Chapter 2
Unidirectional Rivers and Reversible Seas: Global South and Water Metaphors in Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, and Zadie Smith

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Abstract

This essay examines three water-based articulations of socio-environmental ecology as they emerge in the literary works of Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, and Zadie Smith. Special attention will be given to the cultural and aesthetic significance of water metaphors such as canals, rivers, seas, oceans, clouds, wells, and rain. The essay seeks to interpret the semiotics of water in relation to three paradigmatic sociocultural phenomena involving the relationships between the Global North and Global South: first, integration and complete fusion; second, dissimilation and contradiction; and third, indeterminacy and problematic coexistence. These forms of interrelation between the human and nonhuman will be analyzed as expressions of three types of humanity: unified agency, clash of differing identities, and existence in a post-epistemic world.

Keywords

semiotics of water; water-based (socio)spatiality; cultural cross-pollination; human-nonhuman agencies; diasporic memories.

Introduction

In line with the historical and socio-ecological reflections on the similarities and differences within the Global South, as well as on the relationships between North and South (i.e., post-industrial and developing worlds), literature — especially postcolonial literature — has investigated forms of anthropic coevolution in the places of origin and settlement of diasporic subjects. Furthermore, it has explored the links between cultural origins and cultural practices imposed by colonizers on colonized people.

As Bruno Latour points out, such relationships are so integrated that it is difficult to determine our position along the string connecting natural and non-natural phenomena. Nevertheless, through the use of landscape metaphors, postcolonial literature has often highlighted not only forms of profound interaction, but also the breaking points that result in cultural and axiological gaps between human beings (migrant people, exiles, unassimilated and resettled people) and the natural and social landscapes that have housed or co-opted them.

This essay intends to examine three peculiar kinds of landscape ecology and forms of association between human and non-human elements that are expressed in literary works through water metaphors (channels and basins such as canals, rivers, seas and oceans, but also clouds, wells, rain). These distinct ecologies and forms of interaction point towards three paradigmatic sociocultural phenomena:

1) *integration and complete fusion between North and South, namely between the culture of the black diasporic subject and the great classical tradition* (epitomized by Derek Walcott in his 1997 collection *The Bounty*, where the Aegean Sea of the ancient culture overlaps and identifies with the Ocean surrounding the poet's Caribbean island);

2) *dissimilation* and *contradiction* between the emotional and axiological dimensions of the Northern World (England) and those of the transplanted hero from the South (embodied by Kamau Brathwaite in his 1959 poem *South*);

3) *indeterminacy* and *problematic coexistence,* as in Zadie Smith's short-story collection *Grand Union* (2019), in which the water of the Grand Union Canal metaphorically brings with it and blends the remains and traces of conflicting experiences and values, partly nostalgic-archaizing (in relation to the culture of origin), and partly spoilt and distorted by the receiving society. Drains and industrial waste from England and America mingle with purely flowing primeval waters from Antigua, symbolizing not only a phenomenon of environmental contamination, but also a site of cultural and emotional resistance. Just as the huge water flow of the canal (the Grand Union) that originates in the Global South coexists with the industrial eyesore of the North, the diasporic subject's personal and endocultural memories withstand the racial repression suffered in the North. These aspects are emphasized in the short stories "Grand Union" and "Kelso Deconstructed".

The three moments that I have outlined above — integration, contradiction and problematic coexistence — evoke just as many different concepts of

humanity: humanity as unified agency (Walcott), humanity as a plurality of identities inhabiting divergent worlds at war with each other (Brathwaite), humanity in a post-epistemological standstill (Smith).

