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## *Women, Water and the Reclamation of the Feminine*

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*Only the water knows where the water goes, when the river's  
underground- anonymous<sup>i</sup>*

Water has always been an object of veneration and worship—for poets and writers it is a central metaphor. Indeed, the English word *Earth* has its roots in the Sumerian word “*Ea*”, which means “house of water”<sup>ii</sup>. Water is an essential part of the creation stories of most, if not all, civilizations, and in them it, like Earth itself, is most often anthropomorphized as feminine (we will examine this point later). Traditional cultures have always known the basic fact that water is the source of all life, and Western science continues to affirm that cultural awareness. Yet the forces of modernity, for the moment, are perceived as gaining the “higher ground.” Exportation and subsequent execution of ideologies characterized by one-dimensionality, the valuing of immediate economic gain over real sustainability, and the privileging of modern technologies and thought over time-honored methods and cultural wisdom have often meant the imposition of socioeconomic models that are anathema to the welfare of living beings. One need think only of a few of the myriad environmental dilemmas facing us to know that human activity is having a profound impact on a global scale: desertification, destruction of mangroves, global warming, increased intensity and frequency of storms (the 2004-2005 tsunami in Asia and the aftermath of the hurricanes in New Orleans and the Yucatan). These catastrophes are causing, among other things, unprecedented ecological destruction

and a sharp increase in environmental refugees<sup>iii</sup>. Clearly, post-industrial dominant human culture is not doing Earth much good. And that is why there is such strong organization against global capitalism. Anti-globalization activists understand that how we regard nature is fundamental to how we deal with these crises of our own making. How nature is and ought to be regarded is perhaps the most important underlying reason why there is reaction to and organization against capitalist globalization.

The clash between Western and non-Western societies (as they are generically called) arises from their differing understanding of humanity's relation to nature. The former sees a nature/culture divide that sets humanity apart from and above the rest of the natural world, while the latter has thrived on an idea of humanity's interconnectedness to nature. Nowhere is the tension between the capitalist model of 'development' and more traditional sustainable and harmonious approaches to nature more apparent than in the current struggle over the life resource of water. The United Nations has been grappling with the issue of water access for decades. In 1991, under coercive influence from the WTO and multinationals, the UN classified water as a human need, rather than a human right.<sup>iv</sup> In 2002, however, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights passed a resolution that human beings have a right to water, and that resolution has been ratified by 145 countries. Unfortunately, this declaration was not supported by the Kyoto treaty the following year, and first-world corporations continue to push water privatization.

Behind the linguistic clash over *right* versus *need* that plays out in conflicting international decisions and treaties lies a conceptual clash that reduces the

multidimensionality of life elements—in this case, water—to potential commodities susceptible to conquest and control.<sup>v</sup> Earth itself has already been appropriated: land ownership is a cornerstone of Western culture.

Water then appears to be the new frontier element to be vanquished. The attempt to commodify water has specific ramifications for women on both material and ideological planes. Women are the child bearers and often the water bearers, and it is they who must do the bulk of the nourishing of the young. For women, then, access to clean water is extremely vital. Yet women and girls are disproportionately affected by the current world water crisis.<sup>vi</sup> In the majority of capital-poor countries, it is women who must travel long distances to obtain clean water for their families and communities. The further women go to fetch water the greater the gender equity divide: since more and more of women's time is spent just assuring daily water acquisition, it excludes them from participating in other socioeconomic activities. It is not surprising then that it is largely women who are and have been at the center of sustained struggles to preserve local access to water.

### *Water and the Nature/Culture Divide*

The term *water wars* is frequently used to describe what I call the econo-cultural vs. eco-cultural split over how humans relate to this vital resource. On the one side, there are profit-driven corporations which more often than not have the backing of militarized state power. Their goal of economic gain makes them generally attuned to the immediate and

visible. On the other, there are the poor and their allies who desire a (more than) sustainable way of life. Many of these people hold a fierce connection to nature that makes them more attentive to what cannot be seen and what is not immediate. A necessary, albeit not always articulated or wholly recognized, yet also sometimes cynically intended requirement of capitalist advancement is that of cutting the bonds—material and ideological—between humans and nature. If this severance is accomplished, the single most important source of people’s resistance to imposed development is potentially undermined.

Ecofeminist theorists such as Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant are among the first to clearly articulate how the subjugation and colonization of peoples across the globe had its base in wresting them from their relation to nature. As Shiva states in her landmark work *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*,

Throughout the world, the colonization of diverse peoples was, at its root, a forced subjugation of ecological concepts of nature and of the Earth as the repository of all forms, latencies and powers of creation, the ground and cause of the world.<sup>vii</sup>

Merchant, too, affirms that the domination of women is concomitant with the containment of nature and that a “nature-culture dualism is a key factor in Western Civilization’s advance at the expense of nature.”<sup>viii</sup> Both Shiva and Merchant write of the divide between instrumentalist reductionist knowledge that has come to view Earth and all it contains as resources for ‘man’ to make use of. Integrated aspects of nature such as

water are then reduced to separate and isolatable commodities. This reduction is made possible by the market-driven need to compartmentalize and fragment life systems into delineated categorizations that then privilege disconnection over integration, while increasing environmental vulnerability and dependency. The rejection of a holistic perspective is the result of centuries of Western intellectual thought that culminates in the Scientific Revolution and the accompanying European market-based economic system of ownership and commodification.<sup>ix</sup> Ideologically, this shift also parallels the rise of Christianity and its association with the nation-state, which deemed pagan practices such as water worship heretical and persecuted those who practiced veneration of nature.<sup>x</sup> In the resulting paradigm the vibrancy, wholeness and (un)predictability of nature is turned around, such that nature is perceived as passive, needing to be dominated, and valued only in terms of monetary promise and instrumentalist usage. The irony of all this is that epistemological claims for denouncing nature use *nature* linguistically, deeming human dominion as part of “natural processes” and the “natural order” of things.

