

Introduction. Hydropolitics and Literature in Latin America

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no começo era a lama.
logo irrompe uma pata de cavalo,
nódoa, osso sem rédeas ou crina,
rótula ou tronco desgalhado
da cartilagem nua
aflora do lodo, resvala
feito pedra ou dormente
lúcido olho enterrado,
ruína na cerca dos fetos: enredam-se
liquens ao seu redor
como serpente
como mãos que apalpam

cresce no solo e no riacho
raiz ou palafita, rara flor insurrecta
essa espora: avança a agonia sob o rio
escavando com lascas
de unhas e dentes de ferro, até o fundo,
até engolir
o gosto amargo dos metais
(Agustoni, *O gosto amargo dos metais* 13)

in the beginning there was mud.
soon, a horse's foot breaks through,
a stain, bone without reins or mane,
a kneecap or trunk stripped off

of cartilage naked
 it emerges from the mire, drifts
 like a stone or a sleeper
 lucid buried eye,
 a ruin in the fence of ferns: lichens entangle around it
 like a snake
 like groping hands

it grows in the soil and in the stream,
 a root or stilt, a rare insurgent flower
 this spur: agony advances under the river
 digging with splinters
 of nails and iron teeth, down to the depths,
 until it swallows
 the bitter taste of metals¹

This is how Prisca Agustoni begins *O gosto amargo dos metais* (2022), a long poem about the Brumadinho disaster, a dam collapse that occurred in Minas Gerais, Brazil, in January 2019. The environmental catastrophe claimed 270 human as well as an uncountable number of non-human lives, involving the river Doce, known as Watu by Indigenous peoples, who regard its waters as sacred and ancestral. It was caused by mining operations and released millions of cubic metres of toxic sludge into the surrounding land and waterways. Through her poetic language, Agustoni mourns and denounces the death of the river and, at the same time, envisions its resurrection. Her poem presents a form of what we consider in this volume literary hydropolitics.

This volume brings together a varied range of perspectives on the relationship between literature and hydropolitics in Latin America. By linking these two fields of study, we seek to underscore the political significance of water narratives in Latin America, and, at the same time, showcase the value of literary imaginaries and strategies for sharing alternative politics regarding the aquatic environments of the region.

¹ The English translation is our own.

Hydropolitics, a relatively recent scholarly field, combines concepts from sociology, political science and geography. John Waterbury, who coined the term in a book on the intersection between hydraulics and policy in the Nile valley in 1979, departed from a strict definition of hydropolitics as the study of interstate relations concerning the management of shared water resources. Over the course of the following decades, this definition has been amplified to denominate the various ways heterogenous actors (both state and non-state, internal and external) interact over water at different levels (from state control to the individual day-to-day-use of the resource). In a Latin American context, Christine Folch (4) defines hydropolitics as “the political economy that comes from an industrialization and electrification powered by water”, which is the case of the Itaipu Dam she studies in her book. The term can also be used in aquatic contexts that not necessarily serve energy purposes. In *Agua, cultura y sociedad en México* (2002), edited by Patricia Ávila García, for example, René Georges Maury (387) describes hydropolitics simply as “la política hecha con el agua”, “politics made with water.”

In this volume, we adhere to this comprehensive understanding of hydropolitics. We consider aquatic environments as intricate sites of power relations that create inequality and exploitation, but also work, wealth, community or simply the possibility to survive. By approaching hydropolitics mainly from a literary perspective, we aim to include not only the socio-political and material dimension of aquatic environments but also the symbolic and more-than-human relations the issue of water mobilizes. In this way, we aim to go beyond the view on water, characteristic of most hydropolitical studies, as a resource that needs to be managed. At the same time, we also want to move away from an exclusively metaphorical, symbolic or ‘poetic’ understanding of the significance of water in literature. In this sense, this volume connects with recent scholarly work in the field of the blue humanities.

In the blue humanities, the focus lies on the complex interplay between humans and their aquatic surroundings. Although the field matured as a scholarly discourse between 2010 and 2020 (see Mentz 19), Elizabeth DeLoughrey traces the scholarly interest in aquatic environments, especially in the ocean, to the Cold War geopolitics of the late

1940s, when the planet was remapped because nations started to claim more nautical space as their territory. The “spatial turn” in the 1970s, which led to the emergence of globalization and diaspora studies, was a second catalyst for the rise of what DeLoughrey calls “critical ocean studies” (De Loughrey 32).

The tendency of describing economic, historical and social phenomena related to late capitalism and globalization in terms of flows and fluidity, which was prevalent in the 1990s, could be seen as another phase in this scholarly interest in water, although mostly on a metaphorical level. In particular Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (2000), which presents the notion of liquidity as a metaphor for the instable social orders in a fugitive modern world, has been influential. Latin American novels like *Única mirando el mar* (1993) by Fernando Conteras Castro, *Mapocho* (2002) by Nona Fernández or *Híper* (2018) by Alejandro de Angelis, discussed in this book, deploy and rewrite the metaphorical potential of liquidity to resist against a neoliberal logic.

