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**INTERVENTIONS**

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of St. Anthony Falls Lock, closed in June 2015. Image courtesy River Life, University of Minnesota.

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IN REVIEW

# TROUBLED WATERS: RIVERS IN LATIN AMERICAN IMAGINATION

By Tim Frye

The 2013 *Hispanic Issues On Line*[1] volume, *Troubled Waters: Rivers in Latin American Imagination*, is a collection of essays that underscores an intellectual turn in Hispanic and Lusophone Studies toward the environment, and more specifically, the material, metaphysical, and literary “nature” emblematic of rivers that flow south of the Río Grande. For the purposes of this review, I will mention but a few rivers in

a pantheon of great rivers across the breadth of Latin America and how the writers in this volume re-think those rivers beyond poetic backdrops across which colonial, modern, and postmodern literature flow. Rather, these rivers, Pettinaroli and Mutis write in their introduction to *Troubled Waters*, must be understood in relational terms, “as boundary and as connection; as paths to death and life; as emblems of both



*lizdinovella. Rio Sumpul Mural. 2010. Arcatao, El Salvador. Via Flickr.*

transformation and an anchoring of identity; as signs of dissolution and transformation; and as change and continuity” (2).

In *Troubled Waters*, the Amazon, Magdalena, Orinoco, Sumpul, Río de la Plata, and Pastaza, among others, serve as avenues through which to better understand expansionism of the Spanish empire, its subsequent colonization of the Americas, independence and nation formation, and modern imaginaries, for these rivers themselves bear the marks of history in a way that makes their literary representation possible. While the most emblematic of these rivers—the Amazon (see Anderson’s “Traacherous Waters”) [2], Orinoco (see Arias’s “The Intellectual Development of the Orinoco”)[3], and Rio de la Plata (see Hill’s “Ariana Crosses the Atlantic”) [4]—hold a certain gravitas in Western imaginaries, scholarship on rivers like the Magdalena (Colombia) and the Sumpul (El Salvador) offers a distinct window into Latin American life, literature, and history, that remains outside the purview of the U.S. academy.

The Magdalena River flows across Colombia on a North-South axis, nestled between the Cordillera Central and Oriental, emptying the fluvial Andean runoff into the Caribbean Ocean. Its literary construction spans the very first moments of Spanish Conquest to contemporary greats like García Márquez, and more recently Laura Restrepo (see Mutis’s “The Death of the River and the River of Death”)[5]. In her essay “Watershed of Sorrows,” Pettinaroli analyzes some of the first writings of Spanish Conquest, those of Alonso de Santa Cruz, the cosmographer par excellence to Carlos V and Felipe II’s imperial regimes. Pettinaroli theorizes “that Alonso de Santa Cruz’s dramatic description emplaces the [Magdalena] river as a perceptual grid, opening up a discursive space in which to tackle the weightiest question in the dispute over the nature of the Tropics: the ethics of imperial expansion” (20). Already in the sixteenth century, the Magdalena River was written as the locus of enunciation of both localities (local communities,

topographies of the river) and the universal expansion of empire that attempted to engulf and thus erase these localities.

From the mid-twentieth century until contemporary times, Latin American rivers and their literary creation have become landscapes of political and social change and trauma. The Sumpul River forms a section of the border between El Salvador and Honduras, yet the river is more widely known for the massacre that occurred across its banks in 1980 during which some 600 unarmed civilians were killed by the Salvadorian and Honduran armies (see fig. 2.). In his essay, “Blood in the Water,” Kane reminds us just how important the rivers of Central America are, not only to poetics, but also as vehicles for enunciating trauma. He writes, “[T]he river itself becomes a medium of testimony, opens the door to a rereading of Latin American testimonial texts in which the concept of place, including the nonhuman natural world, receives much more careful consideration than it has in the past” (175). This type of relation to the river allows us consider how agency is not solely the arena of humans, and that in moments of trauma, violence, or civil unrest, we must look closer at these aquatic landscapes that we drink from, bathe in, and even die in, for answers.

In many ways, the Magdalena and the Sumpul are emblematic of rivers around the world in that they traverse rural and urban environs. In his essay, “Rural and Urban Rivers,” which is more of a treatise over a long career of Latin American literary scholarship, Raymond Leslie Williams maps urban and rural aquatic landscapes across Latin America, marking their change throughout twentieth-century literature: from the literature of the early republics to the literature of the 2000s. For Williams, moments of rupture read in writers like Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, and Roberto Bolaño echo the reworking of rivers by human intervention, and in doing so, require the re-imagination of what a river can be. He writes, “[T]he flâneur figure and the metro are both easily conceived as urban metaphors for the rural



Santa Cruz, Alonso. *Islario general de todas las islas del mundo*.  
Second Half of 16th Century. Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid.  
By Alonso Santa Cruz [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

river” (201). While river water rushes through pipes below the urban metropolises of Latin America, the reality comes to bear that rivers are becoming increasingly hidden from view, and are thus written through divergent modes such as urban landscapes, and in doing so, render the Romanticist image of the river of the tropics problematic.