The uprooting of Earth-centered ways of relating to nature has had particular impact on women, since in both Western and non-Western cultures the natural world was characteristically understood as feminine.<sup>xi</sup> When there is under emphasis of the feminine, as in the current economic and ecological crises we face, the balance of nature is threatened, and thus so is civilization itself. The privileging of the masculine creates and maintains an imbalance of forces and structurally lends itself to reproducing external power relations of dominance and control. What feminists have come to define as the

cornerstone of patriarchal thought—“power over”—runs seemingly deep having had nearly full rein for centuries. Along with ‘power over’ responses, aggression, competition, and violence have been privileged. And on top of that, there seems to be no alternative way of conceptualizing human interaction. Women have not been wholly immune to this Western ideological transformation. The most obvious example of their involvement is the reification of women in mass cultural representation and the complicity of some, who buy into their own reification (in the Marxian sense) for immediate gain, despite the long-term consequences.

Yet resistance to these imposed profit-driven econo-cultural models has also been globalized and is becoming increasingly felt: Chiapas, Mexico; Cochabamba, Bolivia; the late twentieth century Chipko movement in India; the Partnership for Onondaga Creek and its support of the Haudenosaunee (Onondaga) Land Claim in the state of New York; the work of Wangari Mathai and the Green Belt Movement; and the Small Farmers Movements in Latin America where women are increasingly the major sustainers of the movement are just a handful of the contemporary and on-going water and environmental movements occurring around the world. They are examples not only of how women are at the forefront of these oppositional actions but underscore women’s particular relationship to water: these eco-cultural movements gain their power from a profound understanding and valuing of nature and the life resource of water, not for immediate gain but for future generations, which in turn is reflected in stories and myth passed down through generations. Moreover, they give witness to the fact that capitalist advance has

on the one hand not managed to fully wrest nature-dependent peoples from their environments, yet on the other has acutely compromised that relation, leaving millions in life-threatening conditions.

### *Water- and Earth-Centered Cultures*

Before we discuss these movements specifically, let us first take a look at the resource of water itself, how Earth-centered peoples have come to define and understand it, and why they will never cease defending it.

Life gathers around water and water creates the circumstances for life to gather. Human, plant and animal life seek out water. Without water living things die. Over time water can change everything, while water itself is the ultimate “shape shifter” in its varying forms of vapor, liquid, and ice. Water is visible and invisible. It moves in all directions around the globe— north, south, east, west—through the atmosphere and beyond the planet into the universe. William Marks, in his recent book *The Holy Order of Water*, asserts that water is even present in molecular form on the Sun.<sup>xii</sup> Water represents the need for balance among life forces. Too much or too little of it can kill; blocked and stagnant it becomes polluted and harmful; flowing and filtered it refreshes and gives life. Water’s essential nature therefore is to move and change. It is the quintessential symbol for regeneration and birth and has deep meaning for the oneness of

all creation. It is a force far stronger than humanity—as seen in the recent unprecedented number and force of hurricanes in the West and the tsunami in the East. Given water’s power, ubiquity and force it is not surprising that it is a central component of myth and legend and an object of both veneration and fear. Water has no particular form, yet creates forms to which it adheres and is nameable (river, lake, ocean); therefore it also indicates indifferenciation.<sup>xiii</sup> In effect, water brilliantly signifies the polar opposite of the fragmentation of one-dimensional thought. It is therefore an apt metaphor, for example, for resistance to the reified stagnancy that characterizes corporate models of efficiency and standardization.

Many authors have argued that ancient cultures’ cumulative history of observation of nature and their struggle for survival allowed them to come to insightful conclusions about nature<sup>xiv</sup>— this is certainly the case with water. The sculpture and painting of previous civilizations, for instance, reveal the profound understanding that early peoples had of the fundamental significance and power of vortex energy associated with water as a symbol of the generative force of nature. The visual symbol of vortex energy is the spiral, and it is one of the earliest and most common abstract symbols found in the ancient art of most civilizations throughout the world. William Marks proposes that the vortex energy inherent in water may be the origin of life as it may provide the impetus for creation.<sup>xv</sup> The spiral’s original referent of water energy and generative movement has extended to become a fundamental sign that takes on multiple cultural and linguistic meanings in both ancient and modern societies: it at once represents the



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interconnectedness of all things; the cycle of birth, life, death and return; the movement between the material world and the underworld. Modern cultures know that DNA strands, the fundamental entity of life itself takes a spiral shape. Thus the repeated appearance of the spiral in the artistic expression of first cultures reveals their profound understanding of the forces of the natural world.

