

ISSUE ONE : FALL 2015
OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI



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<http://openrivers.umn.edu>
An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy

FROM WASHINGTON BY 33 261 LOOKING UP STREAM

The cover image is of spring flooding at the Bohemian Flats in 1897. Image Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Introduction to Issue One By Patrick Nunnally, Editor	4
--	---

Features

Knowing the Mississippi By Sandra B. Zellmer, Angela Miller, Thomas Ruys Smith, T.S. McMillin, Wes Modes	7
Knowing the Mississippi By Mona M. Smith, Mark Muller, Mark Gorman, Patrick Hamilton, Richard M. Mizelle, Jr.	17
Knowing the Mississippi By Iyekiyaipiwiŋ Darlene St. Clair, Jennifer Browning, John O. Anfinson, Mark Davis	23
Knowing the Mississippi By Sharon Day, Bernard Williams, Christopher Morris, Conevery Bolton Valencius, Craig Colten	29

In Review

“Remembering the Bohemian Flats”: An Exhibit and a Practice of Public Memory By Laurie Moberg	39
--	----

Primary Sources

A Home Worth Fighting For: The Evictions at the Bohemian Flats By Rachel Hines	43
---	----

Perspectives

The New Madrid Levee: A New Take on an Enduring Conflict By Olivia Dorothy, Patrick Nunnally	47
---	----

Teaching And Practice

Teaching About Rivers By Patrick Nunnally	51
--	----

Geographies

Mussels: A River Life Atlas Collection By Joanne Richardson	55
--	----

Primary Sources

An Enchanted Landscape: Remembering Historic Swede Hollow By Stefanie Kowalczyk	59
--	----

FEATURE

KNOWING THE MISSISSIPPI

By Sandra B. Zellmer, Angela Miller, Thomas Ruys Smith, T.S. McMillin, Wes Modes

We asked a diverse group of river people to respond to the prompt “How did you come to know the Mississippi River? What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?” We present below a few of the responses, in no particular order.



Aerial view of the Hernando de Soto Bridge across the Mississippi River between Memphis, Tennessee and West Memphis, Arkansas, USA. The bridge was opened in 1973 and carries six lanes of Interstate 40 across the river. View is from the Arkansas side to the east-southeast across the river to Memphis. Photographer Larry Donald, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Sandra B. Zellmer

Robert B. Daugherty Professor,
Nebraska College of Law

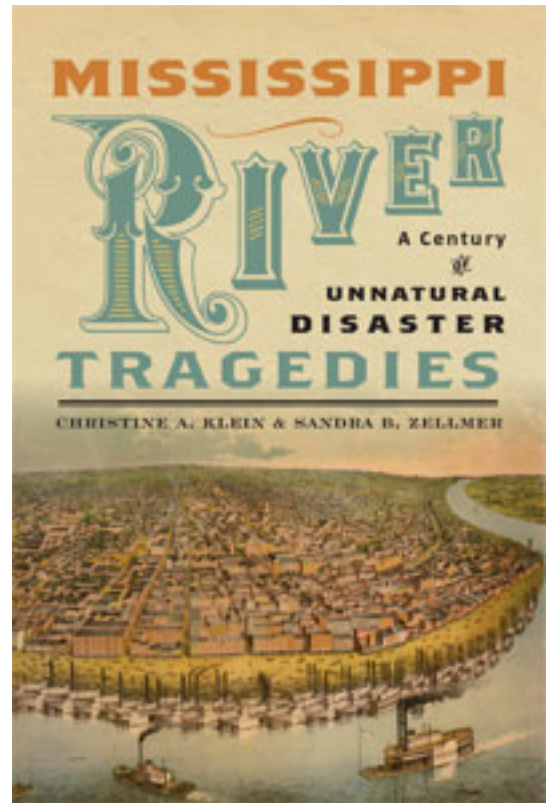
How did you come to know the Mississippi River?

What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?

The author retells a story from “The Headwaters: Notes from Sandra B. Zellmer” (Klein and Zellmer 2014, xii).

When I was little, my mother bathed me in a garbage can filled with Mississippi River water. Not every night, of course, but several times each week during the summer while my family was camping near the river’s headwaters in northern Minnesota. I suppose I smelled a little fishy, but the aroma of river water was completely familiar—and comforting—to me. I savored the names of the headwater lakes where we camped, titles bestowed by Chippewa and Dakota Indians or by European explorers: Itasca, Winnibigoshish, Andrusia, Bemidji, LaSalle.

