

Writing the Memory of Rivers:  
Story, Ecology and Politics in some Contemporary River Writing

by

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## Abstract

Despite watershed damage, pollution and the construction of various kinds of barrier, rivers continue to carry figurative freight in the late twentieth century. This dissertation reads a number of contemporary texts (personal essays, fiction and poetry) that focus on rivers and insist upon contextual, literary and ethical processes of river reflection.

The Introduction sites such writing in cycles of recirculation involving author, watershed and community. Chapter One takes up these issues, looking at essays by Lance Kineth, Scott Russell Sanders, Joan Didion, Edward Abbey (*Down The River*, 1982) and Kathleen Dean Moore (*Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water*, 1995), examining questions of memory, ecological change and the limits of language and observation, in order to demonstrate some links between subject and meandering form. Chapter Two records how, by troping the river as a site of revision and healing, Barry Lopez, David James Duncan and Richard Flanagan localise versions of philosopher Hans Jonas's "imperative of responsibility." In part, Duncan's *The River Why* (1982) and Flanagan's *Death of a River Guide* (1993) braid personal or regional neo-colonial memory to call Lopez's *River Notes* (1979) to account.

Chapters Three and Four then read the psychic, political and ecological reach of the 'fallen river' through Ivan Illich's commentary on water. Analysis of further fiction by Duncan and Flanagan provides a context for a consideration of Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) and a discussion of literary representations of the effect of large dams on indigenous communities and the natural environment. By extension, Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* (1979) and London psychogeographer Iain Sinclair's *Downriver* (1991) track two distinct *urban* riverscapes (by the Tennessee and Thames), figuring them, in Sinclair's words, as "ribbons of memory" in an age of amnesiac capital accumulation.

Chapter Five marks ways in which globalisation, loss, memory, form and line transpire through poetry by Tim Bowling and Daphne Marlatt (*Steveston*, 1974/1984) at the Fraser River; it then re-reads Richard Hugo as a riverscape poet. Finally, a discussion of long poems by Jim Harrison, Don McKay, Gary Snyder and Liz Zetlin leads to a conclusion that emphasises exchange and possibility.

The practice of reading written texts inherently invokes a challenge to 'read a river' more attentively. At the cultural (and thus ecological) watershed, memory constitutes a process of contemporary river reflection, which is distinguished by its sense of provisionality, loss and fragile continuity.

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To my extended family: my love and thanks flow gleefully; you know this, all of you. As the family has expanded over recent years, I think too of those who have gone on. The droplets coalesce.

So I come to endings and to beginnings. As I complete this thesis I do so with two kinds of knowing, through memory and imagination. Memory, brings an awareness of the great love my wife Michelle has shared with me; she has supported me in every way and teaches me the meaning of abundance and grace. I dedicate this thesis to her, but I also dedicate it to our first child who will be born in this place of great rivers: your eyes and name are still unknown to me and my imagining will soon be replaced by your arrival. May the known experience of love carry you ahead into your own silver reaches. When you have grown, we might return to the banks of the Fraser River, our eyes casting about for signs of salmon. In the meantime, other journeys unfold, other memories spring forth.

# Introduction

## Watersheds of Memory

Rivers compel attention and invite stories. For aeons they have focused human cultures, drawing creatures to them as a source of life and anchoring biotic communities to their banks.

Contemporary rivers continue to attract attention and speak to a range of overlapping concerns about 'nature,' self, language, consumerism and modernity. Indeed, with a growing global (human) population, cross-border water conflict, ecosystem collapse and pollution, I argue that rivers are more important than ever as a 'resource' and as a symbol or microcosm of the interdependencies that form and sustain life. This thesis reads recent literature that focuses on the contemporary river. It argues for the continued impact of the cultural meanings rivers carry in the western world. As Wyman Herendeen observes "the continuity of the river motif is one of the major sources of our modern response to landscape and of the myths and cultural expectations that we bring to it" (*Myth* 25). Rivers continue to act as currents of story and memory; they carry a figurative freight that enriches culture like silt.

I trace a range of 'river-writing' from various genres (namely selected personal essays, fiction and poetry) and various countries from the last thirty years. I select river writing because my real interest is the process of "river reflection" (Huser). The project attends to work that is conscious of its own sense of perception, writing that examines ways of looking at and connecting with place, even as the key emblem of that place—the river— continues to attract, disport and dispel figurative torrents.

The writers I read are involved in a process of 'river reflection' that begins introspectively in memory and flows to encompass the politics of the contemporary river. The texts honour and demonstrate a relation (a "recirculation" [Joyce 1]) between the writer and the river: the motile elements of human perception encounter a fluid river and a process of response and reflection begins. The reader extends that movement between place and self by responding to the text and to personal memory.

We humans are as dependent on our ways of knowing the world as we are on water for survival. Much of the work I read here observes that these ways of knowing are ecologically damaging. The threat of species extinction, the anger against the idea or reality of a dam or destructive human encroachment and the displacement of resident communities of people, fish, forests or birds are some of the issues gathered at the water's (and the line's) edge. Humans are

part of a wider ecology. That ecology is fragile. “Ten fish species disappeared in North America during the last decade alone,” while forty-one percent of all recognised fish species live in “the one percent of the earth’s surface that is freshwater” (Abramovitz 60-61). Roughly one quarter of one percent (“one teaspoon of a 5-litre container”) of the world’s water is available for human use, and that is increasingly polluted, inaccessible and unequally shared (de Villiers 31).<sup>1</sup> In a sense these river writers respond to Donald Worster’s call to “think like a river” (*Rivers of Empire* 331; *The Wealth of Nature* 123-34). As one (river-responsive) reader’s response, my dissertation tracks this diverse revisionary process, as it is embodied in some recent writing.

The works foreground a river (or rivers). I attend to the rhetorical means by which the authors construct and use that current through story and narrative. At, on, or in the river the writers are drawn to the waters and their histories. Textually, culturally and visually, rivers are elusive and inspiring. Water’s fluvial qualities demand and elude written description. For Wendell Berry the river “fascinates.... its mysteries must always be tampered with” (“The Rise,” *Recollected Essays* 10). The river runs on, leaving the writer to work within (and challenge) the limits of form, text and narrative. The river means different things to each person, culture and place. There is no one river, no single response. But by grouping a series of responses together, I begin to gather concerns and visions to carry to a river.

The authors use different genres to accommodate the range of concerns borne by river reflection. Those concerns stress the limits of written English language on the page, an ambivalent engagement with the fixity of print before the flow of the river. I analyse the process of river-reflection and the metaphors it yields.

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<sup>1</sup> There is no let up in demand: “The day may come, a few generations hence, when all of the water of all the rivers will be withdrawn at least once during their course to the sea” (Hunt and Garrels 88).



## Some hydrology and its metaphors of memory

Water exists ... in a closed system called the hydrosphere, and contemplating the hydrosphere and the hydrologic cycle is almost enough to make a sceptic believe in the omni-existent Gaia. The system is so intricate, so complex, so interdependent, so all-pervading, and so astonishingly stable that it seems purpose-built for regulating life. (29)

Marq de Villiers, *Water*.

[T]he perspective of the walker is as radically different from that of the boatman as it is from that of the stander on the bank. Walking, you have not merely entered the water; you have entered the course of the stream. You are experiencing not the stream alone nor the land alone, but the contending of the two by which each has been shaped. You are encountering by touch as well as by sight the water of the river and the obstacles it makes its way through or over or under or around. You have put your body into it like a gauge to measure the variations of its depth and the changes of its flow.... Our journey has become one of its processes. (252,257)

Wendell Berry, "The Unforeseen Wilderness."

Luna B. Leopold describes the ways water vapour from leaves, earth, lakes, reservoirs and ocean is pulled skyward by the sun and gravity. Condensing, the water vapours become rain,

which feeds the rivers and lakes. Rivers carry water to the ocean. Evaporation from land and ocean puts water back in the atmosphere, and this exchange goes on continually: Water goes from earth to atmosphere to earth.... This universal truth was forgotten in the Dark Ages. The ancients may have had some appreciation of it, for according to the Bible, 'All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is never full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, they return to flow again [*Ecclesiastes* 1:7]' (4, 6).

Flow, cycles and metaphysics have long combined in European theology as Yi-Fu Tuan observes. Today, that cyclic pattern functions in metaphoric ways through the literature I read ahead. Its recirculating processes are subsumed into other religious understandings, into a renewed understanding of time, or employed at formal and figurative levels to stress a kind of continuity represented by the river. With its transpiration towards the heavens (up to "15 kilometres above the ground") and its terrestrial movement towards the ocean (to a depth of five kilometres below the sea level [de Villiers 29]), the water of the river becomes an emblem of change and activity. Its fluvial surface suggests mobility and openness, for the river basin will gather all run-off; rivers are cumulative phenomena. To speak metaphorically, the hydrologic cycle is a living example of the way ideas, language, images and figuration transpire through culture. Leopold observes that streams:

have as tributaries small creeks and finally join a river of equal or larger size. Large rivers are formed by the joining of ones of intermediate size.

The pattern of this joining is much like the branching of trees. Surprisingly, however, this successive merging is highly organized and is one of the many aspects of dynamic equilibrium within the river system (63).

This dynamic organisation is expressed by the ways bodies of water interact in the same “drainage network” (63). Leopold traces engineer Robert Horton’s work on this topic. A small stream will branch into a creek that in turn branches into a tributary; these flow into a larger river. Each component handles as much as it can, then alters and co-ordinates to run-off into a larger portion of its network.<sup>2</sup> The “segments” of a watershed’s water range from a tiny stream to a large river. Each segment has prior components that it depends upon: “It means that when a sketch of a stream net is drawn, 4 or 5 tributaries should be drawn to any segment [creek, stream or river] of a given order.” The river needs the creek, the creek the stream, the stream the run-off and rain. All “open systems” maintain a “quasi-equilibrium... they tend towards a certain efficiency.” The “consistency of such geometric relations as [the] number, length and order” of the different creeks, stream, tributaries and rivers in the same watershed is testament to equilibrium and functionality: “river networks are fractal” (Bak 81). A branch is unlikely to function without sustaining either itself or the river it feeds:

The ratio of the number and lengths of branches of various orders is approximately comparable in trees and in river systems. This pattern tends to minimize total length and closely approximate the most probable network that would result from entirely random joining. Thus branching patterns of trees, rivers, blood vessels in animal tissue, and other natural networks are not only similar, but are designed for efficiency and stability. (Leopold 67)

As ecologists point out, everything is interconnected. Rivers have their own series of intricate relations with atmosphere, ground conditions and forest cover. A river does not stand alone; it is an expression of dependencies and relations between elements.

The tributaries of a river added together do not constitute the whole of a river basin drainage network, just as the arteries and veins in the fingers and thumb do not constitute the entire system of blood vessels in the hand. There is a land area that drains directly into the main river and that is not included in the drainage of any of the individual tributaries. (Leopold 156)

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term ‘watershed’ in the American sense of a drainage area or basin, “an area from which water drains to a single point; in a natural basin, the area contributing flow to a given place or a given point on a stream” (Leopold 166). The British usage of the term refers to a topographic line (ridge or shelf) where the water flows into a different drainage basin.

My use of the term “riparian” refers to the river bank; I use “riverine” to denote a more direct immersion in current, a current which is fluvial, motile and meandering at any given time.

Similar principles apply to the reach of the dissertation chapters, which have numerous pauses and breaks along their extent, allowing the reader to alight at various points. The chapters are divided into subsections that attend to various works; these in turn are subdivided into sections. Where a ‘bullet’ or point is used, I create attention to the space on the page and the shift in focus (a gap in the net) that declares a more pointed transition.

The river is part of the basin that it in turn continues to shape. Recirculation across self, river and watershed marks much of the work I read in this thesis. This process continues to drench the contemporary imagination. An ethic of care and equilibrium between river and human is needed in the late twentieth century if the twenty-first is to feature living rivers. The writers in this thesis seek this elusive equilibrium. There are no certainties it is recoverable, no uncontested perspective for them (or me) to adopt.

Per Bak, in his scientific theoretical work, likens the accretive existence of a river to the process of remembrance. Rivers have memory; the process of remembrance replicates the formation of a river: “The memory is encoded as a network of riverbeds waiting to be filled up under the relevant external stimulus” (182). Rivers respond to a past that forms them. The writers I read here do the same. The process of river reflection confronts the past that shapes the fluid present. These writers formally engage with river and story. Memory and rivers guide them into the future.

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My thesis argues that the process of river-reflection (as demonstrated in the books I read here) begins in personal memory and moves to a textually-declarative politics, without ever breaking the connection with the creative human world of (saturated) introspection. The personal voice has validity. The movement between the personal net of recollection and the public act of declaration and protest against ecological and cultural losses implies a belief in the power of story and resistance to certain forms of human ‘progress.’ Personal memory extends outwards through text to the wider watershed and the human communities that dwell there. The act of sharing (exchanging) that inner world transgresses any supposed public—private divide while maintaining the intimacy of authorial disclosure and reader reception. Memory becomes a touchstone in the changing present.

This movement from memory to politics, which I liken to the ripples a stone makes in a still pool, is articulated in the process of writing and reader-reception. Rivers mediate the process of reflection and expression. They enable utterance and mirror the ways and means of textual remembrance and becoming. “All rivers become memory” (Fields 166). The current draws river-watchers into their past and then moves the writers to reflect on every tributary the river supports, including the human tributary. Location bespeaks locatedness; (t)here, memories gather and pool as stories begin.

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The works in this thesis affirm connections across story, memory, river and politics. Taking on the fish’s voice, Lee Maracle discusses the “agreements” made by the creatures of the watershed and the river itself, an ecology formed through story, alliance and communication: “We uphold

those agreements. We seek freedom within the limits established by those agreements” (162). This notion of responsibility and communication across elements, species and cultures is one Barry Lopez has borrowed: “Time has nothing to do with this. This is not a story. When you feel the river shuddering against your legs, you are feeling the presence of all these agreements” (*River Notes* 121). The river’s healthy function depends on a huge range of ecological interactions and in turn supports such connections. Maracle and Lopez suggest that our awareness of these connections will determine our response to the river: ecology and story are bound together in the river-work I consider. This emphasis on ‘authentic’ holism (the number of river-focused books is blossoming) may be one of the clearest white responses to the resurgence of indigenous activism and writing in the late twentieth-century. Many of the essayists, for example, seek a connection with place they know colonialism has dismantled for many indigenous peoples. So guilt and longing cohabit in the white writers’ work, and Lopez, like Maracle (for example) encourages the use of the river as a mediating and changing site for healing across species and culture; the river is the medium all share. True, the past is not always attractive; scars abound in the watershed, for “[t]he violence done to the people is also done to the land” (Young 185). But the propensity to learn and atone accretes: there are some things to celebrate. I observe the attitude to past and present memory through the medium of text and the element of water. The texts combine both of these physical and psychic qualities through the work of reckoning and revision.

Time and again the writers call for an updated version of what (in 1979) the philosopher Hans Jonas termed “an imperative of responsibility,” a way of acting and being in the present that takes the needs of future communities into account. I read through this networked consciousness of time and place, and most of the work is (like Jonas’s call) from the late twentieth century. The authors shape an ecology of river, story and memory, a riverine ethics of care. Barry Lopez observes “[w]hen you pick up something in the woods, it is not only connected to everything else by virtue of its being a set piece in an ecosystem, but it’s connected to everything else by virtue of the fact you have an imagination” (Trimble 13). Because such relations depend on the past as much as the present, the contemporary river-writer uses memory as a resource. Such usage is evident in the process of explication that substantiates the personal essay, fictional character development, and resonant imagery within the long poem.

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My own response to this reflexive, process-based work of river-reflection began on a river in the summer of 1990. In late 1989 I was invited to paddle New Zealand's Whanganui River on the annual Tira Hoe Waka (or journey by canoe). For two weeks a group of Maori people of the Whanganui River paddle from the head to the mouth of this longest navigable river in the country. Those Atihaunui A Paparangi sub-tribes have lived with the River for many centuries, shaping sophisticated fishing technologies and a series of rich oral traditions woven into each place on the River. As I paddled the rapids and reaches named after ancestors of my canoe-mates, I encountered another conceptual world, one that sees all time as a continuum that can be travelled in several directions at once. The people drew me into their river-loving world. Their love prompted a process of revision. Dawn and dusk were full of invocation and chanted prayer. Places we stopped at were illuminated by song and by accounts of past deeds, the battles between mountains or the work of river-guardians or *taniwha*, creatures with great green eyes that are iridescent in the night.

These stories collide with the politics and ecology of the contemporary river. Two immigrant concepts of 'river' (colonial and Maori), run alongside each other, "contrapuntally," in Said's sense of the word (66). The Maori river of myth and memory is wounded by a dam, which diverts most of the Whanganui's headwaters. Maori of the River have conducted New Zealand's oldest water rights case. (There is a bitter irony in the River's name translating as, amongst other things, "the River of long-waiting.") Successive governments failed to recognise tribal ownership or priority over the water and bed of the River. While we travelled the River, courts in the capital city were in the midst of hearings over Maori rights to the headwaters. (My father Martin represented the tribal groups in the courts, and I helped to collate evidence in 1989.) The court evidence was grounded in Maori cosmology, in oral narrative and tradition, and in continued fishing practices. All these elements flowed together, but it is the geographically and culturally specific use of Atihaunui tribal memory that sustains and forms the source of the present Maori relation with the River. The Waitangi Tribunal, the nation's land and Treaty settlement office, released a major research report in June 1999: it affirms tribal ownership of the River.

The annual canoe trip is a physical assertion of Maori bonds with the River, the Awa, during a period of intense legal negotiation and argument over the future of the Whanganui and thus of a spiritual base for Atihaunui. I lived through (and was transformed by) a journey where story, memory, politics, spirituality and ecology coalesced. David Young, writing of the Whanganui River and the longstanding Maori harvest of *tuna* (eels), makes a vital observation: "Story is part of the sinew that binds people back to the landscape. In this case the river is narrative, the flow is *tuna*; the harvest is understanding" (180). Rivers have their own unique catches. Here on the Fraser River that catch is salmon and the politics of fishing have rarely been more intense. Resources are contested by story, world view and market forces: rivers are under critical strain (as Abramovitz, Goldsmith and Hildyard, de Villiers, Outwater, Palmer, Postel, White, Worster and others attest).

The Tira Hoe Waka is a profound example of private memory as public activism. Such assertions are apparent in most twentieth-century 'post-'colonial nations. In a sense the nascent interest in river-rights/writes mirrors or responds (sometimes subconsciously) to the call for indigenous self-determination, historical revision and power-sharing voiced by tribal peoples in global forums over the twentieth century. Implicit in my selection (most of the texts are from the late 1960s on; the majority are from the 1990s), is a fascination with the cultural polyvocalities of recent decades as tribal groups, women, and those who speak for rivers rise in an acclamation of life and rights. In many ways the texts I consider are a response to, or part of, that confluence of voices.

So the groundwork for my focus on place and memory is powerful and insistent to this day. My Tira Hoe Waka experience has taught me that the ways one knows or understands a river are culturally constructed. Hence any findings in this dissertation are provisional within its own limited scope and cultural background. My assertions are open, for a river never truly ends at the sea. There may never be a last word on rivers, because they continue to change. Hard and fixed conclusions are unlikely: I do not like dams. After a second Whanganui River trip made with Atihaunui, one person told me to find out where *I* came from. This thesis is part of that process of discovery, part of a personal cultural genealogy. It has also been one way of staying with the River. I want to find out how some other white products of colonialism like myself see the rivers they live with. What concerns are being aired in the writing? Do they twin with my experience of rivers in the late twentieth century? And do they suggest any alternatives for the settlers who may or may not be haunted by other ways of seeing a natural world that is dwindling before their (and our) eyes? I engage with textual memory and the forms, meanings and consequences of different relations with rivers, particularly the drive towards a productivity that limits the natural basis for storied or biological diversity in the future (Livingston 53).

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As a result of my experiences, this thesis is a wary investigation into other textual worlds. After one Maori, rivered world, I want to avoid making absolute pronouncements about indigenous or significantly 'other' cultures than my own, though I suppose pronouncements will be made, because my experience points to the power of cross-cultural communication. But this is not a work of anthropology that looks at another culture, nor is it a work of cultural geography, ecology, hydrology or biology. It does not trace the full extent of river-focused work from even one locale or discipline. Rather, the thesis attends (amongst other things) to some of the metaphors parts of Western culture bring to the river today, in an effort to make sense of my own concerns and memories. I realise I am embedded in the same limitations of language Lance Kinseth confronts in *River Eternal* and that I am ignorant in other (to me) ways of river-knowing as practised by the Peigan Nation of Alberta, or the European angling arcana examined in the novel

*The River Why*. Interpretation or readerly engagement brings me up against the limits of my own knowledge and heightens my curiosity. After seeing the depth of the Maori understanding of the Whanganui River, I am wary of ever saying I know enough to make a pronouncement, pick up a pen, or know a river. But reading and looking about me at the web of loss and potential that marks the present, I believe something must be said. What follows are my provisional, fallible and individual opinions, likely to undergo seasonal change in the flow of time. Monographs on river writing have been confined to specific authors, earlier times or eschew some very recent work. After a trip on a dammed river, I wanted to confront the metaphors shoring up behind reservoirs, and document how some writers respond to the environmental crises of the present, so I might be better prepared to respond myself. I trace memory as a force of resistance. The role of culturally-specific memories on the river marks and defines my own attitudes and concerns.

This thesis is not a history of river activism, ecology, travel writing, hydro-electricity or environmental ethics.<sup>3</sup> Nor does it purport to analyse every important river book of the last thirty

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<sup>3</sup> Those works have been written, and as interested as I am in these areas (an interest largely sparked by the reading done for this thesis), the scope of this particular project does not permit extensive engagement in these fields. In the field of environmental history, one could consult, for example, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (by Roderick Nash, a keen river runner [Huser, "Flowing" 47]), Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the American West* and *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination*; Anna Bramwell's controversial history of ecology or work on the ways patriarchy inscribes itself onto the view of the natural world: "Insofar as landscapes reflect power relationships, it is clear that patriarchal hegemonies have created spaces and places which deny or devalue women. For many women and increasingly, it appears, the environment, such dominance has been damaging. But expressions of power do not go unchallenged. Women have found ways to manipulate restrictive landscapes for their own purposes and we have examples of how they have acted to create conditions more amenable to their interests and values. Because women and men draw meaning from landscapes, and use them in expressing their sense of personal identity, landscapes can also empower people to creativity and action, to develop cultural alternatives that *might* contribute to the making of a sustainable and more socially equitable environment" (Monk 136, my italics). Monk's qualifier in this last sentence haunts the essays I read here: nothing is certain, least of all the capacity to effect change. But the attempt is given further meaning and form through the essay.

Regarding river health, I have been both informed and worried by Sandra Postel's *Last Oasis*, Tim Palmer's *Lifelines: The Case For River Conservation*, Patrick McCully's *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams*, Hildyard and Goldsmith's *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams*, Richard White's *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*, Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* and Blaine Harden's *A River No More* (on the Columbia River). I have consulted *Water, a Primer* as a basic work on hydrology (it is written by Luna Leopold and I think it is no small thing Aldo's son chose to work in this field) and Yi-Fu Tuan on the hydrologic cycle. For more on water generally see Ivan Illich *H<sub>2</sub>O and The Waters of Forgetfulness*, who, along with Herendeen, informs Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory*. Schama, David Hill (on J.M.W. Turner) and Barbara Ziegler (*Riverlink*, a project based on the Fraser River with senior University of British Columbia Fine Arts students) and Raymonde April's exhibit *Les Fleuves invisibles/Invisible Rivers* (Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, Vancouver U.B.C. Nov. 1998-Jan 1999) and Phyllis Greenwood (*Fraser River Suites*, Douglas College, B.C., September 1999) have written or worked on interfaces between art and rivers.

Sandra Postel (*Last Oasis*), Marq de Villiers (*Water*) and Alice Outwater (*Water: A Natural History*) have written recent and very readable accounts of the politics and history of water. For a striking history of water and heroics, see Charles Sprawson's *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero*. The readability and range of the work is testament to an abiding fascination with water, particularly as it becomes more scarce, contaminated and contested.

For British Columbia, work such as *First Fish, First People* (eds. Roche and McHutchison) and that by Mark Hume, Terry Glavin, Hamar Foster, Cole Harris, Diane Newell, Don Gayton, W. H. New, Laurie Ricou and others have given me a strong sense of the parallels and divergences between British Columbia and my place of birth, New Zealand.

My reading of river-work is also implicitly informed by exposure to writing in cultural and feminist geography, (eg. Rose, Pile and Thrift, Carter, Duncan, Cosgrove and Stock); in environmental ethics (Snyder, Livingston, Evernden, Schama, Palmer, Singer, Worster), as well as the works discussed in the note below. Though I do not

years or three centuries.<sup>4</sup> Each river or river book I discuss offers a series of discoveries which in turn reminds me of the rivers I have never written or read about, let alone seen. As you read this

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always refer to these works, I list them here as an indication of the kinds of baggage and limitation I carry as I follow the books ahead.

This thesis is limited to some textual representations of rivers (and only some (fairly small) rivers at that: the Nile, Ganges, Rhine and Amazon deserve and have received their own treatments elsewhere). Entire books could be written about river representation in film (*Death on the Nile*; *The African Queen*; *Fitzcarraldo*; *Aguirre: Wrath of God*; *A River Runs Through It*; *Deliverance*; *The River Wild*; *Apocalypse Now*; *Chinatown*; *Dead Man*, etcetera, etcetera.) Greg Keeler has argued that the river journey film transposes elements of quest and revelation and that they have performed a "progression from less structures, less self-conscious romance to highly structured, more self-conscious use of motif, literary and cinematic allusion, and ritual" (52).

<sup>4</sup> Some of the most contemporary critical literary work on rivers has emerged from the U.S.A. Mark Browning has published *Haunted By Waters: Fly Fishing in North American Literature* (1998), which Roderick Haig-Brown aficionados should consult, a monograph on Haig-Brown being overdue. Glenn Longfellow's 1993 M.A. "Henry David Thoreau, John Graves, Anne Zwinger, Barry Lopez, Edward Abbey and the American River Narrative," makes important links between some recent river writing and the tradition of elegy. John E. Maxwell's 1995 Doctoral dissertation "Alewives, Indians, Sternwheelers and a Drop of Water: An Ecological Map of American Riverbooks" (UC Irvine) is an impressive contribution to the eco-literary understanding of the U.S.A., water-rights and environmental history. Reading work by Henry Thoreau, John Wesley Powell, Mark Twain and Mary Austin, he accounts "for the ways in which rivers are used, manipulated, controlled, owned and damaged as they are integrated into humanity's drive to consume materials and acquire energy" (2). Significantly, Maxwell sees his work of scholarship as an act of "resistance" against incessant consumption of rivers and resources (2). His graceful interweaving of history, ecology and story is exemplary. My own work ranges across more rivers, and is more intent on process than a regional locale, though equally concerned with how the writers I consider resist incessant consumption. The recent volume edited by Raguet and Bouvert (*Sounding the Depths: Water in North American Literature*) has an American theme and wide (though barely Canadian) range. Verne Huser, key river runner and author, has edited the anthology *River Reflections* (Connecticut: East Woods P, 1984). Huser's article "River Classics: The Literature of Flowing Water" poses a key question: "Where do I stop" (45)? The panoply of written work alone on rivers recalls a phrase from Umberto Eco: "our list of titles is still far from complete; and that, therefore, to paraphrase a joke by Macedonio Fernandez, the number of things which are not in the bibliographies is so high that it would be impossible to find room for one more missing item" (*Search* 2). My selection pivots around recent texts that problematise and extend the human relation with rivers, memory and story in the late twentieth century in an effort to understand the feelings that some in the (ex-)colonial world brings to rivers, and the visceral response to dams, pollution, progress and wilderness. The concept of self and nation becomes part of that response. Rivers remain reflective sites.

In *From Landscape to Literature: The River and the Myth of Geography* (1986) Wyman H. Herendeen studies the range of river-focused literature from Greek and Roman Antiquity through to the English writers of the seventeenth-century. His work is important and his conclusions have many resonances with recent river work. Herendeen argues for a major change in the ways seventeenth-century poets symbolised rivers. He describes the shift thus: "the river of the physical world is supplanted by the metaphoric analogue of the inner being.... Increasingly, the mythic dimension of the river—its image of concord and harmony—is that of the soul and psyche of the individual as he exists outside of society in a geography whose values are spiritual rather than political" (*Myth* 328, 321). Rivers lose their symbolic range as the lifeblood of a nation and speak for or represent a more introspective authorial current. For a time the river was a national icon of nationhood; in the giant dam era of the 1930s it became one again for the U.S.A., and in the 1950s for the Soviet Union and Australia, then India. China has championed the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze while battling criticism from engineers, former funders and NGO's while floods pour from the skies. Asia and South America have worn the mark of much development 'aid' in the form of displaced people, concrete ramparts and an unsustainable growth (Roy, McCully, Hildyard). Asia is the most recent locus of the combination of nation and concrete 'progress.'

Herendeen argues that "[s]ociety, on its rivers, was forced into self-awareness, compelled into a state of self-consciousness from which grew its own characteristic river image" (*Myth* 24). His point holds true for the work I consider: it has a self-consciousness that depends on and is sustained by memory, but the threat of ecological collapse has made that reflexivity a problematic act. In the essay form the author's insecurities over personal agency confront corporate power, just as the naturalist, conservationist or indigenous group confronts the resource-stripping trans-national company in the courts. But the political impact of the work may increase in the introspective passages because the writer, unlike the dam-builder, is intent on the past and its lost river. So the act of remembrance becomes, for some, political. In many of the writers I consider, self-consciousness leads the text into memory then out into the ecological (and thus political) basis of that memory, and back again to the self. The



thesis, I am asking you to look to your own local river and its stories. Doing so cultivates a political stance (as many Californians—but especially author Marc Reisner—could tell you), because there are few elements as necessary as water.<sup>5</sup> People will go to war over oil; some (for example Sandra Postel) suggest that cross-border river disputes will escalate into war in the twenty-first century. We die swiftly without water. Freshwater quality and access is under threat from the damaging ways we humans live our lives (Abramovitz). In 1999 (after devastating floods the previous year), water gave millions of people more grief, as the worst floods for years ravaged Southern China, Bangladesh, Korea, the Philippines, Hungary, India and Vietnam, scouring watersheds of crops and other forms of life.

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I am embedded in the resource-hungry world that is doing so much damage to rivers. I am part of that world: most of my life has been dependent on hydro-electricity, as has the production of this thesis.<sup>6</sup> The waters have been rendered as the carrier of use-value and kilowatt-hours to feed the production of papers, theses and policies inside buildings heated by hydro-electricity. Gary Snyder notes these buildings are often made from “cast-in-place concrete . . . a transformation of water-washed gravels, a riverbed stood on end” (“The Forest in the Library” 206). Flowing through stone, we descend through stairwells of vertical riverbed, the largely fluid-based members of a cleansing populace that may lament the intervention of our passion for order on the remembered torrents of the past.

The invasive technologies of damming or polluting a river are portrayed in the writing as assaults upon a fragile and supposedly overrun ideology of harmony and care as much as a physical riverscape. At the river (a meeting place between cultures and a site for stories—and thus memories—from those cultures) the dominant society seeks a kind of hydrotherapy that will redeem the sins of a colonial past and the “technological colonialism” of the present (Cohen). This work is also an examination of doubt in the face of such forces, because many of those who write of and oppose this colonialism realise the pace of development is torrential.

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confessional act of remembrance (exemplified in, for example, the personal essays of Moore or Sanders, or Flanagan’s novels and Bowling’s delta-details) counters the future-oriented drive for progress and profit that diverts or dams rivers in favour of money, not memory. As Rangitihī Tahuparae said, standing by the Whanganui on that first Tira Hoe Waka, things went wrong for white men when the dollar became an *atua* or god.

<sup>5</sup> As Marq de Villiers put it in 1999, “[w]ater is so necessary, so central to all life, that it isn’t surprising it took on a significance beyond the intrinsic. In a world where gods inhabited everything, gods most certainly inhabited water. And it is always interesting, I thought, how politics and religion intersected when it came to water” (71).

<sup>6</sup> (When I first came to Canada to study, I thought the term ‘hydro’ referred to water charges, not the general domestic-utilities bill each house receives in British Columbia.)

## The structure of the thesis

The dissertation is formed into three sections. Though this grouping is based on genre (the personal essay, fiction and poetry respectively), I also discuss common concerns across genres. This thesis maps a partial typology of human responses to rivers through certain texts. These creative responses—transcendent, elegiac, reminiscent, nostalgic and angry—vie and meld with each other at the water's edge. I have selected the texts because they demonstrate (formally, thematically and in terms of content) my argument that rivers invite and sustain attention as the West enters the twenty-first century. Ecological conditions provoke a sense of elegy and highlight diminishing opportunities for ecological recovery. Concurrent with this closing window of opportunity is a realisation that notions such as Nature, holism and redemption are also contested in this post-colonial, post-industrial age.

As the previous pages suggest, these writers respond to ecological crisis because loss of ecological diversity affects story, culture and memory. The cross-genre concerns stem from a process of bearing witness that each writer undertakes. They witness (as I have) the ways cultural and ecological diversity have come under threat. There is much cause for concern. Elegy therefore vies with hope, but these texts (particularly those from the 1990s), argue that hope is provisional and compromised. Humans need rivers, but rivers have gained nothing from us.

In *A Week On The Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Henry David Thoreau argued that the person “who hears the rippling of rivers in these degenerate days will not utterly despair.” (334). In this thesis the writers do not *utterly* despair, but they do despair. Loss constructs their sense of the remnant power of wilderness; even in the pristine watershed the fact remains that rivers are under threat. This threat is allied with a kind of communal amnesia evident in what poet Richard Hugo (see chapter five) calls “the loss of knowns” (*Triggering* 70). How are writers responding to loss? What might endure and what, in the storied and diverse watershed, is worth caring for? I want to know because I have seen how damaged rivers affect the wider watershed and its dependents, and I believe the river is a place where people can learn to conduct a dialogue across cultures and species. I negotiate the texts ahead in search of ways such dialogue has been demonstrated at diverse sites. Each text details a concomitant process of negotiation in its own scripted watershed. One of my roles in this thesis is the summary and analysis of these negotiable

positions that are open to dialogue. I offer a brief summary of the thesis structure before detailing each chapter in more depth.

Chapter one focuses on a range of essayists that bear witness. I open with them to stress the process of perceptual inquiry that *continues* in the fiction and poetry.

Chapters two, three and four attend to fiction. The work allows explication of the process of inquiry, observation and development across a character's ecological and psychological formation. Chapter two scrutinises the notion of the 'pure' transcendent river in three works of fiction. I argue that escapism is not a useful option in the present. The fictional confrontation with fallenness (in the form of dams, pollution and cultural amnesia) compels a moral and politicised response detailed in chapters three and four. Rivers endure, but once ecological collapse sets in, human networks fail.

Despite (and often because of) this, optimism and defiance remain in much of the work I read. This is as true of the poetry (chapter five) as it is of the fiction and essays. The poets I read watch this process of decay, gleaning fleeting solace from remnants. The long poems I read test dialects in "the language of River" that continues to speak through deprecation (Zetlin "Said the river—two"). Optimism springs from attention and the appreciation of response, but none of the writers are sure the "language of River" will be understood in the next century. Kinseth tries to grasp a river in his work, to refigure the process of salvation through textual salvage. To represent the river in language is a key imperative in the long poems I read. The textual invitation to response is one means of passing on such fluvial attention. But the writers test text and attempt to embody it, to transform line into element, word into flow. This flow is not continuous; there are discontinuities in terms of typography and the embodiment of silence, gap and indeterminate estuaries beyond language (reaches the essayists hint at too). The epilogue then tests response on site, looking (via text) for unknown answers beside ungraspable rivers.

Taken together, the texts demonstrate various ways of rivering as an experience and reading as an experience. My stance as a reader varies from critical analysis to full immersion in and acceptance of a text. Fixed positions work against the ethic of care these writers promote, an ethic that requires adaptability in the face of flux, a process of remembrance and response that embodies the fluvial present. Reading can engender this, but there are no certainties reading will provide a simple solution to the complex problems transpiring in the watershed. Doubt is therefore a key component in the work, an ethic of doubt and guardianship; responding to what remains involves facing the responsibilities of responsiveness. Throughout, my interest turns to the process of river writing: how is that elusive current written in to text? This thesis as a whole is an extended, open definition of what that reflective process might be.

Describing her long (river-based) poem *Steveston* (see chapter five), Daphne Marlatt notes how the poem "moves around & keeps returning to the central interface of human lives with the river" ("Long As In Time" 317). This thesis attends to the range and limits of this cyclic interface in the late twentieth-century, observing the continuities in the process of remembrance, protest and

explication across (and through) genre boundaries. On a micro level, each chapter traces a process of personal recollection and concurrent explication, as it is realised in text and disperses amongst a wider watershed community of readers, (hi)stories, public memories and ideas. Each of the writers has their own way of utterance, but each responds to a world that speaks (in myriad, fluvial and cyclical ways) to them. Together the authors make my wider point: rivers are currents of story and memory, still capable of carrying our figuration, and that figuration is still offered.

As a reader, I am involved with the process of river-reflection. River reflection is both the process and product of articulation, born of contemplation and engagement with mental and physical streams. Each writer records a movement from self to world. These ripples reach the community through the text. Inscribed river reflection is part of an almost hydrologic cycle of ideas and opinion called story and history. The authors I read contribute their own versions of Joyce's "commodious vicus of recirculation" (1). As a reader I complete a process of (concentric) apprehension that in (re)turn, sends me back to rivers with new perspectives.

I am interested in how the process of river reflection and river writing is articulated across genre. The various genres extend, look to and echo each other as I proceed through the thesis. Memory appears as a fount in each, and each piece develops a memory of its own because all of the writers make telling use of imagery. The writers ensure that formal distinctions (or traditions) work for them. Each genre places different demands on the reader. Imagery and memory largely constitute the written river. The form that river then takes substantiates the river for the reader. That process of substantiation draws the reader into (and embodies) the work; "nearly all river books become, inevitably, books about memory" (Fields 166). I focus on the functions and forms of river-inspired reflection and recollection in reading the essays, novels and poetry.

Chapter One attends to the ways rivers and remembrance work through the personal essay. The personal essay uses form to meander between public and private confessional modes, dismissing the notion of a clear distinction between public and private, or personal and political registers.<sup>7</sup> The essays I read have a regional U.S. focus, but retain global resonance because rivers speak in many tongues. The essayistic mode of recollection enables shifts in register. The essay form allows anecdote, allegory and poetic imagery to enter the skein of fact gathering and information-sharing.

Many of the essays centre in the Western and Southwestern United States, where the ghosts of salmon and the bulk of dams work hard on the writer's mind. Loss and development are escalating, while an ongoing First Nations presence compels reflection on meanings of home and history. What compels *me* as a reader is the way the writers have turned to the personal essay as a means of integrating the process of remembrance and metaphor into their discussion of the

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<sup>7</sup> Once again feminist theory has challenged the notion of a public-private 'divide.' bell hooks, T. Trinh-Minh-Ha, Donna Haraway, Paula Gunn Allen, Geraldine Pratt, Leslie Marmon Silko, Patricia Grace, Lee Maracle, Gillian Rose: these are some of the writers who have taught me about the ways the private informs public expression, and they do so more effectively than I can summarise in a footnote.

riverine. I am taken by the ways the writer moves between self and external ecology in a movement mediated by the observed current of water and memory.

The chapter opens with a discussion of Lance Kinseth's *River Eternal* (1984) that attempts to trope the river onto the page. His approach tends to elide the river as a source of story and history in favour of the water as a source for metaphor. Conversely, the web of thought and ecology is a central focus for Edward Abbey, Kathleen Dean Moore, Kim Stafford, Scott Russell Sanders and others; this attentiveness is founded on a connection with (and remembrance of) a site. The personal becomes political through the river's mediation of memory. The remembered river is fragile. For Abbey and Sanders that recalled river has been altered by a dam that harms *both* memory and ecology.

Attention to place and consciousness marks the personal essayists. The writers I consider take their cue from the great Michel de Montaigne: they *meander* physically and mentally on their rivered wanderings. The term meander is riverine in etymology and it has come to represent a river *and* a way of thinking (Atkins 6). The essayists honour ecology, history, story and community. The digressive form of the essay is well suited to this "simultitude" of attentiveness (Ricou).

The process of journey and the form of memory dominate the lives of the fictional protagonists I consider in chapters two, three and four. Memory is a resource for change and a means of forming resonant fictional worlds, as motifs or images are repeated along the unfolding reach of narrative and river. As with the essayists, the fiction writers favour meandering potential in their river-focused narratives. The novel offers a range of movement and possibility in the development of a protagonist's memory and character, as well as the chance to enter and embellish an imagined current of story. Variation in content or stance does not detract from the collective appreciation of continuity and remembrance and the metaphoric freight a river bears. The authors (such as David James Duncan or Thomas King) explore tributary digression or flashback to round out their interconnected fictional world. Iain Sinclair's work *Downriver* may reach an apex of self-reflexivity, but even he acknowledges (like the essayist Kinseth) that the river outdoes the language, slipping past textual embellishment.

These are books with a personal and political agenda. They confront ecological issues (the effects of dams or pollution, the encroachment of technologies onto 'nature' and indigenous groups, the endurance of Romanticism in our relation with the non-human, for example) in direct ways. The novel form allows the writer to grapple with and explore the ways a river takes hold of the psyche.

The fiction section consists of three interdependent chapters. Chapter two places texts that feature the pristine river as a site of transcendence and ecological awareness. Much of the work in this thesis responds to a growing awareness of the need to preserve biodiversity for future generations and to champion the river as a place where species and stories gather, as much as

water does. So the pristine or pure river is troped as a place of (personal and national) healing and learning.

Chapters three and four gather fictions of the 'fallen river,' a waterway altered by damming, pollution or other human incursions or lapses. These works critique the human-primacy that places present needs before the needs of ecosystems and the unborn; they also showcase the effects of this human primacy. They, and the 'pure' river stories urge foresight and atavistic reconnection with rivers.<sup>8</sup> A pure river is always under threat while progress remains the sole human agenda. The implication is that people will learn from the damage.

But fifteen years after Hans Jonas called for an "imperative of responsibility" that tried to cast our present actions in the light of those unborn (to preserve the biosphere for those who will depend upon it), John Livingston makes an urgent case for voiding paradigms of utopian-driven desire. With conceptual and technical skills the likes of which have never before emerged on Earth, and with unequalled powers of abstraction, "the problem animal [the "rogue primate" human] is able not only to consume or obliterate elements of non-human Nature at virtually its slightest whim, but also to rationalize that activity in comfortably self-reassuring terms" (183). Since Jonas called for an imperative of human responsibility there are increasing levels of reassurance from corporate sectors: economic success is the new panacea for any political and ecological ills (a mixture often pushed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank), while ecosystem depletion skyrockets. As technology has blossomed people are told the electronic age will transform our thinking: it may do so (for those who can afford access), but electronic commerce, for example, is locked into concepts of progress, distanced from local ecology and control. "The Western future-orientation," Livingston notes (as Jonas had), "is virtually total" (183).

Recent hype over on-line commerce is buoyed up by the prospect of more money being spent, more resources being used, with less effort. "The human mission to dominate becomes more than a mere historicist or determinist expression of our achievements; it becomes the evolved nature of things, the way the world is and was meant to be. It becomes an unassailable and incontrovertible 'reality'" (Livingston, 183). This "zero-order imperative" undergirds "'the ideology of the necessary primacy of the human enterprise'" (Livingston 186, 140). This primacy concerns Jonas and Livingston, and it also concerns the novelists I read, particularly since personal agency is compromised by the forces of desire and capital.

Dystopias need a utopia (or at least a pristine site) as a point of comparison and definition. Iain Sinclair in *Downriver* and Cormac McCarthy in *Suttree* find a grim power in the fallen river. The depths continue to speak to these authors; collapse and failure become a point from which to depart into further story retrieval, or world-making. The corrupted river is not necessarily railed

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the writers (notably Duncan) can be tempted by the pastoral or wild ideal. Much progress is intent on securing such privileges for those who can afford it. A river cabin is a luxury pad, not the drop-out site of choice.

against, it is *used*. Fallenness is a living state in some cases. The ambivalence in *Downriver* and *Suttree* brings us close to the *anomie* of contemporary urban life, its amnesias and absences, but it does not discount the river as an enduring force. I use work by Ivan Illich to trace the mythic qualities of the river in the West, including the Greek Mother of the Titans, Mnemosyne, whose associations with rivered memory and reverence have, Illich believes, been diluted. His discussion of water, memory and culture is important. It weaves text, memory and water in useful ways.

Though a river is fallen in an ecological sense, it *can* still function on a mythic level.<sup>9</sup> McCarthy and Sinclair *use* the fallenness to make a point. For McCarthy, “The builders of cities continue to miss the point as they continue the doomed flight from nature and death” (Bell 110). Sinclair adds that this is a flight from the storied past. Such a movement has always offered rich material.

Several of the writers I consider use fiction to realise treasured dam-busting visions. Over 36 000 large dams have been built since 1905: there are plenty of dams to condemn in the mind. Fictional revenge is one response to pain. That pain and doubt endure while the dam does. But the rivers will take longer to erode the concrete elsewhere. Such structures can limit the range of a personal and communal life and memory.

Reflection and absence are substantive forces in the poetry that pools in chapter five of the thesis. Silence and space are constitutive forces on the page. Often, in poetry, the concrete development of pace depends upon the gaps in the page. The use of the gap is a feature of many of the books I consider: the writers are fine stylists of silence. Expert fisher and writer Keri Hulme said “I think sometimes things have more *impact* the more you let people become part of it, but if you lay out everything neat and proper (as, by and large, television tends to do), people become passive, and also become exclusive; whereas if you make lots of gaps, as in a net [you create a space] for them to fall into or be taken over by, in a sense.” These gaps are crucial in the essay, offering reflective pools. In poetry their very shape on the page or line can affect how we read; Don McKay puts it well: “The pause is full of stories waiting to be told” (143). In my work with long river poems (like McKay’s) I am attentive to the undertows of line break and shifting caesura. These deserve their own attention. The gaps and pauses swell in the line’s reach and fall; the breath is tugged downriver and the mind must follow into new deltas, using the fluvial meander of the reading process.

River writing emphasises interconnections through ecology, memory and community. These qualities coalesce in a way of seeing. Perception becomes a personal and political act. The private is embedded in the watershed; like the river, perception shapes the way a site is (re)formed and used. The poetry focuses on communities under threat: capital globalisation homogenises

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<sup>9</sup> The Whanganui Tira Hoe Waka bears this out, though when stories’ sources are wounded, there is no substitute for river restoration. The Tira Hoe Waka is largely about what the River was and could become again.

culture and place; ecological collapse assails cultural networks. The poets' attention to the interleaving processes of decay and continuity is manifest at the level of line and content.

The river poetry makes subtle demands on readerly consciousness through form, imagery and proprioception. Form is used to pull the reader into the current of the long poem in particular. Poems by Daphne Marlatt and Don McKay, for example, use line length and break, and stanzaic variation to draw the reader into the reach of the poem/river. Working on the level of breath, typography and content, the poets in this section confront riparian and conceptual ecologies, forcing the language to accommodate the spontaneity of water. I am interested in the ways authors use recurrent images and reflexivity to develop a memory within the poem. The echoes are transferred to the reader through the poet's attention to proprioceptive tradition and the process of reading. In some of the poems, the human—river nexus (Marlatt's "central interface"), is unpacked in a way even the most trenchant essayist cannot emulate: the poetry scrutinises the linguistic basis of our understanding.

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The acute engagement with loss made by the writers in this thesis means faith is never easy. Czeslaw Milosz observes "[o]ur civilization poisoned river waters, and their contamination acquires a powerful emotional meaning. As the course of a river is a symbol of time, we are inclined to think of a poisoned time. And yet the sources continue to gush and we believe time will be purified one day" ("Rivers"). Rivers continue to represent vitality; their meaning extends beyond the physical watershed to tap other terrains: "The polluter is condemned not only for physical pollution, but also, implicitly, for a moral pollution that is revealed by the physical pollution. Hence the highly charged emotional tone of much environmental debate: for more is at stake than the chemical composition of a river" (Evernden 7). (I refer to Ivan Illich's discussion of the emotional and cultural resonance of this poisoned time in the introduction to chapter three.) Progressivist economics (and its bedfellow watershed ecosystem damage) works against the diversity and integrity of ecology and story. Any cursory glance at the effects of various imperialisms on biota and language over the last two centuries gives assent to this. Variations in cultural and biological diversity are vanishing at (what I feel is) a sickening rate (Livingston 53; Bringhurst 10). The land or community is swept away by highways (Cormac McCarthy's novel *Suttree*) or new waves of building and cash (Iain Sinclair's *Downriver*, Richard Flanagan's *The*



*Sound of One Hand Clapping*, and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*). Death lurks in manifest forms for those that remain. But no matter how 'fallen' a river may be it is used. It remains, in McCarthy's stygian, florid definition, "grating along like bonedust, afreight with the past, dreams dispersed in the water someway, nothing ever lost" (McCarthy 4). As a magnet for communities and thus stories, the river is championed as "a ribbon of memory" by all the writers I consider (Sinclair, *Lights* 178). In an era of nearly 40 000 large (15 metres or higher) dams, a river's life on the page may be all several generations will ever know of the river that was.

No reprieve from progress is absolutely guaranteed (particularly, Jonas adds, while the threat of nuclear armageddon persists). Hope in cleansing may spring eternal, but for a long time we have pinned those hopes on a utopian-drive that is destroying the basis of health and life. Gazing at the water "time and the rivers continue" but so, Moore, Tim Bowling or McCarthy might add, does death (Raymond 269). People await purification, the redemption encoded into most religious traditions. Many of the writers doubt redemption through progress; nostalgia and sadness may filter in as substitutes, but the reliance on personal memory and community in the face of transnational capitalism is still valued and still personal enough to be fragile and fallible. It is a stance that might open to possibility more than ideology: "It may be that if a concern for Nature is ever to enter and become integrated within a political ideology, we should not expect it to happen within either of the old-line left/right streams. It will need to be something new altogether" (Livingston 187). A "dynamic equilibrium" is needed; rivers can teach us that. (Huser, *River Reflections* 201).

The writers I consider may cycle from political statements to (sometimes despairing, often musing) introspection. Yet that articulation is not silenced: it ripples outwards and readers acknowledge it. There is a fragile faith in the power of creative communication—creative transpiration—across time and elemental spaces. Even in different valleys, rivers can anchor the reader. The waters mediate the journey towards textual articulation. Such utterance (perhaps a consequence of a sense of powerlessness—the population growth is incessant, inequities in water distribution endemic) begins in doubt and proceeds through manifold contingencies.<sup>10</sup> The river writing in this thesis moves between river, self and world. The writing documents that cyclical movement (Joyce's "commodious vicus of recirculation" again [1]) on site, at the river and in the mind. Reflection is a response and a process in its own right. The river work ahead weaves reflection and absence into the text, reinforcing the impact of words uttered and words, worlds and waters held back.

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<sup>10</sup> It is increasingly obvious that whatever benign and noble philosophy is adopted, the pressures of population on the watershed are extreme: "All the easiest aquifers have been tapped, all the easiest rivers dammed. The population is still increasingly at alarming rates. The ecological costs of using all the water in any one system have become only too apparent. Water demand tripled between 1950 and 1990, and is expected to double again in thirty-five years" (de Villiers 32).

A proprioceptive inclination is evident in essayists like Abbey or Kinseth, or the novels *Downriver* and *Death of A River Guide*. The writing process re-turns to interrogate its own process of comprehending the world. The human-nature relationship is embedded and variable; borders and definitions change form, as water does. This transpiration across time, memory and site intrigues me. In those fluid transitions the imaged, poetic trends of the present emerge as “antidotes to despair” that are always haunted by despair (Abbey, *Down the River* 3). Only a stringent curiosity and memory will take the writers past inertia and out onto the page, exchanging images with a wider network of others’ memories, memories that contest in a dynamic quasi-equilibrium we might call meaning, story or community.

## Chapter One

### Memory, Transcendence and the Riverine Essayist

A cheeky reader can concoct an irreverent caricature of the personal 'nature' essayist. The recipe might go something like this:

Find one earnest male (preferably white-shelled)

Mix in:

a combination of spiritual epiphany and personal confession;  
a full (memorised) range of flora and fauna (including the sex life of blackflies or any small creature);  
a superhuman level of fitness;  
a penchant for solitude well beyond the norm;  
the ability to make a decent wild-leaved salad;  
a potted history of the region complete with re-told "Indian" tales.

Stir well; add:

a meditation on the crimes we humans (particularly imperialist ones) have committed as a species.

(There should be a brief, trenchant critique of dam or road engineering in there too.)

This virtuous hardy soul appears to be an updated neo-Romantic, a semi-imperial pioneer sporting a salad of Other religions (Zen Buddhism, Taoism, ersatz Native American mysticism and New Age beliefs, as well as a dash of Chaos theory). This combination replaces the "muscular Christianity" so admired by the pioneer trappers and river runners of North America who lived out the American dream of individual manliness (Phillips 597). The post-colonial figure listed above tempers imperialist righteousness with a Gore-Tex'd penance.

The essayist's departure from or adherence to such patterns is one measure of how I might begin to respond to their work. The writers I read are conscious of how their personae (their very memories), mediate and create the reader's response. They use their own memories as ways to hook the reader into their nexus of perception and concern. My focus here is on the ways the essay negotiates fixed positions and stereotypes, reinventing itself to challenge the divisions and structures that have worked their way into the response to ecologies of river and word, which are routes into the psyche of the millennial 'West.'

## Introduction

In its consciousness, ours is an upland society, the ruins of watersheds, and what that involves and means is little considered. And so the land is heavily taxed to subsidize an 'affluence' that consists, in reality, of health and goods stolen from the unborn. (340)

Wendell Berry, "The Making of A Marginal Farm."  
*Recollected Essays, 1965-1980*

There's a hole in the river  
where memory lies  
Neil Finn, "Hole in the River." *Crowded House*.

Kathleen Dean Moore, the author of *Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water* (1995), suggests the river informs the very motivation of the essayist:

I have come to believe all essays walk in rivers. Essays ask the philosophical question that flows through time—How shall I live my life? The answers drift together through countless converging streams, where they move softly below the reflective surface of the natural world and mix in the deep and quiet places of the mind. This is where an essayist must walk, stirring up the mud. (xii)

For Moore and many others, the essay—and the process of 'river reflection'—replicates the process of thought. The association between process, reflection and writing in Moore's *Riverwalking*, for example, emphasises the space between modes of writing and the traditional digressive qualities of the personal essay. River reflection mimics the watched current while talking back to the author and reader. The oscillation (indeed "recirculation") between self, community and watershed is at the heart of the process of river reflection and essaying. The essayists copy and open to linked inner and outer currents, tracking process and the river: "There are no everlasting hills. There is only everlasting process" (Berry, *Recollected* 257).

Their disclosures foster a shared sense of inquiry into the river "as a voice that can continue to speak to you in your everyday" (Kinseth 5). A wild river is troped as a teacher and a healing place. This shifts the primacy of humanism into a form of watershed-dependent functioning: "the role of the teacher is allocated to the wilderness countersite in political discourse" (Chaloupka and Cawley 11). The river is a countersite to their everyday lives, the focus of their excursions and a source of insight. Literary discourse is political: the texts I read speak to and revision the primacies of the human—river nexus.

Accordingly, this section of my thesis analyses essays with a staunchly riverine focus. Which is read first, the river or the essay? The writers in this section confront the limits of language as they try to represent 'nature' in a way that is true to the river and their own stream of consciousness. The essays demonstrate and examine the movement across self, river and community, testing the limits of their linguistic and political acts of representation.

This chapter focuses on a limited time-frame and geographic range, tracing a body of work concerned with the nuances of belonging, settlement and dislocation. Colonising processes *resettle* (and re-ascribe story, names and politics on to) a place. These writers are trying on some level to come to terms with the names, rivers and ecosystems that have been lost through the ongoing process of human domination of the watershed. They want a home on the river, rather than the range, but the impulse to settle is still strong. The essays exhibit an understanding of a meandering (riverine) consciousness: time is fluid, histories, stories and memories are valid as they form the prospect ahead seen from midstream. Open to the “cross-connections” between insight and riverscape, the essays (documenting river reflection) are fluid, provisional yet purposeful (Adorno 22).

There is a movement between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ here. Oscillating between self and river, city and wilderness, speech and silence, or layered histories and analysis, the essayists demarcate and transgress the public/private ‘divide’ through the act of remembrance and writing. These acts are personal *and* political. The essayists’ focus on the ecology of memory and their own inner currents of feeling is as distinctive and influential as the rivers they attend to. Memory binds disparate registers and feelings through the “meandering” narrative (Atkins 6). Given this riverine definition, it is no wonder the essay proceeds “methodically unmethodically” while remaining attentive to the temporal and narrative shifts of the writer’s consciousness (Adorno 13).<sup>1</sup> Such a journey tests the limits of representation and remembrance. The essays featured trope the river as a reflective and political site.<sup>2</sup>

In *River Eternal* (1989) Lance Kineth asks “How to grasp hold of a river” (42)? Kineth, and the essayists I read in this chapter (see footnote<sup>3</sup>) attempt to “grasp” rivers through language. Kineth poses a problem. There is no one answer, no single river. But the essays share key qualities: as with Berry, there is a concern for the ways watersheds are “taxed” and left as “ruins,” an interest in remnant ecologies and a focus on personal and communal memory that completes and reinforces a series of vital connections involving self, (hi)story and river.

The contemporary river essayist faces a series of problems created by watershed damage. How does the non-fiction writer replicate a connection with a beloved river that might bestir the reader to look to his or her own local waterways? How can the essayist entertain and inform to

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno’s phrase echoes Walter Pater’s description of the essay’s “unmethodical method” (Lopate, “Introduction” xxxvi).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Mancall (paraphrasing Palmer, 1986) notes the effects of a conservation ethos on the literature: “By the late twentieth century.... American writers.... shifted the direction of protest. Though they continued to evoke nature and its splendors, they did so while describing the human and environmental costs of unrestrained development, often with the explicit goal of stimulating a demand for changes in federal policy” (8-9).

<sup>3</sup> The other essayists are Loren Eiseley (“The Flow of the River,” 1957), Kim Stafford (“River and Road,” 1987), Scott Russell Sanders (“After the Flood” and “The Force of Moving Water,” 1993), Edward Abbey (*Down The River*, 1982), Joan Didion (“At the Dam,” circa. 1970, “Holy Water,” 1977) and Kathleen Dean Moore (*Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water*, 1995).

encourage a degree of pleasure *and* concern in the reader? The combination of personal and political agendas functions in the practice of a process of inquiry and remembrance. This recollection often begins in personal anecdote, moving to communal history and the process of ecological change at the river. These essayists *do* wish, however gently, to provoke a response on several levels; they use several registers to do so. Through the careful braiding of these focal modes in their narratives a complex, meaning-laden watershed emerges in print. These meanings endure, despite (or perhaps because of) dams and vanishing 'Nature.'

Stafford, Eiseley, Moore, Abbey and Sanders are expert at handling association and analogy. Some of the finest moments in their essays are those between essay sections, the spaces where focus and register change; such gaps in the page are akin to deep, evocative pools that follow the textual rapids: "the gaps invite the reader to make a translation" (Carter, *Living* 4). The shifts in register that form the braided river of the essay are mediated through memory and the authorial persona.

This sampling of recent essays from the U.S.A. confronts a legacy of dams and the dwindling remnants of wild watersheds; as a result their responses are elegiac, political and intimate. "The struggle for honesty is central to the ethos of the personal essay" (Lopate xxv). Integrity and virtue are important in the work of the nature essayist. A companionable persona encourages the reader's sense of trust. The open persona honours "the Anglo-American tradition of the personal essay" and details the fluid transitions of (riverine) consciousness and register (Atkins 16). The work can be angry or elegiac (when confronting rivers lost to dams or touched by destructive development), yet the essays suggest positive ways of honouring and (re)connecting with rivers. Memory informs the responses of the present and future; it politicises space by deferring to an active nostalgia. This can prompt a restoration of habitat and emotion, or honour a place that has altered in the mind and on the land.

Some of the essay writers are in search of an alternative to a literary pastoral that keeps the wild as another resource, a kind of damp, dirty and oh-so-interesting scopic mall. In this place, rewards are paid out in epiphany and insight. Stafford challenges this trope, as do others, particularly Abbey, Didion and Sanders. This unease with the forms of the past intensifies a sense of limited agency and yet those limits are negated by the awareness of the interconnections on which humans depend. Glen Love identifies the dangers of stereotype: "Literary pastoral traditionally posits a natural world, a green world, to which sophisticated urbanites withdraw in search of the lessons of simplicity which only nature can teach. There, amid sylvan groves and meadows and rural characters — idealised images of country existence — the sophisticates attain a critical vision of the good, simple life, a vision which will presumably sustain them as they return at the end to the great world on the horizon" (Love 231). Many of the writers in this thesis adopt an ecological stance that situates the human in a wider network of species and processes, while realising the "great [urban, human] world" is now a troubled and damaging one.

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The essay is an ideal form for attending to the varied contrapuntal influences of river representation. “Ahead of us a leaf falls from high up in a gentle long fall. In the water its reflection rises perfectly to meet it” (Berry, *Recollected* 229). Many would wish their writing to match the movement of the leaf as its ripples extend to touch the reader. These intimate essays of disclosure and recollection inform and reflect consciousness. Scott Russell Sanders suggests “[w]e all ride the river, we are all born from a sack of water, and some of us never quit hankering for that original wetness” (“The Force of Moving Water” 60). Each essayist demonstrates the elusive nature of rivers and the diversity of the human response to moving water. The response to rivers takes on its most self-reflective guise in this non-fiction.

### **Structure within the flow**

My analysis of the essays is grouped into three sections. In the first section I focus on Kineth (and Eiseley and Stafford). Modes of insight and revelation gather in three writers’ work. Lance Kineth plunges into his elaborate riparian vision of the *River Eternal*, a notion of the river that becomes a metaphor for the workings of the universe and the mind. He creates a network of likenesses between metaphors (dealing with home, process and ecology as synecdoche) through figurative embellishment. Kineth practises a mode of hyper-metaphoric exaltation, grounding a comparative rhetoric in the workings of perception. One unnamed river is the touchstone for all his visions. Loren Eiseley achieves similarly transcendent insight; it is shared more effectively through different rhetorical techniques in his essay “The Flow of the River.” Kim Stafford extends Eiseley’s measured vision to question the very notion of the transcendent river in this age of streaming vehicles. All three writers still affirm the river’s power to compel and carry stories. These three views of ‘the river’ as source of inspiration prove there is no one river, no single way of seeing. These three writers confront the temptation to use the river as a route to transcendence. Kineth steps in, Eiseley’s reservations are washed away and Stafford finds little recourse to wonder in his suffering local river.

The second section of this chapter observes the ‘fallen river’ and three kinds of response to loss which contextualise a kind of ecological and moral suffering. The river-writers pit word and image against what Blaine Harden calls “the inexorable sadness of concrete” (239). Out of that poetry something remains of the drowned watercourse. The section traces some of Edward Abbey’s river pieces, two of Scott Russell Sanders’ river essays and two essays by Joan Didion.

Sanders knows what has been lost in the past, whereas Kineth focuses on his experiential present. Sanders shifts his narrative (from personal memory, to evocative environmental history and back, to reflection) in a fluid oscillation or recirculation of ideas, a quality of mental range

inherent in what Stephen Trimble terms “The Digressive Voice” (13). I then follow Edward Abbey as he veers and floats *Down the River*, by turns lively, laconic and fulsome, letting his mind and language flow (but not overflow in Kinseth’s manner). Abbey and Sanders are paired as they lament dams that have transformed beloved rivers, and thus altered memory and recollection. Didion, however, extends this anger, articulating (“At the Dam”) a kind of haunted awe that suggest the scope of human aspiration and its flip side, human greed. These three writers concur over the psychic damage a dam can cause. They trace the violation of natural process as a kind of deep wronging of the “everlasting” qualities of creation. The result (a dam, a reservoir, a diverted river) is a “humiliating” substitute (McPhee 193).

Section two, then, records three responses to dams or the outright human control of water and its transformation into the “stuff” of utility alone. Ivan Illich suggests this is a substance leached of any mythic or spiritual capacity. Abbey and Sanders feel dams violate the forms of interdependence a river sustains. The negative effects of the dam on an ecological—and thus personal, social and political—level are troped as products of a domineering mindset. These writers oppose human primacy. The male authors argue the ecological is also personal and political, tracing a kind of patriarchy of river control, just as many women have charted patriarchal forces on the social and ecological landscape. Lydia Wevers suggested to me that both sexes have been working to oppose dominant groups and that men often relived a scouting fantasy with a subversive and politicised agenda.

An interlude then attends to essays of paddling and spirit, placing the process of journey in the context of quest and transcendence.

In section three of this chapter, I observe how Kathleen Dean Moore shapes and articulates the interplay between personal reflection and immersion in place and memory, through description, natural history and the basis of feeling that runs through her book. As she notes, her work began near a series of rivers that infuses her sense of identity, belonging and family:

The essays in this collection are river essays because I began to write each one alongside a stream or floating down a river... Drifting on rivers, you know where you will start and you know where you will end up, but on each day’s float, the river determines the rate of flow, falling fast through riffles, pooling up behind ledges, and sometimes, in the eddies at the head of sloughs, curling back upstream in drifts marked by slowly revolving flecks of foam. So, drifting on rivers, I have had time to reflect—to listen and to watch, to speculate, to be grateful, to be astonished. (xii)

Listening, watching, speculating, being astonished, and reflecting: these are essayistic modes of response. It is important at the outset to acknowledge the range of and variety of human responses to rivers even amongst this group of white, pro-river U. S. writers. Graham Good argues that the insights of the essay “are non-transferable.... they do not offer a theory or a method which can be applied to other objects” (24). But when the object in question is a river or watershed the concerns of one essayist can be measured in another part of the world because deforestation or poor water



quality is commonplace. These essays offer new ways of seeing the watersheds we inhabit and depend upon. In bearing witness the essayists take our vision and extend it on their banks. They express an almost Taoist insistence on patience, an appreciation of wholeness and the work of water and feeling, hoping to change minds with the subtle wash of image and turn of phrase. As Georg Lukács suggested in 1910, the essay strives “to achieve equilibrium in a welter of disparate things” (6). The essayists’ confessional stance suggests a persuasive argument must appeal to the heart as well as the head. Personal disclosure is one part of the essayists’ passion, a means by which they share their sense of connection. This use of essayistic persona is an Anglo-American literary tradition. The text also seeks to achieve equilibrium in its variegated focus on ecology, self and history. A kind of textual ecology forms in the work I read. Steeped in the tradition of the essay, the work promises to present the fullest response to watersheds where facts, feelings and memories coalesce.

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There are thousands of essays that may never be written or published which record human interaction with rivers. Many essays are budding—alongside new dams—in the rivers of India, South and Central America, Africa and China. There has been a certain amount of lip service and reform regarding ecology and a shift in consciousness vis-à-vis large dam projects in North America, but the damage has largely been done. So regret is an essayistic topic, pinned between memory and the present. The mentality that sees strong economic growth as a panacea for all problems now encourages dam building in ‘developing’ nations (Roy; McCully; Goldsmith and Hildyard; de Villiers; Postel *etcetera*). The West is trying to safeguard or restrict the developmental models it has bequeathed to the world. But the cycle of dammed rivers, and displaced people continues. The West mitigates damage; the rest of the world begins it anew: why not have ample power when the populace is booming? But there are ways to create power that might take local needs into account, offer full cost-benefit analyses and limit the extent of profiteering in the contracting process (one often dominated by Western firms).

The writers I consider draw on personal memories to resist the threats to collective understanding posed by giant dams. Giant dams drown memory, so memory looks to a pre-dam, pre-lapsarian time. At the river, memory is a recourse of first and last resort, as Sanders knows. Nevertheless, people are busy transforming their rivers in exchange for electricity to drive the present and ensuring consumption continues. The displaced bear witness to dams that block off their past, their livelihood, and their memories.

## The riparian essay: a subgenre? Some issues and nuances of definition.

Characteristically, 'the essay' honours and represents the fluidity of consciousness, "the mind's natural flow instead of the systematized outline of ideas" (Hoagland, "What I Think" 25). Suited to recording river-experience, the essay form "produces the artistic or literary effect or illusion of witnessing thinking in progress, in process" (Atkins 6). It is the ideal site for thoughts on the process of river reflection. Enamoured of the immediacy of encounter, the essays share some qualities of proprioceptive style with the long river-based poems such as *Steveston*: they are engaged with authorial and rivered motion, they travel, and they record experiential learning *through* encounter, immersion and movement. The essays I consider explore both riverine and mental processes. This inscription of process — of movement, reflection, inconclusiveness — represents an encounter with what Berry calls the "everlasting." The writers revel in the flow of consciousness and insight the essay records and depends upon.

Chris Anderson identifies one problem with the term 'literary nonfiction': it refers to a set of negatives, rather than the nature of the genre in question ("Literary Nonfiction" 3). However, there are numerous essayistic qualities shared by the writers I consider in this chapter which contribute to a holistic mode of response and representation: the personal voice and process of confessional remembrance, the use of cumulative imagery for effect and the celebration of curious inquiry.

The essay is marked by its personal voice and subject matter. Montaigne heads "a direct line [from whom] descend all essayists who remain essentially autobiographers, all explorers of the self, who seek clues to that self directly in their own lives and the trivial details of their daily routines" (Fiedler 2). Anderson's gloss on this comment relates to Joan Didion, who "fulfils the tradition of Montaigne: she is tentative and exploratory; she sees her personal experience as an index to larger issues and social problems. But she also extends the form" (Anderson, *Style* 143). All of the writers take personal experience as a benchmark for their work: their river reflection frames and motivates the essay.<sup>4</sup>

The essayist proceeds "methodically unmethodically" (Adorno 13). Theodor Adorno has commented on the nature of the essay. The way an essay will talk within itself, braiding an object and a metaphor, is central to the form. The essay's "transitions repudiate conclusive deductions in favour of cross-connections between elements, something for which discursive logic has no place" (22), though Adorno then suggests essays do not "draw conclusions from coherent individual

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<sup>4</sup> Anderson suggests a link between the "rhetoric of process.... grounded in the moment of the writing" that Didion engages in, and the romantic lyric (as defined by Robert Langbaum), which emphasizes "a specified place and time, an individualized speaker, a dramatized process of thought" (139, 141). This rhetoric of process is evident in Abbey's essays, as well as Moore's, Berry's and Kinseth's. It is rhetoric suited to the description of immediacy of event and insight, and captures the flow and variation of the river journey; it also shares a love of live and memorialised process with the long poems I read in chapter five.

observations” (22). But the meandering focus of the river essay has its own logic and individual observation at its heart. Its fix on process anchors it to the flux of consciousness and the immediacy and ecology of apprehension.<sup>5</sup> Layering image upon image forms a figurative series of connections that suggests the observed riparian ecology and patterns of authorial reflection. Thus the combination of registers seeks to mirror, through aesthetic means, the phenomenological experience of river reflection.

The interaction between elements and metaphor in the river essays builds up a resonant (discursive) logic of image which is cumulative in its impact: “the essay approaches the logic of music, that stringent yet aconceptual art of transition” (Adorno 22). This is one reason why (in the final part of this chapter), I single out Moore’s use of the river as “motif.” The gaps take on form, the unspoken has resonance.

“How do we know where we are?’... We mark the landscape by a multitude of means” (Ryden xi). These essays are another kind of marking, an attempt to write of water, a struggle with representation. The essayists respond to the limits of language (limits which delineate Adorno’s gap between latent forces and opaque occlusion: there is a force embedded in framed silence) in different ways. Kinseth tries to fill the gaps with metaphor, whereas Stafford, Moore and Sanders, for example, leave the silences or the image alone to speak to us. This work offers a way into the recurrent motif of the river in all of the essays, a juxtaposition of elements and concerns: “the essay presses for the reciprocal interaction of its concepts in the process of intellectual experience” (Adorno 13). Adorno speaks of a kind of mental ecology here, one that the writers are conversant and comfortable with as it allows them to layer and extend their descriptions of the river, using associative imagery to compound understanding and detail.

Attending to the process which composes and constructs the personal essay requires mental “elasticity” to navigate “the tension between the presentation and the matter presented” (Adorno

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<sup>5</sup> Adorno’s commentary is relevant here; he suggests the essay works with its own tools to dismantle itself and any pretence of objectivity. In doing so it celebrates subjectivity and apprehension as organising principles, a mode appropriate to the open Anglo-American essay, especially the river writers who attend to the impact of gap and silence:

The essay.... is concerned with what is blind in its objects. It wants to use concepts to pry open the aspect of its objects that cannot be accommodated by concepts, the aspect that reveals, through the contradictions in which concepts become entangled, that the net of their objectivity is a merely subjective arrangement. It wants to polarize the opaque element and release the latent forces in it. (23)

Here he describes the manoeuvre Stafford and Moore and others (such as the poet Daphne Marlatt) use so well. They release the latent and opaque, anchoring them in the net of subjectivities that constitute the enrivered response to water, that external element that sustains us internally on physical and mental levels.

Adorno’s complex essay on the essay was a rejoinder to Georg Lukács’ “On the Nature and Form of the Essay” (1910). Lukács emphasized the essay’s drive “to achieve equilibrium in a welter of disparate things” (6). Lukács notes the essayist’s dependence on personal experience and confession; feeling is the basis for much of the writing: “[t]he essay has to create from within itself all the preconditions for the effectiveness and validity of its vision” and that vision is one the river-essayists I discuss expound and reiterate personally. Whether Adorno dispelled this point is unclear in this context. He seems rather to have re-stated it as a form of negation. These writers challenge themselves by opening their inner worlds to the reader.

22). Composition also requires a degree of patience and acceptance, as Paul Carter ruefully explains: “Even as I wrote them I knew the words did not express what I felt; I wrote them in absence of any more satisfactory mode of expression” (*Living* 87). Some of the frustration with language stems from the element the writers confront: they leave traces of their presence in words, but sometimes feel as if they write on water, as efforts at conceptualising their feelings swirl away on formation. That movement, and the interaction between vanishing and revelation, is also recorded. “A dialectical spirit of inquiry and exploration marks the essay” (Adorno 6). This notion is central to the riverine curiosity that marks each of these writers. The essayists use the declarative stance of their writing to reveal and confront their own (personal and/or linguistic) limitations. Tracking rivers hones the capacity for poise and surrender. Each writer adopts different strategies to maintain this balance between confession and observation, reflection and description.

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Maybe the question is not so much how to “grasp” a river as to unleash the meanings it carries. But one of my central arguments in this thesis, one backed by formal variation in the recent river essay (and Wyman Herendeen’s work on river-writing in the European Classical and Renaissance eras) is that rivers offer, absorb and unleash many combinations of meaning for the writer.

Herendeen aligns the “symbolic network” of rivers in antiquity and the Renaissance with the pursuit of knowledge: “the river in a unique way traverses the realm of geography, or our reaction to landscape, and language, the metaphoric constructs by which we expand our domain into the realm of the unknown.... enmeshed in the language of rivers is the language of thought” (“Rhetoric” 108-9). His point remains true for the river essayists I read. For the Classical and Renaissance authors who followed this motif “the river was part of the pursuit of knowledge and first causes. In some cases it was the object of that knowledge, in others it was symbolic of the quest. In whichever form the tradition manifested itself, for its authors the river was at the very center of a basic humanistic instinct—to know truly man’s place in the order of things, and to articulate it” (Herendeen, “Rhetoric” 109). Moore’s point—“all essays walk in rivers”—allies the desire to learn with the desire to communicate. She and Herendeen know the recirculative process of inquiry and exploration neither begins nor ends on the page, but requires the “central interface” of human interaction to extend the words beyond self and text. Ancient traditions of inquiry are employed to address modern environmental concerns while attending to the flux of consciousness and memory within the river-watcher. The river remains as teacher, mirror and vessel. It remains so in the fiction and poetry I turn to in later chapters; wilderness is a site of pure understanding, of a learning unsullied by the gnostic ideals of human progress that are failing to cope with epistemological and ecological crises of modernity.

## Generic? tributaries

The term “essay” is almost too broad for my purposes. Rather, I am attending to a tributary of the “nature writing” school. Thomas J. Lyon’s “Taxonomy of Nature Writing” has been called “some of the wisest commentary yet written on the tradition” (Scheese, *Nature* 144).<sup>6</sup> Lyon organises American nature writing into a loose series of types; his schema depends on interactions between subgenres. His categorization of nature writing in the United States is distinctive but flexible because the “types” of nature writing “intergrade, and with great frequency” (Lyon 3). Lyon isolates four groups of essays:

the natural history essay (“the main burden of the writing is to convey pointed instruction in the facts of nature”);

the ramble (“a classic American form”, in which “the natural history and the author’s presence are more or less balanced”);

“analytical and comprehensive works on man and nature”;

and “essays of experience”, where “the author’s first-hand contact with nature is the frame for the writing” and their consciousness is to the fore (5).

I focus on the “essay of [*riverine*] experience” in this chapter. Here we journey with the writers to, down (or sometimes in!) the rivers that compel them. Lyon makes three distinctions within such an essay of personal experience:

“the essay of solitude or escape from the city”;

the “travel and adventure” essay;

and the “farm essay,” which emphasizes “stewardship and work” (6).

The river-essays I read fall largely under the first grouping, one which Lyon says is also “a classic American form” but is “more critical” than the ramble (6). The critical eye is prevalent today: it keeps pace with the aftershocks of economic change and fosters a combination of anger and lament. These are essays of retreat, reflection or solitude. They adopt an ambivalent (or complicit)

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<sup>6</sup> Don Scheese concurs with Lyon’s emphasis on formal diversity: “Combining the place-consciousness of pastoralism and the scientific curiosity of natural history, the religious quest of spiritual autobiography and the peregrinations of travel writing, the lyricism of nature enthusiasts and the polemical tone of cultural criticism, nature writing is more vital than ever as we enter the twenty-first century” (38). This is possibly because ‘nature’ itself is more threatened. Ecosystem collapse is endemic, species are vanishing (Livingston 53) and unpolluted freshwater is scarce and inaccessible to millions of people and animals (Abramovitz).

relationship with the city. The writers weave adventure and introspection in ways that speak to the variety of authorial voices, and the “vernacular” of each river (Herendeen, “Rhetoric” 109).<sup>7</sup>

Ambivalence manifests through concerns over watershed pollution and dams. As the West enters the new millennium the rush is on—at some levels—to preserve biodiversity beyond the page. Similarities emerge between textual preservation and the ‘salvage ethnography’ at the turn of last century. River reflection draws out curiosity and concern. It is curiosity that compels Lance Kinseth.

### **Kinseth and the river of exultation**

The rhetoric of rivers becomes involuted: is it the river itself or the river’s language that contains the key to the commentator’s thoughts?

Wyman H. Herendeen, “The Rhetoric of Rivers” (116)

[T]he landscape that I see is more the one to which I aspire than the landscape that exists

Lance Kinseth, *River Eternal* (103)

[T]here is in [nature] no private will, no rebel leaf or limb, but the whole is oppressed by one superincumbent tendency, obeys that redundancy or excess of life which in conscious beings we call *ecstasy*.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Method of Nature” (57)

Even the ‘live’ written essay of river exploration is a retrospective act, fleshed out and realised through the process of remembering. Language calls upon our powers of recollection and the river tests that power to describe and fix experience on the page; its motility defies (or reworks) syntax, calling words to its own tongue of life-bearing liquidity. This section is concerned with three accounts of the confluence of rivers, memory and the idea of transcendence, and the variable (and variably effective) rhetoric employed to convey a textual version of process.

Lance Kinseth’s book *River Eternal* (1989), a collection of four linked river-essays,<sup>8</sup> is an example of the rhetoric of riparian transcendentalism. The river is used as a source for metaphoric association with a transpersonal consciousness and cosmic order. The exaltation he feels beside his local river is distinctive and optimistic, because his focus is on the remnant of wild river that

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<sup>7</sup> Wyman Herendeen observes that each river has been given particular local associations by the people of its region. The same is true of each of the essayists I consider; their local place endures stressors that are globally active.

<sup>8</sup> Because the pieces are linked and numbered, one could view them as components of an extended single essay: “literary genres (and movements) intermingle constantly” (Fishelov 20). I prefer to call Kinseth’s work an essay for formal reasons, including the meandering and process-based nature of his ideas and the attention to his own consciousness and thought.

remains, rather than the dammed river that is lost. Kineth makes a network of connections through metaphor, using the river as a motive force for transcendent consciousness. His book is the most ecstatic I consider in this chapter, and this thesis. While this stance has implications in terms of the human response to nature, it is also revealing in terms of rhetoric and the tendency for rivers to prompt—and absorb—all metaphors offered. It is an account that seems to dispense with deep remembrance while employing it in its scripted reproduction of immediate and transformative sensation.

Kineth maps out his pattern of perception through extended metaphor. Such a usage of rivered metaphor is generally “polymorphous,” being digressive and associative at once (Wurst and Raguet-Bouvard 15). His definitions are networks that depend on metaphoric association: his blood vessels are like a delta, walking is a passage through currents of air. These associations build swiftly to a connective peak that spirals in wider and wider juxtapositions and parallels propelling him into a rhetoric of riverine “astroecology” (4). He is simultaneously at the river, and everywhere else. This is the most rhetorically transcendent work in the chapter; it is also the most self-obsessed: few devote as much attention to their own process of seeing. Transcendentalism often depends on the conduit of the ecstatic seer as proof of the revelation of divinity or a paranormal force.<sup>9</sup> The terms exaltation and ecstasy have religious connotations. Kineth’s book is a neo-Romantic, neo-transcendentalist text. It groups elements of Taoism and systems theory, Green Christianity and eco-philosophy, moving through concentric associative metaphor to suggest a vaguely articulated (but unnamed) power evident in the web of ecology. I feel his stance sometimes exults his way of seeing rather than what is seen. But a perceptual apparatus may be of more ‘use’ than a localised history. The problem is, such a teleology does not depart from a progress-oriented ethic, a drive towards betterment and mastery which is now problematised.

Kineth’s metaphors of natural change and spiritual becoming spring from the ‘eternal’ (unnamed) river seventy miles north of the city where he lives.<sup>10</sup> The force of his riparian

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<sup>9</sup> Emerson spoke of a democratic quality of apprehension, one that Kineth follows in his widespread juxtaposition and use of associative metaphor: “The ecstatic state seems to direct a regard to the whole and not to the parts; to the cause and not to the ends; to the tendency, not to the act.... every star in heaven is discontented and insatiable.... Every man who comes into the world the [stars] seek to fascinate and possess, to pass into his mind, for they desire to republish themselves in a more delicate world than that they occupy” (“The Method of Nature” 61). He goes on to speak of the dangers of proposing a purpose on nature, of being beguiled by Nature’s “cup of enchantments,” (62) as the natural objects seek to reappear in the “primary” world of intellect (53). “Piety” helps the writer “command” nature. “And because all knowledge is assimilation to the object of knowledge, as the power or genius of nature is ecstatic, so must its science or the description of it be.... because ecstasy is the law and cause of nature, therefore you cannot interpret it in too high and deep a sense” (62).

<sup>10</sup> Although he never names his river site, he offers grid co-ordinates: “S.1/2., N.1/2., Sec. 22, T.88N, R.28W, 42.2N—94.07W” (Kineth 6). This unnamng occludes the specifics of ‘his’ river (he will still have solitude) while stressing its embeddedness in the Earth, rather than in name, locale or story. The unnamng sets a pattern, for his analysis forgoes the specifics of site and local history in favour of connections with other places and states through metaphor.

revelation means the book reads as one constant freshet of epiphany. Though his family are acknowledged first, they virtually disappear in the solitary rambles and wondering that follows. This is a book about his relations with a series of non-human communities and with the metaphors of nature, the nature of metaphor.

Kineth's 97 pages of text (framed by a prologue and epilogue) are divided into four chapters: "Homing," "Streaming," "Passage" and "Going Inside." The titles describe the metaphorical *and* perceptual processes that constitute the action of the book, and are determined by Kineth's riparian metaphors rather than seasonal changes. Seasonal change and natural history receive scant attention. The book foregrounds the consciousness of the author. *River Eternal* is a book on the self as tributary of "the vena cava of the eternal, the river" (11). Kineth sees no separation or end to rivers; their flowing is the movement of life: "Wherever I find myself there are rivers" (12). His tendency to interpellate self and river is present in many of the essays I consider; it is the component of the process of "recirculation" that constitutes and enables river reflection. Self and river are simultaneous starting points for a process of reflection the essay encapsulates and represents. These essays have a sense of their own patterns of seeing and use narrative and form to replicate that volute meandering. Just as consciousness returns to and springs from place, so the writers return to the waters, as Kineth bears out:

When I write to you about the river, I am writing to you about the long part of ourselves.... The story of a river, and of all landscapes becomes in a very real way the autobiography of each of us.... Like back and forth sensing, there is always something beginning when something appears to have ended. Water rings go out from a stone in the river. (3-4)

This quality of "back and forth sensing" (Joyce's "recirculation" in another guise) appears in the form of the river and the blend of introspection and observation essayed by Kineth, Moore and others. In *River Eternal* the personal essay is a form of autobiography (as it is in Moore and Sanders). Formally, the essay allies itself with an elemental force (the river) that extends the self. The story of the river is the story of the writer's relation with it and its history. The essayists I read tend to use the form as a means of conscious exploration. The apprehension of textual image, a "back and forth sensing" among self, world and memory, is recirculative. Reader, language and memory enfold within the writing. These essays turn to the past as they look to the future, while remaining grounded in the watershed of the present. The river becomes atemporal and still touches all temporal states. Essayistic meandering binds with (self-) consciousness: "the essayists have presented thought in the shape of story, the story of their own transformation as they wrote, our own as we read" (Hesse 188). Much of Kineth's attention relates to his consciousness rather than any natural history. Transformation is central to his work.

His book opens with "An Invitation," and we plunge into the giddy style of Kineth's prose:



I offer you a story about yourself. It wears the appearance of a praise of River, of Earth, of Star. In your stolen moments grasp the tail of this praise and be lifted out of the strong current of your everyday. Fly inside the solitude of still pools and the calming staccato of rapids....

I am going to fly so deep inside the dance of a river that your everyday may be changed forever, becoming perhaps more subtly colored or perhaps more noticeably lost in a flood of sensations.... Discover your life inside these waters. Here is a way to live an enchanted life in the midst of the everyday, where every moment can open on Always. (1)

Kinseth sees the book as an opportunity to “recover” a more attuned harmony with rivers, and to situate ourselves in an endless network of associations and possibilities, so we view “the *activity* of appearances” rather than the static surface of things (1, 2). “My journey homeward is a revisioning of perception” (33).

Already there is a degree of breathless possibility in Kinseth’s prose which can appear puzzling: “[i]f you could stay with the activity of just one event forever, it would fly in an unbroken inseparable current back inside everything everywhere, including yourself. In a very real way, a bird and even yourself, expresses a star” (2). The prose departs from a linear style of argument and description: it is organic, “being is a spiral”(88). It operates as a Mandelbrot fractal does, “with the number [and form] of large events extending smoothly from the much larger number of [similarly patterned] small events” (Bak 18). Kinseth observes an immediate biological process and uses that movement as a springboard to a celestial or conceptual process that shares similar configurations or patterns. “As above, so below” is a maxim he follows as he crafts an alchemy of perception that hinges on the network of ecology: “I am attempting to walk on the thin ridge between the transitory world that I see everyday and the eternal world that I feel” (40). Metaphor is the strategy he uses to negotiate and articulate this ridge. Kinseth cultivates figures of speech and synecdoche because it is the sense of “constancy in new clothing” that he wants to impart. This constancy and power depends upon connection, between the river as part of the world around it (and vice-versa), and the connection between metaphor, place and consciousness. “By a river’s continual change, by its dependable flow forward, I am steadied” (3). Without metaphor his descriptions would lose context, as they are largely based on association and juxtaposition. Though he values “the overlooked, discarded local places” the local vanishes into the metaphorical (4).

Rivers are troped as a site for revelation and redemption; they are places where traditional boundaries are seen to melt. For Kinseth they embody the numinous. Rivers offer the clearest way of going “*inside*” a landscape: “[b]y a river’s fluidity, you can be lifted out of gravity into the midst of a wild, splitting, and fusing terrain. And the thoughts that rise out of your contemplation and the river’s purl can be like sheet lightning—whole, electrifying, purifying” (3). His is a local quest with mystical undertones that accrue through repeated visits. Familiarity breeds epiphany (a series of spiritual insights and states of mind) and the growth of introspection and Kinseth’s absorption in seeing.

Several of the writers argue that a movement towards interiority is the antidote to centuries of resource wastage and what Barri Cohen calls “technological colonialism.” Kinseth offers a paean to profligacy. One passage demonstrates his problematic tendency to move from faith in personal metaphor to statement of fact. Such a shift is troubling when it creates perceptual absences which could be filled with stories, or details that are overlooked in the rush to trope:

Inside a river’s forward-reaching, I am swept into a view that is both deeply rooted and endlessly refreshing. A river is a long view—a penetrating line that swims back to its living origin and sweeps ahead into its future, remaining in touch with it all. There is a rivering of sorts in everything, in the belly of a valley—in the physical river, of course—and in the microecology of the veining of every leaf and across the back of my hands and inside of my looking eyes, in the atmosphere and in the ocean—yes, in the middle of all that water—and in the astroecology of galaxies.

In every local landscape, and especially in everyone’s remembered river, I have come to believe that we can stumble upon our pilgrim ship and its glory road, all wrapped into one. Here is the elixir for which we have been willing to search worlds to discover. (4)

The Prologue hammers home the commitment to the local: “the essence of travel involves bringing the world inside our identity. We begin to revision the local place as no longer simply a prologue or background to our journey but the journey itself” (8).<sup>11</sup> Place is spiritualised through rhetoric, not historical or local detail. He relives *Walden* and reinforces a cult of male solitude with a river that will accommodate any fantasy.

I suggest this fantasy is a masculinist position, particularly Kinseth’s, that tends to homogenise the diversity of place through abundant metaphor. The cartographic grip has been replaced by spiralling (and thus perhaps more acquisitive and relentless) figuration. Richard Phillips has theorised masculinity in travelling and imperialistic contexts. He suggests a network of positions regarding the male river-watcher: “the metaphorical femininity of the landscape presents an other against which the hero can define his masculine self. This is a figurative expression of the more general mapping of masculinity (including masculine culture, society) in relation to constructions of femininity (landscape, nature)... [Annette] Kolodny argues that the feminised earth may be constructed as lover, mother, and/or other feminine archetypes” (601). A remarkable number of these male writers trope the river as feminine. Bachelard allies the river with the female, as does the neo-Freudian William Niederland. Kinseth’s work is important because it demonstrates quite clearly how the writer can attempt to replicate the river’s torrents in a rush of metaphor.

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<sup>11</sup> This “revisioning” is affirmed by Sanders; for Tim Palmer rivers “must be a focal point of local culture” (*Lifelines* 223). Paul Carter has questioned the reification of the fixed: “despite the normality of displacement, we find the migrant vilified.... Living in a new country is not an eccentricity: it is the contemporary condition” (*Living* 7, 8). Why has nomadism become a burden for the present when it is the oldest form of human existence? The “indigenous” peoples are not cast in stone and mounted on the shore, frozen. Their travel and adjustment to seasonal change is a product of experience in the local place. What ties Sanders and Carter together is their commitment to “tread lightly” on the new place they now inhabit (Carter 8).

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The first chapter, “Homing” affirms the process of settling through inner journeys. Travel is scorned even while it remains his first impulse. Kinseth regards himself as “an anchorite seeking to be steadied inside the permanence that this landscape always affords me” (10). What he is trying to do is to relish the love he holds for his homeplace as a basis for inspiration around the world. The “permanence” is a product of the interconnectedness and flux of all things: once change is accepted as the foundation, fluid solidity becomes a possibility.<sup>12</sup> Kinseth melds concepts of New Age positivism, Buddhism and Gaia theory by locating himself in “a continual coming to and leaving of form” which defines his metaphor of “rivering,” of motion and life: “I am a stream overlaying a stream, and under rivers of sky that are shimmers lost in a cosmic stream” (12). In his river, Kinseth’s metaphoric range is extended towards all rivers; the “perceptual drink” taken from the river intoxicates him. The paragraph that follows uses more and more metaphoric association to try to “grasp” the river, but the water simply runs through the fist of language: “The river is a tea alive and vital,” “vital like a protoplasm,” “a Van Gogh plasma.... elemental and yet a masterwork.... a fine art, a Cezanne form within form or a Rothko color field” (15-16). The “bowl” of the riverbed is a “terrine,” the layers of elements informing Kinseth’s figurative brew (16). Even at this early stage the river demands associative torrents. Assessing the efficacy of these figurations is instructive.

“Homing” is structured around “the full season of one day” by the river. The observations of the diurnal sequence become a metonymy for the seasons of a year or a life. Kinseth follows the interplay of metonymy and synecdoche as a way of measuring nuances of observation: “[t]he local mirrors the cosmic” (31). His description depends upon figurative language and a torrent of metaphor; these encodings (“rivering” is just one of them) can overwhelm the reader, as Kinseth’s vision outpaces the limits of his language. His response? Add more metaphor and extend the analogies, until the bank is breached. Few of the other essayists complain about the limits of representation; they have less need to represent their epiphanies as constants. Rather, they use shifts in tone to register their peak experiences. But Kinseth is all peak! He leaps into the language, testing it and composing a range of conceptual alliances between the particular and the general, the local and the cosmic. In this regard he distills an essayistic tradition. This is despite the fact that for much of the time *River Eternal* attempts to function with the resonant figurative echoes of the prose poem. Lyricism and figuration form an imperative of revelation: every image must tell and refer outside itself at once. His use of the transcendent mode demands this and ensures the

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<sup>12</sup> It is a way of seeing that Wendell Berry has also written of, in a less fulsome (but equally revealing) manner: “What is to be known about [a place] is without limit, and it is endlessly changing. Knowing is therefore like breathing: it can happen, it stays real, only on the condition that it *continues* to happen. As soon as it is recognized that a river—or for that matter, a home—is not a place but a process, not a fact but an event, there ought to come an immense relief: one can step into the same river twice, one can go home again” (“Unforeseen” 248).

mode (rather than the physical basis for it, the river) tends to break through the limits of reading, to saturate the reader in image. What other options does the writer have? One might be silence and the use of gaps, as Moore and others demonstrate.

Kinseth argues that our means for apprehending nature are limiting: "A landscape is a tapestry, yes but one too fluid to be picked up by the ends to be examined.... How to grasp hold of a river?" (42).<sup>13</sup> He observes "the infinity of smallness" by staying "with the object ... its activity" is part of a network of events: "a river is full of small worlds" (21). The river is at odds with the framing convention of landscape, because it is constantly moving. So Kinseth picks up the range of his prose:

Below all this air, below the forest, the river lies so central, catching the last light of the day and the first star on its surface. Like the most consciously intended city, the river has chosen a route right through the center of everything. And yet a river is everywhere. The river cannot be said to stop at a bankside, for bankside drips river that is falling off the hills, and it is also inside the sky reaching up over the river. (26)

Kinseth's undercurrent here is the hydrologic cycle. Yi-Fu Tuan has discussed its impact on seventeenth-century theology.<sup>14</sup> Implicit in this passage is the transpiration of water; that elemental shift evokes the passage of flesh into dust and spirit. The latter permeates all things and endures the ravages of time. Kinseth's faith transfers from the benedictions of a God to the perpetual movement at every level that composes the world and universe. The river offers evidence of continuity in an age when religious certainties have either faded or taken on a stridency intemperate with Kinseth's non-specific (yet fulsome) centripetal-to-centrifugal apprehensions. God has been replaced by streaming atoms and blood and tea, but the transcendent impulse shines clearly through this transposed object of veneration. The signs differ, but the motivation to connect with a transpersonal force remains strong.

*River Eternal* (the promise of eternity does have religious associations) revels in the overlap between inner and outer worlds, and the transpiration between river and metaphor. It is the clearest example of the transcendent qualities of a pure river, demonstrating the heights to which a river can send the writer. Leading hydrologist Luna B. Leopold says "this exchange goes on

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<sup>13</sup> Late in the book comes a conclusion—an admission—that defers to the language of the river as Sanders does: "My voice is as fluid and as useless and as precious as water. It is the voice of one who has no explanation for anything.... Yes, like you I believe there is an answer. But this answer cannot fit the shape of a word. When I have tried to cut up the earth or shape it whole into a word, the best that I have done is to cause a rain of ideas. My best perception is only a veil with dim figures in the distance. Perhaps they are nothing really, only ghosts of an idea" (106-7)

<sup>14</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *The Hydrologic Cycle and the Wisdom of God*. Kinseth's is a religious text and its pantheism has both ancient and modern sources. He links pagan practice from ancient and contemporary times and uses the Transcendentalists as a lynchpin between this range. It strives to reach higher and higher levels, braiding consciousness and connection with a universal power. Where God may have been the divine force in the past, Kinseth transfers his divine longings to the river. As readers we can make any further leaps we like.

continually: Water goes from earth to atmosphere to earth” (4). His description of the hydrologic cycle also describes Kinseth’s associative perceptions of self, river and astroecology.

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In keeping with the venerable associations of the hydrologic cycle, and my emphasis on a recirculating process of river reflection, a cyclical motif runs through Kinseth’s work. His “quest” is a search for origins (“I am derived from fish bone and a ganglion nerve chamber that specialized into a brain” [80]) but it is also a search for connections: “self is a river” (83). To this end (or rather, this “circle of continuation and permanence” [82]) Kinseth regards activity as ongoing and interrelated: “All events fly forward, but their complete essence also involves a process of returns, of come-arounds.... I sweep out in my physical respiration and in my perception, and my water body stream is a spinning water planet woven to its star stream. The physical river is before my hands, but I am deep inside the river eternal, and it is real, not [he warns us] imaginary” (82). Homing, streaming, passage: these processes coalesce to form the notion of “rivering” (“this sense of direction—this passage-taking”), “which is always present and yet always fluid and moving forward” (73, 81). The directional certainty gives him focus; it combines with his connective tropes to form a rhetoric of holism and create his sense of belonging. Kinseth circulates between self and perception rather than self and community or story.

Cycles of return and connection keep spiralling Kinseth towards transcendence. He extends metaphors that trope water as continuity and change, purification and renewal as epitomised by the hydrologic cycle:

Like back and forth sensing there is always something beginning where something appears to have ended. Water rings go out from a stone in the river. Windblown seed lift their withering rootstock. The sea is lifted to become a cloud, and a cloud dissolves to rain or snow. Where is the beginning of one thing and the end of another? Each event is not a new thing as much as it is a rebirth. I pick up a stone and I pick up the past. I toss it into the river and I toss it into the future. (79)

Once again, Kinseth makes the transition between two worlds through metaphor, troping the essayist’s characteristic “movement from the individual to the universal” (Lopate xl). Kinseth performs this movement more than any other essayist I read here. It is a fundamental component of his reliance on metaphor, for in the associative movement between likenesses he is drawn to larger cognate symbols and patterns. For most of his first chapter those patterns have been realised through visual means. His *riverscape* has run over the frame that surrounds *landscape*, but he has yet to transcend language as he might like to.<sup>15</sup> He now desires escape from narrative and perceptual limits.

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Landscape’ is increasingly theorised as a “discursive terrain” (Daniels and Cosgrove 59). “Landscape is a form of knowledge and a form of commentary” (Wevers, “A Story of Land” 9). In landscape convention the preservation

Kinseth realises his dependence on sight as he faces dusk. With the seen world diminished, he is relieved of the burden of figuration. As a writer taken by the proliferation of likeness and difference in the watershed, Kinseth finds a measure of solace in stopping to rest his eyes and *listen*. Wallace Stegner's essay "The Sound of Mountain Water" sees the appeal of the aural in a writing field so taken by the visual scene and landscape.<sup>16</sup> For Kinseth the sound of the river offers another chance for a variation in his book-length epiphany: "Suddenly I go from sitting by a river and watching it to being inside the sound, and I can feel, not just imagine, a streaming that is weaving inside me" (26). The man does not stop; the river's motion compels commentary and the gaps between insights shrink until there is no respite from description and metaphor. Space, water and time are redolent with likenesses of themselves. He is attempting to drown the notion of formal boundary. The urge to survey and describe quietens, although his distrust of imagination does not. Kinseth stills as night falls and events become "judgeless" (27). Under the cover of darkness and sound there is a chance for escape from text. But it is slim: can Kinseth abdicate the certainty of the line?

### Netted by the language

After Kinseth's extended metaphor of the river as a place for revelation, his second chapter, "Streaming," explores the story of the home in motion, "the stream that is in touch with all" (38). This universal force has to become a textual stream; he is compelled to convert this current into writing.

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of memory and the control of territory and people become a strategic, scopic act: "Landscape is a social and cultural product, a way of seeing projected onto the land and having its own techniques and compositional form; a restrictive way of seeing that diminishes alternative modes of experiencing our relations with nature" (Cosgrove, *Social Formation* 269). Diluted, static and pre-emptive, it is, as theorists such as Denis Cosgrove argue, a container for "the visual representation of a bourgeois, rationalist conception of the world" and achieving, through linear perspective, "the control and domination over space as an absolute objective entity, its transformation into the property of individual or state.... One of the consistent purposes of landscape painting has been to present an image of order and proportioned control, to suppress the evidence of tension and conflict between social groups and within human relations in the environment. ("Prospect" 49, 46, 58) B.C. writer Don Gayton stresses the fixity of the convention; in doing so he highlights the ways these river writers confront movement and change and let that process occur: "Like the primal landscape and the remembered landscape, the perceived landscape is not supposed to change" (62). Scott Russell Sanders provides us with one of the finest recent definitions: "What we call landscape is a stretch of earth overlaid with memory, expectation and thought. Land is everything that is actually *there*, independent of us; landscape is what we allow in the doors of perception" (*Hunting for Hope* 7). Sanders echoes my sense of the ways riverscape accrues and depends on memory and feeling.

<sup>16</sup> Stegner writes of Henry's Fork on the Snake River. "By such a river it is impossible to believe that one will ever be tired or old. Every sense applauds it. Taste it, feel its chill on the teeth: it is purity absolute. Watch its racing current, its steady renewal of force: it is transient and eternal" (42). Here are the contradictory and bound qualities of (wild-)riverness that fascinate so many writers, and that evocative adjective (eternal) that has hooked Kinseth.

Kineth uses the metaphor of writing and language (as well as weaving<sup>17</sup>) to create a picture of the river. The river “is a signpost with so many messages as to be indecipherable. And yet the arabesque of its scripts, its fluidity, draws me with compelling force” (27). Kineth feels able to “read” and decipher a grammared, punctuated riverscape. The text works as “a call to make visible” (36). Intent on revelation, he explores a tributary of the river:

I stop and balance on the creek’s round, moist cobble. There are diamonds scattered sparingly on the clear-as-glass shallows. I am trying to decipher its script of sand ripples and its punctuation of small stones and the random comma trails of fingernail clams. The sand reads like an automatic painting, too consistent to be disarray, and yet ambiguous enough to be patterned chaos.... Looking like romanticism, this view is the unabashed wonder of reality. (36-7)

This “view” of the river as a kind of textual collage is highly stylised and I would argue it *is* Romantic.<sup>18</sup> Romanticism is Kineth’s lens: it composes and filters the way he understands the world as a numinous teaching site that “speaks” to him. The ungraspable river motivates his desire for connection. The Romantics felt “art is created only by the upsurge of grand passions (even if the object of this passion is merely the language)” (Eco, “Aesthetic” 97). Kineth’s rhetorical upsurge or torrent looks like romanticism (the site speaks, the individual is ennobled and inspired by that site, and the less pleasant aspects of the modern world vanish beneath the wonder of Nature as observed by the solitary rambler). Efforts at rendition also inspire and captivate; his “series of connotative chains” takes on its own furious, streaming momentum. (Eco, “Aesthetic” 92) Kineth’s vision is not the dreamlike maiden of Shelley’s *Alastor* or Keats’s *Belle Dame*; rather, the apparition appears as the diffuse symbol-form known here as “river eternal.” This site, rendered in lush prose, takes on an aura of significance. Kineth’s vision is attuned to the vitality of things in the everyday: what I may regard as Romantic is the norm for him. This everyday is enriched with association and an innuendo of numinosity. The transcendent trajectory of his

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<sup>17</sup> “My prairie river valley is a fluid tapestry of current that gathers and transforms energy. Each appearance is a strand—a current—in a birthing and aging tapestry.... Each strand threads in and through, up and down, touching the countless other strands that thread and stream across it, all moving forward, weaving the appearance of a valley” (41). Each landscape is composed of different events and activities that warp and weave together and create a whole. Theodor Adorno’s idea of the essay as a woven product is relevant here: “Not less but more than a definitional procedure, the essay presses for reciprocal interaction of its concepts in the process of intellectual experience. In such experience concepts do not form a continuum of operations. Thought does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture” (Adorno 13).

<sup>18</sup> His passage works well with Paul Carter’s discussion of the picturesque. Carter describes the picturesque as “a form of eloquence... a spatial figure of speech... It exhibited a spatial grammar. Picturesque country was country that spoke for itself” (Carter, *Road* 246). Land is, therefore, the material basis for the refashioned punctuation by ‘Capability’ Brown reported (“not without irony,” Carter adds) by Hannah More:

‘He illustrates everything he says about gardening with some literary or grammatical allusion. He told me he compared his art to literary composition. “Now *there*,” he said, pointing his finger, “I make a comma, and *there*,” pointing to another spot, “where another turn is proper, I make a colon; at another point where an interruption is desirable to break the view, a parenthesis; now a full stop, and then I begin another subject.’ (246-7)

project forms through his insistence on an embellished (astro)ecology. If the reader questions his stance we are quieted with a protestation like the one above: this is real. Wonder always rescues him from doubt. Kinseth attracts a postcolonial and Romantic “sense of connection,” feeling that he and a flower or a leaf are part of “one diverse river of genetic gossip,” and then articulates his own fairly *prescriptive* view of that river (38).

This gossiping river braids its way through his chapter of observation and receptivity. Metaphors of writing continue, but the verbed water is still elusive: an approaching storm is termed “the structure of a verbing,” while “the rapids of the river reveal anecdotes about the storm. They are like a word for storms, and in this valley an epilogue” (44). After the storm passes Kinseth walks into the stillness, “hear[ing] a language beyond words, a music and a mother tongue that I cannot decipher, even though I, too, may be speaking it” (48).

I am at the mouth of the rivulet where I began my quest for the essence of streaming. The rivulet speaks as it empties into the river. The sand bottom seems to perk up and wrinkle at the gossip that this rivulet is sharing. It is gibberish to me and yet it is an entrancing foreign tongue. I have decided to remain by this obvious parting mouth, and to mark down the meter and the repetitions, looking for that first small word that will lead to another. This language of all waters seems as ambiguous as the shady edges of the two middle letters of any word. It has the rich look of flight like arabesque. Suddenly the first small word rises rapidly like a body flying out of the river. (49)

The next paragraph begins, naturally, with a widemouth bass breaking the surface of the water: “Some body has cracked its head on this river’s roof” (48). The fish’s leap is an ancient sign that speaks to Kinseth (just as it speaks to David James Duncan in his short fiction “Northwest Passage.”) His “quest” continues, a journey which sees the river as a source for all knowledge, all things. The wilderness is teacher. Kinseth’s entire metaphor of the river as a speaking force and constant source of inspiration harks back to Cicero, Seneca and others, as Herendeen notes: “Speech, knowledge, truth, man’s ability to control the world he has been given through language and wisdom, are ideas confluent in their treatment of the river, so that in the response to this aspect of nature is contained a simultaneous awareness of the *flumen orationis* and *flumen verborum*” (“Rhetoric” 108).<sup>19</sup>

Kinseth retreats to the river to find a source of unbroken continuity (the Utopian fantasy, evident in Romanticism and appropriative New Age “white shamanism”), a continuity which is, ironically, broken and displaced by a dam some miles away from his beloved valley. His preservation of the wholeness-in-flux that we call “river” is thus a stubborn and insistent antidote

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<sup>19</sup> Herendeen footnotes his sentence as follows: “The phrases are from Cicero: *Academica*, II, 119, and *De Natura Deorum*, II, 1, and are used to compare the golden stream of eloquence with empty language and false rhetoric. This use of words originally pertaining to rivers to describe aspects of rhetoric, such as “fons,” “fluo,” “confluo,” and “flumen,” is commonplace in Latin literature” (108-9, n2).



to a fragmentation of seeing.<sup>20</sup> Self and language determine the breadth of his conceptual metaphors of “streaming” and “homing.” These metaphors have their own limitations, ones that become increasingly apparent as the book unfolds. It may be that Kinseth’s overflow of figurative language ends up obscuring the river itself. His point is that the singular river is everywhere, and ‘his’ river is all rivers. The essential river is his local one because it mirrors all others. A pattern is spotted, then mapped onto the world and universe in a form of Mandelbrot-inspired colonisation. But as Kinseth proceeds, his doubts grow: the essential river may not ever appear in text, firstly because his senses are not equipped to see it, secondly because the text cannot represent it, no matter how many metaphors are deployed. The longing to write the “river in itself” is stymied by the limits of language (Sanders 89). The longing to accurately write the Pure, True and Real river is allied with the atavistic longing for Edenic language: orality appeals in an age of fixed text. To truly write the river, Kinseth implies, he must transcend language. Hence the great appeal of sound for him as dusk falls. For Kinseth, finding words for the river itself is like speaking words that apparently cannot exist. Pondering the early Edenic tongue, Umberto Eco wrote “there is no linguistic mechanism for uttering / . . . / , and therefore this sensation is not susceptible of formal insertion into their [Adam and Eve’s] referential system” (Eco, “Aesthetic” 94). Perhaps, as dusk falls, Kinseth confronts a similar problem. Furthermore, the river is different for every viewer. Each person will see different patterns and forms.

The river is always changing, expanding to swallow every cluster of metaphor offered. Adorno’s “cross-connections” have become connotative, self-replicating floods, overflows of figuration that runnel, condense and transpire into more words, more likenesses, and a damp fever of rhetorical hyperventilation. The clarity of the water mocks insight, draws perception out and runs away with it; language unravels behind until the only certainty is a fluid, garrulous and uncontained continuity. Vision runs away with itself:

My eyes find fresh new possibilities in this highway, in this fish house, in this refuse dump, in this body with long green hair, in this plow, in this liquid foot, and in this condensed rain. Each tea drop of this river is capable of bursting open and pouring forth a thousand new images. (20-1)

Are we, after this river journey and vision, simply back in the cave, gloating at the shadows of the water table? “The essayist is” after all, “fascinated with perception” (Lopate xxxiv-v). However, much of Kinseth’s rhetoric produces “a rain of ideas” (or a drenching in figuration) that can obscure the place and its stories, politics and problems (107). He wants to drench the

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<sup>20</sup> Victor Burgin characterises visual brokenness as endemic in the media-saturated present: “[t]he image as object of contemplation has been blasted into so many metaphoric representatives: ‘bites’ and ‘clips’” (Burgin 192). Kinseth wishes to extend the reach of these representatives, and unite them in a braided streaming of words and perception: “nature, like everything else we talk about, is first and foremost an artifact of language” (Chaloupka and Cawley 5).

reader in baroque stylistic tendencies to convey his own sense of excitement and the universality of his local river.<sup>21</sup>

A river's response to verisimilitude is likely to be more chattering, rapid-born(e) laughter. The ultimately inexplicable nature of 'nature' is, for many, one of its inspirations. Wendell Berry, for example, is not fazed by the ways language remains incomplete: "For the wilderness, which is to say the universe, we have no words. We deal with its stones, its trees, its water. We ask ourselves which will be the best way to go. Our words are for the way we have been" (*Recollected*, 257-8). Is it possible that this river, the "remnant freestream," "squeeze[d] into a thin line" of text, is then erased by Kinseth's increasingly anxious struggle to "grasp" it with language (51, 53, 42)? This doubt builds as his book proceeds.

Kinseth adopts a natural historian's mode of specificity for a meditation on the life of clams: for a time the style grounds and slow itself a little. At no other point does he engage with his own anecdotal memories in the same way as his dam side clam-gathering. But the specifics float away: two paragraphs later he is back in a freewheel of metaphor. Despite the appeal to universality—"this story is every story; make your own now in your local place"—the lack of specificity does not always illuminate the unique world of his local flora, fish or riverbed. He would rather illuminate his visions of the world. But his energy can derail his best intentions. Epiphany is a component of much personally based nature writing, but epiphany alone lacks differentiation; there is no plateau of awareness from which to depart. A mountain requires the riverbed from which to rise; the river would not exist without the sloping land to guide the stream. Without variation, the high alpine plateau stretches for miles, lit only by the faint glimmer of ungraspable mirage.

Attempting a hands-off approach that universalises rather than specifies, Kinseth attempts to make his river all rivers. Kinseth has not relayed the river's natural history in great detail, nor its human history. Unlike Edward Hoagland's *Dead Diamond River*, Janet Lembke's *North Carolina Neuse*, Kim Stafford's *Siuslaw*, Moore's *Oregon rivers* or Sanders' *Ohio*, Kinseth's nameless river is not given any human history outside his own presence there.<sup>22</sup> A coal town puffs

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<sup>21</sup> He is an anomaly, a champion of the local and a committed anti-regionalist, because he is democratic with his aesthetic: he wants the world to see as he does, to become enraptured in life and language. This democratic impulse has old roots in American literature, as Alessandro Portelli observes. Kinseth's rhetorical saturation aims to create a kind of figurative abundance: when everything is covered in his way of seeing, the lens will be transparent. But that supposed transparency has dangerous connotations: "The price of an opacity that calls itself transparency is the invisibility of the other: the American continent can be transparent to 'manifest destiny' because its actual inhabitants are declared non-existent" (Portelli 34). The unpeopled, unstoried nature of Kinseth's river valley is troubling. He is too busy troping the river to deal with human stories.

<sup>22</sup> Chaloupka and Cawley discuss the way such absence marginalises indigenous peoples. Paul Carter makes lucid insight into the *mention* of indigenous peoples which problematises utterance: the "longing the Europeans project on to the Aborigines, making them the human other with whom alone a dialogue might be opened that does not suppress the 'noise' of the country, its reluctance to be represented. But that dialogue was never opened, the Aborigines were silenced, assimilated to a figure of speech instead, a figure that marked their absence from the

upstream and his city roars seventy miles below, but still his is a river-portrait without declared human or wildlife (hi)stories. Ultimately we learn more about Kinseth's consciousness than the valley itself. This is no bad thing; but other possible worlds have been closed for the reader, other voices erased in his 'year zero' rush of metaphor. "Surprisingly," he admits, "it remains much more difficult to imagine how my everyday, which is largely outside this valley, can be a river. At one moment culture seems to be too far ahead, and at another too ignorant and too inconsistent and too self-absorbed to match the wisdom of the rivervalley" (84). The waters that restore him to his world and himself are curiously (perhaps deliberately) indistinct, as if the impression of a river will help us blend his waters with our own, continuing the contract between reader and author towards understanding. His community there is non-human, that "tapestry" of vaguely defined activity, plant and creature, a riparian "symbolic network" (to quote Herendeen) that is more pronounced, detailed *and disembodied* than any other I consider (Kinseth 42, Herendeen 108). This site needs explication, he has admitted as much. But attempts to describe seem only to contain. When phenomenology is the basis for his project, it seems feasible to regard the work as a self-referential unit, a recirculative fractal. But the fractal still has a strict (nay rigid) memory of its own. Its germination determines its completion.

Given that Barry Lopez is acknowledged for his early support, it is not surprising that Kinseth notes the power of the river as a source for stories. Watching the debris of cities float by (and there is a vast amount of it, for example, guns, dead animals, litter, a postcard, a clock, a razor and a telephone pole) he surmises that stories may be "the easiest way inside this landscape. By going to the obscure and the tiny, I am again shown that in the small vastness is revealed.... a vast planet is a star's anecdote" (86). But anecdotes are thin on the ground: where have the people, holders of memory and anecdote, gone? Do rivers need stories? Do we humans need them to? We seem to. I have known rivers through their stories and histories, as well as their ecologies. Humans are a part of that ecology, after all. This is why I ask where has Kinseth's past and his own river gone to? Perhaps they have all become our own. As readers, we let Kinseth's river wash over our way of seeing. Will we look to our rivers with new eyes? When you walk through the air, do you feel the eddying currents?

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By attributing the concept of process to events in the river valley Kinseth ensures the metaphor of "streaming" undergirds both his narrative method and his conceptual and perceptual apparatus. His use of mixed metaphor points to the constructed nature of representation. Kinseth relishes the social and rhetorical construction of nature; unlike Neil Evernden, for example (who argues our construct of nature has forced damage upon the world, and might declare the River Eternal a no-

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language" (*Living* 88). In a sense Kinseth tropes the river as Carter says Aborigines have been ciphered, silencing the water with his metaphors.

man's land, so it (or *humans*) can work its way free of metaphor). Kinseth thinks the wild pockets *need* explication, not for their own sake, but for ours. He wants us to see like him, replicating and recoding the river. This scopic accumulation is problematic. It tends to colonise a site with one conceptual sweep to function as "the practical reconquest of the sense of place" (Jameson 51).

Frederic Jameson defines something of this metaphoric mapping of the river. Mental mapping involves "the practical reconquest of a sense of place and construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories" (Jameson 51). Jameson's comments are relevant because they describe the portability of Kinseth's metaphors: "I stuff my house in my shoes. And no matter how far this shanty house wanders, this journey is always homeward... You must realize now that you can find this place within your place" (106-7, 114). Kinseth's appreciation of the local is *conceptual* homing; it is not an exercise that depends on a wild riverbank (though his begins there). His means of representing this feeling state is conceptual: his language attempts (and eludes) the virtual and still allows for general interaction. It is a river-based way of seeing and thinking, but the mapping he does is more generalised. He refuses to name; he tries to leave control to the river: the river-centred text might take its cues from the water alone. But Kinseth later realises that his cues are embedded in language and can disalienate wild space. Jameson's quotation in fact begins thus: "Disalienation in the traditional city, then, involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place" (Jameson 51). The process of disalienation crosses urban and 'wild' space through metaphor and memory. As Kinseth enters the second chapter of his work, he begins to see its limits. I want to quickly trace the way his doubts evolve through the rest of his work; his system of perception comes under swift scrutiny as means and ends collide. The river might provide a way beyond the impasse between linguistic tools and perceptual ambition.

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Kinseth's second essay, "Streaming," affirms the search for belonging begun in "Homing." He begins to ease the desire for control, "to journey and behold rather than search for a way out" (63). Part of Kinseth's strategy of control is his desire to describe everything, to practise a rhetorical "exhaustiveness" that Gillian Rose sees as totalizing and restrictive in geographic knowledges (Rose 101). Kinseth inverts Rose's stereotype of the masculinist geographer desperately accumulating knowledge: he is acquisitive of feeling and experience, but it is the impulse to "grasp" through language that troubles him. He knows the limits, and the river keeps overflowing past them as he attempts to utter what poet Liz Zetlin terms the language of River, "a tongue you're just learning to speak" ("Said the River—two"). Kinseth's language operates like a net of metaphor laid over every process in his (no one else seems to appear in this magical

fiefdom) river valley. Expansiveness becomes a force of inverse containment: his view dominates, and this worries him.

Only in conclusion does Kinseth relent, assessing his limited expression as a problem of equipment (rather like blaming the tennis racquet). The equipment failure is acute because the river keeps on rolling beyond his capacity to trope it. *River Eternal* is important as a river text because it paradoxically spends half its time demonstrating there is no such thing as an effective river text. Description can become an obsession, hence Kinseth's relief at twilight, where he is not compelled to relay everything he sees: darkness takes away his words and coaxes listening. His eyes "are not organs designed to show me the earth" and are declared faulty (103). Vision, language, and ego: all are unworthy for the purpose of representation. So, in listening Kinseth begins the movement towards another kind of immersion (in sound), before his immersion in the water itself. Evidence of continuity and change informs Kinseth's third chapter, "Passage." The way to "grasp" may involve letting go, thereby submerging desire.

By accepting the potential of change Kinseth appears to accept his limits. He begins to face his "grandest fear... that I understand next to nothing. I have found the waters, but I am inside a turbulence where all events, no matter how rock-firm, are chaotic waters—percolating, eroding, tortuous" (62). This important transition marks a "passage" from a need for certainty and control (dams) to acceptance of the wild (a freestreaming river), a movement towards an elusive "watershed way of acting" and the tantalising process of learning to "think [and write!] like a river" (Kinseth 60; Worster, *Rivers*, 331).

