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INTERVENTIONS

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of St. Anthony Falls Lock, closed in June 2015. Image courtesy River Life, University of Minnesota.

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Administrative Editor:
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Production Manager:
Joanne Richardson, Institute for Advanced Study,
University of Minnesota

Contact Us

Open Rivers
Institute for Advanced Study
University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054
Fax: (612) 625-8583
E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu
Web Site: <http://openrivers.umn.edu>

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PERSPECTIVES

OWÁMNIYOMNI, A DAKOTA NAME FOR “ST. ANTHONY FALLS”

By Mona M. Smith

Owámniyomni, a Dakota name for “St. Anthony Falls,” means turbulent water, whirlpool, eddy. To Dakota people the Mississippi River has a few names, one is *ħaħáwakpá* – the river of the falls, a name that reveals the importance of the waterfall.

The current concrete cascade used to make me sad. Smooth water sliding not tumbling, curling water falling. More human interference. More human pretense. “We didn’t really completely destroy the ONLY waterfall on the Mississippi, see?” Artificial. Built. Meaningless. No evolution here, just engineering and pseudo waterfalls. Then I

spent time at the falls with a Dakota elder whose name connects her to *Owámniyomni*. She helped me feel the power of the falls that continues, that is stronger than human power. Then I could see and feel that at the bottom of the smooth slide down the human made part of the falls is the whirling water, the spray, the energy and power of the falls. The falls are manufactured, but the water’s spirit endures. Now I recognize why I feel clearer and soothed and somehow energized each time I spend time in the St. Anthony Falls area. I can’t provide specifics, but the water of the river looks and feels different to me since spending time there with her. I *see* an indescribable spirit



Morning mist at St. Anthony Falls. Image courtesy of Mona M. Smith and Joanne Richardson.

of the water. I feel the possibility of healing. When I spend enough time with the river, I know I will be better able to hear her messages.

Another elder in a video piece produced years ago for the Bdote Memory Map said, “Water is the most powerful medicine. Water can heal anything. All we have to do is ask.” When I see the river in that new way, when it doesn’t look like I used to see it, I ask.

See *Healing Place* video.

Yet another elder says that St. Anthony Falls is a teaching place. I’ve thought about what it

teaches me. One of the first things I learn from the falls is that change is part of everything, even the 2,320-mile long Mississippi River. The falls express change on a scale far beyond human timeline. Twelve thousand years ago the falls were near *Imnizaska* (St. Paul). Now they are in *Bde Ota Otunwe* (Minneapolis). Nothing stays the same. Another thing I learn is that power is not ours. Humans imagine being highest on some invented hierarchy of existence. Listening to St. Anthony Falls, one learns that humans are a part of *mitakuye owasin* (all my relations) and can manipulate, damage, distort, but *makha ina* (mother earth) has dominion

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About the Author

Mona M. Smith is a Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota multimedia artist, educator, owner of Allies:media/art, and artist lead for the Healing Place Collaborative. She is creator of the Bdote Memory Map (in partnership with the Minnesota Humanities Center), Cloudy Waters: Dakota Reflections on the River (exhibited at the Minnesota History Center and elsewhere), and other multimedia installations.