Humanity as Unified Agency

The first literary work that I consider is Derek Walcott's elegy *The Bounty*, which opens the collection of the same name. In this elegy, written in memory of his mother Alix, the poet uses natural metaphors to refer to different cultural systems, suggesting the need for hybridization between North and South: Canto 33 of Dante's *Paradiso* «cores» (Walcott 1997: 10) the dawn's clouds, while Dante's idea of Paradise — which is a theological and poetic entity — contrasts with the natural Caribbean Eden. Here, natural metaphors mainly pertain to the semantic domains of sun and water. In particular, clouds and rain represent the Global North, which not only impacts dramatically on the South, but also enriches it in imaginative and cultural terms. Clouds and rain are messengers from another culture that has both positive effects and drawbacks on the author's own culture.

The first metaphor of water used in the elegy appears in line 6, drawing a connection between the dawn's clouds and Dante's *Paradise*:

> Between the vision of the Tourist Board and the true
> Paradise lies the desert where Isaiah's elations
> force a rose from the sand. The thirty-third canto
> cores the dawn clouds with concentric radiance,
> the breadfruit opens its palms in praise of the bounty
> *bois-pain*, tree of bread, slave food, the bliss of John Clare,
> (Walcott 1997: 3)

According to the ancient *topos*, attentively investigated by Curtius, nature is a book. In Walcott's verses, it is Dante's *Paradise*, which overlaps with the Caribbean scenery: Dante, the cloud-culture coming from the North, fertilizes the South, blending with the Caribbean natural eden.

The image of water reappears in some of the following lines, expressing how the relationship between colonizer and colonized is not merely antagonistic but also dialectically articulated:

> There on the beach, in the desert, lies the dark well
> where the rose of my life was lowered, near the shaken plants,
> near a pool of fresh tears, tolled by the golden bell
> of allamanda, thorns of the bougainvillea, and that is
> their bounty!
> (5)

The poet says that his life originated from a "dark well" sinking near "a pool of fresh tears". Water — the essential element in the metaphorical chain that comprises the clouds, the well and the pool, and that involves the spatial dimensions of height, depth, and surface, symbolizes the Global North, which both overwhelms and nourishes the South. While the water coming from above is a metaphor for the regenerative power of cultural cross-pollination, the image of the well produces other meanings. Water digs deep, it creates a well. The darkness of the well represents the strong *black* origins of the poet, who elsewhere admitted his inability to choose between Africa and his beloved English language[1]. Tears, a variation on the theme of water, represent the suffering caused by the conflicts arisen within his transcultural/multicultural self.

However, as is typical for Walcott, binarisms and oppositions are quickly dissolved on a textual level. The semantic field of water appears again in the third section of the poem in conjunction with other images of underground springs. This kind of groundwater has a positive metaphorical function: it loosens the grip of the roots, questioning the Caribbean poet's presumption of self-sufficiency and isolation. According to Walcott, the poet can't retreat into the limited horizon of his original culture and language. In his verses, he can't just celebrate his own roots. Instead, in order to produce a poetry which is "fertile", he should celebrate his roots while accepting the English language and culture as gifts (the titular "bounty").

> The trickle of underground
> springs, the babble of swollen gulches under drenched ferns,
> loosening the grip of their roots, till their hairy clods
> like unclenching fists swirl wherever the gulch turns
> them, and the shuddering aftermath bends the rods
> of wild cane.
> (7)

The "gift" of the language is thermalized in the third section of the elegy, which opens with the word "Bounty!". If the "underground springs" are the native springs that symbolize the South's ecological system, the «fresh Jacobean springs» (17), represent King James' Bible, one of the founding texts of the English language and culture. They are «Soul-freshening waters» (16) from both a religious and poetic perspective; on the one hand, they recall the figure of the poet's mother, who was a devout Christian; on the other, they symbolize a linguistic medium that allows Walcott to write his verses:

1 «I who have cursed / The drunken officer of British rule, how choose / Between this Africa and the English tongue I love? / Betray them both, or give back what they give?» (Walcott 2007: 6).

