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"WATER IS LIFE". INDIGENOUS VIEWS ON WATER AND WOMEN

Deborah Saidero*

Water sustains us, flows between us, within us, and replenishes us. Water is the blood of Mother Earth and, as such, cleanses not only herself, but all living things
(Assembly of First Nations).

The current water crisis is disproportionately affecting many Indigenous communities across Canada, where the lack of access to water has life-threatening effects on Native health and, in particular, on Indigenous women and girls who are more vulnerable to waterborne infections and mental health problems resulting from water deprivation. Moreover, the inability to carry out their domestic tasks makes women more exposed to lateral violence within their households. To counter this violence against women and water, Indigenous women writers are drawing on their traditional knowledge to assert the sacredness of water and of women as water carriers and life-givers. As part of their broader decolonizing politics to oppose settler-colonialism and destructive views of the Earth as a commodity, they are reasserting their peoples' traditional roles as water protectors and emphasizing the vital and transformative role of water as a source of life and renewal. This article analyses Katherena Vermette's collection of poetry *river woman* and K Dawn Martin's performative piece "Kahnekanoron – Water is Life" which offer a counter discourse to both the settler view of water as a source of profit and the migrant view of water as a passageway to an unknown Eden. The aim is to show how Indigenous views of water as a source of interconnection between humans, animals and nature offer an alternative to Western ideologies of exploitation of the Earth and to the colonial mindset that spurs unequal and violent relations among human beings. The woman-water connection elicited in these poems emphasizes the importance of both for our survival, but also sheds light on how both are intertwined as an effect of patriarchal violence. Ultimately, by celebrating water as a living being, these writers posit water as a site of resistance and healing from the wounds of colonization.

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Introduction

Indigenous peoples around the world firmly believe that "Water is Life", a basic

* Università di Udine.

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truth that has been neglected by most of humanity amidst centuries of colonial usurpation of the Earth's water systems. Today, in the face of advancing human control over waterscapes and wetlands through hydroelectric power stations, dams, canals and piped water supplies, this ancient precept is being vigorously reinstated to advocate for a new global care-based water ethic, capable of repositioning our relationship with water and the ecosystems it sustains on a more reciprocal and respectful basis.

Counter to the anthropocentric exploitation of water as a commodity, Indigenous peoples value and respect water as a sacred life-giving and life-sustaining being. Indeed, from a traditional aboriginal knowledge perspective, water is not merely a resource, but «a living force» that «supports the lives of other beings and aspects of Creation»; it is «the blood of Mother Earth» (McGregor 2008: 27-28) which allows nutrients to flow into the land, thereby ensuring the health, survival and transformation of human and non-human ecosystems. Moreover, as «the lifeblood of the people» (LaDuke 88), it is a primary source of intergenerational knowledge and cultural transfer, since it «connects people today with their ancestors» and «contains knowledge that will be passed on» (Chiefs of Ontario 10).

Water is also woman. In many Indigenous cosmologies water is a female being who, like women, gives life, nourishment and nurturing. Being the first environment for life within a woman's body, it plays an important role before, during and after birth. As Mohawk midwife Katsi Cook explains, «The waters of the earth and the waters of our bodies are one. Breastmilk is formed from the blood of the woman. Our milk, our blood and the waters of the earth are one water, all flowing in rhythm to the moon» (139-140, qtd. McGregor 2008: 28). Women are thus traditionally invested with a special role as water protectors and speakers for the water. Josephine Mandamin, an Anishinaabe grandmother who in 2003 initiated the Mother Earth Water Walk[1], claims that it is women's responsibility to take care of the water because of the spiritual connection they share with her: «As women, we are carriers of the water. We carry life for the people. So when we carry that water, we are telling people that we will go any lengths for the water» (qtd. Gursoz np).

While both water and women are key to survival, they continue to be subjected to multiple forms of neo-colonial violence. Paradoxically, in spite of their water stewardship, Indigenous women and girls are, for instance, the most disproportionately affected by the current water crisis in Canada, where their health is threatened by lack of access to water, making them more vulnerable to

1 This walk around the Great Lakes was repeated annually from 2003 to 2017 to raise awareness about the cultural and spiritual significance of water (see https://motherearthwaterwalk.com).

waterborne infections and mental health problems and more exposed to lateral violence within their households due to the inability to carry out their domestic tasks.

