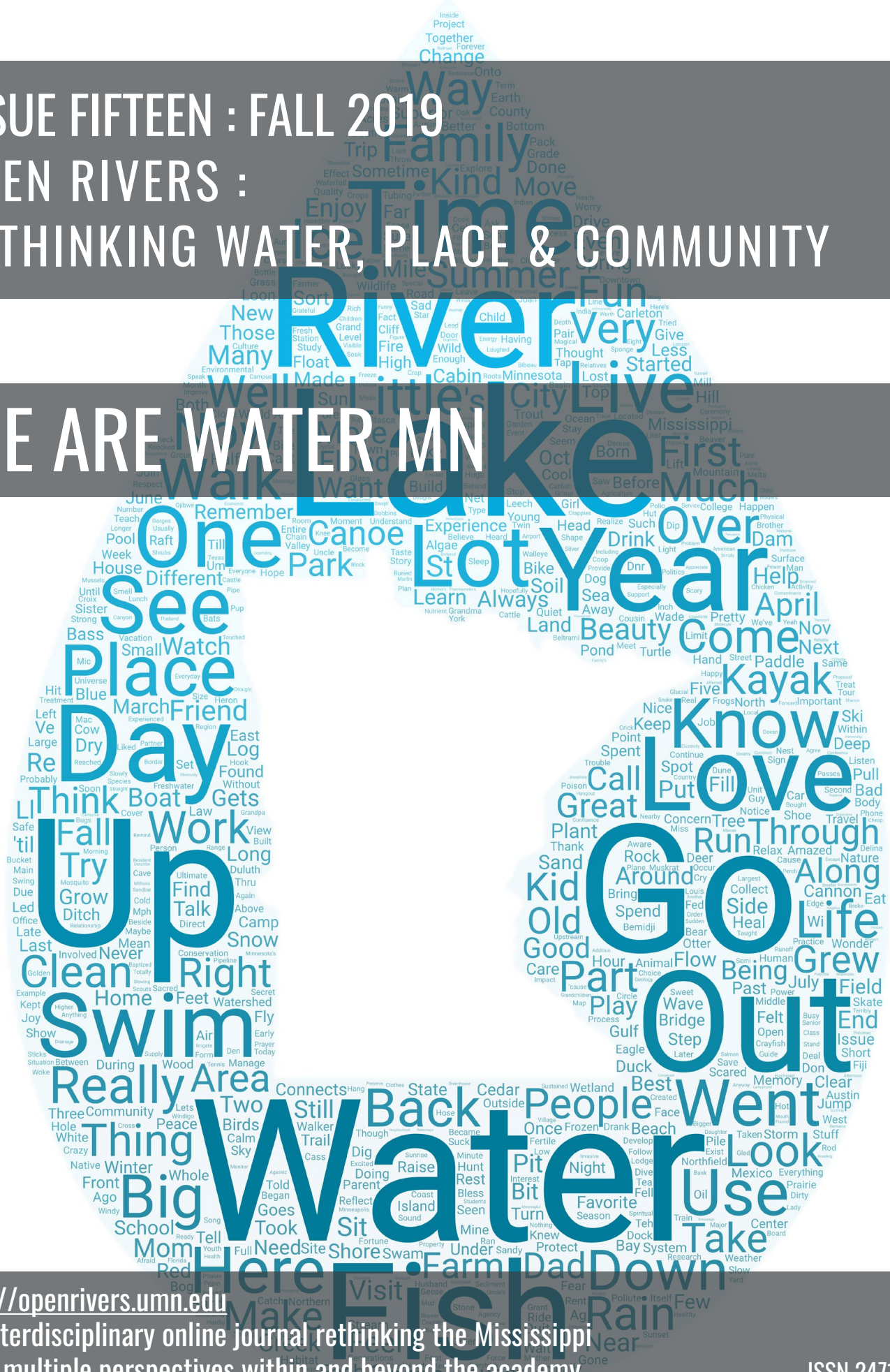


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OPEN RIVERS :
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

WE ARE WATER MN



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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 a word cloud made from narratives representing We Are Water MN. Image courtesy of Minnesota Humanities Center.

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE FIFTEEN

By Patrick Nunnally, Editor

A couple of summers ago, the University hosted an international graduate student workshop on the environmental humanities, that is, interdisciplinary examination of environmental questions from scholars of literature, philosophy, language disciplines, and the like. Not surprisingly, the group wanted to take a Mississippi

River boat tour and I was invited along as the University's resident "river guy."

I was talking with the group before the excursion departed and the conversation naturally turned to Mark Twain. I offered the opinion that Mark Twain's narratives no longer resonated as widely



*The opening ceremony for the We Are Water MN exhibit at the University of Minnesota.
Image courtesy of the author.*

across the country as they once did, that lots of people in the United States don't really see the Mississippi River as an avenue to a particular kind of freedom from the constrictions of "civilization." Furthermore, we can't any longer simply frame the "natural" qualities of the Mississippi as unqualified assets as opposed to the "industrial" or "altered" qualities of the Mississippi as unarguable ills.

So, what are the better narratives? they asked me. Fortunately, I had been working with the We Are Water MN program, so was able to offer two ideas that might drive conversations about the river (and water more broadly).

The first of these is the notion that all of us have a responsibility to water and to the Mississippi River. All water is connected and the water that flows through my house or office in the Twin Cities begins and ends in the Mississippi. Although I don't know the exact scientific details, I suspect that water in the Colorado River, or the Nile, or the Columbia eventually, through the global hydrological cycle, eventually finds its way into the Mississippi. As a user of this water and someone who has empathy for those downstream, I have a responsibility to it.

The second idea that I have picked up from We Are Water MN is that the stresses on our

water systems—both those felt now and those to come—will affect vulnerable communities disproportionately. This is an environmental justice argument that has to do with both water quantity and water quality, and that leaves open the many ways in which vulnerability can be defined. Shrinking rural communities with small tax bases and expensive fixes to their public water systems are "water precarious" in ways different from, but related to, poor urban neighborhoods. Climate change stresses our water systems in myriad ways, as do changes in demographics and political economies.

These two concepts—responsibility to water and awareness of communities' vulnerability to water stress—have become central to our work, and to our thinking in this journal. So, it seemed like a natural fit to devote an issue to the We Are Water MN program. Britt Gangeness and Jennifer Tonko, our very capable guest editors, offer more detail on the program's work, and the articles in this issue all speak directly or indirectly to the great impact that the program has had across Minnesota. These stories and communities exist everywhere; while these are Minnesota-based examples, we feel that they have something to offer to readers beyond the state.

Happy reading!

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About the Author

Patrick Nunnally coordinates the River Life program in the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. He serves as editor for *Open Rivers* and was one of the lead scholars for the University's John E. Sawyer Seminar which focused on the Mississippi River and was funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.