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Hydropoetics: The Rewor(l)ding of Rivers

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Abstract

Valued in utilitarian terms as channels for industry, agriculture, and urban development, rivers are among the most biodiverse yet degraded ecosystems globally. In addition to pragmatic conservation measures, the long-term wellbeing of rivers requires new perspectives on human-water relations that call attention to—and nurture—the cultural, social, and spiritual significance of riverscapes. Drawing from current thinking in the interdisciplinary environmental humanities, this article proposes the idea of hydropoetics as an outlook on rivers based on the ancient idea of poiesis. On a planet undergoing rapid environmental change, three features—embodiment, relationality, and multiscalarity—are important to a hydropoetics attuned to the urgencies of the present. Asserting the capacities of rivers themselves, this framework is developed in reference to contemporary poetry narrating human interdependencies with rivers, including poems by Indonesian, Papua New Guinean, Australian, and British writers. Rather than presuming to give voice to rivers, the framework developed in this article recognizes the inherent language of rivers and, in this way, presents a medium to hear their voice(s). Through the transformative capacity of language—new words, new worlds—hydropoetics inspires new visions of rivers inspiring openness to rivers as they exist as well as in their potential to emerge and transform.

Keywords
Introduction: Riverly vitalities

Near the town of Ubud on the Indonesian island of Bali, I descend lichen-clad stone stairs carefully for fear of slipping. Reaching the bottom, I am greeted by a small statue of the eighth-century sage Rsi Markendya keeping vigil at the confluence of two rivers. Swollen with the drenching rain typical of this season, the West Wos River and its eastern counterpart merge seamlessly here in their susurrating rush southward from sacred Mount Batur to the Indian Ocean. In the Indonesian language, this auspicious point of convergence is known as the Campuhan, or “place where water mixes together.” After meditating by the Campuhan, Markendya and his disciples founded the temple Pura Gunung Lebah overlooking the river gorge (Mann, 2015, p. 97). Bathing in the healing currents and collecting herbs from the steep banks, the group named the river Wosada, the Sanskrit word for “health,” and the adjoining area Ubad, for “medicine.” Representing harmony, balance, and fertility, this sanctified juncture is still imbued with the purifying power that attracted Markendya so many centuries ago. My guide advises me to approach the confluence quietly and with a clear mind. Although a benevolent entity, the Campuhan expects reverence, reciprocation, and, even, pacification. A local story, for instance, tells of a hole in the bank of the Wos River where a monstrous being, or raksasa, crushed spices to lure devotees into the underworld before a selfless farmer finally banished him from the Campuhan (Sukawati, 1979, p. 57). With each step, I imagine the roof of the raksasa’s lair bowing under my weight.
As an animate force, the Campuhan has the capacity to create and destroy, heal and harm, often simultaneously. More than an aggregate of chemical constituents or voiceless resource to be exploited for our desires, the place-organism embodies the dynamism of rivers and, more broadly, of water, as inflected in the Balinese worldview and personified by the mythical raksasa. Extending outward from the Wos to embrace global rivers, this article suggests that the ancient idea of poiesis—of making, emerging, bringing forth—offers as a framework for understanding the lives of rivers. Understanding poiesis as transformation, I will use the term hydropoetics to point to a new outlook on water. I begin by theorizing hydropoetics through ideas of poiesis (Mules, 2014; Plotnitsky, 2013), autopoesis (Maturana & Varela, 1980), environmental poetry or ecopoetics (Hume & Osborne, 2018), and “river-centrism” (Brierley, 2020), highlighting what conservationist Luna Leopold (1977) called “reverence for rivers.”

Following current humanities-based developments in river research, I will argue that three features—embodiment, relationality, and multiscalarity—are especially important to a hydropoetics responsive to the urgencies of the Anthropocene era (Kelly, Scarpino, Berry, Syvitski, & Meybeck, 2018). I then turn to contemporary poetry that depicts rivers as ancestral habitats, including poems from Indonesia (Barokka, 2016; Malna, 2013; Yamani, 2017), Papua New Guinea (Winduo, 2000), Australia (Adamson, 1992), and the United Kingdom (T. Hughes, 1983; Oswald, 2002). Instead of giving voice to rivers, a hydropoetic framework recognizes the inherent languages of rivers and provides the fertile medium for their voice(s) to be heard.

