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Missing power: Nostalgia and disillusionment among Southern California water engineers

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Abstract

California's sprawling network of aqueducts and dams is often cited as the embodiment of a high-modernist approach to resource management. But while once widely celebrated, in recent decades this infrastructural system and the institutions that manage it have been the subject of growing criticism and shrinking funding streams. Based on ethnographic research among employees at several California water agencies, this article explores the sense of nostalgia and diminished power experienced by the workers tasked with overseeing these networks. These emic perspectives are frequently articulated in the form of unfavorable comparisons to an imagined past, when the workers believe that their agencies were better resourced and civil engineers' technical expertise was more respected by the public that they served. Analyzing these stories of declining influence and capacity, the article shows how understandings of individual and institutional power can be conditioned by past paradigms of regional development and technocratic statecraft.

Keywords

Engineers, high modernism, infrastructure, nostalgia, state, water

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Nate,[1] a career water engineer, was midway through his beer when he began talking about California water agencies' bygone golden era. Picking at the remains of a plate of chicken tikka masala, he directed the end of our lunchtime conversation to a period when, as he put it, a water department could go about the business of providing the vital resource to residents without the headaches of interference from politicians and other under-informed outsiders. Though in his 70s when we spoke that day in the spring of 2015, Nate was firm in his conviction that the best time to work as a water engineer in his home region passed well before his working years began. He pinpointed the 1940s and 1950s, a period when his grandfather held a top post in prominent Southern California city's water department, as the years truly worthy of nostalgia. 'Water agencies were at their best then,' he told me with a sigh. 'They [the engineers] were free to just help this place grow.'

This was the first of several lunches that Nate and I shared during my extended fieldwork for a project on California water management. Throughout my research period, we met occasionally to discuss his current work as a member of a local water district's Board of Directors and, unfailingly, his sense that the public water agencies he had spent decades serving were in a state of protracted decline. He often cited the growing power of a capricious, increasingly skeptical public, easily manipulated by short-sighted, technically illiterate, or self-interested actors, as a key factor in this shift. Over the course of these conversations, Nate expressed forcefully a sense of loss and disillusionment that echoed comments and observations made by my younger water agency interlocutors. I came to grasp that, among Southern California's public sector water engineers, the work of overseeing the region's sprawling water networks is widely understood to be far more constrained and much less resourced than it once was. Put differently, these workers believe that they – and the institutions that employ them – have lost much of the power and status that they once enjoyed.

Those familiar with the California waterscape could defensibly term such assessments both eminently reasonable and somewhat obtuse. The pace of large-scale water development in California has clearly slowed since the middle of the 20th century (Erie, 2006; Hundley, 2001; Reisner,1993 [1986]). Despite recurrent droughts and much associated handwringing over the impacts of climate change on the state's water provision arrangements, many proposed aqueduct, dam, wastewater recycling, and desalination projects have remained unbuilt for decades due to inadequate funding and public opposition. But on another level, assertions that the public institutions tasked with managing the state's water lack power ring hollow. As Erik Swyngedouw (2004: 2) once observed of urban water systems, 'controlling the flow of water implies controlling the city, as without the uninterrupted flowing of water, the city's metabolism would come to a halt'. In the Southern California context, the sheer scale of the material footprints and financial resources of the institutions tasked with managing the resource reinforces this point. Agencies like the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California (MWD)

own and operate water infrastructure networks that stretch hundreds of miles into the rural hinterlands and enjoy annual operating budgets in the billions of dollars. By almost any metric imaginable, these institutions continue to play a substantial role in shaping the conditions of possibility for sustaining or expanding urban Southern California.