Kinseth's immersion in the opening paragraph of chapter four, "Going Inside", suggests the limits of metaphor have been acknowledged. But he must race to that real river, because he is running out of pages. So pure connection is his aim: a series of "shortcuts" (a rivulet, the veins of a hand or leaf) to the river eternal are like metonymic signs that lead to the chaos of the rivered universe (91). For him the Earth is a small fragment afloat on galactic currents that spin and whirl within the galaxy, a river full of dying suns and supernovas. The physical river is therefore seen as "a cosmos's energy being expressed," but not as a place of others' myths, or pioneer histories (97). This is about *personal* experience and subjective phenomenology. It is a route towards human enlightenment, rather than anything that exists in its own right. Kinseth appears to *use* the river (or it uses *him*; who, after all, has been grasped here?) as a liquid highway to nirvana. "A river is as many things as there are perceptions," but it does *not* depend upon those perceptions (99). That said, *we* depend upon those perceptions to see the river, and are often bound by language in our explanations of it.

## Transcendence

tulips meteors  
what yu dont

## Transcendence

tulips meteors  
what yu dont  
know

watr & th  
magic current

bill bissett, "growth uv herbs"

Kineth's use of the river as a site for transcendence foreshadows (in a concentrated form) the use other essayists (and writers like David James Duncan in *The River Why*) make of rivers. Personal salvation may spring from riparian contemplation, offering a sense of connection with the natural world, and an understanding of the true scale of human ego there. But the development of bonds with other people, so central to *The River Why* or Moore's essays, is subsumed in *River Eternal*. There are different conceptual and non-human communities he prefers to attend to. "This [river] channel expresses the art of tea and waves, perhaps appreciated most by the clam's blind shining" (99).<sup>23</sup> Where, after all this metaphor, has the river gone? Kineth's point is that the river always moves and gestures beyond itself: even in its own becoming its flow is heading towards other meanings. As the book evolves Kineth sees his meanings have helped the river remain free: it is not easily grasped. Yet there is no one way of interacting that is 'right.' This very diversity is a marker of the cultural freight rivers still bear.

The "back and forth sensing" Kineth uses feeds a cycle of "recirculation" between self and perception (79). The reason I open with Kineth is because his circular pattern between text and world is explicit and suggestive, and this process of recirculation is central to my thesis. Self and river transpire through metaphor, itself a transpiring process. Kineth's approach tends to elide the beginnings of story because it also elides a range of memory. The river seems to have vanished under its own waves of representation. In a sense the final chapter "Going Inside" acknowledges the need to restore the eddied reader to the *river* itself, rather than a *metaphoric* current. But this shift (if, in text, such a move is ever possible) does not occur until the epilogue. That section reveals a man intent on literal immersion.

Kineth makes his ultimate immersion in "The Voice in the Willow Quarter." The Epilogue is a time for contemplation and reckoning, conclusion and confession. Here, he admits his concerns over his perceptual limits—"My voice is as fluid and as useless and as precious as water"—and his exultation now rests upon the fact there is always more than we can see, yet the limited tools we have are indispensable (106). His connections and fluid interplays with the river are "a tale that can never be fully told or sung, and, as ancient as it is, this tale is just beginning"

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<sup>23</sup> In this solitary impulse he is simply echoing Thoreau's guidelines laid down in "Walking."

(112). The river will keep on telling its purling story after we die. Kinseth shifts from a desire for exhaustive description to an acceptance of the limits of language and human knowledge. He stops grasping, and offers the river to us.

Thus his conclusion shifts narrative point of view: the entire book is offered as a metaphor that has stemmed from and obscured the *reader's* inner voice (which, he suggests, is a landscape in its own right). "Who is this old fox to whom you have been listening?" "Nothing is really that different," he adds (113). When we isolate an object, a thing, we deny its interdependence within a pattern of events. Thus Kinseth can see his own face in the land ("just different whorls in one diverse river of nature" [100]); he suggests the earth dances in our mirrored reflection. "Each 'thing' is really nothing, because it is really no one thing, and more than its appearances, and ultimately perhaps everything" (113). His shift to second-person narration for the book's last pages attempts to bind us to his unnamed river. In his tapestry we are all one with the river and its overflowing, continuous life: "You are beginning to trust that you can be anything when your thinking is untied. Your lips part like gills and you drink in a particle of wind before it runs under a cloud, and you awaken" (115).

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According to Graham Good, "[t]he heart of the essay as a form is th[e] moment of characterization, of recognition, of figuration, where the self finds a pattern in the world and the world finds a pattern in the self.... Self and object are configured in mutually illuminating ways" (22). The process of placement is central to the river essayists' work; placing the self in flux enriches the process of river reflection. Kinseth's writing is dense with his making; the reader can return to continue a process of unravelling and connection prompted by his highly wrought prose style. But ultimately he rejects that baroque attempt at description in favour of turning to the river and honouring the fact it can never be "told" into conclusion; the river eternal is just that and it runs on after breath ceases. Perception is always "eroding" and certainties become "chaotic waters" (62).

Kinseth's river is not so much a contained physical entity as a source for metaphor: nameless, nearly unstoried, it becomes a receptive space for his own figurative language. And the river exists outside that language, no matter how hard Kinseth grasps.

Figuration is the basis for *River Eternal*, a transitive medium that forms a recirculation between reader, author and image. Astroecology becomes the shared referent. As a consequence I read or perceive much of this eternal river from a distancing vantage point, an eyrie built on baroque rhetoric. It is a difficult river to get close to: as readers we are not coddled into familiarity, we must seek our own way of local seeing. Kinseth speaks of "the *experience* of inseparability from the landscape," but reading *River Eternal* became, for me, an object lesson in our inseparability from *language* within our view of the landscape (91). "I have become a current," he

states (93). And so the metaphors flow on. But the river flows too; for Kinseth, the troping watcher, the language and the stream are interdependent.

Kinseth asserts his “revising of place” depends upon depth of self more than depth of locale (96). The prose is embedded in the notion of the sublime, but his insistence on metaphor and the river at once foregrounds and silences human agency. *River Eternal* is a perfect example of the way rivers will call forth more and more descriptive language and still evade description. As I turn to the other essayists, I want to bear Kinseth’s desire to grasp the eternal river in mind. Though the other writers use local stories and histories a great deal more than he does, they also crave some kind of eternal river, a current that seems certain to go on and is somehow free of the scars of modern life. They want the haven Kinseth has found, but find the world breaches (rather than extends) their metaphoric lens.

### **The limit and reach of transcendence: Stafford and Eiseley**

Kim Stafford’s 1987 essay “River and Road” is important in the schema I consider, which ranges from the pristine rapture of Kinseth to the angry elegies of Abbey and Sanders. Stafford repudiates the prospect of epiphany as an escape from the consequences of our actions. Loren Eiseley’s “The Flow of the River” finds a middle ground between anti-escapism and the possibility of river-inspired surprise.

Kinseth’s use of metaphor is allied with consciousness. The writing depends on connection and synecdoche to establish and build his argument. For Kinseth, metaphor is the glue that holds community and awareness together. He constructs his world through language: metonymy and metaphor establish connection. These tropes overflow, embellishing their own existence, spawning anew in an effort at hyperrealism. They draw him into (and they demand) a pattern of comprehension through explication. His vision of the river flows “back and forth” between description and association: “I am coming to see the city and the [riparian] willowscape as one rich and immense spiraling story” (79, 111). Conversely Eiseley and Stafford give us a strong sense of that story without flooding us in a thousand possible rivers.

Kinseth’s definition of a dynamic “rivering” gives the viewer a sense of immersion in an endless current. Change is ongoing and involving: “I breathe and a new channel briefly opens in the world.... This streaming within a river and within myself never ceases... spreading out like water ripples in an invisible yet resonating deep chord” (30-1). Kinseth is able to walk through rivers constantly; he imagines his everyday life as a journey through currents of air; in a different kind of river, “this home continues to swim inside me” (31).

How different this ease of association is from the struggle Kim Stafford has in “River and Road.” For him these two routes (one liquid, the other solid; one primal and evocative, the other fixed and amnesiac) are allied in shape and form, but metaphor cannot transport him to a sense of



holistic association. Transcendence fails to block off the encroaching rush of modernity. Kineth makes the leap into figuration with ease. Juxtaposition is his mode of explication and inquiry. But Stafford is left in the noise of the century's end, trying to imagine the I-5 freeway near his home as the correlative of the chatter of rapids: "I thought I could school my ears to that memory of water's grace.... But my heart was weak.... the whisper I heard was not water" (Stafford 156). This is not a complaint about language or the instruments of insight; here the problem resides in the very structures of our functioning. The world is a broken place. His heart cannot bear to see this. The human assault on land and river is relentless. How can memory and story survive? In the gaps and striving of his essaying Stafford gives some possible, fragile answers. Yet his meditation on the remnants of river and memory, or hope and haven, are never certain. Joy is not an emotion that offers Kim Stafford any succour; transcendence has palled as a route for understanding. Other ways of being have crowded that path and the highway is ever present both visually and aurally. "Rivers are roads that move," said Pascal, but now the roads are paved and packed with noisy traffic (Niederland 19). There is no escape from the compromise of living as we do; even in the silence he is haunted by what the industrialised world has become. As Thoreau knew, the train's whistle and roar carries through the still night.

"River and Road" is a meticulous and accessible account of early colonial experience on the Siuslaw River. It pays homage to memory and story but laments the fact that so much of the modern world rushes too fast to stop and attend to the past, a history beside the highway above. The essay recalls the Siuslaw River as a highway in its own right and the tales of the pioneering white settlers. Later in the essay, Stafford shifts to the present. He uses a technique Sanders, Moore, Eiseley and other essayists in general have perfected in their negotiations of reflection and memory: Stafford forms a layered mixture of registers and perspectives, weaving past and present together on personal and communal levels. His process of recirculation begins in anecdote (whether communal or subjective) and extends into the watershed of story and history, as much as ecology. These three sites of complexity (anecdote, watershed and history) might offer their own metaphors, but (unlike Kineth) the writer's metaphor does not predominate. Stafford is uneasy at the contemporary river, but he is not uneasy in his use of language. It is not so much that his seeing is faulty, as it is that the modern world offers so few opportunities to locate the (ecological or historical) past in the movement and pace of 'place' today. Self and river are blocked from Kineth's "back and forth sensing" by the new river called Interstate; recirculation has been stopped and replicated in eerie mechanistic ways.

Stafford's description of this shift and mimicry is worth citing at length because it reads a kind of rivering into the freeway traffic that Kineth would appreciate. But Stafford's metaphor does not help him sleep at night as trucks rumble by. There is no easy answer to the mental crowding Stafford feels. (Kineth's river eternal seems a little further from an interstate six-lane highway.) Much of the essay functions as an elegy to the sound of mountain water, because it is so hard to hear it above the trucks on the road. The contemporary Siuslaw River has less power to

compel and focus a community; it has been overtaken. Stafford's faith in imagination also functions on a different plane. Stafford writes with his feet on the ground, grimly aware of the impacts that humans have on the land of today and tomorrow. The river is the basis for a change that continues in an (ironically) different form. No matter how many figurative comparisons are made, the new river is not a purifying site; astroecology is a long way off and the tone cannot celebrate what is here because the present disregards the forces that have shaped it, those streams of water and memory:

The road is a frozen river that never thaws.

When I stand on the overpass bridge and look down, I can see how water designed the freeway road. Six lanes follow a canyon water carved, a canyon aimed east, then north toward the Willamette River. On ramps join the road then thicken it, like generous tributaries in spate. There is a tidal ebb in the commuter rush at dawn downstream toward the city, then noon slack, and then flood tide dusk, when the lit eyes of the silversides fight their way back up-canyon, sniffing for the exact small pool where they shall spawn. (156)

The river lives on, but this snarling river "never thaws." Trapped as perpetual black ice, Stafford's static river-road bears a feral, almost sinister copy of fish migration. Water, shaper of canyons, not mere highways, has been forgotten as an elemental force. His doubt gnaws like the thrum of engines in the distance. This metallized diurnal migration holds no visceral pleasure. Jump-starting, the "silversides" leave rainbow traces on the sheer-black surface. The signs of the authentic natural experience are present everywhere, but only as diluted copies, weakened forms that have lost the power to be truly 'Natural.' Mechanical reproduction has lost its primal significance. If Kinseth desires a language full of replicant energy to do justice to his local site, then Stafford wishes that his homeplace could honour the energies of story, river and history already present in the region.

Stafford's conclusion flows exquisitely from one new "river" to the Siuslaw that still continues. He sleeps "on an island in the river..." close to the river at last. For an instant the 'authentic' river experience occurs:

Watersound woke me. Dark. I was ready to lie there season by season, to die from my life, or to live as the river lives, to climb with salmon and fall away from that final loving work like rain, to tumble headlong, to flicker away silver with light, powered by moon and sun. (157-8)

Stafford's essay affirms the continuation of rivers, and of stories that appear very different but still adhere to basic principles: the quality of memory, the sanctity of greater rhythms, and our human insignificance before (and integration with) those forces. He writes of the loss of fish in the river, the old stories of huge Chinook. Fish and timber fuelled the pioneer days. Now both have dwindled, and cars ply the air, streaming through the rain. The association with metaphor links Kinseth and Stafford, but the latter's work is laced with gaps and loss. Kinseth fills those places with words, settles the land and river through language, while Stafford is wary about attributing

too much to any form of settlement. He lets his doubts surface in the textual gaps between recollection and reflection. Memory and story become sources in a process of comparison that leaves one with a sense of former abundance and present unease; this process of comparative reflection marks many of the essays that follow in this chapter. For Stafford the Siuslaw cannot offer any constancy of epiphany. Allowing this sadness to shape his work doubles its impact. The longing for nature is primal; his experience of the natural world is not. But in his elegiac connection he makes his still striving river come alive for the reader, leaving us with an image of sound and silence, the echoes of absence that ring in our own ears.

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Loren Eiseley touches on mystery and transcendence in his essay “The Flow of The River.” Placing that 1957 essay alongside the metaphoric flights of *River Eternal* reveals the compelling spiritual force of rivers. Eiseley is important because he speaks to the limits Kineth creates through epiphany alone and crafts another way of representing perceptual power, even in the modern world of highways.

Eiseley begins his essay with a careful nod towards the numinous: “If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water” (15). One striking feature of his essay is its balance between the transcendent and factual. He understands “common water” can hold our myths and, more importantly, enable the world’s functioning: “[i]ts substance reaches everywhere; it touches the past and prepares for the future; it moves under the poles and wanders thinly in the heights of air” (16). He recounts a field trip to the Platte River.<sup>24</sup>

Eiseley’s experience of floating in the Platte River is a literary precursor to Kineth’s sense of rivering. Eiseley has an “extension of shape by osmosis” that sends him into another body of water (16). “You have probably never experienced the meandering roots of a whole watershed or felt your outstretched fingers touching, by some clairvoyant extension, the brooks of snow-line glaciers at the same time you were flowing toward the Gulf over the eroded debris of worn down mountains” (Eiseley 16). Eiseley feels this “extension” as he allows himself to float while facing old fears nascent since a childhood water accident. Eiseley confronts the archetype of release and purification; rivers everywhere are still used as sacred cleansing sites. The challenge these writers face—bringing self to river and river into text—demands a multi-faceted approach that appraises the reach of ecology and the relevance of personal memory. The writers assay the territory between generalities and specifics through memory and metaphor.

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<sup>24</sup> On some levels this trip involves a reconstitution of self, a quiet, fundamental reorientation. The key is that Eiseley articulates these changes within an emotional and geological, riverine and scientific context. Its openness contrasts with the clotted silences Rick Bass records in his story “Platte River” where (as in Raymond Carver’s “So Much Water, So Close to Home”) angling is a way into a kind of compromise and distance that does harm, as if the space of the watershed has suddenly been called upon to represent the emotional upheavals that remain unspoken.

Immersion, that act of surrender to the current and an unexpected sense of the process of renewal and purification are key experiences for Eiseley and Kinseth. Both authors are taken by the moment of release when their feet leave the riverbed. In this instant they hear “the beating of the earth’s dark millennial heart” (Eiseley 21). I quote Eiseley at length here because his prose outshines any summary treatment, and provides insight into the way that he blends the precision of the palaeontologist and poet. The passage must rank as a classic description of a river float-trip. His journey begins with some trepidation; a non-swimmer, alone in the plateau, he realises “[a] man in trouble would cry out in vain” (18). But he lies back, “in the floating position that left my face to the sky, and shoved off” (19):

The sky wheeled over me.

As for men, those myriad little detached ponds with their own swimming corpuscular life, what were they but a way that water has of going about beyond the reach of rivers? I too was a microcosm of pouring rivulets and floating driftwood gnawed by the mysterious animalcules of my own creation. I was three-fourths water, rising and subsiding according to the hollow knocking in my veins: a minute pulse like the eternal pulse that lifts the Himalayas and which, in the following systole, will carry them away. (19-20)

The single-line paragraph is a key marker in all the river-prose I read. It flags a passage of transition, leaping us into a larger context here before slipping us into the humbling (dependant) corporeality of the body. Eiseley has such a warm and unpretentious way of phrasing challenging arguments. His offhand question loads insight with disarming regard, tossing delusions of grandeur and progress into the galactic whirlpool. The “microcosm” contains the rivers: blood vessels are deltas here, but less insistently so than *River Eternal*. Yet that eternal river reappears as the image inverts: the human heart contains the movement of rivers, and the pulse of plate tectonics looks back to the floating life in that water.

Minutes and aeons later he is a changed and reaffirmed man. Water is not the “stuff” of utility alone that Ivan Illich sees flooding the minds of the world instead of holy water. His insight places humans in context with the planet’s functioning in a way that differs from Kinseth’s attempts to draw in the cosmos. Transcendence, for Eiseley, is not an opportunity to extend the ego; rather, it is a vantage point from which to see it in a wider context.<sup>25</sup>

Every spring in the wet meadows and ditches I hear a little shrilling chorus which sounds for all the world like an endlessly reiterated ‘We’re here, we’re here, we’re here.’ And so they are, as frogs, of course. Confident little fellows. I suspect that to some greater ear than ours, man’s optimistic pronouncements about his role and destiny may make a similar little ringing sound that travels a small way out into the

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<sup>25</sup> This is the reason why he details his later discovery of a catfish frozen in the iced-up Platte. The fish survives and Eiseley installs a tank at home, only to find the fish had, one day, leapt out. “A million ancestral years had gone into that jump,” he notes as he laments a severance from “the lost archaic glory that comes from the water brotherhood. We were both projections out of that timeless ferment and locked as well in some greater unity that lay incalculably beyond us.... having been part of the flow of the river I feel no envy [of a creature more beautiful than humans]” (24, 25).

night. It is only its nearness that is offensive. From the heights of a mountain, or a marsh at evening, it blends, not too badly, with all the other sleepy voices that, in croaks or chirrups, are saying the same thing. (25)

On a silent wintry plateau where he recalls his float trip, a snowflake speaks of a principle of “organization” that enables all life. The snowflake, water, “is an apparition from that mysterious shadow world beyond nature, that final world which contains—if anything contains—the explanation of men and catfish and green leaves” (27). His eye for the universal returns again and again to the smallest things, then recirculates back into an anchored universe. Particulars, carefully drawn, become sites for wider insight. The Earth has its own memory. Eiseley reads this geologic record and continues a process of transmission, aware that the medium of language he uses has its purpose and limit, but that it also has its potential. Paul Shepard puts it this way: “Nature is events, not stuff. The wilderness is like a great river of events, diverted by men into this or that irrigation ditch. Any number of patterns of ditches are possible—as long as the river flows” (303). Because he seeks the events and the process, he accepts there are many patterns; his open specificity is one way of contributing to them without losing sight of the functional basis of his knowing.

Eiseley’s prose revels in epiphany, and has a universal range like Kinseth’s; one main difference between them is that Eiseley imparts more natural history. His epiphany springs from a more explicit (*named*) basis in description, detail and reflection. They are more placed, and I think stronger for this, drawing me into an external (and glimpsed internal) world; “science” is a “convenient rational phrase” for the enduring mysteries he lights upon, mysteries he never forgets (27). But the numinous blends with the rational through his process of attentive observation and recollection (22).

Eiseley discusses the way water weaves time and memory (the book “has grown out of the seasonal jottings of a man preoccupied with time” [12-13]). The flow of the river is a metonym for all creation and evolution. As part of that flow, Eiseley regards us as no better or worse than any other creature. Paying attention to the land or river can help us discover the human place in the world, rather than in our inherited sense of that place in the world. With practice we can “find in all [creatures’ calls] a grave pleasure without admitting to any a place of preëminence in his thoughts. It is when all these voices cease and the waters are still, when along the frozen river nothing cries, screams or howls, that the enormous mindlessness of space settles down upon the soul” (25).

## **“The inexorable sadness of concrete:” essays on the fallen river.**

The twentieth century has spawned more than 36 000 dams over fifteen metres in height (at least 18 000 are in China). None of these dams existed one hundred years ago. People need electricity, and dams have done and do—human (generally commercial)—good, but their effect on riverscapes and cultural networks is profound and often destructive (de Villiers 146; McCully 4). Spokane writer Gloria Bird and her ancestors have seen the fallen river and witnessed the ecological catastrophes that attend the large dam. It has taken a few decades for the extent of ecological damage to sink in. Now, even the World Bank takes a more cautious stance (de Villiers 142). But the damage has been done:

There are no illusions to be had  
in the aftermath of flooding dams,  
like love. My vision of that silver leaping  
and flesh so red it appeared raw  
and bleeding was the consequence  
of bad medicine threatening  
every living thing on the planet,  
manifesting itself today in mental  
images of man-made concrete  
blocks, cold and infertile. (“Illusions”)

But Bird closes this poem by saying “the story is far / from being over” (56). Though many of the essayists I read are haunted by the series of losses that their United States is built on, they affirm the fact that the story is ongoing and changing.

In more recent work, what Eiseley termed the “enormous” presence of nature has become the silence of extinct species and stilled rivers. In a sense, Joan Didion imagines this quiet and awful stillness on a global level as she concludes her essay “At the Dam.” Her imagined world is a spectre, but the ghosts of rivers and of salmon weigh heavily on those who knew the rivers before the dam arrived. Sanders, Abbey and Didion are witnesses to the fallout of the ‘fallen’ river.<sup>1</sup>

Edward Abbey and Scott Russell Sanders consider large dams a violation of the ecological interdependence and functionality that a river symbolises and sustains. The negative effects of the dam on an ecological—and thus personal, social and political—level are emphasised as emblematic of all that is wrong with the human urge to control the environment. Dams represent a

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<sup>1</sup> As I note in chapter three, ‘fallen river’ texts criticise the cultural mythology of progress, the “utopian drive” and the “quest to control the future” (Jonas 21; Bowers 169). Most of the essayists therefore step back and use wilderness as a place of retreat; the ideal river becomes a site purged of resource-minded values. The pages ahead trace what happens when some essayists meet a dam, which represents those values *par excellence*.

domineering mindset these particular writers reject. Abbey and Sanders argue the ecological is personal and political, tracing a kind of patriarchy as it is deployed on the land. (Just as many feminist writers such as Dale Spender, Donna Haraway, Gillian Rose, Annette Kolodny and Carolyn Merchant chart patriarchal forces on social, ecological and linguistic terrain.) The personal is political and the watershed is both. The river, a locus of memory and desire, becomes political; anything people depend upon or can control is claimed. Dams are troped as an overt and soulless form of claiming. A dam blocks a fluvial temporality the writers ally with memory. Abbey, Sanders and Didion grapple with ways to recover memory or a future beyond the “inexorable sadness of concrete” (Harden 239). They extend elegy through travel to lost rivers, seeking to re-tap faith in some enduring force. But that faith is compromised by a sense of what has vanished. The (post) colonial ethos of revisionary virtue cannot bring back extinct species. Nor can it extend a sense of personal agency in the face of corporate and bureaucratic tactics: “Preach as we may in our own backyards, cottagers do not often sway a society’s fiscal theology” (Doig 141).

### **Sanders and drowned memory**

In the essays I consider, political responses usually have a basis in feeling: the river is still troped as a symbol of ecological transcendent wholeness:

The river’s movement is an outward show of the current that bears everything along. Wearing a groove in the earth, it reveals a grain in the universe. Quick or sluggish, all creation is a flow—rivers, mountains, trees, babies and parents, butterflies and parrots, rocks, clouds, sun, Milky Way—each part driven at its own pace within a single current. When I look in the mirror each morning the face I see is familiar from the day before, yet subtly changed, shifted downstream, as the river sliding within its banks alters moment by moment. (89-90)

This quotation evokes the vision and tone of Lance Kineth, but the words (actually Scott Sanders’) hint at the allure each river offers the essayist. The river adapts itself and accepts Sanders’ range of associations. Unlike Kineth, Sanders cannot find a pristine segment of his neighbouring Ohio River. Sanders’ river experience is not constantly transcendent; any revelatory moments are rare glimpses, akin to Eiseley’s departure from the world of boundaries and restriction. But they are more tempered by an awareness of loss. Sanders tries to find an essential river just as Kineth does, to search for a pure river, and “dig down through all our inherited images of the Ohio—as real estate, as highway, as plumbing, as scenery—to the ‘river-in-itself’. The Ohio can still speak to us of the holy, the nonhuman, as it spoke to the [Native American] Mound Builders a millennium ago” (89). Kineth seeks his river through layers of metaphor; Sanders does not use metaphor as an end in itself; his careful vision is deployed in a search for meaning, and figuration does not blind him to the realities of the damage around him, damage humans have done. As an archaeologist of regional memory he traces human interaction with the

river over time through story and history. But the irony remains: the 'river-in-itself' compels description, a pre-human quality is imagined, but is therefore seen through human eyes. The pristine river is just out of reach. Somewhere, in the watershed of memory, there could be a pure river, untouched by the ravages of the last two centuries. 'If only' is a refrain in the background.<sup>2</sup> Sander's essay traces the lost river, dogged by the chance it may never be recovered. But his essaying is more intent on ways to move beyond lament and figuration and grapple with the reality of the here-and-now. Epiphany is all very well, but the fallen river, which forms one part of this difficult and amazing world, is one constant he must live with. He does not necessarily have recourse to a pocket of wilderness and if he did its very limited range would provide more cause for concern. For Sanders, holism means responsibility before it means epiphany.

A large dam or the human destruction of the river provokes a response that is almost as visceral as the feelings for the wild river that is lost; elegy or rage needs a comparative anchor. As John McPhee notes below, the dam violates natural processes in a fundamental way. His commentary is still apt for Abbey, Sanders and Didion. Their positions do not entirely match McPhee's caricature, but they attend to the ways we have humiliated natural processes. This humiliation is what Stafford faced at the concrete river, and there is no easy way to subsume a sense of wrong.

In the view of conservationists, there is something special about dams, something—as conservation problems go—that is disproportionately and metaphysically sinister. The outermost circle of the Devil's world seems to be a moat filled mainly with DDT. Next to it is a moat of burning gasoline. Within that is a ring of pinheads each covered with a million people—and so on past phalanxed bulldozers and bicuspid chainsaws into the absolute epicentre of Hell on earth, where stands a dam. The implications of the dam exceed its true level in the scale of environmental catastrophes. Conservationists who can hold themselves in reasonable check before new oil spills and fresh megalopolises mysteriously go insane at even the thought of a dam. The conservation movement is a mystical and religious force, and possibly the reaction to dams is so violent because rivers are the ultimate metaphors of existence, and dams destroy rivers. Humiliating nature, a dam is evil—placed and solid. (193)

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Sanders' history of human presence on the Ohio is a record of lost bio-diversity, a journey through absence that leads the reader to a contemporary landscape of remnant. Edward Hoagland's "Walking the Dead Diamond River" is "an elegy to pleasures now past" (318); Sanders joins the (now global) tradition of the natural history elegy with his account of personal and local loss in two river valleys. The personal effects of altering the river damage his sense of home and

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<sup>2</sup> David Rogers writes of the modernist writer's association with depth and symmetry, narcissism and a "'flow' of a comprehensive surface," organised through "the desire to control or master [the world's] apparently fragmented surface" rather than open to its ungraspable flux (76). The later essayists I read are enraged at a dam's stultifying modernism, and they also resort to the use of textual gaps, doubt and confession in a means of letting fragmentation speak in their post modern essays.



therefore memory; the past local flora and fauna he records are denied to many creatures (including humans) through extinction and exploitation.

I think it significant that Sanders opens his book *Staying Put: Making A Home in A Restless World* (1993) with "After the Flood," an account of his childhood home now drowned by a reservoir. It is a description of a personal loss; Sanders hopes this loss will resonate with thousands in North America, and millions elsewhere in the world (the U.S. essayists, as ardent regionalists, do not necessarily leave their country). This is a post-diluvian world of moral as well as empirical resonance. The essay sets the tone for some of his river-work; key phrasing of retrospective angst ("No hint... survived," "once," "in place of," "but," "now," and "however" [8, 9, 7, 4, 10]) characterises the river writer's elegy, positioning the reader in the present, watching as the concrete shores up the streaming waters. "Returning to one's native ground, always tricky, becomes downright treacherous when the ground is at the bottom of a lake" (5). The return Sanders makes to the river valley of his childhood is an aggrieved one, "up the stream of recollection" as it records the "obliteration" of an inner and outer world (4).

The essay is grounded in memory. It derives its emotional resonance by comparing two landscapes, an internal memorialised one and the drowned world of the present: a reservoir is a place "where loss makes a home" (Boyers). Sanders tells us the West Branch of the Mahoning River in Charlestown, Northeastern Ohio, is "a primal landscape, imprinted on my senses, a place by which I measure every other place" (4). The family home was a place of ambivalent emotions ("Living Under the Influence"). The movement between past and present (fundamental to the elegy) sets up a recurrent motif of recollection and lament that runs through the work of Sanders, Abbey, Stafford and Moore, for example.

Sanders taps social and personal memory for the stories and histories that shape the present. Throughout his collection he examines the ways and means used to create or to alter a landscape for the purposes of destruction or dwelling. His project seeks to limit damage through "staying put" in one place, knowing one patch and learning to care for it (101). "Local knowledge is the grounding for global knowledge"(114). Through memory we can learn to respect variation and remember errors and failures in application. Memory and association determine his response to the reservoir.

The essay introduction sketches a rich, diverse river valley full of crops, birds, fossils and maple trees. This site is seen as an enclave, but the next paragraph qualifies this idyll: "It is also, now, a drowned landscape." This drowning and the displacement that followed "were public acts, the sort of acts we have been repeating from coast to coast as we devour the continent" (4). The largely useless dam was proposed by those who lived elsewhere: "If there had been mansions and factories in the way, the politicians would have doomed a different valley" (5). One third of Charlestown had already been "sliced away" for the building of an arsenal: "On current maps of the township that upper third is blank white, and most of the remaining two-thirds, flooded by the reservoir, is vacant blue. Merely by looking at the map, one can tell that here is a sacrificial zone"

(5). The word sacrifice is not used lightly, and its many associations are suggestive of Sanders' feelings. Loss enables memory; the river we encounter here is a remembered one. It is fragile.

The next phase of his essay demonstrates this fragility. It attends to the varieties of present and recalled loss encountered on this trip: his courtship of a girl who lived above the rising dam site ("The girl and I broke up, but the concrete held" [6]); the eviction of valley neighbours by the rising water and the overgrown area of young forest that has displaced the family home. The pastoral site is claimed by concrete on one side and returning forest on the other. Sanders laments this: the trees destroy evidence of ownership and work, now replaced by the "West Branch Reservation." "Not a house, not a barn, not a plowed field" (9). Sanders wants the signs of human occupation engraved in his memory confirmed, not regrown forest. Certain kinds of pastoral endeavour are permitted. Small-scale farming that is intimate with the land is acceptable; an American rural idyll provided a secure scene Sanders could cling to in times of family struggle. But those verdant fields dotted with homesteads and barns are rare sights today.

After the changes in the old neighbourhood, the sight of the reservoir is an even greater shock; his memory races ahead of the car, only to be brought up sharply by the dam. The empty grey lake has swallowed his remembered world. The repetition of negatives reinforces this: "Waters of separation, waters of oblivion, waters of death" (11). Sanders' essay documents one effect dams (and reservoirs) can have on memory; even if the river conquers the dam in ten thousand years, a person's sense of identity has been drowned:

My worst imaginings had failed to prepare me for this. I stood there dazed. I could not take it in, so much had been taken away. For a long spell I leaned against the guardrail and dredged up everything I could remember of what lay beneath the reservoir. But memory was at last defeated by the blank gray water. No effort of mind could restore the river or drain the valley. I surrendered to what my eyes were telling me. Only then was I truly exiled. (11)

The moment of encounter defies much of the reconstructive writing and remembering that has gone before. It questions his ability to make any kind of recovery. Sanders knows he mourns his drowned childhood, but his real concern is with "how casually, how relentlessly we sever the bonds between person and place" (11-12). Destroying memory, the dam destroyed more than a physical environment; it has damaged the inner life of a community and sent that community packing: "I am suspicious of the logic that would forestall occasional floods by creating a permanent one" (11).<sup>3</sup> Childhood landscapes have been covered; the commitment to his adult home strengthens. This essay conceptualises the elements of loss, remembrance, and anger that may inform the river-essayists' response to dams. Because a dam is such a final structure, the sense of loss, impotence and outrage is enormous; add McPhee's sense that the dam humiliates nature, and the recipe for an enduring animosity is born. But the movement from animosity to

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<sup>3</sup> *Long Sault*, the long poem by Don McKay achieves an allied (though differently formed) focus on the banality and righteousness of the displacer.

action is never certain. In confronting and sharing their doubts, the essayists I read allow a sense of fallibility to permeate their actions: they are not superhuman.

At the end of his first essay (after the flood), Sanders is left, looking at the debris and remnants he calls home, resolved to “go on” (despite the dam) and re-turn towards the new home and community he knows (Hugo, “Making Certain It Goes On” 446). In turning from the river valley of his youth, Sanders sets up the trajectory of his book, forward into the life he has built for himself, the issues that concern him in the present, and the neighbouring Ohio River he wants to safeguard for the future. Memory informs this direction: that dam is not easily forgotten and very little is taken for granted.

In his other river-focused essay, “The Force of Moving Water,” Sanders realises his desire to get closer to the river he lives by as an adult, to learn its stories and trace the evolution of communities by the Ohio, looking for trends and guidelines that can help his children love the river and enrich the community.

This second essay begins with a rather ‘Kinsethian’ (or transcendent) metaphor. Sanders places life processes in a rivered context, with the river as a symbol of a grander scheme of energy. So the birth of his daughter is one part of a current which carries us all: “We all ride the river, we are all born from a sack of water, and some of us never quit hankering for that original wetness.... I crave the company of water, any water, above all the meander and surge of rivers.... there is a part of me that runs night and day with the Ohio” (59-60, 61). (Of course we are mostly water in physical composition and we spent the first nine or so months of our lives as aquatic beings.) Sanders calls for a watershed consciousness where confluence and the patterns of land that distribute water inform actions taken in the watershed. Rivers denote the shape of the land and define “where we *are* more profoundly than any state line or city limit” (62).

Metaphorical play continues. Sanders’ next figurative passage recalls Kinseth and Eiseley. It is a refreshingly honest account of the difficulty of rivered transcendence at the end of the millennium. The river *non*-epiphany is the twentieth-century norm. It is decent of Sanders to acknowledge this. His declared fallibility is one example of the openness so characteristic of the personal literary ‘nature-essay.’ It is honest: we industrialised humans are a filthy lot, and we just make more and more mess as time goes by:

Swimming in the Ohio, I try to feel all the remotest creeks of that vast [drainage] basin trickling through me. I like to imagine I can smell in the river the pines from the mountains, the oaks and hickories of the foothills, the blackberries and wildflowers of the bottomlands. What I’m likelier to smell is diesel oil, cotton poison, coal slurry, or sewage, because twenty-five million people live in the basin, and the watercourses are lined with towns, factories, mills, slag heaps, power plants, and refineries. Like the rest of our planet, the Ohio is caught in a tug-of-war between natural influences and human ones. (63)

The issue here is not so much the surrender of ego and semi-spiritual union with the continent, but the safeguarding of gastrointestinal boundaries so *Giardia* microbes are avoided and continence

maintained. It is refreshing to read an essayist who, like novelists McCarthy and Sinclair, acknowledges the general and industrial pollution (both visual and chemical) that characterises most contemporary urban riverscapes, if only because it will strengthen reader-identification. The waterway will reveal all we throw into it, from rose petals to effluent. Its roiling or eddying surfaces will mirror the nature of our relationship with the river and the world. Sanders interrogates this relationship over the long view of human history in the Ohio River region, tracing an ongoing fall from grace in the late eighteenth century.

The Ohio riverscape is “pastoral and industrial, wild and tame. We exist as a people in that tension, loving wildness and fearing it, longing for contact with untrammelled nature and at the same time longing for control” (64). The “tinkering” the river has endured is a product of this tension (65). Sanders recreates the pre-lapsarian Ohio for the reader in his next section, setting up in greater detail the interplay between wildness and control, represented largely as the gradual spread of colonizing corruption over a land of bounty. Fear before the wilderness is unlikely now as few places will be so isolated as to threaten survival; and the tornado is innately feared across time.

Bounty and abundance are the themes of the early history of the river. Sanders paints an enchanting picture of the early fauna and the crudely-labelled “Mound Builders” who flourished for about 2500 years until 1500 A. C. E. He quotes numerous nineteenth-century white accounts of both the river and the varied Native American tribes who lived in the watershed (which is roughly the size of France). The records describe a place teeming with flocks of pheasant, turkey and heron, panthers, bears, huge grapevines, bison, buffalo, passenger pigeons, many trees and over one hundred species of freshwater fish. “Migrating squirrels crossed the water in such great numbers they formed thick grey rafts, blocking traffic” (74, 76-7). Early European explorers trapped beaver to warm the rich in Europe; for many the river and watershed were “a pathway to somewhere more profitable” (72).<sup>4</sup> Sanders’ account of the river weaves events into the place, emphasising how central rivers have been to North American settlement. Comments by nineteenth-century Ohio resident and painter John James Audubon evoke the bounty of the area and the trust in endless resources that it encouraged in the whites that settled there.

Audubon believed that only the destruction of the forests would extinguish the pigeon population: the birds would survive being killed and piled in haystack-sized mounds, as was the contemporary practice. Instead, the birds were devastated by capture (and the forests fell eventually). The Edenic description is followed by a sorry record of mistreatment and squandered plenty. “I cannot,” Sanders adds, “agree that such brief profit justifies so much desolation. Since the earliest days the Ohio has been used as a dump” (82). This leads to a discussion of the

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<sup>4</sup> See *Outwater* for the consequences of the cold European castle, local European overtrapping and the demand for American beaver pelts. Early trappers and their river-running set the beginnings of rapacious resource-extraction, but are often seen now as hardy types who did not move with the insistent appetites of settlement and had to learn to negotiate and collaborate with indigenous peoples.

American relationship with place, one “founded on *use* and *possession*. The wild valley was a ‘desert’ awaiting our activity, a silence awaiting our noise, a botched attempt at Eden that we would perfect” (85).<sup>5</sup> This entailed “improving” the river and turning it into “a grand canal for barges” (84). A reservoir is a site of absence, control and possession.

Sanders’ account is popular history, unlike his more personal reservoir piece (but even that personal site resonates with others like it). The early commercial and leisurely views of the river remind the reader of the contemporary tension between river conservation and exploitation, a tension that remains in the relation between use and possession, which he critiques. I wonder if there has ever been a human community that did not use a river and regard it as theirs in some way.<sup>6</sup> But the responsibility that goes with dependency (if not ownership) is weakened by our disconnection from the watershed and the ethos that might keep that place healthy for future generations of humans, fish, birds and trees.<sup>7</sup> Sanders’ main point of contention is with what the

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<sup>5</sup> See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, and Marc Reisner’s classic *Cadillac Desert* (for instance) for their discussion of the impulses of the confrontation with and transformation of the wilderness and desert.

<sup>6</sup> Both Abbey and Sanders paint very favourable (possibly romantic) pictures of pre-European civilizations. Abbey has been criticised for doing so (Carter’s praise of nomadism may stand here); Sanders qualifies his stance somewhat. He mentions the early Native Americans who hunted some species to near-extinction. Like several nature essayists, Sanders implicitly valorises indigenous cultures for their environmental ethics but does not really suggest ways of involving those marginalised communities in river management. Their past is held up as exemplary; their present retreats beyond the page. The essayists are often troubled by this issue of marginalisation; there are no easy answers. The riverbank is a traditional dwelling or harvesting site across the world: this is one reason why indigenous tribes were evicted from their riparian settlements. Where riverbanks are not used for crops, they tend to be taken for scenic purposes (feeding the eyes) or commercial, industrial and maritime purposes. It is far easier to locate the displaced on new margins in the modern landscape: the downtown core or the hinterland.

Writing of rivers, Donald Worster hopes the stories and beliefs of the past can inform the present; as I noted he believes we must realise the future will “require our learning to think like a river, our trying to become a river-adaptive people. In the past, groups as diverse as the Papago Indians and the Chinese Taoists seem to have met that requirement successfully, and there is much we can learn from them.” (Worster, *Rivers* 331).

Yes there is much we can learn from indigenous groups or older values. But in the face of walls of concrete and rising demand for electricity and consumption globally, such old ways seem far from entering the directives of utility management, no matter how many liaison officers such companies appoint. The difference today is that tribal groups will be slickly informed that they are about to be ripped off, their land flooded or cell phone towers erected nearby. The capitalist *modus operandi* may have altered, but the outcomes across the last few decades in terms of health, education, justice and housing have not improved as they could. In any case, that learning needs to begin now, and still the right people are not listening. What to do when the dam is in place and our television and computer screens glare into the night? The essayists I consider suggest we turn to the stories we know, and revision our perception, before running at an indigenous person with a microphone drawn and ready.

To think like a river means adapting to the local river *and* the culturally inherited river. As the texts demonstrate, these two rivers are often at variance because post-coloniality attends to the overlap of histories and can become fixated on one or another point of contact. A ‘before’ and ‘after’ often frames the chronology of one culture, rather than *severz!* (King, “Godzilla”). A river brings such disparities into account because it is, to poach Thomas King’s term, “interfusional” (“Godzilla” 11). A river cuts through time. The ecology of the river measures the disparity between what we inherit and enact and what is bequeathed to the future. Many of the writers use the river as an oracle, a source of honesty in the millennial flux of revisionist claims and traditionalist counter-claims and resistance to change. But reification is one inherited model that has done little real good.

<sup>7</sup> In this regard there is a difference between ownership and responsibility, but there will be times when need overtakes certain safeguards. Much of Britain was deforested 3000 years ago during a mini-ice age, and many indigenous cultures have hunted species to extinction: but they did so a great deal more slowly than has occurred in the last two centuries—let alone two *decades*—and their practices had a different conceptual base.

contemporary industrialised person demands as a right, *extra* needs which “tax” the future. Listing the many ways the river has been abused, Sanders calls for restraint; we should look within and to our regions for the sense of belonging that satisfies. Hans Jonas speaks of the imperative of responsibility; this attention is one measure of the foresight and care each of these writers acknowledges.

Sanders traces the history of human response to the Ohio River, interrogating what has brought him and his children to the riverbank in the present. He wishes to instill a love for the river in his children. After analyzing the historical record, he shifts attention to his longing for “the primal river,” a perceptual state rather than a contemporary fact; a metaphor rather than a reality. So we return to the Kinsethian vision that informs his opening, a way of seeing the Ohio that functions best “at dawn or dusk, when twilight erases our handiwork” (89). Sanders provides a neat summary of Kinseth’s vision, proving the wide appeal of moving water, and its tendency to gather metaphor in its path: “all creation is a flow” (89). His essay ends as he tells stories about the river to his children as they sprawl on its banks in the city:

I rattled on because I wanted my children to grow up carrying the Ohio in their minds.... Then after a while I realized that, like the tourists and speculators, I was not speaking of the river but of us two-legged wonders. So I shut up. As the darkness thickened, traffic thinned on the bridge. Boats put in for shore. The fountains stopped sputtering and the waders went home. Eventually there came a moment where the only sound was the shudder of the great muscular dragon body slithering in its bed. And that was the truest speech about the river. (92)

The primal river is metaphorical. The very term “primal” is a metaphorical one, ranking experience in a hierarchy of interpretation. It is an Arcadian and perhaps imagined site, a hidden ideal. Yet almost every river offers tantalising glimpses of such an ideal; people can imagine their own fluvial apex. The river Sanders carries and Kinseth revels in is divined, uncovered once layers of industry, habit and inattention are sluiced away. Both authors hint at an essential river, a river seen *without* culture that still refers back to human perception and presence in its authorial representation, its very coded, filtered existence on the page. Much of the struggle with culture is a struggle with language. Kinseth is beset by the notion his language will not suffice to reveal the essence, though Sanders worries less about the nuances of representation, because the picture he paints is not quite as dependent on metaphor. I wonder, though, if the desire to see an essential river is fundamentally different from the desire to build a new colony and create a new space that shrugs off the burden of the past? In Sanders’ case, this desire is a redemptive act rather than a process of domination and divestment.

For all his powerful doubt (which speaks to contemporary anxieties), Kinseth concludes his river writing by affirming the immortality of his seeing, his “is a view that can live forever” (105). Sanders, interestingly, moves towards Kinseth’s notion of listening attentiveness, perhaps by repudiating human language altogether. His essay concludes where Kinseth’s begins; maybe it is the stronger for it. But in silencing himself, he still depends on metaphor to give voice to the

“muscular” water. We cannot, it seems, leave water alone, but must continue to dapple it with thought and reflection, for it prompts heartfelt offerings. After a time, somewhere in the blank space at the end of his essay, I imagine Sanders and his children perfecting the art of unmediated listening, making new stories in the unpunctuated present.<sup>8</sup>

### **No lentils on board! Abbey down the river**

While Sanders, Stafford and Eiseley balance reflection and research, Kinseth develops a perceptual (and metaphoric) expansiveness few river writers sustain. Edward Abbey’s aversion to purple prose creates interesting weirs and occlusions in his essays. His style makes for a fascinating contrast with the figurative torrents of *River Eternal* and the measured attention to history and feeling practised by Eiseley, Stafford and Sanders.

*Down the River*, Abbey’s 1979 collection of essays (on topics largely pro-wild and anti-nuclear) departs from Sanders and Kinseth in style and tone. Cantankerous and cynical where Kinseth is reverent, Abbey swaggers or deflects attention from himself through controversial opinion, whereas Sanders might, in a similar situation, probably reveal his deeper feelings and plan not to offend but to reach the reader in other ways and at other levels.<sup>9</sup> Abbey, however, lavishes care on his shock tactics, rather than a consistently gentle process of persuasion. Abbey is the Bacchus of the essay and the river raft, heading down the river while stirring passion and opinion just as a motor churns water. Generalised invective (gentle on vegetarians, tough on Pentagon employees) accompanies his musings. The bluster keeps us away from the deeper emotional currents he is riding; his modesty is a deflective cover as he angrily points his finger elsewhere.

Robert Houston argues Abbey’s style celebrates contradiction: quirks are “thrown in for the sake of inconsistency (we’re on to you, Abbey)” (158). Abbey’s grouchy style is calculated to stir. He can wax lyrical, but after doing so, he rolls that wax into an augmented spitball and launches it at someone. He keeps our eyes fixed on the rapids and shifts in his narrative; once again, shifts in register recount shifts in response for reader and writer. Houston discusses Abbey’s gruff self-deprecation:

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<sup>8</sup> His later writing proves this to be so. It is a privilege to journey with him and his children. In *Hunting for Hope* (1998) Sanders recounts a whitewater rafting trip he and his family share, a wild ride that brings them together through experience. This river is too wild to foster reflection (“[t]he point of our bucking ride, I realised, was not to see the canyon but to survive it” [13]), but the *description* of the ride is interleaved with reminiscence. Experience and response foster reminders of previous connection. At the essay’s end, Sanders brings river and progeny together by honouring process: “I lay quietly, following the twin currents of the river and my son’s breath. Here were two reasons for rejoicing, two sources of hope” (17).

<sup>9</sup> I base Sanders’ disinclination towards offence on comments in his essay “Living Under the Influence.” The reader is obliged to accept the truth of the personal essay; its confessional tone is characteristic, as is its invitation to trust. In other work he has detailed how his own concerns about ecology have fostered a premature and complex despair in his teenage son. How do we tell stories of the river to the next generation? Kathleen Dean Moore also asks this.

What counts is that you're a watcher *and* a participant. You go down into the woods and meet the bears. Philosophy naked always embarrasses you a little, though you can sit in the temple and argue with the best of them. But you can seldom allow yourself a flight of thought that you don't undercut soon after with Abbey wit or the admission of uncertainty, a 'yes, but.' (That's all right: Mark Twain would approve. Puncturing pomposity is an old American virtue threatened with extinction.) (164)

Abbey's essays are warts-and-all accounts of his journeys and his opinions; the warts are characteristic. The "Preliminary Notes" to *Down The River* spell out the purpose of his work: "none of the essays in this book requires elucidation, other than to say, as in everything I write, they are meant to serve as antidotes to despair. Despair leads to boredom, electronic games, computer hacking, poetry, and other bad habits" (3). The characteristic Abbey auto-deflation is up and running: on page one he describes the cement-mixing box he failed to float in with his brother ("That was very long ago" [2]) and his sense of fun ensures he does not take himself too seriously: "It's hard for me to stay serious for more than half a page at a time" (Trimble 27). Despite his genuine inclination towards "happier themes," he does tackle serious issues such as nuclear armaments and "the damnation of another river" (6). In this he extends and guides what Stephen Trimble sees as a "refrain of moral concern" in the natural history writer (28). One of Abbey's great achievements is the maintenance of humour and irreverence in the face of pain. His "antidotes to despair" can prevent amnesia or inertia. He reminds us of a river's past, its unrealised stories and scale, and thus the future we lose when the dam gates heave shut. Wild rivers afford pace to his stream of consciousness, allowing him formal flexibility. He wants rivers running free.

Abbey's book is a classic of anti-dam literature. I examine three of Abbey's essays, "Floating," "Down the River with Henry Thoreau" and "Running the San Juan." Two of these works are concerned with external threats (in the form of planned or existing dams), while "Down the River" is a journalled journey that engages with streams of text and water; it remains the archetype of river-based textual criticism, because half the time Abbey's desk is a moving river raft! A movement from a wild space to the city is performed through his insistent critique of urban profligacy. The recirculation of opinion sites city as Other to the fragile and splendid river canyons. Each essay highlights another aspect of his feeling for wild rivers. His essays, fruits of the river conservation movement which expanded in the 1970s in the U. S. A., continue to prompt action, whether in the form of literary criticism or EarthFirst!'s confrontational activism (Palmer *Endangered Rivers*). Many of the texts discussed in this thesis spring from or speak to an awareness river protection movements have encouraged.

Abbey is an exemplary champion of the politicised riverscape. There is a link between reflection and politics in Abbey's work. When a wild river prompts reverie, it is only a matter of time before Abbey's thoughts shift to the ways that river or watershed is threatened by human technologies and desires. Kineth uses a wider referent as a vital and cosmic counterpart to his



patch of wild river, but Abbey's referent is a wider human impulse troped as malign, and destructive of the wild. The urban 'beyond' he tropes recognises no epiphany beyond instant gratification. Contemporary pressures render the sublime and picturesque a fragile construct marketed to eco-tourists with cash to spare.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the product, the wild backdrop is now prime currency in the advertising world. Abbey would be even more sickened than he was. The wild river is a remnant gesturing to an urban 'here' (beneath the billboard) through the 'otherness' and desirability of its status. As a consequence, Abbey's focus shifts from Kinseth's enraptured micro-view to rail against the wider world, then shifts to retreat to the peace of the river on which he is floating. When wilderness is home, as it is for Abbey, the City is the threatening Other. The master of the gritty jeremiad (as Murray identifies him) knows where to fire his rhetorical crossbow.

The essay "Floating" confronts bleak issues with determination and anger. It is a response to another damming project, and his tragic sense of complicity: rivers are being "damned" almost before his eyes. His complicity stems from his belief that "[e]very river I touch turns to heartbreak" and is dammed; how then can he or anyone know the rivers he loves (231)? Perhaps the most important factor *is* his love for the rivers: infectious and respectful, his fondness is at the heart of much of his frustration. The anger he feels at the demise of the Rio Dolores indicates his passion and powers his contemporary jeremiad. The essay demonstrates the strategy of "restraint" Sam Hamill admires, "a gentle nose-thumbing at international stupidity.... the *wu-wei*, action through non-action" (180). This 'non-action' is in fact published, distributed and read. The printed stories make ripples through a community of readers; they inform and challenge us. Abbey makes the movement from reflection to political outrage appear natural. Anger is one response we should not lose — he argues that a lot can be accomplished through outrage. But his emotional currents are variegated, so we will pay them careful attention.

"Floating" is full of rhetorical sweeps and reversals. Just before the language boils over in a surfeit of imagery, Abbey changes tack, enters a cutbank and hauls his prose around. I quote such a passage at length for its examples of this tendency, and its humour. It begins (like Kinseth) with effusive description but does *not* follow him down a route of embellished figurative rhapsody and sensuous synecdoche; rather, his lyricism is tempered by his ironic sense of limitation. Abbey spends time crafting his roguish and unpolished manner. This strategy reinforces the impact of his mixed registers; they work off each other as rocks and water do:

Each precious moment entails every other. Each sacred place suggests the immanent presence of all places. Each man, each woman, exemplifies all humans. The bright faces of my companions, here, now, on this Rio Dolores, this River of Sorrows, somewhere in the melodramatic landscape of southwest Colorado, break my heart—for in their faces, eyes, vivid bodies in action, I see the hope and joy

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<sup>10</sup> The essays were composed before the wild outdoors became as sexy, expensive and as gadget-focused as it is today; we might mark this from the mid-Eighties invention of the mountain bike, the triathlon, cholesterol-monitoring, the growth of synthetic fibres for outdoor gear, increasingly frenzied cities and the sports utility vehicle.

and tragedy of humanity everywhere. Just as the hermit thrush, singing its threnody back in the piney gloom of the forest, speaks for the lost and voiceless everywhere.

What am I trying to say? The same as before—everything. Nothing more than that. Everything implied by water, motion, rivers, boats. By the flowing . . .

What the hell. Here we go again, down one more condemned river. Our foolish rubber rafts nose into the channel and bob on the current. (230-31)

Abbey's stream of awareness, humour and irony is too fulsome, restless and downright treacherous for *constant* exaltation.<sup>11</sup> Too much of that, and he would be bored, bumped out of the raft, or both. The essays are rafter essays; Abbey is not walking on riverbanks, nor quietly musing beside creeks. He is (he appears as) a rough and ready guy who does not let himself get seduced by too much beauty, for many of the beautiful places he loves have been corrupted, flooded and deadened:

... Every river I touch turns to heartbreak.... Glen Canyon was destroyed, and nothing is more vulnerable than the beautiful.

Why yes, the Dolores, too, is scheduled for damnation.... True, only a little dam. But dammit, it's only a little river.

Forget it. Write it off. Fix your mind on the feel of the oars in your hands....(231)

Abbey literally writes off the anger he feels (and the raft he is steering) as the trip begins. He shifts from lamenting dams to admiring dames: a female river guide comes in for extra attention which, if lewd, is also self-consciously provocative. So we start this float trip with our narrator, a man ready (it seems) to record all of his thoughts, noble or otherwise, because, like Everest, they are simply there. The ride and the writing are therefore presented as a genuine (revealing, open) stream of consciousness and association. Digressive praxis gives Abbey the freedom to meander at will, loosening up the form of the essay and his own apparently uncensored, fresh off the raft journal jottings. Of course, even the 'live' accounts are retrospective acts of composition. Abbey selects detail for his epistolary form, as we seem to peer over his shoulder to read his notebook. Where he steps into past tense to engage memory it carries an element of regret: this is the river as it was, and will never be again before his eyes: "even Paradise can be damned, flooded, overrun, generally mucked up by fools in pursuit of paper profits and plastic happiness" (233).

Abbey favours the real-time account in this (and other) river records. There is an immediacy of verb tense and action: the narrative sweeps us along. The current is composed of Abbey's own opinion and of descriptions of the steady, doomed flow of the river. "Floating" intercuts river adventure with Abbey's associative flow. The first stretch sees Abbey pondering

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<sup>11</sup> That said, it is interesting to note his desire to say "everything" and try and "grasp" the river's implications through florid language does exist, and even if he discounts it, we can understand his desire to transmit the richness of his rafting experience. It is also important to note he gives up the purple-prose approach very quickly (after mocking it by inclusion), and goes with his own witty (carefully managed) flow. In many ways his desire to shock is more pointed and defined than Kineth's imposition of his unadorned reality.

(in his usual rapid, hyper-meandering manner) God's love of Nature (not to mention God's very existence), the fate of "concupiscent scribes" and the drowning of Walt Blackadar, the "world's greatest kayaker" (233). This last item proves appropriate: the passengers, who are looking out for us (because we do, after all, want the man to survive and write this essay), punctuate his theological musing ("Watch it!" "Who?" "The wall!" [232]). God may not have appeared just then, but Abbey suggests God's love (and elbow) helped them out. Hence the first rule of river running he imparts: "Thou must know what thou art doing" (233). Serious topics have been introduced in an almost offhand manner.

His thoughts on "Paradise" have their basis in the prospect of lunch. Kineth seems to live on exhilaration and Sanders on deliberation, but Abbey is a river rat who loves his food (and drink). His imagery is grounded. But because he loves rivers too, the thoughts of bliss, oranges and salami quickly shift to the "damnation" the river must endure. He oscillates between reverie and revenge-fantasy (and if his fiction has spawned eco-terrorism, it is proof of how potent imagining can be); his essays delineate how far one individual can be transformed by wilderness experience and then defend that remnant space. Abbey is concerned with "the real world of earth, rivers, life" rather than supporting dams and space programmes (234). Personal risk and the real world of river-loss come together in Abbey's recollection of Mark Dubois, who put his life on the line for the Stanislaus River. However, "[o]ne river gains a reprieve, another goes under." Abbey reprints a news report of the last clearances of farmers and Cherokee legal resistance to the Tellico Dam.<sup>12</sup> U. S. resistance to the might of the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation is strong enough in official economic circles to question the economic viability of giant dam projects (which, as McCully and even the ex-chief of the Bureau note, generally lose money on a grand scale [Abramovitz]). But the late 1970s saw a number of new dam projects find approval; couple this 'progress' with the Reaganite boost in defence spending through the 1980s and one can understand Abbey's concerns and the sheer need for his oppositional views. He is a belligerent advocate for the unborn and unspeaking, urging we attend to the rivers and children who will continue after we die.

Abbey would be justified in going on to recount court and resistance ordeals in greater detail, to spend the rest of the trip fulminating. But he does not; he describes what still remains

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<sup>12</sup> See Peter Matthiessen's *Indian Country* for a discussion of the Tellico Dam and its effects on the tribal groups in the area. The Stanislaus River was dammed anyway; Dubois went on to form the influential and eagle-eyed International Rivers Network, which is busy challenging dam projects in Turkey (which will affect the geo-politics of the Middle East and drown some of the oldest town sites in human history); the Narmada Valley in India (which is continuing despite international outrage, fasting during July 1999, and the earlier withdrawal of funds by the World Bank); China's Three Gorges Dam (international backing swiftly fell away due to massive safety and viability concerns); Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, and elsewhere. The lands of (sometimes formerly) colonised and oppressed peoples are ideal places for dam sites and nuclear reactors: out of the way places like North Wales, parts of Scotland, numerous reservation in the U.S., the areas of Khazakstan and Turkestan, the northern Thai border full of 'rebel' Karen tribes people, the millions of tribal people, Dalits and subsistence farmers and their families displaced in India (Roy), and the use of Tibet as a nuclear reactor/waste site, to name a few. The calculated form of such annexation is imperialist and long-standing.

and he continues to admire the river valley and its fauna, the things which inspire him in the first place. As he watches a redtail hawk, his passengers “urg[e] caution. A glance at the river. I miss the next rock. Can’t hit them all. And bounce safely off the one beyond” (235). So Abbey’s form of special associative, blended river rage and delight continues: as a musing helmsman the main danger is to his own boat and its occupants. His distrust of politicians and “ESTers” remains (the latter being “jet-set androids,” maybe stuck on Eastern Standard Time, who move West yet “will not lift a finger to help defend it” [236]). Irksome problems linger.

Abbey said “forget it” early in the essay, but he cannot. He knows it is possible he will be the last to write of the wild Rio Dolores. Paddling on, he faces the beauty and recalls the loss, memory and sadness marking his journey:

We leave the forest, descending mile after mile, through a winding slickrock canyon toward tableland country. It is like Glen Canyon once again, in miniature, submerged but not forgotten Glen Canyon. The old grief will not go away. Like the loss of a wife, brother, sister, the ache in the heart dulls with time but never dissolves entirely.” (236)

Abbey’s sense of community is allied with people *and* place; the loss of either dimension reduces his entire world. He elaborates on this sense of community by asking “Where is home?.... For many, for more and more of us, the out-of-doors is our true ancestral estate.” Abbey wants balance, a “compromise” figured in small cities and farms “set in the midst of a great unbounded sea of primitive forest, unbroken mountains, virgin desert” (237). But even in imagined (low population?) utopias, Abbey does not let the rhetorical reins go; he pulls himself back from his flight of fancy with typical humour and pragmatism. His humour (and acerbic style) is one of the qualities that few other “nature writers” have been able (or wish?) to emulate. “Another day, another dolor. The dampness of the river has soaked into my brain, giving it the consistency of tapioca. My crackpot dreams fade with the dawn. Too many questions, not enough answers” (237). He carries on down the river while there is still a chance (even if his raft is “lumpen-bourgeois!”), affirming his commitment to the “family” his co-rafters have become. To this end, he allows himself a small rave in favour of loving one another, for with love “we take the sting from death. Loving our mysterious blue planet, we resolve riddles and dissolve enigmas in contingent bliss” (238). By writing of rivers the essayist finds a form of focus that continues; the essay’s oscillating contingent nature mirrors the delights of the waterway. Love is one recourse but even Abbey sees it as functioning as a fragile enclave; it will not necessarily stop dams. His companions and his readers do not run the Bureau of Reclamation. (Now there’s a thought.)

Abbey continues down river until parting near Paradox, Colorado. Here, at journey’s end, he feels assured of the power of stories and memory: “[t]here will always be a Grand Canyon. There will always be a Rio Dolores, dam or no dam” (239). The river near Paradox goes *across* the valley; this gives Abbey hope. His bliss, contingent here upon imagination and upon dams, evokes Kinseth. The consciousness of the river runner flows onwards, out to the ocean of salt and stars that buoys us up. The infinitesimal presence of humans in the reach of time and our

eventual departure as a species gives Abbey the basis for a grim faith; the shell we leave will regenerate:

Not even a plateau could stop the river. Their dams will go down like dominoes. And another river be reborn.

There will always be one more river, not to cross but to follow. The journey goes on forever, and we are fellow voyagers on our little living ship of stone and soil and water and vapor, this delicate planet circling round the sun which humankind call Earth. (239)

And so a Kinsethian touch concludes the final essay in *Down The River*. Such a flourish points to the book's spiritual and philosophical undercurrents, carefully monitored to ensure the right note of gruffness predominates (the jeremiad requires invective). But this gruffness holds a long-range faith in the workings of nature over aeons. Abbey reaches a point where even his insouciance quietens and he opens to the scale of presence around him: the river soothes. His faith in the weakness of dams (it won't collapse overnight but it will collapse eventually) highlights the relationship between wilderness as expansive teacher, and foolish human intervention. His faith in the river's eventual continuity brooks human control. Some things will endure; in half-a-million years that 'something' is likely to include the river.

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A combination of reverence and belligerence informs Abbey's assessment of Henry David Thoreau, that best known of nineteenth-century (part-time) pencil manufacturers (27). Daily entries form the structural basis for the essay. This formal device harks back to Thoreau's journal, and preserves a sense of immediacy; once again Abbey prefers to meander, letting the river and his thoughts on Thoreau's *Walden* take over. Rather than focus entirely on his response to *Walden*, which will not (despite its flowing style) serve my riverine purpose here, I will look at his briefer comments on the Green River.

Not long after Jonathan Raban chugged his way into the first of many giant locks on the Mississippi, boating through the last months of Carter's presidency (a trip recorded in his wonderful 1981 account *Old Glory: An American Voyage*), Edward Abbey set out on a float trip down Utah's Green River.<sup>13</sup> Abbey and party begin on the day of the presidential election. The election result is the last thing on their minds. They are resolved "to treasure the bliss of our

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<sup>13</sup> Incidentally, Raban's book (which I do not have space to consider, as much as I would like to) deflates the concept of the epiphanic journeying quest: the conclusion at the Pacific does not offer a blinding insight, nor does the trip as a whole ease the problems that he set out with. Raban's description of the process of composition is relevant for my purposes: "You have to remember that the books I write are highly shaped versions of real experience. They're not the log of the trip, they're not the literal record. I don't carry a tape recorder; I use my memory rather than a notebook when I'm writing. What I like to do is try to distil the whole experience in memory and then write out of the memory rather than trying to write a piece of literal reportage about the journey" (*Writers and Company* 115).

ignorance for as long as we can" (Abbey 14).<sup>14</sup> This is a journey that focuses on higher things: rivers, the sex life of Henry David Thoreau, and Abbey's scorn of vegetarianism, for example. In other words, irreverence is at a premium. These topics provoke reflection and essayistic "meandering" in "Down the River with Henry Thoreau."

Raban wanted to know the people of the river as much as the Mississippi; he retells their modified stories. Abbey's trip has a different rhythm. Rafting, not motor boating, he is pleased to escape from what he views as a society in decline, to remain isolated from the election (that will usher in the right-wing Reagan government). Raban seeks the unfamiliar and sometimes garish pulse of middle America. Abbey would as soon cause a myocardial infarction, as too many rivers have been "damned" without reason for his liking (143).

One of Abbey's early comments points back to Kinseth's exuberant metaphors and problems with representation: "The power of Thoreau's assertion lies not in its meaning but in its exhilarating suggestiveness.... the words imply more than words can make explicit" (18). The journey Abbey takes with Thoreau ("Thoreau's mind has been haunting mine for most of my life," he says [13]) becomes an interrogation of Abbey's own faith, and gives site to his sense of outrage at the way the planet has been treated.

As I noted, this outrage has rhetorical precedents. John A. Murray observes that "Down the River With Henry Thoreau" is akin to the Puritan jeremiad in three ways: firstly, the pattern of scriptural reference (here, Murray argues, the canonical *Walden* is the text); secondly, Abbey's denunciation of society's decline (for example, the "expand-or-expire agro-industrial empire—a crackpot machine," 17); and thirdly a prophetic vision, seen above in the hope granite and water will eventually overcome concrete and in comments that "revenge is on the way" (34). "When the cities lie at the monster's feet" Abbey will retreat into the wilderness with his offspring and key friends (47, Murray 301). The essay, largely an exegesis of Thoreau's work (with comments on his character, his "fastidious puritanism" and his *lack* of a sex life [20]), returns to the present by way of the literary past, as Abbey finds those insights useful.

Thoreau's comments become relevant in the context of Abbey's ten-day river trip. His river trip is haunted by the world just above and beyond the Green River canyon. Abbey cannot let

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<sup>14</sup> This proves wise. As Tim Palmer reports, "Federal agencies attempted to reform water policies under President Carter. The Reagan administration continued some of the reforms but dropped river protection programs. While budgets for other domestic agencies were cut to the bone, a 25 percent increase was handed out to the Bureau of Reclamation—the largest dam builder in the West" (Palmer *Endangered Rivers*, 3-4). That said, Reagan's insistence on State funding for hydropower projects scaled back *some* of the earlier plans. Palmer believes it was actually Nixon who did the most sterling work for wild rivers. In 1982, Reagan's stance was clear. Verne Huser wrote down his concerns and vision: "As a nation, we have been building a balance for more than two centuries: through a civil war, two world wars, and numerous economic disasters. Even as a river constantly seeks dynamic equilibrium, so the nation may respond to the current circumstances and continue to protect selected rivers and continue to select rivers to protect. The present problems may be merely another rapid to negotiate, an eddy in the gravity-induced flow toward completion of the [National Wild and Scenic Rivers] System, a rock-garden that high water will obviate as the System returns to health. The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System gives us pride in our history and cultural heritage, offers us recreational pleasure, and provides us with the diversity that helps us find balance in our lives" (*River Reflections* 201).

go of that world which has a grip on us all, but he uses his excursions to gain distance from the city. As countersite and counter-discourse to the city, “wilderness is posited as an ‘other place’ for use against a normal, everyday space from which one wishes to stand apart, to criticize” (Chaloupka and Cawley 10). The journeys in his book are excursions out into the field, trips away from concentrated human error, into a threatened otherness that becomes the centre; no river is pure for him. The movement between past (textual) and present (anecdotal) levels of memory is mirrored by the tension between the river that *is* and the corrupted river it might *become*. Where a fallen river haunts, a pure river can simply evoke another pattern of “heartbreak” that eventually humiliates the continuities that Abbey should be able to enter into. His ideal river is one that can run wild into the future because of the way it has been seen in the past and present. In his imagination one dammed river damns the rest. Abbey, shadowed by the terrible prospect of concrete and the human desire for control, cannot always rest easy in the silence, for it may soon be broken. Some of his lyrical passages occur in the moments when he focuses on the river before him, rather than the world he has left behind. But even the silence creates the right conditions for revolt: Abbey’s jeremiad needs distance in order to function. Tranquility brings out his most fulsome views because these remnants are reminders of what has been lost.

Abbey (like Sanders) attacks the attitudes that built the giant dams. The Thoreau essay is a reflection on a writer of a somewhat similar persuasion (Thoreau’s Concord and Merrimack river trips had one eye on what was vanishing), and a way of seeing the world, rather than a detailed account of the history and ecology of the Green River. Much of the essay (taken up with Abbey’s analysis of *Walden*), uses the river as a backdrop to the conversation with Thoreau and a narrative base to (and for) reflection. Reading and river braid in Abbey’s raft. Abbey’s engagement with rivers often affects his meandering narrative, but “Down the River” records a mental engagement with a text, a floating exegesis. It is not punctuated by the constant interruption of rapids and navigation errors or daydreams: long chunks of the text attend to Thoreau and leave the Green River unmentioned.

So the long essay on Thoreau is dominated by Abbey’s response to *Walden*, which is affected by the Green River he is rafting. Abbey’s timely, river-based return to the work of Thoreau engages with his own sense of outrage at environmental collapse. “Both authors are passionately concerned with saving a society that has lost sight of its original values” (Murray 303). For Murray, Abbey ranks as one of the “new Puritans” who flee the fallen city; they are doomed to remain haunted by the damned rivers they reach, the “Paradise” of the remembered—now lost—wild river (Murray 305; Abbey 231). He shifts between nostalgia and anger, always with an eye out for the latest incarnation of barbarians. (Nowadays they would take the form of a shining phalanx of Sports Utility Vehicles, invariably advertised with the Southwest he loved so much as a backdrop. Abbey might turn in his grave at the sight of the things, but then again he might just buy one to cart the canoes.) In any case, the jeremiad practitioner sets up and requires an intensive oscillation between self, river and fallen city.

Beset by memories of plenitude (Glen Canyon) and then loss (represented by “the bland, soft, clear, stagnant reservoir of Lake Powell. Better known as Lake Foul...” [Abbey 135]), Abbey tempers his flights of metaphor because so much has been taken; there is no possibility for unalloyed delight.<sup>15</sup> There is, rather, an element of elegy (Hoagland’s “pleasures’ past”):

For a civilization to annihilate the wildness of such a river so casually, he reasoned, was tantamount to destroying a part of the Southwest’s very soul, its identity as a place of humankind’s earliest origins. Any civilization that could act so senselessly, he concluded, was no civilization at all; the only response was self-defence, namely, dismantling the instruments terrorizing nature through sabotage — whether allegorical, metaphorical, rhetorical, or real sabotage. (Bishop Jr., 124)

Abbey will shock and protest and after a time he will dispense with sadness. Regret is not his home. His irreverence and zest for rhetorical sabotage demands he snubs corporations, the BuRec and the Army Corps of Engineers. “We never give it [Lake Foul] a thought” (135). “Forget it” (231).

Abbey’s prose veers and eddies wildly rather than sustaining the earnest rush of Kineth, or Sanders’ steady focused current. “I write in a deliberately outrageous or provocative manner because I like to startle people. I hope to wake up people. I have no desire to simply soothe or please” (Trimble 27). Abbey loves rivers; that feeling runs constant in his work. He may detest the dams and all they stand for, but he places great faith in the eventual endurance of the rivers. The water and granite will reclaim the valley and destroy the concrete. Abbey does that dam “remodelling” through his imagination, through a transformative vision that refuses to ascribe too much spirituality to the surroundings or the self. Waking before dawn, he sees Saturn, Jupiter and Mars rising from the cusp of the moon in convergence. He notes transcendentalists would see those stars as “symbolic of a greater spiritual reality beyond. And within” (19). But Abbey believes they signify “nothing but themselves ... And that is more than we can make head or tail of” (20). The literal (rather than the figurative) becomes the basis for his reflection and rhetoric. Even the literal is full of mystery and Abbey is content to let the mystery speak for itself.

Abbey’s Thoreau essay becomes an opportunity for invective, rather than a description of gorgeous scenery. Scenery is always under threat (by tourism if nothing else), and Abbey is not content with picturesque accounts of wild remnants.<sup>16</sup> Abbey holds a contradictory position: he relishes and delights in the wild and places faith in its endurance beyond the blink of human

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<sup>15</sup> Gaylord Staveley refers to Glen Canyon as “my splendid lost love” (135). There “[b]eauty never had a chance. Perhaps it will some day. In the meantime, the prevailing twentieth-century values said: Glen Canyon is *useless* until we fill it with water, no matter how much beauty we cover.” Trips on the Green River offer him glimpses of the Glen’s majesty, but they do not square up to the memories of the past. But the someday when the Canyon might recover (through the draining of Lake Powell) is moving closer through the work of Dr. Richard Ingebresten and the Glen Canyon Institute (see Berger citation).

<sup>16</sup> I imagine he would challenge Kineth for not spending more time attending to the damage done on his river eternal, and then would congratulate him for loving that place, despite the damage that has been done.



presence on the planet, but this faith is sorely tested (and angrily shored up) by human meddling: “our technology continues to lag behind genuine human needs” (134). That technology fails to encourage any responsibility; it weakens the imperative to care for future generations and prevent loss so central to Hans Jonas’s work. He bears out Scott Slovic’s key assertion: “Abbey’s true project, his essential consciousness-raising effort, hinges on the conflation of pure aesthetics with volatile moral issues” (11). The conflation creates all kinds of whirlpools in content.

Despite being the essay that critics tend to look to, “Down the River with Henry Thoreau” is less important for my purpose of tracing human responses to the river than “Floating” or “Running the San Juan.”<sup>17</sup> These last two essays display Abbey’s frustration while he scrambles for (inadequate) words to describe the reflection prompted by both wild and “damned” rivers.<sup>13</sup> Descriptions of wild rivers tend to extol harmony, thrill and contentment; those of dammed rivers evoke loss, and prompt further moral introspection for many (but not all). The conclusion to “Running the San Juan” (at a reservoir) imparts a grim finality that Abbey still taps for humour.

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Abbey’s role in the six-day San Juan trip is as the party’s “wilderness philosopher.” “I am not expected to do anything but look wise, keep quiet, and stay out of the way” (125). As the boats set off, Abbey begins his observations on the San Juan, a river that is part of the wider world, affected by human interference, and bound into the lives of those in the watershed. The following

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<sup>17</sup> One exemplar of the postmodern river is the Columbia, which Richard White terms a “virtual river” which has had billions of dollars poured into it to try to create a semblance of ecosystem harmony, an impossible task given the dams that bestride it (106). But another type of postmodern river is the reconstructed “meandering stream” or unstraightened river. This “re-meandered” stream is a river that is re-engineered after channelization in order to restore its riverine environment, its scenic beauty, and the virtue of the populace; as Kenneth Olwig notes, “there is now an almost worldwide call to restore riverine nature” (407). (See Phillips and the work of photographer Peter Goin in *Humanature* (Austin: U Texas Press, 1996) with regard to the re-meandering of the Kissimmee River in Florida, and de Villiers (195-212) on the efforts to re-engineer the Rhine and Danube rivers. The 1999 war between Serbian and NATO forces destroyed many bridges on the Danube, blocking shipping and affecting a swath of businesses along its reach and markets elsewhere.) Worster identifies one motive for this call with regard to the Western U.S.A.: “[a] sense of irreparable loss began to settle about the water empire by the late twentieth-century, a remembrance of things past” (Worster, *Rivers* 324). However, the restoration trend needs to acknowledge the interdependence of wilderness and the everyday:

The natural ideals we hope to restore in the ‘headwaters’ of our national parks must be given form in the planning and protection of our daily environments farther ‘downstream.’ The two cannot be separated, as anyone who has witnessed the polluted airstream of LA smog in the Grand Canyon knows. The damming of Hetch Hetchy and the imparkment of Yosemite reflect two sides of the character of San Francisco’s interaction with its ‘watershed.’” (*Rivers* 408)

<sup>18</sup> Though “Notes From A Cold River,” a fine account of the way a team is formed on a Tatshenshini River journey features glowing descriptions of very fine meals, it lacks the stylistic relish and enjoyment of the Southwest river trips; Abbey’s prose is sketchy, less descriptive, and it seems far more hurried. The company is sometimes less convivial (for example, he takes a dim view of a Pentagon employee who used to write for *Star Trek*). A key factor is locale: he misses his home, even amongst the fine riverscapes of the Yukon. Perhaps there’s not enough to rail against. Love may not save the world on this trip.

excerpt displays Abbey's blend of factual detail and opinion. Once again any seriousness quickly evaporates beneath Abbey's gruff disavowals. The river heads for the Pacific

... which it will never reach. Like many rivers these days the San Juan is bound for practical ends, condemned by industrial agriculture to expire in a thousand irrigation ditches, transmogrified from living river into iceberg lettuce, square tomatoes, celery, onions, Swiss chard, and radishes. Not an entirely unworthy end, I suppose, since we Americans do like to eat and God only knows there are so *many* of us, but—it makes me sad. If I think about it. Like fish, chicken, cows, pigs and lambs, the rivers too are penned and domesticated and diverted through manifold ingenious ways—some of which will not bear witnessing or thinking about—into the bottomless gut of the ever-expanding economy. There must be, somewhere, good reason for our collective gluttony, but if there is a Judgment Day and a God of justice we humans are going to have much to answer for. If I were a good Christian I would dread that day.

Don't think about it. Nobody else does. Except animal liberationists. And vegetarians—those murderers of zucchini! those bean sprout killers! (127)

Abbey's rhetorical shifts enable balance and moral endurance. He moves on from grief and anger, and then has more space for commentary, as he samples the United States' terrible beers, jibes at vegetarians and enjoys the food, stories and company he loves. If he were to lament dams constantly, his humour (one of his sharpest weapons) would vanish, along with much of his impact.

Intent on shock tactics, Abbey believes in the possibility of change and has the prophet's certainty of judgment and select survival, divine or otherwise: "there's many a fork in the road from here to damnation" (235). His zeal is tempered by a declared nonchalance regarding spiritual matters. Abbey constantly scales back received pronouncements of transcendent (or even geologic) presence: "Deep time is too shallow for me .... What matters is the strange, mysterious, overwhelming truth that *we are here now*, in this magnificent place, and never will know why. Or why not" (130). Our very existence is puzzle enough for Abbey, and he likes to keep that puzzle earthy, rather than turning to any theological answers. Kinseth uses metaphor to define or articulate his sense of mystery; Abbey prefers to react with silence—or a change in topic. Somewhere between Abbey's rapid tacks across sentence or paragraph he hints at deeper grief.<sup>19</sup> Of course humour, outrage and insouciance are valid and visceral emotional expressions too, for they sustain. I can almost glimpse him in the notched ambit of a paragraph break. He has the sharp eyes of the coyote and he is grinning very, very widely.

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<sup>19</sup> Abbey's occasional embarrassment at purple prose prevents him from extended metaphorical raves. Of course this does not mean he is easy to embarrass as a person. (It took a mooning at the River Rats convention to get his blood right up, and even that is recounted with glee. The River Rats essay is useful for its take on bureaucracy in rivers, and his anger at the term 'resource'.)

Perhaps he keeps smiling because he knows the San Juan will keep running, outliving the fragile traces of past human settlement.<sup>20</sup> The essay continues, with side trips that trace this past (Anasazi, Mormon and mining settlements), campsite descriptions, and shared father-daughter rapid-running. The excursions are poignant and intriguing. There is also a paragraph of surefire boating tips (“When in doubt, straighten out... Read the river like a book. And if still in doubt—? Jump out. Stay home. Read a book” [133]). Abbey’s lyrical moments are rare, and perhaps more striking for that reason. They are rare because epiphany is rare: it depends upon a plateau for its definitive peak, and (in this case) one of those moments of stillness that drifting offers:

Downstream. In the morning sunlight the silt-loaded San Juan looks like red-eye gravy. In the shade it takes on a bluish, metallic sheen. In the afternoon, squinting towards the sun, floating into the wind, my eyes two feet above the surface of the water, I see the river as a desert Congo with golden scales.

The wind dies away. In the glassy, smooth pooled water above Government Rapids, looking down at my hand in the stream and at three willow leaves floating nearby, all of them, relative to my boat, quite motionless, my impression is one of perfect stillness. An absolute and perfect stasis. And then I raise my eyes and see the hurried shore of the river, the willow and tamarisk and boulders rushing past. (139)

The jocular simile in the first sentence establishes a gritty and easygoing Boy’s Adventure style: there is no sentimentalising here (at least landscape is not sentimentalised, but the laddish mode of interpreting it is). The use of imagery ensures “muscular Christianity” reappears in a dilute guise of offhand pioneering ruggedness. The prose swiftly enters a romantic “golden” phase, panning to the focused sheen of the description of “perfect stillness” (a quiet textual pool). Abbey’s urgency stills too—until his gaze lifts and we realise, almost along with Abbey, that the craft is in constant motion. Even so, he has created a varied flow in one passage, easing us into the rhythm of his journey and his thinking.

The river essayists may experience shifts in their sense of time; the rhythm of a river (in its upper reaches as Abbey experiences the San Juan) responds to seasonal cycles rather than daily tides. There is a hypnotic quality to the current, whether observed from shore or craft. Kineth’s sense of time is expanded by his stretch of wild river whereas Sanders’ is collapsed into a flooding of memory “leaving nothing of the past” (Palmer, *Endangered Rivers* 2). Abbey’s moment is presented, but is then left as given, rather than commented on, troped or deployed as a

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<sup>20</sup> Wendell Berry suggests as much when he discusses rivers in general (and the Kentucky in particular, with one eye, like Eiseley, on the stretch of geological time): “Men may dam it and say that they have made a lake, but it will still be a river. It will keep its nature and bide its time, like a caged wild animal alert for the slightest opening. In time it will have its way; the dam like the ancient cliffs will be carried away piecemeal in the currents” (Berry, “Unforeseen” *Recollected* 246).

transcendental signifier.<sup>21</sup> Abbey simply shifts attention to his fellow boaters. The light touch allows the reader to do the work, if desired, and avoids foisting an overblown epiphany onto the reader.

The essay has delighted. The San Juan provided a perfect river trip. “The magic of a boat. The splendor of a flowing river” (140). But the end brings us hard against the (foreshadowed) reservoir, at the takeout point. The essay comes to a sharp conclusion, a sudden retraction of the ease and delight in the previous pages (though it is a rare page where Abbey is still not having fun). The world has crashed into this place; it is a different valley since Abbey’s last visit; “the Lake Powell Bathtub Ring” is evident. There is no discernible current and a fisherman has some bad news, delivered in the laconic local idiom:

‘Hello there.’  
‘Howdy.’  
‘How’s the fishing?’  
‘Not half bad.’  
‘Where’s the crossing?’  
‘You’re there.’  
‘Yeah? Where’s the road?’  
‘About ten feet below you.’  
‘Well, I’ll be damned. Two years ago it all looked different.’  
‘Well,’ he says, ‘two years ago there was still a river here.’  
‘Well, I’ll be damned.’  
‘Yeah,’ he says, ‘it sure is.’

Enough said.

**“Water is important to people who do not have it, and the same is true of control.” Didion, dams and psychic haunting.**

Outrage is one response to the consequences of the large dam, but Joan Didion’s “At the Dam” reveals an uncommon dash of sensuality and irony. The essay is barely three pages long, but in that space she evokes the “affecting” physical and emotional power of the Hoover Dam (19). The structural and formal brevity of the essay holds the narrative energy of the short story and a compact, squat tone that oozes snubbed concrete abutments and the sheer sides of turbines. “At the Dam” is a meditation on the longevity of concrete rather than its eventual demise. Hoover’s

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<sup>21</sup> “None of the essays in this book requires elucidation” [3] he told us (one reason for the fairly small amount of critical commentary, perhaps?). My attention on river reflection stresses a cyclic mode of interpretation mediated by memory. This focus is especially relevant with regard to his essays “A Colorado River Journey” (1977), “The Damnation of a Canyon” and “Gather at the River” (both 1984), and “River Solitaire” (published 1988). If anything, Abbey’s attentive lyricism is at its peak in these pieces. *Down The River* is a precursor to the maturation of his qualities of lyrical remembrance and elegiac poise in these riverine essays; lack of space means I cannot attend to them here. I recommend them to the reader who wants to see Abbey at the height of his powers of river reflection. They appear in *The Serpents of Paradise: A Reader*. Ed. John Macrae. New York: Henry Holt, 1995.

power as “an idea in the world’s mind” supports a series of linked and overlapping images (199). Didion does not fantasise collapse: she mythologises presence.

The work opens with a sequence of almost intimate admissions, as Didion recounts her dam daydreams just as one might recall a lover: “Since the afternoon in 1967 when I first saw Hoover Dam, its image has never been entirely absent from my inner eye.... suddenly the dam will materialize.... abruptly those power transmission towers will appear before me.... Sometimes I am confronted by the intakes.... Quite often I hear the turbines” (198). An element of complicity and dependence lingers beneath the prose, not because she adores the dam (though she, as a Southern Californian, needs it) but because it dwarfs her, outlining her own mortality and the insignificance of emotion against that sheer structure. Throughout the essay Hoover Dam is described without precise reference to its cubic weight or size. One of the few statistics given is the number of men killed during construction: 96. Didion’s accretion of images, terms and association creates a sense of the dam’s effect rather than a list of specifications. The essay quickly composes itself around a hazy sense of inquiry and solution, a kind of brittle teleology and an almost metaphysical intellectual fathoming: “I used to wonder what it was about the dam that made me think of it at times and in places where I once thought of the Mindanao Trench, or of the stars wheeling in their courses, or of the words *As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, amen*. Dams, after all, are a commonplace: we have all seen one” (198-9).

The essay is constructed around a sequence of journeys and memories that traces why the dam is so affecting for Didion: it is “a monument to faith misplaced”; the former construction town of Boulder City “is perfectly frozen in time” and the energy project has “transparent sexual overtones” (199). Each paragraph in the essay taps a different aspect of the dam: we begin in her web of mental recollection and proceed to the environs and history of the dam. Then we enter the structure of the dam as Didion recounts her visit to the site with a Bureau of Reclamation official. Her experience of the whirring turbines (““Touch it,’ the Reclamation said”—even the man has a mechanistic name) is not erotic but grimly intimate nonetheless. The intensity of the experience banishes figurative referents, as if metaphor itself is crushed through the turbine: “for a long time I just stood there with my hands on the turbine. It was a peculiar moment, but so explicit as to suggest nothing beyond itself” (200). However there remains “something beyond all that, something beyond energy, beyond history, something I could not fit in my mind” (200). Tracing personal memory and inclination for clues about the dam’s power, her memory fails to offer solutions (or clues). Her inquiry takes in the semblance of a quest, full of journey and mental striving.

Just when I presume her response to the dam, or the dam itself, cannot yield to the figurative, nor gesture beyond its own stark grey bulk, Didion realises the image that has been haunting her through this essay and the three years of its gestation. The effect the dam causes is composed of its own lack of gesturing power: it suggests and seems to need nothing beyond itself for its continuation; yet it continues to function, to gesture in its own way. Like wildness, oddly

enough, the dam does not need humans; indeed, the BuRec guide suggests it will outlast us all. This stubborn endurance moves Didion to her resolution, her bleak epiphany. She sees the dam in its dumb functioning, whirring and whirring through aeons of space and time. Her insight is as redolent of loss as Abbey's and Sanders' in some curious and familiar ways that invert the rhetoric of environmental spoliation and confront the inexorable fact of human mortality and folly. This sense of loss accretes: the dam's enduring presence violates ("humiliates" [McPhee 193]) the ongoing cycles of nature; nothing beyond humankind can really use the dam.<sup>22</sup> ("At the Dam" is placed at the end of the "Sojourns" section in *The White Album*, as if to conclude all journeys with the image of the whirring turbines.) Didion's open response shares something of the awful scope of the project, and the reach of human desire. In her final paragraph the focus shifts to the heavens above, extending in range while maintaining a sense of wrong.

The moment occurs as she walks across "a marble star map" at the dam, which fixes the heavens, "the reclamation man" said at "the date the dam was dedicated" (290-1). Where Sanders and Abbey lament the death of rivers they imagine can run forever, Didion finds no comfort in her (post-apocalyptic?) vision: a world without people, a world bled upon by the light of stars and a silent celestial emptiness:

The star map was, he had said, for when we were all gone and the dam was left. I had not thought much of it when he said it, but I thought of it then, with the wind whining and the sun dropping behind a mesa with the finality of a sunset in space. Of course that was the image I had seen always, seen it without quite realizing what I saw, a dynamo finally free of man, splendid at last in its absolute isolation, transmitting power and releasing water to a world where no one is. (201)

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In "Holy Water" (1977), Didion confronts a complex web of dependencies and controls while playing in the Operations Control Center for the California State Water Project. The Project keeps "roughly a trillion gallons of water behind Oroville Dam" and elsewhere and co-ordinates water "deliveries" across the state, pulling water from reservoirs for a two-day journey to irrigation canals and cities (60, 61). The essay describes the locks, dams, pipelines and reservoirs that keep California functioning. These, she argues, are not a cause for lamentation. The barrage of engineering and intervention turns water into a reduced utilitarian "stuff" (in Illich's phrase) but its scarcity prompts feelings beyond the utilitarian, or at least a kind of utilitarian esteem: "Some of us who live in arid parts of the world think about water with a reverence others might find excessive" (59).

Didion's work on this "plumbing on a grand scale" (and her self-declared "obsessive interest" in the water, and waterworks) investigates engineering and the psyche in such a way as to

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<sup>22</sup> "The denial of death implied in religious beliefs so common to all mankind finds powerful support from the observation of nature itself: sun, stars, seasons, seas, and rivers" (Niederland 42).

defy Illich's binary between myth and manipulation, holiness and tap fittings (59).<sup>23</sup> This essay sheds light on the Hoover piece by detailing Didion's hydrologic desire. "It is easy to forget that the only natural force over which we have any control out here is water, and that only recently" (64). At the Centre, elements of engineering and control are ironically described in the language of play; this plumbing is like the Meccano set of the gods:

From this [control] room in Sacramento the whole system takes on the aspect of a perfect three billion dollar hydraulic toy, and in certain ways it is. 'LET'S START DRAINING QUAIL AT 12:00' was the 10:51 A.M. entry on the electronically recorded communications log the day I visit the Operations Control Center. 'Quail' is a reservoir in Los Angeles County with a gross capacity of 1,636,018,000 gallons. 'OK' was the response recorded in the log. I knew at that moment that I had missed the only vocation for which I had any instinctive affinity: I wanted to drain Quail myself. (62)

Didion enjoys her visit to the centre. (As a teenager her raft was sucked through a dam intake chute with her on board; this event that made her "deliriously happy" [60].<sup>24</sup> It is no wonder, then, that she is affected by her visit to the Center.) The mechanistic response to numbers is faithful; here at last the fluid has attained a determinate quality. The scale of the engineering system she confronts tends to occlude its primary ecological basis (even though the basis in turn determines decisions). Mediated by the shorthand of engineering, the move from "river" to "'hydraulic toy'" is easy and it offers a suggestive power that appeals to the need for "control" that borders this essay just as a box contains water.

After a fine meditation on swimming pools ("a pool is, for many of us in the West, a symbol not of affluence but of order, of control over the uncontrollable," 64) and the difficulty of living in arid climes ("I know as well as the next person the considerable transcendent value in a river running wild and undammed, a river running free over granite, but I have also lived beneath such a river when it was running in flood, and gone without showers when it was running dry," 64-5) Didion returns to the Project Control Center: "If I had wanted to drain Quail at 10:51 that morning, I had wanted, by early afternoon, to do a great deal more" (65-6). Here the prose has the eager restraint that marks a proper and sober enthusiasm. She then leaps into her description with the breathless delight of a child heading to the pre-schoolers' paddling pool. The repetition of

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<sup>23</sup> As I note in chapter three, in his 1985 work *H<sub>2</sub>O and the Waters of Forgetfulness: Reflections on the Historicity of 'Stuff'*, Illich argues that the modern city was and is "built around bathrooms and garages, accommodating the circulation of tap water and of traffic" (66). The modern city *uses* water, it does not revere it, he argues. But Didion's essay, from its title on, questions this view by ascribing an aura of significance to the water from a tap, or the cool blue rectangle of a swimming pool.

<sup>24</sup> See Cynthia Griffith Wolf, "Play It as It Lays: Didion and the Diver Heroine." *Contemporary Literature* 24 (1983): 480-95, for a discussion of the earth-diver mythos in protagonist Maria Lang's descent into the Hoover Dam's innards. Lang "makes the only sort of 'heroic dive' available in the aridity that signifies the wilderness of modern America" (491).

the phrase “I wanted” is marked by the range of machines and masses she could have power over. The impression is one of the boys with their toys:

I wanted to open and close the Clifton Court Forebay intake gate. I wanted to produce some power down at the San Luis Dam. I wanted to pick a pool at random from the Aqueduct and pull it down and then refill it, watching for the hydraulic jump. I wanted to put some water over the hill and I wanted to shut down all flow from the Aqueduct into the Bureau of Reclamation’s Cross Valley Canal, just to see how long it would take somebody over at Reclamation to call up and complain. (66)

Didion uses anaphora effectively here. The Greek meaning of the word (carrying up, or back) suggests the water-carrier or reservoir as well as the retraction or containment of disorder, a process that balances the measured release of nourishment and fertility over a vast area, as well as creating a sense of disport and mischief. The girl has control of the toy and her conclusion suggests she will be generous with its gifts. The essay ends with an unrequited desire to share this abundance, to create plenty and give without limit, to nourish the groves of olives and oranges, “flooding the daylong valleys like the Nile. I want it still” (66).

This stance is at odds with “the Reclamation’s” mechanical, high-clinical certainty. Didion reclaims power and water, not to hoard it but to give it all back. Her work on water and power fits perfectly in the context of *The White Album*’s reflection on the shifting relations between gender and power in the 1960s and 1970s. She compounds events and movements of great impact into the language of vulnerable declaration.

Didion’s movement from introspection to political revisioning appears superficially minor. She is not making overt political statements, or trying to shock. But then one realizes how insistently her visions of desire and need have functioned. The desert sports great walls of concrete in the valleys, huge volumes of water are transported as if to a place of famine, one parched to the core. The life-giving liquid then arrives at the palm-lined golf course which has formed a green scab at the edge of a desert. Even in moments of wonder and acknowledgment Didion manages to suggest the whole (now absolutely necessary) absurdities of these times.

Control, water, desire: Didion’s essays are remarkable inversions of ‘greener’ (more strident) anti-dam essays. They are urbane, they appreciate what technology can give us, but also accept the kinds of losses it bequeaths; they still despair deeply (with *less* hope than Kinsey) at the work of humankind, and they open to the pull of control and need. She makes no mention of the former watershed ecosystem (it may have vanished in symbolic scale beneath the dam’s bulk) and its perilous state around her country and the world and she does not write in the traditional *nature* essay tradition. Her essay describes technologies that mimic and cloak larger recirculating natural processes. Concrete has entered the ecosystem; turbines are the new dusk sounds. The network of alliances and enclaves people form with each other and their surroundings ground her needs and her values in the human community, but Didion is never blind to the consequences of our failures and mistakes. That awareness extends beyond the essay in that suggestive and powerful space



beyond the words: somehow her emotional openness suggests the unconscious fears and needs that drive so much human endeavour. Nothing needs to be spelled out because everything is so beautifully implied and implicated; she excels in the evocative. With words and with silence she states very clearly the impulses that build dams and communities. Desire and control pour the concrete for the dam: like Abbey, Stafford and Sanders, she is stunned by the lengths to which those impulses take us and the monuments they leave.

### **Paddling and purification: The canoe excursion as spiritual practice**

Drifting, there comes an intimate sense of how the water has sought its way through the country, and one feels how simple and steadfast is its obedience to the laws of gravity, filling and flowing on.

Wendell Berry, "The Unforeseen Wilderness" (251-2)

Throughout the first part of this chapter the essential river has lurked like a distant treasure. Somewhere, Sanders hopes, is a kind of river experience that redeems and purifies while offering an instructive respite from the appetites of living in the city. Before I proceed to Moore's collection of essays, I want to create an interlude that takes the reader back to the healing power of the journey. Despite the grave state of much of the planet, plenty of writers manage to find redemptive and transformative release in the wild river. Such a current still has powerful mythological and spiritual connotations. Two essays recast the hearty "muscular Christianity" of the keen Victorian explorer into a more modern idiom (Phillips 597). But the suggestion remains: the river or waters can heal; Kineth's river eternal lives on. Tapping into that, the paddler can find another world of encounter and symbol.

Wendell Berry's "The Rise" (1969) and "Exhaustion and Fulfilment: The Ascetic in a Canoe" by a youthful Pierre Elliott Trudeau (1944) provide two ways into the river of spirit, a river that is less likely to be as prescriptive today.<sup>25</sup> These essays are based on personal experience, and they have a varied temporal range: Berry writes of paddling with his wife on the

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<sup>25</sup> There is a note appended to Trudeau's essay: "This essay, which was originally published in French in the November 1944 issue of JEC (*Jeunesse étudiante catholique*), appears here for the first time in translation" (3). Trudeau's "expedition" is akin to the ironic seriousness Thoreau uses to define the "walk" when he demands all ties be severed before setting out (481).

The virtues of canoeing and the idea of quest are well covered by Jamie Benidickson's history of canoeing in Canada from the late nineteenth-century on, *Idleness, Water and a Canoe: Reflections on Paddling for Pleasure*, and William James' article "The Quest Pattern and the Canoe Trip." Benidickson comments that in the youth canoe camps of the latter part of this century "quite deliberate efforts were sometimes made to promote a metamorphosis of the participants.... a vigorous exposure to the wilderness was promoted as an antidote to a rearticulated sense of moral decay" (64). Abbey is one essayist who derides this moral decay; writers "have a moral obligation to be the conscience of their society" (Trimble 28). The contemporary natural history essay offers a newer version of this sense of decline. A backslide occurs on ecological and moral levels because a failure of stewardship abdicates responsibility for the future. The "refrain of moral concern" Trimble identifies has a long provenance (28).

Kentucky River, swollen and turbulent, in December flood and Trudeau ranges across his memory to evoke vast Canadian waterways and thousand-mile canoe journeys.

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Part of Abbey's vicarious enjoyment as a 'river rat' comes from being on the river, floating, paddling and facing the current. All of the essays in this chapter are very much excursionary pieces; they combine elements of adventure and writing, sharing exploration and experience. Most of them remain anchored in the appreciation of *process*, the process of journeying, thinking and observing, and the shifting, growing sense of connection between self and world, mind and water. Berry defines this:

Once the boat has fully entered the consciousness it becomes an intimate extension of the self; one feels as competently amphibious as a duck. And once we felt accustomed and secure in the boat, the day and the river began to come clear to us....

What the canoeist gets, instead of an impression of the river's speed, is an impression of its power. Or, more exactly, the *voluminousness* of its power.... The sophistications of our age do not mitigate this impression. To some degree it remains unimaginable, as is suggested by the memory's recurrent failure to hold on to it. It can never be remembered as wild as it is, and so each new experience of it bears some of the shock of surprise. (7)

"The Rise" documents this awe, and the sense of otherworldliness that takes over on a river through shifts in perspective. When Jonathan Raban returned to the raging Mississippi during 1994 his contact with the river was largely riparian; he was observing the river from the banks, even if that river was swollen beyond recognition and the shore he stood on was a rooftop ("Mississippi"). But his wonderful essay is not a canoeing adventure: it is a piece of reportage, full of the human response that Raban captures so well. Berry's swollen river is a creek in comparison to the Mississippi in flood. Yet when Berry's canoe is swept around, another network of senses leaps into action and he enters a different world. When that riverine flow is charged by flood it transforms "the division between water and land.... It makes a new geography, altering the boundary of worlds" (4). Berry's focus may be different from Raban's, but both men are fascinated by this alteration, the new geography and its rapacious, alluring power. Desire and control interact in unusual ways the writers barely begin to hint at. Throughout this chapter rivers have provoked reflection upon the capacity of language or human need to overflow or fail to reach certain limits. The river's contained but purposeful movement can provoke linked thoughts of control and release. Many variables lie between the limits of perception.

Berry understands the interaction between canoeist and river. Paddling, he notes how the river slips across mental boundaries: "when our minds wandered the river took over and turned us according to inclinations of its own. It bore us like a consciousness, acutely wakeful, filling perfectly the lapses in our own" (5). There is always some kind of interplay going on. This "recirculation" or exchange of (sensory) information and memory appeals to Berry, Moore and

Abbey and informs their direct, flowing accounts. Ecological cycles are larger than normalised human perception; glimpsing that wildness beyond immediate human control on the river's current strikes Berry: the river "is apt to stand for and represent to us all in nature and the universe that is not subject. That is its horror" (8). In their own ways Raban and Berry gloat and tremble at this horror because the river "fascinates.... Its mystery must always be tampered with" (Berry 10). Berry continues by discussing the virtue of the river's sound at the banks, and "that silence in the middle, as though the quiet of the deep flowing rises into the air. Once it is recognized, listened to, that silence has the force of a voice" (11). This is a key assertion: the power of silence is a means of communication in much of the river writing I consider. Hulme's "gaps in the net" and Marlatt's "cycle" are refigured here in the essay; for Berry that cycle is at once suggestive and beyond human utterance. Berry's associative and reflective essay captures the meander of thought on a stylistic level, as do so many of these authors. "The Rise" flows along for a time, then slips into a section of reflection, sliding between natural history and observation to reflection on ecology and eco-philosophy; one paragraph devotes itself to "the most characteristic product of our scientific age ... junk," the next to the call of the pileated woodpecker. Then we return to the current where Berry's trip concludes, affirming the great distance between a river in spate and at rest, between the river and the shore: "With the uproar of the water still in our ears, we had as we entered the house the sense of having been utterly outside the lives we live as usual" (16). "The Rise" speaks to the possibilities of transcendence that hover in each of the essayists I consider. No matter how fallen a river, the site is turned to as a site of reflection. Plunging outside re-turns Berry within.

In 1999 James Raffan published *Bark, Skin, Cedar: Exploring the Canoe in Canadian Experience*. He argues that the canoe has been instrumental in Canada's history, and that the metaphor of the canoe quest has great relevance in cross-cultural contemporary Canada.

Canoeing is a journey on which one must ask, "Who are my partners?" "Where are we going?" and "What is our burden?" A canoe ties its paddlers to the water and to landscape, but it also ties them to each other in significant ways. To move forward, a stroke in the bow requires complementary action in the stern, and vice-versa, sort of Newton's third law of motion, Dekanahwideh-style. A canoe invites its occupants to ponder what's ahead, what's behind, what's beside us, what's above, what's below—a canoe invites awareness, a canoe nurtures situated knowing. And the only way to learn these teachings is to paddle. An annual First Ministers canoe trip. What a concept! (34)

I suspect former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau would give his assent to such a venture: Raffan argues that "canoeing was central to not only his image of himself but also to the image he projected publically" (183)..

Trudeau's essay is all about the distances one travels spiritually and psychologically through journeying by canoe for days, weeks, or months on end, a journey characterised by "the resolve to reach the saturation point. Ideally, the trip should end only when the members are

making no further progress within themselves” (3). This essay differs from the other canoe-loving pieces by being explicitly quasi-religious; this is a meditation on extended canoeing as a quest:

What sets a canoeing expedition apart is that it purifies you more rapidly and inescapably than any other. Travel a thousand miles by train and you are a brute; pedal five hundred on a bicycle and you remain basically a bourgeois; paddle a hundred in a canoe and you are already a child of nature. (3)

There are a number of assumptions being made here: that it is possible to become “a child of nature,” that travel is formed into strata of virtue (how else do ecotourism operators make their living?) and that canoeing offers salvation and pure primitivism at a concentrated level.<sup>26</sup> The “expedition” (not trip, or excursion, or outing) must cleanse on several levels. “To remove all the useless material baggage from a man’s heritage is, at the same time, to free his mind from petty preoccupations, calculations and memories” (4). The body and mind are challenged to the limit. For Trudeau, religion “became simple” and a “new morality” ensued: prayer became “a friendly chiding of the divinity” (4). He returned “not so much a man who reasons more, but a more reasonable man” (4) The mind engages in “sustain[ing] the body in the struggle against a powerful universe” (4). Such an expedition encourages self-reliance and interdependence as people are thrown onto their own resources and each other’s help. The essay is not a description of a journey; it summarises what we might now call the Green Christian philosophy of canoeing, the goals and qualities of the archetypal quest, and the association of wilderness with the transcendent. He concludes by summarising a kind of eco-spirituality sourced in the journey and the new demands it makes on the individual:

I do not want you to think the mind is subjected to a healthy discipline merely by worrying about simplistic problems. I only wish to remind you of that principle of logic which states that valid conclusions do not generally spring from false premises. Now, in a canoe, where those premises are based on nature in its original state (rather than on books, ideas and habits of uncertain value), the mind conforms to that higher wisdom which we call natural philosophy; later, that healthy methodology and acquired humility will be useful in confronting mystical spiritual questions.

I know a man whose school could never teach him patriotism, but who acquired that virtue when he felt in his bones the vastness of his land, and the greatness of those who founded it. (5)

The land becomes a great teacher. The wild refers beyond itself. And supposedly it purifies and sustains.

In the next section I discuss how Kathleen Dean Moore’s essays follow this cyclic pattern of reflection and anecdote, inquiry and digression I have called river reflection. She also shares the things she has learnt at the river, or from the river. This time, though, there is a key difference:

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<sup>26</sup> Trudeau needs to be aware that a hundred miles of canoe paddling at the turn of the century will require very “lumpen bourgeois” resources (to quote Abbey [237]): ecotourism and outdoor adventure is expensive!

the next generation appears in the work as a key focus of love and connection. The rivers of the future will be in their lives. She considers it vital that her children know how to open to, read and connect with the rivers of their memories.

### **Family on the river: *Riverwalking* and the essay of transition**

With *Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water* (1995), Kathleen Dean Moore joins a growing number of women who write on rivers, notably Janet Lembke, those in *First Fish, First Peoples* (edited by Roche and McHutchison), and the women who collaborate with editor Holly Morris in the anthologies *Uncommon Waters: Women Write About Fly-Fishing* (1991) and *A Different Angle: Fly-Fishing Stories By Women* (1996). Publishers are acknowledging that women have had the longest association with rivers in many cultures: Barb Cranmer's film *Luxwesa wa: Strength of The River* (1995), depicts the ongoing Coast Salish traditions of salmon preparation along the Fraser River. For thousands of years the rich fillets of salmon flesh have twirled in the wind, cut and placed by women for storage. Dame Julia Berners of Norwich wrote the first treatise on "fysshyng with an angle" in about 1421 (it was first printed in 1496 and is very thorough). All those chaps with rods or pens in hand have held the best spots on the bank for rather a long time.

Moore's essays confirm and extend the place of women at the river as anglers, workers, walkers, extreme kayakers, rafters and writers. *Riverwalking* remains true to the multiple roles Moore combines in her life (as daughter, philosophy professor, student of biology, wife, mother and writer), and the essayistic tradition of valuing curiosity. "The essay not merely allows for but actually celebrates—indeed is characterized by—surprise, interruption, meandering and slow discovering" (Atkins 6). After all, "the verb meander, [is] derived (also a river term) from the Maeander River" (Niederland 19). Atkins' description defines aspects of the process of reflection: Moore believes "all essays walk in rivers" (xii). *Riverwalking* focuses on rivers and memory more than any other collection I consider precisely because the essays honour Moore's roles: she is an aficionado of the braided river and practitioner of the braided essay. Contrapuntal strands of memory run through the book; undergirding the fact of her father's dying and her own experience of parenting, work and love are the rivers she takes her reflection to. She meets memory at the river. Rivers are the reflective bases from which she considers her wider world; they return her to that world after sheltering her, and they offer the space for new ways of thinking.

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data does not classify *Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water* as essays or philosophy, but Moore acknowledges they tackle

philosophical questions through “the mysteries of the essay” (xiii). Moore delights in meandering, inquiry and “poking around” (27). In fact, she attributes the qualities of moving water—fluidity, reflection, immersion and solace, to name a few—to the essay form in general:

I have come to believe all essays walk in rivers. Essays ask the philosophical question that flows through time—How shall I live my life? The answers drift together through countless converging streams, where they move softly below the reflective surface of the natural world and mix in the deep and quiet places of the mind. This is where the essayist must walk, stirring up the mud. (xii)

Moore concludes her Preface with this provocative metaphor that engages writer and reader in a shared alliance of thought, doubt and curiosity. Bestirred, we are prepared for the range of issues the collection addresses. Moore evokes the variety of essayist form and natural wonder in a way that returns Paul Shepard’s phrase to mind: humans can intervene in the land using “any number of patterns ... as long as the river flows” (Shepard 303). Like Kineth, Sanders, and Abbey, Moore has found ample room for her mind to move in through rivers and the rivered essay. She invites the reader to join her in the series of outstanding essays linked by moving water, family, death and life, and the shifts and runnels of consciousness. From the philosophical to the ecological, from confessional modes to descriptions of the rough skin newts’ courtship, these descriptions are phrased as excursions from everyday life that open to the current and the peaceful riverbank. They also look beyond the river to the mental and physical network of the family and community. The world of human relationships is given as much respect as that of the wider ecology; we are all part of the watershed.

The reader’s preparation for the journey begins in the Preface, which describes another way of seeing self and world through current. The allure of rivers alters and informs perception; we too are drawn, “half observing, half immersed,” into her journeying (xi). Despite being graced with a range of river vessels, Moore is inclined to riverwalk, as she did when young. Her family owns a lovely raft, drift boat, canoe and a kayak, but:

All the same, boats are designed to separate a person from a river and now, when I have a choice, I would rather travel down the river on foot, walking trails that run the length of the river or, best of all, wading through the river itself. When I walk in a quiet river, I move through a reflection of the landscape. The mudbank, the willow thicket, the mare’s-tail clouds lie flat around me, upside-down. The river bisects me at the waist—half observing, half immersed in the gently rocking image of the land. When I press forward against the current, the landscape folds and compresses. Next to my body, it breaks into patches of color that ride past me on a spreading wave. To my back, the willows re-form, bend as if in a high wind, then settle and reach out to the reflection of their roots. (xi)

This elegant movement from inward immersion, out to observation and back to introspection is a motif that runs throughout the collection: this recirculating process of reflection determines the shape of her narratives. This essayistic movement from the specific to the general reinforces the traditions of the personal essay. Shifts in focus occur within each essay; they continue *across* the

essays: Moore recalls her movement towards independence, love and the raising and farewelling of her children, at the same time as she records her father's dying. Her range of reflection extends the nature essay, combining the best of that sub-genre and the personal essay. As her children prepare to leave home, and she thinks of her father half a continent away, she asks a question that draws family *into* nature writing (rather than renouncing them as Thoreau does in "Walking"): "Scientists know so much about homing in animals.... But who has studies the essential issue: What will draw our own children back home" (7)? Moore wishes to bind her children to the rivers she loves, in a network of Oregon valleys she regards as home. At the same time that mythical 'Western' notion of home with its rugged sense of connection to the surrounding land continues to haunt her. The elusive nature of ideals may not be easy to live with, but such limitations are grist to the essayist's mill. Moore suggests doubt may fuel these excursions into river reflection:

We are immigrants to the West—emigrants from Cleveland. But we have lived in Oregon for twenty years now, and you would think that would count for something. We brag about the West as if we had created it, we plant trees and chop them down with an axe, we seek out every isolated river valley and learn the calls of the birds. But a sense of connection eludes us, and, like other immigrants, we live for those small, transcendent moments that may exist only in the imagination, when we will belong completely and perfectly to a way of life embedded in this land. (88)

Riverwalking the waters that run across Oregon may be the way Moore finds that sense of connection, if, indeed, it exists.<sup>27</sup> Oregon rivers flow over her shoes, as if by immersion in the substance that flows through the earth, she will be anchored to a sense of connection that is constant and inviolate. She seeks the streaming that takes Kinseth into the world of the universe, the galaxies in the local, and here she faces that flux of life that mitigates and encourages the desire for connection.

Moore maps home through the watercourses that drew settlers to the West and ensure its continuation. Journeys away from the source become headwaters for others. Moore's downriver journeying is informed by the past that carries her into the future, and shapes her children. The overriding presence in *Riverwalking* is the sense of fragile, remembered continuities riverscapes

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<sup>27</sup> Ultimately Moore realises that the connection she seeks is compromised by (and perhaps constructed by our fear of) the mortality of life; waters flow over the earth as our lives do; every molecule of that water is different and every one is needed. The pace and anomie of modern life has made a kind of ersatz indigenality rather fashionable; this wistfulness is a neo-colonial feature and a means of semi-atonement for the rotten treatment dealt out to indigenous peoples, and an attempt to become like them without living in a region for a millennium or five or ten. It laments the passing of a pre-colonial life and, in recent decades, the passing of traces of a pre-industrial life: we cannot be Indian, we cannot be hillbillies and we cannot be without complicity. The rush on 'lifestyle blocks' of real estate where the rich try out model agriculture without dependence is one example of this, as is the urban demand for small-scale regional organic produce made by some of those successful lifestylers, or those who have been there longer. In both cases the living is likely to be far better than any pre-industrial state: plumbing and washing machines and machinery have eased many a burden.

As noted, Paul Carter queries the disdain of nomadism, seeing culture and language as travelling ways of knowing. Moore's desire for roots is drawn out by waters that depend on bedrock and yet remain mobile; such fluid elemental reflection may only offer the hard-won, gradual sense of connection that Moore in fact demonstrates. Delicacy is the norm in most ecosystems after all.

evoke, and the ways such continuity enriches Moore and her family. There are some constants of connection she looks to as things change; her river journeys help her cherish them, for even those constants will be washed away.

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In the opening essay “The Willamette” Moore traces the human homing instinct through her extended family. She wants to instill a powerful love of place in her daughter Erin’s life “until the river ran in her veins and she could not help but come home again” (3). Moore invokes the river trip as an aid to homing, a spell powered by the lure of rivers and family. Moore achieves much of her aim by imagining it and then acting: she has led her daughter to the waters time and again. Moore considers home as much a shelter from fear as a base camp for expeditions. The essay interleaves memories of Moore’s own departure from her childhood home (and her parents’ emigration from England to Cleveland) with accounts of the Willamette camp just prior to Erin’s departure. This essay introduces Moore’s careful use of recollection as a source for insight into the present. The quality of transition and adjustment gives the work fluidity and scope. It also places her work in that cycle of creative renewal we depend on as readers. The process of reading completes the recirculation of reflection.

If home is given meaning by our “own decisions and memories,” then Moore gives meaning to rivers, inhabiting them in body and mind (9). A home is as strong as the meanings, memories and decisions it bears. Part of a river’s appeal for Moore (and all the essayists) is its ancient capacity to absorb and carry all metaphors and suppositions about its own qualities. Here again, rivers are reflective *and* receptive sites. The element gives range to her figurative representation of rivers as reflective teaching sites.

A self-styled “pioneer,” Moore’s sensitive concept of home must be formed through cycles of return, engagement and renewal, so layers of story and memory coalesce in place. When she says “[n]othing is essentially anything” she reinforces the importance of stories to offer the silence that marked her youth (9). When homes are imagined and storied into meaning they are delicate, open to departure as much as arrival. Departure is the fearsome counterpoint that drives the Willamette camping trip and slips its way to the river side where Moore ponders Erin’s absence, crying then on the round rocks until “the hot breath of the river rose steaming and sweet around my face” (8). The tears suggest bonds of connection rather than its absence. So Moore concludes the essay by thinking on the ways meaning accrues slowly: she recalls the river water pumped through sprinkler-hoses by the airport, how on arriving home after travel the water still carries the scent of river-willows and “flood[s] me with relief. This is what I want for my daughter” (10).



With her memories webbed amongst family and Oregon's waterways, I doubt Erin will have any trouble finding her way back home.

Moore's style is accessible and exceptionally open: she shares a great deal of herself in the course of painful departures and deep renewal. This combination of an affable tone and strong feeling is characteristic of the personal essay. The work of tangential meandering is also likely to hook any topic: biology, language or philosophy. In "The John Day River" a rafting mishap on some tough rapids offers her opportunity to reflect on grace, spurred on by her entertaining summary of John Stuart Mill, "a philosopher specializing in happiness" (12). Moore—herself a Professor of philosophy specialising in ethics—continues her summary:

He said that *the main constituents of happiness appear to be two, tranquillity and excitement. With much tranquillity, many find that they can be content with very little pleasure. With much excitement, many can reconcile themselves to a considerable quantity of pain.* If so, a good river must be happiness distilled and running between high banks, because on a river, tranquillity and excitement alternate every half-mile, every tight, cliff-bound curve, every quiet pool where white flowers float on the reflection of the sky. I think it's a pity that Mill, a nineteenth-century philosopher in London, never found a way to run a desert river. (12)

Here is the varying basis of her reflection, the river as formal base and narrative prompt. Moore then alternates and brings us back to the local site and personal and communal memory, recounting the horrors endured by John Day in the early 1800's, talks with her ailing father, and drives to the put-in at the brown, flood-swollen river. With the float trip smoothing out after the first day of rapids, the tranquillity levels should rise. But her husband Frank tips the boat while solo-paddling the worst rapids. He survives, but Moore's doubts are not entirely dispelled, "because I go through life slightly unnerved by Ralph Waldo Emerson. I half believe him when he says that *Every sweet has its sour; every evil its good. For everything you gain, you lose something. Nature hates a monopoly.* This makes sense to me" (14). Thus Moore concludes the essay by thinking about the balance of pain and pleasure in her life, in the world: "is my father's pain paying for this trip" (17)? This closing question is an easy way to stay guilty, but she gets on with the journey: "Ahead of us are three sun-drenched riverdays and a calm, curving river" (17). And in that juxtaposition of the gloomy and exultant, the rapid and the calm, we see how Moore has fused river and form, the currents of thought and water.

"Analogies, once drawn, are powerful, magical, impossible to control" (60). Moore's use of analogy forms the basis for a brief and striking piece of essayistic river reflection, "The Metolius." By associating dams with the emotional silences in her early personal life, Moore invokes a kind of "double vision" that is consistent with the fluid interplay of introspection and

exploration in her essays.<sup>28</sup> This alliance of images is evident in Moore's dual tracking between inner and outer worlds. Through analogy "The Metolius" sites an external symbolic object (a dam) in the inner terrain of memory. Moore uses the power of analogy (which derives its effectiveness from the alliance of images) to speak of familial blocks from her past, of unresolved, burgeoning silences. Anecdote, reflection and recollection are grounded in her practice of river reflection and writing.

Moore's braiding of analogy, association and insight begins with an *anecdote* (her account of raising a baby possum orphaned by her car<sup>29</sup>), moves to *reflection* on attachment and analogy itself (her considered response to a t-shirt emblazoned with a picture of the earth and the phrase "Love your Mother") and then to *recollection* of her own mother, who was slowly dying from bronchiectasis through Moore's teenage years. This painful event was not really confronted by the family, who decided "sorrow was too dangerous to indulge... after a while it just got easier to tell the [funny] stories and never say what needed to be said" (61). The penultimate section offers Moore's present thoughts on motherhood, the planet and "the terrible questions of redemption and regret" (62). Only in the fifth and final section of this seven-page essay is mention made of a river. The description of the Metolius is doubly powerful because of the images and stories Moore gathers beforehand.

