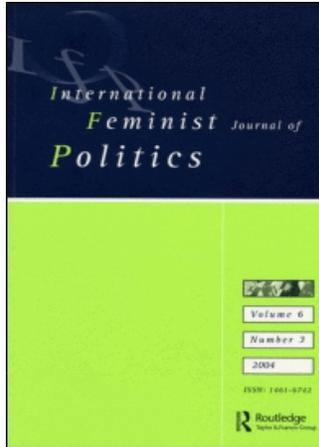


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Julie Sze^a

^a University of California at Davis, USA

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Boundaries of Violence

WATER, GENDER AND GLOBALIZATION AT THE US BORDERS

JULIE SZE

University of California at Davis, USA

Abstract

This essay examines cultural and literary representations of women and water along the US borders. I analyze Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1995) and Kem Nunn's *Tijuana Straits* (2004) to examine how conflicts over water and pollution are gendered in the context of globalization. Through a close textual reading of these novels in their social, political and historical contexts, I argue that water functions as a metaphor for border environmental and justice issues and their gendered dimensions in North America. Water landscapes and the struggles over water provide the backdrop for these texts because of the unique properties of water and environmental pollution to cross boundaries. In crossing political boundaries, water symbolizes the contested politics and the geographic and cultural spaces between nations and communities that hold unequal power. Water also represents complex forms of violence as a result of large-scale economic development, the cultural changes this development ushers in and their gendered effects.

Keywords

borders, globalization, pollution and toxicity, violence, water, women

INTRODUCTION

Despite tendencies in the USA and other industrialized nations to render invisible power relations in the access and delivery of water through large-scale technological systems, the politics of water are literally made concrete by the border wall on the US/Mexico border (specifically between San Diego in Southern California and Tijuana, Mexico). As

supporters of the US border patrol describe the wall on a website (emphasis added):

It lays there in the dark like a sinuous black python . . . It crawls from the surf of the azure blue Pacific Ocean, up the glistening white beach and then on to the east – over the rolling hills and toward the high mountain peaks at the southern extremity of California’s Sierra Nevada mountains. It is all that stands between the *health, beauty and wealth* of America and the *drug inspired violence* of Mexico.¹

The wall juts out twenty yards into the ocean, a reminder that even in the vast and beautiful ocean, political borders, psychic threats and cultural fears about violence and political chaos overwhelming ‘America’ loom large. However, the ‘health, beauty and wealth’ of the USA depend in part on its disproportionate use of natural resources and labor exploitation both at home and abroad (and made abundantly clear at the borderlands where that home and abroad meet). The expansion of corporate-driven ‘free trade’, decreased state regulation of corporate power, and the increased movement of goods for profit are accompanied by a strict policing of people, and growing social, cultural and environmental violence.²

This essay examines cultural and literary representations of women and water along the US borders. I analyze Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms* (1995) and Kem Nunn’s *Tijuana Straits* (2004) to examine how conflicts over water and pollution are gendered in the context of globalization.³ Both novels share political commitments and narrative strategies that engage the politics and boundaries of the USA as a cultural and political hegemon, drawing from environmental and political struggles where local communities and indigenous cultures resist top-down economic development. *Tijuana Straits* draws from the problems associated with pollution as a result of ‘free trade’. The backdrop to *Solar Storms* is the James Bay hydroelectric dam project that flooded Native Cree lands in Canada.⁴

Through a close textual reading of these novels in their social, political and historical contexts, I argue that water functions as a metaphor for border environmental and justice issues and their gendered dimensions in North America. Water landscapes and the struggles over water provide the backdrop for these texts because of the unique properties of water and environmental pollution to cross boundaries. In crossing political boundaries, water symbolizes the contested politics and the geographic and cultural spaces between nations and communities that hold unequal power. Water also represents complex forms of violence as a result of large-scale economic development, the cultural changes this development ushers in and their gendered effects. The impacts of environmental, bodily and cultural violence resulting from development and transnationalism hit Mexican and Native women on the border in a gendered fashion (Kearney 1998). These range from the literal ‘interzone’ of pregnancy where toxic exposures damage growing fetuses in *Tijuana Straits*, to the dynamic between the past and the present and the

intergenerational effects of individual, familial and community violence depicted in *Solar Storms*.

WATER AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AT THE US BORDERS

Much contemporary political concern is centered on the US/Mexico border in the context of post-9/11 fears of terrorism. The dominant political discourse is about 'strengthening' the borders as a technological and militarized space.⁵ The natural environment, specifically, water, points to the absurdity of this militarization since ecosystems cross borders (70 percent of the Tijuana River watershed is in Mexico while 30 percent is located in the USA). Pollution crosses political boundaries, and borders *exacerbate* pollution because environmental management is divided (Herzog 1990). The San Diego/Tijuana region is intimately connected by air pollution and water quality (Nada and Kiy 2004). Also, corporate expansion after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) increased population *and* pollution.

