

# Water is Life: Teaching Climate in the Classroom

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## Abstract

What does it mean for a classroom of college students in Minnesota to read these words? How can they contemplate the idea that water is life, considering both their Dakota neighbors in Standing Rock and the people of Gaza? This essay is a reflection on how I use water in my Minnesota State University undergraduate humanities courses to teach about climate change as the defining crisis of our moment, and its emergence from environmental racism, colonialism, and inequality.

## Keywords

affective ecologies, decoloniality, environmental racism, empathy

In “A Letter from Gaza to the Natives of Standing Rock,” Israa Suliman (2016) writes

Like you, we don’t control our natural resources. Just as you were not consulted about the Dakota Access Pipeline that will traverse your land and contaminate your water supply if installed, we are not consulted by Israel, which wants to mine the gas supply in our harbor for its own use and monopolizes the water supply in the West Bank for the green lawns of its own residents—leaving Palestinians parched and dry. In Gaza, where I live, only 10 percent of our water

supply is drinkable due to the conditions in which we must live. We too know that “water is life” (n.p.).

What does it mean for a classroom of college students in Minnesota to read these words? How can they contemplate the idea that water is life, considering both their Dakota neighbors in Standing Rock and the people of Gaza? This essay is a reflection on how I use water in my Minnesota State University undergraduate humanities courses to teach about climate change as the defining crisis of our moment, and its emergence from environmental racism, colonialism, and inequality. In these conversations, we discuss water in its tangible form—its molecules, its structure, and its cycle from groundwater to atmosphere. We also explore how it serves as a conduit to understanding broader climate change issues.

Water is a monopoly by nature—nothing else fulfills its essential role for life—and everyone must have the right to access it. Like air, water has no substitute. We begin our class by reflecting on our relationships with water, exploring not only how we utilize it but our experiences with it throughout our upbringing. I'm from the coast of Southern California, and I reminisce about standing by the water's edge, breathing in the salt air, swimming, and surfing. Most of my students hail from Minnesota, where their memories are shaped by lakes, cabins, and boats. The city of Mankato sits at the confluence of two rivers, the Blue Earth and the Minnesota. Our lives are also filled with domesticated water: tap water, swimming pools, fishponds, and saturated lawns. Water often serves as the backdrop to their Midwestern summers—the gentle hum of sprinklers, the distant buzz of lawnmowers, and the joyful shrieks of children playing in swimming pools or on the lake. We talk about water as weather phenomena, such as monsoons, snowstorms, and droughts, where the landscapes and their inhabitants react to its sudden scarcity or abundance. We engage with water in the shape of fog, rain, ice, wetlands, urban rivers and creeks, city fountains, and reclaimed urban spaces.

Students quickly connect their experiences with pollution and climate change. I recollect Southern California's years-long droughts and the wildfires, near and far, that covered my childhood home in ash. They might recall the nearby dam nearly breaking from last year's heavy rains, and agricultural runoff creating algae blooms and dead zones in their hometown lakes and ponds. The Minnesota Center for Environmental

Advocacy reports that 40% of Minnesota waters are impaired, and hundreds of lakes and rivers are not drinkable, fishable, or swimmable. Three-fourths of Minnesotans depend on groundwater to drink, and 500,000 Minnesotans drink polluted groundwater with nitrate pollution above safe levels. When we talk about two billion people not having access to clean water, we can include our neighbors and sometimes ourselves. What connects Standing Rock to Gaza is lost water sovereignty tied to settler colonialism, which also links Southern California to Minnesota. Our geographic distance is bridged through our shared connection to water. Although the challenges faced in these locations differ, they all stem from inequity, imperialism, and capitalism.