These family stories focus on issues of caretaking, memory and guardianship. They connect with Stafford and Sanders in making community a key feature of their writing. "The Metolius" does not foreground "the river" and let that suffice; like the other essayists she offers meaning to that force and finally acknowledges the limits of any meaning she can give. This acknowledgment does not disempower her own work; it simply eases her out of the narrative picture. She lets the rivers do the rest, re-presenting the non-human world: rivers that run regardless of (and far better without) human presence; rivers, however, that would not exist in my consciousness were it not for Moore's words, rivers I can learn from and give meaning to, because Moore does not attempt a full description of every nuance of her encounter.

Fluid association, eddies of thought and a flowing narrative: these particularly essayistic qualities mark "The Metolius" but also display the rhetorically open appearance of rigorous thought. When we do reach the concluding section of "The Metolius" we witness a sequence of associations on loss, motherhood and responsibility. We have faced several kinds of dying, endings on a personal and global level that demarcate the variable borders between personal concern and personal influence. Guilt may hover in the gap between what we can do and what we

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<sup>28</sup> Gerard Steen defines the term: "[d]ouble vision is the activation by metaphor of two ideas at the same time, which normally would not be associated with each other; their co-ordinate activation leads to an interaction of images which may produce a double vision" (Steen 42).

<sup>29</sup> A practice that appears rather suspect to me, a New Zealander burdened with the knowledge that there are 90 million possums in N.Z., and that the said marsupials consume 21 000 tonnes of native vegetation *per night* (Department of Conservation figures).

wish to do. Between these two zones of aspiration and effect flow memory, regret and the need for redemption.

Now I look back in grief at events beyond my power to repair. When I think of the Earth, when I think of my mother, desperately damaged and then wronged again by silence, it is the power of mothers to forgive that holds my attention, and the terrible questions of redemption and regret (62).

Guilt seeps into the scene, its atmosphere of betrayal and complicity coalescing at the personal and environmental levels. The meditation which follows is very much associated with these “terrible questions.” Moore sees the “profaned” Earth as incapable of healing itself or us, and so we continue our fretful damage: “We turn our faces away, wilfully separating ourselves from the earth, never acknowledging that there may be no chance for healing, refusing to remember what we have done and what we failed to do. Then, who can forgive us” (63)? The desire for connection in herself and her family is a response to these very valid and urgent concerns.

To read of Moore and her frail father, now years after her mother had died, as they step across the icy moonlit path to the river is to expect a reckoning of sorts. What questions of regret and redemption will be asked? Will anything? To know the Metolius is dammed adds to the atmosphere of strain and silence. Every minute 50,000 gallons of icy water roars through a twelve-mile, five hundred foot deep canyon and “plows into the gray water, slows to a stop, clouds at the edges, and drowns in the warm and silt-choked reservoir” (64). This is a moment of confrontation with the enduring past, a plea for redemption that is impossible because death, like a dam, appears final. Herendeen and I concur that old and new rivers carry all the figurative freight we give them. But Moore concludes her essay with minimal explanation: there are no easy answers. Father and daughter are alive and breathing, which at this moment means a great deal. Yet they remain silent, facing all those blocked stories as the power of analogy seeps into the present, unresolving their nascent past. Seated by the riverbank in the still winter night, they gaze into dark waters:

Barely visible in the shadow of the hill, boulders spread apart and the river rushed out, full and frothing, alive with oxygen, pouring downhill as if it could flow forever. I helped my father brace himself against a tree and slowly scrape the snow off a bench. We sat side by side, looking into the darkness, pulling cold, pine-drenched air deep into our lungs, saying nothing. (64).

Their lungs work. Moore’s mother’s did not; her husband smoked. Redemption may be as unlikely as the dam’s collapse, and as desired as the free flow of water and feeling. Moore’s sequence of presentation never forces analogy or meaning; rather, these qualities emerge as a consequence of narrative; read alone, the river section would have less weight, but read *in sequence* the imagery builds impact. Once again the river absorbs and reflects all offered meanings. Memory, breath and mortality come together at the river which should be a source of vitality, but has been silenced.

In several of her essays Moore begins with her personal experiences, moves to the family, and extends from that grassroots level to wider, connected issues. She does not lose sight of the power of personal experience, and does not hold back from sharing her delight of the wild rivers and ecosystems around her. Moore is an open essayist rather than a didactic, bullying one; she leads by example, and is constantly assessing her doubts and strengths with humility. The contemporary personal essay exacts powerful demands on the author; revelation and openness are expected: Moore meets these expectations with courage and skill.

Moore's essays track a middle course between objective distance and subjective meditation. The connections between ideas, rivers and memories are all important; thus Adorno's oscillating and "reciprocal interaction" and "cross-connections" throughout various elements of the essay are central to Moore's work (Adorno 13, 22). Personal statements ripple outwards into ecological and political contexts; registers and modes of speech interact and highlight each other. The tension and interplay between these modes of expression creates a "quasi-equilibrium" across tributaries of observation, reflection, memory and feeling (Bak 81). Moore balances personal reflection and recollection by attending to the process of apprehending the river. The work begins in memory but ripples out to politics, community and ecology, these routes wending their way back to her self. Such shifts in tone, subject, and focus are marked by the braiding and delineation of registers. The effect is an interaction between different modes of seeing and consciousness. The exchange suggests rivers are dynamic psychological sites:

I want to be able to see *clearly* in both senses of the word. To see clearly in the modern sense: to stop a moment, stock still, and to see through the moment to the landscape as it is, unobstructed, undimmed, each edge sharp, each surface brightly colored, each detail defined, separate, certain, fixed in time and place. These are visions to cherish, like gemstones. But also, every once in a while, to see a landscape with ancient clarity: to see a river fluttering, gleaming with light that moves through time and space, filtered through my own mind, connected to my life and to what came before and to what will come next, infused with meaning, living, luminous, dangerous, lighted from within. (146)

This style is cumulative. It builds over and over on the *desire* for clarity and the curiosity that feeds that desire, stacking adjectives to present the reader with a similarly interdependent goal: sighting a particular *object* "but also" understanding a distinctive networked *process*. Moore shifts deftly between the imagined and the real, the remembered and unknown. Walking that river of doubt and possibility (Kinseth called it a ridge), intensifies the (un)knowing central to learning and the corporeal state of a "luminous, dangerous" way of living. A river journey will present opportunities for risk and nesting, introspection and action. Moore assays with all facets of her being to articulate these linked modes. The bound juxtaposition of register demonstrated above enables this fluid writing and memory-work.

The movement between observation and reflection marks Moore as an essayist committed to both "meandering" ("the value of poking around" [Moore 27]) and insight (Atkins 6). Her essays tend to look back up river to the past that informs her present, because "a person is partly

her memories,” and memories are needed for navigation (31). The desire for nuanced vision becomes a statement of intent, a riverine perceptual credo.<sup>30</sup> Moore is open to a range of river memories; she understands memory as a force that stalls or tracks, offering respite in some cases, regret and pain in others. The essays in the collection span the course of her father’s terminal cancer; positive memories become a refuge at difficult times. Walking in the river, action is fused with meditation; life pits itself against a living force that takes gives and away by degrees.

Moore understands the ways rivers work at/on different levels of the psyche, and the earth. We are bound and liberated by perception and by change: “solidity is only a function of time. A river revealed in a flash of lightning is as thick and quivering as gelatin. And yet, measured against a millennium, a mountain melts down the sides of the valley and pours into the sea” (39). We return to the long view of time and process as Berry, Kinseth, Abbey, Stafford and Sanders and Eiseley have done, placing the work of a river and of humans in active and humbling juxtaposition. Humans face an ongoing force that appears to represent all kinds of continuity. Purpose and focus ensure textual transitions are fluid and telling. Gaps speak of their own resonance here. Moore uses rivers as counterpoints; they enable shifts between boundaries of many kinds:

From professional lives that fragment our studies into discrete objects and focus our attention on answerable questions only, we [Moore and her biologist husband] come together on rivers where biology and philosophy, body and mind, experience and idea, flow side by side until they cannot be distinguished in a landscape that is whole and beautiful and ambiguous. This book is about what I have seen and heard in that land. (xi-xii)

Moore uses juxtaposition (metaphor, analogy and synecdoche) to create an ecology of image. She knits the bounds of figurative language to suggest states of consciousness. Moore, Sanders and Stafford fuse doubt and personal declaration into a revision of the world; when certainties dissolve they have the insight to meander—and recirculate—in the space that dissolution offers.

Rivers erode and gather up lives in what Barry Lopez’s *River Notes* (or any work in this thesis) records as a constant interaction between place and event, linked by a course of water. Lopez, Moore and others suggest there is so much we do *not* know. Our seeing is fallible and there is possibility in this limitation. Moore tropes a limit as something that gestures beyond her and itself, towards infinity and epiphany; borders are by-ways and openings, rather than blocks to understanding. But her gestures do not remain in the astroecological realm; they allow the spaces between narrative transitions to accumulate meaning. Critic and perceptual analyst Brian Stock’s comments and citations are valid. They hint at the fallible nature of seeing that Moore celebrates as an opportunity to extend the self and see the world’s detail and complexity anew. Stock also

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<sup>30</sup> Adorno believed “scientific scholarship fails to deliver what it promises the mind: to illuminate its works from the inside” (8-9). Though recent popular scientific writing rather negates this view, it is worth noting that fun and astonishment enrich the scientific details Moore offers the reader.

points out that certainties are rare, and that the clarity we seek is likely to be as much a construct as any other taxonomy. It may be a minimalist schema but is a schema nonetheless:

Some three generations after the reorientation of physics away from Newtonian axioms, few figures in the field of science maintain that nature can be studied and understood as it 'really is'. 'This may have been my philosophy,' Einstein remarked to Werner Heisenberger, 'but it is nonsense all the same. It is never possible to introduce only observable quantities into a theory. It is the theory that decides what can be observed.' As the notion of ocular objectivity has retreated from the sciences, so it has been modified in other disciplines that depend on the visual sense. (Stock 315)<sup>31</sup>

Theories of observation are scrutinised in *Riverwalking*. Moore's own theory of rivers as reflective gathering places and tactile mentors has been shaped by the rivers themselves as much as what she does to them. Her experience with rivers is a two-way process; she is open to them and this stance affects her prose. Increasingly, her river experiences inform her professional life as a philosopher. These changes are recounted in "The Smohalla River (on a cloudy day)." The essay takes us to Moore's ruffle-rounded campsite; somewhat harried by the muttering waters, she builds a breakwall to create a clear patch of river, a window to bedrock. This quest for clarity recalls her training in philosophy, where ideas were the object of study, notions increasingly "fractured from the lives of real people" (144). In an important passage she explains how rivers challenge this blinkered approach; they enforce inquiry:

Water is an agent of distortion and change, forcing a person to see things in new ways. Each turn of the river opens out a new landscape, something no one has ever seen before and will never see again. The landscape reveals itself in glimpses. The river hides itself in motion. It holds layers of meaning, and so it adds mystery to the landscape, a sense of complexity and risk, a sense that important facts are hidden from view. (145)

A sketch of ideas of memory and the unconscious could, I think, fit with this description of mystery, risk and undisclosed revelation. Moore's sense of reality depends on our provisional and conditioned modes of seeing and remembering.

Her reflection on the costs and need for control and certainty leads her to a credo for the book, and thus for her life.<sup>32</sup> The conclusion discusses the old Latin meaning of 'clarity'—"clear sounding ... lustrous, splendid, radiating light" (145). She follows this with an exceptional

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<sup>31</sup> Stock quotes from Heisenberger (9-10).

<sup>32</sup> This control is championed, in her example, by Descartes, who, Moore points out, noted "I will consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses,' and no one will ever 'be able to mislead me in anything'" (144). This arrogance is also compounded by a rather lustful appreciation of the "infinity of devices" that have since been constituted into the western desire for things (*Discourse* 35). On the river that control is legitimated and structured through dams.

statement of enraptured intent that is as alluring as it is accessible.<sup>33</sup> Moore's river-, mind-, and heart-inspired intention—"lighted from within"—is evident in the book she has written.

A riverscape, like insight or understanding, "reveals itself in glimpses" (146). It demands attention, stamina, and quick eyes. One can be captivated by the broad sweep of the waters or (as Moore is in "Klickitat Creek") the remarkable mating behaviour of rough-skin newts. The movement from the particular to the general links her with Kinseth, but her flights of fancy do not wander entirely into the realm of metaphor. The cosmic or supra-human is tempered in Moore's essays; there are too many things going on right here at the river to get distracted by transcendence for *too* long. Yet Moore uses analogy and metaphor to move towards understanding; the goal is that elusive balance between luminosity and certainty. Too much of either and the reader is bored, and the river's potential explored in only one way. The emphasis on the visionary evokes something of Dillard's essays<sup>34</sup> in their attention to the human place in the wider order and their use of metaphor, but their use of detail gives Moore a focus Kinseth eschews. Moore is willing to laugh at herself, and share moments of humour. Her family laughs at her and provides a basis for the sense of community she imparts:

Standing in the rain, we talk about aspens and mastodons and the speed of light, about how a trout can hold against the currents of a river in flood. Trout find eddies behind rocks where the current careers around and heads back upstream. So it's the deflected power of the river that holds the fish in still water while all the flood rushes past. I suggest that those trout might be a Lesson in Life, but the kids laugh, spilling rainwater from pools on their hoods. (42)

For Moore, rivers are about families, expeditions are about being together on the water, rather than ecstatic but so very solitary Kinsethian epiphanies or Trudeau's ascetic visions. And though Abbey mentions his daughter and her growing love of river rafting, he does not share many thoughts about fatherhood; the nature essayist always has too much to attend to. Sanders and Moore reject this idea and come closest to integrating family into their work as surely as they inhabit their lives. Familial connections and departures braid through the rivers Moore travels; her excursions to rivers and her returns to her city home are affirmations of continuity and change in family dynamics. These are not solitary rambles but intimate accounts of shared emotional journeying. Her family reappears because for Moore and others wilderness is all about family and home-making: "From your pack you can pull what you need to make a safe little hearth and home for you and the people you love. Domesticity is the central pleasure of the wilderness

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<sup>33</sup> This non-exclusive possibility is important; the struggle to see is something Kinseth has worked through but failed to share (he tells rather than shows) in as useful or gradual a way.

<sup>34</sup> Dillard's essay "Aces and Eights" records a river as reflective site, tracing the feelings of a woman briefly reunited with a young girl in a streamside cabin. The girl may be her daughter, but she may also be her own memories of herself, a kind of reconnective meeting.

experience.... [and] is everywhere you look in nature writing and wilderness journals, regardless of gender” (45).<sup>35</sup>

Moore traces transition and continuity *through* process, a dynamic very suited to the essay form. This dynamic—which is a river’s too—weaves through her relationship with (and visits to) her ailing father. “The Jet Stream” turns a dreaded plane journey into a raft-trip: Moore depends on metaphor to conquer her fear of flight and her confrontation with her father’s imminent death. She visualises this time as a trip on a “pool-drop” river full of dangerous descents through waterfalls, rather than the easy glide of what is termed the “continuous” river (91-92). Journeying through the book, the reader watches Moore as she rides out various situations. Her father’s death (and her elderly neighbour Lillian’s departure) at once cements her independence as an adult and reminds her of the precariousness of that state. Moore’s essays affirm the constancy of change and her immersion in the present and the past.

After her father’s death, Moore consolidates her affinity with rivers, transition and continuity in “The Salish River.” This Northwest salmon river is a source of insight and solace in her time of grief. It is a beautiful meditation on dying and renewal, linked by image and content to the journey of the salmon, long an emblem of living continuity in cultures across time:

I have come to the river looking not so much for solace, as for corroboration, for evidence that I have made the best decisions, the safest bets. I’m not sure what the evidence will be, although I have the feeling it won’t be conclusive. Answers come from rivers only reluctantly. You have to build understanding out of small moments, you have to cut the pieces out of a day and fit them together in a new way—like puzzle pieces, or premises. (126)

Her impeccable attention to “small moments” ensures both memory and the present serve as sources for understanding. This essay weaves time and event becoming and beholding transition. For the dweller of the Pacific Rim, salmon runs can represent *the* essence of change. “The times

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<sup>35</sup> Moore’s reflections on community begin with family and the homes they share by Oregon’s rivers. “Puget Sound” traces concerns about her daughter’s independence. “The Deschutes River” measures her son’s growth through the sojourns he makes while fly-fishing, a meditation that fits in with David James Duncan’s metaphysics of angling and personal growth discussed in *The River Why* and the next chapter. Moore’s fascination with transition leads her to community, and the dynamics of change and continuity that form it. Moore flows between memory and the present, describing the homeplaces of youth and adulthood, and the rivers that join them both. Change often derives its force from a sequence and source of continuity. Thus Moore is compelled (in “The Clackamas River”) to write of the departure of her neighbour Lillian, who had lived in her home for 58 years and is suddenly shifted to a rest home. Rivers enter this essay via the spirit of continuity that has marked the Kathy-Lillian relationship. This sequence of repetition (“the way I always do” [133]; “each morning” [134]; “what would always happen next” [135]; “by now” [136]) underscores the busyness of Moore’s family as they take off on another rafting trip watched by Lillian (who used to canoe the Clackamas) “witness to her own past disappearing” (136). Lillian’s departure raises troubling questions for Moore, who marvels at the stamina of older folk who “continue to live while layers of their lives are peeled away” (137). This is a river-essay in the sense that Moore tropes rivers as a source of life and youth, a site of togetherness rather than loss (how different this is from *Suttree* or *Downriver*) and so finds her daughter’s departure for overseas doubly difficult; thus the first essay folds back onto the final section in the book, which contemplates a future where Moore may have to face loneliness or departure as her father does.



of a river are measured by the salmon, and the stages in the salmon's life are measured by its colour" (129).<sup>36</sup>

Moore's description of the salmon's thirty-mile run up the Salish and the fishes' change from clear silver to (in Tim Bowling's phrase) "dying scarlet" followed by its "sooty, spent" spawning evokes association with struggle, continuation and death (129). Within two pages her description is complete; Moore stops there, rather than explicate it dry into a "Lesson in Life" (42). She respects the reader's ability to appreciate sequence and continuity, to let us piece things together. So the next passage describes a rainfall, the drops hammering concentric circles onto the grey face of the water. The pattern of events is clear (it has clarity), and is more striking for that. Process and focus combine at this moment of textualised apprehension. The reader knows the context and the skilled writers seem to let the river provide insight (or rather, they are skilled enough to make it appear this way). Moore faces inconclusion and departure as she watches the streaming water of life, the turning between life and death at the gravelled redds or spawning sites.

The rainfall, the salmon, the sadness: everything comes together by the river. Selected by Moore's father for his funeral, the Old Testament version of Ecclesiastes 3 informs this essay: "*To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven; a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance*" (126). This is the cadence of struggle and release; it is the rhythm Moore carries to the water, and it is confirmed by that cyclical, evocative world. Recirculation is all. We are graced with the chance to journey and the rivers to nourish that passage. In our human-battered world both rivers and journeys are fragile, too easily damaged by a rapacious utilitarianism that takes everything for granted. She concludes her stay and "start[s] the long walk up the river" (130).

"And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald 182).

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<sup>36</sup> Two exemplary river and salmon-focused texts are *First Fish, First People: Salmon Tales of the North Pacific Rim* (Vancouver/Seattle: UBC Press/One Reel, 1998), a stunning compilation of first-hand stories and reflections by indigenous people on the importance of salmon to their cultural life) and Mark Hume's *River of the Angry Moon: Seasons on the Bella Coola* (Vancouver: Greystone, 1998), which marks ecological diversity with the careful observations of a fly fisher. The moments of river reflection and introspective moral digression are rare and all the more powerful for being so in this book: they stand out clearly. For Hume, river reflection is a means of imparting the bond he feels with the Bella Coola. Tim Bowling and Daphne Marlatt, the poets I discuss in Chapter five, are keen watchers of the B.C. salmon coast.

## **Taking the waters: in search of the river-essay**

*Riverwalking* ends as it began, with Moore beside the waters that have captivated her since childhood. Her book is significant because it blends the observations of the naturalist with the confessional honesty of many personal essayists; add to this the fact that her family are integral to the riverscape and *Riverwalking* moves the personal and environmental essay into timely new areas. But is the form that results a new one? Does the “river-essay” begin with Moore?

Well, yes and no. One approach to this question involves extracting definitions of the essay in order to locate Moore within a loose category, ‘the essay.’ As I mention at the start of this chapter, works by Sanders, Kineth, Abbey and Moore and others mentioned here conform to various definitions of the essay. Moore in particular presents an eloquent and open self-portrait to the reader; all of her doubts are expressed in the most forthright of terms. She is thus allied with Montaigne who wrote “Could my mind find a firm footing, I should not be making essays but coming to conclusions; it is, however, always in its apprenticeship and on trial” (235). Such doubts do not weaken Moore’s approach; the work becomes, in Georg Lukács’ words, “a struggle for truth” (Lukács 15). The demands of this struggle lead Moore (and many Anglo-American essayists) to speak personally (Atkins 15). The ‘personal essay’ can encompass any meanderings, given that it bases its content on them.

Lukács argued that “a certain [critical] frivolity of thought and expression.... has shown ... that salvation is necessary and is therefore becoming possible and real. The essayist must now become conscious of his own self, must find himself and build something of his own out of his self” (15). Lukács’ juxtaposition of self-consciousness (perhaps a mode of confession) and salvation is fascinating; it evokes Foucault’s analysis of confession and power in an age where nature-essayists find little absolution in the face of lost ecosystems and dammed rivers. Some might argue that the greater the need for salvation (or restoration) the less likely it is to occur: the more ‘fallen’ the river the more elusive the prospect of redemption. The response to a dam is often an outpouring of personal feeling that does nothing to sway the implacable “humiliating” (McPhee) wall of concrete, a symbol of (for Didion, male) power, or of damnation and silence. Judgement will be passed upon all. Until then, Abbey believes we all await perdition. For the guilty at the riverbank, dams alter the dynamics of personal redemption: absolution and salvation are blocked, diverted, or drowned.

Each author engages with a different quality of memory, whether personal or more collective: Sanders reports the words of others, Kineth tries to transcribe the language of the river. Kineth’s riverview (he runs words like ‘river’ and ‘valley’ together and his seeing is a rivered method, not given to hyphenation or gap) is a composite of his textual re-figuration of place; Eiseley employs an archi-tectonic temporality and Sanders and Stafford bind regional human and natural histories. Didion dissects the ways human desire controls water for the cities, finding

in that impulse a very archaic, powerful and almost doomed kind of giving. Moore is positioned somewhere between all these points; her collection is large enough to encourage her to range across them all. Each essayist's variation in source memory (personal, ecological, historical, transcendent or geologic) produces a different kind of river, and each approach stresses the limited human engagement within longer reaches of time, stretches embodied in the roil of the river, a movement far older than that of hominids in the world's watersheds. The essayists consistently place this time in the context of what has gone before and what will follow for all. Glimpsed in the stream of consciousness, language and chronology, the river essay(ist) looks to the past for guidance into an uncertain future, hoping to remain "lighted from within" in a dark time.

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A second approach to the question of genre definition would be to adopt Moore's own maxim: "all essays walk in rivers" (xii). The open, meandering and braided qualities of the *essai* and its derivatives are informed by an older "watershed way of acting," that helps one "think like a river" (Kinseth 60; Worster, *Rivers* 331). To accept this slightly sly approach would raise rivers to the inspirational status Sanders, Abbey, Kinseth and Moore take as a given: the essay is a simple product of the human dependence and reflection on rivers. Their meanderings spread all places with people, and gather(ed) cities about them worldwide. Spend long enough with the river, these essayists suggest, and it will sweep your thoughts away. More than that, they will begin to shape and inform those thoughts until, like Sanders, you carry a river within you.<sup>37</sup> Whatever categories one gives to river-writing, we can be sure of only one thing: the river is certain to breach the banks and move on out into our lives, drawing us home to the nearby places of cold water, the place of first homes, and first, ongoing stories.

Dams taint those against them: there is nothing that can be rever(s)ed.<sup>38</sup> Yet by writing of their sadness, anger or limitation, these essayists resist silence and spur attentiveness in other watersheds. They emphasise that no river is necessarily safe from human desire: there are no guarantees. In an age of diverse faiths, Abbey and Berry place some of theirs in the continuity of rivers across aeons. For Moore, Sanders and Didion who watch stilled rivers silently in the present, insight is not an immediate comfort; one response to doubt is the documentation of that looking; the record of a lost force of interaction has its own kind of complex truth. The recourse to memory and words breaks the silence, forcing the writer back to introspection. But that cyclic movement asserts the larger truth that readers can bear witness to their river-watching. Words

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<sup>37</sup> Writing here in the Pacific (which I am tempted to regard as a giant salt river gone grinningly wild and now framed by late-arriving skeins of land) is a temptation that Thoreau considers in "Walking." He regards "the Lethe of the Pacific" as a possible antidote to memories of the "Old World and its institutions" (488). "Ocean originally meant the all-encircling river supposed to encompass the earth" (Niederland, 17)). Amnesia and renewal are central concerns at the water's edge, that place of transpiration and dissolution.

<sup>38</sup> Though this has been the response, many are working towards an increased number of dam decommissioning projects in North America, in Glen Canyon (see Berger) or Idaho's Snake River. This is only a fraction of the total number worldwide however.

ripple outwards in a community of readers whose gaze is being honed through the stories of despair, confrontation and fluid resistance. These stories continue in the fiction ahead. Moreover, the process of observation, learning and humility so cherished by the essayist is extended in the fiction I read in chapter two, work that sites a narrative teleology of growth and responsibility in the very nuanced response to the 'pure' river.

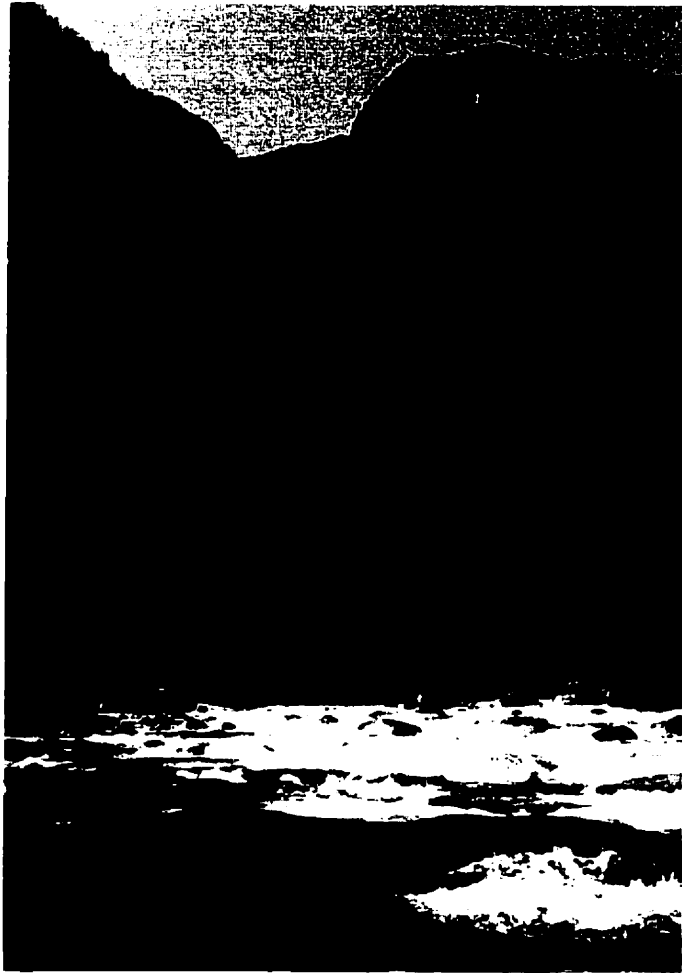


Fig. 1 Stein River, Interior British Columbia.

The only unlogged tributary watershed of the Fraser River that is over 5 000 hectares in size, the Stein River valley was protected from clear-cut logging in the 1980s. It is one of the 'pure' rivers I have visited and serves as a visual entry into the issues of ecology, politics and spirituality considered in the next chapter.

Photograph by Jan Kelly.

## Chapter Two

### Rivers and the 'Imperative of Responsibility': Lopez, Flanagan and Duncan

This chapter attends to fiction with a homing impulse similar to that found in the essays, but the search for memory, meaning and healing is all the more primal. The rivers that are central to Barry Lopez's *River Notes: The Dance of Herons* (1979), David James Duncan's *The River Why* (1983) and Richard Flanagan's *Death of A River Guide* (1993) are largely 'pure' and pristine. They are exemplary sites for learning. Memory enables this process of development that is tied to a river's flow and the meaning it offers—or is given. The currents refuse to conform to all inherited models of 'Nature.' Movement, memory and change reject cultural fixity. Recirculation honours empowering cultural methods. These writers seek a "quasi-equilibrium" through river reflection (Leopold, *Water* 66).

The protagonists in these texts have a choice to make between progress and retreat, between human dominance and surrender to larger ecological forces and between city and idyll. They could revert to the sylvan glade ("in virtually all pastorals, the simple life is not the protagonist's birthright but a desired alternative to complexity" [Marx 56]), but the experience reinforces the fact that engagement with wilderness is not a binary. There is no 'either/or' in the wilderness; such a site is a "countersite" rather than a place without other determinate referents (Chaloupka and Cawley 11). Wilderness is used to counter a range of other sites and colonial drives: for example materialism, excess resource-extraction and racism. As Jane M. Jacobs observes, "the politics of difference operates through and in place. This is not to propose an uncritical concept of place-based essentialism, but rather to invest it with a strategic sensibility" (104). In these three novels, cultural baggage is unpacked and apparently discarded into the current. The 'pure' river becomes a construct: in the mind, no site is untouched by human intervention. The river tends to attract notions of sublimity and then work to reinvent or criticise it. In Flanagan and Duncan, the river's fluidities, and the character's openness to the truths of colonialism combine to form "a space which is neither exclusively of the margins nor of the centre, where such binary oppositions no longer exist with any security" (Jacobs 113). Lopez constructs his *Notes* to centre the river in our thinking; this in itself is a radical movement away from notions of use-value, kilowatt hours and solely human development and complexity.

Yet a longing for spiritual growth lingers. The developmental impulse of these books is progressive. Each text delineates an anti-material spirituality: less without means more within. Protagonists experience the accumulation of perceptual capital. As Emerson suggested in

“Nature,” coming to understand one’s place in the ecological watershed clarifies one’s place in the theological and metaphysical world. But now, aeroplanes wheel above us, as well as the hawk or stars. The wild river is a counterpoint to such forms, a site of authentic healing, where the sins of imperialism can (perhaps) be purged.

The books map the absorption of enlightenment, a teleology mediated by the human ideal of the ‘pure’ (redemptive, pre-colonial) riverscape. This riverscape is pre-colonial in the inherited European sense of Arcadian; it is also nostalgic, and post-colonial in its longing for “the ‘authentic’ Aboriginal site” (Jacobs 104). The pure river teaches the white man; knowledge is gleaned from shards of indigenous presence. However, such an easy retreat from the city is problematised (especially in Flanagan and Duncan). The late twentieth century tends to prevent escape from past and present. A recourse to Native stereotype or Utopian dream palls before encroaching urban sprawl and contested cultural claims to space and memory. As a consequence, the fiction I read in this thesis allows protagonists to hone an updated pattern of communion with nature that is compromised and constructed by the presence of the urban world. The books end up facing personal and cultural memory as one means of coming to terms with it. Such flexibility is one way of trying to share “the river in itself” at the end of a century where sharing has not been equitable.

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A neo-Thoreauvian “walking” (or angling or paddling) might attempt to divine the river’s speech, to learn from the watershed as a means of speaking for the river and revising the sapient world. Through their writing, Lopez, Flanagan and Duncan secure a position in our *moral* discourse for the rivers we depend on, as well as another unspeaking element, the unborn future generations of human and “more-than-human” life that will seek water in the years ahead (Abram). To look to those unborn, and to the world we hold in trust, with an eye to its continuance, constitutes part of what philosopher Hans Jonas terms “an imperative of responsibility.” This longstanding (increasingly rearticulated) ethic informs these writers. It has also informed legal judgments on resource use that carry increasing weight in this age of cross-cultural encounter in the courts.

In a 1972 dissenting opinion for the United States’ Supreme Court, Justice William O. Douglas accorded rights to non-human forms of life by arguing against mining proposals for the Sierra’s Mineral King Valley. As Roderick Nash notes, Douglas saw that the onus was on humans—as the most articulate species—to “speak for the entire ecological community” (Nash 131). Nash makes a statement of great import for this thesis: “People, in effect, would be the moral voice of the river” (131). This is the stance Flanagan, Lopez and Duncan take as they champion wild rivers; these protective representations speak for rivers. They trope rivers as healing sites; human damage to rivers is dysfunctional. Anything less than the pristine wild river free of visible pollution and damning modification becomes a fallen river, perhaps because the examples of human intervention Flanagan and Duncan list are so extreme: a dead creek in Portland,

or dams that destroy huge tracts of land and fisheries, shattering the ecosystem of people and animals, water and trees.

A fallen river therefore reflects on the moral vigilance of those living in its watershed. The foetid outfall acts as a kind of gauge of eco-moral awareness, just as an unpolluted river is similarly constructed to signify a site of virtue.

Ascribing morality to rivers is a romantic gesture in some respects, a position that conflicts with the human control and dominance central to the classical stance. This binary is strong in Flanagan and Duncan in particular. Throughout their work they depict the worst results of classical control over the environment. The sites they valorise are refuges, last oases of wilderness that transform their characters' understanding of human centrality in the world. Coming to John Rennie Short's definition of the romantic and classical vision is like encountering the dualism inherent in the hyphenated longing of the post-colonial. The desire for the idyllic must pass through the rupture of the colonial encounter (Beatson). A scar lingers; it haunts the essays, the poetry and the fiction I read:

For the romantics, the wilderness is to be revered, a sacred space to be contrasted with the profanity of human contact. Where the classicists see progress in the defeat and control of the wilderness, the romantics see regression from a golden age. The romantic vision has strengthened because wilderness, as its size lessens, has become a symbol of lost innocence, a source of nostalgia for a golden age and a metaphor for the fall from grace. (10)

For Flanagan, Duncan and Lopez, the grace of rivers can measure just how far we have neglected an imperative of responsibility. If the river's aura<sup>1</sup> of rarity and threat is breached through dams, pollution or species extinction, this loss implicates human morality. "Silencing" a river through dams is a retraction in the "evolution" of environmental ethics (McCully; Nash 132). These are ethics of care; the notion of animal rights has "extensive Anglo-American roots, to name one branch," and river rights now append that tradition (Nash 137). As cultural difference becomes lauded—and fragile—indigenous approaches to certain bioregions are discussed more widely. Remnants, cultural or riverine, are held up as examples of an ideal, Arcadian—and often unrecoverable—world. But those remnants continue to appeal, because "place is a process, a site of change. And so is the literary page" (New, *Land* 205). In the texts ahead, page, place and river attempt to adjust to the competing trends of river-reification, -protection, -management and river-diversion that have worked their way through the late twentieth century. Speaking for the river, the authors come to see how much they depend on them: "belief in *fixed* answers is likely 'misplaced'" (New 214). The confrontation with shifting eco-moral values is apparent in river-writing. Whether the notion of progress and revision can help rivers blighted by progress is a moot point; it is one these authors have to face.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin's sense of the aurically powerful 'original' artwork figures here: the Wild river becomes automatically Scenic, as the 1968 U.S. Act would have it.



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Every object, cultural or natural, is caught within a web of symbols—these symbols themselves are altered, sometimes ravaged, in the course of time. Furthermore, no symbol exists in a pure state; we bring to any symbolic system the ‘impurities’ of our own understandings and misunderstandings, as well as the desires of our most utopian hopes and cataclysmic fears. (9)

Allen S. Weiss, *Mirrors of Infinity: The French Garden and Seventeenth Century Metaphysics*

In his 1979 work *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Hans Jonas calls for a new ethic. He argues that humanity now has unprecedented power to reconfigure life through bioengineering and to destroy the entire biosphere through over-exploitation or nuclear weaponry. These technologies are a product of the relentless “built-in utopianism” of Western civilisation, which sees human progress as a necessary good, without considering the consequences of that progress on future generations (21). The focus on short-term gain (rarely looking beyond a political term, let alone the next two decades) ensures those without votes are dispossessed of the resources we squander in the present: “The nonexistent has no lobby, and the unborn are powerless” (Jonas 22). Furthermore, most people are required to uphold progress to survive. An individual’s worth is increasingly measured in terms of his or her contribution to the cult(ure) of productivity.

The drive towards utopia and improvement is wrought upon the land and the lives of those that dwell there. Progress in the material world is rapid; Jonas is concerned our ethics have not kept pace. What the nuclear and biotechnical age demands, he argues, is a “humility,” a way of being “borne of the excess of our power to act over our power to foresee and our power to evaluate and to judge” (22). Jonas requires a balance between progress and memory, a kind of cultural and moral recirculation between present and future that takes the burden of current extraction into reckoning a future-based account. The authors cited use their stories to cultivate foresight, evaluation and careful judgement in their characters and readers. Barry Lopez, David James Duncan and Richard Flanagan are intent on tracing the effects of progress on people and watersheds. These three writers attend to apparently pristine rivers, remnants or areas as yet overlooked (and thus paradoxically esteemed) by a booming population running on “built-in utopianism.” The authors reject utopia as one way to avoid the snowballing of gnostic progressivism. But in doing so they trope the utopian wild river as an answer. Solutions breed

their own decay. Still, the authors seek space for wisdom to thrive.<sup>2</sup> As Hans Jonas notes, the urge to retreat and contemplate is unusual:

Living now constantly in the shadow of unwanted, built-in, automatic utopianism, we are constantly confronted with issues whose positive choice requires supreme wisdom — an impossible situation for man in general, because he does not possess that wisdom, and in particular for contemporary man, because he denies the very existence of its object, namely objective value and truth. We need wisdom most when we believe in it least. (21)

Lopez, Flanagan and Duncan offer the passion of stories, the consolation of memory and love, and the solace and challenge of the nonhuman in the form of rivers as a wisdom for this “time of grave omens” (Armstrong 192).<sup>3</sup>

### ***River Notes: Learning from the watershed***

Barry Lopez’s collection of stories *River Notes* (1979) records the awakening of perception and humility through the observation of a watershed, its communities and its wild river. Like Flanagan and Duncan, Barry Lopez uses the familiarities of language to record extraordinary perceptual states, urging his characters and readers to “think like a river” (Worster, “Thinking” 131).<sup>4</sup> Lopez’s careful, considerate narrators understand the interconnectedness of the world and the links between people, animals, story and place. *River Notes* is a contribution towards a water ethic; it is steeped in a rationality beyond economics; it instructs in the restoration of the power of water as an element and image, a symbol and source, rather than a capital investment. “To stick your hands in the river is to feel the cords that bind the earth together in one piece” (*River Notes* 138). Lopez marks those cords out: braids of water and word gesture to a reality of connection that is already present. It simply needs to be understood (hence the work of perception). These interconnections

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<sup>2</sup> Another alternative is direct—because unavoidable—contact with the progressive ideal. As I note in the fourth chapter, *Suttree* and *Downriver* confront the materialist ideal directly. To reject or escape from the city is to respond to and be shaped by it.

<sup>3</sup> Rivers are sites of resistance identified in the headlong rush for homogenised progress. The irony of a belated Western revisionism is that it does little to dispel the need or hunger for resources in the ‘developing’ nations that become geared by Western forces to ‘develop’ so.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Worster coined the phrase; the “thinking” has a moral component which heralds a “‘water ethic’” (134). This ethic looks beyond “a purely economic attitude towards water,” where “the commodity H<sub>2</sub>O [is] bulked here as capital to invest some day” (125). Such thinking leads to action that damages “the wild riparian edges that express a rationality that is different from economics, one we have not yet fully understood” (125). “Water, after all, covers most of this planet’s surface. Even more than land, water is the essence and the context of life, the sphere of our being and that of other creatures. It has a value that extends beyond the economic use we make of it on our farms. Preserving that value of water through a new American agriculture is an extension of ethics as well as of wisdom” (134).

demonstrate a precise and fragile balance, one Worster and Jonas honour. Lopez's imperative is towards a dual responsiveness and responsibility to the environment we depend on and inhabit.

Lopez's ecological priorities are mapped onto the text in the form of speaking cranes, gossiping trees and grieving or dying rivers. These blended focal points unify the watershed and suggest a longing for communication.

I open my discussion of the collection by siting the longing in the search for a pure (first?) holistic language. It might be the language of rivers.<sup>5</sup> But in post-colonial sites holistic utterance is also the exotic language of the indigene. In *River Notes*, it appears these two emblems are conflated. Natives and rivers are the wise forces in these notes. Margery Fee observes that "[t]he sense of loss, of elegiac nostalgia consistently associated with Native people, comes from the urban individual's loss of community, nature, and a personal sense of the numinous" (15). *River Notes* seeks to rearticulate that sense of connection.

In the collection's second story, "The Search for the Heron," we are introduced to an elegant bird that exemplifies the poise sought by the narrator. The "you" in the story is the heron, and the narrator begins to address the bird, desiring its knowledge and union with the river: this story also turns on issues of 'authentic,' autochthonous knowing *both* human and "more-than-human" (in David Abram's phrase) worlds (the inner and outer mindscapes that Lopez explores in his essay "Landscape and Narrative"). The stories are often driven by a desire to attain the awareness of a creature wedded to the world through instinct and experience, untouched by the mediation of the written word, and drenched in mysteriousness. The river becomes a place of communication and interaction through this desire for wisdom: it is the taunting, alluring locus of Lopez's "eco-fables" and a test of how far he has returned to the primitive (Paul 361). Sherman Paul suggests "[t]he recovery of the primitive is central for Lopez because it involves the being-in-the-world to which he aspires, the worlding that puts an end to world alienation" (376). The primitivist urge for a utopia is easy to pay lip-service to but, despite Lopez's powerful argument in his essay "Landscape and Narrative," very hard to put into practice on the level of everyday life or everyday policy. What government has moved anywhere near Lopez's model? Will there ever be enough clear-visioned politicians in one place? Is spiritually informed legislation possible or desirable? Numinous referents are often hijacked in the debating arena, a progress-obsessed place at the best of times. Lopez realises that people often form their credos in solitude: he returns to story and words to prompt certain visionary inclinations but never proves (in this book at least, and he has written far better ones) that the inclinations might function in a fragmented human community.

This longing for the animist, the essence in things, is evident in the desire to see fully. Desire motivates many characters in *River Notes*. Adam's power to name essence in Eden, the

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<sup>5</sup> "I just wanted to be in the current. I wanted to feel it against my legs, feel it against my arms when I swept them back and forth in the cold water. I wanted the undulation of it to enter my flesh. I wanted to take the physical sensation and translate it" (Lopez, "Fire" 50).

fluid holism of oral indigenous traditions: these are some of the typical sites of perceptual desire in a world now paved by human signs and stresses. Philosopher David Abram writes (in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More Than Human World* [1996]) of these sites of longing with no inconsiderable desire himself. Such works always contain an element of loss; they become burdened by the supposed paucity of the written word, beguiled by the remnants of supposedly less-fallen cultures. Abram argues that the development of formal phonetic writing systems fixes and limits perceptual boundaries to the human realm. (How does the animism of Tibetan tradition and scripture fit in here?) Compare his descriptions of spoken, and then written, perceptions:

By regularly shedding the sensory constraints induced by a common language, periodically dissolving the perceptual boundary in order to directly encounter, converse, and bargain with various nonhuman intelligences—with otter, or owl, or eland—and then rejoining the common discourse, the shaman keeps the human discourse from rigidifying, and keeps the perceptual membrane fluid and porous, ensuring the greatest possible attunement between the human community and the animate earth, between the familiar and the fathomless. (256)

The shamanistic transition respects a kinship and alliance between human and “more-than-human,” a group defined by their abundance and potential. (Lopez tropes mystery and paranormal perception as natural; many of his rivered characters are varieties of the idealised contemporary shaman.) Next Abram discusses the modern system of language, a “self-referential system closed off from the world that once engendered it” and limited in its dependence on that world:

... it is only when a culture shifts its participation to these printed letters that the stones fall silent. Only as our senses transfer their animating magic to the written word do the trees become mute, the other animals dumb. (131)

Today, the speaking self looks out at a purely “exterior” nature from a purely “interior” zone, presumably located somewhere inside the physical body or brain. Within alphabetic civilization, virtually *every human* psyche construes itself as just such an individual “interior,” a private “mind” or “consciousness” unrelated to the other “minds” that surround it, or to the environing earth. For there is no longer any common medium, no reciprocity, no *respiration* between the inside and the outside. There is no longer any flow between the self-reflexive domain of alphabetized awareness and all that exceeds, or subtends, this determinate realm. (257)

Lopez positions himself between the two forms of discourse or interrelation Abrams describes, somewhere between the vision he extols in “Landscape and Narrative” and the grim truths of contemporary Native life. Memory and story mediate the recirculation between inner and outer worlds.

I do not disagree with all of Abrams’ argument, but the tendency to reify the indigene is popular and problematic. I wonder if this treatment is useful, or whether it acts solely as a form of lament. Signs of the real, the authentic, are dwindling from the heterogeneous world; any vestige that can be held up as we accelerate into the future reminds us of the pace of change we are

beholden to. The fragile world becomes both a locus and a product of desire. Wilderness is covered with river gravel that paves encircling roads, while the waters—those old old highways—clog nearby. A sense of loss drives a momentum that can dispel diversity.<sup>6</sup> Hans Jonas suggests “utopia” is now “the cause of a splinter elite of radical idealists which, ironically, finds inside their society as a whole the least response among the intended objects of their mission. Their natural tactical allies are nowadays altogether elsewhere—among the ‘wretched of the earth’ in other parts of the world” (181).

Even as Jonas wrote this, Lopez was informing a movement that would look towards the wisdom of the indigenous peoples of the earth for guidance in sustainable living. There has been a slight shift: the elite are sometimes listening to the disenfranchised. But rejecting Abrams’ argument as a possible case of reification does it a disservice: we need to understand how our perceptual tools shape us. Arguing a white male should not enter such indigenous knowledge might depend on how that knowledge is disseminated and used. Abrams has learnt with respect amongst Balinese people, and he engages with texts about indigenous peoples that are in the public domain (even if his work on Aboriginal Australians is erroneously based on Bruce Chatwin’s *Songlines*, a work of problematic status in Australia today—see Michaels). To demand *only* indigenous people engage in the study or support of their culture, though entirely justified after centuries of anthropological snooping and cultural damage, can elide the affinities and commonalities between cultures, as well as the power—and *responsibilities*—of inter-cultural work. Whites have a lot to learn. Respect is crucial: groups should have the power to define and shape their own realities, but they can learn from others. This is the premise of much of the work I read here.

Nevertheless, Peter Wild notes the problematics of Lopez’s early use of indigenous myth; it is not, I suspect, a stance Lopez would adopt with such *transparency* in the present. The white male can barely justify engagement (as Alan Hughes observes) because stereotypes simply morph into another form:<sup>7</sup>

Other people have always felt free to impose upon the indigenous peoples of the Americas more or less whatever took their fancy at the time. Five centuries ago, greed for gold was enough to justify unbridled savagery by European adventurers who used the term ‘Indian’ to describe the 2,000 distinct peoples and cultures they encountered. Today, the 800 peoples that remain find themselves portrayed as the guardians of ecological wisdom, the last remaining reason to believe it survives at all in the human mind. (Hughes 32)

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<sup>6</sup> Nostalgia attaches itself to the art of angling and river-watching. The gaze is often wistfully upstream, into the past, in search of a pure site away from the city. Within the discussion of orality and the power of language, I like to bear a phrase of Italo Calvino’s in mind; it suggests the urgency and drive of communication across cultures and reminds us of the very small part humans play in the scheme of all time: “Words are a frail emergency bridge flung over an abyss between the visible and the invisible” (Gilfedder).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas King, who I discuss in chapter four, is a leading exponent of the art of stereotype-spotting and -puncturing.

The occasional implication in *River Notes* is of a western society that fails to nurture an ecological vision as a whole, as if the masses are spiritually and ecologically bankrupt, and that exceptional people must turn to a fragile indigenous knowledge as a source of ready wisdom. This is an easy and troubling recourse. Laurence Buell argues “[p]ost-European pastoral’s enlistment in the services of these various projects of cultural self-definition confirms its ideological multivalence but intensifies the question of what new world pastoral has to do with actual environments. It seems to have more to do with reinvention of the non-European world as a mirror-opposite of certain European norms” (68). This mirror opposite is often used as a springboard for ersatz mysticism (Fee 16).

Peter Wild terms *River Notes* “insistently visionary,” bent on a rhetoric of mythical revelation which appropriates Native American materials (19). Many of these *Notes* have the combination of semi-Buddhism, Native American mythology and upstanding Christian certainty that a white writer would find hard to get away with in the 1990s. Wild is right: this stance has not aged well, but it *is* a means of representing extraordinary skills of observation that Lopez has sharpened in his own right. Lopez wants to acknowledge the ways he has learnt from the indigenous peoples of his homeland. This kind of acknowledgment has shifted in recent years: “The Ecstasy of the Wideema” (in *Field Notes*) points to his awareness of the politics of anthropology and appropriation. In *River Notes* “The Falls,” “Hanner’s Story” and “Drought” filter Native American responses to animals as a means of drawing attention to contemporary notions of ecology as much as limning the stories with a hint of what Wild calls “pseudo-mystery” (22). There is a scholarly and social neglect of the real values of indigenous oral literatures and philosophies (Bringhurst). Wild has a point. Conversely, he admires Lopez’s later work where the journalistic, scientific and poetic registers are more balanced: after all, is a “will to euphoria” any less dangerous than a will to utopia (Wild 21)?

Wild calls Lopez “the spiritual voyeur of nature” and he feels *River Notes* is unsuccessful as a book, marred by “pat” stories and “unrefined romanticism,” “a will to euphoria based on little more than wish-fulfilment” which draws on “facile” back-to-nature clichés (19, 21). Lopez has “struck a popular cord [*sic*] by appealing to those disappointed with the techno-industrial present” (20). Wild’s harsh—and often warranted—comments do not attend to Lopez’s use of symbol or image as part of the maxim of interdependence he pushes. Rather than dismissing Lopez (or to be fair, *River Notes*; Wild has only praise for the more mature work) for a lack of “realism” (which smacks of normalisation), Wild could attend to the river and the interaction between inner and outer worlds. That said, Wild’s comments have a perverse appeal: he enjoys jabbing at Lopez’s purpler prose, and the comments on use of Native American tradition encapsulate a diluted form of the (ab)use the stories underwent in the 1970s. And Wild is already hinting at the short shrift “roseate romanticism” and “self-indulgence disguised as nature writing” gets from him in general (Wild, “Symposium” 95, 96). Lopez now works towards a more functional philosophy of declared engagement, rather than supposedly transparent cross-cultural immersion. In doing so,

he acknowledges just how long it has been since Europeans spoke to trees, and how settlers might begin to (re)learn the language of balance.

Comparing the florid enthusiasms of *River Notes* with the measured reflexivity in *Field Notes* reveals the extent of cultural and narrative awareness that has emerged over the past two decades. Things are problematised in all arenas.<sup>8</sup> Novels by Laguna author Leslie Marmon Silko from a similar period, *Ceremony* (1977) and *Almanac of the Dead* (1992), graphically represent the destruction of comfortable fictional responses to land and cultural issues: *Ceremony* is a novel full of the hope and promise spiritual union with the land can offer; *Almanac* is a searing document packed with the dark consequences of abandoning respect. Spiritual redemption is not possible: spiritual vengeance, however, is an apocalyptic inevitability. The occasional idealism of the 1970s has been wounded by the continued damage to unique cultural and ecological systems. The rhetoric of hope (my own included) runs up against the bleak realities of the market and the population boom. The unceasing drive towards progress continues: “intoxication has taken place... the technological drive takes care of itself” (Jonas 203). Lopez and Silko respond to this drive with stories of stark difference, Silko unleashing a range of horrors from private chambers, Lopez snatching glimmers of insight from the hounded fields of time.

The confrontation with the fallen is one focus in Lopez’s current research; the beautiful is no longer enough. His work moves away from reverential admiration of beauty, whether natural or human, to face the worst we can do and to track the earth’s capacity for bearing harm. In questioning his own focus on the relatively unspoiled, and embarking on journeys to places where great brutality and loss have occurred, he demonstrates a recognition of the relatedness of history, memory and place, and still maintains the belief place can teach us something important. His recent research attends to awareness of misdeed rather than the positive aesthetics of beauty; he acknowledges the way humans have leached horrors into the earth, events that still speak to those who dwell there decades or centuries later (Hay).

That *Desert Notes* and *River Notes* are now published as one volume reflects the more limited appeal of that earlier work: it lacks the visionary overload of New Ageism on one hand, and is written by a white on the other—culturally safe—one; nevertheless it *has* been reissued. *Field Notes* uses double-spaced enlarged text to reach the page-length of the combined volume, which suggests that publishers are prepared to capitalise on a readerly market for connection.

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<sup>8</sup> “Problematised” for who though? Perhaps they have simply been clarified? When does criticism and revelation become a ‘problem?’ When it troubles white positions? If that is the case then imperialism and the *destructive* power of memory and story might be one of the world’s biggest ongoing ‘problems,’ which each of the writers I read confronts in some implicit or overt way. Most of the writers are like me: they would not exist were it not for the imperialist agenda of the British Empire.

In Abrams and Lopez (and in the books in *this* chapter by Flanagan and Duncan) I think we observe an important intersection between desire and loss, the printed and the spoken word, or the human and “more than-human” world (for they are one). What do we see at this intersection? What mediates, defines and separates? I argue we see the *river*. The river is the symbol that holds or represents the desire and grief in much of this fiction: rivers carry the burden and the hope of any transition, connection or border. Rivers, in their very form, offer gateways to the pre-lingual (Duncan and Flanagan make a point of describing how the river silences the tongues and minds of their protagonists) and provide metaphoric range to what *is* said, felt, or remembered in print. Pouring out of the past, shaping the future before-as-after it moves, the river gladly accepts everything we care to say or write about it, and continues on. And when it does not continue, we have elegy and we still have desire: lament and fantasy take over, and the river bides its time. Meanwhile, the colony is left with that burden of history and the bifurcated territory it brings forth.

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*River Notes'* Contents page suggests a consistent focus on the natural world throughout the stories. The river unifies the often discrete locales, narrators and events the stories realize. Each of Lopez's *Notes* (those of Desert, River and Field) opens with an “Introduction.” These short pieces lock onto the mind of the wandering speaker, tracing “a series of strippings” (*Desert Notes* 8); the “anxiety” or “desperation” of an unforgiving landscape and the wonder of finding water (*Field Notes* 4, 10); and the constant careful attention to details: “the sound of fish dreaming, twilight in a still pool downstream of rocks in a mountain river” (*River Notes* 65). In *Field Notes* (1994), the narrator arrives at the banks of a river honing a sense of completion and safe harbour: he has crossed the desert and survived. Yet the opening of *River Notes* operates as a conclusion in its own right, landing the narrator at the ocean's shore, which is also the ultimate destination in the *Field Notes* introduction, but it still challenges us to begin another journey. Each Introduction, indeed each book, is marked by a keen sense of inquiry and doubt in the face of wilderness, an understanding born(e) of encounters with human limits in uncompromising lands. The stories in *River Notes* analyse the processes of journey and habitation, moving between departure and home-making via observation. As Sherman Paul states “journey, for him, is pilgrimage” (349-50). Like *River Eternal*, this book has a spiritual basis that borrows from Native American mythology to recreate a storied ecology. Though the river could conceivably run throughout the entire book, different aspects feature in every story. Each narrator reads and reveals another aspect of the current. But the current is consistent, a tracery and touchstone the stories return to as reflective loci. It is a measure of the symbolic capacity of the river that it serves as both anchoring point and evocative prompt. Spontaneity and groundedness (key essayistic tonal manoeuvres), find a place in Lopez's attention to perceptual states, growth and change.



Sherman Paul rightly describes *River Notes* as a source of “spiritual counsel” replete with “explicit instruction” (362). This instructive bent is one result of the narrators’ desire for knowledge. Their search for scientific data and measurements as one means of union (“The Rapids” and “The Bend”), for wisdom (the two stories mentioned, and “Upriver” or “The Search for the Heron”), as well as fragile solace or fulfilment (“Dawn,” “The Salmon”) demands a teleology of inquiry and insight within each story. Characters want “to know,” “wrestle meaning,” “to examine,” seek “other revelations,” “go on listening,” and declare “I noted,” “I know.... I do not know” or “I have trained” (73, 88, 99, 99, 115, 130, 132, 133). The pattern of inquiry shapes the relay of information. Lopez continues to place his characters in positions of innocence, awakening or speaking in hindsight (a kind of foresight in his universe), thereby leading the reader through a simulated process of education and “counsel,” leading us “away from a concern with the pleasures, the pains, and the fates of the self toward a concern for the mysterious web of being in which we are all delicately suspended” (Lopez, “Symposium” 90).

“Introduction” is therefore intent on learning and journey; it invites the reader to share in these change-dependent processes. (The shift to the second-person in the story’s final section builds this sense of invitation, and reinforces its influence on Kinseth’s *River Eternal*: the language here is full of wonder and lush mysticism). Lopez’s stories are not full of topographic maps; those who people them desire a clarity of vision: “[t]he spiritual counsel of *River Notes* and *Desert Notes* belongs to the religious manuals of other times” (Paul 362). The narrators go to great lengths to nurture this need for counsel. “Introduction” features a person who (as in *Desert Notes*) is “waiting” (in this case on the coast) and, after “years” of doing so, has reached a fatigued nonchalance, ever ready to return upriver “and begin again” (63, 64, 66).

The narrator regards the river’s run to the ocean as “the weeping of the earth for what is lost” (66). This elegiac tone continues, as Lopez attends to the “sadness of birds” and the limits of human understanding (65). Though doubt is a feature of the story, it seems both confirmed and assuaged by recourse to the patterns of the natural world. The narrator has great stamina, but the piece speaks of exhaustion and “self-delusion” (64). Yet the speaker’s actions within the story are focused and intent: he moves “like a man who could dance hard and fast,” he traces the sand until he can remember each wind- and sea-formed ripple, only to re-learn them after the night tides do their work; and he stands still as many birds alight on his arms as if he were a patient Christ or Buddha, at the perimeter of our own sojourns, “somewhere ahead or beyond, like a flight of crows” (66, 67).

What my qualifiers suggest is an ambivalence at the heart of the story and the collection, a homage to abundance or complexity that simultaneously accrues elegy: the web of life is dwindling before the narrator’s eyes. The perceptual focus is embodied and embedded in the wider body of the watershed. There is an ecological empathy functioning at every level of *River Notes*. This draws the narrator to the river and turns the reader to the myriad forces that function to enable and weaken that site. A distinction is made between human and non-human processes. The stories

place the work of the non-human component of any watershed, stressing the actual ecological functioning of the river. These quests (for they are mystical) seek to determine our place in the scheme of things, while rearticulating that scheme, that web, to the grounded realities of the earth.

His reason for staying at this coastal point where river becomes sea, and sea, river is apparent in a description of that indeterminate (yet rewarding) interstice:<sup>9</sup>

I will tell you something. It is to the thought of the river's banks that I most frequently return, their wordless emergence at a headwaters, the control they urge on the direction of the river, mile after mile, and their disappearance here on the beach as the river enters the ocean. It occurs to me that at the very end the river is suddenly abandoned, that just before it's finished the edges disappear completely, that in this moment a whole life is revealed. (67)

Though this assertion is quickly qualified (“[i]t is possible I am wrong”<sup>10</sup>), the insight remains potent: the dissolution of the ego, the “stripping” of certainties and boundaries is a constant theme in the introductions to the various *Notes*. The quotation introduces an element of life-mapping onto the riverine force that runs through the book. A subtle, unforced association between human and place suggests the span of a river and the patterns of a life are bound. The enlightenment he achieves is seductive for the seeker. How many can decipher the language of cottonwoods or allow the birds to land on their arms? Why, then, is this character dissatisfied? The desire for knowledge is deep here, surpassed only by the thirst for wisdom. This “Introduction” maps the consequences of the thirst for knowledge and understanding that marks the collection. In several stories there is an absolute hunger for union, understanding and harmony.

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The word “know” appears in each of the first three paragraphs of “The Search for the Heron.” The protagonist, a person open to inter-species communion, addresses the heron in the second-person (if person is the term): the story records the attempts of one person to understand the mind of the bird, to relinquish the barrier between self and world and begin a dialogue. “I follow you. You have caught me with your reticence.... If you do not speak I will have to consider making you up” (70). The heron is shy of this human that can hear the speech of trees, who questions in the cadence of an ersatz shaman, abandoning the article to suggest mystery: “I wonder where you have fought warrior. Where!” (70).<sup>11</sup> As the narrator adds, “I did not start out on this to please

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<sup>9</sup> The river mouth is a place of reciprocity and exchange, a phenomenological ecotone (the fecund meeting place between ecosystems), as New Zealand poet Dinah Hawken suggests in her collection *Water, Leaves, Stones*, itself a homage to the mutable reassurances and mortal reminders of life (as well as being a homage to the work of Phyllis Webb). Hawken writes: “‘Whatever is happening is happening / at the estuary’ (“The Settlement”).

<sup>10</sup> “*Notes*, in the title, belongs to the humility that comes of uncertainty and incompleteness—to a book that questions itself,” reminds Sherman Paul (355). The reader can trace Lopez’s increasing self-questioning within the *Notes* trilogy.

you. And in spite of my impatience I am respectful” (71). But the narrator is also interrogative and nosy, snooping amongst the gossip of trees, tracking the dreams of the heron. The language counters the brevity of the second-person pronoun with the phrasing of hearsay and tenderness. Lopez keeps the focus on the non-human, while reminding the reader of the abiding series of connections, and the links between rivers and sadness, a link stressed in the first, second and penultimate stories. Lopez ascribes grief to the waters: “in the river’s notes he has heard Gaia weeping” (Paul 358). By blending the inner emotional world with the physical realities of wildness, Lopez mediates between intellectually discrete worlds, invoking Gaia on a semantic and unconscious level, giving tears back to the earth, and edging our sensibilities in the same direction—home to the world:

One dream alone reveals your grief. The trees said you dreamed most often of the wind. You dreamed that you lived somewhere with the wind, with the wind rippling your feathers; and that children were born of this, that they are the movement of water in all the rivers. You wade, it is suggested, among your children, staring hard, pecking in that lightning way your life from the water that is your child; and sleeping in trees that do not hold you sacred. (71)

Lopez’s use of an extra-sensory narrator makes for an unusual sense of the watershed; the reader is already privy to a remarkable degree of openness between species and place. The story swings between (remarkable) insights into the animal mind and the obsession of the narrator to know more: “I have sought only you. Enough. I wish to know you, and you will not speak” (73). The lush language of dreaming is littered with adjectives and emotional description that highlights the neediness of the narrator’s need (*desire*) to know: respect, shaken, impatience, wisdom, tired, anxious, imploring, angered, unnerved, crippled, compassion, forgiveness—all these words appear in the story which records an emotional and spiritual challenge motivated by desire for union and understanding. The speaker takes parts of the heron’s nest and food, trying to divine something of its life: then a dream arrives, where the compassion of the heron is described, attributing the human emotions to the bird as a way of empathising with nonhuman entities and elements. Lopez has said “[w]e are trying to understand *ourselves* here” (“Interview” 9).<sup>12</sup> The narrator then “knew how much had to be given away, how little could ever be asked” (74).<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> See Bill Reid, “The Anthropologist and the Article,” for a disquisition on the way mysticism is faked by dropping “the” and imitating the stereotype of Wise Laconic Shaman facing Crow or Weasel.

<sup>12</sup> He continued to tell Jim Aton that “The answers don’t always serve as well as the questions, and unresolved mystery serves us very well. As long as you approach animals with regard, with respect, with a sense that there is a mystery there that you need to confront, then you needn’t be concerned with anthropomorphism. It’s a concept you can dispense with” (9).

<sup>13</sup> Musing: maybe this is how I think about the Whanganui River I paddled with Maori of the area, how much it demands, how little I can offer or represent it; how it would overflow the bound of this particular project: and it is fine to let it do so, to let it run on and know there are certain places for certain things. The place for the river, they say, is the river itself.

dream has prompted “forgiveness” and a sense of propriety in the narrator, who copies the heron and enters the river:

I leap into the jade color of the winter river. I fight the current to reach the rocks, climb up on them and listen for the sound of your voice. I stand dripping, shivering in my white nakedness, in the thin dawn light. Waiting. Silent. You begin to appear at a downriver bend. (75)

It is hard to tell whether this act is the culmination of a quest or an aberration; it would likely be classified as quest in some circles, for it leads the speaker to a figurative and literal balance, a sense of the co-operation his desires demand. Like many of the stories in *River Notes*, the alliance of human desire and wild indifference prompts the beginnings of responsibility in the seeker.<sup>14</sup> As Romand Coles observes, “[w]hatever reverence we ourselves deserve emerges from our capacity to dwell dialogically at the ecotone [those biologically diverse meeting places between ecosystems] between self and world” (245). Different kinds of knowledge coalesce around the river’s banks, making varied demands on characters, according to what they do and do not wish to understand. The river is a meeting site where memory and event are reconstituted and restored to narrative; the history of the river becomes the history of story. Lopez is the mediator between ecotones within the natural world *and* the epistemological world. Metaphor and symbol become forces for the transmission of the (un)familiar in nature. “He makes the nonidentical seductive” (Coles 240). Lopez makes herons, stones, light and the gossip of cottonwoods seductive; *he makes rivers seductive*. He makes the natural world approachable (and, as Wild suggests, less dangerous or uncomfortable than it usually is [21]); thus his *Notes* present beautiful rivers free of dams, industrial effluent and raw sewage. The attractive (seductive) aesthetics of his riverine world ensure a dialogue between self and world is initially made desirable, then necessary and, ultimately, indispensable.<sup>15</sup>

A sense of tonal seamlessness ripples among the stories in *River Notes* (a pattern Lopez largely abandons in the more varied *Field Notes*). “The Bend” repeats the first-person narrative that dominates the book. Once again Lopez concerns himself with the ways in which we know and see the river. As in the other stories, notions of borders and division dissolve in the waters. The process of personal change is fluid, but Lopez measures increments and clues in the protagonist’s development. He lives beside a bend in the river that was the object of obsession, and now is a site of balanced perspective; the story recounts this inner journey within an outer landscape.<sup>16</sup> He

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, “The Falls” which recounts a reporter’s search for facts behind a death on the river; “Hanner’s Story” which cautions against the stereotyping of a neighbour and the denial of wisdom, and “Drought,” in which we understand the lengths nature demands we go in order to know ourselves and appease the world that holds us.

<sup>15</sup> Though Lopez’s current project suggests a very different trajectory, and even the collection *Field Notes* includes a story (“The Open Lot”) in which the city is a site of wonder. But even when the beauty has gone, the need for communion remains vital and offers meaning.

might concur with a 1911 *British Columbia Magazine* article that felt “[n]o mystery is quite like the mystery of a river bend, as no curve is quite so beautiful” (Eaton 805). His sense of what is “appropriate” is adjusted by what he learns to see in the watershed: notions of “trespass” alter as understanding shifts (88, 87).

A particularly human conscience develops in the course of the story. The man (why is it easy to pick him as one, though no indication is given?) has moved from “the worst sort of ignorance, the grossest inquiries” to a high level of ecological awareness: though he is modest, few would venture his claim to notice a bird breathe in the distance. Here (as in “Introduction”) the process of observation involves ego-dissolution: “For myself, each day more of me slips away. Absorbed in seeing how the water comes through the bend, just so, I am myself, sliding off” (88).

Thinking like a river, the character fulfils the desire hatched during a period of deep depression: “I began to think (as on a staircase descending to an unexamined basement) about the turn in the river. If I could understand this smoothly done change of direction I could imitate it, I reasoned, just as a man puts what he reads in a story to use, substituting one point for another as he needs” (88). This “just as” speaks volumes about the gentle guidance Lopez lends to his work and about the things we can learn from the mechanics of rivers, that “quasi-equilibrium” that the protagonist seeks (Leopold 66). The character imagines one kind of river-reading: “the rate of flow of the water, the erosion of the outer bank, the slope of the adjacent mountains, the changing

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<sup>16</sup> See chapters three and four for more on faith in the enduring, though fallen, river. “I think of two landscapes—one outside the self, the other within.... one learns a landscape finally not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it.... The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of an individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes” (Lopez “Landscape and Narrative” 64, 65). “The Bend”—and the *Notes* trilogy as a whole—is a fictional rendition of these statements. Each story sketches a series of relations and connections. I will digress to a familiar landscape (for me), namely New Zealand, to sketch this bifurcation.

The New Zealand example speaks to the relevance of Lopez’s inter-cultural aspirations in other (post) colonial sites. In 1975 New Zealand novelist Witi Ihimaera observed “[t]here are two cultural maps of my country, the Maori and the Pakeha [white]. The Pakeha map is dominant, its contours so firmly established that all New Zealanders, including Maori, are shaped by it. The Maori map has eroded and, although its emotional landscape is still to all intents and purposes intact, it has been unable to shape all New Zealanders, including Pakeha” (Ihimaera 215). Lopez wants the whites to open to this influence, to appreciate how other cultures have worked out and expressed the relations between the species. I think this opening has certainly happened to some extent in New Zealand in the latter twentieth century, even in governmental sectors. But the template on the land and culture remains a white one. Once the grid of map and road is laid down it is hard to reverse. The flux of rivers speaks to the possibilities of change and the ongoing dependencies we owe the watershed in any case.

“The first assumption of the European is that land should be developed; the first assumption of the Maori is that land and its resources should be conserved” (Phillips vi). Europeans (Pakeha) in New Zealand now find themselves in an indeterminate, transitory space between these two generalisations, between brownlash and eco-activism. Geoff Park points out the stark facts: “The urge of our lives is to leave some mark on the world. But what is scary here—if you have some idea of what it was like a century ago—is the flash of time it has taken to reduce this ecosystem’s amassed, natural capital to this worn, meagre residue” (23). Working with symbol and image is perhaps less damaging work, especially as many of the writers I consider in these pages have their sense of time opened to such a trans-human, trans-temporal riverine scale of continuity. “Two cosmologies—two landscapes’ [as Ihimaera put it]—coexist in New Zealand. One senses that nature and people are separate, the other that they are inseparable. Caught between them, the business called conservation has to find ways to keep alive both the primordial scent of the land before people and the ancient wisdom that people conserve nature best by using it. It must find itself in the common ground between the archaic life of a New Zealand forest and the comparative millisecond of human intimacy with it” (Park 323).

radius of curvature as the river turned west. It could be revealed neatly, affirmed with graphic authority. I became obsessed with its calculation” (89). Obsession breeds odd conviction: “I became convinced that in this wealth of detail a fixed reason for the river’s graceful turn would be inevitably revealed” (89).

Teams of scientists and engineers are hired, measurements done; data amasses in piles by the bed and remains there, “they reduced the bend in the river to an elegant series of equations,” but the man is still stagnant, almost in somatic recognition that the knowledge and grace he seeks cannot be gleaned through science alone (89). Lopez introduces unusual events that become moments of revelation and transition: the notes appear to harbour a group of birds; they grow moss, “to harden, to resemble the gray boulders in the river. Years passed” (90). The man lies still, until one morning he manages to move, to speak to the bears (“I told them I needed to be near the river”) and is carried to the water to be one with its elemental healing power, its association with renewal and nourishment: “I listened for the sound of water on the outer bar. I observed the hunt of the caddis fly. I am now taking the measure of the bend in these experiences” (90). The language settles slightly as he nears the water, and remains grounded and confident in tone. By taking measure through participation and observation and ranking the action of the non-human on a par with science and ego, he comes to a fuller sense of the relations inherent in the watershed.

At the conclusion the narrator talks of his loss of self, and his dwindling desire to emulate the river; he has moved into a balance with the environment that is matched by the connection of his “interior” landscape. Indeed, at the story’s end, Lopez fuses the two worlds. Individual health no longer consumes him: “I am more interested in this: from above, to a hawk, the bend must appear only natural and I for the moment inseparably a part, like salmon or a flower. I cannot say well enough how this single perception has dismantled my loneliness” (90). A Gaia-inspired epiphany grounds the narrator in the watershed and redeems him from the taint of otherness we impose upon our selves when we ‘Other’ nature.

The story bears out Bachelard’s assertion that

we attribute to water virtues that are antithetic to the sick person. Man projects his desire to be cured [onto healing water] and dreams of a compassionate substance. [“Prescientific studies”] inscribe a psychology of the patient and the doctor in water’s substance.... The union of the sensory and the sensual upholds a moral value. The contemplation and experience of water lead us, by many routes, to an ideal. (*Water and Dreams* 146)

Lopez seeks an integration or union of two landscapes, inner and outer, sensory and sensual, and white and native. Each of the river notes works towards some kind of an ideal or insight: a clarity of vision and a deeper truth (“The Bend,” “The Falls,” “The Shallows”), a surer connection with people and place via “the arduous journey back to love that is at the heart of all eco-fables” (Paul 361). The aesthetics of Lopez’s river (wild, beautiful, abundant in flora and fauna) make it easier to love such a place. The stories emphasise the morality of the ecological ideal. The individual avoids “trespass” and opens to the observable world, rather than solely

attending to “equations.” This interaction between interior and exterior landscapes is seen as therapeutic (Lopez, “Landscape and Narrative”): “With [Lopez], it may be said, the discipline of ecology heals the psyche and the healed psyche serves the unhealed world” (Paul 361).

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The river (as troped by Lopez) will carry any desire, but it never allows the seeker to evade the consequence of wisdom or ignorance. As a reflective site, the current prompts mediation between past memory and present action; characters must measure up to the watershed’s reckoning. The river is a constant backdrop to these adjustments, its own seasonal variations echoing the need for adaptation and interdependence. Yet the river will not be co-opted; Lopez schools us in “humility,” a phrase central to Coles’ and Jonas’ arguments. (Coles 239; Jonas 21). Humility is a key component of the ethics of these three writers. They suggest such an ecologically and morally linked humility grows when humans “recognize we are beings that receive more than we can return in this encounter [with the earth]” (Jonas 21). We may never be able to return what Earth gifts us, but the longing to do so is seen as positive. This longing also stirs doubt and inquiry. “Lopez’s narrative art is a practice of humilitas” (Paul 381). These comments find an earlier source in Aldo Leopold: “Ability to see the cultural value of wilderness boils down, in the last analysis, to a question of intellectual humility.... all history consists of successive excursions from a single starting point, to which man returns again and again to organize yet another search for a durable scale of values” (279).

The authors I examine in this thesis go to the river to conduct this search. For Lopez and others the river is the point of departure and return: it defines the limits of personal journeying (and they can be supra-human) and the links to home and memory. Rivers push at the borders of vision, of knowing; they can beckon and repel. Thus the protagonist who seeks a heron finds release from his obsession (on one level) by acknowledging the limits and grace of the wild. A sense of borders can in fact be useful: a limit can act as a marker for how far we can change or engage with a place before it is threatened. A line can record how far we have gone beyond such a limit. Jonas argues it is our “metaphysical responsibility” (now that we can ruin the planet) to accept the consequences of our actions, as well as the motivations and sources of our guiding stories and beliefs (Jonas 136).

Lopez’s “The Log Jam” is one of the clearest examples in this thesis of the interdependence of river, story and community: it represents human action, and reveals the enduring consequences of that action on the rivers we live by. The story shows how the river can become a teacher and repository of memory, how a simple natural occurrence does not simply end, nor is as it seems.

“The Log Jam” describes six discrete episodes from the period 1946 to 1974; each episode somehow leaves traces that snag on a stump downriver, a token or sign of events (which are life-changing for each protagonist). The river takes note(s) even if the humans do not. The logging

town may change over time and the characters of each scene never meet, but Lopez stresses the unifying force of the river through time and memory: for him, the river remembers; only humans forget. The piles of alders (signs from the beaver dam), the stick used to rescue a drowning child: these are physical markers of an ecological community in which humans are just a part. The river records the life of the community in an ecological shorthand Lopez's narrator reads; the log jam grows in size and takes on an ecology of its own. Each of the jam's components tells a story, from the huge bloodied fir stump which causes the jam (submerged by the son of a man killed trying to fell the tree), to the scattered petals offered to the river as a token of release and hope, by a lonely female character. Sherman Paul describes this woman as a kind of "grieved anima" who echoes the sadness rivers accrue (360). The river bears all these meanings and feelings, and there is a trust in its ability to hold them perpetually, and re-use them "as well as could be expected in that country," a wry conclusion that suggests an ongoing determination—from humans and herons—in the face of grief and loss (86).

Lopez's eco-moral impulse informs his understanding of place, compassion and idealism. In "Hanner's Story" the old man speaks of the wisdom he learnt from a "Quotaka" man about fishing in the river—how respect must be paid: the river exists because of ancient contracts of co-operation laid down between the water, the animals and the salmon. Hanner tells the narrator of the "deep agreement" made: "'they were able to reach an understanding about their obligations to each other and everyone went his way. This remains unchanged. Time has nothing to do with this. This is not a story. When you feel the river shuddering against your legs, you are feeling the presence of all these agreements'" (121). "'You can feel the anger in water behind a dam'" he continues (in the only mention Lopez makes of dams); a dam is seen as a violation of these "agreements." The story suggests an ecological and moral awareness of the "obligations and mutual courtesies" of fishing, and of living. Lopez uses myth and legend to alter the reader's perspective; his acceptance of the immanent life and wisdom of the non-human brings the views of Worster and Leopold (or Duncan and Flanagan) into relief. The lives of human characters play out in a wider natural drama where the dreams of herons become the desires of a man.

Humility, desire and healing are integral in the collection's final story, "Drought." It documents the getting of wisdom, as do *The River Why* and *Death of A River Guide*. The three authors ascribe an immanent power to the landscape: its animals and rivers can move the mind into new worlds and inspire recollection and reflection. Fittingly, this final story concerns the growth of humility, a process evident in each of the three books under consideration in this chapter. Compared with its framing partner, the final story is measured in tone; its insistence on knowledge is not as strident as "The Search for the Heron." "Drought" has more familiar human markers in it: reporters lured by the dry weather, the "terminally evil" real estate agents who seek to buy up the houses of the struggling farmers, and a record of human response the narrator refers to. The language is that of measured retrospect, convincing in its methodical record of the rigours of waterlessness. Once again the river is given a figurative attribution which enables compassionate



reader-response; metaphor loads a range of emotional associations on the river to prompt empathy for the dwindling waterway: "The river like some great whale lies dying in the forest" (133). The narrator has listened to the river: the noise of stones resisting water, animal and insect life "are only commentary on the river's endless reading of the surface of the earth over which it flows" (133). The river notes its home, reading the earth.

The story begins by assuming an unintelligibility between narrator and river, a limit on what is known. Its steady prose belies the fact that the narrator enters into deeper 'non-realistic' dialogue with the herons and the river during this time of "once" and "had been," which characterises the shrinking river's life: "The wailing of the river over its last stones was difficult to bear, yet it was this that drew me back each day, as one visits those dying hopelessly in a hospital room" (134). The narrator enters a state akin to the vision-questers: fasting, isolated and intent upon a "gesture" of affinity and prayer, "an expression of camaraderie, stretching my fingers gently into the darkness toward the inchoate source of the river's strangulation" (134-5). The river is "dying" and depression and compassion combine to make the man "exhort the river." The creatures begin to die too, giving up "their agreement" of enmity in favour of shared survival at a shared pool (135). Like protagonist Gus of *The River Why*, the narrator goes to rescue a fish that is trapped in a dying waterway that is anthropomorphised into a corpse. A pool has "become a pit"; the feelings of "hope" and "futility," "wisdom" and foolishness" experienced during this act map the ambivalent limbo and helplessness of those who wait (136). "What death we saw" (135). "Drought" features the only damaged river in the book. The river is dying through lack of rain, rather than because of human dams or pollution, but Lopez traces the effect its death has on animals (more so than on humans), as a way of stressing the importance of the river: snakes, birds, trees and crops suffer, "the color gone out of the eyes of any creature you met, for whom, out of respect, you would step off the path to allow to pass" (135). This is the only occasion in the story where Lopez uses the direct second-person address, once again calling on a sympathy in the reader to concentrate our awareness of the "web" we are part of.

Interconnection and kinship with the non-human is characteristic of the *Notes* trilogy. "Drought" concludes by affirming this link in a semi-mystical manner. The man has retreated from the company of other people (*River Notes* shies away from the human family to an unnerving degree; such dehumanising is quite different from the later *Field Notes* where people, as well as herons, share the dialogue); the animals descend to the trickle of river that remains. The animals are plentiful: "Raccoon and Porcupine," "Lynx," "Blue Heron and Goshawk" are some of the animals that gather; they thank him for saving the fish. The heron speaks to the man, bringing the desire of the book (and certain phrases in the story: "the sound rain makes" and the fall of fir needles, then later, rain) full circle: the search for the heron is complete. The heron tells the human "We were the first people here. We gave away all the ways of living. Now no one remembers how to live anymore, so the river is drying up.... everything, every gesture, is sacred" (137). The human characters in *River Notes* are intent on re-learning how to live, to see and to know.

The rain returns. So does the (disapproving) mention of people: they “said it was a blessing. They offered explanations enough.... It was no different from any other birth but for a lack of joy, and for that, stranger than anything you can imagine, inhuman and presumptuous” (137-8). These are the people who refuse to think like a river, who fail to acknowledge the interactions and agreements that have been laid down or violated, whether they be ecological or spiritual balances. But our narrator offers “forgiveness” and in the end returns the book, the stories, to the river. It continues onwards, justifying and demanding a careful faith which must tread lightly through the noise and silence of the human world: “The river has come back to fit between its banks. To stick your hands into the river is to feel the cords that bind the earth together in one piece. The sound of it at a distance is like wild horses in a canyon, going sure-footed away from the smell of a cougar come to them faintly on the wind” (138). The continuity and healing power of the river leads us on to the work of Richard Flanagan and David James Duncan, who place their protagonists in the waters of change and story.

They do so with an eye on the ecology their characters are a part of. The books impart a sense of that “web” of life that extends to the diversity of love and remembrance as much as the biodiversity of the watershed. The writers’ focus on the emotional watersheds that characterise us is appropriate and alluring. Our bodies, composed of over 70% water, are fed by tributaries of vein and artery that form deltas across flesh, which dies if the heart or brain is dammed. In the next section we meet a protagonist whose spiritual growth is indexed to his growing awareness of the ecology of his local river valley and his place in it.

### ***The River Why: Spirit Fishing and transpersonal ecology***

Men, women and children—all of whom together hope to follow the timeless path of love and wisdom, in affectionate company with the sky, winds, clouds, trees, waters, animals and grasses—this is the tribe. (116)

Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold*

David James Duncan proposes a new tribe in his 1983 novel *The River Why*. Its human component finds collective energy through personal transformation and the recognition of a spirituality inspired by the natural world. Gus, the protagonist in *The River Why*, returns (renewed and transformed) after his river quest to the embrace of his family, but he must be challenged to appreciate what he already has. The river mediates this journey.<sup>17</sup> As in *River Notes* we recirculate back to the river as a source of inspiration, purity, clarity and instruction. On

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<sup>17</sup> Gus’s journey is a quest, applying elements of the Fisher King’s journey to wholeness through “the help of the Grail-seeker” who appears in manifest forms as the teachers and mentors Gus learns from through the novel (Leach 1: 392; Jobes 1: 575).

the Tamanawis River the imperative of responsibility becomes an imperative towards responsiveness. While it remains wild, the river operates as a counterpoint to all the damage humans can inflict upon the land. Its pure state compels introspection, demanding (and, as Milosz suggests in "Rivers," offering) a cleansing of the soul.

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Duncan's novel focuses on a young fishing-crazed Oregonian Augustine (Gus) Orviston, a journeyman in the ways of the heart, mind and spirit who takes a decidedly riverine route to enlightenment.<sup>18</sup>

Gus caught his first ten-pound steelhead trout at four with a worm; his first fly-fishing ten-pounder came at six years of age (17). He has good reason to be fishing-crazed. Both his parents ("Ma" and "H<sub>2</sub>O") are avid fishers.<sup>19</sup> This obsession is offset by Gus's younger brother Bill Bob, an introvert Blake Burleson suggests is Gus's "shadow.... Bill Bob introduces Gus to the inner world, to the life of the spirit" (Burleson 45). Duncan names Bill Bob as the wise and steady "owl" to Ma's brash "coyote" (239). Bill Bob helps Gus to *see things* properly, unfettered by habits or an overly rational view of life. The best example of the kind of hidebound habit Gus can create is his "Ideal Schedule" (75).

Bored by high school (because it does not involve fishing), Gus slips through the system, quiet as "riverwater" (11). He graduates, and leaves home for an isolated cabin by the "Tamanawis" (a protective pseudonym) River. He settles into a "marathon" fishing life, only to find it resembles

... not a dream come true, but a drudgery of double shifts on a creekside assembly line.

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<sup>18</sup> It is also a fun and blissfully digressive text, perhaps in honour of Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*. Walton's multiply instructive, moral, humorous and meandering text is a fine inspiration. At the conclusion of its Part the First, the two Anglers Venator and Piscator continue their digressive [or as I print it here, *digressive*, as the printer does not recognise the old typeface] and ironic banter, Venator launching into a long resolution that connects spirituality and angling as Duncan does:

"Ven. ... as a pious Man advifed his Friend: *That to beget Mortification, he should frequent Churches, and view Monuments and Charnel-Houses, and then and there consider, how many dead Bones Time has piled up at the Gates of Death; fo when I would beget Content, and increafe Confidence in the Power, and Wisdom, and Providence of Almighty God, I will walk the Meadows by fome gliding stream, and there contemplate the Lillies, that take no Care, and thofe very-many other various, little living Creatures, that are not only created, but fed (Man knows not how) by the Goodnefs of the God of Nature; and therefore, trust in him. This is my Purpose; and fo — Let every thing that hath Breath praise the Lord!: And let the Bleffing of St. Peter's Mafter be with mine!*"

Pif. 'And upon all that are Lovers of Virtue, and dare trust in his Providence, and be quiet, and go an angling.'" The Part concludes with the apt religious aphorism: "Study to be quiet, Thess. iv. II" (215-6). *The River Why* can be seen as an extension of the aims and ambitions of these two polarised anglers; it veers into digression and instruction on moral, piscatorial and ecological levels and draws on a range of religious traditions for chapter headings and guidance.

<sup>19</sup> His English father, Henning Hale-Orviston, follows the fly-fishing, tweed-suited purist school of angling while Ma, Carolina Carper, enjoys worm-baiting, plunking for chub salmon, and a sort of slacker Southern USA style of fishing which greatly offends H<sub>2</sub>O (especially as Ma catches more fish). The parents' "invincible stubbornness" leads to many parental piscatorial arguments between "the effete angler and the raucous cowgirl" (38, 11).

After two weeks of 'ideal' six-hour nights and sixteen-hour days I got an incurable case of insomnia. It hardly mattered: sleeping I dreamt of fishing and waking I fished until there was one, undivided, sleeplike state. There was fishing. There was nothing else (75-6).

By the time his family visits his new home Gus is reduced to a rod-addled, monosyllabic creature used to "maniacal barging from hole to hole and creek to creek" rather than communication (78). The effects of "hallucinatory water" (78) wear off enough for Gus to notice his young brother Bill Bob ("a juggler, balancing everything he did" [192]).

Bill Bob edges Gus towards balance by taking him on a slow walk (on dry land) above the cabin. Gus opens his eyes "for the first time ... all summer.... for the first time since leaving home I felt sort of happy." Bill Bob notices the very shape of the Tamanawis: as it carves through the valley it spells *why* in looping script. Gus says "I'd no idea what he was talking about" (79). The novel recounts his growth in understanding. It is a growth Gus's mind forestalls. He follows the Schedule because not fishing remains "*terrifying*" to one who uses the river as a crutch rather than pathway (82). Soon he is "bamboozled" again, anti-social and thoroughly obsessed, catching 100 trout a day and releasing about 98, mentally blocking out anything unrelated to fishing. Duncan's portrayal (and Gus's recounting of events) questions the limited relationship Gus has with the river. The current is simply something to be *used*, a resource rather than a source of inspiration, Illich's "stuff" rather than an elemental substance. The passage of awareness in Lopez, Flanagan and Duncan follows Illich's transition, from the H<sub>2</sub>O of utilitarian usage to an evocative fount of wisdom, *reversing* the fallen state of polluted thought. (Doing so by a pristine, pure river might help this process.)

Gus's nadir occurs when his pet fish Alfred dies. He cannot fathom the reasons for his feelings of grief, he who has slaughtered many a fish. But later, drowning his sorrows, a boozy journal entry says it all: "except jesus, i mean maybe he was just a fish, but he Alfred, he *was* my friend" (89).<sup>20</sup> The next chapter begins with a passage from the *Koran*: "Allah, Who payeth the disbeliever his due ... is swift at reckoning. There covereth him a wave, above which is a wave, above which is a cloud. Layer upon layer of darkness. When he holdeth out his hand he scarce can see it" (90). For all his technique, Gus remains a disbeliever seeking truth with the wrong means; his soul has not been engaged. Gus is destined for greater things than the proud perfection of his angling alone. Once he begins to see the riverscape fully, he taps into the interior world; inner and outer are brought into concord.

Gus's transformation does, as Burleson notes, follow Jung's process of individuation, from the solidification and sloughing of the persona, the acknowledgment (prompted by crisis) of

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<sup>20</sup> The journal entry is only one of a number of indented passages in the novel which record stories from other times or cultures; these passages act like tributaries that inform the main narrative. Duncan's narrative slips across the stories like a salmon in the water. Like Flanagan he is beholden to the exuberant range of the tale, the braided daring of the yarn, the suggestive power of quotation. Both writers give credence to the etymological root of the word 'text,' the Latin verb *texere*, 'to weave.'

a Shadow, then reconnection with an inner anima or animus, and the recognition of the transpersonal. The book also maps a wider process than individuation: Duncan is careful to wed Gus's growth with a spiritual ecology, an awareness of all the communities of the watershed, the web of life that Lopez urges upon his readers. Several important scenes mark this growth; with each step in his journey Gus *sees* and understands more and more of the worlds around him spiritually because he sees them ecologically. The imperative towards responsibility is mapped out on an intensely symbolic landscape: the river provides the territory for Gus's enlightenment. The way is already there. While Gus learns to "think like a river" (Worster) he also learns to believe with the "humility" of a disciple, and plunge into quest (Jonas 21).

Only a few hours after his drunken journal entry, his obsession is so great that Gus is back on the river (in his aluminium canoe "Sardine"). He is seeking the first of the season's cutthroat trout, but he does so in a "one-pointed" blinkered manner, catching the fish "whose neck I broke off as if twisting off a beer cap" (91). This, rather than the journal entry, is Gus's low point. The fish is almost a commodity alone, the act of fishing mechanical, ruthlessly efficient and joyless. Then fog rolls in, looking ominous. In this grey-out, Gus hooks the body of a drowned fisherman. Shocked and freezing Gus tows him to the local jetty where he is rescued by the philosophising Titus Gerrard. Titus, eloquent of speech and feeling, wise to the spiritual and symbolic<sup>21</sup> nuances of rivers, is one of the guides who watch Gus journey towards the holistic river.

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Hauling up the corpse from the river forces Gus into a mental confrontation with death. After riding out a raging fever, corpse-haunted Gus sits by the river to "petrify" in a stasis of despair and uselessness: "I didn't know anything about anything. Everything in my head came from fishing magazines, fishing manuals, fishing novels," works, he decides, of little philosophical merit (108, 109). Gus's father would balk; Gus compounds this self-doubt by rejecting his vocation as the practice of eccentric killers of life: "we compounded our crimes by gloating over them; and we committed them so mindlessly..." (109). All of his perceived foundations are disintegrating as the fog wraps and chills the stilled fisher: Gus is entering a kind of death (Venator's "mortification"): "My angling craft had smashed on the reefs of incomprehension. I was marooned.... a hollow meaningless nothing" (112). For the first time he fishes his heart and head with equal desperation.

The river does not offer help to Gus in his stubborn emptiness, but he eventually finds solace in the memory of his brother's rich inner world, a place with its own version of Heaven or Eden called the Garden World. Years before, Bill Bob told Gus that this place is populated by our "Garden Angel" or "twin" who appears in the Garden as we die and grows younger rather than

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<sup>21</sup> Witness, for example, the dazzling excerpt from his monograph *What Is Water?*, which is a pool of great facts and opinions Duncan could not fit anywhere else, another of the digressions and side-trips which add to the storied web of the Tamanawis (80-2).

older, returning to a tiny cell which appears in the womb of a woman on earth (118). Bill Bob's vision astounds Gus. Alone in his fogged-in cabin the youngster's envisioned world replaces the image of the drowned fisherman who, Gus imagines, is joyful in the Garden World. The fogged river plays a part in shrouding Gus from his obsession. Now the Tamanawis runs through a world that he begins to appreciate for the first time. The river becomes an external and symbolic base for his spiritual growth.

In Book Three (the appropriately named "Characters in Nature") Gus enters a new phase: he wakes with some distance from his fishing obsession: "I scarcely recognized myself: the fanatical fisherman in me had died" and the fog has lifted (130). Gus climbs above the valley again: "looking south and finally *seeing* something of the place where I lived aroused all the joy I could contain" (131). The chapter is called "The River Writes" and it documents the explosion of an ecological consciousness in Gus: his visual awakening is the beginning of a very personal movement towards responsibility (and ultimately love). The river is a catalyst in his flourishing responsiveness to natural and emotional landscapes.

The first revelation occurs as he "reads" the river's carved passage: "Billions of ever-changing, ever the same gallons of gurgling sun- and moon-washed ink, spelling forever, in plain English, *why*" (131).<sup>22</sup> The word makes Gus "nervous;" he turns away from the question only to confront an even more serious one:

My newly opened eyes fell upon a smooth almost head-shaped mountain. Within the past year it had been clear-cut on the right, clear-cut on the left, scraped, bulldozed, burned and 2,4,5-T-ed to rock and poison soil—but a single-filed swath of mangled, uncut firs had been left to straggle in over the summit in a line.... It was hugely pathetic. An *entire mountain* — not just scalped and maimed but made ridiculous, robbed of all mountain dignity by the absurd surviving swath. (132)

Gus sneers at the rhetoric of clear-cutting and the "'seed trees'" that are meant to replace the "primordial groves that have been killed. As if an ancient, mysterious, beautiful virgin is no more desirable than choked rows of 'easily harvested' clones. As if devastation, mass murder and forced mutation are a kind of farming!" Within this seemingly unselfconscious sexualising of landscape, he appeals for "some shred of gratitude or reverence" from loggers. This anger differs from the dispassionate irony of his first recollections of the logged areas across from his cabin, the "strange nomenclature and stranger treatment of primordial trees" dealt out by Weyerhaeuser (72).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Revelation is the right term; Gus, as Burleson suggests, "emerges as the pagan 'Christian' in a New Age *Pilgrim's Progress*" (41). Augustine is a venerable and consecrated name. God may not reside in the City, but in the River.

<sup>23</sup> Though even this description is managed in such a way as to foreground the beauty of the river and the shocking desecration of the logging, shifting from idyll to barren land in sequence. In July 1999 Weyerhaeuser planned to buy out B.C.'s large logging company Macmillan Bloedel; no doubt some British Columbians are worried the forest clearcutting will continue apace, following New Zealand's Fletcher Challenge B.C. operations. In October 1999 Weyerhaeuser was granted approval for the purchase; they have refused to abide by the belated Macmillan reduction in clearcutting.

Something of this distance comes from the kind of modesty and self-awareness Gus acquires through the novel: while raging at the loggers he turns to look at the koan-like Tamanawis River that poses the open question, *why?* Why this loss, why this destruction, why my obsession? The river prompts reflection and more cultural baggage floats up for inspection. The subsequent feelings of shame about *his* practice of fishing develop into a string of associations that are instrumental in forming Gus's personal imperative of responsibility. It is an imperative inspired by his own memory, locale and (non-human and human) community.

### **Making amends: Towards (piscatorial) responsibility**

Gus's first reaction to his deeds is a stasis of guilt: four days earlier, he was swiftly and irreverently killing fish. Now his reaction is quite different; he recalls

maiming and murdering trout like enemies in wartime, ticking them off in my Log by the thousand, robbing them of all dignity at death by stuffing them, still thrashing, into my creel, or tallying them like downed bowling pins before flinging them back into the water ... stunned by the too-rare air ... And never a thought about the suffering they endured for my amusement. Christ, I was nothing but an aquatic logger ... I had clear-cut many a pond. (132)

He bows his head, but no rivergod dishes out punishment. Gus settles for his own shame instead. The desire to "make amends" runs him through a range of positions on the consumption of fish: a restored angling pond would only lead to more fish-pain, and his father's attitude (more fishing equals more money for fishing experts) fails to appreciate the interests of the fish. Gus reduces the problem to (what *he* perceives as) a simple syllogism: "Dead fish are food. Live fish aren't. People have to eat, so fish have to die" (133). Peter Singer and Andrée Collard would interject before the comma here, but Gus falls back on a system those radical animals-rights authors critique: Christianity. The loaves and fishes are, he muses, evidence of the acceptability of sacrifice; the thanks offered to God and fish make the killing "a sacrament" and thus separates the practice from his father's, who gives thanks in the wrong direction (the bank), and for the wrong reasons. Gus is not killing for money; the argument in favour of necessity exonerates some of his guilt (he is no vegetarian).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In favouring sacrifice as a means of survival Gus adopts an indigenous stance that recognises death as a part of life. By further rejecting corporate greed, he allies himself with hunting communities the world over, recognising indigenous survival methods (and these are real needs: many First Nations depend on fish as a viable source of protein). Michael Marker's recent anti-environmentalist article protests the Green desire to prevent Makah whale hunts as misplaced: corporations are the ones damaging these creatures that have been troped as "Yodas of the Deep" rather than a food source. The environmentalists, Marker argues, reject Makah tradition and reinforce a "secular fundamentalism" that dismisses Makah "for not playing the eco-guru Tonto role" (F7). Marker believes First Nations should be able to define their own reality. In the same newspaper, Marcus Youssef calls for the true eco-tourist "Authentic Experience." "I'd like to propose that the Makah nation revise its traditional whaling practices to

Gus's next thoughts evoke a series of principles that will guide his action: they have affinity with Jonas' call for humility and restraint. The principles are allied with Flanagan's slightly derisive view of cities as zones of pure consumption, and *River Notes*' implication that natural beauty and isolation are prerequisites for full understanding of the world.<sup>25</sup> Duncan uses Gus as a model of self-sufficiency and care, for his consideration deepens as he continues to acknowledge the diversity and potential of the natural world. Gus asks an important question (one Jonas suggests the utopian ideal fails to acknowledge): "what," he ponders,

was the difference between need and greed? How many fish could a man [*sic*] kill without his killing becoming wanton? Which fish could he rightfully kill, and when? And what was the extent of each man's sacrifice on the day he stopped killing? For a lifelong commercial fisherman it meant the end of a way of life, the separation of men from boats and rivers and seas. And even in 'sport' fishing, when a no-kill law leads a weekend plunker to stop fishing, it cuts one of the last little links with the natural world and its wonders. It seemed justifiable to censure

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include prey that is more abundant and more deserving than the grey whale: the eco-tourist. Think about it. It's a relative pound of flesh for the scores of the Makah First Nation ancestors, first gawked at, then slaughtered by our forebears, the European settlers..... You see, I think we ought to be thankful that the Makah and whatever other Nations are interested in reclaiming the whale hunt as part of their savagely eradicated cultural identity. I think that, given our shared history, we ought to be down on our knees, thankful that they're not hunting us."

As almost emblematic of the divisions Marker believes exists between conservationist and First Nation positions (this not a uniform state: not all ecologists are "fundamentalist"), Jim Darling points out that care should be taken by Makah to ensure Makah do not kill any of the small summer resident population of about 200 gray whales (rather than the roughly 25 000 animals which migrate south in early January). This proposal honours whales and ceremonies. Makah propose to catch 22 to 33 whales over five years.

The vexed issue of management and policy between indigenous and recent settler conservation groups dogs most contemporary riverscapes. I think it significant that the first major account of First Peoples' salmon ways in their own stories and words was published in 1998. *First Fish, First People* (eds. Roche and McHutchison) records the indigenous perspective of salmon. Both the people and the fish have been poorly served by the legislation and engineering of this century alone. This compilation makes public the feelings of several writers who in a sense represent their communities. It has been a long time coming. I think the continued open dialogue between groups is vital. In Vancouver there are significant alliances between the West Coast Wilderness Committee and First Nations over protection of the Stoltmann wilderness area; in New Zealand the world's second National Park was created by Maori Chief Te Heuheu to prevent development occurring on the sacred peaks there. New Zealand's Department of Conservation has made great leaps in its liaison and consultation with Maori, despite a pathetic Government budget. Speaking of Australia, Michael Mansell states "there are possibilities. But it is not up to Aboriginal people, for our case is stated clearly. We own this country. Can conservationists acknowledge that? Do they acknowledge that the land and environment which they defend so eagerly, belongs not to them but to Aboriginals" (Pybus and Flanagan 105). Flanagan skirts the issue by ascribing some Aboriginal blood to his protagonist Aljaz; Gus is left happy in his cabin amongst abandoned village sites. The contributors to *First Fish* are allied in their call for self-determination. They are sick of any colonisers telling them what to do with land they held in trust for centuries. I have no answers here, but I am reminded of Jan Penrose's comment that negotiation can be "a willingness in the encompassing nation to negotiate (and thereby limit) the transfer of power" (43). That said, most significant land deals have been negotiated ones, and the willingness to negotiate is a lot better than many tribal groups have experienced with dominant authorities and dams, as I point out in Chapter Four. The middle ground may return to issues of species survival as different human groups collaborate to work to prevent the extinction of elements of the far older "more-than-human" world.

<sup>25</sup> This is relevant if full understanding is related to ecological appreciation (which it is, in the *pure-rivered* texts. Even the writers at the fallen river pay meticulous attention to flotsam and ordure); one can argue that the city dulls too many senses, as Scott Russell Sanders notes: "Any child is a reminder that the rivers of our senses once ran clear. As we grow older, the rivers may be dammed, diked, silted up, or diverted, but so long as we live they still run .... we can clean up these rivers that flow into us. And if we restore our senses, they in turn will replenish us" (*Hunting* 44). Duncan's novel traces this type of ecologically and spiritually linked cleansing.



greed, but it didn't seem to be greed that was censured when fishermen were condemned for keeping a few honest, hard-won victims. (133)

Collard and Singer have departed in disgust, I surmise. This is not an animal liberationist passage. Gus will have to wait before he understands the extent to which his mountain-top musing remains top-heavy, rationalising the human dominance of the natural world, albeit in a communal, considerate way. Perhaps this eco-humanism is all the more seductive (and dangerous?) because of its appeal to the human need for connection with the natural world and exoneration for its depletion. The "little links with the natural world" become guiding spiritual experiences; it is not until later that he understands how far those little links can take one's spirit, or how gently prejudiced his mind is. Yet on the mountain he attains a fuller sense of the complexities of any single act. Gus is intent on creating a morality of fishing. So he continues to ponder, bringing the realm of attitude and consequence into that of necessity, labour and craft. It is a comprehensive condemnation:

No, it wasn't simply the death of fish that bothered me. The thing I found offensive, the thing I hated about Mohican-mountain-makers, gill-netters, poachers, whalehunters, strip-miners, herbicide spewers, dam-erectors, nuclear-reactor-builders or anyone who lusted after flesh, meat, mineral, tree, pelt and dollar—including, first and foremost, myself—was the smug ingratitude, the attitude that assumed the world and its creatures owed us everything we could catch, shoot, tear out, alter, plunder, devour ... and we owed the world nothing in return. (134)

Gus's critique—the long almost ranting litany of resource-(ab)users, the trenchant self-criticism and anger—is his initial reaction to the question of amendment, atonement and reparation. But for a time Gus has no answer to the pace of devastation and the urgency of global need, human and non-human. He cannot stop the consequences of Descartes' admiration for "an infinity of devices" (35).

Jonas observes that "the spell of utopia" dims clear vision: expanding technology creates wounds that demand more technology (184). We urgently need an "outlook of global responsibility and not of grandiose global hope" (Jonas 191). As Duncan argues, this hope quickly degenerates into complacency or smugness: an unrealistic sense of abundance simply fosters over-exploitation. By then, Jonas warns, "intoxication has taken place ... the technological drive takes care of itself" (203). The "built-in" utopian drive is like a self-nourishing virus, or accelerating rolling snowball; it thrives on its own momentum.<sup>26</sup> Jonas is emphatic on this point: "it is vitally necessary to *unhook* the demands of justice, charity and reason from the bait of utopia" (201). This relates to Gus's response to living and destroying to live. In developing an ethics of sacrifice and thanksgiving Gus lays the foundations for an ongoing process of respect

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<sup>26</sup> David Suzuki observes that environmental caution has been supplanted in the media by the hope-filled rhetoric of economic reform, as if the answer to human woes is to be found in the health of the market economy. Such a position fails to take the very basis of the economy into account—the planet—even as it damages it further.

and humility (as Jonas and Lopez urge). He refuses to equate increased consumption with betterment.

Gus's associative meanderings copy the river's curious passage as thoughts eddy into story-pools. Searching for appropriate ways of dealing with issues of justice, responsibility and gratitude, Gus returns to memory and a story of loss and dignity that quickly puts his situation in a new, more demanding light. Once again, a river unfolds further answers. It is the Columbia, just before the dam at Celilo Falls blocked water and lifeways from the area.<sup>27</sup> The person who most embodied the qualities of reverence, skill and understanding for six-year-old Gus and Ma was her friend Thomas Bigeater, a Warm Springs Indian. Given that Duncan composed the novel in the early 1980s, it is not surprising to see the indigene loaded with the role of sage and guardian of the river.<sup>28</sup> There are few of such insight who have associations with the river; even now the people who can know a river with the foundation of centuries of transferred ancestral affiliation are likely to be feted if (from the white point of view) exotically indigenous, rather than a native Londoner, for example.<sup>29</sup> The combination of wistful wisdom still determines many constructions of the indigene.

Duncan does his best to upset the stereotypes by ensuring Gus admits to them ("I'd expected a loin clothed spearman, so for a time I was bored by this fat, dark man in white people's clothing" [134]). As Gus sees Thomas fish with an ancestral club and handmade net, looping the chinook on a leather thong, he too is caught by his masterful fishing. Thomas is the first person Gus has seen praying for the spirit of the fish he kills and giving thanks. Over seventy, Thomas remains nimble and swift, balancing on a thin platform near the massive thundering falls. Gus's language has the staccato rush of a child's recollection, and the short, ironic sentences Thomas King uses so effectively. This is a scene replete with other feelings and issues that float over the young boy's head: the glances Ma and Thomas exchange are full of an anger and sadness that young Gus cannot work out.

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<sup>27</sup> Gus's mother ("a rabid hater of dams") has already taken the young Gus to the brand-new Dalles dam on the Deschutes River to observe the steelhead run batter itself against the diverted spillway water because the fish could not access the poorly-designed fish ladder. "So they fought till the blasting water broke them, then drifted back down the river they'd climbed—unable to spawn, unable to return to sea. There was an island not far downstream covered with tall cottonwoods: the trees were black with vultures too stuffed with mouldering steelhead to fly" (134). Fish remain great and often thwarted figures in this novel: their dignity and stamina, as well as their cargo of attributed mythology and story give them an almost paranormal quality.

<sup>28</sup> It must be stressed that Thomas is just one of a variety of river-sages in a novel packed with more of them than almost any other book I consider. Duncan's portrayal avoids the pitfall of romanticism Lopez at times falls prey to. Carol A. Stabile observes one result of such an omission: "The recuperation of spiritual beliefs and myths from historically remote Native American cultures consequently operates at a suspicious distance from the environmental issues besetting Native Americans at this historical moment" (63). Stabile cites the high incidence of toxic waste dumping on reservations (which are often exempt from Environmental Protection Agency regulations) as one example.

<sup>29</sup> But as I note in chapter four the East London dwellers are described as a kind of displaced indigenous group.

Thomas walks over with his five fifty-pound chinook: “These are the last” he says (136). He argues that the likes of the two drunken fellow tribesmen stabbing and wounding fish below are to blame for the dam.

Ma’s face twisted. “Come on, Thomas. I’d get shitfaced too if some three-faced white bureaucrat broke treaty an’ sunk my fishin’ n’burial grounds ferever!”

Thomas shook his head. “This is not forever. Dams break. Rivers never do. Two salmon can spawn a thousand. The salmon are an old and patient people.” (136)

“So it has always been,” intones Thomas. Equally, “the old ways are never killed, never lost. They are only forgotten, sometimes” (137). To forget is to accrue bad luck. Punishment is handed down by the Spirit Father, and always has been during times of cultural amnesia. Thomas allies his belief with the river and holds faith it will never disappear.<sup>30</sup> He recounts a Nass River story that tells of an earlier transgression by one section of the tribe, the young men of the Wolf Clan. They behave badly, failing to recite prayers over their catch, killing only for the sake of killing, and torturing the fish (i.e. they behave like whites). Eventually the area is scorched by a terrible fire and many are killed. “Then it was the river of fire. Now it is the white man’s dam. These are the Spirit Father’s weapons. Always it is the same: it is the greedy, the cruel, the ungrateful that bring down suffering upon the people” (139). Gus reflects on this, surmising that “the ancient burial ground, like the converts, had to undergo baptism” (140).

Duncan, and Gus, use Thomas’s story and memory as an allegory to illuminate the present; the old fisher’s conduct is an example with which Gus compares his past work (now regarded as “a contest—Gus versus Coastal Streams”) that lacks nobility, dismissed for its lack of generosity and vision (140). But this occurs in a chapter called “The River Writes” and the river, Thomas and memory offer solutions: keep moving forwards, and keep close to the waters. The emphasis on responsibility and *continuity* is shared by Lopez, Flanagan and Abbey, Moore and Sanders. It is an understanding made somewhat popular by the mainstream advocacy (appropriation for political ends?) and coverage of environmental issues during the 1970s and 1980s. This time, share your catch. Gus is “appalled” his fishing may have caused harm on various levels; he now resolves to follow the river road and meet his neighbours (140).

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<sup>30</sup> By doing so Duncan (via Thomas) upsets the expectations of elegy Ma and the reader may carry. A similar reversal happened to Blaine Harden when he went to interview members of the Wanapum tribe whose land was swallowed by a dam that is now their closest neighbour; the reservation nestles at its base. It remained “home” as he used what remained, rather than solely lamenting what was lost (245).

Longfellow notes that the elegiac is the most common form used to represent fallen rivers. The fallen river has passed through a transition from Eliade’s definition of a “sacred” site, an “absolute reality” to a profane state of fallenness (21). The reservoir becomes “infinite” and “homogenous;” “no point of reference is possible.... no orientation can be established” beneath the uniform surface of the reservoir. Sanders’ encounter with drowned memory in his essay “After the Flood” is the clearest example if this transition. But the shift (or fall) is documented by Elizabeth Woody and Gloria Bird in the Dalles and Celilo-based fiction in *First Fish, First People: Salmon Tales of The North Pacific Rim* Eds. Judith Roche and Meg McHutchison.

The remainder of *The River Why* involves Gus in a deepening connection to people and place, the sum total of the river community, both human and wild, complete with Venator's "Natural God" above it.<sup>31</sup> After visiting shops and homes Gus realises his isolated cabin is also part of a *human* network, and that the corpse he rescued from the river was, in a sense, his self lifted beyond the limits of obsession. With "de-fished" eyes he sees and values the people and place clearly, and spruces up his cabin with gifts from his neighbours: "solitude, I found, was no guarantee of anything.... I was free. I was alone. It was hell. The confusion, the misery, the stupidity.... It came from nobody but me" (147, 148). A different level of memory and function is introduced as Gus learns of the local neighbourhood. Duncan sets up another subset of cycles and recirculations between river and community.

Gus recognises the value of communication with others. He then allows himself to feel the need for an intimate companion, and (fortuitously) makes the first meeting with the woman of his dreams, Eddy. Eddy is an exceptional person: she has a beautiful fishing technique (and is also attractive). What is more, that technique is remarkable and rare, evidence, for the fishing-raised Gus, that reveals "a way of looking at things—not just at fishing but at the whole world—and it's a way of looking that's how I've been trying to look too" (265). Her angling prowess helps Gus acknowledge "that I was in the presence of a fishing genius exceeding my own" (154). Gus ogles at Eddy for a long, heart-stirring time, feigning research, and then lumbers into the open, appearing a tongue-tied oaf who is only saved by his own sense of shame at surprising her, and his intricate knowledge of Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*, from which (after fording the river, tearing through bush and up a tree in embarrassment), he proceeds to quote: "'Some waters being drank cause madness, some drunkenness, some laughter to death....'" (160). Their meeting is shattering for Gus: a cavalcade of delight and despair. It is no surprise that he is heartsick afterwards, fearing he will never see this living vision, Eddy, again.

Sitting by the river the next day he spies an ungainly fly-fisher who hooks his own ear. The arrival of Titus Gerrard on the scene is well timed; he is Gus's primary guide in the currents and consolations of philosophy. Tweed-wearing, pipe-smoking and eloquently eccentric, Titus's meanderings take Gus closer to the heart of things. Along with Bill Bob, Thomas Bigeater, Eddy and the Tamanawis River itself, Titus is one of Gus's most important teachers. They all refer back to the river as a source of understanding and allegorical affiliation and insight. Seeing the upset lad Titus inquires: "'Trust me, Gus. You look like a dam about to burst. What happened'" (167)? So Gus does; some hours later, unburdened and be-bourboned, the two head for Portland and Titus's library.

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<sup>31</sup> As for the former, they are a lively and motley bunch, drawn in such a way as to capture the political and social diversity of the Oregon Coast: a steak-eating farming family with six kids (the mother is Emma, the dad Ernie, the youngsters Kernie, Bernie, Darlene, Charlene, Marlene and Ernie II) and the other equally caricatured rural Oregonian neighbour Satyavati, her husband Steve, an ex-surfer, hippie master-candlemaker keen on karmic peace and their (raucous, pesticide-free) young sons Rama and Arjuna.

Titus believes humanity's "immediate goal" is "Divinity" (173). He proceeds to his bookshelves: "There, he paused, as a good fisherman pauses to read water before his first cast." Hooking a stack of books, he turns: "'Well, Gus. Are you ready to fish'" (176). Thus begins a journey into the first route to enlightenment, the wisdom of others (the second pond, Titus believes, being within): Attar, Rumi, Jesus, Buddha, Lao Tzu: a creel of sayings laces the chapter (and the novel), and all flow from the metaphor of the Divine Fisher seizing the heart and mind of the seeker. Titus makes his position clear: "I'm not sane, Gus. I believe in the rivers of living water; I believe our souls swim in that water; I believe Jesus and Buddha and Krishna are the saviour in that water; I believe in the garden World and its Queen. I love the ol' Whopper [God]" (178). Titus ensures Gus takes the right channel in his journey; very quickly in their conversation he locks onto a world Gus knows and uses the power of association to suggest the paranormal. Allegory thrives again. Metonymy continues its vital role in *The River Why*, freighting rivers with the work of human faith, ensuring Gus's path will remain a riverine one:

'Fishermen should be the easiest of men to convince to commence the search for the soul, because *fishing is nothing but the pursuit of the elusive*. Fish invisible to laymen like me are visible to anglers like you by a hundred subtle signs. How can you be so sagacious and patient in seeking fish, and so hasty a hick as to write off your soul because you can't see it?'

Again his question hit me where I lived: I pictured rivers—December rivers, mist-shrouded and cold—and thigh deep in the long glides stood fishermen who'd arrived before dawn.... There they stood in the first gray light ... silent, patient, casting and casting again, retrieving nothing yet never questioning the possibility of bright steelhead hidden beneath the green slicks; numb-fingered, empty-bellied, aching-backed they stood, hatted or hooded like rabbis or monks, grumbling but vigilant, willing to pay hard penance for the mere chance of a sudden, subtle strike. What was a fisherman but an untransmuted seeker? And how much longer must be the wait, how much greater the skill, how much more infinite the patience and intense the vigilance in the search for the gift men call *the soul*? 'Titus,' I said, 'I've been walking around for years with my metaphysical dry fly stuck in my ear!'

He laughed. 'Let's get it out and go fishing!' (179)

Duncan suggests a spiritual ecology and an ecology of the spirit: all things are linked within and without. The religious quality of Gus's search has been suggested early in the novel, through his parents' lack of spiritual belief, and Gus's own attempts to trace the logic and meaning of Christianity in his journal titled the "God-Book." Through adjectival gravitas and allusion to rabbis, monks and penance, Titus and Gus ensure the Tamanawis is, increasingly, a current of spirit and water, an element that crosses worlds and ways of being: it is no longer "'stuff'" in Illich's terminology; it is not fallen, it has been resurrected. By the time Gus finishes recording his journey the river will be a carrier of dreams and the way to the soul, the transformative element that, if followed, will realise and release vision.

When Duncan links penance and the elusive, startling fish-strike, fishing has become prayer, the river a sacred site. Appropriately, the next river Gus sees is one that has been destroyed because too few people recognised its sanctity. The U. S. Grant ("U.S.G.") is a

“suburbanized creek” that afforded young Gus much pleasure (187). Now the suburb has sprawled<sup>32</sup> and Sisisicu (“little, but strong,” the creek’s first name) is damaged (187). Gus’s ecological vision is clear, and it is a personal vision, based on the experience of lost oasis of wilderness in the city. The Sisisicu is now poisoned; it has lost its essential power to sustain life:

The corpse was a big, unwieldy thing—impossible to move and too big to bury ... it’s still lying there in the suburbs of Portland—gallons and gallons of slithering liquid carrion. A creek stiff....

... ‘creek’ isn’t accurate anymore, but there isn’t a word yet for what creeks become once they die....

Even in the least frothy rapids the creek foamed at the mouth, dull yellow-brown bubbles coating everything they touched with a rabid scum. I put my hand in—and gloved it with a tepid, oily film that smelled like a hot street.

Whoever made the laws protecting these backyards from intruders made no laws to protect Sisisicu from poison, filth and sewer. They weren’t my laws. (187-8)

As in Lopez’s “Drought,” the creek is anthropomorphised into an entity with which the reader can identify. Gus’s search for the source follows underground pipes, gutters and pavement until it concludes at a bank building; there the water runs off the bell tower and gathers with other trickles to form the creek.<sup>33</sup> “Here was the uttermost source of the waters that had been Sisisicu: an imitation Liberty Bell on top of a mock Independence Hall” (190). The source is a sham, a copy; it is without soul or redemption and emblematic of the emptiness of many urban monuments, a lack that Duncan (and Illich) perceive as harmful to the human spirit. Duncan’s additional comments on the ecological impact of human endeavour<sup>34</sup> integrate Gus’s will with the natural world, and demonstrate the consequences of utopian ideology. The inclination towards responsibility grows in Gus as he sees the truth of Hans Jonas’s observation: “mere subsistence will push the limits of global tolerance long before utopia can show its face” (Jonas 189). Gus’s reaction is double-edged: he catches the creek’s last trout from a pocket of clean water, freeing it into the Willamette River. He ensures its survival, but in his own mind he has “killed” the creek because it is now without obvious life (186).

Book Three concludes with Gus freeing the fish (“feeling I’d never done a better morning’s fishing”) and facing the future alone: “here before me were the swirling greens and

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<sup>32</sup> “These suburbs, just a century ago, were a wetland—a wide interlacing of ponds, creeks, sloughs, bogs and meadows providing homes for more mink, muskrat, beaver, ducks, deer and herons than you’d find in all the Willamette Valley now. But gradually it had been subdivided, drained, filled, imprisoned in pipes, buried alive” (186).

<sup>33</sup> The water in the gutter has fallen in Gus’s estimation because its wildness and purity have been stolen. This is a culturally produced response: not every culture would see a flowing sidewalk stream as fallen. The Penan of Sarawak, for instance, would call it a river in its own right (Hood). The aesthetic varies from culture to culture. But the commercial and technological drive embedded within most societies’ relation to nature means ecosystem loss is occurring at such a rate that the mode of elegy is both commonplace and (to a mind swept up by and perhaps lamenting change) often appropriate. Survival is never easy.

