

ISSUE TWENTY : WINTER 2022  
OPEN RIVERS :  
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# RIVERS AND MEANING

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An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking water, place & community  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of low clouds in Glen Forsa on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, UK. Image by Jill Diamond on Unsplash.

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INTRODUCTION

# GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE TWENTY: RIVERS AND MEANING

By Mary Modeen, Guest Editor

Firstly, a welcome to you readers, traditional style. Just because we are many, sitting in many places gathered in “internet land” does not mean that I cannot welcome you as a virtual visitor to my place and to what we may imagine as our campfire. Here, 200 meters from the banks, I share with you the River Ericht and speak to you with the sounds of water flowing across rocks and swirling in the currents.

I welcome you to the hills and forests, the local berry fields of Scotland, perched on the divide between the Lowlands and the Highlands and the

farmlands growing potatoes, beans, brassicas, and barley. You too, in my imagination, have your places to share—your rivers and lakes, your coastal beaches and mountains. We are first and ever in the world by the time we come to know where we are. As we come together, what we share here are stories from places and people across the world showing and telling and singing songs that reveal more than one place, more than one story. These are sharings that resonate with with *how* we are in our places and what these places mean to us.



*Fig 1: Detail. The River Ericht, Blairgowrie, Perthshire, Scotland, 2020. Image courtesy of Mary Modeen.*



*Fig 1: The River Ericht, Blairgowrie, Perthshire, Scotland, 2020. Image courtesy of Mary Modeen.*

## An International Perspective of Rivers

This issue of the *Open Rivers* is dedicated to an international perspective of rivers, particularly in an overview of the current place-based research conducted by artists, writers, and socially engaged practitioners who lead fieldwork studies, regeneration schemes, and collaborative community projects. From rivers as far afield as China, Brazil, Canada, Scotland, Ireland, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, rivers as rivers and as “waters of life” will be considered, along with the importance of what rivers mean to human and nonhuman inhabitants and how they come to these meanings.

A river as a metaphor so easily functions symbolically that we take in, all at once, an understanding that what we are seeing is simultaneously water flowing by, but also, from a distance of history, geographical changes, and epochs, how rivers have agency. They are the barometers of environmental health, or they may separate us from the other side; they may divide as political separations and borders, and yes, they may even conjoin creatures, human and nonhuman. They are the forces of erosion as well as of life, carrying away soil, plants, and even more in spate. Rivers are component parts in complex watersheds, separating into two streams that flow in different