Acknowledging such contradictions allows us to approach these engineers' nostalgia for their agencies' high-modernist heyday as a revealing site to explore understandings and experiences of state power (and lack thereof) from within public institutions themselves. Elaborating the emic sense of dwindling influence and capacity among this community of practice, this article examines how these narratives of decline both obscure contemporary arrangements of power and serve as the basis for critique of the neoliberal state. This approach builds on earlier anthropological considerations of nostalgia, understanding it as a context-specific cultural practice rather than 'a given content' (Stewart, 1988: 227), one deserving of careful ethnographic attention rather than generalized dismissal as a sloppy, always regressive version of history (Tannock, 1995). Accounts of nostalgia for bygone eras of colonialism (Bissell, 2005), socialism (Berdahl, 1999; Parla, 2009; Todorova and Gille, 2012) and modernist developmentalism (Ferguson, 1999; Kilroy-Marac 2013; Yarrow 2017) have shown how localized expressions of decline can be mobilized to advance claims on and critiques of the present. Research unraveling the multiple, differently situated and oriented forms of nostalgia that can operate concurrently within a local context underlines the ambivalent nature of the category (Berliner, 2012). Grounding the present analysis in the perspectives of these engineers enables a consideration of a very specific sense of nostalgia, one for a heady era of a muscular, well-resourced public sector enacting a sprawling program of infrastructure development. As this period passed before any current workers were employed by public agencies, this is a longing for a time of which my interlocutors have no direct experience, a temporal relation termed 'exonostalgia' within the literature (Berliner, 2014). In contrast to nostalgic recountings grounded in personal loss or displacement (Lems, 2016), the 'missing' explored here is understood in the sense of having 'missed out' rather than one of being wrenched away from a better place or time.

These articulations of a rose-tinted past, I contend, romanticize a particular set of relations between state institutions and the public that they ostensibly serve. Notably, in a region where frontier mythology and the figure of the rugged individual loom large, the so-called golden era is understood as a time when not only the individual engineer, but also the public water agency that employed him[2] enjoyed more resources and popular esteem. As such, while these articulations resonate in some ways with the accounts of United States history that dominated right-wing political rhetoric on the national stage throughout the 2010s (Goldstein and Hall, 2017; Morton, 2018; Pied, 2018), they are deployed here to praise a substantively different set of socio-political relations from the ones championed in those contexts. Attending to the disillusionment and nostalgia of these engineers, I argue, reveals how understandings of individual and institutional power

are conditioned by past paradigms of regional development and technocratic statecraft – and the centrality of these formations for delineating how power relations evolve over time.

This account draws from 20 months of Los Angeles (LA)-based fieldwork carried out between 2014 and 2018. During this period, I conducted more than three dozen semi-structured interviews with workers who self-identified as engineers currently or previously employed by public water agencies within Southern California, in roles related to water supply, stormwater management, and wastewater recycling. In addition, as part of my participant-observation work for a local environmental non-governmental organization (NGO), I took part in more than 50 working meetings between NGO and public agency representatives, and shared many more casual interactions, like the lunch described at the article's outset, with engineers I met in these contexts. I also observed more than 50 public meetings and forums hosted by a range of water agencies, and reviewed dozens of their reports and planning documents.

The article developed from these materials proceeds in five sections. The first brings the history and political ecology of public water development in Southern California into conversation with the anthropological literature on nostalgia. The next three sections elaborate different dimensions of the narratives of decline articulated by the engineers: their diminished ability to undertake new projects; the widespread disenchantment with their agencies' past works; and the public's growing ability to 'kill' projects through protest. The conclusion elaborates how these nostalgic discourses both facilitate the denial of power and intersect with leftist demands for the enactment of a 'Green New Deal' – that is, an aggressive program of state infrastructure development to address global climate change – highlighting the surprising alignments of purpose that such accounts of the past can produce.

Water, power, hope, and nostalgia

November 5, 1913 marked a pivotal turning point in the history of semi-arid Southern California. On that day, an estimated 30,000 people gathered at the northeastern edge of LA to watch water from the city's just-completed 233-mile aqueduct flow into the fledgling metropolis for the first time. Since then, the region's largest city has relied on water piped in from beyond its borders for the majority of its supply. In contrast to earlier, less successful efforts at water development in the region, building the pipeline was a public project, undertaken by the city's newly established municipal water department, financed with a bond measure, and enabled by interference in a rural land dispute from the federal government (Hoffman, 2001; Kahrl, 1983). The liquid influx enabled the dramatic expansion of LA's population and developed land area, and helped spur a search for other distant water sources to continue that momentum.

