of Zibi frame these lands as a "new model of collaboration" between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the National Capital Region (Zibi 2025, 1–2). They emphasize partnerships with the Algonquins of Ontario and the Pikwàkanagàn First Nation as central to the project's legitimacy and benefits (Zibi 2025, 5). During our discussions with members of the Zibi team, their ambition was often described in terms of "giving the river back" to the community. A sentiment echoed in their public materials, which highlight reopening access to Chaudière Falls, creating new riverfront parks, and restoring and renaturalizing the riverbanks after more than a century of industrial enclosure (Zibi 2025, 3). Despite the divides the river continues to mark—between Indigenous and settler communities, Québec and Ontario, Francophone and Anglophone publics—Zibi aligns itself with the cosmopolitan imaginary promoted by the One Planet Living framework: a sustainability ethos that, in its universalizing gestures, resembles what could be called a one-planet-one-people imaginary, one that risks flattening the very structural and historical differences it claims to bridge.

However, turning Zibi into a common ground, a (carbon-)neutral environment, remains a cosmological projection not without frictions between Zibi's representatives and the Algonquin-Anishinaabe First Nations. Many people initially wanted the area rehabilitated into a park, to return to nature, Brittany admits. The Assembly of First Nations, along with nine out of ten Algonquin chiefs, opposed the project (Cornick 2016). Some opponents also called for the site's restoration to its "natural state," envisioning it as a cultural park and historical memorial for the Algonquin Nation (Cornick 2016). In 2023, Chief Dylan Whiteduck of the Algonquin-Anishinaabe Nation of Kitigan Zibi denounced "The Gathering of Nations" held on the Zibi district site as cultural appropriation,[23] highlighting yet another dimension of the project's contested public messaging.

Behind the greenwashing systems of value extraction, and behind the windows from which to contemplate "vistas" of a river kept at a calculated

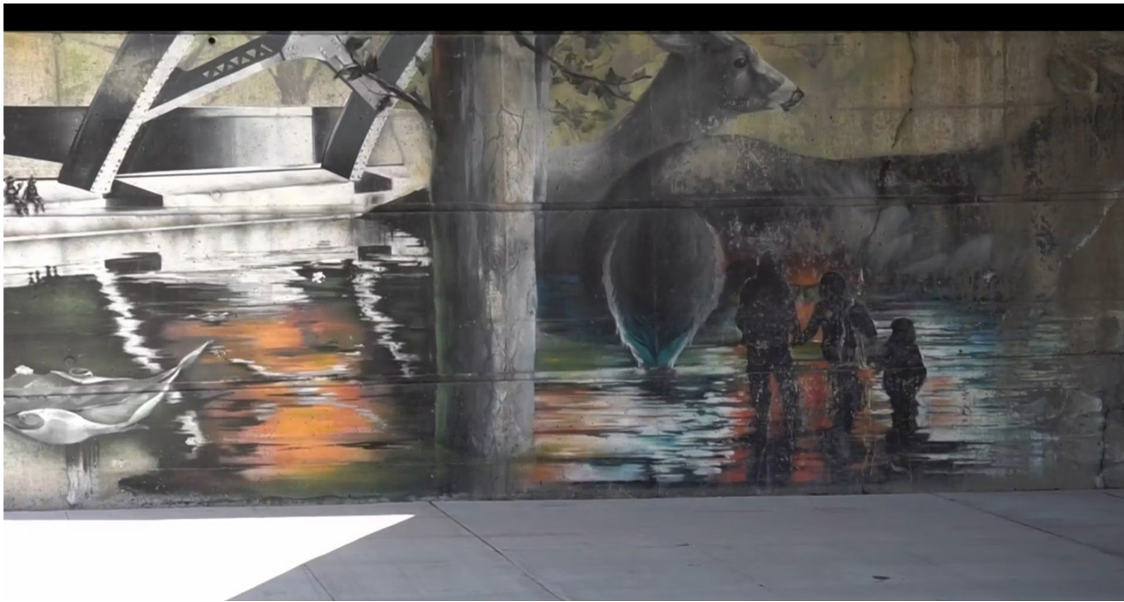
Image 6. River Energies – https://vimeo.com/video/973482359 – UOttawa/HAL

Image 7. Chaudière Falls Circular Dam, May 2024 – Uottawa/HAL

distance, little remains of an ecology of practices, a regime of reciprocity that the sacred land and the waters of the river once were told to animate.