The experiential knowledge of traditional peoples has its expression in oral histories passed down generation after generation. Modern science tends to dismiss this type of ancient knowledge, relegating it to myth.<sup>xvi</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha's ground-breaking text *Woman, Native, Other* forcefully critiques the privileging of scientific method, which, for Minh-ha departs from the integrative cyclical unity of birth, death and return, particularly because of the absence of a dialogical model in such a paradigm:

The question “what is oral tradition?” is a question-answer that needs no answer at all... For “oral” and “written” or “written” vs. “oral” are notions that have been as heavily invested as the notions of “true” and “false” have always been.<sup>xvii</sup>

What Minh-ha terms the ‘myth of mythologies’ must be acknowledged when analyzing native people’s knowledge of nature, i.e., that ‘myth’ (orality) and ‘fact’ (writing) should not be opposed or hierarchized, as all too often happens when stories are altered and translated from one form of communication to the next. She emphasizes that when experiential knowledge is translated into story or legend, that is a process of transmutation necessarily outside of a ‘scientific’ rendering. Yet at the same time, it is

not wholly at odds with the scientific method. After all, science itself is based on observation, though it tends to be mediated by an underlying acceptance of nature as separate and apart from humans. Many scientific studies therefore are somewhat artificial in that they isolate certain factors, include some while excluding others, in order to discover particular characteristics or to collect data on one specific hypothesis. Conclusions based on this mode of observation then often tend not to hold as definitive truths. While a binary way of conceiving the world underlies Western scientific processes, the oral traditions of first peoples observe nature in relation to itself—people and nature on the same plane, integrally and holistically related to each other. Accordingly, traditional cultures learned and continue to learn from water—from watching, observing, and understanding the deep relationship that humans and all life have to this vital substance.

Observation on an even plane with nature fosters creativity and imagination. By anthropomorphizing the natural order one may gain a deeper understanding of humanity's relation to nature; translating nature's 'language' into humanity's language. This is why for Minh-ha, orally transmitted stories are at once ever-changing and the same; like water, then, they are *subversive*, in that they cannot be entirely fixed and predetermined. They are variable and thus provide a power to transgress on a more generalized level—say against corporate intervention.

Interestingly, Minh-ha asserts that storytelling itself is connected to water in a poeticized, metaphorical and feminized way. The storyteller, like water, defies categorization and is

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simultaneously all-encompassing; having great power and deep wisdom of the universe she is venerated and is given a privileged position in the community:

Humidity, receptivity, fecundity. Her ([the storyteller's] speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. Great Mother is the goddess of all waters, the protectress of women and of childbearing, the unwearied sentient hearer, the healer *and also the bringer of diseases*. (my emphasis)<sup>xviii</sup>

Minh-ha's critique of binary thought parallels first people's understanding of how the world works —there is no duality, but rather constant striving toward balance of multiple forces. In her description, the feminized speech of the storyteller is perceptibly linked in natural progression with the Great Mother, who in turn watches over women and reigns over all waters.

Water's enigmatic and life and death-giving properties associated with the feminine are also echoed in Gaston Bachelard's well-known essay *Water and Dreams*, where he, like Minh-ha, compares the poetic imagination to the maternal and thus to water:

The poetic imagination nearly always attributes feminine characteristics to water... how profoundly maternal the waters are. Water swells seeds and causes springs to gush forth... The spring is an irresistible birth, a continuous birth.<sup>xix</sup>

The trinity of women, water and words that Minh-ha asserts for African knowledge systems and that Bachelard asserts as necessary elements of artistic creation also holds true in Asian traditions and in the cosmologies of the Americas where water-defined

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deities generally are feminine, or exhibit traits associated with the feminine (more on this later). Water as what Toril Moi calls “the feminine element *par excellence*”<sup>xxx</sup> has also been acknowledged by feminist spirituality movements in the West in religions such as Wicca and in pagan revival. It also corresponds to linguistic analyses of French feminist theorists like Helene Cixous, who uses water metaphors to elucidate gender difference in relation to language. Specifically, she examines how water as a feminine element impacts how women may enter into the symbolic order of language.<sup>xxi</sup>

### *The Chipko Movement*

Indian cosmology provides another example of the many cultures where women and the life-giving power of water are intertwined and for which human and the natural are not binary opposites, but integrally related. The accepted wisdom of Indian thought, premised upon observation of reality which, to repeat, in traditional cultures is contextualized in nature, has led to sustainable ways of living with, not against, the natural environment. According to Vandana Shiva, in Indian thought the fundamental source of life is movement, built upon the play of opposite forces that define the universe, and which is brought forth by *Shakti*, the dynamic primordial energy from which all existence comes.<sup>xxii</sup> *Shakti*'s power in turn is revealed and expressed in nature or in *Prakriti* – whose ‘nature’ encompasses constant movement, action, and multiplicity. Both *Prakriti* and *Shakti* are part of the feminine principle of the universe—the source of all things. Shiva asserts that this understanding of the natural world is a given feature of both sacred

and secular traditions, and is a central principle of daily life—a fact that may be hard for Western minds to grasp.<sup>xxiii</sup> Interestingly, the primordial energy of *Shakti* as manifested in active nature (*Prakriti*) parallels the vortex energy that Western science is coming to define as the essence of all life, i.e., what provides water with its mysterious and uncanny ability and power to create and destroy.<sup>xxiv</sup> However, that all life arises from the feminine principle must be understood in the context of a tradition that acknowledges the interdependency and connectedness of all things—i.e., that within Indian cosmology there is not necessarily separateness in the dualism, but rather there is dialectical relation between masculine and feminine forces of nature (an aspect that we will see in AfroCuban Santería, discussed further on). This basic point can be illustrated by considering the myriad names by which the great Ganges River is known: Shiva cites no less than 108 names for the river. Most of these names refer to female goddesses or aspects associated with the feminine (purity, unevolved, mountain daughter, etc.),<sup>xxv</sup> yet masculine traits are also attributed to the river. What Shiva, like other feminist theorists, reiterates is that the under emphasis on, and the undermining of, the feminine in the patriarchal period (which in the case of India comes full force with colonization), is key to comprehending the current environmental crisis we face. The loss of the feminine principle, which for Indian cosmology is the source from which all else springs, creates an imbalance and privileging that has severe consequences for humanity and for all life, as the one-dimensional model wills out on the side of (ultimate) destruction.

