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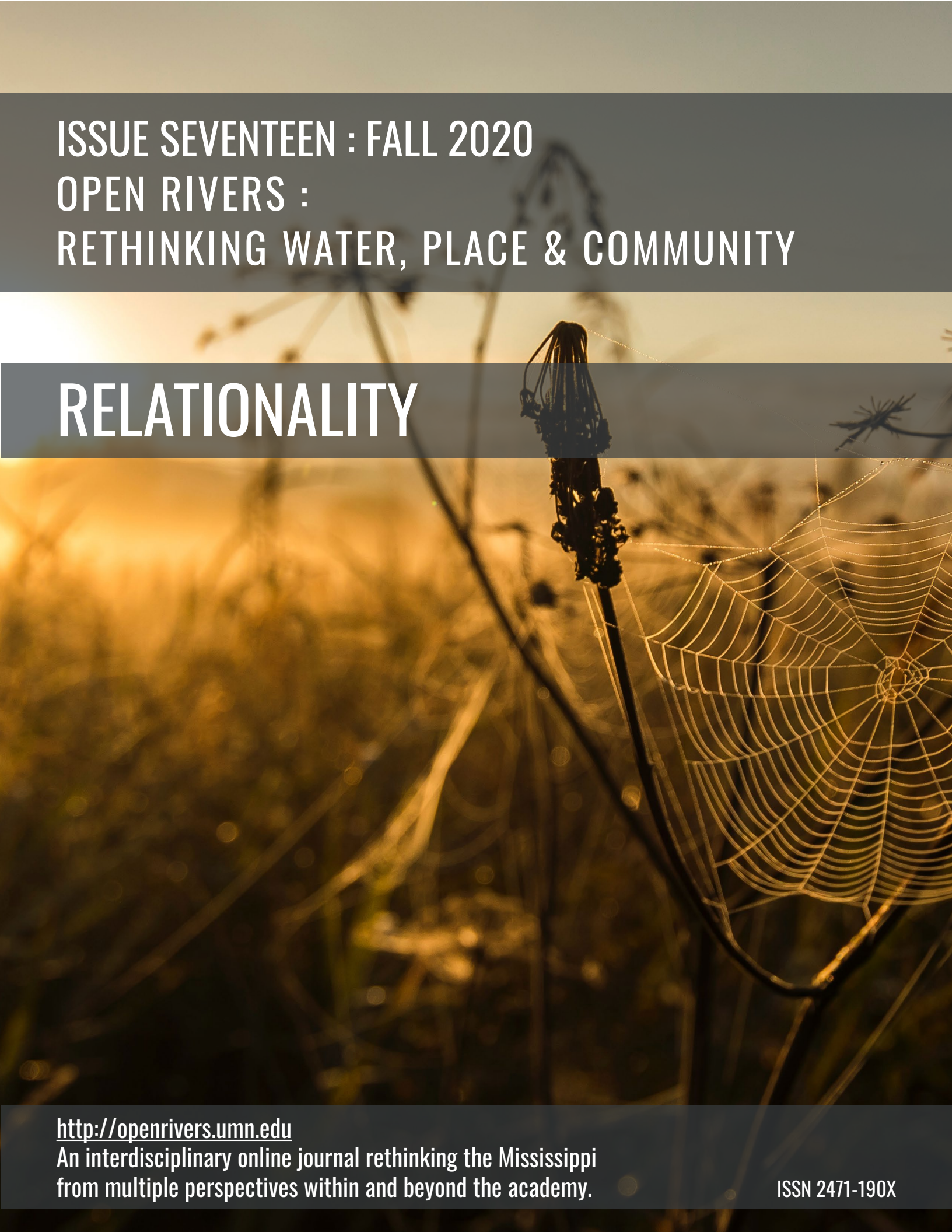

