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Thirsty Machines: Artificial Intelligence, Storied Waters, and Environmental History

This essay examines the infrastructure of artificial intelligence (AI) in the Americas as a folkloric and cultural system, focusing on how AI-driven technologies, particularly data centers, cooling systems, and surveillance networks, reshape land and water relations in ways that constitute a form of vernacular environmental injustice. Through the analytical lens of folklore studies, the essay argues that communities located near AI infrastructure sites, including historically Black neighborhoods in Memphis, Tennessee, and Indigenous water governance contexts such as the Klamath River Basin, produce counter-narratives, ritual practices, and place-based epistemologies that challenge dominant technological narratives. By centering Indigenous, Black, and rural environmental knowledge systems, the essay demonstrates how vernacular ecologies function as both sites of cultural memory and forms of collective resistance to extractive logic. Drawing on contemporary legends, activist testimonies, and place-based narratives, the essay argues that folklore studies provides a critical methodology for understanding how marginalized communities narrate, memorialize, and defend waters threatened by technological expansion.

Keywords (from the AFS Ethnographic Thesaurus and Library of Congress Subject Headings): Artificial intelligence, AI infrastructure, data centers, water justice, environmental justice, environmental memory, collective memory, vernacular ecologies, traditional ecological knowledge, digital extractivism, data colonialism, Indigenous peoples, environmental racism

Artificial intelligence (AI) systems, trained on billions of parameters, deployed across social media platforms, financial systems, and surveillance networks, require infrastructure whose substantial water demands remain unfamiliar to many members of the general public. The machines that power AI do not consume data alone; they consume water. Li et al. describe AI's water footprint as involving "many millions of liters of freshwater consumed for cooling the

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servers and for electricity generation” (2025:54).¹ To cool the processors that train large language models, to maintain the server farms that enable algorithmic decision-making, technology companies compete for water resources in aquifers and river basins already stressed by drought, agriculture, and climate change.

Environmental justice scholars have long documented that the siting of environmentally burdensome infrastructure follows racialized and economically unequal geographies (Bullard 1990; Pulido 2016). What warrants closer attention in current debates over AI is how data-center siting, permitting, and water allocation may reproduce these established patterns of environmental injustice. When tech giants build massive AI facilities, they do not choose randomly. They frequently target historically marginalized communities such as South Memphis, Tennessee, where recent reporting has linked AI infrastructure expansion to areas with longstanding patterns of environmental racism and public health disparities, as well as water-stressed regions in the US Southwest, where data center development intersects with Indigenous land and water rights (Crawford 2021; Whyte 2018). This pattern mirrors what scholars of urban ecology and critical data studies, such as Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) and Ruha Benjamin (2019), describe as forms of “digital redlining,” where corporations calculate that predominantly Black and brown neighborhoods offer fewer regulatory barriers, less organized community resistance, and lower political costs for environmental harm than wealthier, whiter regions (Larsson 2025).

This essay takes the position that this phenomenon cannot be adequately understood through policy analysis alone, through engineering frameworks focused on cooling efficiency, or through corporate sustainability discourse premised on “greening” data centers, understood as efforts to reduce their environmental footprint through more energy efficient computing and cooling systems, improved infrastructure efficiency, and renewable energy sourcing. As Masanet et al. observe, “energy efficiency improvements to the IT [information technology] devices and cooling systems they house can keep energy use in check” (2020:984). Instead, I argue that we must turn to folklore as both method and object of analysis. Folklore, understood here as vernacular knowledge, belief systems, narrative practices, ritual expressions, and place-based meaning-making, and classically defined as “artistic communication in small groups” (Ben-Amos 1971:13), offers a powerful theoretical and analytical apparatus for understanding how communities embedded in these contested landscapes respond, resist, and reimagine their relationships to water, land, and technology. This essay frames folklore as a critical epistemology and a form of political resistance. In communities where AI infrastructure threatens water supplies, displaces agricultural knowledge, and transforms sacred geographies, people narrate their experiences through stories that encode ecological wisdom, historical trauma, and moral vision. They gather in rituals of water protection. They develop what I term “vernacular ecologies”—culturally embedded, relationally grounded ways of knowing, narrating, and caring for land and water that directly challenge the dehumanizing logics of technological extraction and efficiency.