To oppose this violence, water activism and Indigenous environmental ethics are being embraced by Indigenous women writers who draw on their traditional knowledge to assert the sacredness of water and of women as water carriers and life-givers. Red River Métis writer Katherena Vermette from Treaty One territory in Winnipeg, Manitoba and debut poet K Dawn Martin, from the Six Nations of the Grand River, Ontario, are, for instance, endorsing their peoples' traditional roles as water protectors and custodians of the land, so as to emphasize the vital and transformative role of water as a source of life and renewal. Vermette's collection *river woman*[2] and Martin's performative piece "Kahnekanoron – Water is Life" are analyzed here to show how their celebration of water offers a counter discourse to both the settler view of water as a source of profit and the migrant envisioning of water as a passageway to an unknown Eden. Indeed, the Indigenous views of water as a source of interconnection between humans, animals and nature offer an alternative to Western ideologies of exploitation and devastation of the Earth and to the colonial mindset that fosters unequal relations among human beings and between humans and the natural world.

river woman

Water and women are aligned as powerful, interrelated and interchangeable beings in Katherena Vermette's second collection of poetry, *river woman* (2018), a highly political and anticolonial text which opposes Indigenous ethics of love and caring to neocolonial attitudes of domination and violence. Divided into three sections ("black river", "red river" and "an other story"), this decolonial narrative reclaims, indeed, the Indigenous love of water, nature and women against the pain, loss, fragmentation and brokenness resulting from cultural, linguistic and environmental annihilation. As the poet confronts the past and present scars suffered by Indigenous / Métis people and their ancestral lands at the hands of the power-over dynamics upheld by the Canadian government, she strives to read water «against the centripetal pull of colonial signification» and «towards a signification of land-based knowledges» (Gaertner 383), where female beings and feminine qualities like love, caring, empathy and caregiving

2 Small caps in the original. Vermette deliberately violates English spelling conventions and maintains this stylistic choice for the titles of the poems as part of her decolonizing strategy. Tellingly, the use of capitals recurs only on words that are significant for an Indigenous cultural revival, i.e., Anishnaabemowin, Métis Sage and Louis Reel.

are cherished and held sacred. Thus, in contrast to the colonial-patriarchal framing of water and women as possessions, she personifies the river as woman and celebrates their generative, regenerative and healing qualities. In the poem "ghosts", for example, water is posited as a means to heal from the wounds of the colonial experience, which has deprived Indigenous peoples of their lands, cultures and languages and devalued the matriarchal role of their women:

> we need to
> wrap each other
> in warm water
> soak our tired bodies
> like wet earth in spring […]
> and we can finally
> wash our wounds (13).

The woman-river identification foregrounded in the title of the collection signals Vermette's intent to both praise water as a sacred spirit and re-inscribe the role of Indigenous women as keepers of traditional knowledge about water. In accord with tribal beliefs in the interdependence between water, the land and its people, there is no separation in these poems between the river's brown waters, strong Indigenous / Métis women and the poet, all broken by trauma but equally resilient in their shared battle against the brutalities of colonial exploitation, which, Vermette acknowledges, «is not history…it is still happening» (82)[3]. In the title poem "river woman", the poetic persona evokes their intertwined relations and histories, distinguished by both an ancestral maternal bond and similar experiences of abuse and loss of the Anishnaabemowin language:

> This river is a woman
> she is bright
> and she is beautiful
> she once carried
> every nation here
> but she is
> one of those women
> too soon forgotten
> broken like a body
> that begs without words (38).

In keeping with the Native belief in water as kin, the river is also honoured as «your lover», «your mother» and «my sister» (39-40) – an identification which

3 See the poem "métissage / Métis Sage", which also emphasizes the interconnectedness between the Métis poet and the river / land, both equally «unprotected» and timeless: «my blood has been here forever / as rooted as the river / and just as much in danger» (83).

not only bonds the river, the reader and the poet in a reciprocal relationship, but also links women's procreative power to the life-bearing and nurturing qualities of the river. As a mother and water carrier, river woman carries nations, transmits knowledge from one generation to the next, and provides nourishment and medicines by sustaining the many animal and plant creatures that live by her shores.