**Toward a theory of hydropoetics: Unsettling “terracentrism”**

The world’s major rivers and their floodplains are inhabited by approximately 2.7 billion people, or 35 percent of the current human population, in addition to some of the planet’s most
biodiverse habitats. Although covering less than one percent of the Earth’s surface, freshwater bodies, such as rivers, lakes, and wetlands, contain twenty-five percent of all vertebrate species including half of all known fish (K. Hughes, 2021, p. 8). Notwithstanding their ecological, cultural, and spiritual significance throughout history, rivers across the globe face escalating threats from damming, dredging, mining, erosion, flooding, contamination, microplastics, salinization, water depletion, invasive species, and a litany of pressures linked to climate change (Best, 2019). Valued predominantly in economic terms as conduits for industry, agriculture, energy, and urban development, rivers are among the biosphere’s most degraded ecosystems and, in particular, fish populations are collapsing around the world (K. Hughes, 2021, p. 8).

In response to this dire situation, water researchers have begun to explore collaborative alternatives to studying rivers and addressing aquatic issues from diverse perspectives (Christian & Wong, 2017; Kelly et al., 2018; McMillin, 2011; Somerville, 2020). As a new specialization within the interdisciplinary field of the environmental humanities, rivers “exemplify the complicated and complex dynamics of human-nature entanglements” (Kelly, 2018, p. xvi).

The concern of hydropoetics, the core idea developed in this article, then, is to counter what I will call “terracentrism”—the privileging of the terrestrial in the daily lives of we moderns—and to embrace hydrocentricism or, even, what might be called rivercentrism—toward a new outlook on rivers...signifying a river-focused worldview as well as a physical identification with rivers as bodies in themselves. Rivercentrism disrupts a sense of the world based on the apparent constancy of land and “demands a more dynamic approach to organizing life on Earth” (Joshua Bennett, 2020, p. 178). While terracentricism reflects, among other things, humankind’s evolutionary standing as a ground-dwelling species, the backgrounding of the aquatic, moreover, stems from the inability of we moderns to cognize the various ways rivers
and other waterbodies transform over time. Heraclitus famouslydeclaimed that one cannot step into the same river twice. Unlike a comparatively long lasting entity—a stone, tree, or other natural object apparently fixed in time and space—a river is a phenomenon in process, a being that is perpetually in-becoming, and a non-human radically distributed across space and time. Accordingly, the concept of poiesis is helpful to understanding rivers and human-river interactions. Poiesis calls our attention to the generative potential pulsing in all that exists. The term signifies the idea of “bringing forth”—the lively potential of things, including rivers, to change, adapt, intermingle, decouple, intensify, and diminish.

