

◆ Afterword

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Throughout history rivers have flowed through different types of landscapes and have been the stuff of legends and myths. Thus a river marks the boundaries of the underworld in classical mythology; another flows through Eden in the *Book of Genesis*; others on all continents are identified with the great cultures that they nourished (Mauch and Zeller). The South American continent is given life by thousands of rivers, including some of the largest in the world, among them the mighty Amazon, the Paraná, the Magdalena, and the Orinoco, at whose mouth Columbus had located the earthly Paradise. In the modern era, rivers have often been seen “as sites of loss and indicators of human intervention in an otherwise stable natural environment” (Mauch and Zeller 6). Yet these somewhat reductive oppositions are challenged by environmental historians, who “understand humans and nature, technology and environment, as a continuum” (Mauch and Zeller 6). Perhaps, one might say, following some insights by Yi-Fu Tuan some years ago in his seminal book *Topophilia: Perception, Attitudes, and Values* that “Human beings have persistently searched for the ideal environment . . . seeking a point of equilibrium that is not of this world (248); and, more importantly, that “attitudes toward wilderness, and the countryside, insofar as they are verbalized and known, are sophisticated responses to the environment that have their origins in the city” (248). Yet, we know that the city’s “responses to the environment” can often be viewed through a dynamic and contradictory set of discourses, which, as Williams points out (in this volume) distort and question rigid notions of urban and rural spaces.

In their introduction to the cited collection of essays on European and North American Rivers, Mauch and Zeller observe that in various countries and regions, perceptions of rivers have been shaped by “social and economic needs, ecological values, aesthetic preferences, and national identities” (7). While the same observation can be made about many of the major rivers of Latin America, of particular interest to the present volume of *Hispanic Issues Online* is the idea that rivers are also literary, cultural, and political constructions forged by the minds of creative writers, cultural critics,

scientists, and politicians of various ideological and political stripes. Thus, a study of rivers in the Latin American imagination provides insights into a range of questions that are tied to a history marred by the violence of colonialism, political repression, economic exploitation, environmental degradation, and human rights abuses, which are captured through the image of the river as a witness. But rivers are also sources of inspiration of new ideas of spatiality that contest “inherited cosmographies” and reformulate existing notions of the intersection between the local and the global (Pettinaroli and Mutis, in this volume, 6).

In the early phases of conquest and colonization of Amerindia, rivers were bodies of observation and invention by cartographers, cosmographers and official chroniclers, who spun a variety of discourses (often based on classical and mythic narratives) to make sense of an alien reality that was to be coveted for economic exploitation. These new realities created by the colonial order saw an investment of energies in urban centers, which, along with bodies of water and their rational manipulation, served as core structures that made possible the imposition of European commerce (Del Valle, in this volume). But in the colonial era rivers also came to be seen as spaces of difference, wildness, and hostility that needed to be tamed. The latter was to be further emphasized in the nation-state building phase of the nineteenth century, abetted by science and a naturalistic rhetoric that was in consonance with the political and economic agendas of the new nation states. In more recent times, rivers have often become (pre) texts for the retelling/rewriting of history; for speaking about social conflict and, in some cases, to give voice to the repressed other. In this regard, rivers have also become spaces of cultural transformation; complex characters within scenarios that range from the utopian to the apocalyptic, thus capturing some of the economic and political contradictions of the last decades of the twentieth century: multinational corporations often aided by local government interests, violence and ecological disaster, and, in a different context, the erotic impulses released by a new kind of order (Mutis and Taylor Kane, in this volume).

Thus when we speak of rivers in this context, the focus is less on their physical traits and the marking of boundaries, than on a symbolic geography. The latter was illustrated brilliantly some years ago by Claudio Magris in his book *Danubio*, in which the Danube is contrasted with the Rhine to express different notions of identity: “The Danube is the river of Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest, Belgrade, Dacia, the circle which, the same way the Ocean surrounded the Greek world, crosses and surrounds Habsburg Austria, which through myth and ideology has become a symbol for a plural koine The Danube is the Mitteleuropa German-Magiar-Slavic-Romance-Hebraic, polemically contrasted to the German Reich” (qtd. in Bou 6). In his recent discussion of rivers and maps, Enric Bou makes productive use of the concept of alternative space (drawn from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Mille*

Plateaux (A Thousand Plateaus) as well as Henri Lefebvre's notion of a spatial triad: that which is conceived, perceived, and lived (*The Production of Space* 33–39). In Bou's case, the deployment of those concepts allow him to move away from a static notion of "hispanicity" in favor of a perspective that is "plurilingual and multicultural" (3). He further points out, perceptively, that "rivers, as perceived by writers, use as a starting point a spatial practice: that is, the production and reproduction of spatial relations between objects and products. That spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space (7).

Many of the essays in this volume of *Hispanic Issues Online* are, in fact, engaged in a consideration of these spatial practices in looking at the symbolic geographies of rivers and their various uses and appropriations over time. Thus, we know that at the time of conquest and colonization, the descriptions of rivers both emulated and oftentimes deviated from traditional cartographic and philosophical models, all the while constructing a symbolic space that sought to vindicate and, at times, question imperial expansion. Those discursive turns are said to have created notions of otherness as well as a new understanding of the relationships between the local and the global, one that ultimately served both to justify and problematize the imperial project (Pettinaroli, in this volume). Similarly, the lakes and the drainage system of Mexico City are said to have driven a mercantile economy, as the aquatic landscape of the region was turned into a political space (Del Valle, in this volume). And while later, in the nineteenth century, those bodies of water and the land, fauna, and flora that were part of their ecosystem would become the object of more systematic scientific cataloguing and observation, such studies provided both a window onto the tensions between natural history and that of the people, as well as the kind of knowledge that propitiated a greater potential for economic exploitation. Moreover, while Humboldt's holistic reading of the world (which upheld an understanding of life through scientific and aesthetic experiences), led to a representation of the Orinoco river as an all-encompassing space (Marcone, in this volume), and his poetics of landscape allowed for reflection on today's environmental politics, it is fair to say that, in the realm of the symbolic, one can also appropriate space for identitarian purposes. An example of the latter is Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's incursions on race to argue for a "pre-Columbian Aryanism" (Hill, in this volume).