In 1928, recognizing that perceived limits to water supply could circumscribe the region's explosive growth, representatives from the City of LA and eleven nearby jurisdictions founded the MWD, a public regional water wholesaling agency, to

facilitate additional water transference and storage projects (Erie, 2006). Deliveries from the Colorado River Aqueduct, MWD's first major infrastructural undertaking, began in 1943. In the years that followed, MWD's membership expanded to 26 agencies (including cities, irrigation districts, and other more localized public water wholesalers) and the institution lobbied successfully for the passage of California's State Water Project in 1959. Supply from that project began flowing to MWD member customers in 1970. Fifty years later, an estimated 19 million residents of Southern California drink water transported by the agency.

An urban political ecology perspective, one that approaches flows of water and flows of money and power as materially linked (Swyngedouw, 2004), is helpful for orienting an assessment of these institutions. Wrapped by their promoters in the language of utilitarian rationalization of nature – enabling once-wild rivers to provide the 'greatest good for the greatest number' by moving their flows to the Southland (Hundley, 2001) – agencies like the LADWP and MWD shaped the conditions of possibility for development across the US West. Scholars of many stripes have examined the concentration of power produced by such 'Promethean' approaches resource management (Kaika, 2005) in California, via rural disenfranchisement (Cantor, 2020; Piper, 2006), elite capture of public water agencies (Reisner, 1993 [1986]; Worster, 1985), and the subtler forms of alignment that have flourished between urban water agencies and the region's storied 'growth machine' (Erie, 2006; Gottlieb and Fitzsimmons, 1991). MWD's 1959 Laguna Declaration, a document expressing the agency's bedrock commitment to providing adequate water to support any new building within its service area, has been fingered as an example of an ostensibly apolitical agency policy that serves developers far better than it does residents of the increasingly crowded region (Zetland, 2009).

Recent works from the anthropology of infrastructure offer a helpful corrective to accounts that cast water agencies like these as wholly coherent entities, highlighting the ongoing, often messy and piecemeal work that goes into sustaining flows within these networks (Anand, 2017; Barnes, 2014; De Coss-Corzo, 2020). As in recent ethnographies of road building (Harvey and Knox, 2015; Heslop, 2020), this body of scholarship demonstrates civil engineering practice as a situated mixture of applying standardized technical expertise and negotiating local conditions, including political frictions. Such perspectives are particularly useful to keep in mind when considering how decades of growing public discontent with these powerful agencies might shape how those employed within them understand these institutions.

As other accounts of state-led approaches to the rationalization of nature and space suggest, a sprawling universe of unintended consequences tends to accompany even the most exhaustively planned efforts (Mitchell, 2002; Scott, 1999). Beyond material effects, such as dam siltation or the salinization of irrigated soils, these can include the souring of publics initially reverent towards large-scale, 'modern' infrastructures and the improved quality of life that they seemed to promise (Gandy, 2002; Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2000). In the US West big

dams and the urbanization they enabled were initially celebrated as beacons for an era of shared prosperity; by the 1960s an environmentalist backlash to water development projects began to fuel unexpected political complications for a range of public agencies (Wehr, 2004). Concerns over the cost of these programs grew in the years that followed, at the federal, state and local levels (Gumprecht, 2001; Hundley, 2001). In 1982, California voters rejected a ballot referendum on the Peripheral Canal, an expensive, controversial element of the State Water Project that they had approved in 1959. This rejection is frequently cited as an inflection point within the state's water history. In decades past, such projects were popularly understood as sensible public investments in a common future; now, they were cast as ecologically destructive, expensive examples of state overreach for the benefit of a select few (Reisner, 1993 [1986]).