I suggest that poiesis is vital to formulating hydropoetics as a framework for rethinking the value of rivers, articulating the complexities of human-water relations, and confronting river-related issues in the Anthropocene. Warwick Mules (2014) argues that an object is indistinguishable from the transformation it manifests and that poiesis “identifies the being of things in their becoming other: in their creative, shaped and connected possibilities” (22). Similarly, Arkady Plotnitsky (2013) maintains that “all poiesis, all creative making (the original ancient Greek meaning of poiesis) is material and performative” (275). The idea of poiesis as transformation is strongly evident in Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela’s theorization of autopoiesis as “what takes place in the dynamics of the autonomy proper to living systems” (1980, p. xvii). For Maturana and Varela (1980), autopoiesis calls attention to the interdependent nature of entities as “composite unities realized through neighborhood relations” (xxiii). In this sense, beings are constituted by interchanges within living systems. Defined by their relations, phenomena such as rivers arise from these exchanges between natural agents (Maturana & Varela, 1980, p. 118). A living system therefore is always autopoietic; the loss of its autopoiesis brings about biological disintegration, decline, and death (Maturana & Varela, 1980, p. 112).
Over the last two decades, the concept of poiesis has been central to the evolution of environmental poetry, or ecopoetics, understood as poetry expressing ecological values, critiquing the politics of environmental degradation, and upholding an ethics of the natural world (Bryson, 2002, 2005; Hume & Osborne, 2018; Killingsworth, 2004; Knickerbocker, 2012; Morrison, 2015; Rigby, 2004). Catherine Rigby (2004), for instance, presents the concept of ecopoiesis as human activities that enhance ecological flourishing, whereas Scott Knickerbocker (2012) elaborates his idea of sensuous poiesis as “the process of rematerializing language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature” (2). What’s more, the term ecopoetics has recently broadened beyond its literary origins to encompass diverse environmental practices focused on sustainability, conservation, and human-nature equilibrium (Hume & Osborne, 2018). Nonetheless, the academic field of ecopoetics, as the study of environmental poetry, has exhibited a strong terracentric bias during its brief history. Key studies such as J. Scott Bryson’s *The west side of any mountain* (2005) make only passing allusions to rivers and other waterbodies as symbols in American nature poetry while Lynn Keller’s *Recomposing ecopoetics* (2017) privileges the role of terrestrial organisms—beetles, butterflies, and birds—in the environmental poetry of the preceding two decades. In this way, it can be said, ecopoetics asserts the value of the Earth while paying less attention to the biosphere’s hydrological systems and, more specifically, its precious—and precarious—freshwater ecologies. Among critics and scholars, the problem of terracentrism persists, despite river-themed poems in recent anthologies of Western ecopoetics (see, for example, Fisher-Wirth & Street, 2013).

I am suggesting here that the “terracentric” focus of ecopoetics, as an intellectual practice, is indicative of the broader social, cultural, and political privileging of the terrestrial over the aquatic. In response, hydropoetics aims to blur the strict Western demarcation between
the grounded human and sodden non-human—between terra firma and aqua fluidity —by savoring, actually and figuratively, “the freedom of the open water” (Joshua Bennett, 2020, pp. 173–174). Inspired by poetry but not confined to creative writing practices, hydopoetics supports “a river-centric view of the world” that acknowledges rivers as “sentient entities that [or who] are allowed to express their own voice [or voices]” (Brierley, 2020, pp. vii, viii). Hydopoetics considers rivers to be “place-beings” with moral standing and with whom humanity is interwoven in many ways (Brierley, 2020, p. viii). As interdisciplinary geographer Gary J. Brierley (2020) further explains, “if we are part of the river and the river is part of us, it is subject to sensations, it experiences responses, it has a form of consciousness. In other words, it is sentient” (17). Embracing rivers in this way, hydopoetics resists an outlook that asserts human dominance over rivers. From a hydopoetic point of view, rivers are fellow beings—intelligent communicators—who command dialogue and respect: “When working with a river, the first place to start is to talk to it, finding out who it is and what it needs to flow” (Brierley, 2020, p. 21). Similarly, as Luna Leopold (1977) argued more than forty years ago, “economic views are too insensitive to be the only criteria for judging the health of the river organism. What is needed is […] reverence for rivers” (430). Indeed, Leopold’s prescient call for river rights came well before the granting of legal personhood to rivers in New Zealand, India, and Colombia (O’Donnell, 2018).

“I heard this pool whisper a warning:” Hydopoetics from the Dart to the Sepik

Luna Leopold’s notion of “reverence for rivers” invites us to envision possibilities beyond the culturally engrained perception of rivers as mere resources. The process of “reworlding” suggested by Leopold—of restructuring human relations to rivers in terms of reverence and
respect—is propelled, I argue, through the reconfiguration of language and thought. As elaborated here, hydropoetic rewor(l)ding prompts new imaginings of rivers while generating insights into our long-standing interdependencies with river ecosystems. Recent environmental humanities thinking, indeed, emphasizes the importance of taking multiple scales of space and time into account, from the deep past to the remote future (Clark, 2019; Ginn, Bastian, Farrier, & Kidwell, 2018; Oppermann, 2018). Timothy Clark (2019) foregrounds the challenge of understanding environments and ecological issues according to “scales of time and space that often elude normal human perception or judgment” (9). In a similar sense, Franklin Ginn and colleagues (2018) refer to the “temporal dislocation” and “fractured timespace” of the Anthropocene in which humans have astoundingly become “planetary agents on a deep spatial and temporal scale” (214).

