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Female Divinities and Water in Pre-Christian Hispanic Mythology: Imaginary Landscapes for the Conservation of Nature

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Alejandra Acosta Mota

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TEXTE

Hydrofeminism and Mythical Waters: a Critical Approach

1 Thinking about water in a way that breaks from dominant and institutionalized definitions of water requires that we look beyond the modern, positivist view of water as a molecule which, from the 18th century onward, became progressively detached from territories and natural landscapes[1]. This way of conceptualizing the precious liquid that enables all life on earth began developing in Western Europe and North America and now operates around the globe, exerting influence in all kinds of social, economic, political and legal structures.

2 The history of our ideas about water is marked by changes in values that ultimately reflect on the physical, substantial ways in which it becomes polluted, mistreated and drained. As Astrida Neimanis acutely points out, "waterscapes are certainly material, but they would not be *worlded* without a certain aqueous imagination that delimits what we think water should be, and should do"[2]. Would we be so inclined to disregard the care of this natural resource if we imagined it as part of ourselves? From the perspective of the hydro-

logical definition of the body, and of the inherent relation of its watery composition with the ecological environment, humans are part of an interconnected web of living organisms that entangles people with all kinds of embodied entities, those purely aquatic – like oceans, lakes, rivers and streams – and animal too.

3 The formulation of hydrofeminism is indebted to modern feminist thinkers who preceded it, but also to all knowledge that, throughout history, has allowed for alternative imaginaries of water. Although not as in depth as with gender theories and phenomenological previous definitions of water, Neimanis has engaged with the imaginaries of indigenous cosmogonical traditions "to read them as concrete exercises in ways of being in the world". She has been specifically interested in current artistic representations of the ancestral conceptions of water as "a living, spiritual being with its own responsibilities to fulfil", and as crucial to "environmental [...] [and] cultural survival" [3].

4 People who are considered "indigenous" are often defined as those who have a precedent or more original claim to a place, as opposed to others who are characterized as settlers or newcomers. Such claims are usually expressed through place-based descriptions of relationships. The distinction is useful for environmental humanities in the sense that human communities are an essential part of the ecological system. The cosmogonies of these communities ascribe agencies to the different beings and collectives of certain regions. "Indigeneity" thus refers, in a comprehensive way, to systems that integrate humans and nonhumans in particular places over many generations. Indigenous knowledge also often refers to observations of the environment over an extended time period. Therefore, it is important to underline that indigeneity does not necessarily – and seldom does – mean "coming before" so much as a way to express intergenerational systems of responsibilities that connect humans, animals, plants, sacred entities, and all kinds of structures [4].

5 Many cultures have invoked the ocean and water bodies to create their gods and goddesses. The ocean has been for centuries the source for creation myths and of all sorts of evil and good spirits, agents of destruction or protection. They can provide nourishment or even profit and prosperity. Water deities, or mythical entities related

to and controlling water bodies, are at the very beginning or foundation of human societies. The symbolic significance of oceans has been registered all over the globe. Coastal waters, lagoons, estuaries, mangroves, rivers and springs have often inspired the imagination and depiction of submerged worlds in which life and death renewal follow an infinite cycle [5].

6 Indigenous female deities or goddesses are particularly attached to gestationality as the means of the world's origin. The symbolic value of female divinity as the power that creates the natural world is different from the significance that divine male power usually has. For instance, in the Christian cosmogony – the non-scientific most influential cosmogony in Spanish speaking territories – creation of the world is *ex-nihilo*, meaning that it emerges from nothing. On the contrary, goddesses often represent cyclical movements of creation and renewal. Hydrofeminism is fruitful for the study of these goddesses because they represent alternative, non-dominant imaginaries of water. We must take into account, however, that, from hydrofeminism's perspective, gestationality, or water's capacity to enable new life, is opposed to heteronormative reprosexuality as the axis of life's continuum. This is also not an impediment, as Neimanis puts it, to recognize the "feminist commitment to thinking the difference of maternal, feminine, and otherwise gendered and sexed bodies" [6].