The Materiality of Immateriality

Folklore scholars such as Henry Glassie (1995) and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) have attended to the relationship between material reality and cultural meaning-making. As scholars of occupational folklore have shown, the materials that people work with, such as clay, wood, metal, soil, are inseparable from the stories, embodied knowledge, and social expressions that emerge in and through creative practice (Mayo, Norton, and Lucas 2025). Similarly, the relationship between storytelling and the material world constitutes a fundamental dimension of what folklorists call environmental memory, which is the culturally embedded, narratively mediated ways that communities remember, mark, and transmit knowledge about the places they inhabit.

AI infrastructure raises an urgent question: What happens when the material basis of technological systems is deliberately obscured, rendered invisible, or positioned as merely technical? When water consumption becomes a metric, a number in an efficiency calculation rather than a sacred being, a source of life, or a subject of political contention?

For most users interacting with AI systems, such as asking questions to chatbots, relying on algorithmic recommendations, or using facial recognition technology, the infrastructure remains hidden. The computational intensity is dematerialized. Yet this dematerialization is itself a cultural achievement, a narrative accomplishment. Technology companies spend considerable resources marketing an image of weightlessness, of data “in the cloud,” of computation divorced from material consequence. This cultural narrative of dematerialization directly contradicts material reality: data centers are massive, energy-intensive, water-hungry installations that require vast infrastructure networks (Hogan 2015:4; Masanet et al. 2020:984). For communities near these installations, however, this dematerialization is impossible. The water drawn from their aquifers is not abstract. The cooling systems operating 24/7 are audible, visible, and materially consequential. The heat dissipated into their ecosystems is physical, tangible, present.

Through legends, rumors, and contemporary folk narratives, residents living near data center developments in regions such as Prineville, Oregon, and communities in South Memphis, Tennessee, articulate understandings of AI infrastructure that resist corporate framings of inevitability, efficiency, and progress (Crawford 2021; Hogan 2015). These narratives, part of what we might call an emerging folklore of technological resistance, constitute knowledge practices rooted in what scholars of Indigenous epistemology Kyle Powys Whyte (2018) and Arturo Escobar (2018) term “relational ontologies”: ways of knowing that understand humans as embedded within, rather than separate from, ecological systems, and that recognize land and water as living beings deserving of respect and reciprocity rather than resources for extraction (Apoliona-Brown 2025:33, 35).

Digital Redlining and Environmental Racism

Scholars of environmental justice such as Robert D. Bullard (1990) and Laura Pulido (2016) have documented the disproportionate siting of polluting infrastructure in Black communities in the United States, a pattern that recent analyses of digital infrastructure suggest is being reproduced in the placement of data centers and AI-related facilities (Crawford 2021; Hogan 2015). Elon Musk's xAI facility in Memphis operates near predominantly Black South Memphis communities already burdened by industrial pollution; Boxtown, the neighborhood closest to the facility, faces a cancer risk four times the national average, and xAI operated dozens of unpermitted methane gas turbines that emit hazardous pollutants including formaldehyde (Southern Environmental Law Center 2025).

This pattern is not coincidental. It reflects what scholars of environmental justice and critical race theory such as Bullard and Pulido term "environmental racism": the systematic placement of pollution-producing infrastructure in communities of color as a consequence of racialized structures of power. Historical redlining offers an important precedent for understanding these spatial inequalities. Across 202 US cities, historically redlined neighborhoods continue to experience significantly higher levels of air pollution (Lane et al. 2022:345–50), while a recent spatial analysis of 46 data centers in Phoenix found disproportionate proximity to low income and minority populations (Molla 2026).

From a folklore studies perspective, this pattern of disproportionately locating environmentally burdensome infrastructure near low-income communities and communities of color constitutes a form of what we might call infrastructure violence. It operates through narratives, stories about efficiency, about the necessity of technological progress, and about inevitable growth, all of which erase the communities most harmed. Yet communities themselves have generated counter-narratives, oral testimonies, and place-based storytelling that contest these official narratives.

Waters as Storied, Sacred, Relational

Beyond Water as Resource

Contemporary Western management of water, particularly in technological contexts, treats water as a resource, a commodity, and a measurable input to be optimized. Environmental science literature on AI infrastructure speaks of "water usage effectiveness" metrics and cooling efficiency calculations, transforming water into a quantified variable in engineering equations.

Indigenous communities such as the Yurok Tribe in Northern California and the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in North Dakota, as well as Afro-descendant riverine communities in regions such as Colombia and Brazil, understand water radically differently. Across the Americas, water is understood as ancestral, relational, and alive. The Yurok Tribal Council's Klamath River Resolution, for instance, acknowledges "the rights of the Klamath River to exist and flourish,

free from the effects of pollution and climate change,” granting jurisdiction to the Yurok Tribal Court over violations of the river’s rights (Lloyd 2021). This framing does not treat water as a thing to be managed for human use, but as a being with inherent rights and agency, a perspective that departs radically from utilitarian water management frameworks.

