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IMAGINING WATER

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is by Harold Fisk, 1944, plate fifteen, sheet one, showing stream courses from *The Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River*. The map covers sections of Arkansas, Missouri, and Tennessee.

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IN REVIEW

SOUTHERN WATERS

By Simi Kang

Prior to reading *Southern Waters: the Limits to Abundance*, I knew water was important in the American South. Living in New Orleans, it is impossible to ignore how easily water becomes both friend and foe, flooding streets in a light rain just as it provides relief on the hottest August days. What I wasn't aware of was that the South as we have come to know it takes its shape from water-based decisions: New Orleans itself was founded because of its strategic location along three bodies of water—the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River to its south, and

Lake Pontchartrain to the north. What settlers failed to recognize was that by ignoring Southeast Louisiana's swampland, they built a city that, on its best days, sits just below sea level, leaving it vulnerable to the same water that made it such a good place to settle in 1718. This is a simple example of a very complex problem, and, on their own, bodies of knowledge rooted in single disciplines, from ecology to history, can only go so far to link those first decisions with today's water issues.



*A map of the parts of America claimed by France under the names of Louisiana in 1720.
By Herman Moll.*

Enter Craig E. Colten, the Carl O. Sauer Professor of Geography and Anthropology at Louisiana State University, who tacitly asks readers to abandon their mono-disciplinary understandings of natural resources. He does this by using a keen understanding of historical geography to forward a blueprint for something akin to a folkloric water science.

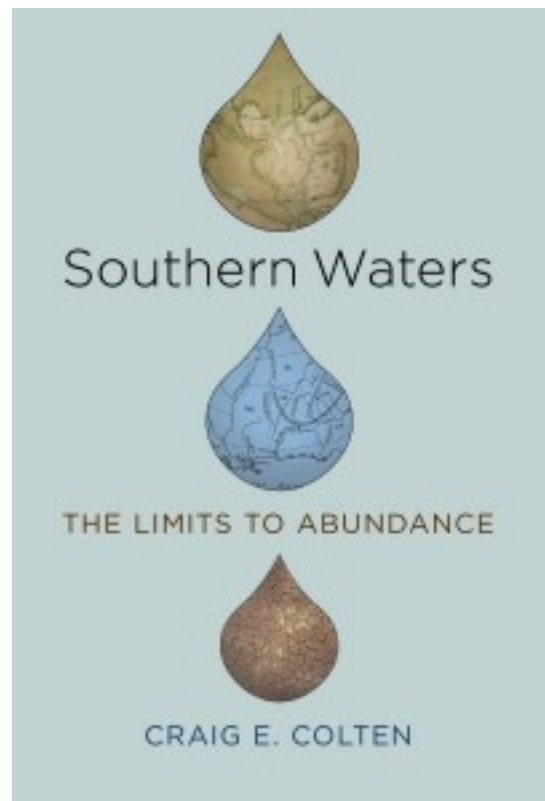
Colten opens the book with histories of water's significance for Indigenous communities, European settlers, and enslaved West Africans. By identifying how each group understood and engaged with water, the book's introduction establishes a settler-centric origin for how Southern waters have been used and managed since the moment European notions of water were applied to the region. Examining settlers' assumption about water's eternal abundance, Colten identifies the basis for a long-standing ethos of water territorialism, ownership, and access in North America, which has shaped both the region's geography and its water policies.

He then turns to a close reading of recent histories of Southern rivers, streams, and swamps to understand the South's long struggle with overuse, over-management, and diversions. Colten argues that managing water resources has historically "followed the path of maximum exploitation to meet short-term needs rather than one of sustainability" (Colten 2014: 8). In what follows, he asks what a present shaped by these historical legacies looks like. Further, he implores: what steps should we take to change national, regional, state, community-based, and individual responses to living with water in the South?

Southern Waters' central chapters each concentrate on interdisciplinary case studies that bring together particular waterways, Southern sub-regions, and political, socioeconomic, and ecological contexts. I began to think of these chapters as "water events," as they expertly bring disparate places, moments, and management

strategies into conversation to illustrate the effects of one or more issues significant to water in the South. However, Colten never massifies events or places; each river, stream, basin, and swamp is historicized and articulated across time and space through a clear sense of place, usage, and cultural relevance.

Each "water event" centralizes stories of human intervention, from the role of everyday citizens and environmentalists to the gradual (and sometimes extraordinarily fast-paced) effects of human management in places like the Atchafalaya Basin, where its function as a Mississippi River flood zone has changed the natural habitat so much that mangroves and the species that rely on them have disappeared. It is here where Colten is most methodical, asking what happens when we can no longer control water, who is liable for



Southern Waters: The Limits to Abundance,
Craig E. Colten, 2014,
LSU Press, 280 pages, \$29.95.

the resulting floods, diversions, and drought, what do these actors do to impede or accelerate solutions, and how might these actions create more problems?

I most enjoyed the way Colten weaves state, regional, and federal law, as well as history and environmental and human geography, into *Southern Waters*, investing them with a life that exceeds percepts of water as merely a resource to be managed. *Southern Waters* learns from the water itself, asking how dam regulation in Virginia and North Carolina is related Alabama navigability laws, and how these all inform capitalists' and citizens' investments in water. It goes on to consider how, by extension, local, regional, and federal policy shapes water usage and protections. While this book is a guide for those who work in policy and environmental preservation, it would just as comfortably sit on the shelves of Southern fishers, hobbyist historians, farmers, birders, and anyone who wades into and is enamored by the waterways of this region.

At times, *Southern Waters* veers into the purely historical and in so doing, loses some of its complexity. In these moments, Colten seems to flatten his otherwise complex analysis, drawing black/white comparisons and assessments of events and policies. However, he always seems

to catch himself, acknowledging the limits of the archive and retracing his steps to invest these studies with nuance and dimension. From a dense narration of waterway naming practices, he reverts to a multi-disciplinary approach, considering the humanized landscapes of the South and the everyday storytelling that brings the physical into the psychic, showing how humans impact water as much through singular and collective imagination as through industrial mills.

Over the course of the book, Colten's case studies give readers an arsenal of geographic, ecological, historic, and socio-legal knowledge to understand the region's current fight to maintain safe, sustainable water supplies, and the conflicts that arise from hazardous, unnavigable, and disappearing water. One of his greatest gifts as a writer is the care he takes with each place, weaving compelling stories that bring the Everglades and Atchafalaya Basin, streams from the East Coast to Texas, and floods along the Mississippi and its subsidiary streams together. The arguments he crafts from these relational analyses are more than the sum of their parts: Colten offers us a way to think about the South beyond its complicated regionalism, focusing on its particularities and in so doing, erupting the way the area has often been singularized as a place frozen in time and temperament.

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Simi Kang is a Ph.D. Candidate in Feminist Studies at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. A native Minnesotan, she is currently conducting fieldwork in New Orleans with Vietnamese and Vietnamese New Orleanian food producers. Her dissertation engages the work of local farmers, fishermen, and restaurateurs to understand how cultivating, harvesting, and making food has become an act of resistance against racializing local and state policies, as well as everyday discourse that circulates about Vietnamese-ness in Southeast Louisiana.