The Tijuana River forms the geographic landscape for *Tijuana Straits* (Nunn 2004). The novel opens with Sam Fahey, a former surfer and drug runner rescuing Magdalena Rivera, a young Mexican activist escaping hired guns out to silence her. As Fahey rescues Magdalena,

[o]ff-shore, a number of dolphins were at play among the waves, primordial shapes suspended in translucent faces – such were the wonders of the Tijuana River Valley, where sights and sounds all but obliterated from the southern half of the state might yet be found – God's script, written among the detritus of two countries.
(Nunn 2004: 17)

The physical beauty and the political 'detritus' in the Valley exist alongside one another, standing for interpersonal and national relationships in the novel with water representing this explosive cocktail of beauty and danger.

This dynamic of water is evident in Magdalena's escape. Throwing herself in the water is what allows her to evade the hitmen. She is filled with a primordial terror of waves and drowning:

the current took her at once, stronger than any man . . . The huge fence loomed above her, repository of crosses, the names of the dead – the infamous fence. In Las Playas they died among its narrow pilings on a regular basis, pinned there like so many exotic insects by the powerful current that swept the beach, the currents she had failed to consider. And she had seen how it would be, drowned at the border like one more clueless pilgrim, within shouting distance of the river that had taken her mother . . . She would drown, she concluded, in the land of the free. Whereupon a big wave broke directly on top of her, taking her wind, driving her down. She thrashed in the darkness, in the terrible creeping cold, till death was something she could taste, and in the end, she gave herself to it.
(Nunn 2004: 37)

The river that had 'taken' Magdalena's mother is a reference to the 1980 flood that affected 20,000 residents in an area along the Tijuana River in the flood plain known as Cartolandia (Bath 1981; Bustamante 1992). Cartolandia (so-called because the housing was made of cardboard) was targeted by the Mexican government because of its poverty, lack of adequate housing and services and burgeoning population. The Government promoted the piping of the river, the building of a flood control channel and evictions. Twenty residents died and another 200 were rumored missing, never to be found, when the river burst its banks after heavy rains and a release of water from the Rodríguez Dam (Manson 2000). The novel includes Magdalena's mother and grandmother among the victims (Nunn 2004: 23).

For Magdalena, water symbolizes the waves of national and international economic development and cross-border political corruption that took her family, at the same time that it delivers her from death. The target of her activism is a smelting and battery recycling plant in Tijuana owned by a US businessman. Residents near the plant reported skin ulcers, respiratory ailments and birth defects and several children had died as a result. This fictional case is drawn from an actual dispute over an abandoned lead smelter brought to attention by a cross-border activist group and presented before an international organization created by Canada, Mexico and the USA.⁶

Water, floods and cross-border development also form the backdrop for *Solar Storms* (Hogan 1995). Centered on Angela Jensen, a troubled Native American teenager, it chronicles her return to Adam's Rib, on the boundary waters of Canada and Minnesota. Sent away as a young child, physically disfigured from her mother's abuse, she returns unmoored and unfamiliar with her indigenous roots and practices. She reunites with her great-grandmother (Agnes Iron), great-great-grandmother (Dora-Rouge) and a woman called Bush, who, although not a blood relation, raised Angela's mother. The four women go on a quest to their northern homelands canoeing through the waters, in an attempt to heal their personal, familial and cultural wounds. As Angela describes her return, 'I was like Agnes had said: Water going back to itself. I was water falling into a lake and these women were that lake' (Hogan 1995: 55).

Angela finds home and safety in family and through learning indigenous cultural practices. That healing is soon threatened by a hydroelectric dam project, drawn from the James Bay hydroelectric project. Specifically, the novel references the 1986 announcement of the 'Great Whale Project', which called for the damming and diversions of five rivers, which would flood Cree and Inuit land along the Great Whale River in northern Quebec. The power generated was intended for export to the USA, and to Southern Quebec. Cree opposition led to Chief Matthew Coon Come's 1990 canoe trip down the Hudson River into New York City. Protests were a major factor in New York State's 1992 withdrawal from a purchasing agreement showing the power of transnational social movements in this component of the overall project (Webster 1992).

