

# Introduction to the Special Issue: Water as Conflict and Water as Commons

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“Speak for the water. Sing for the water. Dance for the water.”

Thus speaks the water in Carole Lindstrom’s most recent picture book, [Autumn Peltier, Water Warrior](#). (Lindstrom, 2023). In this picturebook, water warriors Autumn Peltier and Grandmother Josephine speak, sing, and dance for water. In turn, the water gives life to all who care for it. This presentation of water as both life-giving and needing care calls upon us to consider our relationships and stories related to water. How do we speak, sing, and dance for water in our classrooms and our teaching?

In this issue, we invited educators to share their teaching and learning experiences with water. We received an enthusiastic response from educators, researchers, artists, and learners. As a result, this special issue explores investigations of water learning in the classroom and beyond as they relate to climate issues facing our local neighborhoods and larger global contexts. Investigations of water learning include water for thirst, growth, and play. Some also draw attention to concerns related to water access, safety, possession, drought, and flooding. We are excited to share lessons and reflections that grapple with *conflict* that arises around access to and care for water. At the same time, stories explore reconceptualizations of water that move beyond a product to be bought, sold, and protected, to water as *commons*, a living entity requiring reciprocal relations.

We have organized this special issue through the authors' various foci on curricular examples, resources, reflections, research, critical essays, and creative works. The variety, depth, originality, and exploration of water as commons, as life, as story, as performance alongside water as death-bringer, as healer, and as friend complicated our own relationships to water. We hope also that these pieces offer stories and ways forward for all that explore the pages of this issue.

Our colleagues' descriptions of their curricular activities with students of all ages offer concrete ideas for use in classrooms of all kinds. Tiffany Hagey shares with us a text set from her unit on local and global water issues and describes how she invited students to publish their learning through pocket zines. Katherine Werthwine similarly focuses on visual composing with her 9th and 10th grade intensive reading students as they explore local water concerns and create visual argumentation for community-based solutions. Water as symbolism is explored in Jay Bullock's reflective description of his high school students writing and reading their way through what water means to them personally and the many forms it can take in life and literature. Arts-based approaches to water stories are further highlighted and explored in an easily translatable lesson by Melanie Ariens and Rhonda Nordstrom who position drawing our own water stories as building empathy with human and more-than-human kin alike. Kristine M. Schutz and Rebecca Woodard use beloved recent children's books to support their preservice teacher education students in explorations of water protection and how such texts can support informational reading and writing in the elementary classroom.

Across the pages of the special issue authors describe many resources and reflect on their own work as educators and scholars interested in water. Candance Doerr-Stevens, for example, shares an online collection of picture books, chapter books, young adult novels, and media all focused on water as resource, relative, and place. Julianna Lopez Kershen digs deeply into one award-winning middle grades novel, *Ninth Ward*, to explore standards-based opportunities for engaging young people in investigations of the complicated ways water was experienced and portrayed during Hurricane Katrina. Sonja R. Braucht revisits a unit of study she shared in a previous issue of the journal, reflecting on the significance of community in project-based learning and its social-emotional resonance in climate literacy education.

Our colleagues also shared examples of research-in-action to deepen our orientations to the roles water might play in our work as educators and scholars of climate literacy. Global Water Dances are described as a rich space to conduct large university-public school partnerships focusing on transdisciplinary ways to raise awareness about water issues, promote sustainability, and inspire action to protect water resources, all guided by children's messages about their rights to clean water. Rebecca Rogers and Inda Schaenen offer an approach to discourse analysis centered

on water justice by examining curricular artifacts from their Literacy Clinic, arguing that changing our discourses, linguistic systems, and narratives is necessary to shift our relationships to water and all forms of life. Wenyan Yang uses multimodal discourse analysis to explore how pictures in two recent and award-winning children's books highlight how visual narratives might evoke emotional response and environmental awareness for young readers.

Critical examinations of water and water narratives by authors who contributed to this special issue dug deeply into both healing and confrontation necessary to explore water with students. Danielle Haque invites readers to consider with her how she uses water with her college-age students to examine climate change as the defining crisis of the present moment and its entanglement with environmental racism, colonialism, and inequality. Sean P. Connors shares the critical lens of intersectional environmentalism and introduces key questions to explore for students and teachers to examine interconnectedness and social justice. Milena Renee Rodriguez examines two films that prioritize Indigenous ways of knowing around intergenerational healing through embodied water practices and rituals as starting points for integrating anti-oppressive and ecojustice-oriented discussions within multigenerational and culturally safe educational environments.

We also share a digital version of Christina Randazzo's children's book, *My Friend, the Lake* in this special issue. The book builds from Randazzo's previous research and personal narratives about Lake Erie that address the Lake's importance, impact, and an awareness of the problems that face Lake Erie, and Earth, today.

Across the stories, we invite readers to engage in their own learning and connections, as we collectively consider: How do we relate to water on a personal level? How do we connect to water as a family or larger culture? How does water shape us, our daily lives, and the traditions that define our families and cultures? How do we consume water? When and how do we study water? To whom does water belong? How do we protect and give back to water?

Thank you to our many authors for sharing your voices, songs, and dances for water. Thank you also to the readers and educators of these pages for your curious minds and active commitments to exploring what it means to care for water in our classrooms and beyond.

## Guest Editor Biographies

**Candance Doerr-Stevens (PhD)** is a former middle and high school English Language Arts teacher and currently works as an associate professor of literacy education at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. She teaches courses on the teaching of reading and writing, as well as digital and multimodal composition. She is most energized by her work with teachers, especially in her current role as Director of the UWM Writing Project. Her research focuses on the literacy practices and creative responses we enact for problem-solving and hope in the face of challenging social issues. She can be reached at [doerrste@uwm.edu](mailto:doerrste@uwm.edu).

**Alexandra Panos (PhD)** is a former Middle Grades ELA teacher and currently serves as an Assistant Professor of Literacy Studies and Affiliate Faculty in Measurement and Research in the College of Education at the University of South Florida. She centers her scholarship on the embodied reality that, to quote Octavia Butler, "there is no end to what a living world demands of you." For her, this means prioritizing place-based, community-engaged, and postcritical activities that center the ecological and geographic dimensions of education for equity and justice.

**Stephanie Rollag Yoon (PhD)** is an assistant professor of English at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where she teaches preservice and practicing English Language Arts teachers. Her teaching aligns with her research interests around digital literacies, critical writing pedagogy, and climate literacy. Drawing on her experiences as a middle and high school English teacher, Dr. Rollag Yoon sees students and teachers as brilliant readers and multimodal composers. Across her teaching, professional development, and mentorship, her practices are grounded in feminist pedagogies that center stories of hope.