Right where the piping system of Zibi's air conditioning changes colour and inverts its course, under one of the bridges that connects the two sides of the Kichissippi River and now delineates two Canadian provinces, is a dam. A circular one, of the kind that is harnessing most of the North American river courses today. Built on a spectacular feature, both geographical and

cosmological, this dam serves to produce electricity. It is also home to a large colony of various bird species that gather there for food (and possibly peace).

Dam(ned)

Water foams as it meets the air. The drizzle blurs the contours of the Chaudière Falls' waterline. It is from this indistinction between land and water, at the instant of a seeming phase change as water becomes air, that the falls take their name—"Asticou" in Algonquin, meaning "boiling water." The falls are a sacred gathering place for the Anishinaabe, and, during colonial expansion, also became a crossing point for timber transportation, adding another layer of use and cosmovisioning to the site.

Timber, bound into rafts, was steered along the Ottawa River by men referred to as "cageux" (Labastrou 2005). The hydraulic force of the falls powered a rocking-hammer workshop built in 1803, known then as the Petite Chaudière, as well as the sawmills lining the river. In 1871, an estimated 61 million metres of wood were stockpiled along the banks of the Ottawa River. By 1880, 1,200 saws, driven by water and the labour of up to 5,000 workers, powered this industry (Ouimet 2005, 30). In 1829, the first slide was constructed along the falls to facilitate the passage of large timber rafts destined for export to England and local production, including Ezra Butler's match factory and his paper mill, established in 1889 (Guitard 2005).

Today, six hydroelectric dams are located at the Chaudière Falls. According to the Chaudière Falls' promotional website, these dams generate "green energy for 20,000 homes." The first of the six dams, built in 1891, has been upgraded with "cutting-edge systems and computerized sensors." The latest dam, built in 2017, is entirely underground "to avoid spoiling the natural beauty of the region," the voiceover claims. It adds, somewhat ironically, that the space encompassing the dam was "designed with consideration for First Nations culture, notably by including trees and plant species with traditional uses." A vision feeding urban fantasies of "clean" energy, removed from the environmental and existential destruction borne by those directly affected by the plants' construction.

In fact, along the Ottawa River today, on both sides of the Canadian Federal Capital, *la ritournelle du territoire* seems sepulchrally loopy: the concrete and its robust pieces of capital/infrastructure to the colonizers—and their descent; the plants, trees and waters (when left uncut or "unvaluable" for the industry) to the Indigenous people—and their descendants. As much as the river was regarded as sacred in its capacity to bring people, humans and other living

beings, together, now the same river (is it the same?) can't stop parting them, based on their history, their language, or their money. Once turned into a resource, the water seemed to automatically part ways. Damned…

The Chaudière Falls' dams are of the "run-of-river" type, the oldest and most common form of hydroelectric plants, built throughout the twentieth century. Such dams generally lack reservoirs and are not designed to sustain high-pressure falls. They are designed to utilize low-pressure water currents and instead rely on a smaller drop in level but a larger volume of water to generate energy.

Frédéric, the interlocutor from Brookfield Energy, explained another type of dam, featuring a turbine-dam coupling, which emerged during the second wave of dam construction after the Second World War. This design was first implemented at the Pipmuacan Reservoir on Québec's North Coast (Côte-Nord) in 1956. "It's not the same type of turbine at all," Frédéric said. "These turbines are built for high-pressure water." In this design, the pressure increases with the height of the dam and the fall point, concentrating water into a pipe, either dug underground or visible on the surface. These plants function like "batteries." Their storage reservoirs allow the production of so-called "dispatchable" volumes, that is, water made available on demand based on market prices and profit potential.

