Maureen Devine, Christa Grewe-Volpp (eds.)

Words on Water

Literary and Cultural Representations

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Introduction

Maureen Devine and Christa Grewe-Volpp

Ecocriticism has developed from the early 1990s till today as a burgeoning literary and cultural discipline in the United States. ASLE (The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment) has more than a thousand members by now, conferences and major academic journals have been devoted to ecocritical topics, and numerous publications attest to the vitality of the movement. Ecocriticism is also becoming an academic discipline to be reckoned with in Europe, as the foundation of EASLCE (the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture, and Environment) in Muenster (Germany) in 2004, a first biennial conference in Klagenfurt (Austria) in 2006, and some publications aptly show. In its fairly young history, ecocriticism has developed from a narrow concept of nature as a place "out there," preferably wild, and of an analysis of nature writing, to a much broader concept of nature including urban and human natures, the categories of race, class, and gender, as well as the political issues of the environmental justice movement. An early aversion to theory has given way to the understanding that theories are necessary to make ecocriticism a more precise tool of investigation; the insights and methodologies of poststructuralism, new-historicism, postcolonialism, ecofeminism and other academic "isms" have been used to further the goal to delve more deeply into the ecocritical assumption – which is commonplace by now – that the environmental crisis is a crisis of our Western mind, of our philosophical assumptions and ideologies.

A current consensus among the otherwise very heterogeneous group of ecocritics is the realization that nature and culture can no longer be viewed as separate entities. Neither can nature be understood naively as the actual, prediscursive entity as some early ecocritics argued, nor can nature be seen as a mere text, as radical poststructuralists have proposed. Nature is both: an active, autonomous force, capable of subverting cultural and social achievements, a prelinguistic, prelogical, active entity which forms the basis of and acts upon the signs. But nature is also, at the same time, a social construction, expressive of specific ideologies which are socially as well as environmentally productive. As Kate Soper has pointed out, it is important to keep in mind that a reduction of the understanding of nature to one of these two concepts is blind towards the complex interaction of nature and culture: "just as a simplistic endorsement of 'nature' can seem insensitive to the emancipatory concerns motivating its rejection, so an exclusive emphasis on 'discourse' and signification can very readily appear evasive of ecological realities and irrelevant to the task of addressing them" (59). If no extradiscursive realities are accepted, then only cultural processes have potential meaning, whereas nature as the Other, silent and static, no longer needs further analysis. In this case ecological problems can easily be overlooked. Overlooked is also the fact that humans as biological beings are an intricate part of the ecosystem. But if, on the other hand, the constructedness of nature is ignored, then the political and social implications of the construction tend to be disregarded. Nostalgic images of an idealized nature prevail, and human nature is often essentialized.

An ecocritical analysis will accept nature as an autonomous force; it will try to understand as much as possible about it on a factual basis, relying on the research of the natural sciences. Ecology, biology, geology, even risk theory have been and are still applied to a critical reading of literary and cultural representations of nature to come to a more informed knowlege of nature.[1] At the same time, ecocriticism is wary of so-called objective representations of nature. Representations are never neutral, but, as part of cultural discourse, expressive of a culture's norms and values. Metaphors in particular reveal specific patterns of perception and their ideological connotations. It makes a difference, for example, whether a swamp is depicted as a wasteland or as an ecological biotope, whether a river is a beast to be tamed or a force to be respected. Ecofeminists have pointed out how gendered images of nature are closely linked to an essentialist view of women, how both nature and women (and other minorities) have been historically linked to enable their domination and exploitation. Some, mostly "cultural" ecofeminists such as Mary Daly or Susan Griffith have turned their attention to a revaluation of the natural and the feminine, whereas others, so-called "social" ecofeminists such as Karen Warren, Carolyn Merchant or Ynestra King, see this link as a trap leading to unequal power relationships. Both groups (which cannot be easily separated from each other along a clear line of demarcation) turn their attention to the function of gendered metaphors of nature, how they reflect social ideologies and how these result in specific social practices.[2] Metaphors are a matter of choice, some supporting imperialist, misogynist, or racist ideas and behavior, whereas others may evoke awe and care.