Shiva argues that traditional Indian culture does not compartmentalize water out of its relation to other natural systems. In the cycle of life, for instance, the forest is as essential as water. Trees draw rain and are in turn sustained by the rains. The forest, worshiped as *Aranyani*, a feminine goddess and part of the concept of Earth Mother, is akin to water: water and forest work in reciprocal relation. An integral source of fertility and sustenance, the forest provides the means by which water is filtered, cleansed and kept plentiful and at bay. Trees are the conduits and holders of life-giving water, preventing desertification and drought while protecting living beings from the ravages of storms and floods. They also, in a healthy ecosystem, provide food, shelter and fuel to millions of human beings.

The struggle to protect the forests from the economic encroachment and mismanagement led to the Chipko environmental movement of the 1970s—a struggle viewed by many to be the first modern ecofeminist movement. However, the women-led Chipko movement had its precedence in India three hundred years before when women, led by Amrita Devi, gave their lives to preserve their revered *khejri* tree.<sup>xxvi</sup> This sacrifice in turn influenced Gandhian disciples Mira and Sarala Behn's work to save the forests in the 1940s and 1950s. The Chipko forest movement's de-centered and adaptable characteristics led to its success. In an often-times improvised and highly local chain of events, the Chipko people of the Himalayas literally laid their lives on the line to wrest the remaining and degraded forests out of the hands of timber companies that saw only wood for sale and instantaneous monetary gain. The Chipko women knew that decades of degradation and

loss of the forest meant their own impoverishment, and ultimately the end of their capacity to sustain themselves locally and harmoniously. In response to the use-oriented mindset of tree farm managers, Chipko activists created songs and chants. Here is one which concisely and beautifully emphasizes the life-sustaining capacity of trees while also simply testifying to the activists' knowledge of their own environment:

*What do the forests bear?  
Soil, water and pure air,  
Soil, water and pure air,  
Sustain the earth and all she bears.* <sup>xxvii</sup>

The exchanges cited by Shiva between the ostensible scientific specialists and village women who knew the forest in different and perhaps even more complex ways points once again to the nature/culture divide that extends to the water issue at hand.

Interestingly (though not surprisingly), Shiva points out that while women en masse were at the vanguard of the movement to stop corporate encroachment upon their territory, <sup>xxviii</sup> at the same time there was a perception that a few men spearheaded the movement. <sup>xxix</sup>

Women's central role in the Chipko actions was overlooked as masculinist media models relied on the one, the hero, a single entity toward which to turn. The same is true with what happened in the more recent water wars of Bolivia—when the coalition opposed to water privatization in Bolivia known as *La Co-ordinadora* came up against the Bechtel subsidiary “Aguas de Tunari” that tried to privatize the Bolivian water system. The Bolivian struggle over who controls the water supply too was (and continues to be) largely led and organized by women, yet their integral role is often downplayed because of one man being identified with the movement. <sup>xxx</sup> But it was precisely because of the

many women involved at all levels of participation that movement was sustained and successful. It took, in fact, many leaders to successfully fight against Bechtel, in the case of Bolivia, and the preservation of the forest, in the case of Chipko.<sup>xxxii</sup> Likewise, the invisibility of women's crucial participation in social change also parallels water's invisibility—the work water does *underground* is too often overlooked, yet essential for comprehending the web of life, made strong in its unity, made vulnerable when fragmented.<sup>xxxii</sup>

### *Water and the Feminine in las Américas*

In the Americas we see the feminine principle at work in its close association with water. Pre-Colombian mythology holds many examples of the close correlation between water and the feminine, both in goddess representations and in terms of the pre-creation of the world. When interpreting the role and function of the goddess in ancient civilizations however, it is important to recognize that what we know of them comes to us primarily, if not exclusively, through translation and re-interpretations of Codices and other accounts by European chroniclers of non-Western cultures. The multiple manifestations and identities of many of the gods and goddesses have thus been filtered through linear thought models and a monotheistic belief system. That said, an important goddess figure



of Aztec religion is *Chalchiuhcueye* (She of the Jade Skirt). *Chalchiuhcueye* is the goddess of lakes and streams—she who gives and returns life, but who can also take it away. Consistent with the dualistic nature of Aztec cosmology in which survival is a dance and struggle among opposing forces, this goddess of water also represents capriciousness and changeability of earthly existence. In one depiction of her in the Mesoamerican codices, she is shown with water gushing from her. The water carries people and objects in its wake. The enormity of the 4th Century A.D. statue dedicated to her and found at the Pyramid of the Moon at the sacred and mysterious Mesoamerican site, Teotihuacán, underscores the importance of this goddess, just as her original location at the base of the Pyramid of the Moon<sup>xxxiii</sup> emphasizes her association with the feminine forces of nature. Spanish missionary and chronicler Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún's often-cited study of Aztec rites and customs, *Historia General de las cosas de la Nueva España*, details how *Chalchiuhcueye* is invoked as a life giver and promoter of diligence and hard work in the traditional nahua (Aztec) birthing ceremony in which water played a central role. As the midwife or Ticitl invoked *Chalchiuhcueye*, she would place drops of water in the mouth and on the chest of the newborn, assuring the infant that it would live in community, and that the water would awaken her, revive her, and make her grow strong. As the Ticitl then bathed the child, she associated the cleansing with green and growth. – This underscored the important connection between the child and nature, with water as the symbolic and real intermediary between the two.

