ISSUE NINE : WINTER 2018

# OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# INNOVATIONS

http://openrivers.umn.edu
An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.
ISSN 2471-190X

The cover image is of tending water and listening at Water Bar in Greensboro, North Carolina, courtesy Shanai Matteson, Works Progress, and Water Bar & Public Studio.



*Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community* is produced by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing and the University of Minnesota Institute for Advanced Study.

## Editors



## 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

ISSN 2471-190X

## Editorial Board

# CONTENTS

FEATURE

# WATER BAR: WATER IS ALL WE HAVE

## By Shanai Matteson

*"The effort to know a place deeply is, ultimately, an expression of the human desire to belong, to fit somewhere." – Barry Lopez, The Invitation*

When I'm asked to speak about the work I do as an artist, a cultural organizer, and Collaborative Director of Water Bar & Public Studio, I often struggle with two important points of departure: How do I introduce myself when I have so many different roles in my artistic and organizing life? And where do I begin telling the story of this complex, evolving project—which I did not imagine or develop on my own, and which is more of ecosystem that I tend with others than it is a definable creative project?


*A Water Bar pop-up for Land-O-Lakes employees at their headquarters.*

*The author printing "We Serve Water" drop prints at a Water Bar event.*

Officially, Water Bar began in 2014 as a temporary pop-up created by the arts collective Works Progress Studio, which I've led alongside artist and designer Colin Kloecker since 2010. We were invited by our local public television network to curate an hour-long program of videos and other experiences for a live studio audience, part of their pilot series TV Takeover—which explored the potential of letting artists and arts organizations "take over" the airwaves.

We chose to focus our hour of public TV on the Mississippi River, creating a series of video portraits we titled Dear River, and a menu of related in-studio experiences. Water Bar was one of the ideas that we brought to life on air. You can see a video of that first Water Bar here.

Though our original Water Bar collaborators were scientists, environmental advocates, and other water resource professionals, the project was really born much earlier, after I turned my creative focus and energy toward the exploration of my relationship with the Mississippi River.

For that reason, the origin and development of Water Bar is equal parts artistic exploration and personal reflection. In many ways, Water Bar and all of my artistic and arts organizing work has been a means of knowing my place more deeply—an artistic expression, as Barry Lopez so eloquently defines it, of our human desire to belong to place.

# Belonging to the River

I grew up around, on, and in the Mississippi River. Palisade, the small Minnesota town where I come from, doesn't appear on most highway maps, but I can tell you that it sits at river mile 1086—just over 1000 miles from the mouth of the river—where the old Soo Line railroad once crossed the water.

A steel truss bridge still spans the river at the edge of town, though no trains have run this route since 1985. The line was abandoned when I was three years old, so for most of my life, the Soo Line wasn't a railroad at all; it was a trail for ATVs, snowmobiles, and the occasional off-road bicyclist.

The river, however, was always just *the river*. Were it not for the highway signs that proclaimed a pride in being "on the Mississippi," I'm not sure we would even have known the river's given name. To us, it was just part of the place we lived. And someone—a cousin or second cousin of mine—had tied a rope swing to a tree that hung over the water. If you jumped with enough force, it dropped you halfway to the other side, just upriver from the Soo Line bridge. That was what we knew most viscerally about our relationship with water.

Learning to swim in a river current—to climb up a river bank, digging your toes into cool mud and pulling on tree roots—is still one of the formative lessons of my childhood. As are the stories told by my parents and grandparents about the river and what it could do if a person wasn't careful.

Though the Mississippi is a narrow and winding river where I grew up, we were still warned that it had powers beyond human control and imagination. The river hid garbage people wished away, old washing machines and oil drums and glass bottles. It was a place of danger, as well as ghosts. People we'd known, or that our parents had known when they were young, had drowned in the river when they didn't respect the fact that it was wild. The river could give life, and take it away.

Not surprisingly, we were told never to swim there, but we did anyway. Some of us even jumped from the Soo Line bridge into the water, coming up for air a little farther downstream.

