

Cultural Studies Review
volume 21 number 1 March 2015
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj/index>
pp. 304–9
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book review

Thoughts on Water

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Cecelia Ming Si Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis (eds)

Thinking with Water

McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal, 2013

ISBN 9780773541795 RRP US\$39.95

What does it mean to think with water? Is it possible to use water as a lens to think with? It is these two questions that situate my reading of Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis' co-edited 2013 volume, *Thinking with Water*. Grappling with fresh ideas of water's potential to reframe human thought and action, the collection draws in an eclectic group of contributors including architects, performers, poets, scholars, teachers and visual artists. However, before we dive into my review, let me provide a context for my interest in this project and reasons why I am perhaps a suitable person to critique it.

First, I grew up at Tūrangawaewae Marae on the banks of the Waikato River—New Zealand's longest river. I know about its flooding, fogs, currents, high and low waterlines, and about the safe places to jump into it from bridges. From it I have collected *koura* (freshwater crayfish) and *tuna* (eels). From my tribal elders I know

ISSN 1837-8692

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Citation: Cultural Studies Review (CSR) 2015, 21, 4346, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v21i1.4346>

stories about the river's *taniwha* (water guardians). Perhaps ironically, perhaps not, the Maori tribe that I belong to is called Waikato and one translation of Wai-kato is captive waters. We are understood to be 'river people' by other Maori and non-Maori New Zealanders not only because we share the name of our local river but because we understand the Waikato River to be our *Tupuna Awa* or River Ancestor.

Second, in 2004 I carried out PhD fieldwork in Montreal, the island-city that is encompassed by the great grey and often frozen Kaniatarowá:nen or St Lawrence River. While living in Montreal my time was marked by dealings and exchanges with Mohawk friends and colleagues who resided at Kahnawake (next to Montreal) and Akwesasne (on Cornwall Island in Ontario). Both reservations are located on the St Lawrence River and are next to the St Lawrence shipping seaway.

Third, last year when I was invited to review *Thinking with Water* I was about to take up a research fellowship with the Interdisciplinary Centre for Intercultural and Indigenous Study in Chile. The fellowship located me in the Araucania region in the south of Chile. During the month of October when I arrived in Villarrica town, I counted just five days when it did not rain. Living in soaking conditions meant that a whole different wardrobe was required from what I usually wore in New Zealand. For the first time I became acquainted with the brands Mammut, Marmot and Haka Honu which all promised to keep me warm, dry and aerated. With the large tranquil Lake Villarrica a stone's throw from my university residence and the majestic snow-capped Volcano Villarrica and Andes mountain range always in my view I found myself living what might be described as a researcher's South American wet dream. The purpose of my fellowship in Chile was to collect data on transnational companies, in particular New Zealand companies, that had significant interests in water and other natural resources in Southern Chile. My current research examines the impacts that companies such as Fonterra (the primary owners of Saprole) and Mighty River Power (the primary owners of MRP Geotermia) have on Mapuche populations. In brief, it is these experiences that position me to write a relevant review of *Thinking with Water*.

This book, which attempts to both draw in and challenge its audience has twenty-one sections, rather than chapters, and twenty-three contributors. With contributions encompassing everything from a freshwater mermaid enticing passers-by to taste water samples gathered from rivers, lakes and streams in

Quebec, (133–8) to viewings of delicate jellyfish drawings, (139–64) to a history of mega-dams used in blockbuster movies, (213–31) to a dual water narrative created by an Indigenous Canadian scholar and a Canadian-born Chinese scholar, (232–53) *Thinking with Water* forces its readers into a number of original and at times peculiar water spaces. I confess upfront that it was no easy feat to get a steady bead on a book which had so many sections and participants and included artistic representations that required deep thought and interpretation—a reminder perhaps of how much of our critical reading arrives as second nature, something that merely confirms the way we already see the world. With a strong introductory chapter emphasising the limited and finite reality of earth’s water supply, the co-editors argue that water is often studied only as a resource—a quantifiable, instrumentalised and commodifiable substance. This perspective is corroborated by Mielle Chandler and Astrida Neimanis’s piece, ‘Water Gestationality: What Flows beneath Ethics’, (61–83) and Jennifer Beth Spiegel’s ‘Subterranean Flows: Water Contamination and the Politics of Visibility after the Bhopal Disaster’. (84–103) Both pieces elucidate the way water is objectified and represented as being without agency by powerful elites.

A major theme flowing through the volume is the ineffective way people deal with water problems. This is exemplified in Shirley Roburn’s discussion ‘Acoustic Ecology and Arctic Ocean Governance’. (106–28) Roburn reveals that the excessive noise generated by human activity in Arctic waters is making whales in the region extremely vulnerable. The acoustic disturbances caused by highly industrialised oceans have further flow-on effects. When whale populations are diminished the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples, such as the Inupiat who have a tradition of catching Arctic whales as a source of food, are also threatened. Water problems are also the subject of Spiegel’s piece, which tracks the biochemical flows and trajectories of fluid contaminants. (84–103) Spiegel elucidates the unfortunate fact that corporate responsibility and accountability are often an illusion when real-life disasters occur in developing countries. She further explains that people and natural resources in developing areas are treated as passive objects to be managed by experts from elsewhere. A third water problem is raised in a clever poem by Daphne Marlatt (38) who describes how generations of fish are being removed from Canadian rivers by fish companies. Because of over-fishing there are no fish left for

eagles, bears and other creatures of the wild. Importantly, the poem reveals that rivers are losing the creatures that are meant to inhabit them and the wider ecosystems they support. Gisèle Trudel and Stéphanie Claude highlight the world-wide issue of water purification through an innovative visual performance that focuses on treating grey and black waters. (29–37) Not only does their video footage demonstrate water’s life-giving properties but they also show the ways that water can be recycled and regenerated on very different scales.

