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Eleanor Ruth Hayman

Shaped by the Imagination: Myths of Water, Women, and Purity

Riddle I. Constructed Waters

How is water described and imagined, read and dreamed? How has the image of the female been linked to notions of water, purity, and desire? How is the female body still tied to images of water and how does it continue to be shaped by its materiality? What has all this got to do with bottled water and breast cancer?

“Modern” water is a complex blend of gendered and historical narratives. The manner in which water has been and is defined, and the ways in which it is managed, are products of a hegemonic and now normalized perception of water. Our assumptions, grounded in the dominant metaphors of Western epistemologies, construct a water that bears all the hallmarks of a neutral, passive resource. Modern water is coded as an inanimate commodity to be regulated and managed: it has a “social life” separate from the human animal. For all its neutrality, perceptions of water are steeped, brewed, and percolated in gendered mediums. Water’s gendered materiality comes into question when viewed in light of environmental systems, toxic substances, and biological bodies. It is this critical interlacing of ideas about gender, purity, and power that makes water intensely political.

Gender as a practice is fluid.¹ It is culturally inscribed, and works by “shaping, molding, representing, consuming, manipulating, and producing environmental histories.”² Exploring the gendered dimensions of hydro-environmental problems can, therefore, illuminate new approaches to (hydro-)historical narratives. However, from my perspective, it is not enough to reveal how gender “works” within these narratives. This is

I would like to thank Anne Milne, who first suggested starting an Ecofeminism Reading Group with me at the Rachel Carson Center in 2011 and has been instrumental in my focus here. Enormous help was also sketched out by the reading group members, who condescended to read and critique this paper—it has been transformed under their wise and generous suggestions—thank you so very much! I’d also like to thank the editors Rachel Shindelar and Katie Ritson for their patience and recommendations. Isabelle Kunze and Yousif Ammar also spent considerable time and effort on many parts of this paper. To all I am immensely grateful.

1 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

2 Virginia Scharff, ed., *Seeing Nature through Gender* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), xv.

important research, but what can we do with these myths that knot nature and culture together with such powerful consequences? I want to go one step further by asking how ways of perceiving water—which have all too often been locked into gendered myths—can be re-imagined.

With this in mind, I sketch out the historical riddle of modern water, and then illustrate how the riddle of a bottled water advertisement challenges these gendered myths. I also show that in the process dangerous new myths are simultaneously created. Finally, I attempt a conclusion by describing a vision of the “feral waters” of the future.

Riddle II. Invisible Waters

In Ivan Illich's *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*, an incisive exposure of our contemporary myopic perception of water, the author highlights water's problematic dualisms. Illich argues that “water, throughout history, has been perceived as the stuff which radiates purity: H₂O is the new stuff, on whose purification human survival now depends. H₂O and water have become opposites: H₂O, is a social creation of modern times, a resource that is scarce and calls for technical management.”³ Our desires can never be placated by this sterilized, characterless chemical formula. The eco-feminist Greta Gaard takes another approach; her work exposes water and wastewater dualisms. She places this within the broader western tradition of conceptually separating culture and nature, wilderness and civilization, male and female, etc. Ultimately these binaries produce a “nature” that is severed from humanity. The “normalizing” tendency of these dualisms, and our consequent perception of water, are, to say the least, alarming.⁴ Consider our paradoxical acknowledgment that we are a part of nature, dependent on fresh water to live, and that global fresh water, as a whole system, is in a critical—if not irreparably damaged—condition.

To unpack water's dual nature(s), and to reveal the frameworks that sustain these perceptions, it is worth looking at the way in which the imaginary surrounding water is largely tied to the Western ideal of the feminine. Greta Gaard, for example, makes

3 Ivan Illich, *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*, Ideas in Progress (Marion Boyars Publishers: London, 1986), 75–6.

4 Greta Gaard, “Women, Water, Energy: An Ecofeminist Approach,” *Organisation & Environment* 14, no. 2 (2001): 159.

a provocative link between the positions and treatment of women in Western culture and the treatment of nature (water). I would argue that three mutually reinforcing “watershed mentalities”⁵ sustain this gender-water bondage.