In the light's parallelogram laid on the kitchen floor,
for Thine is the Kingdom, the Glory, and the Power,
the bells of Saint Clement's in the marigolds on the altar,

in the bougainvillea's thorns, in the imperial lilac
and the feathery palms that nodded at the entry
into Jerusalem, the weight of the world on the back

of an ass; dismounting, He left His cross there for sentry
and sneering centurion; then I believed in His Word,
in a widow's immaculate husband, in pews of brown wood,

when the cattle-bell of the chapel summoned our herd
into the varnished stalls, in whose rustling hymnals I heard
the fresh Jacobean springs, the murmur Clare heard

of bounty abiding, the clear language she taught us,
"as the hart panteth," at this, her keen ears pronged
while her three fawns nibbled the soul-freshening waters,

"as the hart panteth for the water-brooks" that belonged
to the language in which I mourn her now, or when
I showed her my first elegy, her husband's, and then her own.
(8)

Walcott inserts the image of the springs in a coherent figurative series to recall the local community's meetings in the Christian church, which were also attended by his mother, Alix, to whom the elegy is dedicated. Even the sacred books read on those occasions are pervaded by water images: the "soul-freshening waters" and the wheezing deers along the rivers are drawn from the Bible and the sacred hymns. Every element originates from the semantic field of water, which stands for the Western Christian culture's power to fertilize the Caribbean cultural and literary world. The Christian culture, and the language of the colonizers enter the author's world through the mediation of his mother Alix. Furthermore, Walcott implicitly compares himself to the romantic poet and Byron's admirer John Clare, who more than any other deserves the label of *ecopoet*.

Walcott's motley poetry is the result of the intersection of a metaphorically "English" water and the Caribbean sun. Not only is Walcott unable to renounce Africa, but he also refuses to consider colonialism as a mere form of political domination. For Walcott, the heterogenesis of ends turned the tragedy of colonization into a process of cultural hybridization, during which Shakespeare's language, like a gift, added words and history to his island's language.

The whole poem is full of images of hybridization. The fifth section opens with oceanic waves that literally "crepitate from the culture of Ovid", just as in the beginning of the poem the rain clouds are a hypostasis of Dante's culture. The vital water from the Western world, which in this case is epitomized by a classical poet, moistens and fertilizes the Caribbean:

> All of these waves crepitate from the culture of Ovid,
> its sibilants and consonants; a universal metre
> piles up these signatures like inscriptions of seaweed
>
> that dry in the pungent sun, lines ruled by mitre
> and laurel, or spray swiftly garlanding the forehead
> of an outcrop (and I hope this settles the matter of presences)
> (11)

What Walcott describes is neither a process of cultural indoctrination nor — in ecological terms — a case of allochthonous invasiveness. Water is dried by the sun (a "pungent sun"). In other words, Caribbean culture incorporates and holds, but, at the same time, it recreates and renews, almost dissolving the beneficial/poisonous gift from the West. It is not by chance that the waves that stand for the Caribbean nature fertilized by classical Latin culture, create "a universal metre". This is not a fake Western-centric universality that identifies alien values with barbarism. In Walcott's poem, Ovid's lines echo in the rhythmic sound of the ocean, becoming universal when they submit to nature. The word "metre" is almost identical to "mitre", which is the name of a plant: the metre is a natural metre. Even the classical poet's "laurel" is an "outcrop" of the Earth. Natural ecology intersects with cultural ecology. In the end of the poem, the Global North is described by drawing once again on water-related images. In spring, after the bear's self-burial, the stuttering

> crocuses open and choir, glaciers shelve and thaw,
> frozen ponds crack into maps, green lances spring
>
> from the melting fields, flags of rooks rise and tatter
> the pierced light, the crumbling quiet avalanches
> of an unsteady sky; the vole uncoils and the otter
>
> worries his sleek head through the verge's branches;
> crannies, culverts, and creeks roar with wrist-numbing water.
> Deer vault invisible hurdles and sniff the sharp air,
> squirrels spring up like questions, berries easily redden,
> edges delight in their own shapes (whoever their shaper).
> But here there is one season, our viridian Eden
> is that of the primal garden that engendered decay,

from the seed of a beetle's shard or a dead hare
white and forgotten as winter with spring on its way.