While such public disillusionment is well documented in this context, perspectives from those within the institutions tasked with maintaining these increasingly unloved infrastructural networks (and the water deliveries that they enable) have been less explored. The sense of decline and loss articulated by Nate and his engineer colleagues when comparing the contemporary work of water management to that of their predecessors in the middle of the 20th century suggests the value of approaching their experiences through the lens of nostalgia for that era of high modernism. In contrast to the extensive anthropological literature on the forms and uses of post-socialist nostalgia (e.g. Berdahl, 1999; Boyer, 2006; Parla, 2009; Todorova and Gille, 2012), ethnographic work elaborating similar cultural practices associated with modernity or modernist developmentalism is more difficult to locate. The amorphous quality of modernity as a category (Appadurai, 1996) and the problem of its periodization, in contrast to the clearly delimited era of state socialism in Eastern Europe (the source of much of the recent nostalgia research within the discipline) likely contributes to this lacuna. Recent writing has begun to explore how nostalgia accretes around sites and periods associated with rapid modernization, often building on James Ferguson's (1999) account of the complex afterlife of the 'modernization myth' in the Zambian Copperbelt. Treating the narrative of the nation's decline since the 1960s as a social fact, Ferguson contends that his interlocutors understood themselves to live in a particular temporal relation to modernity, locating it (and its attendant promises for a better life) in an irretrievable past. Writing from the context of a once-storied psychiatric clinic in Dakar, Senegal, Kate Kilroy-Marac (2013) identifies a similar discourse among some long-time workers, who also lashed a sense of now-withered hope onto the early postcolonial years glossed as the modern past. Other recent work explores how a sense of 'lost' modernity attaches to incomplete or crumbling infrastructural projects in a range of contexts, and how discourse around these sites serves as terrain both to critique the present and meditate on futures that never quite came to pass (Carse and Kneas, 2019; de Jong and Valente-Quinn 2018; Smith 2020; Yarrow 2017). Celebrating a bygone era of modernization, these works show, is often a mode of identifying the space between the promises of a developmentalist paradigm and their incomplete realization in the present.

As the sections that follow demonstrate, the nostalgia for modernity explored here takes on a subtly different character, likely rooted in the reality that the high-modernist infrastructures my interlocutors oversee largely continue to function as designed during the period they identify as their agencies' decline. In material terms, these networks and the institutions that maintain them are delivering just what they promised and, hence, do not serve as such straightforward symbols of ruin or disappointment. But from within these agencies, such ongoing achievements are understood as increasingly fragile and undervalued by the public, contributing to their workers' sense of beleaguered disillusionment and powerlessness.

'They got to build big things' – the sense of diminished capacity

The monthly meetings of MWD's Board of Directors begin with an invocation. A pre-selected speaker approaches a podium at the front of the cavernous ground-floor auditorium of the MWD's downtown LA headquarters, and, facing the 38 members of the board, offers a brief, solemn meditation intended to set the tone for the day's deliberations. At the board's August 2014 meeting, held at the height of a historic drought, a senior water engineer employed by the agency stood at the microphone and offered a reflection on 'the old school', the men that established the agency back in 1928. 'The founders of Metropolitan were remarkable people, their vision looked past their own horizons,' he told the directors, continuing: 'Their commitment was to a vision of the future that would provide for generations that hadn't been born yet. … Members of the Board, may your decisions be graced with the vision of the old school.' Given this opening salvo, it was striking to observe that, during the brief meeting that followed, the biggest news was about how little liquid was currently flowing through its system. MWD's general manager beamed as he told the board that their member agencies were currently purchasing dramatically less water than usual at this time of year, a sign that the agency's water conservation programs were succeeding. In contrast to the days of 'the old school', the agency's major work of the day was to respond to an ongoing drought by inciting consumption reductions, not building enormous pipelines through the desert.

In our conversations, my interlocutors would occasionally rue having missed this earlier moment of developing big water projects. Ken, a middle-aged engineer who had recently left public agency work for a consulting position, described his awe at LA's stormwater spreading grounds, over 500 square acres of water capture infrastructure built between the 1930s and the 1950s, comparing them favorably to the far-smaller rain capture projects he designed during his time working for the city. For Edgar, a LADWP engineer in his 30s, the contrast between his agency's protracted struggle to establish a wastewater-to-drinking water program and its quick work building the city's eponymous aqueduct warranted many disapproving mentions. In Nate's case, the comparisons often took the form of proudly describing his grandfather's work helping build the Hoover Dam as a young man and consulting on plans for California's State Water Project in his twilight years. When

I asked Nate to compare his own career to this record, he would hedge, explaining that he got to work on plenty of groundbreaking projects, but then acknowledging that many of these would not be completed in his lifetime, if at all, due to cost, regulatory, and public relations issues.