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Editors

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

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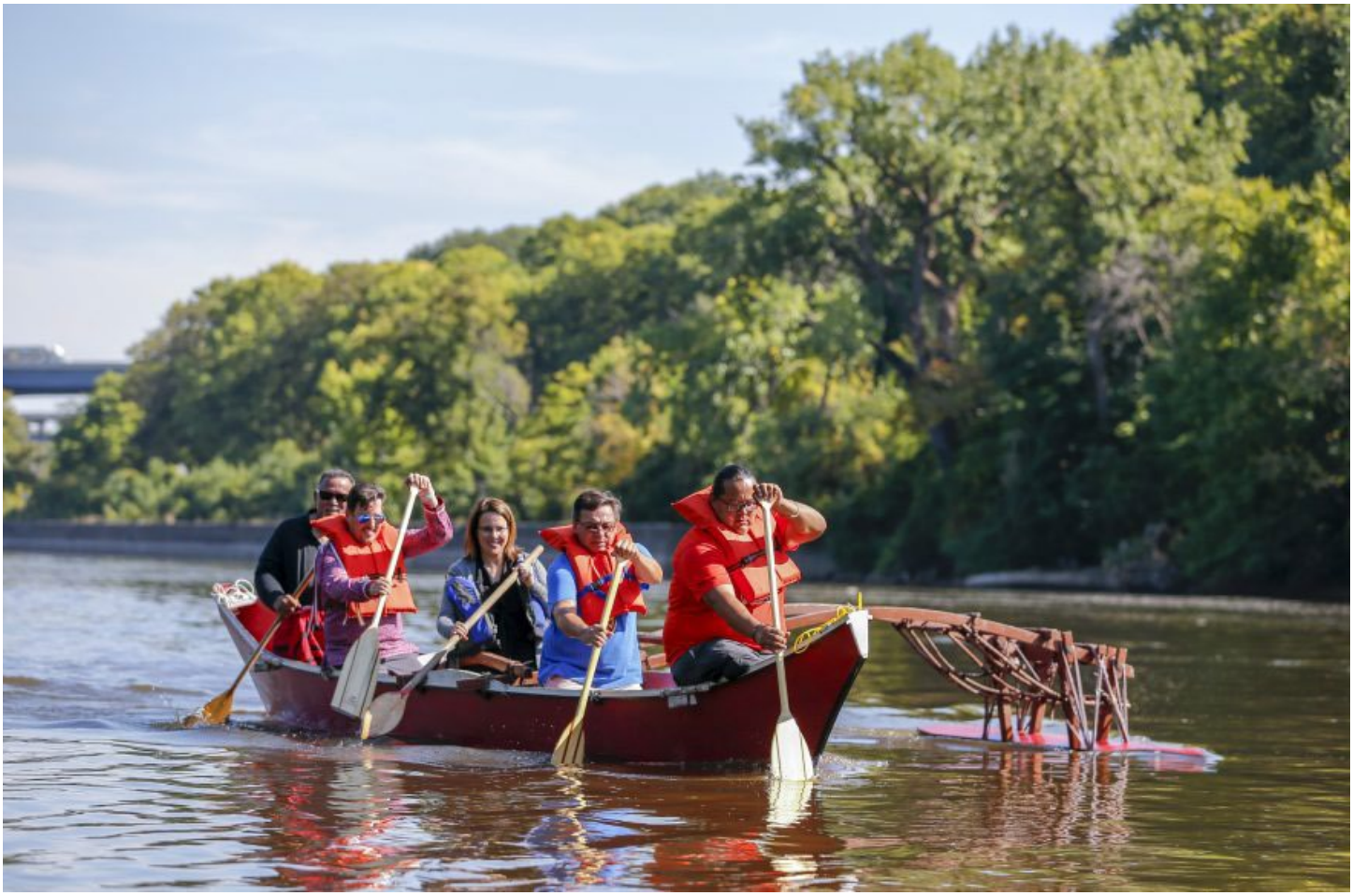
FEATURE

NAVIGATING INDIGENOUS FUTURES WITH THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

By Vicente M. Diaz, Michael J. Dockry, G.-H. Crystal Ng, Virajita Singh, Daniel F. Keefe, Katie Johnston-Goodstar, Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould, Jim Rock, and Christine Taitano DeLisle



President Gabel and project members and community representatives take "a spin" aboard the waa herak NOAA's Arc. From front to back: Mat Pendleton, Lower Sioux Community, Indigenous Futures Project; Eric Chapman, Lac du Flambeau Tribal Council member, Manoomin Project; President Gabel; Dockry, Manoomin Project; and Diaz, Indigenous Futures Project.