It wasn't until I moved to Minneapolis to go to college at the University of Minnesota that I came to realize just how many people live in communities directly on the Mississippi River, and that, importantly, it is not the same river wherever you go. Although my college classmates spent as many days as I did walking or biking back-and-forth across the Washington Avenue Bridge, we didn't all know the river we were crossing in the same way.

Those differences in experience, some subtle and others not, eventually became the spark for a body of artistic and organizing work concerned primarily with the stories we tell about our relationships with water. We are river people, but we don't always know what that means.

*Steel truss bridge over the Mississippi River in Palisade, MN. Image courtesy of Peter Ladd, 2009.*

# One River, Many River Stories

Though I'd grown up around, on, and in the Mississippi, steeped in river stories, I didn't always think of the river as part of my culture or my community, much less my own identity. It took leaving the town where I'd grown up to see the river as more than a thing to be feared, controlled—maybe explored against the wishes of my mother—but rarely more complex than a line through a landscape.

Unlike the people I met at the riverside campground in my hometown, many of them journeying from headwaters to gulf in boats or on bikes, I'd only known the river in place. I knew its contours, its colors, its smells and stories, but only as these flowed through our corner of northern Aitkin County.

In Minneapolis, the Mississippi is wider, and has more points of crossing. It is an entirely different experience. In some ways, it is a different river altogether, one that I came to know mostly from a distance. We don't swim the river here, and few of us paddle it, though efforts are underway to expand access to this experience within the heart of the city. The truth is that many of us don't think of the river at all, even though it's the reason our city exists where and how it does.

That realization—that there is *my river*, as I see and know it—and many other rivers, too, all in some sense *true* to the people who inhabit this watershed, came to me for the first time while I was working for the University of Minnesota's Bell Museum of Natural History.

In addition to developing public education programs to connect science and culture, I also took part in the making of documentary films as an associate producer. The last film I worked on while at the Bell Museum was a documentary called *Troubled Waters: A Mississippi River Story*, which looked at the issues of land use and water quality in the agricultural landscapes of the Mississippi Valley.

As part of this film crew, I was fortunate to travel to a number of rural communities in our greater watershed, including farms in southeast and southwest Minnesota. There, I met men and women who also had stories about how water moves through their lives and places. And like the place where I had grown-up, those stories shaped the ways people lived with land and water. Unconsciously, perhaps, it also shaped their sense of themselves and their belonging to that place.

During the filming of *Troubled Waters*, I also had the opportunity to travel to New Orleans, where we interviewed scientists who study hypoxia, more commonly known as the dead zone, a problem of nutrient pollution spilling from the river's mouth.

Much like my own experience of knowing the Mississippi River both in the place I grew up, and as a landscape feature in the city I chose to live in as an adult, there are multiple ways of knowing convergence. The place where the river meets the Gulf of Mexico is itself a complex story.

The scientists we met, who study the dead zone using instruments to measure oxygen levels, also put on scuba diving gear to observe the eerie stillness of the sea beneath the surface, and saw up close what it looks like when life cannot flourish. We also interviewed shrimp fishermen, who knew the same phenomenon because it was decimating their catch and their local economy. The farmers we met in Minnesota, for the most part, did not know that they were also experiencing this same dead zone—belonging to it, as it were—because the lands they were farming were

directly connected by water. Most of us don't know that when we purchase and consume food or fuel that has its origins in this cropland, we too belong to this problem of hypoxia at the mouth of our river.

The conversations we were able to have along the river, by comparing experiences and searching after ways that water connects us, made me curious about the role of art and storytelling across geography, economy, and culture. It is not merely a matter of entertainment. The stories we tell (and the stories we don't) are like the soil that our solutions to problems might grow from. Stories of connection (or disconnection) make possible (or impossible) our collective efforts to reckon with the relationships we've made to land and water over time. Storytelling—particularly about people in place—is one of the most critical methods we have of addressing the future of our lands and waters. To know water and our place within it, is to know ourselves and our power to create change.

