

Victoria Koski-Karell

University of Michigan

Poetics of Water: Drinking-Water in the Wake of Cholera in Haiti

ABSTRACT

Nine months after the January 2010 earthquake and far from its epicenter, a strain of highly virulent cholera bacteria passed from the dumped sewage of a United Nations military base and infiltrated Haiti's largest and most prominent river. Within weeks, the disease exploded across the country, striking victims with profuse watery diarrhea and vomiting—fatal unless treated with rehydration therapy. The water-borne outbreak visited upon Haiti unprecedented death and fear, seemingly sickening indiscriminately but of course following fault lines of resource scarcity. Those falling ill were almost always also those with limited access to safe drinking water. As cholera became known and cases began to wane, water businesses multiplied. A 2018 World Bank report demonstrates that the private water sector has flourished on account of cholera, taking advantage of the inadequate government response capacity and surge in demand for improved water services triggered by the outbreak. Using a multi-method interdisciplinary approach grounded in ethnographic methods, I investigate this shift. Fieldwork data collected in Saint-Marc, Haiti between 2015-2019 reveal how people and social systems are “getting used to” (abitye) cholera in their ‘water world’ in ways that are not only historically and structurally but also affectively significant.

In the wake of Haiti's first-ever cholera epidemic, embedded in the *longue durée* of always present brutality in and on Black bodies, private sector purified water manufacturing thrives. What can we learn from the ways this water-borne disease is transforming people's lived experience of and relationship to the water they drink? I use the sudden incursion of pathogenic cholera into Haiti's water as a point of departure for theorizing human-water relationality, and the proliferation of water commodities in its aftermath as an opportunity to think critically about structural vulnerability, resentment, creativity, and the role of markets in global health and development.