Indigenous Relationalities At, In, and With Ȟaȟáwakpa [Dakota] / Misi-Ziibi [Anishinaabe] / The Mississippi River

Navigating Indigenous Futures was an all-day event, held September 19, 2019 at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities' east bank of the Mississippi River, to help celebrate Dr. Joan Gabel's inauguration as the University System's seventeenth president.

The event was hosted by two U of M Grand Challenge Research Grant teams: a U of M Twin Cities team of biophysical and social science researchers and Anishinaabe tribal partners, named *Kawe Gidaa-Naanaagadawendaamin Manoomin / First We Must Consider Manoomin (Anishinaabe) / Psiŋ (Dakota) / Wild Rice*

Joe Graveen shows President Gabel how to carve manoomin ricing sticks near the Wigwam Jrs. drummers. Clockwise, from left: Bree Duever, Manoomin Project coordinator; President Gabel; Graveen; Tristan Mustache, drummer; John Johnson, Sr., Lac du Flambeau project partner; Edward Poupart, Lac du Flambeau, Wigwam Jrs. drummer; Elliot Johnson, drummer, and Ganebik Johnson, drummer. Image courtesy of Laura Matson.

Project (hereafter, Manoomin Project), and an interdisciplinary team of U of M Twin Cities and Duluth STEM, Humanities, and Social Sciences researchers, called the *Back to Indigenous Futures Project* (hereafter, Indigenous Futures Project). The event welcomed our new president by showcasing our projects' activities, results, findings, and other material outcomes. On display, too—indeed, *embodied and enacted*—were important social, cultural, and political intangibles. In fact, so much more happened, and remains to happen, as a result of this larger research collaborative celebration that took place on, in, and with the River, thereby calling attention to the River's own power to move, shift, churn, bend, wend, connect, and, in so many other ways, shape and alter its course and boundaries. And affect our courses in the process of engaging it. In this essay, we introduce our projects and call attention to the larger political, social, and cultural stakes that our research projects, individually and collectively, raise for and with our Indigenous community partners. Central among these stakes are the relations of ethics and kinship that attach to water and knowledge pertaining to water for Dakota and Anishinaabe and other Indigenous communities, as well as how such relations point to yet larger domains of belonging and connectivity beyond water, and about which academic research would do well to recognize, understand, and work with. Paramount in these larger sets of what we might call Indigenous Relationalities, or the web of interconnected relations of kinship and ethical regard among Indigenous people, land, water, and sky scapes, include the agential or personhood status of otherwise non-human "natural" elements, their interconnectivity that occurs at multiple and simultaneous temporal scales and logics, and the need for intellectual and social agility and nimbleness to keep apace with, in our case, "water" and Indigenous knowledge about water and interconnected relationships.

We chose to name the event *Navigating Indigenous Futures* for a confluence and constellation of academic and non-academic reasons, while the decision to hold it at the River—a no-brainer for us—expressed the centrality of building relations in a special place that is itself also understood and related to by Indigenous peoples as an ancestral relation or relative. And so, the idea of Indigenous Relationalities (IR), a concept to which we will return shortly, also swirls around, shapes, and connects these projects.

For starters, both projects examine and explore new forms of interdisciplinary and intercultural research through building good relations with Minnesota's Indigenous communities: for the Manoomin Project, with Anishinaabe communities of Northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan; for the Indigenous Futures Project, with Dakota and Pacific Islander (Micronesian) communities of rural, west Minnesota.

In addition, both projects focus on water and water traditions. And they focus on Indigenous mobility.

First We Must Consider Manoomin

The Manoomin Project and its Anishinaabe partners acknowledge wild rice as simultaneously a food, an elder, and a site, all of whose presence was/is historically prophesied. Anishinaabe teachings tell of originating travel, through sky and later through water, in search of a home, a place to be recognized, where "food grows on water" (Benton-Banai 1988). Manoomin —or "the good berry" in Anishinaabe—is central to Anishinaabe cultural practice and seasonal cycles (David et al. 2019; LaDuke and Carlson 2003; Schuldt et al. 2018; Yerxa 2014). Manoomin and nibi (water in Anishinaabe) are indelibly linked, and Anishinaabe women hold ceremonial

