



# IMAGINING RIVERS: THE AESTHETICS, HISTORY, AND POLITICS OF AMERICAN WATERWAYS

A Conversation

between Lawrence Buell and Christof Mauch

This contribution features a transatlantic conversation between Christof Mauch, environmental historian and Americanist from Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, and Lawrence Buell, literary scholar and ‘pioneer’ of ecocriticism from Harvard University. Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) marked the first major attempt to understand the green tradition of environmental writing, nonfiction as well as fiction, beginning in colonial times and continuing into the present day. With Thoreau’s *Walden* as a touchstone, this seminal book provided an account of the place of nature in the history of Western thought. Other highly acclaimed monographs include *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), a book that brought industrialized and exurban landscapes into conversation with one other, and *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2009), which provides a critical survey of the ecocritical movement since the 1970s, with an eye to the future of the discipline.

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CHRISTOF MAUCH: For a long time, from antiquity through to early modern times, philosophers and writers have seen nature—and often rivers—as the driving force of history. *Aether, aer, aqua*, and *terra* were seen as essential for human health; and historians,

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starting with Herodotus in his theory of cyclical floods (for Herodotus Egypt was “a gift from the Nile”) have seen a strong correlation between the thriving of culture and the prosperity of nature. How and why did this understanding change over time?

LAWRENCE BUELL: I believe that the ancient correlation still endures, although less securely. The chief reason for attenuation may be that urbanization dims understanding of the ways cities depend upon natural systems in order to function. A large fraction of every metropolitan population has little conception of how its food is grown and sourced, of where its waste ends up, of where the raw materials for its manufactured goods come from, and so on.

CM: North American literature has produced some great works on rivers. Powerful poems such as Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Henry David Thoreau’s classic *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and novels like James Dickey’s *Deliverance*. In the global imagination, however, no author is more present than Mark Twain. His *Life on the Mississippi* was adapted as a TV movie and a stage musical, and it was translated into multiple languages. I read it as a teenager, in German, alongside *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Both books are unforgettable to this day. The river in Twain’s memoir is both an agent of nature and one that carries memories. I remember Twain’s books because they brought exotic, wild, and adventurous places and times across the Atlantic.

LB: Rivers as outlets for wanderlust, as escape routes for slaves, as arenas of navigational adventure and challenge, as meeting sites for cross-sections of humanity, as places of beauty and ever-shifting hazard—all these Mark Twain renders unforgettably.

CM: What makes Mark Twain such an over-towering figure in river-writing? What are your own favorite readings on waterways—from around the globe and from the US?

LB: In addition to the books you mention, others that have made an impact on me—not a complete list, mind you—are Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*; the “Old Man” sequence of William Faulkner’s *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (aka *The Wild Palms*); Ami-

tav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*; Alejo Carpentier's *The Lost Steps* (*Los pasos perdidos*); the Scottish novelist Neil Gunn's plangent memoir novel *Highland River*; and Rachel Carson's overlooked *Under the Sea Wind* on the marine life of the Chesapeake Bay. John Wesley Powell's *The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons* is a landmark of American cultural history if not quite a literary classic.

CM: Thomas Jefferson declared that the view of the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah river was "worth a voyage across the Atlantic." Emanuel Leutze's spectacular painting of "George Washington crossing the Delaware" has shaped the national memory to this day. Philip Freneau called the Mississippi "the prince of rivers in comparison of whom the Nile is but a small rivulet, and the Danube a ditch." In contrast to some of the big rivers around the globe (the Danube runs through ten countries, the Nile through nine, the Rhine belongs to Switzerland as much as to Germany and the Netherlands), almost all rivers in the US are "national rivers." From a European perspective, it seems that American rivers have taken on a distinct patriotic identity. Would you agree? And if so, how would you explain it?

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LB: The Mississippi River—and its tributaries: the whole drainage basin—is certainly the example par excellence of American riverine nationalism—the vastness of its system and its geographical centrality cater to the American cult of bigness—although you're quite right to point out that it's by no means the only one. The appropriation of rivers in service of national iconography isn't US-specific, by any means, however. The Thames, the Ganges, the Yellow River, and the Yangtze are comparable cases.

CM: In her work on river deltas in the Netherlands and England, Eveline de Smalen, a young, Dutch literary scholar, has argued that Dutch literature on rivers is preoccupied "with city life," whereas the English tradition has often (and especially in the wake of Raymond Williams' focus on "the country") emphasized the rural as an important counter-world to the industrialized cityscapes that have sprung up since the nineteenth century. What explains the national and indeed exceptionalist meanings that rivers have taken on?

LB: The key predictor, I believe, is the extent to which a major riverway falls within national boundaries. but individual nations may also lay rival claims to rivers that flow across borders, as with the Nile for Egypt versus Ethiopia (for Ethiopia the Blue Nile) and in fiction the White Nile of Scholastique Mukasonga's powerful novel about the origins of Rwandan genocide [*Our Lady of the Nile*], near one of whose sources lies the cloistered upscale girl's school on which the narrative centers.

