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# Liquid Violence: The Politics of Water Responsibilisation and Dispossession in South Africa

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ABSTRACT: This article introduces the notion of liquid violence to explain structural and racialised water inequality in contemporary South Africa. Investigating the Waterberg region in Limpopo Province from a water perspective reveals a growing surplus population composed of (ex-)farm workers and their families. Following their relocation – often coerced – from the farms to the town of Vaalwater, these people have been forced to rely on a precarious water supply, while white landowners maintain control over abundant water resources. And yet, as we show, this form of structural violence is perceived as ordinary, even natural. Our biopolitical concept of liquid violence emphasises how this works out and is legitimised in empirical practice. The argument starts from the neoliberal idea that water access depends upon the individual responsibilisation of citizens. For the black working poor, this means accepting to pay for water services or to provide labour on farms. For white landowners, it implies tightening their exclusive control over water and resisting any improvement to the urban supply involving the redistribution of resources. Supported and enabled by the state, liquid violence operates by reworking the boundaries between the public and private spheres. On the one hand, it blurs them by transforming the provision of public water services into a market exchange. On the other hand, and paradoxically, it hardens those same boundaries by legitimising and strengthening the power of those who have property rights in water.

KEYWORDS: Individual responsibilisation, property rights, violence, water, South Africa

## INTRODUCTION

In 2019 large numbers of South African citizens, mostly black and living in the poorest sections of townships or in so-called 'informal settlements', do not have continuous access to safe water. Pipes and taps may be in place, but this is often no guarantee of water flowing through them. The situation is particularly dire in the rural areas of the country, where images of empty buckets 'queuing' at a dry communal tap have become all too common. After more than 20 years since the end of apartheid and much state investment in infrastructure, the basic water rights of a large part of the population are still far from guaranteed.

Several explanations have been given for this calamitous situation. In the early 2000s there was talk of an alleged 'service delivery crisis'. The aim was to draw attention to a crisis of payment following the introduction of neoliberal policies within the realm of public service provision (McDonald and Pape, 2002). Although the number of citizens physically reached by a water supply network increased dramatically during the first years of democracy (2 million households between 1994 and 1999 [McDonald and Pape, 2002: 4]), many were unable to pay water tariffs, as these were calculated to cover the partial or full cost of service provision. This argument has persisted but has, since the mid-2000s,

become more tightly associated with the workings of local governments and their supposed inherent inability to deliver public goods (Atkinson, 2007; Koelble and LiPuma, 2010; Koelble and Siddle, 2014). Key symbolic acts illustrating this are the thousands of so-called 'service delivery protests' by angry citizens against municipalities that have taken place across the country and have often involved forms of violence (Alexander, 2010; von Holdt et al., 2011; Alexander and Pfaffe, 2014).[1] According to von Holdt (2013), this type of collective, subaltern violence is part of what makes South Africa a 'violent democracy'.

We agree with von Holdt's view of violence as integral to South Africa's new order. Yet in this article we want to shift attention from highly visible to less visible, even invisible forms of violence. Rather than examining the violence prompted by these protests, this article aims to conceptualise and explain the structural and racialised inequality in water access as violence in itself. We do so by positing the biopolitical notion of 'liquid violence' to argue that some people are systematically left without sufficient water and that this should be considered a violent (in)action. In Foucauldian parlance, this is a type of violence that represents the norm rather than the exception – something that does not directly kill people but creates the context within which their living conditions deteriorate and people are being 'let die'. As such, we contribute to an emerging literature engaging with biopolitical notions of violence within the field of political ecology (Lorimer and Driessen, 2013; Cavanagh, 2014; Nel, 2015; Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2016; Tyner, 2016; Davies et al., 2017) and also with recent debates on social reproduction as everyday life under capitalism (Bhattacharya, 2017; Roberts, 2008).

Furthermore, our concept of liquid violence draws on critical scholarship on the neoliberalisation of water services and resources to identify the boundary between public and private as the locus of violence. While neoliberalism usually blurs this boundary (Ferguson, 2009), we will show how the public and private spheres in South African water politics are both blurred *and* hardened at the same time. In this context, therefore, 'liquid' relates not only to the fluidity of the workings of biopower, but to the way this power – quite literally – 'flows' across and, paradoxically, thereby strengthens (social, political, racial, geographical and other) boundaries. Understanding this dual dynamic, we argue, allows us to delineate more clearly what is meant by the Foucauldian term 'letting die' than is sometimes the case in studies on violence and biopower. Importantly, and as we will intimate in more detail, 'letting die' is not about 'killing' people – as some mistakenly understand the concept – but about the disinvesting or non-intervening in particular groups of people (or 'forms of life') so that these have structurally less chance of making a living or more chance of seeing their livelihood wither.