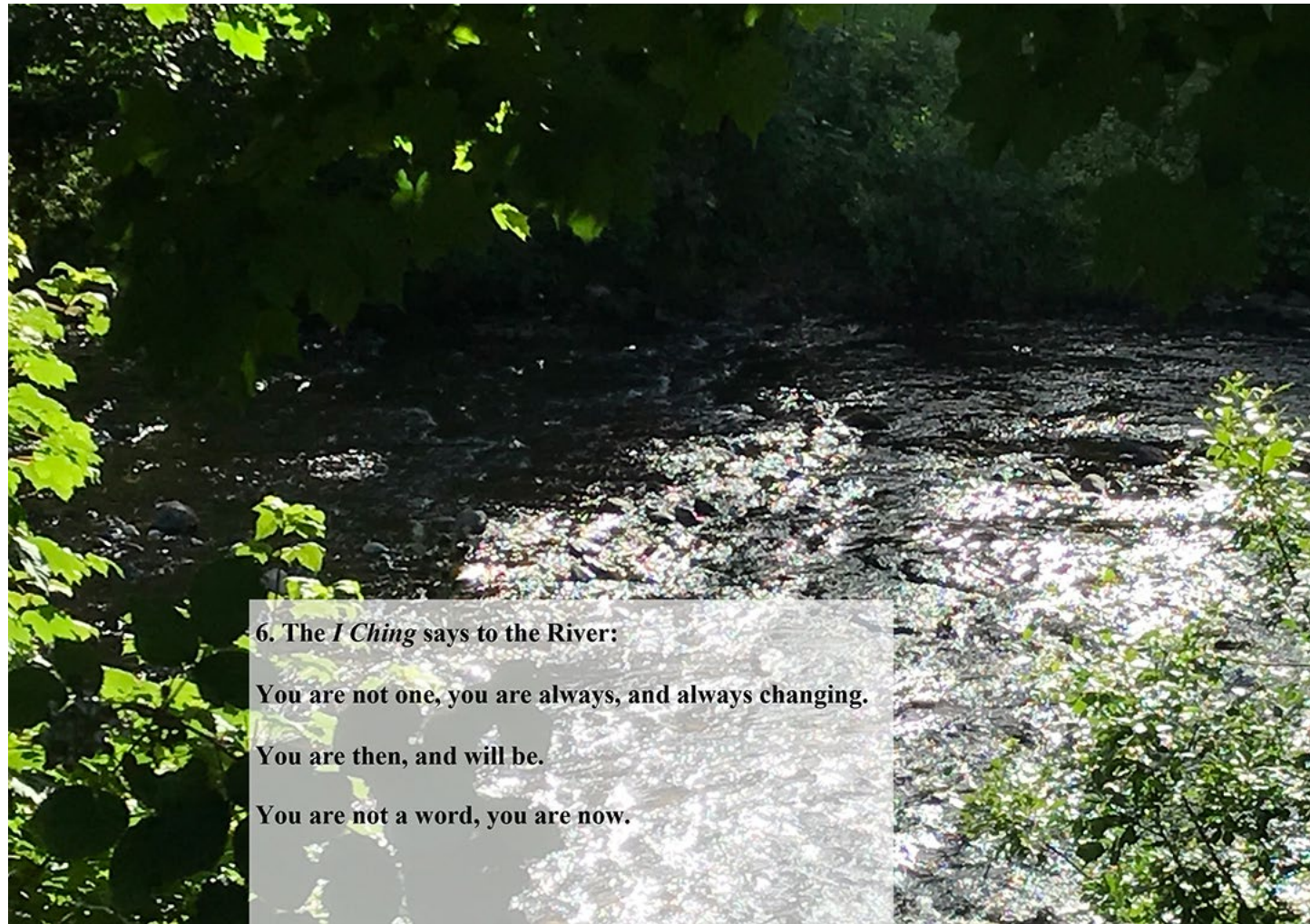


Fig. 2: ‘What the I Ching Says to the River Ericht,’ from the Nexus project. Mary Modeen, digital print on archival paper, 2020. Image courtesy of Mary Modeen.

directions; they can be dammed to provide energy, can be tapped for irrigation, and can even be forced to change the direction of their flow!<sup>[1]</sup> Rivers can disappear underground, flowing unseen in cavernous depths. They can even disappear entirely, as the water tables are depleted,

## Rivers are Precious to All Life on this Planet

What we know universally—and has finally (belatedly) reached a consensus in world understanding—is that rivers are precious to all life on this planet. We learn from Indigenous and traditional peoples across the world that rivers have agency in themselves and teach us the deep interconnectedness of all living things; that they are crucial to the function of the entire world ecosystem; and that human actions have damaged most rivers and completely destroyed several.<sup>[3]</sup> And through news, education, and community

redirected (as in the case of the Chicago River), or lost entirely in a process of climate change.<sup>[2]</sup> The slower lessons show us even more, as time passing, as constant change, as stages of life and mortality, with hints of well-being and joy.

issues, we know the immediacy of necessary action cannot be underestimated. As the world’s attention was focused on COP26, which was just held an hour and a half drive from here, we join the movement, inherent to most Indigenous belief systems, to observe carefully and to act mindfully to redress imbalances. As is shared here in this issue, many of the contributions point to the right of rivers to have clean water, to flow freely, and to exist in themselves entirely apart from human needs or uses.

## Interlude: A True Story from My Youth

When I was a college student in Michigan, the next small town over was St. Louis, Michigan, home to the Michigan Chemical Corporation (now known as Velsico). It was a small-ish company, in a small town, that produced several items in its product line. One among them was cattle feed supplement, which added nutrients to livestock feed as they were fattened up for market. One night in the bagging area, workers accidentally used different bags to seal up the product. Of course, no one knew this at the time. What farmers did notice, increasingly, was that instead of thriving, their cows developed strange sores and lesions, started staggering and grew increasingly dizzy, and then they started dying. Outreach agricultural experts from Michigan State University were called in and tried their best to figure out what was wrong. Then the farmers themselves grew ill and their wives had

hair falling out. Their pigs stopped eating and grew sores before they too died. No one could figure out what sort of pestilence this might be, and so it went for almost two years with accelerated testing.

This was in 1973. What finally emerged was that fire retardant had been accidentally placed in the livestock nutrient supplement bags. There had been no reason prior to this for any feed or materials to be tested for polybrominated biphenyls, or PBB. But indeed, these fire retardant chemicals are exactly what had gotten into the nutrient supply. In a case of one of the most extensive mass poisonings in the United States, PBBs had moved from the cows to the cows’ milk to agricultural runoff and then into the rivers, into the fish, and into the general population of inhabitants, human and nonhuman. People were advised not to eat more than one fish per week; breastfeeding

mothers were told to use formula instead. To this day it has not yet been established if there is intergenerational harm that lingers in the children and grandchildren of inadvertent PBB consumers. The Pine River, which runs through St. Louis and that part of Michigan, is still the subject of ongoing efforts 48 years later to clean what might still be removed from the river.[4] The accident of minutes nearly half a century ago lingers invisibly across the beautiful landscape and scenic rivers.