Firstly, the increasing technological manipulation of water and the ambitious water infrastructure provision to western European city households in the nineteenth century led to water’s increasing invisibility and abstraction. In his book *What is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction*, Jamie Linton illustrates this by reflecting on how the “placelessness of modern water (perhaps best symbolized by the tap) is the transfer of water control to placeless discourses of hydrological engineering, infrastructural management, and economics.”⁶ Dean Bavington argues that the notion of passive, yielding (feminine) water has been constructed with the ideological footprint that it *needs* to be managed.⁷ Ecofeminism exposes concepts such as water as a passive (and invisible) resource, or as a part of a pristine nature. Indeed, it seeks to respond to the ingrained power of social creations of nature (water) that ossify various intersecting forms of “oppression,” whether of race, gender, age, or class.

In their provocative paper entitled “Environmental Orientalisms,” Suzana Sawyer and Arun Agrawal seek to do just this. I classify this as the second form of watershed mentality. The authors expose a form of labeling within the colonial imagination. They note, for example, that “native topographies and peoples [were labeled] as feminine spaces to be violated, and thereby instantiated a sexual/racial hierarchy between colonizer and colonized.”⁸ The environmental historian Donald Worster’s concept of “imperial water” bleeds into Sawyer and Agrawal’s narrative of gendered and sexualized virgin territories (waters), and highlights how, through a reading of both nature (water) and gender, fractures across new lines of race, class, and ethnicity can be illuminated.

5 After Irene Klaver, “Reconnecting Visible and Invisible Water Infrastructures with Water Bodies,” *Thinking with Water*, last modified June 2010, accessed on 08 May 2012, <http://thinkingwithwater.net/content/reconnecting-visible-and-invisible-water-infrastructures-water-bodies>.

6 Jamie Linton, *What is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 18.

7 Inspired by Illich’s notion of iatrogenesis (iatrogenesis is conventionally used in medical language to denote an inadvertent adverse effect or complication resulting from medical treatment or advice), Bavington uses the term here in the context of environmental (water) conservation management. Dean Bavington, “The Iatrogenical Effects of Environmental Management: Servicing a Needy Nature,” in *Occasional Paper Series* (York University Press, 1998).

8 Suzana Sawyer and Arun Agrawal, “Environmental Orientalisms,” *Cultural Critique* 45 (2000): 72.

Figure 1(l):
Palmolive Soap
advertisement
(Courtesy of Collection
de la fondation
Abderrahman Slaoui:
edmalika@
connectcom.net.ma)

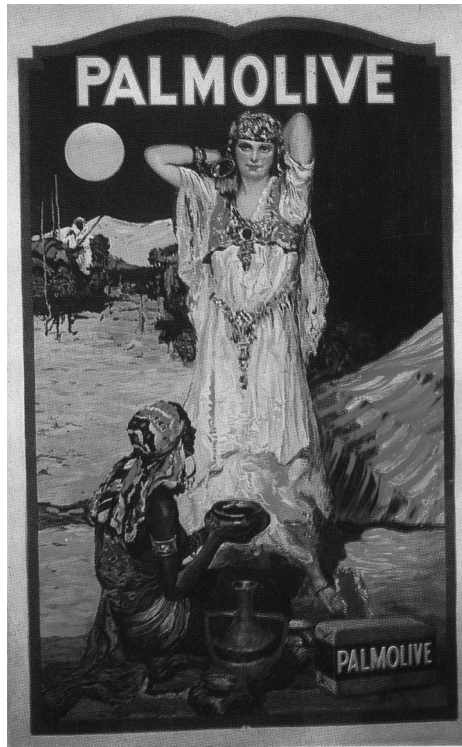
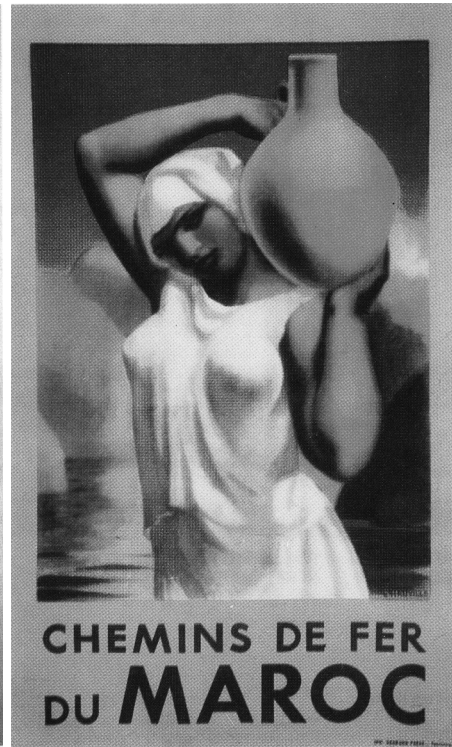


