Ecocinema, Slow Violence, and Environmental Ethics: Death by Water

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Abstract

In the Anthropocene epoch, slow violence triggered by human-caused environmental disaster is omnipresent across the globe. By forming an alternative media-spectatorship/readership in a media-saturated, fast-changing world, ecocinema can potentially help create an ecocentric environmental ethics, allowing us to question long-held notions of anthropocentrism, speciesism, and other ecological issues. Analyzing two documentaries, *A Plastic Ocean* and *Silent River*, this paper investigates the efficacy of the narratives of ecocinema as a powerful cultural and political text in making environmental slow violence perceptible to human imagination and in taking us one step further to environmental justice activism. The study will also examine the way in which water answers back to the environmental injustice triggered by humans through retaliation and revenge, appropriating and expanding Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence and Jane Bennett's concept of thing-power. Closely reading the portrayal of water as a dynamic entity in these two visual texts, this paper argues how the intrinsic value and the agency of water can reveal to humans the problems connected with their strong anthropocentric environmental ethics.

Keywords: ecocinema, environmental ethics, water, slow violence, thing-power

The river sweats
Oil and tar
The barges drift
With the turning tide

(T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land")

TS Eliot's modernist rhetoric "The Waste Land" tells a tale of water that is polluted and exploited, and, eventually, is devoid of any redemptive or regenerative power. An ecocritical reading of the poem reveals a cautionary tale of a deserted civilization in which water retreats itself from a post-industrialized world. The centrality of water is so powerful that it forces us to recognize the supreme agency of water. Section IV of the poem titled "Death by Water" recounts the drowning of Phlebas whose dead body is devoured by the sea water in which "A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers" (315-316). The wrath that the water manifests in

the poem is symptomatic of the rage of the Anthropocene that reminds us of the presence of power and agency in nature. This paper echoes a similar dynamics of water as portrayed in two powerful documentaries, *A Plastic Ocean* and *Silent River*. Though these documentaries foreground extreme injustice to water sources, water is not simply portrayed as a passive entity ready to be exploited. The subtext of these visual texts is rich with a water aesthetic that signals the agency of water and its power to conquer. In the process, the films call for an environmental ethics in which water demands to be respected for its inherent value.

An ecocritical reading of these two documentaries foregrounds the depiction of one crucial elemental matter, i.e., water – recognized as the life force of the planet – as a dynamic and lively entity in contrast to an inert object. Referring to the recent scholarship of elemental ecocriticism, vibrant materialism, and environmental ethics, this paper explores how humanity's failure to recognize water's intrinsic value and power has ravaged the earth, damaging the long-term relationship between the sea and the rest of the environment. Exploring the fundamental elements of the planet such as water, air, fire, and earth, and their complex dynamics, the recently published *Elemental Ecocriticism* seeks to explore in fictional and critical texts "a lush archive for thinking ecology anew" (Cohen and Duckert 4). This book's aim is to develop a material ecocriticism that is "at once estranging, disanthropocentric, and apprehensible, hospitable to new companionships" (6-7). According to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, water, like any other foundational element, is never easy, never still, never straightforward, and never reducible. These eco-documentaries bring forth parallel dynamics of eco materiality of water, which is portrayed as lively, flexible, and irreducible, echoing Jane Bennett's idea of things as powerful and vibrant. Apart from furthering Bennett's idea of thing-power, this paper will also appropriate and expand the concept of "slow violence" proposed by Rob Nixon in an attempt to recognize the agency of non-human nature. What these visual narratives document is not only how human actions inflict violence against water but also how water makes humans victim to slow violence in return. In both cases, the resulting violence is slow and silent which makes it difficult to comprehend on the face of it. Finally, this paper attempts to study these eco-documentaries as tales of water that remind us to show respect for nature and renounce extreme human hubris.

