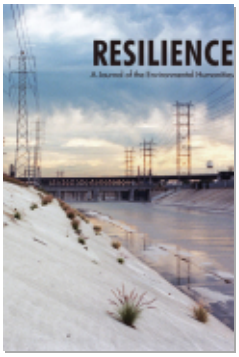
The Power of a Preposition: A Review of *Thinking with Water*



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The Power of a Preposition

A Review of *Thinking with Water*

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Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, eds. *Thinking with Water*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013. Paperback, 368 pp. CAD: 39.95.

Thinking with Water introduces readers to a remarkable edited and interdisciplinary collection of strong stories, critical essays, art installations, and poetry that destabilize, defamiliarize, and seek to rechart dominant ways of thinking about water.

Over the last century, narratives of water have tended to speak of water as an abstraction, as a passive resource that is narrow, essentialized, and of only instrumental value. Reducing water to its chemical formula (H_2O) allows various quantities of water or bodies of water to be controlled and governed, typically by elites and state institutions, sometimes in the name of colonialism but currently more often in the name of privatization. Geographer Jamie Linton (2010, 2014) has referred to this type of water as "modern water." He writes, "Essentially, modern water is a way of knowing, accounting for, and representing water apart from its social context" (Linton 2014, 111).

Flipping the script begins here. This is where critical dialogues about a new water consciousness or an aqueous game changer starts with contributions from selected critical and innovative water thinkers. The impetus for the book itself evolved out of the Thinking with Water project, whose origins are rooted in the environmental studies conference Na-

ture Matters in October 2007, Toronto, Canada (Mortimer-Sandilands 2009). As such, it is biased toward Canadian-US contributors and geographical region. However, the themes it addresses, concepts it introduces, and futures it imagines are critical contributions to debates on water ethics and the formulation of a global water ethics charter and will resonate with many academics, activists, indigenous peoples, and water mediators engaged in negotiations over water rights, governance, and management (Water-Culture Institute 2016).

Editors Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis claim in their introduction, "Toward a Hydrological Turn," that the intention of this book is to "bring water forward for conscious and careful consideration, and to explore the possibilities and limits of thinking with water" (3).[1] They achieve this and more, in my opinion, as I shall illustrate.

Firstly, the simple and effective use of the single preposition "with" (in the English language) is particularly powerful as it sets the tone of the book apart from many other English-language books concerned with the management of, governance of, and commodification of water. Almost every contribution in *Thinking with Water* deals with and emphasizes the qualities implicit within and among sets of relationships WITH water between the human and the more-than-human, underscored by arguments for environmental justice within a "recalibrating of western cosmology," as Mielle Chandler and Astrida Neimanis suggest in their article (65). In this context, I understand Western cosmology to mean the anthropocentric-, patriarchal-, and capitalist-driven imaginaries and assumptions held by much of the West, as well as the colonial nature of knowledge itself (Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Leff 2012). Many academic fields (including postcolonial studies, environmental humanities, feminist studies, and indigenous studies, for instance) have called for a much more rigorous problematization and decolonizing of gendered, indigenous, and water knowledges (Code 2006; Mollett and Faria 2013; Bavington, Grzetic, and Neis 2004; Leff 2012; Mignolo 2013; Thornton 2008).

The art installations work on an imaginary level by adding volume to these recalibrations. However, they are often hard to visualize on paper as many rely on video and audio (often hybrid) projections. Even so, these installations work well by challenging ossified assumptions about the role water plays in time and the meaning of scarcity; and I recommend that they be visited by those close enough geographically, if possible.

Secondly, this edited collection pushes further by advocating not just

a particular hue or register of water ethics but an ambitious proposition that water itself is a model for an ethical system and an even bolder claim, made by Chandler and Neimanis, that "water makes ethics possible" (62). This core idea is surprisingly close to indigenous relationships with and approaches to water. I am personally most familiar with the indigenous ontology of the inland Tlingit and Tagish (from the Yukon Territory in Canada) and the coastal Tlingit (from Alaska in the United States), where, for example, the continuous circulation of respect is a prerequisite for existence, water being the primordial model. Water, respect, and Tlingit identity are intimately related. Just as water and blood circulate with similar verb forms in the Tlingit language, so too must respect. Anthropologist Stephen Langdon points out that this circulation is a fundamental prerequisite for existence: "It is through the continuous circulation of respect—in thought and deed—exhibited in connections and fulfilment of obligations in various socially and ritually prescribed ways that the Tlingit pursue a morality that will insure the continuity of existence" (Sealaska Heritage Institue, 2013). This statement reiterates Tlingit elder and educator David Katzeek's words at the Tlingit Clan Conference in Juneau, Alaska, in November 2013: "Our life is in the water; our breath is in the water" (qtd. in Hayman 2015, 189). Water becomes literally and metaphorically a master verb within a Tlingit cosmology that is itself a highly complex and sophisticated web of spiritual connections and obligations.