Figure 2 (r):
Railroad adver-
tisement from the
French Colony,
Morocco (Courtesy
of Collection de la
fondation Abderrah-
man Slaoui:
edmalika@connect-
com.net.ma)



Water, and all the tropes generated in its name, was therefore crucial for this “repression” to be sustained. Specifically, “the availability and use of water is a race and class issue but its political enmeshment is occluded by its location within scientifically neutral discourses of hygiene and medicine.”⁹ One could describe this as *hydro-orientalism*: by bringing colonial waters under a western epistemological and material control, colonial powers forced the development and diffusion of the ontology of modern water.¹⁰

Thirdly, parallel to the imperial conquest of “premodern” waters and the construction of invisible hydraulic infrastructures in the nineteenth century, a proliferation of impressionist and expressionist artists tied the female and water together in idealized, abstract, and sensual ways. Edgar Degas, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Ernst Ludwig

9 Rakhika Mohanram, “White Water: Race and Oceans Down Under,” *Journal of Colonialism & Colonial History* 4, no. 3 (2003): 38.

10 Linton, *What is Water?* 59.

Kirchener, Gustav Courbet, and Jean Dominique Ingres (to name but a few Western artists) all focused on the female nude as “bather,” furthering the construction of sensual, gendered waters. Illich summarizes as follows:

Water, which had been perceived as the feminine element of nature, in the nineteenth century was tied to a new ‘hygienic’ image of woman, which was itself a creation of the Victorian age. Only the late nineteenth century tied female nudity as a cultural symbol to the tap water in the bathroom. The proximity of suds and nude in the bath domesticated both water and flesh. Water became the stuff that circulates through indoor plumbing and the nude became the symbol of a new fantasy of sexual intimacy defined by the newly created domestic sphere.¹¹

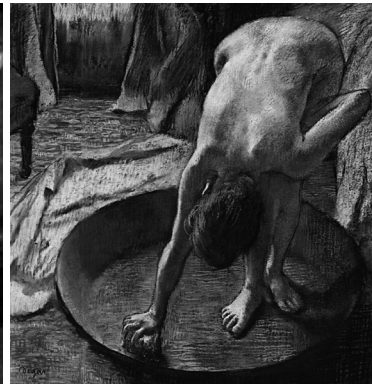


Figure 3 (l):
Edgar Degas's *The Bath*, 1886 (Zenodot Verlagsgesellschaft mbH: <http://www.zeno.org>)

Figure 4 (r):
Edgar Degas's *Woman in the Bath*, 1886 (Zenodot Verlagsgesellschaft mbH: <http://www.zeno.org>)

These powerful dualisms of pure/impure and whore/goddess are calcified and yet still in service in modern water power struggles.

Riddle III. Captured/Circulating Waters

Contemporary bottled water advertising is a highly visible aspect of modern water, and takes on what I call a hyper-constructed vision of water. Bottled water is a contained and passive water, and is thus desirable. It is water that is marketed by its claim to be pure, uncontaminated, and youth- and health-enhancing.

¹¹ Illich, *H2O*, 1.