We illustrate this argument by considering a specific population group and a specific place in South Africa: the black rural poor mainly comprising (ex-)farm workers and dwellers, whose home remains in the formerly 'white' Waterberg plateau in the northern Limpopo Province. The Waterberg constitutes a large tract of mountainous Bushveld that has been undergoing a process of land use conversion from crop and cattle farming to nature conservation for the past 30 years. Since the early 1990s black people have been leaving the farms (often evicted by white owners) and the villages in the adjacent Bantustan of Lebowa to relocate to the small town of Vaalwater. Here they experience an 'ordinary' water crisis defined by a lack of reliable water supply, meaning that services are constantly interrupted, sometimes for weeks. Outside Vaalwater, however, white landowners have water in abundance for both their domestic and productive needs. Water supply in Vaalwater is intimately connected with the colonial and apartheid history of the Waterberg. For this reason, to fully understand the town's water crisis, it is crucial to move beyond the divide between water resources and water services – without compromising analytical rigour.

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[1] Quantifying protests is problematic due to a lack of accurate definitions and data. For instance, the South African Police Service records only crowd incidents (not to be confused with protests). A new motive, 'dissatisfied with service delivery', was introduced in 2008 and 4493 incidents of this type were subsequently registered between 2009 and 2013 (Alexander et al., 2015: 37). On the other hand, the private organisation Municipal IQ recorded 1625 service delivery protests staged against a municipality by community members between 2005 and 2018 (Municipal IQ, 2019).

The first author conducted one year of ethnographic fieldwork at the research site, between 2013 and 2014, followed by three short visits in 2015 and 2018. A combination of participant observation and structured and semi-structured interviews was employed to reach more than 100 respondents among town residents, farmers and local authorities.

The article starts by situating the notion of liquid violence within recent literature on biopolitical violence. It then turns to a broader discussion of the relevance of this literature to contemporary South Africa, after which a case study from the Waterberg region is presented, before ending with a brief conclusion.

## LIQUID AND BIOPOLITICAL VIOLENCE

The relation between violence and the environment has long been on the agenda of political ecology, including water studies (Peluso and Watts, 2001; Zeitoun et al., 2013). However, the last five years have seen a broad and creative resurgence in engaging with questions of violence, particularly by building on or moving beyond Galtung's (1969) notion of 'structural violence' and Nixon's (2011) notion of 'slow violence'. Galtung coined the term structural violence to distinguish personal, direct violence from violence where there is no subject committing a visible action. Importantly, he also employed the term 'social injustice' as a synonym of structural violence and argued that this "shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances" (Galtung, 1969: 171). This basic element is obviously still very visible in South African society, as noted in the introduction. Nixon (2011) adapted the notion of structural violence to a context characterised by neoliberal policies and environmental crises. He coined the term slow violence to indicate a violence that is gradual, invisible and fundamentally dispersed across time and space. Although leading to distress for some (usually the poor) and rendering many lives precarious, slow violence, he argued, is often not recognised as violence at all.

Tyner's (2016) recent work on violence and capitalism is relevant here, for it not only expands the definition of violence, but questions its use as a universal abstract. Tyner shows that what is commonly defined and viewed as violence depends upon socio-spatial relations and in particular the prevailing mode of production. For instance, under neoliberal capitalism a particular valuation of life based on the full commodification of labour makes it possible and appear legitimate that certain people are disallowed life or let die without it being considered a manifestation of violence. According to Tyner, people's lives are valued on the basis of their contribution, or lack thereof, to the reproduction of the capitalist system. Two criteria are employed to decide if a certain population group is to be made live or let die – following Foucault's (2004) categories: productivity (the ability to produce surplus value) and responsibility (the commitment to participate in society as producers and consumers). Those who are deemed unproductive and irresponsible because they cannot enter the formal waged labour market, such as the elderly, disabled, poor and indigent, are left to conduct a meagre existence. Yet their vulnerability to death is not perceived as violence; it is depicted as the result of their own moral or other deficiencies.[2]

The foregoing resonates well with Li's (2010) argument about 'surplus populations' in rural Asia being forced to live precarious lives because they no longer fulfil productive needs. As Li (ibid: 67) puts it, in fact, "it is a stealthy violence that consigns large numbers of people to lead short and limited lives". Another group of surplus, disposable people that has recently been analysed in relation to violence is that composed of migrants and refugees forced to live in makeshift, informal camps inside Europe.[3] Based on research conducted in the 'new jungle' of Calais (France), Davies et al. (2017) demonstrate that

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[2] Clearly, there are many exceptions to this line of argumentation that are important to recognise, and Tyner himself also emphasises this. One possible example of many relates to the many forms of care that take place within capitalist societies that allow those who cannot enter formal wage labour to live very meaningful and fulfilling lives (including in South Africa). See here, for example, the work by J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996; 2003).

[3] During the revision of this article for publication one other reference to the term liquid violence was found; this focused on the ongoing death of migrants at sea (Pezzani, 2019).