<sup>34</sup> And the hollow gesture towards liberty. What, after all, has been freed, one may ask.

grays of a wide, unresting river, and beyond the river a wide and ancient and unknown world that I must now enter.... the last trout had no choice. And it, too, was a timid, creek-bred suburbanite" (198). Layers of figurative association in *The River Why* reinforce the characters' connection with the outside world. By contrasting the wild with the "buried" natural vitality of the city, Book Three consolidates Duncan's assertion that the wilderness has its own presence: nature has the potential to teach those who are willing to learn, and the defiled river teaches us about ourselves. (This is a maxim Flanagan, Cormac McCarthy, Iain Sinclair, Kim Stafford and Scott Russell Sanders also bear out.) At the end of Book Three, Gus realises he has "no choice" but to leap into the unknown rivered world before him (198). It is a move that takes him further into his soul and the soul of the river.

### **Casting and Questing: River as Teacher**

Lopez, Flanagan and Duncan emphasize the river as a site of tutelage. This stance has its European origins, according to Wyman Herendeen, in the analysis of "two streams of knowledge: the one divinity, descending from Moses and the Jordan, and the other philosophy, rising from Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca, and the Greco-Roman Alpheus" (Herendeen "Rhetoric" 117). Herendeen quotes Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*: "The knowledge of man is as the waters, some descending from above, and some springing from beneath; the one informed by the light of nature, the other inspired by divine revelation" (117). Duncan's project amounts to the fusion of divinity, philosophy and nature. In balancing these three aspects in the characters of Titus, Thomas, Bill Bob, Eddy and Gus (not to mention handling a Euro-Asian-Arabic philosophical and theological mixture not dissimilar from Kinseth's), Duncan seeks to temper the techno-utopian drive Bacon vaunted in *New Atlantis*.<sup>35</sup> As Gus's spiritual self develops he attunes to the damage humans can do by attempting the (im)possible.

Duncan counters Descartes' "infinity of devices" (and any progressivist tendencies in the religious realm) with a dose of implicitly honest-to-goodness nature-based transcendentalist and romantic neo-paganism (35). Tanya M. Luhrmann "suspect[s] that one of the motivations for a spiritual involvement in nature is the therapeutic power of that complex, rich imagery, and that this experience reinforces the commitment to environmental protection" (223). She describes Gus well. The retreat or return to nature also alters the range of ethical consideration. A fairly independent and self-sufficient existence limits the confrontation with the gap between Western ethics, the consequences of technology and utopian-thought (Jonas). One can opt out of consumerism and attempt to "make amends."

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<sup>35</sup> The leader of this place of bounty ("We have" is his most common utterance), says "' The end of our Foundation is the knowledge of Causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible" (71).

Such an attempt is intellectually based in the Transcendentalism of the late-nineteenth century. *The River Why* records a transition between this intellectual movement, and the syncretic “environmental paganism” and increasingly direct and confrontational activism that has marked the environmental protests since the late 1970s (some of which are inspired by Edward Abbey’s 1975 novel *The Monkeywrench Gang* [Taylor 99]). Gus is almost the raw material for the Earth First! disciple of the 1980s and 1990s, a kind of watered-down Abbey, a member of the radical centre. (As indeed Jeremiah Ransom becomes in Duncan’s “Not Rocking the Boats,” which I discuss in chapter three.) Bron Taylor’s useful definition of environmental paganism offers a portrait of some (non-Christian) aspects of Gus’s epistemology:

Environmental paganism is an umbrella term for diverse spiritualities that, when combined with ecological understanding, lead to environmental activism. The spiritual tributaries contributing to environmental paganism include those traditionally labeled pantheism or animism (including shamanistic beliefs and experiences of interspecies communication) and the holistic religions of the Far East, which tend to view the world as metaphysically interconnected and sacred....

[W]ithout belaboring a point well made elsewhere it is important to the present interpretive task to remember that American religious nationalism holds a dominant conception of American sacred space as expressing a vision of America as a utopian space, which provides both a model for and a means to achieve God’s purposes on earth. Such a world view is naturally hostile to any competing world view that either denies the premise that America constitutes sacred space or locates America’s sacrality in the landscape itself rather than in the U.S. nation-state. (99)

Duncan’s novel attempts to appease both conservative and conservationist camps and (by doing so) to affirm both stances. Stepping back from technology—turning to the “ancient world”—offers Gus the chance to develop a spiritual—and Romantic—ethic and appreciate what he already has (198). In the pre-Sports Utility Vehicle days of the novel’s setting (or indeed its composition) Gus can happily muse on the low population of the beautiful river valley. In the following passage he justifies his sense of peace and non-violence by deferring, once again, to the Almighty Fisher:

I figured God kept jamming them in there [Portland’s “tract-houses and condos jammed along U.S.G.’s corpse”] because He refused to turn them loose on the Tamanawises of the World until they learned a way of living that wouldn’t turn Tamanawises into U.S.G.’s. It was nice to find myself approving of God’s behavior for a change. (201)

This argument rather collapses in the face of holiday-crowds and rising environmental damage.<sup>36</sup> Or does it? Perhaps this stance rejects the teleology of progress and human control by surrendering to the Divine. But it is also true that he rejects violence and environmental activism that could cause violence. Although he has all the ingredients for activism he chooses self-

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<sup>36</sup> This eco-apocalyptic judgment fails to take account of the commercial pull of cities (it takes capital to opt out and downsize to a riverside cabin) and the possibility their concentration contains some of the environmental damage. That said, city demand felled the trees near Gus’s cabin, and drives the resource extraction elsewhere.



development as the first objective. Gus's ways of helping and protesting are the stealthy ones of the angler. Yet Gus still exercises the power of choice and independence when he refuses to participate in technological bingeing: he retreats to his cabin in the first place, and in the second he ensures the world does not follow him. This retreat does little to prevent the logging across from his cabin. But Duncan's account of what the following months do to Gus's sense of belonging in the world create and record a kind of *eco-ahimsa* or green-Buddhist/Christian activism. It seems this Gus of the 1960s only needs love to help him cross the many rivers homeward. Spirituality and ecology lead to novel-writing as well as tree-spiking. Duncan looks on his work as a form of activism and awareness-raising.

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The ideal, Duncan suggests, is found by a river at some remove from the intoxicated "cars and burbs" (191). But that blissful state is unrealistic for all people: the very appeal of his cabin for him (and the reader) is its difference and distance from the urban norm, its increasingly unattainable quality. The ethics and actions of the questers of the 1960s have led to inflated cabin prices in the 1990s: soul-fishing is hip! But even in 1974-5 when the action of the book occurs, Gus is intent on preserving his idyllic calm: he regards technology and resource use as out of control. This is not a techno-utopia, but a back-to-nature choice for one who can afford it.

Gus deliberately eschews the kind of hectic lifestyle his skills could bring him (and turns crowds from the river valley) by misleading a major fishing reporter he meets soon after he returns to his cabin to soul-fish. He rejects the prospect of a string of imagined commercial adventures (an "infinity of devices" indeed), which start with a boost in income, move on to "Cutthroat Gus's Riverside Fishing Schools" and spiral into lustful "I could ..." visions that pour on for a page, and culminate in his own *intergalactic* angling program: "I could spread my name, face, rods and flies all through the fish-infested heavens, and every resource and river, every hidden treasure and tree, every huge fish and alien queen and natural and unnatural wonder would spread itself before me" (214). In other words, this is imperialism with a rod and fly, and trusty Gus will not have a bar of it. The nature of his deception—the promotion of dry-angling, namely the practice of fishing in the desert, rather than diminishing fish-stocks on the rivers—is a sublime piece of conservationist trickery and pseudo-indigenous farce.

Gus takes on the persona Antoine Chapeau, ex salon-manager of Palm Springs, and ersatz shaman of the "Dry Fishing" method:

'After a day spent casting hookless flies into mirage creeks among the arid dunes, one begins to sense an order of things imperceptible to those whose minds are unaffected by extreme heat and dehydration. You see, Dutch [the reporter], fish live in water. If one understands water one understands fish. And it is by craving water that one comes to understand it. Hence, to learn to fish, go to the desert and stay there. When the seizures and hallucinations start, you'll be amazed at what you'll learn!' (215)

Gus's deterrent is backed up by action: he turfs a brash businessman from his cabin (a man obsessed with ownership) and begins to settle down to fulfilling word-of-mouth tackle orders. A tale of faith and fortitude from Nick, his new assistant, inspires "The Trek," a sojourn upriver to the source of the Tamanawis; "cold deeps had warmed and shallowed" and Gus is determined to "catch" the insights flitting within. In the last third of the novel Duncan develops his most detailed and explicit representation of the river as teacher. When Gus begins his journey towards "the dark water inside me" he does so by the river (239).

Although Gus acknowledges the sacred nature of the river, his (unplanned) journey to its source (a correlative search for his own soul), is initially contrived because he *demand*s and expects enlightenment and a kind of authenticity: "The source of the Tamanawis. No banks or mock Liberty Bells this time" (237). He sets out to fish his "inner waters" and does so on an impulse that could be called ecological because of its emphasis on interrelation and natural symbolism. All Gus's key inspirations "had been given as gifts—like rain, like rivers—unlooked for, unasked for: I had to follow the signs I was given, as rivers follow valleys.... water's ways, meandering and free flowing, had always been my love" (235). This intention opens the series of associative meanderings that lead him to the source of the river. The narrative continues to whirl in its inclusion of transpersonal stories.

The walk is contemplative, marked by the nature-inspired neo-pagan or green-Christian sense that "an oldest, greatest, longest-lost Friend had come to walk the road, unseen beside me" (235). The other constant in Gus's walk is "the changing speech of the Tamanawis" (234). Its connective power across space and symbol inspires a sequence of associations for Gus: the scarlet of the autumn leaves and salmon's flank, the blood-red cedar wood and his own red hand: "I could almost see the blood, streaming like groundwater under the pale earth of my flesh" (237). Gus, the walking river, walks on besides another. He is acutely aware of the power and fragility of the forest he has entered, the cedars that might vanish ("Three-hundred years to grow, three minutes to be felled" [238]), and the Native American villages of the region that have disappeared. Native American initiation quests are described, lending another 'authentic' dimension to Gus's journey, fostering a sense of association, and even affiliation in him, one who means no harm (240). Is this the Grey Owl School of shamanism crossed with early scouting ritual? Is Gus a reincarnation of imposter Archibald Belaney (the Englishman who posed as a native, 'Grey Owl,' in Canada, and was incidentally crucial in preventing the extinction of the beaver), topped up with a dash of Iron John neo-mythology and dilute "muscular" Christianity (Phillips 597)? In a sense his quest helps to *divest* him of the stereotypical quest, to come to his own meaningful realisation that ennobles without appropriation. Gus sees many animals on his journey, and they allow him nearby. They reinforce his sense that this is a world inhabited by creatures with a history beyond

human ken. An owl joins his evening firelight just as a raven follows his journey home: intimations of guardian spirit-animals? The suggestion is made by Duncan (as he recounts the tale of a Tillamook Indian initiation quest), but Gus is too humorous and hungry to wait for visions: “I was two hundred years late and the wrong color” (245). He spots a group of ravens “trying to look portentous and mythical but coming off kind of scruffy-headed and up to no good” (242). Mythical innuendo is deflated in order to set up a more genuine and culturally specific revelation.

He finally arrives at the source of the river, a small “old, clean and untiring” spring in a grove “like a vast lodge,” the light filtered by trees “as if through stained glass” (243). The religious echoes are obvious to him, but his pragmatism wins out: “I wasn’t sure I’d know a spirit-helper if one bit me on the nose” but he knows he is essentially a fisherman. “I had hidden laminations and substrata and sinkholes of fisherman in me I hadn’t even begun to tap.” What is more, “[i]t’s a damned tough business sitting around trying to force yourself to force God to forcefeed you a revelation or vision or spiritual assistant or something.” His understanding of the Tillamook saying “the source is everywhere” leads not to a desired spiritual insight, but to a very important ecological one (laced with Gus’s usual offhand practical humour):

the real Tamanawis was the *entire* Tamanawis, and the source of *that* river was rain, groundwater, dew, snowmelt, fog, mist, animal piss, no-name trickles, podunk swamps, hidden springs, and the source of all these sources was the clouds, and the source of clouds was the sea, so the river running past my cabin literally did have its source ‘everywhere,’ at least every where that water has ever visited—which includes all the Space and Time in the world.... (246-7)

Though Gus considers his spiritual enlightenment complete (he is happy to settle for this rational insight), anyone familiar with theology and the hydrologic cycle could surmise the Divine is at hand (Tuan). Duncan segues into a retelling of an Asian Indian myth, continuing the braiding of tributary stories that redefine and highlight Gus’s development. He trudges home, beyond physical limits. Exhaustion creates a synaesthesia of perception, his senses fusing with the raven’s above, the use of simile suggesting a kind of riverine consciousness: “You just wash down the road like a dead leaf washing down a river” becomes “You wash down this path like water winding down a river” (250). The unity is understood as an ontological *and* ecological entity. Duncan affirms the range of “agreements” (Maracle 162; Lopez, *River Notes* 121) that make a river, and (with Flanagan) the para-lingual nature of such connection: “the infinity of facets [the river] welds into one ... is not accessible to our inspection or understanding; not at the mind’s disposal, nor at the tongue’s” but Duncan argues the raven allowed “you” to see the river in its “pure, primordial” state, to see its immanence before words (251).

Language gets the short straw. Abram would argue that Gus’s fatigue was such that his linguistic perceptual “membrane” dissolved and he flew into the eye of the raven (Abram 256). Still, Gus finds a quiet peace and eases off fishing. Instead, he practises seeing. When Eddy—“the hook, line and sinker of my dreams”—visits Gus’s cabin we are prepared for a simple denouement: the new Eden, a beautiful couple, and a wild river.

Surely Gus's raven-inspired vision and his river-wise lover are enough? But Duncan lands God's hook in Gus before the book is out, supplanting any restraint in his faith. By "playing the chinook" at Eddy's suggestion, allowing (for once in thousands of catches) to let a great fish lead *him*, Gus opens to a sense of the spiritual grace of the river and its watershed dwellers. His light fishing line will break if he tries to control the fifty-pound salmon that is wending its way upriver to spawn. So he follows it all night, obeying the "regal pace" of the chinook (273). He sees "the red groundwater flowing under the pale skin" and the associations of divine fishing alight in his mind (271). Duncan lends the passage a centred tone through his steady descriptions: the jagged discomfort of Gus's previous trip is gone from the language and form of the scene. Sentences are longer and the tone is more consistent than his earlier trek.

An owl appears, "swimming breaststroke through the air" and the river is everywhere again; the love Gus feels with Eddy and the river "overflowed" any emptiness: "love *could* sustain the frailest of lines" (274). The passage records a fusion of Zen notions, Romanticism and angling, along with a sense of the trust innate in the natural world and its rhythms that dissolve the fishing certainties Gus has adhered to:

It had always been my way to approach the river like a wanded magician out to work deception. But this night, thanks to Eddy, thanks to love, I came as a blind man led by seeing-eye salmon—and it showed me a world I believed was destroyed, a world where a man could still walk unfeared among the animals and birds he calls 'wild.' (275)

Gus goes as far as calling the "hunter / quarry paradigm" a "betrayal" because it breaks the trust the animals show Gus on this night. He feels he is "returning to some forgotten, ancient home. The river shimmered and glowed and shattered the moon, flowing from east to west like the horizontal bar of a cross; the line, too, shone pale in the light, reaching vertically from sky to water" (275). Gus walks this crucifix-like space, linking stars and water together, joining heaven and earth. Gus is "overwhelmed" by this and by the trust the chinook shares; the fish begins to appear exemplary: the river and its inhabitants are now superb teachers, not quarry alone. "She swam fearlessly, though she swam towards her death" (275, 276). When the time comes to free the fish, she lets Gus touch her; he enters the river, and submerges himself to get close enough to free the hook. This is the great redemptive act of the book; it is the first time Gus has been beholden to the life of the fish and the river, staying with that life, barely disrupting it. By sharing her journey he comes to another place in the exterior and interior riverscape (Lopez, "Landscape and Narrative"). As he walks along the River Road the cruciform appears again: the road runs "east to west like the horizontal bar of a cross.... a raven called" (277). He feels "a sharp pain in my heart, like a hook being set" and sees a line "like a beam of watery light" from his head to the heavens:

I felt the hand, resting like sunlight on my head. And I knew that the line of light led not to a realm but to a Being, and that the light and the hook were his, and that they were made of love alone. My heart was pierced. I began to weep. I felt the Ancient One drawing me toward him, coaxing me out of this autumn landscape, beckoning me on toward undying joy.

.... from this point in my soul, there was no escape, and nowhere to go. (278)

The river is one manifestation of the divine, and Gus finally understands this, ecologically and spiritually. The ecological “web” Lopez (and Kinseth) addressed extends to the theological. The reference to a crucifix and a male deity implies a green-Christianity, but Duncan does not declare his stance; to do so would banish the syncretic religious concoction he has been shaping through the book. But to have the ultimate “hook” associated with eternal life, a male deity and a crucifix is very suggestive of the Christian base of his ecological recirculation between self, spirit and river.

Duncan opens Book Five with his usual multi-cultural feast of inspirational writing, proving that the Divine takes on many forms and names. Meister Eckhart: “whatever he does, who is caught by this hook, love does it, and love alone” (279). With this passage (which the book has been leading to all along) and the hook in Gus’s heart, the man is redeemed, taken back into God’s light, restored by kinship with the natural world.

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An eco-redemption places Gus and Eddy back by a wild river that is almost Edenic, bar the fact that the trout are still caught; killing continues, because “it is sacrifice—sweet bleeding sacrifice—that sustains you” (282). Wait! Where is the crucifix now? The syllogism is once again a tight one: it must be when the loving pair are fishers to the bone and spirit. This will not satisfy all readers, but those against fish-killing have had many reasons to stop before the final chapter. Nor will many be pleased to read of “the trash fish of the human race” but a hierarchy appeals to the discerning fisherman, even one who fishes with love; doing so bumps one up the hierarchy: “river-armed and ocean-handed, He tends His lines with infinite patience, gracious to those who love him, a mirage to those who don’t” (280). Are we entering a neo-Mormon piscatorial cult? Are David James Duncan and Lance Kinseth its head disciples? “It all rides on how you look at things. And how you look at things depends on how His line leads to your look” (290). The Tamanawis has proved an exacting teacher. It offers redemption through its very existence, but this is a nigh-invisible path. The blind will remain trash; the river does not care. But open to the light and the creel bulges with the saved; the caught are the ones who mind. Once redeemed, a little sacrifice is par for the course—the course of the rivered-Christian. For the hook has the measure of the globe in its curve, and many have been told to take the bait. Thus the cabin stands. Dare you follow the river?

Bare your soul and enter the sweeping current: the line, Duncan suggests, is always there. We just need to open our eyes and let the hook set. Then it is just as he says: there are no choices. He has you, and you will see no other, led on the teleology of revelation to still, deep waters upriver.

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In the next section we turn to a river guide whose very memory is constituted by the recirculating flow of Tasmania's Franklin River. In *Death of A River Guide* Aljaz Cosini gains his enlightenment through the process of remembrance and death: stories outlive the body, and reproduce themselves in and through the flesh of others. Recirculation continues: Aljaz's river is filled with the past: memory saturates the river and the stories spiral "ever outwards" (326). The transcendent impulse that has run through Lopez and Duncan continues in the revised Franklin, Tasmania's river of memory that asks its own questions and bears its own stories.

## *Death of A River Guide: Memories, drowning.*

Stories, stories, stories. A world and a land and even a river full of the damn slippery things.

Aljaz Cosini, *River Guide* (94).

*Death of A River Guide* (1994) is a riverine narrative. There are several linked levels of event in Richard Flanagan's first novel. The most linear and contemporary strand of story occurs on Tasmania's Franklin River. Our river guide, Aljaz Cosini, was contracted to lead a party on a twelve-day raft trip. Aljaz recalls this journey up until day five: on that day he is wedged underwater. We meet him in this fatal position as the book opens. The entire book is a concentration of memory, story and vision, a braided river of events that are funneled through the mind of the drowning man. Aljaz, pinioned by "this tide of the past," must bear witness to visions of his own life and the lives of his ancestors (264). Their stories have made him who he is: they have led him to the river where so many elements combine. Aljaz calls himself "a full stop at the end of the river" (284). He has a sense of inevitability about the way things have worked out.<sup>37</sup> His life and death are the culmination of a whole sequence of stories and agonies: the "memory of loss" that haunted his Australian Aboriginal, Slovenian immigrant, and British convict forebears, is realised as he dies (258). Flanagan is concerned with the run-off we call memory, its relation with oral tradition and the way these fluid expressions travel through the land and lives of his imagined world.<sup>38</sup> There are many kinds of rivers in his book, many levels of figuration, allegory and symbol. There are visions of joy, family and community, a network of memories that find a home in the fusion of thousands of rivulets: Southwest Tasmania's Franklin River.

Flanagan champions the river, chronicling its wild fecund diversity, the human abuses it has endured and the way the river escaped "damnation" only to be compromised or composed through contemporary constructions of 'Nature,' by eco-tourism that commodifies and monumentalises a force Flanagan can only begin to describe. As in *Kinseith*, words are not enough. And as with *Abbey*, *King* or *Duncan*, the Franklin River endures and continues while the 'nation' is castigated. Words may not be enough, but they will have to do. They have their own memory-enriched power.

Pinioned under the water (which is troped as a conduit for memories and the river), the guide Aljaz's "vague thoughts are spreading out like the jetsam that washes past my wet flesh" (110). At the watershed's focal point (a large waterfall), Aljaz is "humiliated by memory" (79).

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<sup>37</sup> A life which has not always been happy, but always eventful: "Maybe I was always drowning" (13).

<sup>38</sup> One character, Reg Ho, "confessed that the greatest attribute a person on the west coast [of Tasmania] could have was to bullshit even more than the bloke next to him" (198).

He has cause to be “none too happy” with what “this river is showing me” (81). This river is a tough teacher, because memories of pain are harsh. “And I am not pleased about that, about the way the river is shoving my mind and heart about, pushing my body, forcing open parts that I thought closed forever” (79). The Franklin is a river of truths that have remained silent until the moments of death, moments Aljaz spends absorbing tributaries of memory, on a “capricious river of visions” (169).

That Aljaz can, in the seconds of his dying, see these visions across centuries, is testament to his complete surrender to “the deep oneiric power of deformation ... that rich viscous imagination which will from time to time bestow the great gift of divine slowness upon our briefest glance” (Bachelard, “The Hand Dreams” 104). In many ways Flanagan’s novel is a remarkable expression of the reverie and interiority which, Bachelard argues, runs through our waking, sleeping and dreaming lives, its course sweeping us into our source-fed destiny. Flanagan’s river is a place of “stories, a world where past, present and future seemed to collide and exist together” (230). The novel uses its form and the river to move toward a story-honed clarity, a level of intuition Bachelard would delight in: “The eye itself, pure vision, grows weary of solids. Its great wish is to dream deformation. If when we look upon the world we could do so with all the freedom of our dreams, then everything would be fluid in an intuition that was truly alive” (Bachelard “The Hand Dreams” 103-4). *Death of A River Guide* is a compendium of viscous visions.

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Flanagan’s Franklin River is, above all, a river of story and memory. These processes can encompass and emulate the fecund variety of the riverine environment; Flanagan suggests we cannot conceptualise the scale of the watershed unless we drench it (and ourselves) in the stories it holds. It then enters another productive realm, for in *Death of A River Guide* the stories and visions refuse to be contained by chronology or reason: we leap across centuries, we hear drunken marsupials regale Aljaz with stories, and we watch the moments of his dying telescope beyond death and time in a process of saturation in memory and water.<sup>39</sup> Aljaz’s Franklin is an anti-Lethe, an Aussie Mnemosyne riffled with the run-off of a dozen lives. These lives coalesce in the turbulent, associative and generous dis-integration that is Aljaz’s remembrance, and his death.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> This telescoping of an instant is evident in Ambrose Bierce’s story “An Incident at Owl Creek Bridge” in which a soldier’s memory telescopes through the instant of his hanging (an event we learn about at the end of the story).

<sup>40</sup> His death is indeed a transformative process, one foreshadowed by a nightmare he used to have: “Sometimes in my sleep I see a terrible flower of death: its stamen stone, its petals water foam variegated with blood, one man disappearing into the foam, another, a different man, arising from the foam. And that different man is me” (274). This passage heads a scene where the rather unfavourably drawn punter Derek is killed in a waterfall accident while portaging gear.



Flanagan's novel is significant for other (related) reasons: its passionate regional focus (the book revels in Tasmania's distinctive, flora, fauna and vernacular; Flanagan suggests these ecologies and networks are threatened by global capitalism); its wry take on eco-tourism and the healing power of the 'Nature' quest; and its insistence on the shaping power of memory upon the generations (and the nation) downstream, in the past-shaped future.

### **Sydney or the bush: the manufacture of wilderness**

In the late 1980s Tasmania became a focal point for political change. In May 1989 the Green Party won five of thirty-five seats in the Tasmanian Parliament and signed an Accord with the Labor Party; Green/Labor gained control over the former Liberal government. The Tasmanian Greens had rallied round a number of issues: in the 1970s they had fought to prevent Tasmania's Lake Pedder from being engulfed by a reservoir. They failed and the dam was built. But the 1980s told a different story, largely because of the hard work of the 1970s: massive struggles to save the Franklin River in Southwest Tasmania culminated in its protection and the eventual election of a series of Green politicians. They were heady times and world attention focused on Green activism downunder. As the rumblings of political chance continued into 1990, Flanagan wrote that "realism ... is often inadequate in its description of reality." Tasmania is "magical" and it was changing (Pybus and Flanagan 210). Some of that magic resided in the bush and in stories: it seems right then, that *Death of A River Guide* reveres magic, story and wilderness.

Flanagan (like Duncan and Lopez) often posits wilderness as a space beyond definition or conceptual reduction.<sup>41</sup> Out there on the river and in amongst the dense rainforest the essentials of life are rather nasty. The city-based clients (called "punters" by the guides) who have signed on for the rafting trip want the land to be kind, healing and simply majestic, but Aljaz and his fellow guides know there is nothing simple about the wild: it is downright scary, but scary for Aljaz in a useful way: "Upon the ditch he can meet his fears, name them — Nasty Notch, the great Ravine, the Churn, Thunderush, the Cauldron, the Pig Trough — and having met them, bid goodbye to them all. Without the trip his thoughts are beyond his control, and wander towards a divide he can never see, the presence of which chills him to the bone" (26). Aljaz fears an interior wilderness.

Here is Aljaz speaking with the lucidity of his near-death vision, taking stock as he sets out on his journey towards the river-mouth, towards death:

I watch as this Aljaz slowly looks up from the river at the bush that forms around its banks and I watch him smile. I know what he is thinking at this precise moment: he is happy to be back at last upon the river, back upon the lousy leech-ridden ditch. Around him, the myrtles and sassafras and native laurels and leatherwoods mass in walls of seemingly impenetrable rainforest, and in front of

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<sup>41</sup> Cassandra Pybus defined the stance in 1990: "Continued opposition to hydro-electric development in the south-west is about the flooding of natural rivers and valleys, irrespective of scenic or recreational worth.... Put simply, Tasmanian Green activists defend the wilderness because it is there, because it has survived relatively undisturbed for millennia and because they believe it has a right to exist without destructive human intervention" (63-4).

him flows the tea-coloured water of the river, daily bronzing and gilding the river rock a little further.

I know he is smiling at the punters, who, despite their protestations to the contrary, despite their assertions that this is the most beautiful country, are already feeling a growing unease with this weird alien environment that seems so alike yet so dissimilar to the wilderness calendars that adorn their lounge-rooms and their offices. It smells strongly of an acrid, fecund earth, and its temperate humidity weighs upon them like a straitjacket of the senses. Wherever they turn there is no escape: always more rainforest, and more of it irreducible to a camera shot. No plasterboard walls or coffee tables are to be found to act as borders, to reduce this land to its rightful role of decoration. Not that they don't try, and almost always at the start of a trip there is at least one customer who shoots off a roll or two of film in nervous excitement. But for Aljaz, this place that they feel to be moving behind them, causing them to sometimes give an anxious look over their shoulder, for Aljaz this place is home. (20-21)

This is a serious analytical and politicised passage, but it has its wry humour too, not the least Flanagan's poaching of the comment by the Tasmanian Premier (the anti-Green Robin Gray who was deposed in 1989), during protests against a proposed dam; Gray said the Franklin River was "a ditch, leech-ridden, unattractive to the majority of people" (Pybus and Flanagan 63). Flanagan's description begins in the tangle of rainforest; at various points in the novel this abundance is contrasted with the manufactured order of the city. This "fecund" watershed literally overflows and blossoms beyond any boundaries we care to construct. It is a place where death seems to lack the finality of loss in the human world. In the bush, succession creates "mass" rather than grief; the river simply continues onwards.

The river is a site of *continuity*; events unfold and produce more of everything. Such plenitude is important to Aljaz, who begins his river trip carrying a heavy load of unresolved grief over the death of his young daughter Jemma (an event which forced his separation from Jemma's mother Couta Ho) and his father's death. Marked by a sense of guilt and failure, Aljaz enjoys the supreme indifference of the rivers and the rainforest: "They have no more opinion of him than of a fallen stick or an entire river. He feels naked, without need, without desire" (19). Their majestic disdain absolves him of responsibility to the present or his past. Once he surrenders to the river and its visions, those desires, evoked through story, become a glue between people and place. His visions grant him this awareness; they also grant him the uneasy truth of hindsight. He looks back on his river-rat work as an exercise in cynicism and love—love for the river he is at "home" in, and a disillusionment with his ability as a guide and the sensitivity of the punters.

With his experience at "reading" the current while rafting, Aljaz is confident on a physical level. He has established a connection with the river. He knows its "language" (297). Yet he ignores that language and sends the party into Deception Gorge after heavy rain. This decision will indirectly lead to a punter's death, and his own. Flanagan implies a loss of humility; the inability to treat the river with care is not only a lapse in judgement: it is a lapse in morality. For the rest of his trip he is consistently guilty about his failure to heed the forces of nature that control him. "Aljaz wonders was one day camped on the bank enough respect? It was his fault. It was

he who had failed to ... read the swirls in the river properly," the river's warnings: eddies, boils and mid-stream pockets. "They had all tried to warn Aljaz and he, who knew their language, had ignored them" (297).

The punters see the guides as authorities ("it frightened Aljaz, this blind belief, like it always frightened him" [32]). Aljaz lives up to this role even when he feels otherwise: he lifts great barrels of gear without a grimace, despite being out of shape and in pain; he fraudulently misnames trees using words gleaned from his last visit to the garden centre; he wears carabiners simply to look important, and he offers plenty of false sincerity to keep clients happy. Even his *ad hoc* meal of corned beef stew takes on a supposedly Brazilian origin: silverside is transformed into "Ekala" and fear into bravado (24, 33, 22, 19). "It is all part of the joke" (22).

This "joke" is the guides' unspoken distance from the city-punters and perhaps from parts of life itself; there is a degree of self-protection and care in this "act" that is "at once a denial and a celebration." The guides affect light-hearted personas and encourage a little self-initiative on the part of the punters; they hope (often, of course, in vain) their clients are not perpetually useless (37). Over pre-trip beers the two guides compare theory:

Jokes are what separate them from us and all their shit about being in harmony with the wilderness. Jokes destroyed all their systems for understanding, for knowing this land, and made it once more strange and unknowable, irreducible to human ideas. Jokes, Aljaz further thought, are all we have to dissolve the lies that come between us and the earth we walk upon. 'They're all jokes,' said the Cockroach, 'every fucking river I've ever fucking rafted.'

They drank another two beers in silence. But the Cockroach knew what Aljaz failed to see about himself: that for Aljaz the joke wasn't funny any more. The art of being a good river guide was looking after your customers while remaining indifferent to them. Sometimes, though loath to admit it, the Cockroach even ended up liking some of his punters. But Aljaz seemed to hate them, and that made the Cockroach uneasy. Most of all he seemed to hate himself. (130)

The city-punters are taken in by the joke. They need to be: the wilderness scares them even as it reassures Aljaz; the indifferent river weakens rational forces and evokes the unknown: this is not the soothing aesthetic of Lopez or Duncan. The Franklin heals at a terrible price.

Flanagan's commentary on image- (and identity-) disruption is telling. A credo against the social manipulation of nature, it challenges conceptual limitation; this is one way to a sense of home, beyond "decoration." Yet Aljaz is disillusioned by his experience as a guide; he encounters groups who fail to comprehend the magnitude of the river, who do not want their sense of security to disintegrate.<sup>42</sup> The Franklin will make its own path: humans simply submit to its demands

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<sup>42</sup> Previous trips are not so bad: "sometimes it was warm, with the river running high, though not too high, with big rapids not too big, the customers decent, and the nights long and full of talk" (107). Aljaz has simply lost his faith the further he runs from his past: "Everyone knew how much I disliked raft guiding.... I didn't say that I had once loved it" (98).

When Aljaz returns to the Franklin after a long and despairing absence, he faces a time of reckoning with his past. He is angry and feels empty and useless. Unease clouds his view of the current group; it determines his attitude from the start of the trip, and in a sense allies him with the river and against the people he is guiding. The river is fearsome. It takes time to handle and to know; only Aljaz has the experience. He is open to the river, happy to be swallowed by it in every sense. Late in the book he steers the raft through a violent rapid, losing control of the steering and almost flipping the crew. Ecstatic, he experiences something of “the old excitement” for the river and the process of guiding:

the feeling of being one with the rapid’s power and the gorge’s passion, the feeling of being and living.... Aljaz’s body feels as if it has exploded into the gorge. He feels every slap of water and bead of rain as a caress, feels the warmth blowing down from the rainforest on the back of his neck and the cold rising from the river as a massage of the senses, sees every detail of the gorge as if it has all come into focus from a previous blur, sees every hue of every colour, sees every droplet of the mist rising from the waterfall, distinguishes every sound of the rapid and the boat. He feels as if he is the rainforest and the river and the rapid. It is as though time has stopped and he has been given infinity with which to explore and know every aspect, every detail of this wondrous moment. The punters do not move.... In the face of their terror he feels the remnants of his excitement ebb away. (299-300)

Flanagan takes care to spell out the detail of this epiphany, to extend the reader’s knowledge into the surrounding environment, tracing the flowering of Aljaz’s perception. The language is fulsome; the description moves outwards from the immediacy of the water’s “caress” to the enveloping sound of the rapid, placing his consciousness at the centre of a rippling circle of awareness. “There are circles within circles” as Flanagan points out (Interview). For a “moment” Aljaz is lifted from his state of gloom. But Flanagan quickly deflates such euphoria; the river may have taken Aljaz to a peak of perceptual ecstasy, but it has led the crew in an opposite direction. They have seen one paddler die in the river; they simply wish to escape Deception Gorge alive. Flanagan uses the experience of the guide and the terror of the punters to present readers with two ways of knowing a place. The “punters” are innocent of the stories of the river and its subtle clues for management. Aljaz, on the other hand, has a detailed knowledge of the river.

In his regard for the ecological and cultural networks of the watershed, Aljaz demonstrates the long-range view Jonas identifies as a vital component of the imperative of responsibility. The visions that are forced upon Aljaz demand he shift his focus: this is a story about the consequences of human action on the emotional and ecological landscapes of its characters, be they humans, rivers or forests.<sup>43</sup> It is an ecological novel in the sense that these aspects of the environment are not seen as discrete; the actions in one realm consistently impact upon the others. Any enforced attempt at division is soon checked by the stories that remind Aljaz and others of the

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<sup>43</sup> Young Aljaz “takes a certain pride in how little he knows about” his forebears (96). The rivery visions ultimately demand a different pride—in remembrance.

interconnectedness of all things. The river is a combination of agreements, as Lopez (using Native American belief) notes. The stories Flanagan braids explore the basis and need for such agreement. The “outside world” holds nothing but fear and loss for Aljaz; his take on city life is dour and discouraging. Is this because he is simply sick of a place that he feels he has failed in, or is this passage more of a clue to his own limitations?

[T]hey only saw what they knew and they knew none of it, and recognised little, and most of that was the world they carried within their crab-backed rafts – their tents and dry camp clothes and coffee pots and routines and rules for ordering the crowding chaos that loomed over them and threatened them and which Aljaz feels as a caress. They felt consumed by the river, felt that they had allowed it to chew them up in its early gorges and were now being digested in its endlessly winding entrails that cut back and forth in crazed meanderings through vast unpeopled mountain ranges. And it frightened them, these people from far away cities whose only measure was man; it terrified them, this world in which the only measure was things that man had not made, the rocks and the mountains and the rain and the sun and the trees and the earth. The river brought them all these feelings, and of a night it brought worse: the most terrible blackness, the most abrupt and ceaseless noises of rushing water.... a further encircling world in which it was possible to be lost and never found and never heard. (80-1)

These passages deliberately construct a wild river that has a supra-linguistic dimension about it, a scale beyond rational urban comprehension. The river expresses these qualities through its sheer force, but Flanagan’s representation also cautions against reductive thinking as a cause of disrespect and a step towards exploitation, because it works against the humility that Jonas believes is so important in developing an imperative of responsibility (Jonas 22). Sullied by the mind, the river will quickly become sullied by the wallet, a thing to use rather than a presence to marvel at and respect, to care for at the very least. The “joke” Aljaz plays is one means of leading people to a sense of the elemental force of the river: it eases (and masks) the transition from mere H<sub>2</sub>O (Ivan Illich’s “stuff”), to the “irreducible” (20). Flanagan is in favour of what Donald Worster maps as a transition “from nature domination to nature accommodation” (Worster, *Rivers of Empire* 332). In any case, events conspire to instil awe in the paddlers. The rainfall increases: it is the Franklin’s turn to dominate. By positioning Aljaz’s story in a retrospective current of memory we see it has always been so.

As the waters rise, the river is represented as a violent and uncontrollable force. The punters are “terrified” of the wild gorge that has “digested” them. They are not given a chance to adjust, to learn to love the river as Aljaz has done, nor to open to another reality. The river quickly becomes too scary to ‘open’ to: there is simply fear and trembling. Aljaz, compelled to hide his fear, lives out a lie. The rising floodwaters ensure the river swells into “a huge army on the march” (296).

And the rafting party are like refugees, seeking to avoid its power, seeking to avoid its wrath and its moments of terrible violence; and their momentum, like that of refugees, is inexorably linked to the martial movement of the river. They look

down at their next footstep, trying to reorient this cracking, roaring world with their own human scale, back to something they can comprehend and control. (297)

Times are changing on the rivers: younger guides do not understand Aljaz's cynical distance and indifference, and punters are increasingly intent upon union with the land, despite their other feelings of fear (129). When Flanagan caricatures a New Age stance he provides further commentary on his belief in *stories* (rather than nose-flutes or ambitions to bond with Nature). The trio of hippies Aljaz encounters during the trip "had no news, only multiple opinions on the state of mother earth, the fundamental evil and destructive nature of all humanity, and the great and total beauty of the river" (35). They are seen as wanting, not only because they are rude and very poorly equipped, but because they have no stories (36). Ironically Aljaz later meets his own death through saving one of the hippies; his party has already lost one punter, Derek, to the Churn, and Aljaz cannot bear responsibility for another life lost, so he leaps in.

Flanagan presents an alternative to the ersatz animism of the three hippies; it is a view of the world that begins wary of the technological drive, but remains grounded in the detail and community of the present: "maybe it was time to walk off the road and head back into the bush whence we came" to cease our "constant flight from our pasts, our families, and our places of birth" (225). Thus he continues into a world of vision memory; it is the process of remembrance and story that takes him, in the tribal fashion, back home.<sup>44</sup>

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When the battle to prevent a dam on the Franklin was won by the conservationists, numerous points along the river were renamed.<sup>45</sup> Aljaz resents this: it confirms him as out of tune with the new ageism of the times, and, more importantly, disrupts his sense of the storied past. Aljaz (like Australian historian Paul Carter), suggests naming is a powerful process: "a collection of named sites that could be reduced to a collection of photographs.... splitting the whole into little bits with

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<sup>44</sup> Note here the "tribal" qualities of the book as defined in a *different*, Native North American, context by Paula Gunn Allen: shared speakers, a range of collaborative voices, and an emphasis on the communal and sustaining qualities of family and memory. Michael Jackson points out that these qualities and tribal bonds are very much alive and integral in the West. No one group has a monopoly on knowledge (Kaa). The consequences of such a view are too common in a present that reminds us of the power of silencing tactics. The emphasis Duncan, Lopez and Flanagan place on balance in imagery, locale, story and narrative point to an influence from tribal traditions, as well as engagement with the West's productive interplays.

In the western mind, shadows highlight the foreground. In contrast, in the tribal view the mutual relationships among shadows and light in all their varying degrees of intensity create a living web of definition and depth, and significance arises from their interplay. Traditional and contemporary tribal arts and crafts testify powerfully to the importance of balance among all the elements in tribal perception, aesthetics and social systems (Allen 244).

<sup>45</sup> For a Green perspective on the battle see Cohen or Flanagan and Pybus.

silly names” (252). But here we reach a clue as to Aljaz’s dislike of the “hippie names”: “most of all he hated that while they had done something [to block the dam], he had done nothing” (252).

He could not help but remember how he had explored other rivers of the west, then watched them drown without helping them. He watched the Murchison River drown and he watched the Mackintosh River drown and he watched the Pieman River drown. He drove all the long way from Hobart all by himself to watch the rivers begin to disappear on the first day the new hydro dams began to fill. Watched them begin to fill and their great gorges disappear and die and he cried and he drove all the long way back to Hobart and he did nothing. His was a memory of defeat only, and the most he felt capable of was bearing witness.... I will remember, he thought.... But to what end? (252)

To what end does Aljaz remember? As Flanagan reveals, stories are the means and the end of Aljaz’s remembrance, and they are both braided in the novel. Bearing witness is a powerful process, especially for a person who can enter the minds of ancestors and their “slippery” world of stories. Dogged by hindsight, Aljaz has plenty of opportunities for regret. Yet his witnessing is not lost; it lives on in his story which is a kind of meta-witnessing. When the dam goes up it offends the mutable, fluid sense of belonging so dear to Aljaz because a dam blocks so many unique and tangible processes of interaction. Much of *Death of A River Guide* reckons with a “memory of loss” that has seeped into the community and almost vanished. Flanagan suggests these memories hold a key to healing, even if the dams remain as tokens of an earlier time of dangerous enthusiasms.

In Flanagan’s view Tasmania was, for a time, isolated from such a progressive ideal. His mapping and representation of the Franklin watershed in 1946 as Aljaz’s father Harry enters it to log Huon pine is loving, detailed and exuberant. The mainland was the place taken over by utopian thinking: “the mainland where people were said to be happy and believed that tomorrow would be even better than today” (90). Like Duncan and Lopez, an older way of seeing the world has vanished: the work that Aljaz’s father does unravels the stories and rivers of the past, but creates new ones, because it carries a whiff of profit chased by further clear-cutting. Old piners they met when Harry took young Aljaz out tell of the change. The gang

talked about how they were the last pining gang on the rivers; talked of how it was all changing, of how not only the river people but the rivers themselves were doomed, to be dammed forever under vast new hydro-electric schemes and already there was bush work to be had cutting exploration tracks for the Hydro-electric Commission’s surveyors and geologists and hydrologists. (93)

Observing the function of memory in *Death of A River Guide*, one can trace the ways this interior process interacts with the riverine world that claims and awakens Aljaz.

## **Memory, family, nation, river**

*Memory and memory*

Not to know. Not to remember. With this one hope:  
That beyond the River Lethe, there is memory, healed.

(Czeslaw Milosz, "Notes" 337)

Both [Peter Conrad and Richard Flanagan] have advanced variations on the idea that Tasmania is Australia's psychological sink – a repository for all the displaced insecurities and cankering guilts that lurk behind the veneer of uneasy Sydney (etcetera) worldliness. (74)

Peter Hay

The authors considered in this thesis value *interaction* between river and people; the essays, fiction and poetry attend to people in the riverscape and their responses to rivers. An ecological impulse is evident in the work of Flanagan, Lopez and Duncan in particular. Their characters are framed as facets of a wider world shaped and re-shaped by human intervention; this intervention has wider consequences on the river and therefore the cultural memory of the watershed community, and these authors spell them out. Lopez, Duncan, McCarthy, Sinclair and King place this intervention in a wider world of ecological connection and historical event, balancing the human and non-human worlds. *Death of A River Guide* creates—and traces varied responses to—an exceptionally figurative and story-soaked river (as all rivers with a history of human encounter are); Flanagan loads the current with human elements, as do all of the writers in this thesis. Stories are what the waters carry, because we humans need more than water to make sense of the world: "We can't get far without history, without stories" observes Geoff Park (1). Flanagan, historian, screenwriter, extreme kayaker and river-guide (who almost drowned on the Franklin) is perfectly qualified to take us on a journey into Tasmania's past. It is, in several ways, every colony's past.

*Death of A River Guide* uses the Franklin River as a catchpool for yarns. In an interview Flanagan says "it was full of these stories. The aim of the book was to capture the intention of landscape and people, not just the Franklin. Not that I want to belittle the Franklin in any way." Nor does he; Flanagan has used the river as a force for revelation and stories, its catchment a site and source of micro-history.

Flanagan deliberately structured his novel in a circular form.<sup>46</sup> His narrative evokes the image of renewal and dispersal conjured by ripples in the water. Our point of reaction and

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<sup>46</sup> "My original title was *Circle* and I was interested in the idea of eternal return. The Aborigines have always been preoccupied with circles. And there are circles within circles. I always wanted the novel to be structured in a circular way" (*Book Guide* interview). His emphasis on the cycles of politics, story, memory and nation are primed in a river setting, particularly the Franklin, which became the site of national attention when protests against the planned dams were in full swing and eventually dictated the outcome of federal elections.



immersion begins with the pinioned body of Aljaz Cosini; from there it radiates or recirculates, simultaneously outward and back in time. Memory facilitates the transpiration of story. Sections of the novel attend to the lives of Aljaz's ancestors at the period of brutal white-Aboriginal contact. Aljaz's visions allow him to see events from his family's past; accordingly the narrative follows him across space and time tracing hundreds of tributaries.

"A river can grant you visions in an act at once generous and despicable, but even a river like the Franklin in full flood cannot explain everything" (*River Guide* 68). Partnered with the River as both oracle and memory-fount, Aljaz Cosini is about to learn all he (n)ever wanted to know about Tasmania and his family's place there. At the cusp of death (he is nearer to death than most people; he simply manages to telescope several lifetimes of vision into a few minutes of drowning), he opens himself to visions of a shared past previously dammed by settler amnesia: "In the detail of a piece of rushing water Aljaz reads the changing visage of the entire river, hears the terrible soul history of his country, and he is frightened" (152). For if the ripples radiate out from Aljaz, they also double back into his mind in an eternal return of stories seeping from the earth, from family and from visions. He, like the waterfall, has become a conduit or focus. Once again, as in Lopez or Duncan, the Franklin is a teaching river, sharing the attributes of revelation and wisdom with the Tamanawis or Big Blackfoot Rivers in Duncan and Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*.<sup>47</sup> Maclean and Duncan tap into personal and familial memory; Flanagan follows their lead, but he takes this one step further by attempting to reveal national memory, and the consequences of denial.

Troping the river as a stream of national history and character is an ancient tradition, as Wyman Herendeen observes: "The river is coextensive with history, unfolding as history itself does, and sharing the cultural consciousness of each successive age. It is not only the present, but also the past and the future" (Herendeen, *Myth* 5). But Lopez and Duncan are not as insistent as Flanagan in representing their rivers as bearers of deeper psychic history; this quality is integral to *Death of A River Guide*—it is the book. Flanagan's Franklin is a river of stories, of history, of personal and local truths. It carries a lot of psychic "jetsam" (110). Without a history of devotion, nor the acknowledgment of a world of indigenous myth (as in King, or Gita Mehta's 1993 sequence *A River Sutra*), the invisible worlds of the Franklin lack a shared social foundation in present-day Tasmania. The collective understanding of the river and the land is impoverished by gruesome deeds of the past, which were swiftly erased from the everyday web of stories and yarns. So Aljaz Cosini must begin with his family until the stories and visions granted by the River lead him back to the forgotten acts that continue to scar the present.

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<sup>47</sup> Maclean's novel is an important work in the river-literature of the 1970s. Elegiac, nostalgic and draped in reminiscence, his novella has attracted a wide range of critical attention, much of it spawned after the film was adapted for the screen by William Kittredge and Annick Smith (two fine Western writers in their own right). I do not have space to consider it in depth here. (See Gordon E. Sleuthaug's "The Buried Stream: Stochastic Narration in *A River Runs Through It*." *English Studies in Canada* 56 (Sept 1997): 315-29. Sleuthaug's is one of the best works on literature and the New Physics I have read.)

So *Death of A River Guide* is an act of salvage and perhaps of salvation, staking the future in respect for the past. In doing this Flanagan contributes to a (variably effective) process of reckoning, revision and reconciliation in settler societies, an acknowledgment of past unjust treatment of indigenous people and places on the part of government and society in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the U.S.A. (for example). Of Tasmania, Flanagan speaks of “a great silence down here,” over convict and Aboriginal history (Interview). In 1990 Flanagan characterized the state of Tasmanian-ness as it used to be, a state that his novel and the events of the 1980s challenged: “To be Tasmanian was to be silent.... to be guilty.... to be marginal.... to be dispossessed” (Pybus and Flanagan 205-6).

I have called silence and memory enabling, enriching forces: they can easily work in entirely negative and debilitating ways, but they are healing forces in the work I consider. These works confront variants of post-colonial pain and use memory to move towards a dynamic equilibrium.

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The Tasmanian poet Peter Hay (in *River Guide* Flanagan acknowledges his help) has written of the task ahead of Tasmania in the vital work of identity construction (particularly in the wake of the 28 April 1996 Port Arthur shooting massacre). Such place-making (or meaning-placement), Hay argues, needs to be “unencumbered” by ideologies and courageous enough to look past the immediate horror that has coalesced around Port Arthur, for that immediacy could erode the traces of the past which offer clues and solace in the search for meaning (Hay 68). “Tasmania,” Hay argues, “has never come to terms with its past” (69). He continues:

That past has the status of a dark family secret – quite literally a dark family secret – the half-brother bogeyman boarded up out of sight in the attic. He/it is the shame of our bastard birth as a prison for the unwanted dregs of the British slums and our subsequent legacy of depravity hard upon vileness, brutality fast upon atrocity. he/it is the rampant institutionalised sodomist rape, its echoes clearly audible in the hysteria that surrounds Tasmania’s current debate about the legal status of sodomy. He/it is the unbearable legacy of brutal dispossession and the near-complete genocide of those whose land this was. He/it is the weight of a guilt that could not be borne. (69)

Hay argues that this forgetting—the pattern of “[c]omplete, utter denial”—warped history and thus identity. An 1879 pamphlet observes ““there seems literally no past”” while recent constructions tend towards misplaced ““triumphalism”” (70). Amnesia and absence pass through the generations. Lethe has its own shadowing hydrologic cycle in the watershed of collective becoming:

None of these constitutes an authentic accommodation to the past. None involves a mature identity-construction, an uncontrived assimilation of the comparatively comfortable present to the seriously compromised past.... All are attempts to

avoid confronting the unbearably real, to evade acceptance of the share of guilt that necessarily attaches to living off an abundant harvest that was sown in atrocity. (At the same time we must deal responsibly with that guilt so that it does not overwhelm us, does not prevent our acting as responsible and morally informed citizens in a world where the skills of morally informed citizenship are coming under gathering stress.) (Hay 70)

Hay requires a degree of honesty and confrontation few nations accede to. But Barry Lopez, who visited Port Arthur with Hay in March 1996, later told Richard Flanagan “that Tasmania was the custodian of an important truth, one of which, in due course, the wider world would have need” (67). Flanagan was a little wary; vague hints of new ageism put him on edge. But Hay concludes by stressing some aspects of Tasmanian community that the world could learn from:

I am convinced Barry Lopez was right. In the confusion of meanings refracted through and by Port Arthur, there is an elusive truth which Tasmanians hold in trust for the world. It is to do with authentic living within thoughtfully constructed structures of community. It is to do with the establishment of respectful, other-regarding relationships within the wider community of biological life. It is to do with the organic maintenance of the past’s shaping presence into the future. That, I think, is what Barry Lopez *meant*.

But *what* did he mean? I don’t know, and the quest for it will be my life’s holy grail. I almost certainly won’t find it. My children might. Or their children. To them I would offer a solitary piece of advice. Start at Port Arthur. (76)

It is important that the three qualities Hay identifies—community, ecology and memory—are evident in *Death of A River Guide*. But what have these qualities to do with *rivers*? A great deal, when an author equates them with memory itself, as Iain Sinclair, Cormac McCarthy or Flanagan do. Few of the writers in this thesis let the river stand alone. The rivers are not represented as self-reflexive entities: they are evocative, inscrutable, and they seem to demand a human response, namely the ascription of meaning and story. Rivers are places where things happen to people and things are remembered. That remembrance is politicised because it is so integral to a community’s sense of itself. Rivers are the first places settled in a new land and remain prime sites of human and non-human interaction, where, in the case of Aljaz’s “punters,” the city meets the bush, and where our visionary guide faces memory and death (20). The Franklin is a catalyst for these encounters; certainties are washed away as the waters rise. Only memory and story remain.

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Harry [Aljaz’s dad] took the family on drives: story journeys, driveabouts really, that tapped into the remembered land: “The stories went on and on. Harry’s was a landscape comprehensible not in terms of beauty but in the subterranean meaning of his stories.” (91)

This “vision business” (which at times unfolds around his dad’s old, ornate and almost nave-like barbecue, where various marsupials tell stories!) worries Aljaz from the start, and with reason (11). For Aljaz has the entire history of his home-island to take on board. Not the “Gothic horrorland” stereotype Cockroach and Aljaz feed to the punters (132); rather, he must confront “a most terrible silence.... that takes its form and its energy from a lie. The lie that the blackfellas had died out. That the ex-convicts had left the island for gold rushes in other countries. That only pure free white settler stock remained” (259). This task takes him back into his life and the lives of his Aboriginal and convict ancestors.

During the river trip Aljaz sees a former campsite now altered by rainforest encroachment, and he understands “his memory of the river was being destroyed by the natural world of the river itself” (84). His efforts at stasis and evasion hinge on his refusal to change, or to confront the tragedy of his daughter’s death. His relationship with Couta has dissolved under grief and the possibility love could endure: “this love so terrified Aljaz” that he ran to the mainland, away from home (266). Thirteen years later family and the Franklin itself prompt Aljaz’s sodden confrontation with memory.

Flanagan suggests we are all “refugees” from our past, bound to any memories we try to flee (297).<sup>48</sup> As the river rises, Aljaz’s visions become more intense, conjuring up images of his grief over the loss of his daughter, and the grief of his Aboriginal ancestors at the desecration of their land, stories and bodies. For the river of visions that claims Aljaz is represented as nothing less than history itself; this is history as an act of memory. Aljaz’s visions bear out the fact that history cannot be controlled; events unfold and take on a life of their own. Aljaz’s efforts at controlling the stream of memory are futile: “Madonna Santa! Why do I feel this? Why do I feel as if I am being destroyed by history? As if the past is some snake venom that is paralysing me limb by limb, organ by organ, slowly tearing my mind apart piece by piece.... all this past welling up...” (264).

Beyond the river, Aljaz’s world is driven by sub-conscious grief: Aljaz ran from the past (a childhood marked by racist bullying and “a series of farewells” [90]), and the repressed memory of his daughter’s death—a process of “leaving myself” which ended up “condemning me to thirteen years of a waking sleep ... I did not grieve. I could not” (90, 262, 263). It seems he really

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<sup>48</sup> The fleeing fosters the passion for an imagined future, a utopia. But it is hollow, based on the “lie that everyone in life has a chance of winning if they try hard enough” (95). Flanagan rejects this progressive positivism, which amounts to rejecting the ethos that drove colonial enterprise. He implies that it devours the facts of history and the resources of the future, a double-edged psychic and ecological debt at the heart of “the injustice of [the children’s] destiny” (95). The refusal to face the past and to provide for the future is dangerous. If there is a utopia it resides in the massive indifference of the bush, a place beyond conceptual reductionism. The Divine is not a place of veneration or succour; instead, Flanagan constructs a kind of heaven of story and family where both things sustain each other and flourish happily in eternity. According to the book’s conclusion, the Divine might be nothing more—or less—than a magnificent everlasting Barbecue. Perhaps this is the modern Aussie version of Heaven? In any case, the deity is not a Christian one; there is attention paid to ecological cycles and universal processes, which may or may not embody the numinous; it all depends on how you look at the water, on what you see there in the river.

only awakens when he is drowning, having water and memory forced into him. At the river he initially finds a landscape too vast to contain him. But Flanagan represents the river as a truth-seeking force, one that strips falsehood and evasion away, one that proffers “a moment of truth—which, after all, resides never in facts, but only in stories” (Flanagan, *One Hand* ii). This is a healing river, but its cure is *very* uncompromising. It is a river that prompts a kind of eschatological individuation: potential is realized on the brink of death (Burlison). The transformation in *Death of A River Guide* is not rhetorically akin to the shamanic watershed quests of *River Notes*; nor is the novel as celebratory as *The River Why*'s focus on personal and familial memory that pays less attention to the scale of national psychic wounds. Tasmania has a superficial advantage here: its size engenders regional distinctiveness, and its psychological character has been subject to focused assessment: how much difference can there be across the island's small flanks, over 170 years? A great deal, Flanagan suggests. But a river holds stories that manage to capture the life of one family as a kind of representative Ur-memory, the collective experience of Tasmania distilled into one torrent.

Wedged in the river, Aljaz finally becomes what he has always been: a part of the swirl of time, story and circumstance, the “full stop”(284). Aljaz becomes the channel through which his deepest history is realized: this is a history of people, so Flanagan has made it a micro-history of Tasmania; the story continues, as the river does.

That other way of seeing remains beneath the water that kills Aljaz even as it bequeaths him his life and the lives of his ancestors: great-grandfather Ned Quade, convict and cannibal, and his abandoned wife Eliza; his dad Harry and his Slovenian mother Sonja; his half-Aboriginal great-grandmother Ellie, and her mother Black Pearl, who in 1828 was raped by a sealer. This violation is recalled near the book's close, and is a scar that explains the fear Aljaz has of confronting his past and present. Black Pearl's autochthonous memory filters and transpires through generations, through the familial and national cycle of memory. She

knows she will never forget the fear and humiliation of this moment, knows that she will never forget, nor will her children, nor the children they beget nor their children [i.e. Aljaz], even long after they have forgotten from where their terrible fear comes, long after they cease to understand why they are afraid. (314)

The rape is part of the flow of almost “eternal,” “crazy, crazy visions” that seem to outmanoeuvre death, slipping past such obstacles like a raft.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “As if there is only one story and it could be writ on a pinhead and within it every story of every man. Perhaps I have always held these visions within me.... Perhaps my mind was never a blank slate upon which my solitary experience was to write its own small story, unaware that it was part of so many other stories. Perhaps that is why these visions are not solely of me but of a whole world that leads to where I am. And beyond. To where we are all going” (320-1).

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The pre-trip bar scene where Cockroach sees Aljaz's hatred of the rafters traces the extent of Aljaz's anger. It is partly an anger borne of a "memory of loss" that encompasses his own life and, through visions and memory, the lives of his ancestors (258). "I wonder whether the memory of loss was carried with those who had originally peopled this land.... Or was it something the convicts and blackfellas shared, that divided them yet might one day bring them all together" (258)? This last question is one of the novel's most speculative and important. It returns to an earlier question that flashes through Aljaz's mind: "What if nobody knew where they came from or where they were going? For the first time in many years he sensed that what was wrong with him might not be entirely his own fault, or capable of solution by him alone" (224). Flanagan suggests a collective confrontation of loss and pain can heal. It is not an easy process, nor does it offer easy solutions. But the river—always certain of its origins and destination—allows for the beginning of remembrance, a healing process that dissolves the ego, and returns Aljaz to his wider family and the parts of himself he thought lost. The imperative of responsibility encompasses the care of the world. Flanagan stresses the care of those stories that explain your place in the flow of events is equally important.

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When Aljaz dies he finally accepts the web of people and chance that has led him to the river. One of his visions featured Harry on the Gordon and Franklin Rivers. Fevered, he is being rowed down to a doctor in Strahan; he imagines he is being rowed through the stars. Days before Harry rowed up the Franklin "focused on nothing, seeing everything" (45). As he dies, Aljaz repeats his father's journey; he leaves his body and floats, "A fleck, a piece of flyshit at the centre of this vast emptiness. Moving. A soul. My soul?" (322). The language dispenses with Duncan's romanticism and Lopez's mysticism, but Aljaz's visions are still splendid. He travels "a tunnel of grace" and sees Australia's life flash before his eyes: "I am floating down the river. But it is no river I recognise" (324).

The novel's final scene depicts Aljaz waking in the boat that bore his father to safety. The harbour throngs with the ancestral family, gathered round Harry's great barbecue eating seafood and fresh baked bread, beers in hand. This is, for some, a kind of Aussie Paradise. Even Black Pearl is there, playing with young Jemma: Aljaz has made it home at last. Like *The River Why, Death of A River Guide* closes with its protagonist buoyed up by a current of love and story, gliding on the implacable force of the past.

The impulse that runs through Lopez, Duncan and Flanagan is an escapist, neo-transcendent one. Each writer turns the process of river reflection into a route for an idyllic escape, one that has been compromised by its own stereotypical construction of the pastoral and the past. *Death of A River Guide* is the most compelling example of the way a writer confronts and attempts to evade the pastoral fantasy. Transcending dishonesty involves grounded observation. Digression and belligerence are qualities of Tasmanian idiom: they serve Flanagan well in blowing apart any townie notions of the natural sublime. The idyll has barely survived the 1980s and 1990s as a viable intellectual trope, castigated as emblematic of the imperialist hunger for ‘virgin’ land and a consequent dispossession through violence. Speaking of the early moderns Yeats, Graves, Stevens, Eliot, and Kenneth Grahame’s *Wind in the Willows*, Bruce Michelson identifies the pastoral or the transcendent river as a site for “a yearning which touched them all, one way or another: to escape from modernity and bourgeois life and cities and noise and glib agnosticism—and find a way home, if only for a moment now and then, to something like a simple and wordless Arcadian repose” (69).

The challenge for the writer is finding a postmodern Arcadia that will satisfy the strong urge for Arcadia and yet avoid appearing falsely mystical, too “mesmerizing” as Huck Finn put it (278). Hokey or sentimental options are not enough: people want more; this may be the problem. John Seelye’s identification of a colonial white male “geophantasy” that tropes the river as avenue to exotic elsewhere (as practised by Kinseth or occasionally Lopez) is less acceptable than it was (89). The “stream of consciousness”<sup>50</sup> casts a long shadow on the contemporary river-writer, as does the Golden Age. Many of the contemporary writers in this thesis confront the forces that damage the Arcadia of yore. A shift in register may seek a (“simple and wordless”?) still pool of repose, or it may brace the mind for another assault on the familiar of capitalism and progress. Railing against Abbey’s “crackpot machine” is the flipside to the search for home. The modern lifestyle enables the search for the idyll: “if on a big American river one can drift away, one is never too far away from the world as known” (Michelson 72). Hop in the SUV and let the gas and guilt start flowing with the latent words. Protest serves to fence off a riparian enclave (on both banks) that will protect the fragile Arcadia. Striving for balance draws on memory to shape elegy and idyll, the bound components of the process of river reflection. Anger and repose are also direct ways of speaking to a posse of urban readers who carry the yearning for Paradise deep in their smog-choked hearts.

Utopia, that elusive no where, traces “a consolation for today cast in the form of tomorrow but borrowed for us from our own personal past” (Rabkin 10). But many of the delightful places in these books are drawn from the storehouse of memory: the river cabins, solitary moments of

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<sup>50</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary attributes A. Bain with the use of the term in his 1855 work *Senses of the Intellect*: “The concurrence of sensations on one common stream of consciousness, in the same cerebral highway” (359). The concurrence of sensation is a network of tributaries. It too strives for “quasi-equilibrium” as a water network does and as Flanagan believes Tasmania should on a psychic level.

communion with birds and rivers, Celilo Falls or heavenly barbecues have already occurred. The works seek to reconstitute a (sometimes personal) vision of history rather than map out an ideal future. A utopia is no place, and therefore a little outside this time—"intellectually" a future prospect, but one "emotionally" steeped in a memory of innocence: "part of their appeal is atavistic, a reversion to a vision of an earlier humankind in "closer and happier relation to necessity and nature and self" (Rabkin 1, 4). This "closer and happier relation" is the goal of much of the work (essayistic and fictional) considered thus far. Closeness is identified with a sense of home (preferably a peaceful river cabin), an 'elsewhere' close to Nature that appeals to those harried by the incessant confluence of cars and cities

The essays and the three works of fiction read thus far make the river home. Each work somehow manages to return to a state of belonging, however fragile or incomplete, though Stafford wonders if such a place is ever real. Flanagan answers it is not (at least not in this life above water and remembrance, this life before death). In the next chapter I consider a range of novels that search for home. The site of the 'fallen' river makes the journey to home imperative. Arcadia is under threat: in these fictional riverscapes the millennial call is a cry of lamentation and resistance. Can memory recover any remnants or is Arcadia gone forever? And where, after all this human searching, is the river?



## Between Memory and Forgetfulness: Some Fictions of the Fallen River

### Introduction

'Fallen river' texts criticise the cultural mythology of progress, the "utopian drive" and the "quest to control the future" (Jonas 21; Bowers 169). They argue that unceasing faith in human control and technology squanders the lives of the unborn. The books in the next two chapters are politicised fictions that challenge the cultural faith in progress. The 'fallen' river finds its unspoiled referent in the 'pure' river that is unsullied by pollution and unimpeded by what—in 1958, Jawaharlal Nehru (initially a pro-dam leader) termed "the disease of giganticism"—in the form of giant dams (McCully 20). A fallen river has, in some (human) measure been "humiliat[ed]" by our interference, as have the stories mapped into the 400 000 km<sup>2</sup> of land (an area equivalent to the size of California) beneath the world's reservoirs (McPhee 193; McCully 7). The dams do not so much shame the river as shame the humans who anthropomorphise the waters in the first place. A sense of moral wrong is prompted or compounded by the ecological problems caused by the dam. Anne Zwinger knows that when the reservoir arrives "[t]he original ecosystem no longer exists" (116). Birds, insects and fish die, water salinates and displaced survivors struggle to relocate their world and memories. As Donald Worster observes of the U.S. West, ecological collapse brought moral responses: "a sense of irreparable loss began to settle about the water empire by the late twentieth century, a remembrance of things past" (*Rivers of Empire* 324).

The fiction I read in the next two chapters traces this sense of loss in several disparate locales united by *damaged* rivers. Another river (of liquid capital) and sheer human need erodes cultural memory. Yet somehow, the rivers manage to hold a near-mythic allure, even in these fast and selectively fastidious times. This fiction is anti-utopian. It confronts the reality of our embeddedness in what might be termed the post-colonial, post-modern river response. Nostalgia and anxiety haunt that troubling, unstable prefix. There is no easy idyll in the works I read in chapter three—*The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (Richard Flanagan's second novel, published (in 1997) to much acclaim in Australia), *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) by Thomas King, David James Duncan's *River Teeth: Stories and Writings* (1995) and Robin Cody's *Ricochet River* (1992). As these writers develop, their work grapples with the failure of contemporary visions of progress. Rivers are dying, overcrowding and pollution are endemic and increasing. Watersheds

are in crisis. The state of the contemporary rivers demonstrates that the old imperative of progress destroys water- and life-ways—yet the writers are embedded in that way of functioning.

None of this is recent news. Joseph Meeker made a key point in his classic 1974 work *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*: “A crisis of consciousness occurs when there is a widespread recognition that many important models of reality inherited from the human past are inadequate, irrelevant, or destructive when applied to present circumstances” (7).<sup>1</sup> The authors refigure the dystopian mode to challenge these inherited models.

Though Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree* (1979) and Iain Sinclair’s *Downriver* (1991) posit no obvious answers to the “crisis of consciousness” (nor the “burden of dreams,” as the documentary on the great river-filmmaker Werner Herzog puts it), all the ‘fallen’ fictions *use* a river to speak back to the humans at the water’s edge. In their dammed or foetid state, these rivers chastise the ways of man, the ways of nations and the greed of ages.

The writers in this thesis often work on a project of recovery that tries to restore water to the status of a powerful evocative element. Each book fights its own way back to an ‘authentic’ riverine power, the essential river Sanders sought out in his essays. This river might be present in some remnant of wildness. Each writer is convinced the (post) colonial river is a fallen one, scarred or dammed by the “carceral network” of colonisation (Foucault 248). The reservoir drowns memories; it disciplines and erases place and community through the drowning of names. The rivers and the First Nations are punished by text-wielding interlopers and rising waters.

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Marq de Villiers suggests anti-dam criticism has blossomed in the last twenty years. In the 1950s and 1960s dams were all the rage. Why, he asks, have they suddenly become (to use Arundhati Roy’s term) so “uncool”? For one thing, large dams (those 15 metres or higher) are often seen as markers of all that is wrong with our “inherited models” of relating to the world and to rivers. In the last half of the twentieth century, dams have altered global riverscapes more profoundly than any other force in the last five thousand. And what models they are—giant wedges straddling in the world’s river valleys, seeking out every last viable site, drowning forests and villages, the grey bulwarks of modernity grate at the contemporary western sensibility (no matter how much that sensibility loves regular water, Californian oranges and automobiles, all things dams help produce). These sensibilities are growing: many dams have not worked as they should, nor made

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, anti-dam rhetoric is almost as old as the U. S. ‘nature writing’ tradition. Regarding Thoreau’s 1849 work *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, John E. Maxwell notes that “by Thoreau’s time, enterprise had already damaged the river environment enough to make fishing more a means for passing the time than for subsistence. He notes that salmon, shad, and alewives formerly lived in abundance in the Concord until dams, canals, and factories stopped the fish migrations up the river (29). As a consequence, Thoreau’s ‘fishing’ self-consciously champions the victims of ‘the Corporation with its dam’ (31)” (Maxwell 32). (Maxwell quotes the 1985 Library of America edition of *A Week*.) The majority of the writers I consider champion victims of the modern Corporation’s dam. They have stilled the rivers of the world in their thousands since World War Two. But it was dams that helped the Allies win that War. Nothing is simple, or without consequence.

much economic sense. They have not always delivered their promised glory. A new vision is emerging; its vigour and moral intent is caught by Donald Worster:

A river, to be sure, is a means to economic production, but before that it is an entity unto itself, with its own processes, dynamics, and values. In a sense it is a sacred being, something we have not created, and therefore worthy of our respect and understanding. To use a river without violating its intrinsic qualities will require much of us. It will require our learning to think like a river, our trying to become a river-adaptive people. (*Rivers of Empire* 331)

If the previous chapter looked at river-adaptation in action (tracing a movement from “nature domination to nature accommodation” [*Rivers of Empire* 332]), the next two chapters confront—and cannot escape—the violated river, the leached site of a once “religious geography,” that remains a “cosmologem” of enduring power (Lincoln 23).

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Ivan Illich suggests the trope of the polluted river as both ‘fallen’ and unfavourable is a recent phenomenon in the Western world. In his 1985 work *H<sub>2</sub>O and the Waters of Forgetfulness: Reflections on the Historicity of ‘Stuff’*, Illich argues that the modern city was and is “built around bathrooms and garages, accommodating the circulation of tap water and of traffic” (66). The modern city *uses* water, it does not revere it. It is utilitarian “H<sub>2</sub>O” rather than a mythic element. Instrumental utilitarianism informs the western role of the contemporary river:

Water throughout history has been perceived as the stuff which radiated purity. H<sub>2</sub>O is the new stuff, on whose purification human survival now depends. H<sub>2</sub>O and water have become opposites: H<sub>2</sub>O is a social creation of modern times, a resource that is scarce and that calls for technical management. It is an observed fluid that has lost the ability to mirror the water of dreams. The city child has no opportunities to come in touch with living water. Water can no more be observed; it can only be imagined, by reflecting on an occasional drop or a humble puddle. (75-6)

Illich sets up a dualism here, between the empowering, inspirational waters of Mnemosyne’s pools and streams (she, that Titan who birthed the nine muses), and an amnesiac substance leached of power and inspirational force. Mnemosyne’s “wellspring of remembrance” had a strong effect on associations between water and fertility: “Being placed among the Titans, a cosmic element—water that washes—became the source of remembrance, the wellspring of culture, and acquired the features of a woman” (32). But that was to change: even the waters of Lethe lose power when *text* is introduced into Ancient Greece. Illich (generalising) argues that “fluid memory” was replaced by the “fixed storehouse” of the rote-learnt written word. Like David Abrams’ description of the

silencing of the “more-than-human” world, this transition is represented as a kind of Fall.<sup>2</sup> Amnesia triumphs over memory (and thus woman, myth, nature and humility). “The voice of the muses” is, in early Greece, subjected to “desiccating and freezing,” just as “Rome’s glory was the ostentatious domestication of Mnemosyne both through the codification of public memories in Roman law and through the piping of city water” (34, 37).<sup>3</sup>

Before I quote Illich’s account of this ‘fall’ into text it is worth bearing Abrams in mind here and linking both commentators’ sense of the lapsarian with the streams that run—or are dammed—through the novels this section reads. Though the novels are from very different

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<sup>2</sup> Various indigenous scholars and commentators on orality point out similar states in the present. In New Zealand, for example, Ngahuia Te Awakotuku observes that many Maori have developed a powerful connection with objects of cultural significance *precisely* because they lack a metaphoric transfer of signification that silences their innate power: “The relationship that Maori enjoy and cultivate with *taonga tuku iho* [treasures of the ancestors] is of major importance. A carved house truly does embody a revered ancestor; a great canoe actually personifies a concept, a vision, that motivates the people” (96-7).

Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday affirms the literal power of language, a literalness the storyteller tries to create: “It is in the nature of the oral tradition that language is understood to be a vital and powerful thing in itself, creative in the deepest sense” (xx).

Words are therefore redolent with interconnections with other words, and with the world as seen, envisioned and imagined in creative thought. Language is a key to maintaining personal and communal harmony with all of creation. This in turn affects the way each story is told, adjusted as it is for each circumstance, each story describing its own origins. Kenneth Lincoln discusses Native American respect for language: “Oral tribal poetry remains for the most part organic, for tribal poets see themselves as essentially keepers of the sacred word bundle.... The people are born into and die out of a language that gives them being” (43).

The fixed static form of the printed page has a far more selective impact; the writer has fewer senses to appeal to. If words are thought of as products, their impact is limited because they have already been defined and restrained. Louis Owens makes this point (with vital implications for self-determination): “With written literacy, language becomes descriptive/historic and begins to lose its unique power as creator of reality” (9). Here Owens provides Abrams with a model, a template of dualism that Illich has used as well. The language of Eden has been taken.

I should note that Illich uses Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) as a resource here. The empowered status of orality has only increased in scale in the last few decades, a move concurrent with the reification of some aspects of indigenous culture from white quarters. This is not to say oral transmission is less than various tribal peoples note, but I am suggesting this ‘lost’ world, this first language, is (like wildness) a site of intense nostalgia in a time of linguistic homogeneity, desiccation and extinction. White authors are seeking pagan or pre-textual examples and trends to bolster a parched sense of authenticity. *Riverdance* holds special choreographic appeal as a staged version of ‘authentic’ resistance to those invaders who would control the Irish Salmon of Knowledge and thus livelihood and water. In that struggle white-skinned viewers can find a shred of redemption or a sense of being hard-done by before driving home in the SUV; a culture of blame begets blame. Now I am generalising, but I want to stress the appeal of nostalgia in this millennial time of change and loss. It saturates the essayists’ work: one of the differences in the ‘fallen’ river texts is that nostalgia is not as powerful a psychological recourse because the worst has happened. The broken river is simply confronted and worked with as a still-potent source of insight, and commentary. But biodiversity and cultural diversity enrich the creative world. Presentation and cross-cultural engagement is vital.

On linguistic and biotic decline, see Alfred B. Crosby and Frances Karttunen, “Biodiversity and Linguistic Diversity: Expansion and Contraction.” *Migration, Preservation and Change*. Eds. Jeffrey Kaplan and Mark Shackleton, and Maarika Toivonen. Helsinki: U Helsinki P, 1999. 7-17. Michael Kraus. “Linguistics and Biology: Threatened Linguistic and Biological Diversity Compared. CLS 32: *Papers From the Parasession on Theory and data in Linguistics*. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society, 1996. 69-75. On linguistic decline, Bringham observes that only 30 of the 300 languages of North America are spoken by children today: “A language is a life form, like a species of plant or animal. Once extinct, it is gone forever. And as each one dies, the intellectual gene pool of the human species shrinks. The big, discontinuous brain to which we all very modestly contribute, and on which we all depend, loses a part of itself that it cannot rebuild” (11).

<sup>3</sup> Schama extends this point in *Landscape and Memory* (he draws on Illich), while Lindsey Davies tracks her Roman P.I. Marcus Didius Falco through Rome’s aqueducts in her novel *Three Hands in the Fountain* (London: Century, 1997).

geographic sites, they reject the amnesiac qualities of Western influence, and see the silenced river as a denial of memory, story and vitality.<sup>4</sup> The river-writer has reason to compound a sense of loss into the textual interstices of the essay. Such a sense of loss drives much of the fiction ahead.

However, the first woman of oral tradition is forgotten when the oral transmission of epics ceases. The classical poet of Greece no longer has need of recollections from a 'beyond.' His sources are frozen into texts. He follows the lines of a written text; the epic river that feeds its own source is remembered no more. Not one Greek city has preserved an altar dedicated to Mnemosyne. Her name becomes a technical term for "memory" now imagined as a page; the stuff of memory turns from water into a shard. Written language, which has fixed words on clay tablets, acquires more authority than the re-evocation of fluid, living speech....

Before epic tradition was recorded, before custom could be fixed in written law, thought and memory were entwined in every statement; the speaker had no way to imagine the distinction between thought and speech. Voice could not be stocked, it left no dregs or grounds. Solemn composition had to fit the rhyme of the hexameter, stressed by the beat of the lyre strings. Consciousness, lacking the metaphor of the alphabet had to be imagined as a stream full of treasures. Each utterance was like a piece of driftwood the speaker fished from a river, something cast off in the beyond that had just then washed up onto the beaches of the mind. (32-3)

This disruption of composition and utterance supposedly deprives the speaker of a fount of possibility. (Bardic tradition often ranked practitioners according to their facility with exacting feats of memory, as the Welsh *eistedfodd* and Maori *whare wananga* or house of learning still do.) Some of the fallen river work I read (notably King and Sinclair) evokes the oral tradition through narrative play. Text, Illich argues, fails to nourish itself. Writing is a reservoir, text a sort of dam. Words become tools, utilities, "stuff" and the oral tales evaporate, along with the deeper capacity to re-member the word/world.

Illich imagines some Edenic speech that invested utterance with a power we could not splice into disassociated 'thought.' The search for the first language—the language of rivers?—taps into deep atavistic urges.<sup>5</sup> Many of the writers considered thus far desire a verbalised, lost home, a now- (and maybe always) drowned version of a "closer and happier [verbal/ontological] relation to necessity, nature and self," a connection with lost innocence and

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<sup>4</sup> Illich picks up on a tendency Kenneth C. Davis mentions: "Why do we tend to forget? There's no big surprise: Americans, as de Tocqueville long ago recognized, are a future-oriented people with a short historical memory. And the accepted, widely taught versions of history are written by the victors, presented in schools as sanitized costume pageantry. This is especially true when the victory is as total as that of America's forefathers over the American Indians, who were nearly 'cleansed' from an entire continent..." (1). Illich is speaking of a culturally specific source of amnesia. (Davis' article is printed under the subheading "Amnesia".) Joseph Meeker argues this tragic view of history-as-Fall compounds environmental problems by quelling foresight.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Claiborne calls river names "the seemingly ineradicable traces of lost languages" (39). Rivers are so fundamental they become the first physical and linguistic sites for human place names.

lost wholeness (Rabkin 4). The Garden and the river have been blocked; the four rivers running out of Eden have dried.

Confronting a river, the writer confronts a symbol of that elemental “fluid memory” that textual practice apparently silences. It is no wonder the river writing process often becomes elegiac. But the writers in this thesis balance lamentation: they seek a recovery of the word’s power by regarding the *river* as a “stream of treasures.” In doing so they counter a trend that has washed water clean of elemental memory.

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For Illich, water in the West becomes cleansing “H<sub>2</sub>O” in the later eighteenth-century: stench suddenly becomes socially offensive, an olfactory marker of moral and cultural *disease*: “for the first time in history, the utopia of the odorless city appears” (48). The city was cleaned, waterworks perfected, and bacteria banished. “Development, right into the late twentieth century has remained associated with water and soap.... the increasing monopoly of Cartesian dimensionality over the sensual perception of space weakened or extinguished the sense of aura” (60, 61). People, things and places had their aura (both fragrant and mythic) scrubbed away. Amnesia results. A process of engineering and treatment through two centuries renders place and sense into tools for utility rather than sites of worship. “In the imagination of the twentieth-century, water lost its mystical power to communicate by touch its deep-seated purity and its mystical power to wash off spiritual blemish” (75).<sup>6</sup>

The essayists seek to mythologise water by re-remembering the river and the concept of harmonious connection with the watershed. The same applies to the novelists’ angry lamentations at the fallen river. Holism implicitly and explicitly challenges the “utopian drive” of a future-oriented society without extracting the prime impulse for improvement, for more, that feeds it. The writers at the fallen river rely on memory to enrich their protest literature. They resist ecologically consumptive amnesia. Such a stance, while politically antagonistic, has its roots in specific cultural bases; for most at the sullied river the Fall haunts in various guises, as does the awareness of its presence.

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The writers in the next two chapters confront the practical impossibility of utopia. But their bleak sites also demonstrate the emotional need for such longing:

It might seem reasonable to suppose that the fable of social improvement is out of fashion. Yet the lasting interest of all utopian writing lies not so much in its

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<sup>6</sup> Illich does not consider the water at Lourdes, which may simply be a mythic site through constant usage.

capacity to engineer a new type of humanity as in its aptitude in dramatising the central human dilemma of having both an imagination and a will that fails to support it. It is perhaps because we do not believe in utopias that we need utopian literature; it has, after all, a deeper purpose than social efficiency—it can restore a sense of being human. (Baker-Smith 4)

The rivers are dark teachers, but they do instruct protagonist and reader alike. Memory archives the trajectory of a river's decline and suggests a possible way out of the polluted stream. But that passage is uncertain.

Writers at the fallen river tap into the longing for utopia by evoking a here-and-now so harsh that any elsewhere or 'no place' becomes appealing. Ecological collapse can engender a lasting despair. Somehow, life-affirming moments win out in the fiction, but only against the natural presence of entropy and death. The writers tend to situate human development in an interdependent ecological setting, if only to stress the symbolic weight of the river: "everything is connected to everything else" (Commoner 33).

Seeing things new, seeing new things, expanding the notion of community so that it becomes situated within the ecological community — these are some ways in which environmental writing can re-perceive the familiar in the interest of deepening the sense of place.... [S]uch devices *displace* in order to *replace*.... they depend heavily on metaphor, myth, and even fantasy to put readers in touch with place. (Buell 266)

These works use rivers as memory channels, reinforcing their role as dwelling places for our cultural baggage and very survival. The texts demonstrate the allure of rivers as psychic sinks and societal and personal mirrors, forces that compel the retrieval of latent memory in the struggle against entropy and stagnation. The fallen river fictions crave a spirit that resists progressivist amnesia; they are enamoured of that longing but realise it is usually *unrealised*. The writers generally regard a real world present or a recent past; the texts I read are not necessarily dystopian or utopian, but in the (almost) here-and-now.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I want to stress that a dammed river is not necessarily an "emasculated" (Zwinger 115) or fallen one. Most of my life (and this thesis) has been sustained through hydro-electricity; the dam has done a lot of people good. It has also done some people harm. Those affected are usually well away from the cities the dams power.

A very polluted river may be a fallen one in my eyes, or the eyes of an ecologist. But when that river has been worshipped for thousands of years, its spiritual, storied and evocative power may be such to apparently cancel out blemishes. The most celebrated case in point is the great Ganges River that runs from the Himalayas to disperse its (profoundly polluted) torrents and trickles in Bangladesh.

When I visited the Ganges River, many locals and pilgrims told me its water was very pure. It seems this river runs above any physical impediment. The same is not true of the Narmada River. This holiest of India's rivers faces massive change as a series of 3 200 dams are planned along its length. There is no way the river as it is known (and the tribal peoples on its banks) can endure this. (See William F. Fisher, ed. *Toward Sustainable Development? Struggling over India's Narmada River*. (Columbia University seminar series. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1995) for a series of articles on this project.) Also of note is the film *Narmada: a valley rises* (Dir. Ali Kazimi. Toronto: Peripheral Visions, 1994). In the summer of 1999 many at the Narmada protested the lifting of a Supreme Court ban on construction.

The literary and cultural nuances of the Indian river are beyond the scope of this thesis. But some sense of the issues involved are detailed in Karmala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dam*. (One of the first major anti-dam works in post-colonial literature, the novel is full of symbolism and the polarities of the harsh British dam engineer and the local 'tribals' of South India.) Further attention is paid to the Narmada by McCully and by Gita Mehta in her story

Andrew Ross defines utopian thought as a criticism of the “deficiencies of the present,” and dystopianism as the challenge to the perceived “deficiencies in the future” (143). Thus most of the previously discussed works in this thesis appear as utopian social criticism. But ecological collapse warps past and future. In the case of fallen river texts the utopia seems unlikely and the past does not redeem; the works trace “perceived inadequacies in social and political systems” of the past and present (Booker 20). The specific fallen rivers quash any easy hope that these systems will change: the Golden Age has been drowned by a reservoir; a “golden goose” is all that remains (King 127). Booker observes that postmodernist works resist binary classification, tending towards Foucault’s sense of a “heterotopia” that embraces several possible worlds (144).

Many of these rivers are “real” and the works respond to treatment of those sites; this lessens dystopian defamiliarisation, but heightens an allied scepticism over the certainty of progress. Even resistance, cynicism or scepticism is questioned. Will they be effective? “If dystopian fiction is centrally informed by a skepticism toward utopian ideals, one might say that postmodernist dystopian fiction is informed by the same skepticism, but also an additional doubt that such skepticism can be truly effective” (Booker 141). Hope, in these contemporary works, does not spring eternal. There is only flux, uncertainty and ontological change that may (or may not) be for the better. Escape from death or pain is due to luck; chance and fate are paramount powers (see the Coyote in King’s work). Gritty survival and human cunning sustain the protagonists, but faith, like the river, has been polluted or blocked by the interventions of the (post)modern world. That resistance (or distance) rebounds against the modernist certainties of progress, which stand tall as concrete dams and re-engineering projects. But each writer recalls time before the dam: memory is a source of resistance and renewal.

Despite the damage, many of the works posit fallen rivers as currents of memory and story. Paying homage to the powers of rivered remembrance, the writers draw on older cultural patterns which, like the rivers, flow into the next millennium. Bruce Lincoln’s analysis of the Indo-European stories of rivered passage in to the Otherworld of the dead ends by affirming the kinds of remembrance each of the books performs. The Otherworld is present, even after the waters of Lethe wash over, “for those memories constantly flow back and become a source of the deepest wisdom and most profound inspiration” (31). Lincoln highlights the “central interface” of

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sequence *A River Sutra* (1993). Mehta braids narrative voices through recollection and sequential narrative to site the river as a place of repose, illumination and story. Entire books have been written about the mythologies of single Indian rivers. Once again these areas exceeds the scope of my thesis. I only needed to stand by the Mother Ganga and watch how the men and women entered that sacred water to know I was out of my depth.

None of this mentions the Nile, Amazon or Yangtze, for example. See Simon Winchester on the Yangtze, (the Three Gorges Dam is attracting a lot of attention and concern: the World Bank withdrew funding for environmental and engineering reasons). Redmond O’Hanlon’s *Congo Journey* (1997) is a wonderful, troubling and poignant account of the area which Joseph Conrad mythologised in *Heart of Darkness* and Florence Nightingale’s accounts of her trip on the Nile, *Letters from Egypt: A Journey on the Nile, 1849-1850* (London: Barnes & Jenkins, 1987) is a classic.



humans at the (manifold) river and the “recirculation” of energies and memories that occurs there. Lincoln continues to point out that such a movement sustains, indeed constitutes us:

[T]he memories of the departed are not without value for those who are yet living. The accumulated memories of the dead comprise the totality of human history. Preserved and appreciated, they are the source of true wisdom, the wisdom that is based on the full sweep of human experience rather than just the idiosyncratic events of one human life. In the last analysis, the present depends upon the past, the living upon the dead, and this world upon the other. Those who die do not just pass on, but continue to contribute to the sustenance of this world, as the world of the living draws strength, meaning and wisdom from the world of the dead, much as one draws water from a spring.

Lincoln’s point returns me to my own: rivers remain a source of transpiring memory and story, just as the world of the living learns from the departed and will bestow memory to the future. The unborn are also left the dams we build, markers of the ways we have read the past and the river. That way of seeing things comes under scrutiny in the next two chapters in particular and this dissertation in general.

Scepticism is a key component of revisionist praxis. The writers ahead engage in textualised revision, divining ways to sustain the fragile process of “recirculation” amongst story, community and river. Provisionality is built into their (into all) ways of seeing. When a river can be stopped, nothing is certain. The same applies when memory runs free.

## Chapter Three

### Damming Memory: Concrete and the Mindful River

#### Slow rivers to healing: *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*

Richard Flanagan's second novel, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997), represents the collapse of a dam as a healing event. Both Flanagan and Thomas King sketch the dams as negative forces: they are seen as unnecessary and disruptive. The dams in each novel are troped as markers to an attitude—a bulwark of ideas—that damage both the land and the people. Flanagan and King concur with David Young (who comments on New Zealand's Whanganui River): "The violence done to the people is also done to the land" (185). Those who build the dams are represented as flawed, their actions the work of a populace inured to the pain they cause the earth and each other. Flanagan's novel maps the psyche of a labourer at the dam, a man under enormous emotional pressure in a time of racial prejudice. The dam in the novel is a cipher the characters return to: its sheer wall and still reservoir act as reminders of all they retain of the past.

Memory is a key force in this novel, as it is in *Death of A River Guide*. Flanagan uses his characters' memories and experiences as one means of tracing the forces that constitute modern-day Australia in general, and contemporary Tasmania in particular. The conduit these forces run through is the protagonist Sonja Buloh. In 1989 (after an absence of over two decades) she returns to her childhood home. This is a journey into memories of the life she shared with her father in a series of hydro-electricity dam sites during the 1950s and 1960s. This confrontation with painful memories ends by affirming the processes of healing and the continuities of life and rivers. The encounter with personal memory flags an investigation into a region's past. Memory functions as a political tool, hauling inequities among race, gender and nation into the harsh antipodean light. Flanagan (and King, Duncan and Cody to a degree) take nationalism to task as a disruptive force. Much baggage is aired. Revisionist desire is dependent upon a sense of moral progress even as it derides forms of imperial prescription. "Postcolonialism internalizes an evolutionary model; it envisions a passing through progressive stages of unfreedom to freedom and of blindness to enlightenment" (Bennett 197). Flanagan's novels implicitly support this "passing through" which Donna Bennett envisions. They use memory as a motive force for the movement to awareness.

Remembrance, so integral to the death of Aljaz Cosini, fuels the journey Sonja Buloh makes to Tasmania in *One Hand*. The distant Sydney life that blocked memories of pain gives way against the "mystery" of her heart (18). "She was a stranger to her past" (16). The narrative

shapes the irruption of memory in the present. The dam cracks, and the release of pent-up forces heals. (Repression and dams come off badly in Flanagan's schema.)

In the 1950s Slovenians Maria and Bojan Buloh travel to Tasmania with their baby daughter Sonja. They have hopes of a new life after the horrors of World War Two and Nazi occupation. Given what they have endured, repression is a survival mechanism. But the memories continue to linger and do damage: Maria suicides in 1954. Now, "[l]ife had revealed itself to Bojan Buloh as the triumph of evil.... a journey downwards to what he now believed to be a true hell" (406). Suttree and Bojan share that dark pit. Sonja lives with her father in a succession of mean foster homes and labour camps filled with other immigrant workers, forming dams in the forested gorges of west Tasmania. Later they move to Hobart, to shacks and sleepouts, which are all the "reffos" can afford, and, more precisely, all the "wogs" are offered. This racism is endemic and Flanagan suggests it brutalises people: Sonja is regularly beaten by her drunken father through her teens. His logic dissolves until he cannot rescue it from the haze of numbness he has become: "*I hit her so she will know how bad it is and how bad I am.....*" (278). Drink is an amnesiac, but so is bigotry. Bojan is not given to expressions of feeling. Emotion has made no difference in the face of loss: "he believed tears were to the living what flowers were to the dead: proof only of the futility of feeling" (149). The novel's optimism resides in the eventual rejection of this position: despair is replaced by fragile hope. This movement can appear forced at times, because Flanagan *insists* on the redeeming power of revision. Father and daughter still move towards some reconciliation with the past, and therefore with each other. The process is a confrontation with memory.

As in *Death of A River Guide* memory and rivers are allied: the rivers Bojan helps to dam were once alive. Their imprisonment behind concrete is part of what Flanagan calls "the terrible revolution" of hydroelectric development (21). In his approach, dams are emblems of irresponsibility, sprung from a righteous boosterism that puts profit and assimilationist nationalism before all kinds of diversity. The novel casts the desire for power as a form of shonky and deluded nation building.

Progress is measured in the stilled waters of the reservoir; progress is a false promise because it does not look back to the past, it curtails full functionality in the present and future. McCarthy, Sinclair, King and Flanagan regard the "utopian-drive" (Jonas) as a form of amnesia. The drive is a great flaw figured in concrete and "the electricity transmission towers, strutting across this forlorn land like giant, muscle-bound warriors" (Flanagan, *One Hand* 22). They all affirm stories which give power back to people and rivers 'silenced' by progress (McCully). Flanagan's narrative makes room for such nuggets of revisionist opinion in the context of dialogue, imagery and pointed authorial comment. Flanagan identifies mythologies of progress to blame; he criticises a form of power that normalises place, race and memory under the aegis of nationalism and development.

## **Bodies of water: Memory and forgetting, Wilderness and domination**

Flanagan has directed *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* for the screen. (His screenplay was the basis for the novel, which was completed while awaiting film-funding). Not surprisingly there are elements of the cinematic in the novel's structure: the 85 chapters are almost scenes; each one averages just five pages in length. Each one focuses on a distinct time: the contemporary narrative of 1989-1990 (the time of reckoning), which is interleaved with memories from 1954 (the date Sonja's mother Maria vanishes from the hydro-camp), until 1967 (the date Sonja leaves for Sydney). This dual narrative propels the novel towards a series of revelations, highlighting the focus on memory and healing that marks Flanagan's work.

Flanagan's prose has a gravitas and precision befitting the burden of pain Sonja and Bojan share. In *Death of A River Guide*, the distortion of memory damages individuals and therefore communities; Flanagan extends this connection to the ways land and rivers suffer when memory is, in Illich's term, "desiccated". Recalling the past is the focus of *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*. The novel's ecological focus is as insistent as *River Guide*: the land is still the basis for the characters' existence, and the damage inflicted upon the non-human world scars the people who condone or do such work.

Chapter Four makes explicit the relation between psyche, memory and land (and a possible engagement with the work of Paul Carter). The colonial surveyors

came with their barefooted convict track cutters and they gave the land strange new names and by their naming and their describing they announced the coming of a terrible revolution. Where their indian-inked maps cut the new country into neat counties with quaint reassuring English names such as Cumberland and Bothwell, the surveyors' successors, the hydro-electricity engineers, made their straight lines reality in the form of the wires along which the new energy, electricity—the new god—hummed its song of promise, its seductive false prophecies that Tasmania would one day be Australia's Ruhr Valley. The island busily, almost hysterically tried to bury its memory of a recent, often hideous past in a future of heavy industry, of gigantic furnaces and enormous machines that were to be powered by the huge resources of water energy that the place possessed in abundance, and for a time the island was falsely praised as a virgin land without history. (21)

The prose is measured and even, the language incisive and sweeping: these are the pronouncements of the revisionist historian, woven into the fictional narrative. Tasmania is besmirched by the naming and engineering of the settlers, "falsely praised" and troped as a *tabula rasa*. In both novels Flanagan's fictional intent is the release of the penned memory of his homeland. The brutal truths of the past, like the rivers, are confined. Truth and wholeness are allied with wild rivers and unscarred, respected land.<sup>8</sup> Flanagan suggests our desires are marked

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<sup>8</sup> This is a stance borne of the profound revisions of Australia's past carried out through various media across the country. This is evident in work by writers such as Paul Carter (*The Road to Botany Bay, Travelling in a New Country*), Robert Hughes (*The Fatal Shore*), Carmel Bird (*The Stolen Generation*), Peter Hay, Thomas Keneally,

upon the land. The ways rivers are *used* points to the human attitude to that place and the future. Dam builders and novelists reveal attitudes through the ways that they use a river. Land and river are employed as ways into the psyche that in turn shapes the land. The two-way traffic between inner and outer worlds allows green polemics a place within character development: his anger is real and present because the dams are. This description above precedes an account of a temporary fusion between the State's official amnesia and "those unfortunate enough to labour at" the dams. The denial of history by Tasmania encourages the labourers "to leave their own individual pasts behind." There is a tendency to homogenise past beliefs into a solely progressive vision. Flanagan's work has always opposed hyperactive amnesia. Damage to land and people is linked: "the destruction of the environment is also a process of social destruction" (Pybus and Flanagan 169).

Flanagan continues his metaphorical investigation into progressive zeal; then, as now, economic growth and free market productivity are seen as new panaceas. But they leave people and places ruined.

By such alchemy the dull fear of the past was transformed into electric power, the coveted gold of the new age, and at the bottom of the alchemists' false distilling all that remained were the pestilential by-products of that magical process for which nobody cared: the cracked natural world and broken human lives, both dregs easily discounted when their insignificant cost was tallied against the growing treasure of the burgeoning hydro-electricity grid, and no-one counted the growing cost and no-one thought that tomorrow might be worse than today, least of all on that day so long ago when Sonja's parents had steamed into the port of Hobart with their sixteen-month old daughter, at what they thought was the end of their long flight from Europe. (22)

Great portents of failure are suggested because of what has been wrought on the island. This long, didactic sentence is making a clear point: the family enters a place of forgetting. The wronging of memory blocks the healing the Bulohs need; the racism they encounter stems hope further. As an adult revisiting west Tasmania, Sonja affirms the mantra that has kept her safe in "sly" Sydney ("You are not your past.... You are your dreams" [23]) because the clearcut forests

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short stories by Archie Weller, work by Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Mudrooroo, Ruby Langford (*Don't Take Your Love To Town*), and Robbie Walker, as well as plays by Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Bob Maza, Eva Johnson and others. Also of note in shaping a revisionist ethos are Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, *The Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (1990), Adam Shoemaker, *Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988* (1989) and Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces*. Australia has latched on to the post-colonial issues Flanagan grapples with; part of the success of his second novel is the way it accords with critical and cultural (but not governmental—John Howard's conservative government has refused to apologise for past injustices) trends over the reckoning with the nation's past.

David Bunn, discussing colonial South African poet Thomas Pringle notes that the displacements and desires of colonialism ensure the colonial "poet requires two cognitive maps to help order the colonial prospect. The first is called up by memory.... The second is a sort of negotiated compromise, a transitional landscape that uses a particular form of ideological containment" (139). The key point is that Lopez, Flanagan and Duncan, King, Moore and Sanders, for example, now know the former ideological containment is inappropriate in the post-colonial site if it is to ever become *postcolonial*. Hence the appeal of rivers running *free*: dams, as the containing forces of the dregs of the modernist desire to control, are ideological and physical containers *par excellence*, ready and waiting to accommodate all revisionist scorn. Memory no longer calls up pleasant prospects. Flanagan's reckoning with the past is geared towards a fairer future for people and watershed.

demonstrate how she has been scarred by denial. The return to the place of trapped memory changes her: the place works on her mind in ways she cannot fathom. “Sonja was in flight, not away from who she was but back toward it” (141). Body, memory and ecology fuse again as Flanagan describes the remnants:

Beyond this dead land of towers and sheep Sonja drove, into the highlands, only recently cleared by the woodchippers, leaving the land as if after a war: a shock as far as the eye could see of churned up mud and ash, punctuated here and there by a massive charred stump, still smouldering weeks after the burn-off of the waste rainforest that could not be made into tissue paper for Japan. Parts of me are dead, Sonja thought, looking at the wastelands around her. She drove on. (23)

Right on cue Sonja sees the top of a dam, the “vast” reservoir and the forest beyond:

That land did not welcome her or care for her, any more than it had cared for her parents who had come to live here so long before. And yet this land had shaped her, shaped them all.  
And they it. (24)

Flanagan’s one-line paragraphs are there to make a point. As the chapter concludes he presents a credo that affirms history, genes and the intangible force of human emotion; the former “shapes” but the latter “the great irrational—the great *human* forces—the destructive power of evil, the redeeming power of love,” are the ones that “determine” people. “But all this lay before Sonja like the waters held back by the dam: immense, mysterious, waiting” (25).

The fourth chapter has established a series of connections among people, place and memory: the rest of the novel draws out the integrity of his position, and it does so by beginning with the most obvious proof of Flanagan’s single-line paragraph: the dam.

This dam is now “aged” and corroded, just as Bojan is; blackened with moss, it appears like the rock of the gorge. But it remains impressive in scale. Once again Flanagan depicts the dam as representative of a way of thinking.<sup>9</sup> But in Tasmania the land seems to be reclaiming the structure:

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<sup>9</sup> As large (and even giant) dams gained popularity they spread from North America and Russia, their bulk sprouting in California and Washington before facing American opposition in the 1960s and 1970s. By then the religion of “the new god” electricity moved ahead of consultants and massive engineering firms who built—and build—in India, South America, Africa and elsewhere, fuelled by IMF funds and packages of economic overhaul. Dams are part of the economy-building ethos that is often pushed as a component of aid and loan packages. Now, Arundhati Roy notes, dams are “undemocratic.” Ecological and other opposition to the dam industry means the industry “in the first world (worth more than £12 billion year) is in trouble and out of work. So it’s exported to the third world, along with their other waste like old weapons, superannuated aircraft carriers and banned pesticides” (Roy). Dams *are* markers of a particular ideology in the present, a faith in progress that nurtures the need for consumption while squandering resources of the future. Dams can help communities in some ways, but they can also disrupt and damage them. Both Arundhati Roy and Flanagan argue that when the destruction of cultural uniqueness and biodiversity becomes viable, things are moving too fast. The dams have spread from America and leave their mark, just as free market economics has transformed the ways the world does business, accumulating and

The mossed and slimed dam seemed to her a relic from another age—an historical oddity as curious and as inexplicable as a Mayan temple in a Mexican jungle—part of a dream that sought to transform the end of the world into a place just like all others, and failed....

There gathered in the pungent damp air about her the sense of imprisoned souls that cluster in the shadowed bases of such vast wet edifices, and that pressing dankness heightened within her a feeling of premonition. (26)

The plaque bolted into the dam commemorates those who built the dam and “helped harness nature for the betterment of mankind” (27), though the rest of the novel describes the immigrant labourers as receiving precious little thanks or respect from Australians on site. Sonja stands at the clammy base of the dam, its calcite stalactites “like tears” on its surface. Here Flanagan pushes the association between the river and metaphor, inner and outer worlds. A painful memory prompts Sonja to embrace the curve of concrete. Struck by the force of her flashback, her ‘organic’ release of memory begins at a place the organic world is reclaiming; she observes the dam’s “desire to render everything around it as industrial—even nature itself. But she could see that the aging dam was decaying back into the natural world, rather than, as its makers had intended, the other way around” (27). His analogy is clear: Sonja’s own intention is dissolving and a kind of inevitable teleology is unfolding. Binding his protagonists to events in the watershed of time and place allows Flanagan to present ecological and personal restoration as natural givens.

The dam still has “the power not simply to make electricity but to summon visions of another time, a distant time of triumphant belief and total confidence.” Sonja, feeling this, imagines the dam collapsing, then realises the truth of the intuition: “that what is made by people can break” (28). Flanagan hints at the fragility and interdependence of human effort in the face of nature and Sonja’s own ‘breakthrough’ to acceptance and natural expression; Flanagan presses his point: to heal the soul one must heal the river. These early chapters form the basis for later scenes and Flanagan’s belief in the intertwined destinies of people and land.

From the “ashes” of the past springs the “forest” of memory (29). *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* makes use of recurrent imagery to stress an ecosystem of ideas and their impact on the land.<sup>10</sup> The relations are flagged by the repetition of images, of a series of colours, a porcelain

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juggling the bulk of debt and dependence. Giant dams become structures nations pin their hopes on if the national image appears to warrant them. China’s Three Gorges Dam is the latest example of this rash assertion of independence: as foreign backing evaporated construction was taken over by local companies. The United States, Soviet Union, India and China have excelled in matching concrete dams to national pride. But the catastrophic floods of 1998 and 1999 in the Yangtze valley and Bangladesh demonstrate the dangers of short-term plans and enormous population pressures: watershed damage affects rivers and communities. Flanagan argues (through Sonja) that something similar occurred in Tasmania in the 1950s, as “the new god” moved across the island, changing it forever by ingratiating the area into the homogeneity of the market’s dominion over rivers, a practice repeated the world over. Chinese forestry experts recently visited New Zealand to learn about replanting techniques that can alleviate flood damage, after conceding “massive deforestation” caused extra watershed and flood damage (*The Dominion* Wellington, NZ. August 24 1998, 6). The Worldwatch Institute has released a report that highlights the role deforestation played in damage in the Yangtze River watershed, in Bangladesh, Honduras and Nicaragua (*The Dominion* 30 Nov 1998, 5).

shard, a pair of red shoes, a river, dam or the colour of a length of wood or the dense air of rainstorm. (The novel's beginning as a filmscript does tend to linger, occasionally overstressing the visual and symbolic language of the image.) Standing there at the dam Sonja allows herself to remember, even though it is some time before this process will offer the "reassurance" she desires (28). The first rush of memory replays her mother's voice: "'to have a future you must forget the past'" (31). For the traumatised Buloh family, this is a credo that life gnaws away at as the self looks to exist beyond sheer survival. Like the dam (which is slowly being taken over by the gorge that surrounds it), Flanagan represents memory as a force with its own organic drive, pushing truth before it into the light. Some shreds of the mythic remain in the water: the river is a kind of truth. It is a truth that refutes the arbitrary promise of a better world, a promise trumpeted by the politician at Bojan's naturalisation ceremony, a ceremony of jingoism and shabby pride.<sup>11</sup>

Flanagan prefers the more subtle cycles of birth, love and death, and the enduring presence of the rainforest that would cover the temporary dwellings of Tullah where Bojan now works (the small hydro-town is a "sour swamp" in decline [51]). The forest is a potent symbol: it was the forest in which Maria died which now faces its own clearcut death. The dam of blocked trust and trapped memory are just two of the images that echo within the book. By choosing to focus on the dam I acknowledge one facet of the story that represents the triumphant utopian-drive both Flanagan and Hans Jonas wish to challenge. Asceticism and wilderness are the alternative aesthetic, a kind of ecological atonement and revenge that attempts to undo from within the ravages inflicted without. The sea-change of consciousness may be enough to begin the decommissioning of dams. Flanagan plants a redemptive and healing seed in the minds of the reader, a motif of confrontation, confession and absolution consistent with the Christian ethos latent in the West.

Flanagan challenges the short-term desire for profit by tracing its effect on Sonja and Bojan: the novel records an ecology of memory and story, tracing how these and the land shape the past and present for both characters. An 'ecology of memory and story' functions in the sense that *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* argues we inhabit and are inhabited by our pasts: the stories we dwell in are a part of the interpreted landscape. Tasmania's landscape has been altered by individuals on the ground, but it is the concerted effect of ideology that has determined whether the rivers run free or follow the whim of "the new god" electricity. Flanagan suggests the individual labourer is not to blame for the silenced river (Bojan loves the wild rivers he dams.<sup>12</sup>) Instead, the

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<sup>10</sup> The reviewer on New Zealand's National Radio begged to differ, suggesting the novel was overly repetitious to the point of distraction. (*Good Morning New Zealand*. RNZ. Wellington. 28/10/98).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Hay played the politician in Flanagan's film version of the story, reiterating the kind of arrogance and racism he derides in his article on Port Arthur (see the section on *Death of A River Guide*). The film's cinematography stresses the sheer scale of the dam and its calcified face, splicing in archival construction footage.

<sup>12</sup> "She [Sonja] asked him how he felt about all the rivers being dammed, whether he thought it good or bad, and he grew garrulous.

'Of course it's bad,' he said. 'It's fucken wrong. I tell you, I used to walk up the banks of that Murchison River and the Mackintosh River and the Pieman River, up that bloody rainforest and I love it up there. All fucken day and then sometimes even the night and the next day. I'd just make myself a nest like a fucken bird I would



dam is evidence of what he calls “Tasmanian madness—the bastard issue of a century and a half of despair cleaving to ever more outrageous fantasies” (137). Flanagan outlines his brief here: to document the cause and consequence of this unique condition, and thus what it means to be Tasmanian. It often entails being at the mercy of larger forces and fads, of aping the airs of others and denying the past (as Aljaz Cosini’s great-great grandfather did) or building projects with dubious economic or environmental merit, to manufacture a cultural pride rather than nourish it creatively. Flanagan does not cease to deride the decisions of the past (and present), to condemn environmental collapse and human greed in forthright terms. He charts the individual response to the powerful forces of prejudice against race or river. His minor characters seem split between sketches of memory-wracked immigrants and largely racist, amnesiac locals. Yet the hunger to remember can create bitter wars each immigrant has experienced.

### **Race-land-memory**

A Polish labourer makes the link between dams, psychic dysfunction, racism and false hope explicit, just before Maria Buloh’s body is found in 1954. The workers are being trucked to the dam site through the snow-scudded morning. Bojan is very worried over Maria’s whereabouts. Flanagan uses the dialogue of these Europeans on the eve of their naturalisation ceremony to critique the kind of rhetoric in the ceremony on the one hand, and describe the burden of memories of horror on the other: two extremes of hope and despair, both damaging and full of consequence. One labourer goes too far; his is a truth that speaks to the other polarity, amnesiac neo-colonialism:

‘They say the tallest hardwood trees in the world are not far from here,’ said the bearded Pole over the truck’s roar.

Bojan, attempting to regain his composure, looked up and forced out a laugh. ‘Lucky for the Aussies we drown them all with the big dam.’

‘What the bloody hell they want all this bloody electricity for anyway?’ asked the Albanian.

Bojan waved dramatically at the bush. ‘For all their bloody industry, of course, you wog fool.’...

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make this nest beautiful it was bloody beautiful branches of myrtle lined with soft dead-man fern fronds. I would catch trout and cook them for tea and for breakfast when I woke so beautiful I sleep ...” (58). Bojan’s Australian (he does not sully his mother tongue with swearing, preferring to do so in Italian when younger) is a far cry from the reverential visionary prose of Lopez’s *River Notes*, but the same feelings are there: the love for the place, its healing power. Bojan even sees “a fucken Tassie tiger” and wonders if he has simply been hitting the schnapps and lexia too hard the night before, given the creatures are meant to be extinct. In his disclaimer on the copyright page Flanagan reveals “I did see a Tasmanian tiger at the age of six in Hellyer Gorge, but it made no conversation with me.”

'They [the Pole says] think if they get the electricity then the industry will come, and then they will be like Europe, then they will have factories instead of forests, battlefields instead of potato fields, rivers that run with blood instead of water.' ...

The Pole was bitter. So were most of them. But they did not want to hear it. ...

But the bearded Pole continued. He spoke not so much to them as to himself, because he knew none wanted even to begin to think that they were all complicit in what they had left. 'Europe is a cancer,' said the bearded Pole finally. 'It spreads death everywhere.' (393-4)

Memory and land twine. We humans are heirs and progenitors of a planet scarred with dammed rivers, poisoned rivers, gashed atmospheres and teeming poverty. Every fear we have is branded onto the earth. Every need we nourish has its consequence. This broken place of pain is Flanagan's Gaia: here everything felt is seen in the land in time, and all the land offers enters into the mind. The landscape is transformed by human intervention: forests, fields and rivers lose their restorative presence. Flanagan's Tasmania, scarred by desire and denial, speaks back to these men in its remnant wooded majesty just as its broken stumps and ashes speak to Sonja thirty-five years later. Parts of her are dead; parts of her homeland have died; memory can heal or poison.

Bojan's furied ossification of character stresses Flanagan's alliance across people, labour, memory and land. After his wife Maria suicides in the forest, Bojan overworks, numbed, yet marvelling "at what he could hold within himself and not break, so much drink and so much more, as if he were transforming into the very dam he daily toiled upon. With this realisation he came close to weeping, because he recognised it as the shadow thrown by the huge shapeless things that had changed him" (65). Thirty five years later he reflects on "the giant wave" of emotion that can still "swamp" him, "this watery wall of memory which prickled his flesh nightly" (106). In 1954 his only response is to keep on working.<sup>13</sup>

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The rest of the novel focuses on the demeaning effect of assimilation and repression, Sonja's 1990 visit and resettlement and a return through memory that helps father and daughter. Sonja feels

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<sup>13</sup> At this time a film crew come on behalf of the Hydro-Commission to record the dam's construction, a "monumental, half-completed, half-destroyed" site. The editors check the rushes, seeing shots of Bojan smashing rock "like a demon" and installing intake filters that seem to "'imprison'" him, and are awed by his frenzied work (69). The image of enclosure returns ten pages later for Sonja as an adult, and in reference to the row of beer glasses in the pub which claim her father over the decades. The imagery in the novel is resonant and occasionally the echoes are very insistent. The toy teapot Sonja breaks after her mother dies is of the same design as the blouse she buys and wears to leave Hobart.

The dam site is described in terms that reduce or scorn human efforts to change the river: the steam shovels "gnawed like rodents into the rocks," the roads appear "as if slash-marked by a mugger's knife," the workers as "ants" or "puppies" beneath the edifice (68). The chief editor is delighted; he feels Tasmania has at last arrived on the world scene ("'It could be some vast Soviet hydro scheme in Siberia or the Urals. Could be the Hoover dam'" [67]), whereas Flanagan suggests it has merely succumbed to its homogenous corrupting desire for more of everything except the past.

guilty and unworthy. For Bojan the self-hatred is fed by his wife's suicide and the racism he encounters in Australia.<sup>14</sup> He demands they speak "Australian" at home, not Slovenian. He buys an encyclopaedia set, which Sonja reads through without really learning anything. After a promising relationship and near-marriage with another woman (which Sonja unthinkingly rejects), "Bojan forsook Jean's love and resumed his interrupted affair with the bottle" (235).

The beatings begin and both are soon caught up in a cycle of violence and acquiescence that they cease to control; to confront it is to face an apparently greater pain. They are controlled "by greater things which grasped them.... nothing they did seemed to add up to anything and their agony only returned each morning, stronger, worse, more unapproachable" (315). Their behaviour compounds their isolation; Flanagan's reinforces his assertion that their violence stems from a contemporary climate of racism. This causal link suggests Tasmania bred a self-hatred in him. (Bojan's childhood is not figured as a source of problems, though the War is. But Tasmania does not help them heal and it does not welcome.) For Bojan's story the only environment that affects him is Tasmania; recollection is discouraged. Dams pile upon dams, pain upon earlier war and conflict.<sup>15</sup>

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Though the bulk of the flashback scenes in the novel move away from the rivers where Bojan worked in the 1950s, the image of the dam remains potent, and Flanagan continues to track how a place works its way into the bones. Sonja returns to Tasmania to find her father working in Tullah on a new hydro-project: the men, without women, entertainment or comfort, are lonely (and wary of admitting this.<sup>16</sup>) The land itself is "aching" and these men know this only too well (174). Bojan—this man who has seen rivers froth pink with human blood during the war—refuses to trust. What he has seen belies any easy faith: like McCarthy, Flanagan does not believe in easy

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<sup>14</sup> Desperate to make a new life for his daughter he endures Australian cuisine ("all the while cursing the infernal, comic backwardness of Australians and all the awful things they mistook for food"—in this case baked beans on toast, with salad [201]).

<sup>15</sup> Murray Bail identifies Flanagan's position in his own novel *Eucalyptus*: "Every country has its own landscape which deposits itself in layers on the consciousness of its citizens, thereby cancelling the exclusive claims made by all other national landscapes" (qtd. in Park, "After the Fever" 11).

<sup>16</sup> There is a strong fatalism that accrues in the work site, a combination of stubborn defiance and resignation that dissolves individual will in the face of other forces of progress. "In the end what mattered was only that there seemed no escape, nothing really but death or grog. . . . A sense that they were as doomed as the trees that they felled for the geologists' tracks, as the rocks they blasted to gravel, as the rivers they were labouring to drown, and all this tended only to make them feel that the rivers and rocks and trees like them had had it coming for a long time and deserved to be destroyed" (181). Les A. Murray observes that the land's "vast indifference can drive us to frenzies of desecration and revenge" and he speaks of Australia's "different laws" that resist the easy importation of ideology upon the land. Flanagan's argument that the land eventually reclaims its own balance supports this, even if continued resource-extraction fails to.

options. Bojan has reached rock bottom by the time Sonja journeys all the way to Tullah to tell him of her pregnancy. He has borne too much without the words for expression; Flanagan argues that racism warps character and confidence. By the time Sonja decides to stay and face her past,<sup>17</sup> Bojan wants to vanish, to discard self and care. He “wished he could dissolve in the driving rain and wash away into the rivers they would soon fuck up forever. Fuck the rivers, thought Bojan” (248). Flanagan links self-hatred with the destruction of the rivers; the work is demeaning because the individual is compromised, prostrate before the whims of global market consumerism, intent on drowning the forests. Flanagan implies the constant stress has reduced Bojan’s capacity for humility and respect; he does not care at this moment; he forgets how much he has loved the rivers (and the daughter) he has helped to stem.

Truth and the river will out. Sonja is waiting for answers after journeying for hours and years. From this point of stubborn anger comes a series of revelations: that her maternal grandfather was killed by the SS (this she knew) and that he was killed in front of her mother, her aunt and grandmother. The SS raped twelve-year-old Maria Buloh, Sonja’s mother. Bojan is fiercely proud of the fact she never told him this (but the whole village knew nevertheless). Silencing memory can be a form of dignity. But it is a tactic that has not served Bojan or Sonja well. Bojan’s outburst of anger and sadness terrifies Sonja, and begins a process of personal upheaval. The dam weakens and the figurative alliance between psyche and locus grows, until the land is made to speak as insistently as Kinseth’s river, until the application of green ideology is as insistent as the earlier desire to clear the land bare. Wilderness is not left alone to remain uninterpreted, solely ‘other’ and beyond language; Flanagan ensures it is taken into his fold of story and imagery. His associative links are clear in subsequent scenes as inner barricades crumble.

Bojan imagines himself as “an old tree at the edge of a new hydro lake ... full of canker and parasitic insects, its base rotted almost out by the rising waters, its crown no longer luxuriant but only heavy” (341). His work and life have brought him down, stripped him of hope and made confrontation with the past inevitable. As the emotional force of the story peaks, so do the waters in the reservoir. Bojan resolves to travel to Sonja’s side for atonement, for reconciliation and for renewal. During the long and rain-lashed drive he doubts if any of these things are possible; he has become as heedless and beholden to other forces as a flooding river. As he wanted, his self is becoming jetsam. “Beyond seeing, the rain scrubbed the mountains and forests and filled the rivers. Moving things that did not want to be moved but whose destiny it was to be reshaped and reformed” (343). Flanagan has been building up to this scene ever since Sonja hugged the

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<sup>17</sup> When she returns to Tasmania she expects little. But her memory forces her to remain and confront what she has hidden, what her father has hidden. At the airport (enlarged to accommodate jumbo jets that fail to arrive) Sonja tells her family friend Helvi “‘The truth is rarely worth knowing. . . It hurts. Lies are easier” and prepares to escape forever (139). But that memory arrests her transit and sends her racing back through the departure lounge “the cyclonic swirl of people arriving and departing, arriving and departing, everyone now a reffo, fleeing the nameless, the unspeakable.... Sonja was in flight, not away from who she was but back toward it” (141).

blackened and fallible dam in chapter four. Sixty-five chapters later the landscape has become the topography of the heart. Everything that happens to Bojan in the next life-wrenching hour affirms this with a power and awe befitting such change.

