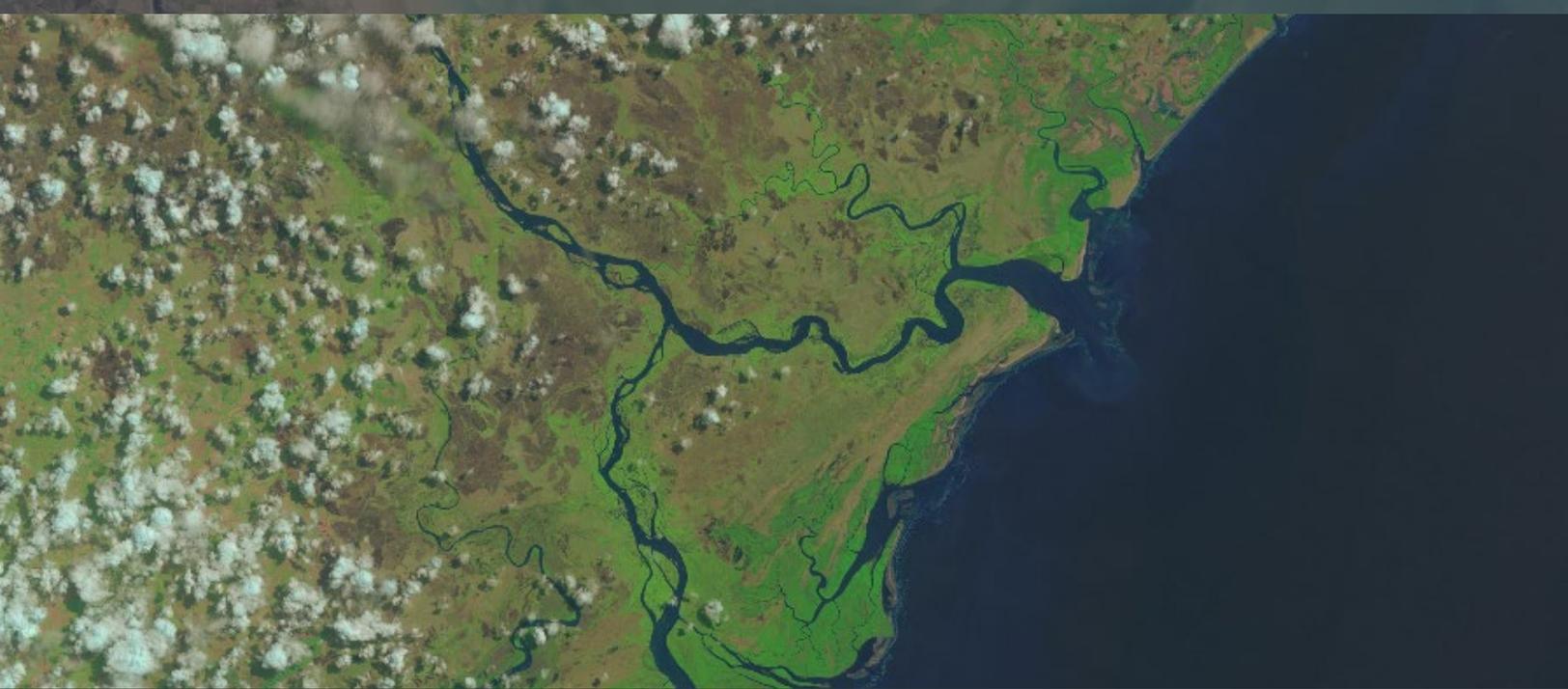




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GRASPING WATER



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An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of Delta of the Yellow River, China (top) and Delta of the Zambezi River, Mozambique (bottom). Landsat imagery courtesy of NASA Goddard Space Flight Center and U.S. Geological Survey.

