

The Literature of Living Water: Literary Environmentalism in the American Southwest in the Wake of World War II.

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M. Jimmie Killingsworth

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**The Literature of Living Water:
Literary Environmentalism in the American Southwest in
the Wake of World War II¹**

M. Jimmie Killingsworth (bio)

In the estimation of Barry Commoner, World War II marked the turning point in the technological transformation of life in modern times that not only produced the world's largest economy but also spawned the resistance ultimately known as environmentalism. The shift from a primarily rural way of life to urbanization and heavy industry accelerated. Farming and ranching were rebuilt on the factory model, with monoculture and chemical application prevailing over small-scale, organic models of the family farm. Road-building and automotive transportation expanded into an increasingly fragmented and paved-over landscape. Household life became a site of micro-industrialization with the aggressive marketing of electric appliances and strong chemicals. Soap yielded to detergents; pesticides and herbicides replaced flyswatters and garden hoes. The nation never actually demobilized after ratcheting up productivity for the war effort, until what Eisenhower called "the military-industrial complex" invaded every corner of life. With the threat of nuclear crisis looming in foreign affairs, on the domestic scene the American people confronted the possibility that we were poisoning the source of life itself. In the 1962 watershed book *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson, the mother of environmentalism, referred to pesticides and synthetic chemicals as "the last and greater danger to our civilization."² Poison and overdevelopment, she taught, could kill us as surely as Soviet missiles, if not as fast.³

On top of everything else, the weather was bad, especially in the American southwest. Having survived the war, veterans returning to the shrinking economic prospects of living off the land in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, encountered a drought that lasted almost the entire decade of the 1950s and threatened to throw the region back into another dust bowl. Water was on everybody's mind. And the government programs designed to deal with the drought, from dam-and-reservoir projects to subsidies and controls on rural economy, came to seem another intrusion of military-industrialism into a way of life that once felt wild and free.

Among these returning veterans were the authors of a rich and varied corpus of writings published in the 1960s and 1970s. They grafted a festering resentment from a youth stolen by global war and government [End Page 18] promises onto a growing public discontent with the war in Vietnam and the environmental misadventures documented by Carson and Commoner. Just as the veterans Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and Joseph Heller produced the first anti-war literature of the period (in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Catch-22*, both of which reflected back on World War II but with the mood generally associated with the Vietnam era), so the veterans among southwestern writers set the standard for literary environmentalism. Edward Abbey and John Graves reacted with irony and elegy as the federally-funded building of dams spread westward from the Tennessee Valley and the Atchafalaya basin in Louisiana into the semiarid midlands of Texas and the red rock deserts of Utah and Nevada. Elmer Kelton dramatized the destruction of ranching culture by the twin forces of drought and government mismanagement on the west Texas plains. And Leslie Marmon Silko, a second-generation writer, turned the stories of returning veterans in her Laguna Pueblo family into a modern rewriting of indigenous myth laced with social critique. Nature essays like Graves's *Goodbye to a River* (1960) and Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968), contemporary westerns like Kelton's *The Time It Never Rained* (1973), the comic satire of Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), and the mystico-political storytelling of Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) share a common complaint: The Machine that chewed up the best years of our lives now aims to destroy our land and wipe out everything in life that is sacred, wild, and free.

This essay offers a brief memorial to this unlikely collection of writings, which I'm calling the literature of living water. The phrase alludes to the Christian Gospel of John, in which living water appears as a metaphor for the life of the spirit, an apt expression for a perpetually thirsty people living in a...

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M. Jimmie Killingsworth, Texas A&M University

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