## Ruminations on Rivers Around the World

What follows here in this collection of essays, artworks, photographs, videos, and songs are ruminations on rivers around the world. These waters have been the source of inspiration, the site of social projects, the documentation of

If lessons are to be learned—that hollow phrase often repeated in political circles—it must be first the truth of interconnectedness. We are all affected by each other’s actions—humans, nonhumans, rivers, air, and earth. The Pine River still flows, but harmed, injured, and yearning as much for the clean water it once carried as the fish, birds, and human inhabitants are. So here is another river, one whose presence is not the joy of others, but one who typifies sorrow, shame, and loss.

geographical characteristics, and the celebration of historical markers of understanding. Several of these contributions are linked to Indigenous perspectives and their underpinning belief systems, some of which have been taken up by Western



Fig. 3: An abandoned barn on the banks of the Pine River in Michigan, 2015.  
Image courtesy of Mary Modeen.

academic environmental scientists aiming at an integration of social systems and natural systems and recognizing the importance of worldviews in environmental actions.[5] The photographic essay by Francisco and Lau Pereira Da Silva and Lau’s wife Helena Beutel uses imagery to do this without the need for text, showing aspects of the high mountain streams in a tropical Atlantic rainforest in Ilhabela, Brazil flowing to the sea. These images tacitly remind us of the physical realities that play out a metaphysical and actual journey simultaneously. Robert Snikkar’s videos do something similar, but differently, as they also include his voice as a settler and that of his Métis friends, Patsea and Carmel, from whom he learns on the Ottawa River, which divides the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, Canada.

Katie Potapoff’s contribution is focused on the other side of Canada, mostly on the Bow and Elbow rivers of Alberta. She experimentally overlays poetry, prose, and artworks with the river configured as body and lived experience. That same aspect of lived experience, but placed in an historic context, is sung by Arthur Watson’s two ballads located both in Scotland’s geography of the northeast of the country between the Dee and Don rivers, as well as in historic time specific to the seventeenth century.

The contributions by Louise Ritchie and Miriam Mallalieu also focus on a lived experience. In Louise’s case, she reflects on the brackish water of the Dichty Burn (“burn” meaning “stream” in Scots). In text, photos, and artworks, she discovers a space for transitions: in time, in salinity, in characteristics that flow undetectably from one quality to another. Miriam’s piece weaves past with present, history as preserved in museum artefacts with family history, and muses along the way about Scotland’s largest river system—the River Tay—in imagining what *it* wants, and how it might be altered from its contact with humans and their trappings.

Tania Kovats is another distinctive artist whose works are profoundly shaped by water.[6] In

her text, she states that “all rivers have their own voice.” In this piece, entitled “TWEED” after the River Tweed in the borders between Scotland and England, she “expressed the narrative of the river as a tortured love story between he/she, north/south, that ultimately ends in separation.” Referencing the tradition of both ballads (such as those sung by Arthur Watson in this issue), she likens the sung genre to her own drawings and writings in border ballads, the text of which is embedded in these works.[7]

A major feature by Margaret Cogswell documents art and research in a body of work that spans more than 35 years. In *River Fugues*, Margaret details a personal journey of investigation that crosses over geography, history, politics, environmental studies, and current events. Beginning in 2003, she researched the musical genre of fugues and instinctively realized that not only the alignment between musical form and movements in rivers made sense, but also decided to construct her meticulously planned art installations in the manner of “writing a musical score for a chamber music ensemble.” Through many images and text and her eponymous book, her intriguing installations work as visual poetry in consolidating her *River Fugues*. [8]

Another major feature in this issue is the work of Jiao Xingtao, a sculptor and socially engaged artist who has led a collaborative art project in Yangdeng, a small rural community in mountainous terrain on the Yangdeng River in Tongzi County of Guizhou Province. Since 2012, Jiao—who is also a professor and vice principal at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, China—has led a group of students and colleagues each year to work in this community with local residents, collaborating on many projects that include murals, sculptures, videos, drawings, benches, and other installations and light projections. His collective understanding is both poetic and practical, material in its expression and immaterial in his intuitive grasp of layered meanings and mythology, highly attuned to the nuances and spirit of the place. His photographs

and video complement the wisdom revealed in his answers in the textual interview.

Two final contributors here must be also be mentioned. Ciara Healy Musson has provided a review of an art exhibition in the Lismore Castle Arts and grounds, the River Blackwater, in County Waterford, Ireland. She not only situates the work for the exhibition, entitled *Light and Language*, within the tradition of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art, but she weaves this work together in a tapestry of the history of the eighteenth-century castle (the initial construction of which began in the twelfth century), and the grounds that abut the Blackwater. Her evocative text brings to life the qualities of the Blackwater's protected species, its glinting sunlight on the water, and inevitably the confluences of time it conjures.