There is no change now, no cycles of spring, autumn, winter,
nor an island's perpetual summer; she took time with her;
no climate, no calendar except for this bountiful day.
(15)

The North is the place where glaciers melt, and the fields get soaked. Cracks, sewers, and streams roar with «wrist-numbing water» (25). Instead, in the South, in the Caribbean Eden, there are no seasons. Nothing changes: «There is no change now, no cycles of spring, autumn, winter» (25). It is as if the poet's mother, while leaving, had taken away time and seasons.

The long elegy ends with the poet declaring that he wants to make use of his mother's lesson by writing about the gift of light. He intends to deal with familiar things that are on the verge of becoming extraordinary, namely the natural facts of his island, which are becoming history since colonization inserted them in a flow of events. But what are these familiar things? Walcott lists them in the last stanza of his elegy:

The crab, the frigate that floats on cruciform wings,
and that nailed and thorn-riddled tree that opens its pews
to the blackbird that hasn't forgotten her because it sings.
(26)

Every image in the end of the elegy has a peculiar relevance. Turning to the humblest and smallest forms of the ecosystem, Walcott mentions 1) the crab, symbolizing the constant temptation to retire in one's shell, defended by outgrowths and spines, driven by the utopian desire for stillness or sideways movement. It is the temptation of the native poets who speak only to their community and, rejecting the gift of English, refuse to proceed forward; 2) "cruciform wings" and "a nailed and thorn-riddled tree", symbols of a Christianity that comes as an imposition from the sea, on a hostile frigate; 3) finally, a "blackbird" that, perching on the ship's mast, conquers it, makes it its own, and sings, just as the postcolonial poet appropriates the expressive tools of the Western tradition — at the same time a gift and an imposition — to sing his elegy for his mother, who is unforgettable and unforgotten.

Humanity as a Plurality of Identities

The *dissimilation* and *contradiction* between the emotional and the axiological dimensions of the Northern world (England) and those of the hero coming from the South are evident in the 1959 poem "South" by Edward Kamau Brathwaite.

Kamau Brathwaite is a Barbadian poet who moved first to the United Kingdom and later to the United States. His poem 'South', composed of six stanzas of six lines each, is included in the 1967 volume *Rights of Passage* and thematizes the nostos – the homecoming journey of a Caribbean wanderer representative of the black diaspora. In this poem, water, and in particular the European rivers — symbols of unidirectionality and narrowness —, are contrasted with the Ocean of the homeland, which stands for vastness, inclusion, and multidirectional circulation of currents-values.

In "Tintern Abbey", Wordsworth celebrates nature while remembering the tranquility and serenity of the landscapes of his childhood — in contrast with the Shakespearian *dim of towns and cities* that characterize the poet's adulthood. In a similar way, Brathwaite *recaptures* his childhood's landscape, where water, in the forms of fog, ocean, and sea, pervades the opening lines, introduced by the meaningful conjunction "but":

But today I recapture the islands'
bright beaches: blue mist from the ocean
rolling into the fishermen's houses.
By these shores I was born: sound of the sea
came in at my window, life heaved and breathed in me then
with the strength of that turbulent soil.

Since then I have travelled: moved far from the beaches:
sojourned in stoniest cities, walking the lands of the north
in sharp slanting sleet and the hail,
crossed countless saltless savannas and come
to this house in the forest where the shadows oppress me
and the only water is rain and the tepid taste of the river.

We who are born of the ocean can never seek solace
in rivers: their flowing runs on like our longing,
reproves us our lack of endeavour and purpose,
proves that our striving will founder on that.
We resent them this wisdom, this freedom: passing us
toiling, waiting and watching their cunning declension down to the sea.

