

SIGNS OF WATER: COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON WATER, RESPONSIBILITY, AND HOPE

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I. IMMERSIONS: From Water Imaginaries to Wild Swimming

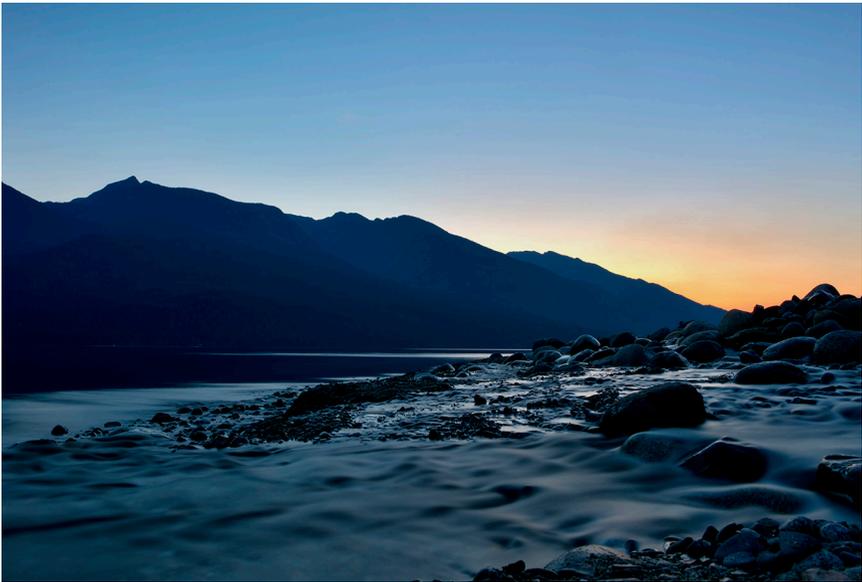


Photo courtesy Robert Boschman

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Introduction

So how might we know from water flowing through our bodies, sensing its gush, feeling its pressures and intensities as it speeds up and slows down, as it pushes against and within us, sometimes in excess?

—Julie Laplante, Chapter 1

No longer an element that is experienced by the senses or as an element that is itself an autonomous, living force, [water] has become the commodity referred to as H₂O, which is loathed as a potential health risk and, hence, managed and monitored according to its degree of purity.

—Michaela Keck, Chapter 2

This first section of *Signs of Water* is concerned with both the theoretical and real aspects of being in water—both the waters that flow inside us as well as those that an immersive swimmer such as Roger Deakin, following rivers, pursues. As authors Julie Laplante and Michaela Keck here state in their respective ways in chapters 1 and 2, humans themselves are made mostly of water, are conceived and develop in it. Our terrestrial lives—from birth to death—are contingent on, and soaked in, our beginnings in water; and humans share in such origins with many other life forms on (or better yet, in) this oceanic planet. In water lies the very proof some require that humans are of this world and not some other. We are in fact water beings. We die so quickly without it that the common equation made between water and life can be painfully real. How water can then be denied as a basic right and instead promoted as an extractive commodity to be sold would be laughable, were it not for the very fact that is successfully pursued by actual corporations with the rights of persons in law.

The term *immersion* is Latinate, used often to express the experience of plunging or being plunged into something. For example, in Anglophone parts of Canada, which we editors call home, French immersion refers to the experience of being schooled in the second official language listed in

the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Our constitution prods those in the English-only majority to plunge into French as though it were this other water body, deep and dark and unknown to many, in which swimming, metaphorically, is something else entirely. Yet the term *immersion*, when it is disambiguated, reveals *mer*, the French word for sea. In the chapters that follow, both Julie Laplante and Michaela Keck make detailed explorations from their respective disciplines—anthropology and literature—of the literal and figurative ramifications of water’s immersive qualities. These chapters constitute in themselves an immersive experience.

If immersion in the real, substantive water of our world often means immersing oneself in others and in their stories and histories—as we shall see throughout this book—it also means encountering regulatory warnings in the form of signs. Hence, Roger Deakin’s water politics, as Keck describes them at the close of this section, also set up our reading of C.R. Grimmer’s portrait of Detroit and its own political and justice struggles over water in the first chapter of the section that succeeds Immersions.

—Robert Boschman and Sonya Jakubec, editors