What is the benefit of an ecocritical reading of literary and cultural texts? Ecocriticism can first help to analyze the meaning of the terms nature, environment, or landscape. It can demonstrate how these terms are culturally defined, and how these cultural designations influence our ideologies, norms, and actions. It can also expose ecologically incorrect attitudes towards nature or detrimental behavior towards it. In this case it functions as a form of policing, an understandable strategy if we consider the urgency of our environmental problems. Ecocriticism after all does have a didactic, activist side. It wants to become involved in political processes, in the raising of consciousness and – ideally – in the effort to save the world. Ecocritics understand very well, however, that policing is only a minor and not always useful part of a critical analysis. They know that they must go beyond a list of do's and dont's, beyond the mere tinkering with the symptoms of environmental problems, beyond a so-called shallow ecology or mere resource management. They must identify and expose how our epistemologies and ideologies have disastrous effects on our environment. Ecocritics must study the complex interconnections of nature and culture, their modes of representation, and their ideological functions in order to identify the specific conditions of the contemporary environmental cri-

1 For a short summary of science-oriented ecocriticism see Lawrence Buell. *The Future of Environmental Criticism* 7-19.

2 A prominent example is still Annette Kolodny's study *The Lay of the Land,* in which she analyzes the gendered images of early explorers and settlers of the American continent.

sis as a crisis of the mind, of, as Lawrence Buell has stated, "attitudes, feelings, images, narratives" (*Writing for an Endangered World* 1).

Water became the focus of our ecocritical endeavors because the significance of water as an increasingly precious resource has received enormous attention in the last several years especially after the United Nations opened the Decade for Action "Water for Life, 2005-2015" http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/background.html).[3] In its opening report, one UN taskforce stated that "Within the next 20 years freshwater will become the most important strategic resource, essential for sustaining life and achieving sustainable development. Its control will be a source of power and the key to economic development, and it will be one of the root causes of socio-political stress" (UN-Water Policy Brief 1). While this is hardly astonishing news to the ecologically aware, it does underscore the cultural and political implications of water. Furthermore, in this particular report the differing effects of water resource management on women and men is emphasized, which echoes one of the basic concerns in ecofeminism as mentioned above and which is addressed in this volume as well.

While the purpose of the United Nations' "Water for Life" Decade is to turn attention to the use of and importance of water globally (as well as to fulfill specific international goals), our critical endeavors entail looking at water in its various forms as part of our cultural identity and heritage, understanding historical perceptions of water includeing political and economic aspects, as well as religious and spiritual perceptions of water past and present. While admittedly some current environmental issues lean more toward catastrophic doomsday prognoses, the other side of the coin – the pleasures and joys of water – cannot be ignored in an ecocritical analysis. Indeed in any cultural studies approach, the natural scientific examination of water is perhaps less relevant than its cultural, spiritual and mythic dimensions. These are expressed in numerous ways including written and oral literature, visual media, rituals and ceremonies, dance, art and architecture and others.

Water as a continually changing entity – sweet or salty, still or raging, frozen or crystallized or even evaporated, in the form of rain (drops), snow (flakes), sleet, hail, glaciers, ice bergs, rivers, lakes, puddles, oceans, warm or cold and all the variations in between – challenges cultural perceptions of it. In current environmental-political-economic debates, water use and water ownership with their subsequent subsidies, taxation and profits come up against the very definitions and boundaries of water and point yet again to the necessity of ecocritical analyses of a culture's norms and values. We might ask such questions as: Has access to water always been equated with political power and dominance? Has access to water always been considered a common human right? How do literary writers represent water and specific bodies of water in their texts? How do artists and other visionaries perceive water? Can the spiritual dimensions impact political concerns about water resources?

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3 Among the themes that are central for the "Water for Life" Decade are: scarcity, access to sanitation and health, water and gender, capacity-building, financing, valuation, Integrated Water Resources Management, trans-boundary water issues, environment and biodiversity, disaster prevention, food and agriculture, pollution and energy.