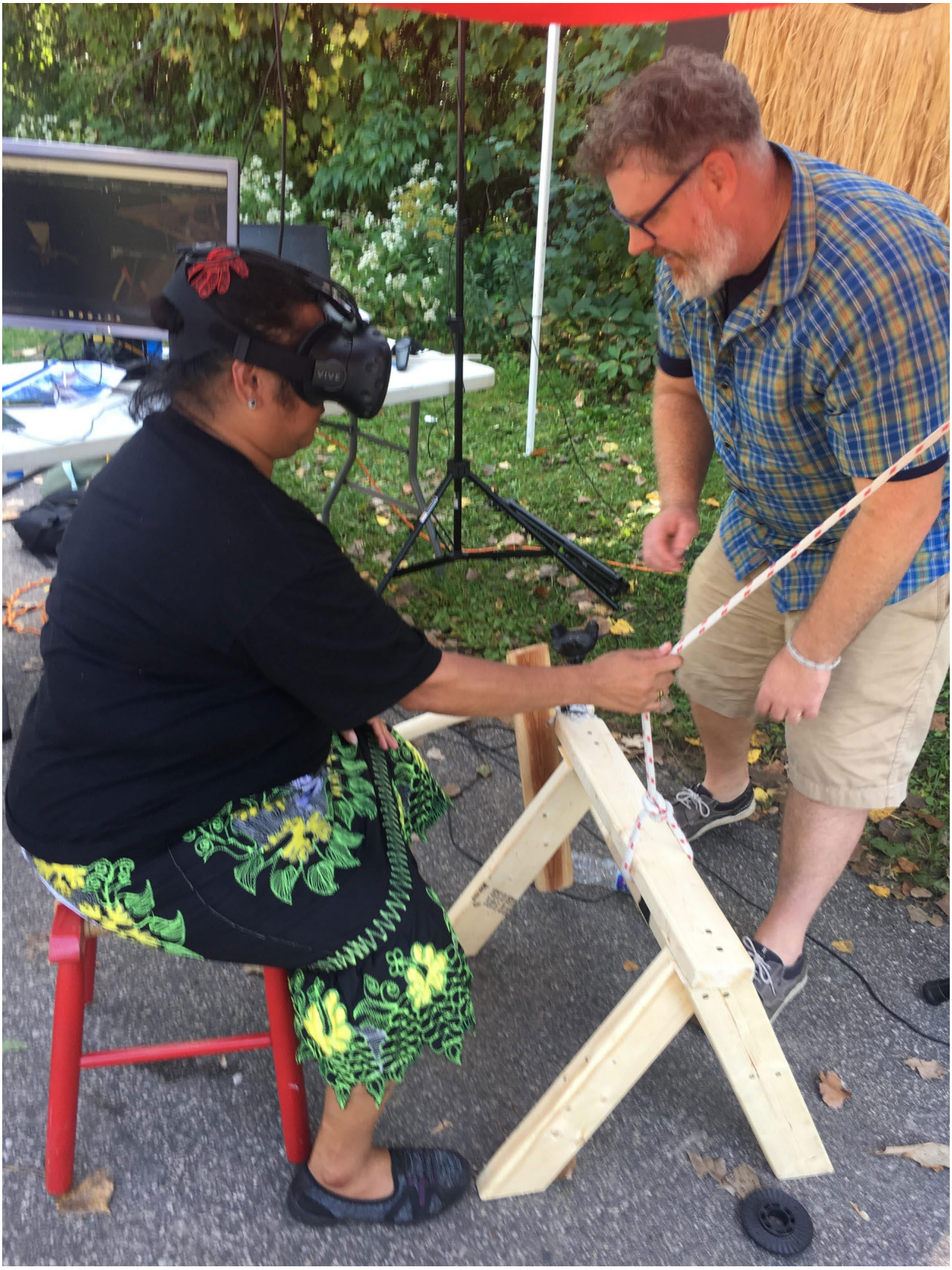
responsibilities to maintain that relationship such that the "manoomin harvest was the most visible expression of women's autonomy in Ojibwe [Anishinaabe] society" (Child 2012: 25). In this Indigenous Futures event that brought together Indigenous peoples from varied places, it is important to recognize that the wild rice-water-human relationship is not just an Anishinaabe experience, and in fact, this relationship transcends any one ecosystem or body of water. Wild rice, known as psiŋ in Dakota, was once abundant across Dakota lands, where our event was held, and served to sustain Dakota peoples (Prairie Island Indian Community Land & Environment Department n.d.).

