

UCLA

Electronic Green Journal

Title

Review: Water Rites: Reimagining Water in the West

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8xx3q217>

Journal

Electronic Green Journal, 1(43)

Author

Ahiness, Ellen

Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.5070/G314344903

Copyright Information

Copyright 2020 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Review: Water Rites: Reimagining Water in the West

Edited by J. Ellis

Reviewed by Ellen Ahlness

Seattle, WA, USA

Ellis, Jim, Ed. *Water Rites: Reimagining Water in the West*. Calgary, Alberta, Canada: University of Calgary Press, 2018. 168 pp. ISBN: 978-1-55238-997-3, paperback, US \$29.99.

Originating from the Calgary Institute's 2017 Annual Community Seminar, *Water Rites: Reimagining Water in the West* developed from conversations on Western Canada's ecosystem changes resulting from climate change as being illustrative of broader global trends. The book's emphasis is on contemporary artists and projects centered on water, though it includes older paintings, illustrations, and photographs to depict changes over time. Combining storytelling with imagery to create a written and visual holistic approach to communication, *Water Rites* is a collection of essays, artwork, and commentary about water rights and incorporates government, indigenous, and nonprofit representative perspectives that offer perspectives on humanity's relationship with water. Contributed to by 16 authors and Alberta eco Trust, the book asks two questions: 1) What are the challenges surrounding water in Western Canada; and 2) What are our rights to water/does water itself have rights?

Certain branches of the social sciences that dominate conversations on water rights and environmental policy may find themselves skeptical of the book's presentation: while it is a visually cohesive and elegant edited collection, its visual arts skew is representative of its humanities origins. Such incorporation is rare within branches such as Political Science, Legal Studies, and Sociology, though the content itself is interdisciplinary and accessible to early career scholars. I would highly recommend this book for anyone seeking to deepen their environmental studies work with Native perspectives, and instructors looking for holistic approaches to environmental issues.

The introduction posits the question of whether a rights-based approach to water is sufficient for political change. By the end of the book, readers will find that the authors narratives not only fit within the book's fourteen clear-cut thematic sections, but that five

chapters do an exceptional job responding to the questions of water rites. First, “embodying kinship responsibilities in & through nipi (water)” combines personal and academic writings to compare individual activism on the behalf of bodies of water to a relationship, requiring humans to behave responsibly, define their commitments, follow through on promises, and give voices to bodies of water. Next, “*the poetics & politics of scarred/sacred water*” imagines damage to the Earth in many forms; as a wound on a body or as a mis-told story. Each imagining proposes and problematizes the spiritual nature of water. “Y2Y: Conserving Headwaters” moves from the theoretical to the practical, policy breakdowns, artists, and community leaders come together to discuss concrete water rights policies under contestation.

Following, “confluence” presents artist statements as they detail work against European constructions of landscapes property, giving anecdotal and theoretical contributions to a larger discussion of water privilege. Finally, “Indigenous water rights & global warming in Alberta” brings contributors together to discuss the trauma of damming water, stemming the natural and healthy flow of something meant to move, likening it to the disconnect inherent in urbanity.

The overarching message seems to be more about humankind’s kinship and reliance on water over its rites. Rather than explicitly answering whether a relationship-centered approach is sufficient for political change, the collections’ circular storytelling suggests a rights-based approach inspires passion that is *necessary* for change. *Water Rites* is just as much a series of prompting questions posed by various contributors to the reader as it is a reflection on challenges to water rights (and rites) by experts and community leaders. Some sections allude to Western Canada’s connections to other regions; however, water is truly transboundary and would lend to critical comparisons.

While a range of writing styles make *Water Rites* mosaic-like, section transitions can be sudden. A rich body of visuals flows through the book, constructing another layer of persuasion in the book’s multi-level rhetoric. The visuals depict contemporary paintings, photographs, and installations that explore individual and community relationships with water. The inclusion of historical images provides a contrast for us to see how this relationship—and its imaginaries—have evolved.

Ellen A. Ahlness, <eahlness@uw.edu> Center for Environmental Politics Fellow,
University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195 USA.