European Union migration policies and practices are founded on a combination of biopolitics *and* 'necropolitics' (Mbembe, 2003), whereby migrants are controlled first through documentation and registration and second through abandonment to informal existences characterised by serious yet preventable suffering. According to the authors, elements of structural and slow violence are recognisable mostly in food deprivation, a lack of water and sanitation facilities and the spread of infection (such as scabies and gastrointestinal diseases), all of which is made more severe by the fact that migrants are 'trapped' in the camp due to its securitisation.

Against this background the present article focuses on the notion of biopolitical violence and how it relates to the water crisis in many parts of South Africa. Central to the concept of biopolitics is that the 'positive' governance of life revolves around making judgments about which forms of life need to be supported and which do not. Dillon and Reid (2009: 87), for example, argue that promoting the emergence of life involves "assaying life since not all life is equally productive of life and, indeed, not all life is productive of the kind of life which promotes life". As a consequence, life and its many forms and possible development trajectories need to be classified so as to be able to decide "whom to correct and whom to punish, as well as who shall live and who shall die, what life-forms will be promoted and which will be terminated" (ibid). According to Biermann and Mansfield (2014: 261), quoting Foucault (2007: 18), "these decisions rely on distinctions between normalcy and aberrance, between biological advantages and threats. But not only must biopower distinguish between good and bad, it must also 'maximise the good circulation by diminishing the bad'". It is the value decisions based on this process, and their effects, that can be described as 'biopolitical violence'.

Based on these central premises, Cavanagh (2014) sought to broaden the terrain upon which biopolitics habitually operates. He argues that under "conditions of global environmental change", "biopolitics mutates from simply constituting a specific mode of governing humans, if it ever truly was, and instead manifests as the politics and political economy of supporting certain and asymmetrically valued forms of both human and nonhuman lives within rapidly shifting ecological conditions" (ibid: 277). Next, Cavanagh identifies three "primary axes" across which contemporary biopolitics in development and sustainability operates: "first, between differently 'racialised' populations of humans; second, between asymmetrically valued populations of humans and nonhumans; and, third, between humans, our vital support systems, and various types of emergent biosecurity threats" (ibid: 273).

The implications of the broadening of the (environmental, conservation and other) terrain upon which biopolitics operates have only recently started to be explored in political ecology literature. Grant (2014), for example, investigates biopolitical security risks with respect to oil pipelines in eastern Canada and how these are configured and contested to secure certain (oil-saturated) forms of life and neglect (less oil-saturated) others. Nel (2015) deals more explicitly with ideas of structural violence to argue that the biopolitics of carbon-focused market environmentalism in Uganda leads to "direct" and "circuitous" forms of "bio-cultural sacrifice" through direct deforestation or more indirect "normalisation of environmental degradation". Focusing on conservation, Biermann and Mansfield (2014: 269) explain that the biopolitical governance of conservation focused on "biological diversity" is based on an acknowledgement that "within that diversity exist kinds that foster ongoing life, which therefore should be maximised, and kinds that are a threat, which are conceived as abnormalities that should be let die". With regard to water, Murdocca (2010) reads the water contamination crisis in one indigenous community in Ontario (Kashechewan) within the framework of a biopolitics of racialised structural violence based on producing Aboriginal people as "degenerate" subjects that are inherently unable to adapt to the core values of liberal democracy. Looking at post-conflict violence in Cambodia (1975-1979), Tyner and Will (2015) argue that the building and management of water infrastructure (supposedly 'make life' interventions) actually contributed to the famine-related deaths of around two million people, as the state considered water security for export-oriented rice production as more important than the security of the lives and livelihoods of some of its citizens.

These are all examples of how structural, often invisible, forms of biopolitical violence inherently encompass social and environmental dimensions. Yet other recent contributions have also sought to highlight hybrid forms of violence, like the notion of 'green violence' introduced by Büscher and Ramutsindela (2016: 2), which is defined as "the deployment of violent instruments and tactics towards the protection of nature and various ideas and aspirations related to nature conservation". Different from, but including connotations of structural and slow violence, green violence encompasses both exceptional and ordinary types of violence in that it is employed specifically in relation to those who are responsible for disrupting a certain ideal (white and colonial) of conservation, such as rhino poachers in South Africa. Nonetheless, one important reason for these authors to coin the term is to further broaden the common understanding of violence, as shown by the fact that green violence is composed of different dimensions, including the material, social and discursive.