The third type of power plant, still rare in Canada, is the pumped-storage plant. The country's only example draws from the waters of Niagara Falls. According to Canada's Energy Regulator (CER), these plants "store gravitational potential energy by pumping water into a reservoir during times of low electricity demand, then generate electricity by releasing water through a turbine during peak demand." Pumped-storage plants aim to ensure grid reliability and maximize water's profitability by circulating it endlessly in a vertical loop. An idealized vision of "fishless" water or, for that matter, of any consideration regarding the complexities and intricacies of aquatic life ecologies. In any case, a vision devoted to market production, invariably siphoning off any critters living underneath its surface, that is beyond volumetrics. When other-than-human beings are considered, though, as eels are at the Chaudière dam, where a ladder has been installed to encourage those elusive inhabitants to move upstream and downstream again, dams often become surveillance sites for species monitoring and conservation politics.

In that respect, each type of dam reflects a degree of water control, though never absolute. These dams, designed to regulate water flows, can cause significant damage if they fail, as Antoine, another interlocutor from Brookfield Energy, pointed out. For this reason, they are considered critical infrastructures, vital to the economic and political development of the Canadian colonial state (Spice 2018).

As symbols of the nation-state, infrastructure such as dams produces and circulates certain national and colonial imaginaries, rooted in a dichotomy between culture and nature. This dichotomy naturalizes the destruction of the latter. Indigenous feminist anthropologist Anne Spice writes that defining infrastructures as tools of the state "takes for granted the state's ontological claims" and thereby excludes "a world of relations, flows, and circulations that the settler state has attempted to destroy and supplant" (2018, 49). Infrastructure deemed critical to the colonial state often mortifies other vital infrastructure—if we expand the term to encompass the relational networks that sustain life, human and nonhuman alike.

At Brookfield, where dams are mostly operated remotely, management sometimes referred to "Mother Nature" when discussing forces beyond their control. "She," they said, "runs everything." Rain, snowmelt, and climate change all impact their operations. The feminization of nature, framed as unpredictable and vast, echoes a colonial imaginary predicated on the separation of nature and culture, where water—such as the river—is conceived as "hypernature," external to culture (Plasson 1998, cited in Helmreich 2011, 135).

The dam and its metaphor embody the authoritarianism of infrastructure designed to control water flows. As political scientist Cara Daggett (2018), building on Klaus Theweleit, observes, the image of the dam animates a patriarchal imaginary—the "soldier-body as dam-body." In Theweleit's words, "it is the Western image of women, an image that 'lives in water,' that comes to stand for flow qua flow, for all that threatens to escape and dissolve the male ego" (1987, 264, cited in Daggett, 2018, 37). At the scale of the nation-state, the dam becomes intrinsic to a colonial and patriarchal history—a history of "damming up" the body politic against uncontrollable flows of desires that threaten to erode its imagined impermeability.

Yet, in the words of Frédéric and Antoine, nature appears as much in control as it is controlled. By naming it "Mother Nature," they personify it not as passive or given but as a complex, sensitive system whose subtle variations demand

attention. This attention, in their case, is mediated through digital technologies that monitor its rhythms (Stengers 2013, 33–35).

This "soft" perspective of a digitally augmented dam aligns with a "soft masculinism"—an ecomodernist posture. Under the guise of so-called green energy that claims to respect the environment and Indigenous perspectives but offers no avenues for reparations, this approach perpetuates colonial epistemologies and infrastructures in the name of those it purports to include…[24]

(Runny) Conclusion

Maps have punctuated our water journey. As Timothy Mitchell (2002) has argued, state maps of (water) infrastructure provide an overarching view that simplifies the complexity of topography, making it legible to state surveyors through grids and cadastral maps. Such mapping rationalizes the relationship between territory and its waters through processes of abstraction that rely on and integrate a quantitative epistemology, which claims (but often fails) to achieve accuracy.

Water events, rendered un/governable and brought under state purview, are transformed into atmospherics—patterns to be measured and predicted, feeding into real estate insurance schemes.[25] Such contemporary predictive technologies reactualize ancient water oracles of the Nile, dating back to when Pharaohs used Nilometers to predict how much water would irrigate arable land, and thus predict how many labourers or soldiers could be sustained before the risk of mutiny arose (Urbanus 2023).