A Plastic Ocean and *Silent River*

A Plastic Ocean is a documentary film that dives into the world of the ocean, investigating what humans have done to the water sources across the globe. Truly transnational in its approach, the documentary takes us to five oceans of the world in an attempt to search the garbage patch and its impact on marine life and on

humans. Director, journalist, filmmaker, and adventurer Craig Leeson sets out to make a documentary about the elusive blue whale which eventually leads to the dreadful discovery of a thick layer of plastic debris – the garbage patch – floating in the Ocean. Released in 2016, it not only received good reviews from critics and viewers as well as fourteen major awards on several prestigious occasions but also was screened in over ninety countries on six continents. This large viewership encourages us to decode the environmental message within the visual text that can eventually offer us an ethical position towards nature. Beautifully shot on the sea and sea beaches, this film juxtaposes the pristine beauty of blue water and the horrifying images of heavily polluted water with plastic debris in an attempt to create a response in the viewers. Throughout the film, apart from using powerful visual images, statistics are presented graphically, and experts are interviewed to offer further insights into some of the problems our water is facing because of pollution.

The second documentary *Silent River* follows the story of a twenty-four-year-old Atawalpa Sofia, born in El Salto, Jalisco, Mexico, who is trying to save one of the most polluted rivers in Mexico, the Santiago River. Directed by Steve Fisher and Jason Jaacks, the film tells the tale of the Santiago River, known locally as "the River of Death," that has become a garbage dump from the waste coming from one of Mexico's largest manufacturing corridors since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. Alarming shots of the polluted river, informed narration, and interviews of the victims make it an excruciating film to watch that exposes how the manufacturing industries like IBM, HP, Coca-Cola, Levi's, Honda, Nestlé, etc., mostly owned by America and Japan, have caused havoc on the river that was once clean and healthy. Released in 2014, this short documentary also garnered positive reviews and received several prestigious awards. Both the documentaries showcase the slow violence caused by the humans and how water talks back to the disaster we have created, reminding us of its agency and vibrant materiality.

Appropriating "slow violence"

The concept of "slow violence" is coined and popularized by Rob Nixon in his critical discussion of the underrepresented and underprivileged class, race, sex, and ethnicity in environmental discourse in his seminal work *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*. He defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). His discussion of environmental slow violence reveals the fact that it is neither spectacular nor immediate. As slow violence lacks "a visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power," the primary challenge for slow violence to make its presence felt is representational (Nixon 3). Hence, he emphasizes the necessity of devising "arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence

of delayed effects" (3). Though he primarily refers to narrative writing as a powerful tool that can emotively foreground the damage slow violence inflicts, his ideas could be equally, if not more, applicable to the narratives of ecocinema. Joni Adamson in her essay "Environmental Justice, Cosmopolitics, and Climate Change," in the same spirit, attempts to evaluate and acknowledge both the efforts and accomplishments of the storytellers, writers, and their allies in a more environmentally ethical epoch, arguing how stories can serve as "new tools, or 'seeing instruments,' for making abstract, often intangible global patterns associated with climate change accessible to a wider public" (172). What they both assert is the impressive power of narratives, which can be equally applicable to the visual narratives of ecocinema. It is not just because ecocinema, irrespective of its genre, has literally a narrative or plot; it is also because of the powerful audio-visual aesthetics that can engage viewers in a meaningful way. These seeing instruments are no longer less effective as a platform for generating ideas and promoting environmental ethics than any other medium, which can eventually offer us "a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen" (Nixon 15). Hence, studying ecocinema as a visual text for witnessing slow violence and generating a critical discussion is a way forward to the twenty-first century environmental scholarship, especially in a time when audio-books, video-books, e-readers, multimodal pedagogy have become a mundane reality.

This paper, however, attempts to appropriate and expand Nixon's idea of "slow violence" because of the generic value it contains. Nixon's emphasis is surely on the slow violence inflicted on the global South, and justifiably so. Nevertheless, human-caused environment slow violence is ubiquitous on a global scale that demands visibility and requires close attention. When we are polluting natural resources like soil, air, water, and more, extracting fossil fuels inappropriately, harming other species insensibly, dumping garbage unreasonably, and creating an imbalance in the ecosystems – in whatever part of the world – we are actually inflicting slow violence on the planet itself, and thus, on humans, in general, as well. Therefore, though there is no denying that poor people are the prime victims of environmental injustice, the non-human nature is damaged as much or more. In this regard, we can turn towards Rachel Carson who warns us against the violence humans selfishly unleash on the environment. Her influential book, *Silent Spring* – one of the founding texts of an ethical approach to nature –informs us of the dangers of the new chemicals we are releasing into the environment. The use of pesticides that risks the well-being of both humans and other biotic and abiotic organisms manifests an expansive form of slow violence inflicted on both human and the non-human world. Hence, apart from an exclusive "slow violence" as proposed by Nixon, we also need to address an inclusive "slow violence" and find apt apparatuses to use to recognize this slow form of violence.