Around the same time of Bauman's publication of *Liquid Modernity*, the chemist Paul Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer coined the term “Anthropocene”, the geological era known as ‘the Age of Man’, due to the impact of the human species on Earth's geological layers, on global ecosystems, on the atmosphere, and, of course, also on planetary waters, which, several years later, sparked a renewed interest in real aquatic environments. The interdisciplinary field of the blue humanities emerged at a moment when water, in particular its scarcity or abundance, became a sign of climate change so tangible that it could no longer be ignored, also in the regions of the world that had been, until then, spared of the concrete socioecological crises related to the Anthropocene.

Within several disciplines, scholars have turned their attention towards the interactions between humans and water to find ways out of the crises related to the Anthropocene. After centuries of anthropocentric discourse, parts of the humanities are trying to move beyond the notion of an era defined by humanity, based on the criticism that the focus on human influence on the planet is, in parts, reductive. *The Hydocene: Eco-Aesthetics in the Age of Water* (2024) by Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris, for example, is a clear attempt to break free from the limitations and dis-

criminations of the term Anthropocene by focusing on planetary water. Increasingly, attention is being directed toward “the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things” (Bennett ix) which, in interconnection with humans, shape our ways of living on the planet. Most of the recent studies in the blue humanities adhere to this vision and move beyond the conception of oceans, rivers and lakes as a flat surface on which human activities take place. Instead, the immersion in the materiality of the water itself leads to alternative ways of seeing and representing, and to other ways of thinking.

In line with these thoughts, human geographers Kimberley Peters and Phil Steinberg (248) coined the term “wet ontologies”: ways of thinking inspired by the material qualities of the ocean which destabilize the static and limited categories that often characterize traditional studies of place, landscape, and territory, and force us to recognize mobility, change, and interconnectedness as inherent features of the world we live in. Publications such as Melody Jue’s *Wild Blue Media. Thinking Through Seawater* (2020) contribute to this epistemological reorientation, demonstrating how ‘the oceanic’ expands established conceptual boundaries and challenges dominant perspectives of solid ground. In the field of anthropology, publications such as *Thinking Like a River* (2023) by Franz Krause or *Amphibious Anthropologies: Living in Wet Environments* (2025), edited by Alejandro Camargo, Luisa Cortesi, and Franz Krause, also recognize the agency of water. They invite us to leave the dichotomy of water and land behind and to focus on the muddy in-between, with the aim to shift towards more sustainable aquatic futures. In the field of cultural philosophy, Astrida Neimanis bases her posthuman feminist phenomenological study *Bodies of Water* (2017) on the idea that the interconnectedness of human and non-human bodies becomes especially clear in watery environments. She stresses the aquatic expansiveness in time and space, as well as the elementary dissolution of borders, and claims that “[f]or us humans, the flow and flush of waters sustain our own bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves” (2).

Peters and Steinberg’s wet ontologies, Jue’s saltwater media study, Krause’s muddy anthropology and Neimanis’ posthuman phenomeno-

logical feminism offer answers to the question about how we can think *with* water, instead of merely *about* it, a question around which the book Neimanis edited together with Cecilia Chen and Janine MacLeod, *Thinking with water* (2013), revolves. Lisa Blackmore and Liliana Gómez brought this question specifically to the realm of studies on Latin American and Caribbean visual cultures. In *Liquid Ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean Art* (2020), they call attention to the fact that the material substance of water defies “purely ocularcentric paradigms of knowledge” (2), and thus invites us to consider other ways of knowing.

What does ‘thinking with water’ mean for literary scholars? Can literature immerse us in an aquatic way of thinking? Serpil Oppermann argues in *Blue Humanities. Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene* (2023) that the element of water opens up new possibilities for creating stories. Aquatic bodies possess an intrinsic capacity to generate meaning, as water can bear witness to ecological transformations and climate change. Through its narratives, Oppermann argues, literature gives voice to non-human entities, such as water, and explores their agency in ways that challenge conventional, human-centered perspectives. Moreover, like water, stories are “rarely autochthonous, they usually begin in many places at once, with many unspoken debts” (Neimanis 8). They appear to be semiotic meshes of narrative tributaries that often cannot be captured in linear patterns and long for new forms of reading.