Damage from the flooded waters is a key concern in *Solar Storms*, specifically the environmental impacts on land and animals. Angela ponders the *cultural* meanings for the Cree. During one meeting where environmental organizers meet, she drifts off:

As I sat thinking about the million dollar dreams of officials, governments and businesses, thinking about the lengths to which they would go, my mind drifted off to water, to wetness itself, and how I'd wanted so often to hold my breath and remain inside the water that springs from the earth and rains down from the sky. Perhaps it would tell me, speak to me, show me a way around these troubles. Water, I knew, had its own needs, its own speaking and desires.
(Hogan 1995: 279)

Water has its own properties, manifesting into springs and rains, representing age-old relations with the natural world and playing a crucial role in indigenous practices and epistemologies. But, as Angela realizes, for 'officials, governments and businesses' focused on economic development with little concern for the environmental, cultural and social costs, the dam's meaning is very different. Thus Angela ponders a radio powered by newly acquired energy:

... a darkness of words and ideas, wants and desires ... part of the fast-moving darkness was the desire of those who wanted to conquer the land, the water, the rivers that kept running away from them. It was their desire to guide the waters, narrow them down into the thin black electrical wires that traversed the world. They wanted to control water, the rise and fall of it, the direction of its ancient life. They wanted its power.

(Hogan 1995: 268)

In seeking to harness power in the water (and to export it to the USA as a commodity through 'black wires'), the dam threatens not only to flood hunting lands, disturbing animals, plants, landscapes and peoples, it also disrupts natural cycles and seasons, and ways of knowing and being in the world based on indigenous cultural and social values.

BORDER VIOLENCE, INTERZONES AND GENDER

Just as water and environmental pollution do not respect political borders, pollution does not respect bodily borders between mother and child. Developing fetuses are particularly vulnerable to toxic exposures. The placenta is like an interzone, or an 'in-between' space, similar to a border region between beings and nations (Loustaunau and Sanchez-Bane 1999). The interdependence of mother and child is what makes pollution and its impact on fetuses so devastating (Steingraber 2001). Toxic and occupational exposures often manifest themselves as reproductive problems, disproportionately affecting

low-income women of color concentrated in dangerous manufacturing environments (Pellow and Park 2003).

The southern border is a site of excessive violence and danger. Crossing the border is dangerous, due to geographically specific risks such as drowning in ocean and rivers and heat deaths in the desert (Eschbach *et al.* 2001; Donato and Patterson 2004). Gendered violence ranges from rape (so common that female border crossers take birth control to avoid pregnancy from it), to the murder of factory girls that acts as a back story in *Tijuana Straits* (echoing the mass murder of female factory workers in the Mexican city of Ciudad Juarez). This violence is also gendered through the presumptive 'villain' of the novel, who is also a 'victim' of economic development. Armando Santoya, the hitman hired to kill Magdalena, used to be a maquila worker, who worked as an assemblyman working with toxic solvents. The factory was where he met Reina (another economic migrant for the rural hinterlands) who bore their child, born with a deadly tumor. Their child was born where an 'entire wing of the hospital' was filled with 'children with anencephaly, that is, children born without brains, the children of factory workers' (Nunn 2004: 91). Although these plot devices are drawn from the Texas border region (anencephaly clusters in Brownsville/Matamoros and the murders at Ciudad Juarez), the politics that shape toxic exposures, labor exploitation and gendered social relationships are also common in Tijuana.

Armando's turn to violence is inextricably linked to the toxic environment he faced as a maquila worker. As a result of his despair at his son's death, he becomes violent toward Reina who escapes to a safe house sponsored by a women's organization for which Magdalena volunteers. Thus, Armando feels special rage toward Magdalena when he is hired to kill her. In their last encounter, Magdalena attempts to reason with Armando, discussing the poisons in his blood, 'that would carry him away present even at the moment of his conception, in the blood of the parents, and that blood tainted like the very water at Armando's feet' (Nunn 2004: 272). She argues that his blood is like the polluted water in the Tijuana River, connecting their familial tragedies with that of their country, with its blood 'sucked dry'. His son and her mother were 'taken by the same agents of avarice and greed' (Nunn 2004: 273).

The intergenerational, gendered and bodily violence in *Solar Storms* is simultaneously literal, symbolic and cultural. On their voyage, the four women encounter towns that had been resettled by the Government from their ancestral lands. As Dora-Rouge describes,

the people were in pain . . . she would never have recognized their puffy faces and empty eyes, their unkempt, hollow appearance. It was a murder of the soul that was taking place there. Murder with no consequences to the killers.

(Hogan 1995: 226)

The cultural violence and disconnection from the land and rituals explain the larger stakes of the dam:

the devastation and the ruin that had fallen over the land fell over the people, too. Most were too broken to fight the building of the dams, the moving of the waters, and that perhaps had been the intention all along. But I could see Dora-Rouge thinking, wondering: how do conquered people get back their lives? She and others knew the protest against the dams and river diversions was their only hope. Those who protested were the ones who could still believe they might survive as a people.

(Hogan 1995: 226)

Thus, Angela understands that the maternal abuse she suffered was a result of pain and violence – not just as individual acts, but a result of complex cultural and intergenerational wounds directed at Native peoples, of which the dam is the most recent incarnation. Thus, she understands that anti-dam activism is how ‘broken’ communities can reclaim their identity and dignity.

