



## **Robert Wittie's Mineral Winters: Cryotherapy in the *Spaw* (1660)**

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### **Abstract:**

Many medical manuals of the mid- to late-seventeenth century advised against the ingestion of cold water: it was typically believed that an excessive amount of cold essentially plugged the body's pores, trapping its unhealthy elements inside. Even when treating outbreaks of burning illness, specialists' cold prescriptions for correcting a patient's humoral imbalances were cautious at best. The Spanish doctor Nicolás Monardes's (1493-1588) dictum "let every man drink cold," for instance, helped to reassess the body's integrity rather than automatically uphold it. This presentation draws from a range of literary and natural-philosophical texts invested in the un/healthy effects of cold contact, and it does so, moreover, by visiting a specific early modern spa. The physician Robert Wittie (1613?-84) successfully turned England's exposed eastern coast into a thriving therapeutic resort. His *Scarborough Spaw* (1660) advertises a salubrious north, rebutting the view held in "Spain, France, and the hot Countries" that "because of the coldness of our climate, the water is not so well concocted with the heat of the Sun, and so is hard of digestion." While he is persuasive in his defense of the physiological benefits that come from "coldness" – its curative properties are "strongest" in winter – his most notable accomplishment, I argue, is in situating the spa-going human subject in wider inter/national waters, collapsing hydro-spatial distance by eliminating the separation between embodiment and environment. Springs, he says, originate from rain and snow entering secret passages in the earth, "which are like unto small fibres of veins, not discernable by the eye, terminating in the skin in all the parts of our bodies." Wittie significantly infuses the commonplace analogy of the human body to a subterranean system with the material waters sourced from one's vicinity; with either a sip or a soak, the self becomes outspread. This material-metaphorical mapping of "veins" regulated *via* a local wellspring recognizes the body's degree of wholesomeness as dependent upon minute temperature adjustments, while, at the same time, it puts a strain on that body's ability to stabilize itself. Returning to Wittie's spa-derived macro-microcosmic model, I believe, can reinsert us in the precarious water cycles of today's cryosphere, calling our attention to (and care for) its porous bodies most at risk.

## **Biography:**

Lowell Duckert is Associate Professor of English at the University of Delaware, where he specializes in early modern literature, environmental criticism, and the “new materialisms” (especially actor-network theory). He has published on various topics such as glaciers, polar bears, the color maroon, rain, fleece, mining, and lagoons. In general, his work attempts to reconceive current relations between humans and nonhumans by plumbing premodern wet worlds. With Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, he is the editor of “Ecomaterialism” (*postmedieval* 4:1 [2013]); *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (2015); and *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking* (2017). His book *For All Waters: Finding Ourselves in Early Modern Wetscapes* was published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2017 and was short-listed for the SLSA’s Michelle Kendrick Memorial Book Prize for the best academic book on literature, science, and the arts.