

New Degrees of Freedom, Act 3: Water (a script for an audio play, as read by Julia Burlingham and Daniel Fisher and arranged by Amnesia Scanner)

Character: a universal substance, a transparent fluid, a compound of hydrogen and oxygen, the sea, rain, saliva, etc.

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I live on earth at present, and I don't know what I am. I know that I am not a category. I am not a thing—a noun. I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process—an integral function of the universe.

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More than half of you consists of me. You drink me, bathe with me, swim in me, and extract energy from me. Life itself is the body running out of me running into history running dry, or me slowly evacuating your body to return to air, ocean, earth, and ice.

Meanwhile, forbidden moistures trickle into forbidden places. Your glands expand at the most unlikely of times, betraying feelings that you have not even admitted to yourself. That is, until you apply deodorant and thermoregulation.

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Experiencing a wide-open skin through which vital substances leak out and dangerous elements seep in? This hydrophobic coating is guaranteed to make your body feel like a statue or a tomb. Spray it on and any water in will reform into a perfect sphere and roll away.

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Our lives are completely intertwined. However, the relationship between us is dried out by your attempts to seal the weak body and protect it from unwanted infiltration. You never get wet.

The hypochondriac, who once obsessed with the circulation of substances and the functioning of the primary organs, has become a cyberneticist. Complex, emergent systems such as the body, city, and planet become inputs, outputs, and controls. Collective consciousness becomes collective bargaining, preemptively negotiating future climatic configurations.

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In the bathhouse, I see myself through your eyes. The wave patterns on the marble floor mimic my movements. The stone is polished to appear liquid. A surface of petrified water, perfectly contained and controlled. And there you are, performing your self-care cycle of voiding and washing. You are more like a sponge than a marble. In fact, even marbles are a sort of sponge. Your fingertips get wrinkled in water—a relic from an earlier semiaquatic existence, useful for handling wet objects.

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How do you see my outlines? Do they resemble a coastline, a plumbing system or, perhaps, your own shape? About 60 percent of your shape? Picture my outlines by picturing everything that surrounds me.

Everything meets in contingency, as if everything had a skin. I border with air on a layer of evaporation. With earth in clay and mud, according to the phases of the moon, the breeze, the season, and the syzygies. Coasts are not lines, but dynamic zones of interaction between geophysical, meteorological, vegetable, animal, and human bodies of water.

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Your body, like a city, depends on my circulation. Likewise, hurricanes need flows of heat and moisture to sustain themselves, which is why they die as they pass over land. I benefit things in my occupying, without striving. Just as the many waters you ingest have traveled from and through watery bodies (aquifers, rivers, reservoirs, treatment plants), so too do you return them to other bodies of water, albeit in new mixtures: as milk, urine, tears, and breath to babies, sewers, and gardens.

Consider me as something unceasingly changing and transforming, less a thing than the trace of a movement, a model out of which everything can be born.

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Breath in, breathe out.

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The 48th Law of Power: Assume Formlessness

Be as fluid and formless as water; never bet on stability or lasting order. Everything changes.

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Before atoms and bacteria were discovered, the concept of the body was understood as a system in which different humors existed in a state of relative equilibrium. Made up of earth (black bile), air (blood), fire (yellow bile), and water (phlegm), we were an element among the rest—an element in fusion. This idea went hand-in-hand with a belief that the body was porous and subject to penetration by the surrounding elements. Unlike a Cartesian body with well-defined boundaries, bodies were considered permeable down to their most intimate recesses.

Today, this sense of selfhood is transformed by the recognition that the very substance of the self is interconnected not only with biological but also with economic and industrial systems.

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Unsure about your place in the universe? Prepare yourself for inhospitable circumstances, such as the cold and compressive world of oceans. Our post-terrestrial outfits, like the wetsuit and the oxygen tank, enable radical detachment from the land.

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One may lose the feeling of a body boundary, or the body and the self, in skin temperature, salty water; deep freeze; by blowing one's breath into a bubble; or at the borderlands of material and virtual worlds.

While sitting on a beach with unlimited bandwidth or residing in international waters to escape state jurisdiction, the lines between the Internet and the ocean also begin to blur. Submarine cables and data clouds provide a landscape for cyber-utopian, water-inspired online culture. Hashtag seapunk, hashtag slimepunk, hashtag icepunk.

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I am virtual water. You have grown a tail and fins.

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Splash. You strain against the bounds of your containments and leave a puddle of water behind. It slowly turns into air, ocean, earth, ice, universal territory, redefining the boundaries of individuality and space. Life is the motion of juices spilling over.

You are no longer a thing—a noun. You seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process—an integral part of an aqueous ecology. Wash and flow. Our foams never settle.

Jenna Sutela, 2014

Referencing Buckminster Fuller, Robert Greene, Astrida Neimanis, Michel Serres, and Gregory Whitehead