Water is also central to the cosmology of the Kogui people who inhabit the unique biosystem of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern coastal Colombia. For the Kogui people, what existed first was the sea and darkness—the sea was everything and everywhere, and was considered the mother of all things. The poetic rendering of this Kogui concept is so beautiful it is worth quoting here:

First there was the sea. All was dark. There was neither sun nor moon nor people, nor plants or animals. The sea was everywhere. It was the mother. But the sea was not people, nor was it nothing, nor was it anything. She was the spirit of what was to come and she was thought and memory.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The sea mother concept once again illustrates early peoples' consciousness that anthropomorphizing language is insufficient to describe the essential nature of origins: sea/mother is the closest linguistic rendering of the life force to which the mythic description refers.

The Kogui people are a fiercely independent people and one of the few human societies that have lived and continue to live in relative isolation from modern society. Their existence follows “the Law of the Mother”<sup>xxxv</sup> in which human life must be in harmony with plant, animal, astrological and all life cycles. Reverence for the Earth is fundamental to their survival, and is manifested by a constant reciprocal interchange between human use of natural resources and the simultaneous replenishing of them: if they take from the Earth, they must give back. As with the Chipko people, the forests (especially as they relate to water) are crucial for Kogui survival. Unfortunately, today the Kogui are threatened by

the increasing incursion of drug trafficking and logging interests into their sacred lands, and overall degradation of their territory from global warming.<sup>xxxvi</sup> That is why in the 1990s, the Koguis, who are traditionally highly distrustful of outsiders, decided to speak to the world and allowed filmmaker Peter Chrzanowsk to document their message that “mankind is killing the mother.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> They see the warning signs particularly through water, as in the retreat of glaciers and the loss of water in the Cordillera. And they recognize the impact this change will have on all planet life.

Psychologist and Latina writer Clarissa Pinkola Estés equates creativity with the waters in myth and story that signify the return home—a destination often denied to oppressed cultures and blocked intellects. Referencing Jung, she states, “when the spirit becomes heavy, it turns to water... Therefore the way of the soul ... leads to water.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> The Americas’ water-related wild-woman archetype that Estés puts forth is woman as “*Río abajo Río*”—the river beneath the river—a designation that describes both water’s visible and invisible trajectories. Estés asserts that the well-known Mexican mythical figure *la llorona*, “the weeping woman,” is an aspect of this wild-woman archetype. The story of *la llorona* has gone through several transmutations, but the basic theme that never alters is this: spurned by her wealthy lover with whom she has had two children, a young, poor woman, overcome with emotion, throws the children into the river. Her children drown and she dies of grief. Her spirit, however, continues to cry and search for the children forever. Having killed her children in anguish or rage (depending on the

version), *la llorona* is the great transgressor, one who has dared to shake the natural order of things, and thus she is to be feared. Misbehaving children or young people who venture out on their own are warned that the *Llorona* will come in the night to get them. She is also the tragic negative side of water—she weeps endlessly, and is forever both connected to and disconnected from the river, the source of life and death.<sup>xxxix</sup> *La llorona* then cannot return home to the water, her unremitting tears a futile symbol of the inability to re-create the river, her essential being eternally lost because the necessary cycle of birth, death and return is not realizable. For Estés a woman can gain access to *Río Abajo Río*, the river beneath the river, by breaking through to her unfathomed creative and imaginative side. She can do this by following intuition and instinct rather than prescribed feminine behaviors. It is her job then to “clean up the river” by responding, beginning and persevering when creativity is stalled, or when exterior and transient forces “pollute” the source of flow and vitality.<sup>xl</sup>

The water metaphor used to describe this archetype is particularly apt since the imagined state is as deep and mysterious, as fluid and flexible, as water. Estés further asserts that in the Latin Southwest the river represents the power to live life fully. Wholly associated with women, the life force of the river parallels the life-giving force of childbearing and the water that pours out of women’s bodies, harking back to the goddess

Chalchuihcuehye:

[The river]... is greeted as the mother, *La Madre Grande*, *La Mujer Grande*, whose waters not only run in the ditches and riverbeds but spill out of the very bodies of women themselves as their babies are born. The river is seen as the Gran Dama who walks the land with a full swirling

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skirt of blue or silver... who lays with the soil to make it good for growing.<sup>xli</sup>

The wise women of the Southwest tell Estés: “How can a river be anything but *La Dulce Acequia*, the wet slot, between the thighs of the Earth?”<sup>xlii</sup> The fundamental association between the river and woman then is what makes the Llorona myth so powerful and poignant: the weeping woman’s life force is denied her, so she can never be whole. The weeping woman also signals the necessity of crying, or of remembrance and mourning as stages in the trajectory toward recovery and renewal. Through mourning one can eventually reach the possibility of rebirth and renewal. The tears of la llorona are metaphors for this process toward a new beginning. Thus as Estés asserts, the weeping woman herself paradoxically represents both the danger inherent in not moving forward as well as the possibility of delving deeper in order to work through pain and move beyond it.