Certainly, *Thinking with Water* does an impressive job of describing the ‘at risk state’ of the often frozen and sometime toxic waters of Quebec, Ontario and other parts of Canada. With many of its contributors based in Canada and writing on bodies of water that fall under Canadian jurisdiction, I wonder if a more apt title for the book might be *Thinking with Canadian Water* or even *Canadians Think with Water*? Andrew Biro’s contribution ‘River-Adaptiveness in a Globalised World’ foregrounds the human domination of nature but also makes the point that the nation of Canada was built on extensive hydro manipulations. (166–84) This mastery of the natural environment goes hand in hand with the growth of social hierarchy and domination. Biro points out the way in which Canadian policy simultaneously manages water scarcity and produces water abundance. As a result a sense of the abundance of water is embedded in Canadian minds and adds to the Canadian citizen’s imaginary sense of security and power. Peter C. van Wyck also writes about Canadian water in ‘Footbridge at Atwater: A Chorographic Inventory of Effects’, which focuses on the Lachine Canal in Montreal. (256–73) Originally built as a means of bypassing the treacherous Lachine Rapids on the St Lawrence River, the canal passes through the southwest part of the island. Van Wyck follows its 14.5 kilometre route sifting through sediments of the past, providing an inventory of the Lachine’s thirty-two contaminated sites.

Of course, I do not mean to imply that the industrial polluting of water, premature thawing of frozen water, or damming and diverting of water are problems relegated to North America. Yet my own research experiences allow me to see that, while all waters have the same fluid properties, specific bodies of water—oceans, rivers, lakes, streams, springs and even rain—are vastly different. They embody different colours, smells and sounds. The waters that I know in New Zealand, and those I experienced in Chile, are very different to the mostly Canadian

waters reported on in this project This is where a dilemma emerges for me around the volume. It is my view that the range of contributors for the project was perhaps not ethnically, culturally or politically broad enough. While *Thinking with Water* is an original first attempt that packs some intellectual punch, a glaring weakness of the project, which is rightly acknowledged in the introductory chapter, is the absence of Indigenous contributors. My reading of the work identifies just two Indigenous participants: Dorothy Christian, who wrote one half of the dual narrative titled 'Untapping Watershed Mind', (232–53) and Jeanette Armstrong, who contributed the poem titled 'Water is Siwkw'. (104) Had there been more Indigenous participation, I believe, the project may have been better equipped to refute the passive character attributed to water by powerful elites, Western science and techno-managerial discourses.

Having made this point, I also acknowledge the insights provided by Veronica Strang who writes about Australian Aborigines and their interpretations of the rainbow serpent, an aquatic deity that represents the cycle of the seasons and the importance of water in human life. As an anthropologist trained to think about other ways of apprehending the material and immaterial world, Strang makes the important point that 'Aboriginal people have other goals: to maintain their own places and their own "life projects" independently of the state and market. They hope to reproduce their own cultural beliefs and values—to "hold the Law". But to hold their own Law, they must also strive to hold water'. (191) Composing a tripartite narrative for the Mitchell, Brisbane and Darling rivers, Strang describes the diverse interests that different stakeholder groups have in the three rivers. Importantly, her work illustrates that small-scale holistic societies do not conceptually separate nature and culture, although presently we lack a terminology (legal or otherwise) for such ideas. Demonstrating the different ways that people think about water, Strang asserts that people inhabit different worlds even when they share the same material environment.

But it is not only the lack of Indigenous contributors that perplexed me, since I also feel that the project's overall objective of inclusivity would have benefited from more international contributors from countries such as China and India, where renowned bodies of water like the Yangtze and Ganges rivers flow, or from regions in Africa, the Middle East, Oceania or South America, where culturally significant

rivers and lakes exist amid greater cultural and ethnic diversity. As Strang's ethnographic work suggests, engaging with people who deal with water regulation, management and governance in ways that are not primarily eco-critical would also provide another perspective on thinking with water.

These provocations notwithstanding, I think it is important to end this review on a positive note because the volume makes a fluid contribution to the complex issues of owning and appropriating water. Ultimately, the work conveys the absolute importance of water to the wellbeing of earth. While each contributor's approach to the project is different, two characteristics bind all the participants together, namely their deep concern for the preservation of water and their desire to reframe the relationships that humans have with water. Their willingness to work together on a collaborative project of such scale and complexity thereby affirms that water must continue to be a common good available to all people and creatures. Accordingly, no single voice or methodology, no matter how much expertise or power it lays claim to, can totally control or own water. As the Waikato people know, it would take more than a lifetime's thinking to comprehend captive waters.

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Marama Muru-Lanning is primarily concerned with issues and debates in environmental and Indigenous anthropology. Marama's research focuses on the commodification and privatisation of fresh water and other natural resources in New Zealand and around the globe. Her first book, *Tūpuna Awa—River Ancestor: Belonging to the Waikato River*, will be published by Auckland University Press in 2015. Before being appointed to the James Henare Māori Research Centre, Marama was a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Anthropology Department at the University of Auckland. Marama is currently conducting research with scholars from Pontificia Catolica Universidad examining the impacts of increased privatised geothermal and hydro electricity generation on Mapuche who reside in the Araucania of Chile. Marama is from Turangawaewae Marae and is of Waikato and Ngati Maniapoto descent.