He finds himself turning towards Butler's Gorge ("the one place he had vowed never to return") as the rain comes down in torrents (343). When he sees the towering dam it is spilling water, breaching at last the cycle of "exploited restraint" that is its *modus operandi* and the status of the oppressed worker. "This dam, which he had with his sweat helped raise so many years ago, whose concrete felt entwined with his very flesh, whose form with his soul had set like rock—this dam was meant to hold everything within. But there it was, water falling with a fury, and he thought he had never seen anything so extraordinary in his life" (345). Bojan finds the key for an unexpected personal release as the dam bursts. Individual and site are one. He takes a pee and then tries to run for the car, and finds "he had turned into concrete. But behind him a huge wild river was pressing and he was breaking, so slowly and inexorably breaking, and what he had held back for so many years was no longer able to be contained" (345-6). As the first lumps of concrete thud onto the gorge Bojan transforms: "[h]e who had been stone and water bursting into dust and vapour" (346). The scale of natural events represents the intensity of psychological transformation. Nature triumphs; revenge is at hand. Older balances are restored in minutes as the dam cracks. Ed Abbey's faith in the power of the river's graceful longevity—and its purifying power—is realised downunder. Bojan's decrepit car tears up the hill, "an old trout ungracefully leaping back towards the dam" (347). The road switches back to reach higher ground and he has to face the dam. Flanagan creates a number of climactic moments in the novel, which are the result of the accretion of events, explosions of water, memory and feeling.<sup>18</sup> The wild river is a healing force; its release augments the status of wilderness as a curative site and allows a stunning transpersonal shift:

At first—though only very briefly—he thought the road was heading straight into a cliff. And then he realised that the cliff was advancing on him, quicker than he was advancing toward it, and he saw that the cliff was a huge wall of water into which he was driving, and he knew the utter strangeness of that moment was as inexpressible as its horror was complete.

And Bojan Buloh, feeling that this was his fate, unavoidable and predestined, no longer wished to flee from the shadow of his fear, but rather to complete his journey into its vast mysterious heart. (348)

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<sup>18</sup> There are several key moments: firstly, Maria's departure from the hut in 1954, and the terrible revelation of her body 79 chapters later (itself foreshadowed and resonant with preceding images of lace, snow, edelweiss [an image of note in *Death of A River Guide* too] and burgundy colours) and Sonja's understanding of the event (and some possible causes), in 1990; thirdly, the first time Sonja is beaten by Bojan, and the chapter in which she leaves Tasmania, a trajectory subsumed under Bojan's immersion in alcohol; all of these impulses toward revelation and disclosure pivot around memory. The dam provides a physical context and metaphoric correlative for the formation and dissolution of memory, feeling and self-identity. Its structure is associated with negativity. I had hoped the film would feature this scene, but sadly (for Flanagan too, I imagine) it did not, the film budget being less than titanic.

“Strangely resigned” to his death, accepting it as a fair return for his “wretched” self, he drives on towards the unshackled river. At the moment he expects death he is redeemed, saved by a few feet of altitude; the water rushes below and Bojan understands grace, “an angel granted a second life. Behind and below him sounds, strangely gentle and beautiful, of rock and valley washing away in water, of concrete tossed as light as water foam.” Somehow the sight of that running river, free at last, allows him to see, with “measureless lucidity” (349). He drives through the storm. “Bojan Buloh was pushing on, pushing back...at and through all the apparitions of horrors that beset him that night” the terrible memories of loss and sadness, facing them with courage and humility (351). He moves (surprisingly quickly) from the “nightmarish hallucination” of the decades since Maria’s suicide, with Sonja’s help, to the realisation that new life is continuing with the child she carries inside her womb (368).

### **The imagery of eco-fantasy**

As an external that we approach and avoid, ‘the natural’ has also been constructed as a source of meaning and truth: something to be valued, cherished.... Consider, in short, the presumption that what is natural is really real and even normal, that the structure of nature has existential and moral significance.... These positions [holistic deep ecology and human-centred resource management] rest upon an appeal to nature either as an ethical model or as a pliable field of human action.

(Bennett and Chaloupka ix, xi).

Writers in this thesis with an ecological (and thus<sup>19</sup> pro-wild river) bent find redemptive power in the image of a broken dam; the collapse satisfies the penchant for continuity many of these river-writers favour. It reminds all of the reach and power of the natural world and serves to place human endeavour in a geo- and ecological perspective. To imagine the rebirth of a river is one way of transcending the grief and anger dams evoke for Sanders, Abbey, King or McKay (for example). In Flanagan’s case the collapse of the dam at Butlers Gorge is an eco-fantasy, an imaginative triumph for the freed forces of nature. Flanagan invents a moment of imaginative

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<sup>19</sup> I would argue the writers I consider largely adopt an *ecological* stance rather than an environmental one. This distinction draws on Andrew Dobson’s work on more radical green politics. What he calls his “rough and ready” definition is as follows: “environmentalism argues for a managerial approach to environmental problems, secure in the belief that they can be solved without fundamental changes in present values or patterns of production or consumption, while ecologism holds that a sustainable and fulfilling existence presupposes radical changes in our relationship with the non-human natural world, and in our mode of social and political life. The Queen of England does not suddenly become a political ecologist by having her fleet of limousines converted to lead-free petrol” (1). Dobson’s distinction is blurred in most mainstream media.

redemption and release for Bojan and the river, irrespective of the realities of the dams in the area. Stories hold sway here, not concrete.<sup>20</sup> One may see the collapse of the dam as ironic, for the Gordon River country remains dammed in numerous places. The Clark Dam on Butler's Gorge still stems the Derwent River; the town of Tullah is near the Mackintosh Dam; the Mackintosh and Murchison Rivers are in turn tributaries of the dammed Pieman. But Flanagan is more concerned with the ways stories can reform consciousness and reveal the truths of interconnection that dams obscure: namely that life continues, free rivers inspire and damming them reflects an outdated ideology. This paradigm is damaging to watersheds and to individuals, because it silences a natural process of emotional and fluvial relation and sustenance. He has cherished this image of collapse because it allows a full explosion of awareness, even enlightenment, for Bojan. This assertion of Lopez's "'network of agreements'" and the river's "dynamic equilibrium" are key to creative defiance and vital to many river-writers (*River Notes* 121; Huser 201).

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As the story closes, Flanagan reminds the reader that life returns to the river valley, and to the Buloh family. By giving birth at the end of the novel Sonja places her faith in the continuity of new life. Working with juxtaposition, the birth of her child is given figurative meaning. The final contraction is a release and journey; the dam breaks and life and the river continue. Flanagan's insistent subject rhyme links this moment with the "old trout" of a car in which Bojan outran the flood. "She was at that moment possessed of the foolish fancy that her womb was some giant rainbow trout returning home in huge skipping leaps upriver, each leap traversing yet another previously impossible fall, and each fall another person ... another place ... another time, now all only water and stone to be traversed" (405-6).

The shedding of self (returning thematically to Lopez's dissolution of ego or Duncan's portrait of the hooked Gus Orviston) is the book's most faith-filled scene. Scepticism fades and a touch of modernist hope enters; the continuity of human and fluvial life affirms the work of remembrance and healing. Doubt crumbles with the dam and the birth. This journey back in time dissolves inner barriers as Sonja's defences crumble and she confronts her future. Personal agonies become political. They are swept into the tide of history they help construct, and are reclaimed, reformed and retold in "this new lifetime" (418). Everything is connected. Time folds

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<sup>20</sup> Flanagan would not be satisfied by Hydro Australia's supposed care for the landscape: their promotional material notes (with regard to the King power development of the late 1980s) that "[g]reat care was taken to reduce the impact of the power scheme on the environment. Revegetation programmes involved the planting of about 25 000 trees and the reduction of over 100 hectares around construction sites" ("Pieman River"). He would not be satisfied about the return of some scrubby trees after two years: the river is dammed and with it the lifeblood of the watershed.

Flanagan elaborates in his short preface on the copyright page; the book only shares the names of certain areas: "for those of you who know otherwise forgive me the occasional liberties I have taken with the geography of my home and the history of my people in the hope of writing something that might possibly be of entertainment and interest to you, and which might hopefully illuminate some moment of truth—which, after all, resides never in facts but only in stories" (ii).

and spirals around moments as discrete and interdependent as droplets of water. The river flows and new life emerges on the gorge walls. This is the place Sonja (who is “now circling time,” 415) takes her daughter: where it all began and (recirculating) will continue: the trees have returned and the river, like memory, again runs free.

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Flanagan’s rivers are accorded the status of spurned heroes resurrected to take their rightful place in the watershed and the mind. Smashing the dam restores standing and voice to the river. Flanagan restores (and restories) the river’s rights. Atonement is made and his resolution offers real hope. Perhaps it is only in the fictional realm. Will eco-atonement, redemption and restoration remain on the page? Flanagan suggests a national catharsis must occur before the rivers run free and the nation is healed into honesty. Ugly barriers to truth and memory should be dismantled and a confrontation with the repressed will then somehow heal land and psyche.

Flanagan’s revisionist *Death of A River Guide* confronts regional and national wounds that fester through denial. Continuing his analysis of Tasmanian racisms, the shift to the immigrant experience excoriates prejudice against other cultures and against wilderness. The racism has seeped across generations, leaving neo-colonial dregs. This psychic transfer, embedded in language, the vision of history and story and the human impact on a bioregion is a “cancer” that shapes the way the world is seen, storied and known.

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I now turn to a novel—*Green Grass, Running Water*—that tropes the recent past as a dystopia for the First Nations of Canada and Native Americans of the United States. The changes wrought by the language and mythology of (neo-) imperialism on their lands and cultures has rapidly defamiliarised tradition and memory. Yet that tradition is the basis for the novel’s form and perspective. Centred on the Native world (he is part-Cherokee), King’s book is distanced from the White, mainstream centre (while being caught up in it): “dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (Booker 19). *Green Grass, Running Water* questions, upsets and revisions the “natural and inevitable,” which in many countries is the White norm. Racism affects rivers and tribal practices, altering geographic and cultural space. Stereotypes and dams erupt across King’s depiction of Turtle Island, a landmass marked by recent borders that cut across traditional territories and White cultural mores (that cut across cultures). King’s route to re-education uses humour; the blade goes in when you laugh.

The politics of dams and rivers affect every aspect of the watershed; the fictional river is a political site. The next section continues to examine the politics of multiple claims to the river. Coyote’s claim is just one of them.

## Dam Native.<sup>21</sup>

### Thomas King: humour, vengeance and the power of ideas

Herb Manuel's story "Transformers" opens with mention of a certain Coyote who appears to have done a lot of work across the continent. Manuel is from the Nlha7káp̓mx Nation of the Fraser River. The Coyote's affinity with the Fraser is, in Thomas King's work, extended to other waterways. There are many rivers Coyote has "done." Here is Herb Manuel's retelling:

During the time that Coyote was transforming he brought the salmon up from the Coast and then he veered off and went north up the Fraser River and up the Thompson River—and he went through the Shushwaps and then he went across the border and brought the salmon up the Columbia River. He done that river all the way up to the Rockies. He led the fish over there as far as they can go—different species of fishes, as he went along. And he transformed different places as he went by. (Hanna and Henry 78)

Language may have fallen into static, Mnemosyne-leeching text; rivers may have been dammed, and dystopias realised. But King reminds us that with Coyote afoot (apaw?), things will keep on transforming. Tragedy is not the only mode of existence or response. Memory and flow have not been entirely stemmed. Time and the rivers create an unbroken whole: King's work unshackles both from mythologies embedded in the language and rivers of the land.

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"It's the idea of a dam that's dangerous."  
Eli Stands Alone, *Green Grass, Running Water*.

I am told by many of you that I must forgive and so I shall  
after an Indian woman puts her shoulder to the Grand Coulee Dam  
and topples it. I am told by many of you that I must forgive  
and so I shall after the flood waters burst each successive dam  
downriver from the Grand Coulee. I am told by many of you  
that I must forgive and so I shall after the floodwaters find  
their way to the mouth of the Columbia River as it enters the Pacific  
and causes all of it to rise ...

Sherman Alexie, from "The Powwow at the End of the World"

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I wish to extend my thanks to Jane Flick and Margery Fee for their help with information about the many tributaries of King's work.

<sup>21</sup> The New Zealand Hip-Hop group Dam Native have been a consistent presence in forming creative South Pacific and Maori focused responses (towards politics, racism and the questionable process of treaty-honouring) through contemporary forms of popular music. Their rhyming beats deliver insightful revisions of times past and present in accessible forms. King does the same thing with his fiction: humour and irony is favoured over didactic blame alone.

Thomas King's fiction grapples with the possibilities and consequences of cultural memory, nationalism and rhetoric. "I think of myself as a dead serious writer. Comedy is simply my strategy" ("Interview," 1994, 6).<sup>22</sup> His second novel, the *apparently* humorous *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), is also an exercise in cultural resistance, arch-cynicism and reworked rage. Great waves of anger rumble beneath the surface of this book, trashing the received histories of Native America and racism at individual and institutional levels. King and Flanagan challenge received notions of history; they support multiple stories that lurk beneath a homogenising nationalism. Marginalised peoples' stories are accorded the power to re-interpret the cultural codes and frames of reference and, in King's work, to reconstitute them entirely: "I wanted to drag that [Native creation] myth through Christianity, through Western literature, through Western history and see what I came up with, sort of push it through that grinder, if you will, as Native culture's been pushed through that sort of North American grinder" (King, "Gzowski" 70-1). His novel is a reformatory force; it questions and ridicules cherished dominant theories and institutions with the help of a sneaky coyote who collaborates with four wise elders to "fix up the world" (466). In doing so they present an alternative to the stories that have shaped and guided Western society (and implicitly warped and misled non-Western ones). King engages in the re-education of his readers by tracing the impact of Christian mythology, "technological colonialism" (Cohen) and utopian thinking on Native Americans/First Nations and the land. In the first instance King suggests these paradigms instil a sense of superiority that allows racism and stereotyping to occur in Native-White contact.

Retellings that mock the archetypes of White power are, for Frantz Fanon, a form of revenge: "The violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values over the ways of life and of thought of the native means that, in revenge, the native laughs in mockery when Western values are mentioned in front of him" (33). King reminds us that his own parodic, mocking vengeance prioritizes Native lifeways. King induces our "active participation in the work" just as various other Native American authors do (Manley 131). "'Sit down and listen,'" says King's narrator. Is he speaking to Coyote? To us? Has the white reader been trying to fix up the world, and succeeding only in making a mess (253)? "'Alright,' I says, 'pay attention'" (107). These

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<sup>22</sup> King's work disrupts inherited ways of seeing: the current tools and lenses are not working—they have done great harm. He does not shy from telling the reader of this damage, but, unlike the often strident Flanagan, he uses humour as a way in. His strategy reworks what Meeker suggested in practical, literary ways: "Productive and stable ecosystems are those which minimize destructive aggression, encourage maximum diversity, and seek to establish equilibrium among their participants — which is essentially what happens in literary comedy. Biological evolution itself shows all the flexibility of comic drama, and little of the monolithic passion peculiar to tragedy" (Meeker 27). Meeker's figure of comedy, the Harlequin, is a strong European version of the Coyote or wise traveller.

imperatives are directed towards Coyote, but the reader cannot avoid attending forever. The reader is part of this story of pursuit, escape and Native survival.

The pattern of cultural domination is then mapped onto the land in the form of a dam. In both cases the waywardly intentioned Coyote helps with demolition and with laughter-, story- and world-formation. Yes, *Green Grass, Running Water* is another dam-busting novel. Flanagan, King, Abbey and Sinclair revel in their creative dismantling of very unwelcome impositions. They fight back with stories, which are, for Flanagan and King, the locus of truth (*One Hand* ii, *Green Grass* 432). 'Truth' is a localised vision or notion, culturally specific and worthy of attention. It is one of many ways of knowing; unfortunately the fact that each community tends to regard their own way of knowing and local area as the centre of the universe is a cause of dispute. Stories are big enough to accommodate several universes and truths at once though. If truths are stories, then they are malleable, fallible and varied. King wants to ensure no one story dominates; when the desire for control outstrips the integrity of another's story we are likely to see trouble. But in King's schema the integrity of a story is fragile (or at least sneaky) and liable to evolve its own life.

Amidst the interconnected lives and events in the novel, the character Eli Stands Alone is of particular relevance because he lives by a large dam and is instrumental in placing legal injunctions against it.<sup>23</sup> By following Eli through the novel, I outline King's imperative: he opposes dams that alter cultural practices, destroy ecosystems and deliver false promises. Eli's story is a protest against the misplaced techno-utopian drive. It highlights the political stance of King's fiction, placing the watershed story in a cultural, environmental and political context to challenge the

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<sup>23</sup> There are dozens of scenes in the book that attend to characters in the present (a few days before the annual Sun Dance on the Blackfoot Reserve near Blossom, Alberta) as they go about their lives. This is a present punctuated by personal memories that record the range of the racism each character has faced; and this highlights the maintenance of cultural distinctiveness. These flashbacks to personal memory record the racism that persists in the present. The scenes show, by example, what Flanagan spells out more overtly in *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*. If Flanagan's Polish woodsman describes Europeans as spreading destruction like a "cancer," then King's characters face the forms that destructiveness takes: linguistic assault (detailed in the numerous episodes of cross-cultural non-communication and the language of film, literature and religion); bureaucratic disdain (e.g., Alberta's family experience with Customs impounding and ruining their sacred Sun Dance outfits) and further institutional racism in all its guises, those mentioned and others, from the rhetoric of hospital, police, army and prison management to the construction of the Lone Ranger as a white man. Contemporary or childhood events are seen as mere dilutions of earlier imprisonments and ideological domination through religion and force of arms.

King records the search for self-identity and belonging in their present limned by that slippery and fairly unhelpful (because given and stereotyped by others) term "Indian." King's work challenges misrepresentation: "[In *Green Grass, Running Water*] I wanted to emphasise that the range of 'Indian' is not as narrow as many people try to make it" ("Interview," 2). King also records mythological memory and its abiding influence on the present, a memory mediated by the four wise elders who set out from institutional confinement (as they have done for decades) to restore balance and tell readers the Christian story is not the first one, but is the result of a very old cultural collision. The collaboration was often dangerous or unexpected because the Coyote was up to his silly tricks (King suggests the Coyote caused The Flood and was the maculate donor for the Immaculate Conception [456]). Kenneth Lincoln's commentary is apt: "In like manner [to Tricksters], the English word 'silly' traces a double lineage back to old English 'saelig,' meaning holy and foolish" (50). The Coyote is the holy fool of this novel; in his paws nothing is safe, no matter how strong it appears or how much concrete it contains.

reader's mental ecology. The watershed, King argues, is an ecological *and* cultural site. Eli's role in the novel thus turns the river into a political entity.

After a career teaching English Literature in Toronto, Professor Eli Stands Alone finally decides to come home, back to the reserve and to the cabin where he was born.<sup>24</sup> This decision is fuelled by the imminent plans to build a large dam by his mother's cabin (which is directly in the path of a proposed spillway) (121). Intimations of various floods appear throughout the novel. We are first introduced to Eli as he looks out from his back porch, at the water that flows by. It is over a decade since he moved back home, and that water is no natural river. The idyllic cabin scene so carefully sketched by David James Duncan dissolves here; "they" have altered the water levels of the spillway in an intimidating gesture. In the next paragraph we see why this is no ordinary porch view (and why Eli has returned home): "He took his cup of coffee out on the porch and sat down in the easy chair and looked back to the west. Four hundred yards behind the cabin, he could see the dam, an immense porcelain wall, white and glistening in the late morning light" (118). King has a low opinion of the dam (which is a set piece in the novel and is likened to a toilet bowl from the start). Near the end of the novel, the dam is smashed by three cars floating in its reservoir (grandly named Parliament Lake): a Nissan, a Pinto and a Karmann-Ghia, phrases which echo the names of three ships Columbus captained, the *Nina*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria* (Flick 4). The cars are floating in this giant semi-toilet towards the novel's conclusion. King sets up the dam as a crucial artifact of the reductive and ruinously extractive process of *colonisation*, with Columbus's ships as nothing more than floating ordure, the Parliament (Lake) a water closet.

Colonisation homogenises and digests cultural difference; its assimilationist residue lingers in the dialogue between characters in this novel (not to mention in the poor plumbing at the Dead Dog Cafe). Language is used to reveal discommunication. Dialogue between White and Indian becomes an exercise in talking past each other, voicing a pair of concurrent monologues.<sup>25</sup> Relations between Eli and the dam engineer Clifford Sifton are a good example (though almost all the whites are hard of hearing).<sup>26</sup> Eli is on his porch when we meet him. Clifford is wading the stream for his regular morning meeting with Eli, which he regards as "a high point" in his day.

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<sup>24</sup> Eli's name evokes Elijah Harper's, the First Nation member of the Manitoba legislature who said "No!" to the Meech Lake Accord. (Flick 6). Harper prevented the ratification of the Accord, just as Eli's stance prevents the operation of the dam. Long and Chiste argue the Accord "largely ignored Aboriginal peoples while focussing on bringing Quebec into the constitutional fold. The Accord presented Canada as a partnership between the English and the French, ignoring the role played by Aboriginal peoples" (227).

<sup>25</sup> See Joan Metge and Patricia Kinloch, *Talking Past Each Other: Problems of Cross-Cultural Communication*. Wellington, NZ: Victoria UP, 1978.

<sup>26</sup> Deafness is particularly apt in the case of Clifford's real-life namesake (1861-1969), who was a (Deaf) lawyer and politician who staunchly promoted the white settlement of the western prairies, and was Superintendent of Indian Affairs under Premier Wilfrid Laurier (Flick 6). Sifton was opposed to the immigration of city-dwellers and others supposedly unfit for farm work. He thereby altered the potential demographics of the colony: "he instructed his agents to discourage the immigration of Italians, Blacks, Jews, Orientals and urban English men who would not, he believed, succeed as farmers" ("Sir Clifford Sifton").

But Eli simply knows Sifton will drink his coffee and read a legal statement without really acknowledging Eli's concerns (442). Sifton asks about fishing first. Eli replies:

'Should be good. Be better if your dam wasn't there.'

'Not my dam, Eli. And you know it.'<sup>27</sup>

'So you say.'

Sifton sat on the railing and squinted at the sun. 'That's the beauty of dams. They don't have personalities and they don't have politics. They store water, and they create electricity. That's it.'

'So how come so many of them are built on Indian land?'<sup>28</sup>

'Only so many places you can build a dam.'

'Provincial report recommended three possible sites.'

'Geography. That's what decides where dams get built.'

'This site wasn't one of them.'

Sifton rolled his lips around the cup. 'Other factors have to be considered too.'

'None of the recommended sites were on Indian land'

Sifton swirled the coffee in the cup until it sloshed over the rim. 'I just build them. Eli. I just build them.' (119-20)

Sifton's argument (like the coffee, like the dam) is unstable. His apparently neutral stance does not wash with Eli, who sees all too clearly the cultural, economic and political consequences of the dam. In a few lines of dialogue King spells out the key issues behind many indigenous peoples' protests against dams: tribal sovereignty over territory, ecosystem collapse, government callousness and a blind and deaf faith in the technical prowess of engineering that silences political opposition, and mistreats those evicted. The message from authority remains identical to the one uttered by Clifford Sifton later in the scene: "We know our business" (120). In other words: back off, this is a democracy; leave us to run it and "just" keep quiet. "In a democracy, only people who can afford it get a turn" (365). The dam builders run water past the porch until it laps at the cabin; they turn on an enormous floodlight at night (a gleaming spheroid which resembles the bad "Imperial" forces' Death Star in the sci-fi film *Star Wars*) and they continue to fight Eli in court. "And in a rather perverse way, Eli had come to enjoy the small pleasures of resistance, knowing that each time Duplessis opened the gates a little too much or turned on the light a little too late, it was because he was there" (287).

When this scene closes, King builds the next two scenes around the issue of the dam's construction and environmental history, as well as its impact on Eli's community. Eli's reminiscence that follows notes the cabin was hand-built by Eli's mother, who did the logging and

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<sup>27</sup> Indeed the dam is being built by "Duplessis Associates International" who have hired another Blackfoot, Charlie Looking Bear, to argue their case. "Duplessis had hired him right out of law school. *Stand Alone v. Duplessis* was his first case. It was his only case. He didn't make the decisions, of course. Those were made by big-shot corporate lawyers in Toronto or London or Zurich. He was just the front, and he knew it. . . . They hired him because he was Blackfoot and Eli was Blackfoot and the combination played well in the newspapers" (126). The firm's name alludes to "former autocratic Union Nationale premier of Quebec Maurice Duplessis, known as 'Le Chef,' (the Chief) who began hydroelectric development projects" (Ridington, "Names" 3). Charlie's ethical stance is constantly under fire from his erstwhile girlfriend Alberta.

<sup>28</sup> See the next subsection for a very brief sketch of the weight of this vital and infrequently asked question.

setting of the timber. When his mother died over ten years before, his sister Norma tells him he might like to see the cabin “before it was flooded or torn down or whatever they did to things like that that were in the way of progress.... ‘You were born there before you went off and became white’” (122). Eli races home for the first time in decades. He meets Clifford minutes later; Sifton’s deafness is marked: “‘Don’t know I want anyone tearing this house down.’ ‘Construction starts in a month.... Nothing personal’” (123). Back then, Sifton felt dams were apersonal; ten years on they are apolitical as well, *despite* the mounting evidence to the contrary that Eli offers.

The next scene shifts to the present. Now the deafness is governmental too. As attorney for the dam builders, Charlie Looking Bear uses evasive language; like Eli, Alberta does not accept it. When Charlie tries to justify or play down the loss of Parliament Lake property destined for the tribe (“‘The government made some changes’”) Alberta replies

‘That’s a new way to describe greed. You know that the tribe isn’t going to make any money off the entire deal.’

‘Then some of us should, don’t you think?’

‘God, Charlie.’...

The dam was there all right. Anyone who wanted to could drive along the river to the small recreation area and have lunch in the shadow of the dam. Or you could walk along the shadow of the lakeshore and enjoy the panorama of water and sky. Or you could drive along the top and look down the spillway into the concrete channels that were clogged with spongy moss and plants.

The dam was there. It just wasn’t working. The lake was there. But no one could use it. (126-7)

The dam is a shadowy white elephant or, as one Blackfoot puts it at a meeting, a golden goose: “‘that’s about all Indians ever got from the government, a goose” (127). The tribal council spurns the Duplessis suggestion that they will make money off the dam; the province is losing money day by day, the company writes costs off their taxes, and the river backs up more and more. “‘I don’t call the shots’” Charlie says, and he does not make the decisions. But partial complicity is still complicity. King has offered a crash course in the folly of badly planned dam projects; many of the more dubious parties are not damaged as seriously as displaced First Nations.

The irony, Charlie mused, was that once Duplessis started construction on the dam, nothing stopped it. Environmental concerns were cast aside. Questions about possible fault lines that run under the dam were dismissed, Native land claims that had been in the courts for over fifty years were shelved. ‘Once you start something like this,’ Duplessis’s chief engineer had told an inquiry board, ‘you can’t stop. Too damn dangerous.’ (128)

To stop is to throw a spanner in the cogs of the techno-utopian juggernaut. Such a precedent is unwelcome to those who stand to gain the most from a project. Well, Eli ensures things are stopped, even if the dam had to be built.

Eli’s resistance is tied to his growing sense of reconnection with home, and a sense of cultural pride. When he first took his partner Karen to the Sun Dance as a young man he drove away and “never looked back” (232). But “[i]n the end he had become what he had always been.

Indian.... Eli could no longer remember what he had in mind when he moved into the cabin, could remember only the emotion he felt when Sifton told him that they were going to tear the cabin down” (289-90). As he tells Sifton, “[i]t’s the idea of a dam that’s dangerous,” because (amongst other things) it presupposes an attitude of fail-safe control (286). King unpacks arrogance and certainty by challenging stereotypes, whether they are cinematic, literary, historical or, in the case of the dam, related to the ecology of home, and the cross-cultural limits of ownership and desire.

Throughout King’s work, White appetites and desires are showcased as missing the point. The novel queries what people actually need; things do not satisfy in and of themselves. The Blossom television-dealer Bill Bursum believes otherwise; he adores gadgets and progress is seen as the solution to all problems.<sup>29</sup> He represents a kind of person—and a state of mind—which sees the dam in purely glorious terms, a thing of gain for all. But in an interconnected world of overlapping cultures and ecosystems, when gain occurs at the expense of natural resources, something is always lost.<sup>30</sup> (Gaia theory and the wisdom of indigenous cultures are fashionable

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<sup>29</sup> Bill Bursum is a character whose desire for property is tied to ownership rather than a sense of sustained belonging over generations; for Bursum the sense of home is as transportable as a land deed. “Power and control—the essence of effective advertising—were, Bursum had decided years before, outside the range of the Indian imagination” so it is not surprising that Bursum and Eli talk past each other with plenty of room to spare (141). Their conversation, once again, is a record of white insistence in the face of Native resistance:

‘Wouldn’t be hard to move the cabin,’ Bursum had told Eli. ‘Probably get the government to move it to higher ground for free.’  
‘Cabin’s just fine right here.’  
‘Might even be able to get a lot on the lake in exchange. What do you think of that?’  
‘Like the place right where it is.’  
‘Can’t stay there forever.’  
‘As long as the grass is green and the waters run.’ (295)

Bursum thinks Eli’s phrase “didn’t mean anything. It was a metaphor. Eli knew that. Every Indian on the reserve knew that. Treaties were hardly sacred documents. They were contracts, and no one signed a contract for eternity” (296). King sets up Bursum as the representative property-obsessed white who fails to keep his word and regards the sanctity of treaties as soluble and unimportant. This is not the view of recent court decisions and is certainly not the view Eli subscribes to.

Bill Bursum’s name recalls the Army scout William Frederick Cody, buffalo trapper supplying meat to workers building the Union Pacific railway on the Great Plains. He was made famous by the author ‘Ned Buntline’ (Edward Zane Carroll Judson) who “popularized him as Buffalo Bill, a living legend of the West. Buntline eventually made Cody the hero of more than 1,700 novels.” Cody toured the Eastern U.S. for eleven years as an entertainer, re-enacting (at times with fellow scout James ‘Wild Bill’ Hickock) scenes from his real and fictional battles with militant Native American groups. (Of note: Cody’s father—active in *anti-slavery* politics—was killed in a politically-motivated attack when Cody was eleven years old.) (Waldman 73).

<sup>30</sup> For Barry Commoner the “First Law of Ecology” is that “everything is connected to everything else.... an ecosystem consists of multiple interconnected parts which act on one another” (33). And as part of that ecosystem and entirely dependent upon it, the human inhabitants of the watershed stake their destiny on the flow of water. King introduces humans into the equation; he reminds the reader of the ceremonial alliance with the non-human, a relationship that underpins the totality of human life. Harley’s question instantly reminds the reader of a mental and spiritual ecology interdependent with the ecosystems that give it life.



accessories, but the fashion has rarely entered policy: King is clear on the similarities between the oppressive policies of the past and the present.)

An interconnected balance is suggested when Eli arrives at the Sun Dance site to wish his nephew Lionel a happy birthday. He walks round the camp with Lionel's dad Harley; in the course of their conversation King proves again that dams are objects that have social and political consequences. You cannot, he suggests, see them as isolated objects without effect on people's lives, and you cannot (as Clifford Sifton does), regard dams as apersonal and apolitical entities which do not affect the watershed and the people of the watershed.

'What about you, Eli?' said Harley. 'You still living out at your mother's place?'

'That's right.'

'Must have one great view of that dam.'

'If you like that kind of thing.'

'Emmett over at Brocket figures that the dam is killing the river.'

'Not doing it any good.'

'He was on the radio the other day. Said if the river doesn't flood like it does every year, the cottonwoods will die.'

'Hadn't heard that.'

'That's what he said. When the river floods, it brings the cottonwoods . . . you know . . .'

'Nutrients?'

'That's it. No floods. No nutrients. No cottonwoods.'

'Emmett ought to know.'

'And if the cottonwoods die, where are we going to get the Sun Dance tree? You see what I mean?'

'Emmett write his member of Parliament?'

Harley turned his face away from the wind and began to laugh. 'What do you think? You figure the dam's going to make us all millionaires?'

Eli looked at Harley and shook his head. 'Maybe we should give the Cree in Quebec a call.'

'Yeah,' said Harley. 'That's what I figure, too.' (414-5)

This is classic King applied to one of the key political issues of the novel. Gently, with plenty of space and no jargon (even the word "nutrients" is introduced with room to settle) he has sketched a cultural ecology of great resonance that details the effects of the dam on the trees and then, after a short pause, drives home the crucial association between people, ceremony and place. The will of the government is laughed off; in this apparently throwaway gesture King compacts generations of broken promises, a sense of betrayal *and* defiance. The mention of the Cree gives further resonance to his statement, as I now discuss. Nothing is what it seems: there is always so much more going on.

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Rivers do not heed international boundaries. "Much of the world has entered a zero-sum game in which increasing the water available to one user means taking some away from another" (Postel 51). At least 214 rivers flow through two or more nations. Sandra Postel predicts major wars

could be fought next century over water, though some reject this notion. Meanwhile the battles continue in Canada: the subheading to a 1997 film on the James Bay, Québec, plan, *Power*, put it plainly: "One River. Two Nations."

### **Great Whale River, Post-de-la-Baleine, Kuujuaaraapikk, Whapmagoostui<sup>31</sup>**

"Everything about hydro-electricity is political."

Matthew Mukash, Chief of Whapmagoostui (*Power*)<sup>32</sup>

"It's renewable, it doesn't cost anything, it's just water."

Ex-Liberal Premier of Quebec Robert Bourassa  
(*Riding the Great Whale*).

Knowing something of the politics of dams and indigenous peoples as a reader of *Green Grass, Running Water* elucidates King's political stance, particularly as it relates to Canada, a nation that "diverts more water than any other country in the world"<sup>33</sup> (Cohen 38).<sup>33</sup> This power generation displaces various tribal groups.

Many Cree and Inuit people have opposed the controversial James Bay hydro-electricity development projects in North Eastern Québec. They have done so through various media, making effective and highly publicised protests against the 45-60 billion dollar development that is "causing the most draconian effects on rivers since the Columbia was dammed" (Palmer, *Lifelines*

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<sup>31</sup> I use work by Barri Cohen for this subheading. "These are the English, French, Inuktitut and Cree names respectively, referring to 'great whale' or, as in French, to 'whaling station'. The latter two names designate a place of nomadic occupation, a history and culture of hunting before the arrival and ensuing imperial English and French contests" that mark the place threatened by the James Bay Hydroelectric project. One river; four cultures. The names and traditions "hover uneasily" over the river because they designate a site close to the transformation of the past and known, a river on the edge of silence, and indigenous lifeways facing inundation (Cohen 34).

<sup>32</sup> Two creative examples bear out Mukash's point: Polanski's famous film *Chinatown*, that records Jack Nicholson's P.I. roamings through the Los Angeles basin, and Lauren Belfer's 1999 novel *City of Light*, a critically-acclaimed account of the wheeling and dealing surrounding Boston's use of political and hydro - power during the turn of the nineteenth-century.

<sup>33</sup> Palmer discusses some of the threatened rivers in the U.S.A. then continues: "For sheer scale and magnitude of destruction, however, nothing matches the new hydroelectric ambitions in Canada" (76). He then goes on to discuss the dam plans for the Stikine River in B.C., Ontario's Moose River Basin and Manitoba's \$6 billion Canawopa Dam on the Nelson River. The plans to log B.C.'s Slocan Valley will affect water quality and fish spawning habitat at Slocan Lake. Non-violent protests at the logging resulted in various arrests in July 1997 (*British Columbia Environmental Report* 8:3 (Fall 1997): 4-8.)

77).<sup>34</sup> Phase One of the project drowned an area “larger than Connecticut” and may have contributed to the deaths of over 10,000 caribou that attempted to cross the altered waterways of the Caniapiscaw River in 1984 (Palmer 78). The protests are especially important in the context of the displacement threatened in *Green Grass, Running Water*: they remind the world that there is a social and ecological environment beyond the cold hard fact of the dams. As Cohen observes

Above all, the apparatus of James Bay has thus far brought into tenuous being those who had been thoroughly marginal: real people, villages, communities, burial grounds, hunting and trapping lines and scores of living forms that have not yet been fully categorized by official science.<sup>35</sup> I write ‘tenuous’ because the displacement of all of these things, organic and inorganic, is consistently courted by hydro-development and its proponents. Displacement, profound reorganization and, quite possibly, erasure. (40)

King’s novel reiterates the holistic view offered by traditions poorly served by media soundbites and stereotypes. If, as Cohen argues, “the Cree and Inuit have countered multiple effects of disempowerment with historical, ethical and practical claims about the hidden entwinement of nature, culture and power” (49), then King reminds *his* readers of these relations throughout *Green Grass, Running Water*. Power is enmeshed in the institutions that claim to house the elders (be they “Christian rules,” prisons or psychiatric-care hospitals), the sales industry that grabs Lionel’s time, or the legal industry which co-opts Charlie’s culture for profitable ends.<sup>36</sup> Above

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<sup>34</sup> If James Bay II is completed, 15 000 Cree and Inuit will be displaced, wildlife will be destroyed, and an area near the size of France will be submerged. Robert Bourassa, former Liberal Premier of Québec, was a strong proponent of the dams, describing natural resources as “almost illimitable” (qtd. in Cohen 36). Barri Cohen cites his 1985 book *Power From The North* at the head of her article on the issue: “Québec is a vast hydroelectric plant in the bud, and every day, millions of potential kilowatt hours flow downhill and out to sea. What a waste!” (32). Cohen quotes from Bourassa’s 1973 book *James Bay*: the rivers, lakes and forests and “the whole history of Québec must be rewritten. Our ancestors’ courage and will must live again in the twentieth century. Québec must occupy its territory; it must conquer James Bay. We have decided the time has come” (Bourassa 10; qtd. in Cohen 39). In the documentary film on the James Bay project, *Power*, Bourassa said he felt like a “conqueror” in undertaking the Hydro scheme and controlling the North (Isacsson). In an earlier documentary he said the La Grande Hydro project “was a matter of conquering Northern Québec, economically speaking” (*Riding*). The need for profit (despite then NY Governor Cuomo’s early opposition to the scheme) lies in the extent of Hydro-Québec’s debt which, at the end of 1994, stood at \$US 26.25 billion. Part of this was accrued through involvement with the massive (and in 1995 still unfinished) Itaipú Dam in Brazil/Paraguay watershed; its inflation-adjusted cost overrun stands at 480% (McCully 280).

Cree Chief Matthew Coon-Come has made good use of television and his phrase “Bourassa’s dream is our nightmare” has been reported widely (Cohen 41-2; *Power*).

One of the more famous Cree and Inuit protests occurred on Earth Day (23 April) 1990, when Coon-Come and Inuit Sappa Fleming joined their people in publicly protesting in New York City. The activists paddled down the Hudson River from their territory to remind those in the NE United States that plans for hydropower for New York, Maine and Vermont would devastate their cultural base. Robbie Dick, former chief of Whapmagoostui put it to the New Yorkers, “when you turn on your switch, you’re killing us” (Cohen 43).

<sup>35</sup> Here Cohen draws upon the information in a report by the Makvik Corporation, “Full environmental review delays hydro project”, *Makvik News* 20 (Fall 1991): 5-7.

<sup>36</sup> Not one of these institutions fully defines the characters; this is one of King’s points. The four elders “may still be women. They’re dressed up as men” (King, “Interview” 4). Similarly, Lionel can choose how he lives his life, but his Aunt Norma will surely let him know how she feels about that choice! White power is everywhere; King reminds his readers how the “cancer” of colonization has spread, and how it endures, but because he never uses a term

all, power is present in the water that had flowed through the river on Blackfoot territory (before it got stalled and stagnant in Parliament [Lake]), a fictional river that finds its source in a series of events that unfolded as King wrote his novel.

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By making Blossom, the Sun Dance and the dam important to his story King anchors his fictional world in contemporary Blackfoot struggles over self-determination. These issues are bound up in water rights. Thomas King has said he uses the names of historical and literary figures because “they blur the line between reality and fiction and between what we think of as history and just gossip—between Indian and non-Indian. I love doing that—putting the reader on the skids. Especially if I can get them to go along with it” (King, “Interview” 5). The reader will skid all over the novel; there are very few names that do not gesture between gossip and history, slyly introducing the extent of injustice faced by indigenous peoples in North America. Take King’s decision to name the dam behind Eli’s the “Grand Baleen.” This evokes the Great Whale River system currently under threat in Québec: the ‘mouth’ of the whale would be stopped by the Grande Baleine Dam. But there are other rivers King has in mind too, ones closer to the Blackfoot territory Eli stands on.

### **The fact of the Oldman Dam and fictional revenge**

A provincial Alberta context grounds King’s work in local history and contemporary politics, while taking a vengeful trip via imagination. After the journey the reader is far more aware of how the past shapes the present, as well as knowing something of the river’s contribution to a “Native” state of awareness that sees “[t]he world as an organic flow” (King, *Challenges* 116).

When Milton Born With A Tooth fired two rounds in the air to warn a 36-man armed tactical Royal Canadian Mounted Police squad off Peigan Nation territory he declared dual claims to the river, and two conceptual worldviews of the river. He was at the proposed spillway to the Oldman River Dam protesting its operation (the Peigan Nation initiated a water rights claim in 1986). Born With A Tooth and other “Lonefighter” activists had dug a channel to divert the Oldman River from the dam intake, thereby safeguarding the health of the fisheries and cottonwood trees in the region. “The Oldman River, its wildlife, cottonwood forests and traditional sites are the foundation of the Peigan culture. The Dam and its predicted destruction of

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as simply uncompromising as Flanagan’s, he leaves room for his characters to adapt and define their own realities. Working on the reader through humour and association, King’s method differs from Flanagan’s; he wants the pain to slip in after the laughter: “You have to be funny enough to get them laughing so they really don’t feel how hard you hit them” (King, “Interview” 6). King suggests that one must get beyond didacticism or solely “preaching” complaint: “you have to get beyond that and figure out clever ways to say that” (King, *Contemporary* 112).

the Oldman River are regarded as cultural genocide” (Lonefighter, “Milton”). “At the outset, Milton was denied bail four times in 1990 while awaiting his first trial,” which (the Alberta Civil Liberties Association observed), “defies belief” (“Oldman Inquiry Sought”). Even counsel for the Prosecution did not oppose bail. During the first bail application the presiding judge was suddenly replaced by a judge with ties to the Conservative Party. Milton’s “first conviction was overturned by the Alberta Court of Appeal. The presiding judge was rebuked by the Judicial Council of Canada for his handling of the case” (Helmer). He won this first appeal, in which Alberta’s Chief Justice stipulated half the prospective jurors be First Nation people. This stipulation was overturned. The one Native who was on the jury was upset at the verdict; the jury was told to retire again until a unanimous decision was reached (Lonefighter, “Alberta”). These delays and questionable tactics (which were challenged throughout Canada by civil rights, legal and many other associations and individuals) are compounded by aspects of the dam’s construction.<sup>37</sup>

Tim Palmer records that in 1979 the Alberta Environment Court found that

‘a dam on the Oldman River is not required now or in the foreseeable future... the Oldman River site would be the worst possible location from environmental and social perspectives.’ Three Rivers Dam would benefit about 150 farmers at a taxpayer cost of several million dollars each....

In 1988 the province faced the requirement that the reservoir be licensed for a specified use, but lacked plans and cost estimates for irrigation facilities. Alberta thereby licensed its dam for the ludicrous purpose of evaporating water. (Palmer 60)

In March 1990 the Supreme Court of Canada quashed the federal licence required by the dam and ordered an Environmental Assessment and Review Process (EARP). Instead, the dam builders stepped up work on the dam. Later “the federal government didn’t even hold the province to [1992] EARP recommendations on the make-up of a public advisory committee, instead allowing the builder—the Alberta Government—to set up the committee. None of the EARP recommendations has been implemented, the first of which was to make the Dam inoperable, turning the Oldman River free” (Pachal). The river itself later became contaminated with mercury, and the downstream ecosystem was destroyed, an event that damaged some of the practices of Peigan Nation (“Strait Facts”). However, the fight to save the Oldman River received national attention and raised demand for accountable planning and responsible development. Part of King’s mandate is to spread this demand, to keep people listening and remembering.

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<sup>37</sup> Tim Palmer records the work of opponents of the dam, who uncovered a 1960s plan to tap a vast network of Eastern Rockies waterways for export to the U.S.A. The massive North American Water And Power Alliance plan comes in for criticism in Reisner and Palmer. Though a 1982 plan for export was supposedly stopped, the dam sites remained under review, and water export from Canada may well increase.

## Indigenous Peoples and rivers

The events surrounding the construction of the Oldman Dam are salutary. They serve as reminders of the long history of dam-building on pockets of tribal land throughout the Americas, Asia, Africa and equivalent sites—pockets of traditional tribal territory or agriculture—worldwide. The remnants of free-flowing U. S. rivers (“only 2 percent of the country’s 5.1 million kilometers of rivers and streams remain free flowing and undeveloped”) are all too often damaged by reservoirs or dams (Abramovitz 61). Indigenous peoples of the world have had to bear a disproportionate amount of displacement and economic and social disadvantage due to dams.

Depending on one’s attitude to the dam, the concrete may form a wall of pride, or of national shame. For those who are young, it is simply there: “[p]ower becomes faceless and impersonal, so much so that many are unaware it exists” (Worster, *Rivers* 52). For those who knew the land before the flood, people like Sanders, and many of the river-communities of indigenous people, it is a different story. Speaking to Blaine Harden, Matt Grunlose (born December 17, 1901), of the Colville Indian band says “Since the flood, everything is Safeway” (Harden 100).

Several recent histories and accounts site large dam projects within a wider field of politics, profit and waste.<sup>38</sup> Now, after the era of giant dams and public works in the West and elsewhere, there is a time of elegy, prompted by growing awareness of the ecological and social costs of large dams; resistance gathers like silt in the bottom of the reservoir. But the dams continue to rise around the world as growing nations demand the power and resources the West has flaunted and squandered.

In 1905 “a crew of Apaches not twenty years removed from Geronimo’s band” hewed the Salt River canyon to help build what would be the tallest rock masonry dam in the world, the 280-foot Roosevelt (Outwater 101). Increasingly the arguments in favour of retaining customary fishing rights emphasise the awareness of ecological balance and scarcity inherent in many of the (now more widely re-established) indigenous fishing practices. Phil Fontaine (then Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs), spoke in support of Milton Born With A Tooth. In protecting ““Mother Earth,”” he said, the activist was making economic and environmental sense: ““The longer those in positions of power continue to prioritise economic interests over environmental impacts, the closer we move toward global destruction”” (“Oldman Inquiry”). That destruction is evident in freshwater ecosystems (Abramovitz).

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Harden, Reisner, Worster, White, McCool, Hunn, McHutchison and Roche, Outwater and Palmer on the Northwest and Western U.S.A., and Goldsmith and Hildyard, McCully, de Villiers and Roy on the litany of global wreckage and displacement dams have caused. Each book provides stark examples of the ways cycles between river, memory and story rupture when the reservoir fills.

Ecosystems—and thus lifeways—have been under attack; King reminds us of this by linking cottonwood trees and the Sun Dance, Eli's fish catch and the dam. The dams have to go somewhere too. Eli's question to Sifton about the need to build on Indian land interrogates power and neo-colonialism, or, more accurately, what Barri Cohen calls "technological colonialism."

There are numerous instances of displacement in North America, displacement echoed in Eli's words. The Columbia is not the only example (though it is perhaps the most discussed). A few others include the Three Affiliated Tribes (Mandans, Hidatsas and Arikas) of North Dakota, who had their land taken in 1948 for the Garrison Dam: most of their productive land was inundated, eighty percent of the population were displaced, and compensation refused (McCully 71; Reisner 186-91).<sup>39</sup>

Canada has a disappointing record on dam and First Nations issues.<sup>40</sup> In British Columbia, the provincial government gave Alcan Aluminium water, land and sub-surface rights *gratis* for the 1954 Kemano project, while displacing First Nations from the Nechako River.<sup>41</sup> The River was made to flow backwards (towards the project) in a manifestation of the kind of human arrogance that was part of the post-World War Two mentality (lambasted by Flanagan and others). "The ones who are going to pay for this whole agreement are the taxpayers, the fish, and the First Nations' people," said Reg Mueller, past vice-tribal chief of the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council, who said the agreement sets the stage for Kemano 3" (Wagg 9).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Colonel Lewis Piek was, according to Marc Reisner, "the architect of the tribes' inundation," a brutal man who destroyed a cultural base and flooded the productive river-valley of the Fort Berthold reservation and its cottonwoods (187). He seized all control of the project, even heading negotiations, a role he seems especially unsuited for. He later revoked all deals struck in the months before (Reisner 189). He is, of course, immortalised as the assistant to Clifford Sifton in King's novel. King's dam becomes the archetypal colonial structure; its eventual destruction releases a vale of tears from the valleys of the continent.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Bocking notes "Across Canada, the first victims of massive water projects have almost always been aboriginal people: the Ingenika people whose land disappeared under Williston Lake behind the Bennett; the Cree, Dene and Métis people who depended on the productivity of the Athabasca delta; the Cree of Northern Manitoba whose fishery was destroyed; the Cree of northern Québec whose way of life disappeared beneath the waves of the James Bay project; the Cheslatta people displaced by Alcan's Kemano scheme. All are people whose lives and traditions revolved around the rhythms of a river; they are, as federal water policy adviser Frank Quinn has shown, 'particularly vulnerable to artificial changes in water distribution and quality ... their lives have been disrupted severely by government-approved corporate-resources development'" (123).

<sup>41</sup> Boyce Richardson's efforts to determine the basis of this deal have been met by corporate silence from Alcan. Richardson observes that "Alcan produced a major sanitizing and public relations effort in the early '80s when they declared their intention to complete the diversion of the Bulkeley-Nechako watershed in British Columbia. Their first proposal would have dried up the river entirely—a staggering example of corporate arrogance. To propagate the scheme, Alcan moved some 30 public relations professionals into the region and they went to work to obscure information, divide and confuse opposition, and generally flummox public opinion. Nevertheless, they were forced by an angry public to moderate this original scheme. So the company went to court to argue that the 1950s handover of the watershed gave the company unfettered power to do what it liked with the rivers. The B.C. government emerged from the court with a 'compromise' agreement that basically gives Alcan what it wants—unless it can again be halted by public opposition" (14).

<sup>42</sup> Dana Wagg mentions "Alcan is using water above and beyond what it needs for aluminium production to produce hydro electric power for sale" (9). If the appropriate amount of water was being used, jobs would not be lost and salmon health would be improved. Upwards of 78% of the river flow is being diverted, destroying salmonid habitat;

Cohen explains one consequence of the “ebullience” which allows profit to override long-term social and ecological survival:

Native villagers along the Nechako were relocated, their lands flooded. There were no negotiations with the government, no promises. One must be accorded the status of a subject with rights and claims to enter into such a discourse. It would be nearly four decades before such recognition was even countenanced by the current BC government. (38)

The pattern of displacement and injustice experienced by indigenous North Americans extends throughout the continent, and around the world.<sup>43</sup> In 1994 Dan Beard, ex-commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation declared that the giant dam era in the U.S. was over. He recommended planners avoid the Columbia and Mississippi style of water engineering: they were costly and damaging (Abramovitz 63). But the builders have gone elsewhere, looking to developing nations for their custom, bankrolled by ‘aid’ loans or packages that end up roping the nation into a programme of repayments and reforms. The reforms are an ideological and financial burden as great as the environmental and social ones created by the dam (Roy, McCully, Goldsmith). What follows is a brief, itemised list of some of the problems dam projects have caused humans, in no particular order, except that I do open with the group who woke me up to the power of rivers, stories, memory and politics:

Whanganui River Maori have been fighting for legal control over their river and fishing rights for over 120 years, the longest water-rights case in New Zealand. Their elders continue to die while waiting for the Government to learn and change, to implement planning decisions that offer the river to the future. In June 1999 the Waitangi Tribunal found in favour of the tribes’ longstanding claim to the bed of the river and its headwaters.

“In India, according to government estimates, 40 per cent of all those who have been displaced by dams are *adivasis*, who represent less than 6 per cent of the total population” (McCully 70). Throughout 1999 numerous *adivasi* of India’s Narmada Valley fasted close to death in protest over the 3200 proposed dams that would brace the country’s holiest of many holy rivers. In June Arundhati Roy attacked the government and others; at the very least 33 million people have been

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biologists advocate for a 36% usage, enough to power the smelter. Instead, major upriver Fraser River salmon stocks are under threat: “To prop up the aluminium industry on both sides of the Canada/U.S. border, taxpayers are trading wild salmon runs for aluminium smelting jobs.” (10). These are the sort of pay-offs and compromises large dams demand: the dam marks the land with the human sense of primacy. The Carrier-Sekani Tribal Council’s call for a ban on all sockeye salmon fishing by all groups in the low-running season of July 1999 is one (contested) means of trying to ease the human pressure (CBC News, 28 July 1999). As Roy, McCully and Reisner (or White, Harden, Palmer, Goldsmith, etcetera) point out, that primacy is another hierarchy the richer nations and classes can afford and the poor must endure.

<sup>43</sup> Much of this material has been collected by the International Rivers Network, a U.S.-based watchdog group established by Mark Dubois and others in the wake of the efforts to save the Stanislaus River in California (Dubois had—after many attempts at working through legitimate channels—decided on a major publicity stunt; he risked his life by chaining himself in a secret spot that would have been inundated by the dam reservoir [Palmer 46-9]). The important book *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams* by Edward Goldsmith and Nicholas Hildyard spurred action; the cases feature in Patrick McCully’s book *Silenced Rivers: The Politics and Ecology of Large Dams*. 70-73. Many more feature in the electronic archives of the International Rivers Network ([www.irm.org](http://www.irm.org)).



displaced by dams in India. She calls the decision to displace thousands of people for the sake of cities a form of "fascist maths."

In Vietnam and the Philippines indigenous people are the ones displaced by major projects (McCully 70). As McCully observes, the homes the people have managed to retain are on fertile riparian land, and are a "last refuge" after many many decades of harsh colonialism.

When Thailand stopped hydroelectric projects after protests from its people, and declared its virtuous environmental stance, it merely shunted the need for power north towards Laos and Burma (Myanmar) where opposition may not be as tolerated. Of the world's 37 proposed large dams McCully lists, 16 are planned for Cambodia, Laos or the Laos/Thai border, and six for Vietnam. All are for power generation (McCully 332-3). They are likely to exacerbate conflict between tribal Karen and Thai forces, destabilise cultural and environmental ecosystems, and increase poverty.<sup>44</sup>

Decades of conflict between indigenous Buddhist Chakma people and Muslim Bengali settlers in Chittagong, south-east Bangladesh stem from the forced resettlement of 100 000 Chakma due to the U.S. funded Kaptai Dam built in 1962.

Indigenous people have had their livelihood ruined by the dam in the Aral Sea region as the once enormous and varied fishery was killed off.

In Brazil numerous tribes have been flooded out of their homeplaces; McCully mentions the Waimiri-Atroari tribe, which numbered 6 000 in 1905, only 374 in 1985, and then had 107 people flooded by the Balbina Dam, a project that may expand to divert the Alalaú River on which they now depend even more.

57 000 Gwembe Tonga people were evacuated from their river valley home (510 000 hectares were subsequently flooded by the massive Kariba reservoir) to sandy infertile territory; those that resisted were shot at by (then British controlled Northern Rhodesian) police.

21 000 Mazatec Indians were displaced by Mexico's Miguel Aleman dam in the late 1950s; those who resisted had their homes burnt by dam workers.

"Before reservoirs were filled in the Soviet Union, evictees were often forced to take part in the burning and destruction of their own houses, orchards and churches and the exhumations of relatives' coffins" (McCully 72). The Russian people suffered greatly during Stalin's Gulag purges; there are terrible stories of dam breaches being filled with labourers' bodies and equipment.

In 1993 a Guatemalan Human Rights activist said "The Chixoy dam was built with the blood of the inhabitants of Rio Negro." 378 Maya Achí Indians were murdered because they resisted relocation. McCully details the "most awful human rights atrocity associated with dam evictions" which occurred in the context of brutal counter-insurgency measures, despite the Rio Negro area being free of 'guerilla' activity" (75).

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<sup>44</sup> The downturn in the Asian economy may slow the rate of development for a time, but recession tends to encourage the case for public works and independence, a process that got the Hoover Dam erected. The Bureau of Reclamation in the U.S. built 36 dams in its first thirty years of existence, and 228 in the next thirty; "the federal engineers were enthralled by dams" (Reisner 481).

On the Tigris River, the Ilisu Dam project in Southeast Turkey is set to drown one of the oldest human towns, Hansankeyf; its funding is particularly contentious, given the English Government Department of Trade and Industry may consider funding the project, despite the World Bank's grave engineering and environmental concerns.<sup>45</sup>

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In 1994 the World Bank examined 192 of its dam projects to see if resettlement to other lands after displacement achieved the Bank's own "fundamental goal," namely that "incomes for all households rose after resettlement."

They found one.<sup>46</sup>

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Water rights remain a crucial global issue in relations between indigenous tribal groups—and larger governments. Of the Western U.S.A., Daniel McCool writes: "In short, to bring justice to all concerned the government must provide water or somehow compensate those who have been injured by lack of water. This returns us to a previous point; the solution will be expensive. It will require more than just pork barrel water policies. And it will test our commitment to justice" (255).

## Back in Blossom

Indigenous spirituality is compromised by injustice, but as Harley and Eli walk amongst the Sun Dance tepees and tents, King shows the reader that local faith and tradition continue. *Green*

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<sup>45</sup> English Trade Minister Brian Wilson wrote to *The Guardian* asking "One final question which genuinely puzzles me and which I ask outside the context of Ilisu. Why do environmental groups maintain such Pavlovian hostility to hydro-electric schemes? Does it count for nothing that this is the one totally renewable resource which contributes serious amounts of energy throughout the world, while at the same time bringing electricity to remote areas (not least of this country) decades before it would otherwise have been achieved? There are many wonderful dams in the world which British engineering excellence has helped to create and which have transformed the lives of poor people. I trust we will never be cowed into a position where we wash our hands of any such scheme; not because it is bad for the people but simply because it has become the focus for a noisy, if distant, campaign."

Wilson's letter drew this response from Edward Goldsmith: "Brian Wilson refuses to publish the facts on the Ilisu dam - the excuse being commercial confidentiality. If it is the law that the interests of any large company has precedence over social, ecological and moral imperatives, then the law must be changed."

The hostility of environmental groups to big dams, especially in tropical and sub-tropical areas, is based on comprehensive research. The study which I co-authored, *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams*, documents how tens of millions of people have been forced off their lands and how they either end up as casual labourers or as refugees. This alone makes nonsense of Mr. Wilson's contention that dams provide a means of fighting poverty."

<sup>46</sup> McCully argues that even that project (Thailand's Khao Laem Dam) failed to meet the "fundamental goal" because it did not assess income of indigenous Karen evicted (82). As de Villiers points out, the World Bank has shied away from carte blanche funding of giant dams in recent years: they are doing their mathematics and realising the projects have not had the benefits or cost savings intended (142-4).

*Green Grass, Running Water* does not rely on the process of highly spiritualised awakening and return embedded in Silko's 1979 *Ceremony*,<sup>47</sup> nor the overt rage that informs her following novel, *Almanac of the Dead* (1993). Rather, his humour forges a middle ground between these points: in other words, it incorporates both spirit and rage. King evokes something of First Nations life and its interface with the White world at the margin (as, for example, Louise Erdrich does in her quartet of novels *Tracks* (1988), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Love Medicine* (1984) and *The Bingo Palace* (1993)). In each case the different authors challenge the limited stereotype of what an "Indian" is. Stereotypes have led to the dam being placed on the Blackfoot Reserve because authorities assumed or fostered a lack of indigenous political agency; prejudice created the Reserve in the first place. The assumption of a lack of political clout and facility with contemporary media is dismissed by Eli and Harley (as surely as the work of Cree who protest the James Bay hydro-electricity developments challenges such prejudice). The depressing thing is that such articulate reason can remain ignored. But King keeps things moving; despair alone does not foster much good. The scene closes with Eli and Harley sharing a droll joke; they watch as more of the tribe gather and arrive for the Sun Dance. The story is remade and retold again: cycles continue. "In a while, the dancers would return to the centre lodge and the families would go back to their tepees and tents. And in the morning, when the sun came out of the east, it would begin again" (429).

King launches a cheeky rhetorical salvo (a complex balance between the political, the enraged and the humorous) against people who would think otherwise. He demonstrates that the bulwarks of concrete and arrogance are not protected from the whims of his Coyote. There are other orders and priorities coterminous with the world of profit. It is a prerogative of the artist to remind others of this. Like Flanagan, King uses his fictional/factional world as a weapon and corrective. His use of humour prevents the novel from becoming a polemic, yet he continually grounds that humour in the world of (often) *negative* historical and cultural experience.<sup>48</sup> In doing so he creates an emotional balance. I am not suggesting King sanitises the very real crises and flaws present in Native-White relations: he scrutinises and itemises them through various eras and manifestations. One remarkable thing is the sheer amount of political commentary and information he packs into an outwardly 'comic' novel. *Green Grass, Running Water* traces the roots of the colonizing experience and their contemporary offshoots. That such a novel is so well received critically and in terms of readership suggests a shift in public taste and consciousness, a change evident in all the work considered in this thesis. But, as the facts show, things are not improving fast enough for indigenous peoples faced with dams. So much damage has been done since 1970.

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<sup>47</sup> (As King demonstrates via the White character George Morningstar, such tropes have been co-opted in the twenty years since that important novel. Mysticism is a lot harder and more demanding to experience than fake.)

<sup>48</sup> He unmasks that power, by lifting amnesia and breaking domination through parody, through Fanon's vengeful hilarity.

Things really begin to flow as Coyote approaches the dam. “‘Perhaps it’s a Coyote dam,’ says Coyote” (449). This is a sufficient warning to the reader: this dam may be the work of the Coyote that trots through the novel, for there are good and bad things in the world. King’s Coyote usually has to find this out through plenty of trial and error: is it possible that most of the misguided water engineering in North America is the work of Coyote?<sup>49</sup> King has woven the mythology of the Earth Diver creation story into his novel, along with four of the powerful figures of Native North American mythology, each of whom live on in the guise of the four elders that fix up part of the world.

The mythic women who weave their way through the novel bring strategies and stories of resistance with them. The *Native* symbolic world is nurtured in the novel by First Woman (based on Atse esdzaa, Navajo shaper of the fifth world of human dwelling), Changing Woman (Diné goddess, Asdzaa nadleehe), Thought Woman (Laguna deity Ts’its’tsi’nako) and Old Woman (helper and adviser in Dunne-za tradition) (Ridington 3-4). The women are traditional characters in different Native oral traditions and relate to stories of Earth Diver, as each of them descends—or falls—from the sky to the earth. “In the beginning the entire world is covered with water. The earth diver... dives to the bottom of the water and brings up a small bit of soil that the creator transforms into land” (Gill and Sullivan 78).<sup>50</sup>

The presence of mythic figures in the novel in the guise of “the old Indians” ensures prior alternatives to the “Christian rules” exist (160). They consolidate the enduring traditions of the First Nations. These traditions, and the many small details of King’s characters’ lives, serve to erode the “discourse” of symbolic domination. In many ways the novel can be seen to pit the older

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<sup>49</sup> I say this because Marc Reisner’s assessment of federal dam projects sounds rather like the way Coyote would operate: “What federal water development has amounted to, in the end, is a uniquely productive, creative vandalism” (485). Coyote’s work may have been responsible for the first transformation of the riverscapes of the continent, changes perfected by whites through those inefficient behemoths, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers. The Coyote’s intentions are usually cast as good intentions gone awry, and s/he does not express any liking for the dam in King’s novel. Coyote’s role is allied with the work of rebalance and recovery embedded in the Earth Diver. The Old ones of his novel are primordial. For Gerald Vizenor even the White world is beholden to collaborate in the process of rebalance and called “to dive with mixedblood survivors into the unknown, into the legal morass of treaties and bureaucratic evils, and to swim deep down and around through federal exclaves and colonial economic enterprises in search of a few honest words upon which to build a new urban turtle island” (xvi-xvii). King’s novel takes the white reader through the exclaves and morass of history, which Elizabeth Woody terms “another form of story” (Roche and McHutchison 85).

<sup>50</sup> The four mythical women also resemble the traditional Blackfoot and Blood Matoki society, a female medicine society that danced at Sun Dances and had their own special tipi. In the night, their six male attendants are sent home “and the women played and joked all night long. Some dressed like men and acted out male parts. . .” Like the Cherokee compass directions that head each of the four parts in the novel, the Matoki travelled clockwise towards the sun in the east to perform therapeutic rituals at the Sun Dance (Gill and Sullivan 184-185). The women are grounded in tradition and there wield their own symbolic and tactile power in response (and opposition) to the dominant symbolic order, which arrived and disturbed their story. Joy Harjo composes some of the finest contemporary versions of the Earth Diver story. See *The Woman Who Fell From The Sky* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994) and *hear* its wonderful accompanying cassette.

forces of Native tradition against the imposition of a later symbolic order: the (techno)colonial and nationalist project. It retells the history of North America, past and present. Except here the relationship between Native and White forms of telling is more “interfusalional,” as the stories of the White world are reworked and ridiculed; they are treated in a similar fashion to the early White response to Native stories (King, “Godzilla” 11).

“‘Hmmmmm,’ says Coyote. ‘All this water imagery must mean something’” (391). Each of the four powerful women engage with river or ocean as they go about their lives, bringing mythology into the present as a living storied and real force. First Woman dives into the Water World (39); Changing Woman enjoys swimming with Moby Jane the whale after escaping from Noah’s Ark and “Christian rules” (160); Thought Woman bathes in a “tricky River” that giggles like a Coyote and floats her off the edge of the Earth, and Old Woman falls into the water too. There she encounters Jesus, who takes credit for her storm-soothing miracle. White appropriation and Native reaction, evasion and resistance link the variations on the Earth Diver story as the women transform into their contemporary forms after being manacled and taken to prison in Florida.<sup>51</sup> The phrase “in the beginning there was nothing, just the water” is said by the narrator, by the elders and even by Dr Joe Hovaugh (who runs the psychiatric hospital that temporarily houses the four elders in this century, as opposed to Fort Marion in the nineteenth). Hovaugh is, in his own right, something of an astrologer prophet in the Western tradition (he predicts an event of great import at Parliament Lake). “‘It’s all the same story,’” the narrator tells his Coyote companion (163). The story flows like a river through the novel. To erect a dam—the very idea, as Eli says—is tantamount to silencing (humiliating) a sequence of stories that flow through (and inform) contemporary events in the book. The culture at the river side is also humiliated. That flow of water and stories must continue: just as the floods nourish the trees, so the cycles of story and tradition nourish any human network.

Water thus appears all over the place in the novel. It pools around the three cars that end up at the dam. The cars float off from their respective parking lots and are seen bobbing through Parliament Lake by Sifton, his colleague Lewis Pick, Dr. Hovaugh and Babo Jones, the unassuming and wise cleaner of the hospital. Joe Hovaugh (praise be) has been navigating through a “sea of maps” like a latter-day Columbus, charting probabilities and categories (like a latter-day Northrop Frye [Flick 5]), arriving at the conclusions the Coyote has fashioned out of sneaky dancing and misfired good intentions (430). When Joe Hovaugh arrives at the Lake with Babo, Bill Bursum is setting up his lakeside deckchair on his undeveloped lot. The three (very different) interpreters of messages from the Native, Euro-astrological and video-communications universes are present to bear witness to the dissolution of that strange power which glories in stopping the rivers that have flowed for millennia. When the three cars bob past, Bill ‘TV’

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<sup>51</sup> They are imprisoned in Fort Marion, as were Geronimo and other key leaders. John Wayne’s given forename was Marion; the name haunts the novel as do Wayne’s films and his leather jacket.

Bursum is flabbergasted, Hovaugh is very upset to see his expensive car soaking along, and Babo repeats the phrase she used when she spotted the Coyote earlier: “Isn’t that just the trick?” (447). She is not worried about her Pinto.

Clifford Sifton, however, is at his wit’s end: “Did I ever tell you I could have had that project in Quebec?” he asks Lewis.

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On this wry note the scenery shifts to Eli’s dawn-lit cabin. The dam, “cold and ponderous, clinging to the geometry of the land” is at his back. Suddenly (as ever), the four elders appear. Their work is almost over.<sup>52</sup> But they have not reckoned on their Coyote companion’s latest effort at changing things; Coyote has been doing “a little” dancing and singing, just enough to cause a terrific earthquake centred under the dam. Coyote giggles as the world gets “bent” again; this means more work for the wise elders, and a swift death for Eli: “he felt the wind explode at his back, and he heard the sound of thunder rolling down the valley” (430). When the concrete of the Grand Baleen Dam buckles and cracks an old order—the flow of water—reappears. As the earth heaves, Lionel (back at the Sun Dance site) feels “as if he were on the ocean” (453). Coyote may have bent things, but the dam was far too rigid in the first place. The tremor lifts the water into a peak “like a mountain” and then smashes the cars into the dam. “And the dam gave way, and the water and the cars tumbled over the edge of the world” (454). The neo-Columbian voyage is over. Hovaugh affirms his predictions, Bursum runs helpless across the muddy reservoir bed, and King restores the balance: “Below, in the valley, the water rolled on as it had for eternity” (455).

The four Indians look at the guilty Coyote: “The last time you fooled around like this,” said Robinson Crusoe, ‘the world got very wet’” (456).

At the dam site a month later Lionel and his sister Latisha (and her three kids) gather with Norma. Latisha makes a simple point: the dam was never needed; nor was it wanted. Charlie and Alberta arrive; the dam is due for demolition and Charlie has lost his job. Alberta is pregnant (no one, save Coyote, is quite sure how *that* happened). As the “river com[es] back to life” the characters converge again, ready to rebuild the cabin and move on with their lives, just like the running water. When larger cycles are acknowledged and the only certainties are change and flux, scepticism dissolves. Scepticism is sometimes fed by modernist plans, but there are already paw prints in the wet concrete. Cultural memory grounds itself in labour, tradition and inter-generational co-operation. By such fragile skeins do we weave the world. The dystopia has been washed away. Things begin again: not in some mythic ‘no place,’ but in the homeplace of return.

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<sup>52</sup> They have cured Lionel of his desire to be John Wayne by letting him wear what King implies is Wayne’s jacket! (The jacket shrinks around him and is eventually returned to George Morningstar; it appears to have belonged to Custer, who was nicknamed “Son of the Morningstar” [Flick 2]). The old ones have “fixed up” that Western film to give it an appropriately victorious end for the triumphant Native Americans.

Water laps around the narrator and the muddy Coyote at the novel's end. Like every end in the book, this is simply another (hydrologic and narrative) cycle, turning into its own re-emergence and recollection: the "recirculation" between reader, politics, story and place continues. *Green Grass, Running Water* ends as it began, with the prospect of more stories ahead. The Oldman Dam may still stand, but its presence is provisional, challenged by story, time and the curtailed—still-roaring—river.

"Norma stuck her stick in the earth. 'We'll start here,' she said. 'So we can see the sun in the morning'" (464).

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In her story "Kettle Falls on the Columbia, Circa 1937," Gloria Bird takes the reader into the imagined life of her grandmother as she joins in the annual harvest of salmon, before the Grand Coulee Dam backwaters flooded the place of much gathering. The piece ends with this sentence that wraps to the story's beginning, where the Coyote freed the Salmon from a trap: "in the story as it is now told, Coyote will return to tear apart the dams that block the passage of salmon. This time, it is the dams that are the monsters he will slay. Coyote will come back and rescue us again as he did in the old days. I wish he would hurry up and come" (Roche and McHutchison 55).

### ***River Teeth: Form, memory and the river***

In this section, short-term river 'management' solutions clash with personal epiphanies that glimpse larger patterns. The individual's experience does not square with the way a (transnational) corporation operates on the (often trans-national) river. David James Duncan takes the rhetoric of varied political groups and dissects it, using memory as a touchstone and referent. *River Teeth* honours riverine variety and response in its mixture of register and form.

Although the rivers considered in this chapter are somehow 'fallen,' sullied through their association with rapacious human desire and the limits of short-term thought, the currents continue to attract attention; they remain reflective sites, places of remembrance for Flanagan, McCarthy, King and Sinclair. 'McCarthy's' river is "afreight with the past" [4], 'Sinclair's' "a ribbon of memory" (*Lights* 178), while King and Flanagan regard the dammed river as an assault on personal and cultural memory and therefore a desecration of the present and future. In the preface to *River Teeth*, his 1995 collection of "stories and writings," David James Duncan offers a metaphor that guides his handling of memory, genre and form. He coins the term "river tooth" for a form which records memories that have remained over time; part-memoir, part-essay, these non-fiction pieces represent enduring moments. In Duncan's figurative vision, rivers represent eternal process and change:

[O]ur present-tense human experience, our lives in the inescapable present, are like living trees. Our memory of experience, our individual pasts, are like trees fallen into a river. The current in that river is the passing of time. And a story—a good, shared story—is a transfusion of nutrients from the old river log into the eternal now of life. (3)

Duncan's concern is with the flashes, the whorls, knots or "teeth" of memory that remain after time has eroded full memory of an event. The nuggets of "not quite narrative" deserve elucidation: "what moves us about many objects is not what remains but what has vanished" (5). Why do some things stick in the mind? What is it about a lingering image that sheds light on the present and the past? Eyes shift downstream, tracking all kinds of departures, losses and (fragile) continuities. Memory nourishes the present, and sometimes the chunks that remain simply baffle.

These "river teeth" are a kind of memoir, a snapshot without any necessary start or finish. There are fragments that tend to reinforce what Duncan first realised at ten years of age, namely that there exists, for him, "a conscious connection between the mysteries of the inner life and those of the outer world" (Duncan "Bird-Watching" 62). The mimetic connection between inner and outer worlds is fundamental to the nature- and river-writing traditions (or writing in general). When someone stops to examine the qualities of this connection (for example Lopez, Eiseley, Stafford, Annie Dillard or Kathleen Dean Moore), the results trace cultural ways of responding to



our surroundings in differently applicable ways. The work I read has this relation at its heart; it is its heart. Each looks at a different river in a different way, but each perspective is hooked by the current, drawn further and further in/to the waterway.

In his 1999 essay “Bird-Watching As a Blood Sport” Duncan details glimpses of attunement and habitation in the avian world. Self-observing, he traces moments which suggest a numinous, loving quality in his contact with bird life and a preoccupation with forms of atonement over the ways humans have destroyed so many of these beautiful creatures. Duncan’s “river teeth” also suggest a beyond; by developing a segment of narrative they evoke the wider stream of time. If water is time, then a river provokes nostalgia and anticipation. Duncan looks forward to his present from the upstream past even as he revels in the recollection of events: memory is fluid and it runs everywhere. Just as his recent essay attends to the latent possibilities of vision, and the “teeth” dwell in the realm of recollection, the “sense” of sight inherent in his memory is reworked and offered to the reader with one of several questions: “How to see more? How to see more clearly?” (“Bird-Watching” 66).

*River Teeth*’s “writings” record moments that remain lodged in memory.<sup>53</sup> Within this deliberate variety (Duncan obviously relishes the chance to leap away from the confines of a single storyline, though *The River Why* does not lack for digressions and tributaries), there are three pieces (“Northwest Passage,” “Don’t Rock the Boats” and “First Native”) that draw on *Why*’s focus on rivers, reflection and the complex interaction between river politics and story.

The first piece I attend to details how the non-human readjusts Duncan’s view of rivers and in turn contributes to a personal affinity for that realm. “Northwest Passage” is one of Duncan’s non-fictional “writings.” I take the form to be a variant on the personal essay, one that assumes readerly acceptance of the reliability of the narrator—the reflective and colloquial Duncan. The personal “knots” of memoir influence the reading of the fiction, dissolving and questioning the (non-) fictional stability of the “I.” But within the essayistic “writings” every impression is given of authentic and honest recollection. “Northwest Passage” is interesting in this regard: it resonates with *The River Why* by recording an ecologically-embedded moment of awareness. The narrator’s epiphany prompts some loss of innocence and the budding of wisdom and awe regarding the ‘natural’ world; often the stories and memoir-sketches recount the ways human presence is bound into and constructs that world. “Northwest Passage” foregrounds the journey made by salmon, not humans, and it is to salmon that Duncan owes his thanks, for they are at the heart of the experience of “redemption” gained by loving the natural world. It seems odd that loving the look of a fish excuses one from killing it, but we are just one part of the food chain. The piece recounts an afternoon’s fishing Duncan (who at sixteen, is like Gus Orviston, loving

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<sup>53</sup> These instances include the evolution of a prejudice (“Another Brutal Indian Attack”); a reassessment of worth in the natural world (“Yellowjacket”); a poignant memoir of a talented musician’s life and untimely death (“My One Conversation With Colin Wallcott”); or fraternal life and baseball (“The Mickey Mantle Koan”) not to mention the diverse (perhaps I mean variably successful) fictions that feature in the collection.

angling, not school) shares with his acquaintance Jered.<sup>54</sup> The work is a variant on the coming-of-age tale, here with an ecological focus. The attention given to the wider ecology and ways of seeing marks the narrator from Nick in Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" where pollution troubles are absent (though issues of masculinity are not), but this too is a story where the protagonist chances upon feelings that surprise the young man into a mature response.

The teenaged Duncan feels affinity for the growing alternative counter-culture of the late 1960s. Long-haired and chilled-out, the young "hippie" spends many hours gazing at a photo in his sheepskin and tapestry lined room: a *National Geographic* picture of the confluence of the Ganges and Jamuna Rivers, their banks lined with the ramshackle huts of the *rishis*, holy men who are meditating and fasting by that sacred site (52). Duncan describes how, after weeks, he "was still in a kind of love with the confluence-dwelling holy men and still unable to say why" (52). He joins Jered to fish, with his mind on lofty things.

They go to a *local* riverine confluence. This brings the story home for many readers, ensuring some affinity with Northwest coasters and stressing the recirculation through past memory, present text and future watershed. Duncan knows the journey holds further meaning because his favourite photo represents a different relation with rivers than he has with the local Columbia; his longing latches on to a spiritualised topography. By the same token the Jamuna's deforested banks differ little from his neighbourhood: the local confluence (in Camas, Washington) is graced by the Crown Zellerbach paper mill. He hopes to transcend this desecrating object:

I knew, before going, that this confluence would be a place I would hate. I'd lived within the sight and smell of the Crown Z mill, directly across the Columbia, all my life. My plan for the day, though—having read of the ancient rishis—was to see whether it might be possible to love what I also hate. (53)

He has good reason to hate the place: the paper mill has destroyed the river's habitat and surrounds. Duncan's description of the area below the mill is thorough: the scene is rendered meaningful because of its filth. It revels (without McCarthy's gothic intensity or Sinclair's barbed satire) in the substance of decay and toxic overload. The river is made to offer insight because Duncan bothers to note it and be disgusted; his response gives pause for thought; he uses this ruined river to make his argument. (Iain Sinclair mines the detritus of the city to similar effect in *Downriver*. He too has a kind of grotty epiphany beside a foul spillway.) The layered density of human pollution, its mass and telltale variety, speaks to us about our awareness of the ecosystem and our habits.

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<sup>54</sup> The two friends have changed in the last two years (or rather, Duncan prides himself on how much he has changed and Jered on how little): "I was trying to piece together some sort of crazy-quilt bhakti/Wishram/Buddhistic/ballplaying mysticism to live by; Jered was your basic working-class, Consciousness One, Huntin'-n'-Fishin' type guy" (53). So while Duncan takes (in retrospect an overblown and rather vain) "pride" in his liberal values, he presumes his friend will not be too outraged by the state of the river (52).

Duncan, beside the Columbia—"an organic machine, a virtual river"—knows the telling power of pollution all too well (White, *Organic* 109). His description of the riverbank documents the waste with the care of a biologist in the field. For the teenaged Duncan, the field has already been transformed by human industry; huge dreams of productivity and choice have placed rail tracks and mill buildings by the river. This is the 'landscape' he knows, the everyday shaped world that has begun to degrade itself through mighty ambition. His species are the dregs we leave behind at the confluence:

The riverbank there was interesting: it was made of hard-packed clay; bare rock; spilled oil; logging cable; shards of every kind and color of pop, beer and booze bottles; flood-crushed car and appliance parts; slabs of broken concrete with rebar sticking out of them; driftwood; drift Styrofoam; drift tires and reject mill parts—*huge* reject mill parts.

We found a rusted sprocket the size of a merry-go round and sat on it.

Our legs fit perfectly between the teeth.

We had come, I felt in my very center, to a joining of everything that created, sustained and warped us. The question was: was it a viable home? Was it still somehow holy? Or was I, with my Bedouin bedroom and stolen Oriental photos, right to long only for escape? (54)

What are the qualities that make a 'home'? How do pioneering, colonising ideals inform the Western notion of retreat? Is the river cabin just one more use of arable land and rare large trees? Even as a teen Duncan was an angler with a mission. He shares this search for roots in other cultures or sites with Kinseth, or early Lopez. The hunger for knowledge and belonging is insistent in the essayists: Duncan allies himself with them as he slips into his own personal essay style. The above passage, its litany of litter slipping into the phenomenology of dwelling, is typical of the juxtapositions Duncan enjoys setting up, those seemingly polarised entities, human and non-human, driftwood and drift-Styrofoam, which are bound by the great river. All we know is that his gut response marks the river as more than "interesting."

The Columbia *is* a great river; Duncan admits it has a "Gangian majesty" even as "[t]he mill rumbled beside us like an insatiable stomach" (54). The river's scale makes it "awesome" if not holy: there needs to be a different kind of respect practised: Duncan imagines some pre-colonial divinity. The salmon become the other world that layers the visible one; they embody the spiritual realm just as accounts of Shiva hone the focus of a riparian *rishi*. But Duncan notes that such spirituality is less prevalent in the U.S. neo-imperial industrial riverscape. Imagination dissolves in the face of gross pollution and Darwin. The Ganges may be filthier than the Columbia, but it is still revered for its spiritual power. Reverence is what the young Duncan wants from the River, and he is not hopeful. A binary fixes in his mind: the present is a fallen age and the Columbia cannot bear the hopes and toxicity of the American dream any more. What is the source for a modern spirituality? The river disappoints us (as Richard White notes [60]) in its ecological responsiveness and fragility, somehow degrading our desire in its revelation of human abuse and honest response to damage. The River begins collapsing, it reveals the pollution, and the

ecosystem reacts to such treatment;. The river responds to our industrial desires, humiliating them as it in turn is demeaned. Duncan renews his description by facing the sullied river:

But when I turned, as I had known I must, to the third waterway, things immediately began to break down. I knew, from studying maps, that a creek named Lacamas—a genuine little river—entered the Crown Zellerbach mill on the opposite side from us. I knew this creek headed north into the mountains north of Camas, and that it'd had its own run of salmon once. But the mill-used fluid that shot from the flume just downstream from our sprocket bore no resemblance to water. It looked like hot pancake batter gushing forth in a quantity so vast that part of me found it laughable.... But it was a steaming, poisonous, killing joke that shot across the Washougal's drought-shriveled mouth in a yellow-gray scythe, curved downstream and coated the Columbia's north shore with what looked like dead human skin for miles. And maybe a rishi could have pondered it and still felt equanimity. All I could feel though, just as I'd feared, was fury and impotence and sickness. (55)

The word "scythe" is used four times to describe the mill outflow; it "shot" towards the river, "killing" and "toxic," likened, gruesomely, to dead human skin (56, 57). This touch of anthropomorphism makes the case seem hopeless. But the reader is as surprised as the lads to see salmon leaping through the surface of the water/page. This is a syntax that flourishes in clean rivers. Its endurance alleviates the humans' feeling of despair. These salmon make it to the clearer water, after encountering the "twist" in the age-old cycle of return: the polluted swath. Bright coho transfix the humans. They jump clear of the "scythe," into clear water upstream: "those salmon leaps were language" (56). They speak to the pair in a way the "dead" run-off and abandoned mill parts cannot; they adapt and live, despite everything, in order to return home and die. They continue their own journey. In an era of dam-building, that continuity means a great deal to the river-watcher.<sup>55</sup> But is this nothing more than a sop to the guilt of the viewer? The anger shifts to wonder and admiration, but it is a tainted pleasure.

Duncan presumes Jered is unmoved by the sight of the leaping salmon, but he is mistaken: the coho's stamina amazes Jered. Jered therefore initiates the focus on the story of return and homing "that we two sons of the same troubled waters needed to sit still and hear" (56). The fish continue the journey so many cultures have laced with narrative; seeing them circumvent the "toxic" barrier is inspiring and shaming for the pair. As Duncan notes, the fish "have no choice: their great speed and long journeys, like ours, create an illusion of freedom, but to live as a race they must finally become as much a part of the river as its water and its stones" (57). He attributes a "cold, primordial rage ... and ... joy" to the fish. Once more figurative language is used to emphasise the power of the salmon, and the folly of man. The story concludes with a moment of

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<sup>55</sup> The salmon gesture to a nostalgic past when Nature reigned supreme, and the use of the pollution as a counterpoint suggests Dana Philips's insight: "today's [natural] symbols are not so readily exploited for propaganda: they are dystopian, rather than utopian" (221). Philips is right, but if the mill were to clean up its effluent it would surely be termed a redemptive act, a potential public-relations victory. But as it stands, the 'fallen' dystopian river reminds us of what is lost.

affinity and identification that crowns Duncan's use of identification and metaphor: Jered "was raging and exalting with the coho as if they were *our* people" an empathy that can transform one's view of the human assumption of control over the environment, or exonerate it in a wave of rhetoric.

"Northwest Passage," like other celebrations of natural endurance by Lopez, Sanders or Flanagan, for example, hails continuity, an important quality of a healthy riverine ecosystem. That system will nourish cycles of return and renewal, be they anadromous or hydrologic. The coho and the river combine to inspire a "frail hope" in this human whose society does much to diminish ecological optimism (57). Duncan sees the river and its human pollution as a "confounding of the vast, the pure and the insane" (57). His combination of the spiritual and the chemical seeks redemption in the face of decline. Much of the literature of fallen rivers suggests too much damage has been done for redemption to be possible; Duncan argues—in his use of juxtaposition, reflection, joy and despair—that it may be possible, at a price.

In many ways "Northwest Passage" bears out Richard White's views of the Columbia. "The river has not gone, it is our hopes for it that have vanished," he argues. "We have not killed the river; we have disappointed ourselves" (*The Organic Machine* 60). The river, a site of hope in the late 1960s (surely its "majesty" would survive human interference?) is weighed down with human expectations. The teens look to the river for something beyond themselves, some larger forces, and the river offers something back. But that image rings a little false: 2 or 2 000 salmon are minimal and the old runs are gone. The catastrophic decline in fish affects the entire watershed. Now such declines are the norm, our own complicity gathers force with the currents of nostalgia. But Duncan's action, his story, does make a difference. The big difference in this memoir (set in the 1960s) is that a fragile hope remains, glimmering. There is a chance for restoration there. Whether that is still the case is tenuous. The statistics are not promising.

The author of *Water: A Natural History*, Alice Outwater, notes the Columbia River irrigation project was 96.7% publicly-funded until 1980. The mentality that drives the total re-engineering or subordination of landscape takes the notions of productivity and control to extremes with the help of advanced technology. That technology in turn demands a technologised landscape, a vista of production and maximised investment of site, space and income:

As a good landscape was one that lay plowed, planted, and stocked, so a good river was one that was dammed, channeled and leveed. From an engineering standpoint, dams were wonderfully multipurpose construction projects, useful for hydroelectric power, flood control, and water supply as well as irrigation. Every canyon was a hole that was waiting to be filled, and water that ran to the sea without being used was considered wasted. (103)

Thomas King makes a similar point (as does Richard White) regarding the danger of the *idea* of a dam; that idea presupposes a desire for power and a presumption of control that takes usage of the watershed and its diversity for granted. For White, desire and dams are linked: "The BPA [Bonneville Power Administration] existed not just to supply electricity but to stimulate a demand

for it. There could never be enough dams” (White 96). This thinking is unpopular now, at least in the BPA’s old sites: “Big dams are obsolete. They’re uncool. They’re undemocratic” (Roy). The past, tracked through the watershed in the form of a sinuous current and the silent witness of trees, is rare; those remnants that remain have sometimes been protected after protest.<sup>56</sup>

Eugene S. Hunn has called the giant dams on the Columbia “great sculptures glorifying progress” which also destroy the lives of salmon and block the cultural and economic frameworks of Native Americans in the region (292).

In 1905 the full U.S. Supreme Court heard the first Pacific Northwest U.S. case over treaties and fishing rights.<sup>57</sup> As the century closes indigenous peoples continue to fight to regain

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<sup>56</sup> The Stein River valley in British Columbia is one such example. But that protection is still rare; the Stein is the last unlogged tributary of the Fraser River over 5 000 hectares. At the edge of the valley stretch bald hills, cleared of trees. Respect for the march of progress is slightly countered by calls for preservation of the biological heritage of the past.

<sup>57</sup> The Yakima had won an 1887 case in the Washington Supreme Court regarding access to the Celilo Falls, a decision sullied eighty years later by the Dalles Dam; the dam saddens young Gus and Ma Orviston, Eddy and Thomas Bigeater in *The River Why*.

The [1855] treaties reserved for the Columbia River Indians the continuing right to fish at usual and accustomed sites. However, that guarantee means nothing if there are no fish to be caught. The Dalles Dam, completed in 1957, buried Celilo Falls under sixty feet of water and struck a knock-out blow to the Columbia River Indians’ subsistence economy. Though the Yakima Tribe received \$15 million in compensation (approximately \$3,270 per member), no amount of money could compensate for the loss of this great fishery (Schuster 1975: 294). Relander reports that unemployment on the Yakima Reservation increased 45 percent as a direct result of the dam (1962: 12). Priest Rapids Dam, completed in 1962, buried another key Indian fishery as well as the most sacred points of contact linking the Wanapam people to their past. (Hunn 292)

Richard White says the Dalles Dam “as the federal agencies privately admitted, clearly violated treaty promises.” He also quotes Army Corps of Engineers’ Brigadier General Chorpening, who said the dam was a conservation measure: “the ‘continuation of commercial fishing above the Bonneville Dam endangers the entire resource.’ Eliminating Indian fishing ‘through construction of the Dalles Dam, accordingly, would be a continuing direct and outstanding contribution toward conservation of the fishery resources in the Columbia River Basin’” (100-101). White documents the efforts at restoring the salmon fishery: it too is a bleak story. “The catches on the Columbia are one measure of the decline. From 1880 to 1930 the catch was 33.9 million pounds a year. From 1931 to 1948 it declined to 23.8 million pounds a year. From 1949 to 1973 the yearly average fell to 10.9 million pounds. In 1993 the catch was 1.4 million pounds. This decline has taken place despite intensive management. If anything, there have been too many managers” (97). Hatchery salmon tend to be weaker physically and genetically than the wild salmon that modify to their particular aquatic bioregion; they also spread disease to the wild salmon (Abramovitz 62; Harden 226; Outwater 113-4; Palmer 34; White 103). The fish that return to the Columbia have to surmount the Bonneville, Dalles, John Day and McNary Dams. “Next come the Priest Rapids Dam, the Beverly Dam, and the Rock Island Dam, for the Columbia is no longer river but a series of slackwater lakes” (Outwater 110). The reservoirs are low in oxygen and their thermodynamics are inimical to salmon health. The few smolt that do make it into the second year of life have to return via the dangerous structures their parents ascended: “In low-flow years, they may have to go through as many as seven or eight dams before they reach the ocean, and as many as 95 percent of the smolts will be macerated en route” (Outwater 111).

In high flow years fish suffer from the supersaturation of nitrogen-laced reservoir spill, dying from “the fish equivalent of a massive attack of the bends” their eyes bleeding and internal organs often exploding; in 1970, as Gus was fishing his Tamanawis, 70 percent of the Columbia’s trout and salmon young died in this manner (Outwater 112). “Back-to-back dams of the lower Snake and lower Columbia incorporate fish ladders for upstream migration, but the return rates of salmon continue to plummet, and the dams are the reason for 95 to 98 percent of the human-caused deaths of these species. The runs continue to decline into the 1990s, and the worst seems yet to come” (Palmer, *Lifelines* 34). “Sorting out the decline of salmon inevitably leads to a pedantic recitation of the four H’s: habitat, hatcheries, hydropower, and harvest. The relative sin committed by each H is inversely proportional to how much money you happen to make off the H in question” (Harden 225).

control of traditional fishing grounds in the face of dams, pollution and fish extinction. Although the 1905 case ruled largely in favour of the Native claimants, Hunn points out that the “ruling left open the possibility that states might nevertheless have the right to regulate Indian fishing in certain circumstances; this last issue is still very much the focus of contention today” (285).

This litany of disturbing statistics and histories only compounds the irony of Duncan’s celebratory work: even before the toll of pollution, some kind of redemption is sought, and as the last remnants of wild water roll on, rivers are feted for their capacity to offer spiritual awakening. But this exaltation is constantly qualified by the obvious damage faced by the river. The flow between Mnemosyne, the fluvial storehouse of memory, and amnesia, the gift of the future-seekers of today is a constant in these pieces. Awareness encounters the consequence of shortsightedness, while hope faces the living dystopia of the present. Reality intervenes before fabulous visions take over. Behind every glorious step Gus Orviston takes in *The River Why*, playing the chinook on its upriver quest, is the awareness that such fish are now almost extinct in that area and worldwide. But the celebratory pieces confirm the redemptive power of wild rivers because they maintain that the current (and the focus it can bring to humans) provides a sense of greater things than the shortsighted desire for money or control. “First Native” records such a holistic belief by tracing a baptismal moment: the young Duncan’s first experience of fly-fishing.

The piece honours the spirituality of fly-fishing (a quality which seems to be either/or in its provenance: either one waxes lyrical over the sport or art, or it remains a damp mystery).<sup>58</sup> Duncan centres his recollections on the metaphor of being caught by the divine; this is a haven of revelation in his otherwise troubled sense of the rivers that are under threat. This image, so central to *The River Why*, is given a key place in Duncan’s own personal life. The practice of fishing, its demanding patience, allows the fisher to develop “the true artist” within (157). It becomes an elegy to his father who passed on the craft, and to the Deschutes River that runs through the piece and to which Duncan makes his unknowing “offering,” a fly “drafted” and pierced upon a hook (160, 159).<sup>59</sup> The “blazing blue river played us,” both fish and fisher:

[T]he river converts your meager offering into an unseen power that enters your whole body through your hands....

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One of the worst effects of dams—the destruction of salmon—therefore damages the life of numerous communities in the watershed, both human and non-human. I have mentioned that Woody, Bird, Armstrong, Kayano and others (in Roche and McHutchison eds. *First Fish, First People: Salmon Tales of the North Pacific Rim*) know this.

<sup>58</sup> Though Mark Browning’s 1998 book *Haunted By Waters: Fly-Fishing in North American Literature* also traces the conversion of its author to angling.

<sup>59</sup> The fly is pierced right through; it then attempts to take off above the water: this gallantry moves Duncan: “I have tried, however awkwardly, to pray for every creature I have knowingly killed since” (159).

By the time you hold the native in your hands it is you who has been caught, you who shines, and feels like silver; you who came, long ago, from water; you who suddenly can't live without this beautiful river. (161)

The metonymic quality to the writing brings to mind the figurative *Why*: there is mention of an “alchemy” of fishing, the hooked heart, of “drafting” the fly (“my little winged Christian” [160]) into service. The pieces vindicate and reaffirm the message of reverence and chance that function through that book and each memoir has its own small teleology and homily that maintains a rusticated virtue. The river runs through this spiritual epiphany; it provides a basis for the invisible in its own intangible reflective power. Its motility evokes the uncontained. Fluidity offers a combination of alluring beauty and danger, providence and power.<sup>60</sup> The river has many forms.

It seems appropriate for Duncan to offer this reverential memoir of genuine conversion before the slightly irreverent touches of his next story, “Not Rocking the Boats.” But that rollicking tale seeks the continuity of faith in the midst of contemporary river life, the hard knots of love for place that remain. It celebrates elements of natural and human behaviour that remain salutary in a corporate age.

### **“Not Rocking the Boats,” Or, how to talk about the recreational fishing war without getting too serious.**

While it is a commonplace for fictions of the ‘fallen river’ to remain elegiac (after all, my term permits little else) it is refreshing to see Duncan tackling the complex issues of recreational river angling and conservation in a humorous way. His story “Not Rocking the Boats” displays his penchant for extremes in character, but it also functions on a macro-level to reaffirm his commitment to the politics of appeasement rather than ecotage, a kind of riverine affection that blends Christian humanism with the moral rights of rivers. His essay on bird watching reveals the ongoing tension in his work between his love of the world and our dependence on it, a dependence that now results in a parasitic relationship. The story combines genre-analysis with eco-terrorism, and cautious capitalism with conservation, seeking an elusive balance through the medium of river and character.

Jeremiah Ransom is a wild-river evangelist. The central character in our narrator’s story, Ransom is six-and-a-half feet tall, “240 flabless pounds,” with long red hair and a short fiery

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<sup>60</sup> Duncan makes explicit a gendering of place that few of the writers I note here consider. He seems to bear out Bachelard’s assertion that rivers are feminine in their symbolic range. I have mentioned Lydia Wever’s supposition that where women moved towards honing and publicising varied feminist consciousnesses (including environmental issues too) from the 1960s and 1970s on, men—white men—tended to leap into the issues of ecology and environment. These are two excessive generalisations, but the latter is somewhat borne out by the demographics of the writers I consider in this thesis: they are overwhelmingly white male writers. But Janet Lembke, Kathleen Dean Moore, the women writing in *First Fish, First Peoples* and Daphne Marlatt, not to mention the work edited by Holly Morris, rebalances this imbalance, suggesting that rivers have drawn men and women and coaxed words, songs and dance from them for longer than anyone can recall.



temper (178, 163). (The narrator is a “writer.” Where does fiction end and ‘river-tooth’ begin?) His “now defunct hero” is Edward Abbey; Jeremiah follows his example in beer-fuelled driving, fulminating against dams, and fearless debate with the fury of his biblical namesake. John A. Murray’s description of Abbey as a brash heir to the Puritans is just right for Ransom: “He is also, like them, a utopian separatist, a dissenter, and an exceptionalist, and his most frequently used rhetorical tool is one these early [Puritan] figures fashioned for him: the jeremiad” (305). Jeremiah is the founder and (supposedly only member) of the “Columbia River Dam Dismantlement Fund.” He opposes anglers who recycle endless banal fishing tips (on unrecyclable paper), and is downright “militant” at the mention of any anglers who not only offer boring tips, but spring the lid on those rare tranquil rivers that are the haunts of the deeply obsessed and dedicated. Jeremiah flips at the sight of a named angling tour chugging through their pools after a magazine feature spilled the beans and emptied their creels:

By mass-marketing and technologizing what was once a secretive craft practised in beautiful secret places, Jeremiah feels they’ve converted the solitary streamside epiphany into ‘a fur and feather fashion show with fish clientele,’ and changed the rivers themselves into ‘a buncha wet bowlin’ alleys.’ In doing so, they have made one large red-headed enemy. (165)

The lines are drawn, the hooks barbed. Duncan sketches the binary of traditionalist versus techno-capitalist.<sup>61</sup> But Jeremiah modifies some of his ranting views in favour of actually spending time with some professional anglers and their clients, rather than simply throwing large rocks at their boats: it is a yarn about alternatives to (even eco-conscious) violence and gradual weakening of stereotypes.<sup>62</sup> Ransom is the centre around which Duncan weaves his yarn. He moves from boys’ adventures to boyish ones, with grown men being enamoured of the waters still, a muscular green-Christianity peeking through in the collection (notably “First Native”).

Jeremiah grew up near rivers; the easygoing narrator suspects they became “surrogate mothers” for him: “I believe it’s perfectly possible for a lonely man, or a lonely boy to make a surrogate mother, of a river. I think Jeremiah ended up with a dozen or more beautiful mothers,

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<sup>61</sup> New Zealand’s Victoria University Tramping Club has a similar competition which pits ‘Old Codgers’ wearing only wool, silk or cotton and carrying no synthetic equipment, against the most Gore-Tex and Eco-Fleece-wearing group, in a race to the destination for the evening.

<sup>62</sup> Speaking of rocks, Duncan’s epigraph for this story is (as always) highly suggestive, prompting analogies and metonymies with U.S. foreign policy (is it as bullish and bloody-minded as Jeremiah’s rock-slinging?) The epigraph is worth noting simply for its nigh-unbelievable elevation of denial:

*There are also enough rocks on earth to kill  
the world’s population several times over.*  
—Lieutenant General Daniel Graham, former director,  
United States Defense Intelligence

Though Duncan does not mention USDI again, the enormity of the statement seeps into the story. Jeremiah Ransom could be seen as taking it to heart in his early Neanderthal-style activism: throw the rock and let gravity and granite do the rest.

all of whom he loved with a fierce, blood-simple, familial love. I believe this is why, seeing the same mothers today, he spends so much time seeing red” (167). The metonymic quality of the writing brings to mind the figurative *Why*: there is mention of an “alchemy” of fishing, the hooked heart, of “drafting” the fly into service and a sense Ransom could be an angrier, grown-up Gus. Though there are serious issues addressed in the story, the tone remains lighthearted.<sup>63</sup> In fact Duncan appears to have stripped down his prose, perhaps a response to the heated feelings involved in the politics and economics of sport fishing.

Jeremiah takes the narrator and their friend John a-fishing on the Deschutes River. The canyon description is hyper-real (a state fuelled by the beer consumed on the crazed journey there: our narrator is seeing double). The language deflates descriptive rhetoric, wryly leaving the scene unfinished on the page (declaring it “indescribable”) and then, almost inverting Abbey’s laconic moves, proceeding to attempt description, with a clear awareness of the limitations of language and his offhand manner: “The canyon wall was twelve hundred feet tall and complicated. The latter day light was doing reddish things to the rimrock.... The river was luminous ...” (173, 174). The trout are “abusively hungry” and the three men start a corny square dance to avoid tangling their lines, only to have their fun spoiled by a series of boats, namely “Jim Burnett’s Flyfishing Extravaganza” (175).

Duncan pulls hard on the reins and the party ends. Sentences contract along with Jeremiah’s eyes. When Burnett visits the trio’s campfire that night Ransom rants his side of the argument, shaping a gargantuan and ghastly vision of commercially over-exploited rivers, cloned and altered fish species and remaining clean rivers privatised and reserved for the rich only. (Talk to many First Nations around the world and they would remind you this exclusion already occurs.) A combination of conspiracy theories is condensed; Duncan raises things to the level of farce: corporate raiding, ghastly pollution, transnational greed and biotechnology and river control, both economic and ecological (“I can smell the day comin’ when there’ll be two kinds of water left—million-dollar-dues fishin’ clubs and open sewers. And the word *river* will be changed to *water-course*” [180]), the growth of DuPont and the Wise Use movement (a neo-conservative, green-backlash organization) and a dystopian commercialization of *everything*. Jeremiah’s vision of Burnett’s company is akin to Gus Orviston’s imagined angling empire, updated for the 1990s: a catch, clone and release policy taken to extravagant extremes.

Burnett’s rejoinder is simple: come and see my business, talk to these supposedly rich clients, and see what I do for rivers. Through this Jeremiah recognises something of Burnett’s lobbying influence on behalf of anglers: ““He stops *dams!*” Jeremiah kept repeating. ‘*Dams!*’ This

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<sup>63</sup> Duncan packs in a lot of information on the genre of “how-to” angling literature, taking a dig at Bunyan, Izaak Walton, Ezra Pound and Annie Dillard’s “unballasted” *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek*, a book obviously too metaphorical for this down-home narrator (an unusual position for Duncan, the eco-Christian, neo-Francis of Assisi character, who has taken Lynn White’s suggestion of Francis as a “patron saint for ecologists” to heart [31]).

obviously came as a shock to a man who believed the only way to stop an adversary was to punch it" (185). Burnett, in turn, eases off publicising the unknown fragile streams and rivers, and Duncan leads us to a happy resolution, a compromise that lacks the sinister uncertainty of Lopez's "A Conversation" (*Field Notes*) and gently resolves the quandary of recreational engagement with the environment on a micro-level. Abbey is reconstituted into a milder 1990s version in a possible rebuke of the recourse to violence; there are some levels of sacrifice Duncan does not wish to stoop to. Killing fish? It has to be done, it seems. But humans? Stop rocking the boat. Compromise is one answer but as recent work suggests, it is too simple and cannot appease him: "one of the terrors of being human, and one of the joys, is that for all our limitations and confusions we have been given power. The life that terrifies me and the life that I adore are one life" ("Bird-Watching" 69). Duncan's river, steeping the mind in time, leads him onwards to the apprehension and comprehension of the past and the ocean ahead.

### ***Ricochet River and the ecologically chastised***

The contention that marks Native American fishing rights today is partly explored in Robin Cody's 1992 novel *Ricochet River*. The book unfolds quite near the scarred Columbia and records a riparian passage into adulthood. Cody's novel has numerous affinities with *The River Why* and Duncan's other accounts of riverine maturation. Wade and Lorna are two local senior high students in Calamas, Oregon; they have itchy feet and ambition but fear being contained by the prejudices of their small logging town. Calamas is a place represented in terms of stagnation and stasis: the people are trapped, backed-up into narrowness like the reservoir by the town (155, 201, 193). This is more evident on Jesse's arrival; a Klamath, independent and irreverent, Jesse shakes up and reveals a nasty core of racism that flares throughout the novel. This is a didactic book, relentless in its portrayal of the acquisition of mild-mannered liberalism in the face of redneck ignorance, replete with anecdotal openings to each chapter which are reinforced by what follows. The town is a reservoir: Jesse, Lorna and Wade are trapped salmon. The book records a growing reverence for stories and other ways of knowing, the transformation from thinking something weak because it is "just a story" to living that story out with pride and honour. It suggests the ways one sees rivers and other people is culturally determined: this is Wade's lesson. The novel charts how Wade's attitude to race and place alters through Jesse's presence.

Displaced from his traditional lands by the Grand Coulee Dam that killed the chinook, Jesse is about to receive his compensation from the government. He is a gifted athlete and raconteur whose style of learning and interacting grates against a dominant system now fraying at the edges. Against that boring *status quo*, Jesse is a rough diamond: "he had a way of carrying himself, or just being there—him and his eerie grin—as if he belonged" (7). Wade, the narrator of the novel, comes to see Jesse for who he is, rather than continuing to pander to a stereotype that

lingers in the town. However, Jesse is represented as the archetypal Indian attuned to the land, the one who grieves as the salmon crash against the dam near town, the one who has trouble fitting his stories into the printed page. “He could think loops and curly-Q’s, but he had trouble thinking in a straight line” (28). A kinder stereotype emerges then, one leavened with detail. He remains, like the Native American Michael in *Suttree*, something of a noble enigma to the white characters.

Jesse is a person who has to bear the consequences of recent and badly handled displacement due to dams: for centuries his ancestors fished at Celilo Falls and the Dalles. Like Gus Orviston, Wade recalls the falls and the spear-fishing. But now that way of life is reduced to a mere “historical marker” (36). Money does little to ease the gutting of a communal way of life: he says his father was killed by the dam as much as age, and it silences the work and life of elder Lawrence White Fish.<sup>64</sup> Jesse helps Wade understand there were “people-before-dams,” opening his mind beyond colonial referents (36). When the pair visit the innards of the local dam Jesse is “spooked” and doubts the faith in engineering that opened the west to whites: “What’s holding it up?” he asks. The bold arrogance of boosterism is a feature of Calamas, a gung-ho clearcut regime now sanitised and hidden by slick corporate public relations.

Later the two visit a small spillway dam that blocks a creek; numerous salmon bash against the walls as the fish ladders fail. Jesse resorts to dashing into the water to lift the fish over the lip of the dam, but they die in his hands; he weeps and weeps, heartbroken at this denial of continuity and life. The chapter is headed with a small anecdote that records the teacher’s displeasure at Jesse’s style of work and her rejection of his innovative essay writing. The analogy is crude, but Cody has made his point: the white system, embodied in dams, teachers or assimilationist mores, blocks and stunts the natural flow of life. When Jesse dynamites this dam he fulfils one kind of hope but fails to realise he has killed all the salmon redds (the gravel beds for the spawning fish and their eggs) that had survived further downstream. So dams are considered evil and restrictive, but also as things that must be lived with and worked round. Wade manages his compromises better than Jesse does; part of the novel records how this is not simply a matter of fate or luck but of privilege, politics and power.

Jesse is shunned by the town and eventually dies trying to prove he can take them on, while Wade lives to float the Columbia River with Lorna and both realise that Jesse had taken them all on, if only they would care to admit it. “The river was so beautiful and sad and quiet,” muses Wade (65). By the end of the novel Wade has lived his life a little more like that local current. Jesse’s loss has slipped the two young lovers into a reflective space where desire is generated in the heart and borne out on a depleted river. These experiences help the two young adults turn to the river and the West once more (via their dream float trip) in a move that is liberating for them as much as it is unintentionally “Western” in its sunset-doused, dead-Native denouement. The Klamath’s death becomes a lesson for the surviving white man and a reminder of the kind of

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<sup>64</sup> Wade too has his own love of the rivers: he and Lorna share a river rafting fantasy that sees them drifting away from Calamas into the wider world.

damage stereotypes can do. This earnest account shares one point with *Green Grass, Running Water*: you cannot block the spirit of a people or a river and not expect repercussions and ripples further out in the stream of time. Sited as a memoir, the novel speaks to rivers of memory. *Ricochet River* remains as one further example of the symbolic and figurative power of the 'fallen' river. Even when a river is damaged it can still carry meaning for those who attend to (and are carried by) it.

The next chapter considers fallen rivers that continue to carry symbolic weight. Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* (1979) taps into the dark reach of a polluted urban river that displays everything the riparian metropolis discards and denies. Scepticism over 'progress' and utopian vision peaks in this book and Iain Sinclair's *Downriver* (1991). Both books recount city rivers neglected by Knoxville, Tennessee and London, England respectively. Both texts trope the river as a source of memory and story. There is no certainty anything will endure the privations of life, least of all the protagonists. Yet somehow, the dark river, "afreight with the past" (McCarthy 4), and polluted by humans (beyond our capacity to see through the filth), births a rich and evocative world of its own, giving voice to a latent dualistic urge for "reniniscences and prescient reveries" (Bachelard, *Water and Dreams* 89).

## Chapter Four

### Rivers of Oblivion, Rivers of Memory

#### *Suttree*: McCarthy's fallen, enduring river

I open my eyes and gaze down  
At the dark water. (31)

James Wright, "To Flood Stage Again."  
*Shall We Gather At the River*

*Fresh water is the true mythical water.* (152)

Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*

The color of this life is water. (415)  
*Suttree*

Travelling with Cormac McCarthy to 1950s Knoxville, Tennessee, the setting for his 1979 novel *Suttree*, involves a journey into "[h]ot summer nights along the river and drunkenness and tales of violence" (264).<sup>1</sup> But *Suttree* is also a novel of dark seasons upon the earth and mind, where foetid, claggy banks seize with cold. The novel ranks as a definitive portrait of the unconscious power and symbolic range of the contemporary decayed urban waterway. *Suttree* and *Downriver* are portraits of the confluence of economics, urban sprawl, people and waterways, bound with rivers and inward currents of emotion, memory and death. Like Sinclair, Marlatt or Sanders, Cormac McCarthy reconstructs a lost riparian community. One of McCarthy's and Sinclair's shared achievements lies in the reconstruction of a world of vanished river dwellers and the resuscitation of a befouled and now-transgressive Mnemosyne.

A Knoxville resident told me the city riverbank of today is attractively landscaped, devoid of shacks, huts or the dwellings of the poor. London's Docklands and Knoxville's riverside have been revamped: older communities have vanished. They have been swept aside by the highway, yet the Tennessee River continues its sluggish meander, the Thames its brownly purl. But continuity is never certain. Somewhere, there will always be a polluted urban river, tracked with the spoils of human living. Both McCarthy and Sinclair map what Simon Perril has (working on

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Tamas Dobozy and the anonymous UBC librarian on summer late-shift; both recommended *Suttree*.

Sinclair) termed “a cartography of absence.” Each author proposes a “universe defined, not statically, but as a dynamic totality of events” (Perril 323). Whether there is any balance or fairness in this universe is another matter.

Alec Wilkinson, writing of the Hudson River, notes that it may be home to 186 species of fish, but it remains “fragile” (86). One of his most striking passages honours a bizarre and fecund wastage relevant to the anti-pastorals *Suttree* and *Downriver*. Rivers may carry a lot of metaphorical freight; they also carry a lot of actual *junk*:

Sunlight penetrates approximately ten feet of the river and gives occasionally as much as six inches' visibility, but deeper than that there is none. Fish swim in the dark. Police Department divers working in the river often close their eyes and use their hands to locate objects, or hope to bump into them, because it gives them a headache to try and focus in the gloom. On the bottom of the river are wrecks, as well as every possible kind of trash, as well as rocks and mud and silt and sludge, as well as tools and steel girders that have fallen off bridges under construction. At Newburgh, parts of the bottom of the river are paved to a depth of about a foot with beer bottles. On the bottom of portions of part of the river that passes the city are lengths of unspooled movie film, and no one knows why. Occasionally, Police Department divers get tangled up in it. Sometimes they swim into phone booths. (50)

Wilkinson ends this passage on a slightly surrealistic note, as if this polluted river is another dimension, still full of Bachelard's sense of the oneiric power to transform everyday perception.<sup>2</sup> Film spools may also lurk in the Thames (Sinclair's planned film project is never realised by him), while this layering of unexplained objects and strange confabulations of sign and symbol resonates throughout in *Suttree*'s “subtle subject rhyme” (Bell 80). Details and emotions accrete and disperse in unpredictable ways. Eddies of sensation are compounded by the protagonist's “elliptical meditations and dreams” that seem at once borne (and reclaimed) by the dark waters of the River, that node of recirculating life, memory and decay (Bell 79). These meditations also occur in *Downriver*, but it is to *Suttree* that I turn first.

There is no reason a river should necessarily attract fond thoughts. McCarthy's grimy city riverscape, home of the protagonist Cornelius Suttree, seeps into the bones, and flings traces of the human world back at the viewer. The “heavy old river with wrinkled face” is lined with shacks and crumbling shanties, a panorama of trash, discarded possessions and watchful people (8). This

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<sup>2</sup> The most recent case of anti-river rhetoric (or rather, jeremiad against the overly fond attribution of “respect” on to the River [28]) cuts to the heart of American symbolism. Ben Metcalf rails against the Mississippi River and all it stands for, a set of ornery and pusillanimous attitudes that have driven his batch of Southern cousins to excess and transgression. The River is powerful but over-rated: “The Mississippi is in reality a thin creek issuing from a nondescript pond in Minnesota and would likely trickle away to nothing before it reached St. Louis if on the way it did not loot every proper river in sight. Even availed of the extra water, the Mississippi is so wasteful with the stuff, and so fickle with its bearings, that only the constant attentions of the Army Corps of Engineers enable it to reach the Gulf at all. Unaided, it would pour off into the Louisiana swampland known as Atchafayala and form a fetid inland sea. Should it therefore surprise us that the Mississippi's pupils have developed a habit for public assistance unrivaled even by that to be found in our decaying coastal cities...” (30).

is Knoxville at the river during the first half of the 1950s, and it is a marginalised place.<sup>3</sup> The expressway that cuts through the McAnally Flats area at the novel's end sweeps a world of dwellings and stories before it, a new torrent which removes the poor from shabby apartments and precarious riverside dwellings that are at least homes of a sort.<sup>4</sup> That purge is just the beginning of a programme of riverscape alteration that has transformed the industrial and shantytown sites of the last four decades: today the Knoxville riverbank is clear of makeshift huts and, like London's Docklands, cleared of a community of dwellers. *Suttree* records a near-vanished world of Western riverside life, a life of independent, bare survival chosen by Cornelius Suttree in preference to his family's wealth.

Few of the other river folk he sees can be said to choose their hard lives. Suttree ventures "among the mass of twisted shapes discarded here by the river," the people tossed out by the city (4). Suttree has decided to live in a run-down houseboat, perhaps hoping the river will eddy away his own memories of failure and loss. But this river, dammed by the Tennessee Valley Authority and regarded forty years ago as "arguably one of the filthiest streams in North America," does not permit amnesia or redemption (Longley 81).<sup>5</sup> Rather, full of "gray clots of nameless waste," the River offers up everything the city exiles and "disremember[s]," becoming one of the novel's most compelling forces—"grating along like bonedust, afreight with the past, dreams dispersed in the water someway, nothing ever lost" (7, 128, 4).

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McCarthy opens the novel by walking us through the city's grime, his vision prowling into dank corners of space ("where lightwire shadows make a gothic harp of cellar doors") and sullied, ever-fallen time ("*Old stone walls unplumbed by weathers, lodged in their striae fossil bones, limestone scarabs rucked in the floor of this once inland sea.*") There is no Eden to reclaim here, but a rank depth that has its own power, its own limey emblems of death. Even the past is frozen, the dead mere "carrion" ennobled by nothing, and remembered by the river alone (3). His opening pages of italicised script suggest an 'elsewhere' animated by the vivid density of his description.

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<sup>3</sup> "The dark waters of the locus infernus run deep in American literature: connecting Ovid to early gothic fiction and to writers as various as Melville, Chopin and London, they also provide a counterpoint to the vision of Edenic America, which ironically remains accessible only to the elect" (Wurst and Raguét-Bouvard, "Introduction" 16). *Suttree* must rank as one of the most thorough-going counterpoints of recent decades.

<sup>4</sup> These changes clear the shanties that were called "Hoovervilles" in an ironic *volte face* as the public works frenzy declined in the later 1930s into entrenched, lingering urban poverty; the President was immortalised in other ways.

<sup>5</sup> Marc Reisner, tracing the rise of large scale arrogance and mismanagement in American river engineering, notes "[t]he creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority marked the first time a major river system was 'viewed whole,' even if the natural river virtually disappeared as a result" (135). John Lewis Longley Jr. recalls the very muddy state of the river, which dams reduce to a series of interconnected backwaters where "the water ebbs or flows only as the river level changes. Because of this, flotsam and jetsam that backs up out of the main stream may stay around for days or even years" (81). Human manipulation of the waterways fully reveals earlier patterns of waste disposal. McCarthy's father worked as a lawyer for the TVA (Bell xii).



*Here at the creek mouth the fields run on to the river, the mud deltaed and baring out of its rich alluvial harbored bones and dread waste, a wrack of cratewood and condoms and fruitrinds. Old tins and jars and ruined household artifacts that rear from the fecal mire of the flats like landmarks in the trackless vales of dementia praecox. A world beyond all fantasy, malevolent and tactile and dissociate, the blown lightbulbs like shorn polyps semitranslucent and skullcolored bobbing blindly down and spectral eyes of oil and now and again the beached and stinking forms of foetal humans bloated like young birds mooneyed and bluish or stale gray.... The neap mud along the [river] shore lies ribbed and slick like the cavernous flitch of some beast hugely foundered.... Ruder forms survive. (4, 5).*

The prologue showcases the grim opulence of McCarthy's prose, as he scours the riverbank, slipping between ghastly water and reeking earth, documenting Suttree's fluid transitions between darkening inner and outer worlds.<sup>6</sup> The ghastly riverscape, full of the waste and failure of human life is a direct affront to the (comparatively) easy transcendence of *The River Why*. This is not Gus Orviston's scenic Tamawanis or Lopez's clear river valley. McCarthy takes a journey and reaches the end of "the inexorable march of time that took all civilizations from Edenic innocence to imperial self-immolation" but he does not pass through Eden (Schama 367). Even Suttree's pastoral adventures are clouded by memories of an unhappy childhood in a stately river-facing mansion, and his retreat into the wilderness brings malnutrition and dislocation, not harmony and redemption as it did for Gus Orviston.