Ecocinema and Slow Violence

Pat Brereton in his book-length study of ecocinema and environmental ethics discusses the social, political, and material impact of ecocinema which is capable of creating strong responses among viewers to the ever-growing environmental challenges facing the earth. Ecocinema, as suggested by Brereton, "an agent for knowledge dissemination, consciousness-raising, public and ethical debate, and even political action" (211), can be considered provocative ethical narratives that require to be deciphered for their embedded environmental messages. Both *A Plastic Ocean* and *Silent River* are rich visual texts that persuasively showcase the violence humans have unleashed against water sources and the human and non-human animals that depend on them. The opening scene of *A Plastic Ocean* starts off with clear blue water, with shots of the glowing sun reflecting on it and the swimming whales. The first seven minutes of the documentary seem to be an adventurous exploration of blue whales. Director Craig Leeson takes us to the Indian Ocean, off the coast of Sri Lanka where there has been no commercial fishing because of the civil war (1983-2009). What he thought would be a relatively pristine environment as the beaches have been closed for up to thirty years turned out to be a nightmarish vision for him, and eventually for the viewers. Underwater cameraman, Doug Allan, transports us into a "horrible, crappy, emulsified mess" of garbage (7:50-7:58). Soon Tanya Streeter, a free diver and environmentalist, joins the team, showing the terrible, painful death of a blue whale which had six square meters of plastic sheeting inside it. It could not eat as its digestive system was blocked, and it died of malnourishment eventually. This troubling scene is soon followed by horrifying images of dolphins and whales trapped in plastic ropes, plastic bags, fishing nets, and so on elsewhere on the planet. Leeson, then, takes us to Tasmania, where he grew up. Once having the cleanest air and pure water, the island has eventually transformed into an industrial area. His investigation finds that the water has heavy amounts of organochlorines and these contain dioxins which are cancer-causing agents.

The next destination was the Med, one of the most polluted bodies of water on the planet, in Marseille, France. The narration informs us: "About eight million tons of plastic is dumped into the world's ocean every year. More than 50 percent of marine debris, including plastic, sinks to the bottom of the ocean" (20:12-20:23). Expectedly, the camera takes us underwater, showing horrible images of plastic, tires, pieces of metal, junk, fishing line, and what not for almost two minutes that makes one want to escape from the distorted space (22:00-24:00). Next, the documentary takes us to "a huge, floating island of garbage, twice the size of Texas in the North Pacific" and explains the slow accumulating process of the enormous mess (26:25-26:30). The impact of these powerful images is immediate and long-lasting, and they appeal not only to the eyes but also to the minds of the viewers. As film theorist

Berys Gaut suggests, vivid visual images are particularly emotive and have the power to stimulate us that might be otherwise challenging through simple narrations or complex facts. "Our emotional reactions to generalities," he argues, "such as statistics recording mortality in developing countries, are often muted: but our emotions are triggered, other things equal, much more powerfully by specifics, and the density of the photographic image is thus a powerful elicitor of emotions" (249). Being faithful to this spirit, the whole documentary contains a series of visually appealing and appalling images of slow violence that is happening from the North Pacific gyre to the South Pacific gyre, from Italy to Fiji, from China to Manila.