By focusing specifically on the political economy of water in South Africa, the notion of liquid violence enables the physical, material reality of water inequality to be brought together with that of biopolitical power and the way this is represented and legalised in judicial and political systems. In this sense, two understandings of the term 'liquid' are suggested. First, and more obviously, liquid relates to water, which is inherently biopolitical. According to Bakker (2012: 619), this means that "water materially connects individual bodies to the collective body politic" (hence its relevance with regard to public health and productivity) and that water supply works as a means of controlling the population. She explains water governance as "a form of biopolitics, based on the categorisation, quantification, and knowledge/power formation of urban residents in an attempt to govern their behaviour" (Bakker, 2013: 283). Based on the same premise von Schnitzler (2016) analyses the provision of water infrastructure in South Africa between apartheid and neoliberalism as a medium to 'make' liberal citizens out of colonial subjects. Second, liquid relates to the fluidity that characterises the workings of biopower, by eroding, for instance, established (geographical, political, economic, social, etc) boundaries. This is a form of governmentality based on the complementary processes of individual responsibilisation and inaction (see Tyner, 2016). In a neoliberal biopolitical context the individual is supposed to be responsible for his or her life, hence power works fluidly across public and private domains. Those who cannot provide for themselves due to structural inequality are, in Foucauldian parlance, being 'let die' – even though there is no clear intention to kill them. Again, this latter point is important, as it is not being suggested that the South African state is deliberately killing its own people. However, in the specific governmental choices it makes and how it does so within a broader political economy of power, the violent effects on certain groups of people are all too real. These, we argue, need to be both understood and emphasised, and the concept of liquid violence enables us to do so.

It is also important to add that liquid violence manifests especially in the sphere of social reproduction, which has been greatly affected by the neoliberal commodification of water, both raw and potable. Roberts (2008: 536) refers to this process as an instance of "primitive accumulation" and she rightly notes that it "generates contradictions and tensions not solely for capitalist relations of production, but more crucially, for relations of social reproduction". For instance, while water commodification is mostly a transnational process its effects are visible on the local level, such as in the case of increased health risks. Also, when a household cannot afford to pay for highly commercialised, state water services, this has repercussions on its internal gendered power relations, as women are most likely to look for alternative water sources. More generally, with regard to the privatisation of several social services, Bhattacharya (2017: 90) argues that, "by systematically privatising previously socialised resources and reducing the quality of services, capital has aimed to make the work of daily regeneration more vulnerable and precarious while simultaneously unloading the entire responsibility and discourse of reproduction onto individual families".

By detailing the broader dynamics of water and biopower in post-apartheid South Africa, the next section further underlines the importance of employing the term liquid violence to understand contemporary water inequality in the country and its structurally violent effect.

## WATER AND BIOPOWER IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

Notwithstanding a lack of detailed studies on access to water services under apartheid (for an exception, see Tempelhoff, 2008), it appears that the state function of supplying water followed a precise, and racialised, hierarchy: whites were better served than non-whites, and residents of townships closer to white areas were better served than residents of rural settlements in Bantustans (Platzky and Walker, 1985). As a result, it is estimated that 12 million people had no access to piped water in 1994. Under the leadership of President Nelson Mandela, the first African National Congress (ANC) government embarked on a large-scale programme of extending water services to households that were previously excluded from the water reticulation network.[4] This took place, however, in a broader context of fiscal austerity, whereby fiscal responsibility (to pay for water services) became a founding principle of the new democracy (von Schnitzler, 2016).

As a response to increased poverty in the second half of the 1990s, President Thabo Mbeki launched a reform of the social protection system in 2001. Analysed by du Toit and Neves (2014) as a "biopolitics of poverty", it saw water take centre stage, particularly with the launch of the Free Basic Water policy (FBW). Originally, FBW was conceived as a universal social measure and aimed to provide every household in the country with a basic water supply (6000 litres per month) free of charge. And yet, since 2005, FBW has progressively been targeting the poor, in that only indigents registered with their local municipality can apply to receive free water.[5] Recent research suggests that, despite their official goals, these water interventions do not end up improving the material conditions of the poor. Instead, in practice they lead to a deterioration of their lives.

This scholarship has focused in particular on the meanings and effects of water infrastructure at the household level. Loftus (2006), for instance, argues that water meters dictate the daily life of poor residents in Durban, as these "technical artefacts" determine how much and when people can consume water. Following the commercialisation of bulk water supply in the late 1990s the city installed new meters with flow-restricting devices with the aim of recovering the costs associated with the provision of water services, thus guaranteeing profits for the water board, from which it bought bulk water. Yet, the new meters were mainly installed in townships: according to Loftus, they were ultimately intended to limit consumption by the poor by ensuring that the latter would not use more than the allocated free basic amount. Loftus employs the term 'everyday violence' to describe a situation where the actual workings of water meters were in fact restricting household consumption to less than the basic amount, or what the local government had declared the minimum necessary to survive.

The case of Durban, generally praised for inspiring the adoption of FBW at the national scale, has also been studied by Hellberg (2017). She argues that different water infrastructure produce different water subjectivities, which separate those who rely solely on FBW from those who can afford to pay for a free flow of water from their taps. It is not all about water, though. Hellberg shows that the way people access water influences how they perceive themselves and their place in society, so that poor township residents associate water with the struggle to survive, whereas wealthy suburb residents see it as something that provides pleasure and a 'good' life. According to Hellberg (2017: 73) then, "differences in access to water produce biopolitical effects. Such effects include a division of the population between those who are supposed to be content with survival and those who can enjoy a convenient and pleasurable life".

