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WOMEN & WATER : CONFRONTATION

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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

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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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PERSPECTIVES

WATER MEMORIES: EXPLORING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH WATER

By Lee Vue

The beginning of my life was shaped by the vast agricultural lands of Fresno, California where my parents had immigrated from the refugee camps in Thailand. With little education and not knowing the English language, they picked vegetables on farms as a way to earn a living alongside other immigrants under the intense sun and heat. As the two youngest children, my little sister

and I would often tag along to run around in the fields.

Fresno is located in the central valley of California and my memory of the place is confined to how dry, hot, and uninspiring it was. During those years of my life, my relationship with water was limited as I only encountered it



2022 / Mississippi Park Connection's program, Kayaking While BIPOC, on the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Image courtesy of Lee Vue.

in mundane ways: running through irrigation ditches, coming down as rain, falling from the faucet or shower to wash dishes, spraying from the hose as I played, though I was always excited to help my older siblings fill five-gallon water jugs at the filtered water station in grocery stores.

One of my favorite memories as a child was participating in a field trip to Yosemite National Park and seeing a waterfall for the first time. Water in that form was so frighteningly powerful, wondrous, and loud. My awe at water in its different forms continued to deepen when, one winter, it snowed in Fresno! My siblings and I rushed outside to play and took photos on a Kodak disposable camera to capture the moment. I had never seen falling snow before.

Today, how I see and understand the world is hugely influenced by water. My sense of direction is informed by bodies of water and where they are geographically. I often find the most peace when I'm near, in, or touching water, and particularly when I'm paddling and moving with the landscape. Water is part of my identity as much as my cultural identity as a Hmong woman. As I introspectively recount and process memories about my relationship to and with water, it is clear that water has been a parent, teacher, mentor, therapist, and friend throughout my life.

2004–2007: Camp Menogyn

My love for water began at a wilderness camp in Minnesota. “Magical” is the only way I can describe Camp Menogyn and my experiences on their wilderness canoe trips including the Boundary Waters (2004, 2005), Quetico (2005), Nor’wester (2006) and the Canadian arctic tundra of Nunavut (2007). These trips transformed

my perception of the natural world and solidified my newfound love for water. Simple pleasures like jumping into lakes and drinking directly from them filled me with gratitude for our abundant water resources and taught me not to take clean water for granted.



2004 / Camp Menogyn Wilderness Trip; Lee with her group swimming in the Boundary Waters. Image courtesy of Lee Vue.

In 2007, my long trip paddling over 500-miles through Nunavut was pivotal in building my inner strength and facilitating my sense of purpose and belonging. Like any teenager, my insecurities ran rampant and I was often filled with self-doubts. It was easy to feel insignificant as I struggled to balance my cultural identity with my American-teenager wants and desires. Realizing I had the skills and endurance to paddle for long days and successfully complete

whitewater runs sparked a flame inside of me. It fed my confidence, fortifying it as each day went by. Being surrounded by supportive peers was empowering because, if there were moments I wanted to give up, I could count on my fellow Menogyn mates to give me the encouragement I needed to persevere. It was these experiences that allowed me to grow into someone stronger, more confident, and more introspective.



2006 / Camp Menogyn Wilderness Trip; Lee with her paddlemate, Ann Raiho, completing a whitewater run on a river in Canada. Image courtesy of Lee Vue.

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My father passed away a few weeks after the completion of my long trip, and then my best friend succumbed to cancer two years later. During the years of grief that followed, I realized my ability to process their loss was tied to the resilience I gained from outdoor experiences—from my relationship with water.



2007 / Camp Menogyn Wilderness Trip; Lee's long-trip group in the arctic tundra at Kazan Falls. Image courtesy of Lee Vue.

2013: The Mississippi River

In September 2013, I embarked on an adventure with friends to thru-paddle the Mississippi River from source to sea. That year, the water was too low to paddle at the headwaters of the Mississippi at Lake Itasca, so we launched from Lake Bemidji with uncertainty and excitement for the journey. Not many people choose to spend months in a micro-community limited to a river, with canoeing as the main mode of transportation.

We bonded throughout the more than ten weeks it took us to paddle the river, but tensions also emerged due to difficulties managing expectations and our different personalities. By the time we made it to New Orleans, the end of the journey felt overdue. Perhaps it was simply because our patience had finally dwindled, knowing the end was near.



2013 / Mississippi River; The Paddle Forward at Lake Bemidji. Image courtesy of Lee Vue.

Physically, the long days on the river took a toll on our bodies. We were unkempt and weary. Our skin was sun-kissed and dirty. Our eyes were sunken due to lack of sleep. The river threw challenges our way with difficult windy days, stormy weather, and cold temperatures. It also taught us about community and pushed

us to grow individually. We had to endure even when our bodies wanted to stop or when we felt emotionally at our wits end. We had to learn to compromise, adapt, and find happiness in the little things like warm hands and silence when we ran out of things to say. For three days a grasshopper lived in my hair, and I was thrilled.



2013 / Mississippi River; Lee paddling with her paddlemate, Nicholas Ryan. Image courtesy of Lee Vue.

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My knowledge of and passion for racial justice at the intersection of environmental justice were just budding at the beginning of the trip. Then that knowledge and passion stretched and expanded as I witnessed firsthand how the river was treated. It was clear that the way the river was used varied as we paddled towards the Gulf of Mexico. It was obvious which communities benefited from the river and which ones didn't. It was

grief that compounded my emotions when I saw how much the river was controlled by mankind. It was empathy that seeped through when I realized the generosity of the river and how giving it was to all of us. It was relief that I felt when we completed our expedition in New Orleans, unaware of all of the ways the river would continue to weave into my life.