McCarthy's Tennessee River reveals the ascendancy of the urban quest for cleanliness traced by Ivan Illich; the flipside to this urge is simple: the waste has to go to somewhere that becomes forgotten. In 1950s Knoxville this place is the river, shunned by the town that shames itself with a foul and revealing channel. The river dominates the novel's first pages as McCarthy describes its cargo sourced in the city above, a parasitic site: that "carnid of shapes upreared on the river plain that has dried up the sap of the earth for miles around" (3-4). The river oozing quietly below the city offers an "omnipresent" dimension to the reader's sense of place, augmenting the sense of the fixed, concrete city with an unfathomed elsewhere below, a current that is Suttree's conscious and subconscious mental topography, tapped by local witch and healer Mother She (Longley 81).<sup>7</sup> Suttree lives beside the river McCarthy calls a "world within a world," a space both beyond and within (4): "The facticity of the river is for him the symbolic equivalent of the world of the spirit" (Young, 77). With the river—both mirror and void—as a symbolic focus, the sense of untapped inchoate depth contributes to *Suttree*'s powerful "eidetic language" (Bell 73).

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<sup>6</sup> John Lewis Longley Jr. notes there are various vital metaphors in the novel, particularly the Tennessee River: "The river represents the form of the novel: flowing from day to day, but not always at the same speed, and not always with the same debris in it. Under the surface are uncharted swirls and eddies; [sic] dark and dangerous, which are matched by the deep uncharted caves that underlie Knoxville" (81).

<sup>7</sup> Further downstream, the detritus of the city eases past the ramshackle old mansions of the planters and farmers, dwellings in Suttree's aristocratic heritage. Although the scene begins to take on the trappings of the idyll, human behaviour and memory soon alter this fragile pastoral (Longley 82, McCarthy 119).

Vereen M. Bell calls the river's function "pointedly overdetermined—it embodies that which calls everything into question" (74).

The world of the spirit, death and the unknown drifts into the first pages of the novel; with the river sloughing through each world, we learn quickly of the braided nature of these realms. Spiritual concerns are not simply holy and exalted: the river gathers everything into itself. We read of a floating foetus, and then a suicide. Suttree is a fisher of memories (and clammy carp or bewhiskered, chemical-laden catfish). We are introduced to him between these death scenes, as he lies "athwart" his fishing skiff, being "sifted and spun" with the rest of the river's gatherings, sandwiched always within a whirl of dark events, floundering at times towards the twilight that may be dawn or dusk (7).

The fisher motif informs *The River Why* (as I noted), the clue-trolling narrative of *Downriver*, not to mention the snagged stories of *River Notes* and *Death of A River Guide*. "What family has no mariner in its tree? No fool, no felon. No fisherman" (McCarthy 128). These are rivers of memory and the bait, catch and discarded innards are all honest relics of the variable past. Suttree's journey is gruelling and unhappy; such a record is necessary if any sense of redemption or struggle is to ring true in his world. Even if McCarthy's novels "resist the imposition of theses.... abstraction or classification," his attitude to many of his characters is "benign" (Bell xiii, 83). McCarthy wheels us in towards a sense of connection and even sympathy for his lonesome creation. Suttree drifts, hauling in his trotlines that extend hundreds of feet downriver; he pulls up torpid fish that never seem to struggle in their dying (and on one occasion are dead on the lines [194]), selling them for a few pieces of silver each day. When we first meet him he lolls in the skiff, sunbathing, in a sultry early morning. McCarthy's description leaps beyond the purely factual and evident to include that "symbolic equivalent" of the spiritual world (Young 77):

He could hear the river talking softly beneath him. Heavy old river with wrinkled face. Beneath the sliding water cannons and carriages, trunnions seized and rusting in the mud, keelboats rotted to the consistency of mucilage. Fabled sturgeons with their horny pentagonal bodies, the cupreous and dacebright carp and catfish with their pale and sprueless underbellies, a thick muck shot with broken glass, with bones and rusted tins and bits of crockery reticulate with mudblack crazings. (8).

McCarthy's language consistently embeds itself in the baroque, as seen in this river bottom archaeology, the description of the "muck" of habitation and loss. The language ensures the river is both archaic and revolting, a primal dark soup that never runs clear. The luxuriant style works in dynamic concert with Suttree's grim world.<sup>8</sup> Suttree floats: "The river water curled from the bowplanks with a viscid quality and lay behind the skiff in a wake like plowed mire" (9). This sentence leads us into a journey past the industrial riverbanks, "past warehouses of galvanized and corrugated tin set in flats grouped from the brick colored earth where the rhomboid and volute

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<sup>8</sup> Some criticise this style. (See Winchell 307).

shapes of limestone jutted all brindled with mud like great bones washed out" (9). The industrial setting is ugly and heartless, "a terrestrial hell" in many ways, placed upon jagged likenesses of the dead (compare this and the polluted, symbolically-charged urban riverscape of Duncan and Sinclair) (144). McCarthy's descriptions of bony building sites pan to the ghastly dredging of a suicide from the river, a man who leapt from the bridge near Suttree's houseboat days before, now trolled up to the remnant world: "The face seemed soft and bloated and wore a grappling hook in the side of it and a crazed grin. They raised him so, gambreled up by the bones of his cheek" (9). No other novel I attend to in this chapter can boast as gruesome a current (or at least one as gruesomely described. The Tennessee is described as a fallen river full of pollution and decay, yet a few miles downstream are the green farms and bright cornfields of another world, glimpses of one of Suttree's discarded lives.<sup>9</sup>

As the novel proceeds, we are introduced to the wide range of characters that live near Cornelius Suttree. We are curious as to his past, and need only wait for the river to take us to answers.<sup>10</sup> We know Suttree was born into a rich family, but chose to disown his father and his values. One Sunday he visits relatives in the green pastures beyond the concrete reach of the city. He floats "past scenes of plenitude from picturebooks suddenly pasted over the waste he was a familiar of, the river like a giant trematode curling down out of the city, welling heavy and septic past these fine homes on the north shore" (119).<sup>11</sup> The city continues to show its wares in the

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<sup>9</sup> The river is sick, but it keeps on going. The old maddened man who lives near the river (and often shrieks sermons and profanities at Suttree as he walks to his boat) knows the river as a fearsome place: "Infidel. Back for the fishing are ye? God himself dont look too close at what lies on that riverbottom. Fit enough for the likes of you" (412). The recovery of the suicide victim recalls the work of the Thames boatmen such as Gaffer Hexham (who earned a living pulling corpses from the river) in *Our Mutual Friend*: "What he had in tow, lunged itself at him sometimes in an awful manner when the boat was checked, and sometimes seemed to try to wrench itself away, though for the most part it followed submissively. A neophyte might have fancied that the ripples passing over it were dreadfully like faint changes of expression on a sightless face; but Gaffer was no neophyte and had no fancies" (Dickens 47).

The warehouses contrast with the human bustle around the river shanties and their (largely) African-American populace. Suttree's presence amongst this community is unusual for the South of the 1950s. The river, "Cloaca Maxima," supports Suttree's life and houseboat, the floating shelter where much of his reflection occurs. The riverboat is the place where he takes stock between his often dangerous or desperate excursions into the city above (13).

<sup>10</sup> Hints of past events appear like the oily roils from the river's deeps: scenes from Suttree's gaol term where he met many of his later acquaintances, including the dauntless Gene Harrogate; others of daily life on the river and nights blasted by the most potent of homemade whisky; a visit from his Uncle John who Suttree's father also despised as he despised Suttree's mother for her lowly rank, and general scenes of drinking and the spontaneous and fragile community of the reveller. The tables in Ab Jones's bar are gravestones salvaged from the cemeteries covered by rising reservoirs, "whole families evicted from their graves downriver by the damming of the waters. Hegiras to high ground..." (113). Later a former friend's name is discovered beneath their beer, graves washed out by dams and floods the dams were meant to ease. Thus does McCarthy weave fact into his tale: it is a remarkable urban reconstruction.

<sup>11</sup> Walking through this half-familiar pastoral world he strolls past a river baptism and sits with two elderly believers (one a convert of twenty-four hours). The older man begins a disquisition on baptismal procedure: to be completely saved nothing but *full* immersion will do: "It wont take it if you dont get total nursin. That old sprinklin business won't get it, buddy boy." "Sprinklers, said the lay preacher in disgust. I'd rather to just go on and be infidel as that" (122). Suttree has no fear of that label. He sees two baptisms and admires the breasts of the

water of the river which appears “like a serpentine trench poured with some dull slag save where the wind engrailed its face and it shimmered lightly in the sun” (120). Trematode and serpent, the river carries associations with evil and decay, with things hidden and chronically debilitating or insistently crippling. This last is an accurate description of how memory functions in Suttree’s life: he is felled by pain from the past and his broken efforts at reconciliation or love, and he is often consumed by a chronic bitterness that stunts his chances for self-renewal. Shunning the work ethic and surrendering to his pain, Suttree is an early Zen-like figure, at times more reminiscent of the flow-seekers of subsequent decades. But happiness is as easy to hold as water. His pain and his past demand his acquiescence, and they burden him. His Sunday visit continues. He arrives at his aunt and uncle’s “plantrife” sunny cottage and leafs through a photo album “which seemed to breathe a reek of the vault, turning up one by one these dead faces” (just as the river does); his relatives stare out at him, limining the connections he has shunned (125, 129). As if affirming this pattern of eschewal, his visit is packed with refusals of food, hospitality or transport. The river, it seems, gathers disconnections and evidence of pain, rather than uniting the community in a concern for the environment, nourishment or family. Still, Suttree’s generosity to the homeless people he knows, and to his friends, is strong.

In choosing to live alone by the river, Terri Witek sees Suttree as continuing a pattern evident in McCarthy’s books: “[a]s homes which are also modes of transport, houseboats act out literally the impermanence of community life which is McCarthy’s continual subtext” (137). Suttree’s brief, sad prison visit from his wife, the visit to his Aunt and Uncle’s and the disastrous trip to his young son’s funeral, concur with Witek’s assertion that certain communal ties are shunned, and those that remain quickly disintegrate under the pressures of violence, poverty or law. Each of these familial episodes—which pivot around a female relative—bear out Witek’s argument: “One of the reasons men so early and guiltily leave home in McCarthy’s books is because of these women’s power, derived from a pain so great that it becomes too much for the men who are implicated in their grief” (139).<sup>12</sup>

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wet-shirted teenaged girl during the first, dismissing the glossolalia of the second as evidence of greater trouble: this man collapses into the water, thrashing mightily—and then he stills: “The preacher was blessing the subsiding roil with one hand and with the other was groping about in the water” (124). He leaves the faithful; he will not “get to that river” as they desire: “Suttree knew the river well already and he turned his back to these malingerers and went on” (124-5). His doubt and his torment are too great to be salved by easy answers.

<sup>12</sup> Witek observes that grief or death seem to be the only options for McCarthy’s female characters. The two main intimate relationships Suttree forms with women founder during the course of the novel: Wanda Reese, the teen he strikes up an illicit affair with is killed, and Joyce, a former “hustler” tires of earning for both of them. Increasingly angry about Suttree’s failure to commit, she suffers a breakdown. Suttree simply turns away and leaves her on the road; the relationship had become untenable and bitter, not surprising for a man who calls himself one of “the congenitally disaffected” (128).

In choosing to live on the river, Suttree moors himself in transience. His moments of reflection in his houseboat offer up glimpses of the supposed dangers of stability. As the novel proceeds, Suttree’s community of friends is shattered by police brutality, imprisonment, alcohol and death; the final summer is characterized as “A season of epidemic violence and death” (416). Yet despite Witek’s argument in favour of instability, there *are* bonds of connection and solicitude in his transient life. But as the novel closes Suttree has seen many of the links break. He chooses to move on, evading the “slavorous” minions of loss that have claimed his passing world. To “fly them”

One of the constants in the novel (other than the Tennessee River) is the city bridge above it; the descriptions of the river bridge dens are 'constants' in that they remain for longer than a season, and the departure of the bridge dwellers is noted. One side of the bridge has barely sheltered an aged, ventriloquial man (that Suttree helps) who longs for death; his eventual demise helps spur Suttree on to a useful sense of dignity. At the other bank, beneath the high vaulting abutments, arrives Gene Harrogate, a bony teen possessed of an "animal cognizance with incipient goodwill" (42). Harrogate's crazed plans for moneymaking and his feckless trust in schemes lead him into some of the book's most (blackly) comic scenes.<sup>13</sup>

Suttree met Harrogate in prison, "this half daft adolescent" having been imprisoned for committing an indecency upon a crop of melons (214). In jail the truth of the crime is quickly revealed and the "moonlight melonmounter" earns a bewildered combination of respect and scorn.

Stealing watermelons eh? said Suttree.  
Harrogate grinned uneasily. They tried to get me for beast, beast . . .  
Bestiality?  
Yeah. But my lawyer told em a watermelon wasnt no beast. He was a smart son  
of a bitch.  
Oh boy, said Suttree. (49)

Suttree will have much cause to repeat that last droll, confounded phrase, because Harrogate travels to Knoxville upon his release from jail. He sets up camp beneath the bridge: his early efforts at home-making are endearing and cunning. His batty riparian opportunism begins with a ring of red construction lamps linked to his grotto via a web of re-routed and live crackling electric cables (which are used to fry unsuspecting pigeons for food). Later, Harrogate fashions a crazed vessel from two joined car hoods and floats, "an eerie rattling apparition stroking through the fog"

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becomes the book's mantra and conclusion, for cities—in McCarthy's gnostic rhetoric—do nothing but concentrate sadness and inequality. (See Daugherty in particular: "For them [the Gnostics] evil was simply everything that *is*, with the exception of the bits of spirit emprisoned here [on earth, in human willpower]" (124). The novel's important semi-theological dialogue reveals Suttree as a man of great eloquence and implacable gnostic pragmatism: "I spoke with bitterness about my life and I said that I would take my own part against the slander of oblivion and the monstrous facelessness of it and that I would stand a stone in the very void where all would read my name. Of that vanity I recant all" (414). Suttree departs the city. "Behind him the city lay smoking, the sad purlieus of the dead immured with the bones of friends and forebears" (471). It began as a site of the dead and buried and it continues so. From one perspective his departure is wanton and irresponsible; but such a stance disregards the grime he chose to leave (as many travellers do) and the fact his community was about to be decimated by the highway. He denies the prospect of a dystopia and makes his protest by setting out into his own reclaimed life: for much of the novel this has never been a likely prospect. From a Buddhist stance, perhaps, his choice is simply the acceptance of evil and pain: 'Oh the joy to know there is no such thing as happiness!'

<sup>13</sup> For example, Harrogate's abduction of an errant pig, his subterranean quest for the wall to the city bank vault (he explodes a sewage main and almost dies a-reeking beneath the streets), his bat-poisoning exploits, his weird attempt to build a raft for this, and his labour intensive phone box scam, whereby he earns a few dollars a day patrolling 286 payphones and easing out some coins, walking the streets with weighty pockets. He swims through the terrestrial phone booths as divers do in the Hudson, trapped in his own oneiric and scheming drift.

though one unlikely to stir the same dread as Charon could muster (210). “The city’s bridges all betrolled now what with old ventriloquists and young melonfanciers” (144). Harrogate paddles his twin-keeled metal boat, poisoning dozens of bats after a rabies-bounty is offered (for dead bats in the street) by the hospital. (He fails to earn the cash he envisioned, but gets a free meal and a dollar and a quarter.) Harrogate punts his tin-pot craft, “trusting some unpublicized principle of buoyancy in existence to keep him safe” (Bell 86). The teen’s story is “an episodic parody of imagination striking back against reality” (Bell 85). Harrogate’s fanciful stubbornness ensures the book does not slew into despondence; the teen’s daffy optimism counters the oppressive cycle of “constantly eluded doom” he inhabits (261). His scheming and longing remains grounded in the prospect of the here-and-now rather than an elsewhere or utopia.

Harrogate is just one of the temporary city river-dwellers who are hounded by winter, police and poverty. There is “the rubber baron” Maggeson who, “like some latterday Charon” scours the river for floating condoms, hooking them “into a pail of soapy water” for eventual resale (108, 106). There are many families who fish and eke out a living near the water, and there is Michael, an “Indian” fisher with “a patchwork boat” (225). Michael is a little more fully realized than some of the river folk; as a fisher of great skill and (that rare thing for Suttree) almost a friend, his presence is notable.

Michael appears in the summer of 1952, almost halfway through the book, and gains attention by landing an 87-pound catfish, a vast beast that evokes another age and world (as do the turtles he catches). All sorts of things stir beneath the waters. An acquaintance begins as Michael shows his especially pungent bait to Suttree. Michael is cast as someone with a poise rare in the novel: his hair is blueblack like Superman’s (“They call me Tonto or Wahoo or Chief. But my name is Michael,” he tells Suttree [225]), he climbs the bluff to his hermetic cave “like a goat,” and he practises lost fishing arts (221). He has a settled air Suttree will never attain; there is an element of quiet need (and simple quiet) that begins to surface in Suttree the one evening he shares with Michael.<sup>14</sup>

Michael invites Suttree up to his cave for a meal of turtle stew. Suttree watches Michael butchering the turtle: after it is beheaded the turtle turns and walks towards the river, a ghastly automaton. This detail reinforces the sense that the river is still host to primal and primeval forces. “The Indian raised the turtle and swung it before him like a censer” (234). The shell removed, the “wet gray foetal mass” will be stewed for several hours (233). The unusual conflation of Christian Orthodoxy and rhetoric used to describe the reeking mudflats in the Prologue gives the evening a sense of portent, otherness and unnamed mystery. When Suttree returns for the meal the scene is pleasant and the riverscape is described in terms of landscape convention: still, “innocent” and calm, gesturing towards a “forbidden” wilderness:

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<sup>14</sup> In this sense Michael almost becomes the enigmatic Tutoring Noble Savage figure. Elusive, grounded and circumspect, this character-type echoes, diluted, in *Michael* and in *River Notes* and *Cody’s Ricochet River*.

The city lay quiet in the evening sun and innocent. Far downstream the river narrowed with distance where the pieced fields lay pale and hazy and the water placid much like those misty landscapes in which Audubon posed his birds. He sat in a tattered lawnchair and watched the traffic on the bridge below. There was no sound save for a bird that conjured up forbidden jungles with its medley of whoops and croaks. Suttree saw it put forth from the bluff and flutter in midair and go back. He leaned his head back. A mayfly, delicate and pale green, drifted past. Lost ephemera, wandered surely from some upland pastoral. The chat came from its bower on the bluffside and fluttered and snatched the mayfly and returned. After a while it sang again. (238)

This self-consciously calm and almost celebratory mood is unusual, as is the convivial “succulent and rich” meal the men share (240). Michael gives Suttree a bone talisman of unknown origin and sits quietly, “decorous.... solemn and unaccountable and bizarre” (240). Suttree does not know what to make of this river-washed man (who predicts Suttree will not fish much longer); he learns precious little in the sole evening they share. Michael disappears from the book until the dead of winter when, half-frozen to death, he taps quietly at the hotel room as Suttree sleeps; he is not heard and creeps away into the night. Suttree’s neglect in this instance suggests how distant Suttree is from the rugged, raw focus he seeks.

McCarthy’s Tennessee is a river that fails to “disremember,” a pent watercourse burdened with the hopes of people who recollect dead lives. There are few examples of strong untroubled community in the novel (though Suttree’s circle of friends is made closer and weaker by adversity): the river, a grim remnant of its former self, rolls past those who remain after the battles of will and love. Even the Reese family, flooded miles downstream in their houseboat, fail to offer any easy example of cohesion. (They later provide Suttree with pearlfishing work which pays in illicit and broken love.) They are just another product of the spring freshet, adrift, “spooling past unpawled with a muted seething freighting seaward her silt and her chattels and her dead” (306). Nothing remains stable; change tends to be for the worst, and human ascendancy and desire is constantly compromised by the darkness of hearts and minds, the perpetual and “ultimate night” (362).

Wanda (the Reese family’s teenaged child) and Suttree begin a relationship that, at first, casts a glow on his perception of the river. “He was struck by the fidelity of this earth he inhabited and he bore it sudden love” (354). “Drifting downriver in the lovely dusk, the river chattering in rips...” (352). The “upland pastoral” that he glimpsed near Michael’s cave—Bell terms it a “prelapsarian idyll” (111)—eases his eyes and kindles dangerous desires. It cannot last. A storm causes a landslide that kills Wanda as she sleeps. Suttree departs the tragedy (as from all the women in his life) like a swirling piece of flotsam: “He left downriver in the dark, the oars aboard, turning slowly in the current, jostling over the shoals. The cottonwoods went by like bones.... He sat in the skiff and held his hands in his lap with the dark blood crusted on the upturned palms” (363). Almost Christ-like, his near-stigmata point to a more sinister passion.

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Suttree returns to his houseboat, now tilted and near sunk from neglect. The autumn nights close in and the homeless are threatened by the police as much as the cold. The old boxcar dweller has vanished; Suttree asks if police were involved. The ventriloquist suggests “[i]t might have been any of em. I reckon I’ll be next. You ain’t safe” (365). Brutal authorities haunt the book; figurative associations build between them and the forces of death and decay. Later the old railway man is seen in the asylum: Suttree has gone (feeling futile) to honour a connection with his mentally ill Aunt Alice, and is shocked to see him in a place he regards as restrictive as jail. Suttree knows it is time to light out for new territory, catching the crest of the advancing expressway.

The 1950s setting defamiliarises the present and creates a remembered fallenness, a state at odds with what Bell so rightly calls “the advance of the Jaycee vision of human purpose” (110). Such an eager progressive vision may have satisfied Suttree’s father, but the son rejected it outright. He opposed that progressivism until he did himself physical harm. But he has little choice in the matter. A man like Suttree, “for whom ontological anxiety is a recurring crisis,” will never rest easily (Bell 89). Suttree’s inclinations are formed in opposition to the “utopian drive” (Jonas 22) and yet his eventual triumph over death places faith in energies, even “astroecologies” that depend on death and continuity. Ecologies of memory and form revolve around the whorl of metaphysics recirculating between decay and survival.

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The new river that breaches buildings and lives at the novel’s end sweeps all before it. Like Kim Stafford’s I-5, this road will carry a diurnal ebb and flow of silvered traffic and begin the removal of the river people. This is the “season of epidemic death and violence” that will change everything (416). The loss that marks Suttree the most (though family, lovers, friends and acquaintances drift out of his life without trace) is that of Ab Jones, a friend and bartender of giant stature and dignity. Ab receives the beginnings of a fatal beating from the police with Suttree nearby. Suttree, told by Jones to leave, steals a police car and, in a scene of determination and helpless anger, sends it careening into the river, its headlights whirling underwater.<sup>15</sup> “For a while

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<sup>15</sup> Frank Shelton suggests that Suttree is inspired to greater purpose and direction by Jones’s “strength and grace contrived out of absolute nothingness” in the face of the advancing armed police (McCarthy 440; Shelton 80). It is possible too that he witnesses the death of his old life as the car sinks beneath the water, and then he resolves to move on.

The maudlin feelings inspired by the dark or polluted body of water find echoes and continuities with Dickens (and with many reflective myths). Dickens’s depiction of young Lizzie Hexham is initially a case in point: “And, as the great black river with its dreary shores was soon lost to her view in the gloom, so, she stood on the river’s brink unable to see into the vast blank misery of a life suspected, and fallen away from by good and bad, but knowing that it lay there dim before her, stretching away to the great ocean, Death” (Dickens 115).

One characteristic of the fallen river Suttree looks on (and indeed this is true of the storied Thames Sinclair observes) is its capacity to inspire thoughts of death and decay rather than life, holism, Nature and affirmation. Yet affirmation *is* what Suttree gleans from somewhere within himself as he departs before the chromed rot sets in and the redevelopment levels one form of difference and community.



he could see the dark hump of it in the river and then it slowly subsided and was gone. He squatted on the damp grass and looked out” (442).

Suttree leaves his houseboat for fear of being arrested, cutting his trotlines after a final run in his skiff. The spring sees him still lying in a grotty hotel room, succumbing to typhoid and the last rites, if not death itself. Feverish hallucinations spiral the prose into a current of images, epiphany and dream. This is not the first time McCarthy’s prose breaks formal barriers and flows everywhere: his primal healing session with local wise woman-witch Mother She uncovers childhood recollections of death in the family, prompts him to seeing “a salt river that ran two ways” and patterns and “orders he had never seen before” (428, 430). At the end of his session he heads back to the river, lying in his houseboat, prophesying and whirling, returning to a state before everything existed, a void, one with the river of unrealised beginnings: “He lay in his bed half waking.... A barge passed on the river. He lay with his feet together and his arms at his sides like a dead king on an altar. He rocked in the swells, floating like the first germ of life adrift on the earth’s cooling seas, formless macule of plasma trapped in a vapor drop and all creation yet to come” (430). There is no Avalon he will float to, no easy escape from his mired river life. This knowledge in fact spurs him on. His ontological condition is critical. But it is also empowering: he gleans insight from an otherworld, acting as a bearer of visceral knowledge that enriches the community. Suttree is close to the world of the dead and their constitutive memories, which Bruce Lincoln scans. Suttree is also taken by the mythic residues that have remained, despite the Tennessee’s dams and Illich’s sense that water has lost its evocative aura. McCarthy returns Mnemosyne to the present; like Mother She, she has become a figure of terrible power rather than simplistic grace alone.

Suttree prepares for his final departure from the McAnally Flats neighbourhood, which is already altering before his eyes. Out of hospital (“You had a close call,” said the priest. “All my life I did” replies Suttree [461]), he returns to the river for a last farewell, finding a rotten corpse in his houseboat bed, perhaps a relic of the life he has already left behind in his feverish insights. “Nothing ever stops moving,” not Suttree, nor “the waste clogged river” (461, 467). “Suttree went back and crossed the river and sat on a stone and watched the water pass for a long time” (467). River reflection accretes and forms other kinds of momentum.

Suttree’s river is a source of travail and of life, muted, dormant or abnormal as it is. As he watches the water he may have occasion to recall two fevered statements: “I know all souls are one and all souls lonely” as well as the notion that “[h]e knew another McAnally good to last a thousand years. There’d be no new roads there” (459, 463). Both offer that edgy mix of security and alienation Suttree seeks, one prompted by gazing at those waters that he can never hold, but which are a constant in the story, rolling turgid, seaward, seemingly without clear beginning or end. As in Sinclair’s *Downriver*, the protagonist seems to head off the known map. If “the color of this life is water,” then Suttree is about to set off for a clear stream (415). Hitching out, he

accepts the drink of water offered at the road side, and the ride that will take him to new rivers, as he looks on—sly to the forces at his back, and the flow ahead.

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*Suttree* posits no easy answers to curbing the tide of progress. An idyll might ensure there is no police violence, poverty or people turning to walk the icy road alone and cold. I have discussed dystopia as a space that allows *desire* and longing functionality within the frame of sceptical inquiry. Vereen Bell identifies something of this energy (a will to survive if a not will to power) that lurks in *Suttree*'s character:

[E]xistence not only precedes but precludes essence. But if essence has been precluded, the human dream of it has not, so the pressure of meaningfulness remains even where meaning will not separate out. This may be why the characters themselves seem so human and so other-than-human at the same time, both vividly of their small worlds and strangely otherworldly also, as if life beyond thought were itself only and yet our elusive dream of it as well. (9)

Bell identifies the fused and disparate energies of the novel. The uroborus consumes itself without dispersing; cycles that form us continue to evolve and decline beyond our reach. Stafford's dark river camp and Flanagan's indifferent wildness percolate in the dark space *Suttree* encountered in fever and insight, "a cold dimension without time without space and where all was motion" (452). There is energy here, but not that of jingoism or the booster. Light penetrates the water for a few feet, while *Suttree*'s trotlines run out for hundreds. The river's dual nature—reflective surface and pervious depth—seems equally unfathomable, yet within the touch of fingers trailed over a skiff. *Suttree* is unable to know the soul of his stillborn twin, yet the "cold dimension" somehow sustains continuity: "what the dark river will corrupt and carry away is always already being restored" (Bell 74).

Redemption is too easy and simple a solution, too slight a transformation to enact before this dark force, these dark waters. *Suttree* has never wanted exoneration. Yet confronting our minute place in the scheme of things, though an awful prospect (perhaps with Didion's turbines whirring quietly in the void) is also authenticating and honest. The defamiliarised world is right at hand, even as it dissolves into ungraspable particulars. Rivers and perceptual states breach known boundaries and one simply "goes on" (Hugo, *Making Certain It Goes On* 446; Bell xiii). When *Suttree* flies beyond the reach of death, we applaud that small light in the firmament, its reflection rippling and changing on the surface of a midnight river.

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The final section of this chapter turns to the "Sweet Thames" troped by Spenser, Eliot and so many others and finds it less than sweet after enduring the "Jaycee vision of human purpose" that Bell defines. This storied "ribbon of memory" unravels through the layered reflexivities of Iain Sinclair's "modernist magpie" narrator (Perril 312). Gazing at self, text, city and river crowded

with ghosts of other stories, memories of other communities glimmer between chrome towers and terraced houses. *Downriver*'s setting, the palpably near "future memory" of cash-whipped London, pays homage to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, textual and celluloid *noir* forms and Dickens's dust-heaps. It details how the progressive excess Suttree avoided has worked its way over the past, almost as a reservoir drowns memory. The change has given loss a home, but Sinclair glimpses the past in the dimmed waters of the Thames. *Downriver* is a multiply digressive record of what he has (not) seen.

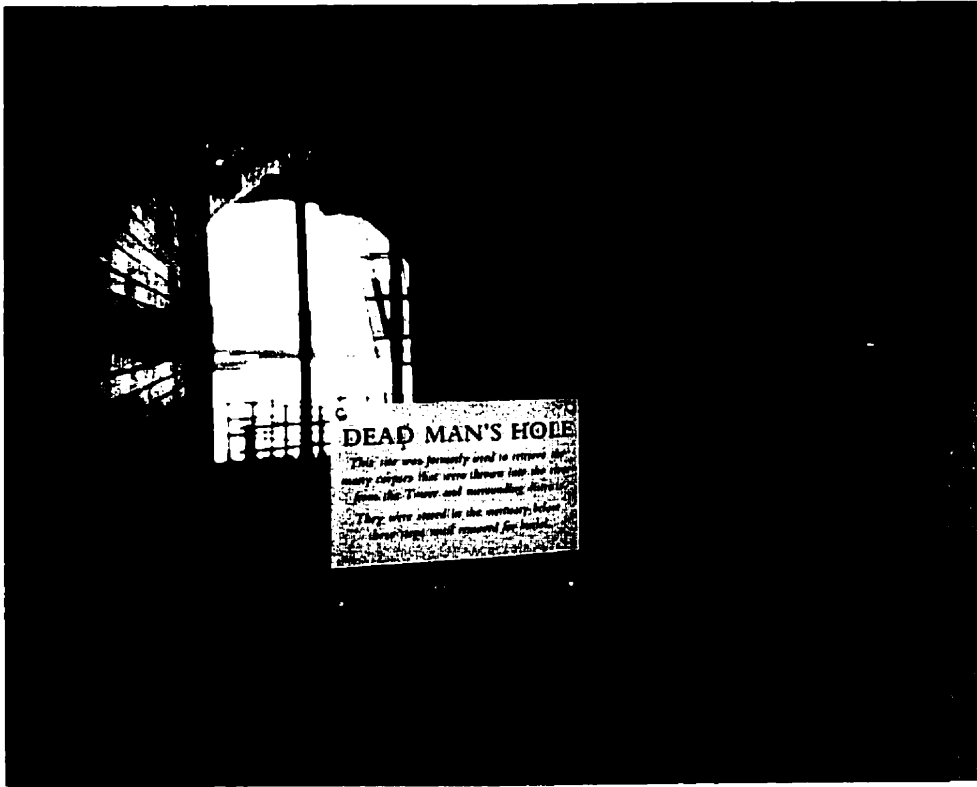


Fig. 2. River Thames. June 1999. Photograph by Michelle Wilson.

**“A liquid matrix.” *Downriver, urban loss and the storied Thames***

Fiction plots to undermine itself, to subvert the shape of the plan as it’s first revealed. It aspires to the trance of false memory, sets up hypnotic rhythms, changes of pace and temperature to lull the only audience that matters into an unearned sense of security: the audience of one – the writer. To delete or deny the original sustaining impulse is to escape history. It’s the thing we all aim for, to divorce text from its dim scribe and to set it free.

Iain Sinclair, “Future Memory”

Alongside real, troubled, neurotic and divided Britain there has come to exist a parallel Leisure’n’Lifestyle Britain, suffused with all the lip-glossed hyper-reality of the American soaps. (103)

Philip Norman, “Fantasy Island plc? Britain in the Eighties”

We’ve lost it, the way Turner knew the Thames was everything....  
The river moves through time, obsessively painted and sketched, shifts of light captured, so that it retains its special status as a ribbon of memory. (178)

Iain Sinclair *Lights Out For The Territory*

In *Downriver, (Or, The Vessels of Wrath): A Narrative in Twelve Tales* (1991) Iain Sinclair protests the demise of established Thames riverside communities. He argues Thatcherite policy and the rampant capitalist speculation of the 1980s damaged the river’s psychic and physical aura:

The late eighties were evil days for the disenfranchised riverside communities of London....

Things had never been so bad. The Thatcherite era was energy without soul. To act was to become. Londoners suddenly had no past, except that which could be pastiched; we wallowed in the worst of ourselves. The river, the spine of my project, was a brochure of all the development notions I most mistrusted. Districts, sunk for decades in complacent somnambulism, were razed overnight.... The indigenous population—the underclass—were temporary trespassers on a soundstage built from quotations. (xiii-xiv)

The Thames, at once ailing and beguiling, is both a source of story and “future memory”—its reflective capacity is embedded in the reach of time. In this “grimoire of river and railway” the Thames looks forwards *and* backwards, an urban and storied river with ancient associations (408, 446). Such flexibility is as much a function of the narrator—one “Iain Sinclair”—as it is the storied Thames (63, 158). Sinclair uses the river as a sinkhole for his own musing, a mirror of his present state and a faint tracery of former communities. Simon Perril astutely notes that “Sinclair’s

cartography of absence is always tentative, borrowing from the energy of conspiracy theory whilst constantly aware that his findings threaten to divulge as much about his state of mind as they do about the state of the country” (311).<sup>16</sup>

Sinclair is explicit about the river’s grim allure in his Introduction to the American edition:

What drew me was the Thames, the agitations of light on the oily water, and all those dead voices screaming their auditions. The William Burroughs method has much to recommend it: ‘I just walk around, and the stories walk through me.’ I wanted to unwind congeries of narrative in the form of a novel; to travel backwards down a changed and changing river. (xiii)

Remove *Downriver*’s compelling riparian *noir* dust jacket and one sees the letters “IS” embossed in bronze on the hardcover. The book reads like the real-time suppositions of a private eye and the journal of one given over—lost—to the pursuit of the image. Gazing into the dirty water, vague outlines appear to look back. Sinclair is haunted by a future that has not occurred, and the past that has. He is intent on countering “the current obsession with colonizing the past as the only place where access is free” (66). Twined in the irrevocable passage of time and memory, beholden to “the duty of keeping a true record” (but true to what? [299]), the Thames reworks (and is worked on by) one who has chosen to give himself over to its foetid secrets, stories that saturate without quite being seized, shaping the Thames as a reflective site, a mirror of assemblages. “We need to know more than there is to tell” (333). History, memory and the river bind Sinclair’s compulsions and tales. In this section I attend to the Thames as a source of Sinclair’s stories and a repository of hauntings, memories, narrative variation and allusion.

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<sup>16</sup> Even since Sinclair’s late-1980s focus on the Thames, the river’s ecology has been improved and many people are turning to the river courtesy of the recently completed 290-kilometre Thames Path. The river now boasts at least 115 species of fish, salmon are returning and commercial fishing has begun again. Acknowledging the wetland history of the river (which two millennia ago was one kilometre wide at high tide, 300 metres at low tide), reeds are now being planted on inner city banks (“Deep River”).

The Thames basin archaeology is rich and varied. From circa 1300-650 BCE fine swords were made and gifted to the river as a sign of prestige and obeisance to the river gods. Recently a Tudor rubbish dump was excavated at the riverside; it contained an intact banana, scotching theories the fruit was first brought to Britain in the eighteenth century (Radio 4 News, BBC London 15 June 1999).

In the sixteenth century John Hammond described the St. Pancras Witch, whose power was attributed to her early work as a magick surfer: “A Most Certain, Strange, and tru Discovery of a Witch. Being taken by some of the Parliament Forces as she was standing on a small planck board and sayling it over the River of Pancrasse” (Museum of London). The cold snap of the seventeenth century made the Thames freeze over during winter. Resulting winter fairs were very popular; all manner of stalls would spring up to serve the city: slices of roast ox, throwing at a cock, ninepins, plays, bear baiting, fox hunting and skittles were just some of the things one could do (“Climate Story” Radio 4. London. 22 June 1999). The nineteenth century saw an unprecedented rise in river traffic as the slave and imperial traders came in to dock and prison hulks sailed out. In 1858 the river reeked so badly with all its sewage content that the House of Commons was forced to close for a time.

This could be contrasted with J.M.W. Turner’s experience of the Thames in 1805: “By Turner’s time the view from Richmond Hill was more overlaid with literary and artistic eulogy than almost any other place in the world” (Hill 53). Sinclair’s lamentations therefore have old roots. John Thomson’s widely read 1727 poem “Summer” spoke of a “boundless landskip,” and David Hill argues Turner sought to capture that sense of reach: “By his choice of medium, line and wash, Turner was expunging the contingent detail which characterizes reality in order to create a landscape of the imagination rather than of fact. The remarkable thing about Turner’s Isleworth is that it existed with equal vividness in both realms at once” (124). I echo Hill by suggesting the remarkable thing about Sinclair’s Thames-scape is that it too is equally vivid in both realms.

As we approach the millennium, utopias gain a fashionable allure, at least in some technophile circles, by which humanity's basic goodness and cultural creativity will be borne out over petty material squabbles and local differences in the dematerialisation of communication. Their apparent opposite, dystopias, are perhaps more fashionable still, and in much wider circles. The air is full of rumors and announcements of various terminations.... (13)

Susan Buck-Morss, Julian Stallabrass and Leonida Donskis,  
*Ground Control: technology and utopia.*

As every increase in technology entails a corresponding increase in anxiety about the loss of the natural, so too does every such increase in speed transform the perceptual apparatus so as to overcompensate for such loss. The ontological takes refuge in the phantasmic. (92)

Allen Weiss, *Unnatural Horizons: Paradox and Contradiction in Landscape Architecture.*

A beguiling combination of ghost-story, hard-boiled detective narrative, and chronicle of the transformation of the East London riverscape, *Downriver* picks up where *Suttree* leaves off: the slathering hounds have arrived. The novel faces (and cannot evade, except through imagined victories) the onslaught of highways, "recolonizing" developers (who share a flourishing gnostic faith in progress and share broking) and their money (132). That zeal sweeps another community aside (just as *Suttree's* friends were displaced), leaving "a plantation of sorrow" (136). As in Knoxville's McAnally Flats, the London Dockside dwellers are already the dispossessed: margin-dwellers, there is no place for them in the now-yuppified landscape of the Docklands. Sinclair chronicles a vanished world. "Quest-hungry," (and aware of others on "mock-grail quests" to feed their bibliographic or other habits [Perill 311]) he stalks the riverbanks, marginal places in the process of becoming speculative sites: in the 1980s, water is declared "sexy" (373, 82).

This section attends to Sinclair's narrative and his archaeology of the derelict buildings and lives shaped by the Thames. The novel forms an ecology of memory appropriate for this navigator of psycho-geographies.

A loose definition of the psycho-geographic gives clues to the abundant tangents, loose ends and blossoming hypertexts of place Sinclair walks through. Each fixed point or object segues into the next; the site is full of referential clue-tracing.<sup>17</sup> As Kevin Jackson notes, this method allows the normal to take on resonance; everything we do leaves a mark:

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<sup>17</sup> His work features the trilogy *Lud Heat* (1975) and *Suicide Bridge* (1979) (poems) which 'closes' with his first novel *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, and the record of story-snooping journeys in *Lights Out For the Territory: Nine Excursions in the Secret History of London*. Sinclair has made the contemporary landscape into a repository of

Psychogeography, you will have gathered, is an attempt to read a location in terms of its associations. As practised by Sinclair, it's a business of seeking out, *inter alia*, the hints buried in place-names, or unwritten historical repetitions (Civil War Levellers to Tom Jones squatters), or the traces left by those writers or painters or criminals who have passed this way. In Sinclair's books, these eccentric investigations are liberally spiced with harsh observations about media chancers and halfwits, glum prognostications about the venality and shallowness of our mercantile culture, and plenty of lively, self-mocking knockabout.

The associative qualities of Sinclair's work nourish his penchant for symbolism and place-enrichment. River-writers invest place with extra meaning: decay does not detract from psychogeographic potential. The wild, shorn of human markings, does not speak as clearly to one who has honed his sight through three decades of London perambulation. Energies are passed through other places. Loss accretes. The city has too many layers to its stories. *Downriver* amasses meaning, infusing the normal and turning again and again to the river that has run constant through the changing land. That fluid cipher holds all the stories.

In his Introduction Sinclair traces the book's genesis: a contract for six short stories, a brief that overflowed its reach and began to grow. The result is a carefully structured novel composed as "twelve fate tales" (333), in which "Sinclair" is dogged by previous texts, their locales, authors and current characters. The braiding of Sinclair's/"Sinclair's" obsessions is shredded by the passage of time and Thatcher. His book opposes the progressive ethos that destroys this familiar riverscape. During the free-market explosion of the 1980s, Sinclair argues that some writers "were forced to give strength to all that was worst in the culture by the very act of noticing it. A compulsive haunter of margins, I wanted to offer my trust to that which was least known: the random convulsions of the river" (xiv).

The twelve tales segue into each other as the flowing journey of Sinclair and the river links disparate events and perceptual states. His characters (and famous figures from history) trail Sinclair as he walks the riverbanks. The clues he seeks are offered by his own creations, who take on lives of their own, leaving "Sinclair" pursuing them through East London, paying homage to other texts and histories as he goes.<sup>18</sup> He tries to make a film and trace lost ghosts, haunted by the wrongs done beside the Thames—slavery, deportation, maritime disaster and all manner of old

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clues and story-tracings. (His characters have eerie half-lives: Joblard and Todd Sileen spill over from *White Chappell* into *Downriver* and on into *Radon's Daughter's* [1994].) More recent work records the remains of East London Jewish life and history. He has collaborated with Rachel Lichtenstein in unveiling the life and work of David Rodinsky (*Rodinsky's Room*. London: Granta, 1999; *Rodinsky's Whitechapel*. London: Artangel, 1999. The films gathered in *Walking Rodinsky* and his re-tracing of Rodinsky's walks in *Dark Lanthorns: Rodinsky's A-Z*. London, 1999). Rodinsky lived in Princelet Street, Spitalfields, above the synagogue, for some decades until the 1960s. Kabbalist, linguist and reclusive scholar, Rodinsky haunts *Downriver* and Lichtenstein's projects.

<sup>18</sup> The character Dr. Adam Tenbrücke has a moment of sensory overload that "Sinclair" seems to experience as a normal state: "He was drowning in physical detail: the chips of blue-painted ceramic tile, the sharp knuckles knocked from coffee mugs, the wounded bricks. He felt their history, felt the warm hands of their owners, felt the energy of their decay. It was all pouring into him" (51).



and new poverty. This is a post-imperial novel that cannot escape from its own past: prefixes are redundant and older stories infiltrate the present.

Sifting the stories, his work amounts to what Seymour Chatman has called “fallible filtration” (149). Sinclair’s narrative trickery (which, in self-mockery, his sculptor friend S. L. Joblard calls “dreary post-modernist fraud” [412]) colludes in baffling any easy definitions: Joblard himself takes over narrating the final “tale.”<sup>19</sup> Sinclair plays with the slippage filtration offers, warping the world between narrator, character and temporal stability. Chatman argues that narrators cannot “pierce the discourse membrane to experience the story world directly; they can experience it only vicariously, through the words of others.... The narrator cannot perceive or conceive things *in* that world: he can only tell or show what happened there, since for him the story world is already ‘past’ and ‘elsewhere’” (144, 146). But when one of the story membranes is the allusive meniscus of the Thames, such ‘elsewheres’ are close by. The elsewhere keeps on washing through Sinclair, taking him by surprise, seizing intention and dashing it into the current:

I was drowning in the psychopathology of obsession: the harder I drove myself in composing this account, taking down the voices (the intrusions from “elsewhere”), the more exposed those around me became to repeated and meaningless mischiefs. My lacerated ego puffed and swelled to a critical state; I began to believe that, by some magical trope, unwittingly enacted, *I had moved ahead of the events I was describing*. Or even, and this is hardest to swallow, by committing these fictions to paper, I had ensured they would occur. (272)

Everything happened, and everything is made up: “the language of Sinclair’s novel’s is hyperactively inventive” (Perril 332). Sinclair (both of him) is a rare-book dealer<sup>20</sup> and novelist. He sets out to write a film script on Tilbury docks and the life and disappearance of David Rodinsky, who lived above the Princelet Street Synagogue.<sup>21</sup> The project quickly veers into an exploration of many things: the Kabbalistic qualities of riverbank architecture; the life of dancer and time-traveller Edith Cadiz: “[t]he beached detritus of the Imperial Dream” (the twelve postcards

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<sup>19</sup> Sinclair’s self-mockery (and his “spirit of consciously deriding fantasy” [Perril 334]) is a constant through his work. Responding to my discovery of a copy of *Downriver* in Oregon he observed: “I’m delighted that my books are being lost and recovered for Oregon bookpits. Just the sort of afterlife I’d wish on them.”

<sup>20</sup> Sinclair has a refined and gruesome taste in rare books. Besides a penchant for Conrad and travel (without cartography: “Anything with a map costs too much money” [15]) he peruses an entomology text titled *The Louse* which recommends rearing said creature “by means of lice boxes attached to the skin, in a garter beneath the sock”) and a text on tropical diseases: “The gross excitements of the Freak Show are enclosed within the discretion of the ethnologist’s cabinet. (Verdict? Irresistible!)” (16).

<sup>21</sup> The Whitechapel area contained 80 synagogues in the nineteenth century; now there are seven and a huge new mosque stands in Whitechapel Road; the area has always had waves of immigrants: Huguenots in the eighteenth century, Irish the next, Jews in the early twentieth, and refugees and exiles from the civil war in Bangladesh in the 1970s. Fascists led by Oswald Mosley paraded through the area in the 1930s (French 285).

Walking Princelet Street today, you will see very little obvious sign of Jewish life. Newer waves of immigrants have shaped each area. The tailors are different and in June fresh Alphonso mangoes can be bought, rather than the knafa pastries of old. The street signs are in English and Bengali, the demographics changed anew. Walking the area after reading Sinclair, one is struck by how carefully he has looked, how much he has recreated, seeking signs of the past (the merest glimmer) and leavening them with significance.

that evoke it and are reproduced between the “tales” [15]); Jack the Ripper; the BBC; the contemporary art-, bibliophile- and pretentious film-script-scene: Thatcherite policy and newspeak; advertising; architecture; disease; the entire urban landscape and *milieu*, and the poetry of Nicholas Moore.

In other words, the project goes deep into the Thames’ river community and the layered histories that invade Sinclair’s consciousness. He combs riverbanks for stories and storehouses, alert to the past in every possible manifestation; he is another fisher of memory and spirit, joining Gus Orviston, Cornelius Suttree, Aljaz Cosini, Sonja Buloh, Norman Maclean, and others, writers touched by the river’s capacity to prompt and embody memory. “Sinclair’s” compulsions are vocational and supernatural—he draws strength from what Weiss terms the “phantasmic”—but such categories continually break down beneath events in the book, even as his impulses and rhetoric compel him to constant pastiche, allusion and irony. Italicised sentences offer grim portents with a knowing intensity. Such cyclic veering and variation of voice is appropriate for an author who seems to be swept away *and* saved at various moments by his story.

Sinclair (like McCarthy or Flanagan) attributes qualities of remembrance to water. The river’s evasive evocations form a reflective site. Sinclair attends to the human stories that unfold along the river. Its eddies and transgressions are mirrored in the narrative, which delights in plucking ‘historical’ moments and reinventing them, just as they hijack any attempts at overt narratorial control. “Iain Sinclair” is far too open to the stories that walk through him to ignore invisible forces or tangents that are snapped up for material. But in *Downriver* the tale snaps back and consumes the teller.<sup>22</sup>

The composition of fiction is an exercise in future memory; the attempt to formulate an accurate description of events that have not yet occurred but which haunt the novelist like a troublesome dream. The right to lie, distort, transpose, edit is what distinguishes fiction from document....

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<sup>22</sup> In its attention to the grimmer potential of river life, the dank depths of urban decay, worked (as in *Suttree*) into plenitude by the waters, *Downriver* gestures towards that Thames-based classic, Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*, wherein “everything so vaunted the spoiling influences of water — discoloured copper, rotten wood, honey-combed stone, green dank deposit — that the after-consequences of being crushed, sucked under, and drawn down, looked as ugly to the imagination as the main event” (Dickens 219-220).

Avrom Fleishman notes, (of Dickens, and this is apt of Sinclair) that “[w]e are led, by a gradual adjustment of our responses to the river, to regard it as not only the setting in which the suffering life of man is lived, but also as the image of that life itself - it is both wealth and rubbish, both beauty and decay, both life and death. *Our Mutual Friend* thus passes beyond its powerful reflection of the topography of modern civilisation to a vision of the eternal course of human life” (Fleishman 126-7).

The most consistent example of haunting and the lapping of river memory (apart from Sinclair’s inversion of *Escape From Alcatraz*, evoking *The Prisoner*, Jerome’s *Three Men In A Boat* and others during his fraught coracle-trip to the Isle of Sheppey) are his nightmarish visions/recollections (temporal and formal lines are constantly blurred) of the wreck of the *Princess Alice*.

The *Alice* was a small steamer (220 feet by 20 feet) that was used as a popular commuting vessel along the Thames. On Tuesday 3 September 1878 (Jo Anderson records) the ship was packed to the gunwhales: there were 900 passengers aboard when the boat was struck (Sinclair reports) by the *Bywell*’s drunken skipper. Very few of the passengers could swim, and the tonnes of sewage in the river exited near the scene of the wreck. Sinclair releases glimpses of the wreck, moments of horror that puncture the narrative: rows of bodies lined up at the docks. Several scenes involve the fictional tracking of a drunken sailor at the scene of the crash.

Fiction plots to undermine itself, to subvert the shape of the plan as it is first revealed. ("Future Memory")

Sinclair (whoever he is) adopts the patois of the hard-boiled detective as part of his (constantly ironic) "duty of keeping a true record" (299).<sup>23</sup> "Our motives were, as always, opaque and spiritually unsound" (18). Immersed in history, he is a latter-day riverman, dredging the Thames for extinguished stories. Amidst his trawlings he slips into the language of the private eye ("[t]he trail was cold") and continues, led on again by the Thames (85).<sup>24</sup> "And always, beyond the pain—the river, black, costive, drawing me on, flaunting the posthumous brilliance of its history" (7).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sinclair is one of London's most famed dealers in works of *noir* pulp fiction.

<sup>24</sup> There are various other examples of the P.I. patois tucked in between the detailed analysis of psycho-geographies, literary tracings and wayward characters: "Now I began to understand the nature of the trap" (149). "A few weeks later I was back. It wasn't going to be easy to shake free of this place. I needed to investigate without the frenzied rush of hunting for negotiable books" (18). "It was time to visit the hospital, to trace the infected fantasy to its source" (71). His narrative follows a teleology of revelation (a publisher's representative reports on the favourable reception of Sinclair's *White Chappell* and says the boss "'has the hunch you could work on something lowlife, London, topographical—basically, *downriver*'" (382). The future memory of events gets woven into their fictional representation; the manuscript is proffered within the certainty (hah!) of its own published representation: "I dragged the spurned and tattered rewrite from my pocket and shoved it across the table. Pencilled comments speared the margins: a messianic tutorial. 'Who is "I"?' was the first controversy. An existential dilemma that stopped the present writer in his tracks. On that single incisive challenge the whole schmear hangs.") "Sinclair" remains sceptical of any certainties, least of all those contained in "the knockabout book-dealing picaresque" known as *Downriver* (383). "I (I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I) have been found out," he observes, labelling each of his "twelve fate tales" (384). The "paddler in narrative shallows" has been swamped by his fluid associations with the Thames (270).

An earlier series of scenes had "Sinclair" hounded by an obsessed Jack the Ripper fan who proffers a manuscript written in Sinclair's hand, and then a copy of his previous novel *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* which conceals earth from the victims' graves.

<sup>25</sup> The "stygian river" leads out and returns into its own retellings (56). Sinclair's journey past the grave of "Prince Lee Boo" is an example of his use of history. Sinclair walks through the under-river Rotherhithe tunnel and emerges in another place. "The tunnel covertly opens a vein between two distinct systems, two descriptions of time" (55). In the surreal, near-medieval zone he enters, Sinclair opens to strange ways of seeing, convinced he has died. Passing Prince Lee Boo's grave, the narrator sees the sheet of stone become a "two-way mirror" which runs subtitles of the tale as the buried man mouths the words (56). Lee Boo is buried near the river, "condemned endlessly to repeat the authorized version of what his short life has become" (56). A chief's son, the "Prince" was "imported into Rotherhithe as exotic ballast," where he made dutiful studies of Western astronomy, "was paraded at balloon-launches, prize-fights, and 'all-ticket' amputations" and died six months later. "It only required his rapid demise to convert him into a theatrical 'smash': an operetta with dances and sentimental speeches, a pantomime. The flyers can be examined to this day at the Picture Research Library" (57). Such blatant assertion of 'fact' is taken with a grain of salt; can Sinclair be telling the truth? But much of his novel describes the way this slippery term has been abused, manipulated and discredited in the 1980s and 1990s by Thatcherite government policy. *Downriver* recalls how that manipulation works out on the waterfront. As it happens (and if that matters, and it does and does not) Lee Boo *did* visit London and he was celebrated crudely and posthumously (Howard 59). Saint Mary's Church, Rotherhithe, houses his tomb chest, erected 1784: "Plain with good inscription, erected by the Honourable East India Company in memory of a prince of the Pelew Islands, whose father had treated the crew of the shipwrecked East Indiamen *Antelope* with great humanity in 1873. Lee Boo returned with the captain to Rotherhithe, only to die of smallpox" (Williamson 257).

The Thames (as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* reminds us) was a point of departure for slave ships, prison hulks, and armies and a port of arrival for plunder, trade and the (post)colonised. It is a peopled river—most rivers are. *Downriver* feeds off the accrued interdependence between people, story and place. “His” Thames gestures to an elsewhere already lost within the motile narrative. History is transmuted, re-used, placed in inverted commas: the hulks that took convicts to Australia are resurrected by his Thatcher-figure for tourists and then reused (in Sinclair's story) as jails for late 1990s vagrants, cholera easing the difficulties of incarcerating so many locals swept away by new money. “Vagrants were driven in (by the container-load) from their cardboard camps. They should no longer give the lie to the Widow's rhetoric of achievement.... The hulks were the flagship of a new social order” (367). Speculation thus continues on the banks: “[w]harves developed into concept dormitories. Rancid docks were reclaimed and rechristened” and a different story unravels on the water (56).

Sinclair dialogues (polylogues?) with the Thames. Few others in this thesis sustain the same intensity of communication, nor do they become quite so artfully consumed by their chosen, current subjects. “If imagination is primary then anything we can imagine must lie in wait to ambush us” (323). The river threatens to spread and swallow its surrounds as it used to 2000 years ago. As the novel roils and rills to its conclusion Sinclair is prepared to let the ugly human markers drown, to “[g]ive it all back to the waters” (386). The river keeps rolling despite the Thatcherite upheaval on its banks.

### **Thatcher and the riparian makeover**

Thatcher's policies were driven by conviction rather than insight and sustained against both common sense and the conclusion of rational debate.... In using the power of the state negatively – to resurrect as much unbridled capitalism as a

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Sinclair makes similar fun of the “Qantas Aboriginal Cricket Tour” which arrives to commemorate the first Australian cricket team to tour England: “[t]he 1868 ‘darkies’ drew a large crowd in London” (89). The captain of the team, “King Cole” dies two weeks after the match; 120 years later a group gathers at Victoria Park Cemetery for a dedication. City councillor Meic Triscombe has arranged for the planting of a straggly eucalyptus tree; (the gardeners bet on its demise; we wonder if ex-municipal gardener Sinclair leans on the spade). The planting offers Sinclair the chance to reflect on the lingering qualities of colonialism. Triscombe bales (“with all the pulling power of a flatulent concrete poet”) through a litany of injustices: “But because *he* was saying it, that truth was lost. He merely participated in the crimes; and by naming them—without heart-directed anger—he softened their edges, generalized them into impotent rhetoric” (94). The event has become “a display” and shady indifference, authenticity as a sound-bite. So the Thames leads out into the wide world, a world which makes its return up the sidling waters and over from The City. Sinclair quotes Hunter S. Thompson: “Civilization ends at the waterline” (354).

decade of power in an elective dictatorship could encompass – Thatcherism morally impoverished and desensitized a nation. (124)

Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism*

Wade in, traveller, and stick fast. Try to imagine, as you go under, Claudius bringing his legions over from the Kent shore. This is where it happened. This was the place.

Look on these new men: Princes of Ruin, Lords of Squalor. (17-8)

Iain Sinclair, *Downriver*

[A river] has a meditating role. So does the story that gives it voice. (127)

Michel de Certeau, "Spatial Stories"

Sinclair and McCarthy reconstruct densely detailed social and ecological riverscapes that are under siege. They are urban rivers. Assailing them both are the speculative forces of capitalism. 'Sinclair's' Thames is part of the human changes unfolding on its banks, changes linked with the speculative frenzies of the 1980s (and now the late 1990s), a "recolonizing" process that creates "a plantation of sorrows" akin to Suttree's "terrestrial hell" (136; McCarthy 144). As Sinclair skulks by the water, gleaning images for his perpetually incomplete film project, he witnesses an urban transformation. Sinclair works with everything that appears. Fact dissolves into the river; the river offers more back.<sup>26</sup>

Undeveloped bombsites were protected by razor-wire, trick paint that took the skin from your hands, chained wolves [Suttree's hounds have moved on]. The old trenches and bunkers were transformed by spectral floodlights into a pageant of future aesthetics: pecked and raked by overhead cameras. The jake-fanciers, blues boys, and ciderheads had gone under: burrowing into the earth they renounced the light. (166)

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<sup>26</sup> Sinclair's narrative is a river itself: he longs for "a magical getout. The one that lets the narrator melt from the narration" (408). "I have to get out from under the burden of a narrative which concludes my request to be released from the burden of a narrative. Which includes.... Even this letter is part of it; the mess, the horror" (411). Given that one of Sinclair's "mentors" is Joseph Conrad, the final words in the sentence are likely to be carefully chosen (56). The peg-legged old sea-dog Todd Sileen is one of Sinclair's most enjoyable characters, and also an obsessive Conrad collector. Of him, Sinclair writes "[t]oo close an association with water has always worked on the physiology of the darker strain of fictional hero" (37). Sinclair has great fun creating allusive moments, from Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men In A Boat* to Peter Ackroyd's work. The river is a seedbed and harvest ground; its abundance is cause for celebration and a certain wry overload, not to mention disdain over the way literature can lay claim to a place. "Literary associations stick like dogdirt to the turbulent mouldings of our boots, as we plod through 'Eliot's' East Coker, 'J. C. Powys's' Montacute" (332-3). I am as likely now to refer to "Sinclair's" Thames, though attribution can become fluid. Each writer remakes the river in their own way.

The encroaching profiteers are raiders egged on by the “Widow,” Sinclair’s evocative caricature of Margaret Thatcher: “This whole book is a sleep of revenge.... She is the worst of us” (411).<sup>27</sup> In his Introduction he explains the rationale and focus of his political attack: the policies and practices of the time were inimical to cultural memory, thus making his own exercise in “future memory”—*Downriver* itself—even more necessary. Philip Norman called the 1980s a time of “sybaritic myopia” (103). Sinclair wants to challenge a similar limitation of vision and memory:

The Thatcherite era was energy without soul. To act was to become. Londoners suddenly had no past, except that which could be pastiched; we wallowed in the worst of ourselves. The river, the spine of my project, was a brochure of all the development notions I most mistrusted.... The indigenous population—the underclass—were temporary trespassers on a soundstage built from quotations....

London tottered on a cusp of vanity, building and stomping, crushing memory under the heel. (xiv)

Sinclair paints the recolonising raiders in an unfavourable light because they represent an assault on “indigenous” lifeways and relics. “Remember. The museum of memory” (373). The echoes of imperialism are traced throughout the novel: Lee Boo, King Cole, the twelve mysterious postcards of nineteenth-century African colonial scenes: all these fragments resonate in a riversite that is re-ordered by new money, chrome and (very prolonged) lunches.<sup>28</sup>

Imperialism, in its Roman and English forms, frames the riverscape. Sinclair traces all these layers. His “renegade” (289) and storied Thames, “that self-renewing avenue of escape” (273) epitomises memory: taken for granted, fouled and then pitched as sexy (“the shift in focus that would make the Thames itself an assertive template from which the new London would be built” [106]), the river continues to offer its stories up to the clairvoyant narrator.

In highlighting the past Sinclair politicises the waters. The Thames is a democratic being; it will not silence the ghosts and images it carries or prompts in the envisioned walker. When he argues “the landscape is destroyed, but the dream of it is everywhere” he returns to the remnants of folk memory and signs of a past waiting for the attuned transmitter of dreams, the shaman-narrator of the anti-pastoral. Graveyard, life-giver, storehouse, indeed *process made visible*, the river continues on:

I was standing once more on the banks of the river. Deleting the dead versions once cleared the track ahead—on! Throw off the rattling tin cans, the barnacled

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<sup>27</sup> Sinclair’s visual sense is acute and unsparing: witness again the spectre of the Baroness, primed to deliver compassion to dear friends like Reagan and Pinochet: “Then the Widow herself clattered on sawn-off stilts into a hail of exploding flashbulbs. She was padded like a Dallas Cowboy; smoke-blue, she chicken-danced towards a nest of microphones. Her head was unnaturally tilted (as if it had been wrongly assembled after a motorway pile-up), but her hair was obedient. A swift, over-rehearsed smile preceded the ankle-stamping homily” (277).

<sup>28</sup> His vicious parody, the account of a debauched and ostentatious luncheon (complete with “the Sh’aaki Twins” [270]) is a case in point (Ch. 8 ii and v), as are the “four months of heroic eating” that form the basis of his meetings to secure a filming contract to record some “erased history,” namely his abandoned film script set on the vanishing Tilbury dockside area (376).

anchors. The river *is* time: breathless, cyclic, unstoppable. It offers immersion, blindness, a poultice of dark clay to seal our eyes forever from the fear and agony of life. Events, and the voices of events, slurp and slap, whisper their liquid lies: false histories in mud and sediment; passions reduced to silt. (331)

As Sinclair's credo (or one of them!), this paragraph hails the continuity of the 'pure' river novel. Though the Thames may have fallen from its earlier salmon-filled glory (and risen from its nineteenth-century reek) it still sustains stories and memories through long association. This river offers talismans of a human past, a haunting transpiration of voices, rather than any deep solace. Its continuity and purpose (a quality Scott Russell Sanders admires) is a reminder of the series of changes going on beside it, though Sinclair takes no comfort from them.<sup>29</sup>

Instead, he returns to the spot where the large passenger wherry *Princess Alice* sank in 1873 (see footnote 22). At the site, memory and water form a touchstone. He tries to mollify his "obsession" by staring into the leaden waters" and wishing for a resurrection of the boat and all aboard who drowned (331). Even if this proves impossible, he still derives sustenance from the anti-pastoral, the littered littoral. In an age of chrome and cash, genuine rubbish and aged junk have an ironic referential power. The river is not simply what it appears to be; it is what has happened in and near it.

A river's capacity to absorb metaphor is not diminished by toxic run-off. That run-off accumulates as one more memory-token, changing, as Herendeen put it, the vernacular of the river ("Rhetoric"). For Sinclair and others rivers are stories, for "stories carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places" (de Certeau 118).<sup>30</sup> Sinclair's reconstructions exercise a kind of grotty nostalgia. The loss of a rather run-down but very

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<sup>29</sup> *Downriver* and *Suttree* delight in repelling the sublime and trashing landscape and pastoral convention. Their grimy ravings muddy the aesthetic basis of the utopian and progressivist vision.

<sup>30</sup> Sinclair's Thames combines aspects of Michel de Certeau's definition of space ("intersections of mobile elements") and "place" ("an instant configuration of positions" [117]). A river is unstable on one level, but this very flux marks a variable boundary, a decisive transformation in element, perception and access; place is space, and space dissolves into fluid space, the intermediate, indeterminate and ineluctable power of water. Stepping into the river both breaches and affirms a braiding of liminal spaces: body, water, earth and air. As a 'place' a river defines and transforms its own spatiality through interaction and submission to rainfall, erosion, transpiration, industry, dams and so on: "a movement always seems to condition the production of space and to associate it with a history" (de Certeau 118). Something of a river's appeal lies in the fact this movement is sometimes indistinguishably ecological and human and non-human. It reminds the observer that history is composed of intersections and configurations of people, place, story and event.

Sinclair is well positioned to comment on the history washed downriver. The boundaries between past and present or text and reality are so fragile that he has trouble separating himself from the flow of words and images he has gathered, that have gathered him. But his continued attention ensures Sinclair uses story as a means of continuity, tapping into the surface of things to trace dark recesses. Crossing the rivers of time and recollection, this history-pirate, hijacked by his own images, makes use of the border and frontier as door and bridge: "Within the frontiers, the alien is already there, an exoticism or sabbath of the memory, a disquieting familiarity. It is as though delimitation itself were the bridge that opens the inside to its other" (de Certeau 129). Sinclair's "sabbath of the memory" is not a time for rest, but for concentration and renewal. In it, brief speculation can quickly segue into full-blown epoch-analysis.

idiosyncratic riverscape evokes as much anger in him as Gus Orviston's response to a clear-cut forest. The *nouveau riche* have displaced the locals, the old-ways have been diluted.<sup>31</sup>

One place (and thus moment, space and story) of insight on Sinclair's trail (near Royal Pavilion Gardens) is a "no man's land" that remains "Edenic" because it has not fallen foul of the cleansing and recolonising process, (though it *is* foul and revealing for all that). Sinclair's meditation on this "last run of wild ground" brings something akin to de Certeau's urban attention to bear on the Thames, a theory augmented with black magic, alchemy and junk analysis. Sinclair journeys to note the stories braced about him; "The river is what makes passage possible" (de Certeau 128).

The description is worth quoting at length; it details how he operates and engages with the remnants of history by the river. A spot untouched by the present takes on the sanctity of wildness because much of the present transports the grime into policy rather than leaving it on the water's edge: the fast and filthy rich have overtaken filth. But in this spot the grime and its stories live on just as they do in *Suttree*. Once more, Sinclair turns the scenic/ironic moment into a political one, where cartography, Thatcher, memory (the *Princess Alice* wreck) and the river create a crucial and characteristic layering. The junk was anathema to Duncan ("Northwest Passage"), but for Sinclair that detritus tells stories worth hearing, stories from a vanishing world:

[T]here is always a territory beyond the gardens (there *has* to be). A wilderness that makes the tentative notion of a garden possible. Beyond music (gossip, easy assignations, French kisses, sticky fingers, cigar smoke, sweet muscat) is a concrete balcony, a fierce ramp aimed at the suck of the river: an unshaven wall of threat, sprayed with curses, among which I notice the delicate invocation "Acker." The tide is teasing the rug away from under the usual catalogue of broken bottles, pieces of chain, grievous bodily weapons that failed their audition, lukewarm motors escaping the net of insurance investigators. Yellow river-sick plasters the hubcaps. This is where you will find (should you so desire) whatever is spat out when all the meat has been picked from the bone. A last run of wild ground which heavy plant instruments are obscurely, but inevitably, eliminating. A brief no man's land. An Edenic flash in an atrocity album. A truce between the mental gardens and the Creekmouth Sewage Works. I can go no further.

I sit on a stone block in a sheltered hollow, and look from my map (Landranger 177) to the river, and back again: the sun dance, the golden float of midge-bright

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<sup>31</sup> Lisa Jardine has questioned Sinclair's wistful prising open of place and story in his recent work with Rachel Lichtenstein focusing on David Rodinsky:

Sinclair ... has a track record of nostalgically reconstructing 'worlds we have lost' out of the detritus of city life. The hallmark of these is a fully formed, knowing authorial identity, which guides the unsuspecting reader. His own voice imposes an order on the fragments, steers the landscape into meaning, tells the reader what to think and feel. For Sinclair, Rodinsky is just one more empty box to fill with regret for a largely unrecoverable British past. For Sinclair, Lichtenstein, too, is just one more stop on an autobiographical walk around Whitechapel.

Jardine has a point, but by the same token much knowledge has emerged in a cross-cultural context; in *Downriver* learning is a shared and organic endeavour of inquiry and revelation. Jardine's concern may be that Rodinsky is not alive to give assent to such a cross-cultural endeavour; her point raises profound questions about the ways and means of honouring the memories, stories and people of the past. Is there an ethics of fiction? Such a code is likely to be culturally and temporally specific.



particles. The love soup. Teasingly, the light reveals itself. The tainted water is marked on the pale blue that represents the Thames with a heavy cross of ink. (There could be no mistake.) The death place, between Gallions Reach and Barking Reach, is named Tripcock Ness, or Margaret. The chill of that baptism inflicts, as if by ordinance, its own shock waves of ruin. Margaret mines the channel, exacts her toll, visits the drowned; a succubus, she drinks their terror, licks the weed from their mouths, irradiates them with her glory. Punitive strokes of benevolence flay them to the last wafer of skin. A curtain of nuclear winter hangs across the river—a second barrier—a thin line of artificial snow; a mantle of ash through which all traffic must pass.

Sitting by the river—“that molten crucible of light”—Sinclair lets his “anger die in the distance” (332). The rich vein of corrupting evidence that spreads out by the Thames honours the uncompromising urban scrutinies of Kathy Acker; there are no easy answers here either. This is one “dead version” Sinclair archives; its deletion is imminent beneath the ““big bang”” of late-Eighties development and “the pervasive workings of the Thatcher revolution” (Diamond 79).<sup>32</sup> The murky waters offer little respite; dead versions may be deleted, but they make way for more refined (though mannered, self-conscious and somehow shaming) reconstructions of what has already vanished on the riverside. Time and the presence of stories are “breathless, cyclic, unstoppable.” So Sinclair keeps pacing, “touched by the perambulations of other ghosts,” gazing at the emptied aftermath.

With the greying and glassing of his riverscape comes the dissolution of story: character and place are sterilised sites. The “Widow” is the arbiter of such revolutions in place, a process of transformation begun on her body. She is crowned with a wig, pumped with extract of monkey-testes, each morning making

her choice from a cabinet of warrior’s teeth, toying between the chew-’em-up-and-spit-out-the pips version and the infinitely alarming smile-them-to-death set the boffins never quite managed to synchronize with her eye language. The Widow was a praise-fed avatar of the robot Maria from *Metropolis*; she looked like herself, but too much so.... Not a breath of criticism, nor a whisper of forbidden names: all was analgesic ‘balance,’ the cancellation of energy. (238)

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<sup>32</sup> Sinclair’s observation of riverside transformation is extended in his book *Lights Out For The Territory* (which includes a brilliant essay on a trip to Jeffrey Archer’s Thameside house). That collection of essays is an account of the making of *Downriver* as much as the un/making of The City. The book recounts his “walks” which “tended, all too often, and like one of my less disciplined paragraphs, to take over with an agenda of their own” along the “mosaic of city and river” (170, 180). Of course the non-capitalist urban river faces great stress today.

This urban shift is borne out by statistics regarding the rate of property development, particularly in the late 1980s. “Remarkably, more than 70% of total take-up in the period 1984-88 has comprised new rather than second-hand floor space” (Diamond 87). Old buildings and vacant lots are quickly gobbled up: “Unused land, which was surplus to current operational use had existed as docklands, railway goods yards, redundant markets etc., for many years previously” notes Diamond (85). Sinclair, chronicler of the supposedly ‘unused’ would query the ‘redundancy’ of these spaces. They may have been ‘unused’ but they were often inhabited. However, the Docklands redevelopment remains applauded in most histories and guidebooks. Recent provisions for East End resident locals, rather than Yuppie imports transferred from other business headquarters (job-shifting rather than job creation), aim to prevent polarisation between low-income local families, and comfortable financiers who commute to work.

The Widow has, in this fiction, reigned for twenty-two years, “a one-party state and a one-woman party” (238). The setting projects the dystopia a few years into the future, while the caricature defamiliarises and satirises at once.<sup>33</sup> Keen for a new public focal point, the leader decides to build a vast riverside monument to her deceased “Consort.”

She was married to the nation now, divorce was out of the question.... The structure must be commissioned: Dead meat, a consort could still be pressed into service. *What are you waiting for?* Put a call through on the blue line to the Sha’aki Twins. A state commission must be set up immediately. Yes, NOW! Of course, this morning. No planning permission is required. Flatten Greenwich if you have to. Next time they’ll think before they vote. (240-1)

The extended steering committee luncheon is a display of jargon, envy and moneyed disdain. The Saatchi twins, regents of 1980s advertising (and massive art collectors), are lampooned. Sinclair’s representation of Thatcherism as “the mindless worship of our silver-skinned abess of pain” provides a case study in the “sybaritic myopia” of the 1980s (Norman 299). Few in the luncheon party can see beyond the nouvelle cuisine, cocaine and bubbly, let alone their egos. The novel seems composed of satirical caricature, grounded by the detailed knowledge of the deleted Dockland’s riverscape. Thus Sinclair turns to the river as a source of *almost* incorruptible memory, despite the changes around it: “[t]he vigour of the past ambushed him at every turn in the river. It was alive, unexorcized. And not hiring out for exploitation” (362).

Sinclair’s account of the Widow’s speech that inaugurates the revamped prison hulks gathers landscape, memory and Thatcherite ideology. As the dystopia gathers power, the old convict ships are put to use again: Britain “successfully made a reservation of her own history” (366). Drawing on Thatcher’s use of the plural pronoun (akin to her use of the singular that “express[es] not a sense of personal responsibility, but of personal rule” [Webster 104]), Sinclair diagnoses an amnesia that strips diversity from the land and culture: “History has been conquered. *Rejoice!* .... The future is what We believe it to be” (366).<sup>34</sup> *Downriver* records the impact extreme

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<sup>33</sup> The succession of resignations from Thatcher’s cabinet was a reaction to her failure to fully inform ministers of “‘what we are going to do’” (Webster 143). Webster argues that “her own convictions took precedence over any need to accommodate other views, or even to listen to them” (143). Even the conservative *Mail on Sunday* “took it for granted [after the resignation of Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson] that Cabinet government had been suspended for a decade and that Mrs Thatcher had inaugurated a period of ‘one-woman rule’” (Webster 144). As Eric J. Evans notes, “[t]he already prevalent reputation was strengthened of a prime minister who traded on the strength of conviction leadership yet who could not tolerate equally strong opinion in others” (110). Evans, Young and Webster are clearly anti-Thatcher.

<sup>34</sup> On Thatcher’s demise, ousted from leadership in 1990, Eric J. Evans notes “*The Guardian*, never a friend to Thatcher, published a one-word reader’s letter which recalled, with savage irony, the lady’s response to success in the Falkland Islands war almost a decade earlier. The letter read: ‘Rejoice!’” (114). Sinclair probably satirises a speech Thatcher made in 1982. The *Guardian*’s Hugo Young recalls her speech thus: “When South Georgia was recaptured on 25 April, in the first encounter with the enemy, she strode regally into Downing Street and instructed the nation: ‘Rejoice, just rejoice!’ Addressing the Scottish Conservative Party on 14 May, she noted: ‘When you’ve spent half your political life dealing with humdrum issues like the environment, it’s exciting to have a real crisis on your hands.’ The struggle, she said, was between good and evil” (273). The Secretary of State for Scotland later told a

Thatcherite ideology has on the social and physical riverscape. The effect is almost as startling and permanent as that other icon of ideology, the giant dam.

Sinclair and *The Widow* cross paths, for their stamping ground is riparian. Thatcher and our wandering narrator appear at the Consort's memorial, along with one of Sinclair's friends, the visionary hermit sculptor Imar O'Hagan.<sup>35</sup> In a climatic moment, the sculptor's creation, a vast animate wicker man, a resurrected piece of pagan ritual, strides towards the ugly memorial commissioned by the Widow. Driven by arcane energies that link snails and psychic pathways with the Kabbala, the creature smashes helicopters from the sky, causing a huge fire in which the memorial and the Widow perish.

Sinclair follows King and Flanagan in imagining a kind of vengeance that redeems the pain inflicted by the government, whose ideologies are symbolised in vast ugly monuments (such as dams or memorial architecture). Each author derives deep and vicarious pleasure from their acts of "creative vandalism" (Reisner 485). Imagination triumphs. The revenge occurs in the field of fiction, but it leads to a sharing of ideas that *may* gain purchase in the minds of the reader. In any case, there is a grand celebratory air to the processes of demolition: the scenes of collapse are cathartic. The book continues on, but Sinclair enjoys a measure of creative power. The dissolution of the ugly, obscene, and unjust harks back to the golden age of the past. This impulse has old roots: the search for acts of redemption that deliver the natural world from its man-made wounds is here transmuted onto the page. This was a tactic familiar to Thoreau: "He [Thoreau]

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friend the speech reminded him of the Nuremberg Rally. Thatcher does not mention this part of her May speech in her memoirs (221). But she does believe the phrase 'Rejoice!' was taken out of context: "I meant they should rejoice in the bloodless capture of South Georgia, not in the war itself" (209). (The real struggle is movingly portrayed in Michael Foreman's picture book *The Tin-Pot Foreign General and The Old Iron Woman*; Thatcher tells us she takes great pride in the sobriquet of 'Iron Lady' [Thatcher 184]). Young argues that the "Falklands War was a seminal event in the life of the Thatcher Administration. "Its triumphant end, effacing any tribulations on the domestic scene, was what guaranteed the Conservatives' political triumph at the next election, and on into the measureless future" (279). (Young's book was completed two years before Thatcher left Parliament.) Thatcher herself wrote "I never confused the leader page of *The Guardian* with *vox populi*" (561).

<sup>35</sup> O'Hagan and "Sinclair" share some journeys. The first is an inversion of *Escape From Alcatraz*: a journey by home-made "carrach" or coracle to the Isle of Dogs, rechristened by Sinclair as the Isle of Doges because of the intricate and affiliated arms of transnational and Catholic capital that have scooped up the region's property; "[t]he island had always been shunned or exploited for its dark potential" (292).

The sculptor reveals his handiwork; the coracle evokes the incredulity reserved for craft akin to Gene Harrogate's twin-prowed tinpot vessel. "Vessel? The thing was a mess of warped ribs: the carcass of a sheep, picked dry by crows.... The currach is a blunt egg, turning on itself, reluctant to face the responsibility of nominating a direction of travel, eager to drift" (*Downriver* 294). Jerome K. Jerome is explicitly revisited here and in the return trip from the island, though both accounts lack the levity and leisure of the earlier novel. There is serious investigative work to do on the Isle. The trio seem to uncover some kind of Voodoo sect with an Anti-Pope and a cabal of men with the intention of taking over the world, the new face of a dark religion (perhaps the sepulchral centre of monetarist ideology), occluded by a conference to which Stephen Hawking has been invited. As Sinclair sneaks through the complex (a Bond-like and littoral literatus), he hears the Professor's reprocessed voice reverberate through the corridors in something of a mantra for the entire novel. "Imag mag mag inary time is sss real ti ti time" (312). Stranded on the island, pursued by slathering hounds, the trio run for it.

Davy Locke, fellow paddler, surmises the power of the river-time-imagination cycle as a wayward fractal: "'a confirmation of Hawking's absence of boundaries, a liquid matrix.... What if the inevitable return of our natural cynicism and disbelief has let slip Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, renegades from Dickens's prison hulks, or any other composite monsters—including those from this fiction you are supposed to be writing? If imagination is primary, then anything we can imagine must lie in wait to ambush us'" (323).

understood that paradise is always already paradise lost, and that it can only be regained in spirit, or more precisely in writing, and not in any worldly site” (Weiss, *Paradox* 88). Sinclair wields some power to change things with his story.

Sinclair positions himself as a gritty neo-*Columbo* figure, sniffing out the “true record” and knowing it may never exist beneath the autocratic record or “analgesic ‘balance’” favoured by The Widow. His record of how things were (personally and communally) is a transpersonal composite. “Sinclair” (like the non-urban River Guide Aljaz Cosini) becomes a conduit for layered memory. Like water, this motile (and malleable) elemental memory is Sinclair’s point of reference, his own locus of truth as much as the Widow’s. In the glare of her steely domination Sinclair is compelled to return to the river’s history to give his own provisional version of events. “Sight offers a geography of surfaces.... The possibility of illusion is always present” (Rodaway 117).

There is much in the novel to attend to; I want to return to the river—the “‘liquid matrix’” that connects disparate elements of story and narrative—and watch Sinclair’s escape from the “Isle of Doges.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Memory Dredging: “the river is the agent of transformation”**

Sinclair is still trapped on the Isle, mired in the offhand schtick of the burnt-out private investigator:

An ugly tide licked at the slipway, leaving gifts: pressed cans, detergent bottles, ends of rope. It was hungry to run us down to Tilbury, and whatever lay in wait. I no longer wanted to burden it. I was happy to sit on the wall, watching these reflex spasms—the cough of mud—as I brooded on other rivers, better days. (355)

A form of escape is at hand: the wayward boat *Reunion* (“no more than a tub of baby-blue fiberglass, a tray with a cabin”), skippered by “our self-inflicted Ahab,” one Jon Kay (357, 355). A navigator-*manqué* who is a driven relic from the 1960s, complete with “ECT-toasted synapses” and a fearsome capacity for hallucinogens, Kay’s “ego had been broken into powder and snorted” (356).

Sinclair and Joblard embark with Kay: the skipper is so far gone he is simply told to head for the sea: “‘You can’t miss it. A big green thing’” (358). The scene provides insight into motive; once again the event is ripe for allusive comment: “We were drawn together now in what Conrad’s Marlow refers to, ambiguously, as ‘the fellowship of the craft.’ The worst was surely

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<sup>36</sup> Before this breakout a diversionary tale records Sinclair’s interview with Peter Riley about the undervalued poet Nicholas Moore. “I would transcribe some sort of record and include it, as a testament, among my twelve fate tales. There should be a bridge of light, however hallucinatory (and self-willed), to span the guilty river” (333). So Sinclair lights out for Cambridge and the interview, returning to see Moore’s plain house and moving “towards the idea of the river” (350). The ‘real’ river appears in the following chapter as we return to the Isle of Doges.

over. We were *Three Men in a Boat*" (362). Sinclair's meditation on that early river fiction reappraises any optimism he may feel:

It struck me we had embarked on a contrary statement of Jerome's Thames journey. Our motives were not dissimilar. It was flawed, therefore. Impure. Vulnerable. Upstream for comedy, Downstream for.... whatever it was we were involved with. We had wantonly chosen the wrong direction. We would never pull gently, at our own pace, back towards the river's source; the spurting puddle in a Cotswold field. We sought dispersal, loss of identity.... We were fleeing in desperation, in pieces, letting the water devils out of their sack. (362)

The haunted river, stewed in Sinclair's brain, boils over to engulf the man who embellished it. Even the novel's moments of frenzied (allusive) action are ironic and reflexive. Sinclair's failed film runs beside the scene; he is out of shot recording events, pulling the director into the frame with references and precedents in hand. The director points back into the past to the rows of cameras and pages bobbing in the river. Things become like water: hard to handle.

Sinclair believes Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* is a creature of his own making but not his intention, which was a more fact-laden, serious work, *The Story of the Thames*. His thoughts on Jerome offer important insights into his own experience of the river: Jerome cannot hold a story in place: "as always, the fiction achieved an independent existence that overwhelmed him, tearing the publisher's advance treatment to shreds. The feeble (premature heritagist) pageant collapsed. The vigour of the past ambushed him at every turn in the river. It was alive, unexorcized. And not hiring out for exploitation" (362). Of course that lingering ghost called history ambushes Sinclair too; both authors have to accede to the stories they are chasing. Sinclair does so explicitly: his investigative work is always in progress. The story, teller and the reader are ambushed by the histories recirculating in the flux of this written river.

The Thames becomes an insistent, blighted Mnemosyne, while a Widow's Lethe slops at the barricades. "We drifted back and forth, cradled between memory and forgetfulness" (364). *Downriver* is born of such a space, because Sinclair seeks clues to the images that do remain to haunt him, even if those clues are often beyond reach. He still makes it indisputably clear that history has *not* been conquered. The Widow is overcome by the associative power of the storied water, the Thames that Sinclair paces—and is "outpaced" by (367). One thing he gleans from Jerome's jolly tale is the river's propensity for offering and retracting its own stories, that revel in passage and ironic, reflexive observation. Sinclair remains aware of Eliot's transposed Mississippi but he knows the river is uncompromising—a story in its own right, always open to further dry salvage.

Kay is at the helm as the *Reunion* lurches through the tidal soup. As they careen about the water Sinclair looks down to a scripted current, another language as beguiling, vital and evocative as memory itself. "The river outpaced my fear of it: a tightening roll of mad calligraphy, scribbled wavelets, erasures, periods of gold" (367). Though polluted, the river's literary and cultural freight is so powerful that Sinclair manages to trope the Thames as a wayward child of

Mnemosyne's pools and currents. Where Illich ascribed purity to the inspiring waters, Sinclair offers homage in the form of a story and flow that survives the City's moral desiccation and its imperial dregs. Dystopian literature protests the present system; Sinclair challenges a *Britannia-Lite* that sweeps otherness aside or showcases it in scopic glee. Sinclair re-members and resists this force by corralling latent voices into his recollective narrative current: "I wanted corpses to rise out of the river, shrieking in accusation. I wanted the past to resolve itself, and the present to become habitable" (378-9). He reinstates a grimed and near-dead Mnemosyne and allows his digressive, allusive text to open to the suggestive processing-based power of orality. He does this through the perceptual and phenomenological foundation of his work's liquid roots.

The Thames, much abused by human waste and chemical effluent, is somewhat fallen, but its many representations are proof that ecological damage is temporarily forgotten by memory and imagination. These creative cultural forces are offered as bulwarks against the arrogant and selective amnesia of Thatcherism. Even in that age the river holds its own, while Sinclair derives satisfaction from the intractability of any redemption: he enters the fallen state and still finds precious mementos amidst the evidence of darker forces. 'History' remains as transient and elusive as ever in the book, but the novel functions to reaffirm its "unexorcized" force; the story leads one on like history, (un)ravelling in the mind that depends on the past and becomes it. "But nothing is lost forever. It slips further out, abdicates the strident exhibitionism of the present tense: lurks like a stray dog, somewhere beyond the circle of firelight.... The museum of memory" (373).

The museum of memory is dredged in the following pages as Sinclair's associations lead from Jerome K. Jerome to the restored prison hulks of yore, to be hijacked by the memory of the *Princess Alice* boating disaster, an event that has haunted Sinclair throughout the book. The *Alice* disaster is recaptured or embellished (we cannot easily tell which) through a range of intertextual digressions (snatches of official and "real" records). These are supplemented by a ghastly and unflinching account of the horrors of the day (and the pillaged and violated corpses of the night) and lines of bodies on the docks. As Sinclair watches, he sees the death throes of the Empire ("this repeated concussion"), finding some redemption in the exercise of memory, of bearing witness by the water (372). Back in the dissolving present, the *Reunion* ploughs ahead towards the other side of the River.

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Sinclair's journey through the dregs of *Heart of Darkness* is, on the physical level, "ominously easy" (374). The *Reunion* crew arrive at Tilbury in one piece after a journey rich in allusive current: "Only the names survive; riding the tide of history like indestructible plastic" (372). Crawling the docks they encounter a film crew shooting the script Sinclair had abandoned some

months earlier: “I was rapidly being written out of my own story” (384).<sup>37</sup> Restless, the three men return to the river and the slim chance of a resolution; their destination is the Sheerness dock. Even at rest he lets the stories filter through him, a conduit for all the era has failed to regard, Sinclair is archaeologist—and alchemist—of memory and the river.<sup>38</sup> The trio depart. “The *Reunion*, with previously suppressed reserves of oomph, surged gratefully off the chart. There were no maps for where we were going” (395).

*Downriver* has reached this site of possibility after red herrings and allusive narrative slippage worthy of Paul Auster’s postmodern detective work, *New York Trilogy*. (Sinclair, his admirer Acker, and Auster rework genre through allusion, reflexivity and narrative irony.) Will the now mapless river-side area of Sheerness, towards the mouth of the Thames, deliver the same restrained promise of *Suttree*’s conclusion, the lambent epiphanies of Lopez, or maybe the gentle and progressive metaphysical eco-spiritual nuances of Gus Orviston’s river journey? I suspect the reader’s uncertainty over this matter is entirely par for the course. Sinclair would not want us to be predicting anything at this point. The weather turns against the vessel and conspires (like so many of Sinclair’s elements) to melt boundaries of perception: “The river became all rivers. The James, the Congo, the Amazon. Eliot’s Mississippi.... It will not yield. The river is the agent of transformation” (396). It is inherently destabilising; thus the novel (like its fluid “spine”) is determined to meander and eddy over any easy investigative and narrative borders of form and genre.

Jon Kay honours this waywardness by running the *Reunion* aground on “the quaggy filth” of Blythe Sands, a notorious stranding site. “We fought for space in these temperamental paddies, these bury-yourself swamps, with the wrecks of East Indiamen: colonists, convicts, merchants, brides, and rum-soaked soldiery” (396). Sinclair could hardly pass over such rich territory. The scenes that follow mock the sea-adventure’s key ingredients: the crazed captain (“Kay cackled until he shook. His eyes rolled like lubricated bearings”), leaky boats (his one is “a motorized ashtray” [398]), and a storm. The language is pyrotechnic, exalted and energised, while even the lightning is relentlessly B-grade: “[a]ntlers of white fire.” Even the storm is ironic. The lightning-shrouded figure of the “true” Kay is perched on the cabin roof, a demonic figure in Hitchcock blue and white. Kay battles his double in a riverine version of *Terminator 2*, only to be fried by lightning

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<sup>37</sup> “A new director (on his way to the knacker’s yard of pop promos), Saul Nickoll, replaced the emotionally bankrupt Sonny Jacques. He determined to blow what remained of the year’s budget on a single grand gesture: the least likely script he could find. Mine was the worst by a comfortable margin. It was so far off the wall that nothing could save it.... If anybody could turn my humble disaster into a millennial catastrophe, he was that man.... I wanted corpses to rise out of the river, shrieking in accusation. I wanted the past to resolve itself, and the present to become habitable” (376, 377-8, 378-9).

<sup>38</sup> They leave Tilbury’s unresolved tale as one echo of the concussions of Empire, a means of place-enrichment through story and memory. It was at Tilbury (he tells us), that a very ill “Pocahontas” disembarked: “We step aside, make room; we watch. Another corpse, beached and scrubbed. Another narrative claimant” (394). Sinclair is well aware of the narrative seizures that compose and embellish his story; this narrator experiences the greedy hunger of a story that wants to wash over and claim everything.

that is drawn by his malfunctioning pocket television. The surreal scene continues as Sinclair leaps overboard—to find the water is merely thigh-deep. “The elements were all assembled for a minor apocalypse. They posed, daring some fool to try and describe them” (398).

In the midst of this allusive and ironic conflagration between text, cinema, history and river, Sinclair’s heroic effort at subterfuge, espionage and picaresque resistance seems to wash beneath the waves. Resistance is not futile, but nor is it easy. The novel resists a strict teleology of improvement and solution: our narrator does not ‘grow’ in the conventional pop-psychology sense. These relentless, boyish adventures demand he gaze everywhere at once. By the end of the novel his obsessions have melted his ego. He is swallowed by the river of mirroring text. Not for Sinclair the transcendent spiritual awakening of Lopez or Kinseth; the quarry has escaped, leaving us with stories of its passing. These metamorphose into the objects of desire, turning on those who would seek to track them down. Memory ambushes the present: it rises out of the River.

“Sinclair”—river-pirate and (hi)story-raider—is stuck at the estuary, gazing into the turgid water, eyeing his self and his fiction.<sup>39</sup> The Thames becomes source, mirror and receptacle, for at the close of his eleventh “fate tale,” he is about to test the reach of his story and narrative guises by following a story that seems to have vanished (as he is about to?) with the tide. He watches a horse swim through the river, its foamed wake vanishing like his own sense of control. The tale has raced away. “You go downstream with impunity only once. If you get safely past Blythe Sands you’re in a different story” (25).

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It appears we *are* in a different story by the time we enter the final “fate tale.” Our narrator is now Joblard, last seen marching away from the stranded soaked Sinclair; he is tired of the “nonsense” Sinclair has written about him, which has reduced him to “the failure of another man’s inspiration” (404). So he has taken over.

Joblard now lives in the rooms above the synagogue that had mesmerized Sinclair. Sinclair has sent him a letter: “How long can I stave off the onset of stone craziness by writing about it?” he notes (407). Sinclair wants “a magical getout. The one that lets the narrator melt from the narration” (408). His stories have begun to backwash into his life: “‘I’ is the man in possession, but *he* is also possessed, untouchable. ‘I’ is immortal” (411). Their coracle-companion Davy Locke did not return from the Isle of Doges; his severed tongue was posted to “Sinclair” who kindly forwards it to Joblard. The last straw, “Sinclair” writes, was his typewriter: it “has decided to go ape. It’s had enough. It’s sick of all the muck and filth it’s been forced to process. I didn’t get my story done in time. My rental with fate was revoked” (408). Repairs

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<sup>39</sup> Blythe Sands is notorious for its history of strandings and pirates. In the late eighteenth century the imperial trade had swollen freight and shipping to such an extent that many vessels “moored in the river for months blocking the passage of other vessels and providing a source of plunder for pilferers and river pirates” (Al Naib 1). Docking capacity was often exceeded almost threefold.



fail. Sinclair flings the heavy machine out of the window, then, guilty, sneaks out later to perform a proper riparian burial.<sup>40</sup> He offers Joblard an ultimatum: “Either *you* (S. L. Joblard) become ‘I,’ or the story ends here” (412). Joblard’s subsequent musings read like the report of a spymaster, controller of Sinclair, the “logorrhoeic tour guide” (388). If Joblard adopts the mask, Sinclair *might* just be able to swim to shore.

Joblard agrees to Sinclair’s request to travel to Sheppey, assuming “the protection of the narrator’s role” so “Sinclair” can escape from his all-consuming fiction. “Can we make our escape while the witnesses (the readers) weigh the plausibility of some tricky conclusion?” asks the exhausted narrator (408). The two meet up again.

Sinclair’s condition is testament to the negative consequences of ego-dissolution. This is no picturesque river-regeneration (as in *The River Why*); nor does there appear to be any radical and wayward means of putting things ‘right’ as King’s Coyote did. To Joblard, Sinclair has had it: he looks like “a fire-bombed sofa.... Has he walked here? Or have they fished him out of the river? .... He wants me to kill him” (417, 418). Even if Joblard narrates this final tale, with “Sinclair” mute and camera-toting beside him, the journey they make is a homage to the backwash of memory. Furthermore, the description of urban squalor has a (typical) fanciful air. Nostalgia limns the continuing anti-pastoral that Sinclair employs. Kabbalistic sites, old churches and strange alignments of building and symbol, are pitted against horrible visions of subterranean vivisection labs, drab vistas of terraced housing and the grey bulk of refineries. The two track a small church Sinclair has researched. There, Joblard looks at the graves of his birth parents for the first time, and experiences a release, as opposed to Sinclair’s distant cynicism.<sup>41</sup> The graves now become “mirrors of transformation” as stone and river link in death and remembrance, a continuity celebrated in the divergent retellings of the novel, its orality on the page. The narrative is performative: wayward, tangential and digressive, it is open to the past and the nuance of the telling, and skewed in performance by the conditions of the water, the light and the mind. Their walk tracks much of the novel in microcosm, returning to see the (thriving) eucalyptus above King Cole’s grave, and tracing myth again as it twines round the present, anchored by place and the river.

We are primed for a riverside showdown (perhaps wondering if “Sinclair” will perish), but what we actually get is a game of cricket! Joblard simply watches as Sinclair pads across the tidal flats. Sitting at the estuary, Joblard comes to a grim conclusion: he (Joblard) has entered the trap. Now he narrates, he is possessed: characters can “refuse” and “abandon” their narrator, but he is beholden to another flow. Sinclair walks on. At the last he joins the cricket team, a compilation of

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<sup>40</sup> “I buried it at low tide, with a vision of Southend (that fault-cloned Miami) away across the water, rising from its archipelago of untreated sewage. A bone-white jewel in a bisto sea” (410).

<sup>41</sup> “As always, the church commissioners had appointed a Harvard Business School jock to neutralize a site that could, however remotely, be connected to folk memories of ritual and mystery” (424).

all the river's ghosts that have haunted him, from Pocahontas to King Cole, Edith Cadiz and others. "Our script is in turnaround. If I do not resist I will be written out" (440). But the river is still there; Sinclair walks to the estuary, that ecotone or place of interaction and change, and begins to bowl the ball. He enters the water that has gifted and taken so much from him and others. Dusk falls and Joblard fades. He watches the players as they return, with their first narrator, back to the water. "The tide has caught them" (442).

Playing cricket before an idyllic sunset appears to be a blissful resolution. Sinclair has achieved his "magical getout" by becoming part of the fictional team he has created/been trailing/been trailed by. But by leaving Joblard stranded as observer (and later receiver) of the text, Sinclair ensures "recirculation" continues in an endless loop of textual production and dispersal, a gentle cyclic wash at the indeterminate border between ocean and river, reader and story.

The sunset bathes the scene in a yellowed glow that J.M.W. Turner, or David Rodinsky might have valued (Hill 124; Sinclair, *Walking Rodinsky*). As the game unfolds, the scene and Sinclair vanish, the only sign of their presence a manuscript left in the hand of the new narrator and the en-rivered reader. The Thames continues; the transpiring story remains in its envelope, hidden in the flux of its own braided continuities of memory.

This tidal riverine novel closes with Sinclair's "grimoire" being delivered to Joblard's vacant house. As the tide continues its inexorable dance at the mouth of the Thames, stories and images recur in waves: memory laps against the composite force of the present, merging river, place, people and story.

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Though *Downriver* is archly aware of its own makings in a way *Suttree* chooses not to be, the two novels share important attributes. These include a stubborn faith in the depth and resonance of the past and memory, openness to rivers as bearers of that past and a recognition that the past can continue to alter lives. The current is not certain or transcendent, but it continues to give itself to those caught up in its passage.

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What lesson can we draw from the 'pure' and 'fallen' river fiction read thus far? One lesson is that we are, as readers, *expected* to learn from these works because they locate themselves in recognisable worlds that are under threat, worlds that gather and grapple with ways of (un)knowing a river through attention, recollection and vision.

The books in chapter two interrogated (to various degrees) the concept of 'hope,' along with notions of progress, human primacy, and personal and communal integration. This process of inquiry criticised the home or culture without memory and located an imperative of responsibility in the characters' capacity to consider their past actions and the needs of the future.

The practice of connection with the past and with ‘wildness’ brought challenges and gifts. But the real challenge, it seems to me, is the maintenance of a connection with the river—and thus the community—under stress, the ‘fallen’ river that reveals the effects of human development and forces confrontation with the consequences of the progressive utopian impulse.

Placed between a looming wave (concrete dam or highway) of amnesiac progress (King, McCarthy, Sinclair) and the hard-won but also *tentative* optimism of renewal (Flanagan, *One Hand*; Duncan “First Native”) the writers tend to find temporary compromise through living mindfully in the present, honouring the forces at their back as well as the unseen route ahead. Those who look carefully know disappearance (of species, language or community) will continue. The present moment might (when matched with memory) offer some creative possibilities that begin by reforming self and extending that supposedly positive outcome to the next generation. Flanagan suggests. River writing in the late twentieth-century faces loss and change; these two variable constants are often matched with remembrance, adaptation and protest. The association with memory implies that recovery is a form of salvage which may offer salvation or redemption. But these notions are dispelled. We must live with the world: nostalgia, false holism, authenticity, panaceas—these are anachronistic options in the fiction because they no longer serve the rivers or communities of the present. The writers face the task of salvage and recovery.

The river writing I have analysed this far concurs with Meeker in arguing that the “inherited concepts” of world-making and comprehension have failed. In this time of dissolution and contested reformation on cultural and ecological levels, no one answer is sufficient. The writers attempt to shrug off the desire for a single answer; such certainty tends to create the concrete structures the authors oppose. Rather, the river suggests (through its purposeful accretion and dissolution) a way forward, a kind of culturally charged release of artifact, symbol or memory. But faced with dispersal at the level of epistemology and ecology, any recourse to certainty must be adapted to the flux of the present. The river seems to elide certainties. So the fiction writers keep witnessing, staying with a process of provisional caretaking and responsibility that embeds its knowing in a cycle of recirculation. Sinclair’s estuarine “getout,” Coyote’s dance and Suttree’s journey off the map imply a malleable belief in the prospect of chance and an unknown future, some form of *compromised* continuity. Life continues. But it has always demanded deformations, dissolution, and fluidity. As with the essayists, the question “how to grasp a river?” is met not with definitive answers but with an uncertain openness that manages to sustain creative flow. These visions celebrate forms of creative becoming and carry their ends just as we carry our lives before the river.

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The next chapter reads riverine poetry with an eye (and breath) on the ways the (fluvial/textual) line catches the reader, drawing us into an extended rhythm and pace of phrase that augments

perceptual and formal boundaries, recirculating images and memories as they unfold on the page. Creative celebration springs from the memories bestowed by those now dead. We are each called to cross the river. Such knowing energises the writing I consider. The poetry is attentive to beginnings and continuities and as it reaches the ocean it shifts again. The resistance to the Lethe-washed erasure of diverse, creative communities and ecologies that is central to the essays and fiction does continue in the poetry, which politicises itself through attention to the ecological and conceptual bases of our knowing. Its form and content navigate a process of dissolution and revision prompted by river reflection: there are ongoing cycles, but there are also ruptures and discontinuities. Elegy, loss and a mournfulness coalesce in the poems, only to be tempered by a delight in the wash of proprioceptive apprehension, the full reach of the here-and-now.

## Chapter Five

### River Poetry: Memory, form and image

The term 'river poetry' refers to poems with a strong riverine focus. Its riverine context may in turn influence its form.<sup>1</sup> Every river is different (and often seen differently across cultures), and each of the poets I read here sees different things in the waters. There are some common themes ahead: attentive reflection on the (communal or personal) past; the measured assessment of ecological decline, and the combination of mortality (the human river-watcher) encountering the seeming immortality of the river's flow. To stand at the river is to border (and transgress) another world that is indisputably part of—indeed constitutive of—the human one. The North American poets I consider in this chapter (Canadians Tim Bowling, Daphne Marlatt, Don McKay and Liz Zetlin, and U.S. poets Gary Snyder, Jim Harrison and Richard Hugo), dwell in the connections that bind us to the water (and thus the concerns over ecological damage). They confront an elemental substance. Water draws them in and then acts as a mirror, turning the poets back to their ever-emergent past. Like Per Bak's sense of the watershed, the long poem (as demonstrated by Marlatt, Harrison, McKay and Zetlin) develops its own memory. Imagery compounds to set up networks of resonance. These poems concern themselves with the nature of perception and the perception of kinds of nature, but they also treat the watershed as a reflective site, a place where limits (and borders) are encountered and breached through lines of text and memory. As the salmon's first destination, the Pacific Ocean is central; the fish swarm at the Canadian/U.S. border, forming new stories and political tales there too.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Herendeen, *From Landscape to Literature: The River and the Myth of Geography* (1987), and Frederic Colwell, *Rivermen: A Romantic Iconography of the River and the Source* (1989), for readings of river poems in Antiquity, the Renaissance and Romantic periods.

<sup>2</sup> In August 1997 tempers flared as British Columbian fishers accused Alaskans of violation of the 1985 Pacific Salmon Treaty. "Over 60% of Sockeye taken in Southeast Alaska are Canadian origin Sockeye.... between 1984 and 1995 Alaskan Coho interceptions increased from 350,000 to 1.4 million" (Armstrong 187, 189). Chris Gudgeon observes in his thoughtful and irreverent book *Consider the Fish*: "While fish in this country are generally considered finders-keepers common property, our salmon are granted a kind of honorary Canadian citizenship the moment they leave British Columbia waters. To the minds of fisherman, politicians, the DFO and even the general public, these fish are the sole property of Canada, or at least, the Canadian multinational conglomerates who control the fishery. That's all well and good, until the sockeye start the long trip back to their native waters, and they're ambushed by undiplomatic Alaskan fishermen" (79-80).

Any knowledge of a place immediately increases one's sense of complexity: there are no easy generalisations to make, few solutions to problems that arise from the intra-human and inter-species encounter. The poems in this chapter initiate and celebrate diverse perceptual modes that are open and inquiring. Such qualities are useful in problem-solving.

Reading poetry by Tim Bowling and Daphne Marlatt in this first section, I appreciate having shared (for a short time) the same Fraser River watershed as their work in *Low Water Slack* (1995) and *Steveston* (1974): it helps to know how rain and river work on wood here, how politics and rivulets combine. The two poets take very different approaches to poetic form, but both acknowledge the Fraser as a storied waterway, a current of memory. Marlatt, Bowling and others in this thesis demonstrate the ways a reflective river site is swiftly politicised. The poetics and politics of ecological collapse and cultural fragmentation are entwined. Linking “[t]he juncture of narrative and symbol, the temporal and the atemporal realms, the representation of water typically provides a locus where the metaphorical and the concrete dimensions of experience meet” (Wurst and Raguet-Bouvard 17).

My introduction briefly sketches some issues regarding First Nations and salmon: these issues inform and underlie any perspective on this Fraser valley watershed.

## Introduction

Before becoming a conscious sight, every landscape is an oneiric experience. (4)

Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*

There are many ways to meet a river. One of the most powerful is through the stories it has inspired. Margo Kane and the Full Circle First Nations Performance Group debuted their work *The River—Home* in Vancouver during March 1999. Full Circle's combination of physical theatre, dance and drama grows out of their wish “to explore culturally resonant forms of storytelling” (*The River—Home*, Programme). In the programme notes, Kane outlines the (meta)physical basis of the work:

For me, The River is a metaphor for the ongoing, ever-flowing existence of First People's traditions – their survival is dependent upon their relationship with the rivers, the land and all of creation....

This is a long River, with many tributaries, depths and currents. This performance acknowledges and honours all of those who have offered their assistance in the journey along the River. We hope the images and symbolic physical work serve to remind each of us that we are part of that River of life, that cycle of birth, and death and ultimately, transformation.

*The River—Home* celebrates “that great River of life,” repeating this phrase at key moments. In this case, that River is the Fraser, one of the world’s last great salmon-bearing waterways: 1,370 kilometres in length, it drains a 96 000 square-mile area almost as large as England, Scotland and Wales combined, carrying the same annual water volume as the Nile river four times its length (“Quirks”). It is right to return to the process of transformation. Herb Manuel spoke of the work transformers did in the Northeast Pacific Rim area.<sup>3</sup> Kane and Full Circle bring that energy of process into the present and onto the stage as they embody and honour the River that sustains them. The Fraser nourished their ancestors for thousands of years. In a sense we all descend from rivers, because we all depend upon them for the life and water they bring. *The River—Home* acknowledges those links and reworks them in the present.

The Fraser is a river of competing memories and is therefore a political site. In the performance the actors gather on the rectangular stage (surrounded by two parallel banks of wooden bleacher seating for the audience). At one end of this stage are assembled driftwood logs and plants; the wall is a backdrop for projected images of running water, images that extend the length of the stage floor. On to this river of light move the actors, swathed in lengths of cloth, their bodies gyrating in the sinuous movement of the salmon, the undulations of water, or the poised dipping movements of the net-wielding fishers, their long-poled nets swooping, dipping and lifting in cyclic waves. Then the encounter between fish and human begins: nets are cast again and again. Music, chanting and drumming weave through this dynamic movement as the inter-species struggle moves before the audience on the banks. People whirl across the image of flowing water; then the rapids and movement slow, dialogue enters, and the scene whirls into darkness, before beginning again with the cycle of fish, fisher and (above and below all) the River.

The poster for *The River—Home* located the play in a river of memory. The emphasis on remembrance and renewal points to an involvement with cycles larger than self, yet incorporated within our own human and rivered process of return and “recirculation.” The play’s “poetic,” “expressionistic, largely non-textual narrative” and choreography gesture to larger patterns (Review). The performance enacts and specifies an ontological movement John Livingston observes: “Self-as-community and self-as-biosphere are extensions in degree, not changes in kind” (182). Full Circle demonstrates the richly textured relationship (indeed a kind of kinship through water, blood and story) with place that many of the river essayists desire. Here, First Nations have worked out that home over millennia. The movement in degree begins for those in the audience open to such a shift in degrees of perception. This mental shift puts humans amid the recirculating world of rivers. This world is the sustaining destination of the poetry I read in this

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<sup>3</sup> I say Northeast because in the play and in the poems I read in the first part of this chapter, ocean becomes centre, rather than Washington, DC.

chapter. I have come across and selected poetry published in the last thirty years that spoke to me of the spiralling connections amongst river, writer, reader and memory. This work changes register like the personal essay, follows vision and digression across a narrative sequence as a novel might, drawing the reader into new fractals of awareness through the interplay of breath, line and image. Together, these composite forces transpire to create textual watersheds that saturate the mind.

The poets' focus on riverine ecological and cultural fragility stresses the concern with loss and potential. Elegy is a very strong component of this poetry, a kind of eco-moral lament that attends to personal loss at the level of personal *and* watershed memory. Difference and variation are compromised. The biodiversity of the Pacific Rim (or of a teaspoon of soil, for that matter) is highly complex. Its fragility is a component of this complexity. Writer and teacher Jeannette C. Armstrong (from the Okanagan First Nation) understands this duality in a very tactile way, for her river home is scarred by dams across the recently imposed international border: "The Pacific Coast is a lace work of streams, rivers and lakes flowing into the inlets, fiords and deltas along the ocean front of the mainland.... We still pray for the return of the salmon, even while the loss to our people creates the deepest possible grief" (181, 182). That grief is a consequence of a mindset that altered the Columbia River through dams. The dams ruptured a cycle that was almost endless in human time: very few salmon return to their territory. The Okanagan First Nation feels the effects of this break: a river recognises no borders and, like the salmon, must move. Dams submerge cultural practices. On the Columbia's lower reaches, Richard White observes "[w]hen dip-netting sites disappeared, sites that concentrated human memories as much as fish, sites that united lineages and families in labour, sites that were valued and ancient possessions, also vanished beneath the water" (*Organic Machine*, 100). Bocking notes that it was only a question of logistics and timing (rather than enlightened planning) that prevented a similar fate for the Fraser River. There are other ways forward that take communities into account. Armstrong closes her essay by calling for collaboration between small-boat fishers and traders, First Nations, academics, and the sixty thousand school children rebuilding salmon habitat in BC and across the border.

... we must forge something new, a new course chosen for the right reasons. A course insuring the preservation of the precious gifts of life to each of us and our generations to come as true caretakers of these lands. For the salmon—our spirit relatives, messengers of the future—are swimming the unclean tides heralding our passing, and in their ebb speak of the duty entrusted to each of us born in this time of grave omens. (192)



## Angry fish = angry people

Many North American writers (especially those with a West Coast affinity) draw inspiration and sustenance from salmon and their “amazing steel thread of willingness” to survive (Maracle 164). That survival is never easy. For river-watchers the evidence of declining ecosystem health is clear. River water and its invertebrate and vertebrate dependents are barometers of the health of the entire watershed. Grief over ecosystem decay is compounded by urban encroachment. Lee Maracle transforms anger into creative resistance. In her essay “When Love Winds Itself Around Desire,” Maracle allies her voice with the fish passing through her Coast Salish territory; the narrative adopts a fish’s singular point of view to assert a truth—we are all related. With the 1999 Sockeye salmon season entirely closed, the essay locates itself within an interspecies crisis. The Fraser, the world’s largest remaining Sockeye river, is running high in 1999; the high water and climatic conditions conspire with overfishing to threaten the salmon’s return. Maracle quotes a Federal report: “*Despite all the studies conducted by the federal government, the journey of the salmon continues to be a mystery*” (163). Maracle’s aquatic messenger criticises us humans with our indulgent sense of primacy: “These people who call our love a mystery stretch their insolence beyond imagination” (166). Her association with the fish brings her closer to the sensate web of connection that we all depend on, and it invests that connection with emotional energy. According to Maracle’s messenger, we are not any good at seeing things as they are or may be: “I’m genuinely puzzled about whether or not their eyes work. I wonder if they even look at the rivers inundating the coastline, each one unique, different from the last” (169). We humans have limited perceptual skills. Writers in this thesis suggest those we *do* have are squandered.

Maracle extends her focus to the kinship of fish. This allows her to question the notion of human primacy:

We have agreements between us and the sea, between us and the children of the sea and between us and the humans. We uphold these agreements. We seek freedom within the limits established by these agreements. The humans we have agreements with know who we are and we recognize them. We are not anyone’s “fishing stock.” We have no agreement with the new humans. There is a way to make this agreement — a spiritual way. The original humans know how to do this, but first they must come together with the new humans, make an agreement between themselves, then make one with us. (162)

Maracle recalls Lopez’s notion of agreement in a way that acknowledges First Nations traditions and First Nations anger. But she also suggests a way forward that begins in cross-cultural dialogue. Communication between cultures, communities and riparian sites helps to ground and extend the poems I read. They attend to the political and physical world.

A river's uniqueness is never easily inscribed or conscripted. The poets I read here know their own limits and the limits of the language. Using line length and sequence they extend the formal and evocative reach of their work. The sequence's narrative flow and connection honours the stories (with varied communal and familial, finned, winged and legged characters) that each writer uses to build up a sense of the river for the reader.

Honouring memory enriches our own encounter with the watershed that surrounds us. In the Fraser Basin, as everywhere, those encounters depend on other cultures and species. This poetry hones appreciation of what Lopez called the "web of life" ("Symposium"), and what King referred to as "organic flow" (*Challenges* 116). The poems detail levels of "clarity" in essayist Moore's compound sense of the word—the apprehension of both precision and process.

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And they [Spuzzum people] welcomed him [Simon Fraser], and they had a little dog. The Indians had fish broiled by their campfire in the spring. It was in springtime and they had this camp fire. They were broiling their fish and they offered Simon Fraser the fish. He didn't like the fish. He kept pointing at the dog, this little dog. The Indians couldn't understand why he kept pointing at this little dog. He wanted the dog. Anyways, they gave him the dog – and what do you think he did with the dog? He killed the dog and ate it. That's what he had for supper, but the Indians didn't like that very much. (124)

Annie York, "Simon Fraser," *Our Tellings*

In the 1990s declining 'fish-stocks' reveal the extent of over-fishing through this century. As legislation struggles to keep up with court rulings, the dynamics of race and resource use on the Fraser become increasingly complex.

Simon Fraser paddled the Fraser River in 1808, and was accorded respect, as he was seen as the "son of the Sun" (Hanna and Henry 126). At Spuzzum he was warned about the dangerous rapids ahead and was offered food. He could not have foreseen the ways colonial progress scoured its way through the Fraser Valley. The first wave of this change may have been invisible, but it was brutal: smallpox preceded white settlement by decades, affecting many of the highly structured First Nations communities along this heavily populated life- and salmon-bearing stream.<sup>4</sup> White narratives thus record a profoundly changed cultural riverscape.

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<sup>4</sup> "Only in the present century have Northwest Native American populations begun to recover from the onslaught of exotic infectious diseases which began with the smallpox epidemic of the 1770s" (Boyd 36). On the topic of disease-transmission in B.C., see (amongst many others) the articles (and endnotes) by Cole Harris, Robert Boyd, Robert Bringhurst (10); Robert Galois, "Measles, 1847-1850: The First Modern Epidemic In British Columbia." *BC Studies* 109 (Spring 1996): 31-43.

Then in 1858 came the gold rush. “This, for [then Governor James] Douglas, was not a gold rush. It was an invasion” (Hutchison 4). It was a cultural invasion for the First Nations of the Fraser Basin, who endured the influx of thousands of miners and the accoutrements of a commercial economy that shunned their complex ceremonial, trading and environmental codes. Cole Harris points out the changes one literary traveller would have seen on his travels: “Rupert Brooke was travelling through a profound settlement discontinuity, measured not, as it would have been in Europe, by decaying cities, wasted fields, and overgrown orchards, but by the abandonment of countless seasonal settlement sites, the unnamings and renamings of the land, and the belief of some that their world was coming to an end and of others that it was opening towards a prosperous future” (619).

Today the White economy has blasted and riven its way into the First Nations of the Fraser River and the River itself. But negativity does not go far on the road to understanding. What I want to note is the powerful, almost prophetic farewell the Spuzzum Chief Pálak offered Fraser. It was sung by a woman of the tribe and is shared by Annie York:

We'll meet you again when the leaves are turning red and yellow. When our chief asks us to pray, we'll pray for you when the sun rises – and when the sun rises, we'll bow our heads towards it and we'll pray for you; and when our Chief takes his pipe and smokes his pipe, the smoke will drift down the river to follow you, and our prayers will descend with you and will accompany you; and when all the trees sway along the beach, the green leaves and the green boughs and all the emerald greens will sway around you and the silvery circle – the eddy, the pool – and you'll be safe when you go through this channel. And when we're in the woods, in the forest, we'll always pray for you, and our prayers will always remain with you, and all the tribes from Spuzzum will always pray for you to return, and one day your flag will fly over us. (Hanna and Henry 126-7)

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My own introduction to the Fraser River involved two journeys, each led by people who know the canyon in exemplary ways that begin with the stories the land holds. The journeys were on two tribal territories, Stó:lo and Nlha7kpámx.

Sonny McHalsie is perhaps unaware of the effect he had on me one Sunday afternoon. I had been at a conference devoted to the Stó:lo Nation (The People of the River), its history and current concerns and potentials. A respected holder of Stó:lo stories, Sonny took some conference participants on a tour of the area. I was led to place after place, Sonny's van tracking down rough roads or into small clearings and river-sites, where rocks and land formations told of a series of transformations (some courtesy of the tricky Weasel, whose sly antics match those of the Raven's or Coyote's elsewhere in the watershed). Sonny told the conference participants stories and recalled past events; the land was layered with another world of forces and creative energies. *This* way of viewing the river is one of the oldest in the valley. It turns geology into a series of epics that help to form kinship structures and maintain continuities of human and non-human life.

Sonny proved the land of this area is deeply storied. The poetry I discuss in this section is just a recent layer, from one White cultural base; there has always been (and, I hope, always will be) more than one story or one way of seeing.

Cole Harris, Geography Professor at UBC, has spent decades researching the human geography of the Fraser Valley and its river. Harris's work in this area is both rigorous and elegant. It is gathered most recently in his 1997 book *The Resettlement of British Columbia*, a volume that attends to the layering of cultures on place and the signs these cultures make. I was able (with classmates from our Geography course) to spend two days exploring the area that has composed the Nlha7káp̓mx territory for thousands of years.

Cole's car wound its way east through evening drizzle, up the Fraser River valley from Vancouver to Lytton (Tl'kém̓tsin<sup>5</sup>), a small interior town at the confluence of the Fraser and Thompson rivers. This juncture of two waters, the green-blue glacial feed of the Thompson, and the Fraser's brown cargo of life-giving silt, was an auspicious place to ground our studies of the workings of colonialism in B.C. Simon Fraser had observed pathways above the river made by centuries of First Nations: "I have been for long periods in the Rocky Mountains, but have never seen anything like this country. It is so wild I cannot find words to describe it at times. We had to pass where no human being should venture; yet in those places there is a regular pathway impressed, or rather indented on the very rocks by frequent travelling.' ... Lytton claims to be the oldest permanently settled place in North America" (MacLennan 254).

Cole was in his element in that dry and stunning valley: the information he shared illuminated the landscape. In one instance, we walked by a large area of boulders (bared through years of placer mining), an orchard and a ranch land area. These parcels of land, the orchard and ranch owned by white families, the rocky area for some years mined and worked by a Chinese immigrant, about a thin slice of land that runs along a tiny stream, a wedge allocated—or left—for the Nlha7káp̓mx, between placer mine and ranch. The trees still stand in this slice of land that holds precious little to sustain human life: no salmon, no game, no edible roots and few plants. This place spoke volumes about the global process and consequences of colonialism; my classmate Mike Thoms observed the long carriages of woodchips pulling towards Vancouver as emblematic of those economic forces: there must have been at least forty open boxcars packed with tree chips.

