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Book Review | Where Rivers Meet the Sea: The Political Ecology of Water

Ashley K. Farmer¹

¹University of Delaware

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Stephanie C. Kane. *Where Rivers Meet the Sea: The Political Ecology of Water*. Temple University Press, 2012; 228 pp.; ISBN: 9781439909317.

Where Rivers Meet the Sea aims to explore how human beings have somehow created an environment that threatens the life-sustaining water systems that are such a natural, and perhaps taken for granted, part of their communities. Exploring rich cultural and historical contexts within two strikingly different South American neighborhoods, Stephanie C. Kane delves into how communities situated along bodies of water interact with and affect the human-water relationship. She pays particular attention to how culture, art, and race are intertwined with politics, crime, and governance.

Dr. Kane's experience as an ethnographer and her fieldwork in Panama, Veracruz, Amsterdam, and Hamburg make her well qualified for this endeavor. Her fluency in Spanish, evident in her written work, results in straightforward and relatable communication in the places she visits. Kane's suitability for pursuit of this project and her commitment to cultural and justice issues is evidenced by prior work such as *The Phantom Gringo Boat: Shamanic Discourse and Development in Panama* (1994).

The book is divided into two parts. The first section focuses on Kane's fieldwork in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, where she meets Antonio Conceição Reis, activist and founder of Nativo de Itapuã, a project focused on the preservation of Lake Abaeté. Kane sees the devastating pollution and heavily trafficked tourist areas. She learns the history of how laundresses used Lake Abaeté to wash clothes, and people used to collect drinking water. Citizens believe the waters of Abaeté have receded over the years, due to the development of local industries and hotels that draw from the lake aquifer and contribute to the sewage, retreat of vegetation, and shallow wells. Studies from government officials deny this. Aside from businesses, the community faces other obstacles in respect to illegal well digging and drainage infra structure. The regional history of racial tensions and religious beliefs come to a head during the Carnival festivals, showcasing the significance of these coastal sites, even though there is little regard to caring for them. The fight for environmental justice culminates in the assassination of activist Antonio Conceição Reis, who was the staunch lone defender of the waters. Among suspicions that police were responsible for his murder, the populace does not correlate the abundance of water with the importance of how to save it, and practices that cause pollution in this marginalized society have become the norm.

In Part Two, Kane travels to Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the Plate River Basin, where two of the dirtiest rivers in the world converge. In stark contrast to Salvador, many in this community are politically active. One of the recurrent demonstrations occurs on World Water Day, when concerned citizens chant, "We are water. We are moving water" (p. 109). A man tells his fellow neighbors, "[I]f we don't take care of water today, we will be accomplices responsible for everything that our children will

see in the generations to come” (p. 111). Even though there are a considerable number of concerned citizens, politics and governance reign supreme amid aspects of crime and power. The military and the governmental elites are in control and do not favor such participatory action, while also denying communities the means with which to achieve goals of clean water and sewage infrastructure. Neighbors and lawyers attempt to work together while tensions result from disparate opinions on how to best proceed in defending the waters. Urban development has crippled river life, and demonstrations in support of clean water are a nuisance to some. Although the section ends on a down note, with the citizens losing a court case based on judges’ jurisdictional claims and displacement of responsibility, the lingering impact is one of hopeful resistance.

Throughout her fieldwork, Kane depicts vivid and lasting images complete with photographs and maps that further enable the readers to immerse themselves by visualizing the neighborhoods and waterways. In places where water is in abundance, she effectively presents the argument that we are not apart from nature and that the environment is very much influenced by our culture. An impressive aspect of this book is the role history plays in these narratives, and this is something Kane highlights exceptionally well. None of these communities began evolving crucial human-water relationships overnight; these were relationships built over many years. What captures the reader’s attention are the personal narratives of people Kane meets along the way, from Antonio, to the laundress Dona Pitu, to the security guard present at a demonstration in Buenos Aires. The struggles and annoyances perceived by the people living in the port cities are presented clearly. Kane also takes care to explain her journey so that those interested in ethnographic methods may gain great insight into her role as participant observer.

While Kane acknowledges the importance of history, culture, environment, law, politics, race, crime, and justice as each impacts the communities she writes about, only some of these concepts are fleshed out within the text. Some of the sections seem disjointed, jumping from narrative to historical analysis. Presumably this is to follow the chronological order of when Kane encountered stories and issues in the field, but this format interrupts the flow of the chapter. In the introduction, one of the stated goals is to highlight aspects of crime and law and the institutions and frameworks they create.

While there are descriptions of environmental degradation, illegal dumping, well excavations, and corporate developments that ignore the existing laws on the books, these concepts as they relate to crime are only explained superficially. The reader is left to make assumptions about the full extent of criminal activity, and how aware citizens are of this activity even being criminal. It is questionable if this secondary goal is met.

Furthermore, Kane briefly concludes that environmental laws need to be enforced and those who are responsible for contaminating, polluting, and otherwise disregarding water should be held accountable. This is undoubtedly true, but the reader is left wanting to know more. How can politically

oppressed individuals spread awareness of the laws in places with corrupt governments, especially when they might not be aware themselves? While these are certainly complex issues that could be addressed holistically in another forum, the statement that these laws should be enforced as a start to address the problems seems too simplistic, without recommendations for what individuals can do on a smaller scale to help.

Despite these criticisms, the reader comes to recognize and appreciate that because of the vast complexity and intricacies of environmental justice and the culture of water, there is no simple way to address the problems. These challenges are shaped by a history of racial and class oppression, religious beliefs, laws fully ignored by citizens and corporations alike, politics and governance by the elite, and numerous other influences. Therefore, the book would be better suited for more advanced students or those with at least a cursory understanding of the issues in this book, as they will be better equipped to appreciate the difficulties of how the human-water relationship is developed and broken down. Policymakers, researchers, and environmentalists will also find this book beneficial, because they already have a vested interest in environmental justice issues. The reader cannot help but walk away with a sense of concern, not only for the cities outlined here, but for all cities along waterways that have become polluted or struggle for access to clean water.