As such comments suggest, today's slower pace of dam and other water infrastructure building does not stem from a lack of ideas for new ways to develop the region's water. Frequent talk of the sort of projects labeled by Ashley Carse and David Kneas (2019) as 'zombies' – that is, infrastructures that never seem to get built yet never seem to fully disappear from consideration – marked both policy discourse and more private conversations during my research period. The Peripheral Canal, a tunnel touted as simplifying north–south water transfers within the state by routing water around an ecologically sensitive delta, was one such project. Rejected by voters in a 1982 ballot measure, an expanded version of the idea re-emerged, branded as the California WaterFix, in the 2010s. Yet despite the vocal support of the state's Department of Water Resources, the MWD, and a range of other powerful public water agencies, the project stalled once again, awash in criticism from many quarters. In 2019, incoming governor Gavin Newsom deemed the project's politics too toxic and withdrew the WaterFix's petition for certification under the Clean Water Act, turning the dream dormant once again. The project's future remains uncertain, with a best-case scenario for its eventual completion decades in the future.

Beyond the increasingly intractable water-use conflicts, the combination of limited funds and extravagant costs are understood as crucial factors preventing many new, grand projects from advancing past their early stages. For some water agencies, funding problems can be traced back to the state's 1978 tax reform, which capped property taxes and effectively hamstrung a wide range of local infrastructure projects. While California voters have demonstrated a willingness to fill some water development gaps via ballot measures in the years since, approving a $7.5 billion water bond in 2014, such funds pale into relative insignificance in comparison to the contemporary costs of dam and aqueduct building. Even if the WaterFix project had been popular, the state's estimated $15 billion price tag – widely considered a lowball – presented its own set of challenges. Importantly, in a break with the region's water development heyday, when the federal Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps of Engineers provided essential financing assistance for water projects, Congressional appropriations for such undertakings have dwindled since the 1980s (Doyle, 2018; Hanak et al., 2014; Reisner,1993 [1986]). As such, despite the considerable political power and financial reach of agencies like MWD and LADWP, they often struggle to move new, large-scale infrastructural projects past the drawing board. In turn, water agency workers, recognizing their employers' depleted capacities to undertake the type of projects that made their reputations in the last century, are inclined to understand their institutions' reach as shrunken, rather than sweeping.

One day in May 2015, Nate and I shared a late lunch after watching the MWD Board of Directors approve $350 million for conservation rebates for customers

who replaced turf with lower-water plants on their properties. We agreed that the move was an important, and perhaps even historic, investment in Southern California's waterscape during a relentless drought. Even so, Nate couldn't resist mentioning that, two decades ago, he had helped draw up a roadmap to guide the region in developing an extensive network of wastewater-to-drinking water facilities. Reminding me that recycled sewage is a 'drought-proof' water resource, he sighed at the region's halting progress towards building out the necessary infrastructure – a situation that wouldn't have arisen in his grandfather's day, he assured me.

'People take the aqueduct for granted' – recoiling at reassessments of legacy projects

On 5 November 2013, LA marked the 100-year anniversary of the city's aqueduct before a small crowd at the Cascades, the site where 30,000 Angelenos had gathered to celebrate the new infrastructure a century earlier. Dressed in Progressive Era costumes, actors reprised the original ceremony for the assembled onlookers. The man playing the late LADWP chief engineer William Mulholland dutifully recited that event's most famous line, gesturing to the flowing water while uttering the words, 'There it is, take it!' Yet for all the familiar notes, the 2013 ceremony was dominated by a different tone. Recently elected LA mayor Eric Garcetti concluded his speech at the event in the following terms:

> In the span of a century, we have not only changed the course of water, but of history itself. So as we might have said in the past, 'Here it is. Take it!' I say to you today: Here it still is. Let us treasure it. Let us conserve it. Let us share it. It is our legacy. It is our right. But it is also our responsibility.

Pointedly reworking Mulholland's original injunction, Garcetti sought to signal some distance between past and present approaches to water management. This was a choice undoubtedly guided by well-established criticisms of the city's deceptive approach to acquiring the land and water rights required to build the pipeline (Hoffman, 2001; Kahrl, 1983), and the negative ecological and economic impacts of the pipeline's ongoing water extractions on both Native and settler communities in the rural landscapes from which it draws the resource (Bertenthal, forthcoming; Mendoza, 2019; Piper, 2006; Randle, forthcoming). While barely scratching the surface of these critiques, Garcetti's hesitant framing of the aqueduct and the water it carries highlights just how mainstream such assessments have become in Southern Californians' understandings of their region's waterscape.