Silent River proves to be more frightful as it documents not only the so-called death of a river but also the devastating health conditions of humans. The documentary starts off with Sofia, the young woman whose journey it promises to follow, and her dream of a clean river in which she desires to swim with a sense of freedom. Contrastingly, in the following shot, the Santiago River, flowing through the town of El Salto, on the outskirts of Guadalajara, Mexico, is shown as nothing but a river of foam. As Sofia informs, the river has never been just a source of water; it is what her community believes is a way of thinking, a way of life. This thread of life of her community has become "untouchable" since the implementation of NAFTA in 1994, which has transformed the region into one of Mexico's largest industrial zones (02:47). Sofia's fear and lamentation are evident in her statement: "The river is so damaged, so contaminated, so full of toxins that what we are breathing, what we are smelling is damaging our respiratory tracts and our vital organs (02:50-03:06). Sofia's father Enrique Enciso informs that there has been a lot of illness, mostly cancer, in this town. Sofia had been to the cemetery only once when her grandmother died before she turned fifteen. However, since then, she has gone there a hundred times because of the number of deaths of known people in the area. What follows is a heartbreaking account of Maria La Pico, a neighbor of Sofia's, who lost her boys, daughter-in-law, and cousin from cancer, from damaged kidneys, from heart disease. More mothers join her with their traumatic stories, such as a six-year-old son requiring a kidney transplant, a young daughter suffering from severe spots on her skin, and more.

Unlike *A Plastic Ocean*, this documentary relies more on the testimony of the victims than on images. In her essay, "Emotions of Consequence?: Viewing Eco-documentaries from a Cognitive Perspective," Weik von Mossner discusses non-fictional films as something which can somehow "document reality" (41). She emphasizes the affective power of personal stories in shaping environmental knowledge through which we may account for our emotional responses to situations which are alien to us. An untrained person or a victim speaking about his/her experiences, memories, hopes, and fears has a more affective impact than an expert

or an actor. Mossner proposes that information about water and air pollution "in the context of transnational environmental injustice take[s] on additional meaning" if it is provided in conjunction with the personal story of victims, which allows viewers "to empathize and sympathize with a specific – and actually existing – human being" (53). This turns out to be more effective in this particular documentary because not only are the primary sufferers humans but the narrative also follows the oral tradition of Mexico. Following the ritual, Raul Munoz, President, Committee for Environmental Defense of El Salto, shares his testimony of the death of a young boy called Miguel Angel Lopez Rocha who suffered an accident on January 25, 2008. His account of the incident manifests how much damage is done to the water over the course of time:

> He fell from the banks of the Ahogado Canal, very close to where it meets the Santiago River. He was playing, slipped, and fell into the canal. He kept playing until his clothes dried. Around 11:00 that night, he began to feel ill. His situation was worsening, sent to the general hospital, was in coma. Had a massive arsenic poisoning. After eighteen days he died. (06:25-07:33)

What the documentary showcases is not an anticipated catastrophe, but what has happened in reality over the course of time. According to Mossner, one of the strategies filmmakers use to stop a documentary from being an eco-catastrophic spectacle is "to provide visual evidence of past changes in natural landscapes and to demonstrate how people are already affected by these changes" (47). *Silent River* truly does that by documenting the slow violence done to the river and people living close by. It evidently shows that the Santiago River has truly converted into a sewer; it is nothing but a drain for almost 300 companies. A government study documented over 1000 chemicals in the river, including phosphorus, which causes foam. Government health statistics have also shown that respiratory disease and kidney failure are among the highest causes of death in El Salto (09:50-10:02). Thus, the alarming information and heart-wrenching testimony of the documentary unfold a human-caused violence that has been going on silently and worsening with each passing day.

However, these two powerful visual texts, *A Plastic Ocean* and *Silent River*, should be read not only as a simple documentation of "slow violence" against water, and eventually against humans and non-human animals, but also as a manifestation of how water answers back to human actions, creating an alternative form of slow violence. A broader and inclusive definition of environmental "slow violence" can make us understand that the whole planet is under tremendous risk. As I am primarily interested in elemental ecocriticism, I not only foreground the violence channeled towards water but also explore the repercussion of that slow violence as manifested

in water's response. Here, I suggest that the way certain humans unleash violence on other humans and on nature, nature too can victimize us, inflicting dreadful disasters. What is significant here is that when nature responds back, it treats the rich or the poor, the Global South or the North alike. I argue that estimating "slow violence" as one dimensional, in which humans are only active agents, would be not only deceiving but also robbing water of its massive agency. Thus, this paper expands Nixon's concept of "slow violence" by introducing a counter form of slow violence that nature inflicts on humans as a form of retaliation.