The “hydropoetics” of Ted Hughes (1983) and Alice Oswald (2002) in the United Kingdom, Robert Adamson (1992) in Australia, and Steven Edmund Winduo (2000) in Papua New Guinea deal with concerns of embodiment (navigating the world through our bodies), relationality (interacting with other beings), and multiscalarity (considering different scales of time) in river contexts. Through their “hydropoetics,” the voices of rivers register as felt sensations affirming the interconnectivity—and, conversely, the dysfunction—between human and water bodies. Ted Hughes’ collection *River* (1983) focuses on British rivers—the Dee, Dart, and Torridge—as well as Scottish, Alaskan, Japanese, and other global rivers through bodily narratives of fishing for trout, witnessing salmon spawning, and becoming embroiled in sharp currents. Hughes’ poetry construes rivers as conscious subjects endowed with perceptive faculties. In the poem “Four March Watercolours,” the river is “Fully occupied with its
callisthenics, / Its twistings and self-wrestlings” (T. Hughes, 1983, p. 16, ll. 15–16), pursuing spring catharsis with dogged intentionality:

The river’s hard at it,

Tries and tries to wash and revive

A bedraggle of dirty bones. Primitive, radical

Engine of earth’s renewal. (T. Hughes, 1983, p. 17, ll. 13–16)

Purifying and reviving, the river rewor(l)ds—reconstitutes and restores—the land. Through “visceral engagement with language,” Hughes forwards an embodied hydropoetics centered on the metabolics—the “engine”—of the river’s body (Skinner, 2018, p. 75).

Hughes in particular focuses on the physical congruences between humans, rivers, and riverscape inhabitants including sheep, salmon, trout, eels, minks, cormorants, kingfishers, and others. Not merely sites of recreation, pleasure, and reverie, rivers are beings with whom people can engage physically and, even, erotically. The collection’s opening poem, “Flesh of lights,” signals the human-nature relationality of Hughes’ poetry, as the river becomes the “Spinal cord of the prone adoring land” (T. Hughes, 1983, p. 7, l. 22). However, the poet’s use of bodily images intensifies in “Milesian encounter on the Sligachan” where the force of a miasmic current jolts the speaker into deep-time consciousness of riverly life:

I heard this pool whisper a warning.

I tickled its leading edges with temptation.

I stroked its throat with a whisker.
I licked the moulded hollows
Of its collarbones
Where the depth, now underbank opposite,
Pulsed up from contained excitements —

Eerie how you know when it’s coming!
So I felt it now, my blood
Prickling and thickening, altering
With an ushering-in of chills [...] (T. Hughes, 1983, p. 32, ll. 50–60)

The Sligachan’s voice is heard as “eerie” sensations of “prickling” and “thickening” in the narrator’s blood. Erotic gestures of tickling, stroking, and licking dispel all pretexts of human estrangement from rivers. In “After moonless midnight,” moreover, the river—one who speaks without words—embraces the narrator caringly and covetously:

The whole river
Listened to me, and, blind,
Invisibly watched me. And held me deeper
With its blind, invisible hands.
‘We’ve got him’, it whispered, ‘We’ve got him’. (T. Hughes, 1983, p. 42, ll. 9–13)
Resisting the notion of voice as exclusive to the human, Hughes’ poetry supplies a language through which rivers express a desire for relation and enact an evolutionary intelligence lunging back in space and time.

These sorts of themes are also vital to Alice Oswald’s poetry. In her long poem *Dart* (2002), the river’s voice encompasses the vocalizations of all river beings, including the poet-narrator, walker, swimmer, naturalist, fisherman, farm worker, oyster harvester, water nymph, and other personae. Indistinguishable from one other, their varied voices meld as the collective voice of the Dart. To compose the poem, Oswald recorded conversations with people living on the Dart as well as the non-human voices of the riverscape. The recordings supplied a sonic inventory out of which the poet produced a narrative of the river from source to sea—from the microscale to the macroscale. In a prefatory note, Oswald (2002) characterizes *Dart* as “a sound-map of the river, a songline from the source to the sea […] All voices should be read as the river’s mutterings” (unpaginated). As a “poetic census” (Pinard, 2009, p. 27) of the Dart, the narrative discloses diverse speakers’ interdependencies with the river (Middleton, 2015, p. 158). Rather than mapped rectilinearly, the riverscape is reckoned relationally through nested scales, each element echoic of the other, from river stone to ocean current:

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one step-width water
of linked stones
trills in the stones
glides in the trills
eels in the glides
in each eel a fingerwidth of sea. (Oswald, 2002, p. 2, ll. 28–33)```
The voice of the Dart emerges out of these bodily relations. As elements with physical bearing, river, stone, fish, foot, finger, melody, and motion coalesce symphonically. In the sixth line, the force of Oswald’s language reaches a zenith through congruences—human (finger) to freshwater (eel) to marine (sea) bodies—eliciting the river voice. In this manner, *Dart* exemplifies the “narrative, metaphorical, and structural reliance on water” that distinguishes hydropoetic writing (Miller, 2018, p. 110).

Just as Oswald attends to the voice(s) of the Dart, Australian poet Robert Adamson’s poetry centers on a particular river system. For Adamson, the mangroves of the Hawkesbury River are a primeval, “fascinating sourcing of the unseen” communicating in a language comprehended by wetland denizens yet frequently misread by Australian settler society (Kinsella, 2013, p. 161). In *Swamp riddles* (1974), Adamson mythologizes the mangroves in scenes of a disoriented figure stumbling through swamplands, “terrified— / shooting wild animals, even though / his supplies were holding out” (unpaginated). Although evoked as “dead waters,” the mangrove is a locus of emergence as silence transports spirits to the “tiny body of a kingfisher” (unpaginated). In *Clean dark* (1992), however, Adamson places greater emphasis on the ecologies of the Hawkesbury while preserving the mythological and metaphysical elements of his earlier writing. The poem “Phasing out the mangroves” strikes an elegiac note:

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Now it has been drawn up and swamp
will be filled, measurements
have been taken. (Adamson, n.d., ll. 1–3)
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The euphemism “phasing out” hastens the desecration of the wetland through the imposition of “concrete geometries […] bent glass and metal domes” (Adamson, n.d., ll. 7, 11). The neocolonial legacies of clearing, draining, filling, and disregarding aquatic ecologies imperil the long-term wellbeing of the Hawkesbury:

The great hunched mangroves
will no longer tend
the instincts of kingfishers. (Adamson, n.d., ll. 8–10)

Adamson’s poetry is bodily (“hunched”), relational (“tend”), and multiscalar in its concern for the future (“will no longer”). His river-centric writing reminds us that, while surveying and classification can enhance conservation measures, these practices have also been deployed historically to “reclaim” wetlands. As the relationships between swamps, mangroves, birds, humans, and other creatures weaken, the “swamp children” forego the river’s voice(s) for an imperial “language of arithmetic in cracked syllables” (Adamson, n.d., ll. 19, 20).

Ancestral rivers figure prominently into the poetry of Steven Edmund Winduo, a Papua New Guinean poet who writes in English, Tok Pisin, and Nagum Boiken, his native language. Winduo’s writing aims to restore traditional relations to rivers such as the Sepik. At the same time, his work brings urgent attention to the Indigenous languages that inflect the many river voices of Papua New Guinea. These focal points orient his collection, Hembemba, a Nagum Boiken term for “river of the forest” (Wood, 2006, p. 85). In the opening poem, “Rivers of the forest,” the river’s movement recalls Hughes’ figure of the self-wrestling dancer:
A young lady passed in rhythmic stride
My young heart on a boat of passion rode
Hooked on the wind of unknown desires. (Winduo, 2000, p. 9, ll. 4–6)

Echoing the river poetry of Hughes, Winduo personifies the river as a paramour or secret lover.
The feminized river initiates men yet threatens to consume those without reverence:

Rivers of the forest swell
Swallow peoples of little thoughts
Leave art to speak of endurance in life. (Winduo, 2000, p. 9, ll. 23–25)

The fourth part of *Hembemba* features poems in Nagum Boiken and Tok Pisin alongside their English versions. Among these, “Canoe making in Megiar” focuses on the communication of hydrological wisdom between generations:

The story of the sea and tides
Leaves the mouth of the old man
He begins from the source of the story. (Winduo, 2000, p. 106, ll. 7–9)

Through a “hydrocentric imagination” (Miller, 2018, p. 109)—an outlook on the world that reflects the importance of rivers and their relations—Winduo urges his people to learn to listen to rivers once more and, in doing so, to restore the values of ancestors who regarded rivers with great respect.
“River stones making your hair’s shadow:” Indonesian hydropoetics

Thus far, I have defined the idea of “hydropoetics” as an embodied, relational, and multiscalar orientation toward water that embraces rivers as sensing bodies in themselves. Beginning with the Balinese Campuhan yet traversing global rivers and poems—from the United Kingdom to Australia to Papua New Guinea—I have adopted what can be called a “transcultural” approach free from literary-political barriers and seeking to understand rivers across cultures (Cooke & Denney, 2021). As the concept of poiesis—the root of poetry—affirms, the relationships between people, rivers, and other organisms are fundamentally embodied regardless of national, political, cultural, religious, spiritual, and other differences. The world over, human beings eat fish, drink water, paddle boats, swim, wade, dive, drown, become nauseated by the pungent reek of industrial waste, and mourn the loss of riverworlds. Through such interactions, the voices of rivers register within and between bodies. The speaker in Hughes’ poem, for instance, experiences the voice of River Sligachan haptically as a current that “grabbed the tip of my heart-nerve” (1983, p. 32). Voice can be understood as the imprints of bodies—the impressions of beings announcing their being. For Eric King Watts (2014), indeed, voice “registers a powerful, some would say passionate, cluster of feelings triggered by life finding a way to announce itself” (259).

Further extending my approach to the “voicing rivers” theme, I now turn to river poems by Sanusi Pane (1971, originally 1927), Hidjaz Yamani (2017, originally 1957), Afrizal Malna (2013), and Khairani Barokka (2016). Indonesian poetry about rivers highlights the urgency of freshwater conservation in the archipelagic nation with a burgeoning human population and severely polluted water systems. As a result of uncontrolled household, industrial, and
agricultural contamination, most Indonesian rivers are in serious ecological decline (Garg, Hamilton, Hochard, Kresch, & Talbot, 2018). The Citarum of West Java, for instance, has been ingloriously dubbed “the world’s most polluted river” (Tarahita & Rakhmat, 2018) while Java’s longest river, the Solo, has been described in no uncertain terms as “a river full of plastic waste, diapers [and] animal carcasses” (Hidayat, 2020). Yet, as the environmental conscience of a nation—and as a wellspring of positive ecological values—poetry has the potential to show us the vital connections between communities, individuals, and rivers. Sensitivity towards rivers is evident in Sanusi Pane’s “Sungai” (“River”) and “Sawah” (“Rice Fields”), written in the 1920s and collected in *Puspa mega* (1971). “Sungai” traces the balletic movement of a river from the mountains to the plains enroute to the sea. In contrast, “Sawah” depicts the centrality of a waterbody to everyday village life:

*Sungai* bersinar, menyilaukan mata
The river shines, dazzles eyes

Menyemburkan buih warna pelangi,
Spitting out a rainbow of froth,

Anak mandi bersuka hati,
A child bathes in delight,

Berkejar-kejaran, berseru gembira.
Chasing, exclaiming joyfully.

Pane’s poetry narrates the pleasure of an immersive, purifying interaction with a local river *that/who* has become both familiar and filiated, that is, part of a family of humans and non-humans (Pane, 1971, p. unpaginated, ll. 5–8, my translation).

The romantic outlook found in Pane’s poetry, however, is disturbed in “Martapura river” by Hidjaz Yamani (2017, p. 154, originally 1957). Located near the city of Banjarmasin in southeast Borneo (Kalimantan), the “dark brown” Martapura “whispers as it passes the *lanting-
lanting,” or houses constructed on stilts, and meanders “past the new buildings on its banks” (Yamani, 2017, p. 154, ll. 1, 2, 4). A speaking subject—a witness, in particular, to the socioecological change of the post-Independence Sukarno era—the whispering Martapura shelters the disenfranchised and downtrodden who cluster along its shores, “their throats parched with thirst” (Yamani, 2017, p. 154, l. 9). Notwithstanding the intrusion of urban infrastructure, human communities depend on the river for their livelihood as dukuh-dukuh, or female merchants in small canoes, paddle by, selling fish and vegetables. Bodily images—“breasts bobbing,” faces covered, eyes wild—signify the relationships between vendors and the Martapura (Yamani, 2017, p. 154, l. 12). These images generate friction between the nostalgia of traditional life and the prospects of economic expansion:

Hundreds of objects disturb the water at my feet.