Indigenous contributions to this volume come from aboriginal scholars Dorothy Christian (Secwepemc community) and Jeannette Armstrong (Syilx First Nation, Okanagan) who, aware that Western ontologies fall short of accounts for emotional and spiritual approaches to water, offer rich phenomenological and embodied water texts. Jeannette Armstrong pulls the acoustic, sensory qualities of water together poetically with the inter- and intra-action of diverse water bodies, from "the tinkling of ice under the bellies of caribou" to the "caressing of thunder eggs . . . the song of the earth, the song of water is the way" (104). Dorothy Christian calls for the decolonization of water to allow for multiple water ontologies to be recognized.

Indigenous languages (mostly in place names) are honored in many chapters (Rita Wong, Dorothy Christian, Melanie Siebert, Jeannette Armstrong, Cecilia Chen, Shirley Roburn, and Veronica Strang), with contributor Daphne Marlatt's poetry struggling to articulate water

through a noun-biased English language: "Verbing the noun out of its stuck edges into an occurrence, currents, *curre-* . . . we've lost the verb in our currency, a frozen exchange streaming emptiness" (39).[2]

Thirdly, challenges to the labelling, compartmentalization, and assumptions of spaces and species lead many authors to lay out new and important baselines of their own. Shirley Roburn, for instance, focuses on the acoustic ecology of whales severely impacted by industrial noise and claims that "reframing the ocean as an acoustic space both highlights the speciesism inherent in human perceptions and categorizations of space, and reclassifies ocean habitats not as wild nature but as areas differentially affected by the pollution of modernity" (107). Stacey Alaimo's study of jellyfish aesthetics, on the other hand, writes that the "images of ocean creatures may provoke a transformation in the parcelling out of the world, as anthropocentric and terrestrial hierarchies, blind spots, and denials may no longer be sensible" (156). From the micro to the macro scale and across species, water is shown to facilitate, connect, and transform. Water itself has agency with purpose and intention. It is this theme—the agency of matter (water)—that will resonate with new materialisms, cultural anthropology, ecocriticism, and environmental philosophy. However, in true interdisciplinary style, it also puts into conversation approaches from literary to film studies, from psychoanalysis to environmental justice movements, from feminism to ecological feminism . . . and thereby "encourages greater theoretical fluidity highlighting the reality that human-environmental engagements are composed of shifting and mutually constitutive processes," as Veronica Strang asserts (186).

If this is a form of countermapping, of recharting the monocultural water imaginary, then it is not only water that needs to be decolonized, but also mapping practices themselves. One evolving approach and methodology that I have personally employed in my own collaborative water research with the Carcross/Tagish First Nation (Yukon Territory, Canada) is deep mapping. As a form of spatial storytelling, deep mapping cautiously expands the traditions of both geographic information systems (GIS) and participatory geographical information science (PGIS) to provide a foundation for the spatial humanities. A deep map—or for this collaborative water research, a deep chart—is an emerging method that attempts to capture experiential, emotional, sensory, acoustic, spir-

itual, and metaphorical space as well as more quantifiable signatures of a specific geographical region (Hayman, forthcoming, 3). As grassroots enterprises, communities are empowered in that the charting and mapping they consider important is honored. Deep mapping fosters and deepens a sense of identity and spirit of place. Furthermore it is for the community to update and add to—it is a living map with audio, video, narrative, and art combined on a multilayered platform—a tool for a local inland Tlingit and Tagish cosmological baseline to be formulated. This in turn is designed to support an inland Tlingit water legislative act rooted in oral histories and indigenous science that speaks to current Canadian environmental law. Through this study of identity and spirit of place or ethnography of place, deep mapping reveals a multitude of relationships with and through water. It not only softens the hydrological violence wrought by colonial powers by establishing and maintaining the hegemony of "modern water" but allows water to speak through a series of hydrosocial relationships.

As Chen suggests in the concluding chapter, "each mapping describes an implicit or explicit set of relationships among landscapes, waterways, populations of the human and more than human, and other lively agents" (279). Charting water's social life at multiple scales and dimensions, as *Thinking with Water* does, implies a dissolving of boundaries and borders—a point of departure for fluid geographies that transcend narrow academic disciplines. This is an exciting and critical read on the cusp of a new water consciousness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eleanor Hayman *is a doctoral student at the Ludwig Maximillian's University, Munich, Germany, pursuing interdisciplinary collaborative water research with self-governing Carcross/Tagish First Nation (CTFN), Yukon Territory, Canada. Her collaborative water research with CTFN will provide the framework for a CTFN government water legislation rooted in the indigenous philosophy, oral narratives, and empirical scientific knowledge of the inland Tlingit and Tagish peoples of the circumpolar north. This will be the first indigenous water legislation of its kind among the fourteen First Nations in the Yukon Territory and will speak directly to Canadian environmental law. Eleanor works closely with CTFN community consultants Mark Wedge / Aan Gooshú (Deisheetaan Clan, Crow Moiety) and Colleen James / G̲ooch Tláa (Dak̲l'aweidí Clan, Wolf Moiety).*

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise credited, parenthetical page citations will refer to *Thinking with Water*.

2. The indigenous language—Tlingit—that is a core element of my own collaborative water research with the Carcross/Tagish First Nation of the Yukon Territory, Canada, is verb based, unlike the English language, which is noun based.

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