The idea of aquatic debts/depths and non-linear storytelling is particularly relevant in the context of Latin America, where human interventions in aquatic environments have been shaping the geopolitics of the region since pre-Columbian times and are inextricably bound up with historical atrocities. The transoceanic colonial history of the region reveals the close connection between bodies of water and economic interests and shows that the conquest and colonization of land is inseparable from a conquest of the waters. Moreover, current ecological crimes and hydropolitical tensions can only be fully understood within the framework of the historical position of many parts of Latin America in the global economy as “extractive zones” (Gómez-Barris). Existing studies on aquatic environments in Latin American literature, such as the special issue *Troubled Waters: Rivers in Latin American Imagination*

(2013), edited by Elizabeth Pettinaroli and Ana María Mutis, the books *The Image of the River in Latin/o American Literature: Written in the Water* (2017), edited by Jeanie Murphy and Elizabeth Rivero, *Hydrocriticism and Colonialism in Latin America*. *Water Marks* (2022), edited by Mabel Moraña, and the special issue *Descolonizar como poética: aguas libres en la literatura y las artes latinoamericanas recientes* (2023), edited by María José Barros y Damaso Rabanal, mainly address these historical debts. The volume *Hydrohumanities: Water Discourse and Environmental Futures* (2022) contains one essay on Latin American literature in which the significance of water for indigenous communities is connected with Peruvian fiction.

This volume draws upon these previous studies² to examine how water, in its manifold forms, functions as a site of memory, resistance, and epistemological reconfiguration in Latin American literature. It aims to foreground the ways in which literary texts from the region engage with aquatic imaginaries to challenge dominant political narratives, unveil submerged perspectives (Gómez-Barris) and envision alternative futures. So far, little attention has been paid to the specific literary strategies that can serve to oppose unequal hydropolitical structures. How does Blackmore's notion of "hydrocultural formations" (421), this is, the idea that bodies of water exert their own aesthetic agency,

2 Our understanding of the aquatic in Latin American literature also relies on Jörg Dünne's research on Argentinean literature, and in particular on his notion of a "liquid space" (2013) that permits us to connect a metaphorical liquid topology of body and world with a concrete aquatic topography. Recently, a growing interest in Latin American aquatic aesthetics has emerged within the German research community. Our book therefore aligns with other academic projects, such as the hydropolitical perspective Wolfram Nitsch (2025) employs in his recent article on Argentinean Delta literature, the conferences "Das Ozeanische und seine Displacements" at the University of Bochum in April 2024 and "Transoceanic Imaginations" at the University of Konstanz, which took place from September 30 to October 2, 2024. Another encounter worth mentioning is the workshop "Cuerpos de agua. Materialidad y narratividad acuáticas en la literatura y el cine de Latinoamérica" at the University of Osnabrück in September 2024, which will result in a publication edited by Berit Callsen (2025).

manifests itself in literature? And how does hydroliterary form connect with politics?

The essays included in this volume address this main question, which can be broken down in a series of sub-questions: How can literature contribute to acting politically *with* water in times of the socioecological crisis called the Anthropocene? In what way does writing about water influence literary form? How can hydroliterary form make us think *with* water instead of merely *about* it as an object or resource? What role does literature play in the configuration of memories of political aquatic histories? And how can hydropolitical literature imagine possible futures beyond the vision of an environmental, human-caused collapse?

The essays included in this volume are presented in three parts.

The essays comprising Part I situate the issues related to water in Latin America within a broader context of a global socioecological and cultural crisis. Estela Schindel criticizes in her essay the anthropocentric assumptions of the term 'Anthropocene' that is frequently used to refer to this crisis. She searches for other ways of being in the world in respectful and harmonious co-existence with environmental forces by focusing on the hydraulic systems of pre-Hispanic Mexico. These systems reveal a close connection between water, landscape and the symbolic world which offers an alternative to the occidental modern perspective on water as a resource or a danger that needs to be controlled.

Gesine Müller connects the image of water as both a vital and a destructive force with the contemporary post-global literary production in Latin America. In several texts by contemporary Latin American authors, she argues, a dynamic of alternation between world exhaustion and world creation is increasingly present. In this ambivalent context, water is given a central role as a vital and potentially destructive substance for literary projects that imagine (post-)global futures. Her essay focuses on three novels by Latin American authors of the post-global phase in the 21st century that deal with water-related themes. *Mugre rosa* (2020) by Fernanda Trías, *Distancia de rescate* (2014) by Samanta Schweblin, and *La Mucama de Omicunlé* (2015) by Rita Indiana show different literary strategies that open possibilities of conviviality in threatened aquatic systems.

Jobst Welge shows how the work of the Brazilian poet João Cabral de Melo Neto (1920–1999) converses with present ecological problems and literature's relationship to the Anthropocene. His essay examines the thematic and formal significance of water and rivers in the long poem *O rio* (1954). In contrast to other works by the author (*O cão sem plumas*) this is a poem that has the river Capibaribe speaking in the first person, insofar as it assimilates the flowing of the water to the flow of the syntax. The course of the river (and of the poem) is strongly related to the social and geographical spaces it traverses in the Brazilian Northeastern region of Pernambuco and to how these spaces are affected by the different water levels—or, as a matter of fact, by the absence of water, the drought that forces people to migrate to other areas. The poem constitutes an occasion to explore the interrelation between water, landscape, humans, and non-humans, but also the principles of a modernist (and regionalist) poetics working with the metaphorical categories of the liquid and the dry.