Similarly, hydrosocial theory, developed by scholars such as Erik Swyngedouw (2009) and Jamie Linton (2010), emphasizes how water relations are never purely material or technical; they are always constituted through power relations, histories of colonialism, and competing epistemologies and cosmologies. And as scholars working with Arctic Indigenous communities have shown, the category of “water security” itself requires expansion beyond mere access to clean water to include spiritual, cultural, and political dimensions of well-being (Wilson et al. 2019:1-2).

Indigenous communities across the Americas understand water protection as inseparable from land defense, sovereignty, and the perpetuation of lifeways. When defending water sources threatened by AI infrastructure, communities thus assert claims that exceed the frameworks available within Western environmental law or policy discourse. They narrate water not as a commodity but as a relative, as a teacher, as a sacred being deserving of protection and reciprocity (Escobar 2025:1150).

Ritual Practices and Expressive Resistance

When communities mobilize to defend waters threatened by technological infrastructure, they do not rely only on policy advocacy or legal challenge. They enact rituals, ceremonies of water protection, prayers at sacred springs, offerings to rivers. These practices transmit ecological knowledge and cultural memory through embodied ritual. Risamasu et al. describe Ngormati, an Akit practice of ecological reverence expressed through offerings, ritual attentiveness, and care for land and water, as “transmitted through practice, inherited through ritual, and rooted in ancestral fidelity” (2026:15)

In the Chiloé Archipelago of southern Chile, the Asamblea de Mujeres Insulares por las Aguas (AMIPA) combines environmental activism with feminist, Indigenous, and place-based practices of water defense (Arriagada Oyarzún et al. 2026). One specific example is the Williche treputo, a coastal ritual in which aromatic branches passed through bonfire smoke are used on fishing corrals and gifts are buried for marine entities, expressing reciprocal obligations toward the intertidal environment (Álvarez et al. 2026:19). These practices function tactically by marking territorial presence and drawing public attention to threatened waters, while also enacting reciprocal relationships with water understood as a living, ancestral being. The intertwining of ritual, resistance, and environmental stewardship reflects relational Indigenous epistemologies, including Kānaka Maoli understandings of ‘āina as an elder connected to people through genealogy and reciprocity (Apoliona-Brown 2025:33) and Hān understandings of water as “a relative,” “a teacher,” and “a healer” (Wilson et al. 2019:8).

Such practices cannot be reduced to symbolic action. They constitute what anthropologists of ritual such as Victor Turner (1969) describe as “efficacious” action, forms of embodied practice that produce real social and cultural effects through performance (Rohmah, Wulandari, and Ekici 2026:110). When women gather at threatened rivers to pour water over their faces and bodies, to speak prayers in Indigenous languages, to make offerings to river beings, they are not engaging in mere symbolism. They are enacting relational ontologies, performing their belonging to place, asserting moral claims, and transforming their own subjectivities as water protectors.

From a folklore studies perspective, such practices can be understood as reflexive cultural performances. As Babcock argues, cultural performances “reflexively comment upon those patterns and alter a society’s awareness of itself” (1980:5). Women’s water ceremonies simultaneously enact cultural practice and narrate its significance, asserting these practices as forms of knowledge and politics.

Land, Memory, Dispossession

Contested Geographies and Historical Erasure

When AI infrastructure companies choose data centers, they select specific places. These selections are never innocent. They follow economic logics of capital accumulation, choosing locations with cheap land, favorable tax policies, and access to water and energy. These siting decisions can layer new forms of extraction onto landscapes already shaped by dispossession, segregation, enslavement, and racialized disinvestment, particularly in communities with limited political and economic power.

Consider the Memphis site of Elon Musk’s xAI facility. South Memphis has a distinct history as a predominantly Black neighborhood shaped by segregation and deliberate policy disinvestment. The site selected for the data center is embedded within this history. Yet corporate narratives around the project emphasize economic development and job creation. In announcing xAI’s expansion, company representative Brent Mayo stated that it would “bring more employment opportunities and economic growth to the area” (Greater Memphis Chamber 2025).