Working against the grammars of colonialization, the feminization of the river thus rejects the victimization of water and women and conversely praises their inborn strength and energy. Despite the neglect and violence that has been inflicted on her («she's been dredged / and dragged», 38) and the man-made attempts to control or limit her[4], river woman is a powerful natural being who has the stamina to survive and be «newly born / every day» (39); she is that woman whose «deft voice / reaches out», whose «spirit / rages on» and whose «song…never fades» (40). She will endlessly flow through prairie land ensuring continual movement and cleansing, while providing a sense of protection. As the speaker in the poem "riverceremony" acknowledges, river woman «holds us close / washes us / like ceremony», thus fostering a feeling of perpetual belonging: «if I am with her / I am home / she can keep me…forever» (52).

By recognizing the river as family member, home and haven, Vermette upholds the Indigenous belief in water as a source of memory, knowledge and nation. In fact, the river whose beauty, endurance, resilience and timelessness is celebrated in these poems is Winnipeg's Red River, an important and non-interchangeable site of cultural identity, spiritual life and memories for the poet and the Métis people. Being the heart of the Métis nation, this sacred water place gathers the spirits of tribal members who pass down ancient spiritual and ecological knowledge about how to relate to Mother Earth to future generations. However, while the Red is cherished as an ancestor for having facilitated the development of the Métis nation following the contact between European settlers and Indigenous peoples, she is also the living memory of the traumas endured by Indigenous communities as a result of the fur trade, the colonization of Manitoba, the state land thefts, the removal of the Métis people and environmental destruction. In more recent times, she also holds the bodies of many missing Indigenous women and men, including, possibly, Vermette's own brother Reuben, to whom the collection is dedicated.

Mingling personal and collective experiences of trauma, Vermette draws on her people's respect for water's creative and destructive powers to inscribe the river as the place where «life and death coalesce», «where pain and resurgence

4 See, for example, the poems "riverlocks" (48) or "ziibiwan (like a river)": «near the lake / the locks comb her / out she roars / over them / insulted / to be so encumbered» (36).

meet» (Ruzek 1). As Greeley reminds us, in Indigenous cultures water is both a life-giver and «a quixotic agent of hardship and death» which assures cycles of «purging and cleansing and thus renewal» (159)[5]. Rather than depicting the river as a threatening life-ending force, the poet thus praises her, instead, as an agent of never-ending transformation and change, who guarantees cyclical rebirth and foreverness through her perpetual eroding activity, her seasonal freezing and thawing, and the limitless natural power of her flow which can easily wipe out man-made structures. In "this river", for example, there is the awareness that river woman is «a trickster» who «laps off into her next form» (54) and will, thus, never succumb: «she was here before you / and she will be here / long after we've all / gone» (56).

Like this river who «of course / is red» (56), Indigenous people – the poet suggests – also rely on this transformative power in order to resist colonial narratives, heal from the burden of pain and restore a lost sense of wholeness. To enact her decolonial transformation of inherited histories of oppression into a narrative of Indigenous resurgence, Vermette skillfully counterpoises antithetical images of the river which deconstruct colonial discourse by readmitting different perspectives. In "ziibiwan (like a river)", for instance, river woman is «source» and «saviour» as opposed to being «border» and «road» (33); she is «the healing / not the hurt…the knowing / not unknown» (34). Likewise, in "this river", she is «ignored», «inconvenient», «irrational», «a bitch in a mood», «a dump», but also «smart», «sweet», «gentle», «beauty full», «a masterpiece», and, above all, in keeping with Indigenous views, she is pure «love» and «power» (53-55)[6]. In other instances, the poet signals her endeavour to introduce the aboriginal perspective into the history of settler colonialism in Canada more assertively, as when she redefines the 1869 rebellion led by Métis leader Loius Riel an act of «resistance» (76), or when, in the poem "new year's eve 2013", she debunks the metanarrative of Terra – and Aqua – Nullius, asserting that settlers would not have survived without help «from neighbouring indians» who gave them «free land / a good start / strong equipment» (64).