Those questions of belonging—to where, and what, and who—kept resurfacing through this storytelling work, and with them, many other questions about the very nature of place, story, and meaning. These are all fertile questions for artists to address, since they contain within them the impossibility of a singular answer or solution—a good thing, since the complexity of current environmental problems requires many solutions, all rooted (I believe) in a need for social and cultural change.

A friend and artistic collaborator recently shared an aphorism he'd heard in his own river travels, which described the problem of coming to agreements about the meaning of a place, an experience, or an event through the singular stories we tell. He said a man in one of the small towns he had visited told him, "There are only three stories: Your story, my story, and the truth."

While the truth of a river might be impossible to contain in a single story, we still go searching after those stories that resonate with our experience in some way. And those resonant stories become threads that connect us, in spite of difference.

That might be exactly what makes it a river, or what makes us river people—that we each, and our places, contain multitudes. By uncovering river stories in conversation and community, and asking how they braid together over time, we begin to see how it is we might belong.

# Can We Drink the River?

The idea to create a bar that only serves tap water began in conversation with scientists and others that I met while working on Troubled Waters. Each time I spoke with someone who had devoted their life to understanding our relationships with the Mississippi River, I become more interested in the river as a place of exchange and transformation.

How could I encourage more people to see their own relationships to water, not only as an academic subject or resource to be consumed, but as an essential part of their body, their life in place, and their story? More than just a line in a landscape, rivers are an inspiration for our own ability to give life, create connections, and make change in complex systems.

By the time Water Bar began, I'd spent years working with established environmental organizations. While I believe very much in their missions, I also know the pitfalls of traditional environmental education and advocacy. Namely, I know the problems that stem from assuming

knowledge, data, and other information *about* something is sufficient to encourage meaningful action for that something. The assumption often goes that if we just distribute good, scientifically sound information widely enough, it will lead to changes in behavior or belief. But as a water scientist I know pointed out, she can tell me a lot about water science, but nothing at all about what people ought to do with their hearts and minds.

As Works Progress Studio began to develop the idea for Water Bar, we asked a number of researchers and water quality professionals what would happen if we invited people to drink directly from the Mississippi River, in its raw form? At first, this was a purposely absurd idea: Who would drink the river? We thought we knew the answer: No one in their right mind.

We also thought that just posing this question might lead to generative discussion, and we were correct about that! As we began to float this idea to other people, we quickly learned that there are few things that generate as much discussion as questions about what is "in the river," and what people will or will not put into their bodies. These questions are also great starting points for understanding the disparities in access, trust, and risk that are inherent in water infrastructure and land use as currently designed.

Initially, we planned to create a kind of speakeasy on the banks of the river, where visitors would be offered a drink pulled straight from the river. Later, this idea evolved to include a method of purifying water on site in a spectacular and beguiling way. We imagined a sculptural installation


*A water tender preparing a flight of tap waters.*

that mimicked a distillery, with vats and winding tubes, all producing safe drinking water, while also producing an occasion for exploring our river relationships, and the very concept of trust and safety.

Somewhere along the way, we were asked by one of our collaborators if we knew the source of our municipal drinking water. To be honest, at the time, I didn't know. Or I did know, but this knowledge was buried in the back of my mind, where I put things I don't think will be of much use in my daily life..

After I was reminded of the fact that in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and other river cities, drinking water comes from the Mississippi, I remembered all of those times when our tap water had the earthy flavor of river that had just been stirred. I had known for a long time that this was part of a natural cycle in rivers and lakes. After all, I had grown up swimming in the dog days of summer—but I had never stopped to consider what this meant as an aesthetic element of the place I lived. In some sense, this was a way of tasting place.

We realized that all we really needed to do to encourage people to consider their most intimate and common relationships to the river, was remind them that they already drink the Mississippi every single day.

*Drinking water intake for the City of Minneapolis.*

*Water Bar tour of Minneapolis drinking water treatment facility.*

# Stories Flow Both Ways

And so we created the first Water Bar to accomplish this simple task: Remind people that we drink the river, as well as the groundwater beneath us. Remind them that this is one of the ways they belong to place. Encourage them to engage more deeply with questions about the future of that place.