*2013 / Mississippi River;
Lee at the beginning (week one) of the trip.
Image courtesy of Lee Vue.*



*2013 / Mississippi River;
Lee at the end (week ten) of the trip.
Image courtesy of Lee Vue.*

2014: The Illinois River

The following year, I found myself on another canoe adventure on one of Mississippi River's tributaries—the Illinois River. After 30 days paddling the river, starting from North Branch, and portions of the Des Moines River, we arrived at the confluence in Grafton, Illinois. It was bittersweet to reach the end. The journey had been filled with learning, intentionally engaging with communities along the way, and visiting state parks, wetlands, museums, wastewater treatment facilities, schools, and more. Upon seeing the confluence, we immediately beached

the canoes onto the sandbar and rushed into the water. Half of us had paddled the Mississippi River together the year before and so it felt like greeting an old friend. The Mississippi River seemed to welcome us with its width and depth. We had accomplished our purpose—to paddle the entire Illinois River—and the river was our biggest supporter. The Illinois River had moved us along its changing landscapes and ecosystem, threw an occasional carp into the canoes to keep us on our toes, and gently bid us farewell as it flowed into the Mississippi.



2014 / Illinois River; group photo at the confluence. Image courtesy of Lee Vue.

That adventure did not feel as challenging as the Mississippi River trip had been. Instead, there was an ease to the routine due to a more structured schedule of activities and planned visits with communities and people. There were moments when I thought, “I can keep doing this for years,” but I admit, it’s easy in the moment to feel infinity was tangible. In truth, I knew this was simply a piece of my life journey, but part of me wanted to extend it. Every river, waterway, and body of water were threads I was weaving to

try to figure out who I wanted to be. My twenties were filled with experimentation, risks, confusion, high expectations, eagerness, and anxiety. Water has a calming effect, and the pull to keep paddling rivers felt like an antidote to all the worries and uncertainties I had.

As we played in the water and rolled around on the sand at the end of that journey, there was one certainty I knew: I want to paddle as many rivers as I can in my lifetime.



2014 / Illinois River; Mark pouring water onto Anna's head at the confluence. Image courtesy of Lee Vue.

2016: The Yukon River Quest

No amount of explanation would have prepared me for the Yukon River Quest alongside my fellow adventure-loving and outdoorsy friends. Four of the six of us had shared experiences at Camp Menogyn and so our chemistry and excitement was in alignment to take on the challenge.

I also have some feelings of guilt associated with this experience because, for the first time, I actively made the choice to conquer the natural world. I cannot describe the colors of the landscape or how the water felt because my memory is occupied with the urgency, time, frustration, and aches of being confined to a canoe for 53 hours paddling nonstop. Paralleling human relationships, it felt as though I had forgotten how special my relationship with water was because

all I cared about was getting to the end instead of acknowledging the river and its gifts.

We won our division and then we flew home the next day. When I share stories about this experience, I often don't lead with the fact that we won. The stories are more focused on how the competition tested us emotionally, mentally, and physically, and forced us to reexamine our priorities in life. As someone who values moving slowly, expressing gratitude, and nurturing others along my life path, I realized from this experience that I care too much about the natural world to see it as a landscape to be conquered. Winning is a thrill, but slowly watching the shoreline as I dip my paddle in the water and breathe in the air—that is the calmness for which my heart beats.



2016 / Yukon River Quest; the team (our team name was the Aurora Collective) in front of the Yukon River. Image courtesy of Lee Vue.



2016 / Yukon River Quest; racing on the Yukon River near the Five Finger Rapids. Image courtesy of Lee Vue.

Present: Sharing the blessing of water

Water has opened new ways to embrace my life, the people around me, and the places and spaces I occupy. In partnership with environmental nonprofit organizations in the Twin Cities, I bridge people's connection to the Mississippi

River through paddling programs. Paddling is a mechanism to create opportunities for people, particularly BIPOC individuals, to build a lasting positive relationship with water.



2022 / Mississippi Park Connection's program, Kayaking While BIPOC, on the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Image courtesy of Lee Vue.

In my work with the nonprofit organization In Progress, I work closely with families to explore their relationship with water through the understanding of grief for a digital storytelling project called Rain Watcher. The cyclic nature of the natural world and water puts into perspective

the cycle of life and death—the continuous ways water is formed, exists, and then disappears, only to do it all over again. Families hold and touch water, submerge photos of their loved ones in water, and sometimes they submerge themselves as a way to embrace the grief and then let it go.



2022 / Participant holding a photo of her sister at Pickerel Lake in Saint Paul, Minnesota, for In Progress' Rain Watcher Project. Image courtesy of Lee Vue.

Everything is connected

From learning how to canoe to paddling rivers and now teaching paddling, the evolution of my relationship with water forms my whole self. The way I think is grounded in interconnectedness, paralleling how water is connected to everything in the natural world. I am aware that a singular action can impact entire ecosystems and communities. Because of this awareness, I often think

deeply about how my actions can ripple into a positive or negative impact or how they might potentially contribute to disparities or perhaps yield equitable outcomes. Intersectionality and interconnectedness inform the way I uphold my values, practice justice, interact with other humans, and, ultimately, how I nurture my intricate connection to the environment.

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About the Author

Lee Vue is a communication strategist committed to social impact and using a racial equity lens to advance narrative change. When she's not immersed in creative and communications projects, she's exploring wild places and waterways, teaching BIPOC communities how to paddle in collaboration with local environmental nonprofits, and coaching high school badminton in St. Paul. She currently serves as a board member for Camp Menogyn, Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, Youth Leadership Initiative, Ann Bancroft Foundation, and BMPP Giving Circle with a deep commitment to uplift the voices of communities of color in the climate, philanthropy and social justice movements. She graduated from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities with a degree in political science and resides in East St. Paul.