In *Woman Hollering Creek*, Chicana author and poet Sandra Cisneros reclaims the weeping woman figure by focusing on the complexity of circumstance for the woman who defies patriarchal definitions of womanhood and motherhood. In the title story of her book *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, the main character, Cleofilas is an obedient young Mexican woman who boldly takes her children and leaves her abusive husband after realizing that married life is not what the *telenovelas* (Mexican soap operas) promised. Cisneros playfully changes “La llorona” to “La Gritona” (literally, “the screaming one,” or, as translated in the title, “woman hollering”) which is the name of the creek that Cleofilas must traverse and that symbolizes her imminent return to her own

family. She is supported logistically in her decision to leave by a stranger, an independent woman who is offered in the story as a contrast to and role model for her. As they are crossing over the creek she tells Cleofilas:

Every time I cross that bridge I do that, Because of the name, you know- Woman Hollering. *Pues*, I holler... Did you ever notice how nothing around here is named after a woman?... That's why I like the name of that *arroyo*—makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right?<sup>xliii</sup>

Cisneros's story offers a new rendering of the Llorona myth in which a woman moves from victim to actor in her own story of return. In "Woman Hollering Creek" then, water is her guide, not the symbol of her limitation.

Water metaphors appear often in the Earth-centered work of Mexican-American singer-songwriter Lila Downs, whose music production is unabashedly allied to and informed by the feminine principle. Decidedly non-violent and non-Western, Downs' songs accentuate how life and death, renewal and decay are inextricably connected parts of the same cyclical whole. Referencing how her Mixtec people were born from trees, Downs underscores the connection of beings with the natural world. She notes that if this process is disrupted, so is the life cycle itself. In the title cut of *Border*, she sings a poem by Chiapan poet Jaime Sabines that states, "I am water that has form; the Earth will drink of it. I am fire and compacted air that will not last. I am the time that passes."<sup>xliv</sup> The song is an acknowledgment of life and death cycles and is a celebration of the oneness of creation, and one's elemental connection to it. In contrast, a later cut, "Tránsito,"

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(“transit” or “traffic”) intimates a different kind of passing as it critiques the wresting of traditional culture from nature in the urban environment of the border; where harmony has been displaced by market demands:

Crazed with asphalt, dust rain/ thunder from the bribe commission  
stone with stone, fact with fact/ what is the barcode on your epitaph.<sup>xlv</sup>

In the city water forms are supplanted by things anathema to them: dust, stone, asphalt. It is a place over determined by the one-dimensionality of capital. The absence of water becomes a metaphor for the displacement caused by market forces and severance from nature. The song struggles to find a way for those displaced from the countryside to eke out a living; to still try to retain some semblance of what was:

Between the stones of a dead lake/ the lament of a city is heard/ another colony extends itself  
another family, no salary and no home/ but the plant keeps booming/everyone struggles to win each day/ we all enjoy life for a while/ transit passes, comes and goes

As her oeuvre taken as a whole illustrates, Downs’ effective artistic response to postcolonialism is ultimately to reclaim and celebrate the roots of a more sustainable ancestral legacy (where women, community and knowledge of nature are vital), while simultaneously critiquing the vacuity of the overemphasis on the individual in the capitalist model.

### *The Water Orishas of Santería*

Water identified deities are some of the most important ones in the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería, a faith system that blends European Catholicism with the varied beliefs of the

enslaved Yoruba peoples of West Africa. In discussing Santería it is important to recognize that it is an extremely complex and fluid religion, and that its roots are much more allied to the African continent than to the European.<sup>xlvi</sup> A defining surface characteristic of Santería is that it is born out of a process known as syncretism, whereby, over time, and as a matter of cultural survival and retention of belief systems and stories, Catholic saints became associated with African *orishas*. The stories of the orishas (gods and goddesses) are themselves like water—non-linear and highly variable. Cuban scholars Lydia Cabrera and Rómulo Lachatañeré were among the first to attempt a systematic understanding of the various Santería traditions in Cuba by interpreting the orally transmitted orisha stories, known as *patakies*, and transcribing them into literary form. Lachatañeré emphasizes that to transmute these stories into writing or to systematize them in any way is a daunting task, particularly since they have at least three different cultural origins (Lucumí of Yoruba origin, Carabalí of Calabar origin and Bantú of the Congo). In trying to understand the orishas within Santería then, we ought to keep in mind Minh-ha's critique of the slippery slope of transmutation between orality and literacy.

The orishas are imbued with very real human characteristics. They are not infallible and are accessible to their followers for two-way communication. Two of the central deities of Santería are allied to water: Yemayá is goddess of fresh and salt waters. She is known as la Virgen de la Regla, the patron saint of Havana. Her sister Oshún is the goddess of the rivers and the goddess of love. Her Catholic equivalent is La Virgen de Cobre—the



copper virgin, dark skinned, and a symbol of the mestizaje inherent in Cuban culture. In different legends, Yemayá has many husbands. These marriages symbolize the interconnectedness of different natural forces and mimic the functioning of the universe and human relationships.<sup>xlvii</sup> For instance, her marriage to Ifá, a minor orisha, did not last because Yemayá's intellect went far beyond his.<sup>xlviii</sup> Yemayá is revered as the universal queen because she is all waters and therefore the mother of all creation. She sustains life and feeds all because without her there is only death. She is the first saint to speak and tell creatures what to do. Similar to traditional nahua birth rites mentioned earlier, Santería rituals include drinking water at birth and death in honor of their mother Yemayá. This allows them to be refreshed and also pacifies the spirits of the dead and the living.