In the class, we read Donna Haraway's (2016) work on "staying with the trouble" alongside the idea that as long as humans view themselves as separate from nature—or as superior to it in some arbitrary hierarchy—we will continue to damage the world around us until it becomes unlivable. Therefore, we must learn to see ourselves as kin with nature, living and interacting as part of it. When we view water as kin, we consider not only how it flows through our cities but also how it circulates within our bodies. We read Craig Santos Perez, an Indigenous Chamorro from the Pacific Island of Guåhan (Guam), a territory of the United States. In his poem, "Chanting the Water," (2020) he commands us to "Say: 'Water is \_\_\_\_!'" (p. 27). Many of the poem's lines reference our bodies, that amniotic fluid is 90 percent water, our bones 30 percent water, our eyes 95 percent water. We must protest that water is life, Santos Perez writes, "because they bring their bulldozers and drills and drones" and "dogs and paychecks and pepper spray and bullets" and "we bring our songs and schools and prayers" (pp. 28-29). His poem links the water within our bodies with the water that connects our planet:

Because ocean-sky-rain-lake flows into the Missouri River –  
because ocean-sky-rain-lake-river returns  
to the Pacific and connects us  
to our cousins at Standing Rock –  
because our blood is 90 percent water –

The reference to the water protectors of Standing Rock and the phrase "water is life" underscores the connection between the oil pipelines and groundwater of the prairies and US colonialism in the Pacific, links facilitated by the ever-continuous cycle of water.

In our discussion of environmental literature, we explore whether literature can do more than just make us contemplate the "wilderness" – however sublime the waters may be– or foster sentiment for others or evoke fear for our own survival. Can it also inspire us to empathize with the planet itself in a meaningful way? I use Alexa Weik von Mossner's (2017) work on affective ecologies, where she combines insights from cognitive science to explore how environmental stories can strategically foster empathy. Her focus on the moral aspects of our empathetic responses to these stories helps me understand how they can be more effective in the classroom. Von Mossner questions if experiencing environmental stories can create emotional connections that drive social change. I ask how we can frame or encourage these emotional connections and representative thinking in the classroom. How do we turn our imaginations to connect with the Earth and the species we share it with, using the fiction we read as our vehicle?

As we discuss these questions, the class juxtaposes poems from Santos Perez's collection, *Habitat Threshold* (2020), with poems about Standing Rock by Demian DineYazhi and Karenne Wood. We read these alongside poems about water occupation in Palestine by Rasha Abdulhadi (2016) and Dawud Mulla (2016). With a different approach, reading these texts can lead students to merely feel sympathy for the people described, which sometimes results in viewing them as distant others enduring US-funded colonialism and conflicts, and their resultant environmental disasters. Given this, we ask ourselves in class whether understanding context, reflecting on our own position and complicity, and desiring justice for others are sufficient. Part of our discussions center on how these poems relate to our initial conversations, our own experiences of water. Students explore what poems like Santos Perez's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Glacier" have to do with their own experience of flooding: "Do you not see how the glacier/ already floods the streets/ of the cities around you?" (p. 19). By connecting students' personal experiences with broader global struggles, like the melting of glaciers, and even the funding of war, these texts can inspire students to see themselves as part of a larger ecological system – as kin to people and planet - and to advocate for both biospheric and human justice.

I'm still trying to determine whether my students' responses show that the literature I believe models planetary care and multispecies kinship inspires something

beyond just human survival. I keep returning to the question of whether this type of climate literacy is sufficient. For instance, can art and literature help us remember, imagine, and even embody the vital role of water in sustaining life on this planet? Can they help us appreciate its beauty, its part within our bodies, its habitat for other species, and the way it connects us beneath the soil, on the ground, and through the air? I ask students to reframe our reading to focus on how specific texts express the idea of mutual liberation, wherein people find freedom through caring for the planet. Through this framework, students express something for the planet beyond self-interested preservation and concern for future generations. Instead, we attend carefully to the modes of familial care-taking and fellow feeling for land and water expressed by this literature. Ultimately, this approach aims to cultivate a deeper sense of connection and responsibility, text by text, encouraging students to see themselves as active participants in a global movement for environmental justice and planetary care.

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