Having said that, I do not think expanding Nixon's idea of slow violence goes against the spirit of his discussion because what he essentially proposes is the recognition, attention, and inclusion of yet-invisible narratives in environmental discourse. This paper, like Nixon who refuses parochial environmentalism, embraces a broad and inclusive approach towards environmentalism by appropriating his concept of "slow violence" in an attempt to not only address the environmental catastrophe triggered by humans but also investigate the agency of nature. I believe that recognizing these dual forms of "slow violence" is crucial to understand the agency of the non-human world. If we consider water as a passive and static entity that bears every human-burden and readily accepts every human-action, we are, certainly, playing our super egoistic, anthropocentric role. Both the documentaries portray water that can react to situation, can transform, can change the course of action. Its supreme agency can be seen in the way it retaliates against human actions. As a dynamic entity, the materiality of water evolves and affects its surroundings in such a drastic way that the life force of the planet metamorphosizes into an active agent of death. This active agency of water brings forth the idea of thing-power that is in full display in both the documentaries.

Here, I borrowed the term thing-power from Bennett's concept of vibrant materiality of things. Bennett in her highly influential book *Vibrant Matter* offers a "vibrant materialism" that essentially subverts the anthropocentric dichotomy between life and matter, beings and things, and organic and inorganic. What she aims at achieving is to foreground "the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite human things" (viii). Exploring the idea of thing-power, she discusses how ordinary items can exceed their status as objects, manifesting traces of individuality or aliveness. Bennett contends that if a plastic bottle, some pollen, and a dead rat can be vibrant, lively, and self-organizing, why not water? Though her idea of thing-power is primarily related to man-made objects/matters/materials, the scope of her discussion is so expansive that one can extend the idea to other natural elements. She might not directly refer to inorganic elements like water as a thing-power, yet, her claim of "a liveliness intrinsic to the materiality of the thing" is inclusive enough to suggest that all matters, organic or inorganic, fall within the discourse of vital

materiality (xvi). The tendency of the two documentaries to echo an ecomaterialism is comprehensible when we witness water not only as dynamic matter but also as a thing-power that has sufficient agency to make a difference, generate effects, and alter the course of events.[1]

Bennett's definition of thing-power which is capable of animating and producing "effects dramatic and subtle" answers for what water does to its surroundings in *A Plastic Ocean* and *Silent River* (6). The way water overpowers its surroundings, making everything around helpless, signals its towering agency. The revenge of water is manifested in its withdrawal from its natural course, in its refusal to cooperate, and in its denial to regenerate. *A Plastic Ocean* illustrates how oceans are driven by five major circular currents, or gyres. Each continent is affected by these massive systems. The motion and dynamism of water, which is beyond human control, is evident in the narration: "They [gyres] collect waste flowing from our rivers and coastlines, and over time, anything floating within the gyre will eventually move towards the center of the gyre" (26:04-26:11). The Great Lakes in North America are shown as an example. Eighty percent of the litter along the shorelines of these majestic lakes is plastic, which eventually ends up being in the Atlantic Ocean. As this documentary primarily deals with plastic dumping in the sea, it investigates "plastic smog" all over the ocean world (27:44). The graphic details of plastic breaking down into microplastics and their assimilation with elements that are present in water make us realize that we must not consider water as a simple, static entity. The role of water as elicitor, in its act of both providing a congenial atmosphere to the transforming process and containing the required chemicals in it, is evident in the narration: "The problem is, these plastics absorb chemicals that are free-floating in the ocean. So, when the fish eat the plastics, those toxins then migrate from the plastic into the muscles or the fats, the parts that we like to eat in fish" (32:00-32:15). In other words, human plastics come full circle as we ingest them via the food chain.