My passion for the outdoors—and the Mississippi River—comes naturally. My father was a third-generation German American farmer who raised cattle, corn, and alfalfa just outside of Sioux City, Iowa, nestled in the valley of the Missouri River, the longest tributary of the Mississippi. He was following in the footsteps of my great-grandfather, Gustav Zellmer, who arrived at the Castle Garden Immigration Depot in New York in 1883, straight off the boat from Germany. As a sixteen-year-old immigrant, Gustav rode the trains west, marveling as he crossed over the Mississippi River and entered Iowa. He had never seen such black, fertile soil,



Author of Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disasters

and he took delight in the gently rolling terrain, perfect for the plow.

Fast-forward to 1951, when my parents, Mervin and Jessie Zellmer, were married. They took a weeklong honeymoon to a magical place that my father had discovered a few years earlier on a fishing trip with a buddy—Lake Itasca. Instead of being squeamish like most girls he knew at the time, my mom took to fishing and to the north woods as if she were born to it. They chased each other over the stepping stones that crossed the headwaters of the Mississippi, rented a boat, and snapped photographs of their adventures fishing for walleye. Mom caught the prize-winner—a hefty twelve-pounder.

Farming and my two older sisters occupied much of their attention for the next decade or so, but my parents never forgot about the headwaters of the Mississippi River. Starting with the summer before my second birthday, we frequently made the eight-hour drive up to Lake Itasca and nearby lakes and tributaries. According to family lore, I learned to swim before I could walk. It was not long before I was catching crappie, bass, northern pike, and, with a lot of luck, walleye and, if I caught it, I was expected to clean it. The year I graduated from high school, my mother invested her nest egg in a small seasonal cabin on Long Lake (one of the ten thousand lakes boasted of by Minnesotans, dozens of which are named “Long”), and we became part-time lake residents.

Although my parents are gone now, their lessons have stuck—the power of water, the beauty of the creatures that occupy the rivers, the fertility of the floodplain, and the measure of independence and self-reliance that could only come (for me, at least) from a childhood spent outdoors. Today, as a lawyer and law professor, specializing in

water and other natural resources, my interest in the Mississippi River is both personal and professional. I am fascinated by the tug-of-war between the river’s natural ecological and hydrological inclinations and society’s demands and its laws. As I look back on my childhood, I understand why the river is so special to so many people, but I wonder why many of those people insist on settling the most vulnerable areas of the river valley—the floodplain—despite persistent and often catastrophic flooding. It seems clear that, in many cases, the law has motivated them to move into harm’s way through land use planning (or lack thereof), structural assurances (such as levees), and various kinds of subsidies and other incentives. But according to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, the life of the law is not just logic; it is also experience. Between the two—logic and experience—plus a strong dose of scientific understanding and human empathy, I’m convinced that the law can be improved to do justice to the river and its communities.

Reference

Klein, Christine, and Sandra B. Zellmer. 2014. *Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disaster*. New York.

Angela Miller

Professor of Art History and Archaeology,
Washington University in St. Louis

*How did you come to know the Mississippi River?
What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?*

I stumbled into the geographical world of the Mississippi River as a graduate student while on fellowship from the Smithsonian in the 1980s. My research took me to the rich historical literature on the settlement of the Mississippi Valley in the

early nineteenth century, located in the incomparable collections of the Library of Congress. Here I found a lost world of promotional tracts and visionary geographies that fueled the expansionist program of the nation as it contemplated the vast

territories acquired in the Louisiana Purchase of 1804, lands still largely ‘empty’ of those white European American settlers who constituted the entering wedge of ‘civilization.’ The literature I found—like the river at its center—linked Whig politicians and trade advocates with regional promoters (one is tempted to say hucksters, as the genre was populated by types who were better known from the scurrilous accounts of Mark Twain and Charles Dickens). These tracts revealed to me a map of hopes and anxieties that made manifestly clear the broader stakes of any enterprise of exploration, settlement, and continental (dis)possession. Such texts reflect a pattern of hopes and fears that took shape in bodily metaphors of ligatures and spines, of corporeal unity and dismemberment.