7 Hydrofeminism's approach to indigenous cosmogonies seeks not to underpin an "essentialist" concept of either sexual difference or water, but rather point out pre-modern, pre-colonial ideas of it that could offset positivist, mechanistic and dominant representations of humans' relationship to water.

8 One of the ways we can study indigenous understandings of water is through mythology: the tradition of allegorical narratives dealing with gods, demigods, and legendary heroes of a particular culture. These stories can be registered in oral or written literature. In a similar way to ecofictions, ancient myths constitute a rich source for thinking about water in feminist and hydrofeminist terms. Fables featuring characters representing animate or ensouled ecologies, for instance the *numen aquae* – spirits or genies that protect a specific place to avoid the possible excesses of intruders and preserve its treasures – even constitute the ancestral roots of both legendary and

literary ecofictions, to the point that the study of mermaids, dragons, water fairies and other water beings is currently a frequent object of research in the fields of education and comparative literature [7].

9 We will focus on how water is conceived in the representations of female divinity, taking goddesses Mari from Basque culture and María Lionza from Venezuelan culture as case studies. These goddesses are less known than the ones from Pagan Greek and Roman cosmogonies; nonetheless they are relevant for anthropological, historical, artistic and linguistic knowledge of the Spanish speaking world territories.

10 Mari and María Mionza are from different sides of the Spanish Atlantic, but they are remarkably both Pre-Christian female divinities related to water, which are still present in the current cultural panorama and particularly recognized as symbols of specific, protected natural reserves. Goddess Mari has been the subject of academic attention since the mid-20th century. Ethnologists noted in Basque folklore the traces of this supreme feminine being, who was linked to the survival of a Neolithic goddess [8]. The oral sources of the Amerindian myth of María Lionza are ancient and date back at least to the beginning of Spanish colonisation. Her figure has not been immune to syncretism, as it has in some contexts taken the attributes of a white, Spanish lady. Nonetheless, she remains an important symbol of aboriginal femininity in Venezuela.

11 Hydrofeminism has underlined the impact that appreciating and assimilating the richness and diversity of water culture could have, particularly through new ways of thinking about the way humans coexist with nature. Taking up on this challenge, I will interpret the myths of Mari and María Lionza and the rituals related to them as part of the alternative water cultures that offset current mechanistic views of waterscapes.

Mari: Life and Water in a Female Cosmos

12 When Alexander von Humboldt was working on his best-selling work *Cosmos* (1850), the available, non-archaic alternatives terms such as “universe”, “monde”, “Earth” and “world” could not cover the recip-

rocal connections of mind, nature, form and history that he wanted to convey. The modern words could not precisely designate the harmoniously ordered whole that nature constitutes. Science needed the aid of poetry, which had in Antiquity come up with a word that signified "universe, order of the world, and adornment of this universal order". Such adornment, of course, comes from human intellect. The material universe could exist without humans, but the "cosmos" could only be shaped by the historical relationship between nature and human perception, one that can be traced in philosophy, literature, art, sciences, technologies, and ecological understanding [9].

13 In indigenous Basque culture, the cosmos is female. At the centre of the Basque community's cosmogony is goddess Mari, an allegorical representation of the planet that is material-animistic at its core. She is the Earth or the maternal body of the universe and, at the same time, the mother soul who animates it, the psyche or consciousness of the universe. Interestingly, the body or matter is not separated from the spirit in its creative function [10]. This symbolic structure thus supports female divinity as the ruler of all that can be defined as a naturalistic vision of the world. She is, in fact, the absolute goddess, because her figure combines functions that in other mythologies appear dispersed or distributed among different genies or deities.

