



ISSUE 22 : FALL 2022  
OPEN RIVERS :  
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# WOMEN & WATER : CONFRONTATION

<https://openrivers.umn.edu>

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

ISSN 2471-190X

The cover image is sunset in Seoul along the Cheonggyecheon stream. Image by Stefan K on Unsplash.

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

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ISSN 2471-190X

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# RESONANT RIVERS: WATER, INDIGENOUS RELATIONALITY, AND OTHER FUTURES

By Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez

## *Note from the Editor*

*After three years, Open Rivers is republishing this profound article from Issue 13: Water & Environmental Justice for two reasons. First, the article draws attention to the ways that several rivers in Canada are entangled in what Doenmez calls “the crisis of the missing and murdered*



*Memorial event for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Winnipeg, July 2015.  
Image courtesy of Caroline Doenmez.*



*Indigenous women and girls.” This focus aligns with the central theme of this issue, Women & Water: Confrontation, while also complementing the array of other articles collected here. Second, through her work, Doenmez brings us into a conversation that is part of an ongoing struggle, a building movement, and a reality that should not be forgotten. Republishing this article is one way that we remember this continuing crisis and build solidarity with the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) movement.*

—Laurie Moberg, Editor

Two sets of rivers in what is now known as Canada are vital actors in urban landscapes. The McIntyre and Kaministiquia Rivers in Thunder Bay, Ontario and the Assiniboine and Red Rivers in Winnipeg, Manitoba are sites of colonial violence and disappearance: in both cities, dead Indigenous people have been pulled

from their depths. Others are thought to still be in the water. In this sense, they are unsettled graveyards where the disappeared *might be* and are sometimes found. What do missing and murdered Indigenous people desire, caution, or demand? How can we be accountable to them? How do the rivers in which they were found emit



*Mural for MMIWG by Tom Andrlich on Portage Ave in Winnipeg.  
Image courtesy of Caroline Doenmez.*

the resonance of their stories and unfulfilled possibilities? How do those still living answer the haunting of the rivers and those within them?

In Winnipeg, the bodies of multiple Indigenous girls and women have been found in the Red River, including Jean Mocharski in 1961, Felicia Solomon in 2003, and Tina Fontaine in 2014. Across the border in Fargo, North Dakota, Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind was found dead in the Red River in 2017 after her baby was violently taken from her body. Thus, the Red River itself has become associated with the pervasive crisis of the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). In May 2014, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police released its first statistical assessment of the epidemic, which listed a total of 1,181 cases of murdered and missing Indigenous women between 1980-2012. [1] However, grassroots activists say the number is closer to 4,000.[2]

While Indigenous women and girls are subjected to specific forms of gendered and sexualized colonial violence, Indigenous men and boys are also being murdered and disappeared. In Thunder Bay, seven Indigenous youth between the ages of fourteen and eighteen died between 2000 and 2011; five of them were found in the McIntyre or Kaministiquia Rivers. In May 2017, two more Indigenous youth were found dead in the Neebing-McIntyre floodway. Several of their deaths were immediately deemed “accidental drownings” in spite of the fact that their families and friends disputed that they would ever enter the freezing currents of their own volition.[3] Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Paul Panacheese, Robyn Harper, Reggie Bushie, Kyle Morrisseau, Jordan Wabasse, Tammy Keeash, and Josiah Begg had all been sent to Thunder Bay from their remote reserves in northern Ontario to attend high school or seek medical services. The federal government is responsible for the education of children on reserves, but many of these communities still do not have high schools because First Nations

education programs in Ontario are “massively underfunded.”[4] Therefore, youth who want to pursue their education have to leave home. Tanya Talaga emphasizes that this situation replicates the residential schooling system, wherein approximately 150,000 Indigenous children in Canada were compelled—sometimes through force, sometimes through necessity—to leave their homes for western educations: “Families are still being told—more than twenty years after the last residential school was shut down—that they must surrender their children for them to gain an education.”[5]

After years of Indigenous family members voicing their concerns, the Thunder Bay Police Service was excoriated in a report by the Office of the Independent Police Review Director for systemic racism in December 2018.[6] The report found that many of the cases of dead Indigenous people were insufficiently investigated and recommended reopening at least 9 cases. While the report signifies an institutional exercise of accountability, we must still ask: what other forms of accountability are needed to address the dead youth? What other modes of healing and redress are possible? What kind of justice could also take account of the rivers themselves? If we understand rivers as more than resources or passive features of a landscape, but rather as sentient life-forces, we would also have to think about the violence inflicted on these waters, as they have been polluted, controlled, and turned into death places. Several Indigenous communities have shown us what it means to respect, defend, and speak for the water, and have articulated the extent to which violence against Indigenous people and water are deeply intertwined. For example, thousands of water protectors at Standing Rock rallied under the phrase “*Mni Wičoni*,” water is life, to defend their waters and communities from the Dakota Access Pipeline. In the Great Lakes region, Anishinaabe women “water walkers” such as Sharon Day and Josephine Mandamin have walked thousands of miles to express the importance of caring for



water and protecting it from pollution. Water protectors have demonstrated that seeking justice for Indigenous people also means seeking justice for the water, and these efforts are rooted in radical relationality and care.[7]

Indigenous community members in Winnipeg and Thunder Bay have enacted care for both the missing and murdered people and the rivers. In Winnipeg, for the past two summers, a ceremony has been held for the Red River. Speaking of the river, one of the organizers, Shauna Taylor said: “It needs to be blessed because there are so many souls in there. They just need to come up and feel like someone actually cares for them.”[8] Another

expression of care for the women and the water was created in early January 2019, when Métis artist Jaime Black[9] sculpted figures of women out of snow lying on the Red River.[10] Here, the river becomes not only a site of disappearance but one of presence and remembrance. Similarly, in the spring of 2018 in Thunder Bay, a group of Indigenous women and girls performed a jingle dress dance on the banks of the McIntyre River to heal the water and mark it as a site of renewal, memory and connection.[11] These modes of address demonstrate that caring for the dead and the water is vital for the survival of the living. The young women dancing for the river as well as the people holding ceremonies on the riverbanks are



*The Red River. Image courtesy of Caroline Doenmez.*



both initiating forms of connection that respond to the haunting of the missing and murdered people, and to the waters which hold, conceal, and sometimes reveal them.

