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Robert Macfarlane  
IS A RIVER  
ALIVE?

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Robert Macfarlane's *Is a River Alive?* is a multi-vocal, heteroglossal text, a confluence of three journeys along at-risk rivers and watersheds: Ecuador's Río Los Cedros; India's Adyar, Cooum, and Kosasthalaiyar Rivers; and Canada's Mutehekau Shipu (or Magpie River).

In each of his three treks, Macfarlane optimistically recounts persistent efforts to frame legal language that endows rivers with rights. In New Zealand, the Te Awa Tupua Act (2017) recognizes the Whanganui River as alive and an ancestor to the Whanganui iwi tribe;<sup>2</sup> in Ecuador, a revised Constitution incorporates the Rights of Nature (2008); in India, the Uttarkhand High Court finds that the Ganges and Yamuna "should be recognized as living entities with attendant rights;"<sup>3</sup> and in Canada, the Mingan Council and the Innu Council jointly declare that the Mutehekau Shipu is "a living, rights-bearing being."<sup>4</sup> Macfarlane's guides to these rivers include some of the agitators, judges, and educators who worked tirelessly to infuse legal language with a new way of seeing rivers, and Macfarlane is explicit about his support for the Rights of Nature movement.

Macfarlane argues that no legal documents will resolve the confusion, bad faith, and apathy that characterize most modern societies' attitudes towards rivers and watersheds. Macfarlane cites Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* as a touchstone

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<sup>2</sup> Macfarlane, 27.

<sup>3</sup> Macfarlane, 146.

<sup>4</sup> Macfarlane, 216-17.

for his efforts to perceive Los Cedros as a sentient being. Kohn describes a “living thought,” suggesting that “. . . [A]ll living beings, and not just humans, think, and . . . that all thoughts are alive.”<sup>5</sup> Accompanied by mycologist Giuliana Furci, Macfarlane quickly elucidates the mycorrhizal network that binds the living forest of Los Cedros. He understands that the forest is not only animate but even meaningfully enchanted (what Macfarlane calls a “*Wunderkammer*”<sup>6</sup>), and he builds upon that base by injecting the compound noun “living river-forest,”<sup>7</sup> expanding the idea of meaningful, sentient animacy to the entire watershed.

But what is the river thinking and how does Macfarlane hear and signify it? Macfarlane tells his readers, soberly, that the living rivers are his co-authors. Picking up the language of noted anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose,<sup>8</sup> Macfarlane positions himself as attentive to the creature-languages, or the earth language, of the rivers. His primary teacher in this effort is Innu writer, poet, and indigenous activist Rita Mestokosho, whose wisdom scaffolds his approach to the Mutehekau Shipu river: pay attention to the river, she counsels, wake up your heart, and then the river may speak through you. All three main river sections are punctuated by extended reflections on what speaking as a river might entail—parataxis, hypotaxis, compounds and, well, the style is different for each river, but Macfarlane’s discovery of the rivers’ flows—their counter-currents, eddies and helixes—structures the sentences, sections, and themes of the text, which repeat and redouble but move together, as an entire material body. They culminate in the final, bracing moment of Macfarlane’s Mutehekau Shipu descent, when he confronts the river’s “mouth,” a force that seems to speak, eliciting spurts of language from Macfarlane, the powerfully ecstatic prose that ends the section and smudges/erases itself in watery ink. He is, he says, “rivered,” an assertion about the writing and expression itself. He sees himself differently, is subject to the river flowing, and achieves the kind of fluvial fluency with which the entire text experiments.

We could call this central component of Macfarlane’s text mere language play; on the other hand, for Macfarlane, play is the well-spring of a carefully preserved hope. Like any of us who care about the living world, Macfarlane daily confronts news of environmental catastrophes. One way, Macfarlane suggests drearily, to show that rivers are alive is to think about the many ways they have been killed: dammed, drowned, poisoned, interred, etc. In the middle section of the text, tracing three dead Indian rivers, Macfarlane hits his lowest ebb. This chapter is pierced by a close-up photograph of a dead sea turtle, empty eye sockets facing the reader, the image of despair. In his final evening, joining a desperate effort, Macfarlane helps volunteers to gather sea turtles’ eggs, stumbling past the beached corpses of a dozen sea turtles to find, relocate and re-inter the eggs, weeping as he digs. The single hatched turtle he

<sup>5</sup> Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (University of California Press, 2013), 71.

<sup>6</sup> Macfarlane, 56.

<sup>7</sup> Macfarlane, 89.

<sup>8</sup> Deborah, Rose Bird, “Val Plumwood’s Philosophical Animism: Attentive Inter-actions in the Sentient World,” *Environmental Humanities* vol. 3 (2013): 93-109.

discovers symbolizes a small hope but will, he realizes, more likely become gull food than make it to the ocean. This dark work—a form of salvation—requires a kind of faith.

Macfarlane's primary contribution to the wider field of interest in nonhuman living beings and agents is probably his established popularity and cultural influence as a best-selling author. Learning from indigenous activists whose efforts have advanced the rights of nature worldwide, Macfarlane's text is less an effort to answer the literal question of the title than to infuse its own language with the life and wonder of the living rivers. In the telling of the story, the detailed bibliography, and the appended glossary, Macfarlane endeavors to shift public perception of the river, taking his readers by the hand, and investing the journey with humor, joy, and epic wonder. Positioning himself less as a teacher than as a student, Macfarlane's work is a persuasive, entertaining, and thoughtful platforming of language and ideas that demand broader circulation. ▣