But today I would join you, travelling river,
borne down the years of your patientest flowing,
past pains that would wreck us, sorrows arrest us,
hatred that washes us up on the flats;
and moving on through the plains that receive us,
processioned in tumult, come to the sea.

Bright waves splash up from the rocks to refresh us,
blue sea-shells shift in their wake

and there is the thatch of the fishermen's houses, the path
made of pebbles, and look!
Small urchins combing the beaches
look up from their traps to salute us:

they remember us just as we left them.
The fisherman, hawking the surf on this side
of the reef, stands up in his boat
and halloos us: a starfish lies in its pool.
And gulls, white sails slanted seaward,
fly into the limitless morning before us.
(Brathwaite 1967: 56-57)

The poem opens *in medias res*, starting with an adversative conjunction, as if the poet were going on with a topic introduced earlier in the text. Since he left the islands, he has always travelled without really finding a new homeplace: he has crossed savannas not lapped by the sea; he has settled in the middle of forests where rain was the only form water could take. The lack of water and the stoniness of the "lands of the north" symbolize dissimilation, the cultural alterity experienced by the diasporic subject during his errancy. Finally, he leaves the stony cities of the North to come back to the ocean, in the South.

The poet is indeed the ocean's son, and therefore he has always been dissatisfied with the rivers since they are unidirectional: their flow is rigidly regulated by two banks. He prefers the ocean, where movements are multidirectional, waters mingle, and sailors can follow endless currents and innumerable trajectories. In his view, rivers are symbols of frustration: they represent the effort to merge with the sea, vain hopes, and expectations that will be irremediably disappointed. However, in his imagination, the "travelling river" is bringing him home, so he is still pleased with its flow and movements.

In the first part of the journey, returning home does not result in the creation of an idyllic or sweetened vision. In fact, the river is full of history and painful memories: following backward the course of the river means retracing the personal and collective history of the black diaspora. It is a river that carries along memories, conflicts, personal and collective wounds, including colonial vexations: «pains that would wreck us, sorrows arrest us, / hatred that washes us up on the flats».

Only at the end of the journey the homeplace's seawater performs a beneficial and restorative function. It heals the spirit, consecrating the culmination of the *nostos*. The sea spray refreshes the travelers' faces: «Bright waves splash up from the rocks to refresh us».

Once the travel is completed, and the poet has come back to his islands, he precipitously leaves the realm of time. Time seems to stop at a precise moment preceding his departure: the fishers' thatched-roof houses are the same as those

he knew before leaving. Landscape cordially comes towards him. His eyes are caught by the same cobblestone paths, the same "urchins" that clean the beaches while welcoming the newcomers, the same fishers that say hello cheerfully. It is a complete return to his origins. However, the sensation of the *nostos* is not just a personal remembrance of real events. The poet feels at home because those who remained (i.e., the guys, the fisher) recognize and remember him. It is this recognition that makes him feel as if he never left.

Homecoming is characterized by two elements: first, the greeting addressed to the poet by young and adult people, which is a sign of recognition and welcoming; secondly, from a linguistic perspective, the constant oscillation between the first-person singular pronoun "I" and the first-person plural pronoun "we". The poet alternates "I" and "we" to describe himself and the group of those who are returning home, like himself. The *self* is not isolated but is part of an itinerant community that ideally reunites with a settled community, just as a river flows into the sea and the ocean. In the end, the "I" — the singular — dissolves within the "we", the plural. In the last seventeen lines, the self disappears: what is left is "we" and "us".

From an axiological perspective, this poem is antipodal to Walcott's elegy. Brathwaite underlines the differences between cultures rather than their productive overlapping. North and South cannot be assimilated, in the same way that the stone and rivers' ecosystems cannot be assimilated into the ocean's ecosystem. While Walcott emphasizes the fertility of intercultural relations, Brathwaite gives voice to the unassimilated subject's diasporic melancholy and homesickness.