In Cabrera's important study, *Yemayá y Ochún: Kariocha, Iyalorichas y Olorichas*, one sees the constant interplay of masculine and feminine forces within and among the orishas themselves. These forces are not always clearly delineated, although some may be more allied with the feminine while others are more masculine in nature. Like the other principle deities, Yemayá is one goddess, fundamentally feminine, but follows at least ten paths (or manifestations) in which she is either more masculine or more feminine. Still, all of these channels relate her to water in some way. Her role in the creation story elucidates this point. Santería holds multiple versions of Earth's creation, but they all appear to have a similar theme and progression. In one story, Olodumare, the all-powerful male god was only of fire and so Olokun, the ocean and masculine god and the oldest manifestation of Yemayá, was born to put out the fire, allowing, Earth to spring

forth from the ashes. Yemayá next made rivers because she needed veins through which her waters (or blood) could flow, and then she gave birth to the moon, stars, sun and everything on Earth. The Olokun side of Yemaya is feared and rarely seen—s/he represents the vastness of the ocean and the call for sacrifice to its waters. In this sense, Olokun has been equated with the Spanish word for the sea (*el mar*), which is a masculine noun, but the sea may also be rendered poetically as *la mar* (feminine). This illustrates the ‘gender-bending’ that is often part and parcel of Santería. Yemayá therefore can be androgynous, or as one santero (a Santería holy person) in Cabrera’s account describes her, ‘of an amphibian sex’<sup>xlix</sup>—not all masculine, not completely feminine, but ultimately feminine as Yemayá.

It is interesting how Oshún comes to be a key player in giving legitimacy to the conversion of African slaves to Catholicism. Remarkably similar to the legendary Mexican story of the Indian Juan Diego, to whom the Virgen de Guadalupe appeared in 1619 conveniently on the very site of the temple of the Aztec goddess Tonantzin, in 1610 in Cuba two native American brothers and a young black slave named Juan Moreno came upon a carved statue of the Virgin Mary during a storm—yet the statue was completely dry and had an inscription that read “I am the Virgin of Charity.” Centuries later, in 1926, she was declared the patron saint of Cuba. The recent Cuban film *Miel para Oshún* (*Honey for Oshún*)<sup>l</sup> is an excellent rendering of the importance of Santería practices for Cubans today, and the importance of keeping those traditions alive, even for those who are exiled from their homeland.<sup>li</sup> The film’s protagonist returns to Cuba in search of his mother, whom he has not seen in the thirty years, ever since his father had taken him to

the U.S. In Cuba, he is introduced to the rituals of Santería, but it is only at the end of his journey that he finally understands Oshún's signs to him to unite love and the river. It is then that he can reunite with his mother, who greets him on a fishing boat where two rivers meet, the symbolic site of Oshún's dominion. Thus, the protagonist can finally rest when he has heeded the feminine goddess and reclaimed the lost feminine side of his existence.

### *Women Reclaiming Water*

To write about women and water is really impossible: it is all-encompassing, far too unwieldy and overwhelming, since as we have seen in the examples above, women are inextricably tied to the water element at all levels of existence. The *patakies* of Santería, the lyrics of Lila Downs, the women at the forefront of the movements to reclaim the right to the life force of water all remind us that water is both separate from and intricately related to the other elements of life: fire, earth, and air, as well as to survival's need for all these to be in harmony and balance. These examples also remind us that wresting a people from its relation to nature has an intense impact not only on the recuperation of that relation, but on the quality of cultural survival. Yet the traditional stories passed through generations remain a great source of resilience and resistance, sustaining movement and creating great art in the process. The importance of recovering the feminine to its fullest, and of heeding the warnings of those most allied with nature in their daily lives (women and first peoples) are crucial to solving this ecological global crisis we face.

A lone tree on the downhill slope of the field northwest of my home marks the spring from which I get my daily water. Even here in Central New York where water is plentiful and the trees are lush, it is a privilege to drink and bathe in the earth-filtered, sweet-tasting water, and to swim in the clear water ponds in summer. The land cooperative of which I am a part facilitates the preservation of this water by keeping a small tract of land out of commercial and corporate hands, at least for now. But I know it cannot be sustained in isolation for long because it is part of a larger and increasingly fragmented web. As women reclaim their right to water, both symbolically and in real terms, we do have a chance to live and live well if we actively join in restoring the broken bonds, conscious of the urgency of the ecological crisis we face.

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<sup>i</sup> From Oak and Amethyst's *Songbook for Seneca Falls Wimmin's Peace Encampment*, Plainfield, Vermont, 1979.

<sup>ii</sup> William Marks, *The Holy Order of Water* 2001.

<sup>iii</sup> PowerPoint Presentation Sustainability and New York Campuses conference, Ithaca College, Ithaca, New York, February 26, 2005.

<sup>iv</sup> Ana Elena Obando "Women and Water Privatization", [www.shrnet.org/docs/issue-water.html](http://www.shrnet.org/docs/issue-water.html), November 2003, p.3.

<sup>v</sup> Laura Santana, "Water, Women and War", *Counterpunch*, October 14, 2004.

[www.counterpunch.org/santina10142004.html](http://www.counterpunch.org/santina10142004.html).

<sup>vi</sup> See WHRnet (Women's Human Rights Net), [www.whrnet.org/docs/issue-water.html](http://www.whrnet.org/docs/issue-water.html), pp. 1-8.

<sup>vii</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, Zed Books: London, 1989,

p. .

<sup>viii</sup> This is a major premise of Carolyn Merchant's groundbreaking critique of Western scientific thought and the subjugation of women, *The Death of Nature*, Harper and Row: San Francisco, 1983, p. 143.

<sup>ix</sup> Merchant, p. 293.

<sup>x</sup> In Europe and the Americas Christian missionaries often took over holy water sites of springs and rivers, erecting monotheistic churches in their place- yet water still plays an important, if not curtailed role in Christian rites such as baptism and entering and leaving the church.

<sup>xi</sup> Merchant, p.xxiii.