We did this in collaboration with a handful of water professionals who have since become long-term programmatic partners and collaborators.

Dr. Carrie Jennings, a glacial geologist who was with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and is now Policy Director at the Freshwater Society, was our first Water Tender—along with several Park Rangers from the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA), Pat Nunnally from the River Life program and Kate Brauman at the Institute on the Environment at the University of Minnesota, and key staff from Minneapolis and St. Paul water utilities and local watershed organizations.


*Serving water at Water Bar on the St. Croix River.*

With these folks tending bar, we served tap waters from across the metropolitan area, learning as we went along about each of these municipalities: Their water sources, treatment methods, and the way that particular water tastes when it is compared to other waters.

We wanted to spark curiosity about water and the ways it connects people to place, and we wanted to create a space where stories about water could flow easily. This is precisely what happened. What surprised us was not that people would slow down and taste water, or tell stories about it, but the impact this exchange had on the professionals we invited to work behind the bar.

What we learned was that not only did Water Bar provide a unique way to share water information and encourage water and river stories to flow between visitors, but the learning about water systems and their connections to culture flowed in both directions, back to the "experts" who were now in a unique position to listen and serve.

"The most that I do when I'm tending the bar is listen ... invariably people who come to Water Bar end up talking about their water sources or what water issues they're concerned about," (Kate Brauman, Twin Cities Daily Planet).

Recognizing that Water Bar could provide a critical framework for reciprocal public and professional education and engagement led us to see the potential for the platform in entirely new and expanded ways. It became much less about sharing our idea or sparking a particular realization among visitors, and much more about creating the social conditions that lead to

*Tending water and listening at Water Bar in Greensboro, North Carolina.*

new relationships and approaches. It became a way to challenge and reorganize the methods of teaching, learning, and building relationships between people and the water that flows through their lives and places.

# An Emergent Space and Strategy

Soon after we began hosting Water Bar pop-ups around the Twin Cities, we were invited to participate as artists in a national survey exhibition called *State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now*, at Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas.

As artists who work in close relationship to place, we tend to resist the inclination to travel our projects beyond the location where they originally emerged. Water Bar had been created as a conversation with the Mississippi River in a specific part of the watershed, so when Crystal Bridges


*Water Bar installation at Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas, part of the survey exhibition, "State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now." Water Bar designed by Colin Kloecker and co-designed/built by sculptor Aaron Dysart.*

Museum approached Works Progress Studio about bringing the project to Arkansas, we had to think deeply about whether or not to participate.

This decision was made even more complex when we considered the people and underlying economies involved. Crystal Bridges is the creation of Alice Walton, heiress to Sam Walton, founder of Walmart. As a young person growing up in a rural community, I had often regarded Walmart as a negative force in our economic and cultural lives. I wrote a bit more about the soul-searching that occurred when we were invited to take part in this exhibition (and our ultimate decision to do so) for St. Louis-based arts publication Temporary Art Review.

In the end, we chose to work with the museum to develop and present a new iteration of Water Bar in partnership with the local water advocacy organization, Illinois River Watershed Partnership (IRWP). Crystal Bridges curators introduced us to IRWP Director Delia Haak, who we learned was a creative risk-taker and champion of innovative water education and engagement. It was Delia who suggested, and offered to financially support, a diverse group of paid college interns to work closely with us and Crystal Bridges to staff a Water Bar in the museum's busy lobby.

Over the course of five months, these students—whose backgrounds ranged from natural resource science to public policy, business, education, and design—became the first regular crew of water bartenders—serving tasting flights of local tap waters gathered from various communities in the Illinois River Watershed.


*Students serving water at Water Bar installation, Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas.*

# Gathering Water

The decision to organize the Water Bar project at Crystal Bridges around college students with diverse science and policy backgrounds, and to prioritize their learning and engagement with an art museum audience, was the point where Water Bar became much more than a public art project. Our decision to serve three waters, each sourced from a very different place and community, was also important to the evolution of the project as a whole.