14 Mari integrates all the kingdoms of nature and the four elements. She encloses into her symbolic persona the mineral, the vegetal, the animal and the human. We find water in its purest form as part of the four elements Mari rules over. She inhabits the planet's interior and directs its aquatic phenomena. Her caves are humid and she manipulates currents and rain, just as she produces the winds, by flying through the atmosphere, and fire, when the sun comes out of her earthly womb, the terraqueous matrix that bears all, and flies like a fiery sickle. Earth and water are at the centre of the creation of Mari's daughters. Contrary to many other mythologies, the sun, *Eguzki* in Euskera, like the moon, *Ilargi*-, is female. They emerge from their mother and return to it after their course across the blue sky, plunging into the reddish sea, as they set to continue their journey into the underworld [11].

15 The particularities of Basque mythology emerge with the preponderance of a widely female lexicon. Studies of Basque toponymy have

also connected Mari to the Neolithic *Mha*, lady of the lands, domestic animals, flowers and serpents [12]. This relates her to the Goddesses of Old Europe, who Marija Gimbutas carefully traced in many sculptures and ritual ceramics collected from southeastern Neolithic and Chalcolithic Europe. In most of them, she interpreted a cyclical perception of time and a system of values and beliefs where regeneration and renewal are fundamental features: a concept in which life and death do not mark the beginning or end of anything, but rather the transformation of something, prior to the dichotomization of thought and the system of binary oppositions: human versus nature, life versus death, man versus woman. The female figurines were not described as naturalistic representations, but rather as universal and symbolic abstractions [13].

16 In Mari's mythology, animals, like water, appear entangled with the female's own figure too. She metamorphoses into all that inhabits the earth. For instance, she is often represented with goat feet, and this is not a mere accident: the animal belongs to her being. In some places she is seen in the form of a bull, a ram, a serpent, a horse, a crow, or a vulture. Underlying all this is the sacredness of the earth as the primary element, as feminine and therefore transmutable and transmuting into all the other beings. In this regard, agrarian imagination, based on the transformation of the seeds of reality through the matrix earth, has profoundly influenced Mari's mythological narratives throughout history [14].

17 Built under the natural surface of an unlimited horizontal terrain only partially known, there is the mysterious, underground place through which rivers of milk flow and where abundant treasures are found. In those undergrounds, Mari's rooms are richly adorned with gold and precious stones. There the souls of ancestors and most of the gods and mythical figures who communicate with humans roam around free, through chasms and caverns. Mari is the goddess of life but also of death. She receives the souls of those who die within the Earth. Prehistoric humans even coexisted in caves with their ancestors, under the tutelage of Mari as their protective spirit. The survival of this familial structure in the later communitarian sense of existence that translated to family houses is remarkable. The domestic cult to ancestry was led by the lady of the house, to gain Mari's favor. Being protected by divinity was identified with communitarian order, guar-

anteed socio-religious harmony, the right of asylum and transmission of the house within the family. Some traditional Basque laws called *Régimen foral* in Spanish are still effective today in historically Basque territories. These laws somehow converge with traditional mythology. The sacredness of the houses and their ancestor has a close correlation with an agrarian social structure defined by the undivided estate and the freedom to make a will, which gives rise to frequent cases of female inheritance and matrilocality that highlight the important social role of women[15]. But where the mythical goddess and the natural landscapes merge the most is in the impressive peaks of the Basque country. The Anboto Mountains – a natural sanctuary with multiple streams and springs – rise in the Urkiola Natural Park, at the heart of the Duranguesado region. This locality houses numerous elements of religious significance, pertaining to its prehistoric, medieval, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque heritage, as well as a vibrant rural mythology that links female entities with witchcraft and the mountains.

18 The limestone slopes of the Anboto Mountains are characterized by being replete with fossils. Not surprisingly, the contrast between their green vegetation and their bare, light-coloured rocks caught the attention of Alexander von Humboldt. Mari is commonly known as the Lady of Anboto, and oversees about 400 caves and inhabits one that is considered her main abode. Quite important Christian temples and monuments were constructed near geographical spaces associated with the Basque goddess of the mountains, but her role as a mountain deity is still present today in some rituals. Mountaineers and shepherdesses often make food offerings to her to pray for good weather, good fortune, and the prevention of accidents[16].