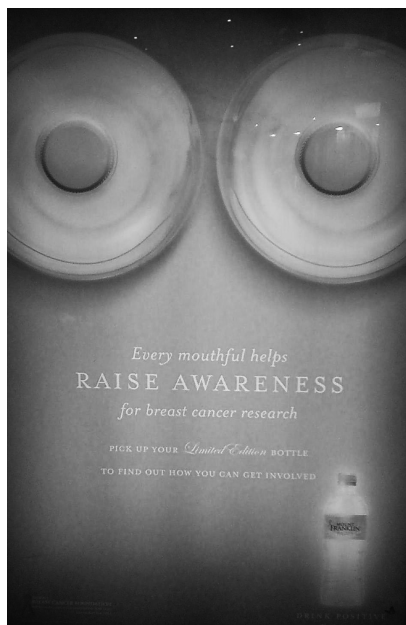


Figure 5:
Mount Franklin
spring water
advertisement, 2007
(avlyxz via flickr:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/avlyxz/2903117655/>)

In the past five years alone there has been an abundance of bottled water advertisements, all of which are tantalizing and seductive portrayals of the nude, wet, “white” female/water performance.¹² Art historian and critic John Berger’s seminal work, *Ways of Seeing*, reflects on five hundred years of Western art and argues that “the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. Women are depicted in a quite different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine—but because the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.”¹³ However, there is another mode of bottled water advertising (see fig. 5) that uses gendered images whilst at the same time subverting recognized norms.

These images show an implicit internalizing of the female signifier on the one hand, whilst on the other shifting recognized boundaries, precisely because human bodies are inherently “contaminated,” permeable, leaky, and materially fluid.

Various thinkers have sought to unpack this “intersubjective” fluid framing of human existence. For example, Stacey Alaimo notes that recognition of flows between human bodies and non-human nature alters the sense of the human subject and challenges perceptions of environmental ethics.¹⁴ Stefan Helmreich’s work on marine microbiology or the “inner ocean” draws “attention to how our bodies’ ecologies are networked to wider oceanic ecologies shaped by such phenomena as blooms of neurotoxic bacteria, which may flow into our nervous systems via drinking water and food chains.”¹⁵ Lastly,

12 See: *Mattoni* mineral water (Italy, 2009), *Vittale* mineral water “Water Your Beauty” (Brazil, 2008), *Smart Water* “My Secret Revealed—I’ve got nothing to hide” (United States, 2007–2009) or Jennifer Aniston’s *Sex Tape Smart Water* (United States, 2011), *Vitasnella* mineral water “You’ll want to wear nothing but your body” (Italy, 2009), and the *Perrier* short film (France, 2011). Visuals are all easily accessible online.

13 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 58.

14 Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2–4.

15 Stefan Helmreich, “Commentary on Water Virtual Issue” *Cultural Anthropology* (2010): www.culanth.org/?=node/361.

Myra Hird's research on microbes and micro-ontology reveals how human bodies are a "mass of interacting selves. A body's capacities are literally the result of what it incorporates; the self is not corporeal but corporate." These flows of viruses, bacteria, and chemicals, often with water as the primary vector, may indeed alter or add to DNA production, which in turn "effect variations in sex and fertility without any recourse to sexual reproduction."¹⁶ In terms of bottled water and breast cancer awareness campaigns, there are some extraordinary tensions here that illuminate gendered flows. We can see these tensions in figure 5, which shows the bottled water advertisement of a Coca-Cola subsidiary.

I chose this advertisement for the Australian Mount Franklin's bottled spring water ("Australia's favorite premium bottled water brand"¹⁷) as it knots together gendered water narratives on a broad series of registers. At first glance, Mount Franklin's bottled water advertising might seem to be buying into a rather predictable and sexualized genre of marketing (the bottles on billboards were even produced in 3D¹⁸). However, there is actually something very interesting going on here. These bottles of spring water are staking out volatile ground within breast cancer territory—another form of hydro-environmental-orientalism, perhaps? As the language of the campaign itself suggests, by "drinking" from the artificial breast, one is not only helping raise awareness of breast cancer, but supporting female breast cancer research.¹⁹ By using the breast-bottle aerial image, the female breast (although of course males are also susceptible to breast cancer), is collapsed into a prosthetic appendage with a plastic pink bottle-top nipple, complete with liquid content. This confuses the nurturing image of breast/breast milk and breast/bottle milk. It is further violated by the idea that this Mount Franklin spring water is pure and that the cancerous breast is impure—replicating the whore/goddess, water/wastewater dualisms. Indeed, the double entendre read into "every mouthful helps," and "raise" awareness supports this hybrid and sexually-confused claim.