Alongside paper state maps thus exists another kind of cartography—not one of carving out, but of seasonal and ephemeral colouring: medicinal plants growing along the Ottawa and Rideau Rivers, intentionally planted by Indigenous wayfarers to trace the portage pathways of the Kichi Sibi.[26] Each trail was composed of different medicinal plants, meant to be harvested along the way.

At stake between digitized cartographies originally made of paper pulp, on the one hand, and plants and murals (see 26), on the other hand, is the elemental bias informing the perspectives they offer, and the way water's capacity to saturate other *media* or milieus is either unaccounted for, as in the assumed dryness of paper maps, which shrank as humidity evaporates (Mitchell 2002, 114), or fully embraced, as in the Nilometers and portage trails, where water's capacity to sustain life becomes the measure line.

Image 8. 2024, work in progress.
An anthropological mapping of the waterworlds bathing our university campus.
Mixed media and watercolour, UOttawa/HAL

By the end of the water semesters, it was our turn to put to the test the concept of inscription (understood as the permanent mark of matter within a terrestrial framework). Following Melody Jue's invitation to feel how oceanic perspectives give way to ephemerality and chromatic intensity, communicating not information but affect, we engaged in watercolours, mapping out movement and intensity through chromatic sensitivity.

A fellow student and artist, Masha Jormand, invited us to get a feel for the water, the paint, the brush, and the paper. Mapping without the hard lines of a pen or even a computer program is no easy task. The water drips onto the paper or is absorbed by it, and the medium itself is always in motion. Watercolour is inherently fluid, and as the brush moved across the page, we were confronted with its unpredictable nature. The pigments bled into each other, mingling in ways we could not entirely control. Shades of blue, green, ochre, and earth tones began to lose sharp delineation, merging into one another. Was this an absence of colour, or was the water itself creating new tints and hues, new meanings?

This process echoes the very essence of the river we have been mapping. Projecting or mimicking the movements of a river—or, more precisely, the way

water flows—feels like another anthropological *dérive*. Just as the river carves paths through the land, shaping the contours of the shores, our watercolours, too, carved their own shapes, transforming as they flowed and spread across the paper. In this sense, the water becomes both a medium and a metaphor. It serves as a tool for exploration and a reminder of the river's fluidity.

To the fluidity of the medium, we added images and photographs, gluing them to our map. These images offered a more conventional, static visual reference—a point of precision that our watercolour map seemed reluctant to provide. The photographs became fixed markers, grounding the work in recognizable forms, while the watercolour retained its abstract, almost ephemeral quality. This hybrid map is a precipitate of research on water. "The precipitate is that which comes out of a saturated solution," write Melody Jue and Rafico Ruiz, following Lisa Yin Han (2021, 3, 232). The map brings back to the foreground the river, the pasts its waters carry, and its ongoing land-water entanglements, which cannot be reduced to mere environmental background (Edgeworth 2011, 42).

When transduced into a scientific element (H_2O), a life-sustaining substance, a force for hydroelectric production and capitalist accumulation, or a climatizing fluid, water always holds within it a mo(ve)ment of suspension—a "pure potentiality," encompassing both a *potential to* and a *potential not to* (Gilson 2007, 103).

Moving away from a hubristic approach depicting rivers as forces to be conquered, our aim was to engage with, and reflect (upon), zones of indiscernibility in which water is more than an object of the kind of "technological mastery" or "appropriation or assumption in thought" that Agamben (via Gilson) analyzes in relation to humanity's own share of animality (Gilson 2007, 103). As archeologist Matthew Edgeworth writes, rivers remain untamable and their waters are "an especially vibrant kind of matter that can act or respond in sometimes unforeseen and surprising ways, requiring counter-responses" (2011, 134). They "are dangerous to think with" and their "flow[s] always threaten to break down the cultural order of things" (2011, 134).

Through ethnographic drifting, we attended to the *singularities* found in the *intervals between* categories of nature and humanity (Agamben 2004, cited in Gilson 2007, 103). For us, thinking and drifting through the waters became a deliberate act that embraced its own inoperativeness (*désoeuvrement*). This act sought to express "potentiality without power" (Gilson 2007, 103)—a state where

the potential inherent in the water's movement is acknowledged without the immediate imposition of control or exertion of power. Here, potentiality was understood not as a capacity actively deployed but as a latent, undetermined force that remains open to various possibilities.