19 These rituals are similar to others that take place across the Atlantic, in the Andes. In those South American peaks food offerings to Mother Earth are made at least once a year, at the beginning of August, while libations or *challas* to Pachamama[17] are daily and precede almost every drink. However, these quasi-universal forms of worship are almost no longer practiced in the Iberian world, due to technological progress and advanced secularization. But food being still offered to Mari in pastoral contexts at the foot of Mount Anboto is both unusual and valuable. Even so, the mountains of Anboto still summon a sort of connection to nature that reflects a sense of communion with the

landscape: drinking their water. The famous Pol-Pol spring, whose onomatopoeic name refers to the waters that flow from it, is ferruginous in composition and has a distinctive reddish colour. Locals travel several kilometres on foot to drink from it, in order to prevent anaemia [18].

María Lionza: Indigenous Water Bodies in South America

20 There are countless stories about who María Lionza was before becoming the Queen and Goddess of both a Venezuelan myth and a cult. Those who venerate her believe that she is a force or spirit with whom they can make pacts to obtain health, wealth, fortune, and love. Despite the many versions of her origins, she is a fundamental part of Venezuelans' understanding of their indigenous history, and she is widely known for being a protector of nature who calls the mountains home. Her importance as a national symbol grew substantially during the 1940s and 1950s, when her legend was promoted as a founding myth.

21 There are two main distinct narratives about who María Lionza was: one that attributes her to an indigenous origin and another that points to a Spanish one. The white woman with European features, María Alonzo or Leonza, derives her power from the wealth secured through land ownership and labour; she is a landowner queen, rich in *morocotas* – old Spanish currency – who is able to make deals to provide wealth to those who worship her. She is similar to the nineteenth-century European lady. However we also find a rich array of mythological female precedents in the American continent. The ancient indigenous roots of María Lionza can be found in Mayuronza, a telluric force, and Yara, a woman from the aboriginal mythology of Brazil related to one of the possible deities of the aboriginal inhabitants of Yaracuy, a Venezuelan region. Both representations, the Spanish lady and the Amerindian woman, are present in paintings, sculptures, and texts produced in Venezuela, as well as in the rituals of the cult of María Lionza, whose rituals are practiced by the most diverse social groups of the urban middle and working classes [19].

22 The oral sources of the Amerindian myth are ancient and date back at least to the beginning of colonisation of the American continent. Archaeologist and ethnologist Gilberto Antolínez published a consolidated version of Maria Lionza's myth in 1945. This tale was to become one of the most influential in contemporary Venezuelan history and cultural imagination. According to Antolínez' anthropological reconstruction, shortly before the Spanish invasion, the daughter of a Nívar chief was born with quite unusual green eyes. The people of the Jirajara tribe to which the father and daughter belonged believed she would bring about their ruin, as told by an ancient legend that had announced the arrival of a girl with empty eyes who would awaken a monstrous serpent. They asked the chief to offer the girl with green eyes as a sacrifice to the anaconda that lived at the bottom of the lake: the guardian spirit of the waters. But the father, instead of handing her over, decided to hide her. She grew up confined, with no one except her mother and twenty-two guardians able to see her eyes, as she had also been forbidden to approach any surface that could serve as a mirror. This could not hold the serpent, who one day put the guardians to sleep and claimed the girl that had grown over the years into a woman of somnambulant beauty. The young woman wandered to the shore of the lake to see for the first time the copy of her face in the water and found in her eyes the reflection of the world of the gods and the dead. The reflection soon took the shape of the anaconda that awaited her on the other side of the water. Right there, where the two images met, that of the monster and that of Jirajara, a hole was formed through which she disappeared. The spirit of the lake was then filled with an unstoppable force, and as it grew so strong, it swept away houses, temples, and crops, turning the lake into a great river that would forever connect the Venezuelan regions of Sorte and Tacarigua [20].