16 Myra Hird, *Sex, Gender and Science* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 74–5.

17 "Taste and Quality" on the official site of Mount Franklin Spring Water, accessed 21 March 2011, <http://www.mountfranklinwater.com.au/drinkPositiveTasteAndQuality.aspx>.

18 See "Breast Cancer Awareness Poster," flickr, last modified 29 January 2004, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/10185659@N04/2912520805/in/pool-892622@N22/>.

19 On a cynical note, Coca-Cola Amatil, which owns Mount Franklin spring water, gave only 250,000 Australian dollars to breast cancer research in 2007 on the back of a 4.6% rise in their share of the bottled still-water market in 2006 due to their Breast Cancer Campaign tie-in. As the Sydney Morning Herald wryly reflected, "Good causes pay dividends."

Ultimately, the idea of the breast-bottle is destabilized; the bottle is parodied as a breast—neither entirely human nor entirely artificial—supporting Donna Haraway’s “cyborgian” (hybrid) thinking, which seeks to subvert nature/culture binaries.²⁰ It further alludes to some women’s choices to have surgically implanted plastics to enhance their “natural” breast size. Indeed, the aerial perspective of the bottle-breasts suggests the female in a supine position—won over/dominated/passive. The symbolic Barbie-pink color of the cap and label feeds into constructions of femininity and, of course, is the ribbon color of the international breast awareness campaign. Catriona Sandilands refers to this woman/water performance as a fluid state through which water and woman disrupt each other as a “recognition of the categories’ perpetual incoherence.”²¹ She continues by arguing that resistance to hegemonic narratives, through destabilizing connections between women and nature, is one of eco-feminism’s many subversive tactics. Mount Franklin’s advertisement, consciously or not, does exactly this.

I would argue that sites of resistance, such as this advertisement should not merely be re-readings, but rather energies that generate new spaces. Such potential spaces have been described as “in between,”²² “playing in the gap,”²³ “mushy materiality,”²⁴ and “feral ground.”²⁵ I have chosen the term “feral waters.” Performances that operate in these feral waters often do so unwittingly. For example, within one register, this savvy bottled water advertisement succeeds in smudging ideas of what is natural and unnatural by presenting an image with which we are uncomfortable. It reveals a set of gendered historical narratives that have produced storied bodies and waters.

On another and equally challenging register, there is a very material way in which gender itself has been and is manipulated through biological processes (in this case hormones²⁶) in the environment, linked directly to the bottling of “pure” water in “impure” plastic containers. By this I refer to endocrine disrupters: industrial pollutants such as

20 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 149–81.

21 Catriona Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 120.

22 Lorraine Code, “Thinking about Ecological Thinking,” *Hypatia* 23, no. 1 (2008): 187.

23 Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist*, 120.

24 Helmreich, *Commentary on Virtual Water*.

25 Anne Milne, “‘Fully motile and AWAITING FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS’: Thinking the Feral in Bioregionalism,” in *The Bioregional Imagination*, ed. by Tom Lynch, Cheryl Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 329–46.

26 Biological processes are themselves influenced by cultural constructions in the way that they alter the way bodies produce sex hormones.

pesticides, drugs, and compounds from the plastic industry, which mimic female sex hormones, also known as xenoestrogens. Nancy Langston has researched this at some length: “endocrine disrupters connect environmental histories of the body with environmental histories of wild places and wild animals . . . our bodies are how we’re most natural, but now they’re also how we’re most industrialized.”²⁷ Although there has been much research revealing the altered genders and reproductive potential of fish, alligators, and birds exposed to unprecedented levels of xenoestrogens in rivers, the literature on PET plastic bottles (that package much spring water, soft drinks, and other beverages) has, until recently, not come under scrutiny.