Central to exploration, settlement, and trade was the promise of mobility: how to move people, animals, and goods physically through spaces of such scale and distance that journeys into these spaces were the nineteenth-century equivalents of space travel. Ever present was the challenge of how to forge connections between the isolated outposts of the Western frontier and the markets, trade depots, and centers of urban life that—however provincial or disreputable—anchored nineteenth-century European Americans’ sense of being ‘civilized,’ kept them from losing touch with the moral refinements of polite society, and held them back from the brink of ‘going native,’ becoming a white Indian, or giving in to the violence of an ungoverned frontier. The river forged such connections, linking the space of the frontier with the time of the nation. The great Mississippi River moderated the hold of the frontier on individuals, promising that no matter how bad things got on the shore, the current would carry them off again toward new territories and markets, tempering the local with the promise of expansive new horizons.

In these same decades before the Civil War, popular new forms of visual culture emerged to

help those in the newly admitted states adjoining the Mississippi and the territories to the north and west—connected to the Mississippi by another great river, the Missouri—to imagine *how* they were connected to the rest of the country. The moving panoramas of the 1840s presented proto-cinematic spectacles that unfurled the landscape bordering the river in a continuous sequence of painted scenery. These river panoramas cranked 800 feet of painted canvas across a stage, enlivened by a narrator who offered anecdotal humor and histories. Such popular spectacles gave audiences who flocked to them from the towns bordering the Mississippi a vivid understanding of the physical and geographical linkages between isolated localities. The fiction of witnessing the landscape of the West from the safe and unencumbered deck of a riverboat further promoted faith in the possibility of a frontier West that was connected to other regions via the mobility of riverways and transportation networks. In the 1840s, George Caleb Bingham—a painter of lyrical power and a classically balanced sense of spatial organization—created landscapes of distilled beauty and clarity. His career might be taken as a sign that the illegibility of western space was being dispelled before the light of art and commerce. Bingham’s art, which circulated in print form, coalesced a new sense of place rooted in the domesticated landscapes of the river. He took what was threatening and disruptive about the emerging communities of the river and offered a reassuring glimpse of a future guaranteed by the flow of commerce and of social and cultural progress embodied in the classical compositions of his own paintings.

It was only when I was able to put my regional tracts and Mississippi Valley promoters, my panoramas and paintings, into conversation with the mythic imagination of nineteenth-century writers that the deeper narrative of my project emerged: a narrative submerged beneath the turbulent waters of trade promotion and settlement. The most profound chroniclers of the Mississippi

River were not promoters or politicians or painters or panoramists, but novelists and writers. Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* unfolds its vast and mythic narrative on a Mississippi riverboat, populated by a cast of characters who span from the worlds of western frontier humor and folktale to cross-cultural cosmologies and myths. The river of *The Confidence-Man* is a vast ungovernable and godlike force of nature that provides the backdrop for the flickering shadow play of human ambition and deception, across a shape-shifting cast of characters in which the one becomes the many and the many, one. And Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* found in the river a utopian space of possibility where one might escape the social evils, petty feuds, and corrupt institutions that hampered the golden promise of the West as a space beyond history and inherited prejudice.

But the river in *Huck Finn* also had a current that carried its protagonists back toward the plantation South and a return to enslavement for Jim. The river represented flight, liberation from the treacheries of physical terrain, and mobility in all its senses. But it also took one back into the heart of darkness, away from whatever redemption might issue from the networked communities of the West as they aspired to a wider national future. The river flowed both toward and away

from the corporeal integrity of a nation in which part and whole were integrated into a geographical system circulating wealth, knowledge, and the amenities of 'polite' society. If the Mississippi was the main geographical ligature of nationhood, and the "spine" of the national body, it also connected the industrial North of free labor to the slave plantations of the South, binding the two together through an infernal pact in which southern cotton was processed by northern and British manufacturers and sold to northern abolitionists along with everyone else. The corporeal integrity of a nation united by its greatest geographical features—its rivers—in the end was threatened by those same rivers of commerce and empire that eventually led toward the Civil War and the dismemberment of the Union.

The Mississippi River occupies multiple histories. From physical geography spring economic ambitions and cultural narratives, and the intense divisions of sectional politics, but also the binding force of national myths. In reclaiming this kaleidoscopic past we also move beyond geographical determinism to embrace the collective agency of local, regional, and national institutions in shaping our shared present and future. Whether the river divides or binds depends on the actions of the individuals and communities along its banks.