In thinking of all the people within these rivers, one form that their haunting takes is the cutting sense of who they could have been. What lives could they have led if they were not stolen?[12] What roles might they have played as parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, teachers, friends, and knowledge-holders for their families and communities? What would their presences mean for the children who are now growing up without their parents, or the parents growing old without their children? What other stories would they have been able to tell for the rest of their lives? In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon helps us understand the “unfulfilled possibility” that haunting figures force us to recognize.[13] This attention to what *could have been* is animated by the water. Each river shows us the importance of envisioning the fulfilled lives of all the Indigenous

people killed or disappeared through various techniques of colonial neglect, disavowal, and murderous violence by making it impossible for us to ignore their deaths. As sites of ceremony, the rivers also emanate the ongoing love their families and communities sustain for those who have been taken. While state institutions may attempt to doubly disappear Indigenous people through their failure to investigate or even search for them, the rivers bear witness and remind us always of these stolen lives. Mojave poet Natalie Diaz writes: “Do you think the water will forget what we have done, what we continue to do?”[14]

In the face of the Canadian state’s incredulity or fleeting sorrow in response to these lives taken, and in light of the ongoing simultaneous dispossession of Indigenous land and life, the rivers compel us to remember and imagine other futures for missing and murdered Indigenous people. As unfixed conduits of memory and loss but also vital sources of new beginnings and survival, rivers hold open the possibility of more



*The Red River near The Forks in Winnipeg. Image courtesy of Caroline Doenmez.*



expansive visions of justice and relationships to the dead. They also prompt an imagining of the futures that might have been, and might still be.

There are days when the boundaries of the present fall away and I see myself in one of these other futures. On a warm summer afternoon, rather than looking for traces of missing women on a patrol, I might instead pass by some of

them on these very streets.[15] They would not be watching us from beneath the shimmering surface of the river. No one would need to put up missing person posters or desperately search throughout the city, pouring messages into the ground with their footsteps and into the air with their breath. In this future, their families didn't need to call out or wait. The women were already almost home.

## Footnotes

[1] "Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview," *Royal Canadian Mounted Police*, 4 May 2014. <http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/missing-and-murdered-aboriginal-women-national-operational-overview>.

[2] John Paul Tasker, "Confusion reigns over number of missing, murdered indigenous women," *CBC News*, 16 February 2016. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/mmiw-4000-hajdu-1.3450237>

[3] Tanya Talaga, *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death, and Hard Truths in a Northern City* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2017): 122.

[4] Jody Porter, "Deep Water" *CBC News*, 4 April 2016. <http://www.cbc.ca/interactives/longform/news/deep-water-indigenous-youth-death>

[5] Tanya Talaga, *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death, and Hard Truths in a Northern City* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2017): 267.

[6] Gerry McNeilly, "Broken Trust: Indigenous People and the Thunder Bay Police Service," *Office of the Independent Police Review Director*, December 2018, <http://oiprd.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/OIPRD-BrokenTrust-Final-Accessible-E.pdf>

[7] Melanie K. Yazzie and Cutcha Risling Baldy, "Introduction: Indigenous peoples and the politics of water," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol. 7, no. 1 (2018): 2-3.

[8] "There are so many souls in there': Group gathers to bless the Red River," *CBC News Manitoba*, 30 July 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/bless-the-red-1.4228403>

[9] Jaime Black is also the creator of the REDress project, a travelling installation of red dresses hung in public places to bring awareness to the MMIWG. <http://www.theredressproject.org>

[10] "Red River snow sculptures honour murdered, missing Indigenous women and girls," *CBC News Manitoba*, 4 January 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/red-river-snow-sculptures-mmiwg-1.4967005>

[11] Willow Fiddler, "Can the jingle dress change the river of tears to the river of hope in Thunder Bay? Some say yes," *APTN National News*, 28 April 2018, <https://aptnnews.ca/2018/04/28/can-the-jingle-dress-change-the-river-of-tears-to-the-river-of-hope-in-thunder-bay-some-say-yes/>

[12] Jean M. Langford, "Toward a Hauntology for the Other-than-Human," Presented at "Ghosts, Haunting, and the Subject of Culture: Toward an Anthropological Hauntology," Meeting of the Society for Psychological Anthropology, April 10, 2015.

[13] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008 edition): 183.

[14] Natalie Diaz, "The First Water Is the Body," in "Women and Standing Rock," *Orion Magazine*, 28 December 2017, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/women-standing-rock/>

[15] Indigenous community members have organized the Bear Clan Patrol and Mama Bear Clan to walk the streets of Winnipeg and provide support and protection to their neighbors.

## Recommended Citation

Doenmez, Caroline Fidan Tyler. 2022. "Resonant Rivers: Water, Indigenous Relationality, and Other Futures." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/resonant-rivers-2022/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9733>

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