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IN REVIEW

LISTENING TO A RIVER: HOW SOUND EMERGES IN RIVER HISTORIES

By Chris Caskey

Peter Coates asks us, in “The Strange Stillness of the Past: Toward an Environmental History of Sound and Noise,” why environmental

historians don’t delve more into sound and noise as they seek information about the past. This review focuses on Coates’ inquiry on water



American landscape painter Thomas Cole captured in his famous painting, View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow, what social anthropologist Paul Connerton described in his book, 'The Spirit of Mourning', as “a tranquil sublimity,” a sublimity Cole connected to a “silent energy of nature.” Landscapes, especially those dominated by rivers, have distinct aural characteristics that scholars have both highlighted and perhaps overlooked. Image via Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

histories, examining some examples in which scholars and writers have utilized sound to analyze and document past waterscapes, but identifying this as an underexplored area of scholarship. This review also demonstrates how we can use ideas from Coates' essay as a kind of blueprint to build a framework for studying sound in river histories. Western historical studies, Coates argues, have "long been resolutely visual in their focus."^[1] With monographs typically including photographs, maps, paintings, and descriptions relying heavily on visual specifics, history (especially environmental history) has for a long time come "soundproofed," he argues. Yet some niches do exist where sound seems to hold credibility as a focus of inquiry—specifically social and urban histories. If these histories can examine how our ears help us make sense of the landscapes around us, Coates suggests, then environmental histories can do the same.

Water, especially that which flows in rivers, is ubiquitous in environmental history. Water and rivers often tie historical scholarship to other humanistic fields, whether it be the research of anthropologists studying water ritual or art historians discussing aesthetics of a romantic river valley. Water also is regularly tied to aural experiences, such as the sound of rain on a rooftop, waves on the beach, or the whooshing of water over rapids in a river canyon. Agreeing with Coates' call for an increased focus on sound in environmental history, I argue this critique is especially relevant and necessary for river histories. A review of water and river histories suggests a dearth of discussions focusing on what those rivers sounded like and minimal analyses on how sound has been used by people over time to represent those rivers.

Coates argues both for "knowing nature through sound" and "picking up nature's voices" in his case for analyzing sound in environmental history.^[2] Replace the word "nature" with "river," and a typology begins to emerge to help tackle the problem of reading for sound in river scholarship.

River historians, when utilizing sound-based sources, tend to deal with sound-based texts like music or verse, or they recount the records of the sounds heard on the rivers themselves, whether they be from audio/video recordings or written sources. Sources associated with the first category can represent an attempt to know rivers by sound or to understand how people knew rivers by sound, and some scholars have utilized them for rich discussions on relationships between rivers, landscapes, places, and identities. Though not necessarily influenced by the literal sound of the rivers they depict, songs and lyrics still illuminate a strong connection between the ear and both the individual and collective experiences along the banks of the rivers portrayed. To a lesser degree, river scholars have also depicted the sounds of the rivers themselves. This act of picking up a river's voice or voices documents both lost landscapes and cultural understanding of those landscapes, and seems to be one that is utilized rarely both inside and outside of the academy.

Backwater Blues, by Richard M. Mizelle, Jr., is a relatively recent example of analyzing how people knew nature through sound. The book examines how race frames experiences and perceptions of environment and environmental disasters, and Mizelle explores how the 1927 floods along the Mississippi River defined the African American experience in the rural south.^[3] Along with more traditional sources, he also uses the lyrics of blues musicians to argue that point—that race served as a filter for the way people experienced, understood, and reacted to the river's destructive forces. He argues that the blues, a music genre with strong roots in the Mississippi Delta region, offers historians data that the traditional archives do not because the medium recorded African American experiences that individuals typically could not articulate. African Americans in the rural south (especially those most affected by the floods of 1927) had a particularly high rate of illiteracy, and those who could read and write feared retaliation from the white-dominated power structure if they were to speak plainly



Every July the Midwest Society for Acoustic Ecology asks people on World Listening Day to pay more attention to their sonic surroundings. This year, officials at Zion National park suggested to visitors that, “Taking a moment to listen to the burbling of the Virgin River, the wind rushing through the leaves of cottonwood trees or hearing the raspy call of a raven,” can improve the outdoor experience. Image via National Park Service.

about their experiences. Thus, Mizelle utilizes the blues as his alternative archive to put forth a more complete analysis of this disastrous flood.