Thomas Ruys Smith

Senior Lecturer, School of Art, Media, and American Studies,
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University of East Anglia

*How did you come to know the Mississippi River?
What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?*

I should start by making it clear that however else I have come to know the Mississippi, and whatever else it might mean to me, our relationship

is first and foremost a transatlantic one. As idiosyncratic as that might seem, it at least puts me in very good company. There is a passage

in Jonathan Raban's *Old Glory* (1981) that speaks to this curious dynamic and speaks to me personally, too. Reminiscing about his childhood in Norfolk, England, in the 1940s (my own home county), Raban recalled his "Huckleberry Finn summer":

The only real river I knew was hardly more than a brook.... if I concentrated really hard, I could see the Mississippi there. First I had to think it twice as wide, then multiply by two, then two again....The rooftops of Fakenham went under. I sank roads, farms, church spires, the old German prisoner-of-war camp, Mr. Banham's flour mill. I flooded Norfolk.... It was a heady, intensely private vision.... The Mississippi was my best invention; a dream which was always there.[1]

The stream of my own childhood—the Tiffey—was part of the same river system as Raban's brook, both tributaries of the Yare that snakes through Norfolk to the North Sea. His understanding—echoing Twain and others—that the river is as much a figment of our imaginations as a real waterway, as accessible in Norfolk, England, as Norfolk, Mississippi (it exists, I googled it), remains vital to me.

Yet, despite my long-seated love of Americana, and a particular fondness for the nineteenth century, I didn't really have my Huckleberry Finn summer until I was living by another river—the Cam, which flowed outside my window during my time as an undergraduate at Cambridge. Having finally, properly encountered Twain's Mississippi, I knew I wanted to write something about it for my final-year dissertation. The river's current was starting to exert its pull. I went searching for other books on the Mississippi and quickly got a

sense of the cultural richness that its waters carried—"The Big Bear of Arkansas," Melville's *The Confidence Man*, and *Martin Chuzzlewit* began the flood. Perhaps above all, though, I was fortunate that the University Library had a copy of Walter Havighurst's *Voices on the River* (1964). It was that book, in many ways, that opened my eyes to the magic of the Mississippi—its teeming vastness, its reach across time and space, its position at the heart, perhaps most importantly, of so many human stories. It is, I still think, the ultimate interdisciplinary subject.

Soon I learned that I had other transatlantic antecedents—the parade of Victorian travellers who made their way to the river and made it the star or the villain (or both) of their antebellum travel accounts. Their visions of the river were rooted close to home, too. I learned that Harriet Martineau's childhood home was located five minutes' walk from the school where I spent ten years of my own childhood; one of the houses that Frances Trollope lived in after returning from America (via the river she loathed so delightfully) sits ten minutes from where I now live in London. It turned out that their Mississippis flowed right past my door. What they taught me was that the view from a distant shore could be as much of a benefit as a handicap when it came to taking in a panorama as grand as that presented by the Mississippi. More, I learned what they (and Raban and others) also knew: that the river was a way—the way—to understand the American story, but much more besides. So although I've now met the physical Mississippi, travelling in the wake of those other transatlantic tourists, it still remains an imagined river for me, too—a long way away but always close at hand, meandering its way through my life across an ocean. It is a dream that's always there.

Reference

[1] Jonathan Raban, *Old Glory* (London: Picador, 1986), 12-13.

T.S. McMillin

Professor of English, Oberlin College

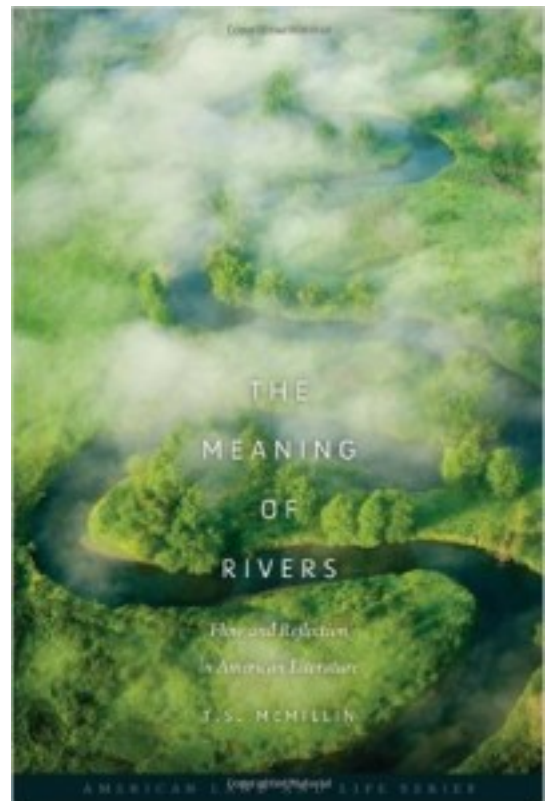
How did you come to know the Mississippi River? What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?