*See video of Water Bar Interviews.*

Both of these decisions were a way to conceive Water Bar not as a discrete artistic or engagement experience, with specific outcomes bounded by place and time, but to express the dynamic nature of our relationships with water and the ways these relationships are always evolving and flowing, with the potential to bring us into conversation with so many other aspects of our culture and society.

Each day for five months student Water Tenders, as we came to know them, gathered water from three different places. In the process, they also experienced three very different ways that water meets human life, culture, economy, and story.

They gathered first from the Crystal Bridges Museum's own restaurant kitchen, meeting the service industry workers who are a largely invisible but critical part of the art world economy in museums today. Though Crystal Bridges is a billion dollar art museum funded by the wealth of Alice Walton, the kitchen is still a restaurant kitchen. We wanted students and the Water Bar to be a conduit for their working-class stories,


*Serving water at Water Bar installation, Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas.*

since what happens with food and food production is ultimately part of a bigger story of how we belong to land and place.

Student Water Tenders also gathered water from the garden center at a Walmart store in a nearby suburb, meeting employees and customers, who were there to purchase products they would ultimately use to design and maintain their landscapes and lawns. Grass, in the form of the American lawn, is one of the largest crops grown in our country, and as such, has a big impact on water. Again, we wanted the Water Tenders and the Water Bar to convey those stories and ways of knowing water to a public audience, so that they might see themselves in relationship.

Finally, students gathered water from a small town in rural Arkansas. Though it is not far from the wealthy hub of Bentonville and Walmart headquarters, this community was a distant place culturally and economically.

The town of Sulpher Springs has long been known for the quality of drinking water pumped from its artesian wells. Water Tenders worked with the only employee of the town's public works department to gather this water, a man who

*Gathering water and learning about water systems in Sulpher Springs, Arkansas, for Water Bar at Crystal Bridges Museum.*

assumed the job after his father retired from the same position.

Although the water quality was high, the infrastructure of Sulpher Springs was outdated and decrepit, an interesting contrast with Bentonville, where the growth of Walmart had spurred a rapid expansion in the city's need for basic infrastructure like water and wastewater service.

These three waters, and the individual experiences of the Water Tenders behind the bar, provided many layers of meaning and possibility for discussion. Rather than spend our time and energy defining those conversations with talking points or messages, or limiting ourselves to a predetermined curriculum, we focused on creating a welcoming and engaging space with the right ingredients for connections and conversations to spark naturally. Through intentional feedback and reflection among students, we also encouraged them to develop these conversations over time into something more integrated and whole.

Rather than a singular project, what we created together was an emergent space and strategy for knowing water, and for integrating our multitude of relationships and experiences with and within it. You can hear from some of the participating students and see this installation in action in this video we produced.

*Learning about the condition of water infrastructure in Sulpher Springs, Arkansas, for Water Bar at Crystal Bridges Museum.*

# Bringing Water Bar Back Home

After the five-month exhibition at Crystal Bridges Museum, we began to ask ourselves in what ways we should continue to develop Water Bar. It was clear that with partners and participating Water Tenders, we'd begun to develop a truly unique and vital platform for water education, engagement, and storytelling. At the same time, we began to get requests from other museums and organizations to bring Water Bar to their places and events, or to prepare their networks of professionals or students to tend bar.

We decided to continue evolving the project in two directions: As a social enterprise, and as an art and community space. Both of these projects—which eventually merged to become Water Bar & Public Studio—are still works in progress. We see both as living and evolving ideas, spaces, and strategies for knowing and serving water.

We incorporated Water Bar & Public Studio as a general benefit corporation in 2017. Benefit corporations are a social enterprise model only recently introduced in Minnesota. It allows us to operate as a business whose primary goal is not profit, but social impact. We serve water. We do this to build relationships and transform culture, providing our pop-up Water Bar and

*Water Bar pop-up at Goat Ridge Brewery in New London, Minnesota.*

*Water Bar pop-up at Goat Ridge Brewery in New London, Minnesota.*

*Neighborhood Night at Water Bar & Public Studio in Minneapolis.*

other education and engagement products to a cross-sector network of businesses, nonprofit organizations, schools, and government agencies.