CM: During my first transcontinental flight across North America, nothing struck me more than the geometry and rigid organization of the terrain. 'The grid,' which signifies the division of land into property, is a signature feature of 'American space.' With its roots in the Land Ordinance of 1785, the meridians and baselines that have inscribed themselves in the landscape appear to exert rigid order and disciplinary control. The cadastral system thus stands in opposition to what otherwise appears to be a rather disorganized and chaotic nature, with a diverse topography and meandering watercourses. I find it intriguing that your monograph *Writing for an Endangered World* culminates in a chapter titled "Watershed Aesthetics," which looks at the natural world as a drainage basin. What triggered your interest in the watershed?

LB: What chiefly inspired "Watershed Aesthetics," as the chapter suggests, was my attraction to the American bioregionalist movement's conception of environmental belonging as the basis of cultural citizenship and, in particular, its vision of the importance of place-connectedness as the basis of cultural identity and its critique of the adequacy of jurisdictional units for understanding the phenomenon of environmental belonging. It honestly didn't occur to me at the time that to feature watersheds as the book's last exhibit might leave a misleading impression of the overall environmental imaginary. If so, I hope that a later essay in which US cadastralism figures centrally makes partial amends: "Antipodal Proximities," in *Reading Across the Pacific: Australia-US Intellectual Histories*, edited by Robert Dixon and Nicholas Birns.

CM: Environmental historian Donald Worster has argued that the history of the American West begins and ends with water. While many see the ranch, the open prairie, and the cowboy

as central to the mythology of the West, Worster claims that canals and irrigation ditches, dams, and reservoirs should be seen as the true representation of the American west. In *Rivers of Empire*, he criticizes a “hydraulic society” that boosts agribusiness elites while sidelining small homesteaders. His vision is for more democratic, bioregionalist development. Do you see similar criticism in literary works?

LB: I heartily agree that the reengineering of watercourses has underwritten ranching and cowboy culture—and western economic development generally. So too, however, with megascale transport networks like railways and highways. Accordingly, in US literary history—in writers such as Mary Austin, Frank Norris, Willa Cather, John Steinbeck, and Leslie Silko—critique of “hydraulic” dependence is best understood not so much as a discrete project but as part of a broader indictment of the abuse of land and smallholders by greed-driven entrepreneurs. As to whether some version of a bioregional ethic can effectively combat this, I’m unsure. I’d like to think so, and I share Worster’s admiration for J.W. Powell’s bold prescription for development of the arid land of the West within the limits of its fluvial geography—a prescription promptly ignored.

Quite apart from the question of whether further such appeals to local rootedness will have traction, except as activators of nostalgic environmental memory, one must also reckon with how readily such appeals can cater to xenophobia, sectionalism, and the lure of cultural homogeneity. Bioregionalism, I fear, tends too readily to presuppose a benign and earth-friendly local populace—a settler culture version of the ecological Indian stereotype. Recent arguments for bioregionalism have sought to correct against this hazard, and rightly so, by conceiving urban districts as parts of bioregions and by pointing out the cultural heterogeneity of actual bioregional populations—but without fully exorcising the image of the interdependent, homogeneous, and small hinterland community as the model of a socio-environmental utopia.

CM: A large percentage of American rivers have been dammed, diverted, or ‘straightjacketed.’ They now flow between human-made banks; their channelization has led to changes in the hydrological cycle, the balance of species, and the destruction of ecosystems.

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Environmentalists are today fighting for the ‘renaturalization’ and ‘freeing of rivers.’ They see agency in nature. After all, rivers are active and dynamic; they ‘flow’ and they ‘work.’ Obviously these are human constructs, and yet I wonder: Is nature political? To what extent can it embody a kind of political agency?

LB: To argue from environmental theory to the politics of nature is tempting but tricky. In the US, if not elsewhere, I predict that de-damming will continue to make much better headway, chiefly for practical environmental and economic reasons, than will arguments for the legal agency or standing of natural systems, especially in the US where the Supreme Court is packed with conservatives for the foreseeable future. In the developing world, of course—India, China, and Africa—we’ll likely see a continued push for more gargantuan hydropower projects for some time to come.

CM: Historian Richard White has claimed that the call for a return to nature is nothing but a religious ritual. It would be an illusion to assume that restoration leads to purity. Sins, he says, do not go away because “history does not go away.” Is there hope? If not in religion, in language? In something else?