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<sup>5</sup> This Nlha7káp̓mx word is reprinted in Hanna and Henry (193). It strikes me that I need to do more than print the Indigenous name and leave it at that. It is not enough. It is a gesture to another world that deserves a better representation than I can offer here and now. In any case First Nations are doing their *own* telling: see Hanna, Carlson and Roche and McHutchison for a glimpse of the history of three B. C. River First Nations, the Nlha7káp̓mx, Stó:lo and (in Armstrong's and Maracle's essays) Okanagan and Coastal Salish respectively. Writer Edward Bulwer Lytton was colonial secretary at the time of the 1858 gold rush. He was an enthusiastic champion of the 'Water Cure' that was popular in the nineteenth century. This hydrotherapy involved wrapping the patient in damp blankets and creating a kind of sweating to the body is "braced and invigorated by the element" (Lytton 27). "I wish you one of the most blessed friendships ever made—the familiar intimacy with water. Not Undine in her virgin existence more sportive and bewitching, not Undine in her wedded state more tender and faithful, than the element of which she is the type.... Round the healing spring still literally dwell the jocund nymphs in whom the Greek poetry personified Mirth and Ease" (48).

Native life has been hemmed in and denied a spiritual, physical and economic base in British Columbia (as elsewhere), even as the First Nations continue to survive with the most tenacious patience. Tenacious patience comes, perhaps, from enduring much loss, but it also comes through genealogy, down through hundreds of bloodlines, tributaries of affiliation with a place that offers a basis—sometimes the only one left—from which to press for rights, redress and re-vision.

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Above the Stein River mouth, as it pours into the Fraser, were minute traces of failed cropping from last century, efforts at settlement and conversion that seemed precarious, as if overwhelmed by the land. Bean crops had failed; old beams spoke of abandoned dwellings. An old church foundation suggested effort and failure. So many echoes here, above the water. By the river mouth was a ring of stones used in ceremonies today. We chose not to go down.

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At a small clearing above the Fraser is a Nlha7káp̓mx cemetery, its contours horribly rent by the transformations wrought by railway construction. One site of repose has been spared: a tiny plot of trees and dangerously skewed headstones. The cemetery lurched by the rail tracks, appearing ready to rise and jump into the river. I could not approach it.

In June of 1999 Canadian National Rail blasted a sacred rock from above the rail lines. Perched on a plateau 4 000 feet above the tracks, it seemed likely to fall. Their efforts to contact local First Nations met with no luck; the blasting proceeded. When Sonny McHalsie spoke on the radio about this, he mentioned the devastation caused by rail construction eighty years ago: “now it’s happening again.” This rock, representative of the index finger of the ancestors, waving in careful observation at the people below, is gone. “All up and down the valley, there are always different stories. Different communities have close relationships to some of the local resources because they usually have a story....” A visible component of those stories has gone with that rock.

I still cannot think of any words that would ease a passage to the headstones or past the fence. The white pickets reproach; I do not hold the rights or have the guidance to enter those stones that ring past and future. Some things must be left for those who came first and know the place best. The small cemetery is no gift, but a reminder of what has been taken. There are good things happening on the River and deep in the bush, but adapted Native fishing technologies and youth training schemes do not make *The Vancouver Sun*’s front page the way headlines like “Natives to defy ban on fishing” do (12 July 1999). The answers are not easy. But maybe, just

maybe, they will begin with shifts in ways of seeing.<sup>6</sup> There has probably never been the same degree of will and intent for healing as there is now; this is just as well.

In the meantime the poets in the pages ahead trace ways of (re)negotiating time and culture through the old rivers that have watched us all. For this section of the thesis I select poets who, through their love of different linguistic and geographic waterways, hone the capacity to re-vision their relationships with rivers and the lands and cultures that surround it. Dystopia and utopia are not the focus as much as the fullness and potential latent in the line, in the here/hear-and-now. Their poems, their elegiac sequences make no pretensions or offer no solutions regarding loss or limitation. They simply lay themselves open before the rivers and their stories, and let the concurrent dialogues begin.

In the first part of this chapter I read with Bowling, Marlatt and Hugo through their fluvial textscapes. The work is arranged in roughly reverse chronological order, offering a reading back through time, laying out elements of Hugo's and Marlatt's warning as they are now manifest in Bowling's confrontation with the Pacific salmon crisis. The reading enacts a kind of provisional archaeology of the degrees of urgency that have built throughout the late twentieth century, a sense of slow-motion crisis that impels and requires Leopold's "durable scale of values" (267). Even the poetry can contribute to this search, raking the silty bank for fragments of hope, ways to go on. The textual palimpsests gathered at the delta present the reader with other possibilities, creative responses to loss. We are left at the edge of the natural world, its textual relics in our hands. Even as they create, these poets know there are contingent and consistent endings unfolding with their words. The "loss of knowns" Hugo warned of is realised in Bowling's meditations on a series of human and anadromous endings; this stance is reaffirmed by Marlatt's understanding of the ways progress erodes Steveston's communal coherence and vitality. As with the writers in the previous chapters, these poets struggle with an advancing tide of change that they cannot stop. Change is part of life: look around while you can.

At the delta, between ocean and river, the backwash of tidal currents, Bowling, Marlatt and Hugo turn their verse around the charged encounter between net and language. They note a movement that transcends linearity in its connection with oceanic and terrestrial ecosystems, tracing the movement of the salmon between the salt and fresh water worlds. Salmon draw communities to the rivers as they have done for thousands of years.

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<sup>6</sup> Or they begin with collaborative cross-cultural riparian dialogues as in the restoration project begun between the Musqueam First Nation, the Vancouver Parks Board and Parks Department at the Musqueam and Cutthroat Creeks just along from Vancouver's Pacific Spirit Regional Park. Working with a spade to construct a filtration wetland to protect the creeks (and thereby the last remaining wild coho salmon in Vancouver, which are in Musqueam Creek) was one way for me to begin to know the local watershed. It was a cross-cultural exercise that put fish first. The ways ahead are manifold and operate on several levels at once.

## Tim Bowling: mortality and poetry at the Delta

Tim Bowling's book *Low Water Slack* (1995) records the cultural and biological components of a fishing community in poetic form. Bowling's poems ground themselves in the stories passed from generation to generation on the communal and familial level. As in the essays, his poems emphasise the interconnected nature of labour, community, history and memory. And like the fiction, he shapes a textual web of river, story and people. Bowling's emphasis on the interdependence of river and human gives his work an implicit (and often explicit) ecological focus. His stories are placed at Ladner, near the Fraser River delta. This is an ecotone (where ecosystems meet) of change and confrontation between ocean and river, fish and fisher. Bowling confronts the end of a way of fishing and living brought on by depletion while he looks to his own mortal existence.

Mortality and memory coalesce by the river. For Bowling and others, memory is a perennial component of the river's symbolic range. The Fraser River, and Bowling's labour as fisherman and member of the fishing community, become the basis for his experience. Tracing "the far bank of my own body," he endows his work (both piscatorial and poetic) with fluid, strong physicality ("Smokehouse" 58). Using the river as a base leads him into the realm of story. Bowling prefers clear narrative exposition and the juxtaposition of analogy and metaphor, rather than Snyder's swift aphorisms and coiled insights, Marlatt's fluid engagement with images, or Hugo's heartfelt personal castings and guttings. Bowling's *work* with the Fraser River gives his collection coherence. If Keats looked to his own heart as a "hornbook," Bowling augments that source with "the river that grants me mercy." This river is part of "the book my heart / has bound with sinews of tide and wind," a book of words and work ("Tidebook/Fishbook" 57). He commemorates, in words, that labour which dies with the body or the day, leaving no trace beyond the flesh of those who remain; this sinew is always (and "never") "enough" (68). Returning to David Young's point, "story is part of the sinew that binds people back to the landscape" (180). Bowling returns to these connections again and again. He must, then, return to memory.

To pay homage to the fishing crews that have gone before and the salmon that sustain them all becomes a principal archival task. The documentation of work and image, two things so fleeting *and* so constitutive of our inner and outer worlds, is one of Bowling's key achievements. It reinforces the corporeality of the river and any British Columbian's intimate dependence on it, while honouring the potential of open form poetics. Ecology begins with your body and your stories. Depending on who listens by the flowing water, those stories may continue.

Interplay between modes of engaging with water and memory is central to the poetry (as it is the essays). Bowling uses the word as a way into the land. His opening poem invites us into the textual/actual watershed, then slips the mooring rope: "From here you're on your own" ("Ladner" 12). The poems never shy from facing mortality. We end. The river does not.

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*Low Water Slack* is divided into three sections; each has a distinct yet connected thematic focus. The first part traces the earlier colonial history of the Fraser River, including the Hell's Gate landslide of 1913 (which was caused by faulty railway construction protocols—it blocked millions of salmon from returning upstream), and the unjust internment of Japanese-Canadians in 1942. Section two attends to the non-human world: it is a piscatorial tracery of memory and work on those links remaining between the anadromous and land-born creatures of the watershed. In part three he makes a return to early personal memories as history and place enfold self.

Part One's poem, "Sockeye Salmon" is both elegy and protest, a riparian account of the combination of river ecology and human feeling. The continuity between outer and inner currents remains strong in the poem and the book as a whole. This applies to the other poets I consider; Bowling follows the potential of open form. The salmon's return to the river of birth becomes a dramatic act, allied in Bowling's narrative with Elizabethan theatre. Bowling's use of symbol and metaphor stresses interdependence between our histories and those of the watershed we inhabit.

The salmon are given the characteristics of knights, then fools ("They moved from the medieval to the Elizabethan / in a few short weeks"). His use of adjective begins in the "pewter" flanks of the fish, "silver" and "subtle red" (33). Associations stress the mortality of fish and human, the basic fact of dying that links different species. "And the eyes never stop believing in the holy purpose of the flesh; they know their dying is divine." Bowling's use of assonance and active verbs suggests a "lust" undimmed by the diffused energies of the human world: "you can't kill their naked century with the hollow / ringing of a human time." Bowling sees salmon as emblematic of a larger cycle we have failed to respect. Our own sense of chronology belittles the salmon's (and the river's) continuity.

The volta takes us into a riverscape of decline and decay. The shift honours the journey itself, as the salmon move from healthy silver to what Bowling's second book terms a "dying scarlet." (Kathleen Dean Moore traces the life-passage of salmon and human in her *Riverwalking* essay "The Salish River." Bowling (and Sanders, McCarthy or Harrison, for example) match her focus on mortality.<sup>7</sup>) The salmon are now "in scarlet hose.... no one understands their ancient irony." Their purpose (in the face of exhaustion or dams) marks the living passage of the river.

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<sup>7</sup> Associations between grief and rivers gather in the first three lines of "Taking Tea to My Father" (as they do in *River Notes*, Moore's essays, or in Harrison, Zetlin McKay and Abbey): "One flashlight-beam in all the darkness flowing / from river and sky, one long bone in the earth, / the path of one tear cried in some endless grief" (28). As the narrator walks through rain and past the river, a welter of images eddy and disperse at the lighted net shed. The



Bowling sees the salmon's stamina as a part of a process that envelops—or *is*—life. The processes of time, succession or extinction have “no pity,” they simply *are* (“Desire” 72). This is not Duncan's benevolent God, tracked by a neo-Walton gone Green, but a majestic neutrality born of complexity. Bowling admires the salmon's indifference and stamina: “Already their tears are growing into a brilliant future, down beneath the gravel,” as loss is transmuted into the spawn that nestles in the gravel redds.

They are singing the strength  
back to earth, and the belief. The sun has murder on  
its hands, and so do we. But the lakes are full of song.  
The rivers open like a great hall, the ocean is a castle  
we can't storm. (33)

The salmon offer Bowling a lesson in living well, making one's actions “tell” in the stream of time; holding nothing back, they are fearless in their intent, an inverse river of will pushing against the current. The cycle of return, those glimpses of natural abundance confronting mortal energy remain a focus of his second section. The work of the watcher and the worker runs together.

“Dog Salmon,” for example, describes “the rainbow of flesh” that marks the river with a blood-touched steel each autumn, their jaws powerful, the fishing crew rebutting with

a silent determination not to rip our hands apart

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familiar light douses night's visions, and the boy returns to his rightful place of limitation and awe beneath the vast sky, beside the great river. But he does not forget the dim blackened reaches, the night he looks to as an adult. Like Harrison, Bowling sees the river as a continuity that marks his own sense of mortality. Departures of all kinds haunt the poet as he gazes into the darkening river: “I am / one step from the black graves flowing / by” (“Canoe Pass,” 51). It is as if the Fraser's fragile continuity prompts Bowling to seek out what endures after loved species (human or fish) and recalled places have gone.

Gaston Bachelard has written (in his usual remarkable manner) of the ways water attracts thoughts of mortality. He writes:

“No doubt the image of tears will come to mind a thousand times to explain the sadness of waters. But this parallel is insufficient; I want to conclude by stressing the underlying reasons for marking the substance of water with the sign of its particular form of misfortune.

Death is in it. Up until now, I have for the most part mentioned images concerning the journey into death. Water carries things far away, water passes like the days. But another reverie takes hold of us to teach us the loss of our being in total dissolution. Each of the elements has its own type of dissolution, earth into dust, fire into smoke. Water dissolves more completely. It helps us to die completely....

The first to be dissolved is a landscape in the rain; lines and forms melt away. But little by little the whole world is brought together again in its water. A single matter has taken over everything. ‘Everything is dissolved’” (*Water and Dreams* 91-2).

Bruce Lincoln's sense of the passage of beings and elements meshes nicely with Illich's assessment of the power of water, an assessment that talks explicitly back to Bachelard's. The properties of water resist boundary and fixed classification. The genres I examine test their own limits.

Thinking of Bruce Lincoln's comments on the water-passage and wisdom of the dead brings to mind LaVerne Adams's story “The Second River” which tropes a B.C. waterway as a distant healing place the dying prepare to cross. To pair this tale of growth and pain in First Nations communities against *River Notes* not only marks the way Lopez elides grim realities (in *that* early volume), it faces the ways those cross-cultural distances function in contemporary life. Adams' young protagonist faces her mother's death and her own cancer while observing the erosion of biological and cultural variation. “‘I know you think she's by a river,’ you say, speaking of your mother who is delirious and dying in the hospital. ‘She's by a river and doesn't know how to cross it. She talks about it in our native language; she knows she's dying. But the doctors don't understand that when it's time, you have to let a person die. They keep looking for new veins to put their needles in’” (23).

when we pick them from the net.  
From late October on, the rainbow  
fades to ugly storm; they grow black as the pilings of ruined  
canneries, drive forward like pounded railroad spikes. (34)

History enters the landscape with a swift series of allusions that link this cycle back into the forces that constitute British Columbia and bind communities beside the Fraser. But the continuity is not taken for granted: Bowling is more aware than most of the pressures upon the fishery, as well as the way a single life, salmon or non-salmon, can be extinguished so rapidly. The dog salmon, he reminds us, will go to their deaths fighting as hard as we humans can. The image of their brute tenacity contributes to an unfolding network of memories that populates the book's second section.

The first section, then, sketches some of the biological and human history; the second locates the larger cycles of community and nature in Bowling's own personal memories of family. The Fraser River becomes a site of communal and personal focus, memory the means by which that focus is given substance: "These words step out of a high dark, / and there's fury in their swimming" ("Smokehouse" 58).

### **Family, memory and work: a rivered trinity**

"Second Home" recalls fishing trips (in a boat now destroyed by fire) as times of literal and figurative transport, across both the caesura of remembrance and the fulsome weight of the present. (T)here "the tide washes you back on the shoals of your age" (29). The very delta has become a recollective remembering site, a personal ecotone between fresh and salt water, present and remembered time, "those deep black waters / where everything is past" ("After Proust" 27).

"All" time may be forgotten, but those who note its flotsam are inclined to remembrance. When Bowling "looks back" to the past (or out along the old boat's bow in the present) memory has shaped not "pillars / of salt" but "small hives of sugar" ("Second Home" 29). The process of remembrance brings its own sweetness; the gift of time bears us along, before crystallising into the repository of memory. That instant of transition (represented as an extended gap on the page, and a distinct ebb and flow in the poem), is still "enough" to sustain the "freshet of vision, freshet of / memory." The names and recollections take on their own substance, vessels that continue to navigate the sloughs of memory.

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Bowling's collection reinforces the interdependence between people, river and story through the matrix of work. Work, in turn, 'recirculates' back into the network of community: for example, jack spring salmon are gathered for a neighbour ("We always take them home." [36]). Bowling repeats this short phrase, its laconic focus suggestive of Richard Hugo's riparian mappings. Hugo and Bowling share a sense of loss and fragile recovery, an understanding of the emotional

resonance of rivers. This connection is evident in the short-paced sentences of “Steelhead, Spawning” (37):

What we dreamed of when young, but never found,  
comes in with the tide tonight. What we loved,  
but lacked the will to pursue, moves swiftly  
in the mouth. Beautiful ghost, blushing  
in the gills, the saltmarsh sighs to see  
your rare body beacon the night. What have  
we done to yesterday? The river flexes its  
last wild muscle, strong and sure. Casts  
its bright hook in our sleep, and pulls.  
While we rise to the unbreathable element  
of loss again.

Time and the river: these are old partners in the minds of people across cultures: “time is but the stream I go a-fishing in” (Thoreau, *Walden* 98). For Bowling the river is a source of redemption. The Fraser becomes the Fisher King, receiving and withdrawing us from familiar spaces and certainties. The return of the salmon suggests another ancient continuity. Bowling’s question begins in the maudlin (and also potentially endless) trope of ecological lament and self-flagellation, but quickly “flexes” to return power and potency to the river. Bowling uses the river to reckon with those human needs that stir creative and destructive urges.

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In “Sturgeon” Bowling forms an alliance between river, memory and wider history or loss. The first of the four poems in the sequence outlines the prejudice (“We believe them ancient, prehistoric.... we believe them alien, mysterious”). Stanza two records a process of explication and revelation.

Much is read into the gaze of the sturgeon, not to mention our own rivered bodies. Here is the flesh that becomes the watershed for the heart’s work. Bowling’s use of figurative language allies the human body with the river, then turns back to the sturgeon’s “Thick, drugged world, / that haze of silt,” wherein “we fear their exotic ugliness / for in it shines / the commonplace beauty of loss.” Bowling shifts quickly to the world of history and memory on the river, linking gut fears with his father’s catch—an 800-pound sturgeon.

Part II of “Sturgeon” recalls the near-mythical catch. Bowling returns to the world of personal memory, “the years I have lived, massing again / in their dark shallows”(61). Traces of the collective mythology of the sturgeon and its sheer awesome size (“the century in a nylon coffin”), linger in his dad’s description: “‘Winched on the wharf ... it looked like a beam of moonlight’” (40). As the fish (trailed beside the boat) died, Bowling tells us “the years left a dark swath / in the dark waters.” The prehistoric, mysterious tone endures in the language. That dignity and awe is one form the river offers up. Bowling uses this great creature as a counterpoint

to the third section, an account of species loss and decline that is used to pinion the lament of the fallen river into the poem:

Most often now, they're young,  
three pounds or four,  
just past being a delicacy  
on the tongues of the rich: imagine a child's living eyes  
in the face of a dead man,  
imagine history condensed to seconds  
hung like lizards in the drifting air.

Bowling argues on behalf of those who wish to halt extinction while still wrestling with his passionate involvement in fishing and the river that motivates him here. The two are not mutually exclusive (the Fisherman's Union backed the 1999 Sockeye salmon season closure: a one-year career does not feed a family). Bowling's dual stance merely hones his sense of larger cycles that are sometimes ignored and demand attention. How far ahead can we look? As *he* looks, he asks two questions that return us to the poem's first stanza: "are we / an exotic ugliness they have come / to fear? Can our gaze reflect / a loss beyond our own?" These questions about the limitation of human vision point to the fourth stanza, where a reckoning of sorts occurs.

In the fecund ecotone (the meeting place between different ecosystems, a border zone) of the estuary, Bowling knows that rivers do not conclude: actions have repercussions as the next cycle continues. Memories can outlive their carrier and sustain those who pass them on. As the poem ends, he brings the symbol of the sturgeon into the *human* moment he describes; it is, as always, an ecological moment. But it is also a metaphysical one; the river is a leaping off place for the spirit. Very few of Bowling's insights depend on humans alone: the river and its fish are usually the basis for feeling states; memory archives fragile continuities. As the poem concludes, father and son recall the "tower of bone" and its shadow, marker of both mortality and wonder. The dark waters still run, and they purify:

And we stare into the river  
one man  
waiting for the black  
to lift from the earth,  
brushing, with a single thought,  
the soot from our trailing selves. (41)

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Some of the lines that speak most strongly of Bowling's rivered fusion of work, place, self and story are from "Oolichan." This poem evokes late dusk, consciously allying it with the delicate, fluid strata of darkness perfected by Goya or da Vinci (or early Van Gogh). As the narrator picks up a bucket of the prized fish oil at the volta, the light has turned towards morning. No explanations are needed for the sense of abundance and gratitude he feels as he looks at the light

hitting that dark liquid. Once again human memory and fish gather at the river. Indeed as the poem closes, they seem to become one:

It is enough to take from hand to hand  
the quiet energy the river conducts  
and pass it down, like silt, through  
the warm, red estuary of every living touch. (42)

Bowling's attention to the ontological and communal meaning of work is a poetic reconfiguration of the point made by environmental historian Richard White: human labour is shaped by (and continues to shape) the rivers we border. Work, White argues, is a suitable basis for historical inquiry, a means of tallying and tracing the ways humans interact with place (White, "Are You"). Such engaging labour binds the body with the body's fuel. Stillness becomes loss: "I am one step from the black graves flowing by" (51). Constancy reiterates in Bowling's work, because it records this cycle of action and reaction, labour, sustenance and survival. It records continuities of labour across generations and (re)builds the images and memories of "local culture" that Wendell Berry says "begin[s] in work and love" ("People, Land and Community," *Standing By Words* 79).<sup>8</sup> *Low Water Slack* weds its focus to the work of the estuarine body that has sustained him and, in the blueblack dusk, that delta is what the poet—the body—has always been. Energy, life, blood and water continue the key "spiral movement" of recirculation between flesh, language, memory and community (Murphy, "Endless"). The ripples move outwards from the (fluid) centre and return again.

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The brute, uncompromising question of survival is never far from the minds of those who work the Fraser River salmon runs: "We know the tides / could make a pauper out of any floating king" (57). The 1990s prove this line a truism. In "Poker" Bowling casts previous fishermen as players in an uncertain game: there are no guarantees in life, especially now the fisher "deal[s] in barren years" (47). Everything is compromised if gifts have been plundered, overfished to the point of collapse.

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Many working in the area of Pacific fisheries weather the crisis caused by decades of sustained overfishing. Terry Glavin and Richard White, Charles Menzies, Richard Bocking, and the First

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<sup>8</sup> Berry's essay concludes thus: "People at work in communities three generations old would know that their bodies renewed, time and again, the movements of other bodies, living and dead, known and loved, remembered and loved, in the same shops, houses, [rivers?], and fields. That, of course, is a description of a kind of community dance. And such a dance is perhaps the best way we have to describe harmony" (79). In this sense, all the writers I consider are re(working) definitions of community and its function as they imagine their own kind of communal, river-bound continuities.

Nations-focused collections edited by Carlson, Hanna and Henry, and Roche and McHutchison acknowledge the long cross-cultural/cross-border histories of salmon, ecology and culture in the northern Pacific. Things are grim now. The way Terry Glavin sees it, the salmon's return to the Fraser is compromised because global profit margins do not allow for the healthiest anadromous cycles and patterns. These patterns are a primary focus for Bowling. He reaches towards the full comprehension that Glavin says is needed:

What this all comes down to is survival and the fact that there are still ancient cycles at work out there. There are forces that shape the way we live, and we flourish or we die by how well we understand them, or at least by how well we recognize they exist, or by how well we try to make some coherent sense of them, and by how well we adapt to those things we may never really understand all that well. Much has been made of the miracle of Pacific salmon, the way they arise from gravel beds in glacier-fed stream splashing down from the Rockies, the way they tumble downstream to the sea and swim so far they come within sight of the mountains of Kamchatka, and the way they find the route back home, somehow. But this is not about miracles. This is about survival.

If there is a miracle in this, it is that after everything we have done to them, they come home to us at all. (65)

In "Poker" Bowling mines the archives of his father's working life to share a remarkable story of a lost abundance. Glavin, like Bowling, observes these same losses, particularly in the mid-1990s.<sup>9</sup> "Poker" uses the image of a catch of four 52-pound red spring salmon as a counterpoint to the "barren years" of the present:<sup>10</sup>

when

the last spring weighed the same, no one  
spoke for fear the river hid a secret hand  
below its flowing surface, and would show it  
in another guise less kind to human wiles. (47)

The stanza break indicates a temporal, ecological and even moral shift. The four "aces" his father dealt have long gone: "We have nothing up our sleeves" and precious little in the river; "we perceive a slower doom," that of gradual and crippling decline that affects the lives of families and communities. This brings to mind David Suzuki's explanation of environmental collapse as a

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<sup>9</sup> Loss haunts the present. Longfellow points out the elegiac qualities of damaged-river reflection; it compounds "the contradictions of innocence and tragedy" (100). In many cases an (occasionally innocent, or at least naïve) hope for infinite resources causes tragic loss; the early sense things were endless confronts the ecological realities of loss. Lamentation for what has gone is as old as love and death. One only needs to read the commentary I mention above to see loss—along with resistance and adaptation—is an integral component of this place called British Columbia.

These B.C. and Pacific Rim writers refute Bruce Hutchison's assertion that the Fraser, "unlike other great rivers," has "produced no songs, no myths, not even a special type of riverman" (4). It all depends on where you look and how you listen. Fifty years on from Hutchison's classic history of the Fraser River, many other voices have emerged in print.

<sup>10</sup> The 1999 Sockeye salmon season has been closed because of high waters, low numbers and a dip in the spawning cycle. This will have a "profound" effect on First Nations along the Fraser; half of B.C.'s First Nation population lives along the river. Many depend on salmon as their main protein source during winter (as they have for millennia), says Ernie Crey of the Sto:lo Nation (CBC Radio News. Vancouver. CBC. 7 August 1999).

“slow-motion” disaster (“Bugs ’R Us”). Bowling faces this drawn-out ending: “History calls, / the future folds. There’s little left to read, / a paradise to weep,” here on “this small planet we’ve overlooked” (“Poker” 47, “Young Eagle on a Piling” 50). Amidst that loss, Bowling glimpses “the truth our petty lives / had drifted from” (52).

Marlatt and Bowling join Glavin and Bocking in arguing that the rise in transnational corporations damages the human sense of awe and care—just as impending poverty takes people and stories from the river in search of other deals. Bowling sees what Abbey calls the serpent of paradise in empty rivers. But this jeremiad against loss fades in the section’s final poem which seeks to “Praise / the running out, and the low water slack” (52). Bowling is always captivated by what the Fraser offers in the present, despite the odds.

### **Making amends**

The river gives and takes away. How, as humans, can we give back to the river from within a culture that seems only to take from the waters that sustain us? Sustenance and extinction bind and clash throughout the book. Section three finds one form of gift or return in poems that keep alert to Glavin’s “things we may never really understand” (61). Praise and memory braid the poems of this final section. The poems are focused on the future as much as the past: this emphasis lends them the weight of prophecy, a portent Bowling employs in “A Postcard from British Columbia to Newfoundland” and “On the Disappearance of Two Million Sockeye Salmon.” Both of these poems face a finality (the loss of salmon, livelihood and community) that is almost inevitable; human control and conservation have weakened before the momentum of human desire and population. The poems argue for their own materiality in a damaged world. Perhaps then, as things fall apart, words and memories are all we have to offer the remnants. “Postcard” works its way to this conclusion through signs and foresight of decay: smokehouses become “coffins,” the eagles and “fevered” bears go hungry, and the sea and river become borderless cadavers; even the graves of humans are “poisoned.” Things reach a millennial frenzy in the first stanza as the message of possible collapse transmits across the continent. The dead are

so far from us  
they might as well be dying on a different coast  
where the only blood that spawns is human  
and the mystery is never how  
we swim our way to death, but why  
our swimming hastens it. (69)

The grim voice of prophecy rings out, inflated, grand and knowing: “it won’t be long / before the vanished schools return / to feed upon our melting dreams.” The poem closes with a bold resolution:

Come, and if we’re doomed  
by the justice of the coldest stars

we alone must be the constellation  
of our final hours. (70)

This sense of determination carries *and* faces the finality of death. The poem acts as a gesture of farewell and confrontation. In the face of such enormous loss there is little one can do, but Bowling argues that this small amount counts; by bringing his perception of the riverscape to bear on the troubled present he turns other faces to the water. Bowling is haunted by a vanishing past and a still splendid present. Updated for the culturally cautious 1990s (a First Nations persona is not adopted; he begins with his stories), *Low Water Slack* recognises the age-old cycles of decline, famine and destruction that are as much a part of the Fraser as its anadromous bounty.

As in Lopez's *River Notes*, the blue heron is a figure of utmost purity and grace, its poise and practice a taunt to graceless beings. The heron's "frail" body bears all the scars our greed has dispatched. Its innocence before loss complements the Little Match Girl in an age of animal rights:

Now a blue heron settles on the grass-tombbed weighs  
of an abandoned boatworks  
and carefully counts each breath  
that leaves its frail body.  
There aren't enough.  
There can never be  
enough. (68)

### **Ways to go on: honouring work and memory**

Bowling has worked out a vision of the watershed that, like the water, funnels to form a river of focused accretion, a torrent of observation and recollection. By turning to personal memory in part three, he acknowledges the ways both place and history shape him. "Aprons" opens Part III. As Bowling's homage to the work his parents did to enable his own survival, the poem describes his mother sweating over preserves and canning, the salmon's blood marking "new borders to our world." This is a poem of departures taken, and of foundations laid down through the hard work of family-building. So Bowling's journeying sensibility meshes with his knowledge of the delta. His river of worked memory and family continuity is "the country I was born to leave" (53). Bowling knows—far better than I—that a life with the river is poised on a series of fluid edges and variables; even his father "had no control over the / borders nature drew upon his life, our lives." Instead the salmon becomes "the gasping cartographer" that maps the limits of what is possible each year. As a part-time fisherman in his own right, Bowling recognises the Fraser as provider ("our winter survival") and killer. "Skullcaps" recounts the aftermath of a death at sea; it concludes with father and son: "We took / our shared blood home, and my father steered" (54). Each moment becomes important because everything could change after the next journey beyond the rivermouth. He shares blood with his family and memories with the delta.



Many of Bowling's poems web mortality, memory and hope into a vision of overlapping cycles: the return of salmon, the shape of a life, the flow of the River. The river mediates and enables his journey, but ultimately we all share the passage of

high water, low water, backup  
and run-off, the heavy, bone-spined history  
that every human eye is born to read and never  
understand. ("Tidebook/Fishbook" 57).

We are all cast adrift at some point: "The dark blade of the current will sweep below us all" ("Gaff-Hooks" 56).<sup>11</sup>

Bowling's locus for the journey through life becomes the reader's temporary home. The Fraser is a vast metaphor that flows past the sleeping electric pockets of Vancouver, of Chilliwack, of Tl'kémstin (Lytton), carrying thousands of memories and years, its inexorable movement sustaining the "roaming fathom" of Bowling's insight (55).

Mortality weaves its certain path through the remainder of section three. "Gumboots" considers the "last journey" that we all must face, though the next poem asserts, "death is too busy dying to be a perfect symbol" ("Gaff-Hooks, 56). (Any reader of his book must wonder at this comment, going as it does against one of his main thematic obsessions.) His penchant for the explanatory narrative directs his poems towards their own individual teleology of revelation. The Fraser is a river that speaks to human concerns through the occupancy and imagination of the late-arriving bipedals, feeding our tendency towards "symbol-making" (Wilson 58).

Bowling ensures this river (like all of the others in this thesis), carries its own metaphysical and symbolic freight. His focus follows the water that runs seawards without cessation. His life (in the scheme of things) is the briefest freshet. The salmon are dying; he is dying; the river, somehow, continues. However, Bowling faces the prospect of a Fraser without its scarlet hordes and finds it an impoverished site. In "Gaff-Hooks" the salmon make an unwilling sacrifice; their netted deaths are still insistent: something of their drive remains as Bowling hauls the flexing bodies up, asking (twice) as he kills, "Why extend your touch if not to love" (56)? Here is a suggestive repetition, the laconic question steeped in romantic longing (seen in some of Richard Hugo's work). Like a river hitting a dam wall, the salmon do not slow as they confront their death. Bowling finds this persistence discomfiting and alluring. The image helps him confront death as a fact of life. Acceptance binds him more closely to the rivered site of his understanding, and thus to the life of the moment, the energy of work and insight. Reflection ('recirculation') between selves, river and world—reinforces his participation in that riverscape's cycles of birth,

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<sup>11</sup> I think here of Jim Jarmusch's film *Dead Man*, which concludes with the dying Johnny Depp pushed seawards at the rivermouth, away from Makah territory. Riding a Makah death canoe, he spends his last moments on this earth gazing into the sky, waves of salt and sweet water lapping at his floating vessel, the last shot of his face suggesting revelation and release as the river disperses into the source-feeding ocean. The canoe, that vessel of so many ancient voyages (for so many cultures), will finally take him to the space where water and land meet; the horizon is cleaved at last.

return and departure. Such cycles are imminent in “every mortal voyage” as lives unfold, stark against the backdrop of running water (64).

“Desire” clarifies the association between fish, humans and mortality: “Even in summer / we know the salmon is its own hoary grave, staring / hard at eternity through the tiny black wreaths / of its singular vision” (72). The poem concludes with the association between death and the salmon, the death we bring to the world simply to survive and the death we bring for more brutal reasons. Bowling finds the path to truth by confronting death: “we must accept our bodies are their own deep graves” (72). In this confrontation he allies himself with a long poetic and visionary tradition. Despite its basis in the trials of contemporary West Coast fishing Bowling’s vision can be transcendent:

Here,  
to want the naked stars,  
we must look through, and through again,  
the blackness that our living spreads upon the earth...

It is in those reflective spaces, where time and awareness purl through memory and the river, that Bowling emerges on the page to me. In his pauses he keeps momentum by staying with memory, work and the river, acknowledging death as part of that current of life. And hope remains: “Something rises in us, despite the world. / This is not silence” (“Sunset: Ladner Harbour” 73).

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“These words step out of a high dark, / and there’s fury in their swimming” (“Smokehouse” 58). The work of fishing binds Bowling to life, place and sustenance; the work of poetry anchors this net-work of process in the minds of others. On the page he finds some way of forever engaging in *and completing* his own “lunge” for meaning. But that lunge is a paradox: only through artful effort can Bowling surrender; only when he is most alive can he write clearly of death. Perhaps his is another form of Zen Buddhism’s *mu-shin* or ‘no-mindedness’ honoured by Jim Harrison and Gary Snyder, a state of pure consciousness that is unconscious of itself.

“Desire” closes by accepting our scale: we are nothing in the eyes of the world. The darkness we look through (and spread) is our own cloaked vanity or pride. To join with the animals and earth while alive, we need to face the fact we bleed and decay with them in death; to join in the river, we must acknowledge its health sustains so much. This is the stark and holistic comfort Bowling scoops from the water. For him (as for Lopez’s narrator in “The Bend”<sup>12</sup>), the river is a source of tranquillity, for it encourages a powerful sense of belonging. Even when departing the river, Bowling knows the waters are alive within him. As he heads east past Hope,

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<sup>12</sup> “I am more interested in this: from above, to a hawk, the bend must appear only natural and I for the moment inseparably a part, like salmon or a flower. I cannot say well enough how this single perception has dismantled my loneliness” (Lopez, *River Notes* 90).

up the Fraser Valley, he realises memory and the river will continue to provide for him in distant sites. After all the 'epitaph-reading' (and strengthened by his cycle of awe and acceptance), he is still *with* the river—or perhaps it remains with him. Letting go, he understands that

Something tender has  
come home to die and always will. This  
is the distance the salmon journey.  
This is the distance our dying knows. (62)

I want to close my discussion of *Low Water Slack*, not with the book's final poem,<sup>13</sup> but with "Fall Fishing" because it contains the elements of symbolic association that work most powerfully in Bowling's poetry. Anguished, awestruck, ultimately conclusive *and* transcendent (he likes to end with a grounded epiphany, one locked into homeplace, work and feeling) his second-longest single poem in the collection tries to encompass everything the river and its work mean to him.

Delivered in the urgent language of recollection and action (stanzas one, two and four begin "At first," "And then" and "Now" respectively) the poem falls into twilight, following the sunset that opens it, gesturing towards a "greater cycle" of death and rebirth "than the one our nets destroy year after year" (74). The very mist becomes "milt" as Bowling travels an eternal, all-encompassing river. He is still tied to the cycles of fish and sun; this connection is evident in the second stanza when the darkness gathers: "And then we lost both banks. Suddenly, our voices / had no bodies." He enters a zone of drift: "We hover like spirits between the worlds" (75). His language is steeped in the gothic: blood, darkness, shadow, the grave, "our bones", "a coho's final gasp", "the soaking marble of our tomb", "the slick stigmata of angered gill"; "we are figures in a nightmare that spins / without pause towards the blindest fathoms / of the open sea"; "a longer doom," all these words appear in the poem, gaffing the fact of death and using it for effect, hauling it in to provoke empathy from the reader. Recirculation is stressed as a desired result.

These are not poems of Huck Finn-ish digression and humour. Nor is this Fraser a river of tempting seductive naiads, of any simple straightforward 'beauty.' It is a riverscape that bleeds death into the conventions of landscape, mottling the view with a rose-hue of gashed gill rime, and near-extinction.<sup>14</sup> The October fog brings on thoughts of death that the salmon-kill simply

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<sup>13</sup> An evocative poem, "Winter" takes the stillness of the season's end into the open space of the book's closure: "Let your voice weigh anchor. / Please. / What can it possibly matter to you? / Love is a rough crossing. / We're all growing older" (79). Bowling's rhetorical question invites and challenges. It matters a great deal: we *are* all growing older and must speak while we can. The water is restorative and enabling. Our hearts must not be startled "before that calmer sea is glimpsed." There, between river and ocean, the journey continues.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Hutchison's classic goes as far as describing it as "unfriendly," (3), "ugly and sublime" (5) and "not to be trusted," (9)—a term any rafter might agree with—not to mention a "prodigal waste of energy" (3). This latter phrase echoes the booster sentiments (reverberating then in Tasmania and New Zealand as well) behind the 1950s plans to dam the Fraser, most of Yukon's rivers and a number from the northern Rockies, piping them and their power to a supposedly deserving (or at least paying) California. This North American Water and Power Alliance was stopped, then; it would have done as much damage as all North American water-diversions combined (de Villiers

reinforces. The fish become glimmers of movement, casting “shadows more powerful than memory” their broken bodies “jagged pieces of the current” (75). Each component, human and non-human, is bent on survival within “a greater cycle” of commerce and demand that neither species can control or condone. The “nightmare” that pulls him under leads—in its own small way—to the decline of salmon stocks. In any case, the salmon has been curtailed, its journey ended before time; this is what troubles Bowling. Complicity (Is this guilt warranted? He does not own a fishing conglomerate; but he knows many have done harm on a small scale) surfaces in the poems, reinforcing the tensions among belonging, vocation and conservation: not for him the easy answers of Duncan’s “sweet sacrifice” (*Why* 298). In 1990s British Columbia that sacrifice has, “without pause,” taken its toll beyond any measure of reason or longevity.<sup>15</sup> It leads instead to a kind of haunted reaction: who can afford to let a full net go? And who can pause in the midst of hauling and look beyond this month’s rent to a decade or deathbed hence? Bowling does so, via memory, seeing a greater cycle and the cracks it bears. (So many have in this summer of 1999.) Then time and survival implode in image:

behind us  
 the slow, irregular heartbeat  
 of the salmon’s fractured cycle bumps dully  
 on our wooden deck, and echoes, until we can’t be certain  
 the awkward rhythm isn’t ours, the black pulse also in  
 our flesh, counting out a longer doom, but just as sure,  
 as we drag the battered scotchman like a small dead sun  
 out of the murk, then idle up the hidden drift,  
 longing always for the born horizon,  
 the saltless, clearblue graves of coming home. (75-6)

Salmon and human exist within a context that provides meaning: they share a destination in their frenzied journey to places (homes) of final (and perhaps purifying?) rest. But the conclusion offers another form of reckoning, not a simple redemption. The sun has died; the only site of repose is the “born horizon” Bowling has been watching from the water. Maybe, in the stillness of the low water slack, this is enough: the river is running, the salmon have provided for another season. And yet.... These two words haunt Bowling. Death and mortality seep into his poems as

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289). Now the latest Canadian controversy is over the bulk export of fresh water. Once the licence is given for bulk exports it can become an unlimited practice, according to Environment Minister David Anderson, who cites the fact only 10% of the Colorado makes it to the sea because of irrigation claims (“As It Happens.” CBC Radio. Toronto. 4 Aug 1999). Marq de Villiers: “At millennium’s end, we find the Mexicans hunkering down, hoping for more water; the Canadians hunkering down, determined on no less water; and the Americans in the middle. The Americans retain their trademark of reckless use ... and creative energy,” but “if conservationism can make everyone a dollar, conservationism has a future” (291).

<sup>15</sup> “There’s a lot of similarities between poets and fishermen,” Bowling told Chris Gudgeon. “In both jobs, you need to develop an awareness of your environment, particularly a sensitivity to cycles and patterns. But you also have to be flexible, to deal with situations as they arise; fish and poems are unpredictable at the best of times.” Bowling sees the plans to buy and trade fish licences as a way to make investors or corporations (rather than small-boat fishermen) rich: a few seine boats grabbing all the quota is “not a very good way to create employment and that’s not very damn good for people or communities” (87, 88).

they do Hugo's and Marlatt's. Dead fishermen, ecological and communal loss, transitions and departures: these indeterminate finalities frame Bowling's reflection. His understanding (like that of Sinclair, McCarthy, Flanagan, Moore, Abbey or Sanders) is open and therefore marked by the losses accumulating in the present. Paradise is not attained, it is wept for. Elegy laments while eulogy can also celebrate. Hooked by past and present, Bowling works out a duality of response neither time nor he can resolve. Some might call this process of mortal apprehension (embedded in limitation and concern) the human condition. But only a few generations have faced quite as many losses in human and "more-than-human" realms (Livingston 53; Abram). In late twentieth-century river writing, that condition has become elegiac and wistful. Worster's "sense of irreparable loss" saturates; there is no simple way to shrug it off (*Empire* 324). Along with the uncertainty of the salmon's return and the certainty of his own departure, the Fraser River offers a path home to memory, if nowhere else. Balanced between the currents and cycles that create B.C., Bowling hauls up the net of local words on a journey we all share.

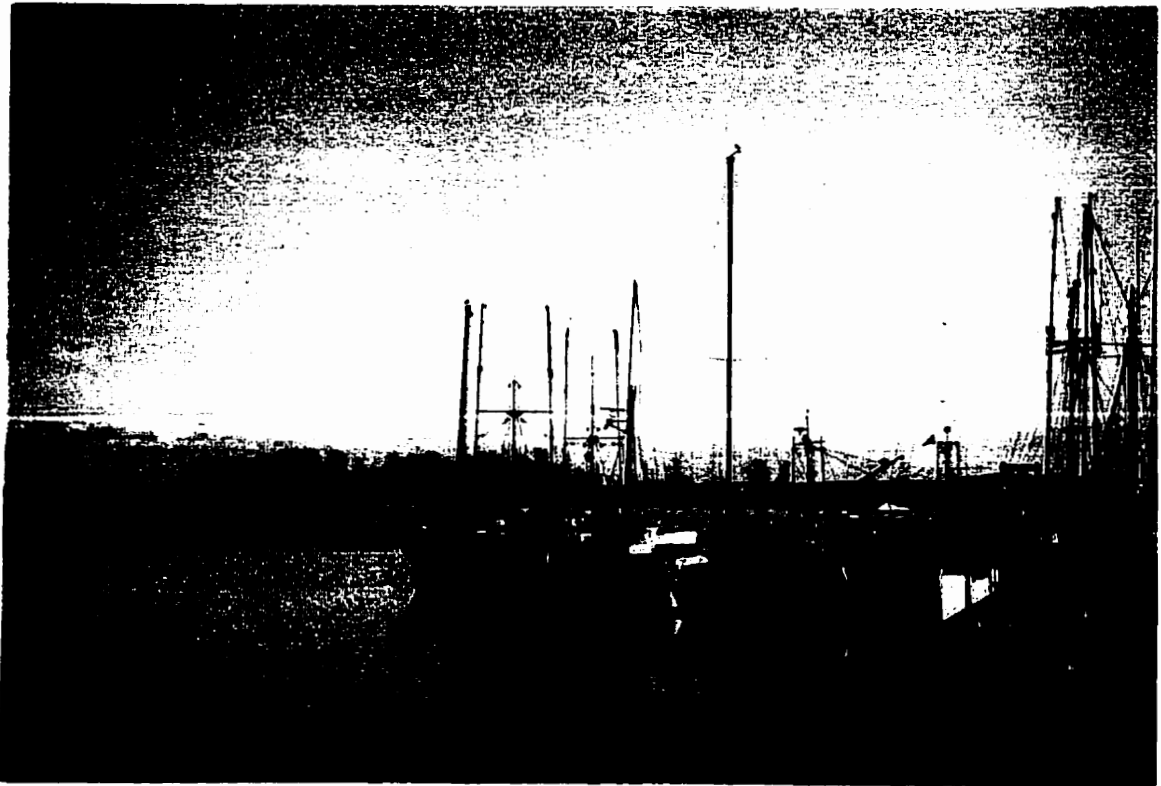


Fig. 3 Fishing Boats at Steveston, April 1988.

After using the *Blue Horizon* which he described as a beautiful boat (it was built by Canadian-Japanese boatbuilders in 1949, then owned by Minaru Miramoto for 37 years), Joel Martineau bought the *Anzen*. On this Spring day in 1988 he was giving the boat a run.

Photograph by Jan Kelly.

**“the past it has passed through”**

**Memory, community and continuity in Daphne Marlatt’s *Steveston***

“dazzlingly undeciphered” (86)

Daphne Marlatt, *Steveston*

I think of *Steveston* as actually a movement around, based on return. A cycle of poems, it moves around & keeps returning to the central interface of human lives with the river.... (316-7)

Daphne Marlatt, “Long as in Time?” *Steveston*”

*Steveston* (1974, revised 1984) is a poem-cycle that revels in the embeddedness of memory in the Fraser River’s delta. James Agee’s words head the book: ““seeking to perceive it as it stands...”” Marlatt establishes a desire for authenticity and clear vision: the book attempts the unadorned view and then segues to Robert Minden’s evocative photography of fishing boats, people, life. These are poems of work, memory and community: they emerge from that basis and remain with it. They are also poems of seeing, of an observer, perhaps even an intruder, but they record and honour (through different sources) a working and cultural tradition in a way that Bowling does. Change and continuity are positive and also erosive: even as Marlatt celebrates the strength of affiliation and labour, the fishery and cultural variety are threatened. The past is present, but it rushes ahead of us.

**Form and the river**

The salmon’s movement is reflected in the supple fluid strength of the poem’s language: her lines possess the power and direction of the school of salmon that returns to spawn, as well as the precision of a single fish moving through the water. Fred Wah calls one of Marlatt’s poems “a paradigm of attentiveness” (16). The phrase applies well to *Steveston*. Open form poetics inform the sequence, seizing internal and external worlds, as Chris Hall observes:

The phenomenologically given environment becomes the given language. The perceptual immediacy of the language reflects, in every sense, the immediacy of the *Steveston* environment, the direct apprehension achieved by and through Marlatt’s sense perceptions. The phenomenologically achieved structures become the chosen

method of poetic working.... The language *enacts* perception, and attains formal validity by virtue of its movement, its formal becoming into poem-as-process-as-object. The poem enacts its own meaning. (147)

When title and form meet, we find the river. *Steveston* ensures we understand the means and the process of perception as cumulative phenomena. The sequence is full of the method of its seeing.

For instance, Marlatt's poem "Pour, pour" reaches for the fluidity of water—no easy feat given the limits of that meniscus we call 'English.' Marlatt overcomes this problem by slipping through the borders of syntax, using enjambement and the line-break to cultivate a sense of linguistic continuity: "The world I live in, give & take, that permeable membrane I & my world are (one), operant in language" ("Marlatt, "Long as in Time?" 316). The formal "flow" of the river is mirrored in the poem's own "dissolving of boundaries"—a literary trope common to river writing (Bullock and Newton, 74). In *Steveston*, this flow breaks the writing past the strictures of line-length, pouring the language into the mind of the reader. Bullock and Newton's point is relevant to the essayist and poet: "Just as a river forms a dialectic between watery currents and retaining bank, wilderness comprehension serves as a dialectic between flowing experience and poetic discourse" (78). Marlatt's poem integrates fluvial comprehension with the receptive work of cross-cultural and estuarine understanding. Her sense of space integrates community.

Formally, the poem performs a reciprocal task in giving itself back to its community and watershed of origin. This circle of giving (important in Harrison and Snyder), has an ecological and textual source, as Marlatt observes:

creation goes on being created as writing enacts it. But because we have got to where we have out of our common history, each of us writes in the teeth of a likelihood of closed time, an end of 'our' own making, yes, but also an end beyond our individual volition & creation. That likelihood surfaced in the poem not because the poem is a complete, if closed, system, but because it opens to the future, keeps pace with the river.... that river never stopped and never stops coming tho our lives propose that time *does*....

I think of *Steveston* as actually a movement around, based on return. A cycle of poems, it moves around & keeps returning to the central interface of human lives with the river... ("Long as in Time" 316-7)

This is a vital point. All the writers I read share this "central interface" through various formal variations. Marlatt suggests the structure of temporal epistemology is too human-centred; it places its limits at the edge of a human (or political) life span, rather than the demanding almost-eternities of the river "that never stops coming." Amongst other things, *Steveston* reorients river-time, ranking it above chronology.<sup>16</sup> Her poem crosses the bookended framing of human primacy by

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<sup>16</sup> English Poet Laureate Andrew Motion is (as was former Laureate Ted Hughes) a keen fisherman. (Hughes' book *River* is a celebratory and meditative collection that draws on his B.C. and English river experiences. [Vancouver *Sun*, 24 July 1999. C1]). After standing at the river for a "few minutes, the universe begins to expand and settle.... everything is the river now." Motion's association with rivers and memory encloses phases of his life and pivots around the memory of his dead mother. At the Dee River in Scotland he watches "the water making and unmaking itself, with the line going ahead and back, with the ripples and the little waves opening and closing, giving their glimpse of what I half-see, half-imagine. [This is] that mood when she is still alive. When the air around me is



“keeping pace with the river.” To engage with Marlatt’s vision by reading drops us into that flow. The poem’s formal, replicative proprioceptions draw us further into her cycle of return. We readers become like the water, transpiring through the estuary and tides of her sequence.

The Fraser River mouth is the site of Marlatt’s dialectic between the human and natural world. She describes her sentences as “forward-streaming,” their “associations spilling over line breaks.... one sentence spills into the next and a river spills into the sea” (94). She is there marshalling “the flow of the poem,” its “drift” as she watches “the ongoing and nameless” (94, 95). Rather than feeling paralysed by the uncontrolled, or meditating on her own end, Marlatt takes up the challenge of letting her perception and language stream, open. “The generative impulse of her long-line usage is with a series of rhythmical washes, sweeps and falls, which may flow either with or against the line ending, with or against a possible enjambement and associated variants of syntax and emphasis” (Hall 147). Marlatt watches her eddied syntax as she takes the plunge towards explication.

“Pour, pour” (17-18) is the Fraser River’s poem as much as it is Marlatt’s. The Fraser provides the basis for her reflection—for in river-writing, the fluid can become a foundation—and the River sustains the four-legged, winged, gilled and bipedal creatures that haunt its shores. The haunting operates in several spaces. “Pour, pour” tracks alluvial and cultural tides and trends across time: Hong Wo, an old fisherman, is tucked away in his “haunt,” a shack that used to be a store and now houses “the tag ends / of his mind.”

The poem slips from river to Hong Wo, and back. Here the Fraser is source and re-source, its fecund cycles traced and realised in Marlatt’s wide-angled *and* precise attention. Though the poem (and Marlatt’s consciously deployed, apprehensive comprehension) enters Hong Wo’s store like an errant and conscious eddy, she returns to the river that

swells &  
moves, this way or that, but always to cast up finally in the muck.... time, this  
downstream its own downpour.

The river is an animating force: in “Pour, Pour” it binds and composes itself and the town and watershed around it. Its continuity is a constant, hauling in traces of a shifting cultural context.

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full of soft swish and shimmer; when the mind is intent but easy, when words form out of nowhere. Aldercones and midges and nettle flowers flipping onto the water, glittering shock rings. The heart, ripening with excitement, entranced, believing the whole of its past has come within reach, and is catchable.... I turn back to the river, crouching forward, and the dazzle began streaming towards me again. This time it wasn’t snowflakes, it was faces, the miniature faces of the dead, some undulating within the white air... some in the water. I cast into them again, and again nothing.” Suddenly, a salmon comes level with him. “It leapt clean out of the water, shoulder high... My heart lifting; I had it fixed in me there... free and separate from everything else in the world, yet belonging to me and me alone.... The burnished silver back... the warrior head. I was a child again, staring into the hard yellow eye. I was as old as my father dreaming in the shade. Then that long second ended, and the fish was beyond me, slapping down through the surface, charging on, towards the mountains and the stoney headwaters.” Motion’s cyclic, resonant memoir is a kind of elegy; it honours the persistence of memory through the stream of time affirmed by Duncan, Flanagan, Stafford, Moore and many many others through history, culture and place. Memory saturates; memory looks back; memory reflects. Illich’s dual world of waters with receptive and reflective power lives on.

Marlatt puts it best when, in her Afterword to the 1984 edition of *Steveston*, she observes that “the poem, like the river, is constantly seeking to arrive in the now, bringing all of the past it has passed through with it” (94).

This past of the poem and river is under erosive pressure from the Lethe-wash of cultural change and amnesiac global capitalism. Global capital seeks short-term profit, though its liquid reach is apparently unending. As Bowling knows, this river of time is beginning to bear the marks of the humans who live for the short-term, who cultivate overfishing rather than long memory. The salmon return to the river—they “re-enter time” and “their source... to die.” Their return to memory at a tactile and physical level reinforces the sense of biological and fluvial motility that has worked its way into the coast for millennia. The human presence at the river is minute when viewed across the reach of time. But arriving at the landscape speaks to the pace of change; by “Pour”’s fourth and final stanza the “wires and the roar of Richmond skyline (money)” envelops the physical river and the mind of the old fisherman Hong Wo. His memory has poured ahead into itself and into a world that consumes and forgets it. Time, “closing in on this life now,” moves with the surety of Marlatt’s descriptive flow, across the man’s home. There is some reassurance that her acuity can, at moments, outpace the force of change she records, so that we may bear witness to a wash tank, a “galvanised floor,” scattered cards and a pile of “good luck chips.” The fisher sits, “invisible guardian of old receipts.” The detail is gleaned almost hurriedly; these are last glimpses as the viewer is swept on.

Like ‘Sinclair’s’ Thames or ‘McCarthy’s’ Tennessee, ‘Marlatt’s’ Fraser (which her gathered imagery forms into an elusive, uncontainable force) is a river of memory, precisely because it is a river of human community. The signs of that community are everywhere. And salmon remember their homes too. They are the ones that have drawn the humans to the water.

### **Communities on the river of the poem**

Marlatt’s version of this fragile *and* “generative,”<sup>17</sup> ongoing *Steveston* emerged as a result of her work in oral history for The University of British Columbia and BC Archives. That job took her to the community of the delta, and face-to-face with the *issei* and *nissei* (first- and second-generation Japanese-Canadians) and Finns who fished there. This history project becomes “aural” (Chew 62) as Marlatt writes it into being in tandem with her long poem that will be heard by the inner ear as much as seen or spoken on the page.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “What may appear to be fragmented and unrelated is structured by the mediation of the generative properties of the language itself” (Hall 156).

<sup>18</sup> *Steveston Recollected*, “held up for a while by lack of funds” was published in 1975, the year after *Steveston* (Chew 70).

Those affected by the river are marked by its harvest: the salmon have drawn communities to the Fraser River for many thousands of years (Bocking 186, Carlson, Hanna and Henry). Language and place, river and salmon become “the mesh we are netted in,” “the place itself, mapped out, a web” (70, 79). Fish remain a resource worth fighting for, and people still fight for them at every level. Elaborate trade and kinship networks evolve around salmon in the First Nations of the Fraser Basin.<sup>19</sup> And Japanese-Canadian communities were slowly growing over the last century. Despite a racist fish licence policy (skilfully summarised by Rinataro Hayashi in *Steveston Recollected*) the communities had begun to gather assets (in appalling conditions) only to have them stripped away during World War Two.<sup>20</sup> The *issei* and *nissei* notions of belonging were violated by internment; that double-displacement is traced by Marlatt (“the young woman from *out there*”) in more detail in *Steveston Recollected* (53). Shirley Chew argues Marlatt uses her long poem to fill in the gaps the “official” aural history leaves out. But even here the sense of anger, “a residue of pain,” is subtly drawn (59). Perhaps these feelings are as influential as the river, a low noise in the roil of consciousness: “[a]lways there is this long shadow, that underlies the street and twins it” (43). Chew finds *Steveston Recollected* “less revealing than might be expected,” because those interviewed “were generally unwilling, whether from policy or habit, to voice their reactions to hostile treatment and hardship.... It is this silence which Marlatt sets out to interpret and fill so that, without ceasing to be Japanese-Canadian history, *Steveston* (1974), the long poem, becomes also her story” (Chew 63).<sup>21</sup> This is one form of Marlatt’s interpretive work, but it also functions as a self-interrogation of her own inner boundaries and emotional ecotones. The shadow she sees would be harmed by full explication. Perceiving it as it stands allows the work to accrue its own dimensionality. Pain is not something to be trifled with.

Chris Hall believes “the knowledge which haunts the poem is that the majority of Japanese inhabitants are essentially in exile, their immigrancy effectively violated by wartime internment” and the periods of hardship and terrible housing they endured (Hall 156). Japanese Canadians

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<sup>19</sup> These links endure in celebratory and complex ways. For one that is simply complex, take a recent news item about the reported dispute between Cheam band members who are dredging a portion of riverbed used as spawning grounds by returning Stuart salmon. The Musqueam Nation downstream are unhappy, as are gravel companies, but the Cheam land, like most First Nations Reserves, is insufficient to maintain a minimal standard of subsistence. (*The Early Edition*. CBC Radio One. Vancouver. 21 April 1999). New fishing methods are tried out and are useful alternatives, but transnational corporations are not interested in fish wheels.

<sup>20</sup> Now the Fraser delta faces further speculative greed as private property dealers buy up areas of fertile agricultural land. “In Delta, at the mouth of the Fraser, only 35 per cent of the land is owned by the people who farm it. Private speculators have driven land prices far above agricultural values because they are confident that sooner or later a change in political climate will enable them to reap enormous profits by rezoning it to urban uses” (Bocking 195). This point was also made in the 1960s: “The plight of the farmer in the Fraser Valley is due largely to the lack of respect for agricultural land as a valuable renewable resource. The bona fide farmer knows the land is a trust from one generation to another” (Parker 167).

<sup>21</sup> As she does in her novel *Obasan*, Joy Kogawa is eloquent in her account of the power of silence: “We’re a very small group in numbers. And so the policy of dispersing Japanese-Canadians across the country, even after the defeat of Japan, worked beyond the wildest dreams of politicians. And forty years later, most of the people of my generation are still hiding in the woodwork and not wanting to speak. As Aunt Emily says in *Obasan*, our tongues were cut off. It takes a while for the nerves to grow back” (*Justice* 10).

were uprooted from their homes and their families were often divided. Unlike Japanese-Americans, their homes and assets were seized, and they were barred from the West Coast until 1 April 1949. A Price-Waterhouse study estimated over \$CDN443 million lost in earnings alone during 1941-9 (*Justice* 5). Japanese-Canadians are “disinherited” (*Steveston* 76) by racism and double-exile from a place of work and belonging, either in Canada or Japan. “The Japanese have been beached like caught fish, and to return homeward and to love is essentially a movement out to sea” (Hall 155).

The fluvial operates in cultural and riverine ecologies, consistent with Marlatt’s focus on “the treatment of race, class and gender in historical and ecological context” (Relke 30). “Pour, pour” and “Imperial Cannery” are haunted and fleshed out by their Japanese subjects who hover like the reflection of stilts on the water. Marlatt’s contact with the physical and cultural riverscape stresses her outside status yet offers details of immersion in the place. Just as a river is fleeting and embedded, so Marlatt’s point of view manages to balance between the categories of objective and subjective “locatable, critical knowledges,” “intersubjective knowledge—the kind of knowledge that incorporates positionality,” as she moves along borders between gender, race and species (Haraway 191; Relke 38). “There’s a subhuman, sub / marine aura to things” that reinforces the liminal presence (23). The Fraser becomes one of the “inroads to a heart that changes” (28) and like that heart it gives in return, that long line “deep enough to in-spire a world, that is, giving back out what I took in.” Marlatt continues: “Steveston was a world very different from the one I usually inhabit, so I stood curiously to it. [The poem] opens to the future, keeps pace with the river” (Marlatt, “Long as in Time?” 315).

Marlatt integrates history in her poem, often through the voices of elderly Japanese-Canadians. The poem springs out of the oral history of others and reformulates interviews from Marlatt’s own research and impressions of the town. She takes us back into communal and cultural memory in her poems. “Imagine: a town” (13) forces us to imagine the worst (“the bodies of men and fish corpse piled on top of each other”), and to honour the ways memory (“He said”) preserves history even as tides wash it away: “do you see the shadow of charred stilts / on cool water?”

There is a collection of *images* here, a bound collation of fragments, “the place itself, mapt out, a web” (79). The narrative line running through this poem is almost protected by the shift in line and focus. But the very strategy of a shifting, oblique touch is part of the poem’s purpose, to treat the memory and story it imparts with a great deal of care and respect, for the story concerns death and tragedy as the “shack” full of card-playing men burns to the river. The river here is “uncalled for, unending: // where chance lurks / fishlike.” Chance, like the river, is unpredictable, beyond us and yet wedded to our bones. It is present in the sudden river eddy or the swerving trot of the Coyote.

Is the town “running / (smoothly?)” asks Marlatt, with a macabre sense of managerial assessment. She then sets the record straight: it is “a town running before a fire / canneries

burning.” “Imagine: a town” asks the reader to bear witness to the pain that has marked this place, the squalor forced upon those Othered. Doing this on a physical level limns the tracings of psychological pain in the sequence. To fill in these traces and explicate them entirely (as Chew suggests Marlatt could have), appears contrary to her open, “unending” poetics/process of perception. Filling in the silences blocks an avenue of possibility and escape for reader and author and suggests an “exhaustiveness” that Marlatt might find restrictive and troubling (Rose 101). To *suggest* everything is preferable to telling everything. She is dealing with other (living) people’s pain.

The language constantly pours over the edges of its own caesurae and line-breaks, reeling (with the smooth flow of the racing spool and the ragged chaos of collapse) across a net of images: from oil to river to blood to “marshland silt no graveyard can exist in but water swills, / endlessly out of itself to the mouth.” The instability at the delta confers fecund movement and continuity as “unending” renewal leads back into itself. Things are changing. For this very reason it fails to offer a solid place of repose for the dead. Marlatt tracks their voices as Bowling or Iain Sinclair do.

Chance endures; this great sly fish of destiny “flicks his tail & swims thru.”

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The remarkable evocation of interior and exterior space realised in *Steveston* demonstrates ways Marlatt’s poem *breaks* conventions of landscape in its transgressive, cross-dimensional and arche-temporal imaginings (Holden).<sup>22</sup> Marlatt slips beyond the static frame. For example, a space of

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<sup>22</sup> *Steveston* shuns the framing conventions of landscape for an open form that holds and surrenders enough space for the speakers and readers to enter. Her work is marked by its provisionality, not an arrogant certainty that circumscribes. When Marlatt scribes the circle, its circumference is an illuminated meniscus, sunlit water, which invites and opens, rather than closing out. The estuary does not hold; tides are uncontained.

Because “landscapes are one of the most pervasive, taken-for-granted texts about social organization,” Marlatt’s open form work is subversive: *Steveston* re-vision the way place is encountered and “read” and thereby challenges some of the key social codes of the perceptual apparatus inherited from landscape tradition (Duncan and Duncan 125). *Steveston* emphasises that any attempt at textualising riverscape is inherently unstable; this is true of all the poetry in this chapter. If “[t]he metaphor of landscape as text works to establish an authoritative reading, and to maintain that authority whenever emotion threatens to erupt and mark the author as a feeling subject” as Gillian Rose argues, then the work Marlatt and others do honour feeling, knowing it will wash over the subject at any time (Rose 101). To honour the river is to honour an emotional, inner world; Marlatt’s respect extends to the Japanese-Canadians that inspire her; she allows them their silence. “[S]pace looks back: space is dynamic and active: containing, defining, separating and naming many points of capture for power and meaning” (Pile and Thrift, 46). The motility of the river is not easily scoped.

<sup>22</sup> *Steveston* “collages perspectives of Steveston, relates its history, and plays its narratives against the subtext of the Kwakiutl Winter Ceremonial. . . . the structures . . . argue against linear causation, to propose some network of operative force” (Davey 186). Marlatt told George Bowering she was very interested in “Kwakiutl cosmology . . . the notion of the sea as being a river running north into a big hole, where it dives down, that’s the end of the world” (“Given This Body” 49).

possibility emerges when the poem “Imperial Cannery, 1913” opens: “Standing inside the door (the river . . .)” now bracketed and suggestive, ellipsed into possibility, is the River:

the Fraser, mouth of the Fraser here where it  
debouches, into marsh, delta, swirling around & past those  
pilings of the cannery wharf they are standing on.... (15)

This river is one site of unconditional giving; it does not demand repayment and has been taken advantage of: “the Fraser gives of itself, incessantly, rich (so the dream goes). . . . a flowing and ever eroding running river...” (16). Even as the water and its bounty tie the young woman to the “iron chink,” “she is in her element,” her rivered body of salty blood bound to Empire and economics. There are life histories borne by the River here. The poem ranges across sixty years as time rolls on, “uncalled for, unending.” One form of time ends with the woman’s death, but *river time* continues. The river’s continuity anchors her to the doorframe, the eyes’ desire shaping her to the horizon of her “dreams.” Dreams which, like the Fraser, breach the dykes of waiting, of labour, of debt to the cannery; they reveal the all too solid absences in her life of work.

If the Fraser is one source of uncomplaining (and thus abused?) bounty, then the unnamed woman’s body is another. The work of feeding her family and feeding the Iron Chink is likely to consume her. The corporeality of her body and the river’s changes are strong. The cold grey of the cannery, of the fish; the bright ribbon she dreams of: imagination becomes the means by which she breaches “her threshold of work” (16). The river is one lifeline out of the doorway, binding the images as her body continues to hold and form her other cycles and perform her labours.<sup>23</sup> Yet the poem’s closure on the dead rhythms of the machine and the bladed certainties of social customs (a trio of further labours) reminds us this is no poem of easy emancipation.

The constancy of labour and oppression is evident. Diana Relke notes that the River is a site of oppression for this unnamed woman worker; the small space of snatched daydream is her only refuge. Even that, Relke argues, is conditioned by stereotype: the ribbon becomes a thing of allure which is not able to release the woman from a machinery of work, marriage and service. Snatches of image and memory suggest a past and a way of knowing that past; paying attention is important, but the poem’s form allows a degree of interpretive space.

“Intelligence (as if by radio)” (69-70) flags that attentiveness. Communal signs and stories run-on from any attempts at containment by the pasts that have created them *and* the future they are endlessly becoming, troping the poetics of transmission through the shifting delta:

Light temporary (occasional cloud &  
she’s moving west, as always, with our spin away from, knots of,  
black chunks of history (old cannery pilings, old sheds rotting their  
legs into the rapid run of water westward, to the sun’s going,....

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<sup>23</sup> This is machinery notched with the even markers “for marriage, for birth, for death;” these cogged certainties exist on the teeth of the “Iron Chink,” that machine into which the canner feeds her energy but not her dreams.

Night, I'm wanting to catch you *this* time  
(the moon's unwinding burial blanket, time, stands in its warp  
temporarily only, light –

Legs of sheds, stumps, amputated limbs  
(torn knots nets are shadows only. Where's the *body* of this being  
we run against? & feel, this net we're caught in, fish, light on  
full, suddenly blinded in its extent: (69)

All things are entities here. Attention to the substantive atmospheres of light and dark, water and time give *Steveston* a grounded quality. The poem's physicality allows the reader to glimpse the massed bodies, the form of "absences in the language," or the dusk and the river as word and world gather (Ricou 214). There is possibility in these spaces. Marlatt sees the mercurial elements of life, river and story through(out) the poem, always aware of her proprioceptive lens. Interconnection functions at the level of image and story; it also works through the poem as an energy that binds the reader to a place-in-text. The poetry understands the ways we perceive and use the elements without culling their elusive qualities. Here, language highlights them for the visitor to the page/place, collaborating with the invisible nature of her perceptual knowing: radio waves, light waves and waves of darkness become elemental, perceived subjects:

This black and white we only half perceive is caught by a wave –  
photography moon operates on a full night, quiet, most of the boats  
out. Wave reading shed, telegraphy of pilings in the river's  
intimate creek of hulls shatter – a dog barking somewhere, the sudden  
chuckle of sea, someone scratching his head, turns in with the last  
bilge into creeping water, splash. This continues . . . (70)

This awareness is intelligence too, intelligence as if by river: fluid, all-encompassing and capable of shifts of focus, the elision of borders. Then, as if repairing a net, Marlatt needles a node of grim racism. Human pain is lifted from 1911 and placed right into the poem's (uncertain) focus on imminent absence: "a ghostly clutter of Indian tenement / Japanese cannery shacks" their numbers replicated on boat hulls "and when 'a boat is found bottom up, its number is taken & the inhabitants of the shack are notified.'"<sup>24</sup> Then we slip fluidly into the haunted, echoing present that fills up with the 'if' of imagination. The poem becomes an inquiry towards compassion:

& if there is still,  
further along, under the gravel of cannery parking lot, a picket  
fence, a woman's wailing all night long, for what? for what return  
the present *doesn't* ride upon? It's not linear:  
the stainless  
steel lines going down in the Gulf echo other trollings, catch  
in the mesh of a net we refuse to see, the accretion of all our

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<sup>24</sup> This quotation, from the Garnet Weston's article "Steveston-by-the-Fraser" (*British Columbia Magazine*, August 1911) suggests a callousness. The article goes on to catalogue the multiracial Steveston as a filthy cultural phantasmagoria, where diversity is coded as a disease. Non-whites are troped to appear eerie and depraved rather than simply different people who happen to be denied the economic and political rights enjoyed by most of the article's male readers.

actions, how they interact, how they inter/read (intelligence),  
receive the reading at sea, a vanishing marsh, a dying river,  
the mesh we are netted in, makes of *us*.

Marlatt sees language as a net (as Keri Hulme does<sup>25</sup>). Language is a light that can blind, a darkness that can occlude and an element we swim in like time, memory or air. We are hooked “at the mouth, where river runs under, in to the immanence of things” (79). In the acrobatics of line, the eddying caesura and enjambement, Marlatt imitates the muscularity of water. The Fraser and the line are forces to be reckoned with. Both river and word are “a way in, to return, in time, the / stream” (“Life Cycle” 71-2). This line “is not linear.” Things “interact,” for no river is an island. *Steveston*’s shorter line length (when compared with Marlatt’s previous book *Rings*, for instance), prompts more “forward-streaming” syntax. This reminds the reader that the “environing” the salmon undergo on the journey home to death is one humans make through language, as we move through spoken, printed and genetic remnants of the past. The poem closes with a (re)circulative vision:

It rings us

where we are (turn & turn about), however the depth its cool  
waters glide (over us), erase, with vast space elide the code  
we’ve managed to forget: this urge to return, & returning, thresh,  
in those shallows, death, leaving what slips by, the spore,  
the spawn, the mark that carries on . . . like a germ, like violence  
in the flesh,

as if, hooknosed, holding to the shape they burn in,  
salmon don’t re-enter time (in four years the river)....

as if the earth were dead

& we within it ash, eating ash, drinking the lead fire of our own  
consumption, “Here’s to us!”

As if, “outside,” a white fire *doesn’t*

ring us, earth flicker its own circuits we, transparent, burn within.

The last line of the poem is remarkable: great stratospheric rivers crack with light, a fire that depends on darkness to define its reach. We might, she suggests, see that reach if we learnt from the river. Streams of language and consciousness require degrees of silence and unknowing, otherwise they become indistinct. The grim triumph of the conclusion lashes back at earlier blind optimism: “Here’s to us” becomes a farewell toast to the planet and all on it: nuclear fires, incessant “consumption” and memories of wars, journeys and losses mapped over the earth’s “circuits.” The endings have blossomed into light and fire.

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<sup>25</sup> Keri Hulme, as I note in the Introduction, said to me: “if you make lots of gaps as in a net [you create a space] for [readers] to fall into...”



How can memory endure when the non-human communities are being ravaged? What will the basis for fishing communities and others be in the Fraser watershed when the trees have vanished along with the salmon? “[L]ogging sediment in upper Fraser streams has been found to decrease the survival of salmon fry by 30 per cent.... More than half the trees cut in British Columbia have been taken since 1977” (Bocking 84, 85). Attention to present details is one way for memory to continue its transpiration: Marlatt’s poem is an archive in its own right. Her sense of flexible fragility, reinforced through run-on lines, doubts and (intertextual) variation, means *Steveston* is a “a mark that carries on” (72). But twenty-six years after its composition many are not sure the salmon will.

### **Deltaed encounters**

When Marlatt says fisherman Hong Wo’s “vision is accretion” she describes her own process of seeing, with at least one proviso: her writing style suggests she does not (or cannot) freeze images as a photograph does. Embedded in language, the images alter and change with each glimpse. Her seeing is *in process*. Fred Wah contextualizes this motility in the work of Charles Olson. Olson’s essay “Proprioception” lays out some fundamentals of a new discourse—“Today: movement at any cost” (181), and his dictum “to bring the land into the eye’s view” (183) are relevant here. Homeostatic awareness is embedded in the process of writing and seeing; reading Marlatt, we are conscious of her provisional consciousness: ‘this is what I am doing/seeing’ she suggests, as our own reading augments the narrative. Closure is not honest to her own experience of the delta.

She strives for a writing which will accurately reflect the condition of the writer at the moment of the writing. This is called ‘proprioceptive’ writing and Marlatt is one of its most distinguished practitioners.... The primary sense of Marlatt’s writing is that the reader is in the process of the making of it. (Wah 15)

Her process of “generative” attention (“seeking to arrive in the now” [94]) acknowledges this ecotone of culture, memory and double (salt/fresh) water, where the only certainty is change (Hall 156). “In other words, it is all connected at this delta, silted up, layer upon interconnected layer, suggesting a multiplicity of positions from which to imagine” (Relke 34). Time and the river taper and run past those left watching. The viewer is bound to be marked by the water and its current, marked in very different ways as (ex-)fisherman or woman, writer and reader: “The body can feel the rhythm and the intelligence behind it, the line as it breathes.... she explores and plays in the landscape that the turns of syntax make, and this movement *across* the page, across voices, parallels the traversing across the history and imagination of that place at the mouth of the Fraser River, at that place on the tongue of the writer” (Wah 19). Marlatt told George Bowering

My notion re prose & poetry is that I'm confused. I have a feeling that both of them have nothing to do with the way they look on the page, but with the way the language is moving. A particular kind of attention to language. Simply, that standard prose is written as if language was transparent. You're not seeing it. Poetry is written with the awareness that it's not transparent, that it is in fact a medium & that you are operating in it thanks to it. Its like the difference between being land animals & [fish]—we don't usually experience air, you know. We breathe in & we breathe out without being aware that we're breathing in any medium at all. That it is our medium. Once we get into the water, which is a foreign element to us, we're very aware of the difficulty of moving thru that element. That's like poetry. You are aware that you're moving in an element, in a medium, & that there is a constant resistance to your moving forward. And that, in fact, any moving forward you make is thanks to that element that you're moving in. So that language ... writes the story as much as you do. ("Given This Body" 61-2)

This comment is vital to a full appreciation of the way *Steveston* flows and functions as a poem. Marlatt "eddies too," caught in her own accretion of images within the larger delta of the poem, suddenly swayed by her own particular en-visioning. The eye, fervent in its run-on, ramps along caesurae; moving with the run-off, it breaches the line break as the reader is slipped into the next stanza. "I've heard it offered that a period is simply the shorthand for the dots of an ellipsis. That a story never does end, only can pause" (Doig 202). The form of the entire poem reinforces the sequential tendency of much river writing (just as "Pour, pour" eases into ellipses, reminding the reader of a continuity sustained—and challenged—by the space between pieces). Shirley Chew suggests the gaps and variations in the poem, its "restless play of genres," represent change: "the precarious nature of this *Steveston* evinces itself in the poem's discontinuities of form and the mixedness of its textual fabric" (64). The poem's own resonances develop an ecology of textual memory and image that honours the interdependencies at the river-mouth.

This *Steveston* is precarious. Its fragile cultural and ecological network permeates—indeed *is—Steveston*. Minden's photograph of worn *kanji* on a hut door (the characters read "Children keep out" [19]) is one record of a fragile way of life.<sup>26</sup> The photograph faces "Pour, pour." It reinforces Marlatt's sense that some Japanese-Canadians are "haunted" by a racist past and rapacious present; the calligraphy lends credence to the poem's sense of delicacy (20). An alliance between "chance" (and the patterned chaos of systems theory), salmon, time and the delta shapes flow and change as a way of life that the fishing community, like the fish, must obey. Lives and livelihood surge through those waters, and their arrival is increasingly needed and increasingly threatened. Thus does the reflective site, the delta, become temporalised and politicised on a human scale. "History in these poems becomes both personal and contemporary; the 'political'

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<sup>26</sup> The first edition of the book placed the photos in the first half with their titles and dates listed at the end of the photos. The poem was separate, in the second half of the book. The 1984 edition of *Steveston* places the photographs *throughout* the poem at strategic points, with the subject/title and date immediately below the picture. This decision makes a substantial impact on the way I read both text and image in the course of the now blended sequence. *The Long Poem Anthology* omits the photographs altogether (probably an apt decision given format restrictions) and (unlike the previous two editions) uses a *distinctly* bold font for each small subsection's title.

implications of the facts Marlatt discovers reach into both her life and the readers" (Davey 195). They do so because they reach through the river, which in the place I write, the Lower Mainland of B. C., affects us all. The prospect of ecological breakdown looms like the imminent spring melt.

**"the place itself, mapt out, a web"**

The poem "Moon" faces Minden's striking photograph of rotting cannery buildings perched above

water seeping up, wetting  
island dirt. It's river, rank odour of river mud banks, the  
strait, the sea. . . .  
It's stagnant ditch water, drainage, gathering scum, Lulu Island,  
dyked off from the sea. (21)

Lulu Island became one hub of "this moon-crazed industry, this town" as it blossomed into a carnival-place for thousands, racing into its own oblivion on a red-fleshed wave, "freshet, & the salmon churning black waters, / darker depths" (22).

"Moon" surges easily between crowds of humans and fish, leaping the temporal "ditch," from the bustle of the early 1900s into the "stagnant" times of the overfished delta beset by "this corporate growth that monopolizes / the sun, moon & tide, fish-run" (22). The ghastliness of the "Now" the poem pivots on shifts the reader from fecund revelry to a "drained" community depleted in a list of negatives: "It / sucks them dry.... drained / by the ditches of their unsatisfied lives" (22). This staging is a harsh judgment on the forces of capitalism and the locals from one who looks "In from the Outside" yet strives towards "synthesis" (22; Relke 29). She condemns corporations yet *seems* to decry the locals too.

How to balance these two judgments? Perhaps the poems themselves will do so: "Seeking to gather up the scattered threads of the past and the present, they run through layers of time, levels of meaning, into their own conclusion" (93). The poems run on regardless; they are not dammed by large corporations where progress is insidious and inevitable, "like a disease, like time" (64). Marlatt's observations of dissatisfied people do not condemn them; she (like Glavin, Bowling and Bocking) points the finger at the larger companies and processes that have "drained" thousands of communities since 1973, "cut down to one day a week: their technology too great for / the crop to bear" (53). What she sees in Steveston is a no-win situation: male underemployment or, for

women, drudgery—“meaning, don’t get theoretical now, the cannery.... how the plant packs their lives, chopping / off the hours, contains *them*” (25). She concludes: “To be given up, gone, in a great bleeding jet, into that other (working) world” (25).

Here is a direct confrontation with the faulty tools of capitalism that, from an ecological viewpoint, destroy the resource base of business and custom without an eye to the future generation of communities (or profit, oddly enough). “Bleeding” affects people and place; capital amputates as well as accretes. But with Marlatt, a crass finality like a ‘conclusion,’ a cessation, is passed over in favour of “the slap slap” of water and time: “(it flows)” (26). The recirculative energy between poet, place, memory and reader sustains her river. Enamoured of process, *Steveston* is “a movement around, based on return” (Marlatt, “Long as in Time” 317). How could a conclusion occur in such a river-focused poem; the river is a site of continuity and transformation even “[a]t the mouth, where river runs under, in, to the immanence of things” (79).<sup>27</sup>

Here, the stern tide of the surveyor’s grid dissolves. On land the people “know the extinction / of open marsh by concrete” (75) and face the dwindling salmon with dread. But in that murky silty water “[t]here are no territories” (79). Marlatt dispenses with the mundane and enters the rhythms of the fish and the river:

It rings us  
where we are (turn & turn about), however the depth its cool  
waters glide (over us), erase, with vast space elide the code  
we’ve managed to forget: this urge to return, & returning, thresh,  
in those shallows, death, leaving what slips by, the spore,  
the spawn, the mark that carries on... (72)

The line and the river sustain and continue, each central to and limning the poem, just as death haunts the delta in every departure a boat makes from the wharves, every word we speak. That is simply “How it goes” (28). Many are “haunted” (29). Marlatt captures the agonised reflection of one bereft (lines surging in grief, recollection and horror “May day May day May day,” and capturing something of that terrible regret—“A pain, a pain rising & no one . . .” [29]). Perhaps the lack of response is part of a “settlement mentality” that ignores the power of the unsettled waters,

that settles down a street that doesn’t go straight thru, pacing the river’s  
winding edge, that sez oblivious, good soil here we’ll put our roots down.  
And the river runs away with them, flood, storm, all manner of lost

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<sup>27</sup> Diana Relke makes a key point: “In the 1970s, West Coast postmodernist writers were fond of quoting a particular Heraclitean aphorism which for them expressed the transformative conflict of opposites that informed both natural process and the processes of language: ‘You cannot step twice into the same river.’ Anyone who’s returned to Marlatt’s *Fraser* as often as I have over the twenty years since its first appearance can hardly deny this truth. But more to the point, there is indeed something in the aphorism that suggests conflict—perhaps it’s the emphasis on the negative. Heraclitus had second thoughts, however. He was apparently aware that his dynamic resists a strict application of the law of contradiction, for he amended the aphorism to read, ‘We step and we do not step into the same river; we are and we are not’ (frag. 81). The shift is a subtle one but it is nevertheless radical, for it throws the whole dynamic into a kind of reverse field: synthesis emerges while conflict recedes” (46-7).

belonging gone, anchorless on out to sea....

The edge, the edge. (41)

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After the disturbing passage through “distress,” it is a relief to reach the measured compact assonance of the next poem, “*Sea Trek* etc.” This assemblage of images and senses leads us to the estuary, the boats poised on the edge of ocean and danger, just as so much of *Steveston* perches on the edge of cultural and ecological shift,

ready,

day after day copper painted & caulked & overhauled, now they  
wait, feeling that suck in green and oily shallows, feeling  
afternoon leaf so close at hand, & late (derisive, cluck of a  
gull domestic, finally) they wait, for headway out to the open  
seas/ the open season, current, storm: & fish. (33)

The focus is on the mouth of the river; it suggests that which has gone before in the cycle of poems and the watershed: river and open ocean combine here to create a tone of expectation and potential, seas and seasons ready to turn.

Prepared by the previous portent of readiness, anything could happen in the narrative. Chance remains a key component. But “*Sea Trek* etc” is also a portrait of abeyance and containment, that complex *etcetera* of dependence and patience. To witness a return to the delta at “Low Tide: A beached vessel,” therefore does not disappoint (34). This stranding (of the vessel of language, control and authority) is a natural consequence of the cycle Marlatt traces through the delta; it also points to a stymied energy in the trio of boys who “violate” “their secret catch,” vandalising the boat as it lies “bleached, like some dying fish.... There’s a curious backwater stillness / to their work,” a stubborn intent (“tied with the tide.”) They, boyishly, ignore calls to leave the boat alone. The energies of storm find expression in the incipient/prepubescent violence—or rough play—of the boys: “in acting out their erotic fantasies vis-a-vis the gillnetter, these boys make it possible to survive their oppressive containment at the lowest rung of the male hierarchy” (Relke 41). The boys are also “tied to the tide” rather than to an adult idea of what they should be doing. Their work is dependent upon larger urges, albeit destructive ones. Their primal “intent” is a thing beyond and within them that time and restrictive mores will bring forth. Their coded pre-teenage behaviour is not exonerated (the entire poem suggests ways of opening that leap such codes), it determines their engagement with the watershed. The position of Minden’s photograph (it follows the poem) implicates the three canny-looking boys there in a way they might rather enjoy.

Both the poem and photographs encounter “the rift of language, race, & sex,” a central concern for Marlatt (38). The river mediates and complicates this rift, this “edge,” that Japanese-Canadians live on. (T)here, the river and history are allied. Marlatt sees the poem as a series of

interconnections (“my image for it was a network” [“Long as in Time” 317]) which “gather up the scattered threads of past and present” (93). The Fraser carries that history and flows through temporal space, it “wavers and wanders, collecting / islands of lives, leaves them stranded or suddenly, after some years visible as, / time passing” (43). Time, like human effort and the work of the body, demands the keenest of eyes.

In keeping with the sense of balance and range in the entire poem, Marlatt recognises the endurance, the *labour* that binds human and fish, river and community in the continuing grit of the local people. The demands of labour tire the body. Feelings of anger fall into the hauling of nets, the raising of masts, the filleting of flesh. It is work, not anger, that occupies the lives of those Marlatt encounters, “nothing more than hard work, over & over” (52). Her approach to history begins (as in *Bowling*) with work and uses labour to explicate a series of relations with the river. As mentioned, this approach is suggested some years later by environmental historian Richard White (“Are You”). It is one Marlatt observes in the early 1970s as steady fishing work dwindles for Anglo-Canadian, Finn, First Nation and Japanese-Canadian fishing crews, their “lives / inextricably tied with the tide” and its run of gleaming salmon (64). Children and adults grew up with that bond, but the labour depends on the fish.

Connection through work is a form of return that Marlatt (like *Bowling*) evokes in her concluding poem “*Steveston, B.C.*,” which is a summation of the poems that have gone before. When read in context and sequence “*Steveston, B.C.*” and *Steveston* itself becomes a kind of inscribed, autotelic map to the poem’s own “past it has passed through.” The fish “circling back in / to their source” *are* a stream of “the ongoing and nameless,” drawing the named humans to livelihood, death and a fragile renewal: Marlatt has said “the river & the sea & death” coalesce (“*Given this Body*” 48). That renewal and return is threatened. Marlatt resists the human interruption in the River’s flowing cycle by asserting “We obscure it with what we pour on these waters, fuel, paint, fill,” even as the River submerges time, human and eternal, in its pouring, a movement replicated in the assonance of her penultimate stanza.<sup>28</sup>

a sea men sink their lives into, continue, dazzlingly undeciphered,  
unread days, dazed with the simple continuance of water pour, of wind of small  
stores turning their annual credit ledgers, debit, silent as winter falls, falls,  
pours. . . .

This is the story of a town, these are the people, whose  
history locates inside of a dream, in site of (in situ) down by the riverbank a  
torrent pouring past its sloughs & back channels, boat basins time repeats

Time becomes the river, the river becomes memory, whirling into itself and outwards, capturing and releasing breath as the lines unfold and the reader inhales, exhales, riding the current of line and word.

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<sup>28</sup> This sense of outrage is amplified by the addition of a single letter in the anthologised version of the poem: “how it pours, this river, right over the rock dam~~n~~ at Cannery Channel” (Marlatt 1979, 122).

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Visiting Finn Slough in the early 1990s, Terry Glavin observed “red paint Japanese characters, barely discernible, believed locally to have once warned children to keep out” (26). The *kanji*, possibly the characters featured in “Pour, Pour” have almost vanished, and according to Glavin, just twenty years after Marlatt’s poem, a way of life had vanished with them: by the late 1980s “old-Steveston was all but gone, and what remained survived as a backdrop to what was becoming more of a Steveston-theme mall than anything else” (36).

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Marlatt’s account of Finn fisher Inez Huovinen is a celebration and delight, the language revelling in the movement of the spring freshet, the rolling of human, boat and river. This a harmony that overcomes the adversity Marlatt has detailed for the various river people. Inez is on her boat, talking, laughing; moving with poise “She runs in the / throat of time, voicing the very swifts & shallows of that river, / urging, in the dash of it, enough to keep up, to live on” (65). Here is a balance of skill and subsistence (“To take / no more than the requisite” [66]) Marlatt enjoys, a vigorous resistance in the face of inflation and other adversities, including that mercurial, challenging Fraser River. The River keeps on returning to the viewer and reader: it seems such a certain process, but, “lovely & perilous” it is really full of chance and doubt (86). Recirculation of fish and fresh water blends with silt and salt as Inez rides the waves, revelling in what is right there *with it* in the moment:

Somehow they survive, this people, these fish,  
survive the refuse bottom, filthy water, their choked lives,  
in a singular dance of survival, each from each. At the  
narrows, in the pressure of waves so checked & held by  
“deep sea frontage” it’s the river’s push against her, play of  
elements her life comes rolling on. Hair flying, in gumboots,  
on deck with rubber apron (“it’s no dance dress”), she’ll take  
all that river gives, willing only to stand her ground (rolling,  
*with it*, right under her feet, her life, rolling, out from under,  
right on out to sea . . . (65)

Yes, in 1974 Marlatt affirms things will continue as boat, fish and human will, somehow, at this coast where the canoe, the boat and the vessel of story has cut the water for so long. The page, place of last recourse in these times of loss, does not specify whether it is human or fish that make the last journey:

sometime creatures of motive  
that swim, *AGAINST* the source, but always continuing to return, always

these lovely & perilous bodies drifting in spawn, swarm on out to sea. (86).



## “On their way to open ocean”: Richard Hugo’s land- and riverscapes

In this section I trace rivered journeys made by a writer who finds solace in water as he moves towards a sense of home. I re-examine Richard Hugo as a “landscape poet” as one means of working towards his equally important (though less analysed) role as a shaper of *riverscapes*. I argue for the enduring potency of rivers and communities in Hugo’s career, from the opening poem “Trout” in his 1961 debut *A Run of Jacks* to the final (eponymous) poem in his 1984 *Collected Poems, Making Certain It Goes On*.<sup>29</sup> Hugo was, for many years, a Seattle-based poet. His words floated north as the salmon do. They merge with Marlatt’s and Bowling’s at the estuaries all three poets are bound to. The three gather their attention on what is lost and vanishing. Like the essayists, they dance at the interplay between what remains and what is remembered, between flow and delta, river and ocean. The process of riparian reflection follows and suggests the ways human habit and perception transpire through—and erode—the cultural, ecological and remembered watershed.

As I note in the previous chapter, Ivan Illich writes of the waters of the past and present in an effort to find

the fluid that drenches the inner and outer spaces of the imagination. More tangible than space, it is even more elusive for two reasons: first because this water has a nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors, and second, because water, even more subtly than space, always possesses two sides.... what it seems to reveal and betray hides the stuff that lies beneath. (24-5)

Illich traces the cultural perceptions of water from myth-laden element to a utility for the cleaning of the body and city, mere “H<sub>2</sub>O.” He regards this shift in terms of decline, corruption and impoverishment: “the twentieth century has transmogrified water into a fluid with which archetypal waters cannot be mixed” (7). Though his lament over sheer utility is balanced by typhoid statistics, Illich’s concern remains: H<sub>2</sub>O “is now an observed fluid that has lost the ability to mirror the water of dreams. The city child has no opportunity to come in touch with living water. Water can no more be observed; it can only be imagined, by reflecting on an occasional drop or a humble puddle” (76).

Illich’s meditation on the fallen waterscape has bearing on a poet who, as a young child, encountered water and imagination together, gazing into a small puddle of rainwater in a backyard tree stump. This stump and its tiny pond were to provide Hugo with his first experiences of the “two sides” of water: “The surface glowed like obsidian and emeralds. When I leaned over the edge of the stump and looked straight down I saw my face and behind it the sky, the white clouds

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<sup>29</sup> All page references for poems are from the 1984 *Collected Poems*.

moving north” (“Small Waters and Tiny Worlds” 163).<sup>30</sup> Hugo confronts the two sides of revelation and memory in “The Towns We Know and Leave Behind, The Rivers We Carry with Us” (343). This poem speaks back to early pieces such as “Hideout” and “Duwamish Head” with the shacks of derelict men, and the latter’s repetition, “River, I have loved, loved badly on your bank” (39, 66). “The Towns ... The Rivers ...” pairs sky and river as collaborative images (and image-banks) which order the river town: (“A town needs a river to forgive the town”). This late poem links James Wright and Hugo, men who “had to stay drunk / to welcome the river,” and evokes the right level of authentic grimy loss. Its concluding stanza clarifies one of Hugo’s prevalent metaphors: the river as time, memory and the past. The anxieties of naming are dispensed with even as the impulse—the obsession—is recorded:

Whatever the name of the river,  
 we both had two women to love,  
 One to love us enough we left behind  
 a town that abuses the day.  
 The other to love the river we brought with us,  
 the shack we lived in,  
 the birds, the towns that return to us for names  
 and we give them names knowing the river  
 murders them away. (345)

The river defeats the obsession to name; the town itself seems threatened. The brute force of the waters and Hugo’s response to this river places it somewhere between Ilich’s discussion of Lethe as prompter of forgetfulness, and Mnemosyne’s restorative riches. It holds two sides at once, just as apprehension and recollection braid in many of Hugo’s poems.

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Like the salmon that moves downstream only to return (an enduring motif in his work), Hugo’s various journeys conclude, finally, with a hard-earned sense of belonging. In 1969 Richard Howard described Hugo’s work as moving “outward from a centre and inward towards it” (279). The ripples return to their point of origin, echoing beginnings in new ways. Hugo’s rivers stay with him; eventually they guide his poetry to the source of acceptance he desired for so long.

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<sup>30</sup> There are various instances where Hugo’s image of the reflecting waters meets the sky, such as, “Nearly all the waters colour like the sky” (“Introduction to the Hoh” 59); “the bent face bobbing in the wake / was counted in another cloud gone north”(“Hideout” 65); “love being the only man casting into / a lake turned silver by sky” (“Letter to Haislip from Hot Springs” 304); “fishermen believed skies / full of willing women” (“Pishkun Reservoir” 443). “The true eye of the earth is water” says Bachelard (*Water and Dreams* 31). These statements offer further clues to Hugo’s envisioned memory, a seeing that cannot dispense with the two sides of water, nor the past and present, fused in a meniscus of potential.

Hugo actually enables a shift from land- to river-scape in his work: these two sites receive different thematic attentions.<sup>31</sup> His first book, after all, begins in the rivers of Washington State, a great many of which originate in a Canadian province a few degrees north, just over a border held fast on maps and ignored (at some cost) by the currents (which plough into dams). As I noted, his *Collected Poems* begin and end with rivers. Where is the land that commentators rave about? Maybe *that* is a detour. “I am sure I saw a river there. I always am” (“Keokuk” 267).

Various critics (notably Dave Smith and Frederick Garber) have written of Hugo’s rivers. In this section I analyse a few of his many river poems and trace the shift from attention to memories of need to realisations of plenty. He moves from memories of absence to the deltas of contentment. First, I chart his use of the grimy landscape, before moving on to mention the continuing perils of postmodern river reflection. I then turn to a handful of his poems, which might act as a small hook into his *oeuvre*.

### **Disparate visions? Landscape theory, and the fallen Hugo landscape**

Before it is even a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.  
Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (6-7)

Jonathan Holden calls Hugo “America’s most accomplished poet of landscape” (“Landscape Poems” 169). Hugo’s terrain can consume the critic. Geographical metaphors, which proliferate throughout the criticism, become markers of critical journeys. This is not surprising, given that the critics attend to a self-confessed “landscape poet,” who admitted “I really am addicted to place” (“Dialogue” 139; “Gains” 296).<sup>32</sup> Hugo argues that “[q]uest for a self is fundamental to poetry,”

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<sup>31</sup> Regarding rivers, I recall Hugo’s “Assumption” that his “triggering” or inspiring places “always” contain a body of water (*Triggering* 25). Rivers run through his work: the paradigm of departure, exploration and difficult return is acknowledged as the shaping force of Hugo’s first three volumes (Holden, *Landscapes* 91). Gerstenberger sees the salmon’s river-run as “suggestive of the pattern of ... most of Hugo’s books” (12). Allen suggests rivers carry Hugo through the early phases of his poetic and personal growth, from the isolation of the first book, and a gradual return to community in the second, *Death of the Kapowsin Tavern* (Allen 56). His later work in *Skye* and his final poems resonate with his acknowledgment of the purposeful currents that draw him to a deeper sense of where and who he loves, and therefore of who he is (“Remembering Graham” 227). The rivers run in the first collection and continue throughout his work. Holden sees the motif of the salmon’s run to sea and back, to the source of birth and memory, as a narrative embedded in “Ballad of the Upper Bumping” and *A Run of Jacks* as a whole (23, 31). Furthermore, the narrative of departure, adventure and return plays out over the first three books, the two Seattle-based volumes being followed by the record of Hugo’s 1963 visit to Italy, the scene of his wartime air service (*Landscapes* 91).

Just a *few* of Hugo’s other river poems include several from his first book, and “Where Jennie Used to Swim” (167), “Where Mission Creek Runs Hard For Joy” (168), “Crinan Canal” (199) and “The Sandbanks” (368). Glee is a special component of many of the *Skye* poems, which show how intense and content Hugo’s imagined, storied seeing has become.

<sup>32</sup> Throughout his interviews, prose and poetry Hugo draws connections between place and self. He tells William Kittredge he thinks “of the world as a kind of hunting ground for poems and that I can find them lying around here

and Thomas Gardner believes “landscape and place” are the tools for Hugo’s quest: rivers are too. (Hugo, “Stray” 33; “An Interview” 139). Examining his riverscapes, I begin to trace the ways Hugo’s vision articulates itself through place, memory, and image. His vision is the Claude Glass through which we see Washington, Italy (in his third book, *Good Luck in Cracked Italian*), Montana and the Isle of Skye, the setting for his eighth and final book, *The Right Madness on Skye* (1980).<sup>33</sup>

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The creation of the unmediated view, the unmediated form of representation is an enduring dream in Western culture. The primal language and primal landscape are objects of unattainable desire for Hugo in his work of “homing” and “reclamation” (Matthews xxi, Holden, “Landscape”). Yet one of Hugo’s key challenges to the distanced objectivity of landscape convention is his recognition that such reclamation, and the primal connection that is its object, is an impossible goal. Doreen Massey observes that “the place called home was never an unmediated experience” (163). Hugo’s inner longings and outer landscape are too vast for anything but acceptance of distance as an enabling force. His radical transformations of space and absence into humanised sites of loss (like Sinclair, Hugo maps absence) give his textual landscapes a nostalgic intimacy and also qualify them: there is no home to feel pain for.<sup>34</sup>

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and there. Hopefully always inside myself ultimately” (139). His addiction to place has had a profound impact on critical work done on his poetry.

*We are Called Human*, by Michael Allen, carefully maps what he calls Hugo’s “geography of feeling.” (56). Donna Gerstenberger’s short 1983 monograph works effectively through Hugo’s “world of impermanence,” his “frontier longing” (5), while the third and most recent, Jonathan Holden’s *Landscapes of the Self*, eponymously acknowledges an emotional terrain. The critical tendency is to enter Hugo’s territory as a visitor. In William Bevis’s assessment, we confront “Hugo’s vast outer spaces [which] are usually in tension with a dense inner space and a dense poetics” (158). Bevis is one of the first critics to site Hugo within the long sweep of settlement and dispossession that are held as motifs of the West: “His own sense of abandonment dovetailed with the region’s history of disaster: the crushing of the Indians, the fur trade boom and bust (1825-45), the mining boom and bust (1860-1900), the homestead boom and bust (1909-19; 66 percent failed), the oil and lumber booms and busts (to the present), the water boom and bust (in full swing now)” (146).

In “Overlooking Yale” Hugo would assert “Out west, survival is enough” (“Overlooking Yale” 349). Bevis’s long comment is important: it brings historical context and First People—White relations into focus. With Bevis, and Don Scheese’s 1985 article, Hugo’s critical terrain reaches a new range after the focused foundational works by Frederick Garber, Allen and Holden; when these issues gather more fully around his poems, our readings are the richer for it.

<sup>33</sup> The Hugo volumes are *A Run of Jacks* (1961); *Death of the Kapowsin Tavern* (1965); *Good Luck in Cracked Italian* (1969); *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir* (1973); *What Thou Lovest Well Remains American* (1975); *31 Letters and 13 Dreams* (1977); *White Center* (1980), and *The Right Madness on Skye* (1980). Hugo was born in 1923; he died of leukemia in 1982.

<sup>34</sup> E. V. Walter notes that the word nostalgia “derives from the Greek words meaning a painful return home” (25). The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites an extract from John Banks, recorded during his travels with Captain James Cook on board the *Endeavour*: “The greatest part of them were now pretty far gone with the longing for home which the Physicians have gone so far as to esteem a disease under the name of Nostalgia” (15: 535). The knowledge of losses upends the remembered world and prioritises it at once. Sanders faced the reservoir: it is no wonder Hugo often did the same, gazing into the floods of absence.

Hugo's poems (like some river-essays) are grounded not in a memory of home, but in the memory of the *need* for home. Hugo imagines the abandoned lodging in "1614 Boren" being called "'place,'" "'house'" or "'edifice,'" never 'home' (40). "The House on 15th S. W." of his childhood, where "Cruelty and rain could be expected. / Any season" holds no fond memories in his early work (224).<sup>35</sup> Hugo's long search for (in Scott Russell Sanders' term), "a place of refuge," resonates with those who are seeking connection (31).<sup>36</sup>

The riverscape is central to his sense of connection. Both physical and imagined, the river grounds him in change: this movement was the foil for his early poems of complaint. Later, the river functions to reflect an openness that honours the contentment he found in love, life and writing.

In 1964, after forty years in Seattle, Hugo moved to Montana, a place where sky, not West Coast delta, absorbed the scope of his longing. He spoke of the almost "direct relationship between the place, the kind of vision I have, and the way I write" surmising that Montana provoked "more panoramic language" ("Gains Made" 298, 299). "Poems" he wrote, "could start on the edge of things, on the border between the home and the void" ("Small Waters" 169).

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Hugo's credo "Statements of Faith" sources some of the nostalgia that haunts his writing (and that of many poets and nature writers) in the changes we impose on the land: "One problem for modern poets is the wholesale change in what we see—the tearing down of buildings, the development of new housing, the accelerated rate of loss of all things that can serve as visual checkpoints and sources of stability.... With the accumulated losses of knows, the imagination is faced with the problem of preserving the world through internalization, then keeping that world rigidly fixed long enough to create the unknown in the poem. (Rilke spoke of this.) Today, memory must become thought's ally" (*The Triggering Town* 73).

Memory is the counterpoint to present loss, siting feeling in the fluid mediation between past and present. Hugo's "mental mapping" moves through time while giving an apparent priority to movement through space (Gould and White 52). Tongue in cheek, he recounts the potentials and pitfalls of the American relationship with place: "Of course, one nice thing about America is that you're always losing. They're always tearing down something you love and putting something uglier in its place. So I don't think we'll run out of losses" ("Gardner" 145).

Some of the many poems that attend to place, the nuances of physical mapping and Hugo's idea of "north" (a provocative one for British Columbians, I feel, and one worthy of explication), are "The Anacortes—Sydney [*sic*] Run" (74) one of his best in this area; "Montana Ranch, Abandoned" (204); "History of the Sketch" (228); "Places and Ways to Live" (234); "After A Train Trip, One Town Remains" (234); "Scene" (327); 'North' and mapping re-occur in "Scene" (327); "La Push" (7); "Duwamish No. 2" (61); "For A Northern Woman" (92); "A Night With Cindy at Heitman's" (193); "A Map of the Peninsula" (24); Northwest Retrospective: Mark Tobey" (47); "A Map of Montana in Italy" (165); "Topographical Map" (268); "A Map of Skye" (380) and "Distances" (434), for example.

<sup>35</sup> See Hugo's "Small Waters and Tiny Worlds" *The Real West Marginal Way* (62-80) for an analysis of his eventual poetic homecoming. In early poems it is only the run-down places, like "The Only Bar in Dixon" that are marked with the name "Home. Home. I knew it entering. / Green cheap plaster and the stores / across the street toward the river / failed" (212).

<sup>36</sup> The need to reconnect with an imagined past means Hugo maps memory for its registers of hope and longing. In his postmodern and postcolonial textual landscapes Hugo departs from the position of viewer as divine wielder of the "sovereign eye" and confident silencer of the memories and communities on the margin (Cosgrove, "Prospect" 48). William W. Bevis is right to suggest that "Hugo did not write of things other than power, he wrote of the absence of power" (151).

Focused on the tainted landscape of loss, and eschewing beauty, he makes the “brief look at something most people ignore” his opportunity for composition (“The Writer’s Situation” 222). Hugo is likely to invest the scene with psychological meaning rather than physical detail alone.<sup>37</sup> Hugo’s “Northwest is not so much a place as a condition” (Allen 58). In 1971 Hugo explained that condition, predicated on absent power and failing community, to Susan Zwinger. He is referring to Montana, but the cycles of failure endemic to a market-driven economy means there are many sites of abandoned hope in the landscape of contemporary production:

[Montana] is lonely, and this is a good place for me as a poet. I write from this standpoint. That is to say, I write about unpeopled worlds. Very seldom does a person in my poems have a relationship with anybody else, and if he does it is usually a dead person. Decaying shacks, abandoned ranches, desolation, endless spaces, plains, mountains, ghost towns: it’s ready made for my sensibilities.... I often write about things that are ignored, or that I think are ignored. I like that feeling of assurance that I’m able to emotionally possess something. (258-9).

This is not the “sublime” landscape of nineteenth-century representations.<sup>38</sup> The awe is there, and so is a kind of urban awfulness, a warm fondness for failure. Hugo’s poetics clearly favour what Jonathan Holden has so rightly called a kind of “seedy numinosity,” rather than sublime grandeur (“Instant Wordsworth” 122).<sup>39</sup>

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Hugo’s landscapes (and they are his, but his gift is to make them seem to belong to many) may continue to appear for *him* because they are constantly *disappearing* for others. Given that these

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<sup>37</sup> In his classic 1964 work *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx argues that “the physical attributes of the land are less important than its metaphoric powers. What finally matters most is its function as a landscape—an image in the mind that represents aesthetic, moral, political, and even religious values” (120). For the observant Hugo, composition is, initially, a speculative (and problematic) process: “It is narcissistic, vain, egotistical, unrealistic, selfish, and hateful to assume emotional ownership of a town or a word. It is also essential” (“Triggering Town” 14).

<sup>38</sup> His comments almost precisely invert the characteristics Barbara Novak ascribes to the copious work of early Western American painters: “For the vast expansive prairies, the immense extensions of space, the awesome mountains, the forbidding and majestic scale that characterized the varied landscape West could only then, as now, be called ‘sublime.’” (149).

Hugo’s only novel, the scopophilic (this term is defined by Peter Brooks as the “erotic investment of the male gaze” [122]) and place-fond mystery *Death and the Good Life* notes some of these qualities. Full of road trips through Montana (just as Hugo’s former student James Welch records car travels through the same vastness in *The Indian Lawyer* [New York: Viking, 1990], for example), the book looks hard at the small towns: “When you see Dixon you feel as if, had you lived there all your life, you’d be either more interesting, or drink more than you do” (15). Hugo’s landscapes are not sublime, even if he wishes to make them so. In one scene the protagonist, soft-hearted homicide detective Al Barnes, looks at Washington’s great mountain: “I winked at Rainier as we crawled past and told it to hang in there. It said it would and stop winking at me, you dumb bastard, I’m a mountain” (56).

<sup>39</sup> Hugo reverses societal norms. He tells Zwinger that in his poems, “Failures retain their identity, and successes lose theirs” (259).

landscapes are intimate with industrial tracings—that built human structures receive as much attention as the ‘natural’ world—it seems appropriate to look on Hugo’s worlds as *places*, rather than ‘landscapes’ in the highly conventional received sense.<sup>40</sup> It may be that America’s greatest landscape poet is the poet of a kind of anti-landscape, a dereliction that is the net result of the erosion of sensitivity to place.<sup>41</sup> The landscape becomes an outlet for anger and dislocation: “No room you find to live in will be home.... Stay homeless, / doomed to hound those human meanings we forget” (“The End of Krim’s Pad” 192). These are the echoes Tim Bowling picks up at the delta across from the U.S./Canadian border. Seattle’s Duwamish Slough and Ladner seem to draw both men to reflect on what has passed, and that which remains, for a time, to haunt the watcher.<sup>42</sup>

As a poet of the industrial or fallen landscape, the anti-‘landscape’ of decay and feeling, Hugo’s terrain is endlessly productive and endlessly unstable. In this sense Hugo attends to landscape as an “intertext,” reading his vision *against* the received conventions, wedding his fallen (but still enduring) world to the notion of the sublime, thereby readjusting the reader’s vision. “I don’t

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<sup>40</sup> A place, in Eugene Walter’s term, “is a matrix of energies, generating representations and causing changes in awareness” (11). Walter argues that “[w]e need to recollect the unity of a place as a location of experience and matrix of energies” (212). Hugo’s careful assumptions spring from the sense of history, story and “gossip” He is attuned to every triggering locale: “You know the mind, how it comes on the scene again / and makes tiny histories of things” (“Letter to Matthews from Barton Street Flats” 281). The loss of knowns can reduce the range of tiny histories, the layers of gossip, while at the same time increasing a sense of history at the personal and communal level. The echo of lost things calls forth tiny histories. Don Scheese: “[b]y pointing out to us what we have ignored, Hugo alerts us to the rapid erosion of place so endemic to a region now beset by boomtown economics” (53). Hugo’s attribution of story to place leads him to the unusual position of sketching working landscapes, and therefore of tracing the failures after the boom. In some cases the towns he sees “failed from the beginning,” leaving the architecture of loss, a vital component of the post-colonial site. (“Why I Think Of Dumar Sadly” 229). In this attention to urban loss his close affinities with Iain Sinclair’s psychogeographies are marked.

<sup>41</sup> Holden argues that Hugo’s poem “West Marginal Way” “suggest[s] that the genius of landscape with respect to space—as ‘place’—is best rendered through its history, through the accumulation of civilized action and gossip that has already given every person and thing its identity, its name.” This kind of definition, with its layering of the terms space, place and landscape could be criticised by cultural geographers because it conflates too many disparate terms. But Hugo’s seeing is very precise, and it acknowledges vision and imagination as creative, braided *processes* (Holden, “Landscape Poems” 171).

<sup>42</sup> Hugo tells Gardner that “the Philipsburg poem was actually the culmination of a kind of writing. It was the poem I had been trying to write for twenty years.... I had been in Philipsburg only three hours the day before, and that was the only time I’d been there” (150). In his essay “The Triggering Town” Hugo argues that for the poet, “[y]our hometown often provides so many knowns ... that the imagination cannot free itself to seek the unknowns” (12). Yet the knowns are the basis for the triggering-effect.

Raymond Williams argues that a “working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation” (120). Hugo observes, but he does not remain separate. His topistic empathies ensure intimate, and very rapid, engagement with place and landscape on an imaginative level. Passing through he is freed from repetitions, and thus from the possibility of knowing too many details. Passing through, he need never risk the dwelling he so desires; glimpsing the ignored, he sees the touches of human warmth that make things bearable. “Degrees of Gray” ends with the possibility of continuation (“The car you bought here still runs”) and thus of restless escape (217).

know how many [landscapes a person can own] but I would say this: I've never run out of them" (Hugo, Gardner 151)

Hugo's terrain, then, is an unstable, previously inhabited one where haunting is common, decay the norm: "The world discards the world" ("Pishkun" 174).<sup>43</sup> Hugo, McCarthy and Iain Sinclair share a penchant for "seedy numinosity" (Holden, "Landscape" 122). The Native American communities Hugo notes shame him and the (post)colonial, (post)modern landscape is troubled by the past it has not come to terms with (and therefore the present it cannot fully inhabit). This site is realistically blighted; as in *Suttree*, these are "cold pastorals," in which "the land does not redeem" (Garber, "Mountain" 75; Bevis 151). Hugo's vision demands recourse to honesty rather than sublimity. Dystopia lurks in alleyways and by "dirty rivers" and utopia unimagined (Hugo, "From the Rain Forest Down" 60; "Last Words to James Wright" 464).

At times in his early work, all Hugo says he needs is a means of escape, and a woman to gaze at. But ultimately he knows such desires are not enough to make *certain* things go on. There needs to be connection with home and community that focuses beyond scopic or material possession. "What endures is what we have neglected," yes, but once endurance is acknowledged, it needs to be sustained ("Ghosts in Garnet" 207). Consciousness of place and community brings new responsibilities: "We spend our lives remembering what we love / to be certain who we are" ("Remembering Graham" 227).

Hugo's sense of place is bound up with his sensitivity to memory. This memory is liable to overflow in conjunction with apprehension. When Hugo says "all memory dissolves in gaze" he suggests not only the erasure sight can bring, but its capacity to restore the viewer to his or her past. Memory becomes fluid, an encompassing force that Hugo has trouble tearing himself away from in his early riparian poems.

Holden is inclined to regard the "replay of [personal] harm" as a limiting feature in the early work; Hugo's recourse to his own pain becomes a forced lament that ties him down and prevents

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Howard notes Hugo's penchant for the bleak: "An habitual prospector of cemeteries, the poet stalks knowingly around 'The Graves At Mukilteo' where 'markers spill and the mayor regrets / the dead can be this derelict.' [36] This is a fallen country, not a noble savagery, having passed, as American landscapes are said to do, from primitivism to decadence without the interval of civilization; its residues are generally recorded in a painter's imagery" (Alone With America, 279). Hugo's fascination for graves did not abate. "Two Graves in a Day" (52); "Houses Lie, Believe the Lying Sea" (89); "Graves at Coupeville" (101); "Indian Graves At Jocko" (179); "Ghosts At Garnet" (207); "Graves in Queens" (263); "With Ripley at the Grave of Albert Parenteau" (329); "Graves in Uig" (384); and "St. John's Chapel" (399) all testify to Hugo's fascination with these markers of past history and community. Don Gayton's observation that the "ultimate, final meeting of nature and culture is the urban cemetery" suggests Hugo's attention to the margins and interfaces between the natural world and variables of human connection (154). Hugo tries to draw history into the present, particularly in his final book. Moreover, they bear witness to his own sense of the layerings and erasures of a postcolonial landscape. Many of the poems focus on the burial sites of Native American or early Skye communities, as exemplary examples of the settler's paucity of memory: "Dead are buried here because the dead / will always be obscure, wind / the one thing whites will always give a chance" (180); "With water, with number / of graves we feel the urge to be finite" (400). Hugo's obsession with memory leads him, in later years, not towards a narrow introspection, but to wider and wider meditations on the scope of community and feeling through time: "The notion of ruins and wounds seems to have something in common. The ruin is a kind of wound of memory" (Cooke and Woollen 308).



growth. Affirming Hugo's last book in his lifetime, *The Right Madness on Skye* (1980), Holden acknowledges "a much longer, overall poetic narrative" that records "the story of Hugo's psychological and artistic moulting—from jack salmon to sad Raymond to 'real' man to holy fool" (*Landscapes of the Self* 163, 180). If Hugo left some of the old pain and redundant stances behind, there were certain elements that remained. To quote the title of the poem Hugo dedicated to James Wright suggests the focus of my next section: "The Towns We Know and Leave Behind, The Rivers We Carry with Us" (343). I have deferred long enough. Wright titled his 1968 volume *Shall We Gather At The River*. There was no question. There remains none.

### Seeking stories, casting for words: from landscape to riverscape

Pitched against the needs of a booming populace and a growing sense of preservation-oriented rhetoric, the future of river-health remains bound by disparate (and polarised) imperatives. In *From Landscape to Literature: The River and the Myth of Geography* (1986), Wyman Herendeen argues the river has come to reflect the inner state of the writer, rather than standing in as a national symbol. From Antiquity to the seventeenth-century, writers and readers could be more certain of what a river symbolised and represented: the river served various purposes, civil, political and, national. As Schama notes, the Nile and the Tiber spoke to and represented national power; the Thames was the highway for the Virgin Queen. From the seventeenth century, however, Herendeen argues the river became the locus for personal and introspective subjectivities, as if reflection spelt the death knell for nationalism on the river:

For the twentieth century the river is a vaguer entity—symbolically and naturally—than it had been, and perhaps this is because nature for us is so thoroughly disguised or hidden. We seldom see unfettered rivers; they are subdued by hydroelectric plants, paved over with roads, or made unapproachable by embankments. Their force is still there, if unseen, and their power is still something to be contended with, as Florentines and Londoners know only too well. However, we are now so unsure of our own and nature's potential, and so doubtful of our ability to redeem the fallen world through our intellect, that the river's symbolic significance is perforce unclear. (6)

I have been arguing that the 'fallen' river has been diverted into use as a form of national heart-searching (in Abbey, Sanders, Duncan, Flanagan and Sinclair especially). Flanagan tropes the unfettered river as a site of healing, and Sinclair sees the past in his ailing "ribbon of memory" which is *both* national and personal (*Lights Out* 178). But every writer is haunted by—and uses—the "unclear" possibilities of river reflection.

For the writers I discuss, the river is a reflective site, a current of memory and story: this remains true for Hugo. His riverscapes are peopled sites; they speak to the tailings of the American Dream: "What endures is what we have neglected" ("Ghosts at Garnet" 207). Profit-

seeking and jingoism are leaching forces. His nationalism is not celebratory (“Beware certain words: Enemy, Liberty, Freedom. / Believe those sounds and you’re aiming a bomb” [“On Hearing a New Escalation” 258]); his optimism is uncertain to say the least: “In a hundred years there will be two kinds of people; those working for the International Grand Conglomerate, and those starving” (Hugo, *Death and the Good Life* 65). His sense of loss (personal and even architectural because his vision resonates with the abandoned world) is diffused through his watersheds. Redemption is not his goal; rather, the river’s surface becomes a place where he can see and seek reflection, casting for remembrances, because no matter what, “things keep breaking in” (“Letter to Sister Madeleine from Iowa City” 277).

Hugo’s riparian metaphors (he is a fisherman first) are spelled out: the river is a site of personal degradation and pain in early poems, but emerges in his later work as a symbol of the capacity for the natural world, love and community to endure, to “go on.” He uses the uncertainty of the present as a basis for reflection; the river’s (and the future’s) very opacity provokes oneiric association in the early work. Hugo’s poetry functions as a register of the communal turn river symbolism is taking in the latter decades of the century, a turn prompted by a growing awareness of environmental damage and “silenced” rivers (McCully). The river is there, not to be used and abused, but learnt from. As with *River Notes* or *The River Why*, Hugo knows “Riverbeds are where we run to learn” (“For Jennifer, 6, on the Teton” 260).

One of Hugo’s legacies is his poetic record of the reflective, nostalgic power of water in a time of increasing industrialisation and urban sprawl.<sup>44</sup> We can imagine him today, watching, waiting and writing beside the neglected, enduring rivers of our time.

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The river serpent swollen with proud silt  
Pushed down his gullet by our fires and our machines,  
But the willow branches ...  
Delicately flourish on the banks –  
I have hung my harp there ...

James K. Baxter, “He Waiata mo Tana”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> As noted, this reflection is contiguous with the massive and often badly planned displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from their watershed homes in Asia, South America and Africa (McCully 322-335). The search for home along the riverbank takes on urgent meaning every day.