Ecocinema and Environmental Ethics

Our failure to understand the complex dynamics of water and its course of action is partly responsible for our treatment of water as a resource for its use value. We must not forget that water has been the pre-condition of the existence of life on the planet. The fluid nature of water allows itself to change forms as convenient, be it vapor, rain, or snow. Here, in the film, water allows and provides a suitable condition for plastics and other debris to turn into poison cells. The violence is so critical that "when sampling blue mussels at six locations along the coastlines of France, Belgium, and Netherlands, microplastics were present in every single organism examined" (*Plastic* 41:43-41:52). The act of taking water simply as a

1 See Mridha's "The Water Ethic: An Elemental-Ecocritical Reading of TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*" for a detailed discussion on how water's response to human actions can be read as the *revenge of the thing* (109-118).

dumping space or a place of exploitation is causing immense toxicological effects not only on the marine animals and organisms such as dolphins, whales, corals, and others but also on humans. According to the documentary, in a recent study published in *Scientific Reports*, UC Davis researchers examined seventy-six fish slated for human consumption in Indonesia and sixty-four in California. They found that, in both groups, roughly one quarter had anthropogenic debris in their guts. The researchers found plastic in the Indonesian population and plastic and textiles fibers in the American one (41:18-41:42). Therefore, the debris we are throwing into the river is eventually coming back into our body system and not only onto the shores through waves and wind. The documentary graphically shows how marine animals eat microplastic and, in the process, they consume the toxins attached to the plastic which eventually pass into the bloodstream. There they bio-accumulate in the fatty tissue and around the vital organs. Humans eventually consume the poison by eating seafood which completes the full circle of slow violence – from humans to water to humans.

Silent River can be considered a more literal manifestation of the thing-power, and eventually the alternative form of "slow violence." The so-called dead river has not become silent; rather it has made humans silent, causing death by water. The presence of phosphorus has not only made it a river of foam but also affected other water sources that are connected to it. Like *A Plastic Ocean*, here water metamorphosizes into a poisonous entity and responds to human actions, creating havoc. The dynamic changeability of water is so much beyond human cognition that we tend to mistake its existence as simple and linear. The documentary reveals that varieties of studies have found that a series of contaminants are found in the water of the Santiago that include heavy metals such as lead, chrome, cobalt, mercury, arsenic as well as synthetic composites such as benzene, toluene, chloroform, endocrine disruptors, etc. (08:23-08:40). As suggested by Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino, humans' attempt to pollute water can eventually transform it from *aqua vitae* to *aqua mortis*. Their reference to water falling back as acidic rain in the domestication process can be regarded as water's response to our efforts to conquer it. "Water turns bad," they maintain, "though more metaphorically so when hyper-commodified as pure purity, and really bad, if not becoming absent, when engineered, diverted, dammed, and colonized" (312). If humans are responsible for making it one of the most contaminated rivers in Mexico by treating it as a drain for industrial waste, the river inevitably answers our actions. The increase in the number of graveyards in El Salto is a visual index of the revenge of water. Sofia's mother Graciela Gonzalez refers to a governmental institution called COFEPRIS that maintained an actual register of deaths of the area. They said categorically that this area had nine times the

amount of cancer as before (10:45-11:10). Thus, *Silent River*, through its powerful narration and effective images, is able to portray water as a complex actant which runs its own course, displaying an undeniable dynamism and metamorphosis that is beyond human cognizance.