LB: Claims that nature is sacred space must be put in context. Some bespeak serious faith commitments, others more pragmatic advocacy for nature protection, still others little more than rhetorical flourish. Without going all the way with those who seriously think of themselves as worshipping in the church of the woods, I’d argue that passionate conviction about the preservation of undeveloped, sizeable tracts of reasonably accessible open space is an absolute value for humans, as well as for environmental well-being, and is entirely defensible as an environmental philosophy and social policy. It is a potentially powerful basis for establishing broader appeal, and is not to be written off as captious purism. Let me add that Richard White’s dismissal of back-to-naturism as pious mumbo jumbo strikes me as at least partly provocative hyperbole, a kind of counterpoint, as it were, to casting himself elsewhere in *The Organic Machine* as a starstruck observer of the romance of hydro-modernization.

CM: Should we read riverscapes and watersheds as texts? It seems that an analysis of the physical world exposes connections between geography, memory, landscape, and social relationships. Is there a fundamental difference between reading texts and reading riverine landscapes?

LB: Both types of reading involve interpretative acts, of course. but it won't do to conflate, for example, acts of vicarious engagement with represented, perhaps suppositious, landscapes (as literary-critical work) with acts arising from engagement with actual spaces and sites. Where the distinctions get more complicated and interesting, however, are middle-ground cases like maps of known places constructed from memory.

CM: In 2011, the Provincial Court of Loja, Ecuador, granted a Constitutional injunction in favor of a river, the Vilcabamba River, against the Provincial Government of Loja. The case was made in drawing on the indigenous idea of “derechos de la naturaleza” (rights of nature). The widening of a road, the court argued, had violated “the rights of the river.” It had increased the river flow and potentially provoked disasters for the vulnerable riverside populations who utilize the river's resources. Some critics would argue that the most powerful—and subversive—ideas that can help rescue endangered environments around the globe (such as the Rights of Nature or the Gross National Happiness Index) are today coming from indigenous understandings. How capable is our culture of incorporating ideas from the global periphery that come with a more subjective evaluation of emotional health and cultural and ecological vitality?

LB: Perhaps the best way to work toward a response to this question is along the lines of the traditional emic/etic distinction in cultural anthropology. Cultural insiders and cultural outsiders both have something to bring to the table, but not the same something. Some sort of cross-pollination of perspectives is needed both for indigeneity to survive in today's world and for the western ecocultural imagination to achieve the granularity needed to avoid entrapment in loops of profitless speculation.

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CM: And to what extent, do you think, can the western cultural imagination suggest an emotionally sensitive and politically powerful way of thinking across nature-culture divides?

LB: Successful cross-pollination of perspectives surely requires substantial actual contact and interaction above and beyond communication from a distance, doing one's homework, etc. Maybe a term of situated fieldwork should become a required part of every future environmental humanist's training.

CM: Currently, US politicians and citizens concerned about global warming are advocating for a Green New Deal. They are hitting a wall in their communication with large parts of the public, not least because many contemporaries have more urgent worries than climate change. After all, the climate's footprint isn't easily detectable in our everyday surroundings. Can imaginative literature about rivers be a call to arms or do we need to be essayistic, journalistic, and nonfictional if we want to move electors and bring about political change?

LB: The power of story, image, and metaphor to rivet attention and instigate change can surely be formidable, as Rachel Carson, for one, proved in *Silent Spring*. I don't think it follows, however, that creative writers or environmental humanists should feel obliged to turn their favored genres of practice into calls to arms, or self-transform into public intellectuals, unless they feel a vocation for it. To state this another way, inquiry and activism are quite different pursuits, requiring different talents and proclivities, which may or may not coexist in the same person, and if they do coexist, they may do so either in mutual reinforcement or in competition with one another, or both. The place in one's head where ideas germinate often is not the same place where one plans one's activism, which in my case has been more through pedagogy and volunteer work outside the cloister. That said, I doubt that environmental writers and creative writers are likely to accomplish anything worthwhile without also being committed environmentalists and, furthermore, convinced of the potential importance of their critical or creative insights to the wider world, whether or not they take it upon themselves to engage in direct activism or advocacy.



CM: You have emphasized in your writings that “watershed consciousness” is a much-needed and effective force in triggering ecological thinking and advocacy. How can we create images, ideas, and understandings that will reach into the minds of ordinary people and not just those who are already environmentally conscious? And who do you see as the leading allies and stewards of rivers and watersheds—today and into the future?

LB: One way would surely be through more proactive mass media-circulating images and infomercials with easy-to-read visuals (a mixture of maps, photos, and info-bits) that dramatize and begin to explain such basics as (1) “everyone” (in the first instance the viewer) lives in a watershed; (2) “*Here is your watershed;*” (3) Here are some of the ways (shown by the map) in which your life depends on the health of the watershed and vice-versa, etc. I’m sure that some environmental NGOs and individual environmentalists have been experimenting with such forms of media pedagogy, and I feel sheepish that I myself have not kept up on this scene. Be that as it may, here I think is an opportunity for closer partnerships between academic environmentalism and the wider realms of popular media, especially if one’s university or research center has a good media lab or working group in environmental media studies.

Clearly international NGOs and local advocacy groups need each other. Neither is sufficient alone. Hope for the future lies in their collaboration.

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