23 The ethnographic studies and reconstruction of the myth during the mid 20th century came to vindicate the aboriginal past of the *mestiza* Goddess by incorporating indigenous sacred beliefs into the story of her origin, giving them a universal scope and assimilating them to the values assigned to archetypal nature. In this sense, María Lionza is considered to be at the centre of a religion similar to those that have developed in other parts of the American continent, which assign a sacred domain to caves, mountains, lagoons, and waterways. The

devotees of these religions can communicate with the spirits that inhabit the animated nature. The venerated goddesses are also often representations of women in association with water, earth, the moon, and the serpent, all underlying symbols of myths originating from ancient matriarchal societies. The goddess Yara, protector of the waters and the harvests, sits on a throne guarded by lions, snakes, and goats. A similar figure in Greek mythology would be the goddesses Cybele or Rhea, who are depicted surrounded by beasts, and were celebrated by priests with dances to the sound of drums [21].

24 María Lionza's legend takes us back to the primordial aquatic chaos of the flood, a symbol of destruction and of cosmic order restoration in mythical tales. Its dual meaning or contradiction is resolved when it becomes an attribute of the deity. Gods and Goddesses can control the flood and, at the same time, embody a powerful force that moves the wheels of time's cycles. Aquatic divinities or entities rule over water masses such as lakes, rivers and springs, seas and oceans, their tides, and all events related to them. From the beginning of civilisations, as symbolic creatures, they often have human characteristics and those of aquatic animals. Probably one of the most known creatures derived from this mythological imagination are mermaids. What all these gods, deities, or water entities have in common is the fact that they have a double relationship to the environment, sometimes attached to nurturing, calm waters, and others to rough, mysteriously dangerous depths [22].

25 The Jirajara woman, who becomes a goddess in the Venezuelan myth, travels inward the water depths to enter the spirits' abode. To cross from the world of humans to the world of spirits she must look into her own eyes. The serpent monster is dangerous, lurking under her reflection. After facing it, she becomes part of the serpent and vice versa. The giant serpent is first crouching beneath the surface of the water, then spilling into the earth. Suddenly, there is no longer any opposition between the woman/human and the animal that represents menacing nature, only the force of the goddess's own creation: the river.

26 By the end of María Lionza's legend, there is no opposition between the woman's body, the body of the animal that eats her or the body of the water that is born from chaos, once the magic inside the lake

provokes it to overflow and become a river. This symbolic image of communion of bodies is extremely powerful when we remember that rivers in the Amazon, and other South American regions, could also be imagined as gigantic serpents. Like the animals, rivers are also alive, and are microcosms in themselves. Rivers have three physiologies: underground, terrestrial, and flying. Their taxonomy is like that of serpents, which can bore through the earth and snake through the mud. Rivers modify their relief and their outline because their metamorphic processes correspond to geomorphic ones. They also "shed their skin" when they change their water, and can even change basins. Water and skin are structural to rivers and snakes; they regulate pressure, temperature, and pain when they keep out or let in harmful substances or elements.

27 Caribbean and South American cultural imaginaries have been heavily influenced by African culture. Enslaved Africans carried by Europeans to the continent brought many of these water myths with them, just as they transferred habits, food, and religion, they incorporated worldviews and myths about nature, which, of course, have been evolving, adapting and mixing with European and local Indigenous cultures over a quite extended period of time. Water is one of the most important symbolic elements in the cultures of the African diaspora[23], it provides movement and life and it can represent enslavement, death, liberation and rebirth. Spirits, goddesses, and associated cults reflect the sociocultural and economic processes by which contemporary Caribbean and South American cultures came into existence.