As part of her politics of colonial contestation, Vermette equally refutes the multicultural policies underlying the construction of Canadian nationality, since

5 In Indigenous recreation stories flooding is, for instance, sent by the Creator to restore balance.

6 The poems in the "red river" section were written during the filming of the documentary *this river* (2016) which Vermette directed with Erika MacPherson when she joined the community volunteer organization Drag the Red in its body-searching activities. As Vermette states, the poems were a cathartic «outlet» to the «horrendously difficult process […] of being in that space…I wanted to show the beauty of the river to counterbalance between these horrible sad things and the peaceful beauty things» (Robb np).

they fail to accommodate the presence and cultural richness of the Indigenous peoples. The speaker of "new year's eve 2013" proudly reminds the country's immigrants that Indigenous peoples «are not part of your mosaic» but rather «the mortar that glues you together [...] the foundation on which you adhere […] the earth you are hurting» who «never belonged to you» (66), thereby defying the attempted erasure of Canada's Native inhabitants and colonial views of land and water ownership. At the same time, the speaker praises the Métis for having successfully blended Indigenous and European traditions while remaining attuned to the natural world.

The articulation of an Indigenous poetics of water in *river woman* ultimately aims at going beyond settler narratives and reclaiming «an other story» that «is written / in water / carved on earth» (61). Water, like the land, is «a living history» (68) that preserves alternate truths, teachings, songs and stories about how to establish healthy, caring relations with all the elements of creation. It is these «stories of the river / about when she was young / and her brown water was / clean / loved» (47) – we are told in "riverstory" – that need to be heard, in order to reclaim a sense of cultural, ecological and spiritual belonging and a loving relationship with water and Indigenous women.

Kahnekanoron

An analogous ecological ethos centered on reciprocal caring relations between water and women is also endorsed in K Dawn Martin's debut poem "Kahnekanoron – Water is Life", which was awarded first prize by Historica Canada at the Indigenous Arts & Stories contest in 2017[7]. Like *river woman*, this performative piece celebrates the woman-water connection to oppose colonial and environmental damage. As the author states, the poem springs from the responsibility she feels toward water as an Indigenous woman and water carrier; her intent is to honour our Mother the Earth, water and Indigenous women warriors, who are involved in various water protecting initiatives like the North Dakota Pipeline protests.

Consisting of three parts, the poem conveys the poet's and the Haudenosaunee peoples' deep love for and connection with water in all its multiple forms (i.e., rain, snow, hail, ice, bodies of water like rivers, lakes, seas, oceans etc. and the waters of our bodies). Indeed, the refrain used to introduce each part is a song from the Akwasasne (Mohawk) Women's singers that recites: «I

7 The poem is published online at http://www.our-story.ca/winners/writing/5989:kahnekanoron-water-is-life. All quotes, including those from the author's statement, are from this version.

love water / All types of water / Water is precious» (np). In the first part, "water and creation", Martin pays homage to the significant role that water plays in Indigenous creation narratives and, in particular, in the Haudenosaunee story about Sky Woman, the pregnant sky goddess who falls out of the sky through a hole left by an eradicated Tree of Life. As she floats down toward the water, Loon and Goose save her from drowning and place her on Turtle's back. Other water creatures like Muskrat bring her mud from the depths of the water so she can create land and live on Turtle with her new-born daughter. In this mythical narrative, water is thus the primordial element from which land and life emerge; it becomes the basic ingredient which is mixed with dirt «to form our clay bodies» and the blood of the earth:

> streams push through
> layers of dirt
> as veins embrace waters and soil
> growing the life blood of Our Mother
> the Earth (np).

In attunement with the idea that origin stories «are the means by which cultural communities ground their identity in particular narratives and particular landscapes» (McGregor 2012: 2), Martin acknowledges water as a relation. Not only does water connect her people to «this land», but it also connects «all in Creation» (np). Despite its leading role in the act of creation, water is not, however, a domineering force, but exists in a harmonious interaction with all other elements, thereby contributing to establish balance in the cosmos.

While articulating key spiritual teachings about holism and interdependency, the myth, as Greeley points out, also «recognizes the value of woman as co-creator of life on earth and deviser of tools and strategies for survival» (170). Indeed, in the poem, Martin reminds us of how Sky Woman «dances and sings / our first gardens into existence» (np): by planting the seeds she had brought from the sky in the mud, she creates the many plant beings that will enable human inhabitation of the earth. As the first mother, Sky Woman is also the grandmother of all mothers, who keep «dreaming, visioning, and creating / new life» (np). In the creation story, in fact, upon her death, Sky Woman's head is flung into the night sky where she lives to this day as Grandmother Moon and controls both the rise and fall of waters and the monthly cycles of female life which ensure that new life will be born.