Today, learning from tribal partners, the Manoomin team recognizes wild rice's status as food, kin, and home, a reality that cannot and ought not be divorced from any aspect of scientific research on "it." Guided by Indigenous knowledge holders, we contemplate manoomin's physical, cultural, and spiritual relationships to and with all the non-human and human elements surrounding it. For example, one tribal member stated, "Of course we know the sediment is important [for manoomin]—it is what muskrat picked up and put on turtle's back in our origin story." By example through its own relationships, manoomin is teaching the team to deepen our own relationships with each other and with water by sharing time together on manoomin lakes and rivers. In the process, a mutual trust and respect have emerged that are transformative as we move an academic endeavor to reckon with the important connections between water, manoomin, people, and Indigenous Knowledge. "First," as we put it in our project's name, "we must consider Manoomin."

Back to Indigenous Futures

For its part, the Indigenous Futures Project explores the relationship between canoe culture revitalization (Low 2015) and learning in Dakota and Micronesian Pacific Islander sets of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) about water and skies; in both cultural systems, as for the Anishinaabe and manoomin, we might say that to know the peoples is to know their waters is to know their land is to know their skies. For example, in Dakota cosmology, the concept and practice of the kapemni—defined loosely but powerfully as "all that is above is reflected below" and vice versa (Goodman 1992; for Ojibwe/Anishinaabe, see Gawboy and Morton 2014)—cannot be detached from knowing the spiritual and temporal significance of specific water and land and sky scapes. What Dakota call the Bdote—the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers near present-day Fort Snelling—is the portal from which humans first entered this world from the sky world, and through which in death they return. The sacred Bdote, like other sacred sites, like Wakháŋ Thípi in nearby St. Paul, connects humans in deep time and cosmic reach through sacred and everyday relations with lands, waters, skies, and other forms and sites of being (Gould and Rock 2016).

Pacific Islanders, even when displaced thousands of miles from their island homes, can also find connectivity in prairie lands/waters/skies/peoples by remembering and putting into practice traditional knowledge of seafaring, which requires deep and instrumentalized knowledge of local skies and waters, land forms, and the travel habits of creatures indigenous and endogenous to the locale (Diaz, forthcoming). Descendants of seafarers whose voyages span four to six thousand years and cover two-thirds of the earth's watery surface, contemporary Pacific Islanders—now beached in rural west Minnesotan plains—seek to learn their traditional knowledge of seafaring, which must now necessarily include learning all they can about Dakota land/water/



Nelisa Elias, Micronesian Community of Milan, and Daniel Keefe, Indigenous Futures. Image courtesy of Jim Rock.

skies, and human and other-than-human beings indigenous to this place (Diaz 2019a).

If good relations are required for both Grand Challenge research projects to succeed and to model appropriate modes of conducting research, the concept and practice of *Indigenous Relationalities* (IR) also features prominently even if it is not named as such in both projects. A theoretical and methodological component in the field of Indigenous Studies, both on account of the concept's ubiquity in Native worlds, and more recent efforts by Indigenous scholars to apply it in academic settings (Todd 2017, 2018), IR expresses how the key concept of *Indigeneity* (Alfred and Corntassel 2005) can also be further understood in terms of the relations of kinship and reciprocal caregiving and caretaking that exist between human and non-human beings, including the relationalities that exist among land, water, and sky scapes, as these are also understood as sentient, ancestral relatives. An ontological as well as analytic category, that is to say, a concept that has to do with Native ways of being, Native ways of knowing, and Native ways of analyzing and understanding the social, natural, and supernatural worlds (Whyte 2018), the concept of Indigeneity can be defined as the claims and conditions of aboriginal belongings and relations to human and non-human peoplehood and places in terms of a people's and place's vernacular practices, and the knowledge systems that emerge from them (Diaz 2019b).

In our projects and at the *Navigating Indigenous Futures* event, IR was expressed as a praxis that embodies relationships with each other and with the River. In this regard, Indigenous Relationalities is expressed through walking the land together and canoeing the water together. IR names how Indigenous people have historically reckoned their sense of selves and sense of purpose through deep relations of kinship and stewardship with other beings, beginning with land/water/skies.