This erasure of local histories and community knowledge constitutes a form of what Gayatri Spivak terms “epistemic violence” (1988:280), through which subordinated forms of knowledge and memory are displaced or devalued. Communities possess place-based practical knowledge and collective memory. As Erykalov writes in the English-language summary accompanying the article, cooperation through shared practices forms “a fund of local practical knowledge and collective memory” (2023:135). When infrastructure projects are planned and implemented without genuine engagement with these forms of knowledge, when the histories that communities hold in oral tradition, in landscape markers, in ritual practice are ignored, communities experience a form of cultural and epistemic harm.

In southwest Memphis, MCAP cofounder Justin J. Pearson describes visiting his great grandmother's grave near the proposed Byhalia Pipeline route, where remembrance of his family's history became inseparable from environmental resistance: "This is our history. Our identity. Our dignity" (Pearson 2021:para.18).

Sacred Geography and Surveillance

For many Indigenous communities, particular landscapes hold sacred significance. Mountains, rivers, springs, and caves can function as sites of ritual, memory, ancestry, and reciprocal relationships (Larsson 2025:2). Their transformation or restricted access can therefore threaten cultural continuity and relationships to spiritually significant places (Larsson 2025:18).

The placement of AI infrastructure, whether data centers, 5G towers, satellite surveillance systems, in or near sacred sites thus constitutes a particular form of harm. These technologies often bring surveillance as well: the monitoring capacity embedded in digital infrastructure can be turned toward Indigenous territories, toward communities resisting extraction, toward land and water defenders.

At Standing Rock, where Indigenous protesters opposed the Dakota Access Pipeline, law enforcement and private security firms subjected the encampment to aerial surveillance, including the use of drones (Schnepf 2019:747, 750). Crawford situates such practices within a broader migration of military and intelligence surveillance into civilian policing, where the boundaries between state and commercial surveillance increasingly blur (2021:199–203).

At Standing Rock, water protectors used Facebook and other social media platforms to circulate videos, images, and first-person accounts that challenged official representations of the protests (Johnson 2017:162). Facebook Live footage also circulated evidence of alleged police violence, including the use of plastic bullets, riot batons, and police dogs (166).

Digital Extractivism and Colonial Continuities

AI as Continuation of Extractive Logic

AI infrastructure does not emerge *ex nihilo*. It inherits and intensifies patterns of extraction, dispossession, and resource theft that characterize centuries of colonialism and industrial capitalism. The mineral supply chains supporting AI hardware include silicon, rare earth elements, and cobalt, whose extraction can carry significant environmental and social consequences, including in Indigenous territories and developing nations (Crawford 2021). The electricity powering data centers, in many cases, derives from fossil fuel combustion or hydroelectric installations, while hydroelectric development has historically displaced Indigenous communities (Masanet et al. 2020; Munzer 2019). The water-cooling systems used by data centers can draw from aquifers and rivers that Indigenous and rural communities understand as sacred and essential (Hogan 2015; Wilson et al. 2019)

Scholars such as Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias describe this constellation of practices as a form of “data colonialism,” a framework that helps illuminate what I term here “digital extractivism,” the extension of colonial extraction logic into digital infrastructure (2019:xix). Just as colonial powers extracted minerals, timber, and agricultural products from colonized lands, contemporary tech companies extract digital resources (data, computational power, labor) while distributing environmental costs to marginalized communities.

This is not a new form of injustice; it is a continuation and intensification of older patterns. Through place names, oral narratives, landscape memory, and ritual practices, communities maintain knowledge of how colonialism and extractive economies have transformed their territories. Studies of Hawaiian place names show how Indigenous naming practices preserve ancestral histories and relationships to land despite colonial transformations (Oliveira 2009:100); Aikanā narratives in southern Amazonia transmit social memories of colonization, land loss, and environmental destruction (Grund 2023:126–8); and oral histories among descendants of formerly enslaved people in the Bahamas preserve memories embedded in former plantation landscapes (Sesma 2022:24). When AI systems extract Indigenous knowledge and cultural resources without community consent or control, these practices can reproduce older colonial relations. As Kwok argues, the resulting “power asymmetry and dispossession” can “echo those of historical colonialism” (2026:6720).

Folklore thus functions as a repository of historical consciousness, a way of maintaining memory of colonial harm and continuity across generations. In their study of Akit ritual life, Risamasu et al. describe ancestral memory as “a living archive, transmitted through reverent practice, not preserved in text” (2026:5). Such ritual continuity also sustains forms of resistance amid ongoing ecological disruption (12–13).