Since imagining the new Latin American nations required an understanding of space, the mapping of aquatic landscapes became part of the process of appropriation of the bio-political and cultural spatiality, even if the "semiotic complexity" of rivers such as the Amazon made this task difficult (Anderson, in this volume). The paradoxical nature of the mighty river, its mythical ethos, its monstrous wilderness, and its radical difference from the Brazilian modern urban landscape, came to serve a national narrative that sought to articulate the past, the present, and the future of the

region in order to create a unified subjectivity based on a deterministic and naturalistic approach (Anderson, in this volume).

But while the Amazon has been at the core of symbolic unity in Brazilian national poetics, the Magdalena River in Colombia has been the thread that connects a chain of violent episodes that originated in the nineteenth century and continues until the present-day. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that Colombian literature often links rivers with the dead. Unlike the Amazon as a place which, as Anderson argues, triangulates the past, the present, and the future, the Magdalena emerges both as a space of sorrow and remembrance, one that aims to heal national and individual trauma (Mutis, in this volume). The Sumpul River of El Salvador plays a similar role in the poems analyzed by Kane (in this volume), in which a set of metaphorical and mythical symbolism constructs a poetics of testimonial expression (the river as witness) as a way to deal with the horror and trauma caused by an incomprehensible violence.

The symbolic space occupied by rivers in Latin American novels from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is substantial, and it has been argued that their literary use ranges from a more literal and pragmatic one, which relates the project of nation building and its urban and rural imaginaries, to a more “metaphorical and conceptual” use that connects with a sense of disappearance that represents both an ecological and a human condition (Williams, in this volume, 208).

Within this framework, rivers could well be seen as spaces embodying the contradictory nature of a whole range of cultural productions that have shaped the continent’s reality, as argued by the editors of this volume. These renewed discussions about rivers also emerge at a time when environmental questions have ignited the public sphere, a time when humanity is capable of destroying the planetary conditions for its own survival as a species. Such a knowledge regarding the vulnerability of the planet’s life by human hands has contributed to a potential epistemic shift from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric paradigm in which discourses about the environment are at center stage (Morton). In this regard, Skinner (in this volume) examines *Cumandá*, a foundational Ecuadorian narrative of the late nineteenth century, to articulate a discussion on gender, race, and national identity, going beyond political allegories to also recover the space of the Pastaza river as one “imbued with human emotion and meaning” (136).

This paradigm shift informed by the ecocritical movement—along with questions raised by critics connected with the “Spatial Turn”²—has contributed to a series of theoretical, cultural, and political debates around the crisis that has arisen from the conflictive relationship between humanity and the environment (Morton 9), a relationship that, following Carlos Fuentes and his readings of Schopenhauer, evokes the impossible return of humans to nature, a place both beloved and feared at the same time. This paradox becomes the spark of art, but also of the utopian narratives that

shaped the European invention of the New World, and later—for Latin Americans—represented the constant search for an origin, one which, like nature, is both feared and desired. Such a search became an obsession of much of the continent’s literary writing of the twentieth century¹; and we might add, that of some of the twenty-first century as well, as may be seen in William Ospina’s novels, where his “counter-current discourses of and on the rivers . . . critically reevaluate the colonial and neocolonial endeavors in our present” (Kressner, in this volume 191).

This contradictory disposition of our relationship with the natural world, hand in hand with today’s consciousness about the pollution and depletion of vital resources such as air and water, makes rivers a critical referent that allows us to explore the relationship between humans and their social and biological environment in an effort to understand our past as well as our present, and to situate ourselves in what Derrida calls the *place of responsibility*, that is to say, the future (“Exordio”).

With this in mind, it is not surprising that rivers condense the problematic and dissonant representations of the region’s imaginaries from the early times of conquest and colonization to the present day. As the various essays in this volume have shown, rivers—their mapping and their textual depictions—become the expression of new readings of the encounter of indigenous populations at the time of the Spanish colonial enterprise; they are reminders of the colonial legacy, and are witnesses to both human and environmental degradation and violence.

Needless to say, discussions about such violence play a central role when questions about the environment and our role in climate change and environmental disasters are beginning to effect social, political, and legal transformations that are likely to reshape our social behavior.³ Thus, *Troubled Waters: Rivers in Latin American Imagination* places itself at the core of a debate around an element that has been serving, and will continue to serve, as a symbolic space that informs cultural, political, and environmental movements in which humanity recognizes and reinvents itself and its surroundings.

Notes

1. For an extended commentary on this subject see Carlos Fuentes, *Viendo visiones; En esto creo; Valiente mundo nuevo*; and, *La gran novela latinoamericana*.
2. See Ernest W. B. Hess-Lüttich for a summary of the changes to the notion of space “from traditional geography to current socio-cultural anthropology” (2). For an excellent collection of essays on space and its role within and among various disciplines (Anthropology, Sociology, Religion, Political Science, Film, and Cultural Studies), see Barney Waif and Santa Arias.
3. See, for instance, the Detox Fashion campaign, which aims to promote “toxic-free fashion and clean water” stating that “you can tell next season’s hottest trend by

looking at the color of the rivers in Mexico and China.”
www.greenpeace.org/international/en/campaigns/toxics/water/detox/detox-fashion/.

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