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Book Review



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by Grace Dobbie and Elliot Goodell Ugalde



About the Authors

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Book Review

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Vermette, Katherena. 2018. *River Woman*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.

Métis writer Katherena Vermette's *River Woman* (2018) is an evocative poetry collection that delves into the profound connections between water and human experience. Through her verses, Vermette personifies rivers, portraying them as sisters, mothers, and lovers, emphasizing our intrinsic bond with these bodies of water.

Vermette presents water as a living entity with its own consciousness and agency, urging readers to think with water rather than merely about it. This approach resonates with Astrida Neimanis' concept of hydrofeminism, which underscores the interconnectedness of water and human bodies, advocating for a deeper understanding of our mutual vulnerabilities and relational entanglements (2016). Vermette's imaginative engagement with water in her poetry advances hydropolitics by offering a deeply intimate portrayal of water's role in human life and emotion.

River Woman is more than a collection of poems; it is a call to live and love with water, to embrace our own unknowability, and to engage with the world through a watery logic that fosters new understandings of place, identity, and love. Vermette's poetry reminds us of the importance of paying attention, listening, and cherishing the subtle movements that shape our existence. By aligning her poetic vision with the themes explored by Neimanis, Vermette enriches our understanding of water as a vital, life-giving force, and a profound metaphor for the complexities of human experience.

Neimanis writes, "how might paying attention to water—really paying attention to it, its movements and relations, its vulnerabilities and gifts, what it does, and how it organizes itself and other bodies—open up a different sort of imaginative space" (2016, 52). Vermette's *River Woman* models a way for us to think, love, and imagine with water; a way for us to listen, learn, and cherish water in our interactions with the land and with

each other. Vermette personifies rivers, writing about them as kin, emphasizing the humanity found in water and our innate connection to it.

This poetic exploration is particularly resonant in the poem “riverlove,” where she communicates how knowing and honoring water allows us to better understand and practice love. She writes, “Now that I know her / I sit here high on the grass / and feel her with me / she laps slower / but ripples in my chest / like love / it is love / that’s what love is” (2018, 46). The rhythms and motions of water and the work it does to give us life are constant. Along with her emphasis on flowing and rippling water, Vermette also pays attention to stillness, freezing, sound, and silence as alternative iterations and experiences of water. This idea parallels Neimanis’ assertion that “liquid is only one of water’s phase states, and flowing is just one of the things it does” (2016, 53). Thinking about water as “what love is,” it is important to recognize all its movements and patterns, and both Neimanis and Vermette point us toward the ways in which we can learn to understand ourselves through the cycles and unpredictabilities of rivers. By identifying something as indefinable as love with something as unknowable as water, Vermette speaks to the importance of listening to the world around us and witnessing that which is unseen.

The effort to witness what is invisible to us is prominent in Vermette’s work as it exemplifies the ways in which literature allows us to witness the world while also witnessing us. In “I write you into every word every,” Vermette models a way for readers to imagine thinking with water, embracing its unknowability, and infusing that practice into all aspects of life. She highlights the importance of the intention and meaning that flow between the words we choose, writing, “flip over any sentence unearth / the simplest phrase / and you will find / pieces of you in it” (2018, 96). This poem continues the established theme of framing love in a manner reminiscent of rivers, similar to an earlier work titled “Ziibiwan,” which means “river” in Anishinaabemowin, emphasizing “the knowing / not unknown” (2018, 34). Like water, knowledge and love in *River Woman* are framed as active, intentional practices that take place despite our inability to fully comprehend them. Love is a constant action, an ever-changing, ever-flowing force that guides us, feeds us, moves us. The way she writes the river as a willful agent, being “smart,” and a “trickster” despite its being undervalued and abused, speaks to the love she is writing in “I write you into every word every” (2018, 54). The love that is always flowing, that we need to consciously tend to and recognize and pour into our work and our connections. The love we have been taught to “make bridges to cut across,” to avoid (2018, 53). This poem puts theory into praxis, exemplifying how the energy and power of the river is something that is lived within us as well, something that we need to cherish and tend to. Her poetry points us toward understanding rivers as teachers, calls us to

“listen / listen / don’t forget to listen” (2018, 22), and this poem in particular provides an example of how thinking with water manifests in our art, our love, and our lives.

Along with thinking, it is important for us to live and love with water. For us to read with water and for us to work to better understand ourselves as being as unknowable, as unpredictable as water. In thinking with water, in employing “watery logics” to our lives, there is potential for us to open up new ways of understanding place, identity, and love (Neimanis 2016, 55). Vermette and Neimanis work together to point us toward the idea that we are not working to uncover a concrete truth about ourselves or the world, rather we are committed to an embodied practice of knowledge that acknowledges the impossibility of possession. While we are learning and living with water, “we are its curious custodians rather than its masters” (Neimanis 2016, 64).

Indeed, Katherena Vermette’s *River Woman* is a profound exploration of the elemental forces shaping human existence. Her poetry goes beyond conventional boundaries, urging readers to engage deeply with water as a sentient and dynamic entity. By aligning her work with Astrida Neimanis’ hydrofeminist principles, Vermette challenges us to rethink our interactions with the natural world, emphasizing our interconnectedness with water. Her nuanced portrayal of water as a metaphor for love, identity, and knowledge compels us to listen, observe, and cherish the subtle movements that shape our lives. Through *River Woman*, Vermette invites us to embrace a holistic understanding of our place within the ecological tapestry, opening new pathways for contemplating the intricate relationships between humanity and nature, consistent with Métis epistemological traditions of place-based knowledge(s) accessible to readers educated in European scholarship.

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