These products and services allow these entities to experiment with the creation of social spaces and storytelling platforms, inviting their audiences and employees to deepen their own knowledge of and relationship with water and place.

*See video of the author at Ignite! Symposium: The Future of Public Health.*

Simultaneously, we now operate a storefront space in our own northeast Minneapolis neighborhood, a tap water taproom combining the Water Bar with flexible creative community space where other artists, scientists, advocates, and educators can experiment and connect. When they do, they exchange ideas, build relationships and movements, and develop new creative collaborations around and with water.

While we still resist a definitive mission or message, we are intentional about the operation of this space, keeping it accessible to a wide community, and seeing our role as "tending water" and "tending space" rather than curating or programming it ourselves. We've found that this ambiguity is a way to encourage innovation, as it allows for the creative contributions of all who visit to influence the direction the project takes as a whole.


*Water Bar at Elsewhere Museum in Greensboro, North Carolina. Part of the South Elm Projects.*

# *Mniówe*

One example of this approach in action is *Mniówe*, a new version of Water Bar that emerged through our participation in a collaborative project, Healing Place, that shares a similar emergent spirit and approach.

Not long after we began hosting Water Bar pop-ups, Works Progress was invited to join Healing Place Collaborative, an Indigenous artist-led group whose work concerns the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, or *bdote* as it is known to Dakota people, a place that is both healing and in need of healing. More than any of the other relationships and collaborations we've been fortunate to work with over the course of this project, Healing Place has had an influence on the very nature of the work and how I see myself as an artist, cultural organizer, and leader of Water Bar's collective efforts.

The form Water Bar has taken, with its emphasis on creating space for people to recognize one another, their stories and relationships, and connections to place, was familiar to Mona Smith

*A meeting of the Healing Place Collaborative at Water Bar & Public Studio.*

and other Dakota people who we met through Healing Place. The Dakota phrase *Mitakuye Owasin* translates to "All My Relations" or "We Are All Related."

Though I was not raised with this Indigenous consciousness about the importance of relationships between people, land, water, and other living and non-living relatives, it's a belief at the core of my own understanding now. It is something I realized as I began to connect the threads of my own and others' experiences with the Mississippi River, which I've continued to gather through my ongoing river storytelling work.

When we began to know Mona Smith and Healing Place, we had not developed a language for talking about this relational approach. It was Mona who pointed out that even our usual tagline—Water Is All We Have—spoke to an implicit bias toward objectification of water as "other" or "commodity," and not as a relative.

I would now say that one of the underlying goals of Water Bar is to actively challenge the colonial frameworks and practices of white-led environmental organizations and projects, including our own, and to do this not by calling out efforts which share our passion for protecting water, land, and life—but by calling them into relationship, and demonstrating the effectiveness, as well as the joy, of other more reciprocal ways of being and creating.

From these realizations and the deeper work of Healing Place partners, a new Water Bar project emerged that our partners call *Mniówe*, a Dakota


*Dr. Carrie Jennings speaks at Water Bar Winter Social. 'Mitakuye Owasin' painting on wall reminds visitors that 'we are all relatives' and that Water Bar is on Dakota land.*


*Prints by various artists on display and available for sale at Water Bar & Public Studio.*


*Water Bar drop print by Water Bar artists. Water Is All We Have letterpress print by artist Ben Weaver and Sister Black Press.*

word meaning a communal well or place to gather water. It is also a place to gather water, *together*.

It's an elegant concept that speaks first to the deeply rooted appreciation within Dakota culture for relationship. As it was explained to me, *Mni* means water, but *ówe* means something like blood or lifeblood of a place and community.