Humanity in a Post-Epistemological Standstill

The third kind of sociocultural phenomena related to peculiar landscape ecologies emerges in the works of Zadie Smith, a New-York based author who was born in London to a Jamaican mother and an English father. Also Smith writes about the diasporic experience, but considers it as an ancestral event. Indeed, her narrative reflects the development of the postmodern cultural discourse.

In the short story collection *Grand Union* (2019), postmodern themes and diasporic thinking intersect, and this interrelation is often expressed by means of water metaphors. In "The Lazy River", for example, Smith imagines that the British tourists who stay in a hotel in Southern Spain are prisoners of a "lazy river". This is the incipit of the short story:

> We're submerged, all of us. You, me, the children, our friends, their children, everybody else. Sometimes we get out for lunch, to read or to tan, never for very long. Then we all climb back into the metaphor. The Lazy River is a circle, it is wet, it has an artificial current. Even if you don't move you will get where and then return to

> wherever you started, and if we may speak of the depth of a metaphor, well, then, it is about three feet deep, excepting a brief stretch at which point it rises to six feet four. Here children scream- clinging to the walls or the nearest adult- until it is three feet deep once more. Round and round we go. All life is in here, flowing. Flowing! Responses vary. Most of us float in the direction of the current, swimming a little, or walking, or treading water. (Smith: 2019: 25)

Some tourists float on their backs; others — the ones who have a university education — swim against the current, but they are always brought back by the waterflow. Everyone is indeed dragged by the current.

The river, which is not particularly deep, and whose murky water flows in circle, takes on a metaphorical value: it is the river of cultural insignificance, wherein all characters bathe while making irrelevant, trivial and purposeless gestures. The narrator asserts that «Lazy River is a metaphor and at the same time a real body of artificial water, in an all-inclusive hotel, in Almeria, somewhere in southern Spain» (26). The river symbolizes the Western way of life practiced by countless and vain vacationers. Some characters sing karaoke, while others buy flotation devices or distractedly meet people ashore. Among the settlers there are two Africans that, for a living, braid tourists' hair. They are the only ones to go upstream. Overall, holidaymakers get accustomed to the circular flow of the current, and float.

The metaphor is almost obvious: the decaying West leaves excremental traces behind (at a certain point the river's water turns green because of human urine). The West is paralyzed, since it lacks *telos* and a core. The story ends with the image of two servants that try to clean the river by picking up «whatever scum we have left off the sides» (34). This enterprise, however, seems to be above their means.

In line with Brathwaite's ecological and aesthetic thinking, Smith contrasts the Lazy River with the waters of Grand Union, the canal connecting London and the Midlands which, to the eyes of Kelso Cochrane, protagonist of the short story "Kelso Deconstructed", resembles the canal of Antigua where he swam as a child. Kelso is an immigrant who strives for integrating into the English society, working and studying to improve himself. Despite his efforts and righteousness, he is killed in London by some white racists that remain unpunished. In his mind, the green muddy lagoon at the back of Antigua's canal overlaps with Hudson and Potomac, two rivers characterised by cold and dirty waters that remind him of America, the first landing place of his diasporic journey. For Kelso, the Grand Union unites past and present in a single event of mortification that destroys his expectations of fitting in with the social dynamics of the Global North. Nevertheless, like Brathwaite, also Smith ends her collection on a note of imaginative redemption. In the final short story, which is tellingly titled "Grand Union", «all the daughters of the world» (241) unite in a chain of solidarity that goes through all generations, and whose links are held

together by two bonding elements: «love, and the recognition of history» (242). If the waters of the Western lazy river are dead, stagnant, and fit only for senseless floating, the waters flowing from the unlimited source of the imagination return to the origins, go back to previous generations, and therefore create an intergenerational bond, holding together the human beings that inhabit the water and cultural ecosystems of both the Northern and Southern hemispheres.

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