This drifting was not passive; rather, it created spaces for new forms of engagement that emerged from surrendering to the flow rather than controlling it. In this surrender to water's indeterminate potential, we encountered and rendered new insights and relations—arising from passing through fluid ecologies rather than asserting control through deliberate motion and imposing meaning upon them. This approach allowed us to engage with water's inherent dynamism without necessarily harnessing or directing its flow, or without being limited to its more visible manifestations.

The movement of water, its course, its courses, the courses of ever-plural waters, whose course ebbs around the *Gîte ami*, speeds up in the Brookfield trading rooms, and slows down at Zibi, is the pulse of the river being felt. Following the river's flow, we found that its contemporary infrastructural couplings re-actualize ancient atmospheric bubbles, which are also speculative bubbles where flows of desire and capital constantly criss-cross. Right under there, under our feet.

In Ottawa, as in many other places around the world where cities are built *upon* rivers, the pulse of water is now changing considerably. Our river semesters were an invitation to pay closer attention to the rifts and rhythms of contested waterworlds. Past and beyond the sound of excavators and dynamite, toward the subsurface quality of our turbid present.

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Notes

1 Accessed 17 September 2025: https://items.ssrc.org/ways-of-water/on-oceanic-fugitivity/

2 Accessed 17 September 2025: https://www.heliotropejournal.net/helio/hydrological-globalization

3 As an oral language, Anishinaabemowin has been translated into written form via both French and English. It is not uncommon now to see people learning a traditionally oral language based on its current written form. There is also the back and forth between languages that sees words moving from one European linguistic realm to the North American Indigenous ones. And vice versa. So, when we write that there are links and relationships between languages, we refer both to the usual semantic connections and movements between languages, but also to the interconnected passages between oral to written form of those three specific languages (Anishinaabemowin, French, and English)—connections and transformations spurring from the land and the people who speak from it, about it.

4 Going back to water in order to better g(r)asp our complex and composed human+ histories has regained some traction in recent years. Ranging from traditional academic studies (see, for instance, the work of Raphaël Morera on Paris waterways), all the way up to contemporary media and artistic *mise en scène*s, as with the last opening ceremony of the Olympic Games *on* the same Parisian waters.

5 For past and current projects visit the humanimalab.org.

6 This is due to what Jue (2020) calls the "terrestrial bias of contemporary theory."

7 "When something happens, it is never just one thing that happens, but several inscribing processes that are unleashed (from cellular reproduction/mutation to social networks' viralities, both running analogically and digitally). But inscribing implies at least two moments, two movements. First is the action of recording what would otherwise have left only a few traces or even no trace at all. Second is the potential for this recording to be mobilized (or actualized) in the future, eventually by someone else, allowing that person to re-enact fragments of the past." (Jaclin 2020)

8 Canadian weather historian and forecaster Rolf Campbell compiles weather data from statistics provided by Environment Canada. To see the chart for the summer 2024: https://x.com/YOW_Weather/status/1114505212956377088/photo/1 (accessed 17 September 2025).

9 Accessed 17 September 2025: https://maps.ottawa.ca/GeoOttawaLite/index.html?appid=45d758e895ae468e99a77237dd39caf6

10 The Eddy match factory was for that matter a major fire hazard and fires were recurrent in North American cities. In 1870, a fire ravaged Carleton County near Ottawa, and in 1871, the Great Chicago Fire destroyed more than 17,450 of the city's 59,500 buildings (Ontario Heritage Trust, 2024; Harter, 2004).

11 Water treatment plants and wastewater treatment plants are connected through the river. Water is either pumped or discharged. In either case it is filtered. It relates to Hiram's work in the sense that floodings contribute to river pollution which is the central point of this section.