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[4] The government spent ZAR 14.8 billion on water infrastructure between 1998 and 2004 (van Koppen and Schreiner, 2014).

[5] The critical scholarship on water services in South Africa seems mostly to have focused on the years prior to Jacob Zuma's presidency (2009-2018). In addition to continuous, if not stronger, control of the poor, one could argue that this ANC government increased the opportunity for patronage and corruption around the development of water infrastructure within a broader context of 'state capture' (see Chipkin and Swilling, 2018). For instance, the War on Leaks programme launched in 2015 under Water and Sanitation Minister Nomvula Mokoyane (herself allegedly deeply involved in state capture) was largely responsible for the department's current bankruptcy. It remains to be seen whether the current Ramaphosa government will introduce any major changes in water service delivery.

In a similar vein, von Schnitzler (2008, 2016) analyses pre-paid water meters in Johannesburg as a site of the simultaneous disciplining of the body and regulation of the population. Pre-paid meters automatically shut off after releasing the free basic amount unless the household purchases credit. Since the water utility mainly installed these meters in the township of Soweto, where most residents could not afford to pay for credit, citizens "were encouraged to subject their daily actions, and indeed their bodily functions, to constant metrological scrutiny" in order to avoid exceeding the fixed free amount (von Schnitzler, 2008: 914). The meters were placed in the homes of township residents with the aim of instilling a "particular budgetary rationality". Supposedly, the new devices would assist poor citizens in calculating the costs and benefits of buying water and ultimately improve their lives. Instead, they cemented a relationship of mistrust between the state and its citizens and transformed 'silent disconnections' (a standard feature of the meter rather than an operation by a municipal worker) into a 'normal' experience that became common for many families.

Water supply is also related to the provision of (waterborne) sanitation. The latter becomes relevant in our discussion, since Robins (2014) employs it to illustrate the presence of structural and slow violence in post-apartheid South Africa, albeit without explicitly grounding them within a discussion of biopower and biopolitics. In particular, he analyses poor sanitation infrastructure causing open defecation and bucket systems to be common daily practices in informal settlements of Khayelitsha township (Cape Town), where the delivery of unenclosed porcelain toilets led to the so-called 'Toilet Wars' of 2011. Robins reads the lack of sanitation as a form of everyday violence linked to structural poverty, which is far removed from the understanding of violence as political violence and gross human rights violations promoted in the country by transitional justice mechanisms, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. While traditional violence is seen as exceptional and subject to a 'politics of the spectacle', the violence embedded in poor sanitation is often perceived as ordinary. Hence, as with Nixon (2011), one of Robins's major concerns appears to acknowledge this form of violence and so render it more visible.

## WATER ACCESS AND INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILISATION

The town of Vaalwater has an old 'water question'. Founded in 1953 in the middle of a white agricultural district as a result of a failed land speculation, the town never had its own water source nor received potable water from a water board, as is the norm in South Africa. Instead, it had to rely on the private waterworks of neighbouring farmers, who had historically settled along the Mokolo River and its tributaries. For as long as the population was small and white,[6] commercial farmers appeared willing to share some of their water resources. This was initially done with the private company developing the settlement, Vaalwater Development Company Pty. Ltd. and later with the Transvaal Board for the Development of Peri-Urban Areas, which took over the management of water services in the 1970s. At first, the town's water was sourced from the Mokolo River. Since the 1980s, however, as the river was dammed north of Vaalwater to supply water to the mining and energy industries in Lephalale, and upstream surface water uses needed to be limited, it has come exclusively from underground aquifers. In practical terms, this means that water is pumped out of boreholes located on private farms to the west and south of Vaalwater, then transported through a pipeline system into a reservoir in town, where it is treated with chlorine and finally distributed to individual and communal water access points (that is, taps). The major problem with this supply system is that it no longer meets the water demands of a growing population, which has gone from less than 1000 in the 1980s to about 30,000 in the 2010s. For instance, at the time of writing, Modimolle-Mookgopong Local Municipality, the current water services provider in Vaalwater, sources a total of 1.6 million litres of water per day from 9 boreholes, partly owned by the municipality itself and partly 'rented' from farmers (Divisional Manager Water Services,

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[6] Vaalwater was declared a 'white only' group area in 1964.

Modimolle-Mookgopong Local Municipality, interview, 20 April 2018). And yet, the estimated total water demand of the population is 3.4 million litres per day, thus leaving a water deficit of 1.8 million litres per day.