28 We have already pointed out María Lionza's connection to Brazilian female divinity. Yara, the Brazilian lady of the water, is an aquatic entity of the rivers and the oceans. In the legends of the Amazon region it manifests in scenarios that always involve the liquid realm, such as waterfalls, lagoons, rivers, streams (*igarapés*), or flood forests (*igapós*). These natural habitats sustain the life of Indigenous peoples. Similar is Yemanyá, a female *orixá* of the African pantheon of the Yoruba religion, whose Brazilian cult is related to coastal waters. One interesting female figure not associated with the Venezuelan Goddess in anthropological research yet is Mami Wata. She is an African spirit who represents the waters from where it emerged and where it lived. It may take the form of the archetypical mermaid, or

siren, the woman-fish, or even that of a snake [24]. Similar to the way that occurs within African culture, American water female deities are mythological beings related to different water bodies, either marine or freshwater ones. They have extended their presence from pre-modern to modern times in magical-religious rituals and their origin probably dates back to the moment humans understood their dependence on water.

29 Beyond the mythical foundation of María Lionza's cult, there is the ritualistic expression of the process of change and transformation in Venezuelan religious life produced by the contact between many different religions and cultures, as well as of the social and political tensions between classes and social groups. It is a widely spread cult that assimilates Indigenous and Black concepts and practices, elements of Catholicism, Freemasonry, Spiritism, and, to a lesser extent, other spiritual sources such as Gnosticism, Kabbalah, and occultism [25]. Nonetheless, what is most remarkable about the veneration of María Lionza for the purposes of this study is that like Mari she is inherently embedded in the natural territory. The Venezuelan goddess has her own mountain, which is today protected as a national natural reserve. Montaña de Sorte, is located within the tropical rainforest life zone and is a natural monument where the Yaracuy, El Chorro and Charay rivers are born; these, together with the Gurabao, Buria, Turbio and other rivers, supply the Majaguas reservoir.

30 Chronicles and other documents from colonial times kept the testimonies and descriptions of numerous sanctuaries or places of worship in the caves of the mountains of north-western Venezuela, confirming the persistence of their use as sacred places and as refuge. An extraordinary number of idols and vessels were found in these caves as offerings, along with animal parts. Offerings were also made to enchantments and owners, who, according to belief, lived in the lakes and waterways of the mountains. These practices were intended to promote the fertility of the land and the well-being of its inhabitants [26].

Conclusion: Imaginary Landscapes for the Conservation of Nature

31 Both in Basque and Venezuelan indigenous mythologies, humans, aquatic creatures and other types of animals live in interrelated, interdependent systems. Addressing the history of their entangled ecologies and multi-species assemblages allows us to challenge modern dichotomies that separate the human from the natural world's existence, as well as move beyond current scientific and cultural understandings of what water is. Animistic and polytheistic religions gave humans a rich system of symbolic representation through which they could conceive their relationship with water devoid of asymmetrical power structures and desires of domination over the Earth as well as the different elements that integrate it.

32 Mythological stories from cosmo-naturalistic conceptions of the planet and their components can offer different paths of imagination that shed a new light on current scientific findings about water being matter that makes up the world's continuous capacity of body creation. María Lionza, like Mari or even Mami Wata, have not, of course, remained immune to the movements of "transculturation", the forcible influence all dominant cultures exert over undermined ones in colonized territories [27]. Over time they have adopted values not necessarily related to the importance of water as a vital liquid that connects everything earthly. Still, the oral and written accounts we have preserved about them clearly represent an alternative to modern conceptions which define water as an instrument of Anthropocentristic objectives and aspirations. These goddesses also adhere to the very material aspects of a particular thinking or set of values about water: they correspond to concrete territories, in many cases protected, and inhabit particular mountains and caves. Their bodies could not be conceived without all the other ones that make up the environment.

33 Historical detachment from the ways in which we imagine the cosmos as organic, reciprocal and formed by circular natural cycles, in favour of a more mechanistic, machine-like view of the natural

world is thoroughly analyzed, from an ecofeminist perspective, by Carolyn Merchant in her now classic work *The Death of Nature* (1980). As Merchant proposes, the divine relationship between women and the creation of everything that belongs to the natural world is previous to the human theories of domination of nature as crucial for human survival. That woman-nature connection is also a symbol of the transitional thinking of the microcosm: the idea that one imagined human-like body can contain a whole universe [28]. In indigenous cosmogonies that microcosmic body, contrary to typical post-Christian imaginaries of microcosm, is quite frequently female, or, at least, not exclusively male.