While Mizelle looks to music as an alternative archive for reading experiences along a river that differ from dominant and long-held narratives and assumptions, David A. Pietz examines how the powerful used music to impose dominant narratives. Pietz's *The Yellow River* tracks development on that iconic river and China's Northern Plain through much of the twentieth century. The book discusses multiple regimes' attempts to control the river through waterworks

to establish legitimacy, the failures of those attempts, the massive human costs of those failures, and their influence in undermining and legitimating power afterwards. Along the Yellow River, music was associated with national identity during the twentieth century with pieces like the *Yellow River Cantata* and the *Sanmenxia Cantata* functioning as patriotic tributes to the powerful state. Pietz examines the music's structure and content matter, specifically discussing the performative aspects of the *Yellow River Cantata*, wherein emotional and catchy music was performed by a large chorus to highlight the subordination of the individual to the collective



*Scholars have associated large water projects like the Shasta Dam, on Northern California's Sacramento River, with their silencing effects on the rivers they impound.
Image via Library of Congress.*

and commemorate revolutionary struggles.[4] Later, the *Sanmenxia Cantata* would still deal in themes of revolution and collectivism. But Pietz points out a subtle shift in how the state projected the river and the natural world from a symbol of the revolution itself to an enemy that needed to be conquered. In *The Yellow River*, both content and structure of the musical works are analyzed, offering insights into relationships among the state, the people, and the river.

With Pietz and Mizelle serving as two (though not the only) examples of efforts to discuss how people knew nature through sound, how have scholars attempted to explore or document the voice of the river itself? Paula Schönach, in a recent and exhaustive review of river literature, points out rightfully one of the most immediate and noticeable impacts of dams—the literal silencing of rivers.[5] Schönach references the equally exhaustive and powerful *Silenced*



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The California mining town of Melones near this bridge and the adjacent stretch of California's Stanislaus River are left silent under hundreds of feet of still waters, as the Stanislaus was inundated after the completion of the New Melones Dam project in 1979. Its soundscape now survives in the historical record and the memories of those who experienced it.

Image via California Historical Society, ca. 1930.

Rivers by Patrick McCully, a must for anyone studying the connections between power, nations, corporate interests, and dam building. The title clearly refers to the audible effect a dam has on a river and its surrounding landscape when the waterway is inundated behind a dam. But while McCully's book is a blow to the ubiquitous claims by dam builders of the advantages of major dam projects around the world,[6] it doesn't spend much, if any, time on the literal silencing of those rivers where the dams were built. The reader does not get a sense of the lost aural characteristics of the canyons and river valleys sacrificed in the name of progress. In fact, the literal soundscape of the river itself (whether recorded in modern media or described in historical documents) appears to be a relatively rare occurrence in river scholarship, whether as a storytelling device or as part of larger analyses.

Take the river biography, a format utilized by water historians to discuss the life of a particular river, placing the river itself as the book's or article's main character. Often, when one reads a biography, one can expect to find description of or secondhand reflection on the main character's voice. But what of the river's voice? Marc Cioc's *The Rhine: An Eco-Biography*, like the books discussed above, does reference some music and verse romanticizing the iconic European waterway.[7] Interestingly, the biography also discusses other sensory experiences along the river, including the changes in smells with increased industrialization.[8] But the sound of the waterway itself is not a focus. The comprehensive *A History of Water* series, edited by Terje Tvedt and others, includes in its first volume a collection of river biographies. All of them (focusing on the Tama, Rhine, Hawkesbury, and Langat) offer sound analysis of historical development along those waterways. But none delve into the voices of the rivers, whether the sounds themselves or how those soundscapes are utilized or interpreted by those who lived and worked along the rivers.[9] Even Richard White's *Organic Machine*, perhaps the best example of a river biography

and a must-read for any water or rivers course, only includes a small sample of the Columbia River's pre-development voice. Accounts from the Lewis and Clark expedition refer to the "raging and hissing," and the "boiling and Whorling" of the river's Long Narrow, writing as if referring more to an untamed living thing than part of the landscape.[10] Rightfully so, these river biographies deal mostly in big-picture, structural terms, wrestling with notions of power, domination, declination, capitalist production, environmental catastrophe, and disasters as they track changes in nature and culture over time. But in doing so, they don't give readers a strong sense of what it sounded like to stand next to those rivers before they were so heavily altered by people over time.