*The author draws his response from
“Overlooking the River” (McMillin 2011, 4-5).*

In some cases, by looking at rivers in a certain way, we miss their larger meanings. If you were to climb one of the bluffs overlooking the upper Mississippi River (say, Brady’s Bluff in Trempealeau County, Wisconsin), you would obtain an outstanding view of the nation’s central waterway as well as the prairie below to the north and east and the bluffs across the river on the Minnesota side, with an occasional farm silo glimmering in the distance. If you are schooled in geology, you might be able to discern an ancient history, consisting of long-ago seas covering the land and then subsiding, epochs of erosion and drainage, and sidwinding river-channel migration. The scope and power of that history can overwhelm other elements of the river’s meaning, including tales of human history: traces of the earliest Native American peoples found in burial and ceremonial mounds, demographic shifts due to European colonization and changing economic tides, old-time water-ski recreation and lock-and-dam construction, loved ones lost to drowning. For a family of campers at the state park or a casual hiker, thoughts might revolve around the scene’s effect on the senses, a feeling of being in the presence of timeless splendor and extended horizons. Depending on the measure of interest allotted to each of us in physical sciences, social history, and scenery aesthetics, the Mississippi we see can differ mightily from another’s Mississippi, and the river we see might cause us to miss another river. Even when we do look at rivers, knowledgeably and lovingly, we

very well might overlook important aspects of their meaning. . . .

. . . [Mark] Twain devoted an ample portion of *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) to a discussion of overlooking the river in the sense of missing its meaning, from historical episodes up through the contemporary period, whether due to systems of value, inexperience, poor reading skills, or incomplete thinking. . . .



*T.S. McMillin is the author of
The Meaning of Rivers: Flow
and Reflection in American
Literature*

One could argue that the difference between the man and the author, Sam Clemens and Mark Twain, is academic, of interest only to those scholars and critical theorists who have disputed such matters for thirty or forty years. *Life on the Mississippi*, however, makes evident that the issue has importance for those who delve into the meaning of rivers. Just as the invention and promotion of “Mark Twain” imply a shift in attention from a real fellow (Clemens) to a made-up figure (Twain), so too does *Life* shift readers’ attention from the actual, material river to a literary, conceptual river. These shifts, in turn, suggest that meaning emerges from the intersection of the material and the conceptual; such a

move does not make the river less real, but it does make literature “realer” than we usually consider it to be. And it gives authors themselves a greater material worth in two senses of the phrase: what authors do (craft things out of letters) becomes a substantial activity, something that matters; and thus their craft might be valued more highly. Clemens, shrewd man that he was, reinvented himself as Mark Twain in order to better earn a living; for similar reasons, he reinvented the Mississippi. Both of these inventions accumulated new meanings.

Reference

McMillin, T.S. 2011. *The Meaning of Rivers: Flow and Reflection in American Literature*. Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press.

Wes Modes

Artist

How did you come to know the Mississippi River?

For the last several years, I’ve participated in an art and history project focused on the river, *A Secret History of American River People*, a multi-year project to travel the river in a homemade shantyboat collecting the personal narratives of people who live and work on the river. Traditionally, art is expected to be about artistic expression, but I wanted to take the time to listen: to river people, to the rhythm of river communities, and to the river itself. That year, I spent a month on the river, and in 2015 I spent three months during the summer season.

Secret History is the culmination of an artist’s dream to build a replica of an early twentieth-century shantyboat from scratch and float down the great Mississippi River, listening to the

stories of river people. It is an attempt to step into the river of history. Swimming through narrative, immersed in personal histories, the project travels through the conflicting and complementary stories of river people and the landscape in which they live.

In summer 2014, inspired by historical accounts of shantyboaters on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, I set out on a journey to record the would-be lost histories of river communities. In the tradition of Howard Zinn’s *People’s History* projects, *A Secret History of American River People* uncovers these hidden stories and brings them to life.

The history of poor people living on or adjacent to the river is not well documented, beyond river memoirs, fiction, and pulp novels. Though part of the American landscape for more than a century, there is very little written about the history of shantyboats and boathouse communities. Even broadening the search to include areas of poor and immigrant communities living adjacent to rivers, the research pickings are quite slim.