Women's special place in the order of existence is celebrated in the second part of the poem, "water and women", which emphasizes how mothers not only sustain and nourish life, but also «sing and whisper teachings to children / in wombs» about the «relations with life and land» (np). Martin extols, in particu-

lar, the connection between mothers' bodies and water, which is both the sacred liquid that sustains unborn children in wombs and the nourishing substance that flows from breasts. As the speaker explains, water also aids entrance into the world during birth:

> on day of my birth
> waters broke through my
> mother's dam
> making tidal waves and water falls
> that sent streams down legs
> soaking the ground
> letting all my relations know
> i was falling and floating to this earth too (np).

Finally, part three, "water, treaty-making and where we are today", conveys Martin's political and decolonial message. Like Vermette, she denounces how not honoured settler treaties «turned creation / into resources» (np), leading to abuse of the land and Indigenous bodies. Their profit-oriented mentality

> severed roots from fertile grounds
> cutting trees down
> covered land with concrete
> dug soils and pathways that
> ripped through naked bodies
> fracking oil and fractured lives (np),

and thereby wrote a history which is opposed to and disrespectful of Indigenous stories that «speak revolutions / of birth and rebirth / creating and recreating» (np). Yet, since the onset of colonialism, her people have resiliently resisted and continue to «defend the sacred» (np). In its closing verses, Martin's poem thus ushers us all to embrace an ethics of caring against environmental destruction and join the battle in defense of Mother Earth because you cannot «desert you mother / when she is at harm and hurting» (np).

Conclusion: Love the Water

Underlying Martin and Vermette's poetry is both the recognition of water as a living force and sentient feminine being, as well as the awareness that, like Indigenous women, water has experienced historical traumas owing to increased commercialization, commodification and privatization. To overcome such pain and loss, it is necessary – the two poets suggest – to reclaim the Indigenous love for, and connection with, Mother Earth and the waters that sustain her/us. Indeed, as Salish writer Lee Maracle claims, despite the difficulty of embracing

it in times of ongoing colonial and dehumanizing tactics, «[l]ove itself has the power to heal» (7) and to root out all violence, thereby allowing us to shift from hatred to deep caring. After all, love is an important teaching that has guided Indigenous peoples in their ethical responsibilities toward achieving total well-being by establishing reciprocal and respectful relations with others and the natural world. In the creation story of Sky Woman, for instance, Muskrat and the other water creatures are «motivated by love for Creation and compassion for Sky Woman» (McGregor 2015: 75) when they decide to sacrifice their lives in order to collect a morsel of soil and bring it to the surface so she can survive. It is this love – Anishinaabe scholar Deborah McGregor states – that «continues to guide our vision, our future» (2015: 75) and the decisions we make for the future generations:

> we can work toward healing through loving responsibility; through caring for ourselves, our communities and the Earth (waters, forests, animals, etc.). It is not enough to heal ourselves; we are obligated to heal with the Earth to fully recover from historical trauma and reclaim well-being (73).

The profound love for water that Vermette and Martin sing in their poetry works accordingly. It functions to posit water as a site of resistance against ecological and colonial traumas and to embrace love as an anticolonial force that frees both people/women and water from the wounds of traumatic experiences, thereby fostering true environmental and water justice. When properly loved and cared for, water is not only able to heal herself from trauma and fulfil her duties toward the ecosystems that depend on her, but she can also «love us and assist us in recovering from our own traumas» (McGregor 2015: 76). As the speaker in Vermette's poem "riverlove" acknowledges, water is endowed with that primordial capacity to love which fills her when she gives herself to the river in a symbiotic relationship:

> now that I know her
> I sit here high on the grass
> and feel her with me
> she laps slower
> but ripples in my chest
> like love
> it is love
> that's what love is (46).

Necessary in this process of restoring mutual co-healing relationships is, thus, learning to know the water and listening to her sacred voice, because the stories and songs she sings with her «humble […] wandering water sound» are replete with ancestral knowledge and wisdom which can «wake earth / with

truth» ("riversong": 51)[8]—a truth that dispels the patriarchal subjugation of the feminine and reinstates the sacredness of water and women, without whom no man or child would be alive. Loving the water and women, Vermette and Martin teach us, is our only hope for reconciliation with Mother Earth and, ultimately, for our survival.

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