

Book reviews

Water Beings: From Nature Worship to the Environmental Crisis by Veronica Strang (2023) 280 pp., The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA. ISBN 978-1-78914-688-2 (hbk), USD 45.00.

As temperatures on Earth continue to rise, the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, has warned that we are entering an 'era of global boiling', and in my view it is water, not carbon, that will ultimately be at the heart of the climate emergency. We see this devastatingly clearly in the many examples of water-related catastrophes, from crippling droughts in the Brazilian Amazon to the relentless floods that have recently overwhelmed Pakistan and washed away much of the city of Derna in Libya. For me, it was a personal and professional connection with water that drove me to read this book, not only to learn more about the work of anthropologist Veronica Strang, but also to understand how humankind could lose sight of something so vital and, dare I say it, spiritual as water.

In *Water Beings*, Strang guides the reader through early human history and our relationship with water as a sacred entity, personified in stories of snake-like aquatic beings and deities such as giant anacondas, rainbow serpents and cloud dragons. The ancient narratives featuring these fluid forms not only spoke to the physical nature of water in terms of flow and movement, the snaking of rivers and the rippling of waves, but also of the creation of the cosmos, of wisdom and the potential renewal of all things. The life-giving qualities of water were once worshipped and deeply respected. This veneration also stemmed from the well-founded fear of the destructive powers of water, with flooding and drought framed as the consequences of upsetting aquatic deities such as river gods or inciting angry storm gods.

From those early beginnings, Strang charts a transition through time and space, from a sacred and feminine representation of water to one that became marginalized and demonized, particularly in the Western world, where monotheistic and patriarchal religions and scientific disenchantment sought to dominate nature and banish any pagan or animistic beliefs. The fluidity and formlessness of water was increasingly associated with unruliness and chaos; marshes and swamps were described as fetid sources of miasma and associated with dangerous 'nether' regions. In Victorian times this was conflated with anxieties about out-of-control female sexuality and monsters that lurk beneath. Shape-shifting beings such as serpentine

water deities were considered threatening and beyond human control. With the rise of imperial power and patriarchal hierarchies, previously androgynous or hermaphrodite water deities became increasingly masculinized. Highlighting many fascinating feminine water deities from all over the globe, Strang introduces us to Sedna, the arctic mother sea goddess, Ratu Lara Kidul, the Javan mermaid goddess, and my personal favourite, Mami Wata, 'a classic embodiment of a feminised, untamed and corrupting Nature: a misogynistic nightmare of disorder' (p. 214).

As humankind shifted from nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyles to permanent settlement, agriculture and irrigation, societal structures became more authoritarian, with centralized government driving increasing social inequalities. Leaders became elevated to the status of gods, and in ancient Egypt came the first major dams. Increasingly the natural world, especially water, were viewed as needing to be controlled and tamed, as were women and the diverse cultures and belief systems that monotheistic religions sought to dominate. The Industrial revolution and the use of water to drive steam engines, with rural workers pushed into cities, led us further down the path of our separation from nature. Capitalism served to reinforce the idea of nature as a matter of utility, an object of consumption or a means of production. Strang also powerfully illustrates the role of religion in this process, highlighting Lynn White's argument that Christianity de-sanctified nature and reinforced the distance between humankind and other species. White, himself a Christian, was not afraid to point out that Western Christianity is the most anthropocentric of all religions. The opposing duality of culture and nature, with crusading superhero knights slaying fearsome dragons, doubled down on the transition from veneration of water beings and water bodies to their control and destruction.

As Strang presents the evidence of our changing relationship with water, she asks how we can reposition ourselves alongside other forms of life, to connect with the living world around us in more equal and reciprocal ways, and to see non-human beings as both creators and ancestors. Such ways of being in and relating to the natural world are deeply embedded in Indigenous and place-based societies, through their traditional, permanent and inalienable relationship with their homelands and ecosystems.

Amidst increasing calls to recognize the legal rights of rivers and non-human entities, to punish ecocide as a crime and

to adopt the rights of nature more widely, Strang demonstrates how this understanding can be built into legal frameworks to protect not only water, but nature as a whole. She reimagines communities as comprising all living things that a river catchment contains, which strikes a particular chord with me as I work with my own community towards the restoration of a river catchment in Sussex, England.

Water Beings is a well-researched and richly illustrated book that I found both inspiring and thought-provoking. It leaves me suitably enchanted, imagining these serpent water beings winding their way through our history. However, their representation of chaos as a source of creativity makes me wonder: will the 'era of global boiling' be chaos enough for us to return to a humbler relationship with all forms of life that share our beautiful blue planet?

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Nature's Temples: A Natural History of Old-Growth Forests by Joan Maloof (2023) 232 pp., Princeton University Press, Princeton, USA. ISBN 978-0-691-23050-4 (pbk), GBP 14.99.

Elderflora: A Modern History of Ancient Trees by Jared Farmer (2022) 448 pp., Basic Books, New York City, USA. ISBN 978-0-465-09784-5 (hbk) USD 35.00.

Finding the biggest or oldest individual of a tree species, so called champion trees, is a pastime somewhat akin to a very slow version of train spotting. It could be easy to dismiss this activity, as I have tended to do without appreciating the scientific rigours involved, but reading these two books has completely changed my outlook. In fact, *Elderflora* by Jared Farmer, a Professor of History, emphasises a whole new dimension to tree conservation. Documenting the conservation status and reducing the extinction risk to individual tree species is one generally acknowledged conservation priority. Protecting assemblages of trees, especially those of species-rich forests, is another. Taking into account the age of trees and forests is yet another important factor emphasised by these two books. Farmer suggests that to become wise stewards of the planet, we must take greater account of the temporal component, recognizing the age of trees and emphasizing the value of old-growth forests. We should conserve trees, not only for