One only has to read Vandana Shiva's *Water Wars* to appreciate the vastly complex multi-faceted views of water and their impact on our current environmental issues. As the title indicates (potable) water might very well become so rare, and in some areas has already become so rare – or is perceived to be so rare and even marketed as such – as to provoke major political and economic conflicts as reiterated in the above-mentioned UN report. But one can also turn to literary texts like Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* in which spirituality becomes the guiding force that ultimately triumphs. Other questions emerge – some of which we have attempted to answer in our choice of articles. For example, how does environmental justice come into play? Or, paraphrasing Toni Morrison in *Playing the Dark*, what are the effects of water pollution on the perpetrators as well as on the victims? As Morrison suggests, formulating the questions reflects the answers, and concentrating on the victims leaves the perpetrators out of the limelight and relieves them of *personal* responsibility. But the personal is the political, we learned long ago from the 1970s feminist slogan, and the political is the cultural, as we learned from the cultural studies field. Water thus becomes a personal as well as a political-cultural-global issue and our perceptions and use of water a personal responsibility.

In the context of non-Western indigenous spirituality yet another question has to be answered: can those with Anglo-European cultural backgrounds approach or understand it without annexing or absorbing or making claims on it? Currently there seems to be a concern about the valorization of indigenous non-Western cultures particularly in their spirituality and rituals dealing with their natural environments. Carolyn Merchant, for example, in *The Death of Nature* pointed out early on in ecocritical and ecofeminist discourse that the religious hierarchy of the Judeo-Christian tradition offers a rationale for the exploitation of nature which together with Western industrialization and then capitalism worked mutually to re-enforce tendencies destructive to the environment. Hierarchical religious traditions seem to be absent in indigenous non-Western cultures like Hinduism, Buddhism, as well as tribal religious beliefs and practices of North and South American Indians, Australian and Pacific Island indigenous peoples and probably many other indigenous groups as well. While this concern about valorizing the spiritual and religious practices of indigenous non-Western cultures itself needs analysis and reflection, that as well as such cultural comparisons goes beyond the limits of this book. Both, however, deserve careful study, hopefully in follow-up volumes, that delve into the ecocritical assumption mentioned above, namely that the environmental crisis is a crisis of our Western mind, of our philosophical assumptions and ideologies.

Divided into three sections, this book presents a unique combination of international and interdisciplinary approaches covering a variety of cultural analyses of global and local water issues. The contributions attest to the productivity of ecocriticism's analyses of literary and cultural representations from a variety of perspectives, illuminating the enormous and multifaceted significance of water in literature, art, and film, as a daily commodity and as part of spiritualism, in the USA, in Canada and in Europe as well as in India and Australia. They demonstrate the imbrication of nature and culture, or, more specifically, how water as an autonomous, active force affects human

culture, and how, on the other hand, cultural ideologies and processes try to tame, to instrumentalize and to define a natural element, albeit often with disastrous results. The contributions, far from giving a comprehensive overview, are nevertheless an important step in highlighting the global significance of water, in appreciating its material quality and in revealing the consequences of its cultural appropriations.

Part I, "Water in Politics, Culture and Science," deals with water as a cultural element and object of political and scientific management in Canada, USA, Australia and France. The contributions explore a range of topics: current water phobias in North America, Australia's confrontation with its possibilities for water harvesting against the backdrop of European attitudes and class consciousness, and the historical desire to control the forces of water with 18th century technology as a symbol of absolute political power. Specifically, Rebecca Raglon maps the anxieties about new water pollution through an analysis of film and print media advertising containing water images. Recent concerns over drugs like birth control pills, Prozac and ibuprofen entering drinking water have been added to more "traditional" concerns like industrial and farm contamination of streams, lakes and ground water. The images of water purity and of water pollution offer a complex and paradoxical case study that provides insights into our broader relationship with the natural world. CA Cranston takes up the issue of harvesting drinking water in Australia, the driest inhabited continent on Earth. The focal point for the intersection between art and economics in a socio-cultural context becomes the simple galvanized rainwater tank steeped in consciousness conflicts of European class issues and urban-rural issues. In keeping with the ideas of power over water and power of water, Louise Barry reminds us that this is an ancient issue expressed in the gardens of the political elite. Garden historians have long pointed out the link between hydraulic effect and expressions of wealth and power in the gardens of the great and the mighty, from the legendary hanging gardens of Babylon to the water plays in Italian Renaissance villas to the gardens of Versailles. Versailles itself became synonymous with absolute power. With this background, the literary representation of hydraulic technology in the gardens of Versailles is analysed in the 1669 novella *La Promenade de Versailles* by Madeleine de Scudéry.