Spadaccini and Gordillo remind us in the afterword of *Troubled Waters*, that in addition to rivers providing water, transportation, religious and metaphysical substance, “rivers are also literary, cultural, and political constructions forged by the minds of creative writers, cultural critics, scientists, and politicians of various ideological stripes” (213). They are sites of exchange, on the banks of which disciplines meet with their disparate methodologies in tow both within and without academia. What is increasingly important, however, is how local and indigenous knowledge of rivers is met by increasingly cemented and alienating modes of modern water: canals, dams, and refuse sites. Absent from “*Troubled Waters*” are important genres to arise out of this very type of confluence of knowledge in the

Hispanic and Lusophone world: in Panama the Canal Novels,[6] and the Dam Novels in Spain,[7] Brazil,[8] and Paraguay.[9] These genres spring up as a result of colossal displacement of people, a reshaping or erasure of the land and traditional practices along rivers, and are often coupled with environmental disaster—take for example the Bento Rodrigues Dam that burst in southeastern Brazil, inundating immense swaths of land and people in toxic mud.

*Troubled Waters* makes crucial steps toward rethinking the relationality of Latin American Rivers, their inseparability from the literature that writes them, and the lived experiences of those that inhabit their banks. Rivers of the Global South, like those of the Global North, are the sites of the often-opposed worlds of local and indigenous knowledge, and technocratic river management. *Troubled Waters* thus signals an important shift toward interdisciplinarity in the approach to rivers in Hispanic and Lusophone Studies, and in doing so allows more comparative work to be done on rivers across the world and the complex histories that flow through them.

## Footnotes

[1] <http://cla.umn.edu/hispanic-issues/online>

[2] Anderson, Mark D. 2013. “Treacherous Waters: Shipwrecked Landscapes and the Possibilities for Nationalistic Emplacement in Brazilian Representations of the Amazon.” *Troubled Waters*, 111-126. [http://cla.umn.edu/sites/cla.umn.edu/files/hiol\\_12\\_06\\_anderson\\_treacherous\\_waters.pdf](http://cla.umn.edu/sites/cla.umn.edu/files/hiol_12_06_anderson_treacherous_waters.pdf)

[3] Arias, Santa. 2013. “The Intellectual Conquest of the Orinico: Filippo Salvatore Gilij’s *Saggio di storia americana* (1780-1784).” *Troubled Waters*, 55-74. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/OB6nyHH-BXY48bUjhfUkpxWUJ1dnc/view>

[4] Hill, Ruth. 2013. “Ariana Crosses the Atlantic: An Archeology of Aryanism in the Nineteenth-Century River Plate.” *Troubled Waters*, 92-110. [http://cla.umn.edu/sites/cla.umn.edu/files/hiol\\_12\\_05\\_hill\\_ariana\\_crosses\\_the\\_atlantic.pdf](http://cla.umn.edu/sites/cla.umn.edu/files/hiol_12_05_hill_ariana_crosses_the_atlantic.pdf)

[5] Mutis, Ana María. 2013. “The Death of the River and the River of Death: The Magdalena River in *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* and *La novia oscura*.” *Troubled Waters*, 144-162. [http://cla.umn.edu/sites/cla.umn.edu/files/hiol\\_12\\_08\\_mutis\\_the\\_death\\_of\\_the\\_river\\_and\\_the\\_river\\_of\\_death.pdf](http://cla.umn.edu/sites/cla.umn.edu/files/hiol_12_08_mutis_the_death_of_the_river_and_the_river_of_death.pdf)

[6] Beleño, Joaquín. *Los forzados de Gamboa* (Panama City: Primer Concurso Premio Ricardo Miró 1959); Gil Blas Tejeira. *Pueblos perdidos* (Panama City: Editorial Universitaria, 1963)

[7] Moncada, Jesús. *Camino de sirga* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2007); Aranbarri, Iñigo, *Cavando el agua*. (Bilbao: Editorial Susa 2008)

[8] Martins de Oliveira, Jorge. *Atentado em Itaipu* (Brazil: Alfa-Omega 1983)

[9] Pitaud, Henri. *La gran ciudad brillante de los guaraníes* (Asunción: Editorial France, 1977); Pitaud, Henri. *Las siete caídas del Río Paraná* (Asunción: Editorial France, 1979).

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## About the Author

Tim Frye is a PhD student in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Minnesota where he engages political and spatial imaginaries of infrastructure and the environment in Latin America. His dissertation project is a comparative analysis of megaprojects in Central America (The Panama Canal and The Gran Canal of Nicaragua) and Brazil (Free Economic Zone of Manaus) and how the intersections of literature, water use, and infrastructure are negotiated by those most affected by their construction.