In terms of innovative interdisciplinary collaboration across Humanities, Social Science, Art, Design, and Computer Engineering fields and disciplines, we in the Indigenous Futures Project also began a process of forging new relations among academic units that are typically siloed from each other (much as how humans, non-humans, and land forms—like traditional disciplines—are typically compartmentalized as conditions for conventional ways of knowing). Against such fragmentations and self-enclosures, we embraced the rigors of building relations as a guiding principle among ourselves and with our Dakota and Pacific Islander relatives, drawing upon and experimenting with processes and technologies such as participatory design and embodied computing as they engage with—learn from and help advance—Dakota and Pacific Islander Traditional Ecological Knowledges to explore the interphase between new/old ways of knowing inside and outside the academy. Like the Bdote, our interdisciplinary and intercommunity partnership is a confluence of potential futures, one that brings Indigenous communities and the University together in ways that align and mutually benefit academic research and Indigenous community resurgence through traditional knowledge in the hopes of imagining a shared future. Thus, at a moment when increasing numbers of individuals and units at the University of Minnesota struggle to address Minnesota's ongoing history of settler colonization of Indigenous land/water/skies, and to redress ongoing histories that have severed Minnesota's Indigenous peoples' relations with their worlds (Waziyatawin 2008), we and our community partners chose to welcome President Gabel by showcasing our research projects and relations at, with, and even *in* the River, and by explicitly recognizing the River itself as both a powerful site and living agent. For this reason the celebration required asking, and making it possible for Indigenous community partners to join us at, on, in, and with, the River, beginning with ceremony to ask the River to welcome and take care of us.

With these Indigenous relatives and relationalities to the River, we opened the day and welcomed our community partners and several of our classes of undergraduate and graduate students with ceremony, drum, and music. The day featured tangible and intangible products and outcomes of all of our relations:

- Exhibits and displays, experiential (embodied) learning "stations" (on topics such as TEK around traditional watercraft and water) featuring the use of Indigenous water craft as well as Virtual Reality canoe sailing and celestial navigation;

- Model canoe and architectural canoe house designs from past U of M Catalyst Workshops; modules that juxtapose the concepts and practices of "culture" and "cultivation"; and

- New models of manoomin research, natural resource management, and traditional Anishinaabe manoomin cultural implements (like rice knocking sticks).

We also celebrated with music and song (Anishinaabe youth drumming; Pacific Islander chanting and singing). Two highlights were President Gabel's canoe outing on the River on a Micronesian outrigger canoe with Anishinaabe, Dakota, Micronesian, and U of M partners, and the ceremonial launching of two new traditional watercraft—an 18 ft. Dakota wata or dugout canoe, and a 20 ft. Waa herak, or traditional outrigger sailing canoe from the Central Carolines Islands in Micronesia. The canoes were built, respectively, in the Lower Sioux Community and in Milan, Minnesota (Canoe Project 2020; Elias et al. 2019; Kelly 2019) through U of M Grand Challenge and U of M Extension Southwest Regional Sustainable Development Program grants.

In name, process, and spirit, *Navigating Indigenous Futures* in, on, and with the River drew—draws—from the power of innovative interdisciplinary and community-engaged research and learning to enact older and deeper Indigenous Relationalities between human and other-than-human beings as a different, possibly unprecedented, way to mark and celebrate the start of a new era toward a just future.

Caught in Rough Waters

In the midst of writing the final draft of this essay on our "shared effort at marking and celebrating the start of a new era toward a just future" at and with the River, our projects and relations, ostensibly like all others, were severely disrupted by the deadly COVID-19 pandemic and the eruption, in Minnesota and across the country, of civil unrest and uprising over systemic race inequalities and other injustices. But for Indigenous peoples in particular, the turmoil is all too familiar; our communities continue to suffer the disproportionate brunt of such natural and human-made catastrophies and tragedies. Just when we thought we inaugurated a new relation at and with the River on campus, the pandemic and social eruptions come along to unleash additional stress and obstacles in our path forward. But like the River, we surge on.

See more images in the Navigating Indigenous Futures Gallery, this issue.

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About the Authors

Vicente M. Diaz is Pohnpeian and Filipino from Guam. An interdisciplinary scholar, Diaz founded and heads The Native Canoe Program in the Department of American Indian Studies, University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus. The program uses Indigenous water craft for community-engaged teaching and research on Indigenous water traditions. Diaz's research is on comparative Indigenous cultural and political resurgence in Oceania and the Native Great Lakes and Upper Mississippi River region, particularly through the lens of Trans-Indigenous theory and practice, which foregrounds Indigenous histories and technologies of travel and mobility and pan-Indigenous solidarity.