Part II, "The Perils of Water," looks at floods and droughts and human beings' conflicted relationship with these natural phenomena. Three of the articles are concerned with the varied responses to recent ecological catastrophes such as hurricanes in the United States. They demonstrate how literature and film offer alternative environmental "readings" of America's arrogance and complacency in the face of such real and imagined disasters, including considerations of when a natural phenomenon becomes a "disaster." In a similar vein, a fourth article on present-day Tamil literature reveals that water shortage is often not a natural catastrophe, but the result of the rapacious lifestyles of urban dwellers. Specifically, David Ingram argues that the film *The Day After Tomorrow* treats climate change through a combination of realism and melodrama, working on an opposition between nature and civilization. Despite its scientific inaccuracy, it provoked a set of responses to Hollywood's attempt to bring across a strong environmental message. Although such an endeavour goes against the usual commercial formulae of Holly-

wood narratives, the film's reception nevertheless showed strong contradictions along ideological lines that in the end left an ambivalent message and revealed the strong cultural aspect of a natural catastrophe. Patrick Murphy focuses on a number of fictional texts contrasting them to historical, scientific and journalistic accounts of hurricane destruction and the public response. Tsunamis and hurricanes are an excellent example for the imbrication of nature and culture. They are overwhelming natural events, to be sure, expressive of enormous natural forces, some of them now believed to be unleashed by the human influence on global warming. The consequences of these disasters for human beings are almost all man-made, and they are closely connected to the categories of race and class. As Murphy points out, it is the poorer, mostly non-white population that is hit the hardest, it is the arrogance of technological so-called masterminds which ignores scientific warnings and previous experiences with natural excesses, and it is the greed of real estate developers which allows constructions in hurricane prone areas right by the sea. Reading Rachel Carson, Zora Neale Hurston, Joan Didion and Sandra Steingraber, Vera Norwood concentrates on gendered responses to natural disasters as an important but usually overlooked aspect. Assessing how women with their particular vulnerability to environmental crisis have coped with them and how they have articulated their experiences of loss in this context offers paths for addressing inequality in gender, race and class relations as well as our relations with the natural world. Nirmal Selvamony connects the Greek concept of "oikos" to the Tamil concept of "tinai" and analyses the complex treatment of water in contemporary Tamil literature on the basis of a play, short stories and poems that incorporate the three fundamental relata – human, world, and the sacred. He shows how the texts reflect the consequences of socially different treatments of water, which range from a respect for bioregional conditions to their violation, and how these treatments are closely connected to social organisations and to issues of power.

Part III, "The Joys of Water," is explicitly oriented to artistic and literary responses to ecological issues. Although a more sensitive human attitude towards water is also a concern in many of the previous contributions, these essays articulate possibilities of healing the gap between the nature-culture divide from a literary artistic perspective. jan jagodzinski differentiates between the masculine and the feminine sublime to analyze water as a theme in eco-art. He argues that the masculine sublime remains caught in a destructive aesthetic that exemplifies a discourse of domination and mastery of the earth, as illustrated in the works of the well-known artist Christo, especially his Florida Keys project which was an ecological tragedy. The feminine sublime (with reference to the Kantian mathematical sublime), on the other hand, is evident in the work of artists mostly by women, but also by Smithson or Goldsworthy. Their art captures a sensibility towards the complexity of nature, especially when it comes to wet lands and deserts with their absence of water, and they try to dissolve the nature-culture divide so prevalent in our western culture. Usha V.T. interprets the verses of the one woman poet among the Alwars, a group of South Indian mystics from the 9th century, as a unique instance of a woman-centric dialogue. Some of Andal's verses are still sung in the temples and spiritual gatherings today. The narrative structure of her poems deals with the physical

and sensual enjoyment of the water in the river where the protagonist is taking her early morning bath, which is at once ritualistic and mundane. The female protagonist calls upon her Divine lover to join her in the socio-cultural ritual, as she moves to the river with her women friends. These apparently simple and domestic metaphors of river and bathing can be seen as leading to higher dimensions of spiritual reasoning.

