

The Goose


Volume 13 | No. 2

Article 25

2-12-2015

Thinking with Water Edited by Cecilia Ming Si Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis

Ryan Palmer
Uppsala Universitet

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Nature and Society Relations Commons](#), and the [Place and Environment Commons](#)
Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Palmer, Ryan. "Thinking with Water Edited by Cecilia Ming Si Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis." *The Goose*, vol. 13, no. 2, article 25, 2015,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol13/iss2/25>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Thinking with Water edited by **CECILIA CHEN, JANINE MACLEOD, and ASTRIDA NEIMANIS**

McGill-Queen's UP, 2013 \$95.00

Reviewed by **RYAN PALMER**

In *The Future of Life*, Edward O. Wilson reminds us of the close and essential relation between water and life. He states that, together with an energy source and organic matter, water equals life and that wherever water is found on Earth life is found also. That water is the future of life is a presupposition of the authors of *Thinking with Water*, though in contrast to Wilson and other biologists the authors here seek to analyze the culture of water, its associations and abstractions, and its ethics and politics. In their chapter titled "Water and Gestationality: What Flows beneath Ethics," Mielle Chandler and Astrida Neimanis emphasize an inversion of Wilson's point when they note that harming water is to harm the conditions requisite for the generation of life itself. From this fundamental point of departure, the authors of *Thinking with Water* consider how we interact with and imagine water. The liquid substance at the centre of each discussion and art project presented in the volume is considered from a variety of perspectives which often take late capitalism as their central referential frame.

Water as a political, conceptual, auditory, material, visual, postcolonial, and ethical subject are but some of the foci of this diverse collection. *Thinking with Water* brings together activists, poets, educators, scholars, and visual, audio, and performance artists to reflect on the myriad ways in which water permeates and affects our lives and imaginations. The collection also considers how we have adapted conceptualizations and practices

concerning water in the twenty-first century. Its twenty-one chapters intermingle the artistic with the analytic in order to suggest fluidity between these different approaches to understanding the role water plays on various strata from the personal to the global. The diversity in the contributors' backgrounds adds to the richness and distinctiveness of the volume as a whole, which includes poetry, essays, images, performances, and exhibitions that engage with water as a substance, resource, and episteme as well as its temporality, flows, and movements.

In an intriguing chapter by Shirley Roburn on the politics attached to water's acoustic ecology, Roburn describes the dispute between Royal Dutch Shell and the Tikigaq Point Hope community in Alaska, USA, a sadly familiar tale of Indigenous communities suffering the collateral damage of corporate irresponsibility. This example allows Roburn to touch on some of the discourses at play in such disputes, including national security, military concerns, market factors, Indigenous practices, and national and international regulations. Conceiving of sound as an index of debates around these issues, Roburn emphasizes an understanding of oceans as acoustic space. Roburn focuses on the echolocation of whales and dolphins and the detrimental effects that disruptive noise produced by shipping, underwater oil and gas exploration, and seismic mapping have on such marine populations. Based on this research, Roburn develops an ecology that perforates the land/sea boundary, as well as that notional line dividing humans from other animals that is being eroded by research into areas like animal behaviour and communication (the revision of binary logic in ecology being a theme which recurs in several chapters). As Roburn convincingly argues, "[t]he consequences

of acoustic pollution—ranging from ototoxic effects to cetacean behavioural changes in feeding and mating patterns—are sobering,” to say the least.

In her chapter “Water and the Material Imagination,” Janine Macleod examines two metaphoric seas, arguing that flow of currency in late capitalism fosters ahistoricity by way of disposable commodities, commodity fetishism, and population mobility; whereas the metaphor of water as memory found in Woolf and Proust attends to a diachrony in which past is made present through memory. Macleod argues that the tension between these two disparate metaphorical treatments of water elucidates opposing approaches to ecological diversity as well as self-understanding.

Jennifer Beth Spiegel’s chapter on the 1984 Bhopal Gas Disaster casts the event as an ongoing—though invisible and subterranean—crisis. As the Union Carbide factory that was responsible for the toxicant leak continues to seep contaminants into soil and groundwater, the crisis has shifted from event to process and, as Spiegel shows, the subterranean flow of pollutants provides an apt metaphor for the crisis’ invisibility within the global political sphere. Spiegel’s chapter provides a compelling case study that grounds the volume as a whole, dealing as it does with questions of perception by demonstrating how the visibility of ecological crisis dramatically modifies responses to catastrophe. The diversity of approaches evinced in the above descriptions carries through the volume. Andrew Biro questions the co-development of irrigation techniques with social organization and labour compartmentalization, drawing out connections between conceptions of nature and conceptions of self. Another reflection on the nature/culture divide is

Veronica Strang’s call to shed this binary notion in favour of an ecological view which understands the human and environment as mutually constitutive. Dorothy Christian and Rita Wong provide more personal accounts, contrasting Indigenous and settler perspectives on water, land, and sovereignty. Cecelia Chen explores the cartography of water and its implications, questioning colonial ways of thinking about water and the practices that emerged from these.

The poetry contributions are varied and well selected. Jeannette Armstrong is Silyx Okanagan, a poet, scholar, activist, and community leader. Armstrong’s contribution to the volume is her dense and sensory poem “Water is Siwilkw.” Armstrong calls attention to the imbricated plateaus of meaning that water has accumulated both physically, as in the geologic crushing and sedimentation of rock for instance, and culturally. Traversing biomes from marsh to desert to tundra, and forms of water such as ice, cloud, and river, the poem highlights the diversity of uses and manifestations of water as ecological, spiritual, subterranean, and ubiquitous. Melanie Siebert’s poem “Alsek Lake” adds to the volume’s consideration of the aurality of water. The poem also draws attention to the dramatic shift of timescale in water cycles as Siebert describes the troubling yet incredible phenomenon (so thoroughly masked for many of us by the technology of plumbing) of ice, thousands of years old, caving open and becoming drinkable. No less engaging is Daphne Marlatt’s poem “generation, generations at the mouth” which juxtaposes an image of water suggested as an eternally recycled blueprint for the body, and the toxicity of a contemporary relation to water which harvests the substance but does not return it. Marlatt creates a disturbing

tension between the cyclical temporality of water and the post-industrial treatment of it that re-routes and pollutes, and uses this broken cycle to suggest other socio-ecological fissures. The failure to reciprocate in our relation with water, Marlatt suggests, is part of a toxic relation at the level of kin and community.

The volume is varied and engaging on numerous levels, balancing well the different types of contributions of art, poetry, and scholarship. The sustained critical attention given to the political realities of late capitalism and questions around conceptualizations and practices pertaining to the aqueous in neocolonial societies—especially Canada, USA, and Australia—meets the more visceral and

sensorial presentations explored in the artistic contributions. This suggests the importance of interdisciplinarity when approaching a subject as broad and fundamental as water, and invites yet more heterogeneity for future studies of this crucial subject. The volume is, overall, a successful one, and invites response as well as further analysis of water from within the humanities.

RYAN PALMER is a doctoral candidate at Uppsala University, Sweden. His research explores the relation between film noir and environmental writing, as well as questions of environmental justice as framed in contemporary North American literature.