

Water Is Life

Ecologies of Writing and Indigeneity

Christina Boyles and Hilary E. Wyss

“Water is Life,” the recent rallying cry of the Standing Rock Sioux opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline, gestures to the urgency of understanding ecological depredations as an attack on life itself. The idea of “water protectors” (as the activists protesting the construction of an oil pipeline under the Missouri River call themselves) emerges from a specific historical moment in relation to #NoDAPL, but this is an apt way to imagine the work of this special issue more generally as a folding together of ecology, indigeneity, and the role of writing in making visible Indigenous ways of engaging with water.

While water scarcity is a concern for all living beings, its impact tends to be greater for Indigenous communities. Reservations in particular are sites where government and corporate entities expose “residents to dangerous environmental conditions,” including dangers caused by air pollution, water contamination, dangerous working conditions, and weapons testing (Taylor 47). Although these environmental concerns are long-standing, increasing privatization of water resources, paired with the ongoing effects of climate change, have amplified discussions about Indigenous water rights in US media. Communities of color, particularly Indigenous communities, have always borne the brunt of environmental injustice; however, these issues have become more explicit in the Trump era. Both under the leadership of Scott Pruitt and in the wake of his resignation, the Environmental Protection Agency has rolled back environmental protections for protected federal lands, particularly those deemed to be of value for natural resource production. Although the EPA is charged with promoting and restoring the health of tribal lands, it also has the authority to allow “tribal communities and other stakeholders to pursue future beneficial use or reuse of resources

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for economic, environmental, and traditional purposes” (“Cleaning Up”). Often, these other stakeholders are given precedence over tribal lands due to intersecting corporate and governmental interests. Such behavior places Indigenous communities at risk in terms of their health and well-being and threatens their sovereign claims to the land.

In response, Native communities have developed a series of protests and legal challenges to contest corporate and governmental claims to these lands. Many of these debates center on the sovereignty of tribal nations: What authority do tribes have over their rolls, lands, and resources? How do these rights operate within Western power structures? How should they operate? The answers to these questions are not answered simply, but they all have a common concern: state and federal laws stifling Indigenous nations for profit and power. This special issue of *SAIL* examines the way Indigenous writers have focused on water—its use, the laws that regulate its distribution, and its cultural and ecological value both within and outside Indigenous communities—to generate meaningful dialogue about the relationship between colonialism, water rights, and tribal sovereignty.

Varying water laws across the United States force Indigenous communities to structure their arguments within specific legal contexts. In the East, water rights are determined by riparian rights, which permit those whose land abuts a body of water to use and access that water. In the West, water rights are determined by prior appropriation, which grants water rights chronologically based on whoever first put the water to “beneficial use” as determined by state and federal law. In theory, this means that all water in the United States should be the property of Indigenous communities; however, *Winters v. United States* (1908) complicates this narrative. According to this ruling, Native water rights are determined according to the location and establishment date of reservation lands. Eastern reservations have access to water their federal land abuts, but they do not have exclusive rights or jurisdiction over this water. Western nations are given prior appropriation rights based on the date on which their reservation was established, a decision that significantly disadvantages many Native communities in the West, particularly those using water from the frequently overdrawn Colorado River. Other issues further complicate this framework; for example, non–federally recognized tribes have no legal water rights. Additionally, the Five Tribes—the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole—are

federally recognized tribes that possess fee lands rather than reservation lands. As such, they have exclusive rights over the water on their lands and are not subject to state authority regarding its use. Barring the laws surrounding the Five Tribes, who maintain the greatest sovereignty over their water rights, US water laws are designed to be exclusionary: they create a gatekeeping mechanism that privileges those in power while disadvantaging others, particularly Indigenous peoples. By denying other Native nations similar autonomy to the Five Tribes, the government negates their claims to both sovereignty and water.

Many groups have already begun to address the relationship between sovereignty and environmental justice. For example, Idle No More speaks out against the misuse of tribal lands in Canada by “assert[ing] Indigenous inherent rights to sovereignty and reinstitut[ing] traditional laws and Nation to Nation Treaties by protecting the lands and waters from corporate destruction” (“The Story”). Similarly, the Standing Rock Sioux and their supporters protested the development of the Keystone XL pipeline on treaty land that is under the control of the Army Corps of Engineers. Both of these groups demonstrate the ways in which corporate interests are allowed to supersede the health and well-being of citizens, particularly Indigenous citizens.

Additionally, the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) unites Indigenous peoples to “protect the sacredness of Earth Mother from contamination & exploitation by respecting and adhering to Indigenous knowledge and natural law” (<http://www.ienearth.org/>). By mobilizing activists from around the globe to places like Standing Rock, the Tar Sands, the People’s Summit (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), and the United Nations, the IEN demonstrates how Indigenous knowledges can be used to address many of the world’s most pressing issues: climate change, capitalistic models of consumption, and the devaluation of non-European knowledgesystems.