34 Studies like those of Gimbutas [29] and Merchant suggest that the veneration of the ancient feminine suffered great decline associated with the social commotion produced by wars over natural resources and the intensification of agricultural development and mineral exploitation [30]. The relationship between cosmogonical beliefs and sociopolitical arrangements are not, however, unidirectional. They serve to affirm each other. Beliefs and values are manifested in practices, when those actions fundamentally change religious and political arrangements. What seems more evident is that the kind of transition that undermined divine femininity started when agriculture was perfected well beyond early small-scale horticulture. The study of water culture over many intergenerational, quite extended periods of times shows that water went from being defined as an embodiment of female principles to become the gift of powerful male religious beings, and, parallel to this, from being owned collectively, to transform into the object of primarily male property rights and control [31].

35 Whether supreme or not, female figures of indigenous cosmogonies have maintained some type of meaningful presence in many religious schemes as deities. The rituals and practices associated with them more often than not take us to the ancestral notion that any destruction that occurs to nature should be the one generated by its own chaotic processes of renewal, not up to humans. Natural movements, whether destructive or nutritious, connect all animal and non-animal bodies. We can see it in the powerful river-snake that swallowed the Jirajara woman or in the consumption of ferruginous mountain water

that could restore the mineral deficiencies within our own watery bodies.

36 It seems evident that these indigenous cosmogonies are congruent with hydrofeminist notions of water bodies. In the mythologies we have observed that:

> water is understood as alive, rather than as mute matter; it is a relation, rather than a thing. It is emplaced, rather than substitutable [...] it manifests a relational ethic that connects human and non-human realms [32].

37 This reflects in the very material ways in which natural animistic spirituality manifests. Currently, as shown in the images from the Miranda Satellite, the northern area of María Lionza's Monument, where religious rituals were traditionally performed, is well preserved; while the southern area shows strong signs of deforestation and extensive land use, which have been permitted in recent years [33].

38 As Neimanis proposes, concepts and figures help humans explain the world by allowing them to appreciate certain aspects of a phenomenon. If we want to focus our attention on how we can coexist with all bodies of water, this might require that we, as a society, invest less resources (including our imagination) in figuring out ways we can benefit from them without giving back to natural cycles of life. Beyond the abstract, materiality can give the opportunity to understand the actual processes of destruction imposed on water that come from our detached understanding of it [34]. Specific imaginaries and concepts give us a way of engaging with the world. For instance, thinking holistically about water means that even as one of its aspects comes into focus in a specific situation, all of its aspects are latent in water's depths, those so profoundly poeticized by cosmogonical thinking. In those imaginaries water is not something that we can act on, or act for, or against. Ritualistic connections to the earth and locations where the goddesses inhabit contradict, in fact, a presumed dominance over water, which instead is a part of the whole of which humans are not separated from. Peregrination to sacred natural places is one of the very material ways through which some people still practice today the connection

to ancient mythical waters. Now the peregrination of the world's masses to sacred natural places seems contrary to their conservation, as it is well-known they deeply damaged mountains like the Everest, which have suffered in the name of climbing a legendary peak. Ironically, it would be materially impossible for all humanity to venerate nature through this kind of ritual, but reading different kinds of narratives and/or teachings about what they mean, in a spiritually and bodily way, to walk through those places when they are not already damaged, for example, is a possible action to take globally. It is, in fact, possible and highly recommendable to bring ancestral imaginaries of water to the intellectual forefront, to schools and mainstream media. If we wanted to, it is possible for them to help the healing of our broken relationship to other bodies of water.

NOTES

1 Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, pp. 19-20.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

4 Kyle Powys Whyte, "Indigeneity", *in* Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason and David Pellow (eds.), *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, New York, New York University Press, 2016, no pagination.