Perhaps some of the best, or at least most easily found, examples of river sounds are contributions to the literature by journalists. Often those descriptions are tied to unusual or disastrous events. John McPhee, in *The Control of Nature*, uses sound pointedly when discussing the experiences of those living against the San Gabriel Mountains in the Los Angeles area, stuck in a warzone between man and nature. "Ordinarily, in their quiet neighborhood, only the creek beside them was likely to make much sound, dropping steeply out of Shields Canyon on its way to the Los Angeles River....When boulders were running there, they sounded like a rolling freight. On a night like this, the boulders should have been running. The creek should have been a torrent. Its unnatural sound was unnaturally absent." [11] Marc Reisner's classic *Cadillac Desert* succinctly describes how the infamous Teton Dam disintegrated "almost noiselessly," [12] and of the near-disaster at Folsom Dam he states, "You couldn't have heard a jet taking off five hundred feet away; that's the kind of noise a million pounds of water makes—a million pounds a second—as it tumbles a couple of hundred feet and crashes into a canyon riverbed." [13]

Other descriptions reflect the rivers in their more typical states. Again, in *Cadillac Desert*, Reisner

draws from John Wesley Powell's recollections of running the rapids of the mighty Colorado before any other white man, as the famous Civil War veteran, geologist, and explorer commented on the "roar of the rapids," the river's "roaring falls" and a river "roaring with mud" all within pages of one another.[14] But perhaps the most effective use of sound by journalists deals with collective perceptions of environment and place. Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman's *King of California* is a comprehensive story of the Boswell family farming empire in the southern San Joaquin Valley, which required massive exercises of power and control over rivers and landscapes. In it, the authors describe the now-evaporated Tulare Lake, which was one of the largest bodies of water in the West before it dried up from upstream damming and farming diversions. In a longer discussion about the language of the Indigenous Yokuts, who lived near the great lake's shores, the authors explore the onomatopoeic terms for nature, including the overwhelming experience of hearing "the sudden flight of flocks so immense they extinguished the sun." The word for this phenomena? "Tow-so, tow-so. A thousand thousands." [15]

I recently presented a research project attempting a reconstruction of a lost river canyon, and a fellow graduate student from a different discipline asked me what the river sounded like. I had a hard time answering the question. Sources for the project included typical historical stuff: photographs, written firsthand accounts, media accounts, maps, and government documents. But the reconstruction as presented couldn't reproduce what this river sounded like before its inundation under a reservoir, and once pointed out, the silence was deafening. Coates argues that sound matters when remembering landscapes and environments, and I believe the same is true for rivers. Rivers are particularly auditory places. They make their own sounds and they have played important roles in influencing aural culture. Whether as a storytelling device, as part of an analysis, or even as an inclusion for the sake of posterity, the sounds of a river, both past and present, are worth documenting as part of the historical record.

Footnotes

[1] Peter A. Coates, "The Strange Stillness of the Past: Toward an Environmental History of Sound and Noise." *Environmental History*, 10 (4): 637.

[2] Coates, 637.

[3] Richard M. Mizelle, Jr., *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[4] David A. Pietz, *The Yellow River: The Problem of Water in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 111–112.

[5] Paula Schönach, "River histories: a thematic review," *Water History* (2017): 13.

[6] Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams* (London: Zed Books, 1996), 133-163.

[7] Mark Cioc, *The Rhine: An Eco-Biography, 1815–2000* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 8–9.

[8] Cioc, 95b.

[9] M.W. Steele, “The History of the Tama River: Social Reconstructions”; M. Cioc, “‘Seeing Like the Prussian State’: Re-Engineering the Rivers of Rhineland and Westphalia”; B. Simmons and J. Scott, “The River has Recorded the Story, Living with the Hawkesbury River, Sydney, NSW, Australia”; C. Siwar and S. Idrus, “Poverty, Water and Environmental Degradation: The Langat River Basin, Malaysia,” from *A History of Water: Volume I: Water Control and River Biographies*, edited by Terje Tvedt and Eva Jakobsson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 217–295.

[10] Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Macmillan, 2011), 11.

[11] John McPhee, *The Control of Nature* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 183–184.

[12] Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 403.

[13] Reisner, 498.

[14] Reisner, 29.

[15] Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman, *The King of California: J.G. Boswell and the Making of a Secret American Empire* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005), 49.

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