The Mount Franklin bottled spring water website details the campaign that reduces ecological and carbon footprints, and highlights their use of extra-light PET bottles, with a commitment to recycling. However, there have been a series of scientific papers pointing to the chemical instability of the PET bottle, which—depending on its manufacturing source, its exposure to high temperatures, and the length of time a fluid is stored or if it is reused—leaches endocrine disrupters, specifically antimony, into the bottled water.²⁸ There is the distinct possibility that consuming quantities of “pure” spring water (whether it be Mount Franklin’s or any other brand) has the potential to introduce increased levels of estrogen-mimicking chemicals into the human body. These have been directly linked to disruptions in the reproductive process (in both human males and females), as well as accelerated growth of breast cancer cells.²⁹ It is ironic to note that on Coca-Cola Amatil’s webpage in their section on *Sustainability and the Environment*, Mount Franklin is marketed as one of the top ten “Most Trusted Brands” of bottled water.³⁰

By exploring this storied water and unpacking complexities that are produced, eco-feminism exposes hegemonic definitions of both “water” and “woman” that embody

27 Nancy Langston, “Gender Transformed: Endocrine Disrupters in the Environment,” in *Seeing Nature Through Gender*, ed. by Virginia Scharff (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 130–1.

28 For more detailed information on PET bottle instability, please see the following article: Westerhoff, P., P. Prapaipong, E. Shock, and A. Hillaireau, “Antimony Leaching from Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET) Plastic Used for Bottled Drinking Water,” *Water Research* 42, no. 3 (2008): 551–556. For contamination of PET bottles as transnational phenomenon, see Martin Wagner and Jörg Oehlmann, “Estrogenic Activity in the E-Screen” *The Journal of Steroid Biochemistry and Molecular Biology* 127, no. 1–2 (2010): 128–135, doi:10.1016/j.jsbmb.2010.10.007.

29 P.D. Darbre, “Environmental Oestrogens, Cosmetics and Breast Cancer” *Best Practice & Research Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* 20, no. 1 (2006): 121–43.

30 In Millward Brown’s February 2010 survey of Most Trusted Brands, Mount Franklin was 7th in the Top 10, and one of only two Australian-owned brands on the list. <http://ccamatil.com/InvestorRelations/md/2010/Mount%20Franklin%20and%20McGrath%20Foundation%20050510.pdf>

gendered power relations. As Sandilands clearly points out, this plastic-related cancer is “not the evil technology of male culture writing itself on a natural gendered body; that very body is an artifactual co-production of nature and technology, and the cancer (and/or xenoestrogens) is a very deadly part of the same complex.” With this detailed example, it is not hard to see how hydro-social implications for both water and gender are played out politically in public health arenas.

Riddle IV. Unstable/Feral Waters

I am seeking to sketch potential worlds that are “storied” and indeed “materialized” quite differently from what has become menacingly familiar. I am offering a re-examination of our social relationship with water on a very ordinary and daily level by *re-imagining* how it is seen, thought, and understood. What is our relationship to water, to bottled water, and to bottled-water advertising that utilizes the breast image in dubious ways?

Unintentionally, Mount Franklin’s bottled water breast cancer awareness advertisement illuminates how water is gendered, controlled, and constructed, whilst at the same time ignorantly (or ironically) highlighting links between plastic-produced endocrine disruptors in water and breast cancer. At worst, the breast cancer awareness campaign (through encouraged sales of bottled water) increases consumption of contaminated water that has been shown to stimulate (breast) cancer cell production. On the one hand, the power of this image challenges, disgusts, and disrupts accepted notions of purity, gender, and water by de-familiarizing the simple alignment of woman and water. On the other hand, it complicates and exposes the fluidity of material/bodily boundaries, designations of gender, and the production of knowledge. Ultimately it narrates a story that politicizes the nature of bottled water in a new way and challenges the insidious myths sustaining certain relationships between water, bodies, and accepted notions of purity. Might this not then be the “feral waters” of a new *hydro-feminism*, a part of ecological feminism that focuses on the flows—imaginative, mythical, and physical—of the social life of water? Are we not all bodies of water?

Further Reading:

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and The Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.

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Sawyer, Suzana and Arun Agrawal. "Environmental Orientalisms." *Cultural Critique* 45 (2000): 71–108.

Scharff, Virginia, ed. *Seeing Nature through Gender*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003.