Here and in many other places, rivers and lakes are our lifeblood, and so are the stories we tell in community—though we rarely think or speak of them as such in public forums. To accelerate this conversation, we have started to bring *Mniówe* to water resource conferences, introducing professional audiences to a paradigm shift that we hope will encourage a new focus in the future of specialized water work.

# The Best Water

Now that we've been creating Water Bar for a few years, and in many different contexts—including at the Minnesota State Fair in 2017, where we served over 21,000 people—I am often asked for my opinion on the best water.

"Shanai, what is the best water you've ever served?"

I think it's assumed that this deep work automatically leads to expertise, when in fact, the more I do this work, the more I am aware of how much I do not know. So what is my favorite tap water of all time? What's the best water we have ever tasted or served?

I try not to answer these questions, but instead, to turn them back to the person who asked: What makes water good, in your experience? Is it really just how it tastes? Or are there many other things to consider, for example, your attachment to the waters that held or sustained you as a child? The health or sustainability of a vital source? Its spiritual or cultural significance? A familiarity that sparks memories of belonging?

Then I tell them my story, which is also now how I prefer to introduce myself:

The best water I have ever tasted comes from the well at my grandparent's farm, a few miles from the Mississippi River, in the county where I grew up. This water was always clear and cold, and had a taste that I could not have described as anything but home. It was a well my grandmother found by dowsing with a willow branch, a practice that would probably raise an eyebrow among many water scientists.

This water, and all of the stories I know about it, were and still are vital elements comprising my own constellation of belonging to a place, and a time.

"What's the real point of all this?"

People also ask that question a lot when they visit us at Water Bar. There is usually a subtle skepticism in their voice, since we never tell them exactly what we think they should do with their knowledge. I think they're expecting that beneath the surface, we should have a specific political motivation or education message, but the truth is that resisting this impulse is precisely the point.

We never intended Water Bar to advocate any singular action, just like it was never meant to be about taste in any qualified way. Rather, it is just about the action of slowing down, the experience of tasting and knowing water with others, and all that this contains and encourages. I've come to believe that ambiguity can be a wonderful antidote and instigator in a cultural moment where many people seem to be realizing that


*Three waters are always on tap at Water Bar.*


*Tasting and testing. What is in the water at Water Bar?*

dualities are an insufficient means for navigating the complex relational lives most of us are living.

People want and need more space for slowing down, knowing themselves and each other, and embracing the ambiguous and wonderful aspects of making place and community together. In other words, there is widespread desire for a much greater breadth of experience and imagination in our public-making lives.

This desire for social space and storytelling is not limited to any single issue. In many places I have been, agriculture figures prominently in discussions about water. In other places, aging infrastructure, urbanization, mining and manufacturing, or the preservation of wild spaces are the focal point for discussions and for organizing. These are more than merely water issues, these are questions about our belonging to place, and ultimately, what that belonging to place means for how we choose to live in community.

I am not a social scientist, but my intuition tells me that the reasons people care enough to serve water—to act on behalf of water, to act with water and people and places at heart—has little to do with reason. It has everything to do with emotion, with belief rooted in story, and with our social imagination. This confluence is a fertile space for the innovative work of artists in community, as well as for any of us who are fortunate enough to access our creativity—to know it, as we know water—as a vital source of our belonging.

*All images courtesy of the author, Water Bar & Public Studio, and Works Progress, unless otherwise stated.*

*Drinking water at Water Bar & Public Studio.*

## Further Reading

- Water Bar and Crystal Bridges.
- Emergent work with US Water Alliance / Art Place.
- Works Progress and Healing Place.
- Water Bar and Impact Hub.
- Artists and Designers on the Mississippi River: Notes from the 'River at our Doorstep' Symposium.
- Place-based art project Water Bar address disparities in drinking water access.

## Recommended Citation

Matteson, Shanai. 2018. "Water Bar: Water is All We Have." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 9. http://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/water-bar/.

## About the Author

Shanai Matteson is a writer, public artist and arts organizer. She is one of the founders and collaborative directors of Water Bar & Public Studio, an artist-led public benefit corporation based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. More info about Water Bar can be found here: https://www.water-bar.org.