And finally, though certainly not least, Laura Donkers writes of Māori tradition and belief as it has shaped contemporary community actions in attending to the regeneration of rivers. She has collaborated with Charmaine Baillie in doing this. In "Māori and non-Māori collaboration on the restoration of an urban stream [Awataha] in Aotearoa New Zealand," Laura outlines traditional Māori belief for us readers, and thereby constructs for us a narrative and video documentation of this important restorative work done by local people. In doing so, she explains the recent actions of individuals who have presented and defended the fact that rivers have the status of "personhood."<sup>[9]</sup> This means that the river's right to exist in itself, without harm, must be granted. Her conclusion is an appeal to change

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the dominant Western perspective that we humans live as somehow separate from nature, understanding that it is only through profound shifts in thinking, valuing, and actions that real change can occur.

In the unique ways that the internet and worldwide web facilitate digital photos, sounds, videos, podcasts, performances, poetry, and artwork, the richness of this issue will be in the many voices, images, creativity, and thoughts of its contributors from around the world speaking to us, showing us the ubiquitous importance of rivers. Just as the ability of digital communications allows us to be separate but together, so too the various aspects of water parallels this way that we are in many places across the world but together in the sense of being touched by rivers, by being connected and interconnected in truly powerful ways. As I welcomed you here to "my" Ericht River and my place at the beginning of this introduction, I welcome you now to this confluence of many rivers with all of these contributors, to the sharing of global *River Fugues*, to the personhood of the Awataha, to the River Tay who has tasted a museum, to the historic Dee and the Don of Aberdeenshire, to the tropical Atlantic rainforest rivers of Ilhabela, to the Ottawa River that divides two Canadian provinces, to the Bow and Elbow rivers of Alberta, to the Tweed which flows between two nations, and to the poor damaged Pine River of Michigan. I welcome you to the Blackwater of Ireland, the Dichty Burn which flows into the Tay, and the fast-moving Yangdeng of Tongzi County, China. We all have stories to share and meanings to ponder. We are all connected.

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## Footnotes

[1] Elizabeth Kolbert, *Under A White Sky: The Nature of the Future* (Dublin: The Bodley Head, Penguin Random House, 2021).

[2] Lourdes Medrano, "The Colorado River Runs Again," *Yes! Magazine*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/environment/2021/08/24/colorado-river-runs-again>.

[3] Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[4] Brett Walton, "Remembering Michigan's PBB Crisis," *The Circle of Blue*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.circleofblue.org/2018/world/remembering-michigans-pbb-crisis/>. In a further note, when Michigan Chemical Corporation had no possible hope of meeting the fines and ongoing legislation arising from this mistake, it moved to Louisiana where the environmental protection laws were much less strict. See also Joyce Eggington, *Poisoning of Michigan* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009).

[5] Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), 75.

[6] Tania Kovats, *Drawing Water: Drawing as a Mechanism for Exploration* (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2014).

[7] A “bothy” is a crude dwelling place for the workers on an estate. As the place where these laborers had long nights together in cramped quarters, singing ballads—songs with a story unfolding—was a frequent way to spend the evenings. In the “border ballads” presented by Tania Kovats, the stories are about the tensions, conflicts, and attractions taking place in contested lands between Scotland and England.

[8] Margaret Cogswell, *River Fugues* (Brooklyn, New York: Rolling Press, 2018).

[9] Isaac Davison, “Whanganui River given legal status of a person under unique Treaty of Waitangi settlement,” *New Zealand Herald*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/whanganui-river-given-legal-status-of-a-person-under-unique-treaty-of-waitangi-settlement/JL3QKSWVZPA7X-W6EN33GKU4JJ4/>.

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## About the Author

Professor Mary Modeen, as an artist/academic, lectures in fine art and more broadly across the humanities in relation to creative practices. Her research has several threads: perception as a cognitive and interpretive process, and especially place-based research, which connects many of these concerns with attention to cultural values, history, and embodied experience. As such, this research is usually interdisciplinary. Part of this work appears as creative art, and part as writing and presentations. Modeen addresses aspects of seeing that go beyond the visible, questioning what we know as sentient humans, and valuing the cultural and individual differences inherent in these perceptions.

Her most recent publications include a co-authored book with Iain Biggs, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place: Geopoetics, Deep Mapping and Slow Residencies* (Routledge, 2021), and “Traditional Knowledge of the Sea in a Time of Change: Stories of the Caiçaras,” in the *Journal of Cultural Geography* (November 2020). Her edited book and essay just published is titled *Decolonising Place-Based Arts Research* (Dundee, 2021). She is chair of Interdisciplinary Art Practice and associate dean international for Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design at the University of Dundee, in Scotland and visiting fellow with the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota.