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# *Memory of Water*: Boundaries of Political Geography and World Literature

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The fact that dystopian literature has a great potential for envisioning alternative futures is elaborated in this article in relation to the Finnish/British author Emmi Itäranta's *Memory of Water* (2013). Itäranta's gloomy low-fi novel is read alongside contemporary ecocritical theory with a focus on issues of vernacular cultures and knowledges versus ideas of cosmopolitan planetary citizenship. Reflections are made about the profound nature of the concept of borders: cultural, temporal, informational, geographical, political, in the event of massive catastrophes. The article investigates how Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence' and Ursula Heise's 'eco-cosmopolitanism' are played out in a novel, and how the novel in turn poses important questions for ecocritical theory. Thus, the interplay between ecocritical literary theory, on the one hand, and literature, on the other, is highlighted. What can dystopia make visible in contemporary theory?

## Introduction

Somewhere in the far north there is a secret underground well of fresh, cool water. When young Noria attains the title of tea master she inherits the secret of water and the responsibility for an underground network of fresh water distribution in a dusty, parched, insect-ridden, peripheral place on earth. *Memory of Water* is set in the near-future world where access to fresh water is controlled by the military, while rain and snowfall are rare. In this article, I will read Emmi Itäranta's novel as a work of world literature that subtly drags one's imagination into an eerie zone of the familiar–unfamiliar. Dystopian low sci-fi at its best.<sup>1</sup>

1. 'Low' or 'soft' science fiction means that the plot is set closer to our civilization in terms of scientific development and social structure. For a short summary of the book see this review: [https://web.archive.org/web/20150305132249/http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2014/08/memory\\_of\\_water.shtml](https://web.archive.org/web/20150305132249/http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2014/08/memory_of_water.shtml) (accessed 21 June 2017).

Yet my intention goes beyond the descriptive as I aim to interlace readings of fiction with ecocritical scholarship, specifically work that has as its goal to contribute to the advancement of social and political discourse through historical and literary commentary. Rob Nixon's book on environmental issues, *Slow Violence* (2011), is an example of reclaiming the academic for the political, and Ursula Heise's *Sense of Place Sense of Planet* (2008) brings literature into direct contact with social and political theories of the global. In Nixon's case it is both about contextualizing the literary texts analysed in an environmental political context, and writing in a manner that contributes to scholarly and public discourse. In the following analysis my point is simply to lightly force dystopian literary fiction into an exchange with ecocritical theory, to understand what contradictions appear, and how world literature can be interlaced with world history and global/world/cosmopolitan theory.

### **With or Without Borders?**

The existence of cultural, linguistic and territorial borders is the paradoxical prerequisite for our understanding of European identity as a unity that *can* and *must* harbour cultural and linguistic difference. In particular, national borders have become, in some circles, a symbol of restricted movement, racist and Islamophobic Europolitics, and seen to legitimize sharp distinctions between those who by belonging are entitled to national systems of benefits, education and security, and those who are not. For others, borders signify a guarantee against intrusion, unwanted change, a safeguard for cultural continuity and for national security. But what would the world look like if most borders were obliterated? Two possible scenarios follow from the above positions: total freedom of movement and an imagined neutralization of all negative difference, or total chaos and the destruction of pure difference for the benefit of a bastardization of cultures and peoples. Between these extremes there are of course a number of positions.

In reading *Memory of Water*, special attention will be paid to the lack of borders and the challenge it poses for the reader *not* to think in terms of borders. I will argue, and demonstrate, how the lack of borders passivizes people (in the novel) because there are no alternative comparable units (e.g. nations, regions, empires) to strive for.

The novel will be approached from three perspectives. First, the novel's mode of production will be discussed in terms of world literature in the border zone between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Second, eco-cosmopolitan theory will be tried as a way of rethinking possible futures and the extent to which they are, perhaps unduly, grounded in the present. Third, the psychological aspects of the novel's narrativization of slow violence are analysed in an attempt to understand the predicament of its human beings.

### ***The Memory of Water* as World Literature**

*The Memory of Water* is a dystopic novel set in a poor and grim future. The text offers no information leakage for the reader's benefit, no explanatory level that

translates between Noria's time and ours, outside of the reader's ability to decipher the relationship between the fictive facts and present-day political reality.<sup>2</sup> The geographic location of Noria's home is possibly in the present-day Nordic countries, most likely Finland, but called the Scandinavian Union. The centrality of the tea ceremony in the novel hints at large-scale shifts in rituals and cultural values of the region. The global-scale military dictatorship might be identifiable as 'Chinese', due to the use of names such as New Qian (a province in present-day China and also a word for money) and Xinjing, and geographic distances that are explained by travel routes when Noria's mother leaves her northern home for the university that is located near the political power.

The fact that Noria is a young woman who attains the mastership of tea is commented on, which suggests that the gendered order of our own time remains. However, the fact that she is a Scandinavian tea master, a ritual we today strongly associate with Japanese and Chinese cultures, is not commented on. Furthermore, the fact that very little is said about the physical appearance of the military leaves the reader in uncertainty as to whether this is an invasion or a union between the Scandinavian Union and New Qian. This is only resolved when it turns out that there is a Finnish-sounding name among the soldiers which hints at local collaborators – it is an occupation. It turns out that the whole society builds on a system of informers revealing illegal water usage to the military. Those caught are ostracized from society and a blue ring is painted on their door, eventually they will perish or be executed. The interplay of near and far draws immediate attention to our own predicament and raises questions such as: Can people stay loyal to their friends and neighbours in dire want of water? How volatile is society in times of scarce resources? In addition, it is relatively easy to imagine water shortage as opposed to the far-flung sci-fi worlds of some other dystopias.

*The Memory of Water* nestles itself into the folds of world literature from the start. World literature is a contested concept and is sometimes used to refer to the sum total of the world's national literatures. Such a definition is, of course, rather meaningless as a disciplinary category. Usually, world literature refers to the circulation of works in the wider world beyond their country of origin. This phenomenon can be approached from a number of theoretical and methodological perspectives such as book markets, cross-border transport, translation, or as a part of the globalization and commodification of aesthetic objects (Spivak and Damrosch 2014; Damrosch 2006).

The literary scholar Emily Apter approaches the issues of translation (or untranslatability), which is a central aspect of world literary theory, in many of her works. Apter believes that untranslatability is not only connected to the practical difficulty of creating a corresponding text in a different language; rather it is a much deeper philosophical question of cognitive dissonance between languages, cultures and concepts. Apter's relationship to translation is notably not at all as negative as it appears

2. *Memory of Water* by Emmi Itäranta, review by Katherine Farnar, 15 August 2014, [https://web.archive.org/web/20150305132249/http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2014/08/memory\\_of\\_water.shtml](https://web.archive.org/web/20150305132249/http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2014/08/memory_of_water.shtml) accessed 19 January 2018.

on the surface, with a title that reads, for example, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013). Translation is a cognitive challenge of the transformation (not only transfer) of text and thought into a new linguistic, literary and cultural setting and it is this enlarged understanding that actually allows Apter to relate rather freely, some may think *too* open-endedly, to the business of translation. She is, for example, appreciative of the French philosopher Alan Badiou's 'hypertranslation' of Plato in *La République de Platon* (2012). This translation is grounded in what Badiou calls 'total comprehension' and results in what Apter then terms 'strong translation' (Apter 2013, 20–25).

Itäranta is a Finnish writer who has lived and worked as a journalist in Britain for several years. She wrote two parallel versions of the book in different languages, Finnish and English. Itäranta explains the implications of the dual process in both practical and creative terms:

I had to write in English initially, because I was submitting the early chapters as coursework for my university degree in the UK. However, I soon discovered that it was quite useful to get feedback from my Finnish writing group, so I ended up writing each chapter in parallel in English and Finnish. It's a slow process, but I find that the result is better, more polished, than when I'm only writing in one language. It's a way of forcing myself to be very thorough and it helps me put some distance between myself and the text. (Buxton 2017)

The Finnish version was published in 2013 and won several literary awards, and an English version was already written and prepared for publication in 2014 (Harper Voyager). To date, the book has been translated into some 20 languages. When it comes to the question of quick global publication, an existing English version is of course a great benefit for a debuting author as it gives access to the transnational world literary networks. More interesting from an aesthetic perspective, I find, is the creation of literature as a multilingual, and therefore a multicultural, process. The question is, should *The Memory of Water* be seen as a translation, or rather as 'born translated' (Walkowitz 2015, 203–233)? The concept is developed by Rebecca Walkowitz to capture the literary and aesthetic mode of writing texts in several languages that may be unintelligible to any one reader, yet highly meaningful in the text and for all readers. The vernacular names and customs interact with the cosmopolitan English only slightly differently from how they do in the Finnish version, due to their foreignness in both linguistic and cultural contexts. There are further layers of multi-linguisticity as the name of the young protagonist, Noria, is also an Arabic term for a traditional water-raising device. That is exactly what Noria does, she distributes water.

Apter's untranslatability and Walkowitz's 'born translated' offer some entries to reading *Memory of Water* as world literature. Here it may suffice to draw attention to the world-making dimensions of writing multilingually. Nelson Goodman's concept of world-making emphasizes the impossibility of getting at the world by other means than symbolic representations such as literature, art and film (Clark *et al.* 2017). Neither Goodman nor Eric Hayot (2011, 137) approach parallel bilingual writing of the kind Itäranta practises, yet Hayot's description of an aesthetic

‘worldedness [as] a form of the relation that a work establishes between the world inside and the world outside itself’ indicates the complexity of world-making in *Memory of Water*. What Itäranta does is to build her work on two sets of languages and cultures simultaneously. In contrast to the effect of multilingual or bilingual texts, where distance and familiarity is created by words present in the text, such as slang, foreign words or sentences, or dialect, Itäranta’s text produces a world beyond the assumed British and Finnish literary and cultural contexts. What is achieved is not a hybrid, but rather an abstraction. It is thus already in the moment of creation a piece of world literature that transgresses culture not only by placing the events in another (fictive) world, but also by the cross-fertilization in making sense of different cultural contexts, the very process of intellectual back-and-forth movement, which cannot be grounded anywhere in between.

The intermingling of identifiable names with strange customs creates that eerie feeling that Sigmund Freud described in his 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche*, a reaction that occurs when one is reminded of something that used to be familiar, but which is now unfamiliar, secret, or repressed. The feeling of the *unheimlich* is created exactly here, at the borderlands of the familiar and the strange. Itäranta chooses to stick close to the present-day world, names, cultures, and communications. Not enough of estrangement is created in order for the reader to imagine quite another world, yet it is disquietingly different. It is an abstraction that is not quite abstract enough, and thus eerie.

In what sense does Itäranta’s novel differ from science-fiction written in (or from) one context? And, interestingly, how does parallel writing differ from when an author translates his or her own works from one language to another, after the completion of a first version? As my questions here suggest, I imagine these to be different kinds of cognitive, intellectual and creative practices. This is along the lines of what Apter (2006) suggests about the complexity of the translation zone that inevitably includes linguistic, cultural, political and local elements. It is furthermore supported by Walkowitz’s argument, which I interpret as a defence of the deep meaningfulness of linguistically inaccessible elements in texts, in Itäranta’s case the uncanny (un)familiarity of the made-up world.

### Basic Conditions for Cosmopolitanism

Ursula Heise has suggested that we need to develop an eco-cosmopolitan stance in the face of the global climate crisis. Her criticism of eco-theory, including much of ecological literary writing, is that it tends to over-emphasize the connection to place as an aspect of ethical and considerate relations to the environment. Local knowledge is, Heise claims, in a specific kind of relationship to the nation and thus spatially limited, even introspective, while cosmopolitanism is related to the global connectivity, networks and communication. Experience is to a large extent played down in Heise’s thinking for the benefit of representations through mediation, such as television or the internet.

In *Memory of Water* we can follow the eco-cosmopolitan dynamic of civilizational decay on a global scale and its effects on the local scale of Noria’s everyday

life. What has disappeared in this dystopian future is the individual's ability to connect these two scales, the local and the global. Communication has almost broken down, there is no information available on what is happening in other parts of the empire, travel is extremely difficult since fossil fuels seem scarce. This discontinuity of information also relates to history as Noria knows little about the past-world (presumably our time) because the losses that occurred during the Twilight Century seem unbridgeable. Noria's mother has a large collection of books because she is a researcher and Noria senses that there are secrets in them to be discovered, just as she knows that her legacy of tea masters' diaries contain potentially dangerous information. The info gap is made even clearer when Noria's friend Sanja salvages some CDs and manages to fix a CD player found in the 'plastic grave' that contains many recognizable items (to the reader) that have lost their significance. The set of CDs recounts a research expedition in search of fresh water. Throughout the book it remains unclear whether the water shortage is a real problem or just a way of controlling the population, as the reader's access to information is as limited as Noria's and Sanja's, who only get at scraps of information from the past world. The young women, however, launch a search expedition of their own.

The connection to the idea of eco-cosmopolitanism is interesting because, as a concept, it assumes that the positive aspects of cosmopolitanism, the feeling of being part of a larger meaningful global network, makes sense. If, for example as in the *Memory of Water*, electronic communication by message pods, as they are called in the book, breaks down and if there is hardly any infrastructure or fuel for physical travel, then the whole idea of planetary eco-cosmopolitanism stands on shaky ground. Such imaginations, in fact, seem to require the kind of eco-modernism of continuous economic growth and technological development that many environmentalists are very sceptical of. In Noria's world, only the negative aspect of globalization, the fact that what happens environmentally in one part of the world risks affecting every other part, is true. Although there are few borders, perhaps no borders at all, the environmental collapse and the disappearance of the democratic state (nation) has absolutely no positive influence of people thinking more inclusively or globally. The sense of the local thus has no means of expanding to a sense of encompassing cosmopolitanism. Heise's use of the term eco-cosmopolitanism is of course a device for analysing aesthetic cultural representations of global climate change. Yet it is interesting how closely Heise's ideas tie in to the current world with the relatively unhindered flow of information and people across the globe that some of us are used to. This is of course the same criticism that has been directed towards all theories of cosmopolitanism, that they tend to represent those individualistic world citizens who hold the right passport and the wallet to match.

Drafting an environmental ethics that would be acceptable to the European or North American middle classes, which would entail radically altered material conditions, e.g. regarding energy, is indeed very difficult. Consider, for example, how the energy debate is framed in a discourse of 'saving' and 'alternative' rather than 'shortage' or 'finished', or how we are encouraged to consume less rather than produce less (e.g. [The Eco Modernity Manifesto](#)). *Memory of Water* makes some

such blind spots visible in its near-future dystopia. Without water for sustainability and energy for travel, what is left of the idea of cosmopolitans embracing the planet in all its fallen glory?

### How Violence Alters Minds

Noria and Sanja are not explicitly depicted as environmental rebels or heroes. If anything, their role is that of youthful, yet cautious, optimists. Their expedition to find the truth about the shortage of fresh water requires advanced planning, intense study and plenty of practical knowledge. The victims of *Memory of Water* are the countless and faceless people who live with the constant lack of fresh water, loss of health and dignity, and who can attain privileges only by snitching on their fellow misfortunates. The whole novel builds on a repressive silence, within families, between friends, at the market. Rob Nixon has coined the term 'slow violence' as a way of describing the opposite of spectacular violence or catastrophe that fits well with media logics that have only short-term public interest. An explosion in a chemical plant or fires in a sweatshop in Bangladesh are such spectacular events that momentarily catch the eyes and ears of international media. The slow violence that continues to cause deterioration over years and years to come, losses of lives, orphans, disappeared sources of income that are eating away the social and political fabric of a society or a social order, remain invisible. Decades after landmines have been planted, people are killed and agricultural areas are inaccessible, which causes famine. Chemical waste from mining seeps into the groundwater, poisoning streams and rivers, and so on. Nothing really newsworthy or spectacular happens, yet life is made impossible as the low-intensity destruction continues. 'How do we bring home – and bring emotionally to life – threats that take time to wreak their havoc, threats that never materialize in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene?' Nixon (2011, 14) asks. That this can be achieved through literature is one possible answer, and in his literary analysis, 'The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen' (Nixon 2011, 15). Nixon is thus, like Heise, referring to medial representations (the sights unseen). However, while Heise depicts medial representation as a desired step away from the local and spatially grounded, Nixon uses it for the opposite reason. For him, representations through literature, poetry, drama, autobiography and film become ways of connecting to unforeseen, even unimaginable, temporal and spatial aspects of human and planetary life.

*Memory of Water* is not written in relation to an ongoing real environmental catastrophe or in defence of a movement in the same manner as the authors in Nixon's analysis. As a work of fiction, it renders a possible near-future and the consequences of a very tangible, and, indeed real, issue of a shortage of drinking water. The withholding of fresh water makes all normal life impossible and it is clearly an exercise of the utmost violence. In the face of such violence the entire social fabric falls apart and we have a silent society of suspicion and distrust – envy – that totally passivizes individuals and makes all collective resistance impossible. Illness is physical because contaminated and dirty water makes people sick (not even the health authorities have

access to water), and illness alters people's individual psychology as well as their ability to act collectively, since access to water is directly dependent on one's disloyalty to the social collective (and loyalty to the military).

Noria's access to water, and the access to her parents' books, give her a special position in society. It is clear from the outset that the family is privileged and not quite as destitute as the other villagers. They have a dwelling house, and a tea house where the father and later Noria receives paying guests, there is a relatively lush garden. The special position is based on the aura surrounding the title of tea master. Her mother's scientific books and her father's tea-master's journals have not interested Noria before she is left alone in the house following her mother's move to Xinjing and her father's death. Noria is the only one who seems to have any will or energy for change, which she very reluctantly shares with her best friend Sanja. The mysterious story revealed on the CDs, hidden after segments of music, propels them into a search for more knowledge. Noria realizes that both her mother and her father, from their different perspectives of (modern) science and (tea master) traditions, are guardians of water, and in her expedition Noria shoulders the responsibility of her family. She eagerly takes on the dusty library of her parents and systematically works through and identifies the important segments of knowledge. However, her care for the community has made her position impossible as the secret well is revealed to more and more people. Noria even distrusts her best friend and accomplice Sanja, who she believes may have betrayed her when she does not turn up for their planned expedition, or escape, to find fresh water.

### **Conclusion**

Notably, cultural and territorial borders are missing in Noria's world, and the centre of political and intellectual gravity has shifted – today's western powers have seemingly lost their significance as world powers. Because of the near-likeness of her world to our world, the reader is inclined to interpret the book according to our cultural and linguistic borders. The vernacularization of names and places, the re- and de-activation of current global hierarchies, lead one into imagining borders at places where there are none in the pages of the book. Europe, for example, does not exist in its current form, and thus much of the world as we know it is subsumed under the rather stereotypical image of today's China attaining world domination. Yet, as Gerard Delanty (2006, 183) has argued, '[b]orders exist not on the edge of the territory of the state, but in numerous points within and beyond it', which causes reflection on identity, loyalty and belonging. No solution is offered in resistance to the faraway powers with tentacles into everyday life through guards and spies, nor are there any conditions for local activism. Furthermore, there seem to be no alternatives to the language of those in power, such as national languages. For the plot of the book this is consequential: the absence of a national border may imply that there are no linguistic or cultural borders. Or, everyone is multilingual to the extent that shifting languages in conversations need not be commented upon. This lack of



borders continues into social relations, as dictatorial power and slow violence have made the private/public distinction redundant. There is really nothing that can/may be debated within a Habermasian public sphere. While spatial borders thus seem to have disappeared, the temporal borders are all the stronger as access to information equals a key to the powerful resource of water.

‘Knowledge is power’ is written across Noria’s cheek on the cover of the first Finnish and English editions. Noria is blond with icy blue eyes and a serious demeanour. A blue ring, the mark of ostracism, circles her face.<sup>3</sup> This paratextual information, not surprisingly, is different depending on edition and target language, and is often replaced by more abstract images, or even covers pointing to the genre of fantasy literature (Genette 1987). Without going into any profound analysis of imagined political and cultural borders, it may suffice here to suggest that the commercial logic of the world book market, at least, expects readers with different cultural and political inclinations. While some are expected to be drawn to a novel about scarce natural resources and (lack of) democratic power, other readers are assumed to be drawn to sheer fantasy.

The witnessing of sights unseen, to borrow Nixon’s evocative words, is indeed very much what *The Memory of Water* can do for the general reader but also for the eco-critic, or eco-theoretician, who is developing ideas of alternative planetary or ecocosmopolitan futures. What are the cracks and blind spots in our repertoire of imaginable alternatives? Can sci-fi, and literature more generally, be used more concretely in political and activist work, environmentally, politically, emotionally?

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3. See <http://www.emmiitaranta.com/memory-of-water>

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