The lack of water resources has forced the municipality to ration water supply, meaning that water flows through the distribution network only a few hours per day. Moreover, water provision is regularly interrupted – usually for days but sometimes even for weeks. And yet, the socio-environmental cost of this precarious water supply is not shared equally among the town residents. The mostly white and middle-class population of Vaalwater, living in its original suburbs, seems able to cope: the number of hours respondents said they had water coming out of their taps was three times higher than the average for the whole town (i.e. nine as opposed to three); further, they can afford to buy a JoJo storage tank (with a capacity of up to 15,000 litres) and connect it to the municipal distribution network or occasionally to a private borehole in the garden. By contrast, the black population living in the township of Leseding is subjected to much more severe conditions, whereby communal taps (more prevalent than in-house or yard ones) are dry most of the day, filling a bucket may take hours, and people restrain themselves from consuming the typical amounts of water needed for daily practices such as bathing or washing in order to save something for the following days. As one respondent, who has to rely on a communal tap connected to a municipal water tank, explained (township resident, interview, 24 October 2013):

> Sometimes we go two or three days without water. And when the water comes, you find a queue of 25 litre drums. And sometimes the water is finished before it is your turn, because there is someone with 20 drums of 25 litres and they want to fill them all. (…) When you have school kids, every morning they want to bath to go to school, you must prepare food for them when they come back, you must wash their uniforms (…) Sometimes it's difficult, if you only have two 25 litre buckets, you have to save, you have to cook, you only wash faces before going to school or to work.

Black people began relocating to Vaalwater in the early 1990s. They came from 'white' farms on the plateau as well as from some of the villages in the former, bordering Bantustan of Lebowa. While moving from the villages was usually a decision taken to improve one's life, including getting better access to water considering the structural shortage of water infrastructure in 'black' rural South Africa, people often left the farms as a result of (sometimes illegal) evictions. Besides the implications in terms of livelihoods, especially when evictions were accompanied by retrenchment or firing, (ex-)farm workers and their families saw their living conditions deteriorate: by leaving the farm they also lost continuous and secure access to water – something that the paternalistic white farmer traditionally provided to his workers.

In fact, it is important to stress that while Modimolle-Mookgopong Local Municipality cannot supply enough water services in Vaalwater, this does not mean that water resources in the Waterberg plateau are scarce. Instead, this case clearly illustrates the difference between water resource availability and access. Water is available both as surface river water (Mokolo and Lephalala catchments) and as groundwater (aquifers and boreholes scattered across the plateau), but access to the resource, that is to say, being able to benefit from it, is dependent upon power relations based on private (land) property (Marcatelli, 2018). The post-apartheid legislation has eliminated private property in water. Nevertheless, white commercial farmers still control the majority of the local (or national, for that matter) water resources by virtue of their ownership of the land; they can make use of them without a state water licence as they are recognised as 'Existing Lawful Uses' and de facto still perceive and treat water as their own possession (particularly when underground). This explains the above remark about the municipality renting boreholes from farmers. The rent is not even meant to cover the cost of equipping and operating the boreholes, as that is currently mostly borne by the municipality; it is pure extraction of value without the production of new commodities in Marxist terms (see Andreucci et al., 2017). Increasing water supply in Vaalwater via rent relations with farmers is unsustainable not only because Modimolle-Mookgopong has insufficient funds but because farmers need water for their own productive uses.

Therefore, water access in the Waterberg is characterised by substantial inequality within the town of Vaalwater *and* between the town and the farms surrounding it. The latter point is crucial but usually dismissed on the assumption that one should not 'confuse' water services with water resources. In this specific context, however, the two are inextricably linked, as has been shown. Most importantly, by overlooking the relationships between water access in town and on the farms – that is to say, who wins and who loses from the current allocation of water resources on the plateau – one runs the risk of normalising this inequality and becoming oblivious to the water poverty (and its consequences) affecting the residents of Leseding. This is illustrated by several comments made by a local white farmer and – surprisingly – a black municipal official. The first was arguing vehemently against the claim that farmers in South Africa were using more water than other people by saying: "are they drinking more water? Or bathing more often? No, it is the crops (not the farmers) that use more water to become food" (commercial farmer, interview, 18 April 2018). To be sure, commercial farmers consume massive amounts of water for crop production, but at the same time they do not have to worry about fetching water with a bucket every time they are thirsty or want to take a bath, thus making it much easier for them to employ the resource in personal uses beyond survival. The municipal official, on the other hand, was explaining how he interpreted the fact that in Vaalwater you have streets crossing the border between suburbs and township, where houses at one end are equipped with all sorts of water-based appliances and those at the other do not have an individual connection to the water reticulation system, when he said: "It's like, if you can afford to buy a Mercedes-Benz and I cannot, what can I do about that? Unfortunately we cannot all be equal" (Divisional Manager Water Services, Modimolle Local Municipality,[7] interview, 30 January 2014). Taken together, these comments reveal a complete disregard for the vulnerability defining everyday life without reliable access to water, which in turn partly explains the lack of state (both local and national) intervention to counter the risks associated with a lack of continuous water supply. Nonetheless, the rest of the section looks in more detail at how and why this violent inaction takes place.