The remaining articles deal with American literature from the 19th to the 20th century, specifically with their various approaches to the natural element water. They demonstrate a wide range of literary ecocritical readings. Christine Gerhardt begins with her interpretation of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson who are widely acknowledged as major American poets of the sea. Whereas most critics have focused on the sea's symbolic import in the work of these two writers, she analyzes the multilayered and often conflicted presence of the material ocean in their art, a feature that connects their work to the emergence of a modern environmental awareness in the middle of the 19th century in the United States. Gerhardt's reading of Whitman's "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" and Dickinson's "I started Early – Took my Dog –" argues for an intertextual dialogue. Both poets recognize the ocean as an autonomous force and as a complex ecosystem that defies cultural control. Both understand how deeply humans are implicated in and dependent on nature which points towards an eco-ethical relationship. The complexity and autonomy of the ocean as a natural force, however, reveals the limits of such a stance. American canonical writers of the 19th century are also the topic of Leland S. Person's essay. Using Emerson's famous experience of becoming a transparent eye-ball as a starting point for his discussion, Person argues that in this ideal vision nature is an object to be transcended instead of a resistant other that ecologists wish to respect. He goes on to examine the master trope of transparency in scenes from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and Thoreau's *Walden* in which characters peer through water they describe as transparent. These literary examples of transparency reveal inherent paradoxes when the lens becomes a mirror, when the gaze is reversed and otherness in nature looks back, when the subject-object relationship between humans and nature is turned into a subject-subject relationship, thus testing the perceptual and relational possibilities of the human presence in the nonhuman world. Ann-Catherine Nabholz reads Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* as a deeply apocalyptic vision of modernity in which the river Seine, in stark contrast to the novel's lack of natural settings, functions as a symbol of hope. Celebrations of the river are juxtaposed to a technological urban world in which human instincts have become denaturalized and art has been devitalized. Miller strives towards a nondualistic, vitalistic vision of the world which he finds in Eastern philosophies. Nabholz bases her analysis of the author's concept of fluidity on Deleuze's and Guattari's concept of the rhizome to elucidate Miller's aesthetics which subvert static notions of nature. Erika Scheidegger focuses on Native American writer Linda Hogan's novel *Solar Storms* as a representative example of a non-dualistic, interactive relationship between human beings and natural elements, especially water. Through mystical encounters with the natural environment her protagonists enter into a non-verbal communication with the nonhuman

world, one that echoes shamanistic practices across the world which has begun to interest ethno-biologists and molecular biologists alike. Especially *Solar Storms* is written to convince skeptical readers of the possibility of interspecies dialogue. By comparing and contrasting aquatic intelligence with scientific results, some crucial ethical questions emerge. Scheidegger also deals with the relevance of a spiritual attitude towards nature. She discusses the question whether it leads to yet another romanticization of indigenous peoples and nature or to an alertness and awareness of such a precious resource as water. Finally, Carmen Flys-Junquera turns to an analysis of New Mexican writer Rudolfo Anaya's texts that, despite their categorization as detective novels, explore the significance of water from various levels and perspectives: environmental, economical, political, cultural, mythical and spiritual. They combine different human approaches to nature, revealing the complex interaction between nature and culture and pointing towards the mutual dependency of both.

Taken together, these diverse contributions with their focus on water on many levels offer a theoretical philosophical basis that can relate to questions of ethics and aesthetics, to an ecocritical analysis of responses to current events like hurricanes and tsunamis, and to reflections on ancient, mystical, spiritual and political conceptions of water as our co-inhabitant of our planet. They are not meant to be comprehensive, but to invite further, even more varied debates on an urgent contemporary issue.

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