The bright sunlight burns my eyes.

I hold these sights fondly in my heart. (Yamani, 2017, p. 154, ll. 15–17)

In Indonesian, pura denotes “temple,” implying the river’s historical standing as a sacrosanct place. Nonetheless, the Martapura, like many Indonesian rivers today, has been contaminated by mercury, cadmium, and other heavy metals that imperil its vitality. Yamani’s poetry, consequently, illuminates the “trans-corporeality” of the urban riverscape “in which human bodies are not only overlapped with one another but also enmeshed with nonhuman creatures and landscapes” (Alaimo, 2016, p. 67).

Similarly “trans-corporeal” in emphasis, Afrizal Malna’s “mother in river cremation” (2013) is a poem underlain by the Hindu-Buddhist principle of Mahābhūta or the four “great”
elements of earth, water, fire, and air. Depicting the cremation of the speaker’s mother, the poem’s concern with transformation implicates the river in the afterlife: “everything that / grows makes a forest to return to. everything i love is burnt also. and / everything I love burns myself” (Malna, 2013, p. 21, ll. 5–7). Malna unsettles the first-person perspective insofar as “I” (not capitalized in the text) includes the narrator, the narrator’s deceased mother, the mother’s ashes, and the river itself as a conduit of reincarnation. The all-embracing “I,” for instance, acquires the viewpoint of ashes scattered in the river: “i see that river recording your face; i see river stones making your / hair’s shadow” (Malna, 2013, p. 21). As an intelligent intermediary between material and spiritual domains, the river “knows why every going is a new arrival” (Malna, 2013, p. 21). The pervasive industrialization of Indonesian riverscapes, nonetheless, is implied through the disconcerting phrases “the smell of burnt rubber” and “that rubber smelling afternoon” found in the first lines of the second and third stanzas, respectively (Malna, 2013, p. 21, l. 8, 13). In this way, Malna’s poetry centralizes the tension between ancient traditions of death and modern contrivances of culture, echoing Yamani’s “Martapura river” although from the perspective of the accelerating environmental deterioration of the Anthropocene present.

A timely example of Indonesian hydropoetics, Khairani Barokka’s long poem Indigenous species (2016) confronts the principal urgencies of the Anthropocene, including climate change, pollution, deforestation, and cultural dispossession. Following the journey of an Indigenous girl smuggled up an unnamed river in Kalimantan, the narrative draws urgent attention to the forced relocation of Indigenous communities, the clear-cutting of forests for plantations, escalating rates of disease caused by pollutants, and the decimation of orangutans and other rainforest inhabitants. Images of human-nature incarceration and female embodiment evoke a distinctive hydropoetics originating in the body “at the depth of its viscera” (Skinner, 2018, p. 66). For
Skinner (2018), visceral poetry “aims to activate matter from within” (83) while, for Alaimo (2010), “trans-corporeality” signifies that “the human body can never be disentangled from the material world, a world composed of emergent, entangled biological creatures as well as a multitude of xenobiotic [synthetic], humanly made substances” (24). In *Indigenous species*, ecological crisis registers culturally and ecologically, as well as neurologically and bodily, as the narrator declares:

> And I don’t want to grow old
> As you paddle downriver
> With the mercury
> Beating down your synapses,
> Eating at your unborn childlings. (Barokka, 2016, p. 21, ll. 1–5)

Here and elsewhere in the poem, river sensibility accommodates different scales of impact—bodily, domestic, local, bioregional, national, biospheric—in dystopian imaginings of Indigenous cosmologies collapsed “Into pulp and paper” and “Eons of intricacies and strength / From the forest to molecular form / On a woman’s lipstick bottle in Iowa” (Barokka, 2016, 27, l. 6, 29, ll. 7–9). Inflecting the global in the local—and vice versa—Barokka’s poem deals with the various scales according to which Anthropocene change is unfolding (Oppermann, 2018).