To start, we argue that this inaction rests on the state's assumption, made common sense under neoliberalism, that (public) water supply is founded on the citizens' individual responsibility to pay for the services they receive. This reflects a blurring of the boundaries between public and private to the point where public service provision becomes essentially a market exchange of specific goods and services defined as 'basic' (such as water, sanitation, electricity and waste removal) between the municipality and its residents or, in bureaucratic jargon, 'customers to the public institutions' (Modimolle Local Municipality, 2013: 16). Citizens are expected to contribute not only to the operating costs of water services, but also to the capital costs of building new water infrastructure. For this reason, in Leseding, where 39% of the population have no income and 50% have an income close to the poverty line (Stats SA, 2011), four out of six extensions are provided with communal standpipes. The state will not upgrade the water infrastructure of the poor because it cannot recover any costs from them. In these conditions residents do not receive a water bill as they are not expected to be able to consume more than the FBW allocation (i.e. 25 litres per person per day). In other words, FBW in Vaalwater is mostly delivered via communal water access points. Since 2009, however, those households that do receive a water bill, but cannot afford to pay it are required to register with the municipality as indigents. This should guarantee them access to the standard free water amount of 6000 litres per household per month, but frequent water shortages have made things uncertain. The local Indigent Clerk, for instance, told us that the municipality was delivering a 'drum' (i.e. 200 litres) of free water per month to registered indigents. Instead of sharing our concern that this quantity may not last long in a household, he said he knew it was

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[7] Modimolle-Mookgopong Local Municipality was only established in 2016 (by the amalgamation of Modimolle and Mookgopong municipalities).

little, but that was because it was given for free: "free water is intended to help people, not to substitute their responsibility to pay" (Indigent Clerk, Modimolle Local Municipality, interview, 18 February 2014).[8]

Besides FBW, a second option offered to the poor and unemployed to become responsible for the provision of basic, public services is the supply of labour, hence the promotion of workfare instead of welfare. The South African water sector offers an interesting and early example of this trend in the Working for Water (WfW) programme. Launched in 1995 by the then Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, WfW is a public work scheme that hires unemployed residents in rural areas to clear invasive alien species. Hough and Prozesky (2012) show that, contrary to the declared objective of creating micro-entrepreneurs working as independent contractors on white farms, the workers are reluctant to leave WfW, despite short-term contracts and wages below the minimum level, because they perceive it as the closest to permanent employment they can aspire to given the lack of job opportunities and the paternalism and racism that persist on white farms.[9]

In the Waterberg the idea that the poor must 'pay their way' in order to get access to water appears to take this point one step further still. It follows from the belief that local water resources should not be redistributed from the farms to the town, or from productive to domestic uses, as the former contribute to economic growth and job creation and ultimately make everyone better off. For instance, the same farmer quoted above made this line of reasoning explicit when he said: "what if people are not thirsty anymore, but they don't have jobs, because you do not give water to the industries, or food, because you do not give water to agriculture?" (commercial farmer, interview, 18 April 2018). On the farm, workers have access to water in abundance, provided that they do not consume too much of it for their own personal uses, as that is reserved for more commercially valuable uses. However, when they leave the farm to go back to their homes in the township those same farm workers do not have enough water to meet their daily basic needs. In other words, water access for the black poor is always mediated through their labour on white farms. And yet, this is considered a fair arrangement by the state because it helps advance capital accumulation while simultaneously appeasing and so disciplining the poor by including them within the capitalist system.

The lack of redistribution of local water resources to improve water service provision in Vaalwater is further demonstrated by the state's refusal to expropriate water from neighbouring landowners. It is important to note that this is not an isolated case but reflects a general trend, whereby successive ANC governments have been reluctant to test the legal possibilities for redistribution (von Holdt, 2013).[10] Besides financial considerations related to the payment of compensation, conversations with local authorities demonstrated a deep sense of respect for existing property relations and a sense of fear that expropriation may disrupt a supposed racial equilibrium based on them. On the other hand, local councillors have suggested and sponsored different and sometimes creative water infrastructure solutions, such as turning the disused grain silos in town into a 'water silos' to be filled with surface water from the Mokolo River, for example. However, these ideas seem to be aimed more at strengthening their authority and appeasing citizen-voters than being feasible, long-term plans; for instance, the Mokolo has

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[8] The Divisional Manager Water Services firmly denied the claim that their Indigent/Free Basic Water policy did not comply with national standards; however, it was impossible to verify this information as, tellingly, none of the respondents knew about or was registered to receive free water.

[9] The fact that WfW continues to imply black labour performed on white land is well captured and problematised in a poem written by E. K. Daufin and published in a special issue of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* on "Politics of water: A confluence of women's voices". A telling strophe reads: "When we slash the invasive, alien, | Water-greedy trees, | I remember how Afrikaners, | Had us Africans | tortured, raped, raided, | On our ancestral knees, | Still bleeding from their cruelty and stupidity, | But at least I've got | A job, | Health care, | and I smile as I cut down, | The European, invasive, alien trees, | With each chop, | My people rise a little higher, | Off their knees" (Working for Water, 2007).