Extracting Ancestral Knowledge

Beyond extracting water and minerals, AI infrastructure also extracts knowledge. Indigenous and Afro-diasporic communities possess longstanding knowledge about land management, water systems, ecological relationships, and agricultural practices (Lwoga, Ngulube, and Stilwell 2011:230–1; Wilson et al. 2019:8; Lozada Ordóñez, Dias da Cruz, and Oliveira de Andrade 2018:631–41). This knowledge, accumulated through generations of observation, experimentation, and spiritual practice, increasingly becomes a target for appropriation and extraction as “data,” including the commercial use of Indigenous knowledge without equitable benefit sharing (Efferth et al. 2016:166; Kwok 2026:6726).

AI systems can also turn Indigenous cultural materials into extractable data. Kwok points to Google Translate’s inclusion of Inuktitut as a case in which publicly available Inuit linguistic data were incorporated into a proprietary model, calling this “a commercialization of a public resource” (2026:6726). Related scholarship uses “biopiracy” to describe the commercial use of biological resources or Indigenous knowledge without equitable benefit sharing (Efferth et al. 2016:166).

In rural Tanzanian communities studied by Lwoga, Ngulube, and Stilwell, knowledge concerning local herbs and blacksmithing was sometimes “transmitted through inheritance” or restricted to particular clans, while some knowledge holders required payment before sharing it (2011:230–1). These practices illustrate locally governed boundaries around access to and transmission of knowledge.

Expressive Resistance and Collective Care

Storytelling as Resistance

In Cerrillos, Santiago, MOSACAT, most of whose members were women, used posters, flyers, rallies, and Facebook graphics to oppose Google’s proposed data center (Lehuedé 2025:1765, 1767). One graphic transformed Google’s logo into a skull and paired a “water woman” with the slogans “This isn’t a drought; this is a robbery” and “No to the data centre. Free up the water” (1767). These images and slogans translate technical debates about water use into a vernacular narrative of appropriation and resistance.

These narratives exemplify what Reet Hiimäe and colleagues describe as “vernacular reactions,” cultural responses through which communities interpret and cope with crisis and change (Hiimäe et al. 2021:21–23). Contemporary legends about AI, narratives about thirsty machines, about corporations stealing water, about surveillance systems, encode community understandings of technological harm. They are not scientifically precise, nor do they need to be to be politically significant. They communicate moral evaluations, assert community values, and mobilize people toward resistance.

Folklorist and environmental scholar Daniel Starosta has argued that disaster narratives and community storytelling constitute what he terms a “culture of disaster preparedness” (2023:1). Through narrative, communities maintain and transmit knowledge about risks and how to respond to them (Starosta 2023:11). Environmental defenders facing AI infrastructure employ similar narrative practices, they tell stories about water protection, about land sovereignty, about the importance of standing together.

Ritual Protest and Embodied Resistance

Communities opposing AI infrastructure also engage in ritual protest, ritualized expressions of resistance that combine strategic action with performative, embodied meaning-making. The practice of blockading data center construction sites, of gathering at threatened waters, of chanting prayers in Indigenous languages all constitute ritualized forms of resistance that simultaneously enact political claims and express spiritual and cultural values.

Recent scholarship on protest movements has emphasized the importance of attending to the embodied, affective, and performative dimensions of activism (Hodge 2019:386–7; Näre and Jokela 2023:165–6). When people gather in ritual protest, they are not merely expressing pre-

existing political positions; they are transforming themselves and their communities through collective action. They strengthen emotional and social bonds. They assert new identities, as water protectors, as land defenders, as protectors of sacred places. They constitute what scholars term “embodied politics,” (Hodge 2019:386–7) politics enacted through the body, through gathering, through movement and sound. Such practices exemplify performative forms of activism where communities use creative expression to assert meaning, mobilize identity, and advance social change.

The Epistemic Dimensions of Vernacular Ecologies

Vernacular Knowledge as Political Theory

Folklore studies offers more than descriptive documentation of how communities respond to technological harm. It offers an epistemology, a way of knowing and valuing that prioritizes community knowledge, cultural practice, and lived experience. This epistemology stands in sharp contrast to technocratic, expert-driven approaches that marginalize community voices and treat technology as inevitable or neutral (Lwoga, Ngulube, and Stilwell 2011).

Indigenous scholars and communities, including Anishinaabe philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte (2018) and decolonial theorists such as Arturo Escobar (2018), have emphasized that their ecological knowledge, knowledge about water systems, about sustainable resource management, about reciprocal relationships with land, is not merely practical utility but constitutes philosophical frameworks, epistemologies, ways of being in relationship. Indigenous water scholarship articulates these relationships directly. Drawing on Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in understandings, Wilson et al. write that “water is a relative; water is a teacher; water is a healer” (2019:8). Such understandings articulate an ontology in which water is embedded in relationships of respect and reciprocity.