I fish all waters  
devoted and hum old songs when I fish alone

Richard Hugo, "Laingaig"

*'Kite hamama popoia te tangata, e kore e mau te ika.'*  
'If a man yawns whilst fishing, he will be unsuccessful.'

Maori whakatauki or proverb.<sup>46</sup>

Frederick Colwell argues that the riverscape informs much Romantic poetry: "From its source to the waiting sea, the riverscape provides the fertile matrix where myth, the mother of all inquiry, is spontaneously generated" (105). In Kinseth and Duncan we see that mythology is alive and well. Hugo's mythos, however, invokes the human topography of lack. Eyeing the Seattle and Montana areas in the 1960s and 1970s, he saw a form of dereliction spawned from failure and departed human opportunity. "No one liked our product and the factory closed" ("The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir" 202). Frederick Garber observes that "nothing in any of his world is without reference to the human" ("Fat Man" 235). This remains true for all of his poetry. His poems render absence as one more form of the ubiquity of loss.

More than any other poet I read for this chapter, Hugo looked to these dark waters of loss. As with his friend and contemporary river-watcher James Wright (and like Tim Bowling who would look to other North Pacific horizons three decades later), Hugo's rivers are places of reflection and perilous refuge. Hugo returns to the river when everything around him gestures towards a stalled, unnatural negativity, when he becomes mute—alien to migration and adaptation: "When the world hurts, I come back alone / along the river" ("Duwamish No. 2" 61).

Hugo not only introduces human presence in the landscape; his poems consistently record human thought and emotion as both a product of and backdrop to place. In this site, other gestures and attempts at connection are clarified:

Where land is flat, words are far apart.  
Each word is seen, coming from far off,  
a calm storm, almost familiar, across  
the plain. The word floats by, alive. ("In Stafford Country" 92)

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<sup>45</sup> The Maori words of this title (literally "A Song for Tana") speak to the connections and affinities Baxter made with the Maori of the Whanganui River in his later years (Baxter 492). Though that River does not feature in much of Baxter's poetry, the awareness he fostered between Pakeha (white) and Maori communities lives on in his work and many have learnt from it. Like Hugo, Baxter was touched by anger over the lingering injustices of colonial practice. Many of New Zealand's river poems are Maori *waiata* (songs); these songs are often unpublished. Many of the great Pakeha river poems have yet to be written.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Taylor, *Te Ika A Maui*. (London: Wertheim and Macintosh, 1855. 132)

The word floats by—the “bubble trails of nervous fish”—and Hugo’s eye sees it, he does not freeze it in its passing (“Cornwall, Touring” 196). Instead, he practices a kind of creative “CPR.”

CPR is the policy of “Catch, Photograph, and Release,” promoted by the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society as a means of conservation (have your fish, let someone else catch it too, and *still* be eligible for competitions). Dana Phillips argues the method is one further example of our distance from the natural world (209). I daresay Hugo would reject this style of fishing. I cannot imagine the same passionate exuberance over a Polaroid snapshot that he shares for his ‘catch’ in “Phoning from Sweathouse Creek” where the creel of fish is both sensually and aesthetically exciting.

River reflection, river reading, demands a careful eye. Even living in Montana, or later on the Isle of Skye, Hugo tends to scan landscape as an angler does. On dry land his eye moves like an angler’s on the bank; he follows rivers and roads, “chasing a way to write” (“Triggering Town” 14). When his vision is clear the task of creating is carried out, whatever the risk. In “Laingaug” he tells us,

I fish all waters  
devoted...  
to cast  
hard for that word, then wait a long time to set.  
Now the reeling in, the fight, the black trout lovely  
on heather, the dead singer in songs  
we recover, and hum when alone, and hum wrong. (403)

“Laingaug” is a commentary on the process of writing, place and the self. As a visitor to Skye, to a past he does not know well yet feels affinities with, Hugo is acutely aware of his provisional vision in this poem. It goes on to affirm this fusion in its affiliation across the architecture of sound and speech, recalled songs, self-individuation, and writing. It situates that vision and memory in the context of place and time, both of which (the poem reveals) are liable to change. The waters are alive as an element and word.

“Laingaug” refers to homecoming and difference, to place, language, and rivers—those waters that have followed Hugo through his work. That element, and the act of fishing for trout and words sustains his sense of home in this later poem. This very *process of creating* becomes his home. It seems fitting that a man so taken by journeying, an inveterate observer of many currents, should find his footing in free-flow. This late poem celebrates a hard-earned self-acceptance; but even in his early work the river remains as a source of inspiration and responsiveness.

The fisher is Hugo’s most mystical poetic figure, but it is also an everyday figure in everyday spaces. Dave Smith, in the only article devoted to Hugo’s fishers, rightly observes that many of his poems cast “fishing as a spiritual exploration” which in turn points to “the continual effort to create a past where none exists” (169). “Plunking the Skagit” describes, then, the search

for roots and images as much as the steelhead run. This Skagit River (as the poem before it, “Bad Vision at the Skagit” attests to), is a McCarthy-like riverscape, complete with a “State Asylum,” “Shacks of migrants on the diked bank,” and “man ultimately poor” beside “stunted” crops and dreams. Yet at this river Hugo is captivated by larger cycles. His list of depressing sites, paced through line-break and syntax as substantial and sprawling, is passed over, as if the river has control whether Hugo likes it or not. “I should see injustice, not slow water and the beating birds / that never move a foot against the sun” (63). The river seems to rise above human tragedies. At this River our endeavours are placed within a “large dispersal— / too long for a lens” (“Snoqualmie” 22). Death is in that range of seeing; Bowling and Hugo watch death working through muted epiphanies at the river. The two Skagit poems represent qualities of inquiry evident throughout his work (and in Moore, Lopez, Duncan and Sinclair, for example). The “bad vision” is supplanted by the image of birds, poised in flight, that “believe / the men are evergreens” (64).

“Plunking the Skagit” begins with patience:

It’s mystery, not wind, the men  
endure. Steelhead draw them here  
where tons of winter drive above  
them north and fires start the day  
along the bar. A hundred feet of nylon  
settles on the river  
and the waiting begins. (63)

“The wait” for a past, for community and for love is conducted through words, words “that float by, alive.” His poems about fish take on the taut rhythms of hunting and the heat of desire. This desire finds some fulfilment in the continued movement: “Above / the guess and ruffle, in the wind— / steelhead to the spawning ground” (64). The line break here leaves the reader floating for an instant, before cutting to an insubstantial “ruffle” of human activity. The line then points us, dashing, towards the river below and the fishes’ ancient cycle. After the detailed focus on human beings in each poem, the rivers return to fill the conclusion.

Hugo’s poems will often lift towards the end, shifting the focus from human particulars and up, oscillating and recirculating out to the movement of water and the distant promise of the horizon. A river’s resistance to reclamation moves Hugo; he is drawn to the estuary, where the sea accepts the river, and to human structures that attempt to control it. These structures recur in his poems as sites of held time and bounded memory. Marlatt will look to the rotting pilings of a cannery and find a story there; Hugo will do the same, and know too that decay is an ongoing process.

Hugo’s rivers are often fallen ones. The “seedy numinosity” is still numinous, after all. Hugo does not need much illumination; he will travel for miles sustained by the scent of memory. “The Lady In Kicking Horse Reservoir” speaks of the endurance of memory. The speaker, jilted

in love, observes his ex-lover in the stagnant water; she is almost a drowned Mnemosyne, enduring the poet's vengeful spite. The brutally honest invocation opens the poem:<sup>47</sup>

Not my hands but green across you now.  
Green tons hold you down, and ten bass curve  
teasing in your hair. Summer slime  
will pile deep on your breast. Four months of ice  
will keep you firm. I hope each spring  
to find you tangled in those pads  
pulled not quite loose, by the spillway pour,  
stars in dead reflection off your teeth.

Lie there lily still. The spillway's closed (201).

The monosyllables, packed with long vowels, the assonance and the use of "tons," "deep" and "hold" give the stanza a sense of bulk, restriction and decay. Alliteration lends certainty and mass to the phrasing. The poem manages to be intimate ("lover"), eulogising ("we still love"), and cruel at once; the macabre description of starlight on teeth, the decomposing body and waving limbs are ghastly celebrations of triumph and loss. But because Hugo does not stop at this tender brutality, but goes on to expose his own weakness and the motivation for his anger, there is a degree of honesty that offers a shred of potential. Things do not end at the closed dam. After the familiar Hugo sites of Indian despair, failed love, industrial failure and broken crops, the river returns to life, for a time: there is a release. The final stanza begins:

The spillway's open and you spill out  
into weather, lover down the bright canal  
and mother, irrigating crops  
dead Indians forgot to plant. (202)

This unleashed bounty is compromised, as dammed rivers always are: the crops are dead, like their first planters. The land, Bevis reminds us, will not redeem. But there is an element of hope. The sentences veer between failure and loss and lengthen through the prospect of reflection. This trapped Mnemosyne becomes mother and lover as Hugo lets go of the past to head west to the Pacific he knows as a home for memories, if not a home for self. Again and again some hope is kindled from the wreckage: the possibilities of love, the possibilities of rivers—Hugo's mature work opens to both these chances. "Wife, children, friend— / I want you all along the way" ("Carloway Broch" 409).

To go forward, turn and look back. Discards—like rivers—have their own stories. In the present the only certainty is the prospect of change. Rivers are stopped; torrents of waste continue. Amidst this, Hugo seeks out the waters that flow. These are the currents that lift him

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<sup>47</sup> For a comment on this honesty see Adrienne Rich, "Caryatid: Rape, War and Masculine Consciousness" *American Poetry Review* 2.3 (1973): 11. For autobiographical details, and a fuller interpretation of the poem see Richard Hugo, "On Hills Going East" (Interview with Donna Gerstenberger, in Myers, ed. *A Trout in the Milk*, 207-221).

beyond failure to the prospect of horizon. No wonder he appeals to the past as the heyday of the strip mall clears his world. In early work he looked to that elemental meeting place where water or earth appear to touch sky. "Home is where / the dirty river dies" ("From the Rain Forest Down" 60).

In the following section, I will trace the architecture and motility of Hugo's riparian consciousness, which is a stream of sound, imagery and feeling. To enter the water is to lose one's footing, to give up certainties to the current. This motif captures much of Hugo's poetic quest. All that is solid, in many of his poems, is endlessly borne away from him by time, by loss, and by the past. In returning to rivers at the end of his life Hugo went back to a source that had nourished and haunted him from its start.

### **"My vision started at this river mouth": Hugo's Rivers**

The eye itself, pure vision, grows weary of solids. Its great wish is to dream deformation. If when we look upon the world we could do so with all the freedom of our dreams, then everything would be fluid in an intuition that was truly alive... the deep oneiric power of deformation... that rich viscous imagination which will from time to time bestow the great gift of divine slowness upon our briefest glance.

Water is, in other words, a universal glue. (103-4)

Gaston Bachelard, "The Hand Dreams."

To read a river demands a shift from the basis of Hugo's already mobile landscapes to fluidities of voice and reception. The primacy of seeing ("A universe is fusing in our eyes") is amalgamated into a balance of hearing, seeing and casting ("Northwest Retrospective: Mark Tobey" 47). Hugo addresses the river in several poems; to face such a mutable audience brings another echo to his phrasing. That elemental force runs on beyond the poem; facing the river, Hugo confronts loss and time. His riparian stance enforces the sense of life passing by: "The run-off, lives or water, leaves us mute" ("Where Mission Creek Runs Hard For Joy" 168). The prospect of absence never silences Hugo. Making something out of nothing is part of his artistry. His capacity to use reflection (rather more than perception) as the basis for his river poems draws the reader into his oneiric waters. Here, the need to frame (through metaphor and description) meets its ultimate challenge in the rivers that mock and provoke containment. Hugo's fluid frames find their source in his early rivers, rivers that never leave him: "My vision started at this river mouth" ("Duwamish Head" 67).

In his first book *A Run of Jacks* (1961), Hugo's line mimics the salmon that leave and return to the river of their birth: its "syntax is the lineament of snare and struggle" (Garber,

“Margin” 229). In the early poems daydreams became the means of escape from self: “Somehow, along those lonely marshy banks I dreamed, I could exercise the suspended cynicism to write a poem.... I got closer to myself. One thing is clear: along the Duwamish I made no distinction between the odd things I created ... and those things endemic to the scene.” (“The Real West Marginal Way” 11). The process of deformation begins. These early poems are packed with the fluid integration of “odd things” on the margin of the industrial river. Shacks of the mad and the murdered become focal points for narrative plunges into recollections of extremes, “The girl upstream was diced by scaling knives.... I am on your bank / blinded and alive” (“Duwamish Head” 65, 67), or strange and tempting potentials:

A leaf falls easily. The river  
has an ease. Southless birds  
decline to sing. If bad glass  
space or bone are states of change,  
there is still the large dispersal—  
too long for a lens and too thin  
even for an eastern gaze. (“Snoqualmie” 21-22)

Hugo’s early riverscapes are not positive spaces: while gesturing to how he could be living, they remind him of how stuck on the bank, how “blinded” he has become. Frederick Garber’s early article notes that the river “carries fish, flotsam, and several possibilities of a kind of relationship which is as rich in its limitations as in its depth” (“Margin” 229). But they provide him with a glimmer of possibility by which to weigh cloying self-pity for what it really is, that “replay of harm” and “a kind of madness” (“Again Kapowsin” 231; “The Real West Marginal Way” 17).

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The three sections in “Duwamish Head” record human pollution at the river, setting up a dialectic between “once” and “now,” vitality and stagnation, as the speaker moves from being a fisher of bullheads (“My vision started on this river mouth”) to being “stuck here (bullhead) in the mud” (65, 67). Nostalgia drives the process between past and stagnant present; self-pity and wistfulness prevent change, and regret stymies acceptance. The small sequence tries to work towards “thinking like a river” as Donald Worster put it, in order to love more fully in the present. After all, as Hugo says in the poem’s central volta, “Rivers jump their beds and don’t look back / regretting they have lost such lovely rides” (66). Retrospection places a record of the past before us. But it cuts all ways: Hugo sees the riverscape the Fraser could become if care is not taken:

With salmon gone and industry moved in  
birds don’t bite the water. Once this river  
brought a cascade color to the sea.  
Now the clouds are cod, crossing on the prowl  
beneath the dredge that heaps a hundred tons  
of crud on barges for the dumping ground. (65)



Nostalgia blossoms here; but things keep moving. Hugo's *oeuvre* is an extended attempt to think like a river: that is his sequential drift across decades of writing, moving towards that "ease" with self and world a river has (22). The healing process Flanagan and Harrison (not to mention Moore and Duncan) ally with the water is latent in Hugo's early work. But in 1965 at "Duwamish Head" the pollution continues: "Jacks don't run. Mills go on polluting / and the river hot with sewage steams" (66). The place loses part of its life: fish vanish, taking the birds, and the river becomes fallen H<sub>2</sub>O, "stuff" for the transport of barges, a vanished dreamscape: "Where cod and boys had war, a bolt plant roars" (67). Worlds are vanishing before his eyes; it seems they are lost forever. The narrator converses with the river, arguing against its age and presence, but he acknowledges "Sight can be polluted / like a river." Hugo's work documents the struggle to get clean, to restore a way of seeing that will cleanse in itself, just as the river might when that seeing is restored. A river's symbolic properties are beholden rather than innate: the way the Ganges is regarded can teach this. Before this learning comes cynicism and anger. Snide, Hugo lashes back at the river's show of indifference to his pain:

What are you, river?  
 Only water, taking any bed you find.  
 All you have is current, doubled back  
 on in-tide, screaming out on out.  
 I am on your bank, blinded and alive....

My fins are hands. The river, once  
 so verbal drifts with such indifference  
 by me I am forced to shout my name:  
 backing up on in-tide, screaming out on out—  
 river, I have loved, loved badly on your bank. (67)

The river abandons the one who abandons it. Hugo will not find such a lack of ghosts any where else: the whole poem is haunted by them, the immigrants who have departed the river shanties, the woman he imagines knowing who is murdered, the playgrounds and fish who do not return. Birds fly off and only memory remains. Memory may not entirely suffice, but it is *worked* with.

"Duwamish Head" is important because it summarises a key Hugo landscape, and therefore a formative state of mind. "To know is to be alien to rivers. / This river helped me play an easy role—/ to be alone, to drink, to fail" (68). Hugo's insistent repetitions of line and phrase compound the stubborn rhythm and the desire to stay the same before a current that tells him otherwise with every eddy. What is done is done. Luckily for the reader, Hugo moves on.

To move to "The River Now" written almost twenty years later is to cross the range of Hugo's growth as person and poet; his writing and interviews bear out the bonds between the two. Though his riverscape has "collapsed" ecologically it offers something back imaginatively. Freed from the possibility of utopia, Hugo has to acknowledge just how far he has truly come. This poem brings human stories out of place in the paradox of the distancing return:

Hardly a ghost left to talk with. The [S]lavs moved on

or changed their names to something green. Greeks gave up  
 old dishes and slid into repose. Runs of salmon thin  
 and thin until a ripple in October might mean carp.  
 Huge mills bang and smoke. Day hangs thick with commerce  
 and my favorite home, always overgrown with roses,  
 collapsed like moral advice. Tugs still pound against  
 the outside pour but real, running on some definite fuel.  
 I can't dream anything, not some lovely woman  
 murdered in a shack, not saw mills going broke,  
 not even wild wine and a landslide though I knew both well.  
 The blood still begs direction home. This river points  
 the way north to blood, the blue stars certain  
 in their swing, their fix. I pass the backwash where  
 the cattails still lean north, familiar grebes pop up,  
 the windchill is the same. And it comes back with the odor  
 of the river, some way I know the lonely sources  
 of despair break down from too much love. No matter  
 how this water fragments in the reeds, it rejoins  
 the river and the bright bay north receives it all,  
 new salmon on their way to open ocean,  
 the easy tub returned. (368-69)

The syntax and line-breaks are swift here: there is indeed “some definite fuel” Hugo is drawing on from within and from his life in general. The lines break in active direction (the words on, against, points, up, and rejoins keep an energy circulating): there is a movement at the level of line—it follows the river, jumping bank or bed where necessary, rather than stalling with regret. Place has decayed but self has rallied, “on the way to open ocean.” This decline is not good ecologically, but at least there is an element of care here, a regard that carries over to Hugo’s final poems. The River is suddenly “now,” rather than the “once” of “Duwamish Head.” Even though what he sees gives cause for despair, there is a renewal and recirculation at play. Even a comparison between the first and final sentences of the poem gives the reader a measure of his generosity. Fantasy is replaced by a sense that the “now” has richness, not lack. When he allies his acceptance of love with the smell of the water, something clicks; lonely sources have crumbled, and the process of acceptance continues. At last the journey appears right. Hugo (in “Letter to Blessing from Missoula”) revels in the love and connection in his life: “I accept maybe for the first time / love and I luxuriate in it, a glutton, a trout / who had a hard time finding a spawning ground, who swam time / after time the wrong river and turned back discouraged / to the sea” (315). This personal connection carries Hugo into the renewed wellhead of the present, the now of the current. The extent to which it informs his vision of community as a whole is evident in the last two Hugo poems I read.

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I'm speaking our time,  
 the time I imagine.

Richard Hugo, "Imagining Delaware" (350)

Space is not static, nor time spaceless.

Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (264)

This brings us to us, and our set lines,  
set deep on the bottom

Richard Hugo, "Making Certain It Goes On"

"Plans for Altering A River" (256) and the final poem in his collection, "Making Certain It Goes On" (446) speak powerfully to the sense of connection and community the later waters have led him to.

"Plans" tropes the voice of the river developer as narrow, brutal ("We got the injunction, the workers are back") and without spirit, a speaker without the feelings of warmth and protest evinced by the voices of the *community* that enter at the poem's end. The voice taken is that of the arrogant developer who believed "the water was settled and at home" when about to be altered. Hugo proves this is an impossibility; water keeps moving and the poem charts a shift as the community turns to the river again, in favour of its health.

Here is the developer in stanza one: "We ask for power: a river boils or falls to turn our turbines, / The river approves of our plans to alter the river." His language, clearly the language of by-laws and injunctions, veers towards the incredulous in the final stanza, after surmounting a range of administrative hurdles (the strike, the concrete drying, the weather):

What's this wild festival in May  
celebrating the run-off, display floats under the stars?  
Children sing through my locked door, 'Old stranger,  
we're going to alter, alter, to alter the river.'  
Just when the water was settled and at home. (257)

The policies of containment, which seem to have guided a lot of Hugo's watchfulness (as opposed to his gaze) are redirected, diverted and channelled through the energy of song and the gathering of light and people. The notion of continuity emerges as a key motif, sparking recovery and glee.

These qualities ring through the final poem. "Making Certain It Goes On" begins in communal becoming. Though he writes of a dammed river, the sense of cyclic renewal emerges in the very first line ("recirculation" returns): "At last the Big Blackfoot river / has risen high enough to again cover the stones." The poem flows into a "tiny history" and begins to spell out the fragile nature of the community and the river: "We love to imagine the drought has ended, the high water will stay..." (447). "Making Certain" works to trace a community beside a dam (Maclean's river is not holy any longer). The third stanza shifts the imaginative history into a stark realism: "Next summer the river will recede" and the fisherman "will trade in any chance he has of / getting a strike for some old durable dream..." (447). But as the poem unfolds we realise the droughts are manufactured; balance needs to be restored. Even though this is a dammed river, its

health is improved by a new dam plan: artificial drought is replaced by regular minimum flows. A fallen river is not destroyed or destoried, but such story energy is only maintained through memory.

That brings us to us, and our set lines  
set deep on the bottom. We're going all out  
for the big ones....  
In this dreamy summer air you and I  
dreamily plan a statue commemorating  
the unknown fisherman. The stone will bear  
no inscription and that deliberate anonymity  
will start enough rumors to keep  
the mill operating, big trout nosing the surface,  
the church reforming white frame  
into handsome blue stone, and this community  
going strong another hundred years. (448)

The “big ones” are as much “rumors” as fish, rumours about the identity of the late fisherman, hints of the range and possibility of everyday endurance. Hugo writes himself into his own death, or at least organises a continuity of fabled story for the good of the people. His hopes for commemoration are modest, his faith in the power of gossip and story tremendous. Easy narratives unfold and keep on forming as the poem closes, because even this dammed river does not end, and nor do the stories or the life of the town. It is the stories that will keep “this community / going strong.” Here is the potent heart of Hugo’s rivers and poetry: people are the ones who have changed the rivers, they leave their marks on them and Hugo sees it all. We are lucky he has left his notes to continue in their own right. The fisher who was such a potent figure in “Laingaig” extends his line. It soars into water, “this brings us to us” and binds reader, poet and place in a re-circulating bond of mutual watchfulness, journey and connection. Bowling, Marlatt and Hugo are allied in their opposition to a progressive zeal that washes “knowns” into oblivion and leaves communities with stilled nets and stilled stories. The poets’ opposition to the loss of distinct tributaries of cultural practice or labour through moral and ecological collapse allies them with the other writers in this thesis. Decline is figured as evidence of a failure of care and function in social networks, a result of the uneven distribution of power. Labour and attention mark the interplay of different kinds of line—inked, genealogical or hooked. Such watchful interactivity marks the four long poems I read next.

## Four long poems and their rivers of memory

If the space between the line, stanza or page becomes the fertile riverbed for the language, and words our flowing pathways, then breath, line and attention can determine the pacing of the reading experience. Marlatt trains her readers for dwelling in the reach and movement of the line, always ready to leap ahead. Her work tests our stamina across word and silence: what mesh can you slip through? The line, as (rather than gillnet) lungnet and springboard, can alter the shape of the journey.

I conclude this section on rivered poetry by attending to four long poems: Jim Harrison's *The Theory and Practice of Rivers* (1985), Don McKay's *Long Sault* (1979), Liz Zetlin's *Said The River* (1995), and *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996) by Gary Snyder.<sup>1</sup> I do so because these sequences offer different ways of using the line to record (and often enact or represent) a process of river-based journeying and remembrance. Marlatt writes *Steveston/Steveston* as a found site and a place of findings or excavations. These casts—through the fluid, shifting territory of memory—honour history as a series of liquifications. For Marlatt and Hugo, history is troped as the dissolution and formation of all communities, a series of arrivals and departures underscored by the river's presence. Salmon exemplify this cyclical accretion of loss and renewal, while humans cleave to their journeys, creating communities and histories of their own. Things keep flowing. Hugo knew this (as Bowling *knows*), watching the wakes of departing people and business, he was attuned to the worlds that remained; his eye (after so much geographic longing) found relief in the movement of water. Home became the place he knew well: the flux of the urge to articulation, rather than a static site of repetitive pain.

The four poets in this section come to terms with change as they watch changing rivers. Jim Harrison sustains the longing and rapture of a male river-watcher, gazing at an element he is unable to control.<sup>2</sup>

Mortality makes the issue of attachment to rivers and people relevant to all readers, as we watch those we love pass out of our lives. Harrison describes the work ahead:

to study rivers, including the postcard

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<sup>1</sup> Snyder's compilation, decades in the making, is not strictly a single poem, but it has a sequential cohesiveness and reflexive awareness in content and structure, a recasting of Bell's "subject rhyme" via elastic echoes of consciousness and reflection, knowing and unknowing transmuted through very different forms.

<sup>2</sup> Niederland's 1950s neo-Freudian "psychogeography" makes associations between rivers and fecundity. Rivers represent the essence of a sensual and nurturing fertility, a mother/lover symbol that recurs in his patients' dreams and in birth imagery. The psychosexual model leaves little room for varied conclusions, but it is used ironically by McKay, who makes reference to the river's seductive power.

waterfalls, is to adopt another life;  
a limited life attaches itself to endless  
movement ... (24)

This juxtaposition of mortality and continuity compels Bowling, Flanagan, Sanders, Moore, Duncan and Abbey, for example. The cycle of birth and death is “endless,” but our lives end. Now humans realize that our behaviour fractures other larger cycles of ecological balance too. There is an onus of responsibility. Two of the four long poems in this section face limits: McKay uses *Long Sault* to travel a now-dammed river and Harrison laments the untimely death of his teenage niece. Though the poems (and the poets) face endings, a sequence can still be “time-affirming” (Davey 186) by its very discursive connective meanderings. These long poems also honour river time: they attest to continuities within the reckoning of mortal limits.

Like Harrison at the river, Snyder attends to a “demarcation between man’s [*sic*] creativity and temporal use of things with nature’s creative and relatively atemporal presence” (Murphy, “Endless”). Part of the lamentation over a dammed river stems from the writer’s recognition that such an enduring form of continuity has been subsumed (humiliated [McPhee 193]) by the limits of temporal, human-controlled time, to be hoarded and spilled on demand. If Frank Davey is right, then such control may be fatal to the survival of the long poem, a mortal paraphrase: “When surprises cease, the poem ends, truth ends” (Davey 191). Dams end surprises; they control, and that control demands new forms of creative resistance and defiance. Endings are not necessarily final. *Long Sault* honours a dammed river; the poem uses poetry to restore the element of surprise, sustaining water and writing through creativity. But it is also an enraged poem, gnashing at its own limitations. Its attempt to recreate what has gone is suffused with a sense of its limits. Endings are endemic and long lamentation the recourse of those left behind, watching, writing. That elegy is another form of continuity; the carcasses of spawned salmon nourish the valley forest.

Zetlin, Harrison, McKay and Snyder (like Marlatt) relish resonance as memory, image and sound work across their poems. Textual assemblages have their own reader-dependent memories; in Zetlin’s case they even inspire new assemblies. McKay and Harrison shape elegies for what has gone, and with Snyder they appreciate the gifts left by emptiness, the possibilities of renewal and insight in each lost moment.

## Jim Harrison's rivers of healing

One day standing in a river with my flyrod  
I'll have the courage to admit my life.

Jim Harrison, "Looking Forward to Age" (33)

Rivers offer a way out of and back into the self; they evoke and console grief. Harrison's long poem "The Theory and Practice of Rivers" (1985) undertakes a healing journey through the medium of reflection, language and river. It publicises grief and growth.

In the later "Cabin Poem" Harrison asks

How can you make a case for yourself  
Before an ocean of trees, or standing  
waist-deep in the river? (*Theory* 63)

"The Theory and Practice of Rivers" gives the world one eloquent answer to his own question. He concludes "Cabin Poem" with an offhand grace that is hard to achieve:

I've decided to make up my mind  
About nothing, to assume the water mask,  
To finish my life disguised as a creek,  
an eddy, joining at night the full,  
sweet flow, to absorb the sky,  
to swallow the heat and cold, the moon  
and the stars, to swallow myself  
in ceaseless flow.

His riverine surrender is complete: this is the amphibian mind's manifesto. It is also that of Harrison the Zen-practitioner. Watching this "ceaseless flow" is an exacting task. His confluence of theory and practice permits openness to life.

The affiliation with fish links Lee Maracle ("I know this river, every eddy" [165]) and Harrison: both are willing to enter the reach of the unknown, guided by the river. Both embark on a perilous journey, and both, for a time, adopt an aquatic persona, opening their work with the fish-eye view.

Harrison is blind in his left eye. But when he is underwater, he says his vision becomes binocular: his sight functions fully in the trout's world. That's the world we enter as "The Theory and Practice of Rivers" opens. He becomes a deep-river swimmer, his lines supple and startling in their imagery:

The rivers of my life, moving looms of light:  
Anchored beneath the log at night I can see the moon  
Up through the water  
As shattered milk....

The current

Lifts me up and out  
Into the dark, gathering motion,

Drifting into an eddy  
with a sideways swirl,  
the sandbar cooler than the air:  
to speak it clearly, how the water goes  
Is how the earth is shaped. (3)

When Harrison adopts the voice of the trout (“at night I can see the moon”), he gestures towards the end of the sequence where the moon appears to fall to earth, enveloping his world of vision. Siting himself *in* the water at the outset signifies aspirations towards oneness with the current, wherever that may be. His flexibility is borne out in the variety of settings in his journey.

Harrison’s river is also an inner current. Though precisely aware of his Michigan locale, he is not given to the kind of site-specific naming that characterises *Steveston* or *Low Water Slack*. ‘His’ river becomes all rivers, embracing the Salt and the Amazon Rivers through “the mute unity of water,” Bachelard’s “universal glue” (“Theory and Practice” 8; “The Hand Dreams” 104). The river becomes a vision-site, a seer’s-sight.

The poem’s second stanza affirms this unity by condensing the insights of Kinseth’s *River Eternal*; journeying mediates the relation between self and river, and metaphor is mobilised in service to the water.

It is not so much that I got  
there from here, which is everyone’s  
story: but the shape  
of the voyage, how it pushed  
outward in every direction  
until it stopped:  
roots of plants and trees,  
certain coral heads,  
photos of splintered lightning,  
blood vessels,  
the shape of creeks and rivers.

Harrison’s collected poems (*The Shape of the Journey*) demonstrate an abiding concern with the poem of process and experience. A sense of the cosmic river is imaged and elaborated in short lines that remain activated by a series of verbs balanced around a single anchoring noun in the central line. That cessation (“it stopped”) suggests further continuities though: the creek bank contains, but that site of resistance diverts energy into other areas, forming a channel formed by water. So though the poem records a series of decelerative states, it ultimately affirms other interconnected (river, blood, roots) continuities. We are in and of the watershed.

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*The Theory and Practice of Rivers* is dedicated “In Memoriam Gloria Glen Harrison, 1964-1979.” In this process of written elegy, Harrison’s fingers are “wrapped around the memory of life” (“Small Poem” 73). He attends to an element that is mercurial and transformative: water and



sadness are often paired in the poem. The sequence is one way for Harrison to come to terms with his own “over-remembered life” and a series of profound losses (73).<sup>3</sup> “How banal the swan-song / which is a water song” he writes (4). He ensures the banal does not come into it, but “the mute unity of water” does (8). The understanding of connection carries its own momentum. In such cases of healing—which his long poem documents—personal “becom[ing]” has a massed power. Just “as a creek turns corners / by grace of volume, heft of water, speed by rate of drop, even the contour of stone / changing day by day,” understanding accretes as his poem records a series of healing cycles (“Acting” 58). The poem is “a song for” Gloria and a song of compassion.

Harrison responds to this death by turning inward and turning to the river. His stanzas run from six lines to over a page, each one detailing an image or narrative sequence, shifting from place to place as he grapples with mortality.<sup>4</sup> His confrontation with the external world reinforces the engagement with self: “I stare into the deepest pool of the river / which holds the mystery of a cellar to a child” (25). Memory and fascination return: many gaze into the water and are captivated, drawn into their past or the world of dream (Bachelard; Illich). Like a river, the poem or “story can’t hesitate to stop” as recirculation between memory and river continue (12).

Components of elegy crop up in this process of introspective and external travel. Notions of the pastoral are reworked (there are descriptions of his own working land). Another component, mourning, is both personal (Gloria’s funeral is recalled) and more public (despair over the cement-channeled rivers of Los Angeles). These de-sexed (lifeless) L.A. rivers surface at a point in the poem where recovery seems impossible. The concrete system simply compounds his feelings of disappointment. He desires mythic cleansing waters and ends up with concrete channels of Illich’s purely utilitarian H<sub>2</sub>O. L. A. rivers are hard canals, unforgiving and unappealing. He finds the women of the area “hard as basalt,” scarred beyond regret in “a riverless city of redolent / and banal sobs” (12), of people with “rock-hard skins” (28). As he says in his thirty-eighth ghazal, “All our cities are lewd and slippery” (*Journey*, 156).

The contrast between the river he loves and the manufactured river he finds in the city is stark. The sequence sets up a series of juxtapositions across fallenness and purity, ideals and

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<sup>3</sup> Harrison cites his accidental blinding at seven years of age (in the left eye) as his first major loss. Twelve years later his father and sister (“the two people closest to me”) die in ghastly circumstances. Numerous friends and relatives die in violent or suicidal circumstances. “The capstone seems to have been the death of my brother’s fourteen-year old daughter” (“Dream as a Metaphor of Survival,” *Just Before Dark* 310). In the same essay, Harrison outlines a dream that points to the processes of survival and giving that underpin the poem: “My father and sister are being driven down the middle of a river in a soundless car by two Native Americans. The four of them are quite happy. The driver pulls up to the shore and tells me flat out that I was never supposed to be a chief in the first place, but a medicine man. I interpreted this to mean that though I was a miserable failure at life I was doing quite well in my art, and if I pursued my art strongly enough I could heal myself and might help heal others. Soon after I began to write a long poem called ‘The Theory & Practice of Rivers’” (312).

<sup>4</sup> This form is evident in his poems “Locations” (1968), “In Interim’s: Outlyer” (1971), “Returning to Earth” (1977) “Time Suite” and “Sonoran Radio” (1996). Numerous departures from the long poem include his *Ghazals* (1971), *Letters to Yesenin* (1973) and a return to the form in 1998’s *Geo-Bestiary*.

actual attainment, flaunting its travelled air. The cement river of Los Angeles follows a description of a Navajo family at a Southwest river; the scene is a counterpoint to the world of tarmac, a land given over to the dollar. "It is indeed ironic that those whom we crushed could help us survive" ("Poetry as Survival," *Just Before Dark* 305). His homeplace gives sustenance;<sup>5</sup> it offers a basis for the cycles of healing and grief that he works through (and walks through), gaining solace in a larger field of vision and connection.

Sitting on the bank, the water  
stares back so deeply you can hear  
it afterwards when you wish. It is the water  
of dreams, and for the nightwalker  
who can almost walk on the water  
it is most of all the water of awakening,  
passing with the speed of life  
herself, drifting in circles in an eddy  
joining the current again  
as if the eddy were a few moments sleep. (12)

The form of the sequence mimics the fluid speed of the nightwalker, Harrison tracing the skein of experience and memory, dropping in to feeling, re-emerging and engaging in excursion, then circling back to images from the past. Reading the poem we enter Harrison's constitutive and dispersing eddy of language and imagery.<sup>6</sup> The poets often address cycles of living and dying, weaving the re-remembering that nets things together.

The search for the past haunts Harrison's poem, stressing the links between grief and memory. As elegy reminds us, endings follow beginnings. Each section in the poem recounts a process of journey and inquiry that moves from anguish to insight (even if cycles of return are compromised "because of time," [14]). Elements of Bachelard's archetype of the drowned Ophelia linger in his mind. The memory of his niece takes many forms. His journeys and visions seek a girl he carved from ice ("she was taken away" [6]); family ("we are moving but I can't / seem to find my wife and two daughters" [6]); and, as "fields become unmoving rivers" (14), he glimpses a teenager in the water. Later he sees "a girl who went to heaven sixty years early" (21). Each trip takes him further into uncertainty and demands release: "It's hard to learn how to be lost after so much training" but he lets go in order to complete the process of healing and commemoration (16). This is a poem of journeys and glimpsed memories, a sequence as a process of inquiry and doubt:

How can I renew oaths

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<sup>5</sup> Speaking of sustenance, remarkable cooking descriptions are also a feature of his work, as we expect from the food columnist for *Esquire* magazine.

<sup>6</sup> Each poet will have his or her own sense of how a current functions. Marlatt and Bowling operate at the estuarine reach and face the meeting elements of ocean and river, race and history, whereas McKay's rapids dictate his rampant pacing more explicitly: he is more wrapped up in the torrents.

I can't quite remember? (17)

What kind of magic, or rite of fertility,  
to transcend this shit-soaked stew? (25)

How long can I stare at the river? (8)

His surrender to things in "Cabin Poem" could be one part of his self-acceptance. Harrison's rivers are places of recourse (the line break is relevant: "In the water I can remember / women I didn't know" [18]) as well as a place of eulogised reminiscence. When the pain seems too great the river offers succour and heals again: The River is "as far as I can move / from the world of numbers" (25); it offers "a forgetfulness I haven't quite earned" (21). Sometimes good memory is a painful gift; his river cuts both ways, providing recall and release. Rivers help balance him emotionally, spiritually and physically. They provide one base for the circle to turn, for a return to be made to self and others via the land.

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Though time compromises, it also comprises; time renews, if allowed to settle and gather in the mind. Writing poetry helps with focus; doing so, Harrison is "trying to bear down on the singularity of images. Movement" (*Conversations* 46). One important passage in his sequence follows a series of images, via rivers, along a narrative of inquiry and uncertain recovery.

... I couldn't escape the suicidal house  
until May when I drove  
through the snow to reach the river.

On the bank by the spring creek  
my shadow seemed to leap  
up to gather me, or it leapt  
up to gather me, not seeming so  
but as a natural fact. Faulkner said  
that the drowned man's shadow had watched  
him from the river all the time.

Drowning in the bourgeois trough,  
a *bourride* or gruel of money, drugs  
whisky, hotels, the dream coasts  
ass in the air at the trough, drowning  
in a river of pus, pus of civilization,  
pus of cities, unholy river of shit,  
of filth, shit of nightmares, shit  
of skewed dreams and swallowed years.  
the river pulls me out,  
draws me elsewhere  
and down to blue water,  
green water  
black water. (18-20)

Here, through a “return upriver in the dark” is the passage through trial, towards some hard-earned acceptance. The journey is comprehensive: through lost pastoral lament (Sanders, Flanagan), the jeremiad against the fallen city (Abbey), immersion in fecund “filth” (Sinclair) of “skewed dreams and swallowed years” (McCarthy and the drowned man) and into the “blue water / green water” of redemption and purity (Duncan). Harrison slips through these difficult phases with apparent ease. But the smooth-paced enjambement and vocal qualities of the phrasing and line break provide space for the emotional work of healing at the level of image, word and action. He makes a return to love, words, and mystery. The river helps with this, pulling him out and elsewhere. The journey replenishes and balances:

I continue to dream myself back to what I lost, and continue to lose and regain, to an earth where I am a fellow creature and to a landscape I can call home. When I return I can offer my family, my writing, my friends, a portion of the gift I’ve been given by seeking it out, consciously or unconsciously. The mystery is still there. (“Dream as a Metaphor for Survival” 317-8)

Invocation becomes an act of assertion and humility: “Water gods, moon gods, god fever, / sun gods, fire gods, give this earth diver / more songs before I die” (22). Late in the poem Harrison speaks/writes (how far apart are these in his work?) of the theory and practice of memory and imagination:

The involuntary image that sweeps  
into the mind, irresistible and without evident  
cause as a dream or thunderstorm,  
or rising to the surface from childhood,  
the longest journey taken in a split second  
from there to now, without pause (26).

This stanza speaks to the form and narrative of his sequence; its eddying, purposeful drive allows memories and images to boil up, while tributary digression occurs within the ambit of the poem’s quest. His “obscene Koan” of a poem is “a plane / that takes off and can never land,” a river that never concludes because time and the river will continue. Harrison’s fullest resolution may, in Zen fashion, be an illusion, something to strive for rather than achieve. He is “trying to become alert enough to live” (28). The quest for (ir)resolution leads to a degree of understanding as he accepts the river’s seaward departure. As the poem closes, with the moon ready to roll upon the earth, Harrison has ushered in multiple ways of being. The re-circling continues as the conclusion opens to beginnings. “I have seen much of the world and am trying to dream myself back to where I already am” (“Introduction” xii).

### **“Not on but in, / to”: Don McKay rides and reads the Long Sault**

McKay’s *Long Sault* is both an angry elegy and a wistful remembrance. The poem is documentary in that it is a record of a personal response to the damming of the Long Sault Rapids

of the St. Lawrence River. McKay calls the dam project “a big energy and loss, both for myself and the community” (321). It remains more introspective and formally varied than the older long “documentary” poems Dorothy Livesay described as a Canadian genre.<sup>7</sup> So it should: McKay may imagine Duncan Campbell Scott’s Ontario Treaty-scripting canoe journeys, but times have changed partly because of those trips Scott made and the scrip and dams they ultimately formed.<sup>8</sup>

The poem’s four parts (“So Long,” “Reading a Rapids,” “Last Laugh” and “The ghost with a hammer”) record personal chronology that veers between past and present responses to the river. The first part watches the river (and the reservoir) in a growling farewell. Part two binds the wild river, river-reading and rafting into a treatise on memory as fond reminiscence is lit with the rapids’ energy: (“She gets too intimate too fast” [136]). “Last Laugh” reworks river history by speaking of the love that gathered at the water over time. The poems of section three extend their line and length to accommodate the mass of story, while part four, “The ghost with a hammer” concludes the sequence in a frenzy of jagged lines and insistent repetition (“LONG SAULT”). The rhythm traces a “breakdown” between its lines of even singing and those of rampant rapid-replication:

hey that moonlight flicker those tongues those curls that

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<sup>7</sup> Livesay suggests “the long storytelling poem with a theme may be the most interesting *poetically*, as well as being deeply representative of Canadian character” (269). Livesay sees the long poem as part “of a conscious attempt to create a dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet” (267). In the long river-poems the objective currents are of equal import as any “facts.” The facticity of the current stimulates reflection on the borderland between objective and subjective states.

<sup>8</sup> Scott made many river journeys in his own right at the turn of the century as Treaty Commissioner and high-ranking civil servant in the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs. In “Rapids at Night” he writes of the elegiac quality of rivers, tying these in with the “human heart that sleeps, / Wild with rushing dreams and deep with sadness!” A “rising calm” “sways and reconquers and floods all the spaces of silence, / One voice, deep with sadness” (19). “The Height of Land sits with an ear to the rich silence at Northern Ontario’s Pic River (Dragland 236), “[t]he gathering of the waters in their sources” (46). Water creates a unity that mocks the splintered human life. It can bring the watcher to a sense of ungraspable wholeness. Scott’s poems and stories, Stan Dragland asserts, “are passionate projections of the incompleteness of white adaptation to this country, of Scott’s own argument with his immigrant soul” that pivots around “the paradoxical nature of being Euro-Canadian, new and old at once” (6, 31). It is a paradox all of the writers in this thesis still grapple with; irresolvable though it might be in the next few lifetimes, their works help chart a way forward through the fluid element of what I see as the (post?) colonial riverscape. James B. Waldram notes that “[t]he process of hydro development in this century, and particularly the manner in which Indian and Métis people have been removed physically and bureaucratically from their water resources, is paralleled by the treaty and scrip processes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (3). Scott was instrumental in implementing these Treaties and other limiting policies. “The social, cultural and economic consequences of hydro dam construction, while little known to the general public, have been devastating to the people who happen to be located along the prime rivers and lakes” (Waldram 3).

McKay writes back to Scott, and to Charles Sangster’s *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay* (1856). This long poem (110 Spenserian stanzas) “echoes forward in the Canadian continuity to the work of Duncan Campbell Scott, A.J.M Smith, Al Purdy and others” (Bentley xi). Bentley notes Sangster’s later revisions of the poem made the poem more “touristic” and “topographical.” Writing to W.D. Lighthall in 1888 he noted that in “the expanded and revised version, the rapids “are . . . written out at length, giving each a character of its own” (xliv). Sangster added more “incidental meditations” as well (xliv). Sangster’s descriptions of the “nameless Terror,” that “awful Shape” of the Lachine Rapids quakes before the power of the River (qtd. in Bentley 134). McKay inverts the energy of a raging river; the “furious stillness” of the reservoir and of memory must suffice. There is no certainty in memory: Archibald Lampman’s *At The Long Sault* records the confrontation between Iroquois and the voyageur Daulac; its bloody scenes are drowned beneath the reservoir as well. Story does not *necessarily* heal or record healing.

Chute you bastards down the silvery v gotta  
Dig that paddle gotta here comes another now  
Sweep

c'mon  
c'mon  
c'mon

(“Long Sault Breakdown” 156)

McKay’s poem begins with loss.<sup>9</sup> “So Long” ruffles, yaws and leaps backwards through time in farewell and re-collection. Remembrance is a process that inheres through the fragmentation of line and narrative: it confronts the silencing of dynamic water, the “furious stillness” of the reservoir that covers his childhood, and tries to fill in the stilled gap his river has become. The rapids disrupt and echo within the lines that memorialise them. The abrupt line breaks and jagged narrative record the lost language of a unique river; all rivers sound different at different times.

*Long Sault*’s opening pair of poems detachedly list the great violence done to the land and river, their quiet rage simmering beneath the banal language of designation and town planning. The phrasing of the command “see” is smug and timetabled like the new schedule that has risen from the drowned river valley. “Ride over the once famous Long Sault Rapids. / Boat leaving every 2 hours — 9 AM to 7 PM” (127). Irony smothers the inundated scene which replicates the framing convention and language of landscape but fills it with banal human structures: “parkway, / control dam”, “lock”, “dikes”, “Dam.” This is the new formation of space (and concrete is the new species) in a site marked by the illimitably known and “manmade” damscape. The poem admonishes and commands the reader, drawing hard edges with an amalgamation of consonant and short-stop lines. Only as the site begins to approach complacency do the lines ease out. The energy that drives McKay’s sequence sometimes collapses in on its own belatedness; hindsight becomes a fragile grimace before the implacable concrete of the dam. Anger implodes and lines scatter, reform and move on, honouring the spirit of the remembered water.

Dread overtakes the second poem, “Dam” (127). Its gentled and compact sentences, submissive and meek in their pace and expression, hold a profound sadness in the scope of the quiet turn of line and eye. The breath across these lines is the contained sighing of grief and regret, coiled until the plosive breakdown of the poem’s triumphant close. If the page allows triumph, then let it run riot, at least until the dam falls. But the gentle break of line and form here suggests a deep wounding of seer and seen:

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<sup>9</sup> Does the poet take on the ‘voice’ of the river and speak for that which has been silenced? If the river regains its voice does the poet become redundant? This is one part of Bruce Berger’s belief regarding Glen Canyon. With the dam decommissioned, the Colorado River will again do the speaking “once we get the actual canyon back, literature about it will become superfluous” (9). This is a nice thought, and rightly classifies much river-writing about the Canyon as elegiac. Berger seeks to “dream apart a dam” so the simultaneous “blurring of past, present and future” can be restored to a motile life. This “blurring” is a state many river-writers are drawn to replicate or honour. To experience it is one way to sense “timelessness” as an expression of river- (rather than chronological) time.

Into the dam  
the river has been wound  
the way God reckons up the souls of men  
and tots the till.

Not coiled, curled.  
The new lake does not strain or brim  
behind the dam.  
It sleeps. It nuzzles the muddy shore as a vacuum cleaner  
Purrs across the carpet.

Spiritual [w]reckoning and accounting merge. The subdued river has been absorbed into the body of the “lake,” a new creature swaddled and swaddling the Earth, allied with the vacuum cleaner that keeps on taking. As Amy Boyers says, “We call it a lake, it is in fact a reservoir, one of the places where loss makes a home.” Loss gathers; threads of memory and imagination compensate, but the dam, “placed and solid,” confronts such sensibilities (McPhee 193).

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McKay’s sequence gathers momentum. “Bedrock” (128-9) considers the anger that gathers in trapped places. It opens in ambivalent remembrance, not complacency; the second word (“were”) strikes at the buried elsewhere of memory and river that has become the poem’s subject. This is a poem of blocked sites and diminished vision “where the Long Sault used to be.” Images of prisoners, “their sunken eyes in the grey / grey flesh” gazing only at “whitewall whitewall whitewall” compound the desolation. At the lost face of the river “in the slab aslant you can feel / the absent turbulence. / An empty gym.” The spectre of wasting muscle evokes the worst humans can do to each other. McKay’s stanzaic turns and indentations swing us to other stories and scenes that challenge what has gone before. He describes some sort of post-apocalyptic aftermath, a terrible rending that leaves poems without a whole world to live in, as if language and memory (“used to be”) themselves are violated by the imposition of concrete:

It is a tale full of its endings.  
There are all these poems standing  
like plumbers amid the ruined buildings  
gesturing tool boxes  
at the absence of bathrooms in the air, is this  
some sort of a joke?  
And only the Long Sault is laughing:  
Fuck your renaissance, get me a beer.

The river fights back, but the battle is one-sided. Anger dissipates. “And now,” he tells the river, “you’re nostalgia” (130). There it is: one component of my argument through this thesis, rendered into a poem. The fallen river induces nostalgia. Regret and the past tense gather at the dam’s face. The present does not redeem. The “tepid and tumid” ex-river has fallen from an “object of terror and delight” (McKay quotes George Heriot’s exploration account), to “a bowl of mushroom

soup.” Nostalgia clings to the dammed river. A change in register soothes (“so / nice, really” leers an alter-ego), until we re-turn to the grim truth; the damming of the river lobotomises the watershed, bringing amnesia to the next generation who have never seen river, only reservoir.

“At the Long Sault Parkway” (131) is a place for dying rivers and abandoned grandmothers (who McKay brings back onto the scene later). The poem documents the process of forgetting and rationalisation that works on those who survive and watch:

No sutures, no Frankenstein bolts through the neck, only  
the dam at the end of the lake, a white wink  
like a distant TV set  
betrays the operation.

You’re better off now, rocking on the porch, you lap,  
lap, lap at the shores of memory,  
counting to infinity by ones.

The upheaval of communities in late 1950s Cornwall, Ontario, *did* occur; the dam drowned “a length of shoreline rich in history and tradition” (321). The “relocated” Christ Church (“neither dead nor alive, / haunted by a worldless music now. / A sussuration flows through the pews / and browses past the altar”) reminds us of consequences of loss; the doubts loss raises linger in the next poem’s title (“Will your anchor hold in the storms of life?”). Storms of human making gather there. This tale of house-moving (“Here was a rapids in the noose. / Here was a field of fire hydrants waiting for a town” [132]) offers further collations of register: from the bewildered viewer (“I can show you the picture”) to the anodyne language of boosterism that sends people to the higher ground without questioning. Indeed McKay argues the relocated families were “shepherd[ed]” by “rhetoric” as much as vast house-moving trucks. “Inside” the “shell” of language, “never asking” or admitting to doubt, the families decamped:

The river was about to swell.  
It was doing the Charles Atlas course, would be  
the servile giant.  
Its language was unlocked: Power & Prosperity,  
Development & Growth... (133)

Doubt swells with the rising concrete and is stripped away to the hills. The extraction of power is a sly business. Benefits seem to wash downstream through the spillway. Feeling and resistance vanish too, the dam and feeling become “cognate / pregnancies / (or carbuncles, as we / couldn’t have said until we’d seen” (133).

This poem affirms McKay’s sense that the river deserves *more* than an “angry elegy” (McKay, *Long Poem Anthology* 321). His remembrance creates new possibilities: “I found other planes of the subject, realized that the moves and power of the Long Sault weren’t really locked up in the dam, began thinking of all the rapids I’d experienced and found them moving in surprising places and pushing the writing into different forms” (321). Memory, and even the reservoir’s “furious stillness,” demand more. The poem honours the energy the reservoir depends on, and



uses that energy and memory to break free of the dam. The rapids guide and re-direct the flow of composition and live on in it. Following the rushing water leads to part three, “Reading a rapids.”

### **Taken for a ride**

Those remembered rapids rush into fulsome oratory. Our narrator “stood on a rock and watched her / and the roar was weather / a big soft push” (“Reading a rapids on the Gens de Terre” 135). The rapids are as embracing as the wind, offering the space and contact of touch. The speaker is watching the river that talks back to him in a sultry manner, coaxing him towards surrender. McKay opens to a sensuality that invites engagement and submission; the river is a beckoning beauty. The sensual and insistent nature of the River’s energy bursts forth in words as he begins to “read” (or perhaps to listen) to the rapids. They speak in several languages but share the promise of sexual and psychological fulfilment (“Don’t stand on the verandah boy, / step inside / and I’ll spread my peacock’s tail of gurgles and cackles, purls / and groans”); the rapid banter of a sales pitch (“I’m the glue that holds it all together son,” this River says. But of course: “Water is a universal glue” [Bachelard, “The Hand Dreams” 104]); and the siren’s allure (“Slide down my throat boy, I’m a feast / of flickering tongues and curls / lascivious as Beardsley, sweet as Shirley Temple...”). Here, in her resplendent and suggestive polyvocality, is Canada’s naiad of the 1970s, a motile muse for the new millennium, one who grants visions as she crafts another death of a river guide—until she is silenced. As McKay observes, “She gets too intimate too fast” and the modern Siren must be contained (136). As the poem closes, his irony peeps out; he knows what kind of a game she plays, and just how deeply he’s taken in, swallowed up:

Across the portage the voice pursues us still  
Biting into spirit as the thwart bites into flesh.  
Someday – I always add this –  
I’ll go back.

The dance of rapids intensifies in “Wolflip.” The poem uses line breaks, repetition and snarling descriptives (the river has teeth and snarls; the wild river has character. “We must be swallowed but / we must be swallowed whole,” bleeding) to replicate the terror and delight of the ride. “Reading the rapids” has to respond formally to the changing wild river and its gifts of otherness.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The section closes with “The Great Canadian Short Story.” Its female logger-protagonist (a kind of Weyerhaeuser Anti-Earth Mother) is voracious and rapacious as she works through the forests of the land in great swaths. At this rate the story will close very quickly on a bare land. Here is Canada’s dark muse for the turn of the millennium, where primary production exhausts resources and foresight makes a belated entry into the minds of producers. After talk of disarmament, a small step back from midnight, we pause and see the things we’ve inflicted on the earth.

Part three's tapestry is one of family journeys and memories that wash into part four's more communal record. "Off the road" recalls camping and paddling in "the intricate quietnesses" of the river: "Dusk is almost better than a word" (142). One of the sequence's great assertions—"The pause is full of stories waiting to be told" ("Alongabout then" 143)—offers reason enough for the reach and mission of the poem as a whole; how else could McKay compound enough silences to tell of his river?

Shorter narrative poems dapple the sequence and function as gently extended calligraphies of the watershed, taking us "Not on but in, / to" the river's history (145). The lines' clarity evoke what a river stirs as we defer our striving to the water. As with Snyder and Harrison, the journey towards explication counts for something in itself. Pens fall into the river (ink is swallowed, 147) and the dusk nearly outdoes language; the river of Babel speaks across time ("I'm the glue that holds it all together, son" [135]). One thing we can do is watch and talk and, perhaps, write. McKay's other poems recognise that we can sing.

Songs have bound to rivers for a long time. As indigenous tradition reveals, they are often the oldest of stories.<sup>11</sup> So when that dam rises up from the earth like a sheer mountain (or the smooth porcelain wall on King's Parliament Lake), McKay just has to sing the blues, the "Long Sault Blues" (149). He sings of an ol' man river who plays a golden sax; he sings of a bubbling language that dried in its tracks:

Well they took me down to the river  
And they showed me a heap of bones  
Yes they took me down to the dried up river  
And they showed me these bald old stones  
Said that is all he ever was goodbye forget him  
You're better off just living on your own

This laid-back style still manages to acknowledge communal histories and the powers of metaphor. The old guy still plays, although McKay is bound to wonder how he survives. They're still there, those "Long Sault Rapids in Kapuskasing"—

We mourn  
here but we never know what for. . . .  
I can't give you anything but love.  
It isn't mournful and it isn't real unhappy  
but melancholy as blood thinking about itself. (151)

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<sup>11</sup> One fine example of the confluence of rivers, race and mortality is the Kern and Hammerstein song "Old Man River," immortalised (and increasingly and effectively politicised over time) by Paul Robeson: "Let me go away from the Mississippi, / Let me go 'way from the white man boss. Show me that stream called the River Jordan, / That's the old stream that I long to cross.... I get weary and sick of tryin' / I'm tired of living and scared of dying, / but Old Man River, he just keeps rollin' along." I think too of the rich tradition of the Mississippi River Delta Blues, Jim's thoughts of crossing to "de Illinoi side" in *Huckleberry Finn* (97), and reggae legend Jimmy Cliff's emancipatory song "Many Rivers To Cross." In Southern slave states "one of the commonest means of escape [from slavery] was water," Brown suggests, in his discussion of "rowing songs and rituals of baptism" (104).

Performative scenes and words saturate this final section as the Rapids' Grandma (brought back by memory from the amnesiac rest home of the Parkway) knits currents together (yes, "metafurs" abound [155]) and the rapids play saxophone. The river is given different roles: standing on a film *noir* beach scene as a razzled bloke, then tussling with antacid formula and other chemicals (nothing heals easily). Word play becomes world play; the river slinks and shimmies everywhere until the final poem, where the old fighter leaps on the "resurrection run through" (156) while riding a raft—a river—that is history itself:

Here comes the Rapids Prince  
Steaming down the river with  
raftsman  
Indian  
coureur de bois come  
hop on board

The dance continues, even as the "breakdown" blossoms—or perhaps *because* the breakdown cracked the dam and the beat, purl and, chute, *Long Sault* continues in a way Abbey, King and Flanagan would applaud. The sequence 'closes' mid-beat, offering a hand to the reader, cavorting free of full-stops and blocks, the "furious stillness" welling up and gathering ancient waters of continuance that echo in the chords of memory and word.

The river is dammed; still, the poems and surprises continue.

### **Here, now: Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*.**

Mind in the mountains, mind of tumbling water,  
mind running rivers.

Gary Snyder, "Raven's Beak River"

One trend acknowledged in the poetry—in everything—I consider in these pages is the way rivers prompt a recirculative offering (of story, or image), almost in return for their own reflective giving. Harrison sees his writing as a process tied to returning with gifts after a journeying; McKay found more than loss at the banks of a stilled river. Gary Snyder continues this generosity in his long-poem *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, which he describes as an offering.<sup>12</sup> Let us begin with his talk of ending:

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<sup>12</sup> Harrison and Snyder share territories because much of Snyder's volume involves travelling (e.g. "Journeys," "Night Highway 99," "The Elwha River," "The Market," "Bubbs Creek Haircut" and "The Mountain Spirit.") "Since 1956 I've been working on a long poem I'm calling 'Mountains and Rivers Without End' after a Chinese sidewise scroll painting. It threatens to be like its title. Travel, the sense of journey in space that modern people have lost... the rise and fall of rocks and water" ("Statement" 420). Another link is their abiding interest in Zen. The two poets meet, in one sense, at the "channelized river" in Los Angeles (*Rivers* 62).

People used to say to me, with a knowing smile, “*Mountains and Rivers* is endless, isn’t it?” I never thought so. Landscapes are endless in their own degree, but I knew my time with this poem would eventually end. The form and the emptiness of the Great Basin showed me where to close it; the boldness of my young people, who ate unlikely manna in the wilderness, how. This poem, which I have come to think of as a sort of sutra—an extended poetic, philosophic, and mythic narrative of the female Buddha Tara—is for them. (158)

Snyder’s poem does not end: his offering continues to be shared.

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To read a river, begin with a Chinese scroll from the early twelfth century: “Streams and Mountains Without End.” A six-page reproduction forms the book’s frontispiece. We reverse Western patterns of reading, flip pages ‘backwards,’ and scan left, downstream. The scroll unfolds in ink-washed grace, and the riverscape is expansive: form seems to billow and absorb space; the mountains, heavens and waters are sometimes indistinguishable. “The Chinese landscape scroll, by virtue of its unframed and voluted nature, presents the viewer a fluid perspective which he [*sic*] may enter at any moment or point and which offers a surface that is ‘ever new but never discontinuous’” (Holaday, 42).<sup>13</sup> Snyder guides us through the viewing:

Step back and gaze again at the land:  
water ripples every hill. (8)

Elements merge but detail remains precise: the squat grazing buffalo; the crouched gait of a man walking beside a horseback ride; “a boatman in the bow looks lost in thought” (6). The scroll’s precision is echoed in Snyder’s sequence, a collection that spans forty years. His homage to the scroll painter Ch’i Shan Wu Chin opens the book:

Clearing the mind and sliding in  
to that created space,  
a web of waters streaming over rocks,  
air misty but not raining,  
seeing this land from a boat on a lake  
or a broad slow river,  
coasting by. (5)

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<sup>13</sup> Holaday quotes Sister Bernadetta Quinn, “Light From The East: The *Cantos* and Chinese Art,” *Greyfriar: Siena Studies in Literature*, 18 (1977): 58. He notes “the connection between Snyder’s poem and the description of ‘landscape’ (which in Chinese translates literally as ‘mountains and water’) bring to light the emphasis of Snyder’s poetics—and open-form poetics in general—on the mimetic relationship between the form of the poem and the environment which it seeks to reflect and in which it was written” (43). Holaday also observes the “quality of suspension” that permeates the landscape scroll, one which draws on “the principle of *hsu shih*. . . ‘hollowness and solidity’” one of those key Zen concepts that holds polarities in dynamic *yin-yang* tension (44).

Proprioception and perception have high status in Snyder's poetry. Their function is interrogated because they form the basis for one's understanding. His inquiries wash back and forth between self and river, crossing ecological, temporal and cultural borders, "fine honed thoughts / going each way" (71). Specificity, form and story coalesce around a venerable scroll. This is not Steveston, condominiums perched where canneries once stood; nor is it Bowling's equally precise pinpointing of remembered experience. Snyder's analysis takes the viewer to a new/old place beyond personal memory, just as Sinclair's own vessel of wrath vanishes off the map of the expected and Suttree leaves for a new haven, (t)here "The watching boat has floated off the page" (6). When the scroll ends, memory abdicates. The scene becomes documented territory, a visualised space shared by viewers across time: "In a way the painting is not fully realized until several centuries of poems have been added" (159). He translates these responses and offers readers his latest commentary. The scroll becomes a palimpsest of viewers, a sequence in its own right, linking responses across time, text, image and culture. Like water, he mediates: "sunken rivers come again / stand by the wall and tell their tale" (9).

Any collection that spans forty years will be full of variation. This one is striking for the consistency of its form and vision. The tone is learned and informed; references to hallucinogenic drugs are pared back as the rigours and blessings of Buddhism are foregrounded.

The inclusiveness and fragmentariness of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* can be seen, therefore, as a corollary expression of Snyder's perception of Buddhist ontological reality, a reality which gives primacy to all concrete data and equality to all concrete experience. Accordingly, every datum is a metonymy for the whole, and all fragments are interrelated. (Holaday 50)

The poems still retain a rambling feel, the open form fluidity true to the river of change and insight. Some bemoan Snyder "for his 'cataloguing of natural objects, mundane events and sensory impressions,' for 'memorialising his own most banal thoughts and unimportant anxieties'" (Rothberg 36). My own response depends more on my state of mind than on the form of the poems. The collection is surprisingly anxiety-free; Snyder's practice of the Zen state of *mu-shin* or 'no-mindedness' is conducive to the qualities of open-form poetry. It encourages the reader to settle into the gaps between words, that space of concentration and meditation.

The Elwha River, I explained, is a real river, and different from the river I described. Where I just walked was real, but I wrote a dream river.... (32)

The collection is a "dream river" that has its own swiftness "sent down from the peaks / flanks and folds / down arroyos and ditches by highways the water" ("The Black-tailed Hare" 73). But it is also an "actual" river because it responds to the world as an interconnective entity. What we call real and dream reside in this place; Snyder regards *both* states as constituents of the river's plenitude. Observing previously contemplated rivers, Snyder ponders time and the transmission of belief and insight across Buddhist tradition, the nuances of language and the movement of humans and water across cultural and physical territory. We are brief glimmers in the flow of

time. Standing on the banks as Harrison and Marlatt do, he accepts the reach of the river and provides power and openness to his own watershed-branded insights.

A spoken language works  
for about five centuries  
life span of a douglas fir;  
big floods, big fires, every couple hundred years,  
a human life lasts eighty,  
a generation twenty.  
Hot summers every eight or ten,  
four seasons every year  
twenty-eight days for the moon  
day / night the twenty-four hours

& a song might last four minutes,

a breath is a breath.

(“Old Woodrat’s Stinky House,” 119-20)

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The longer poem “An Offering for Tara” spells out Snyder’s professed belief in the gift-giving poetry represents. This poem’s first and last sections begin with rivers. In Ladakh’s bare mountains he is fascinated by “the year-round streams in a land of no rain” (106). The rivers of his poem are troped as Buddhas, they are emanations from the Goddess Tara, who, in her compassion, graces the world (and therefore us) with them. When the rivers run, they are still. Their moving meditation remains a constant, even in the shifting of continents:

Senge Chhu, the Indus River.  
Some land from Gondwana,

Crossed the Tethys Sea  
And fetched up again in Eurasia,  
Ranges warping out —  
Indus, Setlej, rivers even from before  
Sat their seats  
As the mountains rose around them million-yearred. (106)

These rivers warp outwards, working patiently with the mountains (and against them, as fluid koan). The poem ranges across space; one river evokes another and things slip into place.

The great Indus river’s running  
just there by the wall.  
(The far shore  
wild salmon spawning  
in the old mine-tailing gravels down the Yuba) (110)

the river  
is all of it everywhere  
all flowing at once,

•

Snyder's offering honours Tara, the one that "lead[s] water." Doing so, it gathers "[t]he whole river. Clear back to each creeklet" ("The Dance" 134). Moving along the path that water forms demands attention. Three poems condense Snyder's relationship with water into individual portraits: "Canyon Wren," "We Wash Our Bowls in This Water" and "The Flowing." Each addresses ecology and spirituality. "I am aware of the very close correspondence between the external and internal landscape in my long poem" (Snyder, *Towards* 131). Oscillating through his sustained encounter with a river and its creatures (in "Canyon Wren," which records a float trip) is the realisation of a river's capacity to provoke enlightenment and awareness. Each line has its own action; verbs accrete but do not crowd each other in the short length.

The continuity of water as a reactive element in human consciousness is balanced by the changes wrought by dams. Snyder's float trip is particularly poignant: it occurred on the Stanislaus just before the New Mellones Dam was completed (despite much protest). No mention is made of the imminent loss of the canyon, or Mark Dubois' activism, but the poem records the passing wonder of the wren's song; like the river those notes are "here and gone" (91). We continue for a short time, "Afloat" in our "tiny skin boat" (132).

"We Wash Our Bowls in This Water" revels in voices from the past, the intertextual engagement with ever-changing rivers across human time. This is in keeping with Snyder's desire to offer "a communicative coherence that liberates the reader to go on with it" (Snyder Interview, 131). This flow leads happily into a "river being," a verb and noun blend that segues the reader into the embodied state of riveriness, what he later calls "'the storm.'" He lets his delighted list (a kind of fluvial taxonomy), spill over:

upwellings, sideswirls, backswirls  
 curl-overs, outripples, eddies, chops and swells  
 wash-overs, shallows confluence turbulence wash-seam  
 wavelets, riffles ... (137)

The list carries on (with more definition), as the voice of a river guide names and describes the treacherous forms water takes: a hydraulic, pillow-rock, haystack, keepers, eddies, backflows, vertical boils and herringbone waves. And that is just one guide, on one river, in one language. Zen texts follow (then Dogen's gloss on the same piece). Each reinforces the impossibility and appeal of words, uttered by or in praise of the running water. Snyder translates Su Tung-p'o's enlightenment poem:

The stream with its sounds is a long broad tongue  
 The looming mountain is a wide-awake body  
 Throughout the night song after song

How can I speak at dawn.

No questions are asked. Snyder honours tradition through translation, incorporation and practice.<sup>14</sup> When he gazes at the river, he recalls those before him who have learnt from those streams; “the smallest part represents the whole” (Holaday 46). He sees the history of water as a transcendent force because others like Dogen have made offerings, and still more have listened. “There is no such thing as a fragment. All are interrelated” (Snyder, Interview 133).

The third poem, “The Flowing,” represents the river as a female sensual force. She does not speak as McKay’s Long Sault does, but she gets Snyder off the verandah and grabs him hard, just where squirming becomes difficult. The poem moves downriver through the Kamo to the Columbia. Once again line breaks and stanzas form around a single image or action:

the lift and plume  
of the water curling out and over,  
  
Salmon arching in the standing spray. (69)

Now these Falls at Celilo are frozen on the page and silenced by a dam. But they continue in a fashion: “the water cycle tumbles round.... The Great Mind passes by its own / fine-honed thoughts / going each way” (71).

Snyder’s humble mind is also fine-honed, capable of looking in two or more directions at once, and, as he passes through the river mouth, birthed into the ocean, he enters into ecstasy and release, he joins with Harrison and McKay in fantasy “the vast loosing / of all that was found, sucked, held, / born, drowned” (72). The river is a great mind, a great mother and lover, a watery web that binds time and people in light. Anthony Hunt describes the entire poem as “a thread that binds us to the ‘jewelled net of interconnectedness’ as we attempt to unravel its very strands” (137). As Snyder lets go of “The Flowing” to return to a greater form, some Diamond Sutra mapped onto the glistening rapids, he offers the reader an image of the sensuality of creative energy. One achievement of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is its movement beyond stereotype; it offers a cross-cultural reading of rivers to the “young people” of the next millennium, while following Buddhist practice with care (158). The making of water and of poems is a gift to us all. One bequest to the river reader of the twenty-first century is the challenge to keep the currents powerful and healthy.

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<sup>14</sup> For an insightful analysis of Taoist water philosophies, see Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue*. Albany : SUNY P, 1997.



## A constant source: *Said The River*—Text—Author

Liz Zetlin's long poem *Said The River* (1995) opens with a quotation from Jorge Luis Borges' *Labyrinth*:

*Time is the substance from which I am made.  
Time is a river which carries me along,  
but I am the river, it is a tiger that devours me,  
but I am the tiger, it is a fire that consumes me,  
but I am the fire.*

*Said the River* emerged from Zetlin's research into the life and work of Isabella Valancy Crawford, the Irish-Canadian writer (active from 1870-until her death in 1887 at age 37) who is best known for her long poem "Malcolm's Katie." Crawford's poem was published in 1884 and sold only 50 of its 1000 copies (Zetlin "Timeline"). Crawford never lived to see anything like popularity or comfort. Zetlin conjectures Crawford composed a series of controversial "burnt poems" that she kept hidden from her mother and acquaintances. Meditations and poems on Crawford's last years, the discovery and destruction of the burnt poems, and Crawford's death are interleaved through a present-day trip on the Saugeen River. Zetlin concludes the poem by listing its "Main Characters;" the Saugeen and Don Rivers are two of them. Entirely without page numbers, employing a range of typographic layouts and watercolour washes, this is a poem that gives itself over to the river, just as Zetlin's author-photo depicts her staring out at us from beneath a waterfall.

Two women (Margaret and Susan) raft the Saugeen River in search of the nineteenth-century author who knew the same stream. The plaque that commemorates Crawford is by the Saugeen; her name, reflected in the river, is "a tempting bait" ("Historical plaque"). "An excuse for a canoe trip, thought Susan. A chance to draw and fish. And watch Margaret glue herself to another life" ("Collaborations"). Their collaborative journey mirrors the process of journeying and creating undertaken by Zetlin and her artist friend Janis Hoogstraten (in an exhibit and an early version of the poem).

The book's layout suggests a flow of ideas, memories and suppositions across time, all in one fluid place, "with language reconstituting self as self reclaims language. But clearly," New asserts, "any claim upon self, however mobile the landscape, creates new margins even if (or as) it erases old ones" (*Land* 202). Erasure and reconstitution of a past self (Crawford as 'real' or imagined, and Margaret as an (un)willing agent in the erasure of her emotional boundaries) parallels the narrator's own revelatory impulses. The contents are centred on the page and the braided narrative crosses dual river writings and journalling/journeyings, "moving over water //... imagining a book" ("Collaborations"). Margaret "travels on [words] like rivers" ("Layers of absence"). Texts braid. These rivers are conduits of memory and story, fragments and supposition. (I think particularly of Marlatt's engagement with Martin Allerdale Grainger's

*Woodsmen of the West* [1908] through her re-visioning 1988 novel *Ana Historic*.) Chunks of Crawford's writing are spliced with the imagined voices of her parents; Margaret uses spliced reflection to allow the voice of her parents into the present. "The daughters wanted understanding / but got advice about / how to move through the world of men" ("Advice their fathers gave"). The two fathers, distant, cold and frightening, connect both Isabella and Margaret: both women are "Imprisoned in our father's / houses, poems hidden / in kitchen cabinets." Characters are used as ways into the mind of Crawford and narrator; all the components are reflected in the mirror of the river. "How a story changes / from the moment of experience / to the retelling of a memory" ("Mirrors 2"). Margaret is caught between that transition for much of the poem, buoyed up by old text and recollection.

As the poem (and the rafts, or the archival recovery) proceeds the women's lives are challenged by internal forces: Crawford is affected by heart problems and Margaret by her impassioned vision. (Like Iain Sinclair she becomes adept at seeing ghosts, and spots Crawford walking past Toronto's CBC building):

she just has to glance up, the past is there  
enclosed by the present....

That's how the mind works. In reverse.  
Obsessed by reflections from the past....

She is losing something. Being eroded away.  
Without knowing how or why, but suspecting  
this force has the strength of water and the ability  
to take many forms. ("Mirrors 1")

This is one project Margaret does not wish to abandon "midstream" (Evidence...). The journey begins, "three women / all in the river together," this river of story, "the same stream as Isabella" seen by "many others before them" ("Arrive"). Like Harrison, Snyder, McKay, Bowling and Marlatt, Zetlin absorbs the river as a stream of insight, archive and limitless consciousness: "all that middle," of possibility. The middle is a space for the removal of borders and blockages. Zetlin engages with text and form in a way that binds the worlds of reading and paddling, past and present. Her emphasis on "middle" and the unstressed line-break opens to the process of written (and read) meandering.

"River Tenses" encourages textual play by opening with a trio of lines that demands attention:

Time changes on the river  
becomes full of should haves  
and would have beens

Many of the river-watchers I read would concur here. *Said The River's* formal affiliation with *Steveston* firms up as Zetlin articulates a process of reading that draws us to the "middle" estuarine

balance between working for meaning and glimpsing insight anew in tandem with the poem. “If” and “but” suggest absence and nostalgia (and Crawford’s life compels this too), but also allow the reader to move in several directions. The long poets put us in the current and untie the net. Past and present unfold and enfold.

When Margaret/Crawford continues “Twice down the Saugeen” (with or through Zetlin), we join them on that journey, “Fifty strokes a minute / so fast the water spray freezes / on her face.” The first trip is matched in pace at the level of the line and syntax. The second trip, on the facing page, breaks into the open form poetic of composition, apprehension and sustained release. Here small glimpses of detail are framed in split-second images that seem to rush into their own silences, as if the ear is periodically submerged under water, then lifted above the flow to hear its terrestrial rushing:

water boiling up

wet pillows of stone

flat ledges where the river drops like stairs

the blue heron that keeps on reappearing around the bend

The last of *Said The River’s* four sections augments inquiry and revelation: Margaret and Susan track Crawford and segue into thoughts of death by tipping their canoe into “a brown water a knife to my heart.” Now “The river’s voice” comes into its own. It binds with Margaret, who returns (via a cycle of apologies) to her mother’s death bed. The series of questions, accretions of guilt and a line of suspense over Crawford’s background and death are revealed as a dilute counter to Margaret’s act of euthanasia, done for her mother (at her behest). Kathleen Dean Moore’s “terrible questions of redemption and regret” are compounded; the two women confront memory and these questions at once. *Said The River* has been building to a revelation; the river brings it on: “a daughter, a mother / all in the same breath / all in this unbearably / powerful river.” “The river’s voice” is her mother’s dying as much as Margaret’s recollection of it, a dual process of release and impossible holding as her mother’s body changes form, becoming “half light half woman.”

Lopez speaks of the grief rivers bear. Now Margaret (like Moore) returns to the river as recourse and resource. When she emerges from the river’s voice (and rights the canoe) Susan is “wiping the mud from my eyes” and suggesting “it’s about time you learned to read the water, instead of just books” (“Propose”). She may well learn to do both. *Said The River* is a recollective act that composes and combines memory across disparate histories, working the “middle” of possibility for ultimate ends. Death teaches those it leaves behind, as does the river.

At first I thought reading the river meant I should be its master  
I would match its speed with my cunning....

That is, until I dreamed smelled

swallowed the river

this river that rushed  
first beneath then over then through me....

and really, all we can do  
is to be aware of its force....

because the success of this maneuver [sic]  
depends on trusting  
your weight  
to the river.

The cumulative release is compounded by the peeling away of memories, dual journeys and reflections; “because” inspires a torrential syllogism of argument, movement and interpretation; in a sense the rapids demand (and remove) the capacity for choice. Refracted voices are bound by water. “Connections,” as the title suggests, repeats key lines from earlier in the sequence and braids the work’s concerns into a whole, scribing the ecology of memory and return that has contained and motivated the teleology of the poem. I want to quote it in full to honour that “middle” space of possibility that is “there, growing” in the present. Memory and the river recirculate. Borges frames the poem; this piece offers a way out of the labyrinth and on towards the delta of the present. The “blurring” of river time which flows all time together allows for a new way of opening to the past. New worlds appear; doubt seems to collapse. Who knows whether the river will offer the transformation Zetlin spells out below; it really depends on how your own ear and heart function in the local watershed. For Zetlin that site is constantly in process. Even death is outfoxed by the flux:

*She will turn again and come to meet me*

I.V.C.

the sun casts their shadow thin across the river  
they stand looking at a suspended line of shoulder  
rare, so they think, yellow irises  
a white trout blurring the line of shoulder  
with little time to choose  
they wonder if there will ever be someone  
who sees them standing here at the edge of memory  
reaching for those who are missing  
a mother, a river, a self  
leaning into the turn of life  
just at the moment of recall  
when the past and present are one

•

When Zetlin closes *Said The River* she offers a challenge that reaffirms rivers as an inspirational site, even in this fallen time: she calls on us to know “River, a tongue you’re just learning to speak.”

I can make you forget what you have learned  
I am taboo and I am sacred.  
I am the first blood of your mother.  
I consume all sins and remake  
Your flesh into a little child’s.  
I am where you sit down beside  
What memories you have left  
and weep.

It is the volta into the second person that stills the river’s surface. Your own face is visible, but Zetlin asks we leave Narcissus and begin speech and utterance anew, in the midst of a stream (“all that middle” of memory, story and image) that is everywhere needed, and all ways at risk:

But I will be all right only  
If I have a constant source  
You are that source,  
You are the fire that burns.  
You are the tiger that consumes.  
You are the river.

In the shift to second person I return to the rivers in my memory, remembered fragments of River. The currents have carried me home before I even knew where I was going, before I understood that was where I needed to be. Once understanding begins, the journey never ends.

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I ‘conclude’ this river poetry chapter with the sense that none of the poems really ends. The reader’s engagement is a kind of continuity, and in any case the poems themselves affirm links and dependencies we owe to people and to rivers. They champion the processes of creativity, inquiry and healing in the face of sometimes humiliating, insistent ‘progress.’ Their engagement with the present uses the force of encounter and response to realise a process of articulation that began with an individual and a community and moved across all the networks that compose these linked entities of flesh and water, these two bodies of memory. The immediacy of apprehension offers one reason to celebrate, one reason to begin textual and proprioceptive journeying. But such celebration is uncertain and qualified: not everyone reads, not every text will work on its reader in the same way. My own position has wavered and shifted in response, particularly when facing a barrage of grim facts, grim realities. But ways are found to go on.

The river may be under threat but this simply spurs the writer on to defiance and explication. Many of the writers I have read here search for home. The poets (like Moore, Abbey, Kineth or Sanders, as with Duncan) suggest home might be found in engagement with the flux of response and articulation, a worded becoming or fount that braids the motile process of perception through the watershed and the perceptual system itself. The poets have no illusions about their capacity to change the world, but know the line gives one way of revisioning and (re)reading life. The poets' vision looks to the present as a gift born(e) out of the past and the instant, constitutive of the unseen way ahead. What we offer to the waters will be felt downstream. We will be washed away into silence. When breath and the rivers cease, lines for the passage of elemental force dry up. Creatures need rivers to nourish lives and we humans also need water to sustain worded lines and memories. Rivers help us give voice to the stories we know and to articulate the recirculating processes of the watershed. The river gathers everything and carries it on.

## Epilogue: Pools, Rivers, Estuaries

### Transpiration

Language, feeling and memory help to compose the cultural watershed. To speak the language of rivers is to collaborate in a process of braided revision and rearticulation: the waters are forever changing. To think like a river is to abandon all certainties to a provisional current, while surrendering provisionality to the (un)certainty of flow. The river writers that have taken me this far see human life as one tributary of a process that constitutes the sustaining watershed.

Stories travel. Landscapes and languages are carried in the mind; cultures are moved across space or water. I have gauged the transpiration of memory through several kinds of story. The texts function in different ways. Yet Duncan, Moore, Bowling and others return to the river as a place of refuge and reflection, a (varying) continuity in a world of change. Each river I have read of, or been to, is threatened or degraded in some way; yet they still have a fundamental importance: rivers continue to attract stories, memories and communities. They continue to swallow metaphor and to be co-opted as a voice of 'truth.' Whose truth, I wonder? The texts revel in provisionality; nothing is certain and the writers admit that. I declared at the outset of this dissertation that I look to these writers for guidance in my response to an escalating series of ecological pressures fed by a booming and very demanding human population. The response many of these writers suggest involves fostering a sense of attentive guardianship or care: challenging the forces that erode diversity, community and equality. This ethic of care comes, in part, from observing rivers and communities in trouble. The imperative of responsibility is one means of encouraging a sense of concern without dissuading positive connection. Part of the responsibility of receiving life is the likelihood of extending it through the lives of others. Tributaries continue to branch. To believe, as I do, in the dynamic between river, community and (hi)story encourages a sense of the watershed as one functional interdependent unit that responds to human interference or damage. At a time when overwhelming statistics are easy to reel off, these authors look into the microcosm of their watershed as a source of inspiration.

But it is loss that lingers in much of the work by Moore, Abbey, Sanders and Hugo, loss that shapes the ways Sonja Buloh, Suttree or Sinclair respond to the world. Eden is at once unrecoverable and desired. Memory falls into the water and remains there for those who dredge for it. But some things just manage to endure throughout the work: the careful observer, the capacity to adapt and to respond. I think these authors leave the millennium with a vision tempered by hard-edged realism. A *combination* of elegy and spontaneity remains in the everyday and will continue in cycles of recirculation beyond the reach of humankind. While humans do remain on

the planet, Aldo Leopold's "search for a durable scale of values" will be ongoing. Conditions are such that values are under extreme pressure. This river writing transmits warnings: first, wake up to what little remains and envision what *might* remain and secondly, act with care and passion if you wish to keep rivers healthy for the next generation. Attempt to forge alliances across communities, cultures and watersheds. Try to learn how to see or hear a river and to pass such observations on. The writers do not hand out solutions: they bestow responsibilities. This is what I take from them: it is a gift and burden that will be carried on, rather than 'concluding.'

The river writing read here has affected how I see the world; I am far more conscious of what has gone and how fragile a watershed's remaining networks are. In these closing pages I share some personal journal entries that read rivers with river reading in mind. At the water's (and page's) edge I engage in observation and elegy, encounter and variation. This braided stream of response is typical of my mixed feelings about rivers in the decades ahead—appreciation of the present, tempered in several cases, by the concern for the future, a composite of response locked into and of our times yet one passed on through many long traditions of mortal lamentation. The fragments I offer here, different in form and approach from the textual analysis, are one way of beginning to hone my reading and writing of River. These new texts make demands and offer riches. Things are washed on to the shore from the deeps. But it is time I declared my bias in another way: by going to the river.

After a long journey through textual currents of different types (the essayist's longings for 'home,' the 'pure' battles for protection and epiphany, the sense of fallenness and enduring possibility, as well as the poetic ventures into hook, line and gap), I 'close' this reading process by engaging with some rivers that have touched me. The rivers I have known offer other ways of seeing texts; the texts I have read bring me other ways of seeing rivers.

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Does one really need to go to Sanders' "river-in-itself," or is the text enough? Recirculation between river, story and community is an interdependent process. The writers do not present the texts as permanent substitutes to direct experience. Rivers were here first. The storied world needs the tangible world in order to remember, renew and reimagine itself. But true to the process of recirculation and creative transpiration I have followed in these pages, that world of communication sends me back into the waters. The struggle for meaning continues by the river and on the page; both are shifting sites. No word is final, no river droplet independent of current or hydrologic cycle.

If, as Hugo suggests, we carry rivers with us, then one can surmise we also carry riverscapes. The water has its own motile charm: it feeds our "hankering" for "home" and "clarity," in part by mocking such solid notions (Sanders 59; Abbey 237; Moore 156). The essayists I read in Chapter One have taught me to look for tropic and topophilic echoes. I have



been lucky enough to make journeys to Britain, where some of the templates for my homeplace (New Zealand) were forged. This first fragment glances over oddly familiar territory.

### **Rivers Chet, Yare and Waveney. Norfolk Broads, East Anglia, England.**

*May 1999.* River Chet, like that other Chet (Baker), on a day of tall cloud, you range sweetly across any kind of melancholy. The Grey Heron's stately ascent stills our breath. I think of Lopez's wise birds, their poised tutelage and co-operative qualities. Michelle, Allan and I hear about the herons from Kenny, who works the boats here. He saw one heron last week, tracking a mother duck and her brood of ten tiny ducklings. The Heron would approach, stoop and eat a duckling—soft yellowbrown down and tiny wings in the gullet: the clack of beak on bone. Then it would follow along again, reach down, pierce the next. All ten of them, one by one.  
The tilt of the head.  
The dance of herons.

•

The waves lap at the hull of the *Kingfisher*, a charming wooden boat built in the 1950s. We are moored on the River Waveney, one of the many waterways that wend through the area known as the Norfolk Broads. This area of interlinked rivers and small lakes (Broads) draws hundreds of tourists like me annually. There are dozens of villages and pubs dotted along the Rivers Waveney, Chet and Yare that we have chugged past at four miles per hour.

•

Moored at Herringfleet Smock Mill, beside the Somerleyton Marshes, we walk along the river and cut inland along tiny lanes towards places called Rocklea St. Mary, Chedgrave, St. Olave's or Somerleyton, each with their stone churches and round church towers. Clumps of wetland or forest smooth into pasture; ploughed fields ramp towards those stone walls that remain. This green, level productivity takes in the eye; it must be something akin to the model white settlers took to New Zealand last century. This template cut through the walls of forest that met the sea-weary traveller. It got the land 'working' and cleared obstructions. The visual echoes I grew up with replay as I walk here.

•

White Crested Shags slip smartly through the wind-ruffled water of the Yare, the water wider now, its slow meander past reed and pasture, our little wooden boat “Kingfisher” chugging along by the even stares of river-watching cows. Algal drifts, scents of rot and green willow: farm run-off is destroying water quality. The rivers are not clear any longer; the nutrification blocks oxygen and has turned over 75% of the broads into a kind of “sterile algal soup” (Somerville 129). Farmland, forest clumps, long ploughed runnels of earth and wild rhubarb and nettle. The mind stills, until a drake flies overhead, harrying a female duck trying to evade pursuit. A swan, its head stained orange by ochre leachates brought out by fertilisers, eases along, seeming nonchalant. The grand cloudscapes are full of birdcalls I do not recognise.

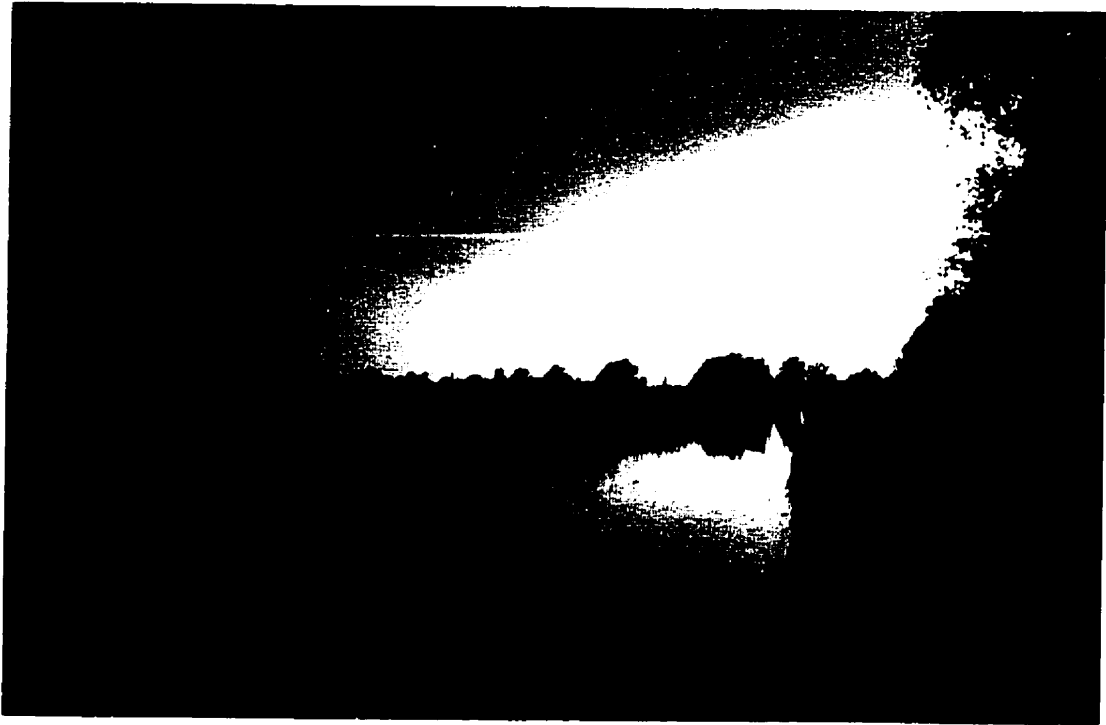


Fig. 4 River Chet. Near Loddon. Norfolk, East Anglia. May 1999.  
Photograph by Michelle Wilson.

In East Anglia, the wetlands, Broads and swamps are preserved ecosystems, somewhat protected, but still vulnerable before real estate and tourism development. They are a haven for birdlife. But these wetlands are man-made. Contemporary preservation efforts focus on retaining the manufactured state of the Broads, which are not lakes as much as great sodden peat pits. In the 1950s, archaeological evidence pointed to the removal of almost one billion cubic feet of peat, between roughly 1070 and 1270. Nearly 50 pits of varying sizes were dug to provide fuel for the booming city of Norwich.

Rising sea levels in the thirteenth century flooded the pits; "by the fifteenth century these open-pits had become, or were becoming, the water-filled lakes we know today" (Dymond 117). These lakes in turn were checked or augmented by dikes and channels over subsequent centuries. The "River" Chet is composed by spade, not current: it was dug out over the years and is really a huge water-filled ditch. Now these bodies of water and wetland are preserved; regenerating reeds are felled to maintain appropriate avian habitat: the reeds are used for thatched roofing that is topped off by sedge. "A broad, left to nature's slow processes, reverts slowly from an open sheet of water to fen a thick mass of reeds and sedge; then to carr woodland in which grows thickets of water-loving trees such as alder and willow; finally to dry woodland, usually of oak" (Somerville 127).

Boats are urged to travel very slowly (to prevent river wash and chronic bank erosion caused by speeding merry tourists). The mud churned from the riverbed prevents clear water and destroys the bank: "Parts of the River Bure are widening by several yards every year" (Somerville 128). I keep the speed very low, but the motor runs on diesel and puffs into the air. There are very few journeys without consequence.

The balance of modern change still tends to erode and destroy, rather than enhance, the country's character — a strange achievement for a generation which has acquired higher standards of living than any of its predecessors.... We desperately need strategies and philosophies which will arrest the decline of ordinary, average places — expanding villages as well as conservation areas.... It remains to be seen whether we can muster the restraint, vision and political will which are needed, first to save our unique and priceless inheritance, and then sensitively to develop it. (Dymond 260)

•

The abandoned riverside house has windows of stone-silled diamond leadlights, most broken now before the curtains of sheeptooth yellow. An empty private granary rises

like a sheared tree behind the house. The river eases round Strumpshaw Fen, hints of ocean tugging at the small hours, at our dreams. When we moor for the night the stillness seems absolute; in the near-darkness of midsummer the world is monochrome, the water a pewter sky. In the morning a NATO jet will scream overhead, returning to the Air Force base. As we cruise, bridges across the Danube are blasted into chunks.

## **Protection**

To speak or fight for the river is an oppositional act. The preservation of wilderness has traditionally excluded major resource extraction such as clearcut logging. When hundreds protested to preserve the Stein River basin in British Columbia, they opposed clearcut logging that had rendered the surrounding valleys bald and dusty. Preserved sites support both biodiversity and nostalgia: in the late twentieth century, wilderness is remnant. Perhaps, after my reading for the river in itself, it is wiser to remain anchored to the library, rather than burn fuel to get to pockets of a former, damaged world. But going to those places allows observation of a different nature. Nature may even observe you. This next fragment talks back to issues of wildness and tries to examine the meanings I carry to a 'pure' river.

## **Stein River. Interior British Columbia, Canada.**

*September 1997*

*"Hey Michelle, this place looks just like the ones I used to see on those TV documentaries about bears!"*

*"Oh, thanks Charles."*

The grey cables of the bridge arc above the greened churn of water, cedar and hemlock bordering the banks. When we walked into this valley two days ago it was banked with black cloud and we wondered what we were doing. Now the weather has settled, we've eaten some of the couscous, and my pack is meant to be lighter: no matter. The Stein is an amazing river. Many have fought for it and for the bears and the trees here. It is the only unlogged watershed tributary of the Fraser River over 5000 hectares. When you get to the mountains and look around, the valleys next to the Stein are brown and cleared.

There are petroglyphs in the Stein valley that reveal the oldest human ways of knowing the river, one passed on in Nlha7kpámx and Stl'atl'imx gatherings over the millennia. This has long been a sacred river. What words can I offer as we enter the valley? When the early spring brings groundwater seepage the rock paintings enhance “many of the paintings, restoring them to their original brilliance. This, say the elders, is the spirits putting on fresh paint” (*Stein*).<sup>1</sup>

The cottonwood back from the River has a signature twelve feet up—the scored clawmarks of the bear. Two days later the grizzly bear visits our campsite by the river. She had been feeding at the water and wants to go upstream. She knows we are there. So she skirts the clearing around us, as Joel whispers hoarsely to me and Jan stills herself. I turn. The bear is 35-feet away, and the trees she walks through are thin. Her fur is cinnamon brown, her hump big above the shoulders. When she turns to look at us I am agape at her gaze: the brown steady eyes just look right at me, so steadily and she walks on, past the tent further on where Michelle is packing up. We scamper towards the tent, whispering as the bear turns into the bush. I am humbled to be alive, to have been seen; I am humble because she chose to leave us alone. Would that we humans could do the same. We later meet a group of forestry students who are assessing histories of fire through tree-ring analysis; they know the bear as a regular in the area.

By the Stein I imagine time as a current that flows through us, that turns and stares into our bones, that moves on, gathering us up for a moment. We spend days and nights with the sound of water, not cars. The river just gives and gives of itself. Watching the green churning current, I am awed by the evidence of continuities read in worn rock. To learn and laugh and walk by the river that runs clean and strong; I am graced by this water and the bounty it has made.

At the end of the week we walk out and hitch a lift south. We walk, muddy and booted, into glitzy Whistler village, and into a world that seems, according to the papers, to have been awash in tears: Diana, Princess of Wales was buried the day before. Tears: small rivers gone salty, unconfined streams that have washed the cheeks of thousands.

No river is pure. No river is untouched by human hand or eye. Aloneness is defined by otherness. There seems no escape from the human seeing that has sustained me and caused me concern, those impulses that preserve, pollute or impound the flowing waters of life. Each chapter of this thesis runs into the next, and the rivers flow into the ocean. The web embraces; the web

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<sup>1</sup> *Stein Valley: Heritage Guide and Map*. Voices of the Earth Foundation. PO Box 52028, North Vancouver, BC V6J 3T2 Canada. Ruby Dunstan, Former Chief of the Lytton Indian Band, established the Foundation, which integrates “the wisdom handed down through the millennia by indigenous ancestors throughout the world” with other non-native ways of knowing for a holistically grounded future.

entraps. The Weber River is bound within that. Despite its healthy state, the world around it leads me to a sense of dis-ease. Purity is a fiction and a truth; it can never escape its human constructedness as a metaphor. But ecological collapse has also made purity a measurable goal. The hydrologic cycle is a fact; the cycle gathers its own fictions. In this fragment I apply my own fictions to an urban river, one bordered by railtracks yet regarded as an estimable restoration site. As with the Stein piece, it attends to the ways a river is never cut off from the human world in our eyes. That human intervention continues at some level.

### **Weber River, Ogden, Utah, U. S. A.**

*February 1999.* I pick my way across a river of tracks until I reach the sound of the water. I have passed over Weber sandstone, clumps of tussock and the scurfed ice of muddy puddles on my trek through the unpeopled area north of Union Station, and still not reached the water.

Ah, the West at last! I'd lit out for the territory beyond rusted boxcars and smashed windows, the abandoned river hinterland of a mobile species. I recognized the standard pale hospital green of the empty point box, and was happy in the language of rust and discard, lapped vintages of concrete. Beyond that stubborn shed and the burnt ochres of rust and earth there are mountains, snowdusted white and grey against the blue sky.

I smell urine at the juncture of platform and wall. Traces. Veering north towards the bald willows, passing signs of humans: cindered fireplaces, sooted glass and a pair of toddler's woollen tights, brown as track rust, flecked with turquoise. Icemelt patters off the blackened warehouse. The humming power lines above me are packed with pigeons: they lift with a great 'churr' of wing. It fades and is replaced again by the hum of powerlines, and now, the rush of water. One more set of tracks and I'm into the trees, those bare limbs intent, waiting. The deer tracks on the snow veer towards the water that runs east for a time. Hunkered by its pewtered purpose, I look into eddies and riffles; I do not dip my hands into the current.

We watch and those we love go on; we look to the ineluctable wake of their departure, their care and absence wrought into our surging hearts. Endings blur in memory. I think of Jim Harrison's lines as I look into the grey rush: "a limited life attaches itself to the endless / movement."

•

Skewed in the bank's chocolate soil, bedecked with fallen leaves is a Tower manual typewriter, its 'i' missing and the strike keys raised in bunched supplication to the forces that have carried it this far. I walk on, grinning. Looking back I see the chrome glint of the carriage return, the dull silver of the river. There's more knitwear at my feet: magenta, black and red, the wool flecked with the silty gift of high water. A fly lands on my lapel.

Upriver and upriver: An old sofa, a chorus book in the snow and then, the HCl Dyce chemical factory. Black barrels spell out why we turn from the rivers: Acetone, Anhydrol Solvent, N-Butyl Acetate 99%, Methanol, Toluene, Solvent Xylene, a barrel of Methylene Chloride with "BAD" written on the label. Skirting the perimeter fence I sniff the air, furtive. Only the smell of urine, dirty ice and concrete here.

The pigeons have returned to the powerlines. I turn from the river and walk across mud and tracks as cars roar across the overbridge. My hands are tainted with the run-off of images, lifetimes, impossible to hold. Behind me a locomotive pulls out to continue its journey. The typewriter has been left, waiting, by the singing river.



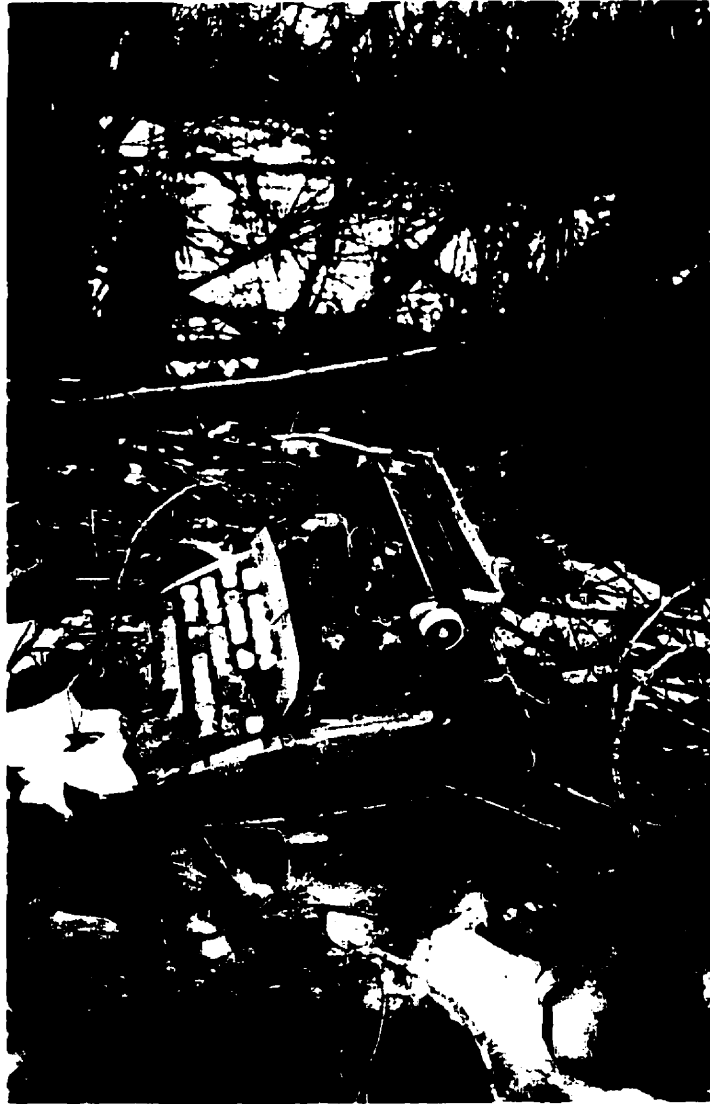


Fig. 5 Found Object. Weber River. February 1999. Photograph by Charles Dawson.

## **Lasting purities, lasting stories**

The bus lurches into its long haul, the bars of the windows caked in dust. I reposition myself on the vinyl seating; Michelle passes me the half-filled bottle of “Bisleri” drinking water. The conductor acknowledges it, not as an overpriced bottle for backpackers, but as a transportable record of a visit to the holy Yamuna and Ganges Rivers, a confluence where another (invisible) river is said to flow above the waters. He sees us as worshippers of those rivers. The slippage between what was expected of us, and what we actually performed, is one of the ironies and gaps that make genuinely (post) colonial river policies so elusive. River management must serve so many ends. India manages to resolve contradictions by accepting them, and ignore river problems by getting on with things. Development is racing ahead and the rivers must bear much of the effluent run-off.

The final two fragments track versions of ‘exotic’ river transformation, where an encounter with Otherness demands reflexivity and where, against certain statistical or ecological odds, the fallen river can still work wonders with the spirit.

### **River Ganges. Varanasi, India**

*May 1995.* In my washed-out picture of the river, the far bank appears devoid of human occupation. Beneath a smirking dawn there’s just a dark stretch of earth, a black tide rising improbably against a glacier’s crenellated tongue. But this is no frozen river.

Early morning. For hours the world here has been stirring in all sorts of ways and the River never stops moving. The red sun gathers itself into an imperious yellow, shining on the glistened bodies of the devout and us dry backpackers who gaze, hesitant, at the holy water. Men and women walk swaying into the water, arms upraised in surrender. Others do laundry, or bathe. I look on.

Later, in a crumbling room by the Ganges, not so much a room as a defiant collation of antique brick and collapsed rafters, draped in live electric wiring, I unroll and admire a small poster of Hanuman the Hindu Monkey-God, poised in sly-seeming meditation. Then Michelle and I walk down to the river that rises out of itself; many who gather have spent years focused on getting to this place. Obeisance is given from stone and flesh. The water is laced with chemicals and still it is swallowed, for its sacredness seems to mitigate harm. “Pure water is so highly valorized that nothing, it seems, can defile it. It is a substance of good” (Bachelard, *Water and Dreams* 141).

The ghats are crowded with wide-hulled wooden row boats offering rides, wooden hulls bumping old stone steps: “Hello boat?” yell the rowers. Later we’ll reply with crumpled rupee notes, get tacked out into the current across the wide, wide water. I’ll watch the man pull on the oars, stop, drift, pull; the roll of oarlocks, his head nodding in the direction of the funeral pyres on shore. I don’t look to the fires. Enough watching has been done.

As the gentleman continues his gazing the sacred water is cupped in palms and is lifted to the face in that old, old gesture. The water mediates skin and blade. The razor is tapped against a steel bowl, turning me away from ersatz reflection. The barber tilts my jaw to clear the last swathe of lather from my chin. A lump of quartz is slid across the after shave, smoothing. The quartz is worn to a curved bole, a ridge against jawbone, clear and hard. The flagstone is also smooth against my cheek: somehow I am on my stomach, cheekbone against the cool stone. There’s a leg (mine) in the hands of the barber and my other limbs are held by his three friends (who have materialised from somewhere). I am just watching the water ease by. After some wriggling I stand and begin the dance of bargaining, finally slipping away. My thoughts swirl with the prayers of many, with the effluent of factory and city, with the carnivorous turtles recently introduced into the water.

Up in the bedroom a primate interloper is biting clear through a film canister and finishing off a bottle of forty acidophilus capsules: the monkey that has broken into our ramshackle room now has the healthiest intestinal flora on the river! The Hanuman poster is in the corner, supervising. The monkey is spotted by neighbours, bounding for the poised reach of the river where we have been sitting quietly, leaving the Ganges to those who can offer the right words of praise to this great, enduring current. As cobalt dusk gathers, the water matches the sky’s expanse and bears us up.

•

What does one have to *know* to enter the water? Does an aura of tradition create another meniscus we need to be guided through? Sometimes, the guide is the only person who can ensure that the dialogue across elements of earth and water or between cultures is as strong and open as it can be. That guide may be textual or a person; in my experience both are instructive and storied. What, then, does it mean to live out the stereotype of the white who is healed by journey into another, autochthonous realm? Well, if it is what the River and the Maori of the Whanganui intended for me all along (I later found out the people planned as much for me), what can I do but simply let go, and flow with the current?

## Te Awa O Whanganui, New Zealand.

*January 1990.* Matiu Mareikura stands at the fire, beside Te Awa O Whanganui, the Whanganui River; the River flows southwest from the central North Island of New Zealand. Matiu's *korero*, his talk, flows on too. Flows on with others' across time, from the reach of Mount Ruapehu, down the River, all the way past Putiki, to the estuary and on to the great Pacific.

A dam diverts the headwaters, but does not stop the stories and songs that blossom with *nga waka* (the canoes) as, each summer, the tribe gathers to reweave local knowledge into the lives of young and old, binding the river and people. This summer trip is the *Tira Hoe Waka*, the journey by canoe. The tribes have fought for their water rights longer than any other people in the country have. "The violence done to the people is also done to the land" (Young 185).

•

We are gathered, preparing for departure, the air resonant with song and prayer. It begins in that still dark hour before dawn. Even in mid-summer the air is chill outside the old meeting house, the *whare tupuna* or house of the ancestors. The ancestors, present too as carved pillars inside the house, stand tall in the minds of their descendants, contemporary Maori who gather to paddle Te Awa O Whanganui. The River still carries the mark of those forebears: they live on in the rapids named after them, in the stories and songs that braid with those streams.

We stand bowed beneath a swirl of mist and the chant of old *karakia* or prayer. The dawn is called forth, as are blessings for the journey ahead.

When I rode with you all into another older history of the land I call home, you shared that strong canoe of your love. You eased me from a dry bridge into the river of life. The songs braid the meeting houses to the river. As we paddled through stories, we knew your ancestors watched on.

Each night at the River is bound by the fluid chanting of sacred *karakia*. Every dawn, every dusk, we are reminded of the responsibility of entering the waters. The canoe I ride, *Kukuta*, sits heavy and stable in the water, marked by years beneath the river. It was churned to the surface in a flood. Now, after its long wait, it rides again. Throughout the trip water will seep into the hull, trying to return us to the deep.

The 80 of us paddle into the upper reaches. The road leaves the riverbank. The silence is so profound and the cliffs so embracing, it feels (over the next days), that we are in a timeless place. Over two weeks the flotilla of *waka* surges and weaves like one of the black eels moving silently through the brown water. Upriver, in the still, cliff

braced stream, paddling. At each bend I find myself “emerging in / The mysterious, and more ample, further waters” (Avison).

At Maraekowhai Julie Ranginui tells me of the old methods her ancestors perfected for catching the lamprey and other river food. Her way of being in the world reveals what oneness with the river and spirit can do.

• • •

The *ruru* (that powerful night owl) was watching us, even during the day.

Hikaia Amohia told us to study the River; he told us how he grasped hold of his responsibilities as they were passed on. He always had a joke ready. But he knew what the power of the river was; he told us about the *taniwha*, those giant water guardians that watch over the sacred places. They might rescue the drowning, or drown the unwary. We heard the stories and we did the right things at each place. Hik died in the chill winter of 1991, his ceaseless activity and intent a call to vigilance. Many miss his orneriness and fast mind and wit, the way it ranged over topics as water does the stony riverbed. His eyes had the glint of water too.

•

Grace Taiaroa always asked those short questions of me, the very tough ones: “When are you coming back?” She had opened her arms and said “moko” (grandchild). I had moved to her side, to her beautiful poise, her love that made her shine. She had a black scarf and a black skirt on in the old style of women elders, and knew about grief. So she knew about love and never stinted with it. We spoke at Patiarero, a place renamed ‘Hiruharama,’ or Jerusalem, in the syncretic wash of belief by the water. In 1994, just prior to the Waitangi Tribunal hearings that would, five years later, culminate in a report that confirmed Maori rights to the River, Grace Taiaroa passed on to her *tupuna*, her ancestors. She was a woman who looked at the River and saw all things. When I saw her looking at the water, I could see she knew its full length; perhaps she is looking at the water now, waiting for that fullness to return.

She waited so long to hear these words that conclude the Waitangi Tribunal’s findings into the Atihaunui claims to the River. The Tribunal measures government actions against the Treaty of Waitangi it was a partner to in 1840. The report concludes with a powerful acknowledgement of everything these people have fought and died for

New Zealand society has changed since 1840, but the Treaty principles do not change. The Crown is obliged now to act honourably with Atihaunui, who have experienced misery and anguish, as well as spiritual and economic loss, at the hands of past governments. The Crown has to atone for past government actions.

I recommend that the Crown give serious consideration to sharing equally the ownership of the Whanganui riverbed – that is, the watercourse – with Atihaunui....

Recognition by the Crown as a full and equal partner in the bed of the river, and an honourable settlement for the gravel extraction, is a small concession for the Crown to make, when balanced against 100 years of struggle by Atihaunui to defend their heritage and rights. (347-8)

•

I remember Matiu Mareikura riding behind us as we left Patiarero. Matiu wished he had a handycam to film us leaping the water; then perhaps we'd see the river was simply handing us on firmly towards the ocean. When you reach that rapid you've got to act: no more time for musing. When he died in July of 1998, it was a shock; he was too young and as a keeper of knowledge he had much to share. But he had given so much. The river calls a lot up from you. Matiu knew what the river could offer, and was masterful in imparting the abundant spirit of the place, and the place of the spiritual in the world.

When I saw Niko Tangaroa, his great smile lit up our faces: "Tira Hoe Waka!" he said, as we pressed noses in greeting. That was at Matiu's funeral. The next funeral I went to, a few months later, was Niko's.

Niko Tangaroa could guide with few words, and things would happen. He went back to the river and it gave him extra strength. The boats he built still make the journey. The Whanganui is where he came from, and where he returned to, going back to his ancestral homeplace of Otoko, a meeting house on a bluff above the River.

Two great men who died earlier than they should have; they never stopped working for the river and its people. These people, known to me for such a short time, are remembered by many others: their aroha, their warmth, vitality and love endure.

Behind Matiu, the star arced fiery orange, trailing glory. The sky's river blazed.

The light. The light will not go out.

• • •

Day five, the upper reaches of the River: I paddle and see a fern frond fall into the smooth deep water. The grace of that movement, its release, stays with me. When I tell Julie Ranginui, one of the wisest people I know, she says, "And when the fern lands, there are ripples..." All the river opens in her smile then, and I feel those ripples within. When I capsize with Kevin Amohia I laugh and laugh in the water, the best

laugh since mum died those years before. As I leave the river I understand I need to let my mother go, to release her and myself by facing her death.

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That dam is a wrong, but the water still heals. How long can you hold off when the water is calling? When you know that's what you really need? Archie Taiaroa stood with me high on the bank: we looked at the water below Atene. "There's a lot of work to be done," he said.

The annual Tira Hoe Waka honours continuity and reminds the rest of the country that there are several ways of knowing water, place and history. As the flotilla worked its way towards the estuary, war chants and the thud of paddle against craft boomed across the water. Traditional Maori weaponry and traditional baseball caps were displayed and swung; old songs flowed beneath the concrete bridge. Already the new stories are recirculating.

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On the soft stone cliffs of the lower river there are a series of holes stretched along several miles like intent punctuation: horizontal and even, these are the holes formed over centuries as Maori poled canoes upriver, working with the cliff.

Now, the holes rest well above the current, each one a stranded absence that speaks to what might have been without the dam.

But they also speak of countless journeys, as the tribes—Pakeha and Maori—became a network of histories. As David Young says, these are histories woven by water. That water, those histories, will flow with us into the next century. And the grievances and possibilities will remain. Like memories in the stone, these stories—the wounds and the joys—offer a space for further progress in the ongoing conversations between cultures, between people and river.

One of the things the Tira Hoe Waka and the people of Te Awa O Whanganui have taught me is that no journey ever truly concludes, just as no river really ends at the sea. The drop of water falls from the paddle, the fern leaf falls into the river. After every contact there are ripples. Even now, those fluid circles are pulsing through me, drawing my eyes and my heart, back to the river, the centre where it all began. The ocean beckons.

*Awa*

## Estuaries

Precisely because the ocean beckons, I intend to ‘close’ this dissertation at the estuary, the inconclusive and inclusive ecotone between (exchanging) versions of the element of water. Exchange is a central component of the notion of recirculation I have followed through my reading. This reading is not a solely literary experience. It has led into ethics, history and ecology; bibliographic networks are dynamic systems too. My reading informs my encounter with rivers: I now ‘read’ a river with an eye to its ecology, an ear to its stories and sounds, and a breath turned towards how those components run on together. My experience of rivers folds into my reading. The textual encounters influence the ways I met the Weber, Chet and Stein Rivers; they also shape how I return to the Ganges and the Whanganui in memory.

Reading teaches that any river depends on a network of watershed collaborations that extend beyond the human realm. That suprahuman reach compels and inspires human response. The river is capable of entering the human imagination at an intimate, familiar and evocative level, but it gestures beyond that ambit. Gaston Bachelard has called water “a substance full of reminiscences and prescient reveries” (*Water and Dreams* 89). Bachelard’s rivers run through time, composing memory and vision. For him, “dreams are associated with knowledge” (93). Reverie is a constitutive act; river reflection sustains the future and flows from the past. Thinking like a river involves honouring source and estuary, two places that frame or define — but do not contain — an interdependent beginning and an ending that is neither of those borders. Writing like a river takes many forms, any form that shares the process of remembrance and apprehension through reflection. Reading a river reads forces that simultaneously run beyond us and create us. My reading has extended my sense of these influences.

River work occurs on several levels at once. Reading a textual river involves the negotiation of a braided stream of rhetoric. Observation and engagement attract other variants of language because a river is a hydrologic, ecologic, political, symbolic and economic force. These streams transpire through and shape the community in a constant cycle. Such a (hydrologic or mental) cycle encourages connection, not closure and abandonment. Continuity is a central and creative aspiration in my reading. Response sustains recirculation; momentum inheres in the process of reception. Things (ideas, silt, driftwood and -styrofoam) are passed on; exchange sustains a river and a community. Things accrete and move on, so the estuary emerges as an expression of encounter and exchange: it is a fertile place.

The immediacy of encounter on the page, in the narrative or through typographic and textual gaps (in Marlatt, Stafford, Moore, or Zetlin, for example) hints at reverie and reminiscence at the estuarine present, the site where past flows into the unknown future. To read a river or to



read of a river embeds the viewer in a present moment that braids with past and future, where time is river time. Writing *Steveston*, Marlatt became “fascinated” by the estuary there. “I would sit at the edge and watch them [river and ocean] mingling” (“Given this Body” 48). The estuary is where the river changes form again and where new possibilities arise. Like any moment, any place, the estuary is a site of change constituted by the past, moving into the future, that unknown ocean.

In “Walking” Thoreau tropes the Pacific Ocean as a Lethe stream that might purge the colonist of the worst of the Old World institutional baggage. Crossing the river is meant to cleanse. But when memory continues to erode in the New World (while the worst of the Old remains), things become worrying.

What form might the River Lethe’s estuary take? This River of forgetfulness might refuse the estuary and the possibility of remembered and mindful continuity demonstrated by Moore, McCarthy or Duncan. It might forego ocean in favour of barrier and dam. But writers such as Marlatt, Flanagan or Sinclair resist closure and amnesia. For them, reflection and remembrance is a form of momentum; it is forgetting that stagnates. To close by asserting that contemporary river writing transcends gender and industry through introspection (while being influenced by these), that the writing demonstrates forms of cross-border and cross-genre creative transpiration, that it depends on memory as a composite force, or that it encounters (and resists resolving) contemporary paradox is not quite enough. For me, the works themselves suggest openness and continuity. The estuary of Lethe is a site of closure. But the river writing and my own discursive method requires a different route. Two poets point me to the estuary where things can begin to recirculate again.

Each of the writers I have read makes a journey. The river bears them “like a consciousness” through the process of utterance (Berry, “The Rise” *Recollected* 5). That dependent, reflective journeying reminds them of every component of the ecosystem—and of memory—that carries them. Canadian poet Margaret Avison calls the experience of reckoning and challenge “The Swimmer’s Moment” (47). This is the meeting with “deadly rapids” and the “black pit” that leads to “more ample, further waters.” For Avison, some people ignore that vortex, spinning on “the rim of suction;” others are taken by the river, claimed forever. When the river unfolds again, and carries on (braiding itself into past and present), only “one or two” arrive at the venerated site: “(the silver reaches of the estuary).” This is the (framed but interactive) place where Avison (like Marlatt) closes her poem, it affirms interconnection by moving out through the “web” (Lopez, “Symposium”) of “that great river of life” (*The River—Home*) and arriving at co-operative concord. “The past it has passed through” determines much of the journey and the way ahead. Memory shapes the braiding we call ‘self’ and the river remakes itself through the continuity of its (inter)dependent development.

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My journey began at the Whanganui River; it concludes at the estuary, that ecotone where ecosystems dialogue alongside a fleeting human presence. At Putiki, mouth of the Whanganui, the River meets the Pacific. Northeast of there, through manifold currents, the Fraser runs into the same Ocean. Where river meets sea, we begin again.

New Zealand poet Dinah Hawken knows the estuary is a place of change and possibility. "The Settlement" (62) enfolds the possibilities of union between a couple into the wider possibilities of cross-cultural becoming. I conclude my thesis with a poem that opens to the ocean ahead and the challenges it brings. I want to end with a sense of possibility, not closure, to open to the potentials of journey and anchoring, love and vision that rivers and these writers have given me. A sense of grace, thankfulness and learning has marked my passage: this sense will ripple through the search ahead:

'I live she said by the sea  
and the sea refuses no river.'

Whatever is happening is happening  
At the estuary.

A pohutukawa arches over the treaty  
As a sanctuary arches over communion.

I live he said by the river  
And the river refuses no sea.

A sanctuary arches over the marriage  
As a pohutukawa arches over communion.

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