Other activist groups examine the relationship between climate change and sovereignty through the promotion of Indigenous environmental knowledges. One group, the Navajo Water Project, seeks to provide clean water for individuals throughout New Mexico. As they note on their website, “Navajo are 67 times more likely than other Americans to live without running water or a toilet. . . . Many Natives can’t get enough clean water, creating a cycle of poverty that limits health, happiness, educational opportunity, and economic security”

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(“About the Project”). By addressing the inequitable living conditions for the Navajo, this group interrogates the ethics of resource allocation in the United States. Other strategies for promoting Indigenous sovereignty include recognizing Native peoples’ rights to land. This can take the form of a land acknowledgment at a public event, or it can involve returning land to the tribes. Notably, the Nature Conservancy in Nebraska recently transferred 160 acres of land to the Ioway. Tribal Vice-Chairman Allan Kelley commented, “This return of a part of our reservation, in a natural condition much as our ancestors would recognize it and which we will continue to restore, is helping us to heal the land and as a tribe” (Hendee). Promoting tribal sovereignty serves as a way to promote justice, to acknowledge the damages caused by settler colonialism, and to promote environmental justice.

Water inherently is linked to both sovereignty and climate change. As water resources become increasingly scarce, access to clean, reliable water resources is crucial. By demanding that the US government acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty, Native peoples are fighting for both autonomy and survival. Of particular concern is the overallocation of the Colorado River, which provides freshwater for most of the Southwest. According to David Owen, “The Colorado suffers from the same kinds of overuse and environmental degradation that increasingly threaten freshwater sources all over the world, as the global population rises toward its projected mid-century level of nine or ten billion, and as changes in the weather play havoc with accustomed precipitation patterns” (7). Highlighting the ways in which this body of water has had an extraordinary impact on both the lived experience of vast numbers of people living within the continental United States and the cultural imaginary of Indigenous communities, three of the four pieces included in this collection discuss territory fed by the Colorado River.

Indeed, what the essays in this collection suggest is that the solutions to our global water problems are to be found in Indigenous communities and are given voice by Native writers—novelists, essayists, and poets. This includes the dismantling of many power structures that now dominate our world—capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy—as well as the implementation of ethical environmental practices, such as a return to viewing nature as a commons that is equally shared by all living things. For non-Indigenous peoples, this also includes embracing Indigenous peoples’ rights to land and sovereignty.¹

As Stephanie Fitzgerald notes, “gender and eco- and environmental criticism have been historically undertheorized in relation to Native studies” (7). All the essays in this special issue of *SAIL* take on these intersecting concerns to make a powerful argument for the inextricable link between discourse and policy and the essential role of Native writers and intellectuals in making visible the political, social, and emotional perils of irresponsible water use. These essays build upon the work of Indigenous scholars who have already begun to explore the relationship between literature and water, including Shari M. Huhndorf, Stephanie J. Fitzgerald, William Huggins, and Niigaan Sinclair. These authors draw connections between original stories, lived experiences, and storytelling to demonstrate the historical, spiritual, and present role of water within their communities. Huggins terms these relationships “literary water ecologies” that help readers understand their relationship to water through the art of storytelling (56).

This special issue builds on this body of scholarship, providing new insight into the work of writers like Leslie Marmon Silko and Simon Ortiz. As Huhndorf notes, Silko’s *Sacred Water* “critically engages the broad history of colonial dispossession along with contemporary debates surrounding water rights in the Southwest” (370); the article by Christina Boyles in this issue builds upon Huhndorf’s argument by expanding this discussion to include other texts by Silko: *Almanac of the Dead*, *Gardens in the Dunes*, and *Oceanstory*. Likewise, Robin Riley Fast’s article further advances Huggins’s claim that “[n]o commentary on the literary and ecological significance of water in a desert ecosystem would be complete without the inclusion of Simon Ortiz (Acoma)” (61).

At the same time, this issue addresses the broader environmental issues present in the western United States. Acknowledging the foundational role of water in many Indigenous communities, the articles in this issue explore the ways in which water forms and re-forms the land, bringing structure and change to our ways of life. Fitzgerald describes this process with the Mississippi, noting that “[w]hat we now know of as coastal Louisiana is new land, made from sediment continuously laid down by the great Mississippi over thousands of years” (91). However, many sites are at risk. Due to industrialization, climate change, and natural disasters, the United Houma Nation is at risk of losing their homelands and ways of life (Fitzgerald 90–101). These issues are not relegated

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to communities along the coast but are ever-present in Indigenous communities across the globe.