Part II zooms in on anomalous distributions of river water: on low water levels, floods and obstructed river flows. The phenomenon of the 'gran bajante', the lowering of the water level in the Río de la Plata due to the 'pampero' wind, is the focus of Jörg Dünne's essay. To examine the literary imaginary of the 'gran bajante', he analyses the scalar transitions between individual history, socio-political history and geohistory in a short story by Martín Kohan, "El error" (2015), and the last short story by Rodolfo Walsh, "Juan se iba por el río" (1977). Walsh's recently found manuscript, which is included at the end of the essay, tells the story of a multiple disappearance: of the text's manuscript (stolen from the author's house in Tigre), of Walsh himself (murdered in the ESMA during the military dictatorship), of the river (due to the lowering of the water level described in the story), and of the protagonist in the riverbed. Dünne's reflections deal with the traces left by this multiple disappearance in contemporary literature and show how these traces of people, writings, and rivers are intertwined within the framework of an environmental poetics.

Berit Callsen focuses on the opposite phenomenon, that of aquatic abundance, which manifests itself in the slow infiltration of a lethal

slum-river in the Costa Rican novel *Única Mirando el mar* (1993) by Fernando Contreras Castro and in the brutal irruption of a flood in the Argentinean novel *Híper* (2018) by Alejandro de Angelis. In both novels, the liquification of space reveals its counter/topical (*contra/tópico*) character. Both texts create symbolic places that in their aquatic abundance unleash self-destructive forces and thus denounce a neoliberal economic model. Embedded in discourses from Material Ecocriticism and New Materialism, Callsen's analysis puts emphasis on the agency of the aquatic, as an element that drives its own semantic value and diffuses into the narrative flow.

Bieke Willem analyzes two texts, *Mapocho* (2002) by Nona Fernández and "Bajo el agua negra" (2015) by Mariana Enríquez, which are set in and around rivers whose flow is heavily obstructed by pollution. Through their setting in dead aquatic environments, these texts link the problem of water pollution to the history of violence and exclusion in Chile and Argentina. The ghosts that emerge, along with the garbage in the obstructed rivers, show that today's anthropocenic horror is inextricably connected to horrors committed in the past. The texts offer ways of living *with* these ghosts, which would correspond, according to Derrida, with our ethical task in turbulent times. Both Fernández and Enríquez imagine accomplishing this task through a religiosity affected by aquatic contamination.

In Part III, the focus shifts to the relationship between water and memory, examining how water serves as a witness, a repository, and a liquid archive of narratives surrounding the Colombian armed conflict. Gesine Brede examines the role of rivers in three contemporary Colombian narratives: *Esta herida llena de peces* (2021) by Lorena Salazar Masso, *Recuerdos del río volador* (2022) by Daniel Ferreira, and *Río Muerto* (2020) by Ricardo Silva Romero. Through these texts, she demonstrates how the river's flow shapes social interactions and (Afro-)Colombian communities, intertwining everyday practices with environmental catastrophes as well as human-induced acts of violence and bloodshed. Her analysis of different, partly submerged perspectives highlights how spaces of fear become fluid, and how the aquatic imaginary mobilises literary representations of emotional paralyses.

Rebecca Seewald examines the interconnections between aquatic and bodily memory in Vanessa Londoño's *El asedio animal* (2021) and questions to what extent the multiperspectivity of Colombian victimhood becomes representable through the prism of water. She explores how water, in its constant flow and transformation, narrates the dispersed, cyclical, and unresolved nature of trauma. By integrating aquatic imagery, Londoño's novel opens up new approaches for understanding the intersections of memory, violence, and survival, highlighting the complexity of a process toward (bodily) healing. Through water's fluidity, Seewald emphasizes how the representation of victimhood challenges linear narratives, offering a way to convey the fragmented, multidimensional experiences of those affected.

Florian Homann examines the convergence of water, ecological agency, and collective memory in the peripheral regions of Chocó and Urabá in Colombia. In *La vida fue hace mucho* (2022) by Marita Lopera, the Caribbean waters assume a central role, functioning as a narrator that, through the protagonist, articulates concerns regarding pollution, ecosystem degradation, and the displacement of local communities driven by violence and economic interests. Similarly, in *Esta herida llena de peces* (2021) by Lorena Salazar Masso, Homann conducts a non-anthropocentric analysis, underscoring the interdependencies between the natural environment and human existence, both of which are accorded a voice within the text. In both of his readings, the narrative structure shifts the focus towards aquatic agency and its capacity to bear witness to historical and ecological violence.

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