The portrayal of water in *A Plastic Ocean* and *Silent River*, in the process, echoes a unique form of ecomateriality where water is presented as an agent for the great change of the earth. These two visual texts are not just simplistic representations of human-caused disaster, environmental or otherwise, that result in making everyone and/or everything suffer. Rather, they portray complex dynamics of ecology by making water an active agent of "slow violence" in answering back to human actions. Ecocriticism's recent tendency towards the elementality of matter is truly significant in the sense that it helps humans understand the commonality of materiality of all biotic and abiotic organisms. Elemental ecocriticism addresses all the four major elements – earth, air, fire, and water – and their "promiscuous combinations," which function within "a humanly knowable scale while extending an irresistible invitation to inhuman realms" (Cohen and Duckert 7). Studying the vital elementality of matter closely is central in the age of the Anthropocene not only to recognize the non-human materiality inside us but also to acknowledge the complex materiality and flexibility of matters. According to Cohen and Duckert, water, like any other foundational element, is neither static nor simple, rather it is always "material burgeoning" and "lively as language" (8). Both the documentaries can be studied as an effort to document that process of becoming and to decode that language. The awareness that water is lively, dynamic, and responsive is the cornerstone of treating it with value and respect. We have to go beyond our petty self-interest that water is here to serve us as a resource. The simple truth – no water means no life on the planet – does not endorse the fact that it is just a valuable commodity that humans must preserve. Rather, what is required is to develop respect towards the uncanny dynamism and agency of water that makes it what it is, which we constantly need both inside and around us. Cohen and Duckert's rhetorical question reinforces this idea, destabilizing our long-held understanding of elemental matter like water: "How did we forget that matter is a precarious system and dynamic entity, not a reservoir of tractable commodities?" (5). Until we fix our anthropocentric and petty materialist attitude, no efforts of humans can triumph in the so-called "saving the planet" movement. They rightly argue that the idea of ruining the world and saving the world are two expressions of the same human hubris.

Water performs prominently in the aesthetic design of the documentaries, depicting water not as a mere resource or an inert matter, but as vibrant, fluxing, and active. The ethos of the documentaries suggests that it is humans who are vulnerable, not water. Water, in both the documentaries, is certainly not, thus, reduced to a simple

matter in reductionist or essentialist terms, rather it is presented as a mighty force. The eco-aesthetics of water give it a certain agency that can greatly impact others, changing the course of events. These two visual texts can offer a new understanding of materiality that is not centered around humans, thereby recognizing the agency of the non-human world. Thus, the documentaries seem to offer us to take an environmental ethical position towards elemental matters, towards the non-human world. Weik von Mossner in her discussion of eco-documentary refers to three crucial rhetorical modes of persuasion – logos, ethos, and pathos (46). Both these exploratory narratives seem to offer logos by pleading cases such as water pollution, death of humans, and marine animals with evidence and facts, ethos by persuading the audience by the character (more applicable for *Silent River*) and authority of the speakers (more applicable for *A Plastic Ocean*) and strong images (applicable for both), and pathos by appealing to emotion and shared values. The persuasive rhetoric of eco-documentary, through a combination of logos, ethos, and pathos, makes us think of and acknowledge the significance of water by recognizing its agency, its inherent value. Both *A Plastic Ocean* and *Silent River* can certainly be read as an attempt to recognize the value of non-human entities through their display of agency and *thing-power* of water. They signal the anthropocentric mindset of humans that blinds us about the life-flow of water that surrounds us everywhere. Our nonchalant actions of dumping garbage or toxic industrial waste into water are instances of our understanding of water as a dead, static thing which can only be exploited because of its use value. An environmental-ethical message embedded in the films, on the contrary, calls for acceptance, recognition, and respect for nature that is expected of humans. Both the documentaries enlighten us against the unintentional or opportunistic blindness of humans that stops us from seeing the common materiality present in all organisms on the planet.

Reminding us of the "swirled mess of obligation," Cohen and Duckert argue how earth, air, fire, water, interstices, and impossible hybridities with which we are coextensive are "intimate aliens" (20). We can study, examine, use, attempt to domesticate, and conquer these elements. But humans must not be egoists in thinking that they can grasp the inner dynamism and agency of elements in a complete sense. Though we are surrounded by these elements intimately, they are still alien to us because of their unique uncanniness. Then what holds everything together? It is our inescapable presence in an undefinable vortex of elements that makes us co-exist, which is equally true of all earthlings. Foregrounding elementality can be a crucial step to understanding the dynamics of co-existence on the planet. Oppermann and Iovino powerfully argue that the fundamental elements such as earth, air, fire, and water bind the destiny and presence of humans and other earthlings in their interlocked voyage of matter and imagination. They remind us