I've tried to know the Mississippi through listening. And in listening I've gathered a strange

What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?

In my months on the river, I feel like I've gotten a taste of river life, but am humbled by the knowledge of the people I've met who've lived on the river for six, seven, eight, or more decades. Through the stories told by these people, I've learned a thing or two. I know that the river is cleaner than it has been in 150 years thanks to the Clean Water Act of 1972, the work of enforcers in the DNR (Department of Natural Resources), and to everyone's surprise, invasive zebra mussels. I know that native mussel beds are critically depleted and that no one knows this better than the river people who helped deplete them during the clamming boom of the late twentieth century. I know that as towns turn their face back to the river, they often displace people who've lived on the river for generations, the gentrification of boom times that can be as irreparably damaging as a bust. I know that river authorities are tasked with the contradictory mandates of river conservation and river navigation, a schizophrenic dichotomy that resulted in the lock and dam system and is simultaneously silting in the backwaters, eroding islands and shorelines, and destroying native habitat. These are just a few of the things that emerged from my hundreds of hours of conversations with river people.

Living, eating, and sleeping on the river for months at a time, I learned a few things on my own. I know that a boat should always approach a

assortment of river wisdom. I've recorded over 50 oral history-style interviews that lasted from one to three hours. I heard from scientists, homeless people living under bridges, merchants, bar owners, river rats, artists, researchers, fishermen, boaters, and people who've lived within sight of the river every day of their lives. I've tried to include voices that are not usually included in the dominant narrative—Black, Latino, Hmong, and Dakota people. My knowing the river is influenced by the perceptions of the people to whom I listen.

dock from downstream. I learned that the texture of the water reflects what's going on beneath the waves, and that wingdams make a visible line on the water, even when they are well beneath my hull. I learned that gar are rare these days, sauger are prized, walleye are still plentiful, that I can't catch catfish to save my life, and that picky fishermen who don't keep perch will often hand me a fish dinner. I've learned that barges and locks are not nearly as scary as people make them out to be, and that a slight wind will turn an ordinary docking or launch into a perilous affair. I've learned that people are generous and good, and in my thousands of conversations, I've only run into three genuine assholes.

One of the surprising epiphanies on the *Secret History* journeys is that we are all river people. As humans, we depend on, and indeed are made of, water. The rivers that run through our towns and cities are not merely incidental aspects of local geography. Our towns and cities are located to take advantage of the river's contribution to transportation, agriculture, and the availability of fresh water. Today, rivers are an actively contested landscape with the process of gentrification much in evidence. For cities attempting to reestablish a connection to their rivers, the impulse is to create a shiny, clean, and sanitized parkland—a kind of mall with a river running through it—rather than a wild and natural waterway.

Urban rivers are the site of concrete abutments, river walks, riverside parks, aggressive policing, and the removal of riparian shrubs and foliage to discourage unauthorized use, such as squatting. These restrictions are a continuation of historic enclosures of the public commons.

Like the river itself, river knowledge is both deep and wide. In my months on the river, however, I've barely gotten beneath the surface of that wisdom.

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Angela Miller is the William Seitz Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. She has published a prizewinning book on the national landscape in the nineteenth century, as well as essays on George Caleb Bingham and moving panoramas of the Mississippi River. She is coauthor of *American Encounters* (Prentice-Hall, 2007), a survey of the arts of the United States and its colonial and pre-conquest histories.

Thomas Ruys Smith is Senior Lecturer in American Literature and Culture at the University of East Anglia in the UK. He is the author, among others, of *River of Dreams: Imagining the Mississippi Before Mark Twain* (Louisiana State University Press, 2007) and *Southern Queen: New Orleans in the Nineteenth Century* (Continuum, 2011).

T. S. McMillin is a Professor of English at Oberlin College. He is the author of *The Meaning of Rivers: Flow & Reflection in American Literature* (University of Iowa Press, 2011) and *Our Preposterous Use of Literature: Emerson & the Nature of Reading* (University of Illinois Press, 2000). His latest research project is centered on the Los Angeles River.

Wes Modes is a California artist behind A Secret History of American River People, an art and history project to collect the stories of people who live and work on major American rivers. In other lives, he is a high-tech runaway, educator, sculptor, writer, community organizer, geek, and mischief-maker.