[10] It remains to be seen what will happen in the context of land reform following the announcement by President Ramaphosa in 2018 that the government intends to make use of expropriation without compensation.

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once again been committed to the mining and energy sectors following the construction of the Medupi coal-fired power station next to Lephalale.

The foregoing shows that 'letting die' in Vaalwater is based, on one hand, on leaving the poor without sufficient water to satisfy their needs and, on the other, on having them internalise the norm that they must limit their water consumption by adapting to shortages, thus learning to use the smallest quantity possible – and supposedly survive on it. In turn, this reflects a particular valuation of productive lives coupled with a valuation of productive uses of water. Not only do the poor and unemployed not deserve to receive more than the minimum, but water resources should not be 'wasted' on domestic needs when productive activities can produce greater returns.

If explicitly demanding individual responsibilisation from township residents helps blur the boundaries between public and private, implicitly encouraging the same behaviour on the part of landowners hardens those same boundaries. In fact, as citizens are pushed to become responsible for their own water provision, they are also legitimised to protect and tighten private control over water resources resting on land ownership as opposed to sharing those same resources so that everyone (including the landless) can have access to an adequate supply. It is within this context that the Waterberg's white landowners reject any relationship between the space of the farm and that of the town and argue that it is not their responsibility to provide the bulk water needed for service delivery in Vaalwater. This argument is reminiscent of the apartheid policy of separate development, specifically the idea that traditional authorities in the Bantustans should be in charge of providing essential public services to blacks. And yet, the emergence of nature conservation as the prevalent mode of production on the plateau is giving it a new twist (Marcatelli, 2015). First, it provides landowners with a new justification, in addition to economic growth and job creation, for keeping 'their' water resources: environmental sustainability. Second, by marketing the Waterberg as an 'unspoilt wilderness' landowners-turned-conservationists erase its history of dispossession of land and other natural resources to argue instead that uneven access to water is 'natural' to the extent that it depends on the location of aquifers, while the presence of a local black population and its water demand are *unnatural* and questionable.

## CONCLUSION

This article has introduced the notion of liquid violence to highlight how the South African state allows a politics of water to endure that leads to dispossession for those citizens who lack safe access to water. It has shown that a highly unequal situation, where some have access to water quantities barely sufficient for survival while others have plenty to use for high-end commercial and touristic objectives, is perceived as 'natural' rather than exceptional and is thus not seen as violence. In particular, it has shown how the state – in conjunction with white private landowners – has been able to 'biopolitically normalise' the abandonment of specific groups of people through a reform of public service provision based on the notion of individual responsibilisation. In other words, only productive and responsible citizens are depicted as deserving to receive water, since they are able to exercise their freedom to purchase it via the market. Those lacking the means should be content to access water indirectly, such as by labouring on farms. In the post-apartheid context, one of those population groups that is excluded from meaningful (as opposed to minimal) state intervention in securing water access is that of (ex-)farm workers and dwellers. At the same time the state appears to support the explicit strategy of white landowners to strengthen their private control over natural resources, which further diminishes its capacity to prevent the black working poor from being let die.

This might seem like a fairly straightforward biopolitical narrative of violence. Yet, the case made here shows something less straightforward, which has been conceptualised as liquid violence: namely, that the public and private spheres in South African water politics are becoming blurred *and* hardened at the same time. In this context, therefore, 'liquid' relates not only to the fluidity of the workings of biopower, but the way biopower – quite literally – 'flows' across boundaries and, in so doing, paradoxically

reinforces them. This has illuminated the 'letting die' aspect of biopolitical processes of violence. In other words, the violence becomes clearer and more pronounced when taking into account how biopolitics deals with and acts on socio-spatial, political, racial and other boundaries, including that between the public and private.

This article maintains that the concept of liquid violence contributes to debates in political ecology and water politics by linking structural forms of violence to the less visible dynamics of dispossession and the production of surplus people currently occurring in many rural spaces in South Africa and around the world. Moreover, as a concept it can be seen to allow broader understandings of violence under biopower by hinting at the 'processual' and emergent features of violent power structures that allude to what Massumi calls 'ontopower' (Massumi, 2015; Büscher, 2018). Liquid violence also highlights that which Tyner and others refer to as invisible or 'abstract' structural violence, which, under enduring apartheid-type conditions, is not invisible at all. Liquid violence is very visible in the South African context.

Yet, as has been shown, visibility does not mean resistance to these violent realities – quite the contrary: they have become naturalised. As such, it illustrates what Sachs (1992: 103) feared over 20 years ago:

> What a painful paradox it would be if, after decades of struggle and sacrifice, we succeeded in doing what apartheid could never do – legitimising inequality. It would continue as before but would be regarded as natural, or, worse still, as the fault of the disadvantaged.

There is thus a most 'illiquid' side to liquid violence. Regardless of intentionalities or rationalities, this point needs to be discussed and debated more openly in order to break the increasing naturalness of inequality and biopolitical violence in South Africa.

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