5 Cristina Brito, *Humans and Aquatic Animals in Early Modern America and Africa*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2023, p. 68.

6 Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

7 Alberto Martos, "Ecofictions and Imaginary of Water, and its importance for cultural memory and sustainability", *Contextos educativos*, nº 32, 2012, pp. 127-146, p. 129.

8 Andrés Ortiz-Osés, *Los mitos vascos. Aproximación hermenéutica*, Bilbao, Universidad de Deusto, 2007, pp. 10.

9 Laura Dassow Walls, "Cosmos", *in* Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason and David Pellow (eds.), *op. cit.*, no pagination.

10 Andrés Ortiz-Osés, *Los mitos*, *op. cit.*, p. 31-32.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 27-33.

12 Mikel Urkola, "¿Mitología preindoeuropea en toponimia? Explicaciones preindoeuropeas de -ama, segi, obi, etc.", *ARSE Boletín anual del Centro arqueológico Saguntino*, nº 48-49, 2014, pp. 15-102, p. 30.

13 Marija Gimbutas, *Diosas y dioses de la vieja Europa 7000-3500 a. C. Mitos, leyendas e imaginería*, Madrid, Ediciones Istmo, pp. 127-167.

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RÉSUMÉS

English

This study highlights the importance of the divine feminine in heritage and biocultural memory, for today's social sensitivity to conservation of water and the natural environment. Indigenous cosmogonies propose concepts of water that predate modern, positivist ways of conceiving humans' relation to water bodies as detached from life cycles. This paper aims to contextualize the ancestral divine feminine and its relationship to water in the field of water imaginaries, from both sides of the Atlantic, within the fundamental ideas that support hydrofeminism as a philosophical stance, and taking as case studies Goddesses Mari (Basque culture) and María Lionza (Venezuelan culture). These goddesses are marginal in the Western World if compared with the more widely known ones from Pagan Greek and Roman cosmogonies, but they are quite important for anthropological, historical, artistic and linguistic knowledge of the Hispanic world. Studying them from hydrofeminism's perspective can significantly enrich the diversity of our current water culture, particularly through their symbolic meaning and mythological narratives. Ultimately, the article explains the connection between the feminine and waterscapes by underlining patterns and correlations that could affect, in a positive way, practices and ethical approaches to the way we relate to water.

Français

Cette étude souligne l'importance du divin féminin dans le patrimoine et la mémoire bioculturelle, dans le cadre de la sensibilité sociale actuelle à la conservation de l'eau et de l'environnement naturel. Les cosmogonies autochtones proposent des conceptions de l'eau antérieures aux approches modernes et positivistes qui conçoivent la relation des humains aux masses d'eau comme détachée des cycles de vie. Cet article vise à contextualiser le divin féminin ancestral et sa relation à l'eau dans le champ des imaginaires de l'eau, des deux côtés de l'Atlantique, au sein des idées fondamentales qui sous-tendent l'hydroféminisme comme position philosophique, et en prenant comme études de cas les déesses Mari (culture basque) et María Lionza (culture vénézuélienne). Ces déesses sont marginales en Occident si on les compare aux déesses plus connues des cosmogonies païennes

grecques et romaines, mais elles sont très importantes pour la connaissance anthropologique, historique, artistique et linguistique du monde hispanique. Les étudier sous l'angle de l'hydroféminisme peut enrichir considérablement la diversité de notre culture de l'eau actuelle, notamment par leur signification symbolique et leurs récits mythologiques. En fin de compte, l'article explique le lien entre le féminin et l'eau dans les paysages aquatiques en soulignant les modèles et les corrélations qui pourraient affecter, de manière positive, les pratiques et les approches éthiques de la façon dont nous nous rapportons à l'eau.

INDEX

Mots-clés
déesses, hydroféminisme, femmes dans le folklore, cultures indigènes, paysages aquatiques

Keywords
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