This shift has not been lost on my engineer interlocutors, who do not share these jaundiced opinions of the LA Aqueduct in particular or the region's network of large-scale water infrastructure in general. When I raised criticisms of these projects in conversation, they often recoiled, highlighting the effectiveness of the dams,

aqueducts, reservoirs, and concrete-lined storm drains in providing potable water and preventing flood damage since their construction in the 20th century. For instance, Norman, a LADWP engineer who worked on the city's 2015 Urban Water Management Plan, described in great detail how the combination of LA's own aqueduct system and the water it purchased from MWD's pipelines had prevented the city from facing shortages even in the harshest drought years. 'What supply has always come in to keep the city going?' he asked me rhetorically, midway through our interview. 'It's always been MWD.' While he understood why people might criticize the impact of that agency's pipelines on Northern California and the Colorado River Basin, Norman told me, he hated the way that people seemed to ignore the fact that their livelihoods and lifestyles in LA would not exist without the water that the aqueducts brought there.

The engineers' frustration at a public they see as ungrateful is grounded for some in a sense that, in eras past, their water provision work used to be held in such high esteem by the people they served. Chatting at a mayoral press conference announcing the connection of a public golf course to the city's recycled wastewater irrigation pipeline, LADWP engineer Edgar shared a bit of trivia that he found revealing. In LA's old City Council Chambers, he told me, the City Engineer had a dedicated seat at the table – that's how much the city used to value its infrastructure. But that reserved seat was eliminated in a remodel some years ago. 'Back in the day, engineers were held in a different kind of esteem, they were recognized as being important to city,' he sighed, before suggesting that this was probably because they did such a good job building everything in the early decades of the 20th century. The implication – that while those infrastructures still stood, they were no longer appreciated by those relying on them – was clear.

Tina, a stormwater engineer employed by an LA County agency, struck a similar note, emphasizing the anachronism of contemporary environmentalists' dismissive assessments of the region's water infrastructures and agencies. She had granted my interview request grudgingly and, when we met, explained that she was hesitant to talk because of her distaste for two relatively recent books about Southern California flood control. Both histories, she contended, used contemporary mores and standards to denounce past development decisions, ignoring the extent of public support for those projects at the time they were built. Environmentalist criticism of the region's concrete-lined rivers and creeks, flood control infrastructure developed in response to a series of property-mangling deluges in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, made her particularly angry, largely because those infrastructures were demanded overwhelmingly by the public. 'Your grandfather's generation cared about protecting homes,' she told me. 'They didn't want high taxes, they thought more homebuilding was a positive thing – they just had different ideas about what is good than we have today.'

These defensive comments are helpful for clarifying the particular form of modernity for which these engineers expressed so much nostalgia. While their nostalgia was unquestionably related to developing the material stuff of these infrastructural networks, the era in which this took place is also understood to

be one in which these networks were loved and celebrated, and the institutions that built and shepherded them to completion were widely viewed as enactors of progress. In this context, the legacy infrastructures from that era continue to work largely as designed, but now they – and the agencies that oversee them – are read differently (and decidedly less generously) by the public. Consensus around the fundamental desirability of these material networks and the forms of modernization that they brought to the region has faded, a shift deeply felt by the engineers left managing the infrastructures. Such perspectives present an interesting break with other accounts of nostalgia for modernity, in which crumbling or incomplete infrastructures are mobilized as symbols of the 'failure of modernization to arrive' (Yarrow, 2017: 568). Here, my interlocutors experience the public as undervaluing the arrival and maintenance of such socio-material arrangements, disavowing the very projects they once demanded.

'Idiots can kill good projects' – fear of an empowered public

As part of my research, I submitted a request to join LA's Recycled Water Advisory Group (RWAG) as an observer. Once the appropriate permissions were granted, a staffer at the LADWP emailed me to arrange an onboarding session. A month later, I found myself in a small meeting room with Edgar and his colleague Tom, who had both blocked an hour from their day's schedule for a detailed orientation. They greeted me with a thick binder of information about the city's existing and proposed wastewater recycling facilities, encouraged me to read it at home and email them with any questions that arose. Then Tom walked me through a well-rehearsed PowerPoint presentation on the topic, with Edgar interjecting occasionally to offer additional details and field my comments.