In March 2015 Niigaan Sinclair spoke at a hearing of the Lake Winnipeg Water Review to encourage legislators to address water pollution throughout the Lake Winnipeg waterway. He stated, “Lake Winnipeg, the only way I can describe it is the epicenter of my life, it is the epicenter of my family. It is what has made my family’s relationships with this place and it has done so for thousands of years in this place” (1277, lines 8–12). He went on to note that “the very first inhabitant and life form of Manitoba was *ataagib*, *ataagib* algae” and that “the members of Peguis take our relationship with *ataagib*, Lake Winnipeg, very seriously. It is our life blood. It is what has created our families, it’s what has created our Treaties, it’s what created our life. And by controlling the water within Lake Winnipeg, we are literally playing with our lives” (1288, lines 12–13, 1289, lines 10–16).

The articles in this special issue seek to pay similar homage to the bodies of water that have created and sustained our lives by advocating that Indigenous frameworks be applied to our environmental initiatives so that we can save both our water and our lives. The first essay, Christina Boyles’s “Writing Water, Writing Life: Silko as Environmental Activist,” engages with four of Silko’s post-1990 works, arguing that together they make a powerful anticolonial statement about water and the need for “an environmental ethos grounded in Indigenous practices.” Boyles argues that it is specifically by engaging with water rather than land that Silko’s later works tap into the potency of Indigenous ways of seeing that world and their revolutionary potential. Both through her writing and in her day-to-day life, Silko demonstrates the need to dismantle capitalism and (eco)colonialism in favor of a more ethical framework: environmental justice grounded in Indigenous knowledge. Robin Riley Fast’s article, “Water, History, and Sovereignty in Simon J. Ortiz’s ‘Our Homeland, a National Sacrifice Area,’” argues for the centrality of Ortiz’s classic essay in establishing a truly relevant modern resistance movement grounded in Indigenous experience. Using the experience of the Acoma people and the severe environmental degradation of their lands, Ortiz’s essay makes a claim for the interconnection between racism and land depredation and the urgent need for Native writers to advocate “for their people’s self-government, sovereignty, and control

of land and natural resources,” thus laying out a set of strategies, Fast argues, for a modern environmental movement.

This special issue moves from a discussion of prominent Indigenous authors Leslie Marmon Silko and Simon Ortiz, both of whom write of the perilous water resources of the Southwest, to an analysis of the problematic archive and alternative ways to preserve Indigenous knowledges surrounding water into our cultural memory. Thus Shanae Aurora Martinez’s article, “Intervening in the Archive: Women-Water Alliances, Narrative Agency, and Reconstructing Indigenous Space in Deborah Miranda’s *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*,” uses the specific geography of the California mission system along the Rio Carmelo and the forms of violence that erased Indigenous people from their own history. Using Deborah Miranda’s *Bad Indians* as a way into this conversation, Martinez argues that the multigenre text usefully intervenes in the larger conversation by reaffirming Indigenous rights through an engagement with a set of archival materials that collectively establish a history of Indigenous presence.

The collection ends with an examination of Standing Rock and its antecedents. “Mnisose / The Missouri River: A Comparative Literary Analysis of River Stories from the Lewis and Clark Expedition to the #NoDAPL Movement” by Sarah Hernandez explores the extensive engagement of Native people with a narrative constructed as part of a larger settler colonial effort to contain the Missouri River (Mnisose). Hernandez thus situates the modern #NoDAPL movement alongside its precedents in various Indigenous interventions in the settler colonial narrative from Lewis and Clark onward. She writes, “The long-standing tension surrounding the continent’s longest river is recorded in an eclectic range of literatures—from oral stories to newspaper articles to travelogues, books, poetry, and, more recently, social media—that reflect a seemingly endless and highly adaptable cycle of settler colonialism” that is countered by the voices of Indigenous people speaking powerfully of their alternative relationship to the river.

The return of land (and the water connected to it) to Native communities is essential to combating the corrosive effects of settler colonial logics, but just as important, as these essays emphasize, is attending to the relationships between the environment and the people. Indigenous communities have long-standing practices that contemporary Indigenous writers and intellectuals have embraced in

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their literatures and other forms of cultural expression. It is our belief that the essays in this special issue establish the interconnectedness of Indigenous water rights and the work of Native writers and intellectuals who have made the ecological issues so pressing within Native communities visible to the global community. Through their writing, they provide the communities most in need of models for engaging with the world and its water resources with strategies that move us all beyond racially charged notions of environmental justice and toward a more balanced understanding of the world and its resources.

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Note

1. For example, during the government's recent rollback of protections for Bears Ears National Monument, Patagonia and REI fought back by becoming "allied with Indian tribes, for whom some of the lands are sacred, as well as with conservationists" (Andrews). While the activism of these corporations was not perfect—they garnered a lot of press that they failed to funnel toward Indigenous communities—they did acknowledge Indigenous peoples' right to land on a public platform. By doing so, they discredited the narrative of Indigenous erasure that plagues much of Western thought.

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