Vernacular ecologies, then, constitute what we might term “epistemologies of resistance,” ways of knowing that resist the reduction of nature to resource, of water to commodity, of land to real estate. These epistemologies maintain that humans are embedded within ecological systems rather than standing outside them; that we have responsibilities toward land and water beings; that economic activities must be constrained by ecological limits and by respect for nonhuman beings; that communities have the right to determine their own relationships to land and technology.

Folklore as Theory, Not Just Data

Throughout this essay, I have attempted to employ folklore not merely as a source of illustrative data, stories, and practices documenting community responses to AI infrastructure, but as a theoretical framework. Folklore studies, understood as the study of shared, orally transmitted, collectively generated cultural knowledge and practice, offers concepts and methods that challenge how we think about AI, technology, and justice.

Specifically, folklore studies insists on attending to how meaning is collectively generated and maintained, how communities understand their own experiences through cultural forms they have developed, how knowledge is preserved and transformed through oral transmission across generations. These insights directly challenge the expert-driven, top-down approaches that characterize most AI governance discourse.

When technologists, policy makers, and corporate leaders discuss AI ethics or environmental sustainability, they often present themselves as offering solutions to communities who are understood as passive recipients. Folklore studies methodology reverses this stance: it asks what communities already know, what cultural resources and practices they have developed, how their own narratives and expressions constitute legitimate forms of knowledge worthy of respect.

Conclusion: Toward Storied Futures

We are at a moment when technological systems increasingly mediate human relationships to water, to land, to other beings. AI systems that determine resource allocation, predict climate impacts, and manage infrastructure are being deployed globally. Yet the infrastructure supporting these systems is not ethereal or neutral. It is material, it is placed, it consumes resources, it produces waste, it distributes harms unevenly.

Communities most affected by AI infrastructure, including Black, Indigenous, and rural communities, draw on culturally grounded forms of knowledge to interpret environmental harm and articulate alternatives to extractive relationships with land and water. Indigenous knowledge systems, in particular, understand land and water through relationships of kinship, reciprocity, and responsibility. Puanani Apoliona-Brown describes ‘āina as “an elder we descend from” (2025:33) and discusses freshwater as a life-giving presence embedded within genealogical and spiritual relationships (35). Such understandings position human communities within ecological relationships that carry responsibilities toward land and water.

Folklore studies insists that these forms of knowledge matter. That the stories communities tell, the rituals they perform, the place-based memories they maintain constitute legitimate ways of knowing deserving of respect and engagement. That technical expertise does not exhaust what counts as knowledge about technology and its impacts.

The future shape of AI infrastructure will not be determined by technologists alone. It will be shaped by the communities whose waters are threatened, whose lands are targeted, whose sacred places are violated. It will be shaped by the water defenders and land protectors who narrate their experiences, who gather in ritual, who maintain memory and transmit knowledge across generations. It will be shaped by the vernacular ecologies that communities have developed and continue to develop in resistance to extractive logic.

To honor these struggles, to support these communities, scholars and advocates must learn to listen, to attend carefully to what communities are already saying, already doing, already knowing. We must value folklore not as supplementary evidence but as central to understanding how technological systems work, how they are resisted, how alternatives might emerge. We must recognize that the future of water, of land, of technological systems themselves, depends on our willingness to center the voices, knowledge systems, and cultural practices of those communities whose struggles have long been marginalized.

The machines are thirsty. But so are we, thirsty for justice, for reciprocity, for ways of living that honor both human communities and the more-than-human world. Folklore, rooted in community knowledge and cultural practice, offers resources for imagining and building such futures. The question is whether those of us positioned within institutions of power have the humility and commitment to truly listen, to learn, and to stand in solidarity with those who have been fighting these battles all along.

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¹ Recent research also cautions against treating widely circulated estimates of AI water consumption as universally applicable. Lei et al. find that “workload-level water use variations exceed [] 10,000-fold” (2025:1), with substantial differences resulting from server efficiency, electricity-grid water intensity, server utilization, cooling systems, infrastructure efficiency, climate, and hardware age. These findings complicate generalized claims about the amount of water consumed by a particular AI workload while reinforcing the importance of examining data-center water use at the level of specific infrastructures and locations.

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