Throughout the session, I was struck by the level of care, attention, and staff time dedicated to the RWAG, a volunteer group of city residents that met infrequently and had no formal role in the LADWP's planning process. Months later, I mentioned this reaction to Edgar during an extended interview. By that point, I had attended two official RWAG events, a public presentation that drew around 50 participants and a trip to a local wastewater recycling facility that attracted fewer than 10. Edgar, who had helped run the larger meeting, told me that he sees this kind of 'high-touch' outreach as an unavoidable part of his work. In the 1990s and 2000s, he explained, jurisdictions across Southern California were forced to halt plans for or even mothball functional wastewater reuse facilities when public outcry arose in response to the so-called 'toilet-to-tap' projects. 'These days, the public is very powerful,' he told me, before explaining that, without sufficient outreach from agencies like his, important water recycling projects were in danger of death-by-protest.

My engineer interlocutors, particularly those who worked with wastewater, frequently discussed power in these terms, locating it squarely in the hands of the public that consumes the water that they provide. As Edgar did that day, most engineers couch this assessment with reference to projects that died after

becoming controversial. Notably, public resistance to these facilities is often attributed to savvy, well-resourced actors with something to gain from preventing treated wastewater from entering local drinking water systems. During my RWAG orientation, Edgar, Tom, and I spent some time discussing the LADWP's $55 million wastewater recycling plant that operated for a single day in 2000 before being permanently shuttered. That facility, they told me, had become a convenient political football among prospective mayoral candidates, including the City Attorney who ordered its shutdown. While the pair acknowledged that the public distaste for the project was real, they maintained that it was mobilized and exploited by actors who cared little, and knew less, about the project's efficacy and importance for the city's water supply mix. Nate and Larry, another wastewater reuse specialist employed by the LA County Sanitation Districts, recounted a similar story when they led me on an informal tour of a treatment plant. Gazing over a row of effluent settling ponds, Nate described a project torpedoed by representatives from a brewery that feared a backlash if customers learned that their product had been made with 'poo-water'. The company, he told me, had retained the services of an unscrupulous medical doctor who used his credentials to drum up baseless fears of an unsafe treatment process, a gambit that proved effective.

In stories like these, water agencies are scripted as weaker than their critics, undermined by their technocratic focus on building good infrastructure rather than selling it to a skeptical public. Over lunch following our visit to the treatment plant, Larry said that he often feels like he and his engineer colleagues enter public relations 'gunfights with knives', coming equipped with technical, rather than emotional appeals for their projects. This acknowledgement, however, was couched in terms of a frustration I heard frequently: at the lack of respect that the public seemed to hold for public water engineers, and the assumptions of malfeasance that many people attributed to them. 'People have accused me of wanting to build an empire,' Larry told me. 'I'm just doing my job, trying to expand the use of this resource [treated wastewater] in a place that needs more water.'

Such reactions elide with frustrations about critiques of legacy projects, but with a key difference. Engineers understand the public to be skeptical of already-built infrastructures, and also of the motives of anyone seeking develop new projects. Coupled with the easily available evidence of a mobilized public's capacity to prevent projects from getting built, engineers frequently cast the present as an era in which their agencies are not only unfairly bullied but also easily defeated when the bullies get too loud. Ethnographic work in other contexts has elaborated how encounters between engineers and the people impacted by their projects can alienate the communities ostensibly served by development and modernization initiatives, reinforcing existing hierarchies that place engineering expertise above more localized and embodied forms of knowledge (Harvey and Knox 2015; Stensrud, 2019). Less remarked upon has been engineers' creeping sense of vulnerability associated with such fraught engagements. As my interlocutors' reflections

suggest, in this context such bruising interactions have shifted some agency practices and left many engineers with a sense of diminished power relative to an increasingly vocal public.

Conclusion

As the previous sections attest, Nate's invocations of his grandfather's day as a time when public agency engineers were 'free to just help this place grow' can be understood as nostalgia for a period when these institutions were more comfortably buffered from critique. Like many idealized accounts of the past, it elides the well-documented instances of public protest and criticism (as well as financial limitations) that marked water development within Southern California during the so-called golden era, particularly when it came to stormwater management (Gumprecht, 2001; Orsi, 2004). Yet while historically imprecise, taking seriously such unfavorable comparisons between present and past helps clarify engineers' understandings of how power operates within the region's waterscape. Though their agencies ostensibly manage the movement of water here, they are keenly aware of the limits to the institutions' control over the resource's flow. Voters and federal agencies are more hesitant to underwrite ambitious infrastructures, while even fully funded projects can be killed by opponents with sufficient mobilizing influence or political sway. Scripting the mid-20th century as a time of popular, well-resourced, technocratic modernization serves as a rebuke to such constrained arrangements, and of the limits that they entail for these agencies.