12 The E. B. Eddy Match Company was founded by Ezra Butler Eddy, an entrepreneur from Vermont. While the production of matches allowed Eddy to enter the timber industry, he quickly expanded his activities to include sawmilling as well as pulp and paper manufacturing. After the death of its founder in 1906, the company changed ownership several times but continued its operations under the name E. B. Eddy until 1998. Today, in addition to the hydroelectric exploitation of the falls, which is now managed by Hydro Ottawa, only the Kruger pulp and paper mill remains as a testament to the continuity of wood-related industrial activity along the banks of what is now the urban center of Ottawa-Gatineau.

13 The use of white phosphorus in match production was banned in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. At Eddy, however, it was not until 1915—one year after legislation was passed by Minister of Labour, Mackenzie King—that the production of matches with white phosphorus came to an end for all manufacturers in Canada (Durocher 2022, 85).

14 Jobson (2021) reactualizes Marx's concept of dead labour to argue that the labour force of enslaved Black workers on plantations in the southern United States and in European colonies was an essential energy source for the rise of capitalism. Jobson's piece is a critique and addendum to Andreas Malm's theory of fossil capitalism (2013; 2016) according to which the origins of fossil capitalism occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, amidst the transition from energy in a state of intermittent and difficult-to-capitalize flows to energy in a state of stock, which allowed for control over both inputs (labour and fuel, with labour as fuel) and outputs. While Malm's analysis of fossil capitalism begins with the white working class in Britain, Jobson argues that a system of energy accumulation and capitalization based on kinetic labour was already at work under slavery regimes.

15 Durocher describes how the factory was forced to install a ventilation system and separate the resting and eating areas from the workplaces; however, despite this new infrastructure, the risks associated with phosphorus exposure did not disappear (Durocher 2022, 81).

16 In English, the term "fuel" comes from the Latin *focalia*: "The word derives from the Old English *feuel*, from the French *fouaille* or *feuaile*, which in turn comes from the Old French *foaile*, used in the early 14th century to refer to a bundle of firewood. Furthermore, *foaile* comes from the legal Latin term *focalia*, which means the right

to request materials for making fire. This right, which Marx would call the "customary right" of the poor, would be severely challenged during the transition to capitalism. *Focalia* originates from the Latin plural *focalis*, relating to the hearth or land. [...]. If we want to be precise, the earliest forms of anthropogenic 'climate change' could be identified with the first hearths." (Pinkus 2016, 12).

17 We owe this idea to a discussion with Georgi De Rham in Darin Barney's seminar on energy.

18 Asphalt and water have a complicated relationship... The material's waterproof qualities are posing an immense challenge to soil humidity absorption and to the quality of living conditions for humans and other living beings walking/living on it. Too hot when the heat strikes. Saturated when the rain comes. (See Jaclin 2026)

19 Radio-Canada. (2015, 16 October). Encadrer le campement du ruisseau de la Brasserie était un défi selon le CIPTO. *Ici Ottawa-Gatineau*. Accessed 17 September 2025: https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/744766/ruisseau-brasserie-campement-sans-abris-fermeture-logement-temporaire

20 Translated from "modes d'habiter" in the original French version.

21 Accessed 17 September 2025: https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/2071324/reduction-effectif-brookfield-energie.

22 Accessed 17 September 2025: https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/microsoft-power-data-centers-with-brookfield-renewables-deal-ft-says-2024-05-01/

23 Accessed 17 September 2025: https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1959812/kitigan-zibi-festival-autochtone-gatineau

24 See for instance *Solar Infrastructure as Media of Resistance, or, Indigenous Solarities against Settler Colonialism* (2021) by environmental humanities scholar Jordan Kinder. About Indigenous solarities, Kinder writes in the wake of Thea N. Riofrancos (2019) that "solar panels themselves have material requirements ties to extraction that have been framed in terms of 'green extractivism'" (Kinder 2021, 64).

25 On flood and insurance, see *Underwater: Loss, Flood Insurance, and the Moral Economy of Climate Change in the United States* (2021) by Rebecca Elliott. See also *Just One Rain Away* (2022) by Stephanie C. Kane.

26 For more details about the portage trails, sees: https://kichisibiancienttrails.ca/wayfinding-map-chief-pinesis-portage/

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