of our common materiality provocatively: "Our blood is saline water, our bones are calcified earth, our breath is volatile air, and our fever is fire – elements that have composed mountains, oceans, and the atmosphere, and have nourished all terrestrial creativities across time and space" (310). According to them, what is true to all the elements is that none can be defined as solitary since all are always in flux, in a stage of metamorphosis. Timothy Morton regards elementality as "givenness." That is why, he is not surprised why modernity, capitalism, and individualism have had troubles with the idea of elementality. They all seek to banish it from their discourse because "in a society where you are supposed to make yourself, this givenness can get in the way" (277). I think any narrative that has the potential of alluding to elementality has the power to remind us that we humans are not superior. Therefore, the common materiality among all things on earth should bind us together with a common purpose for a mutually respectful co-existence.

The presence of David Attenborough in the concluding section of *A Plastic Ocean* makes this ethical positioning of the documentaries more obvious. He clearly says that we do not have any rights to destroy and disrespect this planet. He persuasively comments: "The whole of the ecosystems of the world are based on a healthy ocean. And if that part of the planet becomes dysfunctional, goes wrong, then the whole of life on this planet will suffer" (1:33:50-1:34:02). His appeal not to disrespect the planet and its ecosystems strikes a similar chord with Carson's perception of an ecosystem in which all agents are interdependent, and any imbalance in the healthy relation will make the whole system unstable. Carson's *Silent Spring*, that greatly influenced environmental ethics discourse, offers a vision of a world in which everything contributes to a sequence of well-being of each entity. Reminding us that nature fights back, she warns: "To have risked so much in our efforts to mold nature to our satisfaction and yet to have failed in achieving our goal would indeed be the final irony" (245). The documentary's end gesture of apologizing for destroying the home of the whales is powerful, reminding us of our selfish exploitation of environment and attempts of molding nature. The narrator appeals to our cognitive sense, telling us what whales, if they could, would have asked us: "What were we thinking? Every other species on the planet works towards the benefit of the ecology and environment that it lives in, but us humans, we just seem like passengers on this earth" (1:35:10-1:35:25). Though the claim that each species apart from humans acts sensibly might not be literally true, the powerful rhetoric at the end of the documentary provocatively reminds us of our moral responsibility towards the planet we call home.

Like the beginning, *Silent River* ends with an image of a polluted river and with Sofia's dream of a clean river. She says: "It's not just a crazy dream to see a clean river. It's wanting to be free. It's wanting to live in peace" (11:37-11:47). Her dream

comes with a responsibility that gives her the strength to keep fighting for the cause. Her ethical position is, in fact, a reminiscence of her belief in a harmonious existence with a healthy environment. Thus, both the documentaries do an excellent job in initiating an ethical response to environmental questions. Conjoining elemental activity and environmental justice, these two visual texts attain a status of ecomateriality that, according to Cohen and Duckert, is "a powerful aid to activism," which functions by "attending to matter and writing against the reduction of world to commodity (resource, energy)" (4). Therefore, it is my conviction that sensible environmental documentaries can be effective, pragmatic, and accessible sites for initiating a dialogue in environmental ethical discourse.

This paper concludes on an optimistic note of the pragmatic usefulness of eco-documentary. Both *A Plastic Ocean* and *Silent River* sensibly showcase the "slow violence" done to nature, and, in turn, nature's response to the inflicted violence. Water, the undisputed protagonist of the narratives, is documented with such agency and power that it appeals our cognitive thinking to rethink the elementality and fluidity of water. With the aid of powerful images, informed narration, and candid interviews, the narratives of water caution us not to be blind in greed and pride, reminding us of our responsibility to act as loyal beings for the well-being of the whole planet. They clearly convey the message that it is our materialist and strong anthropocentric action and worldview that triggers the rage of nature against us. In the process, both the documentaries show a strong potential of being a carrier of environmental ethics which otherwise might appear inaccessible. Affecting our emotions and cognitive thinking, they, truly, stand promising in giving us the message of valuing and respecting nature. These two tales of water gently teach us of the authority of water and invite us to disown human hubris, as is evoked by the final scene of *A Plastic Ocean*: "No matter how you look at it, this planet is governed by the blue part. The world truly is mostly a blue place" (1:34:20-1:34:29).

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