**Conclusion: Returning to the Campuhan**

At the Campuhan of Ubud, human and river bodies internestle as a Balinese family disperses the ashes of a deceased loved one into the spirited currents. Frothing eddies subsume the fine dust of a life into the thick, tawny broth of the Wos. Careful not to disturb the ceremony, I contort
myself around a banyan’s aerial roots draping into the currents like thirsty tentacles. Aware of
the treacherously greasy mud underfoot, I tread with care, inching downriver for as long as the
terrain—and spirits—will permit. According to Balinese scriptures, the confluence of rivers
(campuhan)—as well as the junctions of rivers and seas (loloan)—are sacred junctions offering
purification, or melukat (Bräuchler, 2018, p. 376). The Campuhan’s capacity to create and heal,
on the one hand, and to harm and destroy, on the other, represents the cosmological balance that
gave rise to the Balinese religion, or Agama Tirta, where tirta denotes the holy water used in
rites. Essential to Agama Tirta is respect for deities, ensuring plentiful rice harvests and reliable
water flows (Mann, 2015, p. 83). Throughout the island, canals divert rivers through temples and
into paddies, allowing cultivation on steep gradients. Since the eleventh century, this cooperative
water management system, or subak, has reflected the principle of Tri Hita Karana, or the
harmonization of human, natural, and spiritual worlds, including ancestors (UNESCO World
Heritage Centre, 2012). In recent decades, however, rapid modernization in Bali, particularly in
the agriculture and tourism sectors, has drastically depleted the already limited water supply.
With increasing urbanization, subaks must now compete with resorts for resources. At the same
time, as evident especially during the rainy season, plastic waste clogs Bali’s rivers, oceans, and
beaches, disrupting, among other things, the perception of the island as an unsullied idyll.

The funeral ceremony over, I cross a footbridge back to the Campuhan and pause to
witness the miracle of its waters mingling. Incense floods the air. A sculptor chisels the
likenesses of gods and goddesses into river stones. Two fishermen arrive with poles and
squirming bait. At this place of convergence, the profane mixes sinuously with the sacred—the
material with the imagined. I hear a song suddenly plunge from a tree top into the river on its
way to Lembongan, Lombok, Lesser Sunda, the Timor Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of
Carpentaria, the Great Barrier Reef, New Caledonia, and beyond. As sketched in this article, poetic sensitivity towards rivers encourages an expansive feeling for “spatial connections—in the water, sediment, ecology and cultures that the river unites—as well as temporal corridors into the evolution of the landscape, linked ecosystems and human civilization” (Best, 2019, p. 7). At the Campuhan and other confluences—in Bali and elsewhere—meditation on the relations among time, space, nature, spirit, self, and other bears “fluid meanings” (McMillin, 2011, p. 39). In the Anthropocene context, however, river consciousness requires traversing the vast bodily, social, regional, and political scales of ecological crisis. For, as Ursula K. Heise (2008) argues, “a sense of place cannot be conceived outside of a sense of transnational connectedness” (181). As a “recuperative imaginative act,” hydropoetics remains steadfastly focused on the urgencies of the present without losing the power of hope (Hume & Osborne, 2018, p. 10). In this way, hydropoetics invigorates new imaginaries of rivers—new wor(l)dings and rewor(l)dings—encouraging openness to that which exists and that which has yet to emerge.

**Data Availability Statement**

Data is available in the public domain in the form of poetry and critical literature.

**Notes**

1. To limit the scope of the discussion while asserting the importance of transcultural approaches to rivercultures, this article highlights the hydrocentric orientation of contemporary poetry, defined as poems written and published since World War II. In considering the idea of *hydropoetics*, however, readers should also bear in mind older sources such as the *Nadistuti sukta* (“Hymn of praise of rivers”) of the ancient Indian text, *Rigveda*. The fifth verse, for
instance, respectfully invokes the names of ten rivers, including the sacred Ganga and its tributary, the Yamuna.

References