Michael J. Dockry is a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation with traditional territories around southern Lake Michigan and contemporary tribal lands in Central Oklahoma. Dockry is an assistant professor of tribal natural resource management at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities in the Department of Forest Resources and an affiliate faculty member of the American Indian Studies Department. His research and teaching focus on incorporating Indigenous knowledge into forestry and natural resource management. His work supports tribal sovereignty and addresses Indigenous environmental issues across the United States with a focus on the Great Lakes and in South America with a focus on Lowland Bolivia.

G.-H. Crystal Ng is an associate professor in the Earth & Environmental Sciences Department at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. She is interested in how different aspects affecting the hydrologic cycle—including the atmosphere, plants, soil, microbial activity, and geochemistry—interact with each other. She studies how links among these elements help to determine how the environment will respond to perturbations, including climate change, land use and land cover change, and contamination. She works in collaboration with social scientists and Tribal partners in Minnesota and Wisconsin to gain a more integrative and holistic understanding of how natural and human dimensions are intertwined.

Virajita Singh is Senior Research Fellow at the University of Minnesota's Center for Sustainable Building Research (CSBR) and adjunct faculty in the School of Architecture, College of Design. She leads Design for Community Resilience, a participatory design program she founded in CSBR that serves communities, particularly across rural Minnesota, in envisioning their futures through buildings and landscapes. She is Co-PI with her interdisciplinary university colleagues in collaboration with Dakota and Micronesian community members in western Minnesota on the Grand Challenges Research project 'Back to Indigenous Futures,' that explores what it means to find applied synergies between community, land, and indigenous culture-based knowledges and practices, virtual reality and embodied computing, and participatory design.

Daniel F. Keefe is a Distinguished University Teaching Professor and associate professor in the Department of Computer Science and Engineering at the University of Minnesota. His computing research centers on interactive data visualization and immersive computer graphics. Keefe is also a visual artist, and much of his work involves art+science collaboration, recently with a focus of highlighting/revealing the human behind the data.

Katie Johnston-Goodstar is an associate professor in the University of Minnesota School of Social Work where she teaches in the Youth Studies and Social Justice programs. Katie conducts Participatory Action Research with communities, most often with Indigenous youth, to explore and interrogate institutions such as schools and youth development organizations, and improve community well-being through the revitalization of Indigenous knowledges.

Dr. Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould (Grand Traverse Band Odawa/ Ojibwe) currently serves as associate professor of Indigenous education in the College of Education at the UMN Duluth. Roxanne's research and work is global with a focus on Indigenous peoples, education, land justice, critical pedagogy of place, ecofeminism, traditional ecological knowledge and environmental sustainability. Her research includes Indigenous sacred site restoration, Indigenous food sovereignty, examination of Bolivia's agreement with Mother Earth and Living Well model, and Indigenous women's water teachings, traditions, and the work they do to protect it.

Jim Rock (Dakota) M.A.Ed. is University of Minnesota Duluth's Director of Indigenous Programming at the Marshall W. Alworth Planetarium and an instructor in the Physics and Astronomy Department at Swenson College of Science & Engineering. Rock teaches in the Honors Department as well and offers an ethno- and archaeoastronomy course called Native Skywatchers which includes Turtle Island (N., C. & S. America) and Oceania. He has worked or designed experiments with NASA and NOAA and is co-author of the 2014 *D(L)akota Star Map Constellation Guidebook* and other publications on Dakota and regional Sky-Earth connections.

Christine Taitano DeLisle is associate professor of American Indian Studies, University of Minnesota Twin Cities where she teaches courses on Indigenous resurgence, Indigenous women's history, and public history. DeLisle is CHamoru born and raised in Guåhan (Guam) and her research interests span Indigenous oceans, lands, and waters across Oceania and Turtle Island. She is a member of the Guam-based CHamoru women's advocacy organization, I Hagan Famalåo'an Guåhan, and is currently involved in revitalization projects between Dakota peoples and Native Pacific Islanders of Mni Sota Makoce.