CONCLUSION

Faced with complex forms of violence as a result of transnationalism and economic development, Magdalena and Angela recognize the dangers that water and water projects represent to their communities and their intergenerational impacts. But water simultaneously stands for a powerfully benevolent response and reaction to these same political and environmental problems. Angela’s people are from the ‘world of water’. In *Solar Storms*, the dam ceases as a result of Native mobilization, and Angela’s pain is ultimately eased through the love she discovers. In *Tijuana Straits*, Armando’s turn to drugs and violence to numb the pain and loss of his family is contrasted with Magdalena’s activism to avenge her mother and grandmother’s deaths from floods and the continued problems of top-down economic and corporate development. She is saved by Fahey’s kindness, who in the last scene, fashions a human chain with border-crossers that enables them to collectively survive the wave that sweeps Armando out to sea. This collective strength enables survival in the face of forces that can swat down the individual.

In both novels, gender and globalization, the politics of transnationalism and the power of water are represented through lyrical language and through compelling narratives. In creating complex characters and stories, both represent the human costs of the intense levels of violence of development and transnationalism emanating from the USA and how these shape the lives of Mexican and Native women at the borderlands. At the same time, these novels imagine, interpret and represent the culture and politics of transnational environmental and justice claims and offer a powerful

antidote to the dominant political discourse on national borders and free trade in the contemporary USA.

Julie Sze
Assistant Professor
American Studies
University of California at Davis
Davis, CA 95616, USA
E-mail: jsze@ucdavis.edu

Notes

- 1 This particular quotation, along with music alternating between the patriotic and the threatening, was accessed at <http://www.usborderpatrol.com/borderframe1301.htm>, on 16 December 2006. The website as a whole is called the 'USBorder-Patrol' and is maintained by 'supporters of the United States Border Patrol'. This specific quotation and music have since been taken down, although the ideology of the site remains the same. Specifically, the site argues that: 'On horseback, and on land, sea, and air, the United States Border Patrol defends America' (http://www.usborderpatrol.com/Border_Patrol90.htm, accessed 15 June 2007). This website is not a source of objective information on the US-Mexico border in general or on the wall in particular. The implication that the wall is a single entity stretching to the Sierra Nevada mountains is not factually accurate. But, this website effectively illustrates a particularly insidious cultural discourse of fear and anxiety around globalization and immigration at the moment when the border wall is being debated in Congress. The 'border wall' is actually a series of discontinuous barriers built as part of three larger 'Operations' to 'control illegal immigration'. These are: Operation Gatekeeper in California, Operation Hold-the-Line in Texas and Operation Safeguard in Arizona. These barriers are located in the urban sections of the border, the areas that have been the location of the greatest number of illegal crossings in the past, including San Diego, California, Nogales, Arizona and El Paso, Texas. In September 2006, Congress approved the 'Secure Fence Act', which authorizes 700 new miles of fence on the US-Mexico border. President George Bush signed the Act into law in October 2006. The law calls for a double set of steel walls with floodlights, surveillance cameras and motion detectors along one-third of the US-Mexican border.
- 2 Numerous studies have documented this gap between the promises made by 'free trade agreements' such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its actual effects. One such report (Environmental Health Coalition 2004) provides statistics on pollution rates and health issues along the border, specifically in the San Diego/Tijuana region. One other issue that critics of US immigrant policy point to is that in general, the USA does not enforce employer sanctions against those who hire undocumented people.

- 3 I am not suggesting that relations between the USA and its two national neighbors, nor that the particular communities that I examine, are equivalent. Herzog (1990) argues that the southern border, the focus of Nunn's novel, is a unique encounter between a 'first world' and a 'third world' nation. It is policed to a greater extent than the northern border (where Hogan's novel is set) and growth is connected to rampant urbanization. In addition to these political differences, the novels themselves differ greatly in genre and tone. Nunn is most often thought of as an author of 'surf noir', while Hogan is a widely praised author of Native women's literature, writing lyrically on environmental themes.
- 4 For a history of the project and its impacts, see Hornig (1999).
- 5 The Department of Homeland Security awarded Boeing a contract for the Secure Border Initiative to handle technology upgrades for border control, including increased manned aerial vehicles and next-generation detection technology. Boeing relies on adapting military technology and proposed 1,800 towers equipped with cameras and sensors (Porteus 2006). In May 2006, President Bush proposed sending the National Guard to police the southern border.
- 6 The Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) was established to address regional environmental concerns, prevent potential trade and environmental conflicts and to promote the enforcement of environmental laws complementing NAFTA's environmental provisions (see CEC 2007). For activist views on the lead smelting campaign in Tijuana, see the 2006 documentary, *Maquilapolis: City of Factories* (Funari *et al.* 2006).

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