My interlocutors' reverence for the past takes a different form from the versions of nostalgia for modernity explored elsewhere in the anthropological literature. Approached from within the institutions that built some of the most visible manifestations of high-modernist development, the passing of that era of rapid infrastructure construction is not mourned because those networks were left unfinished or allowed to decay. Rather, the agencies and infrastructures, once celebrated and expanding, are now experienced by those who sustain them with their labor as underfunded, unappreciated, and forever criticized. Here, the engineers are nostalgic for modernist developmentalism, but feel that the public for whom their predecessors built aqueducts has decided to spurn the entire paradigm, demanding different infrastructures and too much input while providing too little money. The past they are missing is understood as one of both greater shared purpose and greater state capacity, an imagined pre-neoliberal consensus where everyone wanted the same thing and state institutions were empowered to provide it.

The engineers' shared hunger for such a time underlines the ambivalent politics of nostalgia as a cultural practice. In this context, its content maps far more neatly onto US leftists' demands for a 'Green New Deal' of dramatically increased infrastructure spending than right-wing calls to 'Make America Great Again' via lower corporate tax rates and violent racial exclusion. This alignment becomes

particularly clear when one examines the water targets and projects named in LA's 2019 Sustainable City pLAn, a document also known as 'LA's Green New Deal'. Chief among the pLAn's goals is for the city to reuse 100 per cent of its wastewater by 2035, an undertaking estimated to cost a cool $8 billion (Boxall, 2019; City of LA, 2019). Describing the proposed recycling plant to the LADWP's Board of Directors during a February 2019 meeting, a department engineer repeatedly referred to the project as the city's 'third aqueduct' and the choice to develop it as 'our Mulholland moment', explicitly invoking LA's most famous water project and leader of the 20th century. Framing such a future-oriented project as a return to that era of high-modernist swagger highlights the enduring appeal of that period within these agencies. As in Trumpism, these accounts of the past are grounded in a desire to recapture elements of an earlier, supposedly better era of US history. That, in this context, such narratives lead self-described apolitical technocrats to celebrate the sprawling public infrastructure plans championed by Democratic Socialists demonstrates the wildly diverse ways that exonostalgia can be mobilized within political projects.

The sense of nostalgia expressed here underlines the powerful role that shifting paradigms of regional development and statecraft can play in molding understandings of individual and institutional power. In Southern California, a history of aggressive public investment in dams and aqueducts has unquestionably remade the landscape, enabling extensive development in a region with limited local water resources. The erosion of this approach to water management has affected those who now oversee these infrastructures, leaving them attuned to the power supposedly held by their predecessors and dismissive of the contemporary influence that they enjoy. Such shifts highlight how emic understandings of power are conditioned by the evolving form and reach of state institutions, and the importance of treating these as dynamic, heterogenous nodes in assessments of power relations.

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Notes

1. Per my research protocol, pseudonyms are used to identify my interlocutors throughout the manuscript.
2. Though gender is not central to this article's analysis, it bears explicitly noting that the institutions analyzed here have been and continue to be male-dominated. Recent accusations of sexual harassment and gender-based bullying within MWD (Elmahrek, 2021a, 2021b) suggest that such disparities – and the imbalanced internal power relations that they have fostered – deserve serious consideration. A substantial majority of my interlocutors presented and identified as men, and tended to use exclusively masculine pronouns when referring to their engineer-predecessors. In contrast, racial and ethnic diversity within many of these agencies has increased dramatically between the 'golden era' and the present, and many of my interviewees self-identified as Latino, Persian-American, Arab-American, or Asian-American. While these men frequently participated in the nostalgic discourses discussed here, none directly addressed the fact that *de facto* and *de jure* racial discrimination would likely have prevented them from holding engineering jobs for these agencies during that era.

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