<sup>xii</sup> Marks, p. 43-44. He cites a May 26, 1995 Reuters news release announcing that University of Waterloo scientists found evidence of water vapor and steam on cooler sunspot areas of the sun. See also the National Optical Astronomy Observatory/ National Solar Observatory newsletter <http://www.noao.edu/noao/noaonews/sep95/art2.html>.

- <sup>xiii</sup> See Mircea Eliade, "El simbolismo de las aguas", *Revista Kenos*, no. 3, p. 1-14.  
[www.temakel.com/trtressaguasmeliade.htm](http://www.temakel.com/trtressaguasmeliade.htm).
- <sup>xiv</sup> Marks makes a compelling argument but so do many ecofeminists that he fails to cite. For example, a chapter of his entitled "Water Wars" is the very title of Shiva's book which came out a year earlier and which draws from her essay on sacred waters in her already cited seminal text *Staying Alive*.
- <sup>xv</sup> Marks, p. 49.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Marks, p. 79.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1989.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.* p. 126.
- <sup>xix</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (1942), Edith R. Farrell, translator, Pegasus Foundation: Dallas, TX, 1983
- <sup>xx</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/ Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, Routledge: London, 1985, p. 117.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Moi, pp. 117-118.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Shiva, p. 38.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Shiva, p. 41.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Marks, p. 49.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution and Profit*, South End Press: Cambridge, MA 2001, p. 144.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Shiva, p. 67
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Shiva, p. 77.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> I use the term 'territory' as the Small Farmers Movement of Cajibío uses the term- as a way to express the symbiotic relationship between the land and those who work it. The term describes land use that is sustainable and collective, as opposed to a unidirectional instrumentalist approach to land use.
- <sup>xxix</sup> One of Shiva's motivations for dwelling on the Chipko movement was to honor the women who led it, but whose leadership was largely unknown at the time. Shiva, p. 67.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Sophie Styles, "Water Wars in Bolivia: An Interview with Carmen Pereda and Marcela Olivera," <http://www.zmag.org/ZMag/articles/sep02styles.html>.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Ironically, as Marcela Olivera, a woman in the movement noted, members of the community would ask who the woman was named La-Co-ordinadora: "that was lovely- that people had an image of the Co-ordinadora as a brave woman from the countryside." *Z Magazine*, September 2002, Vol. 15, no.8, [www.zmag.org/ZMAG/articles/sep02styles.html](http://www.zmag.org/ZMAG/articles/sep02styles.html), p.2
- <sup>xxxii</sup> For more on the question of visibility vs. invisibility read Shiva's texts *Staying Alive* and *Water Wars* where the issue is discussed in detail.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> The statue is now in the Völkerkundemuseum, Berlin. See Paul Westheim, *The Art of Ancient Mexico* (Ursula Bernard, trans.), Anchor Books: Garden City, NY, 1965, 138-139.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Inscription in Kogui exhibit, Museo de Oro, Bogotá, Colombia. (my translation).
- <sup>xxxv</sup> See Guillermo E. Rodríguez-Navarro. "Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta - Understanding the Basis for Natural Resource Management. *Knowledge Marketplace Reports- The Third IUCN World Conservation Congress*, Bangkok, Thailand, 17-25 November 2004.  
[www.iucn.org/congress/documents/KMCD/reports/Rodriguez-Navarro](http://www.iucn.org/congress/documents/KMCD/reports/Rodriguez-Navarro).
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> This incursion is due in large measure to the coca fumigation policies specified under the US-Colombian governments agreement of Plan Colombia. Studies have shown that eradication efforts have not decreased coca production- it has just shifted the location of crop cultivation.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Quoted by filmmaker Peter Chrzanowski  
[http://www.reelwest.com/magazine/archives/vol14\\_3/heart2.htm](http://www.reelwest.com/magazine/archives/vol14_3/heart2.htm).
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, Ballantine Books: New York, 1992, p. 296.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> La llorona myth has been rendered in song and stories which reveal her complex nature. In some versions she has killed her children herself so that they would not be enslaved by the

Spanish. See Sandra Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek* and Suni Paz's recording of "la llorona" on *Del cielo de mi niñez*; also Lila Downs, *Sandunga*.

<sup>xi</sup> See Pinkola Estés, pp. 303-320.

<sup>xii</sup> Pinkola Estés, p. 303.

<sup>xiii</sup> Pinkola Estés, p. 303

<sup>xiii</sup> Sandra Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, Vintage Books: New York, 1991, p. 55.

<sup>xiv</sup> "Mi corazón me recuerda" (My heart reminds me) Lila Downs, *Border*, 2002.

<sup>xv</sup> "Locos de asfalto, lluvia de polvo/ Truenos de la comisión del soborno.../Piedra con piedra, dato con dato/ Cuál es el código de tu epitafio" from the song "Tránsito" by and adapted from a poem by Mexican poet María Cruz *Colema de oro y ceniza* 1997. (English translation, mine).

<sup>xvi</sup> For in-depth analysis of the orishas see the work of Lydia Cabrera, *Yemayá y Ochún: Kariocha, Iyalorichas y Olorishas*, Eliseo Torres: Eastchester, NY, 1980.

<sup>xvii</sup> Miguel A. De la Torre, *Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion* William B.

EErdsmans: Grand rapids, MI, 2004, p. 72

<sup>xviii</sup> Cabrera, p. 42.

<sup>xix</sup> Cabrera, p. 28.

<sup>i</sup> Humberto Solas, *Honey for Ochún* 2001

<sup>ii</sup> see Miguel A. de la Torre, *Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America*. William B. Erdsmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2004.